

**“A TRAGIC STORY ABOUT HELPLESSNESS, ANGER AND CIVIL  
DISOBEDIENCE”: AN AFFECTIVE READING OF OLGA  
TOKARCZUK’S *DRIVE YOUR PLOW OVER THE BONES OF THE  
DEAD***

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**Abstract:** The article is an interpretation of Olga Tokarczuk’s novel *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* from the perspective of affective ecocriticism. The first section concentrates on the socio-political circumstances surrounding the novel’s release. This part of the article also considers Tokarczuk’s understanding of literature as an opportunity to experience sadness, frustration and anger in a cathartic way, and, in doing so, examine and better understand those emotions. It is argued that *Drive Your Plow* concentrates on two emotions in particular – sorrow and anger – doing so in the context of a wider debate on moral outrage and ecological activism. The article devotes considerable attention to anger, as experienced by the main protagonist of the novel, Janina Duszejko. It is shown that the notion of anger as retribution permeates Duszejko’s conviction that one has the moral obligation to oppose injustice. Nevertheless, Duszejko’s violent actions problematize her stance on anger, emphasizing her inability to control this emotion.

**Keywords:** Olga Tokarczuk, affective ecocriticism, animal studies

**Tokarczuk – a brief literary résumé**

Olga Tokarczuk’s importance for Polish and European literature is uncontested. The laureate of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2018, Tokarczuk has written works which are both critically acclaimed and widely read. Following Tokarczuk’s success on the international literary scene, articles and essays have been written with the aim of introducing new readers to her works. While the present article has no such ambition, this section will provide a brief overview of the main themes and topics of her works, which may be useful especially to those readers who have yet to learn more about Tokarczuk’s books. This opening section will be followed by the discussion of the novel *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*.

Olga Tokarczuk belongs to a generation born in the 1960s, who made their literary debuts in the times of the political transformation in the 1980s. What characterized this loosely-affiliated group was the decision to break with the

tradition of politically-committed literature and search for new forms of self-expression that would reflect the social, political and economic changes in Poland. The project of formulating a new language and sensitivity made itself felt both among poets, who increasingly often drew on inspirations from American authors, and among writers, including Tokarczuk. As the Polish critic Filip Matwiejczuk rightly points out, Tokarczuk is one of the authors profoundly influenced by the success of Ibero-American literature, especially the novels of Julio Cortázar and Gabriel García Márquez. Those influences are prominent in such books as *Prawiek i inne czasy* (1996; English translation: *Primeval and Other Times*, 2010), a magical realist novel set in the fictitious village of Prawiek, reminiscent of Macondo from *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. While Márquez's influence is clear in *Prawiek i inne czasy*, such novels as *Dom dzienny, dom nocny*<sup>1</sup> (1998; English translation: *House of Day, House of Night*, 2003), and *Bieguni*<sup>2</sup> (2007; English translation: *Flights*, 2017), in their fragmentary and experimental structures, resemble Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch*. Similarly to Cortázar, Tokarczuk also incorporates metafictional elements into her prose; her desire to challenge literary forms and conventions goes hand in hand with the autobiographical tendency to incorporate writers and writer-figures in her prose, so as to comment on literature and the role of the writer in contemporary societies.

Commenting on the influence of Márquez on Tokarczuk, Matwiejczuk points to one more important similarity between the two writers: both *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Primeval and Other Times* are set in provincial towns, far from the influence of metropolitan centres. This interest in the distant and the peripheral is also visible in other books by Tokarczuk, including *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (2009; English translation: 2018), set in the secluded and windswept Kłodzko Valley, in south-western Poland. More often than not, the people who inhabit those remote places are those who, for various reasons, have chosen to remove themselves from the life of larger towns – the social rejects and outsiders, whose values have put them at odds with prevailing norms and beliefs. Tokarczuk's interest in outsiders has a political agenda insofar as she tries to direct the attention of her readers to those that have been left out of mainstream literature and the media. In her most ambitious book *Księgi Jakubowe* (2014; English translation: *The Books of Jacob*, 2021), she undertakes the ambitious task of Henryk Sienkiewicz's *The Trilogy* (1884-8), one of the most

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<sup>1</sup> The German translation of *Dom dzienny, dom nocny* (*Taghaus, Nachthaus*, 1998) received the Brücke-Berlin prize for literature (the award was given to Tokarczuk and her German translator Esther Kinsky. The novel was also shortlisted for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2004.

<sup>2</sup> In 2018 the English translation of *Bieguni* (by Jennifer Croft) received the Man Booker International Prize, the most prestigious literary prize for international fiction published in Britain.

influential literary works in Polish literature, describing the country's troubled history in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. *The Books of Jacob* are situated on the reverse side of *The Trilogy*, describing the characters who have been marginalized Sienkiewicz's version of a heroic and patriarchal society. As Matwiejczuk writes, "Tokarczuk's goal in her symbolic rivalry with Sienkiewicz is to shape the Polish collective imagination and strive to change the cultural paradigm prevalent in the country" – surely one of the most ambitious tasks that the writer could set for herself.

It is beyond doubt that Tokarczuk's writing has a clear political dimension. In *Anna Inn w grobowcach świata* (2006, [*Anna Inn in the Tombs of the World*]), her retelling of the myth of Inanna, the Sumerian goddess of harvest and war,<sup>3</sup> she challenges patriarchal gender stereotypes – a goal that also informs such books as *House of Day*, *House of Night* and *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*. While Tokarczuk's novels can be fruitfully analysed from the perspective of feminism, her political agenda is also environmentally-oriented. In her Nobel Lecture she spoke about "greed, failure to respect nature, selfishness, lack of imagination, endless rivalry and lack of responsibility," arguing that those sins of Western civilization "have reduced the world to the status of an object that can be cut into pieces, used up and destroyed." In her works she challenges this instrumental attitude to the natural world by creating a sensitivity that is alert in equal part to people, animals and objects. As Matwiejczuk writes, Tokarczuk's attention to the object is reminiscent of object-oriented ontology, as practiced by Graham Harman; it is worth adding that her attentiveness to the world of objects, evident from her earliest works, has a clear environmental agenda, formulated in opposition to the consumerism of the Western world.

One of the most recurrent themes in Tokarczuk's novels is that of travelling. As the Polish critic Wojciech Burszta writes, Tokarczuk shares the view of those philosophers who claim that "people in contemporary times, irrespective of their financial status and class belonging, remain homeless which is both their fault and their curse." Burszta argues that Tokarczuk's early writing is an attempt to find a sense of rootedness by creating a special kind of space – an existential one – that would make it unique because of being shaped by and for its inhabitants. This special, existential place, which Burszta calls *chora* (following the French geographer and philosopher, Augustin Berque), is a meeting place between the physical and the metaphysical, the transient and the permanent. While the search for *chora* is an immanent part of Tokarczuk's early books (such as *Podróż ludzi Księgi* (1993; [*Journey of the People of the Book*]) and *Prawiek i inne czasy*), the books written by Tokarczuk in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – argues Burszta – are no longer about *chora*, but rather about the search for it: "To an increasing extent, hers is a travel writing, fascinated with the movement of the world, of people,

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<sup>3</sup> Tokarczuk wrote the book as a contribution to the Canongate Myth Series, a Scottish literary project, in which acclaimed international writers rewrote ancient myths.

and of objects.” The idea of nomadism as a philosophy of life and of creativity can be found not only in her most famous book to date, *Flights* – a novel inspired by a sect of Old Believers who claimed that constant motion is a strategy of avoiding evil – but also in her magnum opus, *Księgi Jakubowe*.

Tokarczuk’s prose is best described as uneven, combining acute philosophical and psychological insights with banal and naïve aphorisms. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that she remains one of the most-widely read authors, both in Poland and abroad. The strongest proof of her popularity among international readers are the numerous translations of her works. So far, her books have been translated into 37 languages,<sup>4</sup> with German, Czech, English, Swedish, and French being the most popular. Tokarczuk’s works have also been published in Serbian, Bulgarian, Croatian, Albanian, Slovakian, Ukrainian, Russian, Belarusian, Korean, Danish, Dutch, Estonian, Finnish, Hindi, Japanese, Macedonian, Romanian, Catalan, Chinese, and other languages. Among her most prolific translators are Milica Markić from Serbia and Petr Vidlák from the Czech Republic, who have each translated 8 of her books.

#### ***Drive Your Plow as an “absorbing novel”***

At the beginning of her Nobel Lecture, delivered on 7 December 2019, Olga Tokarczuk spoke about first-person narration, counting it “among the greatest discoveries of human civilization.” In a novel with a first-person narration, Tokarczuk comments, the boundary dividing the narrator’s self from the reader’s self is often transgressed: “a so-called ‘absorbing novel’ actually counts on that border being blurred – on the reader, through empathy, becoming the narrator for a while” (“The Tender Narrator.” *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, published in 2009 (the English translation by Antonia Lloyd-Jones came out in 2018) can be considered as an “absorbing novel” insofar as it depends on the reader empathizing with its narrator. As Tokarczuk pointed out, “The whole thing [the novel] turns on the reader identifying with her and liking her in spite of initial resistance” (qtd. in Habash).

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<sup>4</sup> The data has been quoted from <https://stl.org.pl/ksiazki-olgi-tokarczuk-na-swiecie/> , last updated 14.10.2019.

*Drive Your Plow* tells the story of a woman of liberal humanist convictions who is pushed to desperation and violence by her repeated confrontations with ideologically and systemically-instituted anthropocentrism and androcentrism. The novel is narrated by Janina Duszejko, an eccentric, but endearing woman in her sixties with a genuine love for animals and a near-fanatical belief in astrology. Formerly an engineer, now an English teacher, Duszejko spends her retirement in a cottage situated in the Kłodzko Valley. Until recently, she enjoyed the company of her two dogs, but since their mysterious disappearance, she lives alone, only occasionally meeting her friend, Dizzy (short for the Polish name Dionizy) – a young IT technician and amateur translator of William Blake’s works, and her neighbour – a reclusive, but good-hearted man whom she dubs Oddball. It is with the death of another neighbour, Big Foot, a reclusive alcoholic and full-time poacher, that the novel begins. As Duszejko visits the man’s house on the night of his tragic death, she makes a discovery that becomes a turning point in her life: she comes across a photograph clearly showing that it was the deceased neighbour, together with his fellow-hunters, who killed her dogs in what was in all probability an act of gratuitous cruelty. From that point on, Duszejko, who feels acutely the pain and injustice inflicted on animals by humans, decides not to stop short at verbal protests. Either ignored or humiliated by others, she resorts to ecotage, but also to acts of violence against the local hunters, all of them rich and powerful males in their forties or fifties. Duszejko is silent about her role in the death of the hunters, trying to make others believe that it was the animals who took revenge for their maltreatment. She is by all accounts an unreliable and even manipulative narrator – a quality that makes it possible for Tokarczuk to construct a novel that is at once a murder mystery, a thriller, and a psychological exploration of one woman’s alienation from a patriarchal community, in which violence against animals has become a culturally and ideologically-sanctioned way of life.

While *Drive Your Plow* was first published in 2009, the political controversy around it began eight years later, after the release of Agnieszka Holland’s movie *Pokot* (*Spoor*) in 2017 and two years after the coming to power of the far-right political party, *Law and Justice*. The reaction of the press was symptomatic of the political divide in Poland between the liberals and the conservatives, the former praising it for broaching important issues, both social and ecological, and the latter criticising it severely for its critical stance towards Catholicism and its

depiction of violence.<sup>1</sup> Aware of the division of Polish society into two opposing political and ideological camps, Tokarczuk gave an interview in which she commented on what she saw as the end of political correctness and the rise of negative, even abusing rhetoric among Poles. In an increasingly divided country, she went on to add, people viewed Holland's film chiefly as political commentary, responding to Janina Duszejko without any distance, as if she were a real person. This, in turn, made people afraid of violence depicted in the film and the novel. Clearly afraid that Holland's film – and her novel – may be viewed as an incitement to commit acts of aggression, Tokarczuk pointed out that she was deeply scared of violence, but that anger and irritation were emotions that should not be ignored:

In the book *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, which served as the basis of the screenplay for *Spoor*, we are made witness to the processes by which violence is born, but, what is more important, we are made aware that people have no control over it [violence], since the eruption of violence is also cathartic. For centuries art has served as a platform for our imagination to manage our dark emotions in a controlled way. (Interview by Janusz Wróblewski, my translation)

While most of the quoted commentary is clear, Tokarczuk's claim that people have no way of controlling violence since its eruption is "also cathartic" is not so obvious. She is perhaps suggesting that since catharsis is deeply written into people's emotional makeup, and since violence offers such an experience, then violence, once provoked, is difficult, or even impossible to control. Literature, Tokarczuk adds, gives us an opportunity to experience catharsis in a safe ("controlled") way, and, in this way, examine and better understand and control our reactions. Later in the interview, Tokarczuk adds that perhaps in the future, with the changing of the political situation in Poland, another dimension of the book and the film will become apparent as "a tragic

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<sup>1</sup> Krzysztof Kłopotowski saw Holland's movie primarily as an attack on Catholicism and argued that it condoned the murders depicted in it. He also criticized Holland for focusing on the violence against animals committed by Poles of Catholic background and failing to mention the involvement of the Jewish and Muslim community in ritual slaughter. An anonymous reviewer writing for a popular conservative online magazine *wPolityce*, formulated a similar, if less bitingly ironic, critique of Holland's movie, arguing that the film "relativizes ecoterrorism" and calls it "ecological propaganda."

story about helplessness, anger and civil disobedience” (Interview by Janusz Wróblewski, my translation).

With twelve years elapsed from the publication of *Drive Your Plow*, it is time to look more dispassionately at the novel, taking the perspective that Tokarczuk mentioned in her interview. As its title suggests, the main aim of this article is to concentrate on Tokarczuk’s exploration of two chief emotions experienced by Duszejko: anger and sorrow. This discussion will also, I hope, show Tokarczuk’s novel as one which makes valid claims about the role of those emotions in social and political commitment. Before addressing these points, it is worthwhile to look more closely at the moral dimension of the novel, as elaborated in the numerous references to the works of William Blake.

### **Living in the land of Ulro**

William Blake is indeed a strong presence in *Drive Your Plow*. He certainly has a decisive influence in shaping Duszejko’s vision of the world as the land of Ulro, governed by a logic based upon heartless law, lacking compassion and solidarity. Duszejko thinks in terms of binary oppositions, pitting against each other imagination and reason, an active life directed to effecting social change to a passive one, governed by old beliefs, a life of freedom lived in harmony with others (including non-human others) to an egoistic and insular existence. Embracing imagination, intuition and emotions, Duszejko time and again finds herself in conflict with people she calls “citizens of Ulro” (120) – men whose thinking is based solely on the dictates of the law. Duszejko’s continued encounters with those men alert the reader to their various misuses of reason: their tautological way of speaking (e.g. having reported her neighbour’s mistreatment of a dog, Duszejko receives the following reply from the police: “A dog is a dog. The countryside is the countryside” (39)); their reliance on the reductive binary opposition between reason and emotions (when Duszejko reports violations of hunting law to the authorities, the officer of the Civic Guard simply responds: “You’re approaching this too emotionally” (115)); finally, their hypocrisy (in one scene a young forester justifies an exploitative use of timber by resorting to the argument about the necessity of human stewardship: “The natural processes have gone wrong, and now we must keep it all in control” (195), but in the next sentence, adds that the reason for cutting down trees is purely commercial: “We need timber for stairs and floors, furniture and paper” (195)).

Like Blake,<sup>2</sup> Duszejko speaks out against those who use law and religion to achieve domination over others. In one powerful scene at the end of the novel she interrupts a Catholic priest in the midst of his sermon, in which he refers to the principle of God-granted environmental stewardship to justify the killing of animals. Enraged by his hypocrisy, Duszejko calls him and other hunters present during the mass “murderers” (240) and, in a deeply emotional appeal, asks them if they have retained any human reactions to guide them in their actions (“Have you lost your minds? Or your hearts? Have you still got hearts?” (240-241)).

Duszejko’s outrage at the callousness of the hunters is emphasized by the most important reference in the novel – Blake’s “Auguries of Innocence.” The poem is, in total, quoted thirteen times,<sup>3</sup> most passages concentrating on human cruelty towards animals in the context of divine retribution. The passages quoted include:

“A dog starv’d at his Master’s Gate/  
Predicts the ruin of the State”

“A Horse misused upon the Road/  
Calls to Heaven for Human blood.”

“Kill not the Moth nor Butterfly/  
For the Last Judgment draweth nigh.”

“He who torments the Chafers Sprite/  
Weaves a Bower in endless Night.”

Those and several other lines from “Auguries of Innocence” strengthen the political message of the novel, and, equally importantly, characterize Duszejko, who is, much like the speaker of Blake’s poem, shocked by the moral degradation of the world and eager to see the divine justice meted out against the oppressors.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In Blake’s universe “the dialectical creativity of Imagination is weakened by two strong social forces, one priestcraft and the other law” (Sabri-Tabrizi 66).

<sup>3</sup> To compare, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” is quoted five times, “Proverbs of Hell” two times, Blake’s letters twice, while “To Tirzah” and “The Mental Travellers” are both quoted once. There are also several references to “The Book of Urizen.”

<sup>4</sup> I am referring here to David Perkins’ article “Animal Right and ‘Auguries of Innocence,’” especially his claim that the voice that speaks in “Auguries of Innocence” is “that of innocence; moreover, it is innocence at a moment of crisis, when it beholds the world of experience” (8), and his comment – especially resonant in the context of Tokarczuk’s novel - that “in none of Blake’s couplets do the animal victims revenge their injuries; [...] revenge is threatened, and its scope and violence measures the shock, horror and anger in the innocent onlooker” (9-10).



In an attempt to transcend the confines of human-oriented, solipsistic reason, Duszejko

resorts to imagination, which, similarly to Blake, she sees as a force capable of transcending the confines of regressive and harmful habits and preconceptions. This idea is contained in the long title of the novel, which is an inexact quotation from Blake's *Proverbs of Hell*: "Drive your cart and your plow over the bones of the dead." As is the case in Blake,<sup>5</sup> the proverb can be read as an exhortation to abandon old ideas and beliefs, and embrace imagination, understood as a faculty unconstrained by limited, sensual perception of the world.

Duszejko's belief in imagination and its perceptual value is evident in her approach to the natural world. In Chapter Four, having described her task of supervising her neighbour's empty houses to protect them against burglaries and damage caused by weather, she makes the following comment:

As I wandered across the fields and wilds on my rounds, I liked to imagine how it would all look millions of years from now. Would the same plants be here? And what about the colour of the sky? [...] Would the tectonic plates have shifted and caused a range of high mountains to pile up here? Or would a sea arise, removing all reasons to use the word 'place' amid the idle motion of the waves? One thing's for sure – these houses won't be here; my efforts are insignificant, they'd fit on a pinhead, just like my life as well. That should never be forgotten. (64)

A close observer of her surroundings, Duszejko wields a perspective that transcends the local and leaves space for a vision of change that is outside the bounds of historical time. The tentativeness of human existence and of human habitation is not a pretext to abandon her efforts – she is, by all accounts, a dedicated guardian and keeper of the houses entrusted to her – but a fact on which she builds her stance of humility with respect to the natural world. While she does not express her identification with any groups or organization, it is quite clear that

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<sup>5</sup> G.R.Sabri-Tabrizi, commenting on this proverb, writes that in it "Blake tells the Angel that if he desires to cleanse himself from 'uncleanliness' and from 'the bones of the dead' he should honour and uphold the active and creative life" (127). He adds: "In order to free the creative personality of Imagination we must not base our values and human relationship upon our limited sense-perception and memories" (128).

her values are akin to the first wave of environmental writers and critics.<sup>6</sup>

Duszejko's search for a wider perspective takes cosmic proportions in her fascination with astrology, which enables her to create her vision of the world as governed by a higher intelligence. She takes comfort in the existence of a cosmic order that "goes far beyond the time and place of Janina Duszejko" (67-68), which subsumes all individual lives in an intricate, but knowable web of relations. The most appealing characteristic of this world is that, unlike the Christian notion of afterlife, it is not based on the logic of forgiveness; on the contrary, in Duszejko's universe, all human deeds echo endlessly in the universe. In this world, evil actions call for swift and just retribution not in another, spiritual reality, but in this world. That Duszejko's involvement in this fictional world goes beyond imagination is a realization that comes gradually to the reader, and so does the disconcerting awareness that her utopia comes at the cost of violence – as utopias often do.

The subversiveness of Tokarczuk's novel lies in the fact that it draws the reader into Duszejko's idiosyncratic microcosm, and then confronts us with the dark side of this world. As Justyna Jaworska points out, Tokarczuk puts the reader in "a difficult and morally activating position of an arbiter: it is the reader who has to decide what to make of the events." Jaworska sees Duszejko's attacks on the hunters as "a pyrrhic victory," achieved by "controversial means," as a result of which "her anarchy [is] too radical for us to treat her as our patron, despite our sympathy for her." Indeed, the liberal reader's attitude to Duszejko will, in all likelihood, involve both identification and dissociation: identification because it is no difficult task to sympathize with Duszejko and share her nature-oriented values, and dissociation, because of her increasingly preposterous obsession with astrology and her subsequent radicalism. One has a sense that Tokarczuk has created this tension so as not to turn her hero into a moral authority and her novel into an ecological manifesto, but instead to direct her readers' attention to the dynamic governing Duszejko's powerful emotions. The following section will look at those emotions in detail, specifically sorrow and anger.

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<sup>6</sup> To take one example, Paul Shepard in his essay "Ecology and Man: A Viewpoint," writing about "interconnection as a general principle of life," argued that human ecology "must take a long view of human life and nature as they form a mesh going beyond historical time and beyond the conceptual bounds of other humane studies" (62). He also made the case that "truly ecological thinking" includes "an element of humility, which moves us to silent wonder and glad affirmation" (69).

**“The fifth element”: Experiencing sorrow**

Generally speaking, sorrow has its source in three distinct, but connected states of mind: it is Duszejko’s reaction to life in general, it derives from her ethical stance with regard to the suffering and death of animals, and it remains as an aftermath of anger. It is worthwhile to examine each one of those sources separately.

Duszejko’s decidedly pessimistic vision of life is at its clearest in her description of her surroundings. Indeed, it is one of the striking features of Duszejko’s narrative that despite her ecocritical orientation, she seldom, if ever, expresses joy or pleasure at the fact of living in a place of natural beauty. Most descriptions of her surroundings concentrate on the inclement weather and emphasize either its practical implications (blocked or impassable roads), or its effect on her state of mind. While this may be understandable at first – the novel begins in winter, when the area is covered heavily with snow – Duszejko’s resigned stance continues into early spring, when “the world is at its most detestable [...]. The sky is low and grey – it looks as if you could reach out and touch it from the top of a small hill” (105). Far from being an instance of seasonal affective disorder, Duszejko’s pessimistic and resigned attitude is deeply rooted in her dark vision of the world, which she projects onto her surroundings. As the quoted passage implies, the oppressiveness of the world is connected with the claustrophobic feeling of being trapped in between the earth and the sky – a state that Duszejko associates with the existential condition of all living beings. The most powerful expression of this conviction can be found at the beginning of her narrative, when, having rescued a maltreated dog from her cruel neighbour, she discovers that the dog took the first opportunity to return to its owner. Reflecting on “the sinister workings of bondage” (43-44), Duszejko then looks out the window at the misty winter morning (“cold and nasty” (44)), and reflects on what she sees as the enslavement of all living beings: “The prison is not outside, but inside each of us. Perhaps we simply don’t know how to live without it” (44).

For Duszejko, the state of imprisonment is not only that of being bound and doomed to unhappiness by one’s habits and preconceptions, but also of living in the body, which, for her is, primarily the site of advancing and inexorable disintegration. Of this fact she is constantly reminded due to her ailing health, or her “Ailments” – what seems to be a partly neurological and partly psychosomatic condition manifesting itself in sudden pains, uncontrollable tremors of the body, cramps, and the stiffening of arms and legs. Those and other symptoms (such as insomnia) are assisted by a sudden lowering of general mood,

pessimistic thoughts and crying, so much so, in fact, that Duszejko appears to suffer from acute, if undiagnosed depression, or bipolar disorder.

One of the first mentions of Duszejko's illness is in connection with the death of her neighbour, Big Foot, a hunter and part-time poacher, whom she hated, but whose death shakes her to the core. It is not so much the fact of his being gone that affects her, but the memory of his immobile and inert body, specifically his feet. For Duszejko, her neighbour's feet and any person's feet in general are "the most intimate and personal part of our bodies" (21), because it is the feet that reveal most acutely and powerfully the fact of our materiality: "It's in the touch of the earth, at its point of contact with the body that the whole mystery is located – the fact that we're built of matter, while also being alien to it, separated from it" (21-22). Our immersion in the material world and, at the same time, inescapable separation from it are strongly felt by Duszejko, whose thinking is permeated by the body-spirit divide. Being part of the material world and at the same time alienated from it, partly by the fact of one's self-awareness and partly by culturally and ideologically instituted categories is a source of sorrow for Duszejko, which she projects onto the surrounding world and the bleak, monotonous winter landscape of the Kłodzko Valley in: "As I gazed at the black-and-white landscape of the Plateau I realized that sorrow is an important word for defining the world. It lies at the foundations of everything, it is the fifth element, the quintessence" (57). It should be added that Duszejko's awareness of her inescapable involvement in the material world is intimately connected with thoughts of her own mortality, which constitute the underlying theme of her narrative. She begins with a comment that at her age she takes care to wash her feet before bed in case the ambulance came to collect her at night. The opening comment, read in the light of the passage about her late neighbour's feet, acquires a symbolic significance: it is as if by washing her feet Duszejko was readying herself for death – the final divorce between the body and the spirit.<sup>7</sup>

Duszejko's existential sorrow should not be seen as only a by-product of a deeply pessimistic vision of the world – it is an emotion that she carefully cultivates, believing that it enables her to adopt a stance of solidarity with other living and suffering beings. Speaking figuratively,

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<sup>7</sup> That she believes in the existence of the spirit is evident from her view on life, which she formulates on the basis of the karmic cycle of existence: "We're all travelling in the same direction, from dependence to freedom, from ritual to free choice" (114).

she offers the following, paradoxical statement about crying and seeing: “Here [in the forest] my tears could flow, bathing my eyes and improving my sight. Maybe that’s why I could see more than people with dry eyes” (154). It is in the forest, where she discovers carcasses of hunted animals, that she experiences sorrow not as an emotion that alienates her from the healthy, but one that allows her to transcend the common, but false perception of suffering as something that happens to the group (the suffering of animals), and view suffering for what it is – an individual experience: “Sorrow, I felt a great sorrow, an endless sense of mourning for every dead Animal” (108). Duszejko’s compassion is rooted in the awareness of her own vulnerability, which, far from being a theoretical proposition, is a deeply felt existential truth. Indeed, one of the reasons why it is so easy to sympathize with Duszejko is that her own vulnerability does not lead her to egoism; on the contrary, it becomes the basis for her tenderness and love towards living beings.<sup>8</sup>

In her affective analysis of compassion Marta Nussbaum defined this emotion as “occasioned by the awareness of other person’s undeserved misfortune” (301). According to Nussbaum, “Even when we feel compassion for animals, whom we know to be very different from ourselves, it is on the basis of our common vulnerability to pain, hunger, and other types of suffering that we feel the emotion” (319). The recognition of shared vulnerability is certainly the grounds for Duszejko’s compassion, her attitude towards animals clearly diverges from that outlined by Nussbaum in that she does not view animals as being so different from people; on the contrary, she writes about animals as if they were close friends: she refers to as “my Little Girls” (44) and names a wild fox, “refined and well-bred,” “Consul” and, on spotting him in a forest, she says: “It was like seeing an old friend” (107). This tendency of Duszejko to anthropomorphize animals may seem endearing or infantile, depending on whether or not one accepts her vision of the world, but it is true that her compassion for suffering animals is based not only on their vulnerability to suffering, but on the sense that their behaviours and motivations are not so different from her own. Duszejko also feels connected to animals by virtue of sharing the same world. A striking example is when an entomologist tells of the existence of a rare species of flat bark beetle inhabiting the local

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<sup>8</sup> Timothy Morton sees those attributes as constitutive of the ecological thought. Referring to Blake’s “Auguries of Innocence” and Blake’s perspective, which never loses sight of individual suffering, he writes: “Up close, the ecological thought has to do with warmth and tenderness; hospitality, wonder, and love; vulnerability and responsibility” (77).

trees, to which Duszejko responds: “I was not aware of this. Frankly, I was pleased – it was as if a new family member had come to join us here” (159).

#### **“The source of all wisdom”: Embracing anger**

While sorrow, originating in the awareness of one’s vulnerability and helplessness, becomes the basis for compassion, the sense of injustice leads Duszejko to anger. This emotion takes a variety of forms, ranging from frustration to rage (or “Wrath,” as she names it).<sup>9</sup> Most encounters with the hunters and the town authorities (who belong to the same group, since the town officials in Tokarczuk’s novel are also hunters) trigger frustration and annoyance in Duszejko, both of which motivate her to criticize the practices of hunting and poaching. In one speech, directed at a young officer of the city guard, Duszejko compares the killing of animals to the Holocaust, pointing out that this heinous practice has become so common that it is considered normal: “There’s nothing shocking about it. Crime has come to be regarded as a normal, everyday activity” (113). Duszejko rages against a world in which the death of one living being is made to serve another, but her words are dismissed by the young official with arguments that show the conflation of sexism, ageism and speciesism. It is when her frustration reaches its peak that it becomes intense anger. This sudden intensification is usually caused by a slight<sup>10</sup> directed at her; for example when one of the hunters reacts to her vocal opposition by calling her “crazy” (72), Duszejko reports feeling “hatred towards him, as sharp as a knife” (40), and physically assaults him.

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<sup>9</sup> „Most authors agree that anger ranges along a dimension of intensity, from frustration and annoyance to rage” (Potegal and Stemmler 5). The distinction between anger and rage in this article will be only that of intensity – I am not adopting any qualitative distinctions, such as the ones introduced by Michael Lewis (I am referring to Lewis’s argument that rage, “more intense, less focused, and longer lasting” (178) than anger, is a response to shame, which is certainly justified in some cases, but does not apply to Tokarczuk’s protagonist. In other words, Lewis’s claim that “When we think of an enraged person, we think of something having to do with serious intense psychological wounding or injury to the person’s feelings” (178) is true in the context of Tokarczuk’s novel with the qualification that in Duszejko’s case this “wounding” should be attributed to sorrow, rather than to shame.

<sup>10</sup> I am referring her to Aristotle’s notion of *oligoria* (slight), meaning “to lessen, to diminish, to make little of” (Fisher 183).

Duszejko's Aristotelian anger<sup>11</sup> is, in fact, present from the beginning of her narrative, appearing in connection with an event that – in the light of the whole novel – turns out to be pivotal. Rummaging through the belongings of her detested (and at that point deceased) neighbour, Big Foot, she chances upon a pile of photographs, one of which she inspects closely. Although she does not reveal what it depicts at this point – this information is found only in the penultimate chapter of the novel – she does describe her reaction to seeing it. Looking at the picture of a band of hunters posing with the animals they killed (including her two dogs), Duszejko experiences first shock and then anger, both of which she, from the perspective of the moment of writing, conflates into one emotion:

My body tensed, I was ready to do battle. My head began to spin, and a dismal wailing rose in my ears, a roar, as if from over the horizon an army of thousands was approaching – voices, the clank of iron, the creak of wheels in the distance. Anger makes the mind clear and incisive, able to see more. It sweeps 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. (27)

Duszejko sees anger as having an invaluable cognitive function in that it sharpens the mind and helps one to fully realize one's priorities. Referencing Blake and his famous proverb "The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction" (which also appears as an epigraph to the penultimate chapter of the novel), Duszejko asserts the value of anger, which, in her view, lies in this emotion's potent capacity to clear away her confusion.<sup>12</sup> She also has a strong belief – and confidence – in the "wisdom" (27) of anger, that is its ability to overwhelm the senses and impose its own logic on her actions.

Duszejko's conviction that anger is capable of overshadowing other emotions and driving people to actions that they would never have otherwise undertaken ("exceeding their limits," to use her formulation) is consistent with scientific accounts of this emotion, according to which

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<sup>11</sup> „For Aristotle, anger is a response, an impulse to react and take revenge for such a slight” – oliguria (Fisher 183).

<sup>12</sup> Duszejko attributes her confusion chiefly to fear. Writing about her attempts to make sense of the world through astrology, she comments: "I look at them [the planets] through my fear, and despite the semblance of cheerfulness that people naively and ingeniously ascribe to me, I see everything as if in a dark mirror, as if through smoked glass" (69).

anger-dictated actions are experienced as “at least partly involuntary.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, Duszejko uses precisely this conception of anger to dissociate herself from her actions: in the penultimate chapter of the novel, she points out that despite elaborate preparations, she was not entirely conscious of her deeds – she blocked them out “as if there were some powerful Defence Mechanisms protecting me” (257-258). She attributes her deeds to her mysterious psychosomatic illness, which caused that “from time to time I was not Janina, but Bellona or Medea” (258). This admission may be read as an unconvincing – and rather half-hearted – attempt at self-justification, since the reference to Roman and Greek mythology only strengthens the note of satisfaction in her conviction that she found a way of dominating the men who had slighted her.

Despite Duszejko’s consistent emphasis on rage as an overwhelming force, it is quite clear that there is another kind of anger at work here. To notice this emotion – and the dynamic that governs it – it is worthwhile to have a closer look at the dramatic scene following Duszejko’s outburst of anger at Father Rustle’s oration. As she demands that the priest and other hunters leave the church, she is herself led outside, where she is told to calm down and threatened that otherwise she will be dealt with by the police. It is at this point – as she is forcefully expelled from the town community – that the anger-generated adrenaline subsides and Duszejko fully realizes her disempowerment: “Anger always leaves a large void behind it, into which a flood of sorrow pours instantly, and keeps on flowing like a great river, without beginning or end. My tears came; once again their sources were replenished” (241). As anger leaves in its wake the feelings of helplessness and isolation, Duszejko is brought back to the all too familiar emotion of distress<sup>14</sup>, which, in her mind, constitutes the mirror opposite of anger (as was mentioned earlier, she associates sorrow with existential fear and the confusion of mind, both of which discourage action and foster passivity). Interestingly, even at this point, when Duszejko experiences helplessness and sorrow, she does not lose sight of her goals: in the scene following her expulsion from the church, she describes observing two magpies (“Fire-raisers” (241)), which, as she

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<sup>13</sup> “At extreme intensity, people become swept up in their anger, do things they might not otherwise do, and experience these acts as at least partially involuntary” (Potegal and Stemmler 5).

<sup>14</sup> Izard points to the connection between anger and distress: “individuals may feel some distress (sadness, discouragement) in anger situations because anger is so seldom expressed in openly satisfying and rewarding ways in our [Western] society” (333).



relates, made her aware of the course of action that she should undertake; that day she causes the biggest destruction yet, setting fire to the presbytery and killing the priest that she detests. This demonstrates that Duszejko's anger is both the impulsive and overpowering kind that she associates with being consumed by fire, and the "cold" kind, leading to rational planning and decision making aimed at exacting revenge on the wrongdoer.<sup>15</sup>

The notion of anger as retribution permeates Duszejko's conviction that one has the moral obligation to oppose injustice ("But the truth is that anyone who feels Anger, and does not take action, merely spreads the infection. So says our Blake" (65)). In this formulation, anger imposes on the subject an ethical imperative to act, which, in Duszejko's case, is so strong that it gives her a sense of mission (towards the end of the novel, having confessed to murdering three out of four men, she adds: "I wasn't lying when I kept insisting it was Animals taking revenge on people. That was the truth. I was their Tool" (257)). Indeed, as we learn at the end of the novel, she carried her weapons in her car at all times, which shows that she was forever ready to resort to physical violence – even killing – as the ultimate means to prove the soundness of her arguments.

*Drive Your Plow* ends with Duszejko more isolated than she was at the beginning of the novel. Helped by her friends to flee the police, she finds herself in a secure shelter in the Białowieża Forest in north-eastern Poland, where she is occasionally visited by Borys Sznajder, an entomologist with whom she lived for a brief while in her house in the Kłodzko Valley. While the novel ends with a life-affirming statement (claiming to know the hour of her death, she says: "I know I still have plenty of time" (268)), there is no denying the fact that, as a result of her life choices, she is now living a life apart from her friends and with slim prospects of joining them. By the end of the novel, her aloneness, no longer a token of her quirky idealism and positive maladjustment to an unjust society, points to her violent radicalism – a stance shared by no other characters besides her. By and large, her alienation is the result of her decision to transgress the moral code and aggress even in the name of a cause that is, in itself, laudable.

Duszejko's solitude is also a token of her failure to see the relational aspect of anger. Anger is, for her, an exclusively private emotion: neither

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<sup>15</sup> The notion of „cold anger” is mentioned by Zoltan Kovecses in his article on the cross-cultural experience of anger: “The notion of cold anger (retribution) as a rational act on the part of the angry person. It is this rational, as opposed to an emotional decision that is conceptualized as being ‘cold’” (172-3).

its agenda, nor its consequences are to be shared with others. This stance results from the intensity of this emotion: it seems that from the beginning of the novel Duszejko is resolved to exact a violent revenge on the hunters and knows well that it is pointless – indeed, dangerous – to share her goal with others, even with her friends. Having said this, it is surprising that despite being a vocal critic of violence towards animals and despite knowing people who would, in all likelihood, be sympathetic to her goals (for example her friend Dizzy, or Borys Sznajder), she is reluctant to share her outrage and thus fails to recognize this emotion's potent ability to connect people seeking to engage in meaningful and constructive action.

By the end of Tokarczuk's novel it becomes quite clear that Duszejko is herself one of the victims of her own anger. Despite her unquestionable insight into her emotions, it remains quite probable that her emphasis on anger as an overpowering force is a thinly-masked disguise for her inability to control this emotion, which ultimately results in the loss of control over her life. This failure of vision and her subsequent alienation from her friends serve to delegitimize the violence committed by Duszejko and to problematize her approach to anger, specifically her tendency to glorify this emotion. Insofar as it invites the readers to distance themselves from Duszejko's motivations and view them critically, *Drive Your Plow* cannot be termed radical despite the violence that it depicts; indeed, the novel is characterized by its strong assertion of the equal value of every life and its rejection of violence as a viable solution to social injustice.

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**"Tragiczna przypowieść o bezradności, gniewie i obywatelskim nieposłuszeństwie": Afektywne odczytanie powieści *Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych* Olgi Tokarczuk**

Artykuł stanowi odczytanie powieści *Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych* Olgi Tokarczuk z perspektywy afektywnej ekokrytyki. Pierwsza część tekstu skupia się na społeczno-politycznym uwarunkowaniu związanych z publikacją powieści Tokarczuk. Omówiona jest tu również koncepcja literatury, według której literatura daje możliwość doświadczenia catharsis w przeżywaniu emocji oraz, dzięki temu, lepszemu ich zrozumieniu. Powieść Tokarczuk koncentruje się na smutku i gniewie w szerszym kontekście debaty na temat protestu obywatelskiego i aktywizmu ekologicznego. Wiele miejsca w artykule poświęcone jest emocji gniewu, przeżywanego przez główną bohaterkę powieści, Janinę Duszejko. Ukazano, że Duszejko postrzega gniew poprzez pryzmat przekonania, że każdy człowiek jest moralnie zobligowany do przeciwstawienia się niesprawiedliwości. Jednakże akty przemocy, których dopuszcza się Duszejko, poddają w wątpliwość zasadność jej przekonania o gniewie, ukazując jej brak kontroli nad tą emocją.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Olga Tokarczuk, afektywna ekokrytyka, studia nad stosunkiem do zwierząt