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## The *Eco-Logic* of Olga Tokarczuk's Prose Worlds. Tenderness and Anger as the Pillars of a New Order\*

**Abstract:** In this paper, we offer a reading of selected novels by 2018 Nobel Prize winner Olga Tokarczuk in terms of their dedication to changing the world. We show that Tokarczuk's essays and fiction defy genre limits and invite readers to exercise their imagination in conceptualising the world and redefining values. The alternative modes of viewing reality proposed by Tokarczuk may provide a starting point for change, in which the synergy of ostensibly mutually exclusive tenderness and anger kindles hope in the times of crisis and inspires courage to embrace change and, in doing so, to use the opportune moment (*kairos*) and institute a new order – one based on justice for the bio-community.

**Keywords:** Olga Tokarczuk, tenderness, anger, bio-community, engagement

The popularity of Polish Nobel Prize winner Olga Tokarczuk's work does not seem to subside; on the contrary, her novel *Bieguni* (*Flights*) has made it to the one hundred best books of world literature as listed by the influential German weekly *Die Zeit*. While there is now just one book-length study of Tokarczuk's writings,<sup>1</sup> a number of Polish researchers time and again offer analyses of and insights into her work, looking at her texts through a variety of

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1. Katarzyna Kantner, *Jak działać za pomocą słów? Proza Olgi Tokarczuk jako dyskurs krytyczny* (Kraków: Universitas, 2019). In the wake of Tokarczuk's Nobel Prize, the Katowice-based journal *Postscriptum Polonistyczne* devoted an entire issue to her writing. See *Postscriptum Polonistyczne* 1, nr 25 (2020), *Olga Tokarczuk – Literacka Nagroda Nobla 2018*, [https://journals.us.edu.pl/index.php/PPol/issue/view/PS\\_P.2020.25.01](https://journals.us.edu.pl/index.php/PPol/issue/view/PS_P.2020.25.01) (11.05.2022).

lenses, such as the animal turn,<sup>2</sup> the post-human world,<sup>3</sup> symbiotic mycelium<sup>4</sup> and genre theory.<sup>5</sup>

Acclaimed by literature scholars, Tokarczuk's books are also appreciated by a sizeable readership comprising individuals who delight in unusual texts, seek engaging plots and value writers committed to exploring the problems of our times, diagnosing them insightfully and, above all, depicting practices that promote the perception of today's crises as opportunity rather than disaster alone. Combined with Tokarczuk's activism, her writing meets readers' expectations in this respect, and her abiding popularity rather explicitly bespeaks the social demand for literature topically engaged in our times and, at the same time, universal enough for its expiry date to exceed, and considerably, too, the spectacular success of individual volumes.

Surely, the right to engaged literature and engaged reading is what we covet most? If the humanities shook off "the aristocratic temperament in which the study of texts, rhetoric, philology, grammar, prosody and so forth had been anchored

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2. See Anna Barcz, "Próba reprezentowania zwierząt: 'Ostatnie historie' i pisarstwo Tokarczuk," in Anna Barcz, *Realizm ekologiczny. Od ekokrytyki do zookrytyki w literaturze polskiej* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Śląsk, 2016), 256–271; Joanna B. Bednarek, "Mroczna fanaberia. Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych Olgi Tokarczuk," in Przemysław Czapliński, Joanna B. Bednarek, and Dawid Gostyński, *Literatura i jej natury. Przewodnik ekokrytyczny dla nauczycieli i uczniów szkół średnich* (Poznań: Rys, 2017), 151–161; Anna Larenta, "Metamorficzność postaci w twórczości Olgi Tokarczuk," *Białostockie Studia Literaturoznawcze* 16 (2020), 83–113; Monika Sosnowska, "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)," *Academic Journal of Modern Philology* 5 (2022), 305–317, [https://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.ojs-doi-10\\_34616\\_ajmp\\_2022\\_15\\_23](https://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.ojs-doi-10_34616_ajmp_2022_15_23) (12.01.2022); Justyna Tabaszewska, "Empatyczny narrator. Upodmiotowienie zwierząt w prozie Olgi Tokarczuk," in Justyna Tabaszewska, *Humanistyka służebna. Negocjowanie pola i budowanie autonomii w dobie kryzysu* (Warszawa: IBL, 2022), 162–193.

3. Iwona Gralewicz-Wolny, "'Po człowieku?' 'Wizyta' Olgi Tokarczuk jako narracja antropoceniczna," *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia Poetica* 11 (2023), 313–325, <https://doi.org/10.24917/23534583.11.20> (12.10.2022); Klaudia Jakubowicz, "Problematyka śmieci w twórczości Olgi Tokarczuk," *Forum Poetyki* 24 (2021), 210–225, [http://fp.amu.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/KJakubowicz\\_ProblematykaSmieciWTworczosciOlgiTokarczuk\\_ForumPoetyki\\_24\\_2021.pdf](http://fp.amu.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/KJakubowicz_ProblematykaSmieciWTworczosciOlgiTokarczuk_ForumPoetyki_24_2021.pdf) (12.10.2022).

4. Anna Larenta, "Grzybnia jako metafora w twórczości Olgi Tokarczuk," *Białostockie Studia Literaturoznawcze* 13 (2018), 201–218, [https://repozytorium.uwb.edu.pl/jspui/bitstream/11320/8676/3/BSL\\_13\\_2018\\_A\\_Larenta\\_Grzybnia\\_jako\\_metafora.pdf](https://repozytorium.uwb.edu.pl/jspui/bitstream/11320/8676/3/BSL_13_2018_A_Larenta_Grzybnia_jako_metafora.pdf) (12.10.2022); Aleksandra Ubertowska, "Pisanie antropocenu z wnętrza grzybni. O prozie Olgi Tokarczuk," in Aleksandra Ubertowska, *Historie biotyczne. Pomiędzy estetyka a geotraumą* (Warszawa: IBL, 2020), 304–321.

5. Anna Hanus and Patryk Austin, "Olga Tokarczuk's *Flights* as an Example of Genre Transformation in the Contemporary Novel – A Linguistic and Literary View," *Tekst i Dyskurs* 16 (2022), 53–74.

for ages<sup>6</sup> and has effectively transformed into a discipline that studies and also produces what is often referred to as resistance – a “weapon of the weak” – literature has already practised that very approach for a long time.

Tokarczuk masterfully taps into this practice as she composes her polyphonic tales of suffering, resistance and revolt, with their protagonists bearing imprints of such experiences. Her characters are misfits, the excluded, minority members and those considered unworthy they are all given a voice with which to speak. This voice always resounds and resonates in ways that move beyond producing a story of (the lost) relations with the world and produce an idiom capable of nurturing the readers’ resilience.

We propose that an “eco-logic” is a good candidate for the supreme entry in the non-existent literary lexicon depicting Tokarczuk’s work. “Eco-logic” would denote a way of reflecting on dwelling well in the world together with other human and more-than-human beings, a mindset founded on environmental values and a mode of thought that locates *Homo sapiens* in the great network of life. Unlike ego-logical, in-bred, anthropocentric and hierarchical thinking, eco-logic would be an expression of relational and networking thought, encouraging splicing and connecting, showcasing unity and unfolding in non-contradictory multiplicity.

We comprehend the eco-logic of Tokarczuk’s prose worlds as founded on two central concepts of her writing. One of them is tenderness and the other is anger. They may be situated at the opposite poles of the latitude of affects, but they do not rule each other out. One reason why we believe that they are so pivotal is that they are what we miss most in today’s world. We are often disengaged, lukewarm and detached; we regard others without empathy. “The world is dying, and we are failing to notice,” Tokarczuk said in “The Tender Narrator,” her Nobel Lecture delivered on 7 December 2019.<sup>7</sup> The lecture was a eulogy of tenderness, with Tokarczuk emphatically insisting that tenderness is the principle of literature and makes it possible to perceive bonds, interdependences and mutualities.

Tokarczuk’s Nobel Lecture encouraged us to explore the concept of tenderness more attentively; while it is woven into the fabric of Tokarczuk’s writings, tenderness is still unexamined and it has hitherto gone largely unnoticed by scholars.<sup>8</sup> This may come as a surprise, given that a cursory glance at Tokarczuk’s work is

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6. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2021), 16.

7. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/tokarczuk/lecture/> (13.12.2023).

8. For the scanty discussions of tenderness in Tokarczuk, see Michał Klinger, “Hymn o czułości Olgi Tokarczuk – próba egzegezy,” *Konteksty Polska Sztuka Ludowa* 1–2 (2021), 65–73; Katarzyna Wądołny-Tatar, “Czułość hetero/auto/a/nomicznego narratora Olgi Tokarczuk,” *Litteraria Copernicana* 42, nr 2 (2022), 61–72.

enough to realise that her literary narratives and authorial commentaries have time and again evoked both tenderness and anger. The pronounced presence and the frequent reiterations of these concepts preclude ignoring them and, first and foremost, offer a new avenue to re-reading Tokarczuk's texts. The paper is thus an attempt to read Tokarczuk's selected novels through the lens of tenderness and anger, two key-words that open Tokarczuk's fiction and statements to other ways of reading the world.

### More Tenderly

As we already mentioned, at their center of Tokarczuk's world is the word "tenderness," of crucial importance for her works, not only used in all possible combinations there, but also elevated to the rank of a brand, a certain hallmark of her writing. It is not without a reason that she made it the centerpiece first of her Nobel Lecture and, a bit later, she used it as a spell of sorts to bind the themes of several essays included in her 2020 book entitled *The Tender Narrator*, just like the lecture.

The category that in a way binds almost all of Olga Tokarczuk's works becomes crucial for the reading of nearly all of her novels; moreover, it has gained staggering popularity as a buzzword in Polish (and not only Polish) literary studies since the time she used it in her Nobel Lecture. She delivered it wearing a black, slightly old-fashioned dress, evoking some associations with a corset, looking at her audience through spectacles with frames somewhat reminiscent of the 19th century, and confessed, as if in spite of the mask she had donned for that very evening important both for her and for literature:

All my life I've been fascinated by the systems of mutual connections and influences of which we are generally unaware, but which we discover by chance, as surprising coincidences or convergences of fate, all those bridges, nuts, bolts, welded joints and connectors that I followed in *Flights*. I'm fascinated by associating facts, and by searching for order. At base – as I am convinced – the writer's mind is a synthetic mind that doggedly gathers up all the tiny pieces in an attempt to stick them together again to create a universal whole. How are we to write, how are we to structure our story to make it capable of raising this great, constellation form of the world?<sup>9</sup>

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9. Olga Tokarczuk, "Czuły narrator" [The Tender Narrator, in Olga Tokarczuk], *Czuły narrator* [*The Tender Narrator*] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2020), 280.

The tender narrator is thus supposed to accommodate the whole cacophony of voices, and by filtering it through their own sensitivity, create a story which will bring closer distant worlds/narratives and, in this way, also people. Thus, according to Tokarczuk, narrating has much in common with the concept of *tikkun*, crucial to Jewish mysticism, namely that of repairing the distorted world, similar to a cracked clay jug: it requires a caring hand/story to restore, at least for a moment, the shape it lost. Contexts related to Jewish mysticism are inevitably evoked by the words of the writer who, five years before the Nobel Prize, published the monumental *The Books of Jacob*, an epic of sorts which portrays the charismatic Jew Jacob Frank as a rebel preaching subversive theories supposed to challenge the ancient order.

However, the tender narrator's totalizing gaze, aiming after all at providing a broad, panoramic mosaic of a story, does not ignore the individual, it is attentive to the concrete, as it is precisely in the detail – in the butterfly effect – that the enchanted narrative power should be sought. The collection of such details forms the constellations Tokarczuk mentioned, and seeing the connections between them requires special insight, trained through empathy and gratitude. The writer unashamedly practices this sport, and she admits it publicly. She does so at the moment of receiving the Nobel Prize when she pays homage to her predecessors, and specifically to one of them: the writer who received this most prestigious award in 1909, one hundred years before Tokarczuk. It was obviously Selma Lagerlöf, the first woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, to whom Tokarczuk, during her Nobel Banquet speech, would “bow low [...] across time.”<sup>10</sup> This affinity of sorts between women, Tokarczuk's gratitude towards her predecessor, as well as a certain mysterious intertwining of destinies and sensitivities, perhaps explain to some extent why the writer chose to wear a dress in the 19th-/early 20th-century style.

The desire for a totalizing gaze accomplished through the refined construction of the narrator was expressed by Tokarczuk herself, who admitted that despite the considerable time difference between the publication of *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* and *The Books of Jacob*, the novels were not only written together, but also shared a methodology:

[...] I set up two tables to work at. On one, I had the notes for *Plow*, while on the other, I spread out the maps, drawings and books related to *The Books of Jacob*. Initially, I tried to get a grasp on the enormous amount of material I had. As my imagination is

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10. <https://oko.press/naprawde-wygralysmy-nobla-olga-tokarczuk-z-przeslaniem-do-kobiet> (5.10.2021).

visual and spatial, I spent my evenings drawing maps and diagrams, family trees and travel itineraries.<sup>11</sup>

To see everything – this is imperative both for Tokarczuk’s narrator and for the characters she created: Yente and Duszejko. To meet this condition, Yente’s body must merge with the cosmos in an almost metaphysical way, while Duszejko’s body, while remaining within the boundaries of reality, must participate in the observation of phenomena which requires a change of perspective to be captured. This tuning in to different ways of seeing things takes place in spaces which are unspectacular, though not alien to laboratory practices. In the case of the protagonist of *Drive Your Plow*, it is the kitchen, a space culturally attributed to women, it is a laboratory where the fullness of the universe is experienced:

This is how I’d spend my evenings: I’d sit at the big kitchen table and devote myself to my favourite occupation. Here on the table sat the laptop Dizzy gave me, though I only ever used a single programme. Here were my Ephemerides, some notepaper, and a few books. [...] I was curious to know if the date of a Person’s death can be seen in their Horoscope. Death in a Horoscope. What does it look like? How does it manifest itself? Which planets play the role of the Fates? Down here, in the world of Urizen, the laws apply. From the starry sky down to moral conscience. These are strict laws, without mercy and without exception. As there is an order of Births, why should there not be an order of Deaths? In all these years I have gathered 1042 dates of birth and 999 dates of death, and my minor research is still in progress. A project without funding from the European Union. A kitchen-table project.<sup>12</sup>

Although Tokarczuk herself admits that the character of Duszejko was based on her neighbor, an architect and an artist, “there was more than one motif [...] underlying the idea of the lonely, subversive, though gentle woman.”<sup>13</sup> One cannot resist the impression that the palimpsest structure of Duszejko will allow the reader to find other tropes too, for instance, autobiographical hints connected with the table (*axis mundi*), the space around which both Tokarczuk’s and Duszejko’s intellectual work is centered. Both form constellations, contrasting their flickering, fusional, deep and dynamic nature against the static world of Urizen. In order

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11. Olga Tokarczuk, “Psychologia literackiego stwarzania świata. Jak powstały *Księgi Jakubowe*” [Psychology of Literary Creation of the World. How *The Books of Jacob* Were Written], *Czuły narrator*, 194–195.

12. Olga Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2018), 46–48.

13. Olga Tokarczuk, “Przypadek Duszejko. Postacie literackie” [The Case of Duszejko. Literary Characters], *Czuły narrator*, 194–214.

to conclude that “[d]own here, in the world of Urizen, the laws apply,”<sup>14</sup> insight is required into what is found above. It turns out to be at the disposal of Duszejko, an aged woman who withdrew from the center of the world to its outskirts. Not only does the protagonist’s reference to Urizen place the novel in the context of William Blake’s philosophy and poetry (after all, the very title of the book alludes to Blake’s work), but, above all, it clearly defines the space of the dispute in which Duszejko participates. Challenging one of the four faces of humanity (Urizen, portrayed by Blake as a blind old man writing books), the woman opposes the order established by Urizen, limited to rules serving only the privileged.<sup>15</sup> It is worth mentioning at this point that the name Urizen is either a combination of two English words, “Your Reason,” or comes from the ancient Greek word meaning “to limit.” It consequently comes as no surprise that Duszejko challenges him to a duel in the name of freedom, in fact not her own but that of others, proving she is closer to other faces of humanity Blake indicated: Luvah (love, emotions), and Urthona (creative imagination). Duszejko seems to speak up for the “other possibilities” we have mentioned, recalling the term used by Brenda Hillman.

They are manifested in a slogan “(ex)centricity” proposed by Tokarczuk, which shortly after its proclamation turned out to be an essential word opening up “other possibilities” of understanding the contemporary world. Tokarczuk’s compelling article “Człowiek na krańcach świata” [Humans on the Edge of the World], published in *Polityka*, a popular Polish weekly, starts from a casual description of the engraving by an unknown artist depicting a pilgrim reaching the end of the earthly realm,<sup>16</sup> published in 1888 by the French astronomer Camille Flammarion, and demonstrates that we have found ourselves in a kairotic<sup>17</sup> moment, offering an opportunity for transformation, yet on one condition, we have to

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14. Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, 48.

15. Urizen can be considered to have become personified in William Blake’s painting depicting Newton. The scientist, sitting on a rock, attentively draws some lines, so absorbed by the task that he remains unmoved by how wonderful the world is. According to scholars, the painting reflects Blake’s skepticism about the values promoted by the Enlightenment, and Newton himself is “a misguided hero, a proponent of mere atheism, bringing not light [...] but greater darkness.” Julia Fiedorczuk and Gerardo Beltrán, *Ekopoetyka/Ecopoética/Ecopoetics. Ekologiczna obrona poezji/Una defensa ecológica de la poesía/An ecological “defence of poetry”* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2015), 201.

16. <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/spoleczenstwo/1972652,1,czlowiek-na-krańcach-swiata-wyjatkowy-esej-olgi-tokarczuk-w-polityce.read>.

17. The adjective “kairotic” comes from the Greek god Kairos. The term “kairos” depicts the time favourable for decision making, an important time one shall not neglect. For more on the kairotic time, see Amélie F. Benedikt, “On Doing the Right Thing at the Right Time: Toward an Ethics of Kairos,” in *Rhetoric and Kairos Essay in History, Theory and Praxis*, ed. Philip Sipiora and James S. Baumlin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 226–236.



acknowledge that the rift appearing in unsealed time (*chronos*), demanding our readiness, calls upon us to abandon the centric point of view, the well-trodden paths of thinking and acting, to go beyond the areas which are well known and, as it were, agreed upon by the community habits of thought, ritual, and stabilized worldviews.<sup>18</sup> Thus, (ex)-centricity, understood as leaning out of the center, enables a different presence in the world than the one practiced so far, legitimized by the opposition against conformism and hypocrisy, and constituting “a kairotic act of courage, of seizing the moment and changing the trajectory of destiny.”<sup>19</sup> In order to leave the center, one should renounce, just like the pilgrim from the engraving mentioned by Tokarczuk, the position occupied so far: stop, kneel down, question the pilgrim’s attributes (the walking stick, the leather sack, the pilgrim’s hat), and with them waive the pilgrim’s immunity, providing protection of sorts against the dangers lurking out there, waiting for those who wander. Losing all this, one should learn how to accept the gift of uncertainty, as well as that of the dazzling novelty experienced by the pilgrim in the engraving placed in Flammarion’s work, peering under the outer shell of the world as if he were looking behind a theatrical scenery. In this kairotic moment, the pilgrim is one of the *ex-centric*s able to stick his head out, outside the boundaries of the established order, consequently representing those who stand in contrast to Urizen because they are able to see the world in its entirety due to their unique competence. This particular competence is *ognozja* [*o-gnosis*], a neologism proposed by Tokarczuk, a key word opening up a discussion on a new vocabulary of terms making it possible to set innovative trajectories in rethinking the world in the 21st century in the context of a long list of crises and an even longer list of tasks to be performed to mitigate them when they can no longer be prevented.<sup>20</sup> Thus, *o-gnosis* is “a cognitive process which, by reflecting objects, situations and phenomena, attempts to organize them into a higher interdependent sense. Colloquially speaking, it is the ability to approach problems synthetically by seeking order both in narratives as such and in details, the small parts of the greater whole [...]”<sup>21</sup>

This particular ability of looking at the world and, consequently, of a particular form of participating in it, is something Duszajko is a depository of. She owes

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18. Olga Tokarczuk, “Człowiek na krańcach świata” [Humans on the Edge of the World], *Polityka* (30 Sep.–6 Oct. 2020), 29.

19. Tokarczuk, “Człowiek na krańcach świata.”

20. Tokarczuk’s call for a new vocabulary met with keen interest. Several intellectuals have accepted the challenge, proposing further terms to trigger reflection on certain constructs we have become accustomed to overly easily. Apart from *o-gnosis*, terms that dismantle their consistency include, for instance, *ekowerwa* [*environmental vigor*], *po-wolność* [*slow and caring sustainability*], *senelas* [*joyous experience of one’s being in nature*].

21. Tokarczuk, “Człowiek na krańcach świata,” 30.



an *o-gnostic* view of the world, first, to the conviction that its flickering sense is revealed in constellations, which she passionately studies at the kitchen table, and, second, the sense is unconcealed thanks to the attentive beholder. This is in fact a quality the protagonist could well bestow on others. To see more, she climbs a hill:

I decided that today, despite the pain, I'd go up the slope and survey the world from above. Everything was sure to be in its place. Maybe that would calm me down, loosen my throat, and I'd feel better. [...] The scenery that opened before me was composed of shades of black and white, and of trees woven together in lines along the boundaries between the fields. [...] I could see the beautiful geometric shapes of fields, strips and rectangles, each with a different texture, each with its own shade, sloping at different angles towards the rapid winter Dusk. And our houses, all seven, were scattered here like a part of nature, as if they had sprung up with the field boundaries [...] I too could have sketched a map from memory. On it our Plateau would have the shape of a fat crescent moon, enclosed on one side by the Silver Mountains – a fairly small, fairly low range that we share with the Czech Republic – and on the other, Polish side, by the White Hills. [...] I love crossing borders.<sup>22</sup>

The mindfulness and the *ex-centric* positioning of the beholder (as Duszejko admits: she likes crossing borders) make it possible to activate the language of architecture and apply it to the landscape. The description of the latter resembles a *veduta* – tangible proof of genius of the architect who made the law that everything is interconnected by the guiding principle of the act of creation. The human presence, mapped by houses looking like building blocks, seems so firmly rooted in the narrative of nature that it essentially appears irremovable. The astonishing philanthropy of nature makes the traces of human living a phenomenon certainly worth noting, if not outright special. This unusual experience, requiring one to lean out of the traditional positions, in other words, what was referred to above as *ex-centricity*, convincingly suggests that beauty is not only in the eye of the beholder having special receptors of sensitivity, but that nature itself is also founded on tenderness. The Earth perceived from this point of view is definitely not Urizen's homeland. Duszejko and the pilgrim depicted in the engraving, just like William Blake, wake up from the "Newtonian dream," yet not to challenge the legitimacy of bringing everything down to a well-wound-up clockwork, or to affirm humans as the crown of creation. On the contrary, the incorporation into experience of the viewpoint of Duszejko's mindfulness and

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22. Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, 41–43.

sensitivity proves that the opportunity offered by *kairos* is not wasted; actually, it makes the hope for metanoia more likely to be fulfilled. After all, the stakes are high. The Earth's tenderness experienced by Duszejko may mean that evolution, as Henryk Skolimowski, the founder of ecological philosophy, argues, "could articulate itself in a new way, create knowledge about itself, create an aesthetic view of itself, create a spiritual contemplation of itself."<sup>23</sup> Humans, as a spiritual contemplation of the Cosmos, are a revolutionary project in that their existence should, by definition, be *ex-centric*: deviating from the anthropocentric trajectory and oriented towards the world. Abandoning the anthropocentric point of view conditions, firstly, the realization of the essence of humanity and, secondly, the fulfilment of the laws of the Cosmos: "We are a part of the Cosmos, which celebrates itself through the richness of the inner life given to us."<sup>24</sup>

Duszejko seems to understand her duty and takes the stance of a sensitive observer, of the tender narrator Tokarczuk calls for. She withdraws from the world. The reader learns that the woman, who used to work as an architect, built bridges in the past, and her artefacts scattered around the world would prove her extraordinary ability to cross borders and, perhaps, also certain conquistador-like ambitions. In the designing of bridges, structures that unite and set out new trajectories, one can see an anticipation of the protagonist's future life: her new task will no longer consist in connecting distant spaces, but in bringing seemingly distant beings closer to one another. After returning from the great big world, Duszejko settles into a small hamlet: "Our hamlet consists of a few houses situated on the Plateau, far from the rest of the world. [...] All you can see on the map is a road and a few houses, no letters."<sup>25</sup> One could say that the woman transforms from a pilgrim (a *flight*?) into a hermit whose life follows the rhythm of nature. In this respect, she slightly resembles the protagonists of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* or from *The Wall*, even though her experiences are far from the symbolic representations of the experience of the woman from Annie Dillard's voluminous contemplations of nature or Marlen Haushofer's novel. Duszejko who lives in the hamlet is like the wise man Frédéric Gros writes about: "The sage has now renounced everything and attained the highest level of freedom: that of perfect detachment. He is no longer involved, either in himself or in the world. [...] when we renounce everything that everything is given to us, in abundance. Everything: meaning the intensity of presence itself."<sup>26</sup> However, Duszejko adds

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23. Henryk Skolimowski and Jan Konrad Górecki, *Zielone oko Kosmosu. Wokół ekofilozofii w rozmowie i esejach* [The Green Eye of the Cosmos. Around Ecophilosophy in Conversation and Essays] (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Atla 2, 2003), 107.

24. Skolimowski and Górecki, *Zielone oko Kosmosu*, 161.

25. Tokarczuk, "Człowiek na krańcach świata," 30.

26. Frédéric Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking*, trans. John Howe (New York: Verso, 2014).

yet another imperative to presence, somewhat at odds with the programmatic non-involvement of the hermit's life. The woman "taking advantage," as it were, of her presence, of participating in space or of playing a role in the landscape, makes herself responsible for the place where she lives. It is not without a reason that she initially earns her living by keeping an eye on holiday homes that demand attention when their owners abandon them at summer's end. Becoming a guardian of this small space located on the windswept Plateau, Duszejko watches over the established order, although she herself does not possess much. Her condition is defined otherwise, not by possessions, but by her concern for what simply exists. This makes her a caregiver rather than an owner, and it is this perspective that defines her relationship towards the world.

The protagonist of Tokarczuk's novel is to some extent the eye of the Cosmos, subjecting the world to a passionate reading that would not have been possible without mindfulness. This, together with *o-gnosis*, allow Duszejko to observe that "the Plateau is a distant geological cousin of the Table Mountains, their remote harbinger," as well as encourage original hypotheses and a reflection on the relational character of nature, including inanimate nature. Not only are all things connected with one another, but they seem to be waiting for a tender and mindful exegete. This methodology of tenderness and mindfulness has in fact already been adapted by scientists, the creators of the mineral evolution theory, one of the numerous concepts responsible for a geological turnaround also in the humanities. The theory proposed by Robert M. Hazen changes the traditional approach to minerals. Leaving aside their chemical and physical composition, previously focused on as most important in the studied material, Hazen introduces a chronology and thus makes it possible to recognize affinity between the individual minerals. As a result of such a procedure, it is possible to create mineral histories of environments,<sup>27</sup> which in turn unite social history and natural history after their incorporation into the network of relationships. Duszejko does perceive family connections between mountain massifs; what is more, she actually practices human-mineral community herself: "I always passed him the salt cellar, because I have a Theory that salt is very good for the transmission of nerve impulses across the synapses. And he learned to plunge a saliva-coated finger into it, and then lick off the salt."<sup>28</sup>

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27. Cf. Monika Bakke, "Gdy stawka jest większa niż życie. Sztuka wobec mineralno-biologicznych wspólnot" [When There's More than Life at Stake. Art vis-à-vis Mineral-Biological Communities], *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2020), 165–185. The scholar rightly demands that mineral species be included in the "companion species" described by Donna Haraway, as we form a material-mineral community with them.

28. Tokarczuk, "Człowiek na krańcach świata," 87.

It can therefore be assumed that mindfulness in Tokarczuk's novel is linked to tenderness. The author allows her protagonist to erect an ethical structure with strong foundations on these two notions, the structure ordering one to stand up in defense of the weakest and those whose tongues cannot be heard. Tenderness and mindfulness can thus be treated as Duszejko's moral guide condensed to a minimum.<sup>29</sup>

### What If That Is Not Enough?

This is when anger appears. Anger, along with tenderness, is a core category in the world of Tokarczuk's prose. According to the writer, these two emotions are not binary. They are rather part of the same *continuum* – commitment, participation in an event, a process, a relationship.<sup>30</sup> They also provide, in our opinion, a basis for hope that can engage people in action for the sake of a more just world. Why is it important for these categories to intertwine? Tenderness, without anger leading to action, can produce the opposite states – hopelessness, despair and apathy. Anger without tenderness, on the other hand, can pose a threat to appropriate relationships. Separately, therefore, they seem to provide an insufficient basis for hope. However, the hope discussed here is not of that simple kind, limited to the formula that “everything will be fine” and “things will work out somehow.” Remaining in hope<sup>31</sup> is rather a perspective of a view on reality that prompts solutions and triggers activity. Consequently, hope gives appropriate meaning. Our impression is that Tokarczuk's writing carries precisely this sense of (new?) meaningfulness.

In *Drive Your Plow*, anger appears mainly as a path leading to action out of concern for the weaker, for the suffering or for those excluded from the human community.<sup>32</sup> Acting in anger, however, is not gentle, peaceful or conflict-free.

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29. Tokarczuk defines mindfulness in a similar way. See Olga Tokarczuk, “Światy bizarne” [Bizarre Worlds], *Tygodnik Powszechny*, special issue “Mistrzynie i mistrzowie prezentują: Dobre życie” 2 (2020), 7–10.

30. Katarzyna Kantner, “Olga Tokarczuk: Nie mam jeszcze poczucia kresu czy spełnienia. Wszystko zaskakująco zostało po staremu” [Olga Tokarczuk: I Don't Feel a Sense of End or Fulfilment Yet. Everything Has Remained the Same, Surprisingly], *Wysokie Obcasy* (13 Nov. 2020), <https://www.wysokieobcasy.pl/wysokie-obcasy/7,157211,26508010,olga-tokarczuk.html?disable-Redirects=true> (5.10.2021).

31. Cf. Rebecca Solnit on hopefulness. Solnit, *Hope in the Dark. Untold Stories, Wild Possibilities* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).

32. The subject of human-animal relations is particularly important to Olga Tokarczuk, and she has often expressed this in her writing, for example in *The Moment of the Bear*, in *Flights*, and in *Final Stories*, as well as in various statements and opinion journalism texts. The author states

The main protagonist's anger<sup>33</sup> constitutes the reverse of sympathy, it becomes the driving force that leads the main character and narrator, Janina Duszejko, to fight for a fair law for all non-human beings. For this struggle, Tokarczuk used the archetype of the avenger, setting it in a genre, the eco-crime novel, but in a way that does not follow entirely the conventions of the crime novel as such. *Drive Your Plow* is more of a pastiche and at times a parody of the genre (the avenger here is an old age pensioner "normal in her very own special way" fighting against the hunting and poaching mafia in the Polish reality<sup>34</sup>), used to describe an investigation of a case more important than the criminal offence as such: "[I]t is not about the killing, but about the right to kill."<sup>35</sup>

A certain prototype of Duszejko can be found in yet another "angry" literary protagonist, one of the characters in *Flights*.<sup>36</sup> Aleksandra, the stranger from Stockholm airport, is busy writing humanity's confessions, "Reports on Infamy," in which no crime perpetrated against animals from the very beginning of the world will be omitted. Her penetrating gaze, which we mentioned earlier in the context of the tender narrator and observer, makes it possible to see the death of a forest in the oak parquet of the Stockholm airport building, and in the Adoration of the Mystic Lamb, to recognize that "the true God is an animal. He's in animals, so close that we don't notice."<sup>37</sup>

In the aforementioned *Tender Narrator*, Tokarczuk admits that *Drive Your Plow* is a certain laboratory of anger, that is, a study of its taming, of viewing it from different perspectives, and, finally, of applying it in practice: "[T]he most important [...] work Mrs. Duszejko allowed me to do involved taking a close look at one of the most important human emotions – anger."<sup>38</sup> In Tokarczuk's prose, this emotion is not collective but individual. It stems, if one were to use the

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that the exclusion of non-human beings occurs due to the absence of laws defending animals (for instance with regard to the difference between poaching and hunting).

33. The novel has received many critical reviews. Among Polish studies, the following books deserve attention: Anna Barcz, *Realizm ekologiczny. Od ekokrytyki do zookrytyki w literaturze polskiej* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Naukowe „Śląsk,” 2016), and Przemysław Czapliński, Joanna B. Bednarek, and Dawid Gostyński, *Literatura i jej natury. Przewodnik ekokrytyczny dla nauczycieli i uczniów szkół średnich* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Rys, 2017).

34. Eliza Kącka, "Dar bogini" [Gift of the Goddess], *Znak* (Apr. 2020), 11.

35. Czapliński, Bednarek, and Gostyński, *Literatura i jej natury*.

36. Olga Tokarczuk, *Flights*, trans. Jennifer Croft (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017), subsection: The Book of Infamy.

37. Tokarczuk, *Flights*. Proof of this, according to the character Aleksandra, can be found in the Ghent Altarpiece. The Adoration of the Mystical Lamb is a polyptych by Dutch masters Hubertus and Jan van Eyck. The Lamb is a sacrificial animal, exhibited in a butchering spectacle, played out in a setting indifferent to its pain.

38. Olga Tokarczuk, *Czuly narrator [Tender Narrator]* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2020), 225.

writer's own term, already well-known to us, from the "ex-centricity of thinking," which condemns the protagonist to incomprehension, to loneliness and, as a consequence, to social exclusion as a woman who is senile, angry, and, in addition, engaged in the defense of animals.<sup>39</sup> In these excluding descriptions, it is hard to avoid comparisons to another fictional character, the 70-year-old writer Elizabeth Costello from *The Lives of Animals* by J. M. Coetzee,<sup>40</sup> whose lectures failed to find understanding in the scientific community. Tokarczuk repeatedly refers to this reading in her essays. Using Coetzee's idea, she constructs a character similar to Costello.<sup>41</sup> This character is Duszejko, whom she uses to communicate content in defense of animals. Thus, Duszejko formulates a message dear to Tokarczuk herself: she points to errors in the interpretation of the law (for instance, the differences between hunting and poaching), compares hunting stands placed in the forest or in the field to guard towers in concentration camps, and admits that humans put themselves above other beings.

The personality of Duszejko, the "old woman," is made to appear deliberately sharper and exaggerated through her anger and empathy, and the protagonist's power is revealed in her activity. Her anger, but also her concern for Others, places her among the wise, courageous and just heroic women. Referring to the origin of this emotion, she herself eventually admits that her name should be "Divine Anger." Thus, the protagonist sees herself as an executor of something higher, of the non-human and, by virtue, this belief legitimizes her actions.

Anger is conducive to constructive action, and in Tokarczuk's case, this is associated not so much with the emotional layer as with rationality, although in the philosophical reflection of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, anger is treated as a passion situated in the irrational sphere of the soul.<sup>42</sup> With Tokarczuk, however, it is different. The writer refutes the traditional accusation against anger, namely, that it darkens the mind. On the contrary, anger is similar to a compass because it makes it possible to figure out what is going on and choose the right direction. In this sense, being angry is more an intellectual than an emotional attitude, a cognitive rather than an emotional category<sup>43</sup>: "Anger makes the mind clear and incisive, able to see more. It sweeps up the other emotions and takes control

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39. Katarzyna Kantner writes about the discourses of exclusion in the only Polish monograph so far on the Nobel Prize winner so far. See Katarzyna Kantner, *Jak działać za pomocą słów? Proza Olgi Tokarczuk jako dyskurs krytyczny* [How to Act Using Words? Olga Tokarczuk as a Critical Discourse] (Kraków: Universitas, 2019).

40. Cf. John Maxwell Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

41. These similarities are also pointed out by Kantner in *Jak działać za pomocą słów?*, 75.

42. Janusz Królikowski, "Czy gniew zawsze jest grzechem?" [Is Wrath Always a Sin?], *Verbum Vitae* 33 (2018), 445–461.

43. Tokarczuk spoke similarly about tenderness.

of the body. Without a doubt Anger is the source of all wisdom, for Anger has the power to exceed any limits.<sup>44</sup>

With her activity and her philosophical tirades, Duszejko precisely explains what this emotion essentially is and where it leads. It brings clarity of mind and composure that gives wisdom. Anger is usually accompanied by a wide range of bodily changes, dynamic gestures, and an altered skin color. The referenced statement, however, shows that it plays a clarifying role in the situation and provides the strength needed to control the body. It is worth adding that the words about the rationality of cognition when getting angry are uttered in the most difficult situation for the animal defender in the novel, in which she loses her dearest creatures. The protagonist learns of the murder of her dogs when she accidentally finds a hunting photo in the house of her neighbor, a man she calls Big Foot. She notes that the photograph also depicts dead bodies of animals she looked after over the years.

It is not difficult to notice that although anger is referred to as a divine emotion, inaction – as a consequence of anger’s influence – is criticized in the protagonist’s statements numerous times. “But the truth is that anyone who feels Anger, and does not take action, merely spreads the infection,”<sup>45</sup> says the protagonist, referring to the words of William Blake. Blake’s words provide, in fact, a motto for her actions and often open different chapters of the novel.

In Tokarczuk’s case, we deal with what Martha Nussbaum calls “Transition Anger.”<sup>46</sup> This term perfectly matches the description of Duszejko’s feelings:

At that point I felt a surge of Anger, genuine, not to say Divine Anger. It flooded me from inside in a burning hot wave. This energy made me feel great, as if it were lifting me off the ground, a mini Big Bang within the universe of my body. There was fire burning within me, like a neutron star. [...] It was a state I recognized – that same state of clarity, divine Wrath, terrible and unstoppable. I could feel my legs itching, and fire pouring into my blood from somewhere, and my blood flowing quickly, carrying this fire to my brain, and now my brain was glowing brightly, my fingertips were filling with fire, and so was my face, and it felt as if my entire body were being flooded by a bright aura, gently raising me upwards, tearing me free of the ground.<sup>47</sup>

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44. Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, 25.

45. Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, 47.

46. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness. Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6. The definition of “Transition Anger” can be summed up in the statement “How outrageous. Something should be done about that.”

47. Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, 128.



The state of capitalized anger is similar to rapture fueled up by fervor and commitment, and in itself provides an opportunity to achieve mental clarity. The body subjected to the affect of anger is engulfed by an aura and by the ability to see the world from a different perspective – a wider bird’s-eye view. Nor is anger a state of aggression, although of course it drives the protagonist to engage in direct fighting and, ultimately, to mete out justice by committing murders. She herself, however, finds justification for her impulsive reaction, citing the killing of “living Creatures” as its valid reason: “I behaved angrily, not aggressively. There’s a difference. I expressed my Anger because they were killing Animals.”<sup>48</sup>

We, the readers, tend to justify her and her actions performed in anger. Duszejko’s anger has something in it of zealous anger, of noble anger and of necessity, for it helps to seek justice, and its reverse is an attitude of sympathy for non-human beings, of concern for the weaker ones, unable to defend themselves, and standing up for a biocommunity whose members will be treated on an equal footing.

Although anger was supposed to act as a signal, it was trivialized and thus “immobilized.” In one interview, Tokarczuk explains how anger works and what its consequences are: “The easiest way to provoke anger in a person is precisely by immobilizing them”<sup>49</sup> (and we know in fact that mobility in the world of Tokarczuk’s fiction is fundamental, while immobilizing a person is tantamount nearly to killing them). As Duszejko argues, the procedures acceptable under the human law have failed, the legally available measures have been exhausted, and priests and police officers, the institutional guardians of morality among people, have fallen short of the expectations. The escalation of images of violence and suffering as well as feeling animals’ pain made the main protagonist act differently than she used to. Faced with “immobilization,” the advocate for a change in reality chooses the only possible direction she can pursue, stemming from a particular logic, an *eco*-logic, as well as constituting the basis for a coherent idea formulated by the protagonist and, consequently, for concrete actions motivated by tenderness and empathy.

At the time of writing this article, Poland is in the period of the largest-scale women’s strikes in the country’s history. They take place against the backdrop of a global pandemic, of war in Ukraine and the Middle East, of a climate catastrophe and are getting stronger. Watching all this, we realize that we are currently facing

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48. Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, 250.

49. Kantner, “Olga Tokarczuk: Nie mam jeszcze poczucia kresu czy spełnienia. Wszystko zaskakująco zostało po staremu” [Olga Tokarczuk: I Don’t Feel a Sense of End or Fulfilment Yet. Everything Has Remained the Same, Surprisingly].

completely new challenges. “There is something wrong with the world,”<sup>50</sup> we repeat after the Nobel Prize winner. One thing is certain in the chaos in which we have come to live. In these turbulent, but also watershed times, it is impossible to live without hope, or without words (perhaps slightly archaic ones) which Tokarczuk re-turns into the circulation in speech and new stories. These words that bring hope, seen from the *ex-centric*, post-human perspective, are simply a different point of view from the one we so strongly cling to, and they include the following: community, tenderness, care, responsibility, empathy with the world of living creatures, but also anger, rebellion, and action, whose movement is a metonymy. All these terms should form a new vocabulary, which will include the key words of Olga Tokarczuk’s prose as well as the bases of a language alternative to the one currently in force. It will most certainly be the language of the new human, *homo ecologicus*, subscribing to a new order, an order turned green. After all, at the core of ecology (from the Greek *oikos*) lies the concern for the good inhabitation of our common home.

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