

Małgorzata Poks

University of Silesia
malgorzatapoks@us.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0003-0055-935X

“A Relative, Really; Disturbingly Similar”: Nonhuman Animals in the Works of Olga Tokarczuk

The winner of the Nobel Prize in literature for a “narrative imagination that with encyclopedic passion represents the crossing of boundaries as a form of life,”¹ Olga Tokarczuk has been gravitating towards the “monstrous” body that complicates clear-cut species and gender boundaries. Her fascination with the excessive, the impure, the hybrid stems from her distrust—confirmed by her psychological training—of normativities and simplistic understandings of the undisciplined profusion of life. To Tokarczuk, the “freaks” displayed to the curious in the circuses or country fairs of yesteryear and to the “more cultured” in the cabinets of the museums of natural history hold the key to a more profound truth about the evolutionary origin, the common nature, and the potential future of all life. Dismantling the fiction of the human-animal divide, hybrid bodies contest the idea of human exceptionalism and our species’ mandate to “subdue” the earth, along with all the nonhuman life-forms that inhabit it. Most recently, neuroscience and new materialisms have revalorized the intuitions of premodern societies about the agency of nonhuman animals as well as their intelligence, perhaps even their awareness of the supernatural. On the whole, nonhuman animals are now widely believed to exhibit features of

¹ Jane Goodall, referred to in Olga Tokarczuk, *Moment niedźwiedzia* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2012), 52. Unless otherwise stated, translation of all Polish sources by Małgorzata Poks. Whenever available, I will quote from the existing English translations of Tokarczuk’s works.

sovereignty, which deflates the human animal claim to exceptionality. They are, as Tokarczuk puts it, “disturbingly similar”² to us.

Known for her active involvement in animal anti-cruelty campaigns, Tokarczuk sensed that “an animal is a kind of disguise” as early as in her childhood. As she writes, it was then that she began to intuit under the animals’ “hairy muzzles and beaks” the presence of “someone else,” someone close and familiar.³ To this day she is:

more tolerant of human than animal suffering. Humans have their own, elaborate, publicized far and wide ontological status, which makes them a privileged species. They have their rationalizations and sublimations. They have their God who will save them in the end. Human suffering is meaningful. For animals there is no consolation, no relief, because no salvation awaits them. Their suffering is without meaning. Their bodies do not belong to them. They have no souls. Animal suffering is absolute, total. [...] When we try to inquire into this state of affairs with empathy, endowed with our reflective capability as we are, the entire horror of animal suffering will be revealed to us, and with it the terrifying, unendurable horror of the world.⁴

To see the face behind the animal mask, to see animals as both incomprehensible and incomprehensibly close to humans,⁵ empathy is a *sine qua non*. Arguably, it was the gift and the curse of empathy—understood as the ability to identify with the pain and suffering as well as the joys of all two-, four-, and no-legged beings—that made Tokarczuk into the tender narrator she is, a writer who sees “the world as being alive, living, interconnected, cooperating with, and codependent on itself.”⁶

This article will foreground Tokarczuk’s art of tenderness as manifested in her repeated attempts to reveal the face behind the animal mask. Since the animal question in *Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych*, 2009 [Published in English as *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, 2019], the author’s most activist, animal-centered novel, has received much criti-

² Tokarczuk, *Ostatnie historie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2004), 113. Further in the text “nonhuman animal” and “human animal” will be replaced by the shorter forms “animal” and “human” respectively.

³ Tokarczuk, *Moment niedźwiedzia*, 52.

⁴ Tokarczuk, *Moment niedźwiedzia*, 31.

⁵ Tokarczuk, *Moment niedźwiedzia*, 53.

⁶ Olga Tokarczuk, *Nobel Lecture by Olga Tokarczuk: Nobel Laureate in Literature 2018* (Svenska Akademien, 2019), 24, <https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2019/12/tokarczuk-lecture-english-2.pdf>.

cal attention⁷, I have decided to leave it out of my analysis, reserving the right to refer to it sporadically to illustrate the claims I will be making. In the main, I want to argue that positioning herself “ex-centrally, away from the center,”⁸ Tokarczuk reclaims animality as our common, human-animal core. Upon this common core she then seeks to build an imaginary, interspecies community, grounded in compassion and mutual respect. Imagining the world otherwise has moral significance, she claims in her essay *Jak wymyślić heterotopię. Gra towarzyska* [How to invent heretotopia: a parlor game]. Imagination plays with possibilities and frees us from naturalized—therefore invisibilized—cultural constructions, dismantling their claims to universality. By inventing heterotopias, Tokarczuk suggests alternatives to the dystopian world of today and reveals potential futures in which humans and nonhumans can live as the brothers and sisters we all are.

Contesting Speciesism: In Whose Image And Likeness?

Stories of origin explain a person’s place in the world and determine their relationship with reality. Western culture has been founded on the creation story contained in the Book of Genesis, according to which humans were created in the image and likeness of God. Second only to the pure spirits known as angels, humans have been entrusted with the mandate to rule the earth and have dominion over all the plants and animals (Gen. 1:28). As Lynn White notes in his seminal 1967 essay “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,”⁹ the literal interpretation of this mandate has had devastating consequences for the nonhuman world. Although progressive theologians have attempted to rescue the story of Genesis from its fundamentalist mistake by focusing on stewardship instead of dominance, it is still the human who is believed to act as God’s representative on earth, taking care of their nonhuman wards. Tokarczuk dissents even from this more animal-friendly narrative, seeing through its implied symbolic

⁷ See Małgorzata Poks, “Between the Tigers of Anger and the Horses of Instruction in Olga Tokarczuk’s *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*,” in *Squirrelling: Human-Animal Studies in the Northern-European Region*, ed. Amelie Björck, Claudia Lindén and Ann-Sofie Lönngrén (Stockholm: Södertörn University, 2022), 63-81; Danijela Petković and Dušica Ljubinković, “Localism, Locavorism, and Animal Rights in Olga Tokarczuk’s Novel *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*,” *Journal of Ecohumanism*, vol.1, no. 2 (2022), 81-94, <https://doi.org/10.33182/joe.v1i2.2448>.

⁸ Tokarczuk, *Nobel Lecture*, 20.

⁹ Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* vol. 155, issue 3767 (10 Mar 1967): 1203-1207.

violence. When Christians pray the *Agnus Dei*, she often wonders, do they not realize they pray to a divinity who has come to this world as a lamb, an animal? In *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, Duszejko, the novel's central character, wishes God to appear to the faithful "as a Sheep, Cow or Stag, and thunder in a mighty tone [...] to put an end to this terrible hypocrisy"¹⁰ of hunting, eating, and torturing animals while adoring their Savior in the form of the Mystic Lamb.

Duszejko's thoughts evoke the famous central panel of the Ghent Altarpiece, *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, which depicts a procession of people coming to pay homage to a white lamb standing on an altar, blood from his wounded breast gushing into a chalice. Since the novel was published the altarpiece has been restored, the 16th century overpaint removed to reveal the strikingly humanoid features of the animal.¹¹ For a character from Tokarczuk's novel *Bieguni* (*Flights*, 2007) a woman on an EU grant who is traveling the world to document animal abuse, the altar is the final proof that "the true God is an animal." The woman believes that God is "in animals, so close that we don't notice. Every day God sacrifices Himself for us, dying over and over, feeding us with His body, clothing us with His skin, allowing us to test our medicines on Him so that we might live longer and better. Thus does He show his affection, bestow on us His friendship and love."¹²

Having questioned the human privilege contained in the Biblical concept of God's image and likeness, Tokarczuk gestures toward eschatology, demanding the inclusion of animals in the select category of the saved. In her short story *Bardo. Szopka* (*Bardo: a nativity scene*, 2001) she focuses on the presence of animals at the side of Jesus's crib to remind us that the Good News was supposed to be proclaimed to all of creation, not exclusively to humans. In the eyes of the ox and the donkey "staring at Infant Jesus," the author reads a silent question: "Was a human God born for animals, too?"¹³ In Mary's gesturing towards the lamb she finds an affirmative answer. Sadly, the clergy tend to seek their God in distant heaven and to overlook the Humble One that is staring them right in the face: since God decided

¹⁰ Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow*, 239.

¹¹ Tokarczuk did not see the original face of the Mystic Lamb before publishing the novel *Bieguni* in 2007. The restoration of the picture began in 2012.

¹² Olga Tokarczuk, *Flights*, trans. Jennifer Croft (New York: Riverhead Books, 2018), 67.

¹³ Olga Tokarczuk, *Gra na wielu bębenkach* [Playing on manydrums] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2019), 128.

to take on fleshly form, He is present in all flesh. Being a human-divine hybrid—“true God and true man”¹⁴—the Mystical Lamb is also human and animal, both at the same time. Perhaps this is what can be glimpsed under the mask of animals: that they are—like humans—disturbingly divine. That there are no boundaries, no fixed identities, that all matter, infused with the spirit—as ancient wisdoms tell us—is in flux, transforming and re-forming itself in an ongoing re-alignment of identities and relationships.

Humanimalities

Tokarczuk does not seem to have much hope for collective humanity in its present condition, which explains why her writings are often read through the critical lens of posthumanism.¹⁵ The author’s rejection of Cartesian humanism manifests in her manifold references to the discursive production of the human subject. This is the leitmotif of her short story *Zdobycie Jerozolimy. Raten 1675* [*The capture of Jerusalem. Raten 1675*]. Von Kynast, lord of the castle in Raten, forces his serfs to rehearse over the entire summer for an elaborate staging of the Crusaders’ successful siege of Jerusalem in 1099, with which he wants to astound his guests. The peasants’ grumbling and their indifference to this epochal event in the history of Christendom seems to confirm their subhuman nature. Stealing their time from the work which feeds them, the aristocrat is enraged by their obsession with food, especially meat. Their preoccupation with bodily concerns and their inability to rise to the level of more sublime ideas prove in his eyes that they are a separate species, not descendants of the biblical parents of humanity. These primitive peasants must differ from true human beings like von Kynast, who is convinced that irrational needs and impractical pursuits are the hallmark of superior humanity.

Von Kynast delights in the species gap and has contempt for these dumb actors, rapacious, aggressive, violent beasts—as he sees them. But it never

¹⁴ Formulation from the Athanasian Creed. For the concept of the human-divine hybrid see: Paul G. Johnson, *God’s Hybrid Son: The Human Element in Jesus* (Durham: Eloquent Books, 2010).

¹⁵ See Urszula Chowaniec, “Nature, Ecocriticism and Posthumanist Melancholy (Novels by Olga Tokarczuk),” *Melancholic, Migrating Bodies in Contemporary Polish Women’s Writings* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 183–194; Artur Rejter, “Literatura wobec dyskursu posthumanizmu: na przykładzie prozy Olgi Tokarczuk [Literature and the discourse of posthumanism: On the example of Olga Tokarczuk’s Prose],” *Język Artystyczny* vol. 16, 2017, 27–47. Małgorzata Kowalcze, “The Posthumanist Dimension of the Novel *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* by Olga Tokarczuk: A Commentary,” *Journal of Posthumanism* vol. 1, no. 2 (Dec. 2021), 225–228, doi:10.33182/jp.v1i2.1397.

occurs to him that this is not who they really are, but who he and the oppressive feudal system make them out to be. Dressing his actors in heavy coats and watching them sweat in the heat, raising their battle zeal with the promise to feed them meat, he makes the starving men fight and bleed one another for the food they crave in their malnourished condition. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the lord's remorseless cruelty echoes the murderous instincts of the truly "beastly" Crusaders he wants to honor. The historical siege of Jerusalem was a bloody affair, followed by rape and an atrocious, deliberately planned massacre of all the Muslims and Jews in the city. Historical sources reveal that at times the Crusaders rode "in the blood of the Saracens up to the knees of their horses."¹⁶ It is chilling to realize that these Christian heroes killed in the name of an abstract idea. As "beastly" as fighting for "mere" food may seem, it is at least justifiable by a biological need common to all forms of life, von Kynast included. But atrocities committed in the name of an abstraction are unknown to nonhuman animals and revolting to the animalized serfs of the story. If humanity is embodied in von Kynast, the reader realizes, Tokarczuk would willingly cast her lot with the "separate species" who prefer to work the fields to massacring self-proclaimed humanity's undesirables, the "infidels" being just one category in the multiplying panoply of animalized groups across the historical spectrum.

Tokarczuk's obsession with monstrosities, with the grotesque and abnormal bodies displayed at county fairs, with legendary monsters and unclassifiable freaks preserved in formaldehyde or exposed in cabinets of curiosities, testifies to her "unswerving, agonizing" belief "that it is in freaks that Being breaks through to the surface and reveals its true nature."¹⁷ Hybrid, non-normative bodies placed somewhere between the "human" and the "animal" (or even vegetal) ends of life's continuum are privileged sites of revelation, deconstructing simplistic dualities, dismantling the artificial barrier erected in the cultural construction of "humanity" as the opposite of abject animality.

Tokarczuk's world teems with undisciplined, unclassifiable bodies. Lake monsters who cause damage to farm animals display such human-like emotions as fidelity in love, grief, and mourning; they can even commit suicide out of longing (*House of Day*, *House of Night*). A human gone fe-

¹⁶ Michael D. Hull, "First Crusade: Siege of Jerusalem," *Military History*, June 1999, Historynet.com. Accessed September 1, 2020. /www.historynet.com/historical_conflicts/.

¹⁷ Tokarczuk, *Flights*, 17.

ral, known as Bad Man in *Prawiek I inne czasy* (*Primeval and Other Times*, 1996), visits Cornspike for his natural needs, but is otherwise a mystery to her and leaves immediately after satisfying his sexual appetite. There is a transgender saint who forces the devil to confess, and the mysterious Ergo Sum, a teacher of Latin and lover of ancient philosophy who turns into a werewolf (*House of Day, House of Night*). The latter, overcome by disgust and guilt at the blood his second nature craves, becomes an honorary blood donor and “annihilates himself in a beastly, we would say post-human, life as a cowherd and hard-working man.”¹⁸ Closer to the cyborgian, posthumanist end of the spectrum are the trans bodies from *Anna w grobowcach świata* [*Anna in the tombs of the world*, 2006] that evolved to perform their functions more efficiently.

There is also a separate group of human-animal hybrids that project a hopeful future for our species. The short story *Najbrzydsza kobieta świata* [*The ugliest woman in the world*, 2001]¹⁹ focuses on a premature evolutionary experiment, possibly aimed at the production of a new, humanimal race. The story originated with Tokarczuk’s discovery of a mummified exhibit in the store room of the Patologisches Museum in Vienna. The mummified woman’s appearance—a large, knobby head, thin slits of eyes, an irregular nose, facial hair, and sharp, pointed teeth—speaks of the monstrous, yet in her story Tokarczuk endows her with refined manners, gentleness, a loving, womanly character, and surprising intelligence. Still, her freakish body stigmatizes her as non-human. Denied membership of the human race, she is refused the last rites and a decent burial, which are a specifically “human” prerogative. But by rejecting her, the normative human reveals the hypocritical, purely ideological criteria of exclusion/inclusion, devised to police the boundary of patriarchal privilege masquerading as universal humanity. In the end, hope for a better world is mummified with the woman and her newborn child, both “congealed, in a dignified pose, [...] like a failed beginning of a new species.”²⁰

¹⁸ Pietro Pascarelli, “From Psychoanalysis to Literature: Olga Tokarczuk,” *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* (12 May 2020), <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/from-psychoanalysis-to-literature-olga-tokarczuk/>.

¹⁹ Tokarczuk, *Gra na wielu bębenkach* [Playing on many drums] (Wałbrzych: Wydawnictwo Ruda, 2001), 148–162. Much better known is the story of the “Ape Woman” Julia Pastrana (1834–1860), an indigenous woman from Mexico who was born with a genetic condition known as *hypertrichosis terminalis*.

²⁰ Tokarczuk, *Gra na wielu bębenkach*, 162.

Tokarczuk observes with growing alarm human beings' irresponsible, if not openly devastating, life patterns. "The flood of stupidity, cruelty, hate speech and images of violence" fill her with apprehension and lead to the conclusion that "there is something wrong with the world."²¹ The salvation of the world, as well as our own species—as the two are inextricably bound together—lies in reclaiming the animality which re-inscribes us within the natural cycles of life. The author repeatedly implies that it is in the rediscovery of our kinship with our animal, vegetal, and mineral sisters and brothers that a common future becomes possible. But to achieve this kind of relationship, we would have to change, evolve towards a new species with a new mental set-up. Tokarczuk's Duszejko has a dream, in which she sees a new race of humans, born of animals.²² Similarly, in the costumed childrengathered in church at the Hubertus mass in *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, Duszejko is offered another glimpse of humanity married to animality, a hybrid species which could restore the sense of wholeness lost with the Blakean Fall. This new race would care for the planet, our common home. After all, the limits of our world are determined only by the limits of our imagination.

The fullest treatment of this theme to date can be found in the 2018 collection *Opowiadania bizardne* [*Tales of the bizarre*]. The short story entitled *Zielone dzieci* [*Green children*] conjures up the contours of an ecological heterotopia hidden in the dense forests of 17th century Poland's eastern borderlands. To the representatives of Cartesian humanity, safely self-separated from the nonhuman world, the wide expanses of the forest are a vast Nothingness. Nature is invisible to the king and his court, who feel no kinship for the nonhuman world. The wilderness is invisible to maimed, citified humanity. But it is there, in the backwoods, that an anarchic tribe of human-animal-vegetal hybrids lives untroubled by the tempestuous winds of European history. Human in shape, with their naked bodies covered by moss, they are nourished by the light of the moon, live in trees, and hibernate in winter, dreaming common dreams. Considering themselves as fruit, they tie their dead to the branches of trees to provide food for the birds and other animals. Since they do not eat meat themselves, the animals live with them on friendly terms and teach them their wisdom.

²¹ Tokarczuk, *Nobel Lecture*, 14.

²² Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow*, 243.

The inability to recognize the wilderness as part of ourselves, and see ourselves included within it, is a mark of diminished humanity. Some of Tokarczuk’s characters long to overcome the human separation from nature, even at the cost of rejecting humanity in its present, mutilated state. Such is the case of the young people from “Green Children,” who leave the king’s entourage and join the forest community. It is to be understood that they will be transformed into green people themselves. The return to untamed nature, from which we are self-alienated, requires change on the most fundamental, ontological level. Such a change is the leading theme of “Transfugium,” another story from *Tales of the Bizarre*. The return to the “Heart”—the wild world that humans cannot enter—necessitates recapturing one’s own wildness and, literally, becoming animal. In the transmuted center where people can undergo this transformation (called transfugation), the master of ceremony, Professor Choi, explains:

In the evolutionary sense we are all chimpanzees, hedgehogs, larches; all of that is inside us. We can reach for it at any moment. There are no impassable gulfs between us and other forms of being. What separates us from one another are gaps, tiny fissures in the texture of being. *Unus mundus*. The world is one.²³

Representing Eastern wisdom, Choi criticizes Western man’s sense of uniqueness, his deluded idea of being different to both other humans and nonhuman life forms. To Choi this is an error of perception, an erroneous fixation on trivial dissimilarities, which falsifies the nature of reality—which is fluent, changeable, unstable. Coming to Transfugium, one learns that, far from being solid, “the world is a stream of forces and relations pressing against one another” and that “reality consists of overlapping wills, mutually entangled into nets, of billions of beings.”²⁴ Reality recognizes no borders, it respects no divisions. “Tiny fissures in the texture of being” separate each being from every other being.²⁵ There is no radical difference. Renata returns to the Heart as a wolf.

²³ Olga Tokarczuk, *Opowiadania bizarne* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2018), 132.

²⁴ Tokarczuk, *Opowiadania bizarne*, 134.

²⁵ NB, the Polish original uses the word *fuga*, which I translate as “fissure.” But it is worth stressing that the story’s title (“Transfugium”) already refers directly to the process of translating one form of life into another by transporting it across those tiny fissures (or *fugi*).

To her citified sister, this is assisted suicide. Voicing the arguments of “diminished” humanity, she—the story’s narrator—wants to save Renata from being reduced to an inferior life form, from ceasing to be “herself.” Renata’s decision seems to be “against nature,”²⁶ which only proves the narrator’s entrapment within the dualistic terms of the Western world. Her inability to understand Renata’s choice is confirmed by an automatic resort to the species difference: “because I am human,”²⁷ she declares. For her, human life, however dreary or unfulfilling, is superior to the lives of animals.

No matter how sympathetic Tokarczuk is to the mystified sister, there is no doubt that she is on Renata’s side. Renata’s successful, perfectly organized, but somewhat sterile and automatic life becomes infused with energy as her interest in wolves develops. She has no doubt that they are superior to humans, as testified by their social organization. With a place for everyone, including loners—“free electrons. Freaks,”²⁸ as she calls them, including herself in this category—the pack caters to the needs of divergent individuals while protecting and caring for the whole in equal measure, in what seems like a model of a welfare state. Wolves, as Renata explains, excel at recognizing intentions. Their eyes “are uncommitted but attentive.”²⁹ Humanity, being deficient in both—attentiveness and the ability to recognize intentions—not to mention deficiencies in matters of social praxis, emerges from this comparison as greatly inferior to the wolf. There is no doubt that, unlike her sister, Renata has seen the face behind the animal mask.

The Latin word *refugium* means a “place of refuge,”³⁰ and a “local environment that has escaped regional ecological change and therefore provides a habitat for endangered species.”³¹ In combination with the prefix “trans,” the title of the story refers to the transformation of Professor Choi’s patients into a form of wildlife and their subsequent transition from the urban (human) to the natural (wild) side of the lake which separates the two worlds. That nobody can cross that border without undergoing the change first is a telling metaphor of our species’ radical alienation from the wilds, our erstwhile home. Alienation is humanity’s irredeemable condi-

²⁶ Tokarczuk, *Opowiadania bizardne*, 130.

²⁷ Tokarczuk, *Opowiadania bizardne*, 132.

²⁸ Tokarczuk, *Opowiadania bizardne*, 144.

²⁹ Tokarczuk, *Opowiadania bizardne*, 145.

³⁰ Charlton T Lewis, *An Elementary Latin Dictionary* (New York, Cincinnati and Chicago: American Book Company, 1890).

³¹ “Refugium,” *Wiktionary. The Free Dictionary*, <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/refugium>.

tion, although the barrier itself is illusory in a world of constantly transforming forms of energy.

Still, once individuals (perhaps the whole species in some future time) reclaim some of their wildness and make their return, they will probably not bring lab-grown meat with them. It is impossible to expect Renata-the-wolf to eat grass or be nourished by the energy of the moon. This is one of the rare moments when Tokarczuk is subliminally admitting that dismantling the separation paradigm would necessitate the return of the food chain, with the human, however, no longer exempt from participating in “the feast in the chain of reciprocity.”³² One feels that Tokarczuk would be ready to pay this price for the “transfugation” of humans—the hoped-for dismantling of Cartesian dualities. Parenthetically speaking, in her personal life Tokarczuk embraces vegetarianism and lab-grown meat as compassionate consumptive choices. Still, some of her positive characters do not flinch from killing their animal family for food. A case in point would be Martha, a mysterious character from *House of Day, House of Night*,³³ who loves her chickens and cares for them until autumn, when she kills them all. Perhaps for the time being the very least we can be is compassionate omnivores, suggests Tokarczuk. And realize that a lack of gratitude is a sin, and wastefulness is a crime.

“Transfugation”—the process of translating humans into nonhumans—carries the etymological echoes of escape or exile “to the other side” (*trans*)—or better still, the side of the Other. Renata escapes from the human life she no longer cherishes into the life of a wolf. Longing for some sense of wholeness, an animalistic sense of oneness with the world, she feels alienated from and fed up with diminished humanity. On the other hand, such an escape, which entails a radical change of identity, carries echoes of the psychiatric disorder known as dissociative fugue, the name of which comes from the Latin word *fuga*, meaning flight. It is a delight to see how all these different readings come to play in the medical process invented by Tokarczuk. The newly emergent wolf is a separate being, it has no connection with the human named Renata and no memory of her earlier, human life. The human disappears for the wolf to come into existence. Transfugium thus connotes a radical escape, across fissures in the texture of being,

³² This is how the ecofeminist Val Plumwood described her epiphany after surviving a crocodile attack. Val Plumwood, *The Eye of the Crocodile*, ed. Lorraine Shannon (Canberra: Australian National University, 2012), 19.

³³ Olga Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones (London: Granta Books, 2002).

into a new identity; it is also an act of finding re-fuge in the wilderness. In essence, the process is a homecoming—a return to *unus mundus*, the original world-as-home from before divisions, a prelapsarian world where all is one, a world of endless relationalities, where everyone and everything is a relative, where we are all “disturbingly similar.”

Empathy and Insight: The Revelation of the Face

In her review of *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, Rachel Riederer observes: “[Duszejko] flattens the differences between people and animals—always imbuing the animals with a little bit of inner life, always reminding the humans that their material bodies are also made of meat.”³⁴ This holds true for Tokarczuk’s fiction in general. Birth and death, drives and appetites, vulnerability to suffering, the body’s physiological and degenerative processes—all life is subject to the same laws, just like all life is endowed with sentience and intelligence. For an ecofeminist, the body is of much greater interest than the mind; it reveals commonalities and continuities which mock timid normativities.

Nowhere are those commonalities more visible than in dying. Parallels between human and nonhuman death are scrutinized with an obsessive attention to detail in the first part of Tokarczuk’s 2004 novel *Ostatnie historie* [*Final Stories*]. Ida, a middle-aged woman confronted with her own mortality, is attracted to a terminally ill dog, Ina. She accompanies the dog in her final days, taking her outside for her physiological needs, spoon-feeding her, listening to her irregular breathing, watching as the dog’s enfeebled body refuses to cooperate, oozing bodily liquids. The woman observes the consecutive stages of the dog’s agony, fascinated and appalled:

Ina is busy. Dying must be difficult, an activity requiring concentration. Sometimes her closed eyes twitch gently. There may be expansive spaces under those eyelids where an important, engrossing game is in progress, leaving no time to spare. Ida strokes the bitch’s face, cautiously. She does not want to disturb her. Ina is there, her abandoned body is here. Its sight brings a lump to her [Ida’s] throat.³⁵

³⁴ Rachel Riederer, “Olga Tokarczuk’s Gripping Eco-Mystery,” *New Republic*, October 10, 2019, <https://newrepublic.com/article/155257/olga-tokarczuk-nobel-prize-novel-drive-plow-bones-dead>.

³⁵ Olga Tokarczuk, *Ostatnie historie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2019), 111.

Ida is concentrated attention. The emotional distance between her and the dying animal is annulled and she is pulled into Ina’s inner world. As life slowly escapes from the dog’s body, Ida watches as the dog’s eye

opens. Black glass, liquid blackness, abysmal, it seems to be limitless. Who knows what she is looking at, but she must be seeing everything. Ida has the feeling that the eye is looking from behind a mask, that the aching, stiffening animal body is only a disguise, a furry, awkward, and bizarre form. Under the mask is someone else, someone close to Ida, a relative, really, disturbingly similar.³⁶

Entering into imaginative communion with the dying animal results in a sudden insight, a new understanding of reality that challenges established perceptions. The recognition of a relative in an animal requires an ethical response.

“Insight,” writes Tokarczuk in her foreword to a book about hunting, “is unique and irreversible—one cannot return to the *status quo ante*. The resulting new consciousness can be painful and terrible.”³⁷ Insight has consequences. In “The Masks of Animals” the author meditates on insight in the context of J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Lives of Animals*. Its heroine, the elderly writer Elizabeth Costello, lectures on the rights of animals. In the course of her lectures she demonstrates the failure of reason in stopping animal cruelty. Instead of relying on reason alone, she seems to be arguing, we need to reclaim the cognitive value of insight and empathy. At least this is how Tokarczuk interprets the novel. Costello’s passionate criticism of the human-engineered animal Holocaust results in her being mocked by academics and shunned by her family. Having seen “some fundamental, terrifying nature of the world,” she can no longer live as others do. Granted insight into the full measure of animal suffering, “one sees the world anew—as radically cruel. And one will have to live in it.”³⁸ For Costello this entails “learning to use ‘compassionate imagination,’”³⁹ which is another word for empathy. But she is incapable of conveying her insight to her listeners and thus of making a real change in the world. Did she fail?—worries Tokar-

³⁶ Tokarczuk, *Ostatnie historie*, 113.

³⁷ Tokarczuk, “Przedmowa,” in Zenon Kruczyński, *Farba znaczy krew* (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz/terytoria, 2008), 5.

³⁸ Tokarczuk, *Moment niedźwiedzia*, 44.

³⁹ Tokarczuk, *Moment niedźwiedzia*, 44.

czuk, and in her question one can hear the reverberations of a larger worry: is the animal advocacy movement doomed to fail? The enigmatic ending of Coetzee's novel does not leave much space for hope. We are all entangled in an endless chain of cruelties and suffering. The only way out is death—this is how Tokarczuk reads the novel's concluding words addressed to Costello by her son: "There, there. It will soon be over."⁴⁰ This reading is consistent with the Manichean coloring of Tokarczuk's writings: powerless as we may be in our efforts to put an end to animal suffering, what really matters is our refusal to participate in it. Empathy helps us understand that we are all interconnected, that all suffering is also always "my" suffering. This is where ethics begins.

What happens to Ida at the moment of her own insight? She must have seen the world in an entirely, painfully new light. Let us repeat once more Tokarczuk's observation: "One sees the world anew—as radically cruel. And one will have to live in it." The problem is that Ida does not. She chooses to die. So far Ida has been hesitating on the threshold, between dying in a car crash and returning to life. Now, with Ina the dog reduced to "a dead, tanned fur coat,"⁴¹ Ida goes straight to the barn where Adrian, the grandson of her hosts, has arranged a hospice for dying animals. As a veterinary surgeon, he is asked to euthanize terminally ill pets, but motivated by pity, he gives them the space in which to die natural deaths. Prolonging the misery of dying looked cruel to Ida, even with the administration of painkillers. But now, with her newly acquired consciousness, does she believe there is a difference between refusing to euthanize nonhumans and withholding the right to die from suffering, terminally ill humans?

Ida opens the door. The table in the middle of the barn is stocked with syringes, vials, needles, bottles, bandages. There are stalls along the walls, some of them clean and empty, in others she can see a dying horse, an immobile black goat lying on its side, and rows of little boxes containing the emaciated bodies of rats. Ida returns to her crashed car, climbs into the driver's seat, fastens the seatbelt, and dies. This ending seems just as ambiguous as that of *The Lives of Animals*. At first it appears that Ida has overcome her fear of dying, having rehearsed the act of death with the dog. But this would leave the revelation of the face unaccounted for. Would it be

⁴⁰ Quoted in Tokarczuk, *Moment niedzwiedzia*, 46.

⁴¹ Tokarczuk, *Ostatnie historie*, 113.

an exaggeration to claim that—in contrast to Elizabeth Costello’s activist stance—Ida’s response is withdrawal? Rather than live in a world founded on the suffering of sentient beings, human and nonhuman, and be incapable of stopping it, she chooses to follow Ina and leave that world? Ida is in limbo; she must choose whether she is ready to die or not. Evidently, understanding the nature of what in *The Masks of Animals* Tokarczuk calls “an Auschwitz extended in time and invisible to most”⁴² makes the potential attractions of life pale in significance. But there are those who, like Duszejko, have no choice. Their empathy propels them to action, enables them “to act as if it mattered,” because, “that is what makes us human, not our DNA.”⁴³

The ethical significance of literary fiction lies in the fact that it allows readers to experience affective identification with the Other and achieve life-transforming insights. Here lies Tokarczuk’s belief in the performative aspect of literary discourse,⁴⁴ her conviction that a literary character like an Elizabeth Costello or a Duszejko, who engages the readers’ compassionate imagination, is potentially more effective than a philosopher using rational arguments to argue the cause of animals in the abstract. In contrast to other forms of discourse, claims Katarzyna Kantner, author of *Jak działać za pomocą słów: Proza Olgi Tokarczuk jako dyskurs krytyczny*, Tokarczuk believes that literature absorbs, allows for affective identification with a character, teaches empathy. Insight has consequences, and so does perceptive inertia. Tokarczuk’s prose reveals the costs of both.

Conclusions

Throughout her writing career Tokarczuk has shown affinities for pre-modern, animist ontologies, which see the whole world as being alive. Occupying an ex-centric position vis-à-vis the Western narratives of progress and human exceptionalism, she has been drawn to the hybrid, the “monstrous,” in search of alternative worlds which could have materialized had evolution not abandoned the humanimal experiment prematurely. Her intuition tells her that such a world, free from binary exclusions, would be

⁴² Tokarczuk, *Moment niedźwiedzia*, 45.

⁴³ Tokarczuk, *Moment niedźwiedzia*, 48.

⁴⁴ Cf. Katarzyna Kantner, *Jak działać za pomocą słów: Proza Olgi Tokarczuk jako dyskurs krytyczny* [How to do things with words: the prose of Olga Tokarczuk as Critical Discourse] (Kraków: Universitas, 2019).

more egalitarian and more compassionate. Imagining the world otherwise is the first step towards changing the current dramatic condition of both animals and animalized humans, situated on the “animal” side of the human-animal divide. This divide is a most dangerous fiction. It is not by the denial of animality, but by “becoming animal”—Tokarczuk argues—by reclaiming our animal roots and recognizing our kinship with nonhumans, “disturbingly similar” under their animal mask, that we become more fully human.

Abstention from using animal products is a regular feature in Tokarczuk’s attempts to envision a new, evolved humanity. To live peacefully and share the earth’s resources with our human and nonhuman kin, we need to move beyond hierarchical thinking which allows for the exploitation, killing, and consumption of the inferiorized, animalized Others. In the real world, a growing number of publications highlight veganism as a rallying point for the interconnected struggles against racism, sexism, heteronormativity, ableism, and other forms of oppression.⁴⁵ Veganism means nonviolence, a renunciation of killing not only for recreational purposes but also for food, clothes, and the other necessities of life, as these can be obtained from alternative sources. Patrice Jones, an activist for social change, a writer, and an educator, has no doubt that veganism is the next evolution.⁴⁶ Tokarczuk consistently promotes veganism in her writings. Given a choice, the most compassionate of her characters choose a nonviolent diet, including lab-grown meat, if available. In Tokarczuk’s most advanced technological utopias people grow meat in their own incubators. In the extreme, however, the author seems to be inclined to accept a paleolithic-style social arrangement, with all species returning to the food chain, the human being no exception.

⁴⁵ For instance: Aph Ko and Syl Ko, Sunaura Taylor, Julia Feliz Brueck. See also: <http://www.consistentantioppression.com/>.

⁴⁶ Patrice Jones is the co-founder of VINE, an LGBTQ-run sanctuary for farmed animals, in Springfield, Vermont. The acronym stands for Veganism Is the Next Evolution.

Małgorzata Poks

Abstract

In her literary work, Olga Tokarczuk consistently pays attention to the scandal of nonhuman animals' involuntary suffering. Criticizing the ideology of human domination over nature and the unreflective replication of naturalized standards of behavior toward animals—manifesting, among others, in the tacit acceptance of the hunting “ritual” or the atrocities of industrial farming—she posits the elevation of empathy and insight to the rank of cognitive tools. In her essay “Maski zwierząt,” she encourages not only artists but everyone—starting with scientists who determine new research paradigms and ending with an average consumer of animal products—to use those tools in order to puncture our cultural prejudices and illusions and see beyond them the animal as an Other who is inconceivably close to us. This article attempts to respond to Tokarczuk's challenge. It tries to decide the ontological status of nonhuman animals in her novels and short stories, reveal the horror of our perceptual inertia which enables systemic oppressions to flourish, and review some of the heterotopian alternatives imagined by Tokarczuk.

Keywords: Olga Tokarczuk, nonhuman animal, empathy, hybrid bodies, animal face

Słowa kluczowe: Olga Tokarczuk, nie-ludzkie zwierzę, empatia, ciała hybrydowe, zwierzęca twarz