

Translating Transgressions in Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*: An Affective Reading

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Abstract

Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead is a 2009 murder-mystery novel written by Nobel laureate Olga Tokarczuk and translated into English by Antonia Lloyd-Jones in 2018. It follows aging eccentric Janina Duszejko as a series of murders takes place in the plateau where she lives. Under the parable-esque whodunit nature of the novel, Tokarczuk explores the theme of transgressions in the light of animal rights activism. This essay is an investigation into the contrasting ideas highlighted by the authorial voice and the perspective held by the protagonist in the light of affect theory and Tokarczuk's own conception of a tender narrator. I argue that Tokarczuk highlights the ambiguity of borders and boundaries in the narration to explore the implications of Duszejko's transgression of societal law and constructing herself as a tool through which animals enact their vengeance.

Keywords: affective politics, tender narration, animal rights, ambiguity

Olga Tokarczuk is one of the most critically and commercially successful novelists among the post-communist generation of Polish authors for exploring the vacuum of possibility through her narration of everyday life that comments on violence through a distinctly post-secular imagination (Jarzyńska; Tighe 189). Although she has been publishing since 1989, her works were not translated into English until 2002. She has received increased critical attention since then, culminating in her receiving the Nobel Prize in literature in 2018 and the Man Booker International Prize for her book *Flights* in the same year. Despite an interest in Olga Tokarczuk's writing afterward, most of the scholarship on her body of work remains in Polish, Czech, Swedish, and other European languages. *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead* (henceforth *Drive Your Plow*) is Olga Tokarczuk's seventh novel. Written in 2009 and translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones into English in 2018, *Drive Your Plow* follows Janina Duszejko, a mad old woman, who has made a religion out of her observations of nature, astrology, and a selection of William Blake's body of work as she tries to convince her community that the series of murders taking place in their vicinity is a result of animals seeking vengeance. (Duszejko rejects her first name and refuses to answer to it under any circumstances. In the spirit of the tender narration this



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essay explores, I will refer to her as Duszejko from hereon.) Staying true to the murder-mystery genre, the ending of the novel reveals Duszejko herself to be the murderer, divulging that all five victims were involved in the murder of Duszejko's little girls, her dogs, who were her only companions. The grief and anger she felt at the tremendous loss created an affect in her that was untranslatable into language (Pawlicki 48). This affect is only communicable by Duszejko's transgression of the laws of society to uphold a law of her own. On the surface, Duszejko's insistence can be dismissed as misdirection. However, her desperation to have the cases open until the authorities recognize animals as the perpetrators is at odds with this reading. This paper investigates Duszejko's claim that she was only the tool with which animals took their revenge. Building off Tokarczuk's conception of a *czułość* or tender narrator, I argue that in Duszejko's worldview, which mimics a form of religion, the murders were indeed nature's revenge enacted through her. Consequently, in *Drive Your Plow*, Janina Duszejko translated the loss of her beloved dogs into a series of murders which she justifies by redrawing the boundaries of her ontological understanding to include herself in the will of nature.

Ambivalence and Borders in the Narration

In her Nobel lecture, Olga Tokarczuk introduces the concept of a *czułość* narrator, translated as tender narrator. Despite the immense popularity and effectiveness of the first person, Tokarczuk finds that the potential of the narrator remains unexplored. Although typically the first-person narrator can offer a very naturalized mode of story-telling, in a way typifying the current climate of the humanities, it also creates "an opposition between the self and the world" ("The Tender Narrator"). She finds that this privileging of the single voice which is, more often than not, the authorial voice, lacks a universality that can be found in the hero of the parable. The hero of such stories could maintain their specificity while also embodying an "everyman everywhere" nature. With the overreach of commercialization, story-telling is in crisis as is the whole world. Tokarczuk believes that now, more than ever, the author's role is to "doggedly [gather] up all the tiny pieces in an attempt to stick them together again to create a universal whole" (17). To do this, she proposes a type of fourth person narration that goes beyond the grammatical.

This is a point of view or a perspective from where everything can be seen. Seeing everything means recognizing the ultimate fact that all things that exist are mutually connected into a single whole, even if the connections between them are not yet known to us. Seeing everything also means a completely different responsibility for the world, because it becomes obvious that every gesture "here" is connected to a gesture "there," that a decision taken in one part

of the world will have an effect in another part of it, and that differentiating between “mine” and “yours” starts to be debatable (21).

The original Polish word Tokarczuk uses to describe this type of narration is “czułość,” which Jenifer Croft and Antonia Llyod-Jones translate as “tenderness.” But in Tokarczuk’s native Polish, it denotes more than what its English translation implies. It can also mean emotionality, cordiality, gentleness, sensitivity regarding a given point, or to stimuli (including words, actions, phenomena, situations), or a technical term that signifies the reaction of film to light (Michna 5). A tender narrator must show a sensitivity to the world and have indents of the world upon her own person. As a result, tender narration is at once rooted in the modality of “the character as narrator,” “the author as narrator,” and “the parabolic everyman as the narrator.”

Janina Duszejko is a terrific example of Tokarczuk practicing what she preaches. *Drive Your Plow* is written in the first person. From the very beginning of the novel, the reader is placed in Duszejko’s world. Her voice as a character is imbued with an oozing eccentricity that makes her very distinct. Identifying with Duszejko is not easy, but her distinctiveness is nevertheless endearing. Her initial struggles seem to be with nasty neighbors, uncaring policemen, merciless weather, an old car, and the illnesses that come with age. She is not an everyman character in any shape or form, but she is grounded in the everyday struggles and indignities of life, which make her sympathetic. But Duszejko is also observant. She does not believe in calling people by their given name, so she takes care to find most people she meets a more befitting nickname instead. She sorts all the people of the world into three categories – “skiers, allergy sufferers and drivers” (38). She has “Theories” regarding people that speak to how much loving attention she pays to all near her.

However, Duszejko is the protagonist of this novel because of her connection with nature. *Drive Your Plow* begins with a description of Duszejko describing her ritual of going to bed with clean feet, because at her age she is very aware that she might need to be taken to the hospital at night. Duszejko is deeply aware of her mortality and approaches it with a nonchalance that speaks to her acceptance of it. Instead of seeking to make a mark upon the world, she finds comfort in the immortality of the natural world. She narrates:

As I wandered across the fields and wilds on my rounds, I liked to imagine how it would all look millions of years from now. Would the same plants be here? And what about the color of the sky? Would it be just the same? Would the tectonic plates have shifted and caused a range of high mountains to pile up here? Or would a sea arise, removing all

reason to use the word 'place' amid the idle motion of the waves? One thing's for sure – these houses won't be here; my efforts are insignificant, they'd fit on a pinhead, just like my life as well. That should never be forgotten. (46)

The natural world lays claim to Duszejko's sensitivity and gentleness much more frequently than people do. As discussed previously, she does indeed pay attention to other people, but she rarely takes on their perspective in the narration. That is not to say she is detached. She very clearly has a wealth of affection for her former pupil Dizzy, her neighbor Good news, Boros the entomologist, and even for Oddball. But other than the handful of characters Duszejko cares for, most people dismiss her as a crazy old woman. Her complaints against Bigfoot are dismissed by the Commandant, Innerd is condescending to her, and even her grief over the loss of her little girls is dismissed by the Priest. By contrast, nature's indiscriminate indifference becomes a comfort. This is reflected in how frequently Duszejko describes the natural world and the tone of awe she takes on when talking about nature. She notices the changes in the world around her to the point she describes it as sensing it. The shift from winter to spring affects her just as much as it affects the plants and animals around her: "Everything was starting to crackle, I could sense a feverish vibration under the grass, under the layer of earth, as if vast, underground nerves, swollen with effort, were just about to burst" (106-107).

Aside from almost taking on the voice of nature, Duszejko's narration highlights the futility of borders and boundaries quite often. The cellphone network around her plateau bounces from the Polish line to the Czech one with no rhyme or logic except its whim. Deer and other animals show no regard for any nation's borders. Even Duszejko herself illegally crosses the border between the two nations frequently. She also frequently personifies animals and natural events to the point where the line between man, animal, and nature is blurred. Duszejko questions the difference between hunting and poaching, because to her, "Both words mean killing" (185).

Crucially, however, the ambiguity highlighted by narration does not mean that Duszejko is able to embrace this ambiguity. On the contrary, Duszejko is obsessed with creating order in the world using her Theories, astrology, and Blake. True to Tokarczuk's concept of the tender narrator, Duszejko's narration is not only her voice, but it also contains the voice of the author. It is Tokarczuk's authorial voice that showcases the crossing of thresholds, borders, and boundaries through Duszejko so frequently, which is at odds with the way the protagonist insists on new boundaries.

After the description of Duszejko's ritual of washing her feet before bed, the first action of the novel is a hammering at her door, described as "violent, immoderate and thus ill-omened" (8). Duszejko, having taken some sleeping aid, struggles to wake up despite the noise. But when she does, she finds the neighbor, nicknamed Oddball, at the door, calling her because their other neighbor Bigfoot is dead. Duszejko leaves the safety of her room and goes out into the darkness. This crossing can be seen as an analogy to her actions throughout the novel. Before the events of *Drive Your Plow* begin, Duszejko is settled into an uninspiring routine. Her grief and loneliness following the passing of her little girls put her in a depressive trance, not unlike sleep. The shock of finding a picture of the men posing with her girls at their feet, like the hammering at the door, drags her out of the safety of her life before that point and, in both cases, she is compelled to act. At the beginning of the novel, she steps into the darkness, and at the end, she flees to the unknown land of the Czech Republic. In between the first and last action of the novel, Duszejko crosses boundaries by pressing past national borders, transgressing the law, disregarding the boundaries of polite society, ignoring the line between the dead and living through the specters of her mother and grandmother's appearance in her boiler room, saying what is meant to be left unsaid and even by daring to say things that sound insane. Duszejko continuously transgresses every law around her, but curiously, she does this without a strong desire to defy. This does not mean she does not understand that she is breaking the laws of society, but rather, she understands the law of her society as wrong. Her transgressions, including the murders, are only acts meant to restore justice as she understands it.

Janina Duszejko's Religion

To claim that Duszejko does not believe her transgressions to be willful defiance because she is not breaking her code of morality, it becomes necessary to discuss what laws or moral boundaries she upholds. Duszejko's eccentricity makes it absolutely clear that she does not believe in following the rules of a society that marginalizes her as an undesirable. She has her sense of right and wrong, so she acts accordingly without trying to justify herself to anyone. The writer vocalizes this sentiment in Duszejko:

We're living in a world that we fabricate for ourselves. We decide what's good and what isn't, we draw maps of meanings for ourselves And then we spend our whole lives struggling with what we have invented for ourselves. The problem is that each of us has our own version of it, so people find it hard to understand each other. (164)

Duszejko agrees with the writer and adds,

the human psyche evolved in order to defend us against seeing the truth.
... It makes sure we'll never understand what's going on around us.
... For it would be impossible to carry the weight of this knowledge.
Because every tiny particle of the world is made of suffering. (165)

Duszejko has built a world of meaning for herself, which is something of a religion. She has caught sight of the suffering that she believes is the building block of life, and she uses her firm belief in astrology and a selective portion of Blake to make sense of it.

Duszejko's obsession with astrology is crucial to her as a character. She firmly believes that there is order in the universe, and it can be interpreted with the help of the stars. She relies on her book of Ephemerides to interpret and predict the world around her. To her, the fate of the world and all who inhabit it is already predetermined:

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? (48)

It is her ambition to prove that astrology can be used to predict one's death as well as one's life. It is a project she takes solitarily, quietly collecting over a thousand dates of birth and nearly as many dates of death. Her conviction in this is so strong that she goes to look for Bigfoot's identity card, despite her contempt towards him and after dealing with the nerve-wracking process of having wrestled his corpse into a position of some kind of dignity. It is this search that leads her to find the fateful photograph that spurs Duszejko into murder. Later, when Duszejko sits with her Ephemerides and looks into Bigfoot's death, she finds the confirmation of what she already suspected. She and Oddball saw deer near Bigfoot's home before they entered. They also found that Bigfoot had choked on deer bone. Duszejko immediately jumps to the conclusion that deer, who she dubs "young ladies," had a role in Bigfoot's death. True to the ambivalent nature of astrology, Duszejko's book of Ephemerides allows her to read the opinion she already held among the stars. Similarly, Duszejko had made it a point to take the Commandant's date and time of birth the first time she met him, and in a letter to the police, she confirms that she also managed to get the birthdate of Innerd. It is not clear if Duszejko might have the birthdates of the President or the Priest, but it is clear through her actions that even if she does not, that uncertainty was not enough to stop her. She read animals as the cause of death for both these characters and was convinced that she knew the exact date of their death. However, Duszejko is also aware of the self-fulfilling nature

of predictions in astrology as is evident in her citing the story of an astrologer who died in fear when a pebble dropped on his head because he had predicted that he would die with a rock falling on his head.

It is also important to note that Duszejko also believes that there is no forgiving God who whittles mortal life down to virtue and sin. She remarks,

We believe we are free, and that God will forgive us. Personally I think otherwise. Finally, transformed into tiny quivering photons, each of our deeds will set off into Outer Space, where the planets will keep watching it like a film until the end of the World. (38)

So, actions do not amount to just the good or bad, in Duszejko's worldview, rather, it is the entirety of an action that matters. Duszejko kills the four men because, to her, not only were those men supposed to be killed by the animals' revenge at that particular time, but it is something that needed to be done at the hands of animals. Additionally, for her cosmic afterlife, she had to take that action to give form to the anger and sorrow she felt.

Duszejko interprets herself as the force that embodies the revenge of animals because of her Blakian worldview. She and her former pupil, whom she lovingly nicknamed Dizzy, translate William Blake's visionary poetry together on Thursdays at her kitchen table. She also quotes from his body of work on a day-to-day basis, demonstrating how influential his work has been to her. Her tenderness and love towards animals mimic Blake's views on animal suffering very closely. She says:

“A dog starv'd at his Master's Gate / Predicts the ruin of the State,” writes Blake in “Auguries of Innocence”. “Are their minds incapable of reaching beyond petty, selfish pleasures? People have a duty towards Animals to lead them – in successive lives – to Liberation. (84)

In an affective reading of the novel, Marek Pawlicki demonstrated how William Blake's prophetic work is of fundamental importance to the structure of the novel and builds the bones of Duszejko's outlook on life. Tokarczuk in chapter titles, epigraphs, and in the dialogics of the text itself through Duszejko and Dizzy's efforts of translation reference Blake's “auguries of innocence,” “the marriage of heaven and hell,” “Proverbs of hell,” and “the book of Urizen.” Blake's mystical views of innocence and sin are things that Duszejko clearly echoes, though, more significantly, Duszejko shares Blake's concerns with the treatment of animals. It is her worldview, or her “Theories” as she refers to them, paired with her faith in astrology that invites the reader into her idiosyncratic world and where readers both empathize and disassociate. The same set of beliefs prompts a deep sense of

sorrow within Duszejko because of the world she occupies. The helplessness of this sorrow later transforms into “Wrath” that Duszejko herself cannot control and the four hunters fall victim to. But it is also clear that Duszejko is a victim of her anger. As a result, the affect that drives Duszejko is neither condemned nor validated by the author, and her actions are allowed to occupy an ambivalent state.

On a metatextual level, the title of this novel itself is an inaccurate reference to Blake’s “Marriage of heaven and hell.” Tokarczuk also quotes from Blake’s poetry in the epigraphs that serve as subtitles for each chapter of *Drive Your Plow*. To a degree, Duszejko herself is modeled after Blake’s eccentric personality and especially his penchant for rage (Powell 8). In that vein, it is only fitting that Duszejko draws on him to justify her actions. Anger, in Duszejko, leads to absolute clarity of vision. So, she concludes, “The truth is that anyone who feels Anger, and does not take action, merely spreads the infection. So says our Blake” (47).

It is also important to note that Duszejko’s interpretation of Blake is limited and intentionally flawed. Duszejko is an English teacher, but she admits that her grasp of English is not as firm as she would like it to be. Many have already pointed out that Duszejko misinterpreted the role of rage in Blake’s work (Pawlicki 39; Powell 9; Mcquil). This misunderstanding can be attributed to the language barrier. Translator Antonia Lloyd-Jones did a wonderful job portraying the process of translation in the novel by providing several English rephrasings of Blake’s “The Mental Traveller.” Further, Duszejko herself admits to finding the “Auguries of Innocence” difficult to understand.

The contrast of the authorial voice in the novel highlights the artifice of borders while the voice of the protagonist insists on new borders and categories based on her conviction in astrology and Blake is the most intriguing factor of the novel. Tokarczuk’s tender narration makes room for the interplay of these two opposing ideas to highlight the arbitrary nature of the law, natural, constitutional, or otherwise. But the protagonist Janina Duszejko is not interested in this ambiguity. The next section discusses the process by which Duszejko is thoroughly incapacitated by the affect of her loss, sorrow, and finally anger.

Translating Affect into Transgression

Malek Pawlicki has already discussed the affective nature of Anger and Sorrow in *Drive Your Plow* in his paper “A Tragic Story About Helplessness, Anger and Civil Disobedience.” Duszejko’s anger, especially, surpasses the state of just an emotion; it compels her into movement. The theme of rage in the service of divine retribution is further explored in Natalia Nielipowicz’s “Between

Tenderness and Anger: Oscillation in *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* by Olga Tokarczuk.” Nielipowicz posited that the uncontrollable anger that drives Duszejko to murder is ultimately rooted in the compassion she feels for all living beings. Duszejko is not by nature vengeful or cruel, only eccentric. She repeatedly appeals to the law for justice and even makes a desperate plea at a church gathering for her community to see the cruelty of hunting. It is when she is unheard and left without any other avenues that she turns to crime. The oscillation, Nielipowicz pointed out, between the two seemingly opposite feelings comes from the same strong sense of right and wrong. In a similar vein, Ellen Mortensen argues that there are ecofeminist principles at play in Duszejko’s action. These principles are manifested in the fury Duszejko feels and the revenge she enacts. For Mortensen, Duszejko is similar to the role of the Fury in Greek mythology. Her anger is righteous and merciless towards the patriarchal manifestation of the hunters. She hunts down the transgressors of natural law and then flees once again.

Duszejko is not a violent person by nature. She resorts to violence because it is the only path left for her after the police and the law of her land fail her. Her rage and sorrow are two sides of the same coin. Duszejko, after months of grief, was deeply moved by the photograph in Bigfoot’s house and she felt that the deer she saw outside entrusted her with revenge, but she still insists that she had not known that she was going to kill the Commandant until she did. She describes it as, “Oh, how wise the body is. I could say it was my body that made the decision, it took the swing and struck the blow” (187). Duszejko claims that she was in a trance-like dissociative state while committing the murder, even as her detailed plans show that she did think about these killings in a rational way. Additionally, it has already been established earlier in the paper that Duszejko had predicted that the death of the Commandant would be at the hands of animals, and she was aware of the self-fulfilling nature of astrological prediction. That certainly lends more credence to why Duszejko did it, but it does not explain why it was so important to her to communicate that this was the animals taking revenge.

Monika Sosnowska asserts that Duszejko defies humanist and anthropocentric ontology by blurring the line between animals and humans. Her “instrumental” function is exposed within the novel’s narrative (being an agent of nature) as well as on a metanarrative level (being “a ventriloquist” who expresses Tokarczuk’s concerns) uniquely suits her for a reordering of the natural world where human beings, through the patriarchal violence enforced by human beings, are who transgress natural law. Further, through the protagonist’s deep emotional connection with animals and the repeated attribution of agency to them,

Tokarczuk compels her readers to

confront the consequences of prevailing anthropocentrism and speciesism, suffering of non-human animals in the Anthropocene, environmental crisis, anthropogenic climate change, and urgency for action on ecological and environmental matters. (Sosnowska 307)

Tokarczuk portrays Duszejko's hopelessness and desperation in vivid detail. She also highlights how Duszejko has tried to appeal to the police and law quite persistently to no avail. We have also established Duszejko's worldview where human beings have a duty to animals. Her letter to the police shows that she wants animals to be considered to be perpetrators of the murder but then for them to be not punished because the "alleged deed was a reaction to the soulless and cruel conduct of the victims" (141). She also makes it clear that she wants the law itself to change. Her insistence on it being animals taking revenge has a political element where she wants the people around her to stop killing by any means necessary. This is why she tells the Dentist and his patients that she believes that it is animals taking revenge on hunters, why she goes on a tirade at Good News' shop and, lastly, why she cries out during Father Russel's sermon at the church. For Duszejko, the murders are not just revenge, but also a desperate, last attempt to move the people of her society towards what she considers ethical. Duszejko wants to translate her transgression into change. She wants to push the boundaries of the law and what is acceptable to society at large until it expands to include the well-being of animals and nature into its concerns. But until society does that, Duszejko crosses the boundary of humanity and allies herself with the animals. She becomes the voice of mute creatures who cannot speak for themselves and she becomes a tool in their fight for survival. For a person with her unique understanding of the world, the affect of life-shattering loss manifests through a radical reshuffling of the world order where murdering cruel men who would harm innocent animals is not morally wrong.

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