

Reflections on "*Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*" by Olga Tokarczuk
Rebecca Carmi
November 1, 2022

In preparing this critical reflection I read "*Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*" by Olga Tokarczuk twice. My first reading was innocent, my second more experienced, serendipitously in echo of the title of a famous work by the 18th Century poet, William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Blake's work is referenced throughout Tokarczuk's book, both in the plot and the structure. Janina and Dizzy meet weekly to work on Dizzy's translations of Blake, epigraphs from Blake commence each chapter, and the central characters travel to the mythic Czech Republic, to a bookstore that later functions as the first stop on Janina's escape railroad, in order to purchase a rare copy of Blake's work.

I wandered through that first reading like a domesticated animal in a pen from which I couldn't completely see over the confines of my yard to the wilds of Tkarshuk's mind. More questions than answers accompanied my reading. Indeed, were it not for the newspaper blurb plastered on the cover of the book, "A brilliant literary murder mystery" (Chicago Tribune), I am not sure I would have cottoned on to the fact that we were investigating a serial killer. I would have happily wandered through the labyrinth of the narrator's mind, with its mysterious Ailments and fits, meeting the characters peopling her world of neighbors known only by epithets, enjoying her lyrical and poetic descriptions of the natural world of the Plateau with its mountains, steppes and forests, and her philosophical meanderings. Asking only, as Janina asks about Blake: "Did he really think like that? What was he describing? Where is that? Where is it happening, and when: Is it a fable or a myth?"

Tokarczuk's novel is told in the first person narrative voice of Janina Duszejko. The reader is brought into the world as Janina is awakened by loud knocking ("violent, immoderate and thus ill-omened") on her door. With the opening sentence we understand that she is well into the second half of life and in poor health: "I am already at an age and additionally in a state where I must always wash my feet thoroughly before bed, in the event of having to be removed by an ambulance in the Night." (Note the humor, which also peppers the book). By the second paragraph she has referenced the Ephemerides (a book of planetary positions that lists where the planets will be in the zodiac in the past, present, or future) and their relationship to the events unfolding. And on top of this she's sleeping in a linen suit she's scavenged from her neighbor's trash. Uh oh, I think, unreliable narrator. Reader beware. In an interview with the Brooklyn Public Library in 2010, Tokarczuk says, "I really like eccentric personalities. There's always someone like that in my books.... I'm always attracted to characters like these, the freaks, and I wrote Janina Duszejko like that completely intentionally. There is a lot in her of my neighbor, a retired architect, who bought a house in the countryside, read a lot and got into all sorts of things. I think that civilization continues and develops thanks to eccentrics."

It is Oddball who is pounding on the door to tell her that Bigfoot is dead. Janina does not use given names, but rather calls people and animals by the epithets that "come to mind of their own accord" the first time she sees a person. "I believe each of us sees the other Person in our own way, so we should give them the name we consider suitable and fitting. Thus we are polyonymous. We have as many names as the number of people with whom we interact." Clearly Janina has her own special way of seeing the

world, and we will come to meet the cast of characters mostly by their epithets: Oddball, Dizzy, The Commandant, Father Rustle, Black Coat, The President, Good News, The Professor, The Dentist, The Writer.

On first reading I was in it for the atmosphere, for the richness of description, for the charm of Janina herself. I was confounded by as many things as I was enlightened. Who was this woman, where was this place, who is the killer? Could it really be an uprising of animals? Because there is a sense of the mythic or fairy tale in the setting. I wasn't even sure that the village was a real place, but rather a literary realm like Faulkner's fictional *Yoknapatawpha county*, Mississippi, or Louise Penny's Canadian village of Three Pines or even Hogwarts in Harry Potter. It felt very Eastern European. The forests, the mists, the cruel winters, the animals who may be killers. The pantheism of nature with fields of daisies who stand like "an army of flower folk." or flowers with upright stalks as if "returning from the gym". What Cleavelander doesn't recognize her descriptions of walking single file through deep snow, carefully placing one foot single-file on the footprint in front of you while maintaining your balance? I was puzzled by the seemingly random capitalization of words and wondered if we were in some sort of Morality Play. There were strains of Kafka in it as well, the absurd interactions with local officials, the endless waits in bureaucratic waiting rooms, the bizarre funerary vigil around Bigfoot's body as the mustachioed hunters waited for a hearse to make it up the unpassable road.

Even on that first reading it was hard to miss the obvious critique of men's dismissal of women, especially older women, as Janina is aware that she is continuously fobbed off as a crazy old lady, an old bag, a crackpot, a madwoman. Janina wonders, "Would a Strapping handsome young man be treated like that if he were to say the same things as I do? Or a buxom

brunette?" One official tells her she is overly concerned about animals because she is too old to have children to care for. She is "approaching this too emotionally," he concludes. And in that funny early episode when the mustachioed mourners drag her back out of bed to sing over Bigfoot's body, she figures out it is because she is a woman, though the minute she starts a hymn they all chime in, clearly capable of singing all by themselves. Later the odious President demonstrates his vileness by continually addressing "my lovely ladies" in the crowd.

Nor can one miss the manifesto on animal rights on every page! In an interview for the Irish Times in 2018, Tokarczuk describes *Drive your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* as a "book about pain" and sees Janina as a spokesperson for animals, as Tokarczuk describes them "these voiceless creatures" who "have this ability to feel pain". I was reminded of the 2001 book by Charles Patterson, entitled *Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust*, which title is based on a quote from the Yiddish writer and another Nobel Laureate, Isaac Bashevis Singer, who says: "In relation to them, all people are Nazis; for the animals it is an eternal Treblinka." The hunting stands are ironically called pulpits. Just as we now look back on slavery, dueling and witch hunts as the insanity of the past, Janina looks upon the hunting, slaughter and imprisonment of animals as the ongoing evil of the present. In the interview with the Brooklyn Public Library, Torkushak says, "This book tells the story of a world which, according to the protagonist, is unjust, evil, and built on bad foundations. This is what reading Blake is all about for her, she draws on his philosophy, and it is rather a negative assessment of the world in which we live, the Ulro Earth. Duszejko, as a pure and innocent person, cannot abide in a world that is sinister, aggressive, terrible, cruel, and sometimes macabre."

Additionally, her continual reference to and obsession with astrology puts her on the fringe of society, adding to the tension between her and the powers that be. The article in the Irish Times reports that, "In thinking about Janina, Tokarczuk wanted 'a system of thinking that wouldn't be official in some way, an alternative system of understanding'. A chance meeting with an amateur astrologer at a party gave the Polish writer the idea for the dissident system she was looking for. To the Brooklyn Public Library interviewer she says, "I put astrology into the book a bit out of spite and with full consideration. I wanted to create a character who would contest generally accepted customs with her whole person."

Upon second reading the book truly became a detective novel for me. But I was the detective and the narrative the mystery, yielding all the clues I had previously missed. First off, I laughed at myself as I realized that the capitalizations were a clear homage to William Blake's style of writing. (I even compiled a list of those words to see if they represented some system of code. Not.) And I can now assure you that her village is a very real place, as upon second reading I took out a map and looked at all the village names and other keys to location and found her village truly exists in the southeast of Poland near the Czech border. And by the way, this is where Tokarczuk actually lives.

But most importantly I realized that all the information about the murders was right there in the story! The motive, the moment of decision, the murder weapon and the murderer. Scattered throughout the text like the proverbial breadcrumbs, they point straight to the crimes.

Upon discovery of Bigfoot's body Janina's thoughts go through a conversion which enables the actions that impel the unfolding of the novel.

Bigfoot is an odious creature, a “little goblin” always up to “stealing, filching, fiddling.” A poacher. “Like a small evil sprite, malevolent and unpredictable. ...” Hairy as a troll, “A predator that only lives in order to sow and inflict suffering. “ Yet Janina feels pity for this troll. “It made me feel sad, horrified, for even someone as foul as he was did not deserve death” But then a mere paragraph later, on p. 6 of the novel, the thought that makes all of her coming actions possible, “And then it occurred to me that in a way Big Foot’s death might be a good thing. It had freed him from the mess that was his life. And it had freed other living Creatures from him. Oh yes, suddenly I realized what a good thing death can be, how just and fair, like a disinfectant, or a vacuum cleaner. I admit that’s what I thought, and that’s what I still think now.”

Oddball steps out of Bigfoot’s hut to call for help, though the phone signal has been busy wandering back and forth across the border with the Czech Republic (Much like Janina herself, who loves to cross borders.) As Janina sneakily rummages through a drawer of Bigfoot’s possessions to find his identity card for astrological analysis, she finds a photograph, not yet revealed to us, but which she later shows to her friends in which The Girls, not yet introduced in the book, lie slaughtered at the feet of a band of local hunters, along with a whole day’s worth of their creature carnage.

The Girls were Janina’s dogs, who had gone missing the past season and the loss of whom has devastated Janina. As Janina looks at the photo she tells us, “It took me a while to understand what I was Looking at. Suddenly total silence fell...my body tensed. I was ready to do battle. My head began to spin, and a dismal wailing rose in my ears, a roar, as if from over the horizon an army of thousands was approaching—voices, the clank of iron, the creak of wheels in the distance. Anger makes the mind clear and incisive, able to see more. It sweeps up the other emotions and takes

control of the body. Without a doubt Anger is the source of all wisdom, for Anger has the power to exceed any limits.” In the interview with the Brooklyn Public Library, Tokarczuk explains, “So the only emotion that is born in a holy person is anger. Anger is not a bad energy. In Polish, we have a phrase that translates to “divine anger,” “righteous anger.” When someone is righteously angry, we know that the situation has surpassed the tolerated limits, the human norms. This book describes a situation like that. The macabre of killing is a matter of course happening around us, so the only way to behave justly is the “divine anger” that inundates Janina Duszejko.”

In her paper, *The Fury's Revenge: An Ecofeminist Reading of Olga Tokarczuk's Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, Ellen Morgenstern writes, “But in my view, it is precisely by presenting the world from Duszejko’s perspective that Tokarczuk succeeds in revealing the callousness of the world that Duszejko is forced to contend with, one in which the accumulation of wealth, the exercise of brute force, the killing of animals, disregard for and abuse of nature as well as of women, are valued over a caring concern for our fellow creatures and the sustainability of our planet.”

That first night Janina noticed deer grazing outside Bigfoot’s window wherein sat a boiled deer head and severed deer feet. Bigfoot had choked on a deer bone. Janina sees it as a clear story of the deer’s vengeance for their slaughtered comrade. Now Janina has the story which she will reenact as she tries to both avenge her beloved dogs, remove the world of the true vermin, and convince the world that it is the animals who are seeking vengeance.

And if there could be any doubt as to what she is up to, she lets us know a few pages later that could she have chosen a name for herself, it would have been something like Bellona (Roman goddess of war) or Medea (a mythological Greek figure who exacted extreme vengeance.) (And in the Norwegian translation the name she chooses for herself is “The Fury”) Later she says, “But the truth is that anyone who feels Anger, and does not take action, merely spreads the infections. So says our Blake.” Later we see she is capable of physical violence when she attacks a band of hunters and has to be pulled off of them. She lets us know she is physically quite strong, and later refers to sports medals she won as a young woman. Halfway through the book we learn that she was a civil engineer by profession until her Ailments ended her career! We see her climb gutters and mix cement, roam long miles in the wilderness, and endure the challenges of remote living in severe weather.

This “crackpot” is a physically strong and capable woman, an intelligent and skilled engineer who built bridges all over the world, a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Indeed, Janina is paired with the Wolf. Her Ailments actually conform to the illness Lupus, as I’m sure the doctors among us realized, (named for the latin word for wolf because their traces resemble a wolf’s bite.) She refers to herself as a solitary She-Wolf as she makes her rounds of her client’s properties in her capacity as winter house manager. She has a wolf’s head on the door of her car. And the *coup de grace* is that she goes to the Mushroom Pickers Ball dressed as a wolf, and as such commits the third murder, that of the President.

All of the murder victims are in the photo with her murdered dogs, all conspired in keeping their deaths, accidental or not, secret from her: The

Commandant, Innerd, The President, and Priest Rustle. The weapon is her frozen ice-filled shopping bag, which we see her put in the car as she goes out. And, by the way, those early sporting awards were for the hammer throw. Her letters to the police accusing animals of enacting vengeance (a rumor she successfully seeds in the community, along with the rumor of a the chapucra) contain a suspicious amount of detail, including the species of beetles found all over the President, (attracted to pheromones she acquired from her lover Boros, the entomologist). Each time she sees her the ghosts of her mother and grandmother in her boiler room, it is the night after one of the murders.

In retrospect and a second reading, the cards fall into place: Lady Wolf, with the frozen shopping bag, in the forest. Lady Wolf, with the hunters snare (and shopping bag,) in the forest. Lady. Wolf with the beetle pheromones (and shopping bag) in the forest, And finally Ms. Wolf again, using the magpies as “fire-raisers,” after she notes that they have a nest on the presbystery roof, to set fire to the actual pulpit of the priest/slash/hunter/murderer. (I love the authors note at the end explaining that his pro-hunting sermon is taken from actual sermons of hunt chaplains.) In a little meta-textual aside, Janina comments on the writer, “In a way, people like her, those who wield a pen, can be dangerous.”

But Janina is so much more than Ms. Scarlett in the drawing room with the wrench! She is beloved and capable of inspiring great loyalty. She has many accomplices and colluders: even the President’s Wife who conveys her request to Janina to kill her husband through meaningful looks, the tale of the Night Archer and pointedly leaving his drunken person to her care while giving her the keys to his car, the penetrating look of the Writer after she describes the murders. When her band of friends stages an

intervention (Janina, we love you but we think you have a problem with murder) she confesses every detail as she shows them, (and finally us) the damning photo she found at Big Foot's. They beg her to leave, but don't turn her in, indeed they protect her.

The next day Dizzy leaves her the tip-off that the police are coming with a blade of grass in a passage of Blake on her doorstep, Oddball promises to marry her in a loud voice as she hides in a secret closet when the police search her house as she hides in the basement, Hodza, the bookstore owner in the romantic Czech Republic shelters her in his bookstore, and her lover, Boros the beetle man, secrets her away to a remote research station where she presumably spends the remainder of her days.

I have in my life a beloved friend, an elderly woman who is eccentric, obviously a beauty at any age, speaks like a fairy-tale, and believes that pianos are an endangered species and devotes her life to caring for, refurbishing and protecting great instruments. She names her pianos. She rescues antique pianos of great historical value that she finds through trolling the internet, and she believes they all have their unique voices over which she waxes rhapsodic, and she cries as she tells of a destroyed masterwork. She is my piano wrangler, the person who has found and restored our pianos (Aarletta, aka Aardark, our Steinway A3, and Chaminade, our Mason Hamlein CC-1), and as I met with to discuss Aarletta's progress mere days after reading the book I suddenly thought, oh my god, this is Janina, (without the murders of course, or I hope), she exists...So real and complex is this creation of Tokarczuk and the world she inhabits, as it sits on the threshold between myth and reality, using the strength of the one to unveil the failings of the other.

Barry, Izabella Joanna, Brooklyn Public Library Interview, "Anger is Not a Bad Energy": In Conversation with Olga Tokarczuk" Fall of 2010

Cronin, Michael, The Irish Times, Oct 1, 2018.

Mortensen, Ellen (2021) The Fury's Revenge: An Ecofeminist Reading of Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, Scando-Slavica, 67:2, 227-246, DOI: [10.1080/00806765.2021.1994002](https://doi.org/10.1080/00806765.2021.1994002)

Novel Club Questions for Nov 1, 2022

Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead by Olga Tokarczuk
Rebecca Carmi

1. Is Janina a hero or a criminal? Is she sane or a psychopath?
2. How does Janina's eccentricity propel the narrative? Does it undermine her message?
3. How is the place in which Janina lives a part of the story? Could it be told if Janina lived anywhere else?
4. Do you have eccentric people in your life and do they support Tokarczuk's assertion that "I think that civilization continues and develops thanks to eccentrics?"
5. Can you come up with epithets à la Janina for some of the people in your life?