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Citizens of Ulro: A Review of Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*

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First published in 2009 and translated into English by Antonia Lloyd-Jones in 2018, Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* testifies to the horrors of living in a world in which regarding animal life as intrinsically valuable is perceived as delusional. With its emphasis on astrology, hunting, and sainthood, *Plow* often reads like a medieval tale, and its approach to animal liberation is accordingly rooted in the Judeo-Christian belief that only humans possess souls. The novel's idiosyncratic voice ventriloquizes animals with undue confidence; its argument that animals are *just like us* is a disappointingly anthropocentric basis on which to predicate their rights. Despite this philosophical shortcoming, the radical empathy of Tokarczuk's genre-bending narrative proves to be an effective rallying cry for the animal rights movement.

Plow unfolds over the course of a dark and punishing winter in a remote Polish plateau. Its narrator, Janina, tends to the vacant houses of those who can afford to flee the cold on an annual basis. Janina is largely ignored by the remaining villagers, who perceive her to be an elderly crank, the sort of person "whom the world regards as useless" (247). Unlike her male counterparts, who occupy themselves with hunting in the plateau's expansive woods, Janina spends her free time researching astrology and translating William Blake. She maintains an animal cemetery beside her house. She confiscates her neighbours' hunting traps and liberates farmed foxes. She frets over the community's plans to reopen an old granite quarry, envisioning the industrial machinery of industry as "avid mouths" that "devour" the earth in pursuit of profit (49). When the village becomes the site of a string of grim and mysterious murders which occur in close proximity to wildlife, Janina seeds the theory that nonhuman animals are responsible for the slew of deaths, attributing their motivation to vengeance against the hunters and/or increased aggression in the wake of anthropogenic climate change.

Plow's preoccupation with the intertwining of hunting and Christianity is

distinctly Polish. The alliance between "throne and altar" is longstanding in Poland; the Catholic Church's involvement ranges from blessing new McDonald's franchises to backing near-total bans on abortion (Skóra 2023, n.p.). The novel precisely illustrates this perspective through Janina's excoriation of her village's idiosyncratic hunting structures: "They were knocked together out of wooden beams, set crosswise; they consisted entirely of crosses. These grotesque figures had four legs and a cabin with embrasures on top. Pulpits, for hunting. This name has always amazed and angered me. For what on earth was taught from that sort of pulpit? What sort of gospel was preached? Isn't it the height of arrogance, isn't it a diabolical idea to call the place from which one kills a pulpit?" (54). Janina emphasizes the etymological irony inherent in the pulpit's nomenclature, likening it to the dais in church whence her village's priest lauds the patron saint of hunters (his sermon does double duty as a corporate advertisement, showing the inextricable ties between capital interests and the church). In drawing attention to the cross-based composition of these hunting pulpits—"grotesque figures" resembling Baba Yaga's chicken-legged hut—Tokarczuk blends metonymy with defamiliarization to reveal the religious foundation of a supposedly secular culture.

The novel's narrator-protagonist represents the nobler half of Baba Yaga: not the old crone who eats children, but the benevolent yet misunderstood steward of the forest and its nonhuman inhabitants. *Plow* encodes witchcraft in Janina's adherence to astrology, a practice far older than Christianity, which in Poland is, according to Tokarczuk, "considered to be the delusion of old women or hysterical girls" (Barry 2020, n.p.). Janina's Catholic male counterparts view her accordingly as a sacrilegious yet altogether benign figure. When Janina refers to her murdered dogs as her "daughters," the village priest censures her for blasphemy: "It's wrong to treat animals as people," he retorts, because "they don't have souls" (236). In endowing its narrator with a derided yet methodical system of belief such as astrology, the novel effectively leverages its capacity for revealing the Enlightenment humanist worldview's quasi-religious roots. That is, authority figures such as the priest and the police consul might read Janina as a madwoman crank, but her willingness to meet them on their own terms repeatedly exposes their own maddening contradictions. When Janina draws the City Guards' attention to animal murder outside the bounds of hunting season, the Guards claim that poaching is beyond their jurisdiction and redirect her to the veterinarian (who is, ironically, also a hunter). This tenuous and imaginary distinction between sanctioned and unsanctioned murder calls attention to the pseudo-biological nature of human difference based in rational knowledge production. Just as the hunting pulpit is

built out of the metonymic cross, the laws that distinguish hunting, poaching, and murder are built on the flimsy and outdated Judeo-Christian conviction that nonhuman animals lack souls.

Janina's "uncivilized madwoman" status affords her a certain agency reserved for those deemed useless by conventional standards. In the world of *Plow*, valuation according to utility is the province of the patriarchal capitalist; to be useless is to go unnoticed, whereas to be useful is to invite exploitation. The village consul defends the operation of his lucrative fox farm according to this rationale: "What use would [the foxes'] beautiful fur be to them at liberty?" (196). This is the same logic that grants Janina's friend Dizzy, who works for the police, the liberty to share confidential information with Janina, because Janina is considered to be "just an old woman, gone off her rocker living in this wilderness. Useless and unimportant" (195). The narrow-minded impulse to equivocate utility with economic gain motivates Janina's murder of *Plow*'s greedy fox farmer and his associates. This poetic justice reflects Tokarczuk's worldview that "civilization continues and develops thanks to eccentrics," and that "the fate of every truth is first to be the object of derision and mockery, before it becomes something generally accepted" (Barry 2020, n.p.). Animal liberation requires humans to imagine a world that does not yet exist; Janina is consequently able to murder her hunter neighbours without suspicion because the authorities hubristically lack the ingenuity to conceive of a possible motive for these so-called crimes.

Despite its attempt to construct a potentially radical reorientation of speciesist hierarchies, *Plow* employs disappointingly anthropocentric rhetoric to reach the conclusion that animals' lives have intrinsic value. Janina fondly refers to the local deer as her "young ladies," yet she attempts to scapegoat them for her own killing spree. She christens her neighbours with pet names such as Oddball and Dizzy, and does the reverse with her neighbours' pets: "as I gazed at [Big Foot's] Dog, the first thing that occurred to me was a human name, Marysia" (19). She authoritatively asserts that the presence of animal tracks circling a young boar's corpse are evidence of animal mourning. She admires her local lesbian horror writer neighbour so much that she questions whether the neighbour is human: "If only I could have seen her feet, perhaps it would have turned out that she was not a human Being either, but some other form of life. A water nymph of the *logos*, or a sylph" (52). These hubristic musings are part and parcel of a slanted first-person narrational perspective, but Janina's ventriloquizing of her nonhuman counterparts carries a self-righteous tenor (not least because she also happens to relish Gorgonzola cheese and buttery béchamel sauce). Animals likely practice rituals, but should this weigh into our

assessment of whether they deserve the same rights as human beings? To presuppose understanding of nonhuman animals is to risk hubris. Conversely, there is a risk of solipsism in fighting for animal liberation only because we perceive animals to be *just like us*.

Plow is also problematic in its insistence on telegraphing its own antiseptic distance from genre fiction, while at the same time working with genre fiction conventions. One of the novel's most capital-L literary qualities is its wholesale engagement with William Blake. The novel's title derives from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and each chapter features an epigraph from Blake's oeuvre. When Janina is not murdering her neighbours or working on astrological charts, she is translating Blake into Polish. Janina is a sort of Blakean antihero, a reluctant citizen of the Land of Ulro who cannot help but see the unjust cruelties at the foundation of western civilization. In my experience, this heightened sense of empathy is disproportionately high in the horror community. Perhaps this is the basis of why so many of us who abstain from eating meat work in the genre: because we feel compelled to explore modern life's myriad quotidian brutalities rather than look away.[1] And this makes it all the more alienating when Tokarczuk calls "writing [for] pure entertainment" a "waste of paper" (Barry 2020, n.p.). With its arbitrary capitalization of words, its philosophical interludes, and its fixation on Blake, *Plow* is a prime candidate for the divisive "elevated horror" label. *Town & Country*'s [dustjacket] blurb lauds *Plow* as a "sharp, memorable alternative to those dime-a-dozen beach bag potboilers." As a genre writer who embraces suspense—that nail-biting hallmark of literature's darkest genres—I am inclined to think of *Plow*'s absence thereof as a drawback rather than a merit. Furthermore, this reticence to see critical value in literature's more affect-driven techniques strikes me as an excessively cerebral impulse, at odds with the very cause *Plow* seeks to address. Tokarczuk's position brings to mind a quotation from Stephen King's *Danse Macabre*: "Begin by assuming that the tale of horror, no matter how primitive, is allegorical by its very nature; that it is symbolic. Assume that it is talking to us, like a patient on a psychoanalyst's couch, about one thing while it means another" (1983, 31). In other words, the conscientious writer needn't deliberately inject ethics into their work; one must trust that one's moral position is an unconscious byproduct of the creative process.

Given the significant overlap between the vegan community and the horror community, *Plow* might be proselytizing to an under-tapped market

[1] Dario Argento, Clive Barker, Kathe Koja, Mike Thorn, Mick Garris, and Rob Zombie are some examples of vegan and vegetarian horror writers and filmmakers.

demographic. Despite *Plow*'s conventional plot, its prose hews more closely to the discursive philosophical style of writers like W. G. Sebald, Clarice Lispector, and Annie Ernaux. My favourite example of this free-associative meandering is a throwaway reference to a television playing *Alien* (another example of Blake mixed with horror) that more or less cuts away to a swarm of fieldfares—a species of bird which Janina (who is a repository of random factoids) explains defend themselves by "defecating on their oppressor—dozens of white droppings land on the predator's lovely wings, soiling them, gluing them together, and coating the feathers in corrosive acid" (98). Tokarczuk's exultant vision of xenomorphic retribution is a refreshing inversion of Ridley Scott's *Alien*. With its deeply idiosyncratic first-person point-of-view, *Plow* invites readers to identify with the xenomorph rather than the enterprising corporation threatening its habitat. And this approach seems to be effective: in a 2019 interview with *The Nobel Prize*, Tokarczuk states that many people told her they stopped eating meat after reading *Plow*.

Just as *Plow*'s village-idiot-cum-wisewoman narrator puts too much stock into proving that nonhuman animals are intelligent, Tokarczuk mistakenly assumes that consciously writing horror for "smart people" demonstrates "superior" craft. And yet, while seasoned horror readers might lack patience for this ponderously discursive novel, those who eschew all but elevated horror may find themselves inducted into a worldview where participating in animal liberation is equated with theft or destruction of property, where killing animals is a necessary given but killing humans is a capital crime, and where "only the sick are truly healthy" (84). Despite its shortcomings as a page-turner and its struggle to find an anti-anthropocentric orientation, *Plow*'s bold experimental style is a fresh and innovative contribution to vegan horror.

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