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Shades of Green Language: Environmentalism in Contemporary Eastern-European Fiction

Abstract: The article compares the “shades” of green language, the language of ecological concern, in recent Eastern-European prose. The Ukrainian language of concern has a distinct “post-Chernobyl tragedy” tinge (Volodymyr Yavorivski, *Maria with Mugwort at the End of the Century*, and Viktor Vasyl’chuk, *Chornobyl Distress of Bucha*). This continues the tradition of “pre-Chernobyl” ecological prose that expresses the unity of man and nature, and pictures the terrible consequences of technological change and pollution. Polish environmental prose of the twenty-first century, represented in this article by Olga Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, and Anna Kamińska, *Simona: A Story about the Unusual Life of Simona Kossak*, speaks in the green language of Maria Rodziewiczówna, Władysław Reymont, and Adolf Dygasiński. Over time, post-colonial accents in the analysed fiction become weak and ecological ones grow stronger. All of these prose works propose living on this planet in symbiotic harmony with nature. Very often, the language of the analysed works is marked by the anthropomorphization of nature, eco-narration, in which the world is seen from the point of view of an animal or a plant. The above-mentioned Eastern-European fiction confirms the global scale of environmental problems, great changes in the culture of environmentalism, and the demand for the language of concern.

Keywords: eco-consciousness, eco-narration, green language, national modes of eco-narration, Polish environmental prose, Ukrainian environmental prose

When the LAST tree is cut down, the last fish eaten, and the last stream poisoned, you will realize that you cannot eat money. (Speake 2008, 286)

These provocative words of wisdom serve as the guiding maxim of this article. The saying is credited to Alanis Obomsawin (an Abenaki from the Odanak reserve),¹ and has been popularized by Greenpeace members who care about protecting and conserving the environment. I also heard it a dozen or so years ago among the Cree, in North Battleford, Saskatchewan. It is very often attributed to the Cree,

¹ See “When the Last Tree is Cut Down ...” (2011).

but has a universal sense that is compatible with green politics and its specific language.

The aim of my article is to compare the “shades” of this common green language, the language of ecological concern, in contemporary Eastern-European prose. The Ukrainian language of concern has a distinct “post-Chernobyl tragedy” tinge (Volodymyr Yavorivski, *Maria with Mugwort at the End of the Century* [1988]; Viktor Vasyl’chuk, *Chornobyl Distress of Bucha* [2013], and so on); this continues the tradition of Mykhaylo Stelmakh’s *The Geese and Swans Are Flying* (1964) or Mykola Rudenko’s *Eagle’s Ravine* (1970), two works that express the unity of man and nature, picturing the terrible consequences of technological change and pollution. Polish environmental prose of the twenty-first century, represented in this article by Olga Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead* (2009), and Anna Kamińska, *Simona: A Story about the Unusual Life of Simona Kossak* (2015), speaks in the green language of Maria Rodziewiczówna’s *The Summer of the Forest People* (1920), but it also includes the environmental themes of Władysław Reymont’s *The Promised Land* (1898) and Adolf Dygasiński’s *Wolf, Dogs, and Humans* (1883).

1 Returning to Chernobyl

The explosion and meltdown of the Chernobyl (Ukrainian Чорнобиль “Chornobyl”) nuclear reactor in 1986 spread radioactive toxins across Europe, killed uncounted thousands through cancer and other radiation-related illnesses, and continues to cause birth defects and illnesses in Belarus and Ukraine. Ukrainian writers were focusing on the environment long before ecocriticism as a field had developed. “Ukrainian ecocritic Inna Sukhenko painstakingly details the literary tradition of her country, revealing that resistance to ecological disasters by way of artistic expression dates back well before the Chernobyl accident, at least to the 1950s” (Slovic et al. 2014, xiii). A few years later, this infamous industrial disaster produced many ecologically oriented works of non-fiction and fiction, predominantly the former (documentary notes, interviews, and so on). All these works differed in form, but spoke the same language of concern, forming “the Chernobyl genre” (see Sukhenko 2014, 118). A couple of years after the accident, Chernobyl became a symbol, a sign of culture, as another Ukrainian critic, Tamara Hundorova, states (Hundorowa 2014, 259). Volodymyr Yavorivski’s *Maria with Mugwort at the End of the Century* (1988) is one of the works of prose devoted to Chernobyl and presents an attempt at fictionalizing documentary narration, a novel based partly on true stories and events.

The plot centres on the Myrovytch family. Three of the sons play roles in the Chernobyl tragedy. Two of them – an engineer and a firefighter – die in the catastrophe; the eldest, a high-salaried professor and one of the designers of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor, will appear in court for his mistakes and irresponsibility. Their mother, an old peasant woman, Maria, must live to help her grandchildren, to rebuild her devastated home, to take care of her domestic animals, and to regenerate her land. In comparison with *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future* (2016; Russian orig. 1997) by Svetlana Alexievich, a Belarusian writer who writes in Russian, and with *Chernobyl* (2011) by Francesco M. Cataluccio, Yavorivski's novel does not have such a purposeful, wide, and drastic description of the devastation of nature. It is concerned with man's fate, the conflict between man and power, and a short history of the Chernobyl disaster. But, reading this novel, one can imagine very vividly the elderly Maria, who very soon returned secretly from evacuation to her old house to save her sick cow and her hungry dog, and to plant potatoes on her land; Maria, bathing the swollen, hardened, and wounded udder of her cow with birch sap from her cellar ("Clean and healthy, non-infected, conserved by Fedir before Chernobyl"; Yavorivski 2009, 378);² Maria taking her cow and her dog, walking with them all day long over "the empty, deserted, desolate, and alien planet" (Yavorivski 2009, 383), without water and grass, with photos of the family and a fascicle of mugwort in her small bundle.³ This fragment focuses on the terrifying situation of the dead, inert, infertile earth and the infected water, which make habitation impossible. With the help of different points of view and multiple narratives, the author looks forward, seeing the post-Chernobyl ecological situation. The unsuccessful, out-of-control children's game at the end of the novel serves as an allegory, a lesson for all mankind, formulated in Maria's words: "They took advantage of boundless will and were punished for this" (Yavorivski 2009, 386).

The beautiful and wise Caucasian shepherd dog Bucha, the hero of Vasyl'chuk's *Chornobyl Distress of Bucha*, was not lucky enough to be reunited with his master. His master, Maksym, who worked at the collective farm stables and had once saved his life, did not return for him from the settlement. The Ukrainian prose writer describes, with exceptional penetration and compassion, Bucha's days and months of suffering from the start, when he ran for a long time after the bus carrying his master, up to the moment of the dog's agonizing death. Vasyl'chuk's dedication reads: "Quite a probable story about probable creatures from the improbable zone ... To all animals which died during and after the Cher-

² All translations from Ukrainian and Polish are mine unless otherwise noted.

³ The mugwort ("chornobyl") of the title comes and goes throughout the text.

nobl catastrophe” (Vasyl’chuk 2012).⁴ The animal’s distress is narrated from the point of view of the dog. Bucha’s despair is united with the despairs of all the animals left behind and abandoned:

Bucha ran after the bus for a long time. Until it had disappeared from the horizon. After that the dog tore down the sandy road for another half hour. And then he fell down. He put his head on his forelegs listlessly and ... began to whine sadly. Then he began to howl. Far away, somewhere near Chernobyl, some other dogs, left behind by their masters, responded with similar horrifying howls. There, in the village, Bucha was born. Then his life was nearly taken away from him. But he was given a good master. And now? ... (Vasyl’chuk 2012)

Vasyl’chuk’s shepherd dog, like a man, felt tragedy, pain, and distress; he could feel compassion and had a soul, but – as a feral dog – he was treated by people as a thing, a dangerous, irradiated thing,⁵ and was condemned to great suffering and death.

The night was dark. It began to drizzle from the starless sky. And Bucha was dying under a broken oak. The mutilated soul was slowly finding its way out of the maimed, disfigured body of the dog. But his consciousness wouldn’t leave him. And he understood everything. He was gazing at the black night with his dim eyes. But he couldn’t see anything. He couldn’t hear any voices, either. He tried to howl. But the only sound he could produce was a feeble wheeze. Like at that time when everything had started. In that picturesque village, which was spread among pines, birches, little glassy lakes, near a tiny winding river. Not far from Chernobyl. (Vasyl’chuk 2012)

This story demonstrates that the post-Chernobyl generation of Ukrainian writers returns to Chernobyl in order to show that humans are dependent upon and interconnected with their environment, that “we can either take care of the land, or see it turned into an unpopulated and uninhabitable desert,”⁶ that the relationship between ecology and animals means correlation. According to the editors of *Ecoambiguity, Community, and Development: Toward a Politicized Ecocriticism*, “Ukrainian environmental experience in the twenty-first century is defined by one

4 Some minor modifications to Oksana Kavun’s translation of *Bucha* will be made for linguistic accuracy.

5 The Ukrainian writer has an English predecessor: “Animals have no souls; therefore, according to the most authoritative Christian theologians, they may become treated as though they were things. The truth, as we are now beginning to realize, is that even things ought not to be treated as mere things. They should be treated as though they were parts of a vast living organism. [...] If we hope to be well treated by nature we must stop talking about ‘mere things’ and start treating our planet with intelligence and consideration” (Huxley 1962).

6 These are the words of David R. Marples (1990, x) concerning Iurii Shcherbak’s *Chernobyl*.

of the world's most infamous industrial disasters [...], and yet Ukrainian culture, like many throughout the world, actually cherishes a profound, even animistic, attachment to the wonders of nature" (Slovic et al. 2014, viii). Thirty years after the explosion, Chernobyl has become a popular tourist destination (see the optimistic and pessimistic visions of Chernobyl tourism in Mirnyi [2010, 22]; Heise [2008, 175–204]; Blackwell [2012, 21–38]; Alexievich [2016, 290–292]), hosting tourist visits that expose travellers to danger and that have moral consequences. With his empathetic nature, and his zeal for protecting forests and animals – not only in connection with Chernobyl – Victor Vasyľchuk is close to his Polish environmental colleagues.

2 Simple living in natural surroundings

What does William Blake's proverb "Drive your cart and your plough over the bones of the dead" mean? Perhaps the contemporary Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk has her own, "green" interpretation of the proverb, naming her detective novel/moral thriller *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*.⁷ The action takes place in Kotlina Kłodzka, in the Kłodzko Valley, a cirque in the Sudetes mountain range in south-western Poland, close to the border with the Czech Republic. Janina Duszejko – a former bridge engineer, a present-day village schoolteacher of English and geography, and a janitor of holiday homes – is the main character. She lives a simple life on her own, in the natural surroundings of the forest, and her contact with the village is limited. She has a passion for astrology and a love for nature, especially for animals. Whenever they are in danger, Janina defends them and stands up for their rights. Not surprisingly, the village does not care about a woman who thinks that the world is a reflection of things inscribed in the stars and reads William Blake for hours. Then poachers and animal abusers start to die in the area. In order to protect the animals and wreak vengeance upon their torturers and wrongdoers, Janina Duszejko killed a man with premeditation. With the help of the heroine, Olga Tokarczuk shifts attention from humans to other creatures (for details, see Weretiuk [2013, 198–205]), and heads towards a weaker anthropocentrism, which states that the world is comprehended from the human

⁷ *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead* was nominated for the Nike Literary Award 2010. Olga Tokarczuk is one of the most critically acclaimed and commercially successful Polish writers of her generation. She has won numerous awards, including the Nike, Vilenica, and Władysław Reymont prizes. In 2018, she became the first Polish author to win the Man Booker International Prize with her *Flights* (2018), an English translation, by Jennifer Croft, of *Bieguni* (2007).

viewpoint. However, this does not negate the fact that we should imagine what reality looks like from the viewpoint of other creatures, and act not only according to our interest, but keeping the interests of other living beings in mind as well. The language of Janina's narration is the language of concern. She is very perceptive and sensitive to nature. In her language, she attributes human qualities or personality to non-human things. She anthropomorphizes trees, plants, animals (e.g. deer [Tokarczuk 2009, 24, 300]);⁸ at the same time, it very often seems that it is the human narrator that theriomorphizes herself: she calls herself "a Lonely She-Wolf" (Tokarczuk 2009, 179). She lives on equal terms with animals, and this equality saves her from anthropocentric superiority.⁹ For her, there are no ugly and unwanted animals, more stupid or worse than man. She wishes to live in symbiosis with nature. The lonely forest woman manages to notice the noiseless, soft, and "damp" (Tokarczuk 2009, 167) flight of a bat. Being in symbiosis with the bat, she wants to know how he sees the world; in answering this question, she could widen her human outlook. Being a protector of nature, she meditates: "I wish I could fly in his [the bat's] body over the Plateau. How do we appear through his senses? As shadows? As beams of vibration, sources of noise?" (Tokarczuk 2009, 168).

In her desire to see the world through the eyes of a non-human being, and from the world-evaluation perspective of this creation that evaluates himself and his human symbiont, Janina is close to the philosophy of Wolfgang Iser and his ideological patron, the poet Robinson Jeffers. Iser offered "the return to trans-human aesthetics, which retracts from the modern rules according to which anything must be understood from man's perspective and in relation to man" (2005, 171). The simple life in the forest does not make the narration simple; Janina's language is full of concern for nature, and at the same time it is rich and wise.

The narrator of Anna Kamińska's biographical novel *Simona: A Story about the Unusual Life of Simona Kossak* (2015) speaks in the green language of Maria Rodziewiczówna's *The Summer of the Forest People* (1920), a novel which has been compared with *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau insofar as it exhibits simple living in natural surroundings, a close observation of nature, and work to defend

⁸ In such a way, Tokarczuk continues the tradition of anthropomorphization in Polish literature represented by Adam Mickiewicz, Stefan Żeromski, Władysław Reymont, and other writers.

⁹ Here she continues Thomas Hardy's tradition of presenting nature. As Charlotte Barrett (n.d.) notes, "Hardy establishes a reciprocal relationship between environment and character; an interaction which serves to demonstrate the changing position of humans in the post-Darwinian Victorian period. Hardy's narrative voice depicts the natural world in the same way the appearance of different individuals are described, and vice versa. This technique removes the sense of authority from human hands, placing humans within the natural world rather than ruling above it."

wild animals and nature. Writing a fictional and documentary novel about a well-known Polish biologist, zoo psychologist, and environmentalist, Professor Simona Gabriela Kossak (1943–2007), the author wrote at the same time a history of the Białowieża Forest, which is one of the last and largest remaining parts of the immense primeval forest that once stretched out across the European Plain. The director of the Polish Biosphere Reserve Białowieża (The National Park in the Białowieża Forest), in his preface to Simona Kossak's book on the Białowieża Forest, presents this unique green place:¹⁰

The Białowieża Forest is the best-preserved fragment of European primeval lowland forests, located on the border between Poland and Byelorussia. The biological richness and natural character of its environment is due to many hundreds of years of protection by rulers of this part of Europe: dukes of Lithuania, kings of Poland and emperors of Russia. The primeval character of ecosystems and permanence of natural processes that have been acting for millennia, make the Białowieża Forest a natural laboratory and an important reference for man-transformed European forests. At presently only 16 % of this invaluable area has the status of a national park. [...] The unique value of this exceptional forest lies in the unceasing action of natural processes in its backwoods of pristine character. European lowland forests lost this greatest and to a large degree non-renewable quality long before now. [...] Only in the Białowieża Forest we can learn about the history of the continent, characterized by the stability of natural processes and a rich biodiversity. (Popiel 2006, 7)

Simona, the great-granddaughter of Juliusz Kossak, granddaughter of Wojciech Kossak, and daughter of Jerzy Kossak – three great painters who loved both Polish landscapes and history – niece of the poet Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska and the satirist Magdalena Samozwaniec, spent more than thirty years in a wooden hut called *Dziedzinka* in the Białowieża Forest, without electricity or access to running water. A lynx slept in her bed, and a tamed boar lived under the same roof with her. According to Kamińska, Simona once said that it was only the years of forest life that taught her, a graduate of biology studies with a specialization in zoo psychology, to understand the language of animals (2015). She was a forest scientist, ecologist, and author of award-winning films about nature. She was also an activist who fought for the protection of Europe's oldest forest. Simona believed that one ought to live a simple life, close to nature. Living among animals let her find something that she had never found among humans.

10 It straddles the border between Poland (Podlaskie voivodeship) and Belarus (Brest and Grodno voblast), and is forty-three miles north of Brest, Belarus, and thirty-nine miles southeast of Białystok, Poland. UNESCO's World Network of Biosphere Reserves included Białowieża in the Man and the Biosphere Programme in 1976, and the Belarusian Biosphere Reserve Belovezhskaya Puschcha in 1993. The forest has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Simona was instantly enchanted with Dziedzinka and simple forest life. She observed and studied different trees, flowers, and animals. Probably the first and strongest of her emotional experiences was her encounter with the European bison,¹¹ Europe's heaviest land animal, the royal animal of the forest. As noted by Józef Popiel,

monarchs of this land protected it in unison. The Forest's flock of bison – well cared for, given additional food in winter and allowed to forage on purposely-cultivated forest clearings – prospered. However, bison had disappeared from the Białowieża Forest for the years 1920–1928. Total extinction of this species was prevented thanks to strenuous efforts of several generations of naturalists, foresters and scientists. (Popiel 2006, 8)

After World War II, the Białowieża Forest became its natural refuge once again. In near-natural conditions, hundreds of bison could be seen in fields and meadows surrounding the forest in the 1970s, when Simona arrived there. Years later, Simona described her first moonlit winter expedition to Dziedzinka and an encounter with the king of the forest in the following words:

It was the first aurochs that I ever saw in my life, I am not counting the ones in the zoo. Well, and this greeting right at the entry into the forest – this monumental aurochs, the whiteness, the snow, the full moon, whitey white everywhere, pretty [...] and the little hut hidden in the little clearing all covered with snow, an abandoned house that no one had lived in for two years. In the middle room, there were no floors, it was generally a ruin. And I looked at this house, all silvered by the moon as it was, romantic, and I said "it's finished, it's here or nowhere else!" (trans. Schlosser, in Kowalczyk 2015)

Bison opened her forest life and became a distinctive frame for her existence. According to Kamińska, a year before Simona's death, the latter published a book on Białowieża with a chapter "Face to Face with a Bison," written with exceptional warmth and pride. Kamińska writes that the

European bison is a symbol, the everlasting pride of Poles, who by a miracle and thanks to the endeavours of a handful of enthusiasts saved this immemorial inhabitant of the ancient Białowieża Forest from extinction. Its majestic figure is the logo of the Polish nature-protection movement, of the Białowieża National Park, and of one bank. It decorates labels of

11 English dictionaries usually give out-of-date information on this animal, for example: "aurochs [awroks] An extinct large wild ox [...], formerly widespread in Europe, Asia, and N Africa, the ancestor of domestic cattle; bulls large with long forward-pointing horns, females smaller with shorter horns; last individual killed in Poland in 1627" (Crystal 1994, 100). According to Rokosz (1995, 5), in 1627 "the last aurochs cow died a natural death in her haunts, as is stated in the report of the royal inspection performed in the year 1630."

bottles of mineral water [...] [and Polish beer!]. As the object of national devotion, the bison is dear to everybody's heart. The bison is a wild animal at its core as well. The most impressive bison males are more than 3m long, stand almost 2m at the shoulder and weigh about 800kg. They used to be even bigger in the past – a bull killed in 1555 was said to be almost 4m long and to weigh 1000kg. (Kamińska 2015, 130–131)

When nature was in danger, Simona used decisive, sharp, and categorical language. She protected it, very often on her own, and not only with the help of words. Most of all, she criticized and disapproved of methods of study which were harmful to nature (see the chapter “Battle-Woman”). As a result, in 1993 she took away the damaging heavy metal jaw-traps set within the territory of the Park by the Mammal Research Plant team. She kept them and refused to give them back. She was even accused by the scientists of stealing their research apparatus. To the lawsuit Simona answered:

Each animal that falls into the trap is potentially condemned to die if the wound to the paws is heavy. [...] it is a lethal threat to the continuity of the lowland lynx type, whose genetic scope is unique across all of Europe, because there are no more lowland lynxes in Europe. It is a disgrace to the world of science for us to have contributed to this. (trans. Schlosser, in Kowalczyk 2015)

In 1992 she criticized the attempts of the PAN (Polish Academy of Sciences) to carry out telemetric studies (in which a wild animal is given a collar with a radio transmitter, so that it transmits information as it moves around), which were dangerous for wolves and lynxes. Then, in the winter of 1993, Simona commented on her battle to save the lynxes and wolves of Białowieża from extinction.

As her visitors and guests recall, Simona was very natural in this natural environment. “She received me with hospitality. She presented such a Scandinavian naturalness. She thought that life had to be simple, close to nature,” Bożena Wajda noted (according to Kamińska 2015, 179). It is not strange that Dutch people eagerly returned to Dziedziniec, the author of *Simona* claims and explains: “She was a revelation for them – a woman in the jungle, an open person; she immediately addressed people by their names, she was natural, with wind-blown hair, with no makeup, surrounded by animals, living in a simple house with no mod-cons, an unprecedented phenomenon in twentieth-century Europe” (Kamińska 2015, 176). The whole life, and scientific and ecological activity, of Simona Kossak were devoted to “bridging the gap between man and nature” (Kamińska 2015, 234). She hated the word “anthropomorphism,” which suggested to her that we should “separate people and animals, as if they were from different planets” (Kamińska 2015, 234).

3 Conclusions

In conclusion, it is tempting to say that these national (local) modes of green language seek to influence the process of the development of our eco-consciousness and education in order to protect natural resources and ecosystems, to renew and revitalize our connections with non-human life. They seem to say that the Białowieża Forest, the Kłodzko Valley, and the Polesian Lowland near Chernobyl are the sort of national property in which every man has a right to live, work, and enjoy coexistence with nature. They touch upon the issue of eco-ethics and proclaim the idea of softening anthropocentrism or abandoning it. What possibly links them with other environmentally oriented works is the notion of the mutual interconnectedness and interdependence of all beings. Moreover, they completely follow Lawrence Buell's definition of such works as those where the "*nonhuman environment, the whole living natural world, is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history*" (1995, 7, quoted by Heise 2008, 42; italics in Buell). The Polish novels head for a dark green language of concern;¹² they are more radical in the face of anthropomorphism. The language of initial Ukrainian post-Chernobyl eco-fiction is light green, with red belts of post-colonial and post-Communist ideological burden, which keeps it tied to anthropocentrism. According to Molly Nichols, "postcolonialism is often seen as anthropocentric, primarily concerned with social justice, and emphasising concepts such as hybridity and displacement. Ecocriticism, on the other hand, is often considered to be earth-centred, primarily concerned with animal rights and environmental conservation, emphasising natural purity and 'belonging'" (2010, 100).

With the passing of time, post-colonial accents become weak and ecological ones grow stronger. All of them propose living on this planet in symbiotic harmony with nature. Very often, the language of the analysed works is marked by the anthropomorphization of nature, specifically eco-narration, in which the world is seen from the point of view of an animal or a plant. The above-mentioned Eastern-European fiction confirms the global scale of environmental problems, great changes in the culture of environmentalism, and the demand for the language of concern.

12 This is an allusion to Bate's (2000, 37) distinction between "light Greens" and "dark Greens."

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