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## Ecologizing Memory

**Anna Barcz, *Environmental Cultures in Soviet East Europe: Literature, History and Memory*. London: Bloomsbury, 2020**

Anna Barcz, the author of the pioneering and widely commented monograph *Ecological Realism: From Ecocriticism to Zoocriticism in Polish Literature* (cf. Jarzyna 2018), is one of the Polish humanists who have been making a contribution to non-anthropocentric studies, and who continue to explore uncharted (or poorly recognized) non-anthropocentric research areas. In her latest work, *Environmental Cultures in Soviet East Europe: Literature, History and Memory*, published in 2020, Barcz tests and explores concepts used in memory studies in order to investigate the environmental memory of Europe under Soviet rule, which, as she demonstrates, cannot be restricted to political, national or linguistic boundaries. As a consequence, the author decides to broaden her research and turn to East-Central European literature, which, she says, not only best resonates with the issues at hand, but also helps to conceptualize philosophical questions in an original way, especially when complex and unique research methods are used. Barcz's study also reveals how far a non-anthropocentric reading can modify the traditional mode of interpretation, with issues of artistic mastery pushed aside.

Barcz's English-language book can be placed, at least tentatively, in the Polish humanities, with which her work shares a variety of themes. Therefore, we could juxtapose it with Aleksandra Ubertowska's literary studies monograph, *Historie biotyczne. Pomiędzy estetyką a geotraumą* (Biotic Histories: Between Aesthetics and Geotrauma, 2020), as well as with memory studies

and environmental history (represented, for example, by Małgorzata Praczyk), and especially studies on the natural consequences of the Holocaust and other genocides, or place it in the context of philosophical and cultural reflection on the Anthropocene (by Ewa Bińczyk and Andrzej Marzec, for example). Nevertheless, as Barcz's work brings to mind this dense network of references we can conclude that she properly defines her field of research and her research methods, and manages the dependencies and tensions between local literary sources and trans-local theories, as she writes for a reader whose competence in one or the other area may not be commensurate.

Referring to the title of the publishing series, *Environmental Cultures*, Barcz examines how the new attempt to relate environmental studies to the construct of Central and Eastern Europe can affect the ideas about this region by either changing its identity, nullifying it, or making it more coherent, or richer. She begins these revisionary discussions with the important caveat that separating Central Europe and Eastern Europe is unwarranted within an environmental perspective. Drawing on previous research, Barcz stresses that the practices of Soviet violence against nature have already been largely recognized, but are usually portrayed from a Western perspective of superiority that fails to acknowledge the parallels between the ways in which the environment was exploited on both sides of the Iron Curtain, as well as conservation efforts in the USSR, or, finally, the peculiarities of the ecological cultures functioning (and being transformed) there. She argues that it is possible to rewrite the environmental history of the region, accounting for elusive nuances, while (to some extent) avoiding oppositions between East and West, which are tainted by political animosities and cultural prejudices. Most importantly, however, as she relies on the language of literature as a vehicle of memory and shapes her interpretation accordingly, nature itself, though wronged, is not victimized, or reduced to the role of a victim of oppression, and regains its autonomy, subjectivity, while people (sometimes) regain the relationships they have lost with it. As a result, the author also significantly reconfigures the field of memory studies, as she advocates a fusion of environmental and cultural approaches.

The book consists of five parts, each divided into several chapters. With the exception of the first part on theory and methods, the next four are arranged in chronological and thematic order, marked by those events and processes in the history of the Soviet Union and its satellite states that were key to the multistage ecocide carried out in Central and Eastern Europe. Specifically, Barcz focuses on the impact modernization and industrialization have had on the environment: from the collectivization of rural areas (including subsequent stages of this project) through the intensification of mining and the catastrophic Chernobyl

nuclear reactor accident, to contemporary dilemmas arising from the status and protection of nature in spaces where genocides have occurred and/or which are considered cultural heritage. Each of the four parts opens with a historical introduction which outlines the framework of collective memory, collective imagination, maps out the key issues and provides a backdrop for often subversive readings of official anthroponormative literary narratives. Significantly, Barcz discusses works that are not only representative of the subject matter, but also complement each other, and thus she preempts the possible accusation that her choice of examples has been arbitrary. She tends not to choose obvious texts, that is, socially or politically engaged, interventionist literature, with a clear message, but she does not select well-known works either. She is an advocate of a reading that is attentive to subtle signals from nature, which are not necessarily straightforward; she seems to be interested in testimonies of environmental memory jotted down incidentally, which prove that environmental memory is integral to cultural memory. Implicitly, the author also shows that it is necessary to revise the historical-literary framework that imposes permissible limits of interpretation on literary texts. Such encroachment on existing interpretations, moreover, is an insightful lesson on how to read the world in a different way, a practice that places Barcz's book within a project of broader reevaluation that goes beyond the formula of academic revision.

Nevertheless, the variety of works that Barcz discusses, and sometimes only alludes to, that represent many national cultures and languages, and were written over almost a century, as well as juxtaposing them in an English-language work, may raise doubts. This is especially true since the author frequently claims to be interested in the language itself: in various instances of the pollution of language (for example, by propaganda newspeak), as well as in evidence of the resilience of language. Barcz's interpretive practice, however, overrules these objections, since her approach does not imply a philological focus on the minutest, potentially untranslatable detail, but rather involves studying larger linguistic structures, usually imagery that is preserved in translation. On the other hand, it is difficult to overestimate the original (and, as it seems, overarching) intention to search in literature for languages that are mimetic of the violence inflicted on nature and humans, to show their interdependence, and to describe the diverse, fairly indescribable strategies of representing ecocide and the ways in which it is experienced. All these mediating concepts prove that literary studies in this area are indispensable. Moreover, these concepts are often reflected in the author's style and argument structure.

Boundaries (or rather, their obliteration, and even nullification) may be considered one of the key words, a leitmotif that emerges as a theme at almost

all levels of this project. This is clear in the first part of the book, where the author defines the conditions of her inquiry, indicates her methodological inspirations, refers to the changes taking place within the disciplines that she traverses, which legitimize the daring links she makes. First, the author accurately describes the constantly expanding field of history as a discipline that is beginning to recognize the historical nature of the differences between humans and other species, and wants to deal with these differences, so its discourse must treat political boundaries more flexibly. Barcz goes on to point out the need for interference between history and literature. She makes the argument (which appears in the works of progressive historians) that a new, non-hierarchical narrative about the past requires the use of artistic tools to understand and represent the position of non-human actors outside the anthropocentric order. Simultaneously, literature is proving to be an increasingly important source of knowledge about the past (though not necessarily the facts), it stimulates the imagination, exposes generally overlooked protagonists (natural agents), and their perspectives—which are usually underestimated or unacknowledged—which change the understanding of history, also environmental history, and do not make the recognition of wrongs and harms dependent on human interests. Finally, considering these correlations, the author shows that it is crucial for her reevaluations to simultaneously expand the imaginarium of cultural memory by including environmental memory, still being discovered and theorized. This also contributes to reconstructing and reinforcing the stories/messages about non-anthropocentric agency, the defiance of non-human beings, as well as the fading and recovery of relations with such beings. In effect, what emerges from Barcz's discussion is the avant-garde idea that memory should be ecologized mainly through literary texts, which of course involves filling in the gaps, searching for and introducing non-human witnesses, both material and imagined, but also results from treating the very matter of memory as an environment that can become polluted, colonized, needs care and attention to balanced relations, or in a word: counteracting anthropogenic environmental impact.

It is significant that Barcz does not privilege any of the ecocritical categories, and thus does not impose any on the narrative she describes, but uses them as needed. However, her argument captures the logic of the Anthropocene, as it encompasses broken or severed ties between species as well as various other examples of human interference in nature and its effects, which are getting more and more out of our control. Consequently, the last part of the book discusses cases of ecosystems functioning, as it were, after humans. Essentially, the reflection on the Anthropocene recurs throughout the monograph, thus shaping the researcher's imagination and affording access to overlooked layers of meaning

in the texts. What is remarkable, however, and rare in humanistic thought on the subject, is that Barcz uses the concept in such a way as to instrumentalize it for Soviet realities. As a result, the chapters of her book are arranged into an overview of Anthropocene narratives, which represents their inherent problems, themes and poetics. In order to convey the scale of the phenomenon, the author coined the apt term “Stalinocene” (Barcz 2020: 40), complementary to the Capitalocene, which helps her describe the fate of the Soviet Bloc villages and agricultural cultures undergoing collectivization.

The scholar describes the plight of the exploited land and the abjectly exhausted people confronting the new order that was imposed on them in the early years of this process, especially with the requirement to introduce industrial breeding, by looking at Andrei Platonov’s *The Foundation Pit*. She highlights the desperation of the peasants who were ready to kill their animals in order not to have to give them away. On this occasion, the author notes that animal-centered history of this period has still not been properly studied. Barcz also symmetrically turns to a novel of the twilight of collectivization (and communism), László Krasznahorkai’s *Satan’s Tango*, in an effort to gain insight into the rural community of the time, a community that had been by then severely exploited, mired in crisis, neglecting its farms, and subject to an equally ravaged nature, which, as the researcher notes, nevertheless takes over the narrative and perhaps seeks liberation and the removal of invasive human factors. These analyses rely on the romantic myth of peaceful, preindustrial rural life, life in harmony with nature, almost without conflict. By referring to this myth, the author proposes a broad understanding of the practices of resistance to collectivization, found both in texts that depict the destruction of the rural world, and in works (she devotes a separate chapter to them) that try to maintain its independence, and reclaim the voices of people and animals. The problem, however, is that Barcz does not nuance the significance and role in the collective imagination of this myth, which in essence masks class conflict, is oppressive to peasant culture, reduces its members (including non-humans) to a stereotypical image, so even when treated instrumentally, it demands suspicion. Thus, though some of the examples are apt (like the poetry of Nikolai Zabolotsky), one is puzzled by the choice of Julia Hartwig’s works, which have little to do with the literature of the rural trend, as an example of texts that salvage the autonomy of so-called farm animals; as these poems, which are important in many respects, either idealize or ignore the living conditions of the protagonist-cows. Meanwhile, Barcz may have considered the work of Tadeusz Nowak, who has knowledge of rural realities and mythicizes them in a critical way, adds more complexity to the situation of animals in the countryside, repeatedly exposes the special

bond with them, which also arises from the common supra-species position of victims of systemic exploitation (dating back, of course, to the pre-collectivization period), while not avoiding realistic images of violence that farmers inflict on them. It seems, therefore, that an intersectional approach, essentially close to the author's research method, might not have fundamentally changed her conclusions, but would nevertheless have allowed her, especially in light of the so-called "people's history" (Adam Leszczyński's term), to better portray the complexity of the problem, and to avoid the risk of falsifying memory, not only environmental memory (Leszczyński 2020; Pobłocki 2021). After all, the tired residents—human and non-human—of the collectivized villages, as the literary scholar calls them, had already been exploited before.

One of the cornerstones of Barcz's narrative—which makes it as much a book about the past as it is about the present—is that it recognizes the "long duration" of Soviet violence against nature as an unfinished story, despite the collapse of the USSR. This, in particular, is apparent as destructive practices continue, and environmental risk is less likely to be noticed and consequently assessed as severe in public discourse and collective imagination. These issues are particularly important when it comes to mining, a phenomenon which is deeply embedded in Polish culture and tradition. Using (and expanding) the tools of risk studies, Barcz proposes to take the approach of deheroizing mining literature, which, she argues, occupies a unique place among Anthropocene narratives, as it thematizes the activity of human interference with the geological layer, and makes the Anthropocene more real. It is notable that Barcz focuses on literary studies that at least relativize, if not undermine, the human position. She discusses Szczepan Twardoch's *Drach*, a work of fiction where the "hyper-objective" voice of the depleted, traumatized (Silesian) land, otherwise difficult to concretize and conceptualize, materializes in the titular character: a mythical, chthonic monster.

In Filip Springer's *Miedzianka*, in turn, an analogous subjectifying voice, only that amplified by Barcz, comes from a collapsing mountain perforated by mine shafts used for copper and uranium mining. These perforations correspond to gaps in the official story; by focusing on them, the researcher nullifies this essentially anthropocentric piece of reportage. As a rule, amplifying the voice of nature, animals, and redistributing the narrative voice in a non-anthropocentric way is one of the most important tools of Barcz's research. Here, the author uses it to access the layers of environmental memory as a more reliable source of knowledge about the past (including the human past) than cultural records, which are entangled politically and ideologically. Trying to imitate and simultaneously criticize the hardships of extracting valuable deposits, the researcher

shows that anthropocenic narratives generally do not unfold on the surface, on the thematic plane, but that these meanings and contents rather extend stratigraphically through the entire text. In this—the central—part of the book, the author makes bold revisions when she advocates that it is necessary to sharpen previous ecocritical postulates, and when, considering the effects of profound interference with nature, she looks into the future, and turns her attention to what will come after the Anthropocene, thus radicalizing the formula of environmental history, and lending a historiosophical angle to her considerations.

Through literary testimonies and interpretive reevaluations, Barcz's monograph vividly reveals the paradoxes of the Soviet attitude to nature: the almost total subjugation of nature leads to people being increasingly entangled in it, and to the discovery of interdependences and weaknesses. This narrative, marked by subtle drama, culminates in a section on the multidimensional experience of the environmental disaster caused by the Chernobyl nuclear power plant reactor failure, which is viewed as a synecdoche: of life in the Anthropocene today, of the threat of global contamination caused by the actions of the USSR a little earlier, as well as a synecdoche of other similar accidents that have not been revealed to the public, and ultimately to the collective memory. Barcz is interested in articulating non-human trauma, grappling with an event that poses an epistemological challenge in non-discursive narratives, which, she shows, predate Timothy Morton's diagnoses of hyperobjects and the search for new, post-nuclear, conceptions of nature. The researcher first binds the experience of language as an ecosystem to this search; as described in Christa Wolf's short story, titled *Störfall (Accident)*. As she analyzes this prose, Barcz notes that language relating to nature, in particular, has been affected by this fission, this contamination; in effect, the contaminated imagination has lost access to the vision of nature that was shaped by poetic descriptions. Simultaneously, when extracting the ecocentric register of Svetlana Alexievich's polyphonic narrative in the *Chernobyl Prayer*, Barcz probes access to environmental witnesses and victims of the disaster, and discovers their place in the memory of an event that, while it formed new interspecies communities of the traumatized, it also maintained fixed anthroponormative divisions between the rescued and the eliminated. Barcz is also careful to ask whether nature regenerated in a depopulated radioactive zone relativizes the assessment of the power plant accident, which, in turn, creates a new arena for thinking about differences in cultural and environmental memory, and reduces the human perspective in an unprecedented way, even within ecocritical discourse.

The last part of the book is particularly noteworthy, as it first offers a bold and much-needed polemic against Martin Pollack's concepts of "contaminated

landscapes” and Claude Lanzmann’s “non sites of memory”—especially in the interpretation of Roma Sendyka. In both of these narratives, nature in genocidal sites has sometimes been accused of being complicit in the crime or considered an obstacle to the cultural commemoration of these events, and has consequently been unfairly portrayed as an enemy (to varying degrees) of the victims and their descendants. The researcher convincingly identifies the anthropocentric abuses inherent in these approaches and generally widespread in memory studies, which result in the violence inflicted on nature being questioned or disparaged on the one hand, and its active participation in remembrance being overlooked, on the other.

Unlike the previous analysis which focused on individual texts, the next two interpretive chapters of this part, in which Barcz elaborates on her proposal to recover the materiality of nature, are a mosaic narrative built around a constellation of works, assigned to specific places and integrated with original methods of reading, as if situated in those places. First, the author discusses poems about the Katyń massacre, in which the forest is shown as a witness and a fellow mourner. This type of imagery has so far been interpreted figuratively, but Barcz suggests treating it literally. Under this approach, it turns out that the authors of these works, perhaps unconsciously, captured the multidimensional dispositions of nature, which—transformed, in part, by being mixed with human remains—remembers the murdered and helps their descendants process the trauma. This is where the researcher finds justification for her idea of “greening” the discourse on sites of memory, by appreciating their own material account of violence. She also demonstrates that, in the long run, this strategy can provide arguments for protecting similarly affected landscapes from any interference. Barcz returns to this issue in the closing chapter on the Białowieża Forest. She diagnoses the problem of the broken relationship between real space and the images about it that operate in cultural memory, whose status does not prevent the almost predatory exploitation of the forest. Hence the author’s innovative proposal to look at the unique forest ecosystem as a palimpsest that is partially formed by human history and telling that history, and thus forcefully integrated into the anthroponormative (often also nationalistic) order, yet still maintaining autonomy. Barcz argues that literature can become a vehicle for such a reading, which nevertheless requires some knowledge of the natural world. She points to works (the writings of Simona Kossak are surprisingly absent from this list) that access scraps of environmental memory, and bring out the complexity of the forest past, scarred by traces of violence, but still able to sustain the (uncontaminated?) myth of primordial, elemental nature. It seems, moreover—and this is my addition—that this myth does not necessarily belong only to the realm

of cultural imagery, but is also actively shaped and communicated by nature itself. Be that as it may, what emerges from the last chapter is a project—so far perhaps never formulated—of particular ecocritical comparativism, possibly with a broader reach in line with the assumptions of “rescue history” (Domańska 2014: 12–26), which stems from the belief that studies of the past from alternative methodological perspectives are crucial for attempts to design the future.

I am providing commentary on Barcz’s book, reconstructing its structure and the discussions in its individual sections, not so much out of a reviewer’s duty, but mainly out of a conviction that it is worth tracing the spectrum of ideas and interpretations that the author proposes, and appreciating the fact that she outlines the crux of the broad phenomenon of environmental memory, while making sure not only that her theoretical approach is clear, but most importantly that she respects the particularities of literary sources and ecological cultures, while experimenting with them to expand the field of (her own) empathy for natural and human traumas. This is a great asset of the work: the value of analysis after analysis, of partial diagnoses cannot be reduced to examples subordinated to an overarching concept. Perhaps this is all the more reason why the book’s lack of an ending, of an attempt to summarize the problems and to draw conclusions, leaves the reader somewhat underwhelmed. The book’s closing statement on the persistence of the pastoral myth re-romanticizing nature, which, incidentally, recurs as a point of reference throughout the work, merits additional comments. Knowing Barcz’s talent, one would be interested to see how she theorizes this issue, and especially how she situates it in the context of her remarks on Anthropocene narratives and the diagnoses that follow from them; in other words, how this myth relates to the condition and (literary) visions of nature after catastrophe: nature viewed in a planetary perspective, transformed by humankind, but also liberated from it, and recuperating its vitality. The tensions between reflection on the human impact on the environment and recognition of the new autonomy of nature largely organizes the arguments throughout the work, so it calls for a meta-commentary. They are, in fact, a measure of how original the author’s standpoint is and of her imagination suggesting the possibility of overruling the perspective of anthropocentric catastrophism; they also prove Barcz’s scholarly drive, philosophical and literary insight and ecocritical sensitivity.

Concluding these remarks, let me make a somewhat less substantive comment (responding, in a sense, to similar discreet gestures by the author). Barcz’s monograph, written and published before Russia’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine, and before the refugee crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, now gains a new dimension, inviting reflection on how nature is once again

entangled in political and ideological conflict. It is directly used against people, who are transported into the wilderness, put in mortal danger when abandoned in swampy areas, with adverse natural conditions made complicit in their fate. Unique ecosystems and animals are also becoming victims of war once again, but for the first time this practice is not being ignored in public discourse, and they are being rescued on a large scale. Finally, the anthropocenic experience of the environmental threat (again, coming from Russia), against which national borders will not protect us, is intensifying. My point is that the practice of thinking about environmental cultures, as postulated by Barcz, seems to be a salvaging activity, at least in terms of the imagination, both collective and individual, and prevents us from lapsing into hasty divisions, not least anthroponormative ones. But most importantly, this book makes us realize that the unprecedented events we are currently witnessing will have a direct impact on nature and will leave an imprint on environmental memory, which, perhaps, will be more closely integrated with cultural memory.

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## | Abstract

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### Ecologizing Memory

This review is a discussion of Anna Barcz's monograph *Environmental Cultures in Soviet East Europe: Literature, History and Memory* (Bloomsbury 2020).

**Keywords:** ecocriticism, memory studies, Central and Eastern European literature, Anthropocene

## | Bio

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