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Dialogical Relationships and the Bear in Indigenous Poetry

STEPHAN DUDECK

Meditations after the Bear Feast: The Poetic Dialogues of N. Scott Momaday and Yuri Vaella

Navarre Scott Momaday and Yuri Vaella, translated and edited by
Alexander Vashchenko and Claude Clayton Smith

(Brunswick, ME: Shanti Arts, 2016), 78 pp. \$19.95 (paperback).

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Abstract: The essay provides a review of a small but remarkable book on the work of two important Native American and Siberian poets, *Meditations after the Bear Feast* by Navarre Scott Momaday and Yuri Vella, published in 2016 by Shanti Arts in Brunswick, Maine. Their poetic dialogue revolves around the well-known role of the bear as a sociocultural keystone species in the boreal forest zone of Eurasia and North America. The essay analyzes the understanding of dialogicity as shaping the intersubjectivity of the poets emerging from human relationships with the environment. It tries to unpack the complex and prophetic bear dream in one of Vella's poems in which he links indigenous ontologies with urgent sociopolitical problems.

Keyword: bear ceremonialism, dialogicity, human–animal relations, indigenous literature, Navarre Scott Momaday, Nenets, Yuri Vella

This small book of 78 pages including short essays and a few poems could easily escape attention if one did not recognize the authors' powerful message. In short form, they present the essence of what unites indigenous peoples in the Northern Hemisphere, a common intimate relationship with forces in the environment more powerful than humans, often expressed symbolically in relationships with the brown bear *Ursus arctos*. In addition, the book portrays the challenges people face by the dominating majority populations and state policies. The book became a memorial to two people who had died much too early in 2013, the Nenets writer and poet Yuri Vella and the translator and



promoter of Native North American and Siberian literature Alexander Vashchenko. The loss of both feels all the more painful in times of growing ignorance and isolation between the two major players on the Northern Hemisphere, Russia and the United States. Voices like the one of Yuri Vella, known for his uncompromising stance toward the destructive effects of oil production, assimilatory policies, and militarization of the state have become rare in today's indigenous Russia. The reader should not expect a pamphlet of indigenous politics, though, even if the book reflects the harsh social reality of indigenous communities in today's Russia and the United States. The texts revolve less around common problems than around the philosophical and ontological unity that links both poets and the worldviews of their indigenous peoples.

Though the book presents a conversation between the two poet-friends, it is not limited to their relationship. It is a dialogue of their texts in the presence of at least five of their closest friends, who contribute their own memories and interpretations. The book is beautifully illustrated with photos of the protagonists and artwork by N. Scott Momaday. The introduction is by a well-known scholar of Native American literature and friend of Vashchenko, Susan Scarberry-Garcia, who organized the first meeting of Scott Momaday and Vella in Siberia. She describes how their friendship developed in her presence through several meetings in Russia as well as the United States. Her introduction is complemented by the account given by Vashchenko and two short essays by Andrew Wiget on the role of bear ceremonialism and the importance of Vashchenko's role in translating and promoting indigenous literatures. The book closes with a short address of Momaday to a memorial meeting of friends on the occasion of Vella's sudden death, some memories of Claude Clayton Smith, and two poems by Nathan Romero. All the texts speak to the importance of this close circle of friends for the exchange of indigenous writers between Siberia and North America and even more broadly about the global message of their writings. We witness the encounter of these two men through their friends' accounts.

Opening the book, one wonders who the authors are. The two names appear on the first page: N. Scott Momaday, the great Kiowa artist and writer from New Mexico, and Yuri Vaella (I use the more common transliteration of his surname, Vella), the well-known Nenets writer and political activist from Western Siberia. The table of contents on page 9 contains the names of four other authors and Scott Momaday as one looks in vain for Vella's name. The riddle is solved only when one gets to page 28 and the proper dialogue in the form of eight poems of

the two initially mentioned poets, which accounts for roughly one-third of the small book. The other parts of the book are short essays by Susan Scarberry-Garcia, Alexander Vashchenko, Andrew Wiget, and Claude Clayton Smith. The two poems dedicated to the two poets by Nathan Romero at the end of the book do not appear in the table of contents.

The editors could have eliminated some minor content errors like that of naming Tobol'sk as the oldest town in Siberia (15) or the misspelling of Priob'e, a name relating in this context to the whole Ob River region (27). A more serious mistake is the misdating of the poem "Prophetic Dream" by Vella, which he wrote prophetically on 4–5 September 2012, almost exactly one year before his death. An English version of the poems had already appeared in Russia in a trilingual edition in Russian, English, and Nenets before Vella's death in 2013 (Vella and Momaday 2013) and more recently in a four-language edition adding Finnish, translated by Karina Lukin (Vella 2016). The present translations of Vella's poems were obviously revised by Claude Clayton Smith and differ slightly from the other editions.

Many might not know that Momaday visited the Soviet Union as early as 1974 to be the first Fulbright professor of American literature at the University of Moscow. His Pulitzer Prize–awarded book *House Made of Dawn* was translated into Russian and published as soon as 1978 in the Soviet Union. Momaday's lifelong personal and artistic relation to the bear was powerfully echoed in the Siberian traditions of worshipping the bear as deity and ancestor. It was already before he first met Vella that he started to write his poem "Summons" on the healing power of the bear, which he then dedicated to Vella. Vella himself answered this poem 12 years later to open a poetic dialogue with Momaday.

I myself, having been a close friend to Yuri Vella who over 20 years spent a great deal of time before and during my PhD research with him, would like to reflect on the character of dialogic conversation in the book under review and its roots in Vella's thinking.

In contrast to dominating introspective and speculative approaches in Russian poetry, Vella always based his writing on concrete experiences and social relations, like that of friendship, kinship, or the relationship between teacher and student. He published frequently in alternating and responding series of poems, as in his collaboration with Russian poet Tatiana Yurgenson in "Hunting Swans" or with an anonymous Russian Orthodox nun in "A Perfect World." The use of the pronoun "you," the use of questions, and the use of direct speech were his means to point at a dialogical character. They reveal that the dialogues represent forms of human relations based on learning from each

other and respecting each other's differences, as well as acknowledging similarity, closeness, and the common ground of shared experiences. These relations comprise acknowledging that we drink the same water, breathe the same air, and are, in the end, responsible for one another in an interdependent world. The everyday—the environs of the reindeer herder's nomad camp or the news from TV—is present in all Vella's texts. The local weather and global politics meet with thoughts about morals and human love, but only insofar as they are rooted in his personal experience. While his interlocutors often formulated thoughts deriving from their emotional state, Vella answered with "nature" and "elders," with observations, experiences, and stories. His answers were rooted in his personality; his having been a reindeer herder; having been educated by the elders through observing, listening, and participating; having been open to the outside world, worried about the exploitation of people and the environment, about the growing role of money in human relations, about the lack of respect toward nature and toward humans. He used the form of dialogue to communicate with all the sources of knowledge, asking questions, listening, observing, drawing conclusions, testing them, and offering his own experience. Sometimes he was a learner, sometimes a teacher, depending on his interlocutor.

He perceived the world as being related through threads of kinship that go far beyond the human. These social relations of kinship and affinity extend to the most important animals in the forest, like the bear and the moose. It is difficult to determine whether the human-animal relations influence the relations among humans or the other way around. The Khanty and Nenets mythology tells us about the kinship of man and bear. The bear has to be treated with respect, as an honorable guest and relative. The myth tells as well about different kinds of possible metamorphosis between spirits, animals, and humans. They live in one world and depend on each other. Hunting and herding are activities that for the Western Siberian natives establish social relationships not based on domination. These activities encompass killing but also care and respect for the animals herded and hunted, as well as keeping the right distance. Moreover, they are based on an understanding and acknowledgment that knowledge is limited. The society includes different beings and allows for respectful exchange, cooperation, and communication, which is extendable toward newcomers, new sorts of strangers entering the world, be they administrators, settlers, scientists, or tourists. Yuri Vella's communication with his dialogue partners but also with his readers is based on this perception of human relationships.

In the eight poems presented in *Meditations after the Bear Feast*, Vella expresses the deepest feeling of affinity in a conversation with Momaday about the spiritual significance of the bear in their lives. Actually, it is a literary correspondence: Vella had been acquainted with the Kiowa writer in Siberia in 1998 and met him later in the United States. They talked about the bear feast, important in both cultures. Momaday wrote to Vella. As they had no common language, they communicated with the help of Vashchenko. But Vella then did not answer for a dozen years, and the real correspondence wouldn't start until much later. There are four letters and four answers, all in three languages: Scott Momaday wrote in English, Vashchenko translated into Russian, and Vella probably answered directly in Russian but later translated his texts into Forest Nenets. The friendship with Scott Momaday expressed through the Forest Nenets term *Nya*—"brother" in a broad sense and "friend" in a deep sense—was not based on frequent visits or correspondence but on a deep feeling of the affinity of their cultures and the spirituality the bear is a part of. The bear itself as a relative of the human, close and similar but yet distanced, is a symbol for affinity, for the link that binds humans to their environment. The poets reflect on the symbolic metamorphosis of the bear, on dreams and fears, on healing and hunting, on killing and dying. The dialogue with Scott Momaday provokes Vella to write his most intimate poem, *A Prophetic Dream*, a poem that contains his political manifesto as well as his reflections on being mortally ill with cancer. The dreamed metamorphosis into a bear can be read as a vision of his own death written almost exactly one year before he actually died. Khanty use the euphemism "becoming a bear" to express that somebody recently died and interpret seeing a bear in a dream as associated with death and rebirth (Moldanova 2001: 97–98).

I can mention only a few aspects here—the bear is obviously humanlike, the master of the forest, the most powerful of the mammals. The bear is the honorable guest and relative, but he is also the prey for the hunter; he is the one that kills the reindeer calves of the reindeer herd every spring. All other relationships with fellow humans and with the nonhuman environment are crystallized in the human–bear relationship. The bear is a human and a nonhuman at the same time. The poem at its core deals with power and vulnerability, with forces more powerful than humans. Humans have to honor the bear's divine origin and the kinship relations they have with the bear in a ritual after the hunt, in which the bear is invited into the people's houses to be entertained with dances and songs, with food and drinks. In Vashchenko and Clayton Smith's famous anthology of indigenous writers from Siberia *The Way*

of *Kinship* (Clayton Smith and Vashchenko 2010: 40–53), the well-known Khanty writer Yeremei Aipin, coincidentally a former classmate and from the same Siberian village as Vella, provides a description of the Khanty bear ceremony in the form of a dialogue between the main character of the novel, Demyan, a Khanty, and a Russian girl named Marina. As Scarberry-Garcia describes in the book under review (15), Aipin provoked Momaday's interest in the Siberian bear ceremonial traditions with a screening of Lennart Meri's famous film on the Khanty bear ceremony, *The Sons of Torum* (Meri 1989).

At the core of Khanty and Forest Nenets culture is the philosophy of the bear. There is no clear boundary between humans, animals, spirits, and the gods, the living and the deceased, the material and the spiritual, the social and the natural, and so forth. More precisely speaking, there are borders between these oppositions, but these borders are transgressible, permeable, and bridgeable. The deeply symbolic and ambivalent relation of human and bear is intermingled with a reflection on the power of money his fellow tribesmen receive from the oil companies and the state, as well as the power of medicine that Yuri has to take in the hospital in town. It is a dark vision of helplessness in the face of powers that claim to help but are in the end associated with the loss of independence and sovereignty. The poem deals with the difference between digestible and indigestible food, acceptable and unacceptable gifts. It speaks to the reindeer herders, whose relationship with power, firstly that of the gods and spirits, is based on negotiations, gifts, and gestures of respect. One has to find out what kind of behavior is appropriate and acceptable in order not to destroy the balanced relationship that allows for both sides to profit from it. This relationship model is diametrically opposed to the relationships Yuri encounters with forces that demand submission and not negotiation, be it the state, oil companies, modern medicine, or the Christian god. For the reindeer herder, the other, be it a god, a human, or an animal to hunt, is a guest. The other is a stranger to be integrated for some time into your home and your family, somebody you establish a relation with, somebody who provides you with news, who gives you the opportunity to learn or to establish a friendship. This can happen only under the condition of mutual respect, respect first of all for each other's differences; only then is it possible to experience the common ground that allows for opening to each other in a dialogue.

Stephan Dudeck is an anthropologist who conducted long-term anthropological fieldwork with Siberian reindeer herding communities. He completed his dissertation on the persistence of reindeer herders' lifestyles in Western Siberia at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, Germany, in 2011. His research deals with practices of hiding and avoidance; the relationship of indigenous people and oil companies; and the preservation of indigenous languages and traditional knowledge, oral history, Khanty bear ceremonialism, and human–animal relationships.
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