

## **A Voice from the Taiga: Yuri Vella and the ecopoetics of resistance**

*Erika Stragapede*

### *Introduction*

Within the literature of the Nenets people of Western Siberia, the voice of poet Yuri Vella (1948–2013) deserves particular attention and careful listening. A reindeer herder and environmental activist, Vella draws nourishment for his writing from the concrete experience of life in the taiga, transforming it into an instrument through which he denounces the transformations inflicted upon his land and community by Russian colonizers. This article proposes to approach Yuri Vella's oeuvre through an ecocritical lens, a new perspective that reveals the depth of his ecological thought and the power of his poetry as a vehicle for environmental awareness and resistance. Prior to the core analysis, an overview of the Forest Nenets people is provided to understand the context in which Vella lived and worked.

### *Forest Nenets: An overview*

Forest Nenets are a semi-nomadic indigenous people of about 1,500 individuals<sup>1</sup> whose settlement area extends in the heart of Western Siberia, southeast of the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug and east of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug-Yugra. Their traditional lifestyle is based on hunting, fishing, and reindeer herding. However, beginning from the Soviet period, the Forest Nenets — like other semi-nomadic populations of the Siberian tundra and taiga — underwent a radical transformation<sup>2</sup> as a result of forced exposure to the dominant Russian culture, which carried values profoundly different from their own, centered on subordinating nature to human needs and economic interests.

---

<sup>1</sup> There can be therefore only approximate data about the number of Forest Nenets nowadays: scholars mention figures between 1000 and 2000 (Toulouze, 2025).

<sup>2</sup> When discussing the transformations that affected the Forest Nenets people, it is important to distinguish between the different phases of colonization: Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet. The first, initiated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, introduced Orthodox missions, taxation, and early administrative control, progressively integrating the Nenets into the Russian imperial periphery. The Soviet phase was marked by a profound ideological and economic reorganization of indigenous life, and, from the 1960s onward, by the rapid industrial development associated with oil extraction in Western Siberia. The post-Soviet period continued to exert pressure on Nenets lands, through neoliberal mechanisms of resource exploitation and the growing presence of multinational corporations such as Lukoil.

The Soviet utilitarian logic was first expressed in the forced collectivization of reindeer herds and in state control over hunting and fishing activities; later, with the discovery of oil deposits in the 1960s, it took the form of systematic exploitation of energy resources present in indigenous territories, triggering a long-term process of destruction that can be described in terms of “slow violence,” to use the words of Rob Nixon (2011). The Nenets, who lived in small groups in the forest, were gradually sedentarized, “domesticated,” and placed on a “track” towards socialism (Arzamazov 2020), thereby inheriting a double legacy: on the one hand, that transmitted by their ancestral culture, and on the other, that instilled by the Soviet power through compulsory boarding-school education, military service, and *kolkhoz*<sup>3</sup> working life.

In this context emerges the figure of Yuri Vella who, although fully integrated into daily Soviet life, over the years embarked on a unique path of cultural and identity reappropriation that led him to rediscover his roots, to defend the environment of the taiga, and to become the poetic and political voice of his people. Vella’s identity is a multifaceted one, and I will briefly present its main aspects.

*First aspect: The reindeer herder*

Yuri Vella was one of the exceptional indigenous Siberian intellectuals who, at the beginning of the 1990s, returned to an ancestral way of life after a prolonged exposure to Soviet culture. He was forty-three when he decided to leave his state job as a hunter in the *promkhoz*<sup>4</sup> and return, together with his wife and ten reindeer purchased with his last salary, to the lands once inhabited by his ancestors and where he himself had been born before his family moved to the village of Varyogan, in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug. His goal was to be a Forest Nenets in the 20th–21st centuries — not by rejecting the contemporary world, but by consciously selecting which of its elements to integrate into the framework of his traditional values. He thus managed to combine the Nenets’ nomadic lifestyle with modern tools, adopting a syncretic approach that revealed profound self-awareness and a balanced synthesis of tradition and modernity. He spent the last decades of his life in the taiga, caring for his reindeer and waging a determined resistance against the oil industry, which disregarded the rights of the Nenets and devastated their lands. This leads to the second aspect of his identity: that of the activist.

*Second aspect: The activist*

Becoming an activist was not a choice for Vella, but a necessity for his survival and that of other indigenous people in the region.<sup>5</sup> Oil and gas companies not only polluted their lands, compromising the quality of water and soil, but also damaged the pastures essential

---

<sup>3</sup> Abbreviation of the Russian *kollektivnoe khozyaistvo* (“collective farm”), a form of agricultural cooperative introduced in the Soviet Union during collectivization.

<sup>4</sup> Abbreviation of the Russian *promyshlennoe khozyaistvo* (“industrial enterprise”), a Soviet-era state farm or economic unit focused on activities such as forestry, hunting, or fishing.

<sup>5</sup> Alongside writers and activists such as Yeremey Aipin (b. 1948), of Khanty origin, and Vladimir Sangi (b. 1935), of Nivkh descent, who were likewise involved in transnational Indigenous movements and engaged with a rapidly changing political landscape in the final years of the Soviet Union. For further discussion of this broader context, see Caffee 2024: 221.

to the survival of the reindeer, thereby disrupting migration routes and endangering the entire life cycle of nomadic communities. Additionally, this violated sacred sites, places fundamental to Nenets memory and spirituality, which were reduced to marginal spaces or erased under industrial pressure. Vella's struggle took the form of a direct confrontation with the oil giant LUKoil,<sup>6</sup> a battle he carried forward until his final days, marked by significant achievements but also inevitable setbacks. Exceptionally skilled with words, Vella knew how to employ different forms of struggle — from protests and acts of civil disobedience to appeals addressed to the press and to the courts — managing to attract considerable media attention. For him, this visibility was essential: the better his struggle was known, in Russia and abroad, the greater his sense of safety.<sup>7</sup>

A central element of his protests was chum, the traditional conical dwelling of the Nenets, which he would set up to occupy an *other space* — be it a road leading to an oil field or the square in front of the regional administration in Khanty-Mansiisk. The chum was a powerful symbol of indigenous life and communion with nature; it embodied Vella's mission to ensure that the land remained inhabited and that indigenous life could continue. As he declared in the last interview<sup>8</sup> he gave before his death: “*А если после человека на этой земле не осталось ни одного чума, то кто будет об этом думать? Кто будет об этом вспоминать?*”<sup>9</sup>

This message runs through Vella's entire existence and resonates in his poetry, which leads me to the final aspect of his identity: that of the poet.

### *Third aspect: The poet*

Yuri Vella was over 35 years old when he decided to enroll at the Maxim Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow.<sup>10</sup> His encounter with literature and critical thought called into question the Soviet educational doctrine he had absorbed at the boarding school, and revealed to him that Nenets culture was by no means inferior but fully substantive and

<sup>6</sup> LUKoil is one of the leading oil companies in Russia. It was founded in 1993 by merging three oil-producing enterprises – Langepasneftegaz, Uraineftegaz and Kogalymneftegaz (hence the name LUKoil), along with three processing enterprises – Permorgsintez, the Volgograd and the Novoufimsk refineries.

<sup>7</sup> Vella's concern arose from the fact that oilmen were not generally known for their scrupulousness. According to Professor Eva Toulouze, who conducted fieldwork in Yuri Vella's camp in the Siberian taiga in the late 1990s, in the years preceding her visits a few local officials — including mayors — had been murdered, reportedly because they had attempted to impose local taxes on LUKoil. Likewise, in the early 1990s, several Khanty activists were killed in the village of Russkinskaia, an episode that led the campaigner Agrafena Pesikova-Sopochina to send her children to stay with their grandmother in Latvia. I thank Professor Toulouze for kindly sharing this information in a personal communication (29 October 2025).

<sup>8</sup> See the short documentary *The Last Monologue* (Kornienko 2013).

<sup>9</sup> “If a person leaves without at least a single tent remaining on the land, who will think of it, who will remember?” (Most translations are by me, unless explicitly indicated otherwise. In a few instances, though, anonymous translations of Vella's poetry have been sourced online and edited by me for style and clarity).

<sup>10</sup> Professor Eva Toulouze reported to me (in a conversation of 8 November 2025), on the basis of Vella's own account, that it was his friend, the ethnographer Izmail Gemuev, who advised him to enroll at the Gorky Institute. Jurij Šarapov, Vella's classmate at the same institute, however, provides a different version, attributing the initiative to the encouragement of Vella's friend, the Mansi writer Yuvan Šestlov (see Vella 2024, vol. 3: 52).

endowed with its own dignity — contrary to what the Soviet regime maintained. Vella himself, in an interview with the director Olga Kornienko (2016), emphasized the transformative value of that experience, which turned out to be much more than a mere academic path:

Литинститут дал мне интеллект, дал главное — понимание ценности стойбищной цивилизации. Я [...] стал понимать, что это цивилизация, а не как раньше говорили — первобытно-общинный строй, от которого надо уходить, переводить коренных жителей на осёдлый образ жизни.<sup>11</sup>

Vella's first collection, *News from the Camp* (Вести из стойбища, 1991), which also served as his graduation work at the Gorky Institute, was dedicated precisely to camp life. This collection was followed by many others, recently gathered in 2024 into a monumental three-volume work: *Yuri Vella. Selected Works* (Юрий Вэлла. Избранное), which also includes contributions by well-known literary critics, writers, anthropologists, ethnographers, and others who knew Vella personally and studied his work, including Vyacheslav Ogryzko, Aleksey Arzamazov, Eva Toulouze, and Olga Lagunova.

#### *Characteristics of Vella's poetic work*

To consider Vella's works as simple poetry collections would be reductive. They represent something original, deeply rooted in the Nenets folklore — a kind of “imprint” of the soul of his people, as critic Mikhail Melnikov observed (Vella 2024, vol. 3: 353). At the same time, they also reflect Vella's personal experience and his relationship with the contemporary world in which he lived. Within them, different genres intertwine: Nenets legends, songs, proverbs, and riddles merge with autobiographical or documentary narratives, as well as with journalistic and ethnographic material.

Equally original is the expressive form, which combines poetry — mostly in free verse — with prose. In the preface to his first book *News from the Camp*, Vella himself explains the origin of this blending, tracing it back to a practice developed by his grandmother Nengi, who used to tell fairy tales and sing songs, alternating an artistic language — highly metaphorical and evocative — with everyday language, which he described as “беден, не имеет ни цвета, ни вкуса, ни запаха, от него ни жарко, ни холодно”<sup>12</sup> (Vella 1991: 5). The experience of oral reception he had in childhood thus influenced Vella's creative activity (*tvorchestvo*), which takes shape as a mixture of prose and poetry — where the prose passages, sober and narrative, seem to complete with, or clarify, the more emotional poetic lines.

Vella's creative language (*tvorchesky yazyk*) is also syncretic, reflecting the author's multilingual and multicultural identity. Nevertheless, Vella favored Russian over Nenets and Khanty — which he also knew — since he regarded it as a means of reaching a wider audience and spread his messages of protest. To this end, he maintained a keen interest

---

<sup>11</sup> “The Literary Institute gave me intellect, but above all an awareness of the value of the nomadic life in the camp. [...] I began to understand that this is a true civilization, and not — as was previously believed — a primitive social form to be overcome by moving indigenous peoples toward a sedentary lifestyle.”

<sup>12</sup> “Poor, devoid of color, taste, and smell, that neither warms nor cools”.

in the translation of his works, a strategy that also served as a form of personal protection. As mentioned above, his notoriety in Russia and abroad was in fact a safeguard: oil companies could not afford to eliminate him, since his death would have made him as a victim far more troublesome than he had ever been alive.

Another distinctive feature of Vella's poetic work is the central presence of the ecological theme. The Nenets worldview is founded on an animistic system of beliefs and on a profound, indissoluble bond between human beings and nature (Golovnev 1995). The natural environment is conceived as an interdependent network in which every element is part of a shared whole, where humans, society, and nature coexist in a syncretic unity and in a relationship of harmony and deep respect. It is therefore not surprising that the ecological dimension permeates Vella's poetic production, as he was a Nenets deeply rooted in the values of his ethnic community. What is surprising, however, and what distinguishes him from other Nenets writers, is the way in which this dimension takes shape in his verse.

Vella's gaze is singular because it is not merely that of a bard of nature who contemplates and celebrates the Siberian taiga. He emancipates himself from this almost dreamlike vision, from the myth of purity and wilderness, to become also a lucid and disenchanted witness of the wounds inflicted upon his land. Two distinct expressive registers can therefore be identified in his writing: on the one hand, the gentle and empathetic register of the reindeer herder poet, capable of conveying devotion, respect, and love for nature and the creatures that inhabit it; on the other, the restless register of the activist poet, who laments and denounces the devastations carried out by the Russian colonizer.

His writing thus reveals itself as multidimensional: alongside the emotional dimension of poetic communication stands the rational dimension, marked by an awareness of the environmental crisis. Writing becomes an instrument of struggle: it questions, educates, and provokes, transforming poetry into a site of ethical reflection, where admiration for nature coexists with the responsibility to protect it from human threat.

How, then, can one define Vella's poetic production? Here I arrive at the central issue of this article.

#### *A brief introduction to ecopoetry*

Nature has always been a privileged subject of poetry. One could say that nature poetry has existed for as long as poetry itself. But it has not always served as a vehicle for a critical awareness of the natural world, nor has it always asserted the necessity of defending it. According to Juliana Spahr (2011: 69), nature poetry tends "to show the beautiful bird but not so often the bulldozer off to the side that [is] about to destroy the bird's habitat."

Nature poetry began to focus on ecological themes in the 1960s, when public attention progressively shifted toward the growing environmental crisis. Academic and scientific interest in consciously environmentalist poetry, however, matured only toward the end of the last century, when — within the field of ecocritical studies that had developed in the American context (S. Slovic, C. Glotfelty, L. Buell) — scholars such as J. Scott Bryson

emphasized the need to investigate ecologically oriented poetry, which until then had been largely neglected in favor of nonfiction and narrative. To Bryson's call for overcoming the genre-bound limitations of ecocritical studies was added that of Patrick D. Murphy, who criticized the narrow focus on American and British literatures. According to Murphy (2000, p.58), it was necessary to reconsider the privilege accorded to certain national literatures in order to enable a greater inclusiveness of literatures from around the world within the conception of nature-oriented literature, thereby also fostering a comparative and transcultural approach to ecocritical studies.

As for terminology, the term that has come into use to designate this manifestation of contemporary nature poetry within the corpus of environmental literature is *ecopoetry*. However, many other variations of the term have been proposed — *ecological poetry*, *environmental poetry*, *green poetry*, *post-pastoral*, or even *ecophenomenological poetry* — depending on the theoretical and methodological nuances each scholar intends to emphasize.

Given the fluid nature of the boundaries of ecopoetry, this study relies on Scott Bryson's definition, and on the distinctive features he identifies, which allow me to frame Yuri Vella's ecological production in a comprehensive way. According to Bryson,

ecopoetry is a subset of nature poetry that, while adhering to certain conventions of Romanticism, also advances beyond that tradition and takes on distinctly contemporary problems and issues, thus resulting in a version of nature poetry generally marked by three primary characteristics. (Bryson 2002: 5)

The *first* characteristic is an emphasis on an ecocentric perspective that recognizes the interdependent nature of the world and leads to a devotion to the land itself, as well as to those creatures that share it with humankind.

Recognizing the world as a community gives rise to the *second* characteristic of ecopoetry: a call for humility in relationships with both human and nonhuman nature. Related to this humility is the *third* attribute of ecopoetry: an intense skepticism concerning hyperrationality, often leading to an indictment of an over-technologized modern world and a warning concerning the tangible risks of ecological catastrophe. These characteristics clearly emerge and find ample resonance in Vella's writing. They are traced here through the analysis of selected passages and texts from his poetic production. "Poetic production" is understood here in a broader and more flexible sense than its traditional meaning, due to Vella's particular poetic nature, as previously noted, which transcends conventional genre boundaries by blending prose and poetry into an original form. For this reason, the analysis will also include collections and texts whose poetic value resides not primarily in their formal structure but in the expressive power of the language and its capacity to convey Vella's personal vision of the world.

### *1. Ecocentric perspective and devotion to the land*

As mentioned above, Vella inherited his ecological vocation from the ethnic community in which the roots of his identity lie — the Forest Nenets — who themselves are deeply rooted in the territory of the Russian Far North. Vella himself provides an explanation of his

people's ecocentric worldview on a page from *The Agan River with tributaries* (*Река Аган со притоками*):

«Северяне» по-ненецки — «нгэм 'тер», дословно — «содержимое Севера». Именно так себя воспринимают и ненцы, и ханты, и другие народы. Они живут не над землей, природой, а внутри нее, и, если сохраняют традиционный образ жизни, навредить ей не могут.<sup>13</sup> (Vella 2024, vol. 2: 392)

Two fundamental aspects emerge from this quotation: the first is the absence of anthropocentric exclusivity in the worldview of the indigenous peoples of the North, according to which humans do not occupy a hierarchical position above the natural environment, but belong to it, are its “content,” an integral part of it; the second is the recognition of a responsibility towards the land-nature, whose safeguarding is entrusted to the ecological knowledge and sustainable practices of the communities that have inhabited it for centuries.

Vella therefore tells us that if the traditional Nenets way of life is threatened, the balance between humans and nature collapses, with serious consequences for the health of the earth. With this awareness, he himself made the decision to reembrace nomadic life and return to the lands once walked by his ancestors. If, on the one hand, the land does not belong to humans — the concept of private property is entirely foreign to Nenets culture — on the other, their right to inhabit and safeguard their ancestral lands is indispensable, since without them the traditional way of life could not be sustained. In a context where indigenous lands are still regarded as resources to be exploited and are handed over to the giants of the extractive industry — oil and gas — it becomes essential to preserve the memory of the ties the Nenets maintain with them.

It was with this aim that Vella wrote *The Agan River with tributaries*. It is a toponymic dictionary of the Agan basin, a truly monumental work that Vella himself considered his most important and meaningful achievement. It is not a simple dictionary, since each entry does not indicate only a place, but also includes legends, anecdotes, and poetic texts in prose form, which once again make Vella's work unique. In this book, written in the three languages spoken in the region — Nenets, Khanty, and Russian — Vella embarks on a journey along the course of the Agan River. As his *oblas* (the traditional boat) slowly drifts along the water, he recounts places once inhabited by numerous and prosperous families. Each toponym preserves a fragment of memory and can help the Nenets reconstruct their own history.

As Vella himself stated in an interview:

Если кто-то из наших потомков когда-нибудь захочет попытаться юридически доказать своё право на тот или иной земельный участок, у него

---

<sup>13</sup> “‘Inhabitants of the North’ in the Nenets language is *ngem 'ter*, literally ‘the content of the North’. This is how the Nenets, the Khanty, and other peoples perceive themselves. They live not on but within land and nature, and if they preserve their traditional way of life, they cannot cause it harm”.

будет возможность обратиться к моему топонимическому словарю. [...] Если река, озеро, какая-то гора, поворот реки имеют название на языке какого-то племени, то это и есть доказательство того, что племя может претендовать на этот участок земли.<sup>14</sup> (Kornienko 2016: 197)

With this invaluable archive in book form, Vella challenges the stereotypical narrative according to which the bearers of Western culture — in this case, Russians — are said to have built civilization where there was nothing. What is *nothing* to the Russians has a history for the indigenous people: every space preserves traces of migrations, memories of ancestors, and the presence of sacred sites. As Eva Toulouze observes, this is likely why Northern peoples are often considered “peoples without history” (Niglas, L., Toulouze, E. 2024: 6): their history is not political but geographical.

*The Agan River with tributaries*, inspired by Vella’s experiences during his travels in the United States and his encounters with the practices of Native American activists, is not only an extraordinary work of linguistic and ethnographic research, but also embodies another aspect of ecopoetry: devotion to the land. At the same time, it represents an authentic act of cultural resistance against the processes of colonization and the expropriation of indigenous lands.

## 2. *Interdependence of the world and humility towards its inhabitants*

Devotion and love for the land and its creatures also manifest themselves in Vella’s ability to engage in a constant dialogue with nature, to perceive its messages, interpret them, and transform them into guidance for daily life. Signs from the natural world — such as the flight of birds, the movements of reindeer, directions of the wind, or the sudden appearance of a weather phenomenon — are not isolated events, but messages embedded in a wider network of meanings that nature offers to those who know how to listen. Every element of reality speaks and refers to something else: nature becomes a text to be read, vital for survival in an extreme environment such as the taiga.

For example, in the poem *The First Cuckoo* (Первая кукушка), Vella interprets the bird’s song as a harbinger of an abundant fishing season:

[...]	[...]
Знал, что утром первая кукушка, Словно колокольчик, запоем.	<i>I knew that in the morning the first cuckoo, like a little bell, would start to sing.</i>
[...]	[...]
И звенит настойчиво: «Ку-ку!»	<i>And it sings insistently: “Cuckoo!”</i>
Значит, нынче рыбы будет много.	<i>It means that this year there will be plenty of fish.</i>

---

<sup>14</sup> “If one day one of our descendants wishes to legally prove their right to a particular piece of land, they will be able to refer to my toponymic dictionary. [...] If a river, a lake, a mountain, a bend bear a name in the language of their clan, that name itself constitutes proof of the bond with the land and of the right to claim it”.

*Ты кукуй, кукушечка, кукуй!*                      *Cuckoo, little cuckoo, keep on singing!*  
*Я тебя не слышал долго-долго.*                      *I haven't heard you for a long, long time.*

This capacity for reading and listening reveals one of the fundamental cores of the Nenets worldview — and therefore of Vella's ecopoetry: the concept of the interdependence of the world, in which elements of reality that may appear distant and unrelated to a Western gaze are instead part of an invisible network of relationships, where each element refers to another and acquires meaning only within the whole.

Interdependence is not only the recognition of the connections that unite different elements but also the awareness of a delicate and reciprocal balance that holds them together, where the removal or damage of a single link can compromise the entire system. In Vella, this dimension is embodied in the chain “Земля – ягель – олень – оленевод – внук оленевода”<sup>15</sup> (Vella, 2024, vol. 3, p. 376), which he describes as fragile but indivisible, emphasizing how essential each component is to the functioning of the whole and showing that the balance of the ecosystem is not only ecological but also social and intergenerational, since the grandson represents the continuity and future of the entire system.

From this chain emerges once again the ecocentric, non-hierarchical position of humans relative to the land and its creatures, particularly the reindeer. This aspect is highlighted in the poem *Triptych about the Reindeer* (Триптих об олене):

*Человек уверен, что он решает судьбу оленя.*

*А олень знает:*

*Оленевод без оленя – Нечеловек.*

*Man is convinced he decides the fate of the reindeer.*

*But the reindeer knows:*

*A reindeer herder without reindeer is a non-man.*

Reindeer represent an essential source of life for the nomadic Nenets, providing them with food, skins to protect against the cold, and means of transportation and trade. The survival of the Nenets people and future generations is closely linked to the well-being of the reindeer. It is this awareness that inspired Vella to write *Reindeer Herder's ABC* (Азбука оленевода, 2005). This multilingual project (Russian, Nenets, Khanty, Mansi, Komi-Zyrian, English, French) not only collects rules guiding the reindeer herder in daily life with wisdom and humility but also offers detailed descriptions of life in the nomadic camp and the cultural practices of the Nenets people. Here too, as in the case of the toponymic dictionary mentioned above, one finds heterogeneous texts, among which poetic triptychs stand out, sometimes in verse form, and sometimes in prose. Among the rules

---

<sup>15</sup> “Land – lichen – reindeer – reindeer herder – grandson of the reindeer herder”.

set out by Vella in this book, the following captures the sense of interdependence and balance:

*Устраивая свою жизнь, всегда в первую очередь думай и поступай так, чтобы было хорошо и удобно твоим оленям и оленятам; и только во вторую очередь думай о себе и о своих детях. Помни, если сегодня хорошо вашим оленям, то завтра будет хорошо вам.*

*“When arranging your life, first think and act on behalf of your deer and fawns; and only then think of yourself and your children. Remember: if today your deer are well provided for, tomorrow will bring good for you” (translation by Aleksandr Vashchenko).*

The close, almost symbiotic relationship that binds Vella to his reindeer is such that he can even sense their presence everywhere, even far from the pastures, as shown in this poem from the book *Hunting the Swans* (Охота на лебедей) (Vella 2024, vol. 1: 165):

*Мне же*

*В городе не перестают являться*

*Олени.*

*Они всегда со мной:*

*В поезде или в самолёте,*

*На съезде или на конференции –*

*Я всегда с ними.*

*Или они всегда со мной.*

*Даже глаз не нужно зажимать.*

*По ягельнику*

*Бок о бок хожу*

*И дыхание каждого чувствую.*

*[...]*

*As for me*

*I cannot help seeing the deer  
even in the city.*

*They are always with me.*

*Train or plane,  
convention or conference—*

*I am with them.*

*Or they are with me.*

*I don't even need to close my eyes.*

*I walk side by side  
over the yagel-moss grounds*

*and feel their breath.*

*[...]*

The awareness of the world as a community also translates into an imperative of humility, which represents a fundamental principle for the Nenets: every human being must take from nature only what is necessary to live — no more, no less. Vella himself recounts in the film *Yuri Vella's World* (Liivo Niglas, 2003) that he stopped hunting and became a reindeer herder when he realized he had reached his proper measure. Other Nenets, including his father Kyli, who were unable to perceive the signals of the land or listen to its “voice,” continued to hunt, and because of their greed, they were not granted long lives. Vella’s message is therefore unequivocal: those who, like oil extractors, stray from the principle of “sufficiency” or from the “ethics of minimalism” (Davydov et al. 2016) under the rationalizing drive of technological progress and industrial development,

damage not only the environment but also themselves, as they condemn themselves to a short life.

In the poem *Temporary City* (Временный город), Vella emphasizes this self-condemnation in reference to those who have destroyed the taiga in the name of what he calls the “splendor of oil rubles.” The city evoked by the poet, as he clarifies in the epigraph, is Koğalym-Lor, built for LUKoil oil workers. It is significant to note that in the Khanty language, Koğalym-Lor means “lake where man has disappeared” (Vella 2024, vol. 1: 112): a place name that takes on the value of prophecy, almost foretelling the fate of those who, betraying the principle of nature’s measure and yielding to greed for profit, end up disappearing along with their delusions of progress.

[...]

*На мёртвом месте*

*Мёртвый город*

*Мёртвым будущим бахвалится.*

*Временные люди*

*Во временном баре*

*Временное пиво*

*С жадностью отхлёбывают.*

*Временное столетие*

*Над их плечами*

*Временные минуты*

*В часах отстукивает.*

[...]

*On dead ground*

*a dead city*

*boasts of a dead future.*

*Temporary people*

*at a temporary bar*

*drink temporary beer*

*with greed.*

*The temporary century*

*on their shoulders*

*ticks temporary minutes*

*on the clocks.*

With this temporary city, which embodies false material values and the spiritual shallowness of its inhabitants, Vella contrasts the millennial and innocent presence of nature:

*Только беспечен*

*Маленький оленёнок,*

*Щипля мох под ногами матери.*

*Only a little fawn*

*is carefree,*

*nibbling moss beneath its mother’s feet.*

*В глубине его глаз*

*Прошлого – тысячелетия,*

*Будущего – тысячелетия.*

*И, почесав копытцем рожки,*

*Небрежно писает*

*На ржавеющий нефтепровод.*

*In the depths of its eyes*

*the past— millennial,*

*the future—millennial.*

*And, scratching its little antlers with a hoof,*

*it casually urinates*

*on the rusty oil pipeline.*

Here, Vella depicts a landscape that is simultaneously alive and wounded: it exists and endures but is no longer the same, transfigured by the traces left by the intrusion of the “other” into its space. The rusty pipeline that winds through the land like a scar becomes a symbol of human intervention that contaminates, corrodes, and distorts, yet is ultimately destined to decay and abandonment in the face of the millennial duration of the taiga.

*3. Indictment of an over-technologized modern world and a warning concerning the very real potential for ecological catastrophe*

Another hallmark of ecopoetry, the condemnation of hyper-technological modern world, is expressed in Vella through his denunciation of the indelible marks of industrial violence. The sight of destroyed forests, polluted lakes, and defiled rivers provokes in him dismay and an *all-pervasive pain*, which finds its fullest expression in the poetic cycle *Forest Pains* (Лесные боли). This cycle consists of seven numbered poems, each dedicated to a different *pain*, all of them converging into a single cry of protest: the collapse of our shared home — the Earth, common to all living beings.

Particularly significant in relation to the theme of the present article are the poems *Fourth Pain* (Боль четвёртая) and *Fifth Pain* (Боль пятая). The former builds its emotional impact around the anaphora of the question “Where is...?”, which punctuates each line like a lament, reflecting the poet’s disorientation and grief at the destruction of the natural landscape and the loss of his community’s traditional spaces.

<i>Где тропа,</i>	<i>Where is the path</i>
<i>По которой кочевал мой род?</i>	<i>On which my clan wandered?</i>
<i>Где урочище,</i>	<i>Where is the clearing</i>
<i>Что зверьём их кормило?</i>	<i>That fed them with game?</i>
<i>Где река,</i>	<i>Where is the river</i>
<i>Из которой поили детей?</i>	<i>From which the children drank?</i>
<i>[...]</i>	<i>[...]</i>

Referring to the river now coated in oil, Vella concludes the poem with another question that transfers the anguish from the past into the future:

<i>[...]</i>	<i>[...]</i>
<i>Сколько же ещё в ней осталось воды?</i>	<i>How much water is left in it?</i>
<i>Хватит ли</i>	<i>Will it be enough</i>
<i>На тот единственный</i>	<i>For that one vital sip</i>
<i>Живительный глоток внуку моему?</i>	<i>For my grandson?</i>

This repetitive questioning becomes a powerful poetic device: it underscores the fragility of nature, amplifies the sense of loss, and simultaneously engages the reader,

making them a witness to the violence inflicted on the environment and the urgent need to preserve it for future generations.

In *Fifth Pain*, the questions give way to a lucid and painful awareness. The poet no longer interrogates memory but openly suffers due to the devastation inflicted upon his land:

*О, тайга!*

*Нет тайги – её вырубili.*

*О, родная земля!*

*Не осталось земли –*

*Её превратили в сплошные дороги,*

*Её превратили в сплошные карьеры,*

*Её превратили в сплошные окраины городов.*

[...]

*Oh, taiga!*

*There is no taiga, it has been cut down.*

*Oh, native land!*

*There is no land left,*

*it has been turned into endless roads,*

*it has been turned into endless quarries*

*It has been turned into endless suburbs.*

[...]

The taiga has been torn apart in every direction: vertically, by drilling for oil, and horizontally, by roads built for its transport. These same roads, besides condemning the surrounding forest to death, disrupted migratory routes, restricting and threatening nomadism, a sacred core of Nenets culture. Faced with the devastation of the taiga, Vella seeks a final glimmer of hope in the tundra:

[...]

*О, тундра!*

*Сегодня я еду к тебе в Заполярье.*

*Дай мне в подарок последний глоток*

*Свежего воздуха.*

[...]

[...]

*Oh, tundra!*

*Today I'm coming to your polar space.*

*Give me as a gift the last sip*

*Of fresh air.*

[...]

Yet even here, he is met with an almost apocalyptic landscape dominated by a “radioactive aurora and poisoned acid rain.”

It is significant how, in both poems, Vella uses the symbol of a sip — of “vital water” or “fresh air” — to underscore the current state of a land reduced to its barest minimum. It represents not comfort or full nourishment but the harsh reality of what remains, an insufficient residue compared to the lost abundance. It becomes at once a symbol of survival, a warning, and a denunciation, condensing the entire ecological drama within itself.

Vella conveys this ecological drama not only on his own behalf, for his generation and the one to come, but also on behalf of the non-human creatures inhabiting his land. Through the rhetorical figure of personification Vella transforms the landscape into a living, suffering interlocutor in order to evoke empathy in the reader and free them from

what Richard Powers (2018) calls “Adam’s curse” — namely our tendency to identify only with what resembles us. Thus, for example, in *First Pain* (Боль первая) the poet gives human features to a trembling poplar whose “foot a tractor has broken with a crack”; while in *Second pain* (Боль вторая) the suffering is that of a mother reindeer who, when her young asks to drink from a stream, responds:

*Не пей, сынок,*

*Потерпи немножко.*

*Пахнет нефтью ручеёк,*

*Отравиться можно.*

*Вот уйдём подальше в тундру,*

*Там вода живая*

*Don't drink, my child,*

*be patient a little longer.*

*The stream smells of oil*

*You could get poisoned.*

*We will go further into the tundra*

*There the water is alive.*

Yet even this promise proves illusory, for wherever they go, the land is already marked by drills and oil stains.

These lines reveal the final aspect of Vella’s ecopoetry that I will examine in this article: the real potential for ecological catastrophe looming over the earth and its inhabitants, a catastrophe that, for Vella, is inseparably linked to an ethical and spiritual crisis of humanity. The violence inflicted on the environment is mirrored in indifference toward other living beings and in the degradation of one’s own conscience.

This is the main theme of one of Vella’s most intense and pessimistic poems: *Mutation* [Мутация] (Vella 2024, vol. 1: 110). The text opens with an epigraph, a fragment of dialogue between grandfather and grandson, describing a disturbing catch: a pike with four nostrils and two protrusions resembling small horns. The poem continues by depicting a series of increasingly distressing mutations affecting both the animal and the human world. The climax occurs with the evocation of the mutating grandfather, endowed with three eyes, three tongues, and three hands, performing atrocious acts on an elk: an extreme deformation that becomes a metaphor for the violence and brutality internalized by humans. Vella suggests that the most terrible mutation is not biological but spiritual, affecting those who forget their connection with nature and other living beings, thus leading to the loss of human integrity.

At the close of the poem, the poet directly appeals to the readers:

Люди!

[...]

пока, слава богу, нет ещё

Двоеголовых

И троеруких?

Но, может,

Для нас незаметно

В нашей жизни уже наступила

Мутация наших поступков,

Мутация в отношениях,

Мутация наших чувств?..

Ах, если б ещё не поздно

Оглянуться на себя.

*People!*

*[...]*

*So far, thank God, there are not yet*

*two-headed*

*or three-armed men, aren't there?*

*But perhaps—*

*without our noticing—*

*in our lives*

*a mutation of our actions,*

*a mutation of our relationships,*

*a mutation of our feelings has already begun?*

*Ah, if only it's not too late*

*to look inside ourselves!*

The final invitation to “look inside ourselves” is an urgent warning: humanity has to recognize internal mutations in time in order to stop the spiral of moral and ecological destruction.

This warning, however, finds a counterpoint in the text *Siberian Apocalypse* (Апокалипсис по-сибирски) (Vella 2024, vol. 2: 116), where such a mutation is already underway: it takes shape in the figure of the Russian oilman, blinded by material interest and incapable of recognizing the horror of his actions. His “clean soul,” devoid of empathy, is the inhuman face of modernity: a man who carries out orders lightly, concerned only with accumulating wealth and even boasting about his gratuitous violence against the earth and its innocent creatures.

Against this indifference, the poet’s voice emerges as a testimony to another perspective: that of a person remaining among the incurable wounds in an apocalyptic scenario:

*А мне после него всю жизнь жить здесь на перерытой, перетоптанной земле, с переломанными деревьями и с замазученными озёрами и реками. [...] Разве это не Апокалипсис? А он в это время будет гнать на солидной скорости легковой автомобиль, рядом с ним будет сидеть счастливая жена. [...] Когда он заезжает ко мне на стойбище и когда наш разговор заходит слишком далеко, он меня в лицо называет лесным диким человеком. А как мне прикажете его называть?*

*I will have to live my whole life here, on a disrupted and trampled land, among broken trees and lakes and rivers sullied with oil. [...] Isn't this the Apocalypse? Meanwhile, he [the oilman] will drive a car at high speed, his happy wife sitting*

*beside him. [...] When he comes to my camp and our conversation goes too far, he openly calls me a “wild man of the forest”. And what, then, should I call him?*

These two rhetorical questions make the reader reflect upon and confront the unavoidable reality of a catastrophe that is both ecological and moral.

It is in this continuous act of questioning that the strength of Vella’s ecopoetry is revealed: it not only denounces a violated nature but brings out its ethical implications, transforming the poetic word into an instrument of resistance, understood as a form of resilience and moral endurance that calls for the awakening of consciousness, one that transcends ethnic boundaries and embraces a universal ethical responsibility for the preservation of the natural world.

In this sense, Vella can be considered an ecopoet, capable not only of speaking *for* nature and the creatures that inhabit it, but also of confronting what Scott Bryson calls “the modern divorce between humanity and the rest of nature”.<sup>16</sup>

Vella left us after years of prolonged illness, and today, many years after his passing, his voice continues to resonate powerfully through his works, bearing witness to the still-present ethno-ecological wound of the Nenets and inviting reflection on the necessity of preserving indigenous cultures, guardians of a profound and respectful relationship with nature.

#### *Works Cited – Reading*

- Bryson, J. S., ed. *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2002.
- Caffee, N. “Indigenous Internationalism and the Art of Recognition: A Soviet Trace on a Global Stage.” *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 61, no. 2, 2024: 221-245.  
<https://doi.org/10.5325/complitstudies.61.2.0221>
- Davydov, V.N., Simonova V.V., Sem, T.Ju., Brandishauskas D. *Ogon', voda, veter i kamen' v evenskiikh landshaftakh: Otnosheniia cheloveka i prirody v Baïkalskoi Sibiri*. Sankt-Peterburg: Muzei antropologii i etnografii RAN, 2016.
- Fisher-Wirth, Ann W., and Laura-Gray Street, eds. *The Ecopoetry Anthology*. San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2013.
- Golovnev, A. *Govoryashchie kul'tury: Traditsii samodiitsev i ugrov*. Yekaterinburg: UrO RAN, 1995.
- Kornienko, O. *Ukhodyashchaya natura. Chto ostalos' za kadrom*. Voronezh: Izdat-Print, 2016.
- Murphy, P. D. *Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature*. Charlottesville and London: U of Virginia P, 2000.
- Niglas, L., Toulouze, E. “Yuri Vella’s Worldview as a Tool for Survival: What Filming Reveals.” *Pro Ethnologia, Perceptions of Worldviews*, 17 (2004): 95–114.
- Nixon, R. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674061194>
- Powers, R. *The Overstory*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.

---

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Fisher-Wirth and Street, 2013: xxviii.

Spahr, J. *Well Then There Now*. Boston: David R. Godine, 2011.

Yuri Vella. *Izbrannoe: Sobranie sochinenii v 3-kh tomakh* [Selected Works: Collected Writings in 3 Volumes]. Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug — Yugra, 2024.

#### *Works cited – Viewing*

Kornienko, O., *Poslednii monolog*. Film. Surgutinform-TV, 2013. 15 min.

Niglas, L, *Yuri Vella's World*. Film. Mp doc & F-Seitse, 2003. 58 min.

#### *References*

Arzamazov A.A. “Izvestnyi i neizvestnyi nenetskii poet Iurii Vella:

Etnokhudozhestvennye narrativy.” *Nasledie*, no. 2 (17) (2020): 146–167

Lagunova, O. *Fenomen tvorchestva russkoiazychnykh pisatelei nentsev i khantov poslednei treti XX veka* (E. D. Aipin, Iu. K. Vella, A. P. Nerkagi). Tiumen', 2007.

Novikova, I. I. “Dialogi v zhizni i tvorchestve Yurii Velly.” In *Yuri Vella. Izbrannoe. Sobranie sochinenii v 3 tomakh*, vol. 3: 374–393. Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug — Yugra, 2024.

Toulouze, E. “Autobiographie d'un autochtone de la taïga de Sibérie occidentale: Iouri Vella et la projection dans l'avenir.” *Slovo* 47, Presses de l'Inalco, 2016,  
<https://doi.org/10.46298/slovo.2017.3241>

Toulouze, Eva. *Yuri Vella (1948–2013) and the Forest Nenets*. Tartu: ELM Scholarly Press, Department of Ethnology, University of Tartu, 2024.

#### *Yuri Vella's publications*

Vella, Y. *Vesti iz stoibishcha* [News from the Camp]. Sverdlovsk, 1991.

Vella, Y. *Belye kriki. Kniga o vechnom* [The White Screams: A Book about Eternity]. Surgut, 1996.

Vella, Y. *Triptikhi* [Triptychs]. Khanty-Mansiisk, 2001.

Vella, Y. *Pogovori so mnoi: Kniga dlia nenetskogo studenta i dlia togo, kto khotel by poslushat' nenetskuiu dushu* [Talk to Me: A Book for a Nenets Student and for Someone Who Would Like to Listen to the Nenets Soul]. Khanty-Mansiisk, 2004.

Vella, Y. *Azbuka olenevoda* [Reindeer Herder's ABC]. Nizhnevartovsk, 2005.

Vella, Y. *Veterok s ozera: Proza i vse, chto napominaet prozu* [Breeze from the Lake: Prose and Prose-like Pieces]. Khanty-Mansiisk, 2008.

Vella, Y. *Zemlia liubvi: Dialogi* [Land of Love: Dialogues]. Khanty-Mansiisk, 2009.

Vella, Y. *Reka Agan so pritokami* [The Agan River with Tributaries]. Khanty-Mansiisk, 2010.

*Erika Stragapede*  
*University of Bari Aldo Moro, Bari, Italy*  
*erika.stragapede@uniba.it*