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“A Pop Song on the Last Day of Earth”: Post-humanism and Environmental Poetics in American Literature

Rose-colored dresses flutter:
Jellyfish dance along in pairs –
With emerald-colored bags,
Bottles and red bottle-caps.
O the sea never had so much color!
(Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, Vaiva Grainytė and Lina Lapelytė,
“Chanson of Admiration III,” *Sun & Sea (Marina)*).

We are introducing a collection of essays about post-humanism and environmental poetics in the middle of a summer that has marked a series of planetary records in wildfires, hurricanes, floods, and temperature rise: Canadian forests have been burning since April 2023, Reuter reports, torching 13.7 million hectares so far (“Canada Wildfires”). On the volcanic island of Maui, 111 people were killed and 2000 hectares of forest razed to the ground by a wildfire fanned by gusts of wind blowing from Hurricane Dora 700 miles south of the archipelago (see Doman, Palmer and Brettell). Southern California is currently bracing itself to face the impact of the first ever hurricane expected to hit the West Coast. July 2023 has been reported to be the hottest month in world history.

This sad semantics of records stirs the imagination with apocalyptic visions of death by fire or by water, extreme climate phenomena that in previous epochs of western culture were the domain of Biblical imagination, manifestations of orders of will and scale far beyond the parameters of human conception – let alone experience and intervention.

But in the past few decades, a bitterly ironic, cosmic twist of history has upscaled our experience to the weird concreteness of Biblical doom, leaving us in the middle of what feels like a no-exit *medias res* and still without the cognitive, imaginative, and affective fit to really make sense of what initially individual scientists and, progressively, military and governmental agencies-funded studies predicted: the burning of fossil fuels changes the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to the point of seriously affecting global temperatures which, in turn, cause climate change. And *our*, humanity-inhabited world, ends.

The outcomes have been predicted at least since computer-calculations and data collecting have made the modelling of future scenarios possible, and increasingly accurate projections are available on both mainstream and alternative media. But while we no longer lack scientific studies, reports, and public discussions about climate change, we still struggle to imagine and understand the impact of its consequences on our everyday life. We have come to realize, as Lucia Pietroiusti, curator of the Golden Lion winning 2019 Lithuanian Pavillion in Venice quoted in *exergo*, put it, that this is how the world ends: “like a pop song on the very last day on Earth” (qtd. in Haleperin n. pag.). The sheer scale of the condition we are in makes us feel both discouraged from even starting to think outside our quotidian rituals, suspended as we are between fear and denial – as the moving opera *Sun and Sea (Marina)* clearly emphasizes – and bereft of cognitive tools that help us to make sense of the processes we are undergoing. So we look to novels, poems and other works of the imagination in a desperate search for entirely new constructions, for different vocabularies and scenarios that might lead us out of the semantics of crisis/wreck/extinction to which we have become so accustomed. But how can literature act as an extinguisher for a planet literally on fire?

The massive attention that in the past two decades academic criticism has paid to theorizing and addressing in ecological terms relations between environments and human subjectivity, their manifestations – agency, creativity, intentionality, etc. – and their terms of engagement with non-human life-forms and language have dovetailed with what we can broadly identify as an established academic discourse about post-humanism, inaugurating a productive season of critical discussion about the question of the relation between art, literature and the environment. Beside igniting

a steady process of revision of the epistemic premises on which human claims about the environment are made, this critical engagement has also expanded the academic conversation about the impact of environmental concerns on literary aesthetics and, vice versa, about the influence of art and literature on conventional perceptions and definitions of the environment. As a result, a growing body of literary, artistic, and philosophical works, often characterized by a marked interdisciplinary orientation, has brought into the horizon of academic criticism what Bruno Latour has called “the multiplicity of existents [...] and the multiplicity of ways they have of existing” (36), thus expanding an awareness of connections and interconnection between self and others which also includes non-human others.

The contributors to this Special Issue have thus variously turned to post-humanism to resist the lingering centrality of the human when thinking about, or narrating, the environment. As Seril Oppermann writes, post-humanism and ecocriticism have in common that both “introduce changes in the way materiality, agency, and nature are conceived” (24). In its many manifestations, during the last decades the posthuman turn has indeed helped decenter human subjectivity (conceived as monolithic, discrete, self-sufficient), introducing more porous, interconnected, relational modes of subjectivity and agency that make room for an enlarged sense of kinship and belonging. What Oppermann terms “ecological post-humanism” valorizes “complex environmental relations, [the] perviousness of species boundaries, and social-ecological-scientific networks within which humans and nonhumans, knowledge practices, and material phenomena are deeply enmeshed” (26).

But how can a post-human outlook help to challenge human exceptionalism and reconceptualize subjectivity and agency, in such a way that eco-sensitivity (and eco-poetics) become less a question of human arrogance intent on saving and singing the planet, in a top-down operation, than a kind of perceptual (or bottom-up) inter-species affinity? One way to look at the productive association between post-humanism and eco-criticism is to consider the empathic connections both foster and explore – connections that are inextricably linked to new, or atypical, epistemological conditions. In an article on Richard Powers’s novel *The Echo Maker* (2006), Heather Houser claims that “unraveling the dynamic

interactions between an individual's mind and the world it perceives might revitalize environmental consciousness" (381). By qualifying the interactions between mind and world as dynamic, Houser's words evoke the perviousness of the boundaries between the inside and the outside world, even as they challenge claims to the exceptionality of human perception. Environmentalism or eco-consciousness stems less from a purposeful conceptual program than from a commonality of feeling – a feeling or thinking *with* (rather than *for*) the environment. As Tirza Brüggemann (quoted by Jane Desmond in her essay in this Special Issue) suggests, ecological empathy is not about alikeness, but rather about training our senses to perceive and feel otherwise.

Even more radically, decentering “the human” does not mean to aim for transcendence, but to break the philosophical, conceptual, imaginary and epistemological boundaries that have historically kept apart what calls itself “the human” from other forms of life, to paraphrase Derrida's expression. This break is preconditional to seeing ecologically, that is to say – following Gregory Bateson's ideas – to understand relations within (eco)systems as relations among differences of kind between organisms and environments, and to account for such differences *and the difference they make* in determining the operations any given organism performs in its environment.

This shift from thinking of organisms as individuals to thinking of organisms as the evolving outcomes of recursive feedback-looping relations with their environments has two massively important theoretical consequences that we can only mention: 1. it deconstructs the concept of “world” as the unifying substratum of experience for all living and non-living organisms, multiplying instead what we can call “world-experiences” for as many organism-in-environment as there are relations; 2. It provides ground for theorizing the relation between living and non-living systems at different orders of causality and recursion between interpenetrating systems different in kind.

It comes as no surprise, then, that this major conceptual shift was also at the core of James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis's Gaia hypothesis, as Bruce Clarke has recently showed (28), “the most innovative, systemic, cosmic theory of life” (30) buttressing Lovelock's “theories of atmospheric self-regulation with her [Margulis's] knowledge of microbial metabolisms”

(30). By “overturning previous evidence and sedimented habits of geological and biological practice, reconfiguring and reconstituting large portion of normal science, and prompting a thorough reconceptualization of humanity’s place in the world” (31), Gaia cosmic theory of life prompted what philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn in his classic *The Structures of Scientific Revolution* defined a paradigm shift: a radical revision of stabilized protocols of scientific knowledge production, which matters to us at the very least to the extent that it introduced a post-humanist, and *ecological*, relational perspective in the study of earth systems.

But how can literature help us engage ecology, in this time of continuing ecological disasters? By means of what strategies, tropes, constructions and perspectives will it address that thing “massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (Morton 1) we have tried to domesticate by calling it climate change? How can literature engage the approaching end of *our* world? What is the use of literature in such a fateful present, anticipating an ever more calamitous near future?

In his study of *Anthropocene Fiction*, Adam Trexel suggests that instead

of fiction being read as attempts to seize the arbitrary meaning of climate change, or as literary representations of scientific representations, climate change novels are best understood as a force that interacts with climate change, remaking what we know about the climate and the novel at the same time.
(35)

Perhaps this is too much to ask of the novel or of any kind of literary work. Probably, a more affordable task for literary texts, is to emphasize the role of literature as an experimental way of generating knowledge that may better accompany our transition toward the deep adaptation ahead, especially if we agree with Anna Kornbluh’s claim that works of literature

compose ideas in non-propositional fashion [...] through the interrelation of different formal registers: setting resounding plot, point of view reinforcing figure, characterization repeating temporality. Novels implicitly pose the question of how their many pieces fit together, and this fabricated whole is a projection of the integral world they precipitate. (267)

It is on the terrain of this interconnection and of the deep revision it entails of our ways of thinking the role of the literary work in relation to, on the one hand, the philosophical and theoretical, and, on the other, the ecological, that the contributors to this special issue have variously looked at American literature, investigating their creative interventions on how we understand the world around us, our place in it, and the place of the literary in it. The essays here collected exemplify that literary methodologies for addressing the entanglements of non-human species, human experience, Earth, and the acceleration of planetary ecocide rely, in different ways, on the talent of literature for what Kornbluh calls “objectivity”: “a capacity for conceptuality, a faculty for synthesis, which runs perpendicular to, but also parallels, the quantitative or the empirical, the phenomenal and the embodied”: literature’s potential to both instantiate abstract relations among its various components and to ground them in specific environments qualifies it as a technology “capable of thinking, not only of eliciting feeling or immediately expressing the personal or contextual” (236), and therefore crucial to the meaning-making process through which the relation between knowledge, experience, and future-building is shaped and re-shaped outside fixed categories or data representation. This quality, according to Kornbluh, defines the specific “mediacy” of literature as a property of literary language, which exercises it by “soliciting methods attuned to mediation rather than fixated on immediate uptake in affect or data” (236).

Taken collectively, the essays in this Special Issue turn to literary language as a “*poiesis* that reconnects words in [literature] and words outside by framing and exploring [...] relations between mind and environment, perceptions and phenomena as relations of meaning,” as Iuli puts it in her essay. A number of the contributions focus on poetry as an apt vehicle to reconnect mind and environment. Leonor Martínez Serrano investigates the eco-poetry of Robert Hass as a means of *attending* to the more-than-human world (a notion that recurs in several contributions). Drawing on the image of wastelands that powerfully emerges from Hass’s work, Martínez Serrano posits that the environmental crisis (and eco-poetry) calls not for the moral agency of world-changers or problem-solvers, which symbolize the peak of human arrogance, but for the ethical agency of witnessing. From this point of view, Hass’s poetry and his anthropogenic wastelands reveal a deep sense

of engagement with and commitment to the more-than-human world, while also operating as a denunciation of the practices that destroy it.

Cristina Iuli and Jane Desmond likewise focus on poetry. The former examines the relations between poetics and knowledge of life-forms in Katherine Larson's *Radial Symmetry* (2011). Desmond explores the potentialities of poetry as a mode of inter-species empathy, with examples from the American canon in which poetic language seems to bridge the gap between different (human/nonhuman/animal) *sensoria*. Her view that poetry, with its power of condensation, its demanding use of sound, line breaks, diction and metaphor, which affects us on both the linguistic and non-linguistic level of assonance, consonance, and meter, can be an extremely effective and affective way to limn these observations, and thus to create lively multi-species artistic ethnographies, stands at the opposite angle from Iuli's reading of Larson's poetry, whose central claim engages the poetic tradition of "nature" poetry by situating its special, deconstructive relation to poetry in the specific ways poems establish their own singular ways of binding of consciousness and communication. From that vantage point, it is not really the metric or formal scheme that conventionally define poetry, but rather its poietic force, its capacity to bring forth what Anna Kornbluh calls "the composition of new, unusual abstractions; the thickening and calibrating of thinking; the vectoring of our senses beyond the merely sensible" (262).

Owen Harry's essay on Daoism in Ursula Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971) clarifies underexplored links between religious thought and some of the tenets of post-humanism to analyze Le Guin's political stance (and to challenge accusations of "quietism"). His essay resonates with Desmond's reminder that some native theorists, like Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate scholar Kim TallBear and Metis anthropologist and artist Zoe Todd, put pressure on the ethnocentric foundations of post-humanist epistemologies, especially in their framing of a wider kinship-based notion of how humans relate to non-human worlds, and in the attribution of vitality to those worlds. For native cosmologies and epistemologies have always incorporated in their definition of environment a comprehensive view of the relation of species and worlds, one in which there is no special position for the human species. So, to a certain extent, what from a Western and Euro-American point of view appears as a new engagement with the posthumous state of

humanist philosophies, does not really seem to break any new ground to observers coming from other conceptual traditions. On the contrary, it risks reinstating once again a provincial – i.e. white, Eurocentric – perspective under universal claims, as has historically been the case with the Euro-American history of thought.

Daniela Fargione seizes on the long-standing censure of anthropocentrism and the often satirical assessment of human deficiency to sympathize with the nonhuman she sees at work in Coetzee to read Lydia Millet's novel *How the Dead Dream* (2008). Millet's novels, she writes, function as an exploration of realms beyond the human with the intent to promote an affective and empathic engagement with the nonhuman. The ethical and empathic practice that, according to Fargione, Millet explores includes – or requires – paying attention or attending to (to use Anna Tsing's term) the other-than-human. In this sense, Fargione's essay connects to Desmond's interest in the possibility of keeping one's animal eye open. The demand for attentiveness inscribed in the novel, however, does not imply mutuality: we cannot expect our narcissistic (human) needs (such as reciprocity) to be fulfilled by the nonhuman.

Finally, Valentina Romanzi focuses on the materiality of language to analyze and valorize the use of metaphors in Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone's novella *That's How You Lose the Time War* (2019). Exploring the literalization of metaphors into metamorphoses, Romanzi takes these literalized metaphors – veritable building blocks of the narrative – as instrumental to the expression and ontological (re)-definition of the post-human subject.

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