

Carmen Concilio, Daniela Fargione *Trees in Literatures and the Arts*

Silvia Boraso

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia; Université Paris-Est Créteil, France

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When Eugene Stormer and Paul Crutzen, in 2000, coined the term 'Anthropocene' to describe a new geological time characterised by the massive impact of human activities on the environment, they catalysed a global debate that would change forever the way human beings approach and conceive life on Earth. At first received with a certain amount of skepticism, the notion of Anthropocene is nowadays well accepted by the scientific community, which tends to locate the beginning of this new epoch around 1950s, after the first atomic tests in the Pacific. In the last two decades, specialists from different research fields - hard and social sciences, the humanities and the arts - have been looking not only for sustainable, technological solutions to the environmental challenges humanity faces today, but also for new ways of thinking the mutual, co-dependent relationship that links humans to other forms of life. In particular, the change in perspective envisioned by postcolonial and ecocritical approaches has led to a reconfiguration of the way we look at biodiversity, ecosystems and cultures that calls into question humanity's hegemonic role in the environment and re-evaluates the function of other animal and non-animal beings in its development and maintenance. Trees especially have gone from being the silent, isolated entities to the fundamental actors in the survival of the planet as well as examples of sustainable biological systems to look up to.



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It is in this light that trees are seen in Carmen Concilio's and Daniela Fargione's book *Trees in Literatures and the Arts. HumanArboreal Perspectives in the Anthropocene* (2021). Derived from a series of interdisciplinary debates "of, about, and around trees" (2) occurred in May 2019 at the University of Turin, the collection of essays invites the reader to view his or her relationship with vegetal forms of life through the lens of mutuality and advocates for a non-anthropocentric vision of the world in which trees, plants, and animals – men included – form one interconnected collectivity. By drawing from poetry in their "attempt to look for meaning and reciprocity" (2), the articles investigate how HumanArboreal relations have been represented in literatures and the arts by adopting an intersectional, multidisciplinary perspective.

The book, divided into five parts, opens with a section on "Human-Tree Kinship". The first essay, "On Becoming Tree. An Alternative, Arbo-real Line of Flight in World Literatures in English" (21-37), is written by one of the editors, Carmen Concilio, and provides a comprehensive list of literary metamorphoses of human beings – mostly women – turning into trees. The author interprets these transformations as a chance for female characters to regain their "arborescence, that is to say their otherness" (26). By analysing four contemporary novels – André Brink's *Imagings of Sand* (1996), Achmat Dangor's *Kafka's Curse* (1997), Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006), and Kang Han's *The Vegetarian* (2007) – Concilio underlines that the protagonists' return to nature allows them to escape the violent, patriarchal society in which they live (26-7), their metamorphosis in the narrative standing as a direct reference to their trauma (34).

Similar experiences of grief are also examined by Shannon Lambert in her "Becoming-botanic. Vegetal Affect and Ecological Grief in Deborah Levy's *Swimming Home* and Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*" (51-69). By challenging human, linear perceptions and representations of time, the text suggests that we look at "vegetal forms to engage with experiences of grief that are depicted as multi-generational and dispersed" (52).

The figurative meaning of trees in literature takes a different turn in Igor Piumetti's "Russian Bodies, Russian Trees. Examples of Interconnections between the Tree of the Motherland and the Soviet People" (71-84), in which the figure of the tree is linked to the nationalist discourse of the Soviet Union. In particular, Piumetti focuses on the way the image of the tree is used as a metaphor for the Motherland in Andrej Platonov's tale *Derevo rodiny* and in the homonymous short, animated movie by Vladimir Petkevič.

A more anthropological view is offered in this section by Emanuela Borgnino's and Gaia Cottino's article, "Pacific Perspectives of the Anthropocene. Trees and Human Relationships" (39-50). The scholars present two Pacific cosmogonies centred on trees, the legend of

the *fa* tree of Tonga and the Hawaiian story of *'ōhi'a lehua*. Both stories call into question the anthropocentric perspective of foundational myths by stressing the role of agents trees assume in the narratives and mirror the way Pacific peoples conceive the world as a network of codependent relations in which all forms of life – the vegetal, the animal, and the human – share responsibility for the preservation of nature and culture.

The second part of the book, “Spiritual Trees”, is dedicated to the religious dimension of forests, trees, and plants. In “Trees as the Masters of Monks. Some Observations on the Role of Trees in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*” (87-94), Bernard Łukasz Sawicki underlines the importance of trees in the monastic life of the Desert Fathers, who view trees as teachers to admire and emulate (87) as well as expressions of the divine on Earth (91). According to the author, that is the reason why in many of their sayings “spirituality is expressed through images of nature, while nature is interpreted in spiritual keys” (89).

The next two essays are dedicated to poetry. In “The Ash Tree as ‘unwobbling pivot’ in Pound’s Early and Late Poetry” (95-110), Stefano Maria Casella analyses the evolution of trees in Pound’s work, moving from “La Fraisne (The Ash Tree)” of his early writings to the “Yggdrasail” of his later texts, in which the tree comes to symbolise “knowledge acquired through initiation, through sensibility” (103).

Irene De Angelis’s article focuses on the role of trees in Seamus Heaney’s poetry (“Seamus Heaney’s Arboreal Poetry”, 111-22). Heir to the Celtic tradition for which trees forebear a spiritual power, in his writings Heaney exploits the forest as a liminal, spiritual space “where paganism and Christianity coexist, a place that is apparently desolate, where beauty and surprise can nonetheless be found” (114).

Paola Della Valle’s essay brings the reader back to the Pacific, namely to New Zealand. In her “Between Ecology and Ritual. Images of New Zealand Trees in Grace, Finlayson, Hilliard, and Sargeson” (123-134), Della Valle stresses the importance of trees in Māori cosmology and analyses the ways in which the latter impinges on New Zealanders’ literary production. Among the many examples she mentions, the birth tree is particularly relevant – the fact that in Māori literature trees often come “to symbolize aspects of the human beings they are connected to” (128) directly stems from the Māori tradition of planting a tree whenever a baby is born, a tree that becomes his or her birth tree.

A similar ecocentric vision is explored by Alberto Baracco in his article “The Tree that Therefore I Am. Humans, Trees, and Gods in Cosimo Terlizzi’s Cinema” (135-48). Baracco affirms that film is “a particularly effective medium for the expression of a viable environmental philosophy” (140) and pinpoints Cosimo Terlizzi’s film *Dei* as the epitome of his ‘ecophilosophical’ theory.

The third section of the collection, "Trees in/and Literatures", is centred exclusively on literature, and begins with Bahar Gürsel's article "Flora J. Cooke's Tree Stories. Progressive Education and Nature in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century United States" (151-61). The essay deals with the fundamental role of nature in Flora J. Cooke's progressive and visionary education strategies. In particular, by presenting trees in their individuality, her children's storybooks promote the idea that it is their uniqueness that makes trees not only beautiful but also useful to the rest of the collectivity. As Gürsel points out,

[b]y identifying herself/himself with a tree, the child also learns the importance of living in a community that would enable her/him to experience the benefits and advantages of communal life. Concurrently, (s)he grasps the fact that her/his individual support would provide for the improvement and enhancement of the community. (158-9)

The following essay is Patrícia Vieira's "Talking Trees in Amazonian 'Novels of the Jungle'" (163-71). Though admitting the non-negligible presence of imperialistic stereotypes in this type of narrative, Vieira chooses to focus on the more foregrounding aspects of three novels of the jungle, namely José Eustasio Rivera's *The Vortex* (1924), Ferreira de Castro's *The Jungle* (1930), and Rómulo Gallego's *Canaima* (1935). In her study, Vieira proves that

[n]ot only are novels of the jungle critical of the excesses of unbridled extractivism as a path to economic development, but they have also broken new ground in their portrayal of an active, sentient forest that, more than any of the human protagonists, is often the main character in the texts. (164)

The section closes with a series of articles dedicated to trees and poetry. Giulia Baselica's essay provides the reader with an analysis of the different connotations of the palm tree in Nikolaj Gumilëv's exotic poetry ("The Poetization of the Exotic in Early Twentieth-Century Russian Literature. Nikolaj Gumilëv's Palm Tree", 187-99), while Roberto Merlo's text examines the negative vision of nature portrayed in George Bacovia's poetic production ("Gardens of Hell, Trees of Death. For a Poetics of Urban Nature in the Lyrics of George Bacovia", 173-86). Merlo argues that the forest, though emblematic of Romanian traditional "wood civilization" (173), in Bacovia's pessimistic vision acquires the features of urban trees and gardens, which embody "mankind's forceful agency over nature and, in a wider perspective, a[re] an exemplary manifestation of the flimsiness of human delusion about progress" (175).

The fourth part of the book revolves around “Trees in the Arts” and presents three different artistic experiences of the relationship between the creator and nature. In “Mother Sequoia. Waiting for an Imperceptible Enlightenment among Millennial Trees” (203-9), the Italian poet Tiziano Fratus accompanies the reader on his meditative journey through different forests in Italy and the US, and promotes a poetic practice that merges Buddhism, philosophy, and ecology.

A similar lyrical experience is offered by Marlene Creates. In her “Tuning and Being Tuned by a Patch of Boreal Forest. Works from the Boreal Poetry Garden, Newfoundland, Canada” (229-41), the artist describes her symbiotic relationship with the forest surrounding her home in Newfoundland, and on the ways in which it has become not only the source of her poetic inspiration, but also the subject of her art – mainly poetry and photography – as well as the medium through which it is expressed.

In the contribution, “Perfoming with Spruce Stumps and Old Tjikko. On the Individuality of Trees” (211-28), Annette Arlander talks about her experience of performing with trees, in particular of her series of photo shoots in which she sat on, next to, and inside spruce stumps. The artist shares with the reader the worries that troubled her at the beginning of her project and how she managed to overcome them:

[e]mphasizing individualism is a risky strategy in the current neoliberal capitalist cultural climate, where individualism is exaggerated anyway. It can nevertheless be useful to focus on singular trees, as an important first step toward decolonizing our relationship with ‘nature’. As ecofeminist Val Plumwood (2003) pointed out, colonial thinking tends to emphasize a very strong difference between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ and to see ‘them’ as all alike, stereotypical, non-individualized. (212)

To photography is also dedicated the opening article of the last section, “Trees and Time”. In “Tree Photography, Arboreal Timescapes, and the Archive in Richard Power’s *The Overstory*” (245-61), Daniela Fargione interprets the use of tree photography in Power’s novel in relation to its fictional representation of time. Relating what happens in “almost four billion years, where humans, in their transient appearance, have been somehow interrelated with trees and plants” (246), *The Overstory* can be defined as “an immense epic on time” (246) narrated from an arboreal point of view.

The section, and the book, ends with a study by Eva-Sabine Zehelein, “Family Trees. Mnemonics, Genealogy, Identity, and Cultural Memory” (263-79). The article is centred on the way lineage and family relationship are conceptualised, mainly by employing the image of the family tree. In particular, Zehelein highlights the symbolic

value this type of visualisation attributes to the tree, which becomes an emblem of organic growth and evolution allowing “[n]ature and culture, the biological and the social, [to] merge in one icon” (266).

As Santiago Zabala suggests in his “Foreword” to the volume, Carmen Concilio’s and Daniela Fargione’s *Trees in Literatures and the Arts* is a book that calls for an “intervention” (xii). By refusing to simply resort to science to find sustainable solutions to the environmental crisis, the authors of the essays do not just tackle climatic issues from a variety of points of view, but go far in proposing decolonial, non-anthropologic ways to approach nature by inviting the reader to look at trees as examples of good practice. What links all the contributions, however, is the scholars’ reliance on poetry as the only means to restore man’s ability to connect with the environment - where science has failed, literatures and the arts will succeed (xii).