

DOI: 10.35923/BAS.28.40

CARMEN CONCILIO, DANIELA FARGIONE (Editors)

***TREES IN LITERATURES AND THE ARTS.
HUMANARBOREAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE ANTHROPOCENE.***

Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books, 2021, 297 pp.
ISBN 978-1-7936-2279-2; 978-1-7936-2280-8

DANA PERCEC

West University of Timișoara

In official geologic terms, our age is known as the Holocene, but, unofficially, the term Anthropocene is more and more frequently used to refer to the recent centuries and decades, in which the human impact on the planet, its climate and ecosystems, has had visible and irreversible effects. Ironically, the rise of rationalism, the triumph of science and the advances in technology have been responsible both for progress, improving living standards and enlightenment, and also for the confirmation of the destructive power of the human species. Reacting against the effects of industrialization and urbanization, the Romantic poets and artists were, in many ways, the first environmentalists. Their nostalgia for a pre-industrial world, for the natural rhythms of life and work, their belief in the protection and love God offers all creatures, animals, and plants, all follow intuitively the principles much more recently outlined by eco-ethics.

The book edited by Carmen Concilio and Daniela Fargione, academics at the University of Turin, Italy, in the Environmental Studies series of Lexington Books goes beyond the abstract purposes of literary criticism and theory, in a successful attempt to draw the readers' attention to important and urgent contemporary concerns. As philosopher and cultural critic Santiago Zabala argues in the Foreword, the relevance of this volume lies in its powerful evocation of an emergency which most of us do not confront directly. But the absence of urgency doesn't make silent emergencies any less serious. If in 2020 the pandemic grabbed us all, more or less symbolically, by the lapels, after it had been an ignored emergency for years, the same can be said about the environmental crisis humanity is facing at the beginning of the third millennium. At the same time, the value of this book consists in its capacity to demonstrate that, while science follows its own path, often inexorably, literatures and arts are more capable of raising public awareness, because of the emotional hold they have on the public. If scientists can barely make their warning reach our ears, written stories, poems, photographs and music will hopefully reach our hearts. In Santiago Zabala's words, "while science seeks to rescue us *from* emergencies by improving and preserving knowledge, the arts rescue us *into* emergencies, calling for our intervention, as this book does." (2021: xiii, emphasis in the original)

Eco-studies are, by definition, interdisciplinary, so this book brings together contributions from a vast array of subjects. Carmen Concilio is professor of English and postcolonial literature, but her interests also include urban studies, migration, landscape and ecology, age and ageing. Daniela Fargione teaches Anglo-American literature, as well as literature in connection with other arts, like photography and music, but her interests are also in the area of environmental humanities (climate change, food, and migration). Similarly, the scholars, academics, and practitioners invited to offer their own perspective in this volume are poets, artists, theologians, pedagogues, cultural and social anthropologists, film critics, scientists, philosophers, historians, experts in Italian literature, Russian literature and art, Romanian literature, Irish studies, postcolonial criticism, Pacific cultures, imagology, reproductives, etc.

The richness of expertise justifies the organization of the book into five large sections, all revolving around the presence and importance of trees. If the Cartesian body-mind divide was translated, in the western world, into the nature vs. culture dichotomy, it is not surprising that trees have regressed farther and farther away from the foreground into the décor of our perceptions and mentalities. In the editors' words, we feel nowadays "mentally and spiritually separated from trees that have become invisible" (2), even if – or maybe especially because – we value them as resources. Only a reconceptualization of the human, the book invites us to see, can lead to a revalorization of nature (and trees) in terms of a relation of interdependence, rather than of dominance and control. This is why the first part of the book focuses on the *Human-Tree Kinship*, in four essays that follow the human-arboreal connection in English-speaking, Korean, and Russian literatures. Carmen Concilio offers a survey of canonical western literature, from Ovid and Virgil, to Dante and Shakespeare, but also of contemporary non-European, non-canonical literatures, in which humans turn into plants, displaying an implicit or even unconscious challenge of established anthropocentrism. Instead, the values promoted approach the infra-human dimension, a form of acceptance which is only natural. Anthropologists Emanuela Borgnino and Gaia Cottino discuss Oceanian customs of promoting human-nature relationships, which include trees in all the practices and rituals of the community. Shannon Lambert analyzes two novels in which trauma and mourning are interceded by trees. Plants, in her view, have a degree of awareness, knowledge, and memory which complements the human capacity. Igor Piumetti describes the tree as a national Russian symbol, commenting on a graphic novel and an animated film, produced several decades apart, the former in full Stalinist propaganda during World War II, the latter in the last years of the Soviet Union, when the political giant was already heading towards dissolution. The tree of the nation symbolizes citizenship, resilience, and community, or, alternatively, freedom and regeneration of the self.

Part II, *Spiritual Trees*, adds a religious dimension to the human-arboreal relationship. Providing a Christian perspective, Bernard Lukasz Sawicki gives trees as models for monks and ascetics, with their solitary but firmly rooted existence, an inspiration and an example of patience and perseverance. Drawing on Christian mysticism, Stefano Maria Casella reads Ezra Pound's poems, paying special attention to the symbolism of the ash-tree in mythological metamorphoses, where it

frequently appears as the central axis of the universe. Non-Christian approaches to tree veneration are taken by Irene De Angelis, who presents the echoes of Celtic traditions and beliefs in Seamus Heaney's poetry. Māori animism explains the depiction of tree worshipping in contemporary New Zealandese fiction, which deplores the alteration of human-arboreal connections by European mentalities. Film studies complete the picture of this section, in the chapter by Alberto Baracco, who analyzes Cosimo Terlizzi's cinema as an example of ecophilosophy, in a dialogue between humans and trees that enables the former to discover their innermost selves.

The third section, *Trees in/and Literatures*, introduces the pedagogical element, with Bahar Gürsel's chapter on Flora Cooke's educational methods of children's immersion in nature, an approach which, in the late 1890s, was way ahead of its time. The next two chapters can be considered mildly didactic in the sense that they discuss literary texts as warnings. Patricia Vieira reads classical adventure and jungle novels, in which the primeval Amazonian forest is the "green hell", as expressions of political and economic agendas of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In contrast, new pseudo-jungle novels respond to this literary tradition with a clear environmental stance, paying homage to the ever dwindling Amazon. Roberto Merlo presents another "green hell", the urban jungle, in which the ugly city sprawl makes both human and vegetal victims, in an unconventional reading of George Bacovia's poetry. Giulia Baselica looks at the palm tree, recurrent in the early twentieth-century poetry of Nikolaj Gumilëv, as an escapist symbol, its exoticism making a stark contrast with the every-day realities of Russia.

Part IV, *Trees in the Arts*, focuses on performative arts, which often contain an element of "dendrosophy", a term coined by Italian poet Tiziano Fratus, author of the first chapter, where he describes his concrete poetry, or "tree poems", as being the result of his epiphanies near millennial Sequoias. Annette Arlander writes about the inclusion of trees in her artistic performances and experiments, her message being the importance of sharing (time, space, care) with the natural environment. Poet and photographer Marlene Creates describes her multimedia and multimodal artwork in eco-digital humanities, whose purpose is to lobby for salvaging the eco-systems of Northern Canada.

The last section, *Trees and Time*, wraps it all up. Trees have their own stories "written" in their rings, stories that go further back in time than individual human memory. Daniela Fargione's chapter starts from this observation, arguing that humans and trees occupy different positions in the time continuum and that, to compensate for the absence of tree-like memory, humans have developed auxiliary media for memory storage, like writing, photography, and cinema. No wonder then, that trees have inspired humans to define their identity, belonging, and genealogy, as Eva Zehelein demonstrates in the closing chapter of the book, about family trees.

To sum up, Carmen Concilio and Daniela Fargione's collection is as much about trees as it is about humans, who only recently started to realize that plants are living species, like animals, and, more importantly, that it turns out we need them more than they need us. The editors offer readers the eighteen chapters of this book

so as to allow themselves to be cured of “plant blindness” (2) for their own benefit, in order to “forge our collective imaginary and prompt us to healthier behaviors and lifestyles” (16). That we are given this opportunity by being reminded of some of the most beautiful pieces of literature and visual arts can only be a great privilege.