


## Presentation

# Literature, Nature and Ethics: Ecocritical Gazes

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Antonio Candido, shining a light on the role of literature in the formation of man, singles out three of its functional aspects: as the construction of autonomous objects with their own structure and meaning; as the configuration of expression, manifesting emotions and collective and/or individual worldviews; and as a form of knowledge that is also known as a fusion of diffuse and unconscious elements. Emphasizing the interconnectivity between literature and human beings, Candido explains that literature tends to be perceived as a form of knowledge, a type of instruction that results in learning. As a consequence, the other functional aspects he mentions – crucial in the dynamics that link literature to the complexity of human nature – tend to be overlooked. As he proposes this idea, Candido postulates that the “effect that literature has is due to the simultaneous action of the three aspects” (CANDIDO, 2011, p. 178-179) mentioned above. The link between the function of literature and the complexity of humans that Candido proposes leads us to one of the purposes of literature: to stimulate the valence of dual meanings in the formation of subjectivities, the expression of times, and the behaviors and attitudes of human beings. In this process, parallel to the dual meanings at play in the formation of subjectivities, literature fosters reflections on the values “that society advocates or considers harmful [...]. Literature confirms and denies, proposes and refutes, supports and defies, opening a way for us to experience problems dialectically” (CANDIDO, 2011, p. 177).

In primordial times, humans were at the mercy of nature, which they believed to be invincible. As successive scientific, industrial, and social revolutions ensued, man began to feel superior to nature, deeming it subjugated to his total control and dominion. This spurred him to

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make complex transformations to the environment and to human beings themselves, which had major impacts on natural systems and everyday living conditions. Along with the origin and consolidation of the capitalist system, modernity also marks a separation between time and space. While the dimension of time is associated with an experience of acceleration, the dimension of space is increasingly compressed, with the effects of both rendering unprecedented changes to the lived experience of the world and all human experience. In this context, modern science emerges with an ontological dimension, which, crucially, rends man from nature, human beings from other beings in the world. In this context, the relationship between humans and nature – something that has been present in literature since Antiquity – is lost.

As man has advanced towards his goal of conquering and manipulating nature to his own ends, literature – bearer of humanist values and encounters between different types of knowledge – has set about probing what it is that connects nature and ethics and has brought new perspectives inspiring a fresh views on environmental issues in our hypermodern and hypertechnological time, helping recalibrate our attitudes towards nature. In different geographical spaces, with different gazes and drawing on different knowledge bases, writings from the spheres of ecocriticism, ecopoetics, ecofeminism, geopoetics, and humanist geography have spread, helping us scrutinize the structures and movements calling for human and social rights from the perspective of the relationship between ethics and nature. In this stated endeavor against exploitation and in support of the harmonious discovery of the phenomena of the universe for the benefit of humankind, literature has also exerted another much-needed function: warning us of the flaws in our relationship with nature, while poetically or narratively proposing transformations and/or changes in direction.

The new configurations of the relationship between humans and their literatures enable us to reflect on our existence, the whole constitution of humanity and the struggle to reconnect with our social, cultural, and environmental ancestry, taking an interdisciplinary approach and viewing the triad of human-nature-literature from the perspective of an encounter with ecocentric or land ethics, as proposed by Aldo Leopold (1949).

Questioning the ways we deal with nature is dear to contemporary literature. However, we cannot forget that romantic writers from all over the world were the first to exhibit what we would today call an ecological conscience or ecofeminist ethic. As James C. McKusick (2000) states, “these writers provide hints, clues, and intimations of different ways of dwelling on Earth”. (MCKUSICK, 2000, p. 228). If we revisit the trajectory of some North American romantic writers, for example, we can see that Jonathan Bate (2001) presents that literature as a novel mode of “ecopoetics”, an essential history of environmental awareness and a passionate argument worth reconsidering in times of environmental crisis.

In *Silent Spring* (1962), considered a milestone in the global environmental movement, Rachel Carson (1907-1964) argues that “the natural landscape is eloquent of the interplay of forces that have created it. It is spread before us like the pages of an open book in which we can read why the land is what it is, and why we should preserve its integrity” (CARSON, 1962, p. 42). From observation and experience, the apprehension of reality becomes factual, and we naturally become an integral part of this world that is so close and yet so far from the human being. According to Timothy Morton, this distance exists because the facts of ecology relate to us, who we are, what we do, and how we act. This is why “they are hard to see from a distance – getting perspective about yourself, interrogating your way of doing and seeing, is one of the hardest things to do” (MORTON, 2018, XXXVI).

Ecofeminism, a theory that emerged in the United States in and around the 1970s, sets to reexamine the relationship between gender and the environment, a postulate that it presents as a theoretical framework designed to foster a better understanding of hierarchical and dualistic definitions of gender and its intersections with nature. This axiom could be used to explain and better understand the dominance of humankind in its relationship with nature, encouraging non-dualistic and non-hierarchical thinking. Ecofeminist activists such as Françoise d’Eaubonne (1920-2005, France)<sup>1</sup> and Vandana Shiva (India) are two figureheads of ecofeminist studies for their work combining academic activity and engagement in environmental problems.

The ethical commitment that binds writer, literature, and nature is also what grounds and guides the words of Jonathan Bate, lending literature and, in Bate’s case, the poet himself, a more concrete role: “The poet: an apparently useless creature. But potentially the savior of ecosystems” (BATE, 2000, p. 231).

In this context, this issue of *Revista Gragoatá* brings together a set of texts that consider literature through the lenses of different theoretical approaches around the theme “Literature, Nature, and Ethical Commitment: Ecocritical Gazes”. Readers will certainly find interesting interlocutions and cross-pollinations among the different transnational and posthuman approaches, as proposed by the philosopher Rosi Braidotti, who understands posthuman criticism as an ethical and creative activity that allows us to rethink our interaction with human and non-human agents: “I define the critical posthuman subject within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity, that is to say a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated, but still grounded and accountable” (BRAIDOTTI, 2013, p. 49).

Initially, the co-organizer of this issue, Susana L. M. Antunes, and Régis Poulet had the pleasure of interviewing Kenneth White, an inescapable figure in geopoetics, a writer responsible for an extensive body of published poetry, narratives, and essays, and the founder

<sup>1</sup> Author of *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (Paris: P. Horay, 1974). Eaubonne was the first to coin the term *ecofeminism*.

of the International Institute of Geopoetics, in 1989. His journey as a creator and his conceptions of literature and nature have become cornerstones of the bid to build a more robust “practice-theory” of geopoetics<sup>2</sup>. In the interview, conducted in English, we see the ethical commitment that drives White and still inspires his work, which dates back to his 1963 publication of the book of poetry *Wild Coal*. His book of essays *Le Plateau de l'Albatros: Introduction à la Géopoétique* (1994) is still a fundamental reference.

The dossier contains a number of studies that discuss ecocriticism, ecological awareness, and the relationship between nature and literature, basing their analyses on literary works from different places. The opening article is “Pájaros: Conciencia Ecológica y Literatura” [Birds: Ecological Awareness and Literature], in which the poet and Professor Margara Russotto analyzes some contemporary Latin American works of literature to demonstrate how they address ecological awareness. Featuring *Silent Spring* (CARSON, 1962), a study that has become an essential reference for present-day ecology, Russotto foregrounds a creature from nature, the bird, and the different ways in which it is portrayed in fictional and poetic texts by such prominent authors as Clarice Lispector, Pablo Neruda, Ida Vitale, to name just three.

From the space of North America, we have a reflection by Robert Simon entitled “21st Century North American Ecocriticism: The Contestation of The Post-Human Condition in *Political Cactus Poems*, by Jonathan Skinner”. In this cultural context, Simon discusses how “the exchange of a recognized ontology based on the concept of nature as an extra-human universe and its concomitant epistemology in poetics stands out as a contrast to the devastating results of present-day capitalism”. The work examines the impact of ecocriticism on North American poets using a new conception of transnationalism. For this, he highlights the poet Jonathan Skinner, whose *Political Cactus Poems* (2005) encapsulate conceptions about natural ethics.

In “Encontrarse con la Naturaleza: Identidades Ecológicas en *Un Viejo que Leía Novelas de Amor*, de Luis Sepúlveda, y *La Loca de Gandoca*, de Anacristina Rossi” [Encountering Nature: Ecological Identities in *Un Viejo que Leía Novelas de Amor*, by Luis Sepúlveda, and *La Loca de Gandoca*, by Anacristina Rossi], the essayist Claudia Marcela Páez Lotero analyzes the ecological narratives indicated in the title of the article to develop the notion of “ecological identity”, drawing on the ideas of the environmental philosopher David Utsler, who works with “environmental identity as a component of identity and as a hermeneutic project whereby the subject can come into contact with nature”. By foregrounding the activism of these novels, Lotero indicates the importance of changing our relationship with the environment on a political, economic, social, and personal level.

Meanwhile, in “O Olhar Ecocrítico de Boaventura Cardoso em *Margens e Travessias*” [The Ecocritical Gaze of Boaventura Cardoso in

<sup>2</sup>For a greater understanding of this proposal, visit the International Institute of Geopoetics website, at: <https://www.institut-geopoetique.org/pt/textosfundadores/56-o-grande-campo-da-geopoetica>.

*Margens e Travessias*], Sandra Sousa demonstrates how humans and nature interact by presenting an Angolan narrative which, alongside trajectories of rivers and descriptions of nature, also leads us through the country's colonial past to give a new understanding of that past and envisage a new future for the country. Taking an actively geographical point of view, the novel maintains an ecocritical perspective on the relationship between literature and nature.

In a Brazilian context, Livia Penedo Jacob offers "A Literatura Indígena Brasileira Diante de Gaia: Ensaio sobre o Fim" [Brazilian Indigenous Literature in the Encounter with Gaia: Rehearsing the End]. In view of the serious and increasingly destructive environmental problems the world is facing, Jacob discusses "how Western thinking is beginning to absorb so-called 'Amerindian thinking'", based on the relationship between humans and nature present in the cosmovisions of these peoples – an influence that can be seen in Bruno Latour and his anthropological proposals. Within this framework, the article presents the work of some writers producing Brazilian indigenous literature, such as Ailton Krenak, Davi Kopenawa, Eliane Potiguara, and Marcia Kambeba.

In German literature, the natural world is also an inescapable topic. In "Percepções da Natureza no Poema 'Näheres über einen Baum' de Hans Magnus Enzensberger" [Perceptions of Nature in the Poem "Näheres über einen Baum", by Hans Magnus Enzensberger], Dionei Mathias analyzes the affiliation of this text, from the anthology *Kiosk* (1995) to a long lyrical tradition about nature. The poem, which translates as "More About a Tree", refers to the appeal of the lyrical voice to its interlocutor about the complexity of a tree's existence, placing this work in the field of ecocriticism. The following article is "Concerto de Feras: a Vocalização do Devir-Animal em *A Confissão da Leoa* (2012), de Mia Couto, e *O Som do Rugido da Onça* (2021), de Micheline Verunschik" [Concert of Beasts: The Vocalization of Becoming-Animal in *A Confissão da Leoa* (2012), by Mia Couto, and *O Som do Rugido da Onça* (2021), by Micheline Verunschik". Written by Júlio César de Araújo Cadó and Juliane Vargas Welter, it explores Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of becoming-animal, using it to compare these two contemporary novels, one Mozambican and the other Brazilian, in convergence with the short story "Meu Tio o Iauaretê" [My Uncle, the Yauaretê], by João Guimarães Rosa. As they put it, "for Mariamar and Iñe-e, the novels' leading characters, an encounter with a jaguar and a lioness, great predators of the two continents in which the stories are set, gives them access to an animality that has been stifled by the workings of oppression". It therefore deals with the relationship between human and non-human and the boundaries imposed by Western thinking and the mechanisms of its ideology.

Similarly, in "Árvores Sagradas: uma Cosmovisão no Chthuluceno" [Sacred Trees: A Cosmivision in the Cthulhucene], Angela Guida and Gleidson André Pereira de Melo develop an ecocritical proposal on

the basis of an analysis of two short stories by Mia Couto, in which the tree is a sacred symbol in a cosmivision that “indissociably melds the human with nature”. In the analysis, the authors address topics related to the geological times proposed by Paul Crutzen (Anthropocene), Jason Moore (Capitalocene) and Donna Haraway (Cthulucene), as well as questions of otherness in relation to becoming-plant. Emphasis is placed on transdisciplinarity, interweaving literature and environment.

The title of the following article, by Marcelo Schincariol, clearly indicates its content. “Entre os Estudos Culturais e os Estudos Literários: uma Breve Discussão sobre a Crítica Literária Ecofeminista” [Between Cultural Studies and Literary Studies: A Brief Discussion of Ecofeminist Literary Criticism] addresses contemporaneity and the importance of affirming ecofeminist literary criticism – something that has received little attention in Brazil, but has gained ground elsewhere, especially in American cultural studies. Wrapping up the dossier with “Writing Back to the Bible: Feminist and Post-Colonial Ecocriticisms in Ursula Le Guin’s *She Unnames Them*”, Débora Scheidt analyzes how the US author Ursula Le Guin (1929-2018) rewrites and displaces the text of the Bible, exploring connections between feminism, postcolonialism, and ecocriticism in “*She Unnames Them*”, a short story republished many times since 1985, when it first appeared in *The New Yorker*, and still relevant to this day.

This issue also includes three articles in its *Varia* section. In the first, “Reminiscências da Paisagem Angolana na Pós-Memória de ‘Retornados’: Um Estudo em Vila Real (Portugal)” [Memories of the Angolan Landscape in the Post-Memory of ‘Returnees’: A study in Vila Real (Portugal)], Thais Gaia Schüler, Filipe Ribeiro, Orquídea Moreira Ribeiro and Magna Lima Magalhães demonstrate how the Angolan landscape, as identity, is a matter of memory in the oral testimonies and narratives of “returnees” from Africa who “settled in the municipality of Vila Real, in the Trás-os-Montes region of Portugal”. In this applied study, three sets of primary sources are used: “literary sources, local, empirical written sources and oral history, the last of which were analyzed in the light of the concepts of environmental history, post-memory, and environmental memory”. In the second text, entitled “Capitalismo Patriarcal em Tempos de Antropoceno: Reflexões sobre a Distopia Feminista *Deuses de Pedra*” [Patriarchal Capitalism in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the Feminist Dystopia *Stone Gods*], Mariana Link Martins, Jenifer da Silva Dias, and Cláudia Lorena Vouto da Fonseca analyze *Stone Gods*, by the British author Jeanette Winterson, as “a feminist dystopian portrayal of the Anthropocene and its pressing needs, which is woven by tragic stories intermingling in different space-times”. The authors draw on feminist criticism for their analysis, especially Silvia Federici’s reflections on the relationships between race, gender, and sexuality inherent to capitalist exploitation. The final article, “Louis-Xavier de Ricard e o Parnasianismo no Brasil” [Louis-Xavier de Ricard and Parnassianism in Brazil], by Alckmar Luis dos Santos, examines how this French poet, “one of the

editors of the first issue of *parnasse contemporain*”, resonated in the poetry of the Brazilian Parnassians.

This, the 61st issue of *Gragoatá*, also features two reviews. The first is of the collection *Ilhas de Vozes em Reencontros Compartilhados* [Islands of Voices in Shared Reunions], edited by Susana L. M. Antunes and published in the United States. It contains a large group of texts that address the island or archipelago space, taken from different works of literature and from the writings of different poets and storytellers working in the Portuguese language. The second is a review of a biography of Clarice Lispector, by Teresa Montero, called *À Procura da Própria Coisa* [In Search of the Very Thing]. The result of painstaking research of this fascinating Brazilian writer, the work reveals that even after three decades of investigation, portraying Lispector always means dealing with the provisional.

We hope this latest issue of *Gragoatá*, devoted to literary studies, offers our readers thought-provoking approaches to literature and nature, ecocriticism, and ecofeminism – all areas that are gaining ever new ground in Brazilian critical thinking, but already established elsewhere around the world. Its aim, thanks to the contributions of authors from Brazil and either living in or from North America, is to widen the horizons of theoretical and analytical endeavors and to stake out new spaces for reflection, which will be of great interest to the growing contingent of people keen to interrogate the relationship between literature and nature, literature and ecology, in search of a new ethic for contemporary times.

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