

## Special Session –

### Literature Facing the Challenges of the Anthropocene

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#### Re-imagining Anthropocene: towards a Post-anthropocentric Planetary Literature

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**Abstract:**

In the last few years, Anthropocene discourse has opened scientific and cultural debates to new transdisciplinary and theoretical horizons. Despite its ambiguity, this geological term reveals the negative impact of human activities on the Earth-system's equilibria, calling for a cultural shift from Western anthropocentrism – based on the division between nature and culture, human, nonhuman, and more-than-human worlds – to more ecological systems of belief. For their part, cultural and literary studies firmly assert the importance of storytelling and literature for the in-present paradigmatic change. On these premises, my article draws on Comparative Literature and Environmental Humanities to call attention to the ecocritical value of the category of the “planet” as opposed to that of the “globe”; secondly, it proposes the analysis of two case studies from European contemporary literature, the novels *Sirene* (2007), by the Italian writer Laura Pugno, and *Truismes* (1996), by the French writer Marie Darrieussecq. Borrowing Bruno Latour's notion of ‘subject’, my aim is to analyse what I call the ‘rhetoric of the planet’, that is, to analyse the rhetorical strategies used by the authors to dismantle Western ontological and epistemological dichotomies and engage with the Anthropocene planetary dimension.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene, Environmental Humanities, Ecocriticism, Contemporary Literature

## 1. From the global to the (ecocritical) planetary: a theoretical discussion

The term Anthropocene first appeared in the 1980s and it was adopted by American biologist Eugene Stoermer to describe the current geological epoch. Later, Stoermer himself together with the Nobel-prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen claimed that considering all

major and still growing impacts of human activities on earth and atmosphere, and at all, including global, scales, it seems to us more than appropriate to emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology by proposing to use the term “Anthropocene” for the current geological epoch. The impacts of current human activities will continue over long periods (Crutzen, and Stoermer, 2000, p. 17-18).

In this regard, the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has claimed that anthropogenic activities have reached such an impact in transforming the chemical composition of the atmosphere and the soil that human agency is not only biological but also *geological* (2008, p. 205-206). In the literary domain, this awareness “enacts the demand to think of human life at much broader scales of space and time” (Clark, 2015, p. 13-14), enhancing ‘multi-scalar’ thinking. In fact, while since the early Modern Age humanistic tradition has kept well-separated human history from natural history, the climate emergency we confront presently, namely the risk of mass extinction, forces the convergence between social history and “deep time” (Chakrabarty, 2008, p. 213) – therefore between humans and nonhumans, both considered as biotic *and* geological agents of the planet. This ‘scale effect’ also brings the reconfiguration of the relationship between the local and the global, the global and the planetary. In what follows, I will briefly touch upon the comparatist and philosophical frameworks of Environmental Humanities to emphasize the intrinsic ‘anthropocenic’ value of the category of the ‘planet’.

In fact, in recent years literary studies and especially in the field of Comparative Literature have notoriously shown a strong interest in the development of a global vision of literary production while being critical of the totalising perspectives of capitalist globalisation. As a result, the word “global” turned out to be extremely problematic. In this regard, Gayatri

Spivak has famously conceptualised the term “planetary” as an alternative to the “globe”. In *Death of a Discipline* (2003) she writes:

The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan. It is not really amenable to a neat contrast with the globe. I cannot say ‘the planet, on the other hand.’ When I invoke the planet, I think of the effort required to figure the (im)possibility of this underived intuition... Planet-thought opens up to embrace an inexhaustible taxonomy of such names, including but not identical with the whole range of human universals... If we imagine ourselves as planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us; it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away (p. 72-73).

Reflecting upon Spivak’s notion of *planetaryity* Jennifer Wenzel emphasizes the “deconstructive reversal of such thinking”, meaning “thinking totality otherwise, to rethink what it means for the earth to have a shape like its own, and to be a home for all” (Wenzel, 2014, p. 21). The statement pairs with Ursula Heise’s conception of the planet: echoing Buell’s position on *ecoglobalism* (Buell, 2007, Chapter 9), Heise advocates for the adoption of an *eco-cosmopolitan* perspective, that is, “an attempt to envision individuals and groups as part of planetary ‘imagined communities’ of both human and nonhuman kinds” (Heise, 2008, p. 61). As for literary production, eco-cosmopolitanism’s aim is to “investigate by what means individuals and groups in specific cultural contexts have succeeded in envisioning themselves in similarly concrete fashion as part of the global biosphere, or by what means they might be enabled to do so” (Heise, 2008, p. 62).

In this regard, recent post-anthropocentric critical theories such as new materialism and posthumanism (Braidotti, 2013; Bennett, 2009; Barad, 2003, 2007; Latour, 2005) have greatly helped to deconstruct the nature-culture, human-nonhuman traditional western dichotomies<sup>1</sup>. Anthropocene discourse seems then to pose a sort of ethical-ecological imperative calling for the dismantlement of humans’ “dreams of control” (Latour, 2015/2017, p. 62) over the planet, implicitly reconfiguring all subjects as “Earthbound” (Latour, 2015/2017, p. 251). Hence, thinking through the planetary dimen-

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<sup>1</sup> In this regard, for materialistic approaches specifically referred to Ecocriticism see *Material ecocriticism*, Iovino, S., & Oppermann, S. (Eds.). Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

sion helps to construct new non-anthropocentric epistemological approaches to reality: the eco-critical value of the notion of the “planet” here becomes very clear. As the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty writes:

The category “planet” allowed to me see, and ultimately to say, that contemplating our own times required us to behold ourselves from two perspectives at once: the planetary and the global. The global is a humancentric construction, the planet decenters the human (2021, p. 18-19).

## 2. Literature and the Anthropocene: critical approach and case studies

Against the background of this transdisciplinary framework, it is useful to explore the aesthetics of such planetary vision in literature, as it offers a privileged perspective for understanding the cultural implications of the Anthropocene. In the next paragraphs, I will propose an ecocritical analysis of two case studies from the contemporary European literary context: the anticipatory and dystopian novels *Sirene* (2007), by the contemporary Italian writer Laura Pugno, and *Truismes* (1996), by the French writer Marie Darrieussecq. The focus on European production will be useful to demonstrate the deconstructive operation the Anthropocene discourse exerts on Western beliefs.

My analysis will be based on what I call the ‘rhetoric of the planet’: in other words, my close reading will focus on those textual passages where rhetorical strategies convey post-anthropocentric and planetary meanings. To do so, I draw on the French philosopher Bruno Latour’s conception of the ‘subject’ to analyse literary figurations representing the disruption of the traditional ontological divisions between human, nonhuman, and more-than-human actants, while enhancing their *naturalcultural* continuum (Haraway, 2008). As Latour states, “being a subject does not mean acting in an autonomous fashion in relation to an objective context; rather, it means sharing agency with other subjects that have also lost their autonomy” (2015/2017, p. 62).

In this way, as some scholars have recently explained (Clark, 2015; Ghosh 2016; Benedetti, 2021), even those elements that narrative codes have conventionally relegated to mere scenography, such as the narratological categories of space and time, acquire attantial value, finally making planetary history and human history converge.

## 2.1. *Sirene*

*Sirene* (2007) is the successful debut novel of the Italian writer Laura Pugno. The story tells of the discovery on Earth of the presence of a new hybrid species, the sirens, and the exploitative regime to which they are subjected by the yakuza, the Japanese mafia that rules the under-ocean city of Underwater. The protagonist, Samuel, who works as an attendant at the mermaids' breeding pools, rapes one of them; out of this inter-species sexual violence, a new hybrid human and nonhuman creature sees the light: Mia.

Drawing on the codes of dystopia and science fiction, the novel sets in the near future where anthropogenic action has deprived the atmosphere of its ozone layer, “e ora il sole sembrava voler divorare l’umanità” (p. 16) [“and now the sun seemed to want to devour humanity”]<sup>1</sup> causing the spread of a black cancer epidemic among humans. In the quoted passage, the interaction between human and nonhuman subjects occurs in literary codes through the similitude between the sun's agency and the animal act of devouring, which describes its contact with human skin. The contamination is then replicated in a potentially infinite fashion through mutual human interaction: “Epidemia era il nome giusto [...] il cancro nero si poteva contagiare tramite il contatto” (p. 16) [“Pandemic was the right term (...) black cancer could be infected through contact”]. The Anthropocene is here presented as both the origin and the condition of the catastrophe<sup>2</sup>: the Anthropos becomes both the victim and the perpetrator of its own dissolution.

The material agency of the space is expressed through the interaction between different characters – the protagonist Samuel, his lover Sadako, and Assan his friend – and is observed in the metaphorical identification between mind and ocean:

La mente è una rete di canali con l’acqua dell’oceano, ripeteva Hassan. La mente è vapore che si alza da una ciotola di riso. Quando Sadako era morta, Samuel aveva pensato di divorare il corpo, prima che lo cremassero. Mangiare la sua carne voleva dire averla dentro

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Italian are my own.

<sup>2</sup> For a philosophical discussion on Anthropocene in terms of causes and conditions see Missiroli, P. (2022), *Teoria critica dell’Antropocene. Vivere dopo la terra, vivere nella terra*, Mimesis.

di sé per sempre. Qualcosa sarebbe passato, doveva passare, nel sangue. Oppure avrebbe potuto imbalsamarla. [...]

Ma poi Sadako era entrata in ospedale, lui stesso le aveva iniettato l'eutanasia, ed era stata cremata. Spargere le ceneri dei cremati nell'oceano era proibito, ma Samuel lo aveva fatto ugualmente.

Il corpo di Sadako era il mare davanti alla città di Underwater (p. 65).

[Mind is a network of channels with ocean water, Hassan used to repeat. Mind is steam rising from a bowl of rice. When Sadako died, Samuel had planned to devour her body before they cremated it. Eating her flesh meant having her inside him forever. Something would pass, had to pass, in the blood. Or he could have embalmed it. (...)]

But then Sadako entered the hospital, he himself injected her with euthanasia, and she was cremated. Scattering the ashes of cremated people into the ocean was forbidden, but Samuel did it anyway.

Sadako's body was the sea in front of the town of Underwater.]

Con l'epidemia, la pesca era cessata. Le spiagge per la specie umana erano un territorio di morte. Le acque di Underwater erano tornate selvagge.

La mente è una rete di canali con l'acqua dell'oceano, diceva spesso Hassan (p. 70).

[With the epidemic, fishing had ceased. The beaches for the human species were a territory of death. The waters of Underwater were wild again.

Mind is a network of channels with ocean water, Hassan often used to say.]

The aquatic element contains, exceeds, and variously identifies with the psychic element of the subject, preserving its material traces after death: the ocean accommodates in its own body the dissolution of the human's body until entangled in a symbiotic relation. The one identifies with the other: "mind is a network of channels with water"; "mind is steam"; "Sadako was the sea". The mantra is iterated multiple times in the novel, and it's always related to death and its sacred dimension – hence the references to various funeral rituals such as endocannibalism and embalmment.

The interweaving of terrestrial and anthropic matter juxtaposes geological and human historical times: the death of the individuum becomes synecdoche, so to speak, of collective extinction. Similarly, urban spaces succumb to the agency of the nonhuman epidemic, participating in its dissolution:

La mente è vapore che si alza da una ciotola di riso.

Presto, l'epidemia avrebbe cancellato Underwater. Le acque dell'oceano sarebbero tornate selvagge (p. 133).

[Mind is steam rising from a bowl of rice.

Soon, the epidemic would have wiped out Underwater. Ocean waters would have returned to being wild]

If, however, on the one hand, mankind and its artificial environment seem destined for extinction, on the other hand, the more-than-human world “stava ritornando selvaggio” (p. 19) [“was returning wild”]. The path is opposite, as for the non-human-other it presupposes a return to the origin, a motion of rebirth. Wild are then the waters and the land deprived of any anthropogenic activity – and so are the sirens, or at least they are again:

Tutto stava ritornando selvaggio. Underwater, i Territori, l'oceano. Le sirene smetteranno di vivere in fondo al mare e ci succederanno sulla Terra. Non le abbiamo addomesticate, non ancora. Le teniamo prigioniere, mangiamo la loro carne. Ma non siamo riusciti a addomesticarle (p. 19).

[Everything was returning wild. Underwater, the Territories, the ocean. The mermaids will stop living at the bottom of the sea and succeed us on Earth. We haven't domesticated them, not yet. We keep them captive, we eat their flesh. But we have not been able to domesticate them.]

The novel juxtaposes the death of a human character, Sadako, caused by black cancer, with the birth of Mia, emblematically a half-human and half-nonhuman being. In fact, the novel's conclusion, far from being “affatto apocalittica, o nichilista” [“not at all apocalyptic, nor nihilistic”] as the author herself explains, opens to a renewed “possibilità esistenziale, [...] un

tentativo di cambiare le cose e le persone e, attraverso queste, il mondo”<sup>1</sup> [“existential possibility (...) a chance to change things and people, thus the world”]. Liberated from the carno-phallogocentric (Derrida, 2008) violence of humans, Mia forgets everything. Her mind is a “tabula rasa” (p. 134), or rather a blank page: the beginning of a new story.

## 2.2. *Truismes*

The second case study regards the novel *Truismes* (1996) by Marie Darrieussecq. The contact zones between the two novels are multiples, but one is of specific interest: their ‘anthropocenic’ imagery. The novel sets in a dystopic Paris and narrates the continuous metamorphosis of the narrator, who is a woman with no name, into a pig. The city is ruled by an authoritarian and xenophobic right-wing party, so the ancient literary *topos* of the polarity between the urban and the rural space is here reconfigured in both political and ecological terms: on the one hand, there is the human domain, despotic, totalitarian, conservative, a realm of both environmental and moral degradation; on the other hand, there is the domain of nature, a place of utopian escape, a realm of freedom, and anarchic wilderness. For the protagonist, the animal metamorphosis seems to act as a defensive response to the general degradation; moreover, the metamorphosis also appears to spread among characters in epidemic modes. The protagonist's body continuously transforms from human to pig and vice-versa. However, when in animal form, the narrator gets access to new, estranged forms of perceptions: the language becomes – paradoxically – extremely poetic. This is evident in the following passage, in which the narrator describes to the reader her deep connection with the Earth, her creaturely, metamorphic relationship with the multiple nonhuman agencies:

C'était la première fois que je voyais des arbres aussi hauts, et qui sentaient si bon. Ils sentaient l'écorce, la sève sauvage ramassée à ras de tronc, ils sentaient toute la puissance endormie de l'hiver. Entre les grosses racines des arbres la terre était éclatée, meuble, comme si les racines la labouraient de l'intérieur en s'enfonçant profondé-

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<sup>1</sup> Interview by Menniti-Ippolito, N., (2017, August 12), La scelta di Dasha ragazza selvaggia in cerca di libertà. *La Tribuna*, p. 30.



ment dedans. J'y ai fourré mon nez. Ça sentait bon la feuille morte de l'automne passé, ça cédaient en toutes petites mottes friables parfumées à la mousse, au gland, au champignon. J'ai fouillé, j'ai creusé, cette odeur c'était comme si la planète entraînait tout entière dans mon corps, ça faisait des saisons en moi, des envols d'oies sauvages, des perce-neiges, des fruits, du vent du sud. Il y avait toutes les strates de toutes les saisons dans les couches d'humus, ça se précisait, ça remontait vers quelque chose (p. 139).

From the sensorial dimension of the narrator's subjectivity, the description moves towards the more-than-human world that lies beyond human historical contingency. The profound relation to the plurality of the living and non-living worlds is rhetorically described with enumeration: "à la mousse, au gland, au champignon"; "des saisons en moi, des envols d'oies sauvages, des perce-neiges, des fruits, du vent du sud". The relationship between the different agencies is highly synesthetic, as the analogies move from the material ("écorce", "sève") to the abstract ("puissance [...] de l'hiver"). The thinkable, that is, the knowable, is the key to accessing the unthinkable, the excess, the more than human.

Expansion places alongside contraction as the narrator's gaze moves from the outside to the inside ("intérieure", "profondément", "dedans", "fourré", "fouillé", "creusé", "entraîné dans"): each actant contains and is contained in turn. The reference to terrestrial stratigraphy materialises the intersection between the diachronic and the synchronic spatio-temporal dimensions. The horizontality of the seasons' temporality (in metonymy "toutes les saisons") is intertwined with the contingent verticality of the soil (in metonymy "les couches d'humus"), the instant alternates with duration.

The narrator's experiential microcosm – human and nonhuman at once – plays with the planetary macrocosm. The frame is stratigraphic, multiscalar, geological:

Dans tout mon corps j'ai viré à nouveau avec le tournoiement de la planète, j'ai respiré avec le croisement des vents, mon cœur a battu avec la masse des marées contre les rivages, et mon sang a coulé avec le poids des neiges. La connaissance des arbres, des parfums, des humus, des mousses et des fougères, a fait jouer mes muscles. Dans mes artères j'ai senti battre l'appel des autres animaux, l'affron-

tement et l'accouplement, le parfum désirable de ma race en rut. L'envie de la vie faisait des vagues sous ma peau, ça me venait de partout, comme des galops de sangliers dans mon cerveau, des éclats de foudre dans mes muscles, ça me venait du fond du vent, du plus ancien des races continuées. Je sentais jusqu'au profond de mes veines la détresse des dinosaures, l'acharnement des coelacanthes, ça me poussait en avant de les savoir vivants ces gros poissons, je ne sais pas comment expliquer ça aujourd'hui et même je ne sais plus comment je sais tout ça (p. 140-141).

The description moves as a wave that pushes upwards, towards the atmosphere (“les vents”, “neiges”) and back downwards, towards the biosphere (“marées”). Framed in its planetary scale, the pluralistic agency of the more-than-human world is rendered through comparisons that place non-human actors in scalar relation to the narrating subject. The narrator's body is assimilated to the one of the planet Earth, her breath co-habits with the motion of the winds, the heartbeat is that of the sea against the shores, her blood drips like snow. The comparison between the different actors stays within the regime of similitude not presupposing a complete overlap between the terms, as in the metaphor: to put it otherwise, each actant is caught in the specificity of its own agency, juxtaposing one another. The subjects, we might say quoting Donna Haraway, are caught in *co-becoming* (2008): rhetorically, the term “avec” is in repetition.

Even the dichotomy between the present and the past is deconstructed in favour of immanence: the ancestral impulse to life perceived under the skin by the narrator goes beyond the physicality of the subject, placing her in a symbiotic relationship with the earthlings of all time. Deep history transcends the boundaries of individual life and death (“des races continuées”), surfacing the end (in metonymy, the dinosaurs) and the beginning (in metonymy, the *coelacanthes*, the oldest known evolutionary line of fish) of the history of life on Earth. The connection with the multiple nonhumans and more-than-human others pairs with the connection with the self: the one incorporates the whole not erasing but containing all the traces of a differentiated plurality, the sign of a multispecies (Haraway 2008) and material (Latour 2005) interdependence that, not by chance, in both novels finds literary synthesis in the metamorphic, hybrid identity of the protagonist.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, in both works, the human subject is always represented in relation to the nonhuman and the more-than-human other. This stands with the two writers' shared interest in engaging with future-oriented narrations that pose a critique of traditional anthropocentric, non-ecological, and capitalist values. In fact, these narrations try to imagine near-future societies in dystopic ways while also seeking to imagine posthuman, hybrid modes of survival in the Anthropocene.

Ultimately, the novels offer an example of the in-act planetary paradigmatic shift that valorises inter- and multispecies forms of relations between co-habiting earthlings, while also asserting the general ability of literature and arts to advocate for a more ecological and post-anthropocentric ethical way of thinking.

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