

Editorial

Creative Writing and Art Mythology and Ecocriticism: A Natural Encounter

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The relationships between myths and the nonhuman world have always been characterized by ambivalence. As Francisco Molina Moreno and Imelda Martin Junquera, the two guest editors of this issue of *Ecozon@*, note in their introduction, mythical narratives reflect concerns for a lost harmony with the natural environment as often as they express the will to subdue it. Yet, this ambivalence is not accidental: it belongs to the very structure of mythical thought, beginning with what Da Silva calls the “conflicting meanings” of the term “myth” itself (103). As Adorno pointed out, the discordant quality of myths has always “been obscure and enlightening at one and the same time” (xiv), exerting a strong influence on human societies by revealing what is hidden as much as hiding (via fiction) what is promised to be disclosed. Paraphrasing Heidegger, we might say that myths can be read as the primitive representation of that “unconcealment” (*aletheia*) that it is not truth and full disclosure but still opens a “clearing” (*Lichtung*) for the appearance of things in the world. The ambivalence of myths is thus meant to display what escapes our immediate comprehension as well as to illustrate the tension between our epistemological finitude and the broader—and to some extent indiscernible—world to which we belong.

This interpretation of myth is particularly compelling for those narratives that indeed portray the origins of human society in their foundational interactions with nonhuman nature. An archetypal example is the story of the two Titan brothers, Prometheus and Epimetheus. As is well known, Prometheus stole fire from the Olympian gods and gave it to humans. His gesture was not appreciated by Zeus, and Prometheus was sentenced to eternal torment for his transgression. Yet, such a dreadful destiny did not hinder his becoming the symbol of human technological striving and “one of the most enduring and successful stories that men have told each other about themselves and their origin” (Ferrarin 293). Less popular is the reason behind his rebellious gesture: as narrated in several classic sources, Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus were given the task of populating the earth, supplying all creatures with their various qualities, such as swiftness, cunning, strength, fur, and wings. However, Epimetheus quickly equipped the nonhuman animals with the whole supply of gifts allotted for the task, leaving Prometheus’ masterpiece, humankind, completely helpless. Hence,

Prometheus stole fire to arm the humans, implicitly giving them control over nature and sparking technological development and civilization. From the perspective of ecocriticism, the myth of Prometheus does not thus inspire hubris, but displays both our biological inferiority vis-à-vis nonhuman creatures and what happens when, focusing too much on our alleged superiority, we do not accept our place within the larger ecology of beings.

In selecting both the material for the Creative Writing and Art section and the cover image for this issue of *Ecozon@* devoted to “Mythology and Ecocriticism,” I tried to draw on a similar “unconcealing” ambivalence. This is the case, for instance, with *Prometheus Delivered*, the installation by Thomas Feuerstein that opens this section of the journal and from which the cover image of this issue is taken. In this work, Feuerstein stages a tension between what is immediately visible and what is the true acting subject by means of a fascinating laboratory of bubbling bioreactors, mysterious fluids, pumps and endless tubes which wind around a sculpture, a replica of Nicolas-Sébastien Adam’s *Prometheus Bound* (1762). As the artist points out in his introductory statement, while Prometheus appears to be the hero, the true, miraculous protagonists of this installation are instead stone-eating (chemolithoautotrophic) bacteria who are decomposing the statue. These bacteria convert the marble into plaster and, in a further complex transformation, they themselves become the food of human liver cells. The cycle of destruction and re-creation inherent in the Prometheus myth is thus replicated in a biochemical process, whereas human hepatocytes grow in a bioreactor and finally form a new three-dimensional liver sculpture. Through this fascinating process, Feuerstein’s installation not only gives us “a glimpse into a time to come in which human beings no longer subsist on animals and plants, but possibly on their own body cells,” but also alludes to the destiny of Prometheus, tortured by the eagle (as the myth goes) as well as trapped by the very technology he gave to humans. As a true contemporary myth, “Prometheus delivered” thus *unconceals* what is not immediately visible, both as bacteria and as the hendiadic relationship between Prometheus and Epimetheus. Although the latter is not mentioned in Feuerstein’s work, the bioreactor at the core of the whole installation cannot but remind us of Epimetheus’s wife, Pandora, and of her box containing all manner of misery and evil as punishment for human hubris. This time, though, the new Pandora’s box represented by Feuerstein’s biochemical reactor does not contain everything terrible that humankind can possibly imagine, but rather the agents of the gradual decomposition of the statuesque and anthropocentric myth of Prometheus. The classically-beautiful but soon-to-be-destroyed statue of Prometheus that is on the cover of this issue of *Ecozon@* is thus *not* a celebration of the anthropocentric myths we have managed to tell ourselves. Instead, it is a symbol of the abilities Epimetheus gave to nonhuman creatures, and, as such, it ambivalently represents an opening toward a poetic and technological approach to myths more attuned to the nonhuman agency of the environment.

Yet, given the etymological close connections between myth and story-telling, it should come as no surprise that most of the works in the Creative Writing and Art section of this issue of *Ecozon@* are literary rather than visual. The second contribution

is in fact a poem, “Venus and Jupiter,” written by Deborah Fleming. Fleming is Professor of English at Ashland University in Ohio (USA) and the editor and director of the Ashland Poetry Press. She has published two collections of poetry, two chapbooks, one novel, and four volumes of scholarship on Yeats, Synge, and Jeffers. “Venus and Jupiter” plays on the ambivalence of the two mythical names in the title of the poem, referring to both divinities and planets. The poem thus reminds us of the human naming of the world as well as of a cosmological understanding of time that both exceeds and encompasses humankind. The erotic miracle of regeneration with which Fleming ends the poem recalls one of the major themes of this issue of *Ecozon@*: the idea that today myths can be both an ancient opening toward a new beginning and a reminder of a harmonic order of nature that is greater than our anthropocentric concerns.

Fleming’s poem is followed by a short play by Catherine M. Lord, entitled “My Tempest: Or How to Manifest with Myths.” Lord is a tenured Lecturer in the Media and Culture Department of the University of Amsterdam, as well as a playwright and director. As a scholar, she has published in the areas of literature, film, adaptation studies, critical theory and practice-based research. Currently, Lord is focusing on ecocriticism and film, preparing a book on planetary ecology, climate change and media. Her creative work for *Ecozon@* refers to one of Shakespeare’s most famous plays, but diverges markedly from its plot. As Lord writes in her introductory statement, in “My Tempest” Caliban is in fact both a young woman and a mythical figure who, in 2018, is dealing with her adoptive father Prospero. In Lord’s rewriting of the story, Caliban discovers that Prospero killed her mother Sycorax through the ecological forces that have protected Sycorax’s mythical spirit, i.e. the trees of Prospero’s Island. The trees draw Caliban over to the forbidden side of the Isle, and they teach Caliban about her mother. From both Prospero’s science of manifestation and Sycorax’s magic preserved in the trees, Caliban conjures a storm to evict Prospero and Miranda. When they go off to work for Monsanto-Bayer, Caliban stays to protect the Island and thus becomes a true ecocritical hero.

Another young woman and mythical figure, Arachne, implicitly lies at the core of the fourth contribution. Written by Allyson Mary Whipple—an MFA candidate at the University of Texas at El Paso and the author of two chapbooks, most recently *Come Into the World Like That* (Five Oaks Press, 2016), “No Ordinary Spider” is a hybrid essay that moves between fiction and nonfiction to braid the author’s observations of a garden spider along with references to biology, ecology, and literature. As she writes in her statement, Whipple’s story “explores arachnophobia, and discusses the ways in which close encounters with even small aspects of the natural world can allow people to overcome fear, and to have greater respect for the world around them.” Although the name Arachne is never mentioned and the narrator explicitly claims to “know better than to name wild animals,” the spider at the center of this piece embodies a numinous and gendered presence (the nonhuman animal is both always referred as “she” and mysteriously “auspicious”) which determines a positive identification between the narrator and the girl who challenged Athena and was therefore transformed into a spider. As the human creature observes her nonhuman counterpart, she overcomes her

fears and learns, too, how to weave a text(ile) that combines feminist empowerment and nonhuman agency.

The Creative Writing Arts section of this issue of *Ecozon@* devoted to “Mythology and Ecocriticism” ends with a different, masculine myth, as represented by Norbert Kovacs’ short story “A Son in His Father’s Forest.” Kovacs lives and writes in Hartford, Connecticut. His stories have appeared or soon will appear in *Westview*, *Foliate Oak*, *Squawk Back*, *Corvus Review*, and *No Extra Words*. The plot of “A Son in His Father’s Forest” is quite linear: a man explores the woods where his late father had once enjoyed walking. Yet, the story actually deals with a question of human dwelling that lies at the heart of several myths: how is our material and emotional “attachment to the land” transmitted from one generation to another? In fact, as the son in Kovacs’ story soon understands that he does not have the same loving knowledge of the forest, that he is not guided by the forest itself as his father was, he also wonders whether he might get lost trying to find his way through it. Nonetheless he goes into the *silva*, and, in the process, he both realizes that “he had missed something his parent had known of the wood” and gains his own comprehension of the natural environment. As in a proper myth, this ambivalent comprehension is indeed made of loss and light as it combines awareness of one’s ignorance and a suggestion to experience first-hand “the trees, the stream, the rock.”

I began my introduction by mentioning how the strength of myths lies in their ambivalence, in their capacity to display in front of us a tension between what we can know and handle, and what is (and should stay) beyond our grasp, both epistemologically and materially. As Patsy Callaghan has stated, myths can dramatize our striving toward ecological humility, toward accepting “the idea that any way of seeing is also a way of not seeing,” that no human seeing and interpreting and re-presenting “can be comprehensive enough” (82-83). From this perspective, all the contributions in the Creative Writing and Art of this issue of *Ecozon@* display a similar attitude: they “unconceal” today’s myths of human and nonhuman ecological resistance, showing that our true comprehension lies in a world that we inhabit but that also exceeds our representation and control.

Works Cited

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