NARRATIVES IN THE ANTHROPOCENE ERA

Charles Travis, Vittorio Valentino (Editors)

Preface by Kirill O. Thompson

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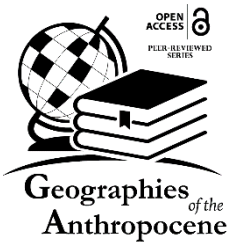
Geographies of the Anthropocene

Narratives in the Anthropocene era

Charles Travis

Vittorio Valentino

Editors



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Geographies of the Anthropocene

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Geographies of the Anthropocene

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The book series "Geographies of the Anthropocene" edited by Scientific International Publisher "Il Sileno Edizioni" will discuss the new processes of the Anthropocene epoch through the various worldviews of geoscientists and

humanists, intersecting disciplines of Geosciences, Geography, Geoethics, Philosophy, Socio-Anthropology, Sociology of Environment and Territory, Psychology, Economics, Environmental Humanities and cognate disciplines.

Geoethics focuses on how scientists (natural and social), arts and humanities scholars working in tandem can become more aware of their ethical responsibilities to guide society on matters related to public safety in the face of natural hazards, sustainable use of resources, climate change and protection of the environment. Furthermore, the integrated and multiple perspectives of the Environmental Humanities, can help to more fully understand the cultures of, and the cultures which frame the Anthropocene. Indeed, the focus of Geoethics and Environmental Humanities research, that is, the analysis of the way humans think and act for the purpose of advising and suggesting appropriate behaviors where human activities interact with the geosphere, is dialectically linked to the complex concept of Anthropocene.

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The choice of digital Open Access format is coherent with the flexible structure of the series, in order to facilitate the direct accessibility and usability by both authors and readers.

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5. Idyll and threat: man-nature relationship in the history of music, art and literature

Federico Volpe[1]

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to retrace the history of man-nature relationship as it was conceived and experienced in the world of music, figurative arts and literature throughout the centuries. This journey through history stems from a reflection about the present time, since the unpredictable disaster of the Covid-19 pandemic has clearly led us to meditate on the real human condition with respect to nature. But the man-nature debate has far more ancient origins. Throughout history, men have always reflected on their relationship with nature, wondering whether to surrender or challenge, to consider nature simply as a frame where men can act freely or as an essential part of the universe deserving respect and worship. In the world of literature and arts, this theme has given birth to inestimable works: poets, painters and musicians have created masterpieces entirely based on the issue of man-nature relationship. The history of this relationship is a history of threat and idyll and provides us with cause for reflection on the current global situation and a possible future reading of the evolution of this indissoluble relationship, as both the present and the future are children of the past.

Keywords: man, nature, music, art, literature.

Introduction

Retracing the history of man-nature relationship in art is not an easy task. In the first place, because this topic has been widely analysed by eminent historians, art historians, philosophers and critics who have produced innumerable outstanding, and often very detailed, studies and interpretations. In the second place, because it is a millenary history, as

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since the appearance of human beings on Earth, men have always reflected on their relationship with nature, trying to describe their reflections, either positive or negative, through the various forms of art. In light of these preliminary considerations, it would be evidently impossible to cover this topic thoroughly, nor is this the ambition of this chapter. The aim of these pages is to provide a brief excursus of the evolution of man-nature relationship throughout the centuries investigating the world of art, from figurative arts to music and literature, from the Old Age[2] to the 19th century. We will make a comparison, to the extent possible, between the various artistic fields, and by tracing the main steps of this evolution and highlighting the two main interpretations of the natural world, seen as idyll and pleasure or threat and danger, we hope to contribute to a "historical" reading of the present time.

As a matter of fact, though on the one hand the scientific and technological innovations of the last years have led to extraordinary developments allowing the human species to believe in full power and control over the planet, on the other hand the unpredictable disaster of the Covid-19 pandemic has clearly disillusioned the omnipotence expectations of human beings, leading us to meditate on the real human condition with respect to nature, on the possibility to dominate nature or on the inevitability of being its victims. What matters in this context is to understand that the pandemic is just the last of a series of questions that have been a real leitmotif in the history of art, a millenary history.

1. From *locus amoenus* to divine punishment: nature in ancient literature

Among the main representations of nature produced by men over the centuries, there is nature as an "idyllic" environment, a source of serenity, a place to live an isolated and moderate life, dedicated to rustic work. A lifestyle often praised by authors to the detriment of the excessive pleasures, richness and splendour of the city. This concept of the natural world was widely spread since the Old Age, and countless examples of idyllic nature can be found in both Greek and Latin literature. Some of these works, particularly renowned and meaningful, are certainly worth-mentioning.

[2] We usually call "Old Age" the long historical period of the ancient civilisations (Egyptians, Greeks, Romans etc.) and we conventionally consider 476 A.D. (the year of Western Roman Empire's fall) as the end of this Age and the beginning of the Middle Ages.

The "journey" in this chapter starts with the *Odyssey*. Homeric poems provide an endless number of natural landscapes and rural settings, often described in detail. We choose to pick the landscape of the island of Phaeacians out of Homer's innumerable possible examples. On his way back from the war of Troy, after wandering in the Mediterranean for years, supported by some divinities and hindered by others, Odysseus lands on an island of happiness, where the intent of the peaceful inhabitants is neither to poison nor to deceive him, but just to help him. The Homeric description of the island starts with an image of a river with crystal clear water and a field of soft grass where princess Nausicaa and her maids are grazing their mules. After washing the clothes in the water, they bathe, spread their skin with plenty of oil and start to play a game, waiting for the washing to dry in the sun (*Odyssey*, VI, 85–100). This image can be identified as one of the models for the development of the literary *tópos* of the *locus amoenus* in the authors of the centuries to come.

However, Homeric poems contain verses where nature is described as the bitter enemy that seriously endangers man's safety. Among the possible examples, we decide to list just two of the threatening natural phenomena described by Homer: the stormy sea and the pestilence. The former is widely depicted in the misadventures of Odysseus, who is persecuted by Poseidon and forced to face sea storms, struggling to survive. The literary *tópos* of the sea storm and the resulting shipwreck is actually prior to Homer and will be used well after the age of the Greek poet. A clear demonstration of this is given by two simple examples. One is an Egyptian papyrus dating back to the period around the 12th–13th dynasty (1938–1630 B. C.), telling the story of an official of the pharaoh, the only survivor after a sea storm, shipwrecked on a desert island inhabited by a speaking snake; needless to say, the other example is Daniel De Foe's *Robinson Crusoe*.

The other natural phenomenon that is particularly relevant in Homer's work is the pestilence, equally triggered by the rage of a numen: when Chryses, a priest of Apollo, attempts to ransom his daughter from Agamemnon, he refuses to release her, thus provoking the rage of Apollo, who sends a plague sweeping through the armies. This type of event will be represented in the literature of later periods, not just as the fruit pure imagination, but rather as the description of real epidemic outbreaks: take, for example, the plague of the 5th century B.C. depicted by Thucydides or the plague of the 14th century described by Boccaccio.

Now, going back to the *locus amoenus,* some notable examples can be found in several authors subsequent to Homer. In the *Works and Days*, the poet Hesiod instructs his brother Perses in rural work, and gives full

description of the seasons: the most striking picture is summer, with its blooming cardoons, singing cicadas, best wine and passionate women; the season to eat the most delicious heifermeat and drink the sweetest goatmilk, with good bread and clear water, sitting in the shadow, turning to the breeze of Zephyr (*Works and Days*, 582– 596). Interestingly enough, this image of summer nature is recalled with extraordinary similarity, between the end of the 7th and the beginning of the 8th century B.C. by the poet Alcaeus, who describes blooming cardoons, cicadas, and women, and invites them to "wet" their lungs with wine (fr. 347 V.).

As mentioned above, the models provided by Homer, Hesiod and Alcaeus represent the foundation of the bucolic poetry, and Theocritus (VI–III sec. B.C.), the creator of the idyllic literary genre, is its first prominent figure. The *Idylls* by Theocritus are scenes of pastoral life, characterised by dreamy descriptions of peaceful and sunny Mediterranean settings, probably inspired by the native Sicily, where abstract spatial coordinates mix with precise elements of time reference, given by the blooming summer season or the calm and quiet midday time. The nature in Theocritus is the nature of the ἀσυχία, of peace and serenity, far from the world of war and violence (*Idylls*, VII, 122–127).

A more evanescent serenity can be found in the nature represented by Virgil (1st century B.C.). The *Bucolics* of the Latin poet are clearly modelled after the *Idylls* and the typical conventional traits of the *locus amoenus*: the shepherd-poets — idealised men devoted to poetry, music and love, as in Theocritus, — live in an uncontaminated nature made of woods, spring waters and brooks, set and inspired by the Mantuan area of the Po Valley, where the poet was born. But unlike what is described by Theocritus, Virgil's nature is threatened by looming upsetting forces, revealing the concern for the civil wars tormenting Rome and Italy between the thirties and forties of the 1st century B.C. Nevertheless, the natural world is portrayed with idyllic beauty, celebrated with images of fresh water (*Bucolics*, V, 47) and colourful flowers (*Bucolics*, IX, 40–42). Rustic life is idealised and praised in both the *Bucolics* and the *Georgics*, where Virgil states that farmers would be more than lucky if they only were aware of what they have (*Georgics*, II, 458–459).

Besides the mentioned geographical settings, i.e. Sicily and the Po Valley, there is a third place where both poets set their works: Arcadia, a mountainous and arduous region in the centre of the Peloponnese, in ancient times inhabited by shepherds who worshipped Pan, god of the wild. The link between bucolic poems and Arcadia will lead to important developments in

modern Italian literature, resulting in 1690 in the foundation of the Literary Academy of Arcadia in Rome, analysed later in this chapter.

2. A gift of God

The period between the last centuries of the Old Age and the beginning of the Middle Ages, as we all know, coincided with the progressive decline of polytheistic religions and the spread or consolidation of monotheistic faiths such as Christianity in Europe and Islam in the Near East, which joined Judaism in the number of the most professed religions in the world. Deeply and increasingly rooted in all social classes, religious ideology in the Middle Ages pervaded and influenced every aspect of human activity, from daily work to art and literary production. The concept of nature was obviously among the most affected by medieval religion.

Throughout the Middle Ages, nature was mostly interpreted symbolically, analogically, and, at a later stage, allegorically. Symbolic and analogic interpretations see in nature the presence of God and the signs of magic and mysterious forces in a rather straightforward identification based on criteria of intuitive similarity. Every detail immediately acquires a symbolic meaning, a transcendent and mysterious value. The treatises on animals (the so-called "bestiaries"), for example, do not study their objective and factual specificity, but largely focus on their moral or religious interpretation, without making any distinction between existing and imaginary animals such as dragons and unicorns. In the transition towards the late Middle Ages, nature starts to be interpreted allegorically: rational effort and intellectual research are now needed to move beyond the threshold of the literal meaning and find the transcendent essence of the natural world (Luperini, 2011a, pp. 14–15).

As for European literature, the linguistic unity that has been a distinctive trait all over Europe up to the barbarian invasions, gradually breaks apart. Latin, which used to be the main common language to communicate, gives birth to a variety of "vulgar" languages still spoken today from Portugal to Romania, while Germanic languages start to take shape in the central-northern part of the continent. Interestingly enough, the first Italian work conventionally referred to as the first example of "vulgar" literature is a religious hymn to nature: the *Laudes creaturarum* by Francesco d'Assisi (1224 ca.). As easily inferable from the title and the author as well, the poem is about the divine origin and essence of the natural world. In the canticle Francesco addresses God, praising him and all his creatures: the sun

that gives us light and is the expression of God himself; the moon and the stars shining in the sky; the wind and the sky, whether cloudy or sunny; water, fire, earth and even death (of the body, of course), which no man can escape. Needless to say, the prayer is permeated by a positive view of nature, which remains absolutely positive even when it deals with the theme of death, implicitly seen as the passage to eternal life. Moreover, the image of the Creator is reflected in every creature, and this generates a feeling of "brotherhood" between man and the natural world: Francesco refers to the elements of nature as "brother" and "sister" , placing nature and man on the same level. But having free will, man has moral responsibilities and will get to paradise only by observing the laws and the will of God.

In the Middle Ages, the main innovative expressions of figurative arts take shape in architecture and sculpture, while painting appears to be still linked to Byzantine art. Prevailing works are frescos and mosaics, purposely designed to decorate architecture surfaces. Examples of nature representation in the art production are easily found in church interior murals, witnesses of the close link between nature and God. Certainly worthmentioning is the Christ *Pantocrator* (Greek: παντοκράτωρ, "almighty"). As in the variant of the Christ on the Throne, the theme here is clearly derived from early medieval models, in both the iconographic meaning and stylistic features (Dorfles, 2010a, p. 369). A meaningful example is the Basilica of San Clemente in Rome, rebuilt at the beginning of the 12th century, under pope Paschal II, after being destroyed by the Normans in 1084. The symmetry axis of the apse wall upper part is represented by a cross with Christ *Patiens* surrounded by natural, animal and vegetal elements: landscapes with deer, peacocks, swans, doves, herons, and a wide variety of flowers. Being creatures of God, these elements of nature are all symbols of salvation: a heavenly garden showing the indissoluble link between the Creation and the Creator (Dorfles, 2010a, p. 375).

Another notable mosaic is the cycle of the Creation, dating back to the 13th century, located inside one of the domes of the St. Mark's Basilica in Venice. Arranged in three concentric circles, the work is divided into twenty-six scenes carrying excerpts from the Genesis. The Creation starts with nature, and the scenes in the mosaic illustrate the days where God separates light from darkness and water from land masses, and gives birth to all kinds of species, creates the sun and the moon, fills waters with fish and the sky with birds, and creates animals portrayed in couples: lions, tigers, leopards, elephants and all the others. And naturally present is the sixth day, when God creates man "in his own image". The abovementioned link

between the creation and the Creator is therefore deeply rooted in medieval mentality and man is as involved in it as the whole world of fauna and flora. This concept is clearly reflected in several sublime examples of medieval art production, and will characterise the world of the western art for many centuries to come

(http://www.basilicasanmarco.it/basilica/mosaici/il-patrimonio-musivo/antico-testamento/, consulted on April 18th 2021).

In line with this concept, though breaking with it at the same time, is Leonardo da Vinci. In his *Gioconda*, the background behind the portrait of the woman represents a quite peculiar landscape. Identified as the Arno valley, the setting appears as a primordial frame, with rocky peaks, waterways and undefined flora. It is like a world undergoing a transformation process, where the air fine dust filters a light that is meant to change depending on the weather. Continuous change and transformation underlie Leonardo's vision of the universe, and express his concept of beauty, which does not respond to precise and strict rules but rather to the profound harmony existing among the elements of the universe. And human beings are undoubtedly a part of this universe featuring natural and divine essence, sharing with it mutability and mystery (Dorfles, 2010b, p. 244). Nevertheless, sometimes this ever-evolving natural world does not include any human component. In his first autograph drawing, *The Arno Valley landscape,* unlike anything expected in the western culture practice, the landscape is "pure", autonomous, not a mere background for a main subject in the foreground. The observer does not concentrate on a particular element but on nature as a whole. Furthermore, abandoning the clean and pure line typical of the Florentine tradition, Leonardo opts for a blurred and segmented trait to convey the transitory essence of phenomena and, therefore, the relativity of appearance (Dorfles, 2010b, pp. 230–231).

3. Landscape painting and Arcadia

While Leonardo is, in some ways, the forerunner of landscape painting, it is fully established in the early 17th century, when more and more representations have natural spaces as the absolute protagonists, rather than subordinate to a subject. In these landscapes, where nature is depicted in abundance and precision of detail, the role of the human being is rather peculiar. The human figure itself is always small and seems almost to be crushed by the size and vastness of nature. However, these landscapes feature a constant and evident presence of human constructions, works made

by man, such as houses, castles, bridges, towers, etc., always represented with care and a sense of geometry. An example of this can be seen in Annibale Carracci's *Flight into Egypt* (1603): similarly to other paintings of the time, here natural reality is idealised, harmonious, ordered, almost "aristocratic", and man is perfectly integrated into it as evidenced not by his mere presence, which is very discreet and almost irrelevant, but rather through traces left behind, such as the castle he built, which stands in the middle of the composition and seems almost to rise naturally from the meadow and the hills (Dorfles, 2010b, p. 420).

Now, there are two possible ways in the history of art to understand the evolution of landscape painting and, consequently, of the representation of the relationship between man and nature. The first way takes us to Northern Europe, to analyse artists such as Paul Bril or Jan Bruegel, in whose landscapes the human figure gradually disappears. Take for example some works by Bril: *Feud of Rocca Sinibalda* leads us to similar observations to those made about Carracci, since the canvas depicts small men in the foreground and, behind them, an imposing fortress rising from the hill. However, human works become less relevant in *Landscape with Roman ruins* or in *The Campo Vaccino with a gipsy woman reading a palm*, both depicting human figures, again small in size, and buildings, now ancient, crumbling, eroded by the passage of time. The same happens in the painting *Ruins and Figures*, but here the constructions are much less crisp and above all much smaller, just like the human beings, so both man and his works are minimised and, in a way, overwhelmed by the trunks, branches and rocks of the natural landscape. But even more impactful are, perhaps, some paintings such as *The stag hunt*, where human works disappear leaving the man in the action of hunting, in a sort of struggle with nature, or *Landscape with a marsh*, where even the human being has now completely gone, and nature has taken over as the undisputed main character.

The second path that can be taken, starting from Carracci, leads us to the Arcadian landscape of the French painters. As already mentioned, Arcadia was a Greek region historically connected with the bucolic poetry of Theocritus and Virgil, and in late 17th century even an important Roman literary academy was named after it. Poets working in the academy aimed to offer an alternative to the baroque "bad taste" by getting back the aesthetic canons of the classical world and Petrarca. But even before the Academy was founded, Arcadia had become the subject of the representations of painters such as Nicolas Poussin or Claude Lorrain, whose brushes produced pastoral scenes with man and nature blending in perfect harmony. The myth of Arcadia is the expression of the ideal and rational peace given

by living immersed in nature, with clear reference to the poet-shepherds of antiquity. And that is exactly what we see in the painting *Et in Arcadia Ego* by Poussin (1638–1639). The painter depicts a scene of shepherds, but it is clearly not a reproduction of peasant life: from the regal robes of the figures to their calm gestures, every element in the painting ennobles the simplicity of the shepherds, giving them a heroic attitude and transforming naturalness into the sublime. But this condition of idyllic peace the shepherds live in is, perhaps, only an illusion pervaded with a subtle sense of melancholy, as in the centre of the painting the characters are looking at a tomb with an inscription: *Et in Arcadia ego*, which gives the title to the composition. Some critics, such as Erwin Panofsky, argue that the ego subject is death, and that therefore the epigraph can be roughly translated as "Even in [the mythical world of] Arcadia, there am I[, the death, exist]". Deeply rooted in the consciousness of Baroque man, the idea of death would thus end up obscuring and threatening even a blissful and beautiful place such as Arcadia, but the ideal and immobile nature surrounding the protagonists sublimates the painful experience into an idyllic atmosphere of calm sweetness (Dorfles, 2010b, p. 467).

The subtle threats and veiled senses of melancholy almost completely disappear from Arcadian landscapes, especially during the 18th century, when shepherd-poets immersed in nature continue to be a frequently painted subject (as, in fact, even in the following century). From the first decades of the 18th century, the desire to take refuge in a welcoming nature is due to the need for freedom from city life. The park becomes the new ideal environment, a sort of middle ground between the forest and the garden, capable of blending nature and civilisation in a perfect balance. One example is *The meeting* by Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1773), where human elements are so seamlessly blended with those of nature that neither of them seems to prevail. Perhaps, never as in this time has nature been experienced by artists as beautiful and kind, a place for a tranquil and pleasant everyday life, a reflection and, in some way, "guardian" of a still aristocratic but no longer heroic man's ambition: happiness (Luperini, 2011c, p. 709).

4. Nature in 18th and early 19th-century music

Our journey through nature is now entering the world of music. As previously underlined with respect to poetry and figurative arts, it would be impossible to mention the whole production related to the representation of nature, but it is certainly possible to trace the trend and the evolution of the

relationship between composers and nature throughout the centuries. At an early stage, the purpose of music is to "describe" nature: Vivaldi's *Four seasons* (1725) is probably the most meaningful example. Composed while dreaming of an ideal world dominated by nature and country life, each concert is accompanied by a sonnet (presumably written by Vivaldi himself) depicting seasonal scenes, and the author's intent is to "translate" them into music. From the bird songs of spring, passing through the violent storms typical of summer and the harvest and hunting scenes of autumn, to the gelid wind of winter, Vivaldi's composition is among the first examples of what is generally referred to as "program music", i.e. an essentially descriptive music. As for man, in these "seasonal representations" whether portrayed as a shepherd, a farmer or a hunter, he appears relaxing in *The Spring*, frightened for the coming storm in *The Summer* , in an idyllic state of elation in *The Autumn*, and in a calm acceptance of cold weather in *The Winter.* Yet, the composer does not identify with the protagonist of the sonnet, not explicitly at least: he gives an objective description of the various situations, except for last movement of *The Winter*, where the "joy" that the season brings about is fully expressed (Brown, 1992, pp. 42–43).

The same descriptive intent can be found in other European composers, such as Philippe Rameau for example, whose *Le rappel des oiseaux* (1724) is a clear example of program music on the notes of the harpsichord. But even later composers are influenced by Vivaldi: Franz Joseph Haydn in 1798 starts a composition called *The seasons*, and Ludwig van Beethoven between 1807 and 1808 creates one of his most famous symphonies, the *Pastoral.* However, Beethoven's work shows a considerably different view and, in fact, leads the beginning of the second stage in the evolution of nature representation in music. Particularly meaningful is the title given to the symphony, *Pastoral*: as a matter of fact, this masterpiece is a real monument dedicated to nature. At that time, Beethoven spends most of his time in the countryside and he is extremely attracted to the serenity and pleasure he finds in that environment, so attracted that he tries to find his inner peace through nature. Unlike Vivaldi, Beethoven does not depict nature per se, but the feelings that nature is able to inspire, thus creating a number of "sentimental scenes", assembled in one of his greatest and most famous works. The first movement is entitled *Awakening of cheerful feelings on arrival in the countryside*. The melody is in the key of F major, the tempo is *Allegro ma non troppo,* without any introductory note or bar: the theme liveliness immediately starts, just like a novel opening *in medias res*. This structural solution perfectly renders the idea of a sudden awakening in the middle of a luxuriant green, with all the cheerfulness it

brings about. *Scene by the brook* is the second movement, *Andante con moto,* in the key of B flat major. This movement is fluid but placid at the same time, and the not too rapid semiquavers played by the strings imitate the flowing water, which is as pure as the soul of the man contemplating nature. The third movement, *Merry gathering of country folk*, returns to the initial key of F major. This *Allegro,* as indicated by the composer, fully meets the mood of the scene, and although Beethoven's aim is not to merely describe pastoral settings but rather to reveal the feelings that these images generate, the atmosphere conveyed by the movement inevitably makes us imagine the happy country folk living their joyful pastoral life. The melody now shows a wider sonority, and acquires an almost "rustic" character, vigorous but simple. The fourth movement brings *The storm,* and here nature unleashes its violence and threat. In this *Allegro* in the key of F minor, some of the instruments play a fundamental role: timpani, for example, create a feeling of sudden fright, while trumpets and trombones generate unprecedented sound effects. The rapid notes of the cellos and contrabasses express interior torment, and the high-pitched notes of flutes and piccolos sound like cry of terror. But the storm does not last long, after all, and with no interruption between the fourth and the fifth movement, we get to *The Shepherd's song. Cheerful and thankful feelings after the storm*. The last movement is an *Allegretto* in the key of F major. In an almost undulating pattern, the clouds dissolve under a solemn melody relying on the sweetness of the clarinets at first, followed by the magnificence and profound warmth of the horns and the ample breath of the strings. When the different sectors of the orchestra play together, the result is a true hymn to nature and seems to demonstrate the awe we feel on contemplating and admiring nature on one side, and, again, the joy to be a part of it on the other. A feeling of joy that is not immune from menacing and perturbating forces, but feels even stronger in this awareness: the awareness of living in perfect harmony in a serene and idyllic balance.

5. From Romanticism to Impressionism

The spread of Romantic ideals and aesthetics in the early 19th century is a real nutriment to the increasing importance of nature in arts. This is partially due to one of the aspects that characterise Romanticism: the attention drawn to the Middle Ages, a time filled with an air of mystery where man lives in close relation with God and nature. As a matter of fact, at the beginning of the 18th century, artists and writers separate from the bourgeois society that

has turned to material and technical world, in search of a more intense relationship with nature. The awareness of the distance existing between man and nature, which is seen as a place of harmony and pantheistic ensemble with the Absolute, so much missed by the artist, results in an impelling need to recover the link between the finite and the infinite, between the individual and cosmic life. In some Romantic poets, this positive view of nature as a goal to reach occasionally co-exists with a totally opposite counterpart, and Giacomo Leopardi is probably the most emblematic figure.

Leopardi deals with nature in his reflections about unhappiness, a feeling that man experiences constantly. At an early stage of his thought, nature is not responsible for human unhappiness. On the contrary, it is considered a positive and beneficial entity, favouring solid and generous illusions that enable man to experience virtues and nobility of spirit. One of the most outstanding of Leopardi's "idylls", where nature is a source of illusion and imagination, is *L'infinito* (1819). In a later phase, what actually generates unhappiness is civilisation, which can destroy the illusions that embellish the human soul and lay bare the "arid truth" of the existence on earth. A clear example can be seen in *Dialogo della Natura e di un islandese* (1824), where unhappiness ceases to be a "historical" human condition characterising the evolution of man, and becomes one of its intrinsic traits. Unhappiness springs from a constant aspiration to pleasure and the consequent realisation that once you have reached the goal, you will always be longing for a greater pleasure in an ever-lasting search. Therefore, nature is considered responsible for determining a need that will never be actually satisfied (Luperini, 2011, *Leopardi*, pp. 17–18).

In art, the Romantic representation of nature is deeply influenced by the theory of the sublime, resumed by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant in 1790 after Edmund Burke's first treatise of 1757. As far as nature is concerned, the sublime describes any experience that exceeds the ordinary limits of an individual's capacities, exciting complex feelings ranging from repulsion to attraction at the same time. Natural phenomena such as storms and blizzards can be objects of both terror and attraction, stressing the enormous disproportion between the immensity of nature and the smallness of man. The aim of Romantic art is not to faithfully represent nature, but rather to express those feelings that nature is able to create. As a consequence, in most cases, nature is seen more as a threat than as an idyll, and tends to demonstrate its power and superiority to man. In Romantic painting, man is often depicted alone, facing the immensity of nature, as in *Wonderer above the sea of fog* or *The monk by the sea* by Caspar David

Friedrich; at times, the observer is not even present in the painting, but the view of nature takes shape through incredibly surprising pictorial effects, as in *Light and colour, The morning after the Deluge*, *The burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons* and *Vesuvius in eruption* by William Turner.

As Romantic canons gradually decline, the European art framework becomes extremely varied. In general terms, the spread of Realism restores a basically Arcadian landscape, with subtle atmospheres and suffused lights, as in *The bridge at Narni* di Jean-Baptiste Corot (1826–1827). However, the persistence of a vivid Romantic heritage is witnessed by the representation of man in an almost symbiotic relationship with nature, as in *Ophelia* by John Everett Millais (1852), or with God, as in *The Angelus* by Jean-François Millet (1858–1859) (Dorfles, 2010b, pp. 615–616, 622). In the second half of the 19th century, French impressionists turn their attention to landscape painting. They often spend long periods of time away from big cities, living on the banks of the Seine or other rivers, where they can catch and immortalise extraordinary light effects, as in the famous series of *Water lilies,* painted by Claude Monet in his garden in Giverny.

As for music, in the transition between the 19th and the 20th century, composers no longer describe nature in itself, nor the feelings arising from it: now nature becomes a sort of "inspiring muse", something that fosters creativity without constraints. A clear example of this is represented by Claude Debussy's *Préludes*, where the titles are written at the end of each piece and are preceded by ellipses. By doing so, the title appears rather indefinite, allusive in relation to the object or the event it refers to. Which does not mean that the object or the event have no relation with the music (the blowing wind, the steps in the snow, and other find their musical correspondence that is not only symbolic but even onomatopoeic), but the choice to place the title at the end indicate the need to exceed any suggestion due to surrounding images and painting in music, to proceed towards abstract art (Rattalino, 1992).

Conclusion

The artistic production of the 20th century allows for innumerable reflections on the relationship between man and nature, in literature, figurative art and music as well, and it would be impossible to explore the whole landscape of the cultural movements flourishing in this period. What is definitely worth-mentioning, however, is the outbreak of the two world wars as the events that most profoundly affected the representation of

nature, and its assimilation to human condition, as in Ungaretti's poetry, for example, where the caducity of man is compared to the uncertainty of autumnal leaves.

As we all know, the issue of man-nature relationship does not arise at the time of the pandemic, but it has always been a core theme throughout the centuries and has left indelible marks in every work of art, and, as a matter of fact, after this brief excursus through nature, we can conclude that man has always believed to be a part of it, whether idyll or threat. The recurring cycles of history tell us that the dramatic situation we are experiencing today, marked by the Covid-19 pandemic, and, therefore, by a "threatening" nature, is not really a one-time event (epidemics were described by Homer, Thucydides and Boccaccio, as mentioned above), but this cyclic history also suggests that man and nature will inevitably resume their complicity, hopefully giving rise, once again, to a new Arcadian idyll.

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"The Anthropocene has still the rank of a scientific hypothesis. Yet, it has already sedimented in our imagination with its stories of climate change and mass extinctions, global pandemics and energy crisis, technofossils and oceanic plastic, social justice and new minerals that are changing the face (and the bowels) of the planet. Investigating this imagination from multiple angles, Narratives in the Anthropocene Era, brilliantly edited by Charles Travis and Vittorio Valentino, is an indispensable tool for situating these stories into the conceptual horizon of the environmental humanities".

(Serenella Iovino, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

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