

NATURE SPEAKS, POETRY RESPONDS

A NATUREZA FALA, A POESIA RESPONDE



Dossiê

Imaginários Botânicos

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Abstract/Resumo

Keywords/Palavras-chave

The article explores the ancient link between plants and poetry, evoking poetry's early connection with healing rituals and its expression throughout history until the present day, when the climate crisis makes imperative a closer proximity to nature by virtue of the feelings and sensations that poetry can invoke in regard to nature's beauty and power of creation.

Plants, Poetry, Nature, Aesthetics, Cultural Anthropology.

O artigo explora o elo antigo entre as plantas e a poesia, evocando a conexão primeva com rituais de cura e sua expressão ao longo da história até os dias de hoje, nos quais a crise climática torna crucial uma maior proximidade com a natureza por meio dos sentimentos e sensações que a poesia pode evocar com respeito à beleza e poder de criação da natureza.

Plantas, Poesia, Natureza, Estética, Antropologia Cultural.

We begin by conjuring one of nature's traits that all of us can relate to, namely beauty. What is this sensation we call beauty, provoked by the sight of a rose in a garden, an orchid between the boughs of a tree, a red and yellow forest canopy? Philosophers still argue over definitions, and scientists over its mechanisms. What we know is that we all respond to beauty, to a **sensation**, though each one of us responds in a different way. Poetry, through special words imbued with emotion, elevates beauty. What is it in nature that we call beauty that so provokes us, to make us want to respond, yes we are enchanted, and makes us want to pass on this enchantment to others with our words? We invoke an excerpt from John Keats' *Endymion*.

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
 Its loveliness increases; it will never
 Pass into nothingness, but still will keep
 A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
 Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.
 Therefore on every morrow, are we wreathing
 A flowery band to bind us to the earth
 Spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth
 Of noble natures, of the gloomy days
 Of all the unhealthy and o'er-darkened ways
 Made for our searching: yes, in spite of all
 Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
 From our dark spirits. Such the sun, the moon,
 Trees old, and young, sprouting a shady boon[...]

John Keats, in his letter to Richard Woodhouse in 1818, describes the poet as a **chameleon**, a shape-shifter, assuming all identities, having none. The poet sublimates his or herself to impersonate, through words, "*The Sun, the Moon, The Sea*." Paul Valéry posits that for centuries poetry was made for enchantment. Roman Jakobson singles out the incantatory function of language. Ezra Pound seeks the magic moment in a poem. The poetic word asks to be taken as of no common import, for the images it conjures can take us beyond ourselves. When Emily Dickinson says "If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry," (HIRSH, 2000, p. 7) this physical transport would not be unfamiliar to a healer.

There must be some link between the spell and the poetic word.

As we know, poetry and healing are as old as cave paintings and hunting, as old as making fire. One people in Papua New Guinea calls poetic language bird language. When healers dance, beat on a drum, chant and call on the elements, they acknowledge that there is a power to reckon with; they beg to converse, to converge with it; a ritual is required, involving movement that is not mundane, speech not of this world, and substances that facilitate this conversation. If successful in this act, the healer goes into a trance, to unlock a secret kept by the natural world. Observing plants as diligently as they looked toward the stars, healers revered these beings that harness the light coming from the sun to nourish the entire planet. Poetry, like healing, also responds to this enchantment cast on us by the natural world. If we accept the famous proposition by Claude Lévy-Strauss that art is a fragment of savage thinking, then poetry could be viewed as a fragment of savage healing.

In a forest, healing rituals involved animals and plants. Chateaubriand rightly says that forests were the first temples of divinity. After we cut trees and cleared fields to plant crops, forest rituals became offerings toward a god to grant us good harvests. Fragment by fragment, poetry shed the trappings of ancient healing rituals. Dithyrambs still involved chant and dance, but what was previously a direct plea to a tree was now an invocation towards Dionysus. The connection with the natural world, however, was still there. Orpheus, we recall, spoke to animals and plants, and many were the metamorphoses between humans, animals and trees, though now mediated by the gods. While the Greeks still applied *physis*, a term for the physical world that embraced all life without division, let us not forget that Greek philosophy was also the source for the classification and hierarchy of living beings. Romans, in their turn, began to employ the word nature for life beyond the tilled field, wildlife, although still holding some woods and gardens to be inhabited by sacred spirits, the *genius loci*. There was still recogni-

tion of power in wilderness, and to conjure this power, a need to engage it with special words.

Later on we adopted the Judeo-Christian legacy of considering ourselves masters of all life on earth: below us, animals, plants, rocks; above us, only the hosts of angels and God himself. We supplanted the power that once we acknowledged in other living beings. As even from deities and myths we walked away, and hence neither tree nor field was still sacred, what spell heard we coming from the wilderness? There was still healing to be done, sure, but the special words were now directed toward one God, creator of one nature bequeathed to us. Poetry, divested of its original role, responded in the only way it knows, crystalizing emotion, as bees crystalize nectar from wild flowers into honey. “We are the bees of the invisible,” Rilke wrote. Poetry took on the challenge to evoke our manifold human concerns such as war, bravery, death, love, hate, fear, betrayal, transcendence, and injustice. Yet, every once in a while, poetry recalled its ancient pact with the natural world. Shakespeare’s Duke Senior, banished by his own brother from court to the Forest of Arden, conveys a sort of congress with the elements in *As you Like it* (Act II Scene I).

Now my comates and brothers in exile
 Hath not old custom made this life more sweet
 Than that of painted pomp? Are not these woods
 More free from peril than the envious court?
 Here we feel but the penalty of Adam;
 The seasons’ difference, as the icy fang
 And churlish chiding of the winter’s wind
 Which, when it bites and blows upon my body
 Even till I shrink with cold, I smile and say
 ‘This is no flattery’; these are counselors
 That feelingly persuade me what I am
 Sweet are the uses of adversity,
 Which like the toad, ugly and venomous,
 Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;
 And this our life, exempt from public haunt
 Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks
 Sermons in stones, and good in everything.

These reminders were not frequent, especially as we further removed ourselves from the natural world, as cities began to take hold, absorbing large parts of the population, and also to eat away at forests and fields. “The

tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing which stands in the way. [...] But to the eyes of the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself,” William Blake wrote. Granting nature an *imagination* is perhaps a recollection of nature’s power of *creation*. Blake’s *Tyger* is an invocation of this creative power.

Tyger tyger burning bright,
 In the forests of the night;
 What immortal hand or eye,
 Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
 Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
 On what wings dare he aspire?
 What the hand, dare seize the fire? [...]

Whereas Blake forcefully pays homage to the power that can create not only the tiger but also the meek lamb, Mary Oliver invokes this power in the apparent modesty of flowers, in *The Lilies Break Open Over the Dark Water*.

Inside
 that mud-hive, that gas sponge,
 that reeking
 leaf-yard, that rippling

dream-bowl, the leeches’
 flecked and swirling
 broth of life, as rich
 as Babylon,

the fists crack
 open and the wands
 of the lilies
 quicken, they rise[...]

Babylon and its riches, however, began to cast its own spell, summoning millions to its vast towers spreading over fields and forests. The field became a place for peasants, the forest for savages. And yet, many were those discontented with the spell of the city. “For thou hast pined and hungered after nature, many a year, In the great city pent”, as Coleridge would have it. To some, even urban gardens did not suffice, for they revealed the human hand, the human eye, what we take and arrange from nature to our benefit, for beauty, for walks, health, and food. In the early days

of the age of science, poetry again reminded us of nature's message, as Walt Whitman wrote, "Science [...] scoffs at reminiscence of dryad and hamadryad, and of trees speaking. But, if they don't, they do as well as most speaking, writing, poetry, sermons—or rather they do a great deal better."

As the devastation of vast swathes of the planet began to take hold in the twentieth century, even science, previously granting justification for unbridled competition and destruction, began to voice concern for nature. Currently, it is fortunate that we have scientists such as Suzanne Simard, the discoverer of the *wood wide web*, native-American botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer, and French botanist Francis Hallé, who offer not only scientific proof that cooperation is widespread in nature but also examples of human communities that cooperate with other living beings. Poetry, no silent witness to the destruction of the natural world, began to raise its voice, evoking its ancient pact with life, as in this poem by Brigit Pegeen Kelly, *Blessed is the Field*.

In the late heat the snakeroot and goldenrod run high
White and gold, the steaming flowers, green and gold
The acid-bitten leaves...It is good to say first

An invocation. Though the words do not always
Seem to work. Still, one must try. Bow your head.
Cross your arms. Say: *Blessed is the day. And the one*

*Who destroys the day. Blessed is this ring of fire
In which we live[...]*

Though the words do not always seem to work. Still one must try. These verses strike one as quite revealing of frailty, not merely that of a field stricken with excessive heat, but the frailty of words themselves. With this fragile material called word, poets try to craft image and meaning. Poetry, this ancient craft heir to the word *poesis*, meaning maker in Greek, invites us to test our material for strength. Since words are constantly changing, poetry cannot accept words at face value. It questions meanings, rejects the straightjackets of grammar and syntax. Poetry reminds us that many words are ambiguous, and that the subjectivi-

ty of experience is also one of how we experience words.

For crafters so conscious of their material, it may appear odd to write about "tongues in trees," and that "trees speak," revealing a rather human tendency to translate manifestations of life into our terms. Why does a tree have to speak? We flatter ourselves that not only it speaks, but to us! Whether as a poet praising nature, or a healer invoking the power of a plant, every human attempt to understand what an animal or plant expresses will always be a translation. And how can we presume to translate from a language we do not even speak? Somehow, poetry keeps on doing exactly so, because these manifestations, casting their spell, never cease to enchant with their beauty and their power, despite our ever greater distance from them.

For poetry is heir to older usages, silenced by organized religion, by civilization, grammar and science. We celebrate those who seek primeval cultures, who break with grammar and meaning, who break themselves on language. As we destroy nature and wear out the very word nature with satiric expressions such as "the call of nature," poetry responds invoking frog, bird, bee, tree, mud, crow, tiger, wolf, bear, blood, flower. Dylan Thomas was prolific in this sort of modern conjuring, communing with the elements and their forces, summoning primal images, in his cadences unleashing the trances of yore, as in the poem *Fern Hill*.

Now as I was young and easy, under the apple boughs,
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,
The night above the dingle starry,
Time let me hail and climb
Golden in the heyday of his eyes,
And honored among wagons I was prince of the apple towns
And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves
Trail, with daisies and barley
Down the rivers of the windfall light[...]

As humans we never cease to respond to nature, one way or another, whether with words or in sheer silence among the trees, listening to wind and birdsong. Poetry is just one way to translate these sensations that the natural world stirs in all of us. Throughout history and despite

changes in our modes of living and the meaning of words, however, poetry never broke its pact with the natural world, with its beauty and power of creation. Poets, these nude savages with rings on their noses who talk to trees, as Wislawa Szymborska put it, serve best not as unacknowledged legislators of the world, but as reminders of who we are beneath all trappings of culture, history, religion and philosophy. “Unbound by history, poetic word expands in immensity,” Latin poet Ovid wrote. Perhaps the reaches of the poetic word can be evoked by this concluding poem from Robert Frost, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*.

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

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