

***Phytographia*: Literature as Plant Writing**

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This article develops the notion of plant writing or *phytographia*, the roots of which go back to the early modern concept of *signatura rerum*, as well as, more recently, to Walter Benjamin's idea of a "language of things" and to Jacques Derrida's arche-writing. *Phytographia* designates the encounter between the plants' inscription in the world and the traces of that imprint left in literary works, mediated by the artistic perspective of the author. The final section of the essay turns to the so-called "jungle novel," set in the Amazonian rainforest, as an instantiation of *phytographia*.

CAN THE PLANT SPEAK?

Humans have always been fascinated by the possibility that plants could share their stories. If they could converse, what would they tell us? What language would they use and how would they describe their wordless existence? It is now well established that plants communicate, for instance through biochemical signals, both amongst themselves and with other living beings, notably insects, in order to warn of danger, to attract pollinators, to repel potential predators, and so on.¹ But the plant tales that appeal to humans the most are not the ones that testify to the pragmatics of survival. We want to learn flora's innermost secrets that appear so hermetic, and to penetrate the core of plant being. What would plants say about themselves, about their environment and, especially, what would they say about us?

1. See, for instance, Martin Heil and Jurriaan Ton, "Long-distance Signalling in Plant Defence," *Trends in Plant Science* 13 (2008): 264–72; and Martin Heil and Richard Karban, "Explaining Evolution of Plant Communication by Airborne Signals," *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* 25 (2010): 137–44.

Writers and artists have been at the forefront of attempts to render plant stories in a way humans would understand. From the talking trees in J. R. Tolkien's fiction to installations that capture human-plant interactions, we have endeavored to learn what vegetal beings convey. A revealing example is the art of Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau, whose works *Interactive Plant Growing* (1992) and *Data Tree* (2009) use a computer program to "translate" a plant's electrical signals into intelligible language. Beyond the artistic realm, Cleve Backster's experiments of connecting plants to a polygraph to determine their reaction to various stimuli or, more recently, the "Midori-san" blog, "written" by a plant sitting in a Japanese coffee shop and linked to a computer program that interprets its sensations, show how spellbound we are by what plants have to tell us.² Perhaps our desire to hear what vegetal beings convey still harks back to the all-encompassing ideals of the Enlightenment. The light of rationality that was to illuminate the darkest recesses of a person's soul should now be extended not only to animals but also to plants. In the Enlightenment's urge towards total visibility, which goes hand in hand with the dream of complete translatability, plant tales were simply awaiting their turn to be rendered fully available and intelligible to the human mind.³

But what would it mean to shed light into the soul of plants, so as to ferret out their accounts of themselves? Unlike humans, plants do not possess a hidden core buried deep in their psyche. As Goethe perceptively noted, the leaf, completely exposed to sunlight and to the elements, is the archetypal form of a plant, the rest of it being nothing more than a metamorphosis of this basic organ.⁴ The intersection of Enlightened reason with the exposure of plant life that offers itself to the exterior world and reveals its riddles on the surface of its skin holds the promise to unravel some binaries that continue to plague contemporary approaches to non-human living beings. For how can we distinguish matter from form, action from thought, nature from culture, if we adopt the perspective of a plant?⁵

2. For a detailed description of the Midori-San blog, see Michael Marder, "To Hear Plants Speak," in *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*, ed. Patrícia Vieira, Monica Gagliano, and John Ryan, forthcoming in 2017.

3. For a discussion of the Enlightenment's dream of full visibility, see Patrícia Vieira, *Seeing Politics Otherwise: Vision in Latin American and Iberian Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 23–26.

4. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: The MIT Press, 2009).

5. Michael Marder's *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014) has precisely highlighted the potential of plant life to undo some of the most enduring metaphysical biases, such as the preference for depth over surface, the preponderance of the whole over its parts or the denigration of materiality in favor of the loftiness of spirit.

The Enlightened aspiration towards full visibility conceals a dark underbelly. Does the human wish to know the stories of plants not express a burning desire to dominate and possess them? In our push to render everything and every being completely transparent, are we not obliterating what we are trying to know? It would serve us well to heed the warning of philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, according to whom knowing the other is tantamount to destroying her, him, or it (although the other was always a person for Levinas, I add “it” to the list of possible others, a pronoun that encompasses both plants and animals). Contrary to the Enlightenment’s insatiable craving for knowledge, Lévinas advocates respect for the other and her/his/its stories, which will always retain an irreducible aura of mystery.⁶

A more charitable understanding of human attraction to plant tales would take its cue not from the Enlightenment’s phantasy of complete visibility but from more recent insights originating in postcolonial studies. One might ask, as a rejoinder to Gayatri Spivak’s famous question about the subaltern, “Can the Plant Speak?”⁷ What would be the parameters of such a metaphorical utterance? Would we be prepared to listen to flora’s paradoxically silent speech? Or would we rather, as Spivak warned in the case of the subaltern, superimpose our thoughts, reasoning, and preconceived ideas, perhaps even in a well-intentioned manner, onto the plant?⁸

The analogy between the plant and the subaltern is clearly not a seamless one. After all, the subaltern is a human being endowed with an intelligible form of language and with a worldview of her own. The problem is the failure to recognize the validity of her claims to a specific mode of existence that is erroneously regarded as inferior. This predicament resulted in extreme brutality in colonial contexts, where colonizers, deaf to the stories of their subjects, insisted on foisting their own master narrative onto the different lands they occupied. Yet, the similarities between the subaltern and the plant are also striking. Relegated to the margins of Western thought, both categories have been posited as negative images of modernity’s triumphant ideals. At least since the time of the first European voyages around the coast of Africa, to India and to America in the fifteenth century, modernity has been charted as a crusade of civilization against barbaric customs and, at the same time, as an effort to tame a wild and unruly nature. Tropical flora that defied the domesticated

6. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Linis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2001).

7. Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

8. I am developing here Michael Marder’s line of argumentation, who argues that “the plant’s absolute silence puts it in the position of the subaltern.” *Plant-Thinking*, 186.

seemliness of European landscapes was particularly singled out as a peril to be overcome as it stood in the way of the West's march of progress.⁹

I suggest that, following in the footsteps of postcolonial studies, we make an effort to hear plants speak. More than in the case of the subaltern, however, this is a challenging endeavor. The tales of plants "as such" will always elude us, given that our relationship to flora is necessarily mediated by human sense-perception, scientific knowledge and an extensive cultural history that includes, among others, georgic and pastoral literature, as well as a large number of utopian and, more recently, dystopian writings. Still, our inability to fully abandon a human standpoint does not spell out the compartmentalization of humans and plants in spheres destined to remain apart. But how can we decipher the mute language of plants and immerse ourselves in their stories?

My tentative answer is that we avail ourselves of the notion of inscription as a possible bridge over the abyss separating humans from the plant world. I borrow this concept from the work of Jacques Derrida and use it to describe the myriad ways in which all beings leave imprints of themselves in their environment and in the existence of those who surround them.¹⁰ The plants' inscription depends primarily on their physical configurations that shape both the contours of a landscape, as in the case of a tall cloud forest, in contrast to a savannah, and of their relation to animals, determined, for instance, by the color of a flower that appeals to a given pollinator or by a human being's attraction to the pleasing combination of shapes and hues in a bouquet. The study of plant modes of inscription in the biosphere is the domain of scientific research that strives to understand how they interact with other living and non-living entities. Vegetal inscription in human lives, in turn, takes place, at a very basic level, through the food we eat, the spaces we inhabit and the oxygen we breathe. In this article, however, I will work with a narrower notion of inscription. I will foreground the specific modes in which the vegetal word is embedded in human cultural productions, a kind of inscription I call *phytographia*, using literature—in this case, literature about the Amazon—as an example of the porous boundary between artistic portrayals of flora and the imprints left in texts by the plants themselves. The goal is not to argue for a radical break between the heterogeneous composite we tend, for simplicity's sake, to designate as "nature," and the equally vague concept of "culture." On the contrary, this essay rests upon the premise that a continuum extends

9. See Nancy Leys Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 53–54; David Arnold. "'Illusory Riches': Representations of the Tropical Word 1840–1950." *Singaporean Journal of Tropical Geography* 21.1 (2000): 7–11.

10. My focus in this essay is on plant modes of inscription but the notion also applies to animals that likewise inscribe themselves in human lives in a variety of ways.

from plant to human forms of inscription, which necessarily interact and get entangled in one another.

Plant inscription is not synonymous with the cognate notion of plant agency. While plants are clearly not inert, unresponsive entities, positing agency in flora veers dangerous close to anthropomorphizing its behavior by using a model derived from human action to describe it. Such a move is here deemed unnecessary, for agency is nothing but a longing for inscription, which is tantamount to say a desire for being.¹¹ Rather than framing it as agency, inscription can be understood in terms of the Spinozan *conatus essendi*, the wish of all things to persevere in existence, a yearning that leaves traces in and through other entities. In what follows, I will highlight the traces of flora in literature, the remnants or remainders of plants' ongoing process of inscription, that is to say, of their very lives.

FROM SIGNATURA RERUM TO PHYTOGRAPHIA

The understanding of the world as a complex chain of significations has deep roots in Western thought. Perhaps the most cogent pre-scientific enunciation of this idea is the doctrine of *signatura rerum*, widely espoused by alchemists and physicians and codified by the German mystic Jakob Böhme in the book *The Signature of All Things* (1621). According to Böhme, all entities bear the mark of God, mediated by the different properties the Creator attributed to them. Each inner characteristic or essence of a thing is expressed in its outward shape, form or signature: "Therefore the greatest understanding lies in the signature, wherein man . . . may learn to know the essence of all essences; for by the external form of all creatures, . . . the hidden spirit is known; for nature has given to everything its language according to its essence and form."¹² If "this is the language of nature, whence everything speaks out of its property, and continually manifests, declares, and sets forth itself for what it is good or profitable,"¹³ humanity should simply learn how to interpret correctly the signature of each being.

Böhme's doctrine was particularly pertinent as a guide to the relationship between humans and plants. Given that vegetal life bore the signs of its qualities in its signature, or outward form, human beings could easily uncover the best use of each tree, bush, herb or flower by attending to the shape of a given plant: "therefore the physician, who understands the signature, may

11. Human agency is one of the forms of human inscription. Many other forms of human inscription, such as bodily expression, involuntary movements, etc., we share with animals and plants.

12. Jakob Böhme, *The Signature of all Things* (London and New York: J. M. Dent & Sons and E. P. Dutton, 1912), <http://jacobboehmeonline.com/>. Accessed 27 May 2015.

13. Böhme, *The Signature*.

best of all gather the herbs himself.”¹⁴ The notion that certain plants were particularly appropriate to treat an illness related to a given part of the body because they resembled this particular organ had been around at least since Classical Antiquity.¹⁵ Böhme revealed the theological underpinnings of this ancient belief by positing the Maker as the ultimate guarantor of the veracity of the signature. God, like a proud artist, had left His indelible imprint upon even the smallest being of His creation and humans placed their trust in these signatures precisely because they could be traced back to the will of a benevolent deity. The system of *signatura rerum* was therefore hierarchically organized, mirroring the late medieval view of a pyramidal creation. God stood at the apex—both as the origin and the crowning—of a string of properties that manifested themselves through their signatures onto the bodies of each being, while humans occupied the ambiguous position of being both the bearers of God’s signature and the decoders of His marks upon the world.

One of Böhme’s most compelling arguments was his insistence on the correspondence between inside and outside: “as the property of each thing is internally, so it has externally its signature, both in animals and vegetables.”¹⁶ The bodies of animals and plants (and also of humans) expressed who they were, in an ongoing commerce between inner and outer realities that resulted in the undoing of this very distinction. For if the shape of an entity expresses its essence, then that essence is already determined by the form. The division between inside and outside is particularly meaningless in the case of plants, which open themselves to the exterior world in their efforts to maximize the surface of their bodies exposed to sunlight. For flora, the signature *is* clearly the essence.

Another name for the plants’ signature is their inscription in the world through their bodily manifestations. In fact, the Latin term *signatura rerum* can be read, following Böhme, as God’s signature onto things, or, alternatively, as the signature *of the things themselves*. Were we to remove the figure of the Creator as the root of all signatures, the system’s hierarchical structure would collapse and we would be left with a multiplicity of signatures that express the mode of being of each thing. The complex of immanent signatures and their interrelations amounts to the language of things, of which the materially inscribed language of plants is a subset.

Walter Benjamin expounded his version of the webs of signification binding all things in an essay titled “On Language as such and on the Language

14. Ibid.

15. For a detailed analysis of role of resemblance and correspondence in early modernity, see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 19ff.

16. Böhme, *The Signature*.

of Man,” written in 1916, where he adopts Böhme’s theologically inflected understanding of language. Similarly to Böhme, he maintains that all entities are pregnant with meaning: “There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language. . . . This use of the word ‘language’ is in no way metaphorical.”¹⁷ Things express themselves through their “more or less material community,” which, in the case of plants, stands for their physical inscription in their environment. This material community, writes Benjamin, “is immediate and infinite, like every linguistic communication; it is magical (for there is also a magic of matter).”¹⁸ He paints the portrait of an enchanted world, alive not because it is populated by the spirits of animism but due to its unfolding in material inscriptions that are equivalent to the language of every being.¹⁹

It is therefore disconcerting to read in the same Benjaminian essay that “the languages of things are imperfect, and they are dumb” (67).²⁰ This is not only because things “are denied the pure formal principle of language—namely, sound” but, more decisively, because they lack the ability to name both themselves and other entities.²¹ Benjamin, retracing Böhme hierarchical view of the world, believed that human beings occupied a special position within language, since they alone possess the capacity of naming. To give each entity a name confers upon humankind the enormous power of ruling over the entire creation: “All nature, insofar as it communicates itself, communicates itself in language, and so finally in man. Hence, he is the lord of nature and can give names to things.”²²

Benjamin highlights the redemptive features of naming that liberates things from their enforced muteness and allows them to come into their own by letting the divine breath of creation trapped in them shine forth through

17. Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man.” in *Selected Writings*. Vol. 1, 1913–1926. ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA, and London, UK: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), 72.

18. Benjamin, “On Language,” 67. Benjamin expresses the same idea later in the text when he mentions the “communication of matter in magic communion,” 70.

19. Benjamin might be implicitly dialoguing in his essay with sociologist Max Weber’s famous verdict that the scientific, Western mindset has led to a disenchantment (Entzauberung) of the world. Positing a language of things would go a long way towards “reenchanting” our existence.

20. Benjamin, “On Language,” 67. For Benjamin, things only come into their own when they communicate their wordless language to humans: “To whom does the lamp communicate itself? The mountain? The fox?—But here the answer is: to man. This is not anthropomorphism. The truth of this answer is shown in human knowledge [Erkenntnis] and perhaps also in art,” 64.

21. *Ibid.*, 67.

22. *Ibid.*, 65.

human language. Yet, he also recognizes that to shackle nature to the vagaries of humanity is to do it a disservice. “It is a metaphysical truth,” he writes, “that all nature would begin to lament if it were endowed with [verbal] language.”²³ Nature silently laments—through its “sensuous breath” or through “a rustling of plants”—its yoke to humankind and its powerlessness to name itself that enslaves it to human language.²⁴ “To be named . . . perhaps always remains an intimation of mourning,” Benjamin acknowledges, “but how much more melancholy it is to be named not from the one blessed paradisiacal language of names, but from the hundred languages of man, in which name has already withered.”²⁵ If the helplessness of non-human entities was already manifest when they were subjected to naming in Eden, how much more despondency do they experience when named in the post-Babelic confusion of languages?

Benjamin hints at a fissure in his seemingly flawless edifice when he notes that the deepest reason for the things’ “melancholy” and “deliberate muteness” is their “overnaming” by humans.²⁶ After the Fall, humans lost touch with the sacredness of naming and language turned into “empty prattle.” This was the precondition for the subsequent “turning away” from and “enslavement of things,” whose different modes of being are trampled when humanity considers them as simple tools or raw materials, a means to an external end.²⁷ Nature’s muteness is thus not only the cause of its servitude but also a form of resistance against its subjection to humans. However, while Benjamin admits to the shortcomings of humans’ relation to its others, he fails to take the next step of disentangling the language of things from its dependence on humanity.

Benjamin posits the move from the language of things to the language of man as the infinite task of translation, his version of the interpretation of each thing’s *signatura*. While, in a pre-Lapsarian world, this translation would be univocal, things can only be named imperfectly after our expulsion from Paradise. Translation has a metaphysical import, namely that of permanently striving towards the exact rendering of one language into another, an ideal that forever eludes fallen humanity. Still, for Benjamin as for Böhme, the relationship between humans and non-humans only becomes possible at all because God ensures the adequateness of all significations: “The objectivity of this translation is, however, guaranteed by God.”²⁸ At the origin of both

23. *Ibid.*, 72.

24. *Ibid.*, 73.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*, 72.

28. *Ibid.*, 70.

humans and the rest of the world, brought into being by the same creative word, God bears responsibility for the correspondence between the name and the named.

There seems to be an alternative in Benjamin's text to the stratified model of translation, whereby an "imperfect language" of things, gives way to "a more perfect one" of human beings.²⁹ Artworks do not aim to translate the language of things into that of humanity, but, rather, to stage an encounter between the two: "art as a whole, including poetry, rests not on the ultimate essence of the spirit of language but on the spirit of language in things, even in its consummate beauty."³⁰ Artists, the demiurges of Romanticism, point in the direction of a non-hierarchical world, where all languages are equally valid and translation moves horizontally, rendering the language of one non-human or human being into that of another. Benjamin is fully aware of the utopian undertones of his take on art: "here we should recall the material community of things in their communication. Moreover, the communication of things is certainly communal in a way that grasps the world as such as an undivided whole."³¹ Art partakes of the things' communitarian nature in its endeavor to bring together non-humans and humans and make the broken, post-Edenic world whole again.

Benjamin singles out the fine arts as the ones most particularly attuned to the language of things: "it is very conceivable that the language of sculpture or painting is founded on certain kinds of thing-languages. . . . We are concerned here with nameless, nonacoustic languages, languages issuing from matter."³² There is, however, no compelling reason to exclude other art forms as potential propitiators of a communion between the languages of different entities. Literature can also set the stage for this encounter, open not only to the Bakhtinian heteroglossy of various human discourses but also to the convergence of non-human and human languages. As we shall see, *phytographia*, or plant writing, denotes one such encounter: the coming together of the wordless, physically inscribed language of plants with an aesthetically mediated form of human language in literature.

How to conceive of Böhme's *signatura rerum* without its religious trappings? Could Benjamin's language of things ever be on par with that of humans? What would be the contours of a language of plants and of plant writing? The path to addressing these quandaries takes us to the notions of arche-writing, trace and *différance* developed by Jacques Derrida in the second half of the twentieth century. The French philosopher positions himself against Western

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., 67.

31. Ibid., 73.

32. Ibid.

thought's bias in favor of spoken language, or phonocentrism, which creates the illusion that each utterance can be traced back to its origin by following the voice to its source in the body of a given human being. Going against this metaphysical fixation on presence, Derrida suggests, instead, that only a generalized inscription of entities and events in the world (and, in fact, of the world itself), creates the conditions of possibility for any form of language—be it non-human or human, spoken or written—to thrive. “Arche-writing” is Derrida’s term for this generalized inscription and inscribability. Drawing on the particular characteristics of the written word, which presupposes a spatial and temporal lag between the moment of enunciation and the time of reading, arche-writing opens “the possibility of the spoken word, then of the ‘graphie’ in the narrow sense”³³ and, I would add, of the language of things and of *phytographia*.

Derrida demarcates arche-writing from previous understandings of the world and the beings in it as laden with meaning in that he posits an original dissemination of all inscriptions, or traces, which cannot be ascribed to a unified cause such as the Unmoved Mover, God or Spirit in the tradition of Western philosophy. For Derrida “this trace is the opening of the first exteriority in general, the enigmatic relationship of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside: spacing.”³⁴ *Différance* is the term he coined to express, simultaneously, the deferral of identity and the difference that always contaminates sameness, underlies all language and life itself, and opens the possibility of spacing and of time. He continues: “The outside, ‘spatial’ and ‘objective’ exteriority . . . would not appear without the grammè, without *différance* as temporalization, without the nonpresence of the other inscribed within the sense of the present, without the relationship with death as the concrete structure of the living present.”³⁵ The ties binding the sayer to the said, the I to her actions, and even the I to herself, are always discontinuous, and otherness, failure and the prospect of death inform all inscriptions.

Arche-writing is inherently violent, given that it stands for the breach, or tearing apart, of all unity and innerness, a breaking asunder and contamination by alterity that, as Derrida puts it, has *always already* happened before any beginning, birth or even dream of inception could take place. “To think the unique within the system, to inscribe it there,” he writes, “such is the gesture of the arche-writing: archeviolence, loss of the proper, of absolute proximity, of self-presence, in truth the loss of what has never taken place, of a self-presence which has never been given but only dreamed of and always already split,

33. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore, MD and London, UK: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 70

34. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 70.

35. *Ibid.*, 70–71.

repeated, incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance."³⁶ The violence of arche-writing is thus a creative one, since beings in the world are nothing more than their inscriptions and traces conceivable only through *différance*.

What is the place of *phytographia* within arche-writing? A Derridean answer to this interrogation would point out that, sessile entities par excellence, always tethered to a given place by their roots, plants are nevertheless the most widespread of beings, not only because they populate a large portion of our planet but also given that, through photosynthesis, they make life on earth possible. The inscriptions of all living beings in the world are, in a very literal sense, a kind of *phytographia*, enabled by the incessant work of plant life. Furthermore, plants not only deliver their seeds to chance, counting on the elements and on other animals for their dissemination in the same way as a piece of writing is often dispersed through circuitous channels, but they also share another central characteristic of written texts, namely their iterability. Plants endlessly repeat parts of themselves by producing multiple leaves, flowers and fruits, all sharing similar traits but also displaying minuscule differences. Vegetal life and inscription are thus eminently *graphic* and could be understood as the paradigmatic example of arche-writing.

The more restricted understanding of the term I am proposing here considers *phytographia* to be one of the modes of plant inscription, which, in turn, is embedded within the context of a broader arche-writing. *Phytographia* is the appellation of an encounter between writings on plants and the writing of plants, which inscribe themselves in human texts. At its most basic, this inscription has, throughout history, relied on papyrus, pencil, ink, paper and countless other writing instruments. But the *phytographia* that will occupy us in the rest of this essay, though beholden to the material substratum of writing, has a still narrower import. It does not depend exclusively on a writer and her sovereign authority to define plant being, which would amount to the resurrection of a naïve form of realism, whereby the author purports objectively to depict the world. Nor does it rest upon a belief in a mystical communion with vegetal life that would take possession of the writer's soul and dictate her prose. Rather, it stands for the literary portrayal of plants that is indebted both to the ingenuity of the author who crafts the text and to the inscription of plants in that very process of creation.

Phytographia can best be grasped by analogy with *photography*, the writing of light. In a photograph, the materiality of the things themselves interacts with light to create an imprint of reality, filtered through and molded by the artistic vision of the photographer. In their inscription in the environment, made possible by photosynthesis, plants already perform a proto-*photographia*.

36. *Ibid.*, 113.

They use sunlight to create their material articulations in the world and, in doing so, imprint themselves in the biosphere, enabling the inscription of all other living beings in the process. Similar to their physical, *photographic* inscription in their surroundings, plants also leave impressions of themselves in human cultural creations, such as literature. *Phytographia* designates this communion between the *photographic* language of plants and the *logographic* language of literature. The realm of the imagination, literature becomes a mediator in the aesthetic encounter with plants, knowing full well that the medium always colors the message and that the mediators themselves are all but evanescent. In the final section of this essay, I turn to literature about the Amazon as an illustration of *phytographic* writing.

AMAZONIAN LITERATURE AS PLANT WRITING

Literature about the Amazon seems to be an obvious choice as an example of *phytographia*. By far the world's largest rainforest, covering an area that spans nine nations and housing a treasure-trove of biodiversity, much of which still remains to be discovered, the Amazon epitomizes the exuberance of flora. From the first wave of Spanish and Portuguese explorers, through the late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century naturalist adventurers, to more contemporary visitors, all of those who have travelled in the region marveled at the lushness, variety and sheer immensity of Amazonian plants.

Spanish Jesuit Priest Cristóbal de Acuña, who crossed the Amazon basin from Quito to Belém in 1639, highlighted in his *New Discovery of the Great River of the Amazons* (1641) the fertility of the jungle and the abundance of food, a natural wealth that reminded him of the Biblical Paradise on earth.³⁷ Centuries later, the British naturalist Henry Walter Bates, called the region a “naturalist’s Paradise” due to the variety of its vegetation.³⁸ “Fancy if you can,” wrote Bates in his *The Naturalist on the River Amazons* (1863), “two millions of square miles of forest. . . . You will hence be prepared to learn that nearly every natural order of plants has here *trees* among its representatives.”³⁹ Bates’s friend Alfred Russel Wallace described “the beauty of the vegetation, which surpassed anything I had seen before”⁴⁰ and Richard Spruce, another British botanist, marveled at the “enormous trees” in the region, “crowned with

37. See Jorge Marcone, “Nuevos descubrimientos del gran río de las Amazonas: la ‘novela de la selva’ y la crítica al imaginario de la Amazonia.” *Estudios. Revista de Investigaciones Literarias y Culturales* 8.16 (2000): 132.

38. Henry Walter Bates, quoted in John Hemming, *Tree of Rivers: The Story of the Amazon* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008), chapter 5, Kindle edition.

39. Bates, quoted in Hemming, *Tree of Rivers*, chapter 5, Kindle edition.

40. Alfred Russel Wallace, *A Narrative of Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro*, quoted in Hemming, *Tree of Rivers*, chapter 5, Kindle edition.

magnificent foliage.”⁴¹ Already in the twentieth century, Theodor Roosevelt, who travelled in the Amazon in 1913–1914 after leaving office as president of the United States, was struck by the “immensely rich and fertile Amazon valley” and by its “magnificent,” “splendid” and “impenetrable” forest.⁴²

Despite consensus about the awe-inspiring plant life of the Amazon, portrayals of the region’s flora have, for the most part, fallen back upon tired clichés. The most pervasive of these is the dichotomous depiction of vegetation either as reminiscent of Earthly Paradise or as a green hell. While Acuña and the botanists quoted above espoused, for the most part, an Edenic view of the forest, filled with natural wonders, others have emphasized the dangers of Amazonian nature. Brazilian writer Euclides da Cunha considered humans to be “impertinent intruders”⁴³ in the region, facing a “dangerous adversary,” a “sovereign and brutal nature,”⁴⁴ while his friend Alberto Rangel characterized the Amazon as a “green hell” in a collection of short stories from 1908.

Perhaps the sheer otherness of the Amazon intimidated travellers, who resorted to religious metaphors as a means to pigeonhole a foreign and potentially threatening vegetation and reduce it to familiar tropes. Beholden to a worldview whose matrix was the temperate climate and the corresponding flora of Europe and North America, the writings describing Amazonian plants either as heavenly or hellish overlook the complexity of vegetal existence in the region, since they approach it through the lens of simplistic categories, such as benign or dangerous, useful or useless, beautiful or unattractive, and so forth. Such writings distort the plants’ physical inscription in the environment by clouding human relationships to vegetation with pre-conceived notions of what the forest should be like. They neglect listening to the plants’ own tales and, therefore, fall short of *phytographia*.

Even though literary texts on the Amazon often reproduce hackneyed representations of the region, literature has managed, in some instances, to move beyond trite descriptions of local flora and allowed a genuine *phytographia* to emerge. In the final pages of this article, I will discuss the so-called “novel of the jungle” that flourished, roughly, in the first half of the twentieth century. Still indebted to previous frameworks for depicting the Amazon, some of these

41. Richard Spruce, *Notes of a Botanist on the Amazon and Andes*, quoted in Hemming, *Tree of Rivers*, chapter 5, Kindle edition.

42. Theodore Roosevelt, *Through the Brazilian Wilderness*. (Project Gutenberg, 2004), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/11746>. Accessed 23 June 2014.

43. Euclides da Cunha, *Um Paraíso Perdido: Reunião de Ensaios Amazônicos*, ed. Hildon Rocha (Brasília: Senado Federal, Conselho Editorial, 2000), 116. This and all other citations from a Portuguese original have been translated into English by the author.

44. Da Cunha, *Um Paraíso Perdido*, 125.

narratives have nevertheless broken new ground in their portrayal of an active, often sentient forest that, more than any of the human protagonists, is the main character in the texts.

To be sure, many “novels of the jungle” inherited elements of the “green hell” narrative: most of them dwell on the misfortunes of travelers and, especially, of workers lured to the Amazon during the rubber boom in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, the “green hell” depicted in these texts is mainly human-made. Life in the forest is hellish due to the exploitative labor conditions that reduce workers, many of them migrants from other regions, to de facto slaves, who give their lives for the enrichment of rubber lords. Rather than victims of the forest, many characters fall prey to a ruthless version of capitalism uninhibited by state rules and protections. These texts can therefore be read in terms of a critique of modernization that at times anticipates environmental discourses from a later period.

Another reason for discussing the “novel of the jungle” in the context of *phytographia* is its representation of the Amazon as a “frontier,” an area of *anomie* where anything can happen, similar to other liminal spaces such as the American “Wild West” of the eighteenth hundreds. Unfettered by the limitations imposed by social norms and by a strong political authority, this territory becomes fertile ground for experimentation. As a borderline region, a meeting point between (Western) human society and the forest, the “frontier” allows for an encounter where the prejudices and preconceptions that govern the relations between humans and non-humans still have not taken root.

The notion of the Amazon as a “frontier” ties in with another trope of the “novel of the jungle,” namely the desire for a return to nature. In many of these texts the protagonists leave a large city and penetrate deep into the jungle, a trajectory reminiscent of the plot of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), which could be considered a predecessor of the genre. Even though Amazonian vegetation does not always offer the main characters the idyllic communion with nature they were hoping for, they do find themselves face-to-face with an environment that is completely foreign to them, an experience that reveals the inscription of the vegetal world at the core of the protagonists’ existence.

The Vortex (La Vorágine), published in 1924 by Colombian novelist José Eustasio Rivera is a quintessential jungle novel. Its storyline begins with the protagonist and first-person narrator Arturo forced to leave his native city of Bogotá to find himself, first, in the Colombian plains and, in the second part of the text, in the depths of the Amazon, following the city-to-jungle trajectory typical of these narratives. But the plot progressively evolves from a fairly conventional clash of man against nature to a deeper appreciation of the Amazonian forest that, at points, appears to speak in its own voice, *phytographically* mediated by the text.

As he and his friends penetrate into the jungle's mysterious environment, Arturo feels both entrapped (he writes: "Oh jungle, wedded to silence, mother of solitude and mists! What malignant fate imprisoned me within your green walls?"⁴⁵) and seduced by the forest. The most telling moments of communion between the men and the vegetal life surrounding them take place when the members of the group come down with fever. In a delirious state, when the constraints of reason and logic loosen, they approach the forest anew and report their extraordinary visions: "He [Pipa] spoke of the trees of the forest as paralyzed giants that at night called to each other and made gestures. . . . They complained of the hand that scored them, the ax that felled them. They were condemned to flourish, flower, grow, perpetuate their formidable species unfructified, unfecundated, uncomprehended by man."⁴⁶ Pipa, one of Arturo's companions, reproduces in his monologue the voice of talking trees, a long-standing trope of religion and of literature, who complain about the destruction brought to the land by greed and about their inability to communicate their aspirations to humankind. His hallucinations continue, offering a glimpse into a human-less future on earth: "Pipa understood their [the trees'] bitter voices, heard that some day they were to cover fields, plains, and cities, until the last trace of man was wiped from the earth, until over all waved only a mass of close-grown foliage, as in the millennia of Genesis when God still floated in space in a nebulous cloud of tears."⁴⁷ The feverish man interweaves visions of the indomitable proliferation of vegetation in the Amazon with human fears of being outlived by plants that will rule over our cities long after humankind's extinction. He conjures up a neo-Paradisiac flora freed from the havoc wrought in forests by human destructiveness, a *phytographic* vision of a future Golden Age of plant life that is simultaneously alluring and frightening.

The encounter between the Amazon's towering presence and the human ability to interpret the forest's imposing inscriptions so as to express them artistically also comes through when the protagonist Arturo addresses the jungle directly to describe the profound impression it made on him: "Unknown gods speak in hushed voices, whispering promises of long life to your [the jungle's] majestic trees, trees that were the contemporaries of paradise. . . . Your vegetation is a family that never betrays itself."⁴⁸ Each plant is addressed by a divine voice, akin to the Socratic daemon, that articulates its specific *signatura* and its entanglement with its family members, the other vegetal beings who inhabit the forest. But this quasi-animistic language of things, magical as it may seem,

45. José Eustasio Rivera, *The Vortex*, trans. Earle K. James (Bogotá: Panamericana Editorial, 2011), 155.

46. *Ibid.*, 179.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*, 155–56.

goes back to the trees' concrete existence and their rootedness in the earth: "You [the jungle] share even in the pain of the leaf that falls. Your multisonous voices rise like a chorus bewailing the giants that crash to earth; and in every breach that is made new germ cells hasten their gestation. You possess the austerity of a cosmic force. You embody the mysteries of creation."⁴⁹ The plants react to their physical transformations—the falling of a leaf or the felling of a tree; their voices are nothing but a response to their evolving inscriptions in the environment that the novel's narrator brings to light in his prose.

Arturo returns to the "multisonous voices" of the forest when he ponders plant sensation later in the novel. "Vegetal life," the narrator writes, "is a sensitive thing, the psychology of which we ignore. In these desolate places, only our presentiments understand the language it speaks."⁵⁰ Not only does the protagonist acknowledge the sentience of plants but he also realizes that they share a language, which humans are only able to recognize imperfectly. He acknowledges that plants tell their own tales and strives to put these into writing. At another point in the text, Arturo, here clearly enunciating his speculations as an *alter ego* of the author, mentions how the language of the forest inspired his literary pursuits: "What cities? Perhaps the source of all my poetry was in the secrets of the virgin forests, in the caresses of gentle breezes, in the unknown language of all things."⁵¹ At its most thought-provoking, *The Vortex* succeeds in weaving this "unknown language of all things," the "secrets of the virgin forest," into tales that humans beings can relate to, a *phytographia* that enunciates plant inscription in literature.

It is time to ask, by way of a conclusion, "Can the Amazon write?" The answer entails reading literary works as spaces of inscription, where we find traces of vegetal language. This does not mean that we will fully abandon our human perspective, an endeavor that would, in any case, be doomed to failure. It does however, in the wake of Eustasio Rivera's *The Vortex*, require us to broaden our human horizons, and to make them capacious enough to accommodate our animal and vegetal others. Literature offers us a hint of what Amazonia's tales would be like; it expresses flora's own signature, imprinted in the text. While it is not a language *of* plants, literary writing can become over-human—sub-, super-, beyond-human—, or better still, it can acknowledge the non-human and the traces of *phytographic* arche-writing within. It behooves us to learn how to listen to and interpret this *phytographia*.

49. *Ibid.*, 156.

50. *Ibid.*, 273.

51. *Ibid.*, 124.