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Vatic Environmentalism:
Orphic Aesthetics and Ecological Justice[1]

Abstract

Founded on readings in quantum theory, poststructuralist philosophy, and world literatures, this article argues that an Orphic tradition can be traced over the last two thousand years, translating a history of human response to the environment which has contributed to the poetic formulation of an ecological ethics that we propose to call vatic environmentalism.

For Marta Frątczak-Dąbrowska

> Carroll was whistling. A solemn and beautiful cry—unlike a whistle I reflected—deeper and mature. Nevertheless his lips were framed to whistle and I could only explain the difference by assuming the sound from his lips was changed when it struck the window and issued into the world (Harris 1960, 113).

> It seems that the more fantastic our image of matter becomes, the more real it becomes (and vice versa) (Barad 2007, 354).

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[1] This article reproduces and builds upon literary histories and arguments provisionally formulated in the last chapter and general conclusion of my monograph (Courbot 2019).

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Keynote: Calibrating Scales

In "The Climate of History: Four Theses," Dipesh Chakrabarty understands the Anthropocene as a question of scale. The Anthropocene, defined as the present geological era in which "humans now wield a geological force" and "have become geological agents" (Chakrabarty 2009, 206), would indicate a "collapse" of the differentiation between the timescales of "human history" and "natural history" (208) caused by the anthropogenic acceleration of natural history, that is, an escalade, a scaling up of the pace of climate change.

This historical turning of the scales also implies that "we" are now responsible for the survival and/or extinction of "our" and "Other" species endangered by global warming: "we" weigh in the scales of environmental justice, insofar as justice is defined as an ethics of responsible relation to others, be they contemporaneous to ourselves, extinct, or yet to come (Derrida 2006, xviii, 26). I am provisionally using scare quotes because the presentation of "humanity" and its "Other" as determined is not mine, but Chakrabarty's. Determination, by the way, is a question of scale that is coterminous with the application of law, in which justice is the institutionalized scaling of "fair" and "unfair." Moreover, scales, as membranes covering the bodies of reptiles and mammals, are visual indicators of a body's outline – classical criteria for determining where one body ends and another begins and, by extension, which body can be judged against which.

A "scale" may also designate a "hut, shed," or habitat, that is, the home, the *oikos* of *oiko-logia*/ecology as a discursive practice that presupposes a definition of "environment" on the scale of "accommodation:" issues of scale thus relate humanity, justice and the environment.[2] Consequently, following Enlightenment ideals, Chakrabarty contends that being responsible in the Anthropocene requires that "reason" be deployed on a planetary scale among human beings (Chakrabarty 2009, 210): logically, the change of ratio induces a rational change, a new scale for the sharing of reason.

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[2] The connection between these various meanings of "scale" is not accidental. A "scale," as a weighing instrument, a hut, and a piece of bodily shell derives from the Germanic root *skel-*, to cut, share, divide, compare. Comparing, separating, or discriminating are acts of measurement by way of which the "scale," as a size reference or as the conventionalization of distances between musical notes, also relates to the Germanic *skel-*, even if the scalar and musical significations derive from the Latin *scala*, to climb. The definition of anthropogenic environmental change, and the implied operation of a *cut* between what is presumably "human" and/or "environmental" is, precisely, the question of scale raised by the Anthropocene. In this article, definitions of "scale" and etymological information are drawn from the *OED*.

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Chakrabarty's reliance on Enlightenment philosophy is no surprise since his scaling of the "human" against the "natural" is a consequence of a belief in the separateness of such things as "man" and "nature" as "independently existing object[s] with inherent attributes," which is typical of Cartesian and Newtonian (meta)physics (Barad 2007, 56, 106-107, 120). Chakrabarty presumes that a separation between human and natural histories has "collapsed" with the Anthropocene (Chakrabarty 2009, 208) subsequently to the anthropogenic merging of their previously distinct time scales, and calls for a new definition of humanity that would "scale up our imagination of the human" (206) and induce a global redistribution of Enlightenment reason (despite the irrationality of contemporary politics) to ward off extinctions (210-211, 219-220).

Chakrabarty implies, then, that previously separate domains of being, respectively predicated on (geological) macroscopic and (human) microscopic timescales, *have become entangled*: "The geologic now of the Anthropocene has become entangled with the now of human history" (212). However, according to empirical evidence provided by quantum physics (Barad 2010, 59-60), this argument is counterfactual. "Humans" and "nature" have not become entangled: the *cut* between "humans" and "nature" is only enacted from their entangled relation within a material "*phenomenon—the inseparability (differentiated indivisibility) of 'object' and 'agencies of observation*" in Niels Bohr's sense of the term (Barad 2010, 253, author's italics). The "human" and the "non-human," the "cultural" and the "natural" are non-original: they do not precede entanglement. By contrast, a phenomenon constitutes the prime-yet-decomposable element from within which the ontic-semantic determination of "humans" and "nature" emerges performatively through their relation of intra-activity, inseparability, différance (Derrida 1982, 13; Barad 2010, 240) or entanglement: "human history" has not become entangled with "natural history." Entanglement is the prerequisite for the definition of the human and the natural, because "we are part of the nature that we seek to understand" (Barad 2007, 247).

The ontic-semantic significance of "humanity" and "nature" is contingent on material arrangements or phenomena, whereby determination is constantly being renegotiated, and outside of which there is no "nature" or "humanity" to speak of: "Phenomena are ontologically primitive relations—relations without pre-existing relata. [...] In other words, relata do not pre-exist relations; rather, relata-within-phenomena emerge through specific intra-actions" (Barad 2017, 233-234). The Anthropocene does not indicate that predetermined "humanity" and "nature" have become entangled, but

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that the entanglement through which "humanity" and "nature" come to matter *has become observable on a macroscopic scale*. Metaphorically, the musicians may have changed scales, but it still is music that is being played.

Speaking of which, the scale of anthropogenic change that the Anthropocene denotes is reminiscent of the myth of Orpheus—whose song could change the course of rivers, make trees move, and alter animal behavior—when Chakrabarty cites Naomi Oreskes' description of the Anthropocene: "We have changed the chemistry of our atmosphere, causing sea level to rise, ice to melt, and climate to change" (Chakrabarty 2009, 206). In this sense, the Anthropocene does not only modify the received meaning of "being human," but indicates that defining the "real" and the "mythological" is contingent on material situations and open to renegotiation too: what used to be perceived as the supernaturality of Orpheus—the poet prophet, or *vates*, as Ovid called him—is now considered a matter of fact.

Founded on readings in quantum theory, twentieth-century philosophy, and literary history, this article argues that an Orphic literary tradition can be traced over the last two thousand years. This tradition translates a history of human response to the physical environment which, since the second half of the twentieth century, has contributed to the poetic formulation of an ecological ethics that we propose to call vatic environmentalism, that is, a material and ethical perception of the environment that is patterned on the poetic and prophetic nature of Orpheus' performativity.

I. Orpheus in Retrospect

The myth of Orpheus owes its longevity to a millennial tradition of artistic and philosophical readings that is as rich as diversified, since versions of the myth started to differ with Ovid and Virgil and went on being revised to the present, in many cultures from Europe and, arguably, Asia, Africa, and the Americas (Gros Louis 1967, 245; Belmont 1985, 60).

According to the myth,[3] Orpheus is the son of the god Apollo and the nymph Calliope, and endowed with supernatural musical abilities, as he can, with his song, induce inanimate elements—trees, water, stones—to move at will, and animals to temper their bestial instincts, gather around and listen to him. As such, and retrospectively, Orpheus personifies the Anthropocene, insofar as he "wield[s] a geological force" (Chakrabarty 2009, 206). Fur-

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[3] The ancient Roman versions of the myth of Orpheus referred to in this article are drawn from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (x 1-111, xi 1-84) and Virgil's *Georgics* (iv 453-527).

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thermore, reading the Anthropocene as the retrospective activation of a myth cancels out the possibility for one to misunderstand the entanglement of humans and nature as unprecedented. In other words, associating the Anthropocene to Orpheus prevents it from becoming a whitewashed or "white mythology" that would have "effaced in itself that fabulous scene which brought it into being" (Derrida 1974, 11). An Orphic understanding of the Anthropocene is, therefore, morally and politically significant, insofar as it pictures human-natural entanglements as historical and (to some extent) performed, rather than new and suffered, thereby entailing a different scale of ecological responsibility.

Orpheus' music also allows him to seduce the nymph Eurydice, with whom he lives happily until her untimely death, when she is bitten by a snake. Refusing the fact of his lover's death, Orpheus, thanks to his skills as a bard, crosses the rivers surrounding the underworld, or Hades, tames the three-headed Cerberus guarding its doors, and persuades Pluto and Persephone to restore Eurydice back to him. Orpheus' success stops there, for, having sung Eurydice back to *him*, he still has to lead her out of Hades and into the realm of the living. Pluto and Persephone allow him to do so under the condition that he shall not look back until Eurydice and he are fully out of the underworld. Orpheus cannot, however, resist the temptation of looking back, and subsequently loses Eurydice a second time. As a result, he ends up wandering Thrace, an unwelcoming region of Greece, until he dies at the hands of "devoutly mad" female bacchanals (Ovid XI, 3) who, having been neglected by him, literally tear him to pieces and throw his remains into the Hebrus river. His severed head, floating downstream, still sings, lamenting the loss of Eurydice, until it reaches the shores of the island of Lesbos, while his specter is reunited with that of his dead wife in Hades. Orpheus' mourning for Eurydice and their reunion as ghosts may therefore allegorize a haunting, melancholic grieving, not for a pre-determined being, but for a modality of entanglement within nature—that is, a scale of ontological relation, for instance, where Orpheus and Eurydice are alive together—that cannot be achieved any longer, because of an irresponsible use of performative agency. In this sense, the vatic ability to (re-)enchant the world through imaginative, artistic means might indeed influence ecological circumstances in that world, but simultaneously indicates the dangers of Orphic overconfidence in the possibility to resuscitate what has gone or is going extinct, including the memory of what was lost, as Ovid and Plato suggest.

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Ovid's rendition of the Orpheus story is, indeed, a direct response to the reception of writing that is illustrated by Plato in the *Phaedrus* and the *Republic*, a reception that was itself conditioned by the spread of Orphism at the time (Young 2008, 10-11). While the textual spread of Orphism made Socrates suspicious of writing, notably of written speech as an elixir of memory, Ovid, through the metaphorical representation of the emergence of writing at the end of his version of the myth of Orpheus (whose song gets magically printed on the leaves that gag him[4]), defends the value of written verse as a means by way of which archaic Greek myths can actually be recorded and *re-membered* into a Greco-Roman, literary *corpus* (Young 2008, 15-17). Following the classical era in which Plato (c. 428-348 BC) and Ovid (43 BC-c. 17 AD) successively lived, the advent and spread of Christianity, from late antiquity to the Middle Ages, led to the formulation of analogies between Jesus Christ and Orpheus as a means to induce pagan communities of the Mediterranean (including Greece and Egypt) to convert to Christianity. This progressively gave way to a moralizing interpretation of the myth in Europe, notably in the wake of the publication of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, in works such as those of Henryson, Chaucer, and the unknown authors of *Ovide Moralisé* and *Sir Orfeo* (Chaucer 1971; Gale 2003, 334; Gros Louis 1966, 652-653; 1967, 245-252). This Christian, syncretic way of reading the myth, which Gros Louis calls the "textual tradition," developed into a "popular tradition," as oral poets took up the Christian version of the myth as a subject for their song, by way of which the myth of Orpheus was popularized and integrated to the world of chivalric romance (Gros Louis 1966, 645).

Although the "popular tradition" came to supplant the "textual" one, both followed their course well into the Renaissance. The "textual" trend, for instance, gained importance in Britain under Elizabethan rule, when Orpheus was favored as a moral poet-philosopher who could temper the base, bestial instincts of animals and men with his song (Gros Louis 1969, 64-71). This view of Orpheus as a civilizing force was capitalized upon by humanist preceptors of rhetoric who, prolonging Ovid's muting of Orpheus' song into

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[4] This printing of verse onto a tree leaf evokes the effect of Orpheus' song on the elements, and the way in which his relation to the natural environment is one of entanglement, in so far as his transformation of natural order always implies his own metamorphosis. Retrospectively, in the Anthropocene, this image indicates that "man" and "nature" are coterminous, co-determined, and that their being is not inherent or granted, but contingent on material arrangements every constituent of which is engaged in a relation of responsibility.

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written verse, privileged Orpheus' speech over his music as an instrument of power. This favoring of rhetoric over music was then used by Elizabethan poets such as Shakespeare, Sidney, John Rainolds, Henry Vaughan, Henry Reynolds, Francis Bacon and Edmund Spenser to legitimize written verse as an art form in its own right, and confirm the importance of their social role as poets (Cochrane 1968, 11). For instance, Spenser, in the *Faerie Queene*, secures his position as a national poet by creating for himself a (literary) genealogy positing Orpheus, via Virgil, as one of his ancestors,[5] and invents, for Elizabeth, a line of descent relating her to feminine forebears such as Britomart, the Virgin Mary, Eurydice, and Isis, by way of which the poet creates a "*translatio imperii*" that entitles Elizabeth to the inheritance of the Roman Empire (Delsigne 2012, 199, 212). Furthermore, Spenser relies on the legend according to which Orpheus was the Argonaut who outplayed the sirens and brought order to the watery world to defend British overseas claims to waters and lands that Britain was trying to wrestle from the Spanish at the time: by the same token, Spenser not only re-inscribed Orpheus within the literary legacy of the Roman Empire, but recreated the Thracian bard as an imperial civilizer in the imagery that promoted modern colonial conquest and the appropriation of oceanic resources.[6]

Apart from this Elizabethan expansion of the "textual tradition" of the Middle Ages, a revival of the "popular tradition of reading the myth of Orpheus occurred by the end of Elizabeth's reign, at the same time as the rise of Puritanism, the advent of Enlightenment philosophy, and the accession of James I to the throne (Gros Louis 1969, 70). The death of Elizabeth and the changing times had a disorienting effect on poets of the period, such as John Donne (Gros Louis 1969, 70), and led to a shift in representations of Orpheus, which started to lean toward the morbid, for instance with Milton's description of the bard's severed head floating down the Hebrus in *Lycidas* (Milton 1637, lines 58-63; Martindale 1985, 322-323). Furthermore, the Puritans' desecration of myths, in addition to the insistence of Enlighten-

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[5] Conversely, Spenser's French contemporary, Ronsard, staged himself as *the* French Orpheus (Cain 1971, 28).

[6] That Orpheus became part of the colonial imagery in which "Britannia rules the waves" might consist in a way through which the myth spread around the world, via colonial routes. The persistence and popularity of the myth on all continents is also due to its cross-cultural adaptability, as thousands of Orpheus-type myths can be found around the world, for instance in India, Japan, New Zealand (in Mahori mythology), Hawaï, Samoa, Melanesia, the New Hebrides, in American Indian mythologies, and in Egyptian and West African tales (Gros Louis 1967, 245; Gonzales 1996, 153-164; Bricault 2006, 261-269; Delsigne 2012, 205; McDaniel 1990, 28; Misrahi-Barak, Joseph-Villain 2012, 36).

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ment philosophers on the importance of pragmatic rationality, ultimately led to "Restoration and eighteenth-century burlesque and mock-heroic treatments of mythical heroes" where Orpheus was "travestied and used as mere decoration" (Gros Louis 1969, 80).

II. Quantock to Quantum

Only with Wordsworth and the subsequent rise of Romanticism in the late seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries would Orpheus again be taken seriously, because the *Lyrical Ballads* project resuscitated the myth's implications on the relational, contingent, unstable, co-determination of humans and nature, and also of reality and magic, as shown below.

During the summer of 1788, in Cambridge, while mourning for his deceased parents, Wordsworth, then an orphan, translated two hundred lines from Virgil's *Georgics*, a hundred of which were dedicated to the myth of Orpheus. It is through this translation, in his formative years, that Wordsworth developed his portrayals of grieving (wo)men and worked out his lyrical sense of a man's relationship to nature and time—for instance through the figure of the rower in his "river" poems (Graver 1991, 137; Wu 1996, 360). Lord Byron and Percy Shelley would soon follow suit, the former by recurrently composing scenes of Orphic leave-taking in *Manfred* and other works (Stratham 2009, 364-365, 371), the latter by claiming, in "A Defence of Poetry," and in keeping with the textual tradition of the Elizabethan period, that poets are "the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (Shelley 1821). At the same time, and well into the Victorian age, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* would remind readers of the dismemberment of Orpheus as much as of the re-membering of Osiris—an Egyptian deity to whom Orpheus is often syncretically related, as a disciple of Isis, Osiris' wife (Delsigne 2012, 206)—and Dickens would allude to the bard in his last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, and to Eurydice through the character of Agnes in *David Copperfield* ("David" himself being a Biblical figure that has also often been compared to Orpheus) (Bauer 1993, 309; Gros Louis 1966, 644).

Meanwhile, the myth of Orpheus lived on into French literature, notably through the syncretic vogue that followed the 1789 Revolution (Cellier 1958, 146; Spiquel 1999, 542) and into the nineteenth century in the works of Gérard de Nerval and Victor Hugo. In "El Desdichado," Nerval represents himself as Orpheus while, in "Aurelia," he laments upon the loss of Eurydice and uses the Rhine as an allusion to *Faust*, Goethe's Orphic tale (Fairlie 1970, 155; Cellier 1958, 147). Hugo recurrently mentions Orpheus throughout his

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work as well (Cellier 1958, 151-152; Spiquel 1999, 546), and it is by citing Hugo's poem entitled "Horreur Sacrée" that Sartre would later claim that "Orpheus is Black" (Hugo 1889, 355; Sartre 1948, ix, translation mine).

As far as France at the turn of the twentieth-century is concerned, Apollinaire certainly was one of its most Orphic poets: his pseudonym related him to Apollo (Orpheus' father), his first collection of poems was entitled "Le Bestiaire d'Orphée" and, in "Alcools," he repeatedly claims to be from Orphic lineage, in addition to comparing himself to (the Christian) God (Grojnowski 1981, 94-100; Dekens 2011, 42). Furthermore, he used to designate his artistic project of coupling poetry to music and the visual arts, notably cubist painting, as Orphic (Grojnowski 1981, 103). Only after seeing *Parade*, the ballet composed by Eric Satie and written by Jean Cocteau— whose Orpheus film trilogy also relates him to the bard (Cocteau 1930; 1950; 1959)—would Apollinaire coin the term "surrealism" to re-christen what he had so far been calling "Orphism." The term would soon be taken up by André Breton to write his *Surrealist Manifesto* (Grojnowski 1981, 103; Bowers 2004, 133). Hence, Surrealism was, from its beginnings, haunted by the specter of Orpheus and, although the artistic movement was short-lived (it is commonly accepted that it lasted from 1919 to 1939), two other forms of Orphism arguably rose from it, and were particularly related to poetic definitions of "man" and "nature" in the Americas, the Caribbean, and Africa (Bowers 2004, 133).

First and foremost, it is actually through his exchanges with French Surrealists that Alejo Carpentier discovered Franz Roh's description of a new form of expressionist painting as "magic realism," a term he re-appropriated as "*lo real maravilloso Americano*," as a means to describe what he viewed as the intrinsically marvelous nature of the American (and Caribbean) landscape that European Surrealists were forced to reproduce, artificially, through the inclusion of exotic elements in their works. Furthermore, Carpentier's use of the term is an open reference to the "French Surrealists' exhortation that reality should be considered as marvelous" (Chanady in Zamora and Faris 1995, 137). This American "territorialization of the imaginary" (137) can be viewed as Orphic insofar as it corresponds to an enchanting and enchanted reception of landscape by way of which "'magic' images are borrowed from the physical environment itself, instead of being projected from the characters' psyches," as Jeanne Delbaere-Garant puts it in her definition of one of the most widespread variants of marvelous realism in literature, which she calls "mythic realism" (Delbaere-Garant in Zamora and Faris 1995, 253). Such an infusion of lyrical sense and supernatural mo-

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tion in a natural landscape is, indeed, comparable to the mythic response of trees and streams to Orpheus' song. By the same token, marvelous reality provides an Orphic gateway into American and/or Caribbean literature(s).

Carpentier's Orphic designation of a supposedly American aesthetics, in addition to leading back to European surrealists and their African influences, points to the cross-cultural dimension of marvelous realism, which can notably be observed through a generic confluence between magical realism and the early Romanticism of Wordsworth and Coleridge. In fact, magical realism consists in a genre of fiction where the presumably supernatural is considered as an integral part of reality. In other words, magical realism may require that some readers temporarily adopt a definition of reality that differs from their sense of what is real. For instance, Carpentier explains that the intrinsically marvelous quality of American landscapes led European explorers to conceive of what they thought supernatural as part of nature, and that such a conception (the supernatural as integral to the natural) led to the specific type of literary production he calls magical realism (Chanady in Zamora and Faris 1995, 124-144). Yet, that a literary genre requires readers to accept the presentation of presumably supernatural facts as reality in order to be (emotionally) receptive to the rest of the work also appears to operate in the same way as what Coleridge—who also wrote verse on Orpheus (Leadbetter 2016)—calls the "willing suspension of disbelief" in his *Biographia Literaria*, when he discusses the *Lyrical Ballads* project,

> in which it was agreed, that my endeavors should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to promote for these shadows of the imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude we have eyes, yet not see, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand (Coleridge 1817).

The willing suspension of disbelief consists in readers accepting the supernatural, "or at least romantic" features of a tale in order to enjoy its "human interest," residing in what such features allow "our inward nature" to express or represent, such as emotions, which Wordsworth had to draw from everyday life and make so strong and passionate that they would "excite

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a feeling analogous to the supernatural" and tear "the film of familiarity" to pieces. Wordsworth's task, then, was to give sight back to readers blinded by the tumult and distractions of daily routine to slow down and adopt a "quiet eye" that would allow them to "see into the life of things" (Wordsworth, Coleridge 2005, 157), which sounds like quite a supernatural fit. Hence, in Wordsworth's part of the project, the requirement of a "willing suspension of disbelief" in the supernatural is syncretized with that of "a willing suspension of perception in distraction." Not only did such prerequisites— calm observation of nature and acceptance of the supernatural effect it may produce—condition Wordsworth and Coleridge's composition of the *Lyrical Ballads*: they also appear to consist in a way of seeing that the marvelous reality of tropical nature forces on its viewers, according to Carpentier. In other words, the supernatural impression that nature produces to induce authors to write in a magical realist way is analogous to the effect that Wordsworth's and Coleridge's early Romantic poetry sought to synthesize, that is, "the powerful overflow of powerful feelings" provoked by one's environment and "recollected in a state of tranquility" (Wordsworth, Coleridge 2005, 307). In this sense, Romanticism might be perceived as being in confluence with magical realism, if magical realism is defined as a literary presentation of one's reception of reality as marvelous.

It follows that Aldous Huxley's contention that Wordsworth's appropriation of nature to convey religious morality would be impossible in the tropics must be qualified:

> The Wordsworthian who exports this pantheistic worship of Nature to the tropics is liable to have his religious convictions somewhat rudely disturbed. Nature, under a vertical sun, and nourished by the equatorial rains, is not at all like that chaste, mild deity who presides over the *Gemüthlichkeit*, the prettiness, the cozy sublimities of the Lake District (Huxley 1964, 6).

Huxley does not perceive that the appropriative gesture of Wordsworth's Romanticism unsettles the very definition of nature by blurring the distinction of what is taken to be inherently natural or supernatural, thereby making nature as uncommodifiable as its (tropical) magical realist reception. Of course, the colonial use of Wordsworth's poems in imperialist educational programs proved traumatic to Caribbean readers and authors such as Jamaica Kincaid, because there was no referent in the tropics to visualize flora such as the "daffodils" of Cumbrian and Quantock hills (Smith 2002, 806). Yet, this negative influence must not be blamed on Wordsworth, but

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on the instrumentalization of his poetry by colonial institutions that served the British imperial agenda (Smith 2002, 812). Furthermore, numerous scholars perceive strong analogies and intertextuality between the works of authors from the African diaspora and early British Romanticism, going so far as calling them "post-Romantics" and their productions "Black Atlantic" Romanticism (Oakley 2011, 3; Pace 2017, 115). Other critics have pointed to the reciprocal influences operating between British Romanticism and Caribbean literature by showing how, for instance, Coleridge and Wordsworth were interested in Caribbean Voodoo and Obeah myths and cults as potent revolutionary tropes for their poems, such as in "Goody Blake and Garry Gill" and "The Three Graves" (Richardson 1993, 4). Moreover, Wordsworth's apology of Toussaint Louverture after his fight for the independence of Saint Domingue (now Haiti) is well known, and the exiled black woman he describes in "We Had a Fellow-Passenger" counts, with Ruth (who, by the way, visits America), Martha Ray, and Betty Foy, among the Orphic women of his verse (Curtis 1987, 144).

I have also shown that the two modes of vision described in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" are similar to the ways of seeing proposed in the magical realist novel *Palace of the Peacock*, written by Guyanese writer Wilson Harris (Courbot 2019, 261-263), whom Pauline Melville, another Guyanese-born magical realist, compares to a Dionysian, visionary creator, that is, a *vatic* writer, before stating that his "genius" is "best expressed in the words of Coleridge" (Melville 1997, 51-52).[7] Inversely, in his reading of a short story by Pauline Melville, Harris states "that the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is now of immense importance" because it can suggest a different social model whereby the extinction of species and the death of the imagination can be countered by viewing Orpheus as a resuscitator that can lead Persephone (as a trope of humanity) back to a love for life by separating her from Pluto (as an allegory of the death-dealings of capitalism) (Harris 1996, 9-11). Harris further suggests that this renewed ethical and environmental significance of the Orpheus myth, this contemporary vatic environmentalism, is supported by the recent advent of quantum physics, which has qualified the post-renaissance cut between natural and supernatural, science and

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[7] I have also contended that Carpentier's idea of the Baroque, Glissant's prophetic vision of the past and George Lamming's "backward glance" are vatic environmental concepts (Courbot 2019, 283-284, 297). For a critique of "Tintern Abbey" as the result of Wordsworth's turning a blind eye to the ecological pollution of the river Wye and to the fact that the Abbey was a resting place for British outcasts, see Levinson 1986.

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fiction, or history and myth as contingent on specific contexts (9-10).[8] This quantum entanglement can be clarified through a tracing of philosophical readings of the Orpheus myth.

III. Eurydice Schrödinger

Apart from magical realism, Negritude is another movement that Sartre, in "Black Orpheus," claims is an Orphic heir to Surrealism (Sartre 1948, xxii).[9] In "Black Orpheus," the preface to Senegalese writer and President Leopold Sedar Senghor's 1948 *Anthologie de la Nouvelle Poésie Nègre et Malgache de Langue Française*, Sartre argues that Negritude poetry is Orphic, in the Ovidian, vatic—poetic and prophetic—sense of the term, for two reasons. First, because Afro-Caribbean Negritude poets such as Césaire, being part of the African diaspora, are in exile, away from a lost Africa, like Orpheus in Thrace, away from Eurydice (Sartre 1948, xvi-xviii). Second, Sartre claims that Negritude poetry consists in the black poets' introspective search to retrieve and capture their black essence and bring it out of spiritual depths and into the light for all the world to see, as if it were a Eurydice (xvii). However, and in spite of Sartre's Orphic interest and primordial influence in twentieth-century French anti-colonial theory, through "Black Orpheus" (1948) and his 1961 preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (Sartre in Fanon 2010, 17-36), "Black Orpheus" sounds very awkward today. For instance, critics have repeatedly shown that Sartre mistakes ethnic essence—which is a fallacy—with historical experience (which is factual) (Sartre 1948, xii, xiv), and does so in order to promote the argu-

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[8] The Guyanese writer's plea on behalf of a mythic quantum imagination reminds one that South America, Africa and the (colonial) history of cosmology and quantum physics intertwine: Arianne rocket ships are launched from French Guyana and the observation of a 1919 eclipse from Brazil and Principe provided empirical evidence for spacetime curvature and Einstein's theory of relativity (DeLoughrey 2007, 76), the expression of which is less suited to the English tongue than to pre-Columbian Amerindian languages, linguists have argued (Melville 2013, 9). Harris' "quantum imaginary" is palpable in the epigraph to this article, where the presumably "supernatural" modification of the character's voice is interpreted as a "natural" pattern of diffraction through a glass window, whereby, as our second epigraph suggests, the marvelous gets real.

[9] The focus on magical realism and Negritude to define vatic environmentalism must, however, not eclipse other twentieth-century ways of reading the myth of Orpheus, such as in Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* or James Joyce's *Ulysses* (Lamson 2010, 255). Harlem Renaissance writer Richard Wright also revised the myth in *The Man Who Lived Underground* (Cappetti 2001, 41). In the 1950s, Tennessee Williams published *Orpheus Descending* (1957), which was adapted to the screen as *The Fugitive Kind* (1960) by Sidney Lumet (Baker Traubitz 1976, 57-66) one year after Marcel Camus had won the Palme d'Or in Cannes for his *Orfeu Negro*, transplanting the myth to Brazil (Villeneuve 2004, 105-122).

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ment that Negritude is the second part of a dialectic, an antithesis to European colonialism that will be synthetically resolved when black men fully integrate the contingents of the world's proletariat (Wehrs 2003, 765; Jacques 2011, 9). This argument reveals Sartre's Marxist bias and is invalidated by the fact that his designation of Negritude as the violent appropriation of the hegemonic language of masters and colonizers (French in the present case) (Sartre 1948, xviii) corresponds, according to Derrida, to a colonial desire that is, hence, not absolutely antithetical to European colonialism, and necessarily unsatisfiable, as the appropriation of literal signification is always-already subverted by the intrinsically metaphoric nature of language (Derrida 1996, 44, 47, 68-70). Furthermore, Sartre's contention that "black consciousness" will become "historical" through such appropriation (Sartre 1948, xxix, xxxvi), in addition to being misguided, presupposes, following Sartre's recurrent Hegelian binary distinctions, that "black consciousness" has been lacking historicity, which is highly debatable.

Finally, Sartre is so blinded by his argument that the language of Negritude poets is essentially "black" that he fails to see how Negritude poetry is replete with allusions to Western mythology, for instance to Homer (Sartre 1948, xxvii-viii). Furthermore, he remains strangely evasive about a citation he makes from Jean-Fernand Brierre (Sartre 1948, xxxvi), where the poetic persona claims that his memory exceeds the limits of lived experience and expands back in time to the era of slavery, while it is precisely via such a type of memory that "black consciousness" is proven to be *already* fully anchored in the history of modernity, and through which the vatic quality of Negritude poetry is confirmed, as the poet's supernatural memory brings a lost past into presence in the same way as Orpheus' song conjures the dead back from the underworld. Such a view of the imagination as a gateway to an apparently inaccessible past is, moreover, crucial in the magical realist literature produced by descendants of the African diaspora, and corroborates philosophical and scientific theses, from those of Renaissance thinkers such as Hobbes and Vico—who respectively believed that the imagination was a form of memory (Hobbes 14) and that, as a consequence of the mnemonic quality of the imagination, myth was formative of history (Banchetti-Robino 2011, 122)—to Holocaust theories of postmemory (Ward 2015, 132) and discoveries in behavioral epigenetics, according to which memory can be *genetically* inherited (Hurley 2013; Powledge 2011, 588-592; Ferenczi 2002, 34-35).[10]

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[10] Epigenetics therefore confirm what was suggested by Ovid's representation of the printing of Orpheus' song onto the leaves that gag him: the entanglements of self and

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Sartre's philosophical reading of Orphism is, therefore, inaccurate. Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka is aware of that, as he criticizes racial essentialism in Sartre, to whom he responds by creating, in *The Man Died* and *Season of Anomy*, African versions of the Orpheus myth that are not ethnically or culturally exclusive (Barber 2001, 91; Whitehead 2008, 29). Afro-Caribbean thinkers such as Stuart Hall and Édouard Glissant have also formulated theories thanks to which cultural identity would no longer be thought of as hermetic and static, but as mutable and open to Otherness (Hall 1990, 225-226; Glissant 1990, 169).[11]

With relevance to the present perspective, in France, during the second half of the twentieth century, and as Donald Wehrs shows, thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, and Emmanuel Levinas promulgated conceptions of identity and otherness that exceeded Sartre's essentialist logic (Wehrs 2003, 771) and turn out to be Orphic: in Levinas' discussion of ethics in *Totality and Infinity*, for instance, the Other, or rather, their *face*, is not, contrarily to what Sartre suggests, essentializable as an undifferentiated whole, but always-already, infinitely escapes any totalizing gaze, because the face constantly expresses itself (Levinas 2009, 42-44), and forces one to watch it again, or *respect* it, and therefore never petrify the Other's face with a Gorgon's stare. Thus, Levinas presents "the face-to-face [as] the starting point [...] of the ethical relationship" (Poirier 2001, 107). In other words, the constant expression of the face is what makes the Other absolutely Other in the same way as, according to Derrida, the intrinsic metaphoricity of language makes it absolutely impossible to appropriate and hypostasize signification (1996, 44). As Patrick Poirier shows, Levinas' representation of the face-to-face, by way of which the Other escapes into infinity, corresponds to a reading of Ovid's description of how, when Orpheus turns around to face Eurydice, she inescapably evades his grasp (Poirier 2001, 108-109). Poirier further explains that it is through this Orphic conception of the ethic relationship that Maurice Blanchot rewrote the myth of Orpheus in "Orpheus' Gaze" and in *The Infinite Conversation* (Blanchot 1982, 171-177; Poirier 2001, 109). Thus, these late-twentieth century French conceptions of ethical relation to Otherness are predicated on a reception of the Orpheus myth.

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other perform "marks on bodies" (Barad 2007, 176), operate material and, hence, environmental reconfigurations that involve agential responsibility and the duty to remember.

[11] Hall does not give a definite name to his theory of identity, but tentatively suggests Derrida's "différance" (Hall 1990, 228-229). Glissant formulates a "poetics of Relation" (Glissant 1992, 169). We propose "tropicality" (Courbot 2019, 13-20).

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Apart from the anecdotal evidence that a quantum detector built to iden-
tify the contents of dark matter in the Bern Underground Laboratory was
named "Orpheus" (Abplanalp et al. 1996, 227), Levinas' Orphic contention
that "the face-to-face is the starting point […] of the ethical relationship"
(Poirier 2001, 107) is comparable to the role of measurement in quantum
physics: following Schrödinger's questioning of the role of observation in his
famous thought-experiment involving the survival of a cat, and subsequently
to evidence yielded by quantum erasers in experimental metaphysics, it has
been confirmed that the measurement of the definite state of an object was
determined by its entanglement with agencies of observation, and that
the simultaneous measurement of the wave and particle behaviors of matter
could not be achieved, as it requires the use of mutually exclusive appa-
ratuses (Barad 2010, 250, 260). In other words, specific entanglements
of Schrödinger and a cat, respectively as agency and object of observation,
determine specific iterations of both physicist and feline. Conversely, Or-
pheus and Eurydice's entanglement posits that the bard's spinning around
determines both his status as beloved or bereaved and that of his lover as
alive or dead. Orpheus is accountable for the measured outcome of his face-
to-face with Eurydice, and for the haunting elusiveness of the event that does
not come to matter in their entanglement.[12] Quantum physicist Karen Barad
expands from Lévinas, for whom "responsibility is not a relation between
two subjects," but, "rather, the otherness of the Other is given in responsibil-
ity" (Barad 2007, 392) by equating responsibility with entanglement. By so
doing, she formulates an ethics that makes any material—and hence not
necessarily human—agency in entanglement responsible for what comes to
exist: therefore, Barad's contention that "accountability and responsibility
must be thought in terms of what matters and what is excluded from matter-
ing" (394) in addition to being consistent with quantum physics, expands
from Lévinas' Orphic ethics, thereby positing a generalized rather than
anthropocentric understanding of a then *vatic* environmentalism where
the operation of a discriminating agential cut between what exists or not—
for instance, the potential Anthropogenic determination of what species

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[12] Barad argues that this relation of complementarity is an ontology of conjuring (both
as dismissal and invitation), that is, a hauntology in Derrida's sense of the term (Barad
2010, 252-253; Derrida 1993, 10, 63, 202). In addition, Plotnitsky explains that Werner
Heisenberg, a founder of quantum theory, was a precursor to deconstruction philosophy,
because his critique of classical science is "analogous to Derrida's decentered 'play' and/as
the inaccessible efficacity of différance and, correlatively, or indeed correlative to the ir-
reducible role of technology and 'writing' in Derrida's extensive sense of the term" (Plot-
nitsky 2002, 226).

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go extinct or get (re)created—is the poetic and prophetic performance of a physical reality in becoming for which the "cutting" or determining agent bears ethical responsibility.

Coda: Toward Performative Democracy

Thus, Orpheus' lyre is an interdisciplinary instrument of diffraction thanks to which the cross-cultural, syncretic superposition of quantum physics, twentieth-century philosophy, and literature becomes significant, insofar as it shows that quantum definitions of the phenomenon and the philosophies of Derrida and Levinas can be patterned on and historically related to a mythological, Orphic perception of the physical environment and the responsibilities that it entails. In other words, the places in which these ontologies of knowing and knowledges of ontology overlap suggest that acknowledging the performativity of entanglement as constitutive of (environmental) reality and its possible futures is both an ethical imperative or responsibility—without which there can be no justice—and a poetic matrix that may be called "vatic environmentalism."[13]

As such, vatic environmentalism coheres with the idea that the performativity of entanglement supersedes worldviews based on assumptions of inherent separability, or *scale*, as the basis for objective representation and, therefore, suggests that achieving ecological justice in the Anthropocene might, incidentally, require a reconsideration of legality and the institution of performative, rather than representative, democracy (Matynia 2009, 5).

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[13] As opposed to Orphic, the adjective "vatic" detaches the idea of poetic prophecy from the masculine, human and European character of Orpheus, thereby allowing for an acknowledgment of Orphic reality that is not necessarily biased by gender, anthropocentrism, or Eurocentrism. However, the mythological genealogies underlying the language being used cannot be circumvented (Derrida 1971, 11): one cannot use English, or French for that matter, and avoid relying on the word "vatic"—at the risk of conjuring its Greek and Roman mythological backgrounds—to designate what is both poetic and prophetic.

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