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On Human-Plant Encounters and Interactions. Phytographical Narration in Henrik Stangerup's *Vejen til Lagoa Santa*

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Henrik Stangerup's novel *Vejen til Lagoa Santa* (1981; *The Road to Lagoa Santa*, 1988) offers topical perspectives on issues of interest in contemporary debates on science, ecology, indigenous knowledge, and (post)colonialism. This article positions the novel within the so-called 'vegetal turn' and engages with the phytographical discourse in the text. Phytographical narratives focus on the writing on plants and the writing of plants (Patricia Vieira), as well as on the 'intersubjectivity', 'interactivity', and 'relationality' between humans and plants (John Charles Ryan). This reading examines the role of tropical flora in transforming the scientific mind of the literary figure P.W. Lund (1801-1880), an internationally renowned Danish naturalist. While sight is central to Lund's efforts to establish order in the Linnaean tradition of scientific observation, his hierarchical and static 'Western gaze' gives way to a new, relational approach to botany, which involves other physical senses. The aim is to consider Lund's 'conversion' as a phytographical turn through which the scientist develops an ecological thinking in line with indigenous ways of knowing and being, and to discuss Stangerup's representational strategies when articulating a counter-gaze and a vegetal language.

Vejen til Lagoa Santa (1981; *La strada per Lagoa Santa*, 1988) di Henrik Stangerup fornisce prospettive attuali su questioni al centro dei dibattiti odierni inerenti a scienza, ecologia, sapere indigeno e (post)colonialismo. Inserendo il romanzo nel contesto della cosiddetta 'svolta vegetale', il presente articolo esamina il modo in cui il discorso fitografico si articola nel testo. Partendo dall'idea che le narrazioni fitografiche costituiscono un tipo di scrittura *su* piante e *di* piante (Patricia Vieira) con focus sull' 'intersoggettività', l' 'interattività' e la 'relazionalità' tra gli esseri umani e le piante (John Charles Ryan), l'indagine si concentra sul ruolo svolto dalla flora tropicale nella trasformazione della mente scientifica del personaggio protagonista P.W. Lund (1801-1880), rinomato naturalista danese. Fedele alla tradizione linneana di osservazione scientifica, la vista è il punto di partenza nei tentativi che Lund mette in atto per cercare di stabilire un ordine nel *systema naturae* dell'Amazzonia, ma il suo sguardo 'occidentale', statico e gerarchico, verrà sostituito da un approccio alla botanica di tipo relazionale, che coinvolge anche altri sensi. Obiettivo del saggio è leggere la 'conversione' di Lund come una 'svolta fitografica' che porta lo scienziato a sviluppare un pensiero ecologico in linea con i principi della conoscenza indigena locale e discutere delle strategie narrative con cui Stangerup rappresenta il linguaggio delle piante e il modo in cui la flora restituisce lo sguardo dello scienziato.

Keywords: *Stangerup*, *Vejen til Lagoa Santa*, *Phytography*, *Critical Plant Studies*, *the Scientist in Literature*

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On Human-Plant Encounters and Interactions. Phytographical Narration in Henrik Stangerup's *Vejen til Lagoa Santa*

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INTRODUCTION

At an early moment in Henrik Stangerup's *Vejen til Lagoa Santa* (1981; *The Road to Lagoa Santa*, 1984) the young Danish scientist Peter Wilhelm Lund is on the verge of undergoing a radical transformation¹. In Rome, during the carnival of 1830, the twenty-nine-year-old naturalist meets Sarah, a Jewish woman, who makes him forget all that has forged his scientific identity so far: his PhD title and the particularities of the black vulture's digestive system. Sarah sees through him, she understands that his clear blue eyes are capable of absorbing everything without any desire to possess, and she realizes that it is in her power to transform the 'bespectacled' scientist from «a heretical vermin, a hothouse plant, into a natural outgrowth of the beauty all around them»². It will, however, take Dr. Lund a lifetime to unlearn his 'heresies' and learn to become a part of the whole.

Women and plants, not the least in the context of «Eurocentric, androcentric [...] colonial plant-collecting» where Stangerup's plot can be positioned, are historically linked in forms of denial that often involve backgrounding and instrumentalization³. If women are indeed

1 The internationally renowned paleontologist and naturalist Peter Wilhelm Lund (Copenhagen 1801-Lagoa Santa 1880) settled in Brazil in 1832 and never returned to Denmark. On the basis of his findings in the limestone caves around Lagoa Santa he formulated new theories on the evolution of the Earth, flora, fauna, and humans. For a recent study of his life and work, see Birgitte Holten and Michael Sterll, *P.W. Lund og knokkelhulerne i Lagoa Santa*, Syddansk Universitetsforlag, Odense 2010.

2 Henrik Stangerup, *The Road to Lagoa Santa*, transl. by Barbara Bluestone, Marion Boyars Publishers, New York-London 1984, p. 68, hereafter *RtLS*. «[E]t kættersk kryb, en drivhusplante, til en naturlig del af skønheden», Henrik Stangerup, *Vejen til Lagoa Santa*, Gyldendal, København 1983, p. 63 (hereafter *VtLS*).

3 Prudence Gibson, *Herbaria and Dark Botany*, in *The Vegetal Turn. History, Concepts, Applications*, ed. by Marcello Di Paola, Springer, Cham 2024, p. 279-290: 279 and 281.

marginalized in the novel's predominantly male universe of scientists, this article looks at the impact that the tropical flora of Brazil has on the protagonist's conversion, arguing that it succeeds where Sarah falls short: it is the non-human community of plants that teaches P.W. Lund how to become human.

1. OUTLINE AND AIM

Vejen til Lagoa Santa is a multifaceted text offering readers many entry points into its literary universe. With reference to its title, earlier interpretations have considered the novel to be a *Bildungsroman* about a conversion second only to that of Saint Paul on the road to Damascus: on the road to Lagoa Santa, Peter Wilhelm Lund experiences an epiphany that changes his vision of life⁴. If read as a historical novel, *The Road to Lagoa Santa* epitomizes György Lukács's definition of this genre as one more revelative of assumptions and tendencies of the time in which the novel is written than of the times it portrays: «without a felt relationship to the present, a portrayal of history is impossible»⁵. But the book also provides a fascinating example of the representation of scientists in Scandinavian literature. From this perspective, the portrayal of Dr Lund incorporates aspects of at least four of Roslynn B. Haynes's archetypes of literary scientists: 'the noble scientist', 'the foolish virtuoso', 'the inhuman researcher', and 'the scientist as adventurer'⁶. In addition, *Lagoa Santa* can also be read

4 See for example Hans Hagedorn Thomsen, *Naturens skyld*, in «Kritik», 58 (1981), p. 110-118; Bo Elbrønd-Bek, *Knoglesamlerens skygge: om Henrik Stangerups roman Vejen til Lagoa Santa*, in «Karneval», (1982), p. 97-123; Tania Ørum, *Vejen til Lagoa Santa*, in «Kritik», 93 (1990), p. 107-116.

5 György Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, transl. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1969, p. 57. On this note, Tania Ørum determines the book to be characteristic of 'an age when the the definition 'faction' was invented, as well as a typical example of a poststructuralist novel with fluid boundaries between documentarism and poetic licence, cf. Ørum, *Vejen til Lagoa Santa*, *op. cit.*, p. 111. In the following pages, *The Road to Lagoa Santa* is rather contextualized in the light of the 1970s' 'ecological wave' with its focus on the interconnectedness of humans and nature, «cooperation and balance rather than dominance and hierarchy», as proposed by 'ecofeminist' ideology in the same era, cf. Eleonora Federici, *Why Ecofeminism Matters. Narrating/Translating Ecofeminisms around the World*, in «Iperstoria. Journal of American and English Studies», 20 (2022), p. 66-77: 66.

6 Roslynn B. Haynes, *From Alchemy to Artificial Intelligence: Stereotypes of the Scientist in Western Literature*, in «Public Understanding of Science», 12 (2003), p. 243-253; Roslynn B. Haynes, *From Faust to Strangelove. Representations of the Scientist in Western Literature*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore-London 1994.

as contribution to the genre of travel literature, featuring a travelling protagonist whose position in his port of call draws close to that of the ‘emigrant’ in Arne Melberg’s taxonomy of travelling personas⁷. Addressing the topicality of the ‘emigrant’-condition in 2005, Melberg observed: «The emigrant approaches the state that all immigration authorities now encourage: to make the foreign their own, to adapt, to become like the others, to abandon their own identity for that of the other, to *go natives*»⁸.

This article looks at Stangerup’s novel with specific attention to the impact that the tropical flora has on P.W. Lund as scientist and travelling persona. Rereading *The Road to Lagoa Santa* with a focus on the encounter between humans and plants brings to the surface several themes that unquestionably lie at the intersection of issues of interest in contemporary debates. Firstly, in an era of climate change, *Lagoa Santa* is a timely reminder of the need to reflect on human-plant interactions and, given its setting, in particular on the Amazon rainforest, currently subject to deforestation, drought, and outbreaks of fire. Secondly, as Dr Lund learns an approach to botany that goes beyond scientific observation and the colonial renaming, collecting, and keeping of plants to become *relational*, the author seems to put in a word for the need to incorporate indigenous knowledge into the tradition of European scientific discourses. In postcolonial terms, it could be argued that Lund’s final, ecological, approach to nature is an early example of indigenous research methodologies put into practice. Thirdly, the portrayal of a Linnaean scientist in Brazil, initially preoccupied with order, boundaries, and compartmentalizing – not only in the field of botany – offers an opportunity to reflect on the legacy of the ‘Father of Taxonomy’, at the centre of recent controversies. While seen as «a pioneer in the study of ecology» and among «the first to describe relationships between living things and their environments», Linnaeus is also referred to as one of the founding fathers of biological racism⁹. Finally, at a time when scientists are increasingly using genetic engineering to modify the life of plants, Stangerup shows us how the botanical world, in turn, is capable of reshaping the human mind.

7 Arne Melberg, *Resa och skriva. En guide till den moderna reselitteraturen*, Daidalos, Göteborg 2005, p. 27-31.

8 «Emigranten närmar sig det tillstånd som alla invandringmyndigheter numera uppmanar: att göra det främmande till sitt egna, att anpassa sig, bli som andra, lämna den egna identiteten för den andra, *go native*» (*ibid.*, p. 31), italics in the original, my translation.

9 Cf. <<https://www.uu.se/en/news/2021/2021-05-07-linnaeus-complicated-relationship-with-racism>> (last access: 10 July 2025).

This article focuses on the encounter between a mind of order and reason and an entity, the Amazon rainforest, which defies orderly and rational categorization. It aims to situate the discourse on vegetation in the novel in the context of what Patricia Vieira has called ‘phytographia’. The term designs «an encounter between writing on plants and the writing *of* plants», the original italics emphasizing Vieira’s invitation to look for «traces of vegetal language» in literary writing. John Charles Ryan similarly conceptualizes ‘phytography’ as «the writing of plants – as our writing about their lives and their writing about themselves and, possibly, about us and us in relation to them»¹⁰. Ryan stresses the ‘intersubjectivity’, ‘interactivity’, and ‘relationality’ between humans and plants as characteristics of phytographical texts¹¹.

It is my contention that Stangerup’s novel, in its descriptions of the interaction between Dr Lund and Amazonia, acknowledges both our human perspective and the ‘above-and-beyond-human’ voices of plants. This focus positions the following reading within the framework of Critical Plant Studies, a field that emerged in the early 2010s as part of the so-called ‘vegetal turn’, denoting an interest in the imprint and agency of plants and, as Anna M. Lawrence writes, the recognition that plants care about things which «humans must care about too if we are to build a more sustainable relation to our planet»¹². Her suggestion, «[a]sking questions like ‘what do plants know?’ draws attention to plants as living beings with their own ways of knowing the world. [...] this is not a new attunement, but one which many communities across the world have been learning from for centuries», ties in with the discourse on indigenous ethics in the novel and brings the attention to what Stangerup’s book has to say about ‘knowledge’, ‘civilization’, and ‘evolution’¹³. While the European scientist’s rational mind is initially opposed to the irrationality of a local community of *naturbørn* (‘children of nature’), then, as the novel progresses, things are turned on end and Lund’s belief that nature can be understood through scientific observation and hierarchical classification appears more irrational than the natives’ faith in supernatural powers. Their *overtro* (‘super-stition’) mirrors Lund’s ‘overnaming’, an act of super-im-

10 John Charles Ryan, *Writing the Lives of Plants: Phytography and the Botanical Imagination*, in «a/b: Auto/Biography Studies», 35 (2020), 1, p. 97-122: 98.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 101-102. Phytography can thus be seen as one way in which the field of Critical Plant Studies finds expression in literary writing.

12 Anna M. Lawrence, *Listening to Plants: Conversations between Critical Plant Studies and Vegetal Geography*, in «Progress in Human Geography», 46 (2022), 2, p. 629-651: 636.

13 *Ibid.*

posing scientific definitions that ends up becoming a limitation in his search for meaning.

What can be said about Stangerup's practice of phytographia? How is the scientist's gradual awareness of the *language* of plants depicted in the novel? How do plants inscribe themselves into the narrative and shape Dr Lund's change in perspective? What narrative strategies are employed to render vegetal language? What is the outcome of this remarkable confrontation between a systematic study of plant life according to Western standards and a local, animistic, approach to nature?

In other words, what do plants know that P.W. Lund does not?

2. SEEING IS BELIEVING: THE SCIENTIFIC GAZE, EXPLORATION, RELIGION

When P.W. Lund sets foot in Brazil, his principal tool of achieving knowledge about an unfamiliar territory is the sense of sight. In Rio de Janeiro, this «sanitary North European» observes the crowds from «a safe distance» and elaborates strategies to avoid touching anything from fear of contracting syphilis, a disease visible in the faces and madness of the people filling the plazas, and one he rapidly proceeds to classify as the Devil's work, the lowest in a hierarchy of diseases including yellow fever, consumption, leprosy, stomach infections, muscular atrophy, rheumatism, and gangrene¹⁴. The centrality of vision in Lund's attempt to understand and create order sits not only within the Western tradition of scientific observation, but also within the 'oculocentric' genre of travel literature¹⁵. With specific attention to exploration writing, Mary Louise Pratt has singled out a traveling subject she calls the 'seeing-man', an admittedly «unfriendly» definition of «the white male subject of European landscape discourse – he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess»¹⁶. In an article on the visual in travel writing, Giorgia Alù and Sarah Patricia Hill trace this 'Western gaze' back to the one-point perspective system developed in Renaissance art, often emphasizing disparities for dramatic effects: «[t]he logic of the gaze in modern Western culture originated from the geometrical construction of pictorial space in the Renaissance period and stressed the viewer's position of power over the object. It

14 Cf. *RtLS*, p. 45-48 (*VtLS*, p. 41-44: 42: «de hygiejniske nord-europæere»).

15 Cf. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routledge, New York 1992.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

created a hierarchy and static arrangement between the seer and the seen, observer and observed»¹⁷. In line with the logic of the Western gaze and the eyes of a European ‘scientist-as-adventurer’, Stangerup draws on stereotypical descriptions of Amazonia as ‘virgin ground’ and ‘green hell’, and when contemplating the African slaves in Rio in comparison to the «civilized European», Dr Lund determines them to be superstitious and primitive, «a wild offshoot of humanity [...] from a remote past»¹⁸. Here, the clinical eye of the scientist meets the top-down gaze of the travelling explorer.

As a European man of science moving through a foreign land, it is through sight that Dr Lund discriminates the form, surface, and colour of the botanical species. His scientific gaze, described as remarkably broad and sharp even in the dark, allows him to organize this knowledge:

Dr. Lund can see nearly one hundred eighty degrees around him. [...] there will be no plant, bush, or shrub which he does not recognize. [...] As darkness falls [...] he can still picture all the trees and bushes of the campo, as in his mind the dry, sometimes leathery, sometimes brittle, consistency of their dull dingy green links up with their names: *Murcia*, *Eugenia*, *Psidium*, *Cassia*, *Mimosa*, *Acacia*, *Byrsonima*, *Kielmyra*, *Davilla*, *Bombax*, *Anacardium*, *Zeyheria montana*¹⁹.

Perfectly oblivious to any pre-existing local names given to the species, Dr Lund ‘baptizes’ the tropical flora with Latin nomenclatures, thus establishing a human-plant relation which can be considered as an act of ‘mastery’ from at least two points of view. Firstly, in the context of ‘the vegetal turn’, as Prudence Gibson observes, the concept of ‘mastery’ designates «the colonial practices of naming and classifying plants without considerations for Indigenous knowledge»²⁰. According to the ‘mastery’-discourse, ‘(re)naming’ and ‘classifying’ gives the one who names and classifies the power to dominate and possess²¹.

17 Giorgia Alù – Sarah Patricia Hill, *The Travelling Eye: Reading the Visual in Travel Narratives*, in «Studies in Travel Writing», 22 (2018), 1, p. 1-15: 4.

18 *RtLS*, p. 46: «en vildt voksende udviklingsgren [...] fra en urtid» (*VtLS*, p. 42).

19 *RtLS*, p. 16 and 18: «Dr Lund er i stand til at se i en vinkel på næsten hundredfirs grader. [...] der [vil] ikke være den urt, den busk og den halvbusk han ikke genkender. [...] han ser stadig alle camposegnes træer og buske for sig mens der bliver mørkere [...] og i hans hjerne mødes deres tørre, snart læderagtige, snart sprøde konsistens af mat, smudsiggrøn farve med deres betegnelser: *Murcia*, *Eugenia*, *Psidium*, *Cassia*, *Mimosa*, *Acacia*, *Byrsonima*, *Kielmyra*, *Davilla*, *Bombax*, *Anacardium*, *Zeyheria montana*» (*VtLS*, p. 14), italics in the original.

20 Gibson, *Herbaria and Dark Botany*, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

21 Stangerup winks his eye to the tradition common among European naturalists

Name-giving has been seen as an exercise of dominion also in a scientific-theological context. In an article discussing the theological background of Linnaean classification, Peter Harrison clarifies how the early-modern taxonomic endeavours were given religious legitimacy²². By departing from the supposition according to which Linnaeus saw himself as a second Adam – on par with the first man on earth and like him a name-giver, superior to other species – Harrison relates Linnaeus' scientific mission to a religious vocation. In line with the Latin phrase *Deus creavit, Linnaeus disposuit* (God created, Linnaeus organized), famously known as the Swedish naturalist's motto, the role of the taxonomist was to make God's rational plan for the universe manifest. Thus, in the footsteps of Linnaeus and already from childhood – as young Peter Wilhelm and his brother make attempts to decode the numerical system according to which the cuckoo calls – Dr Lund is convinced that there is a divine order in nature, one that can and should be represented mathematically to reflect the wisdom of God. The scientist's recital of Latin nomenclatures in the Amazonian wilderness then reads as a declaration of faith, a contemplation of God's divine system of nature where nothing is supernatural or chaotic. In Stangerup's words:

To call anything in God's plan supernatural or contrary to reason is to isolate it from God, who is at one with the Order of Reason. Superstition, to which the Brazilians abandon themselves, is a mere lack of faith. 'A faith must be capable of being articulated,' Oersted would say. *Murcia, Eugenia, Psidium...* that is to articulate the faith. *Cassia, Mimosa, Acacia ...* [...] to describe the Creator's plan²³.

to self-name plants of their own 'discovery'. While Linnaeus humbly named a small pink twinflower *Linnaea Borealis*, Dr Lund finds a boisterous bright-red plant to be the vegetal incarnation of the high-handed naturalist Peder Clausen *aka* Pedro Claudio Dinamarquez. Cf. *RtLS*, p. 265: «the strange eriocaulácea with its long-shaped inflorescence up to three feet high, crimson red. '*Praepalanthus claussonianus!*' suggests Dr. Lund»; «den mærkelige eriocaulácea med langskafte blomsterstande op til en meter i højden, karmoisinrøde. '*Praepalanthus claussonianus!*' foreslår Dr Lund» (*VtLS*, p. 261), italics in the original. Peder Clausen (1801-1872) is another historical character in the book, an uprooted emigrant and the progenitor of numerous children in the area around Minas Gervais. I cannot agree with Per Johns' reading according to which Clausen is Dr Lund's «alter ego» because, as a difference from the latter, Clausen is fully 'uprooted' and able to adapt to the local feudal system to the point of becoming Brazilian whilst Lund dies as an exile, cf. Per Johns, *Mørkets hjerte*, in *Henrik Stangerup*, red. Iben Holk, Odense Universitetsforlag, Odense 1986, p. 137-145: 139.

²² Peter Harrison, *Linnaeus as a Second Adam? Taxonomy and the Religious Vocation*, in «Zygon», 44 (2009), p. 879-893.

²³ *RtLS*, p. 19: «At kalde noget i Guds plan for overnaturligt og i strid med

By contrast, as Dr Lund – triggered by paleontological findings and news about the advancement of evolutionary developmental biology – starts doubting in God’s orderly plan for a world of his own Creation, the scientist’s refined eyesight fails him. Then, as if magical realism were the only narrative mode with which the radical change in Dr Lund’s rational view of the world could be represented, his eyes, Stangerup writes, assuming the point of view of the natives, «melt» and turn into small puddles of water in the sand²⁴. No longer able to read newspapers and magazines, they are likewise unable to decipher Balzac’s satire on Cuvier, a naturalist who, like Linnaeus, believed that the way to make sense of biodiversity was to define hierarchies. Dr Lund’s eyes cannot bear the sight of the words that make up Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* although he is haunted by it: «he frequently has the urge to read the book himself, although he knows it will strain his eyes»²⁵.

It is only when his eyes no longer present a barrier to perception that the engagement with nature can involve other physical senses. As the Western scientific gaze abandons the traveling explorer, Dr Lund tunes in to the voice of nature that has been trying to make itself heard from the very beginning of the novel. As he starts understanding their indications, he gradually enters into a reciprocal communication with the elements:

Can trees tell tales? Can flowers point the way?

Can the wind gossip? Can it whisper from fazenda to fazenda, from senzala to senzala, and all the way out to the tiniest, most isolated caboclo huts?

But the *bones* down in the red earth beneath the protective calcareous crust! What do they say?

Dr. Lund feels as if every bush in the caatinga knows him. Knows what he is seeking, and whispers the message to all the hinterland caves²⁶.

fornuften er at isolere det fra Gud der er et med fornuftsordenen, og overtroen, den som brasilianerne hengiver sig til, har ingen tro. Navnet lyver: en tro må kunne udtales, som Ørsted ville sige det. *Murcia, Eugenia, Psidium...* det er at udtale troen. *Cassia, Mimosa, Acacia ...* det er [...] at beskrive Guds plan» (*VtLS*, p. 15), italics in the original.

²⁴ *RtLS*, p. 194 (*VtLS*, p. 189).

²⁵ *RtLS*, p. 250: «hele tiden må han selv [...] læse i værket selvom han ved at hans øjne ikke kan tåle det» (*VtLS*, p. 246).

²⁶ *RtLS*, p. 20: «Kan træer sladre? Kan blomster vise vej?» (*VtLS*, p. 16); *RtLS*, p. 21: «Kan vinden sladre? Kan den hviske fra fazenda til fazenda, fra senzala til

In a short piece titled *Our Visual Focus – Ocularcentrism*, and with reference to Murray Schaefer’s idea that hearing is a way of touching at a distance, Morten Roar Berg suggests that hearing is «an evolution of our sense of touch, which connotes a feeling of closeness and intimacy»²⁷. To Dr Lund, who has chosen his scientific mission over affection and «in fear and wonder» over physical contact watched the «depraved» and «lascivious» Brazilians spread syphilis in the streets of Rio, the ability to *listen* enables a relational contact with nature, different from the anthropocentric approach assumed by his friend Peter Christian Kierkegaard. In contrast to phytographical philosophy, Kierkegaard seems to suggest that plants should care about what humans care about – i.e., the Christian idea of salvation – and that human-plant interaction can only occur through the means of *human* language:

Can one find consolation in the clouds when one implores infinity in agony? Can the rushes whisper about the absolution of sin, the resurrection of the flesh, and of life eternal?

How can we understand a flower without language?²⁸

3. THE COUNTER-GAZE: A CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE

Dr Lund’s need to learn a new language which is not only sense but also sensibility is linked to the discourse on primitivism in the novel. What forms of life are ‘primitive’ and ‘inferior’? What forms of language are intelligible? When framing the reciprocal gaze between the Danish scientist and the indigenous inhabitants, Stangerup establishes a curious relational dynamic in which identities blur and mix, superior becomes inferior, evolution becomes involution. As the

senzala og helt ud til de mindste afsides beliggende caboclo-hytter?» (*ViLS*, p. 16); *RiLS*, p. 125: «Men hvad siger *knoglerne* nere i den røde jord under dem beskyttende kalkskorpe?» (*ViLS*, p. 121); «Der er som om hver busk i caatingaen kender Dr. Lund, ved hvad han søger og hvisker det til alle hulerne i oplandet» (*ViLS*, p. 129), italics in the original.

27 Our visual focus (part 1) – Ocularcentrism, in «AcousticBulletin», <<https://www.acousticbulletin.com/our-visual-focus-part-1-ocularcentrism/>> (last access: 19 September 2025).

28 *RiLS*, p. 79: «Kan man snakke hermeneutisk udviklingslære med en bæk? Kan man få trøstende svar af skyerne når man i dødsangst råber mod uendeligheden? Kan sivene hviske syndernes forladelse, kødets opstandelse og det evige liv?» (*ViLS*, p. 75); «Hvordan forstå en blomst uden sproget?» (*ViLS*, p. 75).

local population stares back at the foreign other, it is the civilized man who is perceived as a cave man, a *trogldoyte* – because that is how the Danish language sounds to their ears²⁹. In line with the development of the literary character Lund, at this stage his language is indeed full of limitations. Just like the Latin names of the plants in Amazonia cannot cover their meaning, the concept of ‘cave man’ (with reference to Lund’s work as a palaeontologist), is turned on its head. While in the eyes of P.W. Lund, the African slaves are antediluvian *urtidsmennesker*, «ignorant of the Fall of Man, from a remote past which makes them resistant where the civilized European succumbs», and the natives tribal savages «at some point between animal and man, on a stage [...] before the word *we* becomes the word *I* [...] with a collective memory and identical reflexes», the scientist’s obsession with the bones found in the caves leads the locals to give him the nickname *o homem das cavernas*³⁰. He and his assistant Brandt are looked upon «[l]ike exotic animals in a menagerie [...]. As people in Europe regard... apes, monsters, dwarves, bearded ladies»³¹. Again, Dr Lund’s bias against the local, tribal and ‘prehistoric’ society seems to foreshadow the change in awareness he will mature by the end of his life as concerns his own place in the world. But before reaching this understanding, Dr Lund sees humans as individuals with an ‘I-ness’ that separates them from their environment and places them in opposition to a collective and on top of a hierarchy, all according to the divine order of nature:

«We have thus seen how [...] Nature approaches its goal to release the individual from the earth. Man [...] is liberated [...]. For the first time on Earth the sound ‘I’ is heard, and with this word the process of separation between the individual and the world is signed and sealed.» *I!* The envious stones understand him. The trees nod to him in a melancholy way and longingly stretch out their branches to him. [...] The clouds greet him as if he were their equal. The sun warms him with camaraderie while he wanders

29 «Sådan lyder dansk i deres ører» (*ViLS*, p. 17; literally, «that is how Danish sounds to their ears»). In this case the English version of the novel has opted for a liberal translation, cf. «[t]his word for caveman [...] has become his nickname» (*RiLS*, p. 21), a choice which unfortunately loses sight of Stangerup’s wit.

30 *RiLS*, p. 46: «uden begreb om syndefaldet, fra en urtid det gør dem modstandsdyktige hvor den civiliserede europæer bukker under» (*ViLS*, p. 42); *RiLS*, p. 46: «midt mellem dyret og mennesket, på et trin [...] lige inden ordet *vi* bliver till ordet *Jeg* [...] med kollektiv erindring og ens reflekser» (*ViLS*, p. 101); *RiLS*, p. 204 (*ViLS*, p. 199), italics in the original.

31 *RiLS*, p. 202: «Som fremmede dyr i menagerierne! Som man i Europa be- tracter... aber, monstrer, dværge og skæggede damer» (*ViLS*, p. 197).

freely over the Earth. The humble wildflowers painfully comprehend that he has penetrated their innermost mystery as he carefully presses them into a herbarium and with his steel pen describes them in a detailed treatise³².

The interesting aspect of passages like this one is that Lund paradoxically delivers his anthropocentric credo with attention to the perspective of more-than-human matter – stones, trees, clouds, plants, the sun – thus promoting an agency and a loquacity of the natural elements that contradicts the thesis of man's 'otherness' in respect to his environment. This form of magical realism reads environmental behaviours through a human lens, interpreting the first-person narrative voices of the natural elements as an expression of admiration, support, or homage to man:

Nature understands him and does everything to help him. The plants nod approvingly, the crystals glitter in the sunshine far ahead on the path. The birds, the *bem-te-vi*, the *sabiá*, and the first tyrannids whistle him onward, fully aware that at this decisive moment of his life he has no time to study them. They are his fellow conspirators, grateful to him for having classified them so thoroughly, just as the plants thank him for all the times he pressed them into the herbarium. «Take care of the bag!» whisper the stunted trees to him. [...] «Forgive us for the torment we caused you! Every cut! Every attack of fever! Forgive us, forgive us!» whisper all the animals and plants. [...] Someday, he thinks, someday many years hence, this country, this wildlife, will also be civilized. Many naturalists will follow in his footsteps, inspired by his example, to study and classify³³.

32 *RtLS*, p. 96: «Vi havde saaledes set hvorledes Naturen [...] kom sit Maal nærmere, at løsrive Individet fra Jorden. Mennesket [...] er frit; [...] for første gang høre paa Jordens Overflade Lyden: Jeg, og med dette Ord er Separationsprocessen mellem Individet og Omverdenen underskrevet of forseglet'. *Jeg!* Stenene forstår ham, jaloux. Træerne nikker melankolsk til ham og strækker længselsfuldt deres grene efter ham. [...] Skyerne hilser ham, som er han næsten deres ligemand. Solen varmer han kammeratligt på hans frie færd på Jorden mens de usle vejplanter med smerte forstår at han har gennemskuet deres inderste hemmelighed når han omhyggeligt presser dem i herbarium og med stålpenen beskriver dem i en grundig afhandling» (*VtLS*, p. 92), italics in the original.

33 *RtLS*, p. 213: «Naturen forstår ham og sætter alt ind på at hjælpe ham. Planterne nikker billigende til ham, krystallerne reflekterer solen flere kilometer frem af stien, *bemtivien*, *sabiáen* og årets første tyrannider fløjter ham fremad, fremad, velvidende at han ikke i denne afgørende stund af sit liv har tid til at studere dem. De er hans sammensvorne, taknemmelige over at han så grundigt har klassificeret dem ligesom planterne takker ham for alle gange han pressede dem i herbarium. 'Pas på kufferten!' hvisker de forkrøblede træer til ham. [...] 'Tilgiv os alle smerter vi forvoldte dig! Hver en rift! Hvert anfald af feber! Tilgiv os, tilgiv os!' hvisker alle dyrene og alle planterne [...]. En dag, tænker han, en dag om mange år vil også dette land og denne natur blive civiliseret, mange vil komme i hans fodspor, opildnede af hans eksempel, for at studere og klassificere» (*VtLS*, p. 210).

The belief that the Amazonian flora should be approached through observation and classification makes Dr Lund guilty of arrogance, perhaps even ignorance, as he tries to educate the local *doutores* on the subject of indigenous plants species, renamed in Latin:

Not infrequently Dr. Lund must discuss one thing or another with them, and it amuses him to test them to see if they are worthy of their degree, especially the ones who pass themselves off as botanists. The *Malvacea* family? A sigh. No answer. The *Compositae* order? A blush. And the *Euphorbiaceae* family? Out with the smelling salts. No answer³⁴.

But, again, when Stangerup, true to the strategy of the counter-gaze, switches the point of view to that of the Brazilian *doutores* the image we get of the Linnaean botanist – covered with grime, scratched and burned, negligent of all primary, physiological needs – draws close to the stereotypical portrayal of the ‘foolish virtuoso’, one of Roslynn B. Haynes’ seven prototypes recurring in literary representations of scientists. Better known as the ‘nutty professor’, this is the scatterbrained scientist, out of touch with social intercourse and obsessed with his research to the point of becoming an unkempt, almost comic character:

[W]hat [is it] that Danish scientist knows so much more about than they[?] Why in the world does he bother kneeling there in the red soil with perspiration rolling down his face, making his spectacles continually slip down his nose? Why study so diligently and make notes on the difference between the light-violet heads of the genus *Eupatorineae* and the vine-like members of the genus *Vernonia* which grow among the hedges and sometimes completely cover them with a curtain of white fragrant flowers? What is so special about the *Tagete minuta* species with elongated cylindrical flowers with tiny pale yellow ligulate flowers like vestments? [...] Along with *Leonorus tartaricus* [...] the most common wayside plant [...]. Can this be of interest to any serious rational being? [...] «Yes! Yes, *precisely!*» Dr. Lund might growl, irritable in the humid heat, his nails caked with red soil, his spectacles spotted, and his trousers torn. But he must restrain himself from finishing his sentence, «...if, to be sure, one is a rational being!»³⁵

34 *RtLS*, p. 93: «Dr. Lund må ofte i diskussion med dem om snart det ene, snart det andet, og han morer sig i sit stille sind med at prøve om de er deres grad værdige, især de der giver sig ud for at være botanikere. Familien *Malvacea*? Prusten og stønnen. Intet svar. Ordenen *Compositae*? Rømmen og rødmen. Intet svar. Og familien *Euphorbiaceae*? Frem med lugtesaltet. Intet svar» (*ViLS*, p. 89-90), italics in the original.

35 *RtLS*, p. 94-95: «Hvad er det denne danske forsker ved så meget bedre end de[?] At han gider ligge der, på knæ i den røde jord, med sveden drivende ned over ansigtet så brillerne hele tiden glider af hans næse, og ihærdigt undersøge og berette

It seems to me that the question ‘what is a thinking human being?’ explicitly states the theme that ties the different parts of the narrative together. Through the representation of Peter Wilhelm Lund, Stangerup challenges preconceptions and questions the meaning of epithets like ‘serious’, ‘civilized’ and ‘human’. The novel shows us that a scientist who seeks meaning only through a Linnaean method of observation, collecting, and organization, through reading, note-taking, correcting, and copying out, from another point of view identifies as an inhuman researcher, a cave man, a troglodyte, and a bookish fool — an obnoxious one: «with Linnaeus as the one who started it all and handed on the torch, he will once again find inspiration and incentive. He reads again. He savours the ingenious and brilliant ability of the letters to form that irreplaceable quality which is called Meaning»³⁶.

4. THE PHYTOGRAPHICAL TURN

The role that plants play in Dr Lund’s process of becoming human is emphasized through gardening, an activity which has also been seen as an act of mastery. In their introduction to the field of Critical Plant Studies, Wendy Woodward and Erika Lemmer recall Yi-Fu Tuan’s dismissal of the ‘innocence’ of gardening. They write: «[f]or him, gardening is all about power, about the transformation of a landscape and the cultivation of plants according to the will of the gardener»³⁷. In Lagoa Santa, P.W. Lund moves into a house that used to belong to a missionary, a man whose approach to gardening resembles a European exhibition of power: a «Latin feudal mania for planting geometric beds and trimming bushes and shrubs into cubes,

om forskellen mellem familien *Eupatorineæes* lysviolette blomsterhoveder of familien *Vernonias* slyngede urter der gror ind i hækkene og sommetider helt bedækker dem med et gardin af hvide, duftende blomsterduske. Og arten *Tagete minuta* med langstrakte, cylindriske blomster med ganske små, bleggule tungeblomster som ornat [...] Ligesom *Leonorus tartaricus* [...], det almindeligste ukrudt langs landevejen [...]: kan dét beskæftige et seriøst tænkende menneske? [...] ‘Ja! Ja, *netop!*’ kan Dr. Lund finde på at snerre, irriteret i den fugtige hede, med rød jord oppe under neglene, brillerne fedtet til og rifter i buksene, men så bremser han sig for det meste i at fuldføre sætningen: ‘... hvis man vel at mærke *er* et tænkende menneske!’» (*VtLS*, p. 90-91), italics in the original.

³⁶ *RtLS*, p. 201: «med Linné som den der satte det hele i gang och rakte faklen videre, skal han påny finde inspiration og fremdrift. Han læser atter. Han nyder bogstavernes kunstfærdige og geniale evne til at danne dette uerstattelige der hedder mening» (*VtLS*, p. 196).

³⁷ Wendy Woodward – Erika Lemmer, *Introduction: Critical Plant Studies*, in «Journal of Literary Studies», 35 (2019), 4, p. 23-27.

as if this were the park at Versailles»³⁸. However, the old scientist's concern for and identification with the more-than-human lives in this garden is a sign of his changing mindset:

Each plant must be cared for individually, each bush pruned in its own way, and if Dr. Lund accidentally cuts off a live branch or even a green leaf, the plants pain spreads up through his arms and paralyzes him till the bush begins to breathe again and stretch out to the sun. He rakes the paths scrupulously, careful to let the most crystalline pebbles lie as they please³⁹.

Two aspects are of interest in this passage: the recognition that other beings, not only humans, have an 'I-ness' and a will, and the acknowledgment that man cannot be separated from his environment – humans and nature are mutually linked in ecological forms of connection. In the monograph *Climate and Crises: Magical Realism as Environmental Discourse*, Ben Holgate studies how the narrative modes of magical realism can overlap with environmental literature⁴⁰. According to Holgate, magical realism and ecological thinking are «natural allies» and can be employed strategically to empower non-human beings and environments⁴¹. Combined with a postcolonial approach, this alliance can give voice to the silenced: humans, animals, and plants. In Stangerup's novel, the means and narrative modalities of magical realism efficiently counterpoints the scientific rationalism, individualism, and dogmatic religious creed that has formed P.W. Lund's worldview. Recovering a pre-modern and pre-logic ontology, where the supernatural is an integral part of the natural, a different relation between the self and the other – both plants and humans – becomes possible. The scientist thus discovers an alternative knowledge of nature that challenges his post-Enlightenment and colonial approach to botany – but whether this is a result of a descent into

38 *RtLS*, p. 145: «latinsk-feudale mani med at plante alting i geometriske bede og klippe buskene og småtræerne kubusformede som drejer det sig om parken i Versailles» (*VtLS*, p. 141).

39 *RtLS*, p. 240: «Hver eneste plante skal behandles individuelt. Hver busk skal beklippes på sin egen måde, og kommer Dr Lund ved en fejltagelse til at klippe en frisk gren eller selv et blad der ikke er visnet af, forplanter buskens smerte sig op gennem hans arme så han i lang tid må stå helt stille indtil busken atter kan ånde og strække sig mod solen. Stjerne river han omhyggeligt, på en sådan måde at de mest krystalholdige småsten bliver liggende som de selv bedst bryder sig om det» (*VtLS*, p. 235).

40 Ben Holgate, *Climate and Crises: Magical Realism as Environmental Discourse*, Routledge, London-New York 2019.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

folly or a logical consequence of listening to the local knowledge is left unsaid, in line with the ambiguity that surrounds P.W. Lund's destiny both in real life and in fiction⁴².

True to the discourse regarding the gaze and the counter-gaze, Stangerup allows us to read Lund's conversion from two points of view: as a radically new understanding coming from a man who is beginning to reject the theories on which he has built his scientific career, or, as a sign of the madness of a scientist whose foundations are shaken by Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection. When the young botanist Warming joins Lund in Lagoa Santa in 1863, the old scientist has become a legend who defends «the odd notion that one can speak to the flowers if one understands their secret language»⁴³. As a matter of fact, if at an earlier stage in the novel the botanical world is anthropomorphized through the use of an almost human first-person language then, as Dr Lund mediates between human and plant language, a relational communication occurs and the flowers open in a collaborative interchange: «[t]o the rose, the words must be hummed. To the purple creeper on the wall, one must whistle after every fourth word. To the thistles, one must growl very softly. All the flowers unfold when the Doctor wishes them to»⁴⁴. Phytography emerges, John Charles Ryan writes, «at the intersection of vegetal and human languages»⁴⁵.

When the Danish botanist Johannes Eugenius Bülow Warming (1841-1924), author of the text *Plantefamfund* (1895; *Oecology of Plants. Introduction to the Study of Plant Communities*, 1909), and said to be the first researcher to have adapted the concept of ecology to the study of plants, comes to Lagoa Santa with a new way of thinking about botanical communities, Stangerup presents him as follows:

42 Hagedorn Thomsen and Ørum both see madness in the literary character that Dr Lund turns into after his crisis, although Ørum observes that the novel ends with a 'harmonizing moral': «Lund gives up on the traditional, white and European, presumption and domination thinking, for example by accepting the local witch doctor, by assuming the role of a healer [...] and by adopting a boy of mixed race»; «Lund opgiver sin traditionelle hvide europæiske bedreven, sin herredømetænkning – f. eks ved at acceptere den lokale heksedoktor, selv fungere som naturlæge [...] og adoptere en mulat drenge», Ørum, *Vejen til Lagoa Santa, op. cit.*, p. 113 (my translation).

43 *RtLS*, p. 259: «mærkelige ideer om at man kan tale til blomsterne om blot man kan forstå deres hemmelige sprog» (*VtLS*, p. 255).

44 *RtLS*, p. 273: «Rosen skal ordene nynnnes til. De lilla syngblomster op ad muren skal der fljøtes til efter hvert fjerde ord. Tidselblomsterne skal det brummes ganske svagt til. Alle åbner de sig når Doktoren vil» (*VtLS*, p. 268).

45 Ryan, *Writing the Lives of Plants, op. cit.*, p. 10.

[H]e does not like herbariums which press all the sap out of plants [...] the new botany ought not content itself with merely classifying and describing a plant in isolation from its surroundings. The divine fitness of a plant, developed in its struggle to survive, is comprehensible only through knowledge of the soil, neighboring plants, bees, and other insects with which it has contact, climate, shade and sun and the night dew. [...] *The great chain of being* [...] if a single link in the chain is lost or forgotten, then the vision of the sum total of fitness is destroyed or blurred⁴⁶.

At the end of *The Road to Lagoa Santa*, Stangerup shows us how Warming's vision of nature as arranged into ecological communities, instead of into hierarchies, extends into the surrounding society of humans. Barriers between the organization of plants and that of humans seem to break down as Dr Lund's adopted son Nereo, a child of nature believed to be 'in need of education', refuses to leave for Denmark. As he departs alone, Warming is now «more convinced than ever of the rightness of his theory that all things must be seen in their proper context and that no link can be isolated from the chain»⁴⁷.

CONCLUSIONS

This plant-centred reading of *Vejen til Lagoa Santa* has addressed the interaction between the Amazon rainforest and Dr Peter Wilhelm Lund. After a lifetime of approaching the tropical flora armed with herbaria and a toolbox of European scientific paradigms, Stangerup's botanist develops a sensitivity to the language of plants that stimulates a shift in his hierarchical, anthropocentric worldview. Reading *The Road to Lagoa Santa* as a novel containing examples of phytographical writing raises questions about how the voices of plants can be perceived and translated into human language without stigma of anthropocentrism. According to John Charles Ryan, «the challenge for the human writer of plant lives is to sense, listen, and allow in a state of suspended

46 *RtLS*, p. 263: «[han kan] ikke lide de herbarier der presser al saften ud af planterne [...] må den ny botanik ikke stille sig tilfreds med blot at klassificere og beskrive planten løsrevet fra sine omgivelser. En plantes guddommelige hensigtsmæssighed, udviklet i kampen for at overleve, kan kun forstås ved at man forstår dens jordbund, dens naboplanter, benemner alle de insekter den har kontakt med, klimaet, skygge og sol og nattens dug. *Livets lange kæde* [...]: ødelægger man et led i kæden, eller lader man det ude af syne, ødelægger eller slører man blikket for den samlede sum af hensigtsmæssighed» (*VtLS*, p. 258-259), italics in the original.

47 *RtLS*, p. 267: «overbevidst om sin teori om at alt skal ses i sin rette sammenhæng og at man ikke må isolere et led fra dets kæde» (*VtLS*, p. 263).

judgement» and the practice of phytography must be grounded «in an empathic regard for individual plants as subjects with particular lifeworld experiences»⁴⁸. In Stangerup's portrayal, P.W. Lund emerges as a scientist who reaches an alternative, ecological, understanding of the botanical world when the sense of sight is decentred in favour of an hitherto unexperienced olfactory, haptic, and auditive sensibility: «It is as if he can smell all the flowers on the peak of Serra da Piedade – as if he can hear them whispering softly to one another», Stangerup concludes⁴⁹. In tune with the local, tribal context, this new approach encompasses an interaction where humans and plants are on an equal footing, and leads to a profoundly empathetic engagement with nature where the pain of a wrongly trimmed branch affects the scientist as if his own body were injured. In his old age, P.W. Lund's ways of knowing based on «[p]recision, observation, collection of data, classification» thus give way to a form of plant knowledge open to reciprocity and experimentation that goes beyond scientific inquiry⁵⁰. A new sense of duty of care emerges as P.W. Lund understands the ecological relationship that unites humans and plants, people and territories, in a community where no link can be isolated from the chain. Like in magical realism, an encounter between two opposing orders takes place: Lund's post-Enlightenment, empirical studies of nature adapt to a cultural practice in which it is logical to hire an orchestra to play for budding flowers⁵¹. Whether this is a descent into folly of a European scientist whose certainties are crumbling in reaction to Darwin's discoveries, or a culturally appropriate approach honouring a local way of knowing botany, can only depend on one's point of view. Personally, I see Stangerup's reading of P.W. Lund's life as an ecological narrative, a precious and, for its time, rather precocious invitation to consider non-Western and more-than-human ways of being and knowing.

A similar ambiguity surrounds the portrayal of Carl Linnaeus in the novel. Whilst Dr Lund, the plant collector, is obsessed with Linnaeus' systemic activity of classifying, naming and preserving, this stereotypical idea of the Swedish scientist as the Western 'other' is subtly contradicted both at the beginning and end of the narration. As if to suggest that communication between humans and plants is

48 Ryan, *Writing the Lives of Plants*, *op. cit.*, p. 100 and 101.

49 *RtLS*, p. 267: «Det er som om han kan lugte alle blomsterne på toppen af Serra da Piedade – og som hører han deres sagte hvisken til hinanden» (*VtLS*, p. 262).

50 *RtLS*, p. 55-56: «præcision, iagttagelse, indsamling af data, klassifikation» (*VtLS*, p. 262).

51 *RtLS*, p. 271-272 (*VtLS*), p. 267.

a universal experience, the vision of Linnaeus as a man who talked to flowers, convinced that flowers have a soul, appears in the child Wilhelm's fantasies about his mentor⁵². This image frames magical realism as a mode of seeing the world that belongs in the rational Enlightenment era as well as in premodern societies. As the novel comes to its close, and Dr Lund has extinguished his «desire to give things names»⁵³, on his deathbed he visualizes not the Father of Taxonomy but Sara Lisa, Linnaeus's wife, picking flowers for her husband. With this dreamlike image, finally combining women and plants, we have come full circle: the association of women and plants in the closing image establishes a connection invisible to the scientist's gaze before his change in perspective. While *The Road to Lagoa Santa*, as we have seen, gives voice to silenced people and plants by inverting points of view and articulating agency, women remain in the shadow throughout the book. If Lund's rejection of Sarah and inability to choose human affection over his scientific mission is perfectly in line with stereotypical literary representations of 'inhuman scientists' as emotional analphabets, his last words to Nereo contradicts this portrait⁵⁴. Dr Lund's last words – *Amor, amor, amor* – and the fireworks – made from the scientific texts on which all his knowledge was formed – exploding in the sky at his funeral mark Dr Lund's profound conversion, dictated by the awareness of a plant voice that speaks of relationality.

52 *RtLS*, p. 33 (*VtLS*, p. 29).

53 *RtLS*, p. 278: «lyst til at give navne» (*VtLS*, p. 273).

54 Cf. Haynes, *From Faust to Strangelove, op. cit.*, p. 74-93 (Ch. *Inhuman Scientists: The Romantic Perception*).

