Introduction

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As the last revised paper of this special issue made it to our mailboxes, at the end of an academic year plagued by the pandemic, the frontpage of *The Guardian* (10 August 2021) ran this large-print headline: "Global climate crisis: inevitable, unprecedented and irreversible". It accompanied the photograph of an elderly Greek woman captured in a tragic expression of sorrow on the backdrop of wildfire raging over her home island. That was the environmental crisis of the week, but the title referred more generally to the findings of a new bleak Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change document about the status of the environmental crisis at a planetary scale (2021). As part of the sixth and final cycle of an ongoing assessment slated to be finalized in 2022, the IPCC published its most updated scientific report, where it reiterated that: "It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land. Widespread and rapid changes in the atmosphere, ocean, cryosphere and biosphere have occurred." It confirmed that the scale and impact of these changes (in the ocean, ice sheets, and global sea level) has no precedents in history and that their lasting effect may be felt for centuries to millennia, while many extreme weather events of today are indubitably linked to such human-induced climate change. The dire prediction is that the continuous increase in global surface temperature is likely to last until at least the mid-century and that a global warming of 1.5°C and 2°C will be exceeded unless carbon dioxide (CO_2) and other greenhouse gases are drastically reduced in the coming decades.

Where do the Humanities stand in such a daunting scenario? In 2016 the Indian writer and scholar Amitav Ghosh took to task contemporary culture (and his own literary genre, the novel,

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in particular) for its inadequacy vis-à-vis the magnitude of the environmental crisis, expressing a damning indictment:

> In a substantially altered world, when sea-level rise has swallowed the Sundarbans and made cities like Kolkata, New York and Bangkok uninhabitable, when readers and museumgoers turn to the art and literature of our time, will they not look, first, and most urgently, for traces and portents of the altered world of their inheritance? And when they fail to find them, what should they – what can they – do other than to conclude that ours was a time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight? Quite possibly then, this era, which so congratulates itself on its self-awareness, will come to be known as the time of the Great Derangement. (Ghosh 2016: 11)

Ghosh's substantiates his diagnosis with an extensive cultural analysis that, among other things, remarks how the Anthropocene, the first geological era determined by human intervention, coincides with, and derives from the combined forces of capitalism and imperialism, in the same timeframe – we add – where English literature and literary studies have acquired their modern configuration. Concurring with him that "the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (9), we have conceived this issue of *Textus* as a small contribution to the necessary and urgent investigation into the multiple ways in which literature and literary studies can engage the 'great derangement' of our time.

Admittedly, as some of the essays here also demonstrate, literary authors and scholars have dealt with the relationships between humans and their environments for a long time, and the seeds of many forms of modern-day ecological thinking are to be found in literary traditions. Choosing a more recent perspective, we may usefully start from Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's seminal collection *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), which criticized the absence of ecological concerns from recent mappings of critical theory and literary methodologies that aimed at redrawing the boundaries of literary studies by proposing race, class, and gender as new regulative ideas of the field against more traditional approaches. A few years later, Jonathan Bate offered in *Song of the Earth* (2000) one of the first comprehensive ecological readings of English literature, complementing with a distinct British

voice the tradition of North American ecocriticism. Twenty years later, new models have emerged that urge a radical engagement with our predicament, and the Environmental Humanities now offers themselves (at least in the anglosphere) as a broader cultural and interdisciplinary academic paradigm that subsumes ecocriticism and aims at interpreting, critiquing, and ultimately transforming the imperilled world in which we live. The Environmental Humanities encourage us to move beyond both the linguistic and cultural turns that have dominated the last half a century (while adapting their hermeneutic tools) to grapple with the affective materiality of the world, the agency of non-human species and new models of temporality. Acquiring specific formations in different contexts, in the anglosphere the Environmental Humanities also invite us, at the interface with postcolonial and critical race theory, to explore the entanglements of the Anthropocene with the history of colonialism and imperialism alongside forms of racial and social injustice that still structure global politics, especially the impact on migration. The Environmental Humanities are now articulated in various subsets such as Ecopoetics, Animal Studies, Plant Studies, the Blue Humanities, Energy Humanities, and Medical Humanities, and participate in other broad theoretical paradigms such as the Posthuman Humanities, and the Digital Humanities, which consider the unprecedented impact of the digital and technological revolution on our lives and even cognitive processes. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of this approach and revealed the dangers of human tampering with the animal realm, our sense of global interconnectedness, and the importance of the Humanities in a public sphere afflicted by an interrogated but still apparent separation between the Sciences and the Humanities, the spreading of fake news, and conflictive political debate. Beyond this, the pandemic has also aggravated the state of the Humanities within their institutional frameworks, with Italy as an example where the sector of education and cultural industry have been left at the bottom of the list of political priorities and even more underfunded. In this light, even if now it is more difficult to believe Robert S. Emmett and David E. Nye's bold prediction that "ten years from now, the environmental humanities will likely be present in most universities", (2017: 6-7) it is imperative that we think of this as an institutional project as much as a conceptual and intellectual endeavour.

This issue has been a dialogue between Italy and the UK at many levels, and it may be interesting to observe, by way of example, how the same disciplinary designation is fleshed out in two different contexts. The University of Warwick has a concentration of Environmental Humanities across departments in the Faculty of Arts, including English and Comparative Literary Studies, Classics and Ancient History, Film and Television Studies, History, Global Sustainable Development, and Modern Languages. The Environmental Humanities Network also includes colleagues from Philosophy, Law, Politics, Life Sciences, Engineering and beyond, and is one of the most active research gatherings at the University. As a leader in the Environmental Humanities, the Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies houses a number of colleagues actively researching, teaching, and publishing on a geographical and historical range of concerns including biodiversity and habitat conservation, other-than-human worlds, food, urban development, resource extraction, and religion and ecology. Through a specific focus on climate change and the Anthropocene era via emergent energy regimes, sustainability, ecological imperialism, social reproduction, religious ethics, and environmental justice, the group are in the process of developing an MA in Environmental Humanities to address student demand for positive forms of net-zero knowledge and action.

Ca' Foscari's *laurea magistrale* (master's degree) in Environmental Humanities is the first of its kind in Italy and can trace its development from earlier engagements with ecocriticism and postcolonialism. The success and innovation of the program, however, is due to its establishment as a truly transdisciplinary program that incorporates the Natural Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities within the framework of Anthropology (mainly because of Anthropology's bureaucratic capaciousness). Not only does Environmental Humanities have no *Settori Scientifico-Disciplinari*, but the complex architecture of Italian degrees is such that within a degree in Modern Languages there is no space whatsoever for the Natural Sciences, and within a degree in Sciences there is no space for Humanities. Ministry tables show how degrees in Philosophy and History have a surprising lack of flexibility in terms of accommodating interdisciplinarity. Despite these challenges, the *laurea magistrale* in Environmental Humanities has benefited

from the work of many literary scholars actively practicing various forms of interdisciplinary ecocriticism. To repeat an observation made in the Venetian context, many scholars are engaged in the Environmental Humanities even if they do not know it.

Granted that the Environmental Humanities do not live in a vacuum and will always have to negotiate their existence in their academic and non-academic milieus, their core mission is the interpretation of texts. This issue recognizes the need of complex narratives to understand the past and present and imagine a different future by analysing the state of the art of environmental and ecocritical approaches to literary studies, its multiple ramifications, its critical vocabularies, literary cartographies, and new directions. Our goal was to collect essays dealing with specific topics and case studies that could exemplify recent tendencies, interdisciplinary directions, and comparative literary explorations. We were not aiming at an exhaustive cartography since luckily this is already an impossible task and we consider it a success to have been able to include essays that range from the early modern to the postmodern and the postcolonial via the Georgian, the Romantic, the Victorian, and the Modernist, mixing the canonical and the eccentric. We also feel privileged to have welcomed Italian and British voices and to have covered all major literary genres (fiction, poetry, drama).

We start with Shakespeare, who has predictably benefitted from multiple ecocritical interpretations both for its canonical centrality and for the infinite capaciousness of his oeuvre. In "The Wild Field: Stormbraining the Complex Rhythms of *King Lear*", Rocco Coronato tackles one of the most frequently examined plays, noticing how the wasteland and storm that iconically define *King Lear* have been more often than not read allegorically. Coronato challenges many accounts of the play to bring the extreme weather events back to their destructive material existence. By encompassing the early modern discourse on the storm as the visible manifestation of God's wrath, he considers how the storm was rendered in classical and early modern poetry by way of rhythmic variations and graphically displays the cumulative number of joint variations in metre throughout the play. This process recalls the nonlinear processes of complex systems, thus offering the storm in *King Lear* as a complex environment where notions of causality and analogy are perturbed. Serena Baiesi guides us to another classic author. Recalling how

present-day notions and imaginings of climate change are informed by conceptualizations and tropes deriving from Romantic literature, in "Mary Shelley and the Anthropocene: An Eco-feminist Reading of *The Last Man*", Baiesi examines the novel from an ecofeminist perspective. She shows how the postapocalyptic story of the last survivor of a twenty-first century plague offers a representation of the non-human world ('nature') that is far less optimistic than that of Shelley's fellow Romantic authors. The novel also questions the sexual politics of the period by embracing fluidity in gender roles and ultimately representing a range of literary voices that respond, react to, and constantly engage with, the non-human world.

English culture meets the Italian landscape in Sarah Hughes' "Losing Eden: Ruskin and the Anthropocene in the Veneto and England". Two centuries before Ghosh, she suggests, Ruskin raised ecological and conservational concerns about Venice in his writings on the Venetian Lagoon and the English Lake District, described both as fragile landscapes and sacred spaces. Defining him as a "spiritual-spatial thinker", Hughes argues that "In *The Stones of Venice,* Ruskin flexes his analytical muscles in combining an aesthetic reading of art and architecture with a theological exploration of the sacred and divine", offering an analysis of his age that is prescient of Venice's predicament today. With Stefano Rozzoni's "The Georgians and the Environmental Imagination: Re-evaluating *Georgian Poetry (1911-1912)* through an Ecocritical Lens" we enter the twentieth century and address a specific literary output that the critic considers "a missing link between increasing ecocritical attention on Victorian and Modernist literature". Focusing on Edward Marsh's anthology *Georgian Poetry 1911-1912* (1912), Rozzoni rejects the notion that Georgian poets were simply perpetuating trite Romantic clichés of nature in a time of Modernist revolution and shows both how contemporary reviewers appreciated their innovative approach, and how an ecocritical perspective can 'resurrect the Georgians' and help restore their place in the history of English ecological cultures.

The two following essays engage the human/animal relationship, one of the central preoccupations of the Environmental Humanities. In "Modern(ist) fables. Notes on Some Animals Inhabiting Early 20th-century Short Stories", Paolo Bugliani addresses the literary representation of animals in two canonical authors such as Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf as well as a more marginal figure,

Mary Butts. Highlighting the distinct potential of the short story as a genre to enable writers to "conjoin […] the heightened symbolic power of the literary animal with a lively rethinking of traditional models, most notably myth and fable", Roberta Grandi deals with a popular author in "'Animals don't behave like men … They have dignity and animality': Richard Adams's *Watership Down* and interspecies relationships in the Anthropocene." Going against the mainstream representation of animals as anthropomorphic creatures reproducing human behaviour, *Watership Down* (1972), stages rabbit social organization to offer the reader a full immersion in the experience of these animals and an analysis of the contact zones between humans and animals. Grandi examines the defamiliarizing strategy adopted by Adams and the ways in which *Watership Down*'s animals can foster fruitful interspecies relationships and even form alliances with other creatures, transforming "animality" into the byword for a new, eco-centric non-exploitative attitude towards other fellow creatures.

Carmen Gallo deals with an ecologically inflected theatre in "*'Not Not Not Not Not Enough'*: Caryl Churchill's ecological drama and commitment" where she analyses Churchill's early engagement with ecological dramaturgy and imagination predating the 'anthropocentric turn' of the new millennium. Looking at three plays written between the 1970s and the 1990s, she shows how Churchill's powerful and disturbing dramatic experiences subvert our established thoughts and encourage us to imagine a world based on entirely different values. Moreover, they advocate intergenerational dialogue and call for a responsible future. Carmen Concilio crosses the borders of Europe and takes us to the postcolonial and North American space of three major novelists. In "The Garden as Democratic Space: Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, Richard Powers", Concilio thinks through the difficult labelling of novels as science-fiction, dystopian and postapocalyptic writing and notices that Lessing and Atwood explore the garden as a space where democracy is tested. This premise enables a stimulating comparison with Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018), where the entire planet with its forests might be considered as a garden to be taken care of. In this respect all the novels explore social justice, communitarian ideals – in fact utopias – giving voice to environmental projections of engagement and *cura*. Finally, Giulia

Champion explores the material and intellectual commodification and de-commodification of water in "'The River Has Been Put on Tap': Decolonising Water and Historiography in V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (1979) and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2011)". She reads two novels influenced by Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* that provide "counter-narratives of water domestication" to argue that the material and intellectual decolonization of water and water depictions play a crucial role in illuminating imperial and colonial relations of extinction to our current ecological crises.

In his recent volume significantly titled *Searching for the Anthropocene: A Journey into the Environmental Humanities*, Christopher Schaberg writes: "I have been searching for the Anthropocene for many years. But I've been *in* it for even longer– really, my whole life" (2020: 22). We have all been in it for our whole lives, and we offer this issue, with gratitude to the authors, the reviewers, and our copyeditor Marco Medugno, as another piece of equipment for new journeys into the Environmental Humanities, new explorations of familiar and original texts, as well as new pedagogical adventures.

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