

The Posthuman Poetry of Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen

Patricia Vieira

The essay analyzes the poetry of Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen from the perspective of recent theories on posthumanism. I argue that Andresen's body of work could be read as an example of posthuman literature, in that the author gives center-stage to animals, plants and things, who become active participants in her poetry. The article focuses specifically on the issue of language and contends that Andresen tacitly adopts a materialistic standpoint in her texts, foreshadowing what theorists such as Karen Barad or Rosi Braidotti have dubbed "agential realism" or "vital materialism." For Andresen, language is not separate from the materiality of the things themselves, and there is a continuity stretching from human language and literature to the existence of all other entities. The essay ends by teasing out the ethical consequence of such a stance.

Este ensaio analisa a poesia de Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen sob o ponto de vista de teorias recentes acerca do pós-humanismo. A obra de Andresen pode ser interpretada como um exemplo de literatura pós-humanista, já que a autora coloca os animais, as plantas e as coisas no centro da sua prática literária, tornando-se estes participantes ativos na sua poesia. O artigo concentra-se em particular na questão da linguagem e mostra que Andresen adota uma postura materialista implícita nos seus textos, prefigurando o que teóricas como Karen Barad e Rosi Braidotti definiram como "realismo agencial" ou "materialismo vital." Para Andresen, a linguagem não está separada das coisas em si, e há uma continuidade entre a língua e a literatura humanas e a existência de outras entidades. O ensaio termina elucidando a consequências éticas desta postura.

Humanity's Fall from Grace

The point of departure of Portuguese poet Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen's (1919–2001) texts is a recognition that the link between humans and the real has collapsed. Andresen is acutely aware of humankind's fall from an unmediated bond with actuality, a state of grace we purportedly enjoyed in a past Golden Age of existence or in an earthly Paradise, as the one portrayed in the Book of Genesis. She recognizes in various writings that we have lost touch with materiality, her poetry being an exploration of the momentous consequences resulting from such a predicament. In a poem titled "Our Lady of Rocha" ("Senhora da Rocha"), about the patron saint of a chapel perched on a narrow cape in the Algarve, the southernmost region of Portugal, Andresen writes: "You know that for us there is always / The moment when the alliance between man and things is broken" ("Tu sabes que para nós existe sempre / O instante em que se quebra a aliança do homem com as coisas," *OP III*, 15).¹ The poem is ostensibly about the inexorability of time and the fragility of existence, most notably that of fishermen who risk their lives at sea. But it hints at the fact that humanity's quandary can be traced back to a broken concord between humans and things, shipwrecks being only one of the outward signs of this disconnect.² For Andresen, the statue of Our Lady of Rocha inside the chapel is perpetually praying to restore the balance between her worshipers and their surroundings, between humans and the things upon which their lives depend.

In another poem, "Twilight of the Gods" ("Crepúsculo dos Deuses"), Andresen posits an age of harmony in ancient Greece that was destroyed with the end of Hellenic polytheistic culture: "But then they were extinguished / The ancient gods, the inner sun of things / And then the emptiness that separates us from things opened up" ("Mas eis que se apagaram / Os antigos deuses sol interior das coisas / Eis que se abriu o vazio que nos separa das coisas," *OP III*, 70). Classical Greek culture and its pantheon of goddesses and gods embodied for Andresen a gold standard of a balanced relation to the real that has been lost in Modernity. The Greek gods were humankind's way of interacting with what is and their disappearance spelled out our definitive separation from our environment. For Andresen, present-day humanity is clearly out of sync with actuality, a disjunction that is reflected on the gap between the name and the named and that, at the same time, results from this very breach.

Andresen says in an interview that "[poetry] is an energy that connects us to the cosmos, that creates a dialectical relationship with it" "[a poesia] é uma energia que nos liga ao cosmos, que estabelece uma dialéctica com ele," Vasconcelos). The statement presupposes a separation between humans and the cosmos that, through the dialectics that literature sets in motion, might

possibly come together again. In one of her best-known poems, “Muse” (“Musa”), Andresen asks for inspiration to create a poetry that would express the human affinity with all beings, which should shine forth in such a dialectical process:

Muse teach me the song
The exact brother of things
(. . .)

Muse teach me the song
In which I myself return
Without tardiness or haste
Becoming a plant or a stone

Or becoming a wall
Of the primordial house
Or becoming the murmur
Of the sea around it

(. . .)

Because time cuts across me
(. . .)
Time separates me alive
From the floor and the wall
Of the primordial house

(Musa ensina-me o canto
O justo irmão das coisas
(. . .)

Musa ensina-me o canto
Em que eu mesma regresso
Sem demora e sem pressa
Tornada planta ou pedra

Ou tornada parede
Da casa primitiva
Ou tornada o murmúrio
Do mar que a cercava

(. . .)

Pois o tempo me corta
(. . .)
E me separa viva

Do chão e da parede
 Da casa primitiva
OP II, 102–3)

In this poem, we find many of the recurrent tropes prevalent in Andre- sen's texts. It mentions the separation between us and the rest of the world as part of the human condition: our understanding of linear time divides us from things and from the primordial house itself, which could be interpreted metaphorically as a reference to nature. The poet asks her muse to teach her a song that would sew this rupture and mend our broken relationship to the real by functioning as the "exact brother of things," so as to reach the "intact order of the world" ("ordem intacta do mundo," *OP III, 67*). Poetry would thus have a kind of incantatory or magical function, words suturing the gap between us and actuality through a linguistic *fiat*.³

Andresen further entreats the muse to teach her a form of writing that would allow her to return, a somewhat cryptic expression since the place to which she wishes to go back to is never explicitly mentioned. Still, the poet explains that such a return would entail her becoming a plant, a stone, a wall of a house or the murmur of the sea: that is to say, she would become one with the things themselves. This process of transformation adds a layer of complexity to the desire to bridge the gap between humans and actuality through literature. For if one can turn into a plant or a stone, the rift between humans and the real is not an incommensurable abyss but rather a matter of degree. One might say that, more than a means to repair our broken bond with reality, perhaps the function of poetry is, rather, to show that there is no such rift. The place to which the poet wishes to return is, in this reading, an abode she has never truly left, namely, humankind's communion with the rest of existence. Current posthuman philosophies systematize this view of humanity as part of the material becoming that constitutes the world.

A Non-Anthropocentric View of Language

No doubt partly as a reaction against the perceived excesses of poststructuralism, contemporary thought has emphasized the lines of continuity stretching from non-humans to humans, and even from non-living to living beings. A variety of thinkers have criticized the poststructuralist view of language as an all-powerful means to shape reality and of culture as a human construction that is completely separate from the non-human sphere, which is often defined as "nature," for lack of a better term. Karen Barad, for instance, argues that "[l]anguage has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every 'thing'—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation. [. . . M]atters of 'fact'

(. . .) have been replaced with matters of signification (. . .)” (132). Representationalism is the name she gives to this understanding of the subject as “enmeshed in a thick web of representations such that the mind cannot see its way to objects that are now forever out of reach and all that is visible is the sticky problem of humanity’s own captivity within language” (137).⁴ What Barad is describing here is the exacerbation of the Babel predicament, namely, the view of language as a prison separating us from the real, which we can never fully grasp.

Against this understanding of the human subject as entrapped in her own mind, Barad puts forth her notion of agential realism, according to which “the primary semantic units are not ‘words’ but material-discursive practices through which (ontic and semantic) boundaries are constituted. This dynamism is agency” (141). The world is made up of phenomena, understood not as the result of a set of measurements performed by a subject on an object, but, rather, as the “ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting components” (33). In other words, different parts of the world articulate themselves—or act, one might say—in their own specific ways, their intra- (rather than inter-) action being what gives rise to phenomena, which do not pre-exist this relationship. Agential realism undoes, in one broad brushstroke, two deep-rooted principles structuring the view of human language as separated from the rest of actuality. First, it regards comprehensibility and, thus, language in a wide sense, as part of all matter. As a result, it decenters humans from their position as the sole beings capable of making sense of the world.⁵ “[I]n my agential realist account,” writes Barad, “intelligibility is an ontological performance of the world in its ongoing articulation. It is not a human-dependent characteristic but a feature of the world in its differential becoming. (. . .) Furthermore, knowing does not require intellection in the humanist sense, either” (149). For Barad the world is made up of intra-actions that give rise to the different configurations of what is. When we posit a division between matter and meaning, materiality and discursivity, nature and culture, we simply fail to acknowledge that “[h]umans are neither pure cause nor pure effect but part of the world in its open-ended becoming” (150). To rephrase her statement, we obsess about ourselves as special beings, and are therefore unable to see the proverbial forest to which we belong, with its thick web of significations that far surpasses our own.

Barad’s project is to bring the insights of modern physics, in particular the notion that all living and non-living beings are interconnected, to bear on the debate pitting idealism against materialism, constructivism against realism. Coming from a feminist background, Rosi Braidotti also demarcates her understanding of human subjectivity, knowledge and language from both postmodernism and deconstruction. She writes “that the posthuman subject is not postmodern, that is to say it is not anti-foundationalist. Nor

is it deconstructivist, because it is not linguistically framed. The posthuman subjectivity I advocate is rather materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded, firmly located somewhere” (51). In stressing the material substratum of posthumanism, following in a long lineage of monist philosophies that stretches at least as far back as Spinoza, Braidotti abolishes the Cartesian division between matter and mind, things and human language. “[. . . T]he common denominator for the posthuman condition is,” in her words, “an assumption about the vital, self-organizing and yet non-naturalistic structure of living matter itself. This nature-culture continuum is the shared starting point for my take on posthuman theory” (2). All living matter has an intrinsic vitality, and human language is just one among many possible forms of self-organization, one among an almost infinite array of ways to express this vitality.

For Braidotti, posthumanism is not a move beyond humanity, an after-human state more akin to what is now being dubbed transhumanism. The transhuman turn calls for a release of humans from their material substratum, often by resorting to cybernetics as a means to enhance our cognitive and other abilities and help us shed our mortal coil. As Cary Wolfe points out, transhumanism is, in this sense, an intellectual offspring of humanism, since it pursues its aspiration to engender a fully rational, autonomous subject, divorced from the messy emotions, drives and desires associated to animality and to our concrete, material bodies (xiv).⁶ Contrary to transhumanism, posthumanism embraces our kinship with the world around us, and, instead of going beyond corporeality, acknowledges that we share capabilities traditionally considered to be exclusively human—intelligence, language, and so forth—with non-human beings.

Anthropocentrism comes undone in Braidotti’s vital materialism that discards any categorical distinctions between human nature, anthropos and bios, on the one hand, and the lives of non-humans, or zoe, on the other hand (65). The “dynamic, selforganizing structure of life itself,” zoe is “the transversal force that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories and domains” (60). A “[z]oe-centred egalitarianism” is a materialist, secular alternative to progressive humanism that avoids the pitfalls of anthropocentric biases (60).⁷ Still, the prominence of zoe in Braidotti’s understanding of posthumanism begs the question of the status attributed to non-living matter in her definition of vital materiality. Does she merely redraw the boundaries separating us from others, shifting them to the divide between living beings, those who partake of zoe, and non-living, inert matter? Or would her vital materialism encompass all things, be they bios, zoe or hyle?

Barad’s agential realism is more unequivocal in its denial of strict demarcations between living and non-living matter. Similar to Braidotti, she

regards herself as a posthumanist for whom “nonhumans play an important role in natural-cultural practices, including everyday social practices, scientific practices, and practices that do not include humans” (32). But, rather than identifying zoe as the common denominator of posthuman materialism, Barad refers to “bodies,” with the understanding that “[h]uman’ bodies are not inherently different from ‘nonhuman’ ones” (153) and that “[a]ll bodies, not merely ‘human’ bodies, come to matter through the world’s iterative intra-activity—its performativity” (152). All beings, living and non-living, are bodies produced by the mattering of the world, the coming together and drifting apart of matter, a performance that occurs at all levels of reality. In a more pedestrian language, we might say that we are all things, phenomena produced by open-ended intra-actions, and that meaning and language exist in the articulation of things in the world.

How does this theoretical excursus on posthumanism intersect with Andresen’s insights about humanity’s fall from grace? What can notions such as vital materialism and agential realism contribute to a reading of her poetry? A facile interpretation of Andresen’s texts would see it as just another instantiation of post-Romantic nostalgic literature, trying against all odds to rebuild our broken alliance with actuality. While there are certainly indications in her writings that would corroborate such a reading, as we saw in the previous section, Andresen’s poetic praxis unveils a world in which there is no clear-cut divide between human beings and their surroundings, between language and the real. Her texts could thus be read as an example of posthuman poetry, a form of writing that expresses the vital materialism of all things and adopts an agential realist posture, according to which living and non-living beings emerge as a result of their intra-actions, radically transforming what it means to be human and to have a language. The final two sections of this article focus on Andresen’s posthuman writings that foreground the continuities joining all living entities, as well as the living and the non-living. She lends a voice to these beings, showing that our language is, from the start, also a language of animals, plants and things, who contaminate literature with their forms of articulation in the very moment when we try to express their lives in our human speech.

Andresen’s Posthuman Poetry

In a short story from her *Exemplary Tales (Contos exemplares)*, Andresen writes that “[i]n gods, to be and to exist are united” (“[n]os deuses ser e existir estão unidos,” 128) and she returns to this subject in a poem from *The Name of Things (O nome das coisas)*, in which she wishes that “to be and being would coincide” (“E que ser e estar coincidissem,” *OP III*, 177).⁸ If gods are one with their existence, entities for whom to be and to act are the same,

humans tend to problematize their being-in-the-world, the split between the name and the named constituting a sign of this questioning. But gods are not the only beings for whom “to be and to exist are united.” In things, plants and animals acting and being are also not discrete or, to borrow Georges Bataille’s elegant formulation, “[t]he animal [and flora or even things, one might add] is in the world like water in water” (19). In order to get in touch with “the initial existing-being-whole of things” (“[o] estar-ser-inteiro inicial das coisas,” *OP III*, 155), humans can therefore either emulate the gods or follow the example of non-human beings.

In her literature, Andresen often elects the second path. Even though she laments the loss of unity with all things that the demise of the ancient Greek gods represented, she does not always aspire to imitate them. Instead, she frequently turns to animals, plants and things as guides in her quest to become one with actuality, realizing along the way that such unity was always already there, in a learning process that echoes the Platonic anamnesis. For a writer as deeply inspired by Greco-Roman antiquity as Andresen, metamorphosis, that quintessential trope of classical letters, aids her in coming closer to others and in appreciating their modes of existence. Her posthuman poetry envisions the transformation of humans into other beings and vice-versa, in an ongoing exchange that testifies to the fluidity of existence and to the meaninglessness of the watertight categories into which we tend to pigeon-hole reality.

In Andresen’s texts, the poetic subject often becomes an other and experiences the world from this novel point of view. In “The Wind” (“O Vento”), she writes: “And the wind against the windows / Makes me think that maybe I am a bird” (“E o vento contra as janelas / Faz-me pensar que eu talvez seja um pássaro” *OP I*, 175). In another poem she expresses the wish to return to “[t]he freshness of vegetal things, / The floating green of pine forests” (“À frescura das coisas vegetais, / Ao verde flutuante dos pinhais,” *OP I*, 126); she refers to her gestures as moving “[b]etween the animal and the flower like jellyfish” (“Entre o animal e a flor como medusas,” *OP I*, 166); and in yet another text she mentions “[t]he impulse there is in us, unending, / Of being everything and of flourishing in every flower” (“O impulso que há em nós, interminável, / De tudo ser e em cada flor florir,” *OP I*, 127).⁹

The allusion to Fernando Pessoa, whom Andresen describes as “divided” and a “widower” of himself, in the last quote is not coincidental (“dividido;” “viúvo de ti mesmo,” *OP III*, 176, 177). Similar to Pessoa, she also undergoes a process of de-personalization, discarding a unified poetic subjectivity. But while Pessoa metamorphoses into his multiple heteronyms, Andresen transforms into birds, flowers and things. She goes a step further than Álvaro de Campos, who longed to be “everybody everywhere” (“Ah não ser eu toda a gente e toda a parte!”), and aspires to be everything (“tudo ser”), thereby

rejecting the anthropocentric bias that permeates much poetic writing, centered in a human “I,” however conflicted and fragmented it becomes in Modernist verse. More than of Pessoa himself, then, Andresen is a true inheritor of Alberto Caeiro, the “master” of the Pessoaan poetic universe,¹⁰ who yearned to be like a tree or a flower and to learn from their simple, uncomplicated existence.¹¹

The oceanic feeling that permeates the longing to be every thing, is exacerbated in “In All the Gardens” (“Em todos os jardins”), where we read: “In all the gardens I will flourish, (. . .) / One day I will be the sea and the sand, / And I will unite with everything that there is” (“Em todos os jardins hei-de florir, (. . .) / Um dia serei eu o mar e a areia, / A tudo quanto existe me hei-de unir,” *OP I*, 58); and in “Who, Like Me”: “Who like me gets lost and dispersed / In the things and the days?” (“Quem como eu se perde e se dispersa / Nas coisas e nos dias?” *OP I*, 122).¹² In these and other poems, Andresen’s poetic I resembles Pan, the ancient Greek god of nature and the wilderness, about whom she writes in an homonymous poem: “The tree trunks hurt me as if they were my shoulders. / The waves of the sea hurt me like crystal throats / The moonlight hurts me—a white cloth that tears” (“Os troncos das árvores doem-me como se fossem os meus ombros / Doem-me as ondas do mar como gargantas de cristal / Dói-me o luar—branco pano que se rasga,” *OP I*, 197).¹³ Pan feels the trees and the elements in his own flesh, which merges with reality to such an extent that he experiences pain through the movement of the things themselves. Similarly, Andresen fantasizes about losing herself in what is, but, unlike Pan, she regards this as a release from the strictures of her limited existence. Her metamorphosis transforms her to a point where the very concepts of self and other cease to make sense, in that the boundaries of the I dissolve as it becomes another being.

Even though Andresen privileges human metamorphosis, she at points also refers to the transfiguration of animals and plants. She writes, for instance, that at the bottom of the ocean “plants are animals / And animals are flowers” (“as plantas são animais / E os animais são flores,” *OP I*, 50) and, in another poem, that “the trees took a human life” (“as árvores tomaram vida humana” *OP I*, 174). One realizes that all beings are transient forms that endlessly morph into one another in the process of becoming that is the world, an insight that undoes a hierarchical view of nature. In Barad’s terms, we and everything around us are impermanent phenomena resulting from material intra-actions. Agency, or vitality in Braidotti’s formulation, is therefore not an exclusively human feature but is part of matter in its various iterations. To be human is to be fully aware of the fact that the boundaries separating us from others are but ephemeral phenomena within the larger flow of existence.

The question remains, however, as to the role of literary language in this endless becoming. Is poetry simply a means to show a posthuman reality, to reveal our affinity with all beings, which has become obscured by the anthropocentric biases contaminating everyday language? In other words, does poetic language merely afford us a different perspective on actuality? Or does poeticizing have a broader ontological and ethical significance?

Writing the Things Themselves

In her literature, Andresen often expresses her wonder at the magnificence of existence. One of the characters in “The Bishop’s Dinner” (“O jantar do Bispo”), part of *Exemplary Tales*, is touched by the “pure and ancient beauty of the walls and the stones” (“beleza pura e antiga das paredes e das pedras,” 61) and in another short story from the same collection we read: “I feel like laughing and singing in honor of the beauty of things” (“apetece-me rir e cantar em honra da beleza das coisas,” 109).¹⁴ In a speech that serves as an Introduction to her collected works, Andresen writes that, as a child, she discovered in a red apple lying in a room by the sea “the presence of the real itself” and later, when she read Homer, she recognized the “naked, whole happiness, that splendor from the presence of things” (“própria presença do real;” “felicidade nua e inteira, esse esplendor da presença das coisas,” *OP I*, 7). Her literature testifies to this state of wonder in the face of actuality. In a poem from *Dual* she asserts that she “loved with ecstasy the color, the weight and the necessary shape of shells” (“amei com êxtase a cor o peso e a forma necessária das conchas,” *OP III*, 112) and in another one she refers to the “miracle of things that were mine” (“milagre das coisas que eram minhas,” *OP I*, 31). “Landscape” (“Paisagem”) is perhaps the text where her admiration for reality comes through most clearly:

Sudden birds passed through the air
 The smell of the land was deep and bitter
 And far away the rides of the open sea
 Shook their manes in the sand.

It was the blue sky, the green field, the dark land,
 It was the flesh of the trees, elastic and hard,
 It was the drops of blood of resin
 And the leaves where the light scatters.

(. . .)

It was the pine forests where the sky rests,
 It was the weight and the color of each thing,
 Their quietness, secretly alive,
 And their affirmative exhalation.

(Passavam pelo ar aves repentinas,
 O cheiro da terra era fundo e amargo,
 E ao longe as cavalgadas do mar largo
 Sacudiam na areia as suas crinas.

Era o céu azul, o campo verde, a terra escura,
 Era a carne das árvores elástica e dura,
 Eram as gotas de sangue da resina
 E as folhas em que a luz se descombina.

(. . .)

Era o peso e era a cor de cada coisa,
 A sua quietude, secretamente viva,
 A sua exalação afirmativa.
OP I, 44)

The poetic I marvels at the plenitude of each being, whose existence is exactly as it should be. The terse, precise language employed to describe the landscape, where elements are accompanied by simple adjectives—“sudden birds;” “open sea;” blue sky;” “green field;” “dark land;” and so on—testifies to the impact of the scenario onto a human subject who can only do justice to it by being as exact and literal as possible. Such language, devoid of gratuitous flourishes, tries to express “the weight and the color of each thing” in poetic form, so as to honor their “solemnity” (“solenidade das coisas,” *OP III*, 149). The poem recognizes that “things are secretly alive” and that they display an “affirmative exhalation,” thus pointing in the direction of later theorizations about the vitality and agency of matter, such as those by Barad and Braidotti. Poetry’s function is here primarily that of revelation: to highlight the splendor of what is and to emphasize that every thing is animated by a life that overflows the narrow confines of humanity, and even of so-called living beings, and extends to all forms of existence. Writing poetry is, in this sense, a preeminently aesthetic pursuit, given that, going back to the etymological origin of the word “aesthetics,” it makes us perceive things anew, “[a]s if each thing were created again,” devoid of the anthropocentric lens through which we tend to look at the real (“Como se de novo fosse criada cada coisa,” *OP I*, 140).

But poeticizing involves more than the epiphany of (re-)discovering a posthuman reality, more than an apocalypse—which, incidentally, was as the ancient Greek word for revelation—of commonplace beliefs about the natural world as structured hierarchically, with humans as the apex of creation. It means recognizing plants, animals and things as our companions in the world we inhabit. Andresen often posits this relationship as a renewed “alliance / (. . .) with external things” or as “our alliance with things” (“uma

aliança / (. . .) com as coisas exteriores;” “nossa aliança com as coisas,” *OP III*, 42; 179), an alliance she deemed to be broken in the poem “Our Lady of Rocha” with which we began this essay. In “Poetics I” (“Arte Poética I”), for instance, she describes a plain clay amphora that is “the new image of my alliance with things” (“a nova imagem da minha aliança com as coisas,” *OP III*, 94). She emphasizes that this bond with reality goes beyond aesthetics: “The beauty of the pale clay amphora is so obvious, so sure, that it cannot be described. But I know that the word beauty is nothing (. . .). I am not talking about an aesthetic beauty but about a poetic beauty” (“A beleza da ânfora de barro pálido é tão evidente, tão certa que não pode ser descrita. Mas eu sei que a palavra beleza não é nada (. . .). Não falo de uma beleza estética mas de uma beleza poética,” *OP III*, 93). Wherein lies the “poetic beauty” mentioned by Andresen? And how is it different from mere aesthetics?

The short story “Homer” (“Homero”), part of *Exemplary Tales*, touches upon this poetic beauty, whereby the relationship between humanity and other beings is articulated in language. In this text, the narrator describes an old vagabond she knew as a little girl. The man was called “Búzio”—the Portuguese word for a type of shell—, a name that already points to his kinship with nature. When Búzio appeared in the horizon, other people thought he was “a tree, or a distant rock” (“uma árvore, ou um penedo distante,” 134), and even though he lived as a beggar, he did not inspire pity: “To pity him would be like pitying a plane tree or a river, or the wind. In him the barrier separating man from nature seemed to be abolished. / Búzio had nothing, in the same way that a tree has nothing” (“Ter pena dele seria como ter pena de um plátano ou de um rio, ou do vento. Nele parecia abolida a barreira que separa o homem da natureza. / O Búzio não possuía nada, como uma árvore não possui nada,” 136). Búzio was similar to the first human, Adam, about whom Andresen writes: “[he] was like a tree born from the earth / Mixing his life with the ardor of the earth” (“Era como uma árvore de terra nascida / Confundindo com o ardor da terra a sua vida,” *OP I*, 118). Búzio resembled a tree in that he eschewed the conventions that govern most of humanity. For him, private property was meaningless. He lived close to nature, roaming a beach near the seaside village where the narrator lived, and felt no need for the possessions prized by the majority of people.

One day, the narrator followed Búzio to the dunes and was stunned to hear his monologue, which he addressed to the sea: “It was a long, clear, irrational and nebulous speech that seemed, with the light, to outline and sketch all things” (“Era um longo discurso claro, irracional e nebuloso que parecia, com a luz, recortar e desenhar todas as coisas,” 138). The short story ends with a description of this speech that seemed to spring forth from the natural world, in the same way as Búzio himself: “Words that called things, that were the names of things. Bright words like the scales of a fish, big and deserted

words like the beaches. And his words reunited the dispersed fragments of joy of the earth. He invoked them, showed them, named them: wind, freshness of the waters, gold of the sun, silence and brightness of the stars” (“Palavras que chamavam pelas coisas, que eram o nome das coisas. Palavras brilhantes como as escamas de um peixe, palavras grandes e desertas como as praias. E as suas palavras reuniam os restos dispersos da alegria da terra. Ele os invocava, os mostrava, os nomeava: vento, frescura das águas, oiro do sol, silêncio e brilho das estrelas,” 139).¹⁵ Búzio’s language was like Homer’s, who gave the title to the short story, even though he never makes an appearance in the narrative. Faithful to her admiration of classical Greek culture, Andresen implies here that Homer’s language was in tune with what it named, tacitly acknowledging a continuity between the being of all things and the human way of expressing them. Búzio’s monologue was analogous to the language used by the founding figure of Western letters in that he, like Homer before him, drew the strength of his speech from the things themselves, honoring our kinship with other beings. This short-story can thus be read as a fictional poetics, where Andresen articulates her desire to follow in the line of Homer and Búzio and create a literature that would convey the whole of existence, in which to be and being would coincide.

Andresen returns to this topic in “Poetics II” (“Arte Poética II”), where she writes that “poetry is my explanation with the universe, my way of living together with things, my participation in the real.” She adds, further down in the same text, that “if a poet says ‘obscure,’ ‘ample,’ ‘boat,’ ‘stone’ it is because these words name her vision of the world, her connection to things. They were not words chosen aesthetically because of their beauty; they were chosen because of their reality, their necessity, their poetic power to establish an alliance” (“a poesia é a minha explicação com o universo, a minha convivência com as coisas, a minha participação no real,” *OP III*, 95; “Se um poeta diz ‘obscuro,’ ‘amplo,’ ‘barco,’ ‘pedra’ é porque estas palavras nomeiam a sua visão do mundo, a sua ligação com as coisas. Não foram palavras escolhidas esteticamente pela sua beleza, forma escolhidas pela sua realidade, pela sua necessidade, pelo seu poder poético de estabelecer uma aliança.” *OP III*, 95–6). Andresen rejects the commonplace understanding of poetry as a mere aestheticizing of everyday language that relies upon rhyme, rhythm, figures of speech, and so on, to create beautiful linguistic arrangements that we can listen to or read with pleasure. Rather, she emphasizes both the ontological and the epistemological import of poetizing. In poetry, words are chosen for their ability to perfectly name what is. Poems express actuality, and aesthetic beauty is just a by-product of the alliance with the real that the text strives to achieve.

Literature gives voice to the things themselves presupposing, as it does, that there is no strict, qualitative differentiation between the articulation of

other beings in the world and human languages. In a narrative from a collection of short stories titled *Tales of the Land and the Sea* (*Histórias da terra e do mar*), Andresen writes that “the landing of seagulls leaves fine triangular footprints, similar to the writings from a very ancient time” (“o pousar das gaivotas deixa finas pegadas triangulares, semelhantes à escrita de um tempo antiquíssimo,” 60). In another short story from the same collection she writes that “[t]he shape of things was a graphia, a writing. A writing that she did not understand but that she recognized” (“A forma das coisas era uma grafia, uma escrita. Uma escrita que ela não entendia mas reconhecia,” 50). Living beings and things leave an imprint of themselves on the world, a kind of language akin to the one used by humans. In what we would today define as a deconstructive insight, Andresen regards the footprints of animals and the shape of things as a form of writing, part of the arche-writing that permeates the whole of existence. Literature can be regarded as an ontology and an epistemology: it says things as they are, bringing together the language of other entities and human forms of expression. In other words, literature embraces the language of things and accepts it into the fold of human language.¹⁶ Poetic expression is a way to convey actuality and to give voice to the things themselves.

For Andresen, then, poetry uncovers the concord between the being and language of things and those of humans. In a speech later published as “Poetics V” (“Arte poética V”), she confesses that, when she was very young, she believed that poems were “consubstantial with the universe, that they were the breath of things, the name of this world said by that very world” (“os poemas (. . .) eram consubstanciais ao universo, que eram a respiração das coisas, o nome deste mundo dito por ele próprio,” *OP III*, 349). Children instinctively recognize in poetry an attempt to articulate their surroundings in a flawless language that names the real, as though it were the very voice of the things themselves. In another text, she longs for a time when “poems will be the air itself / —The song of being, whole and reunited—” (“E os poemas serão o próprio ar / —Canto do ser inteiro e reunido—,” *OP III*, 58). Poetry will be part of the air that we breathe, a song of the universe that expresses a covenant between humans and things. That is perhaps why Andresen writes that “my function is to allow things to see themselves” (“[s]irvo para que as coisas se vejam,” *OP II*, 108): the “breath of things,” poetry reveals the ontological kinship between human language and the existence of all else and exposes the folly of believing that humankind is qualitatively different from the rest of creation.

In expressing the very ontology of what is, poetic language affords a more rooted understanding of the real and, ultimately, leads to a more ethical connection to things and to ourselves. As Andresen put it: “Poetry was always for me the search for the real. (. . .) Whoever looks for a just relationship to the stone, to the tree, to the river, is necessarily led, by the spirit of truth that

animates her, to look for a just relationship to man” (“Sempre a poesia foi para mim uma perseguição do real. (. . .) Quem procura uma relação justa com a pedra, com a árvore, com o rio, é necessariamente levado, pelo espírito de verdade que o anima, a procurar uma relação justa com o homem,” *OP I*, 7). In an interview, she returns to this subject and says that “both ethics and poetics are the search for a just relation with the real, and the real is that which emerges and manifests itself” (“Ética e poética, ambas são a busca de uma relação justa com o real, e o real é aquilo que emerge e se manifesta,” Pereira). Beyond its ontological and epistemological value, whereby the real “manifests itself,” poetry is also at the root of ethics, in that it teaches us how to relate to each being in its singularity.

In a poem dedicated to Portuguese writer Cesário Verde, Andresen praises his language, with which he strove “[t]o be and to say in the just light of day / To speak clearly to speak clean to speak close” (“Ser e dizer na justa luz do dia / Falar claro falar limpo falar rente,” *OP III*, 339). For Andresen, there is a correlation between language and action: saying things clearly and accurately fosters a just approach to the real. She believes in the “color and (. . .) weight of words,” in the “nakedness of dazzled words, and in their “concrete, clean silence (. . .) / From which the things that are named arise” (“cor e (. . .) peso das palavras;” “nudez das palavras deslumbradas;” “concreto silêncio limpo (. . .) / Donde se erguem as coisas nomeadas,” *OP II*, 141). To put it differently, we learn to appreciate the being of animals, plants and things by naming them in a language that does justice to their mode of existence, that is to say, a human language that expresses the forms of articulation of the things themselves.

Later theorists of posthumanism and vital materialism would concur with Andresen’s views on the link between our perception of other entities’ being-in-the world and socio-political justice. Jane Bennett, for instance, asks: “Why advocate the vitality of matter?” Her answer is that “the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption” (ix). For Bennett, “*materiality* is a term that applies more evenly to humans and non-humans (. . .) that tends to horizontalize the relations between humans, biota, and abiota. It draws human attention sideways, away from an ontologically ranked Great Chain of Being and toward a greater appreciation of the complex entanglements of humans and nonhumans” (112). Recognizing that humans are part of an ongoing movement of becoming of which the whole of matter partakes leads to a more ethical treatment of both living and non-living beings.

What Andresen adds to this equation is the centrality of literature. The precise articulation of other forms of existence in human language is what allows for the “equilibrium between humans and things” (“equilíbrio do homem com as coisas,” *OP II*, 107). As she puts it in the Introduction to her

collected poems, “justice is no different from that balance of things, from that order of the world where the poet wishes to integrate his song” (“a justiça se confunde com aquele equilíbrio das coisas, com aquela ordem do mundo onde o poeta quer integrar o seu canto,” *OP I*, 8). The accurate expression of other entities’ being-in-the-world goes hand in hand with a just and equitable attitude toward them. Articulating the existence of non-humans in human language, literature is therefore a *sine qua non* for an ethical approach to actuality. Andresen’s posthuman poetry not only reveals the continuities that tie all beings together but also calls for an ethical approach to each entity, giving each plant, animal and thing their due.

Notes

1. This and all other quotes from Portuguese texts are rendered in my translation. The page numbers refer to the original work listed in the bibliography. Throughout this essay, I refer to Andresen’s books in abbreviate form in the citations: *CE: Contos exemplares*; *HTM: Histórias da terra e do mar*; *OP: Obra poética*.

2. Andresen returns to this idea in a short story, where she writes that “our condition is not to know. And to never be able to find the unity. And finding the unity would be to wake up” (“(. . .) a nossa condição é não saber. E não poder jamais encontrar a unidade. E encontrar a unidade seria acordar,” *HTM*, 117).

3. For more on the relation between Andresen’s poetry and magic, see Rocha.

4. For Barad, “[t]he belief that grammatical categories reflect the underlying structure of the world is a continuing seductive habit of mind worth questioning. Is it not, after all, the common-sense view of representationalism—the belief that representations serve a mediating function between knower and known—that displays a deep mistrust of matter, holding it off at a distance, figuring it as passive, immutable, and mute, in need of the mark of an external force like culture or history to complete it?” (133). Barad criticizes representationalism for regarding matter as a passive entity, enlivened only by human language and culture.

5. The view that language is not an exclusively human trait was already expounded by Walter Benjamin in a 1916 article titled “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man.” Benjamin argues that “[t]here is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language (. . .). This use of the word ‘language’ is in no way metaphorical” (62). However, Benjamin still believed in the superiority of human language, in that, for him, humans alone are able to name both themselves and other entities (64–7).

6. As Wolfe puts it, “‘the human’ is achieved by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether. In this respect, my sense of posthumanism is the opposite of transhumanism, and in this light, transhumanism should be seen as an intensification of humanism” (xv).

7. In Braidotti’s words, “posthuman theory contests the arrogance of anthropocentrism and the ‘exceptionalism’ of the Human as a transcendental category. It strikes instead an alliance with the productive and immanent force of *zoe*, or life in its nonhuman aspects” (66).

8. In another poem about ancient Greece, Andresen also attributes to the ancient Greek gods the ability to “reestablish / The initial being-to-be-whole of things” (“restabelecem / O estar-ser-inteiro inicial das coisas,” *OP III*, 155).

9. In the poem “My Hands” (“As minhas mãos”) Andresen also mentions her communion with other beings: My hands keep the stars, / I hold my soul to prevent from breaking / The melody that goes from flower to flower, / I tear the sea from the sea and place it in me / And the beat of my heart holds the rhythm of things” (“As minhas mãos mantêm as estrelas, / Seguro a minha alma para que não se quebre / A melodia que vai de flor em flor, / Arranco o mar do mar e ponho-o em mim / E o bater do meu coração sustenta o ritmo das coisas,” *OP I*, 164).

10. In a letter to Adolfo Casais Monteiro about the genesis of his heteronyms Fernando Pessoa famously describes Alberto Caeiro as the “master” of his poetic world.

11. For more on Caeiro’s connection to plants, see Vieira. For more on Andresen’s relation to the poetry of Pessoa, see Martinho and Klobucka.

12. Andresen mentions this dispersion in another poem: “Among the dread of night I walked / Not around things but climbing / Through the heat of their veins / Not around things but dying / Transfigured into everything I loved. (. . .) / each flower (. . .) / I turned into it when I touched it” (“Entre o terror da noite caminhei / Não em redor das coisas mas subindo / Através do calor das suas veias / Não em redor das coisas mas morrendo / Transfigurada em tudo quanto amei. (. . .) / cada flor (. . .) / Quando a tocava nela me tornei,” *OP I*, 132).

13. In a poem about a sunken ship, Andresen also describes a human body who has slowly turned into plants, animals and things: “The captain is a white skeleton, / White as the sands, / He has two shells in the hand / He has algae instead of veins / And a jellyfish instead of a heart” (“É um esqueleto branco o capitão, / Branco como as areias, / Tem duas conchas na mão / Tem algas em vez de veias / E uma medusa em vez de coração,” *OP I*, 111).

14. In the same short story, Andresen writes: “There we would have the time to rest our gaze onto things. There we would have time to touch things” (“Ali haveria tempo para poisar os olhos nas coisas. Ali haveria tempo para tocar as coisas,” *CE*, 97).

15. Andresen also explicitly refers to the correspondence between words and things in the poem “We shall Resurface”: “We shall resurface there where the words / Are the name of things” (“Ressurgiremos ali onde as palavras / São o nome das coisas,” *OP II*, 109).

16. As Stacy Alaimo puts it in her defense of trans-corporeality and the interconnection between various material bodies: “(. . .) human corporeality and textuality effortlessly extend into the more-than-human world. Word, flesh, and dirt are no longer discrete” (14).

Works Cited

- Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2010. Print.
- Andresen, Sophia de Mello Breyner. *Contos exemplares*. Braga: Figueirinhas, 1995. Print.
- . *Histórias da terra e do mar*. Lisbon: Edições Salamandra, 1984. Print.

- . *Obra poética*. Vol. I. Lisbon: Caminho, 2001. Print.
- . *Obra poética*. Vol. II. Lisbon: Caminho, 1999. Print.
- . *Obra poética*. Vol. III. Lisbon: Caminho, 1999. Print.
- Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Half Way: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2007. Print.
- Bataille, Georges. *Theory of Religion*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books, 1992. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man." *Selected Writings*. Vol. 1, 1913–1926. Ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1997. 62–74. Print.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2010. Print.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge, UK and Malden, USA: Polity, 2013. Print.
- De Man, Paul. "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image." *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Norton, 1970. 65–77. Print.
- Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Ed. John Cottingham. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017. Print.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Philosophie der Kunst oder Aesthetik*. Munich: Fink Verlag, 2004. Print.
- Klobucka, Anna. "Sophia escreve Pessoa." *Colóquio/Letras*. 140–141 (1996): 157–176. Print.
- Maher, John C. *Multilingualism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017. Print.
- Martinho, Fernando J. B. "Sophia lê Pessoa." *Persona*. 7 (1982): 26–29. Print.
- Pereira, Miguel Serras. "Sophia: 'Sou uma mistura de norte e sul.'" *Jornal de Letras, Artes e Ideias*. 135 (February 5–11 1985). *Portuguese National Library*. <http://purl.pt/19841/1/galeria/entrevistas/02.html>. Accessed 02.13.2017. Web.
- Pessoa, Fernando. "Ode triunfal." *Arquivo Pessoa*. <http://arquivopessoa.net/textos/2459>. Accessed 02.13.2018. Web.
- Pessoa, Fernando. "Carta a Adolfo Casais Monteiro. 13 Jan. 1935." *Arquivo Pessoa*. <http://arquivopessoa.net/textos/3007>. Accessed 01.21.2015. Web.
- Rocha, Clara. "Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen: Poesia e magia." *Colóquio/Letras*, 132–133 (1994): 165–182. Print.
- Vasconcelos, José Carlos de. "Entrevista com Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen." *Jornal de Letras, Artes e Ideias*. 468 (June 25–July 1 1991). *Portuguese National Library*. <http://purl.pt/19841/1/galeria/entrevistas/06.html>. Accessed 02.13.2017. Web.
- Vieira, Patrícia. "Learning from Plants: Fernando Pessoa's Phytographia." *Estranhar Pessoa*. 3 (October 2016). Web.
- Wolfe, Cary. *What is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 2010. Print.