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Dystopia Revisited: Environmental Issues in Kirsty Logan's *The Gracekeepers*

Abstract: In the last few decades, dystopian narratives have been increasingly concerned with climate change and its cataclysmic effects, as witnessed by the emergence of a new narrative genre labelled 'climate fiction'. Within this context, the present paper offers an analysis of Kirsty Logan's fantasy novel *The Gracekeepers* (2015), a flooded dystopia in which environmental issues, though not programmatically announced, are nevertheless repeatedly foregrounded in the course of the story. Logan provides an original rethinking of the individual's relationship with nature and of human presence in the world, in a powerfully imaginative effort to 'reconfigure the possible' by overcoming traditional boundaries and privileging a new approach based on inclusiveness and hybridisation.

Keywords: Kirsty Logan. *The Gracekeepers.* Eco-dystopia. Critical dystopia. Climate fiction.

1. In the last decades, dystopian narratives have become increasingly involved in the discussion of cogent ecological issues connected with climate change and its cataclysmic effects. As Hughes and Wheeler put it, "climate change has made its way towards the mainstream in recent years, on both the screen and the page, and has now eclipsed nuclear terror as the prime mover of the apocalyptic and dystopian imagination".[1] The newly coined label 'climate fiction' or 'cli-fi' encompasses a whole range of narratives whose patent aim is that of "persuading [their] audience, not only of the devastation being wreaked upon global ecosystems, but of the human consequences of that devastation".[2] Hence, cli-fi is often set in post-apocalyptic worlds which are the nightmarish outcome of human violence to, and exploitation of, the environment. Kirsty Logan's debut novel *The Gracekeepers*, published in 2015,[3] may be inscribed within this kind of speculative fiction, being a post-apocalyptic fantasy in which environmental issues interlace with a highly imaginative inquiry into human nature. Logan's characters feature as individuals who, while daily struggling for survival, also engage in an obstinate search for their own identity and for their place in the world. The novel consistently plays with the idea of liminarity, in that it challenges trenchant distinctions at different levels by promoting hybridisation and boundary crossing while overtly heralding a new way of approaching reality based on the acceptation and valorisation of its complexity and diversity.

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[1] R. Hughes and P. Wheeler, "Introduction. Eco-dystopias: Nature and the Dystopian Imagination", *Critical Survey*, 25 (2), 2013, p. 1.

[2] *Ibidem*, p. 2.

[3] Logan has authored another novel, *The Gloaming* (London, Harvill Secker, 2018) and three short story collections: *The Rental Heart and Other Fairytales* (Cromer, Salt Publishing, 2014), *A Portable Shelter* (Glasgow, The Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2016), and *Things We Say in the Dark* (London, Harvill Secker, 2020). *The Psychology of Animals Swallowed Alive: Love Stories* (2016) is an ebook collection of flash fiction.

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The Gracekeepers describes "a historical collapse, a regression"[4] to a pre-technological world where human life is but a continuous fight for survival. The displacement to undefined time and estranged space allows Logan to turn her story into a cogent allegory of present times, and among the many issues she raises there is a clear concern for the environment and a problematisation of the way human beings interact with it. While urging the reader to reconsider and eventually reject any clear-cut opposition – be it between worlds, social groups, genders – the story also reflects on such polarisations as man vs. nature, human vs. animal, closing on the prospect of a possible escape from dystopia into a utopian condition that significantly involves a new relation with the environment. Hence, *The Gracekeepers* can be ascribed to the so-called 'eco-dystopia', a genre that "unlike dystopias characterised primarily by failed sociopolitical structures, imagine[s] near futures in which the environment has been damaged, perhaps irreparably – usually by human population growth, pollution, […] and the unchecked cycle of production and consumption";[5] at the same time, it is also a 'critical dystopia', a kind of fiction which, in Baccolini and Moylan's terms, allows "both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: the ambiguous, open endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse within the work".[6]

2. Though little is said about its origin, the watery world of *The Gracekeepers* is very likely to be the result of the rise of sea levels due to the increase of global temperature.[7] As a matter of fact, water covers the majority of the globe and only few archipelagos and some odd scattered islands survive. Therefore, land is extremely precious and the few people who are lucky enough to live on solid ground – the so-called 'landlockers' – try to protect their privileged life against the threat of the residual majority of the population, the damplings. The latter live on boats and pull through a precarious existence struggling against hunger and hardships; some of them survive by trading, others provide entertainment for the landlockers – whom they disparagingly call "clams"[8] – in return for food and exchangeable items. The damplings are not normally allowed to go ashore and when they do, they are forced to wear a small bell so that their presence on land can be immediately detected.

Power is no longer related to gold or money: the former bears the same value as "coal and quartz and copper" (p. 3), while the latter has lost all worth, with surviving banknotes serving as mere props for circus entertainment. Land is now power, because it means food; and the landlockers exercise their power not only by keeping the damplings away from their islands

[4] J. PFAELZER, *The Utopian Novel in America: 1886-1896. The Politics of Form*, Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh U.P., 1984, p. 62.

[5] D. GRIFFIN, "Visualizing Eco-Dystopia", *Design and Culture*, 10 (3), 2018, p. 273. On ecology and dystopia see also B. STABLEFORD, "Ecology and Dystopia", in G. CLAEYS (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, Cambridge, CUP, 2010, pp. 259-281.

[6] R. BACCOLINI and T. MOYLAN (eds), *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, New York and London, Routledge, 2003, p. 7.

[7] A cursory hint at human greed as the origin of catastrophe is introduced in the description of the so-called 'banker shows' at the circus. During these performances huge briefcases full of valueless paper money are dragged on stage, and banknotes violently thrown into the audience to provoke their anger against the bankers' rapacity: "Whatever the truth, over time the landlockers had learned to blame the banks, the relentless drive for more money, for the rising seas and the loss of their land" (K. LOGAN, *The Gracekeepers*, London, Harvill Secker, 2015, p. 126. Hereafter pages from this edition will be given parenthetically).

[8] "The crew called the landlockers 'clams' for their brainless need to cling to the shore" (pp. 15-16).

but also by controlling them on water. In line with the dystopian undertone of the story, military tankers sail the sea and occasionally board the damplings' boats to bribe them, often sentencing them to specious incarceration on prison boats. A further menace comes from the so-called 'Revival ships', big cruise liners where religious preachers proselytise damplings through mind-manipulating shows in which symbols of Christianity are variously revived.

On their islands, on the contrary, the haughty landlockers engage in a totally different religious practice. They consider themselves the guardians of traditions and, as a consequence, they enact a sort of "nostalgic Nature-worship",[9] sticking to 'roots' and privileging the contact with the earth as an evident counterpart to the itinerant life of the damplings, who are always on the move. The hierarchical structure of their territories, in which the value of land depends on its distance from water, says much about their attitude. Even the shape of buildings changes as one moves away from the seashore: close to water, houses are "tin-sided towers [looking] more ramshackle than ever, the waves slapping at their bases" (p. 15), with dirty and stinking soil all around; then, the houses become lower and larger on 'reclaimed land', symbolising the landlockers' desire to live as close to the ground as possible. Drawing even nearer to the centre, 'real land' provides space for crops and breeding farms, hence for food and life. At the very core of each island, a copse marks sacred territory, the 'old land' where the landlockers perform their religious ceremonies:

> The woods were old – some of the trees were prehistoric, people said – […] The ground was clear, but above the trees twisted together, interlocking black shapes too dense for them to see far. Scraps of coloured fabric were tied around some of the branches. There were little piles of things at the base of several trees: shiny objects, scraps of paper, soft-looking moss. A shrine? An offering? (p. 18)

Nevertheless, *old* does not bear any positive connotation here, since these traditions are imbued with superstition.[10] Despite their 'natural' religiosity, the landlockers do not enjoy any true contact with nature: they adore trees, but are not allowed to even touch them or their foliage, and only for their ceremonies are they authorised to gather *fallen* branches and leaves to make masks. Sometimes human bodies are accidentally hurt by tree branches and twigs: when this occurs, scars become the hurtful testimony that the harmony between the two spheres – the human and the natural – is painfully lost. Moreover, the landlockers' attachment to the earth symbolically points to their incapability of elevating themselves beyond mere materiality: at their sacred places at the heart of islands, the black shapes of interlocking trees prevent them from 'seeing far', from appreciating the sky and its guiding stars.

No religion actually favours a true communion with the environment, as the revivalists also patently witness. Comfortably settled on board of their gigantic cruise ships, they are "too high up to care" (p. 221) about the surrounding world, and although they are obsessed with cleanness – they employ new converts to rub "at already spotless walls", everything appearing "polished, polished, polished […] scrubbed-shining" (p. 225) – they do not hesitate to pollute the sea, leaving their filth in water:

> As they drew closer to the revival boat, the bumps and thocks against the side of the cutter increased […] frayed ends of rope, the hollow bones of birds, dirty sponges, scraps of fabric sewn with beads.

[9] B. STABLEFORD, "Ecology and Dystopia", p. 269.

[10] During their ceremonies, landlockers march in processions that necessarily follow a circular movement, symbolising their being imprisoned in superstition and prejudice: "Everyone must march in circles, around the island and spiralling in to link hands and surround the copse at the centre" (p. 183).

All the big boats left filth in their wake […] "Debris. Those revival boats are clean as fishbones, because they throw all their muck out behind them." "But what about everyone else? What about their boats?" […] The closer the cutter got to the revival ship, the denser the filth became. (p. 221)

In the passage, the ethical implications of pollution are highlighted through a simple question, "'But what about everyone else?'", which points to responsibility both to the environment and to the other creatures who inhabit it. A contemporary version of the biblical white sepulchres Jesus referred to as an emblem of hypocrisy (Matthew 23: 27), the revivalists become here the symbol of a humanity that has decided to selfishly detach itself from the present and to ignore environmental needs: their neglect of their surroundings is hypocritically consistent with their proclaimed belief in a transcendental future world where happiness will be accomplished.

The damplings obviously condemn the revivalists' despicable behaviour which threatens the health of their very home, the sea. Although their life is extremely hard due to a chronic scarcity of food and the uncontrollable power of the elements, especially during storms, when "the waves and the wind shriek and boom" (p. 67), their attitude towards the sea recalls the landlockers' attachment to earth and trees: the damplings love the "honest way" in which the sea moves and changes (p. 5), "her rhythm! Her passion! Her relentless, depthless wetness!" (p. 63), while the steadiness of the land makes them dizzy and uneasy.[11] Recycling is a necessary habit of theirs – "Everyone […] scavenges and reuses until their things fall apart" (p. 222) – so that waste is incessantly reprocessed. Circus folk, for instance, make hair dyes out of leftovers and seaweeds, while junk can be variously shaped into pretty objects to be bartered, such as "tiny animals made out of the skeletons of other animals" (p. 171). As one of the characters convincingly remarks: "Everything can be used for something" (p. 222).

3. Therefore, the flooded world of *The Gracekeepers* appears to be stiffly split into two separate spheres – earth and sea – with landlockers and damplings unremittingly opposed to each other, but equally struggling with a hostile environment. This is also true of the two female protagonists of the story, Callanish and North, who belong to antithetic poles.

Callanish is a landlocker who, after a traumatic experience involving her mother Veryan, has decided to abandon her island to go and live on a graceyard, one of the places lined up along the equator for the disposal of dead damplings. She welcomes the corpses and performs a ceremony during which bodies are first wrapped up in nets then buried under water. For each of them Callanish chooses a "grace", a caged bird that is intended to mark the spot of burial; the animal is left to starve there, its agony measuring the length of mourning for the bereaved. The girl has webbed hands and feet – the unwelcome gift of Veryan's intimacy with a silvery sea creature on the shore – but her 'otherness' must be hidden to protect her from the prejudices of a rigidly dichotomous world.

[11] The difficulty in the interaction between the humans, on the one hand, and nature, on the other, is experienced by the reader through the characters' point of view: as a matter of fact, the story is told by a third-person narrator that continuously shifts focalisation, in a sort of cinematic sequence of different standpoints, with each chapter bearing the name of its focaliser. On the one hand, this highlights the idea of partiality and one-sidedness but, on the other, it also allows the reader a thorough appreciation of the complexity of reality and of the multifarious relationships humans establish with it.

North, on the other hand, is a dampling who sails the sea with an itinerant circus, the Excalibur: she shares her small coracle with her bear, the animal that features in her much applauded dance number. Since the death of her parents, who were killed by another bear during a night show when she was only a child, the circus crew have been North's family, yet she cannot feel at home with them. She is expected to marry the ringmaster's son and horse tamer, Ainsel, and to go and live with him on a piece of reclaimed land his father – Jarrow Sterling, once a landlocker himself – has bought for them. However, neither Ainsel nor North intend to accomplish with the ringmaster's plan: the former is unrequitedly in love with his mother-in-law, Avalon, who is pregnant with his child, while North's thoughts are focused on her own pregnancy, which she tries to hide for fear of being banished from the circus. Therefore, also North keeps a secret which, in a sort of duplication of Callanish's mother's experience, she owes to the meeting with a mysterious marine being on the seashore.

When Callanish and North first meet (the occasion is the burial of one of the acrobat's body, Whitby, perished during a violent storm), they immediately empathise and decide to disclose their secrets to each other: Callanish takes off her gloves, showing her webbed hands, while North acknowledges her pregnancy and allows the gracekeeper to meet her bear.[12] However, although they reciprocally recognise their marginalised condition as a mark of closeness, they are not ready to accept it unconditionally yet, both being still enmeshed in prejudice. Only at the end of the novel will they be able to envisage a new present together, which, for both, will entail a new awareness of their surroundings: as a matter of fact, a considerable part of their *Bildung* lies in their coming to terms with the environment in its manifold components.

At the beginning of the novel, the two protagonists embody the paradox on which the story is built, that of human creatures and nature appearing fatally close yet irreparably apart. Callanish, for instance, lives on a graceyard that is completely surrounded by the sea, but never touches water, because she thinks it is contaminated by all the corpses she buries in it. Her refusal witnesses, on the one hand, that the landlockers' prejudices against water are hard to die, no matter how close to it they are obliged to live; on the other, in Callanish's case it also symbolises the girl's difficulty in accepting her 'amphibious' condition, one in which water should represent no threat, but rather a welcoming element. Land is no less menacing for Callanish, despite her origins: when she decides to go back to her home island to ask for Veryan's forgiveness – the girl feels guilty for abandoning her mother in the sacred wood where she had decided to give birth to her second daughter, thus causing the newborn's death – Callanish painfully reaches the centre of the island walking a path that is fraught with obstacles. The following passage overtly highlights the idea of estrangement that, throughout the story, undermines the relationship between humans and nature:

> The trees were dense, but Callanish barely slowed as she crossed from the fields to the woods. Beneath the oak canopy dead leaves carpeted the ground, hiding *sharp twigs* and *dents* in the earth. Within ten steps Callanish's bare feet were *scratched to bleeding*, her ankles jolted and throbbing.

[12] "Callanish's ungloved hand was in hers. Her skin was cool and smooth. Their hands were linked, but their palms did not align – North could feel a high ridge of skin linking Callanish's knuckles, soft and solid. Webbing, like a fish. Like a mermaid. North knew now why the gracekeeper had believed where her baby had come from – why the gracekeeper was the only person she'd ever met who would truly understand. She was suddenly sure that if there were light, she'd see the gracekeeper's skin gleam silver. She pressed their hands tighter, holding them close to the bear" (p. 97).

Branches *clawed* at her hair, *grabbing* fingerfuls from the roots; she glanced back, distracted by the blonde strands gleaming among the leaves. At least, she thought as she ran, she would be able to find her way out again: all she had to do was follow the *stolen* parts of her body. (p. 253, my emphases)

North's own experience represents no exception to this alienation: when forced to tread on firm ground, she always wears leather shoes because "she would not let her bare skin touch land" (p. 14), and she is simply disgusted by the smell of the earth ("Soil was dirty, and it smelled; North wanted nothing more than to be away from it […] North put her sleeve over her mouth. It stank here", p. 16). The sea is definitely more familiar to her, but the harshness of her nomadic life with the circus actually prevents her from thoroughly enjoying the 'embrace' of water.

A crucial part of the protagonists' experience lies in their relationship with animals, which adds further interest to the ecological dimension of the story. In the novel, various animals are mentioned, from the cattle raised on islands' farms for food to the horses that perform in the circus, but only some of them are granted specific attention, namely the gracekeepers' birds and the circus bear. Interestingly enough, both the 'graces' and the bear live in a condition of imprisonment of some kind. The birds used on graceyards are kept in cages, and they are purposely starved to death, so that human mourning can be accurately scheduled. As for the circus bear, he is obliged to sail the sea in the tiny space of a coracle and, at least while performing with North, he must be fettered in chains, so that he can be kept under control. Only Callanish and North seem to be able to establish a different relationship with the animal world, and to empathise with these creatures. The former pities the graces she uses for her ceremonies, and she often breaches the rules and feeds them only to make them live a bit longer. She somehow identifies with them, since she is also 'caged' within a traumatic past from which she must try to escape. For her part, North has grown up with her bear, therefore she is deeply attached to him and considers him her family. Theirs is a relationship made of reciprocal attention and support, as the following passages unmistakably show:

North fastened the canvas and slid under her bear's warm frontpaw. His heart beat a thud-a-thud against her back as she let the waves rock them both to sleep. She was good at looking after her bear, and she clung to that thought. Soon there would be another person on their boat, but it would be okay, because North already knew how to care for a creature that needed her. (p. 13)

It wasn't until she slid under the bear's sleeping paw that she felt her heart slow. (p. 22)

North led her bear back to their boat. She would wash the colours off their skins, and they would be themselves again. Alone in their coracle, they were not performers, not burdens, not dangers, not weapons, not food. They were family. (p. 44)

North climbed into her coracle long before dawn. The party was still going, but all she wanted was the comfort of her bear's heart beating against her back. She crawled in beside him […] There was only one creature alive that loved North unconditionally. She lived in a family of two – soon to be three. Her bear was safe. He loved her, and he would learn to love her baby too. She let the coracle rock her to sleep, with her bear's heartbeat at her back. (pp. 50-51)

Notice the insistence on the ideas of 'care' and 'love', which imply taking responsibility towards the 'other', and also the pregnant image of the coracle as a shared space where differences get blurred and the distinction between human and animal turns out to be deflated. When the girl's and the bear's bodies touch and give comfort to each other, they overtly challenge the hierarchical boundary separating the human sphere from the animal sphere,

sealing a bond that is impenetrable to those who cannot go beyond the surface appearance of things. It comes as no surprise, then, that North hides this intimacy with her bear from the rest of the crew, since she is perfectly aware that they would not understand its true meaning.

4. On close scrutiny, Callanish and North finally succeed in crossing, and thus obliterating boundaries, because they are liminal figures who, in North's own words, "don't belong anywhere" but, for this very reason, "can belong everywhere" (p. 293). In fact, it is around the concept of liminality that Logan patiently weaves the optimistic message of her apparently bleak story, articulating it at various levels and, in so doing, granting it specific relevance.

Sandor Klapcsik has convincingly argued that the concept of liminality is crucial to Postmodernist thought insofar as it challenges all monologic and/or hierarchical premises.[13] Moreover, as far as literature is concerned, liminality turns out to be a central issue in several genres such as the fantastic or science fiction, that is narratives dominated by an ontological urge, as Brian McHale has notoriously claimed.[14] At the thematic level, Klapcsik defines liminality as the inclination to blur "the boundaries of the self and the Other, organic and artificial, human and mechanical, and most of all, the real world and the fantastic-virtual".[15]

In *The Gracekeepers*, liminality turns out to be more widespread than it may at first appear. On the one hand, it is manifestly reified in the bodies of several characters, not only 'amphibious' Callanish, but also the circus folk, whose gender identity proves fluid:

> Callanish […] realised that the tattooed women were the tallest she'd ever seen – and then, with a shock, she realised that they weren't women at all. She looked more closely at the pink-haired men, and felt suddenly foolish for not seeing that they were women. Or was it the other way round? She dared another glance, but still couldn't be sure. (p. 77)[16]

On the other, it is an evident feature of space, with several liminal 'places' to mark porous ground on which interpenetration and hybridisation are possible: besides the seashore, where earth and water meet in a continuous reciprocal exchange, also the graceyard, the boat, and the circus are envisaged as evident symbols of liminality.

The graceyard is a borderline place at the crossroads of different dimensions: in the monochrome bluish endpaper of the hardback edition of the novel, it appears as a small hut with a long deck for the berthing of ships; thus, its shape seems to reify an effort to connect, to reduce the distance between here and there, firm ground and moving water. Moreover, because of its function, the graceyard also represents a bridge thrown between life and death, in the attempt to preserve the memory of the past through a proper handling of present bereavement. The choice of the graceyard as the very place in which Callanish

[13] See S. KLAPCSIK, *Liminality in Fantastic Fiction: A Poststructuralist Approach*, Jackson (NC), McFarland, 2012.

[14] See B. MCHALE, *Postmodernist Fiction*, London, Routledge, 1987, pp. 10-11, 59-83.

[15] S. KLAPCSIK, *Liminality in Fantastic Fiction: A Poststructuralist Approach*, p. 21.

[16] The narrator repeatedly insists on the idea of gender blurring while describing circus folk and their performances – "Out on stage, the rest of the circus folk were performing the maypole, everything wrapped in ribbons: the pole, their hair, their bodies, all wrapped tight so the crowd couldn't tell which were girls and which were boys, so they were all girlboysgirls" (p. 1); "All circus folk kept their hair long, dyed bright with whatever coloured things they could scavenge. It helped with the illusion of their performance; their tightrope-walk between the genders" (p. 12) – so that gender itself becomes yet another dichotomy the story aims at undermining.

and North eventually start their life together – hence the plural title of the novel – confirms that, far from being a mere symbol of death, the graceyard can turn into a space of new possibilities.

At the end of the novel, the two protagonists sail to Callanish's graceyard on board of the Excalibur, after the rest of the circus fleet has been destroyed by a fire Avalon has set to North's coracle, causing the bear's death.[17] As a consequence of the blaze, the ringmaster decides to stop all performances, retire on reclaimed land with the rest of the crew, and set North free, giving her the Excalibur as a compensation for her loss. The boat has always represented a privileged frontier in narrative topography, and also in *The Gracekeepers* its function is that of connecting places: a boat can "get you from one end of the world to the other" (p. 36) so that, as one of the characters noticeably contends, it appears as "a compromise" (p. 163). Even more importantly, the Excalibur is no ordinary boat: it can transform into a circus, into a place of imagination and illusion, of metamorphosis and gender blurring. In this sense, the experience of the circus is crucial in the evolution of the protagonists, because it highlights hybridity and metamorphosis, overtly challenging any dogmatic stance.

In fact, change is constantly lurking in the story, be it as a menace to the landlockers, who are afraid of losing their privileges, or as a longed for perspective for most of the damplings, who daily yearn for a better life. In neither case, however, it is actually envisaged as a way out of a rigid 'either-or' mindset, which prevents any true realisation of the complexity and richness of reality, as well as of the possibility of approaching it in a more inclusive and rewarding way. Interestingly enough, in the novel it is up to the fantastic dimension of the story to reveal such an opportunity.

Logan associates the fantastic with the most iconic liminal space in her story, the seashore, which, besides figuring as the very threshold separating – or should we say connecting? – land and sea, also functions as a sort of portal to the fantastic dimension. In fantasy, the portal usually gives access to a different world in which the laws of everyday reality are suspended and/or transgressed; here, on the contrary, the ontological breach is not due to a passage to a distinct world, but it rather consists in the interpenetration of different dimensions, in the same way as the sea and the earth meet and coalesce on the seashore. Thus, the porous space of the blackshore provides a most suitable background for the encounter with the fantastic: overtly alluding to Celtic folklore legends of mermaids and mermen, selkies and merrows, the author chooses a love making scene – the meeting of two bodies where limbs, angles, planes perfectly match – to portray this blending of reality and fantasy. Veryan's and North's parallel memories convey a sense of intimacy, while insisting on the blurring of boundaries:

> She [Veryan] fell into sleep. *Then: a slow pull out, reality seeping into her dreams. A mouth pressing against hers, cold as the sea*. Was this her husband, come back to love her again? She felt *the weight of a body on her own*. She raised her hips. *In the dim light of the stars, she saw the silvery gleam of scales*. (p. 189, my emphases)

> She [North] had lain along the blackshore, seaweed tangling in her hair […] *Then: a slow pull out of*

[17] Water and fire pinpoint two crucial moments in the protagonists' growth – their first meeting on the graceyard for Whitby's ceremony and their final choice to come back to it together –, each preluded by a violent event, respectively a fierce storm and an unquenchable blazing. Implicitly hinting at the mythical import of these cosmogonic elements, in both occasions Logan suggests that a 'rebirth' is possible and that nature cannot but be an integral part of it.

sleep, reality seeping into her dreams. A mouth pressing against hers, cold as the ocean. The weight of a body on her own. The limbs, the angles, the planes of the body matched her own – but not a man, not a woman. *In the dim light of the stars, she saw the silvery gleam of scales.* (p. 95, my emphases)

The quotations foreground the kaleidoscopic muddling of different dimensions – reality, sleep, dream, imagination – that obliterates all hierarchies between them, while the fact that the two distinct recollections are described in the very same terms suggests that the experience of the fantastic is far more pervasive than it may appear at first sight.

Callanish and North eventually accept the condition of in-betweenness the fantastic patently heralds and the story closes on an image of attained harmony catalysed by Ursa, North's newborn baby daughter, whose presence adds further symbolic meaning to an ending in which nature takes centre stage, with the sky acquiring a prominent role at last. The very name chosen for North's little girl, the Latin word for a female bear, hints at the sky, in that it recalls Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, the two constellations of the boreal hemisphere.[18] Being circumpolar stars that orbit the celestial poles without ever dipping below the horizon, the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper are always visible throughout the year, and this is the reason why sailors have always used the North Star, shining at the end of the Little Dipper's handle, to guide them.[19] Hence, they become the very symbol of the protagonists' newly acquired awareness, of their now being able to orientate themselves and get their bearings.

Notice that Callanish finally slides into the water and swims around the graceyard, which implies she has overcome fear and disgust, and recovered a positive relationship with surrounding nature. As North tells her: "I've seen you swim, Callanish. You can dive deeper and longer than anyone else. You'll be able to find such wonderful things" (p. 293). What Callanish has always perceived as a hindrance, even a curse, that is her liminal condition, eventually turns into an opportunity.

Significantly, in the closing image of the novel a sort of new utopia is portrayed which, unlike the prospective promised land of the revivalists, is happily set in the here and now, and rooted in a fulfilling relationship with and enjoyment of the natural elements:

North and Callanish slid off the dock and into the water, tilting back their heads to let the sun warm their faces. Around them the sea stretched to the horizon, silver bright, busy with worlds. Between them Ursa swam, stretching out her webbed fingers, floating between earth and sky. (p. 293)

Ursa appears here as the very epitome of a newly achieved harmony: her webbed body reifies the encounter between earth and water, while her name reminds the reader of the stars and the sky. Hence, while throughout the story characters have been depicted as inexorably pulled downward, either by the powerful strength of the sea, or by a voluntary and superstitious attachment to the earth, the closing suggests a new thrust upward thanks to a renewed relationship with the environment that heralds a sympathetic connection of sea, land, sky, and the human body.

[18] According to classical mythology, the constellations of Ursa Major and Ursa Minor originated from the metamorphoses of Callisto, one of Artemis' beautiful followers, first into a bear, then into a star. Logan certainly had this myth in mind when she envisaged her story: Callisto, who had sworn to preserve her virginity to please Artemis, was possessed by Zeus and had to hide her pregnancy to avoid the goddess's anger, exactly like North, who fears the reaction of the circus folk.

[19] "The North Star is the most beautiful because it's always there. It can always show us the way" (p. 153).

In the dystopian world of *The Gracekeepers*, the result of some environmental catastrophe, humans seem to be destined to unhappiness: despite their being close to nature, their relationship with their surroundings testifies to a loss of harmony, both on islands, where the rich landlockers adore trees they cannot even touch, or among the howling waves of a stormy sea, constantly threatening the poor damplings' lives. In the circus and on the graceyards, animals are exploited and treated as inferior, non sentient beings. On close scrutiny, this dreary reality turns out to be a transposition of many despicable attitudes of our present world (for instance, the selfish indifference of the revivalists, who disgustingly pollute the sea around their immaculate cruise ships), as well as an admonition of what the future might be if the problem of climate change is not duly and instantly addressed. The two protagonists, Callanish and North, succeed in tearing the veil of indifference and violence, thus overcoming boundaries while undermining all kinds of oppositions and related hierarchies (earth vs. sea, landlockers vs. damplings, human vs. animal). They do so by painfully learning to recognise 'otherness' as a strong point on which to build a new existence based on acceptance and reciprocal respect. As we saw, the environment plays a key role in their process of self-recognition: after all, human beings should never forget that whatever life they are allowed, it cannot but be set on this earth, and a beautiful life it may be if only humans learn to value one another, as well as other creatures and the environment that nurtures and embraces them all.

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