

ABSTRACT

For Socrates, being possessed by the nymphs ('nympholeptos') meant a departure from conventionalised patterns of perceiving the world by increasing fluidity in its understanding. Although it may have seemed frightening for many people, it actually demanded gratitude for the elevation of the spirit and the heightened understanding, both wise and prophetic. Can a reparative reading of ancient beliefs and myths through aquatic imagination promote contemporary inclusive and empathetic thinking? An attempt to answer this question is made by referring to water 'nymphs' in the Polish art and literature of the 20th and 21st centuries: Harey from Stanisław Lem's novel *Solaris*, Emma Goldman appearing as a buoy on KarolinaFreino's startling *Confluence* statue on a watery floodplain in Kaunas, and girls — the protagonists of Anna Baumgart's film *Wanda* — stunned and liberated by water. In each case, the element of water supports thinking in terms of emergence, potentiality, and reparative change.

keywords

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'Gnawing at stone, feeding rainbows.'

Aquatic imagination and reparative reading of myths¹

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'You've been in christening fonts and courtesans' baths.
In coffins and kisses.
Gnawing at stone, feeding rainbows.
In the sweat and the dew of pyramids and lilacs.
How light the raindrop's contents are.
How gently the world touches me.
Whenever wherever whatever has happened
is written on waters of Babel.'

Water, Szymborska

The eponymous *Water* in Wisława Szymborska's poem (1962) is the symbol of the whole of human history, reaching deep into the past, to the first cultures, to the world of flora and fauna, and uniting the seemingly unconnected (e.g., the baptismal font and the bath of the courtesan, the Nile and the Ganges, the terror of the drowning, and the thirst of the parched). But while the record of these impossible relationships has been miraculously contained in a single drop of rain that has fallen on the poet's hand, one might incredulously suppose that this watery imagination might have been part of a political programme. However, the waters of Babel are undoubtedly the opposite of the Tower of Babel, an edifice supposedly built out of human hubris. In the Bible, God confused human languages; in *Water*, there is a world of matter alongside different languages, in which radical

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differences are a given. Thus, a drop of rain which falls from heaven seems to be a counterpart to God's angry word which comes 'from above' and establishes boundaries and separations. The poet seems to originate from a different order of knowledge; perhaps she intuitively senses that she was once a water nymph who threatened what was considered law and order? And who continues to be dangerously threatening. But the poet's goal does not seem to be blasphemy; rather, the point is to transform the carnal sensation of touching a drop of water into a language that can unite humans and non-humans across the divide. To use Jacques Rancière's terms, Szymborska's readers were invited to the celebration of community (wet). Origin and community power with water as a new bond. Because 'the bonds of the new community must be built out of the ruins of the old order' (Rancière 2011, 28). I therefore assume that Rancière would approve of this interpretation of Szymborska's poem, for his concept of engaged literature is based on the conviction that it is not a matter of speaking directly from one's point of view, but of ways of activating the surrounding world, of entering into established social relations and discourses. Poems do not mean but speak (Rancière 2011, 24), objects play and suggest, producing multiple meanings as a result, and how we want to understand them is up to us. As Brian O'Keeffe rightly points out in his review of Rancière's book *Mallarmé, la politique de la sirène* (1996): 'The task is to re-found a society and to seal a community that has neither a king nor a god to preside over it' (O'Keeffe 2013, 310), thanks to the new connection between writing and the body and the creation of corporeal writing. In Rancière's perspective, the fact of experiencing rain and the drop of water falling on the poet's skin appears as a communal experience. Poetic games of association offer us the chance to find another way of thinking and the possibility of a new language emerging, with another world alongside it. This new world will not be a celebration of the chimerical power of the Christian 'real presence' of absence (Rancière 2011, 30) and its gods will be created through the new language, which expresses physical phenomena. Indeed, as the philosopher demonstrates, *Mallarmé* considers Greek mythology and its numerous gods to be living personifications of natural phenomena.

Within the space of aquatic imagination evoked by Szymborska, I will present three female figures: Emma, Wanda, and Harey, each created by very diverse Polish artists — Karolina Freino (b. 1978), Anna Baumgart (b. 1966), both visual artists, and Stanisław Lem (1921-2006), a writer. I would like to call these women contemporary nymphs and the psychological (spiritual?) state caused by their presence — nympholepsia. It means here a higher — or merely different — type of conscience, disrupting the prevailing order. It is expressed through sensual experience and a particular relationship to time which does not run obsessively forward. In comparing these fictive women to nymphs and retelling ancient myths as contem-

porary stories, a new mythology is being built (as Jess Zimmerman in *Women and Others Monsters. Building a New Mythology* [2021] would probably say). In the process of revising ancient myths, the following question arises: Is it possible to imagine that thanks to these nymphs not only a new mythology, but also a different kind of knowledge is built?

Such questions are of course about reparative knowledge and research strategies. They are posed by scholars in the fields of queer studies and feminism, and they extend beyond mere restitution of harm. As Susan Best has aptly summarised, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's reparative concepts emphasise ambivalence, and consequently, 'a reparative motive seeks pleasure rather than the avoidance of shame, but it also signals the capacity to assimilate the consequences of destruction and violence' (Best 2016, 3). Reparative strategies, which are an integral part of emancipatory discourse, are particularly important in the context of decolonialism. In regions such as Poland and Central Europe, which were under Soviet influence after World War II, post-colonial methodologies are often adapted to local nuances within the framework of so-called post-dependence studies. The Polish historical narratives included in this discourse, as articulated by Hanna Gosk, shed light on a life overshadowed by the Empire — an enduring period marked by violence, domination, and dependency (Gosk 2008, 76). Nevertheless, there is a growing recognition among scholars that the veil of silence surrounding Russia's and the USSR's colonial practices needs to be lifted. Some scholars chastise their Western counterparts for their hypocrisy and argue for the application of postcolonial methodologies in Central European contexts (Fiut 2014, 34-40). Notably, works such as Szyborska's poem *Water* and Lem's *Solaris* were produced in the shadow of the Empire, while the contributions of Freino and Baumgart emerged in the post-Iron Curtain era. For the scope of this paper, I will not be delving into the intricate and multifaceted postcolonial discourse. However, in acknowledging the role of the aquatic imagination in fostering decolonial thought, I refer specifically to its intersections with feminist studies.

Emma — Nymph of the rivers

Emma Goldman, characterising anarchism as a practical system and employing an aquatic metaphor, asserted that it 'has vitality enough to leave the stagnant waters of the old, and build, as well as sustain, new life. In the light of this conception, anarchism is indeed practical. More than any other idea, it is helping to do away with the wrong and foolish; more than any other idea, it is building and sustaining new life' (Shulman 1998, 63). In Goldman's view, the antithesis was dryness. Predictably,



her commendation of Professor Braun's lectures in Vienna, which she attended, was that they were never 'dry or dull' (Goldman 1931, 127).

I assume that Karolina Freino imagined Emma Goldman (1869-1940), a famous anarchist born to a Jewish family in Kaunas, as a contemporary water nymph endowed with advanced technology. Her startling image found its place at the confluence of the Nemunas and Neris rivers during the 11th Kaunas Biennial in 2017. The temporary counter-monument was on display for three months as part of this artistic event and took the form of a beacon painted in the colours of anarcho-feminism (purple and black). It was 167 centimetres high and a flickering lamp (which was to represent Emma's head) was placed on its cylindrical torso, filled with electronics and three car batteries [Fig.1-2]. A spotlight transmitted Emma's autobiography in Morse code. The text, *Living my Life* (1931) could be read after scanning a QR code placed on a stone on the bank. The artist entitled her work *Confluence*.

The Lithuanian city of Kaunas was of significant importance in the history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Polish Republic (known as Kowno), the Russian Empire (Ковно), and the Third Reich (Kauen). Nationalistic disputes among

Fig. 1 Karolina Freino, "Confluence: The Monument to Emma Goldman." Light installation integrated with a website. Kaunas, Lithuania, 2017. © Karolina Freino.



Fig. 2 Karolina Freino, “Confluence: The Monument to Emma Goldman.” Light installation integrated with a website. Kaunas, Lithuania, 2017. © Karolina Freino.

the multiethnic population led to frequent changes in the statehood of this medieval town under the influence of numerous military campaigns. The local castle was visited by both the Masters of the Teutonic Order and Polish kings. The Nemunas River has played a prominent role in Polish, Lithuanian, and German cultural history. Adam Mickiewicz, celebrated as one of Poland’s greatest poets, admired its beauty. It even found its place in the German national anthem under the name Memel (‘Von der Maas bis an die Memel’). As a result, Kaunas becomes a site of nationalist spectacles, where Jews have historically felt alienated. Freino’s idea was to highlight not only the unique location of the monument at the confluence, but also the processes of flowing together and coming together as related to grassroots anarchist self-organisation so dear to Goldman’s heart. The monument was most captivating at dusk, as the flickering lamplight reflected on the water and flared up with the vibrations of the river waves.

Goldman in Kaunas was thus a shapeshifter, like the nymphs of yore: a robot-android transformed into a glowing light. She resembled a ghost. She was returning to her hometown, which did not need her and from which she had fled, bathed in

an aura of extraordinary light. Goldman, who passed away in 1940 at the age of 71 in distant Toronto, did not witness the pogroms, shootings of Jews in the streets, or many other terrible events that took place in Kaunas during World War II (Szarota 2015, 159-217). Yet, her appearance does evoke some horrible events she did not experience. The streaks of light and the power of the flowing floodplain with billowing clouds above crafted a surprising spectacle of the sublime, blending technological and romantic elements alike. By night, it was powerful in pathos and grandeur, but by day it might even have seemed like an ironic joke. Unlike the buoy bobbing awkwardly on the wave, Goldman wanted to dance in frenzied excitement and abandon, declaring: 'I will dance myself to death! My flesh felt hot, my heart beat wildly as my cavalier swung me around the ballroom and held me tight. To dance myself to death — what a more glorious end!' (Goldman 1931, 20). The artist turns the Jewish migrant Goldman into a beacon. No longer a fugitive, she has the potential to point in a direction, shining on the horizon like a hope that confluence implies solidarity and mutual care and support. She/it expresses the strength that comes from unity. The energy of the two rivers is strikingly powerful and argues for the possibility of achieving common goals.

Freino's aquatic imagination aligns seamlessly with the waves of feminism. As noted by Candace Falk: 'If the wave metaphor (popularised through the description of "the second wave" women's movement) still holds water, it is clear that, even with the ebbs and flows, Goldman's tide continues to roll in' (Falk 2007, 43). Goldman's popularity extended far beyond the second wave, and Freino's invocation of her emphatically demonstrates this. Much like second-wave feminists would later do, Goldman sensationalised the idea that the private is political because the state always reserves the right to intervene in matters concerning women and marriage. Her radical and incendiary ideas quickly made her a public menace, as she not only spoke about war, revolution, and workers, but also publicly addressed liberation from normative sexuality (having had a brief lesbian relationship with Almeda Sperry), contraception, free love, and rights for homosexuals and prostitutes (to use historic terms, the first medical, the second derogatory).

However, as Rochelle Gurstein has pointed out, the attribution of the role of feminist 'foremother' to her is a result of the selective treatment of her views. Unfortunately, she was insensitive to racism, ridiculed suffragettes for believing in state legislation, disliked avant-garde art, and, last but not least, her life, as Candace Falk has demonstrated, did not align with the principles of free love that she preached (Gurstein 2002, 67-89). Her erotic fixation on Dr. Reitman and her prolonged entanglement in this degrading relationship call attention to the erotic madness inherent in nymph stories. Goldman failed to establish a fulfilling and lasting love relationship, a point emphasised by Lori Jo Marso. Ultimately, Goldman

recognised this as the tragic reality for all modern women (Marso 2007, 83). But Goldman needed more than love, she needed love to the point of madness to believe in the importance of fighting for specific political demands. An atheist, she craved love as a divine anointing and legitimation beyond the limits of this world, an extraordinary devotion. To use Rabun Taylor's term that fuses modernity and irrationality, she sought a nympholeptic 'divine chemistry' (Taylor 2018, 284-312) to feel fearless, attain a higher consciousness, and achieve invincibility. Recalling Goldman in Kaunas, the artist emboldens contemporary audiences not to be afraid to challenge constraining and naturalised social norms.

Harey — Nymph of the ocean

The Ocean from Stanisław Lem's novel *Solaris* is also extremely powerful. It has the extraordinary skill to embody the traumas, dreams, and phantasmagorias of those living on a strange planet called Solaris. Harey, the astonishing phantom that can also be called a nymph because she is born from the Ocean, causes madness in Dr. Kris Kelvin, a scholar sent on a space mission to explore the planet. The author sarcastically refers to the scientists as supposed knights of holy contact who really do not need other worlds, only mirrors. Kelvin is one such 'knight' scientist and is totally helpless and frightened when he meets Harey, entirely produced by this mysterious ocean. As hard as it is to believe, she seems to be his long-dead wife, who committed suicide. His sexual desire and guilt prove that a purely scientific approach to this strange phenomenon is insufficient. At one point, he abandons epistemic greed in favour of faith, saying of Harey: 'I started believing in her.' It is Harey who reveals the inadequacy of Dr Kelvin's scientific approaches in studying extraterrestrial civilisations.

While Lem's novel is situated within the science fiction genre, its roots delve deep into the Polish romantic and neo-romantic tradition, marked by its irrational visions. Yet Lem maintains a distance from yielding to these visions. The author arrives at a juncture where both institutionalised science and religion reveal their inadequacy. Confronted with an impasse, a new spirituality becomes imperative. This is why Dr. Kelvin, in echoing the sentiments of the romantic poet Juliusz Słowacki, not only diminishes himself but also establishes a mysterious connection with the fluid, oceanic element. Słowacki, in fact, referred to such a relationship — when immersing himself in water — as an elemental baptism (Rymkiewicz 2004, 206). Despite the differences, it signifies an immersion into a world over which one has no control. Slavoj Žižek, commenting in his *Pervert's Guide to Cinema* on Tarkovsky's film based on Lem's novel, suggests that while Dr. Kelvin's primary problem is getting

rid of Harey, the real tragedy is on her side: for she has no substance, no consistency, no identity of her own, and cannot exist for herself, independently, because she is only her husband's dream. Not only does her memory depend on what Kelvin remembers, her life depends on him: she is even unable to destroy her meagre existence and commit suicide, although she wants to, believing he wants her to. As a ghost and spectral figure, she is someone who cannot be removed and who keeps returning. This, as Žižek sarcastically notes, seems to be men's 'dirty' dream of women as beings wholly dependent on men: if there were no lust for them, women would be condemned to non-existence. Kelvin's reconciliation with his father, not his wife, at the end of the movie further reinforces its anti-feminist message. It may be added to Žižek's remarks that the tragic fate of Harey, who must die so that the world can return to the dominant (old, known) order, refers to a woman who, unlike many nymphs and witches, does not demonstrate her independence and strength. She is doomed simply because she is a woman and men are uncomfortable with her. She makes them aware of ties that do not allow them to be fully free. There is no place for a woman on the planet if it is to be an efficient facility for scientific research. The element of the ocean has to be tamed in its entirety. It appears that Lem is writing not just about the planet Solaris, but also about contemporary modernisation, which is fundamentally patriarchal. Nevertheless, the awareness of a failed contact with an alien form of intelligence heralds the inevitable demise of patriarchy.

It appears that the aquatic imagination surfaced in the latter half of the 20th century in Poland as a reaction to the pervasive rationalism and its forceful imposition by the deterministic obligation to strictly follow the singular path of scientism, especially within the framework of the state doctrine of scientific socialism. The resistance against the so-called 'soc-modernity' (the modernity of Central Europe during the Soviet Union's dominance) manifested itself in diverse forms, and in Lem's case, it materialises as a sort of madness, vividly portrayed through Dr. Kelvin's descent into it. However, this is not a poetic mania or a state of higher consciousness. To ensure Dr. Kelvin's survival, it is imperative that this condition be brought under control.

Wanda — Nymph of the source

Anna Baumgart's film *Wanda* (2022) [Fig. 3-8] aspires, as Dominik Czechowski wrote, to transform Slavic myths into a universal imaginary (Czechowski 2022).² The point of departure is, on the one hand, a fascination with Stanisław Wyspiański's drama *Legenda* (1904) and, on the other, a particular and true catastrophe that

² The film was originally titled *Lake* and submitted to the competition for the Polonia Pavilion, at the Venice Biennale in 2022.

Fig. 3 Anna Baumgart, "Still from the film Wanda," 2022. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 4 Anna Baumgart, "Still from the film Wanda," 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 5 Anna Baumgart, "Still from the film Wanda," 2022. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 6 Anna Baumgart, "Still from the film Wanda," 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 7 Anna Baumgart, "Still from the film Wanda," 2022. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 8 Anna Baumgart, "Still from the film Wanda," 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

occurred in 1948 on Lake Gardno — the sinking of two fishing boats on their way to the village of Rowy on the Baltic Sea, with their passengers: 4 caretakers and 21 girl scouts (the youngest was 8 years old, the oldest 15). In the revised perspective, the tragic death of 25 girls and women, albeit due to the recklessness of the guides and a technical malfunction of the boat, gave rise to Baumgart's various reparative speculations. The desire to live a different life from the one dictated by historical reality and the fascination with water go hand in hand in this film. It is known that, the day before the accident, the girls gave a theatrical performance in front of the local population around a bonfire. They performed a play *About Wanda who Did Not Want a German* ('O Wandzie, co nie chciała Niemca') based on a medieval legend wherein Princess Wanda threw herself into the river to remain a virgin. The protagonist of the play, who throws herself into the watery abyss (incidentally noted in the *Heritage Floor*, a part of *The Dinner Party*, 1979, by Judy Chicago), became the inspiration for Baumgart to create a counterfactual story in which the end is not death, but a different life, a different being. Thus, posthumanist themes are beginning to surface. Baumgart borrows from Wyspiański the idea that Wanda was a daughter of the river. Wanda's words uttered during the performance: 'I come to you, my sister, water, I come to you, my eternity,' (Moller) were of particular significance in the context of the subsequent death of the girl who played her role. However, Baumgart's film does not focus on the tragedy but on the sensuality of pubescent girls, their discovery of their own bodies, their first menstruation. Although we know from history that the girls experienced traumatic moments during World War II, the theme is the search for pleasure and the anticipation of unknown happiness against the backdrop of a benign summer on a white sand beach. A mysterious eco-sexual ritual, a greeting of birth and death at the same time, is the culmination of the plot. One of the first versions of the film's script featured the metamorphosis of women and girls into grey seals (*Halichoerus grypus*), which inhabit the Baltic Sea basin. The transformation of humans into bodies of water will thus take place. The girls did not die but rather changed. A quote from Astrida Neimanis, a posthumanist feminist scholar, might be useful here: '*Bodies of water* insists that if we do live as bodies "in common," this commonality needs to extend beyond the human, into a more expansive sense of "we"' (Neimanis 2017, 12). In the re-edited *Wanda*, this transformation is absent and we are simply left with the fact of the girls' disappearance and confronted with the image of turbulent waves. Either way, the message has not changed; it has become clear that we need to redefine 'we', to look at togetherness more closely, to be aware of whether it means common punishment and discipline or a common dream. Before the transformation/drowning took place, the girls went on a boat, and Wanda's voice from offstage spoke about planetary pansexuality,

queer indigenusness, the system of interspecies exchange, and techno-shamanism as perfect conditions for mourning. At the end the viewers hear: ‘I invite you (...) to a necessary transformation so profound that you say it is impossible, so deep that you think it is unthinkable.’ After these words, the image changes, we no longer see the boat on the lake, the waves appear and we hear that ‘the unthinkable must happen.’ So we hope for a different story that is meant to have a happy ending. That was the goal of retelling the whole story.

Old myths have already exhausted their potential for social support. The new story which seems to be a fairy tale transcends the world of human beings. Nymphs are shapeshifters, they may become either animals or waves. The story is not about sacrifice, but about the transformation of one type of matter into another. This time, Baumgart, involved in artistic research for years, attempted to see the legends of the water nymphs in the context of queer indigenous studies and to reclaim the myth so that through this reinterpretation it would become possible to continually reimagine life. In addition to words from Wyspiański’s *Legend*, the script refers to the passage from *An Apartment on Uranus* (2020), a book by Paul B. Preciado, a trans-activist. Preciado explores the experiences of individuals undergoing medico-legal gender reconciliation procedures, essentially existing in a state of transition. He perceives this process as a transition from one mechanism of truth production to another. As he argues, both trans individuals and migrants seek recognition of their subjectivity from the same state apparatuses that currently exclude them. This paradoxical situation calls for a necessary change. Baumgart constructs a scenario in which the girls undergo maturation, transformation, and an acknowledgment of their sexuality. They are genuinely in transition, embracing the fluidity of water with a deep fascination and an eager, profound anticipation for the unknown. Nonetheless, at this point their bodies are not defined by what had happened in the past or what will happen in the future. The only truth lies in their present material and physical reality. It is more likely to be demonstrated than articulated. It eludes language because there is currently no linguistic framework capable of describing it.

Comparativism in the service of decolonialism

Nymphs have a kind of charm in stories, but when we label someone as a nymph, it is more of a metaphor than a genuine belief in supernatural beings because we have been taught that nymphs do not actually exist. The challenge is how we handle the shift of nymphs from religious to fantasy realms, causing significant

elements of their original mythological context to lose their importance. There is also the challenge of putting together different stories and characters that may seem unrelated. For example, it might be hard to see what Emma Goldman has to do with the heroine in Lem's novel. However, by making these new connections, we get a fresh way to look at the world. If the choice of individual nymphs, that is, the decision to comparatively analyse the works of Freino, Lem, and Baumgart (who did not know each other), seems arbitrary and unclear, the answer to these ambiguities may be found in the methodological premises of contemporary intercultural comparativism, which no longer seeks to deal with mutual influences and contacts, but to show polycentric multiplicity. Subjective choice is part of the process. A line of intersection of these subjectively selected, mutually independent sites and works of Polish culture was thus created. This strategy aims to give a view of culture in motion and of the syncretic and interdisciplinary meeting of those who have come together in order to create a conversation around the multiplicity of female identities within an aquatic perspective, which turns out to transcend national and confessional barriers. This is why Mediterranean *neréids* meet Slavic *undines* and *rusalkas*. Thus, in my reading, the cultural status of the nymph is no longer associated with an archetype or an archaism, but with a dream about the future. It provides a new connecting cultural dynamic at the intersection of the abundance of mythological cultural heritage and our contemporary polycentric world, in which time runs in various directions and space is full of potential links. The nymph does not testify to a genetic affinity to which one should return. Juxtaposing the Tower of Babel with *Water*, Szymborska seems to change gender. Apparently, she swaps a god for an aquatic goddess, with whom a new kind of knowledge emerges. Would there be room for the female autonomy Harey lacked, the dancing Emma loved, the superhuman togetherness Wanda longed for? Nymphs retell our collective histories in ways that are inclusive and supportive. Nymphs in European culture evolved into one of the numerous embodiments of precarious and perilous knowledge linked to immersion — that is, an inability to maintain a critical distance and exercise impartial judgment and/or old, dry estimation. Thus imaginative concept has proven remarkably persistent, continuing to be a subject of reflection well into the 21st century. In contemporary times, this form of knowledge serves as a means to prioritise trust and respect over an exclusive pursuit of truth. This type of wisdom arises more from collaborative thinking, aiming to encompass the critique of the Anthropocene and human *hubris*. The role of the researcher in such a perspective would be to focus on hospitality, to bring about an encounter in which what is important is not the juxtaposition of cultures, but coexistence, complementarity, and understanding (or at least listening attentively) to the 'stranger', serving to learn from a permanent

dialogue (Zelenka 2010: 45-53). Refraining from assessing everything based solely on personal standards now also becomes the responsibility of the researcher. Their role is therefore to promote a culture of hospitality and to point out the emotional pleasure of participating in such a culture. This type of comparative research thus raises the question of a type of community that is not a monocultural entity. Indeed, meeting a stranger allows one to understand oneself. The prospect of encountering nymphs unfolds as an opportunity for a potential reparative chapter in one's own history.

Meeting

After the destruction of Harey, Kris Kelvin meets the mysterious Ocean for the first time. He wants to contact it directly. It wasn't until the destruction of Harey, the instrument of that contact, that he realised he wanted to confront the Ocean in another way than through the mesmerising phantoms of his imagination. But how do we meet someone/something that is not our mirror, in which we do not recognise ourselves? The longing to go beyond the realm of reflections will probably never be satisfied, because sitting near the Ocean, Kelvin had to admit that he still did not understand Them, and that all he had left was the belief that 'the time for cruel miracles has not passed.' Though he assured Harey that she had overshadowed his diseased wife, that he loved only her, she was, after all, a projection of his brain. Dedicated to his scientific mission, Kelvin recognises that within its confines any form of pleasure, even ambivalent pleasure, is out of reach. So he approaches the Ocean as if it were a graveyard, where he has finally laid to rest the prospect of acquiring other knowledge. Nevertheless, he has come to realise that this alternative knowledge, though unpredictable and uncontrollable, is occasionally intertwined with pleasure.

Emma the Beacon also appeared temporarily, only for the three months of the Biennial. Her captivating sensuality was revealed in the evening and at night, when she shimmered and cast a gentle glow on the water. Her disappearance left an emptiness behind. The memory of her emergence from the water and her remarkable story rendered the traditional monuments dedicated to men inadequate within the cityscape.

Today, the closest monument in the area is a 3.5-metre-high statue of John Paul II cast in bronze that was erected back in 2011. Emma and Harey are gone. Kaunas and Solaris seem deserted without them. Would Emma and Harey have anything to say to each other and to us today? Emma insisted: '(...) that our Cause could not expect me to become a nun and that the movement should not be turned into

a cloister. If it meant that, I did not want it' (Goldman 1931, 47). She insisted on the necessity of pleasure. Harey was condemned to an anchoritic life; she had no friends, no family. Emma could not help her, for there seemed to be no way out of the situation. But if they could meet, she could just be close to her, touch her, listen to her, talk to her. Her understanding, her being at her side, would be a relief to Harey's loneliness. And what could Emma tell Wanda? Surely, she could tell her fearlessly about her lesbian relationship with Almeda Sperry, or that her closest friend in St. Petersburg was Neva. She always spoke with great affection about that river, placing it first among the things she loved: 'St. Petersburg, my beloved Neva, my friends, my books and music,' (Goldman 1931, 14) she wrote, in that order, of the things she loved. When she decided to emigrate with her sister, which her father would not allow, only the last argument worked: 'I threatened to jump into the Neva' (Goldman 1931, 13). Surely this overwhelming desire to throw oneself into the abyss of the river, the desire for another life and another world, would be what Emma, Harey, and Wanda could talk about endlessly while sitting on the shore of the lake, enjoying the sensual beauty of the world. Perhaps these meetings of the three characters could be a starting point of a more inclusive world they all dream about individually? Their own singularity and solitude inevitably led them to failure.

Aquatic imagination against dry knowledge

Nympholepsia sounds like a terrible, incurable disease. For Socrates in Plato's *Phaedrus*, being possessed by the nymphs meant a departure from the conventionalised patterns of perceiving the world by increasing fluidity in its understanding. Nympholepsia was integral to a complex cultural system that encompassed religion. Nymphs were part of a 'rustic' pantheon, primarily residing outside the city (Borgeaud 1979, 159-191). And because, as Rita Felski argued in *The Gender of Modernity*, modernity is decisively masculine and bourgeois, rusticity takes on potent anti-modern and altermodern overtones. Nymphs were part of a 'pact' with the landscape, the environment, and non-human entities, always in mutual relations, not viewed within the context of exploitation and economic gain. Although nympholepsia may have seemed frightening for many people, it was actually worthy of gratitude for the elevation of the spirit and the heightened understanding, at once wise and prophetic. Therefore nympholepsia in my story appears to be a worthy tool for constructing new knowledge.

Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* interpreted the famous Homeric tale of the Sirens and Odysseus as a dichotomy, framing it as a narrative depicting the shattering of myth by ordered reason. They considered this to be the quintessential dialectic of the Enlightenment. Roger Caillois reminds us that nympholepsia has the power to relegate men to the role of passive victims of aggressive femininity (Fabiano 2013, 166). Roberto Calasso meticulously followed the remnants of fluid thinking and the anachronistic surges of mythic memory within European culture. Unlike the French Encyclopaedists and other protagonists of the Age of Enlightenment, who scorned pagan gods, Calasso's exploration recognises and embraces the enduring presence of these ancient deities. In *Literature and the Gods* he attributed a special role to nymphs in the survival of thought that resisted exploitative modern ultra-rationality. It was from the source guarded by the shapeshifter Telphusa that the usurper and aggressor Apollo sought not only to acquire liquid, fluid knowledge but, above all, to impose his own measure upon it. For Kathleen Skott-Myhre, mythical figures are simply located 'outside the dominant colonial logic' (Skott-Myhre 2018, 9). Marguerite Yourcenar, a revered voice in French literature, also took a keen interest in nympholepsia. The protagonists of her short story *Anna, soror...* (written in 1925) are a sister and brother, Anna and Miguel, who briefly become romantic lovers. They are brought together thanks to a prophecy by a young Saracen witch, whom Miguel meets at the source: 'Monseigneur,' he thought he heard, 'your sister is waiting for you nearby with a cup full of pure water. You'll drink together.' ['—*Monseigneur, crut-il entendre, votre sœur vous attend près d'ici avec une coupe pleine d'eau pure. Vous boirez ensemble.*'] (Yourcenar 2015, 9). Although the carnal relationship between Miguel and Anna lasts only a few days, it becomes an event that gives meaning to their lives and overshadows everything else. Without Miguel, ageing and lonely, Anna 'was consumed in this dryness as if within a barren desert' [*ce consumait dans cette sécheresse comme à l'intérieur d'un désert aride*'], fell into numbness unable even to cry. 'She was denied the comfort of tears (...)' [*La consolation des larmes lui était refusée (...)*] (Yourcenar 2015, 37). Yourcenar wrote her story during a several-week stay in Naples in 1925 and was very familiar with the monuments there, including the church of San Giovanni a Mare. She must have known about the most important object kept there: a fragment of a Greek sculpture representing Parthenope. This siren appears, for instance, in Virgil's *Georgics*. According to Nicholas Freer, the writer was never able to forget the lessons taught by the *dulcis* (sweet) Parthenope in his youth (Freer 2019, 90). The Saracen witch is undoubtedly an incarnation of Parthenope. The nymphs serve as a poignant reminder to humans that their nature is inherently capricious and unpredictable. While navigating a myriad of choices, people deftly weave through anachronistic

scenarios, perpetually repeating worn-out patterns. Yourcenar did not perceive Parthenope as a finished work of art; instead, she viewed her as an influential figure with the constant power to shape the perception of reality.

In another short story, *L'Homme qui a aimé les Néréides*, from the volume *Nouvelles orientales* (1938), the protagonist is the beggar Panegyotis, who lost his speech at the age of 18 after encountering naked Nereids. These goddesses granted the boy entry into a realm of pleasure, ecstasy, and happiness, taking away his mind so that he, like an innocent faun, could freely engage in their amusements. Before he fell silent forever, he declared that what he had experienced was beyond belief.

In Polish tradition, *rusalkas* were often seen as a mysterious force subtly influencing the fate of a seemingly defenceless nation. A detailed account of the mythical figure Świtezianka can be found in the works of the renowned romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz. According to legend, she resided in Lake Świtez in the Novgorod Highlands and was once the daughter of the city's ruler. In a plea to God, she requested for the city to be sunk in order to free its inhabitants from slavery under the Russian tsar. The submerged city's residents were transformed into water plants, with the exception of the chief's daughter, who became the aquatic Świtezianka. This mythical being, adorned with both beautiful and poisonous flowers, lured oppressors to their death in revenge. The anti-imperial and anti-tsarist undertones of Świtezianka's story gained added significance when, in 1831, the Russian authorities confiscated the manor house on Świtez where Mickiewicz had stayed (Sala 2020, 156). Today, however, 19th-century nymph stories are frequently divested of their national significance. Yet, the term 'thaw', alluding to the period following Stalin's death, still suggests an endeavour to pursue policies grounded in national interests and at a remove from the norms imposed by the USSR. Anyhow, if we recognise Harey as a distorted incarnation of Świtezianka, it becomes evident that Lem was delving not only into the futuristic world of technology, but also into the tragic narrative of the complete loss of the old world. The act of remembering has not simply lost its meaning and utility; it has evolved into a perilous undertaking, mirroring the tragic embodiment of Świtezianka in Harey. References to pagan nymphs in Poland are also linked to the criticism of the dominance of the Catholic Church. Maria Janion observed that the Christianisation of Poland was so thorough that missionaries unabashedly eradicated all traces of ancient culture (Janion 2006, 13). Therefore, according to Janion, who employed Edward Said's concept of orientalisation, ancient Polish culture was subjected to colonisation under the banner of Christianity. Furthermore, Eastern European culture is susceptible to similar distortions and prejudices, much like those associated with the 'Orient.' Polish children do not study Slavic mythology in school. This is not solely due to the influence of the Catholic Church and religious instruction,

but also because the Slavic religion is often regarded here as inferior to Mediterranean religions. Hence, it is the connection of Wanda with queer culture that sets Anna Baumgart's film apart. It seems to be, undoubtedly, a political protest against the government's and the Church's homophobic policies. In addition, however, it is an attempt to reflect on local culture from a decolonial perspective. The recreation and imaginative reinterpretation of Slavic rituals is intended to cultivate a transnational, trans-ethnic community that transcends individual religious boundaries. This aspect aligns closely with Freino's perspective. It is imperative to revisit Mickiewicz, who firmly believed in the mystical union of the Polish and Jewish peoples. Consequently, the community to which Freino directs her work is also supra-ethnic and supranational.

Today, wet ontologies are being developed within the blue humanities, worked on by scholars from various disciplines. In *Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume Through Oceanic Thinking*, Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters employ an argument in defence of 'wet knowledge' reminiscent of the philosophers and artists of old (Steinberg, Peters 2015: 247-264). This represents a shift from fixity to fluidity, flow, and becoming that transcends overly abstract and dematerialised thinking about the world. Moving away from 'flattened' ontologies, it enables us to transcend existing boundaries, directing our attention to both materiality and the previously established notion of 'spirituality.' The materiality of water, existing in three physical states (liquid, ice, and steam), is what makes it a magical shapeshifter. According to Steinberg and Peters, water is a dynamic assemblage in which mobile human and non-human elements are imagined, encountered, and produced, creating an unstable 'thrill' (*frisson*) of matter and meaning. The transitions here are evident, moving from the old religious *tremor* to the new material *frisson*. In this way, they help the imagination to navigate an undefined, dystopian reality that defies established knowledge. Greek or Slavic mythology can be understood as a potential history and serve to build knowledge that is not based on anthropocentrism; it allows different known histories to be queered, for diversity and inclusivity to be defended. Nymphs encourage transversal thinking and the recognition of interrelationships between the environment and humans, advocating for a more horizontal model of mutual relations. The important role of the aquatic imagination seems to be a promising resource for reparative knowledge. Water has become an important actor in the works of Baumgart, Freino, and Lem (although in Lem's case its fluid composition is not necessarily H₂O). Wanda, Emma, and Harey can breathe air, but their connection to the water element defines them as individuals heralding a different way of being. Following Tim Ingold's idea that water is a substance for terrestrial beings and a medium for aquatic beings (Ingold 2007: S26), it can be noted that in the latter case, it is impossible to separate the

person from the medium. The substance is one of many components, and the medium is an immanent part of the body, associated with its life form. Therefore, through the encounter with nymphs, people discover that there are other life forms within their reach. They interconnect divergent ecosystems. Luce Irigaray wrote about a historical 'inattention' to fluids in relation to the traditional belief that rationality is associated with the mechanics of solids. Because nymphs are beings with dual (aquatic and terrestrial) life forms, they cannot be universal; their presence introduces an irritating surplus that must be ignored in rational considerations. Fluidity, and in this case femininity, would be what Irigaray calls in *The Mechanics of Fluids* 'the excess factor' (Irigaray 1985, 108). As she asked: 'But consider this principle of constancy which is so dear to you: what "does it mean"? The avoidance of excessive inflow/outflow-excitement? Coming from the other?' (Irigaray 1985, 115). For her, the persistent repetition of the state of equilibrium is a kind of freezing of the vital form, a repression. This constraint is necessary for achieving homogeneity in forms. Moreover, it risks subverting the entire discursive economy. The person described by Irigaray transcends the limits of the Cartesian subject, undergoing deconstruction and fluid displacement by the other (Quick 1992, 199). Harey as Dr Kelvin's alter ego has to be silenced because the researcher must continue a scientific discourse. She had to die because the conjoining of Dr. Kelvin with her exceeded the requirements of the Law and Science. But by transgressing the Law, Wanda changes and becomes someone/something else. She is not one, singular, not always the same. She also has some other form of existence. In turn, Emma can only exist within the excesses of love, driven by her desire to transgress the Law.

Conclusion

Is it possible today for ancient beliefs and myths to support reparative knowledge building? An attempt to address this question involved looking to water 'nymphs', who allowed us to see that the world does not revolve solely around the same 'dry' knowledge. Aquatic imagination points to the importance of connecting body and environment. The dependency is not a burden; rather, it serves as an indication of embodiment and materiality that cannot be translated into abstract symbols. The manifestation of an alternative knowledge, the alchemical transformation of Logos into lapis, is traditionally represented by *aurum potable* or liquid gold. This miraculously transmuted stone serves as an elixir of life, embodying an esoteric ideal that leads to the truth of enlightened consciousness. Once transmuted, this stone possesses the remarkable ability to hydrate and permeate the body, dissolving

stagnant matter and revealing the brilliance of epiphany. It acts as a catalyst, restoring harmony to the world, fostering health and catalysing moral transformation. Placing trust in the potentiality of this narrative opens the door to the construction of knowledge, with Harey, Emma, and Wanda serving as guides along this transformative journey. They find themselves in a precarious state of transition, navigating the delicate intricacies of their status, roles, and futures. Emma cautions against anti-Semitism, Wanda highlights concerns about Catholic fundamentalism, and Harey points out the misogyny inherent in the modern world. They reappear like phantoms from the past, offering reassurance that even though history has taken unfortunate turns, we still possess the power to effect positive change. Hence, they narrate optimistic scenarios. Wanda advocates for residing in a non-normative and inclusive community, where individuals receive support for their differences; Emma continues to dwell on the concept of love, drawing inspiration from the confluence of two rivers, as she believes their combined strength symbolises the capability of love to overcome all barriers and hierarchies; and Harey is essentially Dr. Kelvin, embodying his innermost self that resists assimilation into the system, particularly one dominated by technology and machines. Is the function of Harey only to provide access to man's hidden self, then? It also seems to serve to deny the autonomous, self-sufficient individual who does not feel connected to the surrounding environment beyond its exploitation. Emma, Wanda, and Harey are fully engrossed in the endeavour to rebuild society and foster a sense of community, free from the influence of the old, harsh deity and rigid, heartless traditions. Their focus is on materiality rather than language and centres on the expression of the body. Ultimately, their dream revolves around fostering a new alliance between the body and language. A proper start requires performative abilities. In a relationship with water nymphs, we become participants in another world and do not dare impose our own measures on other beings. We become grateful that we are no longer trapped in old patterns, and that our contours have become fluid and more connective. Hydromythology can play a role in restoring, inventing, and imagining other ways of inhabiting the world, thus supporting a broader sense of community. On the ground of art history, an aquatic imaginary will allow ancient works of art to be re-examined and shown from a decolonised perspective as living rather than dry, mummified heritage.

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