

The Importance of Creative Writing

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Has the myth of science
nothing to learn
from the science of myth?

– Sisir Kumar Ghose²

A cultural boundary marker

During a visit to India a couple of years ago I came across a book called *Creativity and Environment*. A group of scholars and poets joined to reflect on the role of creative writing for our general ability to grasp not nature as such or humans as such, but the relationship between humans and nature as a precondition for the understanding both entities. The editor Vidya Niwas Misra's essay "Man, Nature and the Poet" is an attempt to revitalise age old Vedic wisdom to approach modern interpretive needs related to our attitude to nature today. The first lines read as follows: "The very idea of environment as an objective entity is beyond comprehension for a Vedic *r̥ṣi* (seer). For him what he sees is simultaneously within him and around him."³ This quote shows that when it comes to nature any imaginary thinking and creative writing has to unite two pairs of opposite poles and their simultaneous interaction: past and present, and "within" and "around". This is exactly what happens in creative writing, also in European thinking.

There is a direct line from Aristotle quoting Empedocles in the fifth century BC "nature is but a name given to [this mixture and separation of elements] by men"⁴ to Kate Soper's reminder that there is "no attempt to explore 'what nature is' that is not centrally concerned with what it has been said to be".⁵ In this perspective we are never confronted with nature as such. Therefore, to comprehend nature as a totality we are part of is a task for creative writing based on both experience and imagination.

How do we experience nature on such conditions? Let me exemplify with a quote from the nineteenth-century French historian Jules Michelet. In his book *La mer* (1861) he writes:

A brave Dutch sailor, a reliable and keen observer who passes his life at sea, frankly admits that the first impression one gets from the sea is fear. For all terrestrial beings water is the element of non-breathing, the element of suffocation, *the fatal and absolute barrier which for ever separates the two worlds*. It comes as no surprise if the enormous masses of water we call the sea, unknown and obscure in its profound density, always appeared dangerous to the human imagination.⁶

Here the sea is looked upon, purely and only, in its capacity to mark the boundary for human culture, for our practical and imaginative powers and identity.

Michelet was deeply influenced by Giambattista Vico, whose *New Science* (1725/1744) he translated into French. In Vico's strange book, culture is singled out, for the first time in European history, as an independent phenomenon to be considered by specific theories and methods, an audacious move that paved the way for the modern study of history from the eighteenth century and onwards. Michelet became the dominant French historian of the nineteenth century, seeing history as the study of human action, intention and responsibility, also in relation to nature. No glimpse of religion, natural science or utilitarian considerations, only the role of the sea as a medium for cultural self-reflection.

I have come across no earlier example which with the same unambiguity insists on keeping humans and nature together. Earlier reflections on this relationship left nature in the last instance to God or the gods, others loosened humans from nature, turning it into primarily material processes in view of scientific or utilitarian goals. With Michelet we are on the brink of the modern life sciences, biology and ecology, where natural and cultural approaches are always intertwined.

On those conditions we do not experience nature as an object, but as a boundary, a "barrier" as Michelet says: *the ultimate boundary marker of the powers and identities defined by humans in the unfolding of human history*. Whatever the difference may be between the various cultural perceptions of the sea, I am convinced that they all agree that the sea confronts us with a decisive cultural boundary we cannot escape, although different cultures interpret it differently. Imagination and creativity operates on the basis on this shared and often troubled experience. With the experience of the sea as my example I'll follow this line of thought.

A cultural paradox

Whether people live near the coast or in the centre of continents, the sea has for millennia captivated human imagination and left its traces across the globe in texts, symbols or myths. However, in spite of its cultural pervasiveness and its universal sameness the sea is always observed and interpreted from a certain point of view established either through comparisons, analogies and metaphors or through particular empirical analysis. We turn the sea into something culturally specific we can relate to in order not to be swallowed up by its sheer enormity.

From this point of view the sea stands out as a cultural barrier, defining the human being more radically than any natural phenomenon on land. In contrast to the continents, the sea can therefore be used in the singular, the Sea, in spite of its complexity in other respects. It is a continuous whole with no clear natural boundaries separating the North Sea from the Atlantic Ocean or the Atlantic Ocean from the Pacific Ocean. In contrast, continents and subcontinents or land territories have natural boundaries like mountain ranges, rivers or, precisely, a coast line bordering on the Sea. Such boundaries are simply there, even if they do not correspond to political or cultural boundaries.

But faced with the Sea we experience a boundlessness beyond human control. Most often it appears to most of us as an endless resource for food and adventures beyond our needs and beyond our imagination in spite of recent warnings from marine biologists. But, at the same time, we are also confronted with a natural boundary which is different from a deep river, an abyss, a swamp or a mountain. At sea, our capacity to define limits and to decide directions of movement by ourselves is challenged. With dry land under our feet we only come close to a similar experience in the desert, which, and for that reason I think, is often described in maritime metaphors (a camel is the "vessel of the desert"). The sea is limitless in the sense that it forces us, possibly in the most radical way, to reflect on our own limitations.

Therefore, those who travel to the end of the world on land, like Xenophon's 10,000 men, Alexander the Great, Marco Polo, the explorers in central Africa, Mao and his followers on the great march, are heroes in many cultures. Most of us doubt whether we ourselves would have the courage and the force to go through what they have pushed themselves to do. But nevertheless, they only expand our own territory and knowledge and challenge the limit of our courage and imagination, not our very existence as humans. They rather confirm its endless possibilities.

But those who confront the sea are playing a much more serious game: they are making visible the border between the human and the nonhuman, in pre-modern cultures between man and the gods and in modern times the border between our practical and cognitive capacity to transform nature in accordance with our needs, shown in the fatal return of nature on an even larger scale: climate change, the Niños, the tsunamis, the rising sea level, the melting glaciers. In contrast to the land, neither the surface nor the bottom of the sea has ever been mapped completely or embedded 100% in international law and agreements, let alone scientific knowledge. The techniques for measuring longitude, the time zones and now GPS working by way of satellites have helped as far as the surface of the sea is concerned. But for the rest...

Here we are confronted with more than our cultural boundaries or the limits of our imagination and control. We are brought face to face with ontological boundaries of our species. A well in our backyard and the Pacific Ocean are of dramatically different dimensions. But throw a child in any of them and it will drown. Therefore, though

cultures with different experiences of waterholes, lakes and oceans may shape their conceptions and images differently when it comes to natural occurrences of water, they do so in relation to the same basic boundary experience, mostly radically staged when the ocean challenges our imagination, through direct experience or texts and images.

Accordingly, the experiential paradox related to the sea – it is only a paradox to us, the humans, of course, and hence experiential – is that the apprehension of the limitlessness of the sea is at the same time a radical experience of the limits of humans. This is the basic problem dealt with in texts concerned with the sea, across the globe and throughout human history: the sea is conceived, first and foremost, as a boundary marker of human culture as such and it challenges our very capacity to imagine an outside of our culture. Confronted with the sea, we have, in an inverted analogy to the fish, to imagine a world outside our aquarium.

We have to deal with a human experience shaped as a paradox between boundlessness and boundaries that cannot be solved or dissolved without the experience itself losing its meaning. Such phenomena can only be dealt with in imaginary and creative writing. But literature is also a storehouse of cultural memory, including religion and science seen as cultural activities. Irrespective of their particular objects and of the ideological impact or truth value of their insights, they are first of all cultural activities, more often than not manifested as co-present cultural contradiction.

To look at the sea as a cultural boundary marker through literature offers, simultaneously and inseparably, a synchronic and diachronic view of our collective attempt to define the boundaries of our capacity to imagine our cultural powers and identity in all its paradoxical heterogeneity. Thus, the complex and changing relationship between the natural, the religious and the cultural approach in history has established an often heterogeneous cultural tradition which is still with us today as a cultural reality.

Religious interpretations of experience

My first examples show a religiously invested approach, being the one with the richest representation in literary and cultural history. In one of the Old Norse sagas, the so-called *Laksdøla Saga* (The Saga from Laksdøla) from around 1250 we hear the story of how the Vikings took possession of Iceland between 800 and 900, until then an island without permanent human settlements, a *terra nullius*. The climate was a bit warmer in the North Atlantic in the beginning of the last millennium. Some of the powerful warriors and landlords felt a bit cramped back home in Norway, in conflict with King Harald the Fair-Haired.

The sea defines the border they have to cross to settle in another place completely their own. Rumours of Iceland have reached them, plenty of fertile land owned by nobody and with an abundance of whale and salmon along the coast. It is up for grabs, just like that, not even to be conquered like England or Ireland. Of one of the men, Bjørn son of Ketil, the saga briefly tells:

Bjørn Ketilsson sailed into Broad Fjord near the southern coast to a place where a smaller fjord cut further into the land. [...] In a bay he found the poles of his throne driven ashore, which he saws as a sign that here he should settle. Then he took possession of all land between Staf River and Hraun Fjord, and the place where he later built was, from then on, called Bjørn Harbour. [...] In spring, Unn, the sister of Bjørn [...] crossed the Broad Fjord and reach a foreland where they had their breakfast. Hence, it was called Cape Breakfast. [...] Then she travelled all the valleys around the Broad Fjord and took all the land she wanted. At the bottom of the fjord the poles of her throne drove ashore; that decided where she should settle. [...] Then Unn divided up parts of her possession and gave them to her men.⁷

The open and indefinite sea is full of unpredictable risks and chances. Here the will of the gods reigns. According to customs, the poles of Bjørn's and Unn's thrones have been thrown into the water, and where they eventually are washed ashore, the gods tell you that this is going to be your place. No human cultural strategy can prevail at sea. Seamanship is important, of course, but permanent occupation of the sea is against both gods and nature.

But once on dry land humans continue on their own. They fence in their land, cut out the wilderness; they declare it their possession and distribute it among themselves; and they name the land as it pleases them, projecting their own activities and names on the land in an imaginative gesture. Thereby they ultimately confirm the will of the gods, manifested at sea but now echoed by the human activities on land.

This is probably the most long lived and most widespread way in human culture of dealing with the cultural boundary between the human and the natural, both manifested and challenged by the sea. We see it again in the German soldier and adventurer Hans Staden who in 1557 published his *Wahrhaftig' Historia und Beschreibung eyner Landtschafft der Wilden/Nacketen/Grimmigen Menschfressen Leuthen/in der Newenwelt America gelegen* (The true story and description of a land placed in the new world of America with wild, naked and cruel man-eating peoples). Staden was a German mercenary soldier serving in the Portuguese army in the West Indies in present day Northern Brazil from about 1545 to 1555. He was taken prisoner by the local people, the Tupinambas among others, who were ritual cannibals. He was later liberated and made a European bestseller out of his memoirs.

What happened to him on two sailtrips to Brazil is referred to as the will of God. He represents himself as a kind of martyr, turning himself from an individual with a random and marginal life into a cultural type expressing the cultural boundary between humans and God, walking a narrow path between the wild waves of sea and of the unruly cannibals at land.

The limits of human culture are shown in a mutual reflection of the human barbarity and the unpredictability of the sea, both of which are luckily superseded by the will of God. This construction is put in place from the first illustration of the book. It shows a picture of a vessel under the following text: "Was hilft der wechter in der statt/ Dem geweltigen Schiff im meer sein fart/ So sie Gott beyde nicht bewart" (What helps the watchman in the city and the large ship that sails the sea, if God does not preserve both).⁸

Moreover, the opening lines of Staden's book consist of a quote from David's Psalm 107, v. 23-32. The first and omitted part of the psalm describes God's guidance of men on land, advising them, punishing them and saving them: "Then they cry unto the LORD in their trouble, *and* he saveth them out of their distress" (v. 19). The verses quoted by Staden repeat the same idea, but now concerning life at sea (here in the King James' version):

- 23. They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters;
- 24. These see the works of the LORD, and his wonders in the deep.
- 25. For he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof.
- 26. They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble. [...]
- 30. Then are they glad because they be quiet; so he bringeth them unto their desired haven. (Psalm 107)

Staden not only describes the actual workings of God in his own life and lifetime, synchronically if you like, but adds from the beginning of his account a diachronic dimension that inscribes his extraordinary adventures in the collective history and memory of Christianity. The challenge of cultural boundaries by the sea brings the entire culture to life, also in the singular instances of the experience of cultural boundary markers like his own life, and most clearly when the sea is part of it. This is the fundamental structure beyond any particular religious framing of it, the Nordic gods of the Vikings or Staden's Christian God.

Order and disorder

As long as the religious interpretation of the experience of marine randomness is maintained, a precarious order is eventually restored and confirmed on land, projecting the unpredictable blessing at sea on the more established but also insecure terrestrial human activities. Every particular divine synthesis of nature and culture, order and disorder, is put in perspective by the general cultural memory as laid down in religious texts like the Psalms and in mythological and epic narratives. If this memory is not anchored in God, but only in human history and culture, then the boundary between culture and nature, order and disorder, ultimately becomes a challenge not to the human faith, but only to strategies and actions on human conditions.

Then the experience of the sea as a cultural boundary marker no longer confirms the power of the borderless divinity, but of the boundary transcending power of humans themselves – their passions, imaginations, innovations and destructions as movements of boundless human unfolding. The unpredictability of the sea is related directly to the ambiguous, powerful and powerless human activities, not to

impenetrable divine intentions. The sea is used to articulate new ways of understanding the borders of human culture. This happens in creative writing.

The role of narrative

In many texts therefore two discursive lines run parallel when the sea is used to articulate the works of imagination. First, a description of a particular cultural boundary transgression on human conditions, and second, the role of literature to re-integrate this vision as a collectively shared cultural interpretation. As the deities gave even the exceptional individual fate of a human being an exemplary status, now it is the text and the meta-text in conjunction that perform this synthesis. Therefore, it is an arbitrary synthesis, itself a work of culture and so an invitation to permanently re-open a reflection on our conditions as cultural beings in natural conditions. Let me finish with two examples, Isak Dinesen and Derek Walcott.

Isak Dinesen, mostly known for her autobiography *Out of Africa* (1937), often used sailors, ships and the sea to express the human capacity to transcend given cultural conditions. For her, the sea evokes the imagination and the urge to go beyond the restraints of a land-based culture, and is also the real place to realise it. One of the mottos of her life was *navigare necesse est*: "it is necessary to sail", namely to sail *on*. An embedded story within her "The Young Man with the Carnation" is called "A Blue Story".⁹ The use of embedded stories is in itself a meta-textual strategy that has always given storytelling a particular cultural power.

A rich young English woman, Lady Helena, is shipwrecked because of fire in the Chinese Sea, but is rescued by a sailor. Her father believes she is dead, but after nine days in a lifeboat with the sailor, she is brought back to England. She is hopelessly lost to the sailor who disappears unknown, carrying her hopes, her passion and her identity with him. She cannot make a good match at home and tells why: the sea has no bottom, she has learned. It stretches, wonderfully blue and boundless, right through the globe so that entities on opposite sites never meet, but keep each other in a mutually interdependent balance and movement. So, after her rescue she has to sail and find a jar of the right blue colour, because only by sailing can she keep the ship on the opposite hemisphere moving. Lady Helena tells her old aunts that

the water, which is the noblest of elements, does of course, go all through the earth, so that our planet really floats in the ether, like a soap-bubble. And there, on the other hemisphere, a ship sails, with which I have got to keep pace. We two are like the reflection of one another, in the deep sea, and the ship of which I speak is always exactly beneath my own ship, on the opposite of the globe.¹⁰

The sea is the dynamic union of the mutually excluded aspects in our lives which, in their complementarity, keep us alive and connected with everything beyond ourselves. But we never confront our counterpart but imaginarily, as we never when alive see our own death. However, experience tells unequivocally that our life does depend on such complementary relations. This experience, mediated by the sea, requires imagination to be formed. As it does in literature. When Helena finally finds the jar of the right blue colour, she stops sailing and dies, and so does the imagined ship with its sailors on the other side. Her heart shall be kept in the blue jar as if it were in the centre of the ocean and thus in the centre of the Earth, the soap-bubble. Here the experience of the sea interprets the experience of *interconnectedness*, not of divine will let alone individual passion as in much romantic and post-romantic literature.

In another story, "The Diver", from *Anecdotes of Destiny* (1958), Dinesen continues this interpretation of human interrelationship, again mediated by the sea. She speculates with delicate irony, tongue in cheek, on the difference between fish and humans, giving priority to the fish. Again we have an embedded story to underline the importance of storytelling itself, but this time we meet the traditional frame narrative. The famous storyteller Mira Jama, a recurrent character in Dinesen's work, tells two interrelated stories where he reflects on the wisdom of God's creation, God being here a creator in an indistinguishable mix of the Islamic Allah, the Christian God and a more vague divinity.

In the first story, the young Softa wants to be like the birds. He constructs a pair of wings to elevate him in the air to communicate with the angels, away from his natural element. The local king finds him dangerous, infested as he is with disturbing although great dreams of major transformations of human life. A young beautiful girl, Thusmu, a dancer, is sent to Softa's house to distract him, pretending to be an angel.

Softa, being a man after all, is delightfully distracted. In the meantime his artificial wings are then eaten by rats and the angel proves to be a real girl. He met a real angel on earth, but angels and heaven were at the same time an illusion. Now he can no longer find his place anywhere in the world where these ends can meet.

In the second story Mira Jama tells the story of Softa to a pearl fisher who happens to be Softa himself. He is now a diver and no longer finds the birds but the fish to be the wisest of all creatures. An old cowfish has told him that

Man can move but in one plane, and is tied to the earth. Still the earth supports him only by the narrow space under the soles of his feet, [...] it may happen to him to tumble down from [the hills], and the earth then receives him with hardness. [...] Man, capable of falling, fell almost immediately, and with him all that was in the dry land. [...] How can an equilibrium be obtained by a creature which refuses to give up the idea of hope and risk?¹¹

So, man is but a poor haunted creature. The old cowfish explains to Softa that a fish, in contrast

is upheld and supported on all sides. [...] We have no hands, so cannot construct anything at all, and are never tempted by vain ambition to alter anything whatever in the universe of the Lord. [...] the fish cannot fall, and never will fall, for how and whereto would we fall? [...] We fish rest quietly, on all sides supported, within an element which all the time accurately and unfailingly evens itself out. An element which may be said to have taken over our personal existence, in as much as, regardless of individual shape and whether be flat or round fish, our weight and body are calculated according to the quantity of our surroundings which we deplace.¹²

The sea establishes the perfect and unalterable relation between a creature and its environment. Not only an interpersonal interconnectedness, but a universal one is exemplified by the sea. It is man, the land creature, who is the volatile person in a volatile terrestrial world. In contrast, the sea contains predictability and stability.

The subtle irony of Dinesen becomes clearer when she mentions that the creed of the fish "states that with us all hope is left out" and that they have "brought past and future together in the maxime: *après nous le déluge*".¹³ From the point of view of humans, this is not perfection, but hell and a cultural apocalypse, in the same way as the world of the birds is beyond our reach and our encounter with it only produces existential confusion. Man is forever moving between those two positions, often forgetting the contradictory blessings of the earth as in Softa's self-forgetting encounter with Thusmu.

The story does not tell the ways of nature or god, but offers a reflection on the conditions of human life and its limits, mediated by the sea as one of its paradoxical counterpoints showing nature both as the all-absorbing totality and as the frightening beyond. The story is the proper medium for this paradoxical experience set in motion by the encounter with the sea.

Past and present, humans and nature

Dinesen intersects the present of the story, the life of Softa, with the past of human kind, with reference to Dante, the Quran, the Bible and other basic cultural writings. This blending becomes a much more complex network in Derek Walcott's modern verse epic, *Omeros* (1990), also with an echo of Dante and in particular of Homer. It rightfully earned him a Nobel prize. On the level of theme, characters and plot, we meet Achilles and Philoctete, two black Caribbean fishermen, living from the sea on a daily basis. We also meet the coloniser, Major Plunkett, a rich emigrant pig farmer who has decisive power over the small community and thus regulates the conditions and outcomes of their work, and also changes the local Afro-Caribbean names of people to Greek names. Thus, Helen is a girl from the village, serving in Plunkett's house and courted by young impatient Hector and befriended with Achilles and Philoctete. Elements from classical mythology, loaded with the maritime adventures, and the colonial background of Plunkett's family involving slave trade and seaborne activities, are mixed in a permanent synchronic and diachronic cross-over together with the down-to-earth local story of hurricanes, poverty, fishing, bar crawling and love of everyday life.

The imagination of the global relationship between humans and their life world, crossing temporal and spatial boundaries, is embedded in the way the story is told.

Unrhymed stanzas with three verses each, in analogy with Dante's *Commedia*, and the many references to classical Greek narratives plus reference to local habits and African-inspired religious practices, candomblé, characterise the text. Everything is rendered in a mix of the local French-English hybrid dialect plus the lyrical prose of an "I", a first-person narrator that communicates with Homer, occurring through the text as a talking marble head.

If Dinesen presents varieties of *interconnectedness* through the sea, Walcott exhibits the *cultural multi-connectedness* in his epic representation of the sea. The sea is the all-pervasive element in all details, from perceptions, images, plot and identities to language. Everybody and everything has a watery existence in this migrant community. Walcott uses the sea to compose the migrant multicultural identities of modern human beings, in one sense criss-crossed by actual cultural boundaries, but in another sense also limitless in its capacity to go beyond any cultural background, as it has happened always in the history of mankind in a way which still shapes our present-day culture. This cultural complexity is, of course, not harmonious but filled with storms, dangers and hurricanes. But it is real. The story uses the sea to express this amalgamated complexity: "they had a common bond between them: the sea," some of the men say to each other.¹⁴

I cannot quote at length, but will give just two examples illustrating the double structure of text and meta-text which creates the text as a totality that articulates the cultural complexity. The poem opens with Achilles cutting down laurel trees to built canoes. The sea penetrates all of the activities *in* the text:

Achilles looked up at the hole the laurel had left.
He saw the hole silently healing with the foam
of a cloud like a breaker. The he saw the swift

crossing the cloud-surf, a small thing, far from its home,
confused by the waves of the blue hills. A thorn vine gripped
his heel, He tugged it free. Around him other ships

were shaping from the saw. With his cutlass he made
a swift sign of the cross [...] as he prayed:
"Tree! You can be a canoe! Or else you cannot!"¹⁵

The narrative self-reflection, the meta-textual activity *of* the text, placing the story as responsible for the generalising coherence of the events, is present throughout the text, but most clearly in the last book, book 7. Here the narrator, the "I", discusses his whole narrative enterprise with Homer, the talking marble head. Another character, Seven Seas, reminds in watery terms the "I" what storytelling is about:

Mind you, *he* [Homer] does not go; he sends his narrator;
he plays tricks with time because there are two journeys
in every odyssey, one on worried waters,

the other crouched and motionless, without noise.
For both, the "I" is a mast; a desk is a raft
for one, foaming with paper, and dipping the beak

of a pen in its foam, while an actual craft
carries the other to cities where people speak
a different language [...] as the sea moves round an island

that appears to be moving, love moves round the heart –
with encircling salt, and the slowly travelling hand
knows its returns to the port from which it must start.¹⁶

Does the boundlessness of the sea, in various forms and cultural contexts, constitute a proper image to evoke a relevant reflection of the man–nature relationship? Do we get back "to the port from which it must start", our paradoxical experience of boundaries and boundlessness?

Awareness

If such questions concern the power of literature to make us aware of our capacity to envision alternative ways of our culture in being confronted with nature, simply

opening the space of an unspecified beyond as a real part of our cultural possibilities, the answer is *yes*. If, on the other hand, the questions invite us to respond by understanding nature as an endless space needing no engagement or care on our part, the answer is *no*.

The sea still offers us an experience of this contradiction, as a living paradox in our life, that keeps us suspended between birds and fish. It prevents us from complacently taking the *yes* for granted. We have to strenuously carve it out of our experience by way of our imagination. In this imaginary process we are not only faced with nature, but also with *religious* interpretations of it based on divine intervention, still abundant around the world, with nature as the basis for an *interconnectedness* between humans and their environment and, finally, with nature as part of a *cultural multi-connectedness* in a world of migrants.

The stories of the sea and of other dimensions of nature force us permanently to rethink and re-imagine the limits of our culture and identity with nature both as part of our lives and responsibilities and as a boundary to what lies beyond our powers. Literature does not give us any solutions, but focuses our mind and responsibility to those aspects of our lives where creativity and imagination is most needed. In another contribution to *Creativity and Environment* that I quoted at the beginning, S. H. Vatsyayan states: "The environment is what I am aware of as surrounding me. It is only when I am *aware of the surroundings* that I can exercise choice in the selection of ways to react to them."¹⁷ The role of creative writing is to enhance this awareness.

Notes

1. Svend Erik Larsen is Professor of Comparative Literature at Aarhus University and was Director of the Humanities research centre *Man & Nature* (1992-1997). He is a Member of the Academia Europaea, chair of the Section for Literary and Theatrical Studies and secretary of the ICLA project Comparative History of Literatures in the European Languages. He is the author of numerous publications on literary history and cultural studies, urban culture and nature relations in particular, and on semiotics, including *Signs in Use* (Routledge, 2002) and "'To See Things for the First Time': Before and After Ecocriticism" (*Journal of Literary Studies*, 23/4).
2. Quoted in Vidya Niwas Misra, ed. (1992), *Creativity and Environment*, Sahitya Akademi, Madras, p. 115.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
4. Aristotle (1997), *Metaphysics*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1014a24.
5. Kate Soper (1995), *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human*, Blackwell, Oxford, p. 20.
6. Jules Michelet (1875/1861), *La mer*, Michel Lévy Frères, Paris, p. 3; italics and translation mine.
7. Gunnar Gunnarsson, et al., eds (1967), *Laksdøla saga*, in *De islandske Sagaer*, Gyldendal, Copenhagen, vol. 1, pp. 190-93; my translation.
8. Hans Staden (1778/1557), *Wahrhaftig' Historia and Beschreibung eyner Landschafft der Wilden/Nacketen/Grimmigen Menschfressen Leuthen/in der Newenwelt America gelegen*, Thiele & Schwarz, Kassel-Wilhelmshöhe (facsimile).
9. Isak Dinesen (1986/1942), "The Young Man with the Carnation", in *Winter's Tales*, Penguin, London, pp. 27-29.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
11. Isak Dinesen (1974/1958), "The Diver" in *Anecdotes of Destiny*, Vintage, New York, pp. 17-18, 20.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18, 20.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
14. Derek Walcott (1990), *Omeros*, Faber and Faber, London, p. 47.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 291.
17. Misra, *op. cit.*, p. 88.