Introduction

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This special issue of *Colloquy* is devoted to the proceedings of last year's Colloquy conference, "Be true to the earth" (March 31-April 1, 2005), which was the inaugural conference of the recently founded Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (Australia-New Zealand). As the founding President of that Association, I was extremely grateful to Dimitris Vardoulakis and the rest of the *Colloquy* editorial team for offering to host our first major international gathering, and I am honoured to have the opportunity to guest edit the wonderful issue of the journal that has resulted from it, ably assisted by Peter Coleman, who led the conference organisation, Samantha Capon and Barbara Ghattas.

"However the call to 'be true to the earth' is to be understood and embodied […], responding to it has almost certainly become more difficult in the century or so since the wayward German philosopher [Friedrich Nietzsche] first framed it: not only because we inhabit a social world that puts people at an ever greater remove from the earth; but also because the earth itself seems to be turning against us." I wrote these words in 2004 in extending an invitation to participate in the forthcoming conference. What I was referring to in that last clause, of course, was global climate change: something that is bound to have catastrophic consequences for a great many beings, human and otherwise, on this beleaguered planet. There is, it seems, no justice in nature's retribution, or if there is, it is of the roughest kind, akin to that encountered in Greek tragedy, when the chorus of innocents goes down along with the protagonists, whose folly has brought on the disaster!

By the time of the conference itself, however, the earth itself had shrugged, as it does from time to time, and hundreds of thousands of people, along with countless other creatures, died as a consequence. In ac-

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counting for the magnitude of the human death toll in the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, commentators pointed to a variety of social, ecological and technological factors, including the overpopulation of vulnerable coastal regions, the clearing of mangrove swamps, and inadequacies in the communication systems that warn of the tsunami risk from submarine earthquakes, while others suggested that paying greater heed to the behaviour of free roaming animals might have saved many who were at liberty to run while they still could. However that might be, this largely natural disaster reminds us that, quite apart from any specifically human folly, life on earth is inevitably fraught with apparently random violence, unmerited suffering, and the omnipresence of death: life, as Derrida writes, cannot be thought rigorously other than as lifedeath; our earthly existence is no less dire than (potentially) delightful.

In view of this dire dimension of earthly existence, is there not something endearing about the human impulse, one that is admittedly fostered more in some cultures than in others, to imagine a world in which life, love, and justice finally prevail over violence, suffering and death? Maybe.Yet, at least in the history of the West, such otherworldly imaginings, whether framed in terms of a heavenly beyond or a techno-scientifically and socially transformed future, have created a dominant culture in which the earth is commonly construed disdainfully as a place of exile or an object of human power/knowledge. In seeking to overcome this flawed quest for transcendence and/or domination of the earth, is it possible to cultivate a properly earthian identity, affirming our continuities with and ethical obligations towards, the wider matrix of earth life, while nonetheless holding true to what might be a peculiarly human desire for the seemingly impossible: a world of peace, love and justice; a world that appears just as remote today as it was when, to recall the biblical origins of one powerful version of this utopian impulse, Jesus of Nazareth conjured a subversive vision of the kingdom of God in a land subjected to the empire of the Romans?

Or is keeping faith with the earth that which is truly impossible for us as human? Do we not betray the earth each time we break into speech and enter the realm of the Symbolic, a world of words that are exclusively human, all-too-human? And have we not always already been cast into this realm before we ever even say a word? Or does this construction of the fundamentally linguistic nature of human being not rely upon an age-old assumption of human apartism that blinds us to continuities between human speech and the manifold signifying systems of our earth others? A human apartism, moreover, that deafens us to those other-than-human voices in the parliament of beings, which might be heard calling to us now for justice and compassion, or maybe, simply, calling us home? This is cer-

tainly my view. It is nonetheless clear that much work remains to be done in examining the ways in which some modes of speaking and writing have been, and continue to be, complicit in certain kinds of culturally specific betrayal of the earth, while others have sought to hold open pathways of connection with the more-than-human realm of lifedeath that sustains and enfolds us. And, whatever else we might get up to, we are certainly going to need to use plenty of those slippery human-all-too-human words in order to debate what it might mean to be true to the earth in these bleak times of escalating armed conflict, ever-increasing social injustice, and global ecological imperilment on a scale that has the potential to radically relativise and reframe our current political conflicts and socio-economic woes. As the articles in this special issue indicate, this is a debate to which scholars in literary and cultural studies have much to contribute. Of the nearly seventy papers presented at the conference, it has only been possible to publish eleven here, but more will be included in the next issue of *PAN* (*Philosophy Activism Nature*), while others have already appeared elsewhere. The lead article is based on the keynote lecture given by Greg Garrard of Bath Spa University, who is the current Chair of ASLE-UK, and there are further articles by established academics (such as the eminent Judith Wright scholar, Veronica Brady and the poet and critic Martin Harrison), alongside others by current or recently completed doctoral students in a variety of disciplines. In addition, we are very grateful to Sage for allowing us to reprint (with minor revisions) an article by ASLE-ANZ member Nonie Sharp, which was originally published in *Organisation and Environment*.

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