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Why Eco-poetry?

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*Why Eco-poetry?*

Before getting to why, I need to ask what: What is eco-poetry? What must an eco-poem be to do justice to its name? My answer is twofold: an eco-poem needs to be environmental and it needs to be environmentalist. By environmental, I mean first that an eco-poem needs to be about the nonhuman natural world—wholly or partly, in some way or other, but really and not just figuratively. In other words, an eco-poem is a kind of nature poem. But an eco-poem needs more than the vocabulary of nature. Consider John Ashbery's "River of the Canoefish":

These wilds came naturally by their monicker.  
In 1825 the first canoefish was seen hanging offshore.  
A few years later another one was spotted.  
Today they are abundant as mackerel, as far as the eye can see,  
tumbled, tumescent, tinted all the colors of the rainbow  
though not in the same order,  
a swelling, scumbled mass, rife with incident  
and generally immune to sorrow.

Shall we gather at the river? On second thought, let's not.

The first tipoff that this amusing poem is not about nature is the "canoefish," which don't exist; another is the "river" of "Shall we gather at the river?" which is from the familiar hymn. Ashbery is a poet of manner, less of nature than of "naturally." A parody of natural history, the poem riffs on gay culture ("rainbow," "tumescent," "immune"). Ashbery's culture poem is still fine and fun. But in my terms it can't count as an eco-poem.

This is not to say that eco-poetry is merely nature served uncooked on the literal page. In *Redstart: An Ecological Poetics*, Forrester Gander declares himself "less interested in 'nature poetry'—where nature features as theme—than in poetry that investigates—both thematically and formally—the relationship between nature and culture, language and perception." I share Gander's preferences, and I think he makes an important point: eco-poets cannot be naive about

matters of perception and poetic representation, which are biologically and culturally specific (a bee's world is not a human's). Yet I'm sure Gander would agree that nature exists not only in the sensorium of the beholder; it's really "out there." There are, for instance, environmental facts—such as the unnerving one that the level of atmospheric carbon dioxide has now reached an unsustainable 400 parts per million—that we know objectively and can render independently of our personal or cultural perceptions, in an essay or a poem. However self-aware and self-reflexive it may be, an ecopoem must be tethered to the natural world.

The second way in which an ecopoem is environmental is that it is ecocentric, not anthropocentric. Human interests cannot be the be-all and end-all of an ecopoem. A familiar example of an anthropocentric nature poem is Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar":

I placed a jar in Tennessee,  
And round it was, upon a hill.  
It made the slovenly wilderness  
Surround that hill.

How I've relished this impish poem, though for me, a son of the shallow South, "slovenly" always rankled. How ardently I lectured my classes that nature here mimics art, as in a sculpture garden; that this artifact, though non-generative, gives birth to "Tennessee," itself an artificial domain bound on top and bottom by imaginary parallel lines, not unlike the poem's "Tennessee" borderlines. Now, though I still love "Anecdote of the Jar," I am sobered by the line "It took dominion everywhere." So God blessed the humans in Eden: "Have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28), a blessing which created anthropocentrism. (It does no good, by the way, to claim that "Anecdote of the Jar" merely or ironically represents the domineering posture; you can say that about any problematic poem.)

Ecopoetry must be really environmental, and so cannot be distinguished from nature poetry by form or technique alone. Here I part ways with writers such as Timothy Morton, who offers as an example of an environmental poem a one-liner by Charles Bernstein:

*THIS POEM INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK*

I suspect Bernstein thinks of this as a conceptual poem, a found poem that by transposition becomes paradoxically self-referential. But for Morton, the poem is environmental because it is “recursive” and so “ambient,” like our surroundings. Morton gleefully concedes that Bernstein’s poem has no natural content or environmentalist message: “The poem is not about bunny rabbits, mountains, or pollution.” I agree that subject matter alone doesn’t make poetry significant, but I bristle at Morton’s mockingly sentimental rhetoric of “bunny rabbits,” a discourse used by anti-environmentalists to ridicule those defending wildlife. Morton argues that by waking us from an immersion in a “lifeworld,” ambient art such as Bernstein’s poem “compels us to assume responsibility for global warming, a direct cause of the ongoing Sixth Mass Extinction Event.” Really? As Morton knows, these imminent extinctions are of plants and animals, not of recursive algorithms. My second objection to this line of argument is more general: if Bernstein’s poem is environmental, what poem isn’t? Morton agrees: “All poems are environmental, because they include the spaces in which they are written and read.” OK, but why environmental and not, say, spatio-temporal? If all poems are environmental poems, environmental poetry means nothing and matters not at all.

A similarly formal approach to environmental poetry is made by Angus Fletcher. In *A New Theory for American Poetry*, Fletcher traces the US tradition of formally environmental poetry (culminating in Ashbery’s prosaic poems) back to Whitman’s “environment-poem,” with its cataloging phrasal lines. Like Morton, Fletcher foregrounds form by dismissing content: “His poems are not *about* the environment.... They *are* environments.” Though I understand how one may be immersed in a poem, my problem with this definition is that it turns every Whitman poem into an “environment-poem.” I am happy to apply this label to “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” because of the specificity of its descriptions — such as the unsnatched and unhatched “four light-green eggs spotted with brown” — and because of its story of the Long Island boy delivered into song by hearing a mockingbird grieving for its mate, and finally because of its translation of the mockingbird’s mournful song into an operatic aria:

*High and clear I shoot my voice over the waves,  
Surely you must know who is here, is here,  
You must know who I am, my love.*

But it isn't the form that makes "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" environmental. Whitman mounted a similarly operatic poem in 1874, "The Song of the Redwood-Tree," which he set in Northern California: "Just back from the rock-bound shore and the caves,/In the saline air from the sea in the Mendocino country." The scene is a disturbing one of deforestation: "I heard the mighty tree its death-chant chanting.//The choppers heard not." As he did earlier, Whitman verbalizes the redwood's chant in operatic italics. But the redwood's song is startlingly hospitable:

*With Nature's calm content, with tacit huge delight,  
We welcome what we wrought for through the past,  
And leave the field for them.*

*For them predicted long,  
For a surperber race.*

The word "race" confirms Whitman's unwritten pun on *sequoia*. The clearing of the redwoods in the 1850s meant the genocide of the red men—primarily the Yuki. Their land was occupied by the "superber" white-skins, their trees sold, their inhabitants killed, enslaved, or herded into reservations—all of which led to the so-called Mendocino War of 1859, nationally notorious for its brutality. I know Fletcher would find "The Song of the Redwood Tree" objectionable, but I don't see how he could deny its being an "environment-poem" by his strictly stylistic criteria.

I turn next to another pair of stylistically similar poems, both from *The Arcadia Project: North American Postmodern Pastoral*. In his introduction to the anthology, Joshua Corey imagines the right balance between Arcadian simulacra and their underlying reality: "To write the postmodern pastoral poem is... to be a digital native with dirt between one's toes." Yet the opening selection, from Brent Cunningham's "Bird & Forest," soars above vulgar reality into post-modern pastiche:

An empty background for the bird's traversal, set with obstacles  
to be navigated: isn't this the principle?

.....

The bird enters the forest; it is introduced. It doesn't think,  
but uses the machine of instinct buried in its flesh, a device

wrapped in an assembly.

Cunningham is an accomplished poet who has adapted Whitman's prosaic measures to the stately abstractions of Stevens and the deadpan ruminations of Michael Palmer. But his notion that birds are machines for whom trees are not habitat but obstructions is mired in an intensely problematic argument advanced by Descartes. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, the philosopher famously described animals, as opposed to ensouled humans, as mere animated automata, devoid of thought or emotion, incapable even of experiencing pain. Come now, aren't birds bird-brained? Let's consult one. Laying out a pair of green and blue rectangles on a tray, the animal psychologist Irene M. Pepperberg asked her African gray parrot, "Alex, what's same?" "Shape," Alex replied. "What's different?" "Color." When I read about that experiment in *Alex and Me* I had to get up and go for a walk. If Alex, with a brain the size of a walnut, was capable of abstracting color from shape and then shape from color, then Descartes's claims about animals were based not on scientific observation but on arbitrary belief.

Later in the anthology we find another poem in the same stanzaic prose, Juliana Spahr's "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache," which I do not hesitate to call an eco-poem. This poem (recalling Whitman's "There Was a Child Went Forth") is an Edenic allegory of our fall from love for nature into love for each other, and our consequent entry into an environmentally ruinous economy. It is charged with natural specifics:

Our hearts took on the shape of well-defined riffles and pools,  
clean substrates, woody debris, meandering channels, flood-  
plains, and mature streamside forests.

Here Spahr is drawing on Randall E. Sanders's *A Guide to Ohio Streams*:

While everybody knows clean water is essential for a healthy stream, few realize they also need diverse physical features such as well-defined riffles and pools, clean substrates, woody debris, meandering channels, floodplains, and mature streamside forests.

To be sure, Spahr's postmodern poem is choral and citational rather than personal and recollective. But her citational method doesn't disqualify "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache" as an eco-poem. The detailed environmental language reverberates in the hollows of the fallen consumerist world:

I replaced what I knew of the stream with Lifestream Total Cholesterol Test Packets, with Snuggle Emerald Stream Fabric Softener Dryer Sheets, with Tisserand Aromatherapy Aroma-Stream Cartridges, with Filter Stream Dust Tamer, and Streamzap PC Remote Control, Acid Stream Launcher, and Viral Data Stream.

The language of this collage is postmodern but it's also referential. It draws its energy and its pathos from the difference between the real stream and the metonymic "stream" of products.

Now for my second criterion. An eco-poem must be not only environmental but environmentalist. First, the environment of an eco-poem is, implicitly or explicitly, impacted by humans. As Ursula K. Heise puts it, eco-poetry is "related to the broader genre of nature poetry but can be distinguished from it by its portrayal of nature as threatened by human activities." In *Well Then There Now* Spahr draws a similar distinction: "even when [the nature poem] got the birds and the plants and the animals right it tended to show the beautiful bird but not so often the bulldozer off to the side that was destroying the bird's habitat." While we should remember that Gary Snyder had already in 1959 written from bitter experience about the bulldozer in the ancient forest, I appreciate Spahr's problem with nature poetry. If a contemporary nature poem leaves its reader in still contemplation of Mother Nature's creatures, it risks being complacent, even what Spahr judges "immoral." But when Spahr adds that nature poems "often show up in the *New Yorker* or various other establishment journals," she is talking not environmental but poetry politics. An eco-poem may be innovative or it may be what I call "renovative" (where any poetic feature, past or present, is available for renewal), or it may even be resolutely traditionalist — and it may appear anywhere. We need all kinds of poems to find and stir up all sorts of poetry readers.

An eco-poem is environmentalist not only thematically, in that it represents environmental damage or risk, but rhetorically: it is urgent,

it aims to unsettle. But doesn't environmentalist poetry then risk complacency at least as much as nature poetry? Aren't ecopoets deluding themselves into thinking that their poems can change anything? "For poetry," as Auden declared in his elegy "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," "makes nothing happen." Auden's proposition, though, is not a fact but a belief. A similar skepticism today informs discussions about efficacy and causality. Hurricane Sandy, arctic glacial melt, the California drought, and so on, can't be specifically linked to global warming—so climate change makes nothing in particular happen. At least so far as we know. But Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* helped make legislation happen. Is poetry uniquely ineffectual? Who thinks now that sixties culture didn't help make the sixties happen? Even if we can never specify its means or results, ecopoetry can also help make environmentalism happen.

The more immediate hazard for ecopoetry, then, is didacticism. If a contemporary nature poem risks being immoral, an ecopoem, whatever its effects, risks being moralistic. How can an ecopoem usher us into a new environmental imagination without teaching us a tiresome lesson? In light of the prevailing tendency to value poetic form over (natural) content, it may be instructive to summarize the history of aestheticism, from which this tendency derives. Kant's non-teleological, purely formal "purposiveness without purpose" passes into romanticism ("Beauty is truth, truth beauty") and the aesthetic movement ("art for art's sake"); then into New Criticism with its "autotelic" verbal icon and Wimsatt and Beardsley's affective fallacy, which might have been called the effective fallacy ("a confusion between ... what [a poem] *is* and what it *does*"); from there into de Manian deconstruction and early non-representational Language poetry. Whatever the variety of formalist aestheticism, the antithesis to form is not so much content as it is message or moral, though as the aesthetic movement progresses into pure poetry, meaning itself becomes suspect by association ("A poem should not mean/But be." — Archibald MacLeish). Poetics wasn't always this way. For Horace, a poem both pleases and instructs. (*Didaskein* means to teach; a *chorodidaskalos* trained the chorus.) A familiar argument against didactic poetry is that it preaches to the choir. A poem should not *preach*, but it may teach the choir a new tune, the chorus a new step. Of course, there will always be self-indulgent didactic poetry; a poem won't save the rhinos by telling us to. But I don't believe poetry that changes us, moves, unsettles, motivates us, or awakens us to



the pleasures and wonders of the natural world is by definition bad.

How might poetry be good and environmentalist? Here are a few instances from the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. Frost wittily broached didacticism in "The Oven Bird." The song of the bird (whose domelike ground nest is shaped like a dutch oven) is commonly translated *preacher, preacher* or *teacher, teacher*. Frost plants thoughts and words into his didactic bird's beak and brain. Here is his sonnet's discordant sestet:

And comes that other fall we name the fall.  
He says the highway dust is over all.  
The bird would cease and be as other birds  
But that he knows in singing not to sing.  
The question that he frames in all but words  
Is what to make of a diminished thing.

Wagon dust? Maybe, but I think he had the automobile in mind. The first triumph of fossil-fueled industry, Ford's Model T, began raising dust throughout the U.S. in 1908; it wasn't until 1913 that most highways were paved. Frost wrote "The Oven Bird" the following year in England. The poem is not overtly didactic. Frost doesn't tell us what to think; but he knows better than to celebrate and sing the Model T.

Marianne Moore is variously unsettling in "He 'Digesteth Harde Yron,'" perhaps the first poem in English to take up species extinction ("the aepyornis," "the moa"; "the harmless solitaire//or great auk"). Her poem focuses on the ostrich, the last of the large flightless birds. In *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens took Moore's poem as a test case, arguing that even a poem of "an extraordinarily factual appearance" (he quotes a horrifying passage beginning "Six hundred ostrich-brains served/at one banquet") represents not an objectively "bare fact" but "an individual reality," conveyed by means of Moore's "finical phraseology," "irony" (activating Moore's titular pun), and "abstraction." But Moore's abstraction is not Fabergé's. Her eggs do not appear jeweled and mounted but brooded, hatched, and guarded by a father ostrich "with/a maternal concentration, after/he has sat on the eggs/at night six weeks." If we had the gift "To see ourself as others see us!" as Burns imagines in "To a Louse," "What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us." In Moore's case, the noble and cunning hunter is imagined ironically from the perspective of his "birdwitted" prey (I quote from Moore's first version, which preserves her alternately

unrhymed and rhymed couplets):

How  
could he, prized for plumes and eggs and young, used  
even as a riding-  
beast, respect men hiding  
actorlike in ostrich-skins, with  
the right hand making the neck move  
as if alive and  
from a bag the left hand  
  
strewing grain, that ostriches  
might be decoyed and killed!

I know what you're thinking, Darwinian reader. In disdaining their "actorlike" hunters, in preserving their species, ostriches guarding their eggs are behaving not courageously but instinctively. (Something they've so far been quite good at; their current conservation status is Least Concern.) However well-intentioned, Moore's poem is moralistic, not to say anthropomorphic. Let's take up these objections in turn. The outraged exclamation is not tacked on here, but flows from Moore's bird's-eye view. Imagine you are hunted by an alien, who, donning the skin of a relative's corpse, nods at you with it, and with it crumbles up some bread for you, and you have something of the horror and disgust of Moore's "individual reality."

The rhetorical strategy of taking up an animal's case by assuming its viewpoint is now pervasive. Anthropomorphism — the ascription of human attributes to something nonhuman (God, animals, plants, things) — assumes that nonhumans exist on an utterly alien order of being. Hence, we can only project human attributes, not recognize them, in other animals. But this presumption is not something we know; it's only something we believe. The opposite belief is probably more familiar to us today: the reduction of the mind to the brain, which makes us all automatons. Not so fast, argued Thomas Nagel in his influential 1974 essay, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" Not what it's like for us to be a bat — to wheel about, bat-winged, by echolocation — but what it's like for a *bat* to be a bat. This, the subjectivity or consciousness of another animal, is something we'll never really know — and this is why we can never confidently reduce humans or other animals to machines. What we *do* know is that it is like *something*

to be a bat. And if a bat has experiences, it can think and feel. In my view, those who refuse to grant animals subjectivity are not cognitive skeptics but consciousness-deniers (with their heads buried in the sand, something not even ostriches do!). The bonobo and the human are woven from at least ninety-eight percent of the same DNA strands. How can we humans be sure we're unique? While it may be fanciful to describe goats as sarcastic or clouds as weeping, the prohibition against anthropomorphism and its offshoot, John Ruskin's pathetic fallacy, strikes me as arbitrary. To empathize beyond human-kind, ecopoets must be ready to commit the pathetic fallacy and to be charged with anthropomorphism.

Let's return for a moment to "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking": can birds really grieve? Isn't such a belief an unscientific, sentimental projection? In *Bird Sense*, the ornithologist Tim Birkhead writes of being in the Canadian High Arctic:

I notice a pair of brent geese ... and am saddened to see that one of the geese has been shot. Beside its lifeless form stands the bird's partner. A week later I pass the same pond again, and the two birds, one live and one dead, are still there.

Was the vigilant goose grieving? Darwin would have said so. But many contemporary ornithologists, wary of projecting, restrict their descriptions to external behavior. Is there any way beyond such behavioralism? Birkhead describes an experiment. Wild-caught great tits were shown, on separate occasions, an owl and a finch. Their behavioral responses were identical, but only the owl "elicited a surge of the stress hormone corticosterone, clear evidence that the great tits were more frightened by the owl." If birds can be fearful, can't we grant them the possibility of being mournful? But, the skeptic persists, how do we know that their fear is the same as our fear? Well, how do I know that your fear is the same as mine? Biology (hormone analysis, shared genomic evolution) and situation (a bird lingering with a dead mate) reveal the unreasoning denial behind an unfeeling skepticism. I act on the assumption that my experiences are not wholly unique, to me or to humans.

In this century, environmentalist poetry is suffused with the deniable but inescapable conditions of species extinction and global warming. Still, today's green poets confront the familiar prejudice against didacticism. In an interview with *Earthlines*, Jorie Graham

articulates what ecopoetry can do to persuade suspicious readers, who

feel anything remotely “political” to be polemical and thus didactic. They feel they “know this information already, so why do they need it in a poem.” That is precisely the point. They “know” it. They are not “feeling it.” That is what activists in the environmental movement are asking of us: help it be felt, help it be imagined.

In her two primarily ecological poetry books, *Sea Change* and *Place*, Graham helps readers see feelingly into “the ‘deep future’ — seven to ten generations hence.” How? By imagining the far in terms of the near. “Dialogue (Of the Imagination’s Fear)” (from *Place*) opens the morning after the bursting of the housing bubble, with its bleak economic environment of mass expulsions “All around in/houses near us.” Meanwhile, it’s the exclamatory “Spring!” of E.E. Cummings and William Carlos Williams. But if our future on an earth laid waste is also foreclosed, Eliot’s season of resurrection seems cruel. Harking back to George Herbert’s “The Flower,” Graham’s buried bulbs think twice about coming up:

I cannot say it but the  
smell is hope meeting terrifying regret, I would say do not open again,  
do not go up,  
    stay under here there is  
    no epoch, we are  
    in something but it is not “the world,” why try to make  
    us feel at  
    home down  
    here, take away the poem, take away this desire that  
has you entering this waste dark space, there are not even pockets of  
time here,  
there are no mysteries, there is no laughter and nothing ever dies, the  
foreclosure  
    you are standing beside look to it, there is a  
woman crying on the second floor as she does not understand what it  
will be like to  
not have a home now, and how to explain to the children at 3:35  
when the bus drops  
    them off—



Graham in “Dialogue” imagined the deep future through the imperiled present; Roberson here imagines the endangered present through the deep past. According to one theory, the paleo-American Clovis people, known for their fluted spear points, hunted the megafauna (including the short-faced bear) through North America, driving them, and themselves, into extinction. And do we choose to follow them? The “we” in Roberson’s cautionary tale includes not only curious ecotourists (and greedy petroleum deposit hunters) but the rest of us who choose (or not) to do what we can to preserve the environmental balance.

Graham crosses economics (eco-, *oikos*: home) with nature, Roberson crosses ecology with anthropology—both increasingly common hybrids in ecopoetry. Robert Hass proceeds similarly in “Ezra Pound’s Proposition,” but his crossings are causal. The “proposition” is Hass’s rendering of Pound’s multi-disciplinary poetics, gleaned from “Mauberly” and the Cantos:

Beauty is sexual, and sexuality  
Is the fertility of the earth and the fertility  
Of the earth is economics.

As Hass explained in a 2007 interview, the poem draws on his experience with International Rivers, “which has been concerned particularly with where environmental issues meet human-rights issues around big-dam projects, many of which have proved destructive, displacing millions of people around the world.” The International Rivers website reproduces “Ezra Pound’s Proposition” and directs readers to the building of the Pak Mun Dam in Thailand. International Rivers itself resists dam construction by “provid[ing] unbiased hydrological and financial analyses of these dam projects to the dam-affected people in the Third World.” Its pedagogical method bears interesting comparison with Hass’s own. The poet might have recorded the history of the dam, along with the local occupations and chaotic displacements; instead, he begins downstream, in Bangkok, with a child prostitute’s own disarming “proposition”: “How about a party, big guy?” In the poem’s second and final stanza, the poet explains how she got there:

Here is more or less how it works:  
The World Bank arranges the credit and the dam

Floods three hundred villages, and the villagers find their way  
To the city where their daughters melt into the teeming streets,  
And the dam's great turbines, beautifully tooled  
In Lund or Dresden or Detroit, financed  
By Lazard Frères in Paris or the Morgan Bank in New York,  
Enabled by judicious gifts from Bechtel of San Francisco  
Or Halliburton of Houston to the local political elite,  
Spun by the force of rushing water,  
Have become hives of shimmering silver  
And, down river, they throw that bluish throb of light  
Across her cheekbones and her lovely skin.

“Ezra Pound’s Proposition” is not polemical or didactic in the usual sense. Hass does not tell us what to do or how to feel. But he does tell us what happened, and he teaches us that the economic injustice flows from a damnable environmental injustice. In a single “unbiased,” just perceptibly ironic, meandering sentence, Hass traces the inhumane misdeed to its source. Beauty of wealth and expertise at the beginning sheds light on the beauty of displaced youth at the end. Having laid out the chain of events, Hass leaves us to ponder the links.

Ecopoetry is nature poetry that has designs on us, that imagines changing the ways we think, feel about, and live and act in the world. If an ecopoem is only a postmodern or a contemporary nature poem, why ecopoetry? The essential difference between nature poetry and ecopoetry cannot be stylistic. But as Frost, Moore, Spahr, Graham, Roberson, Hass, and many other poets have shown us, the ways of being ecopoetic are increasingly diverse. Let me add what my last decade of reading and teaching confirms: nature poetry, even without broaching ruination or restoration, can also be environmentalist. If Hopkins can get me excited about species acting out their names (“As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame”); if John Clare or Emily Dickinson or Snyder or Kay Ryan can encourage me to see myself in an animal; or if Wendell Berry or W.S. Merwin or Brenda Hillman can place me in and beyond the poem, then they have motivated me to want these creatures and environments to stay. By showing us also that some things must go (dams, oil rigs, plastic bags, animal concentration camps, virtual disconnectedness), ecopoetry doesn’t supplant nature poetry but enlarges it.