

Ecopoetry

Definition and History

Readers use the term ecopoetry to describe the most recent development in a longstanding tradition of nature-oriented poetry. Ecopoetry uses language to deepen a sense of nature's presence in our lives; and these invocations of nature's presence—celebratory of the biological fact that we *are* nature— suggest an ecological understanding of nature and its processes. As John Elder explains in the first book-length treatment of the intersections between poetry and ecology, *Imagining the Earth* (1985), the principles of ecology change one's vision of nature as well as the form in which that vision is expressed.

As early as 1980, Robert Bly suggested that poets have long imagined something like an ecological world view. This poetic, cultural and spiritual orientation to the world is organized around a sense of interrelatedness between the human and the more-than-human world. The erosion of this more holistic world view appears in the more self-conscious nature writing of late eighteenth-century Romantic poets in Europe as well as the early nineteenth-century writers in America. The work of these writers expresses a troubled separation from nature, as well as a concern with the irreversible industrial, technological, and political events that were shaping new conditions for human life.

“A poem concerned with a larger economy than the human one”—this is Jonathan Bate's summary assessment of John Keats' “To Autumn,” an ode that expresses a network of relations between inner and outer ecologies of mind. Bate's *Song of the Earth*

(2000) discusses the contexts and legacies of the Romantic tradition through the affinities between the imagination and the biosphere. Wordsworth is the source for the tradition of poems that will no longer arise from an *occasion* but rather respond to a *place*. This response to place is most vividly expressed in the poems of two nineteenth-century American writers, Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. Their work undermines the religious discourses that determine the place of nature and its value in our lives. In his *Walt Whitman and the Earth: A Study in Ecopoetics* (2004), M. Jimmie Killingsworth turns to Whitman for “a more radical investigation into the possibilities and limits of human creativity” in order to better understand “how we use language to figure out our relationship to the earth” (4). His study of the intersections between environmental rhetoric and ecopoetics demonstrates how “Whitman’s poetry embodies the kinds of conflicted experience and language that continually crop up in the discourse of political ecology” (9–10).

This “conflicted experience and language” recurs in nature poetry throughout the twentieth century. Reading William Wordsworth as an ecologically-minded naturalist, John Elder traces changing attentiveness to nature and increasingly conflicted attitudes toward tradition from T.S. Eliot and Robinson Jeffers through the intricacies of nature’s processes in the poems of Gary Snyder, A.R. Ammons, Robert Pack, and Wendell Berry. The intellectual context for Guy Rotella’s 1991 *Reading and Writing Nature* is American nature poetry from the Puritan poets Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor to Emerson and Dickinson. His study traces the broad epistemological and aesthetic implications of this early work in the poetry of Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and Elizabeth Bishop. These four poets turn to nature to explore the possibilities and limits of

language and meaning and envision poetic forms that are, in Rotella's reading, "at best conditional or 'fictive' consolations, not redemptive truths" (xi). Bernard W.

Quetchenbach's *Back from the Far Field: American Nature Poetry in the Late Twentieth Century* (2000) then extends Rotella's study of American nature poetry into the post-war poetry of Robert Bly, Gary Snyder, and Wendell Berry that incorporates the public rhetoric of environmentalism.

Other literary critics who reread modern poetry using the insights and general principles of ecology include Gyorgyi Voros, whose *Notations of the Wild: The Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (1997) describes six familiar aspects of Steven's work that "readily lend themselves to an ecological reading" (83–86). Jane Frazier, in *From Origin to Ecology: Nature and the Poetry of W.S. Merwin* (1999), follows the development of Merwin's ecological world view. Frost, Stevens and Moore are read together in Bonnie Costello's *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern American Poetry* (2003) to demonstrate how landscape serves both as structure and meaning in the later generation of poets. Costello's book, although not explicitly a study of ecopoetics, explores poetic responses to the modern world in Charles Wright, Amy Clampitt, A.R. Ammons and John Ashbery as they create new representations of the landscape. "In Stevens' work, as in Frost's," Costello explains, "the desire for the real, and for nature, must reckon always with the frame, with landscape" (15). Scott Bryson's *The West Side of Any Mountain: Place, Space, and Ecopoetry* (2005) also turns to poems that "become models for how to approach the landscape surrounding us so that we view it as a meaningful place rather than abstract place" (12), with a focus on the poems of Wendell Berry, Joy Harjo, Mary Oliver, and W.S. Merwin.

Contexts, Themes, and Issues

These critical discussions of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman world—between the language of poetry and the world that surrounds a poem—are a part of the historical development of an ecological perspective. Ernst Haeckel's term *oecologie* suggested to his nineteenth-century contemporaries the potential to re-imagine human affairs as a part of the larger economy of nature. As late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century ecologists studied biological entities as a part of an ecosystem, the discipline of ecology sought standing in the scientific community as a quantitative science. The science of ecology then diverged from the descriptive explanations of nature and the role of humans in the natural world and the spatial metaphors that defined the field. The science of ecology also moved from more general conceptions of ecological processes to more complex, unpredictable, and open natural systems; random events, disequilibrium and flux.

The concept of the ecosystem, however, offered an abstract but at the same time tangible way to conceive of (and study) the relationship between natural and human environments. Ecosystem ecology, more simply put, offered a new vision that would help people re-identify with the processes of the natural world. In his 1989 book *The End of Nature*, Bill Mckibben reviews the underlying habits of mind that need to be rethought: “we tell time badly. . . our sense of scale is awry. . .[and] our more-is-better obsession with ‘positive’ numbers prevents us from seeing that we have ruptured our link with Nature” (13-14). This critique begins with the ecological imperatives of the environmental crisis. It envisions the necessity of developing ecological values within the political, social and technological realms—encompassing scientific awareness, a

reverence for the living world, and the responsibility of the continuing work of seeking to align social and community systems with the grander systems of life. These ecological precepts are at the center of Robert Dish's *The Ecological Conscience: Values for Survival* (1970)—a collection of essays that includes Aldo Leopold, Barry Commoner, Paul Shepard, Lewis Mumford, Paul Goodman, and R. Buckminster Fuller—as well as an essay by “eco-poet” Gary Snyder, “poetry and the primitive: notes on poetry as an ecological survival technique.” More recently, ethnobotanist Gary Paul Nabhan reiterates these ecological values in his *Cross-Pollinations: The Marriage of Science and Poetry* (2004). Nabhan provides a case study in mixing the practices of field science with indigenous poetic knowledge (of desert plants, in this case). He moves freely within and across scientific and poetic discourses to discover the possibilities for a more integrated (and more humane) understanding of the natural world.

The development of an ecological perspective in the twentieth century is part of a national and international strain in literary modernism that changed the direction of poetry and art “as a necessary condition for changing the ways in which we think and act as human beings” (Rothenberg and Joris 2). These poets and artists work from the conviction “that poetry is a part of a struggle to save the wild places—in the world and in the mind.” They view “the poem as a wild thing and of poetry and the poet as endangered species” (12). Ecopoetry uses comparable metaphors for describing the relationship between poetic making and ecology. Snyder writes that the ecologist looks at “population dynamics, plant and animal succession, predator-prey relationships, competition and cooperation, feeding levels, food chains, whole ecosystems, and the flow of energy through ecosystems” (*Back* 31). The kind of poem that might draw on these energies in

an ecosystem, he goes on to suggest, would be much like developments in fiction that have moved beyond “stock figures and charming plots” to “the inner lives and psyches of our characters, all their obsessions, kinkiness, and secrets” (32). Literary applications of the term ecology have, as these examples suggest, extended the scientific study of interrelationships to the process of the mind, giving rise to the now familiar phrases “ecology of mind” and “environmental imagination.”

Contemporary readers have defined the ecopoet’s inclination toward primary, lived experience, and the world of the senses, through phenomenology. J. Hillis Miller’s *Six Poets of Reality* (1965) first suggested to readers of American poetry the theoretical resources of phenomenology—specifically through the writings of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger and the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. But it was not until Charles Altieri’s study of American poetry in the 1960s that readers would begin to explore the relationship between poetry and ecology. *Enlarging the Temple* (1979) explores what Altieri calls *radical presence*, “the insistence that the moment immediately and intensively experienced can restore one to harmony with the world and provide ethical and psychological renewal” (78). Altieri offered a sophisticated reading of Snyder that appreciated the ecological system as central metaphor in his poetry. “Ecology deals not with ideas,” Altieri argues in his chapter on Snyder and Robert Duncan, “but with modes of action and with the unity of interrelationships in nature, and its verification is the fullness of the environment it creates” (135). Using this definition, he reads Snyder’s incorporation of the mind’s process into the natural pattern of relationships in the poems “A Walk” and “Six-Month Song in the Foothills” from the 1968 volume *The Backcountry*. “Six-Month Song in the Foothills,” for example, works

from a deep sense of connection and responsibility to the earth that, in turn, “prepares a possible meditative mode where one can construct an imaginary space in which particular balances reveal a deeper unity” (137). “Grinding the falling axe / sharp for the summer / a swallow shooting out over / over the river, snow on the low hills / sharpening wedges for splitting” (*Backcountry* 17). These lines suggest a complex spatial experience by balancing elements in the natural world as well as revealing a mind alive with the exchange of inner and outer life.

Altieri raises significant questions regarding the philosophical adequacy of any poetics of presence in his subsequent discussion of W.S. Merwin’s struggles with presence and absence in *The Lice* (1968) and Denise Levertov’s attempts to use the aesthetics of presence in her poems in the late 1960s. “Considered as metaphysical or religious meditation,” Altieri says, “the poetry of the sixties seems to me highly sophisticated; it takes into account all the obvious secular objections to traditional religious thought and actually continues and extends the inquiries of philosophers as diverse as Heidegger, Whitehead, and Wittgenstein” (226). Frank O’Hara, Snyder, Robert Creeley, and Merwin all “give resonance and imaginative life to Heideggerean claims that poetry is the taking up of sites in which being, or the numinous familiar, discloses itself and testifies to the powers of the attentive mind” (225). However this very success, Altieri insists, “makes it disappointing that the poetry fails so miserably in handling social and ethical issues.” What is missing is an acknowledgement of the gap between values found in mediating on nature and those values developed through reflection on public themes and problems (236).

Leonard Scigaj argues that this gap is not tenable given the environmental crisis and the need to use language to understand nature's process. "With its emphasis on referential context," he insists, "environmental poetry must contain an activist dimension to foreground particular acts of environmental degradation and degraded planetary ecosystems" (21). Scigaj's *Sustainable Poetry* (1999) seeks to reorient readers to the referential function of literature and the standpoint of environmentalism. His project, as he succinctly puts it, seeks to "critique poststructuralist language theory and provide an alternative" (xiii). He turns to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to elucidate the cultural value of writers such as A. R. Ammons, Wendell Berry, Denise Levertov, W. S. Merwin, Gary Snyder and Adrienne Rich. These poets approach language as "a positive instrument that can promote authentic social and environmental relations between humans and their environment—relations that can lead to emancipatory change" (33). As Scigaj admonishes, "We need a sustainable poetry, a poetry that does not allow the degradation of ecosystems through inattention to the referential base of all language. We need a poetry that treats nature as a separate and equal other and includes respect for nature conceived as a series of ecosystems—dynamic and potentially self-regulating cyclic feedback systems" (5). Scigaj concludes that in the face of environmental crisis we are no longer able to naturalize these ecosystems "into benign backdrops for human preoccupations" or to "reduce them to nonexistence by an obsessive focus on language" in our literary work.

Jonathan Bate argues, to the contrary, that ecopoetics properly begins "not as a set of assumptions or proposals about particular environmental issues, but as a way of reflecting upon what it might mean to dwell upon the earth" (266). Killingsworth makes a

similar distinction. “I use the term ecopoetics when my readings aim for a primarily phenomenological significance and ecocriticism when they take a sharply political turn, invoking issues on the current environmentalist agenda” (6). As the literary critic Jed Rasula points out, after all, the poet seeks not to “‘change the world’—a futile repetition of the Prometheus complex—but [to] change the mind that conceives, and accedes to, that composition of the real we acknowledge as the world” (62). Rasula’s *This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry* (2002) elaborates the ecological dynamics at play in the modern poetics of Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Robert Duncan. Rasula has no interest in defining and arguing for the distinctiveness of a select group of poets with common ecological concerns. Rather his subject is poets who call on the imagination “as a resource of ecological understanding” and poetry “in a truly re-creational capacity, one that redefines ‘recreation’ as original participation” (3). For Rasula, ecopoetry begins with the inadequacy of the self and its anthropocentric preoccupations, and it goes on to envision language and poetry, in the words of Snyder, “as an ecological survival technique” (*Earth* 117).

Any poet who writes with an environmental or ecological perspective is implicated in what Bate calls the “ontologically double” nature of the poetic. As Bate describes it, “The poetic is either (both?) a language (*logos*) that restores us to our home (*oikos*) or (and?) a melancholy recognizing that our only home (*oikos*) is language (*logos*)” (281). Angus Fletcher’s *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of Imagination* (2004) affirms this “ontological doubleness” as the condition of any poetic use of language. John Clare, Walt Whitman, and John Ashberry elaborate “both the powers and the constraints operating upon poetry when it

seeks to represent the world around us” (3). Fletcher’s argument addresses the question of what happens when the poet’s way of being in the world “is defined as an ecological surrounding” (5). To what degree is the environment poem, Fletcher asks, “designed to increase our knowledge. As distinct from our experience, and if the latter, must our increased knowledge be of a factual nature?” (135); is it possible, in the environment poem, to distinguish the widest possible definition of nature “from any locally confined notion of any singular environment, any singular ecosystem?” (136-37). And as ecological discourse continues to permeate human thinking about the natural world, how might poetry contribute not to representing the environment, or “saving the earth,” but rather to seeing the future world as an ecosystem?

As Fletcher explains, “Unlike most prose discourse, poetry expresses closes personal involvements, and hence pertains to the way we humans respond, on our own, to environmental matters.” Fletcher elaborates the development of a more democratic and descriptive mode of poetry, the environment poem, that “introduces the experience of an outside that is developed for the reader inside the experience of the work. . . a surrounding that actually has more presence than any state of mind” (227). Rather than focus on the end of the poem as representing a place (the topographic) Fletcher privileges space (the chorographic). He recognizes the limits of defining space in terms of place, or limiting the experience of an environment to a fixed and static state. The chorographic poetry of Clare, Whitman, and Ashberry “names the turbulent surface of the living ground on which or in which every thing is placed, even imprinted, while this sitting or placement remains always shaken and oscillating in the changes of the becoming” (269). The ecopoet, in this definition, uses description to undermine the more accessible comforts of

place, “the nostalgia for home that place humanly implies.” As Fletcher concludes, the chorographic “questions topos or *place*, by showing turbulent movements within *space*.”

Scott Bryson reads the eco-poet’s exploration of place and space as working toward “an increased awareness of the ecological interconnection between all the inhabitants of a particular place” and a “healthy space-consciousness. . . inherently humble” and grounded in “the inadequacies in human attempts to control, master, or even fully understand the world around them” (*West* 22). Bryson argues that the eco-poet offers a vision of the world with two interdependent if not paradoxical desires: “to *create place*, making a conscious and concerted effort to know the more-than-human world around us. . . and to *value space*, recognizing the extent to which that very world is unknowable” (8).

While Fletcher’s work does not explicitly draw on the critical discourse of eco-poetics, his argument extends Bryson’s discussion of poets who seek to both create place and value space—“to know the world and to recognize its ultimate unknowability” (*West* 8). In organizing his study around the idea that “environmental sensitivity demands its own new genre of poetry” (9), however, Fletcher argues that environment poems “are not *about* the environment, whether natural or social, they *are* environments” (103). The question of how a reader enters and becomes subject to the environment poem then becomes a matter of entertaining the possible powers of environmental and ecological identification with a symbolic or semiotic space.

Authors and Their Works

The primary ecological imperative of poetry, in the words of Gary Snyder, “must be that we try to see whatever current crisis we are in as part of an older larger pattern” (“Ecology” 10). The assimilated “compost of feeling and thinking” that gives rise to a poem is a source, for Snyder—deeper than the individual, and more connected. Buddhist philosophy and Native American cultural perspectives and life ways provide additional sources for his distinctive bioregional poetics. Snyder conceives of poetry and scholarship as treating language and memory as part of the natural systems of exchange that inspire human song. He seeks to accomplish this through abandoning the fiction of the self to access a more primary source for understanding through archaic practices and human values more closely associated with nature. From this point of view, poets have more to do than write poems “about” the environment or “speak for” nature: for their creative work arises out of and informs the complex exchanges between nature and human cultures.

Ecology and biology have informed Snyder’s poetics since the 1960s. “As the evolutionary model dominated nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinking, henceforth the ecological model will dominate our model of how the world is—reciprocal and interactive rather than competitive” (130), Snyder proposes in his 1969 collection of journals and essays, *Earth House Hold*. In Snyder’s early poetry, reciprocity and interactivity play out in forms of consciousness and metaphor modeled on the continual exchanges of natural energy and form. His poetics incorporate the impulse to think *about* nature in language as he articulates a way of being *within* nature. At the same time that he has elegantly and successfully developed a distinctive poetry, Snyder established himself as a pre-eminent spokesperson for living more responsibly on the earth. The poems in

Turtle Island (1974) celebrate and affirm life at the same time they suggest a broader vision of living.

Ecological succession is a central metaphor in the bioregional focus of the collection of poems *Axe Handles* (1983). As his work develops, moreover, Snyder continues to affirm the deep and intricate relationship between the ancient cultural traditions of art in China and Japan and the ecological world view of the twentieth century. Snyder sees the world through the prism of language as well as through the impulse of most Chinese and Japanese poetry, of “seeing the world *without* any prism of language, and to bring that seeing *into* language” (*Back* 143).

Mountains and Rivers Without End (1996), a book-length poem that Anthony Hunt calls “a fundamental wisdom text for the modern ecological movement” (272). The sequence of poems explores the present moment (for Snyder the 10,000 years or so of human experience in the Holocene) by moving across cultures and time. The poem explores the history of the North American landscape and its geological and geomorphic processes, while drawing on a long tradition of Chinese art that takes mountains and rivers as the central metaphors for organizing space. *Mountains and Rivers Without End* affirms Bate’s conclusion that Snyder is “the most ecologically self-conscious of twentieth century poets” (246). For the ecological corollary to Snyder’s observation that “nature” will always exceed our attempts to define it is precisely the refusal to accept the idea that we are separate from nature. This reminder expresses a complex and highly developed program Snyder has called re-inhabitation, a part of what Snyder has called the practice of the wild. Snyder’s ecopoetry in this way suggests a broader role for itself, as a

guide to the creation of an ecology of readers and writers. For “what we ultimately need most,” writes Snyder, “are human beings who love the world” (*Back* 70).

Wendell Berry’s agrarian aesthetic parallels Snyder’s bioregional poetics. Elder observes that “Berry identifies his life as a farmer and a poet with the cycle of decay and renewal in the soil. This is an analogy for the process of health in art and human life,” Elder continues, “to which Gary Snyder returns” (52). Both are persuasive writers of nonfiction who are fiercely eloquent on the importance of place, the cultivation of regional economies, and the renewal of place-based, community values. Yet Berry’s Christian vision provides a distinctive path for developing a poetry that seeks to redress a radically diminished state of human affairs. His ecological vision casts man in the role of responsible and responsive steward of the land—in his case, the land of his farm in Port Royal, Kentucky. Such stewardship requires a rejection of a modern urban-industrial society organized around “a series of radical disconnections between body and soul, husband and wife, marriage and community, community and the earth” (*Unsettling* 137).

Berry explores the possibilities of restoring these broken connections in his first books of poetry. These poems speak directly to the contemporary origins of an increasingly indifferent and destructive attitude toward the natural world. The acute sense of loss and destruction of the human community and its relationship to the land in the twentieth century is as troubling a problem for Berry as the history of indifference to the land and the human community that have been a part of this irresponsible behavior. Much like William Carlos Williams in the 1920s, Berry sees the relationship to the land as inseparable from a more complex ecology that includes human history. “I am forever being crept up on and newly startled by the realization that my people established

themselves here by killing or driving out the original possessors, by the awareness that people were once bought and sold here by my people, by the sense of the violence they have done to their own kind and to each other and to the earth, by the persistent failure to serve either the place or their community in it” (*Recollected* 104). The problem lies in the failure to see the affinities between the wild and what he calls the domestic. “The wild and the domestic now often seem isolated values, estranged from one another. And yet these are not exclusive polarities like good and evil. There can be continuity between them, and there must be,” Berry insists in *Long-Legged House* (18).

For Berry, the continuity between the wild and the domestic is sustained through daily labor. Such service, moreover, involves healing. From his first collection *Broken Ground* (1968) Berry seeks to reground his life in the soil of his native Kentucky. Too, he eschews the too-common sense that an understanding of place might be won at little cost. Rather, Berry’s poems urge the contemporary reader to see beyond the narrow vision of one individual’s relationship to the land and to accept the inherited fate of environmental restoration. As his speaker Nathan Coulter puts it in the poem “Where” from *Farming: A Handbook*, “the idea of making / my lifetime one of the several / it will take to bring back / the possibilities of this place / that used to be here” (93). In his fifth collection of essays, *A Continuous Harmony* (1972) he aligns farming with ecology rather than economy, an argument much like Snyder’s in the 1960s that economics, properly understood, would be a sub-branch of ecology. Berry goes on to say that ecology “may well find its proper disciplines in the arts, whose function is to refine and enliven *perception*, for ecological principles, however publicly approved, can be enacted only upon the basis of each man’s perception of his relation to the world” (100). In this, Berry calls attention to the

necessity of discovering things as they are—rather than the impulse to create and impose human forms on the natural world.

This vision of immersion in the more-than-human world has been difficult for poets to sustain given the heightened environmental and ecological concerns of the late twentieth century. Although Snyder and Berry’s work is deeply informed by science, A.R. Ammons has fulfilled Walt Whitman’s prophecy in *Democratic Vistas* of a future that would produce a poet “consistent with science.” Ammons begins with the scientific view that the planet is ancient and has preceded humans by billions of years. And he rejects the idea of permanence and embraces nature as an intricate, evolving, and adaptive system. The critic Helen Vendler celebrates Ammons’s use of scientific language as a distinctive contribution to modern poetry. Ammons is the first American poet, Vendler writes, “to use scientific language with manifest ease and accuracy, as a part of his natural vocabulary.”

Ammons’ first-book length poem, *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (1965), is most explicit about his ecological interests: “*ecology* is my word: tag / me with that,” writes Ammons. “come in there: you will find yourself / in a firmless country: / centers & peripheries / in motion, / organic, interrelations!” (112). As he puts this perspective more directly in his poem “Exotic”: “Science outstrips / other modes & reveals more of / the crux of the matter / than we can calmly / handle.” Ideas and terminology from science pervade *The Collected Poems 1951–1971*, especially the quatrains of “Extremes and Moderations,” and the tercets of “Essay on Poetics” and “Hibernaculum.” The poem “Extremes and Moderations” explores the self-regulating laws of nature in what has been called Ammons’s most significant ecological testimony. Its primary interest is the

precarious relationship between the natural and the artificial. On one level the poem is a romantic paean to those caught in the fixed and constricted environment of the city. However the poem is more centrally concerned with the question of human purpose in the age of science and technology. The poem cautiously accepts human activity at the same time that it rejects outright the idea that human ingenuity and innovation can control nature. It registers a self-conscious environmental concern with the effects of human activity. Echoing Rachel Carson's response to the excesses of human ambition and arrogance in *Silent Spring* (1962), Ammons takes umbrage at "the rampaging industrialists, the chemical devisors and manipulators," intoxicated with "dollar lust"—the cause, he writes, of the loss of "common air" and "common rain's / losing its heavenly clarity." Ammons's position is a natural consequence of his interest in physics, biology, physical chemistry, and meteorology, his love for the inexhaustible mysteries of the natural world, and his meditations on the philosophical and ethical implications of science.

Ammons revives the romantic correspondence between nature and human perception through a life-long study of the intricacies of observable phenomena and the networks of energy and material that make up the natural world. His praise for the quotidian, the overlooked and the useless, is therefore compensatory in the face of the dazzling ephemerality of human activity. His love of the particular thing, moreover, is enriched by his relentless exploration of transient forms. His broad and eclectic knowledge of science moves from the intercellular depths of biology to the interstellar heights of astronomy. And his meditative mind is drawn to the abstract philosophical

implications of physical things and processes—infused with the multiple actions and energies of the natural world that exist beyond the narrow boundaries of the self.

In his early essay “Literature and Ecology,” the critic William Rueckert writes that he knows of no other book of poems “so aware of the biosphere and what human beings have done to destroy it” as W. S. Merwin’s book *The Lice* (1967). “Reading this book of poems,” Rueckert writes, “requires one to unmake and remake one’s mind” (qtd. In Glotfelty and Fromm 117-18). The poems in *The Lice* hold human culture accountable to the delicate and sustaining web of life, as in the speaker’s haunting address to a grey whale in the poem “For a Coming Extinction.” Nevertheless, Merwin’s devotion to nature is shaped by a profound engagement with the contradictions of human culture—a concern with the contours of human desire and its at times unacceptable costs.

In his more than fifteen books of poetry and four books of prose Merwin’s theme, especially as it is developed in the later phase of his work, is the postmodern problem of finding language that can offer an adequate and just account of the world. Merwin’s poems urge the reader to affirm a more capacious sympathy with the non-human world of nature. In *The River Sound* (1999), nature’s persistence appears as an antidote to human and ecological loss. “The Gardens of Versailles,” for example, addresses the human impulse to shape nature points to the diminishment of the natural world under this imposed “form’s vast claim / to have been true forever as the law / of a universe in which nothing appears / to change” (8). However the final lines of the poem intimate that despite this rage for order, the river goes on, as “the sound of water falling echoes in the dream / the dream of water in which the avenues / all of them are the river on its way.” Merwin accepts the difficult and conflicting struggles with language as he seeks to invent

distinctive imaginative structures for understanding nature as well as the human place in a more-than-human world. The origin of a poem, Merwin writes in the “Preface” to *The Second Four Books of Poems*, is “a passion for the momentary countenance of the unrepeatable world.” The destiny of a poem, it might follow, is to awaken in a reader a fuller recognition of the self within the all-too-fragile and quickly passing frame of our lives.

For Merwin, as well as for Mary Oliver, the ecological poem might be said to arise out of what the biologist E. O. Wilson calls the innate “urge to affiliate with other forms of life” (*Biophilia*). As Vicki Graham elaborates, Oliver’s poems register a persistent belief “in the possibility of intimate contact with the non-linguistic world of nature and the confidence in the potential of language to represent that experience” (“Into the Body” 1). Despite the fact that language mediates our relationship to nature, Laird Christensen adds in a more recent overview of her ecopoetry, “Oliver clearly believes that poetry can call attention to the fact that we dwell in a world of presences” (*Ecopoetry* 140). However in a 1996 review essay the poet and critic Gyorgi Voros disparages Oliver’s work for its “peculiar lack of genuine engagement with the natural world,” a failure, Voros concludes, that makes Oliver’s poetry “ecologically unsound” (231, 238). Voros points to the passion for transcendence in Oliver that “impairs the poet’s powers of observation” (235). For Voros, the problem is that despite appearances Oliver is not “content to perceive and honor *this* world in all its ordinariness”; rather, her adoration of the natural world betrays a “passion for transcendence” that “impairs the poet’s powers of observation” (235).

In addition to the two-volume *New and Selected Poems*, Oliver's most recent collections of poetry include *What Do We Know* (2002), *Owls and Other Fantasies* (2003), *Why I wake Early* (2004), *Blue Iris* (2004), and *Thirst* (2006). In these poems Oliver rejects the limits of the confessional strain in contemporary poetry (and the tendency to reproduce merely individually significant moments in a life). What Voros overlooks is that Oliver's descriptions of individual experiences in nature are working toward an ecological understanding the self and human agency. Oliver's focus on dramatizing human experiences in nature works to reinforce or alter the way in which we experience the natural world. Her work doesn't dramatize the commonplace statements that nature is a previously harmonious realm undisturbed by human activity; that nature is a restorative space for human use to recuperate from the excesses of human culture; or that nature would simply reawaken us to a more harmonious or ecological way of being in the world.

Oliver's book-length poem *The Leaf and the Cloud* (2000) may best foreground the limits of what Voros calls "ecologically sound" poetry. One of commonplaces of normative ecology is that we are connected to everything else—a truism, but only in the most trivial sense. For bodily identification with the nonhuman world is, of course, what we already have. One contribution of *The Leaf and the Cloud*, as a book-length poem, is its generic departure from the aesthetics of presence that determines how poems think about the natural world. *The Leaf and the Cloud* is devoted to exploring what Charles Olson once called a poet's "stance toward reality." It is a poem preoccupied with the relationship between the work of the poet and the work of the world. And it is devoted to bringing the reader into its investigation. For instance, in the first of its seven sections,

“Flare,” Oliver welcomes the reader “to the silly, comforting poem” (1). The immediate concern of the speaker is with what the poem is not. It is not “the sunrise, / which is a red rinse, / which is flaring all over the eastern sky; nor is it the “trees, or the burrow burrowing into the earth.” The twelve numbered parts of section one move from Whitman-like questions of a reader (“Therefore, tell me: / what will engage you?”) to declarative instructions to the reader (“The poem is not the world. / It isn’t even the first page of the world” 5).

Calling attention to the poem as a poem is of course nothing new. But the extended and discursive space of the long poem creates a place to record the daily work of the writer who takes as her subject the states of mind that arise in observing the daily unfolding of natural phenomena. In part two of the poem, “Work,” the poet’s work is set alongside what Oliver calls the “work of the world,” the “deliberate music” of the ears of corn swelling under their green leaves, the dark stone, the grouse’s fan-tail. The refrain throughout the sections of part two—“this is the world”—calls attention to the plenitude of the surroundings and the poet’s surprise and amazement at finding out—most often what one does not know. Oliver then poses the inevitable questions that arise in any sustained inquiry into the music of what is happening. “Would it better to sit in silence? / to think everything, to feel everything, to say nothing?” (12), Oliver asks. After all, she responds, such is the impulse of the river and the stone. Her answer is instructive. She is not willing (or able) to accept the odd human preoccupation with the promise that to abandon cultural and anthropocentric frameworks—of language and symbolic representation, of ideas such as beauty, devotion, respect—would somehow place one “closer” to the natural world. As she puts it, “the nature of man is not the nature of

silence.” The nature of man, that is, is wild *and* civilized—utterly alive in the flesh, fiercely obliged to the anthropocentric devotions to beauty, curiosity and respect.

The Leaf and the Cloud enacts the process of building a response to nature through deliberate self-consciousness. The meaning that Oliver attaches to events or phenomena—whether more descriptive and empirical or more abstract and emblematic—comes from an ability to cultivate one’s self—to remain distinct and to live more fully in our language and its capacities to mediate between our conscious bodies and the environment that surrounds us and of which we are always already a part. *The Leaf and the Cloud* is in this way a summation, a generative moment in an evolving ecopoetics.

Conclusion

Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry, W.S. Merwin, A. R. Ammons, and Mary Oliver are representative of a more diverse group of twentieth-century poets whose work has been explicitly shaped by an ecological perspective. In *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry* (1995), for instance, Terry Gifford highlights the ecological nature poetry of the British poets Patrick Kavanagh, Sorley MacLean, Seamus Heaney, and Ted Hughes. Environmental and ecological themes also shape the work of a number of other poets, including Adrienne Rich, Robert Pack, Louise Glück, Joy Harjo, Linda Hogan, Charles Wright, Ernesto Cardenal, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Simon J. Ortiz, Arthur Sze, Daphne Marlatt, Derek Walcott, Margaret and Atwood. This array of voices suggests the expanding focus of ecopoetics as well as its reach beyond the Anglo-American tradition. The tendency to canonize particular authors, and forms of writing about the

natural world, according to Jamie M. Killingsworth, is in part a product of the desire to better understand our relationship to the more-than-human world. But, as he explains, “as we come to see ‘saving the earth’ as one metaphor among many—a metaphor conditioned perhaps by the historical experience of the cold war—our focus can broaden to include a greater diversity of writers” (11). The study of writers with a wider range of imaginative responses might thereby offer readers new ways of exploring the interdependencies of language, human experience, and the more-than-human world.

If one accepts the idea that poetry is “the place where we save the earth,” in the words that bring Bate’s *Song of the Earth* to a close, then the term ecopoetry signals a preoccupation with the fate of the planet. While the narrow framework of human lives, and the perspective gained through generations of human life, registers radical geomorphic changes (volcano eruptions, earthquakes, tidal waves, melting icecaps), the earth’s processes unfold across a timeline not apparent to the perceptions and actions of human beings. Ecopoetry recognizes these limitations at the same time that it models forms of attention and linguistic acts that might make a difference in human lives and the forms of responsibility that arise in the peculiar human capacity for ethical reflection about forms of life beyond our own.

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