



“Images adequate to our predicament”: Ecology, Environment and Ecopoetics

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ABSTRACT This paper discusses the idea of ‘ecopoetry’ by outlining its development from drawing on Romantic and deep ecological traditions in the 1980s to reflecting complex environmental concerns in the 2010s. We identify a distinction between definitions that focus on poetry’s ability to heighten individual readers’ awareness of their physical surroundings on the one hand, and definitions that look for how poems can engage with difficult and complex environmental questions involving scale, justice, and politics on the other. We suggest that the difference between these two kinds of poems might be clarified by differentiating between *ecophenomenological* and *environmental* ecopoetry. We argue that recognition of this difference reflects a broader interdisciplinary development in our understanding of the environment as a social category, and that recognising it more readily and clearly could facilitate increased and improved cross-disciplinary discussions between ecocritical studies of poetry specifically, and environmental humanities more broadly. We carry out our analysis through the lens of the work of two influential poets in the Western, Anglophone world, namely Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes. Heaney and Hughes’s respective poetics exhibit distinctive differences that illustrate our argument. Their poems are frequently taught in university classes on ecopoetry, as well as, especially in their home countries, to younger students, and we argue that the differences we point to in their depictions of human-environment relations are important to recognise in these settings as part of a nuanced and interdisciplinary understanding of the relationship between poetry, ecology and environment.

Introduction¹

While the difficulties of relating emotionally and conceptually to the scale and complexity of contemporary environmental change are increasingly acknowledged,² other research shows that emotions are at least as important as rationality for decision making, on personal as well as

¹ The title of this article is taken from: Seamus Heaney, “Feeling into Words,” in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980).

² e.g. Daniel Gilbert, “If Only Gay Sex Caused Global Warming,” *LA Times* 2 July 2006; Greg Garrard, “The Unbearable Lightness of Green: Air Travel, Climate Change and Literature,” *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 17, no. 2 (2013): 175-88.

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institutional levels.³ This suggests that the obstacles to developing more sustainable societies are as much affective as scientific and political. What images and ideas will help us make emotional sense of issues such as climate change, and how and where will we be able to find and formulate them? How can our imaginations begin to engage with the implications of a profoundly changed relationship between human and non-human nature?

An obvious answer to that question is art, and indeed “Art about Climate Change”⁴ is a growing field. Timothy Clark has pointed out that thinking about climate change forces us to confront “how current modes of thinking and acting are inadequate or anachronistic,”⁵ and as Garrard⁶ has pointed out, climate scientist Mike Hulme has concluded that “[r]ather than placing ourselves in a ‘fight against climate change,’ we need a more constructive and imaginative engagement with the idea of climate change.”⁷ Hannes Bergthaller has suggested that “the larger question that confronts both ecocriticism and environmental history is whether it will be possible to formulate some kind of modern equivalent to the Aristotelian concept of nature—i.e., a concept that would allow us to inscribe ‘social’ and ‘natural’ process in the same matrix and to know them in ways that can to some extent provide practical guidance,”⁸ a suggestion that brings to mind ecocritical discussions of Bruno Latour’s work⁹ as well as developments in material ecocriticism.¹⁰ Poems, though, as Jonathan Bate insisted in his seminal study *The Song of the Earth*, might fall short of practical guidance:

What are poets for? They are not exactly philosophers, though they often try to explain the world and humankind’s place within it. They are not exactly moralists, for at least since the nineteenth century their primary concern has rarely been to tell us in homiletic fashion how to live. But they are often exceptionally lucid or provocative in their articulation of the relationship between internal and external worlds, between being and dwelling.¹¹

³ e.g. Daniel Khaneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

⁴ *The Economist*, “Art about Climate Change: Chilling,” 30 July 2013, accessed 6 November 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21581970-future-uncertain-it-also-inspiring-chilling>.

⁵ Timothy Clark, “Some Climate Change Ironies: Deconstruction, Environmental Politics and the Closure of Ecocriticism,” *The Oxford Literary Review* 32, no. 10 (2010): 131-49.

⁶ Garrard, “The Unbearable Lightness of Green.”

⁷ Mike Hulme, *Why We Disagree About Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction and Opportunity* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 361.

⁸ Hannes Bergthaller, “‘No More Eternal than the Hills of the Poets’: Ecocriticism, Environmental History, and the Shifting Grounds of Moral Authority in *Silent Spring*” (paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, Tenth Biennial Conference, University of Kansas, Lawrence, 28 May – 1 June 2013).

⁹ Laura D. Wall, “From the Modern to the Ecological: Latour on Walden Pond,” in *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*, ed. Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 98-109.

¹⁰ Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, “Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and Models of Narrativity,” *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment* 3, no. 1 (2012): 75-91.

¹¹ Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2001), 251-252.

As climate change and other environmental concerns that only indirectly become visible or recognisable to us increasingly challenge the limits and abilities of our environmental imaginations, these qualities of poetry appear as relevant and intriguing. As Tom Griffiths has argued, all narratives are capable of containing complex and contradicting truths; the story is "a privileged carrier of truth, a way of allowing for multiplicity and complexity at the same time as guaranteeing memorability":

[the] narrative is not just a means, it is a method, and a rigorous and demanding one. The conventional scientific method separates causes from one another, it isolates each one and tests them individually in turn. Narrative, by contrast, carries multiple causes along together, it enacts connectivity.¹²

Perhaps this is especially true for poetry. While all narrative genres are capable of complexity, some struggle to represent environmental problems that challenge human imaginations and include vast and complex temporal and geographical scales far beyond the immediate experience or lifetime of a single individual, for example the difficulties of representing climate change in the form of the novel.¹³ Poems depend on unique formal qualities, and are perhaps even more than other literary genres animated by and able to contain open-ended, multiple and even contradictory levels of meaning. This makes them especially interesting to look to for images that challenge established patterns of environmental thought and address complex, labyrinthine twenty-first century human-environment relations between local and global, social and ecological, perception and imagination.

In 2008, Seamus Heaney stated that, "environmental issues have to a large extent changed the mind of poetry."¹⁴ While part of this essay outlines how poems can contribute to interdisciplinary environmental thought, we also agree with Heaney that modern environmentalism has changed the field of poetry in fundamental ways. We suggest that this change can be recognised by differentiating between on the one hand 'ecophenomenological poetry,' focusing on descriptions and appreciation of non-human nature with roots in Romantic and deep ecology traditions, aiming to heighten individual readers' awareness of their natural surroundings, and on the other hand 'environmental poetry,' which tries to grapple with the changing relationship between human societies and natural environments. To trace this differentiation in detail, we review a number of different positions and approaches regarding the idea of 'ecopoetry,' from particularly literary perspectives towards broader points of view that outline common ground between poetry and other environmental humanities fields. To exemplify our analysis, we compare the respective ecopoetics of two influential poets in the Western, Anglophone world, Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney and former British Poet Laureate Ted Hughes.

¹² Tom Griffiths, "The Humanities and an Environmentally Sustainable Australia," *Australian Humanities Review* 43 (2007).

¹³ Adam Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra, "Climate Change in Literature and Literary Criticism," *WIREs Climate Change* 2, March-April (2011): 185-200.

¹⁴ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 56.

Deep Ecology and Non-Anthropocentric Poetry

Timothy Clark has noted that for deep ecologists:

the essential problem is *anthropocentrism*, the almost all-pervading assumption that it is only in relation to humans that anything else has value. Deep ecologists urge a drastic change in human self-understanding: one should see oneself not as an atomistic individual engaged in the world as a resource for consumption and self-assertion, but as part of a greater living identity. All human actions should be guided by a sense of what is good for the biosphere as a whole. Such a *biocentrism* would affirm the intrinsic value of all natural life and displace the current preference of even the most trivial human demands over the needs of other species or integrity of place.¹⁵

Poetry that adopts this stance, whether explicitly environmentalist or not, has often been described as ecopoetry. While including a variety of styles, many ecopoems have in common an aim to inspire wonder and appreciation for the non-human world, and to highlight its otherness by recognising the distinct perspectives, or *Umwelten*,¹⁶ of other species. Drawing, however agonistically, on Romantic traditions of nature writing, their tone is often celebratory, and they often focus on forms of nature that are relatively straightforward to visualise and relate to.

An example of this is the poetry of Ted Hughes, poet laureate in Great Britain from 1984 to 1998. A central theme in Hughes's poetics is the attempt to see the natural world from a non-human perspective. While some of his animal poems have led some critics to accuse him of writing 'poetry of violence,' what Hughes is really trying to describe is not violent behaviour per se, but the instinctual behaviour of animals that he sees as the opposite to human self-awareness; actions that are free from any interventions by consciousness and therefore, in Hughes's view, essentially different from social and cultural human behaviour. For Hughes, this kind of behaviour is defining of the idea of wilderness, and his so-called nature poems are often about locating and defining precisely such instances of wilderness. In this sense, Hughes's poems usually draw a clear line between nature and culture, and strongly favour the former. Some poems take an apparently different but in essence similar approach and attempt to view and describe humans from a non- or more-than-human¹⁷ perspective, trying to identify and describe human behaviours that, in Hughes's view, connect us to rather than set us apart from other species.

The poem "Brambles"¹⁸ illustrates the latter. "Brambles" describes a flock of jackdaws, comparing them first to a set of briars, then to the poet himself. The poem juxtaposes animal,

¹⁵ Timothy Clark, ed., *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.

¹⁶ Jakob von Uexküll, "A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men: A Picture Book of Invisible Worlds," in *Instinctive Behaviour: The Development of a Modern Concept*, ed. and trans. Claire Schiller (New York: International Universities Press, 1957), 5-80.

¹⁷ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996).

¹⁸ Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003).

plant and human being in a way that counteracts the idea that humans are an essentially different species. It maintains a clear distinction between nature and culture, but proposes a view that relocates traits that we usually refer to as culture on the nature-side of that border. The poem shows how Hughes tries to separate what he sees as 'natural' parts of human culture, such as language or spirituality, from its 'non-natural' sides, such as office work. The distinction is clearly there, but its precise location is questioned.

The poem begins by describing the jackdaws' complex social behaviour and semiosphere:

The whole air, the whole day
Swirls with the calls of jackdaws. The baby jackdaw
Generation is being initiated
Into jackdawdom – that complicated
Court-world of etiquette

And precedence, jingoism and law.

The speaker then shifts his attention to a set of briars, wondering if they too have their own agency: "So craftsmanlike, / Their reachings so deliberate, are they awake?" Next, however, the question is turned around and instead of affirming the briars' agency, the speaker wonders about his own:

Surely they [the briars] aren't just numb,
A blind groping. Yet why not?
Aren't my blood-cells the same?
What do even brain-cells fear or feel

Of the scalpel, or the accident?
They too crown a plant
Of peculiar numbness.

Rather than affirming the agency of the briars and thereby bringing them and (by association) the jackdaws into the cultural, anthropocentric realm of the human speaker, the poem relocates the human into the natural sphere, as a similar product of complex chemical processes that, though they may seem intentional, are no more "awake" than the "reachings" of the briars. By placing the human in the natural world, next to the briars and jackdaws, the poem suggests a sense of equality based on the similarity of cellular processes within the speaker and the briars and jackdaws. The comparison prompts the reader to consider non-human species and nature from a point of view that questions the exceptionality of the human being. While doubting the uniqueness of humans, "Brambles" highlights the intricacy and complexity of the non-human world—the "complicated / Court-world" of "jackdawdom"—in a way that promotes the 'intrinsic value' of nature and also points to a connection with the ideas of deep ecology. This is expressed most explicitly in the final stanza, which celebrates the sacredness of the organic world by describing the jackdaws as

a benighted religion
 Around the godlike syntax and vocabulary
 Of a mute cell, that does not know who we are
 Or even that we are here,
 Unforthcoming as any bramble-flower.

The idea of a non-anthropocentric nature poetry is introduced by Robinson Jeffers in the "Preface" to his 1948 collection of poems, *The Double Axe and Other Poems*. Jeffers describes his poems as presenting "a certain philosophical attitude, which might be called Inhumanism, a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence."¹⁹ He also characterised it as "based on a recognition of the astonishing beauty of things and their living wholeness, and on a rational acceptance of the fact that mankind is neither central nor important in the universe; our vices and blazing crimes are as insignificant as our happiness."²⁰ A recent review of Jeffers elaborates that "the core of inhumanism is the principled rejection of anthropocentrism, and the pursuit of what might as well be called an ecocentric standpoint: one in which nature takes centre stage, not as a receptacle for human activities, emotions, or narratives, but as itself, on its own inhuman terms."²¹

Jeffers' principle of inhumanism can be considered as an early version of deep ecology, which emerged in earnest a few decades later, systematised and introduced in detail by philosopher Arne Naess in 1973. Naess's version of deep ecology is based on a dismissal of "the man-in-environment concept," together with a principle of "[e]cological egalitarianism." The first point rejects a view of the organism as autonomous or isolated from its ecological surroundings, in favour of an ecosystem perspective that fosters a "relational, total-field image." The second point opposes a hierarchical view of the relationship between humans and other forms of nature. A central argument in Naess's version of deep ecology is that the restriction of the normative principle of everyone's "equal right to live and blossom ... to humans is an anthropocentrism with detrimental effects upon the life quality of humans themselves."²²

The same principles are equally fundamental to Hughes's eco-poetics. We see the idea of egalitarianism in "Brambles," for example, where the equality and similarity between animal, plant and human being is the pivotal point. The idea of a holistic universe, where humans are only a small part of a larger context, informs for example "Shackleton Hill,"²³ where "Stars sway the tree / Whose roots / Tighten on an atom." It is also present in numerous poems that emphasise the relationship between animals and their environment over the individual in its own right, so that the ideal form of existence is when perfect unity exists between an animal's

¹⁹ Robinson Jeffers, *The Double Ax and Other Poems* (New York: Random House, 1948), xxi.

²⁰ Quote from John M. Greer, "The Falling Years: An Inhumanist Vision," in *Dark Mountain: Issue 1* (2010), ed. Dougal Hine and Paul Kingsnorth, accessed 6 November 2014, <http://dark-mountain.net/stories/books/book-1/the-falling-years-an-inhumanist-vision>.

²¹ Greer, "The Falling Years."

²² Arne Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement. A Summary," *Inquiry* 16, no. 1 (1973): 95-96.

²³ Hughes, *Collected Poems*.

instincts and signs in its environment (or *Umwelt*); in the poem "Thrushes"²⁴ the bird is "[t]riggered to stirrings beyond sense" with an "efficiency which / Strikes too streamlined for any doubt," while in "Tern" another bird is described as "remote-controlled / By the eyes"; "a triggered magnet / Connects him downward, through a thin shatter, / To a sand-eel."²⁵

Griffiths has pointed out that in this kind of holistic view of nature, "just as the observer cannot be separated from the observed, so is consciousness integral to the universe, not outside it." Moreover he notes that "[i]n this sense, the new vision of the universe revives an animistic view of nature that existed in Europe before the scientific revolution, and which still remains in many parts of the world."²⁶ This spiritual dimension is indispensable to Hughes's view of the relationship between ecology and poetry.²⁷ As Jonathan Bate has pointed out, when the science of ecology gained increasing attention in relation to environmental movements in the 1970s, it presented a way for Hughes to connect his ideas about the relationship between human and non-human nature with his growing concerns for human effects on the natural environment, especially with regard to pollution, species extinction, and technological developments that he saw as increasing the alienation of humans from a life lived "close to nature."²⁸

In Hughes's ecopoetics there is an additional dimension that connects the spiritual, imaginative life of the human mind with the realm of ecology. In both prose and poetry, Hughes has described a link between creation in the natural world, i.e. the creation of organic life, and the creativity of the poet, i.e. artistic creation. For Hughes, the connection between natural and human creativity is especially strong in poems, due to their formal characteristics, which he suggests are more 'elemental' than those of other genres. By linking the creativity behind a plant or an animal to that of the poet, Hughes compares, with surprisingly literal intent, the capturing of an actual animal to the capture of its spirit in a poem.²⁹ This link means that, for Hughes, so far as they are able to 'tap into' the creative energy of the natural world, poems are, like other forms of life, expressions of a divine, more-than-human nature. This idea is similar to that expressed by early ecocritic John Elder, who suggested that "[p]oetry, too, becomes a manifestation of landscape and climate, just as the ecosystem's flora and fauna are"³⁰ (our emphasis).

The idea of a special connection between ecology and poetry has been elaborated by more recent critics into an idea of *ecological poetics*, suggesting that ecopoetry somehow reflects or even takes part in ecological relationships in an intrinsic way. Angus Fletcher has argued for a particularly strong form of such ecopoetics, stating that "poetry takes environmentalist concerns to a higher level."³¹ For Fletcher (as for Hughes), poetry is not

²⁴ Hughes, *Collected Poems*, 82.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 720-721.

²⁶ Griffiths, "The Humanities and an Environmentally Sustainable Australia," 3.

²⁷ Susanna Lidström, "Different Shades of Green: A Dark Green Counterculture in Ted Hughes's *Crow*," *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment* 4, no. 1 (2013): 12-29.

²⁸ Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, 27-28.

²⁹ Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen* (New York: Picador, 1995).

³⁰ John Elder, *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 39.

³¹ Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 3.

merely a description or representation of nature, it actually *is* nature; the poem constitutes an “environmental form.”³² Fletcher identifies what he calls “the *environment-poem*, a genre where the poet neither writes *about* the surrounding world, thematising it, nor analytically represents the world, but actually shapes the poem to *be* an Emersonian or esemplastic circle.”³³ Environment-poems, according to Fletcher, “aspire to surround the reader so that to read them is to have an experience much like suddenly recognizing that one actually has an environment, instead of not perceiving the surround at all.”³⁴ Timothy Morton has described a similar notion of art as “ambient poetics,” suggesting a kind of art that “is about making the imperceptible perceptible, while retaining the form of its imperceptibility—to make the invisible visible, the inaudible audible.”³⁵

Fletcher does not explain how this ‘environment-poem’ would relate to any physical, natural environments, which it seems that it would need to do somehow in order for his definition to avoid being reduced to a more mundane description either of the poem’s ability to make the reader appreciate the actual environment (which is how traditional nature poetry works), or of how reading a poem (or any successful narrative) is like stepping into another environment in a metaphorical sense. One interpretation is that he is suggesting a similarity between poems and nature similar to Hughes’s argument—that poems can speak for or as nature because they ‘channel’ the energies of the natural world. This interpretation is supported by Fletcher’s statement that poetry “gives voice to the unbreakable link between nature and humanity, since poetry, our imaginative making, seems to participate in nature.”³⁶ However, while there is a certain kind of logic to this statement from the basic point of view that everything on earth might stem from the same creative source, the identification of poetry in particular as representing an environmental form different from other social or cultural forms of expression goes well beyond that vague rationale. Poems do not, after all, abide by any special ecological laws that make them different from other artistic forms of expressions (unless you agree with Hughes’s more elaborate beliefs in the relationship between spirituality, nature and the role of poetry.)³⁷ The braided formal and ethnic traditions that constitute the ‘history of poetry’ are better described as phylogenetic than ecological—they are family matters, not the outcome of adaptive processes.

Similarly to Fletcher, John Felstiner centres his analysis in *Can Poetry Save the World?* on the experience of the individual reader, emphasising poetry’s ability to ‘quicken awareness’ of natural surroundings as a first step towards developing a will to “lighten our footprint in a world where all of nature matters vitally,” according to the sentiment “[f]irst consciousness then conscience.”³⁸ Felstiner suggests that “poetry more than any other kind of speech reveals

³² *Ibid.*, 6.

³³ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁴ Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry*.

³⁵ Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 96.

³⁶ Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry*, 4.

³⁷ Lidström, “Different Shades of Green.”

³⁸ John Felstiner, *Can Poetry Save the Earth? A Field Guide to Nature Poems* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2009), xiii.

the vital signs and warning signs of our tenancy on earth,"³⁹ and that "[p]oems make us stop, look, listen long enough for imagination to act, connecting, committing ourselves to the only world we've got."⁴⁰ In this view ecopoetics constitutes what Garrard has defined as "a type of ecocritical Russian formalism that promotes the moral value of poetry's *ostranenie* (defamiliarisation)."⁴¹ The primary focus of this kind of ecopoem is observation or recognition of the natural world for its own sake, rather than in relation to difficult and complex questions regarding human-environment relations, pertaining for example to issues of justice, governance, or access to resources. As a recognition of this particularity and difference, we describe these poems as *ecophenomenological*⁴² rather than *environmental*.

From Literary Nativism to a Global Imaginary

While Fletcher and Hughes suggest that 'nature' and poems are in some sense interchangeable, Hubert Zapf defines the relationship between biological and cultural ecologies as one of "interdependence-yet-difference."⁴³ Noting that "the internal landscapes produced by modern culture and consciousness are equally important for human beings as their external environments,"⁴⁴ Zapf argues that cultural and biological ecologies influence each other based on how the images and languages that produce and make up those "internal landscapes" both shape and are shaped by our sensory relations and responses to our surrounding, natural environments.

The relationship between inner and outer environments in this sense is explored in the poetics of Seamus Heaney, who, in contrast to Hughes's 'inhumanism,' writes about the natural world as inextricable from history, politics, culture, linguistics, and personal and collective memories. These famous lines from "Digging," from Heaney's first collection, *Death of a Naturalist* (Heaney 1966), illustrates our point:

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging.

...

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.

³⁹ John Felstiner, *Can Poetry Save the Earth?*, 4.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴¹ Greg Garrard, "Ecocriticism," *The Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory* 18, no. 1 (2010), 14.

⁴² Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*; Ted Toadvine, "Ecophenomenology in the New Millennium," in *The Reach of Reflection: Issues in Phenomenology's Second Century*, ed. Steven Crowell et al. (Boca Raton, Fla.: Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology, 2001) and *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2009).

⁴³ Hupert Zapf, "Literary Ecology and the Ethics of Text," *New Literary History* 39, no. 4 (2008): 851.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 852.

But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

These lines evoke a rural, physical environment through onomatopoeic descriptions like "cut edge" and "the squelch and slap / Of soggy peat," while framing it through a personal and historical account of the speaker's relationship with this particular soil, through the physical labour of his father and grandfather. The result is a poetic account of an experience that is at the same time physical, cultural, and social. The farming activities that shape the land also create an inner landscape from which the poet writes, using his pen as a spade in a sense that is not only metaphorical; it is a tool not just for writing but for imaginatively "digging into" the relationship between his writerly craft, family history, and the actual soil.

Throughout his oeuvre, Heaney uses particular words with specific etymological backgrounds and connotations as focal points for the relationship between inner and outer landscapes. The poem "Broagh"⁴⁵ for example, differentiates between local and foreign people and their right to a particular place by their ability to pronounce its name correctly. As an Irish poet writing in English, the relationship between native and foreign in Heaney's poetics is complex, in a linguistic as well as ecological sense. In "The Backward Look,"⁴⁶ Heaney outlines the relationship between a certain species and its various names in different languages, intertwining descriptions of the flight of a snipe with references to the marginalisation or disappearance of the Irish language. The poem exhibits an "infolded isomorphism"⁴⁷ between ecological and linguistic ecologies:

A snipe's bleat is fleeing
its nesting ground
into dialect,
into variants,

transliterations whirr
on the nature reserves –
little goat of the air,
of the evening,

little goat of the frost.

⁴⁵ Seamus Heaney, *Wintering Out* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Greg Garrard, "Ecological Literary Criticism: Two Case Studies" (PhD diss., University of Liverpool, 1999).

Michael Molino has stated that this poem "describes the deterioration of the Irish language as the flight of a snipe fleeing a hunter."⁴⁸ However, by choosing "as" rather than "and," Molino separates the snipe's biological and cultural spheres and thus misses the central point of the poem, which is to suggest not only that both the snipe and the Irish language are threatened by extinction but rather that these processes are interlinked—if the species disappears, so eventually will the name for it, which will further erode an already marginalised language.

The relationship between names, places and species in Heaney's poems is complicated by the fact that the poems are written in English, the colonial language in Heaney's Northern Irish context. The Irish words in what is otherwise an English poem take on a double standard, simultaneously native and alien, while the English words are intruders that are at the same time already present 'within' the native (linguistic) ecology of the poem. The poem becomes a hybrid, a place for preservation and reintroduction of species in linguistic environments that are at the same time foreign and familiar.

Considered in relation to the simultaneous development of global environmentalism and Heaney's poetic career, this already complicated notion of literary nativism becomes even more complex. While the focus in Heaney's early poems on native places, languages and dialects suggests what Timothy Clark calls a "bioregional project of 'rehabitation,'"⁴⁹ the increasingly ambiguous presence of non-native words and species in the form of English and other foreign references in Heaney's later poetry suggests a countervailing internationalism that gradually comes to replace the earlier bioregionalism. The international or ecocosmopolitan⁵⁰ trend in Heaney's poetics reflects and recognises an increasing global interconnectedness, between cultures as well as biologies, as expressed in these lines from "The Birthplace"⁵¹:

Everywhere being nowhere,
who can prove
one place more than another?

While "prove" might have certain homely connotations given Heaney's many poems about baking (e.g. "Mossbawn Sunlight"), the prevailing mood here is deracinated *anomie*. A similar feeling of increasing mobility and interchangeability is described by Pico Iyer in *The Global Soul*:

The century just ended, most of us agree, was the century of movement, with planes and phones and even newer toys precipitating what the secretary-general of the UN's Habitat II conference in 1996 called the "largest migration in history"; suddenly, among individuals and among groups, more bodies were being thrown more widely across the planet than ever before. ... Everywhere is so made up of everywhere else—a polycentric anagram—that I hardly notice I'm sitting in a Parisian café just outside Chinatown (in San Francisco),

⁴⁸ Michael Molino, "Flying by the Nets of Language and Nationality: Seamus Heaney, the "English" Language, and Ulster's Troubles," *Modern Philology* 91, no. 2 (1993): 19.

⁴⁹ Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, 125.

⁵⁰ Ursula Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁵¹ Seamus Heaney, *Station Island* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984).

talking to a Mexican-American friend about biculturalism while a Haitian woman stops off to congratulate him on a piece he's just delivered on TV on St. Patrick's Day. 'I know all about those Irish nuns,' she says, in a thick patois, as we sip our Earl Grey tea near signs that say City of Hong Kong, Empress of China.⁵²

The question "Where do you come from?" is becoming, Iyer suggests, "as antiquated an inquiry as 'What regiment do you belong to?'"⁵³

A culmination of this ecocosmopolitan trend in Heaney's poetry is perhaps the poem "Canopy,"⁵⁴ from his last collection, *Human Chain*. "Canopy" describes how the trees in a yard at Harvard through which the speaker is walking resonate with voices from 'everywhere.' This is not a metaphorical description, but actually the result of amplifiers hidden in the trees:

It was the month of May,
Trees in Harvard Yard
Were turning a young green.
There was whispering everywhere.

David Ward had installed
Voice-boxes in the branches,
Speakers wrapped in sacking
Looking like old wasps' nests
...
Hush and backwash and echo.
It was like a recording
Of antiphonal responses
In the congregation of leaves.

Through this very literal example of a natural world that resonates with human presence and voices, the poem provides an image of how a local environment is determined by decisions negotiated and made elsewhere. The fate of many forests, for example, depends on deforestation and preservation policies that are influenced by global politics, environmental campaigns and economic factors that often play out in places far away from the actual trees. Moreover, the voices that speak from the trees bring to mind social constructions of nature, pointing to how human histories, languages and ideas shape our perceptions so that the trees resonate with multiple interpretations and understandings of the natural world. The poem seems to undermine any clear boundaries between the natural world and the cultural, political and linguistic realms we create.

"Canopy" imagines, then, the inseparability of languages, cultures and ecologies, in the sense described by Lawrence Buell in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*: "Genres and texts

⁵² Pico Iyer, *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 10-11.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁴ Seamus Heaney, *Human Chain* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).

are themselves arguably 'ecosystems,' not only in the narrow sense of the text as a discursive 'environment,' but also in the broader sense that ... an individual text must be thought of as environmentally embedded at every stage from its germination to its reception."⁵⁵ A similar notion can be framed in a less text-oriented sense as processes of 'environing,'⁵⁶ pointing to an understanding of the idea of 'environment' not as a passive backdrop, but as the outcome of dynamic interactions between human and non-human natures.

In "Canopy" and elsewhere in Heaney's poetry, humanity and the broader natural world are constantly involved in mutual processes of 'environing.' There is no idea of a 'nature' that is separate from or pre-exists human societies. It is not a matter of combining an idea of 'nature' with human perspectives and cultures in order to gain a more complex understanding; rather the basic premise is that all cultures, languages and natures are biosocial achievements⁵⁷ from the start. This is a different starting point to that of the ecophenomenological poem, which is interested in the ecological world *because* it is different from and outside the self, and is concerned with the relationship or interface between the human and the natural world as separate spheres.

An Eco-poetics for the Anthropocene?

The ecophenomenological poem starts from the experience of the individual, while what we call environmental poems tend to start from the points of view of societies. Stressing the importance of the individual as the basis for poetry's relation and relevance to environmentalism, Fletcher argues that:

Unlike most prose discourse, poetry expresses close personal involvements, and hence pertains to the way we humans respond, on our own, to environmental matters. ... An art like poetry that enhances the presence of the individual is bound to be central in showing how we should understand our environmental rights and obligations. The issue then is this, what is my own response to my surrounding?⁵⁸

Similarly, Felstiner states that "[t]he essential choices, ticklish for government and industry, fall to us first as individuals in our eating, housing, clothing, childbearing, transport, recreation, voting."⁵⁹ Drawing on Romantic traditions and deep ecological notions of the intrinsic value and moral superiority of 'nature' or 'ecology' (in the sense of the word outlined and critiqued by Dana Phillips⁶⁰), Fletcher and Felstiner both argue for a relationship between poetry and

⁵⁵ Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 44.

⁵⁶ Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde, eds., *Nature's End: History and the Environment* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 8; Bergthaller et al., "Mapping Common Ground: Ecocriticism, Environmental History, and the Environmental Humanities," *Environmental Humanities* 5 (2014).

⁵⁷ Thom van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 139.

⁵⁸ Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry*, 3-4.

⁵⁹ Felstiner, *Can Poetry Save the Earth?*, 13.

⁶⁰ Dana Phillips, *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

environment that depends on the ability of the poem to ‘connect’ the reader to the natural world, thereby transforming her into an improved environmental citizen.

In relation to contemporary environmental change, this approach is limited in several ways. First, the ‘nature of nature’ in this account is generally idyllic and pre-Darwinian: when Felstiner talks about connecting the reader to the natural world, the reader assumes that he is not referring to potentially harmful forms of nature, such as viruses, poisonous plants, earthquakes, tsunamis, and so on. To speak of poetry’s ability to heighten the reader’s awareness and valuation of her immediate surroundings is something entirely different from making her feel more closely connected to ‘nature’ (which she might do if she is the victim of a natural disaster, for instance), let alone to the ‘environment,’ which is a different concept altogether. Considering the wide variety of natural phenomena that the word ‘nature’ may refer to, any notion of nature’s ‘inherent worth’ demands clarification and qualification in this respect.

Second, a view of the relationship between poetry and environment that relies mainly on the ability of the poem to facilitate what Lawrence Buell calls “environmental bonding”⁶¹ on the level of the individual is arguably of less importance in a world where the most serious environmental challenges are dealt with by international and global institutions rather than individuals. This is not to deny the importance of individual ambitions and initiatives (indeed they are sometimes the starting point of such institutions), but rather to point to the importance of their directionality. As Garrard notes in “The Unbearable Lightness of Green,” “human population simultaneously magnifies the *cumulative* impact of our actions and *dilutes* my individual agency.”⁶² To insist that the relevance of poetry depends on its ability to reform the individual reader’s view of the natural world is to seriously limit its (and literature’s in a wider sense) relevance in this larger context, simply due to its focus on the individual. Even if it worked, and poetry could persuade its reader to, for example, reduce her carbon footprint, as David MacKay, chief scientific adviser to the British government, has noted, “if everyone does a little, we’ll achieve only a little.”⁶³

This is not to say that the relationship between the individual reading experience and the effect it has on readers’ abilities to appreciate their immediate natural surroundings is *irrelevant*, but rather to argue that it does not need to be the defining characteristic of so called ‘ecopoetry.’ There is a wider range of environmental thought with which poems can interact that do not necessarily, or primarily, rely on the revelatory or reformatory effects of the individual reading experience.

A definition of ecopoetry more akin to this idea is suggested by Clark who argues, *contra* Fletcher and Felstiner, that contemporary environmental thinking is so difficult precisely because its scope so far exceeds that of the single individual, that “[s]cale effects are straightforward to exemplify but impossible to apprehend in any particular individual case.”⁶⁴ Climate change in particular, Clark suggests, is “a matter of *context*” rather than individuality,

⁶¹ Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 98.

⁶² Garrard, “The Unbearable Lightness of Green,” 185.

⁶³ David MacKay, *Sustainable Energy—Without the Hot Air* (Cambridge, England: UIT, 2009), 3.

⁶⁴ Clark, “Some Climate Change Ironies,” 135.

which makes it especially difficult for ecocritics to deal with, other than in abstract terms (working, as they are, in a scholarly tradition where the individual reader is the norm and starting point for most analyses):

much ecocriticism takes the individual attitude as its starting point and then argues for a change in the choices which that individual makes. Thus, it is hoped, the growth of an 'ecological awareness' through the study of environmentalist non-fiction, eco-poetry or real ventures into the wild, will be somehow sufficient to produce an ecologically viable society. Such thinking effectively recognises that climate change enacts a drastic reconfiguration of given distinctions of public and private but, without more sustained work on the nature of the state, ideology, modes of production etc, still seeks to engage it solely in terms of individual attitude and choice. The focus on the individual, whether as green consumer, a reader of an ecocritical argument, or as a backpacker, reinforces the illusion that reality and power remain a matter of individuals pursuing their rights and opinions.⁶⁵

While Fletcher's idea of the environment-poem suggests, like eco-phenomenology, an emphasis on individual experience, Clark argues that climate change and other environmental concerns of similar scale requires a shift in the opposite direction. Fletcher's statement, which might equally imply the politics of anarchism or that of the Tea Party, that "the strong message of [the environment-poem], if it needed one, would be that a good society must become a self-organizing system, without too much top-down control"⁶⁶ is subject to precisely the risk described by Clark of turning environmental politics into a question of the moral choice and responsibility of the individual, thereby reinforcing "a culture of narcissistic individualism already implicated in consumer democracy and environmental danger."⁶⁷ The fact that, as Clark notes, "[t]he very element that renders some trivialities potentially disastrous in the longer term, the effects of scale, necessarily includes almost complete irrelevance of my own 'decision' at the present time,"⁶⁸ points to the importance of awareness of the relationship between local and global environmental struggles and their structural or trans-individual dimensions.

Clark's definition of ecopoetry is based on a qualitatively different idea of the relationship between poetry, nature and environment to that of Fletcher and Felstiner. While Fletcher's and Felstiner's idea of ecopoetry refers to poems that relate directly to 'nature,' and often the particular relationship between the single individual and her or his immediate natural surroundings, Clark's description focuses on the ability of poems to challenge and reconfigure contemporary environmental thought and address more structural, social-ecological relationships:

a loosely 'ecological' poetic emerges in the development and extension of modernist techniques that had been initially pioneered in the first four decades of the twentieth century. At issue is an aesthetic interested in formal experimentation and the conception of the poet or poem as forming a kind of intellectual or spiritual frontier, newly coupled with a sense of the vulnerability and otherness of the natural world, distrust of a society

⁶⁵ Clark, "Some Climate Change Ironies," 141.

⁶⁶ Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry*, 12.

⁶⁷ Clark, "Some Climate Change Ironies," 144-145.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 137.

dominated by materialism and instrumental reason, and sometimes giving a counteraffirmation of non-western modes of perception, thought or rhetorical practice. The poem is often conceived as a space of subjective redefinition and rediscovery through encounters with the non-human.⁶⁹

The idea that environmental poetry is something different from ecophenomenological poetry relates to the argument developed by Timothy Morton in *Ecology without Nature*, which suggests that the “idea of ‘nature’ which so many hold dear will have to whither away in an ‘ecological’ state of human society.”⁷⁰ Morton wants to replace the concept of nature with a particular notion of ecology:

‘Ecology without nature’ could mean ‘ecology without a *concept* of the natural.’ Thinking, when it becomes ideological, tends to fixate on concepts rather than doing what is ‘natural’ to thought, namely, dissolving whatever has taken form. Ecological thinking that was not fixated, that did not stop at a particular concretization of its object, would thus be ‘without nature.’⁷¹

Though we would argue that environment would be a better choice of word here than ecology, Morton highlights the instability of the idea of the ‘natural’ and the increasing impact of ecological processes and conditions that occur on scales and in forms not easily seen by humans, yet that are due to human agency. The kind of thinking that Morton describes, which we would rather call *environmental* thinking, recognises the historical, political and cultural dimensions of the relationship between human and non-human nature that undermine dualistic constructs like nature and culture.

Separating ecophenomenological poetry from environmental poetry helps to differentiate between poems that engage with the natural world as ‘out there,’ with an emphasis on our sensory responses to it, from poems that address concerns associated with the broader field of the environmental humanities, such as environmental and social justice; production and diffusion of environmental knowledge; environmental learning and pedagogy; institutional organisation of research and education (which as it is now almost always categorises environmental studies under natural sciences); distribution and management of resources; political ecology and awareness of the relationship between local and global environmental struggles.⁷² We are not suggesting that the one should be valued more highly than the other, nor do we suggest that one is being or should be replaced by the other. On the contrary, we suggest that acknowledging these poetic forms as significantly different will help to recognise the diversity and complexity of the field of ‘ecopoetry.’ Most importantly, we suggest that recognising this difference will increase possibilities for conversations and interaction between ecocritical studies of poetry and studies and discussions taking place elsewhere in environmental humanities.

⁶⁹ Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, 139.

⁷⁰ Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 11.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷² e.g. Marco Armiero and Lize Sedrez, eds., *A History of Environmentalism: Local Struggles, Global Histories* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

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