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Ecomaterialism



Editors' Introduction

Howl

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen^a and Lowell Duckert^b

^aDepartment of English, George Washington University, Washington, DC.

^bDepartment of English, West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia.

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Howl, howl, howl, howl. A coyote raises its muzzle to the night sky and bays, his body small in a blankness of snow. Though the sky is black and starless, white radiance pours from above. The bare branches of trees shimmer against the encircling dark. The scene is primal. On closer examination, however, the thin trees are in chains, fastened to the frozen ground, guaranteed a straight growth. Telephone lines glimmer in the void of the scene's edge, along with dim city lights. The yellow of a fire hydrant glistens in discordant hue. The aerial luminescence for which the coyote gathers its brown body into a territorial howl is not the moon but a halogen light, so high above the animal that we glimpse only its concrete base and straight-as-a-trained-tree metal (Figure 1).

Howl, howl, howl, howl. A coyote bays at an artificial light mistaken for its lunar companion. Culture intrudes into nature, overwrites primeval forest with modern parking lot, a pathetic scene of environmental devastation. Such an invasive human act is matched only by nature's own incursion: a coyote passes into a den of motorized things. Even the picture's near-symmetry seems to support this division, the lamppost a grey line driven straight down the middle attempting an impossible demarcation, trying to *fix* things.



Figure 1: Amy Stein, *Howl*, 2007; photograph courtesy of the artist.

Yet the image on closer look will not sustain such division. When we observe that the coyote has been perfectly arranged, that no footprints in the snow mark its progress toward participation in this strange still life, then we realize that this animal is as much the work of taxidermy as the Wild. Nature and culture supposedly reside in distinct ontological realms, set across from one another like trees staked into the frozen earth. They never, however, stay still. Hybrid and impure things disrupt any wished-for symmetry, cross over and furtively collaborate, eroding fantasies of environmental separateness. Amy Stein's *Howl* is a brilliant meditation upon how the natural and the cultural have so encroached that they have become intractably entwined, or perhaps they have always been intimates, despite our dreaming separate worlds. Taken from a series called 'Domesticated,' the image of the coyote beneath the lamp suggests that home (the *oikos* in ecology, an encompassed expanse as well as a mere house) is a mixed and difficult space. With its Ginsbergian title invoking the Moloch of industry yet complicating his poetic narrative of lambs and simple ruin, Stein's *Howl* makes a sophisticated visual argument through the powerful deployment of the elements: the dark stillness of night air, the vibrancy of gelid water, a quietly blanketed yet far from dormant earth (its pockmarking by weeds is evidence enough of the activity that unfolds at its surface), the fire of what should be natural luminescence transmuted into a lamp for finding cars.

No facile narrative of a nature/culture divide here, only imbrication, maybe partnerships. The coyote's howl resounds across the crowded lots of the world, conveying what Bruno Latour calls the principle of asymmetry.¹ The elements and the roiling phenomena they create through promiscuous embrace might have become participants in a predictable narrative of human agency terraforming the world's materiality, but *Howl* reveals a choreography more complicated than assimilation into anthropomorphism. Even in the form of this parking lot tableau, earth, air, fire and water are more than a passive component of some merely human story. *Howl* is a tale of ecomaterialism, of a realm that at evening's advent includes the shimmer of stars and distant urban lights. The elements transmute but remain constant in their agency, constant in their companionship.

¹ See, for instance, Chapter 4 in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993).

This special issue of *postmedieval* derives from a long conversation in which many humans and nonhumans have had their say. The discussion began, for the two of us, in Barcelona. The lithic undulations of Park Güell, the Mediterranean under lunar white and the prism of Sagrada Família conspired with nights that lengthened into mornings. We spoke of how the heft of rock and turgidity of water become aerial and igneous when their restlessness finds striking expression. We wondered about an elemental materiality that was not ponderous, that exerts relentless aesthetic and ethical weight. Our conversations continued in Washington, DC, as one of us worked on a project about early modern waters, the other on a book about the liveliness of stone. We found inspiration in Jane Bennett's political ecology of matter, which acknowledges the agency of inhuman things as they enter into assemblages with humans. How might such a dispersed yet inherently communal notion of environmentality intersect with ecologies modern and premodern? What might medieval and early modern studies bring to this conversation? Who else might be given a seat at this gregarious colloquy?

This special issue of *postmedieval*, therefore, takes up Bennett's challenge in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010) to explore the impress and agency of the nonhuman. We do so in a mode true to the study of early literature and culture, yet useful for contemporary ecological theory: by making interlocutors of the four elements and by plumbing the mixed spaces between each. The scholars who accepted our invitation to this interchange have created a forum where matter obtains its complicated agency; where humans are not simply called upon to save, preserve, or conserve a lifeless material world (what hubris), but to recognize the life that already pulses within inorganic forces, manufactured and found objects, nature, and things. We chose the primal elements as our focus not because they offer permanence but because they never cease to move. Unlike Lucretian atoms or empyrean forces (gods or physics) – one too small to be glimpsed, the other too vast – the four elements are easily apprehensible, the very fabric of mundane experience. Their scale is human, yet their visible agency profoundly challenges our anthropocentricity.



Mapping the elements as they move within their proper temporalities is sobering. Catastrophes precede and follow any stability; failures inevitably arrive. In such moments of perturbation we behold the web of interrelationships that constitutes and sustains our own worldedness. Cataclysms inevitably shatter such ecological meshworks, but failure is an invitation to dwell more carefully, fashion more capacious perspectives, and *do better*. Environmental criticism recognizes possibility in worldly enmeshment, calling upon us to work toward change, justice. Yet, this ecological entanglement can itself transform the ways we envision, experience and embody environmentality, especially when we realize the potent agency of the nonhuman. Recognizing what Stacy Alaimo (2010) calls ‘trans-corporeality’ and taking seriously its lived consequences is a ceaselessly difficult labor, but we have good maps. Sometimes the past offers a cartography for the future.

Humans have long been probing, dreaming, worrying over and renewing their elemental relations. Empedocles divided materiality into four turbulent components 2500 years ago, positing strife as entropic force and love as universal binding. The world, he held, is composed and constantly remade by co-minglings of earth, air, fire and water in admixtures cemented by *philia*. Inspired by classical, medieval, early modern and postmodern elementality, the contributors to this volume focus upon the living elements earth, air, water, fire and their medial instantiations: cloud, road, glacier and abyss. None of these phenomena are passive or inert. Ecomaterialism is a study of inhuman agency. This special issue of *postmedieval* acknowledges this autonomy in its arrangement, unfolding in four movements, with four interstices. Our doubled quadricameral scheme demonstrates the impress of the Empedoclean elements – but not, we hope, too neatly. Any closed structure awaits its own disruption: a taxonomy built against disorder only awaits the entrance of some elemental, combinatory force.

That advent can be destructive. It can also offer an invitation to unexpected imaginings. Empedocles offered a structure for the elements that like all systems is insufficient, and yet powerful enough to inspire the philosophy and poetry of Plato, Lucretius, Boethius, Chaucer and Shakespeare. Despite their four-part division into seeming solitariness, the elements never neatly align, never segregate, never settle, and that restless impurity is their strength, a constant source for renewal. The essays that follow offer not a system bounded by hermetic totality but a world constantly in motion; not an environmental ethics forged of fixed connections and injunctive chains but an ecology of precarious bonds and vibrant intermixtures, a *kakosmos* of connectivity, constellations of confluence and collapse.²

Elements are humanly visible. They resonate with our ordinary experience. Empedocles saw the world through elemental eyes, as a strangely disanthropocentric place. The elements – tangible, desirable – offer a queer yet pedestrian ecomaterialism, one that views the world askew ‘from ground level,’ a

2 See Latour (2004, 99) and Latour (2010, 481).

horizontal or planar wandering *through* and *with* that engendered in the Middle Ages and Renaissance new narratives, possibilities and futures. Deviating connections. Not a return to Gaia or our revenge against it, but a turn to composing anew: mystery over mastery, assemblages over solitude, sudden interlocutors, wanderings, unlooked for companionships that reconfigure worldviews. Empedocles spoke of pervasive disordering force only to move to an emphasis on that which binds. We likewise dwell upon the impurities that the forces of love and strife engender, a kind of wilderness posthumanist ethics where the elemental is not something only ‘out there,’ but also within, a wild mess of multiplicity. This elemental ecomaterialism demands something of us. It compels us to think of our own existence as interstitial beings. It asks us to hear the *howls* of heterogeneous life forms – everywhere and from every thing. Is it one or several coyotes? The *oikos* is our home, but our home is not ours alone.

Do not ask what the coyote does on the paved side of culture. Attend to what it does. Howl back. Respond. Our elemental litany: earth, air, fire, water, abyss, glacier, road and cloud. A world where strife is endemic, but a world composed and held together through love.

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Article

Earth: A wandering

Alfred Kentigern Siewers

Department of English and Environmental Studies, Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA.

Abstract Earth is the name of our planet and of an element from which we emerge. Pre-modern and non-modern traditions show us how to live at this conjunction better than many modern simulacra. This reflection examines in particular early medieval Christian tradition, set in dialogue with the emerging twenty-first-century field of ecosemiotics, while wandering from the Susquehanna Valley to Middle-earth.

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Earth is at once both symbol and reality: both a planet with a proper name and a substance, humus, from which the human emerges in participation, along with many of our fellow travelers in the physical world – animals, plants, and others. It is thus also both a wandering and a grounding – and most of all, perhaps, a wondering, at what environmental philosopher Bruce Foltz in a new study of the ongoing life of noetic Christian tradition in environmentalism calls ‘the heavenly beauty of Earth’ (Foltz, 2012). Pre-moderns and non-moderns probably lived and articulated this more particularly than moderns do with our more abstract GreenSpeak. But we all experience the conjunction of meanings of earth at some level. The modern West often expresses it through a type of post-medieval understanding that re-centers us in a medieval middle on Earth, part of the original impetus behind Romanticism. Whether it’s J.R.R. Tolkien’s association of his retro-medieval Shire with Appalachia (Davenport, 1997); the medievalism enabled by a cyberspace that simultaneously removes us from the



Earth and enables us to engage different time periods and cultures more simultaneously: or personal traditions that re-form community with Earth, as we weave them from our scholarship through the interstices of our academic lives or arts: we connect with actual people and physical environments on Earth and in earth as both refugees from the modern and ambassadors to it, enmeshed in that which we seek to proclaim.

As I walk through a last remnant of old-growth forest in Pennsylvania looking for our annual church Fourth of July picnic, passing through shady groves of hemlock trees amid brooks habited by bears, Amish teenagers, and, in earlier days, the nature writer Euell ‘ever eat a pine tree?’ Gibbons, I am reminded of the retro-medieval Forest of Arden.

In Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, the usurper duke’s wrestler Charles asks the dispossessed and out-of-favor Orlando, ‘Come, where is the young gallant that is so desirous to lie with his mother earth?’ (Shakespeare, 1992, 1.2.296).

But Orlando is thrown to earth in a different way than the duke and wrestler envision.

He flees the court for Arden. There he begins carving love poems to Rosalind on trees, in a ‘green world’ in which, as the duke-in-exile remarks, human life ‘exempt from public haunt finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything’ (2.1.299).

Arden, a disappearing forest in the Warwickshire precincts of Stratford-on-Avon, itself becomes a kind of sylvan haunt in the play, written during the time of the Enclosure movement.

Such remnant woods around England had become places where an outlaw forest economy found temporary refuge, while an expanding British Empire cut them down for ships, privatized pasturage, and witnessed a new pastoralism.

Phantoms of the Middle Ages like Robin Hood haunted such woods, while vanishing into Elizabethan stories. These forests of the imagination exemplified C.S. Lewis’ curmudgeonly remark while giving birth to his *Oxford History of English Literature* tome (a painful project he labeled by acronym ‘the oh hell’) that England had no Renaissance because of its insular medieval continuities (Lewis, 1954, 55–56; Coghill, 1965, 60–61).

Yet in Arden’s ‘green world’ of imagination, the denizens of Shakespeare’s forest (a locality confusable in name also with both Ardennes woods in France and biblical Eden) find empathy not only for crying deer, but for each other, ending in a metonymy of marriage rites as well as a crossing of the human and non-human.

What the exiled duke calls ‘this wide and universal theater’ (Shakespeare, 1992, 2.7.135) of Arden becomes in its engagement of the non-human, a place of experience of earth apart from the human conventions of the court.

In its back-and-forth focus between the ‘green world’ and human society, Arden comes to typify what environmental philosophers (glossing Heidegger)

distinguish as earth differentiated from the world of human cultural constructions: 'The other side of nature,' the *phusis* that simultaneously both hides and discloses itself. Yet earth spans the real if ghostly Arden of Warwickshire, as well as the type of older 'green world' associations of English folklore identified by the critic Northrop Frye (Frye, 1949), rooted in both the mythological 'Celtic' Otherworld and the transplanted Desert of early Christian monasticism.

The integration of the real, imaginary, and symbolic in this mysterious sense of earth echoes the American Pragmatist Charles Peirce's pioneering work in ecosemiotics. In Peirce's model, the process of semiosis, or meaning-making (for him a definition of life), could involve a nature-text, an outward-facing triad of sign, environment and meaningful landscape, beyond de Saussure's more arbitrary and internalized binary of signified and signifier (Maran, 2007). Landscape, as a meaningful symbolic overlay of earth, thus integrated the contexts of reader and author, while relating them directly to text and physical environment. The earth itself then reads as a nature-text, but always beyond our full comprehension, since we ourselves are allegory in the text.

Arden's ecosemiotics of 'tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, / sermons in stones, and good in everything' thus provides context, grounding, and redefinition for Jaques' famous notion in the play that 'all the world's a stage, and all the men and women, merely players' (Shakespeare, 1992, 2.1.16–17; 2.7.305). Linking that stage to a physical environment offers earth to Orlando not only as ground of humiliation, and not just Jaques' placeless theater, but as experience of place leading to what deep ecology terms self-realization in the environment of earth. Deleuzian terms take it further into a rhizomic realization. And pre-modern Christian traditions literally and figuratively offer us a vision of the cross between the immanent and the transcendent, the anthropomorphic and the cosmic.

When the Apollo 8 astronauts looked back on our planet from lunar orbit in 1968 and recited the Creation account from Genesis, they offered perhaps the most famous attempt to subsume ancient traditions of earth into the world of modern technology. But their words still evoked a pre-modern sense of our planet as mystery: 'In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth.' In Hebrew, Greek and Latin versions of Genesis 1, the terms used for 'earth' integrated meanings of essence and element, a span referenced here in the term 'Earth.earth.' Medieval schoolmen later split that relationship, demarcating essence and existence, supernatural versus natural, as if trying to forget the living, integrative metaphor of the earth mother, Gaia, referenced by earlier church fathers.



Earth to the ancients meant a realm including land and sea, ultimately planet *and* soil, native country *and* the dust of Genesis, from which humans were energized by God's breath, *pneuma*, in Greek meaning wind and spirit, as well as breath. In medieval Greek usage, following the Septuagint $\gamma\eta$ (from which also developed the root of geology, geometry, geography, and geophilosophy, not to mention Gaia), 'earth' metaphorically stood also for the human mind, the realm of material things, the Promised Land, and heaven, following references in Psalms (Lampe, 1961, s.v.).

And the living breath from God in Hebrew and Greek in the clay or dust was related to earth by more than just simple infusion to early exegetes of Genesis. Its *pneuma* entwined the *logoi* of the speaking-into-being of Creation, in which *logos* could mean at once harmony, word, discourse, story, reason, and purpose. The *kalos*, or goodness, of Creation referenced in the Septuagint Genesis, likewise referred at once to the beautiful and the good, also spanning the physical and the spiritual. A speaking or breathing of harmonies, pre-moderns realized, involved chanting or music. St. Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century declared 'the order of the universe is a kind of musical harmony of varied shapes and colors with a certain order and rhythm' (Gregory of Nyssa, 1999, 27–30). He identified music with the spoken word of God's Spirit-breath as an essential if dynamic pattern of earth. Music, like a Deleuzian 'body without organs,' or colors, as in the early Irish and Native American colors of the winds, span the physical and the spiritual with an energy. The musical description of the *logoi* echoes this verse from the Wisdom of Solomon: 'For the elements were changed in themselves by a kind of harmony, like as in a harp notes change the nature of the tune, and yet are always sounds' (LXX 19:18; emended from Brenton, 1851). St. Basil of Caesarea described the aerial waters and the deeps as both singing hymns of praise to God's glory – reflecting one another chiasmatically on the second day of creation, even as man in the image of God in a sense reflects the divine on the sixth day of Creation in Hebrew parallel poetics (Basil of Caesarea, 1999, 71). Music or chanting is a way to indicate the iconographic incarnation of the cosmic *logoi* in the Creation story, as energy but also as metonymic breath of the Spirit (*pneuma*), so to speak, the same Spirit that Basil refers to as 'cherishing' the waters (using the Syriac version of Genesis), vitalizing seeds of life in the sea as if breathing on them. Man himself is described in corporeal terms as a musical instrument for the *nous* or energy of the soul/spirit, shaped *in* the image and likeness of God, the image of God being the Logos *in* whom man is made. And while articulating a sense of divine *logoi* as cosmic music, Basil differentiates such cosmic semiosis from the Classical 'music of the spheres.' In the latter, to Basil, the human mind dualistically could be considered the objectifying observer-conceptualizer of the music-generating spheres, rather than a liturgical instrument of the very networks of cosmic semiotics that constitute human reason. The latter for him is the dominion of human beings in Paradise over the earth, but in harmonizing semiosis (the

making of meaning) rather than arbitrary control. And the human body is not the only participant in that cosmic music of meaning-making. Basil describes the aerial and terrestrial waters as singing hymns, and the Spirit's cherishing of the waters brings forth life. And humans as cosmic musical instruments interweave color as well as sound in their sub-creation. St. Gregory, associating color with music in describing the cosmic harmonies, evoked hues as virtues, which overlay Creation with layers of incarnational qualities associated with divine likeness (Gregory of Nyssa, 1994, 391).

Earth.earth shares much in common with what could similarly be called Nature.nature. *Nature*, from the Latin *natura*, mysteriously means both the essence of something and of all of us, both something enveloping and outside of us, and an organic presence that has emerged naturally through nativity. Similarly, earth apophatically remains both more and less physical than what we mean today by 'world' as a globalized human semiosphere, or bubble of meaning. The latter incorporates multitudes of virtual individual *Umwelts* (the term coined by the Baltic biologist Jakob von Uexküll in the early twentieth century for 'meaningful environment of an organism', foundational to biosemiotics). Uexküll, too, heard them singing: 'The countless *Umwelts* represent the keyboard upon which nature plays its symphony of meaning ... not constrained by space and time. In our lifetime and in our *Umwelt* we are given the task of constructing a key in nature's keyboard, over which an invisible hand glides' (von Uexküll, 1982, 78).

In the semiotics of earth, *Umwelts* gather into larger semiospheres, including human cultural communities and temporalities (such as overlays of Jewish, Byzantine, Chinese, Julian, and Gregorian calendars sharing the same physical environment). Semiospheres in turn can overlap within ecosemiospheres in eco-regions (such as the peasant-tended wooded meadows of Estonia, Native American-managed prairies of the Upper Midwest, or the urban ecosystems of New York City's archipelago, celebrated in Mark Helprin's *Winter's Tale* [Helprin, 2005]). Ecosemiospheres overlap in the Earth.earth. But our own poetics don't often perceive, celebrate, or experience such overlapping realms of meaning. In the twenty-first century we may still occasionally speak in 1960s space-age terms of 'planet Earth,' or even more awkwardly, 'Spaceship Earth.' But always, as in the iconic Disney nature documentary *Earth*, our technological outer-space iconography of earth since the 1960s projects a crisp bright mimetic concept from the outside, a machino-morphic ecosystem of quantitative inputs and outputs. This 'real' image, now digitalizable between our iPhone fingers and iPad palantiri (similar to what we used to do between our real fingers with the moon in the sky as children, as if the optical-illusion hotdog between digits), spins around in our electronic extensions, only to disappear in technological magic tricks. So too with the Earth.earth, as Stephen Hawking advocates space colonization to save humanity, leaving behind a trashed planet as we search for more galactic landfills. Technology as a philosophy of Creation erases it. But, in the service of a love for Creation (of which the pre-moderns



remind us), the same technology (more as personal *techné* or craft) can help extend our engagement with the Earth.

Living at a cultural distance from high-tech centers likelier to follow Hawking's vision of the Singularity, our home lies in the central Susquehanna Valley, which some geologists call one of the oldest valleys on earth, and some political commentators unflatteringly call Pennsylvtucky, amid the rolling hills and larger ridges and mini-mountains of the northern Appalachians, itself one of the oldest mountain ranges. The Appalachians formed a modern model for Tolkien's retro-Middle-earth, *Miðgarðr* or *Middangeard*, a northern European medieval image of Earth embraced by the roots and branches of the cosmic tree Yggdrasil linking different worlds. The Susquehanna River survived various types of primordial foldings related to the movement of continents and the swallowing of part of it by the sea into the lost estuary now known as the Chesapeake Bay. The cosmic tree of the Iroquois in this region morphed into the peace tree of Onondaga Lake, now a Superfund Cleanup site. And while there are no millennia-old Sequoia trees in this eco-region, near us grow the old-growth hemlock groves of Tall Timbers nature preserve, once home to the nature writer Euell Gibbons and now a favorite haunt of Amish teens on buggy dates. To enter into it, as we do for Fourth of July church picnics and family hikes, is to experience a real-world green-world peace that evokes Shakespeare's Arden.Eden in Penn's Woods. Nearby the renowned trout of Penns Creek run past an old Boy Scout camp (Karoondina, 'land of shining waters' in Delaware), still groaning with summer campers. If there are no salmon of wisdom, there are plenty of fly-casting fishermen.

All this, water and worn-down mountains and woods, in a watershed paradoxically worried now both by gas-drilling fracking and declining river towns, is the earth. From the small plot of enclosed land my wife gardens behind our river-view townhouse in 'downtown' Lewisburg (population 5620, give or take a few births and deaths since the last census), to the polluted mud deposited by the river outside our door when it floods and turns our neighborhood into a Venetian-like scene, to old oak trees of the grove in the hilly center of the college campus down the street, and into Amish farmland farther west, this all too is the earth.

Traveling out that way to bike and to get to the rural house-chapel we attend in Beavertown (population 870) on Beaver Creek, we skirt horse-drawn carriages as we go up and down through the rich farmland of West Union and Snyder Counties. The late Davy Jones of the Monkees moved to Beavertown, to find refuge from rock n' roll celebrity, on a horse farm whose landscape undoubtedly reminded him of rolling countrysides in his native Britain. It's forgiveable to compare the countryside to J.R.R. Tolkien's Shire as well. Tolkien, enamored of America's archaic Appalachia while seeking

refuge from the mechanized destruction of earth in twentieth-century European warfare, drew on a Kentucky friend's lore for the Shire as the heartland of his twentieth-century Arden in Middle-earth. Names of Hobbit families, their love of tobacco, and speech and lifestyles, draw on the culture of an Appalachian state.

The Susquehanna in our Appalachian valley remains a sacred river in native tradition, interconnected with all the waters of the world, according to river steward Gere Reisinger, a naturopath of Seneca descent, who keeps watch over the hyper-polluted old industrial and coal region of the Susquehanna's North Branch, known as the Wyoming Valley (Brubaker, 2002, 68). Mormons also hold sacred the river, where they first began their baptisms, and the watershed offered Edenic refuge too for Slavic Eastern Christians along with their Inferno. Slavic immigrants often died in the mines of its watershed but founded Holy Trinity Monastery, whose grounds at a cypress marsh near Cooperstown dip into the farthest edge of the Susquehanna's headwaters, appropriately, in Jordanville, NY, named for the sacred river of Israel by now-vanished Baptists there.

The urban archipelago of New York City's islands (population 8,175,133), or the 'end' of the river in the Chesapeake near Annapolis' historic mini-urbanity, both seem a long way from local frameworks of earth in the mid-Susquehanna Valley, but are only each about 3 hours away by car. The mythical headwaters are more distant, about 4 hours by expressway, less time than it takes earth to flow in the river from the headwaters to our mid-valley confluence of the West and North branches. At the headwaters, Otsego Lake still opens up a clearing in imaginary endless Eastern Woodlands, as it did under its name of Lake Glimmerglass for Hawkeye in James Fenimore Cooper's legendary green world, and in the pioneering nature writing of his daughter Susan Fenimore Cooper. In summer the pristine green Doubleday field of the Baseball Hall of Fame coexists with the lawn that marks the site of the Cooper manse, a traffic jam of American 'green world' mythology where a statue of James Fenimore broods over crowds visiting the baseball museum but not him.

It is all of course both the same and different earth, and Earth, as the overgrown garden that I tended with my grandfather as a boy in a backyard in inner-city Chicago, listening to his memories of growing up on a nearby farm swallowed by the city, fantasizing my own Eden in a raspberry patch amid grids of streets flowing downtown to the Loop from out of Thomas Jefferson's right-angled head, shooting the occasional rapids of a lost diagonal Indian trail. Chicago's grid, now featuring sodium streetlights blocking the stars and security cameras focusing us back on ourselves in the self-proclaimed 'city in a garden,' like myself, and the Susquehanna Valley, are all earth and the Earth, but different worlds amid it. As in Yggdrasil's entwinements, the worlds entangle both rhizomically and arboreally, as in the cosmic tree in Genesis, however bifurcated by the objectifying gaze of Adam and Eve.



Martin Heidegger helped apply his friend Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle in physics to views of the earth, and while in postwar isolation in a Black Forest cottage helped lay the groundwork for current environmental philosophy, despite his politically reprehensible past. Heidegger described Earth as the region of the withholding of what he termed *phusis*, the mystery of nature that is not objectively present Being. As environmental philosopher Bruce Foltz glosses Heidegger today, 'The earth is that whence *phusis* arises... the closed and self-secluding region that ultimately eluded Greek ontology... Nature as earth is not primarily that "from which" things are made but rather that "whence" self-emerging, self-unfolding, and self-opening arise and "unto which" they recede... The earth allows coming-forth' (Foltz, 1995, 136).

That ultimately postmodern view of the earth finds suggestive parallels in the ninth-century *Periphyseon* by the early Irish philosopher John Scotus Eriugena. He defined Nature as both being and non-being, and earth (*terra*, land or region) as a 'mystic name' signifying the restored wholeness of nature, imbued with the divine energies, in theophany or divine manifestation (Eriugena, 1987, 589). 'Our bodies are placed on this earth or surrounded by this air...bodies within bodies' like 'the fish in the sea' (Eriugena, 1987, 70). His exegesis in his *Periphyseon*, Book 4, Chapter 4, compares Christ's Resurrection to a re-synergized 'earth of nature,' or 'His earth,' uniting earth and Paradise as non-objectified process, in an experiential dialectic of apophasis:

Paradise is not a localized or particular piece of woodland on earth, but a spiritual garden sown with the seeds of the virtues and planted in human nature, or, to be more precise, is nothing else but the human substance itself created in the image of God, in which the Tree of Life, that is the Word and wisdom of God, gives fruit to all life; and in the midst of which streams forth the Fountain of all good things, which again is the Divine Wisdom. ... In this intelligible Paradise God goes walking. (Eriugena, 1987, 500)

Eriugena throughout the *Periphyseon* uses the Latin term *terra* – earth, land, or region – as a mystical name for Creation when experienced in relation with Paradise through the Tree of Life. *Terra* in its energized (or, as we might term it, non-objectified) state is for him 'the bliss of eternal life and the stability of the Primordial Causes, from which all things which are have their origin...the fertile soil of the Primordial Causes' (Eriugena, 1987, 520–521). The primordial causes are Eriugena's adaptation of the *logoi* that St. Maximus the Confessor developed as activities of the Logos. In their effects as theophanies, these 'word-harmonies' interpenetrate and emerge from the earth. The earth thus functions in a sense as the ultimate Deleuze-Guattarian-style 'plane of immanence,' a relational sense of desire as different from Western possessive desire of lack as psychoanalytic models are from the Tao, while also however participating in transcendent meaning.

If earth, like Shakespeare's Arden, is a palimpsest of layered memories and physicalities, words flickering in and out of metonymy, the divine *logoi* (or harmonies) are typed in some respects by today's ecosemiotics. They open a sense of the dominion given unfallen humanity in the earthly garden of Paradise (which, restored, spans the earthly and the heavenly) as reason in the sense of harmony – an experiential semiosis constituting the natural symbolism of the body as described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1970). 'All living things are critics,' interpreting signs, as Kenneth Burke noted in the opening of his *Permanence and Change* (Burke, 1984, 1). Modern physics, in notions of the multiverse, quantum entanglements and the anthropic principle, likewise emphasizes potential relationality in the cosmos that turns our abstracting old scientific matrix of sociobiological time on its head. Resulting postmodern notions of temporality and non-temporality oddly remind us of the more ancient and personal senses of Earth.earth as experience.

C.S. Lewis, translating medieval and Renaissance notions of planets into fantasy and science fiction, included in his space trilogy the idea that each planet hosts an embodying spirit, an Oyarsa. Although Earth's angel is 'bent,' a.k.a. Satan, a figure of what in modern terms might be called the objectification of Earth, 'There is no Oyarsa in Heaven who has not got his representative on Earth,' explains the hero Ransom (a space-traveling philologist loosely based on Tolkien, in the same way that Tolkien loosely based Treebeard on Lewis). 'And there is no world where you could not meet a little unfallen partner of our own black Archon, a kind of other self. That is why there was an Italian Saturn as well as a Heavenly one, and a Cretan Jove as well as an Olympian. It was these early wraiths of the high intelligences that men met in old times when they reported that they had seen the gods' (Lewis, 1996, 313). But if the chief spirit of our objectified 'silent planet' was 'bent,' a.k.a. the fallen angel, then who is the pre-modern type of Earth.earth, originally good and beautiful? A feminine figure of Mother Earth, in various forms, becomes today reconfigured in the Gaia Hypothesis, as advanced by the late biologist Lynn Margulis among others. The complementarity of biological sex becomes a symbolic reality, subverting social modern constructions of binarized gender and of essentialized/consumerized sexualities, in experience of Earth.

To early medieval Christians, such mystery of a feminine-gendered earth resonated bodily in the figure of the Mother of God, identified in Byzantine hymns as the noetic Paradise, Jacob's Ladder spanning earth and heaven, containing the Creator in her womb, while contained in God. Luce Irigaray has noted how a double-enfolding landscape of the female body models a landscape in consonance with nature that is both being and non-being, but in personal bodily ways (Casey, 1998, 321–330). Iconography identified the Mother of God with the enclosed garden, the 'park' at the root meaning of the biblical word Paradise, the garden and the life-giving stream of Eden, both bride and Mother of God, and in a



sense thus transforming the nature of both the human and the divine. In the seventh-century words of St. Andrew of Crete: ‘Conception without seed; nativity past understanding, form a Mother who never knew a man; childbearing undefiled. For the birth of God makes both natures new. Therefore, as Bride and Mother of God, with true worship all generations magnify thee’ (Matthewes-Green, 2006, 179). The Mother of God, at once the Bride of God, turns the sense of Earth.earth inside out. Our sense of both the natures of God and humanity are transformed in that figure of Earth.earth as Mother and Bride of God.

The twentieth-century writer Philip Sherrard, a translator of the collection of patristic writings known as the *Philokalia* [‘the love of the beautiful’], related the figure of Mary to both the feminine-gendered divine Wisdom or *Sophia* of the *Logos*, flowing forth from Paradise, and to Earth.earth:

She is Earth as a single immaterial feminine divinity, and she is earth as a manifold, material reality. She is herself the Body of the cosmic Christ, the created matrix in whom the divine Logos eternally takes flesh. She is the bridge that unites God to the world, the world to God, and it is she that bestows on the world its eternal and sacred value. She is the seal of its sacred identity. (Sherrard, 2004, 181)

In medieval cosmology that touches the postmodern but lightly skips across modernity, Mary becomes ‘real symbol’ of Earth.earth spanning Arden.Eden. In her figure the semiotics of life come charged with energy. Thus monasteries became known as the gardens of the Theotokos, and so in the manmade deserts of clear-cut Ethiopian highlands, Google Earth today discloses green groves around ancient churches that guarded and nurtured their trees (like the sacred trees of early Irish monasteries) as living memories of the savanna of Paradise. Such non-modern insights extend social justice to environmental justice, by a realization of ‘our’ supposed objects as indeed numinous gifts shared by us all.

Human song as life mingles with that of birds under the cosmic tree on earth. The *logoi* or harmonies and purposes of Creation, including ourselves, sing as birds in the branches of the tree of contemplation of the Logos/Harmony, as Maximus put it (Thunberg, 1997, 138–139). Yet the singing or semiosis of the earth calls into question the normality of the discourses of our simulacra worlds of self and society. It engages us with the other as we put on and shed disguises in layers of meaning amid our vanishing Ardens, still personalized in the intersections of time and eternity embodied in the living symbols of trees – mediievally the ‘cross’ between the transcendently semiotic and the immanently incarnational.

Amiens, a courtier-in-exile in *As You Like It*, thus appropriately put the ambivalent yet beguiling terms of our earthly sojourn into homely song in the twilight borderland of Arden, finished and countered by the self-styled fool Jacques. Very simply, under a cosmic-yet-real tree, the song touches first on the medieval forest of adventure and trans-species harmony, then suggests

ascetic sustainability in the greenwood, hinting of post-human futures interweaving categories of human and non-human on earth:

Amiens:

Under the greenwood tree
Who loves to lie with me
And turn his merry note
Unto the sweet bird's throat:
Come hither, come hither, come hither.
Here shall he see
No enemy
But winter and rough weather.
Who doth ambition shun
And loves to live i'th'sun
Seeking the food he eats
And pleased with what he gets:
Come hither, come hither, come hither.
Here shall he see
No enemy
But winter and rough weather.

Jacques:

If it do come to pass
That any man turn ass,
Leaving his wealth and ease,
A stubborn will to please,
Ducdame, ducdame, ducdame:¹
Here shall he see
Gross fools as he,
An [if only] he will come to me.
(Shakespeare, 1992, 2.5.302–303)

1 It has been suggested that 'ducdame' is a nonsense word, but also could mean 'lead him to me' (from Latin), 'come to me' (from Welsh), or a Gypsy term to attract customers, meaning 'I foretell.' It could also reference a woman ('dame') leading a man, which we here could interpret in terms of Mother Earth.

About the Author

Alfred Kentigern Siewers is an Associate Professor of English and an Affiliated Faculty Member in Environmental Studies at Bucknell University. He also co-edits the *Stories of the Susquehanna Valley* series (E-mail: alf.siewers@bucknell.edu).

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Article
Road

Valerie Allen

Department of English, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY,
New York City, NY.

Abstract How does a traveler in the later Middle Ages have knowledge of the road? To what extent does the medieval road become a *topos* or *locus* where a traveler's thoughts gather and recollections are stored? I consider the special features of medieval roads that make this knowledge historically and geographically distinctive. The particular integration of medieval roads with the environment and the (relative) slowness of commute afford travelers the experience of tarrying even as they progress on their way. Contemporary bequests for road maintenance and repair suggest a solicitude that goes beyond the conventions of almsgiving to reveal the epistemological and ontological significance of place.

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Function

His breath hangs in still Martinmas air cut by birdsong and horse snorts. They stop. In front of him where the road widens and dips, last night's rain has formed into deep pools of sticky mud tined at the edges with clawmarks of birds in quest of worms. He casts his eyes about to where the field on the left, grizzled with hoarfrost, slopes down a low embankment toward them. His horse is of the same opinion. Without waiting for the flick of the reins, she heads for the crispy grass and leaves the mud rink for the birds. They pass. Where the road rose again they rejoined the main route.

So ordinary the moment is that it would not have been remembered by the traveler with enough clarity even to get forgotten. It could have occurred during virtually any century, although there is at least one reason why it is more appropriately placed before the sixteenth century, let's say mid-fifteenth century England. It is a moment sufficiently generalized to ask what it might mean for a traveler in the later Middle Ages to have knowledge of the road.

The scene is more appropriately medieval because of the openness of the fields, which by the sixteenth century were rapidly capitulating to wholesale enclosure by wall or hedge of private lands in a process that would, over centuries, wholly alter the appearance of an English landscape that in the fourteenth century had as much as one-third devoted to the open field system (Rackham, 1986, 170). Under such open conditions, roads spread out and become many. Aerial photographs of vestigial medieval country ways show a fingered fan of parallel tracks by which travelers would move to the side of roads that had become flooded or impassible, just as our traveler above does. Enclosure not only corrals multiple tracks to one road, but it also has the effect of straightening their undulations (Hindle, 1989, 21).

The symbiosis of medieval field and road can be illustrated by Margery Kempe's travels. One hot June day in 1413 finds her with her husband traveling the 40-odd-mile journey from York to Bridlington on the coast, no doubt to visit the shrine of the recently canonized local saint, John of Bridlington (Windeatt, 1985, 305). For comparison of distances, consider that during the mid-fourteenth century, a day's journey between Durham and York for a man on horseback in winter was about 30 miles; in summer 36–40 (Harvey, 2005, 121). Threatened with the possibility of having to have sex with her husband, Margery prays 'be-syden a cros in þe feld' (Meech and Allen, 1940, 24). Fields offer a chance to tarry, to be refreshed, to pray, to tend to bodily need and – had the husband had his druthers – other things. They supplement Margery's progress in a continuum of road and landscape as 'sche went be þe wey & in þe feldys' (Meech and Allen, 1940, 101). Fields provide an outlet that are 'parcel' of the way, as William Hawkins states, not part of the way that can be separated from the whole entity, but parcel, integral to the whole collocation called road (Hawkins, 1739).

Geographical possibility and legal permissibility go hand in hand. The medieval road can be considered less a physical entity than a right of passage (Hindle, 1989, 6). The medieval traveler generally has the right to take an alternate route where necessary, rather than keep to a single, designated line of access, used exclusively for the purpose of travel and with a specially prepared surface. Extending this legal right as late as the eighteenth century, Victorian Fabian socialists Sidney and Beatrice Webb (1913, 5) liken the road to an easement:

To the citizen of the twelfth, the fifteenth, or even the eighteenth century, the King's Highway was a more abstract conception. It was not a strip of

land, or any corporeal thing, but a legal and customary right – as the lawyers said, ‘a perpetual right of passage in the sovereign, for himself and his subjects, over another’s land.’ ... What existed, in fact, was not a road, but what we might almost term an easement – a right of way, enjoyed by the public at large from village to village, along a certain customary course, which, if much frequented, became a beaten track.

An easement is a legal concept formulated from the viewpoint of the enjoyer of the right to use without possession the road that lies on another person’s land. The commuter’s prerogative from the viewpoint of the owner of the property is a servitude, a duty to act and not act in certain ways – that is, to maintain the road in good repair, not to enclose or encroach onto the road, not to harass travelers. An easement can be further distinguished from a profit, which authorizes the enjoyer to take something, as in pasture rights, where the commuter has the prerogative both to have passage through the land and to graze livestock there (Pollock and Maitland, 1968, 2: 145–146). Field enclosure, of course, erodes that right of commons.

To William Hawkins (1739, 201), writing in the eighteenth century, travelers had the additional right to deviate from the pathway onto private land where the road had become impassible:

It hath been holden, that if there be a Highway in an open field, and the People have used, Time out of Mind, when the Ways are bad, to go by Outlets on the Land adjoining, such Outlets are Parcel of the Way; for the King’s Subjects ought to have a good Passage, and the good Passage is the Way, and not only the beaten Track; from whence it follows, That if such Outlets be sown with Corn, and the beaten Track be foundrous, the King’s Subjects may justify going upon the Corn.

Hawkins’s distinction between the right of passage and the beaten track suggests that the medieval road is most profitably defined in terms of function rather than its construction and physical parts. A road is a road when it allows one to move on it. Thus, by defining the road in terms of function rather than anatomy, one is free to think more abstractly and flexibly about passageway.

In some respects, medieval roads should indeed be described in terms of anatomy – the clay, sand, marl, gravel and cobblestones used to metal the surface. Civic records are full of details about offenders who fail to mend broken paving or who encroach onto the road, showing by the latter an awareness of the distinctness of boundary between land and commuter strip. Roads, however, have no single stuff out of which they are made and can be multiply instantiated. An entry in the Rolls of Parliament for December 1421 records the efforts of the locals of Abingdon, Oxfordshire, to care for the road that ran between it and Dorchester, about 5 miles away. Having repaired it, they

planted willows and poplars on the adjacent ditches for the raising and mending of the road subsequently as needed (Given-Wilson, 2005). The inventiveness of the medieval traveler in mending surfaces even with organic materials disallows a definition of road in terms of its stuff; the legal right in specific circumstances to deviate into adjacent fields disallows a definition of it in terms of designated place. Hence, the functional description: a road is a modification of the environment to enable forward passage to animals and vehicles in a specific geographical direction.

Forward passage implies another feature of the road, namely, that of keeping on the move, of not stopping. Quoting the 1911 edition of *Pratt and Mackenzie's Law of Highways*, the Webbs (1913, 11) note that 'the right of the public in a highway is an easement of passage only – a right of passing and repassing. In the language of pleading, a party can only justify passing along, not being in, a highway'. No loitering. Although highways in the Middle Ages, no less than in any other period, needed their thoroughfares to remain free of obstructions, the urgency for vehicular speed (and concomitantly for pedestrian safety) grows in later centuries in tandem with a physiology of the road that effectively segregates pedestrian from vehicle, which medieval roads generally do not. Medieval urban streets, narrow by today's standards, were lined with houses and trade stalls. The raised footpath familiar today had no official status in medieval urban areas where wheels, bipeds and quadrupeds shared the same surface, which is one reason for ordinances protecting against the reckless driving of carts or requiring horses to be led to watering rather than driven (Salisbury-Jones, 1975, 64). It was not until 1750 that the wealthy residents of Micklegate in York procured planning permission to erect posts to cordon off a space 2 feet in width for pedestrians to use (Cooper, 1912–1913, 278). Philippe de Beaumanoir (1992, 266; 25.725) notes the widening of roads to permit grazing for cattle or rest for travelers in his description of the local customs of Beauvais during the later thirteenth century.

In terms of nineteenth-century traffic engineering, loiterers are trespassers; yet, Middle English *loitren* simply means to waste time or dawdle. The sixteenth century sees a strengthening of the word to mean hanging around the place, as in *loyter somewhere by the waye* (OED, s.v. *loiter*, v. 1a). In 1596, Augustine Reynolds was fined by the Southampton civic authorities for behavior that the law came to call loitering. While appointed jurymen surveyed the city's streets to identify disrepair and responsibility for repair, Reynolds 'in contemptuous manner as seemed walked upp and downe the streats as we were handling the buisines' (Hartshorne, 2004, 81). Medieval roads generally have a higher tolerance for tarrying. Once more, the concept of road is best taken functionally as unobstructed passageway in abstraction from that of a bordered, paved surface.

Roads are named as variously as they are physically instantiated. One important terminological distinction still current is between (rural) road and (urban) street, where a road passes from one place to another, whereas a street is

situated within a dwelling area (*OED*, s.v. *road*, n. III.4a). The conceptual distinction is upheld to a degree in medieval England, but it cannot be enshrined in the road/street nomenclature for the word ‘road,’ understood as a path or way for land traffic, rarely if ever appears in Middle English. Other words must serve. ‘Way’ (*MED*, s.v. *wei*, n.1a) is the generic term, onto which can be attached various adjectives, hence ‘high’ way (*MED*, s.v. *heigh*, adj.2b[e]) or ‘by’ way (*MED*, s.v. *bi-wei*, n.) or ‘broad’ way (*MED*, s.v. *brod*, adj.7c[e]) or ‘hollow’ way (*MED*, s.v. *holwe*, adj. 2b) or ‘common’ way or ‘private’ way (Trevisa, 1975–1988, 1381). Without some adjectival determiner, *wei* is not a term of precision. ‘Street’ can indeed specify a main urban thoroughfare (*MED*, s.v. *strete*, n.[2]2a), although in northern areas such as York, it goes by the name of ‘gate,’ as in Micklegate, Goodramgate, Petergate. The semantic specificity of *strete*, however, like *wei*, capitulates to more general usage, for example, in Watling ‘Street,’ the public connector road running through the country between Dover and Wroxeter (*MED*, s.v. *strete*, n.[2]1a). The conceptual differentiation between a street that one inhabits and a road along which one passes holds only to a degree, for every street at some point must be passed along and there is no road on which one does not at some point tarry. Not every ‘street’ in the medieval city has architectural structure bordering it, and not every rural ‘road’ is without buildings. The variousness of language of record and verbal intercourse in medieval England – English, Insular French, Latin, not to mention markedly different dialects – further loosens bonds between general concept and specific word. Certainly, medieval rural commuter roads and populated urban streets are distinguished by nomenclature, surfacing materials, size and responsibility for maintenance; however, the distinction, which locks into a town/country, sedentary/mobile polarity, loses any preeminence in a plethora of nicer considerations – whether the road is paved, or a toll road, or a sunken holloway, or raised (that is, a causeway), or common or private, or wide enough for two carts to pass each other, whether only pedestrians and pack-horses can use it; add to this the localness of terminology, and it becomes clear that no exact standard of nomenclature was in place. A more pressing question to ask – at least in the minds of the users at the time – is: ‘Who should pay for mending this?’

The naming of roads by means of size signals another way in which a functional rather than material definition of road pertains. Beaumanoir (1992, 264; 25.719) classifies roads in terms of size from the narrowest *sentier* or footpath of only 4 feet wide to the widest kind of road, the royal road (*chemin royal*), 64 feet wide, built in an unobstructed straight line, which he identifies as the ones that ‘Julius Caesar had made’:

And it should be understood that the reason why they are so wide is so that all products of the earth and living things which man and woman live on can be transported or carried along them, so that everyone can come and

go and transport supplies for all his needs in the width of the road, and go through cities and castles to carry on his business.

Every conceivable human need that can find a transportable commodity to satisfy it can be accommodated by a 64-foot-wide road, which sets the natural limit in the writer's mind on the desire for and possibility of mobility. The road takes its meaning from what moves along it – an army, a cart, a pilgrim and two oxen. When heavy stone or timber moves along it, and when the terrain affords the opportunity, the road can turn into water, for a network of rivers and canals, routinely circulated heavy goods around the country in preference to land transport, and one of the few usages Middle English had for the actual word 'road' is for the riding of waves (*MED*, s.v. *rode*, n.[3]2a). A road allows things to move, and the things that move make roads.

Vision

Diogenes, as Gower (2003, 3: 1219–1220) recounts the incident, grew too elderly for further travels, thus he took instead to sitting in a barrel in order to 'muse in his philosophie/Solein withoute compaignie'. He would turn his barrel as needed in order to 'se the hevене/And deme of the planetes sevene' (Gower, 2003, 3: 1215–1216). One day, as he contemplates the rising sun, King Alexander, out riding, spots him. They converse and the great king learns that, of the two of them, this old man is the real sovereign, for unlike Alexander he can govern his will.

The two men tell us something about two different ways of looking that seem diametrically opposed. Diogenes' gaze is detached, theoretical and motionless; Alexander's involved, practical and roving. Speculation requires stillness of body to allow reason to gaze upon the theater of life. Philosopher of a barrel if not an armchair, Diogenes 'sat stille' for as long as he could ignore the intrusions of commuters, even royal ones (Gower, 2003, 3: 1243). His gaze is upward, for the sun and heavens are images par excellence of pure reality as distinct from the moving shadows of terrestrial affairs. In contrast, King Alexander, on the move, 'caste his yhe aboute' (Gower, 2003, 3: 1228), displaying street smarts not generally practiced by philosophers. Chaucer's (1987, 71; I.3457–3461) carpenter in the *Miller's Tale* recounts the story of Thales falling into a marl-pit as he walked through the fields while gazing at the stars like Diogenes instead of casting his eyes about like Alexander. The carpenter has a point. It is rarely a good idea to be entirely motionless on the road, and brains in vats are particularly at risk. The motionless gaze of *theoria* seems not to be much use on the road, where *praxis* is all.

Yet, in aligning his body with the heavens by turning his barrel in order to gaze upon the sun, Diogenes demonstrates some road awareness

(Gower, 2003, 3: 1214). Alignment is a bringing-into-relation of two things: Diogenes and the sun; and traveler and destination. Aristotle, in his *Categories*, designates the relation of one thing to another by the term *pros ti* (rendered in Latin as *ad aliquid*), which simply means ‘toward something.’ English habitually nominalizes the prepositional phrase, and one of the most misleading ways it does so is in the term ‘means,’ which loses the original sense of the physical orientation of one body aligned with another. The word ‘means,’ though undoubtedly useful, plays into an instrumentalist illusion that medium is a thing separable from datum, that the changes of appearance the target undergoes in aligning and realigning oneself with it have no bearing on its being. Yet, seeming and being are themselves aligned with each other (Heidegger, 2000, 113–115). As the traveler shifts position, the optical information changes, for the destination comes into or goes out of sight or the visual cone between traveler and destination alters shape. The road’s duration and resistant surfaces – not to mention the variables of its wobbles, slopes and detours – are ‘parcel’ of the destination rather than extraneous ‘means’ to an end.

Changes of alignment occur because of the bodily structure of the traveler and of the orientation of the road. With every step and shift of weight from one leg to the other, the angle of orientation skews and must be adjusted. Even more clearly is the case in steering a boat on the ‘sea-road’ to its port, where forward motion is achieved by rolling from side to side, ironically, by spending most of the trajectory technically off course. So challenging is the task of the helmsman, who must constantly compensate for the conditions of the medium through which the ship travels (water currents and wind), that the metaphor yields the word for governance (Latin *gubernare*, to pilot). Unlike the self-mastered Diogenes, who can control his desires as ably as his barrel (see Latin marginal note to Gower, 2003, 3: 1204), Alexander needs self-governance. Travelers who ‘govern’ their alignment stay on course. For them, their destination is less a point in the far distance than a passage continuously adaptive to its environment that gets them somewhere they want to be.

Where the traveler wants to be will usually be out of sight if the journey is of any distance, for the unenclosed road leading there will wend sinuously around rivers, hills, coppices and all the furniture of the earth. How does the traveler have road vision when the destination is out of sight? No metaphysical string connects telos to a ring in his nose. Rather, the traveler moves from one intermediate station to another, not in a bee-line, but glancing from side to side of the destination. The condition of the roads in winter that keeps one to the high road, the chance of a hospice at sundown, the balance of shortest distance weighed against the number of rivers to cross, the importance of hearing mass at a nearby chapel, the availability of fodder for the horse – all these are contributory factors in the plotting of an itinerary of serially connected *loci*. The medieval traveler’s map is a *descriptio* – a list of stations sequentially connected by an unfolding narrative, the last in the series being the final target.

Descriptiones narrate a travel story, punctuated episodically with stops, protracting and connecting discrete plot points into passageway. Stories, if properly told, have their point in their expansion by telling, not simply in delivering the conclusion. In Mandeville's phrase, *descriptiones* 'tell the way,' meaning that his narrative enumerates and describes, counts and recounts the pilgrimage stations to Jerusalem (Allen, 2008, 29). The written inventory of place names includes itself on medieval maps, most notably the fourteenth-century Gough map and Matthew Paris maps of Britain, and in wills that enumerate pilgrimage routes to be taken for the good of the testator's soul. The medieval traveler's map is less cartographic (a spatial representation) than it is topographic (a narrative representation) (Curry, 2005, 683–684). The narrative *descriptio* demonstrates an *ad hoc* logic that fits around the immediate environment as a jigsaw-like assemblage of local components, interconnected at all points, articulated at key stations, visible only from the ground the traveler is on and systematized by lists.

Medieval road vision is performed in the round. Foveal vision – that virtual straight line between the fovea (the part of the eye required for clear vision) and the object of sight – is inevitably privileged for its distinctness, yet peripheral vision, indistinct as it is, is full of information about the surroundings. Looking straight ahead, human eyes provide a roughly hemispherical field of vision from side to side, a bit less from up to down, by turning the head about 270 degrees, by turning the body, full 360-degree vision experienced not as a snapshot or snapshot series but as an unfolding panorama (Gibson, 1986, 189–222). A rider's peripheral vision is aided by an unblinker horse, whose laterally situated eyes can see almost fully around without turning the head. The horse and rider look out for each other. What is seen, as the eyes cast about and body turns, is not a framed picture outside of which the traveler stands, but a continuous ambit of nested and interconnected surfaces, edges, angles, textures and colors – that is, an amphitheater that includes the traveler within its landscape. As various statutes with their requirements for roads to be cleared and trenches to be dug on both sides attest (Rackham, 1986, 268–271), medieval travelers need a clear peripheral field of vision to stay safe. Road connects with its environs in an ambient sweep.

Theoretical knowledge is speculative, attained from sitting still in a barrel and fixating the eye away from self and upon its object. It presupposes and transcends the kind of knowledge attained by locomoting and casting the eyes about. Diogenes did these things in his former travels; now he just sits. The distinction conventionally cast between theoretical and practical knowledge yields here to that between egoless knowledge of an external object on the one hand, and on the other, knowledge of a plenum that extends behind the skull and contains the viewer in the information received. Look ahead and regard one's own nose, which protrudes into the grandest vistas (Gibson, 1986, 117). Just by looking out onto the world through the ovals of eye sockets, the rider

can discern that he is not his horse. The point where the horizon meets the tree tells him his height. The act of casting the eyes about returns the information: 'I am here.'

Place

To the traveler, a road always means that some animal (four- or two-footed) went before, for it only comes about through intentional alteration of the environment, intentionality varying with the degree to which the road has been worked – that is, worn, widened, cleared, leveled or metaled. A road belongs to the built rather than spontaneously occurring environment, meaning that it has been modified for convenience (rather than featuring man-made, treated materials). A road then is one way in which humans make the environment meaningful to them. By modifying it, humans are enabled to be existentially.

When the rider who opened this essay saw the dry field that offered a way around the mud rink, what did he actually see? He saw a field, a mud rink, his own nose and also an opportunity in the environment, a way to find his way forward, an affordance (Gibson, 1986, 127–143). 'Opportunity' can scarcely be posited of the field as a quality independent of the observer, such as solidity and extension. Without rider, horse or some other taker, talk of the field's opportunity is meaningless. Moreover, the environment affords variously in relation to the viewer concerned, for the mud might yield a supporting surface to a small rodent but not to a horse. Some locomoting animal must need passageway in order for the environment to afford it such opportunity. The affordance emerges out of the particular alignment of bodies. The environment, which includes the animal, affords the animal the opportunity to be, to think and to move. This claim represents the field differently from describing it, Aristotle-wise, as a road *in potentia*, according to which the telos of the field would be to turn into a road – that is, the field would become a road through 'natural' causes. It is rather the 'accidental' causes that interest us here: the chance associations of a rainfall, a rider, a horse, a mud-rink and an unenclosed field; the serendipitous opportunity afforded by the bringing-into-relation of bodies and events. No single actor in the network of connections could have organized such an alignment. In this sense, a road is an assemblage of actors.

The affording-of-passageway is not a value added to the physical field as a supervenient extra, a phenomenal occurrence located only in the rider's (and horse's) consciousness, for it is the physical field not some mental apprehension that affords passageway (Gibson, 1986, 139). Mental and physical realia connect in ways that extend beyond the skull. True, the road is not connected to the feet as a hammer held in the hand, but it lets the body do things as would a hammer, dispersing agency into the world (Clark and Chalmers, 1998).

Moreover, when that road becomes familiar from long habits of being in it, when one knows it well and when it becomes a place where one simply is for a lot of time (say from pasturing sheep or ferrying produce to market and back), then it becomes a place where one tarrys. The verb ‘to tarry,’ of unknown origin, was first attested in the 1300s, and its application is flexible: obstructing, not moving, moving slowly, lingering, delaying, spending time and protracting. As its etymology suggests, to protract is to draw forward, to lengthen or prolong. In the sense that it means spending time, tarrying is a kind of dwelling. In the sense that it means to protract, it is a kind of extension, such as a road becomes when one traverses it daily, weekly, monthly for years. Where one tarrys is where one is, existentially speaking, and where one is is where one thinks, as Diogenes well knows. ‘The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, thought essentially’ (Heidegger, 1993, 359). Mental life and lived environment exist on a continuum.

Because presence can extend behind and beyond a body on the road, in the round, the assumption that the traveler can only be in one place at one time remains true only in the most literal of senses. Travelers fill the space ahead of them toward which they move and intend. ‘I am never here only, as this encapsulated body; rather, I am there, that is, I already pervade the space of the room, and only thus can I go through it,’ says Heidegger (1993, 359), riffing on the physics of Aristotelian teleology. Travelers occupy, fill, inhabit, tarry and dwell in what they think about, and in thinking about, align themselves with, and in aligning themselves with, move toward. Thought-wise, the traveler is extended into the panorama. The act of looking out on the world returns the information: ‘I am there.’

My guess is that Robert Plumpton (or Plumtree) was one such traveler. In his will, drawn up in 1506, he bequeaths as much ‘as commys to iiiiij mark’ for the ‘mending of ye watteryng-stede as men goys to ye Dringhowses’ (*Testamenta Eboracensia*, 1869, 260). This watering pump is on the Tadcaster Road that runs southwest of York, a highway bordered on either side by common pastureland. At the time of publication of the will by the Surtees Society, 1869, the watering place still stood. Cooper (1912–1913, 282), writing in 1912–1913, mentions that it was on the west side of The Mount roadway, on the crest of the hill, opposite Elm Bank House, and was in use ‘until about forty years ago’. Raine (1955, 306–307) mentions that a modern watering place now (that is, in 1955) stands on the site of the old one, at Knavesmire Gates. That pump, ‘parcel’ of the way, stood as a landmark for animals, two- and four-footed alike, to step off the road, rest, drink, commune and ruminate. Both it and the road represent a modification of the environment that then affords mobility and sociality by becoming an object thickened with recollection and attachment. The pump is an exercise in *poiesis*, as if humans can only exist in a certain mode when they make things that enable them to exist in that mode, when they give agency to things that then allow humans to act. As watering pump is to

Plumpton, barrel is to Diogenes. Diogenes's speculative gaze may have been trained on the heavens, but he understood the impact of *topos*, the importance of bodily alignment and how tarrying in a barrel can help one think. When Alexander, impressed by the philosopher's sagacity, offers him any gift he wants, Diogenes asks: 'Thanne hove out of mi sonne, / And let it schyne into mi tonne' (then move out of my sunlight and let it shine into my barrel) (Gower, 2003, 3: 1307–1308).

It is clear from numerous fourteenth- and fifteenth-century bequests for mending roads – very often specifically identified just like Plumpton's water pump on the Tadcaster Road – that the testators who made the bequests used those roads habitually, tarried on them. Almsgiving was of course expected in these testaments, and road repair was a conventional enough bequest. Yet, it is striking that the testators' thoughts should return at the close of their lives to these highways where they had long tarried. Such recollections point to the meaning during life of a road well traveled.

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About the Author

Valerie Allen is a Professor of English literature at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY. Her main interests lie at the intersection of literature and philosophy. Relevant publications include: *As the Crow Flies: Roads and Pilgrimage*, *Essays in Medieval Studies* (2008) and (with Ares Axiotis) *L'Art d'enseigner de Martin Heidegger*, trans. Xavier Blandin (Paris: Klincksieck, 2007) (E-mail: vallen@jjay.cuny.edu).

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Article

A poetics of nothing: Air in the early modern imagination

Steve Mentz

Department of English, St John's University, New York.

Abstract This essay explores the materiality of air in three forms: Global Winds, Embodied Breath and Nothing. Each of these three representations appears in different source texts, including Shakespeare's *King Lear*, early modern scientific writings, cartography, meteorology and classical philosophy. Searching for places in which invisible air pushes back against human perceptions and conception, the essay explores what air has to offer early modern ecocritics.

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If a man, that is an aireal creature, could subsist alive above the Air, and that the motion of the Air were as discernible as the Current of Waters, he would see the same vicissitude of Aireal Tides upon the sides and tops of Hills and the streights of Mountains, as now are perceived in the Sea. The high and continued ridges of Hills would appear like Shores, but lone and separated Mountains, as resembling divided Islands.

– Isaac Vossius, *Treatise Concerning the Motion of the Seas and Winds*

When premodern writers looked at the empty air between their pens and their pages, what did they see?

This essay hazards its way into a poetics of nothing in the early modern imagination by seeking out in literary and scientific writings the stirrings of an



invisible presence. I'll fit air into three metaphoric containers: Global Winds, Embodied Breath and Nothing. That's not an exhaustive catalog of early modern images of this protean substance – more could be said about the airy nothings of the imagination, for example – but these three figures assemble an intertwined system. Global Winds press from outside, carrying ships and humans across the newly circumnavigated world ocean. Embodied Breath rises up from within the body, exposing a lived experience of fragile inter-dependence and exchange. But even after these two forces reveal the power that winds and breath exert over human bodies, when we look at air, we still see Nothing. And we all know what comes of nothing.

Two well-recognized features of early modern air were that it moved and it exerted pressure. Early modern observers, even if they lacked Vossius's above-the-atmosphere perspective, could feel winds pushing against them. Standing air also has measurable pressure, as early modern scientists explored. Evangelista Torricelli gets credit for inventing the mercury barometer in 1643 in Florence, but other scientists including Descartes and Vossius were aware of atmospheric pressure. Like Torricelli, who wrote that we 'live submerged at the bottom of a sea of air,' Vossius thought of wind by analogy to water. Vossius in fact considered the two substances one thing. 'Justly reject[ing] the fable of the four elements,' he writes that 'Air is Water, or a dilated humor every way extending itself according to the rule of equipoise or balance' (Vossius, 1677, 143). These elements surround terrestrial earth and counterbalance its solidity with flux. Vossius's description of an impossible viewpoint 'above the Air,' from which the planetary atmosphere resembles a flowing ocean, shows his desire to move beyond air's invisible embrace, to see its nothingness as contingent and escapable. Above the world, in god-like isolation, Vossius imagines a man, perhaps an itinerant scientist like himself, shuttling with his massive book collection around Europe before settling in England in 1670, looking down on an ocean of air. Like water air assumes any shape into which it's put, and this lack of visible structure is among its most vexing qualities. Vossius's fantasy makes air visible. He wants an ocean to see, not emptiness to see through.

Faced with the challenge of this structure-less substance, I'll present a three-layer cocktail of windy circulations swirling outside and inside human bodies. All three sections search for moments in which air pushes back and the invisible becomes momentarily tangible. Catching the wind was familiar to Renaissance humanists as a maxim for hubristic folly, as in this snatch of poetry from Sir Thomas Wyatt: 'I leave off therefore/Sithins in a net I seek to hold the wind' (Wyatt, 1978, 7–8). Wyatt's lyric connects wind to motion but also suggests that his poetry, unlike ships, can't harness windpower. Words are nets, not sails. The global and bodily winds flowing through early modern scientific and literary cultures return time and again to something like Wyatt's frustration, only to build, repeatedly, wind-catching machines. Some of these, like the Portuguese carrack, work very well as long as the winds blow the right way. Others, like

respiration, attract attention only when they stop functioning. In many cases describing the air strains the limits of environmental and aesthetic awareness. Representations of this element index a shifting understanding of the awkward, contingent place of human bodies in a nonhuman world.

Across these three sections, I'll weave brief engagements with the literary text that speaks more directly to my strain of ecocriticism than any other, *King Lear* (see Mentz, 2010). Shakespeare knew much less than Vossius about air-currents, pressure, and the interaction of seas and winds. But in part because of sheer familiarity – Shakespeare is in the air we breathe – and also because of this play's obsessive engagement with human and nonhuman natures, I continue to mine *King Lear's* harrowing interrogation of mortal bodies in hostile environments. An air-infused voyage through the play, touching on storms and last gasps and apocalyptic nothings, helps unpack the unsettling combination of power and fragility in early modern air. Poetic articulations, no less than scientific hypotheses, were drawn to airy nothings, and both types of writing found in that invisible space challenges and incitements to global and personal forms of order.

One last prefatory point: whatever Vossius says, air is not ocean, which also means that it's not history.¹ Unlike the periodic rhythms of oceanic time, airy chronology expands, dissipates, gusts and vanishes. It leaves material traces, including wind-eroded rock formations, but never remains still long enough to be visible. It passes over and through all boundaries. Air may be history's opposite, sheer unintegrated force, roaring through our planet and our bodies. Power we can't see but must take into account. A palpable and present image of constant change.² An emblem for the alterity that underlies a post-sustainability ecology.

1 For the opposite point, see Walcott (1997).

2 'The history of wind and the body is the history of the relationship between change and human being' (Kuriyama, 1999, 242).

Global Winds

First come winds, which can be used. For a long time humans have been building things driven by windpower: examples include sails, windmills, and in the early modern period a global economic network. It's become a commonplace of early modern studies to invoke the founding voyages of globalization, with the circumnavigations of Drake and Cavendish as England's late-breaking entries into the global game near the end of the sixteenth century. In geographic terms, these sea voyages paralleled the cartographic globes produced first by Martin Behaim in Germany in 1492 and later throughout Europe. Creating globes required sophisticated cartographic and geometric knowledge; an early modern globalization was built through complex mathematic and calculative techniques (Elden, 2005). Globes and voyages undergird what Denis Cosgrove calls the 'Apollonian gaze' of globalism, 'a desire for wholeness and a will to power, a dream of transcendence and an appeal to radiance' (Cosgrove, 2001, 2).



During early modern maritime expansion, this global vision traveled by sea, as I've discussed elsewhere (Mentz, 2009). But it was powered by wind.

Recognizing the windiness of early modern globalism means finding change within visions of wholeness. Recent work in oceanic studies has emphasized how the sea facilitated early modern global expansion. Philip Steinberg's *Social Construction of the Ocean* explores maritime space's contested cultural and legal meanings, fueled by commercial rivalries among European powers (Steinberg, 2001, 89–98). Christopher Connery more broadly registers a *Chaoskampf* between stable land and changeable sea throughout the cultural history of the West (Connery, 2006). This essay extends these approaches into the sea of air, borrowing Vossius's emphasis on the deep interaction of the two flowing substances while not fully accepting his conflation of them. The combined wind-sea system drove early modern global networks in a physical sense – both winds and currents made ships go – and also infiltrated the early modern imagination.

This image from Edward Barlow's *Meteorological Essays* (Figure 1) looks like an early visual representation of prevailing winds and currents, but it's actually an attempt to explain the tides. Barlow, a Catholic priest and clockmaker, conflates tides, ocean currents and winds into a single system. While his explanations can be confusing, this image is valuable for its effort at systematic representation. It presents the movements of wind and water as a single inter-related structure that could be measured, visualized and employed on an

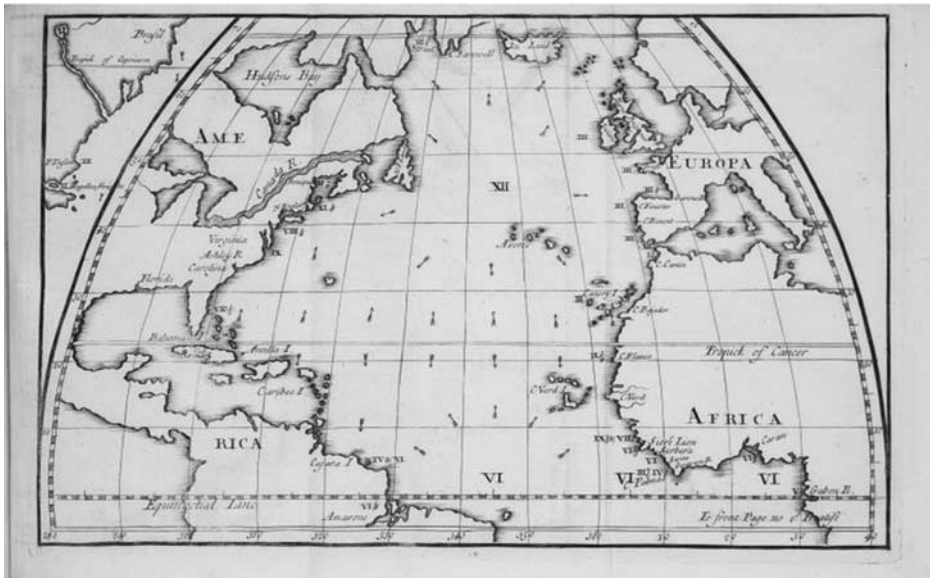


Figure 1: From Edward Barlow, *Meteorological Essays* (1715); by permission of the Folger Shakespeare library.

oceanic scale. European sailors had exploited the clockwise rotation of winds and currents that we now call the North Atlantic Gyre since the early sixteenth century. Ponce de Leon's pilot Antón de Alaminos, who also sailed with Columbus, was almost certainly the first mariner to sail the entire circuit between 1513 and 1519 (Ulanski, 2008, 144–147). Soon thereafter the Spanish treasure-fleet established a circular route, traveling from Europe south with the Canary Current, picking up the North Equatorial Current near the African coast, following it west to the Caribbean basin, then north with the Gulf Stream, and finally east with the North Atlantic current back home. It's not clear when this system was first imagined as a gyre, nor when the first image of it appeared, but Barlow's image provides visual representation of a wind and water system that European mariners had been using for 200 years.

For Barlow, wind represents change, but its small randomness can safely be left out of the system. The movement he call the 'Flux of the Air' is difficult to measure because it is 'so *various* and *inconstant*, as not to be *traced* and *delineated* but by it self' (Barlow, 1715, 68, 71). What he calls the 'Wind's *Indifferency* which way to Blow' represents a tiny flash of randomness in his clockmaker's universe, the whole being guided, as his Preface proclaims, by 'Laws of Motion, establish'd by Divine Wisdom in the Nature of Things ... uniformly and universally observ'd throughout every part of Creation' (Barlow, 1715, 68, sig. A3). The Atlantic system, as Barlow represents it, comprises a network of tides and flows, and semi-random winds follow this almost circular pattern because the lesser always follows the greater order. Some places appear more orderly than others, especially the tropics, where the wind 'blows to the *Westward* perpetually; especially *at Sea*' (Barlow, 1715, 98). But the varied behavior of winds around land does not disturb Barlow's system of oceanic circulation. His explanation of the circulation of winds in the North Atlantic combines the influences of sun, land and sea:

Hence it is effected, that the *same Wind* which was *First* carried *Westerly*, by the *Diurnal* Course of the Sun; and now *Secondly*, is declined, by [the Sun's] *Annual* Motion, more North and South; *Thirdly*, Is often deflected *more obliquely* by the Inclination of the *Shores*; and *Fourthly*, Is return'd back again *Periodically*, from near the *Opposite Points*, by the *Sea's Situation*; which is *finally*, (by the concurrence of its Flux underneath) carried *perpetually* quite contrary to the *Diurnal Course* of the Sun (which first set it on Foot). (Barlow, 1715, 99)

Against his own judgment of aerial inconstancy, Barlow enumerates the structure of prevailing winds in the North Atlantic. It may not quite live up to his title-page's claim of 'Explicating all along its various Appearances, and seeming Irregularities,' but it comprises a global and globalizing vision,



capable of being exported by British merchants and navies (Barlow, 1715, sig. A1).

Barlow's confident if complex assertions of order conceal the fundamental difficulty of fitting winds into a comprehensible system. Nearly 50 years earlier, Vossius had arrived at similar conclusions about the wind-sea system from different assumptions. Barlow accurately argued that tides were caused by the moon, but Vossius insisted that the only driving force was the 'true motion' of the sea, the westward-moving current initiated by the sun's daily course across the sky. 'The first and chief Motion of the Sea and Winds,' Vossius claims on the first page of his *Treatise*, 'is that which between the Tropicks constantly and perpetually follows the Sun; and were it not for the impediment of Land, would with a continued circulation surround the whole Globe of the World' (Vossius, 1677, 1–2). Through this globalizing vision, Vossius rejects the 'vulgarly believed' claim that 'there is nothing more unconstant or unsettled than the Wind' (Vossius, 1677, 142). Vossius argues that wind, which is for him essentially sea, follows the great 'Current of the Water' (Vossius, 1677, 145). Understanding wind as subsidiary to water allows Vossius, like Barlow, to downplay the greater variety of air while emphasizing the long-established reliability of the trade winds. Both writers explain motions of air and sea eastward, 'contrary to the Sun,' in the same way; they are caused by the obstruction of land masses. 'The nature of both do so fully resemble each other,' Vossius says about seas and winds, 'I know not so much as one thing wherein they differ' (Vossius, 1677, 152). Storms, he notes, combine winds with the sea. Vossius asserts the unity of these elements in his final chapter, which contains instructions for making 'an Aeroscope or Weather-Glass, by none (that I know of) hitherto observed' (Vossius, 1677, 185). His claim for primacy may not be warranted; Vossius overlapped with Toricelli in Florence in 1641–1642, but he does not widely share credit for the 1643 invention of the barometer. In any case by 1663, in the Latin edition of his *Treatise*, Vossius claims to have operated the instrument. The Weather-Glass, which predicts the behavior of the sea through measuring the air, is the keystone of his system. 'I know not,' he concludes, 'if any other [tool] so secure and proper can be devised for the foretelling of Tempests' (Vossius, 1677, 188). He admits that 'we can not thereby certainly affix the time' (Vossius, 1677, 188) of a storm, but even partial knowledge proves invaluable to mariners and coastal dwellers alike. The global system has local consequences.

As I've been exploring these scientific models of global winds and seas, a literary response has been building in my mind. I wonder how many readers have already heard it? The old man stands bereft in the storm, exercising the commanding power he has given up. 'Blow, winds,' roll the familiar words, 'and crack your cheeks!' (Shakespeare, 1997, 3.2.1). Religious, political and ecocritical readings emphasize Lear's nakedness before elemental power. But recalling Barlow's and Vossius's efforts to map a worldwide system, I want to reimagine this scene as depicting a global network. Lear's 'little world of man'

3 For still another ecological reading of this scene, which I can't seem to get out of my head, see Mentz (2011).

4 The *OED* notes the word entered Spanish via Oviedo and English through Richard Eden's translations of Peter Martyr.

(3.1.10) gestures toward a vast geography.³ Those are Global Winds striking that feeble body. His hurricanes are New World storms, the word hurricane entering European tongues from a native Caribbean language.⁴ He knows the winds are not his daughters, but he may not realize they span his world.

Shakespeare's scene shows both global and personal winds hitting an old man's skin, but the play's accumulated commentary and canonicity, as well perhaps as its medieval British sources, occlude the global dimension. Rather than pursuing this point via recent theories of globalization, however, I'm going to take a methodological gamble and quote a living American novelist. In a passage that unfurls the global with more intensity than I've found in many theoretical accounts, Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* describes an 'eternal South-easter' on the Atlantic island of St Helena. Living in this wind means facing a global immensity that rips words from human mouths:

The Discipline here, tho' Military in name, is founded in fact upon a Rip-Rap of Play-Acting, Superstitions, mortal Hatreds, and unnatural Loves, of a solemnity appropriate to the unabating Wind, that first Voice, not yet inflected, – the pure Whirl, – of the very Planet. The Gunfire here is at Sunset, and aim'd full into the Wind, as if to repel an Onslaught.... 'We are the Doings of Global Trade in miniature,' cries the Post Surgeon, who tries never to stir too far from the deepest recesses of the Fort, where the Wind may oppress him least. (Pynchon, 1997, 159)

On the windward side of St. Helena, where a desperate German soldier insists that 'God hath abandon'd us' and Pynchon's hero Mason speaks 'knowing he cannot be heard,' globalization flattens human expression (Pynchon, 1997, 161, 159). Living in this world means feeling 'Global Trade' as a palpable force, a pressure and ceaseless roar, driving through and dissipating human contact. Here, in Pynchon's allegory of globalization, Mason has visions of his dead wife. A farmer returning from Windward 'ran about barking, and bit the landlorrd's Wife' (Pynchon, 1997, 160). Unabating, uninflected, unceasing. Too much air drives a man mad. In the words of the character Nevil Maskelyne, the Royal Astronomer on the island to observe the Transit of Venus in 1671, living in this wind changes you: 'It is not to all tastes, here. 'Tis said those who learn to endure it, are wondr'ously Transform'd' (Pynchon, 1997, 159–160). That's true, Pynchon insists, of all Global Winds.

Embodied Breath

Next, and partly in response to winds, comes breath: a biological exchange that circulates air into and out of living bodies. Since classical Greek philosophy used the word *pneuma* as breath and soul, windy suspiration has been linked to the



spark of biological life. The Latin *anima* carries comparable resonance. Given air's capacity for movement, an analysis of breath locates unceasing circulation inside living bodies. Breath does for the body what wind does for the globe: it moves things around, invisibly.

Like early modern scientists who conflated airy circulation with watery flows, recent early modern scholarship has focused on liquidity in the bodily humors. Gail Kern Paster's salutary challenge to post-Enlightenment dualism asks us to read early modern emotions through an 'ecology of the passions' (Paster, 2004, 42). 'Emotions' and their liquid humors, Paster claims, 'were a body's weather' (Paster, 2007, 139). Less direct in my method than Vossius or Barlow, I want first to conflate airy breath and liquid humors and then partially to distinguish their modes of circulation inside the body. Liquid flows dissipate less than airy exhalations. Breathing blurs the inside/outside boundary more radically than humoral exchange. Treating air as trans-corporeal, moving inside and outside the body, provides a microcosmic version of global circulation (see Alaimo, 2010).

The familiar conception of breath as life requires unpacking. Constant suspiration accompanies life, but its precise mechanisms were unknown before modern biology. In *De Spiritu*, an ancient text now regarded as pseudo-Aristotelian, the border between animate flesh and inanimate air appears problematic: 'But if the soul resides in this air, the air is at any rate a neutral substance. Surely, if it becomes animate or becomes soul, it suffers some change and alteration' (Aristotle, 1914, 49). The precise manner in which breath infuses soul into the body remains unclear: 'it may be contended that the air is not the whole of soul but is something which contributes to this potentiality or in this sense makes it, and that which has made it is its principle and foundation' (Aristotle, 1914, 49). For this author, air does not embody life or soul but rather activates the conditions for soul coming into being. The reservoir of inanimate air inside our bodies reminds us that breath is only partly human. It's in us and not us at the same time.

Recognizing via pseudo-Aristotle that air is a conundrum surrounding the production of life rather than life itself enables a new perspective on Lear's howl to Cordelia's unresponsive body. He doesn't seek the living breath inside her but the expelled breath that, like her spirit, has left the body. 'Lend me a looking glass,' he says, 'If that her breath will mist or stain the stone, / Why then she lives' (5.3.262–264). The foggy glass registers life but doesn't quite represent it, even were there any breath to stain its surface. The interior of Cordelia's body remains opaque. Breath, these lines suggest, is more and less than a spark of life; it traces a usually invisible exchange between outside and inside. We want visible signs – 'The feather stirs, she lives' (5.3.266) – but stillness speaks louder than breath. Cordelia spans the mortal bridge; the daughter who has invoked 'all the unpublish'd virtues of the earth' now becomes 'dead as earth' (4.4.16, 5.3.261). Her body occupies both sides. We can't see anything, but we know when one is dead and when one lives.

Cordelia's end stages asphyxiation, death as the stilling of breath, and Lear's anguished words seek to peer into the air/body exchange. This nexus seems

a natural place to employ recent theories of biopolitics. But continuing my pattern of choosing novelists over theorists, I'll slide from the dead Cordelia to a recent Australian surf novel, *Breath* by Tim Winton. My passage shows Winton's teenage hero and his buddy competing at holding their breath. The object of the game, Winton insists, is not triumph but ecstasy:

Deep diving and breath-holding against the clock seemed a more impressive endeavor than the games played by boys Loonie and I tried it a few times. When he flat-out fainted I went into a panic. He came to with a strange moan and a stupid look on his face. Then he did it to me and I went down with a curious tunnel vision and the whole frame of my consciousness seemed to melt at the edges before giving way entirely The attraction was plain enough – it was cheap weirdness in the days before we knew about drugs – but only later did I understand the physiology of it. (Winton, 2008, 44)

Cheap weirdness and stupid distortion emerge from near-encounters with death. But as Winton's careful diction emphasizes, inanimate air dominates the 'physiology' of the event. The lure of the surf draws Winton's hero into a world where humans can't breathe. Breath echoes early modern ideas of bodily humors, things inside us on which we depend only as long as they keep circulating.

Nothing

'Nothing will come of nothing,' pleads the King to his daughter. 'Speak again' (1.1.90).

Air looks like nothing, and fear of nothingness structures its literary and scientific representations. Once emptiness has been seen or acknowledged, it can't be put away. The insidiousness of nothing drives the mirror-structure face-off that rips open *King Lear*. Cordelia's 'Nothing, my lord' (1.1.87) starts the game by replacing her sisters' empty rhetoric with literal emptiness. The play doubles and redoubles this void. 'Nothing?' (1.1.88) reflects the King back to her. The gap her word creates, the hollow into which she cannot heave her heart, assumes its own integrity as it is reflected back at its speaker. 'Nothing' (1.1.89), she says again. It's there, someplace, invisible, between them, in the air. Nothing has arrived. It won't leave for five more acts.

Closeness to the void is one of air's essential symbolic traits. You can't see it; you can only see vapor traces, on a glass or a cold morning. The thin-ness of air, its resonance as a space into which things vanish, emerges from a cultural equivalent of the *horror vacui* that troubled Galileo, Toricelli, Vossius and other early modern scientists. Vacuums must be filled, emptiness cannot last: that's the lesson of the air pump and the barometer. But our eyes say otherwise. Emptiness is all around us.



This third and last conception of air takes up vacancy itself, the void which tantalizes and terrifies. Air as nothing guides us through the familiar contours of early modern Lucretianism, in which atoms and void are the building blocks of the material world. From this standpoint, all things come of nothing. Without nothing, Lucretius argues, motion could not exist: ‘Therefore there is intangible space, void, emptiness. If there were none [of these things], matter could not move in any way’ (Lucretius, 1982, 1.334–335). The three Latin words Lucretius strings together for empty space, *intactus inane vacansque*, give us English terms such as inane, vacant and intact. Void contains these precious things, inviolate. For Lucretius and his followers the physical world requires nothingness: ‘we discern before our eyes ... many things moving in many ways ... which, if there were no void, would not so much lack their restless motion, as never would have been in any way produced ... since matter would have been everywhere quiescent, packed into one solid mass’ (Lucretius, 1982, 1.340–345). Void creates motion, but the existence of void is knowable only by reason. We can’t see it. Of the two things in Lucretius’s universe – matter and void – the first is visible, the second available only by thinking. Thus when he writes that ‘all matter is porous,’ the poet-philosopher asserts the interpenetration of atoms and void, and also of things and minds (Lucretius, 1982, 6.936–937).

Living near this nothingness can be disorienting. The challenges of Lucretius’s philosophy have recently been rehearsed as Europe’s ‘swerve’ into modernity, but even discounting such epochal claims, a world built atop void seems unsettling (see Greenblatt, 2011). Emptiness is something we can never touch. Vossius and Barlow insist that air is actually water, denying the visual nothingness of our airy environment. We find in early modern scientists what we find also in *King Lear*: a desire to not-see the void around them. The miracle of the weather-glass, for Vossius, is making visible the unseen pressure that orders our environment. The Lucretian thought-experiment asks that we focus our minds not on water vapor or the visible force of air pressure, but on emptiness. Following Pynchon’s astronomers and Winton’s surfers, we recognize that the disturbing force of wind and unsettling pleasure of near-asphyxiation work in parallel with the apocalyptic lure the youngest daughter offers her father. Nothing comes of nothing: what we want is to speak again!

Conclusion: Airy Ecomaterialisms

I’ll conclude with three claims about how this exploration of early modern air might contribute to the current state of literary ecocriticism. In a spirit of airy expansion, I propose them as doctrines:

1. *Ecology is motion*: The basic lesson of air in a material ecology is to resist all static conceptions. Everything, always, remains in motion. Even more than

water, which freezes into semi-immobile ice, air's function is circulation and exchange. That all living creatures depend upon some kind of air or oxygen exchange recalls the non-static nature of the biosphere. Against this overwhelming evidence of disruptive change, happy fictions of stasis or sustainability cannot stand.

2. *Invisibility is power*: In symbolic terms, air's power flows from invisibility. Vossius's fantasy provides the tip-off: if air were water and we could see it, we'd loom above it, in a position of inhuman power. We lack that power and that perspective. At the risk of letting something like Foucauldian ideology critique in through a materialist back door, I emphasize the unseen nature of airy power. The eye-catching ocean has long been among our culture's most cherished images of power, including divine power. The unseen air provides a less celebrated image of the fragile connection between human bodies and the nonhuman environment to which we should attend.
3. *Humans are aspirational as well as respirational*: Breathing forges a physical connection to the sea of air, but this mostly unconscious action can be overridden by conscious will. To crave the 'cheap weirdness' of oxygen deprivation isn't just to be a thrill-seeking teen surfer, but also to insist, perversely, on temporary control over bodily reflexes. Forcing our bodies to do without air requires will, and in some cases foolishness. But there's a tiny human victory in such actions, a fleeting instant of separation from an exchange system over which we have little control. Airy nothing fuels the interconnected body-world system, but air also opens up possible moments of escape. Cordelia knows it: sometimes we crave nothing.

About the Author

Steve Mentz is Professor of English at St. John's University in New York City. He is the author of *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean* (2009) and *Romance for Sale in Early Modern England* (2006), and co-editor of *Rogues and Early Modern English Culture* (2004), as well as the author of articles on ecological criticism, Shakespeare and maritime literature. He curated a public gallery exhibition at the Folger Shakespeare Library, 'Lost at Sea: The Ocean in the English Imagination, 1550–1750' (www.folger.edu/lostatsea), and blogs at www.stevementz.com/blog (E-mail: mentzs@stjohns.edu).

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Article

Cloud/land – An Onto-story

Julian Yates

Department of English, University of Delaware, Newark, DE.

Abstract Taking up Jane Bennett’s invitation at the end of *Vibrant Matter* to imagine an ‘onto-story,’ this essay travels our archives by way of the medial impressions generated by the co-presence of a human person and the phenomenon we name ‘cloud.’

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O! It is pleasant, with a heart at ease,
Just after sunset, or by moonlight skies,
To make the shifting clouds be what you please,
Or let the easily persuaded eyes
Own each quaint likeness issuing from the mould
Of a friend’s fancy; or with head bent low
And cheek aslant, see Rivers flow of gold
‘Twixt crimson banks; and then, a traveller, go
From mount to mount thro’ CLOUDLAND, gorgeous land!
Or list’ning to the tide, with closed sight,
Be that blind bard, who on Chian strand
By those deep sounds possessed with inward light,
Beheld the ILIAD and the ODYSSEE
Rise to the swelling of the voiceful sea.

– Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘Fancy in Nubibus,’ 29 October, 1817



Welcome to Cloud/land. Welcome to a *topos* and a topology that considers the mutual or medial impressions left by the confluence of a cloud and a human person – the imagination becomes weather report. By this (you need to understand) nothing will be solved. Cloud/land designates one trope, merely, by which the complexity of living systems codes one another. It produces nothing more durable than a series of cloudy impressions, a fleeting archive and an intimation of nonhuman agencies. Much can happen in the looking. By your naming of the shapes you say you see in the sky, whole worlds, gods, persons, and places will be made and unmade. You will find friends and foes. You will find yourself alone and in a crowd. One day, you will die. However, scan the skies, however you may, I defy you to discern a finite agency, the ‘hand’ of this or that divinity, of Providence, a final cause, human or otherwise, even as you place one there. The weather remains an open system – that by your gazing you reduce to a dwelling. Totalizing in its complexity, the weather yields only weak theories, botched or provisional universals. Clouds come. Clouds go. That is all. Causes uncouple from effects.

Welcome to my ‘onto-story’ or ‘onto-tale,’ as Jane Bennett (2010, 116) names the genre near the end of *Vibrant Matter*. It’s a type of writing that stands surety with a flat ontology that models the world as actor networks, assemblages or ecologies. ‘Picture an ontological field without any unequivocal demarcations between human, animal, vegetable, and mineral,’ she writes, ‘all forces and flows (materialities) are or can become lively, affective, and signaling. And so an affective, speaking human body is not radically different from the affective, signaling nonhumans with which it coexists, hosts, enjoys, senses, consumes, produces, and competes’ (Bennett, 2010, 117). Such materiality is ‘vital.’ However, what a challenge it poses to our powers of description. How do you write a story that is not even a story and continuously rewrites itself, multiplying its threads, most of which you are too limited to perceive? As soon as it begins, an ‘onto-story’ seems to stall, to peter out, coming to figure an impossible narration. Bennett (2010, 119) doesn’t quite name the ‘onto-story’ a cloud, but she may as well have done. ‘It is too close and too fugitive,’ she writes, ‘as much wind as thing, impetus as entity, a movement always on the way to becoming something otherwise, an effluence that is vital and engaged in trajectories but not necessarily intentions’. How, then, to write with the wind?

The final paragraph of *Vibrant Matter* offers hints. Bennett switches modes. The ‘onto-story’ becomes a litany and a *Credo*, ‘a kind of Nicene Creed for would-be vital materialists,’ a string of ‘beliefs’ – ‘in one matter-energy,’ ‘it is wrong to deny vitality to non-human bodies,’ ‘that a careful course of anthropomorphization can help reveal that vitality’ (Bennett, 2010, 122). These beliefs have the flavor of religion or moral philosophy but describe, rather, a re-orienting of perception, a neutral re-tying (*re-ligere*) of aesthetics that may (or may not) relate to ethics and politics. Bennett’s *Credo* seeks to empty eschatology even if it does not escape it, declaring nothing more than a set of conditions or constraints. The constitutive

'I believe' renders the 'human' an occasion, merely, a point of enunciation, an unreliable narrator, at best, a finite 'screen' (Yates, 2010, 228) on which the 'outside that's within' (Bennett, 2010, 113) plays out – that play both vital and deadly (which is to say differently vital or vital for something or someone else).

In what follows, I argue that an 'onto-story' constitutes an infra-genre that subsists within and without texts of all kinds, whose surfaces it interrupts, coming and going, such as so many fugitive clouds. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Fancy in Nubibus' designates the *topos*, keyed for him to the question of Fancy and the Imagination and suggests a strategy for rendering the marks left on texts by an 'onto-story' sensible. Let's join him and go cloud hopping; travel by trope. My aim will be to configure a recursive archive of tropic instances of cloud gazing each tuned to its respective historical moment but also and always to an aesthetic, figural domain whose temporality and consistency remain all its own. Such a method assumes that an 'onto-story' shares the flavor of Derridian 'arche-writing,' of a 'writing that spells its symbols pluri-dimensionally,' in which 'meaning is not subjected to successivity' or the ratio of the line (Derrida, 1974, 85–86), and so which both resists and funds linear writing practices. The difference, if there is one, might exist in the way an 'intelligent materialism,' a materialism that considers matter as 'autopoietic' or self organizing (Berressem, 2005, 51), figures the relation between language and world. Following Michel Serres's (2000, 141) reading of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, this materialism holds that 'atoms ... are letters,' and 'their interconnection constitutes the tissue of the body, in the same way that letters form words, empty spaces, sentences, and texts'. Language emerges from the flux as one instance of generalized coding. 'Nature,' writes Serres 'is coded,' but it remains unreadable (Serres, 2000, 140), for 'sense appears [only] in the local, here, there, yesterday, tomorrow' (Serres, 2000, 146). 'Outside of the universal, there are indeed only versions, codes, and translations' (Serres, 2000, 146), a proliferation of backups held in various substrates (wax, skin, paper, analog and digital). Accordingly, we may say that an 'onto-story' exists everywhere as a sublimated fund from which finite genres are summoned, offering fragments, facsimiles, reflected shards of a pre-phenomenological instance in which language and matter emerge – the monism that Bennett takes as a fugitive given.¹

1 For an allied account of Serres in relation to Derrida, see Jonathan Goldberg's (2009, 31–62) fine treatment.

For Serres, our access to such givens derives always from our rootedness in a particular 'circumstance' (literally, the way *things* stand around). A 'circumstance' designates an eddy of negentropy amid the flux, a momentary stabilization or form that endures for a time. 'Circumstance' marks the 'place [also] where writing emerges as the mnemonic preserver,' writes Serres (2000, 148), and so 'things and words are negentropic tablets ... [that] escape, for as long as the code is memorized, the irreversible flux of dissolution'. These tablets do not tell the whole truth, but neither do they lie. It remains possible then, always and by the very limits imposed by our finitude, to read the traces left by an 'onto-story.' However, this reading requires something more than formal analysis. Each cloud requires



response and re-activation. ‘Better to “live” it through a kind of subjective participation guided by its movement and to recognize’ clouds ‘for what they are: *operators of elevation*,’ urges art historian Hubert Damisch in his *Theory off Cloudl: Toward a History of Painting* (Damisch, 2002, 21).

Think of me, then, as traveling by way of the medial impressions clouds leave on discourse. If, on occasion, my ‘subjective participation’ leads me to misjudge the distance and hurtle earth wards, then consider that I have become some ‘clot’ (silly person) or ‘clod-hopper.’ The words ‘clod’ and ‘clot’ cohabit with ‘cloud’ in Old and Middle and Early Modern English (*OED*; Reed, 1983, 9) – terrestrial shapes just as massy as those shapes in the sky. So, if I appear to play the clown, the ploughman, the country lout, my head and heels sunk in an overly idiomatic soil, understand that an ‘onto-story’ requires the teller to strike strange poses, look askance and to run the risk of failing to produce a vendible narrative, a commodity that I can safely alienate and which you can put to use.

Remember, nothing will be solved. We shall have to begin all over again, each and every cloud.

Initial Conditions (The Seaside: 1817/1948)

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (2001, 16:2, 942) has been out walking. He finds himself, so the story goes, in ‘a lazy poetic mood.’ A sonnet gets written. He finds that he has resumed a certain ‘rhyming Idleness’ or cloud *otium*. ‘O! it is pleasant,’ remarks the speaker, ‘with a heart at ease,’ to ‘make the shifting clouds be what you please’ (Coleridge, 2001, 16: 942). And what a pastime it is! Pure holiday. You are a sovereign in small, controlling the skies – registering the shapes the play of wind and water vapor make when arrested by the eyes. For such shapes that are said to exist in clouds do so only in the exchange between cloud and viewer. Clouds have no boundary other than that which we give them by our perceptual limitations, by our finitude. Ask a meteorologist about cataloguing clouds, and ‘he might laugh in your face, or might patiently explain that in all the language of meteorology, there is no such thing as a cloud, defined as an object with a quasi-permanent identity’ (Wiener, 1948, 41). ‘A topologically inclined meteorologist,’ continues Norbert Wiener (1948, 41) in his *Cybernetics*, ‘might perhaps define a cloud as a connected region of space in which the density of the part of the water content in the solid or liquid state exceeds a certain amount, but this definition would not be of the slightest value to anyone, and would at most represent an extremely transitory state’. ‘What really concerns the meteorologist,’ he writes ‘is some statistical statement as “Boston. January 17, 1950. Sky 38 per cent overcast. Cirro-cumulus”’ (Wiener, 1948, 41).

For Wiener, the time of meteorology, its serial, punctual descriptions of a complexity that it does not reduce, provides an epistemological forbear for the cybernetics he introduces to the world. For Coleridge, the time of ‘CLOUDLAND’ is that of the imagination – or of the possible passage from

mere ‘fancy’ to higher things. Infinite possibilities inhere to this poem that describes no clouds but which, instead, offers orientations, instructions for making and becoming with the sky. The appositive, generative ‘ors’ foreclose nothing, offering instead pure potentiality, open time. The joyous infinitives beckon you to join in and recreate with the cosmos, but foreclose nothing. Look on or up, if you are alone. If you have company, laugh and give your eyes to the spoken words that render your ‘friend’s fancy,’ and make out what she says she sees. You may also, if you like, bend your head, and turn your cheek, and strike the pose the speaker recommends and go cloud hopping from ‘mount to mount,’ the world below rendered golden by the setting sun. Or, maybe you have closed your eyes and let your ears drink in the ‘tide.’ For then your ‘fancies’ may take on the aesthetic heft of Homer’s blind imagination. ‘Closed sight’ approximates the blindness of the bard whose presence on ‘the Chian strand’ tunes him in to the ‘deep sounds possessed with inward light,’ his *Iliad* and his *Odyssey* ‘rising,’ ‘swelling,’ to give him eyes to hear the ‘voiceful sea.’

Shifting clouds; moving water; liquid language – the sonnet begins and ends with a series of instructions on how to take impressions. Somewhere among and between the words that describe you and your friend’s fancies; Homer’s poems; Coleridge’s sonnet; somewhere in the weave of all this walking, talking, looking, listening, reading, re-reading, quoting and plagiarizing – the last five lines ‘belong’ to F. L. Stolberg’s ‘*An Das Meer*’ – lies Cloud/land. The pleasure? Quite precisely, that all of this solves nothing. No cause. No effect. Just possibilities. Such are, it may be said, the immediate conditions of ‘an onto-story’ or ‘onto-tale.’ However, why choose to remain so idle? Why settle for a ‘lazy poetic mood?’ What are Coleridge and Wiener up to?

In the first chapter of *Hermès IV: La Distribution* (Serres, 1977), Serres offers a reading of Wiener’s *Cybernetics*, finding it content with a merely cloudy, meteorological account of ‘immediate conditions’ ‘from which, nothing follows.’² It is, as Serres remarks, a ‘curious circumstance.’ Wiener (1948, 40) begins the first chapter of *Cybernetics* with an old German poem that asks ‘how many stars in the skies, how many clouds above the world? Do you know? God, our Lord, knows the count’. ‘Within limits,’ he writes, ‘the answer to the first question is that ... we do know how many stars there are,’ but, by contrast, we remain unable to count or archive clouds, hence the laughter of the meteorologist, who knows the vast expenditure it would take, the impossible set of circumstances required to do so (Wiener, 1948, 40). Necessarily provisional or projective, ‘meteorological forecasts precede astronomical prediction,’ explains Serres *et al* (1978, 13), ‘Why? Because the forecasts have more force, epistemologically speaking, because they mobilize a more complex knowledge, richer and less abstract concepts. Tuned to circumstances, to conditions it does not reduce, ‘meteorology is the repressed content of history’ (Serres *et al*, 1978, 13). He does not ‘mean the climate but *meteora*: clouds, rain and waterspouts, hailstorms or showers, the direction and force of the wind, here

2 References will be to an excerpt of *Hermès IV: La Distribution* (Serres, 1977), translated as ‘Human/Exact’ (Serres *et al*, 1978, 9).



and now' (Serres, 2000, 67). What happens if we pause with Coleridge and Wiener, and dwell among the cloudy 'here and nows' that mark our discourses, suspending, for a while, our desire for greater significance or narrative?

Of course, such a forceful and primary epistemology is not always 'pleasant' or 'golden.' Neither does it offer much by way of security: prodigies, monsters, plague and mushroom clouds beckon. Worse still, terrestrial soul that you are, you might look up and see nothing, draw a blank.

Distemper (London: 1665/1722)

You might, like H. F., the narrator of Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, come a cropper, end up solo, just some 'clod' or 'clot,' wandering the streets of London. Worse off than Crusoe, H. F. lives shipwreck as a constant. He lacks the store of provisions that would enable him to hold up and wait for Friday, so he shuttles between two apparent options: 'whether I should resolve to stay in *London*, or shut up my House and flee, as many of my Neighbors did' (Defoe, 2010, 9). He goes walking, exploring this or that part of the City, but 'terrified by those frightful Objects' he encounters, he 'retire[s] Home...and resolve[s] to go out no more.' Unable to 'keep those Resolutions for [more than] three or four Days' (Defoe, 2010, 66–67), during which time he prays, confesses his sins, fasts, H. F. ends up back on the streets where 'people fall ... dead' around him. No exact pattern or shape emerges from these movements, even as the *Journal* records the condition of H. F.'s soul.

One day, H. F. finds himself among a crowd of people 'all staring up into the Air, to see what a woman told them appeared plain to her, which was an Angel cloth'd in White, with a fiery Sword in his Hand, waving it, or brandishing it over his Head' (Defoe, 2010, 21). This woman describes 'every part of the Figure to the Life; shew'd them the Motion, and the Form; and the poor people came into it so eagerly ... YES, I see it all plainly, says one. *There's the Sword plain as can be.* Another saw the Angel. One saw his very Face.' H. F. looks up 'as earnestly as the rest.' However, as he says to them, 'I could see nothing, but a white Cloud, bright on one Side, by the shining of the Sun upon the other Part.' The woman shows him. She tries to make him say he sees what she says she sees. However, he cannot. He cannot, in Coleridge's terms, play the part of a friend; his eyes will not take her impressions. For if they did, he writes 'I must have lied.' And so she turns on him; looks him in the face; and 'fancy[-ing that] ... I laugh'd; in which her Imagination deceiv'd her too; for I really did not laugh,' calls him a 'profane Fellow, and a Scoffer.' The crowd jeers him away and returns to their vision.

Yes, H. F. records a demystified attitude to the skies that the Enlightenment has emptied. The anecdote appears among a catalogue of 'breaches among us in matters of Religion.' However, what's key is the way these 'separate Opinions

[that] prevail'd among the People' (Defoe, 2010, 24) reveal the failure of sociality that grips a London that wrestles with the state of emergency occasioned by the plague and the bio-political recoding of its citizenry as diseased vectors. The City empties – its daily patterns recalibrated; its streets trafficked by the carts that collect the dead; the clandestine flow of the infected and the well to the countryside; and punctuated by the shutting up and opening of houses holding infected persons; the melancholy suicides; the wailing of the insane; the patient quiet of those few who manage to live on. *A Journal* catalogues these patterns, takes its structure from them. Such magic that the crowd saw in the skies migrates to the text, a narrative record of swellings and fevers, held together by the passage of the year and H. F.'s voice. It ends when the weather breaks and the plague departs. No *ataraxy* here, no lucid awareness such as Lucretius offers as the plague clouds loom over Athens (Lucretius, Book 6), just the facticity of breathing captured in the *envoi*:

A dreadful Plague in London was,
In the Year Sixty Five,
Which swept an Hundred Thousand Souls
Away; yet I alive! (Defoe, 2010, 212)

Friend and Foe (Elsinore/London: 1600)

Or, perhaps, you're having a bit of bother with your mother, your uncle and your dead Dad – who keeps on calling about something he got in his ear. Enter Polonius: 'My lord, the Queen would speak with you, and presently' (Shakespeare, 1974). Look down. Look anywhere. Look to the sky:

Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?
Pol: By th' mass and 'tis, like a camel indeed.
Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weasel.
Pol: It is back'd like a weasel.
Hamlet: Or like a whale.
Pol: Very like a whale.
Hamlet: Then I will come to my mother by and by.
[Aside] They fool me to the top of my bent. – I will come by and by.
(Shakespeare, 1974, 3.2.374–385)

Hamlet is full of 'almosts' and 'likes.' He approximates; flags suggestions as suggestions; invites agreement; courts contradiction. Polonius, quite out of character if not of sorts, agrees. Come on Polonius, play at being H. F., disagree with me and I shall make a scene; call you a 'scoffer;' run off and away and escape speaking with my mother 'presently.' However, Polonius plays the friend; transubstantiates the 'almosts' and the 'likes' into the Presence (Real or



Commemorative) of camels; draws out the spine of the weasel, which he finds ‘back’d’ in the cloud that bodies it forth; finds the ‘whale,’ with emphatic redundancy, ‘very like a whale.’ He is too much the friend, too much the unfriendly friend to a foe’s fancies.

Hamlet, we know, apes the weather. ‘Mad north-north-west,’ ‘when the wind is southerly [he] knows a hawk from a hand-saw’ (2.2.377–378). Here he amps up his ‘antic disposition’ only to find himself provided with the too ‘easily persuaded eye’ of Polonius who phenomenalizes his figures. What can he do? Curse and moan. Whip himself up and down: ‘Now could I drink hot blood’ (3.2.390). The ‘walking shadow,’ player/spirit (clod or cloud), who bodies him forth on stage, will soon perform the terminal death effects of ending. Therefore, for now, he asserts his sovereignty by a strong reading of the heavens. He might do better to close his eyes, shut himself up, as H. F. thinks best. Blink. Blank out. Stay in bed.

Wink (‘The Sunne Rising’: Circa 1600)

Such it is that John Donne advises when the sun comes calling. Like it or not, you will blink, your eyelid closing to wipe away irritants and to spread moisture over your cornea. Therefore, why not play the sovereign and wink – you might, as Donne hopes, send the solar eye packing. ‘Busy old foole,’³ he writes, in his post-coital admonishing of a sun that intrudes through his window. ‘Goe chide/Late schoolboys, and sour prentices’; ‘tell Court-huntsmen, that the King will ride,/Call country ants to harvest offices’ (5–6; 7–8). ‘Love, all alike, no season knowes, nor clyme,/Nor houres, dayes, moneths, which are the rags of time’ (9–10). Negentropic eddy that it is, love must be weatherproof. Donne winks, or says he would – ‘I could eclipse and cloud [thy beams, so reverend and strong] with a winke’ (13) – but can’t bring himself to do so for fear of losing sight of his lover. Instead, he tells the sun to come back ‘tomorrow late’ and tell him if ‘both th’Indias of spice and Myne’ are still ‘where thou left’st them’ or whether ‘they lie here with mee’ (16–18). Donne pushes back against diurnal inevitability by positing the lovers’ bed as a sovereign state; recoding and thereby demoting both sovereigns and suns, who, in Donne’s counter-Copernican revolution, come to revolve around the lovers’ bed that morphs geo-political and cosmological time into a perpetual sun/day or kairotic hiatus.

Of course it’s just talk, stacking up words against the heavens. However, in doing so the speaker posits the lover’s circumstance as an alternate polity that exerts a cosmological or geological agency – a global loving that warms their bed, all in order to archive their instant. Today the gentle rhetorical ‘push’ by which Donne defies gravity, is available to you for a modest sum by way of a vast technical relay and agglomeration of terrestrial resources projected as water

3 References to Donne’s ‘The Sunne Rising’ are to the *Poetical Works* (1985), hereafter cited parenthetically by line number (here, 1).

vapor hanging in the air, liberating your memory from the massy weight of external memory devices. No worries. Blink away. The i-Cloud archives all.

In the meantime, you will still need to make plans for an ending. For, while your data lives on, you will die. The temperature is rising.

***De Casibus* (Alexandria and London: 31 BCE/1607–1608)**

Cleopatra's Palace by way of the Globe or Blackfriars; the Battle of Actium has been lost. Caesar has won. Local time: mid to late afternoon. We have been hoping all day for clouds – but not for rain.

Antony has been raging – 'The shirt of Nessus is upon me,' 'The witch shall die/To the young Roman boy she hath sold me, and I fall/Under this plot; she dies for't, Eros, ho!' (Shakespeare, 1974, 4.13.43–49). Soon, he expects, he will vanish. Perhaps he already has:

Antony: Eros, thou yet behold'st me

Eros: Ay, noble lord.

Antony: Sometime we see a cloud that's dragonish,
A vapor sometime like a bear or lion,
A [tower'd] citadel, a pendant rock,
A forked mountain, or blue promontory
With trees upon't that nod unto the world,
And mock our eyes with air. Thou hast seen these signs.
They are black vesper's pageants.

Eros: Ay my lord.

Antony: That which is now a horse, even with a thought
The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct
As water is in water.

Eros: It does my lord.
(Shakespeare, 1974, 4.14.1–11)

Thus Antony fades. He does not describe what he sees. Instead he catalogs the shapes he might once have seen or fancies he saw. Such signs signify nothing more to him now than stage machinery – the *opera* of a masque or a mystery play – Evensong, the end of day. The sky becomes a portrait miniature in reverse. The working of paint and jewels and gold comes unfixed – a screen for moving images, fugitive pigments, as all shape is lost.

If Donne's 'The Sunne Rising' provides the script for most of the play, *Antony and Cleopatra* an extended *alba* against Caesar's rise, here Antony sings the serenade.

'Now thy captain is/Even such a body,' he continues, 'Here I am Antony,/Yet cannot hold this visible shape' (4.14.11–14). Antony evaporates, dies as cloud. If



only he could wink; if only he and Cleopatra could take to their bed, send the sun and Caesar packing. However, the deck was stacked for, so he thinks, Cleopatra has ‘pack’d cards with Caesar’s, and false-play’d [his]...glory’ (4.14.19–20). Eros weeps. ‘Nay, weep not, gentle Eros,’ Antony consoles, ‘there is left us/Ourselves to end ourselves’ (4.14.21–22). And so, we watch this extinction, courtesy of Plutarch’s prose become Shakespeare’s verse, the sky the occasion for a lesson in meta/meteorology *cum* moral philosophical calisthenics by which Antony salvages something of his unraveling sovereign ‘we’ to make an ending.

Welcome to cloud/land. You thought you could live elsewhere? Did you not recall, ‘humanity constructs weak coherences?’ (Serres, 2000, 129–130). Cleopatra understands best, of course, that when Rome and history come calling, taxing your ‘niche’ with their eventful plots, you’ve got to ‘detour to escape ... deterioration’ (Serres, 2000, 178). You may, if you die memorably, live on in stories, but you have to make a lasting impression on the archive, living on and in and by your death. Antony goes first; tries hard; asks Eros to kill him; but Eros opts out; beats him to it. Antony must end solo; botches it; runs at his sword; does not die; lives on, still. Cleopatra does better. She narrates their extinction as she goes: ‘My desolation does begin,’ she says ‘to make/A better life’ (by which she means death) ‘Tis paltry to be Caesar’ (Shakespeare, 1974, 5.2.1–3). She will starve herself; end in a ditch or in the Nile, ‘nak’d and let the waterflies/Blow me into abhorring!’ (5.2.57–60) – death by vapor, becoming a host to an insect cloud. The Romans grab her; she evades; dies by asp. Thus Antony and Cleopatra live on as story for as long as there are those to tell it, which, already, Cleopatra begins to do, remembering Antony to her captors – his delights, she says, were ‘dolphin-like; they showed his back above/The element they lived in’ (5.2.89–90).

If meteorology is the repressed content of history, *Antony and Cleopatra* with its succession of short scenes, quick turns and lack of plot, desublimates that content, which takes the form of a series of aesthetic superlatives, of gilded if not golden clouds, impressing themselves upon its several audiences. Rome and Caesar and we watch remotely as the images rerun.

The Shirt of Nessus (Earth: The Anthropocene)

It would be tempting to end this essay by asserting some order of epistemological privilege to meteorology over and above its ability ‘to mobilize a more complex knowledge, richer and less abstract concepts’ (Serres *et al*, 1978, 13). The formal constraints of ending induce desires for moral philosophical or ethical scripts. However, I have not been composing a *de casibus* tragedy. I have merely been cloud hopping. If cloud/land permits nothing more than an accounting of initial conditions, then it would seem foolish to promise more. Clouds roll in and by and, if we follow Serres, indicate a complexity that we

cannot capture. Keyed to the limits of our perceptual apparatus, to the relation between the visible and the invisible, the phenomenal and non phenomenal, clouds present as a crossroads or crux in our discourses, demanding to be read and yet always exceeding the impressions with which they leave us. Accordingly, they assume a spectral quality, generating but also traumatizing our sense of futurity. They authorize only a recounting of what you perceive, here and now.

Such an orientation necessarily leads to a certain hesitance or reserve as to knowing more than my close/d readings permit. I remain sensitive to the concerns of critics and historians who seek to understand how ‘climate change’ or the less alliteratively calming figure of ‘global warming’ might refigure our shared protocols of reading and crafting histories, but cautious with regard to how such a refiguring relies on a discourse of impending apocalypse and a surety of referents. It seems to me that the clod hopping my ‘onto-story’ required of me, discerning that is the tropic work of clouds as writing machine, and the way the weather serves as index to questions of sovereignty, sociality, friendship and matters of security (the state, data protection and archive management), should make me wary of stagings of anthropogenic climate change, of human actions on a geological scale, as, an ‘unfolding geo-tragedy’ (Wood, 2007, 32) or as the inevitable consequences of the *de casibus* tragedy of the life of a species, ‘our falling into the Anthropocene,’ ‘human freedom under the cloud of the Anthropocene’ (Chakrabarty, 2009, 219, 212). That such emplotment augurs in so familiar a fashion suggests that however much I agree with Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009, 219) that we should take up the burden of ‘relat[ing] to a universal history of life,’ it will prove difficult to escape a certain generic predictability to the stories we will craft, and that those stories may still, by imagining that there could be an exit to such problems, shelter the ‘human,’ become climactic or geological agent, from the inhuman cast to the weather. Hence, the tentative, provisional form that my onto-story has taken, an inventorying of medial impressions, of the differently fleeting traces of persons and clouds, and the shifting, mobile politics those impressions occasion.

If, like Antony, ‘the shirt of Nessus’ is upon us, the fabled poisoned tunic that kills Hercules, a trope of looming fatality, an unavoidable unraveling of circumstance, I should like to hear by that invocation not Antony’s sovereign extinction but the terror of an Emmanuel Levinas as he attempts to define responsibility. ‘Responsibility prior to any free commitment,’ he writes, ‘the oneself outside of all the tropes of essence, would be responsibility for the freedom of others. The irremediable guilt with regard to the neighbor is like a Nessus tunic my skin would be’ (Levinas, 1989, 99). As Jacques Lezra (2010, 21) notes in a dazzling commentary, this tunic, soaked in the tainted blood of the centaur Nessus, ‘is not a trope, or not only a trope ... but also reveals the concept’s essence.’ For Levinas, this responsibility constitutes a given, ‘it is pre-supposed’ (Lezra, 2010, 21). This hybrid-skin tunic, this habit world that you may not remove, that was given to you, that you find yourself



inhabiting, constitutes the defining predicament of an existence without exit. It has been there since our beginning, permitting the production only of weak universals, fragmented axioms and imperfect fractured narratives that inquire into every here and now. Such is the way an ‘onto-story’ as infra-genre marks our discourses. Such is the story I have attempted to write.

What do you see in the clouds? It is not, perhaps, such a bad place from which to begin.

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About the Author

Julian Yates is an Associate Professor of English and Material Culture Studies at University of Delaware. He is the author of *Error, Misuse, Failure: Object Lessons from the English Renaissance* (2003), which was a finalist for the MLA Best First Book Prize in 2003. His recent work focuses on questions of ecology, genre and the post-human. He is currently finishing two books: *What’s the Worst Thing You Can Do To Shakespeare?* co-authored with Richard Burt and *The Multi-Species Impression: Renaissance/Organics* (E-mail: jyates@udel.edu).

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Article

Water love

Sharon O'Dair

Department of English, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL.

Abstract This essay is formed of 20 equal parts, like the icosahedron associated with water, the *living* element I was given the opportunity to contemplate by the editors of this cluster. The essay is associative rather than linear, but it does have a point, which, I hope and unlike water, does not slip through the reader's hands.

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Frustrated, I pushed myself away from my desk, stood up and wandered into the guest bedroom. Off a shelf, I picked up a Magic 8 Ball; this 8 Ball is old, possibly antique, not dusty and works. Looking at it – no one else was around – I enquired, 'Magic 8 Ball, tell me, please, is water an icosahedron?' Shaking and turning the 8 Ball, I waited for the buoyant die to settle in its surrounding liquid, and then read: 'Concentrate and ask again.' I laughed. Not for nothing has this 8 Ball lived for 30 years with a literary critic. And then I did as told. I furrowed my brow, narrowed my eyes, tensed my forearms, tightened my grip on the 8 Ball. From my brain, I wiped all thoughts, save one, to repeat my query, only slightly revised, 'Magic 8 Ball, tell me, please, was water an icosahedron?' Shaking and turning the 8 Ball, I waited again for the buoyant die to settle in its surrounding liquid, and then read: 'As I see it, yes.' Smiling, amused at the 8 Ball's craft, its craftiness, I asked, 'Magic 8 Ball, are you an icosahedron?' And the 8 Ball announced, 'Yes – definitely.'

Two hundred words in that paragraph. Just so!! And desire haunted me for a long time to assemble this watery essay in 20 equal parts, mirroring the

1 'Magic 8 Ball, tell me, please, may I include in-text citations without adding to the word count in each paragraph?' Shaking and turning the 8 Ball, I waited again for the buoyant die to settle in its surrounding liquid, and then read: 'As I see it, yes.' With 8 Ball's blessing, I include subsequent citations in-text and trust that you, dear reader, will follow the 8 Ball and not let them disturb the icosahedral shape of this essay.

icosahedral shape of water as Plato, taking a cue from Empodocles, described it in *Timaeus*.¹ What a neat trick this would be! No matter, as the Magic 8 Ball knows, that the regular polyhedron Plato assigned to water – what he thought was water, exemplified water's roundness, its slipperiness – has nothing to do with the atoms composing the material world, or with the one atom of oxygen and two atoms of hydrogen composing a molecule of water. No matter because, as the Magic 8 Ball knows, water was an icosahedron for hundreds of years, even thousands; the influence of Plato's cosmology – at once poetic, scientific and spiritual – was wide and deep, persisting through the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance and culminating (for my purposes) in Johannes Kepler's *Mysterium Cosmographicum*. Here Kepler defended and developed Copernican heliocentrism, in part by modeling the solar system according to Platonic lights, nesting the regular polyhedra within spheres and associating each with a known planet. Each with a known planet and each, uniquely so, just so, with Venus the icosahedron.

But how might I achieve a watery essay in 20 equal parts? Not well, I concluded. Not easily. Not unless I had world enough and time. Which I didn't and don't. Too bad, I thought, because the idea is cool, hip, fly. Sweet. Might I enlist the aid of friends, poets and fiction writers, to contribute an equilateral triangle, an identical face – or two – to the icosahedron I want to construct? This, too, is cool, hip, fly... sweet, allowing me to disperse and alloy agency (and responsibility) for the creation of this verbal icosahedron. But how to organize the crew? Ask for bits about the states of water? Solid? Liquid? Gaseous? Plato offers others – hail, snow, ice, dew, wine, oil, honey, pitch, acid. And think of it, friends! The world is in motion; the polyhedra 'never present themselves in the same form': Water becomes earth; earth becomes air; air becomes fire; fire becomes water; and 'generation appears to be transmitted from one to the other in a circle' (Plato, 1973, 1176). The hundreds and hundreds of triangles with which the demiurge constructs the universe cannot 'be detained in any ... mode of speaking, which represents them as permanent' (Plato, 1973, 1177).

Lucretius, too, believed 'the stuff of the universe' to be in motion, 'an infinite number of atoms moving randomly through space, like dust motes in a sunbeam, colliding, hooking together, forming complex structures, breaking apart again, in a ceaseless process of creation and destruction.' Common it is to put Plato and Lucretius in opposition, and today's fashion makes Lucretius, not Plato, our contemporary. Ancient absurdities notwithstanding, the 'core' of *De Rerum Natura* reveals 'key principles of a modern understanding of the world' (Greenblatt, 2011, 5). No need for a demiurge or a Kantian *Bildungstrieb*, claims Jane Bennett, because Lucretius's world 'consists not of dead matter and living beings but of swerving atoms forming turbulent and productive flows' (Bennett, 2010, 68). But Gordon Campbell identifies a Darwinian evolutionary insight in *Timaeus* lacking

in *De Rerum Natura* or any work of ancient philosophy, and claims, too, that *Timaeus* is itself subversive, cutting across and interrupting the Greek scientific tradition that Lucretius continues and culminates (Campbell, 2000, 146). Plato contests Lucretius intertextually by ‘appropriat[ing] Presocratic scientific cosmology... for his own teleological purposes’ (Campbell, 2000, 166). Not ending, *Timaeus* exemplifies ‘a subversive tradition’ whose *modus operandi* appropriates the scientific: consider today’s ‘Scientific Creationism,’ which would ‘undermine Darwinism’ by similarly ‘appropriat[ing] its very scientific basis’ (Campbell, 2000, 165, 166).

Falling, swerving, rising, changing. Lucretius our contemporary. Or not. Does the adjudication depend on the meaning of ‘our’? On abilities to read Latin and Greek? ‘It was not Lucretius’ exquisite language to which I was responding,’ Stephen Greenblatt recalls about his initial encounter with *De Rerum*. ‘Later I worked through *De rerum natura* in its original Latin hexameters, and I came to understand something of its rich verbal texture, its subtle rhythms and the cunning precision and poignancy of its imagery’ (Greenblatt, 2011, 2). Whether humble or sincere, Greenblatt – Greenblatt! – establishes an uneasy *working* relationship to this text. A world away – even if only just over a century – from the easy mastery of a scholar like Paul Shorey who, in reopening the question of whether Lucretius read Plato, expects not to prove anything but to illumine the parallels between ‘the most poetic of philosophers and the most philosophic of poets’ (Shorey, 1901, 201). Shorey illumines in Greek and Latin, and we work to understand something. Then we are thrown off the horse: ‘Other resemblances are more easily felt than described’ (Shorey, 1901, 205). And into the mud: ‘the instinct of a Giordano Bruno that feels this deeper likeness is a sounder guide than classifications based on oppositions of dogma’ (Shorey, 1901, 207).

Have we suddenly entered the materialist landscape of Marx, Hegel and Adorno? Of Bourdieu? Or Terry Eagleton, for whom the ‘truly elitist’ assumption in literary study is ‘that works of literature can only be appreciated by those with a particular sort of cultural breeding’? (Eagleton, 1996, viii). Probably, but I need not take up that question here. What interests me is how we justify, how we read these texts. Campbell admits to reading Plato as a response to Lucretius, and feels compelled to justify doing so: reading anachronistically is ‘not too far from the truth’ (Campbell, 2000, 146). A different question is how close one must be, and I prefer Marjorie Garber’s justification for anachronistic reading, in this case the moment when Shakespeare met Kafka. Standing on a stage in Prague – one where Mozart conducted *Don Giovanni* – after delivering a virtuosic lecture to last year’s World Shakespeare Congress, Garber was complimented for her ‘wonderful, crazy, speculative’ talk and then pressed about evidence: ‘You can establish Kafka’s debt to Shakespeare, but what about the other way around?’ Perhaps a bit exasperated, Garber replied that Kafka’s debt to Shakespeare bores her.

2 Quotations are from my notes taken during Professor Garber's lecture on 20 July 2011.

What doesn't is Shakespeare's debt to Kafka: 'Kafka writes Shakespeare as we have always known she would.'²

Which edges us toward the realm of art, even into it. Critics are, or strive to be, brilliant writers, 'practic[ing] criticism as art, with bias, or topspin and with splendid assurance.' This paradigm allows the best to 'illuminate so brilliantly the art of the art that they write about' (Teskey, 2010, 247). It doesn't matter whether Lucretius or Plato is our contemporary, whether Kafka wrote Shakespeare, or whether we are fit to adjudicate either question. How much German you got? It doesn't matter that 'the regular polyhedra in fact have nothing to do with the atoms that make up the material world' (Weinberg, 2011, 1). Gordon Teskey sees nothing but 'positivist, pseudo-objective, science-envying criticism' and rightfully calls on colleagues 'to give it a rest' (Teskey, 2010, 247). But criticism is estranged so deeply from the norms of science that one wonders why so much criticism apes science? Do these colleagues not see that natural science, despite having lost prestige among the public, gives up nothing to us. Physics – not Juliet, and certainly not *Social Text* – is the sun in the hypothetical academic universe, and at its 'far edge ... are the arts and literature, [still] subject to [its] force field,' still hoping to become a planet again (Kagan, 2009, 246).

Astonishingly, in his hypothetical academic universe, Jerome Kagan posits Chemistry as Mercury and Biology as Venus. She won't go away, the foam-born goddess, she who emerges from the sea's incubation of castrated flesh, awful and lovely. In furs: Shakespeare's Venus, 'trembling in her passion,' plucks the boy, Adonis, from his horse and transits him away (Shakespeare, 2007, l. 27). He resists. 'She would, he will not in her arms be bound./And when from thence he struggles to be gone,/She locks her lily fingers one in one' (ll. 226–228). He cannot rise. Can he 'taste the whip/In love not given lightly'? Can he 'taste the whip'? (Reed, 1967). Venus likes the taste of 'boys in bondage,' says Rick Rambuss (Rambuss, 2003, 247). Maybe. Why not? Does Venus not represent love's infinite variety? And if so, I say this: Venus, who knows 'where the pleasant fountains lie' (l. 232), likes what I like, the taste of a boy who is a girl, 'more lovely than a man' (l. 9). One who blushes when I kiss 'his brow, his cheek, his chin' (l. 59). Who blushes when I begin again, the taste of a boy who is a girl, with 'soft hands, sweet lips and crystal eyne,/Whose full perfection all the world amazes' (ll. 633–634).

Venus sweats. Once. And pants. Once. But Shakespeare's epyllion presents nothing less than an 'overwhelming physicality' in his hero(ine), 'who seems to pluck us, along with Adonis, into embarrassing intimacy with her hot, panting, sweating, body' (Duncan-Jones, 2001a, 517). From Shakespeare's poem, we receive a 'powerful sense' of that 'body – we can almost feel its warmth and wetness' (Duncan-Jones, 2001b, 76). *We can almost feel its wetness*. Madhavi Menon thinks *Venus and Adonis* subverts teleology, historical and sexual, because it is 'an *unsuccessful* poem: a poem about sex in which no one has sex,

in which sex produces no succession, and in which sexual desire does not succeed either at being identified or at being contained, in people or in categories.’ If we followed Shakespeare’s lead, ‘we [c]ould stop having successful sex’ (Menon, 2005, 514). Which, if a relief, would also be a drag. Besides, without being so bold as to define (successful) sex, I do believe – as above, so below – that readers find themselves (embarrassingly) intimate with Venus’ body. Almost feeling its wetness, its warmth, knowing ‘where the pleasant fountains lie,’ readers find their own. Sweaty, slick, dripping wet, the feel of a woman nearing orgasm, the feel of a woman in climax. Sex in the subtropics.

Cythera. Cyprus. Florida. Alabama. ‘Sweating could feel dangerous if you were alone in the swamp, as if droplet by droplet your body might get whisked into the sun’ – so muses 13 year-old Ava Bigtree, who is not yet having sex (Russell, 2011, 189). Whisked into the sun! Living at 51.32N, Shakespeare couldn’t imagine denaturing his goddess, aerating her, so that she might funnel into Titan (he who is ‘tired in the midday heat,’ who can only look jealously from above, wishing to ‘be by Venus’ side’ [Shakespeare, 2007, ll. 177, 180]). But in Florida, in Alabama, in a subtropics more humid than Venus’ Mediterranean, easy it is to imagine, as Karen Russell does, the dangerous transaction between body and water and sun and air, itself full of water. (Full as air can be, nearing 4 per cent, without condensing, without raining.) Living, as I sometimes do, at 30.30N, I run alone among gulls, plovers and herons, in thick air, on fine wet sand at the moving edge of the sea (Figure 1).³ And I imagine what Russell does, what Ava fears, that I might sweat into the sun, or the sea, a metabolism gone wrong, pushing out vastly more than the 20,000 droplets of water that should glisten my skin.

Frustrated, I pushed myself away from my desk, stood up and wandered into the guest bedroom. Off a shelf I picked up a Magic 8 Ball; this 8 Ball is old, possibly antique, not dusty, and works. Looking at it – no one else was around – I enquired, ‘Magic 8 Ball, tell me, please, is Steven Weinberg right to say symmetry is a ‘key to nature’s secrets?’’ Shaking and turning the 8 Ball, I waited for the buoyant die to settle in its surrounding liquid, and then read: ‘Most likely.’ I laughed. Not for nothing has this 8 Ball lived for 30 years with a literary critic. Then I asked, ‘Is symmetry the key to this essay?’ Shaking and turning the 8 Ball, I waited, and then read: ‘Without a doubt.’ Smiling, amused at the 8 Ball’s wisdom, I asked, ‘Magic 8 Ball, Jane Bennett says her monism “may or may not resonate with the reader’s experience” (Bennett, 2010, 119). She knows she cannot counter very well the criticism that, in the end, it is “a self-conscious, language-wielding human who is articulating a philosophy of vibrant matter” (Bennett, 2010, 120). Magic 8 Ball, can I tell her I am skeptical?’ And the 8 Ball announced, ‘Yes – definitely.’

‘Odd as it may seem, [Shakespeare’s] imagination was obsessed with the notion of the sea as a great storehouse of jewels’ (Pettet, 1955, 219). So writes

3 All photographs in this essay taken by Sharon O’Dair on Dauphin Island, Alabama.



Figure 1: Great blue heron, waiting, on fine wet sand.

the mid-twentieth-century critic, half-forgotten, E. C. Pettet. (If you know him, it's for that thing on *Coriolanus*.) 'Tell me, Apollo .../What Cressid is, what Pandar, and what we? Her bed is India; there she lies, a pearl/Between our Ilium and where she resides/Let it be called the wild and wand'ring flood' (Shakespeare, 1991, 1.1.98–102). At the bottom of Shakespeare's sea, as Steve Mentz knows, too, lies the ooze, 'rich .../With sunken wrack and sunless treasuries' (Shakespeare, 1987, 1.2.165). And rich with bodies, treasured immeasurably, as Ferdinand is by Alonzo: 'my son i'th' ooze is bedded and/I'll seek him deeper than e'er plummet sounded,/And with him there lie mudded' (Shakespeare, 2011, 3.3.100–102). Mudded. Mudded. Living at 51.32N, and in 1600, Shakespeare couldn't imagine varieties of ooze, the ooze composed of biogenic opal, of silica, a jewel. He couldn't imagine an ooze composed of the bodies of polyhedra. But there they lie, at the bottom of the sea, genus *Circogonia* of the order *Phaeodarea*, shaped once like a regular icosahedron.

Toward the end of his life, Ernst Haeckel, to whom we are grateful for the spectacular and enchanting illustrations in *Kunstformen der natur*, including *Circogonia Icosahedra*, promoted a semi-vitalistic monism, one endorsing ‘the fundamental unity of all natural phenomena’ and destroying ‘the artificial boundaries, which up to now have been erected between life and death, between natural science and moral science’ (Haeckel, 1999a, 33). Knowing that an attempt to find the point at which many branches of science and philosophy intersect would surely appear the ‘suspect and superficial work of a dilettante,’ the octogenarian pressed on, searching for crystal souls: ‘All substances, inorganic as well as organic, possess life; all things have psyches, crystals as well as organisms’ (Haeckel, 1999a, 31, 33). All substances have capacities for ‘sensitivity and movement (‘feeling’ and ‘willing’)’ and for ‘regular, apparently goal-directed cooperation which life itself is based on’; there is no dead matter (Haeckel, 1999a, 32) [Figure 2]. None. Jane Bennett says ‘we need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism – the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature – to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world’ (Bennett, 2010, xvi). Generative Venus would agree, her sweaty, slick body, dripping wet, countering the narcissism of Adonis. Whisking into the sun. Tasting the whip.

The biogenic opal, the silica jewels of the Phaeodarea, resonated strongly for Haeckel, but all radiolarians ‘live swimming in the sea and clearly have the greatest pleasure when, in a particular place, ... they stretch out ... their single-celled body ... in all directions, unchecked by other hindrances’ (Haeckel, 1999b, 80). These predator protists pleased themselves, too, stretched out in the Gulf of Mexico during the summer of 2010, following the Deepwater Horizon blowout, which, for over one hundred days, released crude oil and natural gas unimpeded and near to 30.30N. Grazing hungrily on



Figure 2: A ghostly crab on ghostly sand.

petroleum-eating bacteria, such protists, scientists now believe, enhanced the Gulf's ability to clean itself, to degrade the oil pouring into it. Still, sitting at 30.30N in the summer of 2010, anthropomorphizing was easier than ever to do, and scarier, too. A relaxed predator, floating in the Gulf's Franklin Eddy, stretched to capture an oil-filled bacterium is one thing, like sipping Corona on a white-sand beach. Quite another is the oil's unstoppable flow, its fall onto land (NOAA's daily projections, turquoise, blue, and red, oozing here, and there, but not there!), the ways it might stain – forever – the sand richly quartzed, white as blinding snow.

At 30.30N, on a barrier island 10 miles long by 2 miles wide, I find it easy to anthropomorphize. Settled in 1699, the island has been shaped and reshaped and reshaped again by water. The French moved their capital to New Orleans 18 years later, when a hurricane split Dauphin Island into pieces, destroying its stunning natural harbor. The island has been rearranged since by hurricanes and by quotidian tides, rains and effluent from Mobile Bay. And has been so even since I have been staying here: the island was 4 miles longer until 2005, when Hurricane Katrina blasted a breach more than a mile long in the island's western end, which the authors of *The World's Beaches* think may be 'the most hazardous barrier island development in the United States' (Pilkey *et al*, 2011, 42). For years I watched Pelican Island, Dauphin Island's own barrier island, creep slowly, sinuously toward its larger sibling. When would the water, tides and wind bring the two bodies together? Unstoppable and unpredictable, infinitely arresting and shockingly beautiful, the swirling sandy tentacles of Pelican Island finally touched Dauphin Island and touched again, in 2008, some three years after Katrina hastened its movement. Sand still engulfs Dauphin Island's fishing pier.

Here, permanent human residents measure no more than 1500, and tourism is not like that across the bay and farther east in Florida – the aptly and affectionately named 'Redneck Riviera,' where stands a forest of high-rise condominiums; dozens of golf courses, both regulation green and miniature pink; water slide and go-kart parks; souvenir shops too large to ignore; and bars on the sand that serve up Bud after Bud, along with a half-dozen different creatures from the sea, battered, fried and salted. Here, not there, it is easy to imagine the agency of the non-human – not just that of water and tide but of gulls, plovers, pelicans and herons, too. Of thousands of hermit crabs, slowly and awkwardly pulling themselves and their borrowed shells across a muddy flat, just off-shore [Figure 3]. Of the day-trippers, who arrive after a storm, thousands of *Vellela Vellela* – small, azure blue jelly fish with an azure blue sail! Or of those who depart: thousands of fiddler crabs, the size of fingernails, emerging on just one day from a salt marsh to move into the sea. Easy to imagine no human beings at all, when one hears only the wind surge through the tall, thin pines.

Only recently have scientists and theorists busted the binary separating civilization from nature, finding nature in cities and wonder everywhere.

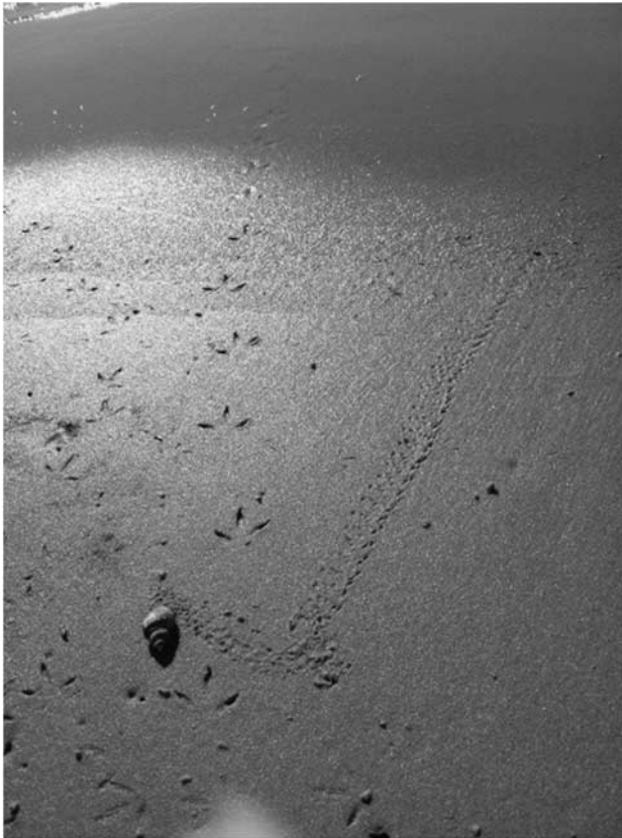


Figure 3: One hermit crab on the move.

Lacking desire to reinscribe that binary, not wishing to say I am not filled with wonder when, in my home in the city, the sun brightens and then disappears the bars from the blinds on the pages of a book, I nonetheless want to insist on the importance of the kinds of wonder to be found in a place like 30.30N. I want to insist on the importance of maintaining not wilderness or the city, neither of which needs me to defend it, but of maintaining, shall we say, the underdeveloped, threatened as the underdeveloped always is by capitalism and science, avatars of progress. Bennett thinks vibrant materiality reduces the need to, as it were, tread lightly on the earth. ‘Sometimes,’ she claims, ‘ecohealth will require individuals and collectives to back off or ramp down their activeness, and sometimes it will call for grander, more dramatic and violent expenditures of human energy’ (Bennett, 2010, 122). But I worry about praxis: will grand, dramatic, violent expenditures be mobilized by familiar methods of capital and science? Will these expenditures of human energy threaten the underdeveloped?

Like most Americans, I have spent a good deal of my life around bodies of water, mostly of the tamed, civilized sort, like the beaches of southern California. (When *did* the tuna leave, Charlie? Who fishes today for scallops from the Second Street Bridge in Long Beach?) But I am convinced of the vital importance to praxis of a watery nature more robust, more generative, than that of the Redneck Riviera, or Malibu. We need watery places where a sand bar swirls and bends and oozes into the water, pushed and pulled by it. Watery places where waves deposit a perfect tiny bivalve, open to the world, pearly-white in the sun, resting just above the tide line. And where those waves, though small, return with such vibrancy that I am moved, every time, to turn them into a line of sparklers, adding all sorts of noises and colors to the water flicking upward and then back into the water. And we need these watery places to bring us up short, even to make us afraid, to imagine in wonder that the army of fiddler crabs, like miniature Lilliputians, might capture a person in the salt marsh and never let go [Figure 4].

Why a half-dozen plovers? (Or are they pipers? Piping plovers? I say they are plovers.) Won't a gaggle of fat gulls do, fed on Santa Monica's discarded French fries? What do they lack that a half-dozen plovers do not? Just this: while I run on the beach, almost in the water, the plovers scurry anxiously in front of me, each one running with head cocked to the right so as to keep one eye on me. Scurrying faster, they stay on the ground until my foot touches some line of proximity known only to them, whereupon they loft briefly into the air and yelp, yelp before landing a bit farther ahead of me, to scurry again, with head cocked and one eye on me. I smile and wonder: why don't they just move to the side until I pass, and return to extracting small creatures from the sand? Why this game of anxiety mile after mile? What are they thinking? Wondering?



Figure 4: An army of fiddler crabs.



Figure 5: What lies beneath?

[Figure 5]. ‘Scientific work is chained to the course of progress,’ explained Max Weber, yet ‘what is yielded by scientific work’ is only presumed to be valuable, and ‘in this, obviously, are contained all our problems’ (Weber, 1974, 137, 143). Fat gulls or anxious plovers?

Anxious plovers. Greenblatt wanted to speak to the dead, and we must speak to the species that once filled our waters and now anxiously do not. Why? Because most of us do not understand the once enormous sizes of these creatures’ populations. This ignorance hamstring science *and* policy, since baselines for judgment shift continuously. Should pelican populations be compared to those of 50 years ago? Three hundred years ago? Speaking to the dead requires speaking to those remaining, which we do by becoming enchanted by and anthropomorphizing the non-human. But we must also speak to people; here I register my skepticism of Bennett. At 30.30N, the fates of life-sustaining, generative water and its creatures depend on decisions humans make now. Neither Katrina nor Deepwater Horizon altered public policy about fossil

fuel consumption. At 30.30N, ExxonMobil and the US Coast Guard sit across from the Richard C. Shelby Center for Ecosystem Based Fisheries Research. Commercial shrimp boats dock nearby. Getting most people to care for the environment would constitute a significant advance. To suggest instead that they think of natural gas, tankers and shrimp as agents like them would prove disastrous. Even if nothing is more powerful than water. Or love.

About the Author

Sharon O'Dair is Hudson Strode Professor of English, and directs the Hudson Strode Program in Renaissance Studies, at the University of Alabama. She co-edited *The Production of English Renaissance Culture* (1994), is author of *Class, Critics, and Shakespeare: Bottom Lines on the Culture Wars* (2000), and edited 'Shakespeareans in the Tempest: Lives and Afterlives of Katrina,' a special issue of *Borrowers and Lenders* (2010). She has published many essays on Shakespeare, literary theory, and the profession of English studies (E-mail: sodair@bama.ua.edu).

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Article
Glacier

Lowell Duckert

Department of English, West Virginia University, West Virginia.

Abstract This essay views glaciers as networks of non/human things that constantly, and slowly, collaborate. Early modern Arctic travel narratives challenge ontological separations between the human and the icescape, demonstrating how glaciers compose bodies and passages, fears and desires, stories and dreams – and how they continue to do so today, even if we think the Ice Age is over.

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The land gets inside us; and we must decide one way or another what this means, what we will do about it.

– Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*

On 5 August 2010, an ice sheet 100 square miles in size calved from the Petermann Glacier in Greenland. Heading through Nares Strait, it had the potential to enter the Atlantic Ocean and eventually strike urban areas. It fortunately did not; and almost expectedly, the scare became evidence for global warming. This wandering chunk of matter doomed human civilization to an inevitable collision course with the icescape. Two years earlier, both the Northwest and the Northeast Passages had opened for the first time. Bill McKibben seizes upon this historic event in *Eaarth*, arguing that their dissolution forces us to see ‘how profoundly we’ve altered the only place we’ve ever known’ (McKibben, 2010, 5). If the Petermann incident illustrates ice’s

transgressive vitality, in McKibben's (2010, xiv) view it is the human who terrorizes the ice: 'We need now to understand the world we've created, and consider – urgently – how to live in it'. McKibben is absolutely right: human actions have real consequences that must be accounted for. Yet, saving ice from an entirely *human* industry implies a kind of Arctic anthropocentricity. We wish to avoid catastrophes that only *our* present actions generate and only *our* future actions will prevent. Unknown causation is too chilling; according to McKibben, there is direct causation for the current crisis: *us*. Despite the human's material enmeshment with icescapes that these recent events describe, ice's agency melts away.

When and how did the human become the center of the (Ant)arctic Circle? If Bruno Latour's theories of actor networks help deterritorialize landscapes and disperse its agents, it is fitting that his landmark text, *We Have Never Been Modern*, opens in Antarctica. The ozone layer crisis, Latour argues, exemplifies the 'proliferation of hybrids' shunned by modernity, which translates agentic ice into an objectified, even if dangerous, substance.¹ Humans exist in an icescape that they must master, exploit or escape. The adventures of Robert Scott and Ernest Shackleton continue to intrigue us, whereas the sublime icebergs of Caspar David Friedrich and Frederic Church caution us. We shudder at the howls of man-eating wolves in *The Grey* (2012) and at the shifty grotesqueness of *The Thing* (1982). Somehow pristine and pure in its violence, and barely able to sustain life, icescapes are inhospitable places where the only things alive are invasive or on the brink of collapse. And where, consequently, indigenous cultures risk being 'frozen' into static histories of survival amidst trackless waste. Ice and humans are not only autonomous things in themselves, but indefatigably opposed as well. The poles of Nature and Culture, such as the North and South Poles, stand stolidly apart. Polarization sets in. We are still fighting a cold war.

However, we are also akin to François Rabelais's character Pantagruel, who, upon hearing unidentifiable voices in the icescape, is informed by the captain of the ship that a battle took place on the edge of the frozen sea. The noises are trapped in ice; when the crystals are brought on board, their vociferousness is released with the slightest touch: 'When we warmed them a little between our hands, they melted like snow, and we actually heard them, though we did not understand them, for they were in a barbarous language' (Rabelais, 1955, 569). Let us clutch ice in our hands – not in the name of war – but in an effort to listen, to embrace and to become more intimate. Almost every traveler who passes through the cryosphere is astonished by the sound of ice. John Muir, (2002, 201), for example, called it 'berg-thunder'. The American nature writer Barry Lopez (1986, 279) is one of ice's most attentive listeners. In *Arctic Dreams*, the northern landscape is inseparable from the imagination: 'It is easy to underestimate the power of a long-term association with the land... with the span of it in memory and imagination, how it fills...one's dreams'. We would

1 See 1.1, 'The Proliferation of Hybrids' (Latour, 1993, 1–3).

benefit from a new ecopoiesis in which place and psyche are always entwined, a bustling ‘country of the mind’ (Lopez, 1986, 252). Can we extend Lopez’s Arctic Dreams, nearly three decades later, into a more melted world? Can we dream better as a result?

Here is cold comfort: *Yes*. Nevertheless, the ‘barbarous language’ proves to be a chronic impediment. Maybe the question is not how we misunderstand what ice is *saying*, but why we do not want to *hear* it at all. If the modernist view of Nature, according to Latour, demarcates what can and cannot be discussed, what is and what is not allowed to speak, our narratives about the physical world are certainly susceptible to this question. As Émilie Hache writes with Latour: ‘we have constantly *restricted* the list of beings to whose appeal we should have been able to respond’ (Hache and Latour, 2010, 325). We choose to listen: here the gap between alienated subject (vocalizing human) and object (mute nonhuman landscape) freezes over. Hearing the ice is an ‘exercise in sensitization’ that encourages us to become ‘*responsible by responding*, in word or deed, to the call of someone or something’ (Hache and Latour, 2010, 312). To rob ice of its voice is a violent act of silencing. *This* is the albatross we must bear.

This essay will be slow, but, like a glacier, I hope it slowly works upon us. What happens when we do not come in from the cold? I propose a frosty thought experiment: to speak for, with, and through the icy world in order to (i) recognize our complex co-implication with icy stuff and (ii) realize the desires in these connections. ‘It is time to compose – in all meanings of the word, including to compose with, that is to compromise, to care, to move slowly, with caution and precaution’ (Latour, 2010, 487). How does ice remind us that we slowly compose *with* and are composed *by* the rimy world? And, what new futures, collectives and joys may come of it? To look forward we must paradoxically move backward. An early modern English travel narrative will be my onto-ecological point of embarkation: Thomas Ellis’s *A True Report of the Third and Last Voyage into Meta Incognita* (1578). In their persistent attempts to discover the Northwest Passage, the English distinguished themselves as tireless conversationalists with ice. In Ellis’s unique case, the very creation of his narrative challenges the division between author and icescape, word and world. The early modern Arctic redefines the relationship between humans and ice – configuring them not as impervious antagonists, but as co-constitutive *living* things constantly being entered and entranced in a process I call *going glacial*. My hope is that these experiences will help us reimagine new futures for our warming world right now.

Going Glacial

Modern science could call glacial ice ‘living’ because of its trademark movement: ‘a natural body of ice, originating on land, and undergoing

movement that transports ice from an area of accumulation to an area of disposal... Glaciers are dynamic entities engaged in accumulating, transporting, and disposing of ice' (Sharp, 1988, 2). Some glaciers move a meter a day; some even sustain worms, plants and algae. The living ice I propose is different from the metaphorical 'life' that science grants it, however. Ice is 'vibrant matter' in Jane Bennett's (2010, 54) phrase: 'a restless activeness, a destructive-creative force-presence that does not coincide fully with any specific body'. Ice is alive, creaturely and desiring; it carries, disperses and distributes non/human things in its icy trajectories. The etymology of *glacier*, in fact, demonstrates its 'Thing-Power' (Bennett, 2010, 6). The *glacier* we think of now ('a river of ice') was coined in the mid-eighteenth century.² Yet, early English authors used *glacies* in its popular Latin meaning of 'ice.' For instance, the *OED* lists 'on a glace' as 'to be frozen' in the mid-fifteenth century. Thus writers might have had *glacies* on their minds whenever they imagined something cold. Around 1400, a verb form appeared in French. The popular Latin *glaciare* ('to slip, slide') gave rise to the Old French word *glacer*, *glacier*, *glacher* ('to glide, slip'). Intriguingly, *glacer* could be a transitive verb as well as an intransitive one: 'to cause to glide or slip.' In time, the noun *glacies* ('ice') merged with *glaciare* ('to slip') to describe what we would now call a glacier. Astonishingly, a glacier does what the Old French word *glacier* denotes – the action of *glaciare*. To make a long etymological lesson short: ice is slippery *and* it slips.

2 All references are from the *OED* online; see the entry for *glace*, *v.* especially.

The early modern English rarely, if ever, used *glacier* instead of *ice* (and its various spellings) when writing about the icescape. George Best (1578, 8), one of the most popular Arctic chroniclers, seldom uses 'Mare Glaciale' to convey the 'frozen Sea'. Nevertheless, the English seized upon *glacier's* multivalent meanings when describing *ice*. It is not anachronistic to speak of early modern 'glaciation' since *ice* and *glacier* perform the same work. Like the *glacies* (noun) side of ice, ice in early modern vocabulary indicates cold material; slippery slopes of contact; and places where things glide, glance and pass through. And like the *glaciare* (verb) potential of ice, ice slides and causes things to slide. If modern science and early modernity seem incongruous, then, *glacier's* etymology helps us realize the agency of living ice and furthermore shows how modern and early modern icescapes may actually interpenetrate one another. The action inherent to *glacier* shifts the focus away from knowable glacial geography to a more theoretical engagement with geophilosophy. Living ice, never figuratively 'living' ice, conjoins the separate fields of glacial geology (work being done by glaciers) and glaciology (the study of glaciers). To study a glacier is always to study its work. A glacier is always-already acting, and its work is never done.

Picture a glacier's smooth stripes in your mind. Does any of this come as a surprise? For the early explorers, *it did*; what is more, they found seduction in glacial motion. Authors flowed with and through these icy expressways, often recounting desire and disaster on the same page. Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 159)

3 In full: 'the BwO is that glacial reality where the alluvions, sedimentations, coagulations, foldings, and recoilings that compose an organism – and also a signification and a subject – occur.'

4 My use of 'feedback' and 'matter-flow' comes from *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (De Landa, 1997).

were right to call the body without organs 'that glacial reality'.³ Slipping with these icy matter flows is what going glacial entails. Both a solid and a liquid at once, glaciers are interstitial places. What the early moderns called *Mare Congelatum* ('Frozen Sea') is really the congealed sea: to *congeal* literally means 'to freeze together.' Though frozen, things paradoxically move: they flow, harden, dissolve and then congeal with other substances. Icescapes are mixtures of human and nonhuman things, 'feedback' flows of sedimented bodies that fuse with one another as they move through the icescape. Ice *is* matter flows.⁴ As we will see, ice is catastrophic at times – a monstrous hull piercer – but it also slips up bodies and takes them to new desires across its translucent sluices.

Composing Ice

An iceman cometh: Martin Frobisher, the uneducated pirate-turned-navy officer who sought riches and fame in northern climes. Major players backed Frobisher's three voyages to modern-day Baffin Island from 1576–1578: Sir Humphrey Gilbert, explorer and Author of *A Discourse of a Discoverie for a New Passage to Cataia* (1566), promoted the idea in court; John Dee, the mystical polymath, invented nautical instruments and provided the maps and navigation techniques; Michael Lok, the London agent for the Muscovy Company, supplied money and stockholder support. Ellis was onboard Frobisher's flagship the *Aid* during the third voyage of 1578. Hopes were high. After his return, Ellis wrote a dedicatory poem 'in praise of Maister Martine Frobisher,' in which he compares his captain to the mythical Jason:

The glittering fleece that he doth bring,
in value sure is more,
Than Iasons was, or Alcides fruite,
whereof was made suche store. (Ellis, 1578)

All in all, the results of the three voyages were far from 'glittering': Frobisher hauled home a thousand tons of worthless black rock thought to contain gold, initiated harmful relations with the native Inuit, mapped no recognizable passage and constructed an Arctic colony that was almost immediately abandoned. Litigation, scandal and insolvency plagued the principal venturers over the following years. Frobisher died fighting the Spanish in 1594; he claimed, or at least others claimed for him, that the Mistaken Strait (Hudson Strait) was the passage to Cathay.

To read Ellis's narrative is to question the sincerity of his introductory praise. Like other contemporary accounts of the third voyage, Ellis describes the monstrous icescape in terrifying detail. The legendary place known as Friseland, for instance, is especially intimidating: 'There we might also perceive the great

Isles of yce lying on the seas, like mountaines, some small, some bigge, of sundrie kindes shapes, and such a number of them, that we coulde not come neere the shoare for them' (Ellis, 1578). Approaching his destination, Ellis (1578) feels fenced in: 'the yce being round about vs, and inclosing vs, as it were within the pales of a Parke'. This 'Parke' is not a bucolic place. The company is enlimned, enclosed and hopelessly claustrophobic. 'Thus the yce comming on vs so fast, we were in great danger, looking euerie houre for death. And thus passed we on in that great danger, seeing both our selves, and the rest of our ships so troubled and tossed amongst the yce, that it woulde make the strongest heart to relent' (Ellis, 1578). They narrowly escape a hoartempest on Bear Sound. Irretrievably 'plunged in... perplexitie' of icy flux, he and his weary companions are forced to fend off the ice: 'the yce had so enuironed vs, that we could see neither land, nor Sea, as farre as we could kenne' (Ellis, 1578).

Eventually, the Bear Sound storm abates and Ellis (1578) 'prais[es] God for [their] deliuerance'. At their moment of salvation, Ellis composes several sketches of a tabular iceberg as seen from all sides (Figure 1).

The storm literally delivers him to new ways of perceiving ice. As if strangely attracted to his vanquished enemy, he renders the iceberg for us in both word and picture:

And as we thus lay off an on, we came by a maruellous huge mountaine of yce, which surpassed all the rest that euer we sawe: for we iudged him to be neere a foure score fadams aboute water, and we thought him to be

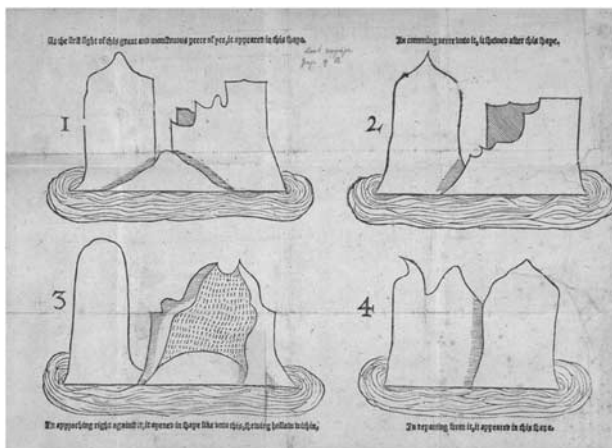


Figure 1: Thomas Ellis's sketches from *A True Report*.

1. At the first sight of this great and monstrous peece of yce, it appeared in this shape.
2. In comming neere unto it, it shewed after this shape.
3. In approaching right against it, it opened in shape like unto this, shewing hollow within.
4. In departing from it, it appeared in this shape.

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a ground for any thing that we could perceue, being there nine score fadams deepe, and of compasse about halfe a mile, of which Island I haue, as neere as I coulde, drawne and here set downe the true proportion, as he appeared in diuerse shapes passing alongest by him. (Ellis, 1578)

The attraction is a nervous one. Even as he draws close, the ice remains harmful like a wounded beast. The caption to the first drawing calls it a ‘great and monstrous peece of yce.’ However, as Ellis draws nearer to it, the ice loses its bite. His second, third and fourth sketches involve careful attention to detail instead of quick judgment. As he nears the iceberg, he discovers a hollow cavity – or rather an entryway – shown in sketch three. Neglecting its ice mazes, Ellis moves on. Significantly, he is the only one moving, ‘passing alongest by him.’ The monolithic form of the fourth sketch clearly illustrates Ellis’s rejection. He might have noticed the iceberg’s hollow cavity as a way to assert his own strength. Eviscerating the ice’s body is a way to gauge and control the icescape by avoiding the complexities of the human-nonhuman relationship. The ‘true proportion’ Ellis describes does just that: he undercuts the immensity of the iceberg by transferring it to a small page in a book he carries. He condenses ice’s monstrous size into something manageable. The sketchbook becomes a method of escape. Ellis’s act of composition, the drawing of ice on the page, is a means to compose his frightened senses in a harsh icescape. Moreover, his composition is avowedly human. He is writing about ice, not letting it glance, pass through or slip him.

As Ellis dwells on the ‘maruellous’ aspect of the ‘huge mountaine of yce,’ however, his report displays the briefest desire for the icescape. There can be no ‘true proportion’ of the iceberg, of course, since ice endlessly changes shapes. Ice itself is diversity in ‘diuerse shapes.’ The ‘maruellous’ shape-shifting power of icebergs powerfully amazes the viewer as well. The mutability of the ice island is part of its splendor and its mystery demands a type of love for and with the physical world. Ellis’s sketches are acts of shared life overtly denied. Yet, he must go to the iceberg to know his opponent. Ellis performs an icy ingesis; his artistic interpretation of the iceberg leads him into, not out of, its cavernous domain. It is in the third sketch – when ‘approching right against it’ – that the iceberg opens to him. The caption describes a moment of proximity, perhaps even of touch: to feel right *against* something and not simply *against* it antagonistically. Crucially, Ellis ‘against’ the iceberg narrates the physical mingling of human and nonhuman. Perhaps he felt something shockingly familiar when ‘against’ the ice, or maybe, like a lonely creature, the ice yearned for his embrace. Ellis anthropomorphizes the iceberg as if making its acquaintance: the ice is not always a creature, an ‘it,’ but is gendered as a male ‘him’ as well. But by ‘passing alongest by him,’ Ellis also passes on his chance to fully go glacial, to realize the pleasurable potential of two beings in mixture rather than ontological players on polarized sides. The opportunity

dissolves. The ice closes in the fourth sketch. His report is finished. Ellis leaves, 'departing from it' forever.

Do we? Returning to Ellis's opening poem, he surely doubted the 'value' of the English enterprise at these unbelievably cold moments. The crew's icy errancy holds much more 'value' in 'store' for us than we first imagined. If we revisit 'Iasons' path, a newer mode of non/human composition appears. As Michel Serres writes in *The Five Senses*, 'Do not seek to know how to look at a landscape – compose a garden instead. Go visiting' (Serres, 2008, 239). Composition is not patient observation of a visible landscape but a place of creativity. For Serres, to visit *is* to compose. He makes this connection via personal experience; his own countryside ramblings prove that the page of the book is inextricable from the *pagi* of the land: 'Pages do not sleep in language, they draw their life from the *pagi*: from the countryside, the flesh and the world' (Serres, 2008, 238). In their shared lives, pages, flesh and landscape compose together in a writerly coexistence. Thus, the geographer is one who both writes about the landscape and is part of a 'fleshy' conjunction with a sensual world. The earth is always writing about itself:

Carried away by torrents and their own weight, halted by obstacles or their own shape, stones descend and break, carve into the talweg the long path of their fall or movement. Masses of sand, driven by the wind, file away at the mountain. Ice cracks and breaks stones and trees, cliffs and the earth on the plain, as does drought. Who is writing? Water, snow, the return to gentler weather, ophite, granite, equilibrium, density, energy, sun, flora and fauna. This covers, that stains. On what do they write? On snow and water, on fauna or flora, on marble or ice. What the earth displays results from the wrinkles it gives itself. A page. (Serres, 2008, 275)

'Who is writing?' Composition, that common task of human writing (indeed of my very own essay here) suddenly is no longer precisely human. Serres's idea of visiting proves that composition is an ecomaterial exercise; like the carved pathways or 'talwegs' a glacier makes in the icescape, our bodies too are carved in a process of co-composition. As the earth writes, we contain its traces on our skin, as do the skins (pages) of the subsequent narratives we write that describe our experience.

Ellis takes Serres's invitation to visit-compose to new territory. For what is the *pagos* (a Greek word meaning 'ice') if not also a *page*? Ellis desires distance from ice, both spatially and ontologically. Nevertheless, his 'maruellous' illustrations in fact illustrate the compositional abilities of living ice. His narrative of the Northwest Passage is a product of glacial composition since the marks of glaciality are the *pages* themselves. Ice *graphs* (or 'writes') just as it *scapes* (or 'creates'). *A True Report* is a true pagographical text. Ellis is not escaping ice through his art as much as he is *scaped* by ice. The ice inserts itself,

'gets inside us' (Lopez, 1986, 411) and collaborates. Ice creates new openings and desires by composing with the human. Ellis's multivalent 'against' models the prepositions any writer may take with ecomaterial. There cannot be 'true proportion,' just endless perspectives, horizons and positions. Composition's greatest contribution is the promise of the *com-*: the ability to truly 'live with' things. Have we forgotten our true sense of composure? What positions may we take *with* things in composition? Visiting ice islands – composing with them, through them – is the lesson lost on Ellis but not on us. We can revisit the desires in and of the icescape. Pagophilia can be a peacemaker, an act of love. We can trace how the (ice) world composes us. What other permutations and shapes await us for the love of ice?

The Ice Age Is Never Over

Ellis's island returns us to the meshwork of connections that icescapes form – of shifting archipelagos, of slips and slides into unknown mixtures, of *going glacial*. Once we understand ice as a lively composer, and not just some passive *pagi* waiting to be written about, the icescape cracks open, and more irenic ways of composure with and within a cold world emerge. Even now, glaciologists question whether or not we have passed the end of the last Ice Age. The accepted view is that the most recent Ice Age, the Pleistocene Epoch, began 1.0–1.5 million years ago and ended 10–11 thousand years ago, giving way to the Holocene Epoch we live in today. Another opinion is that we may be in what is called an 'interglacial interval' – the warmth between glacial phases – instead. The *inter* of the interglacial is significant. Ellis lived during a long duration of cold weather called the Little Ice Age (c. 1350–1800). The place of the human in the vastness of glacial time is relative to being always in the middle, in between and going with material flows. True, Frobisher never 'dissolved the long doubt of the passage' (Best, 1578, 20). But the reality of the Northwest Passage is that it is not a navigable passage. Rather, it is a multitude of passages, a series of interchanges where ice passes through bodies as bodies pass through it. The Ice Age is never over; glaciality is our reality.

And we are still passing through. But how can we acknowledge catastrophes – and hopefully prevent future ones – while discovering the more collaborative connections that going glacial entails for humans and nonhumans alike? We could start by re-examining the living and desirable connections with ice. We would do better by responding to the calls of glacial things. Besides Arctic rocks, Frobisher took another trophy – an Inuit man, kayak and all – back with him to England. The rest is silence. The key is to remain in the disorienting ice maze, to cohabit a glacier's flowing dynamics, Serres's icy image of reality: 'a sort of fluctuating picture of relations and rapports – like the percolating basin of a glacial river' (Serres and Latour, 1995, 105). To this day, the Arctic Circle is one

of the few places in the world we have not fully sounded. When we enter this basin that we can plumb but never fully understand, we enter into new relationships with the cryosphere. Early modern Arctic writers prove that both fears and joys may be found on white horizons. Ellis reminds us that passages still open, that non/human mixtures are always flowing down glacial expressways – somewhere, everywhere – into uncertain futures and Arctic dreams...

* * *

...of shrieking vitriol blue

In addition to stopping the *Judith's* leak with a side of beef, Edward Fenton is known for a log he kept of Frobisher's third voyage. The typical torments of ice are here: 'All the night there was but smale stoore of ize about us, but Middaie we were so daungerfullie environed therewith, that there appeared no waie for us to gett owt of them... The ize were so monstrous that some of them were by estimacion an acour broode and verie deepe in the water, so that we laie in verie greate daunger' (Fenton, 2001, 35). It is hard to imagine the English finding composure in the environing icescape. What is atypical, however, is Fenton's, description of a frigid English dreamscape. Captain Courtney dreams of his own drowning, 'and so troubled therewith in his sleepe, that he cried with such lowdnes, Iesus have mercie upon me' (Fenton, 2001, 46). Similarly, Best narrates a vision that eerily comes true. On the return journey of the second voyage, the boatswain and master of the *Gabriell* are swept overboard: 'Thys mayster... William Smyth... who beeing all the morning before exceeding pleasaunte, tolde hys captayne hee dreamed that he was cast overboorde, and that the boateson hadde hym by the hande, and could not save hym, and so immediately uppon the ende of hys tale, hys dreame came right evelly to passe' (Best, 1578, 35). Both of these dreams reinforce the dangers of the 'evell' icescape. Ice penetrates the English mind in disastrous ways. Courtney fortunately survives; Smith's country of the mind in fact swallows him. The sinking feeling imagined here is not a positive place of transformation, but a chilling ice tomb. Their Arctic dreams are really Arctic nightmares.

* * *

...of quick and living blue

On his first trip to Alaska in 1879, John Muir and his friends leave the town of Wrangell and travel up the coast to Chilcat country. On board the steamship Cassiar, Muir convinces his companions to take an indirect route back, hoping they might venture into the fiords and the various glaciers they have hitherto

observed only from a distance. The party sets out. Cautiously approaching a glacial wall, Muir (2002, 52) notices the others' reactions: 'The doctor simply played tag on it, touched it gently as if it were a dangerous wild beast'. Ice touches back with a bite. Muir's (2002, 52) touch-and-go is stimulating; as he follows the 'glorious crystal wall', he patiently climbs almost 700 feet. He finds himself in a labyrinth of feeling: 'The whole front of the glacier is gashed and sculptured into a maze of shallow caves and crevasses... simmering and throbbing in pale-blue tones of ineffable tenderness and beauty' (Muir, 2002, 52). The glacier is a vibrating, vibrant thing – perhaps even erotic. The ice is an exuberant creature: 'many streams were rejoicing, gurgling, ringing, singing, in frictionless channels worn down through the white disintegrated ice of the surface into the quick and living blue' (Muir, 2002, 52–53). Muir touches the living blue and a new world cracks open. It is at this sensual moment with ice that he hears what the glacier has to say: 'the world, though made, is yet being made; that this is still the morning of creation' (Muir, 2002, 53). The Arctic produces sensational dreams of creation in addition to destruction. We cannot avoid the night terrors of Courtney and Smith, but we cannot diminish the exultancies of Muir, either. The touch of *living* blue sponsors new ways of dreaming about cryospheric connections between skin, heart and mind. Of composing, and living, well...

* * *

And do you dream? said the creature to Captain Walton before he plunged back into the Arctic night (Shelley, 1992, 222).

And do you dream?

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About the Author

Lowell Duckert is an Assistant Professor of English at West Virginia University. His interests include early modern travel literature and drama, ecocriticism and actor-network theory. He has forthcoming articles on Walter Raleigh, rain, swamps and the color maroon (E-mail: Lowell.Duckert@mail.wvu.edu).

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Article Fire

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen^a and Stephanie Trigg^b

^aDepartment of English, George Washington University, Washington, DC.

^bSchool of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne, Victoria.

Abstract This essay follows the complicated aftermath of the agency of fire in medieval Iceland and contemporary Australia. Through a close reading of two Norse sagas, we argue that despite fire's ephemeral nature its material effects are as evident in texts as they are in landscapes.

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O for a Muse of fire that would ascend/the brightest heaven of invention, etc.
– William Shakespeare, Henry V

A traveler, well versed in the old law and the old writings of distant countries, set out in the summer season with his family and traveled so far and so swiftly to the southern lands that winter still held. He met a fellow traveler and her family, and she was also versed in the old law and the old writings of other countries. They spoke together of two islands, Iceland and Australia, both girt by sea, as the old song says¹ – and both criss-crossed with fire, and with stories of fire.

1 'Australians all let us rejoice,/For we are young and free;/We've golden soil and wealth for toil;/Our home is girt by sea': National Anthem

A Story of Fire

Twelve men warm themselves round flames in a tempest-battered hall. Beer and companionship help to forget the storm. A troll bursts through the door, his

garments made of ice. They attack the creature with sticks pulled from the blaze. The next morning where the hall once stood was seen only ‘a huge pile of ashes, and in the ashes were many human bones.’²

A Second Fire Story

Convinced by his companions, merchants who fear they will die without fire, Grettir strips to his tunic and swims across a stormy harbor towards a blaze. Encrusted in icicles, he enters with a tub to convey some logs and is attacked immediately. The straw on the floor ignites as Grettir departs. When the merchants sail to seek their benefactors the next day, they find only ‘a huge pile of ashes, and in the ashes were many human bones’ (38).

This diptych of narrative perspectives is kindled by dual points of view resident within a fourteenth-century Icelandic text. *Grettir’s Saga* is an intricately interwoven story of a warrior who had the misfortune to be born as the Viking Age dwindled into homesteads, mercantile endeavors and scuffles over driftage rights. Grettir is from his youth exceptional in size and strength. The son of a farmer, he finds himself too large to be contained by a pastoral frame. As skilled in fashioning incendiary verse as in brawling, at home neither among men nor monsters, Grettir is also a loner who too late learns the strength that inheres in family and companionship. The unknown author of the saga nestles the two narratives of Grettir stealing fire within each other, textual matryoshka. The episode unfolds shortly after Grettir has defeated the murderous revenant Glam, who every winter invades a farmhouse to shatter the bones of any foolish enough to slumber within. Through the eyes of the 12 men on the Norwegian shore, icy Grettir bursting into their revel is Glam at Thorhallstead. Only the next day will Grettir realize what he and the fire have sparked. Thorir of Gard, the father of two of the incinerated men, prosecutes Grettir relentlessly, has him pronounced outlaw and strives to bring about his death. Grettir’s decapitation on the lonely island of Drangey is the culmination, almost 20 years later, of the chain of events sparked by his stealing fire in Norway. His doom comes about when fire is needed during a storm, when a shelter by the sea has its door broken by a hall invader – only this time it is Grettir who has built the flame and dwells inside, and Grettir who perishes.

Grettir’s Saga unfolds with slow precision and intricate perspectivism. Stories recur with subtle changes or are retroactively transformed as they become the fabric of the past. Few details go to waste. The saga intertwines brooding with exuberance, innovation with the return of the same, beauty with brutality. Yet despite the capaciousness of its geographical, historical and diegetical ambits, *Grettir’s Saga* reveals the anthropocentric limits of all texts. The tale of the stolen fire is narrated from Grettir’s point of view as well as that of the men

of Australia, Peter Dodds McCormick, 1878, rev. 1984.

2 *Grettir’s Saga*, Byock 2009; references by chapter number (here, 38). For the Icelandic, see the edition of Jónsson (1936).



within the besieged hall. As Skapti the lawman says before rendering judgment on Grettir's deed, 'a story is always half told if only one side speaks' (46). But isn't there a third side, a nonhuman one? What about the jetties of land that anchor the narrative, the rocky places of refuge without which the men would have been swept to a cold death? What of the sea that swells and pummels, the ice and hail that immobilize through relentless bombardment? The perturbed air that with its gusts menaces one group, and cannot lessen the merriment of another, secure from its bite? What of the fire that shimmers across the harbor, that warms and consumes the hall, the flame transported across the waves?

No less than incinerated sailors, tiresome merchants and unlucky warriors, fire possesses its own story. Flames that reduce timbers to ash and men to bone exert material as well as narrative agency: as the transmutation of substance; the combustive vanishing of alternative endings, of tales that might have been; as the ignition of narrative chains that will end in Grettir's death. Human actors in the saga jostle with a swarm of nonhuman characters: glaciers, blizzards, ships, whales, swords, spears, horses, mountains, stark islands. Even humans become objects of a sort, sometimes walking in death, moving like animals, forming their uncanny alliances with subterranean spaces or the shimmer of the moon behind winter clouds. These objects and elements are active, effective, affective, powerful. They have tales to tell.

Fire History

Émilie Hache and Bruno Latour have asked what would happen if 'storms, heat waves, and glaciers taking shape or changing shape before our eyes' – all the elements that roil our ecologies – had the power to 'compel us to remix science and politics,' to rethink with slow care our relations to materiality, this time with less anthropocentricity, less moral certitude (Hache and Latour, 2010, 323)? When the world is figured as a wilderness alien to us, a collection of resources for mastery and profligate consumption, then its elements become that against which we build a house and hope the door holds firm. Yet if with these same forces we devise modes of deliberative coinhabitation, we will better discern and esteem the relations that bind us to the destructive and creative powers of the nonhuman. An environmental ethics is best fostered not by certainty and prescription but through hesitation and tentative connection, a carefulness cultivated through multifarious rather than comfortably anthropocentric narratives. Even a force as seemingly insubstantial as fire burns with a power to illuminate this material domain.

Earth, air and water are easy elements for story. Durable collections of molecules, minerals and other composites, their materiality is blunt. Fire is a fleeting force, seldom stubborn, never tangible. *Ardent* signifies burning, desirous, fervent. Texts incised upon rock endure epochs, but the lesson of the Ashburnham House blaze of 1731, which incinerated the Cotton library and singed the *Beowulf*

manuscript, is that fire consumes more easily than conveys a story. Flame signals a change in materiality and is not itself substantial. The combustive release of heat, light and sooty byproducts through rapid oxidation, fire is a chemical process, an action. Its sibling elements possess ample depths: the long ethereal rise from troposphere to exosphere, slow delve through lithic crust towards core; crushing marinal descent to the hadopelagic. Fire, however, is all surface. Different types exist (bushfire, campfire, house fire, hearth), with variations in intensity or origin or use, but there is little profundity to flame. In extreme conditions its touch reduces houses and forests to a flatness of ash as it passes through. Fire's intensity is as mesmeric as it is ephemeral.

Narratives of fire seem doomed to tracing mere aftermath. Yet Stephen J. Pyne has composed what he calls 'fire history,' a mode of ecological analysis attentive to material and biotic relations from the deep past in order to reimagine contemporary modes of ecological inhabitation. In a comprehensive series of volumes dubbed 'Cycle of Fire,' Pyne shows how landscapes that seem natural (autonomously balanced systems that prefer their own solitude) have been so profoundly altered by human-fire-biome confederation that to imagine they exist outside of such dynamic relation is to invite catastrophe. Early British settlers in Australia assumed Aboriginal people were setting fire to the bush with careless disregard. Expelling these communities from the lands that they cultivated through controlled burning left them vulnerable to severe wildfires. Aborigines knew that the phoenix-like eucalyptus seeks immolation by shedding its bark. To foster a sustainable ecoscape it is best to collaborate with these arboreal desires. Only after the bush was catastrophically ablaze did English settlers realize that the land they moved across was already being managed, a companionable collusion among humans, fire and vegetation that had engendered fairly stable biodiversity.³ Fire history illuminates the intimacies among humans, the elements and living ecosystems, stressing that the alliances constitutive of such expanses come about through the agency of all involved. Fire history cannot be anthropocentric because anthropogenic fire is only one participant, one perspective within this multifaceted tale. Pyne's apolitical critical method does not distinguish all that well among humans, scleromorphs like eucalyptus, and fire: all are self-adaptive and promiscuously symbiotic agents, acting in uncannily similar ways within the possibilities and constraints of the environment in which their actions unfold.

A fire history of *Grettir's Saga* starts with the fact that despite the preponderance of other elements in the story, flame impresses itself upon the narrative repeatedly. The text's landscapes are sweeping because they lack trees, an absence which, once recognized, renders the textual ecology of fire even more dramatic. By the time the story was written the island had long been deforested.⁴ For Icelanders firewood was a gift from the ocean, and driftage rights were (as the story stresses) worth killing to maintain. Its zeal for collaboration with humans and its power to radiate warmth determines the

3 Pyne (1991, 80). For the treatment of Aboriginal removal and decline of the native biota, see Pyne (1991, 126).

4 See Ashwell and Jackson (1970, 158–166), and Short (2010, 121–122).



5 See, for example, the explication of the day's igneous progress in Chapter 14.

architecture of many halls and houses where Grettir dwells. Fire is the gravitational force around which sleeping arrangements are organized and the daily progress of domestic chores arranged, integral to the structuration of inhabited spaces and the social relations that unfold within them.⁵ Fire is tangibly present throughout the text, frustrating or intensifying narrative action. A supernatural blaze directs Grettir to the grave of Kar the Old, the undead walker through whom he will gain his beloved short sword (18). A homely flame guides Grettir back to a farm rescued from berserkers, suddenly illuminating his early heroic potential (19). As Grettir awaits the arrival of undead Glam, a fire burns through the night. The fight that follows is a choreography of shadow and luminosity, culminating in Glam's curse that Grettir forever fear the dark (35). Fire must be his constant companion to make life bearable. Glam's body, meanwhile, is incinerated to 'cold ash' so that he will not return. Grettir's theft of fire from the startled seafarers is the saga's pivotal moment, a crime that two decades later will cause his death (38). He is supposed to prove his innocence through the ordeal of carrying glowing iron, but Grettir's fiery disposition ruins the chance (39). He is outlawed for 'house-burning' for 20 years (46). We are not often told what Grettir carries besides his beloved short sword, but we do glimpse him moving with a kettle and fire flint (61). Both the troll-plagued farm at Sandhaugar and the cave where the monsters dwell are lit by blazes. Despite their dining on human flesh, the trolls possess a startling domesticity that connects them back to the homestead, which they are farming for its meat. Fire illuminates a disturbing similarity between the habitations.

Grettir spends his last days on the island of Drangey. A sorceress inscribes runes upon 'a tree trunk with the roots attached' (79) and reddens those letters with her blood. The driftwood makes its way against the current to the island, vividly demonstrating the agency of objects in this saga. Each time Grettir pushes the log to sea it beaches itself again. During a storm his slave gathers the importunate firewood, and Grettir chops the limb without recognition. When his axe glances off its side and slashes his leg, he knows a curse has been activated. Not long afterward, weak with fever, Grettir is attacked. His enemies burst through the door and sever his head (82). All the elements that attended Grettir's initial crime of house-burning return at a death that in some ways replays the scene.

Fire is a quiet principal in *Grettir's Saga*. The relations flame forms and fosters enable the slow unfolding of an environmental awareness in which humans are not lonely actors or masters of the ecosystems they inhabit. Human relationships with active materialities engender complicated narratives of living together in a difficult world, one in which the future may not be easy to discern but the prospects are numerous: an ethics of composition rather than imposition. This perspectivism is so potentially multiple, in fact, that fire must retain an ultimate mystery: story cannot domesticate its elementality. Once we

recognize this incapacity, it is easier to acknowledge the limitations of our attempts to make a coherent narrative about our world-making activities. Graham Harman writes, ‘No one sees any way to speak about the interaction of fire and cotton, since philosophy remains preoccupied with the sole relational gap between humans and the world.’⁶ We have a difficult time imagining a world that does not exist for us, one in which objects enjoy their own relations, or withdraw into unreachability. Yet there must remain a story of fire that *Grettir’s Saga* can never tell, since narrative cannot capture flame in its inhuman fullness, only in those combusive parts made known through the ardent relations we discern. Although fire’s story largely depends upon human survival and narrative (Grettir and the merchants read a tale from ashes and bone after combustion’s vanishing), fire also moves through a nonhuman world that renders it more than a chemical process or an anthropocentric story. Life-sustaining and perilous, alliance-seeking and diffident, fire is complicated, ambivalent, contradictory. The Icelandic word for fire (*eldr*) is the same as the past participle of the verb for having grown old, while *eldi* is the term for procreation and birth; *eldr* is used in designations for dawn as well as lightning; a hall or its sitting room is *eldhús* [‘fire-house’]; *eldibrandr* is firewood, *eldsuppkváma*, a volcano’s eruption, and *eldtinna* is flint Cleasby and Vigfusson (1874, 110–111). There must remain in fire stories and possibilities unknown to those who play with it: potentials never exhausted, concealed spaces where fire smolders or flares indifferent to a world of warriors and merchants and driftwood and curses, where fire remains fiercely itself.

6 Harman (2007, 188).

Fire will not remain encompassed by the hearth’s circle. As the unintended blaze ignited by Grettir makes clear, left to its volition fire will seek unceasing incendiary relation. Flames spread, engendering transformative and lethal connection. We inhabit our world through ancient and new alliances with fire, yet human intentions and human stories can never circumscribe flame, even if they may domesticate its intensity for a while.

A Story of Burnt Njal

Then they came with fire and started a great blaze in front of the doors.

Skarphedin said, ‘Building a fire, boys? Are you going to cook something?’

Grani answered, ‘That’s right, and it’ll be as hot as you need for baking.’

Skarphedin spoke: ‘This is how you reward me for avenging your father – you’re the kind of man who places greater value on a lesser duty.’

The women then poured whey on the flames and put them out. (219)⁷



7 Translations from *Njal's Saga* are from Cook (2001), cited by page number.

A Second Story of Burnt Njal

They took the chickweed and set fire to it, and the people inside did not notice it until flames started coming down all over the hall. Then Flosi and his men started big fires in front of all the doors. The women inside started to suffer badly.

Njal spoke to them: 'Bear this bravely and don't express any fear, for it's only a brief storm, and it will be a long time before we have another like it. Have faith that God is merciful, and that he will not let us burn both in this world and in the next' (220).

Starting fires

Just as our essay begins with several blazes from *Grettir's Saga*, then loops around the world, so too this second half begins with fire stories from *Njal's Saga* and brings discussion back to recent debates about Australian fire history and management. The 'starting' of fire (when, where, why and by whom?) thus becomes a key theme in this joint meditation on fire's agency. Jeffrey has evoked the lambency of fire, its ephemeral materiality. One of the signs of that fleetingness is the difficulty of identifying the temporal or narrative point at which any given fire begins. Even the most traumatic fire in the Old Norse sagas, the most debated, the most clearly foreseen and the most deliberately lit – the burning of Njal's house – has already begun, off stage, when Flosi's men bring *this* fire from one that is already alight: 'they came with fire and started a great blaze.'

The fire that burns Njal, his house and his family, is rehearsed many times before Flosi's men start it in retribution for the killing of Hoskuld. In the first half of the saga, for example, Gunnar's house is burnt down in a way that links the two parts of the narrative. Several omens also presage the second fire. Hildiglum, for example, witnesses a 'witch-ride' (*gandreið*): a vision of a man riding a grey horse through a ring of fire, and throwing his burning torch into the mountains, whereupon 'such a great flame sprang up that he could no longer see the mountains' (215). The man speaks a verse that concludes: 'Flosi's plans are like a flung torch. Flosi's plans are like a flung torch.' Even this vision cannot show an unequivocal starting-point for fire. The man carries a flaming torch; he rides *in* a ring of fire; he sings of a flung torch; he flings his own torch and yet the fire itself, grammatically, still claims its own paratactic agency: 'such a great flame sprang up' (*hlaupa upp eldur mikill*). This prophetic vision, causing Hildiglum to swoon for a long time, nevertheless takes place on the night of the Lord's day: fire is framed but uncontained by a range of pagan, Christian, natural and domestic contexts.

All summer long, too, an old woman who can foretell the future has been scolding and abusing the pile of chickweed lying next to the house, predicting it will be used to burn Njal and her foster-daughter Bergthora, nagging everyone that it should be put in water or burnt, or brought inside. Skarphedin laughs at her, and invokes fate: if it's not the chickweed, something else will be used to light the fire. Yet in light of the old woman's reprimand it is difficult not to see

the chickweed, like the driftwood log in *Grettir's Saga*, as an active participant in a story with a fatal culmination.

In contrast, when Njal speaks to comfort the women as the house fills with smoke, he evokes the flames they are about to endure in terms borrowed from a heroic ethos that underplays suffering: 'Don't express any fear; it's only a brief storm.' Njal then makes a swift transition from this understated approach of heroic stoicism to the terms of Christian eschatology: if we suffer burning here, God will hardly send us to hell. Njal and his family have recently converted to Christianity, after Olaf Tryggvason's missionary, Thangbrand, has travelled to Iceland from Norway. One of the most successful events of Thangbrand's mission to Iceland was to bless a fire that a mad berserk was then unable to pass through (179). Icelandic fire is consistently coded as domestic, or as a marker of thresholds, but this story is another indication of fire's capacity to act as a kind of hinge, or switching-point, between different cultural and religious regimes, a feature it shares with Australian fire.

Flosi says explicitly that burning the house would be 'a great responsibility before God, for we're Christian men. Still, that is the course we must take' (219). Before setting out on the fateful journey, he asks all his men to go to church with him to pray (215). In these complex layers of fatalism and Christian responsibility we can hear several centuries of historical change, and several competing cultural contexts, the multiple temporalities of eleventh-century events composed and recorded in the fourteenth century.

A further exchange between Flosi and Njal's family, quoted above, juxtaposes the domestic and the 'heroic' use of fire. Skarpedin and Njal's other sons are already in the house; and Flosi's men must now be careful to surround it in case there is a secret exit, 'otherwise it's death for us,' as he warns his men against the Njalssons' revenge (218). Skarpedin teases them with insolent abuse about their misplaced domesticity: 'Are you going to cook something?' Grani returns the threat, but Skarphedin instantly changes register and accuses Grani of unethical and unwarranted behavior. The dispute is then returned to more practical domesticity, as the nameless women quench the flames with whey.

As an older man, Njal takes no part in the fighting (like the sons of Thorir in *Grettir's Saga*, his sons are furiously throwing burning beams as a mode of attack). Flosi offers Bergthora, Njal's wife, safe passage from the burning house, but she refuses.

Bergthora spoke: 'I was young when I was given to Njal, and I promised him that one fate should await us both.'

Then the two of them went back in.

Bergthora said, 'What are we to do now?'

Njal answered, 'We will go to our bed and lie down.' (221)



Berghthora tells her grandson Thord, the son of Kari, who will escape and pursue vengeance, that he should leave, and in turn he reminds her of her promise that they will never be parted: ‘and so it must be, for I think it much better to die with you’ (221). Njal tells the foreman to cover the three of them in the bed with the skin of an ox, and they lie down together, the boy in the middle. ‘They crossed themselves and the boy and were heard no more’ (221). Skarpedin sees this and says, ‘Our father has gone to bed early, which is to be expected – he’s an old man’ (222).

After the fire, when Flosi and his men go through the burnt house, they find Njal’s body unburned, and his countenance ‘radiant’ (230), or *bjartur*, as if his body, saint-like, has been preserved from the flames: ‘They all praised God for this and thought it a great miracle’ (230). At the same time there is a material or domestic explanation in the oxhide coverlet. The little boy, however, had stuck his finger out from under the hide and it was burnt off. Skarpedin’s death similarly cathects heroic and Christian ideals. He ends up jammed against the gable wall when the roof collapses, and when his body is found afterwards it is burned up to the knees, the rest unblemished with the exception of two crosses, on his chest, and between his shoulder: ‘people thought he had probably burned these marks himself’ (230). His eyes are open, resolutely facing his death, and perhaps his God.

These and other episodes illuminate the contradictory cultural affiliations of fire in the saga. At a narrative level, moreover, they reveal the disparity between the dramatic immediacy of a fire in the text’s *récit* and the ongoing appearance and disappearance of fire, of this fire, of all fires, in the text’s *histoire*, as the fire is so clearly foreshadowed, and also leaves its burnt scars on the bodies and minds of those who live through the trauma or who mourn the dead. As we have seen, the *starting* of fire can be hard to pinpoint. The *ending* of fire seems clearer, when, for example, the women inside pour whey on the flames and quench them, or when the house has cooled sufficiently for the bodies to be brought out and identified. Nevertheless, fire lives on in trauma, in memory and in rhetoric. Flosi suffers nightmares after the event. Kari, who escapes the burning of his father’s house, can no longer sleep:

Sleep shuns my eyes, Ull
Of the elm-string, all night;
I recall the man
who craved shields set with rings.
In autumn the blazing
sword-trees burned Njal at home;

since then the harm done me

has dwelt in my mind. (232)

Here yet another source of the fire is mentioned, in ‘the blazing sword-trees’. ‘Sword-trees’ – *brandviðir brenndu* – is a kenning for ‘warriors’ but they themselves are characterized as blazing, perhaps as they bring fire to the house.⁸

The saga ‘world’ we read about here is constituted by layers of cultural, social and religious understanding and affiliation. Fire has a similarly uncanny capacity to transform and be transformed; to be both subject and object; and to move, if not live, beyond the moments when it burns most brightly. It burns usefully in the hearth, offering comfort and security, but it burns balefully in the roof; it is thrown into the mountains, yet seems to start itself; it generates fearful anticipation and traumatic aftermath; it is the sign of Christian martyrdom and sanctification; it is the medium of fate. To consider the agency of fire requires contemplating its material, historical and cultural conditions, as well as the narrative structures that hold these things together.

This layered and mixed understanding finds a curious parallel, as we have suggested, in the unlikely comparison between Icelandic and Australian fire. We acknowledge that a comprehensive history of fire in both countries is beyond the scope of this essay, but we think that contemporary debates about fire management and the historical interpretation of fire in Australia can help us draw some conclusions about the historicity and the cultural specificity of its material agency. Pyne’s *Burning Bush* shows how indigenous fire practice exercised a degree of control and understanding over what seemed to European settlers an almost uncontrollable environment. Bill Gammage’s recent study, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia*, makes an even stronger argument, proposing that Indigenous people used different kinds of strategic burns to move animals, to encourage and discourage certain kinds of plants in ‘mosaic’ patterns, region by region, according to terrain, climate and vegetation. Gammage’s thesis, signaled by his seemingly anachronistic title, is contentious, as it implies a kind of fire-management plan, a universal Indigenous system structured by social and regional groups and religious, totemic affiliations with flora and fauna, and extending harmoniously over the entire landmass – the jarring ‘estate’ of the title renders all of Australia an enclosure – despite the many different tribal and language groups. This form of management that ‘made’ the landscape as European settlers found it in 1788, would also have extended temporally, over hundreds of years, given the long life cycle of the eucalyptus. Gammage comments: ‘This system could hardly have land boundaries. There could not be a place where it was practised, and next to it a place where it wasn’t. Australia was inevitably a single estate, albeit with many managers’ (Gammage, 2011b). The implications for fire-management in Australia are profound, and fiercely contested in an era of observable climate change.

8 Kemrat, Ullr, um
alla,/ álmsíma, mér
grímu,/ beðhlíðar
man eg beiði/
bauga, svefn á
augu,/ síð
brandviðir
brenndu/ böðvar
nausts á hausti,/ eg
er að mínu meini
minnigr, Níal inni.

Not all agree that Indigenous fire-practices were so systematic or uniform over the last 50 000 years, however. Scott Mooney's recent study of fossilized charcoal – one of fire's long-term material traces – suggests that fires were more common 28 000–70 000 years ago; that they decreased until 18 000 years ago, at the height of the last ice age, and then dramatically increased again about 200 years ago, after European settlement (Kamenev, 2010). Mooney suggests that Australia's fire history is influenced more by global fire and climate change than Indigenous practice. However, in the same article in *Australian Geographic*, Scott Heckbert suggests charcoal may not be a reliable indicator, as it picks up traces only of large scale fires, not the smaller spot fires associated with traditional Aboriginal practice (Kamenev, 2010). As we write, there is further debate about how to manage burn-offs, and whether, for example, the target of 5 per cent bush burnoff in the state of Victoria (about the size of England) is even possible, let alone suitable to be applied overall.

These historical debates possess policy dimensions that stretch across ecology, ethics, criminology and religion. Their most contentious issues are concerned with motivation and agency. Which authority should take responsibility for fire-management, either for back-burning to *prevent* fires, or to manage emergencies? How do we balance the need to protect houses, farms and people while protecting the natural environment? Can people be forced to evacuate in an emergency? To what extent has climate change made a difference to fire patterns? Given fire's propensities, and the number of environmental variables, and the inherent mesh-like intricacy of every ecosystem, can fire ever really be managed? Against the best intentions of civic and state authorities, how can fire management practices mitigate against either natural forces, such as lightning, or mechanical forces like sparks from angle-grinders or backfiring vehicles that start fires; or the familiar phenomenon whereby fires are deliberately lit through malice or, indeed, an even darker motive. Sometimes fires are started by attention-seeking volunteer firefighters who then leap into action to defend communities they have put at risk. Like the fire in *Njal's Saga*, bushfires leave behind terrible trauma, while a marked increase in domestic violence, in families of victims and fire fighters alike, has recently been observed in the wake of the Black Saturday fires of 2009. Most fires in Australia, however, largely burn beyond human control.

In Australia questions about fire management also open up deep anxieties about race-relations, and the uneasy tension between Indigenous spirituality and the different ways different ethnic and cultural groups feel 'at home' in this country. Who knows the country best, traditional custodians or scientific advisers? Debate about fire-practices is inevitably played out in the conflicted context of Indigenous and settler history. These contexts clash most visibly in the 'welcome to country' that is increasingly offered by Indigenous leaders or elders on state, parliamentary, sporting and academic occasions. This welcome often finds resistance from those who reject any sense of Indigenous

custodianship of the land. 'We are all immigrants,' is the common complaint, 'no matter when we arrived here, fifty thousand or fifty years ago.' The welcome to country often involves a smoking ceremony, as leaves are burned to create purifying smoke: sometimes the smoke is simply wafted towards the people assembled; other times everyone walks through it, bringing the smoke into themselves as a purification.

Whether across the Norse sagas or through Australian history and politics, fire blazes with contested agency. Its apparent timelessness and continuity as an ecomaterial phenomenon is inescapably conjoined with competing cultural, social and spiritual regimes. Yet still fire burns, creating and destroying, composing and challenging, transforming and instituting. Through alliance with this element humans have transformed the world. Eden is supposed to be guarded by a fiery sword, but paradise turns out to have been always already reconfigured by flame. With fire we must imagine more just ways of coinhabiting the earth, and through these stories attend with slow care to the bonds that ally us with every element of which the world's vastness is composed.

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About the Authors

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen is Professor of English and Director of the Medieval and Early Modern Studies Institute at the George Washington University. He is the author of *Of Giants* (1999), *Medieval Identity Machines* (2003) and *Hybridity, Identity and Monstrosity* (2006). He is currently editing a collection entitled *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green* for the University of Minnesota Press (2013) (E-mail: jjcohen@gwu.edu).

Stephanie Trigg is Professor of English Literature at the University of Melbourne. She is the author of *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern* (2001) and *Shame and Honor: A Vulgar History of the Order of the Garter* (2012). She is a founding member of the Australian Research Council's Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions. Her research for the Centre is founded on emotions, the face, and the cultural histories of stone and fire, from medieval Europe to modern Australia (E-mail: sjtrigg@unimelb.edu.au).



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Article

Abyss: Everything is food

Karl Steel

Department of English, Brooklyn College, CUNY, Brooklyn, NY.

Abstract Medieval death poetry revels in the appetites that proliferate around corpses. Death may be an end for a subject, but the subject is also an object for the appetites of others, which will themselves eventually be food objects for others. Few medieval works show this so clearly as the *Disputation Between the Body and the Worms*, a debate poem in which a body finds itself at odds with its own edibility and the competing interests of its own biome. A crowd of worms finally convinces the body to give up her self-possession, and to realize that nothing, not humanity, not wealth, not beauty, will let vulnerability be ‘outsourced,’ for all appetites, bodies, and desires, human and otherwise, will be humbled by the appetites and desires of others.

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The abyss of abysses, it’s usually thought, is the ‘deepest pit’ (Job 17:16), into which, as one twelfth-century poem has it, the dead ‘ceciderunt in profundum ut lapides’ [‘fall into the depth like stones’] (quoted in Gray, 1972, 186).¹ Death drops us into the Inferno, Sheol, Tartarus, or Hades, places all etymologically or at least topographically associated with caverns or holes. Here the dead might be chewed and cooked perpetually in hell’s mouth or perhaps plucked out by God into eternal life. Being rescued requires, among other spiritual tasks, working up anticipatory nausea by meditating on fortune’s whirling wheel and flesh’s mortal weakness. Seven words from a sermon by Caesarius of Arles, spoken by a corpse, summarize the moral tradition: ‘vide pulverem meum,

1 My title comes from Henry Nilson’s song ‘Food, Food, Food,’ from the soundtrack to *Popeye*. Gratitude to the following for conversations,

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2 All translations are the author's, unless otherwise indicated.

et relinque desiderium malum' ['look at my dust, and abandon your evil desires']² (quoted in Woolf, 1968, 322). A millennium after Caesarius, a fifteenth-century tale imagines a wicked young ruler reformed by peering into his father's grave and seeing 'wormes and snakes etyng opon hym' ['worms and snakes eating him'] (quoted in Gray, 1972, 206–207). Disgusted at what he once admired, the ruler commissions a painting of the corpse, which he displays on his bedroom wall as a constant reminder to disdain all worldly glory. To escape this final abyss, only unchanging things should be valued, and brief pleasures – where 'brief' is measured against the span of a human life or human institutions – should be scorned.

A corner of Thomas de Quincey's criticism offers a model for thinking about death and abysses far less anthropocentrically and without the hope of an exit, for humans or anything else. In a note to an extended discussion of Dryden, de Quincey counters an inept critic's objection to Milton's 'and in the lowest deep a lower deep / still threatening to devour me opens wide' (Milton, *Paradise Lost*, IV.76–77). How, asks the critic, could the lowest deep have another deep beneath it? De Quincey explains: 'in cases of deep imaginative feeling, no phenomenon is more natural than precisely this never-ending growth of one colossal grandeur chasing and surmounting another, or of abysses that swallowed up abysses' (de Quincey, 1855, 293). For de Quincey, there is no one pit; no abyss can escape the appetite of another; and there is no ultimate abyss. Swallowing continues unceasingly.

De Quincey's vision of abyssal consumption, without center or end, presents abyssal appetites as a kind of *mise en abyme* of appetite. Andre Gide famously drew the term from 'the device of heraldry that consists in setting in the escutcheon a smaller one "en abyme," at the heart-point' (Gide, 2000, 30) to describe meta-representational redoubling, as in, he explained, *Hamlet's* play-within-a-play and the foreground canvass and background mirror in Velázquez's *Meniñas*. I adapt Gide's well-worn concept perhaps to the point of unrecognizability. For I want *mise en abyme* not to be understood as describing internal repetition. Nor should the term be understood here as a trope of foundationlessness or of the inaccessibility of any guarantee of meaning: *mise en abyme*, read this way, would remain 'correlationist,' the position derided by the object-oriented philosophers 'according to which one cannot think the in-itself without entering into a vicious circle, thereby immediately contradicting oneself' (Meillassoux, 2010, 5). Against a singularly anthropocentric correlationism³ and inspired by de Quincey's swallowing abysses, I mean *mise en abyme* literally, in a materialist, nonanthropocentric, ateleological sense. Everything is amid abysses where no appetite can escape the appetites of others. Amid this turbulence, everything is vulnerable, a condition Derrida so usefully calls the 'nonpower at the heart of power,' the 'not be[ing] able' (Derrida, 2008, 28) to elude being made use of by others.

Swallowing abysses need not be as grand as de Quincey pictured them: they might be as huge as hell, as dragons, as the tides, or as small as mitochondria, or

3 Bogost (2012, 80): 'If anticorrelationism amounts to a rejection of only one correlation and an embrace of multiple correlations, then



as the grave's worms, blowflies, or anaerobic bacteria. Appetites are everywhere, wherever things pass away or grow, wherever things feed other things. Everything is food, and death is at once an end and a flourishing of other appetites that in turn will be consumed by others.

Humans prefer to think of themselves as subjects in a world of objects rather than things like others caught up in a universalized give and take that leaves the subject/object distinction in uncanny disarray (Bennett, 2010). Practically speaking, funerals save humans from the stench of rotting corpses; but they also preserve humans from recognizing themselves as useful materials, like others. Only a few humans willingly give up their corpses to the birds, the sky, the ocean, and so forth.⁴ When most die, they have themselves burned up; or their survivors pickle them with chemicals; or they have them sealed into coffins, little subterranean homes.

Yet in these homes, in and through our bodies, in everything that is, abysses proliferate. My essay explores this point through late medieval death art, notable for reveling in death's appetites. Though medieval death art seems intractably oriented towards human interests and divine promises, its focus on flesh's materiality, and its humiliations of human pretensions to worldly dominance, invites an eco-critical, profane engagement,⁵ as historically and doctrinally inappropriate as such an engagement might seem to be. If, however, we stop imputing cultural homogeneity to any given historical context (for recent critiques, see Felski, 2011, and Harris, 2011), we can see that there is more to this material than God's promise of rescue. Certainly, most medieval death poems are by-the-numbers reaffirmations of late medieval Christian asceticism, a humanism that, it need hardly be said, possesses its own ongoing vitality; yet these works, so drawn to the alien liveliness of corpses, *also* demand that we realize what it means to be bodied amid an ongoing flux of matter and energy that will never be used up, or, to put this another way, in which nothing can ever be saved from its tumble into some abyss.

A worldly engagement with this poetry thus requires interrupting its celestial message and concentrating on what it does with its bodies. I divide the presentations of the corpses into three categories: dry, dusty, and wet. This heuristic comes not from the medieval texts themselves⁶ but rather, with some modifications, from two sources: Maurice Bloch's anthropological observations on the social pollution of the 'wet' putrefaction of corpses, marked as especially feminine; and from the more fanciful anthropology of Georges Bataille, who delights in the horror of 'prodigality of life,' 'the slimy menace of death,' and our anguish over 'that nauseous, rank, and heaving matter, frightful to look upon, a ferment of life, teeming with worms, grubs, and eggs' (Bataille, 1986, 59, 56).

Bloch and Bataille unsurprisingly oppose dryness to wetness. Bataille calls dry bones 'pacifi[ed]' dry bones (Bataille, 1986, 47), while Bloch describes how the male-dominated Merina of the Madagascar highlands reintegrate the bones

centrism is inevitable – whether it be anthropocentrism, petrocentrism, photocentrism, skyocentrism, or any other.'

4 See Morton (2010, 31) on Tibetan 'sky burial,' or Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum* 2.7, on the similar practices of the Caspians. See Roach (2004) for more varied practices.

5 For an allied project, see Rudd, (2007, 21–27) on the lyric 'erþe toc of erþe' (DIMEV #6292).

6 However, see also Westerhof (2008, 15–17, 21–22, 28–29).

of dead relatives into their community once the flesh has rotted off (Bloch and Parry, 1982, 223–224). The subject of dry death has been briefly interrupted by dying, but then, after a time, it carries on in some fashion through its remains, a word that should be heard in both senses, as what is left over and as what persists. The bones once again have a place in the Merina community. Think also of the skull in *memento mori* paintings, a reminder of death, but also as much a reminder of the persistence of some kind of *human* recognizability.

A dusty death, considered by neither Bloch nor Bataille, leaves no remainder. In essence, dusty death answers an *ubi sunt* with ‘nowhere’ rather than, for example, ‘stopping a bung hole’ (Shakespeare, 2006, 5.1.194). The Ash Wednesday service, for example, bypasses our foundational muddiness in Genesis 2:7, where we are made ‘de limo’ [‘from the mud’], to tell us, via Genesis 3:19, ‘memento homo quia pulvis est et in pulverem reverteris’ [‘remember, man, that you are dust, and that you will turn again into dust’]. Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies* XVI.i calls dust (*pulvis*) ‘separated earth,’ ‘carried on the breath of the wind, neither resisting nor able to stay put’ (Isidore, 2007, 317). Unfertile and formless, used up and useless, this matter, nearly not matter at all, is the quiet nothingness to which humans will finally return. This is what a small poem in the late fourteenth-century Vernon manuscript (‘This World fares as a Fantasy’) tells us when it explains ‘Þus waxeþ & wanteþ Mon, hors & hounde; / ffrom nouþt to nouþt þus henne we hiþe’ [‘thus man, horse, and hound grow and fail, from nothing to nothing thus we go hence from here’] (Furnivall, 1901, 696; DIMEV⁷ #2335, 129–130). The Middle English *Death and Liffe* just as dustily characterizes death’s approach as the end of all vigor and motion:

the greene grasse in her gate shee grindeth all to powder;
trees tremble for ffeare and tipen to the ground;
leaues lighten downe lowe and leauen their might;
fowles faylen to fflee when the heard wapen,
and the ffishes in the fflood ffaylen to swimme. (Donatelli,
1989, 193–197)

[in her walking, she grinds the green grass to powder; trees tremble for fear and fall to the ground; leaves fall down and lose their powder; birds fail to flee when they flap their wings vigorously, and the fishes in the water fail to swim.]

And, of course, dusty death’s modern *locus classicus*, the origin of the term, appears in *Macbeth*, in which life arrives fleetingly and then passes away, coming from and going to nothing. In a model both absolutely private and absolutely privative, dusty death concludes all strife, effort, and existence.

Dusty death works as a model only for subjects who imagine their sense of self to be the most important element of their existence. They believe the

7 DIMEV refers to Mooney *et al*, eds., *Digital Index of Middle English Verse*, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/host/imev/>.



(presumptive) end of their thinking means the end, full stop. But of course their material continues.⁸ They will continue to be made useful to others, some human, but hardly. Recognizing this leads us to the wet model, which concentrates not on the disappearance of the subject, but on putrefaction and the appetites corpses attract.

Late medieval death art, to the frequent disgust and titillation of modern scholarship, loved to tell humans that they were ‘esca vermium’ [food for worms].⁹ The fourth-century theologian Ephraem of Syria directs his congregation to look into the grave to see ‘inde scatentem vermium colluuiem’ [‘there a mass teeming with worms’] (quoted in Woolf, 1968, 400). A millennium later, in *The Awntyrs off Arthur*, Gawain meets the horrific ghost of Guinevere’s mother, whose skull a hungry toad bites and whose body is ‘serkeled with serpentes all aboute the sides’ [‘encircled with serpents all around’] (Hahn, 1995, 120). Similar citations could be provided virtually without end, but here I will offer only one more from the central text of the remainder of my essay: ‘A Disputation Betwyx þe Body and Wormes’ (hereafter *Disputation*). In this poem, a corpse, far from finding rest in the grave, instead suffers the gustatory and moral harassment of an explosion of life dedicated, in all senses of the word, to reforming her. Just before winning the argument, the worms brag to the body about their hosts of allied vermin:

þe cokatrys, þe basilysk, & þe dragon,
 þe lyserd, þe tortoys, þe coluber,
 þe tode, þe mowdewarp, & þe scorpyon,
 þe vypera, þe snake, & þe eddyr,
 þe crawpaude, þe pyssemoure, & þe canker,
 þe spytterd, þe mawkes, þe evet of kynde,
 þe watyr leyche, & oþer ar not behynde. (Conlee, 1991, 107–113)

[The cockatrice, the basilisk, and the dragon, The lizard, the tortoise, and the snake, The toad, the mole, and the scorpion, The viper, the snake, and the adder, The toad, the ant, and the crab, The spider, the maggots, and the newt, The water leech, and the others are not far behind.]

The list’s bravura excessiveness insists on the endless utility of the material we thought ours. Consumed by so many mouths, the body abandons her efforts at self-possession. She knows herself to be helpless, food for a host of others, as she has been from the moment she took shape in this world. The process could stop with her reversion to dust, but to get to this arid and formless condition, one gullet after another must be finished with her and with each other in turn. The ashy end cannot arrive until *everything* is ashes, until, that is, all appetites cease.

8 See Joy (2012, 157). Apropos the frustrated efforts of a J.G. Ballard character to erase himself, Joy remarks that ‘even when you are dead, you are still *here*.’

9 For the phrase’s vast popularity, see Cerquiglioni-Toulet (1999, 349, n3).

Part II: Making Friends with Your Abyss

The single extant copy of the 218-line *Disputation* survives in British Library, Additional 37049, a much studied mid-fifteenth-century Carthusian miscellany (for example, Brantley, 2007, and Gray, 2005). Briefly, the *Disputation* is a dream vision in which a body finds itself at odds with its own edibility. Horrified by the worms, then argued (and eaten) out of its pride, the body eventually accepts its flesh as inescapably vulnerable, warns us against worldly pleasures, and then awaits the resurrection. The *Disputation* has been read often and accurately as exemplifying late medieval *memento mori* and *contemptus mundi* topoi (recent treatments include Brantley, 2007, 221–227, and Hennessy, 2002). These studies remain faithful both to the poem’s moral conclusion and to the first two, especially the second, of its five illustrations: the first shows the narrator kneeling before a gruesome crucifix, an image both of suffering flesh and, at least implicitly, of that flesh’s promised glorification. The second of the *Disputation*’s illustrations, the one most frequently reproduced in the scholarship, features a tomb on whose lid is a lifelike sculpture of a well-dressed woman. We also can see into the grave itself, where worms and other vermin cluster around a rotting corpse (Figure 1).

The illustration thus resembles a fashionable late medieval ‘double’ version of the *transi* or ‘cadaver’ monument.¹⁰ The *Disputation* itself includes a typical cadaver monument verse on its tomb illustration that directs the reader, in the first three lines, to ‘take hede vnto my fygure here abowne / And se how sumtyne I was fressche & gay / Now turned to wormes mete & corrupcone’ [‘take heed of my figure here above, now turned to worms’ meat and corruption’], and in the final lines, marked out as a *sententia*, ‘when þou leste wenes, venit mors te superare / when þi grafe grenes. bonum est mortis meditari’ [‘when you least expect it, death comes and overcomes you; when the grass is green, it is good to have death in mind’]. As with the more gruesome cadaver monuments, the hungry vermin in this image cluster around the body, clearly of only secondary importance to it.

The remaining three illustrations of the *Disputation* abandon anthropocentrism (see Figure 2; the other two, not included here, are much the same). In them, the corpse and worm are, as the dreamer says, ‘strangly ilk one oþer corespondyng’ [‘each one strangely alike the other’], each engaged ‘in maner of a dialoge’ [‘in the manner of a dialogue’] (27, 28). For rather than being surrounded by tiny figures, the corpse looks either up or down at four worms, all as large as one of her limbs, occupying as much pictorial space as she does. As in the poem’s text, where the worms have 11 rhyme-royal stanzas to corpse’s 14, the worms and corpse share space more or less equally.

Each worm has a single black dot perhaps representing an eye. The eye gives the worms just enough of a face to differentiate them from the black, faceless critters surrounding the corpse in the ‘double tomb’ illustration, just enough,

10 The classic study, focused on continental examples, is Cohen (1973). For the British fashion for these monuments, and an argument against the notion that they had anything to do with the plague or the promotion of heterodoxy, see King (1990) and King (2003).

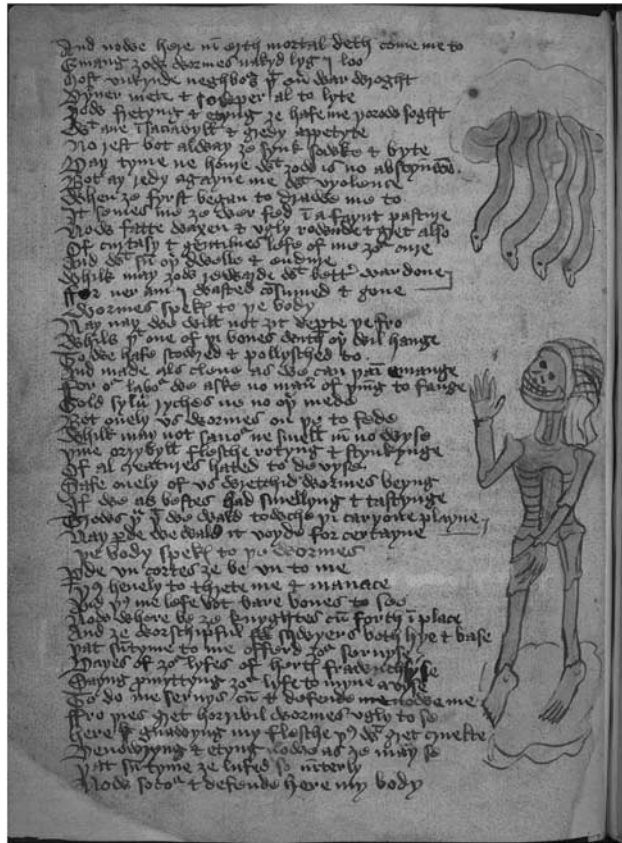


Figure 2: British Library, Add. 37049, f. 33v; © The British Library Board.

[not to leave you until death took you; to eat and gnaw you was our intention, and afterwards to come with you to our region, to have your flesh here for their recompense.]

When the corpse protests by citing scripture, ‘bot3 it in the Sawter Dauid says þat alle / Sal be obeydent vnto mans calle’ [‘but, still, in the Psalms (i.e., in Psalms 8:7–9) David says that all shall be obedient to man’s complaint’] (140–141), the worms counter, ‘Þat power dures whils man has lyfe ... now þi lyfe is gone, with vs may þou not stryfe’ [‘that power lasts only while man has life; now your life is gone and you may not struggle with us’] (142, 144). Repulsed and harassed by their ‘gret cruelte’ [‘great cruelty’] (82) and unconquerable hunger, the corpse cannot get free. All she can do is accept that she is food and has been, all along, an unwitting host to a world of hungry others.



The hungry presence of this impersonal crowd at a vulnerable subject complicates what has often been read as the emblematic moment of critical animal theory, namely, Derrida's naked encounter with his cat. The cat comes across Derrida just as he's emerged from the shower and, so far as Derrida thinks, looks at his penis. Derrida feels ashamed and a bit ashamed of his shame; he follows this by sketching the philosophical distinctions between self-aware nudity and unwitting nakedness, and from there, of course, he dismantles the pretensions of the humanist tradition. To suspend, refuse, or delegitimize human domination, to frustrate the operations of what he calls carnophallogocentrism, Derrida lets himself be 'seen seen' (Derrida, 2008, 13) by his cat. He allows himself the uneasiness of being caught in his own cat's eyes; he lets himself stay uncertain; and he opposes those who take 'no account of the fact that what they call "animal" can *look* at them, and *address* them from down there' (Derrida, 2008, 13). From here, he concentrates on what he and his cat share, the condition – crucially, not a capacity – of inescapable vulnerability. Whatever we can do, we are all exposed to the possibility of being injured or at least suffering.

The corpse is also 'seen seen,' but by a far less benign critter. Derrida allows that his cat might want to injure him when he describes it as looking at him 'without touching yet, and without biting, although that threat remains on its lips or on the tip of its tongue' (Derrida, 2008, 4). The worms, however, are actually in the process of eating the corpse. It may be impossible to think of these worms as Derrida demands we think of his cat, in their 'unsubstitutable singularity' (Derrida, 2008, 9). It may in fact be a mistake to take the worms as singular, since they work – as vermin, as eaters, as *teachers* – only as a crowd. The encounter suggests, therefore, an irreducible conflict between critical animal theory and ecocriticism, as the former concerns itself with particular subjects and with the history of who gets to count as a subject, and the latter with systems and with unraveling pretensions to individuality.

This point will have to be explored elsewhere.¹¹ For now, we can observe how the *Disputation* concerns a fight of the one against the many, or a fight between the presumed one with the multiplicity that undoes it. Recall that some medieval natural science believed that such worms hatched from the spines of human corpses (Westerhof, 2008, 26 n48). The worms erupt from a body that comes to know itself as heterogeneous. Put another way, the *Disputation*, like other medieval death texts, operates as a textual pre-history to the new materialism's frequent (and welcome) microbial perorations, like Jane Bennett's observation that for the supposedly human body, so prolifically sharing itself with microbes, 'the *its* outnumber the *mes*. In a world of vibrant matter, it is thus not enough to say that we are "embodied." We are, rather, an array of bodies, many different kinds of them in a nested set of biomes' (Bennett, 2010, 112–113). These bodies are our companions, some of whom feed with us, some off us, and some who work for our deaths.

11 See, for example, Wolfe (2012).

The *Disputation* can be read, therefore, as demanding that the corpse recognize her entanglement in an inescapably crowded, heterogeneous bodiment. I draw the term ‘bodiment’ from Ralph Acampora’s *Corporeal Compassion*, which demands that we recognize that we are with others by being bodied with them – notably, not embodied, not minds *in* bodies. Acampora explains that we need not convince ourselves of our shared bodiment with others. Rather, we need to undo our sense of separation by becoming ‘sensitive to already constituted “inter-zone” of somaesthetic conviviality’ (Acampora, 2006, 84). As he argues, it is not this being-with that needs justification; rather, the ‘movement towards dissociation and nonaffiliation needs to be justified against a background of relatedness and interconnectivity’ (Acampora, 2006, 5). Acampora’s favored examples are squirrels in city parks; mine, because I think they do more to shock humanism, are worms in the grave. Essentially, whenever medieval death art stresses our coming resurrection and renewal, it aims at dissociation and nonaffiliation; it promises humans that they will be untangled from the shared flux of intermateriality.

In words that we might hear as addressing her companions in this flux, the body declares ‘lat vs be frendes at þis sodayn brayde / Neighbours and luf as before we gan do / Let vs kys and dwell to gedyr euermore’ [‘let us be friends after this unexpected commotion; let us be neighbors and love as we did before. Let us kiss and dwell together forever’] (*Disputation*, 194–196). A beautiful sentiment, one we might hear as addressed to her own microbial multiplicity, but one also ruined by the contract’s fine print: ‘to þat God wil þat I sal agayn vpryse / At þe day of dome before þe hye justyse, / With þe body glorified to be’ [‘until God wills that I shall rise again, on Judgment Day, to be called before his justice with a glorified body’] (197–199). Humanism reasserts itself with her expectation of being rescued from the worms, vulnerability, or any otherworldly entanglement.

Yet this humanism works only if we ignore the ‘euermore,’ or twist it into meaning ‘until things improve.’ We might just as well ignore the promise of rescue, attending primarily or even exclusively to the poem’s bodily present, which is precisely about the body coming to realize that no rescue is coming except, perhaps, at some almost unimaginable future point. After all, the *Disputation*, unlike other, similar debate poems, never mentions the soul. Here, in the grave as in life, the ‘euermore’ of bodiment must be understood as promising a perpetuity entirely different from celestial stasis. It cannot refer to the bodies of corpse and worms themselves. The corpse’s matter will go on, while the corpse itself will soon lose its self-consistency to the worms’ mouths. The worms and other vermin, constitutively vulnerable like anything else, have no better claim to endurance; they too will feed something and be passed on. ‘Euermore’ might be heard, therefore, as characterizing not an impossible bodily persistence but rather the activity of corpse and worms dwelling together. They are mattering together in an activity that will continue regardless of her hope for



an end to it. To dwell with worms, to kiss them and be friends, means to recognize oneself as constitutively enmeshed in never ending cycles of appetite, abysses that go on swallowing for 'euermore.' The corpse may thus be heard as saying, 'so long as I'm in this world, you and I share this condition of edibility. As much as we can, let's be friends in it.'

In friendship, the corpse gives herself up to what has always had her. She offers herself to what would have taken her anyway. In so doing, she accepts what we might take as the final lessons of medieval death poetry: that nothing, not our humanity, not our wealth, not our beauty, will let us 'outsource' our vulnerability; and that appetites and desires, human and otherwise, will be humbled by the appetites and desires of others. We are not the center; there is no center; this is our condition, where 'our' and 'we' should be understood as including not only humans, but all that is. Amid appetites like ours, vulnerable and hungry, we should never forget the use that will be made of all of us. We are for others, whether we know it or not.

Memento mori; memento vivere; memento edere; memento edi.¹²

12 Remember you must die/live/eat/be eaten.

About the author

Karl Steel, an Assistant Professor in Brooklyn College's English Department, has published several articles on posthumanism; a book, *How to Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages* (2011); and edited (with Peggy McCracken) the special issue on 'The Animal Turn' for *postmedieval*. He blogs with several other medievalists at *In the Middle* (E-mail: ksteel@brooklyn.cuny.edu).

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Response Essay

The elements

Jane Bennett

Department of Political Science, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD.

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Quicksand

In ‘Setting the Record Straight on Quicksand’ (a post for *The Daily Beast*), Andrew Sullivan reports that contrary to popular opinion, ‘complete submersion and death in quicksand doesn’t happen in real life.’ The buoyancy of the human body prevents this, and ‘the average person is only going to sink to his or her waist, elbows or armpits.’ Though people do indeed die in quicksand, this is not ‘because they sank all the way in, but because they weren’t able to get out quickly enough and were exposed to the elements – low temperatures, incoming tide, etc.’ (Sullivan, 2012).

Allow me to read Sullivan’s post as symptomatic of that peculiar anxiety provoked when an event (say, death by quicksand) muddies the distinction between inert matter and lively body. Quicksand, that uncanny or unholy mixture of dead grains of silica and lethal capacity – whose very name evokes the moment of ‘quickenning’ or self-moving of an *organism* – is not, Sullivan assures us, all that active after all. Or at least it lacks the brio required to be the agent of a man’s death: No worries! Quicksand is no match for the natural buoyancy (not to mention the will to live) of the human body.

Sullivan sets the record straight to restore quicksand to the status of an environmental *constraint*, a mere (albeit unfavorable) *context* for the struggles of lively organisms. Quicksand reverts to grains of sand that ‘sit in silence, have no purpose or agency; much like the servants in the Victorian novels’ (Olsen, 2003, 97).



Yes. But what about Sullivan's casual invocation of 'the elements'? When human bodies do die in quicksand, it is because, he says, of exposure to 'the elements.' Is this the return of repressed materiality? His invocation of the quaint notion of 'the elements' suggests that Sullivan has not quite succeeded in squelching the thought that humans share the world with a wider range of actants than the matter/life or inorganic/organic divide acknowledge. As quicksand (despite its quickness) is stuffed back into the category of mere stuff, through the backdoor another nonhuman agency creeps in: 'the elements.' These appear in Sullivan's tale less for what they are ('low temperatures, incoming tide, etc.') than for what they do: they will *do you in*. They have superior durability, an impersonal relentlessness: the untiring shining of the sun, the inexorable movement of the tides, the pitiless impartiality of ground temperature.

In ancient and medieval philosophy there were four elements (earth, water, air, and fire); by the mid-sixteenth century oil, salt, sulphur, or spirit were sometimes added to the list; the periodic table in chemistry today names over one hundred elements; this special issue of *postmedieval* delineates eight (earth, water, air, fire, road, glacier, cloud, abyss).

The eco-materialism enacted in this issue initiates the fascinating project of putting that vague and capacious term 'the elements,' the non-modern idea of primordial substances and Titanic forces, to contemporary use. We come to see that a more robust sense of 'the elements,' conjured up in part by revisiting times and places where they were more routinely and intensively experienced, can contribute to a postmedieval eco-ethic.

What is the ontological status of 'the elements'? What are the distinctive capacities or powers of 'the elements'? Are 'the elements' many or one? Sullivan takes pride in being a modern, rational actor, in contrast to the hyperbolic rantings of other bloggers. Can we take his uncharacteristic recourse to the nearly obsolete figure of 'the elements' as evidence of a dark awareness of the enabling/dangerous presence of impersonal, powerful materials? I will use the occasion of these eight shimmering essays, each of which draws from an archive that is premodern, to explore the figure of the elements, and try to dramatize the simmering sense of material powers that we still seem to have, despite a conceptual framework that discourages registering the experience of vibrant matter.

Seven Elements (The Eighth Comes Later)

First, Fire, because the leaping, licking flames make it easy to see it as an active force. What is Fire? Cohen and Trigg say 'ephemeral materiality,' 'all surface' (without the 'depth' of its 'sibling elements' earth or water), a 'gravitational force around which sleeping arrangements are organized and the daily progress of domestic chores arranged.' What can Fire do (what are its verbs)? To burn: Fire's conatus is to burn. 'Left to its volition fire will seek unceasing



incendiary relations,' such that it can 'transmute substance,' turning flesh into ash, and, in burning up the human story-tellers, pre-empt certain plot lines and 'frustrat[e] or intensify narrative action.' To burn, to transmute, to frustrate or intensify. What else can Fire do? Mark our flesh and sear our memory. Even after the flames are gone, it 'lives on, in trauma, in memory and in rhetoric.' But fire, not preoccupied with us, 'also moves through a world of nonhuman relations that render it more than a simple chemical process.' These relations, with other materials that it can consume, are a necessary part of Fire's perpetuation of itself. 'Fire burns, creating and destroying, composing and challenging, transforming and instituting,' as Cohen and Trigg write.

Water can kill Fire. What else can Water do? As hurricane, quotidian tide, rain, and effluent, O'Dair notes that it has the power to rearrange other bodies, such as islands whose mass it shrinks or expands, or human limbs that it can bloat. To kill, to rearrange, to bloat. If sufficiently unpolluted and incompletely commodified, Water can 'bring us up short, even ... make us afraid.' What, then, is Water? A 20-sided regular polyhedron (icosahedron)? One atom of oxygen and two atoms of hydrogen? Or, better, a being with many states: solid, liquid, gaseous, hail, snow, ice, dew, wine, oil, honey, pitch, acid. Water is Venus's sweat, but also, O'Dair writes, the 'thick air' of New Orleans, and 'fine wet sand at the moving edge of the sea.' Water is a fragile element whose fate depends on 'decisions humans make now.'

Glacier is frozen Water. What can Glacier do? Duckert reminds us that it usually acts very slowly, moving at a 'glacial' pace, but sometimes also quite suddenly, as when it calves off from itself, in giant, shrieking ice sheets. To creep, to quicken and calve, to shriek. Glacier makes noises but also records noises, including 'barbarous tongues' that 'are trapped in ice; when the crystals are brought onboard, their vociferousness is released with the slightest touch.' Glacier also makes other bodies slip and slide or move at a pace not indigenous to them, thus delivering them 'to new desires across its translucent sluices.' To record sounds, to glide and cause to skid, to recompose bodies by calling forth new desires. The desire, for example, to do what Thoreau would describe as 'front' the body of a strange other, to, that is, take the risk of standing real close, too close for comfort, so that the different bodies can better affect and be affected by each another. To front, in Duckert's words, is to 'feel right [up] against' the iceberg 'and not simply against it antagonistically.' So positioned, one asks, 'What, then, *are* you, Glacier?' 'Both a solid and a liquid at once,' comes the weird and unstable giant's reply. 'Congealed sea.' A shape-shifter, appearing in 'diiverse shapes passing.'

Now, Air. What is Air? Mentz offers this definitional list: an ahistorical, 'sheer unintegrated force, roaring through our planet and our bodies,' 'an unsettling combination of power and fragility,' a 'power we can't see but must take into account,' a 'palpable and present image of constant change,' a



'structure-less' and 'invisible' substance that takes on different shapes, including that of wind, breath, and nothing or void. Of these three, winds are the most willing to be used or harnessed by people, for trade or transport, or, lately, electricity. But this willingness, this 'reliability of the trade winds,' coexists with 'Wind's *Indifferency* which way to Blow,' its refusal to obey completely a clockmaker's universe.

What can Air do? Hard to say, for its powers are largely invisible. It blows. It circulates. It renews and erodes. As breath, it moves stuff from the outside to the inside of bodies and back again: 'The reservoir of inanimate air inside our bodies reminds us that breath is only partly human. It's in us and not us at the same time,' Mentz writes. To blow, to circulate, to renew, to erode, to remind of mortality.

Next, an admixture of Air and Water: Cloud. A fuzzy aggregate, an ephemeron, a spectral thing. Clouds exist for us on the border between 'the visible and the invisible, the phenomenal and nonphenomenal,' says Yates. What can you do, Cloud? 'Nothing much,' comes the terse reply. Cloud does nothing definite, solves nothing, doesn't yield a 'a vendible narrative, a commodity ... which you can put to use.' Clouds don't offer explanations; to the contrary, they 'uncouple causes from effects.' To laze, to cloud. Still, Cloud is generative, making 'cloudy impressions, a fleeting archive, an intimation of nonhuman agencies.' And Cloud provokes 'cloud gazing and cloud hopping' – and onto-story-telling – in humans. Clouds are a series of 'heres and nows' that mark our discourses, suspending, for a while, our desire for greater significance or narrative.' To suspend desire. 'Clouds roll in and by and ... indicate a complexity that we cannot capture.' Finally, their 'spectral quality' generates but also traumatizes our sense of futurity. To stay in the moment.

On now to the more solid and less subtle Earth. Or is it? Siewers calls it 'the region of the withholding of ... *phusis*, the mystery of nature that is not objectively present Being.' Others see it as divine Creation with intrinsic purpose. For others it is a 'plane of immanence' upon which 'everything is given, upon which unformed elements and materials dance' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, 255). Earth, what can you do? Sing 'as birds in the branches of the tree of contemplation of the Logos'; sing songs, as Siewers writes, that 'meld categories of human and non-human.'

What about Abyss, an element that also goes by the name Appetite? What is it? An indiscriminating cosmic desiring, that uber-natural phenomenon of the 'never-ending growth of one colossal grandeur chasing and surmounting another, or of abysses that swallowed up abysses,' as Steel writes. Appetite is the 'ongoing flux of matter and energy ... in which nothing can ever be saved from its tumble into some abyss.' What can Appetite do, Mr. Steel? Like Fire, it eats, consumes, uses up, 'proliferates,' putrifies, and decomposes by recomposing. It enlivens corpses when it exerts itself via (in? through? with?) maggots.



‘The worms are the corpse’s equal or even superiors.’ Appetite shows that ‘death is an end only for subjects that conceptualize themselves chiefly through pretensions to self-motivated agency.’ To proliferate, to go on and on. Perhaps most of all, what Appetite does is to last, to endure, to persist even as every particular entity will not and cannot, for everything is food.

Setting the Record Crooked on The Elements

A sense for the material powers within and around us is not easy to maintain today. We’re pretty good at detecting them at the level of scientific analysis, but find it hard to remain alive or alert to matter-actions when it comes to questions of society, politics, agency, literature, or environmentalism. Our habit, rather, is to quickly forget encounters with nonhuman agencies and to over-feel the efficacy of human intention and desire. People in other times and places seem to have had less trouble seeing, hearing, or otherwise sensing material powers: ‘Unaware of their ontological blunders, the Saami reindeer herders of northern Scandinavia hugged and greeted the pine tree on their return from the mountains ... [and] had long conversations with drums and stones’ (Olsen, 2003, 95). That the term ‘the elements’ remains in circulation, however, suggests that bits and pieces of these other ways of sensing and responding to the world are still doing some work.

‘The Elements’ obliquely acknowledges a kind of agency that is indeterminately multiple, kin to the indifferent, elemental, Titanic forces/gods who were not fully vanquished, it turns out, by the more individuated and personesque race of Olympians. Like the Titans, ‘The Elements’ occupy/occupies a liminal space between singular and plural, is/are a collective or distributive agency whose members are only imprecisely specifiable (air slips into cloud, cloud into water, water into glacier). ‘The nine ... of us wrote *Ecomaterialism* together. Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd’ (in the style of Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, 3). ‘The elements’ are, perhaps above all, *strong, diffuse, and durable*: we can try to put ‘the elements’ to use, but they won’t be exhausted by our attempts to use them – or, at least, that is the unspoken, desperate hope often embedded within this figure: earth, air, water, fire are too primordial, too basic, too real, for us to use them up.

How, then, to describe the project of ecomaterialism? These essays strike me as a distinctive ‘way’ of doing (political, ecological, social, literary) theory: always with a light touch, never didactic, usually via stories, vignettes, quirky retellings of remarkable events. One could describe ecomaterialism as an attempt to re-describe human experience so as to uncover more of the activity and power of a variety of nonhuman players amidst and within us. Ecomaterialism seeks to expand ‘the list of beings to whose appeal we should have been able to respond,’ to cite Duckert citing Hache and Latour. As

a project of redescription of Nature/materiality, which composes words to transform sensibility, ecomaterialism shares much with the nature-writing of Henry Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Coleridge, and Wordsworth, or their naturalist heirs such as Barry Lopez, Val Plumwood, David Abrams, Annie Dillard. More than some on that list, the ecomaterialists in this issue tend to favor 'pagan' imagery and sensibilities; they seek an enchantment with life in the absence of any grand or intelligent cosmological design. They know about the risks and prize the engagements. Ecomaterialism, as it is practiced by these essays, gives more emphasis than is normally sensible to elemental physicality. The term 'the Elements' is wonderfully vague with regard to the question of whether it refers to something exclusively 'outside' of the human body like the weather, or also refers to something that, as the basic building block, is (inside) us as well.

These eight essays have enhanced my alertness to the elements. But it remains an open question how best to characterize the human relationship to them. Do The Elements 'enable' human agency as affordances? Do they 'infuse' us as vital force? Energize or vibrate with us? Constitute us through and through? Do we 'share' the planet with them? Or is it better to speak of a yet more intimate and constitutive relationship: our bodies are composed of the elements even as our bodies are elements within more complex, super-human physical systems. Or perhaps, as Olsen, following Bruno Latour, says: 'the lines of philosophy are just too straight and clean to prove very helpful when we come to those muddy and crooked paths of things and soil' (Olsen, 2003, 98).

Let me end with the eighth element, Road. It is to me the most perverse of the elements discussed, a thing so wayward that I was tempted to expel it from the group. Whereas the other Elements appear for the most part as staunchly material, as bodies that affect and are affected by other bodies, this one is more semiotic. Sure, the other Elements are susceptible to becoming turned into metaphors, to morphing from elements of matter/force into elements of thinking, imagination, and narrative. But Road goes (almost) too far: its very name implies a human builder rather than a self-driven force. Road, Allen tells us, is 'not a strip of land, or any corporeal thing, but a legal and customary right,' an 'easement,' a *concept* 'most profitably defined in terms of function rather than its construction and physical parts.' Road is a 'way:' 'a modification of the environment to enable forward passage to animals and vehicles in a specific geographical direction'. (This quite strong susceptibility to metaphorization may follow from the fact that Road is promiscuous with regard to its materiality: 'clay, sand, marl, gravel, cobblestones' – any will do just fine). The reader is allowed to move quickly from Road to Roadway to Wayfarer, that is, to human agents. Still, the metaphorization is never total: the materiality of Road still shapes and directs, by its texture, temperature, its zigs and zags, its dust and bumps, and by the vistas it allows or denies, the bodies of men and beasts. To shape, to lead.



Like Road, the quicksand with which I began is a metaphor magnet. The topic of material agency, me thinks, is like quicksand, a sinkhole that threatens to suck even the boldest ecomaterialist back into a human-centered burrow. Like Road and like quicksand, ‘The Elements’ readily become metaphors for something besides themselves: the elements as the Big Other or Nature or What Lies beyond Human Knowing, or as a quaint term for what is really a science of meteorology. Yeah – the Elements are metaphorical. But they can also kill you, or inspire you, or help to organize you – with or without the help of quicksand.

About the Author

Jane Bennett teaches political theory at Johns Hopkins University. She is the author of *Vibrant Matter: The Political Ecology of Things* (2010) and *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (2001), the editor of *Political Theory: An International Journal of Political Philosophy*, and is currently working on a project on *Leaves of Grass* and other greenery (E-mail: janebennett@jhu.edu).

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Book Review Essay

Medieval ecocriticism

Vin Nardizzi

Department of English, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia.

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B.A. Hanawalt and L.J. Kiser, eds.

Engaging with Nature: Essays on the Natural World in Medieval and Early Modern Europe. Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2008, vii + 236pp., \$30.00.

ISBN: 978-0268030834

L. Kordecki

Ecofeminist Subjectivities: Chaucer's Talking Birds. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, xv + 215pp., \$85.00.

ISBN: 978-0230115279

G. Rudd

Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2010, vii + 221pp., £14.99.

ISBN: 978-0719072499

A.K. Siewers

Strange Beauty: Ecocritical Approaches to Early Medieval Landscape. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, xiii + 224pp., \$95.00.

ISBN: 978-0230606647

K. Steel

How To Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages. Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2011, xi + 292pp., \$49.95.

ISBN: 978-0814211571



A genuine curiosity about a literary field not my own guides my thinking in this review essay: What is medieval ecocriticism? In what follows, I hope not only to show that there are several ways to answer this question, but also to provide a generous bibliographic survey of the most eco-relevant articles, chapters, collections, and monographs for contemplation and use by postmedievalists and out-of-field ecocritics alike. As is clear from conference and symposia programs, blog postings and tweets, the shape of medieval ecocriticism is rapidly developing, but I restrict myself here to examples of medieval ecocriticism that are already in print.

As my own work is in an adjacent literary field (Renaissance drama), I thought that in preparation for reading the scholarship that I survey in this review, it would be prudent to remind myself how the Middle Ages has been imagined and presented in a methodology with which I have more familiarity (ecocriticism). I turned to two essays that I take to be representatives of the Middle Ages to the parliament of ecocriticism. First, I pulled from my bookshelves Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), a collection of essays that has become the keystone of North American ecocriticism. I had forgotten that it affords the Middle Ages pride of place: its reprinting of Lynn White Jr's 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis' heads the collection's first part, 'Ecotheory: Reflections on Nature and Culture.' Second, I borrowed from my university library Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace's *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* (2001), which aims to broaden ecocriticism's focus beyond the canon of Romantic and American nature writers, many of whom *The Ecocriticism Reader* features, and instead to extend consideration to 'other authors who seem less concerned with nature than with culture' (Armbruster and Wallace, 2001, 3). Lisa J. Kiser's 'Chaucer and the Politics of Nature' (2001) is the collection's entry on the English Middle Ages, and the editors place it in their first section, whose label ('Reevaluating the Roots of Western Attitudes toward Nature') recalls the title of White's essay and implicitly challenges its contents. The framing of these book chapters, then, tells us much about the import of medieval literature to ecocriticism: we glean that the Middle Ages is the era where our ongoing ecological crisis first began; that the rehearsal of this ecological story constitutes a foundational form of ecotheory; and that, in the new ecocritical dispensation, Chaucer is the figurehead for this field of inquiry. These collections establish a set of expectations about the Middle Ages, but the field of medieval ecocriticism, as it has unfolded since 2001, does not (yet) bear them all out.

Eco-Chaucer

Let's begin with the alleged father of English poetry. At the start of her chapter in *Beyond Nature Writing*, Kiser (2001, 41) assesses the state of medieval



ecocriticism: 'both medievalists and ecocritics,' among whom she counts White, 'have largely ignored the subject of environmental perspectives in medieval texts, and when not ignoring it, they have generalized broadly, and therefore not always usefully, about medieval approaches to the environment.' Her project not only locates in medieval literature 'environmental thinking of a more sophisticated sort than has been claimed in existing scholarship,' but also argues that Chaucer demonstrates a 'remarkable' 'awareness' of 'the politics of nature,' especially of 'an issue that has preoccupied modern ecological critics, the issue of the extent to which it is philosophically sound (and politically justifiable) to insist on extreme social constructivism as the basis on which to ground one's view of the environment' (Kiser, 2001, 43, 50, 51). Kiser's literary exhibit in this essay is Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, a dream vision whose eco-star in her analysis proves not to be the poem's anthropomorphic Lady Nature, but rather its 'tree catalogue and the unassimilated voices of the lower birds,' both of which 'admit' 'a realm outside' of the poem's 'socially constructed view of the environment.' The presence of the trees and the inscrutable birds gestures toward the 'real' of nature,¹ and so they collectively warrant Chaucer's inclusion in the big tent of a revisionary ecocriticism precisely because in their representation he grapples presciently with the nature-culture binary in a way that more modern 'environmental ethicists and ecological critics' also do (Kiser, 2001, 51). By such logic, Chaucer is an eco-contemporary.

1 Morton (2007) articulates a trenchant ecocritique of the 'real' in nature writing.

And yet, oddly, Chaucer has not come to overwhelm medieval ecocriticism in the way that Shakespeare has featured in its Renaissance counterpart. For instance, *ISLE*, the journal of the *Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment*, published a special cluster of essays on Shakespeare and ecocriticism in 2005, but has not devoted comparable attention to Chaucer or to the Middle Ages (Estok, 2005). Academic presses have also been hot for Eco-Shakespeare for some time – witness Gabriel Egan's *Green Shakespeare* (2006), Steve Mentz's *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean* (2009), Lynne Bruckner and Dan Brayton's *Ecocritical Shakespeare* (2011), Simon Estok's *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare* (2011), and Dan Brayton's *Shakespeare's Ocean* (2012) – but they seem to be less excited about an Eco-Chaucer. While researching possible ecocritical books to review, I turned up only one monograph that listed the poet in its full title, Lesley Kordecki's *Ecofeminist Subjectivities: Chaucer's Talking Birds* (2011), which offers a series of extended readings of the *House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, the *Squire's Tale*, the *Nun's Priest's Tale* and the *Manciple's Tale*. More typically, though, the books and essays under review here touch briefly on Chaucer's literary works. In some instances, as in Susan Crane's (2008) account of hunting *à force* and in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's study of medieval 'animals as vehicles' (Cohen, 2008, 41), both of which appear in Barbara A. Hanawalt and Lisa J. Kiser's *Engaging with Nature: Essays on the Natural World in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (2008), excerpts from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* rub shoulders with a host of other medieval texts.



Although Gillian Rudd's *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (2007; reprint 2010) allots significantly more space to 'green readings' of Chaucer – the *Knight's Tale* and *The Book of the Duchess* (Rudd, 2010, 51–74) and the *Franklin's Tale* (Rudd, 2010, 138–48) – than does any other book I'm reviewing except for Kordecki's, it also surveys a rich array of other literary traditions, from lyric poetry to romance. The project that Sarah Stanbury designated 'EcoChaucer' in the title of an essay shortly after Kiser enrolled the poet into the new ecocriticism has yet to fully materialize.

I am not necessarily lamenting this state of scholarly affairs. I am a card-carrying member of the Eco-Shakespeare crowd, and I admit that, notwithstanding all its intellectual generosity, its sense of mutual purpose, and all the genres available for study, it can 'get claustrophobic inside' a single-author 'repertoire,' as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (2011) observed in 2011 in a review of *Ecocritical Shakespeare* for the blog *In the Middle*. However, it is also very likely that Eco-Chaucer will arrive in full force to book catalogues soon enough, whatever is to be said in favor of or against the single-author rubric. It may well be the case that academic presses are lagging behind peer-reviewed journals and essay collections in embracing Eco-Chaucer and, more generally, medieval ecocriticism. Kordecki's *Ecofeminist Subjectivities*, for example, gathers and revises three essays on Chaucer's talking birds, one of which first appeared in 1999 and another of which *ISLE* published. Other article-length studies of Eco-Chaucer include Susan Crane's Biennial Chaucer Lecture 'For the Birds' (2007) and Jodi Grimes's foray into the wooded spaces of the *Knight's Tale* (2012); in 'Ecocriticism and Middle English Literature,' Rebecca M. Douglass (1998, 152–158) takes the Knight's and Miller's tales as her main literary examples, while Kellie Robertson's (2012, 112–121) 'Exemplary Rocks' closes with an astonishing account of 'Chaucer's Pebble,' a jasper stone found in nineteenth-century Egypt that seems to depict Chaucer's profile in miniature. These essays complement Donna Beth Ellard's discussion of birds in the Exeter Book (2011) and Eleanor Johnson's meditation on the meanings of waste in *Wynnere and Wastoure* and *Piers Plowman* (2012), and all collectively suggest that an ecocritical Middle Ages is a hotter topic than it may at first seem, especially among young and upcoming scholars, at the end of the Anthropocene Era. On the basis of such broad interest in medieval ecocriticism, I would wager that there is more Eco-Chaucer, in all scholarly guises and forms, waiting in the wings.

But what of the Eco-Chaucer that is onstage already? Although Stanbury (2004, 13) surveys an array of Chaucerian works, from the *General Prologue's* opening lines to the *Miller's Tale*, in order to demonstrate that in them 'nature' can be employed both to naturalize social hierarchies and to name the agent that controls a character's actions, Eco-Chaucerians, from Kiser to Crane, have tended to narrow their inquiries to the paths and to the sounds of the poet's birds. Kordecki's volume is a valuable elaboration of this project.



In the genres and texts listed above, Kordecki (2011, 22, 23) explores the proposition that Chaucer's talking birds are vehicles of 'innovative narratological indecision and experimentation' through which the poet 'reveal[s] his restless search for an authorial voice.' As that voice 'intertwines with gender and species' in many of the birds populating the Chaucerian aviary (Kordecki, 2011, 4) – a crow, an eagle, a falcon, a hen and a turtledove, among others – Kordecki uses ecofeminism's insistence on the allied domination of nature and women to illuminate how Chaucer temporarily identifies with and 'projects himself into' literary birds, whose language is rejected, stifled, and punished, in order to articulate and to negotiate the vexing matter of censorship (Kordecki, 2011, 18). Although Kordecki (Kordecki, 2011, 153) recognizes that such authorial 'innovations do not come without [anthropocentric] cost,' she also does not want to tune out 'the truly radical accomplishment of...these curbed voices': 'Each poem allows us, through nonhuman discourse, a brief foray into the domain of the untapped other, oftentimes associated for better or worse with women.' Chaucer thus proves a poet of the birds in Kordecki's analysis, but it does not follow that he is also (or only) a poet for the birds. The 'unassimilated voices' of Kiser's birds – the 'real' of nature – have been absorbed here into the poet's figuration of his own cultural production.

Some Versions of Medieval Ecotheory

A parsing of the full title of Kordecki's account of Eco-Chaucer helps to shift discussion to the second expectation about medieval ecocriticism that *The Ecocriticism Reader* and *Beyond Nature Writing* install: it offers a foundational contribution to ecotheory. The title *Ecofeminist Subjectivities* permits us to situate the book's contents in the line of historicist ecofeminism that runs from Carolyn Merchant's *Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1982), to Lisa J. Kiser's survey of representations of Lady Nature in medieval Europe (1996), and to Jennifer Munroe and Rebecca Laroche's *Ecofeminist Approaches to Early Modernity* (2011). Meanwhile, the subtitle *Chaucer's Talking Birds* records a debt to animal studies. This field of inquiry can subdivide into (or blend to varying degrees) philosophical and cultural studies approaches – Crane's study of the hunt *à force* exemplifies the latter mode, while Cohen's account of animal vehicles mixes the two – and aims to describe the shifting boundary that is alleged to cordon human beings off from all other animals. (Animal studies has had an uneasy relation with ecocriticism because, so the critique goes, it is an exercise in anthropocentric navel-gazing rather than an enterprise that is more capaciously co-focused.²) With success, Kordecki uses both ecofeminism and animal studies in its more philosophical guise as a double lens through which to apprehend the consequences

2 Garrard provides a helpful account of the historical



for authorship of endowing literary birds with a long-standing sign of human exceptionalism, the capacity to speak rationally.

Karl Steel likewise demonstrates ample facility with philosophical currents in animal studies in *How To Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages* (2011). Especially noteworthy of Steel's scholarship is the cogent manner by which he revises some tenets of animal studies from the historicist vantage of medieval studies, rather than only applying these tenets to the medieval archive. The breadth of the literary and cultural evidence that Steel adduces in order to elaborate this theoretical project is breathtaking. He 'treat[s] a broad variety of texts, sometimes at a gallop, including legal, doctrinal, and scientific literature, chivalric narrative, hymns, hagiography, and parody, primarily works written in English, French, and Latin, and ranging from the early centuries of Christianity to the fifteenth century' (Steel, 2011, 22). In less able hands, such eclecticism might appear before the reader as a dog's breakfast, but in Steel's ever dexterous grasp it enables in a number of registers the development of a series of interlocking theoretical claims: 'the human is an effect rather than a cause of its domination of animals'; 'the human cannot abandon the subjugation of the animal without abandoning itself'; and 'the human can therefore be said not to exist except in its action of domination.' In this logic, the human fashions and constantly must refashion its existence through forms of violence, which include slaughter, taxonomic classification, doctrine on resurrection, and indifference to animal death, and which 'consign all other species to animality, without, however, being able to' allow humans to 'escape their own animality' (2011, 19). 'To put it simply,' Steel (2011, 15) observes, 'an animal is human when it can be murdered.' Here and throughout the book, Steel's debt to the thinking of Derrida is profound, and his engagement with Derrida's writings on animals is both clear sighted and generative. And yet, it might have been less so had Steel (2011, 43) not also evidenced a deep knowledge of the historical record: a close attention to particulars in these multilingual texts and the skillful assemblage of numerous archival extracts enable Steel to illuminate the operations of a violent repetition compulsion that retroactively 'present[s] the human as a structural position rather than as an essence.' Such careful '[t]racking' of 'the categories human and animal through Christian thought and practice' pays huge historical and theoretical dividends. It 'impedes the transhistoricism by which traditional humanism functions, even in its most sophisticated forms' and simultaneously 'counteracts two often repeated, albeit disharmonious assertions: that Descartes inaugurated modern attitudes of human distinctiveness from animals, and that European thought between the Skeptics and Montaigne unrelentingly considered animals to have only instrumental value to humans' (Steel, 2011, 10–11). I will have more to say about the second assertion in the next section, but if there is anything I think that Steel could have developed more fully in *How To Make a Human*, it is the corrective involving Descartes. Its articulation is, as Steel (2011, 11)

relation between animal studies and ecocriticism (Garrard, 2004, 136–159).



remarks, 'necessary'; I think it is crucial for us to continue repeating it in order to temper some of the nostalgic 'ecomedievalism' that enshrouds, for instance, recent and popular depictions of monastic life, with its communal habits of agriculture and animal husbandry, as a model for sustainability (Rasmussen, 2006, 256–257).

Eleanor Johnson has also brought medieval literature, and especially its representations of waste, into enlightening conversation with ecotheories that have been percolating in recent issues of *PMLA* (2010). During her tenure, the journal's former editor Patricia Yaeger not only commissioned Ken Hiltner, Timothy Morton, Laurie Shannon, and Imre Szeman, among others, to contribute essays on the relations among ecology, energy and literary history, but she also wrote a powerful meditation on the resiliency of plastic detritus in the sea, fish poetry and the tragedy of the commons. One of her main aims in this editorial column is to model 'a practice of anachronistic reading [that] invit[es] stories, novels, and other imaginative works about the sea to provide echo chambers, sites of wild or sober echolalia, for the most pressing questions about the ocean's and the oceanic creatures' survival' (Yaeger, 2010, 538). To some extent, Johnson builds on Yaeger's example, but whereas Yaeger engages a method of strategic anachronism to bring earlier literatures into contact with more modern environmental concerns and catastrophes, like the Pacific Garbage Patch and the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, Johnson (2012, 461) comprehends her project as 'lay[ing] the groundwork for the notion of waste that emerges in later periods.' Her attention to the aesthetics of waste in *Piers Plowman* and *Wynnere and Wastoure* is careful, her reading of a poem that 'embrace[s] the ecological disaster' is powerful (Johnson, 2012, 470), and her labeling of William Langland and *Wynnere's* anonymous poet as 'early ecocritics' also productively advances an anachronism (Johnson, 2012, 473). In this venue, with its wide readership and influence, Johnson helpfully theorizes one legacy of the Middle Ages to our contemporary ecological crises.

Historical Roots and Heretical Futures

Steel's contribution to animal studies and Johnson's to waste studies are examples of medieval ecotheory that have different investments: Derrida and Butler inspire the former's presentation of animals in the Middle Ages, while the latter's style of argument exemplifies a generative mix of philology, historicism and formalism. Neither kind of ecotheory is more valuable than the other; they are complementary and both ultimately enrich medieval ecocriticism. Despite differences in focus and method, though, both Steel and Johnson figure the Middle Ages as a salient moment in an eco-genealogy whose reach extends into the twenty-first century. Such attention to the long-term consequence of their topics marks their conscious participation in a scholarly conversation about



medieval studies, Christianity and ecocriticism that *The Ecocriticism Reader* credits Lynn White Jr with beginning. Indeed, Steel (2011, 10–11, n. 30) and Johnson (2012, 473–474, n. 1) record, approvingly, White's imprint on their thinking: he is the subject of the first endnote in Johnson's essay, and in *How To Make a Human*, he receives substantial attention in a footnote to the introduction. The expectation about the Middle Ages that *The Ecocriticism Reader* sets up – that it is foundational to our contemporary environmental crisis – thus persists in two of the most current examples of medieval ecotheory. (Although not all the ecocritical accounts of medieval literature surveyed in this review cite White, some of their authors would have benefited from reviewing his work.) In light of this fact, it is telling that neither Steel nor Johnson references White from *The Ecocriticism Reader*; instead, each consults the essay's first airing in 1967 in the journal *Science*. Let me be clear: I have no business doling out tickets as if I were the citation police, but I am interested in knowing what ecocriticism medievalists are reading and where they are reading it. Available in multiple venues and no matter the critique it merits for its generalizations and simplifications,³ White's germinal account of 'our ecologic crisis' is worth revisiting because it affords a useful model for articulating how the past matters to our present and how the past's stories could positively shape the future. Johnson and especially Steel build on this model, with great success.

According to White (White, 1994, 5, 12), 'Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt' in a world where the explosion of hydrogen bombs 'might alter the genetics of all life on this planet,' where 'our present combustion of fossil fuels threatens to change the chemistry of the globe's atmosphere as a whole,' and where 'the population explosion, the carcinoma of planless urbanism, [and] the new geological deposits of sewage and garbage' will have certain ill effect on future generations. In the wake of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), public advocacy for protections against such disastrous environmental scenarios emerged, and that crystalizing eco-consciousness seems as plausible a context as any for illuminating White's motives in publishing an essay about 'our ecologic crisis.' The burden that Christianity has to bear in White's (1996, 12) genealogical account of this crisis is two-fold: 'viewed historically,' he observes, 'modern science is an extrapolation of natural theology, and ... modern technology is at least partly to be explained as an Occidental, voluntarist realization of the Christian dogma of man's transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature.' The key term in this explanation, I would argue, is 'realization,' and it encapsulates and vivifies for White (White, 1994, 9) the damaging legacy of Christian anthropocentrism to the twentieth century. Steel traces out a philosophical strand of that legacy from an array of medieval Christian texts about the domination of animals to Derrida, and Johnson gestures toward another strand of that legacy in her study of the relations among the use of energy, labor, and starvation in *Piers Plowman* and *Wynnere and Wastoure*.

3 Critiques of White, such as the response by Ernest S. Feenstra (1967), were not long in coming.



For White (1996, 13, 14), then, the state of eco-affairs during his contemporary moment is bad and rapidly worsening. But he was also no fatalist. In the final section of his essay, White nominates Saint Francis of Assisi, whom he casts as ‘the greatest radical in Christian history since Christ,’ as ‘a patron saint for ecologists.’ However we judge the religiosity of this statement and the bold Christianizing of the ecological movement’s members, whatever we think of the medieval historian’s desire to ‘find a new religion, or rethink our [sic] old one’ (White, 1996, 12) and, however much the version of Saint Francis that White conjures does not match up consistently with his hagiography (Kiser 2004; Steel, 2011, 168 n. 89), this call, at base, is for a reorientation of Christian anthropocentrism from within the very paradigm that, in White’s formulation, is the guilty party. More particularly, White (1996, 14) looks to a heresy within orthodox Christianity – the actions and beliefs of ‘primitive Franciscans’ – in order to advance a new mindset for coping with and reversing our current ecological crisis. Among the more recent crop of medieval ecocritics, White’s model still has some powerful purchase.

As we observed in the previous section, Steel (2011, 11) regards as one of his book’s main historical arguments a revision to the belief ‘that European thought between the Skeptics and Montaigne unrelentingly considered animals to have only instrumental value to humans.’ After he persuasively makes the argument for the instrumentality of animals in a number of medieval genres and texts, Steel (2011, 27) sets for himself this revisionary task in *How To Make a Human*’s epilogue, which ‘considers cases in medieval literature that offer more generous, less anthropocentric modes of being with others.’ Modeling his analysis on Eve Sedgwick’s reparative method of reading, which is ‘less committed to always, invariably revealing secret anxieties,’ Steel (Steel, 2011, 232) takes up four case studies from within the archives of the Christian Middle Ages, the most vivid of which is the Fifteen Signs of the Last Judgment. In this apocalyptic tradition, there can be heard the cries of ‘a world in all its plentitude’ – ‘stones, rivers, waters, trees, birds, beasts, and fish’ – and ‘voices’ that record ‘regret and longing for what humans, believing themselves separate and immutable, will abandon for the empyrean sterility of the resurrection fantasy’ (Steel, 2011, 231, 232). Steel’s (2011, 240) epilogue is no call for us to christen the eco-movement with a patron saint, but it does advocate for ‘humans...[to] abandon themselves to relationships unavailable to mere animals or, for that matter, to mere humans, whether medieval or modern.’ Such abandonment would constitute a release from the binaristic thinking about humans and animals that Steel’s book traces in the mainstream Western Christianity of the Middle Ages and a careful attention to the sounds of the world in all its plentitude.

Whereas Steel recuperates in his epilogue lamentations that reverberate through time from their articulation in a future moment, Alfred K. Siewers rescues from ‘anachronistic’ eco-use the trope of the Otherworld in Old Celt



and Old Welsh literatures. In the densely textured but rewarding *Strange Beauty: Ecocritical Approaches to Early Medieval Landscape*, Siewers (2009, 6) instead locates in Irish Sea literatures before *Beowulf* ‘a model for empathetic human interaction with the environment.’ The intellectual linchpin of Siewers’s study of the dynamism, the multiple spatialities and temporalities and the sheer wonder of the landscape in Irish Sea literatures is John Scotus Eriugena, a Hiberno-Latin philosopher whose treatise *Periphyseon (De Diuisione Naturae)*, as Siewers (2009, 67) observes at the beginning of his chapter on this figure, ‘was banned for centuries by the Western church.’ Focus on this figure thus places Siewers directly in the line of White, who looked to the heresies of Saint Francis as an ecocritical model for right living. However, Siewers could have investigated in greater detail the theoretical implications of the heterodoxy that would come to be associated with Eriugena’s name, philosophy and definition of nature. By what eco-terms would a full-scale reparative reading of heretical practice in the Christian Middle Ages or, for that matter, of Western Europe’s sixteenth-century reformations proceed? Would they be different from White’s? Heresy, it seems to me, is an ecotheory and concept that medieval and Renaissance ecocriticism would do well to take up and further explore. By ‘heresy’ I mean here not only attention to on-the-ground beliefs recorded in premodern England, such as the Lollard idea that ‘prayer said in the feld is as good as the prayer said in the churche’ (Tanner, 1977, 58), but also the unsettling and reforming of some of ecocriticism’s more persistent pieties about Christian stewardship and about the modernity of ecological thinking. In the process, medieval and Renaissance ecocriticisms can help to imagine for our world a range of futures unfolding from banned, censored and forgotten pasts.

About the Author

Vin Nardizzi is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of British Columbia. He is the author of *Wooden Os: Shakespeare's Theatres and England's Trees* (Toronto, 2013). With Stephen Guy-Bray and Will Stockton, he has edited *Queer Renaissance Historiography: Backward Gaze* (Ashgate, 2009); and with Jean E. Feerick, he has edited *The Indistinct Human in Renaissance Literature* (Palgrave, 2012) (E-mail: nardizzi@mail.ubc.ca).

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