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Source: *New Literary History*, Vol. 35, No. 3, Critical Inquiries, Explorations, and Explanations (Summer, 2004), pp. 427-442

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20057847>

Accessed: 02-10-2018 21:59 UTC

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Earth, World, Text: On the (Im)possibility of Ecopoiesis

Kate Rigby

The agnosticism of my title is intended to signal difficulties that cannot be avoided . . .” Flagging thus his critical intentions, Dominic Head, in an article entitled “The (Im)possibility of Ecocriticism,” sets out to question whether and how “the premises of ecological thinking” can truly be “accommodated within [the] increasingly rarefied discipline of literary study.”¹ Along the way, he problematizes a key element in that deep ecological thinking, with which he nonetheless allies himself: namely, the critique of anthropocentrism. Drawing upon the work of British left ecopolitical theorist Andrew Dobson, Head argues for the necessity of distinguishing between a “strong” “human-instrumental attitude to nature”—an attitude which Australian ecopolitical theorist Robyn Eckersley, in a neat turn of phrase, refers to as “human racism”—“and a weak kind, which is merely human-centred.” While it might be essential, in the long run, to overcome the former, the latter, according to Dobson, “is an unavoidable feature of the human condition [and] a necessary condition for there to be such a thing as politics.”²

An acknowledgement of the centrality of the human actant, however contingent, contextualized, and decentered she might be in herself, is also a necessary condition for there to be such a thing as literature, as commonly understood, along with almost all other kinds of artistic endeavor. This is Head’s primary concern in this article, and it leads him to take issue with the “aesthetic of relinquishment” that Lawrence Buell recommends in *The Environmental Imagination*.³ For as Buell himself acknowledges, this aesthetic is ultimately incompatible with most forms of lyric, dramatic, and epic writing: that literature which purveys what Buell calls “the most basic aesthetic pleasures of homocentrism: plot, characterization, lyric pathos, dialogue, intersocial events and so on.”⁴ Reluctant to be confined as a critic to what he terms the “ghetto” of environmental nonfiction, Buell’s favored genre, and keen to engage with both the aesthetics and politics of the postmodern, upon which some ecocritics have simply turned their backs, Head proceeds to

demonstrate the possibility of an ecologically informed reading of an emphatically postmodern and postcolonial novel, J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K.* (1983), while acknowledging that his "model of the ecological text, and ecological operation . . . falls short of existing ecocritical calls for a creative practice and a critical methodology which can give 'voice' to the natural world."⁵

Far from endorsing the impossibility of ecocriticism, Head's problematization of some of its existing assumptions and practices ends up lending the ecocritical project a much wider scope and significance than Buell's aesthetic of relinquishment would allow, vitally important though Buell's work and that of other proponents of nonfiction nature-writing has been in rehabilitating a neglected genre. However, the point at which Head's consideration concludes confronts us with the wider question of whether there could ever be a creative practice and a critical methodology that do not fall short of giving voice to the natural world. This is the question that I would like to pursue here, with reference in particular to the specifically Heideggerian model of *ecopoiesis* developed by Jonathan Bate in the final chapter of *The Song of the Earth*.⁶ Recast in Heideggerian terms, my question might be stated thus: how can a work of art, a thing of human making, or, as the Greeks put it, *poiesis*, speak, and in speaking "save," the earth? For this, according to Bate, is precisely what ecopoetry can do: "If mortals dwell in that they save the earth and if poetry is the original admission of dwelling," Bate concludes, "then poetry is the place where we save the earth."⁷

Bate's Heidegger is that of the essays on technology, dwelling, and poetry that were penned after the war, and it is accordingly to those that I too would like to return, before going back to a key text from the 1930s that Bate strangely omits from his discussion, namely, "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1935/6). Working back to this essay in reverse-chronological order, I will begin with "The Question Concerning Technology" (1953), as I believe that this essay, which has long been of interest to ecophilosophers,⁸ is crucial in delineating the horizon of understanding within which the full contemporary significance of the earlier work on art and dwelling can be seen to appear. This is of course the horizon of Heidegger's analysis of modernity in terms of the dominion of a certain kind of *techne* over both *phusis* and *poiesis*: over both the self-disclosure of natural entities and their "bringing forth" through human art.

Techne, it should be emphasized, is for Heidegger not in itself a bad thing. Following Aristotle, he considers *techne* to be not so much a strategy for manipulating matter, but rather a mode of bringing forth, revealing a potential that hitherto lay concealed in the material being worked. In this sense it is itself *poietic*—and as old as humanity (indeed, I would add, considerably older, for we are far from being the only

species with a knack for making things). With the rise of modern science and technology, however, a new form of *techne* had, in Heidegger's view, come into being: one which does not so much reveal as "challenge" that upon which it works. Modern technology challenges nature by putting to it "the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such."⁹ Heidegger's famous example of this process is the hydroelectrical power plant on the Rhine. The power plant "sets upon" the river to set its turbines moving in order to produce energy, which will then be dispatched to power further forms of challenging activities. "In the context of the interlocking processes pertaining to the orderly disposition of electrical energy," Heidegger concludes, "even the Rhine itself appears as something at our command" (*etwas Bestelltes*). As such it has been reduced to "standing reserve," a forestry term, which construes the forest as so much wood waiting to be extracted, utterly available and infinitely manipulable. Power plants, moreover, are not the only things that ply the Rhine in this way: the river is still no more than standing reserve when construed as "an object on call for inspection by a tour group ordered there by the vacation industry."¹⁰ It is in its demand that natural entities be totally present, perpetually available as objects of knowledge and power, that modern technology is said by Heidegger to complete the project of Western metaphysics.

The process whereby modern technology transforms things into standing reserve Heidegger refers to as "enframing." As his reference to the tour group as "ordered" (*bestellt*) indicates, human beings too are liable to become enframed (*gestellt*) as standing reserve within the modern technological order. At this point, Heidegger's critique of modernity comes close to Adorno and Horkheimer's account of the "dialectic of enlightenment" in their crucial work of the 1940s, whereby the domination of nature is shown to entail both self-alienation through the domination of the body and social domination through economic exploitation and political repression.¹¹ Adorno and Horkheimer have also been seen as precursors of contemporary Green theory, and their analysis of the dialectic of environment plays an important role in Bate's ecocritical discussion of the interstructuration of social domination and environmental exploitation. Returning to Heideggerian terminology, I first became conscious of myself as standing reserve when I discovered to my dismay that "Personnel Services" at Monash University had been renamed "Human Resources": for a resource is precisely that which exists and has value solely to the extent that it can be challenged to supply energy or "raw material." In the era of bioprospecting and genetic engineering, humans are reduced to standing reserve not only for their labor, but also in their very flesh and blood, to the extent that

this has become enframed as “genetic material” to be extracted, stored, and manipulated as medical scientists—and their corporate or state sponsors—see fit.

What chance might we have to escape the *Gestell*, and what is the role of art in this context? Here we discover that there is another point at which Heidegger and his erstwhile Marxist compatriots-in-exile come close: namely, in the disavowal of a narrowly political solution. While Adorno and Horkheimer do not seem to be able to offer any way out of the disastrous dialectic of enlightenment, at least in the text of that name, Heidegger does point to the possibility of a “saving power,” one which (not undialectically) was to emerge from the nature of *techne* itself: the revival, that is, of that other, older form of *techne*, namely, *poiesis*, the bringing forth, which does not challenge by enframing, but which lets things be in their obscure otherness in the very process of revealing them within the work of art. Here, too, there is after all a parallel with Adorno, for whom the only remaining locus of resistance seemed to be within the realm of the aesthetic.¹² David Farrell Krell, in his thoughtful introduction to “The Question Concerning Technology,” is troubled by this retreat from praxis to poetics.¹³ And yet, although it is true that in the concluding paragraphs of this essay, Heidegger’s talk is all of the work of art, *poiesis* is for him ultimately not confined to artistic practice. As suggested in the Hölderlin poem that Heidegger cites here, one that also provided the title for an earlier essay from 1951, “. . . Poetically Man Dwells . . .,” *poiesis* extends ultimately to a whole way of life. As such it is itself a form of praxis: that of knowing how to dwell. In this respect, it would appear that Heideggerian *poiesis* is actually more political, or at least activist, than Adorno’s (post?)-Marxist aesthetics, which does indeed confine itself to the avant-garde work of art as the sole remaining locus of resistance.

What, then, might it mean to withdraw from the *Gestell* in rediscovering the art of dwelling? To dwell, Heidegger explains in “Building Dwelling Thinking” (1951), is to create and caringly maintain a place of habitation within what he terms “the fourfold.” The fourfold comprises earth, understood as the land itself with its particular topography, waterways, and biotic community; sky, including the alternation of night and day, the rhythm of the seasons, and the vagaries of the weather; divinities, those emissaries or traces that yet remain of an absent God; and, last but not least, mortals, fellow humans, those who, in Heidegger’s (questionable) view, alone know that they will die.¹⁴ To dwell in the fourfold is to create and preserve things and places, which in themselves disclose the interweaving, or “gathering,” of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals. This involves attuning oneself in that which one thinks, does, and makes to that which is given with earth and sky: that is, a particular

natural environment. It implies also leaving open a space for the incalculable possibility of divine visitation, while acknowledging one's own mortality and the ties that bind one to fellow mortals, as well as to the place in which one dwells. Above all, writes Heidegger, "Mortals dwell insofar as they save the earth," whereby "to save" (*retten*) is to be understood not so much in the sense of "rescue," but rather of freeing something into "its own presencing" (*etwas in sein eigenes Wesen freilassen*).¹⁵ Heidegger's example of a mode of construction which thus "saves" the earth whilst opening up a place of human habitation is the bridge over the Rhine. Unlike the power plant, the bridge leaves the river to flow freely whilst allowing mortals to go their way, facilitating their interchanges and embodying their desire for a certain freedom of their own: in this case, the opportunity to cross over to the distant shore.

Dwelling is itself an art, for to dwell in the gathering of the fourfold is precisely to dwell poetically, since poiesis is that drawing forth into unconcealment which simultaneously allows things their own being. If dwelling is itself poetic, what then, as Heidegger's favored poet of being and dwelling, Hölderlin, once wondered, are *poets* for? More specifically, what are poets for "in lean years" (*wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit*), to cite the line from Friedrich Hölderlin's ode "Brod und Wein" more fully? As Heidegger explains in the 1946 essay on this question, **poetry acquires a new significance when the earth and its atmosphere, along with humans themselves, have been reduced to mere raw material to be technologically manipulated, reconstructed, and commodified.**¹⁶ The more technologically enframed our world becomes, the more completely we block the way to what Heidegger, in a Rilkean turn of phrase, terms "the Open," which here means something like all that is undelimited. In this context, the task of the poet is in Heidegger's analysis twofold. Critically or negatively, it is to disclose "the unhealable, the unholy *as such*" (*das Heillose als das Heillose*):¹⁷ that is, to disclose the broken and godforsaken world as precisely that. More positively, the poet's task is to reverse the disastrous departure from the Open, which, Heidegger insists, endangers our relationship to Being no less than the A-bomb endangers our physical existence, by recalling the wholeness and holiness of Being in the poetic word.

In ". . . Poetically Man Dwells . . ." it is this affirmative moment that prevails. Here, the task of the poet, as elucidated through a reading of Hölderlin's obscure verse, is said to admit us into dwelling by calling upon us to look up from our worldly labors to the heavens, measuring ourselves against the gods. In this way, he calls us to attend to what a contemporary ecophilosopher might call the wider ecocosmic dimension of our being. The poet of being and dwelling, Heidegger writes, summons the luminosity of the sky and the resonance of the wind into

the singing word and thereby “makes them shine and ring.”¹⁸ The poet, I am tempted to say, borrowing a term from Australian aboriginal cultures, “sings up” the dwelling place, weaving the fourfold into the poetic word.

In Bate’s discussion of Heidegger’s poetics of being and dwelling, the possibility of a critical role for poetry is not addressed. Concerned that Heideggerian dwelling might be tarnished by an echo of the Nazi ideology of “blood and soil,” he undertakes a sensitive close reading of Paul Celan’s haunting lyric “Todtnauberg,” in order to demonstrate the possibility of an ecopoetics of dwelling that emphatically disavows that association. In Bate’s reading of Celan’s poem, the displaced German-speaking Romanian-born Jewish poet resident in France embraces Heidegger’s poetics of being and dwelling even while lamenting the philosopher’s refusal to say a healing word regarding the Holocaust—the murderous endeavor of a regime that Heidegger had himself once supported to deny the Jews (and other “undesirables”) a dwelling place in the European diaspora. Bate’s reading is convincing and valuable. But in my view, Heidegger’s sense of dwelling, certainly by the early 1950s and probably already in the mid-1930s, is itself far removed from an irrationalist cult of blood and soil. For although, in Heidegger, dwelling involves an attunement to the given, it is itself not given, either by place of birth or ancestral belonging, even if your dwelling place does in fact happen to be that of your forefathers. Heidegger is quite emphatic about this: dwelling is an achievement, something which we have to learn again and again, something which involves conscious commitment, not something that is in any sense “in the blood.” Commenting on Heidegger’s discussion of the earthly dwelling place or *heimatlicher Grund* (native land) in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Michel Haar, in his book on Heidegger’s poetics of being and dwelling, also entitled *The Song of the Earth* (1993), observes that this is not necessarily the Earth where the artist is empirically born, “but the Earth he understands and preserves”: “Every true fatherland is adopted; for the ‘natural’ quality of the native land must also be learned, which means borne from understanding and *Stimmung* [mood, attunement] to knowledge.”¹⁹ Returning to the later formulation of this question in “. . . Poetically Man Dwells . . .,” it becomes apparent that some form of exile or at least defamiliarization is intrinsic to dwelling. We must first encounter the absence or obscurity of a place before we can begin to attune ourselves to it in dwelling. The poet admits us into dwelling precisely to the extent that she allows even the most familiar things to appear in all their strangeness, as if encountered for the first time. Only thus might things cease to be mere equipment; only thus might they be revealed as a gathering of the fourfold, the matrix of our dwelling.

So far, so good. Yet there is something in Heidegger's late poetics that continues to trouble me, something that is related not to his erstwhile Nazism, but rather to his persistent human racism.²⁰ While it is certainly true that Heidegger's so-called Turn, which had already occurred in the mid-1930s, is, among other things, a turn away from the excessive anthropocentrism of *Being and Time* (1928), an arrogant assumption of human apartness seems to me to persist in a key element of his philosophy: namely, in his account of the relationship between Being and language. For, in Heidegger's view, it is only within the *logos* of the word that the otherwise undisclosed being of things is revealed. Language thus not only constructs the horizon of understanding, the world, within which we experience the being of beings. It is also, more grandly, through language that we answer to the call of Being by drawing things forth into the "clearing" (*Lichtung*) of an articulated world. Language is thus, as he avers in "What Are Poets For?" the "house of Being"; for, as he states even more emphatically in *Underway to Language*, "only the word grants being to a thing."²¹

Now, this is not to deny the existence of a material reality that precedes and in some respects exceeds anything that humans might say or make of it (and for Heidegger, all saying is in itself a making). Nor is it to deny to the nonhuman a capacity for self-disclosure. Phusis refers to nature precisely as self-disclosing (and thereby also self-concealing): this is the "nature" neither of Newtonian physics nor of Judeo-Christian theology, but the primordial nature of earth and sky. Heidegger also speaks of this self-disclosing nature as "addressing" us and hence calling upon us to respond. For example, in a talk from 1956 on the nineteenth-century dialect poet and storyteller Hebel, a native of Heidegger's own region, he speaks of the way that the "naturalness of nature," in the rising and setting of the sun, moon, and stars, "addresses" or "calls" us (*uns anspricht*), "granting" us (*uns zuspricht*) an experience of the ultimate "mysteriousness of the world."²² It was precisely this *Zuspruch*, the unfathomable givenness of a self-disclosing (and thereby also self-concealing) earth and sky that calls us to respond with word and song, which, as Heidegger had warned in an earlier talk entitled "The Country Path," first delivered to the people of his hometown of Messkirch in 1949, was now in danger of being drowned out by the drone of machines, those false gods of modernity.²³

Despite this admission of the prior self-disclosure of nature, and its call to and upon us, Heidegger does nonetheless insist that, through language, humans have a privileged role to play in giving voice to phusis, speaking things, as it were, into Being. As Bate boldly restates the Heideggerian case, "things need us so that they can be named."²⁴ This seems to me to risk falling back into the hubris of that anthropocentrism

which has always assumed language to be an exclusively human prerogative, forgetting, as Robert S. Corrington puts it, that the “human process actualizes semiotic processes that it did not make and that it did not shape. Our cultural codes, no matter how sophisticated and multi-valued, are what they are by riding on the back of this self-recording nature.”²⁵ From an ecocentric perspective, one which allows to earth, sky, and divinities a plurality of voices of their own, it is not so much that things need us so that they can be named; rather it is we who need to name things so that we can share understandings about what we perceive and value, what we fear and desire, how we should live and how we should die. It is not for us to claim sole rights to the song of the earth, but rather to use our specifically human capacity for song in the widest sense—our capacity, that is, for artistic expression of all sorts—to join in the exuberant singing, dancing, shape-changing, many-hued self-disclosure of phusis.²⁶ It is also worth recalling that in evolutionary terms this magnificent symphony seems to have reached something of a climax at the moment when we arrived on the scene. The vital question now is whether it will survive our efforts to name, tame, and recompose it. In this context, we need poets not so much to draw things into Being through their song, but rather to draw us forth into the polyphonic song of our nonhuman earth others.

David Rothenberg, whose own highly dialogic work incorporates and responds to the voices of a variety of nonhuman others, finds a model for this other kind of “drawing forth” in the ecomusical practice of the Kaluli people of the New Guinea highlands. *Dulugu ganalan*, or “lift-up-oversounding,” is an interweaving of the sounds of the living environment, including human voices and instruments, singing along, as it were, with the more-than-human natural world.²⁷ For an example of something analogous to Rothenberg’s “sudden music” within the visual arts, we might look to Harry Nankin’s “Earthwave Project,” which required the participation, not only of a bevy of long-suffering human friends, but also of the more-than-human world of sea, moon, wind, and cloud. Nankin’s “Sacred Theory of the Wave” involved capturing a negative image of a wave breaking off a remote beach in Victoria, in southeastern Australia, onto a huge sheet of photographic paper attached to a weighty wooden frame held by numerous willing, if rather chilly, assistants. Three attempts were made to catch the wave, and each time something unpredictable intervened to stymie Nankin’s plans, such as a cloud passing over the moon, and a strong undertow that ripped apart the final, and most perfect, image, as the wave retreated from the shore. In the end, this intervention of the iatrogenic was what the project came to be all about.²⁸ Thus, the elemental world of earth and sky finds a “voice” in Nankin’s photographic assemblage precisely by

defeating his original intentions through its incalculability and capacity to surprise.

Writers too sometimes speak of the voices of the more-than-human world. Consider, for example, Robert Gray's lyric retracing of a meditative walk along a forestry trail. This exquisite work of ecopoetry by one of Australia's preeminent living poets of the natural world culminates in the realization of a moment of participatory consciousness, in which the speaker discovers that "all of us are a choir."²⁹ Here, in a place once wounded by logging, the poet has found his voice in being taken up into the song of the regenerating forest. It is of this joyous sense of participation in the more-than-human world of which he now, in his human way, sings: namely, with words. It is tempting to suggest that ecopoetry such as this might be understood as a form of "singing up" that is also a singing along, which is possible within a literate culture. If so, we must nonetheless also acknowledge that there is a world of difference between the solitary experience of the postromantic poet rendered in the form of a written text, and a communal practice of music and dance performed in the midst of the more-than-human dwelling place. Gray might speak of the forest as "a choir," but we cannot hear the forest in his words. Neither, it should be noted, can Rothenberg's recordings put us as listeners in dialogue with whale, eagle, or river; nor can Nankin's shards of photographic paper subject us to the force of the sea.

This brings me to the second aspect of my critique of Heidegger's overvaluation of the poetic word. Gray also points us in the direction of this problem, when, in another poem, he writes of walking in a park in the early morning, concluding, "If no-one saw all this, its existence would go on just as well / And what is really here no words can tell."³⁰ Is there then a dimension of being which, far from being made possible by human language, always, somehow, escapes it? Bate, following Heidegger, is keen to protect language, especially poetry, from the blight of enframing. But, if, as Bate puts it, "enframing means making everything part of a system, thus obliterating the unconcealed being-there of particular things,"³¹ then is this not precisely what language does also? Certainly, Hegel would have us think so, and here, for once, I am more with Hegel (and, behind him, Kant) than with Heidegger. Adam first asserted his dominion over the animals, Hegel argued in the *Jena System* (1803/4), through the imposition of names, which "annihilated" (*vernichtet*) their referents by substituting for their being something ideational that could henceforth exist in the absence of the thing so named.³² To this, the semiotician might add that things thus named become incorporated into a system of signs, whose logic cannot be assumed to be that of the pattern of interrelationship prevailing among

things-in-themselves. If all naming frames, how then can the poet speak of things in a way that allows them their own being? To some extent, or read in a certain way, Heidegger might in fact have an answer to this. To find it, we will have to go back to that work of the mid-1930s, in which he first began to write of the relationship between earth and world.

One of the first texts in which Heidegger turns towards the earth is the essay on "The Origin of the Work of Art." It is here that we read for the first time in Heidegger that, "the world grounds itself on the earth, and earth juts through world." This interrelationship between world and earth is the nexus from which the work of art originates, in Heidegger's account. Moreover, it is in the work of art that this interrelationship is made manifest. For the work of art itself "sets up" (*aufstellt*) a world, while at the same time it "sets forth" (*herstellt*) the earth, disclosing it, that is, as a ground. Thus, "[t]he work of art moves the earth itself into the open region of a world and keeps it there." Heidegger construes the relationship of earth and world here in a decidedly Nietzschean manner, as agonistic, such that the work is said to inaugurate the "strife" (*Streit*) of earth and world.³³ It is through this strife that both earth and world truly come into their own.

How then does earth thrust up into the world in the work of art? In at least four ways, according to Heidegger in this essay. In one aspect, earth appears in the work as the *heimatlicher Grund*, the ground upon which we make our dwelling-place, recalling once again that even here the *Heimat* is to be found or rediscovered, rather than simply inherited. Beyond this, earth is implicit in the work as that matrix or "harmony" (*Einklang*) which supports the relation of all natural beings, including, I would add (although Heidegger does not), human beings in their corporeal interconnectedness with other beings.³⁴ Most obviously, perhaps, earth appears in the work in its own materiality or "thingliness." In literary works, this includes both the phonemes and graphemes—the physical "signifiers," in semiotic-speak—and that whereon they appear, be that the breath of the speaker, in the case of oral literature, or the printed page. Most significantly for my present argument, Heidegger insists here that in the materiality of the work of art, including the dense sonority of spoken verse, earth appears as *that which withdraws and remains hidden*. And if, as Heidegger maintains, the earth is disclosed in language as that which remains "concealed" (*das Verschlossene*), then, in the poetic work, earth is preserved precisely in its unsayability.³⁵

In the 1956 addendum to this essay, Heidegger acknowledges that the work of art as a practice of giving form (*Gestalt*) itself constitutes an enframing, a *Gestell*, of sorts. For all their efforts to incorporate nonhuman voices, I might add, this remains true of Rothenberg's recordings and Nankin's photography, which inevitably have designs on the nonhu-

man voices that they seek to capture within the frame of their work. Heidegger nonetheless distinguishes artistic forming or figuration from technological enframing on the grounds that the former is not a “challenging,” to the precise extent that it preserves the undisclosed—that is, unspeakable—dimension of primordial nature as earth. It is here, in this admission of that which necessarily escapes disclosure, that we might find an antidote to the hubris of a Heideggerian poetics according to which “things need us in order to be named.” Following this construction of the earth as unsayable, we might be led, along with Michel Haar, to a poetics that is perhaps more thoroughly Rilkean than Heideggerian, a negative ecopoetics within which, as Haar puts it, “[p]oetry sings the sayable world, but so as to let it be beyond every name.” According to Haar, Rilke’s “celebration of Earth (‘celebrating the Earth and not the Unsayable,’ *Ninth Elegy*) begins by affirming the expressibility of things and the disavowal of an absolute or supraterrrestrial unsayable, but finishes by assenting to the inexpressibility of Earthly presence itself.”³⁶

How then does the work of art “save” the earth by disclosing it as unsayable? It does so, I would suggest, precisely to the extent that it draws attention to its own status as text and hence as a mode of enframing. In this sense, the literary text saves the earth by disclosing the nonequation of word and thing, poem and place. It may do so in a variety of ways, to which the ecocritic, in company, for once, with the deconstructionist, should be attentive. These include explicit disavowals of sayability, as in the conclusion of Gray’s “Early Morning”; moments of incoherence; but also the formal qualities manifested by all texts, qualities that declare them to be artifacts, carefully crafted works of poetic *techne* rather than spontaneous self-disclosures of *phusis*. An ecopoetics attentive to this moment of negativity, to the withholding of what is promised, might be referred to in Lyotardian terms as a “discourse of the secluded”: that is, a discourse on that which lies outside all enframings, all social systems, including that of language.³⁷ Only to the extent that the work of art is self-canceling, acknowledging in some way its inevitable failure to adequately mediate the voice of nature, can it point us to that which lies beyond its own enframing.

Now, to anyone schooled in Derridean criticism, the negativity of my proposed ecopoetics will doubtless seem all too familiar. There is nonetheless a profound difference in orientation between a straight deconstructive and an ecocritical concern with negative poetics. In order to illuminate that difference, I can do no better than turn to the words of another Frenchman, namely the poet and critic Yves Bonnefoy, who, in an inspired article from 1988, urged literary critics to “lift their eyes from the page.”³⁸ Here, Bonnefoy suggests that while the “textualist

revolution” in literary studies over the past twenty years had begun with an important insight into the noncorrespondence between the world of the text and the world of embodied experience, it had generated a preoccupation with “textuality” and “intertextuality” per se, at the expense of a concern with the world (and that always includes for Bonnefoy the more-than-human natural world). Indeed, he argues that the exclusive concern with relations obtaining solely within and between texts had reduced criticism to “nothing so much as a game—a game without any other responsibility than intellectual—whereas the work studied, on the other hand, might have been an experience of the tragedy of life.” This game is a betrayal of the critic’s responsibility both to the world and to the work, for it obscures a crucial dimension of literature itself: namely, the way in which it both draws us in and sends us forth, urging us to “interrupt” our reading by returning our gaze to what lies forever beyond the page. “It is not within the poet’s scope to reestablish presence,” Bonnefoy writes. “But he can recall that presence is a possible experience, and he can stir up the need for it, keep open the path that leads toward it—after which one will read him and restore to his poem the benefit of that experience it had been unable to completely achieve.”³⁹

Perhaps, then, it might be more helpful to seek in the work of *ecopoiesis*, not so much a voicing of the more-than-human natural world, but, more humbly, simply a response, and, recalling Dobson’s cautionary words regarding the inescapability of weak anthropocentrism, a merely human response at that, to the call of nature’s self-disclosure, its *autopoiesis*. Here, too, however, I would like to join with another Frenchman, Jean-Louis Chrétien, in insisting that, even as such, the work of art will always fall short of responding entirely adequately. According to Chrétien, there is a dimension of our encounters with things, other, world, and God that will always exceed our capacity to respond, whether verbally or corporeally. Of the encounter with beauty, for example, he writes: “The joy with which beauty strikes us delivers us to word and song, to thanks and praise, but how could the response to it not fall short of it?”⁴⁰ For Chrétien, as for Heidegger, we are called to respond to the call of the other; and yet, in Chrétien’s view, it is only in the noncorrespondence of response to the call that we remain open to that which addresses us in an other, who or which is as such irreducible to the self. Falling short is thus neither “a contingent deficit nor a regrettable imperfection. . . . It is the very event of a wound by which our existence is altered and opened, and becomes itself the site of the manifestation of what it responds to.” It is this very woundedness of our song, our recognition of its inadequacy, which necessitates and affirms a plurality of voices. For if no one can say it all, then we are all called upon

to participate in our own way in the “chorus and polyphony” of responses, each of which “accomplishes its unsubstitutable singularity in giving itself into a community and thus making appeal to other voices.”⁴¹ To this, the ecophilosopher would need to add that the chorus and polyphony, in which we are invited to join, contains more than human voices, for which we ourselves cannot stand in.

With reference to a sonnet by Mallarmé, Bonnefoy asks: “How can we read about ‘forgotten woods’ over which ‘somber winter’ passes without going into woods that are our own, where we can either find or lose ourselves?” Chrétien considers “praise, and thus the *thank you* and the *yes*, as the highest possibility of speech.”⁴² A great many works of ecopoiesis clearly do participate in this celebratory mode of response. But, if our woods are no more, what then, we might ask, are poets for? Then, I would suggest, we need poets and other artists who, in Heidegger’s words, are able to disclose *das Heillose als das Heillose*, making space for a different kind of negativity from that which I have discussed hitherto, responding with tones of grief, protest, accusation, or exhortation to times that are not only lean, but also increasingly perilous. One such poet of the romantic period was John Clare, a rural laborer and autodidact, who sang both of the beauty and fragility of the natural world of his own *Heimat* and also of the ravages caused to the land and the rural poor by the enclosure and commodification of the commons. One of the most urgent of Clare’s protest poems is “The Mores,” which begins in a quasi-Wordsworthian manner with a recollection of a place in which the poet had loved to ramble as a child. Yet this place of memory is presented as irretrievable in the present, not so much because of a change in the subjectivity of the poet, as is typically the case in Wordsworth’s verse, but rather because the place itself has been destroyed. What was once a rich ecosystem in which both human and nonhuman, wild and domestic creatures could share with pleasure, has now been stolen from the more-than-human community by private ownership, marred by fences, and turned over to the production of cash crops. Thus, Clare’s poem traces a path to a place whose

paths are stopt—the rude philistines thrall
Is laid upon them and destroyed them all
Each little tyrant with his little sign
Shows where man claims earth glows no more divine
On paths to freedom and to childhood dear
A board sticks up to notice ‘no roads here.’⁴³

Lifting our eyes from Clare’s poem to our world and our earth, we might be led to recall that the loss of the commons, of community, of

biodiversity and ecosocial well-being, has in the meantime reached global proportions. At a time, moreover, when the plenitude of first nature is increasingly at risk of disappearing behind a simulacral second nature, it is more essential than ever that we affirm the absolute priority of the self-disclosure of phusis over whatever might be disclosed of it within the frame of the work of art. Only by insisting on the limits of the text, its inevitable falling-short as a mode of response no less than as an attempted mediation, can we affirm that there is, in the end, no substitute for our own embodied involvement with the more-than-human natural world in those places where we ourselves stray, tarry, and, if we are lucky, dwell. Works of ecological art might be invaluable in calling us to attend anew to the complex interweaving of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals. Rediscovering the art of dwelling, however, is not something that can be achieved by the poet qua poet: it must rather be worked towards by all of us, every day, as we endeavor to find new ways of creating and relating, new ways of living and dying, new ways of letting be and letting go. This alone would truly be a work of ecopoiesis, a making of the dwelling-place, and it is one for which we are also going to need an enhanced understanding of the natural world, technologies that are more compatible with its continued flourishing, and, last but not least, a more socially just and ecologically sustainable economic system.

Whether the realization of this work of collective ecopoiesis is yet possible remains to be seen. In the meantime, let us be inspired by such works of art as I have mentioned here to redouble our endeavors to attune ourselves to the earth, lending our own human voices to its polyphonic song.

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NOTES

- 1 Dominic Head, "The(Im)possibility of Ecocriticism," in *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*, ed. Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells (London: Zed Books, 1998), 27.
- 2 Andrew Dobson, *Green Political Thought* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), quoted in Head, "The(Im)possibility of Ecocriticism," 29. Robyn Eckersley, "Beyond Human Racism," *Environmental Values* 7, no. 2 (1998): 165–82.
- 3 Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).
- 4 Quoted in Head, "The(Im)possibility of Ecocriticism," 33.
- 5 Head, "The(Im)possibility of Ecocriticism," 37.
- 6 Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).
- 7 Bate, *Song of the Earth*, 283.
- 8 See, for example, Michael Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, and Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); and Bruce V.

Foltz, *Inhabiting the Earth: Heidegger, Environmental Ethics, and the Metaphysics of Nature* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993).

9 Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. and intro. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1996), 320.

10 Heidegger, "Question Concerning Technology," 321.

11 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (1944; London: Verso, 1979).

12 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. C. Lenhardt, (1970; London: Routledge, 1989).

13 Krell asserts, "the suppression of the political and of *praxis* by *poiesis* and the work of art ought to disturb us. If thinking perdures beyond or beneath the distinction between theory and practice (see Reading V), does it also remain untouched by the apparent split between *poiesis* and *praxis*?" (*Basic Writings*, 310).

14 Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, ed. and trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 149–50.

15 Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," 150.

16 Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?" *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 89–142.

17 Heidegger, "What are Poets For?" 117.

18 Heidegger, ". . . Poetically Man Dwells . . .," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 225.

19 Michel Haar, *The Song of the Earth: Heidegger and the Grounds of the History of Being*, trans. R. Lilly (1986; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 63.

20 Michael Peters and Ruth Irwin, in another recent reprise to Bate's reading of Heidegger's ecopoetics, also note that "when it comes to the status of humanity in relation to other forms of life, Heidegger retains the prejudices of his times." "Earthsongs: Ecopoetics, Heidegger and Dwelling," *The Trumpeter* 18, no. 1 (2002), http://trumpeter.athabasca.ca/content/v18.1/peters_irwin.htm (accessed February 1, 2003), 8 of 14.

21 Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?" 132; *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (Pfullingen: Noske, 1979), 164.

22 Heidegger, "Hebel—der Hausfreund" (Hebel—the House Friend), in *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens, 1910–1976*, ed. Hermann Heidegger (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983), 145.

23 Heidegger, "Der Feldweg" (The Country Path), in *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens*, 89.

24 Bate, *Song of the Earth*, 265.

25 Robert S. Corrington, *Ecstatic Naturalism: Signs of the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), ix.

26 On the question of the status of human language, as well as on the question of the embodied dimension of human subjectivity, ecocritics might be better served by Merleau-Ponty than by Heidegger, especially in light of David Abram's inspiring ecophilosophical rereading of the former in *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage, 1997). One ecocritic who has already followed this path is Leonard Skigaj in *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999). As I will go on to discuss, however, the continuity of human speaking with that of the more-than-human world is only part of the story. It is also necessary to acknowledge the specificity and negativity of human language, and, in this respect, I suspect that Merleau-Ponty might be as much in need of "correction" as Heidegger.

27 David Rothenberg, "No World but in Things: The Poetry of Naess's Concrete Contents," in *Beneath the Surface: Critical Essays in the Philosophy of Deep Ecology*, ed. Eric Katz, Andrew Light, David Rothenberg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 163. On the relevance of the Bakhtinian theory of "dialogics" to ecological (and specifically, ecofeminist) criticism, see Patrick Murphy, *Literature, Nature, and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995). On Rothenberg's own work, see, for example,

Sudden Music: Improvisation, Sound, Nature (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002) (book plus CD).

28 See Jacqueline Millner's discussion of Nankin's "Sacred Theory of the Wave," in Millner, "Afterword: Perspective on the Perspecta," in *Uncertain Ground: Essays Between Art & Nature*, ed. Martin Thomas (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1999), 173–74.

29 Robert Gray, "On a Forestry Trail," *New Selected Poems* (Sydney: Duffy and Snellgrove, 1998), 239.

30 Gray, "Very Early," *New Selected Poems*, 159.

31 Bate, *Song of the Earth*, 255.

32 G. W. F. Hegel, *Jenaer Systementwürfe I*, ed. K. Duesing and H. Kimmerle (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1975), 20.

33 Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Basic Writings*, 174, 172, 175.

34 Earth in this sense is perhaps not so very different from what Maurice Merleau-Ponty came to call the "flesh of the world." See Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Leford, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 248.

35 "Projective saying is saying, which, in preparing the sayable, simultaneously brings the unsayable as such into a world" (Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," 199).

36 Haar, *Song of the Earth*, 123–24. In my attempted theorization of an eco-poetics of negativity, I am indebted to conversations with my colleague Kevin Hart, who coined the term "poetics of the negative" in an essay on theology and literary theory, "The Poetics of the Negative," in *Reading the Text: Biblical Criticism and Literary Theory*, ed. Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 281–340.

37 Jean François Lyotard, "Ecology as Discourse of the Secluded," *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. Laurence Coupe (London: Routledge, 2000), 135–38.

38 Yves Bonnefoy, "Lifting Our Eyes from the Page" (1988), *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Summer 1990): 794–806.

39 Bonnefoy, "Lifting Our Eyes," 796, 801.

40 Jean-Louis Chrétien, "Retrospection," *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*, trans. Jeffrey Bloechl (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 122. Chrétien's work on beauty is *L'effroi du beau* (Paris: Cerf, 1987). Chrétien's critique of Heidegger's philosophy of language is developed in *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne A. Davenport (1992; New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), especially 30–31.

41 Chrétien, "Retrospection," 122.

42 Bonnefoy, "Lifting Our Eyes," 806; Chrétien, "Retrospection," 128.

43 John Clare, "The Mores," *John Clare*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 196.