Tamkang Review 41.2 (June 2011): 41-61.

Poetry of the Planet, by the Planet, and for the Planet: A Global Manifesto for Being Here

Jonathan Butler
Independent Scholar

Abstract

This essay takes as its launching point the current dilemma faced by the ecological movement: its fragmentary and thus ineffective challenge to the behavioral patterns behind the continued destruction of the planet. Journalism, fiction, non-fiction narrative, and film have all raised awareness of ecological imperatives, but failed to effect the total change required to redirect the current course of humanity from its path towards ecological oblivion. What more is required? This essay posits poetry as a strategic means to heighten global awareness to the ways in which language itself masks the real violence at work on the planet. Using the work of Slovenian critic Slavoj Žižek as a springboard, the claim is made that we must be suspicious of language itself, especially the discourse of "liberal communism" which takes away with one hand what it gives with the other.

My argument is that for real change to occur we must look to the language of the poets who understand that human thought, human embodiment, and the natural world are not separate from each other but intertwined and interconnected in ways that, once acknowledged, will make it necessarily impossible to continue unleashing violence against the planet, since such violence would essentially amount to violence against oneself. The poetry of John Burnside, David Gravender and Boyd Chubbs is analyzed in this light and the commensurate philosophy of such an interconnected world

Jonathan Butler earned his Ph.D. in English Literature at the University of Toronto in 2001. He is a trained scholar in the field of historiographic metafiction and has also published a novel in the genre, *Return of the Native* (Breakwater Books, 2007). He has taught Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Toronto and for the past five years at a private university in Taiwan. A forthcoming article on meta-rhetoric in Kenneth Burke's *Towards a Better Life* will appear early in 2012 in *The University of Toronto Quarterly*. E-mail: jmatthwbutler@gmail.com

(Received 18 October 2010; accepted 15 April 2011)

is tentatively explored. The philosophy of poet/critic Tim Lilburn is used as a backdrop to appreciating the ways in which the aforementioned poets question and challenge traditional metaphysical dualism—the separation of self from world which makes possible and empowers violence against nature in the first place.

Keywords: ecology, poetry, contemplation, epistemology, ontology

> **Ecosystem.** The system formed by the interaction of all living organisms, plants, animals, bacteria, etc. with the physical and chemical factors of their environment. The varieties of meanings attached to the word by different ecologists . . . reflects the variety of boundaries drawn for the environment. Thus, foresters speak of a "woodland ecosystem," meaning the whole tree-covered area, while an entomologist working in the same wood will restrict the term to a fallen log with its insects, fauna and the fungi living on the dead material; such restricted uses have their practical value in helping scientists to define their problem. However, since an eco-system is usually thought of as occurring within a self-contained and restricted area, and since complete isolation of most areas is impossible, it can be argued that the Earth itself is the only real ecosystem.
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> —*The Harper Dictionary of Modern Thought*

Ecocritical voices have for a while been rising to the forefront of the chorus against global warming: a high soprano here, a harmonious tenor there, a resounding alto over there, and occasionally a deep bass booming seemingly from everywhere the syncopated syllables of articulation of the precise behavioral changes required by each and every one of us delinquent stewards of the garden. Change is happening—slowly, not nearly as fast as most would like, but it is happening. And yet there has been a discernible measure of reluctance, of recalcitrance even, on the part of many to institute into their daily regimes the requisite changes for a greener world. The blame has been variously cast on selfishness, inertia, the preference for convenience, and even the naive position—despite hoards of scientific data proving the contrary—that global warming is a hoax, a left-wing conspiracy dreamt up by Ralph Nader, Al Gore, and a handful of pot-smoking, radical hippies who never made it to Wall Street after the "Hip to Be Square" turn-around of the 1980s.[1]

The question might well be asked: what more is required to get everyone on board? Is it simply more consciousness raising that will do the trick? If that is the case, former U.S. Vice President Al Gore's startling documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, should have sufficed as a loud enough wake-up call to the dangers of continuing as before. Additionally, journalist Alan Weisman's shivering speculations in *The World Without Us* lend much fuel to the fire in showing clearly that we might well be a mad, self-destructive, planet-destroying species the world could do just fine without. Such a realization—one would think—should

[1] This is only partly a tongue-in-cheek remark. "Hip to be Square" is a mid-1980s Huey Lewis and the News top-ten hit that was re-popularized after being featured ironically in a brutal murder scene during the classic film *American Psycho* (based on the novel by Bret Easton Ellis). The song itself is a satire of the manner in which many of the 1960s counter-culture radicals who celebrated anti-conservative ways of living came full circle and re-enrolled in college to go on to work in brokerage firms, legal firms and other conservative occupations against which they had so vehemently protested in their youth.

shock even the most careless consumer into a more environmentally friendly set of behaviors. Furthermore, as Joni Adamson has argued in a recent issue of *Tamkang Review*, ecologically-minded writers like Barbara Kingsolver—although often naively attached to traditional notions of place—do much to draw attention to new ways of relating to the earth, of perceiving one's responsibilities to a reciprocal relationship generating proper care of the earth and beneficial nutrition to those who engage in such care. "For example," Adamson claims, "in focusing on local places and the food that can be produced within 200 miles, these writers seem to be suggesting that 'saving the planet' will require each of us to find a local place to which we can commit" (5).[2]

Diane Beresford-Kroeger's *Arboretum America: A Philosophy of the Forest*, first brought her expertise as a specialist on trees to a wider audience. Beresford-Kroeger is a highly respected botanist and expert on the medicinal property of trees. In her recent book, *The Global Forest*, she brings her narrow specialization to an even wider audience with a poetic collection of short essays, underscoring repeatedly the primary lesson that all of life as we know it depends on the trees of the planet which function in an astounding web of complexity—patiently adumbrated throughout the collection. Each of Beresford-Kroeger's essays serves to enhance and strengthen our understanding of trees as absolutely necessary for our continued survival. And yet, the forests of the earth still fall at an alarming rate.

Going back further, one might cite a classic work of fiction such as Ralph Callenbach's 1974 book *Ecotopia* as being precisely the kind of work required to enlighten citizens of a globalized world on how to institute into their lives behavioral patterns commensurate to a proper stewardship of the planet. Despite the implausibility of the plot—mainland U.S. would never permit Northern California, Oregon and Washington to secede and form its own governmental body—the novel succeeds in offering a vision of life in a stable-state economy, one which mirrors nature in ensuring that everything that is produced is recycled. Indeed, one of the novel's epigraphs, borrowing the words of Barry Commoner, says it all: "In nature, no organic substance is synthesized unless there is provision for its degradation; recycling is enforced." As William Weston, the novel's narrator, soon learns (and by extension the reader), "Ecotopia" is not merely a strange experimental world but "might be what we will become" (28-29). Callenbach

[2] Adamson argues that Kingsolver's fiction, along with that of Gary Paul Nabhan, Michael Pollan and Eric Schlosser, raises some key questions regarding the notion of "local place" and whether such notions can continue in the era of globalization. Her discussion of Kingsolver is especially astute as she identifies both the strengths and weaknesses of Kingsolver's position, articulating, in the process, part of the problem with strategic/rational approaches to solving the global ecological crisis. The fragmentation such positions bring about is inherent in the type of approach itself, as discussed below.

has been interviewed recently and cites the incredible influences the novel has had on local movements such as those committed to "permaculture" and sustainability. A recent article in the popular journal *Yoga* attests to just such an influence.[3] Dystopian visions such as those of J.G. Ballard in the 1960s, and recent American fiction obliquely hinting at Armageddon-type scenarios have also played their role: either articulating where our folly will lead us, or else pointing, however obliquely, to a reworking of the traditional value system which has led us here in the first place.[4]

In recent American fiction, perhaps Don DeLillo's brief but critically-barraged novelette *Point Omega* best problematizes the current dilemma of our time.[5] DeLillo's disillusioned character Richard Elster, a former CIA war-consultant and a former academic deeply schooled in manipulating the masses with a "created" reality, puts the matter in a chilling light in trying to account for the atrocity of war and violence still prevalent in the world, the will to self-destruction of the human species. He says, "the sphere of collective human thought . . . is approaching the final term, the last flare. . . . Consciousness is exhausted. Back now to inorganic matter. This is what we want. We want to be stones in a field" (51-53). DeLillo, long celebrated as America's most prescient novelist, is on to something here.[6] Furthermore, he is not alone, as a number of writers, journalists, gurus of human consciousness and self-fulfillment, and other cultural critics are apparently moving in unison towards the suggestion that conventional human

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[3] The *Yoga* journal, run out of San Francisco, is a popular sight in the bookstores and magazine racks of the West Coast of North America. The article mentioned is "The Good Earth" and it adumbrates in some detail the lifestyles of several people from varying backgrounds who have embraced the new "permaculture" lifestyle. Callenbach's book is not given credit directly by any of them but it very likely has had a considerable influence on the movement's popularity today. His book appeared as a 30th anniversary edition in 2004 to much acclaim by those who remembered its first appearance and also those reading it for the first time.

[4] In American literature, examples are numerous and varied in scope and detail: Cormac McCarthy's 2007 novel *The Road* focuses almost exclusively on the effects of an Armageddon-type scenario in which his protagonists stumble forth blindly into a desecrated world seeking shelter and the tentative promise of some habitable future; his earlier work, on the other hand—a novel like *Blood Meridian*—articulates a more primal connection of man to the earth, suggesting at moments a common connection of man to his environment. The renegade band of cowboys traversing the California desert is at one point described as "beings provoked out of the absolute rock" (172), suggesting a common originating union.

[5] The jury is still out on *Point Omega*, but early reviews of the novel range from utter disparagement to confessed bewilderment as to the degree of DeLillo's seriousness. My own sense is that DeLillo is in earnest making a tentative step forward into uncharted territory on both an epistemological and ontological levels. As he says in an interview with Alexandra Alter, "I wanted to suggest things rather than explore them fully." How do we know what "being" is like outside of the range of human consciousness? It is precisely this question which I attempt to explore in this essay by pointing towards the poetry of those who attempt to answer it.

[6] As Vince Passaro poetically phrases it, "Don DeLillo has long been our most prescient novelist, the man whose imagination felt like a crystal ball in which we made out the ghostly silhouettes of the future."

reason is causing us more harm than good. Proof of our collective insanity can be found in abundance but perhaps can be most persuasively articulated in the following two facts: the vehemence with which we continue to destroy each other and the willful destruction we continue to inflict on the planetary life forms which sustain us. Clearly, current modes of thinking are nearing exhaustion. There seems to be little future left if we stick to the old paradigm, an argument sustained by a number of the critics and gurus of contemporary thought alluded to above.[7]

Whether Elster is taken to be a crackpot intellectual dissident or a serious-minded critic of contemporary culture is, of course, debatable. The notion that "consciousness is exhausted," however, is in any case worth taking up here, although I would suggest that it is not so much "consciousness" itself that we have exhausted as conventional modes of using consciousness—to be specific, incorporating a subject/object epistemology deeply embedded in our languages and further ensconced thanks to the meditative insistence of French philosopher René Descartes, widely regarded as the father of modern philosophy, paving the way for Enlightenment thinking to follow in the subsequent centuries.[8]

[7] The scope of this essay cannot, unfortunately, extend as far as an exposition of the respective positions of these other spokesmen, although I can very briefly elucidate their views here. Deepak Chopra, Eckhart Tolle and Wayne Dyer are three key figures who spring immediately to mind. Chopra of course, has drawn massive global audiences after leaving a high-profile career in Western medicine to embrace Ayurveda, the study of mind-body medicine based on a holistic approach. Chopra taught at Boston University and Tufts University in their medical schools for a time, and was Chief of Staff at both New England Memorial Hospital and Boston Regional Medical Center. His decision caused great alarm among his colleagues, who feared he had "lost his mind" (in his own words in a taped audio interview with Tony Robbins available on Youtube). However, his growing reputation soon quelled any doubts that he was indeed on to something with a great measure of validity as many of his patients began to heal under the new paradigm. Chopra is renowned for his attacks on the arrogance of Western (rationalist) science, which seeks to objectify an external world that is, in reality (according to Chopra), interconnected with human thought and embodiment. Eckhart Tolle is a speaker whose most famous book, *The Power of Now*, assists readers in transcending the "thinking brain" and reaching a level of deeper awareness that involves a connection to the world and the present moment instead of a sense of separation from it. Wayne Dyer preaches the wisdom of the Tao, again a variant mode of transcending the "thinking brain" with its constant chattering and noise, an issue DeLillo also refers to in *Point Omega*. There is too much in common here to dismiss it all as coincidence. Human thought seems to be indeed on the verge of a huge paradigm shift, as the diverse group of aforementioned spokesmen seems to maintain.

[8] Dualistic thinking predates Descartes, of course, and is more properly traced back to the ancient Greeks. Paul Shepard, in *Nature and Madness*, cites Robert Pirsig as the first to identify this false and dangerous departure. "In Greece, the Ionian philosophers pursuing what was *true*, instead of what was *good*, won out, separating mind from matter, subject from object, form from substance; these conflicting entities, suggests Robert Persig [sic], became the dynamic of the pseudomyth, history. The Sophists, seeking an organismic relativity of truth to thought, lost. Persig [sic] speaks of the 'unbelievable magnitude of what man, when he gained power to understand and rule the world in terms of dialectic truths, had lost. He had built empires of scientific capability to manipulate the phenomena of nature into enormous manifestations of his own dreams of power and wealth—but for this he had exchanged an

Enlightenment thinking has of course been under scrutiny for the last half-century in the form of poststructuralist and postmodernist critiques, although to be sure, the steadfast figure of Jurgen Habermas has for decades been trying to salvage what he sees as the emancipatory potential of enlightenment thinking.[9] While Habermas has seemed to fight an uphill battle against his professional colleagues in Europe—Jean Baudrillard in particular—most ordinary citizens of the global world still subscribe to enlightenment modes of thinking, perceiving themselves as distinct subjects, separate from a world of other subjects; the natural world is for them thus a conglomerate of objects, wholly distinct from the individuality of the privileged, solitary self as this self negotiates its way through the world.

Such simplistic understanding remains in play today as an unthinkingly dominant paradigm against which the entire environmental movement must struggle, if unwittingly, as we attempt to get our ecological house in order. There are discernible voices rising over the din, to be sure (as suggested at the outset), from such figures as Al Gore from the field of politics, Harrison Ford from Hollywood, and even British royalty's delegate Prince Charles, whose rainforest project has made great strides, in part thanks to the interactive advertisement for the project available on YouTube. But there is something to the movement lacking unison, a kind of fragmentary energy at work, if evidenced only in the fact that the rainforest continues to burn away at the same frenzied rate in the name of a mad pursuit of economic profit, the continued demand for bio-fuels generating a kind of blind single-mindedness characteristic of the most dangerous eras of human history. It seems the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing.

Indeed, Slovenian critic Slavoj Žižek's 2008 study, *Violence*, takes as it's primary motivating principle just such a notion: that the world today as we know it through the media and social discourse masks the real violence at work, against people *and* the planet. The culprit, as Žižek sees it, is language itself, which facilitates such scenarios in which contradictions of extraordinary proportion can exist without due alarm. Žižek's prime example is the idea of "charity," which he defines as "the humanitarian mask hiding the face of economic exploita-

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empire of understanding of equal magnitude: an understanding of what it is to be part of the world, and not an enemy of it'" (Shepard 78). This is the subject of an essay in progress, "*The World Our Bodies Knew*: Ontogenetic Yearning in the Eco-Literary Imagination."

[9] Against the threat of what he perceives as an "aestheticizing" of truth, Habermas has been sounding the battle cry against unrepentant postmodernists and poststructuralists since the publication of *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. As Andreas Huyssen points out, however, Habermas's position becomes a little more understandable given the particularly German context of his argument—the Nazi regime under which Habermas and his relatives suffered. See his extensive contextualizing explanation in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*.

tion" (22). Celebrated donors in our time, figures as gigantic in financial stature and repute as Bill Gates and Warren Buffet, renowned for their massive charitable donations, undo all the ostensible generosity of their charity with the press of a button on Wall Street, where the goal of profit not only supersedes other goals of maintaining ecologically sustainable practices, it completely ignores them. In other words, there is a great illusion in play for those whom Žižek labels (with some disdain) "liberal communists," those who lose little sleep in earning thousands of times more than the average global citizen because they feel they do their job in redistributing the wealth through charity—let us ignore, for the moment, that a ten percent donation of a billion dollars, while a tremendous figure on its own, is hardly a redistribution of the entire gargantuan sum.[10] In short, the language of "charity" allows the legendary financial gurus of our time to perpetuate a system that in itself guarantees continued inequality on a massive scale among individuals and nations alike and also permitting, however invisibly, continued environmental destruction on a global scale.

Žižek's momentum is fuelled not only by socialist indignation, exacerbated by the delusional and self-congratulatory aplomb of the liberal communist—although such indignation is not to be underappreciated (as is evidenced by a full quotation of Bertholt Brecht's poem "The Interrogation of The Good," which closes the first essay of the collection). Žižek's primary target is language itself, which he identifies in his introduction as the primary instrument of "objective violence" in the world, a form of violence much more significant than "subjective violence," though often invisible as people tend to focus on the multiple and manifest forms of the latter: the agents of subjective violence are easily identifiable: terrorists, suicide bombers, serial murderers and criminal gangs run by the drug lords of the underworld. Such prominent agents of subjective violence are highly

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[10] Žižek defines the liberal communist with characteristic satire. "Above all, liberal communists are true citizens of the world. They are good people who worry. They worry about populist fundamentalists *and* irresponsible, greedy, capitalist corporations. They see "deeper causes" of today's problems: it is mass poverty and hopelessness which breeds fundamentalist terror. So their goal is not to earn money, but to change the world, though if this makes them more money as a by-product, who's to complain!" (22). Žižek singles out Bill Gates and George Soros as prime examples, the former, he notes, being already "the single greatest benefactor in the history of humanity, displaying his love for neighbours with hundreds of millions freely given to education, and the battles against hunger and malaria. The catch, of course, its that in order to give, first you have to take. . . . today's liberal communists give away with one hand what they first took with the other" (20-21). Of financier and philanthropist George Soros, Žižek proffers these terse words: "Soros stands for the most ruthless financial speculative exploitation, combined with its counter-agent, humanitarian concern about the catastrophic social consequences of an unbridled market economy. Even his daily routine is marked by a self-eliminating counterpoint; half of his working time is devoted to financial speculation and the other half to humanitarian activities . . . which ultimately fight the effects of his own speculation" (21-22).

visible, and release us from the harder work of identifying the more dangerous forms of "objective" violence: first, the "symbolic violence embedded in language and its forms, what Heidegger would call our 'house of being'"; and second, "systemic" violence, "the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems" (1-2).

Contributing to the ease with which we overlook the more sinister forms of objective violence is the perpetuation of "a fake sense of urgency that perpetuates the left-liberal humanitarian discourse on violence," which functions to promote "a hypocritical sentiment of moral outrage" (6). Liberal communists are thus able to console themselves that they are concerned citizens of the world in fretting about racial violence, child poverty, and the sexual abuse of women: "Every six seconds a woman is raped in this country," is one example Žižek cites, while another is the popular advertisement: "In the time it takes you to read this paragraph, ten children will die of hunger." Such claims may of course be true, but what they serve to accomplish is worth dwelling on for a moment. "There is a fundamental anti-theoretical edge to these urgent injunctions. There is no time to reflect: we have to act *now*. Through this fake sense of urgency, the post-industrial rich, living in their secluded virtual world, not only do not deny or ignore the harsh reality outside their area (their lush, gated communities)—they actively refer to it all the time" (7). One of Žižek's key examples is an ad campaign launched by Starbucks several years ago promoting the fact that a portion of the corporation's profits was donated to health care for the children of Guatemala, the source of their coffee, "the inference being that with every cup you drink, you save a child's life" (6). What is apparent, then, is the functioning of a linguistically-generated system of superficial awareness of the world's problems which overlooks entirely the more systemic causes of these problems. Žižek concludes that what is required more than ever in our time is reflection and learning, a gap in the moment of the harried continuum of the liberal communist imperative to "act now." In other words, we have to probe a little more deeply into the matter.

It is in light of such a recommendation that the focus of this essay turns to poetry as a possible source of such reflection, of such introspection concerning our collective implication in the objective forms of violence perpetuated throughout the world today. If Žižek's suspicion of language is valid—and I think it is—then much is to be gained from interrogating our habitual use of linguistic forms, a propensity widely known to occupy the working thoughts of poets since the inception of the lyric form millennia ago. If what is required is an evolutionary leap beyond a deeply ingrained, linguistically-shaped perspective, then who better than the poets to point the way towards such a transformation?

Poetry of the environment, or "ecopoetry," has been on the rise for some time, although the nature of its contribution to the ecological movement has perhaps been undervalued, as I will argue in detail here. Singular about it is its ability to point beyond the limits of language. We have mastered (and exhausted) rational discourse, become tricksters and artists of argument, capable of instilling in ourselves tremendous comfort that problems are being dealt with while the root causes remain intact, while objective violence, in Žižek's terminology, rages on, not only unchecked, but heartily facilitated by the cunning catch phrases of liberal communism—discursive Prozac for the masses. Let us proceed forward, if tentatively, into the world as it is beyond the constraints of language, beyond the boundaries we have arbitrarily set which have created such an illusion of separation of self from the natural world. We might, as an initiatory first step, adopt poet and essayist Tim Lilburn's credo from *Living In The World As If It Were Home*. Lilburn observes, "The world is its names plus their cancellations, what we call it and the undermining of our identifications by an ungraspable residue in objects. To see it otherwise, to imagine it caught in our phrases, is to know it without courtesy, and this perhaps is not to know it at all" (5).

Lilburn's mention of courtesy might sound odd at first, evidently out of place in a treatise on the philosophy of language. This is not at all the case, however. Courtesy implies an awareness of the other, a dawning sense of one's sharing of being and place with the other or others. Above all it requires contemplation—or reflection, to use Žižek's term, although a primary difference between Žižek and Lilburn is that Žižek still thinks rationality can solve our problems, while Lilburn's notion of contemplation goes beyond rationality to a "cloud of unknowing," a deep "humility," although he is careful to insist it is not "anti-rationalist obscurantism: it is the height of reason" (*Going Home* 140). But such heights of reason require persistence and dedication, prolonged meditation in the attempt to come not to any absolute and final knowledge of things but to a form of humility and genuine charity that would facilitate a truly reverential respect for the natural world and our fellow citizens alike. In this respect, courtesy is not only appropriate here, it is absolutely necessary. It is also at odds with the rational appropriation of the world through an assumed epistemological supremacy, a deeply embedded facet of the Western philosophical tradition, as if our knowledge of the world of things is somehow more substantial than the things themselves. Lilburn puts it this way: "When consciousness crosses the divide into the wilderness of what is there, it expects to find a point of noetic privilege: at last a clear view into the heart of things: but what it does find on the other side is further peculiarity, a new version of distance" (*Living In The World As If It Were Home* 4). Such an appraisal of what is at stake within the striving of human

consciousness to make sense of the world is much needed today as it reaffirms a sense of fundamental unknowingness which might well go a long way to giving us pause before we proceed further with the destruction of that which we feel so certain about.

It should be noted that Lilburn goes through great pains to defend rational thought not only as a natural human "good" but also to insist on its continued usefulness as a heuristic device. He eclectically resurrects for discussion the fourteenth-century religious—some would say "mystical"—text *The Cloud of Unknowing*, anonymously authored. "The ambition for a 'sharp and clear beholding' (15), present in all forms of discursive thinking, is nature, is good: inquiry in pursuit of explanation brings the unlike toward the human sphere by finding it a home in human language and taxonomy; it locates the individual in the scheme of things, and thus is the rudiment of humility" (*Going Home* 151). Rationality is thus both intrinsic to human nature and necessary for social equilibrium, for the fostering of the requisite humility in the individual through his or her "finding a home" in discourse and nomenclature. But note where Lilburn departs from the conventional view of seeing rationality as the highest human achievement: "The force of analytical inquiry, outside the sphere of its competence, is a kind of dissipation: it decays into 'chatter': the pursuit of questions it fosters becomes a 'scattering': the interior representation of noumenal things one seeks becomes a lowering; the ratiocinative impulse must be 'trod down' in this cloud of forgetting" (150).

There is tremendous significance in this dismissing of "analytical inquiry" as not being up for the task, of being "outside the sphere of its competence." First, it should be noted the subject sought for "interior representation" is "noumenal," not material. Second, the uncanny description of such inquiry dissipating or decaying into "chatter," "the pursuit of questions it fosters" becoming "a scattering," corresponds alarmingly with the present state of the ecological movement, which some spokespeople for the movement have indeed described as too "scattered" to have the desired effects so desperately wished for by those committed to the movement.[11] Clearly, a solely rational approach to the problem is not achieving the desired ends. Something extra-rational, supra-rational, is required, and poetry of the environment, or ecopoetry, does indeed offer such a vision.

[11] Harrison Ford, in a discussion with Bill Ford—no relation—on CNN, recently articulated exactly such a frustration with the scattered nature of the movement and its need to work in unison—a goal, Lilburn would argue, which cannot be reached as long as rationality is the paradigm through which it is undertaken.

Scottish poet and fiction writer John Burnside has been working in just such a vein for a number of years—indeed, almost two decades. Not wholly comfortable with labels, he nonetheless is untroubled by the designation "green" poet.[12] Burnside's work as poet, novelist, and short story writer alike, is notable for its invocation of a sub-noumenal realm, a domain in which the material and spiritual blend and transform. Indeed, transformation or transmutation is a key theme in Burnside's work, pointing towards an ecological universality much needed in our time: as Burnside sees it, there is no "thing" or process separate in this world; all are interconnected, transmutable and in a constant state of flux. To appreciate such a perspective is to instantaneously dispense with the subject/object dichotomy which has facilitated such abuse upon the planet since the industrial revolution. Burnside locates the source of human error in the Judeo-Christian impulse to dominate the world through abstraction, through naming, labeling, and categorizing. One of his early poems, "Septuagesima," captures this sentiment perfectly in its opening lines: "I dream of the silence / the day before Adam came / to name the animals" (1). These opening lines alone are arresting in their epistemological and even ontological import. One pauses before reading further, contemplating just such a world as the poet dreams about: no names for things bringing about a commensurate wonder and mystery for the very aspect of being itself in the face of such intellectual poverty. Knowing nothing of what is perceived, there is only the total act of witnessing, perceiver blending into that which is perceived. The poem ends with the reiteration to witness the realm "beyond the gloss of things," alluding to the manner in which naming creates an artificial boundary, a surface façade which poetic desire wants torn away to see the reality of interconnection and interdependence.

Burnside's recent collection *The Hunt in the Forest* continues to explore such a theme, if a little more subtly and obliquely. The collection's title poem commences thus:

> How children think of death is how the shadows
> gather between the trees: a hiding place
> for everything the grown-ups cannot name.
> Nevertheless, they hurry to keep their appointment
> far in the woods, at the meeting of parallel lines,
> where everything is altered by its own
> momentum—altered, though we say transformed—
> greyhound to roebuck, laughter to skin and bone (2)

[12] In an interview with Attila Dosa, Burnside says, "Rather than classify myself in terms of a country like Scotland . . . I'm happy to call myself a green poet or an environmental poet or an ecological poet . . ." (17-18).

The last lines are key, as they contain a poetic ontology, a sense of being-in-the-world as an experience of being "altered," or "transformed." The transformation of greyhound to roebuck is one of material transition; however, the transformation of laughter to skin and bone is a direct reference to the transition of the non-material to the material.[13] For Burnside, the alteration of things is a mystery, and his poetic attitude is commensurately one of respect for the mystery, refusing as he does to come to a definitive understanding. Burnside alludes, but does not conclude; on the contrary, he insists on maintaining the mystery, our fundamental unknowingness in regard to the precise nature of the alterations we each undergo. The closing stanza of "The Hunt in the Forest" poetically encapsulates just such a mystery, such humility in the face of the monumental quest for understanding of self and world:

> and no one survives the hunt: though the men return
> in threes and fours, their faces blank with cold,
> they never quite arrive at what they seem,
> leaving a turn of phrase or a song from childhood
> deep in the forest. . . . (2)

The implication is poignant here, chilling and articulate of a deep commitment to the kind of courtesy Lilburn adumbrates, a courtesy which disowns any claim to final knowledge through nomenclature. The men "never quite arrive at what they seem"—a perpetual distance affirming itself between ontology and epistemology, between being and knowing. Such an allusion brings about a commensurate modesty to counterbalance the rational overconfidence so prevalent in the contemporary sphere of academic and cultural thought. The leaving of a phrase or song in the woods is deeply symbolic of the shedding of the certainties with which one commences "the hunt," a mission which subsequently achieves no arrogant end, no appropriation of absolute knowledge, but instead a humbling of spirit, a confession of ignorance.

The power of Burnside's poetry at its best is to achieve this twofold aim: to point towards the interconnectedness of matter and thought, while also disavowing any self-arrogating epistemological claim to the world. Much like Socrates, Burnside's poetic persona has journeyed long and far into the world to

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[13] To a physicist of the 19th or early 20th century, such a proposition would seem ludicrous; but quantum physics of recent decades has in fact established the influence of thought on matter. See Fritz Capra's argument for the evolution of such scientific understanding in *The Tao of Physics*. Capra argues that quantum physicists now concede that the location of particulate matter during certain experiments is influenced by the interpretive approach of the scientist; in other words, reality becomes an interpretation of one's experience and is no longer objectively separate from the thought processes of the individual. It is of no small consequence that science is coming to the same conclusion as our finest poets.

discover that he knows nothing, or almost nothing, since his intimation of the connectedness of the material world to the non-material world can in some sense be viewed as a kind of epistemological certainty, whatever the opacity of the particular phenomena he observes. John Lucas seems to agree with this interpretation in discussing the manner in which Burnside connects his everyday experience of the natural world with the existence of the spirit world. Lucas claims that such connections "seem to authenticate a sense of something that can be intuited as existing or having existed beyond the dreck of our daily living" (28).

American poet David Gravender, whose work can be read in many ways using a similar critical map, also situates himself at a liminal juncture: his work inhabits the borderland between thought and the material world which thought seeks to appropriate through its names and labels.[14] Gravender is ever-conscious of the failure of language to fully grasp what is there, of the vast abyss of untold phenomena, lamentably unaccounted for in language, and so only intimated, only sensed (or, even more vexing, missed altogether). Again, what is significant is the moral disposition such epistemological poverty instills in the initiate to Gravender's work. A careful reading of even a few of his poems reminds one to tread carefully on the earth, with respect, with courtesy, with a child-like wonder for all that we do not know. His collection Rain *Shadows* contains a number of poems which serve well to exemplify such an orientation. The poem "Mossehurr" is typical in its lyrical intimation of an unarticulated world, and warrants full quotation here. The poem's inspiration derives from Robert Michael Pyle's claim (which is quoted as an epigraph) that there should be words like "mossehurr" to describe "the soft-falling rain that soaks and nourishes the mossy mats without quite wetting the hair." Gravender explores the issue further:

> We should have so many words we lack—our mouths
> clear-cut slopes the rain drops invisibly through—
> a nomenclature native and true as any flora
> to spell the space that falls between the glisten
> of your hair and the moistness of my eye, what passes,
> a racing cloud, over everything we say. A word

[14] Although inexplicably with only a single chapbook to his credit, Gravender has published widely with single poems and groups of poems. He has received such notable international awards as the E. J. Pratt prize in poetry (Canada) and the Geoffrey Dearmer Memorial Award (U.K.), along with the domestic decoration of the William Stafford prize awarded by the Washington Poets Association. For a detailed introduction to his work, see John Burnside's article in *Tabla*, "Waterlog: The Poetry of David Gravender" as well as my essay "Pleasure in the Pains of Remembrance: The Poetry of David Gravender" in the *Portland Review*.

> that would mean the clean aftermath of rainstorms
> in spring; your skin, pink and warm, emerging
> from fogs of soap; the dream that ghosts
> my waking day—a language of evanescence
> transpiring from the skin of every moment
> though our dictionaries grow mossboled
> and softbacked, unbearable dense forests
> of verb and noun decomposing in a sunless litter
> soft as bogs or the burr of lapsing tongues. (23)

Much is required to fully unpack this poem, but a few key observations will suffice here. First and most obvious, is Gravender's paradoxical phrasing of all that he says is beyond our linguistic grasp. The fact that the missing word is, in fact, supplied through *multiple* words points to an oxymoronic feature of the poem's inner workings. The poetic persona seems to be saying: "See what is there that we have no words for? I am using words to describe it." Such a scenario seems to illustrate poignantly the relative position of language in the hierarchy of human experience: first there is experience of the real, then there is our search for an apt word to describe that experience. The hidden corollary here is the mistaken assumption many of us make: we assume the experience of the world should conform to the existing vocabulary we have for it. Such an assumption eliminates the mystery of being here, and the requisite courtesy for that "ungraspable residue" in things, without which, as Lilburn reminds us, we cannot know the world at all.

Second, the use of "ghosts" as a verb—"the dream that ghosts my waking day"—is significant in that it conveys the tenuous nature of such an orientation to the world, a kind of blind going forth where one surrenders a rational certainty of things and begins to trust the form of awareness which lies beyond it—a form, as Lilburn argues, which is not merely "anti-rationalist obscurantism," but the "height of reason." This is important. Gravender, like Lilburn, does not dismiss the rational powers; on the contrary, he insists on their utility as a heuristic device to reach what is higher on the totem pole of wisdom. To elevate language any higher, however, to see it as a moment of absolute or final knowledge, is to fail—utterly, miserably. It is always "a language of evanescence," fading even as it is first grasped. And this is the third key element in the poem, the subsequent diction here being extremely sensitive to the interplay of language and the world it seeks to encapsulate.

This "language of evanescence," it should be noted, is clearly provisional, transitional, transmutable; it is not something separate from the world, but part of it, inextricably intertwined with the organic phenomena of a living and dying world. Gravender endows language with the properties of organic matter as it

is viewed as "transpiring from the skin of every moment." Such an image is apt in two ways, hinging on the double meaning of the word "transpiring" as both "breathing" (in biological terminology) and "happening." It fully captures the temporary nature of the usefulness of language as a heuristic device; like the air we breathe, it is useful for a moment until we need something new—fresh, devoid of impurities and waste materials. Like the carbon dioxide we exhale, language can become exhausted, over-determined and stale, a fact alluded to in the poem's final image, one which also reaffirms the organic interaction of language with the natural world: "though our dictionaries grow mossboled / and softbacked, unbearable dense forests / of verb and noun decomposing in a sunless litter / soft as bogs or the burr of lapsing tongues." Gravender's ecology thus deconstructs the artificial division between language and the world around it. As a consequence of implicating language within nature, a concomitant responsibility towards the natural world emerges in the form of the very courtesy Lilburn's epistemology demands of us.

It is not insignificant that Burnside himself comments on Gravender's work, although the two poets live worlds apart, the former making his home along the firth of Tay where he teaches at the University of St. Andrew's in Scotland; the latter lives near the shores of Puget Sound in the Pacific Northwest of America. Both poets are keen observers of nature. Both see beyond the artificial boundary Western culture has discursively instituted between humanity and its environment, falsifying the ecological truth of our unified being-here. As Burnside puts it, Gravender's poems address the "urgent" need for "a poetry that sees human flesh and blood as 'natural' . . . as transmutable: capable, that is, of a continuing, shifting, alchemical existence, woven into, and inseparable from, the fabric of the world."[15]

This last imperative is worth dwelling on, and might even be expounded further to include, as Gravender's poetry seems to imply, our discourses about the world itself. Human flesh, human thought, human discourse are all "woven into" the very "fabric of the world," in Burnside's terms. There is in such a body of poetry an all-encapsulating ecology that requires, as a commensurate recognition, a recalibration of conventional thinking, of thinking derived from the tradition of Western philosophy which arrogates the thinking subject above and beyond

[15] The word "urgent" might prompt a recollection of Žižek's repudiation of the "fake sense of urgency" promoted by the discourse of liberal communism. Such an equation in this case would be false, however, since such a small percentage of people read poetry anyway. Furthermore, embracing Gravender's principles would certainly not lead to further abuse of people or the planet, but reawaken within us all a sense of our common connection, the interrelatedness of all things.

the world which is contemplated, classified, and assigned a subordinate and separate dwelling place in the world. Both Burnside's and Gravender's poetry resurrect a lost unity in the Western tradition—although one not lost to many aboriginal cultures who maintain ways of being in the world increasingly foreign to contemporary dwellers on the planet. The poetry of both Burnside and Gravender lead us, in Lilburn's terminology, towards something we might call home.

It is no coincidence that the work of Newfoundland poet Boyd Chubbs articulates a vision of things between the cracks of the conventionally perceived world. There is in Chubbs' work a distinct indifference to—if not outright distaste for—the certainty of subjective perception, of the cognitive grasping of intellectual content. Chubbs finds solace only in allusion, solely in intimation. The impulse behind such poetic form is easily explained in light of Chubbs' predilection for interweaving his poetic persona with the natural world. For Chubbs, his poetic sensibility does not perceive a world, it *is* a world, his own impressions blending with his sense of self so that no division can be said to exist between poetic intellect and the geography it seems to circumnavigate in an endless quest for "home." Consider his poem "Somewhere Behind Memory and Sound":

> Halfway between the harbour and the cliffs,
> where blackberries, bursting and famous,
> straggled in patches on their low, tough moss,
> he sat on a rock and watched the wind,
> the fast and surly one from the sou'west,
> throw the sea turbulent theologies.
> Somewhere behind memory and sound,
> before moss and alders, flies in hoards;
> before hunters, lovers and gulls across
> the short program of summer could chase
> or find their kind, it was this love-strange way—
> the sea, the rocks—with, against; here, beyond (33)

The articulation of prepositional possibility at the end of this poem is not an afterthought, as the punctuation, an em dash, might first seem to imply. These last words, "with, against; here, beyond," mirror the suggestion of "turbulent theologies" in the last line of the previous stanza, since the choice of preposition changes drastically the type of world the poet postulates as predating human habitation of the planet. There is a speculative courtesy at work here, something akin to Lilburn's dictum that the world "is its names and their cancellations." Chubbs chooses two pairs of opposing terms to suggest just such a cancellation: "with" versus "against" and "here" versus "beyond"; in so doing, he returns to the world a mystery robbed from it by the tradition of Western metaphysics so

arrogant in its claims of epistemological and ontological certainty. "Where Fog, a Solid Jig" expostulates further on the impropriety of division: subject from object, person from thing. Fog in this poem is a metaphor for the cloud of unknowing, where the sobriety of rational thought gives way to a Dionysian drunkenness. The allusions are as tenuous as they should be in a poem whose guiding metaphor is the shrouding nature of fog; nevertheless, they are arguably present enough for critical discernment. For Chubbs, an islander, fog is an omnipresent part of his lebenswelt or "lived world," an integral aspect to his being here amongst the cliffs and shorelines. Chubbs observes his landscape with the poet's eye, refusing to delineate further than allusion, than intimation:

> where fog, a solid jig upon the coast,
> clapboard healer, migrant doctor
> for the drunken earth and sea,
> baptized the place, did it all,
> consumed it, wrapped it deep in physics,
> wrapped it with ghost sea, ghost swell
> and the mute voice of being, made it
> an island–its captives, a tribal sound (39)

There is an atavistic impulse here that seeps through even on a first reading. Sustained meditation on the lines yields up even more: the suggestion of healing conveyed through the phrase "migrant doctor" and echoed by the ancient term "physics" for the healing powers of those who practice such a beneficial art as healing. The fog is both real and symbolic of all that is outside our range of comprehension—once again a cloud of unknowingness descending upon us to humble us. The "mute voice of being" further underscores the failure of language to encapsulate the truth of what is, of what we are. Our collective "being here" is a presence that does not speak through words, although we attempt—and perpetually fail—to embrace it with our terminologies.

In different ways, Burnside, Gravender, and Chubbs all work towards a common conclusion. Such a conclusion goes a long way towards a poetry *of* the planet, *by* the planet, *for* the planet. It is likely not insignificant that all three poets live near the water, where planetary forces of tide and weather instill themselves at the forefront of awareness, instead of at the periphery as they tend to do in large urban centers where life activities can continue on almost oblivious to the goings-on of the natural world. The natural world thus takes root in the experience of these poets in a manner which cannot be ignored. First, the very language itself emerges not from the ivory tower of the ostensibly "autonomous" poetic intellect, but from the very earth itself, as these poets see humanity and its tools as emerging from and engaging with the natural world, not as something

distinct from it. Second, the poets view themselves as "interwoven" with the "fabric of the world." Unlike Western philosophy at its most arid and arrogant—Descartes in his studio at meditation, assessing the world of extension as his privileged intellect perceives it—the work of these three poets is a humble proffering, a modestly proposed contribution to an organic system that unifies all in its transforming embrace. "And no one survives the hunt" Burnside reminds us, insisting on the inescapably transmutable feature of our being here: "greyhound to roebuck, laughter to skin and bone." To appreciate this facet of our collective being here is to renounce any claim to a position of dominion over the natural world, such a renunciation bringing with it a commensurate cessation of violence to the natural world. Rational arguments for saving our environment can only take us so far as long as the underlying ontology remains so utterly skewed. An understanding of what the poets seem to know, on the contrary, gives us a window of hope, re-situates our place within an entire system not as isolated entities, but as interconnected parts of an ecological whole.

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地球之詩：
爲存於此地所做的全球宣言

摘　要

此文旨在探討現今生態運動所面臨的困境——即，其零碎性使其在挑戰種種針對地球的破壞行爲時，無絕對影響力。即使報章雜誌、小說、與電影皆逐漸因環境意識抬頭而出產具有環保意識的作品，卻都無法帶來任何能扭轉人類走向生態毀滅命運的全面性改革。那麼，究竟是少了什麼呢？對此，我將在此文中提出，「詩」能作爲一種提高全球環境意識的重要方法。經由詩，我們能了解語言本身即藏有現行於地球上對環境的眞實暴力。藉由引用斯洛維尼亞籍理論家紀傑克(Slovoj Žižek)的作品，我將討論我們對語言存疑的必要性，特別是針對那倡導左手施右手受做法的「自由共產主義」論述。

我的論點是，若要使眞正的改變得以落實，我們必須從某些詩人的語言去尋求解決之道。那些詩人明白人的思想、人的存在和自然界是密不可分的三者，彼此間相互連結。一旦這個道理能被領略，對環境的暴力將無法再施行；因爲三者互存的關係，對環境施暴即等於對自身施暴。在此文中，我將分析詩人伯恩賽(John Burnside)、葛拉凡德(David Gravender) 與查布思(Boyd Chubbs)的詩，這些詩人具有上述對世界的理解，並且皆致力於探索以上三者間的相互關係。除此之外，上述三位詩人並對傳統形而上二元論提出詰問與質疑。傳統形而上二元論相信個人與世界是分離的，這樣的思想使環境暴力得以存在，甚至被加強。在此也引述詩人暨理論家利爾本(Tim Lilburn)的論述，以闡述詩人們如何提出對此二元論的詰問與質疑。

關鍵字：生態，詩，省思，知識論，本體論