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Writing Within: Notes on Ecopoetics as Spatial Practice

“Our problem, exactly, is that the human and the natural are indivisible, and yet are different.”
Wendell Berry, “Preserving Wildness”

One exciting development in the thorny field ecologically-engaged writing is the investigation of the “poetics” portion of an “eco-poetics.” This necessitates some self-scrutiny, and this can be problematic. What to address can be daunting enough. Now the question of *how* must be considered. The recent reconsideration of poetic perceptions and praxis takes shape against an overtly romantic conception of nature as other – exemplified in Leonard M. Scigaj’s recent study *Sustainable Poetry*. His claim is that, given the current environmental crisis, “we need a poetry that treats nature as a separate and equal other and includes respect for nature conceived as a series of ecosystems”(5). On this second point I agree, unless respecting ecosystems entails treating them as separate; are we and nature not, as Wendell Berry puts it, “indivisible?” To dub nature “other” would seem to entail, in Scigaj’s view, that “nature must have its own voice, separate and at least equal to the voice of humans”(5). How can this be? How can the “voice of nature” be other than a human construct? When poets consider natural phenomena, traces of human activity, and our relation to these, the best we can do is listen to ourselves observing and considering, and understand that poems create contexts for this listening. And ask: how do we hear other than our own language?

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An ecopoetics, as Jonathan Skinner’s writing in the journal *ecopoetics* suggests, is a human language entrenched with the materiality and relationships that subsume our shared “environment” – the “house” of *eco* in which we all dwell: the planet earth. “Thus: ecopoetics, a housemaking”(7). This implies writing what is habitable and undertaking a writing practice that is part of the process of making the habitable. All of this points to *place*. Throughout the month of May of 2007, most mornings I sat on the front porch and wrote, sometimes directed by a project, sometimes observing my neighbors, sometimes thinking and listening until some words to follow took hold. Sometimes observing the birds. One morning I heard the sharp spur of a bird song, and I looked to the sweetgum tree where I know there to be a nest, which from this angle I couldn’t see. I returned to my writing. Then the sharp sound retrieved me to my surroundings again. Not three feet distant and under the roof with me, a bird perched on the string of lights. A moment of mutual recognition, then it flew. This communication was, quite literally, a calling card: bird intends to move in. A few days later, morning revealed a nest up on a cornice inside the porch. One house finch (the male, I found out, after consulting my Oklahoma bird book) asway on the string of lights, the other pressed down into the nest on an impossibly narrow corner ledge.

What else does this finch announce? After a few days observation and cohabitation, my mind is pulled toward thinking about what, without much thought, I have a word for: ecosystem. The finch locates me. I want to explore and check whether the balance suggested by this word indeed

exists because everything I do is amidst this. I want to know where I am. I want my thinking on this matter to be shapely and to be as near as possible to finite. Exploring my ecosystem, it seems, will require mappings and tracings of connections, complicated by the possibility that any two objects can create a system; too difficult a terrain, from my perspective. I am somewhat smitten with a newfound word *bioregion*, describing “a region whose limits are naturally defined by topographic and biological features (as mountain ranges and ecosystems)” according to Merriam-Webster. My bioregion, then, is not my artificially-defined yard (from the Old English, *geard*, meaning enclosure). Although it poses a handy perceptual limit, my traversions into the life of birds and other nonhuman life-systems only begin there; these include familiar places I visit on foot regularly. My intuition is that my bioregion – the one I am located in – is peculiar to my body and where it goes. While this is satisfyingly shapely (I *like* where I go *because* I go there), as a lived definition of bioregion, it is limited. I haven’t yet found a map that demarcates local bioregions. As I am writing this, a University of Oklahoma reference librarian stops by my office to ask whether I wanted a plant map? or a geological map? And I feel a pang of satisfaction and a sense of definite relief that some paths are opening to my investigations.

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Undoubtedly, poetry must be consciously “influenced by a sensitivity to ecological thinking,” as Scigaj puts it (11), to be *eco*. What else is entailed? Marcella Durand, in “The Ecology of Poetry,” a talk published in the second issue of *ecopoetics*, provides some useful nodes of definition. “Ecological poetry,” she writes, “recycles materials, functions with an intense awareness of space, seeks an equality of value between all living and unliving things, explores multiple perspectives as an attempt to subvert the dominant paradigms of mono-perception, consumption and hierarchy, and utilizes powers of concentration to increase lucidity and attain a more transparent, less anthropocentric mode of existence”(59). There is much at play in this rich passage (and it serves as my guide), but I would like to add and consider an awareness of *place*. *Place* differs from *space* in an implied specificity. Space is an abstraction, something we might experience or desire as a concept; a place a spatial location; it is arrived at or returned to. One inhabits, experiences and so owns sensually the sounds, textures, smells, of a place. Further, the concept of place is multifaceted; as Lawrence Buell has noted, it points in three directions, at least: “toward environmental materiality, toward social perception or construction, and toward individual affect or bond”(63). Thus addressing place, and more specifically the ‘being located’ or localism that is central to environmental writing, enables consideration of the material “emplacement” or “environ-ment” of the writer, of language as a perceiving and constructing tool, and of connection (affect, bond) in many senses.

I’ll attempt to address all these directions. But first I must stand my ground on this concept of emplaced writing – what I’m going to call “writing within.” I’m probably not the first poet to want to do this – just, perhaps, the least prepared one. What I do know is that emplaced or environed writing requires attending to bioregions and regions of thought that lie beyond my immediate scope – to use a visual metaphor. The scale of this task is illustrated in Andrew Schelling’s “Discussion Topics / Bioregional Poetry”; among the fifty or so topics are “mountain highways follow Indian trade routes,” “phenology: periodic shifts in flora and fauna due to season changes,” “biotechnology,” and “wilderness not in the past but in the future” (181-83). In pointing out a broad range of interdependencies within and across ecosystems, Schelling’s list

gestures towards what's significant about an ecopoetics as a situated writing practice; it recognizes a material emplacement within a complicated set of conditions and relations. From where the writer is, she must attempt to complicate that place: understand what it was, how it got to be, how it is being actuated, and what it might be. To my mind, an ecopoetics of writing within is concerned equally with engaging these things and with *poiesis*: with making poetry. Thus, it operates through an awareness of language as a framing device, which accompanies a more basic awareness of the potential abuse of "nature" as a framing device that identifies and isolates an "other" onto which is cast human fears, ideals, desires, etc. – sometimes as the "voice of nature." In an ecopoetical practice that considers material *and* linguistic emplacement (or how we situate language as a framing "tool," to use Buell's term), environment *and* language *and* poet are ineluctable presences.

I like thinking through materiality, language, and affect, but I don't think these are the "multiple perspectives" Durand has in mind. Yet my hope is that an investigation of ecopoetics via the concept of place will prove to be inclusive of these as well.

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As for my bioregion, it is difficult to discern from my own experience where exactly (or when, or how) Tallgrass Prairie and Cross Timbers (also known as Post-Oak Blackjack) meet, though their meeting traces a crooked, roughly north-south line through Cleveland County, whose southern border is inscribed by Bottomland (or Floodplain) of the Canadian River and the tremendous variety of species thriving there (hackberry, red elm, sugarberry, green ash, sycamore, boxelder, pecan, cottonwood). I do know where the plains meet rolling hills meet a mosaic of deciduous forest dominated by centuries-old post oaks, savanna, and glade – on the road out to the reservoir that is Lake Thunderbird.

I am in the Central Red-Bed Plains, notable for its gently rolling hills and broad, flat plains.

Where I am is intergrades of prairie and forest. When prairie land is abandoned, when fires are suppressed, forest and woodland vegetation readily replace it. Predominant grasses: bluestem, big bluestem, Indiangrass, and switchgrass. Other vegetation: lead plantain, Indian plantain, prairie clover, heath aster, small panic grass, pallid coneflower, ashy sunflower, Missouri goldenrod. And other vegetation: beebalm, hairy sunflower, little bluestem, poverty grass, pussytoes, trailing lespedeza, and purpletop. Trees: post oak, blackjack oak, backhaw, black oak, black hickory, buckbrush, gum bumelia, Mexican plum, redbud, roughleaf dogwood, and smooth and winged sumac.

The topography or landscape of Oklahoma is defined by its mountains and streams. The mountains consist mainly of resistant rock masses that were folded, faulted, and thrust upward in the geologic past, whereas the streams eroded the less-resistant rock units and lowered the landscape to form the remainder of the state. Between 1000 and 1500 feet above sea level: that's where I am.

Lower Permian. Dominantly shallow marine, deltaic, and alluvial deposits of red sandstone and shale. Outcrops of white gypsum are conspicuous. Mostly marine red sandstone and shale, with some thin beds of limestone. That's where I am.

By far the most common soil in the state is Mollisol – deep darkly colored solids that formed under the grasslands, the dark color derived from the high organic content. An important agricultural soil, allowing for a wide variety of crops. Little league moms at the Luxury Wash in town for a tournament ask how to get rid of red dirt stains; that's where I am.

Arkansas River Basin. Major Tributary Canadian River, 411 miles long, drainage area 19,487 square miles. Lake Thunderbird, impounded 1964. Formerly Little River. 6,070 acres of pool. 256 square mile drainage area. Shoreline 86 miles. The map of aquifers without the map of industries, chemical fertilizer use, garbage dumps, swimming pools, Burger Kings, auto-borne shoppers, and big box stores, that's where I am.

Seeming to be everywhere and unique to no place. That's where I am?

The site of significant but not major oil and or gas production. That's where I am.

I live between two major cattle trails established in the late 1860s, in use until 1890. The Chisholm Trail and the Shawnee Trail (the west arm). The decline is attributed to a quarantine on entering herds imposed by Kansas (think *Hud*), growth of ranching on the northern plains, and the expansion of railroads into Texas.

Okla-homma is Choctaw for “red people.” I live in historically “Indian Territory.” The Choctaw and four other southeastern tribes were removed here – the Cherokee most memorably via the “trail of tears” of 1838-39. In the 1870s the federal government of the United States directed the many tribes to a place in the new state. I live in formerly “unassigned lands” – what on earth can that mean? – abutted on all sides by lands assigned to the peoples Chickasaw, Pottawatomie and Shawnee, Kickapoo, Iowa, Sac and Fox, Pawnee, Cherokee, and Cheyenne and Arapaho. And surrounded further still by Kaw-Kansa, Tonkawa and Nez Perce, Ponca, Oto and Missouri, Seminole, Wichita and Caddo and Tawakoni, and Waco Hainai and Anadarko and Kichai, Comanche and Kiowa and Apache, Choctaw and Catawba, Creek and Yuchi and Natchae and Tuskegee and Apalachicola and Hitchiti and Koasati and Alabama, Delaware and Stockbridge and Munsee, Ottawa, and Osage – to the borders of the state. The panhandle, taken from Mexico in 1836, after 1850 known as “No Man's Land” because Texas ceded the territory falling between the 36°30' and 37° north latitude in order to enter the union and remain a slave state. This is the only portion of Oklahoma not formerly American Indian territory. (I haven't walked there yet).

Some explorers who trampled over here where I live: Washington Irving, 1832; Dragoon expedition, 1834; Josiah Gregg, 1839-1840; Nathaniel Boone, 1843.

Tallgrass Prairie has declined in acreage, yet the yard (front yard, back yard, garden, driveway or not, no matter, park the car in the yard) is not remarked in the “Vegetation” map in the *Historical Atlas of Oklahoma*, and the section detailing “Humans on the Landscape” finds history only through the nineteenth century. The atlas provides a purview I can not achieve on foot – but why did I think this book would dispel the horizon of my thinking?

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By focusing on place I do not wish to imply that an eco-poetical writing practice is necessarily localized, or limited by location; clearly global implications can not escape the environmental imagination today. But an eco-poetics occurs somewhere; it is an event, one that necessarily exists alongside other human and nonhuman events in the world; one that at least does no harm; recycling paper along with recycling language is a venerable precedent of an eco-poetic practice. Returning the poem to the cycle; or, as Durand suggests, operating through a “lucid yet wild infusion of structure of poem with structure of matter/energy” (59). Such an infusion of intra-human (poem) with extra-human (matter/energy) requires us to rethink what we mean by “our.” Our environment. Our language. Our poem. Any place is ultimately a shared place. Who shares? Who is this “our”?

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Friends With Trees I

Julie Patton’s “Slug Art” illustrates this concept of emplacement, of being and writing in a shared place. It addresses the question of “our.” In this mulch poem of language interspersed between bitten-up leaves (one foliage-leaf per folio-leaf, so to speak, in the montage arranged by Skinner for the first issue of *ecopoetics*), words are represented in a surround of natural and cultural processes: the slug organism semantically slides into the fossil fuel motor oil “ink slugs of the road” semantically slides into the slug of a “drive by - - - - - / - - - - - shooting.” Human *and* slug organisms undoubtedly inhabit all the regions in which the “hollow report / [of] slugs / don’t even / score.” Thus Patton likens the benign slimy slug and the fatal metal slug. And in noticing the unnoticed, in noting unnoticed connections between different sorts of slug-localism, “Slug Art” subsumes seemingly disparate events even as the poem-collage is subsumed under the sign of the organic. Indeed, the poem turns out to be a message from several fronts (or places) and an ambiguous hum(a/i)nsect letter to the world: “—signed, / June, buggy” (89). So emplacement, or writing within, can arise not only from a singular place, but through a traversing of places – a walk, in a sense, which is also a surveying. “Walker, Errant,” as Thoreau put it in “Walking.” “Nature” is so thoroughly suffused with and defined by culture, that for Patton and many others writing today Thoreau’s refusal of society to be “an inhabitant, . . . part and parcel of nature” is not an option. But one thing seems certain: eco-conscious poets keep one foot on the ground at all times.

“Slug Art” inserts animal presence at the very basis of even the most “cultural” of events – gun violence and writing. But more importantly, Patton’s inter-species collaborative technique investigates the agent of the verb *poiesis*. Thus it raises a significant question: whose “our” is a poem – or any context we presume to design? Writing, as so cogently illustrated in this piece, is nothing short of, impossible to separate from, not antecedent or precedent to but *coexisting with*. A co-inscription. A writing within.

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Once, while hiking in the Wasatch Mountains near Salt Lake City, Utah, I was struck, even tickled, to encounter, some 15 minutes away from the parking lot below, a sign informing “You are Entering the Wilderness.” In National Park lingo, “Wilderness” is that land we give back, so to speak, to things wild even as we set it aside for ourselves. It would be more honest if the sign had read “You are Entering our Wilderness.”

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In his introduction to *Wild Form, Savage Grammar*, Andrew Schelling speaks of discovering fragments of a “contract between humans and other life forms” in the art and philosophy of Asia. When those house finches took up residence with me at 509 South Lahoma Avenue, I felt bidden to some ancient, preverbal, interspecies understanding – the understanding that I, as an inhabitant of “natures” already-shaped by human history (the nature of “block” and “neighborhood”; the nature of two-storey-house-with-finished-basement-and-roofed-porch), had to somehow reorganize my comforts and make space for this other, smaller, inhabitant. I felt compelled to honor its “natural right.” This meant I would not use the front door but the side door, lest she take flight from her roost. And then I would pass by the steps on the far end of the porch, some twelve feet from her perch, gingerly, so as not to disturb. Often my efforts seemed unremarked; when I’d arrived at the front of the house she’d be gone. The days were warming and eventually I grew less concerned, or, more accurately, her absence ceased to instill in me a sense of guilt, of being a bad housemate.

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Buell defines an environmental poet by their attention to both natural history and human history. An ecopoetics is the sign of a person adapting to the fact of being surrounded by and taking part in human and other necessities and desires and where these overlap, which is everywhere. And we are writing through a history of this; Charles Olson, whose essay-manifesto “Projective Verse” is an attempt to provide for poems as fields of activity, claimed that “SPACE” was the “first fact” of American geography. By this he meant to recall the “withinness” of our/human existence – within “history,” *i.e.* the oral and written records, as equally as within the phenomenal fact of the material world and the idiosyncratic histories there, yet, to be discovered. To write, thus, is to make those discoveries, is, in discovering a history, to discover the person – the person as dynamic “vector” into “the real itself,” not finite but “force” in the field that is a play of forces. Olson’s project was to rethink poetic form to account for this sense of the real. While it was not pointedly an *ecopoetical* project, it was to some extent a writing within. But when, in Boulder, and startled into the new bioregion I encounter – dirt, air, bugs, flowers, everything, all different – especially when I see my first Baltimore Oriole, when I share a few moments with a Mule Deer a sidewalk away grazing on a wildflower garden, I’m struck by the anthropocentrism of a “Maximus.” Can human presence be more humble, a vector among vectors?

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In Joanne Kyger's work, particularly the many Bolinas-based poems she's written in the last two decades, the poem is on-the-page and in-the-world at once through a co-mingling of experience, thought, perception, and fact.

The wind picks up
a rush of leaves waving

wildly for your understanding
– apple, plum, bamboo
rooted and flourishing
next to your home
in the air awake

without defect

(from "Your Heart is Fine")

Formal decisions – spacing and line breaks – highlight the materiality of language, the word placed on the page within the temporality of worldly experience “to allow the present moment its weight,” as George Hart writes of Larry Eigner’s poems (327). Understanding is as rooted as bamboo. What is (isolated) “without defect”? The spatio-syntactic removal of this clause affects a non-decision that is part of the weight of the moment. As Hart notes, a text that destabilizes referentiality, that gets in the way of representing nature, wouldn’t seem to be environmental literature. Yet he proposes, in contrast to a neoromantic strain of nature poetry, a postmodernist version, which, while it values textuality over the immaterial voice, nonetheless contributes to the “green canon” by bringing “nature and language together on the page”(315). For Hart, both the energy exchange that is evident in Eigner’s work and his use of the typewriter as a means of graphing language on the page – both ideas inherited from “Projective Verse” – qualify him as a nature poet. Such categorical distinctions are useful in broadening the canon, but what’s really at stake for Hart is Eigner’s immediate engagement with the natural world through a poetry that is also aware that it is mediating, is marks on a page.

Kyger shares Eigner’s materialist engagement with the page – the “tab” is a felt movement in her work. But unlike Eigner, Buddhist Kyger works to dispel a mind/body dualism: to be writing is to be breathing, to be temporal, to be present; for her, an Olsonian “breath line” is a unit of perception, which is a unit of thought, yet she attempts to emplace perceptions as events, outside of her physically, outside of her mentally – on the sparsely populated mesa on which she makes her home. Hart writes of emplacement when he contrasts “the impulse toward retreat and return” that characterizes “nature poetry” with the “awareness of the interpenetration of nature and culture” that is at the heart of postmodernist writing: “It is a return to our senses, so to speak, rather than a return to a pristine natural place”(320). Kyger’s “rooted and flourishing / next to your home” is such a return. Like Eigner, “find[ing] another way to write poetry’s connection to

nature” (Hart, 321); that is, not writing to find *meaning* in nature, but to find nature in nature, and whatever else inhabits these shared spaces.

Schelling writes of having learned, from Kyger, “that the journal as a regular writing practice shifts the focus of writing from that old Occidental head trip ‘who are you’ – to ‘when’ and ‘where’ are you” (169). A Thoreauvean writing shed with a large sliding glass door sits at a distance from her modest abode surrounded by gardens and woods with their resident and itinerant “cast of characters . . . / going through a season” (“Sunday Bay Lookout Check-Up”). The country should be dotted with such locations where people could hide out, practice meditation, and work, thought her close friend Philip Whalen: “This is something that I think is necessary in order for human beings to go on being human beings,” he wrote. For Kyger, “being a human being” is manifested in an awareness of what surrounds the self that arises from a practice of meditative sitting and observing a place infused with a sense of responsibility to maintain its balance. Writing, for Kyger, impels the process of forming a complex knowledge of place. Such biocentrism is an attempt to turn an age-old anthropocentrism on its head.

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Friends With Trees II

“Nature, last week, including human nature. I had mowed by hand to the river – half way down the middle of the path I found two red dogwood and the sweetest little ash sapling. I knew I’d have to put a fence round ‘em if I ever wanted to keep ‘em from harm but let it go unfenced for a whole day. But in those twenty-four hours my neighbor who has a power mowing machine came over and in his zeal mowed me down my dogwoods and tree.”

Lorine Niedecker, letter to Louis Zukofsky, June 1948

My friend tree
I sawed you down
but I must attend
an older friend
the sun

My Friend Tree (1961) is the title of Lorine Niedecker’s second book of poems. I came across it in The Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh. How did this seed of Niedecker’s *T&G: The Collected Poems, 1936-1966*, published in 1969 by the Jargon Society in North Carolina, blow across the Atlantic to here, to Ian Hamilton Finlay’s Wild Hawthorne Press? The title poem suggests an act of sacrifice – an exchange of tree for sun – and offers an apology for “saw[ing] you down.” To a suburb dweller like myself, this is a horrific act, usually performed in devotion to the concept of lawn, and strikingly *selfish* – what about the birds, the bugs, the shade, the tree itself? In Niedecker’s within it is done to “attend / an older friend / the sun.” The gentle closed-mouth sounds of *down* and *sun*, *attend* and *friend* that conclude the last four lines of this single-cinquin poem are a sort of salve – the recurring vibrational intensity of “en” not unlike the sacred syllable *om*. The root of the Sanskrit name for this syllable (praṇava) means “to shout, sound, praise.” This is a song of praise to the fated tree and a claim of culpability, and as such it speaks powerfully about the responsibility of a life lived within. It is, finally, an event, a moment

in the larger sweep of personal and natural history, and one gets the sense from the slightness of the poem that Niedecker is aware of the smallness of this moment. Yet it is not unremarkable. The environment is a space shared with a collection of “friends”: birds and insects, flowers and waterlife populate Niedecker’s condensery; the poems put forward these things as things in a world content to go on without us, in which we are but one incidental creation among others, for which Niedecker seems thankful:

Along the river
 wild sunflowers
over my head
 the dead
who gave me life
 give me this
our relatives the air
 floods
our rich friend
 silt

Emplaced and multiple – our: tree + sun + floods + Lorine + etc.. Silt the very site of many and long in the making.

Niedecker’s poems often give way to natural things and beings that are “over [her] head” both literally and figuratively. They subtly reveal her part in an emplaced ecopoiesis through the small poem on the page, or the carefully assembled small book (*My Friend Tree* collects all of sixteen pages). Through the linebreak she consciously interjects humanity and intellect into the poem; a responsibility undertaken not without affect. In fact, it is the balance of intellect and affect that makes her poetry endearing and powerful.

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Is it true that there can not be an eco-poetics without an emotional bond to experienced things?

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Well, you know
 I love what I’ve found

 here next to a precise tidal zone

(Kyger, from “*Well, you know*”)

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There is a dual tension at work in many of Kyger's bioregional poems. At some moments the poem is an account of the world-as-it-is, at other moments a idiosyncratic self emerges like a sprite. Yet, the poem announces a concerted effort to write as a way to displace self from phenomenal experience. Thus Kyger strives for a poetics in which these two acts – of being, and of “letting be” – work in concert. She uses the journal as a site of poetry, time-marking and framing the place and materials surrounding the writing. With stunning clarity, the here and now surface: native animals, plants, waters, people, moon and sky interwoven with thoughts, the mind working. The poem is porous, a duration. Not a slice of life, but an instance of inhabiting what she calls “the gather dome” – thus, a site of ecological being. And in turn the surrounding ecosystem – a plurality of interconnected beings – infuses her poetic process:

Today's got the bright

cool awareness of fall and be careful
you don't startle the quail on the way
to write this from an alarming
squeaky chair that makes the baby
robin respond in song

(from “Today's got the bright”)

Wanting to note the awareness of fall, one must gear up to write; these acts are equally within. The thought is weighted equally with the physical presence; neither is more complex than the other. The ears of this stanza point in several directions, gives witness to a studied listening. Thus writing within is full of such decisions – preserve the equanimity of the Quail or excite the young Robin?

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We risk destroying what we do not comprehend. Her intense black eyes stare out over the nest rim and her tail tucked against the inside corner of the short ledge shoots up behind her. Compact and alert. I peek out through the Venetian blinds at all hours and never see her sleep. I won't say that living with that bird, incorporating her daily patterns into mine, has brought me closer to nature or anything like that. What these finches brought to the fore was that nature is a sustaining surround to the life I live though I am often unaware of it. I mean that I am aware of it in a purely habitual impact-minimizing way – recycling, re-using, biking and walking rather than driving around town, turning off lights when I leave a room, altering house temperatures only when faced with unbearable highs and lows – but here I was confronted with the fact that I am in an ecosystem, a shifting field of adaptation. And by changing my routine I'd turned that noun into a verb state: I was doing the “in which populations respond to each other” part of “ecosystem.” I was *ecosysteming*. An ecosystem is most profoundly effected by human activity. Of course I've known this for a long time. But because of these birds it re-occurred to me tangibly, audibly, spatially, that writing takes place, unavoidably, within this fact, whether we write poems “about” nature in cityscapes with marginal “natural environments,” in trammled parks where we retreat

from the signs of being oh-so-human, or in sub-urban settings where the ritual aural assault of lawn edger and leaf blower signals the neatening of the natural. In my office wordprocessing my practice is no less within the context of nature than when crossing the Texas panhandle on I-40, or ruminating on my front porch with its overarching trees and wildness, or traipsing the high desert mountains of New Mexico recording cicadas – I am writing within a field of activities; within nature, no matter how far removed.

And still, I do wonder if I am being naïve in considering my reconfiguration of my living space and my writing a moment of major awareness. A shift in outlook, an occasion to which I respond, that reorganizes priorities. Am I romanticizing ecology in a bird's nest? Is mine a “goofy pastoralism,” to borrow a phrase from Schelling? Is a more significant environmental crisis (that is, a more pressing event than avian reproduction) escaping my purview? Should I be monitoring, nurturing, or acknowledging something else instead?

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For Kyger, the phenomenal world is rich, multilayered, a space of the multiple temporalities. Whose “our” is a poem?

It’s a quiet night. Then the crickets start talking
back and forth in their particular rhythmic tone
varying with your thoughts.
 Soon too frog chorus
with several voices. The air fills
with this chanting pulse talk back and forth
drifting. Vast. Kerouac bound.
By merely listening, you add your sound

(Kyger, from “Ah, Phooey”)

In the word cluster “Soon too frog chorus” you can almost hear the bellowing. But the compact agrammatical phrase is not merely mimetic of this sound, or melodic for the sake of the lyric. This poem is a sounding back to its environment. Being via benign adding.

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Friends With Trees III

On a Jersey beach I recently watched the breeze-impelled sea grass push gentle lines into the sand. Meanwhile, suspending multiple pens to the tips of tree branches, such as weeping willow, Artist Tim Knowles creates “tree drawings.” As the tree sways in the wind it draws on paper positioned below.

[http://www.rokebygallery.com/matrix_engine/content.php?page_id=944&image=949]. The gallery website that features Knowles claims that he “creates drawings independent of his own hand, using elaborate apparatus or time consuming practices” and that his works invite “chance

and unpredictability” (i.e. nature) into the final composition. It is an attempt to capture the inscription of trees in their own right. Yet this act strikes me as ungenerous to the trees – I suppose it’s the way Knowles turns swaying into labor; he has found a way to get trees to draw *for him*. Here is a displaced, rather than an emplaced, practice. Nonetheless, it compels us to think of how the temporal life of trees (and the minds of artists) transects our concepts of, our need for, permanence.

Robert Grenier, on the other hand, in the “scrawl” poems he started writing about a decade ago, is trying to write with the trees. Crooked, organic lines of text return to a tree-like within-the-environment-ness. In several series of poems, his hands frame the photographs of his small tree-handwritten books (see, for example, *Pond I* at <http://www.thing.net/~grist/l&d/grenier/rgpnd01.htm>). The page itself, due to the difficult-to-read letters, becomes a landscape in which the reader experiences a sense of wonder *prior to* recognizing the written word. One stares *then* “reads,” and not easily – like walking over a knobby, cobbled path. His illuminated enviro-poems are a museum-ready version of Ian Hamilton Finlay’s Little Sparta, a farm-turned text and sculpture garden at Stonypath, Dunsyre, Scotland. There, I did not know what to do first: look, read, walk, make note, check out the horizon, snap a pic, or burst with joy. Similarly, Grenier’s work returns me to the scene of envired making – of walking, breathing, looking, listening, all *before* language; writing is cogently within material, intellectual, and affective fields at once – in that rich eco-poetical nexus.

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The metaphysics of domestic architecture, beshrubbed suburban parcels, and rectilinear street layout may presume to answer to human necessity, but they do not delineate it for me. If “humans differ most from other creatures in the extent to which they must be *made* what they are – that is, in the extent to which they are artifacts of their culture” (141), as Wendell Berry phrased it, then writing poetry is an escape from artifactual existence. It is a way to create culture, to resist being trapped squarely in the ready lines and definitions. An eco-poetical writing within, in particular, by grappling with material and linguistic conditions, creates cultures not only of the mind or heart, but of places; it strives to resituate possession, the “our,” within a matrix of human and nonhuman needs and lifeways. Nature can not have a voice in poems – but a poet can write envired, within, in a place of multiple listenings and differing inscriptions.

Notes & Works Cited

note: pdf versions of *ecopoetics* are available on-line at <http://www.factoryschool.org/ecopoetics/>

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