

Poeticizing Ecology/Ecologizing Poetry: Reading Emily Bishop's "Poem" Ecologically

Kevin Andrew Spicer and Beth McDermott

Nick Selby's "Ecopoetries in America" lays out quite lucidly why poetry and ecology so easily go hand-in-hand. Selby's main contention is that "to read poetry in a post-pastoral age (as Terry Gifford has called it) requires a delicately poised ethics of close reading, of response and responsibility to the local conditions of the poem."¹ Citing William Rueckert's 1978 essay, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,"² Selby claims that thirty-plus years later, ecopoetics still "depends on what Rueckert calls 'the first law of ecology,' namely that 'Everything is connected to everything else.'"³ Although his essay never frames it this way, these two ideas can themselves be easily linked with one another: precisely because it is either trivially true or vacuous to assert that "everything is connected to everything else," it follows that to read poetry requires a "delicately poised ethics of close reading." The analytic philosopher Donald Davidson noted as well that "everything is like everything, and in endless ways"⁴—but realizing this makes it perhaps too simple to maintain that close reading would thus be required precisely because everything is like everything else, and in infinitely-many different ways. Although this "first law of ecology" seems otiose, Selby's essay makes a strong claim that we would like to attempt to strengthen—namely, "that to read poetically is to read ecologically."⁵ It may also benefit readers to know that this paper is a co-authored, collaborative effort that attempts to synthesize categories—poststructuralism, ecology, and ekphrasis—that are not typically put in conversation with one another. In order to fortify this argument, we would like to begin, first, with a slightly different version and definition of "ecological poetry"; second, we will extend Selby's own list of ecopoets for whom close reading is key to include the work of Elizabeth Bishop. In doing so, we hope to pair poststructuralist thought with Bishop's use of ekphrasis in "Poem," which shares with deconstruction an

¹Nick Selby, "Ecopoetries in America," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry Since 1945*, ed. Jennifer Ashton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 128.

²William Rueckert, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 105-23.

³Selby, 128-29.

⁴Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," in *The Essential Davidson* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), 216.

⁵Selby, 136.

emphasis on infinite regress: the painting triggers her memory, a process which unfolds with the form of the poem back in time. Instead of asking what the painting means, Bishop's poem asks "where is it being made from" and "what does it presuppose?"⁶ However, the painting isn't the sole catalyst to her recollection; the process by which Bishop's speaker thinks through these questions allows us to observe the way she disassembles the framelines of the painting to argue "there is no outside text."⁷ Even the scene she thinks she remembers is a moving target because of how the poem prioritizes time. As Bonnie Costello has pointed out, memory for Bishop is not "a form of mastery over time"; rather, it occurs as "an involuntary force."⁸ Reading "Poem," we experience with the speaker the surprise of her recognition and question whether we are in a zone of meaning despite moments where "two [or more] looks" coincide: "Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!"⁹ In this paper we contend that "Poem's" re-marking of the speaker's uncle's "small family relic" is best understood by putting Timothy Morton's work on deconstruction and ecology in dialogue with Bishop's use of ekphrasis, the results of which will illustrate "the differential process by which and as which texts exist as such, as strangers to themselves."¹⁰ Furthermore, if this tripod approaches what it means to read ecologically, then the thinking of deconstruction as it is brought into dialogue with ecology itself finds an unlikely home in the overlap of perspectives that Bishop's speaker marks between memory and painting.

1. Poeticizing Ecology through Poststructuralism

It is important to understand that Morton's effort to bring deconstruction and ecology to the same table is not particularly in line with arguments literary scholars were initially making in the field of "ecocriticism"—"an intellectual movement," according to Timothy Clark, "datable to the founding of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment in 1992."¹¹ For example, since the early 2000s, critics such as J. Scott Bryson, Jonathan Bate, Lawrence Buell and David W. Gilcrest have been attempting to bracket out from modern and contemporary poetry a kind of lyric known as the ecopoem. The term itself seems to have originated with

⁶Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), xv.

⁷Timothy Morton, "Ecology as Text, Text as Ecology," *Oxford Literary Review* 32, no.1 (2010): 3; quoting Derrida's *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*.

⁸Bonnie Costello, *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 11.

⁹Elizabeth Bishop, "Poem," in *The Complete Poems 1927-1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 176-77.

¹⁰Morton, 2.

¹¹Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 4.

Bryson, since for Buell and Gilcrest “environmental text” or “environmental poem” is the phraseology of choice.¹² Since its origin out of ecocriticism—defined by Buell as “the omnibus term by which the new polyform literature and environment studies movement has come to be labeled, especially in the United States”¹³—the environmental poem has been a hard-to-define subset not only of contemporary poetry, but of contemporary nature poetry. That is, for Buell and Gilcrest, not all contemporary nature poetry is environmental poetry, and this is a distinction we will see maintained in more recent attempts to define ecopoetry. For Gilcrest, it is not enough just to write about nature in a poem, especially since “nature” defined as “the nonhuman aspects of the world around us” reinforces the familiar nature/culture bifurcation that “tends to mask *human nature*, the aspect of our existence that includes our lives lived as sheerly physical and physiological entities.”¹⁴ Rather, the environmental poem extends an environmental perspective: “the view that all beings, including humans, exist in complex relationship to their surroundings and are implicated in comprehensive physical and physiological processes.”¹⁵ The implication of the human is also important for Buell. For Buell, the environmental perspective that Gilcrest expects from the environmental text seems to be observable largely through the text’s subject matter. He proposes the following four criteria:

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation.
4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text.¹⁶

While we realize that the job of the critic is to argue his or her perspective about a text, one of the questions that Buell’s criteria raise immediately pertains to language. The idea, for example, that the nonhuman environment is a “presence,” “interest,” or “sense” that is either

¹²See Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2001) and David W. Gilcrest, *Greening the Lyre: Environmental Poetics and Ethics* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2002).

¹³*Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁴Gilcrest, 2.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶Quoted in Gilcrest, 3.

explicit or “at least implicit” in the text would suggest that these criteria are subjective and a matter of degree. How does one determine the difference between “framing device” and “presence”? And how is “human accountability to the environment” read in the actual language of the text? Furthermore, is it up to the poet, the poetic speaker, the reader, and/or the critic to demonstrate whether or not a poem’s stance is truly environmental? Finally, the question that most pertains to the unstated assumption that holds Buell’s criteria and his ideal text together is: do the taking of such measurements really espouse an ethics based on the state of the world as it really is?

One of the things Morton’s work offers is a critique of an objective environmental perspective, or an examination of how the four criteria that Buell proposes actually end up reinforcing the nature/culture distinction that, per Morton, only puts nature at a further remove as an object of aesthetic contemplation. There are no objective criteria for what constitutes “ecopoetry,” but we would argue that attention to the aesthetics of the text and to form in particular best allows us to understand what it means to read ecologically.¹⁷ For our purposes, the breadth of *The Eco-poetry Anthology* does some work towards helping us distinguish reading ecologically from reading poetry for its subject matter, most often someone’s (i.e. the poet’s) experience of being in nature. In their preface, editors Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street acknowledge that “ecopoetry” is difficult to define. While attempting to establish a critical discourse, they offer three categories that suggest how the term means different things to different people. The first category, “nature poetry,” is a type of eco-poetry, but “not all nature poetry evinces the accurate and unsentimental awareness of the natural world that is the sine qua non of eco-poetry.”¹⁸ In other words, while nature poetry often explores the relationship between the human subject and the other-than-human world, those relationships are not necessarily contemptuous; thus nature poetry isn’t as committed to social injustices as “environmental poetry,” their second category. Per Fisher-Wirth and Street, environmental poetry is the type of eco-poetry most intentionally engaged with environmental justice. They acknowledge that environmental poetry, or “activist” poetry is “powerful,”¹⁹ despite it being complicated by questions about what exactly “nature” is. This leads to Fisher-Wirth and Street’s third and final category: “ecological poetry.” Ecological poetry is “more elusive than the first two because it engages questions of form most directly” and “tends to think in self-reflexive ways about how

¹⁷See Timothy Morton’s essay, “Ecologocentrism: Unworking Animals,” *SubStance* 37, no. 3 (2008): 88-90, where the issue of aesthetics is central, but in need of a bit more elaboration.

¹⁸Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street, eds., *The Eco-poetry Anthology* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2013), xxviii.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, xxix.

poems can be ecological or somehow enact ecology.”²⁰ This category of ecopoetry is also the most willing to engage with poststructuralist theories.

Although *The Ecopoetry Anthology* editors’ taxonomy can be helpful for orienting ourselves within the realm of poetry about Nature, its usefulness is heightened if one thinks about precisely how these three categories are related to one another. The work of Timothy Morton and Levi Bryant—two thinkers belonging to the object-oriented ontology (OOO) and speculative realist (SR) movements within Continental philosophy—allows one to argue that there is a hierarchical relation between nature, ecological, and environmental poetry: these three terms are not all on the same level. We would like to argue that ecological poetry undergirds both nature poetry and environmental poetry due to the fact that the former utilizes the lessons of deconstruction and poststructuralist discourses about textuality and language. Indeed, poststructuralist thinking makes clear precisely why Rueckert’s “fundamental law of ecology”—that “everything is connected to everything else”—can only be, at best, a great starting point.

In Morton’s already mentioned essay from 2010, “Ecology as Text, Text as Ecology,” he suggests that “deconstruction and ecology should talk to one another.”²¹ A great deal of Morton’s paper focuses on Derrida’s concept of the *re-mark*. “Can we ensure,” he asks, “that an array of squiggles is insignificant? What is the smallest indicator that we are in a zone of meaning?”²² Morton argues that the systems-theoretical approach to language and signification “bypass[es] deconstruction” in its attempt to delineate the most minimal mark on a written surface, say, that differentiates a zone of meaning from a zone of nonmeaning.²³ The weakness of this “bypass” comes through its inability to account for the infinite regress not only of language, but also of “accounts of life and consciousness”:

The systems-theoretical approach, embraced too swiftly by posthumanism, cannot account for the infinite regress of writing and writable surface. Bedazzled by the impossibility of autotelic systems, posthumanism forgets that what makes a system systematic is its irreducible inconsistency. Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorem is an account of why systems need to be inconsistent in order to be coherent; in a sense Gödel’s Theorem is deconstruction in mathematical form. This is indeed a profoundly ecological notion. Ultimately, all life forms are subject to “Gödelisation” (some entity or other could undermine their consistency). All life forms (systems to be sure) are limited and inconsistent—another way of saying that we are all

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Morton, “Ecology as Text,” 1. See also Morton, “Ecologocentrism: Unworking Animals,” especially p.74 where he says that “Deconstruction is the secret best friend of ecology.”

²²Morton, “Ecology as Text,” 12.

²³Ibid., 13.

fragile, mortal entities coexisting haphazardly: a good beginning for an ethics.²⁴

Morton's fundamental insight into, and extension of, deconstruction to ecological thinking is through the application of Derrida's conceptions of alterity and otherness to nature itself: "To be aware of the trace [the *re-mark*] as such is to coexist with the radically unknowable: Derrida's *arrivant*, opening a realm of the infinitely other, an otherness that is intimately 'here,' under our skin—it is our skin, teeming with symbionts—even as it evaporates 'here' into an infinite network of traces."²⁵ Thus, for Morton, to read ecologically is to read deconstructively.

These interventions can be easily combined with Selby's aforementioned contention that "to read poetically is to read ecologically." This assertion comes on the heels of a citation of Gary Snyder's "Straits of Malacca 24 Oct 1957" which puts forward "three poetic versions of the same event—the intervention, and passing, of the human (in the form of a ship) over a natural scene." Each of the three versions give divergent perspectives on this event—and this very multiplicity, according to Selby, "demonstrate[s] how a struggle to get nature right...might best issue from a poetics of linguistic indeterminacy."²⁶ Now, despite Morton's distaste for systems-theoretical approaches, these theories do have much more to offer than he would seem to initially allow.²⁷ Niklas Luhmann's conception of deconstruction as a method of "second-order observing" in his *Theories of Distinction: Redescribing the Descriptions of Modernity*,²⁸ is very germane to our attempts here to understand the collaboration between deconstruction and ecology. Levi Bryant summarizes this second-order observation as dealing precisely with "an observation of 'how the observer observes' or the *distinctions* that allow the observer to indicate in [a] particular way."²⁹ Focusing on "how observers observe rather than *what* observers observe" gives us a nice way to talk about what is happening both in Snyder's poem and also in Selby's own reading of it as producing a deep connection between ecology and the ways in which observers cleave the world—in the ways observers *mark* and *remark* a space of meaning from a space of nonmeaning. Levi Bryant's metaphor of distinction as "cleaving" the world strikes us as apropos given Selby's own use of Snyder's poem, which itself takes the

²⁴Ibid., 13-14.

²⁵Ibid., 14-15.

²⁶Selby, 135.

²⁷Indeed, this is the argument of Cary Wolfe in his *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), especially chapter 1.

²⁸Niklas Luhmann, *Theories of Distinction: Redescribing the Descriptions of Modernity*, ed. William Rasch (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), see chapter 4, especially p. 108.

²⁹Levi Bryant, "Distinction: On Deconstruction," *Larval Subjects*, last modified 11 March 2013, <https://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2011/03/19/distinction-on-deconstruction>.

“intervention of the human” as metonymically illustrated by a ship cutting the waters of the ocean. To give space to alterity, to allow the otherness not only of nature but also of language’s differential and arbitrary character, is to expand the “marked” space of ecology.³⁰

Selby does not, unfortunately, clarify fully precisely what it means to “read ecologically”; we do know that reading ecologically has something to do, in Snyder’s poem, with “a struggle to get nature right,” but it is still confusing as to precisely what it would mean to “get nature right.” It seems far more likely—though he never phrases it this way—that to do it correctly is impossible; all we have are the numerous attempts to do it right. It would certainly be possible to argue that this is perhaps the best way to parse “reading ecologically”—i.e. reading ecologically means understanding the multiple perspectives. Indeed, it means having to deal with linguistic indeterminacy. Moreover, it is also easy to claim that deconstruction here can be helpful yet again. The conjunction of deconstruction and ecology should not be a simple one-to-one pairing; it should not simply pair up terms from one to the other. One of the great capacities of ecological thinking is its expansiveness, its amplificatory power. If one can treat ecology semiotically, as Morton does vis-à-vis Derrida, then it is a simple step to claim that an awareness of the multiple ways in which we observe observers cleave the world through distinctions is fundamentally ecological. The nature of semiotic systems as different and differing ways to draw distinctions are themselves capable of this same amplificatory power. One of the problems with Morton’s treatment of everything in the world—and every system in the world—as capable of “Gödelisation” should be amended slightly here, as Morton is correct to say that this “is a fundamentally ecological notion,” though that is certainly not all there is to say on the matter. “Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorem” does indeed show that there are some theorems that will not be provable from within a specific formal-logical system with a particular set of premises. However, these theorems are not unprovable in a deeply ontological way—i.e. these theorems will not be *unprovable in themselves* (they will not be “absolutely undecidable”). Other formal systems with different initial premises will actually be able to show these unprovable theorems as provable. Morton’s insight here is perfectly consistent with Lacan’s famous “there is no metalanguage” remarks—no system will be able to totalize things in a way such that all theorems are provable. For a given axiomatic system, some truths will be unprovable, but these theorems will be amenable to proof within a different set of premises. To read this in a systems-theoretical approach is to assert that despite the fact that certain systems will have blind spots, these very same spots are able to become visible by utilizing different axioms. System A may have a blind spot, X, but that same blind spot may not be blind to system B. This is, of course, just another way to say that our systems are amplificatory. There

³⁰The language of a distinction that draws a difference between “marked” and “unmarked” states—for Morton, Bryant, and Luhmann—comes from George Spencer-Brown’s *Laws of Form* (New York: Bantam, 1979).

can be no doubt that certain distinctions made by a particular system make some things “marked” and other things “unmarked,” to use George Spencer-Brown’s language. However, the power of ecological thinking is to allow us to constantly expand the space that falls under the “marked state” while simultaneously understanding that no totalizing of the field is possible; ecological thinking thus provides one of the most significant ways in which the non-totalizable nature of the other is welcomed and allowed to remain other.

This mention of a non-appropriative thinking of the other allows us to segue easily into another claim of Selby’s that needs more elucidation—namely, the assertion that reading poetry requires “a delicately poised ethics of close reading.” Morton’s work, again, is helpful here. In his “Waking Up Inside an Object: The Subject of Ecology”³¹ and elsewhere, Morton speaks of OOO’s perspective giving rise to what he calls “strange strangers.”³² For the OOO and SR philosophers, a “fundamentally ecological view of the world” implies that all “lifeforms [are] properly uncanny, since lifeforms cannot by definition coincide with themselves in any sense.”³³ All entities are asserted to be “uncanny, strangely strange, even to themselves.” Perhaps not so curious is Morton’s recourse to Levinas here to talk about the alterity of any entity whatsoever, “from goldfish to intergalactic dust clouds”:

We think of ecology as systems and interconnectivity because those derive from the models that gave rise to thinking outside of the human-world correlate in the first place. What emerge from this thinking, however, are unique irreducible strange strangers, *more like the Levinasian other than ambassadors from some holistic web of life.*³⁴

No entity completely coincides with itself because ecological thinking has helped us to see how every entity is shot-through with traces of the other; we ourselves are made up of other lifeforms; life is made up of nonlife.³⁵ To think ecologically is to think the other within the self (especially including all the *nonhuman* others), within any entity whatsoever. To engage ecologically is to engage ethically—to open up a space wherein we can, following Hamlet’s advice to Horatio, “as a stranger give it welcome.”³⁶ Just as philosophers like Levinas and Derrida argued for decades over the course of numerous essays and books that there was an

³¹Timothy Morton, “Waking Up Inside an Object: The Subject of Ecology,” *English Language Notes* 49, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2011): 183-191.

³² See Morton, “Ecologocentrism,” 76-77, where this Levinasian-Derridean lineage is made clear.

³³Morton, “Waking Up,” 184-85.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 185.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 1, scene 5, page 8, line 167.

ethics that was prior to any prescriptive system of morality and rules—it is possible that this openness to the other gives us another way to show how ecological poetry, in Fisher-Wirth and Street’s terminology, undergirds the more politically engaged and involved “environmental poetry.”

The ability of language to open up new spaces for the other shows a clear quality necessary for our current environmental situation within the Anthropocene. Poetry itself has much to offer here; its potential becomes clear if we juxtapose a pair of essays—Dipesh Chakrabaty’s “Climate of History” and Marcella Durand’s short “The Ecology of Poetry.” In discussing the possibility of humanity itself coming to grasp itself as a species, he maintains that such a thing is impossible to “experience.” Humanity is a global species, but no human being ever experiences such a thing. And this is precisely because all of our awareness of humanity’s effects on the planet comes through, as Ben Dibley puts it, “scientific analyses,” which are all “outside the human sensorium.”³⁷ Although this is certainly true, the very strength of scientific discourse is also its weakness, as Durand’s essay makes readily clear in her assertion that poetry is able to pull together precisely what scientific discourse does not.

Association, juxtaposition, metaphor are how poets can go further than the scientist in addressing systems. The poet can legitimately juxtapose kelp beds with junkyards. Or to get really technical, reflect the water reservoir system for a large city in the linguistic structure of repetitive water-associated words in a poem. And poets right now are the only scientist-artists who can do these sorts of associations and get away with them—all other disciplines, such as biology, oceanography, or mathematics carry an obligation to separate their ideas into discrete topics. You’re not really allowed to associate your findings about sea-birds nesting on a remote Arctic island with the drought in the West. But as a poet, you certainly can. And you can do it in a way that journalists can’t—you can do it in a way that is concentrated, that alters perception, that permanently alters language or a linguistic structure. Because you as poets are lucky enough to work in a medium that not only is in itself an art, but an art that interacts essentially with the exterior world, with things, events, systems. Through this multi-dimensional aspect of poetry, poets are an essential catalyst for increased perception, and increased change.³⁸

Durand’s reminder that association and metaphor—the very stuff of poetry—can have

³⁷Ben Dibley, “Nature is Us: The Anthropocene and Species-Being,” *Transformations* 21 (2012), http://www.transformationsjournal.org/issues/21/article_07.shtml.

³⁸Marcella Durand, “The Ecology of Poetry,” *ecopoetics* 2 (Fall 2002): 62.

powerful effects on perception suggests that humanity's impact on the planet need not come only through scientific analyses that extend beyond the limits of humanity's sensorium. If poetry can be "experienced" in such a way that scientific studies cannot, then it is possible to view poetry itself as a kind of prosthesis that gives us access to things beyond the human in ways that are quite similar to the scientific prosthetic.

Towards the end of Chakrabaty's essay, he takes E. O. Wilson to task over a deeply ontological (and linguistic) concern over humanity's status as a species, as a species that is having a geological impact on the planet.

We humans never experience ourselves as a species. We can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such. There could be no phenomenology of us as a species. Even if we were to emotionally identify with a word like *mankind*, we would not know what being a species is, for, in species history, humans are only an instance of the concept species as indeed would be any other life form. But one never experiences being a concept.³⁹

Ben Dibley has put this idea in slightly different form as follows: "The unintended consequences of human actions—climate change, mass extinction, oceanic acidification, soil degradation and so on—escape the human sensorium. These effects of our actions as a species are only brought to vision through scientific analysis."⁴⁰ Although we can hardly disagree with this formulation that the awareness of our global impact does come through a set of scientific prostheses that "escape the human sensorium," we might also wonder a bit more about the aesthetic's capacity—in our case in ecological poetry—to speak of what escapes our terrestrial limitations. It is certainly possible to argue that the scientific data Chakrabaty and Dibley speak of here does indeed push beyond those limits; yet, Durand's argument about poetry also needs to be brought to bear here on a context that the former authors claim is the regime only of science.

2. Ecologizing Poetry through Ekphrasis

Durand's reminder of the increased perception that poetry can procure makes a good case for poetry's value inherent in a set of formal relationships that work on the human in the same way that a human can work on a poem. Associative thinking also reminds us that it is the nature of language to refer and defer; like Bishop's speaker's roving eye, associative leaps demonstrate,

³⁹Dipesh Chakrabaty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 220.

⁴⁰Dibley, "Nature is Us."

as Morton writes of the re-mark, “the impossibility of ever successfully distinguishing one state from another.”⁴¹ Thinking about language’s capacity to defer is ecological in a way environmental poetry is not. Fisher-Wirth and Street want for ecopoetry on the whole to be communal, to return us “to the world of our senses.”⁴² Surely the editors are punning on “sense” and referring to both the faculties of perception as well as “common” sense or intelligence. In other words, it is common sense not to destroy “a mountaintop, coral reef, a forest, a human community.”⁴³ Poetry can give us, through associative thinking, the ability to have this common sense. But we agree with James Longenbach that while a poem can *mean* such a thing to one or more people, “a poem’s power inheres less in its conclusions than in its propensity to resist them, demonstrating their inadequacy while moving inevitably toward them.”⁴⁴ It is the very nature of ecological poetry to question not only what is meant by “common,” but also “a form historically taken for granted—that of the singular, coherent self.”⁴⁵

Bishop’s speaker in “Poem” questions the singular, coherent self as a second-order observer encountering “a minor family relic.”⁴⁶ In addition to the re-mark illustrating the inability to distinguish between two states, Morton furthermore notes that the “‘mark’ seems nicely poised between accident and deliberation, drawing and writing.”⁴⁷ Defined in brief by James Heffernan as a “a verbal representation of a visual representation,”⁴⁸ ekphrasis is a mode that foregrounds second-order observation and the re-mark. Bishop’s “Poem” is especially concerned with re-marking place through the painting. Rather than position time in opposition to the painting, Bishop’s attempt at a re-representation foregrounds time in the same way that Morton describes:

It’s common to experience time dilating and contracting when we read a story or a poem. We can identify formal narrative techniques and other devices such as ekphrasis that make this happen. We know that form generates time. It’s just that we have tacitly accepted the habit of thinking that time and space (and

⁴¹Morton, “Ecology as Text,” 13.

⁴²Fisher-Wirth and Street, xxvii.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴James Longenbach, *The Resistance to Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 10.

⁴⁵Fisher-Wirth, xxix.

⁴⁶Bishop, 176-77.

⁴⁷Morton, “Ecology as Text,” 13.

⁴⁸James Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 1.

causality more generally) subtend objects, in particular flimsy artifacts such as poems. So we think that how a poem “times” is a superficial coating. OOO reverses this picture. Time, space, and causality float “in front of” objects: they just are ways in which an object appears.⁴⁹

As the second-order observer, Bishop’s speaker’s own seeing is conflated with the ancestor who preceded her. Time “floats ‘in front of’”⁵⁰ the painting in a way Bishop attempts to harness by marking the space of what sits on the page as “poetry.” If “Poem” had been titled “Nova Scotia,” or something of the like, the title would have acted as a kind of frame subtended by time. The fact that it is titled “Poem” creates a unilateral relationship between poem and painting that “radically question[s] the genuine ex-istence” of categories like inside and outside, or poem and painting, “far more than clinging to an aesthetic amalgam of the two.”⁵¹ Here is the title and opening stanza to illustrate what we mean:

Poem

About the size of an old-style dollar bill,
American or Canadian,
mostly the same whites, gray greens, and steel grays
—this little painting (a sketch for a larger one?)
has never earned any money in its life.
Useless and free, it has spent seventy years
as a minor family relic
handed along collaterally to owners
who looked at it sometimes, or didn’t bother to.

Because the subject of the opening sentence is suspended (“this little painting”), we do not know what is being compared to “an old-style dollar bill” until line four. Before then, it is easy to read the poem’s opening line in relation to the title like the mark Morton observes as “nicely poised between accident and deliberation, drawing and writing.”⁵² Is the poem or painting

⁴⁹Timothy Morton, “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry,” *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 214.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 55.

⁵²Morton, “Ecology as Text,” 13.

“about the size of an old-style dollar bill”? We cannot see the painting, but we can see the poem and presume that it is more expansive because of the opening metaphor. Furthermore, the poem continues to be ordered in a way that suggests deliberation despite the unspecified title; throughout all 5 stanzas, lines stretch roughly the same distance from left to right across the page, averaging between 8-10 syllables long.

The syntax is noticeably broken by an em-dash at the start of line four. It sets the subject of the sentence apart, especially since the line also contains a parenthetical aside and question. Looking at the poem, our eye falls there perhaps even more than we register the title. However, the aside questions the ability to clearly delineate text, i.e. the painting as such. A sketch is not the same thing as a painting, no matter how insignificant it may be. A painting has more effort behind it—at least that is the presumption. But the end result is that it doesn’t really matter. Something in the white space between the first and second stanzas permits Bishop’s speaker to become a second-order observer:

Useless and free, it has spent seventy years
as a minor family relic
handed along collaterally to owners
who looked at it sometimes, or didn’t bother to.
It must be Nova Scotia: only there
does one see gabled wooden houses
painted that awful shade of brown.

We argue for the marked space between stanzas because the last line of stanza one, which is concerned with recognition, downplays previous owners’ powers of observation so that perception heightens as the painting changes hands. Previous owners “didn’t bother,” but recognition peaks with the speed behind the first sentence of stanza two. The speaker’s certainty about place is colloquial enough to suggest “only there” has been identified once or twice before; “there” sits at the end of the line which is to say that it is annotated by the syntax as a momentary conflation of painting and memory. However, “only [,] there” also suggests a possible rebuttal, especially as it sits to the other side of a caesura. Bishop’s careful descriptions are not unlike what Selby means by “an attempt to get nature right”;⁵³ “nature” is a place in the speaker’s memory, and she is working on re-marking it from the painting. Costello gives a sensitive reading of Bishop’s “Poem” in the context of her relationship to the visual arts in general. Costello points out that Bishop often chooses to write ekphrastic poetry about works

⁵³Selby, 135.

of art that are valued, but not necessarily for the artist's mastery over his craft. For example: "Poem" and "Large Bad Picture" reference a family member's humble attempts to depict landscapes both sublime and common. Bishop's speakers do not value these objects for their cash equivalent; nor does she value the paintings' beauty. According to Costello, what Bishop's speaker values is the paintings' power to evoke memory:

These objects have personal value for the beholder. They are usually tied to the activity of memory, for Bishop the key to art's power to affect us. Yet if art is not a means of transcending the conditions of existence, it is, nevertheless, more than epitaph. The work continues to 'live,' just as remembering can be a thread of life. By writing about the temporal status of visual art, Bishop joins a long tradition of ekphrastic verse which ascribes to the plastic and graphic media the virtues of permanence, presence, inexhaustible expressiveness, and above all the ability to evoke a moment of life and movement within static forms.⁵⁴

Costello's description of ekphrasis as ascribing to media "the virtues of permanence, presence, inexhaustible expressiveness" and "the ability to evoke a moment of life and movement within static forms" is no doubt informed by critics such as Murray Krieger, W.J.T. Mitchell, and James Heffernan. Krieger in particular argued for the likeness between the ekphrastic poem and the still-life (*nature morte*) artwork when he described the poem as symbolic of "the frozen, stilled world of plastic relationships which must be superimposed upon literature's turning world to 'still' it."⁵⁵ However, Bishop's "Poem" aspires to move rather than contribute to the world of plastic relationships. Its very "presence"—the quality of ekphrastic verse that Costello mentions above—is complicated by the second-order observation that reminds us that memory is ecological. Morton is again useful here: "Derrida's formulation that there is no outside-text is ... a deep and expanded form of empiricism. For truly empiricism is the study of relationships between things, and of things as sets of relationships, rather than solid seeming objects separated by empty seeming space."⁵⁶ Emphasis on the relationship between poem and painting is reinforced by the notional ekphrasis happening in Bishop's poem: like Achilles' shield, we cannot view Bishop's "minor family relic" except as it exists in relation to the speaker's memory.

Unlike Krieger's emphasis on stasis, Heffernan's notion of ekphrasis helps us to understand how Bishop's "Poem" moves, since ekphrasis is, according to Heffernan, temporally fraught by

⁵⁴Costello, 215.

⁵⁵Quoted in Heffernan, 2.

⁵⁶Morton, "Ecology as Text," 3-4.

narrative impulse, rather than “a way of freezing time in space.”⁵⁷ “Ekphrasis is dynamic and obstetric,” Heffernan argues, deliberately invoking the journey of labor and delivery: “it typically delivers *from* the pregnant moment of visual art its embryonically narrative impulse, and thus makes explicit the story that visual art tells only by implication.”⁵⁸ Heffernan’s birth metaphor suggests that the ekphrastic poem is not quite the continuation of an art object but it comes close, at least genetically speaking. Where this continuation is effectively severed is in the almost Oedipal battle that ensues. For Heffernan, the relationship between a verbal representation and its visual parent is not one of passive inheritance but “gendered antagonism”; that is, ekphrasis thrives on a quest for power between the poet’s word and the painter’s image.⁵⁹ For Heffernan, this antagonism is “often powerfully gendered: the expression of a duel between male and female gazes, the voice of male speech striving to control a female image that is both alluring and threatening, of male narrative striving to overcome the fixating impact of beauty poised in space.”⁶⁰ However, even though we appreciate the relational aspect of Heffernan’s theory, we do not get the sense that this battle of wills is happening in “Poem,” a text that Heffernan might have looked at in his 1993 study that is heavy on male poets and also maintains, as part of its theoretical argument, a male/female antagonism between poetry and visual art. While Heffernan is not the first to put “the sister arts” in a contested relationship, his argument that the relationship is binary and gendered perpetuates a limited understanding of sex and gender and ignores the way poets like Bishop have used ekphrasis to deconstruct binary opposition. Contemporary poet Douglas Kearney refers to the problematic history of ekphrasis in “MESS”:

8a.

I can’t call it ekphrasis. The poetry wants to claim the secrets of other arts. To steal them away. To take them and make them work in strange fields of white space. Ain’t this a failure of character?

8b.

Said I’m not going to call it ekphrasis. The poetry wants to take other arts into its mouth. But not to chew them up. Just keep them there, so the words have to make their way around them, through them, with them.

... “What have we made???!?”

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

I still don't know. But I know the "we" didn't exist before I realized my failure.⁶¹

Kearney's language about ekphrasis is profoundly political. To "claim the secrets of other arts" and "make them work in strange fields of white space" describes ekphrasis as part of Orientalist discourse. To call such discourse into question in favor of "we" sounds like Darwin vis-à-vis Morton: "Darwinism frees the mind for an ethics and politics based not on soulless authoritarianism, but on intimacy with coexisting strange others (*Autrui*), because Darwinism shows how utterly flimsy and contingent and non-teleological the biosphere is."⁶² Such ecology is in contrast to Heffernan's equation of painterly space with the feminine, which we would argue is commensurate with what Morton finds problematic about "Nature": it is that space over there, "over yonder," in the distance.⁶³ Perhaps thinking about ecology without Nature, as per Morton, allows us to make this transition to Bishop's revision of classical ekphrasis: in other words, what happens when a verbal representation of a visual representation refuses to uphold Heffernan's conception of ekphrasis built on male/female bifurcation? What happens when the movement, or narrative impulse, doesn't come to rest in a battle of wills, but continues to infinitely regress? We are interested in what this means for reading Bishop's "Poem" ecologically. While Costello is right that Bishop's poem about an uncle's amateurish painting is atypical, we don't think that the painting's "personal value" to the speaker matters so much as the speaker's second-order observation and the ecological reading that results. After identifying "Nova Scotia," the speaker of "Poem" roams the surface of the painting with her eye, momentarily stepping into it when she shifts from seeing to feeling:

The other houses, the bits that show, are white.
Elm trees, low hills, a thin church steeple
—that gray-blue wisp—or is it? In the foreground
a water meadow with some tiny cows,
two brushstrokes each, but confidently cows;
two miniscule white geese in the blue water,
back-to-back, feeding, and a slanting stick.
Up closer, a wild iris, white and yellow,

⁶¹Douglas Kearney, "MESS," *Poetry Foundation*, last modified 10 January 2011, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2011/01/mess>.

⁶²Morton, "Ecology as Text," 9.

⁶³Morton, "Ecologocentrism," 75.

fresh-squiggled from the tube.
The air is fresh and cold; cold early spring
clear as gray glass; a half inch of blue sky
below the steel-gray storm clouds.
(They were the artist's speciality.)
A specklike bird is flying to the left.
Or is it a flyspeck looking like a bird?

In these lines that read the painting so closely, nowhere does place come to the forefront with more force than "The air is fresh and cold." Before this, the eye is roving, acknowledging the painter's effort to represent the scene with varying degrees of success. The description is predominantly visual. But the shift to "fresh and cold" suggests the speaker can actually feel the air in her memory. It's as if some aperture permits her entry, perhaps having to do with the word "wisp." The syntax of a line like "Elm trees, low hills, a thin church steeple / —that gray-blue wisp—or is it?" could have conceivably been "Is that gray-blue wisp / a thin church steeple?" Not only does Bishop refuse the too-easy parallel format; the way the syntax functions in relation to the line ending suggests a prioritization of the wisp over what it does or does not represent. It is bracketed out as a reference to the painting's materiality, since the various denotations of "wisp" include "a small broom; a whisk." However, "in various transferred and allusive senses," "wisp" can also mean "A thin, narrow, filmy, or slight piece, fragment, or portion (*of* something); a mere shred or 'slip' *of*." ⁶⁴ Etymologically, it is also related to "whisk": A brief rapid sweeping movement; a sudden light stroke, rush, dart."⁶⁵ The wisp is a trace of something Bishop's speaker seeks but can't confirm. The brief sweeping of the painter's brush is both prior-to and simultaneous with her moment of recognition:

Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!
It's behind—I can almost remember the farmer's name.
His barn backed on that meadow. There it is,
titanium white, one dab. The hint of steeple,
filaments of brush-hairs, barely there,
must be the Presbyterian church.

⁶⁴*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "wisp."

⁶⁵*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "whisk."

Would that be Miss Gillespie's house?

Those particular geese and cows
are naturally before my time.

The exclamation "Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!" is the height of second-order observation in the poem. The geese and cows that came before her remind us of her relationship to them; like the ancestor who "was quite famous, an R.A....,"⁶⁶ they are indicative of the way deconstruction and ecology come to rest in the re-mark. Whether Darwinian or linguistic, Morton is right that "there is an infinite regress potential here, since a minimal mark that 'pings' to echo the functionality of a system depends upon an already functioning system of meaning, an already inscribed surface."⁶⁷ "The hint of steeple," metonymic for "the Presbyterian church," is always-already inscribed, referring us back to "wisp," which we know as "barely there" before we even read the phrase in stanza three.⁶⁸

Infinite regress is a conducive way to think about ekphrasis because it correlates to the criticism of "vision" in the final stanza:

Our visions coincided—'visions' is
too serious a word—our looks, two looks:
art 'copying from life' and life itself,
life and the memory of it so compressed
they've turned into each other. Which is which?
Life and the memory of it cramped,
dim, on a piece of Bristol board,
dim, but how live, how touching in detail...

We would argue that there is no attempt in Bishop's poem to silence the painting or stand in a dominant relationship to the painting; in fact, she needs it to "coincide" with her perspective, to make reference to her own "look," her own lack of "vision." Furthermore, the critique of ekphrasis as a mode steeped in Western metaphysics is exactly in line with the second-order observation that attempts to compress memory and experience: they are "so compressed /

⁶⁶Bishop, 177.

⁶⁷Morton, "Ecology as Text," 13.

⁶⁸Bishop, 176-177.

they've turned into each other."⁶⁹ Modifiers like "cramped" and "dim" bring us back to the size of "this little painting" and remind us of "wisp": "A thin, narrow, filmy, or slight piece, fragment, or portion (*of* something); a mere shred or 'slip' *of*."

And yet, despite the suggestion that this little painting is itself wisp-like, its significance to Bishop's memory and the actual place it re-marks almost reinscribes what had begun as lack. If we recall, the painting "never earned any money in its life [and was] handed along collaterally to owners / who looked at it sometimes, or didn't bother to."⁷⁰ What's "free" by the poem's end are memory and experience, which is to say the preservation of experience that form can seek but not maintain:

—the little that we get for free
the little of our earthly trust. Not much.
About the size of our abidance
along with theirs: the munching cows,
the iris, crisp and shivering, the water
still standing from spring freshets,
the yet-to-be dismantled elms, the geese.

In this list that includes cows, iris, standing water, and geese, the "yet-to-be dismantled elms" have such slim abidance that even though they are not yet dismantled, the certitude of their dismantling overwhelms the entire list and everything is contingent upon their shortened lifespan (or stature). In fact, the entire list is kept horizontal in the same way that Bishop refuses hierarchical structures throughout the entirety of the poem. But "dismantled" also suggests that these elms have been *arranged* by the painter and the poet who follows; in other words, Bishop's word choice goes a long way to remind us that she is not interested in merely representing objective reality but rather wants to show how the artifice of the painting and the poem are mutually reliant on one another, which is to say that the perspective of the speaker is reliant on the painter in order for the coincidence of seeing to occur.

We cannot help but think of Morton's singling out of Darwin when we read Bishop's final lines, which sound as though she is describing "elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner."⁷¹ Perhaps this is nowhere more

⁶⁹Bishop, 177.

⁷⁰Ibid., 176.

⁷¹Quoted in Morton, "Ecology as Text," 1.

clear than the “yet-to-be dismantled elms,” which we read as already dismantled, but only in proximity to something else, in this case “our” selves. We are the dismantlers, even though we share the elms’ abidance, which is to say that we continue in a particular condition so long as they do. As we have previously suggested, there are moments in the poem where the speaker seems to slip into the painting, a gesture that could be read as simply postmodern; however, Bishop’s refusal to accept the sufficiency of a single vantage point through ekphrasis creates an opening for second-order observation to occur; as Costello puts it, her memory depends “on an earlier event which it keeps causally alive.”⁷²

We previously discussed Levi Bryant’s focus on “*how* observers observe” rather than what they observe in order to argue that reading ecologically should take precedence over the subject matter of a poem. Bishop’s poetry has already been considered to have ecological importance. She is mentioned, for example, by Gilcrest, who places her in the company of Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and Marianne Moore: poets who, per Gilcrest, usher in “the emergence of a ‘hermeneutical’ nature poetry that continues to influence the way poets approach the nonhuman.”⁷³ Two of Bishop’s poems that seem to illustrate Gilcrest’s interest in hermeneutics are “At the Fishhouses” and “The Moose”—both highly descriptive placed-based poems included in *The Eco-poetry Anthology*. However, while these may seem like more obvious choices by which to argue the ecological import of Bishop’s poetry, we argue that Morton’s claim that ecology and deconstruction should talk to one another is best illustrated by “Poem.” When it comes to describing what eco-poetry is or what it can do for a nation experiencing a profound lack of imagination, we would urge scholars to look to deconstruction and interrogate the poem that purports to view the world like a butterfly pinned to a diorama; we contend that, not only is it impossible to get nature right, but our attempts should be numerous, flawed, and seeking other attempts, other representations and words that have missed the mark, that expand the marked space of the other and remind us we are shot through with traces of life and nonlife.

⁷²Costello, 194.

⁷³Gilcrest, 93.