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# Ecopoetry as Mind into Matter: Some Educational Possibilities

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**Abstract**

In part, this work draws on the revisioning of curriculum in the context of the climate crisis that occupies Chapter 8 of the author's book on *Sense of Place, Identity, and the Revisioning of Curriculum* (2023: Springer Nature). The focus here is the "genre" of ecopoetry, described by Walton (2018) as "contributing to the task of repairing divisions between humanity and the ecosystems that constitute and support us" (p. 393). As a response to the Anthropocene, ecopoetry is potentially polemical and activist. However, as it is argued, it can also operate in more covert means by modelling ways in which ecocritical ontological and epistemological stances, congruent with traditional indigenous wisdoms, can be *languaged* into the textures of poems in ways that suggest a relationship with the non-human world that is both non-hierarchical and non-anthropocentric. This monograph will begin by revisiting and critiquing the poetics of romanticism and its contribution to anthropocentrism, before moving on to a consideration of some poems which are deemed to be ecopoetic in their stance and expression (including some by the author). This work has direct relevance to the English Language Arts (in the US context) but would have interdisciplinary implications in educational settings where there are attempts at cross-disciplinary collaboration, especially between the languages, arts, social sciences and sciences.

## Introduction

Inevitably, there is a personal dimension to an article of this kind, given that I was born at a time when such notions as "environmentalism" and "ecology" were newcomers on the discursive block and the Anthropocene as a naming of our current planetary age was yet to be invented. I will be using the term discourse in a Foucaultian sense to denote, as Fairclough (1992) put it: "a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning" (1992, p. 64). Putting it another a way, a discourse is a socially constructed way of making sense of the world – or some aspect of it – as encapsulated in language and other signifying practices.

A *poetics* (looks plural, but is generally thought of as singular) is a way of thinking about poetry – how one might go about writing it, interpreting it and evaluating it. I first came across the word when I took a course in literary criticism in 1969. It was the title of a work by Aristotle, where his focus was not on poetry, but rather on the making of tragedy as a dramatic form. I am using the word "making" pointedly here, with an eye on the etymology of our English words "poet," "poetry," and "poetics." All derive from the ancient Greek word *poiesis* (*ποιεῖν*), which means "a making" or "creation" – as well as the verb *poieîn* ("to make").

A poetics is a creature of its time. In some respects, the same is true of poems. In section XII of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," American poet Wallace Stevens writes:

> The poem is the cry of its occasion,
> Part of the res itself and not about it. (1966, p. 473)

Poems can be thought of as ways of making sense of the world of our experience, or at least as responses to some aspect of it. In his remarkable essay, "The Figure a Poem Makes," Robert Frost call these "clarifications" – "momentary stays against confusion" (1951, p. 17).
However, as I argue here, these sense-making acts are situated in times and places. They are affected by who we are, our relationships, our topics of interest, how we think and the discourses we subscribe to, intentionally or unconsciously. The poetics I subscribed to in the 1970s is different from the one I subscribe to today. At a personal level, the next section might be thought of as a flashback.

## The poetics of romanticism

In the same course on literary criticism that I mentioned previously, another prescribed text was Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria,* published in 1817. Though Coleridge's text predates the development of experimental psychology, it is clear that he is constructing a theory of mind, and specifically the modus operandi of what we have come to call the *imagination.* Here we have it from the famous Chapter 13:

> The Imagination then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary Imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the

> finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I Am. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

While God is not mentioned specifically here, there is reference to a transcendental, creative force ("the infinite I Am"). The focus is firstly on a human faculty – the "primary Imagination"– the "living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception." The capitalisation is telling in the sense that this faculty is deemed to be god-like. Indeed, human agency via the imagination duplicates, though on a finite scale, the Creator's role in bringing the world into existence. The secondary imagination is regarded as identical in its agency with the primary. The verbs used to describe its operation are significant in their sequencing, since they suggest that imaginative creation has a deconstructive aspect as well as a creative one where the aim is to "idealise and to unify." Particularly pertinent to the argument I am making here is the concluding sentence, which constructs the referential world of objects as "essentially fixed and dead." The source of romantic order is the agency of the creative self, acting *on* the world as perceived.

Thinking of my 22-year-old self, reading this, I can still understand his being caught up in its dizzying *heroisation* of human creativity and the hallowing of the artist. I would have connected this discourse of the artist with Stephen Dedalus's rhapsodic celebration of the "artificer" in James Joyce's "*The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,"* written over a century later.

As an English student at Auckland University, I was exposed to the poetics of the New Criticism (Locke, 2003), which was represented for me by a classic, 20th-century text, *Understanding Poetry* by the American critics, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren.
The following quotation from *Understanding Poetry,* is a typical embodiment of the New Critical tone.

> Poetry enables us to know what it "feels like" to be live in the world. What does it "feel like," for instance, to be in love, to hate somebody, to be conscience-stricken, to watch a sunset or stand by a death-bed, to be willing to die for a cause or live in a passionate devotion to some chosen ideal? Only poetry – in the broadest sense of the word – can help us to answer such questions, and help us, thus, to an understanding of ourselves and of our own values. We may say, in fact, that literature is the most sophisticated example of the process by which we come to grasp our own environment, especially our human environment, with its complex and ambiguous values; you become aware through imaginative enactment and an imaginative logic that all the possibilities of fate are your own, for better or worse. Literature is the most complicated language that man has invented for talking not only to others but to himself; or rather, it is the language he has invented so that he may be *himself.* (Brooks & Warren, 1976, p. 9).

It is a tone which has echoes of Coleridge, but is far more polemical in its focus on poetry as a way of coming to know, as compared with other, say, disciplinary-based ways of understanding our "own" environment. (Why "own"? I suggest that the link to "ownership" and the focus on our "own" species is not accidental.) Literature, as a sense-making "process," is enabled (as in Coleridge's case) through "imaginative enactment and an imaginative logic." This enables the environment to be "grasped." This word, compared with Coleridge's verbs "idealise" and "unify," is itself telling; if we describe the imagination as a "grasping faculty," it makes it sound greedier than heroic.

Wallace Stevens, whom I would rate as the greatest of American romantic poets, wrote "Anecdote of the Jar" in 1918, when he was in the town of Elizabethton, Tennessee.[1]

> I placed a jar in Tennessee,
> And round it was, upon a hill.
> It made the slovenly wilderness
> Surround that hill.
>
> The wilderness rose up to it,
> And sprawled around, no longer wild.
> The jar was round upon the ground
> And tall and of a port in air.
>
> It took dominion everywhere.
> The jar was grey and bare.
> It did not give of bird or bush,
> Like nothing else in Tennessee. (1966, p. 76)

Some commentators suggest a link to Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*; Stevens's jar is plain in comparison. However, as I read it, the most significant allusion is to the Book of Genesis 1:26-28: "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." In this case, it is the human artifact that exercises dominion, not just because of its elevated placement, but because of some mysterious power. The final two lines suggest it has little relationship to the natural environment, yet can tame the erstwhile "slovenly wilderness." Stevens would have known that "slovenly" was a strange epithet to apply to the wilderness, since it was generally applied to untidy humans, whose lack of attention to matters of dress would have suggested a failing of character.

What to make of this? Firstly, we don't conflate the "I" with the poet. It could well be a representative figure, even the archetypal settler of the New World bent on bringing the

[1] It has its own page in Wikipedia. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anecdote_of_the_Jar#:~:text=%22Anecdote%20of%20the%20Jar%22%20is,the%20town%20of%20Elizabethton%2C%20Tennessee.

unrespectable wilderness (including its original inhabitants) under the control of a version of the European colonising imagination – as "grey and bare" as the Puritan worldview (see Carroll, 1969). This is an imagination that would bring the natural world to heel – mine it for whatever sense might be made from it via a kind of extractive, poetic logic. Two of his aphorisms reprinted in the "Adagia" section of his *Opus Posthumous* (1957) might be cited side-by-side to suggest that the human imagination can undertake sense-making in ways that are inadequate or even destructive.

> The imagination is the romantic. (p. 163)
> A dead romantic is a falsification. (p. 160)

The romantic imagination, as a concept central to its poetics, has the potential to be manifested in four destructive ways:

- Its heroization can produce such figures as Ahab in Melville's *Moby Dick* – an egomaniacal, business tycoon bent on staining the blank canvas of the White Whale's flank by means of his harpoon's barbs.
- Its rage for order may lead to a habitual *lack* of attention to aspects of the environment it is seeking to "grasp."
- Poets may be insufficiently aware of the predispositions that they bring to their imaginative acts. Regarding the quotation from Brooks and Warren (1976), literature may well be "the most complicated language that man has invented for talking" to others and himself, but language of its very essence is subject to discursive construction.
- Thinking of the other-than-human realm as "essentially fixed and dead," (Coleridge) rules out:

    - According this realm and its inhabitants any agency in one's imaginative acts.
    - According the inhabitants of this realm with a self-hood and intelligence, hence undermining the potential for one's poetics to be based in a reciprocal relationship with the more-than-human world.
    - A view of the more-than-human world that would insist that it is entitled to be cared for and respected on its own terms, and not be exploited purely and simply for economic profit-making.

**Towards an ecopoetic poetics**

Let me be clear that what I have been critiquing is a specific strand in romantic poetic discourse. There is a mordant wit operating in Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar" that is apt for that poem, but is atypical of, say, "The Idea of Order at Key West." In one of his Adagia he even writes: "All of our ideas come from the natural world: trees = umbrellas" (1957, p. 163).
There is no question in my mind that Wordsworth remains one of the great "nature poets" in English. There are great passages in his epic poem of the self, *The Prelude*, which represent the natural environment as agentive and as a presence that demands respect (see Locke, 2023).

The same goes for John Clare (1793-1864) – up till recently the forgotten romantic – whom some critics view as an early exponent of eco-poetry. I will return to his work below.

I want to begin this section with Walton's (2018) definition of ecopoetry and then draw attention to a range of discourses that underpin my own understanding of it. Ecopoetry, she writes, is "poetry that addresses, or can be read in ways that address, the current conditions of our environmental crisis" (p. 393). As a form of polemical writing, she goes on, "ecopoetry can be framed as an active and activist form of writing and reading, contributing to the task of repairing divisions between humanity and the ecosystems that constitute and support us" (p. 393). As Walton argues, this polemicism can take two forms:

- An overt attack on the policies, technologies and practices that are currently putting the future of life on earth at risk
- A critique of certain types of poetic discourse itself, which either compromise ways in which nature is constructed (e.g., by being anthropomorphised), or marginalising certain perspectives on the relationship between people and their natural environment). (Locke, 2023, p. 135)

*Contesting anthropocentrism*

In the quoted passage above, Brooks and Warren (1976) write: "Poetry enables us to know what it 'feels like' to be live in the world." In this utterance, what and how humans feel is the central concern. Anthropocentrism constructs humanity as having hegemony over non-human creatures and the right to prioritise human needs and wants in our actions viz-à-viz our natural environment, as if humans alone possess intrinsic value. At its worst, it leads to reckless exploitation of this environment, widespread destruction, species extinction and pollution. The age we live in – the Anthropocene – "encapsulates the unprecedented planetary-scale changes resulting from societal transformations, at least since the European industrial revolution and particularly over the past 65 years of world development" (Brondizio et al. 2016, p. 319). Contesting anthropocentrism means thinking of humanity, not as apart but rather as a part of the totality of our environment.

*Ecocentrism* is one theoretical outlook that adopts this position. Goralnik and Nelson (2012) define ecocentrism as: "The ethical belief that both individuals and whole ecosystems, watersheds, species, the biotic community have inherent value as ends in themselves" (p. 145). Referring to the Anthropocene, Aotearoa anthropologist Anne Salmond (2023) notes that "An ontologic in which all other beings are created for human purposes fosters a sense of exceptionalism that helps to drive climate change, biodiversity losses and related phenomena..." (p. 488). As a broad, philosophical framework, *posthumanism* challenges this ontologic. Rubin (2018), for example, argues that posthumanist education reflects "a foundational shift away from defining elements of the modern Euro-Western human, like the valorization of reason, belief in scientific objectivity, and the ethic that (Euro-Western male) humans should impose order on everything around them (often violently) in order to subdue the world into systematized predictability" (p. 328).

These various contemporary theorisations are old news to Indigenous peoples, for whom anthropocentrism is totally at odds with their ontologies. As Salmond points out, Indigenous thought is not characterised by a division between people and the environment, culture and nature, "mind and matter, theory and practice" (2023, p. 488). In the case of my own country of Aotearoa, te ao Māori (a Māori worldview) is rooted in connection and relationality. The Māori word *whenua* means both placenta and land. The body of the individual self is not viewed as separable from the body of the group and its ancestral land.[2]

In an essay on New Zealand ecopoet, Dinah Hawken (whom I'll be discussing below), Janet Newman offers her own definition of ecopoetry as "poetry of persuasion towards better environmental stewardship" (p. 8). My focus in the next section is on specific language practices that serve the following ends of ecopoetry, as I understand and attempt to compose it. These ends include:

- According agency to objects/beings in the non-human world
- Writing as if our ontological relationship with the non-human world is one of interpenetration – we are embodied *in* the non-human world and cannot be separated from it
- Writing in a way that reflects a sense of reciprocity with the more-than-human world – we are givers as well as receivers, inhabiting a natural environment that is plenitudinous in its giving and is owed in return the gift of our care and nurture
- Writing about the natural world as if it were capable of responding to us in a language of its own, which we might "hear" were we sufficiently attuned and attentive (Native American environmental biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer calls this language "a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world" {2013, p. 55})
- Using metaphor as a way of entering into dialogue with the non-human world and being wary of the risk of anthropocentrism in the use of personification
- Regarding the ecology of the poem's occasion as a determinant of its prosody (e.g. its rhythm, cadences, lineation, at so on).

**Some ecopoetic practices with examples**

In what follows, I identify a specific feature or practice and relate its use to the above ends. I then share a poem or poetic extract, say something about its circumstances, and point out instances of the feature under discussion. (Some poems, of course, will illustrate more than one feature pertaining to the above ends.)

*Focusing on verb transitivity*

The poem below is the first part of a poem entitled "Home Comforts," which I wrote in 2015 after a teaching stint at the University of Halmstad in Sweden (Locke, 2019, pp. 68–9). While in Sweden, I participated in conversations on post-humanism with colleagues, and also developed an appreciation of the verse of Tomas Tranströmer. "Home Comforts" was

[2] For more on this, see Locke, 2023, Chapter 4: "Indigeneity and Sense of Place."

something of an experiment, where I deliberately wrote a poem where no verb had a human being as subject. That was a simple, syntactical way of ensuring that the human beings in the poem were acted *on* rather than *acting* on. In the first two lines, for example, "wool" is the subject of the transitive verbs "warms" and "weaves," which have the direct objects "her" and "a message" respectively.

The wool warms her
        weaves a message
of containment
        her shoes
open themselves up to her
        closing in on her feet
as if keeping secrets.

Later, her legs
        lead her along
pavements that resist
        the gravity of her bearing.

There is a sight
        that thrusts away her gaze:
the cardboard coverall
        sheltering the homeless man
with plastic bags accommodating
        the mereness of his belongings.

The subway grill
        breathes its comforting vapour
in his direction improvising
        an electric blanket.

The bottle glass
        insinuates itself
in the caked grime
        of his sinewed hand.

*Asserting affinities*

One way of collapsing the separation of human and more-than-human realms is to construct a poem around the recognition of profound similarity. In Tomas Tranströmer's poem, "A Few Moments," he begins by evoking a dwarf pine, not so much its trunk and branches, but rather its "widening, secretly groping, deathless or half-deathless root system." In the second stanza, he asserts a deep affinity, i.e., that "I you she he also put roots out." In the third and last stanza, he moves from the assertion of an affinity to an assertion of unity within the overall ecology:

"It is as if my five senses were hooked up to some other [more-than-human] creature" (2001, p. 47).[3]

*Expanding signification*

Suzanne Simard has gained global prominence for discoveries related to the reciprocal support systems at work via fungal systems in the forest underfloor. Her memoir, *Finding the Mother Tree* (2022), is a marvellous example of how a forestry scientist was awakened into a non-anthropocentric view of the natural world. Her later work is marked by the realisation of a profound affinity between forest ecosystems and human societies with respect to the relationality at work. She writes: "We can think of an ecosystem of wolves, caribou, trees, and fungi creating biodiversity just as an orchestra of woodwind, brass, percussion, and string musicians assembled into a symphony. Or our brains, composed of neurons, axons, and neurotransmitters, produce thought and compassion" (p. 189). She draws the conclusion, contested by some, that these ecosystems are "complex," "self-organising," and "have the hallmarks of *intelligence.* Recognising that forest ecosystems...have these elements of intelligence helps us leave behind old notions that they are inert, simple, linear, and predictable" (p. 190). In one sweep, the hierarchy of the great chain of being mentioned earlier is upended by the idea that natural systems are as intelligent, purposeful and agentic as human society (and even somewhat wiser).

In semiotic theory, a word is an example of a signifier which refers to something signified (an object, concept, etc), sometimes called the "referent." The signifier and signified together constitute a "sign." A user's sense of the *meaning* of a specific sign is termed its "signification." Something rather radical, both literally and metaphorically, [4] is happening in Simard's work. Firstly, the signifier "intelligence" is being applied to a non-human referent, i.e., a natural ecosystem. Secondly, the signifier "mother" is being applied to a non-human being, i.e., a tree.

This is not simply the fanciful use of personification, typically defined as the application of human attributes to a non-human object. (Think of the line from *Hamlet,* where Horatio exclaims: "But, look, the morn, in russet mantle clad, / Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill," where the language used to personify the morn is somewhat arbitrary.) Simard is applying the signifier "mother" to a particular tree because it produces offspring, supports its young trees in terms of their physical needs, and even keeps an eye out for their well-being. There is nothing whimsical about the choice of signifier, since the tree is exhibiting maternal traits. It is no mere personification. Rather the signification of the word "mother" as sign is being expanded to include a non-human being.

On a personal note, reading Simard changed my own feelings about the trees on my own property and my relationship to them. It was like joining a fellowship that I did not know existed. The following poem would not have been written without having read Simard's book.

[3] To access a full version of this poem, albeit with a different translator, see https://roundhousepoetrycircle.wordpress.com/2016/09/25/a-few-minutes/

[4] Our word "radical" comes form the Latin word "radix" signifying "root."

The logic of the poem expands the signification of the old tree even further. The rejection of the "linear" in the poem *The Returning*, owes something to the quotation from Simard above, but also to the Indigenous sense of time as being circular:

> I don't want to call it reclaiming.
>
> It is not about territory
> but rather a dreamtime intrusion
> into one's line of sight
> as if the linear has
> had its day.
>
> There is soft moss
> and grey-green lichen
> ornamenting the old gate
> into the once-was
> formal orchard now
> the domain of windfall apples
> crunching at the soles of your shoes
> as you slip toward the old tree.
>
> She remembers you
> of the slightness of childhood
> when you were counted
> though you couldn't have said it
> as one of her brood
> rocking in unison with her
> no less rooted to her
> than her stroppy offspring
> tied to her apron strings
> through a fungal telegraph.
>
> There is no call
> for song and dance –
> the mere press of your hand
> against the surety of her bark
> is enough to seal the covenant.

*Aligning oneself with the natural world and its processes*

The extract below comes from a poem by Aotearoa ecopoet, Dinah Hawken, entitled "Talking to a Tree Fern at Lake Rotoiti." The title itself constructs the tree fern as a partner in a dialogue, even as a kind of confessor. In the first stanza, she is alluding to a poem written fourteen years before, where in her climbing she has compared herself to a "rata [vine] on your trunk."

> Under your dark arms
> that night with no moon
> I decided to let my life climb up

quietly – and I have, I have

but now we're afraid of
quietly, we drive and drive
and do not see
the graceful things
that lift us up, with such definition,
to our own gracefulness.

Heron, tree fern, cello:
all the same thing. (Hawken, 2001, pp. 120-1)

A person familiar with the Northern rata of New Zealand will know that it begins as an epiphyte, will then send its roots to the ground, and eventually grow into a tall, flowering tree that finally encloses its host. In thinking of herself as a rata, Hawken is identifying with the way it becomes inseparable from its host, just as she is inseparable from the tree fern and its ecology. By the middle stanza, the tree fern has become emblematic of this ecology: "Heron, tree fern, cello: / all the same thing."

*Composing by field*

I've taken this sub-heading from a highly influential essay entitled "Projective Verse," written in 1950 by Charles Olson, one-time rector of Black Mountain College (1933-1956). Early in the essay, the ebullient Olson, in turning his back on traditional metrical verse, insisted that "A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it...by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader." A poem's form, then, was not something predetermined, but rather "an extension of content" (1973, p. 148).

I came under the spell of Olson and other Black Mountain poets, such as Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan, in the 1970s. At this time, I would have seen the notion of composing by field as referring to the way one might assemble words and phrases on a blank page. Nowadays, I see it in ecological terms, where the field (and its energy) is the whole ecology of composition embracing poet, place, social situatedness and so on. The poet is at once inseparable from the field and in a certain sense its spokesperson.

The Black Mountain College Museum is located in Asheville, NC, a short drive from Black Mountain itself. The poem below was written in my son and daughter-in-law's house, not far from Asheville, on the densely wooded Mercy Ridge in the Blue Ridge Mountains. It was, as I soon discovered, regularly visited by a mother black bear and her cubs. (You'll see that I'm starting to delineate the field, whence the poem emerged into print.) Tanbark Ridge dominates the vista that opens up from the house's north-facing deck. The Museum and the history it celebrates was an extension of the field. The poem itself is influenced by the poetry of Robert Creeley. What I'm attempting to capture, in the rhythms, phrasing and lineation, is my sense of Tanbark Ridge as a dynamic, ever-changing vista.

**Tanbark Ridge** for Dayna (after Robert Creeley)

Your eye runs
left to right
peak to peak
returning

the misted green
of constant
forest cladding
in the moment

sprawls down
in the light
haze of
morning light

moment by
moment you
know the sight
lines shift

seemingly
jet propelled
the clumps
of cloud

grow and
congeal
loom upward
you might think

from the valley
floor until
become a blank
canvas of white

out wait
take time
breathe and
await the

reenactment

*Talking back to humankind*

In simple terms, when poets adopt a persona (or "mask"), they are taking on a role which in some way is appropriate for the dramatic occasion of the poem. The self-congratulatory speaker

in “Anecdote of the Jar,” as discussed previously, is not to be identified with Wallace Stevens, the poet. I have been a long-time admirer of American poet, William Carlos Williams, for a range of reasons. One of these is his famous slogan about poetry: “No ideas but in things,” which connects with the poetics of Charles Olson's referred to above. In addition, in a range of prose and poetic works, Williams adopted an ecological stance, where he viewed culture as arising in a place. (One might view his epic poem, *Paterson*, as enacting a place-based consciousness.)

His poem, “The Trees,” was first published in 1913 in *Poetry* magazine. In it, he playfully assumes the voice of trees, who are addressing humankind in less than flattering language:

> Christ, the bastards
> haven't even sense enough
> to stay out in the rain –
>
> Wha ha ha ha
> Wheeeeee
> Clacka tacka tacka
> tacka tacka
> wha ha ha ha ha
> ha ha ha (1969, p. 59–60)

I wrote the poem below also during my stay near Asheville (in 2024). It also adopts a persona and addresses the human species. In my persona as the collective voice of the trees surrounding the Mercy Ridge house, I express certain sensitivities. Firstly, I am aware that human beings have played fast and loose in assuming naming rights for my own species. So I have refused to identify myself in terms of this nomenclature; rather I have drawn attention to such features as the specific shapes of my leaves. Secondly, I am making it clear that, as our friend Suzanne Simard has made clear, we have a thing or two to teach the human species about nurture and collaboration.

> **Anthologising Trees**
>
> As if intent on providing a foreword
> emboldened perhaps by Williams' paeon of
> mimicry wha ha ha ha ha
> the trees assemble as foreground
>
> you are surrounded don't try
> to go anywhere forsake the Tanbark
> Ridge yonder in its losing battle
> with impending cloud and implosive
> thunder
>
> we offer you the flowering of
> particularity once you shrug

off the lure of nomenclature
it's the worst form of name-calling
only a human could devise

soak it up, buddy let
the shape find you we wear
our veins for all to see
ribbed to the touch the lobes
ripe for susurrating wind better
than any Aeolian harp

we are the world's upright citizens
vectored into verticality
you won't find us tearing
one another limb from limb
only age upends us bole
towards the merciful sky

without vanity we can proclaim
we are the veritable lords of
the rings our carved portion
of eternity telling it loud
and clear we are proud of
our roots which serve to gather
us

*Bestowing loving attention on the more-then-human world*

I have left this practice until last, as perhaps the most important disposition of an ecopoet. As members of the human species, we know the value of being lovingly attended to. Our failure to bestow loving attention on our planetary homeland might be viewed as the primary cause of its dire state.

My final poetic illustration comes from the poetry of John Clare, the so-called English "peasant" poet, who spent most of his life in poverty-stricken circumstances in the Northamptonshire village of Helpston. Clare was a keen observer and amateur botanist, with an eye for detail that is unsurpassed in English poetry. Two hundred years after his birth, Irish poet Seamus Heaney remarked in a lecture on Clare, that in many of his nature poems "what opens the channels of expression so exhilaratingly is the removal of every screen between the identity of the person and the identity of the place" (1995, p. 75).

His poem, "The Nightingale's Nest" was published in *The Rural Muse* (1935). The extract below is the conclusion of the poem.[5]

[5] For the full text see https://erikleo.wordpress.com/2020/06/13/john-clares-nightingale/

How curious is the nest: no other bird
Uses such loose materials or weaves
Its dwelling in such spots – dead oaken leaves
Are placed without and velvet moss within
And little scraps of grass and, scant and spare,
What scarcely seem materials, down and hair.
For from men's haunts she nothing seems to win,
Yet Nature is the builder and contrives
Homes for her children's comfort even here
Where solitude's disciples spend their lives
Unseen, save when a wanderer passes near
That loves such pleasant places. Deep adown
The nest is made, a hermit's mossy cell.
Snug lie her curious eggs in number five
Of deadened green, or rather olive brown,
And the old prickly thorn-bush guards them well.
So here we'll leave them, still unknown to wrong,
As the old woodland's legacy of song. (2003, pp. 170-171)

Clare's nightingale is the thing itself, unique and distanced from the human realm. It does not bear the sort of symbolic freight as does the bird in Keats' more famous "Ode to a Nightingale," written around ten years earlier and published by the same printing house. There is a compelling irony in our sense of this nightingale's innocence and vulnerability, given our knowledge of the fate that is befalling countless bird species in this present age.

**Conclusion**

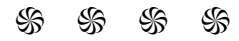
The English romantic poet Shelley's assertion in 1821 that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" was always an absurd claim, regardless of how one interprets it. When I wrote *Sense of Place, Identity, and the Revisioning of Curriculum* (2023), I was writing as a poet, English teacher, educator and grandparent. The book was my attempt to address the climate crisis and was dedicated to my grandchildren. I also saw the book as a form of activism – so is ecopoetry.

As an educator over many years, I have become less and less inclined to believe in top-town systemic change, and more and more committed to bottom-up change – beginning in sites such as schools, moving to regions and then to larger, spatial entities. Chapter 8 of my book offers a way of revisioning a school's educational programme, very much based on the idea of teachers across a range of disciplines working collaboratively, and in a cross-disciplinary way, to *implace* their subjects in the Anthropocene. I take this word from philosopher of place, Edward Casey (1993), who insists that: "To exist at all...is to have a place – to be implaced....To be is to be in place" (pp. 13-4).

What does it mean? In the first instance, it means acknowledging the climate crisis and committing broadly to support efforts to raise awareness of its causes and remedies. It is the

one topic that must be prioritised in our school programme design as much as in our public conversations about what matters to our lives and futures. Secondly, it demands a focus on the concept of sense of place as a means of personalising and localising the necessary collective drive to adequately design and implement measures to restore our planet and reverse current catastrophic levels of climate change.

Ecopoetry, as I have discussed it here, is highly relevant to English Language Arts teachers who are not afraid of poetry and who would like to help their students through reading and writing poetry to engage with the places that matter to them, especially at a local level, and to develop a commitment of care for these places. This is where it must start – for all of us.



*Cover photo:* Provided by the author; Tanbark Ridge

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