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Who's afraid of the lyric mode? Romanticism's long tail and Adamson's ecopoetics.

Abstract

Although ecocriticism has roots in Romanticism, much discourse around ecopoetry has come to hinge on a distancing from a 'Romantic', 'ego-driven' style of poetry, seen to be unethical. Such positions problematize lyric poetry, given its strong association with both Romanticism and the formal centrality of the self. This paper contends that lyric is often conflated with a reductive view of Romanticism and seeks to uncouple the form from such views. Looking to the work of Australian poet Robert Adamson, lyric is framed here as a performative mode rather than a genre, and is presented as an engaged type of ethical discourse which functions via reader answerability. Maintaining a Merleau-Pontean ontology as regards the lyric subject and the dynamic between word and world, and drawing upon Barthes's use of the term 'place', the paper concludes that the lyric can function as a decidedly ethical ecopoetry, in which the place of lyric is also the place of the ecopoetic.

Biographical Note

Willo Drummond is a PhD candidate in creative writing at Macquarie University and a recipient of an Australian Postgraduate Award. In 2014 she completed a Master of Research thesis examining the ethics of the lyric mode in Australian ecopoetics, a project which included a small suite of poetry entitled 'Propagules for Drift and Dispersal', and a critical analysis of the work of Robert Adamson. Her current research considers extended mind perspectives and creative writing, with a focus on the early notebook practices of U.S. poet Denise Levertov. A poetry reader for *Overland Literary Journal*, Willo's writing is published, or forthcoming, in *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Meniscus*, *The Quarry*, *Australian Poetry Anthology 2015*, *Bukker Tillibul* and *Mascara Literary Review*.

Keywords

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Reading much critical discourse around ecopoetry, one can come to perceive a distinctly anti-lyric, anti-Romantic stance, even though ecocriticism, the broader field in which ecopoetry rests, has its very roots in Romanticism (Bate 1991: 9). In order to re-examine the ethics of lyric as ecopoetry, I consider the origins of this anti-lyric stance, and then look to current literary-ethical discourse, which has reframed the ethics of lyric over the last decade and a half by leveraging the concept of reader 'answerability' (Cole 2001: 396). Rather than define a lyric ecopoetics against Romanticism, in this paper I consider lyric as a performative mode rather than a genre, in order to suggest that, far from being selfish or solipsistic, lyric is actually a poetry that is deeply *engaged*: a dialogic, inter-subjective form of expression which presupposes a reader encounter comprised of 'conscienceful listening' (Buell 1999: 12). Referring to the work of contemporary Australian poet Robert Adamson, I aim to demonstrate that lyric can function as a decidedly ethical ecopoetry. Adamson's poetry, often noted for its lyricism, demonstrates a dynamic Merleau-Pontian ontology as regards both the lyric subject, and the relationship between word and world which troubles several received conceptions of lyric. By noting a link between the literary-ethical concept of answerability and Roland Barthes's use of the term 'place' (Barthes 1968: 1325), and developing this concept through my reading of (or 'listening' to) Adamson, I conclude that the 'place' of lyric is also the 'place' of the ecopoetic.¹

Many definitions of ecopoetry, in (rightly) emphasising eco-centrism and humility toward the non-human world (Bryson 2002: 6-7), often hinge upon a distancing from a 'Romantic', 'ego-driven' style of poetry: a poetry seen to be unethical, either for its colonising or imperial implications, or a solipsism which suggests a turning from, or disregard of, ever more pressing social and environmental realities.² J. Scott Bryson, for example, asserts that ecopoets operate from a position of self-consciousness that nevertheless 'deamphasize[s] the individual ego' (Bryson 2005: 22). Implicit in this is a charge against an ego driven, Romantic style of poetry. More explicitly, Ali Alizadeh and Penelope Pitt-Alizadeh position ecopoetry as a distinct subversion of Romantic discourse: '. . . a subversive form of writing, presenting an anti-possessive, anti-oppressive contemporary challenge to the dominant discourses of English literature since Romanticism' (Alizadeh & Pitt-Alizadeh 2009: 55). Timothy Clark, frames ecopoetry as writing that aims to move beyond 'the romantic lyric . . . aggrandizement of the personal ego' (Clark 2011: 139-40), cautioning that many eco-texts — in which he includes both poetry and prose — often perpetuate an 'individualistic romanticism' (30) which 'can tend toward a strident individualism barely distinguishable from a consumerist ethos of regarding all things as a means for self-cultivation' (30). Similarly, Dana Phillips draws on Walter Benjamin's argument for lyric poetry as 'antiquated' (qtd. in Phillips 2003: 194) to examine 'lyric' (198) non-fiction nature writing such as Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and claims that an excessive focus on the self in much nature writing makes it 'too selfish' to be an ethical kind of writing (Phillips 2003: 195).

Is lyric poetry, then, 'too selfish' to be an ethical ecopoetry? Is it, along with all of its Romantic baggage, the textual embodiment of the cult of individualism that such statements would suggest? As a creative writer with a distinctively lyric bent to my own writing practice, this possibility is a source of personal concern, and the motivating drive for this paper.

Critical thickets (of 'selfish Romantic lyrics')

Although ecopoetry is oriented toward its own distinct set of contemporary ethical concerns, I'd like to foreground the argument to follow by suggesting that the field inherits the notion of the selfish Romantic lyric from two key patterns which emerged throughout twentieth century literary criticism. The first is an anti-Romantic stance generated and sustained by the twin theoretical manoeuvres of New Criticism and New Historicism. That is, by New Criticism's

distillation of the 'Romantic lyric' to certain poems from a handful of poets who best represented the New Critical stance on the text as a closed unit — essentially erasing such elements as author and history, and 'vanishing' Romanticism's broader impact and diversity (Roe 2005: 9).³ This was accompanied the New Historical indictment of the resulting 'Romantic myopia': a reaction first voiced in Jerome McGann's 1983 polemic *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Eldridge 2001: 6), and ultimately as a comment on a reductive New Criticism than on Romanticism itself (Johnston 2005: 172).

The second key pattern is a conflation of 'lyric' with 'Romantic lyric' throughout contemporary literary criticism. This tendency is evidenced well by Mark Jeffreys, who argues that even critics such as Marjorie Perloff, whom he credits as 'the acutest critic of the evolution of nineteenth – and twentieth-century – lyric poetry' (Jeffreys 1995: 197), have consistently conflated the two terms in their discussions of lyric texts. The unfortunate result of these two patterns, particularly from the perspective of the present discussion, is that we end up with something of a double conflation — an anti-Romantic-anti-Lyric stance — a persistent thicket of critical elision which finds its way into much thinking about, and discussion of, contemporary lyric and ecological writing. Arguing for an uncoupling of the two terms ('lyric' and 'Romantic lyric'), Jeffreys usefully reminds us that lyric is neither inherently Romantic, nor inherently ideological (Jeffreys 1995: 196, 203).

Creative resistance (three claims along a lyric lane)

That such an anti-Romantic-anti-lyric stance persists in contemporary eco-criticism can be seen by the various statements which opened this paper. This trend in the field has not gone entirely unnoticed. In her editorial to the inaugural edition of the Australian journal of ecopoetry and ecopoetics, *Plumwood Mountain*, Anne Elvey suggests she is 'hesitant to go all the way with Alizadeh in moving on from Romanticism' (Elvey 2014). A similar resistance can be seen in the preface to *The Ecopoetry Anthology*, where poet-editors Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street write: 'to dismiss the complex traditions of. . . romanticism. . . is too easy. The concept of self that romanticism espouses is problematic, but day to day we still have selves. This is not a flaw or a moral failing but something we can observe and ponder' (Fisher-Wirth and Street 2013: xxx). Taking a cue from the comments of Elvey, Fisher-Wirth and Street, this paper will not define a lyric ecopoetics against Romanticism. Instead I present a view of an ethical lyric ecopoetics which rests on three key claims: a) that it is more fruitful (particularly for discussions of creative practice) to view lyric as a mode than a genre; b) that lyric, as a distinctly performative mode, is always concerned with address, and is thus dialogic; and c) that the dialogic nature of lyric mobilizes its ethical function via reader answerability.

a) Lyric as Mode

A recurring theme in the long conversation around the nature of lyric is the difficulty of pinning the concept down in generic terms. Attempts to define 'lyric' within a generic frame invariably prove partial at best, as they tend either to be so restrictive that they fail to include what, on second inspection prove to be many important lyric poems, or they are so broad as to be essentially meaningless (Albright 1985; Brewster 2009; Culler 1985; 2008). Daniel Albright argues instead, that the lyric should be viewed as a mode rather than a genre:

the lyric is not . . . a genre; no one can hope to compile a set of criteria, a questionnaire that, when answered, would confidently tell us whether a poem was or was not lyric; rather one should say that the lyric is a mode, discoverable in odes and dramas and novels and possibly

the telephone directory, through which the reader becomes aware of the illusion of music beyond the sense of the language. (Albright 1985: ix)

Although a discussion of the musicality of lyric is beyond the scope of this paper, Albright's playful framing usefully shifts emphasis from form to function. If, following Genette, 'genre' describes the formal and thematic features of a literary category, and 'mode' a means of enunciation (Genette 1992: 60-72), Albright's claim may provide a tangible way of discussing lyric. In other words, while we may not quite be able to pin down what lyric *is* (and the briefest glance at the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* makes it immediately apparent that this has historically been the case), we may find an attempt to examine what lyric *does* a more fruitful endeavour. Particularly when attempting to understand how lyric might function as an ethical ecopoetry.

b) Lyric as Performance

If lyric is a mode, it is a mode of performance. This is well demonstrated by Scott Brewster's (2009) survey of lyric practice and critique from the classical era to the late twentieth century. Brewster argues that despite shifting understanding of the term from antiquity to the present, lyric persistently 'involves a (rhetorical) performance and some relationship to another, as it is invariably an address to a lover, friend, absent or dead other, to an unspecified but implicit interlocutor – to some form of audience' (Brewster 2009: 12). He points out that this 'implies a very different aesthetic experience from that associated with the isolated individual, who speaks or sings alone' (2). Brewster's emphasis on the performativity of lyric allows for the various manifestations of the 'lyric I', which many generic approaches to lyric struggle to contain. As he explains: regardless of '[w]hether the "I" speaks alone or to others, expresses emotion directly or adopts an elaborate disguise, lyric is fundamentally concerned with the conditions and nature of address' (2). Brewster draws strongly upon Jonathan Culler's frequently made argument for the predominance of 'apostrophe' in lyric (Culler 1981; 1985).⁴ This frequent feature of lyric poetry, which 'directly addresses abstractions, absent or quasi-divine presences in a tone of speech which is often strange or unsettling' (Brewster 2009: 38) problematizes the New Critical theory of lyric as the individualised voice, or as dramatic monologue (Culler 1985: 40). For Brewster, as for others as we shall see in the following section of this paper, lyric occurs in the reader engagement with the poem. Regardless of the degree to which a given poem makes use of the textual 'I', the lyric mode works via its (sensuous, affective) exchange with the reader. Indeed, it must be noted that even Wordsworth, for so many the exemplar of 'lyric solipsism', also had the reader strongly in mind in the 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*. The poems in *Lyrical Ballads* function 'by placing [the] Reader in the way of receiving from ordinary moral sensations another and more salutary impression than we are accustomed to receive from them' (Wordsworth 1800: xvi). The lyric as an address always pre-supposes an exchange, and 'since it is obliged to address itself to someone,' it is 'inter-subjective' and dialogic (Brewster 2009: 12). It is this feature of the mode which has proven foundational to discussions of the ethics of lyric, a point to which I turn presently.

c) The 'Place' of Lyric

The dialogic nature of lyric proved key to discussions of lyric poetry which began to emerge from the field of literary ethical discourse from the 1990's.⁵ In the last decade and a half, there has been a shift in the understanding of lyric in this space, largely due to a focus on reader 'answerability' (Cole 2001: 384, 396). A strong example of this work is William Waters' case for the ethics of lyric address in *Rainer Maria Rilke's* imperatives. For Waters, and contrary to

the views of many Rilke critics, understanding Rilke's lyrics requires taking on a 'responsibility' for 'responsiveness' (Waters 2004: 723): '. . . to understand the poem,' he claims, 'we must experience it. . .' (724). 'Only by doing this, can the reader receive 'the power of the aesthetic to make you change your life' (711):

To read, to be played upon, to give up what we are holding back and to be carried somewhere we did not design to go, is one way we can be transformed in the hands of another. The aesthetic effect of the poem *is* its ethical force, but to know what that means, we must surrender ourselves and become, instead, the poem's reader. (718)

For Waters, the responsibility of the reader is the application of the poem 'to one's own experience of life. . .' (724). To understand, to receive, the ethics of lyric, we must open ourselves, we must take seriously and *personally* the nature of lyric address and the lyric's sensuous performance of language. We must, in short, answer the lyric's call. Then, '[t]o receive a poem is to be changed, to come to the space that the poem wants to occupy and there to become the poem's recipient' (Waters 2004: 728). This of course flies in the face of notions such as the affective fallacy, 'the supposed error of judging a work by its emotional impact on the reader, an argument which' as David Brooks notes, has had 'considerable consequences for the reception and evaluation of the lyric' (Brooks 2013: 49). In an introduction to a special issue of *PMLA* on *Ethics and Literary Study*, Lawrence Buell calls the readerly work involved in answerability 'conscienceful listening' (Buell 1999: 12).⁶ Literary ethical frameworks which hinge on the concept of answerability suggest that far from being a 'solipsistic abandoning', a 'turning away', a 'silence' (or 'silencing'), lyric, as a most intimate of modes is actually intensely *engaged*. It speaks, from space and time, to *you* (dear reader); it asks for you to meet it; it asks for your answer.

Outside of the field of literary ethical discourse, yet closely echoing these arguments, Jonathan Culler has recently gone so far as to suggest that the lyric voice is less a voice itself than an invitation for the reader to become that voice. (Culler 2014: 164). This brings to mind Roland Barthes's well-known claim regarding texts, authors and readers: 'No one, no "person" says it: its source, its voice is not the true place of the writing, which is reading' (Barthes 1968: 1325). We might say then, to extend this Barthesian phrase, that the 'place' of lyric is reader encounter.

Given these three claims for lyric (that lyric is a mode of performance whose ethics requests answerability from the reader), I turn now to the work of contemporary Australian poet Robert Adamson, to consider how lyric might function as an ethical ecopoetry.

Adamson's Lyrical Ethics (a 'listening' in the 'place of lyric')

Robert Adamson's poetry exemplifies the process of answerability, of 'conscienceful listening' (Buell 1999: 12), both from the perspective of composition — his poetry is engaged in dialogue both with other poets and with the more-than-human world — and in what it asks of the reader. His work is also particularly pertinent to the focus of this paper due to his early reputation as 'an explicitly romantic and strongly subjective poet' (Nicholls 1997: 108), noted for his 'lyricism' (Forbes, qtd. in Brooks 1994: 280, and Kinsella 1999: 333), perspectives which continue in the critical response to two most recent publications (Coburn 2014; Fealy 2015; Day 2015). At the same time, Adamson has also historically been noted for his openness to postmodern poetics (Day 2015: 16; Nicholls 1997: 108; Kinsella 1999: 315). In fact, it is true to say that Adamson has remained connected to *both* the traditions and the avant-garde, refusing to jettison either what Kevin Hart calls the 'Orphic conception of art' (Hart 1997: 77) or his fascination with language and its borders (Sharkey 1985: 314). Yet far from this making him any less the lyric poet, his poetry can be said to embody the tension identified by Andy

Brown as central to lyric poetry: the dynamic between 'newness and tradition' (Brown 2006: 7).

Although the Hawkesbury River and its many more-than-human inhabitants has been a persistent theme in Adamson's poetry over some 45 years, only a small sample of his work has received dedicated attention within what may be described as an ecocritical framework.⁷ Most recently, Meera Atkinson considers 'The Goldfinches of Baghdad', published in Adamson's 2006 collection by the same name, to argue for the potential of 'animal poetics' to 'effect change' (Atkinson 2013: 114, 117-120). But what of Adamson's lyricism itself? I will now examine several approaches the poet has taken to the representation of, and engagement with, the other-than-human world in his work, drawing attention to the material and dialectic performativity of his lyric poetry, as well as, briefly, to its particularly Merleau-Pontian ontology (that is, its emphasis on the chiasmic nature of being) and how this performance functions as ethical ecopoetics. To do so I will consider three poems which span Adamson's career to 2009: 'The Ghost Crabs' (1974), 'The Speaking Page' (1989), and 'Walking by The River' (2006/2009). All three poems are reprinted in Adamson's *The Golden Bird, New and Selected Poems* (2008).

If, as suggested by Fisher-Wirth and Street, '[e]copoetry enacts through language the manifold relationship between the human and other than human world' (2013: xxx), then I claim Adamson's lyrics certainly constitute ecopoetry. The poems considered here perform an ecopoetics as conceived by these poet-editors in two distinct ways: first, via an exploration of the subject in the world and, second, via levels of abstraction which disrupt the usual distinctions between word and world, language and nature. Both of these strategies offer the reader, via reader answerability, access to what nature writer and ecocritic Richard Kerridge calls 'ecological perception': the dissolution of 'unifying notions of selfhood and strong dualistic separations between culture and nature, subject and object or human and non-human' (Kerridge 2013: 354). They function, thus, as ethical ecopoetics.

Adamson's work is deeply engaged with the shifting nature of subjectivity. Livio Dobrez has discussed at length what he calls the 'metamorphosing' or 'shifting' subject position in Adamson's work. For Dobrez, Adamson's poems explore various positions on the spectrum of subject-object interrelations. These shifts occur from poem to poem, and often even within the poems themselves (Dobrez 1990: 163). Sometimes, in an Adamson poem, subjectivity is presented as a discrete consciousness, at other times subjectivity shifts, via varying degrees of interrelatedness with the natural world to what Dobrez — borrowing and developing the concept from Charles Olson — calls 'field poetics' (Dobrez 1990: 132-3, 173-4), and which we might frame as subject-as-field. In such moments, 'subjectivity is spread out, allocated borders coterminous with those of the poem itself' (173). Finally, there are occasions where subjectivity becomes so stretched as to become 'obliterated' (175): where the subject of the poem seems to merge with nature completely, 'thus bypassing the complicated subject-object manoeuvres of the epistemological act' (175). We see this motion at play in Adamson's early poem 'The Ghost Crabs' (Adamson 2008: 126; Dobrez 1990: 175), a poem which enacts the dynamic of merging and differentiation. Subjectivity flows back and forth throughout the poem with the motion of the tide, from a reflective 'I', to a perceiving, relational subject, to subject-as-field and subject merged with nature.

From the first line in 'The Ghost Crabs' we become aware of the multidirectional nature of being: 'I flow back into myself with the tide.' Yet to 'flow back' implies a return from elsewhere, and in the very next line, in a moment of what Jonathan Culler would identify as uniquely lyric apostrophe (Culler 1981: 137), the subjectivity of the poem expands to cosmic proportions:

O moon that draws and drives
us and we move through until we are
dancing. . . . (2-4)

The collective pronoun here implies a sense of communion with all beings — human and more-than-human alike — who are susceptible to the pull of the moon. It also implicates the reader. Subjectivity then disperses, to three lines of subject-as-field: ‘. . . Balancing starlight on/ the marshes, shaking the leaves/or calming the water . . .’ (4-6). Just who is ‘balancing’, ‘shaking’ and ‘calming’ here remains tantalisingly ambiguous. However, such dispersed subjectivity does not remain for long and soon contracts to a discrete, perceiving subject over the following seven lines:

Feeling warmth
ghost crabs come out, their claws
snapping held high in the air.

The river pulls at mangrove roots
as the ebb begins: standing to
my waist in water, prawns kick up
from under my toes . . . (6-12)

Ghost crabs are not the only beings so affected by the ebb of the tide here, subject - and reader - are caught in the flow also. The tide turning, subjectivity again disperses, this time to the point of ‘obliteration’ (Dobrez 1990: 175), an imagined merging with the river, following the call of the muse:

--My love
would have me go now – moving off
with the river, skidding along
beneath the silt, head filled with
water. . . . (12-16)

This passage is one of two in ‘The Ghost Crabs’ where the subject moves closest to *being* nature. Dobrez highlights this motion as the dialectic at play at the heart of Adamson’s poetry: ‘[t]o be nature while *knowing* it’ (Dobrez 1990: 174). But no sooner do we have this moment of liquid union than we are returned abruptly to the reflective, contained subject: ‘the shock of feeling comes back/to my nerves: memories play/ their part again. . . .’ (Adamson 2008: 126, lines 17-19). Over the next two stanzas this motion is repeated, traversing the spectrum of Adamson subject-object positions: first, out through perception: ‘. . . a kingfisher ruffles its feathers/against the dew’ (22-23), then relation: ‘She beckons from/ the far shore, a chill runs/along my arms – I wade into shallows calling, and straining my sight’ (23-26), and finally, to a sense of the extended self: ‘. . . My hands/ shoot out over the tide . . . / . . . The senses/strain forward towards claws// turning and growing from the dawn’ (29-33). Ultimately though, the subject ‘. . . cannot reach . . .’ (34), and we are returned to the perceiving, situated subject, and the disappointment of the pentasyllabic ‘dead roots and branches’ (38) as the metamorphosing subject comes full circle.

The dynamic subjectivity in Adamson’s poetry can be seen as a performance of what Merleau-Ponty identifies as the ‘imminen[ce]’ of the ‘reversibility’ of the ‘flesh’ of the world (Merleau-

Ponty 1968: 147, 131), an ontology which functions to overcome the subject-object distinction when describing experience. As Merleau-Ponty argues in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968): 'Flesh' is an "'element" of Being' (139) comprised of the 'reversibility of the seeing and the visible, or the touching and the touched' (147). However, he emphasises, this 'reversibility is always imminent and never realized in fact' (147). Although 'self and world are inextricably entwined' (Diprose 2008: 8), due to their being part of the same flesh, they are also differentiated. For the moment of perception is also a moment of 'dehiscence' (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 153), a bursting open, a dividing of self and world. The union of 'flesh' is always only a potential, merging cannot be, although we are already in a sense one, as two parts constituting the flesh of the world. The chiasmic nature of Merleau-Pontian 'flesh' is captured succinctly by Fred Evans when he states that because of this 'unity composed of difference' (Evans 2008: 191), 'we can *almost* see through each other's eyes. But no sooner do I take up your perspective than it becomes mine and no longer yours. Our unification . . . can therefore only be imminent and never achieved' (192). This dynamic is performed again and again in the Adamson lyric.

An ontology which can accommodate both unity and dehiscence is often suggested as essential to an environmental, or ecocritical, ethics. In his seminal work of ecocriticism *The Song of The Earth*, Jonathan Bate pauses within a predominantly Heideggerian analysis to posit Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as the antidote to an 'egocentric' poetics (Bate 2000: 191). Similarly, social theorist David W. Kidner has argued for the necessity of dynamic subjectivity to environmental ethics:

In the realm of nature as in personal life, a clear sense of one's own, separate identity is a prerequisite for a mature relationship, one that recognizes the difference between oneself and the other while respecting the other. Paradoxically it is also a prerequisite, for letting oneself *temporarily* merge with the other. This paradox, however, is only superficial, since a vital relationship with the other is one which is dynamic, which recognizes the interplay between separation and relation. (Kidner 1998: 66)

In performing the imminence of 'flesh', Adamson's metamorphosing subject thus offers up an ethical way of being in the word.

Shifting subjectivity is actually a recurring theme across the work of several poets of Adamson's milieu. Caitlin Punshon argues that the poetry of the 'generation of '68' presented a new, self-reflexive way of engaging with the Australian landscape that is not fixed, and which therefore 'unsettles our preconceptions and shows us new ways of seeing and seeing how we see' (Punshon 2003: 63). Yet Punshon points out that of all the '68 poets, 'the role of subjectivity in perception' was taken up 'most particularly by Robert Adamson' (61). Moreover, Punshon claims landscape for Adamson is both perceived *and* experienced (62). In other words, Adamson's work performs the chiasmic dynamic of 'flesh'. To read an Adamson poem, Punshon states (referencing Adamson's poem 'Green Prawn Map') '[t]he reader needs to go with the flow, sinking willingly into the poems and drifting "away from map reason"' (62). This evokes Merleau-Ponty's position in *The Visible and The Invisible* (1968), as recently glossed by eco-phenomenologist Louise Westling, on 'the proper exercise of language as an openness to Being rather than an attempt to fix meaning precisely' (Westling 2011: 131).

The suggestion that we, as reader, must let go, and drift 'away from map reason' can also be seen in the second of Adamson's poems I wish to discuss here, 'The Speaking Page' (Adamson 2008: 128-9), first published in *The Clean Dark* (1989), the collection for which Adamson received significant recognition as a lyricist. This poem, written in response to a photograph by Juno Gemes of the Hawkesbury River, highlights and reflects upon the role of the imagination in our connection to the other-than-human world (Kinsella 1999: 337).¹ Like 'The Ghost Crabs', in 'The Speaking Page' we are given a performance of impermanence, of the

imminence of the flesh of the world. There is a movement from perception, to union, to differentiation in the poem. The motion of the tide is key to the work, reflecting the sensuous, corporeal nature of coming to an understanding of the river, and this is concretised in the undulating shape of the poem:

When the tide moves again
comes up over
the point here
and spills
into Parsley Bay,
goes over
the rivers' torn entrails –
your breath becomes
tidal
atmosphere,
it heals deeply
thoroughly
then you
begin to understand
that the river
is like a blank page (1-16)

'The Speaking Page' emphasises that one cannot colonise the river with reason. In order to meet the river, to hear 'its language' (25) you must '. . . enter it/ differently . . .' (17-18). Adamson makes a link between subjectivity, creativity and understanding in this poem. In this way 'The Speaking Page' is a precursor to later work where Adamson blurs the line between poetry (or language) and nature more explicitly. Here the river is only 'like a blank page' (16, emphasis added), nevertheless it is only via a sensitive process akin to writing - or creativity - that one might gain access to it: you must '. . . shape/it as you would/a new thought/first vaguely/with phrases/then sentences/ until finally/its language/starts talking -' (18-26). This run of enjambed, predominantly three syllable lines, carries the reader along as though on a tidal swell until we arrive at a passage of dispersed subjectivity, where '. . . the tide/begins to make music/as it covers oysters/as it climbs/over rocks/its song fills the valley' (32-37). Ultimately, however, union cannot remain. In a moment of self-conscious Merleau-Pontian *dehiscence*, the subject returns to an awareness of the role of the imagination: 'of course/ its imagination/ weaving/the river-song, your mind's/ invention/is playing you' (43-48).

The metamorphosing subjectivity in 'The Speaking Page' enacts what coming to an understanding of the river might *feel* like. It performs the creative process of *answerability* to the river. At the same time, the use of the imperative calls, via that very same process, for the reader to respond to the poem with their own identification in the 'place' of lyric. For, just as Merleau-Ponty states of the experience of the visible world, '.... he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he *is of it*...' (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 134-135), to understand a poem like this, 'we must experience it, which means experiencing ourselves [as the "you"]' (Waters 2004: 724).

In its movement across the page, and in its undulating acceleration and deceleration, 'The Speaking Page' 'performs phenomenologically', in that it grants the reader 'the perception of perception' (Williams 2011: 41). Nerys Williams argues that such 'self-reflexive lyrics' (39) are about the 'experience of experience', the way experience 'filters through' the poet (40). This self-reflexive style of lyric is also relevant to a consideration of 'Walking by The River' (Adamson 2008: 209), the final and most abstract of the three poems I wish to discuss here.

'Walking by The River' can be considered to demonstrate what Dobrez, borrowing again from Olson, identifies as the 'centripetal' kinetics inherent to some of Adamson's work, (Dobrez 1990: 282-286), where abstraction is heightened to the point where word, or poem, *is* world. In this poem, words themselves are materialised to the point that the line between language and world becomes blurred, thus disrupting the distinction between nature and culture:

He walked waist-deep
through his thoughts,
emotions, a tangle of vines
and tree-creepers. (1-4)

In the opening verse paragraph of 'Walking by The River', it is not precisely clear whether the 'vines /and tree-creepers' (3-4) are to be read as mimetic representations of vegetation in the phenomenal world, or as figurative representations of the 'thoughts,/emotions' (1-2) of the subject. It remains ambiguous; neither option is given status over the other, evoking Merleau-Ponty on the fundamental ambiguity of language, or 'the paradox of expression' (Adams 2008: 155). In Adamson's work, such abstraction allows words to be materialised *as* nature. Language becomes what poet, essayist and environmental activist Gary Snyder calls a 'wild system' (Snyder 1995: 174), one which refutes the distinction between culture and nature (178-9).

Simultaneously however, 'Walking by The River' also keeps in focus the *gap* between language and the world. In the second verse paragraph, nature cannot be captured in words for the poet subject, just as words themselves cannot be captured, 'flying before him' (6):

His words were finches,
flying before him
as he swung his arms –
scrambled paragraphs. (5-8)

In the second part of 'Walking by The River', Adamson works the poem toward its climax by highlighting this dialectic for the reader. Words, although sensuous vehicles of the flesh of the world, can never entirely capture the essence of the visible: '[a] waterfall sound[s]/ ahead of his walk,/ chipped words crac[k/] with each step . . .' (9-12). Yet, this marking of the gap between word and world simultaneously allows the integrity of 'waterfall', of crumbled and jagged earth, to ring through. Here, as contemporary US poet Jennifer Moxley claims in relation to the inherent dialectics of the lyric mode, '*what fails to be . . . IS*' (Moxley 2005: 52). In an intensely satisfying poetic manoeuvre, Adamson then utilises this gap, and the pause it generates in the momentum of the poem, to shift the poem toward its dénouement. What was a gap between language and world now becomes a figurative clearing through which subject and poem emerge: '. . . He came to// a calm place . . .' (Adamson 2008: 209, lines 12-13), where the very wild materiality of language – '. . . opulent phrases/ in bloom. . . .' (13-14) - allows for what Tom Bristow calls the 'sensitive naming' central to ecopoetics (Bristow 2010: 83). Now, finally, the sensuous materiality of the vegetation by the river sings forth, in all its plump particularity: '. . . purple-fruited/pigface, the blackthorn's/blue-black sloe' (Adamson

2008: 209, lines 14-16). As readers, to understand, to *experience*, the conclusion of this poem, we must 'fully welcome' language in all 'its sonorous being' (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 155) via the conscienceful listening that entails reader answerability. Once again, in the place of lyric, we are offered a 'perception of perception' (Williams 2011: 41) of the more-than-human world. For, in Adamson's work, the poem is a *way of being*. As David Malouf has stated: when it comes to Adamson, 'poetry is simply the most immediate form of thinking and being' (Malouf 2001: 56). 'Walking by The River' enacts the experience of the poet-in-space via an intensely self-reflexive lyric in which thought and world are experienced as language whilst simultaneously retaining their autonomy and particularity. It performs, in other words, Merleau-Ponty's 'paradox of expression' (Adams 2008: 155).

The three Adamson poems considered here perform for the reader the experience of being in the more-than-human-world, via the lyric dialectics of both subject and word. That is, via the reversibility of 'flesh' and the 'paradox of expression'. Just as 'The Ghost Crabs' and 'The Speaking Page' enact for the reader the experience of the imminence of being in the more-than-human world; by disrupting the divide between word and world, Adamson's more abstract lyrics, such as 'Walking by The River', perform for the reader a way of experiencing the world in which nature/culture dualisms are dissolved. These poems perform in the 'dialogic theatre of the Anthropocene' (Bristow 2015: 8) and as readers we encounter their ethical function in the 'place of lyric'. That is, via the process of lyric answerability: by 'experiencing ourselves [as the "you"]' (Waters 2004: 724), by 'drifting "away from map reason"' (Punshon 2003: 62), and by welcoming into our own 'sonorous [B]eing' their sensuous materiality of language (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 155).

Jonathan Bate argues that ecopoetry, rather than being descriptive or a didactic presentation of 'green' theory, is rather an 'experiencing' (Bate 2000: 42). Similarly, poet Ed Roberson states that ecopoetry: 'occurs when an individual's sense of the larger Earth enters into the world of human knowledge. The main understanding that results from this encounter is *the Ecopoetic*' (qtd. in Fisher-Wirth and Street 2013: xxx). If the place of lyric is reader encounter, then Robert Adamson's poetry demonstrates how the place of lyric can also be the place of the ecopoetic. Each of these poems offer the reader the experience of the ecopoetic via the inter-subjective exchange of reader answerability. In the place of lyric, Adamson's poems mobilize an ethical ecopoetics: they offer up a fleshly engagement with both word *and* world, which may enable the reader to experience the more-than-human-world, as though for the first time.

Endnotes

[1] My use of the term 'place' in this paper thus represents an alternative to a well-known trope in the ecocritical field.

[2] Timothy Clark argues that 'Romantic' refers to 'the historical period ... of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', and 'romantic' with a small 'r' refers to 'continuing and deeply ingrained modes of thought that oppose industrial society with ideas of "nature" and "the natural" as modes of secular redemption' (Clark 2011: 13).

[3] Roe identifies this 'handful' as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats (2003). See also Cole 2011: 383; Culler 1985: 38-41; and Johnston 2005: 172 on New Criticism's framing of lyric.

[4] Culler has more recently developed and refined his claim that apostrophe is central to the lyric tradition in his *Theory of the Lyric* (2015).

[5] This is reflected in the work of Attridge; Buell 1999; Cole 2011; Scanlon 2007; Shapiro & Shapiro; and Waters 2004. While, Cole draws a parallel between the Bakhtinian concept of answerability and a 'Levinasian ethics: 1990 *Art & Answerability* Austin: University of Texas Press.

[6] As Buell notes, however, viewing text as a personal encounter is not without its 'perils' one of which is 'the implication that reader resistance is unethical' (13).

[7] Atkinson 2013; Cassidy 2007; Johnson 2003; McLaren 2009; Punshon 2003.

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