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RESEARCH

## Contemporary Poetic Ecologies and a Return to Form

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Ecology is currently coming under increasing poetic scrutiny in a range of terms (landscape, place, environment). Critical responses to this poetry commonly assume a relationship between form and content, wherein textual ecology – the shape of the poem on the page, the spatial and sonic relationship that its parts bear to one another – mimics or otherwise expresses the ecology that the poem describes. Most often, this has been taken to mean that a freer verse style reflects real-world ecologies better by escaping the artificial, cultural constructs of metered verse, and replacing them with more 'natural' free verse rhythms. The role of the lyric 'I' has also come under examination in much of this poetry and in accompanying criticism: experimental landscape poetry often dispenses with its explicit presence in the poem (even if its implicit influence is much more difficult to eradicate). However, these lines of thinking might not take advantage of the fullest sense of 'ecology'.

This article argues that the continued presence of inherited ('traditional') poetic forms (metres and rhythms) has been overlooked in contemporary poetry addressing this set of concerns. A number of poets are noticing the way in which form can be harnessed – adapted rather than slavishly adhered to – in creating poetic ecologies. In particular, I look at sonnets or sonnet-like forms in recent poems explicitly concerned with nature, place, and environment by Jo Shapcott, Jen Hadfield, and Kathleen Jamie. In light of the environmental concerns that these poets address, the ghost of metre to be found in their work might signal an uneasy relationship between human, 'cultural' and non-human, 'natural' actors in ecology. I aim to notice a trend in contemporary poetic ecologies and offer redress to the ways in which a return to form might have been overlooked in critical discussions of the topic.

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**Keywords:** ecology; lyric; ecocriticism; anthropocentrism; form; Jo Shapcott; Jen Hadfield; Kathleen Jamie

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Ecology is currently coming under increasing poetic scrutiny in a range of terms such as landscape, place, and environment. In this article, I suggest that the continued presence of inherited ('traditional') poetic forms are being overlooked in critical responses to contemporary poetry addressing this set of concerns. I begin by charting and, in some cases, challenging the theoretical premises that underpin prevailing critical positions, and elaborating a different stance: a critically-aware and flexible sense of the lyric and the forms that often accompany it is a necessary part of the critical apparatus for discerning what is happening in ecopoetry today. The later phases of the article switch from abstract to applied discussion. I draw on examples from the work of Jo Shapcott, Jen Hadfield and Kathleen Jamie to indicate that the first-person pronoun sometimes provides a route towards environmental thinking rather than precluding it.

Critical responses to ecologically-oriented poetry commonly assume a relationship between form and content, wherein textual ecology – the shape of the poem on the page and on the tongue, the linguistic, spatial, and sonic relationship that its parts bear to one another – mimics or otherwise expresses the ecology that the poem describes. Often, this has been taken to mean that a freer verse style reflects real-world ecologies better by escaping the artificial, cultural constructs of metered verse, and replacing them with more 'natural' free verse rhythms: open field poems operate as ecosystems (so the metaphor goes). In this vein, much of the energy of Jonathan Skinner's *ecopoetics* journal since its first volume in 2001 has been devoted to fostering neo-modernist ecopoetry, Forrest Gander and John Kinsella's *Redstart: An Ecological Poetics* (2012) has mapped new directions, and *The Ground Aslant: An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry* (2011), edited by Harriet Tarlo, has consolidated this work in the UK. Glossing such developments, Timothy Clark observes that 'a loosely "ecological" poetic emerges in the development and extension of modernist techniques that had been initially pioneered in the first four decades of the twentieth century' (Clark 2011, 139). The role of the lyric narrating persona has come under scrutiny in much of this poetry and in accompanying criticism: Robert Macfarlane has noted of *The Ground Aslant* that 'the lyric "I," the first-person witness and narrator so central to prose writing about nature, barely survives here. [. . .] Rather, the "I"

gets aggressively dismantled' (Macfarlane 2011, 14). Experimental landscape poetry often dispenses with its explicit presence in the poem (even if its implicit influence is much more difficult to eradicate). Where this poetry evokes environment, the supposedly anthropocentric tendencies of first-person lyric expression are exchanged for a purportedly heterogeneous voicing. However, I argue here that these lines of thinking might not take advantage of the fullest sense of 'ecology' in their neglect of the roles humans uncontrovertibly play in the web of relations that the term indicates.

Shapcott, Hadfield, and Jamie, though not forming a cohesive group, are paradigmatic of a number of poets who are noticing the way in which form can be harnessed – adapted rather than slavishly adhered to – in creating poetic ecologies. In particular, I look at their deployment of sonnets or sonnet-like forms – a form with a history intimately associated with very human concerns – repurposed in recent poems explicitly concerned with nature, place, and environment. Indeed, the warping of expectations that are created by the sonnet form allows these poets to dramatise a shift towards ecologically-aware thinking. In light of the environmental concerns that these poets address, the ghost of metre to be found in their work might signal an uneasy relationship between human, 'cultural' and non-human, 'natural' actors in ecology. I aim to notice a trend in contemporary poetic ecologies and offer redress to the ways in which a return to form might have been overlooked in critical discussions of the topic.

The distinction between two modes of environmental poetry maps broadly onto the distinction between 'mainstream' and 'experimental' poetics which has (sometimes unhelpfully) come to characterise much recent discourse. Whilst this article will come to contest this division, it serves here to introduce a key factor in the debate I address. I begin, therefore, with two poets' opposing views on the role of language and, more specifically, poetry in mediating the relationship between people and the world they live in. Harriet Tarlo, a writer and advocate of experimental landscape poetry (or, in her own terms, 'Linguistically Innovative Poetry'), argues that the 'suspicion of the referential element of language' found there 'is deeply desirable for the poet concerned with nature and environment.' It is, she avers, 'that very sense of the gap between our language and our world that preserves respect for

the non-linguistic world' (Tarlo 2007, n.p.). That is, experimental poetry expresses something of the otherness of the world and therefore inculcates valuing it. Kathleen Jamie, whose poetics are distinctive but much more clearly engaged with received metres and forms than Tarlo's are, has spoken about beginning from a similar view of language and poetry but later developing her ideas towards an alternative position: 'I used to think that language was what got in the way, that it was a screen, a dark glass. That you could not get at the world because you were stuck with language, but now I think that's wrong. Now I think language is what connects us with the world' (Scott 2005, n.p.). Though Jamie is often modest in her statements – she describes her writing as directed 'toward the natural world' rather than being 'about' it (Jamie n.d., n.p.) – she is clear about the role of poetry: 'It's poetry's job, isn't it, to keep making sense of the world in language, to keep the negotiation going? We can't relinquish that' (Jamie 2005, 177). It is, for Jamie, in this connection through language that valuing environment might be expressed. The difference between the two positions – one emphasising language's role in separating us from the rest of the world and one focused on language's role in bridging that gap – is, in many ways, the basis of differing takes on poetic ecologies. In what follows, I examine each position in turn.

In order to account firstly for Tarlo's stance, it is necessary to rehearse the ways in which free verse rhythms and/or open field poetics have come to be privileged in some recent critical discourse. This has resulted from the impact of one movement of the early twenty-first century upon another. In *The Song of the Earth* (2000), Jonathan Bate advocates ecopoetics, wherein 'the rhythmic, syntactic and linguistic intensifications' characteristic of poetry 'give peculiar force' to the making of a dwelling place: 'it could be that *poiesis* in the sense of verse-making is language's most direct path of return to the *oikos*, the place of dwelling, because metre itself – a quiet but persistent music, a recurring cycle, a heartbeat – is an answering to nature's own rhythms, an echoing of the song of the earth itself' (Bate 2000, 75/6). Bate finds this action to be taking place in poetry from a broad array of pastoral and romantic traditions, much of it lyric in voice and metrical in form. These *poetic* features thus become associated with a *philosophical or political* attempt to recuperate a harmonious alignment

between human and environment. Bate's ideas, in one form or another, still hold sway across much 'mainstream' poetry. For instance, Fiona Sampson's editorial for a recent issue of *Poetry Review* on 'The Poetry of Place' focuses on the issue of 'belonging,' a cognate term for Bate's 'dwelling' (Sampson 2012, 1).

Such a position comes under pressure from the roughly contemporaneous revival of avant-garde and neo-modernist poetics. Majorie Perloff's call to arms for a new poetics observes that 'the aesthetic of early modernism has provided the seeds of the materialist poetic which is increasingly our own' at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Indeed, 'it is this particular legacy of early modernism,' transmitted through language poetry and open-field poetics of the mid-twentieth century, which 'the new poetics has sought to recover' (Perloff 2002, 3, 6). The most readily apparent manifestation of this return has seen poets recall and expand upon F.S. Flint's famous imagist injunction to 'compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome' (Flint 1972, 129), and Ezra Pound's commitment that 'a new cadence is a new idea' (Pound 1972, 135). The preference for cadence over metre is the basic feature of avant-garde poetry today. Very often, this is accompanied by a non-lyric voice that is also indebted to modernist innovation with the fragment. This rejuvenation of experimental poetry, particularly in the field of environmentally-oriented writing, has placed Bate's ecopoetics under vigorous pressure. My aim here is *not* to reassert Bate's ecopoetics. Indeed, the critique from experimental quarters is necessary and justified. Recent scholarship, then, has suggested two alternatives: namely, attempts at dwelling, and non-human perspectives. My aim is to suggest that there is a third option: some contemporary poets who do engage with lyric and metre are doing much more than simply rearticulating a naïve form of 'dwelling,' without eschewing the presence of the human in ecology as some experimental landscape poetry does. They are adapting tradition to envisage a more complex web of relations and articulate the uneasy relationships between human and non-human participants in ecology.

The results of the impact of neo-modernism on ecopoetics can be seen in Tarlo's assertion that 'Linguistically Innovative Poetry proves to be a particularly fruitful area

of research for someone exploring the connections between place and landscape with ecology and environmental thought' (Tarlo 2007, n.p.). Tarlo argues that 'the subtleties of experimental poetics provide an ideal linguistic arena' for the 'shifting and sifting of assessing and reassessing our relationship with the places and spaces we inhabit.' She dwells on two qualities of experimental poetics in particular. Firstly, 'the avant-garde tradition has eschewed the self-important, traditional lyric "I," and thus enacted a 'poetic displacement of the anthropocentric view [. . .] to make radical landscape poetry one of the most dynamic and innovative places to look for examples of language which dares to imagine the "other than human."' Secondly, and following from this, a 'more dynamic, open form style of writing, which makes use of the whole page-space to create' (i.e. which isn't tied to metrical form) might 'embody the vast, complex, inter-related network of vegetation, insect and animal life that [a landscape] contains.' The ecology of the open-field poem, Tarlo argues, is best suited to mimic real-world ecologies. My misgiving here is that the removal of the lyric voice serves to elide the human from this network. Nonetheless, Tarlo states that experimental poetry thus escapes the 'nostalgia for "pure nature"' and the 'sentimentality so closely associated with "nature" in more traditional poetry of the pastoral tradition' (Tarlo 2007, n.p.).

Discussing climate change and contemporary modernist poetry, Richard Kerridge makes a similar case. Kerridge uses critical theory from Slavoj Žižek to introduce his discussion of our collective imaginative relationship to contemporary ecologies. Deploying Žižek's Lacanian terminology, Kerridge suggests that climate change is 'the real' (ontological but escaping inscription) that we cannot comprehend in our symbolic realm. For Kerridge, we 'cannot respond adequately to the crisis because it is so unprecedented and incommensurate as to be unrepresentable by existing forms of narrative' (Kerridge 2007, 132). This, of course, has implications for the kind of poetry that he considers useful in addressing ecological and environmental concerns: 'contemporary neo-modernist writing has specific equipment for reaching into this subject, as writing that keeps to the personal voice and the conventionally poetic does not. [. . .] Neo-modernism, and the cut-up method in particular, can bring into

poetic space kinds of discourse not normally available to the personal lyric' (Kerridge 2007, 133). In short, useful poetry is poetry that steps outside the lyric mode and the conformity to traditional poetic metre that underwrites it. Jeremy Prynne is the poet on whose example Kerridge's argument is subsequently predicated. 'In refusing to mediate all his material as the narrated experience or dramatic utterance of a persona,' Kerridge argues, 'Prynne gains access to wider sweeps of perspective than such a dramatised experience could contain. He is able to engage with the world as economic system or ecosystem' (Kerridge 2007, 137). Kerridge does not explain how Prynne goes about gaining access to this perspective, which can surely only be a human (and hubristic) projection. The tendency in this thinking is shared by much ecocriticism in which an alternative to anthropocentric perspective is sought. Here, the implication seems to be that in escaping personal (human) lyricism, experimental poetry can give voice to a whole ecology.

Molly Bloomfield concurs when she finds that 'contemporary British poetry in the modernist tradition [. . .] offers rich opportunities for exploring the ethical and political implications of environmental aesthetics' (Bloomfield 2013, 121). Her focus is open-field poetics and she finds that 'this aesthetic strategy constitutes a formally embodied investigation of environmental aesthetics and ethics:'

Open-field poetics claim a relation between the concrete space of the page and particular geographies. But this relation is complex; by drawing attention to their own artifice, these "landscapes" repudiate any easy mimetic relation with a material geography "beyond" the text. In doing so, they question the representational conventions of landscape writing (Bloomfield 2013, 122).

Bloomfield's hopes for the usefulness of experimental poetry are more modest than Kerridge's – it might disrupt our habitual perceptions of ecology though it won't necessarily revolutionise our sense of the 'real' – but the broad preference for escaping the lyric is shared. The pitfall being sidestepped here is 'ecomimesis,' as described by Timothy Morton in *Ecology Without Nature*. This is 'nature writing' that 'attempts



to carve out a strong sense of place, a radical embeddedness in the landscape' (Morton 2007, 132). In short, it is the ecopoetics that Bate maps out. In open-field poetry, Bloomfield argues, the naivety of this kind of immersive experience is foregone because textuality is emphasised, with the effect that 'resulting shifts of attention have an orientational function, enacting an ethical acknowledgement of a parallel complexity of alterities present in material geographies.' In other words, a poetic text that emanates from a range of voices that interact in complex ways on the page is an analogy for the complex interaction of actors in a real-world ecology. Modernist-indebted, open-field poetry, the argument goes, is the medium in which this can take place. My dispute is particularly with this last stage of the argument. It is inaccurate to say that poetry engaged with traditional metre consistently falls into the trap of naïve ecomimesis, or that experimental poetry is always devoid of it. Whilst Bloomfield guards against it, the same cannot consistently be said of Tarlo (indeed, some of her statements, see above, seem to buy into it wholesale).

Those who endorse open field poetics have in common a desire to step outside of the cultural formations of poetic tradition and the smothering of organic form that they find it to enact. It is not my intention to downplay the importance of this radical and sometimes utopian endeavour, but to draw attention to the short-sightedness of casting it as a superior alternative to mainstream poetry that deals in (and, crucially, plays off) traditional or familiar metrical form. A radical step outside of 'anthropocentric' perspective is not the only worthwhile role for environmental poetry today. Rather, in the anthropocene age when man is the biggest (and most damaging) player in almost any ecology (and indeed in the global ecology) then to look to escape human cultural forms is perhaps not even the most urgent task. There are other ways for powerful interventions to be made. For those who work within (and on the bounds of) form, inhabiting metre and showing where it breaks down might better demonstrate the disharmonies of contemporary ecology. Indeed, this kind of approach is predicated on a fuller sense of the term 'ecology' itself: one that includes humans and human culture in its midst.

The two principle definitions of 'ecology' offered by the *OED* both include human activity. It is, firstly, 'the branch of biology that deals with the relationships between living organisms and their environment' and 'the relationships themselves;' and secondly, 'the study of or concern for the effect of human activity on the environment.' In both senses, human cultures are encompassed by the term. Raymond Williams' historical semantics for 'ecology' indicate its roots in the Greek *oikos* – household. On this basis it is fair to assume that humans have been considered one of the inhabitants of this household for as long as the term has been used. (Furthermore, Williams also reveals that 'nature' is a term which only excludes the man-made from the late-eighteenth century onwards, whilst earlier usage was inclusive in this regard) (Raymond Williams 1983, 110, 223). There is a disjuncture between this inclusivity and the well policed border that informs much recent critical work. Problems in ecocritical reading occur when the zeal of challenges to anthropocentrism shade over into critiques of anthropo-presencing in literature. Much of the original purview of this critical mode (as Greg Garrard describes it, 'the relationship of the human and the non-human') is cut off in this narrowing of focus (Garrard 2004, 5). A restoration of emphasis on relationships is required. This need not, as I have stated, signify a return to romantic dwelling, but in fact opens up new perspectives. Sarah Whatmore, for example, has investigated other avenues by envisioning 'an upheaval in the binary terms in which the question of nature has been posed and a re-cognition of the intimate, sensible and hectic bonds through which people and plants; devices and creatures; documents and elements take hold their shape in relation to each other in the fabric-ations of everyday life' (Whatmore 2002, 3). From this perspective, human cultural forms (including poetic forms) need not be separated off from the natural processes and networks of ecology. Conceived in this relational way, the idea of ecology provides powerful purchase for the recognition of humans' entanglement *in* environment rather than for asserting mastery *over* it. 'Ecological discourses,' Louisa Gairn notes, 'allow for the growth of a new sense of self, and of the relationship between self and other, which radically differs from what has gone before. One might begin to think of this newly configured relationship

between humans and the environment as one of osmosis rather than consumption.' In turn, 'the attentive semi-permeable "natural" self might find it difficult to think of its environment as a functional resource, ready to be exploited' (Gairn 2008, 6). A poetics that registers this semi-permeable self and attempts to navigate rather than simply to jettison its inevitably cultural forms is surely one that has an important contribution to make in this arena.

The central claim of this article, then, is that the modern lyric is perhaps uniquely suited to represent this reconfigured sense of self in environment. Indeed, the contemporary lyric voice is not one that straightforwardly asserts a unified self uncritically: despite its long afterlife, Aristotle's division of poetry into lyric, dramatic, and epic has had to be modified in light of recent innovations in lyric poetry where slippage in voice is a defining feature (Aristotle 2013). Departing from a Romantic legacy, the modern lyric, Scott Brewster observes, is 'inter-subjective, since it is obliged to address itself to someone, and its represented or dramatized speaker/voice invariably is involved in a dialogue with another' (Brewster 2009, 12). Awareness of these circumstances manifests in a performative, self-reflexive poetry. Indeed, the lyric today is not incompatible with the Bakhtinian dialogic in which the monological authority of the speaker is destabilised (Bakhtin 1989). Rather, Brewster continues, 'lyric, far from presenting the unmediated thoughts and feelings of an isolated individual, centres on the relationship between the self and others, the self and history, and the self and language' (Brewster 2009, 14). The self and environment, I argue here, might easily be added to this list. Materialist approaches to this literary form develop relational ways of thinking. For Theodor Adorno, lyric poetry's universality derives not from its simply expressing individually what everyone feels. 'Rather, immersion in what has taken individual form elevates the lyric poem to the status of something universal by making manifest something not distorted, not grasped, not yet subsumed' (Adorno 1991, 38). As Brewster glosses these findings, the lyric might be 'untimely, in the sense of imagining different historical and conceptual possibilities, and its reading against the historical grain' (Brewster 2009, 33). Poetic ecologies that take lyric form possess the potential to play exactly this role. They

might give expression, thematically and formally, to a semi-permeable self which is contingent upon the ecology that it inhabits. At the same time, the breakdown of the unitary self and voice that they envision ask questions that push the debate beyond the idea of harmonic dwelling that they have sometimes been accused of perpetuating. The examples to follow demonstrate this shift in action, and demonstrate that it is *dependent on* rather than *inhibited by* lyric voice, at least as a point of departure. Lastly, before moving forward, it is worth noting here that Jane Dowson and Alice Entwhistle have found women's poetry to be at the heart of the process of revising the lyric. (The poets I dwell on in this article are female.) In appropriating the formal characteristics of a male-dominated canon, Dowson and Entwhistle observe, female poets transform 'the confidently unitary lyric voice, the cohering "I" of "the intimate self" into the looser, non-unitary compass of the third person' (Dowson and Entwhistle 2005, 240). I do not wish to project an agenda shared by these female poets, but to note simply that they are well positioned to track the same loosening in relation to environment.

In what remains, then, I will look at the uses that three contemporary poets make of the sonnet form in their work concerned with ideas of ecology. The almost universal familiarity with the sonnet and the significant cultural freight that it carries suggests that where it is deployed in an ecological context, the intention is at least in part to draw attention to the conscious shaping of material into a very human form and to comment on the way that process has happened historically. These poets have noticed that beyond the compass of human relationships, the ready identification of the parts of a sonnet and the relation that they bear to one another also lends the form to expressing ecology. All of the examples that I cite, to varying degrees, transgress some of the sonnet's conventions, sometimes to the extent that only its ghostly (but still discernible) imprint remains upon a looser poem. My position is at odds with that of Ian Davidson, and other advocates of free verse poetics like him, who find experimental poetry to be 'more concerned' with 'the way in which the material of the poem is distributed within its chosen medium.' For Davidson, in free verse 'the shape on the page is produced by the poem, in comparison to the more regular

poetry that fills up pre-existing space.' It is surely more accurate to say that whilst experimental poetry might be *more explicit* in this concern, poets who elect to maintain a relationship (however divergent) with traditional metrical forms are equally aware of the space on the page. T.S. Eliot's affirmation that 'the ghost of some simple metre should lurk behind the arras in even the "freest" verse; to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse' surely cuts both ways in this context. Just as experimental poetry signifies true freedom 'when it appears against the background of an artificial limitation,' so verse bearing a closer relationship to metre is equally marked by its divergence from tradition (Eliot 1953, 90). In the context of the sonnet, the deformations and departures enacted in the following poems can be read to make analogical comment on the ecological relationships that the poem describes: simply put, formal tensions often signal discordant ecologies, particularly in an era of human-induced climate change. This comment can be made equally well (or better) by performing the frictions of metrical form as by jettisoning it altogether.

Jo Shapcott is a poet who employs metrical form but she is not one who celebrates dwelling in place or environment in any straightforward way. She does not, in this sense, conform to Bate's model for ecopoetry. Shapcott has written about early encounters with Seamus Heaney and other poets like him whose writing expresses a sense of being embedded in place, and, not sharing that experience, making it her business to 'be a different kind of writer, for whom place and language are less certain, for whom shifting territories are the norm.' An ambivalent relationship to one's homeland such as that expressed by Elizabeth Bishop, Shapcott writes, 'felt more familiar to me and, as I came to understand, more typical of western contemporary experience than rootedness' (Shapcott 2000, 42–43). Alongside these geographical questions, Shapcott is also regarded as a poet engaged in questioning ideas of the self as the genesis of poetic voice and employing dramatic monologue to explore this issue. As Jane Satterfield observes, 'Shapcott employs a variety of masks, but the voice each embodies is always her own, more deliberative than lyrical, subject to the divisions of consciousness that characterise contemporary experience' (Satterfield 1997, 214). Unsettled environments and an unsettled self are often explored together in her poems. For David G. Williams, Shapcott's work is

characterised by 'the dissolution of the sense of self and its absorption and dispersion into the adjacent world' (David G. Williams 1995, 240–241). Williams, focusing on Shapcott's *Phrase Book* (1992), goes on to suggest she opens out a sense of self by placing it in dialogue with the public events that are coterminous with the writing of the poems (for this collection, the First Gulf War). This reading practice chimes with Adorno's materialist sense of the lyric discussed above. Here, to adopt the same critical approach for the more recent collection *Of Mutability* (2010) is to recognise the burgeoning awareness of climate change as a defining public context for these poems. In this context, Shapcott's poetic investigations into the self and into rootedness and dwelling play out as observations on environment and ecology.

*Of Mutability* makes clear in its title that it is engaged with a long poetic tradition of reflection on mortality and change (recalling Spenser, Wordsworth, and Shelley). Many of the poems are prompted by an illness and refer to the mutability of the human body, but they are also simultaneously attendant to the mutability of the environment, with climate change registering repeatedly and responded to in subtle ways. As such, these poems draw on the older sense of lyric, reflecting on events from the poet's own life (the illness described is the cancer Shapcott experienced at this time) but they also play off this lineage and inflect the mode differently. In particular, the collection's several sonnets on this theme might even be considered, in Harold Bloom's terminology, a corrective swerve away from the influence Wordsworth's reflections on the topic in the same form (Bloom 1997). In Wordsworth's 'Mutability' sonnet, the external world features as grounding simile for otherwise abstract reflections on dissolution: truth's forms 'melt like frosty rime, / That in the morning whitened hill and plain / And is no more' (Wordsworth 2000, 353). For Shapcott environment is as much subject matter as metaphorical descriptor. As Deryn Rees-Jones observes, her poems play out 'a relationship between self and world so that the fixed matter of the body also becomes unfixed in a merger with the landscape around it' (Rees-Jones 2013, 164). Mutability is marked in this collection's sequence with runs of poems gravitating towards a common topic, device or formal similarity which gathers together and then dissipates. The mutations within the collection

place it somewhere between organic form and the artifice of structural pattern. Here, I select one paradigmatic poem to dwell on.

'Era,' the collection's second poem, is typical of many in establishing links between human and ecological mutability. Its title and the explicit dating that forms its opening line signal historicity and pre-empt the gradual convergence of focus on the environmental concerns of our time, but also simultaneously point to the significant moment of uncertainty in the narrator's life that acts as the prompt for this subject matter. The octet runs thus:

The twenty-second day of March two thousand and three  
 I left home shortly after eight thirty  
 on foot towards the City. I said goodbye  
 to the outside of my body: I was going in.  
 The magpies were squabbling in the park.  
 The little fountain splashed chemical bubbles  
 over its lip. Traffic swarmed and swam  
 round Vauxhall Cross, like crazy fish, with teeth.

(Shapcott 2010, 4)

'Going in' for an operation does not, in this poem, prompt an inward turn in reflection. Rather the unconscious state that the anaesthetic will produce and, it is implied, that the illness might make permanent, prompts an attentiveness to surroundings perceived 'on foot' (that is, experienced directly). Saying 'goodbye / to the outside of my body' begins to turn the poem's focus towards that outside – towards environment and ecological concerns. The permeable boundary between self and world, inside and outside, is one that recurs repeatedly elsewhere in the collection. Here, the natural and the man-made are both present (the squabbling magpies and the fountain's chemical bubbles), and their uneasy relationship is signified in the simile comparing the traffic of Vauxhall Cross to a swarm of piranha. Furthermore, the octet's fragmented and unstable but nonetheless faintly discernible rhyme ('and three'/'thirty'/'city,' for example), along with the interplay of enjambment and cae-

sura, create a poetic shape and pattern that is other than what might be expected from the sonnet, perhaps mimicking an ecology out of kilter.

If the personal and the environmental combine here, the lyric reflection of the octet gives way to a widening of perspective in the sestet:

And anything could be real in a country  
 where Red Kites were spreading east and now  
 we had February swallows. Planes from Heathrow  
 roared not far enough overhead, shedding  
 jet trails which pointed over there: those other  
 places where all the frontiers end with a question.

Petrarchan structure, with the octet posing a question and the sestet shifting towards its solution, is harnessed in 'Era' to present the overcoming of ego and human primacy. Regard for self and its attendant concern for health (and worry at its loss) are steadily subsumed in the switch in orientation towards a kind of environmental consciousness. The former is not abandoned altogether, but it is placed *within* a broader perspective. The volta – emphasised with an additional line break – facilitates this modulation away from the lyric 'I' which appears thrice before and not at all thereafter, where the collective 'we' is the only pronoun to appear. The poem shifts orientation from personal to environmental mutability (the concern of that collective), registering, as it does, by looking up to see first the changed habits of birds in the changing climate, and second the aeroplanes that symbolise the human activities causing that change. If there is a pastoral motif in noticing animals, it is one that fits the pattern Satterfield observes in Shapcott's writing, being ironic rather than nostalgic (Satterfield 1997, 214).

Environmental concern is not offered as a cipher for personal mutability here but genuinely comes to displace it across the poem's progression. The same thing happens across the collection's span: broader ecological concerns repeatedly intervene to measure and set limits on lyric, personal reflection. Rather than eliding the lyric 'I' completely, its initial retention allows the poem to dramatise its decentring.



The unstated question with which this sonnet reflexively concludes surely bears, at least in part, upon the relationships between human and non-human voices in this ecological network. Shapcott has spoken about envying novelists' freedom 'to explore the lives of others,' whilst poets are expected 'to write about themselves and their histories:' 'In my writing there's a lot about boundaries and different skins and different worlds. It may be that I feel the self is enclosing, and I like the idea that you can pass out of it, and get into other places, other imaginations, other skins' (Phillips 2001, 21). The crucial point here is that despite finding the self enclosing, Shapcott does not simply avoid using the poetic forms and voices most closely associated with it. Rather, she adopts those perspectives initially to more forcefully dramatise the 'passing out' of them that she describes. In the poems of *Of Mutability*, passing *in* to an environmentally-aware perspective is taking place as a corollary.

Jen Hadfield has also employed the sonnet form in poems concerned with place and environment to enact the same kind of decentring of human voice. *Nigh No Place* (2008), her T.S. Eliot Prize-winning second collection, bears comparison to Shapcott's work in a number of respects, geographical chief amongst them. It too complicates ideas of dwelling and rootedness. Though Hadfield is English, the collection charts a journey across Canada in its first section, living in her adopted Shetland in the second, and narrowing the focus further to consider the landscapes of Burra – a constituent island thereof – in the third and final section. Though invested in recording the day-to-day details of her residence there, these poems nonetheless display an awareness of Hadfield's being a visitor in Canada and an incomer in Shetland. They invoke the music of local voices (particularly in Shetland) but do so aware of the complications involved. Again, I select a single paradigmatic poem for emphasis. 'Burra Grace,' the first of 'Seven Burra Poems' that focus on this Shetland isle at the close of the collection, performs a more explicit displacement of lyric voice than Shapcott's 'Era' in a much more radical deformation of sonnet form. As the poem appears in the collection, the following fourteen lines are printed on a verso page:

I bide on this bit  
of broken biscuit –

sodden junket  
of peathag, daffodil;

a cramp of basalt  
and rosy granite.

I bide on this bit  
Of broken biscuit

And all its frumpy gods  
be thankit:

sobbing wimbrel,  
shalder, rabbit,

peew-t,  
peew-t

On the corresponding recto page, this final call is repeated on the otherwise silent, white page:

peew-t,  
peew-t

(Hadfield 2008, 52–53)

The lyric ‘I,’ with which the poem opens and returns to in the repeated phrase at line seven, affirms only presence – ‘biding’ is the verb, rather than anything like ‘belonging’ – and acts only to bear witness to the place that is the real focus of the poem. (There is, in fact, no guarantee that the narrator is human rather than animal here.) That said, narratorial presence carries through the poem in the dialect lexicon that it employs (like so many others in this collection, which contains its own glossary). However, the short, clipped lines, restrained for the most part to description, play down narratorial orchestration of the poem. Rather, a set of ecological relation-

ships is depicted in the initial detailing of soil (peathag), plant life (daffodil), geology (basalt, granite), and evocation of Burra's weather and the resultant conditions underfoot ('sodden junket'); followed by animals found (and seen) there. The whole is stitched together with a pattern of half- and assonantal-rhymes. The whimbrel (curlew), shalder (oystercatcher) and rabbit listed in lines 11 and 12 prepare a transition in which the distinctive call of the peewit (northern lapwing) comes to take the place of the lyric voice. This final 'couplet' of the 'sonnet' – in its Shakespearean form the place for summation – breaks from left-margin orientation, emphasising the new departure. Its repetition on the facing page, without clear indication if it is to be taken as a continuation of this poem or a new one, only affirms the point (as does the fact that the collection's next poem is titled 'Nearly a Sonnet'). The printed poem enacts a radical departure from both metre and lyric voice that performs the movement towards environmental orientation. It is only able to do so by initially inhabiting both.

The third of three examples given in this article is a poem by Kathleen Jamie, with whose views on this issue I opened. Whilst Jamie's poetry reflects a more settled relationship with place (especially Fife, where she lives) than either Shapcott or Hadfield, her work veers strongly away from any received Romantic pastoral. Her poems, like Hadfield's, are often written in short lines and are careful not to stray too far from description. Indeed, her sparse poetics is one that treats observation – of human and of environmental themes – as its primary task. Jamie's *The Overhaul* (2012) adopts the sonnet and adapts its traditions subtly in the ecological focus of a number of poems. A sequence of 'Five Tay Sonnets' observe that river and its surrounds, noting continuities and changes over a duration of years. 'Ospreys,' the first of these, addresses a pair of these birds in the second person, playing off the tradition of writing sonnets to a beloved. Indeed, here one of the poem's themes (perhaps, as that with which it concludes, its most important theme) is the attachment to the ospreys by those who recognise them. Like all of Jamie's bird poems, it refers to particular known and recognised creatures rather than the species as a whole:

You'll be wondering why you bothered: beating  
 up from Senegal, just to hit a teuchit storm –  
 late March blizzards and raw winds – before the tilt

across the A9, to arrive, mere  
 hours apart, at the self-same riverside

Scots pine, and possess again the stick and fishbones  
 of last year's nest: still here, pretty much  
 like the rest of us – gale-battered, winter-worn, half toppled away . . .

(Jamie 2012, 5)

Though the lyric 'I' is not used explicitly (replaced, perhaps, with the collective 'us' in line eight), the marked dialect approximates its presence in this poem (a tactic shared with Hadfield). Even so, humans and the man-made are very much a presence in the ecology described here: the ospreys must cross the A9 road, and they catch fish in the loch 'trout-stocked' for angling. Indeed, humans themselves are subject to the same seasonal experiences as plants and other animals in the environment: they too are 'gale-battered' and 'winter-worn'. As the two poems that precede this one in the collection ('The Beach,' 'The Dash') make clear, they too experience storms and the coming of spring. In 'Ospreys,' the mid-poem likeness does not inaugurate a shift towards human concerns though – focus returns to the birds quickly. The point made is more that human and non-human species have inhabitation of this place in common. There is certainly human presence in this ecology, but the perspective is not one that enacts human dominance. The poem dramatises the imaginative leap necessary in this turnaround:

So redd up your cradle, on the tree-top,  
 claim your teind from the shining  
 estates of the firth, or the trout-stocked loch.  
 What do you care? Either way,  
 there'll be a few glad whispers round town today:  
*that them, baith o' them, they're in.*

'Ospreys' concludes with noticing this involvement in ecology, with the kind of attentiveness that it has embodied, and it does this on behalf of a collective – the townsfolk – rather than the individual voice with which the sonnet is usually associated. The poem has, following the quote from Jamie with which I began, employed language, including the poetic 'language' of form, to 'keep the negotiation going,' to connect to and value the natural world (Jamie 2005, 177). Lucy Collins observes that 'the most subtle and attentive poets will manipulate the possibilities of form to yield new approaches to topics of urgency. Jamie uses the lyric to combine individual perspectives with material of deceptive cultural weight' (Collins 2011, 155). I hope to have shown that Shapcott, Hadfield, Jamie, and others who there is not space to discuss, use lyric form to demonstrate the implication of human narratives in environmental narratives, and vice versa.

The problem that this article has addressed is articulated by Collins thus: 'To free the non-human to realize its own essence means resisting the imposition of human will – and the primacy of individual human identity – in the world. Yet human selfhood cannot be denied without falsifying the unique perspective that makes writing possible in the first place' (Collins 2011, 156). Experimental poets' responses to the dilemma have largely foregone lyric voice in order to sidestep the anthropocentrism which can be associated with it. Others, who are often called mainstream by comparison, have felt the pressure expressed in the second part of Collins' statement: that human perspective is what we have to work from, and, perhaps, that to imagine another, broader purview is to abandon the grounds for observation that we possess. These writers have, my analyses demonstrate, taken as their task the dramatization of ecological networks of connection and influence between human, non-human, and shared environment. They do so *through* voice and form (in these specific examples, lyric voice and sonnet form), often by playing with and departing from the expectations that these poetic conventions inevitably set up. Their engagement with tradition manifests as a warping of its routines.

Gairn suggests that Jamie is one of a number of contemporary writers who 'are not only reviewing human relationships with nature, but also the role writing has

to play in exploring and strengthening that relationship – helping to determine the ecological “value” of poetry and fiction’ (Gairn 2008, 156). The same might also be said of the other poets I have considered here. A catholic approach to the whole issue – the relationship of ecology and form in contemporary poetry – reveals that the distinction between free verse and metered forms is only a subdivision in the wider cultural process of poetic ‘making’ (the charging of language with utmost meaning, to adopt Pound’s description). In this vein, Neal Alexander and David Cooper find that place and geography provide ‘a kind of common ground’ between different poetic camps: ‘Although their methods may appear to be very different, post-Romantics and neo-Modernists often turn out to have shared preoccupations with the relations between place and identity, humans and non-humans, nature and culture, art and the world’ (Alexander and Cooper 2013, 2). Within this broad endeavour, I have argued that there is an important place for poets working in dialogue with and on the borders of traditional metre, and who would therefore not be called neo-modernist, but whose outlook is far from post-Romantic. They are cognisant of the implications of poetic making and try to consider it in their reckonings. They do so by harnessing widely-recognised forms – the example here has been the sonnet but there are many more – and modifying them to express analogically the network of relationships (especially including discordant ones in an era of climate change) that make up ecologies.

### **Competing Interests**

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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