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# Poetic Co-operation in the Works of “Nature Writers of Our Own Time”

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# Poetic Co-operation in the Works of “Nature Writers of Our Own Time”

Yves-Charles Grandjeat

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## Nature writers of our own time

- 1 More than forty years ago, in his essay “A secular pilgrimage,” published in the collection *A Continuous Harmony* (1970), Wendell Berry wrote:

The nature poets of our own time characteristically approach their subject with an openness of spirit and imagination, allowing the meaning and the movement of the poem to suggest themselves out of the facts. Their art has an implicit and essential humility, a reluctance to impose on things as they are, a willingness to relate to the world as student and servant, a wish to be included in the natural order rather than to “conquer nature,” a wish to discover the natural form rather than to create new forms that would be exclusively human (2).

- 2 “Allowing the meaning and the movement of the poem to suggest themselves out of the facts” rather than “impos[ing]” meaning and movement on facts, Berry’s “Nature writers of our time” seem, in the author’s perspective, to have found ways to let the environment lift itself to expression, rather than forcefully lifting it into their idea of how it should express itself. At stake here, is the tricky question of assessing whether, if at all, and if so, how, a nature writer can let nature speak for itself in her or his writings, rather than bending nature to his or her agenda.
- 3 Berry’s “our own time,” clearly, as his writings bear out, is the time when principles of ecology have started filtering into nature writing, particularly the fundamental principles of Aldo Leopold’s famous “land ethic”—viewing land as “a community to which we belong,” rather than a “commodity belonging to us” (Leopold xviii). For Leopold, this meant “respect” for the community as a whole and for each member individually, which involved allowing non-human members of the community a space of their own, one in which their “right to continued existence,” including “their continued existence in a natural state” (*ibid.*), free from human intrusion, was affirmed. Human interaction with other members of the community, in this context, was to take

the form not of competition, but *co-operation*: "his ethics prompt him to *co-operate*" (emphasis mine) (239).<sup>1</sup> Berry similarly advocates an ethics of "humility" geared towards a relation of "inclusion," rather than "imposition". How nature writers may let this ethical stance inform their writing is easy enough to imagine in terms of the explicit message conveyed by literary texts; what is perhaps less obvious yet more interesting to explore is how such ethics of cooperation on the basis of equal rights to poetic and, more broadly speaking, literary agency, may translate into the nature writer's imagination and, further, into the very inscription of a text on the page. The question I mean to explore then, is how a "land ethic" of the type advocated by Leopold can translate into a *poetics* of the land of the type evoked by Berry. Can the poet relinquish authority and let other members of the land community become co-operators of the creation process? While claiming to give up authorial control, can the poet avoid turning this claim to *surrender* into another strategy for conquest, a ploy to reaffirm, ironically, his will to mastery? In other words, how does one shift from the vertical "lifting an environment to expression" to a more communal act of *sharing expression* with the environment? I shall here call upon over a motley group of nature writers, Rick Bass, Terry Tempest Williams, Annie Dillard, Mary Oliver, Peter Matthiessen and Gary Snyder to outline some ethical and scriptural strategies put to use in seeking out paths for such collaboration.<sup>2</sup>

## Textual regrounding through ritual

- 4 Moving from Berry's "own time" closer to *our* own time, we find that the development of a thriving field of ecocritical theory has indeed refined approaches to such cooperative ecotexts, notably, lately, through a critical reassessment of the "reality" of the text, balancing the former poststructuralist emphasis on the textuality of the real. In *The Land's Wild Music*, Mark Tredinnick precisely seeks ways of engaging in such a communal relation of poetic co-operation of the nature writer with his natural environment. Paul Carter's *The Lie of the Land* offers him the notion of the "middle voice," a voice which, Carter writes, "dissolves the subject-object relation," so that the two are seen "grounding each in the other, continuously redefining both in terms of each other" (36). Then, Tredinnick writes, "the voice we hear belongs to them both; [...]. The middle voice is the voice of reciprocity, of intersubjectivity" (36). It is, clearly, the voice of shared expression. This middle voice arises from a shared reality, a "transcorporeality" which, Stacy Alaimo reminds us, stems from "a new materialistic and posthumanist sense of the human as substantially and perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies of environment" (Alaimo 476). Such interconnectedness then involves regrounding the human text, "rematerializing it," as Scott Knickerbocker would put it in his "sensuous *poesis*," in a materiality which is not seen as inert, fixed, or passive but as a network of active relations. This is the idea found at the heart of material ecocriticism, or the "new materialism," seeking to "rework the human-non-human mutual 'infiltrations' in ways that take into account matter's 'inherent creativity'" (De Landa 16, quoted in Iovino & Oppermann 453).
- 5 New materialism extends the assertion that "matter is filled with agency" (*ibid*) to the sense that matter produces meaning, while meaning is grounded in matter: "discursive practices intra-act and are co-extensive with material processes in the many ways the world articulates itself" (Iovino & Opperman 454). Meaning is brought back to ground,

words and the world are no longer dissociated and it is possible to listen to "the voice of the land" (Theodore Roszak) or "the land's wild music" (Mark Tredinnick). Yet, while one can easily bring oneself to imagine how a "middle voice" might bridge the gap between subject and object, it is harder to imagine what language such a middle voice, arising partly from a non-human subject, might speak and how it could filter through discursive artefacts produced out of human language. Of course, there is no need to oppose the two notions, once one agrees the humans are creatures of the earth, and that the earth speaks through all of its creatures, including human earthlings. Yet, modern and postmodern humans have disconnected themselves from the earth, dismissing holistic, animistic rituals as primitive, and shunning attempts to bridge the languages of the elements and the languages of human awareness as regressive and irrational, thus silencing the middle voice. In this context, the middle voice can only arise from a reconnecting process out of which the text no longer appears as an abstract construct but emerges as a *material, spiritual* and *animated* performance that takes us a long way from the poststructuralist disembodiment of the text.<sup>3</sup> The regrounding of the text also involves a re-embodiment of the poet, and of the reader.

- 6 My argument here is that reconnection to a holistic language is necessary to the production of ecotexts. Ecotexts, from this perspective, are not just sensuous texts that flaunt the materiality of a language regrounded in the ecosystem. They do this, but also act as texts that make the regrounding possible by systematically crossing and recrossing the lines between mind, matter *and* spirit. Such regrounding calls for some form of reintegration, which is not possible without *ritualistic* intervention. The attention to ritual takes me some way from Knickerbocker's take on ecopoetics, closer to Gary Snyder's rough and dense yet luminous *Practice of the Wild*, or to Native American ritual earth poetics and "ground theory," as they have been put forth by Leslie Marmon Silko, Paula Gunn Allen or Scott Momaday, for instance.<sup>4</sup> Paula Gunn Allen, for one, reminds us that all native literature is ceremonial, to the extent that "every story, every song, every ceremony tells the Indian that each creature is part of a living whole and that all parts of that whole are related to one another by virtue of their participation in the whole of being" (Gunn Allen 247). The native song is part of a material and spiritual reality, and as such it connects the singer to that greater, integrated reality. Knickerbocker and Snyder share (with others) the goal of "rematerializing language," notably through figural motion and sound effects; they both look at poetic language not just as *representing*, but, also, and more importantly, *performing* the world, in assessing the ecological impact of a poetic statement. Yet there seems to be a difference between looking at the way language "performs" or "enacts" the world, in the way that Knickerbocker does, as if the world was still the object of poetic performance, or connecting the reality of poetic performance with the material and spiritual world of ecological moves and intentions. Differences between Knickerbocker and Snyder also stem from Snyder's long immersion in Native American and Oriental (Japanese Zen Buddhist) worldviews, in which the notion of language as ritual—that is, as connector in an integrated world—adds another, *spiritual*, dimension to Western attempts at bridging words and world. Ultimately, the ritualistic function enables the writer, speaker or reader—and not just the poem—to become an ingredient in the holistic ritual, connecting—or perhaps reconnecting—with the material reality whose energy flows through poetic discourse.
- 7 Of course we only have access here to the printed texts but we may read those as "leavings" of a global ritual *work* in which Snyder's poems or Rick Bass's stories, for

instance, participate—traces that can be reactivated at any new reading. The term “work” here has to be understood in the broad sense which Tom Pughe gives the word, echoing Jonathan Bates’s use of the term “ecological work,” with reference to what he calls ecopoems, or more generally ecoliterature (Pughe 2011). The work of the poem in this sense, again, does not stop at the message, content, or ideas conveyed. It ponders the way in which the poem organizes its material and assesses what is at stake in choosing not just *what* it represents but *how* it represents it, showing, through a metafictional inquiry, what is at stake in the *work* and *energy* of the *representing*, on the one hand, rather than the quality of the represented. My own use of the term ecopoetics calls for this pondering of representational praxis, and it seeks to respond to the energy of poetic discourse, of *the poetic statement as a ritualistic offering of material and psychic energy* (Snyder uses the image of “fruiting”) taking “place” in the ecosystem at large. It also considers the poem, or the poetic image as a tiny statement in the broad cultural conversations through which the planet constantly reorganizes itself.

- 8 Snyder sees the *work* of the poet, from a cultural and an organic perspective, as one of recycling old material, setting out to digest “detritus” from the past to craft images, symbols, myths, and stories pointing the way to a possible future: “as climax forest is to biome, and fungus is to the recycling of energy, so [...] art is an assimilator of unfelt experience, perception, sensation and memory for the whole society” (Snyder, 2004 10). The choice of this organic metaphor to describe the role of the poet in society is not coincidental. Again, it re-establishes the soil as the ultimate “real” whose loss has been proclaimed over and over again since the crisis of modernism, and even *regrounds* postmodern debates about the loss of the real as part of the way in which this fundamental “real”—the ecosystem—keeps refashioning itself. Cultural and artistic production participates in an evolving and complex set of responses devised by the ecosystem to regulate itself. In Snyder’s perspective, indeed, the poem takes on special value in what the critic and writer Ronald Grimes, calls “the Deep World’s Gift Economy,” to which it contributes its “incantatory Riff for a Global Medicine Show” (Snyder 2004 11-12).<sup>5</sup>
- 9 Every ritual calls for some sort of sacrificial offering. Here, there is no need to search high and low for a sacrificial victim. What needs to be shed is a Western sense of the self as separated from and superior to the rest of the living. In the case of ecotexts, then, preliminary sacrifice is carried out symbolically through narratives of surrender, imagined attempts on the writer’s part to shed her sense of self, or that possessive, self-interested part of the self called the ego. Such shedding may be experienced as painful, yet it delivers access to an enlarged form of consciousness in which the middle voice can be sounded. *Narratives of abnegation*, indeed, come as a necessary response to Wendell Berry’s invitation to “an implicit and essential humility, a reluctance to impose on things as they are.” Retreat then becomes a necessary first step towards reconnection.

## Unravelling the self: a po-ethics of humility

- 10 As Knickerbocker has shown, poets may emphasize the artificiality of language in clarifying their position towards nature, stressing their own “unnaturalness,” so that there may be a significant degree of *self-defeat* at the heart of nature writing.<sup>6</sup> The nature writer’s purpose is to achieve some form of intimate exchange with the natural

world, which supposes finding a common language and engaging in a shared experience. Yet this intention must be handled cautiously, lest it lead to appropriation. The nature writer's first cautionary move is then, often, an avowal of distance or even better, an ironic step backward. Aldo Leopold's "January" vignette, for instance, follows a skunk's trail in the thawing snow, to a bloody snow patch testifying to a rabbit's deadly encounter with an owl. Nothing is left there save "a bloody spot, encircled by a wide-sweeping arc of owl's wings" (Leopold 5). As for the skunk, its track "finally enters a pile of driftwood, and does not emerge" (5). The narrator then finds himself empty-handed and *left to his own device*: "I turn homeward, still wondering" (5). The first mark of respect, then, is to refrain from invading the space of the other, show one's devices and then turn around, retracing one's steps. One may here remember Rick Bass's narrator's injunction regarding bears in *The Lost Grizzlies*: "Give this creature space" (Bass 143).

- 11 Meeting the world on its own terms indeed then requires letting it go its own unpredictable way, so that nature writing often presents us with narratives of loss and grief. Bass's narrator's dreamlike encounter with the bear leaves him filled with grief: "I stand at the edge of the chute's clearing and am filled with an inexplicable sense of loss" (216). Mary Oliver's mushrooms, like the hapless stroller having tasted "shark-white death angels /in their torn veils" (Oliver, 1983, 4), collapse and "slide back under the shining / fields of rain" (5). Her owl is seen flying away, shunning exchange with the puny figure of the poet, who has to acknowledge her inability to meet the bird on her own terms:

Not in shyness but in disgust  
the owl  
turns its face from me and pours itself  
into the air, hurrying  
until it is out of sight—  
and, after all,  
even if we came by some miracle  
upon a language which we both knew,  
what is it I might say  
there in the orange light of early morning,  
in the owl's resting time,  
that would have any pluck and worth in it?— (23)

- 12 The break between stanzas one and two, introducing an unlikely pause in the middle of the owl's flowing flight, or between stanzas two and three, pitting the wish for a common language against evidence of starkly different worlds, as well as the use of the black bar at the end of lines 5 and 12, register the disturbing presence of an alien life. Dashes open gaps through which the world filters in as that upon which, like the Stranger in Levinas's philosophy, the "I" has no power.
- 13 Animal images, like the owl above, are called upon to establish a link with other worlds, that of the non-human, and that of the dead. They are the privileged agents of the sort of opening of the human mind induced by the dissolution of the ego. In several respects, animals act as "channelers," spiritual mediators connecting the quick and the dead, the human and the broader non-human world—a position of go-between in which traditional cultures have always put them, and which is reinforced by their condition as creatures who, although part of the non-human world, make frequent, intimate forays into human territories. Birds have been traditionally entrusted with linking the Earth with the heavenly world. When these birds, in addition to flying between the world

below and the world above, happen to be "Burrowing Owls," as is the case in the opening section of Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge*, they become grounded, and thus acquire additional symbolic power. Williams has inherited from her Mormon education the belief in a "spirit world" in which "each human being, bird, bulrush, along with all other life forms had a spirit life before it came to dwell physically on the earth" (*Refuge* 14), but she also feeds on other mythologies, notably those of pre-Columbian Mexico, and that of ancient Egypt. The latter is handed down by the narrator's grandmother, looking at ibises as "companions of gods": "Ibis escorts Toth, the Egyptian god of wisdom and magic. [...]. And there are two colors of ibis—one black and one white. The dark bird is believed to be associated with death, the white bird a celebration of birth" (18). Next to the great and small predators, birds indeed play a central role in much of nature writing as symbolic openers, ambassadors of death and emissaries of the non-human world. In *Refuge*, birds symbolically bring together two forms of the non-human—animals, and death. They are ambivalent mediators, reminding Williams' narrator, for one, that she has to accept loss and even death in order to contact the "other." One may in this respect recall the episode in which this narrator lies on the lake shore next to a dead swan and washes its body, as if she was preparing it for a ceremony. Paying respect to the dead bird opens up the narrator's imagination to another form of awareness and energy, another way of inhabiting the world: "I imagined the great heart that propelled the bird forward day after day, night after night. Imagined the deep breaths taken as it lifted from the arctic tundra, the camaraderie within the flock" (Williams 121). This decentering of human awareness is made possible by "a shedding of that which was no longer necessary" (192). As Johanna Macy has argued, and as the "fierce green light" in the eyes of the dying wolf in Aldo Leopold's "Thinking like a mountain" suggests, grieving is the recognition, in loss, of a vital link. William's *Refuge* beautifully shows how the death of a loved one, because it heightens the vulnerability of the self, opens it up to what it may lock out when resting unperturbed in its citadel—to the world freed from the lens of an anthropocentric gaze.

- 14 Death, the ultimate opening, comes as a recurrent theme in nature writing. Mary Oliver's observation of nature is often trained on birds of prey, whether hawk, "heaven's fistful of death and destruction" (34) or vulture, "However ultimately sweet / the huddle of death to fuel / those powerful wings" (156). Yet, however destructive, death is also welcome as a release from the ego, bringing on awareness of the other. Breaching the self can come as a surface ripping, as in Mary Oliver's poem "August," in which the blackberry picker spends "all day among the high / branches, reaching / my ripped arms, thinking / of nothing" (143). Or it may come as deep mourning. Nature writers familiar with Eastern thinking, like Matthiessen and Snyder, or with Native American worldviews, in which there is no such notion as our western sovereign, autonomous self, come here with a definite advantage. Thus, in *The Snow Leopard*, Peter Matthiessen's narrator's memories of the agony of his beloved wife, D, as she struggles against cancer, are part of his quest for the snow leopard—indeed, they bring him closer to the elusive creature. The narrator recalls a zen meditation session in which he sat facing the wife whom he knew was dying. This meditation on death brings him to experience an overwhelming "Presence of vast benevolence" (104), which, for lack of a better word, he chooses to call "the smile." This experience lets the world in: "For the first time since unremembered childhood, I was not alone; there was no separate 'I'" (105). Dissolution of the boundaries of the self is thus triggered by awareness and acceptance of the loss of the loved one: "but for D's crisis which had cut through forty

years of encrustations, I might never have had such an experience at all; that great enlightenment was only born out of deep *Samadhi*.<sup>7</sup> In this period, the invitation came to go on a journey to the Himalaya" (107). Death of the western ego and dissolution of the eagerness to hold down and own the world, then, is the first step towards the snow leopard.

- 15 Vulnerability is advocated, in nature writing, next to humility, as a quality to be cultivated: "not being finished at the skin," to paraphrase Tredinnick, is, for the writer, the condition for encounter: "the writer who reaches out through senses and imagination to the place, Lopez is suggesting, opens the pores of the skin of the self that much wider to the place" (Tredinnick, 78). In Snyder's poems, emptying the self through meditation is the way to contact the non-human world. These poems place very little emphasis on the observer's states of mind, trying to remain as "objective" as possible: "One granite ridge / A tree, would be enough / Or even a rock, a small creek, / A bark shred in a pool," to ensure that "All the junk that goes with being human / Drops away" (Snyder 1992, 6). As Snyder puts it in one of his essays: "In Buddhist spiritual ecology, the first thing to give up is the ego [...] Dogen famously said 'We study the self to forget the self. When you forget the self you become one with ten thousand things'" (Snyder 2004, 6). And indeed, both ego and self are largely erased, in the poems, through a combination of unflagging attention to the phenomenal world and an awareness that every perception is only a passing moment in the constant flux in which it dissolves. Reward may then be granted in the form of "Cold proud eyes / Of Cougar or coyote" (Snyder 1992, 6). Again, animals show up as ambassadors travelling between the worlds.
- 16 In textual practice, vulnerability promotes a willingness to admit representational defeat, which may show up as textual disorganization, notably in the form of breaks, or through the sudden leap of an unlikely perception. Indeed, contact with the other may require long hours of meditation, but it may also occur as unbidden and unexpected, leaving the narrator baffled. The agent of disruption may be an animal, it may also be a human stranger, an enigmatic "other" questioning and disrupting the narrator's perceptive grid and thus pointing to the possibility of a drastically other viewpoint, as well as—this is also the case in meditation—uncovering the delusional quality of any given viewpoint. Thus Annie Dillard's narrator finds herself facing a weasel "I swivelled around—and the next instant, inexplicably, I was looking down at a weasel, who was looking up at me. Weasel! I'd never seen one wild before" (13). In Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*, the same experience of disruptive apparition may involve a native head suddenly popping into the narrator's tent: "The tent is so small that in effect, one wears it, and the abrupt intrusion of another head—and a strange, wolfish, dirty head at that—put our faces much too close together for my liking" (205). Here too, the narrator is suddenly jolted from his self-contained, self-sufficient yet limiting and arbitrary western view by an entirely unbidden "other," whom the narrator depicts himself, with no small degree of humor, as totally unable to figure out. The narrator then rudely shoos the intruder away, only to see the latter's face then transfigured by "a smile truly blessed in its wholehearted acceptance—approval, even—of the world and its ways" (206). When the narrator, suddenly realizing his mistaken perception, and filled with remorse, tries to call back the stranger, it is too late: "the man waved goodbye to me and my bad manners and vanished from the yard" (206). The outlandish face breaking through the tent flaps brings the narrator to face his own deluded perspective, pointing to the possibility of an entirely different one, from which he, and

not the inquisitive native, is the intruder—a western intruder who, despite his rude manners, is utterly welcome in this strange territory.<sup>8</sup> The text then hints at a reversing of perspectives. Yet, this unsettling opening, once effected, is only fleetingly glimpsed and, the minute it is offered, it vanishes. As does the snow leopard.

- 17 Disorientation thus eases Matthiessen's pilgrim's quest for the bharal, the rarely observed Himalayan blue sheep, and the even more secretive snow leopard. Proliferating ancient esoteric Tibetan or B'on topographical names, rather than helping the narrator or the reader get their bearings, enhance defamiliarization. The narrator, dizzy with emptiness, light and altitude, must then refocus on details: "For minute after minute I watch the roughing of their coats by the mountain wind" (220). Like in meditation, however, attention focussed on the real opens up awareness to the illusion lodged in perception of the real as a solid, permanent entity. The ruffled sheep coats make visible the invisible wind. Wind keeps blowing. A griffon sweeps by, "the cold air ringing in its golden head" (212) and again, the experience is that of a swift passing, an abrupt breach, and a similarly sudden whorl in the textual flow: "Dark, light, dark: a raptor, scimitar winged, under the sun peak—I know, I know" (212). Expectations fail to materialize. The eagerly sought Crystal monastery at Shey is deserted and locked up: all inhabitants have left the village and fled the snow. The narrator is left alone with the mountain. The slow, repetitive rhythm of the pilgrimage narrative, rotating like prayer wheels, follows the trudging across vast mountain spaces; the seemingly endless stalking of the bharal does not progress but opens into a greater space and time in which man, this precarious visitor, is absorbed by the constantly shifting, elemental world of snow, rock, and light. Matthiessen's journal is a path leading the western reader into another space-time, in which he must relinquish his self-centered, and, more largely, anthropocentric ways. In addition to the many micro-narratives of encounters with another world, rhythm—the slowing, halting, erratic pace of the narrative—acts as the textual means to nudge both narrator and reader into this space of reconnection. The text does not *just* call attention to the "sensuousness of words" (Knickerboker): it disrupts the linearity of western quest narratives to grant a ritualistic access to another, holistic form of awareness which appears in keeping both with ecological principles *and* with Eastern philosophies.

## Ringling with the earth

- 18 Matthiessen's narrative also keeps pausing for long introspective passages and abstruse forays into the complex history of Buddhism, reminding us of all we do not and cannot know. The narrator halts, and the story stops: "The mountains have no meaning. They *are* meaning. The mountains *are*" (196). Words shed their meanings, and they start ringing: "I ring with life, and the mountains ring, and when I can hear it, there is a ringing that we share" (196). Of course, the word "ringing" is the textual trace of the world of mountains which remains outside the text: "I understand all this, not in my mind but in my heart, knowing how meaningless it is to try to capture what cannot be expressed, knowing that mere words will remain when I read it all again, another day" (196). Yet the word "ringing," as in "These rocks and mountains, all this matter, the snow itself, the air—the earth is ringing" (162), *does* ring. The narrative is successful to the extent that it unsettles the reader, induces him to let go of the need for an ordered narrative of human progress, and leads him to a place where words connect with the

non-human world in a common rhythm and sound. "Sometimes, when I meditate, the big rocks dance" (195), Matthiessen's narrator muses, making his words ring and dance as if these words were stones, as in Gary Snyder's "Riprap": "Lay down these words / Before your mind like rocks" (Snyder 1992, 21).

- 19 The text then functions not as representation of the natural world but as *performance* and *ritual*, a means of connecting the natural world through a combination of imaginary suggestion and through sensory engagement in the world. As Tredinnick suggests, taking his cue from Paul Carter, again, if one pays attention to "the energetic quality of places" (15) and thinks of them as "dynamic spaces, living and turbulent, never still and never finished" (*ibid*), then writing can, rather than aiming at representing a place, attempt to "to engage the world *metrically*" (14). This is materialistic *and* ritualistic writing, in which aural, musical qualities take over. Words released from their descriptive or narrative duty reverberate not only like music, but also like chanted mantras leading to true awareness. Music, sound patterns, rhythm, echoes, silences, intervals, implicate language in the turbulent, complex yet coherent dynamics of material life. Matthiessen's "cold air ringing in its golden head" (212) brings to mind Snyder's keen attention to the physicality of language, with poems packed with alliterated hard, plosive, dental and guttural consonants, foregrounding the acoustic density of the lines: "each word a rock / a creek washed stone / Granite: ingrained / with torment of fire and weight / Crystal and sediment linked hot..." (Snyder 1992, 21). "Riprap," "a cobble of stone laid on steep, slick rock to make a trail for horses in the mountains," registers the sensory impact of words: "tough trees crammed / In thin stone fractures" (8), each word a sharp rhythmic slap connecting mind and matter. Words lined up like stones on a trail bring out the poem as a melodic line whose rhythm plays along that of place: "the rhythm I'm drawing on most now is the whole of the landscape of the Sierra Nevada, to feel it all moving underneath. There is the periodicity of ridge, gorge, ridge, gorge, ridge, gorge at the spur ridge..." (48).
- 20 Poetic intervention is a momentary concretion in the ongoing flow through which life keeps reshaping itself. The *work* of the poem does not limit itself to the vocabulary and syntax it puts to work and the circulation of meaning it orchestrates. The lines in Snyder's poems ripple like the wake of a ship or the crest of a wave, and words act as dynamic mediators between the landscape and the mind, displaying "the body of the mind" (21): "sharp wave choppy line- / interface tide flows- / seagulls sit on the meeting / eating/ ... / the real work. / washing and sighing, / sliding by" (Snyder 1992, 227). This brings to mind Nathalie Cochoy's reading of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, suggesting an analogy between Dillard's writing and the world of nature, as Dillard "makes the constant hesitations and emendations of her prose coincide with the permanent shedding and growing of the world" (Cochoy 34). There again, rhythm is foremost. Cochoy shows how Dillard's prose remarkably discloses "the pulsing substance of language and its immediate involvement in the natural realm" (35). Words and sentences dance when one engages one's voice, breath, and body in a live reading, perhaps less so when one reads a poem sitting in the library and engages in symbolic breathing. Yet, the nature writers "of our time," to go back to Berry's statement, calling on powerful images to release their songs from the clutches of the self-centered, anthropocentric ego, then striking them like so many meditation bowls, and letting them fill up with the dense substance and energetic flow of sound, can turn them into ritualistic channels for poetic co-operation between man and the world. It is even

possible, when reading Matthiessen's pages, for instance, to think of them as so many prayer flags, like the white "wind-picture" his pilgrim is offered by the old crippled yet happy Lama of Crystal Monastery. Like prayer flags flapping in the wind, so that mantras inscribed on them may be blown all over the land, the turned pages of the nature poem or narrative, as they move from reader to reader, connect mind to mind, and mind to land, in the very light breeze arising from the turning.

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## NOTES

1. Hence the title for this paper. I find the notion of co-operation better suited to my argument than that of collaboration, not only because of the historical burden of meaning put on the word "collaboration" by my country's (France) history—during and after WWII, "collaboration" inevitably referred to French collaboration with the Nazi occupying forces—but also because "operation" better applies to the phenomenon of joint human and non-human production and operation of a common "opus" through a common "modus operandi."
2. In calling on such a diverse congregation, I am aware I am not paying each of these writers the full tribute they deserve. I am also aware that each of them occupies a specific position within the field of nature writers. I have, in other contributions, devoted full papers to individual writers—notably Rick Bass, Barry Lopez, Gary Snyder, Terry Tempest Williams (see bibliography). My purpose here is *not* to produce an in-depth study of a given text, but to sketch some stages in a process of giving voice to nature which emerges from their combined, however unique, perspectives.
3. I myself am self-consciously working here against the structuralist and poststructuralist invitation—or should I say injunction?—to emancipate the text from its context and focus exclusively on the "textuality" of the world, if not to look at the world as text. I, in contrast, consider this essay as *grounded* in the ecosystem. Meanwhile, I find myself looking at structuralist or poststructuralist statements as ways of intervening not only ideologically but also ecologically in the organic, material, real world even while they may contribute to textualizing it with everything they have.

4. David L. Moore's recent *That Dream Shall Have a Name* interestingly casts such "ground theory" as one in which "all the voices standing on and under and over that ground may speak and be heard," partaking in an ecology of "reciprocal interrelations": "Ground Theory, then, reaffirms the primary challenge in Indian-white relations: the land, its creatures, and its people interrelated and always seeking balance" (30).
  5. Snyder refers here to the title of a paper by Ronald Grimes precisely entitled "Performance Is Currency in the Deep World's Gift Economy: An Incantatory riff for a global Medicine Show."
  6. I myself have made a similar argument in some modest contributions, for instance my "Coming down the Mountain: Text and Countertext in Rick Bass's *Caribou Rising*."
  7. Samadhi, in yoga and Buddhist meditation, is the ultimate stage, a nondualistic state of awareness in which the boundary between subject and object dissolves. It is the state of Enlightenment.
  8. I am not suggesting that Matthiessen casts the native as closer to nature than the western pilgrim. Here, the native acts like a Zen master jolting a student out of his established mental habits to lead him beyond mental constructs.
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## ABSTRACTS

This paper invites several U.S. nature writers—notably Peter Matthiessen, Terry Tempest Williams and Gary Snyder—to outline the contours of a "land poetics" in keeping with Aldo Leopold's "land ethic". How can the writer-poet reach for a "middle voice" which would sound both, and with equal significance, the nature writer and nature itself, turning the latter into a subject rather than an object of discourse? While sketching out the intellectual context, in the field of ecocriticism, which has made it possible to imagine such a common "middle voice," this paper argues that the voice cannot materialize without some form of ritual conversion. The writers it looks at are committed to such a ritual—and not just thematic or formal—practice of poetic discourse, which first calls for a sacrifice, usually performed in the presence of an animal figure: that of the individual, sovereign figure of the Western self. This undoing releases the rhythmic materiality of language, discourse and narrative from the strictures of the self to open them up to life at large. In this context, the poetic statement acts like an offering, a momentary concretion, or "fruiting" (Snyder), in the energetic flow by means of which the ecosystem keeps realigning itself.

Cet article convoque plusieurs écrivains de la nature nord-américains—notamment Peter Matthiessen, Terry Tempest Williams et Gary Snyder—pour explorer ce que pourrait être, en accord avec l'éthique de la terre d'Aldo Leopold, une « poétique de la terre ». Comment l'écrivain-poète peut-il tracer une « voix du milieu » qui donnerait à entendre simultanément, et à part égale, le poète-écrivain de la nature et la nature elle-même, non plus objet, mais bien sujet du discours ? Tout en rappelant le contexte théorique qui permet de penser cette voix, cet article s'interroge sur les conditions de son émergence concrète, et pense que celle-ci appelle une conversion radicale exigeant une forme de rituel. Chez les écrivains convoqués, cette pratique rituelle, et non seulement thématique et/ou formelle, de l'écriture, passe inévitablement par un sacrifice auquel préside une figure animale : celui du principe et de la figure de l'auteur individualisé, souverain, et indépendant. C'est ce sacrifice qui permet de libérer la matérialité rythmique d'un récit et d'une langue qui débordent l'individu pour entrer en communication

avec la vie de l'écosystème. Dans ce contexte, l'énergie poétique du texte constitue une forme d'intervention physique et psychique dans le flux des discours par le biais desquels l'écosystème ne cesse de se réorganiser.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** nature writers, U.S.A., land ethic, ecocriticism, land poetics, ritual, reconnection, incorporation, animals, death, meditation, energy, rhythm

**Mots-clés:** écrivains de la nature, Etats-Unis, éthique de la terre, écocritique, poétique de la terre, rituel, réenracinement, incorporation, animaux, mort, méditation, énergie, rythme

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