

What are Poets For?
Heidegger's Gift to Ecocriticism

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The song of the land, the song of rural labour, the song of delight in the many forms of life with which we all share our physical world, is too important and too moving to be tamely given up, in an embittered betrayal, to the confident enemies of all significant and actual independence and renewal.

Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (1973), London: Hogarth Press, 1985, p. 271.

“I beseech you, my brothers, remain faithful to the earth [sei der Erde treu], and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly [überirdische] hopes.”

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*

We have ears because we can listen attentively, and thanks to this we may hear the song of the Earth, its trembling and quivering that remains undisturbed by the huge tumult that man has, for the time being, organized on its exhausted surface.

Martin Heidegger, *Heraklit, Gesamtausgabe*, Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1975-, Vol. 55, ed. Manfred Frank, p. 247 (Trans. Michel Haar)

“What are poets for?” This is the title of the last chapter of Jonathan Bate’s wonderful new book, *The Song of the Earth* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP 2000), without doubt the most important work of ecocriticism to have been published in Britain to date. “What are Poets For?” As some of you will no doubt have registered, this is also the title of a remarkable essay by Heidegger from the year following Germany’s nadir, the *Stunde Null* of 1945: “What are poets for?” “Wozu Dichter?”, asked Heidegger as he began to emerge from his inner exile in the bosky depths of the Black Forest (“Wozu Dichter?”, in *Holzwege, Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 5, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hermann, Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977). Heidegger, in turn, had taken his cue from Hölderlin, who asks in one of his most inscrutable poems, “...wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?”: “...what are poets for in times of need?” Heidegger’s were indeed times of need, in ways that would have been unimaginable to the romantic poet; in ways that in some respects were not openly acknowledged by the poeticising philosopher either. Our times, too, are times of need: haunted by the unacknowledged evils of the recent past, racked by intractable wrongs in the present, and facing the prospect that in the not too distant future, the very earth that sustains us will become unlivable. Heidegger, famously, did not like to talk of the evils of the recent past. Nor did he speak much of social injustice generally. The plight of the earth, however, was increasingly of concern to the forest-dwelling sage, who bewailed our reduction of the things of the earth to ‘standing reserve;’ our forgetfulness of what it means to truly build, dwell and muse as mortals who live and breathe and have their being on this earth, under this sky, and in expectation of the incalculable grace of divine visitation. It is in the face of this global catastrophe, as well as – implicitly, at least – in the wake of the more localised disaster of Nazism, that Heidegger turns to poetry, as

the privileged medium in which the wholeness and holiness of Being might once more be brought forth into the Open by (and of) the Word.

And so, not unreasonably, it is to the later Heidegger that Bate in his turn turns in arguing for the ecological importance of literary works of the creative imagination, especially poetry, in restoring us to the earth. „If mortals dwell in that they save the earth,“ concludes Bate, „and if poetry is the original admission of dwelling, then poetry is the place where we save the earth.“ (283) This truly is good news. For if literature can in some sense ‘save the earth,’ then literary studies are worth saving also, and my own work is not all in vain. With this in mind, I can more readily reconcile myself to spending my days holed up with books and students, rather than risking life and limb up a tree in a logging coupe, or sailing the high seas as a Greenpeace warrior. Heidegger, it seems, has bequeathed a great gift to ecocriticism: a philosophy within which art, literature, and above all poetry, are granted a leading role in countering the technological domination of the earth with an ethos of care, which names things in order to let them be, and which admits us into dwelling as a more gracious way of being.

And yet, I fear that Bate might have been over-hasty in his reading of Heidegger, and that what he has embraced as a gift, might turn out to be veritably ‘giftig,’ if you’ll excuse the second-hand cross-lingual pun; a poisoned chalice, so to speak, or at any rate, one from which we will need to sup in moderation. Later on in the paper, I will return to these concerns about the ecocritical reception of Heidegger’s risky gift. First, however, I would like to make some remarks of a more general nature about the contemporary enterprise of ecocriticism.

Remembering the Earth

In 1756, the vicar of Selbourne planted four lime trees between his house and the butcher’s yard opposite, “ ‘ to hide the sight of blood and filth’ ” (cit. Thomas 1983, 299). Gilbert White was a great naturalist and went on to write *The Natural History of Selbourne* (1789), a text much prized by ecocritics as environmental literature. White’s arboreal screening out of the slaughter-house is, in a sense, equally significant, for it exemplifies a key development in the history of changing attitudes towards the natural world at the dawn of western modernity: namely, a growing uneasiness about killing animals for food. (See Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*) Towards the end of the 18th century this change in sensibilities led some, including the English poet Shelley, to become vegetarian.¹ The vast majority of people, including the vicar of Selbourne, nonetheless continued to eat animals. What changed was rather that slaughterhouses were banished from the public gaze, while meat increasingly was sold and prepared as faceless flesh - that is, minus the head. What concerns me here for the moment is less the ethics of meat consumption than the concealment of its price. For it is this kind of concealment that would become characteristic of society’s relationship to the natural world in the modern era – an era, which the dramatic disclosure of global ecological imperilment might perhaps be bringing to an end.

Since the 18th century, the necessity of recalling the true cost – the cost, that is, both to subordinate humans and to the earth - of our production processes and consumption habits has grown in equal measure to its difficulty. For at the same time that the ecosystems sustaining all life on earth have become ever more critically endangered by

our growing numbers and levels of consumption, more and more people – above all, those whose ecological debt is the largest - live at an ever greater remove from the natural world, unmindful of their impact upon the earth. For some in this category, forgetfulness of the earth has modulated into a kind of disaffiliation. Enamoured more of the works of human creation than of the givenness of the natural world, they look forward to an increasingly technologised future, in which we too will in some measure become machines (if indeed we are not so already). In some fashionable circles, this apotheosis of human narcissism is referred to rather misleadingly as ‘posthumanism.’ From an ecocentric perspective, this new cyber-technophilia looks more like a continuation under another guise of that age-old humanist dream, which has haunted the Western imagination since at least the time of Plato, of transcending our corporeal finitude. What religion, it is believed, can no longer do for us, technology can; and so, we look forward, yet again, to throwing off our mortal coil, if not in heaven, then at least in cyber space or outer space – anywhere, so long as we can kid ourselves that we are no longer earthbound. There is however another path beyond the self-deceptions of humanism. This is the path of *ecocentrism*, which leads in the direction of a deeper immanence, or perhaps of a certain transcendence: into an acceptance, that is, of our corporeality and thereby also our interconnectedness with our myriad, if ever less diverse, ‘earth others.’ⁱⁱⁱ

From this perspective, the challenge of the moment, is to become neither a cyborg nor a god/dess,ⁱⁱⁱ but, in Aldo Leopold’s resonant words, “a plain member and citizen of the land community” (Leopold 1998, 89). It may in the long run prove impossible for humans to become once more just another species among many, not least in view of the increased responsibility for actively shaping the future of life on earth that has come with our capacity to devastate it. Leopold’s ‘Land Ethic’ nonetheless remains inspirational, in my view: namely, as an exhortation to divest ourselves both of the assumption that the rest of nature exists solely for our benefit, and of the desire to leave it behind altogether. Such a turning towards the earth, it should be stressed, does not imply a complete renunciation of *techne*, either in the more common sense of ‘making,’ nor in the more buried sense recovered by Heidegger, of ‘bringing forth.’ To bring things forth through making is part of our species being as human, and it is probably neither desirable nor possible for us to desist from this kind of activity. What the land ethic does nonetheless enjoin is a revaluing of *physis*,^{iv} of that which is given prior to any human making, such that our technologies, transactions and transformations might be rendered compatible with the flourishing of all life on earth, human and otherwise.

This revaluation of *physis* has not come easily to those academic disciplines devoted to the study of cultural artifacts. Literary critics and cultural theorists in particular have been notoriously slow to register those changes in thinking about the relationship of culture and society to the natural world which began to be articulated in neighbouring disciplines, above all philosophy, but also theology, politics and history, from the early 1970s. “If your knowledge of the outside world were limited to what you could infer from the major publications of the literary profession,” observed Cheryl Glotfelty in 1996 in her introduction to the first ecocriticism reader,

you would quickly discern that race, class and gender were the hot topics of the late twentieth century, but you would never know that the earth’s

life support systems were under stress. Indeed, you might never know that there was an earth at all. (Glotfelty 1996, xvi)

There were in fact some isolated calls for an ecologically oriented criticism during the 1970s, including those of Joseph Meeker (1972) and William Rueckert (1978, repr. 1996), who is credited with coining the term ‘ecocriticism.’ However, it was not until the end of the 20th century that the study of literature and the environment was finally recognized as ‘a subject on the rise’ by no less an authority in such matters than the *PMLA*.^v

In some respects it is perhaps not surprising that the study of literary texts should be coupled with such forgetfulness of the earth. Although the practice of criticism has ancient origins in the exegesis of Biblical and classical Greek texts, modern literary criticism only began to be institutionalized as an academic discipline in the early 19th century. This was precisely the time when a rigid separation began to be drawn between the ‘natural’ and the ‘human’ sciences. Significantly, this is a divide that few literary critics and cultural theorists, including those who pride themselves on their interdisciplinarity, have dared to cross, until relatively recently. This compartmentalization of knowledge is central to what Bruno Latour (1993) terms the “Modern Constitution,” which sunders the human from the nonhuman realm, while defining humanity’s relationship to the natural world preeminently in terms of mastery and possession. It is the Modern Constitution, which facilitates also that characteristically modern (and especially urban) form of self-deception, whereby the consumption of meat can be disconnected from the suffering and death of animals. To regain a sense of the inextricability of nature and culture, *physis* and *techne*, earth and artifact – consumption and destruction - would be to move beyond the impasse of modernism, no less than the arrogance of humanism. In Latour’s words, it would in fact lead to the discovery that in one sense at least, ‘we have never been modern.’

What, then, might such a posthumanist, postmodernist remembering of the earth entail for the literary critic or cultural theorist? In her poem “Parchment,” Michelle Boisseau (2000) gives us some valuable leads:

I’m holding in my hand the skin of a calf
that lived 600 years ago, translucent
skin that someone stretched on four strong poles,
skin someone scraped with a moon-shaped blade.
Here is the flesh side, it understood true dark.
Here is the hair side that met the day’s weather,
the long ago rain. It is all inscribed
with the dark brown ink of prayer,

the acid galls of ancient oaks, though these reds,
deluxe rivulets that brighten the margins,
are cinnabar ground too a paste, another paste
of lapis for these blue medieval skies,
and for flowering meadows or a lady’s long braids-
the orpiment – a yellow arsenic –

whose grinding felled the illuminator's
boy assistants like flies, or the insect kermes

whose pregnant bodies gave pigment, and the goose
who supplied quills, the horse its hair, and flax
the fine strong thread that held the folded skins
into a private book stamped with gold for a king.

The parchment that Boisseau describes here is a product of *techne*, an artifact of considerable beauty, embodying something of the religious traditions and aesthetic sensibilities of a rich cultural tradition: it is, we learn, a late medieval illuminated prayerbook. In her poetic presentation of this prayerbook, however, Boisseau calls attention not to its meaning as a text, nor to its economic or antiquarian value, but to its materiality. Or rather, she asks us to reconsider its potential meaning and value in relation to its materiality, perceived in terms of its cost to the natural world. Thus, she recalls the slaughtered calf, whose skin supplied the parchment; the oak trees, the insect-engendered galls from which supplied dark ink for the written text; the cinnabar, lapis, orpiment and “the insect kermes /whose pregnant bodies gave pigment, and the goose/who supplied quills, the horse its hair.” Recalling too, the illuminator’s boy assistants, who died “like flies” from arsenic poisoning as a result of their labour, Boisseau reminds us also that the price of production is borne by subordinate humans, as well as by non-human others. This link between social domination and the exploitation of nature is hinted at again in the close of the poem, where we learn the purpose for which this book had been produced at such cost: namely, for the private use of a king.

If, as Walter Benjamin once observed, there is no work of civilization which is not simultaneously a product of barbarism, then to this the ecocritic might add that there is no work of culture which is not simultaneously exploitative of nature. This is of course also true of Boisseau’s “Parchment,” the writing, publication and distribution of which will have taken its own toll on the natural environment (as has the production of this paper). And yet, the relationship between nature and culture is not one way. Of this too we might be reminded by Boisseau’s poem. For the written prayers and visual images contained in this prayerbook convey ideas about nature, and about the relationship between nature, humanity and the divine, which crucially conditioned medieval perceptions and practices regarding the natural world – and which continue to resonate in complex and contradictory ways up to the present. Culture, as we have by now been told *ad nauseam*, constructs the prism through which we know nature. We begin to internalise this prism from the moment we learn to speak – the moment, that is, that we are inducted into the *logos*, the world as shaped by language. ‘Nature,’ which, as Raymond Williams has remarked, is “perhaps the most complex word in the [English] language” [*Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, London: Fontana (rev. ed.) 1983, 219), is in this sense a cultural, and above all, a linguistic construct. Few ecocritics would deny this. But all would hasten to add that the physical reality of air, water, fire, rock, plants, animals, soils, ecosystems, solar systems etcetera, to which I refer when I speak of ‘the natural world,’ precedes and exceeds whatever words might say about it. It is this insistence on the ultimate precedence of nature vis-à-vis culture, which signals the ecocritical move

beyond the so-called ‘linguistic turn.’ For some ecocritics, including myself, this precedence extends to a consideration of the ways in which human languages, cultures and textual constructs are themselves conditioned by the natural environment.

It might be countered, here, that at a time when there is allegedly no place on earth that has not been affected in some way by humanity’s alteration of the natural environment, this precedence of nature has become questionable. It is however precisely the imperilment of the biosphere wrought by that alteration which impels the ecocritical reinstatement of the referent as a matter of legitimate concern. For the ecocritic, it is vital to be able to say, with Kate Soper, that “it is not language that has a hole in its ozone layer; and the ‘real’ thing continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier.” [*What is Nature?* London: Blackwell, 1995, p.?] Moreover, the fact that ever more of the earth’s surface is currently being refashioned by *techne* does not mean that *physis* has ceased to exist. All human making, including the largely unintentional remaking (or rather, undoing) of the earth’s ecosystems, remains dependent upon physical processes which precede and exceed human knowledge and power. All human being, meanwhile, remains interwoven, albeit often invisibly, with the life of countless nonhuman entities, animate and (supposedly) inanimate, which continue as best they can to pursue their own ends in the midst of an increasingly anthropogenic environment.

Ecocriticism, then, remembers the earth by rendering an account of the indebtedness of culture to nature. While acknowledging the role of language in shaping our view of the world, ecocritics seek to restore significance to the world beyond the page. More specifically, they are concerned to revalue the more-than-human natural world, to which some texts and cultural traditions invite us to attend. In this way, ecocriticism has a vital contribution to make to the wider project of Green Studies, which, in Laurence Coupe’s words, “debates ‘Nature’ in order to defend nature” (Coupe 2000, 5). For many ecocritics, moreover, the defense of nature is vitally interconnected with the pursuit of social justice. Although it is a relatively new kid on the block, ecocriticism is “large and contains multitudes,” as Scott Slovic puts it (with apologies to Whitman) (Slovic, 1999, 1102). Ecocritics are increasingly many and varied, drawing on a range of analytical strategies and theoretical approaches, and addressing a diversity of cultural phenomena, from Shakespearean drama to wildlife documentaries, romantic pastoral to sci-fi ecothrillers, the Bible to Basho.

Within this spectrum, my own work is concerned with the development of an account of the relationship between culture and nature which returns significance and agency to the latter as the basis for a rereading of European romanticism and its poetics of place. From the perspective of this project in particular, an engagement with Heidegger seems to be inevitable.

Heidegger’s Gift to Ecocriticism

Although Heidegger has been in discussion in ecophilosophy and ecotheology for over a decade, the first substantial treatment of his work in an ecocritical frame is, to my knowledge, Jonathan Bate’s. Here then I would like to join Bate in conversation about Heidegger, not in a spirit of critique, but rather, if I might put it thus, of comradeship (for

comrades were originally those who shared a room, and although we don't do that, we are, I think, both coming from the same place).

As mentioned previously, Bate's Heidegger is the author of the essays on technology, dwelling and poetry that were penned after the War. Those who are familiar with Heidegger's oeuvre will recognise that this Heidegger postdates not only the disaster of Nazi Germany, but also what is known in the field as Heidegger's Turn, *die Kehre*: his turn, that is, towards *physis* and the Earth. This Turn, however, had already happened some years previously: in the mid-1930s, following, and I would argue necessarily so, Heidegger's (partial) disillusionment with Nazism and consequent retreat from the town, Freiburg, where he had been Rector of the University, to the Black Forest. One of the earliest articulations of the Turn is the essay on "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1935/6), an important text which Bate, strangely, chooses to ignore. Here, and in his "Introduction to Metaphysics" (also 1935), Heidegger begins to pose the question of what is 'natural' in being, exploring the possibility of the obtrusion of Earth into the world of historical human existence (*Dasein*). This possibility had been occluded within *Being and Time* (1928), due to Heidegger's insistence – one which was to become a dubious truism of many a poststructuralism – that for *Dasein* there could in fact be nothing outside the world of human language, culture and historical existence. "Outside of here," the impoverished space of the merely human world-stage, as Hamm says to Clov in Beckett's hypermodernist *Endgame*, "it's death." Within this world, non-human natural entities can figure only instrumentally, as 'equipment,' as Heidegger puts it: objects-for-use in the realisation of specifically human, and human-centred, projects. As Michel Haar observes in his extraordinary book on Heidegger's Turn, also entitled *The Song of the Earth* (trans. R. Lilly, Bloomington: Indiana UP 1993, 19),

If it were the last word of the philosopher, the analysis of *Being and Time*, with its anti-Romantic dryness, could lead to the suffocating vision of a world totally cut-off from life, partitioned like a gigantic workshop, completely centred upon its own space and...blind to the Earth. It seems, however, that it is precisely a reversal of this interpretation between world and Earth that the Turn most clearly effects.

Making good Bate's omission, I will in due course return to that earlier document of the Turn, „The Origin of the Work of Art.“ I want to work back to it in reverse chronological order, however, beginning with „The Question Concerning Technology“ (1953). For I believe that this essay is crucial in delineating the horizon of understanding within which the full contemporary significance of the earlier work on art and dwelling can be seen to appear. This is of course the horizon of Heidegger's analysis of modernity in terms of the dominion of a certain kind of *techne* over both *physis* and *poiesis*, over both the self-disclosure of natural entities and their ‚bringing forth‘ through human art.

For Heidegger, following Aristotle, *techne* is nonetheless itself also a mode of bringing forth, a revealing of a potential that hitherto lay concealed in the material being worked. In this sense it is itself *poietic* – and as old as humanity (indeed, I would add, considerably older, for we are far from being the only species with a knack for making things!) With the rise of modern science and technology, however, a new form of *techne*

had, in Heidegger's view, come into being, one which does not so much reveal as „challenge“ that upon which it works. Modern technology challenges nature by putting to it „the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such“ (Krell trans., p. 320; HW, 15). Heidegger's famous example of this process is the hydroelectrical power plant on the Rhine. The power plant „sets upon“ the river in order to set its turbines moving in order to produce energy, which will then be dispatched to power further forms of challenging activities. „In the context of the interlocking processes pertaining to the orderly disposition of electrical energy,“ Heidegger concludes, „even the Rhine itself appears as something at our command“ (*etwas Bestelltes*) (Krell, 321; HW, 16). As such it has been reduced to „standing reserve“ – a forestry term, according to which the forest appears as so much wood waiting to be extracted, utterly available and infinitely manipulable. Power plants, moreover, are not the only things that ply the Rhine in this way: the river is still little better than standing reserve when constructed as „an object on call for inspection by a tour group ordered there by the vacation industry“ (Krell, 321; HW 17).

The process whereby modern technology transforms things into standing reserve Heidegger refers to as 'enframing.' As his reference to the tour group as „ordered“ (*bestellt*) indicates, human beings too are liable to become enframed (*gestellt*) as standing reserve. At this point, Heidegger's critique of modernity comes close to Adorno's and Horkheimer's account of the 'dialectic of enlightenment,' whereby the domination of nature is shown to entail both self-alienation through the domination of the body, and social domination through economic exploitation and political repression. Adorno and Horkheimer have also been seen as crucial precursors of contemporary Green theory, and their analysis of the dialectic of enlightenment plays an important role in Bate's ecocritical discussion of the interstructuration of social domination and environmental exploitation. Returning to Heideggerian terminology, I first became conscious of myself as standing reserve when I discovered that „Personnel Services“ at Monash had been renamed „Human Resources,“ for a resource is precisely that which exists and has value solely to the extent that it can be challenged to supply energy or 'raw material.' In the era of bioprospecting and genetic engineering, moreover, humans are reduced to standing reserve not only for their labour, but also in their very flesh and blood, to the extent that this has become enframed as 'genetic material' to be extracted, stored and manipulated as medical scientists - and their corporate sponsors - see fit.

What chance might we have to escape the *Gestell*, and what is the role of art in this context? Here we discover that there is another point at which Heidegger and his erstwhile Marxist compatriots-in-exile come close: namely, in the disavowal of a narrowly political solution. While Adorno and Horkheimer do not seem to be able to offer any way out of the disastrous dialectic of enlightenment, at least in the text of that name, Heidegger does point the possibility of a „saving power,“ one which (not undialectically) was to emerge from the nature of *techne* itself: the revival, that is, of that other, older form of *techne*, which he terms *poiesis*, the bringing forth, which does not challenge by enframing, but which lets things be in their obscure otherness in the very process of revealing them within the work of art. Here too, there is after all a parallel with Adorno, for whom the only remaining locus of resistance seemed to be within the realm of the aesthetic. David Farrell Krell, in a thoughtful introduction to his translation of „The Question Concerning Technology,“ is troubled by this retreat from praxis to poetics.

And yet, although it is true that in the concluding paragraphs of this essay, Heidegger's talk is all of the work of art, *poiesis* is for him ultimately not confined to artistic practice. As suggested in the Hölderlin poem that Heidegger cites here, one which also provided the title for an earlier essay, "...poetically man dwells..." (1951), *poiesis* extends ultimately to a whole way of life. As such it is itself a praxis: that of knowing how to dwell.

What then, might it mean to withdraw from the *Gestell* in rediscovering the art of dwelling? To dwell, Heidegger explains in "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" (also 1951), is to create and caringly maintain a place of habitation within what he terms "the Fourfold." The Fourfold comprises Earth, understood as the land itself, including its specific topography, waterways and biotic community; Sky, including the alternation of night and day, the rhythm of the seasons, and the vagaries of the weather; Divinities, those emissaries or traces that yet remain of an absent God; and, last but not least, Mortals, fellow humans, those who in Heidegger's (questionable) view alone know that they will die. To dwell in the Fourfold is to create and preserve things and places, which in themselves disclose the interweaving, or 'gathering,' of Earth, Sky, Divinities and Mortals. This involves attuning oneself in that which one thinks, does and makes to that which is given with Earth and Sky: that is, a particular natural environment. It implies also leaving open a space for the possibility of the divine, while assenting to one's own mortality and the ties that bind one to fellow mortals, as well as to the place in which one dwells. Above all, writes Heidegger, "mortals dwell insofar as they save the Earth," whereby "to save" (*retten*) is to be understood not so much in the sense of "rescue," but rather of "letting be" ("*etwas in sein eigenes Wesen freilassen*"; *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, p.152). Heidegger's example of a mode of construction, which thus "saves" the Earth whilst opening up a place of human habitation is the bridge over the Rhine. Unlike the power plant, the bridge leaves the river to flow freely whilst allowing mortals to go their way, facilitating their interchanges and embodying their desire for a certain kind of transcendence, the possibility of crossing over to the distant shore, of being both near and far (154-5).

Dwelling is itself an art, for to dwell in the gathering of the Fourfold is precisely to dwell poetically, to the extent that *poiesis* names that drawing forth into unconcealment which simultaneously lets things be in their hiddenness. If dwelling is itself poetic, what then, to return to our original question, are *poets* for? As Heidegger explains in the essay of that name, preempting the burden of the "Question Concerning Technology," poetry acquires a new significance when the earth and its atmosphere, along with humans themselves, have been reduced to mere raw material to be technologically manipulated, reconstructed and commodified (HW, 289-92). The more technologically constructed our world becomes, moreover, the more completely we block the way to what Heidegger, in a Rilkean turn of phrase, terms "the Open," the wholeness of being, undelimited by what he would later term technological enframing ("*das große Ganze alles dessen, was eingeschränkt ist*," 284). In this context, the task of the poet is in Heidegger's analysis twofold. Critically or negatively, it is to disclose "*das Heillose als das Heillose*," (295), that is, to disclose the disastrously technologised and hence desacralised or god-forsaken world as precisely that. More positively, the poet's task is to reverse the disastrous departure from the Open, which, Heidegger insists, endangers our

relationship to being no less that the A-bomb endangers our physical existence, by recalling the wholeness and holiness of being in the poetic word (317).

In the later essay, "...poetically man dwells..." it is this affirmative moment which prevails. Here, the task of the poet as elucidated through a reading of Hölderlin's strange verse, is said to be to admit us into dwelling by calling upon us to look up from our worldly labours to the heavens, measuring ourselves against the gods (196). In this way, the poet calls us to attend to what I would call the wider eco-cosmic dimension of our being. Importantly, poetry is a listening before it is a saying, and it is a saying that invites us to listen. The poet of being and dwelling, Heidegger writes, summons the luminosity of sky and the resonance of the wind into the singing word and thereby brings them to shine and ring (204). The poet, I am tempted to say, borrowing a term from Aboriginal cultures, in a sense 'sings up' the dwelling place, weaving the Fourfold into the poetic word.

In Bate's discussion of Heidegger's poetics of being and dwelling, the possibility of a critical role for poetry in needy times is not addressed. Concerned that Heideggerian dwelling might be tarnished by an echo of the Nazi ideology of 'blood and soil,' he undertakes a sensitive close reading of Paul Celan's haunting lyric "Todtnauberg," in order to demonstrate the possibility of an ecopoetics of dwelling that emphatically disavows that association. In Bate's reading of Celan's poem, the displaced German-speaking Romanian-born Jewish poet resident in France embraces Heidegger's poetics of being and dwelling even while lamenting the philosopher's refusal to say a healing word regarding the Holocaust - the murderous endeavour of a regime that Heidegger had himself once supported to deny the Jews a dwelling place in the European diaspora. Bate's reading is convincing and valuable. But in my view, Heidegger's sense of dwelling, certainly by the early '50s, possibly already in the mid-30s, is itself far removed from an irrationalist cult of blood and soil. For although, in Heidegger, dwelling involves an attunement to the given, it is itself not given, either by place of birth or ancestral belonging, even if your dwelling place does in fact happen to be that of your forefathers. Heidegger is quite emphatic about this: dwelling is an achievement, something which we have to learn again and again, something which involves conscious commitment, not something that is in any sense 'in the blood.' Commenting on Heidegger's discussion of the earthly dwelling place or *heimatlicher Grund* ('native land') in the "Origin of the Work of Art", Michel Haar observes that this is not necessarily the Earth where the artist is empirically born, "but the Earth he understands and preserves:"

Every true fatherland is adopted; for the 'natural'
quality of the native land must also be learned,
which means borne from understanding and
Stimmung to knowledge. (63)

Returning to the later formulation of this question in "...poetically man dwells..." it becomes apparent that some form of exile, or in Deleuzian parlance, deterritorialisation, is intrinsic to dwelling. We must first encounter the absence or strangeness of a place before we can begin to attune ourselves to it in dwelling. The poet admits us into dwelling precisely to the extent that she allows even the most familiar things to appear in

all their strangeness, as if encountered for the first time. Only thus might things cease to be mere equipment; only thus might they be revealed as a gathering of the Fourfold, the matrix of our dwelling.

All this is very exciting stuff for ecocritics such as myself. As indicated at the outset, I am nonetheless wary about some of the more intoxicating elements of Heidegger's poetics. What is potentially *giftig* in Heidegger's gift to ecocriticism is nonetheless in my view not at all related to his erstwhile fascism, but rather to his persistent human racism. While it is certainly true that Heidegger's Turn towards the Earth is a turn away from the excessive anthropocentrism of *Being and Time*, the arrogance of humanism seems to me to persist in a key element of his philosophy: namely, in his account of the relationship between being and language. For if, as Heidegger insists, language, that is, human language, is "the house of being;" if, as he puts it even more emphatically in "Underway to language," "Only the word grants being to a thing" (*Unterwegs zur Sprache*, 6th ed., Pfullingen: Noske, 1979, p. 164); then, as Bate observes, "things need us so that they can be named" (265). Surprisingly, Bate fails to problematise the extraordinary hubris implicit in this conception. As I see it, this hubris is twofold: firstly, it denies language to the rest of the natural world, claiming signification, once again, as an exclusively human prerogative. This is not only almost certainly empirically wrong, it is also ethically troubling from an ecocentric perspective. For it renders non-human nature effectively silent, transforming the song of the earth into a purely human accomplishment, rather than something that long precedes the evolutionary appearance of human beings and the development of their admittedly unprecedentedly complex and subtle signifying codes.

From an ecocentric perspective, it is not so much the case that things need us so that they can be named, but rather it is we who need to name things so that we can share understandings about what we perceive and value, what we fear and desire. It is not for us to claim sole rights to the song of the earth, but rather to use our specifically human capacity for song in the widest sense – our capacity, that is for artistic expression of all sorts – to join in the exuberant singing, dancing, shape-changing, many-hued self-disclosure of *physis*. It is also worth recalling, here, that this magnificent symphony seems to have reached something of a climax at the moment when we arrived on the scene. The question now is whether it will survive our efforts to name, tame and recompose it. In this context, we need poets not so much to draw things into being through *their* song, but rather to draw us forth into the song *of the others*. In a recent article, David Rothenberg suggests a model for this other kind of drawing forth in an eco-musical conception of the Kaluli people of the African rainforest called *dulugu ganalan*. Translated as "lift-up-oversounding," this term refers to the complex interweaving of the sounds of the living environment, including human voices and instruments, singing along, as it were with the more-than-human world. ("No World but in Things: The Poetry of Naess's Concrete Contents," in Eric Katz, Andrew Light, David Rothenberg, *Beneath the Surface. Critical Essays in the Philosophy of Deep Ecology*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000, p. 163). Or, to take an example that is closer to home, one might consider Philip Glass's new composition "Voices." Performed recently as part of the musical celebration of Australian Federation, "Voices" features an interweaving of organ and didgeroo with a chorus of Australian animal sounds and a spoken narrative, written and performed by Joy Murphy of the Wurindjeri people, thus prefiguring aesthetically that

double reconciliation – of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples and of non-indigenous Australians and the land – which is yet to be realized in society generally.

How then might poets join their voices to that of the land? In part, perhaps, by foregrounding precisely the earthy materiality of spoken language, its opaque sonority and rhythmical quality, through the use of metrical and phonetic patterning. Perhaps also, through the dense web of meanings that they weave between the words of the poem and between the poem and its intertexts, a semantic web, which might be seen to mimic the complex interrelationships characterizing natural systems. But potentially also, I would suggest, through a celebration of the world beyond the World of the text - the sounds, motion, colours and forms, that is, of the sustaining Earth. Robert Gray's lyric retracing of a meditative walk along a forestry trail is exemplary of this kind of affirmation, culminating as it does in the realisation of a moment of participatory consciousness, in which the poet discovers that "all of us are a choir" (*New Selected Poems*, p. 239). Here, the poet has found his voice in being taken up into the song of the forest. It is of this joyous sense of participation in the more-than-human world of which he now, in his human way, sings: namely with words (and, more specifically, according to certain poetic conventions of both Western and Eastern origin). It is tempting to suggest that ecopoetry might be reconceived as that form of singing along, perhaps even 'singing up,' which is possible in a verbal form within a literate culture. If so, we must nonetheless also acknowledge that there is a world of difference between the solitary experience of the postromantic poet rendered in the medium of a written text and a communal practice of music and dance performed in the midst of the more-than-human dwelling place.

And this brings me to my second critique of Heidegger's over-valuation of the poetic word. Gray also points us in the direction of this problem, when, in another poem, he writes of walking in a park in the early morning ("Very Early", p. 159), concluding:

If no-one saw all this, its existence would go on just as well.
And what is really here no words can tell.

"What is really here no words can tell." Is there then a mode of being which, far from being made possible by human language, always, somehow, escapes it? Bate, following Heidegger, is very keen to protect language, especially poetry, from the blight of enframing. But, if, as Bate puts it, "enframing means making everything part of a system, thus obliterating the unconcealed being-there of particular things" (255), then is this not precisely what language does also? Certainly, Hegel would have us think so, and here, for once, I am more with Hegel (and behind him, Kant) than with Heidegger (and behind him, Nietzsche). Adam first asserted his dominion over the animals, Hegel argued in the *Jena System Programme* of 1803/4, through the imposition of names, which "annihilated" (*vernichtet*) their referents by substituting for their particular embodied being something general and ideational that could henceforth exist in the absence of the thing so named.¹ To this, the semiotician might add that things thus named are also incorporated into a system of signs, whose logic cannot be assumed to be that of the

¹ "Der erst Act, wodurch Adam seine Herrschafft über die Thiere constituiert hat, ist, daß er ihnen Nahmen gab, d.h. sie als seiende vernichtete, und sie zu für sich ideellen machte [...] Im Nahmen ist die für sich seyende Realität des Zeichens vernichtet. *Jenaer Systementwürfe I*, ed. K. Düsing-H. Kimmerle, *Gesammelt Werke*, Vol. 6, Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1975, p.20.

pattern of interrelationship prevailing among things-in-themselves. And yet, is this not in a sense admitted by Heidegger too? It is my suspicion that if Heidegger's poetics is poisoned by an over-valuation of human language, his account of the relationship between Earth and World in "The Origin of the Work of Art" might harbour an antidote.

As mentioned previously, this is one of the first texts in which Heidegger turns towards the Earth, arguing that "the World grounds itself upon the Earth, and the Earth thrusts up (*durchragt*) through the World" (UKW, 35). This interrelationship between World and Earth is the nexus from which the work of art originates, in Heidegger's account. Moreover, it is in the work of art that this interrelationship is made manifest. For the work of art itself 'erects' (*aufstellt*) a world, while at the same time 'emplacing' (*herstellt*) the Earth, disclosing it, that is, as a ground. Thus, "the work of art draws forth and holds the Earth in the Open of a World. The work lets the Earth be an Earth" (UKW, 32). Heidegger construes the relationship of Earth and World in a decidedly Nietzschean manner as agonistic, such that the work is said to inaugurate the 'strife' (*Streit*) of Earth and World (36). It is through this strife that both Earth and World truly come into their own, so to speak.

Most ecocritics, myself included, are probably predisposed to find this talk of strife distasteful. And yet there is something salutary here, reminding us that our own woolly talk about 'living in harmony with nature' is just not good enough. For it masks both the inevitable violence entailed in any making and dwelling and the abiding propensity of the Earth and elements to undo all our hard work at the least notice. Disliking strife, I am nonetheless inclined to refer instead to a mutually enhancing 'dialectic' of Earth and World (admittedly, this is really no better than a euphemism). Alternatively, we might borrow a term from Edward Casey: namely, "thickening." In his Heideggerian elucidation of the place-world (*Getting Back into Place. Toward a New Understanding of the Place-World*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993, p. 253), Casey uses this term to describe what happens in places where there is a reciprocal movement between nature and culture, whereby each is augmented by the other. If we translate 'thickening' back into German (whence, I suspect, Casey's term is derived), namely, as *Ver-dichtung*, it is apparent that such places are themselves *poietic* in a thoroughly Heideggerian sense (and as such, true places of dwelling). (If you want to know what such a place feels like, you should read Wordsworth's paean to Grasmere in "Home at Grasmere;" alternatively you could come and visit me in The Patch!) Perhaps, then, if we want to sidestep, not only strife, but also the euphemism of the dialectic, we might say that the work of art – which is, for Heidegger, always ultimately *Dichtung* – inaugurates and models a thickening of Earth and World, in which the difference between the two is not obliterated by their connection. Extending the metaphor, it would appear that the work is a 'clearing' which takes us right into the thick of things; entering into the poem, we might then find ourselves not so much in the open, as in a veritable thicket!

How then does Earth thrust up into the World in the work of art? In at least four ways, according to Heidegger in this essay. In one aspect, Earth appears in the work as the *heimatlicher Grund*, the ground upon which we seek to make our dwelling, recalling once again that even here, in the mid-1930s, the *Heimat* is to be rediscovered rather than simply inherited. Beyond this, Earth is implicit in the work at that matrix or 'harmony' (*Einklang*) which supports the relation of all natural beings, including, I would add (although Heidegger does not) human beings in their corporeal interconnectedness with

other beings. Most obviously, perhaps, Earth appears in the work in its own materiality or ‘thingliness.’ In literary works, this might include both the phonemes and graphemes – the physical ‘signifiers’ in semiotic-speak - and that whereon they appear, be that the breath of the speaker, in the case of oral literature, or the printed page. It is, as we have seen, to this earthly materiality of the text that Boisseau invites us to attend in her poem “Parchment.” Most significantly for my present argument, Heidegger insists here that in the dense materiality of the work of art, Earth appears as that which withdraws and remains hidden. This is no less true of poetry proper than of any other form of art. For if, as Heidegger maintains, the Earth is disclosed in language as that which remains closed (*das Verschlussene*), then, in the poetic work, Earth is preserved precisely in its unsayability (*Das entwerfende Sagen ist jenes, das in der Bereitung des Sagbaren zugleich das Unsagbare als ein solches zur Welt bringt*, UKW, 61).²

It is here, I would suggest, that we might find an antidote to the poisonous hubris of a poetics, Heidegger’s own indeed, within which “things need us in order to be named.” Following this construction of the Earth as unsayable, we might be led, as is Michel Haar, to a poetics that is more Rilkean than Heideggerian, a negative ecopoetics within which, as Haar puts it, “[p]oetry sings the sayable world, but so as to let it be beyond every name” (Haar, 123). According to Haar, Rilke’s “celebration of Earth (‘celebrating the Earth and not the Unsayable,’ *Ninth Elegy*) begins by affirming the expressibility of things and the disavowal of an absolute or supraterrrestrial unsayable, but finishes by assenting to the inexpressibility of Earthly presence itself” (124). There is more here too. Contra Heidegger in “What are Poets For?” Haar reinterprets Rilke’s metaphor of the *Weltinnenraum*, the “interior space of the world,” not as the interior of the human heart, the purely subjective place into which Heidegger claims the things of the Earth are subsumed in Rilke’s poetry, but rather as a space prior to the division of subject and object. This is a space in which the self is, so to speak, traversed by the other. Rilke puts it this way: “The one space reaches through all things: the internal space of the world. The birds traverse us in their flight...” (“Durch alle Wesen reicht der eine Raum: Weltinnenraum. Die Vögel fliegen durch uns hindurch...” “Fünf Gesänge,” *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. II, Insel, 1962, p. 93). This is, Haar suggests, the ‘heart of the world’ *beyond subjectivity*.

Picking up a pair of terms from *Being and Time*, one might also say that we are traversed by the other when our disposition (*Befindlichkeit*) is affected by a prevailing atmosphere or mood (*Stimmung*) of the Earth. This thinking of ‘mood’ and ‘disposition’ (a term, which Heidegger later dropped as too closely tied to *Dasein*) are perhaps the only aspects of Heidegger’s influential early work that can be made fruitful for ecocriticism, and even then, it is necessary to reconfigure them. In *Being and Time*, mood, understood as a pre-subjective ground of feeling through which the world is first opened to our awareness, pertains exclusively to the historical World of human social life. However, in light of the Turn, we might ask, again with Michel Haar, whether it might not also be related to the Earth (41)? Do not the Earth and the Sky, in the form of the topography of the land and its creatures, the weather, the seasons and time of day, also generate their

² Cf. “Zur Sache des Denkens” (Tubingen: Niemeyer, 1969, p.72): “the dark of the forest which language otherwise calls *Dickung*” resides within the opaque quality of the poetic word; *Lichtung* occurs as a moment of de-densifying, clearing. See Haar, p. 99: “Would this unfathomable and unnameable obscurity not be something like the original possibility of the Earth?”

own atmosphere which touches and moves us, whether we notice it or not? And is not the experience of such atmospheric effects, the experience of being traversed by “the moods of time and season [...] and the spirit of the place” as Wordsworth puts it in *The Prelude* (Book XII, lines 118-120; 1850 edition), the point of departure for most nature poetry? This is a line of investigation that has been taken up within the ecological aesthetics of Gernot Böhme, who draws upon the work of the German post-Heideggerian philosopher of the body, Hermann Schmitz. There is much more to be said about this, but that is another paper. In this context, the point that I would like to stress here once again is that while the work of art might generate its own atmosphere, no work of ecopoetry can convey more than a trace of the original experience of attunement to the moods of the time and season and the spirit of the place, to which it might allude.

How then does the poetic work save the Earth by disclosing it as unsayable? It does so, I would suggest, precisely to the extent that it draws attention to its own status as text, and hence as a mode of enframing. In this sense, the poem saves the Earth by preserving its hiddenness in the non-equation of word and thing. It may do so in a variety of ways, to which the ecocritic no less than the deconstructionist (from whom ecocritics might have a few tips to learn!) should be attentive. These include explicit disavowals of sayability, as in the conclusion of Gray’s “Early Morning,” moments of semantic incoherence, and the formal qualities manifested by all texts, qualities which declare them to be artifacts, works of poetic *techne* rather than self-disclosures of *physis*. An ecopoetics attentive to this moment of negativity, to the withholding of what is promised, might be referred to in Lyotardian terms as a “discourse of the secluded,” that is, a discourse on that which lies outside all enframings, all social systems, including that of language.

Now, to those of you schooled in Derridean criticism, the negativity of my proposed ecopoetics will doubtless seem dreadfully familiar, not to say old hat. There is nonetheless a profound difference in orientation between a Derridean and an ecocritical concern with negative poetics. In order to illuminate that difference, I can do no better than turn to the words of another Frenchman, namely the poet Yves Bonnefoy, who, in an inspired article from 1988, urged literary critics to ‘lift their eyes from the page’ (Eng. trans. “Lifting Our Eyes from the Page,” *Critical Inquiry* 16, Summer 1990, pp. 794-806). Here, Bonnefoy suggests that while the “textualist revolution” in literary studies over the past twenty years had begun with an important insight into the non-correspondence between the world of the text and the world of embodied experience, it had generated a preoccupation with ‘textuality’ *per se*, at the expense of a concern with the world (let alone the Earth!), which, he insists, continues to exist beyond the text. Indeed, he argues that the exclusive concern with relations obtaining solely within and between texts had reduced criticism to “nothing so much as a game – a game without any other responsibility than intellectual – whereas the work studied, on the other hand, might have been an experience of the tragedy of life” (796). This game is a betrayal of the critic’s responsibility both to the world (and the Earth), and to the work, for it obscures a crucial dimension of literature itself: namely, the way in which it both draws us in and sends us forth, urging us to ‘interrupt’ our reading by returning our gaze to the world beyond the page. “It is not within the poet’s scope to reestablish presence,” Bonnefoy writes. “But he can recall that presence is a possible experience, and he can stir up the need for it, keep open the path that leads toward it – after which one will read him and

restore to his poem the benefit of that experience it had been unable to completely achieve.” (801). From this one could conclude that although poetry might be valuable in admitting us into dwelling, it can only do so if we resist the textualist temptation of allowing the word to displace the world. With reference to a sonnet by Mallarme, Bonnefoy asks: “How can we read about ‘forgotten woods’ over which ‘somber winter’ passes without going into woods that are our own, where we can either find or lose ourselves?” (806)

But if our woods are no more, what then are poets for?

Then, I would suggest, we need poets who, in Heidegger’s words, are able to disclose “das Heillose *als* das Heillose.” One such poet of the romantic period was John Clare, a rural labourer and autodidact, who sang not only of the wondrous beauty and fragility of the natural world in his own corner of Northamptonshire, but also of the ravages caused both to the land and to the rural poor, by the enclosure of erstwhile common land. One of my favourite of Clare’s protest poems is “The Mores,” which begins in somewhat Wordsworthian manner with a recollection of a place in which he had loved to ramble as a child. This place of memory is presented as irretrievable in the present, not so much because of a change in the subjectivity of the poet, as in Wordsworth’s verse, but rather because the place itself has been destroyed. What was once a rich ecosystem, in which both human and non-human, wild and domestic creatures could share with pleasure, has now been stolen from the community by private ownership, marred by fences and turned over to the production of cash crops. Thus, Clare’s poem traces a path to a place whose,

paths are stopt – the rude philistines thrall
Is laid upon them and destroyed them all
Each little tyrant with his little sign
Shows where man claims earth glows no more divine
On paths to freedom and to childhood dear
A board sticks up to notice ‘no roads here’

Lifting our eyes from Clare’s poem to our World and our Earth, we might be led to recall that the loss of the commons, of community, of biodiversity and ecosocial well-being has in the meantime reached global proportions. And so, in conclusion, I would like to commend to you the words of another untutored poet, one of our own day, a nameless, and possibly collective poet of protest, who is also concerned to disclose “das Heillose *als* das Heillose.” The anonymous words of this text are considerably less skillfully wrought than Clare’s; they are raw, passionate, probably naïve. I commend them to you, then, not as a work of ecopoetry, but rather as a reminder of the context within which it has once again become important to ask what are poets for in needy times. Here then are the words of an anonymous voice from the Seattle protest against the machinations of multinational capital, for which we are all, human and otherwise, truly but ‘standing reserve’:

“Why we are here”

Because the world we had imagined,
the one we had always counted on is disappearing.
Because the sun has become cancerous
and the planet is getting hotter.
Because children are starving
in the shadows of yachts and economic summits.
Because there are already too many planes in the sky.

This is the manufactured world
you seek to codify and expedite.
We are here to tell you
there is something else we want to buy.

What we want money no longer recognizes
like the vitality of nature,
the integrity of work.
We don't want engineered fruit,
we want to see and smell the food
growing in our neighbourhoods.

We are here because a voice inside us,
a memory in our blood, tells us
you are not just a bank, or a fund;
you have become the blind tip
of a dark wave which has forgotten its source.
We are here to defend and honour
what is real, natural, human and basic
against these rising tides of greed.

We are here by the insistence of spirit
and by the authority of nature.
If you doubt for one minute the power of truth
or the primacy of nature
try not breathing for that length of time.

Now you know the pressure of our desire.
We are not here to tinker with your laws.
We are here to change you, and ourselves,
from the inside out.
This is not a political protest.
It is an uprising of the soul.

What are poets for? I too would like to believe that poets can in some measure help us to 'save the Earth.' However, they will only be able to do so if we are prepared to look up and listen when they urge us to lift our eyes from the page.

ⁱ Shelley's participation in this 'revolution in taste' is explored by Timothy Morton (1994).

ⁱⁱ The term 'earth others,' which refers to all natural entities, from rhinos to river systems, microbes to mountains, is taken from Val Plumwood (1994).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," which concludes with the assertion, "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess" (Haraway 1991, 181). In Haraway's case, it should be stressed, becoming cyborg does not imply disaffiliation from the earth. I nonetheless find her choice of alternatives too narrow, and her readiness to embrace a technologised identity counterproductive in terms of revaluing and reconnecting with the natural world.

^{iv} This distinction comes from Aristotle and refers to things crafted by humans, as well as the crafting capacity itself, as opposed to those things which are given by nature.

^v See e.g. the Special Forum on "Literatures of the Environment" in *PMLA* 114/5 (October 1999).