Exorcising Modernism

edited by
Mikołaj Wiśniewski

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Nick Selby

Answering "Each in His Nature": Some Ways out of *The Cantos*

There are the Alps. What is there to say about them?
They don't make sense. Fatal glaciers, crags cranks climb,
jumbled boulder and weed, pasture and boulder, scree,
et l'on entend, maybe, le refrain joyeux et leger.
Who knows what the ice will have scraped on the rock it
is smoothing?

There they are, you will have to go a long way round
if you want to avoid them.
It takes some getting used to. There are the Alps,
fools! Sit down and wait for them to crumble!

Basil Bunting, "On the Fly-Leaf of Pound's Cantos" (132)

For Elizabeth Bishop and A. R. Ammons "nature" as it occurs in Ezra Pound's *The Cantos* – and, by extension, in modernism more generally – is a ghost in need of exorcism. Not only is this

because the very fact of *The Cantos* looms over subsequent poets, seemingly insurmountable – as Basil Bunting points out in the poem I am using as an epigraph to this essay – but it is also because the legacy of modernism they represent exerts such a powerful sway over how these poets have come to think about the world they depict and inhabit. For Bunting *The Cantos* are a discrete world. They are massive, supremely unknowable and sublimely indifferent (like Shelley's "Mont Blanc") to our foolish attentions. Their "nature" is entirely other, uninhabitable. However, it is with such a depiction of Pound's poetic project that fault-lines within modernist conceptions of "nature" begin to show and, through them, the poetic edifice of *The Cantos* begins to crumble. Bunting's poem, that is, starts showing what it is that Bishop and Ammons seek to exorcise in *The Cantos*. First, the nature of the poem and the nature of reality are seen to be both incommensurate and incommunicable. For, despite the mass and weight – their "thingness" – ascribed to them by Bunting, *The Cantos* are absent from his poem, named only in its title. The very fact of their matter can be approached only through Bunting's extended geological metaphor. This, in turn, means that "nature" and culture are felt to be inescapably divided. The fact of the Alps – "There are the Alps" – and the fact of *The Cantos* may reflect each other, but Pound's poem stands apart from "nature," the world of rocky things "out there." And second, this division is conditioned by vertical tropes expressing a human desire to conquer "nature." One must, in Bunting's view, either scale the heights of *The Cantos* or wait for them to crumble down to earth. Such conditioning, as Timothy Morton has pointed out, reaches back to Romantic conceptions of "nature" but is inextricably bound-into a modern world-view.[1] Facing such a modernist legacy, both Bishop and

[1] The argument of Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* hinges on the notion that the conception of "nature" developed

Ammons develop poetics that challenge the sorts of modernist conceptions of "nature" made evident by Bunting's poem. Their answer to Pound's legacy are poems that seek to exorcise "nature" as the ghost-in-the-machine of modernity.

This essay traces such an exorcism by examining the ways in which the respective poetics of Bishop and Ammons mark the sorts of attitudes to "nature" that undergird *The Cantos* in particular, and modernist American poetics more generally, as profoundly troubled. The essay's second half will focus especially on close readings of Bishop's "At the Fishhouses" and Ammons' "Corsons Inlet." And I will argue, throughout, that Bishop and Ammons find ways out of Pound's (and modernism's) poetic legacy by exercising an ecological poetics in which modernist conceptions of "nature" (such as those revealed in Bunting's poem) are disrupted. This is because rather than presenting "nature" as something "over there" whose heights might be scaled by human endeavour, their poetics set out to explore a horizontal web of connections in which poem and world, things and thinking, poet and reader are inextricably entangled. Indeed, the sort of ecological poetics that we see played out in "At the Fishhouses" and "Corsons Inlet" can be seen to perform precisely the sort of "ungrounding" of the human which "forces it back onto the ground (...) *Earth*," and which – as Timothy Morton argues – is necessary to "ecological thought" (*Hyperobjects* 18). These poems re-cast "nature" not as a transcendent reality towards which a poem might gesture, but as the very ground in which they work, an environment of "things" both human and non-human extending across the poetic field in a relationship of

in Romantic thinking and furthered by modernity paradoxically stands in the way of ecological thought. He notes (11) that Nature and a sense of place are a "retroactive fantasy (...) determined by the corrosive effects of modernity." The classic exposition of the nature-culture divide is Raymond Williams in his *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. See also Kate Soper *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the non-Human*.

consequences and contingencies. Both poets, that is, answer the overarching scale and ambition of Pound's "forty-year epic" via a poetics of detailed observation and speculation that is bound together in a web of intimate interrelations. For them, as we shall see, the poem is an entangled environment. It is what Jane Bennett describes as a "vibrant object" whose entanglements ground its aesthetic operation in the earth rather than in conceptions of "nature" that arise out of "the misty transcendentalism of modernity" that Morton diagnoses as getting in the way of true ecological thinking (*Hyperobjects* 20).[2] What this essay asserts, then, is that it is precisely from their poetic attempts to exorcise modernity (via Pound) that Bishop and Ammons can be read as proto eco-poets.

Of course, it might be argued that *The Cantos* themselves offer the sort of entangled poetic environment, detailed observation and web of connections and contingencies that I am invoking when I describe Bishop's and Ammons' response to Pound. This is very much how Richard Caddel has read Pound's epic. For Caddel, *The Cantos* deliver "an experiential closeness to things" (145) which contrasts markedly with a "Romantic sensibility to natural things" which operates as "a kind of tourism" (141). Quite correctly Caddel sees the power and inventiveness of Pound's poetic project as resting in its ability to give vibrant and detailed attention to "nature," to the things of the world as they become the things of his poem. Here, says Caddel, is a poetic modelling for "an ecology" in that it is "based on real observation" (143). In Caddel's reading of it, Pound's poem is an "open-ended," "interactive" and "dynamic system" and thus provides a model for thinking through the "jump from nature poetry to ecological poetry" (139). Such a description of *The Cantos* is remarkably close to how I am seeking to characterise the poetics

[2] See also *Ecology Without Nature* where Morton describes Nature as a "transcendental principle" underpinning modern thought (5) and "a transcendental term in a material mask" (14).

of Bishop and Ammons in their attempt to disentangle themselves from the ghost of Pound. So, what is it – then – that allows us to read their work as more properly ecological than that of Pound? What is it that marks *The Cantos* as a less fully aware exercise in ecological thinking than "At the Fishhouses" and "Corsons Inlet"? At their heart, these questions recognise that modernist conceptions of "nature" as they are at play in Pound's poetics are inadequate to the ecological thinking that I am arguing takes place in the work of Bishop and Ammons (and it is for this reason that I will refer to "nature" – in inverted commas – throughout this essay). Answering such questions, therefore, propels my reading of Bishop and Ammons towards an object-oriented poetics which asserts a non-anthropomorphic understanding of "nature." This will require a more detailed discussion of Jane Bennett's idea of (poems as) vibrant objects. Before coming to that, though, I want to think a little more about the modernist legacy that *The Cantos* represent for Bishop and Ammons. To do this I will turn, first, to Pound's "Canto 13," and then to a poem each by Bishop and Ammons that, rather than taking the "long way round," explicitly face up to Pound's legacy.

After the welter of Graeco-Roman myth, the babble of various European voices and histories, and the starkly disjunctive modernist poetics of fragmentation and disjunction that confront us in the first dozen cantos, "Canto 13" announces a (poetic) realm of natural order, political balance and aesthetic contemplation. This canto signals the entry of Confucian thinking into Pound's epic project. It is delicate and poised, a still point in a turbulent modernist world. It presents a contemplative moment of poetic calm prior to the turbulent disorder and poetic rancour of the "Hell Cantos" that immediately follow it and which bitterly excoriate modern society. Yet, despite its apparent eschewal of modernity, "Canto 13" still projects "nature" and the natural world through a modernist lens. Indeed, "Canto 13" provides a useful measure

of Morton's proposition that the idea of "nature" supports modern thought by becoming "a transcendental term in a material mask" (*Ecology without Nature* 14). The ground that "Canto 13" occupies is one of Confucian instruction (which Pound patches together from various sources in the Confucian *Analects*). Confucius – "Kung" in the canto – discusses effective action and the arts of leadership with his pupils. The pupils – quite literally – follow Confucius as he walks through the landscape:

> Kung walked
>   by the dynastic temple
>   and into the cedar grove,
>   and then out to the lower river,
> And with him Khieu, Tchi,
>   and Tian the low speaking.
>   (*Cantos* 58)

Their various responses to Kung's statement that "we are unknown" offer military, political, religious and aesthetic solutions to the apparent problem posed by their teacher. Tseu-lou would "put the defences in order," while Khieu would – as "lord of a province" – "put it in better order than this is," and Tchi would "prefer a small mountain temple (...) with order in the observances, / with a suitable performance of the ritual." Different forms of order, that is, are offered against the chaos of the unknown. But it is Tian's "answer" that provides the most sustained and complex response to Kung and it is one that pitches aesthetic pleasure against the threat of dispersal into unknowingness:

> And Tian said, with his hand on the strings of his lute
> The low sounds continuing
>   after his hand left the strings,
> And the sound went up like smoke, under the leaves,

And he looked after the sound:
"The old swimming hole,
"And the boys flopping off the planks,
"Or sitting in the underbrush playing mandolins."
(*Cantos* 58)

That Tian's response to Kung is the lengthiest of all the pupils' responses, riddlingly metaphorical, and couched in terms of music is surely not unimportant as part of an epic project whose very title refers to song and whose structure Pound conceived of musically.[3] Indeed, George Kearns has pointed out that Canto 13's "exposition" of Confucianism operates in "the musical, not the rhetorical, sense" (56). For Pound, it seems, the chaos of nature can be overcome by the power of music, that is – extrapolating into the scheme of *The Cantos* as a whole[4] – by poetry. Or, at least, the poem offers a space of retreat from the world; the "boys" may well remain unknown but they do have the compensation of aesthetic pleasure. And the calm poetic pleasures of the canto are ones associated with being in the natural world: "flopping off (...) planks," "sitting in the underbrush" and noting, at the canto's conclusion, how "The blossoms of the apricot / blow from the east to the west / And I have tried to keep them from falling" (60). What is being laid out here is Pound's conception of a rather special relationship between "the poetic" and "the natural." There are, however, problems with this formulation. Through them, the crumbling of Pound's depiction of "nature" in his epic modernist project might be detected. For what "Canto 13" proposes is an anthropocentric world-view grounded in a stark division between "nature" and culture.

3 Pound described *The Cantos* as "rather like, or unlike, subject and response and counter subject in fugue" in a letter to his father, 11 April, 1927. See *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound* (210).

4 George Dekker in *Sailing After Knowledge* notes that "the implications of this canto must be grasped if we are to understand the rest of the poem" (3).

This is made clear in the closing lines of the canto. The resigned failure to arrest the falling of the apricot blossoms in these lines suggests that the transmission of Confucian thought from East to West will be piecemeal, at best, if not entirely thwarted. What is interesting here is that "nature" and natural processes (apricot blossom, the falling of leaves) become metaphors for cultural processes. "Nature" is thus written over, transcended even as it is announced in the text. We witness this, too, in the passage detailing Tian's response to Kung. His voice – he is described as "low speaking" – and his music – "low sounds" – ascend into the air "like smoke, under the leaves." Such movement from depths to heights effectively writes "nature" into a set of vertical (and thus "transcendent") relations. In such a hierarchy of relations, aesthetic order overwrites "nature." This all points to the fact that, in Pound's poetics (as in modernism more broadly), "nature" is read in such a way that it becomes that which it is not, an aestheticised "other" to human culture. The laying claim to "nature" for anthropocentric purposes is at the heart of the canto and exposes the limitations of how *The Cantos* treat the object world. This becomes even more apparent when we consider the fact that Pound seems at particular pains *not* to privilege Tian's response to Kung over those of Tseu-lou, Khieu and Tchi. In Pound's source – *Confucian Analects*, Book 11, xxv, 1-8 – Confucius praises Tian above the others (who he criticises for being self-serving). In the canto, however, we are told that "Kung smiled upon all of them equally." The reason for this alteration lies in the subsequent lines of the canto and the understanding of "nature" – a word that George Dekker notes is a key word for "Canto 13" (6) – that they endorse. In these lines Thseng-sie asks Kung which of his pupils "had answered correctly" to which Kung responds: "'They have all answered correctly, / 'That is to say, each in his nature'" (58). Here, then, "nature" constitutes an internal, *human*, condition for Pound. It is not seen as something standing on its own *apart from* human

intervention but as the means *through which* human action in the world comes to be expressed and justified. To answer in such a way – "each in his nature" – is thus to see such "nature" as merely a foil to desires for cultural order, whether they be seen in military, political, religious or aesthetic terms. In such a way, Pound's "nature" is both profoundly haunted by that of Emerson and might be seen to lead to Pound's totalitarian politics. It is this intellectual legacy that both Bishop and Ammons interrogate through their efforts to develop an ecologically nuanced poetics.

I turn now to two poems in which Bishop and Ammons each explicitly answer Pound's legacy. As well as demonstrating Bishop's and Ammons's consciously felt need to face up to that legacy, these poems also help define the terms of these poets' respective eco-poetics – how they answer Pound, as it were, "in their nature."

First, Bishop's "Visits to St Elizabeths" (1956) surveys the wreckage of Pound's life and of his shattered poetic project after the second world war. She made several visits to Pound – in 1949-1950 – at St Elizabeths hospital in Washington (where he was incarcerated) while she worked as poetry consultant at the Library of Congress. Her poem depicts him as a lost and homeless figure, exiled in a poetic labyrinth modelled on the nursery rhyme "The House that Jack Built." Bishop's Pound is trapped in an increasingly complex, though repetitive and bitterly ironic, poetic edifice of his own making. By turns Pound is described as a "tragic," "honoured" and "old, brave" man; as the poem progresses he becomes "cranky," "cruel" and "tedious" and towards the end he becomes "the wretched man / that lies in the house of Bedlam" (133-35). The poetic accretion that spins out the rest of the poem from its opening declaration "This is the house of Bedlam // This is the man / That lies in the house of Bedlam" affords Bishop one way out of the disaster of Pound's politics. This is because her poetic form, building one

more line into each new stanza, makes very real the sense of connectedness which Pound's poetics tragically misses. Bishop's poem repeatedly reminds us, in the phrase that closes each stanza (the "man / that lies in the house of Bedlam"), that Pound's poetic edifice is built on "lies." In this way her poem serves, among other things, as an indictment of the failures of modernism. If her poem points to the modern world we inhabit ("This is the time / of the tragic man") it also figures such times through the building of an insane asylum, with Pound the monster at the heart of this modern labyrinth. For, as Guy Davenport has so exquisitely shown, the myth of the Cretan labyrinth runs through modernism and is very plausibly the origin of the rhyme "The House that Jack Built" (45-60).

By writing Pound into the entanglements of this nursery rhyme, Bishop's point seems to be that no poem – no poet – can ever be entirely innocent in its description of, and relation to, the object world. The poetic house that Pound built – *The Cantos* – fails, ultimately, for Bishop because Pound's epic desire to build a poetic republic renders the world mysterious. The world is flattened by books (another form of transcending the "natural") only to be subject, in the next stanzas of the poem, to the frustrated enquiries of a "boy that pats the floor" into the state of that world. These enquiries are phenomenological ones, grounded in the boy's senses of sight and feeling. But they are ones that cannot be answered in Pound's poetics. They also expose one of the conditions of modernity, namely its treating of the things of the world as objects subject to the Daedalian ingenuity by which humans transform that world into a dwelling place (of wooden boards, walls and a door, all – presumably – made from "natural" objects transformed through human technologies): "This is the boy that pats the floor / to see if the world is there, is flat, / (...) / These are the years and the walls and the door / that shut on a boy that pats the floor / to feel if the world is there and flat" (134).

Here we can see that the grounds of Bishop's response to Pound are ecological ones; her poetry is concerned with questions of home and how to describe the world in which we find ourselves. In this she distinguishes herself from the cultural edifice – the poetic house that Pound built – of modernity in which "nature" is subsumed by human endeavours and failures. Her poetics is thus – properly – ecological in the attention it gives to οίκος – home – to the object world and our inhabitation of it. And it is this, I argue, that allows us to trace what Bonnie Costello has described as Bishop's "major temperamental shift (...) from the poetry of high modernism on which her imagination was bred" (92).

Second, we witness the poetic heave of such a shift in the poem that opens Ammons's *Collected Poems*. First published in 1951, "So I said I am Ezra" directly faces up to the poetic legacy of *The Cantos* (1). Like Bishop's "Visits to St Elizabeths," Ammons's poem writes Pound into a web of poetic connections, into an epic project that sees him finally stranded and voiceless, a homeless exile. "So I said I am Ezra" acts out a deft poetic ventriloquism. It follows Pound in its imagery and mythic resonance, but answers him by attending to the ecological implications of the poetic environment through which the *The Cantos* operate in their opening moments. Like "Canto 1," which begins with "And" ("And then went down to the ship") and closes with the connective phrase "So that," Ammons's poem opens as already connected to the environment of entangled myth, history and poetry from which it emerges. Both poems take place on a windy shoreline, with Ammons's "voice of the surf (...) oceanward" echoing Pound's "winds from sternward." And both seek to raise ghostly voices. However, where *The Cantos* begin with the ritual by which Odysseus calls up the spirits of the dead to facilitate his eventual return home, Ammons's poem seeks to exorcise the ghosts of modernity that are raised by Pound's poetic digging into mythic shorelines:

So I said I am Ezra
and the wind whipped my throat
gaming for the sounds of my voice
          I listened to the wind
go over my head and up into the night
Turning to the sea I said

I am Ezra
but there were no echoes from the waves
The words were swallowed up
          in the voice of the surf
or leaping over the swells
lost themselves oceanward

(1)

Here it is not simply the voice, but the very bodily experience of giving voice to something and of naming oneself that is subject to dissolution by – and into – the forces of "nature." The contrast with the propitiatory rite with which *The Cantos* open is thus heavily marked; whereas, in "Canto 1," Odysseus's dead companion Elpenor desires to be remembered in the inscription on his tomb – "*A man of no fortune, and with a name to come*" (4) – the words of Ammons's Ezra are "swallowed up / in the voice of the surf" and his name is lost to the wind. "Nature" cannot be coerced here into a mythic pattern of loss and return (one of the controlling tropes of Pound's epic project). Indeed, the violence of "the wind whipped my throat" coupled with the disdainfully playful "gaming for the sounds of my voice" renders the external world implacable and unresponsive ("there were no echoes from the waves") at the scale of human concerns.

This is not to say, though, that Ammons's poem merely turns "nature" into an intractable force, much like Bunting's earlier characterisation of *The Cantos*. That would be – simply – to return

to views of "nature" as sublimely transcendent, the sort of metaphysical foil for aesthetic endeavour – as Morton has shown – that I am arguing Ammons seeks to challenge. So, although Ammons stages, at the outset of his poetic career, the threat to his poetics of being swallowed up by its modernist precursors by taking on the name of Ezra in this poem, he also finds a means of absolving his poetics from such a threat through the reading of "nature" that the poem develops. We witness this in the poem's attention to tropes of echoing. Not only does the poem echo "Canto 1" (and *The Cantos* more broadly) as we have seen, but its tone, imagery and setting also echo Pound's early imagist poem "The Return" as well as H.D.'s "Hermes of the Ways" in that Ammons's "whipped my throat" recalls the wind-swept "coarse, salt-crusted grass / (...) / [that] whips round my ankles" in H.D.'s poem (38). The "arid plain" and "handful of dust" of Eliot's *The Waste Land* are also echoed in Ammons's description of "sheets of sand" that are "ripped" and thrown across the dunes by the wind. In these examples, Ammons's voice emerges from modernism's poetic echo chamber only to be subsumed into a seemingly mythic environment of half-heard prophecy (the Biblical Ezra), drowned voices (like Eliot's Phlebas, lost to the "sea swell") and a half-world of sea "swells," wind and mist (with Ammons's startling "seamists" signalling this swallowing of one thing into another). Here, poetry itself occupies – indeed mediates, like Hermes, like Homer's Tiresias – a space between the quotidian and the divine. And what is acted out in such a space is a human drama in which "nature" is both transcendent and destructive: the wind "[goes] *over* my head and *up* into the night"; there are "no echoes from the waves"; words are "swallowed *up*," "leaping *over* the swells / lost"; and the speaker walks "*over* the bleached and broken fields" [emphasis added]. The sharp separation, here, between object-world and poetic-world is one, I argue, through which modernism operates by privileging the human *over* the natural.

"So I Said I am Ezra" is not, however, content to rest on such a separation. As the poem proceeds, its words become entangled *within* the environment they describe, rather than seeking to transcend it. This gives the poem a bodily force and vibrancy:

> The words (...)
> lost themselves oceanward
>   Over the bleached and broken fields
> I moved my feet and turning from the wind
>   that ripped sheets of sand
>   from the beach and threw them
>   like seamists across the dunes
> swayed as if the wind were taking me away
> and said
>   I am Ezra
>
> (1)

Rather than seeking aesthetic compensation by raising ghosts – voices from the mythic past – to counter the loss of voice and identity from which it is generated, the poem sees such loss as a measure of its capacity to enact a proper sense of being-in-the-world. As a result, the poem's human subject and "nature" as the object of the poem's attention become tangled together, with Ammons's poetic form expressly working to blur the division between objective and subjective realities. Words are therefore "lost (...) oceanward / Over the (...) fields" so that their dispersal into the wind (and into the poem) underscores the fact that the grammatically suspended subject in the following line – "I moved my feet" – is also conditioned by the phrase "Over the bleached and broken fields." The actions of the wind and of the subject in the wind are further complicated and entwined together in the lines that follow where the speaker's active movement in "turning from the wind" gives way to his passive "sway[ing]" in the wind,

as though it "were taking [him] away." These lines bracket three other lines in which the wind's power to enact such a taking away of agency is signalled by the muscular verbs "ripped" and "threw" (which in turn recall, again, many of the poems in H.D.'s *Sea Garden* collection), and by the image of sand scattered "across the dunes" by the wind. And at this point it is no longer clear who or what is speaking. Both wind and speaker are so enmeshed now that both of them could be construed as the subject of the verb "said." This impression is strengthened by the line break, raising the question "Is it the poem's speaker or the wind that now speaks?" When heard here the phrase "I am Ezra" which echoes throughout the poem is therefore either a defiant attempt on the part of the poem's speaker to re-assert his identity, or it is the point at which that identity is snatched away by the wind, with the poem's voice now subject to the power and echoing mimicry of the natural world.

And it is in this way that the poem exorcises the modernist ghosts that are conjured up by the echoing invocation of its opening word: "So." For Ammons, what follows – or answers – modernity, then, is a "fall[ing] out of being" rather than a ventriloquised repetition of one of its key voices. In realising this, Ammons's poetics is released into engaging the object world as it is, rather than reading it as an archetypal landscape onto which are written human struggles. However much we may think it does, the natural world does not reflect – echo – us. In recognition of this, the poem's closing lines, noticeably, do not seek dominance *over* "nature," rather they describe its speaker: "Ezra (...) splash[ing] *among* the windy oats / that clutch the dunes / of unremembered seas" [emphasis added]. Such "amongstness" is crucial, therefore, to the poem's negotiation of modernity (and, as we will see, to Ammons's development and deployment of an ecologically aware poetics) as it marks the poem's engagement with, and entanglement within, "nature." Whereas his modernist precursors write themselves away

from "nature," Ammons seeks a poetics that immerses him in it. The seas at the poem's close are "unremembered," that is, because the poem now seeks to engage a world unmediated by echoes of myth, past experience or previous poets. For the poem to "clutch the dunes" in this way is to offer a new approach to the real in which poem and speaking voice are participants in "nature" rather than means of controlling it (via ancient ritual or poetic mastery). What Ammons realises in this opening poem of his first collection, then, is that he must answer Pound in his own poetic "nature" and that to do this his poetics must acknowledge its own entanglement within a play of forces that extend beyond just the cultural, the human. A poem is not, for Ammons, therefore, merely a model of the natural world (a sort of metaphorical ground into which one might dig so as to release redemptive ghosts), but an integral component of it. This poetic thought – which is, of its nature, an ecological thought – brings us to Jane Bennett's discussion of vibrant objects, and to her notion that a poem's affective force rests in its acknowledgement of its condition as a vital participant in the object world.

According to Jane Bennett "things" have "force," they act upon us – aesthetically, politically, ethically – because their material nature is affective, or "vibrant." We do not face, that is, a universe of inert matter, but one in which human and non-human alike are "actants" engaged and entangled together in everyday, earthly existence (*Vibrant Matter* 8-10). Her assertion of "thing-power" or the "force of things" entails a shift of focus (which entails, in itself, a shift away from modernist modes of thinking) from "the language of epistemology to that of ontology" (3). This shift from epistemology to ontology is, of course, central to Brian McHale's classic formulation of the differences between modernism and postmodernism (McHale 10-11). I am not, however, simply arguing that by exorcising Pound's ghost Bishop and Ammons merely enter the "postmodern." Although much postmodern thinking is useful

to the sort of ecological thought that leads from an object-oriented poetics, not only does postmodernism's relativisation of values – or "correlationism" (as Morton puts it) – rest on anthropocentric views of "nature," but it also rejects the idea that there can be any reality outside of the textual (*Hyperobjects* 9). What I am asserting is that this has profound consequences for thinking about how Bishop and Ammons respond to their modernist legacy. Their poetic negotiations with Pound, that is, furnish them with a new poetics of reality, one which approaches the "force of things" and consequently feels "nature" differently from their modernist forefather. Theirs becomes a vibrant poetics. And it is precisely the attention of such an object-oriented poetics to the nature of reality, to that "irreducibly strange dimension of matter, an *out*-side," that marks it as nonanthropocentric (*Vibrant Matter* 2-3). It exorcises modernism by privileging investigations of "being in the world" rather than ones of knowledge about the world. Indeed, what Bennett describes in her intellectual project as a shift "from a focus on an elusive recalcitrance hovering between immanence and transcendence (the absolute) to an active, earthy, not-quite-human capaciousness (vibrant matter)" (*Vibrant Matter* 3) serves well to describe the terms in which I am approaching a reading of Bishop and Ammons *after* Pound.

Bennett's opposition, here, between ideas of "the absolute" and of "vibrant matter" points up a problem with Pound's modernist project that Bishop and Ammons, as I have started to show, seek to answer. On the one hand, *The Cantos* provide only a "*model*," as Caddel has it, of the jump from "nature poetry to ecological poetry." "Nature," as we have seen in the example of "Canto 13," operates throughout *The Cantos* as a transcendent idea about the world that, moreover, conditions Pound's thinking about human-nonhuman relations. In effect, and to borrow Wallace Stevens's phrase, *The Cantos* deliver "ideas about the thing" rather than "the thing itself" (534). This means that "nature" as it is

described by *The Cantos* is – as we shall see – withdrawn from the object through which it is observed or realised. As object oriented thinkers such as Morton, Bennett and Graham Harman have argued, such a withdrawal (Bennett's sense of the "recalcitrance" of things) plagues modernist thinking.[5] On the other hand, this sort of withdrawal from its objects leads *The Cantos* to privilege tropes of verticality over ones of horizontality. This is because Pound's epic project – indeed the poetics of modernism for which it is a model – reaches after the absolute by reading the world of things ("nature" itself) as a means of achieving visionary transcendence (or mythic depth). As Pound noted, *The Cantos* are an attempt to "bust thru from [the] quotidien [sic!] into [the] 'divine'" (*Selected Letters* 210). By emphasising vertical tropes in this way, Pound's poetics hierarchizes his relation to the world of objects and places the human at its centre. Curiously, then, *The Cantos* – despite claims for them as the model for a modernist poetics – are steeped in Romantic understandings of "nature" (as transcendent, other, ultimately unknowable) that are both anthropocentric and profoundly "American," and which – Morton has argued – preclude ecological thinking.[6]

In contrast to this, Bishop's and Ammons's poetics both explore the gap between the things of their poems and the things of the world, and emphasise horizontal relations. Rather than seeking to read "through" things toward some transcendental truth about the world, their poetry explores the relations that inhere amongst and between the things of the world. And such things include the poem and the poet; cultural objects do not – that is – stand apart from natural ones. Such an object oriented poetics has important political and aesthetic consequences, as Jane Bennett's

[5] Morton, *Hyperobjects* 11-15, 56-8, 76; Bennett *Vibrant Matter* 1, 50; Harman, *Tool-Being* 129-32.

[6] In *The Ecological Thought* Morton writes that "What we call Nature is monstrous and mutating, strangely strange all the way down and all the way through" (61).

work demonstrates. The horizontalising of object relations (quite apart from undercutting discourses of modernity, as Bruno Latour has pointed out[7]) is part and parcel of Bishop's and Ammons's ecological poetics. Bennett has noted that "to begin to experience the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally, is to take a step toward a more ecological sensibility" (*Vibrant Matter* 10). What this entails for Bishop and Ammons, then, is not just to get past Pound's politics (the instrumentalizing brutalities that led to his advocacy of fascism) but also to move towards a more properly ecological sense of poem itself as an affective – "vibrant" – object within a field of entangled relations to the world. Their poetry is thus neither distinct nor different from the environment in which it finds itself an (aesthetic) actant. As I hope to demonstrate further, theirs is a poetry that, in Bennett's words, "can help us feel more of the liveliness of (...) things and reveal more of the threads of connection binding our fate to theirs" ("Systems and Things" 232).

I want now to pick up two aspects of such object-oriented poetics by considering Bishop's "At the Fishhouses" and Ammons's "Corsons Inlet." As discussed above both of these aspects arise from the assertion that the object world remains recalcitrantly withdrawn from us. Though this sense of withdrawal might seem to account for modernity's attempt to repair a sense of alienation and loss in its dealings with the world, my argument is that this is not the case in Bishop and Ammons. And this is precisely because their poetics takes place in a world of entangled relationships rather than by standing outside of the world in order to describe it. For them, alienation is a condition of Being to be explored rather than a symptom of modernity to be conquered. First, then, I will argue that Bishop's attention to vertical and horizontal tropes in "At the

[7] See Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* on the notion of horizontalisation as a function of "Humanism Redistributed" (136-38).

Fishhouses" allows her to read against the epic instrumentality of *The Cantos*. For Bishop, home (however contested) rests in a poetic play of horizontalised relations. In this sense, as we shall see, οίκος is at the ecological heart of her poetic economy. And, second, I argue that "Corsons Inlet" does not present itself as a poetic modelling of "nature." Rather, it is a participant in it. Poetic observation and speculation in Ammons's poem, then, is active – bodily, a walk – and it raises questions of scale, scope and line because its concern is to determine what part of "nature" a poem inhabits rather than to bracket off "nature" by poetic description. My readings of "At the Fishhouses" and "Corsons Inlet" proceed, then, as means of exemplifying and developing an argument that Bishop and Ammons find ways out of *The Cantos* by reading against the grain of modernist tropes of "nature." Both of these poems, that is, might be seen as attempts to assert, or at least explore, the sort of vibrancy and connectedness between poetry and the object world it encounters that is pointed up by Bennett. Indeed, both poems are grounded on the assumption that a poem is not an environment distinct from that environment in which it finds itself and which we might call "nature." In this respect their poetics work to repair the gap between word and world which sustains modernity's poetics of loss and which is played out in *The Cantos*. But this is not simply to reiterate claims for Bishop and Ammons as "nature" poets. Their work does not merely *describe* a world "out there" that is inescapably "other," a transcendent realm reached after but never brought under human control, rather it *engages* that world as the dwelling point of their poetry. Seeing themselves standing within nature, within a field of vibrant objects that includes poet, poem and the "things" of the world all acting together, allows them to delineate the terms of an ecological poetics, a means of feeling the (poetic) textures of the ecological thought.

To start with Bishop. "At the Fishhouses," despite its seemingly observational offhandedness (at least in its first half),

is an exploration of the gap – and consequent play – between knowledge and experience. It is set in Nova Scotia and details Bishop's return to a fishing town remembered from her childhood. Though it is a poem generated out of the play of memory, loss and nostalgia, its attention to how we – how poetry manages to – front the world distinguishes it from the "stance towards reality" encountered in modernist poetry such as Pound's Pisan Cantos. Like many of Bishop's other major poems, it teases out the conditions of being-in-the-world through minutely detailed attention to the things of that world. The close observation that characterises this poem is Bishop's means of drawing us into her experiencing of the world. It is in this sense, then, that "At the Fishhouses" exceeds claims that are usually made for Bishop as a "nature poet."[8] We see this in the poem's opening lines where the encounter between the world's conditions and the conditional nature of our being-in-the-world is played out in Bishop's careful poetic setting down of the fishermen within her descriptive environment:

> Although it is a cold evening,
> down by one of the fishhouses
> an old man sits netting,
> his net, in the gloaming almost invisible,
> a dark purple-brown,
> and his shuttle worn and polished.
> The air smells so strong of codfish
> it makes one's nose run and one's eyes water.
> (64)

[8] Thomas Travisano describes "At the Fishhouses" as "perhaps [Bishop's] finest nature lyric" (98); Bonnie Costello sees Bishop as "absorbing [Marianne] Moore's own sensibility [of] defining nature as art" (43); Jeffrey Thomson links Bishop and Moore as "nature poets" concerned with ideas of "loss" (154).

In these opening lines we are gradually enfolded into the poetic environment, spun into it through the carefully paced observation. As Lorrie Goldensohn has noted, though Bishop's poems "behave at first sight as if they were simple description," their "insist[ence] on fact and thingishness" renders them skeptical about "the usual species barrier between the fantastic and the real" (1-2). Here, Bishop's keen eye draws us into a curious set of object relations where the world – "nature" – is both familiar and strangely withdrawn. According to Scott Knickerbocker, her "close, careful description reveals the world's strangeness" (58). The consequences of this are revealing in terms of her temperamental shift away from modernism. Unlike Pound's underscoring of what he takes to be a fundamental divide between the human and nonhuman world, revealed most tellingly in some of the much celebrated lyric passages of *The Pisan Cantos*, Bishop's poetics takes such strangeness to be the condition of experiencing the world, not a barrier to it. For Pound, an infant wasp building a nest brings hope of a redemptive spring renewal as it "carr[ies] our news / (...) to them that dwell under the earth" (*Cantos* 547). As with Odysseus's summoning of ghosts at the start of *The* Cantos, "nature" is here a mere conduit for human news, a mythic channel between living and dead. For Bishop, spring is cold (indeed, "At the Fishhouses" appears in her collection *A Cold Spring*) and her poem confronts a resolutely hostile environment, a strange "Cold dark deep and absolutely clear, / element bearable to no mortal." The poem's emphasis upon elemental forces – the ocean's unknowability – contrasts markedly with Pound's recourse to myth as a source of cultural renewal.

By engaging the "world's strangeness" and exploring the "species barrier" between the world and our perception of it, "At the Fishhouses" sets out key terms within Bishop's ecological poetics. This is because the problem with the object world – its withdrawal – becomes precisely the domain of her poetic

investigations. For her a poem can never be the object of its enquiry. Yet she builds her poetics upon an attempt to observe and record the world in such detail and nuance that the poem's *experiencing* of the world renders us closer to the condition(s) of that world. In this respect she approaches ecological thinking, by developing a poetic economy where dwelling on the nature of the world – things and our affective relationship with them – necessitates an attentive dwelling *in* the world. This develops as the poem proceeds and is integral to its structure. Understated as they are, then, the dialogues that structure this poem – between land and sea; poet and fisherman; past and present; poet and seal; experience and knowledge – are Bishop's means of testing the contingencies and entanglements that shape our sense of our place in the world. The conditions of our being-in-the-world spin out, that is, from the opening conditional clause of the poem. From the start, the poem carefully, though in a quietly unannounced manner, introduces its major concern, namely what it means to find ourselves immersed in an inhospitable – cold – object world. By starting with the conditional phrase "Although it is..." followed by the relational "down by one," the poem brings us news of a poetic landscape in which human actions and our being-in-the-world are already intricately entwined, conditional upon each other.

This, of course, is signalled by the old man's work of mending his nets, more obliquely by the fact that his "shuttle" is "worn and polished," and by the figurative economy that the poem thus sets in train. Anne Stevenson has pointed out that it is a poem "on the subject of living, and making a living," and this is undoubtedly correct, but the poem's work is also to render that living a withdrawn, impersonal force, much like the "it" which we are told in the first line is "cold" (34). For the poem to do this, it must present its objects as standing-in for something which they are not, for it is in the act of standing-in that we might detect the emergence of the poem's – and poetry's – affective

economy. Immersed in the setting of "gloaming" strangeness, actors, actions and objects become hazily indistinct with the divisions between them "almost invisible." The fisherman is – by virtue of the indefinite article, "*an* old man," used to describe him – an impersonal and vaguely representative figure for an industry in decline. Consequently, his actions in the world (he is "netting") blur into the stuff of that world ("his net") which itself seems to spread into the oncoming "dark purple-brown" of the evening. This blurring of verb and noun, action and thing, marks the world's recalcitrance as it does the description – or, more properly, presentation – of the "worn and polished" condition of the fisherman's shuttle. In such a setting, making a living exposes us to the erosive conditions of living in the world. But the poem's negotiation of the harsh conditions of fact and thingishness can be based only in a poetic withdrawal from those conditions, presenting them through the image of the fisherman's shuttle or, later, of his "black old knife / the blade of which is almost worn away" (65). For this reason, the poet, too, at this point, is curiously withdrawn from the scene, marking her experience of it via the diffident possessive pronoun "one's": "it makes one's nose run and one's eyes water." Here the poet is passive in the face of the sensory onslaught of the world, the overbearing smell of fish. Hardly a moment of sublimity in the face of nature, the poet's involuntary act is intimate and bodily – it amounts to weeping – and thus indicates the affective relations between poem and world that is traced by the poem's ecological thought. This line, in turn, echoes the earlier use of the word "one" where we are told the setting for the scene is "by *one* of the fishhouses." Singular, but non-specific, this setting gestures towards the intimate strangeness of object relations that the poem explores.

The following lines of the poem continue this exploration. Human endeavour in the world is now contrasted with a sense of the spread of "nature" that constitutes that world through a contrast

between verticals and horizontals. We may have noticed already that the fisherman sits “*down* by one of the fishhouses” (reminding us, perhaps, of the downward trajectory of Pound’s house-building wasp), and the description of the fishhouses itself is dominated by vertical tropes:

> The five fishhouses have steeply peaked roofs
> and narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up
> to storerooms in the gables
> for the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down on.
> (64)

While these “houses,” with their “peaked roofs” and “gables,” are associated with the domestic, with dwelling in the world, they also result from human exploitation of natural resources. As “storehouses,” figures of the fishing industry, they serve a larger economy. Embedded in the vertical imagery here – and signalled further in the neatly functional “cleated gangplanks,” “storerooms” and the ordered procession of “wheelbarrows (...) up and down” – is man’s dominance *over* “nature.” While this can be read back into the vertical imagery that dominates Pound’s dealings with the natural world in the *Pisan Cantos* – the “smell of mint under the tentflaps” and the “grass or whatever here under the tentflaps” in “Canto 74” (442, 460); the changing number of birds high up on various wires that recurs throughout “Canto 79”; or the “infant wasp” that has “descended, / from mud on the tent roof to Tellus” and the “mint” that “springs up again” in “Canto 83” (547) – Bishop’s view of “nature” departs from Pound’s in subsequent lines of the poem, where such dominance over “nature” is complicated by a growing sense of poetry’s involvement – horizontal entanglement – within it.

Just as earlier the encroaching evening spreads into the poetic landscape, the sea is now a horizontal force that spreads

across the texture of the poetic surface. As the poem's new visual horizon, the sea colours the things of Bishop's attention ghostly silver, diminishing their particularity under the spread and spill of a translucent liquidity:

> All is silver: the heavy surface of the sea,
> swelling slowly as if considering spilling over,
> is opaque, but the silver of the benches,
> the lobster pots, and masts, scattered
> among the wild jagged rocks,
> is of an apparent translucence
>
> (64)

Such a sense of spreading relations among and between things is as much aural as it is visual, and is witnessed in the procession of "s" sounds in the first and second lines above that spread throughout this passage, as though the spread of "silverness" that is described here is the condition of the poem's affective energies. Bishop's poetics, that is, becomes attentive to its own play in the process of things that her poem observes and acts upon. This is apparent, too, in the later detail of "layers of beautiful herring scales" (64) that (like the spreading silver light covering everything in the lines above) have "plastered" "fishtubs," "wheelbarrows" and the fisherman's "vest" and "thumb" with "creamy iridescent coats of mail" (64). In such moments the poem explores its own status as a reflective surface – it glitters with detail, yet is oddly defensive and impenetrable, like armour. It is also oddly domestic, as the plastering of surfaces by these fish scales imitates the action of plastering walls to make a house fit for habitation. The poem asserts a set of horizontal relations between itself and the object world; its poetics is one that extends across and between the vibrant objects it presents, drawing human and non-human together into the "net" of connections and actions

that constitutes "nature."[9] Increasingly, then, such a sense of the spread of surfaces across the poem's visual horizon means that it enacts what Bonnie Costello has described as Bishop's replacement of "the vertical sublime with her own horizontal accent" (10). The consequence of this is that as the poem proceeds it seeks more insistently to question what the real cost of living is. It goes beyond, that is, Anne Stevenson's characterisation of it as a poem about making a living. But it does this in resonantly poetic terms, helping, therefore, to establish ways in which the poetic itself might provide means for a proper approach to and encounter with the (natural) world.

The turning point of the poem hinges on the interplay of vertical and horizontal axes:

> Down at the water's edge, at the place
> where they haul up the boats, up the long ramp
> descending into the water, thin silver
> tree trunks are laid horizontally
> across the gray stones, down and down
> at intervals of four or five feet.
>
> (65)

This moment seems purely observational, yet it is one that shifts the poem's focus from a descriptive encounter with the things of the world – poetic colours, sounds and, notably, the fisherman who the poet recognises "was a friend of my grandfather" (64) – in its first half, and onto an exploration, in its second half, of the texture of our knowledge and experience of being in and of "nature." The poem's horizontal accent allows it to test the extent to which

[9] See Morton's *Ecological Thought* which – throughout – elucidates further this imagery of the net and "thinks through the mesh of life forms" (18) to explain our sense of entangled relationship to the object world we inhabit.

human intervention – or, as we see later, immersion – in the world determines such knowledge, much as such intervention determines (from the felling of trees, to the need for easy access to the sea for fishing boats) the fact that the "silver / tree trunks" here have – with deliberation and care – been laid horizontally on the stones. If these horizontal tree trunks facilitate the entry of boats into the water, they also precipitate the poem's entry into a consideration of how we come to know the world we inhabit. With the poem itself another such intervention in the world, this sort of figurative manoeuvre becomes a necessary condition of our sense of being-in-the-world in that it allows us to feel the force of things as they act upon us, those "threads of connection" Bennett has noted, "binding our fate to theirs" ("Systems and Things" 232). This is not to say, though, that the world becomes – via the poem – immediately discoverable. Objects, and our knowledge of the object-world, remain withdrawn from us. Yet this, poetry asserts, is our ontological condition, the intimate strangeness that allows an approach to the natural world. The horizontalised object-relations that the poem's figurative economy discovers are the grounds of its ecological critique of modernity's propensity to subsume "nature" by turning it to metaphysical ends. Thus, David Kalstone misreads "At the Fishhouses" when he claims it "accumulates the sense of an artistry beyond the human" (57). Rather than simply endowing "nature" with a mysterious otherness so as "to win some authority over it" – Kalstone's point about this poem – my argument is that the poem's recognition (which is an ecological one) is that beyondness is our element. It is our condition of being-in-the-world because it is what we share – as actants, vibrant objects – with the rest of nature. The natural world, spreading across the poem's field of perception much as the tree trunks are laid "across the gray stones," therefore retains a sense of intractable otherness. The poem now turns its attention to the ocean water, which it describes as "Cold dark deep and absolutely clear, / element bearable to no mortal" (65), as a figure for "nature."

However, this sweeping generalisation about the water being "bearable to no mortal" is tempered immediately by the poet's realisation that non-human animals, "fish" and "seals," *can* live in it. This realisation sparks the poet's memory of her encounter with "one seal particularly" that appeared in the water "evening after evening" and was "curious about me" (65). She recalls how she "used to sing him Baptist hymns," because "He was interested in music: / like me a believer in total immersion" (65). A joke, yes, but this anecdote also points up the poem's theme of exploring our immersion in "nature" and its ecological recognition that rather than us simply looking out from an anthropocentric position at a world "beyond the human," that world, equally, looks back at us. The seal, we are told, "stood up in the water and regarded me / steadily" (65). Looking back across the horizontal surface dark water, then, the seal's gaze traces the threads of connection between poem and object world, marking both as affective agents within it. And at this point, the poem's steady gaze – Bishop's famous eye for observational detail – shifts from the real world to one of speculation:

> If you should dip your hand in,
> your wrist would ache immediately,
> your bones would begin to ache and your hand would
> burn
> as if the water were a transmutation of fire...
> If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,
> then briny, then surely burn your tongue.
>
> (65-66)

Here, the affective power of the object-world over us is seen to depend upon our imagination of that world. What we make of it, how we touch and taste it, results as much from the condition of our poetic knowledge about the world as it does from our actual – bodily – experience of it. Once again, our immersion in this poetic

environment is facilitated by conditional clauses ("if you should..."; "as if the water"; "If you tasted"), thus underscoring Bishop's point that the condition of our being-in-the-world is a poetic one. From here we move to the poem's final image in which the sea, and its ever expanding dark horizon (already a metaphor for our entangled relations to the natural world), becomes a metaphor for "knowledge": "It is like what we imagine knowledge to be: / dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free" (66). The ecological recognition of "At the Fishhouses" is that proper knowledge of the world draws from our immersive involvement in the world. This is both an imaginative condition and one that is ongoing and affective – "moving" – conditional, that is, upon a poetics of being-in-the--world. That it is, we are told, "drawn from the cold hard mouth / of the world" (66) is especially telling as this image draws together senses of the poem as that which draws – depicts – the stuff of the world and as that which acts in the world as a vibrant object itself, drawing material – as does a bucket from a well – into its own sphere. It confirms, therefore, the quality of the world's withdrawal from us.

The poem's ecological force lies precisely here. It does not take the figurative, as much ecocriticism has done, as confirmation of a divide between "nature" and "culture."[10] Rather, Bishop sees her poem as a means of exploring a world in which "nature" is always already both imagined, a product of culture, and an actual reality "out there." As in Bruno Latour's idea of a hybrid "nature-cuture," the figurative economy of Bishop's poetics asserts that the world as it is cannot be divorced from our encounter with, and consequent entanglement within, it. Her poem presents the natural world as simultaneously constructed and real.[11] It ends,

[10] On the troubled stance of Ecocriticism regarding ideas of the figurative see my essay "Ecopoetries in America" (Selby 127-42) and Knickerbocker's *Ecopoetics* (1-18).
[11] See Latour (6) and Knickerbocker (9).

thus, by pushing its epistemological speculation towards an ontological – or, more properly, a phenomenological – one in which we experience its "dark, salt, clear" world as one that is "forever flowing, and since / our knowledge is historical, flowing and flown" (66). At once caught in the processes of "nature" – its flow – and feeling the world as forever elusive – "flown" – "At the Fishhouses" presents "nature" as the condition of our being, the cold spring from which we draw our experience and knowledge of the world. The poem's closing realisation is that human and nonhuman are not separate from one another but are both immersed in the same process of being-in-the-world, both drawn together as entangled objects. Poetry, then, is the fabric – the netting – of such entanglement. And with such a realisation, Bishop's poetics becomes a means of avoiding the sublimation of "nature" witnessed in the failed efforts of *The Cantos* to build "a paradiso terrestre" (816).

That the poem is a field of affective action participating in the flow of events of "nature" is central to Ammons's "Corsons Inlet." So, in drawing towards my conclusion, what I want to examine in Ammons's poem is how a sense of bodily involvement in the ever-changing flow of "nature" allows him to track a growing sense of the changes of scale necessary to a properly worked-through ecological poetics. My argument is that "Corsons Inlet" – a key text in Ammons's development as an ecopoet – exorcises modernity's ghost by demonstrating that poetry is something in itself (a "vibrant object," we might say) rather than being *about* something. In this I agree with John Wilkinson whose essay on "aboutness" in Ammons's *Garbage* notes that "Ammons revels in breaking Pound's strictures, voluminously" (38), though, as we will see later, I disagree with Wilkinson's characterisation of "nature" in Ammons's poetics. "Corsons Inlet," then, presents the natural world not as something to be "bust through" by poetry but to be taken on its own terms. Poetic experience, Ammons's

poem argues, is co-extensive with knowledge of the world, and the sea-scape that the poem describes enacts the poem's – and our – bound-iness with the object world.[12] The poem is "nature." Such a move "toward nature" in Ammons is, as Susan Stewart argues, contingent upon "things distant com[ing] close and all standing things mov[ing] toward their 'horizontals'" (25). We will come to this sense of the distance and proximity of things in "nature" later, in the poem's ecologically significant dealing with ideas of scale and scope. For now, though, as we saw with Bishop, it is an emphasis on horizontal axes that allows for the poem's intermeshing of event and the recording of event in its unfolding measure of the natural world. This is apparent in the poem's opening lines:

> I went for a walk over the dunes again this morning
> to the sea,
> then turned right along
>   the surf
>   rounded a naked headland
>   and returned
>
>   along the inlet shore:
>
> (147-48)

The spread of the poem on the page here, its sinuous turns and returns, traces the horizontal play of the poet's vision over the shoreline it describes. It also mirrors the poet's act of walking that constitutes this scene. The poem, that is, extends horizontally outwards to go "round" the "naked headland" before returning

[12] See Leonard M. Scigaj, *Sustainable Poetry* (84-5), who argues that the notion of "homology" in Ammons – between poem and world – underpins the poet's "perception of ecological interrelatedness."

towards its left-hand margin, “along the inlet shore.” We attend closely to the poem’s (horizontal) play of lineation, even as it directs our attention to the object-world of its setting. Indeed, the poem’s turns and returns define its status as poetry, verse – of course – being etymologically related to the Latin *versus*, or the plough’s turning of the soil. Ammons, himself, has drawn the comparison between a walk and a poem in just such terms: “the (...) resemblance – he notes – between a poem and a walk is that each turns, one or more times, and eventually returns” (“A Poem is a Walk” 117). In “Corsons Inlet” the interrelation of poem and walk is the ecological ground of Ammons’s poetics. And it is in the poem’s line endings – where it turns and returns to the next line – that poet, poem and natural world become entangled. As the poet turns “along / the surf,” the placing of “the surf” as a separate line makes it as much the subject of the two verbs – “rounded” and “returned” – in the following two lines as is the poet himself. The exchange of energy here – turning and returning – between poet, poem and world means that they become interwoven as part of a complex ecosystem (Scigaj 85). The ongoingness of the poem – we are told the poet goes for a walk “*again* this morning” – brings us alongside “nature.” And the resemblance between “again” and “along” in these lines (where one turns into the other through the action of the poem) indicates the dynamic interplay between poem and world.

Such an apprehension of “things in the dynamics of themselves” is something Ammons had experienced as a young man contemplating the horizontal shoreline when onboard a ship anchored in the South Pacific.[13] It is an apprehension that structures the thinking of his ecopoetics and that also distinguishes such

[13] His account of this moment is given in “The Paris Review Interview” published in *Set in Motion: Essays, Interviews, and Dialogues*. See also Andrew Zawacki’s “Ego and Eco” (49).

thinking from Bishop's vision of "nature" because of its emphasis on the dynamic process of things rather than on a drawing together of things in our poetic apprehension of the world. This presents a problem for Ammons. The dynamic play of the poem depends, as we have seen, on the play of its line on the page. But, as the poem announces,

> in nature there are few sharp lines: there are areas of primrose
>   more or less dispersed
> (...)
> I have reached no conclusions, have erected no boundaries,
> shutting out and shutting in, separating inside
> from outside: I have
> drawn no lines:
>
> (148-49)

Aesthetic order – poetic form – and natural order – "primrose / more or less dispersed" – seem troublingly at odds here; an impression that is strengthened by the ironic separation of "inside" from "outside" by a line break. And what this demands of the poet is a twofold acceptance of his place within the "nature-culture" complex posited by Latour. If, as Latour's notion of "nature-culture" suggests, the world we inhabit is "simultaneously real, social and narrated" (8), then Ammons's ecological poetics must account for – indeed, partake of – the affective energies of such simultaneous interactions. The poem cannot bracket off the world from its experiencing of the world. For the poem to be "caught always in the event of change" (149), its mirroring of reality – the "overall wandering of mirroring mind" (148) traced by the poem – must entail a yielding of form to formlessness. First, then, this necessitates Ammons's acceptance of the diminishment of his

affective agency as a poet, of poetry's power to narrate "nature." Second, this decentering of the poet, entails an acceptance of risk as poetry's (and "nature's") determining energy. The first half of "Corsons Inlet" deals with the first of these acceptances; the second half with the second. In other words, by exposing the anthropocentrism at play in poetic attempts to "draw" or "mirror" the natural world, "Corsons Inlet" embraces risk. It does this not simply as a poetic principle but as an ecological one that leads to the insight, in the poem's conclusion, that "there is no finality of vision."

In its first half, the poem's giving up of thought in favour of vision – which we might read as following the shift from epistemology to ontology that accompanies mid-century poets' attempts to find ways out of modernity – signifies its attempt to determine ecological coordinates for itself:

> the walk liberating, I was released from forms,
> from the perpendiculars,
>   straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds
> of thought
> into the hues, shadings, rises, flowing bends and blends
>   of sight:
>
> I allow myself eddies of meaning:
> yield to a direction of significance
> running
> like a stream through the geography of my work:
>   (148)

With "perpendiculars" and "straight lines" once more eschewed, the poet is left to survey the condition of his being in this landscape. This is seen to depend upon the interpenetration of poetic and real environments in which the material of the poem – its "blocks,

boxes, binds" of thought – are given up to the "flowing bends and blends" of the poet's vision of the material world through the repeated "b" sounds. While we witness here a poetics of reciprocity at work, between the poem's geography and that of the natural world it encounters, this sort of mapping is not without ecological anxiety for Ammons. He is in the position of surveyor and his "sight," or poetic vision, enacts a mapping of the shoreline, seeing it as material susceptible to human measure. This is felt in the somewhat reluctant "yielding" to patterns of significance beyond human scope that Ammons registers in the phrase "I allow myself eddies of meaning." The release into being-in-the-world may be "liberating" but it is also – at this point in the poem – rather forced because it is marked by Ammons's apprehension of an ontological difference between poem and world, human and nonhuman. This anxiety rests on the operation of metaphor within the poem's affective economy. Given the etymological sense of "geography" as a "writing of the land" the metaphor of the poem itself as a landscape subsumes the problem of "nature-culture" which it announces into a problem of poetic representation. This "overly facile solution to the problem of mediating between sense experience and thought," as Roger Gilbert describes it (215), points up the ecological problem that "Corsons Inlet" faces. Where significance and meaning run "*like* a stream" [my emphasis] in a poem that is likened to "geography," that poem stands significantly apart from the actual landscape it seeks to embody. And this is still, significantly, a problem of anthropocentrism whereby "nature" is made to stand-in for a human condition.

As the poem proceeds, it seeks to solve this problem by tracing how it might stand in "nature" rather than stand-in for it. In subsequent lines Ammons thus dismisses totalising, metaphysical gestures which sublimate our experience of the world into the meanings we make of that world: "but Overall is beyond me: is the sum of these events / I cannot draw" (148). The decentering

this implies is also an implicit critique of Pound's poetics in which a reaching after poetic paradise is fatally – though in a highly effective lyric move – compromised by its failure to face the world: "That I lost my center / fighting the world / (...) / and that I tried to make a paradiso / terrestre" (*Cantos* 816). The suspension of time implied by such a poetic paradise (which has its roots in Dante's theological sense of a cosmic "Overall") is anathema to the ecological poetics that Ammons is developing. The insight that "Corsons Inlet" pursues, then, is that poem and world (and, indeed, walk) are ongoing processes, systems of energy exchange rather than of achieved poetic stasis. Earlier Ammons "yielded" to such energies, to "eddies of meaning," now it is with willing acceptance that the poet finds himself entangled in a world of provisional meanings:

> so I am willing to go along, to accept
> the becoming
> thought, to stake off no beginnings or ends, establish
>   no walls:
>
> (149)

Here, poetic thought is "becoming" both in the sense of it as ongoing, a process, and in the sense of it as fitted to, or even flattering, its occasion. At this point the poem becomes its environment, rather than walling it off. We hear, too, the logic of the poem's argument at this point – signalled by the "so" – accepting a new significance to the poem's being-in-the-world (we may also hear an echo of the earlier poem "So I said I am Ezra" and thus read this ecological insight back into that poem). This is the poem's turning point, for it registers the ecological realisation that poetry must become the ground it inhabits.

This realisation is carried out in the second half of "Corsons Inlet" through its embracing of "risk" and the effects this has on its

notions of scale and order. Risk underpins the poem's detailing of the energy-rich eco-system it describes and which it, in fact, comes to feel itself participant in. At its first use in the poem, "risk" is that which has "exposed" "black shoals of mussels" to the "air" and "sun" making them food for gulls. In particular one "young mottled gull" eats "to vomiting" and, like the poem itself, is "caught always in the event of change" (149). Both poem and food chain are risky exchanges of energy, caught in continual change. Risk, therefore, becomes the condition of being-in-the-world, it is the vibrant matter of "nature." And – though it spreads everywhere – it is not an abstraction, an "Overall" that divorces experience from the world, rather

> risk is full: every living thing in
> siege: the demand is life, to keep life: the small
> white blacklegged egret, how beautiful, quietly stalks
> and spears
>   the shallows, darts to shore
>   to stab – what? I couldn't
>   see against the black mudflats – a frightened
> fiddler crab?
>
> (149-50)

Quite literally, the poet's vision is obscured here by the actions of the natural world as they unfold before him. Risk is full in "Corsons Inlet" precisely because the poem cannot – as a participant in the events it describes – see the whole picture, it can inhabit no totalising position. Like the egret and the imagined fiddler crab, the poem is subject to the demand of life, namely the constant flow of energy between the participants in its events. The play, here, between small and large scale event – between the "small (...) egret" hunting for food and the demand of "life" that runs through "every living thing" – sustains the poem's ecological

thought because it allows the poem to feel its entanglement within the processes of the natural world whose "constant change" is "rich with entropy" (150). If the poem's assertion of ecological risk entails a facing up to "nature" that recognises the fundamental interconnectedness of all matter – "the 'field' of action / with moving incalculable center" (150) – then the consequence of this in the poem is upon its evaluation of scale, and of poetry as our measure of things.

In the "Introduction" to a new edition of his important book *The End of Nature*, Bill McKibben notes that one reason for the current ecological crisis is that "our sense of scale is awry" (ix).[14] And it is the issue of a sense of scale that propels "Corsons Inlet" towards its conclusion (which is, of course, that there can be no conclusion). The poem realises that human order and natural order, poem and universe, though they "go along" at seemingly different scales – as different orders of being – are one and the same. Both are constituted by a vibrant exchange of energy, by the "pulsations of order" that are "working in and out" of them:

> in the smaller view, order tight with shape:
> blue tiny flowers on a leafless weed: carapace of crab:
> snail shell:
>   pulsations of order
>   in the bellies of minnows: orders swallowed,
> broken down, transferred through membranes
> to strengthen larger orders: but in the large view, no
> lines or changeless shapes: the working in and out,
> together
>   and against, of millions of events:
>
> (150)

[14] See also Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry* (13).

The ecological order that "Corsons Inlet" conceives, then, is one that answers the desire of Pound's modernist poetics to bring order to what it perceived as disorderly "nature." Indeed, Ammons's poem asserts that the natural order is "not chaos" but "an order held / in constant change" (150). In contrast, as we saw in "Canto 13," Pound's modernist project inheres in the imposition of human order upon the natural world. Such inherency is, for Pound and the modernism for which his poetics are metonymic, crucial to its conceptualisation of "nature" and its transcendence through culture. If Kung's pupils answer "in their nature," then the natural becomes a category of the human, a means of sublating into an idea of cultural poetics. As Pound approvingly quotes, late in *The Cantos*, "'A man's paradise is his good nature'" (637), thus confirming that his poetic project, to build paradise, is founded on just the sort of absorption of "nature" into a metaphysical characteristic of human culture that Timothy Morton has diagnosed as a symptom of modernity's blindness to the actual world we inhabit. Modernist poetics do not, in other words, read the ground upon which they are inscribed but they transcend it, theirs is a hypostatised geography. John Wilkinson's otherwise brilliant reading of Ammons, of the peristaltic process of his poetics, succumbs to this blindness in its assertion that "Human beings are not so much 'part of nature' as the natural world is thoroughly human and worked over, and must be accepted as such. There is nothing other than us, neither garbage nor wilderness" (46). To see "nature" in such terms is to undercut the ecological thought that underpins Bishop's and Ammons's poetics. What this sort of account fails to acknowledge is precisely the "pulsations of order" in which Ammons's poetics is entangled and which lead to its final apprehension that

> Scope eludes my grasp, that there is no finality of
> vision,

> that I have perceived nothing completely,
> that tomorrow a new walk is a new walk.
>
> (151)

This is – finally – a matter of scale (and we might remember here the silver fish scales spreading over the poetic environment of Bishop's poem), a matter of how Ammons's and Bishop's respective poetics might come to measure their being in and of "nature," their poetic entanglement in its scoping and scopic processes. At Pisa, Pound movingly detailed his diminishment in the face of "nature": Birds on wires "write (...) in their treble scale" (*Cantos* 539); we must "Learn of the green world what can be thy place / In scaled invention, or true artistry" (535); and we are told, "When the mind swings by a grass-blade / an ant's forefoot shall save you" (547). In such moments, "nature" is transcribed into a human scale, transmuted to a set of aesthetic compensations. For Ammons, the simple exercise of taking a walk by the seashore presents him with the ecopoetic means to exorcise the ghost of modernity, at least its tendency to sublimate the natural world by turning it into a figure of human survival. For Bishop and Ammons, poetry is (about) a risky engagement with the world of vibrant matter it inhabits. Their poetry finds ways out of modernity by engaging the natural world not as a paradisal "finality of vision," but as the texture and scope – indeed, the energy – of our being in the world.

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