Radically Different: Thinking the Nonhuman in Wallace Stevens and Theodor Adorno
and
WITCH
(poetry collection)

Rebecca Tamás

submitted for

PhD in Creative and Critical Writing

University of East Anglia
School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing

June 2017

Author Name: Rebecca Tamás   **Year of Submission: 2017**

Abstract

My critical study argues that a majority of traditional 'nature' poetry has not formed a language able to confront the acute problems of our current environmental moment. I suggest that what is needed within poetry is a kind of 'ecological' writing, writing that is not only about ecological subjects, but is in itself ecological: open to the pattern of relations existent between the human and the nonhuman.

In my critical study I look at Adorno's theories about the nonidentity of the nonhuman — the difference that human thought has suppressed in its attempt to achieve a unified and coherent identity — and how this nonidentity might paradoxically be revealed by the human foregrounding their inability to access it fully. Adorno argues that such nonidentical difference may be crucial in unpicking identificatory thinking practices, challenging the rigidity of reified human thought. I examine, through close reading, how Stevens' poetry enacts the kind of paradox Adorno describes, moving between the intense desire to understand nonhuman life, and the awareness that nonhuman difference can never fully appear within human consciousness or language. The thesis argues for radical nonhuman difference as something able to emerge from the processes of flexible and resistive poetic language; a form perfectly suited to gesturing towards, though never fully containing, nonhuman difference, agency and being. In my critical study poetry demonstrates its ability to become ecological; offering up new cognitive possibilities the challenge the supposed coherence and rigidity of human identity and thought.

WITCH, the creative portion of this thesis, explores difference as it appears for 'female' and differently gendered persons. The poems in WITCH use the transformative potential of magic, witchcraft and the occult to question what a feminist poetic language might look like; gesturing towards gendered difference and oppression, without containing or commodifying it. This collection re-connects poetry to its origin in spell making and ritual, exploring contemporary ideas of alterity, knowledge and power.

Contents

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to my first critical supervisor Dr David Nowell-Smith, for his profound encouragement, assistance and wisdom in bringing this project to fruition. I will always be grateful for his hard work, support and guidance.

Thanks are also due to my second critical supervisor Professor Tiffany Atkinson. I could not imagine a better, kinder or more hardworking ally for the final part of my PhD work, or one who could have inculcated confidence and self-belief in the way that Tiffany has. Huge thanks are due to her for making me feel *seen* as a scholar and as a poet, and for encouraging me to create a project that reflects my own interests and abilities, rather than one that bows to imagined expectation. I am forever a better scholar, writer, and thinker, because of her.

As my primary creative supervisor Professor Denise Riley has provided truly peerless, unwavering support throughout the entirety of this project. She has done this not only through her incisive and brilliant advice on my poems, but through her encouragement of me at all stages. I have been honoured to work with her on my poetry, in what has been a transformative experience for my entire practice as a writer. I can never thank her enough for her kindness and her unique inspiration, I feel inestimably lucky to have had the privilege of her supervision.

I would like to thank my family for their encouragement, especially my brother Jonathan, and my mother Nina, whose support and belief has been total, and has meant everything in creating this project. Thanks also to my impossibly brilliant friends, and to my wonderful partner Matthew, without whose love and generosity I would have faltered many times.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to five women: Kim Sherwood, Lily Meyer, Eliza Robertson, Anna Metcalfe and Kirsten Haywood; otherwise known as 'The Witches of 10 Bell Lane'. Without your help, encouragement, advice, laughter, intelligence and love, I simply could not have done this. Witches, I will be forever grateful.

Declaration

A number of the poems in *WITCH* have appeared in earlier forms in the journals *The White Review: Issue Fourteen*, *The Suburban Review: March 2016,* and *Minerva Platform: Forthcoming*; and in the poetry pamphlet *Savage*, published by *Clinic*: *March 2017*.

Thesis Introduction

Difference and the Struggle of Language

Thought ... is an act of negation, of resistance to that which is forced upon it.
Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*.

A woman is an ever fickle, changeable thing.
Virgil, *The Aeneid*.

Above all, magic seemed a form of ... insubordination, and an instrument of
grassroots resistance to power.
Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*.

It is the irrational/ That is worth living for.
Dorothea Lasky, *Thing*.

Difference is the concern, the area of exploration and the philosophical condition
that both components of this thesis, creative and critical, consider. As a scholar and
a poet, I am profoundly interested in the ways in which difference might appear in
language, and how that difference might challenge the parameters of thought. At
the heart of each half of my thesis is this question: how does one write difference
in a way that recognises its existence, without at the same time obliterating it,
covering it over with one's own concepts and structures of thought, rendering it
mute?

It is within this thesis that I will fully answer this question. However, in this
preface, I hope to make clear how my interest in bringing difference into language
serves as the uniting thread that ties together the concerns of both my collection of
poetry, and my critical essay. This preface is a foretaste; a set of images and forms
that will find their fruition in the thinking of the work itself. As any writer will
know, discussing one's work, especially if it is creative, can be a genuinely painful
struggle—searching to 'explain' what has already found its own very specific

shape within language. I will, however, confront the inevitable difficulties and failings of describing my thesis, in an attempt to register how the forms of my poetry were found, and the crucial relationship between that poetry and the more clearly delineated work of my critical writing.

In my critical study the difference that I attempt to register is that of nonhuman 'nature'— a difference that has been relentlessly silenced by human concepts and structures; physical, linguistic and metaphorical. It is my suggestion that this suppression, and ignorance, of nonhuman difference may be at the root of much of our degradation and destruction of the nonhuman world. I will suggest that we most often perceive 'nature' as either as a transformative comfort, or as a savage wilderness that we must suppress; and that in these simplifications and generalisations its actual, tangible difference and individuality is lost. I will consider how an 'ecological writing' might be able to challenge these simplifications, and explore how poetic language might develop its ability to attend to, and even serve, the relationship between the human and the nonhuman.

The critical portion of my thesis will argue that we suppress and destroy nonhuman difference because its genuine, complicated difference, is what we do not, and cannot, own. This difference is what escapes from us in every encounter with 'nature,' thus challenging the illusion of our human mastery—the supporting ideological structure of our reified society. So we mute nonhuman difference, thus losing what, I will suggest, is the nonhuman's greatest opportunity for the human—the chance to see something, experience something, not ourselves. This encounter with nonhuman difference offers a way to briefly break through the prison of stifling human subjectivity, a way to glimpse something beyond our own identificatory thinking.[1] I will suggest that we must find ways of thinking *with* nonhuman difference; creating forms of thought and language that resist the pressure of controlling reified conceptions, rather than suppressing nonhuman

---

[1] I do not wish to suggest that the attempt to escape human subjectivity is a new one, indeed the possibility of such an escape was the central concern of the Post-Kantian philosophers of the 1790's. What I do wish to suggest is that in considering the nonhuman, especially within poetic language, we may find new ways to attempt this escape that respond fruitfully to the particular struggles of our own environmental moment.

agency. Unless we create such forms we will be unable to glimpse beyond the prison of our human subjectivity, or witness any kind of genuine nonhuman agency or difference. Nonhuman difference is not *for* us, and does not speak *to* us, yet momentary knowledge of it can transform the ways in which we are able to understand reality; our failure to know nonhuman identity gesturing towards the incompleteness of our rigid human concepts. I will argue that it may be in the act of *poetic* language—language unmoored from the wholly rational, open to the liminal and fragile changeability of experience, that this difference might be able to become apparent.

The critical part of my thesis will go on to argue that Theodor Adorno's theories of nonidentity and negative dialectics; and Wallace Stevens' ambiguous, flexible and resistive poetry; can demonstrate how attempts to glimpse nonhuman difference can transform what environmental and ecological writing might be and mean: creating forms of language which not only 'cover' ecological themes, but are *themselves ecological*. Poetry such as this would manage to register the impossibility of human cognition ever fully recognising nonhuman difference, whilst paradoxically bringing a crucial awareness of this difference into human knowledge. I will suggest that such a paradox provides the aesthetic energy necessary to create poetry able to grapple with, and respond to, our uniquely dangerous, important and complicated environmental moment. My work will show that a focus on the difference, agency and individuality of the nonhuman offers poetics a new set of linguistic acts and aesthetic challenges, ones which can question, and even potentially alter, rigid forms of human thinking.

The difference that is the central focus of my poetry collection *WITCH*, is 'different' and yet profoundly related, from that of my critical study. *WITCH* will explore feminist language and forms of gendered difference, particularly that of those considered by society to be 'female,'[2] those who are nonbinary, or those who are

---

[2] I will be referring to the 'female' within speech marks to make clear my understanding of 'femaleness' as an identity or potential viewpoint that takes place *within perceptions created by society's structures*, a way of looking at or designating a person's apparent self, rather than as any inherent quality issuing from the appearance, biology, body, genes, character or behaviour of any individual. My interest in feminism and feminist poetics come from an interest in questioning and challenging patriarchal and misogynist actions towards, and structures of thought around, those

differently gendered. These forms include: sexuality and emotion; magic; bodily experience; the occult; pagan relationships with the nonhuman; mysticism and esoteric practice. The collection will explore the European Witch Trials, and women's historical suppression, but it will also question the rigidity of gender and identity; using the strangeness of magic and the occult to form newly transformative forms of poetic language. My poetry will touch on the ways in which the historically degraded difference of 'female knowledge,' (elements of difference allocated to or associated with women, rather than ones inherently issuing from them) might be able to come into the open— radically interrogating what a challenging feminist poetic language might look like; and how magic, ritual speech, witchcraft and spell making's alterity might give power to such language. My poems will seek to discover what can happen when such alterity takes hold of not only poetry's content, but the very forms of its expression.

It is in making use of the material of the occult and witchcraft that my language hopes to take on the paradoxical power of that which has been shut down and closed off: a new way of making meaning that sees no boundary between intellectual exploration and the exploration of visceral feeling and ritualistic knowledge. As part of the research for this collection (which also included much practice-based research and experimentation) I looked at many representations of witchcraft and witches throughout history; from folk stories and plays, to written accounts of European and American Witch Trials, lewd cartoons, paintings, etchings and religious pamphlets and tracts. All of these representations, bar the very recent, were 'negative,' seeking to either mock, demonise, silence or criticise those considered as, or imagined as, 'witches'. However, being surrounded by these 'negative' texts and images, I could not help but be overwhelmed by their *power*. However critical these representations or accounts, they all gave those portrayed (almost all of whom were rendered as 'female') an agency, a humour, a strength, and an influence on events, that I had never seen in the representation of women, in works of the Western tradition at least, in any historical period before our own. This underlined to me, and made tangible, the obvious connection

---

considered 'female,' or differently gendered, rather than from any belief about the inherent qualities or sexual characteristics of infinitely varied human beings.

between the fear of witchcraft and the fear of 'female' and differently gendered power. It was thrilling to me to see such fearful power represented, even when couched in misogyny, distaste and cruelty. Thinking about this 'female' and differently gendered power, negative and shunned, yet spectacular and teeming with agency, gave me access to a new aesthetic energy—alternative power not only an abstract idea, but a visible form, one able to migrate into the body of poetic language.

My work on the connection between feminist language and occult elements in my poetry has not appeared out of the ether, but has been fed by a huge number of inspiring 'female' and differently gendered poets and writers. These writer's interests in sexuality, gender, feminism and magic, have shown me the possible routes for my collection to come into being. There are numerous writers and books that have been part of this, but I will focus on the most crucial, to situate *WITCH* effectively within its poetic and imaginative context.

Italian writer and historian Silvia Federici's controversial theoretical work *Caliban and the Witch* is without a doubt the non-fiction work that has been most influential on the writing of *WITCH*. In her book Federici links the European Witch Trials, the conquest and colonisation of 'The New World,' and the state's need for obedient 'female' labour to support men's employment within capitalism. For Federici the women often accused of witchcraft: those who worked as 'healers,' or as midwives, those who were widows, independent women, and those from different backgrounds to their communities, and so on, were a threat to the rigidified gender roles made absolutely necessary by a system of wage labour; a system in which a woman's work as mother, housekeeper and wife for the employed man must be solidified into a universal 'natural' constant. Federici's work has been queried for its historical accuracy, and she does make some claims that cannot be fully confirmed. For this reason, it is important to state that it is not the information Federici provides that influenced or supported the writing of my book. Rather Federici's central argument: that the oppression of individuals through the Witch Trials was a systematic and total suppression of a particularly 'female' and differently gendered power, knowledge and agency, has given me new

11

ways to think about, and most importantly *imagine*, the intersection between politics, witchcraft, magic and feminist change in my own work. It is Federici's re-politicisation of the European and American Witch Trials, events that have become familiar, tame, and even innocuous and entertaining within of popular culture (see the Halloween events that take place in Salem, Massachusetts every year), that alerted me to the sedimented feminist and political charge available within them. Federici made clear to me that these events are not only of interest for their historical information, but for the imaginative possibilities and knowledge that they offer to contemporary feminist thinking.

As I have written the creative portion of this thesis I have drawn strength from a number of contemporary poets building on poetic histories including the experimental and innovative tradition, as well as confessional and lyric tradition of writers such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. These contemporary poets use such varied poetic histories and opportunities to re-figure feminist poetics for our own moment. These writers include Anne Carson, Dorothea Lasky, Bhanu Kapil, Hoa Nguyen, Maggie Nelson, Nisha Ramayya, Ariana Reines, Jackie Wang and Sophie Collins; all poets who speak boldly and strangely of sexual desire, the potential of magic and/or the supernatural, and the violence of living. These poets are strongly intellectual and rational, and yet they are equally committed to irrationality, feeling and affective experience—transforming the possibilities of what a diverse 'female,' nonbinary or differently gendered speaking might become.

In particular, the work of American poets Dorothea Lasky and Ariana Reines has shaped this collection, because of the intense attention both have offered to the intersection between a potential feminist poetics and magic. Neither has focused on witchcraft specifically (as, indeed, none of the poets listed above have), but their poetry has interrogated how magic might be a way of shifting the parameters of language and thought; opening up new ways to explore gendered experience. Ariana Reines, in her book *Mercury*[3], looks at mystical and runic symbols, as well as alchemy and ritual; to create a strange, vicious and unusual language that

---

[3] Reines, Ariana. *Mercury*. Albany, NY: Fence Books, 2011.

questions differently gendered and 'female' existence, and what might be possible for women's interaction with the natural world. Reines' poems are violent, explicit, cruel, sometimes even shocking, but her work is never anything less than *empowering*. I mean this not in the banal sense of the word, but that of giving 'female' and differently gendered persons a world in language in which their power, being and feeling is accessible and visible.

Dorothea Lasky, across her various collections, including *Black Life*[4], *Awe*[5], *Thunderbird*[6] and *Rome*[7], investigates how magic (and astrology, the occult and the supernatural) can give voice to the messy, complicated and *bodily* experience of desire, gendered experience and spiritual knowledge. Lasky's poetic tone is oddly, even confrontationally, simplistic, gentle and childlike. This tone has the effect of forcing the reader to come face to face with the earnestness of Lasky's explorations, the genuine commitment she has to using poetics to reveal 'debased' knowledge. Lasky has shown me that poetry can engage in magical themes without apology or shyness. Rather than being embarrassed about subjects that a conventional or even patriarchal view might deem 'silly,' Lasky makes the most of her unusual thematic areas; using them to create wholly original, powerful poetry that considers what a feminist poetics might not only look like, but also *feel* like. Both Lasky and Reines have shown me ways forward in creating poetry that merges a fascination with the magical and the irrational, with a rational, searching intelligence: an integrated, radical poetics capable of confronting complicated questions of thought and experience.

I should make very clear at this point, however, that my *aim* to make use of the alterity and power of witchcraft and the esoteric for liberatory poetic purposes, is not a simple one to execute. I had to ask myself, as a poet, how I could address the hugely complicated, varied, diverse and contradictory span of 'female' and differently gendered experience within my collection. How could I register, for example, the individuality of the women killed as witches for their difference; and

---

[4] Lasky, Dorothea. *Black Life*. Seattle, WA: Wave Books, 2010.
[5] Lasky, Dorothea. *Awe*. Seattle, WA: Wave Books, 2007.
[6] Lasky, Dorothea. *Thunderbird*. Seattle, WA: Wave Books, 2012.
[7] Lasky, Dorothea. *Rome: Poems*. New York, NY: Liverlight Publishing Corp, 2016.

at the same time try and create a language that did not speak over, mute or provide false unity to the endless, diverse differences of gender identity, race, class, reproductive situation, age, health, location, religion, sexuality, body, space and wealth, for 'female,' non-binary, differently gendered people and others?

In coming to terms with, and grappling with, this difficulty, the work of my critical study was absolutely crucial. There is a huge space between human and nonhuman difference, and yet both of their suppressions turns on the desire of reified society to merge all into obedient sameness, its refusal to accept dissonant ways of being that serve no clear master. To register multifaceted difference within my poetry, I faced the same challenges as the poets attempting to register nonhuman difference—the attempt to speak with, rather than speak for, what you are not entirely; the attempt to create forms of poetic thinking that resist control and dominance, that resist unity of meaning and exchange-value equivalence.

My critical thesis, taking its direction from Theodor Adorno, showed me that in making the impossibility of reaching difference apparent, it could paradoxically appear into view—a shimmer of what is not known, registered if not fully observed. Learning from this, I attempted to weave this practice of silence, of not knowing, into my own poetry. This meant that instead of a more straightforward and historically accurate 'dramatisation' of the Witch Trials, or similar, my work became a much more unpredictable, various creation. Unsurprisingly, the difference of the nonhuman itself crept into my work: the central figure of the witch finding a connection with, and exploring, a nonhuman difference that echoes her own gendered and experiential alterity. The language of my collection seeks to register and question the historical silence of 'female' and differently gendered individuals, not by re-creating realistic voices from the past, but by reproducing imperfect creative knowledge. The collection clearly shows up the gaps of what cannot be known within language; inviting the reader to shape their own individual poetic experience.

The poems in *WITCH* are as strange, as unrealistic, as fantastical, as funny and as *weird* as the unknown must be. They use the unpredictable, resistive, aesthetically

fertile language of spells, of nonhuman interaction, of ritual. They are not 'well made' and satisfyingly complete, they are not formally perfect or linguistically safe, and they are not *true* in any straightforward, documentary sense. The poems embrace the potential of poetic cruelty and violence but turn it on itself: explosive, destruction becoming an outlet for affection between the women and differently gendered individuals and voices in these poems, who must blast their own existence into the continuum of history by force. It is important to me that these poems are confrontational and violent, so that they can honestly express the anger that was such a large part of their making. However, I would not want the anger expressed to suggest any desire to physically cause harm in the tangible world, or for that anger to eclipse the transcendent, humorous, and pleasurable freedom made possible by the forms of thinking that witchcraft and magic offer.

The witch figure of my poems is not caught in a constant cycle of mourning. She does, and must, look backwards at the suffering of the past, but at the same time she looks forward into disparate potential futures. In these poems, the imaginative destruction of oppressive and patriarchal structures happens within the space of poetic experience—transformative violence taking action at the roots of thought.

The poems of this collection cannot speak satisfactorily for even *one* woman or differently gendered person, from the past or the present moment, let alone all of them. No writer could have the breadth of experience within their lifespan to make such a thing achievable, but more importantly no one voice could *possibly* encompass the infinite variety of lived difference. For this reason, it is crucial to me that the transformative language of my poems is drawn, in part, from their inevitable failure to know and to understand. My poems fail, and would of course always fail, in their attempt to create a 'wholly' feminist language (feminism itself not being in any way a stable idea or form of thinking); one that is able to dismantle patriarchal structures of gender, and return the repressed agency of those buried and silenced by the past. Rather the poems of this collection reach out into the darkness, circling round suppressed experience, suffering, practice and knowledge, like bodies around a fire. The shadows that the flames cast do not 'reveal' everything, but their dark shapes make apparent that *something* is there,

moving, unclear, extant. I cannot return suppressed difference to us, nor can I recreate it, but I hope that in my poetry it can be gestured towards, that the space can echo.

The nonhuman's meaning (if indeed it has one) sits far outside of normal measures of comprehensibility. Nonhuman meaning is so distant that perhaps it is only within poetic language, where linguistic imagination reaches furthest, that we may be able to hint at it. Nonhuman species and individuals seek to survive, but the meaning behind this survival, the event horizon of nonhuman experience, cannot be crossed. In the same way, occult experience may involve spells that encourage certain occurrences, or ward off negative ones, but the meaning, and indeed the activating power, *behind* these ritual actions and practices always remains unclear. Even the most clichéd representations of magic, mysticism and witchcraft contain some element of 'mystery,' some element of unknown knowledge, tantalisingly hidden from those outside the circle, and even from those within it. A lack of, or rejection of, clear, consumable and comprehensible meaning is what gives these areas a quality that struggles to accommodate identificatory structures.

This 'lack' of meaning demonstrates why difference is not only an encouragement to respect and treat with compassion things and individuals not like ourselves; but also a way of bringing into thought forms of knowledge that challenge, by their very nature, identificatory thinking practices. My twin creative and critical approaches will seek to show that when space is made within poetry for us to observe language reaching for, and failing to capture, difference; such difference might emerge, briefly, into the light. My thesis seeks to show the resistive, transformative potential of this emergence—aesthetics as a space for thinking capable of change. It is to such thinking that the work you are about to read is dedicated: a work which I encourage you to read in your own order, carving a unique path through the poetic and critical interventions of this thesis.

Radically Different: Thinking the Nonhuman in Wallace Stevens and Theodor Adorno.

Critical Introduction

> To live in the world but outside of existing conceptions of it.
> **Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia'.**

> If thinking is to be true – if it is to be true today, in any case – it must also be a thinking against itself.
> **Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*.**

This critical thesis is a work of intellectual and philosophical consideration, yet it is also work born from the questions of a creative, poetic practice. I am aware that at this contemporary moment we face, quite simply, a reckoning with the fact that nonhuman[8] beings, habitats and things are profoundly affected, and profoundly damaged, by our actions. This is arguably the defining knowledge of our time, and it will shape the defining questions of our future. I wish to respond therefore, in the work of this thesis, to the unprecedented environmental changes taking place due to human action. It seems necessary for me, as a scholar and as a practioner, to find spaces in poetic language in which the political, moral, ethical, mental and emotional impacts of climate change and environmental destruction can be thought about. It was (and is) my belief that poetic language has unique qualities that make it suitable for considerations of this kind, a flexibility and a freedom that allows well-worn concepts, ideas and images to be questioned and unpicked.

Poetry re-figures the boundaries of what language can speak or mean, and so is best placed to touch the edges of things outside of human comprehension: things within the 'natural,' nonhuman world. This flexible, lambent changeability holds the potential to explore, through language, how we have allowed nonhuman

---

[8] This term will be explored, and its use defended, later on in this introduction.

destruction to take place, and why. The unfixed nature of poetic meaning; - words loosening themselves from their usual carapaces— might in turn allow the unfixed, alien and unpredictable reality of the nonhuman come forward a little way into human understanding. These were, and are, my hopes for poetic language.

It was this passionate interest in finding a language for our contemporary environmental moment—a moment in which we are painfully aware of our impacts on the 'natural' world, that encouraged me to apply for a PhD in the first place. For me it seemed an opportunity to make space for such writing, whilst also critically studying the 'nature poetry' that would support my work. It became clear to me, however, in my own attempts to write 'nature poetry,' that something was wrong. This was not just a case of 'writer's block', or a paucity of useful ideas. Rather it felt more like a philosophical and intellectual void—a lack of modes in which to respond to the 'natural world,' to think about landscape, the environment, climate change and destruction within aesthetics. It seemed that the 'obvious' candidates, 21st century and 20th century mainstream 'nature' poets, had little to offer me, however many times I turned to them for guidance and inspiration. My attempts to write environmentally-focused poetry dried up. I had things to say, but did not know how to say them, and could find no obvious modern 'nature' writer who seemed to have accessed a mode that I could learn from in answering my own contemporary aesthetic questions[9]. So I had to ask myself: what kind of writing did I feel was missing, and what would this kind of writing look like? Why did I find the closely held ambitions of my creative work stymied by the poetry that I looked to for guidance?

Considering the state of environmental emergency in which we find ourselves, it seems naive, even unethical, to write comfortingly lyrical meditations on nature, ones that elide the shadow of danger that hangs over every element of the 'natural' world. At the same time, straightforward polemic seems not only often to be bad

---

[9] I explore the details of the 'nature' poetry I attempted to reckon with in the body of my first chapter.

poetry, but to be less effective as polemic than articles or political speeches, in which facts can be explained and possible practical solutions laid out.

How then can poetry serve what I wish to claim as its powerful environmental potential? How can poetry explore the thin line between domestic human experience and wilderness, and broach the strangeness of the more than human world, whilst also serving, rather than harming, these elements? By harm I do not mean tangible physical harm, but rather a continuation of the very thinking practices that have fed into much environmental destruction and oppression— that the human is more important than the nonhuman, that 'nature' is an entertaining, comforting whole that is there to serve us, either physically; as resources, or emotionally; as balm and pleasure. In such ways of thinking, 'nature' has no agency of its own, but serves only as an adjunct to us, utterly comprehensible, consumable and silent. Unfortunately, there is no simple answer to the question of how one can create art that does not become part of these damaging practices; art that can even be part of a resistance against such ways of thinking and being. It thus became apparent to me that any artistic or intellectual practice that wished to challenge the usual ways of considering the 'natural' world would have to face up to, rather than the smooth over, the complications of this task.

As I will illustrate in Chapter One, I had become impatient with work that elided the agency of the nonhuman, and which elided humanity's role in its control and oppression. It seemed essential therefore to find a way of writing that managed to both respect the agency and difference of the nonhuman, and *simultaneously* own up to and draw attention to the human actions and thoughts that constantly suppress, distance and silence that nonhuman being or object. Such writing would include human subjectivity, always, as part of the aesthetic equation—looking, and being aware of the mode of looking at the same time. This would make it easier to avoid the trap of sentimentalising 'nature' as something easily accessible; something timeless and pure, untouched by human impact. Instead it might be possible to draw into the frame not only the nonhuman itself, but the swirl of conflicting and flawed human constructs that crowd around it.

The poetry I was looking for - writing that might manage to achieve a balance between genuine consideration of the nonhuman, alongside a potent awareness of damaging human conceptual structures - I came to think of as 'ecological poetry.' *The Merriam -Webster Dictionary* explains the meaning of ecology thus: '1: branch of science concerned with the interrelationship of organisms and their environments 2: the totality or pattern of relations between organisms and their environment.'[10] It is the second part of this definition that allowed me to start imagining the kind of nonhuman poetics that I feel is both lacking, and necessary, in our contemporary moment. That is: '*the totality or pattern of relations between organisms and their environments.*' Certainly no poetics can contain the totality of anything, but it might be possible, in poetry, to represent not only a nonhuman object, environment or organism, but the pattern of relations that shape how we as humans see that nonhuman. It might also be possible to represent how these patterns impact upon our behaviour towards, and relationship with, that nonhuman. It became apparent to me that a poetics that sought to look at the 'interrelationship' and 'pattern of relations' between human and nonhuman, rather than seeking to somehow represent or consider the nonhuman in 'isolation' (something I will argue is impossible to achieve anyway), would be able to better serve the nonhuman: reflecting the actual political, ethical and intellectual boundaries within which any representation of the nonhuman is held. In reflecting the boundaries that limit and suppress the nonhuman within language, it might be possible to question these boundaries, even change them.

Despite being able hypothesise the type of ecological poetics I might hope to practice, I was as yet no closer to creating or supporting such work directly. I could not imagine what this work might look or feel like, and could not seek to create it in a vacuum of my own making. For this reason, my thesis turned away from my own practice to search for writers and thinkers outside of the environmental mainstream—writers who could point towards ways of thinking and creating that might have something to offer the project of ecological poetics.

---

[10] "Ecology Definition." Merriam-Webster. Accessed September 06, 2016. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ecology.

The writers that I became drawn to were not necessarily those who might be considered avowedly environmental. Though this thesis draws on contemporary eco-criticism — especially the work of American theorists Timothy Morton and Jane Bennett — its central critical focus is the work of the Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor Adorno, a critic profoundly influenced by Marxism and by the upheavals of fascism and war that took place in Europe during his lifetime.

Though Adorno is not 'traditionally' considered to be a voice for environmentalism, it is his philosophy, and its emphasis on new ways of thinking about the difference of the nonhuman, that has allowed me to carve a path towards understanding what an ecological poetry might be and mean; refreshing the terms of the mainstream 'environmental' discourse within aesthetics. Brian O'Connor describes the dialectical focus of Adorno's philosophy in a way that reveals its huge import to the questions of my thesis:

> Adorno uses the term 'dialectical' as the illuminating experience of contradiction. Hence the name he was to give to his philosophy, *negative dialectics*. In dialectical thinking the object is allowed to speak against the finality of our conceptualizations. It operates, then, with a sense of obligation to the object: the obligation to deal with the object on its own terms. Adorno actually speaks of this disposition as '*Schuld*' which means both 'guilt' and 'debt.' It is a consciousness of what our concepts fail to say about the object and it is the obligation that the knowledge of that failure places on us to think ever more about the object in its particularity.[11]

In Adorno's dialectics the object, nonhuman thing, or being, is 'allowed to speak against the finality of our conceptualizations.' Such speaking, whereby the nonhuman finds a way to appear in its individuality and agency within human thinking, will be at the centre of my consideration of an ecological poetics. In Adorno's theory it becomes possible to imagine a kind of thinking in which

---

[11] Brian O'Connor, *Adorno* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013), p.20.

concepts turn on themselves and confront their own failure, a failure that illuminates the very object that these concepts have failed to capture. It is in Adorno that I have a found words for the *potential of language*—a way of considering how we can think about nonhuman difference that is both hopeful and relentlessly critical. Adorno's work provides a revelation of the cracks in thinking, seeking to make those cracks wider rather than smooth them over. For Adorno guilt and failure are the starting point for thinking about and writing about the nonhuman object— rather than a soothing lyrical comfort, or a falsely encouraging and dominating eco-polemic. Adorno's work brings the 'nonidentical,' into focus, a term that is at the heart of how I will be framing my understanding of the position of the nonhuman within poetry. Lambert Zuidervaart, writing for *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, explains this term and its importance for Adorno's philosophy, through a brief comparison with Hegel's idealism:

> The concept of the nonidentical … marks the difference between Adorno's materialism and Hegel's idealism. Although he shares Hegel's emphasis on a speculative identity between thought and being, between subject and object, and between reason and reality, Adorno denies that this identity has been achieved in a positive fashion. For the most part this identity has occurred negatively instead. That is to say, human thought, in achieving identity and unity, has imposed these upon objects, suppressing or ignoring their differences and diversity. Such imposition is driven by a societal formation whose exchange principle demands the equivalence (exchange value) of what is inherently nonequivalent (use value). Whereas Hegel's speculative identity amounts to an identity between identity and nonidentity, Adorno's amounts to a nonidentity between identity and nonidentity. That is why Adorno calls for a "negative dialectic" and why he rejects the affirmative character of Hegel's dialectic.[12]

The existence of the 'nonidentical:' the 'differences and diversity' of nonhuman beings and objects obscured by being made 'equivalent' by exchange-value driven

---

[12] Zuidervaart, Lambert. "Theodor W. Adorno." Stanford University. 2003. Accessed September 06, 2016. http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/adorno/.

society, is what ecological poetry would hope to gesture towards. Adorno locates part of the damage of capitalist society not only in tangible action, but in the action of thought—the 'nonidentical' individual element of objects, and in the case of this thesis, specifically nonhumans, hidden and suppressed by a conceptual system that overlays their reality with human principles. It will be my argument that this understanding of nonidentity might make it possible for us to re-orient poetic language to reveal the outline of hidden difference: - not a full comprehension, but a distant glimpse that would illuminate the failure of humanity's totalising concepts. In this difference resides the unique and alien agency of the nonhuman, an agency that I will argue we must be able to register if we wish to challenge destructive attitudes, and actions, towards the nonhuman world within poetics.

It is not only, however, Adorno's theories of the object that drew me so intensely to his work in attempting to answer the questions of my creative practice, and of this critical study. Adorno holds a uniquely powerful appeal for me as a poet— a philosopher and critic who engages fully with aesthetics as a site of potent intellectual change. Adorno does not seek to 'use' art in his theory as the material for social change; rather it is art's resistance to a specific and reified 'use' that makes it so central to his thought, and to the argument of my thesis. It is within the aesthetic mimesis of artworks that the 'uselessness' of art might serve as a space made briefly free of the strictures of reified thought. Brian O'Connor, in his book *Adorno*, suggests that:

> Aesthetic mimesis is (for Adorno) ... a diagnostic concept. It serves as a reference point in Adorno's theory for non-reified human behaviour. It assumes a particular form in aesthetic activity, but even in that form it points towards something that is absent from the everyday experience of life within the social totality. Aesthetic experience possesses, he claims, 'the mimetic vestige, the plenipotentiary of an undamaged life in the midst of mutilated life' (AT 117), providing us with a glimpse of our mimetic potential. It is in this respect 'the unimpaired corrective of reified consciousness' (AT 339). In the experience of aesthetic mimesis – imitative creativity – there is 'the happiness of producing the world once over' (AT

339), that has almost entirely been eliminated by the reifying rationality of the social totality.[13]

O'Connor suggests that mimesis' 'imitative process' is:

> … suggestive of Adorno's account of non-identical experience, which involves subjects adjusting … 'to a moment which they themselves are not' (ND 138).[14]

Mimesis is a term with widely varying interpretations and significations within critical theory, but its importance for Adorno comes from its rare ability to insert irrationality into a society of total rationality— the nonidentical elements that reified thought seeks to bury, but which may be able to be revealed within artworks. As Adorno argues:

> Art is a refuge for mimetic comportment. In art the subject exposes itself … to its other, separated from it and yet not entirely separated … That art, something mimetic, is possible in the midst of rationality, and that it employs its means, is a response to the faulty irrationality of the rational world as an over-administered world. For the aim of all rationality—the quintessence of the means for dominating nature—would have to be something other than means, hence something not rational. Capitalist society hides and disavows precisely this irrationality, and in contrast to this, art represents truth in a double sense: It maintains the image of its aim, which has been obscured by rationality, and it convicts the status quo of its irrationality and absurdity … Art completes knowledge with that that is excluded from knowledge and thereby once again impairs its character as knowledge, its univocity … Art cannot fulfil its concept.[15]

---

[13] Brian O'Connor, *Adorno* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013), p.150.
[14] Brian O'Connor, *Adorno* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013), p.153.
[15] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.73-74.

Within the mimesis Adorno describes, the viewer or reader comes across an experience of the other: the nonidentity and irrationality supressed by reified thought. In this experience they may momentarily loose themselves from the complete control of human subjectivity— 'a moment which they themselves are not.'[16] It is such a moment that allows 'our mimetic potential' to come forward, a glimpse of 'undamaged life in the midst of mutilated life.' This matters profoundly to my thesis, because it suggests that art's failure to 'fulfil its concept' might make possible a space in which the profound difference of nonidentity can be met: a site in which the observer of an artwork might glimpse something beyond reified identificatory thinking, and witness nonhuman individuality. This way of seeing the relationship between observer and artwork allows us to understand why it might be within aesthetics, and, as I will argue, particularly poetry, that nonhuman independence might emerge, challenging controlling human conceptions. I will argue that the mimetic 'irrationality' that Adorno describes might be best served by the liminal potential of poetic language: poetry's flexible and non-linear capabilities allowing for a meaning able to stretch rationality to its limits, the irrational pushing up against rational within capacious poetic form.

In examining Adorno's ideas in this thesis I have chosen to focus my attention on *Aesthetic Theory[17]* and *Negative Dialectics[18]*, as well as considering the text of Adorno's 1962 lecture 'Commitment.'[19] Though I have spent time working across Adorno's canon of thought, it is within *Aesthetic Theory* and *Negative Dialectics* that the critical ideas that I have outlined have their fullest expression. In bringing these two centres of Adorno's thought together, I will be able to explore the impact of Adorno's theories on the action of thinking, and on the potential of aesthetics. These areas will not serve to give me a 'mode' of criticism, or a set of wholly inflexible critical rules to follow, in my consideration of poetry's ability to connect to nonhuman difference. Rather, Adorno's work will serve as inspiration and guide, part of an intellectual conversation in which Adorno's theories assist in

---

[16] Quoted in Brian O'Connor, *Adorno* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013), p.153.
[17] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic), 2013.
[18] Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics*. (New York, NY: Continuum), 2003.
[19] Adorno, Theodor W. "Commitment." ada.evergreen.edu. Accessed September 6, 2016.
http://ada.evergreen.edu/~arunc/texts/frankfurt/commitment/commitment.pdf.

steering me towards what might be made achievable in human-nonhuman relations, within the flexible space of poetic language.

My interest in exploring the potential for poetry to become a space in which nonhuman difference can be registered, has found its critical force through Adorno's work. However, this thesis would have been impossible to undertake if I had not been able to find a poet whom I felt had *already* created some form of ecological poetics, work that allowed me to think into what a contemporary ecological poetics might be. It is for this reason that I found myself called back to the work of the American modernist poet Wallace Stevens. Stevens is not an overtly 'nature' orientated poet in the mould of Wendell Berry, for example, (a writer I will consider in my first chapter). Yet it is in Stevens' work that I found language capable of making nonhuman difference available to the reader, language that simultaneously explores and critiques its own limits, whilst pointing towards the nonhuman nonidentity that it can never fully cognise. Stevens work is intimately and obsessively concerned with difference, and the ability, or failure, of language to capture that difference. His poetics captures human subjectivity reaching towards the nonidentical, an impossible reaching that, through its failure, paradoxically produces an awareness of the existence of nonhuman objects, beyond human conceptions.

Despite these qualities, within conventional literary criticism Stevens remains an unlikely ecological figure. This is partly due to the reported nature of Stevens the man, not a person in whom a movement for ecological equality and balance might seek its champion. Adam Kirsch, writing in *The Atlantic,* says of Stevens:

> He never left North America. He was casually racist and anti-Semitic. A Hoover Republican, he distrusted labor unions. He drank too much at parties, to overcome his natural shyness, and later had to apologize for his boorishness. In the depths of the Depression, he made $20,000 a year, the

equivalent of $350,000 today. Each detail feels more interest-repelling than the last.[20]

It is important to quote these abhorrent, queasy making qualities of Stevens to make it clear that this thesis is in no way a defence of Stevens the man. It is, and can only be, an exploration of Stevens the poet, of the words on the page and the book in my hands—a claiming of poetic heritage and inspiration by a person whom Stevens himself, according to biographical reports, would intensely dislike. This examination does not excuse Stevens the man, but it does, for the purposes of this thesis, put him aside.

It is not only Stevens the individual, however, who does not appear to fit any predictably ecological mould. It is also Stevens the *poet* who has been considered an unlikely candidate for works of nonhuman interest. Scott Knickerbocker, in his book *Ecopoetics*, references one of Stevens most famous critics, Helen Vendler, in his suggestion that:

> According to most of Wallace Stevens's prominent critics, the poet is anything but ecologically orientated … For Vendler … the "true" Stevens … is unmoved by the material particularities of the natural world: "The lively things of this world—human, animal, vegetable—do not touch him as they did Keats or Wordsworth …" Vendler goes even further to claim that … Stevens is actually repulsed by the material fecundity of nature … To abbreviate an old argument: for Vendler and others, Stevens's "imagination" takes precedence over "reality."[21]

Knickerbocker goes on to argue that:

[20] Kirsch, Adam. "The Patron Saint of Inner Lives." The Atlantic. Accessed September 06, 2016. http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-patron-saint-of-inner-lives/471468/.
[21] Scott Knickerbocker, *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), p.19.

The dominant view … is that Stevens privileges the imagination and everything that accompanies it—art, artifice, language—over reality, traditionally conceived as physical nature, or that, even more strongly, imagination creates reality. In this view Stevens is dedicated to … "putting the fictional before the real" (Rosu xi). This view clearly serves contemporary social constructionism and the poststructuralist account of the rupture between language and the world to which it refers. While no one would claim the opposite of this view of Stevens … a closer look at his statements on poetry as well as his poetry itself reveal that for Stevens, reality is not swallowed up by the imagination. To him these terms are not simply opposed to each other; nor do they collapse completely into each other. Instead, the imagination and reality require each other … "[The imagination] has the strength of reality or none at all" (Necessary Angel 6,7) … "[The nature of poetry] is an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals" (Necessary Angel 24, 27).[22]

Stevens' explorations of the power of the creative imagination have contributed to the view that Stevens 'privileges the imagination' over reality. From the traditional standpoint of ecocriticism, a poet whose prime focus is the imagination can never be an aesthetic voice for the reality of nonhuman 'nature.' However, as Knickerbocker argues, for Stevens 'the imagination and reality require each other.'[23] What becomes apparent in Stevens' poetics is that one cannot simply brush away imagination, artifice and thought to reach authentic, tangible nonhuman difference and individuality. Human beings are irrevocably caught up in the intense subjectivity of their own imaginative conceptions of the world, conceptions that inflect any experience they might wish to have of nonhuman reality. It is in bringing the imagination to the fore, rather than ignoring it, that Stevens manages to interrogate the cognitive controls that human beings place around nonhuman existence.

---

[22] Scott Knickerbocker, *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), p.22-23.
[23] Ibid

Stevens interrogates poetic language, its metaphors and its unstable concepts, to briefly create clearings in which nonhuman difference can appear through a recognition of the concepts placed around it. It is Stevens' exploration of the constant interplay between imagination and reality that allows the reader the briefest glimpse of nonhuman reality beyond our conceptions. This most 'fantastical,' humorous and imaginative of poets is thus best placed to enact an ecological poetics. As Knickerbocker argues:

> ... the effect Stevens ... has as a proto-ecological modernist is to put into question what composes the real as well as to help us see the wild unpredictability of language. Stevens never proposes a specific way we should treat nature, but his poetics shows us the intertwined relationship of language and the imagination with physical reality in its most fundamental form. No matter how much we pare down or restrict language to get at brute nature, "something resides," yet that residuum of language and sound is itself wild and beyond our ability completely to control it, like nature.[24]

Stevens' poetry provides unique challenges and possibilities for the reader. Stevens uses language less to create a holistic set of narratives, and more to render linguistic spaces in which the reader's mind might challenge its own conceptions. In these spaces the reader might recognise the dialectical qualities of their own thinking, reaching beyond totalising subjectivity; and thus, perhaps, furthering the possibility that they might recognise nonhuman difference.

Stevens' poetry also encourages an active, creative reading process, one that resonates deeply with me as a creative practioner. Stevens makes it possible to imagine a poetry that is not propagandist, didactic or 'convincing,' and yet one in which the potential for intellectual change exists within the open spaces of linguistic action. Such poetry does not tell the reader what to think, but makes a wider spectrum of potential thought available to the reader—a space to think in,

---

[24] Scott Knickerbocker, *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), p.36.

rather than a list of things to think. Bart Eeckhout, quoting Daniel R Schwarz, in his book *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing*, argues that:

> "More than any major figure, … Stevens restructured our concept of what it means to read" … Stevens's own texts … compel the reader to develop a more than usual degree of self-consciousness about the act of reading. Stevens's metapoetry demands and engenders its own type of metareader. It actively prompts or begs us to study the question of its appropriability and possibilities for contextualisation. And lest this question appear too cerebral, we might recall that such prompting or begging is of more than theoretical importance: it engages us in many senses, including that of doubling the poet's self-styled task—the task, that is, of recording the mind in the act of finding what will suffice.[25]

In drawing our attention to 'the act of reading,' that we engage in with each poem, Stevens also makes us slowly aware of the acts of reading that structure our every experience of the outside, 'objective,' world. Each act of understanding is one of reading and interpretation, shaped by the concepts and knowledge that is always already pre-formed in our minds. In drawing out a multiplicity of possible meanings and contexts, Stevens' flexible language points us towards the multiplicity of meaning and agency that lies beyond our wholly human subjectivity. Within Stevens the act of reading becomes one in which self-consciousness of thought drives knowledge—an understanding of the nonhuman world, gleaned from an awareness of the multiple failures of static human conceptions to cognise that world. As John N. Serio argues in *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens*:

> Stevens pointedly declares that everything we believe is a fiction, that reality is an invention of the mind … This stance does not turn Stevens into a solipsist, nor does it imply a denial of reality, which Stevens explicitly affirms as the "ding an sich" (23), or the "Thing Itself" (451). But it is to

---

[25] Bart Eeckhout, *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), p.21-22.

grant that all we can know of the outer world is our interpretation of it and that the construction of this interpretation is a poetic act. As Stevens observes in "Adagia," "Things seen are things as seen" (902).[26]

It is in becoming aware of our 'interpretation,' of the world, that we begin to imagine a seeing that would go beyond it. To gesture in any way to the actual world of nonhuman difference, we must realise that any experience of it is fashioned by the 'interpretation' which we inevitably place upon it. As Serio suggests, totally removing this interpretation or conceptual screen is impossible. However, in Stevens poetry, this screen is witnessed, tested and stretched through language, pulled far beyond its usual unthinking position. In this stretching, tiny splits may appear, an awareness of *what is* built through a knowledge of what we are unable to witness. Stevens' 'fiction,' does not negate the reality of the nonhuman world. Rather it is in prioritising this fictionionalising, through the processes of poetry, that what is behind the fiction might make a shadowy appearance— a blurred outline on a photographic negative showing that something was there, though we may not be able to fully recognise what that something is. As Serio suggests:

> In the (poetic) process, what is evoked, tellingly, if only momentarily, is a credible belief in a fiction that discloses reality.[27]

The poems of Stevens that I have chosen to consider in this thesis cover a wide scope of his poetic career, from early work to some of his late poems.[28] This is because my method in selecting these poems was driven by questions of poetic creation, the potential of these works to emerge as sites of ecological poetics. I do not attempt to make an argument about the importance of different sections of Stevens' oeuvre, or to give an overview of his poetic development and historical context. Many fine books have already undertaken these tasks successfully, and I

[26] John N. Serio, *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.4.
[27] John N. Serio, *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.6.
[28] My source for Stevens' poems is: Stevens, Wallace*. Collected Poems.* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006).

feel no need to add to them. Rather, as I have said, the instances of Stevens' work that I have selected are the ones in which the potentiality of using poetic language to excavate nonhuman agency and difference is most apparent. The close readings of his poems that I provide in no way seek to become the 'definitive' or final readings of these works. Instead my readings of these poems open up potentialities of meaning in which a reader might be able to challenge or question their usual relations with, and concepts of, nonhuman difference and individuality. Stevens' language is, for a reader, an open-ended, liminal experience in which poetics reaches for the difference that it cannot contain. As Stevens himself argues: 'A poem need not have a meaning, and like most things in nature often does not have.'[29] My methodology does not attempt to fix a consumable and final 'meaning,' upon the poems I consider, but to recognise them as sites of cognitive potential in which nonhuman difference might come to be glimpsed. These poems are spaces of thinking, not finished 'products' with a correct interpretation.

My readings are as creative as my poetic writing—imaginative acts in which the mind witnesses itself in its own attempts to go beyond itself, reading that has the provisionality and possibility of the writing process. Such reading is a central part of my own creative writing, my own efforts to find forms of cognition which might allow an ecological poetics to bloom into life. It is for this reason that, despite an intimate familiarity with the texts, I do not extensively draw upon Stevens' prose writings on poetics in this thesis. Stevens' prose works, including *The Necessary Angel,*[30] and sections such as 'Adagia' from *Opus Posthumous*,[31] are beautiful and informative works of thought that reveal much about Stevens' own process, his wide interactions with philosophy and literature, and the act of poetry itself. However, it is not my aim in this thesis to explore how Stevens' prose work relates to his poetry, or to try and use Stevens' own statements to 'explain' the meanings and intentions of his poems. In excluding Stevens' reflections on his own poetic experience, I am able to more closely map my own readings of the poems as they

---

[29] Stevens, Wallace, and Samuel French Morse. *Opus Posthumous*. (New York: A.A Knopf, 1957), p.201.
[30] Stevens, Wallace. *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. (New York: Knopf, 1951).
[31] Stevens, Wallace, and Samuel French Morse. *Opus Posthumous*. (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1957).

are influenced by Adorno's theories and contemporary eco-critics. To try and match these readings up point for point with Stevens' own complex and contradictory philosophy would be dishonest, and un-illuminating. The readings of this thesis respond to the ecological potential of the poems themselves, not ignoring Stevens philosophy, but also not foregrounding it. In seeking to provide fresh and original scholarship I turn away from the traditional texts of academic Stevens analysis— exploring a new set of works more able to help me understand my creative relation to Stevens' poetry, in a time of contemporary ecological crisis.

Throughout this thesis I will be providing glosses of relevant critical terms, but there is one term that is central to my thesis and which merits particular explanation and understanding. That word is 'nonhuman,' a word that I use instead of the more commonly used word, 'nature'. To understand why I rarely use the word 'nature,' in this thesis, and why, when I do, I use quotation marks, I must briefly turn to the contemporary American eco-critic Timothy Morton, and his book *Ecology Without Nature*.[32] It is in researching Morton's book for this thesis that I found voice for the reasons that I felt uncomfortable with the word 'nature,' and persuasive arguments that convinced me that its use would be unable to serve the aims of this project. Morton argues that:

> 'We discover how nature always slips out of reach in the very act of grasping it … Even as it establishes a middle ground "in between" terms such as subject and object, or inside and outside, nature without fail excludes certain terms, thus reproducing the difference between inside and outside in other ways. Just when it brings us into proximity with the nonhuman "other," nature re-establishes a comfortable distance between "us" and "them." With ecological friends like these, who needs enemies?'[33]

For Morton, 'nature' flattens the essential differences between varying objects and subjects that are 'natural' into an undifferentiated sameness, and distances the

---

[32] Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
[33] Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics. (*Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.19.

human being from the 'other' of 'nature.' In doing so, 'nature' becomes an undifferentiated mass whose individual sites of agency are hidden—a mass that is distant from the uniqueness of human beings, whose implication in, and intimacy with 'nature' is entirely lost. 'Nature' describes so much that it describes almost nothing at all, neither a factual term, nor an obvious metaphor, binding together all that is not human into an oppositional position with that which is human. It sanctions a divide and a separation that is not a recognition of difference, but rather an easy evasion of our connection to the alien reality of the 'natural' world. The word 'nonhuman' on the other hand, though far from perfect, is a word that manages to drain away some of the philosophical and intellectual baggage contained in 'nature.' The 'nonhuman,' obviously enough, means quite clearly that which is not human, and nothing else. It can refer to living beings, and to rocks and mountains and air. The word in no way excludes the possibility that both the nonhuman and the human are as 'natural' as each other, nor the possibility of a web of intimacy between nonhuman beings and objects and humans. As Morton argues:

> Life-forms are constantly coming and going, mutating and becoming extinct. Biospheres and eco-systems are subject to arising and cessation. Living beings do not form a solid prehistorical, or nonhistorical ground upon which human history plays. But nature is often wheeled out to adjudicate between what is fleeting and what is substantial and permanent. Nature smoothes over uneven history, making its struggles and suffering illegible.[34]

The 'nonhuman,' does unfortunately rely on the 'human,' to make its meaning, and yet its attempt at simple designation may leave space in signification for the 'arising and cessation,' Morton describes; the complex and constant change that occurs within nonhuman action. 'Nature' patches over 'uneven history,' a trans-historical, everlasting concept that makes its 'struggles and suffering illegible;' a romanticised sameness that renders the tectonic plates under the earth and a

---

[34] Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.21.

family of wasps part of one comfy, and comfortably distant, substance. All 'nature' must, at root, be *the same*, whereas nonhuman beings and objects may only share the fact that they are not human: sites of intense difference that are not the same as us, and may not be at all the same as each other.

As this thesis will argue, language can never hope to do full justice to the unique individuality and agency of the nonhuman. It can only grasp after its truth, failing in its attempts for full understanding. This thesis will however also argue that the language that makes up this search *matters*, that linguistic choices have the power to release difference into human comprehension, and to own up to human conceptual control. My choice of words in this thesis are important for the possibilities they make available within thinking, the space they carve for traditional human conceptions of the nonhuman to be stretched and challenged. Morton argues that:

> The idea of nature is all too real, and it has an all too real effect upon all too real beliefs, practices, and decisions in the all too real world. True, I claim that there is no such "thing" as nature, if by nature we mean something that is single, independent and lasting. But deluded ideas and ideological fixations do exist. "Nature" is a focal point that compels us to assume certain attitudes. Ideology resides in the attitude we assume toward the fascinating object. By dissolving the object, we render the ideological fixation inoperative. At least, that is the plan.'[35]

Like Morton, my 'plan' for the critical portion of my thesis seeks to undermine 'ideological fixations,' finding room for nonhuman nonidentity to appear through and beyond human ideas of it. Using 'nonhuman,' instead of 'nature,' is no guarantee of success, as every word is freighted with history and ideology. In removing the familiar term of 'nature,' however, I hope that the more unfamiliar 'nonhuman,' will inculcate a potential self-consciousness in my reader about what they understand as nonhuman beings and objects. This potential self-

---

[35] Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.20.

consciousness may help to bring about an awareness of difference: the seething variety of things that cannot be comfortably held under the capacious term of 'nature,' but which strive to emerge in their individuality through language. It is this difference that my thesis will seek to explore, responding to the alien quality of nonhuman difference, and the alien quality of language itself. My work will attempt to make an intellectual space in which it might be possible to imagine an ecological poetry that could do justice to ecological existence; to a contemporary moment in which recognising difference might give us profoundly relevant ways of thinking about our relations with the more-than-human world.

Chapter One

Where Has All The 'Nature' Poetry Gone?

As I have explored in my introduction, the environmental questions of our times can equally be thought of as linguistic questions—therefore there is a need for poetry, the art form in which language confronts itself most deeply, to engender new ways of describing and enacting human relationships with the nonhuman world. Yet, despite this, the majority of modern[36] poetry that seems to support the 'natural' world, also seems to reproduce the ways of thinking that are at the heart of environmental suppression, as I will demonstrate in this chapter. Thus this thesis must as: where can contemporary poets look in order to shape a poetics that refrains from colonizing and oppressing the nonhuman; one that responds to the pressure of the environmental crisis whilst revealing the agency and difference of the natural world?

It is not just the obvious horror that drives these questions: the loss of nonhuman life, the destruction of habitats and landscapes, the dangers of pollution, global warming, deforestation and water poverty. It is also a horror that comes from the poetic and philosophical understanding that thought-worlds are produced by life-worlds: that the capabilities of our thought partly depend on the *material environments* that impact upon it. In this understanding, the nonhuman is not only fodder for metaphor and imagination, it is a catalyst and a forebear of the creative act—its own unique difference and individuality stretching and shaping the intellectual and imaginative potential of the human mind.

From this perspective, the loss of nonhuman beings or environments is a lessening of the capabilities we may have as thinking animals, ones able to break through subjectivity and become witnesses of essential and enchanting difference. To not turn in on ourselves— a painfully lonely and intellectually incestuous species playing inside the prison of our own subjectivity— we will need to allow for a

---

[36] By this I mean 20th and 21st Century poetry.

recognition of nonhuman difference, agency and freedom, in both physical and linguistic spaces.

It was my frustration at a lack of non-oppressive 'nature' poetry from which to grow my practice that led me, as I have explained in my introduction, to this thesis, and towards seeking potential ways out of the poetic bind that I describe. To understand these potentialities, however, it is at first crucial to understand the problem which I am trying to solve. That is: what are the issues at work in much modern 'nature' poetry that get in the way of meaningful poetic interactions with the nonhuman?

It is my argument that modern (by which I mean mid to late 20th century, and 21st century) Anglophone 'nature' poetry has a habit of falling into two general camps: what I will call the 'committed' and the 'pastoral'. These camps have dominated the character of 'nature' poetry for nearly a hundred years, and, as I will suggest, may be contributing to contemporary poetry's inability to face up to the environmental challenges we now face. Most mainstream environmental poems (with inevitable exceptions)[37] either seek to convey a strongly political message in relation to 'nature', one committed to changing people's attitudes and actions towards the nonhuman; or they attempt to provide a lyric and immediate rendering of the experience of the nonhuman for the reader.[38] As I will prove in this chapter, both of these dominant poetic strategies falter in their lack of recognition of the

---

[37] I unfortunately do not have space in this thesis to explore the exciting work of 'Radical Landscape Poetry', seen most fully in the anthology *The Ground Aslant: Radical Landscape Poetry*, ed. Harriet Tarlo (Shearsman 2010), and in the work of Harriet Tarlo herself, and the poet Carol Watts, amongst others. This work takes a different position to the kind of ecological poetry I believe Stevens exemplifies, but has many fascinating connections to it, and shows another kind of potential way forward for contemporary environmental poetics.

[38] The general trend towards these types of poetry can be seen in the wide range of American and British 'eco-poetry' and 'nature poetry' anthologies, in their picks from 20th and 21st century work. These include: Peter Abbs, Ed, Earth Songs: A Resurgence Anthology of Contemporary Eco-poetry. (Cambridge: Green Books. 1990); Alice Oswald, Ed, *The Thunder Mutters, 101 Poems for the Planet.* (London: Faber and Faber. 2006); Neil Astley, Ed, *Earth Shattering: Ecopoems.* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books. 2007); Florence Caplow, Susan A Cohen, Eds, *Wildbranch: An Anthology of Nature, Environmental and Place based writing.* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press. 2010); David Knowles and Sharon Blackie, eds, *Entanglements: New Ecopoetry.* (Isle of Lewis: Two Ravens Press), 2012; Anne Fisher Wirth, Laura Grey-Street, Eds, *The Ecopoetry Anthology.* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press. 2013). Many of these poems are highly skilled and beautiful pieces of work, but the problems with their general poetic strategies will be elucidated in this chapter.

contingency and agency of nonhuman individuals and things; and so can only be dead ends in the search for an ecologically engaged poetics.[39]

To understand and reveal the problems with the activist environmental writing of 'committed' poetry, I will first look at Gary Snyder's poem 'Mother Earth, Her Whales'.[40] Alongside this poem I will consider the text of Theodor Adorno's 1962 lecture *Commitment*,[41] a piece of work that powerfully demonstrates the failures of art that commits itself to a didactic message.

Snyder's poem is a polemic against a capitalistic system that abuses nonhuman beings and things, as well as the human beings who live in 'natural' environments:

> The grasses are working in the sun. Turn it green.
> Turn it sweet. That we may eat.
> Grow our meat.
>
> Brazil says "sovereign use of Natural Resources"
> Thirty thousand kinds of unknown plants.
> The living actual people of the jungle
> > sold and tortured ...
>
> Ah China, where are the tigers, the wild boars,
> > the monkeys,
> > > like the snows of yesteryear

---

[39] The poets I will be placing particular emphasis on in this chapter, Gary Snyder (as an example of 'committed' poetry, and Wendell Berry, (as an example of 'pastoral' poetry), are both American, and are both part of the same generation: Snyder born in 1930, and Berry in 1934. As such, though they are very different writers stylistically, these poets both share a narrow bracket—white, American men of nearly the same age. I point this out to make clear that I do not and could not consider these two men exemplars of *all* poetic perspectives, but that I do consider them two broadly representative poles of mainstream environmental poetry, poets that have hugely influenced the writing of their and our current moment. As the careers of these two dominant 'nature' poets come to a close (both are now in their late 80's) it seems the perfect moment to re-assess their work, and consider where environmental poetry might go from here as we tackle ever more challenging ecological situations.

[40] Snyder, Gary. *Turtle Island*. (New York: New Directions), 1974.

[41] Adorno, Theodor W. "Commitment." Ada.Evergreen. Accessed September 6, 2016. http://ada.evergreen.edu/~arunc/texts/frankfurt/commitment/commitment.pdf.

> Gone in a mist, a flash, and the dry hard ground
>
> Is parking space for fifty thousand trucks.[42]

Snyder's general poetic argument: that oppressive human systems destroy and manipulate environments and beings, and that they should be resisted, is in itself one that, to my mind, seems 'correct'. I too would like to see governments and societies treat the nonhuman with care. So why is it that I find the poem not only ineffective as art, but also ineffective, even counter-productive, in its liberatory aims for the nonhuman? Adorno argues in *Commitment* that:

> Works of art which by their existence take the side of the victims of a rationality that subjugates nature are even in their protest constitutively implicated in the process of rationalization itself. Were they to try to disown it, they would become both esthetically and socially powerless: mere clay.[43]

Adorno is suggesting that if an artwork tries to polemically take the side of victims of a rational, capitalist society, putting itself in the same category as the victims by unhitching itself from that society, then it falls into the rationalizing trap of that society. This is because, in putting forward a polemical argument, the artwork takes on the empiricist nature of capitalist society. Adorno suggests that:

> Once the life of the mind renounces the duty and liberty of its own pure objectification, it has abdicated. Thereafter, works of art merely assimilate themselves sedulously to the brute existence against which they protest, in forms so ephemeral (the very charge made vice versa by committed against autonomous works) that from their first day they belong to the seminars in which they inevitably end.[44]

---

[42] Snyder, Gary. *Turtle Island*. (New York: New Directions, 1974), p.47, Lines 5-49.
[43] Adorno, Theodor W. "Commitment." Ada.Evergreen. Accessed September 6, 2016. http://ada.evergreen.edu/~arunc/texts/frankfurt/commitment/commitment.pdf, p.1.
[44] Ibid

We can see this assimilation at work in Snyder's poem, which aims to liberate the nonhuman from human oppression, and yet ends up repeating, in its aim for political effectiveness, the tropes at the heart of this oppression. In the seventh stanza of the poem, the speaker asks, 'Is man most precious of all things?' and with an assumed affirmative answers his own question: '-then let us love him, and his brothers, all those,/Fading living beings.'[45] Putting aside the glaring gender imbalance of these lines, the poem has itself made the *very* argument that fuels so much environmental exploitation: that man 'is the most precious of all things,' and so can take what s/he needs from the 'natural' world, even if it has dire ecological consequences.

Snyder knows that most of his readers will place human beings at the top of the chain of being over animals, plants and objects, yet instead of challenging this view, questioning whether a scale of importance distracts from the individual, unexchangable value of each being, he reiterates human specialness. Snyder is of course trying to use the 'specialness' of humanity as a tool to plead for the specialness of other creatures. He hopes that his readers will see these beings as 'brothers,' part of their world, almost as important as them, and thus worth saving. And yet, in so doing, Snyder's poem cannot help making the arguments that his poem is designed to negate. His need to convince his readers politically has not only subsumed his aims, it has shattered them. These lines leave the reader's perspective on the nonhuman unchallenged, nowhere confronting the possibility that the nonhuman may have a right to exist not because it is connected to or pleasing to humans, but simply because it is.

We see this negation of nonhuman agency and independence again in one of the poem's most overtly polemical stanzas:

> *Solidarity*: The people.
> Standing Tree People!
> Flying Bird People!

---

[45] Snyder, Gary. *Turtle Island*. (New York: New Directions), 1974, p.47, Lines 40-42.

Swimming Sea People!

Four-legged, two legged, people!⁴⁶

This stanza calls for 'solidarity' between human and nonhuman, but the laudable political aim is in trouble immediately. Firstly, this solidarity can only be one way, framed as it is in human language inaccessible for any nonhuman being. More importantly, though the aim of describing various nonhumans as kinds of people can *only* be to equalize their importance and value in the minds of the reader, it achieves the opposite. 'The people' are at the top of the stanza— the real human 'people' who need no extra designation, the original and ideal version of human-ness. The animals then described as 'Flying Bird People,' and so on, are not only literally lower down in this poetic schema of value, they are only being given value at all as a kinds of humans, not as their own, always-different selves. Snyder hopes to engender affection in his readers for nonhumans by convincing us that they are really just other (lesser) kinds of humans, ones with feathers or gills. But this is an oppressive act that elides the individual reality and difference of those plants and animals mentioned. Rather than confronting his reader with the challenge of loving or valuing the absolute, and inaccessible, difference of those with whom they share a world, he perpetrates the same intellectual mistake that leads to the nonhuman oppression he deplores.

In *Commitment*, Adorno analyses what he sees as the problems at work in the 20ᵗʰ century German playwright Bertolt Brecht's 'committed' writing:

> 'Even Brecht's best work was infected by the deceptions of his commitment.
> Its language shows how far the underlying poetic subject and its message
> have come apart. In an attempt to overcome the gap, Brecht affected the
> diction of the oppressed. But the doctrine he advocated needs the language
> of the intellectual. The homeliness and simplicity of his tone is thus a
> fiction. It betrays itself both by signs of exaggeration and by stylized
> regression to archaic or provincial forms of expression. It can often be

---

⁴⁶ Snyder, Gary. *Turtle Island.* (New York: New Directions, 1974), p.48, Lines 48-52.

importunate, and ears which have not let themselves be deprived of their native sensitivity cannot help hearing that they are talked into something. It is a usurpation and almost contempt for victims to speak like this, as if the author were one of them.'[47]

In Brecht's desire to *speak up* for the oppressed, he ends up speaking *for* them, trying to merge real political subjects with the political work itself. In doing so, the victim's own agency and reality is usurped by the author trying to be 'one of them'. This explication of Brecht's concerns clarifies another problem at the heart of Snyder's polemical environmental poetics. Snyder rails against those who attempt to speak for the nonhuman world:

> How can the head-heavy power-hungry politic scientist
> Government   two-world   Capitalist imperialist
>
> …
>
>   non-farmer   jet-set   bureaucrats
> Speak for the green of the leaf? Speak for the soil?[48]

Snyder draws a separation between those in power and the nonhuman world they 'speak for,' whilst simultaneously oppressing. Yet Snyder's entire aim in this poem is to speak for (to speak up for) the nonhuman 'natural' world. His motivations are understandable, but by speaking for nonhuman beings he elides their difference, obscuring the individuality of their suffering and experience.

Snyder criticises the 'bureaucrats' who speak for the nonhuman, but he does not consider the inherent problems of any human *speaking*, that is using human language and linguistic forms, to express the reality of non-linguistic beings. Nor does he consider that the valid factors that make the nonhuman appealing to

[47] Adorno, Theodor W. "Commitment." Ada.Evergreen. Accessed September 6, 2016. http://ada.evergreen.edu/~arunc/texts/frankfurt/commitment/commitment.pdf, p.7-8.
[48] Snyder, Gary. *Turtle Island*. (New York: New Directions, 1974), p.48, Lines 53-57.

him—beauty, diversity, wildness, strength and so on—may mean nothing at all to nonhuman beings and things themselves. The 'green of the leaf,' may be a human source of affection for the plant world, but may mean nothing to the plant itself, or be understood completely differently in the plant's life processes. At the heart of Snyder's love for the nonhuman is a wholly hermetic lifeworld of experience and or/existence, one that is violated when it is presented as communicable. This is not to suggest that human beings cannot work for nonhuman protection and liberation. But it does, however, reveal a huge problem at the heart of Snyder's poem. By presenting his poem's narrator, and by extension himself, as the 'rightful' speaker for the nonhuman — without any reflection on the fractures of meaning in any human communication of nonhuman reality — nonhuman agency is lost. The controlling voices of the bureaucrats are replaced by a much more well-meaning, but equally misleading, poetic speaker. Snyder does not explore the gaps between representation and reality, between his desire to protect the nonhuman and its inaccessible reality. By ignoring these gaps, Snyder negates any liberatory potential for the nonhuman in his eagerness to make his poetry effective as politics.

Adorno's lecture expresses another central problem with committed artworks: the possibility that, in representing a victim's suffering, that suffering is corrupted through a process of aestheticization:

> …by turning suffering into images, despite all their hard implacability, they wound our shame before the victims. For these are used to create something, works of art, that are thrown to the consumption of a world which destroyed them. The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it. The moral of this art, not to forget for a single instant, slithers into the abyss of its opposite. The esthetic principle of stylization, and even the solemn prayer of the

chorus, make an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed.[49]

By using the horror of suffering as an aesthetic tool for making a political point, the suffering becomes 'meaningful': - it gains a paradoxical kind of value as the material for future change. In doing this, its agonising futility is concealed, and we may even draw some kind of aesthetic pleasure from its role as part of an artwork; forcing suffering to become sublimated for a higher political purpose. This also contains the potential 'to elicit enjoyment' from suffering within the society that caused the suffering in the first place. Snyder's poem, unaware, operates within the corrupted aestheticization Adorno describes. It does this by painting a richly evocative picture of environmental pain, in the hope that this will make its polemic more effective:

> The robots argue how to parcel out our Mother Earth
> To last a little longer
>   like vultures flapping
> Belching, gurgling,
>   near a dying Doe.

> "In yonder field a slain knight lies-
> We'll fly to him and peck his eyes
>   with a down
>   derry derry derry down down."[50]

This stanza draws a pleasurable, perhaps even mildly erotic, contrast between the ugly, disgusting vultures 'belching' and 'flapping' and the vulnerable, female, dying doe deer. These lines suggest that the 'natural' world is beautiful, delicate and pure, unlike the horrible and foul 'robot' vultures of human governments. In 'supporting' the aims of the poem, the reader finds themselves pleasurably on the

---

[49] Adorno, Theodor W. "Commitment." Ada.Evergreen. Accessed September 6, 2016. http://ada.evergreen.edu/~arunc/texts/frankfurt/commitment/commitment.pdf, p.9.
[50] Snyder, Gary. *Turtle Island.* (New York: New Directions, 1974), p.49, Lines 59-67.

pure and morally correct side of 'natural' world and its attractive doe. The reader's agreement with Snyder's argument is rewarded by inclusion within its beauty and goodness, further underlined by the stanza's connection of the doe to a 'knight'— someone noble, chaste and pure, slain in righteous battle.

In simplifying nonhuman struggles in this way, Snyder betrays the very victims of human oppression he wants to protect. It is particularly telling that he imagines his hated bureaucratic humans as nonhuman 'vultures.' This metaphorical aestheticization suggests that nonhumans who appear ugly, unpleasant and foul need not apply to his liberatory program. It little matters that vultures have a crucial place in the ecosystem, making use of rotten dead animals and returning them to the life cycle— they are aesthetically unappealing, and so are not offered sympathy in the poem. Whether Snyder has any genuine dislike of vultures is irrelevant: in painting them this way, Snyder elides the actual and complicated reality of the nonhuman world he is trying to save. The suffering and oppression of the whole network of nonhuman beings is reduced to the sad, tragically satisfying and sentimental fate of a dying doe. This is designed to give pleasure and self-satisfaction to the reader, and so turn nonhuman suffering into a tool for political change. This conversion, however, neglects those he is hoping to save by ignoring their individuality, favouring those pleasant to human tastes rather than supporting all. The cliché of the disgusting vulture fails to make language confront its own well-worn images, at the same time that it fails to acknowledge the variety and contingency of the nonhuman. The poem turns nonhuman suffering into a comfortably familiar linguistic artifact, one that is offered back to the human society that created it. Thus Snyder's political aim 'slithers into the abyss of its opposite'[51].

As proven by my explorations of 'committed' art so far, the attempted merger of aesthetics into politics leads to a situation in which the aims of both fall into difficulty. It is my argument that not only does polemical political content fail the responsibilities of artworks, but that the nature of artworks cannot help but cancel

---

[51] Adorno, Theodor W. "Commitment." Ada.Evergreen. Accessed September 6, 2016. http://ada.evergreen.edu/~arunc/texts/frankfurt/commitment/commitment.pdf, p.9.

them out as political tools. To understand this, I look to Adorno's examination of Brecht's play *Mother Courage*. In this section of his lecture, Adorno demonstrates the problem of the inevitable political simplification needed when a specific cause is transformed into aesthetic experience:

> The picture-book technique which Brecht needs to spell out his thesis prevents him from proving it. A sociopolitical analysis, of the sort Marx and Engels sketched in their criticism of Lassalle's play Franz von Sickingen, would show that Brecht's simplistic equation of the Thirty Years' War with a modern war excludes precisely what is crucial for the behavior and fate of Mother Courage in Grimmelshausen's original drama. Because the society of the Thirty Years' War was not the functional capitalist society of modern times, we cannot even poetically stipulate a closed functional system in which the lives and deaths of private individuals directly reveal economic laws … His attempt to reconstruct the reality of society thus led first to a false social model and then to dramatic implausibility. Bad politics becomes bad art and vice versa.[52]

In Brecht's use of the Thirty Years' War as a symbol for the troubles of his own historical period, the political reality of both times is distorted, as is the play's artistic integrity. This is because 'If we take Brecht at his word and make politics the criterion by which to judge his committed theatre, by the same token it proves untrue.'[53] Brecht's play asks to be treated as politics, and so when it acts as art — imaginative, metaphorical, straying away from clear factual arguments — it simultaneously fails as both. The precision that is expected of political analysis can never be offered by an artwork. Yet, in putting forward the nature of the work as wholly political, this expectation is set up, only to be disappointed. The negation of the political within the artistic also takes place in Snyder's work, where the desire for a factual underpinning to his argument poses problems for the effectiveness of his poem as art.

---

[52] Adorno, Theodor W. "Commitment." Ada.Evergreen. Accessed September 6, 2016. http://ada.evergreen.edu/~arunc/texts/frankfurt/commitment/commitment.pdf, p.7.
[53] Adorno, Theodor W. "Commitment." Ada.Evergreen. Accessed September 6, 2016. http://ada.evergreen.edu/~arunc/texts/frankfurt/commitment/commitment.pdf, p.6.

Snyder uses specific real world examples in his poem to underline the importance of his ecological arguments, and to draw attention to what has been lost in the 'natural' world through human expansion and activity:

> Pére David's Deer, the Elaphure,
> Lived in the tule marshes of the Yellow River
> Two thousand years ago- and lost its home to rice-
> The forests of Lo-yang were logged and all the silt &
> Sand flowed down, and gone, by 1200 AD[54]

The aim of this stanza is to use specific detail — 'Pere David's Deer,' 'The forests of Lo-yang' — to bring home to the reader that even in the distant past of '1200 AD,' environmental destruction was robbing nonhuman creatures of their homes and lives. It thus hopes to awaken the reader to the scale of the suffering that has taken place, and encourage them to take an active interest in averting more of the same. However, in providing us with specifically factual information to back up a political argument, Snyder encourages us to read the poem in an empirical and analytic manner—yet such a reading falters on the lack of information provided. Was the rice that took over the 'tule marshes' planted for crude profit, or was it planted by people in desperate poverty who needed to eat? If the latter, would Snyder still deplore their actions, if man is the 'most precious of all things'?

If Snyder is arguing that nonhuman environments should never be destroyed, even if it means improving, or saving, the lives of human beings, then that would appear to be a contradictory political stance to the one he adopts earlier in the poem, one for which the reader may well desire an explanation. Either way, we are left in confusion, wondering over the exact circumstances and evidence Snyder invokes, but without the means to clarify the particular political terms of the poem. Of course Snyder's simplifications are not simple political evasion—the aim of the poems, and poems like it, is to forge like-minded communities, and encourage that

---

[54] Snyder, Gary. *Turtle Island.* (New York: New Directions, 1974), p.49, Lines 27-31.

community to take environmental action. Such community building is rooted in Snyder's 20th century historical moment, and comes from a positive desire to band together to create change. However it is my argument that action built on such evasions and simplifications inevitably cover over the necessary complications of nonhuman difference, eliding nonhuman individuality at the same time that they work towards its alleged freedom.

Further to this, Snyder says nothing about the political geographical differences between '1200 AD,' in Asia and the modern day actions of a Western society. Were the reasons for environmental destruction the same then as now, despite one being imperial and feudalist, and one being capitalist? By bringing them together without comment in this way, the reader is left to assume that these two societies *are* the same, providing 'bad politics' that does nothing to reveal the varying societal drivers behind ecological collapse, or the complicated relations between past and present attitudes to the 'natural' world. This fudging of the political within the aesthetic reveals that 'committed' artworks are actually always speaking to those who already agree with them. This is why they can provide factual arguments that falter under scrutiny: because they expect the emotional power of their message to sweep aside such concerns in an assessment of the work. This is supported by Adorno's statement that:

> The notion of a "message" in art, even when politically radical, already contains an accommodation to the world: the stance of the lecturer conceals a clandestine entente with the listeners, who could only be truly rescued from illusions by refusal of it.[55]

The message of 'committed' art such as Snyder's poem covertly assumes a sympathetic listener, accommodating itself to the ego and sentimentality of a reader who is already on its side. At no point does Snyder's 'committed' poem challenge the structures of thought that lead to nonhuman oppression. The poem argues for change, but does not enact that change within its formulation as an

---

[55] Adorno, Theodor W. "Commitment." Ada.Evergreen. Accessed September 6, 2016. http://ada.evergreen.edu/~arunc/texts/frankfurt/commitment/commitment.pdf, p.12.

artwork. Adorno suggests that, 'It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men's heads.'[56] Rather than demonstrating generalised political alternatives in a way that a pamphlet or documentary might, art may be able, in its very aesthetic form, to resist the oppressive structures of an ideologically saturated world. Adorno describes artworks that operate in this way as 'Autonomous works of art':

> Autonomous works of art…firmly negate empirical reality, destroy the destroyer, that which merely exists and by merely existing endlessly reiterates guilt. It is none other than Sartre who has seen the connection between the autonomy of a work and an intention which is not conferred upon it but is its own gesture towards reality. "The work of art," he has written, "does not have an end; there we agree with Kant. But the reason is that it is an end. The Kantian formula does not account for the appeal which resounds at the basis of each painting, each statue, each book" … The uncalculating autonomy of works which avoid popularization and adaptation to the market involuntarily becomes an attack on them.'[57]

'Autonomous works of art,' reject exchange-value in their avoidance of a clear 'message,' one that, however noble, could turn them into another 'useful' object, vulnerable to, and available for, capitalist exchange. 'Autonomous' artworks lack an easily consumable intention and cannot help but 'negate empirical reality,' as their very existence 'becomes an attack' upon dominant modes of existence in which they can play no part. It is to the potentials of such work that I will turn in my second chapter. Before reaching that point however, I will elucidate the other general area of 'nature' poetry that, I will argue, fails in both its treatment of the nonhuman and the achievement of its own artistic aims. That is 'pastoral' poetry.

---

[56] Adorno, Theodor W. "Commitment." Ada.Evergreen. Accessed September 6, 2016. http://ada.evergreen.edu/~arunc/texts/frankfurt/commitment/commitment.pdf, p.3.
[57] Adorno, Theodor W. "Commitment." Ada.Evergreen. Accessed September 6, 2016. http://ada.evergreen.edu/~arunc/texts/frankfurt/commitment/commitment.pdf, p.9.

'Pastoral'[58] poetry focuses on an immediate experience of the natural world, blurring as much as possible the divide between the observing and recording human poet, and the nonhuman beings described. I will explore this 'pastoral' environmental poetry through the work of American farmer and writer Wendell Berry. To elucidate some of my concerns about poetry such as Berry's, I will also look at the critical work of Timothy Morton, a contemporary environmental philosopher and critic, focusing on his text *Ecology Without Nature*.[59] Morton's book challenges the very concept of a separate, reified 'nature' within human culture, and argues that this concept is a block to real change within environmental relations. More specifically however he provides a critique of what he calls 'ecomimesis': nature writing (including 'pastoral' poetry) that aims for total immediacy. It is Morton's critique of this type of writing, drawn in part from his own readings of Adorno, that will elucidate my explication of the contradictions and problems of 'pastoral' writing.

Berry's poems provide lyrical meditations on 'nature' and place, often evoking the solace he finds in experiencing the nonhuman world. We see this solace clearly in 'The peace of wild things'*:*

> When despair grows in me
> and I wake in the middle of the night …
> in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
> I go and lie down where the wood drake
> rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
>
> I come into the peace of wild things

---

[58] The reason that I have assigned the general title of 'pastoral' to the poetry discussed in this section of the chapter, is due to its aesthetic context, as described by The Oxford Dictionary: '(Of a work of art) portraying or evoking country life, typically in a romanticized or idealized form.' The ideal and romantic image found in a pastoral vision of 'nature' is at the very heart of the difficulties that I find in Berry's work, and similar works of this type, making it the most effective and communicative moniker possible for the poetry that I will be discussing. "Definition of Pastoral." Oxford Dictionary. Accessed September 07, 2016.
http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/pastoral.
[59] Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

who do not tax their lives with forethought

of grief.

I come into the presence of still water.[60]

Berry's writing in these lines seems in no way aesthetically self-aware. Rather, it is concerned with providing a beautiful account of immediate experience. The simple movement of 'I go and lie down' carries the reader with the narrator as they come 'into the peace of wild things'— the peace made to appear as easily accessible as the entrance to the pond or forest. The experience feels automatic, inevitable, a direct communication or transfusion of peace from the nonhuman to the poetic subject, and therefore to the reader. There is no registering of the potential gaps between nonhuman, poetic narrator, poetic author, and reader. All signs that this poem — and its quasi-mystical, peaceful atmosphere — are artistic constructs have been muted. The immediacy of the transmission of peaceful capabilities: 'I come into the presence of still water,' is utterly smooth. Morton describes this kind of 'ecomimiesis,' as 'rendering':

> Rendering attempts to simulate reality itself: to tear to pieces the aesthetic screen that separates the perceiving subject from the object. The idea is that we obtain an immediate world, a directly perceived reality beyond our understanding. When ecomimesis renders an environment, it is implicitly saying: "This environment is real; do not think that there is an aesthetic framework here." All signals that we are in a constructed realm have been minimised.[61]

The rendering that Morton describes could, on first look, be perceived merely as an aesthetic choice, a way of writing that allows the author to focus on what he is describing, rather than spending attention on the frame of description itself. However, Morton argues that:

---

[60] Berry, Wendell. *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*. (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998), p.30, Lines 1-8.
[61] Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.35.

> Nature writing relieves us of the obligation to encounter non-identity, sometimes called "nature," the "more-than-human," the "nonhuman." Like a daytime chat show its mode is one of avoidance rather than escapism. The aesthetic, artful, contrived quality of writing is downplayed. Nature writing seems to be a sheer rendering of the real, just as "reality TV" appears to be real (and we all know very well that it is not).[62]

For Morton, the smooth and confident communication of nonhuman 'reality' by way of a 'sheer rendering', disallows the nonidentity and difference of the nonhuman. By downplaying the constructed nature of humanly-made artworks, 'rendering' performs what seems to be a full reveal of the 'reality' of the nonhuman, without ever questioning whether such a reveal is possible for a human subject. This avoids a consideration of the difference that the nonhuman may possess beyond the accessibility of a human understanding, thus suppressing its independence and freedom.

Berry's work clearly emerges out of love, affection, and even respect for the 'natural' world. However, in providing a pastoral rendering of immediate experience, this 'natural' world, and its nonhuman beings, are suppressed. Berry describes the 'wood drake' as he 'rests in his beauty on the water.' Already with this line the 'immediacy' and 'reality' of Berry's version of environmental experience is called into question. The wood drake is very unlikely indeed to have any sense of the concept of beauty. Yet in saying that he 'rests *in his* beauty,' (my italics) Berry turns the concept of beauty into something *belonging* to the drake himself. The porous nature of Berry's natural world, one that so easily communicates its 'peace' to the human subject, is not all it seems. Rather than being given a reliable account of nonhuman experience, we are given human concepts, and whatever the drake may be, or feel, vanishes. Any kind of nonhuman truth is occluded through the blurring of a human conception into an apparent nonhuman reality.

---

[62] Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.125.

The issue of immediacy is also apparent in the description of coming into, 'the peace of wild things/who do not tax their lives with forethought/of grief.' The fact that the narrator finds the presence of wild things relaxing or peaceful is in no way problematic. What is problematic, however, is that these lines suggest a direct entrance of the human into nonhuman experience. The narrator claims a knowledge of nonhumans 'who do not tax their life with forethought,' a peace that he has access to. Yet the narrator cannot possibly know whether wild things have a 'forethought of grief', whether some do and some don't, or none do at all. In fact, could it be said that they don't 'tax' themselves with grief, if they do not have a concept of grief at all? Or death? Or tax? Of course we cannot answer these questions, but in presenting his work as if we can, Berry turns the ambient peace of a landscape— the quiet, the aesthetic beauty — into a claim for a direct line to the truth of the nonhuman. In doing so, nonhuman reality is not only obscured, it is contained and repackaged as a comforting 'truth' for the human subjects that cause its oppression. The challenge of nonidentity, of laying down by the water next to appealing but hermetic difference, is never explored. Rather the nonhuman's actuality is circled with human constructs, and thus hidden. As Morton suggests, 'To borrow an argument from Theodor Adorno…the thinking process is in essence the encounter with non-identity. If not, it is just the manipulation of preformed pieces on a readymade board.'[63] In Berry's poem all the reader is given is a swirl of pre-existing human fantasies, fantasies which stand in for a real interaction between the human mind and the existence of a nonidentical nonhuman being.

In the final stanza of Berry's poem the narrator states that: 'For a time/I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.'[64] *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* explains the meaning of 'grace' as: 'unmerited divine assistance given humans for their regeneration or sanctification.'[65] The nonhuman world has provided a grace to humans that is 'unmerited,' an access to freedom that seems to need no human

---

[63] Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.13-14.
[64] Berry, Wendell. *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*. (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint), 1998, p.30, Lines 10-11.
[65] "Grace Definition." Merriam-Webster. Accessed September 07, 2016. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/grace.

effort. Yet surely the 'peace' offered by this nonhuman world is an idea created by its very hermetic difference. The closed off presence of the nonhuman turns into a mirror for the human subject, reflecting their emotional need for a gentle, innocent nature. The challenging difference of the nonhuman is converted into a wall of comforting silence, upon which human desires can be projected. The nonhuman's difference becomes 'useful,' a tool of (non-divine) assistance in which humans can convince themselves that they are briefly free of human worries, whilst remaining utterly submerged in their own subjectivity. The nonhuman cannot be what it is, but becomes again an adjunct to human needs and fantasies.

Such a rendering of nonhuman reality also conveniently overlooks the ways in which human actions have made the entire 'world' of the nonhuman profoundly un-peaceful and disturbed. Whether it is clearly apparent in Berry's landscape or not, all of nonhuman life is impacted by humanity's erosion of natural environments, its agriculture, its creation of global warming and on and on. Berry's pond or river may already be affected by toxic pollution or increasing temperatures, but, even if it isn't (which is unlikely), the potential for these impacts is inevitable. Morton argues that:

> Nature writing tries to be "immediate"—to do without the processes of language and the artful construction of illusions. It wants to maintain the impression of directness. But this can only be a supreme illusion, ironically, in a world in which one can find Coke cans in Antarctica. The immediacy that nature writing values is itself as reified as a Coke can.'[66]

The immediacy of the 'natural world,' its untouched peacefulness, is always-already covered by the fingerprints of human action. This is not to in any way negate the difference of the nonhuman, whose ultimate reality remains hermetic to the human subject, but to suggest that it is nevertheless caught up in processes which humanity itself has caused. The 'peace of wild things,' (if it ever existed at all), has been profoundly tampered with by humanity, in both overt and subtle

---

[66] Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.125.

ways. Whether it is global warming, or early humans encouraging the growth of certain medicinal plants, an untouched and 'pure' environment is a reified fantasy; one that fatally distracts from the intimacy with difference that exists in the human relation to the nonhuman world. There can after all be no harking back to the peace of 'original nature,' without already having a clear conception of human culture—it is an awareness of that culture that gives us any notion of 'nature' in the first place, 'nature' only able to exist as one half of that lingustic contrast.[67] Without that cultured other, 'nature' simply falls away into generalised 'being.' The purity of a seperate 'nature' that Berry admires so much, is a purity that springs wholly from his own intensely human way of thinking and percieving.

One of the central tendencies of contemporary pastoral poetry, alongside immediacy, is its definition of certain places, almost always rural, as centres which can exist outside of capitalism's rapacious ideology. In describing such places, pastoral poetry seems to offer the hope of an alternative reality, one free from the ideological shackles of exchange-value that lead to the degradation and abuse of human and nonhuman alike. I will, however, suggest that, in positing certain places as environmentally 'good' in contrast to other 'bad places', pastoral poetry reproduces the same consumerist, colonising systems it hopes to reject; as well as obscuring the actual power relations of human and nonhuman interactions. In Berry's poem, 'In This World', the narrator evokes his serene rural locality, and contrasts it to the violence of the wider world:

> The sun sets.
> Ahead of nightfall the birds sing.
>
> I have climbed up to water the horses
> and now sit and rest, high on the hillside,
> letting the day gather and pass.
> Below me

---

[67] The reliance of the concept of 'nature' on the concept of 'culture,' was most famously explored by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Raw and the Cooked*: Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Raw and the Cooked. Vol. 1. Mythologiques*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

cattle graze …

slow and preoccupied as stars.
In this world
men are making plans, wearing themselves out,
spending their lives, in order to kill each other.[68]

In these lines, the reader is invited to be gently surprised that 'In this world,' there can exist both places that have a calm, measured and wholesome way of life, and places in which men spend their lives 'in order to kill each other'. The assumption is that, despite sharing a 'world', the narrator's rural idyll is as far away as possible from the (surely) urban space of brutality and danger. This is expressed by the lines 'The sun sets/Ahead of nightfall the birds sing' — images so simple that they seem edenic, timeless. Berry's narrator is caught up in the eternal rhythms of the earth, rather than the hustle and speed of the violent townscape — a human being whose life is closer that of to the nonhuman 'horses,' and 'cows' that share his locale, than to the cruel humans far away from him. However, in representing place in this manner, Berry's poetry ignores any connection there may be between his innocently portrayed 'natural' world, and the capitalistic, modern world that he rejects. Rejection of this kind is described by Morton as 'beautiful soul syndrome,' which he explains thus:

It is all very well to carp at the desires of others while not owning up to the determinacy of one's own desire. This is a political as well as an intellectual position, one to which ecological thinking is itself prone. After Hegel I call it beautiful soul syndrome… The "beautiful soul" washes his or her hands of the corrupt world, refusing to admit how in this very abstemiousness and distaste he or she participates in the creation of that world.[69]

---

[68] Berry, Wendell. *New Collected Poems*. (Berkley, CA: Counterpoint, 2012), p.128, Lines 5-12.
[69] Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.13.

Berry's beautiful and restful rural place only takes on its meaning because of the contrasts that make such a meaning possible. It is a knowledge of busy and sometimes dangerous *other* places that makes the narrator's place exist—a mirage of its opposite, a landscape shaped as the echo of all that Berry hopes to reject within the modern world. Berry's location is intimately connected to the places he rejects, and in-fact needs those places to be 'bad', for his to gain its status as 'good'. As well as this, by creating a sense of place within his poetry that is seemingly untouched by the 'corrupt' world Morton describes, Berry removes himself from the site in which change could take place. By treating the rest of the world as a distasteful space of violence, the dangers that threaten 'nature' and the rural are not averted, they are ignored; whilst the narrator and reader can bask smugly in the higher moral quality of their chosen location. In doing this the poem partially recreates the world it rejects, strengthening its sense of inevitability as the urban ying to Berry's rural yang; and doing absolutely nothing to shift its paradigms. This treatment of place not only helps to prop up the existing systems of the wider world; it also obscures the ideological violence that is happening in the seemingly pure location that Berry evokes. Morton argues that:

> Ideological determination depends not just upon the content and form of an artwork or rhetorical device, but also on the subject position that it establishes. The artwork hails us, establishing a certain range of attitudes.[70]

The content and form of Berry's poem lull the reader into a place of quiet peace:

> cattle graze out across the wide fields of the bottomlands
> slow and preoccupied as stars[71]

The sibilance of 'slow' and 'stars' and the imagistic space of 'out across,' and 'wide fields,' cannot help but communicate a mixture of gentleness and freedom for both the nonhumans grazing and the human observing them. However, if we look

---

[70] Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.80.
[71] Berry, Wendell. *New Collected Poems*. (Berkley, CA: Counterpoint, 2012), p.128, Lines 8-10.

closer, we see that these poetic aspects cover up the position of a subject re-producing the oppressive tropes we would expect Berry's writing to reject. This occurs because the hierarchy of the narrating subject over the nonhuman object allows the reality of what takes place to remain hidden. The cattle of the poem serve as a symbol of an utterly natural and peaceful way of life. Yet if the cattle were living a 'natural' life, outside of human protection, then they would be inevitably caught up in the violence of the predator-prey relationship. As well as this, they would not be separated by gender, as they are on farmland, leading to violence in the struggle for mates, as well as the potentially visceral spectacle of procreation. Even in their peacefully constructed state as farm animals, they, or their calves, will eventually serve as meat for the human subject that idealises them as figures of non-violence. The peace in which they seem to live, and which they embody for the poem, is an utterly reified human fantasy.

The problem with Berry's poetic construction, for my argument, is not that it is 'unrealistic.' It is that, in obscuring the utter control of the human subject over the nonhuman being, both within the physical landscape, and in the aesthetic system of the poem, the nonhuman's agency and individuality is occupied and suppressed. It seems as if the nonhuman roams freely through the life of the poem, as it does through the fields, when actually it is being bent to serve the ideological pleasure of the subject, taking part in the creation of a comfortingly eco-friendly sense of self. By creating an unrealistically peaceful, and fully comprehensible, version of nonhuman existence, Berry turns actual nonhuman life into a reified and consumable product. Not one peep of actual nonhuman suffering, difference, or mystery appears in Berry's poem. His seemingly 'naturalistic' lyric turns the nonhuman into an aesthetically petrified, and conveniently communicable, version of its actual and complicated self. Morton suggests that:

> Literature about the environment takes on various roles within
> consumerism. One function is to soothe the pains and stresses of industrial
> society, as national parks assuage our weekday world … ecological writing
> (including criticism) fills a gap in normative forms of consumerism. It does
> not fall out of consumerism altogether. It provides a "new and improved"

version of it—however little those invested in such literature and criticism may like it.[72]

In creating a soothing version of farm life, Berry turns a complicated actuality into a pleasant poetic product. Despite his genuine aim to reject the ideology of capitalist and consumerist competition and violence, Berry provides the 'new and improved' consumerism Morton describes. In this new consumerism, the product on offer is, paradoxically, the very pleasure that comes from feeling oneself free, morally or physically, of consumerism and capitalism. This paradox feeds the enjoyment of Berry's narrator, and his readers. Enjoyment is bought through a hierarchical control over the meaning of nonhuman existence, an image of freedom that is philosophically and literally its opposite. Whether killed for meat, or enjoyed in a poem, the agency or individuality of the nonhuman is nowhere to be found. This eco-consumerism does nothing to challenge the unbalanced subject/object relations that are in part responsible for the oppressive violence of capitalism. Rather these relations are symbolically rejected at the same time that they are aesthetically performed.

This sort of subjective masquerade, one that provides a version of the nonhuman that is merely human wish fulfilment, does nothing to solve the problems of representing the nonhuman in a way that is non-oppressive. It also does nothing to suggest how a poet might be able to access nonhuman difference and communicate it, or if such communication is even desirable within aesthetics. Morton suggests that:

> To truly love nature would be to love what is nonidentical with us …
> Instead of trying endlessly to get rid of the subject-object dualism…to love
> the thingness, not in a Heideggerian sense, but actually the mute, objectified
> quality of the object, its radical non-identity. Nature is not a mirror of our

---

[72] Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.114-115.

mind. Ecological criticism should admit to the unnaturalness both of the object and of the subject: ecological desire is not chaste.[73]

What if part of the problem of Berry's pastoral poetry is not only that it covers up unequal power relations in its communication of nonhuman reality, but that the desire to communicate this reality is itself problematic? Morton is arguing for a kind of ecopoetics that does not seek to *better* communicate the nonhuman to its readers, but one that rather admits to the inherent strangeness and hermetic difference of the nonhuman, but is prepared to think about it and love it anyway. Admitting such a love-at-a-distance would 'denature' the idealised 'naturalness' of the nonhuman, but would also, as Morton argues, do the same for the subject. A subject aware of its failure to fully comprehend the nonhuman is one that would be unable to set itself up as an idealised paragon of rural wholeness 'at one' with the natural world. Even if the human subject was practically involved with the nonhuman, it would be an involvement, an intimacy, with a world of nonidentity, of strangeness. Poetry from such a subject position would lose the comforting pastoral unity of Berry's cultivated landscapes, as well as the self-deluding positivity of Gary Snyder's committed eco-solidarity. It would have to describe its interest in, its passion for, a nonhuman world of which it has no full grasp, revealing the aporias of its own understanding. In doing so, however, it might be able to achieve what Morton calls 'a radical openness to other beings, without goal;'[74] an openness that could make space for the agency of the nonhuman to become apparent. My second chapter will argue that this kind of poetry can overcome the problems I have explored in the work of Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder; offering us, as contemporary writers, potential ways forward in creating an environmentally engaged, ecological poetics.

---

[73] Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.185-186.
[74] Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.164.

Chapter Two

Making The Mute Eloquent.

In my first chapter I considered some of the problems which I perceive to exist in the two central strands of modern 'nature' poetry: the 'committed' and the 'pastoral.' I argued that these forms of poetry, exemplified by the writers Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder, suppress the agency and difference of the nonhuman. Language of this kind reflects human subjectivity back to itself, rather than exploring or revealing the individuality of nonhuman existence. As demonstrated in that chapter, it seems clear to me that poetry which claims a full understanding of nonhuman reality fails the nonhuman beings it considers; and ignores the potential of poetic language to open up new ways of thinking for human subjects.

In this chapter I will be close reading four of the American poet Wallace Stevens' works. Stevens is a writer whose poetics, I believe, comes close to a non-oppressive engagement with the nonhuman. I will be holding Stevens' poems up as examples of language that can engage with, and make fruitful rather than barren, the challenges faced by poets attempting to interact with the nonhuman in their work. I will use readings of Stevens' individual poems to argue that the issues of my first chapter, the usurping of nonhuman agency, and the transformation of nonhuman experience into consumable human products; do not have to be inevitable in creating a poetics of the nonhuman. I will argue that these problems can be resolved in a form of writing that does not call for change, but rather produces a space of potential change within the movements of its own aesthetic structures. In this space the mind of the poetic reader has the opportunity to challenge its own subjectivity, and the chance to glimpse the radical individuality and difference of the nonhuman. These unusual opportunities certainly cannot *guarantee* a shift in either the reader's perspective or their actions, but it can prompt new kinds of thinking, ones accessed through the generative instability of poetic language. Such poetic thinking, in which totalising subjectivity is pierced by nonhuman difference, is what makes it possible to imagine changed forms of interaction with the nonhuman.

My argument is that it is in poetry that the structures and traditions of language can be unstitched, and that through this challenge to language, a challenge to the very character of thinking can be mounted—language facing itself within an experience of radical reading. It will be my suggestion that Stevens' writing allows us to experience such reading, to imagine a poetry that recognises and reveals the existence of nonhuman agency; whilst always owning up to the domineering potentialities of its own language.

Stevens' poetry demonstrates that the best place to begin in making changes to human-nonhuman relationships may be within language itself. The intensity of poetry's use of language, and its ability to change the ways in which that language is experienced and signified, makes it, to my mind, the form in which these intellectual and perceptual transformations can be most readily achieved. In Stevens' case this is initiated through a dismantling of the subject positions that lead to controlling perspectives on, and actions towards, the nonhuman. That is not in any way to say that Stevens' poems serve as concrete tools for activism, nor that they should. My argument is rather that a shift in perception must be achieved at the deepest level if we have any hope of amending human action towards the nonhuman world; and that looking to the work of these poems can contribute to that shift.

In Chapter One I touched on Adorno's conception of what he calls 'autonomous works of art.' Adorno asserts that, 'The uncalculating autonomy of works which avoid popularization and adaptation to the market involuntarily becomes an attack on them.'[75] It is my suggestion that just such an autonomy can be found in Stevens; specifically, the refusal of his poems to provide a straightforward ecological message or palatable version of 'nature' in their consideration of the nonhuman. This autonomy allows Stevens' poems to transcend the repetitive subjectivity of Berry, Snyder and their ilk, creating a transformative aesthetic experience for the reader. The slipperiness of Stevens' poems when faced with questions of genre or intent allows them to resist 'adaption to the market'[76]— to

---

[75] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.9.
[76] Ibid

resist the very forces of identificatory thinking that are at the root of nonhuman oppression. The space of unknowing that we enter into within the poems operates very differently from the exchange-value driven system with which we are familiar. This suspension of exchange-value, for an experience whose value is hard to quantify or delineate, creates the ideal situation for a questioning of human subjectivity. To experience the autonomy of one of Stevens' poems is to glimpse what might be possible beyond reified conceptions, an autonomy that also mirrors that of the nonhuman, just beyond reach. Stevens' poems do not give us a position that can be summed up and reproduced. Rather they create spaces in which we can briefly experience something that is not our own subjectivity; where uncertainty and openness replace the ideology and certainty we observed in the poetry of my first chapter.

It could be argued that Stevens' poems are not 'ecological' poems at all— certainly they have no discernibly polemical content, nor do they lament any lost species, or celebrate, in a straightforward and lyrical manner, the 'natural' world. Instead, Stevens' poems interrogate the subject positions of their human narrators, and that of the creating artist themselves. The poems question how any perspective or aesthetic act can hope to speak of an existence beyond its own. The poems mine the gap between the human desire to connect with the nonhuman, and the hermetic individuality of the nonhuman itself. In doing this, I will argue, Stevens replaces poems *about* 'natural' or ecological topics, with poems that are *in themselves ecological*: aesthetic spaces in which the interrelationships and differences of nonhuman and human organisms and environments can emerge. Within these spaces the human subject reveals its limitedness, owning up to the chasm between its experience and the experience of the nonhuman which it hopes to comprehend.

Revealing the space between human understanding and nonhuman reality produces a poetic structure that is radical in its rethinking of the nonhuman within aesthetics. Instead of attempting to use poetry as a magnifying glass for the nonhuman, picking out its detail in the hope of comprehending it, Stevens' poems instead turn the glass onto the poetic human subject. In doing this — looking at the

crippling failures of the subject's attempt to understand the nonhuman — an awareness of nonhuman autonomy is able to briefly appear, through the knowledge of its *absence.* Thus the telos of Stevens' poetic movement becomes reaching out, yet failing to fully grasp, the nonhuman. In so doing Stevens reveals both the domination of the nonhuman by human culture and concepts, and the irretrievable distance, strangeness and nonidentity of the nonhuman's individual reality. It is this movement that I will focus on in my attempt to show how Stevens' poetry challenges human subjectivity, and is able to glimpse nonhuman agency.

To understand *why* a poetry of this kind is important, and how it operates, I return again to the ideas of Theodor Adorno. I will be exploring the full repercussions of Adorno's aesthetic philosophy on my argument in my third chapter, however in this chapter the specific focus will be on Adorno's idea of the nonidentical. Nonidentity is explained by the contemporary philosopher Lambert Zuidervaart in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*:

> Adorno claims that modern philosophy has privileged thought and its concepts. As a result, philosophy has not done justice to that in the object which does not fit under concepts -- the unique side of everything "by virtue of which things are identical neither to the kinds they embody nor to other instances of those kinds." (Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p.54.) Such "identity thinking" ignores or suppresses "the non-identical." It thereby takes part in the domination of nature.[77]

The nonhuman is, as evidenced by this statement, always nonidentical, in that the nonhuman's individuality of existence cannot be fully contained by human concepts. Adorno, in *Aesthetic Theory*, argues that these human concepts oppress the nonhuman by claiming that they can fully comprehend and communicate its specific reality. These concepts cover over the nonhuman's nonidentity, muting its agency and replacing it with an image forged entirely by human subjectivity. This muting is part of the exploitation of the nonhuman, turning it into a resource for

---

[77] "Adorno: Key Concepts." *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*. Accessed September 12, 2016. http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/23859-theodor-adorno-key-concepts/.

human use or experience, its own being-in-itself suppressed. Adorno also argues that this silencing of the nonhuman cannot merely be thought away, as it is an inherent part of the identificatory thinking brought about by reified society, and thus is part of human subjectivity itself. It may however be possible, he argues, for art to touch on the reality of the nonhuman by making 'the mute eloquent;' exposing 'itself to failure through the insurmountable contradiction between the idea of making the mute eloquent, which demands a desperate effort, and the idea of what this effort would amount to, the idea of what cannot in any way be willed.'[78]

It is my contention that Stevens' poems manage to make the mute eloquent through the 'insurmountable contradiction' that Adorno suggests. Stevens' poems, in their simultaneous forward-backwards motion toward the nonhuman, manage to craft a gap in language in which we can briefly glimpse the reality of the nonhuman object outside of our subjectivity—a reality made 'mute' to us by the structures of our subjectivity, unable to locate the nonhuman's individual being within a totalising mental system. For me it is this motion, rather than the feigned immediacy of 'pastoral' poetry, or the political messages of 'committed' poetry, that comes closest to a truly non-dominating interaction with the nonhuman world. Stevens manages to gesture with his language towards the individuality of the nonhuman without controlling, processing, or finally comprehending it. Such language is 'ecological' in the sense that it contains the 'pattern of relations' that make up how we perceive the nonhuman. It reveals the hidden structures of our understanding, stretching towards the nonhuman but never quite reaching it. In doing so 'ecological' language manages to paradoxically glimpse nonhuman reality from within this network of relations, providing illumination for what cannot be found.

It is Stevens' poetic search for an understanding of objective, nonhuman reality in his poems, which allows it to be made clear how far a reified human perspective will always be from such an understanding. However, as I will demonstrate,

---

[78] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.107.

enacting the frustration of this desire within poetry can itself be 'like a new knowledge of reality;' allowing the reader to catch a shimmer of nonhuman being-in-itself on the very edge of their perception.

To understand how the nonidentical can appear, through the attempt, and eventual failure, of language to comprehend it, we must attend to the ways in which Stevens dramatizes and reveals these failures within his poetry. The first poem I will consider in this regard is 'The Man on the Dump'. In the first stanza of this poem the dump is described as a place 'full/Of images,'[79] where material from every corner of the world seems to turn up, 'So the sun,/And so the moon, both come, and the janitor's poems/Of every day, the wrapper on the can of pears,/The cat in the paper bag, the corset…the tiger chest, for tea.'[80] The detailed variety of this list, its jumbled specificity, achieves a kind of paradoxical generalisation. This is achieved because the spheres the list touches upon — things cosmic — the sun and moon, things human — the corset, and things nonhuman — the cat and the pears, are so wide as to be able to symbolise everything, and yet are made up of such odd images that they retain the sensual impression of individual instances of objective existence. In setting up the dump's 'janitor's poems,'[81] as made from the discarded sweepings of the material world, as environments of generalised specificity, Stevens is bringing reality itself into our consideration: - hinting towards a multitude of vibrant individual objects which are impossible for him to summarise or express fully. This lack of summary is crucial because, rather than aiming to represent reality effectively through the dump, Stevens instead makes us aware of how difficult it is for human concepts to access the complicated difference of the objective world. Stevens makes evident the impossibility of forming images that can successfully capture nonhuman, non-subjective reality in full.

The difficulty of accessing reality through language is then expanded on in detail in the next section of the poem:

---

[79] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.176, Lines 3-4.
[80] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.176, Lines 5-9.
[81] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.176, Line 6.

> The freshness of night has been fresh a long time,
>
> The freshness of morning, the blowing of day, one says
>
> That it puffs as Cornelius Nepos reads, it puffs
>
> More than, less than or it puffs like this or that.[82]

The 'freshness' of a breath of wind or a morning has been expressed so much that the experience of 'freshness' in language is no longer fresh, weighted as it is by the known history of other's past experience and metaphors of experience. This is made clear by the mention of 'Cornelius Nepos,' a Roman biographer of 'great lives', who acts as a reminder of the monolith of recorded human life that stands between us and a truly 'fresh,' wholly new experience of reality. So, from the evidence of these first stanzas, it seems as if the reality of the world is cut off from poetic communication, as the language and metaphors which we attempt to use to dig it out are worn and warped from overuse, no longer reliable carriers of direct meaning.

However, later in the poem, Stevens seems to pose a challenge to the arguments of his own first stanza. He does this by attempting a powerful description of nonhuman particularity on the dump: 'Now, in the time of spring (azaleas, trilliums,/Myrtle, viburnums, daffodils, blue phlox)'[83] This incredibly specific list of names appears to liberate the flowers from the generalisations of human concepts, those which force objects into pre-conceived ideas, rather than taking their understanding from the objects themselves. Unlike the lumped together 'flowers' of the previous stanza, these flowers have individual and separate titles which have more to do with their scientific actuality than any kind of humanly imposed metaphor or vision of beauty. The practicality and facticity of these names, and the jumble of conflicting sounds that they force on the inner ear, seem to allow the flowers to be themselves, nonidentical to the human, their difference from anything but themselves foregrounded. In this Stevens appears to have found a way to de-poeticise his poetry, managing to describe flowers without any 'flowery'

---

[82] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.176, Lines 10-13.
[83] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.176, Lines 21-22.

language; thus separating 'spring' from its usual generalised and romanticised character and restoring to language some of the nonhuman specificity of objective reality.

Yet the stanza continues: 'Between that disgust and this, between the things/That are on the dump (azaleas and so on) /And those that will be (azaleas and so on).'[84] From an explication of seemingly specific instances of reality, Stevens swerves back to the generalisation of 'and so on,' in lines that are both visually and aurally balanced with each other, examples of sameness rather than difference. By doing this Stevens reveals that even the scientific sounding, botanical names of his earlier line contain and embody a kind of hidden generalisation. This is because the names are human sum ups of subjectively decided species, such as 'azaleas,' and not expressions of the individual reality of each flower. These concepts exist to order and make consumable the specific difference of the nonhuman. They masquerade as full disclosures of nonhuman reality by placing concepts around the object which speak as if they were the object itself. The 'disgust' that is cited in the lines is a disgust at the failure of the poem's language to live up to, or access, nonhuman reality, however hard it tries to draw close to the specificity of the nonhuman object. The poetry's attempt to hone in on objective reality has failed, and we as readers have witnessed its failure.

However, despite this disgust, the speaker of the poem asserts that 'One feels the purifying change. One rejects/The trash.'[85] What change can have emerged from this utter poetic failure? 'One' rejects the trash, but, as Stevens has set up in his first stanza that everything is trash, everything is on the dump, then it is everything that is being rejected. All the old images and conceptions are being recognised as faulty in their ability to connect to and access nonhuman reality. The failure is not of the individual poem, but of all poems, all language. Unlike the flawed consciousness of 'committed' or 'pastoral' poems, convinced that their particular organisation of words will succeed in drawing the nonhuman from its hiding place, this poem accepts the complete inability of all language to reveal

---

[84] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.176, Lines 23-25.
[85] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.176, Lines 26-27.

nonhuman reality. This total rejection is 'purifying' and liberating, because, in recognising the impossibility of touching the nonidentical fully through language, the nonidentical seems to speak through the gap. This is achieved not through a 'change' of language, the always-already failed attempt to replace one set of metaphors with a more effective alternative, but through a 'change' in what language is attempting to do. By creating a poem that explicitly reveals its failure to access the nonidentical, the reader of the poem cannot help but become aware of the distance between language and the thing it tries to describe. In witnessing this gap, they witness the space in which the nonhuman should be, and so become negatively aware of its objective reality. This is not to say that this gap provides us with full knowledge of the nonidentical. Instead, being aware of this gap makes us unavoidably aware of its shrouded but vital existence, distant as we may be from capturing or cognising its meaning. Like a chalk outline around a no longer present corpse, it is our witnessing of what is not there which tells us what was or should be. This is a knowledge of absence, rather than of detailed reality. This poetic knowledge out of emptiness is deftly demonstrated by the extra space left in the transition between the relevant stanza and the one that follows it:

> One feels the purifying change. One rejects
> The trash.
>
>   That's the moment when the moon creeps up
> To the bubbling of bassoons. That's the time
> One looks at the elephant-colorings of tires.[86]

Creating these unusual line formations, which appear in no other stanza, gives a visual way for Stevens to show the nonidentical gap, a space on the page that contains nothing, and yet which, surrounded by words, is visible. Reality rushes into view as what is not there, the nonidentity that we experience powerfully in poetry because we are paradoxically aware that we cannot fully experience it. This

---

[86] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.176-177, Lines 26-30.

paradox is the central one of the poem, and of Stevens' nonhuman poetics, a closeness to difference that can only be bred through distance.

The nonidentical is not, however, put forward in Stevens' poetics as static entity, waiting to be revealed through poetry. In the paradox of seeing-through-not-seeing in his poetry, we become aware of the agency of the nonhuman, an agency usually covered up by the suppressive nature of identificatory thinking. This can be understood by turning to the poem 'On the Road Home'. The poem begins, 'It was when I said,/"There is no such thing as the truth,"/That the grapes seemed fatter. The fox ran out of his hole.'[87] It is at the very moment that the speaker gives up on comprehending the truth of reality, gives up on the very existence of truth for the human subject, that reality forcefully asserts itself. The nonhuman suddenly comes into view, the grapes seeming 'fatter,' taking up more room, and the fox running 'out of his hole,' choosing to leave a secret space and briefly flash up in the open. The irony of the speaker's 'no such thing' alongside these rich bursts of nonhuman activity communicates not that any comprehension of true reality has taken place, after all the grapes *seem* fatter, but that reality continues to flourish and change beyond our conception of it. It is when the speaker accepts that the only truth available is that we cannot access truth that, 'the silence was largest/…the night was roundest,/The fragrance of the autumn warmest,/Closest and strongest.'[88] It seems odd that the sound of possible human-nonhuman knowledge should be silence, and that this silence should go along with a deeply sensual experience of an autumn night. But this silence is not a shutting out, rather it is a marker of the fact that the narrator has had a genuine glimpse of nonhuman difference. It is the nonhuman's very silence that discloses its agency, its ability to retreat invisibly into the void without us. This disclosure of agency through silence requires a different kind of listening from the human subject, one attentive to gaps, to the emptiness that reveals the absence of the nonidentical, and thus its hidden sensual reality. This kind of listening does not hear nothing, it hears 'silence,' a lack of sound full of the inaccessible but potent reality of nonhuman life. Unable to follow or comprehend, but able to attend to this lack, the human becomes aware of

---

[87] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.177, Lines 1-4.
[88] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.178, Lines 20-23.

the nonhuman, nonidentical agency that resists its concepts. In recognising nonhuman agency Stevens' poems also recognise that we do not need to believe in the nonhuman for the nonhuman to exist. The nonhuman does not need our conceptions to come into being, shaking us off at the very moment that we think we have got hold of its reality. It is this poetic rejection of epistemological idealism that offers the hope that the nonidentical gap may not simply be another way to trap the nonhuman within our concepts, another version of human control masked as an allowance of independence.

To understand the poetic impact of recognising the agency of the nonhuman beyond our conceptions, we now return to the third stanza of 'The Man on the Dump'. As soon as the speaker 'rejects/The trash'[89] of human metaphor:

> That's the moment when the moon creeps up
> To the bubbling of bassoons. That's the time
> One looks at the elephant-colorings of tires.
> Everything is shed; and the moon comes up as the moon
> (All its images are in the dump) and you see
> As a man (not like an image of a man),
> You see the moon rise in the empty sky.[90]

Having rejected the trash, and recognised the limitations of human conceptions, it is paradoxically then possible to see the moon 'come up as the moon,' as all its images 'are in the dump.' The moon's metaphors and ideas are discarded, in an 'empty sky' free of attempts to make sense of and control it. In the same way it can be seen 'As a man,' that is, not like some image or concept of what a man (or indeed woman) might be, but as a separate, individual human being; aware of the limits of comprehension, and yet made momentarily free by this knowledge. A connected kind of release takes place in 'On the Road Home', when the separate agency of the nonhuman is recognised: 'the tree, at night, began to

---

[89] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.176, Lines 26-27.
[90] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.176-177, Lines 28-34.

change,/Smoking through green and smoking blue.'[91] The tree begins to appear less as the solid and reliable thing we might imagine it, and more like a gas: 'smoking through' our concepts of it, our images of 'green' and 'blue,' as, moving like smoke, it cannot be pinned down or held onto. The speaker of the poem's rejection of total human knowledge allows the tree itself to evade human conceptions of its individual reality. Or, rather, the tree's specific nonidentity was always evading human conceptions, but now this liberated evasion is visible to the speaker, and readers, of the poem. Of course, however, as we see in 'The Man on the Dump', not 'Everything is shed,' in Stevens' poetics. This is evidenced by the line 'the elephant-colorings of tires,'[92] in the poem, a metaphor which attempts to use the reality of one nonhuman thing to describe another: getting closer to it through imagery, whilst simultaneously pulling away from its unique reality. This metaphor demonstrates the inability of language to fully comprehend or make explicit the nonidentical. What is 'shed,' is the idea that such a comprehension could be achieved, the surreal quality of the image drawing attention to its very imprecision, and so, again, accessing a kind of knowledge of reality within negation, a knowledge that appears in its distance from us.

To demonstrate this reality through negation it is, however, not enough to simply state the existence of the nonhuman's agency and nonidentity, and leave the reader to become enlightened by their failure to comprehend it. What is absolutely crucial in these poems is the movement towards, and then the failure to capture, the reality of the nonhuman. It is this ceaseless backwards and forwards motion of language that can forge a fertile poetic paradox out of failure. It does this by allowing us to witness the nonidentical gap emerging from within a crosshatch of poetic movement, a gap that would otherwise remain invisible. Poetic language is able to create, and hold in balance, a paradox that transforms linguistic failure into an engine for nonhuman witness— language that lays itself bare, allowing nonhuman revelation to emerge through cracks made by what it cannot do.

---

[91] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.177-178, Lines 8-9.
[92] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.177, Line 30.

In an earlier paragraph I explored the lines in 'On the Road Home', which focuses on a tree, 'Smoking through green and smoking blue,'[93] the tree's evasion of human conceptions becoming visible to the poem's speakers. However, directly after this revelation of nonhuman agency come the lines, 'We were two figures in a wood./We said we stood alone.'[94] Immediately we move from one individual tree to a 'wood,' a generalised group of trees under their familiar moniker. The speakers have returned to their human conceptions, and so are 'alone,' surrounded by the nonhuman and yet not truly with it, not able to register its separate and complete agency and difference. So these lines, in their motion towards and then away from the nonidentical, necessarily contain both the freedom offered within language, and its remainder. The 'Smoking through,' of the tree cannot be a permanent state of awareness for the speakers, or readers, of the poem. It can only flash up as a glimpse of the nonidentical's existence, briefly illuminating the overwhelming subjectivity of human beings' identificatory thinking.

The motion between reality and subjectivity is also apparent, as we have seen, in 'The Man on the Dump'. However, in the final stanza of the poem Stevens moves into a piercing self-commentary on his own poetic strategy. The stanza painfully questions whether even Stevens' poetry is guilty of offering delusionary revelation, a new way of circulating the same old suppression of the nonidentical nonhuman. This stanza digs into the very form of poetics that the potential reader has been hoping might liberate them from total identificatory thinking. The stanza begins:

> One sits and beats an old tin can lard pail.
> One beats and beats for that which one believes.
> That's what one wants to get near. Could it after all
> Be merely oneself, as superior as the ear
> to a crow's voice? Did the nightingale torture the ear,
> Pack the heart and scratch the mind? And does the ear
> solace itself in peevish birds? Is it peace,
> Is it a philosopher's honeymoon, one finds

[93] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.178, Line 9.
[94] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.178, Lines 10-11.

On the dump?[95]

In these lines Stevens questions whether the rejection of human conceptions can offer any actual glimpse of the nonidentical's existence, or whether the subject is simply glimpsing itself, cloaked in the borrowed strangeness of the nonhuman. The beating of the 'old tin can' in the poem seems to be sound, rhythm, poetry—and the belief is the belief in reality, that it is really out there, outside the self: 'that's what one wants to get near.' However, the fear is that even these small, unseen yet seen glimpses of reality are 'merely oneself.' If this is the case then the nightingale's song becomes 'torture' because through its beauty, its appeal, it has tricked the mind into thinking it has truly experienced something outside of itself. The deluded mind then finds 'solace' in 'peevish' birds, the perversely obstinate nonhuman that gives nothing away. This is the 'philosopher's honeymoon:' poetry as a pretence that reality can be seen in any way through language, in truth only a distraction from a total failure to escape subjectivity. This is the deluded poetry which hears 'the blatter of grackles,' and says 'Invisible priest,' immediately turning nonhuman nonidentity into the symbol or equivalent of a completely human idea, in this case religion. Such poetry pulls 'the day to pieces' by crying 'stanza my stone': - thinking that it can forge its lines directly from the earth. This assumed direct connection between human and nonhuman, in its dominating arrogance, pulls the day apart, pulls apart any chance that reality might have had to come through to the human. This is Stevens' version of poetic despair: poetry not as a way to gesture towards nonidentical reality, but as another form of false consciousness, another way of pretending to let the nonhuman be, whilst converting it utterly into subjective human experience.

Yet, in the final line, seeming to have taken apart the earlier stanzas' offered possibility of circling around the gap of nonidentity, and thus recognising its existence, the poem finishes: 'Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the.'[96] It is only through language that, however imperfectly, we came to know of 'the' truth at all. 'The the' was what gave us the very idea of truth when we came to try

---

[95] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.177, Lines 35-43.
[96] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.177, Line 48.

and understand it, language the only available vehicle to think around what the nonhuman might be or mean. For this reason, painful and impossible as it is, it is through language that we must look for truth, for reality. This may mean turning language against itself, recognising its failures to access the nonidentical, and through this, gaining knowledge of the existence of what we cannot know. But Stevens' shows that we need language to reach, and fail, and reach, as this poem itself does, after nonidentity and the nonhuman, never pretending to grasp and control it. We must accept that nonhuman nonidentity can never fully appear to us, never be fully cognised, rising up only as an absence which we can witness but not decode. In doing this, language may offer a fractured mirage of the object-in-itself, the distant but crucial knowledge of an existence outside subjectivity. Steven's demonstrates why it is in *language* that we must attempt to re-think our relationship with the nonhuman, poetry as the essential aesthetic workshop in which new strategies for interactions between the human and nonhuman are forged.

The third poem I will address in this chapter, 'Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself', also creates a movement between language's attempt to capture the always receding nonidentical, and its failure to do so. However, like the 'The Man On the Dump', this poem is also concerned that poetic movement may not be enough, and that the seeming glimpses of nonidentical difference that appear are really the human talking to him or herself. The poem dramatizes the back and forth of the speaker's mind, as he tries to prove to himself that there really is an objective outside world beyond his own stifling subjectivity. In doing this the poem shows us the experience of constant questioning necessary to undertake this form of poetics, a form that rejects the cast iron rigidity of the subjective self found in 'committed' and 'pastoral' poetry—subjectivities unable to criticise their own perspectives, and so doomed to repeat their own concerns to themselves, unable to glimpse the nonhuman sphere. Stevens' poetics, in contrast, reaches for the nonidentical whilst always being aware of its own inability to fully grasp it. It is this fractured, self-questioning experience of failure that offers the only hope of moving beyond the strictures of reified human conceptions within language.

In the first stanza of 'Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself', the speaker of the poem hears 'a scrawny cry from outside' which 'Seemed like a sound in his mind.'[97] The cry, coming at the 'earliest end of winter, /In March,'[98] is outside, part of a moment of nonhuman change and seasonal transition, of a distinctly nonhuman agency. Yet the cry seems to the speaker like 'a sound in his mind.'[99] Despite the promise of the poem's title, any sound from outside will always be received and shaped by the inner mind, it cannot pass pure, untouched by human conception. The next lines however attempt to reaffirm the genuine existence of a space outside of subjectivity: 'He knew that he heard it,/A bird's cry, at daylight or before, In the early March wind.'[100] This line offers a list of environmental specifics that demonstrate the speaker's need to believe, to 'know,' that what he heard was genuinely something outside himself. A nonhuman sound has been registered, at a specific time, in the specific context of the 'early March wind,' these details aiding the speaker in imagining a world that is not himself.

This need or desire to prove the existence of objective reality is developed by the next stanza: 'The sun...No longer a battered panache above snow.../It would have been outside,'[101] which repeats the insistence of the speaker that their experience was not a subjective imagining, that there really is an *outside* taking place. The line also registers a change in the nonhuman sun, its 'battered panache,' shifting to the utterly bare description of 'It would have been outside.' The damaged flamboyance of 'battered panache'— a flamboyance we must assume is draped around the sun by human metaphor — recedes as an awareness of the reality of the outside develops. In stating only that it is 'outside', the description is less rich, and yet we get a clearer sense of the reality of the sun beyond our metaphors, a nonhuman entity apart from our ideas, simply outside.

The poem continues to build the structural pressure of this 'outside' in its attempt to reveal the possibility of objective reality: 'It was not from the vast

---

[97] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.466, Lines 2-3.
[98] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.466, Lines 1-2.
[99] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.466, Line 3.
[100] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.466, Lines 4-6.
[101] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.466, Lines 7-9.

ventriloquism/Of sleep's faded papier-mâché…/The sun was coming from outside.'[102] The sun and the bird's cry are not ventriloquized, they are not the voice of the subject masquerading as the voice of nonhuman difference. Nor are they part of 'sleep's faded papier-mâché', the soft, malleable detritus of dreams which, occurring in sleep, are the mind talking to it itself, and have nothing to do with accessing an external reality. The line also repeats the belief that the sun is 'outside,' the word gaining in weight as it is repeated, pressing through the inherently crafted nature of poetic language with the distantly luminous promise of something beyond human craft and thought.

At the end of the poem Stevens moves the focus more closely in on the bird's cry itself, and the impact its nonhuman expression has on the human speaker's ability to recognise and believe in an external reality— 'That scrawny cry—it was/A chorister whose c preceded the choir.'[103] The cry is not imagined as a full choir, but as a single chorister who's 'c' sets the note for the other singers. In these ingenious lines we 'hear' both the single note and the choir that must follow, our minds unable to help filling in the next step in the chain of sound from chorister to choir. Yet of course the only note we can clearly imagine or 'hear' in our minds, as it is the note has been given to us, is that single 'c,' and not the following unknown song of the choir. In leaving this unfilled gap Stevens shows how the bird's cry reveals the complexity and richness of the nonhuman's nonidentical world, without revealing it. The unheard choir rises in the reader's mind, but without sound, a space that points to itself, to a knowledge that we gain and simultaneously cannot have. The speaker has got as close as one can to the reality of the nonhuman world, through the imaginative glow of its retreating absence. The cry is 'part of the colossal sun … Still far away,'[104] still free from the control of human knowledge, powerful and revelatory as the experience of it has been.

The poem's final line is, 'It was like/A new knowledge of reality.'[105] The experience that has been brought about by the cry is *like* a new knowledge of reality, rather

[102] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.466, Lines 10-12.
[103] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.466, Lines 13-14.
[104] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.466, Lines 15-17.
[105] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.466, Lines 17-18.

than an actually new, complete knowledge of reality, because that would be impossible within the mind's conceptions. This being 'like' is crucial, because, in its awareness of the failure of language, of our incomplete understanding of the nonhuman, the knowledge is achieved that there *is* an outside of the human mind and human subjectivity; even if that outside is opaque and distant. The wonder of this outside pierces the speaker of 'Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself' with difference, with the violent realisation that there is an inaccessible world of nonhuman nonidentity. This realisation forges the hope of something beyond reified human conceptions. It is this hope that animates and ignites the effects of each of the poems discussed in this chapter.

The final poem that I will be examining is 'The Snow Man', which shares a questioning of human subjectivity and its limits with the poems explored so far. 'The Snow Man' demonstrates the near impossibility of understanding the nonhuman world without what we observe being coloured by human concepts:

> One must have a mind of winter …

> not to think
> Of any misery in the sound of the wind[106]

The reader of these lines is inevitably unable to help merging their imaginative version of a winter wind with the 'misery' described as its sound. The aesthetic imaginary of a cold wind cannot appear without an attendant descriptor of 'misery,' or bleakness being assumed, showing how difficult it is to separate a nonhuman instance from our conception of it. The reader is made aware of the potential of 'not' thinking this way, of having a 'mind of winter' able to parse the nonhuman. Yet the human connection of 'misery' and a January wind is too tightly bound to be easily undone. This despite the fact that the sad 'sound' of the wind is actually the movement of 'a few leaves'[107]:

---

[106] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.8, Lines 1-8.
[107] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.8, Line 9.

> Which is the sound of the land
>
> Full of the same wind
>
> That is blowing in the same bare place[108]

The sounds that emerge from the wind passing over the leaves and the land, come from a nonhuman existence that has nothing to do with any of our ideas of emotion or atmosphere. The land is 'bare' of concepts, of anything but itself, and yet we cannot experience it that way; trapped in a form of thinking in which our human understanding struggles to achieve an objective view of the nonhuman. This attention towards the layers separating human understanding and nonhuman reality is underlined by the repeated imagery of snow built up over nonhuman objects:

> One must have a mind of winter
>
> To regard the frost and the boughs
>
> Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;
>
> And have been cold a long time
>
> To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
>
> The spruces rough in the distant glitter
>
> Of the January sun; …[109]

To 'regard' the 'boughs' and the 'junipers' in their entirety would mean somehow seeing beneath the crusts of snow and ice layered on top of them. Stevens' imagery simultaneously shows us nonhuman entities, and hides them beneath wintry coverings. This imagery demonstrates, within the body of the poem, the experiential paradox of viewing a nonhuman object whose being-in-itself you cannot access— our understanding as smothered by our own conceptions as the pines by snow. The final stanza of the poem seems to confirm that the human mind is always unable to draw itself out of identificatory, reified thinking in order to see the individual agency of the nonhuman:

---

108 Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.8, Lines 10-12.
109 Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.8, Lines 1-7.

> For the listener, who listens in the snow,
>
> And, nothing himself, beholds
>
> Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.[110]

The 'listener' of the poem is able to 'see' everything in the scene in front of them — 'Nothing that is not there,' but what is there is not available to him — 'the nothing that is.'[111] On first consideration this appears to be a negative assessment: the 'listener' can see 'nothing,' a set of nonhuman objects that appear in the physical world, but are utterly closed off from human consideration. The nonhuman's existence is essentially invisible in any search for understanding or meaning, the listener frozen out from insight.

However, if we attend to the details of these lines, we see that Stevens' poem is more open and complex than this apparent judgement seems to suggest. The half rhymes of 'boughs/snow,' 'time/ice,' 'think/wind,' 'snow/beholds,'[112] provide an aesthetic experience that is both connected and distant—the mind of the reader matching up the sounds at the same time that they experience the rhythmic remainder; simultaneous closeness and jarring separation. A rhyme scheme of this nature intimates that there may be forms of connection possible in aesthetic experience that is not wholly forthcoming. The import of this can be understood by looking again at the final stanza. The stanza considers someone who 'beholds,' and yet this person is described as 'the listener, who listens in the snow.'[113] There is a disjunct here between stated sense perceptions: a listener who looks. This suggests that though it may be impossible to entirely see past human concepts to observe the nonhuman, there is another form of perception available. This perception would be attentive to the sound of nonhuman silence, looking for the nonhuman through its physical apparitions whilst simultaneously listening to its lack of arrival into human comprehension. We can only 'hear' the 'sound of the wind' by listening to its imprint in the vibrations of 'leaves' and 'land' being

---

[110] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.8, Lines 13-15.
[111] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.8, Line 15.
[112] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.8, Lines 2-14.
[113] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.8, Line 13.

shaken.[114] In the same way, this form of perception would seek to gain understanding from the vibrations, traces and echoes of the nonhuman, rather than the impossible to reach nonhuman object itself. It would listen to a land rich with the silence of nonhuman, existent but closed. This kind of poetic perception is offered to us in Stevens' poem— one able to catch sight of nonhuman reality through the reverberation of its absence.

The listener described by the poem is 'nothing himself,'[115] an extremely cryptic line that is both paradoxical and uncertain. On the one hand the human listener is 'nothing' in the negative sense; he is a closed off entity to which no nonhuman has access, both invisible to the truth of the other. On the other hand, the listener being 'nothing,' means that he is described in the same terms as 'the nothing that is,'[116] the hermetic but existent realm of the nonhuman. As the poem's half rhymes brought together instances of language and ideas whilst pushing them apart, this shared description provides a connected space in which the human and the nonhuman are equalized. Both are 'nothing,' and so both can claim a joint place within the open expanse of the negative: closed, but bristling with intimate potential.

Stevens' line 'Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is,'[117] is the final one of the poem. The ambiguity of this line brings the reader into an uncertain space, one where the usual rules of exchange-value—the value of each thing located in what it can be exchanged for, are suspended. The 'nothing' is the hermetic nonhuman to which the human has no access, excluding it from becoming a fixed and comprehensible unit for consumption. Yet this is a nothing 'that is.' It exists in the very same world that a human being exists in, part of the 'nothing that is not there,' a physical fact that manages to deflect all enquiries into its being and existence. The nonhuman's closed off absence points to the existence of what cannot be known, and so, paradoxically, makes that existence briefly apparent.

---

114 Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.8, Lines 8-10.
115 Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.8, Line 14.
116 Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.8, Line 15.
117 Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.8, Line 15.

The intense paradox of this nonhuman apparition, fully there and yet fully absent, briefly undoes the rules of reified understanding. Existing side by side with the human, intimate in its sharing of our world, it remains wholly distant from a form that could make it accessible to us and our identificatory thinking. In bringing awareness to this relational paradox, Stevens creates an autonomous realm within his poem—a place in which it is possible to briefly 'think outside' of identificatory thinking. The poem has no consumable (and thus exchangeable) 'message' that can be easily summed up, nor does it provide a comforting narrative of suggested ways to improve human beings' treatment of the environment. This lack of message resists 'adaption to the market,'[118] not through a specific political stance, but through the poem's refusal of fungibility, its refusal to be anything other than its own unique and singular entity.

Stevens' poem is a 'bare place' in which some of the strictures of human concepts can be suspended, leaving the reader in an interaction with an unknown nonhuman thing—an interaction that, in its very lack of a rigid purpose or aim, allows for a glimpse of the freedom available beyond all-encompassing subjectivity. It is in this being-in-itself that we might find ways to think towards the nonhuman's own fiercely independent agency and difference, allowing beings and objects that belong entirely to themselves the space to exist. Like all of the poems discussed in this chapter, *The Snow Man* does not call for change, but rather creates an ecological space in which change might take place in the body of language itself, at the root of how we think into the world.

---

[118] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.9.

Chapter Three

The Capacity Of Thought.

At the heart of this project is a re-thinking of the ways in which we might call on poetry to be ecological, (that is, provide ways towards sustainable, equitable relations between human and nonhuman beings) both in the structures of texts themselves, and in the ways that we read and criticise those texts. In Chapter One I addressed some of the problems I felt hampered mainstream environmental poetry's relationship with the nonhuman, and in Chapter Two I looked at how Adorno's idea of the nonidentical might reveal the ecological potential of Wallace Stevens' poetry. In this chapter I will build on the work of Chapter Two, arguing that it is in Adorno's work that we find theories able to reveal how ecological poetry might alter thinking practices: producing a dialectic within language that makes the structural rigidity of thought apparent, whilst using this rigidity to point to the existent world beyond these stirctures.

In this chapter I will particularly be focusing on Adorno's essay, 'Society,' and his longer work *Negative Dialectics*. I will also continue to explore the ecological potential of Wallace Stevens' poetry, making use of Adorno's influence to excavate the challenge to traditional modes of thinking about the nonhuman provided by Stevens' work. Rather than simply placing Steven's work 'under the lens' of Adorno, I will seek to represent a fruitful conversation between the two, revealing the critical understandings birthed by this interaction. Through this conversation I will aim to reveal not only *how* Stevens' poetry attempts to undo reified thinking about the nonhuman, but *why* this undoing could be crucial in transforming our attitudes and actions towards the nonhuman world.

One thing that is particularly interesting about Adorno's philosophy is its sheer difference from most of mainstream environmental aesthetic criticism, often termed 'eco-criticism.' Adorno's work is not only different in its attitude to its material, but in the very fact that its areas of consideration are not constricted by any overt generic affiliation. Such affiliations can be profoundly generative in the

opportunities they provide for making connections between scholars' work, but can also pre-form the expectation of what critical work should attend to, and even what answers or conclusions it should provide. Adorno's freedom from this disciplinary specificity allowed him to produce work that challenges some of our assumptions about the nonhuman, and which can take on and consider elements from any relevant field of thought.

Ecocriticism is a varied field, and so cannot be in any way repudiated as a hegemonic academic system, but there are elements in its ways of thinking and reading that often recur, perhaps due to the disciplinary expectations cited above, that are revealing to consider in contrast to Adorno's aesthetic and cognitive ideas. In a series of short essays titled *Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice*,[119] produced in 1994 for the US branch of *The Association of Literature and the Environment*, a selection of critics working in ecocriticism set out their ideas about what this field does, and the meanings it holds.

In his essay for this series, 'What is Ecocriticism?' Harry Crockett explains that 'Ecocriticism elucidates relationships between human and non-human nature.' Apart from his non-questioning use of the word 'nature,' this appears to be a reasonable account of the aims of ecocriticism. However, Crockett goes on to argue that:

> We want to have an impact beyond the academy about those matters in the
> world most dear to us. Ultimately, we will be failures in our own eyes if our
> labors don't help green our society.[120]

Despite Crockett's passionate assertion, the terms of the supposed 'failure' that he mentions are not made clear. Crockett also suggests that, 'We reject the prevailing

---

[119] *Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice*, ed. Branch, Michael P., and Sean O'Grady. ASLE. Accessed September 12, 2016. http://www.asle.org/wp-content/uploads/ASLE_Primer_DefiningEcocrit.pdf.
[120] Crockett, Harry, "What is Ecocriticism?" in *Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice*, ed. Branch, Michael P., and Sean O'Grady. ASLE. Accessed September 12, 2016. http://www.asle.org/wp-content/uploads/ASLE_Primer_DefiningEcocrit.pdf.p.5.

critical assumption that reality is socially constructed.'[121] Crockett does not go on to elucidate the ways in which he hopes that criticism will have an impact in helping 'green,' our society. Nor does he provide further details about how he is so sure that reality is not 'socially constructed.' These statements reflect two important issues that arise in a number of mainstream eco-critical readings. These are: the desire to use environmental literature to bring about concrete political and social change, and the belief that reality, especially nonhuman reality, is uncomplicatedly 'out there,' if we would only look for it. These two elements are connected in that they seem to focus more on action, pushing out into the 'real' world, than on a consideration of thinking practices, and how those practices effect the world of the nonhuman. Crockett seems sure that it is possible to change things through ecocriticism, but how this will be done is not explained. There is no mention of how ecocriticism might not only draw attention to environmental problems, but also challenge the systems of thought that are in part responsible for those very problems.

In an essay from the same series, also titled 'What is Ecocriticism?' Cheryll Glotfelty describes her version of eco-critical thought:

> Ecocritics and theorists ask questions like the following: How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom?[122]

These questions focus less on social change, and more on how the nonhuman is represented within literature, also a valuable area of study. What is similar in both essays however is the idea of 'nature' as something 'there,' a part of the tangible world that is easily accessible, and easily considered. Glotfelty's essay does seem to take into account to some degree the linguistic and cultural construction of 'nature' in literature, and yet leaves concepts such as 'Ecological wisdom,' and

---

[121] Ibid

[122] Glotfelty, Cheryll, "What is Ecocriticism?" in *Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice*, ed. Branch, Michael P., and Sean O'Grady. ASLE. Accessed September 12, 2016. http://www.asle.org/wp-content/uploads/ASLE_Primer_DefiningEcocrit.pdf. p.6.

'nature' unexplored in themselves; not questioning how these formations themselves may act as a bar to genuine consideration of nonhuman existence.

I have no wish to negate the importance of these critics' aims, and they are writing an earlier stage in the evolution of ecocriticm that writers such as Timothy Morton and Jane Bennett, whose work I will also consider. I do however want to suggest that many assumptions and structures of thought that the human brings to the consideration of the nonhuman, are skipped over in these seemingly clear and concise versions of eco-critical aesthetics—aesthetics whose influence is still powerfully felt in much mainstream ecocriticism. These critics laudably aim to think about how the nonhuman is represented, but there is no mention at all of the kinds of thinking that made this representation possible, or the assumptions that exist in the act of human beings representing the nonhuman in the first place. Similarly, the aim to 'green' society, to create a critical response to aesthetics that reaches directly *out* into the political world, seems to jump over the *internal* intellectual and conceptual changes within criticism that might be crucial before direct change is possible. This is not in any way to repudiate the need for action. It is rather to re-orientate our attention: to put thinking and writing practices at the forefront of what needs to be examined if human-nonhuman relations have a hope of being altered. In this chapter I will seek to step back from attempts to use texts as tools for political, physical action. Instead I will consider what happens when we approach texts as spaces where the action of thinking might be challenged; where the roots of nonhuman oppression might reveal themselves, and so, become vulnerable.

In contrast to the assumptions of the eco-critics already mentioned, Adorno's ideas seek to challenge the concepts, ideologies and structures of thinking that we bring to bear on the nonhuman and the world in general. For Adorno, unless these structures can be resisted, no genuine work of nonhuman liberation can take place, either within art itself, or in the use of that art for social change. Adorno's work suggests as much of a desire to change human-nonhuman relationships as the critics mentioned above, but his ways of bringing this about involve not only a *consideration* of the nonhuman and its appearance in aesthetics, but a

consideration of what happens, and can happen, in the *very acts of thought* that shape human interactions with nonhuman objects. This consideration differentiates Adorno from much mainstream criticism about the nonhuman, and, I will argue, provides a unique philosophical and critical perspective with which to consider the ecological potential of aesthetics.

In the previous chapters I have touched on Adorno's thinking in relation to 'autonomous art': art that does not make a political statement, or sum up and explain a communicable message. Such art is revolutionary in its very 'being-in-itself,' its resistance to becoming an exchangeable commodity. It is in exploring autonomous art and its language that I as a poet have been able to see a way forward in forging an ecological writing, one that does not suppress the singularity of the nonhuman. In critically examining Wallace Stevens' autonomous art, I am able not only to locate some of the causes of nonhuman oppression in the structures of reified thought, but also to consider ways in which it might be possible to challenge those structures within poetry. This chapter attempts to create a new way to think about the possibilities of poetics through an engagement with Adorno's critical strategies; forging the hope that ecological change may take place, in some part, in the work of language itself.

In his essay 'Society,' contained within in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno argues that:

> What is social in art is its immanent movement against society, not its manifest opinions. Its historical gesture repels empirical reality, of which artworks are nevertheless part in that they are things. Insofar as a social function can be predicted for artworks, it is their functionlessness. Through their difference from a bewitched reality, they embody negatively a position in which what is would find its rightful place, its own. Their enchantment is disenchantment. Their social essence requires a double reflection on their being-for-themselves and on their relations to society.[123]

---

[123] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.309.

For Adorno, any concrete 'opinions' that an artwork might express matter much less than its 'functionlessness' a quality which 'repels empirical reality,' through its difference from that reality. In its intense being-in-itself, its existence outside of the 'useful' practical space of empirical society, autonomous art offers the possibility of something beyond reified capitalist ideology. Adorno believes that to understand such art we must understand that its 'being-in-itself' converges with its 'relation to society': a socially radical act that takes place through a rejection of any functional action. It is this paradox, radical potential drawn from uselessness, from which autonomous art draws its power, repelling the strictures of total exchange-value.

Adorno suggests that:

> Art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as "socially useful," it criticizes society by merely existing, for which puritans of all stripes condemn it. There is nothing pure, nothing structured strictly according to its own immanent law, that does not implicitly criticize the debasement of a situation evolving in the direction of a total exchange society in which everything is heteronomously defined. Art's asociality is the determinate negation of a determinate society.[124]

What is revolutionary in this is that it suggests that 'asociality,' a lack of message and action within art, is the *only way* in which it is able to become 'social'—this because, in a society completely defined by exchange-value, what is 'socially useful' can only be the complete rejection of society's control within art's very structure. Rather than criticizing, in a clear way, a society which controls not only life but modes of thought, art is able to be, in itself, an alternative mode of thinking; an autonomy that cannot help but challenge determinate ideology. This alternative does not easily solve the problems of society, but it does offer the promise that

---

[124] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.308.

there may be other ways of being, a chink in the armour of a totalising ideological system. For Adorno:

> The iridescence that emanates from artworks, which today taboo all affirmation, is the appearance of the affirmative *ineffabile*, the emergence of the nonexisiting as if it did exist. Its claim to existence flickers out in aesthetic semblance; yet what does not exist, by appearing, is promised. The constellation of the existing and nonexisiting is the utopic figure of art. Although it is compelled toward absolute negativity, it is precisely by virtue of this negativity that it is not absolutely negative.[125]

To understand how this 'iridescence' appears in poetry, and the ways in which it can help us to re-think the making of a space for nonhuman difference, is one of the key aims of this chapter. Adorno does not give specific examples of individual works that embody his autonomous ideal. However, it is my argument that in Wallace Stevens's work we can see how art is able to produce 'the emergence of the nonexisiting as if it did exist;' demonstrating the potential of this emergence to re-structure human-nonhuman relations within aesthetics. I will first explore the 'constellation of the existing and nonexisiting' in Stevens' short poem 'Disillusionment of 10 o'clock', seeking to show how this constellation makes it possible to 'shake' the 'I' of subjectivity's thinking, pushing back against the empirical world's totalising control, the locked conceptual space that suffocates and degrades nonhuman agency.

In 'Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock', which is short enough to reproduce in its entirety, Stevens paints an apparently whimsical picture of a dreamlike world:

> The houses are haunted
> By white night-gowns.
> None are green,
> Or purple with green rings,

---

[125] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.318.

Or green with yellow rings,

Or yellow with blue rings.

None of them are strange,

With socks of lace

And beaded ceintures.

People are not going

To dream of baboons and periwinkles.

Only, here and there, an old sailor,

Drunk and asleep in his boots,

Catches tigers

In red weather.[126]

This poem puts across no strongly worded riposte to its society's structure or ideology, and yet it provides an immanent movement against society in the very structure of its imagery; in the creation of a fantasy world that pushes back against the empiricism of reified reality.

The poem takes place at 10 o'clock, the time in which people traditionally go to bed or get ready for bed, a time between waking and sleeping. This liminality allows what *is* to brush up against what *could be*. In this ambiguous space Stevens describes houses that are 'haunted/By white night-gowns.'[127] This first line already pushes the poem into a questioning of the boundaries between what is existent and what is not. Unlike the imagined night-gowns that come after them, the white night-gowns are 'real', they are mundane physical objects, and yet the 'houses' are 'haunted' by them. These supposedly existent objects are acting, or are being perceived to act, in the manner of non-existent supernatural entities, ghosts and ghouls. In this first image the existent is emerging *as if it did not exist*, undermining the claim to total reality that prevailing empiricism holds. The surrealistic quality of these 'real,' yet paranormal, night-gowns is then added to a description of what is not real, but imagined:

---

[126] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.57, Lines 1-15.
[127] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.57, Lines 1-2.

> None are green,
>
> Or purple with green rings,
>
> Or green with yellow rings,
>
> Or yellow with blue rings.[128]

These imagined night-gowns are drawn into the 'constellation of existing and nonexisiting,' equally as strange as 'what is.' The brightness of the colours in their encircling 'rings,' merge for the reader through the rhythmic circling of the poem's language, throwing together potentialities of colour and movement. Rather than the night-gowns existing as specifically dyed objects, they swirl into a constellation of what is and what might be, their rings as unsettlingly unexpected as the white night-gowns' hauntings. This imagistic movement, blurring the boundaries between imaginative possibility and tangible reality, is continued by Stevens' lines:

> None of them are strange,
>
> With socks of lace
>
> And beaded ceintures.[129]

Lace is most often something intricately patterned in swirls and flourishes, and 'beaded ceintures,' which are belts or girdles, twist and wrap round the waist—a deepening of the circling and swirling movements of the poem. These effects drive the configurations of the non-existent nightgowns into the reader's mind: these splendid night-gowns may not be real, yet their shapes, striped and twirling, impress themselves structurally upon the reader. They are not there, and yet they are being made present to us—a poetic dialectic of absence and presence. Stevens claims that 'None of them are strange,' whilst their strangeness is exploding visually in our imagination, producing an 'emergence of the nonexisiting as if it did exist.' Stevens is providing a negation of empirical control through the immanent aesthetic effects of the poem itself. These effects are furthered by the lines:

> People are not going

---

128 Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.57, Lines 3-6.
129 Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.57, Lines 7-9.

To dream of baboons and periwinkles[130]

The bizarre juxtaposition of these lines belies the claim that people 'are not going to dream,' of these things, because of course the reader of the poem is part of an act of imagination, a kind of waking dream, in which these very things become cognitively possible. The poetic satisfaction and strange beauty of this aural and imagistic juxtaposition, criticizes a world in which these things do not occur more strongly than an outright denunciation would. We *want* to be able to dream of these things, not to return to the cold emptiness of the white night-gowns, ghostly in their separation from any hint of warm bodies that might wear them.

These lines also establish a tension between an empirical world and a more imaginative one through the multiple possibilities invoked through the use of the word 'periwinkle'. Not only is this an appealingly unusual world, but it contains three distinct potential nonhuman meanings. 'Periwinkle' means a shade of blue/purple, a flower, and a type of sea snail.[131] This word draws attention to the endless difference and individuality of the nonhuman, because one word cannot effectively contain its differences. The single word is not enough for us to know what is being represented, reminding us that no words or concepts can ever fully contain nonhuman reality. Potentialities of meaning flicker in these lines, pointing to the huge range of realities that are unable to exist within the closed net of reified society. 'People are not going/To dream,' of these nonexistent realities, but within the poem, they become available to us as readers, their objective agency reaching out of the poem into consciousness. In 'Society' Adorno argues that:

> The shock aroused by important works is not employed to trigger personal, otherwise repressed emotions. Rather, this shock is the moment in which recipients forget themselves and disappear into the work; it is the moment of being shaken. The recipients lose their footing; the possibility of truth, embodied in the aesthetic image, becomes tangible. This immediacy, in the

[130] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.57, Lines 10-11.
[131] "Definition of Periwinkle." Merriam-Webster. Accessed September 29, 2016.
http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/periwinkle.

fullest sense, of relation to artworks is a function of mediation, of penetrating and encompassing experience; it takes shape in the fraction of an instant, and for this the whole of consciousness is required, not isolated stimuli and responses. The experience of art as that of truth or untruth is more than subjective experience: It is the irruption of objectivity into subjective consciousness. The experience is mediated through subjectivity precisely at the point where the subjective reaction is most intense ... Non-judging, artworks point—as with their finger—to their content without its thereby becoming discursive.[132]

To come into contact with the hermetic reality of the nonhuman is to experience the 'irruption of objectivity into subjective consciousness.' The shock of this experience for the reader is the shock of momentarily losing one's totalising subjectivity, which sees everything entirely through its own concepts. The 'immediacy' of the experience briefly shakes consciousness, allowing the full potential of autonomous art to emerge— not 'discursive' argument, but the ability to point towards new ways of thinking outside of empirical ideology. In this way Stevens' poem, thoroughly without consumable 'message,' challenges the reader's subjectivity by allowing objectivity to emerge briefly through his poem's imaginative language. The very flexibility of language is what makes this challenge possible— the experience of the 'irruption of objectivity' can take place for the reader because of the ways in which the meanings of words can crumble and give way within themselves. For example, 'Periwinkle' can, as we have seen, mean sea-snail, purple and then flower, or it can mean all of these, or more, at the same time. This inherent movability in language's signification offers a potently liminal space in which differing meanings and modes of being can become apparent. In language, and especially within poetic language, the possibility of the not-real and the real can co-exist, giving the reader a way into a thinking that sees beyond the rigid structures of empirical concepts. Language is the source of concepts, and yet, dialectically, offers respite from their control.

---

[132] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.332.

In its last stanza the poem's 'immanent movement against society' develops its most explicit expression:

> Only, here and there, an old sailor,
> Drunk and asleep in his boots,
> Catches tigers
> In red weather.[133]

In this small section of the poem we further witness the possibility of forging an aesthetic dialectic that allows the not-real to make its presence known amongst the real. In this dialectic the creative power of poetry reveals a potential in the existent structures of the empirical—not negating the empirical entirely, but using those structures to point beyond to what cannot yet exist within its own construction. Imaginative poetry cannot wholly do without the empirical, relying as it does on its organizational and rational powers, and the logic it imparts to language. It can however bring about a dialectic in which the empirical challenges itself, enabling realities beyond itself to bloom into cognitive life. Adorno describes the result of this action as:

> The iridescence that emanates from artworks...the appearance of the affirmative *ineffabile*, the emergence of the nonexisiting as if it did exist.[134]

In this poem the 'iridescence' comes from the possibility of seeing beyond the reified world, towards the existent, but hidden, individual nonidentity of the nonhuman. The 'old sailor,' is able, in dreaming, to catch 'tigers/In red weather.' Perhaps due to his profession, inevitably suggesting extensive travel and movement through nonhuman environments, the 'sailor' is able to access a way of thinking and imagining very different to the owners of 'white night-gowns.' In his dreams he 'catches' tigers— but this does not suggest the usual control and commodification of the nonhuman by the human that we might expect. This catching takes place in 'red weather,' the very colour of the environment produced

---

[133] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.57, Lines 12-15.
[134] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.318.

by the tiger's red-orange colouring. It is the tiger's space entirely, one that the 'sailor' is able to briefly enter into. What he 'catches' is, obviously, not the body of a real tiger, but the potential of imagining the tiger's nonhuman reality. Separated from the 'normality' of empirical external reality by two states that change mental processes—drunkenness and sleep, the 'sailor' is able to imagine the emergence of nonhuman reality 'as if it did exist;' as if it's full agency and individuality were able to come forth. In entering into the space of these lines, the reader also briefly experiences nonhuman agency 'as if it did exist.' The reader's subjectivity is challenged by the poem's structural reversal of values: the nonhuman able to define what is, rather than the human. Adorno describes the importance of this challenge to subjectivity when he suggests that:

> For a few moments the I becomes aware, in real terms, of the possibility of letting self-preservation fall away, though it does not actually succeed in realizing this possibility. It is not the aesthetic shudder that is semblance but rather its attitude to objectivity: In its immediacy the shudder feels the potential as if it were actual. The I is seized by the unmetaphorical, semblance-shattering consciousness: that it itself is not ultimate, but semblance. For the subject, this transforms art into what it is in-itself, the historical voice of repressed nature, ultimately critical of the principal of the I, that internal agent of repression. The subjective experience directed against the I is an element of the objective truth of art.[135]

As subjectivity is challenged within the poem, the 'I' becomes briefly aware that 'it itself is not ultimate.' This is a moment of thought that 'transforms art,' revealing 'the historical voice of repressed nature,' that is always and everywhere suppressed by the control of human conceptual systems. Nothing outside of the reader's mind has been clearly changed, and yet something utterly crucial for a transformation of human-nonhuman relations has taken place: the negation (though transient) of the all-encompassing 'I.' In negating this 'I,' total subjectivity is suspended, bringing about an awareness of nonhuman agency; that the human is

---

[135] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.333.

not everything, but shares a world with very real others. It is not possible to draw from this poetic experience physical manifestations of changed action in real time. I would argue however, that for ecological change to take place we first need to change the structures of thought that oppress the nonhuman. In Stevens' poem we see how poetics can begin this change at the level of language.

The immanent aesthetic structure of Stevens' poem, especially the use of imagistic effects, brings the objective, 'nonexistent' nonhuman into the realm of the existing. This is made clear in the poem's use of colour. Up until the final line, the poem has listed every colour that makes up the visible light spectrum: 'white' and also the traditional visible rainbow of 'yellow, green, blue,' and 'purple.'[136] Though the reader may not be consciously aware of it, the colour red is missing, and so the final line, 'red weather,'[137] offers imagistic completion. The line fills in a gap for the reader, a poetic fulfilment crafted out of imagined elements. In this poetic effect what does not exist is able to act as if it did, integrating into the action of the reader's mental experience. In this way Steven's poem, without any explicit critique, (beyond a dislike of boring aesthetic choices) is able to push back against what is able to exist in the empirical world of human subjectivity. Stevens' act of imagination immanently challenges 'a total exchange society in which everything is heteronomously defined.'[138] It does this by 'crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as "socially useful."[139] The poem forces that which does not exist to flash up inside its immanent reality as if it did, and so 'criticizes society by merely existing.'[140] This poetic effect is a challenge to empirical thought structures because it allows a dialectic to not only be considered, but to be experienced in language. The dialectical interaction of the not-real and the real within the poem offers mental pathways in which thought's own potential is revealed to itself—that the very limits of thought's structures and concepts can provide breaking points that reveal the potent absence of the nonhuman.

---

[136] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.57, Lines 2-6.
[137] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber), 2006, p.57, Line 15.
[138] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.308.
[139] Ibid
[140] Ibid

Stevens' poem has no concretely 'useful' purpose, but instead offers a singular experience of potentially renewed thinking for its reader. The negation of a consumable 'use value' negates the structures of empirical 'usefulness' to, paradoxically, become 'useful,' or, more exactly, to become *fruitful*. The immanent dialectical vortex of the poem shakes the 'I' and thus makes thinking beyond empiricism, beyond subjectivity, imaginable. This thinking therefore makes the reality of the nonhuman imaginable, something that can be momentarily glimpsed, despite not being fully apprehended. Understanding that the potential of poetry may lie in what it does *not* do: — its 'uselessness,' its unique separation from everything beyond its own aesthetic imagination — enables us to see what it may *make possible* in human thinking towards the nonhuman.

Adorno's interest in the ways in which thinking can be shifted to better understand the objective world are elucidated not only in *Aesthetic Theory*, but in his long masterwork, *Negative Dialectics*. In this book, Adorno's focus is on the thinking that takes place in philosophy in particular, and how it can better apprehend objects through critical self-consciousness and a questioning of concepts. Deborah Cook, in her book *Adorno on Nature*, makes explicit why this questioning of thinking practices is of crucial importance when reshaping attitudes to the nonhuman, what she describes as 'nature':

> Once we realize that "[a]bsolute domination of nature is absolute submission to nature," we may be able to "arch beyond" our largely sadomasochistic relation to nature by means of self-reflection (P 152) … Adorno made this point in *Negative Dialectics*: "If negative dialectics calls for the self-reflection of thinking, the tangible implication is that if thinking is to be true – if it is to be true today, in any case – it must also be a thinking against itself" (ND 365).

> Only critical self-reflection can prevent the subject "from building walls between itself and the object, from the supposition that its being-for-itself is an in-and-for-itself" (ND 31). Thinking about thought therefore entails

thinking about nature as that from which reason emerged but to which it cannot be reduced, that from which concepts are formed but with which they are not identical and, finally, as that with which thought may eventually be reconciled. For reconciliation to occur, human beings and non-human things should be regarded neither as an undifferentiated unity, nor in their current hostile antithesis.[141]

As Cook makes clear, for Adorno philosophy can only succeed when it performs acts of criticism not only on the world at large, but on itself also—aware that its concepts have close relationships with nonhuman reality, but that they do not explain or contain the totality of that reality itself. This is an understanding that recognises the difference of the nonhuman, without rushing to contain and silence it through fixed concepts. This understanding also does not assume that this difference must mean a total alienation and polarisation between nonhuman and human. Rather, the being-in-itself of the nonhuman, in this ideal, 'reconciled' cognition, is understood by the human through an accepting of intimacy with difference: a difference that is acknowledged, but not subsumed, within a thinking always aware of its own limits. Cook suggests that:

Denouncing Western reason because it effectively condemns thought to thinking itself, [Adorno] argued that, to escape the sphere of immanence, of narcissistic navel gazing, thought must become self-critical.[142]

For Cook:

In the thinking Adorno champions, a concept should "lead to its otherness without absorbing that otherness" (ND 157). To paraphrase Robert-Hullot Kentor, Adorno wants to plumb the capacity of thought to allow nature to break in on the mind that masters it.[143]

[141] Cook, Deborah. *Adorno on Nature*. (Durham: Acumen, 2011), p.90.
[142] Cook, Deborah. *Adorno on Nature*. (Durham: Acumen, 2011), p.62.
[143] Cook, Deborah. *Adorno on Nature*. (Durham: Acumen, 2011), p.63.

The exploration of thought that Cook describes — thought plumbing its own nature to expose otherness, challenging concepts to reveal the submerged nonidentity of the nonhuman — takes place within the context of philosophy. Indeed, philosophy seems the most obvious place in which thinking might be expected to confront itself. It is my argument, however, that these explorations of the otherness available in thinking also have huge relevance in considering aesthetics; particularly in the attempt to try and understand how poetry might alter thinking practices to better challenge the oppression of the nonhuman. Adorno's ideas focus on changing philosophy, but can be powerfully turned towards to an examination of how poetic thinking might change our thinking around the nonhuman world.

Adorno explains the core of *Negative Dialectics* in this way:

> The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without remainders, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy... It indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived. Yet the appearance of identity is inherent in thought itself, in its pure form. To think is to identify. Conceptual order is content to screen what thinking seeks to comprehend. The semblance and the truth of thought entwine. The semblance cannot be decreed away, as by avowal of a being-in-itself outside the totality of cogitative definitions ... Aware that the conceptual totality is mere appearance, I have no way but to break immanently, in its own measure, through the appearance of total identity.[144]

'Conceptual totality,' is the unavoidable containment of experience and thought within the reified conceptual structures of human society. There is no way to swerve this containment, despite an awareness that 'objects do not go into their concepts without remainders.' The awareness is important, but incomplete— cognisant of the fact that objects have a 'remainder' not captured by concepts, but

---

[144] Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics*. (New York, NY: Continuum), 2003, p.5.

unable to witness the reality of this 'remainder'. Yet this mental blockade is not hopeless in Adorno's argument. Thought itself contains the potential to 'identify,' to genuinely comprehend the reality of a thing. This genuine identification is however 'entwine(d)' with the 'semblance' produced by 'conceptual order.' Within this paradox the 'semblance' of concepts cannot be exited, it can only be broken 'immanently, in its own measure.' The force of concepts is thus used to undo the totality of concepts, through and within a mind that is compromised by those very structures. This is the challenge of *Negative Dialectics*: to make use of the revolutionary potential within thought, undoing the falsehoods of the reified structures that are also inherent parts of that thought— thought made to battle against itself and its own limits.

It is this attempt to undo thinking through thinking that I believe animates Wallace Stevens' poetry, in its attempts to come closer to a non-oppressive interaction with the reality of the nonhuman. Stevens' poetic structures undermine reified thought, pointing to forms of thinking that could make space for the nonhuman 'remainder;' the difference of nonhuman reality that always escapes us, but that flashes up as a warning that we are not alone in the embodied world.

Stevens' poem 'Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction', is deeply concerned with the relationship between poetry and the world—or, rather, with the ways in which poetry can shape our thinking towards the world. In this poem Stevens challenges the totality of human concepts through a system of language that inherently works against itself: one that rubs linguistic and imagistic concepts against each other to create small fractures in thinking. These fractures, occurring within poetry, are able to bring to our attention the possibility of a nonhuman reality beyond concepts. Thus Stevens makes use of thought's own resistive potential, and imagines what might be possible if our ideas genuinely began from objects, rather than from our pre-existing human conceptions of those objects.

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno argues that the belief that concepts can be used to transcend concepts is absolutely essential to philosophy:

Though doubtful as ever, a confidence that philosophy can make it after all—that the concept can transcend the concept, the preparatory and concluding element, and can thus reach the nonconceptual—is one of philosophy's inalienable features…Otherwise it must capitulate, and the human mind with it … But whatever truth the concepts cover beyond their abstract range can have no other stage than what the concepts suppress, disparage and discard. The cognitive utopia would be to use concepts to unseal the non-conceptual with concepts, without making it their equal.[145]

For Adorno, thought must focus on what concepts 'suppress, disparage and discard,' to have any hope of opening up the potential of nonidentity. Adorno's 'cognitive utopia' is a place in which the nonconceptual comes forward through an awareness of the concepts set around it. In such a 'utopia,' the inherent nonconceptual nonidentity of the nonhuman would be able to find room, its suppressed reality able to make contact with our own.

The attempt to release the potential of the nonconceptual through concepts takes place in Stevens' poem. Here Stevens focuses on the failure of linguistic concepts to reveal the genuine reality of the nonhuman; breeding, from this failure, a perception of what concepts might hide. This is demonstrated in the first stanza of the poem's first section 'It Must Be Abstract':

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
Of this invention, this invented world,
The inconceivable idea of the sun.

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it.

Never suppose an inventing mind as source

---

[145] Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics*. (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), p.10.

> Of this idea nor for that mind compose
> A voluminous master folded in his fire.
>
> How clean the sun when seen in its idea,
> Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven
> That has expelled us and our images . . .[146]

To understand how Stevens is challenging concepts in this stanza, one must turn to the word that is central to these lines: 'idea.' Stevens' narrator addresses the poem to an 'ephebe,' the ancient Greek word for a young man in training. This young man, as part of his learning process, is asked to begin by 'perceiving the idea/Of this invention…/The inconceivable idea of the sun.' This 'idea' is 'inconceivable,' because its subject is uncertain—is this the *sun's* idea, coming from it, or *our* idea of the sun? The location of meaning is not immediately apparent, and this difficulty is made apparent in the multiplicity of meanings available in the word 'idea.' The etymological richness of the word allows Stevens to question how and if nonhuman meaning can become accessible to us. The word comes from the Greek root 'idein,' to see, which becomes 'idea,' meaning the 'form, the look of a thing, a kind.' By the 1610's the word is recorded as meaning, in the English language, 'the concept of something to be done; concept of what ought to be, differing from what is observed,' eventually morphing into its contemporary usage: 'the result of thinking.'[147] This complicated history of the word 'idea' mirrors our modes of thinking— from the original potential of simply being able to 'see,' our ability to witness the reality of the objects of the world has been corrupted by the layers of concepts that we place on top of it. From 'seeing,' we move to 'form,' 'a kind'— seeing things as instances of 'kinds' of other things, putting what we observe into categories that blur individual difference.

'Idea,' which began as a word for the physical act of seeing, ends up meaning 'the results of thinking': everything that we see, seen through, and created by, the

[146] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.331, Lines 9-20.
[147] "Etymology of Idea." Online Etymology Dictionary. Accessed September 18, 2016. http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=idea.

structures of our thinking—our understanding of the world regurgitated to us by the concepts that we place around it. It is for this reason that the narrator asks the 'ephebe,' to 'become an ignorant man again/And see the sun again with an ignorant eye/And see it clearly in the idea of it.' To become 'ignorant,' would be to reject the layers of human conceptions that separate us from the nonhuman sun, seeing it 'in the idea' 'of it.' An 'idea' that is 'of' the sun itself: 'idea' here returned to its original meaning of sight, a genuine witnessing of the complete reality of the nonhuman. To be able to achieve such a thing would be the 'cognitive utopia' that Adorno describes in *Negative Dialectics*.

The intense difficulty of ever reaching such a utopia is explored in the second part of the stanza, where the challenge of achieving 'ignorance' is revealed:

> Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
> A name for something that never could be named.
> There was a project for the sun and is.
>
> There is a project for the sun. The sun
> Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
> In the difficulty of what it is to be.[148]

'Phoebus,' the name of the sun god in Greek and Roman mythology, has slipped out of contemporary usage, leaving a seemingly more realistic vision of what the sun is, without religious myth. But Stevens makes clear that 'Phoebus was/A name for something that never could be named.' Our current concepts may be more subtly pervasive than those of the Greco-Romans, but they are equally as distant from the sun's actual nonhuman reality. Stevens demonstrates this in the poem's effort to undo concepts from a nonhuman object. The narrator states that 'the sun/Must bear no name,' but then cannot help but follow this immediately with 'gold flourisher'—a new name as imprecise and lofty as those that have gone before. There is no way to imagine the nonhuman entirely without name, that is, entirely

---

[148] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.332, Lines 24-29.

without concepts. All that we can do is observe the nonhuman in 'the difficulty of what it is to be,' an object of difference struggling to escape our concepts, but registering in our human minds through those very concepts. Stevens makes us aware of how our thought wriggles out of concepts only to immediately fall into others, managing to build an aesthetic self-awareness of the structures of identificatory thinking, even as he is unable to dismantle them.

Adorno argues that:

> What the philosophical concept will not abandon is the yearning that animates the nonconceptual side of art, and whose fulfilment shuns the immediate side of art as mere appearance. The concept—the organon of thinking, and yet the wall between thinking and the thought—negates that yearning. Philosophy can neither circumvent such negation nor submit to it. It must strive, by way of the concept, to transcend the concept.[149]

Concepts are what make thinking possible, and yet they must be transcended in the search for a form of thought that could fully respond to the world outside of the thinker's subjectivity. In stanza *IV* of the same section of the poem, 'It Must Be Abstract', Stevens builds on the self-conscious awareness of concepts he has inculcated in the poem. This awareness allows him to begin to reshape the reader's poetic experience, so as to unseal the potential of the nonconceptual through concepts:

> The first idea was not our own. Adam
> In Eden was the father of Descartes
> And eve made air the mirror of herself,
>
> Of her sons and of her daughters. They found themselves
> In heaven as in a glass; a second earth;
> And in the earth itself they found a green—

[149] Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics*. (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), p.15.

The inhabitants of a very varnished green.
But the first idea was not to shape the clouds
In imitation. The clouds preceded us.

There was a muddy centre before we breathed.
There was a myth before the myth began,
Venerable and articulate and complete.[150]

Stevens takes us in this stanza to 'Eden,' the imagined start of human life on earth (in the Western imagination), the ultimate concept or myth of paradisiacal beginnings. Yet at the same time as being placed at this human beginning, we are told that 'The first idea was not our own.' In this 'Eden', Adam and Eve find themselves 'In heaven as in a glass; a second earth.' The concept of ultimate beginning is being reversed—instead of heaven/'Eden' coming before the more imperfect 'earth,' here 'Eden is described' as 'a second earth,' no longer the originator of creation. 'Eden' is pictured, in this poem, as a beginning that is human in every aspect: 'Adam/In Eden was the father of Descartes/And eve made air the mirror of herself,/Of her sons and of her daughters.' Adam is here directly connected to Descartes and his famous statement, 'I think therefore I am.' This is a mode of understanding in which human thinking is the absolute of what it means to exist. In this mode, unless an object thinks as human beings do, it is impossible for it to meaningfully exist at all. 'Eve' absorbs this oppressively human-centered perspective, making the air 'a mirror of herself': forcing nonhuman objects to reflect her structures of thought, and rejecting any other kinds of being.

However, the traditional myth/concept of Eden is not simply discarded by Stevens. Rather it is challenged by another myth: 'the myth before the myth began.' This 'myth' is of 'the muddy centre before we breathed': a primordial creative space that contains a multitude of nonhuman differences. Stevens' 'muddy centre' undermines Adam and Eve's identificatory thinking by creating an alternative,

---

[150] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.333-334, Lines 72-85.

nonhuman, concept of what Eden might be. This form of Eden is 'Venerable and articulate and complete'—an utterly nonhuman 'centre' that is 'articulate,' able to communicate clearly, despite not showing any signs of being able to undertake thinking processes. This nonhuman object or being has knowledge, it is 'venerable' or wise, and it can communicate and interact with other objects. It does these things without partaking in anything resembling human cognition. It is 'complete' in itself, without human input. This form of Eden challenges totally a concept of life in which a human thinking mind is needed for meaning to emerge. In this alternative concept, meaning began with the nonhuman: muddily fertile and equal with the human in its creative ability. 'Eden' remains, but its meaning and potential has been entirely transformed through the language that brings the concept to life. Stevens connects this nonhuman creative potential to poetry itself:

> From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
> That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
>
> ….
>
> We are the mimics. Clouds are pedagogues
> The air is not a mirror but bare board[151]

Having undermined the concept of the human as the original source of generative existence, Stevens is now able to reshape thinking about aesthetics, and poetry specifically. In these lines Stevens suggests that the poem begins not with human genius, thinking or inspiration, but with the extreme alterity of the nonhuman world making itself known. In this imagining, the world 'is not our own,' and this realisation can act as an impetus for poetry, the human seeking reconciliation and understanding within its aesthetic acts. Unlike the original 'Eden' myth, where humanity orders and controls the nonhuman, Stevens' narrator claims that: 'We are the mimics. Clouds are pedagogues.' It is human beings who copy the nonhuman, learning from its ways of being, rather than the other way around. The

---

[151] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.334, Lines 84-88.

air is 'not a mirror,' not a nonhuman reflection of our own concepts, but something utterly singular and separate from us.

Adorno argues that: 'Concepts alone can achieve what the concept prevents.'[152] In these stanzas Stevens has undermined a restrictive concept with an alternative version of that concept, making new ways of thinking vitally available for the reader. In these refreshed ways of thinking it becomes possible to apprehend the total agency and singularity of the nonhuman, even if this individuality's exact details remain oblique. Stevens has not destroyed the concept of 'Eden,' but has rather refigured it to unseal the revolutionary potential available within. This enables a re-thinking of what a creative beginning might be, both in embodied human experience, and in aesthetics. This re-thinking briefly suspends the totality of human meaning, raising the nonhuman's forms of being into an equal position with the human within cognition. The reader is not 'told,' to re-consider the nonhuman, instead Stevens breaks into concepts with other kinds of concepts, making such a re-consideration an immanent part of full engagement with the poem. At least for the moment of reading, nonhuman agency flares up through the fragility of concepts, momentarily restored to human cognition. It is my argument that such an opportunity gives the reader a chance to transform their thinking towards the nonhuman, in ways that are neither dominating nor silencing. Steven's poem is not a manifesto; it is an opportunity.

Stevens not only challenges identificatory thinking in 'Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction', creating opportunities for new forms of cognition—he also crucially explores the challenges of these new forms, investigating what happens in the mind as it attempts to process towards a less restrictive mode of understanding. Writing in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno argues that:

> To want substance in cognition is to want a utopia. It is this consciousness of possibility that sticks to the concrete, the undisfigured. Utopia is blocked off by possibility, never by immediate reality; this is why it seems abstract

---

[152] Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics*. (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), p.53.

in the midst of extant things. The inextinguishable color comes from nonbeing. Thought is its servant, a piece of existence extending—however negatively—to that which is not. The utmost distance alone would be proximity...[153]

The 'utopia' of thinking that is imagined in *Negative Dialectics*, in which the human is able to fully comprehend and connect to the reality of the nonhuman, is not blocked off by 'immediate reality,' the physical qualities of the objects of the world. These objects do, in theory, have the capabilities to communicate and connect, but they are restrained by what is *possible* for those things in the current reified system. Nonhuman nonidentity has been excised from our lived reality, and so exists in what might be, in 'nonbeing.' To make contact with nonidentity, thought must extend to 'that which is not.' This means enacting a process of thought that, though inevitably based in the tangible world, reaches out into what does not yet exist fully in the human sphere. To further understand such efforts of thinking, I look now to stanza *III* of the section 'It Must Be Abstract':

> We say: At night an Arabian in my room,
> With his damned hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how,
> Inscribes a primitive astronomy
>
> Across the unscrawled fores the future casts
> And throws his stars around the floor. By day
> The wood-dove used to chant his hoobla-hoo
>
> And still the grossest iridescence of ocean
> Howls hoo and rises and howls hoo and falls.
> Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation.[154]

This stanza seems, on first reading, to be a criticism of irrational modes of being and thinking from a rationalist perspective. The narrator describes 'an Arabian'

[153] Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics*. (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), p.56-57.
[154] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.333, Lines 63-71.

'with his damned hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how' inscribing a 'primitive astronomy' that invades the narrator's own 'room.' The 'Arabian' is dismissed, his sounds, which we must assume to be part of quasi-religious or magical chants, are damned, and his astronomy is described as 'primitive.' On top of this, the fact that the man is 'Arabian,' conjures up xenophobic stereotypes of Eastern mystics and fakirs using false conjuring to trick and mislead. And yet, looking closer, there is more to the seeming nonsense of his 'hoobla-hoobla' than might appear. Firstly, though it is described as 'primitive' the 'Arabian''s actions are referred to as 'astronomy.' Rather than the fuzzy and imprecise 'astrology' that we might expect, 'astronomy' suggests the precise scientific discipline of examining the heavenly bodies. Secondly, the 'Arabian': 'Across the unscrawled fores the future casts.' He does not *attempt* to cast 'the future,' he casts it, suggesting a level of skill at odds with the way in which he is dismissed by the narrator. At the same time as this figure is rejected and sneered at, he is also given agency and power. To understand the paradoxical poetic thinking taking place here, it is revealing to look at this argument from *Negative Dialectics*:

> We are not to philosophize about concrete things; we are to philosophize, rather, out of these things. But if we surrender to the specific object we are suspected of lacking an unequivocal position. What differs from the existent will strike the existent as witchcraft …[155]

When thinking is not 'about concrete things,' taking its starting point from already existent human concepts, but rather thinks 'out of these things,' it loses the 'unequivocal position,' of reliably fixed and total conceptions. In thinking 'out of … things' thought draws on potential nonidentity, rather than what clearly appears. In this way it produces 'What differs from the existent,' and so strikes the reified human mind as 'witchcraft.' Stevens' narrator registers the 'Arabian'(s) mode of thinking as a kind of 'witchcraft,' a primitive divination that has nothing to do with the empirical world. Yet, submerged deep within this very same reified

---

[155] Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics*. (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), p.33.

perspective, is the awareness of its opposite—that alternative structures of cognition could reveal the actual nonidentical reality of the nonhuman.

In the lines we have looked at so far, the narrator's perspective is battling between identificatory thinking and moments of hidden awareness. However, in the second half of the stanza this awareness bursts to the surface, both in the narrator's mind, and in the language of the poem. The narrator reflects:

> ... By day
> The wood-dove used to chant his hoobla-hoo
>
> And still the grossest iridescence of ocean
> Howls hoo and rises and howls hoo and falls.[156]

The 'hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how' of the 'Arabian', which seemed like nonsense at the beginning of the poem, is now transformed into the nearly identical 'hoobla-hoo' of the 'wood-dove.' What appeared as utterly scrambled meaning suddenly comes into view as a perfectly recognisable, rhythmically and aurally onomatopoeic description of the call of the 'wood-dove.' Similarly, the 'hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how,' finds a very close echo in the 'ocean' that 'Howls hoo and rises and howls hoo and falls'—another recognisably onomatopoeic nonhuman description. Here the 'Howls' express the sounds of the waves, captured in a poetic structure of 5 syllables in each half of the sentence, reproducing the balanced rhythm of tidal movement.

The reader's mind abruptly has to convert what seemed like babble into recognisable nonhuman sounds and rhythms rendered in language. What seemed like 'witchcraft' is actually produced from the real, yet of course utterly different and separate, being of the nonhuman—intimately close to us and yet inherently alien. In response to this experience the narrator reflects that: 'Life's nonsense

---

[156] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.333, Lines 67-70.

pierces us with strange relation,' describing how the not-yet existent nonidentity of the nonhuman can, even in its unrevealed state, 'pierce' human thinking with a potentiality beyond itself. The narrator's thinking, and the reader's, has been inverted by a realisation that what exists outside of empirical conceptions is as real as what exists within it. It becomes clear that just because something is not contained by human meaning, this does not make it meaningless, or unworthy of consideration. Stevens achieves this effect through and within language, making use of the instability of words as they lurch from incomprehensibility into comprehensibility, within the flexible space of poetic meaning. Adorno argues that:

> The means employed in negative dialectics for the penetration of its hardened objects is possibility—the possibility of which their reality has cheated the objects and which is nonetheless visible in each one. But no matter how hard we try for linguistic expression of such a history congealed in things, the words we use will remain concepts. Their precision substitutes for the thing itself, without quite bringing its selfhood to mind; there is a gap between words and the thing they conjure.[157]

Stevens deftly plays with 'the gap between words and the thing they conjure' in this stanza, prising it open through the close proximity of nonsense and sense available in the same words: 'hoobla-hoo' as ritualistic gibberish, and 'hoobla-hoo' as the clear description of a bird's song. In doing so Stevens reveals 'the possibility' of the nonhuman, 'of which their reality' has cheated them, 'and which nonetheless is visible in each one.' Instead of attempting to fix the instability of language in his poetry, Stevens uses this very instability to challenge fixed totalities of thinking, totalities that paradoxically take place within thought's expression in language. As Adorno argues:

> Dialectics appropriates for the power of thought what historically seemed to be a flaw in thinking: its link with language which nothing can wholly break.[158]

---

[157] Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics.* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), p.52-53.
[158] Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics.* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), p.56.

Stevens uses the potential of poetic instability to bring out the freedom available in thought's unbreakable 'link' to language. Stevens acts out, in the body of his poetry, a thinking that immanently criticises and breaks concepts at their most vulnerable point—their existence in language. In doing this, new ways of thinking about the nonhuman are offered to the human, making the openness of poetic language a model, and a zone of experimentation, for what thinking is capable of.

The final stanza that I will consider from 'Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction', in my examination of how Stevens uses poetry to challenge identificatory thinking structures, is stanza *VII* of the section 'It Must Give Pleasure'. In this stanza Stevens not only contrasts more open modes of understanding with identificatory thinking, but presses the reader to imagine what it might be like to actually forge a genuine experience of the nonhuman: an act of thinking that leads toward the potential of thinking itself. In Stanza *VII* Stevens describes the behaviour and thought of a character called 'Canon Aspirin':

> He imposes orders as he thinks of them,
> As the fox and snake do. It is a brave affair.
> Next he builds capitols and in their corridors,
>
> Whiter than wax, sonorous, fame as it is,
> He establishes statues of reasonable men,
> Who surpassed the most literate owl, the most erudite
>
> Of elephants...[159]

The 'Canon,' imposes orders 'as he thinks of them,' responding to the actual moment as the nonhuman 'fox and snake' might do. What differs in him however is that he then turns these structures of immanent thought outward, solidifying them

---

[159] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.352, Lines 569-575.

into edifices— 'he builds capitols.' As part of this building he 'establishes statues of reasonable men,/Who surpassed the most literate owl.' Reason has here been extracted from the nonhuman world and made into an immovable totality, surpassing any connection to 'the owl;' to forms of knowledge that touch on the nonhuman. This is identitarian thinking in its purest form, and Stevens resists such thinking in the following lines of the stanza:

> ... But to impose is not
> To discover. To discover an order as of
> A season, to discover summer and know it,
>
> To discover winter and know it well, to find
> Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
> Out of nothing to have come on major weather ...[160]

In this version of thinking, knowledge comes not from reasoning, but from the discovery of 'an order as of/A season'— the nonhuman's own structures, its being-in-itself. As Adorno argues in *Negative Dialectics*:

> This cognition seeks to say what something is, while identitarian thinking says what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what, accordingly, it is not itself. The more relentlessly our identitarian thinking besets its object, the farther it will take us from the identity of the object.[161]

'Imposing orders' on the objects of the world may feel like getting closer to them, making sense of them, but it actually takes one further and further away 'from the identity of the object.' The challenge of more open cognition is to think 'out of nothing,' to genuinely face the nonhuman without imposing any concepts on it at all. In such a thinking it would be possible to 'come on major weather,' to grasp the most important truths of nonhuman existence and difference. However, Stevens is

---

[160] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.352-353, Lines 575-580.
[161] Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics*. (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), p.149.

not in any way claiming that his poem or his narrator have achieved this cognition, as made clear in the next section of stanza *VII*:

> It is possible, possible, possible. It must
> Be possible. It must be that in time
> The real will from its crude compoundings come,
>
> Seeming at first, a beast disgorged, unlike,
> Warmed by a desperate milk. To find the real,
> To be stripped of every fiction except one,
>
> The fiction of an absolute— Angel,
> Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear
> The luminous melody of proper sound.[162]

What Stevens does do in these lines is *imagine* what it might be like if the reality of nonhuman difference was able to come forward and be experienced by the human. In these lines Stevens imagines that 'The real,' would 'at first' seem like 'a beast disgorged.' The experience of reconciled cognition would not simply be a happy and balanced one; rather it would involve a shocking confrontation with the existence of absolute difference. We can understand why this would take place by turning again to Adorno's arguments:

> What we differentiate will appear divergent, dissonant, negative for just as long as the structure of our consciousness obliges it to strive for unity: as long as its demand for totality will be its measure for whatever is not identical with it. This is what dialectics holds up to our consciousness as a contradiction … Identity and contradiction of thought are welded together.[163]

---

[162] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.353, Lines 581-589.
[163] Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics*. (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), p.6.

In human minds in which the identificatory 'structure of…consciousness' demands 'totality' and 'unity,' the total difference of the nonhuman will appear 'as a contradiction' that is 'divergent, dissonant, negative.' This negativity is what we see in Stevens' lines, where the nonhuman is 'unlike' and is therefore 'dissonant' and terrifying. The unlikeness of the nonhuman is imagined in its total contradiction to empirical identity thinking—the pain or shock of these lines echoes the pain that we would truly experience if we were able to 'find the real.' In these lines however Stevens is also expressing poetic hope: 'It is possible, possible, possible. It must/Be possible. It must be that in time/The real will from its crude compoundings come…' The shock of the real is what may be desired and imagined in poetry, despite its pain, because it is this shock that would burst through concepts, allowing the alterity of the nonhuman to emerge. This shock would be able to produce a genuine experience of reality. Adorno argues that:

> The power of the status quo puts up the facades into which our consciousness crashes. It must seek to crash through them. This alone would free the postulate of depth from ideology. Surviving in such resistance is the speculative moment: what will not have its law prescribed for it by given facts transcends them even in the closest contact with the objects, and in repudiating a sacrosanct transcendence. Where the thought transcends the bonds it tied in resistance—there is its freedom.[164]

In Stevens' poem we are able to imagine crashing through 'the facades' erected by 'The power of the status quo.' For a moment the poem, and with it the reader's thought, 'transcends the bonds it tied in resistance.' The traditional modes of identificatory thinking are rejected, and replaced with an embodied cognition that recognises dissonance and contradiction as the markers of the real. In such a poetic experience the mind is briefly offered the 'freedom' that Adorno describes.

Stevens is not however blithely confident in the ability of poetry to release the mind from the prison of reified thought—he is aware that, in our current state, the

---

[164] Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics*. (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), p.17-18.

mind cannot operate wholly outside of concepts. Because of this, in his imagining, the appearance of nonhuman difference strips the mind 'of every fiction except one,/The fiction of an absolute…' This necessary fiction, or concept as it indeed is, is different from the concepts of identificatory thinking because it is fruitful rather than totalising. This fiction of the absolute — the hope or dream of a joyfully 'absolute' understanding of difference — powers the human mind towards an understanding of difference, rather than seeking to close down and suppress it. The idea of the 'absolute' is a fiction, but the necessary glow of its imaginative potential gives vigour to the search for genuine nonhuman agency and comprehension. Stevens' fiction does not place itself in an empirical throne over the lower nonhuman, but rather defers to the reality of that nonhuman:

> … Angel,
> Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear
> The luminous melody of proper sound.[165]

In these lines a fictional and humanly created figure/concept, an 'Angel,' is asked to 'be silent' in his 'luminous cloud,' to listen to 'The luminous melody of proper sound' that flows from the reality of the nonhuman. Stevens does not describe this melody, because, of course, it has not yet actually been experienced by human cognition. But in forcing the reader to imagine it silently, it becomes 'luminous.' Its nonidentity shines out of nonexistence, a promise of 'proper sound' that could be found if only our thinking was capable of apprehending it.

As Adorno argues: 'What would lie in the beyond makes its appearance only in the materials and categories within.'[166] What is beyond human cognition can only be glimpsed 'in the materials and categories within': its promise offered in a poetry that bends structures of language to make its readers understand that 'the beyond' does exist, however shrouded in the silence of a reified human system. In Stevens' poems it is possible to work on the very structures of our thinking, to unpick the conceptual rigidity that stands between human beings, and a non-dominating,

---

[165] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.353, Lines 587-589.
[166] Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics*. (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), p.140.

genuinely equal interaction with nonhuman beings. Almost every action on our part begins with thinking—thinking is itself a kind of action that reaches out from our subjectivity into the world, even as it is coddled and protected from actual contact with it by our concepts. In Stevens it is possible to see how the action of thinking might be changed, through a dialectic formed from the instability made available in poetic language. It is in this change that our imagination and our thought might finally be able to turn to the needs and agency of the nonhuman.

Chapter Four

The Enchantment Of Disenchantment.

Adorno's attention to the gap between the human and nonhuman has allowed me, within the critical part of this thesis, to read Stevens in a way that is generative— uncovering aesthetic modes that might speak to contemporary poetry as it grapples with how best to address nonhuman life and existence, in an era of environmental destruction and uncertainty. I have discovered that it is possible to write about the nonhuman in a way that is not dominating, *if* you constantly draw attention to the gaps between creative understanding and nonhuman reality. Adorno's work has made it possible to lift the radical potential of Stevens' poetry into the light, and in so doing, imagine how one might turn towards the nonhuman within poetics.

In this chapter I will seek to demonstrate how the gaps in understanding between human and nonhuman need not create an alienated poetics, but can in fact bring forth an enchantment forged from the recognition of vibrant distance. To do this I will continue to explore Stevens and Adorno, alongside the work of contemporary American theorist Jane Bennett. I will also provide a close reading of Stevens' poem 'Sunday Morning', a reading that will illustrate why the mode of enchantment might be the affectual state in which the promise of Adorno's theories can be most fully realised.

Throughout this project Adorno's ideas have re-orientated my attention away from any attempt to 'capture' the nonhuman thing-itself, and towards an attention to the space where that thing should be—revealing the existence of nonhuman agency in a failure to comprehend that agency. Adorno's thinking seeks to break down our conceptual assumptions: challenging our subjectivity and disenchanting our ideas of human dominance. Adorno shows us, always, what we do not know. This is essential in its challenge to our thinking structures, and provides a dialectic in which we might be able to glimpse something, however fleetingly, beyond our own confines. It may be, however, all too easy to see these ideas as ones that, in

upending our usual comfortable assumptions and cosy certainties, leave us in an emptier and more joyless world, if a more knowledgeable one. It is crucially important, therefore, for me to emphasise in this final chapter the ways in which the disenchantment of traditional thinking practices simultaneously *enchants*—breaking through the ruins of damaging ideology to illuminate resistant magic in the material world.

For me, although he is at absolutely no pains to emphasise it, Adorno's version of the nonidentical is one in which a glimpse of distant reality can transform a suffocatingly lonely human world, into one overflowing with nonhuman individuality and vibrant materiality. It is this vibrancy, emerging painfully from the unsparing dialectics of Adorno's theories, that first drew me to his work: a perspective in which it is possible to find enchantment, even hope, in a frank reckoning with human failure and nonhuman strangeness. The way in which Adorno illuminates a world of always-escaping difference shows that it is possible to enchant in the very act of disenchantment. Adorno's theories remove humanity from its elevated position, and suggest that there is so much more to the universe than an endless feedback loop of the human witnessing the human. It is this enchantment, born of negativity, that guides my reading of Stevens, and indeed my own creation of poetic work.

In the critical portion of my thesis thus far, I have illustrated how Stevens creates an awareness of the distance between the human and the nonhuman in his poetry, using the theories of Adorno to clarify my understanding. But I have not, perhaps, given enough attention to the enchantment, the joy even, that can emerge from the witnessing of this gap in his poetry—and how this enchantment might form a central part of the poetic recognition of nonhuman difference. I want to defend the central texts of my thesis from inclusion in the pantheon of 'rationalist disenchantment,' and argue that they not only shake us out of our complacency, but also awaken us to the enchanting difference of the nonhuman world.

Adorno's work opens up the potential for modes of enchantment, but it does not elaborate on them in detail in Adorno's own work. Adorno does not spend time

considering why the experience of enchantment might be a crucial element in cognising nonhuman difference, and this experience remains a tantalising possibility sedimented within his arguments. It is for this reason that I will turn to theorist Jane Bennett to reveal the ways in which enchantment might bloom alongside an awareness of nonhuman difference, and to consider why enchantment might be an important affectual state in considering the nonhuman.

It will be my argument that the 'enchantment of disenchantment' might be able to not only reveal to us the impossibility of fully understanding the nonhuman, but also make us aware of the crucial intimacy that continues between human and nonhuman, despite that distance. I will argue that the enchantment born of nonhuman ambiguity and mystery is perfectly placed to be revealed within poetry, within language that is itself flexible and enchanting. I will demonstrate this affinity in an examination of Stevens' poem 'Sunday Morning', showing how poetic language might bring the reader towards a fruitful intimacy with alien strangeness and unpredictability. In Chapter Three I explored the potentialities of thinking made possible by Adorno's theories and Stevens' poetry. In this chapter I hope to show how the affectual mood of enchantment might not only make these new states of thinking desirable, but how it might make them fully *possible*.

In her book, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, theorist Jane Bennett sets out to challenge the modern view of life as being 'disenchanted,' and to return the ethical and aesthetic potentiality of the nonhuman material world to the foreground of our thinking. In Bennett's argument the forces of scientific rationalism, and, paradoxically, modern Christianity, have combined to create a Western imagination that perceives itself as disenchanted and meaningless. Bennett argues that:

> The disenchantment of modernity … goes something like this:
> There was once a time when Nature was purposive, God was active in the details of human affairs, human and other creatures were defined by a pre-existing web of relations, social life was characterized by face-to-face relations, and political order took the form of organic community. Then,

this premodern world gave way to forces of scientific and instrumental rationality, secularism, individualism, and the bureaucratic state—all of which, combined, disenchant the world.[167]

For Bennett:

> Disenchantment does not mean that we live in a world that has been completely counted up and figured out but rather that the world has become calculable in principle … In a disenchanting world the principle of calcubility tends to overrule, even if it does not always overpower, experience … the calculable world functions as a "regulative ideal."[168]

The principle of calcubility that Bennett describes creates meaninglessness out of rationality; just as religion creates a meaninglessness that stems from material 'worldly life' being seen as unimportant in a teleology where only life *after* death has true importance. What remains outside the heavenly realm is as calculable and limited as the specimens of scientific rationality:

> … modern science and "ethically" orientated religion collaborated in disenchanting the world; they were sources of, even while they proffered solutions for, the problem of meaninglessness that haunts us. Science progressively takes the spirit out of things and reduces them to uninspiring matter, otherworldly religions desanctify earthly life …[169]

Bennet's problem with this worldview is not that she believes it ignores or represses an unexpressed spiritual element at work in the living world. Rather it is that she believes that:

[167] Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.7.
[168] Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.59.
[169] Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.62.

In the cultural narrative of disenchantment, the prospects for loving life—
or saying "yes" to the world, are not good. What's to love about an alienated
existence on a dead planet? ... This life provokes moments of joy, and that
joy can propel ethics.[170]

Bennett's concern is that the Western world's narrative of disenchantment, one in
which the teleological meaning of religion, myth and political certainty has been
lost, is not only one that is depressing, but one that is paralysing. In an 'alienated
existence' on a 'dead planet,' ethical interest in the survival and thriving of
nonhuman existence is likely to be low, as is, indeed, that towards other human
beings. Bennett is not arguing that an 'enchanted' worldview necessarily causes
ethical action, or sympathy towards, or interest in, nonhuman life. She is, however,
arguing that without some sense of enchantment these ethical interests, indeed
any interests that go beyond the self, are hard to bring about. Bennett argues that:

The experience of enchantment is ... an essential component of an ethical,
ecologically aware life. In the mood of enchantment, we sense that "we" are
always mixed up with "it," and "it" shares in some of the agency we officially
ascribe only to ourselves.[171]

For Bennett, to be able to question the relations between the self and the world,
that world must be seen to not only possess agency, but also to be 'mixed up' with
our own existence. Bennett is not putting forward a holistic view of the human and
nonhuman, but is rather drawing attention to the fact that, though the nonhuman's
difference may be closed and hermetic, that difference still exists intimately with
our own lives. In Bennett's argument, the nonhuman can never be rejected as
nothing to do with us.

At this point it is crucial to ask, what then *is* enchantment if it is no longer the
experience of a teleological, religious worldview in which everything is given

---

[170] Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. (Princeton,
NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.4.
[171] Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. (Princeton,
NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.99

meaning by divine presence? What is the enchantment that allows for an awareness of our profound intimacy with nonhuman difference? Bennett describes it in thus:

> To be enchanted…is to participate in a momentarily immobilizing encounter; it is to be transfixed, spellbound. Phillip Fisher describes this as "a moment of pure presence":
>
> > "[T]he moment of pure presence within wonder lies in the object's difference and the uniqueness being so striking to the mind that it does not remind us of anything and we find ourselves delaying its presence for a time in which the mind does not move on by association to something else …"
>
> The mood I'm calling enchantment involves … (1) a pleasurable feeling of being charmed by the novel and as yet unprocessed encounter and (2) a more *unheimlich* (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one's default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition.[172]

For Bennett, enchantment can be experienced in a moment of 'wonder' in which 'the object's difference' comes to the fore and disrupts one's usual assumptions and thinking practices. What is important to my thesis in this is not only that enchantment *is* possible, even in a world without teleological religious or ideological meaning—it is that this enchantment comes, in Bennett's argument, from the difference of the nonhuman itself. In this argument, a recognition of nonhuman difference does not disenchant — separating and alienating the human from the material world around them— *it is the ultimate source of enchantment.*

Bennett's argument gives voice to the enchantment that I have always found available in Adorno's theories of disenchantment, but which are not elaborated on in detail by the philosopher himself. Namely, that the recognition of a nonhuman

---

[172] Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.5.

agency outside of our understanding is not lowering or depressing, but hugely enlivening in its ability to show us that the alien material world exists outside of the prison of our subjectivity. Such an awareness brings about, or may bring about, the 'plenitude,' or 'fullness,' that Bennett describes. Such an awareness places the human in an unavoidably imperfect world, but one in which there is the profound and thrilling hope of something outside of suffocatingly reified existence. In this world the mystery of nonhuman strangeness glimmers in the distance, its very remoteness from us providing enchanting proof that there is more to reality than lonely, suffocating human subjectivity.

The enchantment Bennett describes is not one grounded in mythic or religious ideas. These teleological versions of enchantment are as roundly rejected as the 'meaninglessness' of rational disenchantment:

> (The) teleological model of enchantment ... is also the one at work in the story of modernity as disenchanted: proponents of disenchantment share with those who lament its loss the assumption that only a teleological world is worthy of our enchantment. I contest that assumption. A world capable of enchanting need not be designed, or predisposed to human happiness, or expressive of intrinsic purpose or meaning.[173]

The enchantment found in nonhuman difference absolutely does not re-animate a teleological view of reality, one in which eco-spirituality replaces traditional dogma. For Bennett, any form of teleology robs the material world of the vibrant unpredictability that marks its independence from the human. The enchantment of nonhuman difference does not fill in the cracks of disenchantment, but replaces the entire system with an embodied liveliness born of unknowable strangeness and nonhuman singularity. The fact that the nonhuman acts and exists with no attention to the 'destiny' of human beings is what makes it enchanting—revealing that the human exists in a world that contains more than their own stultifying

---

[173] Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.11.

concepts. This world is changeable and active, and is not negated by the assumed inevitability of any outcome or system; political, religious, societal or otherwise.

Bennett comes from a background of political philosophy, and her view of enchantment is shaped by her interest in its potential to bring about the possibility of ethical action:

> Enchantment is a state of openness to the disturbing-captivating elements in everyday experience … Enchantment, in the model I am defending, as operative in a world without telos … enchantment is a mood with ethical potential. More specifically, my contention is that enchantment can aid in the project of cultivating a stance of presumptive generosity (i.e. of rendering oneself more open to the surprise of other selves and bodies and more willing and able to enter into productive assemblages with them) …[174]

As this thesis is directed towards the potentiality of aesthetics, in particular poetry, this focus both excites and worries me. It must be made clear that, in my argument, enchantment holds no guarantee of causing ethical behaviour, or of equalizing the material relations between human and nonhuman. What is crucial, however, in Bennett's text is the way in which she is drawing attention to the ethical *potential* available in affectual experience—the enchantment of a 'lively and mobile' web of human and nonhuman life allowing, perhaps, a 'presumptive generosity' towards different bodies and forms. Bennett too is sensitive to the frailty of any ethical assumption:

> Just how does an enchanted sensibility make it more likely that ethical principles will be enacted as ethical practices? Any response to this question must be somewhat experimental. The one I am playing out is basically this: Enchantment is a feeling of being connected in an affirmative way to existence … This sense of fullness … encourages the finite human animal, in turn, to give away some of its own time and effort on behalf of

---

[174] Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.131.

other creatures. A sensibility attuned to moments of enchantment is no guarantee that this will happen, but it does make it more possible. Any sensibility is an orchestrated arrangement of affections, but affective energies are unruly and protean forces and tend to wander from the musical score. Thus, the link between them and an ethical sensibility is tenuous and unstable and requires repeated acts of discipline and retuning. I do not think that there is any way around this fragility or the effort it takes to respond to it.[175]

Bennett's focus on 'ethical practices,' cannot wholly be my own. Its focus on the results of thinking is too concrete, for my argument, to make room for the potential of poetry's 'being-in-itself,' its freedom from use, however ethically successful. Despite this, Bennett's description of an ethical sensibility that requires 'repeated acts of discipline and retuning' gives me an illuminating way to clarify the ability of poetic language to engender new ways of thinking towards the nonhuman. Poetic practice necessitates the 'retuning' Bennett describes, constantly going over and improving upon linguistic potentialities to get closer to a form of language, and a form of thought, that can better attend to the difference of the nonhuman. This 'discipline,' can be a way of understanding how an attention to writing practices, and especially *reading* practices, as seen in this thesis, can reveal ways of interacting with language that challenge the usual rigidity of subjective thought.

Poetic language can be a space in which the enchanting difference and ambiguity of nonhuman agency is revealed through repeated acts of language, both for the writer and the reader. As Bennett suggests, no guaranteed outcome can be assumed from any practice; ethical or aesthetic. What can perhaps be achieved, however, is a repeated attention to perception that allows the usual boundaries of thinking to be challenged. In poetics, this means developing a process of 'enchanted reading', a way of entering the language of a poem that attends to the opportunities that arise to consider nonhuman difference and enchantment.

---

[175] Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.156-157.

Reading in such a way does not aim to 'change' the narrative of the poem being read, but rather attempts to become sensitive to the multiplicity of possibilities the poem being read might contain. Such a form of reading is enacted in this thesis' consideration of Stevens, a reading that does not adhere to a set of guidelines, but which rather follows Bennett in its attempt to repeatedly retune and reassess its position in relation to the nonhuman.

Bennett's 'enchanted sensibility' does not bind together the human and the nonhuman in sameness in its attempt to inculcate ethical action, rather it alerts human thinking practices to the unique difference that the nonhuman possesses:

> … as one becomes practiced in experiencing natural objects in their unique specificity, one, in turn, becomes more competent at recognizing other selves for their own sake; thus, the characteristic quality of the self under the sway of an aesthetic mood is an appreciation of the quality of the freedom (i.e. the self-determining potential) of others.[176]

As Bennett makes clear here, enchantment is 'an appreciation of … freedom,' an ability to revel in what is not oneself, to enjoy and respect, rather than to fear, the alien strangeness of the material world. This appreciation can be 'practiced,' and this is crucially important to understanding why it might occur most powerfully in aesthetics. To read or hear an argument made, such as 'the nonhuman should have rights,' does not bring about a practice—it asks for a decision to agree or not to agree with a statement. It is, in the main, a rational and intellectual consideration of an argument. The 'practice' of being enchanted by nonhuman difference is, however, something that develops through affectual experience, through repeated thinking *and* feeling. Such thinking and feeling, as I will demonstrate in my analysis of Stevens, can take place in poetic language in a way that it cannot in political tracts. In poetry affectual 'enchantment' and joy can merge with intellectual and philosophical thinking—producing an *embodied experience* of nonhuman difference, rather than an abstract argument. This does not reject rational

---

[176] Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.147.

thinking, but rather brings it together with felt experience, giving nonhuman agency the space to unfold its affectual potential.

The experience of enchantment has much in common with the aesthetic potential of poetry. Bennett argues that:

> The unknowability and unmanufacturability of … ethical ground find(s) … parallels in the way that enchantment hits one as if from out of the blue, without warning. You can prepare for it, try to cultivate a receptivity towards it, but it is never only or fully the product of will or intention.[177]

As I have argued earlier on in this thesis, it is poetry's 'uselessness,' its escape from fixed structures of meaning, that gives it its unique power. Unlike most narrative fiction, for example, poetry is language that can be, if it wishes, language without telos—without an endpoint, without a story or the need for a consumable 'meaning.' Poetry is language as momentary aesthetic experience, and as such mirrors the 'unknowability' of enchantment—its meaning taking place in the space between reader and language, connections forged 'without warning.' It is for this reason that enchantment might be most likely to find a home in poetry, a place in which 'receptivity' can be cultivated through language, rather than arguments put forward and won. The un-fixed nature of an enchantment born out of nonhuman difference is as evanescent, and imprecise, as the experience of poetic language itself.

Before turning to Stevens' work, it is important to return again to Adorno, to reveal the importance of one particular element of the enchantment made possible by the difference of the nonhuman—ambiguity. For Adorno the 'beauty' of the 'natural world', what I call the nonhuman, rests in indeterminacy. Adorno argues that what fills the nonhuman with beauty, with the potential for enchantment, is that its ambiguity gestures to what is beyond reified society; to a reconciliation that might be achieved if the world was not profoundly damaged.

---

[177] Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.169.

In his essay 'Natural Beauty,' contained in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno argues that:

> That the experience of natural beauty, at least according to its subjective
> consciousness, is entirely distinct from the domination of nature, as if the
> experience were at one with the primordial origin, marks out both the
> strength and the weakness of the experience: its strength, because it
> recollects a world without domination, one that probably never existed; its
> weakness, because through this recollection it dissolves back into that
> amorphousness out of which genius once arose and for the first time
> became conscious of the idea of freedom that could be realized in a world
> free from domination.[178]

For Adorno, the experience of the nonhuman's 'beauty' seems as if it were 'at one
with the primordial origin,' part of a world in which human 'domination' and
control has no part. This echo of a world without the human (one that Adorno
makes clear may be no more than a fantasy) is intensely powerful and yet weak at
the same time—weak because it recalls something barely existent, the wisp of a
past or future free from domination; powerful because, in recollecting the
potential of such a world, it introduces the potential of that world into reified
thinking. Nonhuman difference strikes the mind with 'the idea of freedom,' a
possibility as enchanting and enlivening as it is fragile.

Adorno argues that:

> The image of nature survives because its complete negation in the
> artifact—negation that rescues this image—is necessarily blind to what
> exists beyond bourgeois society, its labour, its commodities. Natural beauty
> remains the allegory of this beyond in spite of its mediation through social
> immanence. If, however, this allegory were substituted as the achieved

---

[178] Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.91.

state of reconciliation, it would be degraded as an aid for cloaking and legitimating the unreconciled world …[179]

In this description Adorno explains why 'natural beauty' is able to remain an 'allegory' of 'the beyond': because it appears blind to the painful reality of human suffering and oppression. 'Natural beauty' appears as world of freedom, an existence where destructive human concepts have no power or meaning. Paradoxically it is this apparent blindness that allows 'natural beauty' to stand-in for a world in which oppression and domination might be negated. For this dialectic to continue it is absolutely crucial for an actually 'achieved state of reconciliation' not to be suggested, something we see in the Stevens poem I will examine in this chapter. For Adorno the nonhuman does not enchant because it becomes part of a holistic system of human-nonhuman unification. Rather, for Adorno, it is the suggestion of an as-yet unachieved freedom that provides enchantment; containing within it the partial freedom of being able to briefly imagine the possibility of a world beyond domination.

Adorno's focus on 'natural beauty,' in his consideration of the nonhuman, is founded on the fact that it is in this 'beauty' that the crucial ambiguity of nonhuman difference is best expressed, an ambiguity with profound import for art, and in particular poetry. Adorno argues that:

> Only a pedant presumes to distinguish the beautiful from the ugly in nature, but without such a distinction the concept of natural beauty would be empty … A qualitative distinction can be sought, if at all, in the degree to which something not made by human beings is eloquent: in its expression. What is beautiful in nature is what appears to be more than is literally there. Without receptivity there would be no such objective expression, but it is not reducible to the subject; natural beauty points to the primacy of the object in subjective experience. Natural beauty is perceived both as authoritatively binding and as something incomprehensible that

---

[179] Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.94.

questioningly awaits its solution. Above all else it is this double character of natural beauty that has been conferred on art. Under its optic, art is not the imitation of nature but the imitation of natural beauty. It develops in tandem with the allegorical intention that manifests it without deciphering it; in tandem with meanings that are not objectified as in significative language.[180]

In this paragraph Adorno links the indeterminacy of art with that of 'natural beauty,' evoking the promissory quality of a medium that can point towards the potential of a freedom from reified subjectivity, even if it cannot provide that freedom. For Adorno the nonhuman is 'beautiful' because it 'appears to be more than is literally there'—its 'beauty' enchants because it hints at something beyond what we see, an agency and independence belonging to itself, one that is apparent and yet invisible. In this way of thinking, the nonhuman disenchants a human conceptual system in which only human subjectivity has meaning, then replaces it with the enchanting possibilities of a world beyond the human. It is these possibilities that we see in Stevens' poem, 'Sunday Morning', a poem that simultaneously disenchants teleological systems and beliefs, whilst re-enchanting the world through a poetry open to the vibrant potentiality of ambiguous and mysterious nonhuman life.

In 'Sunday Morning' we see the enchanting possibilities of materiality, possibilities which enrich and expand human experience, and the ways in which these enchantments are forged through the promissory quality of 'natural beauty.' The nonhuman world's 'beauty' emanates from the fact that it contains something beyond subjectivity, and so figures as a kind of tangible, breathing hope of escaping the tight net of reified thought. These possibilities are not expressed by poetry as a vehicle for any kind of 'message;' rather the possibilities of enchantment through ambiguity and change are the very same ones that animate the aesthetic acts of poetry itself. Poetry's power is drawn, in part, from its indeterminacy. Poetry can refigure language's meaning in ways that are

---

[180] Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.96-97.

expressive, and yet which do not provide consumable, and thus exchangeable, messages. Neither poetry, nor the nonhuman and human worlds, are reconciled, neither can create paradise. Yet through them, with them, we might be able to catch glimpses of the potential for change that exists not in an imagined heaven, but in the very voice, meat and mud of material reality; the energetic and alien realm of ever-changing bodies and ever-shifting linguistic signs.

In Stevens' poem we see dramatized the rejection of a teleological religious attitude, one that would place Christian salvation in the next world as the true theatre of life's meaning, leaving the material world as a blank waiting place. In this rejection Stevens' not only challenges a worldview that would locate meaning only in the afterlife, he also describes attitudes towards, and affects issuing from, the ambiguous and changeable nonhuman world.

Stevens' poem refigures what religion might see as vacuous matter into sites where the nonhuman and the human might interact, producing, for the human, an awareness of intimacy with alien difference that enchants and enlivens. My interest here is less in the detail of what Stevens' poem is rejecting— a Christian theological system with specific beliefs about the afterlife and the meaning of life on earth, (interesting as this is) and more in the potentials that the poem opens up for ways of being and thinking that reject teleological modes of apprehending existence. Stevens mainly focuses on Christianity in the poem, but its strictures are not much different to all unyielding, disenchanting conceptual forms, forms that figure human experience and human subjectivity as the central points of meaning in an inert sea of lesser objects and creatures. Mainstream Christianity reduces the nonhuman because it is not capable of spiritual ascension, capitalism and its associated reified structures reduce the nonhuman because it/they are seen as exchangeable commodities, wholly consumable by humanity's subjective experience. In both systems the potential of nonhuman agency is ignored, as well as the possibility this agency might offer to challenge and crack human subjectivity, opening up the potential for enchantment and change.

Stevens poem makes possible an 'enchanted reading:' acts of existing within language that disenchant and enchant simultaneously, converting the instability and failures of human conceptual structures, and indeed language itself, into luminous sites of generative difference. Though the narrative focus may be on religion, the strategies of disenchantment and enchantment in the poem map out potential ways of thinking and reading that contain the power to cut through all teleological forms of thought. The actions of language in the poem invite a multiplicity of readings, not merely the more 'traditional' analysis of the poem as a simple rejection of organised religion. The devastating power of this poem, its affectual impact on me as a non-Christian reader, is testament to its ability to transcend this more usual narrative reading. I would argue that this is because the poem brings alive the joyful potential of the material nonhuman world, re-figuring it as of equal worth to the realm of the solely human. In doing so, the poem makes available a profound rejection of exchange-value society — one in which nothing has worth beyond what it can be traded for — and returns to the reader the possibility contained in their intimacy with the alterity of the nonhuman world. The poem's language maps out a network of resistance to deadening teleological thought, a splintering of cognitive control that can be as powerful in its disenchantment of capitalist rationalism as it is in its disenchantment of Western religion. 'Sunday Morning' does not attempt to convince us of an argument, but rather makes possible a practice of reading in which one might be able to draw enchantment from the nonhuman difference made available through language.

'Sunday Morning' follows a woman considering whether meaning is possible in a world without god. It begins with a scene of lively and yet relaxing pleasure:

> Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
> Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
> And the green freedom of a cockatoo
> Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
> The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.[181]

---

[181] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.58, Lines 1-5.

Despite it being 'Sunday Morning,' the brightness and physical vibrancy of this scene seems powerful enough to dispel any thought of religion. In these very first lines Stevens is drawing on each of the physical senses—touch in the feel of what would most likely be a silk peignoir (a wrap or dressing gown), smell in the pungent aromas of coffee and oranges, taste in those same objects, sight in the bright fruit and the 'green … cockatoo,' and sound inevitably issuing from the calls and wingbeats of this creature. The fullness of this experience seems bound to hold the enchanted attention of the poem's central figure. Then, however:

> She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
> Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
> As a calm darkens among water-lights.
> The pungent oranges and bright, green wings
> Seem things in some procession of the dead,
> Winding across wide water, without sound.
> The day is like wide water, without sound,
> Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
> Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
> Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.[182]

In this part of the stanza we see the woman fall asleep, or at least daydream, and this reduction of attention to her material surroundings results in the 'Encroachment of that old catastrophe': death, and the religious associations and reactions that come with it. The complacency the woman had in relation to these spiritual matters now disappears, transforming her affectual relationship with the nonhuman objects and beings around her. The 'pungent' material reality of the world, its sharp individuality, is dampened by a 'calm' that 'darkens.' This 'calm' is peaceful but stultifying, turning the objects into 'things in some procession of the dead.' This is because vital materiality has been replaced with the conceptual strictures of religion, where everything is part of a procession towards the actual

---

[182] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.58, Lines 6-15.

meaning that will be revealed to human individuals upon death. Each thing loses its individual agency, and so its force— merged into sameness by a system of thinking that sees it as 'mere' matter. Only human beings will reach heaven, the alleged centre of meaning, paradoxically excising the 'reality' from real objects. The repetition of 'wide water, without sound,' emphasises how this sameness will remove 'sound,' which we must assume will muffle the potential of poetic, (oral and aural) forms of communication—anything not focused on 'silent Palestine,' a vision of reality utterly removed from material and mortal existence.

In Stevens' second stanza this vision is challenged, and potential ways of being presented that reject teleological modes of existence. In this stanza affectual and intellectual opportunities emerge from interactions with the nonhuman, interactions predicated on the nonhuman being perceived as a real and actual part of the meaningful world:

> Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
> In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
> In any balm or beauty of the earth,
> Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?
> Divinity must live within herself:
> Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
> Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
> Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
> Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
> All pleasures and all pains, remembering
> The bough of summer and the winter branch.
> These are the measures destined for her soul.[183]

In this stanza we see how enchantment is drawn not just from witnessing the nonhuman, but in the *interactions* that occur between human affectual experience and nonhuman objects. The 'Divinity' that 'must live within herself,' comes through

---

[183] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.58-59, Lines 18-30.

an openness, a porousness to the other. The woman's experiences and emotions are described in language that folds into and out of the nonhuman without consuming it, or negating its difference: 'comforts of the sun,' and 'Passions of rain,' describe feelings that do not take place *in* those environments, but are *of* them. This blurring of linguistic boundaries makes us aware that human experience is not simply projected onto a blank nonhuman screen, but is formed partly out of the separate reality of that nonhuman being or object. This is, however, always a one sided knowledge of experience: human experience is shaped by the nonhuman, we cannot know if the experience goes both ways. The affectual wonder and clarity of 'moods in falling snow' and 'Elations when the forest blooms,' recognise the agency of the nonhuman, its ability to shape and impact upon intimate experience, without suggesting any full knowledge of the alien nonhuman environment or object.

Stevens' language is highly sensitive to the potential effect of the nonhuman, but it is not soggily holistic. He describes 'gusty/Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights,[184]' the 'Emotion' of the human figure made 'gusty,' by their environment, porous to nonhuman direction. But there is however no suggestion that the wet road or 'gusty' wind has any reaction to the human. The nonhuman is figured here as still distant, still unreachable in its individual entirety, but this hermetic difference does not stop it having a powerful impact on human subjectivity and experience. What is a 'gusty' emotion after all? It would be hard to explain such a thing, being as it is an experience flecked with the impact of hermetic nonhuman difference, and yet the poetic language does not render something that is unimaginable. We know how it feels to be 'gusty,' to have the wind blow through our feelings, heightening them, unmooring them from their internal roots and cutting them with the presence of uncontrollable strangeness, a sudden vulnerable awareness of the genuine reality of the 'outside.' This description draws the reader into an awareness of their own intimacy with nonhuman difference, an awareness of the imaginative potential in the crossing point between mental experience and nonhuman interaction. This is not to say that the nonhuman somehow 'gains

---

[184] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.58-59, Lines 26-27.

meaning' through the fact that its existence might be able to bring about enchantment for the human—it is rather that, in becoming briefly aware of the agency of the nonhuman, the human is able to find a moment of exhalation in a mental and societal system where everything exists for something else, is exchangeable. The difference and strangeness of nonhuman distance may bring about human enchantment for the *very reason* that nonhuman difference does not exist for our comprehension or benefit. The 'Divinity' made available through a non-teleological interaction with nonhuman difference is drawn from this potential, one that offers 'All pleasures and all pains,' a full experience of life that might momentarily be able include the various ways of being outside of human subjectivity.

Stevens takes the impossibly lofty and distant state of 'Divinity:' 'the state of being a god, the state of being divine,'[185] and makes it available to a human being, the highest possible form of enlightenment, of knowledge, of perfection, appearing 'within herself.' This potential is not, in this case, accessed through religion, but through the woman's interactions with the difference of the nonhuman world. Here 'the measures' of the soul are 'The bough of summer and the winter branch,' material, nonhuman objects that change and decay. This 'soul' is defined by nonhuman objects, and is vulnerable to them—drawing its enchantment from the instability and difference of a nonhuman world that, unlike the behaviour expected of a Christian god, may pay absolutely no heed to it, that guarantees no future of total comprehension. This is a version of experience that is not comfortable, but one that is open enough to draw genuine enchantment from the alterity of nonhuman existence. In such an experience there are 'Things to be cherished,' an embodied vibrant world deserving of love, rather than a world of cold matter that serves the suffocating circle of human wants.

In stanza *VII,* Stevens provides the reader with an even clearer vision of what might be possible if human subjectivity became truly receptive to the enchantment available in nonhuman difference and mystery:

[185] "Definition of Divinity." Merriam-Webster. Accessed September 12, 2016. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/divinity.

> Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
>
> Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn
>
> Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
>
> Not as a god, but as a god might be,
>
> Naked among them, like a savage source.
>
> Their chant shall be a chant of paradise,
>
> Out of their blood, returning to the sky;
>
> And in their chant shall enter, voice by voice,
>
> The windy lake wherein their lord delights,
>
> The trees, like serafin, and echoing hills,
>
> That choir among themselves long afterward.
>
> They shall know well the heavenly fellowship
>
> Of men that perish and of summer morn.
>
> And whence they came and whither they shall go
>
> The dew upon their feet shall manifest.[186]

In these lines we see the promised meaning of religion subverted by the promised meaning of nonhuman interaction. The men of this scene are devoted to the sun: 'Not as a god, but as a god might be.' This action is very similar to worship, but it is not worship. These men share a 'heavenly fellowship/Of men that perish and of summer morn.' The fellowship offered in this sun's 'devotion,' is not only between the men, but also includes the 'summer morn.' Clearly the men are drawing huge enchantment and energy from their experience of the nonhuman, but it is not a simple interaction where the nonhuman is drained to serve the human. There a 'fellowship' assumed between human and nonhuman actants, even if this fellowship is as loose as it is possible to be, forged in the knowledge of human-nonhuman intimacy, rather than any knowledge of the nonhuman's own truth. Similarly, the sun is described as '*a* savage source,' (my italics) rather than as *their* 'savage source.' The sun is a 'savage source' in and of itself. It gives light and energy to human and nonhuman alike, but this does not denote any telos on its

---

[186] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.61, Lines 91-105.

part, or anything else's. The sun is not a god, because though it makes life possible, it does this for no reason other than its own being: it does not exist *for* humanity.

In the idealised imaginative version of the enchantment available to the central figure of the poem, enchantment is created by unpeeling solitary human subjectivity, revealing the intense intimacy with difference possible between human and nonhuman:

> Their chant shall be a chant of paradise,
> Out of their blood, returning to the sky;
> And in their chant shall enter, voice by voice,
> The windy lake wherein their lord delights,
> The trees, like serafin, and echoing hills,
> That choir among themselves long afterward.[187]

The men's chant comes 'Out of their blood,' but is not only shared between them. Their chant returns 'to the sky,' and enters 'voice by voice,/The windy lake wherein their lord delights.' Human expression is imagined here as being able to not only react to the nonhuman, but 'enter' it, not destroying or controlling it but setting up an equalized relationship. In this image, the men's expressive 'chant' encourages the 'trees' and hills into their own kind of singing, they 'choir among themselves long afterward.' This is of course partly a description of the men's echoing voices, but it also brings to the fore the possibility of witnessing nonhuman agency. The trees are like 'serafin': individuals who choose to sing and praise, an imagined singing that belongs to the trees rather than the human singers. In this version of enchantment, it becomes almost possible to draw the nonhuman out into clear response, agency not glimpsed or hinted at but truly made available. Importantly, the symbolic, almost pagan nature of these images make it clear that this is not Stevens' depiction of what *is*, but of what might be if the enchanting and vibrant potential of the nonhuman could be fully experienced.

---

[187] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.61, Lines 96-101.

Yes, Stevens' poem refigures paradise as the material world all around us, but it is not necessarily suggesting that this paradise is always available to human experience. Rather it can be glimpsed in moments of openness when closed subjectivity falls away, and in this stanza the poem imagines such experiences at full force—the utter difference of the nonhuman 'naked' to us, terrifying but also enlivening. Even in this version of material paradise there is however no telos, no guarantee of destiny or life. Ambiguity and even mystery remain a central part of how embodied life will operate. We see this in the final two lines of the stanza:

> And whence they came and whither they shall go
> The dew upon their feet shall manifest.[188]

Where the men come from and where they will end up will be made 'manifest,' exhibited through and made apparent from, the 'dew upon their feet.' This is almost a tautology; the dew will *show* where they will go *only as they are going there*. The revelation of their future only happens at the exact moment that that future becomes present, observable in the droplets of water their feet collect as they move. Simply, nothing can be predicted about what will happen until it is taking place, there is no plan or map of any kind available, only the material reality of movement and change. This captures the profound ambiguity of Stevens' paradise, a paradise that becomes so not because of the outcome it will produce, but because of its potential to make possible enchanting contact with the genuine reality of the nonhuman world. This enchantment has no guarantees, but is rather focused on a momentary affectual experience that reveals that something might exist beyond reified subjectivity. The promise of freedom buried in this experience is what renders it a kind of 'paradise.'

It is important to draw attention to the fact that the powerful enchantment Stevens locates, and indeed creates, in his poem is drawn paradoxically from an action of *disenchantment*. For Stevens' poetry to be able to ripple with the enchanting brightness of nonhuman vibrancy and difference, he must dismantle, and thus

---

[188] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.61, Lines 104-105.

disenchant, previous sites of enchantment. As I have argued earlier on in this reading, though this disenchantment takes place in a rejection of Christian doctrine, it also serves as a disenchantment of any system which places human meaning and conceptual structures as the engendering forces of meaning and 'useful' action in the world. Stevens' poem is committed to a search for the real, to a kind of enchantment that issues not solely from the human, but from human experience as an embodied object in a material world. This is made apparent in stanza *IV* of the poem:

> She says, "I am content when wakened birds,
> Before they fly, test the reality
> Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings;
> But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields
> Return no more, where, then, is paradise?"
> There is not any haunt of prophecy,
> Nor any old chimera of the grave,
> Neither the golden underground, nor isle
> Melodious, where spirits gat them home,
> Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm
> Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured
> As April's green endures; or will endure
> Like her remembrance of awakened birds,
> Or her desire for June and evening, tipped
> By the consummation of the swallow's wings.[189]

In this stanza we see the central figure of the poem's fear that the joy she finds in the ambiguous actions of the nonhuman may be too short-lived to counter a need for a more fixed, Christian paradise. She is briefly content 'when wakened birds … test the reality/Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings.' In this image we see that 'reality' itself is being questioned through nonhuman action. The 'wakened birds' test the 'fields' through their song, a preparation for embodied movement

---

[189] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.59-60, Lines 46-60.

that suddenly draws the mind into an awareness that there is an entirely separate agency existing right next to its own. The birds are not mechanistic, but self-directed, giving flight to a sense of the world that is full—a world that contains human subjectivity, alongside a nonhuman difference that points beyond that subjectivity. In this ambiguous space of 'misty fields,' the woman is able to be 'content,' comforted by a world in which, in a very real sense, she is not alone. By this I mean that as a human being she is not alone on the earth, but intimate with real and vibrant beings whose experience escapes her, and yet which she can know exists. However, the mortality of this living world, its inevitably short life span, creates concern. The poem responds by listing a series of religious and quasi-religious concepts:

> There is not any haunt of prophecy,
> Nor any old chimera of the grave,
> Neither the golden underground, nor isle
> Melodious, where spirits gat them home,
> Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm
> Remote on heaven's hill[190]

and then contrasting these expired concepts with the endurance of 'April's green.'[191] Stevens is disenchanting any possible form of religious, spiritual or generally teleological belief by making us aware that it is *they* that are short-lived, rather than the endlessly renewing life of the nonhuman. What seems fragile and mortal has power in its ability to change and grow, existing far beyond the invented conceptual solutions that humans tack on to existence to try and make it fully comprehensible. The paradoxical endurance of spring's delicate greenery refigures our ideas of what is lasting, and makes the conceptual systems of the 'visionary south' and 'heaven's hill' seem as insubstantial and flimsy as a daydream. As a result, the enchanting power of these systems leaches away, placing such enchantment into the space of an embodied experience of difference:

---

[190] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.59-60, Lines 51-56.
[191] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.60, Line 57.

> Like her remembrance of awakened birds,
>
> Or her desire for June and evening, tipped
>
> By the consummation of the swallow's wings.[192]

The woman's 'remembrance' of birds will not endure in the way an edifice might, rather it endures in her own understanding, the experience of nonhuman difference creating more affectual resonance than any rigid conceptual system. The woman's 'desire for June and evening,' expresses a longing to connect with the embodied human world. What is crucial however here is that this desire is not consummated by the gaining of a full, holistic comprehension of that nonhuman world. It is consummated by 'swallow's wings,' an inherently ambiguous and changeable nonhuman object. Not only can those wings fly anywhere, and fly away from her, they are specifically of the 'swallow' a bird famous for its long distance travel and its movement from place to place. Consummation of desire is found at the painful point of distance; a desire, even a love, for a nonhuman actant that has no interest in, or responsibility to, the human individual. Such a consummation continues and deepens desire rather than finishing it, satisfaction found in the enchantment of what is able to be wholly free from human subjectivity.

The language of these lines impresses the enchanting ambiguity of this experience into the reader's mind. The woman's 'desire for June and evening,' is 'tipped' by 'the swallow's wings.' How can desire be tipped? We are able to understand this image as that of wings that are tipped with colour—an image that ingeniously relocates the edges of the woman's human experience to the physical edges of a nonhuman body. This makes apparent that the consummation of her desire is not in having it *consumed* and negated by nonhuman experience. It is rather 'tipped,' touched and at the same time thrown off balance by a nonhuman difference that offers no holistic inclusion. This is an enchantment that manages to consummate desire in the unfinished, unpredictable extension of that desire—change and potential replacing diktat and holy commandment.

---

[192] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.60, Lines 58-60.

In stanza VIII, the final stanza of the poem, the enchanting opportunities of ambiguity and difference found in stanza IV find their own consummation:

> She hears, upon that water without sound,
> A voice that cries, "The tomb in Palestine
> Is not the porch of spirits lingering.
> It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay."
> We live in an old chaos of the sun,
> Or old dependency of day and night,
> Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
> Of that wide water, inescapable.
> Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
> Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
> Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
> And, in the isolation of the sky,
> At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
> Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
> Downward to darkness, on extended wings.[193]

In this stanza the 'water without sound,' the space of religiously defined death that turns everything towards the afterlife, is pierced by a 'voice' that challenges Christ's rebirth—the central concept of Christian belief. The voice brings the spiritual concept wholly back to earth, describing Christ's tomb as 'the grave of Jesus, where he lay.' Rather than god becoming flesh, and then being resurrected and becoming immortal god again, here Jesus becomes flesh for good. His body becomes a corpse with no 'lingering' spirits to turn the material world into background objects for the 'real' action of heaven. This poetic disenchantment, coming as it does after Steven's series of disenchantments throughout the poem, leaves again a space in which different aspects of being are able to have their enchantment recognised. Into the grave space left by Christ's now long-gone corpse, new potentials emanate. Stevens lists differing descriptions of the

---

[193] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.61-62, Lines 106-120.

ambiguous, enchanting and changeable material world as imagined without such teleological, religious concerns:

> We live in an old chaos of the sun,
> Or old dependency of day and night,
> Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
> Of that wide water, inescapable.[194]

Firstly, Stevens does not offer one description that can accurately sum up and contain the potential of experience. Rather he offers three options, punctuated by two uses of 'Or' that suggest both the infinite variety of experience, and the impossibility of this experience ever being accurately and perfectly captured in language. Stevens is not trying to overcome the instability of language, but is using it to better illuminate the instability at the heart of experience and being itself. The descriptions themselves repeatedly de-centre humanity from any role in directing the contours of existence—humanity lives 'in an old chaos of the sun,' our life only a by-product of the energy created by a nonhuman object that knows nothing of us and does not seek to serve us. Or we are simply directed by the 'old dependency of day and night,' our daily structures and forms engendered by the earth's movement around the sun, rather than any original plan of our own. Or we are in an 'island solitude, unsponsored, free,' separate from any spiritual guidance, but also made potentially free by this lack of guidance. Despite the inevitability of 'that wide water,' death, freedom in life might be possible if we transform our attention and direct it towards the embodied living difference of the nonhuman world. In the final part of the stanza Stevens describes this world, drawing lyric attention to the enchanting mystery of its difference:

> Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
> Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
> Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
> And, in the isolation of the sky,

---

[194] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.61-62, Lines 110-113.

146

> At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
>
> Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
>
> Downward to darkness, on extended wings.[195]

These lines are beautiful, but the beauty that they capture is not of friendly sameness, but independent and unknowable difference. The quail's 'cries' are 'spontaneous,' and 'Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness,' bringing themselves forth for themselves, presumably far away from any human being who might eat them. Similarly, in the 'isolation of the sky,' 'casual flocks of pigeons make/Ambiguous undulations.' The sky is empty of heavenly meaning, and the pigeons are 'casual,' unperturbed by any human conception or meaning placed on to them. The pigeons are expressive in their undulations, but these movements are 'Ambiguous,' their meaning to the pigeons themselves cannot be decoded by a human observer. So we have a world stuffed with vibrant material actions, 'Deer' moving on mountains, 'quail' calling, 'berries' ripening and birds flying, and yet none of these actions can be fully understood, fully mastered by the human. We are not distant from the physical world, but its meaning, its agency and hermetic existence is, in our current state, hidden from us. This intense intimacy with difference does not however alienate as one might expect. The very alienness of the nonhuman enchants and beguiles, a thrilling, endlessly deep environment of the more than human, of what goes beyond human subjectivity.

Stevens embodies the experience of this enchantment in the rhyme scheme of the poem itself. We have the satisfying rhyme of 'cries' and 'sky,' on alternating lines. We would then expect another two rhymes separated by a non-rhyming line, to continue the formal structure. Instead however there are only three following lines rather than four, invalidating the potential for that rhyme scheme. When the rhyme does come it is in two lines together, and it is a half rhyme: 'sink' and 'wings.' On top of this, the syllable count of the poem, ten syllables per line, is interrupted by 'Ambiguous undulations as they sink,' which is eleven syllables. This extra syllable sounds out in the reader's mind an extra note of difference, of

---

[195] Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.62, Lines 114-120.

unexpected action overstretching the boundaries of structure. This means that in a very small space we move between the aural satisfaction and pleasure of balanced full rhyme, to the unexpected syllable count and incomplete rhyme of the final lines—intense beauty and surprising ambiguity embedded in the poetic configuration itself. The 'Ambiguous undulations' of the pigeons go 'Downwards to darkness, on extended wings'—both disappearing from us into the darkness of unknowing, of mystery, and opening up 'extended wings': creating space and movement. This final image is not a closing down but an opening up, potential emerging from the realisation that we cannot follow where the nonhuman goes entirely. It is when we catch our breath at this line, its beguiling and yet maddening instability, that we as readers are able to become enchanted by an awareness of what we do not know.

In this poem Stevens manages to access the hope that can be found in paying attention to that which we cannot enter into— a nonhuman realm whose existence reminds us that we are not at the centre of a totally subjective, suffocatingly one-note cosmos. Rather, agency and independence do exist beyond us, hermetically sealed by our inability, as yet, to overcome conceptual structures. Despite this, an awareness that this independence is really out there is profoundly enchanting, a brightness threading through what we know, illuminating the possibility of freedom. In bringing disenchantment to bear in this way, Stevens enlivens rather than making cynical. Stevens picks apart our expectations and beliefs not to make us bereft, but to ignite our sensitivity to the vibrancy of the alien material world.

This critical portion of my thesis has explored what might become possible when the difference of the nonhuman is allowed space within the structures of language, and has questioned how thinking might shift if able to come into contact with such language within an ecological poetics. Ecological poetics, as I have shown, cannot be a rule-book for change, offering language to be used as a tool for action. What it may be able to do, however, is challenge the entrenched thinking practices that raise human values and structures over the modes of existence of every other being and thing—thus forcing air into the cracks of closed reified thought.

By examining Stevens and Adorno I have become aware of how such ecological poetry might be brought about through the constant bringing forward of aesthetic failure and guilt, the impossibility of poetry capturing nonhuman difference revealing the very existence of that difference, glinting just beyond human comprehension. Whether contemporary poetry might respond to the systematic destruction, degradation and suppression of the nonhuman world through writing of this kind cannot yet be know. What I do know, however, is that it is in the brief glimpses of nonhuman individuality made available to me by the processes of this thesis, that I have found my own muted creative hope. Not the hope of 'changing the world,' (though that is worthy and necessary) but the hope that poetry need not merely be a handmaiden to oppressive relations between human and nonhuman; the hope that poetry's instability, unpredictability and liminality might make it the perfect space in which oppressive relations and thinking practices can be shifted, unpicked.

Poetry will not jump off the page or out of the mouth and save the rainforest, cool the climate or clean the microbeads from the stomachs of fish, much as I might want it to. But it need not serve the rigid, life-defying human concepts that make nonhuman beings and things mere exchangeable commodities for fuel or pleasure. Every human action takes place in a web of intense intimacy with the nonhuman world, despite its difference and distance from our comprehension. Every human action in this web, including those that impact upon the nonhuman world, begins, consciously or unconsciously, in thought. It is my belief, drawn from the lessons of this critical portion of my thesis, that it is in poetry that this thought might, for a brief moment, have the potential to change—that a glimpse of nonhuman difference, rising up through the layers of human failure, might challenge the suffocating sameness of human subjectivity.

Poetry is where thought goes for the possibility of dissolving itself and being remade, and, as I have proved throughout this critical study, where it may hope to become ecological. It is in poetry that I will continue my efforts to make nonhuman difference come alive for the human, and where I hope to continue being surprised, amazed, and thrown out of my assumptions by the feral independence,

difference, autonomy and beauty of a world that is not, and will never will be, ours. In a contemporary moment in which the nonhuman is often treated as little more than a statistic, a wealth resource or an entertainment, this seems to me to be some of the most essential work of modern poetics.

WITCH

Rebecca Tamás.

A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind.

Anne Sexton

What differs from the existent will strike the existent as witchcraft.

Theodor Adorno

/penis hex/

the hex for a penis isn't really all about
a penis
the penis is not an issue all fine doing its own thing
ink blot semen   sweet white plaster
pale peach tartlet
but when it goes you see   you see a lot of things

to hex a penis off means taking a laugh out for a walk
long and blue
cold as Russia
laughing and laughing your mouth is open
let your girlfriend see your tongue

to hex a penis off wrap yourself up
in a warm bed and no one is there
intellectual persuasion
hand in the unowned air
peeling strips of dull bleached sky

hex like artemisia
holofernes head back   the fucking sucker
head back and tirades full of blood
he goes down way way down
judith's painted hand is a snare
she is catching your penis and taking it home

hex with a plate of grilled pears
against cream
a glass of just-pink wine
teacups porcelain thrush egg blue
your soft under the breath singing

hex it off with a little journey
islands of any kind ideally somewhere cold
green things butting out into a black/grey sea
no one is on the island to tell you the kind of
things you should be touching

hex at a child-wedding
don't worry it's cool
at the ceremony just wait until the
drinks are being served and then set fire
to the whole place

153

the drapes that are azure blue
holiday destination blue pope innocent blue
the child-bride comes with you
her big gobstopper eyes and hello kitty backpack
full of dicks

hex in a philosophy seminar
see them start to detach and waver
a few centimetres apart from their owners

maybe i'm not actually bothered by the logical
summation of things
their soft and sweet calculation and steadfast rationale
maybe i like it out here in the dark cold wood
with all my bits hanging down and fiery creatures
perching on every surface shaking their claws
maybe i like it with god holding my sweaty wavering hand

hex it by saying nothing
this navy zip-up and scarf says that i understand comfort
and solidarity
don't talk to me   don't tell me about your day
or ask me where the good places are
is there a problem is this sector
no
off it goes

turn back and unpave the roads
hex an epic poem some kind of discharge
a throne that you forged from
gold and diamonds and plastic bangles
and crow feathers and infinity rings

hex it through glory
total and utter glory
your huge red/black hair reaching and touching the upper echelons
pagan understanding and all types of weird singing
some woman in a mint silk pantsuit so happy with
a penis between her legs and the next shucking it off
able to do exactly as is necessary

wind batters the tall insane skyscrapers
glowering hungry sky   very unusual
that metallic taste in your mouth
it's changing   you see

INTERROGATION (1)

Are you a witch?

Are you

Have you had relations with the devil?

Have you

Have you had relations with the devil and what took place?

I kissed him under the tail, it was a bit like soil, a bit like road tar
when it heats up, he was flickering in pleasure, the field would
be just the same when I tongue that, the bird's feathers parting.

What knowledge did the devil give you?

I built a house next to the sea, the roof is red/orange, the sky
is a shaking plate of light peeling you back, there is grass
out the front, some metal bins, you can see a lighthouse. I began
to sleep with the windows open, I began to creep along the bed
to my own globe face in the mirror. Sitting rubbed up in myself
is this fierce fire, it does not come from me, even the stones in
the drive are crackling with it.

What did the devil make you do under his control?

His mother had just died. We ate mint ice
cream by the coffin, he was missing her, my
sock was loose, we kept laughing.

What is magic?

Picture an egg yolk, that huge yellow throw up sun.
Dementedly shining, falling out of itself, birthed and
reverent.

What is magic?

Little cracks coming in, small flaws in the glass,
and the air slapping itself, you stand on a hill,
things are mainly green and breakable,
you think ok I'm not alone, but mainly,

ok I was never alone, on a far off hill the
earth is breaking up against the gas pressure
of the sun, if there was ever anything to miss
this is what you miss, how it's beginning.

What crimes have you enacted?

Love makes me forget myself sometimes.
I am horribly angry, I am sick with it,
my vomit turns black, but this love.
I can't explain it, beyond that it is exactly.

What other witches/sorcerers have you conjured with?

S couldn't eat. The food was poor and cheap but not that.
She had these amazing dark eyes.

Have you taken black mass?

I've wondered why things turn. Rustling and fluttering cells,
the nib of the chest where what you might call soul slides out
and enters a hyena fucking happily amongst the fruit rinds.

What did the devil make you do under his control?

What you should do is go out and get really drunk.

What did the devil make you do under his control?

What you should do is get a sleeper train.

What did the devil make you do under his control?

I can pack everything and I can carry the suitcases up
staircases and along roads. I can go, even though
I am not importantly myself. Some of the things
that are me can go.

Have you profaned holy scripture?

The biggest fear is that reality itself starts to curdle,
stiffens into waxy stops.
.

Were you born to witches or trained in witchcraft?

Were you

Who have you used spells against in this parish?

I can't say that I've met god face to face, but I
can tell you how I imagine it. God holding my heart
in a palm as it flexes from blue to green to white.
God being really tired, haar of sea fog.
I've had to decide what it looks like, what it is.
Shiver of the long world, cold feet,
a small, bright, filthy song.

WITCH AND THE DEVIL

when the witch first met the devil the devil was
a beautiful man and a beautiful woman
the devil had long eyelashes and a body that was hard and soft
at the same time so that you wanted to hold him
and also be held by her and run your hands through the curly
sticky liquorice hair which smelt of the salt churned up by the prow of a boat
the devil wanted to know the witch he wanted to ask about the spells she did
when she pulled roots out of the living air and controlled jackdaws with the ease
of directing first year undergraduates in a department play
he wanted to see the things she could do when she pushed her fingers into the mud
and listened as best she could to what the mud was saying until sometimes the mud
found its way up her throat and out of her mouth
the devil was very different the witch could see he was different by the way he talked
to her and actually listened to the answers
the witch liked his sloping gait and the way he looked at her with oilslick eyes
that kept changing colour sky and sea shifting direction
the witch had been waiting for a long time because even though
she lived in a pre-industrial society she dreamt of motorways and nightclubs
though she didn't know they were called motorways and nightclubs
she dreamt of huge chunks of the sky falling down and covering all the spires
drowning all the bells and towns and ploughs and churches in blue

the devil liked getting up early which is what the witch liked so they would go out
before anyone else was around and they would act out satanic rituals in the woods
the witch was surprised by this because she thought the devil would prefer the night-time
but she was also pleased because you could see what you were doing a lot better at dawn
and also the light had the green tint of rusted copper and took part in the celebrations
which the devil said were the best he had probably ever done because the witch was so
good at doing them and such a natural
the witch kept having sex with the devil and the devil had all the sexual organs you could
want so the witch could have him inside her at the same time as putting his breast in her mouth
and even though the witch had always assumed that she probably did like sex in general
though not usually in practice this time the witch liked it in practice because she didn't have
to put her hand over her mouth or anything like that she just had to do what she was doing
and the devil loved putting his tongue between her and also turning into other animals whilst he
was down there so the witch didn't just feel like she was getting what she wanted she felt like
everyone everywhere was getting what they wanted

the devil made the witch a salad which had lettuce and cucumber in it but which also had
watermelon in it the pink flesh and the black seeds
the witch began crying at this though she wasn't exactly clear why
something about the wet pinkness and hard blackness and the cold fruit of it in her mouth
against the slightly dirty vegetables reminded her of the descriptions of christ's resurrection
when after all that time behind a boulder being dead he comes out and he is still dead but
he's alive at the same time and is glowing with an odd light like a northern summer when

158

the sun doesn't set and he's smiling in his whole but also destroyed flesh
which is staying on his bones with the pink new blood that someone put in there

the witch showed the devil how to talk through eye blinks so that no-one else
knew what was going on and the devil tried to show the witch how to become
invisible but that was a really hard one that was going to take her a while to get right
the devil had a lot of books with him which he kept stuffed in his underwear drawer
a mix of things like the bible told backwards and general works of contemporary literature
so the witch could read all of that when she wasn't practising how to change the weather
by sucking on a spoon of honey and dog hair or how to use parsley to stop the
pastor speaking on sundays so that he would just have to wave his hands around and try
and impersonate the terrible fires of hell and the scalding water that would greet each sinner
when they finally gave up their hard life and went onto the next hard life for another go

the witch had never thought about what other people thought about exactly
she had thought about those motorways and nightclubs and had imagined getting run
over or dying of a drug overdose she had also imagined turning to chalk and dissipating
she had imagined giving birth to a huge squadron of frogs and eels
and she had told people about it which meant that she didn't have to worry about getting
married as much as other girls or women or young men had to worry about getting married
but now she was thinking about different different things like unrolling clouds of blue tits
from the cavities between her muscles and a huge ornate building filled with beds so that you
couldn't see the floor only lovely silk topped mattresses where women climbed from bunk to
bunk whispering to each other and lighting candles and never having to have their feet touch the
sawdust under a roof made of clear glass so that they could all see out but no-one could see in

the devil didn't like to talk about god that much because of their falling out
the witch wasn't even sure sometimes if the devil 100% believed in him
still the witch wanted to know what god was like from a being with first-hand experience
she wanted to unplug the gap that she had thought about at night when she was small
thinking of nothing praying to nothing watching the curtain slap and slap against the window
so the devil described a landscape of ice with icy crags and peaks rising up into an ice pale sky
vast expanses of snow tunnelling along wind channels in twisted curls and icebergs wide and
huge as continents bleeding water down onto the frozen sheets of ice which were too thick
to be tested with scientific instruments air that is so cold that birds that fly into it are knocked
down dead straight away whales are left cubed and shattered as they meet the immobile sea
miles and miles of whiteness so that looking at it is also not looking at it the witch asked how can
god be an environment made of ice and the devil said no god isn't the ice he's under the ice
but you have to be very very very hot to burn your way through to him

one thing the witch didn't ask the devil about was badness even though she knew a lot
of people would say that the devil was full of badness if not defined by badness
but by this point the witch was as sick of goodness as much as she was sick of badness
in fact she was really sick of them her spine ached with all of it collecting
like pink nauseous liquid in the links between her vertebrae
the witch wanted some sort of power though she knew it would get her into trouble

the witch wanted to be allowed to do her own thing without disturbance
she wanted to throw the broom into the grate and instead
buy an airplane rising across a tin can silver sky higher and higher
30,000 feet and rising so high that no-one can grab onto your ankles
no-one can cover you or take a shot get you on your back pull something
a blue void of cloud cold planets shoals of birds
she had always been looking up so had been practising for a long time
standing on ledges craning her neck and picturing a space outside the ground
a walk into the air that looks like the future because it is

the devil said that he was accused of murder wherever he went even though
he never murdered anybody not because of morality but for other reasons
to do with essential life force and the energy capture of the seasons
he said he wasn't a man and wouldn't drink milk because it didn't belong to him and that
even if someone was with him for 1000 years they weren't going to get him
there was nothing to get or at least getting doesn't work like that
the devil did say he believed in a personal kind of sacrifice that didn't involve
an altar or necessarily have a particular cause though he had a soft spot for martyrs
he rather said that you had to make a decision are you prepared to destroy yourself
for freedom even though it will be really awful and maybe worse than not freedom
even though it will involve some true horror examples of which include lungs full of swamp tar
the smallest bit of daylight refracting through permanently shut blinds
and a large selection of types of silence each and every one of which are unobserved
the devil always looked at the witch with an expression of compassion which was
the same expression she had on her face when she looked at him
but when he talked about freedom he looked painfully quiet like the kind of
person who casts no shadow and the witch wondered if actually that was because
her face looked like that

when the witch said goodbye to the devil
they didn't get that overtly emotional but they held onto each other
for a long time until there was a flow of breath back and forth that
was entirely equal in the air passing through their mouths
it is terrible how we can never guarantee anything we really want is
what the witch thought but still she took a bit of her hair and tied it round
the devil's wrist and the devil said something in her ear but it wasn't words
so I can't transcribe it but it looked like a body floating on a sea
of grass with the moon pulling that grass backwards and forwards
in tides and with each tug of the moonlight more blue flowers burst up
out of the soil and stretch their capped mouths and the body passes over them
in light so strong you could read by it

WITCH AND THE SUFFRAGETTES

again somehow the witch finds it is about eating and not eating
they don't eat and so they are made to eat
she asks a policeman 'what is with this eating thing?'
but he doesn't know why just that when a woman eats
she is eating for the state
when she watches her friend forced to lie back and be fed
she retches
the feeding is the same as being sick it is the same as not
being fed because it leaves you hungry
ghost meal fattened with air
the witch tries to listen to the feeding because it is saying something
she knows it looks like a penis being forced down her throat
and she knows that they know it
the feeding wants to make things happen without desire
weakness is too close to permeability
see through bones which are an obvious lack
calling out EMPTY EMPTY EMPTY EMPTY body only
small because the mind is small there is no room for it inside
the feeding is the tippex and it says that fullness is the cover up
when the witch is fed she thinks how interesting it is that
fullness can be so blank
groping around in the sick dark not allowed to pour out only
allowed to take in

witch is sad when she thinks about the suffragettes
their pale green and pink their soft bodies and hard placards
the witch wonders what happiness could possibly look like
at some point it went wrong and even though she's very old she
doesn't know exactly when that point was
but she's thinking that the most likely is probably Orpheus
when Orpheus was singing it was so marvellous and Eurydice sang too
obviously they were a really good couple
back then it was early you could still smell the cinders coming off the big bang
nothing had really fixed yet nothing looked lasting
trees were improvising their places
Orpheus went back to get Eurydice from death as we know
but he wouldn't let her make her own way out of the rubble seek into the scratch of
each step that is not knowing always not knowing
he looked at her eyes which were dry and dark
her song is still down there somewhere

the smell of freedom is the smell of vomit the witch can see that now
it isn't lots of clear light pouring in gold fantastic gold
it is vomiting all over yourself and it getting hard in the folds
it is getting your time and they don't give you anything so
you bleed down your legs thighs sticky
so they smack when you move them wet gloss

smell of slaughtered animals the unclean things
is the smell of where you're going into the sweat
of piss and cold
into the rawness where the inside comes outside
which is exactly what they hate
the smell of earth is like this
it's dirty

the rush of death is a stunt
it vibrates its own meaning
which garbles and surpasses you
all of the explosions are coming
out of your head eating the words
when the houses burn are you meant
to feel sorry for it the witch thinks probably
yes but obviously no
all the fires coursing up the townhouses
and golf courses and morning rooms and
nurseries and halls of commerce and residences
were all already there cracking and flailing
and spitting
the pleasure of seeing everyone see it
their white eyes fat with flames
it is all burning it has all been burning us

WITCH BABY

the witch
goes down the shaded path
to where all her old babies are
crisped up now
little touches under the ground
angels feel bad about it angels
have tin foil wings and are apologetic
angels are sad and cry their faces never going red
but they can't hump on the bodies
each body that was a little sperm and a shaking
globular egg that was a green pustule
a bacterium full of something (potential) or
one inch to the right and could have been an oak tree
angels imagine the jobs the babies could have done as good citizens
beautiful and whole with satisfying marriages and smallholdings
witch thinks no a fuck-ton of small waiting christs
who had to die because if they lived she'd die and then they'd die anyway
capture and restraint the hot desire to have one but also be left alone
angels don't like christ that dirty guy
his eyes were brown like silt that won't do he sweated and drank juice
christ born to die well it makes sense a christ for the funeral pyre
death wet in his mouth
these small ones also their little burning faces and snapped necks
shivering in the body where it happens
someone has to live over the very end
isn't that the point of the story?

WITCH SCOLD

she looked at the hard bridle
saw it running with its own capture
red and
blue and
black
stop
witch attempted to be separate from her own body
witch attempted to unwoman
witch was not a wife but they could hear her going on
and on and on and wow and on
he held her arms and she kicked and someone else did
it went over her head the metal bar over her tongue
caged latches she stopped struggling when she could
not get away she made her eyes black holes dragging gravity
the tongue's flesh was spongy and wet it was raining
so in the marketplace of course she waited one arm
tied to a post and all of that metal on her head her brain
people did their early capitalist accumulation
people said things and there was no saying back
now there were no words that words should break
and if a kind of silence was home what vocabulary
could be eaten back could be swallowed new names
in the damp thought spaces where no noise comes
a loud cry that isn't the name of a cry but is a cry
there was a small group of people left in a forest
she had heard their language was a collection
of bird sounds in the sounds time did not exist
there were no names no one pushed themselves on
themselves the canopy opened like a huge mouth
running speaking through itself with a burning fork
words until they burn and scald insufficient
from far away witch could see a ship moving
it was taking voices in soot boxes
the sails were white so she knew pain
because of course standing there the tongue
death was white and not black death had always
been white waving its blank lock into the air
its jargon from a capped and stained spreadsheet

WITCH GOVERNMENT

the witch thinks about what it would be like to fuck the government
the government would be an octopus would it or no a giant squid
that huge cobalt industrial complex eye
how can anything be that big
how can basically a prawn swell and swell to these Cousteau proportions
you can't see where its sex parts are you can only see the eye the huge
impossible eye much more sophisticated than an x-ray
which only sees bones this sees soul this sees sin this sees your GPS location
the fucking happens without visibility there are things touching the insides of you
perhaps its huge phallus has entered you and is moving around but then again
it could be one of the tentacles and you don't have any way of knowing
there must be pornos a lot like this but with slightly less rare animals
unsurprisingly witch thinks it would not be nice in the traditional sense of nice
the pulsating tentacles or phallus or phalluses breaking into different sections of
your body as if you are an unpicked thread material meeting material slowly
taking the speech bits and the feelings bits and uncoring them like slit avocados
discarding and melting down and widening into a colossal shouting
on the other hand there are some elements that want absolutely no resistance at all
that want to slick and shuddering the parts that hurt gone and vomited
it is horrifying but easy it doesn't take effort forcing yourself to watch a bad film
but just happens the brine flow and the thick parts soldering into your vagina
your own eye is closed your own breath is making sympathies saying let's stay healthy
or somewhere out in the sea I found myself and melted into this everything
even though the fucking is deeply impersonal and separate each breast a round cushion
of disconnected pleasure still it has worked out something intimate about your weak dark inside
region still as you separate and click off there is a growing national pride in not being your actual
self but something whole and gigantic and full of salt and progress and power and clean covered
in oil and travelling ink and passports that go anywhere and have a long series of numbers printed
on them

WITCH WOOD

the witch thinks about what it would be like to
fuck woods and not the government
the stretch of land is green but has redness in the soil
the trees gather around a path from Roman times which
has sunk into the ground an opening flashing and brightening
fucking the trees is giving back the means of production to the trees
xylem and blood vessel outreach tell me how it is when there's a storm
not that different because we all shake but some don't
have a shelter it can't be made romantic branches are entering different
parts of your body is that right different parts of your body are entering
branches you are shouting loudly and thistles racketing about in here inside
your radical opening and singular throat sounds for this to work you can't
spend more than four hours on the ground clearing bracken or cutting
because it ruins so easily when it is not a choice the tree is taking
water from you drenching and it has an archive of season and this is what it is like to
feel snow pushing hard in between your legs cold and magisterial and probably not in any
widely available porno when the summer gets in there inside the pockets of your arms
open sweaty mouth space is being made that widens and separates more and more and
you look the same but really green hair you forget the words for assessment criteria
for investigation for intersection for fence for phallus for trunk for the thing the thing the thing
one solar panel opening eat it up and eat it up stacked cream layers of light
skin just touching the next fine membrane of skin the page with a hoof mark a peaking stain

WITCH EUROPE

the witch has romantic leanings that are expended on no-one
apart from the petrol station boy
he gets given flowers and a few kisses because he is too small
to hunt the witch
the rest of them however would hunt the witch
the witch would like to get some of them under her and cradle
their heads on her breasts or fuck them against the arm of the sofa
the witch would like to have conversations about her favourite
literary genres
the witch would like to roll a cigarette and put it in their mouths
watch the smoke curl up past grey eyes
but she isn't totally stupid
the petrol station boy looks at her tattoo and says 'cool!'

the witch knows all about Europe
in Europe people are sad a lot
in Europe there are excellent things
like fiestas and shaded cupolas
and places that used to be abbeys
but are now sort of team ups between
stone walls and grass and sky
to make full bodied installations
about the impermanence
and yet eternal recombination
of things
in Europe there are all these bullet holes
from burning the last lot of witches
and there are military parades
where the hats distract you
to a certain extent from the killing element
but European rivers smell of death anyway
so you can never really forget about it

the witch records her body as local
because she's extremely old underneath
the witch understands that just because you stay very still
it doesn't mean you aren't listening
it doesn't mean that you don't exist
she understands that people like fast
so she impersonates a rock and doesn't want to be liked
she impersonates a tree and fuck
she's thinking like a tree
her mind gets green and grows and grows

when the witch was captured they instigated a strip search
they were looking for the place the devil had marked her

with his teeth
or with his penis
or with his own devil instruments
there wasn't anything very obvious apart from a mole
and a suntan mark
so they also had a look inside her
and they did find a smudge there
which the witch said was a birth mark
but no matter
they asked a witch a lot of questions about what she got up to
all the fun she had with the devil tricking people
stealing people's livestock
encouraging women to leave their husbands
turning into a panther and a brown lizard
and having sex with the devil in those forms
they asked her why she hated goodness and life
at which she couldn't help closing her eyes
and thinking of a blue wide light coming off the sea
so they pulled her eyes open
and asked her whether she knew how to make men's cocks shrivel up
and fall off

the witch tells the petrol station boy about it
on his break whilst they both eat coconut-pecan muffins
which aren't that nice but which are going off today
the boy has a somewhat flat and unresponsive face
which makes him easy to talk to
the witch tells him about the trial
how there were always lots of journalists there
trying to take photos of the witch outside
and that inside it was quiet and sombre
with everyone in black apart from the witch
who hadn't been given anything else apart from
her slip which meant her skin prickled
at the trial a lot of people made claims about the witch
such as that she poisoned their dogs
that she brought lightning
that she made all the girls in the town go mad
and start foaming at the mouth and downing vodka
that she stole babies and ate them raw on battlefields
that she said war and it was war

the witch tells the boy
that she used to dream about a hill
covered in lumps of earth
the lumps stuck up and so you couldn't walk
properly over the hill or sit or look at the view
under each of the lumps someone was buried

and the earth wasn't thick at all over the dead people
so the witch got on her knees and pulled some of
the corpses up to the surface which were at different
stages of putrefaction
because she really wanted to see their faces
and to remember as much as she could about their hair colour
their bone structure or clothes
or to fish out personal artefacts from the graves
and work out their names
but the hill didn't end and every time she pulled out a body
more stretched out in front of her
so that even those she had looked at were starting to blur together
in her mind
the witch decided that the only thing to do was to eat
some dirt from every grave so that even if she couldn't remember
who was who then at least some of their bacteria might get inside her
and mix up and absorb into her own bacteria
and so she went along and stuffed handfuls of soil into her mouth
without stopping on and on even though she felt sick and knew that she'd never
get to everyone before night came and made it impossible

the witch is an excellent dancer which is good
because as far as she knows it's hard to pin down dance
as a criminal act depending upon where you do it
as its reason for occurring usually has ambiguous elements
also the witch doesn't trust the words which come out of her
which is why she has stopped writing things down
instead there is the dancing which she is good at without
having had specific training and also people expect women
to dance and they expect witches to dance so it doesn't confirm
or deny she could be doing it to get sexual attention
which she isn't but they don't know that do they
she dances keenly and quietly with added humming to keep time
you can't belong in there and you can't dance with her
which is the point
it's like that poem except that she isn't the dancer she really is
in this case the dance

the witch doesn't have a party membership
maybe because she travels so much
and finds herself interested in things
like a string of red beads hanging off a fence post
in very hot dusty sunlight
peeling paint on a car that has been left to fall apart
with weeds creeping themselves through the windshield
and the engine
rows of skulls in glass cases
two men holding each other or fighting in a lit window

waking up in a boat and throwing up the sweet potato fritters
from the night before all over someone's thick dark hair

the boy at the petrol station didn't have a lot of time left
on his break so the witch told him about the burning
the witch said if you could see inside those flames
then you would know that it wasn't just you burning
with your skin peeling back in red open mouths
or your eyelids crackling away in ashy slick folds
meaning you couldn't not look
you'd also know that everything else was burning too
that the sky was melting its blue fat down to black
cold needling stars
that christ's lungs were splitting under the pressure of
hot blood his words losing their oxygen
and flattening out
that women's bellies were popping open ripe melons
of meat onto the cobbles and high rise balconies
you'd see the small dark core at the centre of the
planet contracting into blank steel
absorbing all the matter and all the light that you had
thought was spread across the universe

spell for logic

you will sit on your hands
the sea has a fat logic if you look at it right
operating sneakily by the moon

you will menstruate exactly when the packet
tells you to

cut off all the dead parts in your chest
a cheap Andromeda
BE ORGANISED

lie on a ring binder and hold your breath
look at the flood of water running up the sand
the snow that hovers
bitchy and quiet

in this rest you are rested
this whole and perfect sleep

tell me what you wanted
from this

spell for change

CRACK

goes the mountain

BLOOD   BLOOD   BLOOD

are you scared yet?

little fissures are putting their black hands onto
the earth

    an opening

SMASH SMASH SMASH

I hope you like this

hot and wet and tired and pain

a bird grows nasty feathers

      its song is geothermal

a clever shaking wound

spell for friendship

utter night with
bras on the floor
and a container ship full

I CAN'T WAIT FOR THE MEMORIAL
TO DO US JUSTICE

the point is she's talking and you don't get it

when the moment comes
when everything pulls back from its sheath of flesh
and the staggering weirdness flows and pulses like
a lash

send her a text

you thought it'd be your mum
but like christ you renounce
those false and precious things

for a pasty agony

the end of the world (or something)
with who you've chosen

spell for a siege

the bread is lying in pieces   along the road
but frozen

if you take your tongue to it you may be able to unlock something

    damp squares

  put on all the clothing you own and climb a tree

  the faces of the children are sort of funny from up here   mashed
oil paintings

it seems that being human is not enough   or

    it's not relevant

you are a shining hungry bone like the rest of them
    (my catkin)

the stray dogs scratching their teeth on ice

    the oval birds

bend down and kiss the dirty soil

   gnash yr brown and heathen teeth

  focus on black holes
  on immensities

they are as clever   and as   sorrowful   as you

spell for animals

    their heads of different shapes
    are on the floor
    a kind of blue fungible molasses

there are a lot of things you could say like:

      sweet
      but didn't have a lot of language

      sweet
      but is this thing

      sweet
      am I supposed to kiss it better?

    when the bits all rustle up and burn and spread
    and catch and rush and fall and slip and wet and move
    and finalise

where   will   my thought

      the pools of words   crowning in   distant   space

    where will   it go?

spell for online porn

ok get the camera out

  the reason I want you in this cavity is
     ugly magic

     all of the sperm becomes pearl

these   fat   fingers

     the hole gets tighter and tighter and tighter and tighter

       and it feels like a metaphor

     but that's my actual penis

     that's the actual sun coming up whilst we're in it

spell for bad relationships

hang your mouth

  the blue and sappy teeth there

it is so tiring

unwrap little fingers from their gloves

  now you will be bad

  he is tripping on those backwards stairs

ow!

no crying is allowed

  as you throw the corpse from windows

just shout the day you were born

SHOUT IT

  every one is a victory in this place!

you win

you win

spell for reptiles

come into the ice!

behind a black eye
the comfort of venom

you are not seductive

you are inside the lithe pouch of self

  tell me

  how you do that

spell for women's books

the cat shit vellum

    the bad storm coming in over the flatlands vellum

the old murderer's vellum

the poet moves their hips like someone on a tram about to vomit

     Athena still and glacial in her blue ice-bath

fresh as a painted door

spell for dramatics

when the wind is in

I can still tell

the difference

a thousand hawks

her plastic impossible tears

tiny screwed up pastel heart

I CAN STILL TELL

the way opens

a mountain in the side of air

a   dark and freeing thinness

spell for sex

one damp steak

  hung outside from the porch

whistling into the streaked and furious
night

spell for exile

Ovid

     sad in Romania

   that black sky

  friendly incomprehensible   language

and his own curdled quiet tongue

    COME   BACK TO ME

    the violent sea   is not lonely

   witness

   a furled wrap of your old hair

   lying in the drain

   one   fog   at a window

    everyone saying   go home please!

   and the sea playing porous

no no no

spell for Nietzsche's horse

hold me with tender

soft thing

we are all becoming feminine
who can say what   man is
  on this nano level

your ears are terrible furred lips

'successor of the dead god'

safe in my crude opening

    good   girl

spell for mysticism

I cannot say it is good when it is so bad
I cannot say   hug this guy over here
or   this recording   this nice bowl of walnuts

where you   are

            it all explodes

however

the light tells me something

        one fat scream

SEE THIS

I don't know what yet
  my eyes are still red and cracked
the bits of dust thickening   but

oh

      look—

it is alive out there

spell for reality

what do you do when the answer to
too much is absolutely nothing?
honey sits on the table
fat and glowing
winter light gives you a pass
nine minutes of feeling nearly
completely alive

sometimes the ashy body in the ground seems
to have all the answers
ultimate realness   nasty truth as the final only truth
why then   this stupid relentless yearning for snow
     why the   honey and talking

the burning bush is another form of ultimate realness
but what is it telling us
certainly it's nasty
however also   gold
also the entire pocket cosmos shifting and flapping
gentle limbs   holding each other   in the depth of the fire

then   somehow

as   much snow as you could ask   for

wet-gold honey and locusts

WITCH PAGAN

in the little dark
the witch sits
green men on the walls flailing their tongues
who am I but a collapsing galaxy?

when Iphigenia died all her friends were outside
sniffling and rubbing their faces
the slugs inking a black message in the grass
the impossible religion is always to forgive
it is also sitting up to the chest in mud and learning nothing
mud songs sky mud mud harrier
the complete terror of how it hurts
the owls watching you and meaning nothing
the crows speaking and suffering
curling out of the wind with a spit of blood in their mouths
you must forgive that they are not bad and not good
you must not know them and not try
white hot ember sending out movement

the difference is   a space of sky

rope hanging in the uncaught air

WITCH CITY

the fire the ash
something like Byzantium
all the incredible gardens going away
all the incredible sunsets of history
dancing a polka   a shuffly waltz

in a café you can talk to someone and think
this is the end of fascism   right here
in the way that we are knowing things together
climbing the alpine slope of the mind in little jumps

in the café you are aware of Cleopatra   her good headdresses
her astute understanding of economics her carpet rolls
her sense of humour   she is my best girl
she is full of such excellent knowledge
hello….?
is anyone there?

history is so old and gross
wake me up when
wake me up when it really gets started

the city is a cauldron set it off
everything is really dusty
witch's hands are covered in dirt something sticky

under the streets the sewers is the oily singing sea
in the plain trees there are watchful bird creatures interested parties
imagine being so new   not one whole century   in your smudgy face

a lot of traffic noise
these hurtful insinuations   that witch is all better

  moon with the footmarks rubbed off

WITCH MARS

witch is on mars
her own occult space program
runes of hovering peace
red blood folds
alien silver trickling down her legs

mars is just   lovely
holograms of your face endlessly repeated
witch says to herself that no-one has ever been hurt here
impossible! a planetary surface free of bruise
no-one has died   wet then heavy unappealing flesh
no-one has corrupted   mystics still pure and flashing
like neon signs
empty red dust   empress of a flat land   cold boulders
sweet tender   terrain of   never - been - slit

from mars
the earth is a small green eye
well   every woman needs a rest
green pulsing   heart   ugly breaker

my darling

WITCH EARTH

the saddest year of my life is every single year
the kirk with its little whitewashed windows
the small towns and the seedy pyres

three girls play in the silty garden
heads on fire with light
their dresses pink and violet
suntrap angels small beasts
always the same beginning
smoke hovering and smarting in the distance

what the earth deserves
so much
so much more
than dead bodies—bits flailing about

when the evenings go dark and no one is about
how do you bear it
how do you bear the small stench
the black water rising and rising

history is hands cupped for some warm urine
girls or people or things in their torn outfits
history is a joke compared to earth
its huge painful promises

witch watches the girls and their lit hair
their sharp teeth
the earth likes wolves at least
you can give it wolves
you can give it
that

WITCH TRIALS

what happens at a witches' sabbat is
a bunch of women sit together
lock fingers and say things
sometimes they sing
sometimes they tell each other secrets or
make plans
the wind rubs away their voices
they sneak them back
stars cough
this is what it's like to turn over to the devil
so much smoke
so much strange movement

the witch has familiars
she has a wolf a dog a sparrow a grey cat
a horse a delicate toad a shivering goat
why on earth would you not kiss those slim
blue tongues
why would you not slip into the night with them

when the devil came back the witch started asking him
about god again even if it was a somewhat awkward subject
she wanted to know why she occasionally turned up at church
and sat alone on the end stall feeling bored and sick and all the stone
seemed to say you are not alive you are not alive you are not alive
the devil pushed his hair up into a butterfly clip
sighed and said it's buried there's just this space
and the witch said tell me about the space tell me what would happen
if I could touch god and lick his marble face tell me what would
occur if I was let down there to find him it's been so long
and the devil said you don't want it but would be something like
black black black black black black black black black black
black black black black green black black black black black
pink

the witch tries to think about how it started
maybe it was when a girl came home late at
night with half her clothes missing
maybe it was when the witch made beds in the cellar
for everyone coming to abort their unwanted babies
and she burned herbs to get rid of the smell of shit
and blood and women went home dazed and elated
by themselves by their strange lightness
maybe it was when she saw a woman spend every day
walking from her house to the top of the hill and back again
over and over never actually stopping
her face was sooty and her mac had rips in it

she kept walking and walking at top speed
and the witch wanted to say please stop
or where are you going but of course
she knew exactly where she was going

maybe it was when she put on that scratchy halter
maybe it was when someone knocked a fence up
and her and the cow just looked at each other blindly
maybe it was when corpses went into the river
maybe it was when the books peeled off
maybe it was when everyone started to look down at
the floor rather than catching each other's eyes
maybe it was when the town board took a financial
stake in sexual services
maybe it was when they kept saying walk don't run
and her legs ached with green splintered clashing
maybe it was when bats fled the church at weddings
maybe it was when there was this punishment
maybe it was when her friend started to say hit me
please hit me please hit me hit me hit me hit me hit me

the witch wanted to run away
but where is away
they were using her name like a flag
hands were grey with smoke
when they touched you it was a
touch that pulls internal organs
dirty shapes amongst the viscera

night can start at daybreak
that was clear
night when you pray and pray
for morning and listen out for a bird's
minute watery cry
and it doesn't come

the witch could only think of it in squares
one small image at a time a sip of it
men standing
cage
neon
floor
foot twisting like a shot hare
colour leaking from a bit of paper

the witch wanted to organise dances
that would heat the room to such an extent
that all of it would be sweated out
all the humanness would bleed
into furry salt and slick pouring
the witch wanted to cut throats
break and break and break and break
and break and break
see what her hand would look like
ripped from its mooring
hate is this spit
it is pushing open a chapped mouth
and spitting into it

the witch thought
once in this square there were
dinosaurs and before that there were these
fish who began rubbing their fins on the sand
they wanted to come up and breathe
and walk around
there were fish-people come out of the sea
gasping and coughing building small shelters
out of pines
at some point one of them will have put an arm
around another one
at some point one will have started singing
the witch begged to the air when did this
what is this

the ash stuck to everything
it became everything and ran down
the houses down people's faces
down windowpanes and chicken
coops and sheds and workshops and
front steps and bed sheets and cardboard boxes
tight sticky little collar around every cell
the ash got into the atmosphere and changed
the weather systems
rain didn't dig out light but brought a choked distance
dogs were eating their young and leaving the half
chewed bits on the pavement
they know something
thought the witch

the witch didn't record how many people
were called witches or who died
who condemned them or who reported them

who tried to hide who went quite bravely
to the flames who screamed up to the edge of sound
when they were dying who was quiet or
how many children wandered around the mess
what level of society the average victim came
from or what happened to bone marrow in the heat
which people were sent mad by events and started
to beg for themselves to be killed too
who remained seemingly unaffected
what happened to the excess of blood that someone
had to collect
to the individual teeth the gold jewellery the ornate rings
the balled up sanitary pads the false eyes rolling fondly
the slick waste from intestinal breakdown
the song that she was singing that then ended up in heads
corpse words 'the road the road was narrow but my lover
he fought on' in live heads worming and writhing
the lack of crying at funerals
the boy dragging his filthy dog into the square because
he knew that it was the devil incarnate that it had killed
his mother his sister that it made him touch his own cock
and moan for something that if he could push it up into
the fire too then probably all of this would end
someone licking at a dark patch on the ground
like it was the most tender spot of something beloved
instead the witch spent the whole time forcing her eyes to
stay open
even when the air was very thick she was going
keep having a look
even if it took every piece of eye meat
she would develop night vision
for this long night

WITCH FIRE

the witch lay in immense thick darkness
around her were the bones of the body
she burned
let be burned and slipped off snakelike
being witch the witch still breathed
under the pile of logs and ash
at the corner of what should be known
adjunct to her bones are the other bones
adjunct to her skin are the other skins
and other hair and other eyes hard globules
what dead thoughts can live down here
someone didn't like her husband
someone loved hers and screamed to be separated
someone kept their own shed of goats which they
tended like children someone read philosophy
someone had a tic where they kept scratching
their face someone had had a recurring dream
that they were a medieval knight with clean
gilt armour who had their own horse and castle
and who rode out on adventures and would
drive through the thicket branches slapping their
face find a damsel tied up against a tree with
long wavy brown hair and when they got close
would see that they are the damsel they are the horse
they are riding themselves they are saving themselves

the witch is tired and at war
she hates the past and she hates the present
she hates how easy it is how innocuous how boring
hates England and wants to stop at that but finds
herself hating them all she hates the landmasses of
Europe their fat seas their pin tip hills she hates
their verdant grasses and their polite architecture
their binaries their sinewy rivers their flatlands and mud and windmills
and factories and press organisations and colonial bureaucracy and prisons
and fellowships and barnyards and pump rooms and lochs and silage plants
there is light and she loves it coming in from space
clean and sharp as an equation light slipping under chapped eyelids
sometimes warm sometimes cold hint of blue roughness
of spectral red twist of lilac blue rim spot of green
the witch can love light unexpected the witch can feel it
gathering up in itself the light is not stupid or clever
the light is an option as yet unplanned
unknown

WITCH SPEAKS TO GOD

hello?

hello

is this?

not quite

what does it smell like there?

mainly linen

is it big?

well vaulted but tight

are you?

if I

give me a name?

no

tell it then?

ok beloved

do you get sick of?

never yet

can we please?

you must

if the books are all saying?

a lake standing quietly under fir trees

viscous heart

make it up very cleverly

why do you why do you?

this is a difficult one for a whistling
void of passion

but I don't I just wait unfortunately

I curl as close as I possibly can

am very disappointing and obscure

then hope

you understand still why we are all so?

absolutely

I am inside that

what can I then how much it breaks?

well

they don't run

right at the lip of it where I go away

go there

can't you?

brain feelings

never tell me to go sweetheart

it was already

the loudness can be let out in an instant

tender despicable wanting

very important

you?

it gets faster

you and a large mud-brown eye

in every place it happens

each by each

by each

196

by each

bright and

yeah exactly

the line?

ouch

spell for midsummer's day

burn the fire and jump

dear heart

under all this is a centre of human jam
red and pulsing

what you feel touch your face
    in a wavering immense cut

the sun   is hovering at her absolute mid-point

   do you feel that fucked and desperate gilding stir in you?

   your stinking consecrated jam?

   throw yourself down on the floor like a bad dog

get on your knees   and lick the boards

   get up again

the fire is doing things to you

 that feel amazing

this earth is so

   remarkable

spell for emotions

make a cake that looks like a picture of your mother making a cake
set up an industrial skyline with more and more tender phalluses hitting the air

don't   you   realise   how little   time there is?

you can't set up a portfolio

or reason about the amount of passengers through the border

    YOU HAVE TO START CRYING OR WHATEVER!

    you have to cup a breast just there in the suggestive lamplight
    or put yr mouth on a fox's mouth though it hurts and hurts
    or carry a person on your back over a revered mountain

you have to

      hurry hurry hurry hurry

spell for January

the two-head calls to you

     he is resting over a door and motioning you in and sending you out

who will be on your list of the most ambitious fucks?

who will be on your list of the persons leaning towards disaster?

  I won't say DON'T BUY

   just tip your head back like an eel is going in

   the cold has something to say   in its weak syllables:

   we will have achieved something when you get up and make coffee naked and you are not naked

we will have achieved something when   everyone leans into the ugly gale

   and is properly afraid

spell for UN resolutions

    the sun comes

they are lying there on the frayed grass

   some warm arms and legs

there is only a particular smell in them

   small occult fire

when the libraries were burning down everyone was running back
and forth with armfuls of paper

 a   touch
down to the genome

       SAVE THE

   ah because suddenly you care

language and its vulgar rotations

grass thinks too

is thinking:

    'my only'

spell for translation

beat the drum

    listen to those nasty liars!

     oh   god

how good it feels

    in her

spell for joy

THESUN THESUN THESUN

nothing can be trusted!
raise up your rinsed hands!
terrible fury and becoming!
take off your clothes!

one colossal owner of the void
brightness folding into itself
again and again vulval or filo

I see a shaking which is total and absolute fear

one day yr gonna die!

the hot impossible apple of
your perfection

you freckled you covered in something
you utter

just open up your face
light's ice cream cone coming
on the inside of yr eyelids

say yes five thousand times
(o love)

spell for political change

a zeitgeist request here
 BE SO IN ACCORD WITH YOURSELF
        THAT YOU GO AWAY

nothing is like you
that picture online
she has a human body bits of it
her eyes and mouth are clammy that's
            weird
there might sort of be breasts under the sheet

anyway you're crying and crying

spit gummy mouth
trailing

she is nothing like you and yeah
would look at your body and blankness
empty

so

take that dead ugly body into your bed
it hates you

let it crack and swell

when things get really bad
lick it
the shaking of pink awful mulch
the scrabbly leaves in the slowly rotting mouth
river water

are you covered in dry blood fluids
so sad

yes
adoring what it is
adoring with everything you have and are
her damp alien mess
then you have reached the first stage of what we decide
to call socialism

spell for agency

there is such a thing as a cold and
terrible night

     a lot of murdered sex workers

in a drama-documentary about
 murdered sex workers

 the cold night gathers round

locusts talking about you

  things in the air

that are not of this world

  STICK YOUR HAND INTO THE GREEN/BLACK SLIME

she wore tight leggings with the band showing

   she didn't mind burying the shit back into the friendly earth

 a mourner of patchy neon

 is there magic   here?

what do you   think

 lady

spell for maths

  this is hard

   can you see that   rubbing around   the huge cold wind
   numbers making faces in ash

Hypatia had her skin taken off with tiles

   she made equations   zero on her long tongue

Hypatia   saw the stars

    but you never will

she saw   blazing signs   codes   the   future

   you'll never see that though
   standing in the mulchy forest
   straining your poor eyes

Hypatia got in on a constellation   an adorable moon crater
the messages   the   decimals   reaching   her skinny desiring hands

   but you'll never see it
   you'll die and you'll never see

   one single thing that she has seen

spell for Lilith

Lilith you look so nice with that snake

   your hair curled the way a serpent might

   Lilith   you are such a bad girl

      i heard you like reproductive justice
      i heard you like staying up all night   with your lips pressed against the cracks

Lilith can you make an owl demon?
a huge one?
flapping through the night with copper eyes
shrieking for our salvation
dripping internal blood all over used cars and buildings of state

   Lilith
you have a really great body
you are a taunt
an un-fucked thing   in a realm of little bits

   Lilith
please sleep in my bed at night
smelling of lavender and coal
rub my back   and look at me   with an impossible black gaze

      the things you have seen
      a whole universe of your own making
      entirely pleasure   cos yr made of fire

   Lilith
take us back with you

sliding all over the floor
raving & screaming
and very happy

spell for the witch's hammer

a two pronged sword
to put them down

out there a lot of things happen

witches
undo   each other   a candle in each opening

    witches wake at night and cry
    beasts with curly horns comfort them
    /suck gently

witches go astray
carnality   swooping and fluttering   like a ragged flag

they   laugh   so much
covered in purple bruises
teaching   tricks   GPS of the eternal flagellant light   always going
home

the witch's hammer sinks into flesh
then   disappears   and only mercury remains   its little peasant trail

        the witches eat your book
        then you
        then everything

WITCH VOLCANO

Witch lies on the volcano
amongst creeping language
red spaces/ash snowflakes
lava says something huge
the way it shudders down the mountain
a song without melody
clouds of dust hold the forest
lava still coming in slow sweet insistence
the sun coming in and out of black
waving and smiling with bright teeth

a retinue of ghosts follow the lava
their singing a slow boom
ghosts are not sad which is why they are here
the volcano could never be a sad object
it could never weep only resist
pink lava making heartfelt in a green forest

ghosts have seen things
ghosts have watched aliens making love in silt from silt
meteor love a moon on moon
terrible cell creation whooping breath long dead
but alive alive and crawling with beetle certainty
through the humming fire

the witch has too many reasons to part from the earth but she won't part
inside a crater the skin of the earth bursts
she cannot go home from the world
she sees herself warm covered in soot and definitely not cute
a new set of scary words crawling
a new set of tongues that look unborn and haggard

down below things shudder
the volcano is ready at all times
it happily gorges on being itself
as the ghosts rub their hands in glee
as they procreate violently smoke hissing from
gashes in the rock

ghosts are pink and blue and gold   agile birds
they are safe when they can change
safe when they can mourn and have voice to mourn
safe when they can hurt   safe and entirely shattering
all of them crowding up into each other's skinny arms

transparent clever yearning bodies and eyes
transparent tears and happy gnashing lovely teeth
transparent organs pulsing and held out like gifts

the witch watches the charged belonging air
rubs her foot in the salt lava
intimate and hot as god

WITCH SISTER

a sort of woman's face
all gods in it
dearest sister
dearest beloved
marriage comes as knife between us—
we don't need it

witch sister
passionate head and arms
excellent culottes
on the outside can't tell if you'd see it
the way to breed magic is to put our heads together
for now the new epoch appears
passionate cheek and foot
what of 2000 years for us?
giant churches and pyramids glittering
in a weird unholy air
what of the many
rubbing our stomachs and laughing   like dogs

witch has many sisters
callous hot mouths
sneaky breaths

yes explosions are good
mountains coming down like pebbles
but also

you put a hand in her hand
witch's hair turns to snakes
terrible terrible
and it begins

WITCH KNOWING

under the strange light
witch watches something strange
moving about
wet dark shape in the snow
hurrier
sentient or un-sentient?
animal or mineral?

witch is scared of ghosts on their own
what exhausting thing might they want?
what annoying   painful demands?
what yellow   milk will they force through her
sentimental   and lukewarm wetness

but wet dark shape is not a ghost
is not a thing
is not   in-fact   dark
just throws shadows   about
vibrates lightlessly
in light

witch shouts out an   O

into the hush

wet shape in the sleet shivers
the very white   day
the bright mountains
    the   long tepid grasses

wet shape is not witch's soul
it hovers
is not a soul
is a thing but not

one thing

wet   shape   speaks runes
draws in the sky
an inter-spacial worshipper
of   changed positions

wet shape does not call back

but   it does

its huge   call   shakes the witch's ribcage   wide   open

blue and honey

shimmering index   of inside knowledge

wet shape's voice is not a voice

it is a stranger with no body
somehow making the light sing

'come home'

WITCH AFTER

the witch is under neon glow
the petrol station boy is rubbing her
hand he would wear her makeup
he would wear her perfume
he doesn't have a problem with things like that
the witch is sucking a sparkling lemon drink out of a
long straw her hands are cold
time is incredibly heavy but loose holding itself
up like one of those long distance albatrosses
with huge ungainly wings crossing immense
distances not stopping to eat or shit or cry or think
the petrol station boy shares a cigarette with her
under the no smoking sign which is his way of saying
I don't know what of all to be sorry for but I am sorry
the witch permits a half smile and explains the system
of land enclosure to him while she takes little menthol puffs
she hasn't looked in the mirror for three days and can feel
her face growing into itself
in the car park the devil is waiting for the witch he has
on a green dress his hair is in a slick ponytail his boots
are shiny and dotted with diamante studs
he is thinking about the flammable nature of everything
and how it could still be burned up at any time
even the concrete the plastic files the nanotechnology
and a little part of him is thinking about god as it always is
thinking about the word liberation and its sound
the witch has loam on her cold hands she has soot
on them and bird's feathers
she tells the petrol station boy about what happens
when you agree to go and live in a foxes' den
how your face gets smaller how you do these shivered
scratchy screams how you bite into raw chicken
how you don't do it what you do you do something else
how crows talk to you and come off kind of bitchy
the petrol station boy laughs he is so young that he looks insane
to have only just turned up to the party and nonchalantly
drink an orange juice in that manner while summer is developing
because anything bad can happen and anything can
teeth snapping and cawing blood making little pathways
the devil is shouting over to the witch
the witch is shouting back and she is just shouting like she
will always be just shouting and shouting and singing quietly
and dancing around the petrol station forecourt strangely

INTERROGATION (2)

How do you do your magic?

How is so balletic, how is like a dance spectacular, getting up
from your seat at the back of the stage and rushing into the
spotlight, rushing into movement, a body doing not exactly
what is 'natural' to it (is dance natural) but what its potential
is, the shapes that flesh didn't command only opened.

How do you do your magic?

If there is a worst word it is nostalgia, the choirs
twisting a larch into a tea towel, if you make it
warm and curling, and so the twitching knowledge
sinks a little, my instinct to stuff leaves into my mouth
recedes, smaller and smaller the incantations and the
freshness.

Have you written your spells down for others to make use of?

aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa

Where did you learn your knowledge of witchcraft?

I could pick any woman. i.e. Iphigenia i.e. Jane Grey
Buy a wife, have a nice and symbolic wedding, take her home,
put your penis in there, make some humans. Sometimes you buy a dress.
Sometimes you are sort of kind and have a blond face, sometimes
you are shit, or drown her with one hand pocketed. Inside that, never.
Inside, a slick web. A field of tubers processed under electric lights.
Please record a million, million, million, million, million ghosts.
Please record a system of language never heard before on the surface of the earth.

What are your plans for treasonous action against the King and state?

If I say the witch knows things, you won't enjoy. I could smash every
dousing crystal, apparition, rune, astrological symbol, bassinet, globe
of silver, dagger, pleated skirt and we would still. Dogs come
singing like well born ladies on a good day.

How many times have you used your craft for material gain?

There was once a person I led to be killed. In the ballad it
was four roses on a pale cheek, it was wet long hair like
trailing oil. I found myself radicalised. I found the state I was
in unbearable. I found that violence looked pure, all the clean
edges. When the call came. He was quite small for what he'd
done. I never felt less bad. I was. It was freezing, totally freezing.
Everything was a new country, the way you notice things when
you first visit a city, the half open windows, the smell of orange
blossom, the bottle green trams and full skirted waitresses.
Something after all this time had occurred or was occurring.
Not good, existent. Afterwards my lover put a small
kiss on my mouth and said, do you really hate us all?
And I said, obviously.

Have you attempted to draw others into your dark arts?

The best time though wasn't then, all that dry, agonised
scratching. The best time was a Tuesday, we didn't go
into college. We cut up magazines into strange art forms
and listened to the radio. The sun had the touching innocence
of the early 90's, hair bleached a pale lilac at the edges.
There was a little world and it didn't say anything, nor
did it have to perform. No one self-consciously did a
pillow fight in their training bra. Instead, our legs got
warm. Instead we made mothers into a word as easy as
drinks in a bowl of ice. We found all the thoughts
there had not been time for in the previous, saw tremendous
fleets of new work flood into the hallway. The Odyssey had
a bit about periods. One new love poem for each asteroid
in the outer atmosphere. Some thawing. All the time I was
thinking, I got it back, I got it all back.

\cunt hex

all the attention & cold love
waiting at the finland station for the trains to rush in
oh
this cunt is a commie red until the very end
this cunt is a commie with its heat set onto surplus value
be as afraid as you can be afraid
be afraid until you tremble the cunt wavering through concrete
so hardly and so softly

cunt hex is the very end of men
it sees you in the small eye
your badly written messages and stink of nerve gas
what is this portable transmission   what are these borders
wet and sticky to the touch
blackened tongue parts hanging off porches

the cunt eats ice cream from the clean bowl of your skull
laughing
bands together all of the hamlets w/ needlepoint accuracy
cries in the shower cries onto newspapers cries during sex cries at passport control
cries in the sky down in the pit covered in swivelling happy tar

the cunt has face turned out has lobes switched onto rental practices refuge with a huge heart in it
please tell me again to my face that emotion has no place in the body of language
please tell me again why police try and crawl up in this mouth how it spits them out crisping
nicely

a cunt hex is a terrible thing
you are a wet bone in a pool of other bones
you can feel this in your bowels your sunken boy-womb where snow breeds
it comes in at the root of your spine it is a temple to your beautiful self pity
it is a temple where everything burns where the body burns and all the deserving angels
go into the pyre

hex ends your accretion of capital
hex hears you at night the way you fuck— pathetic and nasty
it's both weak and sort of aiming towards violent
we'll stop all that your mouth choke with dousing rods
you thought there was a conspiracy of women didn't you you thought that
yes you're right of course
we are laughing at your dick just like you assumed
but for completely different reasons

hex from a cunt is a blue skill
essential as seabirds
meaningful aspect
good work that must be done at the level of dirt
work that must draw all the people together all the workers
all the cunt workers taut and loosening
all the cunt workers cuntless or heavy
all the cunt workers rising up
they will put their program of songs onto the curriculum
they will be herbivore but really nasty really awful
cunt hex is matter of fact
it is excising the bad matter cutting away at what has gone off
your little standards your medley of avant-garde hits
where the world is your emotionless brunch party where the world is what you do to it one great
battlefield heaving with unsuitably attired corpses with all your small type books so ugly in the
way of actual plants

we are all so damaged and imperfect we are all so hurt know that as I hex you I hug you know
that as you are hexed and the blood is pouring from your head and groin that it is only because I
love everything that is alive it is only because after the source of the infection being sliced and
opened up to the parched grass it is only then that our work truly begins only then that the dour
singers get murdered and you get allowed to breathe

a kind of tender petalled forgiveness comes in my hate for you
a forgiveness that knows how it is to hurt and hurt on when inside you turn off

the cunt has its own pink-brown seashell-salted brightening solution for all this

Bibliography

Abbs, Peter, ed. *Earth Songs: A Resurgence Anthology of Contemporary Eco-poetry*. Cambridge: Green Books. 1990.

Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1996.

Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
--- *Commitment*. ada.evergreen.edu. Accessed September 6, 2016.http://ada.evergreen.edu/~arunc/texts/frankfurt/commitment/commitment.pdf.
--- *Minima Moralia, Culture and Materialism*. Translated by E.F.N. Jephcott. London: Verso, 2010.
--- *Negative Dialectics*. New York, NY: Continuum, 2003.

Astley, Neil, ed. *Earth Shattering: Ecopoems*. Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books. 2007.

Berry, Emily, Anne Carson, and Sophie Collins. *If I'm scared we can't win*. London: Penguin Books, 2016.

Branch, Michael P., and O'Grady, Sean, eds. *Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice.* ASLE. Accessed September 12, 2016. http://www.asle.org/wpcontent/uploads/ASLE_Primer_DefiningEcocrit.pdf.

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by M. Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.

Bate, Jonathan. *The Song of the Earth*. London: Picador, 2000.

Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.
--- *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

Berry, Wendell. *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*. Washington, D.C. Counterpoint, 1998.

Bernstein, J. M. *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Blackie, Sharon, Knowles, David, eds. *Entanglements: New Ecopoetry*. Isle of Lewis: Two Ravens Press, 2012.

Bloom, Harold. *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell
     University Press, 1977.

Bolla, Peter De, and Stefan H. Uhlig. *Aesthetics and the Work of Art: Adorno, Kafka,
     Richter*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Bryson, J. Scott. *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah
     Press, 2002.

Carson, Anne. *Decreation*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2006.
     --- *Plainwater: essays and poetry*. New York: Vintage Books, 2000.

Caplow, Florence, A Cohen, Susan, eds. *Wildbranch: An Anthology of Nature,
     Environmental and Place based writing*. Salt Lake City: The University of
     Utah Press. 2010.

Clark, Timothy. *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*.
     Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Coole, Diana H., and Samantha Frost, eds. *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and
     Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

Cook, Deborah. *Adorno on Nature*. Durham: Acumen, 2011.

Coupe, Laurence, ed. *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*.
     London: Routledge, 2000.

Cowley, Jason, ed. *The New Nature Writing*. London: Granta Books, 2008.

Critchley, Emily, ed. *Out of Everywhere 2: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by
     Women in North America and the UK*. Hastings: Reality Street, 2015

Crockett, Harry, "What is Ecocriticism?" in *Defining Ecocritical Theory and
     Practice*, ed. Branch, Michael P., and Sean O'Grady. ASLE. Accessed
     September 12, 2016. http://www.asle.org/wp
     content/uploads/ASLE_Primer_DefiningEcocrit.pdf.p.5.

Deakin, Roger. *Wildwood: A Journey through Trees*. London: Penguin, 2008.

Devall, Bill. *Deep Ecology: George Sessions*. Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1985.

Eeckhout, Bart. *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing.*
     Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002.

Empson, William. *Some Versions of Pastoral*. Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1950.

Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch*. New York, NY: Autonomedia, 2014.

Foster, Roger. *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007.

Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Gibson, Nigel C., and Andrew Rubin. *Adorno: A Critical Reader*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002.

Gifford, Terry. *Pastoral*. London: Routledge, 1999.

Glotfelty, Cheryll, "What is Ecocriticism?" in *Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice*, ed. Branch, Michael P., and Sean O'Grady. ASLE. Accessed September 12, 2016. http://www.asle.org/wp-content/uploads/ASLE_Primer_DefiningEcocrit.pdf. p.6.

Grey-Street, Laura, Fisher Wirth, Anne, eds. *The Ecopoetry Anthology*. (San Antonio: Trinity University Press. 2013

Grusin, Richard A. *The Nonhuman Turn*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Translated by John Cumming. London: Verso, 1997.

Institoris, Heinrich. *Malleus Maleficarum*. Edited by Jakob Sprenger. Translated by Christopher S. Mackay. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Jack, Ian Robert James., ed. *Country Life: Dispatches from What's Left of It*. London: Granta, 2005.

James, William. *Pragmatism and Other Writings*. Edited by Giles B. Gunn. New York: Penguin Books, 2000.

Jarvis, Simon. *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2007.

Jamie, Kathleen. *Findings*. London: Penguin, 2005.

Kapil, Bhanu. *Ban en banlieue*. New York: Nightboat Books, 2015.
        ---*Schizophrene*. New York: Nightboat Books, 2011.

Kirsch, Adam. "The Patron Saint of Inner Lives." The Atlantic. Accessed September 06, 2016. http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-patron-saint-of-inner-lives/471468/.

Knickerbocker, Scott. *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012.

Lasky, Dorothea. *Awe*. Seattle, WA: Wave Books, 2007.
--- *Black Life*. Seattle, WA: Wave Books, 2010.
--- *Rome: Poems*. New York, NY: Liverlight Publishing Corp, 2016.
--- *Thunderbird*. Seattle, WA: Wave Books, 2012.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Raw and the Cooked. Vol. 1. Mythologiques*. New York: Harper & Row, 1969.

Lilburn, Tim. *Going Home: Essays*. Toronto: Anansi, 2008.

Maitland, Sara. *Gossip from the Forest: The Tangled Roots of Our Forests and Fairytales*. London: Granta, 2012.

McArthur, Margaret. *Earth Magic: Seasonal Guide*. Berkshire: Capall Bann Publishing, 1993.

Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980.

Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, s.v. "Definition of Divinity." Accessed September 12, 2016. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/divinity.
--- "Definition of Ecology". Accessed September 06, 2016. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ecology.
--- "Definition of Grace." Accessed September 07, 2016. http://www.merriam- webster.com/dictionary/grace.
--- "Definition of Periwinkle." Accessed September 29, 2016. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/periwinkle.

Moore, Jason W. *Capitalism in the web of life: ecology and the accumulation of capital*. New York: Verso, 2015.

Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.
--- *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
--- *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*. Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2013.
--- *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

Nelson, Maggie. *Bluets*. S.L: Jonathan Cape, 2017.

Ngai, Sianne. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Cambridge, MA:
 Harvard University Press, 2012.

Nguyen, Hoa. *As long as trees last*. Seattle, WA: Wave Books, 2012.

O'Connor, Brian. *Adorno.* Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013.

Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. "Etymology of Idea." Accessed September
 18, 2016. http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=idea.

Oswald, Alice, ed. *The Thunder Mutters, 101 Poems for the Planet.* London:
 Faber and Faber. 2006.

Oxford Online Dictionary, s.v. "Definition of Pastoral." Accessed September
 07, 2016. http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/pastoral.

Pick, Anat. *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film*.
 New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

Porteous, Alexander. *The Forest in Folklore and Mythology*. Mineola, NY: Dover
 Publications, 2002.

Ramayya, Nisha. *Notes on Sanskrit*. Hunstanton, Norfolk: Oystercatcher Press,
 2015.

Reines, Ariana. *Mercury*. Albany, NY: Fence Books, 2011.

Roper, Lyndal. *Witch craze: terror and fantasy in Baroque Germany*. New Haven:
 Yale University Press, 2006.

Serio, John N. *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens.* Cambridge,
 UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Sessions, George, and Bill Devall. *Deep Ecology: Living as If Nature Mattered.* Salt
 Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1985.

Sessions, George, ed. *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-first Century*. Boston:
 Shambhala, 1995.

Smith, Joe, Renata Tyszczuk, and Robert Butler. *Culture and Climate Change:
 Narratives*.

Snyder, Gary. *Turtle Island*. New York: New Directions, 1974.

Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. New York: Viking, 2005.

Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 2006.

--- *Opus Posthumous*. New York: A.A Knopf, 1957.

--- *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. New York:
     Knopf, 1951.

Tarlo, Harriet, ed. *The Ground Aslant: Radical Landscape Poetry*. Bristol: Shearsman
     2010.

Uschan, Michael V. *The Salem witch trials*. Milwaukee, WI: World Almanac Library,
     2004.

Wang, Jackie. *Tiny spelunker of the oneiro-womb: dream selections, Oct. 7, 2014 –
     Feb. 4 2015*. New York, NY: Capricious, 2016.

Watts, Carol. *When blue light falls*. Hunstanton, Norfolk: Oystercatcher Press, 2008.

Zuidervaart, Lambert. "Adorno: Key Concepts." Notre Dame Philosophical
     Reviews. Accessed September 12, 2016.