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“Hubcap and Lichen”:
Anti-Anthropocentrism in Libby Hart’s *Wild* and Bonny
Cassidy’s *Final Theory*

Libby Hart, *Wild*

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Bonny Cassidy, *Final Theory*

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In a poem from the first section of Bonny Cassidy’s *Final Theory*, we are shown a particularly striking scene: in a makeshift darkroom in a blighted future, a double-exposed photograph reveals “lichen and hub cap / printed across one another // like two hands braced against the light, a herald for the / Anthropocene” (13). This palimpsest of natural and manufactured worlds is symbolic of the new ecological age in which the human impact upon our planet has become inescapable. The current turn towards ecopoetics, and ecological philosophy more broadly, speaks of a desire to revise our habituated anthropocentrism and to reposition the human subject as dependent upon and implicated within complex global systems of interrelation. Given that lyric poetry in particular has a subjective, or even solipsistic, bent, there is, according to Timothy Morton in “The Dark Ecology of Elegy”, a necessary tension between the human self and the “radical others” (269) of the nonhuman world that can be seen throughout most conscientious contemporary poetry, whether overtly ecopoetic or not. In reading both *Final Theory* and Libby Hart’s *Wild*, we discover poetry in which humans are intimately connected with the worlds they inhabit, and throughout which the crises of our current ecological moment are illuminated.

As Dorothy M. Nielsen writes, the foundation for contemporary ecological thought rests on the assertion that “‘nature’ has been considered an inert resource since the Enlightenment” (141) and that humankind’s continued existence in the Anthropocene must be reevaluated to account for our position, not as masters of nature, but as one part in an interrelated ecological system. Ecological art offers an explicit challenge to anthropocentric human behaviours, often through

an elegiac form that imagines the dire future consequences of continued environmental exploitation. However, as Morton suggests, these works “fuse elegy and prophecy” (254) as they offer a simultaneous vision both of the possible future and of an idealised past that is always already lost.

Morton argues that this double vision can stand in the way of a genuine reformation of our notions of the natural world. It follows, then, that rather than glancing back at an idyllic past and forward at an imperfect future, we should read ecopoetry first and foremost as a reflection of the present moment and present *oikos*, our ecology right now. Hart’s poetry in *Wild* provides a backwards glance in the first section of the book, through lush, detail-rich evocations of animals and objects that have been enshrined in mythical thought. This is countered, however, with the more intimate, personal poems in the second section (including a number of poems depicting the interrelationships of starlings and human tourists in Rome, as well as three elegies for members of her family). Cassidy casts her gaze in the other direction, offering a speculative vision of two future moments: in the near future, a couple scavenge a life from the wreckage of civilization; farther into the future, a strange posthuman girl explores a blighted space seemingly empty of human life. In both cases, we must acknowledge that, in elegising the past and foretelling continued loss in the future, we distance ourselves from our own position within present ecological systems. Morton’s exhortation that ecological thinking requires “radical intimacy with radical strangers” (269) is borne out in both of these collections, as the poets seek to connect past to present and present to possible futures.

If, following Barbara Johnson, we treat “lyric poetry ... as a poetry of the subject” (309), we can consider the position of nature as an object, a background upon which subjectivity can be constructed and from which the lyric subject draws inspiration. The natural sublime that persists through Romantic and neo-Romantic poetry (and which, arguably, also underpins modern conservationist thought) is distant and separate from us. The natural world is valorised, but rarely is it inhabited. Wordsworth’s daffodils, gazed at from afar, are significant only due to the effect they have on the speaker – the lyric subject is central, and the natural world is a sublime yet distant peripheral.

In order to escape this solipsism, a more conscientious mode of contemporary poetry is obligated to address the tension between the lyric self and a world that can no longer be held at a distance. This is not just the domain of ecopoets, but of many others whose work challenges what Laurel Peacock describes as the anthropocentric “definition of nature as [a] passive backdrop” (86) to human activity. Though their tones and styles diverge, Hart and Cassidy are both adept wordsmiths grappling with the responsibility of the lyric subject to the world that we inhabit. Hart’s work evokes the mythical and spiritual dimensions of the natural world, as well as the intimate realities of elegy, and demonstrates the complex interactions between the human and the nonhuman through her detail-rich descriptions and verdant, playful language. In contrast, Cassidy’s comparatively restrained exploration of a speculative planetary future positions the self as intrinsically related to the wilderness and advocates for connectivity between humans, living, dead, and yet to come.

Rather than treating nature as a sublime otherness, Hart offers a lush lyrical exploration of the relationships between real and mythical nature in the first section of *Wild*, fittingly titled “Huginn and Muninn” after the ravens which give blind Odin his oversight of the world. These symbiotic relationships between human and nonhuman organisms are recognised as intrinsic to

the mythical stories that Hart draws on, as well as to our lived experience. This also, obliquely, accounts for the metamorphic, almost phantasmagoric details in Hart's poems:

I think of all the shape-shifters
moving in and out of their bodies. ("Scent" 9)

The capacity for empathy and intimacy that comes from moving in and out of different bodies and different experiences serves to connect the human and nonhuman, the organic and mechanical. "Scent" concludes with two new forms of embodiment

A slender man bends to become a leopard,
an octopus walks out of the sea. (9)

Elsewhere, birds evolve into mechanised drones ("Mutable" 26); the fox-spirit of Japanese folklore, the *kitsune*, finds that her "Otherworldly redness sheds easily" as she takes a human form ("Kitsune" 15); the she-wolf who nursed Romulus and Remus returns to human habitats while "muttering wolfchat" ("Wolf" 41). This transference of characteristics results in lush, lyrically evocative poetry, and Hart is at her best when she is subtly transforming language to reflect the energy and flexibility of her subject-matter. The inhabitants of these poems are constantly changing shape, adding evolutionary variety and unpredictability to the system, and Hart's language is likewise metaphorical, kaleidoscopic, metamorphic and unpredictable.

These are poems of creation, evolution, the endless becomings of life, operating in "edgeland", the liminal space between rationality and dreaming, where "each smoke of thought is read with closed eyes" ("Aurora" 16) and where change is heralded most frequently by the appearance of birds. In "Branwen's Bidding" (part of the "Huginn and Muninn" section but subtitled with the Latin name of the common starling and thus closely connected to many of the later poems), the bird is both messenger and mimic. The starling in this poem carries both a sister's written letter to her brother and the echo of her voice, learned along with "a screech of barn owl, a burr of tractor" (23). It seeks and speaks in her stead, sent to "Look for him in cloud and in wave" and to "rest against his overcoat / and mimic me" (23). This mediated intimacy is enriched by the bird's presence, which stands in for human touch and speech; the starling makes contact between the two siblings possible. However, this poem, like a handful of others throughout the book (including "Quiver", which faces "Branwen's Bidding"), seems to slip into a typically Romantic anthropocentrism, with the natural world portrayed simply in its instrumentality. Hart's language remains dazzling, her images evocative and rich, and given that her project is not explicitly an eco-poetic one, this is a minor fault, but it demonstrates the trap of historical or mythic retrospection: there is the constant peril of merely replicating the ideas and approaches from which one is trying to make something new.

In offering a speculative vision of future loss, cataclysm and near-extinction, Cassidy faces different difficulties in *Final Theory*. Despite its title, there is very little overtly theoretical in this collection – rather, Cassidy's work is grounded, immediate and personal, and it confronts us with an eerie sense of the self being made and unmade by language as ephemeral as the tides. In comparison to the lushness of *Wild*, this is a work of scarcity, and is clearly engaging with contemporary concerns regarding environmental degradation and destruction. We can see this degradation in Cassidy's masterfully deconstructed grammar and syntax: sentences break, nouns and verbs shift; this is language itself being taken to the "edgeland" between sea and sand.

Final Theory arose from Cassidy's 2011 research trip through the Southern Ocean, funded by an Antarctic Arts Fellowship. As Cassidy recounts in "The Ice Was All Between", an essay

published by *Meanjin*, landfall on the Antarctic continent was thwarted by loose icebergs and accumulated sea ice, and as a result, this work is formed less from direct experience than from “some composite idea of Antarctica I now had no hope of seeing” (11). The polar icecaps remain, for the majority of us, a distant and sublime wilderness, inaccessible and unimaginable. However, *Final Theory* offers a compelling solution to this problem: if Antarctica must remain speculative, then surely it is the ideal site for broader imaginings of our ecological future, and for challenges, as Cassidy writes in “Wondrous Cauld”, to the “illusions of immediacy and continuity” to which we, as a species, cling.

This question of continuity is exemplified in the structure of the collection, which alternates between sections focused on near-future couple and those focused on a posthuman girl. Both are traversing landscapes in crisis, isolated within a blighted world, but there is a connection between them, two moments of existence “linked by a theoretical wave” (18). Without knowing it, the couple are creating artefacts to be found in the future. The photographer is capturing images in memoriam of a lost world:

“We’ll drive ’til this land swims,”
you say. “My camera might sink
but we’ll be safe inside it:
fat and rich and pink.” (9)

It is he* who preserves the images of hubcap and lichen, while the poet preserves them all in her words, as historian, prophet and elegist. *My pronouns here are hypothetical and heteronormative, based on the sense that the journey of the couple is tinged by autobiography and Cassidy’s own trips with her partner, photographer and writer Tim Grey. Sometimes, in the face of the blighted sublime, “the poem writes itself” (48); at others, it creates and recreates the “speechless” world:

Either poetry or a fracture could restart
the river’s current: un-complicate
that concrete dam
just as these words cup
the old lake – still faintly carved and sunk –
and undo its eclipse. (42)

This passage subtly juxtaposes human and nonhuman: on the long view, the construction of the “concrete dam” to manage and control the environment is as futile as the attempt to capture this environment in words. However, in the face of the “eclipse” of humankind, the poet takes solace from the creative power of language – the power to reverse, if only in imagination, the ecological ruin that surrounds her.

In this collection, language does more than create the world anew. Cassidy’s poems fracture the relationship between invention and description, as the posthuman girl is marked from the beginning as a text being written by the poet: “One letter at a time. I write her out” (1). She is a hypothetical future, a consolation to shore against the ruin that surrounds the couple. In creating photographs and poems, they are clinging to the hope for continuity and connection with future people: “The poem and the photo are desire / collected, dispersed” (55). The girl is a crucial part of this desire, and the poet recognises “my heartless twin; useless thing” (10) as a fellow explorer in a complex and unpredictable ecosystem. Throughout these poems, the imaginary is no less alive than the real, whether in memory, dream, poem or possible future. The

posthuman child and her aquatic world are rendered as vividly as the more “realistic” lyric subjects, as a resourceful inheritor of this barely recognisable world.

However, the elegy here is for more than just the environment, though the devastation of ecological systems is apparent through the continued observations of broken birds and waterways evaporated into puddles. This collection offers a speculative mourning for the ultimate loss: the loss of the human species as “We go / into the sough / of stopless / beginning” (60) in the final poem from the couples’ perspective, the loss of the lyric subject, the extinction of our species and the evolution of something, *someone*, simultaneously familiar and radically other. The posthuman child inherits the flotsam and wreckage of the human world as she “gulps enough brine / to sink / onto a rift shelf piled with trash”, including “a spread of morsels not seen since her lives / on the surface: canisters, their reels of punctuated weed” (67). These relics of humanity are treated as part of the new ecology, one species of weed amongst many others, and though the child remembers terranean life, it is the artefacts of our own existence – cameras, cars, tabletops – that are defamiliarised and othered. It is confronting to imagine that the “avenues of the last ice” (70) will be witnessed, not by humans like us, but by some radical other to whom our language, objects and experiences are barely coherent. However, this reinforces the anti-anthropocentric view of our planetary ecology: humankind is one part of a complex and varied system of objects and subjects, selves and others, one “cool accident” (78) amongst many.

The ecological double visions presented in *Wild* and *Final Theory* are stylistically divergent, but ultimately offer the same opportunities to consider our present *oikos* in its relations to a mythologised past and a speculative future. Hart and Cassidy both blur the lines between the imaginary and the real in a manner that does not commonly occur in more vehemently ecopoetical works: Hart offers visions of abundance, interrelation and symbiosis while Cassidy portrays the feared loss of connection that accompanies ecological devastation. The richness and restraint that characterise their respective works serve to reflect the spaces and habitats depicted by them, and to challenge the anthropocentric presumption that the human subject is somehow separate from the ecological systems of our planet.

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