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TOWARD THE DEFINITION OF ECOPOETICS

But who, if he chose, could not touch the bottom of thought? The poet does not, however, permit himself to go beyond the thought to be discovered in the context of that with which he is dealing: no ideas but in things. The poet thinks with his poem, in that lies his thought, and that in itself is the profundity.

--William Carlos Williams, *Autobiography*

Ecopoetics joins two ideas in one without hyphenation but with a few prepositional connectives such as "about," "for," "against," "with" and "between." It is a *gathering\** together of ecology and poetics: to use the term in vogue in literary criticism today, it is the intertextuality of the two disciplines. Their very language of *intertextuality* fashions the ecological imperative that in the UNIVERSE everything is connected to everything else. In the context of modern technomorphic civilization, the ecopoet is a *deconstructionist* who is by nature radical and subversive. His vocation is to deregulate the monopoly of established truth and demand the transformation of the given or accepted toward a new discovery of reality. As a radical the ecopoet intends to *uproot* the way the world of men is and has always been. However, he is not a nihilist because he replaces what is old or uprooted with something new. The ecopoet is a supreme de(con)structionist -- the one who destroys and constructs simultaneously. It was William Carlos Williams who said: "destruction and creation are simultaneous." Take John Dryden's *A Song for Saint Cecilia's Day* (1687). As her legend was told by Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales*, Saint Cecilia was a Christian martyr and the patroness of

church music. The poem's last line reads: "And Music shall untune the sky." Here to "untune" means to "destroy" in the sense that music marks the beginning and end of creation. The eco-poet aims to "untune" and "(re)tune" the world.

Heidegger's thought is an impeccable signpost to eco-poetics. By "questioning" as "the piety of thinking," he intended to uproot or overcome the metaphysical tradition of the West from Plato to the technostucture of the modern world. He spoke of the fourfold unity (*Einheit*) of sky, earth, gods and mortals -- including of course (wo)man as the mortal of all mortals. The poetic is supreme and intrinsic to the thought of this fourfold unity, the topology of Being. For, after the fashion of Holderlin and Rilke, it is the acme of thinking. Poetry for Heidegger does not surmount the earth in order to escape it, but rather it brings (wo)man onto, and makes him belong to, the earth: it brings him *dwelling* on earth. The thought of the eco-poet should teach us how to dwell on earth.

The "calling" of eco-poetics is to invent a new epistemology of moods between humans and their surrounding world by means of language. In a significant way the eco-poet is a wordsmith as well as a guardian of language. However, his language must be *attuned* to the world of people and things. It must be receptive and reverential, not calculative, manipulative and representational. As Emerson put it, all thinking is "a pious reception."

Since time immemorial the Chinese have insisted on the idea of rectifying names (*cheng ming*) -- the utmost carefulness of speaking and writing because language is not extrinsic to our conduct and our conception of the world. Speaking or saying, for example, is not describing but performing as an integral part of the moral conduct of (wo)man as

human. The poet is often described literally and metaphorically as "creator," "legislator," "ambassador," etc. In our context here, the eco-poet is, like Hermes, a messenger of the silent cosmos. The "economy" of words betokens the genius, gift and virtue of the poet as messenger. The poet knows of no "waste." In this sense, the poetic essence is embodied in the Japanese *haiku*, and all poetry is, so to speak, the *bonsai* of literature as writing (*acriture*). "Small is beautiful" embodies the aesthetic quintessence of all poetry. Eco-poetics is the way of thinking *economically*.

The poet teaches us how to establish our rapport with other people and a myriad of things in nature. The poet's communication with the world by the economy of words is not one of prolonged and distanced mediation, but rather it is one of immediacy or a short cut without short-circuiting. In short, the poet's language is *diatactical* in the sense that it implies the close contact between any two distinguished elements with the sense of touch or tactility--the intimacy which shortens the distance between the senser and the sensed without short-circuiting. Poetry is, as it were, the "handicraft" of language. As far as I know, there is no poet who stresses language as the diatactics of (wo)man and the world of things more strongly than William Carlos Williams. As Joseph N. Riddel states eloquently and poignantly in his deconstructive study of Williams, *The Inverted Bell* (pp. 32-33):

Language is Williams' measure of man. Man lives in the house of language, and carries out his transactions there. And language is the perfect instance of touch as measure. Through language man touches the world of things. He does not take possession of the world but takes his place in it, not as

subject but as object. Through language man touches other men; he becomes a self only in his relation with the other and to the unknown. This is objectification, knowledge. It is appropriate that both marriage and the city are at once figures for and manifestations of this kind of knowledge, of relation, and that each is a supplementary figure for the poem. But the modern city and the modern marriage are not such figures. On the contrary, they are manifestations of the failure of language, of its loss of measure, of its historical distancing: evident in the divorce that characterizes the contemporary relationship of man and woman, in the unbridgeable distance between culture and nature, and most crucially in man's "blockage" from his origins, or from the eternal bridge.

Humans were able to speak before they wrote, and they must have sung before they spoke. "Homer 'follows' Orpheus as inevitably as poetry follows song, action follows vision, or writing follows speech." (Riddel, *ibid.*, p. 5) Without doubt poetry and music are closely related. The poet Eliot spoke of "the music of poetry" and the composer Stravinsky reciprocally spoke of "the poetics of music": since the immemorial poetry and music have been chiasmic. In the ancient worlds, the discovery of sound was associated often with that of the universe itself. In ancient Greece, *mousike* meant music, poetry, drama and dance all at once. In oral or preliterate culture, poetry was sung with the aid of a stringed instrument. Homer was an oral poet who sang his poetry. As the legend goes, Orpheus was a musician who was able to make the whole of nature dance in delight. He made rocks, mountains, streams, trees,

forests, animals and birds dance as well as (wo)men. The ecopoet must be Orphean. In his poetry as Orphean embodiment or incarnation, the word and the dead are one and the same. With the advent of writing, however, sight has superceded hearing and correspondingly the sequential, localizing, analytic and isolating overtook the simultaneous, globalizing, synthesizing and socializing. Somewhere and sometime in the course of history we seem to have forgotten the original "measure" of things as *metron*, as musical timing. We refer to intelligence as a bright rather than a loud mind, and we speak of seeing the truth with the mind's eye rather than hearing it with the mind's ear. The bicameral mind has disappeared.

For the incomparable deconstructionist Nietzsche, only music justifies the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. For many, music is paradigmatic to all other arts. Beethoven exalted music as a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy. Rilke declared that singing is Being (*Dasein*). However, the aesthetic or musical "measurement" of the world should not be mistaken with pure aestheticism. For it is more than the voice of art for the sake of art. So I wish to accentuate harmony as the primary condition of *mousike* or being musical and as a moral and social *principium*. Aldo Leopold was fond of using the metaphor *roundness* (as in the "round river") as the moral parable of ecology that means the biological continuum and interrelatedness of all things and symbolizes the global (i.e., all-encompassing and spherical) scope of ecology as the "measurement" of earth as a "household." The Indian philosopher-poet Tagore spoke eloquently of (wo)man's fulfillment in harmony with nature and considered trees, flowers, rivers, mountains, rainbows and blue skies (i.e., all *wild* things) as indispensable to the *education* of (wo)man as desks, blackboards, books and examinations. In the Chinese view, similarly, there is

also an affinity between the aesthetic and the ethical: the beautiful and the good are synonymous. As the aesthetic is the harmony between (wo)man and nature, so is the good the harmonious relationship between (wo)man and (wo)man: not only is the ethical grounded in the aesthetic, but also harmony is the unifying theme of the aesthetic and ethical. Harmony, therefore, is the essence not only of the aesthetic but also of the interhuman. It is the essence of relationships between (wo)man and nature and between (wo)man and (wo)man. If harmony is the ultimate pitch of musicality, ecopoetics divorced from the sound of music would be deprived of something fundamental, that is the keyboard of understanding reality. For only where there is sociality, is there reality. The ecopoet must sing harmony not as the unitariness of the undifferentiated but as a polyphonic chord or orchestration of the differentiated many. His song is an echo of the universe as the sounding orbit. The ecopoet's voice is the voice of Orpheus. His song celebrates ecotopia.



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\*J. Glenn Gray reports that the German word Heidegger used, *versammelin*, was translated with Heidegger's own approval as "to gather" which is rooted in the old German *gattern* (to couple, to espouse or join in marriage) which in turn was derived from the Greek *to agathon* (the good). According to Thorlief Boman, moreover, the Greek *logos* came from *lego* (to speak) and the root *leg-* is "to gather." *Logos* means "to gather," "to speak" and "to think." In *The New Science*, the eighteenth-century Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico made the following interesting observation: "This was the order of human institutions: first the forests, after that the huts, then the villages, next

the cities, and finally the academies. This axiom is a great principle of etymology, for this sequence of human institutions sets the pattern for the histories of words in the various native languages. Thus we observe in the Latin language that almost the whole corpus of its words had sylvan or rustic origins. For example, *lex*. First it must have meant a collection of acorns. Thence we believe is derived *illex*, as it were *illex*, the oak (as certainly *aquilex* means collector of waters); for the oak produces the acorns by which the swine are drawn together. *Lex* was next a collection of vegetables, from which the latter were called *legumina*. Later on, at a time when vulgar letters had not yet been invented for writing down the laws, *lex* by a necessity of civil nature must have meant a collection of citizens, or the public parliament; so that the presence of the people was the *lex*, or 'law,' that solemnized the wills that were *calatis comitiis*, in the presence of the assembled *comitia*. Finally, collecting letters, and making, as it were, a sheaf of them for each word, was called *legere*, reading."

