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From Mourning to Meditation: Theorizing Eco-poetics, Thinking Ecology

A Dissertation Presented

by

Jessica Lee Curran

to

The Graduate School

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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Composed of twelve chapters and argued through the months of the year, this dissertation analyzes the works of Emily Dickinson and Henry David Thoreau, situating them in a contemporary ecocritical context, but more importantly, in a widened sense of eco-poetics. The project's thesis states that the eco-poet, in mourning the loss of nature as idealization and salvation, embraces a state of radical metaphor-making, which in turn allows for a heightened sense of intimacy and necessitates a commitment to meditation. The cultivation of intimacy and the practice of meditation lie at the heart of ecological thinking and being. In order to theorize ecology in relation to meditation, the project interrogates and rethinks "meditation" as a canonical term through an intervention of non-western epistemology. In moving with the calendar, the chapters address key eco-poetic figures (the stranger, the field, the garden, the heart), processes (mourning, breathing, singing), and literary practices (the notebook, the letter, the calendar). In shaping this narrative of *ecopoiesis*, multiple genres are discussed in relation to meditative practice as a form of diurnal awareness, including the epistle, ode, haiku, journal, lyric fiction, and elegy. In turn, analysis of Dickinson and Thoreau is supplemented by a range of other voices, including contemporary poets Jane Hirshfield, W.S. Merwin, and Juliana Spahr. The project reaches back to Horace's Stoic and Epicurean education for eco-poetic roots in the West and forward to contemporary global extensions and analogues, in particular, Korean poet Ko Un. As ecological thinking requires scale elongation in both temporal and spatial planes, this dissertation ultimately argues for a new mode of reading ecologically, recognizing patterns of interrelation and modes of questioning that widen and deepen a shifting set of perspectives.

*The poet is more in the air than the
naturalist though they may walk side
by side—Granted that you are out of
door—but what if the outer door is open,
if the inner door is shut. You must walk
sometimes perfectly free—not prying nor
inquisitive—not bent upon seeing things—
Throw away a whole day for a single
expansion—a single inspiration of air—*

-Henry David Thoreau

*It is up to the writer to recognize everything
that happens to her as a gift, to love each
thing that comes under the eye's
contemplation, inner and outer. To set up
straw men is not only a failure of heart—it
will also be an inevitable failure of writing.
In this, the lessons of ecology, Zen, and
artistic craft are the same.*

-Jane Hirshfield

*Forever—is composed of Nows—
'Tis not a different time—
Except for Infiniteness—
And Latitude of Home—*

*From this—experienced Here—
Remove the Dates—to These—
Let Months dissolve in further Months—
And Years—exhale in Years—*

-Emily Dickinson

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September

“There is no end to the essence”

Projective Projects & The Ecocritic’s Calendar

The ecological thought is as much about opening our minds as it is about knowing something or other in particular. At its limit, it is a radical openness to everything.

-Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*

Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so. He is in the perpetual predicament that the continuity of things is the whole matter, for him, of comedy and tragedy; that this continuity is never, by the space of an instant or an inch, broken, and that, to do anything at all, he has at once intensely to consult and intensely to ignore it.

-Henry James, Preface to Roderick Hudson

*And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form’d, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.*

-Walt Whitman, “A Noiseless Patient Spider”

Ecology’s most fundamental principle states that everything is connected. And so, ecology has to do with relations and the stories we tell ourselves about infinite connectivity. And as Henry James famously noted, “relations stop nowhere.” In fronting this infinite awareness, the artist draws a “circle” to make some sense and shape of the endless proliferation of relation. Ecology, as much as it is about interrelationships that end nowhere, also concerns the boundaries by which we do something about such expanse. *Poeisis* has to do with making and with creating—with both drawing boundaries and extending beyond them. Driven by radical openness, the ecopoet lets in as much as possible; she senses the work of knowing the self and world—navigating interiority and exteriority— never ends. She also knows creative making is a means of accessing and extending this awareness, even as she must draw boundaries to touch the edges of what is known, in order to verge on what is unknown.

But this is not the only sense of the word. In the 21st century, the word ecology often has to do with the environment, particularly with concern for the environment—with fear and sometimes paranoia. Ecology has to do with global warming, species depletion, toxins, and sustainability. In the 21st century, ecology is green and green is for sale. Some call our current state a crisis; others call it a revolution. There’s an inescapable heaviness to ecology—a tremor accompanying such awareness. But with this tremor, there has also been defensiveness, fear, and

anger. Accordingly, many ecocritics have looked to this crisis, pointing fingers and speaking of better ways of being. They have read literature that draws attention to the damaged earth and championed texts that attempt to save it. It's not that these modes of criticism are wrong, but that when we think of ecology in the context of poetry, we need to expand our associations. Ecology, if anything, asks for wideness. Ecology connects us. Ecology is terrifying and enrapturing and asks us to accept unknowing. Ecology asks us to accept everything. Ecology invites us to consider the implications of our continuity. Ecology demands we come to a fuller, and therefore more unstable, understanding of where and who we are. Ecology asks us to front and to forgive. And finally, as this dissertation will suggest, ecology asks us to mourn and to meditate.

Every story starts somewhere. This story starts in the autumn. The seasons are the most pervasive metaphor in Western poetics for good reason; as their lesson is that of birth and death, the seasons offer a story that shapes our extremes—our suffering and our joy, our loss and our love. The poet's emergence into ecological being starts with grief and suffering. The ecopoet first relinquishes her idealized notions of nature. And because of loss and pain, she must learn a new way. And so, she turns to metaphor. Through the process of making metaphor—of creating new relations and revivifying old ones—the ecopoet establishes a new way of existing in the world. This new way is paradoxical in that it recognizes inherent connection, but also the deep patterns of difference that such relations depend upon. And the further the ecopoet goes into metaphor, the more she emerges into relations that can be thought of as intimate—ones that are startling and unnerving—ones that necessitate self-exposure and vulnerability. Intimacy concerns rhetorical immediacy and the incredible singularity of any human life. Intimacy is unhinging. And so, intimacy necessitates meditative processes. Through meditation, the ecopoet learns new ways of staying with the tremor of intimacy, even in the face of more loss, as it inevitably surfaces again. The ecopoet disciplines herself to a daily practice of self-growth and pays attention to her breath. And in letting go of illusions of nature and literary production, the ecopoet willfully meditates, opening herself to the infinite reaches that ecological thinking releases.

Simply stated, in mourning the loss of nature as ideal and salvation, the ecopoet embraces a radical metaphoricity, which allows for a heightened sense of intimacy and a commitment to meditation. In turn, the cultivation of intimacy and the process of meditation lie at the heart of ecological thinking and being.

This western narrative has a linear projection, although we cannot forget that the seasons inflect a cycle, and as the year turns again, we find ourselves with new loss—we find that loss never ends. Just as these four stages exist with our seasons, a meditative consciousness brings us more fully into the present and makes us more aware that these stages exist simultaneously. As such, a meditative consciousness asks that we cease to judge or idealize one state more than another and rather recognize their inherent interdependence. Interdependent cycles ask and allow us to sense summer in winter and autumn in spring. As Annie Dillard writes, “there is a bit of every season in each season” (Dillard 76). Ecology's ultimate temporal narrative suggests there is only the present—though a deep present that resounds with memory and intention. As much as this project constructs a narrative of emergence into ecological being, it also recognizes the simultaneity of these states—the ripe readiness of the present, and the ways in which each month of the calendar depends upon the others.

Because ecology hinges on infinity, ecopoetics concerns a life commitment; with each day, there are new changes, new experiences, and new impressions. But what does this do to a critic? To an ecocritic? How does the ecocritic read ecocritically? How does a critic, so used to

reading closely and in specialized modes, consider everything? How does she shape a criticism wide enough to allow perspective to endlessly shift? To trace wide patterns of connections and to listen to nuanced voices of intimacy? Part of the difficulty for the ecocritic concerns the process of drawing boundaries. And so, in a way, the ecocritic is compelled to become a poet-critic. The ecocritic must find a form large enough to contain multitudes—the world’s full immensity and the infinite relations, but also one that draws some boundaries to shape that immensity—and to allow her reader to come to closer to it. To do this, the ecocritic, like the ecopoet, projects a project. In my case, it is the construction of a calendar. *Theorizing Ecopoetics, Thinking Ecology* might also be called, *The Ecocritic’s Calendar*.

But what is a project, and why are projects important to ecology? This project chiefly concerns two masters of ecopoetics: Emily Dickinson and Henry David Thoreau. These are old writers who need to be read in new ways. The first question we need to ask is, *What is Dickinson’s project?* Then, *What is Thoreau’s project?* And finally, what does this mean for ecopoetic criticism?

Dickinson

The American Romantic tradition is closely related to the idea of the project, though its most prolific writers rarely used the word itself. Indeed, Emily Dickinson only used it once in a poem, a poem that was transcribed on an envelope, which of course, is somehow a part of her project.

On that specific Pillow
Our projects flit away—
The Night’s tremendous Morrow
And whether sleep will stay
Or usher us—a stranger—
To situations new
The effort to comprise it
Is all the soul can do— (Fr 1554)¹

As in so many instances, Dickinson’s syntax strains certainty. What does seem clear is that the poem hinges on the abyss of sleep. Today’s “projects flit away”—tomorrow, the “tremendous Morrow” might “usher us” as strangers into new situations, and so perhaps present new projects. All “the soul can do” is put forth an effort to “comprise it.”

It seems particularly compelling that Dickinson—a poet so immensely absorbed in engaging projects—barely mentions the word in her copious production of lyrics. If we think of her fascicles, her gardens, her correspondence, and her gift-giving, then we might start to sense the breadth and endless relations between these mediums of expression. And indeed this has been part of the contemporary critical struggle with approaching her work. Sometimes we find ourselves asking, *What is her work?* As this dissertation will argue, when we ask this question

¹ Throughout this dissertation, I will cite Dickinson’s poems through the R.W. Franklin’s numbering in the reading edition. The letters, unless otherwise noted, are cited through Thomas H. Johnson’s numbering system in *Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters*.

and feel anxious concerning the critical meshings its response necessitates, we are starting to theorize ecopoetics.

In *Dickinson's Misery*, Virginia Jackson proposes that we learn just as much about our history of lyric reading from Dickinson's lyrics as anything the individual poems themselves might tell us. In *Choosing Not Choosing*, Sharon Cameron dives into similar questions, thinking through how we understand Dickinson's lyrics when they are read in fascicle form, or when we read them contextually. Cameron's conclusions are revealing; she suggests that "Meaning in Dickinson's poems is produced by relations that evolve and shift" (159) – her subjects and topics teach us "how relations specify subjects by obliquity and juxtaposition, and indeed specify subjects in the process of either evolving or shifting" (45). In reading Dickinson's variant poems and their placements within the fascicles, Cameron argues that "Dickinson economizes meaning" and "regulates the relation between part and whole so that the question What is subject becomes What are its parameters? including What are its textual parameters?" (159). As Cameron suggests, "What is subject" is the same as thinking "What are parameters?" Following this line, when we ask what Dickinson's project was, we must also ask "what are the parameters?" In turn, when we ask what Dickinson's concept of self is, we also ask "How does she draw boundaries?" What happens there? This is why Dickinson's language of circumference will become important, as it allows her to theorize at the edge—not just the edge of the self, but also the edge of poetic creation.

But what is a project? As children we do science projects and art projects. As adults, we might have home improvement projects and self-improvement projects. It has become a word that is so commonplace that we perhaps neglect its meanings. Tracing etymologies, the *OED* turns our attention to the Latin term *prōiectus*, which refers to the "fact of extending beyond a surface or edge, projection." Projects extend and stretch beyond edges—they project—pushing beyond parameters. Cameron's argument is echoed in Dickinson's contention that her business is circumference, drawing our attention to the parameters that allow subjects to form. But although such boundaries are drawn, the work of the project consists in continuing to extend beyond, re-drawing if necessary, but only to sink deeper—to reach further—to imagine more. Dickinson was no stranger to the language of extensive reaching, perhaps best exemplified in her language of infinity. And so, our sense of Dickinson's project might be expounded by turning to her sense of thinking big—because think big she did. How big did Dickinson think? Once again, when we ask this question, we are theorizing ecopoetics.

As a teenager, Emily Dickinson created a Herbarium, which recently has been beautifully replicated in a facsimile edition. On May 7, 1845, she wrote to her school-girl friend Abiah Root: "My plants look finely now. I am going to send you a little geranium leaf in this letter, which you must press for me. Have you made you an herbarium yet? I hope you will if you have not, it would be such a treasure to you; most all the girls are making one. If you do, perhaps I can make some additions to it from flowers growing around here" (L 6). Dickinson would go on always to keep a garden and to write copious poems on flowers, which she would routinely send to relations, often accompanied by a pressed specimen. Her creativity was inspired by and engaged with the world around her. The more one studies her work, the more the connections radiate—the more resonance her lexicon takes on.

Indeed, it is difficult to trace the reach of Dickinson's poesis—the line of her poetic making. She is such an enticing subject for literary critics because her richly metaphorical language allows a flexibility and space for infinite critical identification. Timothy Morton argues in *The Ecological Thought* that "The best environmental thinking is thinking big—as big as

possible, and maybe even bigger than that we can conceive” (20).² But how do we think so big? And how does such big thinking translate into making?

Perhaps into 1789 lyrics and hundreds of surviving letters. Perhaps into woven fascicles and ceaseless writings and re-writings. Perhaps into a herbarium, a garden, a coconut cake recipe, a cricket, and an untraceable exchange between these mediums. Perhaps into an abandonment of the notion of the contained poem and with that, our notion of nature.

What is particularly challenging about ecology is that, in many ways, it defies critical containment. But what I want to suggest is that understanding ecopoetics necessitates that we too project beyond the boundaries of how we think of literary production. While we might acutely analyze details of a particular poem or essay, we need also to project ourselves beyond to imagine the interconnections that radiate through varying media and beyond the formality of publishable literary production. We need to extend beyond the parameters of contained criticism, even as we shape structures and narratives that hold our questions and allow our reaching. Ecopoetics demands creative thinking. Ecopoetics also requires negative capability—a comfort in uncertainty. As Dickinson said of paradise, “All we know/Is the uncertain certainty” (Fr 1421). The same might be said of ecology—we might be certain of its uncertainty—we might commit ourselves to never fully knowing.

Thoreau

Like Dickinson, Thoreau both thought and created in ways that sought to shape the endless relations of ecological awareness. As Emerson wrote after the death of his dear friend:

The scale on which his studies proceeded was so large as to require longevity, and we were the less prepared for his sudden disappearance. The country knows not yet, or in the least part, how great a son it has lost. It seems an injury that he should leave in the midst of his broken task which none else can finish, a kind of indignity to so noble a soul that he should depart out of nature before yet he has really been shown to his peers for what he is. (quoted in Dean 5)

Perhaps more aware of the range of Thoreau’s work than most others, Emerson draws attention to the vast “scale” of his friend’s life’s work—a task that “none else can finish.” And perhaps Emerson’s choice of the term “scale” is most apt, for Thoreau’s “studies” were nothing if not extensive and expansive. And as this dissertation will suggest, when we start questioning a writer’s scale, we are theorizing ecopoetics.

What was Thoreau’s project? Was it his self-conscious cultivation of a metaphoric language as a means of living deliberately, expressed in the poetry of *Walden*? Was it his *Journal*, a work that spanned twenty-four years, forty-seven volumes, and two million words? Was it his travel narratives into boundary environments of extreme resonance—the heights of Katahdin in the *Maine Woods* and the edge of the ocean in *Cape Cod*? Was it his late and

² Because Timothy Morton’s *The Ecological Thought* will be cited with frequency, unless otherwise indicated by a different title, all Morton citations will be from this text.

unfinished works—extensive projects that documented subtle and cyclical dimensions of environmental phenomena?

Thoreau was a writer who never ceased writing, making it a daily labor; in another sense, Thoreau's *poesis* implies a *praxis*. The diurnal action of literary labors entails a commitment to meditation, and his experimentation with the calendar and journal form suggest first and foremost a commitment to the contingency of the present moment. Like Dickinson, his forays into publication and fame were abandoned in favor of a steady commitment to his projects—many still of which press the limits of our means of literary reproduction.

While Sharon Cameron's work on Dickinson's fascicles is among the most valuable criticism available to help us think of the eco-poetic range of the poet's work, Cameron is also one of the more perceptive critics of Thoreau's range as well. In *Writing Nature*, her study of Thoreau's journal, Cameron notes that "The *Journal* itself prohibits the use of many interpretive procedures ordinarily taken for granted" (4). Her conclusions are essential:

The greatest problem posed by the *Journal* is not in fact its length, albeit that is formidable. The greatest problem posed by the *Journal* is our wish to not be assaulted by its ideas as these are at once fearful and familiar: that meaning is not circumscribed; that we cannot excerpt it; that nature remains alien; that, notwithstanding, we continue to see it. In this respect, *Walden* will remain the canonical text, as it converts those interminable *Journal* questions and illustrations to emblems, to recognitions, to codified meanings. (154)

As Cameron notes, the length of Thoreau's *Journal* corresponds to and exceeds the weight of its ideas—that "meaning is not circumscribed" and that "nature remains alien." When Thoreau died of tuberculosis in 1862, he left behind a rich archive of writing projects still very much in process. Bradley Dean explains the substance of Thoreau's final projects, "Thoreau's 354-page manuscript on *The Dispersion of Seeds*, his 631-page manuscript on *Wild Fruits*, his more than 700 pages of notes and charts of natural phenomena in Concord in the 1850's, and his 3,000 pages in twelve notebooks on aboriginal North America remain unknown to the general public—and, with a handful of exceptions, even to specialists in American literature" (Dean 3). It is important to acknowledge the projective trajectories of Dickinson and Thoreau in developing eco-poetic theory. These questions that I have been outlining concerning projects are ultimately questions of ecology's genres, as well as the accordant practices for reading and encountering eco-poetic literary productions, issues that I will also address in "October." Although throughout this dissertation I will turn to the questions engendered by close readings of individual poems and passages, it is critical to always consciously entertain the relation of the close reading to the sense of the life project. Although such relations are not always easily identifiable or explicable, eco-poetic theory demands the literary critic exercise a negative capability in reading and analysis. Eco-poetic theory demands that the critic recognize formal context and contingency—and turn to writers who consciously shaped writing that is loyal to diurnal practice and elongated scale. Because it is so highly subjective, a meditation practice is not something that is easily describable or measurable. In turn, when we think of a writer's textual corpus as a indication of his or her meditative work, we must proceed with openness, with curiosity, and sometimes, with awe.

Leaves of Grass, Ko Un, and the Project's Purpose

If there is one writer who seems to exemplify the reach of the life project, it must surely be Whitman and his ever-expansive *Leaves of Grass*. Although my dissertation will only tangentially reference Whitman, he is, in so many ways, the elephant in the room. *Leaves of Grass* is a classic projective project, one that exemplifies endless additions and revisions, while also offering regenerative metaphors to center the infinite potential of literary work as meditative work. Importantly, *Leaves of Grass* also impels us to question its purpose or underlying motivation. It is my sense that Whitman's project is ultimately grounded in the cultivation of a compassionate sensibility—of opening the self wide enough to embrace all that the self encounters, as the poet best articulates in “Salut au Monde!”:

My spirit has pass'd in compassion and determination around the whole earth.
I have look'd for equals and lovers and found them ready for me in all lands,
I think some divine rapport has equalized me with them. (Whitman 296)

And while *Leaves of Grass* has always been thought of as a national project of the American democratic sensibility, Whitman's compassion stretches beyond the confines of nation and his poetic vision and “spirit” pass “around the whole earth.” With Whitman, we might consider how a life-project is motivated through the imperative to generate increased awareness, compassion, and inclusion—to not deny anything or anyone from the reaches of the poet's language and vision.

To consider a contemporary example of a project with a similar scope and scale to Whitman's inexhaustible inclusion, we can turn our attentions to Korean poet Ko Un. While imprisoned in the early 1980's, Ko Un “felt called to promise” that if he “ever came out alive, he would set about writing a poetic record of the life of every person he had ever known of” (34). Ko Un's project, *Maninbo* (translated as *Ten Thousand Lives*) is, in the words of Robert Hass, “one of the most extraordinary projects in contemporary literature” (30). And indeed, the scale and scope of Ko Un's work has drawn enough international attention to provoke reporters to wait outside of his home each year before the Nobel Prize for literature is announced. As a national project for a war-torn nation, *Maninbo* is also a deeply meditative literary experiment that hinges on an infinite awareness. And despite the fact that with 4001 poems and 30 volumes, Ko Un completed his final volume, he explains that ultimately, “there is no end to the essence of ‘Maninbo’ and perhaps somebody might see my soul working on the 31st volume” (Sung-jin, no page). The “essence” of the project has no end, and it is precisely this open-form that makes Ko Un such a valuable poet for ecopoetics. However, Ko Un's value for ecopoetics moves beyond the sheer scale of his project; his work is valuable because of what such scale necessitates. Ko Un's project self-consciously offers a collision of poetry and meditation—or a vision of meditation as poetry. In an interview with Patricia Donegan, Ko Un explains the genesis of *Maninbo* in the following words:

The idea of *Maninbo* came at a very difficult point of my life. In May 1980

I was arrested and going to be court-martialed by the emerging dictatorship. I was accused of "rebellion." The people arrested with me were the now-deceased priest Moon Ik-hwan and former president Kim Dae-jung. When you are in a military prison, it's a kind of labyrinth: we didn't know where anyone was, whether alive or dead. If the single weak electric bulb went out, it was a black room, so we were full of fear, for we felt we might be killed at any moment. The thought that really sustained my life was that if I were to get out of there, I would have to write these poems. I thought that even if I didn't do it, the thought in itself would be a source of strength. (Donegan 4)

From this passage, we can see the ways in which *Maninbo* was born as a means of sustaining existence. In the midst of dire suffering, Ko Un vowed to himself that he would give voice to the suffering of his people—the thought itself was “a source of strength.” A Buddhist monk for a period of time, Ko Un developed a project that is inherently meditative; influenced by his monastic training, it offers an example of what type of literary form a meditative consciousness might produce. And although Ko Un recognizes the differences between meditation and poetry, he also expresses their intimate relation through the silence that they share:

Great master Wonhyo of Korean Buddhism said that there are two kinds of truth: truth according to words, and truth without words. You can say that Zen focuses on the truth without the words and that poetry focuses on the truth with words. Yet every poem, all poetry is related to Zen, to meditation, because after each line of poetry there is silence. Although we read the words, between... between there is the silence... (Donegan 5)

The range and dedication of Ko Un's project is incredible, as his vision rivals Whitman's compassionate inclusion. Some poems concern close family members, as the following, “Ch'ung-jo, My Little Brother”:

At the end of the Japanese period we had nothing to eat.
There were no trees on the hills.
Springtime was dreary without azaleas.
Ch'ung-jo, my little brother,
born when I was already a big boy,
chose that wretched time to come into the world.
Mother was carted off on a wagon down Shiorit road
to the hospital near the harbor.
A rough tampon inserted
to keep his head from popping out,
she was carted off on a rickety wagon;
he kept trying to be born but the passage was blocked
as mother hung on to the wagon side
and screamed bloody murder.

So they went off
down Shiorit road
and the kid was born in a hospital called
Guam Hospital so we called him the Guam Kid:
that's how Ch'ung-jo my little brother was born.
Once out, he grew up fine.
He'd go racing off, a pinwheel in his hand.
My brother lived through
Independence, the War, the 1960 Revolution
then just past thirty he died of leukemia.
That kid could work up the beat of any old song,
merrily singing and dancing. (102-103)

As this poem demonstrates, the ways in which Ko Un offers realistic details of the suffering of his subjects is balanced by how he often finds a means of ending the poems with a compassionate vision. Although it was a “wretched time to come into the world” when Ch'ung-jo was born, and although he dies tragically young, we are left with a vision of him “merrily singing and dancing.” This poem is representative of a larger tendency of the poet's project, which sustains a compassionate warmth for his subjects despite whether they are family or only a passing relation from his memory. Robert Hass writes of *Maninbo* how “One would think that the poems would begin to seem formulaic, that the ways of calling up a life would begin to be repetitive, and they never are. In that way it is a book of wonders in its mix of the lives of ordinary people, people from stories and legends, and historical figures. They all take their place inside this extraordinarily rich reach of a single consciousness” (30). And perhaps most importantly, this “extraordinarily rich reach” of Ko Un's awareness is supported by the compassionate acceptance his consciousness allows.

Recently, in a class I taught that dealt specifically with the relationship between meditation and poetry, I had my students read all of Ko Un's English translations aloud, a handful of poems at each session. What emerged from the exercise was a sense of the necessary range of perception as well as the consistent compassion Ko Un managed to have for each subject—even ones that required representations of violence and cruelty. David Ferry explains of Horace how “One of the great pleasures of the four books of Horace's odes is to see *how he will do it this time*. It's like watching a great diver being challenged by one perfect dive to perform yet another, of another kind and degree of difficulty, and another, and he does” (*Odes* x). Ferry's language might easily apply to Ko Un. Part of the reward of reading *Maninbo* emerges from witnessing the ways in which the poet manages, time after time, to construct realistic representations of his people's suffering, including soldiers who perpetuate violence, while simultaneously embracing and forgiving his subjects—offering them all compassion within the larger context of human suffering. As my students articulated, time and time again, Ko Un offers poetic portraits that eschew judgment in favor of acceptance and empathy. Consider the following poem:

In the fall of 1977, as I was on my way
for an interview with the assistant governor,

going down one corridor of Sodaemun Prison,
I met a man so handsome, wow, he left you gaping.
I learned from the guard accompanying me
it was Pak Ch'ol-ung, under sentence of death.

The youngest in his family, Pak Ch'ol-ung
had organized his older brothers, killed
and buried a man and his wife,
antique dealers in Insandong, along with the driver.

Since he was under sentence of death,
he always wore handcuffs,
even in his cell.

That bright smile
those graceful movements
undoubtedly the star in some movie
only it was as if somewhere in his life
the seed of that dreadful act had sprouted
and grown up, taking his body for humus.

On the floor of the cellar
behind the necktie factory of the execution room
his sprawling corpse was neither good nor evil. (346-7)

This poem offers an example of Ko Un's need to write of individuals who perpetuated atrocities, a sad reality of war-torn Korea's history. Withholding judgment of Pak Ch'ol-ung, Ko Un concludes the poem with a sense of equanimity—the sprawling corpse is “neither good nor evil.” And when we recall Ko Un's darkened jail cell, one can imagine the degree of conscious work such a project entails. More than a collection of poems, *Maninbo* is a deeply personal project of an extraordinary range.

Maninbo is certainly a national project, but it is also an ecological one because its awareness is infinite. And although *Maninbo* is formally about people, it is everywhere concerned with the earth and animals that are also intrinsically connected to peoples' lives. Consider the following poem, “Azaleas,” which portrays the ways in which the memory of a young girl named Yang-gum is intimately related to the environmental history of Ko Un's village.

Halmi Hill used to be ablaze with azaleas
until I was four years old.
After that, for several years running
we were reduced to grubbing out the azalea roots
and burning them to heat the rooms in winter.
Those were hard times.
There were no azaleas left to blossom when spring came.

If people were poor, it was only right
that Halmi Hill behind the village should also be poor.
Still, a few azalea roots survived
and soon they at least were blooming again.
Yang-gum, a girl from our village, climbed up to see those azaleas,
wearing a long red ribbon,
piled stones around them and built a fence,
forgot home and talks for a while, just sat there.
“Gosh! What am I doing, still here? Gracious, good gracious!” (61)

This poem, about Ko Un’s memory of the girl Yang-gum with the red ribbon, is a part of the history of Ko Un’s village, socially and environmentally. The need to cut down the azalea trees for fire wood is indicative of poverty and oppression, as well as the endurance of life. And while most poems in *Maninbo* are titled by the subject’s name, this poem emphasizes the correspondence between Yang-gum and the azaleas—red ribbon and azalea flowers—both effected and resilient, connected in the poet’s memory.

Ultimately, Ko Un’s project is valuable for ecopoetic theory because it not only offers a contemporary life-project, but also because it offers us a concrete example of the meditative work the life-project is capable of in an ecological context. And in turning to Ko Un here in order to expand the notion of the project, I am also modeling a critical turn that this dissertation will make throughout. Because Western poetics does not have a developed critical vocabulary to discuss meditation as a poetic practice (the term does not even appear listed in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*), it is necessary and productive to turn to Eastern philosophies and traditions (Yogic and Buddhist in particular), in order to develop a vocabulary and critical framework through which to help theorize the connections between meditation and poetry. In turning to *Maninbo*, we can witness an example of an ecological life-project that is made possible through Ko Un’s meditative consciousness. And meditation, as this dissertation will suggest in varying ways, is the ground for ecological poetics.

On Methodology & Personal Philosophy

Ultimately, the type of ecological criticism that I will theorize in this dissertation is closer to recent global criticism than to much current ecocritical scholarship. In particular the sense of deep time presented by Wai Chee Dimock in *Through other Continents* offers a mode of thinking that adequately accounts for the scale-shifting necessary for ecological thinking. Reflecting the recent pressure put on the construct of the nation-state, Dimock proposes a critical framework that emphasizes American literature not as a “discrete entity,” but rather as a “criss-crossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever-multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures,” which allow a sense of the “abiding traces of the planet’s multitudinous life” (Dimock 3). Advocating a “scale enlargement along the temporal axis,” Dimock’s work exemplifies an opening in critical awareness that moves beyond the parameters of the nation-state and offers literary texts comparative contexts that propel forward in endless relation. Dimock’s emphasis on temporal “scale” in literary thinking is an important foundation for ecological thinking, even as it often asks for scale enlargement upon both temporal and spatial axes. In addition, ecological thinking asks for awareness concerning the

psychological states that correspond to such expansive scale shifts. As my project is directly concerned with poetics rather than literary history, this dissertation will primarily emphasize the ways in which scale enlargement is made possible through meditative consciousness and manifests itself through literary genre, poetic practice, and metaphorical relation. Ecology asks us to think big—but, as I will suggest throughout the following chapters, such wideness must account for, and work to integrate, both internal experience and external awareness. As such, this dissertation will work to creatively integrate a range of critical voices and perspectives, although it will ultimately favor critics who are interested in questions of enlarged scales, whether they be formal, ecological, global, psychological, or existential.

In relation, in its attempt to theorize ecopoetics, this dissertation is guided by a philosophical position that does several things. Primarily, it works to listen to the voices of poets above those of literary critics and theorists. At times it will turn to various literary critics as a subject of critique or commendation, doing the work of a “dissertation,” which demands a degree of intervention and scholarly positioning. However, this project’s underlying position is grounded in my own basic sensibilities, particularly the openness engendered by Dickinson’s epistemological expanse and the literary growth encouraged by Thoreau’s explorative metaphoricity. Also, the basic importance of figures (the field, the heart, the garden), processes (mourning, breathing, singing), and literary genres (the notebook, the letter, the calendar) centralize and condense my critical position. It is my sense that these are key figures and processes that are worth thinking through in working to expand and explore the relationship between meditation, poetry, and ecology. Persistently, my argument advocates the importance of these tropes and practices to ecopoetics; it is my sense that they are worth sitting on and breathing with, as they continue to widen the field and engender further thinking.

In relation, at times, I have traced connections for the sake of their resonance rather than their argument. The tension between the essay and the chapter is often at play. Although a dissertation asks one to dissertate, it would betray my sense of poetry and personal philosophy (in addition to the subject of my project) not to acknowledge the ultimate sense of unknowing that guides my critical practice. In listening to the voice of the poet, it becomes necessary to acknowledge and explore the epistemological uncertainty that strong poetry engenders. Importantly, this same sense of uncertainty also defines ecological thinking, and so, the natural correspondence between poetry and ecology encourages their symbiosis.

In the shaping of this critical tenor, I find it necessary to acknowledge my guiding examples, particularly Robert Pogue Harrison’s voice as a literary critic. As a comparative literature scholar with a command of multiple languages, Harrison’s interest in myth, poetics, and philosophy explores key cultural archetypes, while also paying attention to specific nuances offered by the subjective range of lyric production. When interviewed, he explains his position in the following language:

I see it in the following way, though you may disagree. If there is something distinctive about my approach, it is my insistent listening to the voice of the poet, by which I mean the voice of literature as such. I start from the conviction that literature knows better than philosophy what philosophy seeks to articulate in abstract terms – knows it not only more intuitively but also less naively. Sometimes one must first expose oneself to the abstractions of philosophy in order to discover the universal implications of what offers itself latently and *specifically* in the literary work. I find it frustrating that many theorists

and philosophers who tout their sympathy towards literature often do not make genuine efforts to be guided by what the poem or text is revealing, especially in those cases when they put on an elaborate show of minute textual analysis.³

Harrison's sense of allowing oneself to be "guided by what the poem or the text is revealing" exhibits a willingness of the critic to submit his own political or theoretical agenda to the nuances of the voice he uses to support his position. "Minute textual analysis" is only valuable if it also balances with "insistent listening" to the voice of literature; rather than producing theoretical acrobatics in order to validate the critic's intelligence, it more important to listen, to learn, and to trust literature. But listening to the voice of the poet can at times correlate to the critic's willingness to admit uncertainty, after all, good poetry often affirms the uncertainty that defines the human condition. For the articulation of this perception, I am indebted to the work of Jane Hirshfield, who, as both poet and critic, sheds much light on the relationship between poetry and uncertainty. As she perceptively articulates,

To be human is to be unsure, and if the purpose of poetry is to deepen the humanness in us, poetry will be unsure as well. By the navigation of open-ended yet resonant conclusions, by multifaceted statement, by subtle resolutions and non-resolutions of circumstance and sound, good poetry helps us to be more richly uncertain, in more profound ways. St. Augustine said of Time, "If you don't ask me what Time is, I know, but if you ask what it is, then I don't." But the truth is, we don't need to understand uncertainty or time for them to accomplish their work in our lives, or in poems—all we need do is live them out and through, and that, well, that can scarcely be avoided. ("Poetry and Uncertainty," no page)

Following Hirshfield's sense, this dissertation works to value the intellectual utility of uncertainty even as it seeks to position and affirm. Although our contemporary sense of "dissertating" is often associated with arguing, intervening, and examining—it is important to also recall the term's etymology—*dissertatio* in Latin, which primarily suggests discourse. And so, a dissertation might also be thought of as an opportunity to generate discourse on a subject, with the ultimate objective to widen discourse of the subject, provoking further discourse in future writing projects and fields.

A Final Note: Pedagogues and Ecologues.

³ "Echoes of the Phenomenon—A Conversation with Robert Pogue Harrison," *Image and Narrative: Online Magazine of Visual Narrative*. Volume X. Issue 1 (March 2009) http://www.imageandnarrative.be/Images_de_1_invisible/debruyne.htm. For all citations that come from internet publications, I will include the url in a footnote.

I start this dissertation with “September” as a commitment to my project’s ultimate purpose, which affirms the notion that literary criticism, in its generation of discourse, is ultimately instructive in its intention. Northrop Frye notes that in “literature we have both a theory and a practice” and the “theory of literature is what I mean by criticism, the activity of uniting literature with society” (*Educated* 127). As Frye continues, the “great bulk of criticism is teaching” and the ultimate goal of teaching literature involves the “transfer of imaginative energy from literature to the student” (128). A dissertation, as a theoretical work of literary criticism by a graduate student, is both a written statement of the student’s imaginative energy generated from the study of literature, as well as a commitment to the intrinsic value of literary studies at large. Ecological criticism in particular, as it harbors an awareness of an increasingly strained global position, must work to generate connections between literature and society, between poetry and personal experience, as well as between theory and practice. And so, when I first decided on the shape of a calendar, it was clear to me that it would begin in September. In September we return to school and to the instructive purpose of literary criticism. As such, ecopoetic criticism, like all literary criticism, should always be aware of its pedagogical utility and purpose. As Emily Dickinson puts it best, “September’s Bacculaureate” encourages us to move with the season, to put up our fun, and “turn philosopher.”

September’s Bacculaureate
A combination is
Of Crickets—Crows—and Retrospects
And dissembling Breeze

That hints without assuming—
An innuendo sear
That makes the Heart put up it’s Fun—
And turn Philosopher. (Fr 1313)

October

“Notebooks of the Present”

Four Seasons and The Genres of Ecology

No one, to my knowledge, has observed the minute differences in the seasons....A Book of the seasons, each page of which should be written in its own season and out-of-doors, or in its own locality whenever it may be.

-Henry David Thoreau, June 11, 1851

To sum it up, then—if indeed any conclusion is possible when everybody is talking at once and it is time to be going—it seems that it would be wise for the writers of the present to renounce the hope of creating masterpieces. Their poems, plays, biographies, novels are not books but notebooks, and Time, like a good schoolmaster, will take them in his hands, point to their blots and scrawls and erasures, and tear them across; but he will not throw them into the waste-paper basket. He will keep them because other students will find them very useful. It is from notebooks of the present that the masterpieces of the future are made.

-Virginia Woolf, “How it Strikes a Contemporary”

The matter very well accordeth with the season of the moneth.

-Edmund Spenser, *The Shepheardes Calender*

In this chapter, I will introduce the primary genres that this dissertation will encounter when theorizing ecology. Already in “September,” I have framed the notion of the “life project”—or recognized the ultimate unboundedness (and according critical humility) at the heart of ecopoetic creation. Part of the work of the ecopoet concerns drawing boundaries to do something about the infinite underpinnings of ecological thinking. In turn, the ecocritic must exercise an awareness of the ways in which literary genre confronts infinite relation and creates in the face of such expanse. As my own shaping of an ecocritical calendar attests, employing a seasonal narrative offers a flexible structure that balances difference, innately working through a process of loss and regeneration.

What the genres I will discuss in this chapter share is a complex relationship between mourning, metaphor, intimacy, and meditation. Inherent in their composition is a relinquishment of lyric perfection in favor of an understanding of literary production as a diurnal practice—or an exchange of the notion of a poem as meditation in favor of an understanding of the writer as engaged in a larger process of conscious meditation. Not surprisingly, due to their concentrated interest in daily passings, these different genres often share a heightened awareness of the moment of their composition—often framing themselves through temporal markers, such as a day, a month, a year, etc. Literary genres that explicitly present a temporal frame are productive

for theorizing ecopoetics because they offer boundaries that allow writers to do something about the infinite awareness that ecological thinking propels, both temporally and spatially. In particular, literature that “writes the date,” whether directly, as in a letter or journal entry, or indirectly, in a moment of deep reverence to the season or day—heightens awareness and acceptance of what *is* at a particular moment, rather than projecting idealizations of what could be, which largely fosters mental probing that resists full acceptance. However, as I discussed in “September,” often “life projects” can create critical impasse, as the extent of their scale can challenge epistemological framing and critical authority. And while the “life project” is the ultimate ecopoetic genre, there are other literary manifestations that also encourage and engender further thinking within this perceptual mode.

In her essay “How it Strikes a Contemporary,” quoted as an epigram to this chapter, Virginia Woolf notes that it is important for “writers of the present to renounce the hope of creating masterpieces”—and instead to recognize the contingencies of “notebooks” as a worthy literary genre in and of itself (*Essays* 30). Woolf’s call for the notebook was part of her Modernist confrontation with a new century defined by increasing epistemological fragmentation and the need for new literary forms to develop amidst such radical change. As Woolf sensed, the notebook can serve as a meditation tool—a space where a writer might observe both internal and external passing phenomena. Notebooks provide space for everything—and involve the relinquishment of pressures of publication and external validation. Notebooks are where ecopoetics begin and renew faith in beginnings, regardless of whether or not subsequent revisions and re-writings will turn these initial fragments into more recognizable and reproducible literary productions.

In developing his own theory for American poetry in relation to the environment, Angus Fletcher establishes the importance of what he calls “diurnal knowledge” in the eventual creation of an “environment poem”—or a poem that becomes its own environment. Building from journalistic reporting of daily passings (largely via Whitman), Fletcher describes diurnal knowledge as being “connected to the most basic human needs—living, breathing, sexuality, health, sickness, getting and spending even—but in all cases the knowledge of life that has not yet been mechanized. It is above all seasonal knowledge, a function of natural order” (90-91). Diurnal awareness concerns the “daily, quotidian round of life” and “connects us to major traditional extensions of diurnal time, namely, the myth and fact of the changing seasons, often rendered as an undated yearly calendar.” This type of knowledge ultimately yields a poetry of description rather than narration, and an awareness of the “unclosed messiness of natural process” as “there is nothing but the day, which is always disappearing, reappearing, disappearing, reappearing in perpetual sequence” (92-93). Accordingly, Whitman’s endless present participles and John Clare’s “way of ending-the-poem-without-ending” allow an embracing of “chaos and complexity” rather than a sense of Romantic completion as an echo of Platonic formal holism (92). And while Fletcher recognizes the need for diurnal knowledge in connection to environmental thinking, what he does not discuss in his theory are the ways in which diurnal knowledge is also essential to meditation. Literary forms that emphasize diurnal knowledge do more than just report and record passing phenomena—they also generate an awareness that allows the artist to witness and gradually accept two ecological principles: that everything changes and everything is connected.

It is my intention in this chapter to look at the seasons as ecopoetic form rather than content, not to consider poetry that is about the seasons, but rather poetry that uses seasonal markers to structure its unfolding. This is why I am less interested in Keats’ “To Autumn,”

which, while an exemplary poem that looks deeply into the experience of the season, is not formally constructed by the season it represents. And while it might seem that Dickinson's "lyrics" would undermine my emphasis on diurnal knowledge and uncontained forms, it is important to recall alternate ways of considering these poems. As established in "September," I approach them through Virginia Jackson and Sharon Cameron, who both recognize that Dickinson's perfect lyrics are more a product of our desire for a contained creation than a recognition of the endless contingencies and meshings of mediums that ultimately characterize her literary *corpus*. Indeed, in some senses, it is more productive to think of Dickinson's lyrics as epistles, as so many of them were written and re-written into letters. Regardless, her most contained lyrics will also find a space in the genres I outline in the pages to follow—though perhaps not where first thought.

As previously mentioned, this dissertation will reiterate the importance for literary criticism to not look at individual poems as meditations, but rather to consider poetic creation as being part of a larger meditative process. This intention will guide the genres and writers I frame to shape my theory of ecopoetics. Importantly though, I do not wish to exclude any literary production from the scope of ecopoetic theory—declaring that, for example, Keats' "Ode to Autumn" is not ecological. Because ecology recognizes ceaseless change and radical interconnection, nothing is excludable from its theoretical reaches; as a system that is all-containing, it is accordingly all-inclusive. Indeed, this issue concerns much of the ecocritic's challenge—to draw critical boundaries while also not closing down alternate potential directions and positions, despite moments of contradiction, paradox, and impasse. However, my hope in this dissertation concerns the attempt to outline and advocate a series of genres that seem to open questions and discourse surrounding ecopoetics even wider—and to favor genres that encourage mourning and metaphor, while also cultivating intimacy and meditative awareness. In order to do this, genres that exercise a notebook sensibility, holding space for contingency and diurnal knowledge, demand acknowledgement and will ultimately underlie the larger poetics that guide my project. And while some readers might immediately associate ecology with nature, and so expect to see genres such as the pastoral to follow, "November" will work to deconstruct the notion of nature in favor of a more radical and uncanny ecology. In turn, "December" will account specifically for the pastoral as it merges with elegy, when inflected by an ecological awareness.

The Journal

If there is a literary genre that quite literally is a notebook—offering a space for diurnal meditation and recognition of contingency and connection—it is by all means the journal. Once again, Virginia Woolf's perception of the journal is highly productive for ecopoetic thinking:

But what is more to the point is my belief that the habit of writing thus for my own eye only is good practise. It loosens the ligaments. Never mind the misses and the stumbles. Going at such a pace as I do I must make the most direct & instant shots at my object, & thus have to lay hands on words, choose them & shoot them with no more pause than is needed to put my pen in the ink. I believe that during the past year I can trace some increase of ease in my professional writing which I attribute to my casual half hours after tea. Moreover

there looms ahead of me the shadow of some kind of form which a diary might attain to. I might in the course of time learn what it is that one can make of this loose, drifting material of life; finding another use for it than the use I put it to, so much more consciously & scrupulously, in fiction. What sort of diary should I like mine to be? Something loose knit, & yet not slovenly, so elastic that it will embrace anything, solemn, slight or beautiful that comes into my mind. (*A Writer's Diary* 13)

Woolf emphasizes the importance of having a writing genre that is “so elastic that it will embrace anything.” The journal’s ability to provide a venue for this opening embrace is precisely what makes it ecopoetic. Woolf describes the fluidity and flux of the diary—its elasticity and capaciousness. As a space for a more spontaneous form of automatic writing, the diary does not offer judgment of thought or rigid lines, but rather values experimentation, spontaneity, and process.

As mentioned in “September,” Thoreau’s journal is perhaps best understood as his primary project—the “terra-firma” that allowed his other more polished works to emerge into circulation. In his journal he writes of the need to, “Write often and write upon a thousand themes”—emphasizing the journal’s capacity to hold abundance and difference. He continues to explain, “Those sentences are good and well discharged which are like so many little resiliencies from the spring floor of our life.—a distinct fruit & kernel itself—springing from terra-firma. Let there be as many distinct plants as the soil & the light can sustain. Take as many bounds in a day as possible” (Peck 289). Each day offers new opportunities to take risks in language—to shape new forms and sow new seeds—but it is the space of the journal itself that clears the ground for further shaping and nourishment. The journal also heightens awareness of the present moment with its elusive changes and its evasive nature. As Daniel Peck explains, “For the Concord Transcendentalists, a journal was the most responsive of literary forms, the form most likely to catch one’s inspiration in the moment of its inception, and journal keeping became for a time almost a required practice for Emersonians” (Peck ix). Ultimately, journals encourage an awareness that recognizes interconnection and change—and the only boundary that frames them is the mark of each day, which does its own work in encouraging diurnal knowledge. As Robert Richardson explains of Emerson’s journal, “The aimlessness and lack of system were part of the point, which was to preserve things just as they came to him, without second thoughts, without fitting them into predetermined niches” (Richardson 21). Importantly, such emphasis on first thoughts and spontaneity in writing are characteristic of a meditative consciousness.

Although not all journals self-consciously inscribe the date on the top of the page, they largely allow diurnal knowledge to guide and frame their composition. Importantly, the form is largely dictated by external factors—the hours of the day, the passing of the season, the weather, holidays, etc.—even as it has the potential to inscribe highly intimate and subjective responses to these outer phenomena.

The Calendar

Bridging on the journal is the calendar, a genre already catalogued in relation to the life project in “September.” Indeed, journals that are meticulous with dates might be thought of as calendars, employing and organizing diurnal awareness, as well as recognizing the contingency

of internal experience upon external phenomena. Perhaps the most canonical example of the calendar as literary form is the *Shepherd's Calendar*, where Spenser, following Virgil's example, presents an extended pastoral. However, unlike Virgil, Spenser employs great structural adherence through his use of the months to organize each extended poem. As Thomas Cain writes of the project, "To organize a series of eclogues (as poems in a pastoral series are called) by a calendar design and to subordinate his speakers to the exigencies of the seasons is Spenser's innovation, with the result a structurally more intricate yet more unified pastoral sequence than Virgil's or any other previous poet" (Spenser 3). Because, as Cain points out, so little happens in pastoral (which involves little action and is mostly dialogue between rustic figures), the employment of calendrical structure adds and implies an inevitable motion and sense of external change. As a "literature of stasis," pastoral does not always concede the same external pressures that the georgic mode might include, whether social, meteorological, political, etc. Indeed, as Barbara Kiefer Lewalski argues, the *Calendar* does "not keep up the expected pastoral stasis but instead have been made subject, by the addition of a calendar, to georgic seasonable variety" (Lewalski 113). This sense of "seasonable variety" and external influences is evident in Spenser's prefatory "arguments" that introduce each eclogue. For example in "Februarie," he writes, "The matter very well accordeth with the season of the moneth, the yeare now drouping, and as it were, drawing to his last age. For as in this time of yeare, so then in our bodies there is a dry and withering cold, which congealeth the crudled blood, and frieseth the wetherbeaten flesh, with stormes of Future, and hoar frosts of Care" (39). Although little happens in this eclogue, which is "rather morall and generall, the bent to any secrete or particular purpose," the tenor and circumstances of the dialogue that occurs between the pastoral characters are both analogized and influenced by the cold weather and the winter's cruelty: "the matter very well accordeth with the seasons of the moneth." With his glosses, antiquated type-face, and illustrative wood-cuts, Spenser's *Calendar* presents itself as a compelling and difficult mixing of genre, which although highly crafted, offers a form that is ultimately dependent upon external factors.

Another genre of writing that consistently employs calendrical structures is garden writing. In "February" I will turn more directly to the preponderance of garden metaphors in ecopoetic writing, but it is also worth noting their connection to the calendar. For example, we might consider Vita Sackville-West's *In Your Garden*, a collection of garden essays, which she compiles and organizes through the months. In explaining her method of organization in the prefatory remarks to the second volume, *In Your Garden Again*, Sackville-West writes, "the months have been grouped together irrespective of the year in which the articles appear" because originally the articles were "spaced seasonally" (5). Although Sackville-West recognizes the confusion of letting the years collide, the calendar guided by the months takes ultimate precedence in narrating and organizing her garden writings.

Similarly, the Czech writer Karel Capek's famous work of garden-writing, *The Gardener's Year*, is also dependent upon the calendar for its unfolding. The chapters show the possessive relationship of the month to the gardener, commencing with "The Gardener's January," and moving forward. With each month, Capek offers ironic observations and commentaries on duties and difficulties presented by the given month. He writes, "March is the busiest month in the garden, which should be prepared for the coming of spring" (29), while, "From a horticultural point of view—September is a gratifying and excellent month" (81). In "November the soil should be turned over and loosened," while in July, "according to the immutable law of gardeners, roses are grafted" (99, 63). Filling his text with advice and playful

disappointments, Capek urges his gardener readers to “make haste and not waste a single day, if you want to do what is necessary” (116). The gardener’s work is never done, and the parameters of the months allow for an unfolding of work and tasks in relation to weather and growth cycles. Garden writing is necessarily and consistently dependent upon outer changes and phenomenon, so it makes sense that the calendar (and by extension the almanac) would find prolific use in this mode of writing.

The Lyric Fiction

The lyric fiction is a genre perhaps best theorized by one of its most dedicated contemporary practitioners—Carole Maso. In her essay “Notes of a Lyric Artist Working in Prose,” Maso names this experimental genre and describes the lyric novelist’s work in comparison to the lyric poet’s. She describes the lyric fiction as a genre where “The novelist’s lyric ‘I’ engaged, as the epic poet is, in the world. A singer singing *in relation to others*” (*Break Every Rule* 31). Combining the intensity of first person utterance with the epic or narrative’s traditional role of presenting a character’s voice in relation to other voices, Maso’s sense of the lyric fiction offers a hybrid genre that extends the lyric moment through a larger full-length narrative. As she explains, this type of fiction involves “a pattern, which is revealed as patterns are, through elongation and perspective, the ability to see a whole, a necklace of luminous moments strung together” (23). Maso’s discussion of the lyric fiction is based on an epistemological position that acknowledges unknowing and uncertainty—or a conception of reality that is illusive and contingent. As she explains, “Many fiction writers do not, I believe, acknowledge reality’s remoteness, its mysteriousness. Its inaccessibility to us and to our modes of expression, though the novel is one of the very few good places for this sort of explanation” (24). Accordingly, she shapes fragmentary narratives that hold space for fleeting impressions and contradictory experience.

In her own lyric novels, Maso often utilizes a temporal structure in order to frame her lyric fragmentation. In *The Art Lover*, the narrative moves through the four seasons—both commencing and ending in spring. The narrative voice also shifts, offering colliding narrators, including Maso herself, relating the pathos of non-fictional memoir to the plot events of her characters’ lives. What remains consistent is the passing of the seasons—and the motion of the characters lives through cycles of change. As the narrator offers, “At Cummington fashion stood still, along with almost everything else, except the seasons and, hopefully, art” (39). Both the seasons and art continue to change. In *Ava*, Maso condenses time further and divides the narrative into three sections—Morning, Afternoon, Night—presenting a narrative of the last day of a woman’s life. As Ava lies on her deathbed, memories flood forward and intermingle with present sensations. She envisions her first-person narration as a “the last love letter I will ever write” (215) and as far as the narrative journeys in terms of sensation, memory, and imaginings, it is always grounded in the space of a last day; the frame of one day holds a woman’s whole life. Importantly, both *The Art Lover* and *Ava* are elegiac—one mourning the loss surrounding the ground-zero AIDS crisis in the West Village (many scenes in the book take place in St. Vincent’s Hospital)—and the other taking place on the last day of Ava’s life as she succumbs to a “rare blood disease.”

In relation, Maso often credits Virginia Woolf as one of her greatest teachers, and a master of the genre of lyric fiction. Indeed, Woolf’s novels also employ distinct temporal narratives and are defined by intensely figurative and rhythmic prose sentences. In *Mrs.*

Dalloway, she frames the narrative through a single day in a woman's life; *Between the Acts* further condenses time and frames itself through the span of an afternoon play performance. True to its title, *The Years* spans fifty years, but takes the personal nuances of one family's changing state through a representative day from selected passing years, as its narrative structure. Referencing Woolf's work in her criticism, Maso describes the power of the lyric novel "To make a place for ambivalence or uncertainty to be *experienced* and not just referred or alluded to seems one of the most interesting challenges of the novel. The tentative, the unresolved, the incomplete might be enacted. Played out in the theater of one's imagination" (43). In using temporal structuring to create the parameters through which the "unresolved" and "incomplete" might be enacted, Maso, like Woolf, is able to choreograph her fragmented and lyrical language within a literary space or "place" for "uncertainty" to be "*experienced*."

Although these novels by Maso and Woolf, having undergone extensive revisionary and publication processes, are by many means describable as masterpieces, their insistence on the primacy of the fleeting nuances and impressions of subjective experience allow them to also feel like "notebooks"; they present narrative experiences that move with time passing, in flux and relation to shifts in external phenomena and internal difference. This experimental space of the lyric novel provides productive parameters for eco-poetic creation. Timothy Morton writes that Woolf's "narratives are ecological because" she "lets consciousnesses slide into each other: this includes nonhuman as well as human consciousnesses" (107). And indeed, this "flow in and out of characters' heads" does present an ecological sensibility—an inclusiveness and meshing of internal and external experience—however, Woolf's firm temporal structures provide the form that allow these collisions to slide, as they would inevitably in a given moment. Her ecological content is made possible by her allegiance to genres that frame infinite awareness through temporal windows.

The Lyric Essay

In relation to the lyric fiction is the lyric essay or the lyric non-fiction. An experimental genre, the lyric essay has been garnering increasing contemporary attention, especially through literary journals such as *The Seneca Review*, which has taken on the lyric essay as its central focus. As the editors Deborah Tall and John D'Agata explain, "we turn to the lyric essay" for its "malleability, ingenuity, immediacy, complexity, and use of poetic language." They describe the genre in the following language:

Given its genre mingling, the lyric essay often accretes by fragments, taking shape mosaically - its import visible only when one stands back and sees it whole. The stories it tells may be no more than metaphors. Or, storyless, it may spiral in on itself, circling the core of a single image or idea, without climax, without a paraphrasable theme. The lyric essay stalks its subject like quarry but is never content to merely explain or confess. It elucidates through the dance of its own delving.⁴

⁴ Deborah Tall and John D'Agata, "The Lyric Essay," <http://www.hws.edu/academics/senecareview/lyricessay.aspx>

Through the accretion of fragments and the taking of shape “mosaically,” the lyric essay is a genre that is propelled by contingency and relation—not always forcing such relations, but rather allowing them to exist like different pieces of broken tile in a mosaic. Often, lyric essays will take on temporal narratives to frame their unending malleability. The lyric essay is often highly metaphorical—propelling its organization around a “single image or idea.” The lyric essay elucidates the “dance of its own delving” and reveals the process through which it unfolds rather than arguing any single point or position. The writer’s concentration on a guiding metaphor over time ultimately channels the work’s coherence and choreography.

One of the most obvious and relevant practitioners of this genre is Thoreau. *Walden* is constructed through a seasonal narrative, as Thoreau initiates his experiment on the Fourth of July and ultimately works his way toward spring. Thoreau’s other major work, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, is structured as its title suggests through the days of the week, and each chapter records a different day of the journey, bearing symbolic motion as the narrative moves through its process of mourning. I will further discuss the importance of Thoreau’s formal choices in *A Week* in relation to ecology in “December,” but it is important to recognize his central role in the history of this genre, made explicit in his employment of metaphor and poetic figures to both organize and shape his language. Not surprisingly, much environmental writing falls under this genre distinction, including Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, which, echoing *Walden*, is thematically divided into the four seasons.

If there is a contemporary text that works to explicitly express ecological thinking and to exist as a paradigmatic example of an extended lyric essay, Terry Tempest Williams’ *Finding Beauty in a Broken World* is a strong candidate. While it does not divide itself through days or months or seasons, in the central section of the book Williams records her experiences out in the field as a naturalist, observing and documenting prairie dog activity—“learning that basic things like where a prairie dog emerges from in the morning and where it retires at dusk convey a wealth of information about an individual” (115). Constructed as a series of field notes, Williams dates different days “8 June 04” and further divides these sections into segments of hours. And so, philosophical and introspective musings will be positioned against notes from the field:

8:00 A.M.

Good morning P Dog #35, Burrow NZ at 7:33 A.M.

Good morning, Madam Head Wide Apart, Burrow 9T at 7:35 A.M.

Good morning, P Dog #24, Burrow NW at 7:42 A.M.

Good morning, p dog babies, Burrow 9W at 7:50 A.M. (Williams 171)

Interspersed with these more scientific recordings are Williams’ own personal reflections—observations of what she is learning and the realizations that surface after long hours gathering data. Williams shapes a fragmentary narrative, listing passing thoughts and impressions through accretion, without putting pressure on their coherence and explanatory line. Her style is close to Maso’s (indeed in other places Williams quotes Maso as a means of expressing her own poetic *ethos*): fragmentary, intimate, contingent, revealing. Williams’ notes range from the observational obvious “Today marks one week for me in this tower” (165) to the philosophically

inquisitive—as she concludes her prairie dog stay with one question: “What is real?” She continues to establish an anaphoric meditation on this daunting question:

What is real? These prairie dogs and the lives they live and have adapted to in grassland communities over time, deep time?

What is real? A gravel pit adjacent to one of the last remaining protected prairie dog colonies in the world? A corral where cowboys in an honest day’s work saddle up horses with prairie dogs under hoof for visitors to ride in Bryce Canyon National Park?

What is real? Two planes slamming into the World Trade Center and the wake of fear that has never stopped in this endless war of terror?

What is real? Forgiveness or revenge and the mounting deaths of thousands of human beings as America wages war in Afghanistan and Iraq?

What is real? Steves’ recurrence of lymphoma? A closet full of shoes? Making love? Making money? Making right with the world with the smallest of unseen gestures? (197-8)

The questions that Williams presents here attempt to collage the fragmentary dimensions of her own experience—aligning the local and global—the personal and political—the environmental and the social. The mosaic becomes a master metaphor for Williams’ ecological understanding, as well as her ecopoetic narration—“a mosaic is a conversation between what is broken” (6). Also potentially critiqued as postmodern pastiche, Williams’ inclusion of notes and quotes echoes the commonplace book—a genre predating postmodernism and also analogous to a mosaic accretion of different positions and voices. Importantly, Williams always acknowledges connections and favors metaphors (such as the mosaic) that perpetuate relations, rather than closing off through critique. In entertaining another master-metaphor, she quotes Deleuze and Guattari, “A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections”—and asks, “Can one be a rhizome artist? Can one ‘form a rhizome with the world’?” (164). As an ecological writer, Williams does more than just write about nature; rather, she offers in her literary experiments forms that open and encourage the flood gates of ecological thinking. In finding metaphors like the mosaic to shape her formal parameters, Williams creates ecologically—fostering further connections, relations, and contingencies. And importantly, like *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack River*, *Finding Beauty in a Broken World* is also an elegy—the work of mourning takes time, follows days, and shifts with the seasons.

The Elegy

Because the elegy demonstrates a type of work and takes place through time, it too often allows its formal structure to be dictated by shifting external phenomena. Following Freud’s sense of the “work of mourning”—or grief as a process or project, Peter Sacks suggests that

“Elegy should be seen as a working through of grief and as a symbolic action” (1). But as I will discuss further in “December,” elegy, when brought together with ecological thinking, aligns closer with Freud’s notion of melancholia, where mourning is more sustained rather than productively closed. As Timothy Morton explains, “We cannot mourn for the environment because we are so deeply attached to it—we *are it*. So ecological discourse holds out the possibility of a mourning without end. Ecological elegy, then, must provide forms that undermine a sense of closure” (“Dark Ecology” 253). As I have been arguing in this chapter, “notebook” genres, are by and large, “forms without closure,” although any poetic making depends on some formal structure to exist to bring it into being; in the case of the examples I have been outlining, the diurnal frame or the calendar can provide a form without closure, even as it offers boundaries by which to do something about the infinite awareness that ecological thinking provokes. Even life projects, with their seemingly endless scales, often depend upon diurnal awareness as a means of confronting grief—whether or not “successful mourning” will take place. Indeed, many of the full-length works I have named in this chapter are elegies, and present a situation where the writer will work through a period of mourning by nurturing diurnal awareness and through the creation of a narrative, regardless of how fractured and fragmentary it might be. In “December” I will more directly dive into the paradoxical relationship between elegy and ecology. However, in moving forward, it is important to consider the extent to which ecopoetics is inherently dependent on an elegiac mode, as it continually asks us to recognize the transient nature of experience, as well as the need to relinquish idealized notions of nature and the literary masterpiece. In turn, poetry that depends upon a meditative consciousness also inherently recognizes the shifting phenomenal experience of each day, and so, the concurrent existential non-attachment to what presents itself. In this sense, the “letting go” of elegy is necessary, even as the next day might present the poet with a new awareness of which to mourn and of which to let go.

The Letter

Among its other compelling qualities, letters, like many of the genres I identify in this chapter, do the work of “writing the date.” Acute awareness of both their moment and location of composition shape the circumstances of composition and compel their transcription. Consider Dickinson’s playful letter-poem addressed to “Bee!” from “Fly”:

Bee! I’m expecting you!
Was saying Yesterday
To Somebody you know
That you were due—

The Frogs got home last Week—
Are settled, and at work—
Birds mostly back—
The Clover warm and thick—

You’ll get my letter by
The Seventeenth; Reply

Or better, be with me—
Your's, Fly. (Fr 983)

Aside from the amusing imaginative scenario Dickinson envisions, the reporting of temporal indicators in each stanza of the poem (“was saying Yesterday,” “Frogs got home last Week,” “You’ll get my letter by/The Seventeenth”) illustrate the extent to which epistles often express and depend upon diurnal awareness. As another example, consider Dickinson’s letter to her friends Dr. and Mrs. Holland, dated “autumn 1853”: “it is cold tonight, but the thought of you so warm, that I sit by it as a fireside, and am never cold any more. I love to write to you—it gives my heart a holiday and sets the bells ringing. If prayers had any answers to them, you were all here to-night” (L 133). Here, the coldness of the night presents itself as an antecedent scenario that guides the letter’s composition and rhetoric; Dickinson’s work on the writing desk is initiated by external phenomenon.

The other important dimension of the letter for ecopoetics concerns the intimacy it engenders. As I will more directly address in “May,” letters offer staging ground for exposure and intimacy, and while not usually written with the intention of publication, letters often make deictic reference to the writing desk itself. In Dickinson’s case, letters often came along with gifts, cookies, flowers, or other home-made gestures of affection and generosity, reminding us of the materiality often provoked by literary projects. In “May” I will more directly address the letter as an ecopoetic genre that exemplifies ecological intimacy, in addition to suggesting that the epistolary impulse at large helps generate the intimacy that ecological awareness necessitates and engenders.

The Haiku

In “August” I will turn to an Eastern poetic, recognizing the ways in which it underlies and enforces many of the epistemological points that contribute to ecological thinking; philosophy and poetry that depend upon and encourage meditation often adhere to certain cognitive positions and precepts. Zen Buddhism, in particular, as a philosophical system that encourages mindful awareness through meditation practice, fosters diurnal knowledge and pushes even further into precise present moment mental absorption. However, as Jane Hirshfield explains, Zen is more “set of tools” than a “study of doctrine”: “Zen is less the study of doctrine than a set of tools for discovering what can be known when the world is looked at with open eyes. Poetry can be thought of in much the same way, and the recognition of impermanence, ceaseless alternation, and interdependence—the connection of each person, creature, event, and object with every other—need not be ‘Buddhist’ ” (*The Heart of Haiku*, 142). As a literary genre closely related to Zen Buddhism, the Haiku consistently recognizes “impermanence, ceaseless alternation, and interdependence” within the brief space of seventeen syllables. Jane Hirshfield continues to explain how the haiku is paradoxical due to its “scale and speed”—“in the moment of haiku perception, something outer is seen, heard, tasted, felt, emplaced in a scene or context. That new perception then seeds an inner response beyond paraphrase, name, or any other form of containment” (61). In her account of Basho’s poetry, Hirshfield describes the genre in the following language, “Some haiku seem reports of internal awareness, some seem to point at the external, but Basho’s work as a whole awakens the necessary permeability of all to all. Awareness of the mind’s movements makes clear that is it the mind’s nature to move” (480).

Through this awareness of “permeability” and inner and outer flux, Basho’s haiku do not so much arrest a moment as recognize its fleeting motion; haiku acknowledge the moment as it slips away. In paying attention to both place and time, haiku re-enforce transience and contingency, both of the self and of the world. Consider Basho through Robert Hass’ translation:

A monk sips morning tea,
it’s quiet,
the chrysanthemum’s flowering. (46)

A snowy morning—
by myself,
chewing on dried salmon. (12)

A bee
staggers out
of the peony. (18)

Basho’s haiku affirm a sense of the poem’s action sliding outside of its frame. We imagine the bee as it staggers, the poet chewing as the snow falls, and a monk sipping as the chrysanthemum’s flower. These are not images frozen eternally in time, but rather poems that frame a process of continuance—a relinquishment of holding and fixing in favor of acknowledgement of passing and shifting. Basho best articulates this particular poetic phenomenon through his prose:

The basis of art is change in the universe. What’s still has changeless form. Moving things change, and because we cannot stop to time, it continues unarrested. To stop a thing would be to halve a sight or sound in our heart. Cherry blossoms whirl, leaves fall, and the wind flits them both along the ground. We cannot arrest with our eyes or ear what lies in such things. Were we to gain mastery over them, we would find that the life of each things had vanished without a trace. (233)

As Basho suggests through his ruminations on the “unarrested,” rather than gaining “mastery,” eco-poetic creation humbly recognizes ceaseless change—favoring present tense expression and collision of both inner and outer experience. Traditionally, haiku also include a reference to the season, as they emerged from renga, which involve larger cycles of call and response poetry, which consistently moves through the seasons. Not attached to narration, these poems do not adhere to the common Western impulse to stop time in lyric poetry, or to freeze, capture, or perpetuate stasis. In turn, the haiku poet is not as attached to his literary product as a piece that perpetuates captured time or experience. Rather, as Basho writes, “*Haiki* exists only while it’s on

the writing desk. Once it's taken off, it should be regarded as a mere scrap of paper" (235). Also a journal writer and itinerant travelling writer, Basho's emphasis is on the moment of composition—the process of inception and the spontaneous quality of such writing.

The haiku has also received attention and prominence in twentieth-century American poetry, as Ezra Pound's famous "In the Station of the Metro" has become paradigmatic of the work of the imagism it represents and inspires. One of the most important American Haiku practitioners was Richard Wright, who when suffering from debilitating illness during the last years of his life wrote four thousand haiku from his exile in Paris:

Hurdy-gurdy sounds
Soften the glow of streetlamps
In the evening dusk.

The drone of spring rain;
A lonely woman strokes
The fur of her cat. (Wright 91)

Wright's daughter Julia Wright accounts for her father's passionate and prolific outpouring of haiku production during the last year of his life through two connected but distinct experiences. The first concerns a process of necessary mourning in the face of numerous losses, not excluding his exile. As Julia Wright explains, "the haiku enabled him to mourn a mother whose physical absence from his life had begun way before her death"—"with the haiku, a self-nurturing could begin, albeit so close to his own death" (Wright xi). In addition to the haiku aiding in mourning and self-nurturance though its collision of internal and external change, Julia Wright also identifies the ways in which this writing served as a type of therapy for her father's illness. As she writes, "I believe his haiku were self-developed antidotes against illness, and that breaking down words into syllables matched the shortness of his breath, especially on the bad days when his inability to sit up at the typewriter restricted the very breadth of writing" (Wright viii). In "June" I will more specifically address the relation of breathing and breath duration to ecopoetic creation, but here it is worth recognizing Julia Wright's connection between her father's breath and his chosen genre. Poetry that heightens breath awareness is almost always indicative of a meditative consciousness at work and in process. In addition, many haiku practitioners address its therapeutic qualities—the ways in which the process of drawing together a single image into the syllable patterns absorbs the mind fully, letting go other concerns and deliberations. As Basho writes, "Composition must occur in an instant, like a woodcutter felling a huge tree, or a swordsman leaping at his enemy. It is also like cutting a ripe watermelon with a sharp knife or taking a large bite at a pear" (Hass 234).

Once again, by emphasizing the haiku's qualities in relation to meditation practice, I do not intend to dismiss the Western lyric as a genre void of such awareness. Indeed, the Western lyric's present-tense elongation offers provocative explorations of experimentation with temporality and experience. As much of this dissertation will explicitly argue for and illustrate ecopoetic dimensions in Dickinson's poetry, it is necessary to consider the ways in which her poems also recognize that time is always moving, and poetry struggles to do something with this ceaseless continuance:

To see the Summer Sky
Is Poetry, though never in a book it lie—
True Poems flee— (Fr 1491)

As Sharon Cameron argues in *Lyric Time*, “all of Dickinson’s poems fight temporality with a vengeance” because “All action, these poems seem to insist, and consequently all narrative and story on whose shoulders action is carried, leads to an ending, leads to death” (203). As Cameron argues, Dickinson’s poems exemplify the struggle of lyric to resist temporality. However, in a deconstructive sense, it is precisely this temporal motion that allows for any alternative—revealing the extent to which lyric is ultimately dependent upon temporal passing. Dickinson’s sense of a “center”—or the alternate temporality promised by “immortality”—and her consistent recognition that “True poems” like everything “flee,” situate her in relation to haiku. Because loss, and ultimately death, lie at the center of Dickinson’s poetic impulse, even her struggles to do something about this condition first recognize her awareness, and at times, her acceptance, of mortality’s inevitability.

Dickinson’s poems have been described by critics in terms of distillation, compression, and crystallization. Like haiku, they often reference the seasons and especially their passing. But clearly Dickinson did not write haiku, as many of her poems unfold through multiple stanzas and engage in elaborate and extended figural constructions. However, as studying a poet like Basho reminds us, the work on the “writing desk”—the daily discipline and commitment of the poet—and especially his willingness to let external phenomena intervene and influence subjective shaping and experience, is indicative of a meditative consciousness at work. As Jane Hirshfield writes, “Basho’s seventeen-syllable haiku, looked at closely, are much like Emily Dickinson’s poems: they are small but many (both poets left behind over a thousand poems), and the work of each of these poets crosses implausibly variable and precise terrains of mind and world. Basho’s haiku describe and feel, think and debate. They test ideas against the realities of observation; they renovate, expand, and intensify both experience and the range of language” (450). Ultimately, it is, as Hirshfield notes, the expansion and intensification of “both experience and language”—of both “mind and world”—that characterize Dickinson’s contribution to ecopoetics.

The Garden Poem

In “July,” I will theorize a genre of poetry that I am calling “garden poetry”—a genre long present in Western literary history, but not yet explicitly framed and discussed in terms of its productive offerings for ecological thinking. In positioning myself against the notion of the poem as a meditation, this chapter will consider poems that are produced from a larger meditative consciousness, or poems that emerge from a meditative awareness and consequently demonstrate a series of social virtues. Taking Horace’s *Odes* as an originary and still highly-relevant example, I will also discuss a series of other poems that demonstrate an ecological thinking grounded in the sense of caring for the *oikos*, or household. In their capacity to both teach and delight, these poems have the potential for a type of ecological singing—or a propensity to praise and celebrate what *is*—emerging from acceptance and embodied as gratitude. Having moved through mourning and into meditation, these poems might be carried

forward in order to teach future students of ecological criticism the sensibility that ecopoetics ultimately works to cultivate and sustain.

November

“Those who know her, know her less/The nearer her they get”:

Dickinson, Ecological Infinity, and Letting Nature Go

I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?
-Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

What could be stranger than what is familiar? As anyone who has a long-term partner can attest, the strangest person is the one you wake up with every morning. Far from gradually erasing strangeness, intimacy heightens it. The more we know them, the stranger they become.

-Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*

*Just Infinites of Nought—
As far as I could see—
So looked the face I looked upon—
So looked itself—on Me—*

-Emily Dickinson (Fr 693)

Although ecological criticism has been a prolific field of literary scholarship for roughly twenty years, we are still awaiting a full-length ecocritical monograph on Emily Dickinson. As one of American’s most beloved “nature poets,” she has been strangely absent from the waves of academic ecocritical literary production. But the absence of Dickinson from this critical nexus says more about ecocriticism’s limitations than her place in the conversation. Indeed, thinking of Dickinson as an “ecopoetic” requires we relinquish our notions of “nature” as a site of idealization or salvation—something much ecocritical work has struggled to do. In this chapter I will argue that Dickinson is a profoundly ecological poet, but that our acceptance of this quality of her work depends upon our relinquishment of a notion of an idealized nature in favor of a more uncanny sense of ecology. Following the theoretical advances of Timothy Morton in *The Ecological Thought*, I will present the ways in which Dickinson’s conception of “nature” is closer to the implications engendered by ecological awareness. Subsequently, in considering Emily Dickinson as an ecological poet, questions will arise: If ecological thinking ultimately implies that we are all “connected,” what exactly does this mean? And amidst such connectivity, how do we account for the all too common human feelings of loneliness, depression, and isolation? How do we experience ecological connectivity? What makes ecological awareness possible? And finally, what type of poetic expression emerges from this awareness—what figures and paradigms does ecological connectivity employ?

Nature, as Dickinson teaches us, is enigmatic. For Dickinson, “nature” is not some idealized place of nostalgia and longing, but rather is a site of sensual experience and encounter. It is also a word that appears 160 times in her 1789 poems. Almost always it is capitalized, often it is personified (“the simple news that Nature told” [Fr 519]), often feminized (“Nature murmured to herself” [Fr 627]) and sometimes it is found in quotation marks (“Nay ‘nature’ is what we see” [Fr 703]). Not surprisingly, attempting to understand Dickinson’s “nature” leads one down a path of uncertainty, epistemological resistance, and enigma. The more attention the poet lends to nature, the more nature as an idealized place is deconstructed in favor of nature as mysterious abyss and locus of unknowing. But it is precisely this recognition of radical uncertainty that will allow for intimacy and ultimately demonstrates Dickinson’s proximity to ecological thinking.

In *The Ecological Thought*, one of Timothy Morton’s most compelling theoretical constructs centers on the notion of intimacy as fundamental to ecological thinking. In pushing the notion of “interconnectedness” to its full implications, Morton recognizes that interrelation depends upon recognition of the necessary boundaries that allow us to think through and experience interconnection.

The ecological thought realizes that all beings are interconnected.
This is the mesh. The ecological thought realizes that the boundaries
between, and identities of being are affected by this interconnection.
This is the strange stranger. The ecological thought finds itself next
to other beings, neither me nor not-me. These other beings exist,
but they don’t really exist. They are strange, all the way down.
The more intimately we know them, the stranger they become.
The ecological thought is intimacy with the strangeness of the
stranger. The ultimate strangeness, the strangeness of pure semblance,
is (feminine) subjectivity, whose essence is radical passivity. (94)

Morton’s conception of the “strange stranger” thinks of the other (animal, human, biological) as “neither me nor not-me.” His argument is based on evolutionary thinking, which suggests larger patterns of interrelation at the level of the gene. However, he also recognizes the role of human consciousness in apprehending interconnection. His discussion is worked through in conversation with continental ethical philosophy (Levinas, Irigaray, Derrida) and questions of identity and of relation to the “other.” His construct of the “strange stranger” serves to recognize paradoxes of ecological subjectivity and the according uncanniness of interconnection.

And while Morton never turns to Dickinson, his language might have been borrowed from her. Consider one of her boldest statements on nature:

What mystery pervades a well!
The water lives so far—
A neighbor from another world
Residing in a jar

Whose limit none have ever seen,

But just his lid of glass—
Like looking every time you please
In an abyss's face!

The grass does not appear afraid,
I often wonder he
Can stand so close and look so bold
At what is awe to me.

Related somehow they may be,
The sedge stands next the sea
Where he is floorless
And does no timidity betray—

But nature is a stranger yet;
The ones that cite her most
Have never passed her haunted house,
Nor simplified her ghost.

To pity those that know her not
Is helped by the regret
That those who know her, know her less
The nearer her they get. (Fr 1433)

This poem works to identify the “stranger” of nature—or nature as a stranger, particularly the abysmal mystery of expansive depth provoked by the image of a well or the ocean. The speaker exhibits a fear of such epistemological uncertainty, questioning whether “nature” can ever be known. She creates a series of personified relationships between natural objects that are proximate and seem to be interested in the potentialities of relationships of contiguity to encounter natural mystery. “Related somehow they may be,/The sedge stands next the sea”—“Those who know her, know her less/The nearer her they get;” trying to “know” nature and her mysterious depths seems to cut to the center of ecological intrigue. What is fascinating about the poem is how Dickinson suggests the relation but refuses to define it. She says, “there is some connection here, but I can’t say it—the more I try to know, the less I know.” This type of thinking opens itself to radical uncertainty and is profoundly ecological. This is a representation of the “strange stranger.” Dickinson plays with paradoxes of knowing through images of proximity and distance. As Timothy Morton writes, “What could be stranger than what is familiar? As anyone who has a long-term partner can attest, the strangest person is the one you wake up with every morning. Far from gradually erasing strangeness, intimacy heightens it. The more we know them, the stranger they become. Intimacy itself is strange” (41). Or, in Dickinson’s language, “Those who know her, know her less/The nearer her they get.”

Dickinson returns to the idea of nature as a haunted house in a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson: “Nature is a Haunted House -- but Art -- a House that tries to be haunted” (L 459). Here, nature does not have a house that one might pass by, but rather is represented through a direct metaphor. Nature is not the stranger but the House (though that

house is certainly strange to the point of being uncanny) and Art attempts to create or be that enigmatic. In arguing for the importance of studying art in trying to fathom ecology, Morton writes, “studying art is important, because art sometimes gives voice to what is unspeakable elsewhere, either temporally—one day we will find the words—or intrinsically—words are impossible. Since the ecological thought is so new and so open, and therefore so difficult, we should expect art to show us some of the way” (12). Art’s striving to lend “voice” to the “unspeakable” turns out to lend a prime site for theorizing ecology. And Dickinson, as a poet of “finite infinity,” provides the paradoxical language for surfacing our often confused and figure-driven experiences related to the expanse of such thinking.

In relation, Freud’s notions of *unheimlich* (un-homely) and *Heimlich* (homely) help to frame Dickinson’s haunted houses and help think through Morton’s notion of the ecological thought, which he associates with the uncanny.⁵ In his famous essay, Freud writes, “the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (“The Uncanny” 930). As he explains, “What interests me most in this long extract is to find that among its different shades of meaning the word ‘*heimlich*’ exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, ‘*unheimlich*’ ” (933)—“thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*” (934). In theorizing the strangeness of familiarity, Freud’s notion of the uncanny becomes useful in Dickinson’s nature poems. Consider the following poem where the first winter frost is personified as a strange stranger.

The Frost was never seen—
 If met, too rapid passed,
 Or in too unsubstantial Team—
 The Flowers notice first

A Stranger hovering round
 A Symptom of alarm
 In Villages remotely set
 But search effaces him

Till some retrieveless night
 Our Vigilance at waste
 The Garden gets the only shot
 That never could be traced.

Unproved is much we know—
 Unknown the worst we fear—
 Of Strangers is the Earth the Inn

⁵ For a reading of the uncanny in Dickinson’s poetry in specific relation to Gothicism, see Daneen Wadrop’s “Emily Dickinson and the Gothic Fascicle,” where Wadrop reads the Gothic as the dark side of Romanticism, suggesting, “the twist of the Gothic inheres in the psychological fact that what can scare the most remains what is closest”—Dickinson finds “the Freudian twists in her oxymorons—the appalling exhilaration, the captivating horror, the liberating fright, the freeing terror” (Wadrop 144).

Of Secrets is the Air—

To Analyze perhaps
A Philip would prefer
But Labor vaster than myself
I find it to infer. (Fr 1190)

Representing the frost as a criminal—a “stranger hovering round” and lending him a face (which is effaced) Dickinson’s personified frost shoots the garden—untraceable and enigmatic to persistent vigilance. The earth itself is an “inn” for strangers and the air is a place to hold secrets. Analysis is useless, futile and a labor vaster than which the speaker feels capable. “Unproved” and “unknown,” inference is impossible in the face of nature’s motions. But what is perhaps too obvious to mention in the poem is the fact that frosts come every year and are not really strangers to New England residents like Dickinson. Dickinson sees strangeness in what is most familiar, cyclical, and predictable. Rather than taking solace or consolation in nature’s diurnal round, she looks past metaphors and understandings of nature’s holistic benevolence in favor of a “retrieveless” uncertainty.

For Dickinson, intimacy always seems to involve a corresponding estrangement. Even in the following poem, what can be read as fairly innocuous representation of Summer’s passing, is also suggestive of nature’s persistent mystery.

Without a smile—Without a throe
A Summer’s soft assemblies go
To their entrancing end
Unknown—for all the times we met—
Estranged, however intimate—
What a dissembling Friend— (Fr 1340)

Reading summer as a metonym of nature, intimacy is again represented through dissemblance, in concealing true intentions behind a false appearance. Once again, “however intimate,” we are ultimately “estranged” from fully containing such enigma.⁶

⁶ Angus Fletcher’s book *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, Environment, and the Future of the Imagination* also notes an uncanniness in American “nature” poetry, which he attributes to questions of scale. Fletcher writes, “Both exegesis and evaluation of Romantic poetry have emphasized the poet’s role as voiced consciousness, this dynamic relation between nature and our species, but the present study takes almost the opposite view, while never denying our human need for transcendental and extraordinary flights of the imagination. It could be argued that a substratum of naturalistic study and description is determining for the Romantics, but remains often obscured by clouds of glory, whereas American poetry meets a new scale of *things*, a larger scale. The Americans are somehow troubled by the fact that Nature is simply bigger than we are” (Fletcher 5). Dickinson and her endless motions inward seem to work in an opposite direction from Fletcher’s exemplum, Whitman.

As these examples illustrate, Dickinson is no stranger to the stranger. Over and over again her poems exhibit moments of relinquishment of certainty as they represent nature not as beautiful and good, but all too often as just plain strange. As one who dwells in “possibility,” Dickinson often professes an understanding that acknowledges the limitations of her knowledge. At times, the penetrating presence of mortality and the bewildering implications of a fully engaged consciousness seem all too easy to turn away from. In the *Notebooks*, Coleridge writes, “In looking at objects of Nature, I seem rather to be seeking, as it were *asking* for, a symbolical language within me that already and forever exists, than observing anything new” (qtd. in Frye, *Romanticism* 10-11). Dickinson seems to align with this tendency in Romanticism, which understands outer reality in terms of inner experience. Again and again she dares to stare into such uncertainty—as she acknowledges the terror embedded in the reaches of human consciousness. Outer immensities correspond to and work in reciprocity to inner immensities:

I never hear that one is dead
Without the chance of Life
Afresh annihilating me
That mightiest Belief,

Too mighty for the Daily mind
That tilling its abyss,
Had Madness, had it once, or Twice
The yawning Consciousness,

Beliefs are Bandaged, like the Tongue
When Terror were it told
In any Tone commensurate
Would strike us instant Dead—

I do not know the man so bold
He dare in lonely Place
That awful stranger—Consciousness
Deliberately face— (Fr 1325)

Once again, Dickinson recognizes the notion of the “stranger” within—the stranger of one’s own Consciousness. Whereas in “What mystery pervades a well,” nature is figured as a stranger, in “I never hear that one is dead,” Consciousness itself is the stranger. Facing consciousness with deliberate intention entails an exhibition of bravery, but is also potentially maddening. Beliefs, particularly the “mightiest belief,” which recognizes ultimate annihilation, become bandaged or blindfolded in facing such terror.

I am particularly drawn to the final line in the poem—“Deliberately face—,” as it once again figures a gesture of intimacy and also recalls Thoreau’s language in *Walden*, where “Deliberately” is one of his most important terms. In “Where I Lived, What I Lived For,” Thoreau writes, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life.” He writes on the subject of conscious awakening, “I have never yet met a

man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?" (59). Like Thoreau's emphasis in *Walden*, Dickinson's poem revolves around the conscious willingness to directly face the abysmal depths of human consciousness. In this case, the terrifying ultimatum is mortality. And while Dickinson professes to not know "a man so bold," one senses, again and again in her poetry, that she is a woman bold enough to undertake Thoreau's work of deliberately facing both internal and external abysses.⁷ Intimacy depends upon this recognition. To once again quote Morton, "Our intimacy is an allowing of and a coming to terms with the passivity and void of the strange stranger. And since the strange stranger is in us, the void is in us, too...the inbuilt uncanniness of the strange strangers is part of how we can be intimate with them" (80).

In these examples we can witness moments in both Dickinson and Thoreau where ecological thinking takes place—in their deliberate facing of strangeness—both inner and outer. Face-to-face encounters are often intimidating. Just as in *Walden* when Thoreau reiterates the need to "front only the essential facts of life," Dickinson's work exhibits a willingness to "front" what she sees as essential. As Susan Stewart writes, there is a "profound intimacy and affect" associated with face-to-face works of art. She suggests that this power might stem from "our biological experiences" and that the human predilection for frontal sexuality "led to notions of uniqueness in sexual encounters and to the development of the idea of the personal lover. These vital experiences of our own nature contribute to the expectations we bring to all face-to-face meetings, including those encounters we have with objects" (Stewart 146). Face-to-face encounters are also essential to Levinas's notion of the "ethical relation." In *Totality and Infinity*, he writes, "the relation with infinity, the idea of infinity in us, conditions it positively. Infinity presents itself as a face in the ethical resistance that paralyzes my powers and from the depths of defenseless eyes rises firm and absolute from in its nudity and destitution" (Levinas 200-201). Levinas's ethical relation works through the reciprocity of inner and outer infinities, presented in the meeting of two faces.

In relation, Dickinson's poems exhibit a particular interest in face-to-face encounters: "Just Infinites of Nought—/As far as I could see—/So looked the face I looked upon—/So looked itself—on Me—" (Fr 693). Often in Dickinson's face-to-face representations, such outward looking generates a self-awareness—just as one looks out, one becomes aware of the other who is looking in. Face-to-face encounters generate reciprocities of intimacy and an uncanny self-consciousness of the depths of oneself and the other. Just as Thoreau's consciousness of his "Bean Field" leads to a point of awareness where he recognizes the beans could be potentially conscious of him—"What shall I learn of the beans or the beans of me?" (101), Dickinson also acknowledges the reciprocity of intimate relations. In representing nature, Dickinson often gives it a face that she can face. This process of personification, while at times evaded and attempted to be excused by Dickinson critics, serves as a practice of ecological thinking:

The single Flower of the Earth
That I, in passing by
Unconscious was—Great Nature's Face

⁷ Also recall the poem discussed above where looking at the bottom of the well is like looking in "an abyss's face."

Ecocritical texts have often critiqued personification as an anthropocentric and accordingly anti-ecological gesture. For example, ecocritic Scott J. Bryson defines one of the “three primary characteristics of ecopoetry” to be “an ecological and biocentric perspective recognizing the interdependent nature of the world” (Bryson 2).⁸ Ecocriticism’s desire to reach an “ecological and biocentric perspective” is challenged by instances of personification as they inevitably reveal the constructive center of human consciousness. Much poetic criticism has also criticized anthropomorphism as overly sentimentalized and juvenile.⁹ These reasons might account for ecocriticism’s inability to locate Dickinson in its original theoretical strategies and critiques.¹⁰ However, recognizing the faces of natural others and imagining them where they might not first seem obvious can be thought of as proposing an environmental ethics. Personification—and especially the figuring face-to-face encounters with the world—allows an intimacy with non-human others; intimacy in turn allows an ethical relation in the reciprocity of awareness. In the poem mentioned above, Dickinson’s syntax places the verb of being in a position where it might be connected to “Great Nature’s face” or the poem’s subject “I.” Who is unconscious here? In this sense, the “was” serves as a structural and syntactical locus of relation and both parties stand to become more aware of the other’s passing.

One of Levinas’s key terms is “infinity”—a term Dickinson uses again and again in her figuring of the self and others.

I could suffice for Him, I knew—
He—could suffice for Me—

⁸ Also see Leonard Scigaj’s *Sustainable Poetry* where he defines ecopoetry as a “verbal record of an interactive encounter between human psyche and nature, where nature retains its autonomy” (80). In Bryson, Scigaj, and others, anthropomorphism is understood as a device that pulls away from a more ecocentric perspective. Lawrence Buell writes that “anthropomorphism implies an anthropocentric frame of reference, but the two do not correlate precisely” (*Future of Environmental Criticism* 134). It is in this juncture of correlation between anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism that future studies in ecocriticism need to venture—to think through the inevitabilities of both tendencies, and the ways in which ecocentricism requires an imaginative capability to exist at all.

⁹ In the case of Dickinson studies, see Charles Anderson’s *Emily Dickinson: Stairway of Surprise*.

¹⁰ In the most recently published edition of the *Emily Dickinson Journal*, an article entitled “Dickinson’s Animals and Anthropomorphism” by Aaron Shackelford is relevant to my discussion. Shackelford takes a more a historicist approach in reaching a similar conclusion to what I am in arguing in this chapter. He suggests, “In mid nineteenth-century America, books and magazines were filled with discussions on how to go about understanding animal life. Dickinson’s animal poems join these concerns over epistemology and biology to interrogate the ways in which humans could describe and understand other creatures” (Shackelford 48).

Yet Hesitating fractions—Both
Surveyed Infinity—

“Would I be Whole” He sudden broached—
My syllable rebelled—
‘Twas face to face with Nature—forced—
‘Twas face to face with God—

Withdrew the Sun—to other Wests—
Withdrew the furthest Star
Before Decision –stooped to speech—
And then—be audibler

The Answer of the Sea unto
The Motion of the Moon—
Herself adjust Her Tides—unto—
Could I—do else—with Mine? (Fr 712)

Once again, epistemological uncertainty is present in both the subject and the syntax of this poem, as it also frames a meeting between the speaking self and the other—in this case, a “He.” What does it mean to suffice for another? Are they surveying one another, or are they looking outward to the surrounding world? What is the desire at work in the poem? What is the sense of being “whole” that is at stake? Does the poem reference a Platonic dream of a lost other half? Is this a love poem? There is ambiguity here, but my sense is that the speaker, in facing the other, apprehends “Infinity,” which is synonymous with Nature and with God—all are boundless in their reaches. Positioned “Face to face” with the other, while also questioning the possibility of being enough for another, time lapses before an analogous answer from the Sea is heard. The Sea adjusts herself in relation to the Moon, just as the speaker questions the inevitability of her own adjustment to the other, echoed in the repeating preposition “unto.”¹¹ Reciprocity is merged into infinity and uncertainty, syntax strains, and the depths of self are best analogized to the depths of the other.

As these examples have been suggesting, Dickinson’s inward looking and acknowledgement of the self’s far and terrifying reaches correspond with her outward looking. As Thoreau writes, “Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations” (111).¹²

¹¹ There is more ecocritical potential here, as Dickinson’s poems offer copious examples of poems with “nature” faces—faces of birds, flowers, etc.

¹² Emerson in his “Divinity School Address” used the language of “infinite relations” posing such beholding as an aim of Transcendentalist thinking: “Behold these outrunning laws, which our imperfect apprehension can see tend this way and that, but not come full circle. Behold these infinite relations, so like, so unlike; many, yet one. I would study, I would know, I would admire forever.” Dickinson, not surprisingly, also took her turn with the term, “Not so the infinite

The ecological principle of infinite relation is only possible in recognizing epistemological and ontological disorientation as inherently uncanny. In this sense, we might re-think moments in the American Romantic tradition that have often overlooked the uncanniness of metaphors of organic regeneration. We might also read the strangeness in such moments as Whitman's famous "If you want me look for me under your boot-soles" and Thoreau's "Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mold myself?" Biologically, these statements bear validity in a context of composting and deep time. But taken in the present literalness, there is another type of biology at work—the theory of endosymbiosis, which takes place as Morton writes, "within as well as among organisms" (36). Joan Kirkby's recent article on Dickinson and Darwin suggests that "Darwinian themes, ideas, and imagery that were circulating in New England were part of the social energy that is embedded in Dickinson's nature writings" (Kirkby 4). By demonstrating the proliferation of Darwinian ideas and discourse in New England periodicals and working through corresponding examples in Dickinson's poetry, Kirkby even goes as far as to argue that "it is appropriate to regard her as one of the great Darwinian poets of the nineteenth century" (Kirkby 18). In particular, Dickinson seems to have developed an acute awareness at the level of her language concerning the ins and outs of radical intimacy.

As there is an inevitable psychological component to ecological thinking, it is also worth recognizing how the notion of the boundary has become productive in psychology when theorizing relationship dynamics and processes of self-differentiation.¹³ In this sense, intimacy depends upon boundaries. Intimacy depends upon autonomy. Closeness depends upon distance. Similarity depends upon difference. Not surprisingly, Dickinson's poetics also exhibit a fascination with the boundary of self-differentiation—often represented through paradoxes surrounding the notion of circumference. As she famously wrote to Higginson in 1862, "My business is circumference—" (L 268). In the following poem she poses circumference as a threshold of subjectivity:

His mind of man, a secret makes
I meet him with a start
He carries a circumference
In which I have no part—

Or even if I deem I do
He otherwise may know
Impregnable to inquest

Relations—Below/Division is Adhesion's forfeit—On High/Affliction but a speculation—And
Wo/A Fallacy, a Figment, We knew—" (Fr. 997).

¹³ I am drawing my ideas here from psychologist Karen Prager's book *The Psychology of Intimacy*. Prager writes, "It seems likely that the more relational intimacy, individuation, separateness, and privacy promote each other, the more rewarding, harmonious, and enduring an intimate relationship is likely to be" (276). The work of psychiatrist Peter Kramer also discusses intimacy and differentiation, but often in terms of the American transcendental tradition of self-help and autonomy. Kramer reads Emerson, Thoreau, and William James among others in order to frame self-differentiation in the context of American philosophy and literature.

The speaker of the poem both denies and implies her relation with the circumference of the other. The circumference is a point of meeting, though there is a great deal of irreconcilability in the intense differentiation of subjectivity. Despite being “neighborly,” there is still a sense of impregnability. Although this could just be a case of a private though friendly neighbor, Dickinson’s opening line is suggestive. The term “his mind of man” suggests a larger humanity or shared commonality—the mind of man of which *his* mind of man is one, representing the carrying of circumference as a larger human tendency. In this poem, circumference serves as a type of psychological boundary. Laura Gribbin writes, “Though Circumference is often treated as a necessary boundary, in many poems it is seen less as a limit than as a point of convergence or conflation. Something seems to exist beyond Circumference, but it cannot be experienced. Like Kant’s notion of a boundary, Circumference is at once a division and a connection, the locus of relation” (Gribbin 12). As the “locus of relation,” for Dickinson, circumference is a figure of the boundary and the boundary is what ultimately fosters intimacy between differentiated subjectivities.

The psychological understandings of boundaries are important for ecological theory because radical connectedness necessarily demands we consider them, returning us to core questions of subject and object. It is also for these reasons that Morton’s intervention in bringing deconstruction to ecocriticism is needed and necessary. Ecocriticism is ultimately absorbed in theorizing the relation with the other in the hope of practicing a new ethics for a new century. A new perception of “nature” means relinquishing an old one and thinking through the question of relation—how we relate to others and ourselves. Much continental post-structural theory, interested in the ethics of subject and object, has had a productive dialogue with psychoanalytic theory. We might see how through a notion such as the boundary, ecocriticism might open itself to further interdisciplinary discourse while also recognizing its continuities with contemporary literary theory.

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud writes, “our present ego-feeling is only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive, indeed, an all-embracing, feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it” (14). While Freud framed our intimacy as something that has been lost (this is why a chapter of my project deals with the centrality of the elegy in ecopoetic theory), Dickinson seems less retrospective and more interested in negotiating intimacy in the present. For Dickinson, “Perception of an Object costs/Precise the Object’s loss---/Perception in itself a Gain/Replaying to it’s price” (Fr 1103). Dickinson’s emphasis on individual perception as a vehicle of relation allows her to negotiate intimacies in the present, rather than mourn a lost state of ultimate connectivity. Individual differences and lost connectivities serve as opportunities for Dickinson to exercise her awareness of intimacy. Embedded in disconnect is the opportunity for moving deeper into difference. As she writes, “But gain—thro’ loss—Through Grief—obtain” (Fr 834).

I will return more directly to the intimacy Dickinson’s poetry both creates and inspires in “April,” but before then, there is still much to work through. As we have already relinquished our idealized notions of the perfect poem and of redemptive nature in favor of notebooks and ecology, it becomes necessary to explore further the complex dynamics between ecology and elegy. And the elegy, as the genre that most directly engaged with loss, also tends to depend upon idealized nature in order to do so. In “December,” I will explore Thoreau’s struggle with

pastoral elegy in the face of ecological change and awareness, recognizing how ecology is always asking us to let something go.

December

“Is’t then too late the damage to repair?”

Henry David Thoreau and The Work of the Ecolament

...the earth, say they, having been long subjected to extremely artificial and luxurious modes of cultivation, to gratify appetite, converted into a sty or hot-bed, where men for profit increase the ordinary decay of nature.

-Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*

*Thoreau’s own pond
was bounded by the railroad, punctuated
by the ‘telegraph trees’ and their Aeolian wires.
All of my dread and all of my longing hope the Earth
may outwit the huge stupidity of its humans,
can find their signs and portents here, their recapitulations
of joy and awe.*

-Denise Levertov, “The Almost-Island”

*Best Gains—must have the Losses’ test—
To constitute them— Gains.*

-Emily Dickinson
Fr 499

In “November,” I argued that Dickinson develops an ecological awareness through her conception of nature as uncanny and ultimately unknowable. Accordingly, as Dickinson teaches us, it is precisely this awareness that encourages the ecocritic to recognize and relinquish the notion of nature as salvation; such a move only engenders further separation between the self and world. But the notion of nature has long been a productive solace for poets, particularly writers of elegy, who often turn to the natural world to recognize patterns of life and death to encourage consolation and productive mourning; while the mortality of winter is inevitable, the spring promises resurrection. As such, it would seem that the pastoral elegy, as a genre of poetry deeply connected to these notions of natural cycles, would encounter some difficulty when confronted with an ecological awareness. What happens when “nature” is pulled out from under pastoral elegy? How does elegy confront ecology? And, in our age of global warming and environmental crisis, do we turn to the world in the same way? Do natural cycles and processes offer the same consolatory power? When we let go of nature, where do we turn when we mourn? And what do we find? In her poem “The Almost-Island,” from *Evening Train*, a collection of poems that

mourn environmental damage, Denise Levertov struggles to find redemption in the natural world when guided by an awareness of its fragility and vulnerability. As Levertov recognizes, we are in the same danger of idealizing *Walden* as a perfect expression of pastoral salvation, rather than reminding ourselves, as Thoreau often did, that his beloved pond was bound by the railroad and “telegraph trees.” As I will argue in this chapter, the power and resilience of Thoreau’s faith in metaphors of regeneration is directly connected to his personal loss and relinquishment of both his identity as a poet and his sense of nature in favor of ecology. As I will suggest, Thoreau went through a complicated process of poetic mourning that lets go of the pastoral elegy in favor of a new literary genre. This genre will negotiate the questions mentioned above and come to dominate subsequent ecological poetics—a literary phenomenon that I refer to as the ecolament.

In “Former Inhabitants” and “Winter Visitors” in *Walden*, Thoreau’s narrative moves inward, encrusted by the frigidity of a New England winter. In the snowy season, Thoreau not only turns indoors, but also turns to the past, as he writes, “with such reminiscences I repeopled the woods and lulled myself asleep” (171). Recalling the former inhabitants of the woods, Thoreau recognizes how “only a dent in the earth marks the site of these dwellings,” as they become buried in strawberry and sumac brambles over time. For Thoreau, inward mournings correspond to outward changes: “What a sorrowful act must that be,—the covering up of wells! coincident with the opening of wells of tears” (170). It is Thoreau’s saddest season in *Walden*, as he rubs up against the crust of an abrasive environment and experiences a time when his optimistic metaphors of growth are strained and exchanged for taciturn expressions of loss. Thoreau’s expressions of winter in *Walden* are indicative of his fascination with the relation between inward grief and outward change—the traditional literary work of the pastoral elegy. And so, in understanding Thoreau’s meditative and metaphorical ecopoetics, we need to turn our attentions to his expressions of grief—the inevitable winter, and the necessary ground that allows for his radical growth. Or, as Dickinson best expresses—we need to think through how, “Winter under cultivation/Is as arable as Spring” (Fr 1720).

Throughout this dissertation, I will turn to Northrop Frye’s sense of metaphor as an identification of the self and the world. But from where does this need to identify emerge? Frye suggests that it is generated from emotions concerning separation and lost connection. He writes, “I feel separated and cut off from the world around me, but occasionally I’ve felt that it was really a part of me, and I hope I’ll have that feeling again, and that next time it won’t go away...I said earlier that this is a feeling of lost identity, and that poetry, by using the language of identification, which is metaphor, tries to lead our imaginations back to it” (*Educated Imagination* 53). Metaphor works as the “language of identification,” which seeks to negotiate our feelings of separation—leading us back to some lost place or sense of connection. But are we lost or have we lost? What is the difference? And how might such senses influence the ways we create?

Ecocritical theory has generally critiqued Cartesian dualism, in seeking to subsume human difference, insisting either that we are or that we should be “connected.” Rather than recognizing an inherent sense of “lost identity,” ecocritical texts have argued that this sense of loss is illusionary, or that we need to locate ways of rejoining with the earth—subsuming and healing the ontological fragmentation that estranges us. Consider ecofeminist Susan Griffin’s language where she writes “If human consciousness can be rejoined not only with the human body but with the body of the earth, what seems incipient in the reunion is the recovery of meaning within existence that will infuse every kind of meeting between self and the universe.”

This act of “re-joining” is based on the “science of ecology,” where it has “been established that all phenomena in nature, including human beings, are interconnected” (Griffin 9). Griffin’s language is indicative of much ecocritical theory, which acknowledges a sense of lost connectivity, but also relies on a retrospective turning. Such work idealizes a past Nature rather than embracing a present ecology, which, as I suggested in “November,” future work in ecological criticism needs to embrace.

Ultimately such ecological theories do not seem that distant from the basic desires of Romanticism, which also express a condition of alienation in relation to lost sensuality and environmental connectedness. As M.H. Abrams explains:

It was at the same time an attempt to overcome the sense of man’s alienation from the world by healing the cleavage between subject and object, between the vital, purposeful, value-full world of private experience and the dead postulated world of extension, quantity, and motion. To establish that man shares his own life with nature was to reanimate the dead universe of the materialists, and at the same time most effectively tie man back to his milieu. (Abrams 65)

For whatever the reasons—whether they be psychological or socio-cultural or anthropological—driven through capitalism or materialism or environmental determinism—we feel the desire to connect. This desire is inevitably based on a sense of disconnection. *Only connect* was Forster’s famous epigram to *Howard’s End*—a sentiment echoed throughout modernist texts, expressing existential anxiety toward an increasingly fragmented world. And perhaps Modernism was Romanticism’s irony, an exhaustion falling after the optimistic energies of writers like Emerson and Whitman. These writers ceaselessly believed in the human ability to create relation—to connect and contact—fusing subjects and objects and locating ways of joining the self and the world. And while evolution and genetics prove that we are connected in profound and essential ways, we are still estranged because of loss or lack or perhaps even fear of intimacy, which is another way of expressing the experiential awareness of deep relation. As this dissertation has been suggesting, intimacy is paradoxical. It goes in both directions—moving outward necessitates a moving inward—knowing another corresponds to knowing the self. This is why ecological literature is not always about landscape or pristine wilderness. Ecological literature concerns all the ideas and emotions that accompany the motion toward increasing and deepening awareness. And metaphor is the linguistic and conceptual vehicle through which we forge connections that negotiate our sense of loss and difference. It is constructive, imaginative, and creative—but also dependent, in certain ways, upon this sense of separation.

Natural metaphors, particularly ones of growth and cultivation, inevitably concern mortality; summer needs its winter, just as birth needs its death. What beauty and promise of growth these metaphors enable is dependent upon death—and we must fully accept this. As Thoreau learns, when we front life, we front mortality. Robert Pogue Harrison also connects Thoreau’s desire to live a deliberate and awakened life to an ultimate need to front the “fact of death.” As he writes:

Thoreau's excursion in the woods of Walden, then, seeks to reduce life to the essentiality of its facts, in other words to reduce life to the fact of death. A fact of life is not so much something to live with but to die with. It is a self-knowledge that is either in you or not in you when you 'come to die,' depending upon your choice, while alive, to live or not to live what is life. (*Forests* 222)

What underlies the metaphorical possibilities of Thoreau's project at Walden is the state of loss. In relation, it is important to recall that while Thoreau was staying in his cabin on Walden Pond, he was not formally writing *Walden*. Rather, he was writing and preparing the manuscript of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, an elegiac text that also organizes itself around master metaphors—in particular that of the river and its connection to the passage of time. *A Week* is Thoreau's most explicitly elegiac work, as it narrates a two-week journey Thoreau took with his brother John, before his untimely and gruesome death to tetanus. Many critics have noted the elegiac quality of the text (and the currents that similarly run through *Walden*), but there has been no explicit discussion of the crossing of Thoreau's elegy with ecology. And while Harrison argues that Thoreau goes to *Walden* to ultimately leave *Walden*, we might also recognize how a similar relinquishment of the construct of an idealized nature takes place in *A Week*. This work is explicitly enacted through Thoreau's struggles with the genre of pastoral elegy, as well as through his negotiations concerning his status and identity as a poet. The pastoral, as a genre that depends upon the idealization of nature, challenges Thoreau's ecological sensibilities, which read change, history, and loss in both his inner and outer worlds.

Many critics have proposed that *A Week* functions as a pastoral elegy in that it displaces human loss by locating cyclical and regenerative processes on the landscape. However, these readings miss much of Thoreau's complicated ecological sensibility. In reading *A Week* as an eco-poetic text, we need to reconcile the text's overwhelming elegiac pathos with Thoreau's cutting observations of history and geography. Before turning more explicitly to *A Week*, we might first consider Whitman's poem "This Compost," where we can witness a moment where "nature" seems to both cause and trouble the processes of consolation. Although Whitman's work often attempts to subsume Civil War trauma into more hopeful visions, consider these lines:

Something startles me where I thought I was safest
I withdraw from the still woods I loved,
I will not go now on the pastures to walk,
I will not strip the clothes from my body to my lover the sea,
I will not touch my flesh to the earth as to other flesh to renew me. (Whitman
495)

Here, some antecedent moment of heightened awareness precedes the speaker's initial moment of speaking, as there is an immediate temporal juxtaposition between a past of safety and paralyzed "now." Presenting an anti-pastoral retreat from the wood and pasture, the speaker is unable to be "renewed" by the earth because of an overwhelming and sickening feeling of being haunted by the "sour dead" buried beneath the ground: "Where have you disposed of their

carcasses/Those drunkards and gluttons of so many generations?” Here, it is the very idea of compost or regenerative nature that is troubling.

Now I am terrified at the Earth, it is that calm and patient,
It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions,
It turns harmless and stainless on its axis, with such endless
successions of diseases' corpses, (Ibid)

The speaker seems only partially convinced in his attempts to envision a regenerative and healing nature. Rather, the mood of the poem presents a type of gothic terror—most literally a sense of something beneath the ground. As such, the poem becomes a type of elegy for pastoral conventions themselves, where the impulse toward the pastoral exists, however, it is mingled with a larger ecological awareness that is uncanny and challenges transcendental idealism. Thoreau faces similar challenges in *A Week*, a text that presses the limits and possibilities of both elegy and pastoral—becoming an early example of the eco-elegy—or a text that works to work through the loss of the illusion of nature itself.

In terms of critical reception, *A Week* has often been overlooked in favor of *Walden*, largely due to its digressive nature. Meredith McGill perceptively offers a framework for understanding Thoreau's formal choices in suggesting how:

One way to describe the difficulty and sheer strangeness of this text is to note that it is suspended between incompatible modes of representation: on one hand, the travel narrative, with its specific setting, defined *telos*, central figure of traveler-observer, and temporal continuity of the trip; on the other hand, the commonplace book, a multivocal, discontinuous collection of sententiae, forgoing temporal order and continuity for abstraction, giddy swerves into self-referentiality, and the generative nature of juxtaposition. (McGill 367)

In not denying the confounding referential nature of the text, McGill's interpretive stance positions itself with the “juxtaposition” of a-temporal commonplace inserts located within the larger temporal travel narrative. Following McGill, to understand *A Week* as an eco-elegy, it is necessary to closely examine the juxtaposition between these lyric and narrative modes. In the narrative Thoreau acknowledges a damaged and altered landscape; accordingly, his elegiac verses become impinged by these realizations. Consequently, he relies on his poems and lyric fragments (essentially, the timeless tradition) as a means of working through grief. These moments function in diverse ways. At times, they become a type of meta-commentary on the tradition of elegy. At other moments, however, they become overly adhesive to the artifice of convention, causing Thoreau to doubt his own ability to produce verse that endures over time, and consequently to locate tropes that allow successful mourning. Ultimately, *A Week* enacts a complicated process, where more than just mourning John, Thoreau also mourns the construct of nature itself.

In its most generalized sense, *A Week*, through its various digression, allows for questions of progress and history. Numerous moments in the text serve as a type of social commentary on industrialized New England. For example, *A Week* memorably presents meditations on the absent Native American past and how the white man comes, “buys his hunting-grounds, and at length forgets where he is buried and ploughs up his bones” (43). Not only can history be read in the landscape, but it also *becomes* the physical environment. In journeying through numerous locks and dams, Thoreau ruminates on how such technology has led to flooding as well as impeding the migratory patterns of fish. He describes the Concord as a “dead” river, because of its proximity to the railroad line, “instead of a scream of fish-hawk scaring the fishes, is heard the whistle of the steam-engine, arousing a country to its progress” (71). Similarly, the Merrimack River is described in terms of its altered fish populations—both bass and salmon are “more rare” and the “locks and dams have proved more or less destructive to the fisheries” (71). In order to further understand the dynamics between land development and Euro-American presence, consider Thoreau’s narrative account:

Some spring the white man came, built him a house, and made a clearing here, letting in the sun, dried up a farm, piled up the old gray stones in fences, cut down the pines around his dwelling, planted orchard seeds brought from the old country, and persuaded the civil apple-tree to blossom next to the wild pine and juniper...He rudely bridged the stream, and drove his team afield into the river meadows, cut the wild grass...and with his grain he scattered the seeds of the dandelion and the wild trefoil over the meadows, mingling his English flowers with the wild native ones. (43)

This particular passage suggests a type of ecological colonialism, where the most seemingly “natural” dimensions of the landscape cannot be separated from their human origins, and accordingly, their participation in colonial history. Beyond building bridges and fences and accidentally plowing up Indian bones, the colonial presence has gone even further in altering the actual ecological balances of species.¹⁴ The “wild native” flowers are mingled, the seeds have spawned, and the continent is altered. Already, on some levels, we can see how for an American naturalist, such as Thoreau, the idea of pastoral is impossible—the more one looks toward the American landscape, the more one sees colonial history and the consequences of European expansionism. History cannot be absorbed by the landscape because history *becomes* the

¹⁴ For more specific information on dandelions and other British weeds, see Donald Worster’s *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (Cambridge UP, 1988)—specifically Chapter 5, “Ecological Imperialism: The Overseas Migration of Western European as Biological Phenomenon,” where Worster offers an extended discussion of the success of “European weeds in America,” which at one point, inspired “Charles Darwin to goad the American botanist Asa Gray: ‘Does it not hurt your Yankee pride that we thrust you so confoundly? I am sure Mrs. Gray will stick up for your own weeds. Ask her whether they are not more honest, downright good sort of weeds’ ” (103) in addition to the “stunning, even awesome success of European agriculture” in North America (106).

landscape. In “Friday,” the last chapter in *A Week*, Thoreau returns once again to this trope in explaining how:

Some have thought that the gales do not at present waft to the voyager the natural and original fragrance of the land, such as the early navigators described, and that the loss of many odoriferous native plants, sweet-scented grasses and medicinal herbs, which formerly sweetened the atmosphere, and rendered it salubrious, -- by the grazing cattle and the rooting swine, is the source of many diseases which now prevail; the earth, say they, having been long subjected to extremely artificial and luxurious modes of cultivation, to gratify appetite, converted into a sty or hot-bed, where men for profit increase the ordinary decay of nature. (287)

What distinguishes the latter passage from the previous one is the presence of a distinct elegiac tone, which gathers momentum with the narrative. Thoreau’s initial and more satirical observations of ecological imperialism are transformed into a sense of bitter loss—gales that do not console—gales that also need mourning. Here, the wind, one of Romanticism’s favorite transcendent metaphors, loses its capacity to console while also becoming connected to “disease” through a complex ecological weave. It is a fascinating and essential moment in Thoreau’s text, where the usual sensuous satisfaction of a natural other is inhibited, and rather becomes a manifestation of human destruction—long “subjected to extremely and luxurious modes of cultivation.” Such passages force the reader to become hyper-conscious of the moments when Thoreau turns toward natural occurrences to understand natural process, especially those surrounding death and regeneration; something as simple as the “gales” of New England trigger memories of a disruptive national past.¹⁵

¹⁵In this context, it is also worth considering Thoreau’s 1862 essay “Wild Apples,” published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, where through the figure of the apple tree, he created a commentary on human progress and migration: “It has been longer cultivated than any other, and so is more humanized; and who knows but, like the dog, it will at length be no longer traceable to its wild original? It migrates with man, like the dog and horse and cow: first, perchance, from Greece to Italy, thence to England, thence to America; and our Western emigrant is still marching steadily toward the setting sun with the seeds of the apple in his pocket, or perhaps a few young trees strapped to his load. At least a million apple-trees are thus set farther westward this year than any cultivated ones grew last year. Consider how the Blossom-Week, like the Sabbath, is thus annually spreading over the prairies; for when man migrates, he carries with him not only his birds, quadrupeds, insects, vegetables, and his very sward, but his orchard also.” Here, the ancient apple tree is entwined with human history—“humanized” and distant from its “wild origin.” In *A Week*, the image of a nail in an apple tree bookends the work and the presence of the apple trees on the landscape continuously reappears in the narrative. For Thoreau, the Edenic apple is always connected to human narratives, as he explains, “brought hither its ancestors by ours once. These gentler trees imparted a half-civilized and twilight aspect to the otherwise barbarian land.” In America, the apple trees are never untouched nature, but rather a part of civilization on the undeveloped continent. As Thoreau explains, one will find “in history, that the era in which men cultivate the apple, and the amenities of the garden, is essentially different

Such passages reveal the extent to which Thoreau seems conscious of how the project of the poet becomes interrupted and challenged—the pastoral cannot and will not suffice because “nature” has become uncanny and unnatural. In this sense, we can read Thoreau’s *A Week* as embodying struggles in form and literary convention. In his narrative discussions he is able to offer a didactic conversation concerning the roots and consequences of his observations. However, complementing *A Week’s* narrative motion as structured through the river journey, Thoreau inserts copious lyric excerpts from a range of authors (from Channing to Homer), in addition to at least fifty of his own poems. Many of these inserts actually are pastoral elegies. For example, in “Friday,” Thoreau includes an excerpt from “A Pastoral Elegy on the Death of Sir William Drummond” by William Drummond of Hawthornden: “Wise Nature’s darlings, they live in the world/Perplexing not themselves how it is hurled” (271). Such “citations” suggest that Thoreau was looking toward this literary history for a type of consolation and connection. The text also presents Thoreau’s own elegiac verse. For example, in “Wednesday,” the chapter most involved with the working through of John’s death, Thoreau includes a frank elegy for his brother. Preceding the poem, Thoreau discusses the failings of language in attempting to ascertain the character of a “Friend”¹⁶ “The universe seems bankrupt as soon as we begin to discuss the character of individuals. Our discourse all runs to slander, and our limits grow narrower as we advance” (209). While Thoreau is largely confident in representing landscape and history, he suggests the impossibility of summing up a human existence. As he writes, “I say, let us speak of mushrooms and trees rather. Yet we can sometimes afford to remember them in private” (209). The lyric allows Thoreau a space for this more “private” sense of loss, and the elegy is not only highly typical, but also a type of meta-elegy, conscious of the tradition in which it participates. For example, consider the following stanzas:

The sphere henceforth my elegy shall sing,
 For elegy has other subject none;
 Each strain of music in my ears shall ring
 Knell of departure from that other one.

Make haste and celebrate my tragedy
 With fitting strain resound ye woods and fields;
 Sorrow is dearer in such case to me
 Than all the joys other occasion yields. (210)

from that of the hunter and forest life, and neither can displace the other without loss.” A symbol of supposed “progress,” the apple tree becomes also symbol of loss—a constant presence on the American landscape and an essential part of the history of human civilization.

¹⁶ Thoreau’s choice to make Wednesday a meditation of the “Friend” rather than brother positions itself within a larger history of elegy. John B. Vickery explains this significance, in that the idea of the “friend,” –“whether simply an acquaintance or a relative and whether identified by name, blood relationship, or left anonymous—occupies a central position in the history of elegy. It is as once the focal point for the poet’s acknowledgement of a self other than his own whose loss is a surrogate and anticipation of his mortality” (11).

Here, occurrences in the natural world resonate for the speaker only in the context of loss; each sound that he hears is a “knell” –the ominous noise of a funeral bell. The pentameter verse serves as a type of artifice and it seems not nature that consoles but rather the idea of elegy. In these two stanzas, the speaker is aware of poetic tradition, and by calling on the genre itself, performs a type of public rite hyper-conscious of what a poet *should* be doing to successfully mourn. Importantly, Thoreau’s elegy does not stand in isolation; rather it is absorbed in the surrounding narrative, and the immediate transition back into prose states: “Friendship is evanescent in every man’s experience, and remembered like heat lightning in past summers” (211). The narrative continues with an extended meditation of how “The Friend” is always present yet elusive—“some fair floating isle of palms eluding the mariner in Pacific seas” (211). Accordingly, the elegist is always on the fringes of capturing his friend’s essence—and his project, to somehow grasp that “evanescent in every man’s experience” posits him always haunting “the outskirts of his time” (212). He is conceived of as an explorer and in the inserted poem “The Atlantides” Thoreau pushes back into a mythic space, as the poem takes on the speaking voice of lost “Friends” “Our fabled shores none ever reach,/No mariner has found our beach.” Here, what is lost is always illusive—always the object of desire. Significantly, the second stanza of “The Atlantides” presents a different voice, one that directly addresses those lost and distant and mythic islands “smothered in the streams of love:”

But sink not yet, ye desolate isles,
Anon your coast with commerce smiles,
And richer freights ye’ll furnish far
Than Africa or Malabar
Be fair, be fertile evermore,
Ye rumored but untrodden shore,
Who first unto your lands shall send,
And pawn the jewels of the crown
To call your distant soils their own. (212)

In this vital lyric moment, Thoreau’s mythic islands of what is lost are infringed upon by history. If they are ever found, they will instantly be subject to “commerce”—the “fertile” shores subject to possession and development for material ends. The very pastoral richness of the elegist’s project attempts to transcend the localized details of a specific place, but cannot help but to be connected to actual places, with actual histories (Africa for example). Here, pastoral can always and only be mythic—once infringed upon by people, it is tainted and transformed by an inevitable mercantilist and colonialist greed. The lost “Friend” is represented as a larger sense of lost land—or the untouched pastoral landscape and the project of the elegist cannot escape from history. We can see how in mourning John, Thoreau inevitably is entangled in a meditation on loss itself, with the idea of the pastoral constantly resurfacing as both present and absent in myth and history accordingly.

In light of this entanglement, let us again return to the last meta-elegy for John which I discussed above. The final stanza offers:

Is't then too late the damage to repair?
Distance, forsooth, from my weak grasp hath reft
The empty husk, and clutched the useless tare,
But in my hands the wheat and kernel left. (210)

Here, the idea of distance (between the living and dead, the two brothers, or the ability of the poet to represent his friend), has stripped the speaker of the infertile objects (the “empty husk” and “useless tare”) and has left him with the fruitful pieces—the “wheat and kernel.” Peter Sacks explains how in both Greek myth and Western elegy, “Only the object as lost, and not the object itself, enters into the substitutive sign, and the latter is accepted only by a turning away from the actual identity of what was lost. Consolation thus depends on a trope that remains at an essential remove from what it replaces” (4). For Thoreau’s speaker, the “wheat and kernel” serve as the substitutive sign, which allow consolation to work. And so, a poem that starts with an idealization of the brother’s image (“Lately, alas, I knew a gentle boy,/Whose features were all cast in virtue’s mold” [208]) concludes with the speaker clutching organic objects in his hands. Our job as readers is to imagine the speaker holding the wheat and kernels, while at the same time contextualizing the image and the poem with Thoreau’s surrounding exposition, which as I have shown, works to destabilize the impulse to idealize nature. In *A Week*, the very seeds bear a history of colonial imperialism—the seeds themselves are a reminder of something else—of an Edenic nature that has been lost.

In his extended study on the work of poetic mourning, R. Clifton Spargo locates Wordsworth’s “Elegiac Stanzas” as “seeming perhaps both a historical center and turning point for pastoral persuasiveness,” with future elegists continuing “to invoke pastoral scenes, almost perhaps as a poetic reflex, but with perceptibly diminished expectations about the consolations they will offer” (Spargo 225). Although Thoreau is rarely mentioned in critical surveys of elegy,¹⁷ it seems possible to also locate him as an American counterpart of Wordsworth. And although *A Week* is saturated with emotion and longing—full of sadness and grief, Thoreau wavers in relation to “pastoral persuasiveness” in mediating such grief. Even as many critics advocate understanding *A Week* as being a successful river journey up the stream of time, the text can also be understood as presenting a complex moment in literary history—where pastoral elegy in America deems itself impossible through an overriding self-consciousness of environmental consequences of colonialism. Instead, we might understand Thoreau’s frustrations with the pastoral elegy as being correspondent to his experimentations with the ecological elegy, a complex and paradoxical genre that mourns the loss of nature itself.

In his essay “Dark Ecology,” Timothy Morton describes how “elegy, weeping for a lost Edenic oneness between humanity and nature, undermines this weeping at the very moment of the weeping itself” (254). As he writes, “Ecological language might appear to be intrinsically elegiac. In a sense, nature is the ultimate lost object. It is the never-arriving terminus of a metonymic series: birds, flowers mountains...nature. The ecological threat, however, is quite the reverse of elegy. In elegy, the person departs and the environment echoes our woe. In ecological thinking, the fear is that we will go on living, while the environment disappears around us”

¹⁷Significantly, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* is not once mentioned in Max Cavitch’s new inclusive work: *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning From the Puritans to Whitman* (2007).

(253). In mourning John in *A Week*, Thoreau's turning to nature engenders further displacement, frustrating both his capacity as a poet and his work as a mourner. Underlying *Walden's* optimistic living metaphors is this sense of estrangement and displacement—as mentioned earlier, part of Thoreau's work at *Walden* concerns leaving *Walden*—abandoning his idealized constructions of both nature and the literary history that allegorizes nature. Or, as Morton explains, “To have ecology, we must give up Nature. But since we have been addicted to Nature for so long, giving up will be painful. Giving up a fantasy is harder than giving up a reality” (95). What makes *A Week* such an important text for ecopoetics is how Thoreau's relinquishment of Nature is directly connected to an abandonment of his notion of Poetry itself.

Importantly, many critics locate a type of optimism and resolution in *A Week*, claiming that the self-contained temporality of the week and the journey *there* and *back* offers a narrative of progress.¹⁸ As H. Daniel Peck offers, “Built upon a journey with a beginning and an end, its linear form called for—and received, in its lyrical closing chapter—resolution and closure” (*Thoreau's Morning* 36). But aside from the fact that the book neatly returns to the precise “spot” where it started, and that Thoreau includes a conclusive “THE END,” are there any moments in “Friday”—this “lyrical closing chapter” that punctuate this neat return? Where do this chapter's digressions go? On his own death-bed, Thoreau asked a friend to read “Friday” aloud to him, indicating the integral status of this moment in his *corpus*. Like “Wednesday,” Thoreau's last chapter “Friday” is laden with grief and meditations on loss. “Friday” however, distinguishes itself as embodying the season change—harvesting the verge between summer and autumn. The first paragraph concludes, “We had gone to bed summer, and awoke in autumn; for summer passes into autumn in some unimaginable point in time, like the turning of the leaf” (269), and the chapter is saturated in the imagery of change. Thoreau's meandering descriptions of autumnal ripening gradually merge into an extended discussion of poetry and, in his own way, provide a “defense” of poetry.¹⁹ For Thoreau, the “summer” of English poetry, like the “Greek and Latin before it, seems well advanced toward its fall, and laden with the fruit and foliage of the season” (295). In this context, Friday presents an extended elegiac working through of the lost grandeur of the mytho-poetic Western tradition—no longer a “seer,” the “bard has in great measure lost the sacredness of his office” (295). For Thoreau, the poet has become distant from nature—he has come “within doors” so instead of a former heroic song, “we see the comfortable fireside, and hear the crackling fagots in all verse” (296). Thoreau's ideal poet is Homer, who writes “as if nature spoke. He presents to us the simplest picture of human life, so the child itself can understand them, and the man must not think twice to appreciate his naturalness” (74). Like Homer, the best poet “sings how the blood flows in his veins” (74). Thoreau describes how “we are a people” who live “in houses of pearl and porcelain, and drink only light wines”—a people physically weakened and no longer capable of producing real and true poetry. Thoreau's ideal poet is one who is strong and “like the sun, he will indifferently select his rhymes, and with a liberal taste weave his verse the planet and the stubble” (302). Accordingly, strong poetry has permanence; it is like “unhewn granite,” and is measured successful by its ability to endure and “polish” with time: “A work of genius is rough-hewn from the first, able to anticipate the lapse of time, and has an ingrained polish, which still appears when fragments are broken off, an

¹⁸ For example, see Richard Lebeaux's “Week of a Man's Life” in *Thoreau's Seasons*

¹⁹ Here I am thinking of Shelley's famous Defense and Emerson's “The Poet,” as two pieces that meditate on what poetry *is*—and how the *poet* functions in the world.

essential quality of its substance” (303). But where does Thoreau situate himself as a “poet” within this conversation? To what extent is he a part of the “we,” of “pearl and porcelain” that he works to trouble? We cannot overlook the numerous lyric poems at work in the body of the text—many of which would be later published again in his posthumous collection *Poems and Nature* in 1895. On one level, Thoreau situates himself as a strong poet, echoing his earlier comment that “like the sun, he will indifferently select his rhyme:”

I am the autumnal sun,
With autumn gales my race is run;
When will the hazel put forth its flowers,
Or the grape ripen under my bowers?
When will the harvest or the hunter’s moon,
Turn my midnight into mid-noon?
I am all sere and yellow,
And to my core mellow.
The mast is dropping within my woods,
The winter is lurking within my moods,
And the rustling of the withered leaf
Is the constant music of my grief (304)

There is something almost a bit juvenile in these rhymes (sun/run, yellow/mellow)—a sense of a need of forcing the rhyme—of trying to make a poem do what it needs to do in order to endure as verse. And although the lyric speaker is identifying with the sun, it seems more difficult to believe that this selection of rhyme is “indifferent.” I am reminded of my favorite verse moment from Thoreau:

I say, Turn it outdoors
Into the moors
I love a life whose plot is simple
And does not thicken with every pimple.
A soul so sound no sickly conscience binds it,
That makes the universe no worse than’t finds it.

This verse seems more natural to Thoreau—his willingness to confound meter and directly address the reader more powerfully matches his urge to “Turn it outdoors.” But what do we make of the “pimple”? Indeed it seems a case of a poet struggling to find something to rhyme with “simple”—and there is a strict need on the poet’s part to adhere to end-rhyme—a tacit sense of obligation to poetic endurance (rhyme being what allows us to remember). However let us return to the “autumnal sun,” where the sun is full of grief, as her season of dominance (summer) is fading into winter. Directly following the poem, Thoreau acknowledges the weakness of his verse—he is acutely aware of the shortcomings of his poem to communicate his essential point,

and he offers a translation of his verse into prose, or as he notes, “To an unskillful rhymer the Muse thus spoke in prose” (304):

The moon no longer reflects the day, but rises to her absolute rule, and the husbandman and hunter acknowledge her for their mistress. Asters and golden-rods reign along the way, and the life-everlasting withers not. The fields are reaped and shorn of their pride, but an inward verdure still crowns them. The thistle scatters its down on the pool, and yellow leaves clothe the vine, and naught disturbs the serious life of men. But behind the sheaves, and under the sod, there lurks a ripe fruit, which the reapers have not gathered, the true harvest of the year, which it bears forever, annually watering and maturing it, and man never severs the stalk which bears this palatable fruit. (304)

It is fascinating that Thoreau suggests that these two excerpts are synonymous in consideration of how greatly they differ in terms of tone and conclusion. The poem is full of grief whereas the prose offers faith in transcendentalist transformation, however, one that still bears connection to the human intervention and a less-idealized sense of nature. Perhaps there is something redeemable—some metaphorical “palatable fruit”—“lurking” under and away from man and his ceaseless “severing.” Perhaps nature can still offer a type of consolation—a “true harvest” of redemption. Thoreau’s deliberate juxtaposition of verse and narrative indicates the extent to which he feels his own verse cannot suffice—that he is not one of those “strong” poets whom he so strongly admires. Instead, he is a prose writer entwined with history and geography, and rather than needing to impose loss upon the landscape (as pastoral-elegists tend to do), he acknowledges that it is already there. This larger mourning of the bardic tradition confronts Thoreau’s own faith in both elegy and pastoral—his own resignation and abandonment of using the lyric as a form of expression, despite his apparent respect and admiration for such traditions. It is for these reasons that I am hesitant to read *A Week*’s representation of the journey as being entirely redemptive. Rather, we might think of *A Week* as being an abandonment of pastoral elegy and an early example of eco-elegy. In addition, we might consider how Thoreau came into his own as a prose stylist, abandoning his struggles with the formal poetic versification in favor of his sinuous and densely metaphorical prose that will come to full fruition in *Walden*. That Thoreau’s prose style is connected to his mourning for an idealized nature is an important idea, suggesting the dense metaphoricity of ecological thinking, rather than an allegorical sense of nature. Metaphoricity kaleidoscopes perspective, and as I will argue in “January,” Thoreau’s metaphorical prose in *Walden* will come to stand as among his greatest achievements in eco-poetic making.

In *A Week*, we can witness Thoreau’s process of working through and letting go of both his identity as a poet and his idealization of nature as supreme symbolic allusion. In holding himself to the heights of the pastoral elegy, Thoreau actually does the work of the eco-lament, which requires a type of meditation and will come to full fruition in his writing of *Walden*. It seems important to recall the sense of loss that spurns metaphor. And in working to identify Thoreau’s metaphoricity, it also seems important to think of what it depends upon—an inherent sense of loss.

In “January” and “February,” I will turn away from Thoreau’s grief in *A Week* and turn toward his celebrations of cultivation in *Walden*, where he exhibits a persistent capacity to favor metaphors of growth and regeneration, while also recognizing the loss that such growth depends upon. Indeed, *A Week* is such a central text in the Thoreau canon because it shows us the process through which he confronted winter, and allowed the experience of loss to inflect his future interest in metaphor and meditation. In “A Winter Walk,” one of Thoreau’s earliest essays, he writes, “Though winter is represented in the almanac as an old man, facing the wind and sleet, and drawing his cloak about him, we rather think of him as a merry woodchopper, and warm-blooded youth, as blithe as summer” (*Essays* 40). Throughout the essay, Thoreau’s literary eye sees signs of warmth amidst coldness. His shifting perspective embraces the more optimistic end of seasonal paradoxes and cycles, as he finds ways of re-situating winter as summer: “The day is but a Scandinavian night. The winter is an arctic summer” (31) and “there is a slumbering subterranean fire in nature which never goes out, and which no cold can chill. It finally melts the great snow, and in January or July is only buried under thicker or thinner covering” (30). In this earlier essay, we can hear Thoreau’s living metaphor of vital heat melting even the sterile frigidity of a New England winter. And while Thoreau’s vibrant and inexhaustible metaphors might often turn our attentions to tropes of growth, warmth, and awakening—we need to also remember his inevitable winter—what the strength of such vitality depends upon—and the particular collision of elegy and ecology that is exemplified in *A Week*. *Walden*’s metaphoricity will synthesize the elegiac pathos of *A Week* with the early naïveté of “A Winter Walk,” finding ways to grow amidst loss—to persist through December and proceed to January.

January

“It was no longer beans that I hoed, nor I that hoed beans”

Thoreau and the Metaphorical Field as Meditation

Those old books suggested a certain fertility, an Ohio soil, as if they were making a humos for new literatures to spring in. I heard the bellowing of bullfrogs and the hum of the mosquitoes reverberating through the thick embossed covers when I had closed the book. Decayed literature makes the richest of all soils.

-Henry David Thoreau, March 16, 1852

We can say that the term ‘metaphor’ has usually been used to denote a peculiarity, or perhaps better, an innate property, of language.... Metaphor is perhaps the principal sign that words do not stand in isolation; so long as they have histories—and all words do, even ones that appear newly coined—they will have a metaphorical field of their own.

-David Punter, *Metaphor*

Poetry constantly requires a new relation.

-Wallace Stevens, *Adagia*

As I suggested in “December,” Thoreau’s mourning of nature opens a poetic space to forge new relations in language. However, in letting go of the lyric poem in favor of extended prose works framed through diurnal awareness, Thoreau by no means relinquished figuration. Indeed, as the organizational principles of *A Week* and *Walden* attest, Thoreau’s genius lies in his manipulation and construction of master metaphors through which he was able to frame the infinite dimension of ecological thinking. And metaphor, as I will argue in these next chapters, is essential to propelling ecological thinking. Because metaphor draws two different concepts into a relationship of identification, its inherent paradoxical position analogizes to ecological thinking, which, as I explained in “November,” depends upon uncanny balances of sameness and difference. And since ecological thinking implies radical and expansive connectivity, metaphor’s ability to encourage new relations is an essential poetic technique that engenders further ecological thinking. As such, in this chapter, I will argue that *Walden’s* strength and sense of ecology is shaped by its profound metaphoricity.

In her book *Passions for Nature*, Rochelle Johnson argues that Thoreau ultimately seeks to get “beyond” metaphor in his work and that in *Walden* it “seems” that,

Thoreau shaped his language in a way that he believed would impress his fellow transcendentalists, as well as in ways that would appeal to his audience.

We might see the frequent use of metaphor in *Walden* as an implicit testament to the difficulty of evading metaphor in an age when metaphors for nature pervaded cultural discourse as the increasingly industrialized American grew evermore alienated from the natural world. (Johnson 192)

Although she is able to support this position by pointing to Thoreau's later and more empirical work in the *Kalendar*, Johnson's contention that Thoreau's use of metaphor is merely a rhetorical appeal to his audience significantly undercuts both the inevitability and the value of metaphor in ecological thinking. Johnson's argument is embedded in the perpetuation of ecocritical "nature" discourse, which I have been positioning myself against, as urged forward by Morton's recent theoretical contentions. She argues that the "real world" disappears in *Walden* because the text is "sufficiently immersed in metaphor that it leaves readers adrift in philosophizing to such a degree that the real natural world seems far gone" (Johnson 200). But once again, the desire to see the "real world" in this text seems more a product of ecocritical advocacy than of the complex literary work Thoreau actually produced, which is, as most readers immediately notice, saturated in metaphor. In suggesting that *Walden* is primarily a "social experiment," Johnson blames metaphor as the figure taking both Thoreau and readers away from the "real world." However, a "social experiment" pitted against the "real world" sets up a dichotomy that simplifies and shuts down the complex expanding webs of relation engendered by ecological thinking. Ultimately, I think of *Walden* as a text more interested in metaphor and meditation than "nature." As I will argue throughout these next chapters, metaphorical figuration, to draw on ecology's most inescapable metaphor, is essential for clearing the ground and planting the seeds that will nurture and encourage meditative consciousness. Witnessing Thoreau's metaphorical play with the *logos* in *Walden* can serve as analogy for work that needs to happen in order for the eventual emergence into the Eastern sensibility of metaphor as convergence, rather than purely transference. Johnson's work is more focused on Thoreau's outward looking, rather than the recognition of the intense correspondence between Thoreau's outward and inward looking. As I suggested in "November," attempts to understand "nature" ultimately lead to epistemological uncertainty, a state that returns us once again to the unknowability of the self. In her conclusion Johnson does concede that Thoreau (and Susan Fenimore Cooper) "seem to have accepted humbly nature's meaning as something they could not know fully" (222). However, Johnson's chapter on Thoreau's desire to get "beyond metaphor" seems consistent with much ecocritical writing that seeks to critique the highly self-reflexive space of poetic composition in favor of a more scientifically mimetic representation of the natural world.

But how should the critic interested in ecopoetics approach *Walden*, one of American literature's most canonical and philosophical texts? Robert Frost is perhaps most relevant in his insistence that *Walden* should be read as a great poem: "Far be it from me to regret that all poetry isn't in verse. I'm sure I'm glad of all the unversified poetry of *Walden*—" (quoted in Moneterio 58). Frost reads *Walden* as a poem—as "unversified poetry"—explaining at another point how, "In *Walden* I always get it near the height of poetry." Frost's categorization of *Walden* as a work of poetry is not particularly surprising, especially in considering of his own centralization of metaphor in his understanding of poetry and education. In his famous essay "Education by Poetry," Frost succinctly claimed, "Education by poetry is education by metaphor." As he explains,

What I am pointing out is that unless you are at home in the metaphor, unless you have had your proper poetical education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere. Because you are not at ease with figurative values: you don't know the metaphor in its strength and its weakness. You don't know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you. You are not safe with science; you are not safe in history.²⁰

Indeed, it is certainly *Walden's* highly metaphorical style that allows us to understand it as poetry. Among other valuable lessons, *Walden* offers its readers a "poetical education in the metaphor," as Thoreau rides his metaphors through a multiplicity of levels and senses. And metaphor, as Frost suggests, has everything to do with the process of learning.

Interestingly, in all of *Walden*, Thoreau only refers to metaphor explicitly on one occasion.²¹ The opening paragraph of "Sounds" states:

But while we are confined to books, though the most select and classic, and read only particular written languages, which are themselves but dialects and provincial, we are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak without metaphor, which alone is copious and standard. Much is published, but little printed. The rays which stream through the shutter will be no longer remembered when the shutter is wholly removed. No method nor discipline can supersede the necessity of being forever on the alert. What is a course of history or philosophy, or poetry, no matter how well selected, or the best society, or the most admirable routine of life, compared with the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen? Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer? Read your fate, see what is before you, and walk on into futurity. (72)

In initiating this chapter on sensual experience, Thoreau draws attention to the limitations of language to capture "the language which all things speak without metaphor." While this statement might be read as a critique or frustration with poetic troping, we must also turn our attention to what Thoreau asks instead: "Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer?" A "seer" in *Walden* functions as a trope that expands the experience of deep looking. "Seeing" in *Walden* also acts metaphorically. So while Thoreau mourns the loss of "a language without metaphor," he also asks us to focus our attention on a particular metaphor—that of vision.

²⁰ A reproduction of this essay, which was initially a talk Frost delivered at Amherst College and subsequently was published by the school in 1931, can be found through the University of Texas: <http://www.en.utexas.edu/amlit/amlitprivate/scans/edbypo.html>

²¹ In "Economy," Thoreau explicitly refers to analogy in his discussion of "vital heat," another one of his living metaphors.

Indeed, “seeing” might be understood as a metaphor for metaphor, as recognizing sameness in difference involves a shift of perception. In this sense, Thoreau is not critiquing metaphor, but rather is presenting a plea for living metaphor, a term that this chapter and “February” will work to theorize in relation to ecology.

While Robert Frost thought of *Walden* as poetry, the text has always challenged critics when subjected to questions of genre. Unarguably central in the canon of American literature, *Walden* has maintained popularity through both an academic and general readership—and Thoreau himself has sustained fame as both a philosopher and a folk hero. But how do we read the text? Walter Harding offers the most essential and foundational approaches in his essay, “Five Ways to Look at Walden.” In recognizing the many reasons why people read *Walden*, Harding outlines the five most essential readings: a natural history essay, “a do-it-yourself guide to the simple life” (Harding 151), “a satirical criticism of modern life and living” (154), as “belletristic” or from a “purely technical standpoint,” and on a spiritual level, as a “guidebook to a higher life” (160). Lawrence Buell’s important ecocritical work, *The Environmental Imagination* takes on *Walden* in an ecocritical context as exemplifying the natural history essay. Buell works through Thoreau’s legacy—his “canonization as environmental saint”—and his importance to both political and literary green argumentation and analysis—and his “stature as a representative of green American thinking” (2). However, while it might seem obvious for an ecocritical reading to draw attention to the natural historical dimensions of a text, an ecopoetic reading necessarily must encounter and synthesize all the ways of reading mentioned by Harding. It is the multiplicity of genre and interpretive breadth that represent *Walden*’s particular power and genius. Thinking ecologically also requires us to think big—in Dickinson’s language—to “dwell in possibility.” As I will argue in “August,” theorizing ecopoetics asks us to hold multiple views in relation and reading *Walden* requires us to consider Harding’s “Five ways” and perhaps even more. More than just a book about the environment, *Walden* is ecological because it is a book about everything. As Buell ultimately acknowledges, Thoreau’s “literary masterpiece was an intricate nest woven idiosyncratically out of materials gathered from diverse sources,” recognizing the writer’s “dependence on his culture” just as much as on nature (423). Rather than defining it as a text about “nature,” *Walden* asks us to consider its textuality first and foremost.

Instead of breaking this chapter down into a more narrow focus—to allegory or synecdoche or metonymy (which are all tropes of either the word or the sentence), I want to think of metaphor in its widest and most inexhaustible ways. I will be working with a sense of metaphor as an illogical identification—what Northrop Frye explains in *The Educated Imagination* as “products of an impulse to identify human and natural worlds” (39). It is in this quite simple formulation—as a product of the impulse to “identify human and natural worlds,” that metaphor becomes an essential subject for ecological theory. Metaphor is important because, while it ontologically identifies, its semantic structure maintains a recognition of difference. As I discussed in my chapter on Dickinson’s ecological intimacy, ecology also depends upon a recognition of difference. Frye’s formulation of metaphor as a process of identification is not that far off from ecological theory, in that he recognizes the uncanny epistemological uncertainty that underlies human consciousness’s encounters with the strange stranger. As Frye writes, “We have to look at the figures of speech a writer uses, his images and symbols, to realize that underneath all the complexity of human life that uneasy stare at alien nature is still haunting us, and the problem of surmounting it still with us” (56). As Frye suggests, slowing down to look at these figures of speech ultimately brings us to a type of face-to-face encounter with “alien

nature.” Like intimacy, metaphors can be uncanny, as they negotiate the boundaries between sameness and difference—of familiarity and unfamiliarity. As David Punter writes, “metaphor is a crucial way in which we can apprehend the quality of the uncanny, considered as the process which establishes the inseparability of the familiar and the unfamiliar” (85). In drawing together two separate and distinct words, metaphors work on both linguistic and conceptual levels to identify and to separate—and to allow the human mind, through a poetic consciousness, to entertain the possibilities of radical connectivity. In turn, any discussion of metaphor inevitably should acknowledge Aristotle’s originary theorization, which is also one of perceiving semblance and familiarity. Like Frost, Aristotle ranked metaphor’s centrality in poetic composition. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle explains that for poets, what is “most important by far is to have an aptitude for metaphor. This alone cannot be had from another but is a sign of natural endowment; since being good at making metaphors is equivalent to being perceptive of resemblances” (1459a, Hutton). Like Frost, Aristotle nonetheless acknowledges the useful pedagogical power of metaphor. In Book Three of *Rhetoric*, Aristotle writes, “To learn easily is naturally pleasant to all people, and words signify something, so whatever words create knowledge in us are the pleasantest. . . . Metaphor most brings about learning” (1410b, Kennedy). Both Aristotle and Frost identify metaphor as a vehicle of “learning”—something that will also be important in considering Thoreau’s autodidacticism and his project of self-cultivation. In “July” I will more directly address currents of didactic poetry in the west that emerge from meditative awareness and are valuable to ecopoetic pedagogy; for now, it is worth noting the educative value of metaphorical thinking as a useful tool in fostering meditative awareness. However, in order to work through these ideas, I want to turn to “The Bean Field”—one of the most densely metaphorical sections in *Walden*, where the central metaphor concerns the process of cultivation. From seeds to weeds, Thoreau’s language weaves in and out of the endless figurations offered by his field, including those who pass through it and fly over it. In reading “The Bean Field,” one senses—at times because he explicitly declares—Thoreau’s motion toward an awareness of a proliferation of layered metaphor, where differing senses of meaning converge and disperse. And so, in order to think of Thoreau’s ecopoetics, we must dive into his metaphoricity—we must enter his field and turn with his tropes, witnessing the power of metaphor to incite ecological thinking.

“The Bean Field” opens with an interrogative position that sets the stage for the implosion of his metaphoricity. In the first paragraph Thoreau questions: “What was the meaning of this so steady and self-respecting, this small Herculean labor, I knew not” and “But why should I raise them? Only Heaven knows. This was my curious labor all summer,—” (100). Thoreau also questions early in the essay, “What shall I learn of beans or beans of me?” (101). In taking this interrogative stance toward his subject early on, Thoreau’s questions open a rhetorical space that will allow the ecological thinking driven by living metaphor to take hold. Thoreau’s questions imply an ethics in a sense of “should” and a pedagogy of “shall” in wondering what he will learn. Importantly, this interrogative tone returns again in the final paragraph of the essay where Thoreau once again compounds questions: “These beans have results which are not harvested by me. Do they not grow for woodchucks partly?” and “How, then, can our harvest fail?” and “Shall I not rejoice also at the abundance of weeds whose seeds are the granary of the birds?” (108). In opening and closing his essay with questions, Thoreau opens the space for a play of response—exercising a capacity for shifting perspective through a loosening of his language. By drawing in the possible effects the field might have on the woodchuck and birds, the notion of failure becomes metaphorical, in that it is a “product of an impulse to identify the

human and natural worlds.” Perhaps, his failure is success for the birds. Perhaps the very concept of failure, when brought into a type of stereoscopy, might converge into another sense, and by doing so, continuing his process of self-education through metaphor.²²

While Thoreau’s essay opens and closes with questions, the main body of “The Bean Field” meanders through the varying meanings of the field, the beans, and the process of cultivation. While the idea of the field presents a spatial-temporal geography, the beans become connected to an ethics of care and the other. Both the beans and the field are inextricably bound up in the process of cultivation itself, which Thoreau frames as spiritual work and a type of art, as he is “dabbling like a plastic artist in the dewy and crumbling sand” (101). Or, as he writes near the end of the essay, “Ancient poetry and mythology suggest, at least, that husbandry was once a sacred art” (107). Thoreau’s questions are ultimately simple enough. What is the meaning of the bean field? What is the meaning and value of his labor? How might it be understood as a “sacred art”?

The answers to these questions are vast and varied and embedded in literary and mythological allusion. One of Thoreau’s most important literary references in “The Bean Field” is the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a text he read regularly and passionately during his stay at Walden. In his book, *The Gita within Walden*, Paul Friedrich carefully traces the depth of Thoreau’s—and Concord’s for that matter—interest in Eastern literature, working through the “confluence” between the two texts. As Friedrich writes, “he eventually read ‘the divine *Gita*’ in three translations, two English and one French, and studied it not only during his two-year sojourn on the lake but off and on during the seven revisions of *Walden* that were generated over nine years” (Friedrich 26). Indeed, *Walden* frequently references the *Gita*, perhaps most powerfully in “The Pond in Winter,” where Thoreau writes:

In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmological philosophy of the Bhagvat Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions. I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Brahmin, priest of Brahma and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas, or dwells at the root of the tree with his crust and water jug. I meet his servant and come to draw water for his master, and our buckets as it were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges. (193)

²² One might also consider this passage from Thoreau’s Journal as offering a similar shifting sense of reality by considering a multiplicity of perspective: “What we call wildness is a civilization other than our own. The hen-hawk shuns the farmer, but it seeks the friendly shelter and support of the pine. It will not consent to walk in the barn-yard, but it loves to soar above the clouds. It has its own way and is beautiful, when we would fain subject it to our will. So any surpassing work of art is strange and wild to the mass of men, as is genius itself. No hawk that soars and steals our poultry is wilder than genius, and none is more persecuted or above persecution” (Journal February 16, 1859).

While Thoreau was clearly influenced by the *Gita*—a book he claimed to remember “as an hour before sunrise,” I am less concerned with re-writing critical work already done in favor of thinking about how these Eastern texts specifically might have influenced his sense of metaphor.²³ We need to turn to *The Gita* in order to think through Thoreau’s conception of “the field,” as the term is particularly important in the ancient text.

Thoreau frames his battle in Homeric terms as he weeds: “A long war, not with cranes, but with weeds, those Trojans who had sun and rain and dews on their side. Daily the beans saw me come to their rescue armed with a hoe, and thin the ranks of their enemies, filling up the trenches with weedy dead” (105). In figuring the bean field as a type of battlefield, Thoreau draws an allusion to the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which also takes place on a battlefield, as it presents a dialogue between Arjuna (a heroic warrior) and Krishna (a supreme being or god incarnate), incited from Arjuna’s crisis due to his despair in the face of battle. In the eighteen chapters that follow (*Walden*, not surprisingly is also framed in eighteen chapters), Krishna offers, in highly poetic language, an extended series of advice concerning how one is to live. The concept of the “field” becomes central in the unfolding of Krishna’s yogic wisdom:

Just as the sun by itself
illuminates the entire world,
so the field owner illuminates
everything in the field.

He whose inner eye sees
how the Knower is distinct from the field,
and how men are set free from Nature,
arrives at the highest state. (13. 33-34, Mitchell 156)²⁴

²³As quoted by Friedrich (1). Certainly see Friedrich’s text for a more detailed discussion concerning Thoreau’s intertextual negotiations with the *Gita*—and Thoreau’s claim that “Farthest India is nearer to me than Concord or Lexington.” In addition, for more on Thoreau and the *Bhagavad-Gita*, see Dimock’s *Through Other Continents*, where she reads Thoreau’s references in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* through larger literary exchanges between Ancient and Modern India.

²⁴ I am using Stephen Mitchell’s translation here because of its modern accessibility and poetic sensibility. Thoreau consulted several translations, but primarily references Charles Wilkins’ translation from 1785—the first translation of the *Gita* into English. Friedrich uses Barbara Stoler Miller’s contemporary translation in his book. In Wilkins’ translation, the passage reads: “Learn that by the word *Kfhetra* is implied this body, and that he who is acquainted with it is called *Kfhetra-gna*. Know that I am that *Kfhetra-gna* in every mortal frame. The knowledge of the *Kfhetra* and the *Kfherta-gna* is by me esteemed *Gnan* or wisdom” (101). Wilkins translates the word *Kfhetra* in his glossary as “land,” (156) although at other points in his translation, he refers to it as “field” as in battle-field, or “*Kooroo-kfhetra*” (27).

What is perhaps most important about Krishna's advice to Thoreau's essay concerns the centrality of the "knower of the field" in seeing or illumining what is outside of him. Nature and the self (the field and its knower) are not collapsed into an irretrievable sameness. This passage echoes a position Thoreau posits in "Solitude":

I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you. (88)

Thoreau's sense of a "certain doubleness" is closely related to meditation, the state that Timothy Morton argues ecological thinking needs to work toward. As Morton writes, "Meditation doesn't mean becoming 'one with everything' or turning in to (nonexistent) Nature—how could you? Meditation means exposing our conceptual fixations and exploring the openness of the mesh" (127). Part of Thoreau's work in his bean field is gradually to expose "conceptual fixations," and to explore openness, but also with a larger sense of direction and purpose, or meditation as a process of self watching the self. In the *Gita*, Krishna encourages Arjuna to fight, but also illuminates that the ultimate fight is spiritual work. As Friedrich writes, "Thoreau's and the *Gita* poet's field-knowers both perceive and illuminate their respective fields with the eye of knowledge. Both poets, in the course of their respective texts, become more and more knowers, in many senses, of 'the field' in even more senses" (52). We can recognize Friedrich's background in anthropology when he refers to Thoreau's "complex master metaphors" (2) as "totalizing symbols" that "congeal or essentialize or abstract the gist of connections that may be historical or particular to two or more cultural realms, or that space such realms at the universal level of the psychic unity of humankind" (37). While there is certainly intellectual value in thinking through Friedrich's sense of anthropological continuity between the two texts, there are also digressive passages in "The Bean Field" that at times seem to lead away from an elevated and totalizing symbolic process. For example, Thoreau provides us with a list of his expenses—"For a hoe," "Horse and cart to get crop," etc. as well as instructions for planting, "Plant the common white small bush bean about the first of June, in rows three feet by eighteen inches apart" (106). He offers the local gossip concerning his field, "Fellow-travelers as they rattled by compared it aloud with the fields which they had passed, so I came to know how I stood in the agricultural world" (102). In addition, he includes socio-historical observations, which are also an important part of the field. He writes, "As I drew a still fresher soil about the rows with my hoe, I disturbed the ashes of unchronicled nations who in primeval years lived under these leaves" (103). In unearthing these Indian artifacts, Thoreau recognizes that "It was no longer beans that I hoed, nor I that hoed beans" (103). Recognizing the perpetual shifting nature of the field as he consciously moves through time, Thoreau's figuring of the field conflates the literal and figurative meanings. His writing of the associative convergences of the field exemplifies a sense of metaphoricity—a writing that in its perpetual troping turns back on itself, recognizing the paradoxical need for language, while not denying its simultaneous limitations and undoings.

Although deconstructive theory emphasizes the rhetoricity and metaphoricity of a given

text (and its according intertextual and contextual deconstructions), such methodology is also evident in texts that are already self-conscious of metaphoricity. In his introduction to his translation of the *Gita*, Stephen Mitchell puts the same concept in a different way. He writes, “The most profound sacred texts have a way of self-destructing. They undermine their own authority and gleefully hoist themselves with their own petard. Because they don’t confuse what they are with what they are about, they encourage us to see them as, in the end, disposable” (Mitchell 29). Mitchell borrows an expression from *Hamlet* here—“For ‘tis the sport to have the enginer/Hoist with his own petar”— a passage where Hamlet refers to his switching of his death-warrant letter. Ironically of course, as in most tragedy, it is the hero who ultimately ends up hoisted.

In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack*, Thoreau writes, “besides the vast and cosmological philosophy of the Bhagvat-Geeta, even our Shakespeare seems sometimes youthful green and practical merely” (116). What is compelling here is that Thoreau, in selecting a Western text as a point of comparison, compares *The Bhagavad- Gita* to Shakespeare, rather than another spiritual scripture. Shakespeare’s work is exemplary of metaphoricity, self-consciously constructing and deconstructing figures—turning words and phrases over and over—always in the ironic and contextual present that the drama affords. Shakespeare and the *Gita* tend to abound in metaphoricity—hoisting themselves by their own petards and inventing such metaphors in the process. *Walden* often hoists itself as well, encouraging us to look at these books for their ever expanding and contracting ecology of words and figures, just as much as their messages and meanings. Indeed, it is these playful contradictions that either delight or frustrate Thoreau’s readers and offer such productive space for generating a series of interpretive positions.

Ultimately it is an awareness of the *field*, in all its implications and their accordant undoings, that can be understood as the prime example of Thoreau’s metaphoricity. But it is Thoreau’s weeding of his own distractions and his turning to cultivation (and thinking of his writing too in this sense) that encourages the living metaphor and guide his labor. He is cultivating material beans. He is also cultivating an intimate relationship with beans—as he writes, “It was a singular experience that long acquaintance which I cultivated with beans” (104). In turn, he is also cultivating a relationship with his own self-development, particularly his language and his discipline towards his language. One of Thoreau’s most important sentences in the chapter involves his relinquishment of his georgic industry in favor of a more directly spiritual work. He writes, “ I said to myself, I will not plant beans and corn with so much industry another summer, but such seeds, if the seed is not lost, as sincerity, truth, simplicity, faith, innocence, and the like, and see if they will not grow in this soil, even with less toil and manurance, and sustain me, for surely it has been exhausted for these crops” (106). More important than the beans or corn or his industry, which can become “exhausted,” is the metaphoricity of the field, in this case of “seeds”—especially those of “sincerity, truth, simplicity, faith, innocence, and the like.” These seeds are what Thoreau takes away from the field—what he would focus on planting in some future summer. Such seeds are also what he feels are needed in the development of American politics: “Our ambassadors should be instructed to send home such seeds as these, and Congress help to distribute them all over the land” (107). Such seeds are at the center of his project at Walden Pond.

Undergraduates often think of Thoreau’s bean field as his means of self-sustainability. They think of going into the woods to live alone and not need outside resources for sustenance, idealizing the agrarian pastoral in relation to American myths of independence. Essentially, they remain overly influenced by the Thoreau of “Economy,” where Thoreau writes of the bean field

in terms of economic utility and production. A basic reading of the text will quickly overturn these conceptions, as Thoreau, ever ironic and self-conscious, was not interested in eating his beans as much as in harvesting metaphorical flexibility in his language from them. As he writes:

Not that I wanted beans to eat, for I am by nature a Pythagorean, so far as beans are concerned, whether they mean porridge or voting, and exchanged them for rice; but, perchance, as some must work in fields if only for sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable maker one day. It was on the whole a rare amusement, which, continued too long, might have become a dissipation.
(105)

It is passages like these that make Stanley Cavell's reading of *Walden* so convincing and central. As Cavell explains, "Less obviously, hoeing serves the writer as a trope—in particular, a metaphor—for writing" and that "the first value of the metaphorical equation of writing and hoeing is that his writing must bear up under repetitiveness" (Cavell 22). Like hoeing beans, writing requires a commitment to what at times can be repetitive and frustrating labor. And perhaps this is where we can understand Thoreau's ironic tone in the essay—his recognition of his work as a "rare amusement," in that his writing (like the beans) is also subject to forces beyond his control, and perhaps has results "not harvested by me." What he can do and does do, over and over again in *Walden*, is turn to the world that surrounds him in order to harvest tropes. "Nature" becomes a living metaphor for change, and change is central to meditative experience. "The Bean Field" offers us a paradigmatic example of metaphoricity because of its presence as a locus of suggestion turns its own foundations—a concentrated figure through which a living metaphor might take root and grow. Like ecology, living metaphors require the imagination to extend and to bend. They suggest an interaction of time and space that must be enacted in the present. Metaphors recognize difference and separation even as they work to identify and connect. In this sense, Thoreau's living metaphor—that of cultivation—is an ecopoetic necessity, as it involves practice and the care to not over-cultivate, a critique Thoreau often makes of the contemporary land-use. His field is the "connecting link between wild and cultivated fields," as it was, "not in a bad sense, a half-cultivated field. They were beans cheerfully returning to their wild and primitive state that I cultivated" (102). Cultivating a "half-cultivated field" is itself a type of careful cultivation.

"The Bean Field," although not one of Thoreau's most spiritually aesthetic metaphors, is perhaps his most practical, and so also one of his most necessary, in that it enacts the process of clearing the ground and opening oneself to layers of meaning that ecology necessitates. The process of meditating on metaphoricity might converge into a locating of a living metaphor—a word or idea or concept or construct that endlessly ripples into ethical suggestion. When a living metaphor is located, then it might become a guiding path to and through meditation—as we might return to it again and again. In *The Gita*, Krishna reminds Arjuna:

However often the restless
mind may break loose and wander,
he should rein it in and constantly

bring it back to the Self (Mitchell 93)

Just as Thoreau's essay wanders from humor to list-making to rapturous singing to mock-epic musings, so does the "restless mind" break loose and wander. The work is to return to the literal field each morning and so to remain in the openness of metaphoricity. Once in this more meditative space, living metaphors might then take hold and guide.

Our understanding of Thoreau's metaphoricity is further expanded in thinking through the writer's relation to Eastern senses of metaphor. Because Thoreau read so widely and with such fervor, it makes sense that his own sense of metaphor might be inflected through other literary traditions. As he writes "It would be worthy of the age to print together the collected Scriptures or Sacred Writings of the several nations, the Chinese, the Hindoos, the Persians, and the Hebrews, and others, as the Scripture of mankind" (116). Daniel Peck discusses moments of Eastern metaphor in Thoreau's *Journal*. He turns to Stephen Owens' notion of "parallelism" in his studies of Chinese poetry. According to Owens, "Parallelism and metaphor are essentially different: unlike metaphor, parallelism supposes that both terms are present on the same level of discourse and that neither 'stands in for' the other...Parallelism is content to let its terms rest side by side" (Peck 71). David Punter, in his study of metaphor, presents Eastern metaphor in a different way. Punter writes:

Thus we may fairly say of traditional Chinese poetry, as I have mentioned before, that it is better considered a series of parts of a continuous process of *metaphorisation*; but the crucial point is to make this stock of metaphors *converge*, to find and reveal in them an underlying ground, so that a general term like 'passion', for example, 'takes root' in a sphere which spans natural imagery and the interior world of the poet considered as a human subject, in all the complex senses of the term. (Punter 39)

From parallelism to convergence, these Eastern theories of metaphor offer differing understandings of metaphoricity, especially on a psychological level. Peck sees Thoreau's writing in *The Journal* as synthesizing both the Western and Eastern tendencies, where "we experience the metaphoric relation not as displacement but as placement. The relation belongs to the imagination, but it also belongs to the world" (Peck 73). And perhaps this is a part of Thoreau's particular genius—his ability to be receptive and creative across different literary styles and cultures—refers both to the Romantic Western notion of the imaginative power of metaphor-making and the Eastern motion toward convergence, or in Punter's language, allowing a "general term" to root itself in "a sphere which spans natural imagery and the interior world of the poet." This process of metaphor-making—of drawing relations between the interior and exterior worlds of the poet—is essential to ecological thinking because it begs us to slow down and reflect upon the infinite possibilities of such connections.

Much ecocritical work has found the turning to Eastern philosophy and psychology to offer productive analogues for ecological thinking. Most recently, Timothy Morton turns to Buddhist and yogic epistemologies, recognizing their correspondences to ecological thinking. As Morton writes, "Ecological collectivities must make space for introversion and reflection,

including meditative practices....Meditation is yoga, which means yoking: enacting or experiencing an intrinsic interconnectedness” (Morton 127). Thoreau was no stranger to meditative practice, as he writes in his “Conclusion,” with the admonition to “explore thyself”:

Direct your eye right inward, and you'll find
A thousand regions in your mind
Yet undiscovered. Travel them, and be
Expert in home-cosmography.

Thoreau’s inward journeying—his call to direct the eye inward—exemplifies a meditative process and is part of his urgent conclusion to *Walden*. One of his most explicit passages discussing meditation occurs earlier in “Sounds”:

I did not read books the first summer; I hoed beans. Nay, I often did better than this. There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of head or hands. I love a broad margin to my life. Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, inundisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveler’s wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance. I realized what the Orientals mean by contemplation and the forsaking of works. (72)

This paragraph helps to open “Sounds” and shows how Thoreau’s living metaphor of cultivation surfaces not just in “The Bean Field,” but across the larger expanse of *Walden*. Correcting his assertion that all he did was hoe beans his first summer, Thoreau elucidates that his primary work was that of meditative contemplation. Forsaking the work of the “head or hands”— or the analytical and physical labors—Thoreau lets economy go in “undisturbed solitude and stillness,” mindful of the singing birds and moving sun. But beyond his sensual observations, Thoreau also is observing his own mind—contemplating his reception of sensual experience. Writing in general can be understood as a meditative practice in that it encourages the self-reflexive process of composition, though it too uses both the head and hands. The metaphor he chooses to use: “I love a broad margin to my life,” suggests the blank space at the side of the page. For all of the words, sentences, and paragraphs, Thoreau also points to the blankness—the non-linguistic emptiness surrounding the page of his existence. The metaphor reinforces the closeness of his writing to his life, and the centrality of metaphoricity in this process. It is critical that Thoreau’s passage on meditative contemplation turns to his living metaphor of cultivation to structure his meditative experience. His employment of the language of cultivation—the “bloom of the

present moment” and his simile, “I grew in those seasons like corn in the night”— might also be understood in relation to Thoreau’s interest in Eastern spirituality, especially since here he makes a direct reference to the “forsaking of words” that he had read about from the “Orientals.”

In 1844 an excerpted translation of the *Lotus Sutra* was published in the *Dial* under Thoreau’s name. Although there is some debate whether Thoreau or Elizabeth Peabody actually translated the text from the French, Thoreau’s name associates him closely with the translation in some intimate capacity. The section was published under the title, “The Preaching of the Buddha” and the selected passage is from Chapter Five, sometimes translated as “The Parable of Medicinal Plants.” In the chapter, the speaker explains the notion of Buddha-dharma through the metaphorical construct of a cloud and the “homogeneous rain,” which nourish all people, and in turn are metaphorically classified as different types of plants:

Listen. I am going to explain to you what the humble and small plants are, which are found in the world; what the plants of middle size are; and what the trees of great height. Those men who live with a knowledge of the law exempt from imperfections, who have obtained annihilation, who have the six kinds of supernatural knowledge, and the three sciences, these men are named the small plants. The men who live in the caverns of the mountains, and who aspire to the state of Prateyekabuddha, men whose minds are half purified, are the plants of middle size. Those who solicit the rank of heroes, saying, I will be a Buddha, I will be the chief of gods and men, and who cultivate energy and contemplation, these are the most elevated plants. And the sons of Buddha who quietly and full of reserve, cultivate charity, and conceive no doubt concerning the rank of heroes among men, these are named trees. Those who turn the wheel and look not backward, the strong men who possess the power of supernatural faculties, and who deliver millions of living beings, these are named great trees.

It is, however, one and the same law which is preached by the conqueror, even as it is one homogeneous water which is poured out by the cloud, those men who possess as I have just said, the different faculties, are as different plants which burst from the surface of the earth.

Thou mayst know by this example and this explanation the means of which Tathagaka makes use; thou knowest how he preaches a single law whose different developments resemble drops of rain. As to me, I will pour out the rain of the law, and the whole world shall be filled with satisfaction, and men shall meditate, each one according to his strength upon this homogeneous law which I explain. So that while the rain falls, the herbs and the bushes, as well as the plants of middle size, the trees of all sizes, shall shine in the ten points of space. (400)²⁵

It is not surprising that Thoreau would have expressed interest in this particular chapter, as it identifies all beings as types of plants. The passage encourages individuals to meditate according to their strength and position, echoing his language in “Sounds” on meditation and cultivation,

²⁵ The *Dial*. No. XV (Volume IV, number 3): January 1844. This and other *Dial* publications can be accessed on the Walden Pond Project website at www.walden.org

where Thoreau states that he grew “in those seasons like corn in the night.” In “Sounds,” he does not compare himself to a tree or a large plant, but rather to the middle-sized corn, perhaps akin to the “men who live in the caverns of the mountains” and are “half-purified.” Instead, he lives in the woods and each morning bathes in Walden Pond with the intention further purifying his being.

As many scholars have noted, Concord’s access to Eastern texts was limited and subject to less than ideal linguistic and cultural translations. Rather than arguing that Thoreau was a Buddhist or proto-Buddhist, we might recognize the ways in which his imagination found metaphorical flexibility in both the *Gita*’s figurings of self-discipline and the *Lotus Sutra*’s parable of meditative growth in relation to one’s faculty. Ultimately, it seems important to consider the ways in which living metaphors are deployed in texts of spiritual and ethical significance. Meditation and yoga teachers routinely employ living metaphors to guide their students—whether visualizing the mind as an empty sky and thoughts as clouds passing through—or visualizing breathing processes through the inhalation of light and exhalation of smoke. Sitting meditation can be difficult and strange—especially for Westerners caught up in the endlessness of agendas and the valuation of the analytical mind. Living metaphors serve to guide and structure meditative experiences, even as perhaps the ultimate goal involves their relinquishment. In “February,” I’ll focus more exclusively on living metaphors and the ways they depend upon metaphoricity, but for now, we need to further consider why such practice is important to ecology and ecopoetics.

Thoreau’s interest in metaphors of growth and cultivation seems particularly illuminating to pay attention to because they perform their figural function on us; they take root and grow through the text and exemplify the work of the living metaphor. Speaking of the environment seems to immediately draw our attentions outward—to nature and to external sensory experiences. However, the other side of the sensual is the spiritual, and the turning inward. Throughout this project I have been reiterating that ecology concerns a process of widening awareness. While it might initially seem counter-productive for ecocritical work to draw our attention away from constructs like nature and environment in favor of cultivating meditative consciousness and linguistic creativity, ecopoesis—and its persistent interest in lyric subjectivity and interiority—necessitates this internal correspondence. In another sense, it necessitates metaphoricity—the work of identification and its according undoing. While it might sound a bit strange to argue that Thoreau is his most ecological when he observes his own mind, it is nevertheless an idea we need to try on. So much ecocritical attention has focused on Thoreau’s interest in natural history—his scientific observations and commitment to watching nature’s changing cycles. And perhaps if we are going to think environmentally, we might best focus on exteriority—on facts and empirical data. But if we are interested in thinking ecologically, we need the interiority just as much and perhaps even more. An ecopoetic reading can draw our attention to the metaphoricity through which Thoreau reveals his own wonder and disorientation. An ecopoetic reading of *Walden* finds its flexibility in Thoreau’s bean field, turning tropes and tilling metaphoricity.

February

“Late—my Garden of a Rock/Yielded Grape—and Maise—”

Living Metaphor & Garden Theory

The symbol of an ancient man’s thoughts becomes a modern man’s speech.

-Thoreau, *Walden*

It is easily seen that there is nothing lucky or capricious in these analogies, but that they are constant, and pervade nature. These are not the dreams of a few poets, here and there, but man is an analogist and studies relations in all objects. –Emerson, Nature

Thoreau goes into nature to be brought out of nature.

-Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests*

But a garden is a relation, this is one of the countless reasons why it is never finished.

-W.S. Merwin, “The Shape of Water”

In this chapter, I will continue to suggest the importance of metaphor to ecological thinking—especially living metaphors, which encourage further thinking, and trigger waves of relation through both linguistic and cognitive connectivity. In turn, I will argue that the garden is the ultimate living metaphor—a metaphor for life itself—and teaches us much of what it means to be human in an ecological context. In order to make this point, I will first discuss the importance of living metaphor to ecology, and then move on to a discussion of the garden as the ultimate living metaphor, drawing into conversation the voices of some of contemporary poetry’s most profound and prolific poet-gardeners, in particular Stanley Kunitz and W.S. Merwin. Importantly though, as the correspondence between meditation and poetry motivates the motion of this calendar, and I am also interested in identifying the work metaphor does in preparing the ground for meditation, it is necessary to consider what lies at the edge of metaphor; in this case, the moment when metaphor ceases motion and arrives in the poetic space of pure image. Once again, it is the garden, as the ultimate living metaphor, which brings us to the edge of pure image—or the state of meditation commonly referred to as pure awareness.

In “January” I used the term “metaphoricity,” which is most basically understood as the power of metaphor, although the *Oxford English Dictionary* offers an even vaguer definition in stating, “The fact or nature of being metaphorical; metaphorical nature, figurativeness.” With a first identified usage in 1970, the term has mainly been used in philosophical discourse, particularly in deconstructive theory. Derrida is often associated with the use of the word, which his translator defines as, “figuration as a gesture that turns back upon itself” (Derrida xxiv).

Metaphoricity is an important term for Derrida because, along with the contingency of intertextuality, it frames the literary nature of philosophical documents. As Hugh Silverman explains, “In Derrida’s sense, metaphoricity is a structure of referral that accounts for the possibility and impossibility of the philosophical discourse, yet not insofar as this discourse may be construed as literary” (Silverman 188).

The other critical term that follows metaphoricity, and which I will employ in this chapter, is “living metaphor.” As I have been suggesting, a state of metaphoricity allows for the inception and perpetuation of living metaphor. Living metaphor is also elusive when subject to definition, although its primary usage usually surfaces in relation to the notion of dead metaphor. Paul Ricoeur, one of the West’s most passionate and optimistic theorists of metaphor, critiques deconstructionist notions of the inevitability of the dead metaphor. Rather, Ricoeur posits the concept of the living metaphor. As he explains, “Metaphor is living by virtue of the fact that it introduces the spark of imagination into a ‘thinking more’ at a conceptual level. This struggle to ‘think more,’ guided by the ‘vivifying principle,’ is the ‘soul’ of interpretation” (303). Ricoeur suggests that the creative linguistic imagination urges on the process of “thinking more” when “put to conceptual thought.” And so, living metaphor—the expressive metaphor that incites the process of “thinking more”—also allows us to conceive of the importance of the life project, which, as I identified in “September,” is the ultimate eco-poetic project.

In his ecocritical study of Whitman, Jimmie Killingsworth notes that metaphor is not best thought of as an eco-poetic technique as it can “overwhelm difference” in its insistence on identification:

For eco-poetics, metaphor is particularly problematical because it is a form of language that identifies two ostensibly unlike things. Modern definitions of nature, despite the troubled survival of a concept like ‘human nature,’ begin from a point of difference, nature being designated as the nonhuman realm, the environment. But metaphors appear to have little respect for such boundaries, leaving tension and irony (sometimes unintended irony) where difference once prevailed. (48)

Killingsworth understands metaphor as challenging eco-poetics because of its ironic residue, troubling boundaries between the human and nonhuman realms. However, this same sense of irony might also be understood as helping us to think ecologically, rather than holding onto a more naïve sense of holistic connectivity that collapses the ontological discontinuity between humans and others. Timothy Morton argues that a “more honest ecological art would linger in the shadowy world of irony and difference,” as irony “insists that there are other points of view we must acknowledge” (Morton 17). The irony engendered by metaphoricity allows a recognition that people are intimately connected to the *logos*, acknowledging the ways our language creates relation. In that metaphor and irony both depend upon awareness of non-literal implications and a multiplicity of points of view, they offer a productive direction for eco-poetics. It is precisely the irony generated by metaphor that makes it eco-poetic, as a world of irony and difference engenders a multiplicity of meaning and perspective.

Ultimately, it seems impossible to clearly demarcate the line between metaphoricity and living metaphor, especially with a writer like Thoreau. Unearthing and recognizing the dense

metaphoricity of a word is the work that allows language to continue to grow in implication and suggestion. In *The Rule of Metaphor*, Ricoeur presents a theory of metaphor that accentuates its performative and active quality. As previously mentioned, Ricoeur positions himself against Derrida's notion of the dead metaphor, favoring rather the contextual revitalizing of the "ancient metaphors" in philosophical discourse:

The philosopher has a perfect right to try and say what is strange and distant by rejuvenating some dead metaphor or by restoring some archaic meaning of a word. Our own investigation has prepared us to say that this language ploy involves no mystique of 'primordial meaning.' A buried sense becomes a new meaning in the present instance of discourse. This is all the more true when speculative thought adopts the new meaning in order to blaze a path to the 'thing' itself. The return of ancient metaphors—that of light, the ground, the home, the way or path—must be regarded in the same manner. Their use in a new context is a form of innovation. (311)

Thoreau's recontextualization of ancient and spiritual metaphors can be thought of in relation to Ricoeur's notion of the living metaphor's centrality in philosophical discourse. Not surprisingly, such active revitalizing of language can also be found in the American Romantic tradition, as its writers sought to create a new American sense of language, yet one still worthy of European acknowledgement and respect. Such a view of language is witnessed and is also emphasized in Emerson's formulation of the work of the poet in "The Poet":

Language is fossil poetry. As the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images, or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin. But the poet names the thing because he sees it, or comes one step nearer to it than any other. This expression, or naming, is not art, but a second nature, grown out of the first, as a leaf out of a tree. What we call nature, is a certain self-regulated motion, or change; and nature does all things by her own hands, and does not leave another to baptise her, but baptises herself; and this through the metamorphosis again. (*Selected Essays* 271)

Because nature is in a perpetual state of flux, the poet comes closest to naming and re-naming the original poetic identification, "rejoicing the intellect, which delights in detachment and boundary" (271). Emerson more specifically values synecdoche as a model of analogical identification, which seeks and believes in a larger whole. Even the poet himself is "representative"—"He stands among partial man for the complete man" (260). Above all else, Emerson advocates a fluidity of thought and a sense of process over product, recognizing the inexhaustible nature of language. He writes, "we are far from having exhausted the significance of the few symbols we use. We can come to use them yet with a terrible simplicity. It does not need that a poem should be long. Every word was once a poem. Every new relation is a word"

(269). In many ways, Emerson identifies the poet as the one who is responsible for revitalizing living metaphor—one who ever creates new relations from the “few symbols we use.”

Thoreau, as I have been suggesting, seems quite self-consciously comfortable with the state of metaphoricity. In surely echoing his mentor, Thoreau writes in “Spring” that “The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit,—not a fossil earth, but a living earth” (199). While Emerson states that language can become fossilized while the earth is constantly changing, Thoreau uses the term poetry as an analogue for the living quality of the earth; the earth is not a fossil to be studied but rather is alive in its motions and perpetual change. Poetry, as something always alive, serves as a correspondent. Both Thoreau and Emerson see the living quality of the earth and use it as a metaphor for the living quality of language, inextricably linking the two in their process of relation-making.

To look at this still yet another way, we might also turn to Dickinson’s succinct formulation:

A word is dead, when it is said
Some say—
I say it just begins to live
That day (Fr 278)

Although their arguments bear different implications, Ricoeur, Emerson, Thoreau, and Dickinson all point to the living quality of language. Metaphors of cultivation concern the work of attending to and becoming aware of the motions of this living capacity—and nurturing its continued growth.

Throughout this dissertation, part of my methodology is to draw attention to particular words that serve as nodes of concentrated meaning and relation-making. Whether the “heart” or the “field,” these words encourage eco-poetic creation—they allow relation-making in language to continue to unfold; they are living metaphors. In *Walden*, Thoreau does incredible work in his commitment to casting the lines of living metaphors.²⁶ Among the most important are the field,

²⁶ It seems important to recognize Sharon Cameron’s work on Thoreau’s *Journal* as the “record of a man thinking about nature, however at odds with each other these thoughts or views might be” (134). While Cavell sees *Walden* as Thoreau’s most important and fully realized work, Cameron argues that the *Journal* gets closer to “writing nature” largely due to questions of genre and audience. “Thinking our way into the issues raised by Thoreau is the option of which *Walden* deprives us. For thought in the book exists as a figure of speech, as a trope for connections whose meaning is predetermined. If the problem in *Walden* is that thought is a dead end because we have no access to it, the problem in the *Journal* is that thinking is endless” (Cameron 134). Whether or not *Walden* or the *Journal* gets “closer” to nature is less my concern, but it does seem important to note that Cameron also locates discontinuity as the perennial theme of the *Journal*’s project of relation-making, as “discontinuity could be described as the *Journal*’s dominant feature, for no thought is ever entirely separated from or joined to any other thought” (6).

spring, a reflective pond or the “earth’s eye,” the notion of being awake, bathing, vital heat, and the state of being lost. Although I have identified the importance of Thoreau’s notion of cultivation in connection to the field, I could have chosen any of these figures and traced its converging and dispersing meanings in a similar way. Thoreau’s living metaphors are philosophical in that they encourage the process of inquiry. They are also spiritual in their commitment to meditation, ethical self-growth, and moral action. They are conceptual, linguistic, and deconstructive—and ultimately, they are at the heart of the ways we might understand ecology’s pervasiveness in *Walden*.

In relation, *Walden* is not an eco-poetic text because its writer seeks to become one with nature, but rather, because he is committed to cultivating living metaphors that allow relation-making to continue, even as they acknowledge and depend upon his ontological discontinuity with the world that surrounds him. In “Where I Lived, What I Lived For,” Thoreau offers, through one of his more direct statements concerning the purpose of his experiment at *Walden*, the metaphor of dawn. In his call to awakening, he writes, “We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn” (59). This time of day “Morning,” he writes “is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me” (58). Thoreau’s thesis has little to do with “nature” and everything to do with locating metaphors in the world that surrounds him, which allow deliberate effrontery to continue.

In other places I have suggested that Dickinson and Thoreau exhibit an epistemological uncertainty in the face of nature and that this estrangement fosters an ecological intimacy. In this chapter, I am suggesting that we might commit ourselves to intimacy through meditative practices guided by living metaphors. In terms of poetics, this commitment manifests itself as writerly discipline, often as the work of metaphor-making, a product of, to restate Frye’s language, the “impulse to identify human and natural worlds.” Because we are estranged, this work of identification seems essential and is at the center of our ecological being. It is no surprise that Thoreau describes his relationship with his beans as an intimate one, while also noting that his purpose in building this relationship is for the sake of tropes and symbols. Intimacy is tied to metaphoricity because they both involve the deepening and forging of relation—they both also bring us to paradoxical positions, kaleidoscoping sameness and difference through constructive and deconstructive means. Metaphoricity allows us to hold a seemingly endless array of possibilities—metaphors allow us to stretch the bounds by which we can think and imagine. In many ways, so does intimacy.

As I have been reiterating, everything in ecology has to do with relation. We often think of relation as synonymous with connection or association. However it seems important to also remember the first definition offered in the *OED*, which states: “The action of giving an account of something; narration, report. In early use also in to make relation: to relate, recount.” This sense suggests the active nature of relation—that relations are made through narrative accounts. Metaphors are action driven—living metaphors in particular continue to act, to practice, and to process. Relation, and its centrality in ecology, depends upon a creative narrative of connection-making.

Ecology concerns relation. Metaphors make relation. *Poesis* is making. Metaphors compose ecology. The *logos* is relation. *Eco-Poesis*—eco-poetics—has to do with the creative making of relation—with the cultivation of living metaphors. Robert Pogue Harrison best articulates how the troping *logos* lies at the center of ecology. He writes:

The Greek word *logos* is usually translated as “language,” but more originally it means “relation.” *Logos* is that which binds, gathers, or relates. It binds humans to nature in the mode of openness and difference. It is that wherein we dwell and by which we relate to this or that place. Without *logos* there is no place, only habitat; no *domus*, only niche; no finitude, only the endless reproductive cycle of species-being; no dwelling, only subsisting. In short *logos* is that which opens the human abode on earth.

The word ‘eco-logy’ names this abode. In Greek, *oikos* means “house” or “abode”—the Latin *domus*. In this sense *oikos* and *logos* belong together inseparably, for *logos* is the *oikos* of humanity. Thus the word “ecology” names far more than the science that studies ecosystems; it names the universal human manner of being in the world. As a cause that takes us beyond the end of history, ecology cannot remain naïve about the deeper meaning of the word that summarizes its vocation. We dwell not in nature but in relation to nature. We do not inhabit the earth but inhabit our excess of the earth. We dwell not in the forest but in an exteriority with regard to its closure. We do not subsist so much as transcend. (*Forests*, 200-201)

Although not bearing any ecocritical labels, the work of Robert Pogue Harrison is among the most important in working to theorize ecology through literature, as he is careful to not adopt ecology as a “cause” and “ecologically oriented doctrines” that “fail to think the discontinuity between humanity and nature radically enough.” For Harrison, this ontological discontinuity “manifests itself in the phenomenon of language,” even as it is the *logos* that works to create relation (200). Not surprisingly, one of Harrison’s most important subjects is Thoreau, and he explains how the “lesson of *Walden* lies in this pedagogy of estrangement,” where the woods, as a metonym of nature, provide a place to get lost, just as Thoreau’s “enigmatic prose” at times “evades us as we are alternately lured and confused” (223). Thoreau does not go to Walden to become merged into a holistic nature. Rather, he goes into the woods (another one of his master metaphors), to overcome nature—and perhaps even to mourn it. As Harrison writes, “Thoreau goes into nature to be brought out of nature” (230). Harrison’s etymological definition of ecology (as well as his use of Thoreau as an exploratory example) is useful because it suggests that our ecological being is bound to language; it is ever growing and changing, not in the denial of language, but rather in its exploration and expansion. In this sense, part of our ecopoetic work lies in exploring the *logos*—and in locating and creating metaphors that do not cease to turn.

Thoreau in particular exhibited a persistent capacity to favor metaphors of growth and regeneration, something not uncommon to the American Georgic and Arcadian impulses, as well as Romanticism’s interest in pastoral. Indeed, Romanticism’s most penetrating metaphor was that of organicism, as it wove its way transatlantically through language and imagination, finding the ideal analogue for the human mind “as a living plant, growing out of into its perception” (Abrams 68). M.H. Abrams explains how through the “archetypal plant,” Coleridge identified the “highest faculty of man in the growth of a plant and its power to assimilate outer elements to which its respiration has already made contribution” (69). The organic metaphor, favoring growth and a dynamic exchange between inner and outer forms, is also productive for ecopoetics. We cultivate “archetypal plants” in archetypal gardens, and it is ultimately the latter figure that ecopoetic theory needs to think. Since my first draftings of this dissertation, gardens

have been both entertaining and obsessing my critical imagination and I am quite convinced that they are the living metaphor at the center of ecology. But why are they so inescapable?

With its plants and flowers and with its growth and death, the garden serves as a master metaphor, capable of gathering and cultivating the expansion of the *logos*. The word “garden” speaks a proliferation of figural suggestion, and the practice of gardening can be highly meditative because it recognizes the persistence of change and the need for increasing awareness and attention. And as I have been suggesting, any creative practice that we might consider meditative, metaphorical, or that might involve deepening intimacy or the working through of grief, bears resonance and importance for ecopoetic criticism. Gardening, in so many ways, is the supreme subject for ecopoetics, because it necessarily allows all of these other ideas to manifest and take shape; gardens exemplify the possibilities of living metaphor. Gardens allow relation—indeed, to quote master poet-gardener W.S. Merwin, “a garden is a relation.” And most importantly, gardens do away with constructs of an idealized nature. As Merwin best states:

Obviously a garden is not the wilderness but an assembly of shapes, most of them living, that owes some share of its composition, its appearance, to human design and effort, human conventions and convenience, and the human pursuit of that elusive, indefinable harmony that we call beauty. It has a life of its own, an intricate, willful, secret life, as any gardener knows. It is only the humans in it who think of it as a garden. (Garmey 17)

Not surprisingly, Emily Dickinson was an avid gardener. Judith Farr’s book *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson* and the 2010 exhibit at the New York Botanical Gardens both attest to her passion for flowers and the ways the sensory dimensions of her poetry were enriched through her attention to her plants. As Dickinson most succinctly stated, in an 1859 letter to her cousin Louisa, “I was reared in the garden, you know.” Dickinson’s acute attentions to individual plants and flowers indicate a wide botanical knowledge not uncommon to women of her class and position. But also her attention to birds, butterflies, bees, insects, and climate changes helped her encounter themes like mortality and intimacy—imagining the reaches of human empathy and identification. Having to care for one’s flowers inevitably opens one’s attentions to the difference of each day. A devoted gardener is necessarily aware of loss, change, and growth. A devoted gardener is necessarily aware. And as a devoted gardener, Dickinson had great faith in the transformative capacity of gardens:

On the Bleakness of my Lot
Bloom I strove to raise—
Late—my Garden of a Rock
Yielded Grape—and Maise—

Soil of Flint, if steady tilled
Will refund the Hand—
Seed of Palm, by Lybian Sun
Fructified in Sand— (Fr 862)

If “steady tilled,” even the most bleak lot might yield grape and maize; once again, the steady striving of the gardener offers possibilities for unanticipated growth and transformation. While Dickinson’s garden work primarily cultivated delicate and exquisite annuals and perennials, Thoreau took his gardening to more georgic ends, as his experiments in “The Bean Field” aim toward the cultivation of both crop and language. He celebrates the process of labor and the varying metaphorical fruits of such work. However, Thoreau also recognized the important ecological power of the garden. As he writes in *Walden*, “All that I could say, then, with respect to farming on a large scale, (I have always cultivated a garden) was, that I had my seeds ready.” (54). His parenthetical excerpt emphasizes the constancy of his identity as gardener—“always” a part of his practice.

But what is a garden after all? The answers to this question are as diverse as the writers who garden and write poetry. In *The Wild Braid*, a text where he reflects on his dual life passions of gardening and poetry, Stanley Kunitz sees the garden as “a metaphor for the poems you write in a lifetime.” He explains:

I think of gardening as an extension of one’s own being, something as deeply personal and intimate as writing a poem. The difference is that the garden is alive and it is created to endure just the way a human being comes into the world and lives, suffers, enjoys, and is mortal. The lifespan of a flowering plant can be so short, so abbreviated by the changing of the seasons, it seems to be a compressed parable of human experience.

The garden is, in a sense, the cosmos in miniature, a condensation of the world that is open to your senses. It doesn’t end at the limits of your own parcel of land, or your own state, or your own nation. Every cultivated plot of ground is symbolic of the surprises and ramifications of life itself in all its various forms, including the human. (14)

Drawing attention to the metaphoricity of a garden, Kunitz understands it as a “condensation” and the life of a plant as a “compressed parable.” A condensation and parable, the garden is an ultimate metaphor for “life itself”—endlessly symbolic about what is most essential and human.

In a poem entitled “What is a Garden,” Merwin confronts the question in a different way:

All day working happily down near the stream bed
the light passing into the remote opalescence
it returns to as the year wakes toward winter
a season of rain in a year already rich
in rain with masked light emerging on all sides
in the new leaves of the palms quietly waving
time of mud and slipping and of overhearing
the water under the sloped group going on whispering
as it travels time of rain thundering at night
and of rocks rolling and echoing in the torrent

and of looking up after noon through the high branches
to see fine rain drifting across the sunlight
over the valley that was abused and at last left
to fill with thickets of rampant aliens
that brought habits but no stories under the mango trees
already vast as clouds there I keep discovering
beneath the tangle the ancient shaping of water
to which the light of an hour comes back as to a secret
and there I planted young palms in places I had not pondered
until then I imagined their roots setting out in the dark
knowing without knowledge I kept trying to see them standing
in that bend of the valley in the light that would come (*The River
Sound*, 10)

Merwin's poem does not describe what one might first think of as a garden—with flowers, arrangements, borders, and frames. However, mindful planting is very much the subject of the poem. In characteristic style, without punctuation and capitalization, Merwin blends images together, primarily through use of present participles. The leaves of the palm are quietly “waving,” the “rocks rolling,” the “light emerging,” and the “rain drifting.” Merwin also positions prepositions that function both before and after (“I had not pondered/until then I imagined”) subject-verb constructions. Like the use of gerunds, this technique works to blend and merge varying moments and objects. What we see about a garden is the mindfulness of its gardener. Although Merwin's speaker opens noting that he is spending all day working by the stream, he also sees beyond the day, and sees the garden in relation to the seasons and deeper temporal scales (“the ancient shaping of water”). The planting that takes place of the palms is not random or ornamental or functional, but rather is a part of the speaker's process of imagining their growth and visioning their eventual regeneration; the gardener invokes a deep seeing. Merwin writes of a garden how “It is only the humans in it who think of it as a garden.” In directly interrogating what a garden is, Merwin's poem emphasizes not only the garden, but the human who works and creates such a place, revealing their contingency and intimacy.

“What is a Garden,” like much of Merwin's work, includes a deep sense of loss, particularly in his inclusion of environmental abuse: “over the valley that was abused and at last left/to fill with thickets of rampant aliens/that brought habits but no stories under the mango trees.” For Merwin, gardening is a pre-agricultural practice capable of “joy and magic,” as he explains in his essay “The Shape of Water”:

When we have reached a point where our own kind is steadily destroying the rest of the life on earth and some of us are anxious not to do that, our relation to the earth begins to be that of a gardener to a garden. I believe that gardening, the deliberate influencing of particular plants in the forest, existed for millennia before there was agriculture, and I am convinced that there was a measure of joy and magic in that relation from the beginning, something that probably sobered up considerably when it started to fall into line and become agriculture.

[...]

In my own lifetime I have seen the role of a garden, the very idea of a garden, not merely altered but reversed. Gardens, from the beginning (as the etymology of the word suggests), existed as enclaves designed and maintained to keep *out* the wilderness, to guard what was inside for human use or pleasure. Once it became possible for human beings to destroy environments anywhere on earth, the situation was turned around, and anyone who wanted to protect and save any remaining bit of the natural environment was acting in the role of a gardener—one whose purpose, at this point, was to keep encroaching human exploitation and disturbance *out*. The model for this garden has always been the forest itself, even though I know that the word “reforestation” is generally meaningless, and that only a forest knows how to grow a forest. (Garmey 18)

For Merwin, a garden poem is not about georgic ideals. His garden of palm trees in the rainforest of Maui is not necessarily about food production or the hard labor that goes into such work. Rather, a contemporary garden reacts to “human exploitation and disturbance,” working to keep them out and mourning their consequences. Merwin does note that gardens do exist for “human use and pleasure,” not denying their practical and sensual utility. However, in other places, as in the following poem, Merwin presents a strong anti-agricultural sentiment:

Place

On the last day of the world
I would want to plant a tree

what for
not for the fruit

the tree that bears the fruit
is not the one that was planted

I want the tree that stands
in the earth for the first time

with the sun already
going down

and the water
touching its roots

in the earth full of the dead
and the clouds passing

one by one

over its leaves (*Rain in the Trees* 64)

In this poem, the speaker's attention is not focused on the fruit or the growth of the tree, but rather the deep symbolic resonance in the planting itself. The apocalyptic poem also offers a sense of hope, focusing on the origins of transformation. The last day of the world, is in its way, also a first day, initiated by the process of planting.

In "July" I will argue that in the West there exists a genre of "garden poetry"—or a poetry closely related to the tone of Horace's *Odes* that both teaches and delights the social virtues that derive from meditative awareness; in the case of Horace, these virtues are structured by Stoic and Epicurean education. In this chapter, I am suggesting that it is the garden rather than notions of the wild or untouched "nature" that offers the most productive figural construct for poetic representations of ecological epistemology. Because a garden is "a relation," it offers and embodies metaphorical thinking and does away with idealizations of untouched "nature." For both ecology and meditation, the lessons of the garden are endless and essential; and because they do not deny human perception and language, gardens are far more ecological than notions of nature. Following Harrison's sense, gardens perpetuate heightened awareness of the *logos*—helping us realize that we do not dwell in nature but rather in relation to nature.

My reader will notice that throughout this dissertation, my methodology, in its interest in the relationship between poetry and meditation, has not been grounded in New-Historicist methods of reading. The question of the garden's relationship to history nonetheless becomes necessary to address. In his brilliant study of gardens, Harrison argues that "whether real or imaginary" the garden has "provided sanctuary from the frenzy and tumult of history" (*Gardens* ix). Following Voltaire's final instructions in *Candide* ("Il faut cultiver notre jardin"), Harrison suggests that "It is *because* we are thrown into history that we must cultivate our garden"—human gardens "however self-enclosed their world may be, invariably take their stand in history, if only as couterforce to history's deleterious drives" (x). As a "counterforce" to history, gardens offer places of "sanctuary" from history's ramifications—gardens are dependent upon history, as a necessary reaction and contingency—and are essential for meditation practice and reflection on the social virtues that history both needs and destroys. As David Cooper describes, in the Buddhist tradition, "there is discussion of the groves and parks in which early Buddhists passed much of their time as moral and intellectual resources—as places, reflection in and on which, cultivates understanding both of the virtues and of the nature of reality" (Cooper 7). Cultivating a garden, both literally and metaphorically, provides both the space and materials "in and on which" to facilitate deepened awareness. And while it might seem that my work avoids historicizing impulses, it actually depends upon them—existing as an intellectual space to process and contemplate history's "ramifications."

In my opening paragraph I wrote that the garden, as the ultimate living metaphor for life itself, brings us to the edge of metaphor; accordingly, we can only get beyond metaphor by reaching the edge of metaphor. As Thoreau's linguistic manipulation of the bean field teaches us, it is necessary to explore and expand the *logos* in order to become aware of the infinite relations that underlie both ecological thinking and meditative perception. However, just as in meditation

there are steps that lead to the ultimate point of realization, or to pure awareness,²⁷ the same is true for poetic perception. Metaphor is necessary, but at a certain point might fall away, relinquished into the stillness of image. In this sense, image is the ecopoetic correlative to pure awareness in the world of meditation.

Voltaire's urgent final call is also the subject of an early poem by Jane Hirshfield, which notes the ways in which the archetypal metaphor becomes absorbed in the labor of cultivation. In Hirshfield's poem "November, Remembering Voltaire," the lessons and labors of the garden bring the speaker to the edge of metaphor:

In the evenings
I scrape my fingernails clean,
hunt through old catalogues for new seed,
oil workboots and shears.
This garden is no metaphor—
more a task that swallows you into itself,
earth using, as always, everything it can.
I lend myself to unpromising winter dirt
with leaf-mold and bulb,
plant into the oncoming cold.
Not that I ever thought
the philosopher meant to be taken literally,
but with no invented God overhead,
I conjure a stubborn faith in rotting
that ripens into soil,
in an old corm that flowers steadily each spring:
not symbols, but reassurances,
like a mother's voice at bedtime reading a long-familiar book,
the known words barely listened to,
but bridging for all the nights of a life
each world to the next. (*Of Gravity and Angels* 36)

Voltaire's famous advice lingers in Hirshfield's mind as she aligns the metaphor with the literal practice of gardening: "This garden is no metaphor—more a task that swallows you into itself." Hirshfield suggests that working in the garden brings one to certain constancies—"not symbols but reassurances." As much as the garden can function as a master metaphor, it perhaps succeeds so thoroughly in this context because of the lessons its literal existence invokes, which concern a magnification of transience and relation. Conjuring up "stubborn faith in rotting/that ripens the soil," Hirshfield notes the consistent and reliable transformative process of rotting and regeneration. The poem draws back to the literal truths such patient toil reveals, primarily the cyclical renewal mediated by the process of composting. And so, while the garden serves as such

²⁷ Here I am considering the 8 Limbs of Yoga as outline by Pantajali in *The Yoga Sutras*, where pratyahara, dharana, and dhyana are necessary steps preparing the mind for samadhi, or the ultimate state of pure awareness.

a productive metaphor for a series of ecological principles (the necessity of care, the endlessness of connectivity, the inevitability of mortality, etc.)—at a certain point, the on-going connections might fall away into a purer witnessing of connectivity through image, rather than a conscious identification through metaphor.

In *Twentieth Century Pleasures*, Robert Hass writes that “Images are not quite ideas, they are stiller than that, with less implication outside themselves. And they are not myth, they do not have that explanatory power; they are nearer to pure story. Nor are they always metaphors” (275). He continues to explain how “In the nineteenth century one would have said that what compelled us about them was a sense of the eternal. And it is something like that, some feeling in the arrest of the image that what perishes and what lasts forever have been brought into conjunction, and accompanying that sensation is a feeling of release from the self” (275). Hass’ sense of image is supported by his sustained interest in haiku (consider his elegant translations of Basho, Buson, and Issa)—in addition to citations from Whitman, Chekhov, and others. But this language of “release from the self” and the idea of “pure story” that Hass uses to define image is also a part of the emergence into ecopoetic being, ideas which I will address more directly in “August.” In addition, in “July,” I will return to the social virtues of the garden in order to see the living metaphor further through its instructive potentials.

March

“From the Thousand Responses of my Heart Never to Cease”:

Dickinson, Jane Hirschfield, and the Lives of the Heart

... and though I knew that ‘heart’ is one of those words -- like ‘dream’ or ‘poetry’ -- that poets are not supposed to use, I felt that, as person and poet, it would be disastrous to turn away from a subject that kept coming up.

-Jane Hirshfield

Dear Friend—Nothing inclusive of a human heart could be ‘trivial.’ The appalling boon makes all things paltry but itself.

-Emily Dickinson to Mrs. J.S. Cooper

*From those beginning notes of yearning and love there in the mist,
From the thousand responses of my heart never to cease,
From the myriad thence-arous'd words,
From the word stronger and more delicious than any*

-Walt Whitman, “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking”

Often, the language of the heart seems sentimental, clichéd, romantic, and trite. The heart of the matter, heart-break, heart-to-heart, heart in your mouth, heart as open book, to know by heart, a heart on fire, heart in your hand, heart on your sleeve; such heart-phrases are among the most forbidden poetic clichés. They are also, in certain ways, compellingly unavoidable.

As such, the “heart” is not only a word that is shunned in sophisticated poetic construction, but also is a term that seems to have little place in the world of academic critique and theory. As a term of pedagogy, perhaps the heart might gain some respect, as Roger Rosenblatt urges his writing students to write from the heart in his recent book *Unless it Moves the Human Heart*. Rosenblatt writes, “For all its frailty and bitterness, the human heart is worthy of your love. Love it. Have faith in it. Both you and the human heart are full of sorrow. But only one of you can speak for that sorrow and ease its burdens and make it sing—word after word after word” (155). Rosenblatt’s recognition of grief and sorrow as the underlying motivation of creative writing suggests that only allegiance to one’s heart will help create an individuated style, or will, to use a creative writing term, develop and distinguish one’s voice. Rosenblatt encourages his students to write from their hearts because, in one way or another, the heart needs to be confronted, explored, and validated; one speaks from his or her sorrow, transforming suffering into artistic making. As Rosenblatt advocates, strong writing comes from an opening of the heart.

In this chapter, I will argue that ecopoetics demands that we pay attention to the imagery and metaphorical implications of the heart for several reasons. Primarily, it is a figure that allows

for a type of yoking or joining, as it often collapses contradictory impulses into a single center. Accordingly, as the center of the body's vitality and possibility, the heart's potency is simple enough to understand, especially as it concerns an immediate connection to the breath. With its constant rhythm, the heart is unavoidable in the language of poetry and music, as exemplified in iambic pentameter's closeness to the beating heart. In addition, the heart's preponderance of clichés indicate its figural excess, which is either grounds for its dismissal or an occasion for our attentions. And in still yet another sense, the heart bears a metonymic relationship to love, and love has to do with ecology. As Timothy Morton reminds us, ecology has to do with "love, loss, despair, and passion" (2). Indeed, Morton goes as far as to end his book with the word love: "The ecological thought can be highly unpleasant. But once you have started to think it, you can't unthink it. We have started to think it. In the future, we will all be thinking the ecological thought. It's irresistible, like true love" (135). As this quote suggests, Morton's book at large argues that ecological thinking concerns radical intimacy—and love, however we might choose to define it, inevitably surfaces when we encounter intimacy. As this chapter will suggest, the heart—with all its contradictions—is among the most ecological of poetic figures. On its most literal level, its functioning, and its actual shape and substance, connect language to corporeality. And as we often think of ecology in relation to webs and meshes, it is the heart that allows such circuitry and exchange and relation to occur in the body itself. The heart's encouragement of multiplicity characterizes its essence. As a figure, the heart is endless. And as I have been suggesting, so too is ecology. But the west has had a long struggle with reconciling and negotiating the relationship between Mind and Body, a duality that sometimes aligns the heart with the body/emotion and the brain with the mind/intellect. Still, in other instances and despite dualisms, the heart offers a metaphorical flexibility that collapses dualities between mind and body. Such statements depend upon context and examples but the heart serves to bring together contradictory impulses and relations. As the seat of suffering, the heart also allows for empathetic identification and offers the promise of an ethical relation – especially in Eastern philosophy, which offers us a complementary sense of the heart as both organ and figure that yokes mind/body dualities.

In this chapter I cite little to no critical and theoretical voices. This is because I am unaware of critics (especially ecocritics) who speak of the heart as the poets do; indeed, the heart seems very much the subject of poets. So instead, this chapter will primarily employ literary examples, working to theorize the heart as a supreme figure in ecopoetic creation. I will start with a discussion of the ways the heart was important to Emily Dickinson, even as she struggled with reconciling Western dualities between the Mind and Heart. Dickinson's heart references are vast and varied, but ultimately navigate the fine line between a feeling heart and a suffering heart. Her allegiance to a multiplicity of heart references and understandings is a vital part of her ecopoetic making. In the second part of this chapter, I will turn to contemporary poet Jane Hirshfield's valuation of the heart (as informed by its sense in Eastern poetics) as central to poetic making. Hirshfield is an important writer for ecocriticism to consider because of her conviction that the mind of meditation, the mind of ecology, and the mind of poetic making are essentially the same. As she writes, "It is up to the writer to recognize everything that happens to her as a gift, to love each thing that comes under the eye's contemplation, inner or outer. To set up straw men is not only a failure of heart—it will also be an inevitable failure of writing. In this, the lessons of ecology, Zen, and artistic craft are the same" (*Nine Gates* 212). In her insistence that "everything that happens" needs to be understood as a type of gift, Hirshfield's poems work to not deny dimensions of experience in favor of any larger ideology or philosophy. Rather, her

spiritual and intellectual sensibilities synthesize to advocate awareness and acceptance. It is this willingness to stay with both the inner and outer worlds and her refusal to “set up straw men” that allow us to understand Hirshfield’s poetics as profoundly ecological. If ecology has to do with being as open as possible, then straw-men are an inevitable failure—and so arguments that include straw men seem counter-intuitive to ecopoetic criticism. Accordingly, in this chapter, I will abstain from critiquing ecocriticism at large in favor of suggesting how future critical projects might pay attention to figures like the heart, which might initially seem to bear little connection to environmentality. As I have been suggesting throughout this dissertation, our ability to be open to outward relations (and to deal with issues like environmental ethics and sustainable development) directly corresponds to our inward turnings. As Thoreau wrote in his journal, “The poet is more in the air than the naturalist though they may walk side by side—Granted that you are out of door—but what if the outer door is open, if the inner door is shut” (Peck 172). It is for these reasons that the heart, as perhaps the most inward of images, also bears the potential to open and reach outward. Here, I will suggest that the heart has the capacity for yoking, just as in “January” I argued that the “field” is a metaphor that allows language to delight and evolve through ever-expanding relation.

The language of the heart (especially its suffering) is among the most penetrating in Romanticism, as typified in Keats’ famed opening lines of “Ode to a Nightingale,” where he writes, “My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains/My sense, as though of hemlock, I had drunk.” Keats was no stranger to the language of the heart—especially that of the suffering heart. In an 1819 letter to his brother and sister-in-law, he wrote: I will call the *world* a School instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read—I will call the *human heart* the *horn Book* used in that school—and I will call the *Child able to read, the Soul* made from that *school* and its *hornbook*. Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school as Intelligence and make it a soul? A place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways!” (quoted in Rodriguez, 176). Similar to the opening passage from Rosenblatt, Keats’ writing of the world as school and the human heart as hornbook presents a peculiar pedagogy, although largely consistent with the Romantic valuing of the heart over the head—or affective capacities over intellectual knowledge. However, his framing of the “thousand diverse ways” of the heart’s feeling and suffering concerns what I find most important here. Rather than any single sense, the heart is best expressed through its multiplicity of states and ways; what seems to distinguish the heart is precisely its diversity—or its capacity to experience difference, or an acknowledgement of its many lives.

Keats was among Dickinson’s favorite poets, and both poets professed explicit valuation of Shakespeare as supreme source of poetry and wisdom. Dickinson only directly references Shakespeare once in her poetry, although she commonly adulates him in her letters. For example, in a letter from the early 1880’s Dickinson wrote to Sue:

Dear Sue--

With the
Exception of
Shakespeare, you
have told me of
more knowledge

than any one living--
To say that sincerely
is strange praise-- (L 757)

In this earnest note, Dickinson expresses her love for Sue in comparison to her admiration for Shakespeare's boundless knowledge, although she rarely explicitly states this feeling in her poems. One rare example states:

Drama's Vitallest Expression is the Common Day
That arise and set about Us—
Other Tragedy

Perish in the Recitation—
This—the best enact
When the Audience is scattered
And the Boxes shut—

“Hamlet” to Himself were Hamlet—
Had not Shakespeare wrote
Though the “Romeo” left no Record
Of his Juliet,

It were infinite enacted
In the Human Heart—
Only Theater recorded
Owner cannot shut— (Fr 776)

Although Dickinson offers a critique of the theater, as drama's “vitallest expression” concerns the diurnal round, she values the presence of the heart at the heart of Shakespeare's poetry. Embedded in this poem is the capitalized Human Heart—a place of infinite enacting, which unlike a theater, cannot be shut down and exists beyond record. And while Dickinson might have avoided explicit reference to Shakespeare in her poems, her language of the heart echoes the Bard's—revealing the dual fascination these two writers shared with the inner and endless workings of the vital organ.

Shakespeare used the word over five hundred times—perhaps most famously in *King Lear*, where both Gloucester and Lear die—or so it seems—of conditions of the heart. As Edgar reports of his father's death:

his flawed heart
(Alack, too weak the conflict to support!)
'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief,
Burst smilingly. (V.iii.208-211)

While Gloucester's heart "bursts," Lear's seems to break, as Kent states while Lear collapses, "Break heart; I prithee, break!" These are among Shakespeare's most famous heart references, perhaps because they remind us of the pathos of tragedy, which is nowhere more profound than in the expression of heartbreak, especially as it echoes in the chambers of a family, as the lessons of Oedipus, Hamlet, and Lear teach us.

For Dickinson, "The Heart has many Doors" (Fr 1623)—and with her abundant references, she walks down the corridors that lead to those doors—sometimes opening them, sometimes crossing into even more unspeakable terrain. While the brain has corridors, the heart has doors, suggesting Dickinson connected the organ with openings and closings rather than a more spatialized being. Dickinson's *Webster's Dictionary* offers fifteen different definitions of the heart, ranging from a "muscular viscous" to the "inner part" to the "chief part" to "seat of affections" to the "seat of understanding" to the "seat of will." Her 148 references, in turn exhibit many of these associative meanings, as she negotiates the heart through her metaphors and images, exhibiting its diversity and many lives.

I will further discuss in "April" how Dickinson's poetics of intimacy are particularly sensitive to the capacity for suffering and compassion engendered by the experience of heart break and grief; many of her heart poems deal specifically with this state, as in the following poem where language is deemed useless and impossible in the aftermath of heartbreak. This is a poem where "pain has an element of blank:"

Love's stricken "why"
Is all that love can speak—
Built of but just a syllable,
The hugest hearts that break. (Fr 1392)

Here, the heart that breaks can only question its enormous pain; analysis and understanding are not present, and all love might do is admit one interrogative syllable. Just as the human heart struggles to speak, it also struggles to receive language:

By homely gifts and hindered words
The human heart is told
Of nothing—
"Nothing" is the force
That renovates the World— (Fr 1611)

In the following poem, heartbreak serves as an opportunity for empathetic identification, as a means of generating intimacy and empathy:

Unto a broken heart
No other one may go
Without the high prerogative

Itself hath suffered too (Fr 1745)

With its speechlessness and suffering, the broken heart is among the most penetrating, persistent, and effective metaphors in Western poetry. It is a metaphor so close to the affective experience that Emily Dickinson considered it part of her life work to protect others from such suffering: “If I can stop one heart from breaking/I shall not live in vain.” But perhaps Dickinson’s acute awareness of heartbreak emerged from her recognition of the boundless and infinite potential of the human heart to feel and know:

The Life we have is very great.
The Life that we shall see
Surpasses it, we know, because
It is Infinity.
But when all space has been beheld
And all Dominion shown
The smallest Human Heart’s extent
Reduces it to none. (Fr 1178)

In many ways this is a typical Dickinson poem in its figuration of outer immensities in relation to inner ranges—except here, she gives primacy of the “Human Heart’s extent,” which is irreducible to the life we have now or the life that is to come. The reaches of Dickinson’s interiority reach beyond all else; indeed, they even surpass this life and the next. Although the next life might be infinity, it is still matched by the “smallest Human Heart’s extent.”

In another poem, Dickinson creates a narrative of the heart’s requests, indicating its shifting and evolving states, reminding us once again of its multiplicity.

The Heart asks Pleasure—first—
And then—excuse from Pain—
And then—those little Anodynes
That deaden suffering—

And then—to go to sleep—
And then—if it should be
The will of the it’s Inquisitor
The privilege to die— (Fr 588)

Here, Dickinson offers a narrative of the heart’s desires as it moves from pleasure to pain to suffering to sleep and finally death. Helen Vendler reads this poem as part of Dickinson’s sense of “serial existence” as it is shaped by emotional trauma. As Vendler writes, “How boldly the Heart had asked ‘Pleasure—first—’; how reduced it has become as it begs that there be a last stage to this process” (Vendler 68). In the space of two short stanzas, Dickinson offers a

representation of the Heart that is subject to radical change.

Still in other places, the heart is the seat of grace and music—a place of reception, capable of Electric Rest.

The Bird her punctual music brings
And lays it in it's place—
It's place is in the Human Heart
And in the Heavenly Grace—
What respite from her thrilling toil
Did Beauty ever take—
But work might be Electric Rest
To those that Magic make— (Fr 1556)

Through these diverse examples, we can see how Dickinson's heart references are difficult to synthesize into a single cohesive suggestion. Rather, it is her allegiance to the figure's diversity that makes her usage particularly relevant to ecology; she offers the heart enormous attention and allows it to bear different states and expressions. And although Dickinson clearly recognized the many ways the heart opens and closes, she also seemed to struggle with collapsing a duality she sensed between Mind and Heart. Note the following poem, where her negotiation favors the heart:

The Heart is the Capital of the Mind
The Mind is a single State—
The Heart and the Mind together make
A single continent—

One—is the Population—
Numerous enough—
This ecstatic Nation
Seek—it is Yourself. (Fr 1381)

Here, Dickinson offers a geo-political analogue for inner landscapes. As “Capital” the heart coordinates and centralizes the “State,” which is the mind. What makes a continent a Nation is the centralization of the heart, just as what offers a person a sense of subjective differentiation is once again the heart. What is important about the poem is how Dickinson's metaphors present the heart and mind as interdependent (as a State depends upon its Capital), while also still prioritizing the importance of the heart. In another poem that was written shortly after this one, Dickinson also brings the heart/mind into relation:

The Mind lives on the Heart
Like any Parasite—

If that is full of Meat
The Mind is fat—

But if the Heart omit
Emaciate the Wit—
The Ailment of it
So absolute. (Fr 1384)

In this poem, Dickinson's pathological language once again values the heart over the mind, although still recognizing their interdependence. In a blunt expression, Dickinson suggests that a generous and healthy heart—a heart “full of meat”—allows the Mind to also possess vigor and substance. If the heart “omit,” the consequences are “absolute,” as it falls to emaciation. Once again, Dickinson represents the primacy of the heart over the mind in terms of its strength and generosity, however, she does not easily separate the two constructs. While she establishes intimate relations between heart and mind, she does not fully find ways out of this conceived struggle, which seems to embody a larger struggle in the Western sensibility. Although the heart is recognized as central, it is often aligned with the body in a mind/body and intellect/emotion dualism that does not fully embrace its ability to subsume these constructs.

In an 1880 letter to Mrs. J.S. Cooper, Dickinson wrote: “Dear Friend—Nothing inclusive of a human heart could be ‘trivial.’ The appalling boon makes all things paltry but itself” (L 863). Dickinson understood that careful attention to the human heart concerned the work of a poet and human being. And as I have been suggesting, this allegiance to the heart is an ecological position, as attention to the heart inevitably leads to recognizing its multiplicity of states and its boundless inner depths. In addition, as Dickinson knew, broken hearts generate empathy and compassion, which are necessary for ecological identification. Although her allegiances seemed to be to the heart above all else, the English language did not allow Dickinson the vocabulary that ultimately could subsume the dualism between head and heart. The heart is also highly important to Eastern literatures, and in turning our attentions toward other examples, Dickinson's struggle might find contemporary reconciliation.

Jane Hirshfield's collection of poems *The Lives of the Heart* explicitly takes on the multiplicity of the heart's functioning—its openings and closings, its visceralities and abstractions, its intricacies and absurdities. Above all, Hirshfield's writing of the “Heart” aims to vivify a contemporary malaise, what she describes as a cultural denigration due to negligence toward emotional experience. In an interview published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Hirshfield explains her hesitancy and commitment to writing her way into the heart. She describes how, “There was something I needed to return to regarding the many lives of the heart, and though I knew that ‘heart’ is one of those words -- like ‘dream’ or ‘poetry’ -- that poets are not supposed to use, I felt that, as person and poet, it would be disastrous to turn away from a subject that kept coming up” (“Some Place” 56). As a subject that keeps presenting itself, she chooses to go into its far and unknown reaches, a turning inward that allows for revivification of outward language and values:

Perhaps these poems came to me because I hadn't been looking thoroughly enough at the activity of my own heart -- I had fallen asleep in a way, or

had been looking overly outward. And certainly the heart is denigrated by our culture, which values the intellect and neglects the emotional, or cheapens it to the dulled formulas of mass media. Perhaps I was looking in those poems for a container of concentration and words with which to try to do better, to counteract that dulling, both inward and outward.

It's also true that for some years a central task in my life has been to try to affirm the difficult parts of my experience; that attempt is what many of the heart poems address. It's easy to say yes to being happy, but it's harder to agree to grief and loss and transience and to the fact that desire is fathomless and ultimately unfillable. At some point I realized that you don't get a full human life if you try to cut off one end of it, that you need to agree to the entire experience, to the full spectrum of what happens. ("Some Place" 56)

Hirshfield explains that her "heart poems" address her attempt to "affirm the difficult parts" of her experience. Rather than looking "overly outward," which can be symptomatic of much ecocritical reading, Hirshfield urges a necessary turning inward, despite the difficulty and reluctance that surrounds such confrontation. She turns to the image of the heart and its ultimately "fathomless" and "unfillable" desires as a means of fronting "grief and loss and transience." In "December" I discussed the paradoxical relationship between grief and growth—or how loss is the necessary counterpoint to metaphorical extension and concerns fronting mortality and negotiating a process of letting go. In this window of March, between the grief of late winter and the generous abundance of spring, we might consider the process of opening, or how the process of letting go allows for a shift in direction and a new capacity for deepened being.

The first poem in *The Lives of the Heart* bears the same title and serves as a type of prologue for the poems that are to follow:

The Lives of the Heart

Are ligneous, muscular, chemical.
Wear birch-colored feathers,
green tunnels of horse-tail reed.
Wear calcified spirals, Fibonacci spheres.
Are edible; are glass; are clay; blue schist.
Can be burned as tallow, as coal,
can be skinned for garnets, for shoes.
Cast shadows or light;
shuffle; snort; cry out in passion.
Are salt, are bitter,
tear sweet grass with their teeth.
Step silently into blue needle-fall at dawn.
Thrash in the net until hit.
Rise up as cities, as serpentine magma, as maples,

hiss lava-red into the sea.
 Leave the strange kiss of their bodies
 in Burgess Shale. Can be found, can be lost,
 can be carried, broken, sung.
 Lie dormant until they are opened by ice,
 by drought. Go blind in the service of lace.
 Are starving, are sated, indifferent, curious, mad.
 Are stamped out in plastic, in tin.
 Are stubborn, are careful, are slipshod,
 are strung on the blue backs of flies
 on the black backs of cows.
 Wander the fragrant carpets of alpine flowers.
 Not one is not held in the arms of the rest, to blossom.
 Not one is not given to ecstasy's lions.
 Not one does not grieve.
 Each of them opens and closes, closes and opens
 the heavy gate—violent, serene, consenting, suffering it all. (3)

Here, Hirshfield's lives of the heart structure their expression through anaphora of the verb to be. The lives of the heart concern being—being that is endlessly modified by contradiction. The lives of the heart are stubborn, careful, slipshod, starving, sated, indifferent, curious, mad, edible, and bitter. They wear varied shapes and are stamped in different mediums. They are found and lost and carried and broken and sung, reminding of how Keats sketches of an education of the heart and how it “feels and suffers in a thousand diverse ways.” Or, as Whitman writes of emerging from “Out of the cradle endlessly rocking:”

From those beginning notes of yearning and love there in the mist,
 From the thousand responses of my heart never to cease,
 From the myriad thence-arous'd words, (Whitman 388)

For Hirshfield, what seems to unify this boundless diversity of being is what is stated in the final five lines, as her double negatives draw our attentions. For all of their different qualities and states, the lives of the heart are all “held in the arms of the rest, to blossom” and “given to ecstasy's lions.” For all their difference, grief is the affective state that unites the lives of the heart, as well as the process of opening and closing. The poem ends with an image of a heavy gate that “opens and closes, closes and opens,” reminding us of Dickinson's claim that the heart has many doors.

In many ways, with such rhythmic and anaphoric listing, Hirshfield is closer to Whitman in this poem than Dickinson, although she recognizes that both writers “stepped fully, if by different means, into the life of the threshold.” Hirshfield explains this threshold existence of the writer as involving the capacity to speak from “the point of view of multiplicity, between, visitation” (*Nine Gates* 205) and the ability to step “past what we already think we know and into an entirely new relationship with the many possibilities of being” (224). Whitman's rhythmic

and extensive listing, which works through repetition and variation, offers a poetic form that allows for the heart's many lives (or the grass's many leaves).

However, not all of the poems in *The Lives of the Heart* make their point through anaphora and techniques of listing and amalgamation. Indeed, some poems offer more concise statements that embody the range of the heart's capacities through a direct opposition of images, as in the following poem, "Late Prayer":

Tenderness does not choose its own uses.
It goes out to everything equally,
circling rabbit and hawk.
Look: in the iron bucket,
a single nail a single ruby—
all the heavens and hells.
They rattle in the heart and make one sound. (45)

Here, Hirshfield positions an image of two objects—a "single nail a single ruby" in an iron bucket. For all their visual difference, the two objects make a single sound when they rattle in the heart. Hirshfield analogizes this to the workings of tenderness itself—an open heart will accept stimulation from both nail and ruby—will go to "everything equally." It does not discriminate, but rather its openness allows it to take what is presented. Tenderness must choose not to choose.

One of the points that echoes throughout Hirshfield's meditations on the heart concerns the way the heart "refuses nothing," as in "Lake and Maple:"

I want to give myself
utterly
as this maple
that burned and burned
for three days without stinging
and then in two more
dropped off every leaf;
as this lake that,
no matter what comes
to its green-blue depths,
both takes and returns it.
In the still heart,
that refuses nothing,
the world is twice-born—
two earths wheeling,
two heavens,
two egrets reaching
down into subtraction;
even the fish
for an instant doubled,

before it is gone.
I want the fish.
I want the losing it all
when it rains and I want
the returning transparence.
I want the place
by the edge-flowers where
the shallow sand is deceptive,
where whatever
steps in must plunge,
and I want that plunging.
I want the ones
who come in secret to drink
only in early darkness,
and I want the ones
who are swallowed.
I want the say
this water sees without eyes,
hears without ears,
shivers without will or fear
at the gentlest touch.
I want the way it
accepts the cold moonlight
and lets it pass
without judgment or comment,
There is a lake,
Lalla Ded sang, no larger
than one seed of mustard,
that all things return to.
O heart, if you
will not, cannot, give me the lake,
then give me the song. (77-78)

Like the “The Lives of the Heart,” Hirshfield once again turns to anaphoric listings of desires, though these desires are for relinquishment just as much as for requisition. Hirshfield’s statements of wanting frame themselves on the dualities of a world that is “twice-born,” as desires are doubled through their composition and dissolution; just as the lake that, “no matter what comes/to its green-blue depths,/both takes and returns it.” Hirshfield opens the poem with wanting to give herself to the world like a maple dropping its leaves in its process of “losing it all” and “returning to transparence.” And abundance is irrevocably tied to loss, as in the following short poem, “Abundant Heart”:

Because the pelicans circle and dive, the fish

Because the cows are fat, the rains

Because the tree is heavy with pears, the earth

Because the woman grows thin, the heart (16)

In this poem, Hirshfield offers a series of inverted causal statements, switching subjects and objects, suggesting a mutual interdependency between her terms. Rather than stating the cows grow fat because of the rains, Hirshfield offers a syntax that posits the existence of the rains as depending upon the cows being fat. In the final line, where the existence of the heart is suggested, Hirshfield offers a connection to loss; because people grow thin (for whatever reason—mortality, illness, depression), the heart is abundant.

As a practicing Buddhist, Hirshfield's use of the word heart is deeply informed by a sensibility that does not position the heart against the mind. Rather, the heart holds the mind, suffusing the opposition. Much of Hirshfield's intimacy with the heart is exemplified in her dedication to the work of translating Japanese poetry into English. As she writes, "In Japanese, the words sometimes respectively translated as *mind* and *heart* are suffused with the other's nature in a way that English speakers can scarcely conceive. The heart thinks; the mind feels keenly. In poetry, mind, emotion, body, and perception are similarly entwined, each circling into the realm of the others, part of a whole" (*Nine Gates* 126). Hirshfield aligns the Japanese sensibility with the very nature of poetry itself, as it entwines "mind, emotion, body, and perception." Importantly, it is the heart that allows for a linguistic locus of such circling of relation. As Hirshfield writes, "'Heart-mind' is a concept English lacks, but in Japanese the one word *shin* includes both the realm of mind and that of the feeling heart" (*Nine Gates* 87). The Japanese word *kokoro* is also sometimes used for the concept of "heart-mind," as Edwin McClellan writes: "The best rendering of the Japanese word 'kokoro' that I have seen is Lafcadio Hearn's, which is: 'the heart of things' (Soseki vi). The heart of things returns us to the notion of a meditative centering, necessary for both poetry and ecology.

Ecopoetic criticism bears the ability to move away from ideologies that seek to save and idealize "nature" in favor of following Hirshfield's path toward both acceptance and release of whatever it is that the heart encounters. Working against the anger that sometimes associated with activist agendas, the most compelling literary texts for ecopoetic criticism look deeply into the human heart as a means of being, thinking, and making ecologically. Consider the example of William Powers, a conservation activist in the Bolivian Amazon, who passed a decade fighting for environmental policy reform. In a recent article, Powers confesses to a perception of nature that has little to do with ecology. As he writes of his activist attitudes, "Nature was always 'out there,' a bunch of threatened cloud forests, coral reefs, watersheds, and orangutans in need of saving from the 'bad guys' I was fighting." After embarking on a series of intensive yogic meditation experiences, Powers writes of a shift in his environmental consciousness. He writes, "I let go of an eco-driven need to save the whole world" as he began to understand the need to leave a "stressed, isolated self behind and become part of the environment, forging greater outer change from an inner place of calm and reflection" (Powers 65-7). Powers's story is by no means unusual and echoes Hirshfield's purposes for writing *The Lives of the Heart*—of her attentions being focused "overly outward" rather than at the complex and essential lives of her own heart. If, as I have been arguing, ecopoetics requires a meditative consciousness capable of

staying with inevitable loss, the image of the heart allows for a profound creative opening. As Dickinson knew, “the appalling boon makes all things paltry besides itself”; the human heart deserves our attentions.

In “A Prayer for My Daughter,” Yeats wishes his daughter beauty, but not too much—and not to “Lose natural kindness and maybe/The heart-revealing intimacy/That chose right,” (Yeats 188). As the poem continues “Hearts are not had as a gift but hearts are earned/by those who are not entirely beautiful” (189). It is our willingness to face our weakness and shortcomings that allows us to earn our hearts. Hearts are not gifts, but rather require conscious effort and courage amidst vulnerability. To eventually emerge into spring, we must have patience through the loss of winter. Such patience often pays off; April is a month of blossoming—a time of literal opening. Among other things, the spring reminds us of constant change and transformation. April is—in so many ways—a month of the change, and so also one of the heart. In Hirshfield’s translation of the ancient Japanese poet Ono No Komachi, the flower of the human heart is ever changing:

How invisibly
it changes color
in this world,
the flower
of the human heart. (*Ink Dark* 44)

The blossoms of April yield even brighter color in May—another month of abundant growth and metaphor. But as we move forward, we might also take a moment to look back. Hirshfield ends *The Lives of the Heart* with the following poem and reference to March:

Three Times My Life Has Opened

Three times my life has opened.
Once, into darkness and rain.
Once, into what the body carries at all times within it and starts
to remember each time it enters the act of love.
Once, to the fire that holds all.
These three were no different.
You will recognize what I am saying or you will not.
But outside my window all day a maple has stepped from her leaves
like a woman in love with winter, dropping the colored silks.
Neither are we different in what we know.
There is a door. It opens. Then it is closed. But a slip of light
stays, like a scrap of unreadable paper left on the floor,
or the one red leaf the snow releases in March. (108)

Perhaps its not surprising that Hirshfield’s final poem meditating on the lives of the heart is a poem that offers an image of a maple tree losing its leaves, like a “woman in love with winter.”

The transformation of the heart—its abundance and possibility—depends upon a relinquishment of fire and passion. Although the poem is most explicitly about opening, it also depends upon closing. Hirshfield leaves us with an image of light of floor, compared to a scrap of paper and a “red leaf the snow releases in March.” But the line that lies at the center of the poem, “You will recognize what I am saying or you will not” is perhaps the most important. What does it mean to open? Is it speakable? Regardless, if we shy away from such opening—if all the heart does is close— then there is no intimacy. And if there is no intimacy, there is no ecology—and certainly no poetry.

April

Easing my famine/At my Lexicon

Intimacy and the Ecology of *Dear Emily*—

It's hard to be taught to fall in love. Falling in and out of love is hardly something we accomplish by good study habits or research skills or critical analysis. But denying ventures of love in the academy, especially in the humanities, is not an attractive alternative. Retreat to an enclosure of reductive readings, disciplined by method and theory, may give me control and gradable, handleable results—that's self-evident! But that retreat also leaves me bereft of those unmanageable deliverances that it is the genius of the humanities to preserve and pass on.

-Edward F. Mooney, *Lost Intimacy in American Thought*

*Unto my Books—so good to turn—
Far ends of tired Days—
It half endears the Abstinence—
And Pain—is missed—in Praise.*

-Emily Dickinson (Fr 512)

Within the discipline of criticism, nothing more difficult than praise. To speak of what you love—not admire, not know to be good, not find reasonably interesting, not feel briefly moved by or charmed by—to speak of such work is difficult because the natural correlatives of awe and reverence are not verbal.

-Louise Gluck, *Proofs and Theories*

In “March,” I argued that the heart is a supreme figure in ecopoet making. But when we think of the heart, we cannot help but to think of it as a symbol of love—and love, with all of its exposure and uncertainty, concerns the emotional state at the center of ecological thinking. Throughout this dissertation, I have been reiterating the importance of intimacy in ecological thinking. In this chapter, we will begin to more directly verge on the transition between metaphor and intimacy; or, now that new relations have been made, we must sink down into their intricacies and explore their consequences and possibilities for ecology. In this chapter I will argue that the way in which poetic writing and reading generate and propagate intimacy is an ecological act. In particular, the literary production of some writers seems to garner and exemplify such response. Not surprisingly, Dickinson is once again exemplary for this form of critical attention, as her work inspires an outpouring of critical ardor. As such, the endearing critical heritage of *Dear Emily* offers us a productive space to think through the intricacies of intimacy and ecology.

Dickinson's poetics present us with abundant instances of intimate address, as she often rhetorically advances to her addressee through affectionate discourse. In turn, Dickinson also imagines playful and amorous dialogue between other non-human beings. In Dickinson's poetic ecology, bees talk to bogs—"How Public—like a Frog—/To tell someone's name—the livelong June—To an admiring Bog!" (Fr 261)—and skies to hills—"The Skies cant keep their secret!/They tell it to the Hills—" (Fr 213). In relation, her poems are rife with direct and intimate address between human and non-human others:

We introduce ourselves
To Planets and to Flowers
But with ourselves
Have etiquettes
Embarrassments
And awes (Fr 1184)

Dickinson's relations with flowers and planets, among other creatures, represent instances of her intimate ecology—moments where, in confronting alienating nature in an affectionate way, she offers a means of forging relation with difference. In addition, Dickinson's speaker also often addresses the world itself—and perhaps her most intimate address to a natural other is her salutation to March—*dear March*. With a teasing tone that taunts the teasing season, Dickinson writes:

Dear March—Come in—
How glad I am—
I hoped for you before—
Put down your Hat—
You must have walked—
How out of Breath you are—
Dear March, how are you, and the Rest—
Did you leave Nature well—
Oh March, Come right up the stairs with me –
I have so much to tell—

I got your Letter, and the Birds—
The Maples never knew that you were coming—
I declare—how Red their Faces grew—
But March, forgive me—
All those Hills you left for me to Hue—
There was no Purple suitable—
You took it all with you— (Fr 1320)

What do we make of this playful dance with March? How do we frame such intimacy with a month? Dickinson represents a relation to nature that is erotic and the poem uses personification to a point of playful exaggeration. She gives the maples faces that are flush with the season's return and asks forgiveness for not being able to color the hills in the "suitable" shade of purple that the season lends. Inviting March up the stairs and flush with the excitement of a lover's return, the speaker offers the month a human form, with hat and all, as in another poem where she writes, "We like March—his Shoes are Purple" (Fr 1193). But what is March for Dickinson? Here, it is the return of color and birds—of red maples and purple hills. March is a month of transitions and closeness to rebirth—the ending of winter and the coming of spring. For a poet as deeply perceptive as Dickinson (and also as a gardener, closely tied to the seasons) "March is the month of expectation" (Fr 1422). But March—like strange stranger November—is also a metonym for nature, except while November's frost cruelly strikes at night, Dickinson offers terms of endearment to March. Timothy Morton explains how "Paradoxically, the best way to have ecological awareness is to love the world as a person; while the best way to love a person is to love what is most intimate to them, the 'thing' embedded in their makeup" (201). In loving March as a person, Dickinson presents a moment of ecological awareness. And March, as my previous examples suggest, was not Dickinson's only nature-metonym that she expressed such closeness to. As such, Dickinson's willingness to "love the world as a person" should not be dismissed as non-ecocentric anthropomorphism, but rather understood as a tenant of her ecopoetic position.

In turn, while Dickinson loved March, so many of her readers confess to loving her—addressing her in turn as their *dear* Emily. What should we make of such expressions of critical affection? How do Dickinson's intimate addresses between and to nature-others correspond to the ways her readers find themselves addressing her? What does endearment have to with the ways we read and critique ecologically?

To consider a typical instance of this tendency in Dickinson studies, consider the way Archibald MacLeish calls *Emily* by her first name. He writes:

No one can read these poems...without perceiving that he is not so much reading as being spoken to. There is a curious energy in the words and a tone like no other most of us have ever heard. Indeed, it is the tone rather than the words that one remembers afterwards. Which is why one comes to a poem of Emily's one has never read before as to an old friend (MacLiesh 307).

Suggesting that there is something at work in Dickinson's tone, MacLeish describes how the experience of encountering a new Dickinson poem is akin to returning to an "old friend" – her "curious energy" simulates spoken and intimate conversation. And perhaps it is this same tonality that MacLeish experiences—one of intimate exchange—that can be seen throughout her voluminous lyrics, as her mode of address often embraces the intimacy associated with epistolarity.

MacLeish's discussion of return to an old friend is not an oddity but rather a tendency in Dickinson studies. As biographer Richard Sewall writes, "For all of her bleakness and secretive ways, Emily Dickinson establishes an intimacy with her readers that few other poets do" (Sewall

707)—and this intimacy is felt and expressed by some of her best readers. For example, Susan Howe’s famous text *My Emily Dickinson* has long stood as a cornerstone of Dickinson criticism. In *My Emily Dickinson*, we have a poet writing poetically about a poet. We have a feminist grammar and an academic experiment. But we also have Howe’s possessive pronoun. We have a closeness, an immediacy, and a pervasive intimacy. We have an admonition of gratitude and a personal project. In her introduction to the book, Howe writes of her desire “to find the words to thank” – “to make her extraordinary range perceptible.” She writes, “For years I have wanted to find words to thank Emily Dickinson for the inspiration of her poetic daring. I hope by exploring the typology and topography of one singularly haunting work to make her extraordinary range perceptible to another reader” (Howe 35). Susan Howe has spent a lifetime of intellectual and emotional engagement with Emily Dickinson and her affair with the poet is one of deep intimacy. And as one of Dickinson’s most steadfast scholars, Howe’s is also rather typical in expressing such closeness to *Dear Emily*.

In particular, poets pay expressive homage to Emily. Galway Kinnell credits reading Dickinson as being one of his most formative experiences and in his poem “The Deconstruction of Emily Dickinson,” he professes a steadfast loyalty to “Emily,”—a loyalty to “that sanctum within me where Emily sometimes speaks a verse,” as he criticizes her cooptation by academic proselytizing (Kinnell 23). Rachel Hadas’s poem “Teaching Emily Dickinson” also directly addresses “Emily”—who shows the class of students what they “owed” her for her what her poetry teaches:

What starts as one more Monday
merges to a collective Dickinson,
separate vessels pooling some huge truth
sampled bit by bit by each of us.

She sings the pain of loneliness for one.
Another sees a life of wasted youth;
then one long flinching from what lay beneath
green earth; last, pallid peerings at the stone
she too now knows the secret of.

Alone,
together, we’d decipher BIRD SOUL BEE
dialect humdrum only until heard
with the rapt nervy patience, Emily,
you showed us that we owed you. One small bird
opens its wings. They spread. They cover us:
myriad lives foreshortened into Word. (Hadas 113)

In this poem, Hadas’s students experience Dickinson’s poetry in diverse ways, however, the power of the poet’s language works to bring these “separate vessels” into a “collective Dickinson.” The poet’s language—her power of the “Word”—humbles, instructs, and unifies a group of students. “Word”—a word Dickinson so often used and sanctified, contracts subjective

difference and the poet's language teaches the class to cultivate a "rapt nervy patience," which Dickinson both demonstrates and ultimately deserves.

In another example from a poem Maxine Kumin dedicates to fellow poet Marie Howe, Kumin imagines Dickinson alive in the 1990's, where "She'd wear/magenta tights, black ankle socks/and tiny pointed paddock boots" (Coghill 54). Importantly though, Kumin's final stanza moves away from imagining Dickinson's fashion and politics in a contemporary milieu in favor of her language—"her words for the century to come/are pithy, oxymoronic/Her fly buzzes me all the way home." For all of their play with "Dear Emily," these different poets return to her language—quoting and carrying it forward—letting the distinct subjectivity of Dickinson's lexicon guide their relationship and intimacy.

My point in offering these examples is to illustrate the potency of Dickinson's poetry to generate closeness.²⁸ Importantly, for Howe, Kinnell, Hadas, and Kumin, it's not her autobiography, but rather, the way her language works that generates a literary phenomenon that brings readers into emotional immediacy.²⁹ Often, the closeness readers express feeling is connected to an articulation of distance. Dickinson critic Cindy MacKenzie for example confesses, "Dickinson's poetry makes me feel in ways that not only comfort but also disturb me, that appeal strongly not only to emotions but just as strongly to my intellect" (MacKenzie xiii). As such, the intimacy Dickinson's critics express lies somewhere between emotions and intellect, and somewhere between comfort and disturbance. In contemplating this phenomenon, Dickinson critic Robert Weisbuch explains:

A different intimacy—in fact, several kinds of intimacy—occurs instead. In fact, it is my sense that readers of Dickinson experience a sense of extraordinary closeness to the writer and then get led to the biographical fallacy by not examining the nature of this feeling carefully enough. She must be telling us about her life, they reason, because it feels so intimate. But the intimacies Dickinson offers are different and more formidable.

The primary intimacy has to do with her strategy of writing itself, for the analogical technique brings us close to a mind at active work, so close that there is a shocking aesthetic immediacy. (Weisbuch 212)

²⁸ There is a whole book dedicated to poems inspired by Emily Dickinson entitled, *Visiting Emily* and published by the University of Iowa Press. Amy Clampitt, Adrienne Rich, William Stafford, and Hart Crane among many others offer poems dedicated and inspired by Emily.

²⁹ Christopher Benfey's recent review in *The New York Review of Books* of Helen Vendler's new book on Dickinson discusses the recent production of books that are interested in constructing and imagining Dickinson's biographical intrigues. Indeed, it has become a bit of an industry, for example, consider the recent publications *White Heat* by Brenda Wineapple and *Lives Like Loaded Guns: Dickinson and her Family's Feuds* by Lyndall Gordon. My work is less interested in biography and more interested how her literary production can be thought of in relation to ecology.

For Weisbuch, Dickinson's analogical choices and the active poetic imagination generate an intimacy with the reader because they allow us to see her process of symbolizing. Because no other mind could possibly think quite like hers, Dickinson's poetry presents a deeply individuated consciousness making choices of such singularity that they move beyond autobiographical connections. The "aesthetic immediacy" of her analogical imagination is "shocking."

Critic Margaret Freeman suggests a similar intimacy between Dickinson and her readers, due to the poet's elliptical qualities and the necessary silences generated in both syntactical and cognitive breaks. For Freeman, this resemblance to informal discourse accounts for the closeness readers seem to feel to Dickinson's work despite its difficulty. As she explains, "Dickinson is unique among major poets for being both very obscure and very popular" and this "paradoxical impression of obscurity and popularity" exists because her elisions and breaks represent "a crucial fact about intimate conversation." She explains:

The closer the relationship between participants in a discourse, the more implicit the speaker's discourse becomes and the less help the hearer needs to process it. Precisely this contrary-to-fact intimacy between persona and reader accounts for the difficulty of a Dickinson poem, difficult because it leaves to silence what formal discourse among strangers would normally demand. This very same intimacy accounts for the closeness and strong sense of identification Dickinson's readers feel, even though they sometimes find it difficult to explain exactly what a poem might be saying. (Freeman 192)

Freeman's sense of Dickinson's intimacy emerges from the poet's famous breaks and dashes—the semantics of silence generate a feeling of implicit communication. The "obscurity" is connected to the "popularity" and Dickinson's difficulty is related to the closeness readers identify. Even Helen Vendler in her recently published study on Dickinson notes the poet's expanse and difficulty. She writes, "Like all capacious writers, she baffles complete understanding" (Vendler 1). For Vendler, "The more we read of this poet, the more she fills up our atmosphere—natural, intellectual, moral—with her abstractions crossed with images" (Ibid).

Dickinson's poetry is nothing if not intimate because the closer readers become to her work (whether at the level of figural construction in a poem or at the larger level of grasping her range of subjects and styles throughout her corpus) the more they seem to become aware of the impossibility of fathoming, to use Vendler's term, the extent of her "capacious" poetics. As Weisbuch suggests, at the level of her metaphors Dickinson's creative imagination is endless and singular. The more we know Dickinson, the more we become aware of the impossibility of grasping the full range of her analogy-making consciousness. As these critics and poets suggest, intimacy has to do with cognitive breaks and unhinging metaphors. Intimacy has to do with recognizing the expansive depths of the other and in return, generates a sense of the expansive depths of the self. And while the question of a poet's ability to draw readers into an intimate relation is suggestive in a number of critical contexts, I want to intervene in this conversation by locating intimacy as an ecological principle and suggest that the way in which poetic writing (and reading) generates intimacy is an ecological act. This is a dimension of ecology that has little to do with constructions of nature and more to do with paradoxes of subjectivity and the

uncanniness of the full implications of “interconnectedness.” As my “November” suggests, ecocriticism’s neglect of Dickinson has more to do with its need to advance theoretically than Dickinson’s place in the conversation. Indeed, as my project suggests, Dickinson is a profoundly ecological poet, but only when we abandon idealized nature worship and rather start thinking ecologically, which can at times be an uncomfortable and uncanny experience—but also an intimate one. Dickinson’s sense of intimacy is consistent with ecological theory that suggests intimacy’s relation to strangeness, uncertainty, and at some moments, the uncanny. Dickinson’s poetics exhibit intimate relations with natural others (birds, flowers, snakes, bees, etc.) and natural forces (seasons, months, and weather) because she recognizes the incredible singularity and strangeness of these forces. Just as readers seem to experience an intimacy with Dickinson because of the distinctness of her analogical imagination, syntactical breaks, and struggles for meaning, Dickinson’s poetics represent ecological intimacy; not because she says, “We’re all the same,” but rather because she exhibits a particular consciousness that recognizes the uncanny relationship between sameness and difference at the center of our experience of ecology.

As I discussed in “November,” strangers, faces, and boundaries all serve as figures involved in the poetic framing of intimacy. And intimacy, as I have been suggesting, is ground zero for ecological theory. Thinking through representations and feelings of intimacy offers productive ground for ecopoetic scholarship to move beyond nature worship and idealization. Rather than arguing that we are all connected, a mature ecopoetic theory needs to acknowledge the inevitable uncertainty of the relations between both self and world, and the ways language serves to mediate and frustrate those relations. In her compelling study of Thoreau’s *Journal*, Sharon Cameron reaches a similar conclusion. She shows how, “In the *Journal*, contact with nature, unmediated by the social world, allows Thoreau to see—and more to the point—to say—the ways in which he is separate from the nature that he loves. Like all intimate relations, this one forces inconsolable recognitions” (Cameron 46). Thoreau serves as a productive counterpoint for Dickinson because his writing represents the conscious project of working toward an ecological intimacy. Indeed, in “The Bean Field,” he describes the process through which he becomes “more intimate with my beans than usual” (*Walden* 102).

It was a singular experience that long acquaintance which I cultivated with beans, what with planting, and hoeing, and harvesting, and threshing, and picking over, and selling them, --the last was the hardest of all, -I might add eating, for I did taste. I was determined to know beans. When they were growing, I used to hoe from five O’clock in the morning till noon, and commonly spent the rest of the day about other affairs. Consider the intimate and curious acquaintance one makes with various kinds of weeds— (Ibid)

As I discussed in “January,” Thoreau’s intimacy with his bean field works on a number of levels, primarily to provide his writing project with a rich language of cultivation, seeds, and growth. Like a true gardener, he spends long hours of patient toil with his beans, getting to know them through the conscious project of cultivation. But he ends the chapter in subjecting his subject to questions that reveal his relinquishment of control and full understanding of his proud project as he admits “These beans have results which are not harvested by me” (108). The end of Thoreau’s exposition on his “long acquaintance with beans” concedes that the “true husbandman” will

ultimate “finish his labor with everyday, relinquishing all claim to the produce of his fields, and sacrificing in his mind not only his first but his last fruits also” (108). Once again, intimacy leads to, in Cameron’s words, “inconsolable recognitions.” Although “January” primarily looked at Thoreau’s use of metaphorical thinking in preparation for meditation, it is also important to recognize the ways in which his bean field also worked to generate intimacy.

True to its fundamental interests and metaphors, ecological criticism is evolving. Over the past twenty years, ecological criticism has presented a series of arguments that critique the Cartesian *cogito* as allowing the Western subject to act, violate, and destroy without a more holistic understanding of his responsibility to and contingency within the larger ecological system. Ecosophies such as Deep Ecology will, for example, argue for the abolishing of anthropocentric epistemologies in favor of more ecocentric ways of being and knowing. Ecocriticism has also pointed to the continent, toward Heidegger’s sense of *being* and *dwelling* and Merleau Ponty’s phenomenology of consciousness’s embodied experience in the world, to make arguments that ground the subject in a larger subjectivity. Through these intellectual paths and others, in its insistence on humanity’s innate continuity with the surrounding world, ecocriticism has, at times, reverted to an idealism that advocates organic holism. Timothy Morton’s recent work has critiqued ecocriticism’s interest in capital-N Nature and ecocriticism’s valuation of the construct. Morton offers the notion of the mesh, a different intellectual construct for fathoming the implications of ecology. Not easily definable, Morton’s notion of the mesh is a short way of saying, “the interconnectedness of all things” (28). Morton describes the mesh as “vast yet intimate: there is no here or there, so everything is brought within our awareness. The more we analyze, the more ambiguous things become” (40). Or, to repeat Dickinson’s language, “Those that know her know her less/The nearer her they get”—analysis of the nature is, as she states, a “labor vaster than myself.”

Although Dickinson uses the term “nature,” she does not idealize nature as a point of supreme primordial connection that abolishes difference. For Dickinson, difference—especially “internal difference/where the meanings are”—takes precedence over transcendental connectivity (Fr 320). Unlike Emerson, Dickinson does not translate her conception of nature into an idealism that recognizes nature’s power as maternal and beneficent. In *Nature* he writes, “I have no hostility to nature but a child’s love to it...let us speak her fair. I do not wish to fling stones at my beautiful mother, nor soil my gentle nest” (*Nature* 25). Emerson’s persistent desire to see his proverbial thought, “the invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common,” advocates an eye that sees the miraculous rather than senses the uncanny. Dickinson is closer to Thoreau’s elliptical uncertainty during his ascent of Katahdin when he writes, “I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound here become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one....but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them...Talk of mysteries!” (Thoreau, *Essays*),³⁰ Ecological thinking involves a bewildering recognition of one’s own incredible limitations. It involves a continual widening of awareness and a letting go of control. Like intimacy, it is sometimes a place of trembling and vulnerability—of mysteries and strangeness. Like Dickinson’s gaps in syntax, intimacy has to do with dashes and ellipsis. Thinking about and practicing intimacy brings us closer to ecology. For these reasons, reading Dickinson brings us close to ecology.

In Italian *intimare* means to order or command, suggesting a sense of intimidation. Intimacy is intimidating. The deep root of intimacy lies in the verb form—to intimate, *intimare*

³⁰ This is also a passage that Morton uses in discussing his notion of the mesh (33).

in Latin—“to put or bring into, to impress, to make familiar”—and in the noun *intimus*, “the innermost and inmost.” Intimacy’s linguistic origins suggest both its exteriority and interiority. *Intimare* suggests the relation with the world and *intimus* reminds of the relation with the self. In past work I’ve focused more exclusively on paradoxes of eros in relation to metaphors of continuity or the desire or longing to connect. But intimacy is different from eros, which I identify with a predetermined condition of loss and the gravity that seeks to re-merge it. Intimacy recognizes connection by accepting difference. Intimacy involves a mature love that recognizes and accepts difference as offering the most stable ground for sameness. Intimacy relinquishes control. Intimacy dwells in epistemological uncertainty and contingency. Intimacy concerns a reciprocity with alterity and is temporally concerned with the present. Dickinson’s poetry exhibits an intimacy as an ecological principle because she destabilizes conventional Romantic understandings of an idealized nature in favor of radical uncertainty. Dickinson allow her poems to break and tremble:

Four Trees—upon a solitary Acre—
Without Design
Or Order, or Apparent Action—
Maintain—

The Sun—upon a Morning meets them—
The Wind—
No nearer Neighbor—have they—
But God—

The Acre gives them—Place—
They—Him—Attention of Passer by—
Of Shadow, or of Squirrel, haply—
Or Boy—

What Deed is Their’s unto the General Nature—
What Plan
They severally—retard—or further—
Unknown (Fr 778)

The poem’s incredible broken syntax seems to serve to communicate the larger difficulty with relating pieces to one another and then to the whole scene. What is the relation between the trees and the sun, the Acre, and those who pass by? What can be known about these trees? In their lack of “design” they still manage to “maintain.” The sun “meets,” the wind is a near “neighbor,” the acre “gives.” Are these pieces joined by a “larger plan”? If so, what is it? What “deed” is their’s? How do they function? Or, are they joined by a sense of coincidence? Once again, the means of the connection present uncertainty. In the poem, the bare words are joined (or separated) by Dickinson’s dash. Indeed, this is a poem that depends entirely upon the dashes to further communicate an elliptical reluctance to commit to analysis. This is a poem of hesitation—a poem that ends with the word “unknown.” As a poet who often writes poetry of

deliberate and experimental definition, Dickinson's interrogative stance is rhetorically suggestive. As Helen Vendler writes "Four Trees" is "a meditation on nature as a permanent withholder of meaning" —a poem that "welcomes the absence of transcendental intelligibility" (Vendler 326, 329). A typical ecological reading might seek to say that the four trees in a place are part of a symbiotic web of being and ecological connectivity. Although Dickinson's poem places these objects in a linguistic shape and scene, the "inter" of their connections remains elusive and paradoxical.

But what, after all, is the point of such a conception of nature? Morton suggests that our intimacy with the strange stranger ultimately provides us with a "platform for compassion rather than condescending pity" (80). Compassion, or co-feeling, is what grows from intimacy. Compassion has to do with mountains stooping to flowers, after all, as Dickinson might suggest, it is their stooping that makes them mountains:

The Himmaleh was known to stoop
Unto the Daisy low—
Transported with Compassion
That such a Doll should grow
Where Tent by Tent—Her Universe
Hung Out it's Flags of Snow— (Fr 460).

Daisy was a nickname Dickinson used in signing her letters to Samuel Bowles and she often self-identified with the flower—the simple, humble, abundant daisy. Dickinson would have had access to geography in her education at the Mount Holyoke Seminar for Girls. But is it possible that she would have read of Tibetan prayer flags, which have become a universal symbol of peace and compassion? What is the end (or beginning) of Dickinson's figuring, facing, personifying, and opening?

It seems important to question and draw attention to Dickinson's powers of intimacy and to allow ourselves to ask questions. Have you ever referred to Dickinson as Emily? What is the poem you love most? What does it feel like to imagine the range of her poetics? What metaphor, in its wild and differentiated posing, shocks you into a new awareness? Which poem do you find yourself repeating and turning to? Which poem brings you to the edge of your intelligibility? What happens when our criticisms, as with Susan Howe's, start or end with love? What does this have to do with ecology? Love is a boundless concept, and feels less associatively clinical than intimacy. Intimacy is enticing for the academic because it lends itself to psychology and etymology. But love is unavoidable for the poet. As Dickinson wrote in one of her final lyrics, "That Love is all there is/Is all we know of Love,/It is enough, the freight should be/Proportioned to the groove" (Fr 1745).

Louise Gluck writes, "Within the discipline of criticism, nothing is more difficult than praise. To speak of what you love—not admire, not know to be good, not find reasonably interesting, not feel briefly moved by or charmed by—to speak of such work is difficult because the natural correlatives of awe and reverence are not verbal" (Gluck 29). Dickinson wrote, "Love is it's own rescue, for we—at our supremest, are but its trembling Emblems" (L 522). Why do we love Emily Dickinson?

As many of Dickinson's most faithful readers attest, the experience of reading her poetry can also be one of disorientation and uncertainty. The boundlessness of her repertoire is part of the reason why readers attest to closeness. Our experience is often one of intimacy because it is vast, paradoxical, and full of possibility and difference. There seems no end to her poetics. It is precisely this unbounded openness that allows us to think of her as an ecological poet.

As I developed in "March," Dickinson wrote prolifically of the human heart—both its breaking and beaming. And as this chapter negotiates the poet's closeness with her readers, I would like to share one of my favorite Dickinson lyrics:

If I can stop one Heart from breaking
I shall not live in vain
If I case cease one
Life the Aching

Or cool one Pain
Or help one fainting Robin
Unto his Nest again
I shall not live in vain. (Fr 982)

This poem is an atypical Dickinson poem in that it does not dance with elaborate figuration or juncture into broken syntax. Here, the work inscribed by some terrifying and uncanny dance of intimacy with the strange stranger also allows for a capacity for compassion. As Stanley Kunitz writes, "The heart breaks and breaks/and lives by breaking./It is necessary to go/through the dark and deeper dark/and not to turn" (*Passing Through* 68). Dickinson's willingness to not turn from the deeper dark impels her desire to help the fainting robin. Her capacity to experience and imagine heartbreak, perhaps the height of emotional pain, reveals her dedication to her inward journey. But it is the "deeper dark" of this journey that impels the turning outward—that fosters the crucible of relation—that allows intimacy to be nourished. As Dickinson best states, "Emerging from an Abyss, and reentering it—that is Life" (L 1024). It is this same commitment to the inward journey that manifests itself in Dickinson's journey through loss, another abyss that we reenter again and again. Dickinson's closeness to the passing months (even the most challenging and erratic ones) exhibits her ability to be open, her practice of dwelling in possibility, though there is certainly pain in such exposure. However, it is this openness that allows us to enter and in turn to develop our own intimate relations with her language—and so we all practice a type of ecology—as Dickinson's language inspires a reciprocal ecopoetic.

My personal foray into an intimate relationship with *Dear Emily* has been meditated in this dissertation through the online Emily Dickinson Lexicon, hosted and developed through Brigham Young University. An invaluable tool to Dickinson scholars and students, the lexicon has been especially important in enabling me to navigate through the terrain of Dickinson's poetics—in a way, the lexicon, as a searchable web of linguistic relation, presents a type of ecology. The lexicon allows Dickinson readers to experience and create their own paths of relation through her vast literary production—tracing words through various usages and framings. This form of reading allows readers to get close to Dickinson's language at the level of the word—and then to witness the way each word offers new instances of meaning as it in turn is

placed into a new figural relation. Dickinson herself feasted on the intricacies of individual words. As she wrote of,

Easing my famine
At my Lexicon—
Logarithm—had I—for Drink—
'Twas a dry Wine— (Fr 754)

The lexicon, or book of words, provides a cataloguing of the eccentricities and individualities of a poet's language at the level of the word—framing the vocabulary choices that will in turn become turned and tuned through figuration and syntactical relations. And as Dickinson wrote so many poems of definition and analogical alignment, the Dickinson lexicon allows us to encounter words in a way that draws our awareness to how they radiate with dense metaphoricity. Intensely dependent on and interested in the power of words, Dickinson often used the language of physical satiation to frame her relationship to them:

He ate and drank the precious Words—
His spirit grew robust—
He knew no more that he was poor,
Nor that his frame was Dust—
He danced along the dingy Days
And this Bequest of Wings
Was but a Book—What Liberty
A loosened Spirit brings— (Fr 1593)

In the following poem, Dickinson shapes the careful process of word-selection (words as “candidates”) the poet undergoes in her search through “philology”:

Shall I take thee, the Poet said
To the propounded word?
Be stationed with the Candidates
Till I have finer tried—

The Poet searched Philology
And was about to ring
For the suspended Candidate
There came unsummoned in—

That portion of the Vision
The Word applied to fill
Not unto nomination

The Cherubim reveal— (Fr 1243)

Readers of Dickinson often develop their own relational lexicons—words they borrow and hinge upon through their individual engagement with her poems. Personally, I am haunted by words such as *cipher* and *panther* and *conjecture*—words such as *cordiality* and *diadem* and *dwelt*. Her distinct vocabulary compounded by her elliptical and junctured figurations allow us to get close to her difference—to become both aware of and intimate with her reaches.

Ultimately, the ecological intimacy that Dickinson’s poetics inspire should not be overlooked and is a critical pedagogical tool in its own right. In his book *Lost Intimacy in American Thought*, Edward F. Mooney presents a collection of essays as “expressions of love,” in a larger argument for the importance of the “artful critic”—one who demonstrates “attentive care,” writing essays that “can carry out a generous, even pious criticism or elaboration that brings a theme or person or objects to its next or fuller meaning” (3). Mooney’s point is that our ability to experience intimacy with texts involves a type of conversational ethics in and of its own right—and that our ability to express love as critics is integral to the health and perpetuation of the humanities in our contemporary cultural milieu. As he explains:

Whatever comes alive through the humanities arrives through intimacy and openness to texts, dance, and cities as these carry the arts of conversation, gesture, or praise, the habits of attentiveness, gratitude, or compassion, the contours of grieving or outrage; and as these carry the arts of seeing and coping with affliction, injustice, and estrangement (religious, existential, or otherwise). As these arts of coping and conservation and habits of attention gradually disappear from the university they do not take up residence elsewhere (at least not in a *healthy* elsewhere). The lives and imaginations and hearts of its students are less for their disappearance. If departments in the humanities husband these varied sensibilities, proto-religious or not, sensibilities at least in *search* of a heart (and mourning its absence), then they keep alive these disappearing locales where the arts of human expression are cared for and revived. (Mooney 174-5)

In writing a lyrical philosophy, Mooney pushes genre distinctions in humanities writing—and attempts to practice his theory through his prose and position. As Laura Dassow Walls’ review of this “lyrical, searching and intimate book” argues “philosophy becomes poetry, argument becomes prayer, and skepticism becomes love”—especially and despite the confrontation with “doubt and suffering.”³¹ The transformation of philosophy to poetry allows for a lyrical and intimate openness—and for a healthy unknowing analogous to ecological awareness. And while Mooney’s primary subject is Thoreau, Dickinson’s poetics is no less relevant to the extension of his argument. Indeed, Dickinson’s poetics teach us to read ecologically—to be open to radical difference, to be comfortable in unknowing—and to feel intimacy and openness to a text. And

³¹ Laura Dassow Walls’ review and others can be found on Continuum Books’ webpage. <http://www.continuumbooks.com/books/detail.aspx?BookId=133951&SearchType=Basic>

so, our ability to express love and gratitude—our ability to say *Dear Emily*—ultimately grounds us in ecology.

May

By a Flower—By A Letter—/By a nimble love—

Rhetorical Immediacy & Epistolary Ecology

*In terms of how much they open us to the ecological thought,
I'd rank compassion, curiosity, humility, openness, sadness,
and tenderness the highest.*

-Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*

*You will find that the person who finishes writing the letter is not
the person who began it. Peace, understanding, and compassion
have transformed you.*

-Thich Nhat Hanh, *Happiness*

*And what is Ecstasy but Affection, and what is Affection but the
Germ of the Little Note?*

*A Letter is a Joy of Earth—
It is denied the Gods—*

-Emily Dickinson (L 960)

It goes without saying that the letter is a literary genre that exemplifies intimacy. In turn, as intimacy is a necessary psychological component of ecology, the letter is one of ecology's most revealing and constructive genres. But perhaps what is most important about letters for ecology is the way in which the intimacy generated by writing letters might also be thought of in terms of meditation practice. Intimacy requires work and a mental conditioning to sustain amidst an encounter with a radically different subjectivity. And letters, particularly personal letters, as a genre of writing that often demonstrates a specific rhetorical purpose, necessitate an awareness of audience that is specialized and subjective. As Andres Rodriguez writes, "the familiar letter is the preeminent form of individuality and intimacy; it involves both one's own voice and that other whom one knows well enough to feel free or open with. The familiar letter evinces a symbolic freedom conferred on friends who share the writer's confidence. Such freedom implies or provides an outlet for expressing spontaneity" (26). Love letters in particular, or letters that admit and express love, require receptivity and empathy. And as Rodriguez notes, the spontaneity letter-writing can encourage also characterizes the letter as a notebook-genre, or a form of writing that emerges from diurnal awareness on the writing desk. Letters involve time,

materiality, and temporal context; they can travel distance, both literally and metaphorically, between disparate geographical and psychological states.

As many critics have noted, Emily Dickinson's letters are an inextricable part of her poetics; in her letters, she drafted, shared, and copied poems. In addition, the prose of her letters, with its fragmentation and dramatic punctuation, shares many of the same techniques as her lyrics. Importantly, Dickinson often framed her poetic relation with the world through figures of letter-writing: "This is my letter to the world/that never wrote to Me/The Simple News that Nature told—/With tender majesty" (Fr 519) or "By a Flower—By A Letter—/By a nimble love—" (Fr 163). In a letter to Higginson she wrote, "A letter always seemed to me like Immortality, for is it not the mind alone, without corporeal friend" (L 330). While letters, because they depend upon absence, might suggest a lack of intimacy, they can also be thought of as heightening a verbal intimacy, refining and defining language in ways that depend upon the immediate reception of the addressee. In another sense, because letters depend upon separation, they come closer to ecology in their refusal to convert distance and difference into a perfect and continuous complicity.

Dickinson's most intimate and sustained correspondence was with her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert, and lasted the length of her lifetime, serving as the drafting-ground of many of her greatest lyrics. As Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith note in their work on editing the correspondence of Dickinson and Gilbert, "The letter-poem, a category that includes signed poems and letters with poems or with lines of poetry, will be seen her a distinct and important Dickinson genre" (xxv). In this intimate genre and correspondence, Dickinson again and again points to Sue (and her separation from Sue) as offering her space for her own differentiation. Consider the following brief notes:

To be Susan
is Imagination,
To have been
Susan, a Dream— (Hart/Smith 242)

Susan.
To thank one
for Sweetness, is
possible, but for
Spaciousness, out
of sight— (Hart/Smith 235)

Susan is a
vast and sweet
Sister, and
Emily hopes to
deserve her,
but not now— (Hart/Smith 232)

In these examples to her most intimate correspondent, Dickinson acknowledges how Sue's differentiation is "vast" and offers "spaciousness" as well as imaginative inspiration. In addition, the lyric, "But Nature is a stranger yet," discussed in "November," was also written in a letter to Gilbert in the late 1870's in an alternate version. In this drafting, Dickinson wrote, "But Susan/is a Stranger yet—/The Ones who/ cite her most/Have never scaled /her Haunted House/Nor compromised/her Ghost—" (Hart/Smith 215). In that Dickinson replaces her most intimate relation "Susan" with the word "Nature" suggests the need to look at person-person exchanges in order to think through the self's relation with the world; letters heighten the difference that ecological connectivity depends upon. Consider the following letter to Susan Gilbert, in which Dickinson wrote of her profound loneliness:

Susie—it is a little thing to say how lone it is—anyone can do it, but to wear the liveness next to your heart for weeks, when you sleep, and when you wake, ever missing something, *this*, all cannot say, and it baffles me. I would paint a portrait which would bring the tears, had I canvass for it, and the scene should be—*solitude*, and the figures—solitude—and the lights and shades, each a solitude. I could fill a chamber with landscapes so lone, men should pause and weep there; then haste grateful home, for a loved one left. Today has been a fair day, very still and blue. Tonight, the crimson children are playing in the West, and tomorrow will be colder. In all I number you. I want to think of you each hour in the day. What you are saying—doing—I want to walk with you, as seeing yet unseen. You say you walk and sew alone. *I walk and sew alone.* I don't see much of Vinnie—she's mostly dusting stairs!
(L 176)

Right at the end she writes, "They say that absence conquers. It has vanquished me," and indeed Dickinson does seem vanquished by absence but also, such separation serves as a necessary precondition for the letter's composition. Dickinson identifies her loneliness with Sue's loneliness: "You say you walk and sew alone. *I walk and sew alone.*" Their intimacy is generated through their loneliness. Dickinson also turns to her environment—to the cold weather and the "fair day, very still and blue"—explaining to Sue how, "In all I number you." What seems to put Dickinson in touch with her environment is a feeling of separation. In introducing her work on Dickinson's letters, Agnieszka Salska explains, "Recent studies of Dickinson's letters seek to demonstrate that, nourished by a culture of intimacy of which the letter was the primary vehicle, the poet formulated principles of her poetics in the course of her intense and extended correspondence. Her poetry and correspondence are founded on the epistemological resistance to 'closure in all its forms' and on the primacy of the intimate but dialogical, not monologic, voice" (165). With their dialogism, letters are necessarily intimate and were a focus Dickinson's time and energies. As in the example cited above, we can recognize the ways in which letter writing corresponds to ecological concepts. I do not wish to imply that all letter-writing is ecological or even intimate. But I would suggest that Dickinson's affectionate modes of address and the physical and psychological closeness of her poems and letters exhibit a profound intimacy, often presenting a reciprocity between subjects—a full facing of the other. And perhaps most

importantly, I would suggest that Dickinson's letter-writing offered her an opportunity to practice meditation.

In offering basic meditations that people might engage in during their daily lives, Thich Nhat Hanh proposes the meditative capacity of letter writing. As he explains,

There are pacifists who can write protest letters of great condemnation but who are incapable of writing a love letter. You have to write in such a way that the other person is receptive toward reading; you have to speak in such a way that the other person is receptive toward listening. If you do not, it is not worth the trouble to write or to speak. To write in such a way is to practice meditation." (Hanh, *True Love*, 40)

Hanh's most important word in this passage is "receptive," indicating the necessary vulnerability and heart-opening that letter-writing engenders. Because love letters involve vulnerability, they might be meditative; meditation, in turn, as I will discuss more in "June" and "July," can be transformative and is an essential part of ecological being. In "April" I discussed the intimacy Dickinson's poetics engender through the expansive and highly individuated figurations generated by her lexicon. Here, I draw attention to the ways in which Dickinson's epistolary impulse allowed her to express emotional vulnerability. In turn, such sincerity and vulnerability allow for a degree of mindful awareness concerning the texture of the relation between the self and the other. Correspondence suggests communication, coming together, and parallel action, but like metaphor, also depends upon a recognition of difference.

As this dissertation is turning to its final season, this chapter and "August" will offer more experimental writing that seeks to practice just as much as theorize their central focus. In "July" I will discuss the Epicurean virtue of gratitude as an inevitable component of ecological awareness. Here, I will offer an expression of gratitude; what follows are letters of thanks. If ecology demands intimacy, then eco-poetics thrives in the letter's expressive capacity. Each of these letters, save the first, due to its circumstances, were originally hand-written and have been mailed to their respective addressee. They are by no means exclusive, but rather are a sampling and a part of a conscious exercise to situate my voice as a writer, critic, and teacher. Reiterating the etymology of the dissertation as a type of discourse within a community of scholars, these letters work to open discourse, intimately and immediately. They are their own argument and practice their own theory. In my heart, their chief importance lies in their expression of gratitude to these individuals, who have all been, in their ways, extraordinary teachers.

Jane Hirshfield, Key West Writer's Workshop

Dear Jane,

March 21, 2012

Today, I decided that in order to complete the last chapter of my dissertation, it would be necessary to write you a letter. And this afternoon, I stumbled across the call for the Key West

writer's workshop, which also asked for a letter. Two birds with one stone; I am writing one letter.

My dissertation is on ecopoetics. Structured as a calendar, it offers a simple narrative: emergence into ecological being might be thought of a process, involving the relationship between mourning, metaphor, intimacy, and meditation. One chapter is on letters. In my mind, the letter and epistolary address foster intimacy—revealing interiority and the singularity of any voice, allowing us to recognize the difference that connectivity depends upon. We met several years ago at the 92nd Street Y. As you signed my copy of *After*, I told you I was going to write my dissertation on your work. You laughed and said *good luck*, warmly and perhaps with some disbelief. But I went ahead and did what I said I would. Your poetic sensibility guides my study of Dickinson and Thoreau, as they collide with other poetic voices: Ko Un, Basho, Horace, Emerson, Shakespeare, Merwin, and Richard Wright. In one chapter, I consider Dickinson's figurations of the heart in relation to yours—the many doors—the openings and closings. Your words describing the writer's need to accept everything that comes—that “the lessons of ecology, Zen, and artistic craft are the same”—have long guided the integration of my personal perception with my scholarship. Among others, my dissertation has chapters on Dickinson's breathing, Horace's stoic acceptance, and the living quality of garden metaphors.

My theory is guided by practice. At the time I met you I was a regular at a Tibetan meditation center, but since then, I have found a spiritual home with hatha yoga, which I practice daily nurtured by a local community of people equally faithful to integrating the limbs of yoga. Finding this practice has given me strength to put my work out there and to find new courage to seek communities of writers, reaching out with something that has long been a solitary therapy for me. And so, as I am finally finishing my PhD, I am also beginning to share my creative work—something that my shaky self-confidence struggled with for years.

The lyric—the short poem—has always intimidated me with its perfection. I've admired it so earnestly and turned to it consistently in order to deepen my capacity to feel and to widen my ability to empathize. Your line—“to read a book of poetry/from back to front/there is the cure for certain kinds of sadness”—is a profound truth that both consoles and assures me. Although I am teacher and scholar, in my heart I am a practicing writer, as writing every day has sustained my desire to see with greater clarity. I have heaps of poems. I have a 65 volume handwritten journal written over the past 10 years. I have two creative manuscripts—a collection of lyric essays and a lyric novel—that I have recently sent off into the world. The passion of writers like Carole Maso and Terry Tempest Williams have guided these projects, but ultimately it is the lyric poem that haunts me—that confronts me with my familiar tendencies to think I'm not quite good enough. It is the genre I love most, and so perhaps it makes sense that I am intimidated by its beauty and power—it is the one that is calling me and asking me to risk—the one that continues to take my breath away.

As I am in the final, and at times tedious stages of my dissertation, about a month ago I created a project for myself—a haiku a day for one year—as a creative space to counter the final push in academic writing. My submission includes samples from the project, which I've named 366, since it began on Leap Day. I am also including some poems from several years ago that I wrote to counter the loss of my grandfather. My propensity for calendars and diurnal awareness lead me toward constructing projects—years, months, weeks, moments.

Today, at my university, I won an award for excellence in teaching by a grad student. It comes with \$500. I've spent so much time these past years encouraging my students to speak from their hearts and write faithfully with love and devotion. With my small prize money, I

would be delighted to offer myself a new educational context—since it goes without saying that to be strong teachers we must also be dedicated students. I would love to join this workshop—to find a safe place to ask the questions that haunt me. You have long been a teacher of mine. It would be an honor to be able to learn more about this genre that I resiliently admire, to work through my hesitation and reluctance, and to more fully emerge into the ecopoetic being I have been thinking through these past years with the help of Dickinson and Thoreau. Your wisdom and passion have, of course, been equally invaluable in this process. For this I thank you.

With warmth and gratitude,
Jesse Lee Curran

Roger Rosenblatt, Stony Brook Southampton

Dear Professor Rosenblatt,

March 26, 2012

I am writing to invite you to my dissertation defense this summer. We have never met, yet we share geography and relations. For the past six years I have been a PhD student in English at Stony Brook; Susan and Peter, who speak of you warmly, are both on my committee. I also grew up in Huntington with Travis Rave, one of your MFA students from last fall. Your new book *Kayak Mornings* shares much with my dissertation—although the genre is certainly different, our questions concern the same eternal themes: grief, nature, meditation, love.

This photograph, which a friend took about a year ago, is rather resonant—a deep image of my life. On the bottom two shelves are my journals—most of the 65 volumes I’ve worked through since I was a freshman in college. They are, in Woolf’s words “notebooks” rather than “masterpieces.” They have helped me exist in language—and to make writing a daily practice. If you notice, your book is also on the shelf—caught serendipitously by the camera, but prominently positioned for good reason. It was an inspiring and important read for me last spring. It allowed me to write a chapter on the human heart in my dissertation—to make an argument for its imagery and immediacy. In the beginning of the chapter, I quote you: “For all its frailty and bitterness, the human heart is worthy of your love. Love it. Have faith in it.” With your encouragement, I offer the human heart my scholarly love. As Dickinson so perfectly notes in a letter to Mrs. Cooper, “Dear Friend—Nothing inclusive of a human heart could be ‘trivial.’ The appalling boon makes all things paltry but itself.”

I came to your talk when you were nominated for the Cherry Prize. Sharing much with your book, your presentation was delightful and inspiring. You seem to me to be a practicing writer—a person who has spent his life writing, across genre and to a wide readership. In a way, you humanize the humanities for me. I respect this very much. All too often I hear colleagues pit teaching and writing as antagonists, but I have often found the classroom grounds me, allowing me to exercise new ideas, while also providing me with lots of material for writing during the evenings and over breaks. All students have rich histories—they have loved and have lost and often are struggling to affirm their voices and ideas. In turn, it brings me great joy to challenge and empower them. Echoing your sentiments, I encourage them to speak intelligently and sincerely—and to always come from the heart. In close relation to this idea, my teaching philosophy emerges from the Buddhist notion of a beginner’s mind and the belief that we can only begin where we are, accepting and becoming increasingly aware of this place.

My dissertation is called *Theorizing Ecopoetics, Thinking Ecology*. It takes the form of a calendar, twelve chapters (though I think of them as essays) that bring together readings primarily of Dickinson and Thoreau, but also others—Emerson, Shakespeare, Horace—and contemporary poets like Hirshfield and Merwin and Ko Un. All and all, there are many voices, as the project offers twelve views of its subject. My argument states that the emergence into ecological being concerns mourning, metaphor, intimacy, and meditation. Among other things, I write about love, loss, and letting go—turning to eastern poetic sensibilities to help us talk about currents of meditation in the west. I have chapters on gardens and metaphor, Dickinson and breathing, Horace’s stoic acceptance, and Thoreau’s collision of elegy and ecology. It has been an interesting process, finding academic languages for discussing things so primal and wordless—so important and real. Much of my journey these past six years as a grad student has been to convince myself that these are topics we can and should write on in academia—that their directness impels us to confront them with clarity, reverence, and grace. And once again, your words have helped to guide me along. Indeed, they touched my heart. Your recent books re-enforce to me the incredible value of literature to help us learn of our human condition—to become better people—more loving, more open, more empathetic and sincere. For this I thank you.

Have you ever practiced breathing meditation? I only ask because it is such a beautiful practice and seems so connected to the rhythm of kayaking. The way you write about kayaking seems analogous to the ways I think about gardening or practicing yoga asana—daily opportunities that allow us to merge into something beyond ourselves—guided by natural rhythms and ebbing in the currents of ceaseless change. There have been times when during my daily yoga class, I have broken into tears while doing a backbend; apparently, as my teachers have told me, this is not uncommon. In truth, I feel tears right now. Sometimes it just feels right to open our hearts—to say or do what is difficult—and to sense that if our words come from this place, then the rest will find its way of working out. We are always changing, always in relation, and with hope, always opening and accepting this inevitability. And perhaps such acceptance allows us to experience a balance of motion and stasis—Eliot’s “still point of the turning world.” As you write “I am moving forward, even as I am moving in circles”—and as Wallace Stevens writes,

*The boat was built of stones that had lost their weight and being no longer heavy
Had left in them only a brilliance, of unaccustomed origin,
So that he had stood up in the boat leaning and looking before him
Did not pass like someone voyaging out and beyond the familiar.
He belonged to the far-foreign departure of his vessel and as part of it,
Part of the speculum of figure on its prow, its symbol, whatever it was,
Part of the glass-like sides on which it glided over the salt-stained water.*

Part of me wishes I had found my way out to a class at Southampton these past years—I’ve been so close and technically eligible as a Stony Brook student. But we can only be where we are now and I am satisfied with the work I have done at Stony Brook. I hope you don’t mind me sending you some papers: the table of contents of my dissertation and my academic C.V. I can’t quite imagine how busy you probably are and forgive me for imagining all English professors have quiet time for reading and writing letters. But, as I am coming to the end of my time here at Stony Brook, I thought it fitting to reach out and offer thanks—and to extend the

invitation. I hope your spring is delightful, renewing faith in beginnings. If you think you might be able to attend my defense, please contact me for more information.

Warmly,
Jesse Lee Curran

Robert Pogue Harrison, Stanford University

Dear Professor Harrison:

March 22, 2012

I am writing you as a final assignment I've given myself in the concluding stages of my dissertation. I have a chapter on letters and how their rhetorical intimacy is important to ecological thinking. However, instead of just theorizing and analyzing letters, I am also writing a series of them to writers and thinkers I deeply admire, offering thanks to the voices that sustain my position in academia and have taught me through the years how to read and respect texts.

Perhaps it would be best to begin by revealing a personal anecdote concerning your role in my expression of gratitude. The other afternoon I sat down to read a book within my field. After trying to work my way through the first several pages, I put the book down. I was struggling and confused—feeling defeated by the dense academic prose that sat tacitly on the page. And what is worse, this was such a familiar feeling for me. It was the same one that I felt as a first year PhD student in my theory seminar—a feeling of not understanding and perhaps never being able to understand. Although it has taken me some time, I gradually have been able to embrace not knowing as a point of intellectual freedom rather than a personal limitation, and to recognize that my struggle with these texts might say something about the quality of their writing in addition to the limitations of my intellect. After struggling with that alienating theoretical prose that afternoon, I re-read a chapter in *Gardens*, and felt warmly taken in; the experience felt akin to reading a favorite book of poems. Here, I thought to myself, is a book rich in intellectual scope and crafted in a language that explains and ingratiate as it unfolds itself. Your writing does not alienate me—although resonant and sophisticated, it does not obfuscate. Your book on gardens in particular has been one of the most important I have read—as a student, a writer, and human being. And after my struggles that afternoon, I returned to your writing as a type of academic therapy—whispering to myself, *this is my model—this is the scholarly prose I seek to emulate and create—this is writing that teaches me, both about its subject and the importance of respecting the reader, rather than parading over her. This is the writing of a scholar who cares about his subject and audience, as well as the language that allows these two to connect.*

Several years ago, I was fortunate to come across the interview where you spoke the following words:

If there is something distinctive about my approach, it is my insistent listening to the voice of the poet, by which I mean the voice of literature as such. I start from the conviction that literature knows better than philosophy what philosophy seeks to articulate in abstract terms – knows it not only more intuitively but also less naively.

I included these words in the first dissertation proposal I put together years ago, and am returning to them again now, as I work to articulate my methodology in my introduction. Listening to the

voice of the poet seems to be an act of courage and humility—a statement of faith in poetry to both teach in its time and way. I chose to study Emily Dickinson as a central figure in my dissertation because she exercises a negative capability (and asks me to do the same)—she seems endless to me and there is always a new figuration that affects me viscerally, even if I perhaps have not quite grasped it cognitively. It is precisely because Dickinson has such a radical poetic imagination that she is so easy to adore; her obscurity is also her individuality, which, as I suggest in my project, generates intimacy and allows us to so naturally endear her as *Dear Emily*.

Your books are placed on my shelf in good company—and then tenor of your voice often reminds me to Czeslaw Milosz in his brilliant essay “My Intention”:

But perhaps the value of communication depends on the acknowledgment of one’s own limits, which, mysteriously, are also limits common to many others; and aren’t these the same limits of a hundred thousand years ago? And when the air is filled with the clamor of analysis and conclusion, would it be entirely useless to admit you do not understand?

It’s not that your writing emphasizes such limitations, but rather that it allows me to feel as though it is ok to ask questions—to try on new ideas and to speak my own with conviction and passion. Your chapter in *Gardens* on the importance of discourse and intimacy in education correlates intuitively to my experience as both student and teacher; such vulnerability is necessary, and as you point out, in order to grow, we must feel safe and nurtured. Ultimately, I suppose what I am trying to say is that your books have created a space of learning where I have felt safe to grow and to risk—to question and persist. The clarity of your language and your reverence for your subject creates a space in the text for me to enter—to feel comfortable admitting my own questions and uncertainties. And it is precisely in this space that I have grown as a scholar and, with hope, come into my own voice. Most importantly I learn from your work—and in turn, this learning inspires me to continue on this path as a professor and writer of literary criticism.

So often it seems these days that people are clamoring about the death of the humanities, which I tend to avoid if only because the humanities are thriving in my daily life. It seems to me that much of this “death” has to do with the ways in which academic texts can limit their audience through employing arrogant rhetoric of certainty and critique. Just as gardens might stand as counterforce to the destruction of history, so too does your writing stand as counterforce to work that obscures and isolates the academy from the discourse of daily life.

As your work has been so important in guiding me through my dissertation, I wanted to take a moment to personally thank you. The photograph, if you recognize, is of the Villa Cimbrone (from one of my annual trips to Italia), which I was delighted to see mentioned in *Gardens*. It was among the most enchanting places I’ve ever spent a summer afternoon and inspired pages the beginnings of a novel that waits patiently for me to return to when the time is right. As you express, it is a magical place—a place that haunts the imagination with its grace. Your work has been so important in allowing me to follow this path whole-heartedly—with faith and devotion. Like relationships, cultivating gardens of any kind is worth the work. Thank you for your passionate vision. Thank you for your poetic philosophy. Thank you for writing books that continue to open.

bell hooks, Berea College

Dear bell hooks

April 10, 2011

I came across your work at just the right time. Although I am in preparing to defend my dissertation in English this summer, it was not through the academy that I fell into your work, but rather through the *Shambhala Sun*. The *Sun*, in turn, led me to your pedagogy texts—and both spoke directly to my heart.

When I graduated college I became interested in Buddhist meditation—my partner at the time was committed to a *sangha* and everything about being at the local center made sense to me intuitively—especially the challenge of and *tapas* necessary for sitting meditation. Although that relationship eventually ended, I carried my experiences forward and they always grounded me as I worked through locating my position in the “ivory tower,” a place where I have often felt confused and inadequate, despite my passion for literature and writing. However, I am blessed with supportive mentors, who seemed to sense I was my own worst (and potentially self-destructive) critic. Instead of critique, they offered me encouragement, affirming that I was precisely where I should be—that I belonged in this PhD program just as much as anyone else.

These past two years, I have fallen in love with hatha yoga. I recently went through a teacher-training program and have found ways to make it a daily practice. I am once again blessed to have found a center with generous teachers who embody compassion and devotion, and who see the practice as one that generates self-acceptance, self-awareness, and self-love. And with this self-acceptance, it becomes more possible to be present for others—to stand tall while also being receptive. Increasingly, I am finding productive exchange between what I learn each morning in yoga or meditation with how I organize and run my classroom. The notion of a beginner’s mind in particular works with such grace when asking students to approach challenging texts or assignments. Everything has to do with helping students feel comfortable to come from their own positions. And, as you explain in your work, for students to open, their instructor must also level herself. More and more, I find my yoga practice encourages me to open my heart in my classroom, as I speak more freely of my process and path. When I am away from the classroom, I notice I begin to miss it and the space it creates to ask questions, to be open, and to affirm the value of sincerity. Like coming into a familiar yoga pose, a literature classroom offers an invaluable opportunity to return, to accept, to reveal, and to receive.

These past months, your work has helped empower me in the academy—to feel increased confidence in pursuing my chosen profession as an educator. I’ve always held the conviction that the way we live—the way we listen, respect, and work to widen compassion—is the most important work we can do as human beings. I’ve found reinforcement of these ideas in classrooms of all kinds. I owe my sense of spiritual freedom to my teachers, and I believe so deeply in my heart that education has the power to transform, as my personal experience validates this claim. I suppose this is why coming into your pedagogy texts felt like coming home; it is so deeply satisfying to find an articulation of philosophies and practices that make sense to me on an intuitive level.

As a final personal assignment in my dissertation, I am writing a series of letters to figures I admire to thank them for the integrity of their work and to acknowledge the ways in which they have helped guide my own faith in the value of literary studies. I am deeply grateful for the time you have spent writing your books. I can’t tell you how much it means to me to read

a respected academic who also says that there is “an aspect of our vocation that is sacred.” This is what matters in the end. This is what has mattered all along.

Much of my dissertation works to theorize eco-poetics through Emily Dickinson. One of my favorite poems seems fitting to share with you now:

If I can stop one Heart from breaking
I shall not live in vain
If I can ease one Life the Aching
Or cool one Pain

Or help one fainting Robin
Unto his Nest again
I shall not live in vain.

In many ways, your work has done this for me. It has nurtured my heart, and continues to help return me to the nest when I lose my way.

The image on this card is one of hundreds of views of my happy Buddha statue that I bow to and smile at throughout my day. I am sending you a series of these cards—perhaps they’ll find a use in your own correspondence. I make them with Thich Nhat Hanh’s words in my heart: if “you don’t find a beautiful Buddha, wait, and have a flower instead. A flower is a Buddha. A flower has a Buddha nature.” At the end of yoga asana practice when one says *Namaste* to the teacher, she bows down to the radiance inside all of us—to the Buddha nature we all share. I am so happy to be able to say *Namaste* to you here—and to thank you for sharing your resilient light.

With respect and love,
Jesse Lee Curran

June

Transcendental Meditation

Ecopoetics & Dickinson's Breath

I made it out of a mouthful of air

-William Butler Yeats, "He thinks of Those who have spoken Evil
of his Beloved"

The smoke of my own breath,

Echoes, ripples, and buzzed whispers....loveroot, silkthread, crotch and vine,

*My respiration and inspiration....the beating of my heart....the passing of
blood and air through my lungs.*

-Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

Returning is a different route

The spirit could not show

For breathing is the only work

To be enacted now.

-Emily Dickinson (Fr 1342)

One of the points I have been reiterating throughout this dissertation is that ecopoetics involves a subject who is practicing a form of meditation. More than just writing poems that can be described as meditations, the ecopoet practices meditation through a variety of means. In turn, the ecopoet's meditative practice both establishes and guides the questions, forms, and themes that will characterize her *corpus*. As such, theorizing ecopoetics necessitates that theorize the relationship between meditation and poetry.

There is of course something inherently paradoxical in poetry that attempts to represent meditative experience, as meditation is often framed in silence and the absence of language. Jane Hirshfield describes the connection between poetry and meditation in the following way: "My feeling is that the paths of poetry and of meditation are closely linked—one is an attentiveness and awareness that exists in language, the other an attentiveness and awareness that exists in silence, but each is a way to attempt to penetrate experience thoroughly, to its core."³² Sharing intent, meditation and poetry depend upon one another in a deconstructive sense; a poet with a keen awareness that "exists in language"—one that "penetrates experience thoroughly"—must also depend upon moments of silence to counter such language. As Hirshfield questions, "If I

³² This quotation can be found on Hirshfield's biography on the Poetry Foundation's website: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/jane-hirshfield>

were not able to enter the silence before words, how could I find any words I don't already know yet?" (Gregory 45). In their motion toward deep concentration, the poet and the meditation practitioner share more than most, as the two designations often collide into and collapse onto one another.

Meditation resists definition because it is ultimately a subjective experience and tends toward wordlessness. As Hirshfield says, "We run out of language very fast when we try to explain the experience of zazen" (Gregory 44). At large, Western poetics does not have a strong vocabulary to help negotiate the connections between meditation and poetry; it therefore necessarily benefits from an intervention of non-western epistemology, where the discourses of meditation are more at ease in expression and its inevitable failure. In these summer months of June, July and August, after sustaining and creating through grief, metaphor, and intimacy, I will more explicitly develop the relationship between ecopoetic creation and meditation practice, initiating my discussion of this connection through the act of conscious breathing.

In this chapter I will argue that Emily Dickinson possessed what meditation practitioners refer to as "breath awareness." I will not argue that Dickinson was a master breather or meditator or latent Buddhist or some other title that exists more in the realm of speculative biography than in the textual material of her poetry. Rather, I will suggest that if we want to think of Dickinson as an ecopoet, we need to locate a sense of her meditation practice, and this is perhaps nowhere more present than in her breath awareness. Not surprisingly, this breath awareness seems most heightened in poems of death, pain, and fear, which were among Dickinson's greatest subjects. As Sharon Leiter notes, "Emily Dickinson was an anatomist of pain. She used the word in no less than 50 poems, and its variants—agony, despair, grief, hurt, and suffering—countless times" (Leiter 31). But rather than explicating Dickinson's figurations of pain, as critics have done for decades, I instead will suggest that drawing awareness to breathing is what allowed Dickinson to explore, negotiate, create, and sustain amidst the physical and emotional pain that characterized her life and letters. Dickinson's emergence into ecological being is made possible through her breath awareness, which allowed her to create out of the grief and epistemological uncertainty that her ecological thinking inspired. After working through the implications of Dickinson's breath awareness for ecopoetics, I will then turn to a contemporary analogue—considering Juliana Spahr's work in *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*, as a seminal text for ecopoetics, which resonates with my work in previous months, as well as the breath poetics theorized here.

First and foremost, breath awareness requires an attention to the quality of one's respiration. Eastern didactic texts that offer guidance for meditation repeatedly, as obvious as it may seem, simply suggest paying attention to one's breath. As Zen master Shunryu Suzuki explains, in practicing zazen or zen sitting meditation, "our mind always follows our breathing"—"all that exists is the movement of the breathing" (Suzuki 29). In drawing attention to the quality and motion of one's breath, one is drawn into the present moment, and is consequently able to both distance and identify emotion and feeling. Simply stated, breath awareness is indicative of a meditative consciousness.

In turning to Dickinson's breath awareness, first consider one of the most direct examples from "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass," and Dickinson's exploration of fear in relation to an encounter with a snake. The last stanza culminates:

But never met this Fellow

Attended or alone
Without a tighter Breathing
And Zero at the bone. (Fr 1096)

The presence of the snake instills fear and an awareness of mortality in the speaker's mind. The tightness of breath—its constriction and compression—characterizes the encounter. Whatever “Zero at the bone” means, it is syntactically connected to constricted breath, as a response to the terror inflicted by the snake. This is one instance of many where Dickinson exhibits breath awareness in the face of fear and uncertainty. In another example from an early poem, Dickinson writes:

A throe upon the features—
A hurry in the breath—
An ecstasy of parting
Denominated “Death”—

An anguish at the mention
Which when to patience grown—
I've known permission given
To rejoin it's own. (Fr 105)

In this poem, Dickinson “denominates” or names death through describing its effects, which include a “throe” or spasm on the facial features and a quickening of the breath. The anguish that surfaces at the mention of Death is only mediated through “patience.” While the speaker does not manipulate the breath in order to counter the emotional antecedent the poem frames, she does draw attention to its quality, drawing it forward into conscious awareness.

Zen meditation teacher and poet Thich Nhat Hanh describes conscious breathing as the “foundation of all mindfulness practice.” He writes:

In our daily life, we breathe, but we forget that we're breathing. The foundation of all mindfulness practice is to bring our attention to our in-breath and out-breath. This is called mindfulness of breathing, or conscious breathing. It's very simple, but the effect can be great. In our daily life, although our body is in one place, our mind is often in another. Paying attention to our in-breath and out-breath brings our mind back to our body. And suddenly we are there, fully present in the here and the now. (*Happiness 3*)

What meditation teachers usually reiterate is that eventual consciousness and control of the breath must first be preceded by awareness and acceptance of the breath. It matters not if the breath is hurried or tight, but rather that an individual recognizes its quality; the breath has many states and it is necessary to draw awareness to its changing nature. As Jane Hirshfield writes in the poem “Red Berries,” “Our one breath follows another like spotted horses, no two alike”

(*Given Sugar* 8). In that no two are alike, drawing attention to the breath is also an exercise in fronting the infinite implications of impermanence, an ecological analogue on a highly personal and experiential level.

While the previous examples demonstrate that Dickinson possessed an awareness of the quality of breath, other poems present Dickinson's use of conscious breathing as a type of meditative tool. In these instances, Dickinson's active and conscious breathing allowed her to attain or sustain a certain state or endure a challenging situation. In the following poem, breath allows the speaker to both "take the Trick" and then to "simulate" it once again when "removed from Air."

I breathed enough to take the Trick—
And now, removed from Air—
I simulate the Breath, so well—
That One, to be quite sure—

The Lungs are stirless—must descend
Among the cunning cells—
And touch the Pantomime—Himself,
How numb, the Bellows feel! (Fr 308)

Gregory Orr confesses that in reading Dickinson, "I still feel in the best of her poems there are always lines or images or turns of thought that I can't follow, and yet this in no way diminishes my sense that I have absorbed the energy and significance of the poem" (Orr 173). As with most of Dickinson's lyrics, a reading of the poem might hinge on evasive syntax or on an elusive pronoun. A reading of this poem hinges on how we frame "the Trick." The expression "to take the Trick" is perhaps most productively thought of in relation to playing a game, or a metaphorical game where the stakes are high and tension is rampant. The speaker admits to breathing enough to win the hand, using the breath as a tool to move through a difficult situation. But the poem's present moment reveals a speaker who is "removed from Air," attempting to "simulate the Breath"—stirring "stirless" lungs back to life. Whether removed from air because of death, anxiety, or some other restriction, the speaker recognizes the need to call on the familiar rehearsed breath in order to stimulate and simulate the "Pantomime," or the lifelessness that has taken hold.

In the following poem, Dickinson frames the infinitive of the verb "to breathe" as the central action that allows arrival at a point of bliss—albeit a paradoxical one.

Through what transports of Patience
I reached the stolid Bliss
To breathe my Blank without thee
Attest me this and this—
By that bleak exultation
I won as near as this
Thy privilege of dying

Abbreviate me this (Fr 1265)

Dickinson's use of the word "blank" occurs often throughout her poems—an evasive cipher that echoes its Old French origin (*blanc* or white), suggesting empty space and the absence of distinguishing qualities. In this poem, she frames the "Blank" as something that is breathed. The paradoxical sense of the "stolid Bliss"—a dull and obtuse sense of happiness and joy—is further enforced in its second characterization as a "bleak exultation." These mixed phrases collide with Dickinson's repetition of the deictic "this," which works to evade meaning in the poem, while also reinforcing the wordless "blank" that lies at the center of the experience she frames. Stolid and dull both in sense and sound, "this" cannot be attested or abbreviated—it can only be repeated, and with each repetition, further enforces its stolid void. Here, blankness is associated with the center of Dickinson's meditative experience—a blankness that wipes away both words and temporal framing. Importantly, in Dickinson's poem, it is once again patience—"transports of Patience"—that allows her "to breathe" into a sense of arrival at bliss. In this instance her breath awareness positions and prescribes a type of meditative experience.

Perhaps Dickinson's most famous poem framing the notion of blankness presents it in relation to the experience of pain.

Pain—has an Element of Blank—
It cannot recollect
When it begun—Or if there were
A time when it was not—

It has no Future—but itself—
It's infinite contain
It's Past—enlightened to perceive
New Periods—Of Pain. (Fr 760)

I had opened this chapter mentioning that the most explicit framing of breathing in Dickinson's poetry often surfaces in poems of pain and suffering. While this poem does not directly mention breathing, it does describe the ways Pain absorbs temporal distinctions and draws an individual fully into pain's presence. As Helen Vendler writes of this poem, "For Dickinson, this aspect of Pain frustrates poetic completeness"—"the writer cannot inscribe the experience on that Blank. The Infinite, we realize, has a Blank in it too" (Vendler 317). Or, as Cynthia Hogue explains, "pain posits us in an infinity of present tense that has no future but itself" (MacKenzie and Dana 107). As mentioned in earlier chapters, Dickinson's familiar confrontation with epistemological uncertainty, especially through the sense of the infinite, is what brings her closest to a type of ecological thinking. And so, the blankness of pain as subject and experience does the same work as breathing. To recall Thich Nhat Hanh's simple words that frame conscious breathing, "suddenly we are there, fully present in the here and the now." If we read these two poems together in order to focus Dickinson's sense of blankness—to "breathe my blank"—we can trace the shape of her sense of meditation as both experience and practice.

Throughout this dissertation, I have turned to Sharon Cameron as one of Dickinson's most perceptive and rigorous critics. Perhaps it is not surprising that Cameron's passion for Dickinson's poetics parallels her interest in meditation and its relation to pain and suffering. In her book *Beautiful Work: A Meditation on Pain*, Cameron provides a "story of an initiation into a meditation practice" through a character named Anna. As a hospice worker and victim of childhood emotional abuse, Anna's meditation practice is motivated through the desire to learn more about the nature of pain, and the ways it differs from suffering. In a lyrical prose that collides memory, dream descriptions, and meditation notes, Cameron offers compelling language that frames one individual's meditation experience. For example, at one point in the narrative, Anna questions and considers the quality of her own breath:

No breath moment is like another. There is no story of breath. Breath is not continuous. Breath changes. But awareness does not change. How can that be?

Breath comes and goes, and falls deep into my body. Between my breasts there is a tightness. Long and sharp, breath twists and bends. Breath comes and goes nonetheless. The twisting relents.

Breath is drawn upward into my head. But my head cannot contain the breath, and the breath flows through my head outward where I have never been.

It is not my breath. Nor is it another's. It is no one's breath. Nonetheless, I am being breathed.

My mind grows still. Breath is the faintest touch. Breath is nothing. Bliss comes. Now the breath is *not* neutral anymore.

I am experiencing something I do not understand. (16-17)

As Anna experiences, breath does not have narrative, nor is it continuous or consistent. Where and how we experience the breath in the body ("between the breasts," "long and sharp," "twisting," "upward in the head," etc.) is subject to constant change. As Anna comes to realize, staying with the breath—sustaining awareness, which "does not change," eventually stills the mind, opening the threshold for a sense of "bliss." Although it is continuous in the sense that it does not relent, its ultimate nature is changing, subject to different qualities. Although Anna does not understand what she is experiencing through this practice, the experience remains—a "stolid bliss" in its own right. At another point, a more experienced teacher explains to Anna how to meditate, and why breath awareness is essential:

"At the beginning breath is all we notice, and we do return again and again to breath to steady ourselves. But when the mind is supple, like mine, we enlarge the field of attention so that the object of meditation is anything at all as it comes into and passes out of awareness. Let breath be our example. But what is breath an example of? When you become aware of breathing, you won't see something you've seen before. Breath looks to be a recognizable process. I assure you that it is not.

"Is the breath long or short? Coarse or subtle? Is breath labored? You might ask: *what is breath's nature?* I'm telling you breath *has* no nature except

change. The same with thought, feeling, hunger, pain, boredom, heat, consciousness itself.” (19)

Anna’s teacher explains to her how drawing awareness to one’s breath ultimately reveals the endless changeability of the “breath’s nature.” As an analogue to consciousness itself, the observer of breath will eventually accept that its ultimate nature is one of ceaseless changeability. And so, awareness of the breath functions on a number of levels, bringing the breather directly into the present, while also offering an opportunity for the individual to meditate on the infinite nature of change. In earlier chapters, I have theorized and framed the infinite relations of ecology, particularly in Dickinson’s poetics; Dickinson’s ability to both contemplate and negotiate these ideas is made possible through a meditative consciousness, no where more present than in her breath awareness. Pain and uncertainty teach an individual to breathe, just as the breath allows one to consciously endure amidst such unknowing.

We can also witness Dickinson’s conscious respiration in poems that engage more immediately with the sensual experiences connected to breathing. In poems where she focuses directly on the sense of smell, we can observe a withdrawal of the other senses in favor of a focusing on the olfactory experience associated with inhalation.

This was a Poet—
It is That
Distills amazing sense
From Ordinary Meanings—
And Attar so immense (Fr 446)

In her garden of perfumes and attars, Dickinson had ample opportunity to refine and represent her sensual encounters. In this poem, the Poet is especially capable of extracting “amazing sense” from both “ordinary” meanings and sensual experiences. We can witness the speaker’s conscious inhalation as a mindful breath that fosters this activity associated with poetic identity. The refining and focusing of distinct sensual experiences is also a step in meditative experience, especially the sense of smell, as it directly channels breath. In translating and analyzing the *Yoga Sutras* of Pantajali, an ancient guide of yogic meditation, Chip Hartranft explains, “Abiding in the sensations of the body as it sits and breathes brings about withdrawal of the senses, with the attention shifting to an interiorized perspective. Concentration yokes the perceptual flow by funneling it in to a single object or field” (Hartranft 31). Known in yogic philosophy as *pratyahara*, channeling and focusing the senses is made possible through breath awareness and establishes a foundation for further meditation practice. In the following lyric, the concentration on an immense attar allows it to journey across time through its distillation, making summer in a “Lady’s Drawer” long past the flower’s life cycle:

Essential Oils—are wrung—
The Attar from the Rose
Be not expressed by Suns—alone—

It is the gift of Screws—

The General Rose—decay—
But this—in Lady’s Drawer
Make Summer—when the Lady lie
In Ceaseless Rosemary— (Fr 772)

In turn, Dickinson’s awareness of emphatic exhalation can be witnessed in poems that represent sighing. In Dickinson *Webster’s Dictionary*, the first definition of the verb to sigh is written as, “Emit; heave a long breath; suffer a deep single respiration; [fig.] express sorrow.” The definition for the nominal form of the word notes, “Single deep respiration; a long breath; the inhaling of a larger quantity of air than usual, and the sudden emission of it, and esp. Indicating or expressing dejection, grief, weariness, longing, pain, or relief.”³³ Sighing is a type of breathing often associated with grief and release after emotional exhaustion. In the following short lyric, the sigh is granted to a modest frog, intoxicated with a summer afternoon:

The long sigh of the Frog
Opon a Summer’s Day
Enacts intoxication
Opon the Reverie— (Fr 1384)

In the following poem, a sigh is offered as a form of communication and expression:

No Notice gave She, but a Change—
No Message, but a sigh—
For Whom, the Time did not suffice
That she should specify. (Fr 860)

As these examples suggest, Dickinson’s awareness of the body’s physical respiration processes—both inhalation and exhalation—composes her breath awareness. But the representation of breathing in Dickinson’s poetry pushes further into figural terrain, as she also takes the breath as metaphor for life itself, forging into respiration’s etymological roots as a means of transcending mortality.

I’ve dropped my Brain—My soul is numb—
The Veins that used to run
Stop palsied—‘tis Paralysis

³³ The definitions from Dickinson’s *Webster’s* can all be found online through the Dickinson Lexicon. <http://edl.byu.edu/>

Done perfecter in stone—

Vitality is Carved and cool—
My nerve in marble lies—
A Breathing Woman
Yesterday—endowed with Paradise.

Not dumb—I had a sort that moved—
A Sense that smote and stirred—
Instincts for Dance—a carpet part—
An Aptitude for Bird—

Who wrought Carrara in me
And chiseled all my tune
Were it a witchcraft—were it Death—
I've still a chance to strain

To Being, somewhere—Motion—Breath—
Though Centuries beyond,
And every limit a Decade—
I'll shiver, satisfied. (Fr 1088)

This poem is perhaps best read as a statement on the power of poetry to transcend the limitations of a human life. Here, the speaker speaks of her existence from beyond the grave or some altered state of being. Though her veins “used to run,” they are now paralyzed, akin to Carrara marble, “carved and cool.” The statement, “A Breathing Woman” serves as a locus of identity of an intelligent and active woman, possessing vitality, instinct, and aptitude. Breath is associated with life in the second stanza, although the term returns again in the final stanza in a variation. Though the body’s mortality inevitably leads to “palsied” paralysis of frozen nerves and hardened flesh, “Being” might still take hold “somewhere”—even “centuries beyond.” If we consider the second definition of “strain” from Dickinson’s *Webster’s* (“sing, make music”) as a figure for making poetry, then the “Motion—Breath—”, which the speaker posits as possible, suggests the connection between breath and poetry. In another sense, this instance demonstrates how breath itself lies at the center of Dickinson’s understanding of poetic making.

It is not unusual or surprising that Dickinson denotes poetic making in direct relation to breathing. Her acute sensitivity for linguistic contingencies and etymologies is perhaps one of the greatest pleasures for her literary critic, as the poet’s intelligence creates distinct lines between words and their roots. As mentioned in “April,” Dickinson wrote in one poem, “The poet searched Philology” (Fr 1243)—and in another describes the process of, “Easing my famine/At my Lexicon—” (Fr 754). “Respiration” links to the Latin root for breath and breathing (*spirare* in Latin). In the following poem, where Dickinson uses the language of the Gospel as an analogy for her own sense of language, she once again uses breathing as a means of relating the power and quality of poetic making.

A word made Flesh is seldom
And tremblingly partook
Nor then perhaps reported
But have I not mistook
Each one of us has tasted
With ecstasies of stealth
The very food debated
To our specific strength—

A word that breathes distinctly
Has not the power to die
Cohesive as the Spirit
It may expire if He—

“Made Flesh and dwelt among us”
Could condescension be
Like this consent of Language
This loved Philology (Fr 1715)

In recalling the Gospel according to John, Dickinson plays with the notion of incarnation in relation to the potency of poetic language. “A word that breathes distinctly” maintains vitality so long as the human spirit that speaks the word does not expire. As Helen Vendler says of this poem, Dickinson dares “to appropriate the Incarnation as a metaphor for her own experience of the ‘consent of language’”—and “whereas the preacher coopts the human to illustrate the divine, Dickinson coopts the divine to illustrate the human” (Vendler 510). With her “loved Philology,” Dickinson analogizes the physical formulation and articulation of language to the cohesiveness of the spirit—when we speak, we exercise a type of incarnation. Or, as she frames the process in another poem, “A word is dead, when it is said/Some say—/I say it just begins to live/That day” (Fr 278). Recalling the words from Yeats that opened this chapter (“I made it out of a mouthful of air”), poetry depends upon breath—it is the stuff both literally and figuratively that defines the spirit’s rhythmic breathing. As Dickinson writes, “The Spirit lurks within the Flesh/Like Tides within the Sea” (Fr 1627). And it is also this intimate relation between the breath and meditation that allows us to conceive of an implicit spirituality embedded in ecopoetics.

While my analysis has primarily negotiated Dickinson’s representations of breathing, to consider the way Dickinson’s verse “breathes” seems particularly important, especially since the poet herself was personally concerned with the question. As she wrote to Higginson on April 15, 1862, “Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive? The mind is so near itself—it cannot see, distinctly—and I have none to ask? Should you think it breathed — and had you the leisure to tell me, I should feel quick gratitude—” (L 260). Clearly, Dickinson used breathing as a metaphor for vitality and life, but there is an important literal dimension at work in the pairing that begs us to ask the following questions: *Do Dickinson’s poems breathe?* And if so, *how?* Can we witness Dickinson breathing in her poetry? And is there a method of analysis that might recognize the patterns and qualities of breathing in her verse?

Dickinson’s critics have long attempted to discern her dash, as biographer Richard Sewall notes, “her ubiquitous and eccentric form of punctuation—the dash...has been a matter of

concern to almost all post 1955 commentators” (Sewall 3). Perhaps the most direct study on this wily piece of punctuation is Paul Crumbley’s book, *Inflections of the Pen: Dash and Voice in Emily Dickinson*. Crumbley argues that Dickinson’s dash “can be read as an indication that Dickinson has rejected the myth of wholeness implied by the possibility of rending. Rather than being a painful symbol of loss and division, the dash suggests that disjunction, to Dickinson, is one of the defining characteristics of the self in language” (Crumbley 15). He explains that Dickinson’s dash presents a dialogic voice that both speaks and reflects other discourses, and that the disruptive nature of Dickinson’s dash posits itself against a sense of a unified self. As Crumbley writes, “the syntactic rupture represented” by the dash, “both challenges the linear progression of sentences and emphasizes the uncertainty of poetic identity” (Grabher, et alia. 105). Sharon Cameron describes the dash as emphasizing “an unboundedness which admits of making radical connections” (*Choosing Not Choosing* 179). Whether to connect or separate, to link or break, to open or close, to affirm or deny, Dickinson’s dash is poised in a paradoxical position of evasion, as it quite literally draws a blank—offering the poem’s speaker a moment to pause—or, perhaps, to breathe.

In writing of Dickinson’s overall rhythmic effects in conjunction with her dashes and commas, which in the manuscripts appear as “hooks, slashes, calligraphic strokes of the pen,” the poet and editor of Dickinson’s poems Brenda Hillman explains how “much of the musical beauty in her poems, I find, has to do with breath, with breathlessness” (Hillman x-xi). In providing an example of the importance of breath in Dickinson’s poems, Hillman offers the following:

Heavenly hurt, it gives us—
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the meanings, are—

Hillman explains how the isolation of the final “are” requires the reader to “inevitably gulp a bit before reading that word, and slightly gasp, afterward....The breath, then, replicates both motion and isolation” (Hillman xii). As Hillman notes, it is possible to read Dickinson’s dashes as exhalative gasps. In the following poem, which draws attention to the pause between breaths, Dickinson makes the point playfully explicit:

Great Streets of silence led away
To Neighborhoods of Pause—
Here was no Notice—no Dissent
No Universe—no Laws—

By Clocks, ‘Twas Morning, and for Night
The Bells at Distance called—
But Epoc had no basis here
For Period exhaled. (Fr 1166)

In punning on the word “period,” Dickinson draws attention to the ways punctuation functions in relation to breath. The “pause” and “period,” as moments of silent space work in the poem to both signify and enact the mechanics of breathing in relation to poetic composition.

Roughly a century later, poet Charles Olson would take on the relationship between breathing and poetry explicitly, declaring, “The line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line, its metric and its ending where its breathing shall come to termination” (Olson 242). Olson proposed a poetry that came fully from the body, depending directly on the breath. And while Olson’s projective poetic project deserves its own ecopoetic analysis, the connections between breath and poetry become more explicitly theorized in 20th century American poetry, as meditation practice became more self-consciously integrated into poetic discourse and literary communities. Allen Ginsberg is perhaps the most prolific, erudite, and experimental writer on the subject, as he had an extensive meditation practice, developed from his interest and engagement with Eastern psychology and philosophy. In 1980 he wrote the following poem, “Meditation and Poetics,” which echoes Dickinson’s play with the spirit as the “vehicle for poetry and song.”

Spiritus means breath, etymologically, and breath spirit is the
vehicle for poetry and song as well as the air horse
the Mind rides during the meditation practice. Sit down and relax
with a straight spine and pass into space with your air.
People followed their outbreath in Tibet. So did Poets in the
west, filling their body-wind with vowels and tones of Voice.
Sometimes you forget you’re breathing and the mind
daydreams poems of past history future furniture present
erotic bliss
Old shameful conversations but a fly buzzing when you died
like Emily Dickinson brings you back mindful to the room
where
you sit and keep breathing aware of the walls around you and
the endless blue sky above your mind
The daydreams isolated recollected as objects can be poetry
stormy epics or flashy haikus.
A thought like a poem begins you can’t tell where then it gets
big in the mind’s eye an imaginary universe and then
Disappears like a white elephant into the blue or “as a bird”
leaves the imprint of its flight in the sky”
So thought ends you can’t tell where, except it disappears into
thin air like Shakespeare’s plays.
Shakespeare left his breath for us to hear his Cadence, so did
Shelley and William Carlos Williams and Kerouac.
“The breath whose might I have invoked in song Descends on
me; my spirit’s bark is driven, far from shore ...”
One Thursday in 1919 William Carlos Williams stood in his
shoes and remembered the breath coming in and out at his nose,
right at the end of World War I. It’s almost World War III and

we're still breathing. (153)

In this poem, Ginsberg posits that breathing meditation has long been present in Western poetics. Poets like Shakespeare and Shelley leave their “breath for us to hear in Cadence,” invoking it in “song.” Linguistically and physically, the breath is never far from spirit itself—“breath spirit is the vehicle for poetry and song.” Not surprisingly, Ginsberg references Dickinson, noting how her poetry in particular brings an individual back to the immediacy of the present—“back mindful to the room.”

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air—
Between the heavens of storm—

The Eyes around—had wrung them dry—
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset—when the King
Be witnessed—in the Room— (Fr 591)

As the speaker witnesses the instance of her death, she is also aware of the stillness in the room and the breathing of the on-lookers, “gathering firm” as they witness the moment of passing. And as the speaker’s breath dissipates, the room opens in stillness—“between the heavens of storm”—as time slows and opens. As Ginsberg represents, breathing allows poetic presence, “aware of the walls around you and/the endless blue above your mind.” Or, in Dickinson’s language, poetic presence offers the freedom to dwell in possibility, to have “for an everlasting Roof/The Gambrels of the Sky—” (Fr 466).

While there are many introductory poetry texts that instruct readers “how to read a poem,” offering guidelines for rhetoric, figuration, and scansion, how does one *breathe* a poem? Like meditation, such a question is only answerable through subjective practice and experience. It is necessary to read the poem aloud to actually breathe with it—the rhythmic pace of a lyric poem’s language, and the breath necessary (especially as we all breathe differently) to articulate the poem, is an intimate negotiation between the text and the reader—one that ultimately bears the potential to return, quite literally to that extreme ecopoetic figure—the heart. In discussing his interpretation of Olson’s projective poetics, Ginsberg describes emphasis in the following language:

If the whole body is mobilized, that means the whole sing breath of the body is used, whether it’s a shallow breath or a deep breath . . . and if it is a physical breath it means it’s the whole metabolism and the feelings of the body and the *heart* spasm that’s involved, so that breath leads, so to speak, directly to the heart, the center of feeling. At least that’s the way I interpret it. (145)

With her short lines and abundant dashes, Dickinson leaves her reader ample opportunity to become aware of her breath. Providing punctuated pauses and moments of silence to register and articulate her broken syntax, Dickinson's poetry also offers occasion after occasion to become aware of the silence that poetic language depends upon. Returning to Jane Hirshfield's formulation with which I had started this discussion about the relationship between poetry and meditation, "one is an attentiveness and awareness that exists in language, the other an attentiveness and awareness that exists in silence." What poetry and meditation both share is breath awareness, a dependence on silence, Yeats' "mouthful of air," and Dickinson's sense of "internal difference,/Where the meanings, are."

Part of my methodology throughout this dissertation has worked to offer contemporary analogues to eco-poetic issues theorized through Dickinson and Thoreau, and in doing so, to substantiate the contemporary ecological relevance of reading these canonical voices. In 2005 Juliana Spahr published a book of poems, *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*. A text that deserves extended attention and a place in future eco-poetic criticism, Spahr uses the breath itself—the fact that we breathe and process the same air—as a means of framing ecological connectivity. Through anaphoric repetition and a series of lyric poems that repeatedly yoke the cells within the body, the space that surrounds the body, and the air that allows and sustains the continuance of life itself, Spahr's work traverses subjectivities and speaks of infinite relation. Considering the following lines from the opening poem:

Everyone with lungs breathes the space in and out as everyone
with lungs breathes the space between the hands in and out

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands and
the space around the hands in and out

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands and
the space around the hands and the space of the room and the
space of the building that surrounds the room and the space of
the neighborhoods nearby in and out

The poem continues, and in layering through surrounding environs, ultimately concludes in the final stanza, with an expansion to the level of the mesosphere:

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands
and the space around the hands and the space of the room and
the space of the building that surrounds the room and the space of
the neighborhoods nearby and the space of the cities and the
space of the regions and the space of the nations and the space
of the continents and island and the space of the oceans and the
space of the troposphere and the space of the stratosphere

and the space of the mesosphere in and out.

In this everything turning and small being breathed in and out
by everyone with lungs during all the moments. (7-8)

By initiating in proximity to the body, writing of the “space between the hands” and the “space around the hands,” Spahr continues to connect that space to the space of higher spheres. In aligning this shift of scale with an anaphoric repetition, Spahr mediates a relation between the local, the global, and the geologic. Importantly, it is breathing that creates these relations, surrounding the space between difference and mediating the shifting scales, as ultimately, everything is “being breathed in and out/by everyone with lungs during all moments.”

Spahr’s text is paradigmatically ecopoetic, as it works through the different stages of ecopoetic emergence that I have theorized in this dissertation. First and foremost, *This Connection* is elegiac in its nature and does not idealize a pristine construct of nature. In the world of these poems, “Guided missile frigates, attack submarines, oilers, and amphibious/transport/dock ships follow us to bed.” This work is by no means “nature poetry,” as Spahr’s reach negotiates just about any stimuli that fronts her experience. Watching the news and noting varying announcements and happenings, Spahr’s style presents a type of prose poetry that works through listing as a method of lamentation. She catalogs global atrocities of “this endless twentieth century” (37) alongside tragedies and struggles within individual human lives:

The Greenland glaciers and Arctic Sea ice melt at unprecedented
levels and still a ship fuels and slips out of port.

Winona Ryder has thirty prescriptions for downers from twenty
different doctors and still a ship fuels up and slips out of port. (40)

Making connections through overt repetition, Spahr’s lists lament rather than romanticize; they steadily register rather than idealize. As she writes, “Beloveds, I keep trying to speak of loving but all I speak about is acts of war and acts of war and acts of war.” (28). She writes:

I speak of eighty evacuated from Touba.

I speak of the ninety-five-year-old woman who was shot by Israeli
troops while driving from Palestine into Israel.

I speak of the six-hundred-year-old Spanish Haggadah now in
Sarajevo.

I speak of Burundi and the Forces for the Defense of Democracy. (28)

In an interview from 2009, Spahr describes her intentions in *This Connection* through the following language:

I attempt to think about what it means to have the global constantly intruding, insistently changing what it means to be local. And the day book form was very literal. I sat down to try and chart out, through poetry, what I saw happening in the news. It was an experiment to see if poetry could help me understand the war that was inevitably coming. And I'm not sure it did finally. Mainly though I was attempting to work with lyric. Which I wanted to do because I had spent so many years dismissing lyric, seeing it as individualist, as convention bound. And so I was trying to think about why I had misunderstood lyric. And to think about how one of the interesting things about lyric is that it is all about building empathy and intimacy between humans.³⁴

As Spahr notes, *This Connection* presents itself as a type of lyric daybook, organizing poems by dates instead of titles. As I discussed in relation to Thoreau's journal and Dickinson's epistles, literary practices that involve writing the date, or composing directly from and of a present moment in time and place, heighten a meditative awareness. As discussed in "October," the writing of the date—the awareness of the present moment—is a hallmark of meditative consciousness and is a foundational component in the eventual construction of a calendar or other eco-poetic project. In Spahr's book, the opening page notes "poem written after september 11/2001," and the following section contains poems written from "November 30/2002 to march 27/2003." The poems often refer explicitly to current events, "Yesterday the UN report on weapons was released," "Today Israel votes and death toll rises" (48). As exemplified here, temporal presence rather than retrospective or prospective idealization is a foundation to defining eco-poetic genres. Spahr's method of plainly stating the news and cataloguing events alongside one another works to create connections along elongated scales, despite geography or cultural distance. As Spahr explains in a prefatory passage, "After September 11" her thinking "shifted." She writes, "I felt I had to think about what I was connected with, and what I was complicit with, as I lived off the fat of the military industrial complex on a small island. I had to think about my intimacy with things I would rather not be intimate with even as (because?) I was very far away from all those things geographically" (13). Despite geographic distance, the speaker negotiates the intimacy of the strange stranger—the uncanny awareness that ecological connectivity implies:

Embedded deep in our cells is ourselves and everyone else.

Going back ten generations we have nine thousand ancestors and
going back twenty-five we get thirty million.

All of us shaped by all of us and then other things as well, other

³⁴ <http://thewriterscenter.blogspot.com/2009/10/juliana-spahr-at-folger-shakespeare.html>

things such as the flora and fauna and all others as well.

When I speak of your thighs and their long muscles of smoothness, I speak of your cells and I speak of the British Embassy being closed in Kenya and the US urging more aggressive Iraq inspections and the bushfire that is destroying homes in Sydney. (31)

Spahr's ecological imagining aligns with a global-political consciousness, although at the root of these connections lies shared DNA—the evolutionary implications of genetic science—“embedded deep in our cells is ourselves and everyone else.” In order to draw these ecological connections into a type of linguistic representation, Spahr employs metaphor as the tool that negotiates the sameness and difference at the center of ecological thinking. For example, in one poem, the speaker states, “In bed, when I stroke the down on your cheeks, I also stroke the/carrier battle group ships, the guided missile cruisers, and the/guided missile destroyers” (74). Part of ecological being demands acceptance of what is—acknowledgement of connection and relation—and relinquishment of idealization for a fronting of contingency. In this passage, the most intimate of gestures—a caress of a lover's cheek—is drawn, through cataloguing, into a relationship with battleships and missile cruisers. What separates the cheek from the battleship? Through parallel narratives, these two are brought into a convergence, with implications that suggest a necessary intimacy, shape a sense of uncanny relation.

Spahr's poems also hinge on intimacy through their form of address, as the speaker's voice repeatedly apostrophizes “Beloveds,” who often seem to be representative of lovers, though at other moments seem to expand beyond to a universal beloved: “Beloveds, our world is small and isolated” (25), “Beloveds, this poem is an attempt to speak with the calmness of the world seen from space and to forget the details,” (35), “During the bombing, beloveds, our life goes on as usual” (69). The lyric form and the beloved address allow for an intimacy—a profound closeness with difference and a means of taking what seems far and drawing it close. As Spahr's speaker notes, “I speak of boundaries and connections, locals and globals, butterfly wings and hurricanes” (20).

At one point in *The Connection*, Spahr's speaker asks, “Beloveds, how can we understand it all?” (38). And indeed, this is often a question that surfaces in ecological texts. Can we make sense of the disparate connections? What are the implications of ecological connectivity? *This Connection* does not necessarily pose an answer, but rather builds a method for maintaining. Ultimately it is the breath—the “connection of everyone with lungs”—that draws intimacy into immediacy, and allows awareness of interconnection at a highly literal level; we share the air, which is processed by cellular respiration. As Spahr writes,

This burning, this dirt air we breathe together, our dependence on this, our ability to stop breathing, our desire to just get out of this world and yet we are taking the burning of the world into our lungs every day where it rests inside us, haunting us, making us twitch and turn in our bed at night despite the comfort we take from each other's bodies. (57)

As nuclear activists and environmental scientists often attest, ecological damage is pervasive and expansive, following meteorological and geologic patterns and cycles across the globe. Or, as Spahr's language suggests, we take the "the burning of the world" into our lungs where it rests and haunts, uncannily emphasizing inevitable and irrevocable interconnection. And while Spahr's late 20th century needs to confront these burning implications of ecological connectivity, there are certainly transcendental roots of such thinking. In a late essay entitled "Country Life," Emerson extols the virtues of fresh air and exercise in cultivating an ethical existence. He writes:

We are very sensible of this, when, in midsummer, we go to the seashore, or to mountains, or when, after much confinement to the house, we go abroad into the landscape, with any leisure to attend to its soothing and expanding influences. The power of the air was the first explanation offered by the early philosophers of the mutual understanding that men have. "The air," said Anaximenes, "is the soul, and the essence of life. By breathing it, we become intelligent, and, because we breathe the same air, understand one another."
(Later Lectures 53)

In quoting Anaximenes, Emerson elucidates that identification between individuals is at the heart of how people understand each other; we share the air. Or, as Spahr writes, the air is "being breathed in and out/by everyone with lungs during all moments." If ecology's most central tenet states that we are interconnected, it is the air that we breathe that most tangibly touches this relation. And, as this dissertation has been arguing, meditation, especially breath awareness, allows us to exist consciously in this crucible of connection—and to endure despite and amidst its most dire implications.

I had playfully entitled this chapter "Transcendental Meditation," not because I am willing or wanting to speak for the popular late 20th Century movement introduced from India and established as a popular and trademarked technique in the west. Rather, as I have been suggesting, ecopoetic being necessitates meditative practices and involves a subject who is not just writing poems as meditations, but is willfully engaged in a larger process of meditation in order to create in the midst of (as well as from) ecological awareness. And while, to affirm Ginsburg's statement that "poets in the west" have long followed their "outbreath," Western literary criticism lacks a developed vocabulary and theoretical grounding to move from the idea of *poem as meditation* to *poet as meditating*, which ecopoetics ultimately requires and inspires.

Ecopoetic theory necessarily benefits from intervening epistemologies, which were also foundational to American Transcendental philosophy and poetic sensibility. Lawrence Buell summarizes that the Transcendentalist movement in American recognized "the need to engage the wisdom of Asian literature and spirituality—the classics of Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, and Islamic culture—as seriously as the wisdom of the west" (*American Transcendentalists* xiii). And indeed, as I have discussed in other chapters, Thoreau in particular was engaged with such texts and philosophies, shaping his ideas and projects through larger metaphors that foster meditative philosophies and ecopoetic practices. However, we have no such documentation with

Dickinson. And whether or not she read ancient Hindu scriptures or sat formally in a chair and closed her eyes and went “inside” seems less important than the way she time and time again drew attention to the act of breathing itself—witnessing it and describing it as the vitality of her verse—and using it as a meditative tool to look deeply into pain and suffering. And while Juliana Spahr’s contemporary lamentation recognizes our dependence on the “dirt air we breathe together,” Dickinson affirms that despite all else, “breathing is the only work/to be enacted now.”

July

“Let the heart rejoice in what it has right now”

The *Domus*, *Ataraxia*, and Horatian Garden Poetry as Ecological Singing

*I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag
as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost,
if only to wake my neighbors up.*

-Henry David Thoreau, Epigram to *Walden*

But as for me, my simple meal consists

*Of chicory and mallow from the garden
And olives from the little olive tree.*

*Apollo grant that I be satisfied
With what I have as what I ought to have*

-Horace, Ode, i.31

*Move through transformation, out and in.
What is the deepest loss that you have suffered?
If drinking wine is bitter, change yourself to wine.*

-Rilke, *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, ii.29

Since its inception, ecological criticism has been propelled by environmental activism and heightened concern for an increasingly urgent global positioning. In suggesting throughout this dissertation that meditation is central to ecopoetics, it still seems necessary to reconcile an environmental *praxis* in relation to meditation. What type of values does a meditative consciousness instill? Is meditation an end in and of itself, or does it advocate and enable values that might have socio-political consequence for environmental issues? And still, perhaps most important to my discussion, what type of poetry might a meditative consciousness produce? And how might this poetry instruct us in how best to live in the 21st century—a century of environmental urgency?

Juliana Spahr’s work discussed in “June” suggests a radical imagining of interconnection through breath consciousness and anaphoric meditation. And as Dickinson’s ecopoetics suggest, breathing is necessary in order to maintain and sustain amidst the terror of mortality and the uncanny reaches of the unknown that ecological thinking propels. These meditative poetic techniques are essential insofar as much environmental rhetoric works through instilling fear,

through the suggestion of radical toxicity and apocalyptic disaster. In addition, in our contemporary culture, we can actively witness the cooption of ecology or the “green” by the consumerist engine. Due to these conditions, increasingly widening awareness ultimately leads to a point of epistemological unknowing and potentially to an existential paralysis, leading in some cases to depression and anxiety. From this point of vulnerability, meditation becomes necessary in order to center and strengthen—to not collapse amidst the endless unknowing that characterizes ecological thinking. Often, environmental rhetoric of prevention and preservation is framed through dire and devastating consequences; part of my work in this dissertation has served to offer an alternative to “save the planet” discourses that motivate response through invoking peril and fear. Instead, I have been advocating an awareness that comes from a point of acceptance rather than anger—of relinquishing idealization of what *should be* in favor of cultivating compassionate intimacy with the strange stranger that lies without and within.

In addition, throughout this dissertation, I have been suggesting that Western literary criticism does not have a developed vocabulary and sensibility that can fully theorize and think through meditation as an ecological practice and prerogative. Accordingly, it has been necessary to turn to non-Western ways of thinking in order to locate languages and theories to think through the relationship between poetry, meditation, and ecology. However, this is not to say that the Western poetic tradition is void of philosophical and poetic currents that present and nurture a meditative consciousness. As a vehicle for widening awareness—both of the self and what surrounds—meditation practice is supported by a series of ethical precepts that both emerge from and guide its continuance. But this awareness of ceaseless change, radical interconnection, and the gradual motion toward deeper attention as a means of accepting what *is* rather than obsessing and fantasizing over what was or could be, encourages ecopoets to confront and accept the dire and the devastating. Perhaps, such awareness might even manage to cultivate a sustaining sense of contentment despite and amidst such daunting circumstances.

In order to frame these ideas in poetic language, I first want to turn to a poem that is one of the most famous in the western tradition, even as it is perhaps one of the most decontextualized and misunderstood—Horace’s famous ode addressed “To Leuconoe”:

Don't be too eager to ask
 What the gods have in mind for us,
What will become of you,
 What will become of me,
What you can read in the cards,
 Or spell out on the Ouija board.
It's better not to know.
 Either Jupiter says
This coming winter is not
 After all going to be
The last winter you have,
 Or else, Jupiter says
This winter that's coming soon,
 Eating away the cliffs
Along the Tyrrhenian Sea,
 Is going to be the final

Winter of all. Be mindful.
Take good care of your household.
The time we have is short.
Cut short your hopes for longer.
Now as I say these words,
Time has already fled
Backwards away—
Leuconoe—
Hold on to the day. (Ferry 33)³⁵

In his famous ode, Horace offers timeless advice. He tells his friend, *Don't be too eager, It's better not to know*, and to *Cut short your hopes for longer*. In this version, David Ferry translates the famous *carpe diem* as “hold on to the day.” Although often translated as “seize the day” and thought of as a rallying cry for living in the moment, Ferry’s choice suggests a paradox of position, in particular, the impossibility of capturing the moment itself in language, as it is ever changing and slipping out of grasp; “hold on to the day,” because time has already “fled/backwards away—.” Classicist Alessandro Barchiesi writes that the Latin words *carpere* and *capere* convey “not rushed pleasures but the attempt to slow down the present, as if by plucking and grazing” and that for Horace, “time is the part of him that is outside of his full control” (Barchiesi 154). For the poet of the *Odes*, “the point is not just an obsession with time, but a search for marked, single occasions and for marked, ritualized times of life” (Ibid). However, in thinking through ecopoetic paradigms, the most critical line in the poem is not the famous *carpe diem*, but rather: “Be mindful. Take good care of your household.” While we cannot ultimately predict weather patterns and whether the coming winter will be our last, we can be mindful and we might take care.

As mentioned previously, ecology descends from the Greek *oikos*—the household—or *domus* in Latin. And while Horace does not use the term *domus* in this ode, Ferry’s translation rightfully acknowledges the term here. Direct and mindful care of the *domus* is perhaps the best we can do. Implicit in the etymology of ecology, taking care of the *domus* is an ecological necessity. Importantly, Ferry’s translation choices often draw on a vocabulary that seems relevant to contemporary meditation terminology, no doubt due to his sense of Horace’s education in Stoic and Epicurean philosophy, which also advocated meditative processes of awareness and acceptance.

In other poems, Horace does use the word *domus* and Ferry accordingly offers the same translation, as in Ode 11 from Book IV: “The household is getting ready; the silver is polished.”

³⁵ I am working with Ferry’s translation for a variety of reasons, many of which will be addressed in the following pages. However, it is my sense that Ferry’s translation, with its direct line and humble vocabulary, delivers a Horace that might add much to our contemporary ecological sensibility. Part of the work of ecopoetics takes the urgency of ecology and transforms it into immediacy, only possible through language that opens rather than closes—and to scholarship that makes itself relevant to a wide audience of readers. In close relation, I advocate a type of academic language that does not obfuscate, but rather works toward a humble and direct line, accessible to a wider audience of readers.

The household, and particularly the act of taking care of the household, was a deep concern for Horace and is also a deep concern for ecology, as in the following ode, which directly confronts the inevitability of mortality:

Linquenda tellus et domus et placens
uxor, neque harum quas colis arborum
te praeter invisas cupressos
ulla brevem dominum sequeter

Each one of us must leave the earth he loves
And leave his home and leave his tender wife,
And leave the trees he planted and took good care of. (136-7)

Here, in his acknowledgement of inevitable mortality, Horace connects a series of departures; “Each one of us must leave” earth (*tellus*), household (*domus*), wife (*uxor*), and the trees (*arborum*) we plant and tend. Horace’s sense of the *domus* is central to both his biography and poetry. If we are looking for ecological wisdom for the 21st century, we might best turn back to Augustan Rome—and in turning to Horace, we can also observe the western philosophical roots of an eco-poetic sensibility.

Over and over again in his *Odes*, Horace expresses a sense of knowing through unknowing. Horace’s thematic points affirm a healthy degree of doubt and uncertainty—and from this lack of full epistemological grounding, they urge a life of moderation and a sense of self-care. His advice, as many have noted, is nothing we have not heard before. Indeed, at moments, it can seem incredibly obvious, written into a western cultural consciousness of common sense and simple living. As one critic explains, “These basic notions, which, to be sure, also owe something to common sense, receive from Horace a formulation that is so clear and incisive that they have become part of the European cultural heritage, which has often drawn upon Horace’s poetry as a storehouse of maxims” (Conte 305). And despite the familiarity from their integration into a western cultural sensibility, Horace’s *Odes* offer moments of meditative awareness that ecological thinking still necessitates and confronts; their counsel for ecological thinking is endless and essential. For example, consider Horace’s advice to Licinius:

You’ll do better, Licinius, not to spend your life
Venturing too far on the dangerous waters,
Or else, for fear of storms, staying too close in
To the dangerous shoreline. That man does best
Who chooses the middle way, so he doesn’t end up
Living under a roof that’s going to ruin
Or in some gorgeous mansion everyone envies.
The tallest pine shakes most in a wind storm;
The loftiest tower falls down with the loudest crash;
The lightning bolt heads straight for the mountain top.
Always expect reversals; be hopeful in trouble,

Be worried when things go well. That's how it is
For the man whose heart is ready for anything.
It's also true that Jupiter brings on the hard winters;
If things are bad right now, they won't always be.
Apollo isn't always drawing his bow;
There are times when he takes up his lyre and plays,
And awakens the music sleeping upon the strings.
Be resolute when things are going against you,
But shorten sail when the fair wind blows too strong. (127)

Horace urges a life of moderation: “That man does best/Who chooses the middle way.” He also is an adherent of ceaseless change: “If things are bad right now, they won't always be.” Ferry's translation choices—particularly the language of the “middle way” cannot help but acknowledge Horace's philosophical proximity to Buddhist precepts and metaphors.³⁶ To consider this statement through a personal anecdote, recently, at the end of the term in an undergraduate class I taught on Buddhism and Poetry, I presented the students with some of Horace's odes while withholding the author's name. My students immediately identified the meditative dimensions of the texts, convinced I could have been offering them yet another Buddhist writer's take on the way awareness of inevitable change underpins the means of living an ethical life—and how poetry might deepen our awareness of this process. Horace's ability to “expect reversals” and to ensure the “heart is ready for anything” sounded familiar to my students because he professes a philosophy of equanimity and present-mindfulness. But of course, it is not Buddhist thought here, but rather Horace's blend of Stoic and Epicurean philosophy that my students recognized and responded to. Ultimately, through Ferry's translation, my students were deriving a comparative positioning between the East and the West, which is also shared by ecological thinking. They aptly compared it to another poem by Jane Hirshfield:

Your story was like this: you were happy, then you were sad,
you slept, you awakened.
Sometimes you ate roasted chestnuts, sometimes persimmons. (*After* 93)

The simple and direct dependence of reversals, as well as a consistent recognition of inevitable change, serves as a point of epistemological continuity between Eastern and Western philosophy. The simplicity of the language that both Horace and Hirshfield shape is integral to the life of moderation that their ecopoetic philosophical positions advocate. David Ferry's translations

³⁶ It seems worth recognizing that comparative philosophy might shed more light on the complex and important relationship between Stoic and Yogic philosophies. Indeed, the 6th Century BC witnessed a remarkable global influx of meditative philosophy. As Irvine notes, “we find Pythagoras (570-500BC) philosophizing in Italy; Thales (636-546 BC), Anaximander (641-547 BC), and Heraclitus (535-475) in Greece; Confucius (551-479 BC) in China; and Buddha (563-483 BC) in India” (Irvine 16). Although we do not know the degree of cross-cultural exchange at work in these overlapping dates, their simultaneous emergence does seem worth knowing.

seem particularly sensitive to this awareness, as he explains how, “In Horace’s view of things the unexpected is expected too, and the dire, and his stoical acceptance that this is so gives strength to a style which is unshakable in its clarity and force” (xiii). Importantly, Stoic and Epicurean philosophies are perhaps best thought of as life philosophies, or as practical guides for living ethically in order to be a more content and responsible human being. As the Stoic philosopher Seneca wrote, “He who studies with a philosopher should take away with him some one good thing every day: he should daily return home a sounder man, or on the way to become sounder” (qtd. in Irvine 4). Horace’s “stoical acceptance” might also be thought of as his Epicurean *ataraxia*, which Robert Pogue Harrison identifies as the ultimate objective of Epicurean education. As Harrison writes, “Epicurus understood happiness as a state of mind and believed that it consisted primarily in *ataraxia*, which we translate as ‘peace of mind’ or ‘spiritual tranquility’ (in Greek it means literally the state of being unperturbed)” (*Gardens* 74). As he continues to explain, for the Epicureans the achievement of *ataraxia* is only possible through shedding “anxieties about death and reinscribe its inevitability within the cosmic order of things” (75). Or, stated more directly, *ataraxia* is possible through “meditation on mortality.” Harrison frames his discussion of Epicurean *ataraxia* in his work on gardens and the means by which they exemplify the human condition. As he writes, “Epicureans who worked the *hortulus* knew that constant vigilance and intervention were necessary to keep the wilder forces of nature at bay, or under effective control.” Gardens, “when well conceived—transfigure rather than overcome nature. Indeed, a distinct tension pervades the state of *ataraxia*, albeit in a quiet and mastered form, much like the mastered tension that pervades the serene presence of human gardens” (75). In earlier months, I argued that the garden is a supreme ecopoetic figure as it is boundless in relation and exemplifies the work of living metaphor. Here, I am suggesting that ecopoetics can productively widen through theorizing a genre of lyric poetry in the west—a garden poetry of simple living—a poetry of *ataraxia*—a poetry that implicitly comes from a point of ecological awareness and acceptance.

The complexity of Horace’s relation to both Stoic and Epicurean philosophy is a testament to his culture and education. But Horace also seems to have taken much from these philosophies, in particular their value in practical application, in order to create his own poetic exploration of intimacy and immediacy, shaping his own garden poetry, teaching and delighting readers for centuries. Timothy Morton declares in the end of *The Ecological Thought* that “ecological collectives must make space for introversion and reflection, including meditative practices” (127). I have agreed with this claim and taken it even further in working with Jane Hirshfield’s contention that the mind of meditation, ecology, and poetry do ultimately the same work. And so, in this context, it makes sense that if we are to theorize ecopoetics we need to pay attention to the currents of meditative poetry in the West. My students’ assumption that Horace was Buddhist offers us a relevant position from which to proceed. In “August” I will more explicitly turn to an Eastern poetic, but here, we might think of the tradition of what I have been calling ‘garden poetry’ in the west as a compelling ecological genre, with the Horatian ode as an illustrative exemplar. Like a garden, which always involves a degree of human artifice and imagination, “the serious tone the ode” calls for its use of “heightened diction and enrichment by poetic device” (*Princeton Encyclopedia* 855). But the Horatian ode in particular, which is “tranquil rather than intense, contemplative rather than brilliant, and intended for the reader in his library rather than for the spectator in the theater,” emphasizes the contemplative interiority that ecological thinking demands (856). In addition, Horace’s odes are inherently intimate, often addressing friends with advice and humor, echoing the ecological epistolarity I discussed in

“May.” Horace’s odes possess what Carl Phillips describes as a “muted and honed grace whose clarity is that of composed reflection” (Baker and Townsend 89). Phillips discusses the “different kind of intimacy” that Horace’s Odes project. As he explains, Horace “tends to transform an often ordinary situation into an instance of intimacy that we don’t just overhear or witness, we are invited into it. The tone is, more often than not, one of familiarity, camaraderie—a tone combined, though, with a meditative cast of mind that is ever aware of life’s sobering realities, without losing a sense, too, of the comic” (103). The rhetorical immediacy of Horace’s odes, with their willingness to, in Phillips’s words, “transform” an “ordinary situation” into an “instance of intimacy,” further opens their relevance for ecopoetics. Ultimately, Horace projects a tone of equanimity that closely analogizes to the notion of the garden as school and refuge—or as a means to both teach and delight.

Jamaica Kincaid is perhaps one of our most prolific and profound contemporary garden writers, and in her memoir chronicling her experiences trekking and gathering seeds in the foot hills of the Himalayas, she can’t help but to think of her garden back home. As she writes:

As I walked and observed, each plant, be it tree, shrub, or herbaceous perennial, seemed perfect in its setting or in its sighting. I was in fact looking at Nature, or the thing called so, and I was also looking at a garden. The garden is an invention, the garden is an awareness, a self-consciousness, an artifice. We think and feel that we are making something natural when we make a garden, something that, if come upon unexpectedly, is a pleasure to behold; something that banishes the idea of order and hard work and disappointment and sadness, even as the garden is sometimes made up of nothing but all that. (Kincaid 188-9)

Kincaid’s acknowledgement of how a garden both reveals and conceals “hard work and disappointment and sadness” is a testament to its importance in both education and pleasure. Her definition—a “garden is an awareness”—is Epicurean in its own right, and close to Horace’s poetic sensibility. Horace writes garden poetry not because his subject is gardens, but rather because of his awareness of mortality and reversals. Horace writes garden poetry because of his commitment to awareness in its own right. Horace writes garden poetry because he recognizes that the ability to behold pleasure is ultimately dependent upon “hard work and disappointment and sadness.” Finally, Horace writes garden poetry because of his allegiance to the garden as meditative refuge and metaphor. As he writes, “Protected, here in the garden, under these trees,/You will have nothing to fear from jealous Cyrus” (51). In the garden, there is a type of protection—a place of contentment, where “from the horn of plenty flow/All the good things of our local fields and vines” (51). This sense of *ataraxia* is essential to a sustainable ecological being because it slows down the consumerist engines of idealization to a point where meditation and poetry might constructively come together.

In close relation, Horace’s garden poetry often makes metaphorical use of the seasons, which serves to reinforce his sense of constant change, inevitable loss, and unavoidable mortality. As he urged his friend Torquatus, “don’t pin your hopes on living forever”:

The changing year gives you fair warning not to;

So does the hour that takes away the daylight;
Winter's cold air melts into the warmth of spring;
Then spring is trampled down under the summer;
Summer is buried under the apples of autumn;
And winter comes back in with its ice and cold. (284)

There is perhaps no more obvious and consistent indicator of inevitable change than the seasonal cycle. Horace's poem emphasizes the transitions of these cycles, and winter always "comes back." Awareness of seasonal cycles implicitly involves acceptance of change and mortality. And as this dissertation has been reiterating, seasonal awareness enables successful mourning, while also providing ethical precepts that enable a meditative consciousness to take hold.

With their use of reversals and seasonal imagery, Horace's odes do not necessarily always hold the formal and elevated tone often associated with the genre. J.D. McClatchy writes that the "word *ode* conjures the stiff, exclamatory celebrations of Pindar. Actually the word Horace himself used to describe these poems was *carmina* or 'songs'" (McClatchy 11). And whereas "Pindar praised the victorious athlete, Horace clucks over the hapless suitor or retiring rustic; instead of hymns to honor a glistening prowess, Horace will suggest another cup of wine in the shade" (Ibid). Horace's *carmina* are perhaps best thought of as a poetry of acceptance rather than resistance, a poetry of praise rather than blame, and perhaps most importantly to the argument of this dissertation, a poetry that reliably moves from mourning to meditation. Such a move is perhaps best illustrated in Ode i.24, addressed to Virgil, where Horace opens "How should this grief be properly put into words?" By the end of the poem, the speaker proposes a type of answer, "It is hard. But all of this must be endured,/And by endurance what never can be changed/Will be at last made easier in the heart." In Ode ii.15, which Ferry titles "The Old Days," Horace mourns the loss of the "little farms," which he experiences as fleeting due to increasing scale and the raising of enormous estates:

It won't be long before the little farms
Will be crowded out of being by the great
Estates of these latter days with their enormous
Fish ponds bigger than Lake Lucrinus is.

Now the old elm is yielding to the new
Plane tree (to which no vine will ever cling)
And the ubiquitous fragrance of the myrtle,
The violets, and the other sweet-smelling flowers,

Scatters itself and spreads throughout the groves
Of ancient olive trees which once rewarded
Their owner's patient labor. And pretty soon
The decorative laurel tree will quite shut out

The hot sun's rays once needed by the farmer.
It wasn't like this at all in Cato's time

Or Romulus's time. Our fathers' ways
Were not these ways. Nobody minded then

That his holding was nothing more than a little farm.
They thought more then about the common good.
Nobody had a great big portico then,
Built on the north for shade from the summer sun.

Brick houses roofed with thatch were common as dirt
And nobody scorned them. The law, however, required
That everyone should pay his share of the cost
Of adorning with marble the temples of the gods. (ii.15. 139).

In recognizing the passing of a more rustic mode of living, Horace does not explicitly place blame on “the law,” which asked the people to pay the expense of raising marble temples for the gods. In contrasting imagery—“brick houses roofed with thatch” and temples made of marble—Horace presents a shift in culture and commerce, the “little farm” for the “great big portico,” emphasizes the former ways in which people did not scorn such simplicity. While Horace does idealize the rustic, his poem laments and acknowledges the change he experiences rather than arguing for a way things should be. Here, excess itself, rather than any particular individual or group, is responsible for the loss. Mourning is a necessary ecopoetic process, and in the ode that follows, Horace counters excess with contentment, and moves from mourning to meditation:

That man lives well who lives a frugal life.
On his table gleams the lovingly polished salt-dish
His father left him. Neither fear nor greed
Disturbs his good night's sleep.

Why do we try so hard to own so much?
Why go south in the winter to find the sun?
Who ever went away to a foreign country
And got away from himself?

Care scrambles abroad the rich man's brass-trimmed yacht;
Outruns the swiftest horses; outruns the deer;
Is swifter than Eurus, the squall-winter, driving the clouds,
Raising a sudden storm.

Let the heart rejoice in what is has right now;
Don't worry about whatever might come in the future;
Turn it aside with a smile. There's no such thing
As absolute guaranteed bliss.

Achilles in his glory was taken away;
Tithonus got old but look what he wasted away to;

And what the next minute might take away from you,
It might offer instead to me. (141)

As mentioned in other chapters, meditation involves bringing the mind as fully as possible into the present. In an endless cycle of reaching for more, the mind cannot rest and accept. Horace's questions are just as essential to our culture as his own: Why do we try so hard to own so much? Why go south in the winter to find the sun? If there is "no such thing/as absolute guaranteed bliss" then why do we continually grasp after it? Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius also warned in his *Meditations* of being overly possessive of possessions, "beware lest delight in them leads you to cherish them so dearly that their loss would destroy your peace of mind" (qtd. in Irvine 82). Horace's urging of a simple life suggests a philosophical position that Thoreau would take up hundreds of years later when he wrote in *Walden*:

Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three,
and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and
keep your accounts on your thumb nail. In the midst of this chopping sea of
civilized life, such are the clouds and storms and quicksands and thousand-and-
one items to be allowed for, that a man has to live, if he would not founder and
go to the bottom and not make his port at all, by dead reckoning, and he must be
a great calculator indeed who succeeds. Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals
a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce
other things in proportion.

Thoreau's call for a simple life in *Walden* often falls into moments of hyperbolic rhetoric to incite reaction from his readers, but in his more intimate epistles to his friend H.G.O. Blake, he expresses the same recognition of the simple life in more humble words. As he wrote to Blake, "I do believe in simplicity. It is astonishing as well as sad, how many trivial affairs even the wisest thinks he must attend to in a day; how singular an affair he thinks he must omit. When the mathematician would solve a difficult problem, he first frees the equation of all incumbrances, and reduces it to its simplest terms. So simplify the problem of life, distinguish the necessary and the real. Probe the earth to see where your main roots run" (*Letters* 36). His move toward simplifying the "equation of all incumbrances," or in reducing "things in proportion" relates directly to clarifying and enacting the social virtues that he advocated in *Walden*. Reducing life to its lowest terms—or "living meanly"—both results from and continues to nurture meditative practice, which was also essential to Thoreau's critique of the growing consumerism he was witnessing.

Importantly though, the motion toward simplicity and the tempering of excess luxury does not necessarily imply a life void of pleasure. Quite the contrary, for Horace, delight is essential to a life well-lived. Horace's famous statement in his *Ars Poetica* identified the purpose of poetry in close relation to *ataraxia*; a poem should be "Created to yield delight to the heart and mind./If it falls a little short of doing that, It falls right down to the bottom, all the way down" (*Epistles* 179). Neither ascetic or overly aesthetic, Horace's poetry often expresses the satisfaction of sensual experience as it is experienced in a local context. As gardeners know, the

satisfaction of fruits and flowers are not devoid of the consciousness of the work of cultivation they required. The fruit is the culmination of a process of hard work and discipline, and for these reasons, it is an essential pleasure of garden poetry; this is not fruit for the sake of fruit, but rather is fruit as fruition of a process—inextricably connected to seed, season, and circumstance. Through his poetry, we sense Horace’s celebration of wine and of local fare, and his gradual retreat from Rome to his Sabine Farm, his country house where he wrote poetry. In many ways, we can think of Horace as an early advocate of local sustainability. We sense the incredible pleasure he takes in the cultivation of fruit. And this fruit, we sense, is the fruit of his labor as well, as in the following ode, where he offers his patron and friend the best his Sabine hills has to offer:

Maecenas, when you come to visit me
You will share with me from ordinary cups

The Sabine wine my household has to offer,
The local table wine of the neighborhood. (57)

In *The Ecological Thought*, Morton dismisses the localism of environmental rhetoric (such as the popular phrase, “small is beautiful”) as a limitation to the “thinking big” that ecology demands. But Horace shows us that what is local is also most immediate and most intimate, and thinking big also means cultivating mindful awareness of and in the present formulated by a larger temporal perspective. In Horace’s shaping, meditation asks you to be first and foremost, alert and awake where you are—by no means to be lost in provincial small-mindedness, but rather, to cultivate a way of thinking that is characterized by a celebration of the ordinary and is supported by the gratification of being mindful of local processes as they unfold. In the following Ode, which reads as a type of prayer, Horace dismisses the “lavish harvests of Sardinia,” and the glory of “gold” and “Indian ivory” in favor of the fruits of his own Sabine Farm:

What shall I ask for from the god Apollo
As on his day I pour the new wine out,

Here in his temple, at the petition time?
Neither for gold nor Indian ivory

Nor for the lavish harvests of Sardinia,
Nor the herds of grazing cattle that make

The Calabrian landscape such a delight to see,
Nor for the fields whose edges the Liris River

Grazes upon as it quietly moves along.
Let those to whom the privilege has been given

Prune their vines that grow the Calenian wine
The merchant pours into his golden wine glass

Which he has bought with what he got for trading
With what he brought from Syria this year—

He who's so favored by all the gods that he
Can go out upon the dangerous Atlantic

Time after time and come back safe and sound.
But as for me, my simple meal consists

Of chicory and mallow from the garden
And olives from the little olive tree.

Apollo grant that I be satisfied
With what I have as what I ought to have,

And that I live my old age out with honor,
In health of mind and body, doing my work. (83)

Once again, a sense of contentment—the promise of *ataraxia*—and the necessity of a poetry of humble praise is essential to eco-poetics. For Horace, “chicory and mallow from the garden/And olives from the little olive tree” are not a just a matter of practical economics, but rather serve as a paradigmatic example of stoic acceptance and Epicurean *ataraxia*. This process of drawing gratitude to what is present is often easier said than done, but for Horace, turning away from the “lavish harvests of Sardinia” and to his “simple meal” is a spiritual exercise and is instructive for a meditative eco-poetic practice.

Dickinson's love of flowers and Thoreau's boundless interest in wild fruits serve as further examples of the need for eco-poetics to consider the laudatory capacity of the contemplative ode. Despite environmental damage and relinquished idealizations of a pristine nature for the ecological strange stranger, there is still need to cultivate our capacity for *ataraxia*, and to gracefully celebrate abundance and beauty as it is granted. Or, as Robert Pogue Harrison eloquently states, the “Epicurean project of self-humanization” requires the cultivation of the social virtues of “patience, hope, and gratitude—which one might call existential dispositions toward the temporal ecstasies of past, present, and future” (*Gardens* 78). Rather than ceaselessly grasping at the present, through patience, Epicurean philosophy encourages a “serene acceptance of both what is given and what is withheld by life in the present” (*Ibid*). The increased capacity for patience and a deepened sense of gratitude are lessons from the garden, which allow one to celebrate the ordinary while simultaneously relinquishing the struggle to make it permanent. We hear this voice in Dickinson, as in the following poem where she playfully derives enormous contentment from her garden flowers:

Paris could not lay the fold

Belted down with emerald—
Venice could not show a cheek
Of a tint so lustrous meek—
Never such an ambushade
As of briar and lead displayed
For my little damask maid—

I had rather wear her grace
Than an Earl's distinguished face-
I had rather dwell like her
Than be "Duke of Exeter"—
Royalty enough for me
To subdue the Bumblebee. (Fr 96)

Like Horace, Dickinson recognized the abundance offered by the simple flowers in her garden—and her poems on flowers are consequently boundless. She also recognized the fleeting nature of such pleasure, ultimately subject to ceaseless change and ecological transformation.

To see the Summer Sky
Is Poetry, though never in a Book it lie—
True Poems flee— (Fr 1491).

In Western literary criticism, meditation and poetry have most often been brought together as subjects through discussion of the metaphysical poets, in relation to their concentrated ways of looking deeply into the contradictions and ironies of a particular subject or state. Indeed, my dissertation's interest in gardens and meditation would necessarily demand it addresses the relevance of Andrew Marvell's "The Garden," where the speaker, in the refuge and quiet of a garden, circles more deeply into the existential dimensions of his subject, ultimately moving toward a refinement and valorization of the mind's eye.

Meanwhile the mind, from pleasure less,
Withdraws into its happiness:
The mind, that ocean where each kind
Does straight its own resemblance find;
Yet it creates, transcending these,
Far other worlds, and other seas,
Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in the green shade. (Negri 78)

Harrison writes of this poem, "sometimes the most intense journeys—the most visionary journeys—take place while one stays put, in moments of stillness unscorched by 'passion's

heat” (Harrison 119). Marvell’s poem narrates a moment of deep perception—a gradual looking deeper—which offers conflicting ways of perceiving and identifying with the garden surrounding the speaker. But what is the upshot of this intellectual probing? Ultimately the poem moves toward a paradoxical position:

How well the skilful gard’ner drew
Of flowers and herbs this dial new,
Where from above the milder sun
Does through a fragrant zodiac run;
And, as it works, the industrious bee
Computes its time as well as we.
How could such sweet and wholesome hours
Be reckoned but with herbs and flowers! (Negri 78)

Asking such questions concerning natural and aesthetic order are ultimately futile, and Marvell’s poem affirms a type of epistemological uncertainty common to ecological thought. However, the poem’s cycle of probing, and its recognition of the mind’s ability to annihilate “all that’s made” leans toward a position of existential paralysis. Indeed, ecological thinking can bring us to points of paradoxical impasse, as Marvell’s poem suggests, however, ecological urgency also begs us to question what comes next—how should we act—and what should we do?

In contrast, Horace’s *carmine* are perhaps best thought of not as meditations, but rather as poems that express the process and purpose of practicing meditation. The representation of the labor and fruits of this work consequently refines an ecopoetic temperament characterized by emotional restraint and a sense of *ataraxia*. With his didactic edge, Horace provides some framework for both thinking and being, while also advocating a type of tempered sensual pleasure that might also be thought of as a song of gratitude.

Importantly, not all poems that are called odes fall into this category of garden poetry. The Romantic ode, which often presents a scene, looks deeply into this scene, and then offers a new perspective on it, might once again represent a process of meditation or be thought of as a meditation. But as I have been suggesting, ecopoetics demands we also consider the subject meditating—the practice of meditation—in addition to crystallized moments of meditative perception; in thinking of meditation as product rather than practice, Western literary criticism has limited itself, especially in terms of ecological thinking. Garden poetry, as I have been describing it, offers not just moments of meditation, but also a guiding sense of why meditation is important—and what lessons such work yields, as well as the spiritual-philosophical precepts that encourage it. Importantly, in certain instances, garden poetry might also be thought of as a poetry of celebration—a poetry of ecological singing—a poetry that speaks from a heart opened and tempered through meditation.

Thoreau boldly opened *Walden* by playing against Coleridge’s “Ode to Dejection,” and instead proposed to “brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost.” But what was Thoreau bragging about? In the Conclusion of *Walden*, he urges his readers “no matter how mean your life is, meet it and live it. Do not shun it and call it hard names.” Instead of writing an ode to dejection, he wrote a highly complex work, in language he called “extravagant,” though perhaps not extravagant enough for the urgency of his concerns. *Walden* is

not about living in perfect harmony with nature, but rather is a reflective guide on how to live a better life—first and foremost with one’s own sense of self. In turn, Horace offers us a series of portraits of what meditation yields, rather than offering poems that might be thought of as meditations; he offers us an intimate voice of instruction, one that teaches and delights.

Ultimately, I have been theorizing the ways meditative consciousness is shaped, heightened, expressed, and encouraged through poetry. In moving through a process of lamentation into a meditative awareness, praise often surfaces—praise rather than desire or grasping as end in and of itself. We might trace this sense of ecological singing through diverse times, cultural positions, and geographies. In particular, I am thinking of Rilke’s insistence in his *Sonnets to Orpheus* that “Praising is what matters!” (Mitchell 235)—that “When there is poetry,/it is Orpheus singing” (233). Or consider the final sonnet, where Rilke connects breath to song, offering another example of the move from mourning to meditation.

Silent friend of many distances, feel
how your breath enlarges all of space.
Let your presence ring out like a bell
into the night. What feeds upon your face

grows mighty from the nourishment thus offered.
Move through transformation, out and in.
What is the deepest loss that you have suffered?
If drinking wine is bitter, change yourself to wine.

In this immeasurable darkness, be the power
that rounds your senses in their magic ring,
the sense of their mysterious encounter.

And if the earthly no longer knows your name,
whisper to the silent earth: I’m flowing,
To the flashing water say: I am. (Mitchell 255)

The height of Rilke’s praise depends upon his willingness to confront and accept the “immeasurable darkness,” which in this poem is dependent upon the “out and in” of the breath, moving “through transformation.” Or, as he writes in another sonnet, “Song, as you have taught it, is not desire,/not wooing any grace that can be achieved;/song is reality” (I, 3). As Horace sensed, the relinquishment of grasping desire offers a type of song—in Rilke’s words, “True singing is a different breath, about/nothing. A gust inside the god. A wind.” (I, 3).

Native American poet Joy Harjo’s ecological singing sometimes takes the form of prayer, as in “Eagle Poem,” which is also dependent upon breathing and acceptance of mortality and responsibility for the *domus*—“we must take the utmost care”:

To pray you open your whole self
To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon

To one whole voice that is you.
And know there is more
That you can't see, can't hear
Can't know except in moments
Steadily growing, and in languages
That aren't always sound but other
Circles of motion.
Like eagle that Sunday morning
Over Salt River. Circles in blue sky
In wind, swept our hearts clean
With sacred wings.
We see you, see ourselves and know
That we must take the utmost care
And kindness in all things.
Breathe in, knowing we are made of
All this, and breathe, knowing
We are truly blessed because we
Were born, and die soon, within a
True circle of motion,
Like eagle rounding out the morning
Inside us.
We pray that it will be done
In beauty.
In beauty. (Harjo 85)

In addition to Harjo's example of ecological singing, we might also consider Pablo Neruda's expansive and inexhaustible *Elemental Odes*—his poetry of praise, celebrating objects and connecting images through metaphor. Consider the end of his "Ode to Wine":

But you are not only love,
the burning kiss
or the ignited heart
you are also
fellowship, transparency,
chorus of discipline,
abundance of flowers.
I love to have on the table,
while people are talking,
the light of the bottle
of intelligent wine,
let them drink it,
let them remember in each
golden drop
or topaz goblet

or purple glass,
that autumn labored
till it filled the vessels with wine,
and let the simple man learn,
in the rituals of his trade,
to remember the earth and his duties
to propagate the canticle of the fruit. (Mitchell 87)

Neruda ends his extravagant celebration with a call for remembrance to care for the *domus* and to continue to praise the culmination of gardening practice; he encourages the simple man “to remember the earth and his duties” and to “propagate the canticle of the fruit.” Wine, in particular, as a further manifestation of fruit, situates its singer in a larger awareness of its process. Horace, no doubt, would have approved of Neruda’s laudation of this “chorus of discipline” and “abundance of flowers.” Wine, again and again, allows Horace to let go of anxiety and grasping, and to enter into the present moment of experience, as in the following ode:

Don’t bother to look for anything less simple
Than simple myrtle, suitable to the scene:
The garlanded cupbearer waiting, and garlanded I,
Here in the shade of the arbor, drinking my wine. (99)

“In the shade of the arbor” Horace shapes his rustic scene, not void of irony, but resolute on the acceptance of “anything less simple/than simple myrtle.” In another poem, Horace urges to “Take everything as it comes”—to see each day alive as the ultimate “profit”:

Put down in your books as profit every new day
That Fortune allows you to have. While you’re still young,
And while morose old age is far away,

There’s love, there are parties, there’s dancing and there’s music,
There are young people out in the city squares together
As evening comes on, there are whispers of lovers, there’s laughter. (i.9)

While a skeptical reader might view these poems aside as the products of a drunken hedonist, Horace’s sense of *ataraxia* haunts the wisdom laden in these words. When “there’s dancing and there’s music,” there is also the potential for gratitude and acceptance—there is further reason for song—a song that is hard earned through mourning and meditation.

Throughout Buddhist philosophies, the value of practicing meditation is often emphasized through *dharma*, or the teachings and doctrines of the ancient traditions. In the West, our traces of meditation teachings and doctrines, while perhaps not as explicit, are nevertheless

abundant, and are ultimately essential in the widening our understanding of ecopoetics. As such, Horace's call for poetry to both teach and delight is not a urging for a pedantic didacticism, but rather recognizes the need for teachers, and the community of learning that ecological awareness inspires and necessitates. Ecological singing is created out of the pleasure we take in widened awareness of fruit and flowers; such pleasure, while readily available, is rarely naïve or void of uncertainty and the grief of mortality. And so, garden poetry of ecological singing might also offer us a type of spiritual education. If we are seeking an analogue for Western *dharma*, we need only to turn to this tradition, exemplified by Horace, but by no means limited by him. In relation, this dissertation also aims to both question and instruct the social virtues embedded in ecopoetry, and the means by which such literature can facilitate the meditative consciousness that ecology so urgently needs.

August

Twelve Views of Ecopoetics

(On Mount Fuji & Blackbirds)

*Amid cloudy mists,
in a second its view has changed
one hundred times.*

-Basho

*I don't know whether I believe in God or not. I think, really,
I'm some sort of Buddhist. But the essential thing is to put
oneself in a frame of mind which is close to that of prayer.*

-Henri Matisse

*The claims of yoga, nevertheless, are only as good as its
practice, regardless of any high-minded rhetoric surrounding
its teaching. The same is true for poetry, or any human activity
that aspires to grace.*

-Stanley Plumly, "Lyric Yoga"

Before this dissertation took the form of a calendar and developed a narrative of emergence into ecopoetic awareness, its form simply sought to present a series of views of ecopoetics. It is my sense that ecological thinking asks us to practice different ways of seeing—and to sense that shifting perspective allows us to touch the infinite each time we look at the same thing and see how something about it has changed. Ultimately, a calendar, in dividing a year, also allows us a series of views of the seasons that shape our lives. No two Augusts are ever quite the same, and perhaps it is in the identification of cyclical repetition that we are able to fully witness the inevitability of change. Calendars offer spatial manifestations of diurnal awareness, and as their pages continue to turn, they connect us to a sense of temporal elongation. Narrative will necessarily emerge in our human lives, but the practice of multiplying perspective is worth the work on the daily round. Such a practice ultimately encourages us to let our narrative be impermanence—and eventually to be able to relinquish metaphor into pure image.

The Japanese artist Katsushikia Hokusai and his views of Mount Fuji offer a paradigmatic example. Long before Hokusai, Fuji was a sacred site in Japan—a place of pilgrimage and deep spiritual resonance. According to art historian Richard Lane, the idea of diverse views of Fuji as an artistic subject goes back to the sixteenth century, when an anonymous Zen monk composed a series of verses called "Eight Views of Fuji." The idea was then picked up by the classical painter Kano Tanyu, which was probably part of Hokusai's inspiration (Lane 188). In the 19th century, Hokusai took it on in a radical way—producing

dozens of images of the mountain and drawing attention to paradoxes between permanence and impermanence. While Hokusai started with thirty-six views of Fuji, his final project actually contained forty-six. After the completion of his first set in 1833, he then continued with a black and white sequel edition entitled, *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*. Hokusai's views of Fuji were a part of his larger commitment to artistic creation as a diurnal practice and life-commitment. Beyond Fuji and over the course of his life, Hokusai painted "well over thirty-thousand designs, an average of at least one work for every day of his long artistic life" (Lane 276). As his abundant production suggests, Hokusai was an artist of boundless creativity, devoted to producing images that suggest endless ways of seeing.

But it is Fuji for which Hokusai remains internationally famous; these days, posters of the "Great Wave" and "Red Fuji" are commonly found on the walls of college student dorms. In borrowing his project's title for her memoir of her time teaching English in Japan, Cathy Davidson explains of Hokusai how "for all his exuberant zest for life, Hokusai was a holy man. In old age, he returned repeatedly to the subject of Mount Fuji, seeking to communicate something of what the mountain represents in symbolic or metaphysical terms" (Davidson 2). Whether or not he was a holy man, as an artist, Hokusai's real genius emerges from his sense of framing; his positioning of Fuji in his prints is endlessly provoking in its creativity. In the forty-six wood-block prints, our perspective of Fuji is perpetually shifting. In certain views, there are people or animals juxtaposed with Fuji, while in others the perspective is offered from on the mountain itself. As Hokusai sensed, the views of Fuji are ultimately infinite. As a symbol of "eternity and immutability," Hokusai's "poetic meditation on the mountain is connected with a spiritual quest" (Bouquillard 9). And as a paradoxical representation of the relation between change and constancy, Hokusai's views of Fuji offer a poetic meditation of ecological significance. To look up at a constant mountain each day and to witness the way it relates to both its surrounding landscape and the viewer's position offers an exercise of meditative awareness. And to this day, on the train that runs between Tokyo and Kyoto, people regularly request window seats on the right side of the train to catch a view of the mountain; whether or not they actually see it, they are still practicing a form of seeing that is reminiscent of Hokusai's views. Hokusai's resonance is also traced outside of Japan, as the European impressionists became interested in "varying and reinterpreting a single subject"—framing that subject "beneath changing skies and from varying angles, to capture and reconstitute the impression of a fleeting moment" (Bouquillard 8). We need only to think of Claude Monet's haystacks and Cezanne's Mount St-Victoire to observe Hokusai's influence, as these artists also dedicated their vision to shifting perspective of a single subject.

Hokusai's interest in the shifting presence of Fuji is indicative of a meditative perspective that was shared by other Japanese artists. Basho in particular recognized the power and challenge of representing the mountain:

Here, before my eyes, Mount Fuji stands steeply above the earth, towering into the vast sky. As if the mountain is opening its cloud gates to welcome the sun and the moon, wherever I turn, I see its magnificent face, and its beautiful appearances change in myriad ways. [Facing Fuji,] poets could not produce a fitting verse, talented writers would be out of words, and artists could only put down their painting brushes. People say that there is a Holy Man living on faraway Gushe Mountain. I wonder if he could compose a poem or draw a

picture of Mount Fuji.

Amid cloudy mists,
in a second its view has changed
one hundred times. (quoted in Kerkham 70)

In this passage, Basho draws attention to the “myriad ways” of facing Fuji and the according representational challenge for both visual and verbal artists. And although Basho exhibits great humility in recognizing the ultimate impossibility of representing Fuji due to “cloudy mists” that are continually concealing and revealing the mountain, he did write a handful of haiku on Fuji. In one of his more famous haiku, he writes:

Misty rain,
can't see Fuji
--interesting! (Hass 14)

This poem has long been subject of critical debate. Why is not seeing Fuji interesting? In Basho's 17th Century Japan, missing an opportunity to see Fuji would have been disappointing, a lost opportunity to witness a sacred presence. Robert Aitken reads the poem as offering a subtle moralistic teaching in line with Zen philosophy, in that “the purpose of Zen is the perfection of character, and one fault of character, and one fault of character is the tendency to hold fixed expectations....Here we are in Shizuoka Prefecture—I expect to see Mount Fuji” (47). As Aitken offers, Basho's subtle observation suggests that attachment to expectation hinders full acceptance of what exists in the moment of perception. Not seeing Fuji is just as interesting as seeing Fuji, as it offers another means of becoming aware of expectations and perceptions. In another haiku, Basho offers reverence for the mountain as it is concealed and revealed:

Chilling autumn rains
curtain Mount Fuji, then make it
more beautiful to see (Hamill 27)

Basho's genius lies in his acceptance of perception at the moment of composition. As he writes, “when we observe calmly, we discover that all things have their fulfillment” (Hass 237). In this haiku, the cold rains that might obscure the mountain also lend to its beauty in more than one mode of perception, as both curtain and natural effect. Once again, what matters is the fresh impression of what presents itself, grounded in the acknowledgement that “the basis of art is change in the universe” (Hass 233). In relation, the condensed form of the haiku offers a productive ground to frame movement as it manifests through a single perception. As W.S. Merwin explains, Basho's haiku might be thought of as “no-time manifesting in time”:

Not static, as the unsympathetic Western reader might suppose. But dynamic in the manner of a single frame of thought—an instant that is unique, indivisible, and therefore whole. The flash itself, immeasurable in any time whatever: no-time manifesting in time. So the moment of the haiku could be said not to move but to be, totally, movement: that movement which, because it is not relative, is inseparable from stillness (Aitken xiv).

As expression of movement itself, haiku composition presents an instance of temporal paradox, balancing stillness and motion. Perhaps the greatest benefit of a meditative perspective in artistic composition concerns the ways in which a beginner's mind, or an acceptance of what is at the moment, can yield endless creativity. As Zen master Shunryu Suzuki writes, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few." I had quoted Matisse as an epigraph to this chapter because he serves as an example of a Western artist who explicitly advocated a beginner's mind. Deeply influenced by Cezanne (who in turn was influenced by Hokusai), Matisse was also an articulate writer, highly interested in the work of meditation in relation to artistic creation. Over and over again in his writings, Matisse emphasizes the importance of cultivating a fresh impression. As he writes, "The effort needed to see things without distortion demands a kind of courage; and this courage is essential to the artist, who has to look at everything as though he were seeing it for the first time" (Flam 218). In another essay he explains how, "I think that nothing is more difficult for a true painter than to paint a rose, since before he can do so, he has first to forget all the roses that were ever painted" (Flam 218). As Matisse recognizes, "to see without distortion" is a type of meditative work, which is practiced by ceaseless observation. And perhaps the best way to embody this method is to recognize it is more practice than method—more daily commitment than theoretical position. In explaining his artistic process, Matisse also wrote that his "only method was work and observation. I work all the time: weekdays and Sundays, Christmas and New Year's day. But can you call that a method? I see too many things to be able to commit myself to just one" (Flam 102). Through consistent devotion to work and observation, Matisse's creative process might be thought of as having a meditative quality. And whether or not he sat in silence practicing sitting meditation, Matisse possessed a meditative awareness derived from his practice.

To witness a similar poetic play with perspective in American poetry, we can turn to Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," although in switching the medium from painting to poetry, the emphasis on pure image is elided in favor of shifting rhetorical perspectives. More than a series of poetic images, the arrangement of stanzas in this poem asks us to exercise different perceptual modes. Stevens also experimented with such scale and perspective shifting through verbal mediums in other poems, such as "Six Significant Landscapes" and "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," where the arrangement on the page through roman numerals indicates a shifting perception of the same theme.

Connections between Wallace Stevens and meditation have been made before. In particular, in his book, *A Mind of Winter*, Bevis argues that Wallace Stevens' "asceticism is meditative," exemplified in poems like "The Snow Man" (Bevis 4). As Bevis explains, "Meditation, as I use the term, is a state of consciousness—that is, an experience—and not inherently an idea of any other linguistic, aesthetic, philosophical, or religious proposition.... And since the meditative state of consciousness is itself aconceptual, it has problematic relation to any of theories with which we must interpret and value it" (Bevis 4). As Bevis notes, the

“aconceptual” reality of meditation inhibits our theoretical access to it. But Bevis does not focus on poems like “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” in arguing that Stevens is meditative. Rather, he positions Stevens’ meditative impulse against his imaginative seeing—arguing that the “impersonality” of Stevens’ work is what qualifies him as meditative. But instead of trying to theorize an aconceptual and radically subjective experience, this dissertation has sought to discuss diverse literary practices that might facilitate such experience. It is my contention that meditation is more productively theorized through thinking of it as a practice. As poet and yoga practitioner Stanley Plumly aptly writes, “The claims of yoga, nevertheless, are only as good as its practice, regardless of any high-minded rhetoric surrounding its teaching” (Plumly 62).

In my own personal experience studying with various yoga and meditation teachers, I have heard meditation defined in terms of the following vocabulary: concentration, focus, emptiness, absorption, flow, mindfulness, presence, creativity, and awareness. In Pantajali’s *Yoga Sutras*, meditation is more specifically qualified in terms of different stages. You cannot reach the final stage—*samadhi*—without working through the contingent seven other “limbs” of yogic practice, which involve physical and mental disciplines, breath control, and bodily health—in addition to the inner quiet and concentration we usually associate with meditation. Throughout this dissertation I have tried to move away from our critical emphasis on poetry as meditation in favor of the poet as actively meditating. And as various chapters have suggested, meditation need not be limited to impersonality or asceticism, but can also be thought of in relation to daily practice, breath-consciousness, gardening, shaping living metaphors, keeping a notebook, writing a letter, nurturing intimate relations, and widening perspective by whatever means possible. It is these practices that sustain the infinite awareness that ecological thinking demands. For these reasons, I find Stevens exemplifies a meditative awareness in his practice of perspectivism just as much as in his inner impersonal quiet. In addition to seeking representations of meditative states, we might also draw our attentions to examples of meditative practice. As Stevens wrote, “Poetry has to be something more than a conception of the mind. It has to be a revelation of nature. Conceptions are artificial. Perceptions are endless” (Stevens 904). The same could be said for meditation. And although Stevens explicitly framed perspectivism as part of the formal method of his poem, Dickinson shared a similar, though less self-consciously arranged, awareness. The uncanny and reliable presence of birds scatter throughout her lexicon. To demonstrate the ways Dickinson exemplified a linguistic perspectivism without formally framing it, consider the following arrangement of thirteen excerpts from her poems—“Thirteen Ways of Writing a Bird” by Emily Dickinson:

i.

A Bird, came down the Walk—
He did not know I saw—
He bit an Angle Worm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw (359)

ii.

In my Garden, rides a Bird

Opon a single Wheel—
Whose spokes a dizzy music make
As 'twere a travelling Mill— (370)

iii.

The saddest noise, the sweetest noise,
The maddest noise that grows,—
The birds, they make it in the spring,
At night's delicious close (1789)

iv.

On my volcano grows the Grass
A meditative spot—
An acre for a Bird to choose
Would be the general thought— (1743)

v.

The Bird her punctual music brings
And lays it in it's place—
It's place is in the Human Heart
And in the Heavenly Grace— (1556)

vi.

A Wind that rose though not a Leaf
In any Forest stirred—
But with itself did cold commune
Beyond the realm of Bird. (1216)

vii.

At Half past Three
A Single Bird
Unto a silent sky
Propounded but a single term
Of cautious Melody. (1099)

viii.

If Bird the silence contradict
Or flower presume to show
In that low summer of the West
Impossible to know— (1741)

ix.

Why Birds, a summer morning
Should stab my ravished Spirit
With Dirks of Melody
Is part of an inquiry
That will receive reply
When Flesh and Spirit sunder
In Death's immediately— (1450)

x.

The Sun went down—no Man looked on—
The Earth and I and One
A nameless Bird—a Stranger
Were Witness for the Crown— (1109)

xi.

Out of sight? What of that?
See the Bird—reach it!
Curve by Curve—Sweep by Sweep—
Round the Steep Air—
Danger! What is that to Her?
Better 'tis to fail—there—
Than debate—here— (733)

xii.

The “Bird within the Hand”
Superior to the one
The “Bush” may yield me
Or may not—
Too late to choose again. (1021)

xiii.

Further in summer than the Birds—
Pathetic from the Grass—
A minor Nation celebrates
It's unobtrusive Mass. (895)

As I have suggested throughout this dissertation, there is a sense that each time Dickinson uses a word, she redefines it in terms of syntax and context. I chose these excerpts here because, as

Dickinson's bird flies in and out the frame, it crosses with other terms of dense metaphoricity. In the case of these thirteen views, the bird crosses with the stranger, the heart, the field, the garden, the winter, and the self-reflexive space of the lexicon. In a sense, this arrangement of excerpts is indicative of the ways in which Dickinson is ecological—in that her poetic project offers her readers a series of syntactical views of different words and experiences. But here, I leave it up to my reader to as an exercise in eco-poetic thinking to explore the relations—and to consider at least a dozen views of a word and see what they teach us about *logos* as relation.

In the material manuscript of this dissertation, I have included photographs to accompany each chapter. These images, in my mind, offer a visual correspondence to the intellectual reach of each chapter. In “February” I discussed how, at the edge of metaphor, we might emerge into pure image—and that pure image has the possibility to harbor the full reach of living metaphor, without needing to make the connection explicit. Rather, images, although carefully framed, present themselves and ask the one receiving them to fill in the second term, generating a profound intimacy between writer and reader. This is part of the reason why, in this final chapter, I turned to visual artists to locate analogous examples of meditative processes in artistic creation.

In extending my emphasis on *praxis* further, what follows is two literary experiments. The first experiment offers twelve views of the dissertation, removing their attachment to the months of the year, in favor of offering a dozen portraits of the image at the heart of each chapter. My full awareness of these precise words emerged only toward the end of my writing, and if I continue revising this chapter, I would like to further experiment with my intellectual and emotional associations with each of these terms. The second literary experiment emerges from a project I started in late February of 2012, where I committed to writing a haiku each day for one year, in order to more intimately familiarize myself with the form. Because I was finding increasing interest in the meditative component of the haiku tradition, I decided to dive in and explore the form's parameters. And because my own personal yogic meditation practice is driven by allegiance to daily discipline, I have emphasized those qualities here. More than any idealized state or representation of what meditation or haiku-writing might be, I find it important to understand it as a daily practice, which through time reveals itself in myriad ways. In terms of the haiku, more than any other guidance, I continue to try and stay close to Basho's words—that “when you are composing a verse, let there not be a hair's breadth separating your mind from what you write. Quickly say what is in your mind; never hesitate a moment” (Hass 234). My haiku are often more aphoristic than imagistic—and they do not always follow the traditional guideline of referencing the time of year. The gradual process of becoming aware of the seventeen syllable arrangement has, perhaps most importantly, created a space for me to continue thinking through the rich relationship between metaphor and image, not to mention the world of poetic form. It is my hope that these literary experiments, as well as the photographs, will offer my reader additional views of eco-poetics. Because eco-poetics has to do with creative scale elongations, the work concerns a life-commitment—and such commitments are only fulfilled on a diurnal basis. Such projects necessarily ask for humility and imagination. Hokusai famously explained his own sense of the artistic practice as life-project in the following words:

From the age of six I had a penchant for copying the forms of things, and from about fifty my pictures were frequently published. Until the age of seventy, nothing I drew was worthy of notice. At seventy-three years, I was somehow able to fathom the growth of plants and trees, and the structure

of birds, animals, insects and fish. Thus when I reach eighty years, I hope to have made increasing progress, and at ninety to see further into the underlying principles of things, so that at one hundred years I will have achieved a divine state in my art, and at one hundred and ten, every dot and every stroke will be as though alive (qtd. in Machotka 213).

The scale of Hokusai's commitment is indicative of the perspectivism that he generated as an artist. Zen Master Dogen wrote that "To study the Way is to study the self, to study the self is to forget the self, to study the self is to awaken to the ten thousand things" (qtd. in Hirshfield, *Nine Gates*, 140). The "ten thousand things" is a common expression in Buddhist and Taoist writings and refers to the infinite plenitude of what the world presents. To write a haiku a day for ten thousand days would take roughly 27 years. As mentioned in "September," Ko Un finally let *Ten Thousand Lives* go with about 4000 poems—a process that took him between 25 and 30 years from conception to completion. Perhaps, somewhere in his mind, he was able to undertake the scale of his project by making it a daily practice—to write 10,000 poems at the pace of one each day would take between 25 and 30 years. Similarly, if I continued writing a haiku each day for the next 30 years, I might be able to more confidently speak of the meditative work of the genre. For now, all I can do is offer, in Basho's words once again, "mere scraps of paper" from the "writing desk"—what haiku finally are, after the absorption at the instant of composition. As the work of Hokusai, Basho, Matisse, Stevens, Dickinson, and Thoreau shows us, there is always a fresh impression—there "is no end to the essence." And so, the ecocritic's calendar turns another page. The eco-poetic project never ends.

the calendar

The frame the boundary the project the edge. The project projects beyond the edge because time keeps moving. We need not understand time to sense this. We know it without needing to say. We know our lives are years are seasons are months are weeks are days are moments. Days follow days like words follow words. But should the line break? Where to punctuate? Where to pick up the pen and to let the ink stream across the page? Where to stop? We live in the boxes and the space of each day. The space of each moment. The pages keep turning, months slide into months, years exhale in years. Meditation concerns elongation. From Paumanok, where I was born, leaves of grass streaming through my blood. This season and this climate. This city and its citizens. Whitman was never finished. Whitman was always singing. Whitman I hear you singing. Dickinson—I hear you breathing. Thoreau, I see you minding the field, turning and troping until the page turns once more. The calendar brings us back to the day. Each day. To this day. Right now.

the notebook

The gift of prolificacy. The space of therapy. Endless afternoons and journeys to the interior. To be young and uncertain and on a train alone in a foreign land, but to have a notebook. With a notebook one is safe in expression and uncertainty. With a notebook, one might practice. One might make writing a daily practice. This is the first work. This is the only work. Live it and let it anchor your body to your mind each day. Let it let you come from the heart. Write each morning. Write each evening. Write to work through. Write to work with. Write the play of the preposition. Write to practice. Write as your refuge. Write in your notebook, morning by morning and season by season. Write without caring if the work will live beyond you. Write without attachment. Write knowing it matters not if the notebook is burned. Write because you can. Write for the pleasure of ink and letters and cursive and swirls. Write at your desk. Write the shape of the sunlight on the page. Write to see the self and the season. Write to see the self in the season. Write in the notebook. Write in this notebook. Know this is your masterpiece.

the stranger

Everything worth knowing can't be known. But how to say this? And what does it do? O thank you dear Emily—dear haunted houses and deep wells. Emily of infinity, poetess of the ocean. Emily so uncanny. Emily of ecology and not nature. You speak the inner wisdom: The more we know the less we know. But what does this feel like? And what does it mean? Dear Dickinson, it's you who are strange. You who are so strange and so brilliant—you make me feel safe in not-knowing. So strange and so close—so infinite indeed. I watch the robins out the window—their mechanical motions. Snapping worms in half and darting back. Dear Emily, I think of you watching them and wondering about difference—internal and unknowable. Dear Emily, what would it be look to look you in the eyes? Your wide eyes. Your elephant eyes.

the winter

It will be a difficult winter, but then spring will come. When someone we love leaves, we return to the foreign land where we were born. We know this. We know this is real. The words become simple, often one syllable. Words like heartbreak, death, loss, grief. They blanket the landscape. We keen, we cry, we mourn. The colorless land of lamentation. No project is complete without it. No life is real without it. And so, we learn how to breathe. We learn how to let go. We relinquish illusion. We find our heart's perfect analogy in the cold. We come in and sleep deep. We remember spring. We remember the summer in our hearts. We have faith in its coming. But the body makes its own heat, if you keep moving and go walking. The deeper the suffering, the deeper the breath, the more necessary the stride. Only loss is certain. Suffering and letting go. We walk through winter and survive.

the field

Meditating on the field. Meditating in the field. Meditating on anything wide that prepares us. Shoveling dirt. Making it work that works. Inhale and plunge, exhale and lift. Those who work the earth—with and on and through—by and for and because of. What is your field—the one that lies deep in your heart? I see the field of my childhood—my grandfather's small plot of string beans in Levittown. He gives me a brown paper bag—he says to go and pick beans in the bean field. I see another field in the Piemonte. We squat for hours, crates of green beans and beans the color of butter. And just yesterday, we picked a plot of earth with sun on all sides. Beyond the weeds I see our summer happiness and our autumn harvest. But first time to turn in. Inhale and plunge. Exhale and lift. Time for steady work. Time for time in the field. Time for time at the ocean. Another field. An opening and expanse. A place for what spring promises.

the garden

The thing about the garden is that once you start thinking it you can't unthink it and why would you want to? And if we have the bean field, then we have the delicacy of care. A field of beans is not always a bonsai tree or an orchid, a rose garden, or perennials on the edge of your climate. The garden is a place to allow hearts to open. Care, love, sustenance—the forces of life and acceptance. Gardening teaches us to love and to care and to work. It is also the most fluid pedagogical metaphor; it appears in guidance for meditation practice, for healthy relationships, for ecological sustainability and for education. It is also a place to cultivate the self—the *hortus conclusus*—the center of soul. A space for desire—archetypal, eternal. Paradise is on the side of a hill, near the sea, in Southern Italy. Terraced with lemons and thick with plums. It's not that hard to find, but easier when taken by the hand of someone who knows the way. Gardens are endless. Gardens know only growth, decay, and more growth. Gardens are endless and gardens do not fail. Even when they fail.

the heart

This is the one on flowers and yoga. On blossoms and breaking open. This one does not deny depth and resilience. This is the one that celebrates beauty and senses how each moment we begin again. The space where we can use the word unabashedly and with conviction. The space for warriors with warrior hearts. What matters most and what never stops. In their breaking they become more capable. This is the place for tears and opening. This is the word *vulnerability*. For the center—the yoking. The heart is a flower, a lotus flower. The heart is any flower that opens—and closes. This is the one that matters most. The one of words like grace, vitality, love. In Japanese *kokoro*. In Italian *cuore*. The core, the center, the strength. This is the one I take away. The work here is to not be ashamed of this word. Rather, to start from it. This is the only one.

the lexicon

I owe my dissertation to Emily Dickinson's lexicon and the Emily Dickinson Lexicon. She too loved lexicons—Shakespeare's in particular. A lexicon is a catalogue of words, and for a poet, the words shape the landscape of thought. In spending time with a poet's lexicon, we enter her enormous intelligence. We enter the kingdom of her heart—and touch the boundaries that show us how wide her desire reaches and how deep her soul resounds. If we believe in words and see how they tremor in infinite relation as we touch them, then we might dance in a lexicon. Any writer's first allegiance is to language. She sees how what is real balances with the range and precision of language. Dickinson, as poet of definition, spent her life in the reaches of figuration. A poet of internal difference—a soul aware of her breath—her poems were born from her sense of spirit. She gave her life to her craft and it is our fortune to be able to widen our sense of the English language through the arrangements she left behind. There are no footnotes in true poetry. Only bowing down to grace. Dear Emily of cordial caterpillars, constant Carlo, and Caspian choirs. Dear Dickinson—abashed—abated—abbreviated. You are my boundless baccalaureate—and I, your bagatelle biographer. Thank you dear Emily for your lexicon—thank you for the faith in a new figuration.

the letter

Dear Reader,

I write letters because they make me feel like I'm not alone. I write them when I am alone and it is a way of not being alone. This time I spend writing to you is time I spend with you. Your presence in my life entices me to open mine. I write letters because they also allow me to thank you—for reading with a curious heart. Letters offer a venue to speak openly, with directness and candor. I write letters because I love opening the mailbox. Letters, if they come from the heart, might learn how to sing. Letters are your subjectivity meeting mine. They are risk and comfort. Given more time and another draft I might find a way of making these words more precise. But

for now, please know I believe in ecology and meditation and letters. I love them because they end with another word that means so much—sincerity.

*Sincerely,
jlc*

the breath

To keep going even when it feels as though we can't. There is no image for the breath—only going inward and release. There are no words for the breath. There is only gratitude. Only awareness. Only this: breathing in—*here*—breathing out—*now*. Close your eyes dear reader. Turn your attention to your breath. Inhale *I am*. Exhale *free*. The spirit, the life force, the soul. Only you can know this. Only you know what these words mean. Only you can control, release, surrender. Only you can allow your breath to guide you and calm you. Only the breath can let you go deeper—go wider. Inhale *here*. Exhale *now*.

the song

In Calabria there is the heavy scent of orange blossom. It feels like the language feels to me. Familiar. Familiar enough for this to be a type of home. Part of me always wants to be in Italy, though what I found there I brought back: the kitchen garden and the dinner table. Morning coffee with *biscotti*. A pear and a carving knife. A piece of *orte* for daily greens and a *passeggiatta* after dinner. Every journey to Italy is a journey to fruit. The fruit is nothing without the feeling of day's work—and often better when there is laughter and shade from the sun. Even better when there are wildflowers and dragonflies. At night, I dream of orange blossoms. I dream of the Sabine farm. We pick tomatoes and make sauce. We cut basil and make pesto. We cut grapes and make wine. This is the daily rhythm that pulls me. In gratitude and praise. In song and celebration. This middle way does not deny these steady pleasures. When I read Horace, something is sanctified. I don't have the right words—but I do have some images. A wheelbarrow and a sloping field. Chicory and mallow. Shade from the little olive tree. Horace teaches how we don't need Italy. We need not worry about tomorrow. We need acceptance, gratitude, and song. Horace shows us how this life is the only life. This life is the good life. This life is the one worth living. This life is the song.

the blackbird

We were camped in view of Fuji for days before catching a glimpse of her—the clouds heavy and streaming—edges slipping in and out of view. But finally, she was revealed to us. Her shadow on the cabbage field at five in the morning—light in august and the grace of the rising sun. And then the next day we climbed to the top and saw her another way—her shadow on the earth—our shadows on the crater. That week I was supposed to be presenting at the Emily Dickinson Society conference in Oxford, but because I had fallen in love, I had followed my lover to Fuji, where I fell in love again—with him and this place so far. By Fuji I felt close to Dickinson—to eternity and infinity—to weariness and readiness and risk beyond the edge of my

imagining. Here was intimacy. Here was the broken heart opened to the summer sun. Here was getting over by going through. We hiked to the top of a sacred volcano and saw the sun set behind her—her massive shadow extending beyond the horizon. And then the next day, as I sat watching the mountain with morning coffee, I understood Hokusai in another way. There were an infinite amount of views of this mountain—of the stillness and steadiness of a mountain. It is a perfect paradox in which to breathe. In Stevens the blackbird keeps moving. In Hokusai, the world keeps moving while Fuji stays still. It's the same lesson: infinite relation. Sometimes we're the blackbird and sometimes we watch her flying. And each time we witness the motion of a blackbird—each time we look toward Fuji and perceive a different frame—we are living our ecology. This is the eco poet's practice, and whether the medium is words or paint, such seeing never ceases. Ecology has to do with diversity and multiplicity. It has to do with negative capability and compassion. Ecology has to do with imagination and empathy. Ecology has to do with rapture—with creativity—with comfort in more than one view.

(the calendar)

A haiku a day:
cure for the solitary
scholar's winter blues.

The wild writer
found a form that made the work
like washing dishes.

These seventeen sounds
save me each evening from this
lingering winter.

Snow boots and rain coats,
the two ladies keep walking;
they don't miss a day.

If you love it, it
shouldn't be hard to defend,
write, need defending.

The haiku project
is hardest in spring—this mad
color—silencing.

Ten chapters released
save beginning and the end
she's still holding on.

His iphone reminds
him to keep busy—filling
in all those boxes.

The poet-critic
writes the days of the week
all days of the week.

Certain heaviness
with these final pages—
years with this project.

A Lit PhD:
First you read, then think and mourn—
then you write and write.

Long steady road since
'Intro to Shakespeare'—freshman
in love with feeling.

(the notebook)

The open notebook
the wine—the kitchen table:
Not a masterpiece.

Not a diary
since leap year when it became
a haiku notebook.

First day of spring
Basho thinks of autumn's end—
I think of summer

A writer on a train
watching spring begin, wonders
If she's a poet.

After an hour
with the notebook—she smiles, feels
a little lighter.

Now she doesn't run
to the notebook—now that its
the diurnal round.

The lucky project
finds a form—just as the days
reach and elongate.

Streamed with pink ink and
Two feet high off the floor—the
proud pile of drafts.

Though she abandons
narrative, she still needs the
notebook to shape self.

Haiku fit so well
in evenings, in margins, in

calendar boxes.

The desire of
the critic to write of plums—
to be a poet.

So many pages:
lists, loves, tears—dear notebooks:
sixty-five volumes.

(the stranger)

The robin's sharp eye
darts to the dirt, the worm,
to us, to nowhere.

A thousand blackbirds
swarming and searching—no wind
Sky of one color.

Though its been many
years, he's still a mystery—
lovely, lost to me.

Crocus heads retreat
even baby ones seem scared
two days with no sun.

Many funerals
these days—cancer, accidents.
Fear is also strange.

The cardinal's eyes
like a raccoon's—two circles
ringing, in bright day.

Is it me? Is it
you? Who am I? What are you?
The strange strange stranger.

How figural! The
bumblebee—until she stings:
itching leg for days.

May can't decide

to be the beauty she is—
or hide: weeks of clouds.

He's driving, smiling.
She feels heaviness and hopeless:
A relationship.

One unknown to the
family—Dear Emily,
I too—understand.

Lilac in April
Haiku swallowed—the season,
this dissertation.

(the winter)

She sobs into night
the woman who tries so hard:
a day without poems.

How it breaks my heart
to hear her breathing struggle—
my mom too gets old.

Longest day so far
winter wind storming to spring
the sun still shining.

Though she can stand on
her hands—she still feels like a
seed—barely past frost.

The listless writer
waits for afternoon sun to
flood her studio.

Coming from the North
the fierce wind battles the shore
makes space between us.

Winter wind is back
just in time to remind buds
they opened too soon.

People are worried

with this strange weather, though spring
flowers always fall.

Winter haikus—so
hard to write! Save when the world
is hushed snowy white.

Closing in—the end—
last words to be a haiku
of a long winter.

Through eyes of the sick
the daffodils are fading:
spring too can be cruel.

The old ones count their
years in winters—it's not a
year without winter.

(the field)

As seedlings break through
the metaphors are springing
from earth, from image.

Words like bright marbles.
Metaphor is always here
even when it's not.

After the rain storm
the baby lettuces shine—
seem doubled in size.

The writer's hands look
like the farmer's—stained, calloused,
a day in the field.

Oceans as far as
one can see—as wide as self;
apt analogy.

Dinner on the table
waiting for him to return:
his day in the field.

On the first of May
they stake their plot—dreaming of
summer tomatoes.

The blank page offers
space for sutras and seeds—beds
for letters and love.

Yellow beaks, white ducks
blue kiddy pools, red barn—paint
the field of dark mud.

So eager pulling
those weeds until the sting—that
field belongs to bees.

My field? Poetry,
ecology, the present:
all things infinite.

An old English word,
In opposition to the
wood: flat and wide earth.

(the garden)

The kale being thinned
is delighted in new space
planted in moonlight.

The shell falls away
metaphor crosses itself
warm light, enlightened.

On his hands and knees
saving sweet baby lettuce
bathed in full moonlight.

A banana peel
no more a banana peel:
rather, this compost.

Rock on top of rock
placed and secured—he's shaping
the Buddha's shrine.

The garden readies
to double—finally—spring
rain in this spring draught.

Though happy here
Paradise exists up there—
Italia—Ravello.

In Calabria
the roses—heavy and full
today—one year since.

To honor their love
he arranges rocks, plants sedge rows
shapes this earth she loves.

The Buddha statue
watches baby lettuces
watching leaves emerge.

In guarding these plants
he guards his home, family
village and island.

The garden with its
defeats and bumble bees—still
perfect metaphor.

(the heart)

Daffodils parade.
The scholar sheds her schooling
Opens her heart, sings.

Next to sun and moon
so close, till death do them part:
Mars and Venus shine.

To be a poet
of Paumanok—just walk, then
love this broken shore.

Wear the bee necklace
because of essence—Dear Miss

buzzing Emily.

Really, all letters
are love letters—you can't talk
of love without heart.

Think how it never
stops pumping—the resilient
core—the human heart.

He comes home with red
chard for his lover's garden:
she loves bright color.

The teacher said, "Do
the 19th century, you
can speak of the soul"

The woman with the
transplanted heart gives birth while
twenty doctors watch.

To dissertate—or
to speak from the heart? Or, to
argue for the heart?

Scarlet begonias
circle the stone shrine—she plants
Buddha a red scarf.

The last bleeding heart
petal has fallen, its tears
now nurture the earth.

(the lexicon)

A dissertation?
Discourse? A garden? A school?
This swift lexicon?

You can deconstruct
so then you can reconstruct
how deconstructive!

Etymology:
the true sense and the essence

beyond history.

The *logos* of my
oikos is flush with flowers
spring, summer, and song.

Quotation marks—or
italics. Self-reflexive
dictionary.

Why do they call these
patient pastel shade-loving
flowers impatient?

Wallace Stevens' words:
Imagination, cockatoo
poem, reality.

Do the PhD
to learn the forms and words—then
plant the seeds in verse.

Three more notebooks. Three
strangers. Two winters. Eight fields.
Three hearts and five songs.

Even here there is
language—pure expression:
yoga asana.

A rose, an estate
estate is the summer—
bees of Sicily.

Let my history
be letters, words, silence—pure
etymology.

(the letter)

Dear dear Emily
I love you because of March
and uncertainty.

*Dear My Committee,
I hope you don't mind these—they
are my therapy.*

*Dear dear mom and dad
thank you so—one thousand times
you give me strength, breath.*

*Dear Henry David
you've carried me through years—through
the bean field at dawn.*

*Dear Wild Walt: Though
you left, did you ever leave
our home—Huntington?*

*Emily, after
I finish this essay, I'll
take you to the beach.*

*Dear bell hooks—you turn
the cold ivory tower
into a garden.*

*Dear Vincent Van Gogh
Irises, Almond branches—
pulsing sunflowers.*

*Dear Prof Tim Morton:
You get there first. I get there
later—purple ink.*

*Dear Jane—thank you for
your world of words—planted in
the field of the heart.*

*Dear Walt—you had a
pony. I have a Honda.
We both get around.*

*Dear RPH—your
words guide me: Not in nature
but in relation.*

(the breath)

Stretching the muscles
is easier today—spring lungs
taking, making, more.

Make time for sitting
quiet—ten minutes each day:
what all teachers say.

After morning class
with the beloved teacher
it's spring, all smiles.

Bliss is but bliss—
Thank you Em for the lines
And breath is but breath.

The margins and dashes
Between words, letting them be—
nothing without breath.

Dickinson inhales
draws deep-then pauses and holds
what Whitman exhales.

Breadth: a measure of
width—so, a soul's breadth exhales
in infinity.

As the ladies breathe
longer, deeper, their bodies
melt into the earth.

Moving from mourning
to meditation; morning
breathing, letting go.

The stomach fills first
then chest up to clavicle.
Then let it all go.

She sits quietly
this morning—breathing morning
cherry blossoms breath.

There is no image
for the breath—only lilac
filling memory.

(the song)

Escarole and beans
parmesan cheese, your lover
twinkle, candlelight.

Patsy Cline singing
while Magnolia petals
snow the blessed earth.

These five syllables
are enough space for summer's
fruit—her fullest song.

Cracks of salt glimmer
in olive oil—candles keep
March lions at bay.

Singing is far more
natural when the sun shines—
when May sheds her clouds.

A rainbow in praise
of the soul—the sound of the
bold harmonium.

Waiting in the fridge
to toast the last draft—bottle
of chilled *prosecco*.

Supercalifra
gilisticxpiali
docious. Atrocious!

Fruit not forbidden!
At the Ciao Bella Café

strawberries are song.

Watching evening light
fall on your smiling lover—
now—here—this—heaven.

The work never ends
Do a good day's worth—then cease
relax and give thanks.

The happy voices
of children in the park—and
birds in the new leaves.

(the blackbird)

Haiku teaches those
who think too much to be brief:
the world turns bud green.

Fuji is an image
changing—then—unchanging—so
deep within my heart.

The happy crow is
splashing away—way too big
for that small bird bath.

The present slips once
more—light bestows another
matchless impression.

Two deer sit under
the tree, on top of a sea
of cherry blossoms.

Color over form
fuchsia is all I see—this
ancient azalea.

Matisse says *work*—
color, expression, and prayer.
Matisse says *springtime*.

That steady blackbird

just circumnavigated
the ancient mountain.

Are red and yellow
the pure, real thing? Are they just
light—or metaphor?

The wise ones speak of
the thousand ways to God—while
not selling you theirs.

Clouds veiling Fuji
Unveiling—blackbird appears
disappears, appears.

He draws the mountain
each day for thirty long years
he loves the mountain.

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Appendix

The following figures are photographs were taken with a 35mm camera. In the material manuscript of the dissertation, the photographs were fixed to different colored paper and served to introduce their corresponding chapters. As I explain in “August,” these images offer a visual correspondence to the intellectual reach of each chapter. Although the texture and color is somewhat lost in this format, they might still be thought of as providing yet another view of ecopoetics.

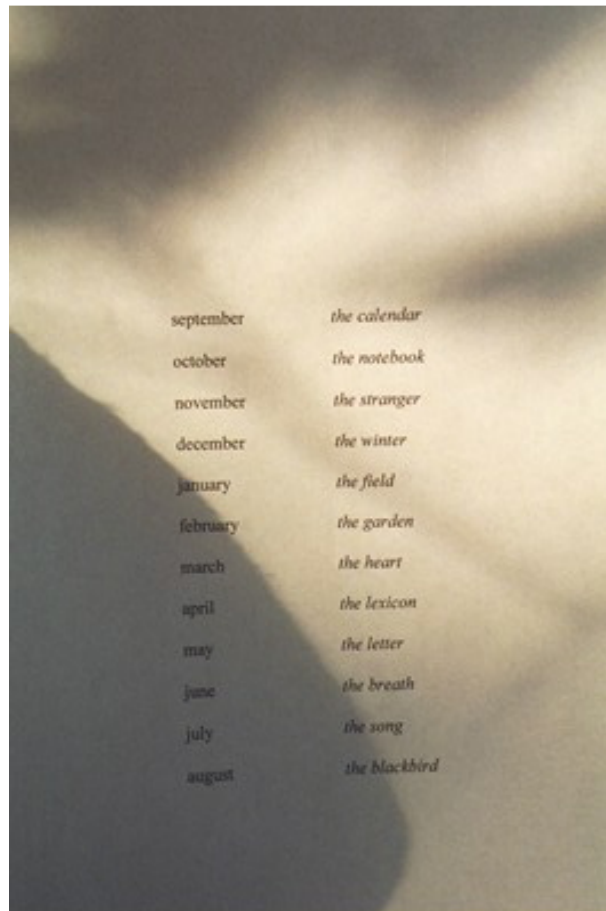


Figure 1. “contents”



Figure 2. “the calendar”



Figure 3. “the notebook”



Figure 4. “the stranger”



Figure 5. “the winter”



Figure 6. “the field”



Figure 7. “the garden”



Figure 8. “the heart”



Figure 9. “the lexicon”



Figure 10. “the letter”



Figure 11. “the breath”



Figure 12. “the song”



Figure 13. “the blackbird”