

**From Ecocriticism to Ecohumanities: An Essay-Review of  
Mark Dickinson and Clare Goulet (eds), *Lyric Ecology: 25  
Meditations on the work of Jan Zwicky* (Toronto: Cormorant Books,  
2010)<sup>1</sup>**

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Jan Zwicky is a poet, philosopher and musician, one of a small but culturally influential group of Canadian writers, including Robert Bringhurst, Tim Lilburn, Don McKay, Dennis Lee and Sean Kane, whose work could reasonably be described as ecopoetic.<sup>2</sup> I think it is fair to say that the single most significant work to issue from this group so far is Bringhurst's masterful translations and commentaries in his three-volume *Masterworks of the Classical Haida Mythtellers*, justly described by Margaret Atwood as 'an American *Iliad*'.

Zwicky's own writing is exemplary; it glows with resonance and clarity, two qualities she herself prizes and discusses. She has published six books of poems and two of philosophy: *Lyric Philosophy* (1992) and *Wisdom and Metaphor* (2003).<sup>3</sup> Many of these have won awards, although none have attracted much mainstream attention yet. The book under review is a collection of 'meditations' on her work by colleagues, students and friends. The publisher, Cormorant Books, is one of a number of small Canadian presses whose continuing production of books of high quality (in every way), given the economic and cultural climate, is little less than heroic. (Others include the Gaspereau, Pedlar, and House of Anansi Presses, and Brick Books.) I have no doubt the same could be said of their books' authors and editors, too, including Dickinson and Goulet.

I am going to use this space partly to discuss the book itself and partly to introduce Zwicky's work, but mainly to raise some issues concerning ecologically-oriented literary criticism which that work opens up. Let me begin by saying that the context for any criticism of *Lyric Ecology*'s contributors or of Zwicky is my deep appreciation. These essays are varied, rich and fascinating. At the same time, though, they are a bit reverential for my taste, and I shall honour Zwicky's philosophy by treating it as tougher than might first appear from some of its apparently elusive or insubstantial subject-matter, such as the lyric. It will certainly stand questioning and constructive criticizing. By the same token, her work throws open doors onto great vistas; that many of them remain largely unexplored, as we shall see, is not a weakness but an open invitation to all.

What of the poems? They receive considerable attention in this collection as the way in which, to quote Sue Sinclair, 'Zwicky most fully enacts the kinds of resonance-sensitive thought that she defends elsewhere'. The poems are also highlighted as where her sensitivity to music as non-linguistic meaning finds its most powerful if paradoxical expression. I can but agree, and see little to add. I also feel constrained by a personal conviction (unfashionably Romantic, perhaps) that unlike philosophy of any kind, poems speak best for themselves and often gain little from analysis. Suffice it to say that the best of Zwicky's poems I have read – 'Small Song: Mozart' and 'Apple Song', for example, or 'Driving Northwest'<sup>4</sup> – are gems of crystalline insight and emotion: not dazzling so much as illuminating. They bear

comparison (a list perforce radically incomplete) with those of Robert Hass, R.S. Thomas, Mary Oliver and Tomas Tranströmer.

### Zwicky's Philosophy

Let me turn to the two books of philosophy, which I believe to be creative and important (especially the first). Both are large folio volumes, beautifully produced, with Zwicky's thoughts on the left-hand pages interspersed, on the right-hand sides, by quotations from others, living or technically dead, in the conversations. (These interlocutors are delightfully varied but chief among them are Wittgenstein and Heraclitus.) This innovation of form is inseparable, in terms of Zwicky's own practice of philosophy, from that of content, because those terms specify that meaning, even when carried by the linguistic, exceeds it; so it not possible to exhaust the different meanings conveyed by different forms of words in a panoptical meta-discourse whose form is neutral or irrelevant. Wisdom, lyric, metaphor, music, thinking, resonance, integrity: these are what Zwicky gives attention to and, in the same spirit, tries to enact.

It is worth adding that implicit in the clarity of Zwicky's spare prose is welcome indictment of the bad prose that now dominates much of the academy: hyperabstract, passively constructed, tortuously obscure and riddled with in-house jargon. Shamefully, eminent professors often lead the way; as Proust's narrator remarks witheringly, 'Quality of language is something the theorists think they can do without...' Wittgenstein being one of Zwicky's philosophical mentors, his observation also comes to mind that 'What can be said at all can be said clearly'.<sup>5</sup> Not necessarily *simply*, note; but *clearly*. (I am aware of offering a hostage to fortune here, of course!)

*Lyric Philosophy* begins by counterposing the lyric and the technological. Lyric most fully realises itself in moments of wordless clarity and beauty which – against the grain of the whole Platonic tradition – foreground rather than seek to transcend specificity, contingency and vulnerability. It constitutes, and is constituted by, a world of relations with subjects (not objects) whose value is as ends in themselves (not as means to other ends). Its counter-pole is therefore what Zwicky calls the technological: the mode of use-values, things and/as resources, and manipulation in order to exploit them. Language that is tendentially instrumentalist belongs here, and we are language-using creatures, with language that uses. Lyric, then,

springs from the desire to recapture the intuited wholeness of the non-linguistic world, to heal the slash in the mind that is the capacity for language. But as language-using creatures, it is of our essence that that gap cannot be permanently healed. The recognition that it cannot is the source of lyric's poignancy (230).

The upshot is that 'The "wholeness" of wordlessness, what is so frequently imaged as fusion with the world (or God, or nature), is one that we cannot *live* in if, at the same time, we are to *be* human' (284).

Zwicky then proffers a vital third mode: the domestic, which 'accepts the essential tension between lyric desire and the capacity for technology. In this acceptance, it mediates.... To become domestic is to accept that one cannot live in

wordlessness. This is compatible with wanting to' (258, 534). It also gives rise to a kind of use which is not the same as exploitation (222): the difference between harvesting wood and clearcutting a forest, say. But Zwicky's 'domestic' is not middling in the sense of an Aristotelian mean which could, in principle, become algorithmic, but rather in a dynamic, contextual, unformalisable sense, qualitatively differing from both 'extremes', that is closer to a Buddhist middle way. It also has strong resonances with an ecofeminist ethic of care.

I would like to urge consideration of the late philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, especially his *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), in this context. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's ideas, David Abram succeeded brilliantly at introducing an explicitly ecological phenomenology in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1997). Those ideas, however, are so rich they will bear returning to again and again. Their relevance here includes, but goes beyond, the commonalities Merleau-Ponty and Zwicky obviously share: the irreducibility of embodiment and bodies as lived sites of perspectives; the inseparability of the limited, finite and contingent on one hand and ultimate ontological mystery on the other; and wonder at that mystery, in all its particulars, as an interrogative 'ontological organ' (121) which underlies all asking and all knowing. That relevance extends to his concept of 'flesh' as the reversible interdependence of subject/object, mind/body and self/other. Flesh, according to Merleau-Ponty,

is not a fact or a sum of facts 'material' or 'spiritual'.... The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term 'element,' in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being (139).

Apprehension of this 'general thing' avoids the polar errors Merleau-Ponty identified as empiricism (singling out the sensible) and rationalism (recognising only the intelligible) because it grasps ideas not as the contrary of the sensible but as 'its lining and its depth' (149). In a way that (I feel) enriches Zwicky's 'lyric' as ontological attention to particularities, Merleau-Ponty writes that

experiences could not be given to us *as ideas* except in a carnal experience. It is not only that we would find in that carnal experience the *occasion* to think them; it is that they owe their authority, their fascinating, indestructible power, precisely to the fact that they are in transparency behind the sensible, or in its heart. Each time that we want to get at it immediately, or lay hands on it, or see it unveiled, we do in fact feel that the attempt is misconceived, that it retreats in the measure that we approach. The explicitation does not give us the idea itself; it is but a second version of it, a more manageable derivative (150; emphases in original in both excerpts).

But the idea and the carnality, and the set of dualities these stand for, are neither a simple unity nor a *dualism* (understanding the latter to be a mutually exclusive opposition, rather than the co-given, mutually constitutive divergence of duality). Rather, they 'chiasmically' intertwine in such a way as to enable but limit each other; so just what makes participation in/as life possible also makes its perfect or complete realisation impossible. ('Chiasm' is Merleau-Ponty's term describing the criss-crossing this state/process involves.)

Compare Merleau-Ponty's perspective with that of Zwicky as encapsulated in this collection by Warren Heiti – 'What is difficult: recognizing that the experience of self, which separates us from the world, also supports connection' – and Mark Dickinson: domesticity 'suggests that the basic tensions of existence are not only irresolvable, but constitute one of the ways in which the world hangs together.' To recognise and accept this ambiguity and its tensions philosophically means letting go of the dream that they can ever be resolved, even in principle. But then, as Zwicky says, 'To abandon classical system is to accept, to comprehend, the inevitability of loss. And at the same time to allow things to bloom into their own radiant specificity' (Zwicky, 1992: 536).

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has proved as difficult for 'classical' schools to accept as that of Zwicky, since, as he remarks, 'The "answer" is higher than the "facts," lower than the "essences," in the wild Being [*l'être sauvage*] where they [i.e., these two] were, and – behind or beneath the cleavages of our acquired culture – continue to be, undivided' (1968: 121). Lawrence Hass, the author of a good recent treatment of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, writes of his 'rigorous, lyrical effort to articulate being ("singing the world")' (2008: 136): a description that surely applies in equal measure to Zwicky, and underlines how much the former could bring to the conversation.

In rejecting the identification of clarity with formal analysis or system, then, Zwicky 'doesn't so much disagree with the philosophical community as she does speak otherwise' (to quote Carolyn Richardson). Actually, I think it would have strengthened this collection to have included something by a good analytical philosopher sufficiently unreconstructed (or perhaps I should say, constructed) to have turned Wittgenstein against Zwicky by arguing that just as the meaning of a word is determined not by some essence, etymological or otherwise, but by its use in context, so philosophy now just is what it has become. In that case, any attempt to restore it to the disciplined love of wisdom is chimerical. If I were Zwicky (to go still further out on this speculative branch, already bending dangerously), I might respond by pointing out that as the very change in the meaning of 'philosophy' shows, traditions, like linguistic meanings, do alter over time; so however unlikely (and it is), such a radical development (that is, a return to roots) is not impossible...and that that, normatively, would be a Good Thing. In the meantime, let a hundred flowers bloom – poetry, philosophy, music and more – and find their own unique cultural specificities! There is no need for any of them – poetry, say – to 'be' another – philosophy, say. In fact, any such undomestic demand would be programmatic in a way directly counter to the spirit of Zwicky's work as a whole: like a demand for total lyric, or Lyric.

The inherent link between philosophy and poetry being language, Zwicky's concern is how poetic language can be the vehicle for transcending the limitations of language in a moment of lyrical comprehension. Not at will, for that would place it back in the realm of the techno-instrumental, but in response, if *it* is willing, to the writer's invitation. (Compare Max Weber's extraordinary definition of truth: 'only that which *wants* to be true for all those who *want* the truth.'<sup>6</sup>)

Turning to *Wisdom and Metaphor*, in this book Zwicky alternates between showing how metaphor, far from being merely a literary device, is at the very heart of wisdom, and showing the metaphysical self-mutilation that results from analytical philosophers' attempts to deny and/or domesticate metaphor. The usual way philosophers attempt to do so is to treat metaphor – in which 'x [which is not y] is y', and therefore simultaneously is *and* is not y – as simile, in which x is merely *like* y in ways that can be specified without logical contradiction. The discussion thereby

remains comfortably on its chosen terrain of epistemology, representation and science.

Extending the treatment of these ideas in *Lyric Philosophy, Wisdom and Metaphor* is another valuable book (as well as another lovely artefact). Regrettably, however, a significant omission means it is not as good as it could have been. I am referring to the work – which, for excellent (and not merely professional) reasons, is central to the subject of metaphor – of Paul Ricoeur, especially *The Rule of Metaphor* (2003 [1975]).<sup>7</sup>

For example, Zwicky asserts that language must have non-metaphorical instances (2003: 23, 46), because without them there would be no technically distinct, i.e. non-metaphorical, elements to be linked together through metaphor. And ‘Non-metaphorical language enacts the way it is with things-in-their-distinctness’ (2003: 32). But it’s not quite that simple. If you allow that things have ‘their own radiant specificity’ (1992: 536), and that not only is all seeing seeing-*as* but all being is being-*as*, then surely everything is at least potentially metaphorical. (I say ‘potentially’, meaning, ‘It could always in principle be realised as such in experience’, because to impose it as a universal and abstract dictum in fact would be another of those putatively non-metaphorical moves, enacted in bad philosophical conscience, that Zwicky rightly wants to resist.) In any case, it seems Ricoeur would disagree with Zwicky. He points out that every attempt to critique metaphor or find a contrast class for it (as opposed to within it: ‘living’ vs. ‘dead’ metaphors, etc.) is itself forced to rely on metaphorical language:

There is no non-metaphorical standpoint.... The theory of metaphor returns in a circular manner to the metaphor of theory, which determines the truth of being in terms of presence. If this is so, then there can be no principle for delimiting metaphor, no definition in which the defining does not contain the defined; metaphoricity is absolutely uncontrollable [Ricoeur, 2003: 339].

Such wildness sounds much more like Zwicky’s world, along with Merleau-Ponty’s ‘wild being’, than the Trojan horse of non-metaphoricity that she seems to casually concede. So too do such observations as ‘the enigma of metaphorical discourse is that what it creates, it discovers; and what it finds, it invents’, so that ‘the creative dimension of language is consonant with the creative aspects of reality itself’ (2003: 283, 300). But my fundamental point is not to argue that Zwicky is wrong or Ricoeur right. It is to say that he has much to offer this conversation. As it is, his absence is debilitating. It is also puzzling, given his eminence and his virtues as a philosopher who struggled, with notable success, to combine the analytical and ‘continental’ schools.

### **East, West and North**

Here I turn to something not discussed in the collection under review, or anywhere else, so far as I know, which seems to me well worth remarking. In practice, practice cannot be distinguished from theory. But in the peculiar practice of theory (which sometimes goes by the name of philosophy), they can be analytically distinguished. In those terms, then, I can say with some confidence that the chief practices, insights and values which Zwicky urge upon us, and which are integral to her approach, are practically indistinguishable from those fundamental to Buddhist meditation (whether

vipassana, zazen or basic vajrayana). I am thinking, for example, of her epigraph for the collection – ‘truth is the result of attention.... Of really looking’ – and her advice to learn to bear with the unresolvable tensions inherent in negotiating ontological antinomies, and recognise the paradoxical emptiness of things required in order for them to be themselves.

Zwicky returns repeatedly to ‘thisness’ and ‘emptiness’ (as in, ‘Nothing can echo with being unless it is emptied of itself’). These are terms for which there are Buddhist equivalents that are as precise as is possible in such deep waters: Sanskrit *tathātā* and *sūnyatā* respectively. Furthermore, in one of her characteristic formulations of the former, quoted in the collection, ‘Thisness is the experience of a distinct thing in such a way that the resonant structure of the world sounds through it.’ Compare this to Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall’s authoritative commentary (2003) on philosophical Daoism: for example, that ‘the defining purpose of the *Daodejing* is bringing into focus and sustaining a productive disposition that allows for the fullest appreciation of those specific things and events that constitute one’s field of experience’ (11); or the inseparability ‘of *dao* and the myriad of insistent particulars (*de*)’ which ‘allows things to shine forth as themselves, both in their transitoriness and in their particularity, without mediation’ (33, 159). Does not all this suggest profound metaphysical ground in common (itself shared by Daoism and Chinese Buddhism)? And does no one want to, and feel able to, explore this fascinating terrain?

To some extent, the way to doing so has already been cleared by the work – not scholarly in academic terms, perhaps, but certainly not unlearned, and in all senses viable – of Gary Snyder, just a few hundred miles south of Zwicky et al. but much closer in spirit. Inhabitation; recovering indigenous wisdom; the practice of the wild; the intimacy of the wild, the good and the sacred; the etiquette of relations with all beings; ecopoetics... Talk about (meta-)resonance! Yet oddly, Snyder goes unmentioned.

I cannot help wondering if this shunning of foreign colleagues (and potential allies) could be deliberate. Obviously it is a good thing that Canadian ecopoetics has achieved sufficient robustness to escape the American and European (including British) spheres of direct influence, and stand on its own feet. That too is a kind of cultural reinhabitation and localism: locally sourced meaning, you might say. It would be a shame, however, if one consequence was a recrudescence of provincialism, now crypto-nationalist. (I have in mind a self-critical distinction made by P.J. Kavanagh: ‘In Ireland we are provincial not parochial, for it requires a great deal of courage to be parochial.’)

In any case, Snyder also offers a very important opening into Zwicky’s work and its own ground, one with specific implications for the ecohumanities. He has identified himself as ‘a Buddhist animist’ (Taylor, vol. 2, 1563). This is itself a ‘tensive’ formulation. A rationalist might ask Snyder, how can you be both *a*-centric – here, ‘centred’ on Buddhist ‘emptiness’, but also true of Zwicky’s equally tensive and liminal ‘domestic’ – and *eco*-centric: here, animist? But that question would imply a misunderstanding. To practise acentrism is just ‘to allow things to bloom into their own radiant specificity’ (Zwicky, 1992: 536) – and thereby to recognise and honour the other animals, local deities, ancestors and whoever else one finds oneself caught up together with in the nexus of life. This is what Bruno Latour (1993: 107) calls ‘the ancient anthropological matrix, the one we have never abandoned’, whence issue humans, other animals, and divinities; and, of course, ‘things’. In a Buddhist perspective, no beings are ruled out of court as impossible (e.g. ‘supernatural’), but

equally, none are singled out and worshipped as elite or non-entangled (ditto). No matter who or what, we're all in this together. Therefore all are worthy of compassion.

This, I believe, is how Zwicky's practice is ecological: not in its subject-matter, which may or may not be 'natural', but in the way it grants all life, visible and invisible, its full specificity and perishability. We might also call such life 'the wild'. Because it is fully relational and therefore reflexive, it is negotiable but unmasterable. That is what makes it 'eco'.

I should emphasise that my point is not that Zwicky's mode is 'really' Buddhist or Daoist. It is that what she has discovered and worked out is close kin to what they have too, and in profound depth and detail. In a sense this is not surprising. As Snyder (163) notes, 'All of us are apprenticed to the same teacher that the religious institutions originally worked with: reality.' But it is, at the very least, worthy of note, and therefore of exploration.

### Some Implications

By now you may be asking yourself, where does this discussion leave ecocriticism? The implications, it seems to me, are powerful. Zwicky et al., together with others, make a strong case against the dominant modernist model<sup>8</sup> in philosophy, pedagogy and contemporary culture in general, one vulnerable to the critique succinctly summarised in the collection under review by Harvey Hix: people 'cannot see *what* they need to see until they come to see *as* they need to see'. To the extent these scholars are right (and obviously I think they are), literary criticism that is subsumed in an industrialised educational system *cannot* be 'eco', whatever the subject-matter on its syllabus. Monological, anthropocentric, objectifying and prizing putative mastery, the mode of approach itself destroys any genuinely ecological content as it proceeds. (The still unsurpassed guide to this process, intended to realise 'the system from which everything and anything follows', whose all-consuming quantitative fungibility ordains that 'all gods and qualities must be destroyed', is Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.) And what kind of discipline colludes in extinguishing what it studies and replacing it with a lifeless simulacrum called 'Nature'?

It's no news that to a disturbing extent, and ever-increasingly, the business-managerial-administrative model of education has succeeded in colonising the contemporary academy.<sup>9</sup> That is all-too-evident in the general educational dominance of maths and science, the servants of economism,<sup>10</sup> and in the inexorable transformation of professors into 'harried employees required to fulfil quotas under the scrutiny of professional managers' (as J.M. Coetzee [2007] put it), whose ascendancy over teachers and researchers continues. (In British universities, the number of non-academic managers has increased 33% in the past five years, compared to a 10% rise in academic staff and 9% more students.<sup>11</sup>) Alongside them, academics are under enormous pressure to become knowledge-managers themselves. (It seems common practice now for teachers who show *apparatchik* potential to be trained up and promoted to positions of relative power simply for that reason, regardless of whether they are effective educators; but then, what constitutes 'education' is simultaneously redefined in a utilitarian manner, so the whole process becomes nicely circular and uncriticisable.) Then there is the proliferation of 'targets' and 'learning outcomes', the 'knowledge economy', an 'impact agenda' and other

ugly subaltern euphemisms for the rule of capital. As the Belgian philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers warns,

the multifaceted machine called technoscience is in the process of redefining our own worlds in terms that makes them available for its comparative operations. The relative passivity of the academic world, lending itself to ranking systems of evaluation and productivity comparison which reshape it in a radical manner, is sufficient to demonstrate how easy it is to have people, [even those] who are not naïve or impressed or overpowered, to submit to questions that are not only irrelevant but, as such, sound the death-knell of what matters for them.

She adds: ‘Daring to speculate will not save us, probably, but it may at least give us words that both disentangle us from what is in the process of destroying us, and affirm a proximity with those who were already destroyed in the name of rationality, objectivity and the great divide between nature and culture.’<sup>12</sup>

These problems are already at work in ‘ecocriticism’, beginning with the term itself. Modernism has long claimed criticism and critique, culminating in iconoclasm, as its own. (That requires turning a blind eye, as usual, to its religious and specifically Protestant roots). As Latour (36) says, ‘anyone who has never been obsessed by the distinction between rationality and obscurantism, between false ideology and true science, has never been modern.’ Thus what modernism requires is a *method* – the more algorithmic and therefore supposedly infallible the better – for distinguishing one from the other. Hence the modern academic obsession – principally among the social sciences, but also infecting the humanities – with methodology, amounting (in Mary Midgley’s typically acute term) to methodolatry, thus signalling their subjection to the ideology of scientism. Indeed, whenever you find yourself in a pedagogical situation where a method is taught as a *procedure* which will produce the desired *result* (indistinguishable from magic, but let that pass), rather than as a *ritual* for *getting started* and *playing*, you know the megamachine is in charge.<sup>13</sup> But I shall return to the issue names later.

Another sign is that one is actively encouraged to treat the desired end as itself instrumental, fundamentally a means to another end in an endless similar succession: good grades in order to get a good job, resulting in financial success, rewarded by status and personal security, leading to...? Love of the subject, instead of beginning and end (and what is teaching without it but drudgery for both teacher and students?), becomes optional window-dressing; indeed, evince it too obviously and you will be patronised as someone who can be indulged but has rather missed the point.

A third sign, unfailingly, is the language one finds being used. I won’t repeat what I have already said about this, except to note that the higher one goes in the academy, it seems, it is the language of business or politics that one finds. Worse, if possible, its ugly, abstract and lifeless prose echoes that of bad academic writing. (Orwell’s superb essay on ‘Politics and the English Language’ never dates, unfortunately.) This tendency is led from the top; for example, when it was time to appoint a new Poet Laureate in the UK in November 2008, the minister for Culture, Media and Sport – an identity which speaks for itself – announced that his department was ‘consulting widely in the poetry sector’. British universities are, of course, directed by the minister for Business, Innovation and Skills... Well, useful to get that learned.



What is someone to do, then, whose first priority remains the integrity of the subject – in this case, understanding literature and the Earth? ('The environment' is a weasel word and I wish ASLE would jettison it. I have nothing against weasels, but I do against words that lend themselves to the anthropocentric delusion that nature is something 'out there' which exists to showcase and support 'us'.) The answer, I would say, is this: if you can find an academic position which allows you to study, teach and write it, then excellent! If not, however, you should be prepared to try to find a way to still do those things, and survive, outside the academy, or at least on its edges. Comparing the present situation with that of Eastern bloc universities under Communist rule, when real teaching of (mostly) banned texts took place elsewhere, Coetzee (2007) comments:

If the spirit of the university is to survive, something along those lines may have to come into being in countries where tertiary education has been wholly subordinated to business principles. In other words, the real university may have to move into people's homes and grant degrees for which the sole backing will be the names of the scholars who sign the certificates.

It is significant, and arguably discouraging, that almost none of the Canadian scholar-poets of whom Zwicky is one has found a lasting academic home.<sup>14</sup> But there seem to be significant national and even regional variations; an important group of scholars of the ecohumanities in Australia, to whom I shall return in a moment, seem to have so succeeded. In the UK the situation is mixed, but I find it difficult to be sanguine. Certainly the overall situation seems worse here than in America.

### **The Rectification of Terms<sup>15</sup>**

I'm not a linguistic idealist who thinks that changing a term will change the (rest of) the reality. On the other hand, terms are part of reality and affect the rest of it. So I would like to propose, building on the arguments of Zwicky and others, that it would help if we adopted 'ecological humanities', or 'ecohumanities' for short.<sup>16</sup> It retains the 'eco', reminding us of the indispensability to what we are studying, *and* how we study it, of nature as the wild – including, but not limited to, wilderness. And it is superior to 'ecocriticism' in at least three ways. Not that the following *desiderata* depend on adopting the term itself, of course; but in my view, it would help to realise them.

*First*, 'humanities' reminds us of our freedom – as an ideal, at the very least – from servitude to scientism, the dominant secular ideology of the age, together with its master, capital. In this context, few things are more dispiriting to read than ecocritical analyses unselfcritically reducing environmental aesthetics, literature and promissorily everything else to an epiphenomeon of evolutionary psychology. Unity – a single 'underlying' or 'overarching' order – is the long dream at the heart of science but alien, not least in its ever-ready potential for tyranny, to the sceptical, pluralist and humane temper of the humanities. It follows that any offer to 'unify' or 'synthesise' the two (notoriously, E. O. Wilson's 'consilience') is nothing of the kind: it is science annexing and ruling the humanities on its own terms. It may be that biosemiotics will prove different, and indeed I hope so. I cannot help suspecting, however, that like complexity theory before it, by the time biosemiotics can effect a genuine synthesis it will already have been ejected from the club of 'genuine' science. Of course, the

dominant understanding of what science is may itself change; but that, in my opinion, is a big ask.

*Second*, following on, the ‘humanities’ plural reminds us that integral to any such studies is an ecological pluralism: constitutive relations, perspectives, realities. The contrast class is once again monism, whose single principle promises, in Max Weber’s immortal words, that ‘one can, in principle, master all things by calculation’. That, of course, is the royal road to ‘the disenchantment of the world’ – nature, society and education alike.<sup>17</sup>

And *third*, since we are humans,<sup>18</sup> the word also encourages us to recognise that the unavoidable (indeed, precious) hermeneutic reflexivity such studies entail, which enables any knowing at all, also rules out any intellectually colonialist and/or masculinist mastery of the subject. But here the ‘eco’ adds, crucially, that intelligence, subjectivity and agency are not only human but inhere in more-than-human nature, vastly greater, in which we participate.<sup>19</sup> The study of ecology, both ‘scientific’ and ‘cultural’, is itself ecological too.<sup>20</sup>

Highly germane in this context, although lack of space forbids an adequate discussion, is another group of scholars whose actual and potential impact is belied by their small numbers. Oddly enough, they are to be found in a land at the other end of the world that was also briefly a British colony. In 2001, Deborah Bird Rose initiated a discussion at the Australian National University with a small group of scholars, including Libby Robin, Freya Mathews, Kate Rigby and Tom Griffiths among others, which led to the birth of an inspiring new forum dedicated to the ecological humanities. The late Val Plumwood, who used the term in her *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (2002), was also closely associated with this project. I urge readers to look into it, if they haven’t already.<sup>21</sup>

There is still another reason to prefer ‘ecohumanities’. In the collection under review, Ross Leckie notes Zwicky’s belief that ‘in abolishing a capacity for a certain kind of romantic feeling we have given up the ability to register the feeling of loss’, and warns that ‘the survival strategy that relies on the relentlessly ironic inures us to our own diminishment.’ Zwicky argues, he writes, ‘that nostalgia, regret, and the graceful, whether construed as aesthetic gesture or as ethical humility, hold the possibility of political engagement. Nostalgia has a form of truth. It has a crucial resource, which is to open emotional life to the experience of loss, in this case the loss of the natural world.’ I am reminded of Fraser Harrison’s rich and powerfully argued case for a ‘radical nostalgia’ which, despite its risks (chiefly sentimentality and ideological naïveté), expresses ‘a truth of its own, which reflects an authentic and deeply felt emotion.’<sup>22</sup> Harrison concludes, ‘what must be conserved before anything else is the desire in ourselves for Home – for harmony, peace and love, for growth in nature and in our imaginative powers – because unless we keep this alive, we shall lose everything’ (171, 172).<sup>23</sup>

Not the least of Zwicky’s virtues is to remind us of that imperative. We need the ecohumanities, too, to remind of something Montaigne knew in his bones but modern so-called humanists, bent on smashing God or ruling non-human nature, have forgotten: that we co-exist with a multitude of others, both human and non-human, who are our existential equals; and in our relations with them, we only fulfil what it means to be human by being humane.

## Loose Ends

Zwicky's suspicion of Heidegger's anthropocentric valorisation of language and eschatological apprehension of Being is commendable.<sup>24</sup> She might consider more caution with Plato, however, and not just the hard-faced philosopher king who would expel poets from the polity. Even for the author of the fluffier *Symposium*, the beloved is not loved for himself as such but only to the extent that he (and it was a he) leads onwards and upwards to the Idea of love: not so much perishable radiant particularity as dispensable vanishing mediator.

I also notice that no one in the collection, nor Zwicky and her colleagues (so far as I know), ever mentions Gregory Bateson. To be sure, there is no reason, strictly speaking, why they should. Nonetheless, I would like to see him honoured as a wise and brave elder. Nearly four decades ago, in the face of much incomprehension and hostility, Bateson emphasized patterns as the essence of meaning; the crucial relationship between parts and wholes, in both 'social' and 'natural' fields; the centrality of metaphor to play, and play to learning; and the complementary and corrective function of wisdom ('circuit') as against purposive information ('arc') – all in presciently ecological context. Why do so many write as if he had never existed?<sup>25</sup>

Finally, no position is possible that doesn't leave something important unaddressed or isn't flawed in some respect. (William Empson once wondered what a bodhisattva's flaw could be, given that he or she is not a Buddha and is therefore, by definition, imperfect. His irreverent answer was, a bit of a busybody.) I have already explored some areas that are unaddressed, whether by Zwicky or others. One I haven't mentioned, but have run out of space to do more than that now, is the resonance between Zwicky's recommended and enacted 'form of life' (way of being) and that of the North American indigenous mythtellers, at the heart of Bringhurst's and Kane's work.<sup>26</sup> Those storytellers, poets and philosophers' wisdom – not only in the Pacific Northwest but everywhere else it survives – is surely indispensable for the project of cultural and spiritual reinhabitation, so necessary, to have a chance of succeeding.

As for flaws, it seems fair to note that there is a certain rarefied and ascetic quality in Zwicky's work which reminds me, by way of contrast, of what John Cowper Powys (122-23) described as 'the inherent barbarism and crudity of rank human nature with which any genuine Religion – to be really organic – must keep in close touch.' I agree with Powys's intuition and can't find much awareness of that here. Where, for example, where might it find a place in the lyric, domestic or technological? Perhaps it is an unconscious but complementary fourth to the trinity Zwicky has so acutely identified?

In any case, if that is the price for work of such luminous intellectual and emotional intelligence, it is one worth paying. I hope the ecohumanities community will take close note of Zwicky's work, together with that of her close colleagues. Learning 'to live on the Earth on the Earth's terms' (Kane, 255) must include learning how to *think* on those terms; or as the late Richard Sylvan (182) put it, learning 'to think like a mountain and not like a cash register'. What, now, could possibly be more important?

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Patrick Curry is a writer, recovering academic, and expatriate Canadian from Winnipeg who has lived so long in London (England) that he misses snow in winter. A revised edition of his most recent book, *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction* (Polity Press) is forthcoming later this year. Acting on (or out) a longstanding obsession, he is writing a book on enchantment which he describes as work of philosophical anthropology. His first book of poems is slouching towards a publisher.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The expected publication date is June 2010. British and other European orders should be placed directly with Cormorant Books through their website, or else through Amazon.com or Amazon.ca. I am grateful to Marc Côté for providing a pre-publication draft. (Working from a manuscript has meant I am unable to supply page numbers for quotations.) I am also in debt to Michael Winship for his close reading and excellent suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> See Lilburn (2002); also, Mark Dickinson, 'Canadian Primal: Five poet-thinkers redefine our relationship to nature', *The Walrus* (June 2009) 62-65.

<sup>3</sup> A second edition of *Lyric Philosophy*, published by Gaspereau Press, will appear in 2010.

<sup>4</sup> The first two are from her 2005, the last from her 1998.

<sup>5</sup> At the end of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Scaff, 118.

<sup>7</sup> The English title is a botched version of the original, *La métaphore vive*.

<sup>8</sup> With Platonic-Christian-Cartesian provenance: see my paper of 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Recently, for example, see Anthony T. Grafton, 'Britain: The Disgrace of the Universities', *The New York Review of Books* (27.3.10).

<sup>10</sup> See Mark Slouka's excellent article, 'Dehumanized. When math and science rule the school', *Harper's Magazine*, Sept. 2009, 32-40. Also Simon Jenkins, 'Scientists may gloat, but an assault is underway against all the arts', *The Guardian* (26.3.10).

<sup>11</sup> *The Guardian*, Education Supplement (30.3.10).

<sup>12</sup> From a talk given in Copenhagen on 3.9.09, 'Comparison as a Matter of Concern', to be published in *Common Ground* in 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis Mumford's plangent term.

<sup>14</sup> She herself recently gave up her professorship at the University of Victoria.

<sup>15</sup> *Zhèngmíng*, a paramount Confucian concern and, as Confucius thought, not a bad place to start.

<sup>16</sup> There is also much to be said for 'green studies', as in Laurence Coupe's fine collection of 2000. However, my pragmatic sense is that it is not going to catch on, whereas 'ecohumanities' just might. I am also mindful that my suggestion implies something of a return to Joseph Meeker's 'literary ecology': part of the subtitle of revised editions of his seminal work *The Comedy of Survival*...and none the worse for that!

<sup>17</sup> From 'Science as a Vocation'.

<sup>18</sup> See here the apposite reflections of Sean Kane in this issue.

<sup>19</sup> See here, of course, those of David Abram.

<sup>20</sup> See Curry 2008. See also Wendy Wheeler's (2008) exploration in terms of biosemiotics.

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<sup>21</sup> See their website – <http://www.ecologicalhumanities.org/index.html> and Rose and Robin’s article of 2004, accessible at <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-April-2004/rose.html>

<sup>22</sup> See my use of this idea in chapter one of my 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Respecting the ecohumanities, the collection in which this essay can be found – Mabey et al. (1984) – is probably the most unjustly neglected in modern times. Why was there never a reprint?

<sup>24</sup> See Westling 2007; also Faye (2010). (The way many eminent contemporary professional philosophers have closed ranks to protect Heidegger’s reputation is a scandal.)

<sup>25</sup> Exceptions include Wheeler in this issue, obviously; Rose and Robin (2004), as well as Rose in earlier work; and my paper of 2008. See Harries-Jones (1995) and Charleton (2008).

<sup>26</sup> See also the contribution of Basso 1996, outstanding among other excellent related work.

“A Few Small Essays on the Poetics of Grace” Lyric Ecology: An Appreciation of the Work of Jan Zwicky, ed. Mark Dickinson and Clare Goulet. Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2010. 94-102. Links to the ICSI website and to our peer-reviewed journal Critical Studies in Improvisation can be found at <http://www.improvcommunity.ca>. — title. Lyric Ecology book. Read reviews from world’s largest community for readers. Jan Zwicky is one of Canada’s most innovative intellectual figures. As a poet... Goodreads helps you keep track of books you want to read. Start by marking “Lyric Ecology: An Appreciation of the Work of Jan Zwicky” as Want to Read: Want to Read saving | Want to Read. Mark Dickinson and Clare Goulet (eds), Lyric Ecology: 25. Meditations on the work of Jan Zwicky (Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2010)1. Patrick Curry (A draft of a paper for Green Letters 13 (2010) pp. 95-109). Jan Zwicky is a poet, philosopher and musician, one of a small but culturally influential group of Canadian writers, including Robert Bringhurst, Tim Lilburn, Don McKay, Dennis Lee and Sean Kane, whose work could reasonably be described as ecopoetic.2 I think it is fair to say that the single most significant work to issue from this group so far is Bringhurst’s masterful translations and com