

Dirty Transcendence: Remnants of the Sacred and Changes in Contemporary Ecopoetics

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Tomas Tranströmer, whose poetry is influenced by the austere landscape of the Swedish coast, in his poem *From March 1979* seems to suggest that it is not easy to “read” nature unequivocally. The date in the title places a hypothetical experience in time. Accompanied by a poetic reflection, it becomes a commentary on the nature of more-than-human communication:

Weary of all who come with words, words but no language
I make my way to the snow-covered island.
The untamed has no words.
The unwritten pages spread out on every side!
I come upon the tracks of deer in the snow.
Language but no words.¹

¹ Tomas Tranströmer, “From March 1979”, *The Guardian*, 6 October 2011.

In this poem, the Nobel prize winner contrasts human language with the silence of nature – the latter is devoid of words which are the most important carriers of meaning for man; yet, it communicates better or more than human messages subject to the laws of inflation and overproduction. When read in the context of the theory of the sign, the tracks of deer (*språk*) become language; they become a trace which refers to the being that left it. On the other hand, the words (*ord*) refer only to one another; they are based on dictionary definitions and circulate in sentences which claim them as complex systems of references. Such a perspective suggests that the wear and tear to which words are subjected is caused by the rift between the content and the living subject who makes the signs. And although this poem fits into the romantic *topos* of nature that is a refuge from the tiring, industrialized and technologized human world, it is also a meta-literary reflection on the natural landscape as a place where one looks for a source of meaning that could feed the weakening power of communication.

Wisława Szymborska, in her poem *I'm working on the world*, writing about “soliloquies of forests,” “the epic hoot of owls,” and “crafty hedgehogs drafting aphorisms after dark,”² draws attention to the potential power of language hidden in nature. However, like Trans-trömer, she suggests, and writes in *The Silence of Plants*,³ that in the reality known to us, nature would never use actual “words.” Like snow and hoofprints, nature transcends human verbalization. However, the most acclaimed poets of the late twentieth century, including Seamus Heaney, wish to “tune” the poetic language to nature. Heaney wished that the pen in his hand would work like his father’s and grandfather’s spade, sinking into the ground, piercing peat. What, however, would correspond in this analogy to potatoes dug out by his ancestors – potatoes that are as cool, hard, and unreadable as a stone from Wisława Szymborska’s poem?⁴

In all poems, nature resists language, nevertheless suggesting that some non-discursive meaning is hidden in hard or soft, wet or dry matter, whose character gives meaning to poetic tropes and metaphors. Its unreadable core seems to constitute the transcendent “other” which is always outside the human discursive universe but may nevertheless influence the systems of references that exist within it. The natural environment is “external” to the human world defined as a linguistic construct. In this context, I would like to reflect on the applicability of the category of transcendence in relation to selected twentieth-century and twenty-first-century poems, assuming that the transformations of the “transcendent” paradigm may shed new light on the transformations in contemporary eco-poetics.

² Wisława Szymborska, “I’m working on the world”, in: *Poems New and Collected* (New York: Mariner Books, 2000), 3.

³ Wisława Szymborska, “The Silence of Plants”, in: *Poems New and Collected* (New York: Mariner Books, 2000), 269.

⁴ See: Wisława Szymborska, “Conversation with a stone”, in: *Poems New and Collected* (New York: Mariner Books, 2000), 62-64.

Reconfigurations of transcendence

“Transcendence” is a problematic term that has been subjected to many redefinitions and revaluations in the long history of philosophy and religion. Presented for centuries – in various “forms” – as a privileged mode of existence of eternal and perfect beings and shedding light on the passing and imperfect things of “this world,” in the nineteenth century it was “challenged” by both G.W.F. Hegel, for whom philosophy became speculation about the death of God, and Friedrich Nietzsche, who identified the idea of God with restrictions that people imposed on themselves, learning to finally reject them. The classic notion of transcendence has been marginalized as the secularization processes began to gain prominence.⁵ Modernity, as suggested by Hans Jonas, is defined by unconditional immanence, allowing us to address the problem of our being-in-the-world without referring to miraculous interference because the world is “left to itself.”⁶

This does not mean, however, that postmodern humanities have abandoned questions pertaining to the transcendent mode of existence. The editors of *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry* (published as part of the *Religion and Postmodernity* series) identified two main contemporary transcendent paradigms. The first, associated with such thinkers as Emmanuel Lévinas, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, is associated with the belief that the existing ideas about transcendence were not sufficiently transcendent, which stems from a distrust of language. Concepts referring to “wholly other,” *différance*, Derridean *khôra*, or “God without being” were deconstructed and thus the existing categories used in philosophy and theology to reflect on transcendence were reformulated. This led John Caputo and Michael Scanlon to introduce the category of “hypertranscendence.”⁷ The second “post-transcendent” tendency is associated with such thinkers as Gilles Deleuze and Luce Irigaray and centers on contemporary reflection on the rehabilitation of materialism, insofar as all kinds of transcendence are inherently immanent. This paradigm was described extensively by Patrice Haynes, who called it “immanent transcendence.” This category was founded on the belief that “theorizing matter in contemporary continental philosophy often involves some sort of transvaluation of transcendence.”⁸ Ultimately, as Caputo and Scanlon write, “the word ‘transcendence’ (...) is a relative term. It depends upon what is being transcended or gone beyond. It can mean transcending the subject (...), the self (...), beings (...), the sensible world (...), Being.”⁹

Ecocriticism, having developed in conjunction with structuralism and poststructuralism, from the very beginning faced the problem of the status of extra-textual reality. On the one hand, the environmental humanities could not reduce nature to a linguistic construct.

⁵ See: Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge (Mass.): Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 618–75.

⁶ Hans Jonas, *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, ed. Lawrence Vogel (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 134.

⁷ Michael J. Scanlon and John D. Caputo, *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry*, The Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 15.

⁸ Patrice Haynes, *Immanent Transcendence: Reconfiguring Materialism in Continental Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1.

⁹ Scanlon and Caputo, *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry*, 15.

On the other hand, the discipline found it difficult to avoid referential and essentialist approaches. Therefore, taking as my starting point poetic intuitions and bearing in mind the two shifts in contemporary approaches to the category of transcendence (which moved away from the shortcomings of language towards a new understanding of matter), I would like to propose an alternative view of the relationship between textual representations and the natural environment. In the most general sense, I see the human universe of signs, linguistic systems, and symbolic references, which determines the acquisition of knowledge about the “external” world (the world that is not part of this universe), as immanent. This perspective corresponds to some extent to Charles Taylor’s concepts of “exclusive humanism” and “our universe of buffered selves.”¹⁰ In his book *A Secular Age*, Taylor tried to prove that the processes of secularization and the development of science which changed the way in which we see the world proceeded concurrently with the process of assigning all human agency to the human mind. This led to a rift, a buffer, between man and the world.

Similarly, notwithstanding the traditional understanding of the term, I see as transcendent everything that transcends the human universe of signs – especially material reality, which is an irreducible point of reference for man. On the one hand, it resists language as the non-discursive “other.” On the other hand, it determines the existence of the immanent human world, which is our proper element. Nature seems to play a special role in the hierarchy of such “transcendent beings.” First, because, as more-than-human, it represents the more-than-human. Secondly, and this is a fundamental question, it conditions human life on the biological level. Such a redefinition of transcendence corresponds to the findings made by sociologists who studied a representative group of non-believers from Denmark, Sweden and Estonia (secularized countries with vast pristine areas). In the article *The relocation of transcendence*, we learn that – at least in the context of people living in Denmark, Sweden and Estonia – the experiences related to transcendence shift from the sphere of the sacred to that of nature.¹¹ However, my approach to immanence and transcendence is not identical with the worldview traditionally associated with Anglo-Saxon Romanticism or American transcendentalism, which recognize the sacred in nature but also postulate transcending the sensual order of things. The difference between these approaches is determined, in my opinion, by a different understanding of immanence.

Respectively, the distinction between transcendence and immanence presented here is by no means a theory of perception; rather, it is a working diagnosis – a reformulation of a certain cultural legacy, a dualism, which needed to be transgressed. This reformulation seems important to me, however, because although the distinction between immanence and transcendence is purely technical, it still means that, as I hope to demonstrate, the attributes traditionally ascribed to both elements of this dichotomy are still valid.

¹⁰See: Charles Taylor, “The Bulwarks of Belief”, in: *A Secular Age* (Cambridge (Mass.): Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 25–89.

¹¹See: D. Thurffjell et al., “The Relocation of Transcendence: Using Schutz to Conceptualize the Nature Experiences of Secular People”, *Nature and Culture* 14, no. 2 (01 2019): 190–214, <https://doi.org/10.3167/nc.2019.140205>.

The Eye and the Window: The legacy of modernist poetry

In her debut collection of poems, published at what is now considered the beginning of the Great Acceleration, Elizabeth Bishop commented on an ordinary fishing scene. The poem opens with the boastful: “I caught a tremendous fish,”¹² which suggests a hypothetical victory of man over nature: man’s technical superiority which earns him a reward. When the fish is pulled out of the water, it ceases to be a part of nature: no longer in its element, it turns into an “object”¹³ that is observed, emphasizing the ambiguity inscribed in the initial line (after all, one can also “catch an image” or “catch a glimpse;” the “I” is also a homophone of the noun eye). The image of the fish constructed in the lines that follow is not a simple description. It is meant to fill the reader with disgust: skin hangs “in strips/ like ancient wallpaper,”¹⁴ it is covered in brown spots, the gills inhale “terrible oxygen” and are “fresh and crisp with blood;” they can also “cut so badly.” The x-ray eye of the lyrical I also describes the inside of the fish – “the coarse white flesh packed in like feathers” and the eye – but only from the outside, because the fish does not look back at the lyrical I. The fish’s irises are “backed and packed/ with tarnished tinfoil/ seen through the lenses/ of old scratched isinglass.”¹⁵

Finally, the “I” focuses on the “five old pieces of fish-line” and “five big hooks” in the animal’s mouth, which are “like meals with their ribbons.”¹⁶ Who ultimately wins in this duel? There is, after all, something repulsive about this “trophy;” something that prevents the “I,” similarly to five other fishermen who came before, from claiming the fish. This mysterious quality reveals to us yet another ambiguity inscribed in the opening line (“I caught a tremendous fish”): the fish is not only big but also powerful. The word “tremendous” evokes fear. Although it is held in the hand, the fish may be associated with the elusive Moby Dick – the whale is as white as the meat of the animal that was finally released and not eaten by humans. Despite human interference in the natural world (as evidenced by the hooks in the fish’s mouth and the fact that “oil had spread a rainbow around the rusted engine”) and despite the fact that the fish has been caught and “did not fight,” the *misterium tremendum* personified in it cannot be transcended. It turns out to be as pointless as Ahab’s desperate quest in Herman Melville’s novel. Although the sensual description captures the dramatic nature of the scene and allows the reader to “feel” the different textures, the mysterious core personified in the described animal is left untouched.

Scott Knickerbocker analyses the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop in his book *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, The Nature of Language*. He also analyses the works of several American poets, demonstrating how they combine their interest in nature with “linguistic scepticism,”¹⁷ expressed as artifice. Knickerbocker also comments on the “organic formalism” of 20th-century confessional poetry and the American tradition of (ecological) nature writing. The ecopoetic

¹²Elizabeth Bishop, “The fish”, in: *Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 43.

¹³Bishop, 44.

¹⁴Bishop, 43.

¹⁵Bishop, 43.

¹⁶Bishop, 44.

¹⁷Scott Knickerbocker, *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 13.

value of his chosen examples is to be determined not so much by the subject matter, but by the emphasis on the materiality of language itself, both through formal measures stimulating the senses of sight and hearing and through style “infused with the natural world.”¹⁸ As such, stylistic tropes, although infused with original meanings, return or reflect the gaze, presenting people with the image of their internal states. They are symbolically “attractive” because they refer to natural matter and, as such, constitute an inalienable linguistic proof of the existence of the “transcendent” world of nature. Knickerbocker calls this process of “the re-materialization of language,” in itself a “response to more-than-human nature,”¹⁹ “sensuous poesis.” It does not so much reflect the world, but, with the use of the aforementioned formal poetic tools, “enact[s], rather than merely represent[s], the immediate, embodied experience of more-than-human nature.”²⁰

Knickerbocker’s view of ecopoetics corresponds to the structure of the poetic epiphany, which Ryszard Nycz brilliantly analyses in Polish literary studies. Nycz draws attention to the modernist redefinition of the category of “epiphany.” It transformed from a romantic individual insight into the order of existence which transcends the senses into a strictly secular concept, which refers to “not directly visible,” “particular,” “contingent” or “embodied” reality.²¹ As Nycz writes:

The poetics of epiphany is a set of convictions whose source is modern literature and its view of poetic language and writing as endowed with extraordinary status, at the center of which lie those ‘epiphanies’, i.e. descriptions of intense, fragmented, instantaneous traces of the extraordinary value of everyday existence of individual things.²²

One of the most important examples of Polish modernist poetry of this type for Nycz were the works of Bolesław Leśmian – perhaps the most interesting 20th-century Polish “nature poet.” As Leśmian writes in the poem *Łąka* [The meadow], “słowami przez okno w świat wygląda” [he uses words to look through a window into the world]. As Michał Markowski argues, Leśmian uses language to show, and not merely represent, the world.²³ Leśmian not only embodied in his poems but also commented on the phenomenon captured by Knickerbocker, emphasizing the sensuality of words that come alive in a poem through rhythm. The words in his poems are “cheekily colourful,” “boldly intertwined” and take on a “real form.”²⁴ The reality of this form, however, is not based on mimetic properties, but on the sensuality of poetry itself. It evokes “the original song without words,”²⁵ which, as Leśmian writes inspired by Henri Bergson,

¹⁸Knickerbocker, 185.

¹⁹See: Knickerbocker, 2.

²⁰Knickerbocker, 13.

²¹Ryszard Nycz, “Poetyka epifanii a modernizm: od Norwida do Leśmiana” [The poetics of epiphany and modernism: From Norwid to Leśmian], *Teksty Drugie : teoria literatury, krytyka, interpretacja*. 4 (1996): 21.

²²Nycz, 22.

²³Michał Paweł Markowski, *Polska literatura nowoczesna: Leśmian, Schulz, Witkacy* [Modern Polish literature: Leśmian, Schulz, Witkacy] (Kraków: Universitas, 2007), 105.

²⁴Bolesław Leśmian, “Z rozmyślań o poezji” [From reflections on poetry], in: *Szkice literackie* [Essays on literature], ed. Jacek Trznadel (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2011), 60.

²⁵Bolesław Leśmian, “Przemiany rzeczywistości” [Transformations of reality], in: *Szkice literackie*, ed. Jacek Trznadel (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2011), 44.

comes from the “illogical spheres of existence” and transcends “the boundaries of grammar and syntax,” and simply cannot be confined to a logical sentence.²⁶ The tone of this original song resonates in the human soul, but only momentarily comes to life in poetry, when it “animates” words, thus manifesting its presence within the human linguistic universe. As such, the sensual, “re-materialized” poetic language is for Leśmian a bridge between immanence (rationally comprehensible human world) and transcendence (non-logical, extra-linguistic life): “Linguistic creativity and writing are inextricably linked with poetic creativity. It is an excellent thing, not only in terms of literature but also biology. It is a triumph of man over himself; the essence of one’s being is extended into more-than-animal worlds.”²⁷

Such a relationship between immanence and transcendence may explain why poets associated with the trend which, for the sake of simplicity, I will call after Knickerbocker “organic formalism” focused mainly on evoking “sensuous effects” (the experience of communing with nature). In his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram, an American ecologist and philosopher, to whom Knickerbocker refers, emphasizes (like J.W. Herder) the biological origin of language. Abram argues that the formation of a distinct “human-only” world went hand in hand with the adoption of an arbitrary system of signs used by humans to communicate. The process of improving the technique of writing effectively meant a governed human universe. Abram perceives this process as a kind of trap:

Caught up in a mess of abstraction, our attention hypnotized by a host of human-made technologies that only reflect us back to ourselves, it is all too easy for us to forget our carnal inherence in a more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities.²⁸

The process of poetic “re-materialization” of language corresponds to the ritual relation with transcendent non-linguistic reality. This is more or less how the British artist David Jones put it. Jones claimed that figurative language, based on references to matter, is a quasi-sacramental (in the Catholic sense of the word) evocation of reality: therefore, symbols which refer to nature seem to be more effective than a different kind of reference.²⁹

One of the most interesting poets of the second half of the twentieth century, who creatively reflected on this dependency, was the attentive reader of Jones — R.S. Thomas. Thomas was a keen observer of the wild, rugged Welsh landscapes and the harsh living conditions of local farmers. The motif of glass and the surface of water found in his poetry, which could serve both as a window and a mirror, also referred to his poetic language. The poet writes in his autobiographical collection *The Echoes Return Slow*: “both window and mirror. Was he unique in using it as a window of an asylum, as glass to look through into a watery jungle, where life preyed on itself, ferocious yet hushed as the face of the believer, ambushed in a mirror?” Thomas further adds: “so much easier for the retired mind to lull itself to sleep among the

²⁶Leśmian, 45.

²⁷Leśmian, “Z rozmyślań o poezji”, 71.

²⁸David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language In The More-Than-Human World* (New York: Random House, 1997), 22.

²⁹David Jones, “Art and Sacrament”, in: *Epoch and Artist: Selected Writings*, ed. Harman Grisewood, 2017, 174.

reflections.”³⁰ The word “believer” is not used by accident in this quote; as a pastor, Thomas more than once problematized transcendent religious views, drawing attention to the human tendency to create God in his own image. Reflection – representing human experience in language – seems inevitable. What is important for Thomas, however, is this double referentiality, which allows him to see beyond the vague outline of the human face the more-than-human reality which corresponds to the traditional notion of transcendence. Therefore, when Thomas reflects on the environment transformed by human civilization and the mechanization of farm work, which he valued because it fostered a close (though neither easy nor sentimental) relationship with nature, he asks: “Is there a contraceptive/for the machine, that we may enjoy / intercourse with it without being overrun / by vocabulary?”³¹

Thomas also investigates the relationship between poetic language and the materiality of nature. Writing about the atomic bomb and the potential threat of a nuclear war, the poet referred to himself, as if by necessity, the “composer of the first radioactive verses.”³² This declaration is connected with his most recognizable formal feature, the use of enjambment, insofar as the poet divides sentences into lines in such a way as to give their individual parts a meaning that is often incompatible with the logical order of the sentence. For example, the ending of the poem *The Signpost*, published in the volume *Frequencies*, reads: “Time / is a main road, eternity / the turning that we don’t take.”³³ Thomas often refers to experiences which are not sensual but still affect man who is not able to process them rationally. This example illustrates the poetics of Thomas quite well. Distrustful of linguistic devices conveying transcendent reality, he refers to non-intuitive, sometimes aporetic, aspects of material sciences to poetically emphasize the apophatic nature of the sacred.³⁴

The poetics of the Anthropocene

The beginning of the 21st century is often seen as a conventional yet important turning point. Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer introduced the word Anthropocene in 2000. The understanding that human interference in the natural world is comparable with geological forces leads to serious redefinitions within the relationship between the immanence of the human universe of signs and the transcendence of the more-than-human reality of nature. The concept of nature as an inexhaustible reservoir of more-than-human beauty, a refuge from the human world and a mystery, as it falls apart. Nature is exploited; it is reduced to satisfy human needs or replaced with artificial, more comfortable, materials, and thus the transcendent in nature withers, breaks into pieces and, in general, undergoes secularization (in its redefined understanding).

³⁰R. S. Thomas, “The Echoes Return Slow”, in: *Collected Later Poems, 1988-2000* (Tarsset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2013), 48.

³¹R. S. Thomas, “Counterpoint”, in: *Collected Later Poems, 1988-2000* (Tarsset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2013), 115.

³²Thomas, “The Echoes Return Slow”, 49.

³³R. S. Thomas, “Frequencies”, in: *Collected Poems: 1945-1990* (London: Phoenix, 2004), 344.

³⁴See: Joanna Soćko, *Poezja (meta)fizyczna: materialność w twórczości R. S. Thomasa* [(Meta)physical poetry: materiality in the works of R. S. Thomas] (Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN Wydawnictwo, 2017).

Importantly, the consequences of the Anthropocene are a threat to humanity. The anticipated consequences of destroying and rebuilding pristine wild areas make man somewhat paradoxically aware of his irreducible biological (and thus vulnerable) nature, which previously seemed to be limited to some “external” more-than-human reality. No wonder that the humanities revisit traditional indigenous models of ecological knowledge, developed on the basis of animistic practices combined with the sacralization and the tabooisation of nature.³⁵ Religious laws and rituals which limit human interference in nature are still perceived by modern “Westerners” as “superstitious.”³⁶ However, the model of communing with nature, which they propose, is appreciated more and more in the context of the extended anthropocenic suicide.

The new nature of the relation between man and nature in the Anthropocene is reflected in twenty-first-century ecopoetics. In the book *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene*, Lynn Keller discusses the works of such poets as Forrest Gander, Ed Roberson, Adam Dickinson, and Jorie Graham and demonstrates that in contemporary poetry nature is always discussed in the context of human interference. In the introduction, Keller discusses Evelyn Reilly’s brilliant poem *Wing / Span / Screw / Cluster (Aves)* from the volume *Styrofoam* (2009). The poem, in a thought-provoking form, juxtaposes slogans, images and symbols which evoke flying. This poetic patchwork is visible in the title. Words related to flying or birds intertwine in it. The final word, *aves*, refers primarily to the taxonomic name of birds. It may also invoke the street (short for avenue) and the Latin greeting commonly associated with Mary and the Annunciation. Two images which appear before the text of the poem refer to all three connotations. The first image shows a bird carcass on a road (“one of about 51,900 Google image search results for “roadkill + bird”). The second is a photograph of Giovanni Bernini’s famous 17th-century sculpture the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. This juxtaposition reflects the “clash” between the sacred and the profane, which lies at the heart of Reilly’s poem. Keller argues that Saint Teresa “represents the longing for transcendence of one’s earthly condition – a focus that distracts human attention and care from this world on which the survival of human and nonhuman animals depends.”³⁷ This is certainly one valid interpretation. However, it seems to me that in Reilly’s poem the relationship between transcendence and immanence is much more complex, and the attributes of transcendence are not limited to the separate sphere of the sacred. On the contrary, the poem demonstrates that transgression, something that we seek as humans, blurs the boundaries between “here” and “there,” which ultimately leads to the “profanation” of the unattainable “beyond,” whatever it may be. It is represented in the poem through the image of levitating cosmic debris which represents the remnants of human expansion.³⁸

³⁵See: e.g. Raymond John Pierotti, *Indigenous Knowledge, Ecology, and Evolutionary Biology* (London: Routledge, 2012).

³⁶I use this phrase as a simplification and a mental shortcut, bearing in mind that the current rehabilitation of the so-called indigenous ecological knowledge does not concern the religious context of its acquisition and practice.

³⁷Lynn Keller, *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2018), 21.

³⁸Evelyn Reilly, “Wing/Span/Screw/Cluster (Aves)”, in: *Styrofoam* (New York: Roof Books, 2009), 28–29.

The form of the poem also refers to transgression, specifically, as regards representation. The poem is formatted like an Internet page (*the actual.entangle / man (sic) to aves (sick)*³⁹), short sentences read like Internet entries, and entire phrases quoted from the Internet *verbatim* evoke, as Keller writes, “the nonlinear modes of information organization and transmission we depend on this era of globalized commerce and consumption.”⁴⁰ On the other hand, such formal experiments demonstrate that linguistic and symbolic representations, human connections and interactions, have been transferred into the virtual “cloud,” which is nevertheless still traditionally associated with the sacred and the transcendent. The re-location of the redefined immanent into the domain of “everything that flies” highlights its problematic relationship with hummingbirds, which, even though they move their wings the fastest in the world, may cease to exist in the near future: *Yet still.humming in fastest ::: 1200/ min (heart-beat) 50/sec (wingbeat)*.⁴¹

Blurring the boundary between immanence and transcendence also complicates linguistic self-identification validated by distinguishing between the self and the “other” (non-human/more-than-human). In Polish poetry, it is clearly visible in the works of Kacper Bartczak, Anna Adamowicz, Ilona Witkowska and Monika Lubińska. In a different poem (devoted to, among other things, the “extinction” of certain aspects of language, such as “subjections of the subject”), Evelyn Reilly comments on this crisis of self-identification: “Self follows a thread of narrativity/ only to crash against the glass/ of non-transparent communication/ The shock continues at least a century.”⁴² Monika Lubińska expands this metaphor, encouraging the reader to identify with the person in a mermaid costume who “palcuje okna szklanki lustra” [fingers the windows of a mirror glass].⁴³ This image only seemingly refers to a game children would play – it points to the disturbing process of self-discovery (realizing that one is a human-animal / cultural-biological / immanent-transcendent hybrid) which disturbs visual perception. That is why when “mijasz półtłuste wieprzowe/ usługi ubojowe coraz częściej/ myślisz że szyby mętnieją” [you pass semi-fat pork / slaughtering services more and more often / you think that the windows are getting cloudy],⁴⁴ and finally “łapią cię żaby” [frogs catch you] and “palce powieki kleją śluzem” [your fingers glue your eyelids with slime].⁴⁵ And although the “I” in one of the poems claims that “chciałaby mieć pewność siebie/ nie rzadziej niż raz na/ zawsze” [they would like to be self-confident / at least once/ and for all],⁴⁶ the poet makes it clear that the constitution of the autonomous subject – looking at one’s reflection in the more-than-human material, showing one’s entire self – is illusionary when you are aware of the deep dependence between what we do to the environment and animals and who we – as biological beings – are: “byłam zygotą kobietą zarodkiem chłopcem/ wieprzowiną drobiem

³⁹Reilly, 28.

⁴⁰Keller, *Recomposing Eco-poetics*, 23.

⁴¹Reilly, “Wing/ Span/ Screw/ Cluster (Aves)”, 29.

⁴²Evelyn Reilly, “Yet the Wor(l)d Can Still Be Very Pretty”, date of access: 15 April 2021, <https://www.poetryproject.org/publications/poems-texts/yes-the-wor-l-d-can-still-be-very-pretty>.

⁴³Monika Lubińska, “podaj liczbę” [give me a number], in: *Nareszcie możemy się zjadać* [We can finally eat one another] (Łódź: Stowarzyszenie Pisarzy Polskich. Oddział : Dom Literatury, 2019), 5.

⁴⁴Lubińska, 6.

⁴⁵Lubińska, 6.

⁴⁶Monika Lubińska, “-”, in: *Nareszcie możemy się zjadać* (Łódź: Stowarzyszenie Pisarzy Polskich. Oddział : Dom Literatury, 2019), 10.

[...]/ rodziłam roboty które nic nie jadły/ a produkowały elektrośmieci” [I was a zygote woman an embryo boy / pork poultry [...] / I gave birth to robots that did not eat / and still produced electro-waste].⁴⁷ In a different poem, Lubińska writes: “jestem w ciąży z fasolką szparagową/ i nie wiem czy to bezpieczne dla środowiska” [I am pregnant with green beans / and I do not know if it is safe for the environment].⁴⁸ She questions and challenges the autonomy of the human body, which is already signaled in the title of the volume, *nareszcie możemy się zjadać* [we can finally eat one another].

The vision of life as eating which questions the possibility of constituting an autonomous and independent (human) subject is also visible in the “posthuman”⁴⁹ poetry of Kacper Bartczak, in which food turns out to be the only sovereign.⁵⁰ According to the French etymology of the word, a sovereign is something supreme, most important, superior. One of Bartczak’s most recent volumes of poetry focuses on the “supreme food,” which refers to the most important Christian sacrament – the Eucharist. The concept of a transcendent God who, paradoxically, turns into food which brings together the human (but already saved, and therefore transcendent) body and a wheat wafer in order to instill in the mortal body some divine immortality – thus creating an organic community of the body and the church – lies at the heart of all essential transformations that blur all possible boundaries between the transcendent and the immanent. In the processes of these transubstantiations, only a poem may become autonomous. Redefining Christian conventions, the poem is a word that becomes flesh. It is in fact performative, symbolic and material – it is a “poem-organism”⁵¹ that not so much connects but mixes these spheres in the shared bloodstream. In this way, the poem becomes a new form of incarnation, but derives its vitality from the “ciała niechwalebego/ bo mojego”⁵² [unworthy/ body of mine] made of various textures, which – unlike in Christian symbolism – is a mixture of natural and plastic materials, and its ultimate form is the result of various “worldly” political, social and economic forces. The poem “saves” because it organically incorporates this immanent sphere into the material (the real), and the most important manifestation of “more-than-human” nature is the organic force forging the poem’s cyborg body, which brings to mind the tiger from William Blake’s famous poem (although devoid of its fearful symmetry).

Leśmian’s poems were reminiscent of Bergson’s *elan vital*, “songs without words” which through poetry could revive “the logical domain of existence,” allowing man to achieve the epiphanic moment of self-awareness. The poems of “organic formalists,” such as Bishop and Thomas, evoked the material and the real in order to locate man in those spheres. However,

⁴⁷Lubińska, 10.

⁴⁸Monika Lubińska, “niepokalane poczęcie” [immaculate conception], in: *Nareszcie możemy się zjadać* (Łódź: Stowarzyszenie Pisarzy Polskich. Oddział: Dom Literatury, 2019), 15.

⁴⁹See: Wit Pietrzak and Uniwersytet Łódzki, “Poezja poczwłowiecza: «Pokarm suweren» Kacpra Bartczaka” [Post-human poetry: Kacper Bartczak’s ‘Food Sovereign’], *Er(r)go: teoria, literatura, kultura*. 2019 (2019): 153–63.

⁵⁰See: Kacper Bartczak, *Pokarm suweren* [Food sovereign] (Stronie Śląskie: Biuro Literackie, 2017).

⁵¹See: Jakub Skurtys, “Pieśń kopalni i tworzyw sztucznych (wokół «Wierszy organicznych» Kacpra Bartczaka)” [A song of minerals and plastics (Kacper Bartczak’s “Organic Poems”)] in: *Ekokrytyka*, ed. Krzysztof Wojciechowski, 2018, 33.

⁵²Kacper Bartczak, “Konsubstancje” [Consubstances], in: *Pokarm suweren* (Stronie Śląskie: Biuro Literackie, 2017), 5.

in the poems of the “anthropocene poets” such a dichotomy is untenable. In the context of the redefined concepts of immanence and transcendence, the Anthropocene is the opposite of the epiphany. “Anthropocene poems” present human expansion as a profane invasion into the transcendent sphere of the “more-than-human,” which so far has been protected by the laws of tradition and rituals, making people feel that they are part of something greater; something that is fundamental to their existence. Disturbing the division between immanence (a universe of measures, signs and symbols) and transcendence is visible in, as Anna Kałuża puts it, “contingent” poetics.⁵³ As the name suggests, it is based on random juxtapositions and materialized in arbitrary arrangements. Immanence and transcendence do come together but it happens at the cost of the immanent order of language, as demonstrated by numerous anacolutha, the breakdown of syntactic forms and the ambiguity of representations. Reilly, Lubińska and Bartczak show that we can no longer distance ourselves from the world, adopting a point of view that would make it possible to show the world or oneself in a wider perspective. Our hybrid bodies and the world appear to be Timothy Morton’s “hyperobjects;” they adhere to any other object they touch but we cannot see them in their entirety.⁵⁴ However, the remnants of religious mentality – in the form of processed phrases and profane references – suggest that the attempts to reconstitute literally any point of reference are being made. It demonstrates that there is a high price to pay for such formal (and disillusioned) experiments.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

⁵³See: Anna Kałuża, “Szacunki ryzyka” [Estimated risk], date of access 15 April 2021, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/8549-szacunki-ryzyka.html>.

⁵⁴See: Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT:

The analysis of a number of late 20th-century nature poems allows the author to redefine the traditional concepts of transcendence and immanence in the context of post-secular studies and the broadly defined new materialism. The article argues that the reformulation of these categories allows one to map the dynamic changes in the 20th-century and 21st-century eco-poetics. The analysis of selected poems written by poets who are well aware of the limits of language, allows the author to draw attention to the debate around the concept of the Anthropocene, a significant turning point in itself. The article discusses current poetic tendencies, taking into account the impact of the Anthropocene.

anthropocene

POSTSECULARISM

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Joanna Soćko – born in 1985, literary scholar, assistant professor at the Institute of Literary Studies at the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Silesia. She is interested in storytelling, narrative anthropology and texts which help explore the border between contemporary ecocritical and post-secular theories. She is the author of the book *Poezja (meta)fizyczna. Materialność w twórczości R. S. Thomasa* [(Meta) physical poetry: Materiality in the works of R. S. Thomas] (2017, Wydawnictwo IBL), numerous articles and a subjective slow travel guide to Katowice and the surrounding area. |