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RECLAIMING ROMANTICISM

TOWARDS AN ECOPOETICS
OF DECOLONISATION

KATE RIGBY

B L O O M S B U R Y

Reclaiming Romanticism

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Towards an Ecopoetics of Decolonization

Kate Rigby

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For

Robert Hartley

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which flows into the Yarra River in the heart of Melbourne. In the inaugural issue of the journal that I co-founded with Freya Mathews and Sharon Pfueller, *PAN (Philosophy Activism Nature)*, we included an extract from John Anderson's book-length poem *the forest set out like the night* (1995), which celebrates this little waterway. With John, then, I join in praise of:

the Merri Creek saying the right things
over and over ...

(2000: 22)

At the same time, I am mindful that whatever the Merri has had to say over the millennia will have been received differently through the cultural prisms of diverse human listeners. Those who have had longest to learn her aqueous tongue are the Wurundjeri, whose Country the Merri helped to shape, and from whom nineteenth-century colonizers from far distant climes learnt to hail her as such: 'Merri Merri', 'many rocks'. In honouring the Merri, then, I would also like to pay my respects to Wurundjeri Elders, past, present and future.

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Over the past few years of seemingly endless writing and rewriting, walks with the gracefully ageing Laska have helped to keep me moderately sane.

The book is dedicated to my human partner of forty years, Robert Hartley, without whom none of this would have been possible.

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‘Gernot Böhme’s Ecological Aesthetics of Atmosphere’, in A. Goodbody and K. Rigby (eds), *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*, 139–52, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011.

“Come forth into the light of things”: Material Spirit and Negative Eco-poetics’, in G. C. Stallings, M. Asensi and C. Good (eds), *Material Spirit: Religion and Literature Intranscendent*, 111–28, New York: Fordham University Press, 2014.

‘Literature, Ethics, and Bushfire in Australia’, in J. Adamson and M. Davis (eds), *Humanities for the Environment: Integrated Knowledges and New Constellations of Practice*, 210–24, London: Routledge, 2016.

“Piping in their honey dreams”: Towards a Creaturely Eco-poetics’, in F. Middelhof, S. Schönbeck, R. Borgards and C. Gersdorf (eds), *Texts, Animals, Environments: Zoopoetics and Eco-poetics*, 281–95, Freiburg i.B.: Rombach, 2019.

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Norton & co. and the Audre Lorde Estate for ‘The Bees’ by Audre Lorde © 1997, 2000.

When this book was already in press, Australia began to burn as never before. As I write this final acknowledgement, the fires are burning still, currently covering an area almost the size of England. Thankfully, only a small number of human lives have been lost thus far, but thousands have been rendered homeless, and some billion animals have perished (infinitely more if insects are factored in), possibly propelling some species over the brink of extinction and further compromising damaged ecosystems. This is a particularly grim instance of those

sentinel events, such as I discussed in my last book, *Dancing with Disaster*, that are proliferating worldwide, bearing witness to the ecocidal trajectory of today's fossil-fuelled industrial-capitalist societies. Parts of this book are bound to have come out differently had they been written in the still uncertain aftermath of this eco-catastrophe. As it is, I wish to remember the unhoused and injured, those who have died and those who mourn, and to acknowledge, with gratitude, the efforts of all who are endeavouring to protect, tend and support those, human and otherwise, most immediately afflicted. With this book, I join in solidarity with those who are seeking to voice and heed the call issuing from this truly apocalyptic conflagration: a call, that is, for a profound transformation, at once decolonial and ecological, in our relations with one another, other others, and the ravaged Earth in these ever-more perilous times.

Bath, January 2020

Introduction

Only now is Antiquity arising. ...The remains of ancient times are but the specific stimuli for the formation of Antiquity. ...It is the same in the case of Classical literature as it is with Antiquity; it is not actually given to us – it is not at hand (*vorhanden*) – rather, it is yet to be engendered by us. Only through assiduous and inspired study of the Ancients might a Classical literature arise before us – one that the Ancients themselves did not have.

(Novalis 1960: 640–42; my trans.)

Romanticism, decolonization and ecopoetics

The question of how to inherit the cultural legacies of former times comes into critical focus when continuity can no longer be taken for granted. This is undoubtedly the case for people today, who are struggling to orient themselves in the face of massive change and uncertainty on numerous fronts, as the weather grows weirder, wildlife dwindles and many places become strange or even unliveable. Yet it was also true for those Europeans in the late eighteenth century, whose inherited notions of ‘nature’, ‘culture’ and society were being challenged by new scientific discoveries, inventions and modes of production; encounters with so-called ‘primitive’ peoples, whose lifeways provided purchase for European self-critique (whilst also being massively disrupted as a consequence of colonization); and an efflorescence of emancipatory political movements of various stripes. The resultant sense of living at a time of rupture contributed to the emergence of the self-consciously modern hermeneutic sensibility exemplified in the above quotation from Novalis’ 1798 essay on the neoclassical turn of his renowned older contemporary, F. W. Goethe. Novalis’ insistence on the need for both ‘assiduous’ attention and ‘inspired’ interpretation in our reception of earlier literatures, recognizing that cultural legacies are

always (co-)constructed after the event, is one of the many facets of European Romanticism that I seek to reclaim for the perilous present in this book. To begin with, it informs my approach to the very question of Romantic inheritances. If, for the generation that would subsequently become known as ‘Romantic’ (or ‘Early Romantic’, in the case of Novalis and friends in Jena in the 1790s), the ‘study of the Ancients’ was to give rise to a ‘Classical literature... that the Ancients themselves did not have’, then we must acknowledge in turn that our own study of Novalis and his contemporaries on both sides of the Channel (like that of previous generations of Romanticism scholars) will inevitably produce a ‘Romantic literature’ that the ‘Romantics’ (most of whom did not think of themselves as such) did not have.

This is not to say that the work of reclamation in which I am engaged here is intended to produce yet another account, however self-consciously qualified as an interpretive construct, of Romanticism *per se*. On the contrary: my starting point is that Romanticism, understood as a defined ‘movement’, does not exist outside of the pages of literary historiography. The flurry of exploration, experimentation, agitation, reflection and creation across diverse fields of activity that was going in northwestern Europe around 1800, fanning out to other parts of the world during the course of the nineteenth century and beyond, took diverse forms and had divergent tendencies. These have been variously identified and evaluated by successive ecocritics over the past thirty years or so.¹ In the landmark early ecocritical work of Jonathan Bate (1991), British Romanticism was hailed as the source of a distinctively left-green ‘environmental tradition’ extending from William Wordsworth to William Morris, whilst for Lawrence Buell (1995), Thoreau’s writing was exemplary of a North American ‘environmental imagination’ of a more deep ecological hue. These were wholly affirmative accounts, and there were many more besides.² Unsurprisingly, more critical perspectives were soon being voiced, including in my own earlier work on European Romanticism (2004).³ In the meantime, however, I have become troubled by the summary dismissal of Romanticism *per se* that has become commonplace among ecocritics and eco-poets, who are at pains to dissociate themselves from such allegedly ‘romantic’ misdemeanours as individualism, sentimentalism and an anachronistic hankering after either pastoral idylls or sublime wilderness. Such tendencies, I would agree, are problematic, and they can certainly be identified in some instances of Romantic thought and literature. As much recent Romanticist scholarship has amply demonstrated, however, there are also countervailing tendencies that were historically salient and remain of signal value from a contemporary

perspective. These include, for example, the links with Buddhism traced by Mark Lussier (2011), the 'ecology of wonder' explored by Louise Economides (2016) and the emancipatory geopolitics that J. A. Hubbell (2018) identifies in the work of Byron.⁴

Reclaiming Romanticism extends this new phase of sympathetic re-evaluation of key aspects of the heterogeneous inheritance of European Romanticism with a view to delineating a decolonizing eco-poetics for our own time of multifaceted rupture. This entails a reconsideration not only of particular works of British Romantic verse, viewed within the wider frame of European Romantic thought and literature, but also of the significantly different afterlives of European Romanticism in the new worlds of North America and Australia. This is explored further by bringing Romantic eco-poetics into conversation with the verse of American and Australian writers from the mid-twentieth century to the present. Crucially, I also consider how the decolonizing eco-poetics that I trace in their work, and its Romantic antecedents, might be translated into forms of ecopolitical praxis beyond the page.

The concept of 'decolonization', upon which this discussion is premised, is bio-inclusive, in that it concerns relations of domination obtaining between humans and nonhumans, in addition to (and often in connection with) those that obtain among humans, especially on the basis of race, class and gender.⁵ In this, I draw on Val Plumwood's ecopolitical analysis of what she termed the 'logic of colonisation' (1993), in conjunction with Deborah Bird Rose's proposals for an 'ethics of decolonization' (2004).⁶ Integrating feminist, socialist and postcolonial critiques of hegemonic social relations with the radical ecological critique of human domination of 'nature', Plumwood argued that all these forms of frequently (albeit not necessarily or intrinsically) interlinked oppression were grounded in a conceptual structure of 'hierarchical dualism'. Key features of hierarchical dualism, in her analysis, include 'backgrounding' the independent interests and agency of the subordinate group and the denial of dependence upon their services on the part of the dominant one; the refusal to recognize any similarities between the dominant and subordinate groups in favour of a 'hyperseparated' construction of their differences ('radical exclusion'); the definition of the subordinate group in terms of lack vis-à-vis the valued traits of the dominant one ('incorporation'); a disregard for differences among members of the subordinate group ('homogenisation'); and the accordance of value to them primarily or exclusively as a means to an end ('instrumentalism') (41–59).⁷ While Plumwood's own work was primarily ecofeminist in orientation, Rose's 'ethics for decolonisation' arose from her work with First Nations Australians,

especially with communities in and around Yarralin, Lingara, Pigeon Hole and Daguragu in the Northern Territory, and Wallaga Lake and Narooma in New South Wales. Rose's analysis of the entanglement of Aboriginal dispossession with environmental degradation brings Aboriginal ontologies into conversation with the philosophical ethics of Emmanuel Levinas (1996), especially as read though, and in conjunction with, the post-Holocaust philosophy of James Hatley (2000). For Rose,

The ethical challenge of decolonization illuminates a ground for powerful presence. Against domination it asserts relationality, against control it asserts mutuality, against hyperseparation it asserts connectivity, and against claims that rely on an imagined future it asserts engaged responsiveness in the present.

(2004: 213)

This perspective is avowedly countermodern, putting pressure on linear narratives of historical progress, whilst resisting the temptation to idealize the past. As such, it also highlights the difficulty and incompleteness of decolonization as an ongoing process with uncertain outcomes. Acknowledging other-than-human agencies and interests operating across vast reaches of time and space, this approach affords a way of integrating the human-centred concerns with social justice animating postcolonial criticism with the 'dehumanizing' dimensions of the type of Anthropocene criticism adumbrated by Timothy Clark (2015: 115–38).⁸

In re-evaluating Romanticism through a decolonial lens, I draw also on a range of other approaches within the wider field of the environmental humanities, including ecoreligious studies, multispecies studies and biosemiotics, in order to identify within Romantic verse particular ecopoetic arts of resistance to hegemonic constructions of human subjectivity and instrumentalizing constructions of 'nature'. Such arts of resistance might be considered a mode of 'culture-critical metadiscourse', to recall Hubert Zapf's theory of 'cultural ecology', motivating 'a radical self-examination of prevailing cultural systems from an overarching ecological perspective of individual and collective survival and sustainability' (2016: 103). In this way, I argue, Romantic poetry harbours potentials for a decolonizing praxis, pitched against both human domination of nonhuman others and the domination of some humans by others, especially, in the case of settler nations, Indigenous and enslaved peoples by colonial powers. For that potential to be realized, however, it is also necessary to put pressure on the culturally specific and historically contingent assumptions about human relations with 'nature' that were exported to the colonies, including through

the medium of Romantic verse: Romantic eco-poetics, in other words, must itself be decolonized. This in turn requires more inclusive conversations, a deepened dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers, in order to discern alternative modes of perceiving, articulating and embodying our interrelationships with one another and other others, and with our ecologically imperilled earthly environs.

The decolonizing eco-poetics that I explore in this book is not tied to any particular form or style of poetic writing. I share with Stuart Cooke (2013) the view that what Philip Mead describes as the ‘resistance to easily communicable “meanings”’ (Mead 2008: 6), the source of much of the pleasure of poetry for many readers, can also be ecopolitically salient. In particular, I argue in the first chapter that the propensity of poetry in its more-or-less unconventional uses of language to trip us up as we read along, demanding that we slow down and accept that not all it has to say to us is readily within our grasp, is crucial to its capacity to entrain a more contemplative way of being in the world. In my analysis, however, whatever ecopolitical efficacy might accrue to particular poetics beyond the confines of the literary sphere should be sought not primarily in their formal characteristics but rather in the wider networks in which they are received and through which their meanings are activated. The argument of, and for, form is overstated when, for instance, Angus Fletcher asserts, ‘Underneath the bipolar structure of the couplet their always lurks a desire to define, to enclose, to delimit’ (2004: 35). Heroic couplets might well have become rather hackneyed by the late eighteenth century (Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge certainly thought so). But it is by no means self-evident that their deployment as a poetic device is necessarily politically suspect. More generally, I worry that much current discussion of eco-poetics remains beholden to the ideology of the avant-garde, according to which the rupturing of the aesthetic conventions of lyrical language and traditional forms of versification is an imperative of ecopolitical correctness.

While the advocacy for avant-garde eco-poetics generally takes its cue from the Modernists’ self-professed break with Romanticism, a commitment to formal experimentation is itself part of the Romantic heritage: explicitly so, for example, in Wordsworth’s 1798 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (a title that was itself an affront to poetic convention), which explicitly recommends the poems included in this volume to their adventurous readers as ‘experiments’ (1974: vol. 1, 116). This is not to say that such experiments are not worthwhile or to deny that the formal properties of poetic texts carry their own semantic

significance, as many contributors to the burgeoning field of ecopoetics have shown.⁹ However, progressive perspectives can be mediated through a variety of poetic forms, and different kinds of poetry will resonate better with some readerships than others. As Jonathon Skinner observed in his contribution to the inaugural edition of his journal *ecopoetics*, any writer ‘who wants to engage poetry with more-than-human life has no choice but to resist simply, and instrumentally, stepping over language’ (Skinner 2001b: 105). In his editorial statement, Skinner nonetheless affirmed the diversity of ecopoetic writing in its capacity to ‘subvert the endless debates about “language” vs. lyric, margin vs. mainstream, performed vs. written, innovative vs. academic, or, now, digitized vs. printed approaches to poetry’ (2001a: 6). Skinner has recently reiterated this pluralistic approach to questions of poetic form, style and indeed medium, observing that ‘ecopoetics may be more productively approached as a discursive site, to which many different kinds of poetry can contribute’ (2017: 329): a view that is confirmed, in my analysis, by several other contributors to this ongoing discussion (e.g. Bristow 2015; Hume and Osborne 2018; Farrier 2019; and Bellarsi and Rauscher 2019).¹⁰

Poetry, as Mead puts it, is ‘networked language’ (2008), and what counts above all with respect to its ecolitical salience are those social networks in and through which its aesthetic arts of resistance get translated into extra-literary practices of transformation. If the poetry of Romantic writers that I discuss here remains of more than merely historical or narrowly ‘literary’ interest, it is because of the ways in which it continues to be invoked in the public sphere: for example, when the poetry of Wordsworth and Keats becomes a springboard for public conversations around climate change¹¹; when Blake is called upon to promote a ‘radically expanded vision’ in facing the challenges of the Anthropocene justly and nonviolently¹²; or when John Clare gets hailed by high-profile *Guardian* columnist and public intellectual George Monbiot as the ‘poet of environmental crisis’, who showed how the ‘era of greed began with the enclosure of land.’¹³ Rather than examining such translations in terms of the reception history of specific texts or writers, however, this book works with an extended concept of *oikopoiesis*, encompassing modes of crafting (which is to say, reclaiming, reconstructing, defending and decolonizing) collective living spaces that are modelled in the poetry under discussion, but put into action beyond the page. In the absence of such a move beyond the purely textual, as Aboriginal poet and scholar Evelyn Araluen has insisted, ‘We run the risk of foreclosing decolonization to an academic elite by coding it purely within poetics and academic practice’ (2017a: n.p.).¹⁴

From ‘Anthropocene’ to ‘Ploutocene’?

As this book was nearing completion, two news items broke through the media clamour and commanded my full attention. The first was yet another in the rising tide of ecological bad news stories; and, once again, it was from Australia. What had long been predicted had now come to pass: for the first time, a fellow mammal had been declared extinct as a clear consequence of anthropogenic climate change. The critter in question was not charismatic: a nondescript rodent called the Bramble Cay melomys (*Melomys rubicale*), whose territory appears to have been confined to a small island in the Torres Strait off the northernmost tip of Queensland. The Bramble Cay melomys is believed to be the sole endemic mammal of the Great Barrier Reef, and their declining numbers had been noted by conservation biologists some years previously. A proposed protection plan was not put into action, however, and according to a scientific report for the Queensland government from 2016, the surviving population disappeared sometime between 2009 and 2014 (Gynther *et al.* 2016). Yet it was only when the federal minister for the environment relocated it from the ranks of the Endangered to the officially Extinct in her biodiversity update of 18 February 2019 that the national, and thence international, press sat up and took notice. For according to the conservation biologists who had been urging their protection, the vegetation that provided shelter and sustenance for the disregarded melomys had been declining for some time, probably as a consequence of growing storm surges, and it appears that the remaining population was simply washed away by rising waters of the Torres Strait.¹⁵

In the same press release that announced the extinction of the Bramble Cay melomys, the environment minister also commented on the re-categorization of the Spectacled Flying-fox from Vulnerable to Endangered in the wake of ‘a recent heat stress event in north Queensland’.¹⁶ In fact, some 23,000 individuals, representing almost a third of the remaining population of this species, which had already been halved over the previous decade, had fallen dead out of their arboreal roosting places over a deadly two-day period in November 2018.¹⁷ I found this especially heartbreaking as it occurred only a month after the death of my friend and mentor Deborah Bird Rose, who had long been a champion of the flying-fox, along with those who care for them (e.g. Rose 2011a).¹⁸ Among other things, Rose taught me that flying-foxes are an important pollinator species for Australian eucalypt forests. Few are likely to mourn the extinction of the Bramble Cay melomys in itself, but the plight of the Spectacled Flying-fox indicates that

a great many more species are also experiencing immense suffering and mass mortality as a consequence of climate change. Among those who are likely to follow the fate of the Bramble Cay melomys, some will be keystone species; and as they disappear, entire ecosystems will begin to unravel. In this way, climate change is a harbinger of what Rose called 'double death': death, that is, that can no longer be folded back into life, because life can no longer keep pace with death; death that breeds yet more death, engendering 'cascades of death that curtail the future and unmake the living presence of the past'.¹⁹

Climate change is but one of several far-reaching alterations to Earth's biophysical systems that are taken to provide evidence for the by now all-too-familiar postulate that our planet has entered a new geological era driven by the largely unintended consequences of human activities. Another is the massive quantity of chicken bones that will be found in the future fossil record of those parts of the world where there were profits to be made from intensive farming and fast food. Others include the global distribution of nuclear radiation from the detonation of atomic weapons; dwindling populations and species of non-domesticated plants and animals vis-à-vis growing populations of humans and their domesticated species; changes in the phosphorus and nitrogen cycles; and large concentrations of novel materials, such as concrete, steel and plastics. Problematically dubbed the Anthropocene, this era might be described as one in which the endeavours of what was initially a very small and relatively privileged proportion of Earth's human population to make itself at home in the world in a new fashion – namely, by means of fossil-fuelled industrialization – has effectively unhoused countless others, human as well as nonhuman. If the elites of the older industrial heartlands are finally beginning to acknowledge that we are facing a 'climate' and 'environmental emergency', then it is surely at least in part because those who have hitherto benefitted disproportionately from this form of 'development' are starting to feel threatened by its adverse consequences. Yet the experience of becoming de-domiciled, of finding one's home territory rendered inaccessible or unrecognizable as a consequence of the home-making efforts of others, has long been familiar to colonized peoples. From the perspective of Potawatomi philosopher Kyle White and the Indigenous communities with whom he works, anthropogenic climate change is 'an intensification of environmental change imposed on Indigenous peoples by colonialism' (2017: 153; see also Davis and Todd 2017). In some parts of the world, moreover, notably in the Americas, colonization entailed the exploitation of the labour of enslaved peoples forcibly removed from elsewhere. There were, as Kathryn Yusoff puts it, 'a billion black Anthropocenes' (2019).

Yet in the penal colonies of New South Wales and Tasmania, white bodies too were bound, brutalized and set to work in the service of empire. Given the subaltern ranks from which these convicts were generally drawn, along with impact of the Highland clearances and parliamentary enclosures in propelling many 'free' settlers to the colonies, it becomes clear that the homogenizing term 'Anthropocene' masks differentials of class as well as race.

In Australia, as in parts of North America, colonization also brought a raft of new species, along with a very different set of ideas about, and practices of, land use. And there too, the invaders' claim to possession of the colonial earth was frequently asserted by force of arms. The extent of frontier violence in Australia is only now beginning to come to light; and, as in the case of climate change, many are still in denial. This was brought home to me by the second news story that erupted into my workaday world in the week following the reported extinction of the Bramble Cay melomys: a special report in the *Guardian Australia* on the University of Newcastle's interactive map charting the spread of massacre sites across the country between 1794 and 1928 – sites, that is, where six or more Aboriginal people are known to have been murdered in frontier violence. For me, as a descendant of settler Australians, watching those red dots, some small, some large, proliferating like the pox across the face of the continent was a chilling experience. It was made all the more so by the rider at the top of the map: 'Data is incomplete with more sites still to be added, particularly in WA.'²⁰ The First Nations Australians who were variously shot, poisoned and run off cliffs are now thought to total at least 100,000 – as many as all of the Australians (some of whom were Aboriginal) who died in all foreign military engagements put together, and around 12 per cent of the estimated pre-contact population of 850,000 (representing some 700 language groups). Many more died as a result of introduced diseases and reduced food sources: by the time of Federation in 1901, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island population is thought to have diminished to around 117,000.²¹ Genocide, like ecocide, perpetrates double death; and in colonial Australia, as in some other settler nations, genocide and ecocide were interconnected (Rose 2004: 34–36). Today, moreover, too many Aboriginal people's lives are still blighted by maladies linked with the continuing trauma of displacement, disadvantage and discrimination. The life expectancy of non-Indigenous Australians is about eight years longer than that of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, who are also more than twice as likely to die at their own hands.²² The causes for this discrepancy are complex, but redressing it will certainly require proper acknowledgement of the extent of the violence perpetrated against Aboriginal people in the frontier wars and the

unjustifiability of the suffering they have endured and continue to experience. As Rose stresses in her ‘ethics for decolonization’, suffering is exacerbated when it goes unacknowledged, and, as Levinas argues, the ‘justification of the neighbor’s pain is certainly the source of all immorality’ (qtd. Rose 2004: 7).

These two news items, one highlighting how anthropogenic global heating is set to ramp up an already disastrously high extinction rate, the other pointing to the still inadequately acknowledged extent of frontier violence in Australia, are indicative of the hermeneutic horizon within which my re-consideration of Romantic legacies is located. But they also point back to the historical conjunction within which European Romanticism emerged, when both of these trajectories were set in train: the former, in 1784, with the invention of James Watt’s steam engine, and its subsequent deployment in the expansion of fossil-fuelled capitalist industrialization; and the latter, in 1788, when the First Fleet hove into Botany Bay to establish a penal colony on the continent that the British had dubbed Australia and claimed for the Crown. It was the first of these that provided Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer with their proposed dating of the onset of the Anthropocene. Yet, as I have already indicated, their coinage is problematic. For in attributing those Earth system changes to which it refers to an amorphous *Anthropos*, it veils the uneven distribution of culpability and vulnerability among different sectors of the human population (both within and between nations). Among the alternatives that have been proposed, ‘Capitolocene’ (Moore 2015) has considerable diagnostic value, to the extent that turbo-charged capitalism has been, and remains, a driving force in the production, perpetuation and exacerbation of these Earth system changes, along with their inequitable impacts. However, it risks overlooking the appalling environmental record of the non-capitalist regimes of Maoist China and the Soviet Union; and it is worth noting that the shift to renewable energy production is currently being undertaken by some corporations regardless of government policies, or, in the case of the USA under Donald Trump, even in spite of them. Anna Tsing’s and Donna Haraway’s term ‘Plantationocene’ helpfully highlights another salient dimension of the socioecological crisis that continues to unfold around the world: namely, ‘the devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations, relying on slave labor and other forms of exploited, alienated, and usually spatially transported labor’ (Haraway 2015: 162). This is a term that I take up in my third chapter, in order to explore the entanglement of industrialized farming not only with colonization (internal, in the form of enclosure, as well as external) but also with slavery. It seems unlikely, however,

that these practices would have left a significant trace in the future geological record in the absence of the widespread combustion of fossil fuels. Haraway's other coinage 'Chthulucene' is too much of a mouthful, but I appreciate the way that she deploys it to designate a 'timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth' (2016: 2). By contrast with H. P. Lovecraft's 'misogynist racial-nightmare monster Cthulhu' (2016: 101), Haraway's Chthulucene envisages the formation and proliferation of inclusive alliances among the 'earthbound', human and otherwise. This coinage, then, is not so much diagnostic as aspirational, signaling an ecopolitical commitment to act in ways that might render the Anthropocene not an era in its own right but merely a transitional period. Even more aspirational is Glenn Albrecht's use of the term 'Symbiocene' to designate not where we are and how we might 'stay with the trouble' in more life-affirming ways but rather a utopian horizon towards which we might move: an era in which 'human action, culture and enterprise will be exemplified by those cumulative types of relationships and attributes nurtured by humans that enhance mutual interdependence and mutual benefit for *all* living beings (desirable), all species (essential) and the health of all ecosystems (mandatory)' – an era characterized by the deployment of technologies of biomimicry within an ecosocial polity of 'sumbiocracy', nourishing the human impulse towards 'sumbiophilia', the love of living together in multi-species communities (2015). This is, to be sure, an appealing (if at this stage rather vague and decidedly remote) prospect. But it leaves open the question of how best to designate the new geological era in which 'we' (which is to say, diverse collectives in differing ways) currently find ourselves.

The time frame that is gaining acceptance among geologists for the onset of the Anthropocene is the mid-twentieth century, coinciding with the Great Acceleration of industrial modernity. All that, however, was contingent upon the development of fossil-fuelled manufacturing and transportation, as noted by Crutzen and Stoermer in their original proposal of a late eighteenth-century dating: the point at which glacial ice began to accumulate evidence of growing carbon dioxide emissions.²³ Around a year after James Watt patented his steam engine, the English poet Anna Seward composed a poem that conveys something of the shock of the immediate environmental impact of industrialization, as well as suggesting another way in which our current era might be framed. Lamenting the violation of 'sylvan Colebrook' by the air, water and noise pollution from Britain's first coal-fired iron foundry, Seward imagines the 'Genius' of the place having been 'by Plutus brib'd', such that this once-beautiful valley on the verdant surface of the Earth had fallen under the sway of Erebus, the Greek god of deep

darkness associated with the passage into Hades (1810: 314–19). Plutus is the Romanized form of Ploutos, the Greek god of wealth, traditionally associated with agricultural bounty. In ‘Colebrook Dale’, however, the wealth generated by the iron foundry was not agricultural but rather dependent upon the exploitation of mineral riches extracted from Earth’s dark depths. This kind of wealth was associated in Greek literature with another deity, Plouton, who also ruled the realm of the dead. In the case of the extraction of fossil fuels, moreover, it is the dead who are themselves being exhumed and exploited: the remains, that is, of ancient forests and sea creatures. In this way, one might say that, with fossil-fuelled industrialization (along with its by-products, including plastics), the realm of the dead has invaded the lifeworld of Gaiā’s ‘Critical Zone’: Earth’s permeable boundary layer, extending from groundwaters to treetops, where life is generated and sustained by means of complex interactions among rock, water, soil and living organisms (Arènes, Latour and Giillardet, 2018). This colonization of the Critical Zone is propelling those processes of ecological unravelling that are tipping the dance of lifedeath (life understood as encompassing death, and *vice versa*) towards the terminus of double death. Perhaps, then, a fitting alternative to Anthropocene might be ‘Ploutocene’, understood as the era in which the inequitably distributed wealth pursued by Ploutocrats (beginning with those who ensured the ascendancy of steam over water power in the late eighteenth century [Malm 2016]) is garnered at an increasingly unbearable cost to, and unimaginably long-term consequences for, the wider collective, human as well as nonhuman, of the living Earth.

Capitolocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene, Symbiocene... Ploutocene: all of these alternatives (and others) are valuable for illuminating particular dimensions of the genesis and character of our current situation, along with our potential future prospects. They seem unlikely to dislodge the geologists’ favoured terminology of the Anthropocene, not least because it is gaining traction for socioecological discussions in the public arena beyond the bounds of the terminologically obsessed academy. It is nonetheless crucial to be mindful of the implications of the divergent narratives within which it is being deployed, with their differing accounts of ‘how we got here’, where we should be heading, who should get us there and how (Bonneuil 2015). While I agree that ‘Anthropocene’ falls short as a diagnostic term, I share David Farrier’s view that it is proving useful as a ‘provocation’ (Yusoff 2013: 781): namely, to reconsider ‘what it means to be human in a time of political, ethical, and ecological crisis’ (Farrier 2019: 17).²⁴ In this way, Anthropocene discourse, whilst risking the effacement of salient social differences with respect to both responsibility and vulnerability, nonetheless

opens the possibility of putting pressure on the *anthropos*. And it is not least for its probing of the category of the human, and of humankind's relations with otherkinds and our shared earthly environs, that Romanticism has long been of interest to ecocritics. This questioning was prompted in large part by those technoscientific and socioeconomic developments that launched the perilous Ploutocene, but it was also profoundly informed by colonial encounters with other peoples, lifeways and landscapes.²⁵

Romantic inheritances revisited

The charge most commonly laid against Romanticism by postcolonial ecocritics is that raised by William Cronon in his highly influential essay 'The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature' (1996). In Johnson's Dictionary of 1755, the definition of 'wilderness' carries a distinctly negative connotation as a 'tract of solitude and savageness'. Yet, as I discuss in the first chapter, such places had long been sought out by monks and mystics as places of contemplative retreat. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, this Christian religious tradition, which has counterparts in other faiths and philosophies, was brought into conversation with the classical concept of the 'sublime', following Nicolas Boileau's French translation of Longinus' essay 'On the Sublime' in 1674. In Lord Shaftesbury's *The Moralists, A Philosophical Rhapsody* (1709), for example, those wild regions that were once reviled as desolate and god-forsaken are revalued as more truly theophanic (revelatory of the divine) than places which had been made over by humans:

I shall no longer resist the passion in me for things of a natural kind; where neither Art, nor the Conceit or Caprice of Man has spoil'd their genuine order, by breaking in upon that primitive state. Even the rude Rocks, the mossy Caverns, the irregular unwrought Grotto's, and broken Falls of Waters, with all the horrid Graces of the Wilderness itself, as representing NATURE more, will be the more engaging, and appear with the Magnificence beyond the formal Mockery of princely Gardens.

(Pevsner 1968: 82–83)

Subsequently, Edmund Burke and Emmanuel Kant formulated differing accounts of the sublime as an aesthetic phenomenon. Whereas Burke follows Shaftesbury in associating the sublime with an attitude of respect for that which transcends the merely human, Kant's aesthetic theory is supremely logocentric. Although

Kant's examples are similar, including the contemplation of awe-inspiring natural phenomena that threaten to overwhelm the human spectator through their magnitude or incomprehensibility, he argues that the sublime moment only arrives when we realize 'the supremacy of our cognitive faculties on the rational side over the greatest faculty of sensibility' (1892: 106): for there is in Nature no power greater than our own exclusively human capacity of reason.

The Burkean and Kantian versions of the sublime undoubtedly informed Romantic aesthetics in certain ways and to varying degrees. In my assessment, however, Cronon misconstrues the significance of the aesthetics of the sublime with respect to European Romanticism, projecting back onto British writers a predilection for 'pristine wilderness' that really only gained prominence in North America. To claim that Wordsworth, Thoreau and Muir 'agree completely about the church in which they prefer to worship' (Cronon 1996: 75) is to overlook crucial differences between European and North American Romanticisms. The Wordsworth passage Cronon cites in support of this claim comes from Book 6 of *The Prelude*, where the speaker reads into the sublime landscape of the Alps 'Characters of the great Apocalypse,/The types and symbols of Eternity,/Of first, and last, and midst, and without end' (qtd. Cronon 1996: 74). Cronon admits that Wordsworth's experience of the 'Black drizzling crags', 'stationary blasts of waterfalls', 'bewildered winds' and 'giddy prospect of the raving stream' that he records encountering on the Simplon Pass 'inspired more awe and dismay than joy or pleasure' (74). But what also needs to be noted is how atypical is this passage in Wordsworth's writing around 1800, which, as Louise Economides (2016) has shown, is more concerned with experiences of 'wonder' than with the sublime. Such experiences can just as readily be come by on an evening stroll at home in Grasmere, along the river Wye or even in view of London at dawn; they certainly do not require you to go traipsing around in rugged foreign climes. Moreover, in previous passages in Book 6, it becomes apparent that what the speaker values most about this alpine region is not only, or even primarily, its sublime landscape, which, as he notes wryly with respect to Mont Blanc, sometimes falls short of the expectations aroused by earlier literary representations, but rather the mode of human dwelling that he believed ('romantically', to be sure) was to be found in its pastoral vales: egalitarian, democratic and attuned to the natural environment.

Nor does 'pristine wilderness' hold much appeal for other European Romantics. Blake's concern was precisely to unmask unconscious human assumptions about 'Nature', as a precursor to beneficially (re-)humanizing the world (were he alive today, Blake might well find himself among the ranks

of those who embrace an egalitarian and bio-inclusive variant of the ‘good Anthropocene’). From this perspective, entirely unpeopled places constituted a dismal, even meaningless, prospect. For Blake, all living things were imbued with an immanent holiness. But the recognition of this indwelling holiness was a human accomplishment to be cultivated on city streets no less than in any ‘lonely dell,’ such as that in which the ‘little girl found’ came to live among the wild beasts in his ‘Songs of Experience’ (1794). Shelley, contemplating the unquestionably sublime vista of Mont Blanc in his 1817 poem of that name, also highlights the very different meanings that humans might derive from the ‘mysterious tongue’ of this dynamic landscape, whether ‘awful doubt’ or a ‘faith so mild,/So solemn, so serene, that man may be,/But for such faith, with nature reconciled’ (l.77–79).²⁶ Viewing with horror the destruction of human and nonhuman habitations alike by the ineluctable force of the expanding glacier that he witnessed there in the ‘year without a summer,’ it is evident that he inclines to the former interpretation. And when Keats, uncharacteristically, ventured into the celebrated wilds of Scotland, what he experienced ‘at the top of Ben Nevis,’ as he recorded in the sonnet occasioned by this jaunt, was not a rapturous encounter with the divine but rather the discovery, in the mist veiling his view, of an apt figure for the narrow limits of human knowledge. This is, to be sure, an epiphany of sorts, but one keyed to privation and negativity, rather than rapturous union with the divine. The landscape of German Romantic ‘nature poetry’ (*Naturlyrik*), such as that of Joseph von Eichendorff or Clemens Brentano, might have had its wild edges; but, like that of the Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and John Clare, it was predominantly rural. And when the late Romantic German Jewish writer Heine joined other seekers of the fashionably sublime on the summit of the Brocken in the Harz Mountains in the 1820s, he was moved, not to awe or even wonder, but rather to satirize his fellow bourgeois tourists’ by now highly conventionalized expressions of appreciation for ‘how beautiful nature is, by and large!’ (1993: 69).

In this connection, it is crucial to distinguish between ‘wildness’ and ‘wilderness.’ The experience of wonder is contingent upon an encounter with the self-disclosure of things ‘doing their own thing,’ as it were, pursuing their own way in the world: as if they were in some sense, if not necessarily consciously so, agentic or ‘self-willed,’ and hence ‘wild’ in the root meaning of the word, rather than pinned down as the passive object of human knowledge and power. It is along these lines that I read Thoreau’s famous pronouncement: ‘In wildness is the preservation of the World’ (qtd. Cronon 1996: 69). As Cronon admits, Thoreau’s description of his experience in the sublime ‘wilderness’ of

Mt. Katahdin is closer to Wordsworth's on the Simplon Pass than it is to the 'domesticated sublime' that he traces in John Muir's 'late romantic' descriptions of Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada, which 'reflect none of the terror or anxiety one finds in earlier writers' (75). The crucial point to add here, though, is that the work for which Thoreau is rightly most famous, *Walden Pond*, is precisely not concerned with wilderness but with the author's experiment in becoming a good 'neighbour' (a key word in this text, carrying a profound resonance in a largely Christian culture) to more-than-human others in a peopled place, close to Boston and in earshot of the railway.²⁷ In this respect, Thoreau remains far truer to the European Romantic legacy than does Muir, an émigré Scot who made his way to North America from Victorian-era Britain. For far from endorsing the separation of a domain demarcated as wholly 'natural', let alone as 'wilderness', from one cast as 'cultural', European romantic ecopoetics is tilted towards an ecoprophetic call for the (re-)creation of forms of collective flourishing in places that are inextricably naturalcultural.

Closely allied to the charge of wilderness fetishism is the critique of the allegedly 'egotistical sublime' commonly attributed to the Romantic poetics of solitary rambling. The primary whipping boy here is Wordsworth, the original target of Keats' unkind comment, and it is also this accusation that I set out to challenge in the first chapter. Solitude, I argue here, is integral to the contemplative practice that is at once advocated and modelled in Wordsworth's early verse. While the particular tradition of contemplation that Wordsworth had to draw on was Christian, it has counterparts in many other cultural and religious traditions, including Buddhism, the Romantic resonance of which has been highlighted by Mark Lussier (2011), and other Eastern traditions, as well as in Native American and Australian Aboriginal cultures.²⁸ In my opening chapter, I read Wordsworth's contemplative ecopoetics through the lens of Douglas Christie's 'contemplative ecology' (2013) as an art of resistance to the reductively instrumental rationality that was then threatening to sacrifice the 'poetry of nature' to the artifices of industry. Drawing also on speculative realist and new materialist accounts of the 'dazzlement of things' (Shaviri 2011: n.p.), I show how the wonder afforded by Wordsworthian wandering, far from comprising an 'egotistical sublime', was affectionately fraternal, radicalizing the 'brotherliness' that was to have been brought about, but which was ultimately betrayed, by the French Revolution, by extending it democratically to places, animals and indeed all manner of 'things', including other people. The text that exhorts its readers to 'come forth into the light of things', moreover, invites its readers to view it too in a contemplative mode. At the same time, it is only by drawing attention to its

own inadequacy as a purely verbal response to the radiant realities to which it gestures that the poem might succeed in luring its recipients to experience them through their own contemplative practice. For the contemporary Canadian poet Tim Lilburn, the retrieval of the Western variant of the transcultural practice of contemplation is intrinsic to the process of decolonization, in so far as this can be approached from the side of the colonizers. Leading on from my discussion of Lilburn's contribution to a decolonial contemplative ecopoetics, I conclude the first chapter by considering how contemplative practices are currently being incorporated into the vital work of 'inner transition' to ways of living that promise to be more conducive to collective flourishing.

In the second chapter, I consider how contemplative praxis can also engender a deeper appreciation of the bodily dimensions of human existence, and thereby also of our environmental affectivity, pushing back against ratiocentric constructions of the human subject as a quasi-disembodied mind, immune to environmental influences. This pertains to a somewhat different kind of 'transcorporeality' from that proposed by Stacy Alaimo (2010). Alaimo's coinage highlights the inequitable distribution of environmental harms arising from the passage of toxic chemicals through the semi-permeable membrane of human skin and gastro-intestinal tracts. Here, I explore the affective aspect of transcorporeality: namely, how the physical qualities of things, spaces, times of day and times of year, as perceived through the sensate human body, impinge upon our sensibility, mood and state of mind, as seen through the lens of Gernot Böhme's 'ecological aesthetics'. Focusing this discussion around a reading of John Keats' 'To Autumn', I counterpose the comforting seasonal affects invoked in this ode to the uncanny Anthropocene affects evoked in Kevin Hart's surreal 'That Bad Summer', which imagines downtown Melbourne in the grip of anthropogenic global heating. This too has implications for environmental justice. In urban, industrialized societies, the well-heeled generally have greater opportunity to protect themselves from the adverse consequences of industrial pollution and to reside and ramble in the kinds of environments that are increasingly recognized as conducive to a heightened sense of well-being (environments, that is, that are also conducive to the flourishing of other life forms). The ecopoetic cultivation of an increased awareness of the affective powers of place, then, finds a necessary ecopolitical counterpart in the democratization of what ecocritic Samantha Walton has termed the 'cultures of nature and wellbeing'.²⁹ As I show with respect to CERES Community Environment Park in inner Melbourne, inclusive practices of ecological flourishing and human well-being can well be cultivated in urban spaces and in ways that interlink the local and the global.

If contemplative ecopoetics entrains a praxis of non-appropriative attentiveness to things beyond the text, while affective ecopoetics turns that attention back upon the self in its trans-corporeal responsiveness to its environs, the creaturely ecopoetics, with which I am concerned in Chapter 3, highlights human entanglements, at once material and moral, with other living beings. These entanglements entail shared, if unevenly distributed, vulnerabilities as well as shared, if variegated, communicative capacities. They harbour the ever-present risk of conflict and harm but also opportunities to co-create emergent multi-species worlds no longer constrained by the colonizing logic of human-nonhuman hyperseparation, and hence conducive to more felicitous forms of coexistence and 'sympoiesis' (a term coined by Friedrich Schlegel) in our own perilous times. Here, I turn my attention specifically to the potentially risky co-becoming of humans and bees, along with the plants they pollinate, in the poetry of John Clare, viewed against the horizon of the Plantationocene, within which the loss of the commons, both in England and the Americas, was integrally bound up with the history of transatlantic slavery. In this context, I examine two very different bee poems by African American writers Audre Lorde and Natasha Trethewey, both of which contemplate the rupturing of human-bee coexistence, whilst raising tricky questions regarding the intersection of racist, sexist and speciesist oppression and violence. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of a conservation initiative among largely African American and Hispanic American churchgoers in Chicago, in which the entangled histories of human and other-than-human displacement and disadvantage have given rise to a hopeful multispecies praxis of social and ecological healing.

In the fourth chapter, I consider how the ecopoetic arts of contemplation, affective attunement and creaturely *sympoiesis* open onto a call for radical ecopolitical transformation, above all in the work of William Blake: one that took inspiration from biblical prophetic and apocalyptic writing. For Blake and other Romantic writers, a creative engagement with biblical texts, no longer bound by doctrinal strictures, was facilitated by the historical and aesthetic reframing of the scriptures as historically situated, culturally contingent and poetically crafted works of literature. Among the biblical prophets who ghost Blake's work was Jeremiah, hailed by environmental and climate ethicist Michael Northcott as 'the first ecological prophet in literary and religious history' (2007: 12). In the latter part of the chapter, I discern an echo of Jeremiah's ecoprophetic call to heed the cry of the Earth, as manifest in the drying out of soil and dying out of plants and animals, in a poem by the Australian author and activist Judith Wright. It is from Wright's poem 'Dust' (1945), composed on the cusp

of the Great Acceleration, that this chapter takes its title. The socioecological ills and deceptive cultural imaginary that Wright targets here pre-dated current concerns about climate change. This poem acquires a new salience in our own context, however, in that it queries the construction of the dust storm to which it responds as a 'natural disaster', highlighting the role of ecologically inappropriate settler Australian agricultural practices in its hybrid naturalcultural causation. Similarly, Jordie Albiston's poetic sequence 'Lamentations' (2013) returns to the biblical 'Lamentations of Jeremiah' to find a prophetic mode of response to the Victorian 'Black Saturday' firestorm of January 2009, in which the dire implications of anthropogenic global heating for this part of Australia became horrifically legible.

For the Romantics, prophetic language was held to be performative: its value lay in the change that it effected, both in individuals and in the wider society. Among twentieth-century Australian poets, Wright was undoubtedly the most (poetically and politically) significant inheritor of this Romantic conception of the poet as prophet. Towards the end of her life, though, she despaired of the political efficacy of the poetic word: the idealist project of engendering a new imaginary, a better dream, by purely literary means had begun to look like another 'wrong dream'. Throughout this book, I too have stressed the insufficiency of poetry in the face of the complex socioecological challenges of the Anthropocene. Following Wright, then, this chapter concludes with a consideration of a contemporary example of scientifically-informed, faith-based ecopolitical activism in Australia, which takes prophetic ecopoetics well beyond the page.

If Australia looms large in this monograph, it is in part because the violent colonial history of that nation is one with which I continue to grapple on a personal level as an Anglo-Celtic Australian. Among my nineteenth-century forbears were impoverished rural labourers from Wiltshire, who took a supported passage to work on a pastoral property in South Australia. They ended up doing pretty well for themselves and their descendants out of wheat farming on land that had been stolen from the Yorta Yorta people of Northern Victoria, where some of my relatives remain to this day. The Australian story is of wider interest, however, since as Timothy Clark observes, it 'provides a particularly stark example of the challenges of the Anthropocene' (2015: 116), with a highly urbanized society living at some remove from the impacts of the agricultural and mining industries upon which their prosperity depend, the negative consequences of which have largely been borne by Australia's First Nations and the indigenous plants and animals of their ancestral lands. As Tom

Griffiths observed in a talk first presented in 2003, 'Australian history is like a giant experiment in ecological crisis and management', in which the impact of culturally inflected and historically contingent differences of perception and practice has been starkly evident in the treatment of the land (2007: n.p.). Partly for this reason, Australia also offers a rather different perspective on the question of Romanticism and Empire from the by now far more familiar one that has been told with respect to North America by ecocritics such as Kevin Hutchings (2009) and William Cronon. Romanticism looks different from 'down under': not least because during the time of its European efflorescence, the British colonization of Australia was just getting underway. In the rough and ready penal settlements of New South Wales and 'Van Diemen's Land' (Tasmania), the sheer 'physical battle for survival', as Wright observed in 'Romanticism and the Last Frontier' (1958), left little time or energy for 'the life of the mind, education and culture' (1975: 61). The first British people to wind up in Australia (most of them unwillingly) viewed their strange new place of sojourn or stay through a pre-Romantic lens; and by the time a self-consciously Australian settler literary culture began to emerge in the 1830s, Romanticism was already on the wane in Britain and Germany. Nor was there anything comparable to the delayed Romanticism propagated by the New England Transcendentalists from the 1830s through to the 1850s. It would appear that in Australia, 'romanticism simply did not happen' (Kane 1996: 10). Between 1800 and 1850, works by British Romantic poets, notably Byron, Southey, Shelley and Wordsworth, were nonetheless among the most frequently advertised literature in the Australian colonies; but so too were works by Pope, Thompson, Cowper and Burns, among other earlier writers, along with those by newer ones, especially Browning, Tennyson and Longfellow (Kane 1996: 212).

Though Romanticism is absent as a discrete 'movement', Romantic inheritances do nonetheless surface in various guises in Australian literature from the 1830s onwards (Lansdown 2009).³⁰ Literary historians have perused these Romantic traces in many different ways, depending, in large part, on their literary critical and cultural historical assumptions regarding the character of European (or more commonly, only British) Romanticism. To provide a full account of Romanticism in Australia from an ecocritical perspective would require a monograph in its own right. Within the limits of my final chapter, however, I delineate some of the ways in which the afterlives of Romanticism have played out differently there from in North America.

For one thing, wilderness neo-romanticism arrived only very late in Australia, largely via the influence of US environmentalism from the late 1970s, and it

swiftly came under fire in the contemporaneous context of the Aboriginal land rights movement and its champions (which included Judith Wright).³¹ It does not appear to have played a significant role in the settler Australian reception and reworking of European Romantic eco-poetics in the nineteenth century. In this context, it was not so much the valorization of 'wilderness' as nostalgia for England's 'green and pleasant land', nourished by European pastoral and georgic imaginaries, together with a linear view of historical development, which became entangled with the economic imperative of making a living from stolen land, and hence complicit with the violence of colonial expansion. Here, I explore this 'pastoral imposition' (Kinsella 2007a: xii) in relation to the work of a lesser-known contemporary of Judith Wright, David Campbell, who, like Wright, was a descendant of pioneering pastoralists. In my reading, Campbell's incomplete journey towards a decolonizing eco-poetics during the 1970s underscores the impossibility of succeeding in such an undertaking in the absence of Indigenous interlocutors. To the extent that Wright arguably advanced further along this path, her friendship with Oodgeroo Noonuccal (formerly known as Kath Walker) was a crucial enabling factor. In their affection for one another, and through their literary interchange and political alliance, they contributed to the emergence of a distinctively Australian transcultural decolonial eco-poetics, or rather, *ecopoethics*, which, as Peter Minter has shown, was at once 'radically ecocentric and variously anti-hegemonic' (Minter 2015: 74).³² The further development of such an eco-poetics along genuinely *transcultural* (rather than, more modestly, *inter-cultural*) lines will require the participation of multiple voices, including, in a contemporary Australian context, those of non-Indigenous people belonging to diverse minority ethnic groups. Those who inherit the dominant colonial culture, however, are faced with particular challenges and responsibilities with respect to past wrongs and ongoing injustices. Here, then, I bring the work of one such contemporary Anglo-Australian poet, Anne Elvey, into conversation with that of the Wiradjuri writer Jeanine Leane. In so doing, I discern the lineaments of a decolonial renegotiation of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and a vision of how they might 'walk back over' their fraught histories and work together in pursuit of justice, reconciliation and renewed care for country, amidst the ramifying damage of the Anthropo(and other)cene(s).

‘Come forth into the light of things’: Contemplative ecopoetics

‘Romantic poesy’, according to one of its most ardent early advocates, Friedrich Schlegel, combines ‘inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature’, reflecting self-consciously on its own creative purposes, processes and open-ended potential for interpretation. This is not to say that many works of pre-Romantic literature might not also have done this. Indeed, in Schlegel’s aphorism on ‘romantic poesy’, first published anonymously in his co-edited journal, *Athenäum*, ‘romantic’ does not designate a historically new type of literature so much as the essence of the literary. By this account, ‘all poetry is, or should be romantic’, that is, a mode of writing that can

make poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical; poeticize wit and fill and saturate the forms of art with every kind of good, solid matter for instruction, and animate them with the pulsations of humor ... [and] can hover at the midpoint, between the portrayed and the portrayer, free of all real and ideal self-interest, on the wings of poetic reflection, and can raise that reflection again and again to a higher power, can multiply it in an endless succession of mirrors.

(Simpson 1988: 192–93)

In hindsight it is clear that this was a characteristically Romantic construction of what poetic literature *per se* should be and do. Not all literature of the Romantic period, to be sure, fulfilled Schlegel’s criteria (which, by his own account, were most fully realized in the endlessly malleable, forever hybridizing and gloriously polylogic form of the novel). Yet much of the writing that was later taken to comprise the Romantic canon certainly does manifest a high degree of often ironic self-reflexivity, frequently conjoined with a consciously modernizing mission. In the Advertisement for *Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems* (1798), for example, Wordsworth

averted that most of the poems in this collaborative collection were ‘to be considered experiments’ (1974: vol. I.117). This implied, as he observed in 1815 (and with a degree of frustration regarding the generally poor reception of his earlier work), that ‘every author, so far as he is great and at the same time *original*, had had the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed’ (1974: vol. III.80).

Installing innovation at the heart of artistic creativity, early Romanticism was the first avant-garde movement in European cultural history. This has already been argued persuasively with respect to what Schlegel termed the ‘symphilosophical’ and ‘sympoetic’¹ collaboration that gave rise to the *Athenäum* in 1798 (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1988: 8). Yet it is no less true of Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s expressly ‘experimental’ collaboration on the *Lyrical Ballads*, which came out that very same year. Among the poems included in this volume are a pair penned by Wordsworth that constitutes a lyrical counterpart to Schlegel’s fragment on ‘romantic poesy’. Titled ‘Expostulation and Reply’ and ‘The Tables Turned: An Evening Scene on the Same Subject’, these deceptively simple verses set forth a literary project that promised to ‘make poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical’ in a very specific way: namely, by means of a contemplative eco-poetics that is explicitly cast as countering the reductively instrumental rationality that was then threatening to sacrifice the ‘poetry of nature’ to the artifices of industry.

Contemplative practices can be found throughout the world and are embedded in diverse religious and philosophical traditions. Wordsworth inherits the Christian variant, the renewed salience of which has been elaborated by Douglas E. Christie in the face of ramifying socioecological crisis in *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind* (2013). Whilst I draw on Christie’s ‘contemplative ecology’ in this chapter, I also show how Wordsworth loosens contemplative experience away from any narrowly Christian or theistic frameworks of belief and weds it to a *poethics* of non-appropriative encounter with all manner of ‘things forever speaking’, as he puts it ‘Expostulation and Reply’: things, that is, which I interpret through a new materialist lens as at once utterly singular and dynamically intra-active. The eco-poetic art of contemplation is currently enjoying a renaissance not only in contemporary verse, such as that of the Canadian poet Tim Lilburn, for whom it offers critical decolonizing potentials, but also in the praxis of those engaged in the vital work of ‘inner transition’ to ways of living that promise to be more conducive to collective flourishing.

Into the 'light of things': Wordsworth's contemplative ecopoetics

'Expostulation and Reply', like its counterpart, is a conversation poem, staging a dialogue between two speakers, in which 'Matthew' (who turns out to be the fall guy) upbraids 'William' for sitting around idly daydreaming when he should be improving his mind by imbibing 'the spirit/breathed/From dead men to their kind' (l. 7–8) in the medium of the written word.² William, who, in the fourth stanza, is revealed as the lyrical 'I' and, therefore, in control of how this conversation comes across, counters with a philosophical defence of contemplation, arguing that the cultivation of a 'wise passiveness' (l.24) provides a different kind of mental nourishment: namely, one that is afforded by a heightened receptivity to those other-than-human utterances that arrive unbidden from 'the mighty sum/Of things forever speaking' (l.25–26).

Ghosting the opposition between book learning and contemplating nature that Wordsworth sets up in this dialogue is the long-standing theological distinction between scripture and creation as sources of divine revelation. That the Book of Nature, as it became known, could be theophanic, affording intimations of its heavenly author, had biblical warrant. Nowhere is this view advanced more startlingly than in the book of Job. Speaking from the whirlwind, the voice of the Lord exhorts the titular hard-pressed man-of-faith to look up from his merely personal woes, grievous and undeserved as they were, in order to behold the vastly more-than-human world that everywhere bore the trace of its attentive creator. This is disclosed as a world in which a myriad of creatures – the lion and the raven, mountain goat and deer, wild ass and oxen, ostrich and eagle – were busy going about their own lives, facing their own challenges, independently from human interests and oversight (Job 38.39–39.18); a world where even domesticated animals, such as the undaunted horse, retain their own agency and seek their own satisfaction (39:19–25); a world in which the Lord causes it to rain in the 'desert, which is empty of human life' (38:26), extending provision to all creatures equally and taking particular delight in those that elude human control: the hippo-like Behemoth, hailed as 'the first of the great acts of God' (Job 40.19), and the crocodilian Leviathan, 'king over all that are proud' (41:34). This rambunctiously biodiverse world is said to display the heavenly 'wisdom' that is woven into its 'inward parts' (38:36), together with the divine care with which it is sustained, regardless of narrowly human concerns and ultimately beyond human ken.³

The lesson learnt by Job has generally been backgrounded within Western European Christianity, but certainly not forgotten. Here, for example, is a restatement of it by the highly influential thirteenth-century philosopher, and early proponent of ‘natural theology’, Thomas Aquinas:

God brought things into being in order that God’s goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them; and because God’s goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, God produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided.

(Part 1, Qu. 47, Article 1; 1917)

Still, you will look in vain in the Christian New Testament for anything resembling the marvellous Hebrew hymn to the heterogeneous collective of creatures that thrive as best they can amidst the elemental forces of earth and sky in Job. There is a faint echo of the Lord’s exhortation to Job to lift his gaze from his human-all-too-human self-preoccupation in those Gospel passages where Jesus observes that not one sparrow ‘will fall to the ground without the Father’s care’ (Mt. 10.29) and invites his followers to ‘consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these’ (Lk. 12.27; see also Mt. 6.28). Here, though, in contrast to the bio-inclusive vision disclosed to Job, the point of the exercise is to reassure the faithful of God’s special care and provision for them as privileged members of the created order, notwithstanding their current oppressed condition as Jewish subjects of the Roman Empire (‘you are of more value than many sparrows’ Mt. 10.31; ‘how much more will he clothe you?’ Lk. 12.28). The theophanic character of creation as a whole is nonetheless stunningly restated in the opening of John’s gospel, which declares that the divine Word/Logos, which was incarnate in human guise in Jesus of Nazareth, had been inscribed into all things from the beginning of time:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

(Jn. 1.1–4)

This passage, beloved of ecotheologians, has given rise to the pantheistic doctrine of the Cosmic Christ, which proclaims, with Paul, that the divine is at once ‘above all and through all and in all’ (Eph. 4:6).⁴

Yet long before there were ecotheologians, there were any number of misfit mystics, for some of whom the contemplation of creation was also a primary source of religious experience, and a vehicle for communing with the divine. Among these were many of the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the late third and fourth centuries, whose counter-cultural experiments laid the foundation for the development of monasticism, in which Wordsworth developed a keen interest, closely linked with his advocacy of contemplative practice (Fay 2018). Although this movement began at a time when Christians were still suffering violent persecution at the hands of Roman authorities, it expanded in the years following Constantine's Edict of Milan (313), which, in decriminalizing Christianity, initiated the process whereby a socially critical grassroots insurgency eventually became the official religion of the troubled late Roman Empire. Turning aside from the newly tolerated imperial church, these spiritual seekers followed Jesus in his forty-day sojourn among the wild beasts by withdrawing from mainstream Roman society in favour of living an ascetic life of prayerful quietude and service to others as hermits, or in small communities, in the deserts of Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor and Judaea. In the midst of our own troubled times, the spiritual practice inaugurated by the Desert Fathers and Mothers is being critically reclaimed in the guise of what Douglas E. Christie has termed a 'contemplative ecology'.⁵ And it is in the horizon of the contemporary theorization and instantiation of contemplative ecology that I want to resituate Wordsworth's eco-poetic project.

Returning to 'Expostulation and Reply', we might begin by noting the physical location and somatic compartment attributed to the speaker named 'William':

Why, William, on that old grey stone,
 Thus for the length of half a day,
 Why, William, sit you thus alone,
 And dream your time away?

(l.1–4)

Viewed through the lens of the Christian contemplative tradition, William's solitary reverie on an 'old grey stone' – one that William later informs us looks out over Esthwaite Lake – accords with the praxis of *anachoresis*, withdrawal, in order to cultivate an inner stillness (*heschia*) conducive to silent prayer. For the Desert Fathers and Mothers, this meant putting considerable physical distance between themselves and the centres of Roman civilization over long periods of time. But *anachoresis* can be undertaken anywhere, anytime, if you can find a place of quietude that affords a degree of distance from mainstream society and

the general busy-ness of everyday life. That this is the case with William's sojourn on the stone is suggested by Matthew when he observes in the third stanza:

You look round on your Mother Earth,
 As if she for no purpose bore you;
 As if you were her first-born birth
 And none had lived before you!

(l.9–12)

William's purposelessness is precisely the point: contemplative practice entails the relinquishment of goal-directed activity in order to simply be present to each passing moment. As you allow yourself to surrender to the here and now, you are loosened away from your fixed social identity, with its heavy weight of memory and expectation, and freed up to become otherwise, as if, in this moment, you were indeed Earth's 'first-born birth'. Traditionally, *anachoresis* was associated with varying degrees of *apotaxis*, or renunciation, embodied in a range of sometimes extreme and, as Virginia Burrus (2019) has shown, decidedly 'queer' ascetic practices.⁶ Wordsworth was not one for hairshirts and self-flagellation (although his household was a necessarily frugal one at this time). There is nonetheless an element of *apotaxis* and, its companion, *apophysis* (self-emptying) here, to the extent that William has explicitly disavowed active 'seeking' – specifically, after knowledge – in favour of a 'wise passiveness'. The discipline of renunciation and self-emptying has a liberating aspect, entailing a freedom from worry or striving (*atoraxia*), which in turn enables a heightened attention to whatever is making itself manifest in the here and now (*prosoche*).

As Kevin Hart has observed with respect to the medieval Scottish mystical theologian Richard of St. Victor (1096–1141), the inheritors of the contemplative practices of the Desert Fathers and Mothers shared with later phenomenologists a concern with the 'conversion of the gaze from the natural attitude to another attitude', akin to what Edmund Husserl termed *epoché* and 'bracketing': the practice of bringing to mind and then setting aside unconscious biases or assumptions in order to attend more fully to the way in which the phenomenon being contemplated discloses itself to the perceiver in the given situation (Hart 2018: 2). This self-reflective modification of consciousness is implicit in William's assertion:

The eye – it cannot chose but see;
 We cannot bid the ear be still;
 Our bodies feel, where'er they be,
 Against or with our will.

Nor less I deem that there are Powers
Which of themselves our minds impress.

(l.17–22)

Attending to these mental impressions, which William speculatively attributes to the agency of unspecified Powers (and to which I will return anon), while bracketing what we think we know and seek to discover, is a source of intellectual nourishment of an entirely different sort from that ‘spirit breathed/ From dead men to their kind’ afforded by book learning. In the Christian contemplative tradition, benefiting from such nourishment is understood to entail discernment (*diakrisis*), leading to a glimpse of, or even participation in, the divine *Logos* woven in and through all things. While drawing on this tradition, Wordsworth is nonetheless taking it off in a new direction: one that is compatible with a panentheistic form of Christianity but also conducive to a modern, secular, or at least non-doctrinal, ecopoetics.⁷ In order to bring this into view, it is helpful to compare this Wordsworthian take on contemplation with that of some of his contemporaries.

In the ‘Advertisement’ for the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth explains that the lines entitled ‘Expostulation and Reply’, and those that follow, ‘arose out of a conversation with a friend who was somewhat unreasonably attached to modern books of moral philosophy’ (Wu 2006: 332). The friend in question was William Hazlitt, who subsequently observed of their ‘metaphysical argument’ in his 1823 essay on ‘My First Acquaintance with Poets’ that ‘neither of us succeeded in making ourselves perfectly clear and intelligible’ (Wu 2006: 781). By relocating the conversation to Esthwaite Water, where Wordsworth had attended school at Hawkshead, he loosens the identity of the speaker’s interlocutor away from that of Hazlitt. Moreover, given that he has bestowed his own moniker on one of the speakers in this conversation poem, it is tempting to read ‘Matthew’ as a cypher for the author’s own friend, with whom he had co-produced the volume in which ‘Expostulation and Reply’ was published: a possibility that might well have occasioned Coleridge a wry smile, if not a little irritation (and by no means for the only time in their oftentimes fractious friendship). Yet that would be decidedly unfair. Indeed, according to Hazlitt, whilst he and Wordsworth were engaged in metaphysical disputation, Coleridge ‘was explaining the different notes of the nightingale to his sister’ (Wu 2006: 781). Keen though he undoubtedly was on book learning, Coleridge was at least as interested in the thought of living, as distinct from dead, men: above all, that of certain contemporary German philosophers, in pursuit of which he had recently been studying at Göttingen University, infamously leaving William and his sister

Dorothy holed up in the small town of Goslar, without German – or much in the way of heating – over the long cold winter of 1798–9. Moreover, the author of ‘Frost at Midnight’ was clearly also a poet of contemplation. Here, Coleridge’s speaker experiences a temporary *anachoresis* in his solitary nocturnal vigil in a cottage, whose other inmates were ‘all at rest’ (l.4). Yet, contrary to his expectation that this quietude would suit ‘abstruser musings’ (l.6), this very calm ‘disturbs/ And vexes meditation with its strange/And extreme silentness’ (l.8–9). While *heschia* eludes him, he does achieve a heightened level of self-awareness as he is prompted to reflect upon his own restless state of mind, and propensity for projection, by attending to a fluttering film of soot on the grate:

Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit
 By its own moods interpret, everywhere
 Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
 And makes a toy of Thought.

(l.20–24)⁸

Even as the speaker finds a queer companionship by sharing in the ‘unquiet’ of this strange ‘stranger’, as such sooty films were known at the time, he fails to achieve that ecstatic communion with the living Word made manifest in the natural world, which he wishes for his sleeping son:

... so shalt thou see and hear
 The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
 Of that eternal language, which thy God
 Utters, who from eternity doth teach
 Himself in all, and all things in himself,
 Great universal Teacher! He shall mould
 Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.

(l.58–64)

Contemplative experience can just as readily open onto absence as onto presence, unknowing as illumination: indeed, there is an entire variant of Christian mysticism dedicated to this *via negativa* (also referred to as *apophatic* as distinct from *kataphatic* spirituality). Entering into communion with creation, moreover, can also deepen your anguished awareness of suffering and wrong: contemplation is by no means a wholly joyous experience. Yet, while the speaker of ‘Frost at Midnight’ was evidently unable to find his way onto the *via positiva*, this was not always so for Coleridge himself. In his later *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, and specifically on the relationship between philosophy and religion from Thales to Kant (1818–19), Coleridge

speaks of the ‘joy’ that he had experienced in those moments of ‘reverie’ afforded by aimless rambling, when ‘individuality is lost’ and the self no longer experiences itself as entirely separate from ‘the flowers, the trees, the beasts, yea from the very surface of the [waters and the] sands of the desert’ (qtd. Cooper 2017: 41).

Coleridge’s reference to the desert sands recalls the specifically Christian tradition of contemplation inaugurated by the Desert Fathers and Mothers, within which communion with creation is commonly not an end in itself but rather motivated by a desire for union with the divine: a longing, never to be fully requited in this life, which lends to much Christian mysticism a decidedly erotic bent, inspired by the profoundly sensual (if to modern ears, also somewhat peculiar) poetic discourse of the biblical Song of Songs. Yet in the very same year in which the *Lyrical Ballads* appeared, a young German clergyman and theologian published a slender volume of essays that identified contemplative experience as the transhistorical and transcultural core or ‘essence’ of religion *per se*. Friedrich Schleiermacher’s *On Religion* is subtitled ‘Talks to Its Cultured Despisers’, among whom were several of the author’s own close friends, including Friedrich Schlegel, who could not fathom why Schleiermacher could have any truck with religion in their enlightened age. Extensively researched, and acutely aware of contemporary debates concerning epistemology, ontology and ethics, as well as literature and aesthetics, these ‘Talks’ paved the way for modern post-dogmatic theology, historical-critical biblical scholarship and comparative religious studies (Crouter 1988).⁹

Schleiermacher argued that what his friends, who had all been raised in either Christian or Jewish households, rightly objected to in the inherited religious beliefs and practices of their day were the moribund rituals, outdated metaphysical assumptions and repressive moral codes, which had historically become attached to these, and other religious traditions, over time. But these cultural-historical accretions were by no means definitive of religion. Religion *per se*, he argued, had to be distinguished from metaphysics and morals. It did not necessarily entail belief in any kind of supernatural deities or an immaterial afterlife. Nor was revelation to be found in literalistic readings of holy scriptures, all of which were written by one, or usually several, human-all-too-human authors, however inspired, in potentially very different contexts from those in which they were read, and they were inevitably open to a wide range of interpretations. The world’s diverse religious traditions, in his view, had nonetheless grown out of what Schleiermacher took to be a common human experience of an essentially contemplative kind: ‘Religion’s essence is neither

thinking nor acting but intuition and feeling. It wishes to intuit the universe, wishes devoutly to overhear the universe's own manifestations and actions, longs to be grasped and filled by the universe's immediate influences in childlike passivity' (1988: 102).

It becomes apparent here that Schleiermacher has not been able to dispense with metaphysics entirely, for he has smuggled a rather big metaphysical concept into his definition of religious experience in the guise of 'the universe' (*Universum*, a term that he changes to *Weltall*, literally, the world as a whole, i.e. cosmos, or simply *Welt*, world, in the revised edition of 1806). I will return to this later, but for now, let me simply note that Schleiermacher's 'universe' is evidently inflected by the new philosophy of nature currently being developed by another associate of the Jena Romantics, namely F. J. Schelling. In his *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (*Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur*, 1797), Schelling drew on the heterodox seventeenth-century Jewish philosopher Benedict de Spinoza in conceptualizing Nature as twofold, manifesting in one dimension as a plurality of discrete entities (*natura naturans*, 'nature natures') and in another as a generative process of co-becoming (*natura naturata*, 'nature natured', which Spinoza, scandalously equated with God). Similarly, Schleiermacher's dynamic Universe appears both in its multitudinous products and in its underlying productivity:

The universe exists in uninterrupted activity and reveals itself to us in every moment. Every form that it brings forth, every being to which it gives a separate existence according to the fullness of life, every occurrence that spills forth from its rich, ever-fruitful womb, is an action of the same upon us. Thus to accept everything individual as a part of the whole and everything limited as a representation of the infinite is religion.

(1988: 105)

Recalling Aquinas, notice this shift: for the former, 'The whole universe in its wholeness more perfectly shares in and represents the divine goodness than any one creature by itself'. In Schleiermacher's transcultural take on religious experience, by contrast, any finite entity might be seen to open onto the infinite, if, to the contemplative gaze, it is beheld as a *holon*: a part in which the whole is inherent.

To become aware of oneself as participating in the infinite as 'part of the whole', and hence, as having a 'world', requires, minimally, a relationship with another being, who is recognized as such in their alterity: hence, in Schleiermacher's reading of Genesis 2 (the truth value of which, needless to say, he assumes to be poetic rather than literal), it was through the creation of Eve as a separate being that

Adam ‘discovered humanity, and in humanity the world’. Only then, moreover, did he become capable of ‘hearing the voice of the deity and answering it’ (1988: 119). Grounded in relationality, religion is also generative of sociability, in that those who have experienced religious intuitions and feelings typically desire to communicate such experiences to others: ‘Once there is religion, it must necessarily be also be social’ (163). But once it becomes social, it inevitably also acquires all those dubious ritualistic, metaphysical and moralistic accretions, which need to be subjected to constant critical review, if the religion is to remain alive.

Religious experience, while cultivated through shared practices, is nonetheless an intimately personal affair, albeit one that entails surrendering the illusion of isolated and sovereign selfhood in recognition of your profound interconnectedness with myriad others, and ultimate ‘dependence’ (a keyword of his mature theology¹⁰) upon the sacred ‘whole’:

when we have intuited the universe and, looking back from that perspective upon our self, see how, in comparison with the universe, it disappears into infinite smallness, what can then be more appropriate for mortals than true unaffected humility?

(1988: 129)

Emphatically rejecting the metaphysical ‘distinction between this world and the world beyond’ (94), Schleiermacher recasts ‘immortality’ in terms of an inner-worldly and embodied experience of self-transcendence: ‘Strive here already to annihilate your individuality and to live in the one and all’, he exhorts his readers, for, ‘[t]o be one with the infinite in the midst of the finite and to be eternal in a moment, that is the immortality of religion’ (139–40).

Schleiermacher insists that ‘religion maintains its own sphere and its own character only by completely removing itself from the sphere of speculation as well as from that of praxis’ (102). This implies, among other things, that the natural sciences should be absolutely free from religious dogma in their pursuit of empirical knowledge of the natural world: understanding how physical things function should be left to physicists and is not the job of religion. Nor should our moral precepts and principles be shackled to the mores of past times and distant places. This does not mean that religion, as Schleiermacher understood it, should be considered a purely personal, optional extra, however. Far from it: for him, religion is the ‘indispensable third next to these two’, disclosing the ‘common ground’ between them (102). Religious experience, that is to say, provides the necessary underpinning for both metaphysics and morals, without which the former is likely to become hubristic and the latter formulaic:

To want to have speculation and praxis without religion is rash arrogance. It is insolent enmity against the gods; it is the unholy sense of Prometheus, who cowardly stole what in calm certainty he would have been able to ask for and expect. Man has merely stolen the feeling of his infinity and godlikeness, and as an unjust possession it cannot thrive for him if he is not also conscious of his limitedness, the contingency of his whole form, the silent disappearance of his whole existence in the immeasurable.

(1988: 102–03)

Along with an intimation of one's own dependence upon the infinite, religious experience engenders a sense of the inherent holiness of all finite others: religion, Schleiermacher avers, 'considers everything holy' (94). The radical ethical implications of this religious attitude are suggested nowhere more powerfully than by another highly unorthodox Protestant of Schleiermacher's day, namely William Blake. In his 'Auguries of Innocence' (c. 1803), what follows from the perception of the inherence of the infinite in the finite, the heavenly in the earthly, is a call for the liberation of more-than-human life from all forms of human exploitation and cruelty. I am going to return to this poem in my discussion of Blake's 'prophetic ecopoetics' in Chapter 4. For now, I want to highlight a potential tension between the opening stanza, with its talk of the eternal, and what follows, namely a long list of particular instances of human cruelty to specific groups (mainly animals, but also marginalized humans, such as prostitutes and orphans). In Kevin Hutchings' analysis, Blake held that

a 'holism' giving primacy to the whole over the part is potentially tyrannous, for when parts of a system are considered primarily in terms of their relationship to the greater system or whole, they are necessarily instrumentalized, as their perceived function in the grand scheme of things becomes their most important defining attribute.

(2002: 34–35)

This returns us to the question I raised earlier regarding Schleiermacher's implicit reliance on a metaphysical premise, namely that of 'the universe', in his purportedly non-metaphysical conceptualization of religion. In view of the potential for the metaphysics of totality to become complicit with the politics of totalitarianism, we might want to diverge from Schleiermacher's terminology on this point. To be fair, Schleiermacher highlights connectedness, or communion, over unity and identity. In this respect, his account of religious experience differs from Deep Ecological ecospiritualities of self-identification with the Earth, which, as Plumwood observed, effectively obliterate alterity and elide the complexity of socioecological relations (2002: 196–217). But do we even need some version of the One (whether parsed as

God, Universe, World or Earth), as Schleiermacher evidently believed, in order to cultivate ethical relations with the Many? Here, I am inclined to agree with Timothy Morton in his advocacy of an ethics of co-existence, not in the closed compass of a 'world' but in an open 'mesh' without a centre or an edge (2010 and 2011). From this perspective, religious experience might be redescribed as affording the feeling not of 'oneness' with the 'universe' but of intimate enmeshment, which is to say also, enfleshment, with infinite others, human and otherwise, living and dead, 'animate' and 'inanimate', from whom you receive your existence, from moment to moment, as a gift, and to whom therefore you are, in a very profound sense, beholden.

Although he was an ordained minister, the young Schleiermacher vested his hopes for the renewal of religion in literature and the arts, hailing poets and seers, orators and artists as a 'higher priesthood', whose creative endeavours were able to 'bring deity closer to those who normally grasp only the finite and the trivial' by disclosing the inherence of 'the heavenly' in the earthly (1988: 83). His erstwhile irreligious friends were duly flattered and inspired to find their creative labours hailed as paving the way for those 'new formations of religion' that, he proclaims at the end of the last address, 'must appear and soon' (223).¹¹

Across the Channel, the renewal of religion through art and literature was also very much on the agenda at this time, and nowhere more emphatically so than in the case of Blake. Wordsworth might not have conceived of his project in quite these terms, but in another of the *Lyrical ballads*, 'Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey', his speaker too assumes the guise of poet-priest in inducting his sister into the holy mystery that had been disclosed to him on the banks of the River Wye: not, that is to say, within the institutional framework of the old religion represented metonymically by the ruined abbey, which is mentioned in the title, only to be bracketed out of the poem itself, but in the more-than-human world that he hails under the name of 'nature':

And I have felt
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
 Of something far more deeply interfused,
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
 And the round ocean and the living air,
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
 A motion and a spirit, that impels
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
 And rolls through all things.

(1.96–105)

It seems likely that the emphatically immanent sense of the sacred articulated here and elsewhere in early Wordsworth was at least partially Spinozan in orientation and indebted not only to the premise that the divine inhered in the physical world, the One in the Many, (*deus sive natura*, ‘God or Nature’ being two sides, as it were, of the same coin), but also to Spinoza’s notion of *conatus*, the inherent impulse or drive within all things, human and non-human, animate and inanimate, to maintain and extend themselves, to and through, their dynamic interrelations with others in an open-ended process of mutual becoming.¹² It is this non-doctrinal sense of immanent holiness, I would suggest, that informs the poetic project announced in ‘Expostulation and Reply’ and its companion piece, ‘The Tables Turned’.

What is particularly noteworthy in Wordsworth’s take on contemplation in the first of these is the subtle swerve away from divine singularity to earthly multiplicity in the penultimate stanza:

Think you, ‘mid all this mighty sum
Of things forever speaking,
That nothing of itself will come,
But we must still be seeking?’

(l.25–29)

Here, it becomes apparent that the ‘wise passiveness,’ which William is advocating, is not conventionally Christian. It is not being conducted with God in creation, nor even with the mighty ‘*soul of the world*’, which would have been the slightly risqué, but nonetheless acceptably, even fashionably, Neoplatonist phrasing that Wordsworth possibly anticipated his readers might expect. This Neoplatonic formulation is invoked, for example, by Coleridge in his ‘Effusion XXXV’ of 1795. Best known in its revised form as ‘The Aeolian Harp’ (1834), Coleridge’s speaker shares with his beloved interlocutor his philosophical speculation that ‘all of animated nature/Be but organic harps diversely framed/
That tremble into thought, as oer them sweeps,/Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,/At once the soul of each, and God of all’ (l. 36–40). Wordsworth’s William, by contrast, is laying himself open to an address from within the ‘*sum/Of things, forever speaking*’. Interrupted, and hence highlighted, by the line-break, this phrase is also decidedly ambiguous. Does it imply that all things together, whether cumulatively – or, more likely, given the Romantic fascination with mutually constitutive influences (*Wechselwirkung*, as the Germans termed it), ‘intra-actively’, as the (not entirely) ‘new’ materialists of our own day have it (Barad 2007: 353–96) – are ‘forever speaking’? Or are we to understand that every single thing, human or otherwise, ‘animate’ or ‘inanimate’, tangible or intangible – including, for instance, the old grey stone that William has claimed

as a seat, or the lake beside which he is sitting, or those mysterious ‘Powers’ that bring food for thought – has something to say, and is therefore liable to address itself to the contemplative, or, as the speaker puts it in the last line, ‘dreaming’, mind in potentially surprising ways?

In the following poem, in which William ‘turns the tables’ on his studious friend, berating him for poring over his books when he should be heading outside for an evening stroll, this ambiguity is ultimately resolved on the side of ‘things.’ This is how it begins:

Up! up! my Friend, and quit your books;
Or surely you’ll grow double:
Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks;
Why all this toil and trouble?

The sun, above the mountain’s head,
A freshening lustre mellow
Through all the long green fields has spread,
His first sweet evening yellow.

Books! tis a dull and endless strife;
Come, hear the woodland linnet,
How sweet his music! On my life,
There’s more of wisdom in it.

And hark! How blithe the throstle sings!
He, too, is no mean preacher;
Come forth into the light of things,
Let Nature be your Teacher.

(l. 1–16)

Now, it must be admitted that it is hard to recite this poem without an ironic smirk. The corniness of the imagery (replete with a ‘mellow’ ‘yellow’ sunset, the obligatory Lakeland mountain, ‘green fields’, and ‘sweet’ birdsong issuing from ‘vernal woods’) is compounded by the jaunty verse form, with its regular iambic metre and a-b-a-b rhyme scheme, which is liable to put one in mind of the kind of doggerel famously parodied by the urbane Dr. Johnson:

As with my hat upon my head
I walked along the Strand
I there did meet another man
With his hat in his hand.

(Preminger and Brogan 1993: 301)

Add to this the heavy-handed didacticism of the Rousseauian exclamation, ‘Let Nature be your Teacher’, which was already looking somewhat jaded by the late eighteenth century, and it is seriously hard-going trying to convince your wired-up twenty-first-century students that this poem was penned by one of the greatest lyricists in the English language. It is, of course, Wordsworth’s ‘greatness’, that is to say, his profound influence on many generations of later writers, that is part of the problem: if the imagery looks corny, it is because we have encountered it *ad nauseam* in the verse of so many of the Lakeland poet’s epigones. Moreover, that seemingly saccharine neo-pastoral imagery, together with the sing-song simplicity of the verse form, were integral to the demotic ambition of the *Lyrical Ballads* in its emphatic rejection of the erudite diction and highly wrought prosodic structures of Neoclassicism. What interests me here, though, is not so much Wordsworth’s literary innovation (although I will return to that too), but, rather, what I take to be the ontological and ethical implications of its poetic argument. This turns upon an arresting line, which occurs in the fourth stanza, immediately preceding, and thereby reconfiguring, the perhaps not so Rousseauian image of Nature as Teacher: ‘Come forth into the light of things.’

Let me repeat that: Come forth into the light of things.

Up to this point, we have been bouncing along merrily with Wordsworth’s folksy metre and conventional lexicon, when suddenly, in classic Wordsworthian manner, we are tripped up by an expression that is, on reflection, very queer indeed. The thing is, you see, that the preceding verses have primed you to expect another cliché, the waning ‘light of day’ being the most likely candidate. But the speaker suddenly takes another of those slight swerves away from the expected – so slight that you could easily miss it unless you are paying very close attention – and that subtle deviation, a single word in this case, changes everything. ‘Come forth into the light of *things*’? What on earth is that supposed to mean? In what sense are we to conceive of things as having their own light, as distinct from being illuminated from the outside? What would it mean to expose ourselves to this light, that is not the light of the setting sun, or of moon, candle, light bulb or iPhone, although all those things too must be assumed to also manifest this peculiar other light? And how might we appear to ourselves in this strange other light, the light of things, of which we too perhaps are such: things, that is, with our own light?

The reason why this line has got me hooked is that I cannot quite get my head around it. But I think that is precisely the point: as a work of what I have elsewhere termed ‘negative ecopoetics’ (Rigby 2004a: 119–27; Rigby 2004b),

this text turns on something you cannot grasp; something that dissolves the Rousseauian reification of Nature-as-a-whole into a plurality of entities that have the capacity to instruct precisely by escaping our hold on them; something that gets named, midway through the poem, ‘the light of things’. Once we have got up and brushed ourselves down after being tripped up by this line, we discover, reading on, that what William wants his friend to lay aside, at least for a spell, is not only – perhaps not even primarily – his books, but rather, a mode of cognitive comportment. Because what gets in the way of apprehending ‘the light of things’ is not so much being indoors: it is, as we are told in the second-last stanza, our ‘meddling intellect’, which, ‘Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things: –/We murder to dissect’ (l.28).

This reference to dissection, at a time when anti-vivisectionism was on the rise among early animal rights and animal welfare campaigners (Perkins 2003), suggests that Wordsworth’s target is that mode of cognitive comportment most closely associated with Francis Bacon’s *novum organum*, that is, the experimental method of modern empirical science. This reading is invited also by the preceding line, ‘Sweet is the lore which Nature brings’, if *lore* is taken to cut its figure against the *Laws* of Nature, as disclosed by Sir Isaac Newton *et al.* Now, this should not be assumed to imply a hostile attitude to the emerging natural sciences *per se*. Wordsworth was among those Romantic writers who were ‘fascinated by the discoveries of their age’ and had personal relationships with natural philosophers (Hall 2016: 4). At this time he was especially enamoured of Erasmus Darwin’s work on the ‘loves of plants’ in *The Botanic Garden* (1791), and he later developed a friendship with the geologist (and priest) Adam Sedgwick (Reno 2016). The lexicon of ‘Expostulation and Reply’ is also suggestive of the vitalist physics of this period. Specifically, those peculiar ‘Powers’ could well refer to the ‘powers’ or ‘potencies’, dynamic forces in nature, postulated by contemporary natural philosophers. In Schelling’s view, these ‘potencies’ underlay the inherent ‘productivity’ of nature, giving rise to its evidently self-transformative and evolutionary character through the intra-action of opposing forces, which perpetually generated novel entities. Such ‘powers’ were also postulated by Coleridge’s acquaintance, the renowned chemist, Humphry Davy, whom Wordsworth later enlisted to edit the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (including correcting his punctuation), and for whom the primary ‘power’ of nature was light (Rigby 2004a: 26–28).¹³

And yet, to behold the peculiar light of things, as distinct from the physical light in which things appear, the light that Newton had famously refracted into its component colours, is to view them from a different perspective from that

of the empirical scientist, who approaches the object under investigation with a pre-conceived hypothesis to be either proven or disproven. This approach can be extremely useful if you want to understand how physical entities function, and therefore also how they might be manipulated or replicated to suit human purposes. As Schelling observed, however:

Every experiment is a question addressed to nature that nature is forced to answer. But every question contains a hidden *a priori* judgement: every experiment *qua* experiment is prophecy; experimentation in itself is a production of the phenomenon.

(Schelling 1858: 276)

It is, of course, entirely possible to study natural phenomena empirically in a different manner, and this was precisely what Schelling's friend, the amateur scientist, and philosopher of science, J. G. Goethe attempted with his own counter-Newtonian studies of colour (and much else besides), which entailed the bracketing of prior assumptions in favour of paying attention to the way in which phenomena disclose themselves under a range of conditions, and in relation to one another and the observer. This participatory and contemplative mode of investigation Goethe termed a 'gentle empiricism': one that accords well with the phenomenological practice of transcendental reflection that represented for Husserl the '*theoria* of genuine science' (Seamon and Zajonc 1998). But this is still not quite the attitude that Wordsworth wants to privilege. The point seems to be that neither empirical investigation nor rational reflection, as purveyed, perhaps, by the books that the speaker wishes his friend to quit, should comprise the only and certainly not the primary way in which we relate to what he once again simply – and marvellously – calls 'things'.

How else, then, might we relate to them? This is suggested in the last two lines, where we are given a positive hint as to how we might put ourselves in the way of that strange other light: 'Come forth', the speaker once again exhorts his friend, but now he adds, 'and bring with you a heart/That watches and receives'. This is not, I would suggest, the coolly disinterested stance intended by Goethean 'gentle empiricism' or Husserlian phenomenology, but something closer to the original Greek understanding of *theoria*, which was derived from *thaumázō*, to wonder or revere. And it also carries more than a trace of the Christian tradition of contemplation, which, as Hart has stressed, 'is practiced in love, not scholarly disinterest' (forthcoming),¹⁴ recalling in particular Duns Scotus' teaching that every creature is endowed with its own 'inner light', which we can perceive only if we recognize it as 'gifted by the loving Creator with a sanctity beyond our ability to understand, towards which we are in turn

called to act as *imago Christi*, as images of Christ who embodied divine love' (Ingham 2003: 53, 54–56, 66). Wordsworth's contemplative ecopoetics, then, is perhaps better termed a 'poethics' (Retallack 2003). For it at once constitutes and enjoins a form of 'acknowledgement', as Harrison has it, which foregrounds 'the responsibility of the self in the presence of the "strange stranger," recognising the presences of things, whether sentient or not, and extending to them a sense of agency, autonomy, and moral personhood even as they recognise and respect their mystery and difference' (2016: 189).

The affectionate attention that Wordsworth is advocating here can be practiced anywhere, anytime. Going out of doors is not a prerequisite. And yet, as Coleridge discovered, and as Rousseau had described in his influential *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (*Reveries d'un Promeneur solitaire*, 1780) – an intertext that Wordsworth's readers would have readily recognized in 'The Tables Turned' – rambling can be highly conducive to reverie, wandering to wondering. David E. Cooper (2017), in his discussion of Coleridge and contemplation, describes this as 'meditation on the move', and notes that it is also cultivated in non-Western contemplative traditions, especially Daoism and Buddhism. The seventeenth-century Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō, whose walking poetry has been compared with Wordsworth's,¹⁵ was a master of meditation on the move in the Zen Buddhist tradition; a tradition that continues to inspire contemporary ecopoets, such as Gary Snyder and Robert Gray. But whether or not we don our hiking boots, and regardless of whether, if we do step 'outside', we are heading out onto a rural lane or a city street, the key thing is that we seek to still ourselves sufficiently to allow things to disclose themselves to us in their own way and their own time, being mindful that in so doing they are always also withdrawing from us: nothing is ever fully revealed. In order to allow yourself to be illuminated by the light of things you are going to need to surrender for the moment your perhaps perfectly legitimate desire to objectively know and instrumentally use them, and position yourself instead as the recipient of whatever it is that they might have to reveal to you, in ways that forever exceed your expectations, comprehension, and capacity adequately to respond to their appeal.

Wordsworth, it turns out, was seriously into things. In this, he was far from alone. Indeed, in the eighteenth century, several writers, including Defoe, Pope, Swift, Gay and Sterne, took to writing narratives told by such things as coins, coaches, clothes, animals and insects (Lamb 2011). But Wordsworth's things are not fantasized as speaking English: they are, so to speak, doing their own thing, in excess of whatever we might have to say about them. According to Adam Potkay (2008), 'thing' or 'things' occur no less than 439 times in Wordsworth's corpus.

Moreover, Wordsworth deploys this term in a markedly different manner both from Samuel Johnson's authoritative *Dictionary* definition of 1755, according to which 'thing' designates 'Whatever is; not a person,' and from William Blackstone's prototypically modern usage in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–9) as 'a being without life or consciousness; an inanimate object, as distinguished from a person or living creature' (Potkay 2008: 394). By contrast, 'Wordsworth uses *things* in a way that blurs distinctions between persons and nonpersons, between entities and events' (395). In so doing, he 'borrowed from but gestured beyond Shaftesburian natural religion and Spinozan pantheism in imagining a joyous affection and non-appropriative stance towards natural things' (392). Potkay frames this radically democratic stance through Silvia Benso's philosophy of ethical responsiveness to the 'facialities' of material entities. Bringing Heidegger's thinking of the thing as a 'gathering' of earth, sky, gods and mortals into a mutually corrective conversation with Levinas' thinking of ethics as the 'dimension within which a nonviolating encounter with the other can come to pass' (2000: xxxii), Benso passes beyond both Heidegger and Levinas in proposing an ethics of things, whether manufactured, crafted or naturally occurring, including those that commonly get classified as 'inanimate' objects.¹⁶

Yet Wordsworth's contemplative ecopoetics also lends itself to a speculative realist interpretation, namely as entailing that fundamentally aesthetic mode of encounter in which, as Steven Shaviro (2011) puts it, the thing 'bursts forth in a splendour that dazzles and blinds me'. Shaviro explains,

In these cases the understanding is frustrated, and the will reaches the limits of its power. It is only aesthetically, beyond understanding and will, that I can appreciate the *actus* of the thing being what it is, in what Harman calls 'the sheer sincerity of existence'. The dazzlement of things bursting forth is what Harman calls *allure*: the sense of an object's existence apart from, and over and above, its own qualities. Allure has to do with the showing-forth of that which is, strictly speaking, inaccessible; it 'invites us toward another level of reality'. In the event of allure, I encounter the very *being* of a thing, beyond all definition or correlation. I am forced to acknowledge its integrity, entirely apart from me. Such an encounter alters the parameters of the world, tearing apart 'the contexture of meaning', and rupturing every consensus.

(Shaviro 2011: n.p.)¹⁷

In keeping with Harman's Object Oriented Ontology (OOO), Shaviro uses the terms 'thing' and 'object' interchangeably in this article. It is worth noting,

though, that this substitution would be ruinous for Wordsworth's poem, and not only because it would wreck the phonetic patterning: 'things', at the end of the third line, rhymes with 'sings' in the first, and provides the metrically necessary stress. The problem is also semantic: 'Come forth into the light of *objects*' would set up dissonant connotations, inevitably summoning that hierarchical dualism of subject and object, whereby the privileged place of the former is to claim to know and command the latter: this is precisely the attitude that Wordsworth attributes to the 'meddling intellect' and its murderous dissections. Like Jane Bennett, then, I prefer to join Wordsworth in 'siding with things' (to recall Francis Ponge [1942], another notable poet of things). As Bennett observes,

'Thing' or 'body' has advantages over 'object', I think, if one's task is to disrupt the political parsing that yields only active (American, manly) subjects and passive objects. Why try to disrupt this parsing? Because we are daily confronted with evidence of nonhuman vitalities actively at work around and within us. I also do so because the frame of subjects and objects is unfriendly to the intensified ecological awareness that we need if we are to respond intelligently to signs of the breakdown of the earth's carrying capacity for human [and, I would add, diverse nonhuman] life.

(2012: 231)

The other thing about 'things' is that they are both singular and interrelational: the etymology (much loved by Heidegger, of course, although that is not necessarily a recommendation) of 'thing' (Old High German *Ding*) is assembly, or meeting-place. In this connection, I also share Bennett's concern regarding 'the purity of Harman's commitment to the aloof object' (2012: 228), ontologically isolated from all assemblages, systems and processes.¹⁸

Shaviri provides a helpful correction on this point, namely in his pairing of allure with 'metamorphosis', understood as 'a kind of wayward attraction, a movement of withdrawal and substitution, a continual play of becoming. In the movement of allure', he suggests, 'the web of meaning is ruptured, as the thing emerges violently from its context; but in the movement of metamorphosis, the web of meaning is multiplied and extended, echoed and distorted, propagated to infinity, as the thing loses itself in the network of its own ramifying traces' (2011: n.p.). This take on 'metamorphosis' has a Whiteheadian orientation (in turn derived from Whitehead's reception of Goethe's philosophy of nature as metamorphic process), and his article concludes with a discussion of Whitehead's reading of Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' in *Science and the Modern World* (1967: 75–94), which demonstrates that 'the separation of entities, and their

“cumulation” [Whitehead] or interpenetration, are two sides of the same coin; they are alike irreducible to subjectivism, sensationalism, and simple presence’ (Shaviro 2011: n.p.).

From this perspective, then, to enter into the ‘light of things’ is not only to lay oneself open to an encounter with particular entities in their alluring singularity; it is also to find oneself caught up in dynamic processes of interconnectivity, ‘conversing’ with ‘the mighty sum/Of things, forever speaking’. What matters, then, is *both* those radiantly alluring things that address us, and one another, as unique co-existents, as Morton puts it, discrete entities that the poet singles out by name – ‘my friend’, the sun, that mountain head, those green fields, that linnets, that thistle and that vernal wood – *and* the dynamic interrelations with one another (and an innumerable diversity of other others) through which they are forever being intra-actively (re- and de-)composed.

I have stressed that the contemplative attitude can be assumed anywhere, anytime. Yet, from a historical perspective, it is not irrelevant that the kinds of entities and processes that Wordsworth’s speaker wants his friend to engage with are other-than-human. This is not a matter of fetishizing ‘Nature’ but of recognizing that industrial modernity, which was beginning to get a fossil-fuelled boost during Wordsworth’s day, produces forms of human self-enclosure that are liable to render the privileged in particular at risk of a potentially hazardous disregard for other-than-human beings and processes (Plumwood 2002: 97–122). In this historical horizon, it does matter, after all, that ‘William’ should exhort his friend to ‘close up those barren leaves’, the human-all-too-human books he is perusing, and head out of doors. But note the catch here: it is only by means of such ‘barren leaves’, a metaphor which, in foregrounding the materiality of the text, deftly undercuts the dubious opposition between Nature and Culture that the poem might mistakenly be assumed to buy into, that the author, Wordsworth, issues his call to us, distant as we are to him in time as well as space, to ‘come forth into the light of things’. Reading books and contemplating nature, it turns out, are complementary rather than opposed activities. In a classic instance of romantic irony, the very text, whose primary speaker seeks to lure his scholarly interlocutor out on an evening stroll, is pitching a poetic project: namely that of recalling and revaluing those contemplative encounters with beyond-human others that open us up to a bio-inclusive ethics of co-existence and collective flourishing. Moreover, the poetic text itself, in tripping the reader up from time to time, as Wordsworth does with that weird phrase ‘the light of things’, resisting our desire for a quick fix of meaning, asks to be approached contemplatively as an

elusive thing in its own right, at once alluringly singular and metamorphically interrelational, its meaning infinitely deferred to Derrida's 'future future' (Morton 2012: 221). It is just such a mode of meditative perusal that Wordsworth recommends to his readers in the Preface to 'The Excursion', where he likens his poems to the 'cells, Oratories, and sepulchral Recesses' of a 'gothic Church' (Fay 2018: 27).

While it might draw on prior texts and traditions, this Romantic poetic project is self-consciously modern, deploying an innovative poetic language, which invites its readers to slow down and tarry with uncertainty, in contrast with the textual fast food proffered by the growing capitalist literary market. And while the contemplative comportment that this entrains is informed by Christian practices, which, as Schleiermacher recognized, were a local articulation of a perennial religious experience, the non-doctrinal mode of transcendence advanced by Wordsworth was lateral rather than vertical: across to all manner of earthly things, rather than up to a heavenly Other. The wonder afforded by Wordsworthian wandering, far from comprising an 'egotistical sublime', as Keats unkindly claimed, was affectionately fraternal, radicalizing the brotherliness that was to have been brought about, but which was ultimately betrayed, by the French Revolution, by extending it democratically to places, animals and things, as well as people. This radically democratic ethos is also in play in Wordsworth's formal experimentation: by creating a space within literate culture for the demotic forms of folksong, the *Lyrical Ballads* sought to open poetry to a wider readership. At the same time, though – and here I return to the necessarily 'negative' moment of ecopoetics – it is only by owning up to its inadequacy in mediating the inextricably material and moral encounters, which the poetic text recalls, that it might succeed in luring its readers to explore them for themselves, in the flesh, rather than (only) on the page.

Doing this, as William insists in 'The Tables Turned', not only affords mental nourishment; it also provides emotional and physical benefits. Nature's 'teachings', or at least, those that arrive in moments of reverential reverie, do not consist in moral codes or theoretical postulates but rather are sensed in the flesh in the revitalization that we experience in the midst of other things that are flourishing after their own lights:

She has a world of ready wealth,
Our minds and hearts to bless –
Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,
Truth breathed by cheerfulness.

One impulse from a vernal wood
 May teach you more of man,
 Of moral evil and of good,
 Than all the sages can.

(l. 17–24)

By casting contemplative practice as affording ‘ready wealth’ of a non-pecuniary kind, Wordsworth implicitly counter-poses this mode of relating to the world not only to that afforded by philosophical reflection and scientific investigation but also to that which sets upon the Earth as a source of financial gain: at this time of the dawning Ploutocene, that meant in particular the exploitation of ever deeper coal seams to fuel the growing manufactories and associated transportation systems of the Industrial Revolution. In addition to enhancing your own well-being, William maintains that this non-acquisitive approach to living things in particular (such as the interconnected collective of the ‘vernal woods’) can be a source of ethical guidance. This does not mean that it is possible to read off a moral code from ‘nature’. Rather, if ‘impulse’ is taken to connote *conatus*, then these promised benefits, at once personal and ethical, are consistent with Wordsworth’s neo-Spinozan ethic of collective flourishing.

‘There is no presence’: Tim Lilburn’s contemplative eco-poetics of the *via negativa*

Within the horizon of Wordsworthian contemplative eco-poetics, the connection between contemplative encounters with natural phenomena and an enhanced sense of well-being – one that had been postulated by Rousseau, and is now recognized by the UK’s National Health Service (as will be discussed further in the following chapter) – is experienced in quotidian contexts in more-or-less anthropogenic environments, potentially including urban ones, as Wordsworth indicated in his sonnet ‘Composed on London Bridge’. Moreover, it was contingent on decolonizing human relations with the ‘mighty sum/Of things, forever speaking’. Subsequently, however, the quest for spiritual experience (and/or physical adventure) ‘in nature’ became caught up with other kinds of colonial practice: notably in North America, where it was associated with the appropriation of indigenous homelands to create national parks framed as ‘wilderness’. In such contexts, an eco-poetics of presence penned by non-Indigenous writers, celebrating their experiences of communing with Nature in the ‘wild’, risks perpetuating this colonizing gesture of erasing Indigenous

place-making. Contemporary Canadian poet Tim Lilburn has responded to this dilemma by departing from the Wordsworthian *via positiva* to pursue a rigorously apophatic contemplative eco-poetics.

In his 2017 essay collection *The Larger Conversation: Contemplation and Place* (2017), informed by his conversations with First Nations Canadians, including the Saanich poet Kevin Paul, his instructor in the indigenous SENĆOTEN language, Lilburn observes that ‘Europe came maimed to North America’ (236), beholden to ‘a sort of reasoning that Val Plumwood called hyper-rationality, the cognitive lymph of turbo capitalism’ (237). For this reason, he maintains that the work of decolonization, from the side of the colonizer, entails both the recognition of past wrongs and continuing social injustice and ecological damage *and* the recovery of the Western counter-tradition of contemplation:

The renovation of Western philosophy required to imagine a post-imperial world...cannot be achieved by invention, but only by a retrieval...of lost cultural parts. It will entail the resuscitation of a larger version of the self, deepened interiority that is sustained by conversation with a range of interlocutors, not all of them human...what does justice now ask of us? an ascesis of contemplative acts...which offers no strategic efficiency, yet nevertheless contains within itself the germ of the sole durable politics.

(Lilburn 2017: 230–31)

As a writer, Lilburn has long practiced a form of ‘poetic attention’ that, as Alison Calder observes, ‘seeks not to appropriate the world, but to stand alongside it’ (Introduction to Lilburn 2007: ix).¹⁹ As Lilburn puts it in his essay collection *Living in the World As If It Were Home*, this ‘involves submitting to be disarmed and taking on the silence of things, the marginality and anonymity of grass, sage, lichen, things never properly seen’ (22). Far from offering a ‘world of ready wealth’, things are disclosed by Lilburn precisely as withholding whatever meaning and order that they might have in themselves (or for others) from the poet, who is, after all, only human, and a newcomer at that, and constantly at risk of seeing only himself in the other: ‘The grass is a mirror that clouds as the bright look goes in’, concedes the speaker in Lilburn’s ‘In the Hills, Watching’ (2007: 18). This does not mean, though, that the things to which Lilburn’s verse bears witness, however inadequately, are devoid of their own radiance. On the contrary: as he writes in a poem entitled, axiomatically, ‘There Is No presence’, ‘What glitters in things is a mountain, it can’t be held in the mouth’ (2007: 25). Nor can this glittering even be glimpsed if you believe that the world ‘is there to do with as you will’ (1999: 35). What the glittering signifies is that while there

is 'no presence' in the guise of an object to be possessed, there is what Silvia Benso terms 'presencing', namely in the event, or perhaps even the trace of the event, whereby something is glimpsed precisely as ungraspable.

In Lilburn's 1999 collection, *Desire Never Leaves*, the desire in question is twofold: to fully know the other from the inside out, as it were, to get inside them or become one with them, and then to render in words what you have experienced with them. There is no end to this desire, for it can never be fulfilled:

Contemplative knowing is not a feeling, a rest, a peace that sweeps over one, reward for the ferocity of one's romantic yearnings, one's energetic Wordsworthian peerings. Contemplative knowing of the deer and the hill must gather about the conviction that neither can be known.

(1999: 18)

And that each of them 'exceeds its name' (1999: 61). Lilburn's theologically informed post-romantic ecopoetics of the *via negativa* effects an implicit critique of the narcissism of consumer culture precisely by bespeaking the resistance of things to our desire for revelation, entailing the adoption of 'a stance of quiet before things in which your various acquisitivenesses – for knowledge, supremacy, consolation – are stilled, exhausted before the remoteness, the militant individuality of what is there' (1999: 21). Here is another stanza from 'There Is No Presence':

You are good but no blond disc in the grass for you, none, no bone
of light, no little palate or gland of stupid but shining
intelligibility, the pure bride, none, none for you, in the grass prong.
A glacier of night
shoved through the centre of things. Juniper hard with absence.
You are alone in the world: the flab of the river
is anarchic, the water is feathered with ignorance,
a dangerous mirror that makes your face darkness throwing its hair.

(2007: 27)

'You are alone in the world': does this not risk reinstating human apartness, the toxic legacy of that dreaded reason-nature hierarchal dualism, which ecophilosophers such as Plumwood have held in large part responsible for our ecosocial woes? Potentially, but not necessarily. Lilburn is not denying mind to matter unequivocally but rather accepting the limits of human consciousness and facing up to radical non-identity. Nor does this insistence on the non-identity of self and other, word and thing necessarily set us apart from the world: other things too communicate in their own ways, such as the pumpkins, which, in Lilburn's

poem of that name, ‘sing, in the panic of September/sun’ (2007: 5). In *The Larger Conversation*, moreover, he writes of how his relationship with the land shifted as he began to be invited into the world as spoken in SENĆO’FEN. While Lilburn found it particularly difficult to articulate its ‘under the tongue’ sounds, which, as Kevin Paul explained to him, echo ‘the sound of rocks loosened and played by the tidal ebb and flow’, learning the Indigenous names for things brought him into conversation with them in a new way: ‘the trees, birds, plants “opened their eyes,” or so it seemed. This animation was a reduction of distance between object in the land and me, as well as an apparent shuffling aside on the part of oaks, stones, salal, which permitted space for me in the forest’ (2017: 232). By making the effort to learn an Indigenous language, one understood by its Saanich speakers as continuous with the more-than-human languages of the land, the non-Indigenous poet, it seems, no longer feels entirely ‘alone in the world’.

In keeping with his new sense of the significance of different cultural traditions of naming and conceptions of language, Lilburn’s most recent poetry collection is called *The Names* (2016). In ‘The End of August’, ‘thinking’ is not hoarded by the human speaker but rather distributed amongst any number of things:

Queen Anne’s lace, lurk
of vetch in forests, white
clover shaken in a fist of final bees,
dust chalks everywhere.
And the gloom of fireweed
in abandoned quarries,
autumn’s vampiric looks;
a leaf falls from oceanspray,
this is thinking.
A dog barks,
cold pours its slag
 in a scoop through sky.

The hoard of neglect
is in the beauty-vault of things.
Fewer than eight red pear leaves
among sodden pine needles on my low shed roof.

(2016: 23)

Moving from forests through an abandoned industrial site to his own home, the contemplative gaze of Lilburn’s speaker calls us to attend to commonly neglected things, upholding the lowly – plants lurking on the forest floor and others recolonizing a quarry, ‘last bees’ and a barking dog, chalk dust and cold

air, fallen pear leaves and pine needles on his ‘low shed roof’ – as if to say, as did William Carlos Williams (whose ‘Queen-Anne’s Lace’ is recalled in the opening line) of that red wheelbarrow in the rain, on the least of these too, ‘it all depends’. Naming in this way affirms the mattering of things, even though their meaning, like Lilburn’s verse itself, with its strange locutions (‘hoard of neglect’, ‘beauty-vault of things’) exceeds our grasp. In this way, the poetic work of human words, shaped so as to draw attention to the sonorous materiality of speech, becomes a mode of singing along with more-than-human others among the ‘mighty sum/Of things, forever speaking’. As such, it might also afford a form of training in the art of co-existence on a planet in crisis, where the sum of living kinds is daily dwindling.

‘Towards a contemplative commons’: Contemplative *ecopoiesis*

The *ecopoetics* of contemplation, as Fay says of Wordsworth’s ‘monastic inheritance’, is a device to ‘convey and induce quietness’ (Fay 2018: 27). This quietude, however, should not be confused with quietism. ‘Disaster’, as Lilburn notes, ‘is often the precursor of great contemplative ages’ (2017: 239). In the face of unfolding *ecocide*, contemplative praxis is increasingly emerging not only, as Lilburn sees it, as a response to grief but also as facilitating a successful transition to a post-capitalist, commons-based political economy. As the organizers of a workshop ‘Toward a Contemplative Commons’, held in August 2017 at the Potsdam Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies observe, this ‘will not only depend on the capacity for new technologies and social relations to alter the balance of political and economic power; it will also depend on developing social practices that underlie a broader cultural shift.’²⁰ Contemplative practices, drawn from different cultural traditions (often Eastern ones), are now seen as intrinsic to what is being termed the ‘inner transition’ to sustainability, notably in the context of the Transition Town movement, which began in Totnes in England in 2006, and has since spread to many other countries, including Canada.²¹ Such practices ‘allow us to expand [our] sense of self to become-with the world-in-becoming, while allowing us to cultivate a moment-to-moment familiarity with one’s intimate relations to human and non-human others.’²² The deep enjoyment this affords can help wean participants away from the pseudo-satisfactions of consumerism, as well as enhancing their awareness of the ways in which their (in)actions affect others, human and otherwise, potentially over great distances of time and space, sensitizing them to others’ suffering, as well as potentially helping them to admit to their own. Opening a space in

which guilt, grief and anger can be at once acknowledged and (for a time at least) set to one side, contemplative practices can also assist in the cultivation of collaborative capacities, respect for perceived opponents and non-violent modes of resistance. Undertaken out-of-doors in the context of ecopolitical activism, they can also help to remind protesters of ‘what it is we are trying to protect’, as one of the Quaker participants in the (currently ongoing) campaign against the enlargement of Kinder Morgan’s Trans Mountain pipeline (bringing oil from the Alberta tar sands to the port at Burnaby in British Columbia), told Victor Lam: this is, she said, ‘about really trying to get totally grounded and getting out of the us and them mentality and really wanting to be coming from a place of love’ (Qtd Lam 2019).

Whether of the *via positiva* or *negativa*, contemplative ecopoetics has much to offer to the ‘inner transition’ advanced here. This kind of writing, an enduring legacy of the Romantic project to ‘make poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical’, provides training in a non-appropriative mode of being-toward and becoming-with more-than-human others, which is not exhausted by reading but persists in prodding us to ‘lift our eyes from the page’ (Bonney 1990) and make our way back into the ‘light of things’.