

Anthropocene and Posthumanism in Contemporary Eco-Poetry: An Ecocritical Reading of “21st Century Lecture” and “A Field of Finches Without Sight Still Singing”

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Summary:

Ralph Black’s “21st Century Lecture” (2007) and Grace Cavalieri’s “A Field of Finches Without Sight Still Singing” (2010) are read in this paper as eco-poems in terms of two central concepts in ecocriticism: the Anthropocene and posthumanism respectively. Canonical in ecocriticism, the Anthropocene and posthumanism have constructed the main themes in contemporary ecopoetry, which is to reflect on and address the environmental crisis. While Black attempts to focalise the grave dangers to which humanity is subjecting the environment, he lectures the readers about climate change. On a related, but different note, Cavalieri brings to the fore the other-than-human world in an endeavour to promote biocentrism. Black’s speaker adopts an outsider’s attitude to expose the Anthropocentric activities on the planet, whereas Cavalieri weaves a narrative that captures the historical struggle of singing birds. The melancholic tone the poems evoke is an attempt to accentuate the seriousness of the declining planetary system that the poets varyingly discuss.

Introduction

The new term “ecopoetry” goes hand in hand with the current literary scene in which it was coined. The development of science since the 19th-century has been a huge part of how readers began to perceive their existence in the environment around them, as J. Scott Bryson argues. Therefore, the traditional romantic nature poetry was disparaged by the beginning of the 20th as environmental awareness started to develop (2). Given these circumstances, anthropomorphised nature is no longer taken seriously and has even dwindled.

The terminology associated with ecocriticism has been burgeoning and developing, providing a stable theoretical ground for literary texts to be investigated and evaluated. The Anthropocene, which emerged firsthand from geology, endowed ecocriticism with new horizons that, subsequently, alter how texts discuss nature and nonhuman entities. Timothy Clark believes that “the shifts in sense and understanding summed up in the term ‘Anthropocene’ are so profound as to be inexpressible within our inherited vocabulary” (2019, p. 12). Hence, ecopoets that articulate anthropocentric issues must have faced this inexpressibility in a world, and more importantly a language, dominated for so long by human-centred conventions.

The legitimate question of why nature poetry had to be replaced by ecopoetry is best answered by Bryson’s definition of ecopoetry as “a subset of nature poetry that, while adhering to certain conventions of romanticism, also advances beyond that tradition and takes on distinctly contemporary problems and issues” (2002, p. 5). In this vein, the main concerns of ecopoetry are ecological and environmental issues that, in modern capitalist times, are getting more calamitous. Ecopoets undertake the mission of criticising the human effect on the planet and the defiled ecological system caused by anthropocentric activities.

In order to address the current environmental crisis, ecopoetry not only brings to the fore the impact of the Anthropocene but also attributes agency to the otherwise silent beings such as animals. Posthumanism is the term used to describe such tendency, rejecting the longstanding belief of human subjectivity and voice. The term itself is connected with numerous disciplines other than literature. Nevertheless, the literary milieu is basically concerned with how other inhuman beings are represented, and whether such representations enhance how these beings are being treated in real life. While several scholars consider posthumanism as an antithesis to the Enlightenment humanism, Karin Kukkonen argues differently. She postulates that even though posthumanism attempts to promote a conscious change of what is meant to be human, “it does not relate this change to the complexities involved in the historically previous change in consciousness that took

place in the Enlightenment” (2020, p. 27). Thereby, to assume that the Enlightenment beliefs were all humanist at the core is invalid.

In this paper, two areas of ecocriticism, namely the Anthropocene and posthumanism, are going to be explored in relation to ecopoetry. Their emergence and connection to ecocriticism will be addressed as well. Following the brief discussion of the theoretical framework, Ralph Black’s “21st Century Lecture” and Grace Cavalieri’s “A Field of Finches Without Sight Still Singing” are read and evaluated in terms of the Anthropocene and posthumanism respectively.

The Anthropocene and Posthumanism: an Overview

The atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and the ecologist Eugene Stoermer declared in 2000 that the earth’s geology altered due to human interference, and a new geological epoch needs to be announced. The Anthropocene, or the “Age of Man” sums up the impacts of humans on the planet and the whole biodiversity. (Heise, 2020, p. 121). When this epoch exactly began is debatable among scientists and experts. Scientists, for instance, see that this epoch started almost two hundred years ago (Adamson, 2014). Timothy Clark, however, argues that this epoch “officially” started in the 1950s when the nuclear bomb tests disseminated “the radioactive elements” across the planet (2019, p. 17).

Emerging from the field of pure sciences, the Anthropocene permeates literature and the humanities, becoming an avant-garde ingredient of ecocriticism, which studies “the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xviii). Dale Jamieson delineates the main feature of this epoch, which is the growth of human population and, therefore, the exigency of more energy sources, food, water, and discarding “waste products” (2017, p. 14). Accordingly, this feature is what literary texts highly criticise and reflect upon. The expanding urban societies and technological advancement have become controversial topics. Sam Solnick argues that examining poetry through the Anthropocentric lens underscores how awareness of this epoch’s central features “inflects the ways that ecologically concerned and scientifically informed poetry conceives of life” (2017, p. 4). The Anthropocene is not simply a geological epoch to define and characterise. It is rather a time for humans to raise ethical, political,

economical, and philosophical questions. Therefore, understood beyond geology, the Anthropocene, for the humanities, designates "this slow but massive shift in the tectonic plates of human self-conceptions" (Clark, 2014a; 2014b, p. 80). In this regard, it seems that poetry's main purpose is to present the dilemmas created by this new human-centred culture.

At the opposite pole, the posthumanist principle challenges the notion of human centrality and resists anthropocentric ethics. Posthumanism, first and foremost, reacts to the technological advances and anthropocentric practices that promote the concept of human exceptionalism. Pramod Nayar opines that "Posthumanism as a philosophical approach involves a rethinking of the very idea of subjectivity because it sees human subjectivity as an assemblage, co-evolving with machines and animals" (2014, p. 8). This philosophical notion brings a wide spectrum to the literary realm, challenging the orthodoxy of human superiority over the world. Posthumanism has dethroned the Anthropocene, putting mankind on an equal footing with other beings. As Ursula K. Heise states, the advent of "posthumanist strains of thought in the humanities and social sciences" thrusts into the centrality of human agency (2017, p. 4). Thus, posthumanism blurs the boundaries between human and nonhuman that the Anthropocene has created. Posthumanism influences several humanistic and scientific fields. However, Louise Westling conceptualises posthumanism as comprising two main dimensions. The first is the "techno" or "cyborg" posthumanism of Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles who see humans as always combinations of technology and the innate. The second direction regards the "animate posthumanism" or animal studies. The latter constructs a very promising possibility for ecocriticism as it seeks to destabilise the boundaries between the supposedly superior species and other beings within the ecosystem (2006, pp. 29-30). Axel Goodbody considers representing animals in literature as a substantial step towards reconnecting the human and the nonhuman (2014).

Significant to posthumanist literature is the question of voice. It is no surprise that literature, granted by the "egalitarian nature of representing speech and thought", is arguably the cultural arena, most occupied with representing other-than-humans, as

Thomsen postulates (2020, p. 338). Giving voice to various nonhuman entities is the attribute most crucial to posthumanist narrative, and poetry that places other-than-human beings as subject is the most appealing to the posthumanist outlook. On that account, posthumanism does not advocate for poetry that invests in a mere human subject. Even further, nonhuman entities, be it animals, inanimate beings, or imaginary creatures, must also be given a sort of agency when they are represented. Posthumanism has several concerns; chief among them are the entanglement of the subject and its environment, human and nonhuman lived experience, and the question of subjectivity in a modern computerised age (Kukkonen, 2020). In this regard, the posthumanist diverse categories, such as "human-animal studies, multispecies ethnography, and new materialisms", have debunked the belief that only humans have agency and subjectivity, postulating that "human subjects are themselves constituted by nonhuman agents and environments" (Heise, 2020, p. 121)

Joni Adamson mentions that, for so long, ecocritics and writers have been preoccupied by what it means to "remake anthropos" to fit "a new environmentally ethical epoch" (2014, 171). The Anthropocene and posthumanism together constitute theoretical frameworks for poetry to speak of the environmental crisis in an attitude more relevant to the urgency of the current ecological situation. The new frameworks might accelerate the cultural works, poetry among them, to yield new eco-ethics and redefine the human subject as part of the environment, not its master.

"21st Century Lecture": Environmental Awareness

Ralph Black criticises capitalism as an aspect of the Anthropocene and exhibits all its evil effects on the world. "21st Century Lecture" plainly lays out the reasons behind the current planetary crisis, and how all these reasons are connected to capitalist economy. Consumerism, advanced war technology, pollution, and the lack of connection with nature, for Black, are all connected to each other, creating a vicious cycle. As the title makes clear, the poem is didactic in tone. Black addresses a white privileged individual, who already knows about the collapsing state of the environment and what has caused it; nevertheless the polymath addressed does not

act on that knowledge. The poem itself simulates a speech, taking place in an academic institution, specifically in the 21st century when consumerism and capitalism have become the new religions. The anthropocentric practices the poem details have caused damage to the planet as well as its inhabitants, acknowledging that such practices will eventually affect the same species that advocates for their continuation.

Black lectures his privileged readers in order to urge them to seriously consider the hopeless situation of the world. One of the striking metaphors the poem offers is the "torn shirt". The world is not supposed to look like a piece of fabric that, no matter what, will eventually get shabby. Notwithstanding, for Black, the world as we know it, is no more than a rag. Even though it is bleak, the reminder the poem begins with tells a realistic situation of the world:

Listen. You know what a torn shirt
the world's become. You know how thin
its fabric. You know what seams are,
and how your life, as though by accident,
settles in and trembles them apart. (Black, 2013, p. 185)

The other purpose this metaphor achieves is referring to the biodiversity of the planet. The "seams" the addressee seems to unintentionally disregard and neglect are what truly transforms a fabric into a shirt, and makes it exist. The seams that humans have subjected to pressure to the point of bursting are what puts existence together. Here, Black denounces how humans place themselves, albeit subconsciously, at the centre, while disregarding the biotic factors and other beings whose absence may lead to the end of the world. Later on, the poem brings attention to the significance of diversity of the environment. References to starving "polar bears at the edge/ of their ice" and the "CO₂" (Black, 2013, p. 186) both indicate an ecological collapse that must be stopped.

The poem names the culture of consumerism in the West as the enemy of the planet, elucidating its damaging landmarks and life-threatening consequences. Nowadays, buying unnecessary things is a cultural trend. Black explains that today's consumer should be more eco-conscious and regard with suspicion the institutes that make

these products. Thus, "The shirts/ you bought on a whim have to go back/ to the Singapore sweatshop" (Black, 2013, p. 185) insinuates the unconscious, compulsive consumption.

The poet counts on his addressee's awareness and intelligence to choose sustainable products and adopt an ecoethical lifestyle. All along the poem, Black drops such reminders as "You're a smart enough guy" and "You're not an idiot. You're not a fool" (2013, pp. 185-186), rallying its addressees to the cause, a matter that makes them feel responsible for the environment. The poem almost never condemns its reader, not directly at least, yet it presents everyday's trivial, reckless actions as having huge repercussions for the environment. The poem blames the refusal to contemplate these actions in the way of stopping and replacing the ones that impact the environment negatively. Reading the morning newspaper and coming across "Baghdad, Darfur, the Bronx" (2013, p. 185), the addressees must review their decisions and revise their choices. Furthermore, the poem evokes pathos in its readers with nostalgia to childhood. The connection of the child to nature is strong enough for "three-hundred-year-old trees" to take away a child's breath. This part contributes to a significant theme which is the need to develop an ecoethic, very much like the one children inherently have. Michael J. Gormley states that "if we cannot codify an ecoethic that approaches speaking as nature, the humanities will again find itself passed over by a capitalist system favoring technologies of production" (2021, pp. 25-26). The poet asserts this is not the legacy parents should leave to their children. Much as they love them, no one can protect children from the environmental disasters in store for them. Black warns against a future where humankind is more connected to technology and material gains than to nature and earth. He spurs the reader to maintain sympathy as the sole countervailing force against global capitalism/politics, "You won't let your heart—that tiny/ glacial island—fracture and calve" (2013, p. 186).

The poet does not hold back, but lists industries that have damaged the environment most in this anthropocentric age. Besides, Black reminds the addressees that everyone is affected whether one lives in the vicinity of the industrial facilities or away from them. Their poisonous releases are carried everywhere by the wind that

blows over them. The wind, once a healer, “mantra” and an enigma or “koan”, is no longer healthy to breathe in:

oil refineries,
fission factories, wind farms, water mills,
think tanks, smelters, grinders, brothels,
landfills, gun shops, (Black, 2013, p. 186)

The poet keeps repeating that everything he mentions is not new to its addressee, and this kind of information is always made public in the newspapers or aired on the radio. In so doing, he laments the passivity and ineffectiveness of the addressees. In the final lines, the poet stresses the notion of an all-knowing listener, yet too inert to take action.

You know all this. No one’s telling you anything
you haven’t known for a hundred years.
But your tongue says *say it*, just the same.
Your mouth makes the shape of a call, a cry,
an uneven song. You reach for a pen,
tired as you are. You write it down, because
stories and maps are the same. (Black, 2013, p. 186)

Black defines his addressee’s job that involves writing in the way of documenting and reminding. The privileged addressee might be an academic, a writer, a journalist, a poet, or even none of the above, yet they can recruit the pen to inform others about the climate crisis which will eventually affect all beings.

“A Field of Finches Without Sight Still Singing”: A Historical Account of an Overlooked Creatures

Cavalieri veers onto a different trajectory and tells the melancholy history of finches and their ability to continue creating songs in spite of their sorrow. The poem is dedicated to birds, particularly blind finches, and it serves as a eulogy, narrating how “Bullfinches in ancient times had eyes put out/ so they would sing more sweet” (205). The poet is not interested in evoking a sense of guilt in the readers. Even though the bullfinches suffer, the poem uses the passive voice “had put out” to accentuate their suffering without stating human culpability in their suffering.

Cavalieri gushes over the bullfinches' endurance and their perseverance. While such a narrative is often linked with indigenous peoples, Cavalieri alters it to shed light on birds, highlighting their suffering across history. The poet references a brutal practice in ancient times when bullfinches were blinded in the belief that they would sing better in captivity when they are blind. Hence, the blind birds continued to fly in the air and sing their hearts out "as if nothing had been lost" (2013, p. 205). Moreover, Cavalieri capitalises on the blinding ritual by tracing the whereabouts of the gauged eyes, which mingle with the whole biosphere. The eyes of finches drop to the ground and fertilise the soil so that they would convert to flower seeds.

The poet invites readers to go back in time, speculate and meditate on such a notion as that the birds are not flying, but "moving in the wind", and being integrated into it. As such, they are an essential component of the ecosystem where all biotic and abiotic beings are merged and unified. In other words, the flora that cover the planet and the wind that makes up the air all living organisms breathe carry traces of finches. Towards its closure, the poem reverts to the human world to honour poetry, a human creation that began, the poet postulates, in imitation of birds songs. That humans, at some point in history, mimicked birds leads the poet to conclude that all animate beings are connected one way or another:

Every sound

we hear turns to a bigger one and each is
true. We add our own until it is the first

din ever heard, the way poetry begins. (Cavalieri, 2013, p. 205)

Final Remarks

Criticising the Anthropocene as well as decentring humankind and deposing them from the position of superiority are being the main concerns of contemporary eco-poetry. Every environmental issue is connected, one way or another, with these fundamental premises. Black's "21st Century Lecture", for instance, exposes the environmental injustices that the Anthropocene is guilty of. The Anthropocene in the poem constructs a vertical economy where domination is inherited rather than chosen, and humans with power oppress and persecute even their own species, let alone silent nature. Meanwhile, Cavalieri cleverly removes mankind from the centre

only to narrate the sad history of the bullfinches. These birds are not romanticised and Cavalieri does not seem interested in doing so. The poem manages to create a narrative where bullfinches alone are the main topic. The two poems generate a melancholic sense; one mourns the waning biosphere, while the second revisits the horrible history of overlooked birds.

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الانثروبوسين وما بعد الإنسانية في الشعر البيئي المعاصر: قراءة نقد بيئية في قصيدتي "محاضرة القرن الواحد والعشرين" و "حقل طائر الحسون بلا بصر مانرال يغني"

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الكلمات المفتاحية: الانثروبوسين، ما بعد الإنسانية، الشعر البيئي المعاصر

الملخص:

يتناول هذا البحث قراءة نقد بيئية لقصيدة رالف بلاك "محاضرة القرن الواحد والعشرين" (٢٠٠٧)، و قصيدة غرايس كافاليري "حقل طائر الحسون بلا بصر مانزال يغني" (٢٠١٠)، في ضوء مفهومين وهما المركزية الإنسانية (الانثروبوسين) وما بعد الإنسانية، على التوالي. يشكّل هذين المفهومين معالم الشعر البيئي المعاصر ويمثلان أهم موضوعاته، والذي بدوره يعكس و يتناول الأزمة البيئية. في أثناء محاولته التركيز على المخاطر الجسيمة التي تلحقها البشرية على البيئة، يلقي بلاك محاضرة لقراءته لإدراك جدية التغير المناخي. في سياق متصل، بينما تسلط كافاليري الضوء على عالم لا يتمحور حول البشرية، سعياً لتعزيز مفهوم المركزية الحيوية. يتبنى المتحدث الشعري في قصيدة بلاك موقف الناقد الدخيل، مستنكراً الممارسات ذات نزعة إنسانية مركزية (انثروبومركزية)، بينما تحيك كافاليري سردية تجسد الصراع التاريخي للطيور المغردة. يمثل المزاج الكئيب الذي تتبناه القصيدتين مسعى للتركيز على جدية النظام البيئي المندب الذي يتناوله الشاعرين بدرجات متفاوتة.