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The Sustainable Male: Masculine Ecology in the Poetry of John Burnside.

"Whale to the ocean, bird to the sky, man to his dream" (Don Paterson).

I: Poetry and the Environment

In recent years, literature and criticism has begun to address seriously the issues of

environmental destruction and ecological (im)balance. Poetry that deals with the

natural world has, in particular, rediscovered its authority, lending it a new public and

didactic function, a renewed vigour and urgency. Recently, the term *ecopoetry* has

established itself as the preferred term by many writers and critics to describe poetry

responding to contemporary environmental crisis. Introducing his anthology *Earth

Shattering* (2007), Neil Astley describes some of the features associated with

ecopoetry:

> Ecopoetry goes beyond traditional nature poetry to take on distinctly contemporary issues […] Ecopoems
> dramatise the dangers and poverty of a modern world perilously cut off from nature and ruled by technology,
> self-interest and economic power.[1]

More than this, ecopoetry refers to verse rooted in a distinct mindset; it describes a

mode of metaphysical enquiry which recognises our profound alienation from the

natural world and suggests ways of enacting a reconnection. How this is undertaken

depends, of course, on the poet, but Jonathan Bate has suggested that ecopoetry "is

not a description of dwelling with the earth, not a disengaged thinking about it, but an

experiencing of it."[2] For Bate, to present the reader with an *experience* of the natural

world is the purpose of ecopoetry: "reverie, solitude, walking: to turn these

experiences into language is to be an ecopoet." Of course, solitary reflection upon the

natural world holds long associations with the Romantic movement and, in particular,

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[1] Neil Astley, ed., *Earth Shattering: Ecopoems* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2007), 15.
[2] Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2001), 42.

with Wordsworth and others writing out of the Lake District. Indeed, Jonathan Bate's seminal *The Song of the Earth* (2001) traces modern environmental consciousness to this period in English literature, pointing out that Thomas Carlyle, writing in 1830, is among the first to use the word "environment," albeit in terms of a "picturesque environment" (Bate 2001, 13). This legacy of Romanticism—the fallacious treatment of "wild places" as aesthetic confection—remains a problem in myriad debates concerning the future of the countryside, from conservation to affordable rural housing. Bate's point is, however, that the very word "environment" arose precisely because of man's alienation from it:

> prior to the nineteenth century, there was no need for a word to describe the influence of physical conditions on persons and communities because it was self-evident that personal and communal identity were intimately related to physical setting (Bate 2001, 13).

The Industrial Revolution, with its dramatic resettling of British society from predominantly rural-dwelling to largely city-dwelling, required a language that explained a human state that had hitherto been taken for granted. It is the disjunction between the populace and the cycles of nature that causes environmental consciousness and, furthermore, polarises the city with the countryside. The "feeling of the alienation of city-dwelling which was identified by Wordsworth and others" (Bate 2001, 13) is what caused him, in the preface to the third edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), to emphasise a predilection for rural subject matter, reasoning that, in rustic toil, "the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature."[3] While Wordsworth can confidently retreat from the upheavals of technological advance, finding a wild harbour in nature as "a sign of stability and permanence," Bate points out that, in the contemporary age of environmental crisis,

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[3] William Wordsworth, "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads," *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th edition, vol. 2, ed. M.H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 239–51 (241).

"we cannot take the eternity of nature for granted."[4] It is out of this context that ecopoets speak: over more than two-hundred years, human ideas of nature have, particularly in the West, licensed the destruction of the natural world as a disposable resource, the other, an unruly space that, for the bulk of the population, is confined to the central reservation or the window-box. The impulse of ecopoetry lies in its challenging of ideas towards nature, overcoming Romantic notions of imaginative transcendence, to locate a site of (re)enchantment with nature, transmitting the experience in the form of verse. To support his advocacy of ecopoetry as a means of re-engagement with nature, Bate turns to the very etymology of the term: "*poiesis* (Greek 'making') of the *oikos* (Greek 'home' or 'dwelling-place')" (Bate 2001, 245). Bate sees the rhythms and metaphors of poetry as capable of providing an experience of and connection with humankind's original habitat, though he admits that, by definition, "the poet can only give us a trace, not the thing itself" (Bate 2001, 237).

II: "The Discourse of the Secluded"

John Burnside is one of Britain's foremost exponents of ecological poetry. Across ten collections of verse to date, he has been unwavering in his investigation of the relationship between the human and non-human worlds. A significant aspect of his work across the genres of his writing is an investigation of masculinity and, in particular, his view of masculine identity as unable to recognise its independency with others; in short, the masculine impulse seeks to deny the ecology of being, whether in terms of a relationship with the natural world, or of fulfilling personal relationships.

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[4] Jonathan Bate, preface to *Wild Reckoning: An Anthology Provoked by Rachel Carson's Silent Spring*, ed. by John Burnside and Maurice Riordan (London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2004), 11.

Despite Burnside's prolific output since the late 1980s—he has also published novels and short fiction, as well as a volume of memoir—he has thus far received comparatively little critical attention. Moreover, responses to his work have almost universally avoided any mention of literary ecology. This chapter is therefore one of the first to consider Burnside's verse in the context of the poet's own self-avowed project and, moreover, to express the link between his ecological work and attitudes towards masculinity. For Burnside, "poetry is also a matter of repentance. To repent as in 'to wish to amend', 'to reconsider.'"[5] His is a poetry of reflection and atonement, but also a brand of verse that calls for change, for a disciplined consideration of the sustainable male.

The poetry of John Burnside is the lyrical evocation of home; "home" in the sense of the *oikos*, humankind's original habitat in nature. Burnside's work consists of an interrogation of how this home might be spiritually (re)inhabited, how the contemporary human subject might be re-enchanted by nature. Part of this project entails an interrogation of his own masculine inheritance: the need to acquire control and power over others—and the original other of nature—as well as how this need for control thwarts our potential for sustainable living. In this essay I wish to examine Burnside's themes as an expression of his ecopoetic stance, but also to focus upon how his project is problematised by issues of masculine power and resulting violence.

Much of Burnside's verse over the past twenty years has consisted in an exploration of the ecopoetic trope of dwelling, which may be understood in two related senses. To

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[5] John Burnside, in *Dream State: The New Scottish Poets*, ed. by Donny O' Rourke, 2nd edition (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2002), 6.

aspire towards dwelling is "learning to find a place on the earth which does not dominate, manipulate, pollute or destroy it," but the process of dwelling is also to do with a rootedness in place and time, as Greg Garrard explains: "'Dwelling' is not a transient state; rather, it implies the long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work."[6] To dwell, then, is not merely to find a conservationist response to habitat, it is also to view oneself as part of a narrative of dwelling in a particular place; it is to effect a sustained continuance in harmony with, rather than in opposition to, the *oikos*.

Of course, *oikos* is the root word of both "ecology" and "economy." Logically, the two modern concepts remain bound up in one-another: they both refer to a system that works at its optimum when sustainable. One of the most fraught environmental and political issues of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, however, has been the threat to the earth's ecology from rapacious economic growth. Jean-François Lyotard argues that the primacy of the economy has removed us from our connection with the *oikos* in its original sense:

> when *oikos* gives rise to *oikonomikos* or *oikonomikon*, a complex transformation of the word *oikos* occurs. If "economic" means the public sphere, it implies that the *oikos* itself has slipped away elsewhere […] I mean simply that, for me, "ecology" means the discourse of the secluded, of the thing that has not become public, that has not become communicational, that has not become systemic, and that can never become any of these things.[7]

If the *oikos* has "slipped away elsewhere," Lyotard suggests that we need to establish a way of retrieving it. For him, the *oikos* is not merely an "environment" but "a relation with something that is inscribed at the origin in all minds, souls, or psychic

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[6] Laurence Coupe, introduction to "Earth, Memory and Critique of Modernity," in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. Laurence Coupe (London: Routledge, 2000), 61–5 (64); Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 109.

[7] Jean François Lyotard, "Ecology as Discourse of the Secluded," in *The Green Studies Reader*, ed. Laurence Coupe (London: Routledge, 2000), 135–9 (136).

apparatuses" (Lyotard 2000, 135). It is "everything that is not [public]." Lyotard's

oikos equates to a fundamental connection with humankind's habitat, an original and

implicit association. He argues, however, that the modern economical system has so

populated us with public discourses that there is no longer a language, or a space, in

which to express ourselves. Our home in our own expression, as well as our home in

the world, has been usurped and our connections with the *oikos* suppressed by a

"heritage of meaning" which we must learn to combat: "we […] have to deconstruct,

to dismember, to criticize the defenses that are already built into our psyche, impeding

us from hearing original fundamental questions" (Lyotard 2000, 136).

Lyotard's stance may be understood further with reference to Martin Heidegger's

ideas, particularly his essay "The Question Concerning Technology." In it, Heidegger

argues that man has used modern technology to "set upon" and to "challenge" nature,

instead of allowing it to unfold in its own way. The peasant farmer, claims Heidegger,

"places the seed in the keeping of the forces of growth and watches over its

increase."[8] Industrial processes, including industrial farming, rather subjugate nature

within a process of "regulating and securing," reducing the earth itself to nothing

more than a series of resources, to be held in storage until required. The economy

obtains primacy over ecology. Nature becomes entrapped in what Heidegger calls the

Gestell: a frame or stand, where it is merely another commodity awaiting man's call

to transformation and use. Furthermore, in his quest to regulate and to secure, man has

become entangled in his own process. To use Louis Althusser's term, the human

subject is interpellated—called or "hailed" by ideological norms, whether familial,

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[8] Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt
(New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 3–36 (15).

cultural or governmental—until they unconsciously acquiesce to ideological control.[9]

Man, interpellated into man-made systems, becomes himself standing reserve, a

demarcated resource awaiting activation and use:

> If man is challenged, ordered […] then does not man himself belong even more originally than nature within the standing-reserve? The current talk about human resources, about the supply of patients for a clinic, gives evidence of this (Heidegger 1977, 18).

This obsession with regulation and control leads to the impression that "everything

man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct" (Heidegger 1977, 27).

Moreover, the enframing of man within an economic "standing reserve" becomes a

threat to humanity, raising the possibility that man's entrapment within artificial

systems denies him the ability "to experience the call of a more primal truth"

(Heidegger 1977, 28). In short, existing in a public sphere obsessively ordered and

regulated for human utility, humanity loses sight of itself, is unable to access the

oikos.

It is significant that Lyotard believes the *oikos* to be contained in what he calls "the

discourse of the secluded." Obtaining access to this discourse involves freeing oneself

from order and regulation. One must engage in a self-conscious purging of influences,

the breaking down of what he terms "a sound filter, a sort of noise that allows us not

to hear the real questions." He states: "the task—I call it 'anamnesis'—involves … a

working through the filter or the screen preserving our quietness" (Lyotard 2000,

136). Lyotard argues for a form of expression unconnected to commercial and even

quotidian concerns, not obsessed with "optimal performance," but which is built for

the purpose of "listening to and seeking for what is secluded." Lyotard's use of the

term "anamnesis" to describe this process is interesting in itself. "Anamnesis" is both

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[9] Louis Althusser, "from Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, ed. by Antony Easthope and Kate McGowan (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992), 42–50 (47).

a recollection of things past, or a reminiscence, and a section of the Eucharistic canon "in which the sacrifice of Christ is recalled and pleaded."[10] The word permits itself association with recollection but also remembrance. This anamnestic discourse, claims Lyotard, "is called 'literature', 'art', or 'writing' in general." In the artistic literary sphere we might find a voice for, and a home in, the *oikos*, the realm of the secluded.

It is this sense of "working through," a process of "anamnesis," that informs John Burnside's ecopoetic project: the recovery of the *oikos* through self-examination and openness to the original other of nature. Burnside's speakers attempt to break through the security and regulation of human life to gain access to other possibilities. In the poem "Suburbs," the speaker says: "the realisation dawns that I live in an invented place whose only purpose is avoidance, and what I would avoid, I carry with me, always."[11]

III: Self and Other

Dag Andersson has observed that "in Burnside's poetry the self is a haunted spot."[12] Indeed, his poetic speakers are often troubled individuals whose propensity for violence (both physical and psychological) is symptom and cause of their dubious relationship to the other. A feature of Burnside's male speakers, in both his poetry and prose, is that they are adept at self-removal: distanced from social relationships and in a condition of alienation from their physical environment. Theirs is a refusal to accept

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[10] *Oxford English Dictionary*, www.oed.com.
[11] John Burnside, "Suburbs," in *Common Knowledge* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1991), 41.
[12] Dag T. Andersson, " '…Only the Other Versions of Myself': Images of the Other in the Poetry of John Burnside," *Chapman* 96 (2000), 35–9 (35).

difference or to yield to the idea of interconnection or interdependence; they may be characterised, in Burnside's words, as representing "the failure of the self-absorbed individual to accept his or her responsibilities in an essentially shared world."[13] While Burnside here speaks of "his or her" responsibilities, in his poetry it is the male figure who cannot accept the demands of the other, whether human or non-human. In rejection of all that is not "self," his speakers are in a condition of solipsistic isolation. In particular, many characters in Burnside's "darkest" collection *Swimming in the Flood* (1995) are haunted by the malignant spectre of their *own* otherness. To compensate, they close themselves off, destroying all they do not resemble. In the poem "Wrong," the adolescent killer tells us:

> There were small things I killed for pleasure:
> ladybirds, craneflies, spiders and night-flying moths,
> […]
> I sprinkled lines of salt
> on worms and slugs
> and waited for the larger, sweeter kills:
> the neighbour's Siamese, tied in a sack
> and bubbling under the stream of Cotter's brook.[14]

After killing "a luckless child," the speaker awaits the media response: "I know this scene by heart," he tells us, as he imagines the child's parents leaning towards their television set, experiencing "that sense of themselves / as seen, like the people in the movies" (Burnside 1995, 10). In the same collection, the character in "The Light Institute" finds himself "suddenly alive / chosen for something, leaving my bed in the dark" in order to meet "the one I should have been: / Walter Pidgeon. Gable. Franchot Tone." [15] The two speakers seek empowerment through identification with media-generated models of behaviour, imagining these as means to self-fulfilment. In both cases, the only person who can recognise the illusory power these codes bestow are the speakers themselves. The paucity of narrative possibilities for these young males

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[13] John Burnside, "Hell on Earth," *SundayHerald*, "SevenDays" supplement, 4 May 2008.
[14] John Burnside, "Wrong," in *Swimming in the Flood* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), 5–10 (9).
[15] John Burnside, "The Light Institute," in *Swimming in the Flood* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), 13.

is symbolised in Hollywood myths of masculine stoicism and renegade independence. In bleak contrast, Burnside's speaker in "Wrong" is also attracted to narratives of child murder as portrayed on the television news. These are received as empowering and redemptive rather than engendering pathos and empathy. As fiction and non-fiction fuse, recognition of, and openness to, external reality—and its essential otherness—is curtailed. The internal fantasy-worlds inhabited by these characters permit the monstrous, which is both concealed and revealed within a solipsistic narcissism. Many of the speakers in *Swimming in the Flood* are reminiscent of voices that feature in Carol Ann Duffy's verse. The eponymous "Psychopath" in *Selling Manhattan* (1987) shares with Burnside's males the need to seek domination over others, to remove their will to consolidate his own: "one thump did it, then I was on her, / giving her everything I had. Jack the Lad. Ladies' Man."[16] Interpellated by social roles from Hollywood, the psychopath perverts them to activate a menacing persona: "when I zip up the leather, I'm in a new skin." His victim, a local teenage girl, is disposed of in the canal: "I picked her up, dead slim, and slid her in." The voice in Duffy's "Education for Leisure" begins his monologue with the chilling declaration: "today I am going to kill something." Constructing his own omnipotence, he kills a fly, telling us: "we did that at school. Shakespeare" (Duffy 1994, 11). These are not merely the "wanton boys" that Gloucester talks of in *King Lear* however, but rather a more dangerously alienated male sub-group, at once a part of society and apart from it.

Utilising the voices of the excluded to document Britain's rapidly changing social landscape has been a common feature of Duffy's verse since she began to publish in

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[16] Carol Anne Duffy, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1994), 45.

the mid 1980s. The rise of consumerism and the decline of traditional metanarratives of community belonging have been central to her concerns. The monologues of (often working-class) male speakers frequently bespeak of their being marooned—to recall Heidegger's term—in the position of "standing reserve," for which there is no current employment. The literal and metaphorical redundancy of these figures simultaneously others them from national concerns as well as positing the mainstream as an other on which these submerged groups can focus their alienation. Only the language and images of popular culture offer alternative ways of being. Angelica Michelis argues that in Duffy's work:

> the "media-speak" of everyday language […] produces the speaking subject as the effect of language rather than its creator. This results in a state of alienation and exclusion in which the home country is exposed as the Other Country in which we are foreigners and have lost our bearings.[17]

Michelis seems to indicate that these speakers are alienated not only from national narratives of work and self-improvement, but also from the very territory—the physical environment—on which nation is projected. Disconnected from a wider social sphere, speakers in the work of Burnside and Duffy utilise violence as an illusory route to power and self-determination; unable to formulate, and so exercise, their alienation (whether emotionally or politically), violence is inflicted, as in the case of Burnside's poem "Wrong," on an increasing scale, beginning with violence against animals in the local territory. These speakers enact what Andersson calls "the distorted form of self-possession and autonomy" (Andersson 2000, 38). To stave off the spectre of their own otherness, these speakers insist that they are autonomous subjects. Consequently, they become estranged, become, in fact, the very other that they fear. The character in "Wrong" desires "a raptor's grace, an undertaker's skill

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[17] Angelica Michelis, "'Me not know what these people mean': Gender and National Identity in Carol Ann Duffy's Poetry," in *The Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy: "Choosing Tough Words"*, ed. by Angelica Michelis and Antony Rowland (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 77–99 (95–6).

with flesh and bone, / a single-mindedness, a sense of being" (Burnside 1995, 5). In the absence of other narrative possibilities, Burnside's speakers come under the spell of what Thomas R. Smith has described as the "mystique of redeeming violence."[18]

This will to self-empowerment, leading to a destructive domination of others, is frequently interrogated in Burnside's verse; unlike Duffy, though, Burnside does not see his violent protagonists merely as victims of social and economic change. Instead, He views violence and the need for domination as inherently masculine traits. He has said that: "I feel that every man in the world, down to the poorest man, has the possibility of exercising power, if only over his even poorer wife and children."[19] In an essay on masculinity, Burnside elucidates further on this theme: "competition, violence, and the need for power are hard-coded into the education and socialising of males."[20] He believes that "the pain men suffer, the rage with which we live, arises from a failure to become the people we might have been, the failure, not so much to achieve, as to even pursue wholeness as human beings." What Burnside seems to suggest here is that the prescriptive idea of "male," defined as competitive, closed alike to difference and notions of his own interdependence with others, amounts to less than a "human being." The paucity of behaviours "hard coded" into male education are manifested, in Burnside's view, as a dehumanising rubric for male isolation, an othering of the male that ironically breeds in him the fear of otherness.

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[18] Thomas R. Smith, "Chariot of the Sun: Men and the Shame of Environmental Degradation," *Eco-Man: New Perspectives on Masculinity and Nature*, ed. by Mark Allister (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 54–65 (58).

[19] Lesley McDowell, "Poet Sees the Plight," *SundayHerald*, January 19, 2003, 'SevenDays' supplement, 10.

[20] John Burnside, "Masculinity: The Problems of Power and the Possibility of Grace," *Edinburgh Review* 100 (1999), 119–123 (122).

Men, according to Burnside, are often thwarted, emotionally stunted, by their need for recognition, meaning titles, awards and other social, external manifestations of success. Burnside argues that recognised attainment in the social sphere is vital to the self-worth of males. It may be said that, in his terms, men must circumvent any sense of their being other; competition and recognition through the acquisition of power are the means by which males consolidate their status. The corollary of this, Burnside might say, is that the internal, emotional and spiritual aspects of masculinity are utterly overlooked. The constant impulse to acquire power is what prevents, and so perverts, male self-fulfilment. It may be argued, however, that Burnside's view of masculinity is heavily influenced by the kinds of men he was exposed to in his own youth, largely spent in the steeltown of Corby, Northants., a place where "if you were a man, you were always closed, you were always defensive. That's what male power is about" (McDowell 2003, 10). The kind of masculinity Burnside seems to envisage is embodied in the figure of the working-class "hard man," an archetype which has haunted the British cultural consciousness for much of the twentieth century. He has been particularly in evidence in Scottish literature since at least the 1930s and remains a (defiant, problematic) figure to the present, comprising of "an almost impenetrable exterior shell surrounding a vulnerable and uncertain interior."[21] Certainly, in many of Burnside's poems one finds alongside depictions of casual brutality the simultaneous suggestion of male vulnerability. In "A Normal Skin," the speaker mourns his partner's attempts to believe in his essential fragility: "for years you would buy those razors with the orange handles, / the toothpastes and mild shampoos for a sensitive skin / I never had."[22] Even as he testifies to "how little I feel, / when I stop to listen,"

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[21] Gill Plain, "Hard Nuts to Crack: Devolving Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Fiction," in *Posting the Male: Masculinities in Post-War and Contemporary British Literature*, ed. Daniel Lea and Berthold Schoene (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 55–69 (55).

[22] John Burnside, "A Normal Skin," in *A Normal Skin* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997), 1–2.

there remains an undercurrent of inarticulate and obstructed emotion which the speaker merely succeeds in summoning even as he denies its existence. This sense of being unable to convey emotion is seen again in Burnside's poem "Husbandry," in which the speaker addresses his wife when he says:

> Why children make pulp of slugs
> with a sprinking of salt
>
> or hang a nest of fledglings on a gate
> with stolen pins
>
> is why I sometimes turn towards the dark
> and leave you guessing.[23]

The speaker craves "the butter and nickel taste / of cruelty," motivated by "fear and love: / cradled remoteness, nurtured by stalled desire." Incapable of pursuing wholeness in a relationship, he resorts to adult versions of childhood cruelty, instinctive and unreflective.

IV: A Process of Separation

Not all of Burnside's male voices are closed to and fearful of the other, though. Several of his poem sequences show a process of healing, a rejection of fear and brutality in favour of a more measured openness. Interestingly, these poems of regeneration often deal with the ongoing negative effects of a father's influence, indicating not only the inheritance of the traits of a particular father, but also a wider masculine heritage. In "A Process of Separation" (Burnside 1997, 6–15), the speaker confronts, and then rejects, his inherited propensity to violence, conveyed in images of animal savagery: "the weight I cannot lose, / the falcon turning, borrowed from the air, / my unexpected kinship with its hunger." The speaker acknowledges that his

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[23] John Burnside, "Husbandry," in *The Asylum Dance* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 53.

longing for "transformation" is problematised by his "containing, like a cyst, my father's soul, / his cryptic love, his taste for carrion." In "Burning a Woman," a contrasting sense of forgiveness comes to inhabit the poem sequence as it progresses. Moving from images of his father "drunk again, and dead these seven years," the speaker works to overcome the trauma of his mother's death. In doing so, he finds the means to articulate his hatred of his father, imagining him "burning my mother, a fortnight after she died: / her only coat, her witch's broom of scarves;" but he admits: "I've worked from this faded blueprint and got it wrong / time after time."[24] The speaker's tacit realisation is the futility of his own resentment and, moreover, that in forgiveness he can avoid any resemblance with his father. His conscious otherness from received models of masculine behaviour provides the means to transcend the destructive cycles that have afflicted both father and son.

The connection between Burnside's poems of malignant masculinity and his work with ecological poetry lies in attitudes towards objectivity and violence. It is the same myopic refusal to engage with otherness that feeds alike male destructiveness and destruction of the natural world. In an interview, he has argued that:

> violence arises from the tendency to objectify others—humans, animals, terrain and so on […] —and spiritual enlightenment begins, I feel, in a first recognition that there are no objects in the world, that there is no possibility of being meaningfully "objective." Thus violence is the symptom of a spiritual failure, a failure to recognise the fundamental imperative to respect and honour "the other."[25]

Technological and scientific objectification of the natural world is, for Burnside, a form of violence, as well as a sign of spiritual poverty. As Jonathan Bate has noted in *The Song of the Earth*, "Enlightenment's instrumentalization of nature frees mankind

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[24] John Burnside, "Burning a Woman," *Swimming in the Flood*, 36–41.
[25] Attila Dósa, "An Interview with John Burnside," *Scottish Studies Review* 4.1 (Spring 2003), 9–24 (19).

from the tyranny of nature (disease, famine), but its disenchantment of nature licences the destruction of nature" (Bate 2001, 78). Harold Fromm agrees, pointing out that:

Western man does not generally live in fear of Nature, except when earthquakes or cancer strike, for he is mostly unaware of a connection with Nature that has been artfully concealed by modern technology.[26]

As Heidegger has argued, it is humankind's attitudes to, and use of, modern technology that permits the instrumentalisation of nature; meanwhile, Heidegger claims, man "exalts himself to the posture of lord of the earth" (Heidegger 1977, 27). Humankind has, over time, arrived at the conception of the original other of nature as nothing more than *Bestand* or "standing reserve," awaiting man's manipulation and use. Nature has become ensnared in man's economic model, entrapped within the economy of public discourses that prevents access to its spiritual depths. If, as Lyotard suggests, the human subject has been silenced in modernity, so too has nature lost its status as a subject, and has instead become objectified for merely human use. Burnside's ecological poetry shows his attempts at "anamnesis," at harnessing a remembrance of an authentic relationship with nature:

I have peeled the bark from the tree
to smell its ghost,
and walked the boundaries of ice and bone
where the parish returns to itself
in a flurry of snow;

I have learned to observe the winters:
the apples that fall for days
in abandoned yards,
the fernwork of ice and water
sealing me up with the dead
in misted rooms

as I come to define my place.[27]

In this extract from the poem "Halloween," the persona identifies himself only by immersion into the natural world. He does not stand over it, merely describing nature in terms of setting or background; it is not, to use Carlyle's phrase, "a picturesque

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[26] Harold Fromm, "From Transcendence to Obsolescence: A Route Map," in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, ed. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 30–9 (32–3).
[27] John Burnside, "Halloween," in *The Myth of the Twin* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), 1.

environment." Rather, the speaker is absorbed into nature. The self comes to be

defined only by an intimate enmeshing with the other. Writing on "the interiority of

outdoor experience," Scott Slovic claims that

> by confronting "face to face" the separate realm of nature, by becoming aware of its "otherness," the writer implicitly becomes more deeply aware of his or her own dimensions, limitations in form and understanding, and processes of grappling with the unknown.[28]

Slovic describes the "dialectical tension between correspondence and otherness" that

he finds in writing by David Henry Thoreau (Slovic 1996, 353), and it is a similar

kind of "vacillation" that Burnside displays in "Halloween," as the speaker describes

himself at once as self and other. In his meditation, the poet finds "versions of myself,

/ familiar and strange, and swaddled in their time / as I am." "Halloween" is a poem

of dwelling, an invocation of home in a particular environment. Moreover, the poem

is not merely a mimetic representation of landscape (itself a form of objectification)

but a lyric that generates meaning by deixis; that is, by developing meaning and

significance relative to context.[29] The speaker is located within the environment. He

does not merely describe features of the space, he becomes a part of its ecology.

Burnside demonstrates this technique further in "Koi" when he explains that:

> The trick is to create a world
> from nothing
>
>   —not the sound a blackbird makes
> in drifted leaves
>
> not dogwood
>   or the unexpected scent
> of jasmine by the west gate.

Rather: "the trick is in the making / not the made / beginning where an idle mind

spools out / to borderline and limit," taking in "not the thing itself / but where it

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[28] Scott Slovic, "Nature Writing and Environmental Psychology," in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 351–71 (352).

[29] William Howarth notes that "Ecocriticism, instead of taxing science for its use of language to represent (mimesis), examines its ability to point (deixis)," "Some Principles of Ecocriticism," in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, ed. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 69–92 (80).

stands."[30] This dialectical relationship between self and other allows Burnside to inscribe in his verse the possibility of a dwelling within nature; to use one of Jonathan Bate's phrases, Burnside provides not a descriptive account, but "a *revelation* of dwelling" (Bate 2001, 266).

V: "Poetically Man Dwells"

It would be wrong, however, to consider the poet as anti-scientific or anti-rational. Rather, Burnside's verse corresponds to J. Scott Bryson's account of the defining characteristics of ecopoetry: "ecocentrism, a humble appreciation of wildness" and also "a skepticism toward hyperrationality."[31] One should not, however, equate scepticism of "hyperrationality" with outright hostility to it. On the subject of scientific enquiry, Burnside quotes Wittgenstein: "it is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists […] We feel that even when all *possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched." Burnside states: "Knowing the *how*, and celebrating the *that*, it seems to me, is the basis of meaningful dwelling."[32] Invoking again a dialectical model, Burnside believes that it is only between the public discourse of science and the "secluded" discourse of *poiesis* that a clarity of vision can be achieved. In the poem "Taxonomy," the speaker describes "the given and the named / discovered and invented / one more

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[30] John Burnside, 'Koi,' in *The Light Trap* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), 3.
[31] J. Scott Bryson, *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2002), 5.
[32] John Burnside, "A Science of Belonging: Poetry as Ecology," *Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Science*, ed. Robert Crawford (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 91–106 (92).

time, // with each new bud or tendril that unfolds."[33] In "De Anima," by contrast, another speaker encounters a bird he has no name for, "a migrant foreigner that must have strayed," whose song is "so much a question to the self I was / I came through / on the far side of the day / uncertain / plundered / given up for lost."[34]

In Burnside's verse it is the gathering together of the known and the unknown, the self and the other, that constitutes the process of learning to dwell. For his male speakers, this entails a surrender of their need for power and control over the other, a rejection of the idea of self-containment. Burnside's verse charts, moreover, an acceptance and working through of cultural and familial inheritance. Burnside's "anamnesis" is not only the recollection of an authentic relationship with nature. His anamnestic verse is also used to (re)collect images of destructive male thought and behaviour. Burnside constantly interrogates what he sees as the culturally and historically inherited propensity of males to seek power and domination over others. Just as man's domination over nature has led to ecological crisis—and, by extension, exposed the unsustainability of current human activity—Burnside argues that male behaviour is, in itself, unsustainable in its propensity for violence and its closed rejection of otherness. Through interrogation of masculinity, and through immersion in the natural world, Burnside's speakers are used to examine the features of a sustainable masculinity. Within Burnside's work, we find tentative depictions of a masculinity that allows its subjects to achieve wholeness through acceptance of, and engagement with, the other. Furthermore, these figures are able "to deconstruct, to dismember" (Lyotard 2000, 136) a heritage that impedes access to the *oikos*.

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[33] John Burnside, "Taxonomy," in *The Light Trap* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003), 6–7.
[34] John Burnside, "De Anima," in *The Good Neighbour* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), 36–9 (38).

Burnside's technique is to show what it is to construct a narrative that accounts for one's presence on the earth in place and time, even if this can only be done by means of images that are partial, or transient. Roderick Watson has spoken of Burnside's "continuing sense of being haunted by a feeling of 'home' as something that we seek, and may even inhabit, but can never truly possess."[35] The true spirit of dwelling, in the sense of (re)inhabiting the *oikos*, does not have to do with *possession* of a home— which implies power over it—but in recognising one's place in it. This project is close in intent to that described by Heidegger in his essays on dwelling and, in particular, his concept of "the fourfold:"

> human being consists in dwelling and, indeed, dwelling in the sense of the stay of mortals on the earth.
>   But "on the earth" already means "under the sky." Both of these *also* mean "remaining before the divinities" and include a "belonging to men's being with one another." By a primal oneness the four—earth and sky, divinities and mortals—belong together in one.[36]

Heidegger's "fourfold" requires a profound openness to the other, an acceptance of the essential nature of the earth's elements, including humanity. He demands a personal asceticism whose chief end is to set all elements of "the fourfold" free into their own interrelated presencing; that is, simply, to allow them to reveal themselves in their own way, without any thought of purely instrumental use: "Mortals dwell in that they receive the sky as sky. They leave to the sun and moon their journey, to the stars their courses, to the seasons their blessing and their inclemency" (Heidegger 1975, 150). As Heidegger has said: "to save the earth is more than to exploit it or even wear it out. Saving the earth does not master the earth and does not subjugate it, which is merely one step from spoilation" (Heidegger 1975, 150). In poetic terms, Heidegger (after Hölderlin) would have it that "poetically man dwells," constructing a poetic language that at once recognises the known and the mysterious: "poetic images

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[35] Roderick Watson, *The Literature of Scotland*, vol. 2, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave, 2007), 320.
[36] Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 143–63 (149).

are imaginings in a distinctive sense: not mere fancies and illusions but imaginings

that are visible inclusions of the alien in the sight of the familiar."[37] Poetic dwelling in

this way must acknowledge, as Kate Rigby has noted, "that there is a dimension of the

land that remains latent or undisclosed: something that gives itself to experience as

exceeding our powers of comprehension and control."[38] For Burnside, this knowledge

translates into an exploration of the liminal. His verse shows a fascination with

"points at which one thing becomes another: the old year becomes the new, summer

becomes autumn, day becomes night." These are, he says, "the moments when the

person is susceptible to change: where being is raw […] where identity is less fixed,

more open to possibility."[39] These between-states come to characterise Burnside's

examination of the means by which one may dwell on the earth, taking in both the

known and unknown, the self and the other. His poem "The Solitary in Autumn"

charts the speaker's attempts to voice the ineffable, the revelation of the undisclosed:

> There is perfume in the shade
> that is almost viburnum,
> traces of snow and water in the light,
> a blankness along the canal
> that waits to be filled
>
> and, given the silence, given the promise of frost,
> I might have welcomed this as something else:
> the taste of windfalls moving on the stream
> a faint god's partial emergence
> through willow and alder.[40]

The poet is content here to experience a muted epiphany. Some kind of knowledge, or

truth, is seen emerging, but it remains tentative, a possibility. This aspect of

Burnside's verse has proved unsatisfying for some critics. John Lucas states: "the

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[37] Martin Heidegger, "…Poetically Man Dwells…," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 211–29 (226).
[38] Kate Rigby, *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 90.
[39] John Burnside, "Poetry and a Sense of Place," *Nordlit* 1 (1996), http://www.hum.uit.no/nordlit/1/burnside.html, accessed 20 February 2002.
[40] John Burnside, 'The Solitary in Autumn,' in *The Myth of the Twin* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), 56.

numinous can't, I realise, be seized as you'd grip a piece of coal with tongs, but there are moments in this poet's work when, for all its accomplishment, it is resolute only in irresolution."[41] Christopher Whyte agrees, opining that "Burnside's more soothing conclusions have an air of prevarication;" the enchanted atmosphere, he claims, "could also be befuddlement."[42] While, for some, Burnside's avoidance of resolution is frustrating, it is entirely fitting that that his speakers should be content to accept the possibilities of a situation instead of trying to convert them into concrete, quantifiable, experience. Burnside's verse tantalisingly resonates with an unspecified, a series of presences that refuse systematisation, that remain, in Lyotard's sense, "secluded." In "The Myth of the Twin" the speaker describes "the silence that stands in the birchwoods, the common / soul" (Burnside 1994, 53), while Aristotle's conception of the soul is investigated in "De Anima" (Burnside 2005, 36–41). More conventionally Christian ideas also appear throughout his work in the form of recurring themes surrounding forms of annunciation. The figure of Christ is also an explicit reference, though often in a form that is "never quite the god they talked about // in Sunday school" (Burnside 2007, 5). In interviews, too, Burnside has admitted the influence upon his work of Gnostic texts.[43] Whether the transcendental signified—or the god of Heidegger, "who remains unknown, is revealed *as* such by the sky" (Heidegger 1975, 223)—Burnside tracks the partial revealings bestowed as his speakers approach re-enchantment with the *oikos*. While he may employ a frustratingly diverse range of religious, spiritual, even mystical, references, these equate to a striving to connect with the other, a commitment to openness but also to introspection; evading

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[41] John Lucas, "Souls, Ghosts, Angels and 'Things Not Human': John Burnside, Alice Oswald and Kathleen Jamie," *PN Review* 177 (2007), 27–32 (29).

[42] Christopher Whyte, "Twenty-one Collections for the Twenty-First Century," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Fiction*, ed. Berthold Schoene (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 78–88 (81).

[43] See Attila Dósa, "An Interview with John Burnside," *Scottish Studies Review* 4.1 (2003), 9–24 and W.N. Herbert, "John Burnside Interviewed," *Verse* 11.3/12.1 (1995), 41–9.

mediaspeak and inherited violence, spiritual bricolage may be the only means by which his speakers can explain states and conditions that cannot be accounted for using "public" discourses. These are poems of exploration and revelation, in search of a "secluded" discourse that might accommodate such states. Burnside's male speakers approach a more sustainable relationship with the world, and so with themselves. "What we need to learn to do," says Burnside, "is to transform ourselves, so that living is an act of grace, a transcendence of any need for power or control." Crucial to Burnside's vision of a rehabilitated masculinity is that "transcendence" be "an inward process; there will be no visible achievements, no titles bestowed upon the successful" (Burnside 2000, 122).

In his insistence upon the need for males to re-evaluate their cultural inheritance; in his commitment to an ecopoetic re-enchantment with nature, Burnside advocates a "discourse of the secluded," that which is private, which is non-systemic, which strives to express our original connection to the *oikos*. In Burnside's verse, what we find is a poet engaged in this disciplined process: that of finding a means to express a relationship with nature that can examine the mystery inherent in that connection, the numinous as well as the physical, even if this translates into nothing more than:

> a murmur that comes through the wind,
> a hand's-breadth, a wingspan,
>
> arriving from nowhere, or conjured up out of the dark
> between the near field and the kitchen door,
> to sound me out, to comfort me with nothing.[44]

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[44] John Burnside, 'By Pittenweem,' in *Gift Songs* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007), 56–60 (60).

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