

Elemental Relations

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ABSTRACT

The four elements offer a humanly apprehensible entryway into thinking ecologically. Bound by *philia* and hounded by catastrophe, the materialism that the elements convey disrupts placid narratives.

United Airlines flight from DCA to DTW, March 2012.

Severe weather in Ohio and Pennsylvania triggers numerous diversions to Detroit. I do not take the extra forty minutes we spend circling the airport as an omen of things to arrive. It is.

A large room in the student center at Eastern Michigan University. The symposium "Nonhumans: Ecology, Ethics, Objects" is underway. Craig Dionne introduces the event and Eileen Joy presents the two speakers. My talk is a careful choreography of words and images.

Social anthropologist Tim Ingold has argued that, like "to grow" and "to dwell," the verb "to produce" is intransitive and nonteleological. Affects, perceptions, artworks, objects, variation, and story are insistently produced without necessary origin in intention or purpose (Ingold 2011, 6). Ingold is speaking not only of human action but the vectors of "life itself," of the nontotalizable amalgams of forces and substances (biotic and inorganic) that knot into ecologies and ceaselessly create. Among these productions are numerous recording devices that inscribe, transmit and intensify relation—things without which I could not stand in this room, could not share with you some thoughts on how narrative-objects companion other kinds of objects. Our longest functioning clock and most extensive archive is lithic: geological strata thick with primal traces, perished monsters, the leavings of catastro-

phes, the burgeoning of new forms, intimations of possible destinies. Other libraries include tree rings, ice cores, and DNA, even if these devices hold more data than evident story. If narrative is a future-saturated device for artful connection-forging (that is, an apparatus of composition, of production), then humans are among the world's most finely attuned story machines. Only stone has fulfilled this charge with stauncher historical determination.

A densely populated and ceaselessly generative thingscape as well as a mingling of biomes, the world produces, endlessly, objects without pre-determined objectives. Life swarms, substances and energies proliferate (and at times vanish). Ecology is the study of open systems impossibly full. As various object oriented ontologies have insisted, every thing or unit or machine at every scale possesses integrity and infolded mystery.¹ Sometimes these exist in utter detachment, sometimes in mutual and co-implicated relation.² On occasion they are indifferent to humans, at other times intimate allies. Inhuman world and human culture are not separate spheres. Everything is not inevitably connected—withdrawal, solitude, and extinction are also constants—but within an ecosystem (even at the scale of the world ecosystem) a great many things are profoundly interrelated. Not permanently, not necessarily even for long, and certainly not in some totalized giving over, but interconnected in extensive and unpredictable ways all the same. We uncannily partner with things (stone, fire) that have always already uncannily partnered with us. They are ready to hand as well as that through which handiness and handedness are possible. Without the mineralization of life, without stone implanting itself in invertebrate flesh, we would not be able to touch rock or fashion art.

Within this complicated cosmos, then, we must through narrative and other kinds of action foster ethical relations with humans and inhumans alike: multifold, hesitant, consequence-minded interconnections that thicken, fructify, and affirm. Narrative is the intermediary by virtue of which these environmental meshworks, mangles and networks are articulated, documented, vitalized.³ Thick with voices and dense with agency, an object exterior to any author, narrative also breathes with its own life.⁴ As Tim Morton (2008) writes, “Reading a text is a profoundly ecological act, because ecology, at bottom, is coexistence (with others, of course),

¹ This sentence gestures towards the terminology of various object theorists who have helped me to frame this investigation: Harman (2011), Bogost (2012), Bryant (2011); also see Levi Bryant's (2012) article “Borromean Machine-Oriented Ontology, Strange Strangers, and Alien Phenomenology.” Material feminism has also developed a sophisticated vocabulary for exploring such entanglements, often with a great deal more practical politics behind that analysis. See especially, Stacy Alaimo (2010) on “transcorporeality.”

² On co-implication, see Duckert (2012), 273–279.

³ For network, see the work of Bruno Latour, such as *Reassembling the Social* (2005); for meshwork, see Tim Ingold, *Being Alive* (2011, 63–65); for mangle, see Andrew Pickering, *The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency and Science* (1995).

⁴ On narrative autopoiesis and agency, see Eileen Joy, “Notes Toward a Speculative Realist Literary Criticism” (2011) and “Weird Reading” (2013).

which implies interdependence.”⁵ The same is true of composing a text; reading and writing are both modes of production. Narrative is not the only means we possess for plumbing ecological interpenetration, but its partnership has proven enduringly potent.

These human/nonhuman entanglements could also be called elemental relations. Whether in classical philosophy (Empedocles with his earth, air, fire and water) or common parlance (exposure to the great outdoors, to the hostility of weather and landscape), the elements are at once the most intractable, enduring, agentic and fundamental of materials. Thick stone is documentary, the material of our earliest surviving tools and the conveyor of human prehistory. Restless water is that which cannot be inscribed (except as ice), a substance enclosed within our bodies as memory of a briny origin, the force through which we domesticate landscapes. Wind is propulsion, power, spirit, tornado. Fire is oblitative, the partner through which we transform every terrain into which we step. Though they are perilous, even lethal, without elemental confederations we would possess no dwellings. Smaller than gods and larger than atoms, the elements offer a human-scale entry into nonhuman relations.⁶ Unlike vast divinities or minuscule particles, invisible because alien to our scale, the elements are amenable allies because their narratives are noisily audible, their activity energetic and obvious. The slowest and the swiftest, rock and flame, are the most challenging to contain within customary frames. Though both are processes as much as substances, humans do not naturally inhabit lithic or igneous temporalities. Our moderate duration is closer to air and water, the two elements behind storm. Yet fire and stone likewise flow, at least when we accept their invitation to nonanthropocentric measures of time. Their stories convey the fertile past and pulse with futurity. Through our alliances with the elements we human-ized ourselves: no cooking or clearing without flame, no foundations without stone, small movement without water and air. The elements are also that which will remain long after our departure.

The elements do not need us. They no doubt relate to each other on their own, outside of human terms. As Graham Harman writes, when “the gap between humans and world” is “privileged over the gaps between tree and wind, or fire and cotton,” we end up reinscribing a tiresome anthro-pocentricity that measures all things solipsistically, as if humans were the apex of the universe rather than one creative and productive agent among many (Harman 2009, 67). Time neither culminates nor ends in the cataclysm of the Anthropocene, and even though we are irremediably human it does not follow that the measure of all things should be our

⁵ Morton continues, “What I call *the ecological thought* is the thinking of this coexistence and interdependence to the fullest possible extent of which we are capable.” See the “Ecological Thought-Mission Statement” (Morton 2008).

⁶ On elemental ecocriticism, see Jeffrey Cohen, “An Abecedarium for the Elements” (2011, 291–303), as well as the special issue of *postmedieval* devoted to “Ecomaterialism” (Cohen and Duckert 2013).

limited senses. Yet this object oriented realization does not allow us to wave goodbye to an earth we've ruined, departing for realms that aren't so postlapsarian, for Edens that remain unspoiled, because it's impossible to dwell in them. Human-scale elemental relations assist in avoiding the pratfalls of scientism and theology, roaming a world with no answers in advance, no outside to what we're intractably within: a co-inhabited realm of humans and nonhumans, neither the measure of the other, a stormy fiery watery earthy text-loving expanse that isn't anthropocentric, but also isn't indifferent to me as I am telling you this story and you who listen and consider, for a while, how roiling the ground beneath us is, how inadequately we have constructed our shelters—this very room—with and against the elements, to consider what happens when the door blows open at an unexpected advent.

We travel to medieval Iceland and a story of sudden arrival. A door bursts from its hinges, dangerous strangers enter, and all that the dwelling protects against reaches within.

Hold on.

Meeting room in the EMU student union, continued.

"I am sorry but you will need to evacuate immediately to the shelter on first floor or the stairwells. Take your belongings with you. Walk quickly. You need to get out now."

A windowless auditorium: noisy, crowded, warm.

I am thinking about interruption and advent. My presentation was timed to unfold with a flow of visual commentary, images of stone, water, flame, cloud. I'd taken these photographs in Spain, France, Germany, England, Australia while pursuing my elemental research projects, journal of a wandering year. Makeshift inuksuit on a Maine shore. Sunrise, a raven, grey menhir. Candles in Sagrada Familia. Fragment of the Berlin Wall. Rocks like seaborne castles along the Victoria coast. The *miroir d'eau* of Bordeaux at night, my son and daughter blurred in their running. Crater of a dormant volcano. Pebbles on a Jewish grave in Montparnasse.

When the announcement intruded from the hallway, I spoke over it, assuming the words were not for us gathered in the room. A man then entered and declared the tornado. Much of the student union is made of glass. We were led to an auditorium in the building's center where we sat for almost two hours, watching the progress of the F3 on a monitor. As excitement yielded to boredom, a student group recited poetry and some Girl Scouts played Duck-Duck-Goose. I pretended to need the restroom so that I could watch the deluge outside: green sky, gale, and relentless flood.⁷

⁷ For a compelling account of the evacuation of the symposium due to tornado, see Montroso (2012).

No one was injured by the whirlwind, but homes in a nearby town were smashed. When we were evacuated to the shelter I was just arriving at the portion of my paper about storm, hearth, firm doors bursting, the shattering of the home. *Ok í því brast sundr hurðin.*

Drangey Island, north coast of Iceland, eleventh century.

The wind had been howling for days, winter's advent, and when the gale fell Grettir knew trouble neared. The shepherd's hut had been home in exile, shared with his brother, a servant, a ram. He'd spent days inside. Grettir was dying. *Ok knýr heldr fast*, the hard knock of enemies at the threshold, the door about to break.⁸ Because the island is sheer cliff on every side, Grettir had depended on Drangey's towering withdrawal to ward him. He cursed the need for fire that had driven him to chop driftwood and cut his leg, an injury that held him to an unaccustomed bed.

Grettir grasped his sword as the timbers yielded.

Once he had been on the other side of breaking doors. Grettir had been that thing against which houses are constructed, the catastrophe that limns the *oikos*. Now all that the house been constructed to exclude was about to burst within.

Washington, DC. This place where I am writing. August 2012.

Grettir's Saga was composed in the fourteenth century by a Christian imagin-ing what life must have been like during Iceland's Viking Age. Monster and hero in one, its protagonist is a complicated warrior never fully in control of his impulses. His decapitation on a solitary island is the culmination, twenty years later, of events sparked when Grettir steals fire from a similarly lonely hall during a storm. Its wooden walls go up in flames, incinerating those within. Skapti the lawman declares before Grettir is outlawed for this deed that "a story is always half told if only one side speaks" (46). Skapti is speaking of human litigants, but what about the land that anchors the narrative, the rocky places of refuge, the stones constantly lifted and hurled? What of the sea that enables distant travel, that rages and churns? What of the gales that blast the island, that keep an ill Grettir in his island home, secure from its bite, and cause such misery for his servant that he neglects to raise the cliff ladder at a pivotal moment? What about the fire that lights the evening, warms at the hearth, consumes human lives? The narrative is alive with non-human characters. Even humans become objects of a sort, sometimes walking in death, forming their uncanny alliances with subterranean spaces or the shimmer of the moon behind winter clouds. The Old Icelandic term for the undead is *draugr* or

⁸ *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* 2001, 7 and *Grettir's Saga* 2009, 82; references to both hereafter by chapter number. This narrative from *Grettir's Saga* forms a triptych with the essay I co-wrote with Stephanie Trigg on "Fire" in the special issue of *postmedieval* (Cohen and Duckert 2013) and my Introduction to *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral*, "All Things" (Cohen 2012, 1–8).

aptrgangr, “return-walker,” a person still moving after reduction to a corpse’s putative inanimation. The dead are supposed to be as immobile as the stones beneath which they are buried. But what if those rocks also reveal themselves as exerters of unexpected agency, possessors of uncanny animism? Rock is our most inert substance, our cliché for inaction, our symbol for givenness, the very substance of the impassive Real. We found our lives upon a base of stone but do not take stone’s power to initiate into account. What if we did?

Our narratives might change. We’ve fucked up the world we inhabit, this perilous place without a beyond, this place we treat as if an inexhaustible resource. Unless we refashion our relations to materiality and objects, unless we learn to compose our stories and our ethics not from the elements (as if all that is inhuman were inert) but with them (as agency-exerting partners possessed of unsounded depths and innate dignity), we may well find ourselves in a grey and brown space of stumps, fumes and sludge—like the ending of *The Lorax*, when the grumpy little ecologist hoists himself by his keister and vanishes into the smog, abandoning humans to their industrial mire.⁹ Yet despite what we know from the denouement of ecocatastrophe narratives, a dark ecology is not necessarily The End. As Timothy Morton has observed, even toxic sludge possesses aesthetic power and numbers among the “irreducibly unique” objects that compose our world.¹⁰ Muck is a terminus only from a human point of view. Produced by humans, by factories, by elements, sludge is likewise productive: of feelings, of stories, and even, perversely, of life.

Playing with fire leaves you burned, thinking with stone leaves you smarting, water has a cold sting. Elemental relations quicken as they bind, thicken as we cultivate confederation with their power. Narrative enables the envisioning of realms at times indifferent to us, thingscapes that often excludes us, but through that imagining we connect and interdepend all the more deeply. Materially, ethically, narratively, we’re too entangled to escape this call to dwell with rather than despite, against, or through. Narrative is the relational machine of ethics, and the perspectivism of stories is our complicated but unremittingly productive angel of connection. On ground that is never firm, lit by dangerous burnings that are also our *sine qua non*, we must imagine more just modes of coinhabitation. Through stories of stone, fire, wind and water we attend with slow care to the ethical bonds that ally us with a thing coming always into being: with that impossible and always already ruined but absolutely essential converging of restless elements that is the world.

Ok knýr heldr fast.

Here. Now. With you.

⁹ On grey, brown, black and other non-green shades for ecology, see Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed., *Prismatic Ecologies: Ecotheory Beyond Green* (2013).

¹⁰ On this “dark ecology,” see Morton 2007, 159.

I have been untruthful about my partner in composing this essay. The tornado interrupted ahead of schedule. The door had not yet been threatened. No monster or storm was bursting the bolts, and I had not yet pronounced “Hold on.” The elements are seldom compliant. They have terrible timing.

This essay, however, bears throughout the impress of the storm that suspended its origin. The presentation I was to give on “Elemental Relations” in March 2012 will never be delivered. This piece you are reading is not a substitute but a meditation on aftermath. The hurried evacuation, the time spent in the sweltering auditorium, the unexpected companionships a tempest’s advent engendered, the green sky and the relentless rush of waters, glass against gale, community within a whirlwind: these arrivals convinced me not to postpone the performance, but to cancel. Something less solitary had already unfolded. Relations had become participations, production, co-composition. At the all-clear we returned to the room and instead of my practiced talk I gave an informal account of things I might have said, of things the storm had asked me to think. I gave up on companionless performance. We had all the conditions in place for an emergence, for one of those rare moments when formality dissolves and bonds of unexpected solidarity become visible, and a conversation unspools, one in which everything can change, one in which even the unlooked-for and inhuman arrival had become an interlocutor. The tornado had intruded and in its wake we could not carry on as if the conditions of our gathering and the knowledge that we brought to our colloquy had not been profoundly altered. Elemental relations are elemental participations. They possess no exterior.

Catastrophe is always about to arrive again. We live in ruin’s midst. We have always dwelt in this middle, at this doorway that sometimes holds firm against storm but sometimes blows open as the elements arrive. “*Ok knýr heldr fast, ’ sagði Grettir, ’ok óþyrmiliga;’ ok í því brast sundr hurðin.* ‘This time he knocks rather hard,’ said Grettir, who added, ‘and not in a kindly manner either.’ Just then the door burst apart.

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