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No TV for Woodpeckers by Gary Barwin, If Pressed by Andrew McEwan, and Ecology without Culture: Aesthetics for a Toxic World by Christine L. Marran

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Active Ecologies

No TV for Woodpeckers by **GARY BARWIN**
Wolsak & Wynn, 2017 $18.00

If Pressed by **ANDREW McEWAN**
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Ecology without Culture: Aesthetics for a Toxic World by **CHRISTINE L. MARRAN**
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Reviewed by **MICHAEL D. SLOANE**

The poems in Gary Barwin's *No TV for Woodpeckers* are saunas. In 2015, experimental indie rock artist Phil Elverum of Mount Eerie put out an album entitled *Sauna*, and in the press release noted the following:

> The sauna that this album was inspired by is not a sauna that actually exists anywhere. It is about the idea of a small man-made wooden room crushed beneath a universe's worth of bad weather; a concentration of extreme heat within a vast tough world. Inside this deliberate space a transformation occurs. (n.p.)

For Elverum, the sauna is the song, and for Barwin, it is the poem. To be sure, Barwin's collection of poems is by no means solipsistic; rather, *No TV for Woodpeckers* presents pieces where the reader is not only immersed in an exploration of the environment of a poem, but also privy to the evolution of language, mind, and interpretation. Without a doubt, Barwin's poetics crank up the heat.

Barwin's poems are alive. In the first section of *No TV for Woodpeckers* entitled "Needleminer," there are twelve poems that take pre-existing texts from the likes of Charles Bernstein to Erín Moure to C.D. Wright and re-populate them with Hamilton, Ontario's diverse organic life while also modifying the results given that species change environments (92-93). As Barwin poignantly notes, "Language isn't a virus from outer space. It is our environment" (92). Take, for instance, the opening stanza of "The Snakes of Hamilton, Ontario":

> ring-necked the milk snake
> is mud puppy
> redbelly
> oh what the garter[.] (1-4)

Inside this lively environment poem, Barwin's "oh" transforms into an "O," which stands for Ouroboros—the ancient symbol of a snake eating its own tail. Here, the cyclicality of weird interpretive mutations brings the text to life.

No TV for Woodpeckers is also playful and funny, and Barwin's sense of humour often uses strange phenomena as a foil for the profound. Drawing from entertainment in the media environment, the source for Barwin's "Hilarious Video Online," is a GIF of a man who has lit a phallic firework strapped to his crotch, which horribly—and literally—backfires. In considering the GIF and poem in tandem, Barwin brings together popular culture and literature to hilariously produce a self-aggrandizing speaker who seemingly justifies the idiotic act through love; "O glittering William Blake interstellar pixie-dust firestorm" (7), the speaker exclaims, announcing their virility and, in turn, a real, romantic sentiment by the end:

you literally lit my wick
and it was all bentonite, lifting
        charge,
pyrotechnics, black powder, delay
        charge

 ratio of propellant to projectile
        mass
and I could think
only of you[.] (19-24)

In "Shabbiest Anapæst"—a poem that is not too shabby with at least a dozen anapests—the speaker addresses the reader towards the end of the poem: "did you know the title is an anagram?" (18). Following this, the origin of crass and surreal lines like "babe, asshat, panties," "aphasia's bent beast," and "abashes sapient bat" (21-23) is made apparent, which highlights the weird evolution of language while also inviting further mutation by the reader. By the end of the poem, the once silly speaker is now rather sincere:

but you know I'm just killing time
because I'm afraid of the end and
really I'm just looking for love
        (again!) (24-26)

Barwin's juxtapositions are laugh-out-loud funny, yes, but they often work to communicate something more; after all, his signature technique is explicitly acknowledged in this collection: "Here the poem, 32 lines long, / one hour old is not unexpectedly glib though / it hopes for real tenderness" (25-27).

Of course, Barwin's *No TV for Woodpeckers* is not all fun and games. A number of poems and certain lines articulate transformative moments and

stark reminders of interpersonal relations in the world and beyond. For example, the incredibly powerful poem "Goodbye" involves a speaker saying "goodbye" to a list of one hundred and thirty-six types of guns—this is overkill for a reason. While the speaker is, yes, saying so long to his or her arsenal, this poem offers up a serious critique of excessive violence today.

Elsewhere in Barwin's collection, the micro- and macroscopic are placed side by side in a way that presents a provocative and perhaps tongue-in-cheek re-positioning of language and the universe; specifically, in "Celestial Bodies," Barwin writes, "the centre of the galaxy passes over the dictionary / the dictionary remains unchanged" (50-51). In *No TV for Woodpeckers*, Barwin engages and entertains the reader in a way that ensures some semblance of an environmental (re)orientation and immersion through energy, humour, and transformation. Barwin knows that even "endlessnesslessnesslessness" (37) comes to an end, but *No TV for Woodpeckers* warrants repeat readings.

The cover of Andrew McEwan's *If Pressed* is a photograph of Lisa Nilsson's *Transverse Head-Tongue* (2013). Viewed from the transverse plane, or an imaginary horizontal plane used to represent human anatomy, Nilsson's work depicts a tongue, bottom teeth, and tonsils, using Japanese mulberry paper and gilded edges of old books that have been rolled, shaped, and glued together through the Renaissance technique of "quilling" or "paper filigree" (Nilsson "Tissue Series"). Nilsson's piece is the perfect figure for McEwan's poetry, because it introduces an intertextual cross-section of life, the materiality of the poetic voice, and an engagement with tactile

mediums and ludic forms. Nilsson's title hints at what is happening in McEwan's work: a provocative pressing of verse that moves across and goes beyond mind and body to show the potential of poetry.

From Gertrude Stein to Will Alexander to Jacques Roubaud, there is a range of influences pressed into the fibres of each page; yet, McEwan's style stands out, too, especially via intertextuality. Intertexts cut across this collection and work to expose and critique facets of life under industrial modernity and late capitalism. *If Pressed*'s intertexts draw from a number of sources including Lucretius, Robert Burton, online advertisements, and Sarnia, Ontario's Chemical Valley's impact on the Aamjiwnaang First Nation reserve. McEwan's poetry picks through past and present artifacts, events, and environments to draw attention to "the crisis economy" (2). For McEwan, there is a system trading in turmoil and lesser evils—namely, capitalism. If anything, McEwan's use of the Bauhaus song title for a poem captures the insatiable consumer: "All We Ever Wanted Was Everything." In this poem, the lines, "Struggle / through work to coffee break" (16-17), echo Bauhaus' lyric, "Get up, eat jelly, sandwich bars and barbed wire / and squash every week into a day." Elsewhere, McEwan uses intertextuality to emphasize the impact of capitalism on the psyche. Working with Derrida's *The Work of Mourning*, the aptly titled "Return Policy," a pithy insight comparing the remembrance of lost loved ones and commodity exchange, is not only self-reflexive— "Reference passes through writing" (33)— but also normalizes alienation—

Self-help

is just how capitalism feels. (36-38)

The poet speaks up through other voices to encourage critique and incite change.

Throughout *If Pressed*, McEwan foregrounds the materiality of the poetic voice, which evokes an environmental ethic. The titular prose poem announces the shift from abstract to concrete as "we descend to particulars" (1). McEwan moves in and out of abstraction in *If Pressed*, but his poems work to ground readers in their material conditions via bodily poetics with lines, such as, "So briefly rest now, anatomized / body" (2-3), "In the book the body putrefies" (10), and "Frantic flesh" (13). These are from the five-part "Of Matter Diverse and Confused" spread throughout the collection, which highlight how we are in and a part of the surrounds. Indeed, in another subsection of "Of Matter Diverse and Confused," playfully entitled "Vain Cures," the body is brought to bear on something bigger:

The body is like a clock—
if one wheel is amiss, all the rest are
        disordered.
[...]
The awareness of a system acting
        upon the body, weighing it
        down[.] (1-2, 7)

Sounding rather cybernetic, McEwan gestures to an embodied subject in an environment, which is a necessary starting point for thought.

Also, McEwan cleverly evokes tactile mediums and employs ludic forms to push poetry towards action. Through the possibility of textual play, the reader is immersed in the real world through an engaging linguistic environment. In the section entitled "Depression Inventory," for instance, there is an instructional imperative—"*Check all that apply*" (15)—

that calls on the reader to act. The first poem of this section, "Sadness," opens with the following lines:

> earthquake ||
> began || fissures || in
> the US || I cannot stand
> it || rumbled through
> the || rest
> of the world || (1-6)

At the end, there are three options for the reader to consider: "1) caused or was caused by anxiety," "2) caused or was caused by possibility of dislocation," and "3) caused or was caused by undermined growth" (14-16). Not only does the poem's use of the double vertical bar scansion sign for a caesura imagine a reader marking up the text, let alone mimicking the tectonic tremors that "sent / || waves || sent / refugees" (8-10), but, also, the poem's form becomes a form to fill out that literally sets thinking in motion through marking up. Here, the precariat living in and through environmental disasters are textually felt in a way that fosters awareness and action.

Elsewhere, McEwan's playful forms foreground ethereal and digital environments. With a title taken from 18th-century chemist and meteorologist Luke Howard's "Essay on the Modification of Clouds," the metaphoric "Spreading Sheets" press clouds on the page while papering the sky. The following phrases are sporadically spread out on the page: "3 hours ago," "patches dissipate," "by morning," "commute dawn," "becomes," "patchy Vancouver over the last," and "couple of days" (9-13). Here, words from weather reports are clouds floating on the page printed in pixilated grey rather than solid black ink to allow for a textual encounter with the diaphanous, dynamic environment.

The speaker recognizes the porous borders between human and environment with lines like, "Everything if I evaporate" (3). This type of engagement, moreover, extends to the virtual in "Review," the closing poem of *If Pressed*, which "transcribes and arranges sentences mined from Google results for the phrase 'this book is depressing'" (130). From one line to several lines, "Review" gradually gets longer and longer with a total of seventy-seven iterations of the mined phrase. Undoubtedly, the difference and repetition of "this book is depressing" has a cumulative, palpable effect on the reader; reaching a threshold or tipping point, "Review" compels us to consider again and again the act of analysis, which often skews towards an appeal to emotion—here is loud social commentary on the state of critical thinking today. Yet, "Review"'s playfulness combines emotion and action, too, as the "press" in "depressing" puts pressure on the reader to think about what the poem is doing. In part, "Review" reflects virtual voices reaching a critical mass warranting attention and action with responses pushing for aesthetic intervention into thought and world. Whether it is through intertexts, materiality, or formal play, McEwan's *If Pressed* contacts the reader in a way that engages him or her with its meaningful materials for action in and for the environment.

Christine L. Marran's *Ecology without Culture* responds to how, today, ecocriticism is human, all too human. Specifically, she takes up texts that engage "ecological imaginaries" in order to challenge "exceptionalist claims made at the level of ethnicity, culture, and species" (3). As her title suggests, *Ecology without Culture* directly responds to Timothy

Morton's landmark publication, *Ecology without Nature* (2007). For Marran, Morton's notion that the "'idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art'" (qtd. in Marran 3) is a "contradiction in terms" (4). In response, Marran offers a powerful takedown of cultural humanism, or what could be "the chief stumbling block to ecological thinking" (4), as she seeks to show how "ecocriticism can engage culture without making the perpetuation of *ethnos* or *anthropos* the endgame" (6).

However, a version of Marran's criticism of Morton has appeared elsewhere. Specifically, Levi Bryant notes how "Morton advocates abandoning the notion of 'nature' as it gives rise to connotations of an elsewhere," which "risks reducing the natural world to *cultural constructions*" (295). Bryant suggests that the "winning move" is in "abandoning the idea that *culture* is something *outside* nature" (295-296). For Bryant, this tactic

> undermines the human exceptionalism implicit in the distinction between nature and culture, and highlights the manner in which social and cultural formations are imbricated with broader material domains. (296)

While it would have been useful to see Marran dialogue with Bryant in some way, *Ecology without Culture* still offers unique "ways of thinking ecocritically outside the protective enclosure of cultural and human exceptionalism" (Marran 6) in a thoroughly theoretical introduction and four stimulating chapters.

In the introduction, Marran posits a number of smart notions to critique and construct useful analyses. Her concept of

the "biotrope," for instance, works to "foreground the point that representations of the biological world inherently indicate both the material and the semiotic" (6). Acknowledging her indebtedness to Donna Haraway, Marran moves on to emphasize how the "material substratum of the biotrope is what makes it always incommensurable with the represented object" (6), which establishes resistance itself as a founding component for an epistemological and ontological framework. On top of this, Marran identifies a problem and offers a label for it: "ethnic environmentalism" (12). This

> attempts to solve environmental problems through the suggestive force of ethnic belonging and ethnic histories without addressing capitalist modernity. (13)

She goes on to explain that this

> kind of ethnic environmentalism suggests a loss: *if only* we could return to the past; *if only* we had not forgotten communal values of the past, which are, by definition under ethnic environmentalism, sustainable. (13)

Pointing to how ethnic environmentalism is "most interested in sustaining a particular ethnic nationalist collectivity" (13), Marran understands how we need to name and know the obstacle in order to work around it for the sake of pursuing alternative, speculative thinking that actually tends to the environment. While *Ecology without Culture*'s intervention might be an uphill battle against Quentin Meillassoux's notion of correlationism, or

the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other[,] (5)

Marran is up to the task.

In chapter one, Marran offers the expression "obligate storytelling" to refer to narratives that stress "the bond, the fetter, the bowline, the *ligare*, of one being to another at the level of care and substance, of thought and matter" (27). Reading through Ishimure Michiko's *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* (1969), Marran discusses obligate storytelling relative to the Chisso corporation's methyl mercury poisoning of the Shiranui Sea in and around Minamata city in the Kumamoto prefecture in Japan in the mid-twentieth century.

Taking her analysis to the next level, Marran's second chapter challenges postcolonial ecocritic Rob Nixon's claim in *Slow Violence* (2011) that "moving images cannot capture slow violence" (59). Departing from "spectacle-driven media" (58), Marran discusses filmmaker Tsuchimoto Noriaki's documentaries to make her case. Of note especially is Marran's poignant analysis of slow violence in the context of Tsuchimoto's *Nuclear Scrapbook* (1982), which is a forty-six-minute film that shows newspaper articles about radiation, nuclear bomb tests, and nuclear waste; indeed, unpacking the implicit comparison between nuclear bombs and nuclear power, Marran offers a stark exploration of slow violence (82).

Then, in chapter three, Marran turns to spatial relations in environmental writing, and how they change one's sense of who is vulnerable to toxins in the environment; here, she takes up—and, in turn, dissolves—the divide between urban

and rural by way of her analysis of industrial and agricultural chemicals through a discussion of Ariyoshi Sawako's novel, *Cumulative Pollution* (1975). We learn a lot from Marran's cutting insight into this text: "a toxic event is no event at all, but rather a systemic inundation of food, air, and water identified at the site of use" (101).

In the last chapter of *Ecology without Culture*, Marran explores another instance of how cultural difference can and often does impede true ecocritical thinking, which entails a thoughtful discussion of Anthropocene discourse (118). Ultimately, Marran argues that

> Anthropocene discourse requires thinking at the level of species as declared in the name of the concept itself and, in that sense, is trapped by a tautology of human exceptionalism. (118)

Interestingly, though, while she meticulously engages planetary perspectives brought up by scholars such as Masao Miyoshi and Gayatri Spivak, there is no mention of Haraway's recent "Chthulucene," or that which

> entangles myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages—including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus. (192n28).

Here, conversing with Haraway may have helped Marran's critique.

Overall, while Marran's *Ecology without Culture* at times digresses into critics talking about critics, exhibits an archive more than an argument, and backgrounds the overarching critique of

cultural humanism, Marran's book is a necessary one for further advancing ecocriticism past problematic patterns of analysis; indeed, she offers much inspiration for literary and cultural critics today interested in moving past the all-too-human and, instead, pursuing a methodology that makes "room for more-than-human agencies and their time frames and scales" (129).

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