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Lyric Weathering:

Reading Poetry in the Age of Bewilderment

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Abstract

The language of ecocriticism is often one of mourning and melancholia: a mourning for the end of nature that has already come to pass. The emergent field of ecopoetics is driven, similarly, by a language of grief and its most emblematic forms are, accordingly, elegies. In this article, I make a case for reorienting the language of ecocriticism to make it more hospitable to the affects – bewilderment and anxiety: negative affects that are characterised by confusion and by an inability to act – which, I contend, might better characterise our relation to the changing climate. I make this argument through a reading of John Ashbery’s late work because he encapsulates the particular forms of inattention and anxiety that saturate the contemporary atmosphere. Ashbery’s poems are, in no typical sense, ‘ecopoems’, and the criticism his work invites is only incidentally ‘eco’. In this way, I make an argument about the incidental ecopoem that offers insight insofar as it captures the psychological stakes of states of bewilderment on our ability to think the future.

I. Beyond Nature's Ends

Mourning is impossible work; it might also be a convenient distraction from the difficulty of living with uncertainty. When Freud opens his 1917 essay 'Mourning and Melancholia', he speaks of mourning an abstraction – 'such as one's country, liberty, an ideal and so on'.¹ It is difficult to get over something that was only ever imaginable in the first place, as Benedict Anderson frames our alliance to such abstract concepts as nation and freedom.² The impossible work of mourning, as Freud tells us, is likely to produce melancholia: a psychic state that swirls inexorably around a lost object and which forecloses the possibility of moving on. Climate change, insofar as it is imagined as an end to Nature, might also figure as one of these abstractions: as the object of loss around which ecocriticism gathers its critique. Nature's ends are our own in the terminal terminology of much environmental thinking, insofar as we are left to mourn it. The end of nature betokens mourning has become the standard line of thought in environmental studies, at least since 1989. The 'end of nature' thesis, as articulated by Bill McKibben, coincides remarkably suggestively with Francis Fukuyama's thesis, published the same year, on the 'end of history'. McKibben's *The End of Nature* makes a U-turn from the dominant nature thesis that time is running out, to make the case that nature's time has already run out: 'there is nothing but us', he pronounces, speaking

to us from nature's afterlives.³ Rhetorically, its move is to suggest that there is no grace period left. Imaginatively, it proposes that nature is not present to serve our interests; that nature has ended because capitalism has forgotten to observe this fact. McKibben's nature, even or especially in its demise, bears the traits of a Romantic version of Mother Nature which deplores anthropocentrism, the lyric device through which Romantic poets forebode a cosmic wounding of nature. McKibben's thesis runs deep in American environmental writing, where nature is presented as a sublime and mysterious force that we must observe by. This view of nature is, in short, religious: it is the sacred text, and, in the Romantic vein, its end is the culmination of a long downward turn since the slow trauma of industrialisation reaped havoc on our communion with the natural world.

McKibben's thesis frames climate change within the emergent language of the Anthropocene, on the premise that the familiar divide between people and the natural world is no longer useful or accurate. We are left, at the world's end, to mourn a state – our natural state – that has already come to pass. The strange temporality of this sense of an ending in the present tense is one that positions the present as already in the past; as a foregone conclusion that we are left to find a language to articulate. McKibben recognises that climate change demands a new way of thinking, and a new language in which to formulate the kind of thinking that might help prevent it: a problem that he figures as a spatial and temporal one. In the opening pages of the book, he asks the reader to imagine a disaster of Hiroshima's proportions, though one that does not happen so instantaneously.⁴ McKibben's rhetorical strategy works through a series of adjustments to the present that allows us to feel the impact of the past, but what he is really up against is the conceptual problem of the future, from which we are not immune. 'I file the fear away for future considerations', he writes,

psychically aligning himself with the dominant responses to climate change.⁵ It is not difficult to file this fear away: we are not simply oblivious to change and disaster but inundated in it. But what he is really talking about is not fear but a continuous anxiety that defers thinking to some future date.

One of the core claims of this essay is that the co-optation of the language of mourning and melancholia into the greening of literary criticism and poetics is liable to result in the closed circuit of literary and political knowledge that characterises what Margaret Ronda refers to as the ‘essentially observational and mimetic ethos of ecocriticism proper’.⁶ Melancholia, as Freud teaches us, bears an obsessional relation not only to the past – but to the past’s object, at the expense of thinking the future. Mourning is, for this matter, no better, insofar as it is impossible work, as Freud almost concedes.⁷ Following Ronda’s observations about the elegiac thinking that pervades ecological texts, ecocriticism and ecopoetics alike, I seek to make a case for imagining an ecopoetics and an ecocriticism that goes beyond mourning and melancholia – and indeed Nature, one that centres instead the states of affective bewilderment and psychic flight that characterise the difficulty of engaging with questions of climate change in the present. It takes poetry as its object – and John Ashbery’s late work, in particular – to present an alternative reading for how a green literary criticism might psychically orient itself not to the impossible work of mourning but rather to anxiety: a negative affect that is rooted in a condition of postponement.⁸ It is also a critical move that is enacted with the aim of approaching an experimental style of literary critique that might ensure a certain level of ‘interested stress’ which, Steven Connor argues, might be ‘the most important thing the humanities can do in relation to the question of climate change’.⁹ If the humanities are to have a stake to play in slowing or hoping to reverse climate change, he

writes, it will be in negotiating ‘some kind of role in the work of stressory maintenance and affect management that may enable us, at the very least, to stay focused on a problem that is going to go away only if we are even more completely wrong about things than we have ever been’.¹⁰

It is the contention of this essay that poetry’s paradoxical form of thinking offers its own political philosophy, one that has a bearing, as I demonstrate through a reading of Ashbery’s work, that opens up new possibilities for environmental thought.¹¹ Or, rather, it brings us to the edge of what we know, or want to know, about environmental degradation. Otherwise expressed, it articulates how, in spite of our increasing, accumulative and repetitive knowledge of the invisible changes that are occurring around us, we are disposed – or rather the affect around us – disposes us, to not know these changes. I draw upon recent developments in psychoanalysis to conceptualise this conundrum, as well as ecocriticism’s response to the affective turn in criticism.¹² But, in a sense, I also recognise that the Romantic lyric got their first – in the way that it lends its ear to a world in which nothing visible or empirical happens, and yet on which so much depends. Whilst maintaining a certain scepticism of the problematic continuity between our time and the time of Romanticism, I nonetheless argue, reiterating the argument made by Anahid Nersessian’s brilliant work in this field, that the aesthetic and ethical possibilities of unknowing, or what she refers to as ‘nescience’, is indispensable to confronting certain futures, even if, or because, those forms of unknowing require, paradoxically, a great degree of thought and attention.¹³

The psychological premise of this argument is that it is not simply enough to think about how the world's future is changing in our present; we need to register how profoundly disorienting its change is. To address the conundrums that climate change presents we need to find our bearings; a line that sounds psychoanalytic in its most pop incarnation, but which, in fact, bears a momentous psycho-political weight on our ability to move beyond the thoughtlessness that has brought about these changes in the first place. A poetry that speaks to these conundrums is consequently one that starts not from a state of loss but rather from 'the mind-boggling forces of human destructiveness', as psychoanalytic writer Christopher Bollas observes.¹⁴ In this way, it seeks to reorient ecocriticism away from a mournful direction to grapple with the suprasensible character of our environment. Anxiety and bewilderment are, in this way, mobilised as affective critical lenses that might account for what cannot be tracked and measured, which are the demands, as Timothy Morton contends, of a contemporary ecocriticism.¹⁵ It has been much observed but perhaps bears restating that contemporary writers write about nature with the recognition that nature is changing, that humans are agents of that change and that the disaster of climate change has not only been predicted *avant la lettre* but has been predicted in, before and of our times. We are, in other words, saturated in a climate of prediction that has entered into the ordinary state of things and resulted in an anxiety that is ever present yet also strangely undetectable or at least uncommunicable. This anxiety might be conceived as an overstimulated numbness that is the condition of living in precarious times – or simply modern times.¹⁶ Anxiety, and its cousin defences, disaffection and disillusionment, are contagious affects, though their contagion has largely dissociating and disorienting effects, which might account for the strange conundrum before us: that the more that we know about climate change, the worse the situation becomes.¹⁷

II. Ecocriticism Beside Itself

Forms of critical and creative *reading for the planet* converge in the sub-disciplines known as ecocriticism, an environmentalist literary movement, grounded in Romantic studies, and ecopoetics, a poetic field whose emergence can be traced to the late 1990s and the early 2000s, and which is associated with the journal of that name edited by Jonathan Skinner.¹⁸ Skinner locates the emergence of ecopoetics within a particular moment of ‘historical urgency’ (the first issue was published in winter 2001) and locates the project’s emergence as a way of redressing the ‘editing out’ of nature from contemporary poetics.¹⁹ It is, in this sense, a return to nature that is prompted by the erasure of the ‘discipline of close, scrupulous observation’.²⁰ The project sets out to prompt a redress on nature’s behalf – through a discipline of close observation – and, in this way, it parallels the project of ecocriticism, more generally, which aims to make it possible for the humanities to take a more responsible account of earthly objects through a reorientation of its disciplines, which is also a doubling down on the institutional practice of interdisciplinarity.²¹ If critique has run out of steam, to adopt Bruno Latour’s framing, critique is wielded as a yardstick for the immeasurable changes that modernity has reaped upon the natural world at the same time that it is mobilised as an argument for why we have, in fact, never truly been modern.²² In other words, the environmental humanities throws the definition and the work of the humanities into crisis. Ecopoetics, similarly seeks to resolve the problem of the environment through a poetic obsessiveness that is not unlike melancholia’s lost object. Discipline is its form of resistance and nature is its object. Although the journal calls for an ‘investigative poetics’, the

tone is largely elegiac: the sense is that something is being lost, or has already been lost, and that the object of this loss is a distinct idea of 'nature' rooted in the world outside.²³ It is almost to prove that poetry itself has not run out of steam.

At the moment of literature's increasing deterritorialization (as it turns global and digital), ecocriticism announces itself to remind us what is at stake in practices of reading. The reading methodologies that are integral to it are continuous with a New Critical mode of reading for detail: close reading as a turning inwards. There is, of course, a paradox of returning to close read poetry for knowledge of the changing climate: it is one that often has the effect of looking for nature – and its ends – everywhere, which is to say, with paranoid ways of reading. At the end of his case study on paranoia, Freud famously concludes by noting a 'striking similarity' between his subject, Dr Schreber's, persecutory delusion and his own theoretical methods: 'the delusions of paranoiacs have an unpalatable external similarity and internal kinship to the systems of our philosophers' – of which, as ever, in Freud's work, he, too, is implicated.²⁴ Theory, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick famously theorises, tends towards paranoia. Against the paranoid imperative, which often turns into a pathologizing diagnosis, she posits an alternative mode of reading – reparatively – which takes on a particular resonance in the context of an ecocritical methodology that aims for something that we do not already know about the world around us.²⁵

A growing body of ecocriticism recognises the absurdity, or at least the paranoia, of these reading methodologies: but even as they claim the nonsensical nature of reading to 'save the planet', they invariably tend to fall back on a mode of literary analysis that is presented as

transformative. Take, for example, the methodology set out in Jennifer Wenzel's excellent *The Disposition of Nature* (2019):

Reading for the planet is not disembodied “global,” cosmopolitan, or universalist reading from nowhere, as in the bird’s-eye view or “God trick”, but reading from near to there: between specific sites, across multiple divides, at more than one scale. This multiscalar reading practice shuttles between the microscopically specific and the world-historical, in four dimensions, across space and time—reading (and rereading) as a dynamic process of *rescaling*.²⁶

It certainly asks a lot of literature to rescale this dynamic process, even as it grounds this process in a humble closeness (‘from near to there’). My argument here, drawing on Connor’s, is that the humanities might have more to offer the environment by insisting on its own marginality, by inhabiting Thoreau’s ‘broad margins’; or, otherwise expressed, the humanities – and poetry, in particular – becomes most useful when it insists on its own lack of use value.²⁷ An ecocriticism that is oriented towards a reparative rather than a paranoid reading (and here I am implicitly mapping paranoid reading practices onto the insistence that the value of the humanities be reasserted) might, in this way, not ask much from literature at all. It might emerge instead, in Nersessian’s words, as ‘a kind of by-the-way environmentalism’.²⁸ Insofar as this strain of ecocriticism might have a political philosophy, it demands something other from the political – and from poetry – than what we already know. Rather than a disciplining of sight and form, a return to a Romantic conception of Nature, or an argument about how we were never truly modern, it grounds its understanding of the changing climate in a problematic historical continuity that is understood through bewildered states. It finds a bond for these times and for these disciplines in a state of being in the dark; a state of psychic bewilderment that is, as Bollas contends, integral for comprehending the difficulty of our times. Where Bollas develops his thesis of psychoanalysis in an age of bewilderment into a study of mourning and melancholia, I seek

instead to stick with the confusion, and make a case for an ecocritical model that might do the same.²⁹

This mode of ecocriticism recognises that nature exists in various forms, and that gendered and racialised lives cannot be viewed as entirely distinct from an understanding of nature *out there*. Its mode is a difficulty that we do not recognise as such: it is not a modernist difficulty inviting us to unpack meaning but rather the kind of difficulty for which we do not yet have a ready critical response. It creates a kind of opening within the field of ecocriticism, as the methodological equivalent of the inconvenient ecopoem, which points to the failures of critical and literary vocabularies to master this object that seems designed for their interpretative models. ‘Difficulty’, more importantly for this argument, as Nersessian writes, ‘plays for time’.³⁰ It plays, more specifically, for the meantime, that will not be subsumed into a critical idiom and which the inconvenient ecopoem orients itself around. It is a time with a historical equation that can only be understood poetically. Dawn Lundy Martin poetically translates: ‘If you multiply geography by time you have right here’.³¹ The ‘here’ that she directs the reader to is the space of poetry and its possibilities; it is also our depleted, exhausted present tense. ‘Sudden awareness of the possibility of absolute loss’, as Lundy Martin writes in ‘Also Birds,’ breaks in upon the poem. But the loss becomes not the occasion for lament, or a recourse to an apocalyptic imaginary, but is rather a kind of knowledge that exists alongside others: one that emerges ‘from the mire’: a confusion in which the poem is rooted and which it does not seek to resolve.

III. Towards a New Form of Attention

Poetry has historically been cast in the role of exemplarity in the field of political philosophy: the case of poetry is to provide an example for how we might arrive at a different kind of thought.³² Poetry has a stake in how nature is conceived, in particular. These stakes are often understood formally through the devices of figuration and anthropomorphism, but they might be understood, more broadly, as a calling to attention – to natural rhythms, and to the place where those rhythms are experienced as rupture. It might be understood, more particularly, as the place where calls to attention are made on the condition of inutility. This principle goes to the heart of Romantic understandings of poetry, as a kind of attention that emerges by way of inattentiveness, and one way that their legacies might be understood is as a refusal of poetry to be put to service (in the name of arguments such as this one). This model of inattention has not only been the primary language in which nature finds its expression but also the mode in which historical events are attended to, often through an act of listening to nature, to detect something on the horizon, something that resists knowing, an act that is as performative as it is historically important, an act that mimics the poem's elusive relation to history.³³

Poetic form, in this reading, becomes a way to experiment with attention that always comes to bear on, but is never entirely limited to, the experience of reading. Attention might be precisely what is going on when nothing appears to happen, just as when we read a poem, seemingly ignoring the world around us (allowing the poem to pay attention for us). But the legacies of Romanticism also offer an alternative promise: that this turning away from the

world is also a call to a different kind of attention, one that is rooted in the refusal to make attention a command that can be folded into a discipline, be it academic or military. Attention must, in its expansive Romantic understanding, be undisciplined and it must, by the same token, provide us with a model for a more interdisciplinary mode of thinking that moves between and interlaces various fields in order to be better attuned to analysing the present through listening into what appears to be unfolding on the horizon (the stakes of the lyric in interdisciplinary thought might be framed explicitly as this act of listening to emergent states that are baffling and uncertain). The incidental ecopoem – the poem of the meantime – acknowledges not simply the poem’s object of attention but the competing demands on the poet and the reader that make it a wonder that poems get written and read at all. This anxiety that is written into the poem is both particular to our times and continuous with the kinds of anxiety about industrialisation that goes to the heart of Romantic figurations of nature. A historiography of anxiety connects these moments in this way, affectively, outside of a linear understanding of history.

The gravity of things in the Romantic lyric is a portal to things unseen. What the lyric promises is a new way of seeing: a way of seeing – and also hearing – what cannot otherwise be seen or detected, and this way of seeing is also largely framed as a new form of attuning to the complexity of modern life. Poetry leans its ear to the ground, or the air (it is in this aural sense that it sees) to detect something that is as yet undetectable about the future (if it orients itself towards the future, it does so in order to be better placed to understand the transformations of the present). The lyric’s resistance to co-optation within a modern order of utility positions it as the unusual object of our attention that reminds us that the work of paying attention to the world might be at odds with the forms of knowledge that are

traditionally understood as central to engaging in the present. This conundrum – of attention’s rewards and its frustrations – is poetry’s own, and the Romantic lyric’s, in particular, because it was in the Romantic period that the writing of literature became entangled with the modes of attention that it also criticises. In other words, the lyric understands itself in a contradictory relation to the world, and these contradictory forms of attention are the paradoxes on which poetry continues to offer its own zone of understanding outside of knowledge.

It is not surprising that so much ecocritical work goes on within the field broadly defined as Romantic studies, nor that poetry is so often its primary object. The Romantic poets, and John Clare in particular, as Sara Guyer argues, might be understood to operate ‘like a rhetorical figure – a prosopopoeia, or fictional apostrophe – that returns the possibility of poetic production and of the writing self’.³⁴ In other words, the legacies of the Romantic lyric operate in an analogous way to the devices of the Romantic lyric itself – calling into existence the Nature – positioned as the other – that is no longer there. This would be one way to understand how the Romantic legacy lives on in Ashbery’s work, though, a close reading of his late work, reveals something slightly more complicated. Ashbery’s work, in this way, returns us to the stakes of inattention for Romantic poetry whilst providing a particular portal for the stakes of confusion, understood as the affective disorientation of living in the present, for the paradigmatic shifts of thought that climate change demands. We might turn, to contemplate this idea, to Ashbery’s own writing on Clare, where he observes in his first essay of his Charles Norton Lectures, published as *Other Traditions*, that Clare is the poet who he ‘reads habitually in order to get started; a poetic jump-start for times when the batteries have run down’.³⁵ The effect is ‘always the same’, he observes, ‘that of reinserting

me in my present, of re-establishing the “now””.³⁶ It is almost as if, he suggests, reading poetry furnishes us with its own kind of energy – when the modern world fails to work.³⁷

This metaphor of poetry as a kind of energising battery is useful insofar as it provides a theorisation for poetry’s ability to reacquaint us with the world around us (understood not simply as Nature) and to reinvigorate, but in a way that does not translate into some effective output (it is not a consciousness-raising but a new sense of the difficulty of inhabiting the present).

The negative feeling of disconcertedness or disorientation is central to the affective bewilderment that modern life induces – of being lost on one’s own cognitive map of available affects. Ashbery’s poetic stage sets form their own American landscape that is so distinctive in contemporary poetics insofar as it attunes itself to all the invisible activity that continues to happen undetected as an atmosphere that is inhabited as our contemporary weather. In Ashbery’s poems, America’s grids and systems become visible – or rather audible – in their invisibility. In his work, poetic knowledge emerges as a kind of psychic soporific in the face of a horizontalism of ideas which plants new challenges in critique’s eroded soil. Far from a call to responsibility, Ashbery’s concept of nature and naturalization is rooted in a porousness between his understanding of clouds – those archetypal Romantic lyric atmospheric objects – and clouds, understood, contemporaneously, as hyperobjects that connect the sky to data clouds and network clouds.³⁸ To fully comprehend the stakes of poetry in thinking environmental degradation in the present, what is needed is a scholarly kind of attention that is, as Ashbery writes in his poem ‘The Other Tradition’, ‘Studious as a butterfly in a parking lot’: restless, light-footed, and unconfined to a particular scholarly location (this is not the same as insisting on interdisciplinarity): the incidental ecopoem

invites just such an occasional model of ecocriticism.³⁹ The stakes of environmental thinking in Ashbery's work are rooted in this other tradition, in an eccentric canon which is read in order to return us to a stranger understanding of the world: to states of living as being in the dark.

Ashbery, who always conveys this conundrum ironically – with a tender irony that keeps the possibility of change alive – enacts this shift from the world *out there* to the world inside the mind in the opening lines of his prose poem “For John Clare:”

Kind of empty in the way it sees everything, the earth gets to its feet and salutes the sky. More of a success at it this time than most others it is. The feeling that the sky might be in the back of someone's mind.⁴⁰

Implicit in this shift of focus to the way we imagine the sky as an interior landscape of the mind is a reformation of the question of what counts as ecological critique. Attention, and its distractions, rather than nature, and our responsibility to it, is what is at stake. It is grounded in the idea that poetry might be most useful in prosaically telling us, or poetically illuminating, what we already know, but have not quite found the language to formulate, or have not wanted to know. In taking Ashbery as its critical object, this essay argues that his affectively saturated late poetic output, which circles around the question of climate change only insofar as the entire contemporary landscape is changing, might provide an alternative way of reading ecopoetically. In so doing, it strives to move beyond the tendency to read his late work in terms of a late style, framed, in Edward Said's understanding of late style, as connected to the writer's 'maturity'.⁴¹ It seeks instead to position it – to historicise it – within an affective climate that is characterised by the negative feeling of disconcertedness – of not being 'focused' or 'gathered'. This feeling of disconcertedness is not exclusively related to

environmental destructiveness but it is one of its symptoms and manifestations, which is the starting point for Ashbery's late lyrics, which feature a lyric subject that is so bewildered that it cannot gather itself into anything as definitive as an identifiable self.⁴² It is primarily by being concerned with atmospheres – in the whole place where the 'sensuous suprasensible thing called climate change lurks' – that Ashbery provides a model for how we might shift the conversation outwards from an understanding of Romantic things to the nebulous space of climate – as we psychically process it – in which nature is being transformed, and in which nature is fundamentally indistinguishable from technology.⁴³

IV. A Poetics of the Meantime

In the meantime, there is anxiety. For Freud, anxiety is a particularly paradoxical state since the affective confusion that it induces creates the impression that the danger is both inside and outside. Psychoanalysis has been crucial to formulating a language for anxiety and for accounting for its historical emergence. Anxiety is useful as an affective lens because it has a 'quality of indefiniteness and lack of an object', as Freud writes, which evidences the affective history of something that is not consciously known.⁴⁴ Rather than start from the premise that 'we' are all simply too careless or unaware to care about climate change, a poetry that is rooted in the state of bewilderment that anxiety induces, starts from the premise that we do not know the unconscious effects that knowledge of climate change bears on the psyche, and that our generalised anxiety might at least be read as indicative not of indifference but of its, and our own, unknowable character: an unknowable character that we connect to other unknowable historical situations that have had traumatic, devastating

consequences. In 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death' (1915), Freud starts from the premise that it is almost impossible to think with the anxiety prompted by catastrophe on the horizon: 'standing too close to the great changes that have already taken place or are beginning to [...] we ourselves are at a loss as to the significance of the impressions which press upon us'.⁴⁵ The only way to resolve anxiety, for psychoanalysis, is to go through anxiety: to acknowledge that we cannot guarantee futurity, our own or the world around us.

Defence mechanisms are mobilised against everything that is liable to give rise to anxiety. At the same time anxiety is its own defence against what does not want to be known. There is something strange about grounding an ecopoetics in the affective landscape of the negative emotions, and anxiety in particular, precisely because it is, as an analytical method and as an aesthetic strategy, one that is rooted in the act of deferral. Anxiety relentlessly defers action to some future date. As a negative emotion, it is at least useful in that it demonstrates a sceptical or a critical stance towards the phenomena delineated: it denotes a resistance to something that resists being thought through. Freud distinguishes between 'anxiety' which he defines as 'a particular state of expecting danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one' with 'fear' which 'requires a definite object of which to be afraid'.⁴⁶ Keeping anxious, as Freud argues in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), is a way to ensure that the mind can endure: if only in dreams and hallucinations. It is only dreams, as he observes in his *Introductory Lectures*, in which anxiety is induced 'to the point of waking us up'.⁴⁷

It is both a truism and a truth that we can open a late book by Ashbery anywhere and find this all-consuming mode of anxiety; his poems enact an affective adjustment to the anxiety that

suffuses the atmosphere around it (the atmosphere in which the poet writes and in which we read the poem: one that is full of mall announcements and bad presidents speaking in childish tones). Anxiety has a distinctive temporality: it looks both backwards and forwards, and it is this quality that ensures that even when Ashbery's poetry enters a nostalgic mode, its effect is never quite nostalgia, but rather an ironic sense of our relation to history. The continuous feeling of anxiety that seeps through his two large collected volumes of poetry might be read as a barometer of anxiety's historiography in the twentieth century: a low-level continuous anxiety, which peaks in the Cold War period, and which morphs into a particular state of bewilderment that can be charted in his work from the late 1990s onwards. We might turn, for example, to the overt announcement of this affective conundrum that Ashbery spells out in 'The Problem of Anxiety', from his 1997 collection *Can You Hear, Bird*, which playfully inverts the traditional anthropomorphic view of lyric as emulating birdsong. 'The Problem of Anxiety' turns out to be a problem of representation: a question that is framed as the question of sexuality, and its inclusion, though the orientation of the poem directs us from a sense of time passing – fifty years – to a sense of the contingent yet inexhaustible – autonomous – nature of art in a landscape where not even the trees seem interested in their bloom:

Fifty years have passed
since I started living in those dark towns
I was telling you about.
Well, not much has changed. I still can't figure out
how to get from the post office to the swings in the park.
Apple trees blossom in the cold, not from conviction,
and my hair is the color of dandelion fluff.

Suppose this poem were about you – would you
put in the thing I've carefully left out:
descriptions of pain, and sex, and how shiftily
people behave toward each other? Naw, that's
all in some book it seems. For you
I've saved the descriptions of chicken sandwiches,
and the glass eye that stares at me in amazement
from the bronze mantel, and will never be appeased.⁴⁸

The transcendental Emersonian eyeball places an American transcendentalist tradition, ironically, centre stage, though it is one where art is imagined as a turning away from the world rather than an orientation back towards nature. It suggests that poetry might be useful in its autonomy, in its redirection to something that can never be fully exhaustible. What is the use of descriptions of chicken sandwiches, we might reasonably ask? The use value is precisely uncertain: the political philosophy that poetry makes nothing happen, Ashbery suggests, might just be our best lifeline. At the centre of the poem is a supposition that interpolates the reader: 'Suppose this poem were about you'. Ashbery's late poems, suffused with a generalised anxiety, refuse even to muster up a paranoid subject to offer its reader consolation. The difficulty that these poems present locates itself in the failure to think in this climate. Their proposition is that it is difficult to say anything at all, but poetry can at least take hold of its affective weather; it can at least play for time, by figuring out how it feels to live through this temporal landscape of the meantime. When Adam Kirsch ponders in a *New York Times* article, why 'no one in power in 2014 is asking for John Ashbery's views on climate change', we might reasonably respond, because poetry is not an answer.⁴⁹

This reading of Ashbery's work might extend to the New York School's as a whole.⁵⁰ The New York School's affinities, or lack thereof, with nature, are particular and remarkable, and require these framings to fully comprehend how presciently they speak to the present.⁵¹ It is also their understanding of nature as its own kind of technology that makes their work feel so distinctly modern. It, too, furnishes ecocriticism with a particularly rich idiom for thinking about media not simply as an environment but environment also as a media where the message is simply not getting through, a message that is framed explicitly in Ashbery's work from the 1970s as a call from the atmosphere to an unresponsive earth. What specifically no

longer works is the Romantic lyric's dominant tropes: apostrophe and prosopopoeia. What we witness in Ashbery's work – or rather what we attend to – is the significance of these atmospheres and their bearing not only on our ability to imagine nature but to think at all. Take, for example, his 1977 poem 'Crazy Weather' which pivots around the failure of apostrophe – the lyric's most central device: 'the sky calls / to the deaf earth' (there is, of course, also the aural play on death).⁵² This crazy weather is not simply nature *out there* but also the general climate of anxiety that suffuses the 1970s and which produces paranoid ways of thinking – and paranoid ways of *reading*, where thinking at all is hard work. Rather than, as in the Romantic frame, the poet addressing Nature, in Ashbery's poem, it is the sky – the atmosphere – that struggles to make this communication happen. As ever in Ashbery's work, this failure is presented ironically rather than apocalyptically (or as an ironic apocalypse, ironic because it will happen with our knowledge, or without it).

I take Ashbery here as my model because his poetry schools us in the ironic adjustments that not only evidences 'nescience' – states of not knowing – but which might provide us with a critical model for the 'agnostic militancy' that Nersessian argues is required for an ecological critique that 'adds reality' to ecological and political facts by situating them within an everyday atmosphere.⁵³ This is the position from which Ashbery's late work emerges and it provides a rhetorically useful and attentive contribution to ecological concern insofar as its interest is only loosely environmental. Far from seeking to raise consciousness about the looming environmental disaster on the horizon, it is interested instead in registering the affective confusion that envelopes our thinking – and indeed the lyric – and which makes the ecological pressures that are inseparable from it so difficult to conceptualise. Ashbery's work attends, in particular, to those psychic conundrums expressed as systems that are designed so

that the user does not have to think about the alternatively empowering and disempowering sleep in which they are enveloped. An environmental turn might be located in Ashbery's work in the 1970s, at a time when the history of environmental thought is most profoundly reshaped, and which continues to chart these developments until the final poem he wrote, 'Climate Correction' shortly before his death in September 2017.

I close with this poem – which is not particularly remarkable or memorable (certainly hardly distinguishable from much of Ashbery's late work) – because it articulates the psychic stakes of thinking about an uncertain future in the bewilderment of the present, and because its own incidental form provides a model for the kind of poetics of the meantime that I have ventured to theorise here. It is so unconcerned with its own legacy that it creates the impression of disappearing into the atmosphere (or into the digitalised ether), having the opposite effect of an elegy which seeks to monumentalise loss. Its impersonal speaker addresses a reader with an intimacy that presumes knowledge of our confusion in the face of disaster: a confusion that is held at bay by wilfully calling up a state of being in the dark. The speaker speaks to us generally yet also intimately on this matter because they, too, are intimate with the state of being in the dark: this is the paradoxical knowledge that poetry affords. 'A chaser' defers the knowledge that the poem at the same time bears. But the poem's knowledge is also vitally ambiguous: it directs us back to states of not knowing, which might at least allow us to hold in view a future that is not certain. Bewilderment might be understood as a defensive posture, but it is also one that allows us to get a handle on how the more pervasive forms of human destructiveness are passive forms of destruction.

To close then, with ‘Climate Correction’, with poetry in its most ironic eco guise:

So what if there was an attempt to widen
the gap. Reel in the scenery.
It’s unlike us to reel in the difference.

We got the room
in other hands, to exit like a merino ghost.
What was I telling you about?

Walks in the reeds. Be
contumely about it.
You need a chaser.

In other words, persist, but rather
a dense shadow fanned out.
Not exactly evil, but you get the point.⁵⁴

In the place of an elegy for nature – or indeed the poet whose death might occupy the place of nature’s absence – Ashbery offers us instead a form of adjustment: form as an ironic adjustment; a poem that is anything but a catalyst for moral action, or indeed the kind of poem that we parse for critical knowledge. The poem, written eight months into the Trump administration, is entrenched in ‘a deepening pessimism about the future’, as Bollas notes of how this climate has taken hold, with a characteristic irony that does not exculpate the poet or indeed the reader from this worsening state of affairs.⁵⁵ Ashbery has been chosen as a figure of exemplarity because he resists that designation: his writing engages with environmental degradation only to the extent that it tries to represent the degree to which we all ignore it. In poems that just happen to be about climate change because climate change saturates the whole context of their writing, his work has the effect of quietly directing us to the psychic conundrum of living with the thing that is undetectable yet present, disastrous and changeable and yet which remains unaddressed. No need for the poet to lean his ear to the ground to detect disaster on the horizon; it is everywhere around us. Still, there is poetry when the batteries have run down, when critique has run out of steam. The wager is that it might

provide a model for how a literary criticism might evidence a greenness in spite of itself, by not asking too much from literature, or indeed not thinking too intently about what poetry will look like without the seasons.

¹ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917) in James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1956), Vol. 14, p. 243.

² See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

³ Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 54.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶ Margaret Ronda, 'Mourning and Melancholia in the Anthropocene', *Post45*, 06.10.13.

⁷ Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 258.

⁸ This piece implicitly engages and forms a counterpart to John Shoptaw's piece in which he quickly makes a distinction between 'nature' and 'culture' poems on which grounds he quickly argues that Ashbery's poem – here he reads 'River of the Canoe-fish' cannot count as an ecopoem. 'Why Ecopoetry? There's No Plan B', *Poetry*, January 2016.

⁹ Steven Connor, 'Decomposing the Humanities', *New Literary History* 47.2-3 (2016), 275-288 (283).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

¹¹ For a detailed reading of Ashbery's representation of nature throughout his career, see: Stephen J. Ross, *Invisible Terrain: John Ashbery and the Aesthetics of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹² For an overview and example of this turn, see: Heather Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction: Environment and Affect* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

¹³ Anahid Nersessian, 'Two Gardens: An Experiment in Calamity Form', *Modern Language Quarterly* 74.3 (2013), pp. 307-329 (p. 312).

¹⁴ Christopher Bollas, 'Psychoanalysis in the Age of Bewilderment: On the Return of the Oppressed', *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 96.3 (2015), pp. 535-551 (p. 537).

¹⁵ This idea is outlined most succinctly in Timothy Morton, 'How to Defeat Invisible Gods', Keynote, Or3ra, Mexico City, June 26, 2015 [a recording and transcript of the paper is readily available online].

¹⁶ As Jonathan Crary notes, forms of diffuse attentiveness and semi-automatism 'are part of larger strategies of power in which the aim is not mass-deception, but rather states of neutralization and inactivation, in which one is dispossessed of time'. 24/7 (London: Verso: 2013), p. 88.

¹⁷ Andreas Malm makes this observation early on in *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam-Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso: 2015), p. 9.

¹⁸ On the institutionalization of ecocriticism, see Ursula Heise's glossing of the term and the 'environmental humanities', which gains popularity around 2010, which emerges from the interdisciplinary field of 'environmental studies', institutionalized since the 1960s, in *Futures of Comparative Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 293-94. My article is positioned, in part, against the idea that Heise asserts that, for literary work to matter, environmentally, it needs to have a 'social impact', p. 282.

¹⁹ Jonathan Skinner, 'Editor's Statement', *Ecopoetics* 1 (winter 2001), p. 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²¹ Greg Garrard argues that 'ecocriticism began as an environmentalist literary movement that challenged Marxists and New Historicists over the meaning and significance of British Romanticism'. In the 'waves' metaphor of ecocriticism, this argument aligns itself with the 'second-wave'. *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 1.

²² See: Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (2004), 225-248.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁴ Freud, 'Psycho-analytic Notes on An Autobiographical Account of A Case of Paranoia', *SE*, Vol. p. 79.

- ²⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is about You', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123-152.
- ²⁶ Jennifer Wenzel, *The Disposition of Nature: Environmental Crisis and World Literature* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), p. 2.
- ²⁷ Henry David Thoreau, *The Portable Thoreau* ed. Carl Bode (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 288.
- ²⁸ Anahid Nersessian, 'Romantic Ecocriticism Lately', *Literary Compass* 15.1 (January 2018), 1-16 (1).
- ²⁹ Bollas develops this thesis more extensively in *Meaning and Melancholia: Life in the Age of Bewilderment* (New York: Routledge, 2018).
- ³⁰ Anahid Nersessian, 'Romantic Difficulty', *New Literary History* 49.4 (2018), pp. 451-466 (p.464).
- ³¹ Dawn Lundy Martin, 'Also Birds' [Excerpt], poets.org.
- ³² For more on this, see: Christopher Nealon, 'The Poetic Case', *Critical Inquiry* 33 (2007), 865-886.
- ³³ Lily Gurton-Wachter makes this argument in *Watchwords: Romanticism and the Poetics of Attention* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016). I allude at several points in this article to de Quincey's recollection of an evening during the Peninsula War when he and Wordsworth went for a walk to await the mail carried which they expected to arrive with news of war. 'At intervals', de Quincey recounts, 'Wordsworth had stretched himself at length on the high road, applying his ear to the ground, so as to catch any sound of wheels that might be groaning along at a distance', pp. 85-86.
- ³⁴ Sara Guyer, *Reading with John Clare: Biopoetics, Sovereignty, Romanticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p. 40.
- ³⁵ John Ashbery, *Other Traditions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 5.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ³⁷ For a more detailed reading of Ashbery's reading of Clare see: Angus Fletcher's *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment and the Future of Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 57-74. Fletcher's study also positions Ashbery as the most recent (the last for the sake of the book) descendent of his ecotheory of poetry that he outlines in his study.
- ³⁸ For more on this term, see: Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
- ³⁹ John Ashbery, *Collected Poems, 1956-1987* ed. Mark Ford (Manchester: Carcanet, 2008), p. 492.
- ⁴⁰ Ashbery, *Collected Poems, 1956-1987*, p. 198.
- ⁴¹ Edward Said, *On Late Style* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), x. As an example of such a reading, see: J. T. Welsh, 'John Ashbery and the Problem of Late Style', <https://jtwelsch.com/research/ashbery-late-style/> [accessed 10 May 2020].
- ⁴² Ashbery is my example here, though this critical reading would work equally well as a reading of Lisa Robertson's *The Weather* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2014). Robertson's introduction is particularly useful here: 'Introduction to *The Weather*', in *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture Third Edition* (Toronto: Coach House, 2011), p. 60.
- ⁴³ Nersessian, 'Two Gardens', p. 308.
- ⁴⁴ Freud, 'Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety' (1926 [1925]), *SE*, Vol. 20, pp. 164-65.
- ⁴⁵ Freud, 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death' (1915), *SE*, Vol. 14, p. 275.
- ⁴⁶ Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), *SE*, Vol. 18, p. 12.
- ⁴⁷ Freud, 'Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis: Part II: Dreams' (1916 [1915-1916]), *SE*, Vol. 15, p. 91.
- ⁴⁸ Ashbery, *Can You Hear, Bird* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), p. 121.
- ⁴⁹ Adam Kirsch and Leslie Jamison, 'How Has the Social Role of Poetry Changed Since Shelley', *New York Times*, November 18, 2014.
- ⁵⁰ Jonathan Skinner's interest in reclaiming experimental midcentury American poetry for the ecopoetics canon is important here, although the work of the New York School is conspicuous for its absence in an overview of the field, as in *Ecopoetics: Essays in the Field* ed. Angela Hume and Gillian Osborne (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018).
- ⁵¹ Poets included under this umbrella's 'first generation' include Frank O'Hara, James Schuyler, Kenneth Koch and Barbara Guest. My comment also applies to its expansive 'second generation'.
- ⁵² Ashbery, *Collected Poems, 1956-1987*, p. 503.
- ⁵³ Nersessian, 'Two Gardens', p. 312.
- ⁵⁴ Ashbery, 'Climate Correction', *Harper's*, 337.2019 (August 2018).
- ⁵⁵ Bollas, 'Psychoanalysis in the Age of Bewilderment', p. 538.