

**“Looking with care and desire
seemed a political act”:
Environmental Concern in the
Poetry of Tim Lilburn**

by Jenny Kerber

In an essay discussing the relationship between Canadian literature and landscape, David Carpenter takes the idea of “reverence for place” and stretches it in a more overtly environmental direction: “Canadians still need to learn how to love their place, their many places. Perhaps beneath the looming spectres of acid rain and global warming, this need has acquired an international urgency. . . . My plea is for an intelligent, abiding way of calling this place—these places—we inhabit, home” (19-20). The task of becoming “at home” in a particular social and ecological place dominates the work of Saskatchewan poet Tim Lilburn; indeed, one of Lilburn’s most pressing questions is, “How to be here?” (*MS* 57, 60; “Going Home” 175). To this point Lilburn has achieved significant acclaim as a nature poet, but is it any longer possible to write nature poetry without also addressing more explicitly “environmental” concerns? What is the relationship between nature poetry and other contemporary discourses about the environment? Lilburn’s comments following the acknowledgements of his 1994 volume *Moosewood Sandhills* suggest environmental concern that wavers between futility and hope: “Part of the feeling that attends returning to the world is the belief that restoration cannot occur—that and the impression of desire pushing past this conviction of impossibility” (67-68). Initially this statement seems to have a curious relation to environmentalism, for instead of using the *lingua franca* of greening, in which words such as limitation, sustainability, and complexity are common currency, Lilburn chooses to focus on desire. How might a preoccupation with desire become a gateway to exploring the environmental politics of nature?

For Lilburn, desire for nature is intimately related to spiritual concerns. As a product of intense Jesuit scholarly training, along with his current interests as a philosophical teacher and writer, Lilburn employs, challenges, and extends several longstanding theological ideas in his linking of desire and spirituality in his poetry. In what follows I will examine how

Lilburn constructs the relationship between desire and the natural world through the deployment of two theological concepts: panentheism and apophaticism. Panentheism is succinctly summarized in the idea that the ‘finite bears the infinite’; that is, there is a mutual indwelling of the supernatural and the material, but neither is ever fully contained by the other.¹ Apophaticism, simply defined, is the articulation of a thing or phenomenon (usually God) via a process of negation. After looking at how these theological ideas function in Lilburn’s poetry, I will explore how Lilburn’s use of these concepts affirms, but also complicates, an “environmental” reading of his work. By turning spiritual concern with divinity towards earthly, natural phenomena, Lilburn’s panentheism challenges earth-denying models of spirituality and makes environmentalism, with all of its attendant social and political questions, a legitimate and necessary topic of *spiritual* concern. Lilburn’s apophatic approach to the Saskatchewan scrubland must be regarded with more ambivalence, however, for while it effectively links spiritual desire to the environment, it also risks placing “Nature” outside the realm of political, discursive debate. These seemingly contradictory impulses in Lilburn’s work open up interesting questions not only about how one defines the “politics of nature,” but also about what it means to write nature poetry and criticism in an age of increasingly dire environmental circumstances.

In an article on Lilburn’s *Moosewood Sandhills*, Brian Bartlett suggests that part of the text’s originality lies in its adaptation of the language of religious asceticism to a desire for intense union with *natural phenomena* rather than with an explicitly Judaeo-Christian God (33-34). One sees the kind of ascetic impulse Bartlett is referring to in the following lines from Lilburn’s poem “From an Anchorage”:

Empty yourself, be alone.
Love the earth as felt and grease, love it,
 heavy bread of leafmould, deer shit and moon light.
(MS 24)

The ascetic imperative here (“Empty yourself,” “be alone”) is accompanied by an equally strong injunction to “love the earth” by focusing on particular details that might elude the casual observer of landscape, details which range from the microscopic (“leafmould”) to the distant and ephemeral (“moon light”). The reference to “moon light” also invites a consideration of how the finite bears the infinite, for one does not “see” moon light directly, but rather experiences it by witnessing its dwelling in prosaic, earthly things, such as “leafmould” and “deer shit”.² Lilburn’s language

also enacts the way in which desire turns the *being* of things into the *becoming* of action, as nouns are repeatedly conflated with verbs: “Love the earth as *felt* and grease,” “leafmould, deer *shit* and moon *light*” (emphasizes mine). This conflation of noun and verb has the effect of blurring the line between mere description and activity.

The poem then continues with another ascetic command, followed by a sequence of lines that formally enact earthward movement, this time literally digging themselves into the page’s white space:

Hunker down.
Knowing in the end relaxes into the shining pose of a desire
to kneel and scrape the walls of a coyote hole
deserted in a sand hill slope into a room to lie in,
white roots above you, air scarred with your breath.
(MS 24)

In following the movement of the lines across the page, the reader joins the poet in his den, hunkering down underneath the white spaces permeating the lines above. Getting into the poem thus means crawling metaphorically into the earth.

While Bartlett sees the direction of the ascetic impulse towards the earth as a move *away* from concern with transcendent divinity, I would suggest that the concept of panentheism troubles such a dichotomous understanding of natural phenomena and their relationship to the divine. In its insistence that the finite bears the infinite, panentheism affirms that the divine has chosen to dwell and is present in the particularity or “thisness” of all created things.³ Paying homage to the particularity of each thing means that the natural world can no longer be regarded only as a vehicle for divine speech. Nature for Lilburn is not merely a text to be deciphered to discover a higher, divine intent; rather, the natural world must be met and praised on its own terms. Numerous places in the poetry suggest that the means of praising divinity lie within the earth itself; for example, in the poem “Piety” the Saskatchewan landscape is characterized as an archive containing guidelines for spiritual practice adequate to the place: “Beneath this earth, tensed libraries of tears. / Lectionaries, hermetica, dust, the perfumed inks. / In Cyrillic, wolf” (MS 29). Here the language of orthodoxy has become localized, and in some sense, wilded in the vernacular of the poet’s local place.⁴ The poetry of *Moosewood Sandhills* aptly illustrates panentheism’s demand that a turning towards the divine (theocentrism) must first involve a geocentric turning towards the earth.

Lilburn's work thrives on this kind of panentheistic paradox, suggesting that one encounters the infinite not by ascetically denying materiality, but rather by succumbing to the pull of particular earthly places and things. The poetry is thus littered with commands that take on the language of ascetic discipline and channel it into earth-bound attentiveness: "Lie on your belly now, stare, pour into the golden / eye of the grain and be counted" (*MS* 41). Thus Lilburn's "kingdom of heaven" is that which lies "in the grass / pulling a / forgottenness toward itself..." (*TR* 31). Most often in the poetry, this geocentrism begins with looking at the ecological details of landscapes that are not generally regarded either for their aesthetic beauty or for their utility. Lilburn's landscapes are sun-scorched, alkali-ridden, and dotted only here and there by small bluffs of trees—in short, they are not easy places in which to settle oneself. And yet it is into this ground that the poems urge one to dig in order to attain spiritual revelation. As the persona repeatedly insists elsewhere in the book, "You dig in the ground because you want to see" (*MS* 38).

For Lilburn, "seeing" is not merely some form of self-indulgent spiritual questing; rather, it is a form of environmental practice. His prefatory note to *Moosewood Sandhills* suggests a form of desire at work within the poetry that extends beyond mere nature appreciation: "I moved in, planted thin gardens, dug a root cellar, slept in the fields under summer stars—and *looked*. How to be in the world as if it were home? Looking with care and desire seemed a political act. The century was closing" (*MS* 9). In the face of some fin-de-siècle weariness, even eco-apocalyptic anxiety, Lilburn begins with the act of looking. As Bartlett points out, a survey of the titles of Lilburn's poems in *Moosewood Sandhills* highlights the value he places on looking; here, titles such as "In the Hills, Watching," "Gazing at the Wall," and "Learning a Deeper Courtesy of the Eye" emphasize the importance of vision that extends beyond either passive landscape appreciation or utilitarianism (Bartlett 35).

The type of looking Lilburn's poetry advocates thus walks a delicate path, motivated by desire yet resistant to its appropriative impulses. Lilburn has suggested that looking without presumption transforms desire into environmental courtesy, thereby functioning as a "necessary apology" for the imperialisms humans have engaged in with regard to the earth ("Listening with Courtesy" 142). What is less clear, however, is how looking can be understood as a "political act." Can mere attentiveness function in the service of more overtly environmental goals? Further, is "looking" ever innocent? How is looking itself sometimes also a form of interaction with, even a disruption of, the looked-upon?

Here, it is helpful to turn to one of Lilburn's Sagehill Writers' Project colleagues, Don McKay, who has written at length about poetic attentiveness in his book, *Vis à Vis: Notes on Poetry and Wilderness*. McKay defines poetic attention as a "sort of readiness, a species of longing which is without the desire to possess" the other (26). Poetic attention thus becomes a way of resisting the impulse to reduce the natural world simply to a set of raw materials whose whole being is defined in accordance with human needs and desires. At the same time, McKay is keenly aware of how attending is inextricably tied to the politics of mediation; he thus rejects the idea that it is ever possible for the nature poet to sit down and unproblematically "write the natural." Instead, he remarks, "[l]anguage *is* already there in poetic attention; like an athlete at her limit, language is experiencing its speechlessness and the consequent need to stretch *itself* to be adequate to this form of knowing" (30). Nature poetry is not about avoiding anthropocentrism, but about enacting it thoughtfully (29).

So the attentiveness encouraged by a nature poet like Lilburn who wants to leave the animals, the grass, and the river "as they are" must also recognize that it cannot (and I would argue, *should not*) extricate itself from wrestling with the limits of both language and the human senses. One can see Lilburn's engagement with these kinds of limits in a few lines from the poem "On the Bed of Attention," wherein the persona speaks of "a smell of old snow under the bushes where the brown thrasher was" (TR 9). Here again, the reader is enjoined to "hunker down," for the smell that is invoked can only be accessed by physically getting down on one's hands and knees "under the bushes." However, when the reader arrives at the syntactic site where the brown thrasher ought to be found, s/he finds that the bird that gives the place its unique olfactory character is no longer present. The vacuum left by the absence of the brown thrasher is filled by the reader's desire, a desire that seeks but cannot ultimately be satiated.

Lilburn's meditation on the site of loss "where the brown thrasher was" might also be interpreted ecocritically, for the absence of the bird may signal not only its literal absence, but also a metaphoric loss of species effected by environmental deterioration. The site of the brown thrasher's absence brings to mind an eerie echo of Rachel Carson's classic environmental text *Silent Spring*, where the author begins by setting out a fable of a "silent spring" in which the sound of birds has been erased due to species loss at the hand of human-produced pesticides: "There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example—where had they gone?...It was a spring without voices" (Carson 2). In Lilburn's poem, the seeking desire generated by avian absence is frustrated not only by the limits of linguistic

expression, but also by the potentially more enduring threat of environmental loss. In another poem from *To the River*, Lilburn again prompts the reader to consider both poetic and ecological limits, suggesting that his ability to write about a particular natural environment is hindered not only by the landscape's own unyielding character and the perceiver's limits of knowing, but also by the prospect of loss that haunts nature itself. The persona states that there is "[n]o flavour in the way the water bends, nothing in the mirror; / it's inside the pelt of a coyote someone shot and skinned" (TR 36). The threat of the permanence of ecological loss presents itself as the ultimate threat to the kind of knowing that Lilburn suggests is key to being at home in the world, as the revelatory potential within the natural world finally recedes beyond the knower's reach: "All you could know and you do not know it" (TR 35).

Here might be a good place to consider how Lilburn's wrestling with limits in his poetry leads to the deployment of the other key theological concept I want to discuss: apophaticism. Apophaticism, derived from the Greek *apo-* (away from, un-) and *phatos*—(spoken), emerges out of negative theology, and is a form of speaking which paradoxically uses language to address (via a form of negation or denial) what is beyond the reach of language. McKay's remarks are again instructive here, for they insist that "[p]oets are supremely interested in what language can't do; in order to gesture outside, they use language in a way that flirts with its destruction" (*Vis à Vis* 32). If many of Lilburn's poem titles are suggestive of looking, so too do many of them suggest lack, impossibility, and negation; for example, in the 1999 volume *To the River*, one finds a series of titles preoccupied with the *via negativa*: "There Is No Presence," "Nothing There," "There, Beside What Can't Be Heard".

Since Lilburn chooses the apophatic way of writing nature, one might expect him to be thoroughly tongue-tied. But on the contrary, there is an almost comic excess in all of this speaking about not speaking. Lilburn suggests that the way of negation, taking into account the panentheistic sacrality, the "thisness" of each particular thing, must ultimately lead to metaphoric verbosity. In *Living in the World As If It Were Home*, he argues:

If everything about a thing is divine, the thing cannot be uttered in total truth. It is its name but more than its name. It merits a multitude of names; it is approached best by praise, a form of naming which has given up the project of identification in a sort of drunkenness, a form of naming which is unthinkable without wonder, that shining and disarmed step toward the world. (77-78)

To see how this process works, in which negation is followed by a plethora of names, one can turn to the first section of the poem "There Is No Presence" (TR 11-17). The poem begins with nature description, setting up the reader's expectation for a moment of illumination: "There are geese over the water, flickering in bad light, sometimes pushing / through / from the other side" (lines 1-3). At the very moment the poem generates expectation in the reader for a kind of mystical union with the world, however, this myth of return is displaced and then frustrated: "here is desire, / a light around the tongue, world next / to the world, a garden that would appear if the word were found" (lines 3-5). At this point, one might assume, the poem should grind to a halt. Once Lilburn insists that the elusive word cannot ultimately be "found," what more can be said?

One possible response to this question emerges in the title to Lilburn's 1999 book of essays, *Living In The World As If It Were Home*. Since the world is never completely home to us, and since language runs into limits, we cannot readily accomplish some sort of idyllic return to nature via "true" mimetic representation. Rather, there is always a strangeness and a uniqueness to the natural world that undermines notions of easy familiarity. However, the possibility afforded by metaphor—the "as if" of language—still allows us to say something about the world. Faced with the impossibility of naming the world, we still use the word to love it, to attend to it, and to walk alongside it. So the poem continues, "What glitters in things is a mountain, it can't be held in the / mouth" (lines 6-7). Though what "glitters in things" can't be held in the mouth, a response to the world is still possible via metaphor: "what glitters in things is a mountain." The use of metaphor thus functions as a response to nature in which the desire created by the failure of language itself propels one to a kind of action. What "can't be held in the mouth" demands release; it must be uttered, no matter how inadequate language might seem to the task. So the poem continues on in a burst of metaphor that evokes the night scene for the reader in a way that both attends to detail and gestures beyond it to wonder: "The heavy grasses; night bends from the waist and / goes down into them. / The last light is the intelligence, the smallness of / birds in wild berries. / The stars clank up, black-wet weight running / on the oil of anticipation. / The geese participate in the boiling dark and they / are a speech of it" (lines 8-15). At the end of the passage, after this burst of metaphor, the act of speaking is ultimately given to the geese themselves; the poet cannot speak the darkness of the night that the poem evokes, but it seems that the geese can: in fact, they are themselves that "speech of nature" to which the poet aspires. In finally relinquishing speaking, there is a move away even from

metaphoric language, as the utterance of the poem is attributed to nature itself.

But this is where Lilburn's apophaticism becomes potentially problematic, for in denying the possibility of his own capacity to speak about the world, the poet runs at least two risks. The first problem with adopting this kind of nature writing strategy is that it diminishes both the importance and the relevance of knowledge about nature that ongoing work in other fields—especially the sciences—can contribute to ecocritical discussion. The importance of a personal experience of revelation here takes precedence when it might better be placed within a more diverse framework of ecocritically useful ways of knowing and writing about nature. This emphasis on mystical revelation has implications not only for what we regard as “proper” nature poetry, but also for what kinds of writing are regarded as suitable material for the practice of ecocriticism. Critic Dana Phillips, for example, has recently suggested that the kind of contemporary nature writing attended to and lauded by many established ecocritics has actually narrowed, rather than broadened, the kinds of ecological knowledge that might be gained by literary study. Phillips argues that much ecocriticism has tended to privilege a form of personal revelatory knowledge of “Nature” that can be accessed only by the attentive nature writer.⁵ Scientific, social, political and other forms of knowledge about nature then take a back seat to the recounting of personal mystical experience. While such experience may inspire a kind of wonder for nature in the reader, even prompting him/her to go out and seek similar experiences, it is arguably less successful at starting a conversation *about* nature, addressing questions about how it is constructed and negotiated by different actors on both local and global scales.

The second risk the poet runs in denying his or her capacity to speak about the world is that of essentializing nature: the voice of nature in Lilburn's poem cited above is the “speech” of the geese.⁶ In attributing speech to nature itself, the poet elides his own aesthetic fashioning of nature. Multiple natures, shaped by an array of potentially conflicting human discourses, are reduced to a single Nature whose inscrutable character lies ultimately outside of the boundaries of questioning and debate. In his well-known essay on negative theology, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” Jacques Derrida argues that in spite of its insistence on the way of negation, apophaticism actually participates in the same divine economy as assertive, cataphatic theology, even taking it to a whole new level of essentiality (Foshay 3-4). By insisting that to speak of God, one must be silent, Derrida argues that negative theologians actually end up asserting Being itself (78).

To illustrate this point, Derrida cites Meister Eckhart: ““But when I said that God is not being and that He is above Being (über wesen), I have not denied Him being (ich im niht wesen abegesprochen) but, rather, I have exalted Being in Him”” (78). Reading Lilburn, one is left wondering if the apophatic approach to nature similarly ends up on the brink of reasserting the essentiality of capital-‘n’ “Nature.” Lilburn says that he cannot speak nature, but in the cases cited above, does he not paradoxically end up asserting the “Truth” of Nature by making his speech nature’s speech?

On one hand, Lilburn asserts that “looking with care and desire” is a “political” act, and indeed his panentheism can be read as a move towards political engagement without sacrificing the desire for spiritual connection with nature. On the other hand, however, Lilburn’s apophatic way of apprehending and writing about nature may hinder dialogue and debate about the environment as a politically-charged set of discourses. If Lilburn’s *via negativa* ends up advocating a form of essentialism, it risks turning Nature into a trump card that overrides all ongoing conversations of environmental politics and debate. An essentialized Nature is ostensibly taken out of the realm of politics, even as it is often deployed in political ways that hide their own particularity and contingency under the cloak of naturalness. As Raymond Williams argues, it is a short step from asserting the “truth about nature” to using that truth to legitimate one’s own particular ideas and propositions:

In some serious argument, but even more in popular controversy and in various kinds of contemporary rhetoric, we continually come across propositions of the form ‘Nature is...’, or ‘Nature shows...’, or ‘Nature teaches...’. And what is usually apparent about what is then said is that it is selective, according to the speaker’s general purpose. (70)

Does Lilburn’s apophatic gesturing then constitute a retreat from political discourses about nature? Concerning that nature of which one cannot speak, must one be silent?

Some will no doubt argue that too much silence is part of contemporary environmentalism’s problem. The assumption here is that more speech will lead to more knowledge, which will in turn lead to more activism. Silence, the refusal to name, is thus regarded as the companion of apathy. However, could it not also be that too much speaking, too much information, too much “white noise,” in Don DeLillo’s parlance, is an equally large environmental liability, as vocabularies of species loss, of toxicity, and of resource depletion become so linguistically managed that they are eventu-

ally rendered unremarkable? Under the circumstances, is it preferable to speak up, or shut up?

I do not have any simple answers to these questions, but I do think that the issue of discourse is crucial. Sometimes the use of language *via* naming can function as an act of courtesy towards the natural world, while at other times, activism may paradoxically emerge in the conscious act of *not* naming; the latter is what Lilburn has called “an activism of forgetting the royalty of one’s name, of yielding, of stepping aside” (“Going Home” 184). Back in 1996, Lilburn declared that what he wanted to do was “write something that has nothing of the writer, nothing of artifice in it, that is not *about* nature but that *is* nature” (“Writing As a Ghostly Activity” 9). But what does it mean to write this kind of nature poetry in a time in which our experiences and interactions with nature are often highly managed and mediated? Further, who gets to articulate what nature “is” and what it is not? What kinds of written experiences of nature are endorsed by the growing field of ecocriticism, which are neglected, and why?

I think that Lilburn’s recent nature poetry tends to be more *environmentally*-inclined when it highlights its artifice and consciously allows multiple discourses of nature to clash, converse, and co-exist with one another. The singular speech *of* Nature then becomes a series of discourses *about* nature. What “glitters in things” is something that does not lie outside of discourse or artifice, but rather is a matter of conscious, discursive debate. Desire, that unfulfilled longing for nature that one sees in Lilburn’s particular brand of panentheism, renders being an always *becoming*; hence any name that is found for nature is always a provisional one.⁷ Every name or adjective for natural phenomena is always provisional partly because of the instability of language and meaning, but also because the natural phenomena described are themselves dynamic and our ecological knowledge of them is incomplete. As the persona remarks in the poem “You Sleep Your Way There,” “You will never read all there is / in the library of this dark” (*TR* 49). At the same time, by issuing forth a plethora of provisional namings that edge their way towards praise, Lilburn’s poems do give the reader a fuller picture of certain aspects of the natural prairie world in spite of his insistence that he cannot utter that reality in language.⁸ The challenge is to use language to attend to the diversity of natural phenomena, to things in their *haecceity*, while not losing sight of how nature is also circumscribed by an array of political, scientific, social, and aesthetic discourses. Attending to the metaphoric, multiple names of things allows a variety of discourses and a range of political choices to emerge, no single one of which can necessarily claim to be the singular speech of Nature.

This might then not only cultivate a desire for nature as a kind of engaged environmental practice, but also widen the path for a greater number of discussions about what constitutes “nature” itself.

Notes

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- 1 Pantheism is often confused with pantheism, which is defined as the total identification of the divine with the forces of nature and material substances. Unlike pantheism, pantheism retains the possibility of divine transcendence. Cf. Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* 100.
- 2 Lilburn’s use of pantheism has much in common with the paradox of *hierophany* as explained by Mircea Eliade. Eliade uses the term to designate the act of manifestation of the sacred. Etymologically, hierophany means “*something sacred shows itself to us.*” Cf. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* 11.
- 3 Lilburn uses the concept of *haecceity*, or “thisness” to convey the idea of divine presence in a material thing in a way that contributes to the particularity and uniqueness of that thing. The concept is most commonly associated with the 13th century philosopher and theologian John Duns Scotus. Cf. John Duns Scotus, *Gods and Creatures: The Quodlibetal Question* 511.
- 4 Here I am using the no longer commonly used verb form of the term “wild” which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, designated a process of becoming, running, or growing wild (*OED* v.1).
- 5 Cf. Dana Phillips, *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America* 195.
- 6 One sees a similar phenomenon wherein speech is attributed to nature itself in a poem titled “There” from Lilburn’s recent collection, *Kill-site*: “I was in the ground and the animal came to me wearing signs. / It came out of the water moaning in stone, and it turned toward / me and this was speech” (35).
- 7 For the idea of desire as something that renders being an always becoming, I am indebted to Darryl Whetter’s discussion of the poetry of Lilburn, Daphne Marlatt, and Robert Kroetsch in “The Birds, the Bees, and Kristeva: An Examination of Sexual Desire in the Nature Poetry of Daphne Marlatt, Robert Kroetsch, and Tim Lilburn” 47.
- 8 For example, the sheer number of different adjectives and metaphors that Lilburn uses to describe his subject in *To the River* conveys to the reader a rich mental picture of the South Saskatchewan River that gives voice to its consistencies and contradictions through geological time and the changing of the seasons.

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