Maria Cristina Iuli

Wanderers on the Way Into the Neighborhood of Being: Katherine Larson's Poetry of Life-forms

"Being-ness exists in many guises."
"Existence is revealed in many ways."
(Martin Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?*)

"Every natural fact is an emanation,
and that from which it emanates is an emanation also,
and from every emanation is a new emanation."
(Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Method of Nature")

In this essay I discuss Katherine Larson's poetry collection, *Radial Symmetry* (2011) within the framework of environmental literature, as a work that interrogates the relation between poetics and knowledge of life-forms. The essay is divided into three sections. The first section provides the background for reading Larson's poetry in the context of aesthetics as a domain in which literary and philosophical discourse overlap. The second introduces the problematics of poetic languages vis-à-vis "nature" as "the house of Being" or nature as "standing reserve," by considering Martin Heidegger's reflections on Being, language, and beings in "The Question Concerning Technology" and Emerson's pluralistic, non-representational view of language in *Nature*, which provide a more specific philosophical niche for situating Larson's poetry. The third and final section delivers a close reading of some of Larson's poems meant to exemplify the difference they make in engaging "nature," "life," and "Being" by means of language: whether by taking care of those entities, or by reducing them to "standing reserve".

Aesthetics

A kinship exists between philosophy and poetry, as Heidegger remarked in *What Is Philosophy?* and as Ralph Waldo Emerson worked out in *Nature* (1836) – which Lawrence Buell defined "the first canonical work of US literature to unfold a theory of nature with special reference to poetics" (13).

The literary line that connects the eighteenth-century environmental imagination with contemporary ecological thinking intersects with philosophical inquiries into the nature of human knowledge inaugurated by René Descartes's *Meditations* and first systematized by Immanuel Kant's transcendental philosophy, whose differentiated fields of specialized knowledge marked the appearance of *aesthetics* as a "science of forms" within a general theory of knowledge and the emergence of the (white) modernist, humanist subject – even if, rather than the grounding figure of knowledge, such a subject appeared as the effect of a reflective manner of thinking. By thematizing the gap between phenomenon and thing, perceptions and reality, the conceivable and the communicable, aesthetics expressed the attempt of transcendental philosophy to address the failure of human cognition to assimilate the non-human, the radically different, "nature," by encoding it under the category of the *sublime* in literature and art. While philosophically inaccessible in its in-human inexhaustible multiplicity, nature was thus paradoxically made to re-enter highly specialized forms of communication, such as art and literature, through a variety of tropes for feelings of the inexpressible or ineffable.[1]

Tropes, metaphors and other kinds of reference to the "natural" world feature extensively across the entire American lyric tradition and stand out in some of the most abstract works of the great American modernist poets – for example Elizabeth Bishop, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams – as well as in the verses of contemporary poets such as W. S. Merwin, Archibald R. Ammons, Gary Snyder and, as we will see, Katherine Larson. Their works "scale up our imagination of the human" and simultaneously spell out the collapse of concepts of "man" and "nature," central to "age-old humanistic philosophies" (Chakrabarty 206),

thus inviting re-readings that highlight the alignment of their poetics with current environmentally critical discourse.

Yet, it is not because of their contemplation of non-human life or their self-conscious exposure of the limits of human understanding vis-à-vis what Bruno Latour calls "the multiplicity of existents […] and the multiplicity of ways they have of existing" (36), that those poems should be called ecological. Even more than in their lyric capacity to convey what David Farrier calls "a sense of geological intimacy" across vastly distant temporalities (127), the deep bond linking these poems to environmental thinking, I contend, is to be found in the specific ways they dramatize the discontinuity between environments and poetic acts and, at the same time, both undo the illusion of an ontologically *given* "environment" ready for the poet, the philosopher or the scientist to address, and bring forth a *poiesis* that reconnects the words in the poem and the worlds outside by framing and exploring – within the terms of the poem and its ways of making sense – relations between mind and environment, perceptions and phenomena as relations of meaning. In so doing, modernist and contemporary poems reveal their deep ecological awareness not when and because they engage thematically with environmental issues "in the world," but when and because they frame singular, specific relations between worlds and words and investigate and exemplify by the same act their own capacity to create meaning and knowledge unconventionally. In this respect, and because both create relations of knowledge, we can agree with Emerson and Heidegger that poetry affirms its ecological quality through its kinship to philosophy.

My use of the expression "ecological awareness" follows Timothy Morton's definition, in turn inspired by Gregory Bateson's conception of ecology as "a new way of thinking about ideas and about those aggregates of ideas which I call 'minds […] extending from natural evolutionary forms to human cultural behaviors" (xv). Like Bateson's system(s) of relations, Morton's ecological view implies a "detailed and increasing sense, in science and outside of it, of the innumerable interrelationships among lifeforms and between life and non-life" (*Hyperobjects* 128). This definition matters precisely because it underscores how the inexhaustibility of interrelations among life-forms is always contingent with living and non-living aggregates and with our ways of making them through our "filtering" media, and

how our mundane attempts to describe them are doomed to misfire, if the aim is to capture "the environment" (and, by extension, "the world" or "nature," or "reality") as a "solid, veridical" entity independent "of the writing process itself" (Morton, *Ecology* 30). Therefore, Morton suggests an ecology "without nature." Once "nature," "the environment" and "the world" are refuted as the unifying empirical objects or the ideal concepts of universal experience, the theoretical problem becomes how to integrate the multiplicities of "worlds" and observations of such worlds into something called knowledge. This has been the quintessential problem of modern poetry in the line inaugurated by Romanticism, sharply referenced by Emerson's observation: "The method of nature: who could ever analyze it? [...] The wholeness we admire in the order of the world, is the result of infinite distribution" ("Method" 119). But what does it mean to put the exploration of the relation between mind and environment at the center of the poetic work? How is the multiplicity of experiences and worlds both implied and silenced by the poetic form? What ecology is enacted by poems in their observations of "natural facts"?

An enlightening example of the labor required to accomplish the paradoxical effort of keeping the overwhelming complexity of the environment unknowably teeming while unifying it in the poetic act, of binding some form of human understanding to world-making is precisely Marianne Moore's distinction between the states of "unconfusion" and "confusion" that the mind submits to its own proof – rather than to any proof of nature – in the poem "The Mind is an Enchanting Thing," or in the long poem "The Octopus," where "pseudopodia" – itself a designation deriving from Moore's training in biology – *seemingly* organizes a poem *seemingly* about Mount Tacoma, where knowledge of environmental ecologies – while painstakingly detailed – is always already an effect of self-referential mental processes. But perhaps the most telling definition of Moore's un-naturalized poetics is given by Moore herself in the three remaining lines of the final version of "Poetry," after her relentless process of revision: "I too dislike it. / Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in / It, after all, a place for the genuine" (36) – where for "the genuine" we should not read a reference to an unspoiled, immediate, pure embodied experience taking place in an unfathomable environment

outside the poem and represented by it, but rather, if a five decades history of revisions means anything, the poem's own self-referential production of "the genuine" as an act of extreme poetic compression.[2]

Just to give another example: William Carlos Williams's poems often run against his professed realism of the *thing*, a realism paradoxically acquired only through the exact organization of images brought forth by a poetic vision that foregrounds the mental geometry of "the thing itself." The poetic attempt to present "the rose," for instance, in the poem so entitled, starts with a declaration about the self-referential organization of the poem: while the flower is obsolete, each petal ends "in / an edge" that "cuts without cutting / meets – nothing – renews itself in metal or porcelain" (44). The difference between how the rose is perceived and how it is communicated, expressed in the emphasized deconstruction of the metaphorical language of poetry, marks the anti-realism of Williams's poetics, reveals the asymmetry between the rose as a natural fact (whatever that may be) and the rose as a trope, and elects that asymmetry as its focus: "to engage roses becomes a geometry."[3]

This preoccupation about the nature of the relation between mind and reality is also central to Wallace Stevens's poetry, escalating in his late works – as Cary Wolfe has brilliantly detailed in his study on Stevens which also expounds a theory of *Ecological Poetics*. As Wolfe points out, for instance, "The Idea of Order at Key West" stages the first order observations of the irreducible gap between the perception of the song of the woman singing "the world in which *she* sang" and our awareness that "there never was a world *for* her / Except the one she sang and singing, made" (Wolfe, *Ecological Poetics* 47).

Poetry such as Moore's, Williams's and Stevens's stays clear of what Morton calls "ecomimesis:" a rhetorical strategy that encapsulates the desire "to go beyond the aesthetic dimension altogether, […] to go beyond art" in order to "evoke a sense of the reality of nature" (Morton, *Ecology* 31). Both strategy and desire for "reality" are grounded in the presumption of correspondence between "representation" and "truth," in turn dependent on the philosophically pre-modern presumption of language transparency, and completely oblivious to the idea that words have meaning only by reference to other words. But the philosophical determinism ingrained in

realist and idealist theories, as Carsten Strathausen sharply puts it, reads aesthetic works as epiphenomena of scientific theories, missing the point of the specificities of how knowledge production is historically contingent and embedded in particular media. Such determinism as gets manifested in neo-Darwinist critical projects, Strathausen argues, "fails or refuses to acknowledge the fact that the concepts we use co-determine the objects we analyze," and that "there is no scientific cure for the paradoxical relation between concept and object born of modern science and philosophy, because this paradox grows at its very root: 'Logos is paradox'" (15).

In going "beyond the real and the ideal" (Poole 13) and in binding worlds to poetic acts, abstract, ecological poetry thus shares with twentieth-century anti-representational philosophies a skeptical attitude towards the Cartesian idea that the world exists as a knowable, discrete object that can be represented by the philosopher's, the poet's, or the scientist's language. This enquiring mode does not aim to represent and classify, but lingers in the hiatus between language and life, allowing the "Being of being" to emerge and manifest itself (Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?*).

Problems

The poetics of American biologist-poet Katherine Larson stands in relation, on the one hand, to the long trajectory of ecological poetics that extends from Romantic anglophone traditions to contemporary poetry, and, on the other, to the equally long critique of biologism, scientific determinism and other forms of reductionism that Emerson in *Nature* articulated against attempts to represent, classify and reduce environmental complexity – instead of being open to the ways in which what he calls *spirit* gets manifested in nature. This line of thinking reconnects Emerson to Larson via the literary tradition, but also Larson to anti-representational philosophy via Heidegger's philosophical reflections on the relation between humanism and technology formulated in the famous 1947 "Letter on Humanism," and in the later essay "The Question Concerning Technology."[4]

Identifying in the distinction between subject and object the foundation of the grammar of western metaphysics (or humanism), and

finding it entirely responsible for the "homelessness" of modern man and the forgetting of Being, in his "Letter on Humanism" Heidegger charges Western philosophy with substituting essence (which we may rename essentialism) for the truth of Being, and calls for a liberation of language from the grammar of humanism and for a return to the core of thinking, which he posits as the truth of Being, the authentic dimension of what Being means. The language Heidegger uses to make the point is dense, but worth quoting at length for our argument:

> Much bemoaned of late, and much too lately, the downfall of language is, however, not the ground for, but already a consequence of, the state of affairs in which language under the dominance of the modern metaphysics of subjectivity almost irremediably falls out of its element. Language still denies us its essence: that it is the house of the truth of Being. Instead, language surrenders itself to our mere willing and trafficking as an instrument of domination over beings. Beings themselves appear as actualities in the interaction of cause and effect. We encounter beings as actualities in a calculative businesslike way, but also scientifically and by way of philosophy, with explanations and proofs. (222-23)

The scandal of metaphysics, Heidegger suggests, is that it produces humanism as a structure of domination by constituting (programming, one may say) through the syntax of subject and object and cause and effect, the failure of language to function in the service of the truth of Being, leading man [sic] to forget Being and to falsely abide by the multiplicity of other) beings by a relation that is both inauthentic (because it originates in the forgetting of Being) and violent, because it is actualized as "our [i.e. human] mere willing and trafficking as an instrument of domination" (223).[5] It does not matter that language and the creator-to-creature relation may be put to good use: it is the use itself that is problematic because it reproduces an instrumental, non-authentic relation to language and Being.

By making the essence of language unavailable to *man*, the fallen state of language casts man into the state of actuality among actualities, both exposing humans to the risk of losing admission to "the house of Being" that is language, and eroding all their claims to knowledge: "We encounter beings as actualities in a calculative businesslike way, but also scientifically and by way of philosophy, with explanations and proofs"

(223). Exposing a thesis that will take a further twist in "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger eventually hints at a possibility for man to move out of his fallen state by looking to philosophy and to poetry as two distinct kinds of poiesis in the service of authentic language because both are moved by poetic creation. As he put it in *What Is Philosophy?*, between philosophy and poetry "there exists a secret kinship because in the service of language both intercede on behalf of language and give lavishly of themselves" (90).

It is in their efforts in the service of "language" as "the house of Being" – of an openness to receiving and unveiling the many ways in which "Existence is revealed" and the "many guises" in which "Being-ness exists" – that philosophy and poetry may bring man nearer not to Being, but to "*the neighborhood of Being*" to the "clearing" where man's original task, which is to guard the truth of Being, may be performed (234, 237).

This concern for "the many guises in which Being exists" found one of its most telling images in North American literature in Emerson's "transparent eyeball," which seems to resolve through an image of absolute immanence the problem of the integration of the multiple impressions "generated by multiple natural objects" (Emerson, *Nature* 9), and the contradictions of being creator and creature, of observing nature while being part of nature. Recent readers of Emerson – including Stanley Cavell, Lee Brown, Branka Arsić, Cary Wolfe, and Ryan White – have discussed the significance of Emerson's transparent eyeball metaphor not so much as the index of a transcendence gained by the poetic vision, or by the projection of a continuity between mind and nature, but rather as the possibility opened to thinking by Emerson's awareness of the necessary partiality and contingency of all observation.[6] Precisely as a device that allows for the contingent integration of the universe's complexity within an organic perspective, the transparent eyeball suggests the non-immediacy of the poetic vision and its correlation to a world that it engenders and incorporates by the same act in its specific medium.

Emerson's poetic vision unifies only contingently and paradoxically what constitutionally defies unity. Hence, Emerson's poet is neither phenomenally continuous to a nature that pervades him, nor does it represent nature outside him. Rather, he suggests, nature is too complex for the poet to trace down – let alone to represent, in its simultaneously

infinite, inexhaustible possibilities. Nature surfaces in the adjustment of the world to the concept and not the other way around – as the epigraph from Plotinus in the 1836 edition frames it: "an image or imitation of wisdom, the last thing of the soul; Nature being a thing which doth only do, but not know" (*Nature* 1836, 0); it gets shaped for human apprehension and understanding through what Heidegger calls *Gestell*. *Gestell*, or enframing, is "the destining of technology" ("Technology" 331), an "ordering", an imposition, a non-originary way of structuring thinking that orders nature and the human's relation to itself and to nature outside the thinking of Being. It is responsible for preemptively foreclosing the possibility "that man might be admitted more and sooner […] to that which is unconcealed […] in order that he might experience as his essence the requisite belonging to revealing" (331).[7] Enframing remains within the mold of metaphysics, completely absorbed in beings (things, creatures, objects), and in logical, rational concepts; oblivious to Being and to the thinking of Being.

Gestell/enframing is the logical matrix on which humanist ontological and epistemological claims depend. As a relation that orders nature – and man – as "standing reserve" or "resource" by authorizing a thinking that produces "use" as a destiny, *Gestell* is the essence of modern technology, and as such, it brings forth a world by revealing nature as the chief storehouse of the standing energy reserve (324). Heidegger sees it as the danger intrinsic to technology for man's progress toward the truth of Being, because it institutes an inauthentic relation of man with himself and with nature (see Wolfe, *Before the Law*). This inauthenticity averts man from his proper task: to take care of the truth of Being and to reveal the truth of the world, whose undetermined destiny "is heralded in poetry, without yet becoming manifest as the history of Being" (Heidegger, "Letter" 242).

Both Emerson and Heidegger condemn improper (i.e.: inauthentic) ways of addressing nature, distinguishing between undetermined nature and nature as the standing reserve of energy available for instrumental use. This difference recalls the Emersonian distinction between wood and wooden objects in *Nature:* "It is this which distinguishes the stick of timber of the wood-cutter, from the tree of the poet" (9). It is also the distinction Heidegger makes between man and human resources. Both thinkers warn against the manipulation and systematization of the natural world

performed by the scientist, himself a byproduct in the chain of "trafficking with Being" (Heidegger, "Letter" 223).

Following this reasoning, we may say that by acting under the determination of science and calculation, woodcutter and scientist alike act as the owners of the world, and become the willing or unaware instruments of the reduction of nature to standing reserve. Even language – which for Heidegger is the house of Being – is determined by such "destiny." If, for Heidegger, man "is not the lord of beings" but "the Shepherd of Being" ("Letter" 245) distinguished from other creatures and things by the task of guarding Being and attending to its truth through the special – authentic – relation he is supposed to have with language, then how is man to fulfill this task?

To Emerson, a way out of instrumental reason toward authenticity appears in the capacity of the poetic sentiment to attend to that "property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet," as he puts it in the "Language" section of *Nature* (21).[8] Similarly, in "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger suggests that "the saving power" may be glimpsed in what is poetic in every art or, in other words, "in every revealing of essential unfolding into the beautiful" ("Technology" 340). However, unveiling is neither immediate nor "naturally" available, and can be thought of only when the question of technology – that is, of the relation between knowledge and reason which is the epistemological condition of truth – is addressed in the arts. As he put it, "only if reflection upon art, for its part, does not shut its eyes to the constellation of truth in relation to which we are *questioning*" (340). Poetic thinking, an original thinking that in Heidegger's words "has no result. Has no effects," exists authentically only in the words of poetry, in a "saying […] higher than the validity of the sciences, because it is freer. For it lets Being – be" ("Letter" 259).

Radial Symmetry

It is in the philosophical passage opened by Emerson and taken up by Heidegger, in which philosophy and poetry share a secret language that "lets Being be," that we can best situate the work of Katherine Larson.[9] Molecular biologist, field ecologist, and contemporary poet, Larson has

published in several specialized journals. Her first collection, *Radial Symmetry*, was published in 2011 after she was selected by Louise Glück as the winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets. The collection is organized in four sections, showcasing Larson's poetic evolution across fifteen years of writing and three continents of fieldwork as a marine molecular biologist. Section three stands out as a unit entirely dedicated to the longest poem in the collection, "Ghost Nets," written in 2009 for a collaborative project on the ecologies of the Sea of Cortez developed with visual artist Heather Greene, and inspired by the observation of the impact of gill nets on the marine ecosystem of the Californian Gulf area.[10]

In her foreword to the collection, Louise Glück singles out the poem as "a kind of dreamlike diary of being," where "the precision and variety of Larson's impressions, their layered abundance, correspond to the gleanings of some very lucky (and actual) nets," highlighting an exactness in the presentation of observed lifeforms that applies to the entire collection; Glück also points out that the title makes of the poem a protest by implication: "an informed defense of unprotected life in the face of casually pervasive human destructiveness" (xiv). Glück's idea of unprotected life being guarded by poetry echoes Heidegger's view of poetry as the language that guards the truth of Being. However, her political reading of Larson's poetics is rather overstated. While life forms figure prominently in Larson's poetry, particularly as contingent configurations of the shifting, changing network of relations the poetic act generates and brings together with exactitude, they are never subsumed under a generic concept of "life," as something already given that must be protected as such because endowed with positive value. For this reason, pace Glück, the multiplicity of unstable life-aggregates in Larson's poetry is less a symbol of political resistance to ecocide than an attempt to creatively press language into unexpected configurations of imagined ecologies – if we understand ecologies to mean, with Gregory Bateson, systems of relations. In other words, if Larson's poetry guards the truth of Being, it is not primarily by virtue of "the thing said," but because of "the quality of the saying."

The title of the collection, *Radial Symmetry,* points to the self-referential process by means of which, as systems of reference, taxonomies mean in relation to their internal logic: "radial symmetry" is the metaphor for a form of symmetry proper to animals such as starfish, which display identical

parts arranged in a circular fashion around a central axis. The title also evokes the biological process of self-organization by means of which some marine organisms such as starfish, corals, and jellyfish may start life with bilateral symmetry, but develop a different type of symmetry as adults. The lack of correspondence between starfish classified as bilaterally symmetrical and their adult forms, which are radially symmetrical, suggests, first of all (as the scientist most cited by Heidegger, Jacob Von Uexküll, insisted in his studies on perception and functionality in living things; see Sagan), that different forms of marine organisms have different ecological habitats as specific environments to which each animal establishes a corresponding relation. In this respect, radial symmetries exemplify Morton's claim that "there is no nature" in general terms, but only lifeforms – with the rejoinder that lifeforms are no "raw data" (to use, again, Gregory Bateson's expression); that the world of any organism – including us – is always already structured, and that its structuring is self-referential, exclusive, blind, and "observable" (we can say, perceivable) only by second-order "observations," that is to say, at a higher level of abstraction from the place/time of its happening, and can be communicated only through notational systems governed by different temporalities and locations from those established at a biological level (the living of the living organism) and at the level of consciousness (perceptions, awareness).[11] For poetry this is good news, because it brings back language as the conceptual filter that binds communication and consciousness in forms through which the poet creates her symmetries (Larson), geometries (Williams) or ideas of order (Stevens) in a language that aims to not be predetermined by "trafficking with beings," and that for this reason we may call ecological.

If we read Larson's poetry with this observation in mind, we see why the perspective framed by Emerson's and Heidegger's questions is helpful in focusing on the formal processes and the poetic forms through which we approach phenomena. Attending to the shifting morphologies of "unprotected life," Larson's lyrics enact the tensions between – in Heidegger's metaphor – an original thinking that "reaches no result and has no effects" ("Letter" 259), and a language that *destines* morphological multiplicity and diversity to become standing reserve. At a crucial stage in the history of our and other species, when "what saves us" seems utterly

out of reach, hidden by the technology and by inauthentic language that segments the environment into "things," Larson's lines let us see what our thinking habits and our inauthentic language would blind us to: "Hybrid forms, shiny parabolas everywhere" ("Coriolis" 37).

By centering the extraordinary polymorphic force of nature and our ways of observing it, Larson approaches the mysterious manifestations of life forms tentatively, with the humility of a biologist and the grace of a poet, suggesting through unusual syntax, unexpected parallelisms and striking images, hidden relationships, resonances, and overlappings between forms: living systems and symbolic systems are engaged, forced at times, into relations first invisible, then imaginable and finally structured through/in the formal organization of the poem. As she writes in the central section of "Almost A Figure":

> I was in Belfast, you were hospitalized and
> tested. I kept dreaming of doctors with enormous hands
> abusing flowers.
> And of a sericulture room, dimly lit
>
> > where the single
> > > long filaments of silkworms
> > > were drawn from empty cocoons
> > > by machines –
>
> *My entomology professor once said:*
> > *On the cephalothorax of the brown recluse*
> > *there is a pattern like a violin.*
>
> > Forgive me this old habit. It is dangerous to make suffering beautiful.
> > (23; italics in the original)

The marvelous appearance of living forms (the brown recluse stands out first, and then, in backward reading, the silkworms, the abused flowers, the enormous hands, the hospitalized body) is not delivered as shapeless recipient of "life," but always in the plural manifestations of living

architectures' formal elegance. There is no nature degree zero in the precise naming of multiple life forms that inhabit this poem, only forms inspiring more forms and lyrical metamorphoses set out in order to make the invisible visible through the poem's organization of images, analogies, quotations, and contrasts. The poem risks a free fall into stereotype ("to make suffering beautiful"), into the language of the inauthentic ("This old habit"). Yet, by juxtaposing different enframings of life forms – in poetry, medicalization, the silk industry and, in the final stanza, sculpture – it thematizes observation as the medium that makes visible the multiplication of "the world" into mutually irreducible system/environment relations, while also inviting comparisons of the different ways distinct media have of establishing self-referential relations with those lifeforms.

In diagnosis, the patient's body is recoded by medical signs and associated to the inauthentic language of science, but also to poetry (Akhmatova is summoned in the first line of the poem), to art (the violin), and to industrial, extractive relations of dominion: caterpillars spin silk filaments only to be boiled into dead matter before completing their life-cycle. Poeisis brings forth poetry and silk, but each process of emergence implies a singular relation to language, thinking, and value: poetry may only keep us wandering closer to "the clearing of Being," but there is no doubt that capital accumulation encounters beings only as "actualities in a calculative businesslike way" (Heidegger, "Technology" 223) as objects of dominion. The silkworm, as Ingrid Diran's re-reading of Marx's alienation put it, is used in Marx "as an entirely material figure for life under real subsumption […]. Silkworms are that unfortunate species in which life-activity has so long coincided with labor-power as to be naturalized as value, although this valorization has come at the expense, precisely, of the silkworm's life cycle" (21). The forking paths are symbolized by the violin's unconventional association to the image of "free," useless, un-destined, brown recluse vis-à-vis the image of a cocoon emptied out of the caterpillar "whose living phase-change has been subordinate to a phase-change of value,"and literally turned into "standing reserve" (21) by and for the silk market. In the same vein, Larson contrasts the abusing hands of doctors in the hospital scene with "*clay arms and hands of women*" (21; italics in the original) displayed in the artist's window in the last stanza.

By acknowledging how life is structured by different knowledges, Larson brings forth a poetics that addresses Being by generating non-functional, non-instrumental, non-destined relationships of knowledge that are un-*productive*, lead to no "end" and thrive in deconstructing identities, bringing the conventional back into the play of relations that may generate surprising and hybrid forms. This mode of composition encases a theory of knowledge in which different codes impinge on each other and get remixed in poems that – as Glück points out – are often organized as dreamscapes affording a transient unity of vision. As Larson put it in an interview:

> you have poems in the book that have aquatic entomology and then ancient Egyptian burial rites. You know, and it's like, so what is the common ground? How can you write your way into a place where these things come into relation? I feel like when these disparate things are forced into relation, which they are in a poem, and a poem is kind of one of the only places that this kind of thing can happen where you can move so associatively instead of so logically or so rationally in some ways, really surprising things end up happening. (Donovan n. pag.)

There is nothing revolutionary in these words, which return us to the scene of surrealism and other modernist avant-garde practices. Yet, what is crucial for poetry as a medium for thinking ecologically is Larson's effort to theorize relations as central to a formal exploration of environments, and poetry as a unique niche where singular, undetermined, non-logical relations of knowledge are possible. Following Diran's framing of Marx's theory of value as "a paradigm of transmutability" whereby "to become valuable, life and non-life must become signs of their exchangeability, and thereby undergo an algebraic or semiological reduction" (10), we can see poetry as a strategy of resistance to precisely the semiological reduction of life and non-life to value, to valuable life.

This is what Larson underlines in her 2013 sonnet, "Coriolis," that takes its title from the inertial or "fictitious" force that acts on rotating objects. The poem blurs the difference between one lifeform and the other, their inside/outside distinctions while also suspending implied parasite/host attributions by making it impossible at first reading to tell, for instance,

which is the host and which the parasite: fungus or cacti? Is the poem addressing sick cacti that folded fungus inside, or are fungus hosting sick cacti? Much depends on how we read each single word in the first line, whether as a sequence of images, or semantically, and even in the second option, "shrouds," suspended as it is between the first and the second verse, is ambiguously positioned as a noun or a verb. This suspension of meaning is kept until the stanza turns into analogy with the covered furniture in seasonally vacated houses, but the ambiguity never entirely disappears, both because of the semantic association between "shroud" and "mystery," and because of the process of covering over and/or stripping off, protecting and eroding, growing and decaying affects, like rotating winds, all "discrete lifeforms, non-life, and their relationships" (*Hyperobjects* 128) – to use Morton's definition.

The alliterative structure, dominated by hissing sounds, evokes the instability of life conditions under the dominance of eroding winds, implied in the reference to Coriolis, and installs transience – semantically, physically, and structurally – in the poem as a principle affecting all embodied life forms. Coriolis, a fictitious force not unlike poetry, turns out to be the poem's structuring principle, destabilizing an order of signification that the poem evokes as the promise of scientific knowledge only to overturn it in the final couplet. The poetic voice simultaneously addresses itself – the subject of enunciation and its indeterminate interlocutors – and its implied recipients with a "you," the two united by their belonging to the human species. An epistemological unhinging opens the poem to the possibility of unusual morphologies now observed in their biological and rhetorical polyvalence, as if by two modes of observation activated at the same moment:

Sick cacti folded inside fungus shrouds
like a summer house in winter
when the furniture is hushed in cloth.

Roof with its shingles stripped off, porcelain
with its century rinsed in snowmelt.

> Even the spoons collect their light like sleep.
>
> This is not your house, not your bowl
> of disarticulated crinoid stems, not the green
> phosphorescence of terrarium moss
> so spring it hurts your eyes.
>
> These are not your woods, not your striped
> tree snails, not your oxygen whose
> eddies drift so fluently between the lungs
> of certain molluscs, man.
>
> Hybrid forms, shiny parabolas everywhere.
> This is not your earth.
> ("Coriolis" 37)

The biblical tone of the injunction: "this is not your earth" de-idealizes the human subject, progressively marginalizing it, if not pushing it altogether out of the signifying system established by the poem against the enframing of the human as the symbol of self-assumed sovereignty produced by metaphysics and magnified by the Old Testament. The uttering "you" that questions and knows is ousted from its epicentrality in the poem by a centrifugal sequence of negative affirmations ("This is not your house / These are not your woods / This is not your earth"), apparently generated by a higher – subjectless – instance which exposes its inconsistency. The subject is de-formed as a mis-knowing subject, confusing his world for the world: "These are not your woods, nor your striped / tree snails, nor your oxygen whose / eddies drift so fluently between her lungs / of certain molluscs, man."

In the poem "Statuary" radial symmetry is a metaphor for yet another variation on the theme, the endless permutation of inside and outside, the self-referential transformation of species and their embodied enaction. Species are seen as biologic machines processing their outside as their own inside, thus suggesting unexpected similarities between lifeforms – and between Being and beings – that defy instrumentality:

> but the earthworms
> seem to think it all right
> they move forward
> and let the world pass
> through them they eat
> and eat at it, content to connect
> everything through
> the individual links
> of their purple bodies to stay
> one place would be death.
> (*Radial Symmetry* 3)

Larson's poeisis suggests that to observe is not to represent. It centers a relation with an environment and the thinking of thinking that couples the mind and the body, language and consciousness as the main filter of our access to the world's excessive complexity: "Between worlds we pass through and that pass through us" binding possibilities into forms "is the mind" (3). This is the point of "Metamorphosis," which juxtaposes the abstraction of "life, life, life" with the multiple, transient and singular life forms defying any night in which all living forms are black:

> We dredge the stream with soup strainers
> and separate dragonfly and damselfly nymphs –
> their eyes like inky bulbs, jaws snapping
> at the light as if the world was full of
> tiny traps, each hairpin mechanism
> tripped for transformation. Such a ricochet
>
> of appetites insisting *life, life, life* against
> the watery dark, the tuberous reeds.
> (57)

Under the poet's care, the multiplicity of living forms, examples of empirical life vis-à-vis "the world" resists the de-differentiation of life and alerts to a strategy of knowing afforded by poiesis: "the integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects"; when we speak of nature in this manner, Emerson declares, "we have a distinct but most poetical

sense in the mind" (*Nature* 9). This is the poetic constitution of life forms, attained when the mind selects what it can see from the multiplicity of life forms it must not be able to see and yet continue to contemplate blindly. It also means resisting the reduction of the labor of life to commodity.

In "Crypsis and Mimicry," the science lesson is pressured by the creation of poetry, revealed as an alternative metaphor for all knowledge that, in the impossibility of a point-for-point correspondence between the complexity of environments and the complexity of systems, must proceed blindly. As Larson put it in an interview, in science you "have hypothesis, observation, and testing, and it sort of proceeds in that manner. But [...] your field of knowledge is fragmentary and you get to the place where you can't exactly see beyond that horizon, you have to rely in some ways on intuition to get to that new place, and [...] analogy and metaphor" (Donovan n. pag.).

> I used to believe that science was only concerned
> With certainty. Later, I recognized its mystery.
> There isn't language for it –
> The way I can see you when you are shining.
> Our roots crypsis, our wings mimicry.
> (*Radial Symmetry* 12)

Not seeing/seeing/not to be seen are temporary shifts in the conditions of lifeforms and their environments, as the difference between crypsis (hiding in the background) and mimicry (imitating another species behavior) foregrounds. As Larson puts it: "this sort of gap sometimes that happens where you can perceive something completely differently, you know? And if you can embody that, if you can create a structure for that in a poem – this sort of living perception – that's really what keeps me going" (Johnson n. pag.).

Claiming the status of poetry as the place where the invisible complexity of life can be revealed is a way of taking care of and guarding Being, a way of wandering in its neighborhood by abiding in poetic language. Thus, it seems appropriate to entrust the words of the poet as the epigon of our reflection: "Writing offers a tremendous sense of freedom – the freedom to engage, to invent, to shape, to approach, to imbue. At this point in

my life, it's really no longer a choice. It's impossible for me to think of being without it" (Johnson n. pag.).

Notes

[1]   Timothy Morton and Cary Wolfe have both addressed the question of the romantic trope of the "ineffable" in poetry. Morton aligns his elaboration with the aesthetic discourse of Object Oriented Ontology, while Wolfe develops a pragmatist theory rooted in second order cybernetics, social systems theory and evolutionary biology.

[2]   For an extensive discussion of Moore's poems see Costello; Erickson; Nardi.

[3]   On Williams's poetics, particularly from a post-humanist and formal point of view, see Payne, especially the first chapter.

[4]   For a critical history of the essay, see Rabinach.

[5]   When used in this text, the masculine, gendered, universalized term "man" (instead of human) is a reference to Heidegger's original and it means "human."

[6]   Stanley Cavell inaugurated a renewed reading of Emerson away from both Romantic idealism and skepticism in *In Quest for the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (1994) and in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (2003). For what concerns this essay, I am indebted to the re-reading of Cavell from the perspective of Nikhlas Luhmann's social systems theory inaugurated by Cary Wolfe. See Wolfe "The Eye" and *Ecological Poetics*, and White.

[7]   For a thorough discussion of Heidegger's "gestell" in relation to biopolitical thinking, see Campbell, especially ch. 2. On Derrida's deconstruction of Heidegger in a posthumanist frame, see Wolfe *Before the Law.*

[8]   Except where otherwise indicated, the quotations from Emerson's *Nature* are from the Library of America edition of *Essays and Lectures*.

[9]   On Heidegger reader of Emerson via Niezstche, see Cavell "Aversive Thinking"; Zavatta.

[10]   See the project description and visual archive at the Heather Green *Ghost Net Project* website.

[11]   I have discussed the relation system/environment in social systems theory ad second order cybernetics inspired by the biology of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela elsewhere, and refer readers to those discussions ("What Meaning" and "Osservare il Postumanesimo"). My understanding of these processes owes plenty to Cary Wolfe's teachings and theoretical elaborations of those theories.

Works Cited

Bateson, Gregory. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: A Revolutionary Approach to Man's Understanding of Himself*. San Francisco: Chandler, 1972.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and the Literary Imagination*. Malden: Blackwell, 2005.

Campbell, Timothy. *Improper Life: Technology and Biopolitics from Heidegger to Agamben.* Minneapolis: U Minnesota Press, 2011.

Cavell, Stanley. "Aversive Thinking: Emersonian Representations in Heidegger and Nietzsche", *NLH* 22 (1991): 129-60.

–. *In Quest for the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1994.

– *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes.* Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Climate of History: Four Thesis." *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 197-222.

Costello, Bonnie. *Marianne Moore: Imaginary Possessions.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008.

Diran, Ingrid. "Marx's Silkworm. Valuable Life and the Life of Value." *Diacritics* 46 (2018): 4-29.

Donovan, Gregory. "A Conversation with Katherine Larson." *Blackbird* 11 (2012): n. pag. <https://blackbird.vcu.edu/v11n2/features/larson_k/conversation_page.shtml>.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature.* Boston: James Munroe & Company, 1836.

–. *Nature*. 1836. *Essays and Lectures*. Ed. Joel Porte. Washington: The Library of America, 1983. 1-49.

–. "The Method of Nature." 1841. *Essays and Lectures*. 113-30.

Erickson, Darlene W. *Illusion Is More Precise than Precision: The Poetry of Marianne Moore.* Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1992.

Farrier, David: *Anthropocene Poetics. Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2019.

Green, Heather. *Ghost Net Project*. 2009. <https://www.heathergreen-art.com/transect-statement>.

Heidegger, Martin. "Letter on Humanism." 1947. *Basic Writings*. Ed. David Farrell Krell. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993. 213-65.

–. "The Question Concerning Technology." 1954. *Basic Writings* 307-41.

–. *What Is Philosophy?* 1956. Trans. William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde. New Haven: Twayne, 1956.

Iuli, Maria Cristina. "What Meaning Follows Form?" *Modernism/modernity* 23 (2016): 573-92.

–. "Osservare il Postumanesimo." *Aut Aut* 383 (2019): 71-86.

Johnson, Grant. "'Writing Allows Me to Approach My Life with a Greater Passion': Micro-Interview with Katherine Larson." *The Kenyon Review* 15 Mar. 2011: n. pag. <https://

kenyonreview.org/2011/03/writing-allows-me-to-approach-my-life-with-a-greater-passion-micro-interview-with-katherine-larson/>.

Larson, Katherine. *Radial Symmetry*. Foreword by Louise Glück. New Haven: Yale UP, 2011.

—. "Coriolis." *Orion* 32 (2013): 37.

Latour, Bruno. *Facing Gaia: Eight Lessons on the New Climatic Regime.* Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Polity, 2017.

Moore, Marianne. *Complete Poems*. New York: Penguin, 1994.

Morton, Timothy. *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007.

—. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World.* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2013.

Nardi, Paola. *Marianne Moore: La poesia dello spazio*. Roma: Artemide, 2007.

Payne, Mark. *The Animal Part: Humans and Other Animals in the Poetic Imagination.* Chicago: Chicago UP, 2010.

Poole, Robert. "Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, and Wallace Stevens: Reality and Poetic Vitality." *CLA Journal* 36 (1992): 12-23.

Rabinach, Anson. "Heidegger's Letter on Humanism as Text and Event." *New German Critique* 62 (1994): 3-38.

Sagan, Dorion. "Introduction." Jakob Von Uexküll, *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans; With a Theory of Meaning*. 1934. Trans. J. O'Neill, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010. 1-34.

Strathausen, Carsten. *Bioaesthetics. Making Sense of Life in Science and the Arts*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2020.

White, Ryan. *The Hidden God: Pragmatism and Posthumanism in American Thought*. New York: Columbia UP, 2015.

Williams, William Carlos. *Selected Poems*. Ed. Charles Tomlinson, New York: New Directions, 1985.

Wolfe, Cary. "The Eye Is the First Circle." *The Other Emerson.* Eds. Branka Arsić and Cary Wolfe. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010. 271-300.

—. *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 2012.

—. *Ecological Poetics; or, Wallace Stevens's Birds*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2020.

Zavatta, Benedetta. *La sfida del carattere: Nietzsche lettore di Emerson*. Roma: ER, 2006.