

stakes get higher. None of this is remotely funny, or just an intellectual exercise. The disorientation of virtual reality—wondering how far immersed we have become in a world with no metalanguage—is as nothing compared with the disorientation of global warming—exactly the same wondering, with extra added death and destruction. The already existing ecological emergency resembles the anxiety about virtual reality—that we will be drowned in a psychotic soup where we won't be able to tell one thing from another—only it also involves the possibility of our own death. It is very hard to get used to the idea that the catastrophe, far from being imminent, *has already taken place*.

More haste, less speed. This is the ideal moment for us to slow down as Derrida encouraged us to do, and *not* act (out), but instead to read the linkage between an apparently technocultural-aesthetic issue and an apparently wet and organic one. This book will take the injunction to hurry up and do nothing seriously. Exploring the aesthetics of this frightening and seductive immersion will be how it works its way out of the maze. Instead of talking about content—software and wetware—I explore the realm of *form*. This is not by any means because I think that there are, or ever were, purely aesthetic solutions to our social and political problems. It is more that the very act of scrutinizing the aesthetics of the issue at hand encourages the beginnings of a critical view. This is an argument about close reading, which has always tried to be both up close, and distant, at the same time. At a subtle level, it may be impossible to forget the aesthetic dimension altogether, and in that sense, my approach *is* a kind of aesthetic solution!

Teasing out just how paradoxical this is will become one of the book's testing problems as it tries to maintain the appropriate degree of slow reading. Distance and proximity are aestheticized terms. They imply a perceiving subject and a perceived object. They are part of Immanuel Kant's language of aesthetics—in order to have aesthetic appreciation, you have to have an appropriate distance toward the aesthetic "thing."<sup>53</sup> We keep hearing that we can no longer just sit back and be spectators when it comes to the environmental events around us. The original advertising of virtual reality was an incitement to get into it and dissolve our boundaries. I am banking on the idea that shedding some critical light on ideas of distance and proximity will be of help. So let us begin by examining some artistic forms that play with these terms, whether they are explicitly "environmental" or not.



## The Art of Environmental Language

### "I Can't Believe It Isn't Nature!"

As you read, a white bear leisurely  
pees, dyeing the snow  
saffron,

and as you read, many gods  
lie among lianas: eyes of obsidian  
are watching the generations of leaves,

and as you read  
the sea is turning its dark pages,  
turning  
its dark pages.

—DENISE LEVERTOV, "TO THE READER"

As I write this, I am sitting on the seashore. The gentle sound of waves lapping against my deck chair coincides with the sound of my fingers typing away at the laptop. Overhead the cry of a gull pierces the twilight sky, conjuring up a sensation of distance. The smoke trail of an ocean liner disappears over the far horizon. The surrounding air is moist and smells of seaweed. The crackle of pebbles on the shore as the waves roll in reminds me of England, summer holidays on stony beaches.

No—that was pure fiction; just a tease. As I write this, a western scrub jay is chattering outside my window, harmonizing with the quiet scratch of my pen on this piece of paper. The sound of Debussy's *Trio for Flute, Viola, and Harp* falls gently around me from the speakers in the living room. The coolness of the air conditioning suggests the blazing heat of the Californian afternoon. A crop-spraying plane buzzes low overhead.

That was also just fiction. What's really happening as I write this: a digital camera is resting silently on a copy of an anthology of Romantic poetry. The sound of Ligeti fills the headphones, chiming with a signal from the dishwashing machine. The smell of sweet pea-scented bubble bath seems artificial in comparison to the aroma of freshly mowed grass outside the window. An ant crawls down my computer screen.

The more I try to evoke where I am—the “I” who is writing this text—the more phrases and figures of speech I must employ. I must get involved in a process of writing, the very writing that I am *not* describing when I evoke the environment in which writing is taking place. The more convincingly I render my surroundings, the more figurative language I end up with. The more I try to show you what lies beyond this page, the more of a page I have. And the more of a fictional “I” I have—splitting “me” into the one who is writing and the one who is being written about—the less convincing I sound.

My attempt to break the spell of language results in a further involvement in that very spell. Perhaps this environmental language offers a digression from the main point. Or perhaps it is a compelling illustration, or an indication of my sincerity. The writing breaks out of philosophical or literary fictional or poetic modes into a journal style, something with a date or a time marker, something with a signature—and thus falls back into the writing it was trying to escape.<sup>1</sup> Many different types of literature try it. Consider the beginning of Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* with its journal-style evocation of Michaelmas term and its all-pervasive London fog.<sup>2</sup>

The “as I write” tag is optional, being nearly always implicit in the narrative mode of this rhetoric, which has a decidedly ecological usage.<sup>3</sup> But in attempting to exit the generic horizon that contains it, or any suggestion of rhetorical strategy altogether (“This isn’t writing, it’s the real thing!”), the “as I write” gesture enters an ineluctable gravitational field. It cannot achieve escape velocity from writing itself. The more the narrator evokes a surrounding world, the more the reader consumes a potentially interminable stream of opaque scribbles, figures, and tropes. It is like the house in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*. Try as she might to leave the front garden, Alice finds herself back at the front door. Denise Levertov’s poem “To the Reader” inverts “as I write” into “as you read.” But the effect is the same, or even stronger, for, as in advertising language, “you” becomes a niche in the text, specifically designed for the actual reader.<sup>4</sup>

This rhetorical strategy appears with astounding frequency in a variety of ecological texts. In trying to evoke a sense of the reality of nature, many texts suggest, often explicitly, that (1) this reality is solid, veridical, and independent (notably of the writing process itself) and that (2) it would be better for the reader to experience it directly rather than just read about it. But in making their case these texts are pulled into the orbit of writing, with its slippery, tricksterish qualities of never

quite meaning what it says or saying what it means—“turning / its dark pages.” Never mind that for many cultures nature is a trickster, and literary illusion would aptly summon its ever-changing, elusive “essence.” The rhetorical device usually serves the purpose of coming clean about something “really” occurring, definitively “outside” the text, both authentic and authenticating.

### Ecomimesis: Nature Writing and the Nature of Writing

The device—I call it *ecomimesis*—wants to go beyond the aesthetic dimension altogether. It wants to break out of the normative aesthetic frame, go beyond art. Introducing *Walden*, Thoreau writes: “When I wrote the following pages . . . I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only.”<sup>5</sup> There is nothing more “literary” than this activity of acknowledging, in the negative, the suction of fictional writing.<sup>6</sup> And it is not a matter of being more, or less, sophisticated than others. The kitsch of an Aldo Leopold, writing a journal (an “almanac”) to convey nature in a suitable (non)aesthetic form, meets the avant-garde strategy of a minimalist painter who puts an empty frame in an art gallery, or a pile of “stuff” without a surrounding frame; or a John Cage, making music out of silence or out of ambient noise.<sup>7</sup> Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* tries to escape the pull of the literary, in much the same way as avant-garde art tries to escape the conventional aesthetic. Levertov’s “To the Reader” is highly literary, going so far as to compare the rolling waves with the turning of a text’s pages. There is no guilt about writing here. Levertov does point beyond the specific event of the words on the page, the voice intoning the words. But somehow “To the Reader” achieves a sense of the surrounding environment, not by being less artful, but by being more so. This conscious, reflexive, postmodern version is all the *more* ecomimetic for that.

Contemporary art evokes what is often excluded in our view of the picture: its surrounding frame, the space of the gallery itself, the institution of art altogether. In a very significant way, these experiments are *environmental*. Only the taste and habits of the academy have prevented us from seeing the connection between this supposedly “sophisticated” art and the kitsch we know as “nature writing.” Roland Barthes writes, in a passage of avant-garde ecomimesis, about the expe-

rience of walking through a dry riverbed. The experience, he writes, is analogous to that of what he calls *text*—an infinite play of interweaving signs:

The reader of the Text may be compared to someone at a loose end . . . this passably empty subject strolls—it is what happened to the author of these lines, then it was that he had a vivid idea of the Text—on the side of a valley, a *oued* [Arabic: a streambed that is usually dry except during the rainy season] flowing down below (*oued* is there to bear witness to a certain feeling of unfamiliarity); what he perceives is multiple, irreducible, coming from a disconnected, heterogeneous variety of substances and perspectives: lights, colours, vegetation, heat, air, slender explosions of noises, scant cries of birds, children's voices from over on the other side, passages, gestures, clothes of inhabitants near or far away.<sup>8</sup>

We normally think of nature writing as having a certain kind of content—say the Lake District. But here we have the orientalist desert. This is orientalist ecomimesis, in contrast to the familiar Eurocentric or American variety. It succinctly demonstrates how avant-garde ecomimesis is cut from the same cloth as the kitsch variety, despite apparent differences (the one organicist, the other artificial, the one about being “home,” the other about being “away,” and so on). *Oued* conjures up an opaque, exotic land teeming with what Barthes calls “half-identifiable” significance.<sup>9</sup> Barthes opens up this vision with a string of words that confirm the supposed mysteriousness of the Arabic word rather than explaining it. The word itself is treated as foreign, and so is the climate and environment that it signifies: a wet season and a dry season, a river where people walk, evoking the medieval *monde renversé* or world turned upside down. This is not a world you could live in, but a world you could visit, as a tourist. All the traits of ecomimesis are there: the authenticating “it is what happened to the author of these lines,” bringing us into a shared, virtual present time of reading and narrating; the paratactic list; the imagery of disjointed phenomena surrounding the narrator; the quietness (not silence, not full sound) of the “slender explosions” and “scant cries” that evoke the distance between the hearer and the sound source. Here in the very gospel of post-structuralism, of the supposedly antinatural bliss of sheer textuality, we find ecomimesis. Barthes offers us a vivid evocation of atmosphere.

### An Ambient Poetics

*Strong* ecomimesis purports to evoke the here and now of writing. It is an inside-out form of “situatedness” rhetoric. Rather than describe

“where I am coming from” (“as a blue-blooded young Portuguese hot dog salesman”), I invoke “where I am” (“as I write this, the smell of hot dogs wafts through the Lisbon night air”). The reader glimpses the environment rather than the person. But the effect is much the same. Ecomimesis is an authenticating device. *Weak* ecomimesis operates whenever writing evokes an environment. Rhetoric used to have a whole panoply of terms for this weak form of ecomimesis: *geographia* (the description of earth or land), *topographia* (place), *chorographia* (nation), *chronographia* (time), *hydrographia* (water), *anemographia* (wind), *dendrographia* (trees).<sup>10</sup> (Angus Fletcher has resuscitated *chorographia* to describe exactly what I am after in this chapter, the “environment-poem.”)<sup>11</sup> But the emphasis on situatedness is distinct and modern. Situatedness is a rhetoric that David Simpson has linked to the urgency of impending and “threateningly nondiscriminatory” ecological peril. Situatedness is pervasive, he argues, because “no one now thinks himself immune from radical threat.”<sup>12</sup> The particular raises its lone voice in the jaws of general doom.

Ecomimesis is a pressure point, crystallizing a vast and complex ideological network of beliefs, practices, and processes in and around the idea of the natural world. It is extraordinarily common, both in nature writing and in ecological criticism. Consider Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination*: “The grove of second-growth pine trees that sway at this moment of writing, with their blue-yellow-green five-needle clusters above spiky circles of atrophied lower limbs.”<sup>13</sup> Or James McKusick: “As I write these words, I peer out of the window of my study across open fields and gnarled trees crusted with ice. Beyond those trees I see cars and trucks dashing along a busy interstate highway past dirty piles of melting snow that still remain from last week's snowstorm. This is the city of Baltimore, where I live.”<sup>14</sup> For ecological criticism to be properly critical, it must get a purchase on ecomimesis. Ecomimesis is a mixture of *excursus* and *exemplum*. *Excursus* is a “tale, or interpolated anecdote, which follows the exposition and illustrates or amplifies some point in it.” *Exemplum*, also known as *paradigma*, or *paradiegesis*, is “an example cited, either true or feigned; [an] illustrative story.”<sup>15</sup> What then, of the specific features of ecomimesis? *Paradiegesis* specifically implies narrative. But first some remarks about the descriptive properties of ecomimesis are in order.

Ecomimesis involves a poetics of *ambience*. Ambience denotes a sense of a circumambient, or surrounding, *world*. It suggests something material and physical, though somewhat intangible, as if space itself had a material aspect—an idea that should not, after Einstein, appear

strange. Ambience derives from the Latin *ambo*, “on both sides.” Ambient poetics could apply as easily to music, sculpture, or performance art as it could to writing. Ambience, that which surrounds on both sides, can refer to the margins of a page, the silence before and after music, the frame and walls around a picture, the decorative spaces of a building (*parergon*), including *niches* for sculpture—a word that was later taken up in ecological language.<sup>16</sup> Ambience includes more than a particular version of it, the *nature* rendered by ecomimesis. In the realm of music, Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony is ambient, as is Vaughan Williams’s Fifth Symphony; but so are the works of Brian Eno (and explicitly so). Eno’s own case for ambience employs ideas that are commonly associated with artifice rather than with nature, such as the notion that music could be like perfume or a “tint.”<sup>17</sup> But as we have seen, ecomimesis is not necessarily on the side of nature.

I choose the word *ambience* in part to make strange the idea of environment, which is all too often associated with a particular view of nature. Ambience has a very long history in Western philosophy and literature. Leo Spitzer has traced the jagged evolution of the senses of “ambience” from the time of the pre-Socratic philosophers to Heidegger and beyond.<sup>18</sup> Throughout this history the environment has been associated with a surrounding atmosphere, more or less palpable, yet ethereal and subtle. It is the job of ecomimesis to convey this sense of atmosphere. Let us examine thoroughly the most salient features of this ambient poetics.

There are six main elements: *rendering*, the *medial*, the *timbral*, the *Aeolian*, *tone*, and, most fundamentally, the *re-mark*. These terms overlap, and are somewhat arbitrary and vague. Rendering refers to the result of ambient poetics, its telos. Tone describes the material makeup. Medial, Aeolian, and timbral refer to technical or “efficient” processes—effects. I have borrowed these terms from many types of media: film (rendering), music (the Aeolian, the timbral, tone), poetry (the Aeolian), painting (re-mark), and writing (tone). The fact that the terminology derives from diverse forms reflects the significance of multimedia in general, and synesthesia in particular, in inspiring the notion of an ambient poetics. New kinds of art and aesthetics have provoked literary criticism, art history, and musicology to acknowledge the role of the environmental.<sup>19</sup>

The different elements of ambient poetics are all present to some degree in ecomimesis. More formally experimental ecomimesis, such as sound art, uses these elements to affect layers of significance other than

just imagery: rhythm, lineation, and typography, for instance. Less experimental ecomimesis restricts itself to imagery alone. A realist novel or a philosophical essay that contained ecomimesis might not suddenly break out into Mallarméan experiments with crossed-out words—or, if it were an essay by Jacques Derrida, it might.

### *Rendering*

First and foremost, ambient poetics is a *rendering*. I mean this in the sense developed by the concrete music composer and cinema theorist Michel Chion.<sup>20</sup> Rendering is technically what visual- and sonic-effects artists do to a film to generate a more or less consistent sense of atmosphere or world. After the action has been shot and the computer and other effects pasted into the film, the entire shot is “rendered,” so that all the filmic elements will simulate, say, a sunny day in the Alps, rather than a wet night in the tropics. This rendering, like Jean Baudrillard’s idea of the simulacrum, pertains to a copy without an original.<sup>21</sup> There was no “real” sunny day. Rendering nevertheless bathes all the filmic elements in the atmosphere of the sunny day.

Is rendering a significant aesthetic phenomenon, or a non-aesthetic or anti-aesthetic one? Rendering attempts to simulate reality itself: to tear to pieces the aesthetic screen that separates the perceiving subject from the object. The idea is that we obtain an *immediate* world, a directly perceived reality beyond our understanding. When ecomimesis renders an environment, it is implicitly saying: “This environment is real; do not think that there is an aesthetic framework here.” All signals that we are in a constructed realm have been minimized. Alternatively, even when the perceiver proceeds by “cynical reason,” we know very well that we are being deceived, but our disbelief is willingly suspended. Or we choose to enjoy the rendering as if it were not artificial. Rendering encourages us to switch off our aesthetic vigilance. But even if we know very well that it is a special effect, we enjoy the deception. Despite inevitable failure, how well the narrator imparts a sense of immediacy! As Slatterfield and Slovic say about their collection of ecological narratives, it calls on “the use of a living, breathing narrator (a kind of affective presence) to enhance a story’s capacity to include the reader in the told experience.”<sup>22</sup> Francis Ponge’s view of *adéquation* (an idea that we will see is important for Heidegger) is similar. Buell has used this notion to suggest that no matter how stylized it is, language can render real things, that is, ecological ones.<sup>23</sup>

Art since the age of sensibility has sought this immediacy. If only the poet could do a rubbing of his or her brain, and transmit the feelings to us directly. This is the logic of a certain type of Romanticism, and doubtless of realism, naturalism, and impressionism (and expressionism, and so forth). We have only to think of surrealism and automatic writing, a “direct” rendering of unconscious processes; of abstract expressionism with its monumental canvases; of concrete music’s sampling and splicing of environmental sound (by Luc Ferrari, for instance); or of environmental art that creates a “space” we must inhabit, if only for a while. Nam June Paik’s *TV Garden* (1982).<sup>24</sup> turns televisions broadcasting images of leaping dancers into budding flowers. It is immersive yet humorous and ironical in a way that is, in Schiller’s language, sentimental rather than naive.

Rendering practices risk forgetting the other side of Romanticism, the value of hesitation and irony. They overlook why Wordsworth insisted that poetry not only is “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” but also is “recollected in tranquility.” Although reflection then dissolves this tranquility until “an emotion, similar to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind,” the process thus becomes delayed and mediated.<sup>25</sup> Already we can see cracks in the ecomimetic illusion of immediacy.

#### *The Medial: Contact as Content*

The *medial* derives from the argument in Roman Jakobson’s “Closing Statement,” with its analyses of phatic statements.<sup>26</sup> Jakobson explores six aspects of communication and their attendant literary effects. These effects are achieved by foregrounding one of the parts of communication. The six parts are addresser, addressee, message, code, contact, and context. Emphasizing the addresser gives us a “conative” statement that directly focuses on the intentions of the receiver of the message: “You must feel that Jakobson’s model is valid.” Stressing the addresser results in an “emotive” statement: “Let me tell you how I feel about Jakobson.” Foregrounding the message itself results in a poetic statement, since Jakobson, a structuralist, thinks that poetic language is peculiarly self-referential. If the code is foregrounded, we obtain a “metalinguistic” statement: “You can’t say that! It isn’t allowed in structuralist theories of language.” If we focus on the context, we get a “referential” statement: “This is a message about Jakobson’s six-part model of communication.”

If we foreground the *contact*, we obtain a phatic statement (Greek *phasis*, speech). “Can you read this awfully small typeface?” “This telephone line is very crackly. Call me back in five minutes—I can’t hear you.” “Check, check, check one, microphone check.” “Testing, testing.” “You’re on the air.” The contact is the dimension—as literally as you would like to understand that word—in which communication takes place. Phatic statements make us aware of the actual air between us, or the electromagnetic field that makes it possible to listen to recorded music, or see a movie. They point out the atmosphere in which the message is transmitted. Jakobson claimed that talking birds share this function alone, of all the different types of communication.<sup>27</sup> Future ecocriticism must take the phatic dimension of language into account. When exploring the radically new environment of the moon, the first words between the American astronauts and Houston were phatic: “You can go ahead with the TV now, we’re standing by.” The environmental aspect of phatic communication explains the popularity in contemporary ambient electronic music of samples from radio talk shows (“Hello, you’re on the air”), scanned telephone conversations and other phatic phenomena.<sup>28</sup>

I prefer the term *medial* rather than *phatic*, because I see no reason that a statement that foregrounds the medium should necessarily have to do with *speech* per se. *Medial* writing, for instance, highlights the page on which the words were written, or the graphics out of which they were composed. Medial statements pertain to perception. Usually we spend our lives ignoring the contact. When the medium of communication becomes impeded or thickened, we become aware of it, just as snow makes us painfully aware of walking. The Russian Formalists, the precursors of the structuralists, described literariness as an impeding of the normative processes of language. Viktor Shklovsky declared, “The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’ . . . to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.”<sup>29</sup> When the phone is not working properly, we notice it as a medium of transmission. The converse is also true: to point out the medium in which communication is taking place is to interrupt that communication. Notice how the black marks on this page are separated from the edge by an empty margin of blank paper?

When ecomimesis points out the environment, it performs a medial function, either at the level of content or at the level of form. *Contact* becomes *content*. Ecomimesis interrupts the flow of an argument or a sequence of narrative events, thus making us aware of the atmosphere

“around” the action or the environment in which or about which the philosopher is writing. Avant-garde and experimental artworks that are not directly ecological in content are environmental in form, since they contain medial elements. Keith Rowe, guitarist in the improvisational music group AMM, talks of the inclusion of “un-intention” (his technical term for silence) in the paintings of Mark Rothko. Un-intention generates a certain atmosphere surrounding Rothko’s giant squares of vibrating color.<sup>30</sup> Maurice Blanchot traced the earliest moment of this feature of art to what he calls the *désœuvrement* (“unworking”) in Romantic poetry.<sup>31</sup> This unworking accounts for the automated feel of ambient poetics, the “found” quality, the sense that it is working “all by itself” or “coming from nowhere” (see the subsection after next).

“As I write” (birds are singing, the grass is growing) is a medial statement. Literally, and the medial is always literal to some extent, the dimension is the page we are reading. The idea is to reinforce the illusion that the dimension of reading is the same as inscription: that reader and writer inhabit the same dimension, the same *place*. Our awareness of this dimension is available precisely because its transparency has been impeded by the addition of the exuberant, exorbitant ecomimesis to the argument. The “as,” poised between “since” and “when,” between a temporal marker and an indicator of logical analogy, seduces us from one level of rhetoric to the next. We enter the warm bath of ambient ecomimesis.

Here comes the twist. One of the media that medial statements can point out is the very medium of the voice or of writing itself. Since the sound of music is available via the medium of, say, a violin, then a medial musical passage would make us aware of the “violin-ness” of the sound—its timbre. The timbre is the quality with which the sound-emitting matter is vibrating. So one of the contents of a medial message could be the medium in *this* sense. This undermines the normal distinction we make between medium as atmosphere or environment—as a background or “field”—and medium as material thing—something in the foreground. In general, ambient poetics seeks to undermine the normal distinction between background and foreground.

Medial statements can include media in the sense of timbre. Surely this is why much experimental “noise” music—which seeks precisely to undo the boundary between what we consider noise and what we consider sound—is interested in timbre. Cage’s prepared piano makes us aware of the materiality of the piano, the fact that it is made of taut vibrating strings inside a hard wooden box. The sustain pedal, invented in the Romantic period as an addition to the pianoforte, performs this

function itself. Conversely, the sustained vibration of a note or drone makes us aware of the space in which the vibration is occurring. Ambient music can render a picture of an environment using sound effects (birdsong, waves) or make us aware of the space in which we are sitting through drones, reverberation, and feedback. The object, the material, of concrete music is timbre. Linguistic art can do the same. At the end of Levertov’s “To the Reader,” we don’t know what is written on the “dark pages”—they are obscure as well as visually dark. We become aware of the text as material, as paper and pages, and the physical rhythm of turning. The turn (Italian: *volta*) is a moment in a sonnet at which the thought processes in the sonnet begin to shift. It is also a trope, a rhetorical turning. And it is the *clinamen* of Lucretius, the turn or swerve of particles that brings about the generation of worlds. Levertov’s “turning” is a trope that physicalizes the notion of troping or of *volta*, of switching from one idea to another, of negation.

In Thoreau’s *Walden* the distant sound of bells brings to mind the atmosphere in which they resonate:

All sound heard at the greatest possible distance produces one and the same effect, a vibration of the universal lyre, just as the intervening atmosphere makes a distant ridge of earth interesting to our eyes by the azure tint it imparts to it. There came to me in this case a melody which the air had strained, and which had conversed with every leaf and needle of the wood, that portion of sound which the elements had taken up and modulated and echoed from vale to vale. The echo is, to some extent, an original sound, and therein is the magic and charm of it. It is not merely a repetition of what was worth repeating in the bell, but partly the voice of the wood; the same trivial words and notes sung by a wood-nymph.<sup>32</sup>

In this remarkable passage, Thoreau theorizes the medial quality of ambient poetics. Notice how “strained,” “air,” and “melody” are all synonyms for music. Thoreau is describing how sound is “filtered”—a common idea since the advent of the synthesizer, which electronically filters sound waves. An echo is evidence of a medium of the air that intervenes between things like a bell and the human ear, but also of wood that vibrates. We shall see, however, that we cannot be as confident as Thoreau about the “original” quality of echoed sound. The echo undermines notions of originality and presence.

### *The Timbral*

The *timbral* is about sound in its physicality, rather than about its symbolic meaning (“timbral” comes from *timbre*, “The character or quality

of a musical or vocal sound (distinct from its pitch and intensity) depending upon the particular voice or instrument producing it").<sup>33</sup> Timbre, which initially meant a particular percussion instrument, either a drum or a bell without a clapper ("tambourine" is a related word), came to describe the way sound strikes or stamps (French *timbrer*) our ears, sometime around the late Romantic and Victorian periods. Timbre derives from the Greek *tympanon*. The taut skin of the drum, even of the eardrum, separates the inside from the outside like a margin, and gives rise to resonant sound when struck. The *tympan* in a printing press makes sure the paper is flat enough to register the type correctly. Is this drum, this margin, part of the inside or the outside? Derrida has shown how this suggestive term evokes the difficulty of distinguishing properly between inside and outside.<sup>34</sup>

The timbral voice is vivid with the resonance of the lungs, throat, saliva, teeth, and skull: the grain of the voice, as Barthes called it.<sup>35</sup> Far from the transcendental "Voice" of Derridean theory, this voice does not edit out its material embodiment. Lacan's "llanguage," "lalangue," is the meaningless fluctuation of tongue-enjoyment.<sup>36</sup> This meaningless fluctuation makes us think about a space (the mouth) that is thoroughly material.<sup>37</sup> Nursery rhymes enable the baby to hear the sound of the parent's voice, rather than any specific words. One of the strongest ambient effects is the rendering of this timbral voice. Our own body is one of the uncanniest phenomena we could ever encounter. What is closest to home is also the strangest—the look and sound of our own throat. Thus, timbral statements can be strongly medial, evoking the medium that utters them. And medial statements can be timbral, pointing out the physicality and materiality of the language. This is strongly environmental. A guitar note brings to mind the wood out of which it is made. The timbral and the medial are two ways of describing the same thing. This axiom asserts that at bottom, foreground and background are more than intertwined.

Martin Heidegger affirms that we never hear sound in the abstract. Instead, we hear the way *things* (a very rich word for Heidegger) *sound*, in an almost active sense of the verb. We hear "the storm whistling in the chimney," the sound of the wind *in* the door, the wail of the hound *across* the moor.<sup>38</sup> For Heidegger there is no such thing as a "pure" tone all by itself. Here is a paradox. The perceptual phenomena we have been exploring possess material thingliness. They are inseparable from matter, including fields of force. Even a supposedly "pure" tone such as a sine wave still emerges from material (say, an electrical cir-

cuit), and is amplified and transmitted by various materials and energy fields. For Heidegger, the idea of "pure" sound derives from a notion of the thing as a sensory manifold (a mixture of how things feel, touch, taste, and so on): "the *aistheton*, that which is perceptible by sensations."<sup>39</sup> But such ideas risk suggesting that there is nothing other than subjective experience. Modern art and theory, however, experiment with pure tone. We could point to the use of sheer sound or color in art—Yves Klein's and Derek Jarman's use of blue are extreme examples. Klein's pure blue canvases hang in numerous galleries. He wrote of International Klein Blue, a special suspension of ultramarine (crystals of ground lapis lazuli) in a clear commercial binder, Rhodopas: "IKB / spirit in matter."<sup>40</sup> We could also invoke the interpretation of sheer sound or color in psychoanalytic and literary theory.<sup>41</sup>

Whether we think of nature as an environment, or as other beings (animals, plants, and so on), it keeps collapsing either into subjectivity or into objectivity. It is very hard, perhaps impossible, to keep nature just where it appears—somewhere in between. The difficulty used to be resolved by ideas such as that of the elements. Before they became specific atoms in the periodic table, the elements were manifolds of what we conventionally separate as "subjectivity" and "objectivity." The philosophy of elements bears strong resemblances to phenomenology. We still describe verse as liquid, rhetoric as fiery or earthy. Thinking in elemental terms is thinking that matter has certain intrinsic qualities—*wateriness* is not just "painted on" to the surface of the thing called water; water is watery through and through. These terms have gradually come to have a purely subjective sense (this room *feels* dry; I am *hot tempered*). Like timbre and tone (see the later subsection), the elemental is a way of describing a "thing" that is also an "environment." It is substantial, yet surrounding. The Classical elements (fire, water, earth, air) were about the body as much as they were about the atmosphere.

### *The Aeolian*

The *Aeolian* ensures that ambient poetics establishes a sense of processes continuing without a subject or an author. The Aeolian has no obvious source. "Acousmatic" sound, for instance, is disembodied sound emanating from an unseen source. It comes "from nowhere," or it is inextricably bound up with the space in which it is heard. Consider the voice-over in a movie. It does not originate anywhere in the picture on the screen. Cinematic "rendering" employs acousmatic sound to fill the auditorium (surround sound). The specific sound form of a partic-

ular place is reproduced, rather than sheer silence. Jet planes unseen on the film's surface appear to fly overhead. The surrounding quiet of a desert of shifting sands is heard as we watch the protagonist recalling his or her experiences there. Experimental music contains examples of acousmatic sound, emerging from loudspeakers. So does the everyday technology of listening to recorded sound: "The true threat of phonography came not from its ability to displace a voice but its ability to displace a person's *own* voice."<sup>42</sup>

In poetry, images can appear to arise without or despite the narrator's control. A poem called "A Geology," in *Cascadia*, Brenda Hillman's experiment with L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, is both a montage of descriptions of California through geologic time and an account of getting over an addiction. It is impossible to determine which layer has priority. Each layer minimizes the input of a conscious subject: by comparison with geology, addiction and withdrawal are intensely physical processes that must be endured. The form of the poem heightens the physicality by playing with typographical arrangement. There is often something going on in the margin, out of reach of our reading gaze. One metaphor blends into another in a disturbing, punning way that makes it impossible to decide which level of reality is, to use a geological figure, the bedrock.

A certain degree of audiovisual hallucination happens when we read poetry, as Celeste Langan has demonstrated concerning Walter Scott's long narrative poem *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*.<sup>43</sup> Aeolian phenomena are necessarily synesthetic, and synesthesia may not give rise to a holistic pattern. Because we cannot directly perceive the source, those organs of our perception *not* engaged by the disembodied event become occupied with different phenomena. This is the import of contemporary sound art, comprising productions that are supposed to be different from conventional music. Sound art is sometimes exhibited in places traditionally reserved for visual art. In these environments, there is less focus on the musicians (if any) and the music (if any). Acousmatic sound can compel us to a state of distraction rather than aesthetic absorption. This is not inevitable: synaesthesia could become an even more compelling form of *Gesamtkunstwerk* than immersive, Wagnerian forms.

The idea of sounds without a source has come under attack from proponents of acoustic ecology. R. Murray Schafer, who coined the term *soundscape* in 1967, labeled it schizophonia. Acoustic ecology criticizes disembodiment as a feature of modern alienation. Like other

forms of Romanticism, acoustic ecology yearns for an organic world of face-to-face contact in which the sound of things corresponds to the way they appear to the senses and to a certain concept of the natural. The Aeolian provokes anxiety, because built into it is a hesitation between an *obscure* source and *no* source at all. If the source is obscure, the phenomenon dwells in our world. We need to expand our perception to take stock of it. It is like what Tzvetan Todorov calls the supernatural uncanny: an unusual occurrence that is ultimately explicable.<sup>44</sup> If, however, there is no source at all, the phenomenon does not reside in our world. It radically bisects it. This is akin to Todorov's supernatural marvelous: an event that must be believed on its own terms. We thus face a choice between a transcendental experience and a psychotic one. Most ecomimesis wants to reassure us that the source is merely obscure—we should just open our ears and eyes *more*. But this obscurity is always underwritten by a more threatening void, since this very void is what gives ecomimesis its divine intensity, its admonishing tone of "Shh! Listen!" Even at the very depth of the illusion of rendering, there is a blankness that is structural to our acceptance of the illusion itself.

#### *Tone: Intensity, Stasis, Suspension*

Ambience is an expansion of the space-time continuum in an artwork, to the point at which time comes to a standstill. To investigate this, let us rescue the idea of *tone* from its awful fate in American high schools. Tone is a notoriously casual term. It has something kitsch about it: it is too emotional, too physical. When we consider it closely, tone has a more precise significance. It refers to the quality of vibration. Tone can denote the tension in a string or muscle (muscle tone), or a certain pitch: the way in which matter is vibrating. It also, significantly, refers to a notion of place; hence "ecotone," a zone of ecological transition. A rough aesthetic equivalent is the German *Stimmung* ("mood," "attunement"), used by Alexander von Humboldt in his description of how different art emerges from different climates, and Immanuel Kant in his analysis of the sublime.<sup>45</sup> Tone accounts materially for that slippery word *atmosphere*. Multimedia, music, and visual art play with atmosphere as instrument and as raw material. There is a literary analogy in environmental writing and forms of poetics going back to the culture of sensibility in the eighteenth century.<sup>46</sup>

Tone is useful because it ambiguously refers both to the body and to the environment. For "the body" (as it is so often called in contemporary art and theory) *is* the environment, in the conventional, vulgar



Cartesian sense. “We inhabit the body” like a person living in a house. Environmental art makes us aware of our ears, just as much as it makes us aware of the atmosphere. But in so doing, it nudges us out of the vulgar Cartesianism, like phenomenological philosophy. The linkage of perceiver and perceived is a predominant theme in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology.<sup>47</sup> There also exists a British lineage. Lockean empiricism asserts that reality will be different for different perceivers.<sup>48</sup> Later in the eighteenth century, the discourse of sentimentality, which registered truth on the body, was developed into an ethics in Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, with implications for the evolution of the novel.<sup>49</sup> Synesthetic works of art try to disrupt our sense of being centered, located in a specific place, inhabiting “the body” from a central point. Our senses are disoriented; we notice that our gaze is “over there,” our hearing is “outside” the room we are sitting in.

Bodily processes are cyclic. Plateaus of tension and relaxation take place over time. The narrative aspect of ecomimesis generates tone. Specifically, this is a strong form of ekphrasis (*descriptio*, vivid description). Ekphrasis exists when a narrator says “picture this.” It often takes a visual form, but traditionally ekphrasis can embody any sensory input, and thus it is appropriate to our multimedia age.<sup>50</sup> Vivid description slows down or suspends narrative time. Let us distinguish between *plot*—the events of a narrative in chronological sequence—and *story*—the events in the order in which the narrator tells them. Suppose that in the plot, event B follows event A after an interval of five seconds, but that in the story an intervening ekphrasis is inserted that takes several pages for the reader to get through, such as Homer’s description of Achilles’ shield during the intense description of battle at the end of the *Iliad*. The effect on the reader is that the time of narration is held in stasis. In narrative, suspension occurs when the time of the plot (the events as they would have occurred in “real time”) diverges widely from the time of the story (the events as they are narrated).

In the second decade of the nineteenth century, Sir Thomas Raffles enjoyed the repetitive music of the Indonesian gamelan, and Leonhard Huizinga later declared, “It is a ‘state,’ such as moonlight poured over the fields.”<sup>51</sup> Static sound became a basis of contemporary music, as composers such as Claude Debussy incorporated into their compositions what they had learned from the gamelan since its appearance at the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris (1889). Stasis becomes audible in musical *suspension*, where one layer of sound changes more slowly than another layer. Disco music compels dancers to stay on the dance

floor not only because it involves repetitive beats, but also because it sustains suspended chords that do not progress from A to B, but remain “in between” without resolution. This can only be a matter of semblance, even in visual art. Since repetition is itself a function of difference, funk, then disco, then hip-hop, then house, were progressively able to mine ever more deeply the basic blues structure for a sweet spot, a suspended chord pulsating in rhythmic space. Tone is another word for this sweet spot, somewhere within the third part of a four-part blues, always near the resolution but never quite making it.

This is how ambience enters the time dimension. Tone is a matter of quantity, whether of rhythm or imagery: strictly speaking, the amplitude of vibrations. An AA rhyme scheme increases the energy level of a poem, as would a preponderance of repeated beats. A more complex rhyme scheme, a less repetitive rhythmic structure, renders the text “cooler.” Texts also exploit negative rhythm to generate tone. The absence of sound or graphic marks can be as potent as their presence. Gaps between stanzas, and other kinds of broken lineation, create tone out of sheer blankness. In terms of imagery, tone is also quantitative. It is not necessarily a matter of *what sort* of imagery, just *how much*. Just as words come in phrases, imagery comes in clusters. Metonymic listing can generate an overwhelming tone. As with rhythm, there is such a thing as negative imagery, or *apophasis*—saying something in the negative. Negative theology asserts that God is not big, small, white, black, here, there . . . Extreme negativity consists in ellipsis ( . . . ) or silence. Even more extreme is placing a word under erasure, as Mallarmé does (or consider Heidegger’s word ~~Being~~). How do you pronounce a crossed-out word? The erasure compels us to pay attention to the word as graphic mark, and to the paper on which it is written (and the silence of the unspoken). Think of the use of shadow in drawing, or silence in music. Cage scored optional quantities of silence of exactly the same length as positive musical phrases, for the performer to substitute spontaneously.

A text can describe something by delineating it negatively. *Occupatio* gives apophasis a self-reflexive twist, consisting in complaining about how words fail our ability to describe something. This negative delineation is especially important in ambient poetics. Since ambience tries to evoke the background *as* background—to drag it into the foreground would dissolve it—it must resort to oblique rhetorical strategies. There is a school of thought that negative ecology, like negative theology, is a more apt description of nature. I remain convinced by

Derrida's remarks that negative theology is still plagued by the metaphysical.<sup>52</sup> It is probable that a negative poetics of the environment also suffers from these symptoms.<sup>53</sup>

Kant's view of the sublime provides a limit case for this section of the argument, much more so than that of Burke, who evokes the sublime in actually existing things rather than in mental experience. If Kant himself, transcendental idealist that he is, provides tools for reading ambient poetics, how much more would someone inclined toward materialism or empiricism do the same. The sheer quantity of nature writing is a cause of its power. And what could be more evocative of this than a swathe of blankness, language that evokes an endless murmuring or scribbling, or glittering color, or the diffusion of a huge cloud of scent? This language establishes a plateau on which all signals are equal in intensity—which might as well be silence. A negative quantity, the absence of something “there,” evokes a sense of sheer space. In Kant's terms, our mind recognizes its power to imagine what is not there: “*Sublime is what even to be able to think proves that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense.*”<sup>54</sup> Kant demonstrates this by taking us on a journey of quantity, from the size of a tree, through that of a mountain, to the magnitude of the earth, and finally to “the immense multitude of such Milky Way systems.”<sup>55</sup> The sublime transports the mind from the external world to the internal one.

Negative quantity has become a powerful tool of modern art, but also of modern ideology. For example, consider the use of silence in nationalist rituals. This surely explains the cenotaph, the empty tomb of the unknown soldier. Before Cage, the two minutes' silence on Armistice Day was intended from its inception as a radio broadcast that would make Britons aware of their country's dead. The composer Jonty Semper recently combined every available BBC recording of the two minutes' silence, complete with newsreel hiss, birds calling, cannons firing, and rain.<sup>56</sup> The design that won the commission for Ground Zero in New York City is entitled “Reflections of Absence.”

Negative quantity, signified through ellipsis, or some other effect, is a suggestive transportation point in the text, which allows subjectivity to beam down into it. The Romantic bohemian consumerist, Thomas De Quincey, experimented with his own kinds of psychic and physical intensity in taking opium. De Quincey theorizes how, from the reader's (or listener's, or dancer's) point of view, tone gives us pause. This pausing is not a mere hiatus or stopping. It is rather a staying-in-place endowed with its own intensity. There is “not much going on,” which is

not the same as no information at all. We are thrown back on the here-and-now of bodily sensation. In the anechoic chamber at Harvard, Cage heard the sound of his own body as if it were amplified.<sup>57</sup> This heightening of awareness takes place in what De Quincey calls *parenthesis* or *syncope*.<sup>58</sup> Syncope commonly refers to abbreviation, and, more rarely, to a loss of consciousness, but De Quincey makes the term experiential.<sup>59</sup> Parenthesis usually places a phrase or sentence inside another one, but De Quincey extends the term toward the notion of tone, a plateau or suspension, what Wordsworth called a “spot of time.”

*Re-Mark: “I Can't Believe It Isn't Art”*

We generally take one kind of medium to be the *background*: the ambient air or electromagnetic field, the paper on which text appears. The other kind of medium, the one we explored as the timbral, appears as *foreground*. A disembodied Aeolian sound emanates “from the background” but appears “in the foreground.” With Aeolian events, we have a paradoxical situation in which background and foreground have collapsed in one sense, but persist in another sense.

We are approaching the fundamental properties of ambient poetics, the basis of ecomimesis. Background and foreground rely upon distinguishing between here and there, this and that. We talk about “background noise,” while music appears as in the foreground, terms indicating distinct political and historical bearings.<sup>60</sup> Background music, Muzak, or specifically ambient music, attempt to undo the normal difference between foreground and background. The Aeolian attempts to undo the difference between a perceptual event upon which we can focus, and one that appears to surround us and which cannot be directly brought “in front of” the sense organs without losing its enveloping properties. Current neurophysiology has suggested that a receptor in the hypothalamus, Alpha-7, enables the distinction between foreground and background sound. A breakdown in the neurotransmission across this receptor may in part be responsible for schizophrenic symptoms such as hearing voices (foreground phenomena) emanating from sonic sources (radiators, air vents) that are normally considered as lying in the background.<sup>61</sup>

Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1970) is a powerful demonstration of the shifting and intertwined qualities of foreground and background.<sup>62</sup> A voice speaking in a room is recorded over and over again, such that each previous recording becomes what is then re-recorded in the same room. The text that Lucier reads is about this pro-

cess. It is medial. After a short while, the recording picks up the resonance of the room and feeds it back, amplifying and articulating it through the sound of the speaking voice. (Likewise, amplifier feedback in general lets us hear the sound of the technical medium of transmission.) We lose the words and gain the sound of the room “itself.” I put “itself” in quotation marks because what we come to realize is that the voice and the room are mutually determining. One does not precede the other. The work is situated on a wavering margin between words and music, and between music and sheer sound, and ultimately between sound (foreground) and noise (background). Retroactively, we realize that the room was present in the voice at the very beginning of the process. The voice was always already in its environment. “I am sitting in a room” sits in a room. There was never a point of “hand-over” at which the sound of the voice “in itself” modulated into the sound of the room “in itself.” Voice is to room, not even as sound source to medium, but as tongue to bell. They were always implicated in each other. This art is as environmental as writing about birds and trees, if not more so, because it tries directly to *render* the actual (sensation of) environment altogether. We could easily think of visual equivalents, such as environmental sculpture. Andy Goldsworthy’s work gradually dissolves into its site.<sup>63</sup>

Aesthetic, and furthermore, metaphysical distinctions, involve discriminations between inside and outside.<sup>64</sup> We can be sure that this discrimination is metaphysical, since really what we are dealing with is the idea of *medium*, split into two aspects (foreground and background). We must be careful not to assert that a medium exists “before” the split occurs, since the notion of medium depends upon this very split (between “here” and “there”). There is a Buddhist saying that reality is “not one, and not two.” Dualistic interpretations are highly dubious. But so are monist ones—there is no (single, independent, lasting) “thing” underneath the dualist concept. Otherwise Alvin Lucier would not have been able to generate *I Am Sitting in a Room*.

How does the split that separates background and foreground occur? There is a device that produces it in art. Jacques Derrida has brilliantly analyzed it in such works as *Dissemination* and *The Truth in Painting*. He calls it the *re-mark*.<sup>65</sup> The re-mark is the fundamental property of ambience, its basic gesture. The re-mark is a kind of echo. It is a special mark (or a series of them) that makes us aware that we are in the presence of (significant) marks. How do you discriminate between the letters on this page and random patches of dirt, or patches of paint and

“extraneous” matter on the canvas? Or between *noise* and *sound* (how about *harmony* and *dissonance*)? Or between *graphics* and *letters*? Or a nonspecific *smell* and a specific or significant *scent*? Or, even more subtly, between a ringing bell and a sounding tongue?<sup>66</sup> Between a substance and its attributes? A re-mark differentiates between *space* and *place*. In modern life this distinction is between *objective* (space) and *subjective* (place) phenomena.<sup>67</sup> Every time I teach a class on ecological language, at least one student asserts that “place” is what a person makes of “space,” without reference to an outside. Even when it is external, place has become something that people *do*, or construct; a space that, as it were, *happens to* someone. Despite the rigidity of the student response, I am suggesting here that subjectivity and objectivity are just a hair’s breadth (if that) away from each other. The illusive play of the re-mark establishes their difference out of an undifferentiated ground.

In T. S. Eliot’s poetry, how do we recognize that some image of an external thing is actually an “objective correlative” for a subjective state? Some very small flicker occurs. A re-mark flips an “objective” image into a “subjective” one. The re-mark is minimalistic. It doesn’t take much for ecomimesis to suggest a quality of place. The subjective value that shines out of places such as Thoreau’s Walden Pond emanate from minute, as well as from larger, signals in the text. To identify the re-mark is to answer the question: how little does the text need to differentiate between foreground and background, or between space and place?

It is a truism that contemporary art tries to challenge such distinctions. But the re-mark occurs more widely. The re-mark is behind the humor of the Charlie Brown cartoons. When the bird Woodstock speaks, we don’t know what he is saying, but we know *that he is speaking*, because the little squiggles above his head are placed in a speech bubble, which performs the action of the re-mark and makes us pay attention to *these* squiggles as meaningful in some unspecified way. (Woodstock himself, who appeared after the Woodstock festival, is close to the subject of this book, insofar as he embodies the natural world “beyond” Snoopy’s garden lawn.)

Gestalt psychology establishes a rigid distinction between figure and ground such that figure and ground entail each other (the faces and candlestick illusion is the classic example), while it remains strictly impossible to see both as figure, or both as ground, at the same time. The re-mark is a quantal event. What happens at the level of the re-mark re-

sembles what happens in quantum physics, at the level of the very small. This sounds abstruse, even mystical, but really I mean it in a very straightforward sense. The occurrence of the re-mark is always a “one-shot deal.” In quantum mechanics, a *choice* presents itself between waves and particles. We could measure things one way or another; never as an amalgam of the two simultaneously.<sup>68</sup> Until the measurement takes place, both possibilities are superposed, one on the other. Reality, at that “moment” (though that word only makes sense after the quantum wave reduction), is only a series of probabilities.

We cannot claim that there is a special entity that exists as a combination of both wave and particle. There is *nothing underneath* the wave/particle distinction. The same is true of the re-mark. Either the inside/outside distinction is constituted, or not—in which case the distinction will appear at another date, in another place. The level of the re-mark is a fundamentally indeterminate one, at which a squiggle could be either just a squiggle or a letter. However close we get to the (admittedly artificial) boundary between inside and outside (sound/noise, smell/scent, squiggle/letter), we won’t find anything in between. This is related to a mathematical paradox. It is impossible to establish in advance (using an algorithm) whether a point will lie on the boundary of a set, even a very simple one: “Imagine two algorithms generating the digits 0.99999 . . . and 1.0000 . . . respectively, but we might never know if the 9s, or the 0s, are going to continue indefinitely, so that the two numbers are equal, or whether some other digit will eventually appear, and the numbers are unequal.”<sup>69</sup>

The brilliance of ambient rhetoric is to make it appear as if, for a fleeting second, there *is* something in between. Calling William Wordsworth a minimalist, Geoffrey Hartman praises the idea of Wordsworthian nature as a contemplative space in his book on culture: “The spacious ambience of nature when treated with respect, allows physical and emotional freedom; it is an outdoor room essential to thought and untraumatic (that is, relatively unforced) development.”<sup>70</sup> This “outdoor room” is the result of ambient rhetoric (and a certain attachment to an idea of a temperate climate; untraumatic development would be less possible if one were freezing to death). This is not to say that ambience is not incarnated in physical things. Ambient rhetoric is present, for instance, in the common suburban lawn, which acts as an extension of the inside of the house and is referred to as a carpet.<sup>71</sup> Actually existing spaces can have ambient qualities; otherwise, certain forms of contemporary architecture would not be possible.

*Margin* (French *marge*) denotes a border or an edge, hence “seashore.” Indeed, if current industrial policies remain unchecked, these very spaces, such as coral reefs, and liminal species (Latin, *limen*, boundary) such as amphibians, will be increasingly at risk of being wiped out. But because of the logic of the re-mark, such spaces, whether they are outside or inside our heads, embody what is, at bottom, illusory. I mean here to support these margins. As a matter of urgency, we just *cannot* go on thinking of them as “in between.” We must choose to include them on this side of human social practices, to factor them in to our political and ethical decisions. As Bruno Latour states, “Political philosophy . . . finds itself confronted with the obligation to *internalize* the environment that it had viewed up to now as another world.”<sup>72</sup>

Since it appears to lie in between oppositional entities, the effect of ambience is always *anamorphic*—it can only be glimpsed as a fleeting, dissolving presence that flickers across our perception and cannot be brought front and center. Georges Bataille was substantiating it too much when he labeled what he called the *informe* “unassimilable waste,” but it is a suggestive image for the ecological critic, preoccupied with waste products that will not be flushed away.<sup>73</sup> Minimalist experiments with empty frames and also with frameless and formless “found objects” or installations make this apparent.<sup>74</sup> In these works, art tries to sneak a glimpse of itself from the side, or from ground level, like an animal.<sup>75</sup> We have returned to the idea of *rendering*, but with greater understanding. Rendering appears to dissolve the aesthetic dimension because it depends upon a certain necessarily finite play with the *re-mark*. The more extreme the play, the more art collapses into non-art. Hence the infamous stories of janitors clearing away installations, thinking they were just random piles of paintbrushes and pots of paint. There is a politics to this aesthetics. It says that if we point out where the waste goes, we won’t be able to keep ourselves from taking greater care of our world. In the rhetoric of juxtaposing contents and frame, product and waste, the anti-aesthetics of the high avant-garde meets more common varieties of ecological language.

A question to which we shall return: does not this collapse of art into non-art actually paradoxically serve to *hold open* the space of the aesthetic “until something better comes along” in an age where all art has been commercialized?<sup>76</sup> And therefore is not the collapse a strongly Romantic gesture of defying the commodity world? I reiterate that this is not to say that there do not exist actual anamorphic life-forms. These

very life-forms (coral, sea slugs, invertebrates) are vital for sustaining life on earth. Because they have no distinct shape, it is very hard to make them cute, to turn them into objects of consumerist environmental sympathy. A doe-eyed coral reef is more likely to elicit a gasp of horror than a coo of identification.

Although it tries with all its might to give the illusion of doing so, ambient poetics will *never* actually dissolve the difference between inside and outside. The re-mark either undoes the distinction altogether, in which case there is nothing to perceive, or it establishes it in the first place, in which case there is something to perceive, with a boundary. On this point, there is an absolute difference between my argument and that of Jean-François Lyotard. Lyotard claims that there is such a thing as *nuance*, some quality of color or sound that exists “in between” inside and outside.<sup>77</sup> I am claiming that you will never be able to find some “thing” in between, however close to the boundary line you get. It is like those tests at the optometrist’s, when slightly different lenses are presented: “Do you prefer number one, or number two?” However similar the lenses, there is never a way of seeing “in between” the first and second lens. The choice is always starkly and straightforwardly between “one” and “two.” Lyotard is one of those post-structuralist thinkers who, however nihilistic he appears, actually believes in something—a “better” something than what is available through normal aesthetics, to be sure, but something nevertheless. I, on the other hand, do not think that ambience will save us from anything.

If “new and improved” versions of continuity between inside and outside, such as *nuance*, are suspect in their attempt to smooth over the quantum difference that the re-mark establishes, then magical forms of differentiation—for example, ones that are miraculously “nonhierarchical” or “nonlinear”—are out of bounds too. These forms, such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s idea of the “rhizome,” are also post-structuralist fantasies that seek to do away with the strange, bumpy divisions between things. “Rhizomes,” so the story goes, are better than hierarchical “trees” of information, because they do not discriminate between different levels of importance.<sup>78</sup> A rhizome is a sprout of a plant such as a potato, which grows, when compared with plants that must deal with gravity, in a seemingly indiscriminate manner, sometimes putting out a new fruit, sometimes carrying on growing.

This image has become very popular in fashionable sound art circles, in part because of the popularization of Deleuze and Guattari in techno music by DJ Spooky (the author of a “rhizomic” study, *Rhythm Science*), and others such as David Toop, an ambient composer and writer

of books on ambient music and sound art.<sup>79</sup> The compositional technique of bricolage or pastiche, a collage of snatches and samples of music, lends itself to the idea that this music does not depend upon normative hierarchies such as beginning/end, background/foreground, high/low, and so forth. The *nouveau roman* of the 1960s (Robbe-Grillet) took this principle down to the very level of the syntax of the individual sentence, whose subject would change alarmingly somewhere in the middle. The snobbery of contemporary music criticism and fashion readily corrects the idea that a real disruption of norms has taken place. Some rhizomes are more rhizomic than others.

If the function of rhizome is to join and therefore to differentiate, then how can it do it in a “better way” than a binary play of difference, without collapsing difference into identity? If sound *b* grows “rhizomically” out of sound *a*, then is it the same sound, or a different sound? If I am retrofitting my car, tacking on found pieces here and there and ignoring the factory specifications, does it stop being the same car at some point? If it is now a “different” car, then in what consists the rhizomic thread connecting the “two” cars? If it is the “same” car, then surely there is no point in talking about a connection, rhizomic or not, between two things, since only one thing exists. If I have somehow produced a “quasi-car” that exists “between” the original car and an entirely different one, then this car will suffer from the same problems—is it different or the same?

If we try to avoid the idea of hierarchy (between inside and outside, say), with the language of rhizome, we will be left with the same conundrum, dressed up in chic language, as the one we confronted earlier. Moreover, there is an aesthetic politics of the rhizome, which promotes rhizome for rhizome’s sake.<sup>80</sup> Thinking that you are doing something new by mixing different sounds together from different sources, or inventing new ways of mimicking real or imaginary sounds, is the very form of modern music production, and has been so at least since the emergence of capitalist demands for fresh product. Rhizomic writing, visual art, architecture, and multimedia all suffer the same ironic fate.

Scholarship in auditory cultural studies, which studies the history of sonic environments, has tended to see sound along a continuum, even as a circle (or “O factor”) that traces a smooth transition from “primal cries” through speech to music, then to ambient sound and back again to cries.<sup>81</sup> But the quantum character of the re-mark assures that there is no genuine continuum and that the transition from one sound to the next will be very bumpy. The bumps themselves are formed by all kinds of ideological and philosophical processes.

None of this is to claim that inside and outside “really” exist. In fact, understanding the re-mark means radically questioning the genuine existence of these categories, far more than clinging to an aesthetic amalgam of the two, especially a “new and improved” version, such as ambience. Ambience suggests that there is a special kind of noise-sound, or sound-noise; a noise that is also a sound, a sound that is also a noise. Somehow, however, we can still tell the difference between the two. Somewhere that is *both* inside *and* outside suffers from this wish to have it both ways. Somewhere that is *neither* inside *nor* outside is strictly inconceivable. Believing that such a place exists is sheer nihilism.

### Ecorhapsody and Ecodidacticism: Turn On, Tune In, Get Out

“Ecomimesis” is a rough Greek translation for “nature writing.” It is the mimesis of the *oikos* (Greek “home”). I have been arguing that there is an intense and specific form of ecomimesis. Let us consider more carefully what *mimesis* signifies. We have seen how ecomimesis is a rendering. Rather than a weak representation, or imitation, this is a strong, magical form, a compelling illusion rather than a simple copy. Plato’s idea of mimesis is more appropriate here than Aristotle’s. Aristotle considers mimesis to be simple imitation, as when an actor acts a role.<sup>82</sup> For Plato mimesis is a divinely inspired form of madness. This is not simply a matter of copying forms, but of being plugged in to a source of inspiration, “mainlining” reality.

The poet is a *rhapsode*, and mimesis is a form of *rhapsody*. A rhapsode is “one who stitches or strings songs together: one who recited Epic poems, a rhapsodist; sometimes . . . the bard who recited his own poem, but mostly . . . a class of persons who got their living by reciting the poems of Homer: hence the poems of Homer came to be divided into certain lengths called *rhapsodies*, i.e. *lays* or *cantos*, which were recited at one time.”<sup>83</sup> Even in the case of “the bard who recited his own poem,” not to mention the idea of a class of readers, rhapsody embodies a notion of reading rather than writing, of recording or transmitting rather than spontaneous production. During the later eighteenth century, “rhapsody” and “rhapsode” became associated with irrational, nonfactual language, and with the notion of “miscellany,” a popular literary term at the time, indicating an almost random “threading” of topics.<sup>84</sup> The earlier sense of rhapsody as a threading of memorized verses extends to suggest juxtaposed poems. The expanded definition of rhapsody still gestures toward reading. Ecological rhapsody is a reading of the book of nature.

In Plato’s *Ion*, Socrates does not exactly condemn poetry, as one might expect; rather, he places poetry outside the sphere of rational thinking. Such thinking involves a self-possessed subject, or “mastery.”<sup>85</sup> Poetry, however, is the invasion of divine madness. Socrates addresses the rhapsode Ion:

It’s a divine power that moves you, as a “Magnetic” stone moves iron rings . . . This stone not only pulls those rings, if they’re iron, it also puts power *in* the rings, so that they in turn can do just what the stone does . . . so that there’s sometimes a very long chain of iron pieces and rings hanging from one another . . . In the same way, the Muse makes some people inspired herself, and then through those who are inspired a chain of other enthusiasts is suspended.<sup>86</sup>

The magnet is a suggestive image of ambient poetics. The “divine power” exerts a force we now call a magnetic field, in which things become charged with energy. Poetic power emanates from beyond the subject. Inspiration derives from the environment. Plato depicts inspiration as a transmogrification of human into beast: “Poets tell us that they gather songs at honey-flowing springs, from glades and gardens of the Muses, and that they bear songs to us as bees carry honey, flying like bees. And what they say is true. For a poet is an airy thing . . . and he is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind and his intellect is no longer in him.”<sup>87</sup> The poet literally “goes out of his mind,” like a bee leaving the hive to gather honey from a flower. The poet is an *enthusiast*: literally, he or she buzzes within (Greek, *enthuein*).<sup>88</sup> The environment (“glades and gardens of the Muses”) is “out of our mind.” Poetry is a medium, the contact. The poet becomes the servant of the medium, its gardener.<sup>89</sup> Ion becomes the puppet of fiction: “when I tell a sad story, my eyes are full of tears; and when I tell a story that’s frightening or awful, my hair stands on end with fear and my heart jumps.”<sup>90</sup> The mind lets go while the body takes over.

Whether or not it is written for recitation, ecomimesis embodies this automatic quality in its form. It is as if the narrator turns on a spigot, out of which flows a potentially endless stream of metonymic associations: “Dionysiac parousia [presence] is confirmed by the common mark of the sudden and spontaneous, the *automaton*, another technical term for Dionysian epiphany.”<sup>91</sup> Surrealist “automatic writing” develops this desire to render—not just to copy, however perfectly, but actually to *transmit*—something that circumvents the conscious will.<sup>92</sup> André Breton describes how the automatic writer becomes a recording device: “The expression ‘all is written,’ it seems to me, must be literally

held to. All is written on the blank page, and writers make far too much ado about something that is like a revelation or a *photographic* development.”<sup>93</sup> Some Romantic poems try to look like psychological curiosities, such as Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan.” Wordsworth placed lines of poetry on or in the earth, trying to turn them into found objects.<sup>94</sup> Just as individualism and private space were opening up, so collectivity and nonpersonal, or transpersonal, environmental space became artistically exciting.

*Ecorhapsody* is a mode of ecomimesis. The environment in general manifests in some specific element, as if it were magnetically charged. (I often wonder whether ecological writing is at bottom nothing other than the poetics of these fields altogether. If it were not for the gravitational field, the earth would have no atmosphere at all.) The general enters the realm of the particular. An abstraction passes into an empirical domain. “Oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze.”<sup>95</sup> Wordsworth’s apostrophe to the ambient air is a fitting way to begin a poem about the formation of a poet’s mind in dialectical relation with the world that surrounds him. The image suggests that significance and inspiration come from “elsewhere,” even if that elsewhere is really an analogue for somewhere “in” the poet’s mind. This elsewhere is beyond concept, but palpable, like the air. It exists in between somewhere so different that it is utterly unknown, and “here,” the place of the subject.

Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Heidegger based theories of poetics on notions of attunement to and immersion in an environment, which bring to mind the idea of rhapsody. Schopenhauer’s view of lyric is that “the subjective disposition . . . imparts its own hue to the perceived surrounding, and conversely, the surroundings communicate the reflex of their color to the will.”<sup>96</sup> For Nietzsche, the Dionysian aspect of art, embodied in the Greek chorus, is an immersion in phenomena, a blissful, intoxicated collapse of the Schopenhauerian *principium individuationis* (principle of individuation).<sup>97</sup> For Heidegger, poetics in general is a right reading of the environment—a monitoring, though he would not approve of the technological metaphor. In Heidegger’s description of a van Gogh painting, the environment resonates in a pair of peasant shoes. Beyond its particular shape and texture, this environment is an inkling of Being itself, which Heidegger calls *Dasein*—“being there”:

As long as we only imagine a pair of shoes in general, or simply look at the empty, unused shoes as they merely stand there in the picture, we shall never discover what the equipmental being of the equipment truly is. From Van Gogh’s painting we cannot even tell where these shoes stand. There is nothing surrounding this pair of peasant shoes in or to which

they might belong—only an undefined space. There are not even clods of soil from the field or the field-path sticking to them, which would at least hint at their use. A pair of peasant shoes and nothing more. And yet—

From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the *earth*, and it is protected in the *world* of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself.<sup>98</sup>

“In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth”: the language wants us to hear this non-sound, almost a subsonic (empirical but inaudible) sound. Beyond a certain feeling, rhapsody is most properly the *tone* of the environment, registered in discrete things that, simply because they are discrete, are no longer just in the background, but have been pulled into the foreground. Rhapsody is the resonance of the background in the foreground: “In the vicinity of the work [of art] we were suddenly somewhere else than we usually tend to be.”<sup>99</sup> The very space inside the shoes, “the dark opening of the worn insides,” speaks of the outside. It all depends on what “in” means—inside? In the shoes’ material? In our idea of the shoes?

Heidegger’s locative vagueness has a precise function. As he develops his view of art as a “happening of truth” in the revealing of the “thingly” character of the thing, it becomes clear that this view is deeply rhapsodic. Rather than trying to be adequate to a real pair of shoes—Heidegger criticizes the idea that art is, in the medieval terminology, a kind of *adaequatio*—the artwork embodies the historical-cultural “world” in which it was made, and the “earth” out of which it emerges and which, in Heidegger’s words, “shelters” it, “makes space for that spaciousness.” In a Greek temple in a “rock-cleft valley,” we glimpse the way Greek culture organized “birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline”; and “The luster and gleam of the stone, though itself apparently glowing only by the grace of the sun, yet first brings to light the light of the day, the breadth of the sky, the darkness of the night.”<sup>100</sup> Unlike the transcendental,

Neoplatonic realm, to which representation can only be adequate, Heidegger posits a beyond that is also right here. No wonder ecopoetics, which wants to convey both *here* and a sense of *beyond*, often looks to Heidegger. But as we saw in the analysis of the Aeolian, what is obscure (beyond) opens up the possibility of a threatening void, an inert or dark spot that fascinates ecopoetics and which ecopoetics wants to paint over.

Ecorhapsody mobilizes class, as we shall see when we examine ambience as a function of automation in the following chapter. For Heidegger “man is the shepherd of Being”—he might as well have said that man is the rhapsode of being, a romanticized worker whose job is to hold it in mind.<sup>101</sup> Aristotle’s pragmatic definition of mimesis links humans to animals: man is the “most imitative of creatures.”<sup>102</sup> Ecorhapsody can also mobilize species. Despite his comparison of poets to bees, Plato’s view of rhapsody removes humans from the animal realm. Likewise, Heidegger said explicitly that animals lacked precisely a sense of their environment as a surrounding “world.”<sup>103</sup> More recently, David Abram has tried to link environmental poetics to an attunement to the animal aspects of human being.<sup>104</sup> There is a zero-sum game going on here, however one thinks of animals. Either one is more conscious and less attuned to the world, or more sensitive to the world and less conscious.

What would a rhapsodic tuning-in look like? The environment produces a certain tone inside a railway carriage in Edward Thomas’s “Adlestrop”:

Yes. I remember Adlestrop—  
The name, because one afternoon  
Of heat the express-train drew up there  
Unwontedly. It was late June.

The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.  
No one left and no one came  
On the bare platform. What I saw  
Was Adlestrop—only the name

And willows, and willow-herb, and grass,  
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,  
No whit less still and lonely fair  
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

And for that minute a blackbird sang  
Close by, and round him, mistier,

Farther and farther, all the birds  
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.<sup>105</sup>

The sheer name of a train station gives rise to a whole sequence of surrounding impressions. The first seem insignificant. The hissing steam and the clearing throat are timbral. They are functions of the physicality of the train and its passengers. Before we get a positive description of the surrounding world, there is an uncanny sense of something lurking just beyond our ken. It is a present absence made vivid by the “don’t think of a pink elephant” quality of “No one left and no one came / On the bare platform” (6–7), a good example of the “negative quantity” described earlier as a feature of ambient tone.

We look back at the beginning of the poem—one of the features of silent reading is that we can scan backward—and find it changed. The poem was already an answer to a question hanging in the air: “Yes. I remember Adlestrop” (1). Whether or not the narrator posed the question, the “Yes” medially acknowledges the communication dimension. Moreover, before the paratactic rhapsody beginning with “And” (9) there is a blank space, unmarked with words. It serves as the re-mark that opens the inside of the carriage to the outside world. It distinguishes the inside from the outside and their attendant associations (industry/nature, stillness/movement, intimate/panoramic). A linking and a de-linking, a spacing, opens up before we know it. We can only know it after the fact. “Adlestrop” always already existed within a larger textual field. The poem itself has an “elsewhere” whence it arises, in the definite yet nonconceptual sense outlined earlier. In the same way, the station name, “Adlestrop,” always existed within a wider environment. Ian Hamilton Finlay’s sculpture *Starlit Waters* (1967) consists of the carved wooden phrase “Starlit Waters” enveloped by a fishing net, as if the title were the name of a boat; a name that also refers to the environment around it. So while the poem, moving forward, widens out to include this environment, if we look backward, we see that there already was one. This sensation creeps up on us uncannily. It is as if we had never left. The medium that contains the poem, for which Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire are in some ways just analogues, tugs at us.

That “and” in the third verse amplifies the reader’s awareness out of the carriage to include a widening circle of things, “farther and farther.” “It was late June” (4): the innocent-seeming “It was” contains its own haunting rhapsodic tone. Emmanuel Levinas has examined the effect of the “there is” (French *il y a*; German *Es gibt*). What is the “it”



when we say “it is raining”? The “it” is Being for Heidegger, “a presence of absence,” since it cannot exist on its own.<sup>106</sup> For Levinas the *it* is the horrifying—that is, literally flesh-creeping—quality of sheer existence. This is the horror of what Levinas characterizes as experience in a Cartesian world, despite himself, if we are to believe his citation of Pascal, who wrote of Cartesian space that its silence filled him with dread.<sup>107</sup>

*There is* “transcends inwardness as well as exteriority,” subject and object. Levinas writes:

When the forms of things are dissolved in the night, the darkness of the night, which is neither an object nor the quality of an object, invades like a presence. In the night, where we are riven to it, we are not dealing with anything. But this nothing is not that of pure nothingness. There is no longer *this* or *that*; there is not “something.” But this universal absence is in its turn a presence, an absolutely unavoidable presence. It is not the dialectical counterpart of absence, and we do not grasp it through a thought. It is immediately there. There is no discourse. Nothing responds to us, but this silence; the voice of this silence is understood and frightens like the silence of those infinite spaces Pascal speaks of. *There is*, in general, without it mattering what there is, without our being able to fix a substantive to this term. *There is* is an impersonal form, like in it rains, or it is warm. Its anonymity is essential. The mind does not find itself faced with an apprehended exterior. The exterior—if one insists on this term—remains uncorrelated with an interior. It is no longer given. It is no longer a world. What we call the I is itself submerged by the night, invaded, depersonalized, stifled by it. The disappearance of all things and of the I leaves what cannot disappear, the sheer fact of being in which *one* participates, whether one wants to or not, without having taken the initiative, anonymously. Being remains, like a field of forces, like a heavy atmosphere belonging to no one, universal, returning in the midst of the negation which put it aside, and in all the powers to which that negation may be multiplied.

*It is* or *there is* makes us aware of *tone*, both inside and outside our bodies. There is more or less tension in the environment: “The rustling of the *there is* . . . is horror.”<sup>108</sup> Levinas’s onomatopoeia is disembodied. The *there is* is an automated process.

The environment just happens around us, without our intention. Or it is the objectified, perhaps unintended consequence of an intention—intention’s echo. Levertov figures nature as a series of reading-writing processes continuing in some other key, around and beyond the act of reading the written text. The earth (in Heidegger’s sense) continues behind our backs, “over there.” Levertov makes a poem about *that*, turning inside out the normative subject of lyric which, as writers from

Schopenhauer to Allen Grossman have observed, is the ego (Grossman’s suggestive phrase is “the genre of the other mind”<sup>109</sup>) Instead of getting to know the narrator’s sense of self, of “I,” the narrator forces us to attune to *it*. Instead of *here is*, the poem says *there is*.

Ecorhapsody operates through parataxis and metonymy. The general shines in the particular after a lot of rubbing, each phrase trying to coax a new sparkle. Lists have a tempo or *phase*. They can also have varied moments of intensity or tone. Shifts in phase and tone evoke a force from “elsewhere” within the text itself. Levertov’s poem has intense tone. Three stanzas of similar length accumulate three strong images. The final image has a slower phase than the others, since it is repeated: “the sea is turning its dark pages, / turning / its dark pages” (8–10). Our eyes must “turn” from one line to the next to follow the syntax, producing a rhythmical slowing-down that echoes the way the image coagulates and hangs at the bottom of the poem.

Ecorhapsodic lists are suffused with enjoyment, never directly available, off to the side, just around the corner, in the next item on the list. In ecorhapsodic mimesis, we can always admire but never touch. One way to radicalize ecorhapsody is to shatter the aesthetic distance that enables the sliding of desire. Coleridge opts radically for “hot” rather than “cool” (aesthetic) contemplation in *The Ancient Mariner*. When the Mariner “loses himself” rhapsodically in the water snakes (4.272–287), the proximity of the disgusting object punctures the normative aesthetic distance associated with “good taste,” the product of eighteenth-century aesthetic development.<sup>110</sup> Likewise, the drinking and eating of Orphic substances in “Kubla Khan” turns the poet into the target of a ritualized disgust (“Weave a circle round him thrice, / And close your eyes with holy dread,” (51–52)).<sup>111</sup> Like Keats, Coleridge approaches hyperbolic enjoyment, undermining the distance and mastery of the anthropocentric human subject. There are poetic traditions within Romanticism that run counter to the expectations of ecomimesis.

*Ecodidacticism* is an often deliberately oblique quality by which ecomimesis makes us exclaim, “Oh! Nature!” There are two levels of didacticism. Ecomimesis points us in the direction of nature, which is meant to teach us something. In “Adlestrop,” the expansion of awareness outside the railway carriage eventually makes us aware of the counties of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire. No longer are we in a purely abstract space of hissing and throat clearing, but we are in a highly significant place charged with national identity. There may be explicit instructions about how to look for natural things. For instance,

we could be advised on how to set up our equipment—a tent, some binoculars—so as to see birds or flowers more vividly. But ecomimesis may contain another command, one that does not involve instruments but evokes nature as noninstrumental or anti-technological. This is the order to *stop reading* and “go out into” nature. The injunction is to “Look up!” from one’s book, as Wordsworth’s “The Tables Turned” puts it. To read an injunction to stop reading is paradoxical. A 1970s children’s television program in the United Kingdom was called *Why Don’t You Just Turn off Your Television Set and Go and Do Something More Interesting Instead?* Of course, it was always more interesting to watch other people doing it on the TV (see “Reality Writing” in Chapter 2). And there is always *some* instrumentality—this noninstrumental nature is *for* something, if only, in a circular fashion, to teach us the value of the noninstrumental. Ecodidacticism thus participates in the Kantian aesthetic of purposiveness without a purpose.

There is a very intense moment of ecodidacticism in Thoreau’s *The Maine Woods*. The high ecomimetic tone, a veritable forest of phrases that stretches over the best part of the first hundred pages in the Penguin edition, finally gives way to Thoreau’s realization, as he narrates the descent of Mount Katahdin, that this is “primeval, untamed, and forever untamable *Nature*.”<sup>112</sup> Thoreau mythologizes the mountain as a powerfully nonhuman realm:

It is difficult to conceive of a region uninhabited by man. We habitually presume his presence and influence everywhere. And yet we have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast and drear and inhuman, though in the midst of cities. Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful. I looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work. This was that earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man’s garden, but the unhandseled globe. It was not lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland, nor lea, or arable, nor waste land. It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth, as it was made forever and ever,—to be the dwelling of man, we say,—so Nature made it, and man may use it if he can. Man was not to be associated with it. It was Matter, vast, terrific,—not his Mother Earth that we have heard of, not for him to tread on, or be buried in,—no, it were being too familiar even to let his bones lie there,—the home, this, of Necessity and Fate.<sup>113</sup>

The Greek Titans (Chaos, Night) bestow upon this wilderness a sense of something primitive, something that many previous societies superseded. “Unhandseled” is the key word. It is derived from an Old En-

glish noun for money or a gift, as an offering that inaugurates something (earnest money); a luckpenny, or token of good luck; a first installment; or an offering inaugurating the new year.<sup>114</sup> Thoreau describes the wilderness as never having entered into any economic transaction. Even a precapitalist term from old-fashioned rituals is inappropriate. The more modern (Enlightenment) gods of “Nature . . . Matter . . . Necessity and Fate” lose something in this linguistic transaction. They lose all trace of rationality.

Didacticism blends with rhapsody, as Thoreau’s rhetoric injects the feel of nonhuman nature into our very minds:

What is it to be admitted to a museum, to see a myriad of particular things, compared with being shown some star’s surface, some hard matter in its home! I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one,—*that* my body might,—but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is this titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come into contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common sense!* *Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?*<sup>115</sup>

The italics at the end perform the role of the *re-mark*. They announce a heightened tone, inviting the reader to imagine his or her vocal muscles tightening. They put our body into the text, which had been gliding along of its own accord for almost a hundred pages. This far into *The Maine Woods*, we are embedded in the “contact” of a text, and here we are made to wonder at how far in we have gone. Textual pressure renders an environmental one. Despite the wealth of texts on the Maine Woods, the rhetoric evokes an utterly pristine zone.<sup>116</sup> Even when the narrator is apparently screaming in our face (“*Contact! Contact!*”), the message hovers off to one side. It appears to inhabit an entirely different dimension, like the skull in Hans Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors*. Nature loses its nature when we look at it head on. We can only glimpse it anamorphically—as a distortion, as a shapeless thing, or as the way in which other things lose their shape. This “shapeless thing” is the very *form* of ecological writing.

### Ecomimesis as Fantasy: Are You Experienced?

Why is ambient rhetoric, with its basic feature of the *re-mark*, vital to ecomimesis? Ecological writing wants to undo habitual distinctions between nature and ourselves. It is supposed not just to describe, but also to provide a working model for a dissolving of the difference between

subject and object, a dualism seen as the fundamental philosophical reason for human beings' destruction of the environment. If we could not merely figure out but actually *experience* the fact that we were embedded in our world, then we would be less likely to destroy it. The subject-object dualism depends upon a distinction between inside and outside. The subject is "this," "over here," inside; the object is "that," "over there," outside. Various metaphysical systems support this distinction, and not just in the West. The Hindu idea of *tat tvam asi* for instance ("thou art that"), is posited as the pinnacle of self-realization. Indeed, it has been a function of the orientalism of ecological criticism that it has usually considered the West to be hopelessly mired in Cartesian dualism, while other, more exotic or primitive cultures benefit from a more embedded view.<sup>117</sup> Since our thinking appears compromised beyond repair, the new ecological view derives from an aesthetic *experience* of the natural world.<sup>118</sup>

Val Plumwood's *Environmental Culture*, a philosophical text, contains ecomimesis. None is more sustained than a passage from the chapter "Towards a Materialist Spirituality of Place." The chapter concludes Plumwood's investigation of how notions of reason should be re-fashioned to suit a moment of ecological crisis. Plumwood tries to find an "alternative paradigm" to Lockean theories of land ownership in a sense of communication: "making ownership out in the essentially narrative terms of naming and interpreting in the land, in telling its story in ways that show a deep and loving acquaintance with it and a history of dialogical interaction."<sup>119</sup> The effect of the passage is cumulative:

A world perceived in communicative and narrative terms is certainly far richer and more exciting than the self-enclosed world of meaningless and silent objects exclusionary, monological and commodity thinking creates, reflecting back to us only the echo of our own desires. The communicativity and intentionality of more-than-human others is often the key to the power of place. As dusk gathers beyond my desk and the light glows green, the forest around me comes alive with a sublime and delicate sound like the chiming of countless little silver bells. The sound is almost the only sign to human senses of the innumerable tiny rainforest tree crickets who rub their wings and legs together to make it. It evokes the enchantment of late summer in the cool, misty mountain forest of my Australian home more richly and sensually than any human description, any photograph, map or calendar. As the year turns, this dusk song gives way to others, in regular succession, for the twilight is a sensory and communicative space of much significance for forest dwellers. The erotic tinkling of the crickets holds the space until the first cool weather. That is the time for

the squeals of the Little Red Flying Foxes feeding on nectar-filled white Pinkwood flowers. Then, in the chilly violet twilights of late autumn, the silence may be broke by a Lyrebird calling late from nest or perch. Or, if you are lucky, you may hear a distant Powerful Owl hoot and cry for love. In the frosty stillness of moon-silver nights in May or June, you should listen for the Sooty Owl's shuddering, ghostly, scream, and for the questing bass of a mal Barking Owl from June to August, while the courting Mountain Thrushes still play their early evening flutes. August brings forth the first Boobrook Owl duets—his baritone to her soprano—that signal spring, foreshadowing their cheerful but impassioned mating operettas of September and October. November to January is the best time for the great frog choruses, although these in turn have their negotiated spaces and species successions throughout the year. But from mid-summer onwards the lusty tree frogs retire and dewfall brings out the whole droning orchestras of mole crickets, each drone, it seems, equipped with an ear-splitting vibrator designed to guide in a flying evening mate. When they too begin to retire in February, the cycle starts once more as the gentle love-songs of the dew-crickets fill the twilight autumn air again until the first cold spell.<sup>120</sup>

The idea of dialogue, taken from Mikhail Bakhtin and Jürgen Habermas in equal measure, is important to Plumwood. But the form this particular passage takes, even as it demonstrates a dialogue with other sentient beings, is not itself a dialogue. This is not to argue against Plumwood's thesis, or to catch it in the act of betraying itself; for example, by finding that this is actually an example of individualist monologue. This passage is not a monologue. It is more like a jungle of writing, twisting, and writhing to such an extent that it almost appears autonomous from the text that surrounds it. It requires more and more of itself to justify itself. There is no logical conclusion. There are notes of instrumental didacticism: "you should listen . . . November to January is the best time for. . ." But there is an overwhelming, seductively noninstrumental quality to the whole thing. What is it doing almost at the end of Plumwood's book? It is providing a *fantasy*, an aesthetic playground in which the ideas in the book appear incarnated, a literary gravitational field generated by the sheer quantity of vivid description (ekphrasis). Plumwood's ecomimesis is ambient in relation to the main argument. It hovers to one side of it, not directly supporting it but making it aesthetically appealing.

We might think that Plumwood's rhetoric is just a special feature of a religious form of ecological discourse. We might think that it need not concern us very much, if we are ready to take it with a pinch of salt. But

this language demands a genuine response. Moreover, it is strikingly the same when writing tries to invoke a sheer sense of environment as if for its own sake. Experimental art likewise models utopian spaces, rather than simply describing something. Take a look at the sophisticated evocation of ambient sound, at the very beginning of David Toop's *Ocean of Sound*:

Sitting quietly in never-never land, I am listening to summer fleas jump off my small female cat on to the polished wood floor. Outside, starlings are squabbling in the fig tree and from behind me I can hear swifts wheeling over rooftops. An ambulance siren, full panic mode, passes from behind the left centre of my head to starboard front. Next door, the neighbours are screaming—" . . . fuck you . . . I didn't . . . get out that door . . ."—but I tune that out. The ambient hum of night air and low frequency motor vehicle drone merges with insect hum called back from the 1970s, a country garden somewhere, high summer in the afternoon. The snow has settled. I can smell woodsmoke. Looking for fires I open the front door, peer into the shining dark and hear stillness. Not country stillness but urban shutdown. So tranquil.

Truthfully, I am lying in intensive care. Wired, plugged and electronically connected, I have glided from coma into a sonic simulation of past, and passed, life. As befits an altered state, the memories have been superimposed, stripped of context, conflated from seasons, times, eras, moments, even fictions, into a concentrated essence of my existence in the sound-world.

These sounds reconnect me to a world from which I had disengaged. Sound places us in the real universe. Looking ahead, I can see a plane enlivened by visually represented objects. I can touch within a limited radius. I can smell a body, a glass of beer, burning dust. But sound comes from everywhere, unbidden. My brain seeks it out, sorts it, makes me feel the immensity of the universe even when I have no wish to look or absorb.<sup>121</sup>

The passage continues for another page. Toop does not argue, but renders, like Plumwood. He is both rhapsodic and didactic—"Sound places us in the real universe." The imagery is more self-reflexive than Plumwood's. The sounds are juxtaposed memories rather than an actually existing "soundscape." This is a construct, says the passage. The narrator wants us to know that this is a simulation. But despite this, perhaps even because of it, the passage is compelling. It strives to authenticate the "I" by situating it: "Sitting quietly . . . I am listening," albeit in "never-never land." Whether the space being evoked is supposed to be real or taken as unreal, the same rhetorical strategies apply: authentication, rendering, the Aeolian, and other ambient effects such as suspension and stasis.

If, as demonstrated, the dissolution of inside and outside is strictly impossible—though ecomimesis puts a lot of effort into simulating it—then ecomimesis is a form of ideological fantasy. When ambient rhetoric tries to blur inside and outside, or abolish them, or superimpose them, it generates an inconsistent "thing." Lyotard's "nuance" exists somewhere "in between" the normative colors, or in between the normative notes of a musical scale. This "in between" is better described as ambience, with "nuance" as an aspect of tone. Students of literature should be beginning to recognize what is going on here. It is commonly called *the aesthetic*. But Lyotard asserts that nuance is beyond normal aesthetic categories and hence, he hopes, the problems associated with the aesthetic: notably, that it does not really collapse the subject-object dualism, either by reconciling subject to object, or by undoing the distinction altogether. Ambience, or nuance, are "new and improved" versions of the aesthetic. In bursting the bubble of the aesthetic, we find ourselves in a new, potentially even more compelling, bubble.

Nevertheless, the fantastic inconsistency of ambience makes it possible to do critique. Ambience is what Jacques Lacan would have called a *sinthome*. The *sinthome* is the materially embodied, meaningless, and inconsistent kernel of "idiotic enjoyment" that sustains an otherwise discursive ideological field.<sup>122</sup> The *sinthome* of homophobia, for instance, might be an image of the "queer," or certain kinds of sex act. Ideology resides in the distance we assume toward this fantasy object. By collapsing the distance we undermine the potency of the ideological field. Within every field is a symptom, and every symptom can be made to vomit forth a *sinthome*. By assuming with pride the word *queer*, the gay movement disabled the ideological field that sustains homophobia. This paradoxical act of identification with the fantasy object of ideology could be mirrored in critical analysis, by the relentless close reading of texts, not in order to achieve some tasteful distance toward them, but precisely in order to "mess around" with them, or as my students sometimes say in horror, "dissect."

A word about "objects." I have modified the term *sinthome*. What Lacan applies to an objectal substance could apply to surrounding space. This involves an inversion. Imagine the *sinthome* not as figure but as ground: a potent, non-neutral ground, a giant stain. This would square well with the vaginal connotations of the *sinthome*, in patriarchy a *wound* that is also a *space*.<sup>123</sup> When I refer to ambience as a fantasy thing, the terminology is not quite exact—fantasy space is more like it.

If it is to have teeth, ecocritique must be self-critical. Ecocritique is a twofold process, consisting both in exuberant friendliness and dis-

arming skepticism. The approach is not to be confused with nihilism. We are treading a path between saying that something called nature exists, and saying that nothing exists at all. We are not claiming that some entity lies between these views. We are dealing with the raw materials of ideology, the stuff that generates seductive images of “nature.” That is why it is important to go as “far in” to the notion of nature in ecomimesis as possible. In the name of ecology itself, we should pull out all the plugs. This is radically different from a “new historicist” approach, in which our own analysis, rightly wary of the aesthetic dimension, ironically recreates the very aesthetic distance it is criticizing, by holding the artwork at a disdainful distance. At its best, historicism claims that there is no single solid subject of history. But it also risks casting a negative aura around the aesthetic object, one of phobic distance. It re-creates history in the image of a self-contained, richly ambivalent poem as read by one of the New Critics like Cleanth Brooks.

Do we find any inconsistencies in nature writing? There is a profound inconsistency between ambience, the way ecomimesis operates, and ecomimesis itself. The poetics of the echo, for example, interferes with the fantasy that ecomimesis is immediate. This immediacy must be an illusion that the narrator manages to pull off, with varying degrees of success. And even if successful, the illusion is not an accurate rendering of the environment. We can only perceive things *after* they have arisen, never before and never at exactly the same time. In this sense, all experience is only passing memory. Ambient poetics, amplifying this quality, is imbued with the uncanny, but there is a disjunction with ecomimesis at this point. Ecomimesis resists the uncanny, in its effort to present an original, pristine nature not “infected” with the consciousness, the mentality, or the desire of the perceiver, unless it is deemed to be “natural.” Ecomimesis wants to deliver nature in the raw, but it always arrives with a slight smell of burning.

Echoes are inescapable features of ambience. Some nature writers think that they are receiving a direct transmission from nature, when in fact they are watching a mirror of the mind. There is a choice between honesty and hypocrisy. We can admit that all we can sense of nature is an echo of our “sounding out” of it. We posit nature retroactively. Narcissus is only aware of his beloved Echo through the repetition of his words. This was formalized in Renaissance verse when “Echo” repeats the last syllables of a verse. This is a basic mimetic function of some animals: the echolocation of bats “sounds out” the dimensions of a place, a phenomenon exploited by Alvin Lucier in *Vespers*, in which

musicians use electronic devices that emit pulses of sound for the same purpose. For Narcissus to love Echo properly, he must love her as the trace of his voice reflected in the sheer extension of matter: the vibrational qualities of air, the reflective properties of water. To remain true to Echo he must remain “faithful” to the fact that she **only** exists as a “faithful” reproduction of his voice. Narcissism appears on both sides of the equation.<sup>124</sup> Narcissism is on the side of self-absorption disguised as immersion in, or contact with, another being (called Nature). And narcissism is on the side of the subject who cynically knows “very well” that he or she is in an echo chamber.

The exuberant immediacy of ecorhapsody contradicts the melancholic delay of the ambient effects out of which it is made. Ecorhapsody suggests that we can have the real deal, nature as it is, even while it consists of a list of elements, which only gestures toward the real. Ecodidacticism infers that nature and self are connected, and in so doing short-circuits the paradoxes of ambient rhetoric. Consider the trope of chiasmus: I am you and what I see is me; I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together.<sup>125</sup> Merleau-Ponty describes experience as a “chiasm,” an intertwining of what is sensed with the one who is sensing.<sup>126</sup> Such ideas are very suggestive for ecological poetics, since they provide a way of determining that the self and its world are intertwined. Chiasmus does not solve anything, because in order to work, both terms must be *preserved* even as they are cancelled at another level. Think of an optical illusion that confuses background and foreground, such as the faces/candlestick, or a work by M. C. Escher, playing with simplistic cubes without proper foreshortening, such that the front and back faces have the same size.<sup>127</sup> It becomes impossible to say which face is at the front. The trick operates on two levels. On the first level, we perceive a breakdown of our normal distinction between background and foreground, but on the second, this distinction is preserved. In order for the first level to be effective, the second level must also be effective. What is given with one gesture is paradoxically taken away with another. Term *x* dissolves into term *y*, but retains the form of term *x*. Otherwise we would not be able to recognize that it had dissolved! All we would be left with would be term *y*. So when nature writing collapses self and nature, it prizes them apart on another level.

What if, however, the chiasmus did not want us to solve it, to hold both its terms properly together in our mind? What if the philosophical musing that chiasmus lets loose concealed a meaningless, “sprouting” enjoyment? This is where the *sinthome*, the kernel of idiotic enjoyment,

operates. One would expect a poetics of rendering to be interested in employing the *sinthome*. A simple way of recognizing the *sinthome* is to wonder what all this nature writing is *for*. There is just so much of it; a potentially infinite supply. Nature writing tries to evoke this sense of sheer stuff. The form of Chinese painting called “mountains and rivers without end” was borrowed for Gary Snyder’s huge poem sequence of the same name.<sup>128</sup> At most points in the giant scroll on which the mountains and rivers are painted, except at the beginning and at the end, there is the sense that the scroll could go on forever. There is just a vast proliferation of brushstrokes. In the same way, nature writing in general is *sinthomic*, a sprawl of sheer *text*. By analogy, “nature” is a gigantic swathe of sheer *life*, or *stuff*. This stuff is always eluding conceptuality, not because it transcends the material realm, but because it is relentlessly material. Our conceptual mind keeps slipping off its surface. Snyder’s poem tries to capture, to render, this quality as an experience of Buddhist *shunyata* or emptiness, though the term evokes the idea of *nothingness* rather than the “something-ness” I am aiming at here.

Western explorations of Buddhism aside, we are not far from the notion of a life-substance that emerged in *Lebensphilosophie* in Schelling and others, from which existential and psychoanalytic ideas, not to mention literary ones, of *life* are derived. Nature, after all, according to modern (post-Romantic) thinking, is what sprouts; it is the state of stimulation, of metabolism between the inside and the outside. It is the state of swelling and opening to the outside—or orgasm, as Lamarck put it.<sup>129</sup> Paul Ricoeur’s idea of metaphor also leaps to mind. Ricoeur states, “*Lively* expression is that which expresses existence as *alive*.”<sup>130</sup> Nature writing embodies this orgasmic view of life (French, *jouissance*) in the aesthetic form of endless textuality. Thoreau’s *The Maine Woods* does not even try to tell us something, but appears merely to be a journal, something artless that falls out of normal conventions of literary narrative. Didacticism becomes an orgasmic peak rather than a sober reflection. But nature writing involves us in a basic paradox. The more nature we have, and therefore the more “lively expression,” the more writing we have. The paradox is present in the very phrase “nature writing.” Is nature to be thought of as writing? Or is writing a natural process, in the sense that Byron meant when he referred to the “lava” of imagination?<sup>131</sup> Nature writing is a dense chiasmus.

For Ricoeur, “All *mimesis*, even creative—nay, *especially* creative—*mimesis*, takes place within the horizons of a being-in-the-world which it makes present.”<sup>132</sup> This sounds like a positive theory of ecomimesis, which wants to fit nature like skin fits a hand—it *is* the hand. Adorno’s

remarks on the way some art “steps out” into nature, collapsing the barrier between art and non-art, are appropriate here:

Authentic artworks, which hold fast to the idea of reconciliation with nature by making themselves completely a second nature, have consistently felt the urge, as if in need of a breath of fresh air, to step outside of themselves. Since identity is not to be their last word, they have sought consolation in first nature . . . The extent to which this taking a breath depends on what is mediated, on the world of conventions, is unmistakable. Over long periods the feeling of natural beauty intensified with the suffering of the subject thrown back on himself in a mangled and administered world; the experience bears the mark of *Weltschmerz*. Even Kant had misgivings about the art made by human beings and conventionally opposed to nature . . . The gesture of stepping out into the open is shared . . . with the artworks of their time. Kant lodged the sublime—and probably along with it all beauty that rises above the mere play of form—in nature.<sup>133</sup>

Adorno asserts that sometimes art needs to “take a breath,” to renounce the hard work of dominating nature in the name of art. Instead of shaping natural materials into sculpture, perhaps sculpture should dissolve back into nature, as in the work of Andy Goldsworthy. Nature writing is another way of saying artless art. The *sinthome* is necessarily inconsistent. There is no genuine material embodiment of an ideological system. The presence of chiasmus should alert to an intense, *sinthomic* level, which does not make sense but just *is*, beyond the pleasant mirror effect of chiasmus itself.

Presence and absence are intertwined in difference. Ecomimetic tone—the bodily sensation of *thereness*—is compromised by the inescapable dimension of time. Ecological writing may want to drag us into the here and now, in a mystical or primitivist or exoticist gesture that seeks to sweep away bad Western cunning. The past is just an illusion. The future is yet to come. Dig the present! But when we get there, we discover that the here and now does not exist either. The here and now has come to be associated with a certain meditative calm and quiet. Yet quiet—even more so silence—is always elsewhere. It is someone else’s, somewhere else (Cage: “all of the sound we don’t intend”).<sup>134</sup> Quietness is a common effect of ambient music, which strives to be below the threshold of regular listening. Quietness strives toward the pregnant pause: *syncope*. *Syncope* is thus always the effect of tone—there is always some information (in the cybernetic sense), and in order to differentiate it there must be some roughness, some *noise*. Quiet is the idea of tone we almost can’t perceive, tone that is constantly vanishing. It is not necessarily relaxed or peaceful. The *syncope*

De Quincey analyzes—the silence in *Macbeth* after the murder of King Duncan—is unbearably tense. The narrative cliché “It’s quiet—too quiet” speaks the truth that as soon as we perceive it, quiet becomes saturated with tone and therefore intense. Quiet itself is stimulating.

Like death, quiescence is always further to the side of the margin of the paper than where we rest our reading gaze. But we can still glimpse it out of the corners of our eyes. Freud tries to give an ambience to death, an experiential quality, as if we could experience it on *this* side. Life yearns toward, in James Strachey’s poetic translation, “the quiescence of the inorganic world.”<sup>135</sup> This haunting phrase is more than what Freud might be suggesting, however. “Quiescence” implies something still living, where “inertia” would have brought it to a dead stop. We want to experience ourselves as objects. In other words, consciousness tries to feel what it is like to be a purely extended thing (*res extensa*, in Cartesian terms).

Nirvana has a utopian edge and is relevant in this life, as Adorno recognized. One can imagine it as an experience rather than as the dissolution of experience:

A mankind which no longer knows want will begin to have an inkling of the delusory, futile nature of all the arrangements hitherto made in order to escape want, which used wealth to reproduce want on a larger scale. Enjoyment itself would be affected, just as its present framework is inseparable from operating, planning, having one’s way, subjugating. *Rien faire comme une bête*, lying on water and looking peacefully at the sky, “being, nothing else, without any further definition and fulfilment,” might take the place of process, act, satisfaction, and so truly keep the promise of dialectical logic that it would culminate in its origin. None of the abstract concepts comes closer to fulfilled utopia than that of eternal peace.<sup>136</sup>

Blankness and silence thus convey, in extremis, either a state in which nothing *must* be done, or one in which nothing *needs* to be done. Ecomimesis strains to see outside itself, in a dialectic of life and death: a rhythm that alternates between incorporating the environment and becoming tenser, versus relaxing into an inorganic state (becoming the environment). Peeping round the corner at a state where there are no humans, no readers—trying to see our own death—is a common ecological fantasy, as Mary Shelley demonstrated very early in her science-fiction work, *The Last Man*, in which the reader gets to contemplate a world without humans.<sup>137</sup> When we try to see our own death, the “we” who are seeing remain alive.

Wordsworth is the Romantic master of tone, and the ironic ways in

which consciousness floats around it, recalls it, alters it. Through simple repetition, he suggests the tension of a sigh or a sob, a physical tightening or relaxing, within the act of reading the poem. Tone appears to float above or behind the sheer linguistic surface.<sup>138</sup> The notion of repetition brings up another feature of ambient poetics. *Retroactivity* compels us to look back, or listen back, through time to posit something new, to reframe or to alter what we have been perceiving. We can’t be sure that we have been in a suspension until we have left it; retroactively, we know that the narrative has been circling around on itself. Likewise, the environment becomes audible as an echo, as after-image.<sup>139</sup>

Even though Hegel attributes pure repetition to cultures existing outside his concept of history (such as Africa), repetition persists within the very teleological structures of high Romanticism. Here I concur with James Snead, who identified countercurrents of European philosophy and culture that celebrated the idea of repetition.<sup>140</sup> Repetition is the subject of Wordsworth’s “There was a Boy,” a “lyrical ballad” about a boy who hoots to owls, repeating their sounds across a lake.

There was a Boy, ye knew him well, ye Cliffs  
And Islands of Winander! many a time,  
At evening, when the stars had just begun  
To move along the edges of the hills,  
Rising or setting, would he stand alone,  
Beneath the trees, or by the glimmering lake,  
And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands  
Press’d closely palm to palm and to his mouth  
Uplifted, he, as through an instrument,  
Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls  
That they might answer him. And they would shout  
Across the wat’ry vale and shout again  
Responsive to his call, with quivering peals,  
And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud  
Redoubled and redoubled, a wild scene  
Of mirth and jocund din. And, when it chanced  
That pauses of deep silence mock’d his skill,  
Then, sometimes, in that silence, while he hung  
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprize  
Has carried far into his heart the voice  
Of mountain torrents, or the visible scene  
Would enter unawares into his mind  
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,

Its woods, and that uncertain heaven, receiv'd  
Into the bosom of the steady lake.

Fair are the woods, and beauteous is the spot,  
The vale where he was born: the Church-yard hangs  
Upon a slope above the village school,  
And there along that bank when I have pass'd  
At evening, I believe, that near his grave  
A full half-hour together I have stood,  
Mute—for he died when he was ten years old.<sup>141</sup>

De Quincey was immensely fond of the suspension or parenthesis in the middle, when we read that the owls sometimes do not respond to the boy's "mimic hootings" (10), and that in the silence he becomes aware of his environment. Out for a walk one evening with William Wordsworth, De Quincey's mind is opened to an awareness of ambience: "No sound came up through the winding valleys that stretched to the north, and the few cottage lights, gleaming at wide distances from recesses amidst the rocky hills, had long been extinct."<sup>142</sup> The apophasis of "no sound" makes us *hear* the *absence* of sound—ambient poetics resounds with this logic, the same as that which applies in "don't think of a pink elephant!"

De Quincey continues: "Once, when he was slowly rising from his effort, his eye caught a bright star that was glittering between the brow of Seat Sandal and of the mighty Helvellyn." Wordsworth declares "if, under any circumstances, the attention is energetically braced up to an act of steady observation, or of steady expectation, then, if this intense condition of vigilance should suddenly relax, at that moment any beautiful, any impressive visual object, or collection of objects, falling upon the eye, is carried to the heart with a power not known under other circumstances." This unexpected consequence of a meditative state should be familiar to anyone who has practiced meditation. Wordsworth explains:

Just now, my ear was placed upon the stretch, in order to catch any sound of wheels that might come down upon the lake of Wythburn from the Keswick road; at the very instant when I raised my head from the ground, in final abandonment of hope for this night, at the very instant when the organs of attention were all at once relaxing from their tension, the bright star hanging in the air above those outlines of massy blackness fell suddenly upon my eye, and penetrated my capacity of apprehension with a pathos and a sense of the infinite, that would not have arrested me under other circumstances.<sup>143</sup>

Wordsworth outlines a minimalist sensory attunement, like meditation, one of surprising surprise, we might say—of a surprise that remains surprise because it does not participate in what Wordsworth himself called the "gross and violent stimulants" of the poetics of sensibility.<sup>144</sup>

We find out that we have been standing beside the boy's grave all the time we were reading of the boy's exploits in the woods, returning the echoes of the owls. Looking back from the end of the poem we posit the boy's death and our identification with him, in a tranquil, sweet quietness. The whole poem becomes an "echo" of the boy. We can only become aware that we were in a space of identification after the fact. This awareness is always uncanny—familiar yet strange, and even more so, familiarly strange, based on minimal clues such as the repetition of "hung" (18) and "hangs" (27), the position of both of which at the ends of lines makes us hang suspended in mid-page. The ultimate uncanny experience is recognizing the strange as a familiar feature of the familiar. Freud explained that the uncanny was associated with the compulsion to repeat. In ambient poetics, the uncanny works such that the space-time of the text turns out to have changed, almost imperceptibly. We become attuned to this quality *before* the text is read, before it begins. So the sense is that the change *will have occurred*. This quality of future anteriority is built into the work—an uncannily proleptic backward glance. We get the uncanny sense that at some time in the unfolding of the text, we will look back and all will have changed. Like a loud sound heard from far away, the retroactivity effect in "There was a Boy" makes sure that the poem is not just a plateau of tone.

The actual "moment," if there is one at all, since it only *becomes* actual retroactively, is a blankness. This is rendered in Wordsworth's poem by the subtle use of blank space and lineation. "But" would have differentiated things more than "And"—which is why Wordsworth does not use it (16). Ambient poetics has a mournful quality even when its explicit topic is not mourning (in fact, "There was a Boy" *is* a work of mourning). I am saying "mournful" here, but I am not distinguishing, as Freud did, between mourning and melancholia, which boils down to a distinction between proper and improper digestion. In some sense, "proper" mourning would always be too late. Having fully digested the lost object, we could never taste it again. As a section in Chapter 3 will suggest, melancholy is more apt, even more ethically appropriate, to an ecological situation in which the worst has already happened, and in which we find ourselves, like Wordsworth's narrator,



or a character in *noir* fiction, already fully implicated. In Galenic medicine, melancholy was the humor that was closest to the earth.

The moment of contact is always in the past. In this sense we never actually have it or inhabit it. We posit it afterward. An echo can only reach our ears after the sound has caused the medium to vibrate. According to the theory of relativity, all perceptual phenomena exist in the past, reaching our senses at a later date—even light, even gravity, which Newton thought was instantaneous. So the uncanny, future-anterior, retroactive—and, moreover, melancholic—qualities of ambient poetics are, ironically, accurate. They track the inevitable too-lateness of the way in which things arise. This point becomes very important when we assess why environmental writing is at such pains to convey a sense of immediacy. The immediacy is what “Romantic ecology” wants to hear in the echoes of the owls across the lake. In an astonishing bait and switch, Wordsworth withdraws this immediacy even as he appears to offer it.

The sublimity of sheer tone turns out to be dangerous for ecomimesis. Kant explicitly forbids the sublime to refer to anything “teleological.” Thus a text cannot celebrate the environmental capacity of the environment and remain sublime, no matter how much the author piles phrase on phrase. Kant puts it this way:

When we judge the sight of the ocean we must not do so on the basis of how we *think* it, enriched with all sorts of knowledge which we possess (but which is not contained in the direct intuition), e.g., as a vast realm of aquatic creatures, or as the great reservoir supplying the water for the vapors that impregnate the air with clouds for the benefit of the land, or again as an element that, while separating continents from one another, yet makes possible the greatest communication among them; for all such judgments will be teleological. Instead we must be able to view the ocean as poets do, merely in terms of what manifests itself to the eye—e.g., if we observe it while it is calm, as a clear mirror of water bounded only by the sky; or, if it turbulent, as being like an abyss threatening to engulf everything—and yet find it sublime.<sup>145</sup>

This goes for any environment, real or imagined: “when we call the sight of the starry sky *sublime*, we must not base our judgment upon any concepts of worlds that are inhabited by rational beings.” Tone comes into the orbit of the sublime, but ecomimesis deflects it, if it remains at all representational. The content of ecomimesis is thus at war with its form. Tone also threatens to collapse into sheer stimulation, what Kant calls “mere sensations of an object (gratification or pain).”<sup>146</sup>

Tone is either too abstract, or not abstract enough, for ecomimesis. Ambient poetics complicates and even disables the aims of ecomimesis, which tries to get around these complications by viewing the environment “as poets do”—that is, as an aesthetic object, or even as an analogue for the aesthetic altogether. That way the ambience of the textual environment can have just the right amount of abstraction—too little and it becomes sheer sensation; too much and it turns into something teleological. But maintaining the appropriate distance is tricky.

Ecomimesis is a specific rhetoric that generates a fantasy of nature as a surrounding atmosphere, palpable but shapeless. The ambient poetics that establishes this experience interferes with attempts to set up a unified, transcendent nature that could become a symptomatic fantasy thing. Critical close reading elicits the inconsistent properties of this ambient poetics. Ambience compromises ecomimesis because the very processes that try to convey the illusion of immediacy and naturalness keep dispelling it from within. In the language of Julia Kristeva, ambience is the *genotext* to the *phenotext* of ecomimesis. Kristeva defines the genotext: “[Genotext] will include semiotic processes but also the advent of the symbolic. The former includes drives, their disposition and their division of the body, plus the ecological and social system surrounding the body, such as objects and pre-Oedipal relations with parents. The latter encompasses the emergence of object and subject, and the constitution of nuclei of meaning involving categories: semantic and categorical fields.”<sup>147</sup> The genotext generates the phenotext, “language that serves to communicate.” Surging, pulsing “quanta” (Kristeva’s word) are the “underlying foundation” of language.<sup>148</sup> Ironically, the genotext *is* the environment, the matrix in which the subject is born and grows (“the ecological and social system surrounding the body” is part of it). It is this very environment that inhibits ecomimesis from firmly establishing an essential or substantial environmental nature of any kind. And, even more ironically, especially for Kristeva herself, who believed that the genotext had a revolutionary potential, one of the ways in which this happens is that the Cartesian self that floats above phenomena keeps rearing its ugly head, ironically in those very texts that try to flatten the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity.

In sum, one of the principal complaints against establishing a vivid, solidly real nature “out there” or “over there” is that it just fails to be convincing. This lack of believability penetrates to the very core of ecomimesis, the most potent rhetorical device for establishing a sense of

nature. The inherent instability of language, and of the human and nonhuman worlds, ensure that ecomimesis fails to deliver.

Let me say right here that the attempt to forge art and concepts that lie “in between” traditional ideas of inside and outside is noble, exciting, and the only reason why I can write this book at all. The problem comes when we start to think that there is something behind or beyond or above (in other words, outside!) the inside–outside distinction. *Not* that the distinction is real; it is entirely spurious. Thus, it is wrong to claim that there is something more real beyond inside and outside, whether that thing is a world of (sacred) nature (traditional ecological language) or machines (Deleuze and Guattari world). Yet it is equally wrong to say that there is nothing, to “believe in nothing,” as it were, and to say that he or she who has the best argument is the right one—pure nihilism. There is *not even nothing* beyond inside and outside. Getting used to that could take a lifetime, or more.



## Romanticism and the Environmental Subject

Even the elementary concepts of time and space have begun to vacillate. Space is killed by the railways. I feel as if the mountains and forests of all countries were advancing on Paris. Even now, I can smell the German linden trees; the North Sea's breakers are rolling against my door.

—HEINRICH HEINE

We now begin to contextualize ambience, the texture of ecomimesis. Contextualization is necessarily incomplete: there is always more where that came from. And almost any text contains weak ecomimesis. We can safely conclude that ecomimesis exists in various cultures. Consider Basho: “The frog jumps into the old pond / The sound of the water.”<sup>1</sup> The final line of the haiku mimics-evokes the plop of the frog, the trace of the sound, the presence of an ear and a mind that hears, all contained in a “world.” Our sense of the broad scope of ambience is right and proper. Any formalist definition of literary effects can be broadly applied. And if ambience were not a feature of rhetorical and artistic production in general, this study would have no basis.

Since all texts coordinate relationships between inside and outside, ambience, and in particular the function of the re-mark, its fundamental component, is an aspect of every text. The associated distinctions (background/foreground, sound/noise, graphics/sign, smell/scent), fall into place “after” the text has established this basic relationship. We can expect to find ambient qualities in any artwork whatsoever. We need not restrict ourselves to works that are specifically ambient, and especially not that subset of works that contain ecomimesis. In a world properly attuned to the environment, we would read poems with an eye to ecology, no matter what their content.

The universality of ambient poetics is also a condition of the very long history of ideas such as *milieu* and *ambience*, as Leo Spitzer demonstrated. Spitzer painstakingly charts a long reduction of ambi-