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Jack Karras April 2016

Frost, Auden, and the Roots of Ecopoetry

By

Jack Karras

Dr. Erwin Rosinberg
Adviser

Department of English

Dr. Erwin Rosinberg
Adviser

Dr. Christina Colvin
Committee Member

Dr. Garth Tissol
Committee Member

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By

Jack Karras

Dr. Erwin Rosinberg
Adviser

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Abstract

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As evidence for humanity's negative effects on the Earth's climate compounds, the ability to effectively relay this information to the public has become increasingly critical. Today, climate change media is swamped with commercials, posters, cartoons, articles, and interviews – so much so that poetry is often overlooked. Ecopoetry nevertheless combines its accessibility with its capacity to spread concise emotional appeals in a way that makes it uniquely effective when matched against other forms of climate change media. While it is impossible to fully grasp climate change without understanding the scientific data supporting its existence, the public will not engage in our effort to save the planet without *caring* – this is why we need ecopoetry. "Frost, Auden, and the Roots of Ecopoetry" focuses on the evolution of ecopoetry and argues that modernist poets such as Robert Frost and W.H. Auden are necessary intermediaries between Romanticism and contemporary ecopoetry. Throughout their catalogues Frost and Auden restructure the Romantic concept of the "egotistical sublime" into an "everyday sublime," culminating in the transformation of nature poetry from a genre absorbed by nature's overwhelming grandeur into a genre largely rooted in environmental ethics and conservation.

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Introduction

In his book *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets*, Leonard Scigaj writes that "all nature poetry is obviously not automatically environmental poetry, even in the contemporary present." I agree; there is a perceptible difference between "nature poetry" of the past, often tied to the pastoral or Romantic traditions, and contemporary ecopoetry. While nature poetry is often classified as "natural" because of its setting, Scigaj states that contemporary ecopoetry is notable for its shift toward "environmental ethics, for here the environmental writer allows nonhuman living things to have habitats and histories of their own." This is the definition of ecopoetry that I too will adopt because it captures the ethical spirit of contemporary ecopoetry that I find particularly emblematic of the genre. Ecopoetry is distinct from the modernist nature poetry that comes before it as well as the Romantic nature poetry of even earlier times because ecopoetry is written in the midst of a large volume of new scientific information regarding climate change. Therefore, although there are certainly remnants of Frost and Auden still living within contemporary ecopoetry, its focus is concentrated more directly on eco-ethics.

While Romanticism, modernism, and contemporary ecopoetry all have very strong ties to natural settings, these genres are often regarded as distinct from one another; I, however, contend that modernist nature poetry acts as a bridge that connects Romanticism to ecopoetry and that without modernism, ecopoetry could not exist. Modernist poets such as Robert Frost and W.H. Auden are able to do this by restructuring the Romantic "egotistical sublime" into an "everyday sublime." Romantic poets, most notably William

Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, John Keats, and Percy Shelley, thought of nature as monumental and awe-inspiring, yet also portrayed it as something necessary to experience firsthand. The result of their language is a sense of "egoism," a term that adequately expresses the notion that Romanticists viewed the personal experience of the natural world's grandeur as its most "real" form of beauty. Poems such as Wordsworth's "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" and Shelley's "Mont Blanc" exemplify this principle. In his book *Negative Capability: The Intuitive Approach in Keats*, Professor Walter Jackson Bate defines the egotistical sublime as requiring "de-personalization, both spiritual and psychological, a sympathetic objectification that was all encompassing and capable of projecting itself onto all other beings and things in nature… carried out in the name of 'Poetry's naturalness' and in that of the poet himself." Put more simply, the egotistical sublime is not something the Romantics believe is common or can be invoked without a totally flush sense of overwhelming emotion at the natural world's outward beauty.

There are writings from Romantic poets themselves that also expound on the nature of their egoism. In William Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, for example, Wordsworth lays out a schema for thinking about Romantic ballads that further develops the egotistical sublime. He states, "My habits of meditation have so formed my feelings, as that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite those feelings, will be found to carry along with them a *purpose*," which suggests that, to Wordsworth, a lyrical ballad derives its purpose from a specific feeling that can only be attained through the self-reflection of a monumental experience. This sentiment is paired with Wordsworth's claim that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," a claim that dramatically contrasts Frost and Auden's commonplace settings which often do not center around an

"overflow" of feelings, but instead subtlety. Frost and Auden's concentration on the subtlety of the natural world and its ability to act as a placeholder for human emotion is perhaps the largest disparity that exists between modernist nature poetry and the Romantic examples that come before it. Rather than recounting a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," the modernists trace more nuanced feelings of beauty that arise under more conventional circumstances. Wordsworth also emphasizes the fact that when poets imitate the stylistic techniques of Shakespeare, Milton, and other influential writers, their poems appear to be diluted and inauthentic – Wordsworth comments on "style," and notes that imitating "mechanical devices" takes away from communicating the "real language of men." Therefore, rather egotistically, Wordsworth suggests that the constraints of language are what keep him from a sort of poetic perfection, implying that emotions can never be adequately conveyed through poetry alone. While Robert Frost and W.H. Auden were well-versed in Romantic poetry (even borrowing from it at times), their poetry seems to explore a version of the sublime that does not necessarily require ballads or vaulting language that the Romantics use to best target the "real language" Wordsworth speaks of; instead, their perception of the sublime is one rooted in the beauty of everyday life, placing emphasis on commonplace events as opposed to monumental ones. The mood evoked by Frost and Auden is one more reminiscent to contemporary ecopoetry than Romanticism precisely because one of their core modifications to the Romantic tradition is their divergence from focusing on ballad-worthy occasions. This modernist technique seems to align Frost and Auden with ecopoetry in such a way that makes their intimate link with contemporary ecopoetry undoubtable, flying completely contrary to the notion that modernism and contemporary ecopoetry can be understood as largely unrelated.

In her essay "The Surrender of the Body in Mary Oliver and Amy Clampitt's Ecopoetry," Martina Antretter defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." The key phrase in this definition is "relationship." Although Romanticism focused on the overwhelming feelings incited by the natural world, a relationship implies a sort of mutual engagement with one another – I contend that a *mutual engagement* with the natural world is something found extensively throughout the modernist nature poetry of Frost and Auden whereas the egoism present in Romanticism treats humanity's interaction with nature as a spectacle rather than a pure relationship. While Frost and Auden are not considered to be contemporary (Frost and Auden wrote nearly 100 years ago and did not author poems with the modern concern of climate change in mind), seeing the similarities of Frost and Auden to contemporary ecopoets while also acknowledging their antecedence to Romanticism reveals their necessary place in poetic history: the bridge between Romanticism and ecopoetry. To understand how modernists such as Frost and Auden bridge the gap between Romantic thinking and contemporary ecopoetry, it is necessary to highlight why ecopoetry is relevant and effective today; additionally, it is important to address both why and how modernism was instrumental in the emergence of contemporary ecopoetry. While Romanticism is interested in capturing the emotions evoked by the natural world's awe-inspiring scenery, the heart of ecopoetry is an ethical conversation of the natural world as it relates to a growing body of research indicating that the Earth's climate is changing rapidly due to post-industrial revolution pollution. Poetry, unlike scientific data or research papers, has the ability to spread a uniquely concise emotional appeal that can focus on the data's implications rather than its mathematical nuances. An example of a

poem that is rooted in science but makes use of a more humanistic emotional appeal is "For a Coming Extinction" by W.S. Merwin. The poem's opening lines, "Grey whale, / Now that we are sending you to The End," are grim, with the capitalized "End" referencing the title's "Coming Extinction." Although the poem references climate change indirectly, the focus of the poem can be interpreted as an emotional appeal to address the climate change data the author presumes the reader is aware of. This is different from both the Romantics, who attempt to convey their powerful and lofty emotions in what has been described as an "egotistical" manner, and modernists, whose poetry does not directly or indirectly reflect scientific records. The takeaway from contemporary ecopoetry is to recognize that it likely could not have existed without the intermediary poetry of the modernists – the phasing out of the egotistical sublime into an "everyday sublime" generated interest in the natural world from people who otherwise might not have closely read or understood the Romantics. Additionally, the accessible language of Frost and Auden allowed their poetry to be intimately relatable to people from the streets of New York City to the countryside of Vermont – not simply those fortunate enough to witness the spectacles of Tintern Abbey or Mont Blanc.

Another key ingredient in a discussion of Frost and Auden is the nature of "modernism." In his book *The Concept of Modernism*, Professor Astradur Eysteinsson states that "there is a rapidly spreading agreement that 'modernism' is a legitimate concept broadly signifying a paradigmatic shift, a major revolt, beginning in the mid- and late nineteenth century, against the prevalent literary and aesthetic traditions of the Western world." This definition suits Frost and Auden well because both poets restructure the "egoism" found within Romantic nature poetry and renovate it into something that more

closely resembles contemporary ecopoetry than what was considered "traditional" nature poetry. If modernism can be defined vaguely as an update of tradition, which I believe it can, then the discussion of Frost and Auden as updates to Romanticism can ensue because they, like the ecopoets who follow them, modernize the state of nature poetry. In other words, an understanding of both Romanticism and contemporary ecopoetry reveals that the modernist poetry of Robert Frost and W.H. Auden bridges the gap between these genres. By spreading the appeal of nature poetry and dissolving the egotistical sublime into an everyday sublime, Frost and Auden are able to generate a passion of the natural world that is intimate for their readers. Frost and Auden, in introducing these concepts, also build the groundwork for ethical conversations about nature that, once coupled with scientific advancements, allowed for the creation of contemporary ecopoetry. In his book *The West Side of Any Mountain: Place, Space, and Ecopoetry*, J. Scott Bryson defines the contemporary ecopoet: "Put simply, ecopoets offer a vision of the world that values the interaction between two interdependent and seemingly paradoxical desires, both of which are attempts to respond to the modern divorce between humanity and the rest of nature: (1) to *create place*, making a conscious and concerted effort to know more-than-human world around us; and (2) to *value space*, recognizing the extent to which that very world is ultimately unknowable." When looking at place and space, the two critical factors in Bryson's ecopoetic definition, it is apparent that modernists such as Frost and Auden are the link between Romanticism and contemporary ecopoetry. Frost and Auden write about places in spaces that, within the egotistical model of poetry, were not grandiose enough to be given space between the margins; however, the modernist shift toward the "everyday sublime" restructured this model and allowed the contemporary ecopoetic tradition to

commence.

Robert Frost: Definitively Modern

Robert Frost's relationship to modernism is one rooted in the New England countryside – his scenic home, however, did not alleviate a series of tensions that plagued Frost for much of his life. Frost, a teacher and farmer before becoming a career poet, was undoubtedly influenced by his rural upbringing during his writing process – Frost's commonplace settings and the artful complexity of his seemingly mundane subject matter reflect this. However, the darker shades of Frost's life are also reflected within his poems: as Howard Bloom notes in his research guide *Robert Frost*, "feeling that he was not valued as highly as modernist writers such as Pound and T.S. Eliot, he frequently jockeyed for compensation and recognition, and complained that he did not receive a Nobel Prize." Frost's dissatisfaction with his position within modernism can also be seen throughout his poetry's rather somber musings on the nature of choices, learning, and aging. Throughout Frost's body of poetry, his use of the natural world as a placeholder for human emotion highlights his interest in the relationship between humanity and nature. Additionally, Frost is interested in the role chance plays within nature and how we, as humans, interact with chance. For example, in Frost's famous poem "The Road Not Taken" the speaker states that he or she shall tell "this with a sigh / Somewhere ages and ages hence," suggesting there's something nostalgic in the retelling of the poem – a situation that, at its broadest, is about the act of making choices at the expense of other options and the feeling of never being able to realize those options. For this reason, Frost's poetry seems to give a

bleak but earnest look into the sorts of feelings people experience every day while contemplating nature.

In Frost's poetry, his uniquely rural style is highlighted in his ability to demonstrate that the value of the natural world is not entirely wrapped up in its physical matter – this is not only a sign that he truly is a modernist, but it also shows his deviation from prior Romantic traditions. An example of this technique is Frost's 1915 poem "Birches" which, although centered around birch trees, is an abstract contemplation on growing up. Throughout "Birches," Frost updates the Romantic philosophy which argues for the admiration of nature's grand physicality to call for an admiration of how birches can, in addition to being physically beautiful, also be a vehicle for understanding human emotions. From its onset, "Birches" uses language that wavers between the physical and fantastical features of birch trees, culminating in the realization that both depictions are "true" in their own right – throughout the poem, Frost will switch off between language that emphasizes the ways in which birches are tangible trees as well as the ways in which birches can reflect human growth. This is striking because unlike Romantic poetry that attempted to uncover nature's objective beauty through its egotistical lens, Frost suggests that the love of nature can be entirely personal and subject to the viewer's desires – in other words, Frost is rejecting the Romantic idea that it is the poet's responsibility to share his or her overwhelming and powerful feelings with an audience. Instead, Frost is offering his readers a chance to create their own beauty. The poem's opening sentence ushers the reader into this juxtaposition between the physical and the abstract realities of birch trees by introducing a peculiar thought: birches bend because a boy's been swinging them. Although the reader is meant to understand that birches might realistically "bend to the left

and right / Across the lines of straighter and darker trees," the speaker's suggestion that "some boy's been swinging them" is fathomable in the realm of metaphor. From this point on, "Birches" seems to not only be a meditation on subjectivity and experience, but also an exploration of the uncanny relationship between familiarity and unfamiliarity. In other words, birches act as a vehicle through which the speaker can analyze his or her experiences within both the physical and abstract realms. This relationship is first explored when the speaker longingly states "But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay / As ice-storms do." Beginning the sentence with "but" is the speaker's first suggestion, almost directly to the reader, that he or she is searching for a world in which the unrealistic suggestion that swinging can bend birches might be true. In other words, close reading reveals that the speaker seems to beckon the reader to join him or her on a journey away from objective truth toward a more subjective, abstract reality in which birches can both be bent by ice and swinging. "But" is a word that not only indicates hesitation, but also subtly conveys the speaker's desire. This stands completely contrary to what is understood as stereotypically Romantic because the Romanticists were purveyors of objective beauty and would likely not have written about the ways in which nature can be metaphorically molded to different peoples' experiences. Ultimately, this craving to participate in both the real and abstract realms will culminate by engaging the reader in an exploration of his or her own experiences. The poem's first few sentences act as a precursor to the poem's consistently wavering language that beckons us to try and understand "our" world through the eyes of the natural world just as the speaker does.

Within the vast universe of trees, birches are particularly magical. During dusk and dawn their white bark often glows, preserving the first and last glimpses of that day's

sunlight in their sheen; during more wintery seasons they often camouflage themselves within ice and snow. Frost is certainly aware of how uniquely striking birches are and, through vivid imagery, uses the beauty of birches as a trigger for the speaker's emotions. The speaker's use of the second-person singular "you" is both engaging and intimate as it harkens back to singular moments of beauty in both the speaker and reader's pasts; this language is a gesture of intimacy. "Often you must have seen them / Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning / After a rain" is not a generic description – it is so specific and so hauntingly nuanced (calling attention to odd, non-generic specificities such as "a sunny winter morning" and "after a rain") that the reader cannot help but feel that the speaker's emotions are tightly bound to visual illustrations of things that happened in his or her life. Once again, we see that the egotistical lens of Romanticism is tossed away in favor of a more everyday lens that can apply to anyone. Frost seems to suggest that the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings Wordsworth writes about in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* can be achieved during moments that are *not* extraordinary – Frost sees that powerful feelings, instead, can be achieved by these rather ordinary scenes he writes about in "Birches." This appears, if nothing else, to be a call for a reassessment of the value we as readers place in the natural world; within "Birches," nature is serving as the speaker's emotional fortress and as a trigger for his or her emotions. Frost's modernist reassessment, therefore, seems to stem from the fact that humanity often views the natural world as a "placeholder" rather than recognizing the very necessary value of it simply existing. Frost shows that nature does not have to mean the same thing to everyone, and by simply acknowledging its existence we are acknowledging that there are people, even if we cannot relate with their particular emotions, who use the natural world as a harbor for their emotions. At this

moment, Frost appears particularly modern – his poem can be read not only a call to appreciate nature for its abstract ability to conserve emotion, but also as a call to conserve nature because of how intimately humanity can relate with it. It is in this idea that the poem's primary conflict is established: although the speaker is intimately attached to the birches within the physical realm, he or she is never able to entirely escape the possibility that these trees are bending from a more human, metaphorical power. We see the speaker juggling multiple forms versions of truth. Just as the speaker strays deeply into the poem's beautiful and erupting language depicting birches as shedding "crystal shells / Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust-- / Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away / You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen," he or she cannot help but return to the more humanistic suggestion that swinging bends birches. The speaker's wavering language is a nod to a productive, yet elusive tension: is it possible to move toward a more subjective, individual form of truth that allows for the speaker's suggestion that birches are bent by swinging to be accepted? Frost would argue that yes, both versions of "truth" can coexist because the physical beauty of birches can act as the catalyst for the speaker's emotions, resulting in an inseparable connection between the physical and abstract worlds.

A natural question that arises from Frost's distance from Romanticism is whether or not humanity should attribute the same weight to abstract truths as physical truths. These questions are of the sort that Judith Oster, author of "Frost's Poetry of Metaphor," is contemplating when she bluntly asks: "What is this poem *about?*" Oster's relatively simply query is useful because after meditating on both the the boy and ice storms, the speaker's focus seems to tether between highly contradictory ideas – abstract truth and earthly physicality – in a way that makes deconstructing the poem difficult. This level of depth

Oster acknowledges is what harbors the poem's contemplative qualities. This question can begin to be addressed when the speaker confrontationally inserts, "But I was going to say when Truth ["Truth" being capitalized in this instance to represent an objective version of truth] broke in / With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm / I should prefer to have some boy bend them / As he went out and in to fetch the cows— / Some boy too far from town to learn baseball, / Whose only play was what he found himself, / Summer or winter, and could play alone." Here, the speaker breaks into detail as oddly specific as the physical descriptions that came before it, exhibiting an engaging intensity that forces the reader to entertain the possibility that boys do, in some manner, bend birches. Particular specificity, I believe, layers the poem with personal intimacy and a sense that the speaker is not unlike the reader who, more likely than not, also is compelled by the world's peculiarities and overlays emotion on top of nature.

As "Birches" unfolds, it becomes clear that Frost's ability to develop the birch tree into a character in both the physical and metaphysical realms is one of the reasons the poem is so relatable. Moreover, even the speaker's most cosmic contemplations of nature are rooted to human experience through visceral, physical language. It becomes apparent throughout the poem that birches are the ideal figures through which to contemplate emotions and explore the nature of subjective truth. While birches are physically haunting and visually peculiar in comparison to other trees, even when they reach toward the heavens they remain bolted into the ground by their roots, thereby spanning both the physical and fantastical realms. I believe that this sort of interplay between the material and metaphysical realms in terms of the natural world is jarring; it allows the reader to

explore the physical aspects of nature while simultaneously breaching a more contemporary view of the natural world.

This crossover is represented when the speaker suggests, "So was I once myself a swinger of birches. / And so I dream of going back to be." Here, the speaker confesses that being a swinger of birches is not purely fantasy, attesting not only that he has swung from birches, but that he would like to swing from them again. It is at this moment within "Birches" that we truly witness the convergence of the physical and metaphysical realms, with the reader invited to accept both ice storms and a swinging boy as separate, but equally real "truths" regarding the bent birches. In other words, "Birches" encourages us to accept both physical and emotional, nostalgic, abstract realities as experiential truth. As the poem concludes, Frost uses adopts gripping, wavering language that supports this sentiment and allows the speaker's yearning and emotional voice to flourish:

> I'd like to get away from earth awhile
> And then come back to it and begin over.
> May no fate willfully misunderstand me
> And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
> Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
> I don't know where it's likely to go better.
> I'd like to do by climbing a birch tree,
> And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
> *Toward* heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
> But dipped its top and set me down again.
> That would be good both going and coming back.
> One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

This concluding section of "Birches" is particularly compelling because its language is apprehensively nostalgic in its desire for a glimpse into the cosmos while remaining

attached to the physicality of the natural world. As Oster points out, it is odd that the speaker would claim "Earth's the right place for love" when "he just has been talking about pain and weariness, memories of himself being a swinger of birches, of a pathless wood, and a weeping eye." Oster's observation is that the speaker's language appears paradoxical, and therefore (productively) confusing regarding how Earth could be the ideal location for love amidst its negativity. This confusion can be characterized as productive because it is a reflection of the speaker's fixation on the nature of "Truth" and ultimately the key to unlocking the poem's stance on love – the confusion reflects the fact that the world, in the speaker's eyes, is so subjective. On the one hand, Earth exists within its physical properties; on the other, however, it exists metaphysically, and as Oster would argue, *through* metaphor. In other words, the speaker's discovery is that Earth is the right place for love because here, unique to the rest of the universe as far as we can tell, is the only place where love can exist in both physical and metaphysical terms.

Ultimately Frost, throughout the poem, shows that perhaps the natural world *is* our vehicle for accessing emotions that often seem fleeing, abstract, and indefinite. "Birches" is moving not because of the speaker's story, but because it is curiously relatable through its implication that anyone can be a swinger of birches and access these layered passions that, as Frost and other modernists interestingly point out, are contained within our natural spaces. Thus, it is not a stretch to suggest that "Birches" seems to redefine the role of the natural world within the realm of poetry; rather than existing as something to behold (in the Romantic sense), the speaker shows that nature's value is also a result of its ability to relate to people and reflect human life, and in this case growing up.

Another characteristic of the modernist moment Frost participates in is the use of the natural world as a participatory character within his poetry. Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is an example of a poem that deviates from Romanticism and uses the natural world as a character within its world. While the Romantic tradition uses the natural world as a setting for the purpose of being witnessed ("Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," "Kubla Khan," and "Mont Blanc" are all examples), "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" modifies this trend by using its setting as a dynamic and personified force within the poem. This technique allows the reader to feel the presence of the woods just as the speaker might have – this is an entirely contrary to Romanticism which often features more static landscapes that speakers behold rather than immerse themselves in. Specifically, Frost's tone surrounds the woods in mystery, a technique that in itself reinvents the natural world's value by making the reader ponder for him or herself what its contents are. This poem, like "Birches," is a contemplation of how we perceive experience through a more abstract view of the natural world. The first line of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" introduces the poem's contemplative narrator who states, "Whose woods these are I think I know." Even within the first sentence Frost immediately subordinates nature into humanity's possession – *someone* owns these woods. To elaborate, our introduction to the realm of the poem is a classical one that references the land's physicality; in other words, suggesting that the woods are "someone's" implies that the speaker's frame of reference when addressing the natural world is one related to the land's monetary value, but not its emotional or personal value. This sentiment is exacerbated by the use of "He" once and "His" twice within the first stanza, placing emphasis on the land's personal ownership – what we find, however, is that the poem's

land inspires and reinvigorates our speaker even as he very consciously communicates that he is the land's patron, but *not* its owner. This point is well worth drawing out because it is especially compelling that the speaker is inspired by land that is indisputably not his. Further, the woods are owned by someone "in the village" who "will not see me stopping here," creating an interesting juxtaposition between the land owner's detachment and the speaker's intimacy with the woods. Another facet of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" that diverges slightly from "Birches" is the portrayal of the forest's immense darkness. Even before the reader is told in the second stanza that it is "The darkest evening of the year," the woods seem to envelop the speaker. It is this participatory and non-physical interaction between the woods and the speaker that allows us to reevaluate nature's value. This is not to say that Frost is opposing the buying and selling of land; instead, he shows that value can take multiple forms, with the land's monetary value being entirely separate from the more internal value the speaker experiences within the poem. Frost's technique, therefore, is to show that value can be expressed in ways that it may not have been in poetry of the past.

Another element of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is its treatment of time. The poem feels far more drawn out than its action allows for (the poem is a long-winded expression of a moment that probably lasted only a few seconds) because the dark night and dense woods illuminate the narrator's solitude, placing the reader in a state of heightened consciousness, harkening to Romanticists such as Shelley and Wordsworth who were also proponents of an "elevated" sublimity. The key difference between "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and the Romantic version of sublimity, however, is that Frost's language constructs a forest that appears to have a consciousness of its own in addition to

the speaker – this is the antithesis of egotistical, speaker-centric Romanticism. Frost's style in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is the same sort of environmental consciousness that proponents of climate change awareness strive to incite today because oftentimes nature is taken for granted as a permanent fixture rather than a stopping place, as in this poem. Further, in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" the narrator seems to be enthralled by the loftiness of the trees as he "watch[es] the woods fill up with snow," perpetuating the longstanding belief that nature's imposing stature bears a sort of reverent power. It is easy to imagine yourself in this scene and to feel the presence of the forest that is undoubtedly present, but unseen. The language Frost uses in illustrating the forest fully incorporates it as a character of the poem alongside the speaker and his horse.

The second stanza of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" intensifies the poem's feeling of isolation:

> My little horse must think it queer
> To stop without a farmhouse near
> Between the woods and frozen lake
> The darkest evening of the year.

Juxtaposing the phrases "little horse," "darkest evening," and "without a farmhouse near" against each other shows how vulnerable the speaker and his horse seem to be within the woods. Additionally, being "between" the woods and lake as well as watching the "woods fill up with snow" makes the speaker seem as if he is being watched – it feels as if the speaker stumbled into a snow globe. This setting is the ideal location for introspection because the dark woods spotlight the speaker's solitude, placing both the reader and speaker in a state of increased awareness as I mentioned previously. This, more than anything, is the spark that allows the speaker to harness the land's metaphysical value.

One of Frost's hallmarks is engaging a broad range of senses, which he seems to accomplish within the first three stanzas of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" effectively. The speaker is clearly aware of snow filling up the forest which one can easily imagine impairs his vision as he rides through the blackened forest, and we are also shown how quiet the woods are. Put simply, we are told that the forest is affecting the speaker physically. I read this to mean that the natural world takes on a life of its own within the poem, participating in the poem as a "living" character as much as the speaker and his horse.

When reading "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," the clash between civilization and the natural world is readily apparent. As in "Birches," the core of the poem is the convergence of these two unlike worlds. While the property-owning, seemingly disciplined material world is meant to contrast against the natural landscape the speaker finds himself riding through, the woods are not particularly "wild" as the reader expect them to be – instead, they feel conscious and dynamic as well as lofty, vast, and dark. And, although dark, I do not feel that this forest is empty. Rather, its vivacity shows through Frost's enigmatic and soaring language, making me feel as if the speaker is being watched by the forest's trees and other hidden creatures. Additionally, it is important to note that while the speaker's anxiety of the unknown is felt, it is not overwhelming. Instead, the forest feels peculiarly protective as it surrounds the speaker, filling his world with gentle snowflakes. With this in mind, a central component of the reader's experience is the way in which the these hard-to-articulate aspects are so relatable we can all imagine ourselves in the speaker's position even if we have not lived through a parallel experience. Similar to "Birches," it is the fact that the natural world can exist as a participatory character that distances itself from earlier Romanticism.

While “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” is largely reflective of “Birches” throughout, its fourth stanza is especially metaphysical in nature and, under my interpretation, very distinctly “modern:”

> The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
> But I have promises to keep,
> And miles to go before I sleep,
> And miles to go before I sleep.

It is perhaps strange after describing the woods as so dark and cold that they would be (seemingly) contradictorily be described as “lovely,” but it would be a mistake to assume that the first three stanzas are not equally lovely. To elaborate, I believe that watching the woods fill up with snow and stopping apprehensively under the dark night sky are both lovely because of the drive they represent. I other words, I believe that the modernist moment in which the value of the natural world can be seen in the fact that the speaker stopped in the midst of a dark and snowy forest in order to take note of the loftiness of the forest around him. This loftiness, as opposed to being frightening or ominous, is compelling – the speaker is rejuvenated. “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” ends with suggestion of “vague” promises and a journey that has not yet been completed. The final line’s repetition is especially powerful because both lines have slightly different meanings; while the first “And miles to go before I sleep” seems to refer to a worldly sojourn, its immediate repetition is a call to something greater. In a similar way to “Birches” contemplating the infinite by way of climbing a birch tree into the heavens, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” contemplates the infinite through the forest’s loftiness and the speaker’s fleeting hesitation and vague promises.

When comparing "Birches" to "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," it becomes clear that Frost's poetic vision is in some way derived from an intense feeling of mutual acknowledgement between man and nature. There no better poem to demonstrate this idea concisely than the melodic, six-line "Fireflies in the Garden." This poem, in a few short lines, combines the metaphysical contemplation of "Birches" with "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening's" lofty physicality:

> Here come real stars to fill the upper skies,
> And here on earth come emulating flies,
> That though they never equal stars in size,
> (And they were never really stars at heart)
> Achieve at times a very star-like start.
> Only, of course, they can't sustain the part.

"Fireflies in the Garden" is striking because of its unlikely but instantly understandable comparison between stars and fireflies. To grasp this juxtaposition, it is important to recognize the word "come" in the context of the poem. While stars are often viewed as fixed to the night sky, Frost uses motion to give them the firefly-like quality of motion by having both the stars and fireflies "come" into the scene, which animates them and gives them a more interactive disposition. This is the same sort of linguistic technique Frost uses in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" in creating a seemingly conscious, lofty forest that envelops the speaker – in both instances, the setting of the poem feels "alive" as a direct result of Frost's subtle but vivacious diction. This is at the heart of Helen Bacon's argument in her essay "Frost and the Ancient Muses." Bacon states that Frost "refrained from the kind of obvious learning, sometimes accompanied by footnotes, that impressed readers of Pound and Eliot." In other words, Frost's style (as seen within the first three

poems discussed within this paper as well as many other of his works) is one that is illustrative rather than instructive – it does not rely on blunt explanation. To that end, it is important to note that "Fireflies in the Garden," while ostensibly simple, also provides metaphysical contemplation through its simple yet powerful fusion of fireflies and stars. Bacon describes this phenomenon quite well in her analysis of Frost's poem "The Pasture." She states that this poem "is an example of the way an utterly simple poem, apparently restricted to rural New England realities, can talk about 'everything' in terms of New England." Similarly, "Fireflies in the Garden" explores the "everything" Bacon refers to – within a few lines, "Fireflies in the Garden" meditates the nature of change, destiny, humanity, and what it means to be alive. Throughout my discussion on Frost, I believe that one of the most important linkages connecting each of the poems I have chosen is Frost's ability to call attention to more issues than explicitly stated between the margins.

While "Birches," "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," and "Fireflies in the Garden" participate within a modernist moment in which the natural world is reevaluated predominately because of their ability to show that man and nature are metaphysically intertwined, Frost also has a series of poems that are more theoretical in style that use the natural world as a means through which to deliver more broad dialogue on human experience. These poems, unlike those mentioned previously, are not focused on a speaker's orientation within nature; rather, these poems are broad hypotheses on the ways in which the world is poetically constructed. "Fire and Ice," for example, stretches the imagination toward a more harmonious, balanced view of the natural world's power without having an auditory speaker:

Some say the world will end in fire,

Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if I had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

In lines 1 and 2 Frost creates lore about the world's finality which feels eerie because the end of the world does not seem graspable, yet intimate because both fire and ice are so familiar. The realm of the poem, in this instance, is entirely metaphysical which allows a sort of out-of-body contemplation of the world's destruction. Additionally, there is a mysterious beauty in Frost's characterization of fire and ice which is partially due to his captivating language, but also due to the very idea that the world will be consumed by either fire or ice – an almost mythological proposition. For example, linking the destruction of the world via fire to "what I've tasted of desire" feels timeless and calls to mind tragedies of antiquity. This idea, much like the metaphysical meaning of birches, allows us to view the world through a lens fixated on the more abstract components of the natural world that have been mused over for thousands of years; because of this unique treatment of the natural world, I believe it is appropriate to claim that Frost is willingly participating in the tradition of poetic naturalism while, alongside the body of his work, takes place within a modernist moment that would spring forth modern ecopoetry.

Ultimately, "Fire and Ice," as well as poems such as "Nothing Gold Can Stay" and "Dust of Snow" reveal the lengths to which Frost was consumed by the interaction of humanity with the natural world. Whether it be an exploration of the end of the world or

something more lighthearted such as a speaker being hit with falling snow from a tree, Frost never ceases to use intimate, engaging language that dramatically personalizes the reading experience. This is why reading a Frost poem is such a unique undertaking, and why I argue that he helped shape modern ecopoetry – to sum up Frost's purpose simply, he shows how compelling the natural world is even in the most unlikely of situations.

A fitting poem that combines the themes found in many Frost poems is "Into My Own," a poem that uses the natural world to underscore a speaker's journey. The poem's first stanza is austere and incorporates a vision of the natural world into the difficulties as well as the comforts the speaker faces:

> One of my wishes is that those dark trees,
> So old and firm they scarcely show the breeze,
> Were not, as 'twere, the merest mask of gloom,
> But stretched away unto the edge of doom.

The "dark trees," haunting yet "old" and reliable, seem to offer the speaker comfort. Rather than appearing dangerous, as one might expect, the trees seem to be a reference point of guidance for the speaker who, through his commitment to the natural world, ultimately finds himself "sure of all I thought was true." "Into My Own" is a poem that shows the speaker's reverence to the natural world while not coming off as overly egotistical – he appears to be content in his solitude within the outstretched landscape. Unlike the static version of the natural world often painted within Romanticism (Shelley's vision of Mont Blanc, Coleridge's crossing of the Alps, and Wordsworth's trip to Tintern Abbey come to mind), "Into My Own" shows that nature can accompany, and even reassure, the speaker's journey.

One of Frost's lesser known poems, "Sand Dunes," exemplifies the contentious tone of "Into My Own" making it feel more like a metaphorical reflection on humanity than a poem exclusively about nature. The poem's first stanza, referring to the cyclical nature of ocean waves, is written with looming language that sets up the poem's primary observation:

> Sea waves are green and wet,
> But up from where they die,
> Rise others vaster yet,
> And those are brown and dry.

Although "Sand Dunes" was written well before the contemporary ecopoetry movement, Frost's language pits the natural world against its human counterparts. We see waves and dunes harshly jutting out of the earth in the poem's first stanza, which attempt to "bury in solid sand / The men she could not drown." This metaphorical use of sand dunes feels modern because the poem appears to be a battle for earth's surface with nature pushing back against humanity's oppression – this is not unlike the battle for conservation that contemporary ecopoets engage in today. In the third stanza of "Sand Dunes" the speaker implies that the most dangerous aspect of humanity is the mind, an idea supported by, "But she [nature] does not know mankind / If by and change of shape, / She hopes to cut off mind." Let us compare this sort of language to the verbiage in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," a Romantic poem that also incorporates a battle between man and nature. Within "Kubla Khan," the speaker calls out:

> But oh! That deep romantic chasm which slanted
> Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
> A savage place! As holy and enchanted
> As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted

> By woman wailing for her demon-lover!
> And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
> As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
> A mighty fountain momently was forced.

This passage from "Kubla Khan" displays Coleridge's exclamatory rhetoric and fairy tale-like imagery, techniques very distinct from Frost's cold realism. The disparity between Coleridge and Frost's language in these fundamentally similar passages helps to display the difference between depictions of the natural world within Romanticism and modernism – while Romanticism is grounded in overwhelming, exclamatory, and unearthly imagery, the modernism of Frost is colder and more existential in nature, lending itself more readily to comparisons with contemporary ecopoetry.

Modern ecopoetry can only exist on the backbone of readers and authors who deeply *care* about nature; this feeling of "care" is something Frost is exceptional at inspiring, albeit in more abstract terms than modern ecopoets: as a reader I want to know what the speaker's promises are in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and what he or she is contemplating in the poem's moment of hesitation; I want to understand the speaker's metaphorical underpinning in "Fire and Ice," I want to visualize both fireflies and stars in one melded field of view. Regardless of the poem, Frost makes his readers care, which I contend is an absolutely critical leap toward today's contemporary ecocriticism. While Frost's poetry was a product of the modernist movement, it also acts as the genesis of contemporary ecopoetry because of his devotion to the reader's experience with nature. It is this metaphysical engagement that compels his readers to recognize the necessity of preserving both the material and intangible cultures related to the natural world. For this reason, I believe that Frost's poetry falls into a peculiar segment of nature poetry that is

neither entirely pastoral nor entirely environmentalist (in the modern, eco-ethical sense). Instead, to borrow once more from J. Scott Bryson's book *The West Side of Any Mountain: Place, Space, and Ecopoetry,* it "both connects with and diverges from earlier [and later] versions of nature poetry" into a category of its own.

W.H. Auden's Relationship with the Natural World

Like Robert Frost, W.H. Auden's poetry is essential to the creation of modern ecopoetry because it compels the reader, much like Frost's poems, to invest in a contemplation of the uncanny intimacy between humanity and the natural world – Auden, however, goes about this reevaluation in a manner unlike Frost. While Frost's poetry was largely inspired by New England's scenic landscapes, Auden was a more urban poet inspired by the cityscapes of New York and Berlin. While Frost is notably remembered for his complex rural settings, I believe Auden's contribution lies in his mastery of revealing the ways in which we view cities through a natural lens – in other words, I believe that Auden, unlike Frost, superimposes the intimacy Frost invokes in scenic New England over cityscapes to reveal that urbanism cannot exist without the contrasting force of the natural world.

"September 1, 1939," a poem set directly before the start of World War II, exemplifies Auden's juxtaposition of the natural world and the city. The poem's first three lines, "I sit in one of the dives / On Fifty-second Street / Uncertain and afraid" seem to immediately combine the grittiness of the city with the trepidation and anxiety incited in a more natural setting. Auden, in just a few words, is able to overlay the "wild" uncertainty of Frost's forested settings onto the urban sprawl of New York City. While modern ecopoetry often views cities with a critical eye because of the association between urban expansion and industrial pollution, Auden is able to tap into a more humanistic side of urbanism that includes emotions typically evoked by nature. As the poem progresses, the speaker's insecurities shine. Within the first stanza, the speaker calls the 1930s a "dishonest decade"

and states that "Waves of anger and fear / Circulate over the bright / And darkened lands of the earth," highlighting the dismal outlook entering World War II, and the existential, primal fears associated with the impending world war. Additionally, the speaker highlights the world's desensitization to the caustic horrors of war in noting that the populous is "Obsessing our private lives; / The unmentionable odor of death / Offends the September night." Very notable is the fact that the odor of human destruction and impending war offends the night itself; Auden, particularly within this poem, is able to effectively portray not only the anxieties of war, but also the effect this has on the state of the natural world. With this in mind, it is easy to understand how the modernist "everyday sublime" can be found within the depths of New York City, albeit an iteration of the sublime fueled by apprehension. In other words, the undefinable, pit-of-your-stomach feelings evoked at the onset of war can be felt reverberating through the bones of the city, with the "sublime" referring to the poet's attempt to define the indefinite. Sublimity, therefore, is meant simply as a way to define the elusive feelings that underpin the relationship between the natural world and the city within the realm of the poem. Auden identifies this "everyday sublime" and juxtaposes New York City and the natural world by oscillating between natural and artificial language in the poem's fifth stanza:

> Faces along the bar
> Cling to their average day:
> The lights must never go out,
> The music must always play,
> All the conventions conspire
> To make this fort assume
> The furniture of home;
> Lest we should see where we are,

Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.

Within this stanza Auden contemplates what would happen if New York City's inhabitants, transfixed by the routine of bars and music, lost their way of life (losing a sense of routine was a very real existential possibility during the onset of World War II); Auden then suggests, answering his own query, that we would be nothing more than children lost in a haunted wood if that were to happen. Modern ecopoetry accomplishes something similar: it forces its readers to imagine a life devoid of the natural world, just as Auden is asking us to imagine a world without basics as fundamental as listening to music at a bar. In both scenarios, the notion that the natural world is infinite is challenged. Jean-Michel Rabate, in his book *A Handbook of Modernism Studies*, nicely describes Auden's interest in the individual's place within society (as well as his distaste of collectivism) when he states, "For the Auden of World War II and after, the notion of a collective national identity or manner of expression had not only come to seem unaesthetic, but unethical." This is why we see New York City's underbelly rather than its glamour and why Auden's tone feels so existentially threatening.

Auden's anti-collectivist sentiments that, in tone and style, feel as if they could be referencing the natural world are most apparent in "September 1, 1939's" final two stanzas. Auden's language feels ethereal within these stanzas and reflects the modernist everyday sublime that characterizes the elusively compelling impulses that persist through tough times. "All I have is a voice" indicates a clear but powerful shift in the direction of the poem. While the poem's initial stanzas lay out the speaker's anxieties and capture the grit of New York City, the speaker's voice seems to break through the negativity of the night's

"odor of death" to provide a more compelling outlook on the situation. Auden exemplifies the battle between "Authority / Whose buildings grope the sky" and the individual by referencing the "The romantic" mindset required in order to conceptualize positivity within the realm of the poem. Additionally, the juxtaposition between the sky and New York City's skyline represents the division between human catastrophe and the "wild" natural world that Auden is suggesting the city's inhabitants are wavering between. The poem's final stanza is a continuation of this juxtaposition begging with the word "Defenseless," a term that largely harkens back to the "Children afraid of the night" mentioned earlier in the poem. The final stanza is also notably abstract in relation to the rest of the poem, radiating a Frost-like tone:

> Defenseless under the night
> Our world in stupor lies;
> Yet, dotted everywhere,
> Ironic points of light
> Flash out wherever the Just
> Exchange their messages:
> May I, composed like them
> Of Eros and of dust,
> Beleaguered by the same
> Negation and despair,
> Show an affirming flame.

The words "Defenseless" and "stupor" within the first two lines of this stanza are terms of vulnerability, offering the reader an animalistic vision of the danger World War II poses in the poem. Auden, unlike Frost, conveys the emotions that exist within the natural world (fear, anxiety, darkness, the unknown) without explicitly setting his poems in natural environments. This sort of flexibility has carried over to modern ecopoetry's more

abstract, indirect strains such as Mary Oliver's "Sleeping in the Forest" or Margaret Atwood's "Habitation" which are often as indirect as they are direct. Additionally, the ironic points of light found within New York City's skyline offers a vision almost antithetical to the Romantic egotistical sublime. Rather than focusing on the grandeur of the skyline itself for a glimmer of hope on the eve of World War II, the speaker is compelled by the way the goings on in the city seem to form a cohesive ecosystem without there being any direct linkages between the disparate points of light. In other words, the speaker finds hope in the fact that society can exist through invisible connections and unseen relationships, perhaps suggesting that even if the world were to be devastated by war, its inhabitants would be able to persist. This tacit optimism, symbolized by an "affirming flame," has a power that both political and war centered poetry cannot entirely convey.

One of contemporary ecopoetry's most basic concepts is the notion that the natural world does not "act" with humanity in mind – Mont Blanc, for example, is not permanent and does not exist for our viewing. Instead, ecopoetry takes a more unforgiving stance rooted in the fact that the natural world does not discriminate about who it acts on. Additionally, we see that in ecopoetry the natural world, unlike in Romanticism, is written as being a victim of human action, not a driver of human action. W.H. Auden's poem "Musee des Beaux Arts" is a strong example of a modernist poem that shows this transition from a Romantic outlook toward a more contemporary outlook.

Auden's "Musee des Beaux Arts," an ekphrastic poem referencing Pieter Breughel's painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1558), highlights how unforgiving the natural world is. I suspect Auden chose to write about *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* because it is remarkably modern for being a mid 16th century painting. Although the painting was

made before the Romantic movement, its content totally contrasts Romantic egoism – this is what Auden highlights most prominently. Auden begins "Musee des Beaux Arts" by stating that "About suffering they were never wrong, / The Old Masters," noting that old Flemish painters, and in this instance Breughel, utilizes the same idea of mundane happenstance that Auden engages by pointing out "ironic points of light" in "September 1, 1939." In *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, Icarus, a mythological figure noted for drowning in the sea, is shown drowning next to a wooden ship passing him by. Here it is apparent that the natural world does not make amends to save Icarus just as the passengers in the ship do not stray off course to save him. This is representational of the unforgiving relationship between humanity and the natural world and illustrates a reality that Romantic poets were seemingly less interested in. I contend that it is this blatant lack of egoism that has persisted into the contemporary ecopoetry movement – for example, the natural world in "For a Coming Extinction" does not seem to respond to the fact that the poem is about extinction other than its grim tone. Instead, the natural world flounders with humanity left to watch the destruction it created. Before even considering the poem, therefore, just researching "Musee des Beaux Art's" subject matter leads to the some of same thematic undercurrents expressed in today's ecopoetry.

The second stanza of "Musee des Beaux Arts" explicitly refers to *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, paying special attention to the ploughman and ship's failure to acknowledge Icarus's death. By noting how "everything turns away / Quite leisurely from disaster," the tone of the poem remains ill and reflects the notion that the natural world does not exist for the pleasure of humanity, an egotistical and seemingly Romantic worldview. Auden's view of the natural world, therefore, is one rooted in the idea that the natural world does not act

with humanity in mind. The conclusion of "Musee des Beaux Arts" is even more somber than the beginning of the poem because unlike the ploughman, Auden recognizes that the ship most likely sees Icarus in the sea while continuing to sail ahead. Auden's imagery as he describes the "expensive delicate ship that must have seen / Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky, / Had somewhere to go and sailed calmly on" is hauntingly justifiable; this ship, especially within its medieval setting, probably could not have afforded to help save Icarus because it would have been a waste of time and resources. The challenge that Auden poses with this imagery is that even though it is morally compelling to want to save Icarus, it is impossible to not have at least a little understanding for both the ploughman and the ship who, in completing their respective duties, cannot stop to save him. This is the sort of moral dilemma that is also existent in much of contemporary ecopoetry: although it is difficult to face a crisis that one man or woman cannot fix such as climate change, it is hypocritical to dismiss personal responsibility and place the duty of fixing that crisis on other people (this moral challenge is a reflection the reader's moral test of sympathizing with both the ploughman and ship's lack of action). In both cases, the natural world acts as a consistent variable against which the reader must reflect on his or her ethical framework. To the ploughman and the ship, the boy in the sea is not the same mythical character that the audience of the painting recognizes, but simply one person drowning in a medieval world that was surely filled with many tragedies of this sort.

Because of the banal nature of the scene and the modernist perspective, Auden creates tension between the audience and the characters within *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. The scene is framed in a way that focuses on each character's point of reference: the ploughman is oblivious to Icarus drowning in the sea, the ship notices Icarus but continues

sailing on calmly, and Icarus drowns. In just one rather mundane still-frame there are three extremely distinct characters with different motives, stories, and experiences, and they all display different responses. We can use this multidimensional framework to show how poetry that was once egotistical (referring to poetry that only offers a single frame of reference) evolved into what we have today, which is an ethically charged body of contemporary ecopoetry that focuses on scenes rather than isolated experiences.

Another example of an Auden poem that demonstrates the evolution toward contemporary ecopoetry is "Woods," Part II of a seven-poem series titled "Bucolics." The poem's opening line, "Sylvan meant savage in those primal woods / Piero di Cosimo so loved to draw," detours sharply away from the language of the Romantics. This is not to say that Romanticists exclusively portrayed the natural world in a positive, affectionate light – they didn't. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," for example, shows the natural world's vindictive tendencies, yet does not connote "savagery" or suggest that nature is "primal" like the speaker in "Woods" does. While Coleridge's nature is orderly and logically malicious, Auden's nature is wild and untamed. Auden, unlike Coleridge in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," produces a fear that can be relatable to the poem's audience – the reader of these poems will likely not find him or herself on a ship and proceed to kill an albatross (the direct cause of destruction in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"), but Auden's concept unknown chaos living within the woods will relate to audiences as long as forests exist. The rest of the poem's first stanza echoes this sentiment: "Where nudes, bears, lions, sows with women's heads, / Mounted and murdered and ate each other raw, / Nor thought the lightning-kindled bush to tame / But, flabbergasted, fled the useful flame." Piero di Cosimo's famous landscapes such as "The

Death of Procris" and "Perseus Rescuing Andromeda" reflect Auden's chaotic language and further distance "Woods" from its more orderly Romantic antecedents.

The poem's second stanza further complicates the woods by calling into question the very nature of "land" itself. Within the stanza, we see kings and squires vying for land to tame and make social while whispers of chaos from the first stanza remain in the background – by stating that land is "licensed" for social use, Auden's language suggests that the Cosimo-esque chaos of the first stanza is the natural world's most "natural" state. Language such as the phrase "Reduced to patches owned by hunting squires" and "They whispered still of unsocial fires" demonstrates the extent to which the natural world can only be temporarily tamed. In her article "The Pastoral Formula of W.H. Auden and Piero di Cosimo," Virginia Hyde states that "W.H. Auden is a problematic practitioner in the classical pastoral mode with which his titles frequently ally him. However, when he does give a Latinate source in his 'Bucolics' – the Italian Renaissance painter, Piero di Cosimo – he drops a vital clue about the type of historic (and prehistoric) metaphor running throughout his poetic landscapes. In turning to Piero for the 'artifice' proper to the pastoral, he actually arrives at anti-idyllic realism through a faithful description of art." Hyde's main argument, that Auden's language portrays "anti-idyllic realism," runs contrary to the Romantic language of authors like Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats who, in poems such as "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," "Mont Blanc," and "Ode on a Grecian Urn," are undoubtedly idyllic in their representations of beauty within the natural world. Similar to Frost, Auden's language acts as a transition between Romanticism and what is arguably a more realistic and relatable vision of the natural world.

According to Hyde, Auden's premise of "hard primitivism" is "at odds with the pastoral's conventional setting in Arcadia or the Golden Age of perfection in men and in their surroundings." Contemporary ecopoetry, while not entirely built from Auden's chaotic primitivism, aligns more closely with Auden's realism than Romanticism's idealism. Josh Weinstein, in his article "Marianne Moore's Ecopoetic Architectonics," states that one of the defining characteristics of Moore's ecopoetry is "The flattening of hierarchy in her portrayal of the mundane and the fabulous in her animal, as well as human, subjects." In other words, Moore's treatment of *everything* natural is as equitable as possible. In not giving special treatment to humanity within "Woods" and by stating in the poem's second stanza that the villages still tell tales of "unsocial fires," Auden shows that he, like Moore, does not place humanity in a protective bubble immune to the forces of nature; "Musee des Beaux Arts" clearly follows this model as well by referencing the death of Icarus by the hands of nature. There is nothing Romantically egotistical in Auden's language – instead, his perspective is one that is more reminiscent of the cold bluntness of contemporary ecopoetry. No line illustrates this better than the final line in "Woods," "A culture is no better than its woods." This thought provoking quote implies that a culture, whatever it may be, is no better than the woods it imagines for itself. The speaker's point, using Cosimo's landscapes as an example, is that a culture's evils and chaos that are often envisioned to live within the woods are inherently present within that culture. Therefore, according to this principle, Auden is suggesting that the Italian Renaissance's existence was no better than the maladies present in Cosimo's work. This view is one far different and far less egotistical than the stances taken by Romanticists, and why Auden's claim that "A

culture is no better than its woods" helps to represent the bridge between Romanticism and ecopoetry.

Auden's poem "The Fall of Rome" also follows this trend of realism at the expense of idyllic positivity – a quality that distances Auden from the earlier Romantics. Throughout "The Fall of Rome" Auden compares the end of the Roman Empire to modern civilization, paying particular attention to each situation's similarities. The first stanza, "The piers are pummeled by the waves; / In a lonely field the rain / Lashes an abandoned train; / Outlaws fill the mountain caves," does not initially appear to reflect the poem's title, although throughout the poem the speaker addresses the similarities between the sexual culture of Rome and the present. Although this comparison is striking and disturbing, the speaker then notes that "Little birds with scarlet legs" and "Herds of reindeer" who are "Unendowed with wealth or pity" will continue to live unaffected by the fall of humanity that the speaker predicts. Ultimately, this goes to show that Auden's language, while critical of human nature, recognizes the fact that the natural world and its inhabitants are more permanent than the cycles of humanity that occupy it.

Another Auden poem that meditates on the nature of permanence is "The Shield of Achilles," an ekphrastic poem referring to the shield of Achilles in Homer's *Iliad*. The poem's opening stanza is the genesis for one of the poem's most prominent contemplations, a comparison of nature's permanence with humanity's morality:

> She looked over his shoulder
> For vines and olive trees,
> Marble well-governed cities
> And ships upon untamed seas,
> But there on the shining metal

His hands had put instead
An artificial wilderness
And a sky like lead.

Auden's use of the words "marble," "metal," and "lead" introduce the enduring aspects that both the shield and nature have in common. Further, it must be assumed that the audience of "The Shield of Achilles" is aware of the myth in which Achilles is shot and killed by an arrow, alerting the reader to the fact that it is the shield and the memories etched into his shield that will remain rather than Achilles himself – additionally, it is likely clear to the poem's audience that along with the memories of Achilles's shield, the "vines and olive trees" and "untamed seas" have also persisted through time. Therefore, after just the first stanza of "The Shield of Achilles" the reader is subject to an intense reminder of humanity's morality in the face of the natural world's permanence – a concept embedded within many Auden poems. Both "The Fall of Rome" and "The Shield of Achilles" refer back to antiquity yet simultaneously remain definitively modern in tone and style. Ultimately, Auden's language within these poems differs from the earlier Romantics who also delved into antiquity (Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" comes to mind) because the in both of Auden's journeys to antiquity he uses the natural world to portray the stark brevity of human life – a concept that adheres to the "hard primitivism" Hyde believes is core to Auden's nature poetry.

One of W.H. Auden's greatest attributes as a poet is his ability to display the value of the natural world in contexts that do not always completely focus on nature. "September 1, 1939," for example, demonstrates that the feelings evoked by nature are ever-present, even in the most unlikely of locations such as New York City's skyline and dive bars. Further, Auden's beautiful language in the poem's final stanza is both haunting and compelling as

the speaker looks upon “Ironic points of light,” each representing a different person’s nighttime activity. Even in such desperate times Auden’s language feels intimate, as if an invisible string were connecting the points of light scattered across New York’s cityscape. Auden, certainly reflective of the Romantics in their love of the natural world, evolves the egotistical sublime into “anti-idyllic realism” through his premise of “hard primitivism,” ultimately supporting Frost in restructuring the Romantic model of nature poetry. Therefore, through an understanding of Auden I believe it is possible to gleam a more complete understanding of the nature of contemporary ecopoetry and its evolution from egotistical to everyday.

Conclusion

As evidence for humanity's negative effects on the Earth's climate compounds, the ability to effectively relay this information to the public has become increasingly critical. Today, climate change media is swamped with commercials, posters, cartoons, articles, and interviews – so much so that poetry is often overlooked. Ecopoetry nevertheless combines its accessibility with its capacity to spread concise emotional appeals in a way that makes it uniquely effective when matched against other forms of climate change media. While it is impossible to fully grasp climate change without understanding the scientific data supporting its existence, the public will not engage in our effort to save the planet without *caring* – this is why we need ecopoetry.

Although poetry cannot be the only form of media to portray climate change to the public, it can certainly augment the discussion productively. There is no better use of a poem to enhance a piece of climate change media than Peter Heller's use of the poem "When Will I Be Home?" by Li Shangyin at the end of his novel *The Dog Stars*. Shangyin, who lived approximately 1100 years ago, was recently rediscovered because of his incredibly vague, yet emotionally gripping nature poems. "When Will I Be Home?" albeit only known to English speakers through translation, uses language that feels contemporary in syntax and tone – and, most importantly, it compels the reader feel emotionally attached to the poem's setting:

> When will I be home? I don't know.
> In the mountains, in the rainy night,
> The autumn lake is flooded.

Someday we will be together again.
We will sit in the candlelight by the west window,
And I will tell you how I remembered you
Tonight on the stormy mountain.

"When Will I Be Home?" evoking longing through the open-ended prospect of someday returning home, feels post-Romantic because of its hauntingly somber appreciation of the natural world. The poem's mountains and contemplative rain as well as its hauntingly stormy mountain are the poem's guardians of human emotion much like the settings in Frost and Auden's poetry. The poem's speaker, like the speakers in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "September 1, 1939," does not simply appreciate the natural world for its physical beauty – the speaker instead uses nature as a vehicle through which he or she can divulge human emotions separate from pure overwhelming awe. In understanding the poetry of Frost and Auden, it becomes apparent that their influences have bled into the contemporary ecopoetic environment. Both Frost and Auden update the Romantic concept of the egotistical sublime by using language that better conflates the natural world and the lives of everyday people – this is what ecopoetry, now backed with scientific data, has the responsibility of doing as well.

The way in which Robert Frost and W.H. Auden create relationships with nature in their poetry is adequately represented in Timothy Morton's 2010 book *The Ecological Thought.* Within Morton's book, he uses the term "mesh" to explain the connectedness of the natural world. This sentiment is similar to the "invisible string" that I previously suggested holds together the ironic points of light mentioned in Auden's "September 1, 1939." Describing nature as existing within a mesh implies a level of connectedness that the reader can feel within the poems of Frost and Auden that he or she might not be able to

feel in the more egotistical Romantic nature poems. Further, communicating the "mesh" is perhaps the key to increasing engagement with climate change – when people are compelled to feel as though the world's climate and the threat of future extinctions affects their lives, they will respond with increasing levels of attention.

Recently, the news has been filled with new data indicating that sea levels have the potential to rise over 3 feet by 2100 – twice the amount that was previously expected. According to Camille von Kaenel's article "Antarctica Meltdown Could Double Sea Level Rise" in *Scientific American*, "A melting Antarctica alone could raise oceans by more than 3 feet by the end of the century if greenhouse gas emissions continued unabated, roughly doubling previous total sea-level rise estimates, according to new research." Additionally, the paper states that "The idea that a small variation in temperature could cause massive ice loss at the poles has precedent: Around 120,000 years ago, during the last interglacial period, sea levels rose 6 to 9 meters (20 to 30 feet) higher than today as the planet warmed by zero to 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 Fahrenheit). During the Pliocene Epoch 3 million years ago, which saw a carbon dioxide atmospheric concentration similar to today's, sea levels rose by up to 10 to 30 meters (32 to 98 feet)." While compelling, there is still a large segment of the population will either not read scientific articles or dismiss a 3-foot rise in sea levels by 2100 as not being impactful. Whatever the case may be, this is a clear example of an instance where the scientific implications of climate change are likely more dire than the public believes them to be. This why poetry, based largely on the augmentation of data via an emotional appeal, has the chance to be particularly effective. The following comparison between Gordon Ramel's "Tiger Tiger Revisited" and William Blake's "The Tyger" shows how this technique can be painfully effective:

William Blake's "The Tyger" illustrates the fear and energy tigers have the ability to inspire:

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, and what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

Gordon Ramel's "Tiger Tiger Revisited," conversely, looks into the unfortunate decline of tigers by humanity's own hand due to climate change and politics:

Tiger tiger fading fast
In the shadow we have cast,
What brave law or business deal
Can thy future's safety seal.

What the future, what the hope
That humankind may learn to cope
With life and maintenance of breath
Without this need of needless death.

In what sulphurous cauldron groans
The mind that lives to sell your bones;
And what the moral poverty
Of those take thy life from thee?

What the learning, what the thought
That values lives like yours at naught?
What the science or machine
Where beauty such as yours is seen?

Who did he hate who sowed the seed
Of human ignorance and greed;
And can he smile our work to see
As we who killed the lamb kill thee.

Tiger tiger fading fast
From the present to the past,
How can mere humanity

So quickly still thy majesty?

Ramel's solemn emulation of Blake and his emotionally charged remodeling of "The Tyger" is the same sort of emulation (in a much less literal sense) that contemporary ecopoets have shown directly and indirectly toward Frost and Auden. In the future, ecopoets ought to return to the genesis of their genre and emulate authors like Frost and Auden as inspiration for how to best represent their anxieties not through data, but through emotional and intimate texts demonstrating the multitude of reasons, ranging from individual to global, we need to conserve the world's natural spaces.

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