

# The environmental crisis and transitional phenomena: Brenda Hillman's ecopoetic playing

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## Abstract

Many writings in ecopsychology make reference to “the environmental crisis” as an apocalyptic scenario, but few define the cause of this crisis. This essay proposes that the cause for apocalyptic rhetoric of environmental crisis is as much psychological as environmental. It draws on Winnicott’s idea of playing as haunted by the otherness of reality to offer a therapeutic reading of the poetry of Muriel Rukeyser and Brenda Hillman in which the imaginative resources of trope, apostrophe, dedication and allusion serve to make bearable the anxiety that leads to apocalyptic rhetoric in ecopsychological writings.

**Keywords:** psychoanalysis, poetry, Winnicott, play

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## Ecopsychology and apocalypse

Apocalyptic rhetoric of environmental crisis is rife in ecopsychology<sup>1</sup>. This may be warranted. The final chapter of Jared Diamond’s *Collapse* consists of a distressing discussion of twelve contemporary environmental problems that indicate not only that industrial civilization is profoundly environmentally destructive but also that perhaps it is already catastrophically flawed by its harmful impacts on environmental systems (Diamond, 2005: 486-525). Diamond’s is a granular discussion of particular problems. The contrast with generalization about “the environmental crisis” is

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah DuNann Winter says “our Western civilization is not sustainable” (Winter, 1996: xiv). Somewhat more ominously, she and Susan M. Koger describe “the potential danger of irreversible ecological collapse” (Koger, 2004: 3). The phrase “ecological crisis” is offered by Fisher (Fisher, 2002: xv). David Orr describes “a world gone mad” (Orr, 2009: 15). Buzzell and Chalquist speak of “the environmental crisis now threatening all species with extinction” (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009: 21). Roszak speaks of “behavior both individual and collective that now threatens to destroy the living planet” (Roszak, 1999: ix). Macy and Brown write that as “the intricate web of living systems unravels, we can bring it all down with us” (Macy & Brown, 1998: 16). Clark writes of “the current environmental crisis” (2011: xiii).

significant (Chalquist, 2009: 72). Whatever our local circumstances, we as a global society have many environmental challenges. But how do they, even in aggregate, become the environmental crisis?<sup>2</sup>

Despite the lack of specificity among many of those who announce it, the phenomenon of environmental crisis is widespread among thoughtful writers in the field of ecopsychology. So what is the crisis, really? There are already many answers to this question, including such apparently unsolvable crises as anthropogenic climate change and the rash of extinctions of species. But neither of these, for all their enormity, call for the more extreme versions of apocalyptic rhetoric that can be found in the field<sup>3</sup>. What's more, some ecopsychologists present the crisis as having its source in a human failing and its solution in a reform of some kind. Two with particular popularity are Deep Ecology's quarrel with anthropocentrism and New Age turning from denial about the harmfulness of our relation with the natural world.

With respect to the first, George Sessions tracks the history of an alternative to the privileging of our species: "Lynn White's critique of Christian anthropocentrism and the ecological crisis, together with Aldo Leopold's ecocentric perspective, were major influences" on the development of Deep Ecology (Sessions, 1995: 156). From an outsider's perspective, little has changed in Deep Ecology since the appearance of these seminal texts arguing that there is something unethical about our fascination with the prerogatives of humanity. That steadfastness is probably appropriate. Anthropocentrism has brought us to a crisis – if you believe this deeply, it bears repeating to as broad an audience as possible. So one answer is that our environmental crisis is an ethical one.

Alternatively, a spiritual perspective has been offered by Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown in *Coming Back to Life*. In one of their formulations of the crisis and its cure, a three-part process of awakening leads to a confrontation with

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to suggest that all discussions of crisis are apocalyptic, or that they all manifest a kind of anxiety that can be understood interpretively. My interest here is to intervene in the specifically apocalyptic strain of ecopsychological rhetoric that I've documented in the first footnote, as well as to the apocalyptic strain in discussions of environmentality in the culture at large. I think it is an open question how sincerely felt many of these warnings are, but I take ecopsychologists' expressions of them to be sincere and so wish to engage them thoughtfully.

<sup>3</sup> Shock, revulsion, panic, the passionate commitment to effect change – these are appropriate and understandable reactions to the prevalence of extinctions and global climate change and other environmental concerns, of course. It is the point at which these reactions merge with apocalyptic fantasy that I wish to locate my intervention.

## environmental crisis and a healing conversion:

Let us borrow the perspective of future generations and, in that larger context of time, look at how this Great Turning is gaining momentum today, through the choices of countless individuals and groups. We can see that it is happening simultaneously in three areas or dimensions that are mutually reinforcing. These are: 1) actions to slow the damage to Earth and its beings; 2) analysis of structural causes and creation of structural alternatives; and 3) a fundamental shift in worldview and values. (Macy & Brown, 1998: 17).

The work they advocate involves a kind of spiritual transformation, one that is based on a sober analysis of structural causes that leads to a reformation of values. Part of this process involves feeling “pain for the world” (Macy & Brown, 1998: 26). The awakening involves moving through mourning and despair to make a Great Turning. From this concerned but hopeful perspective, our environmental crisis is a spiritual one.

In the hope of an ecocriticism that doesn't naively carry forward the vague rhetoric of crisis but at the same time doesn't deny the phenomenon of extreme distress that ecopsychology's sometimes apocalyptic message registers, I would like in this essay to offer an alternative to Deep Ecology and New Age conversion, to offer a psychoanalytic understanding of and response to environmental crisis<sup>4</sup>. The source of the ideas I want to discuss and argue for is the work of D.W. Winnicott. The thesis is simple: having an environment can be the source of an emotional crisis<sup>5</sup>. Winnicott's insights on this point, and his careful, imaginative development of ideas about how to respond to such a crisis, will lead me to engage with literary ecocriticism and the poetry of Muriel Rukeyser and Brenda Hillman.

## **Culture and transitional space**

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The most widely known discovery in Winnicott's work is that some young humans find – because they have the need for – a transitional object. This is often a blanket

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<sup>4</sup> I am interested in the therapeutic work that culture can do. I locate the work I see Hillman's and Rukeyser's poetry doing as somewhere apart from ecocentrism or biocentrism. I would not call this work anthropocentric, however; my sense is that if we are to respond effectively to the environmental challenges we are facing, and if subsequent generations are to do this, we can and should call on some works of culture to help us have a more helpful psychological relation to environmentality. The human sphere needs to find more in culture than it has thus far to enable it to respond maturely and intelligently to the challenges the planet is facing.

<sup>5</sup> This argument from a Winnicottian perspective can I think be complemented by Sally Weintrobe's Kleinian argument that in experiencing our dependence on an environment we are subject to two different anxieties: “the narcissistic part [of the psyche] is anxious it will not survive if reality is accepted” whereas the “realistic part is anxious that the narcissistic part has caused damage and may imperil its survival” (2013: 34).

or teddy bear, but it can be something considerably smaller. The transitional object is what Winnicott calls the child's "first 'not-me' possession" (Winnicott, 1971: 1). He has this to say about it:

Of the transitional object it can be said that it is a matter of agreement between [the psychoanalyst] and the baby that we will never ask this question: 'Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?' The important point is that no decision on this point is expected. The question is not to be formulated. (Winnicott, 1971: 12)

This is because the transitional object becomes of use to the child when he or she is absorbed in the work of coping with "the intermediate area between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived" (Winnicott, 1971: 3). The reason this involves work is that the child initially experiences him or her self as omnipotent – there is no external world, no outside: "In health, all the baby's experiences are felt to emanate from themselves, and this is sustained and then appropriately subverted by the adaptive mother" (Winnicott, 2011: 151). Only gradually does the child come to experience him or her self as having an environment, and this process is fraught with anxiety. If the child experiences the external world as not sufficiently under his or her control at an early stage in development, he or she is subjected to intense fear:

In situations where babies have suffered impingements that expose them to primitive anxieties . . . the illusion (of omnipotence) is shattered and, with it, the sense of having created the world. One might say that their incipient psychic reality is hijacked by the external world rather than being facilitated by it (Winnicott, 2011: 151).

The experience of the environment for a baby needs to be the experience of what Winnicott elsewhere calls the "facilitating environment", or else it can become pathogenic.

The realm of experience in which the child gradually loses the illusion of omnipotence and becomes accustomed to the division between self and environment Winnicott calls transitional space. Its characteristic activity is playing, and playing remains a resource throughout life:

On the basis of playing is built the whole of man's experiential existence. No longer are we either introvert or extravert. We experience life in the area of transitional phenomena, in the exciting interweave of subjectivity and objective observation, and in an area that is intermediate between the inner reality of the individual and the shared reality of the world that is external to individuals. (Winnicott, 1971: 64).

Playing, the first occasions of which happen with a transitional object, makes the experience of the external world "exciting". And it is the source of a functional

environmental consciousness.

In his later writings, Winnicott drew connections between the early experience of a transitional object and the mature experience of playing, connections that are facilitated by what he calls “man’s cultural heritage” (Winnicott, 1971: 149). He describes “transitional phenomena, tracing these in all their subtle developments right from the early use of a transitional object or technique to the ultimate stages of a human being’s capacity for cultural experience” (Winnicott, 1971: 40). As a cultural theorist, Winnicott is remarkable for his sensitivity to the psychodynamics of transitional phenomena, and especially his insistence that the dynamics he observed in the development of children are relevant to mature experiences of culture:

It is assumed here that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience ... which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.). This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is ‘lost’ in play (Winnicott, 1971: 13).

For this reason, Winnicott says, “playing is always liable to become frightening” (Winnicott, 1971: 50). What makes playing vulnerable is “the precariousness of the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control of actual objects” (Winnicott, 1971: 47). The analogy between childish playing and a mature experience of art raises the question of whether Winnicott is talking only about the experience of creating art or also of being in the role of audience. As far as I know, he offers no discussion of the differences between these two, and it is difficult to find grounds for a guess about how much significance Winnicott would take this distinction to have. For the purposes of my argument, reading can be playful.

So playing is a creative response to the anxiety of having an environment, the anxiety of being reminded of the limits of one’s capacity for control of the material world on which one depends. Because of this, Winnicott as a cultural theorist is especially attuned to the role of place in mature transitional phenomena. Since playing’s deepest motivation is environmental awareness, it is always true that “playing has a place” (Winnicott, 1971: 41). In “The Location of Cultural Experience”, Winnicott poses at the very end of the essay a question that can also be read as an assertion: “where is cultural experience located?” (Winnicott, 1971: 103). The question remains unanswered because it is rhetorical, and the point is that playing is always located. As I understand Winnicott’s cultural theory, this is the most difficult question that art asks, indeed the one that always haunts the experience of art – the question of its relationship to being in a place.

## Further theoretical considerations

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I want to talk in some depth about how Winnicott can help us see the resources offered by poetry for the experience of environmental crisis, and before I do this both modesty and expediency compel me to talk about the way in which some of this work has already been done. In the field of ecocriticism, the writer whose perspective is in my judgment closest to Winnicott's, and who offers an insightful example of how art can be used to respond to environmental crisis, is Stacy Alaimo. Most relevant here is her description of "trans-corporeality" in culture.

Alaimo's project in *Bodily Natures* is to demonstrate that "conceptions of the human self are profoundly altered by the recognition that 'the environment' is not located somewhere out there but is always the very substance of ourselves" (Alaimo, 2010: 4). She makes in a somewhat different way Winnicott's point that we are always dependent on the material environment, and for her, as for Winnicott, the experience of this is characterized by anxiety: "a recognition of trans-corporeality entails a rather disconcerting sense of being immersed within incalculable, interconnected material agencies that erode even our most sophisticated modes of understanding" (Alaimo, 2010: 17). If the message of trans-corporeal understanding is that there is no stable boundary between the environment and the human being, the experience of immersion that this entails recalls Winnicott's description of the haunting of transitional space by the recognition of the threatening otherness of the external world.

Alaimo reads many cultural texts – poems, novels, autobiographies, photojournalism – in her discussion of the consequences of trans-corporeal consciousness, demonstrating the ways in which "trans-corporeality often ruptures ordinary knowledge practices" (Alaimo, 2010: 17). Her main interest is in how political authority and scientific authority are challenged by those who creatively insist on the porosity of the boundary between environment and self. She discusses to this end the poetry of Simon Ortiz and Muriel Rukeyser. Tracing the kind of unsettling knowledge that Winnicott says can disturb the experience of playing, she argues that Rukeyser's 1938 *The Book of the Dead*, which focuses on the death of hundreds of migrant workers from exposure to silica dust while creating a tunnel in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, "poetically captures nature as an aesthetic vision and sublime power, only to counter those images with depictions of peopled natures and, more compellingly, with the harmful material substances that 'nature' can become" (Alaimo, 2010: 48). Alaimo's reading is a rebuttal of some of the earlier interpretations of the poem that seek and find in the book a celebration of the

political potential of working-class consciousness and activism, or those that find in it a more spiritual message of redemption:

I would argue that the poem insists upon the materiality of water, air, and of course the silica-bearing rock itself. Mythical, spiritual, and transcendent readings escape the gravitational pull of the rest of the poem, which depicts a social/material landscape of substantial, all-encompassing networks of power and knowledge, substances and forces, environments and institutions (Alaimo, 2010: 52).

In a sense, Alaimo's reading of the poem can be thought of as describing with a political emphasis precisely the dynamic Winnicott finds in the experience of transitional phenomena. The world is depicted imaginatively but at points it becomes threateningly real. The real work of the poem is in the way Rukeyser "tries to recast a manifest destiny myth of America, in which lands are mastered and tamed, with an acknowledgement of the sometimes hazardous materiality of those places – places that may well become the substance of the people themselves" (Alaimo, 2010: 57).

Alaimo's way of reading *The Book of the Dead* offers a model for a poetics that begins with the crisis that underlies the apocalyptic rhetoric of some ecopsychology. But from a perspective informed by Winnicott her account of an ecopoetic engagement with this crisis is missing the dimension of haunting and playing in Rukeyser's poem. She finds the poem to suggest an "environmentalism" that "would employ both X-rays and maps, protecting human bodies and environments" (Alaimo, 2010: 58). But in her judgment the book "fails to reconcile the competing aims of environmental justice and environmentalism" and is "profoundly anthropocentric" (Alaimo, 2010: 58). Excusing Rukeyser – "surely it is asking too much for Rukeyser to have resolved such conflicts in the 1930s" – she articulates her view of what trans-corporeal poetics should be about when it engages with the story of Gauley Bridge: "But it is, I hope, not impossible to imagine a trans-corporeal ethics that would include animals who are not human, and to visualize creatured, as well as peopled, environments in which the imperative remains to prevent silica dust and other forms of air, water, and soil pollution to permeate all sorts of bodies" (Alaimo, 2010: 59). Alaimo finds the ethical vision of the poem to be anthropocentric and incomplete.

I agree with Alaimo about the desirability of such an alternative ethics. But her move from poetics to ethics is problematic to me. Relevant to such a conflation of the two different realms is the caution Lawrence Buell offers in "Literature as Environmental(ist) Thought Experiment" that:

the prior and more basic problem with impact-oriented thinking is the presumption that environmental writing and criticism ought to be conceived more in terms of service to a cause than as

the upshot of polymorphous intellectual curiosity or diffuse concern for environmentality. Not associated with any settled position. (Buell, 2009: 24)

Bringing together Winnicott and Buell, I would argue that the ethics of Rukeyser's poetry of environmental crisis should be understood as emerging from a daring sense of play in which one's sense of bodily integrity is at risk, poetry that is haunted by a "diffuse concern for environmentality"<sup>6</sup> With respect to Rukeyser's poem, the psychological and imaginative courage of writing about those who have been killed by their physical environment, those who belong to *The Book of the Dead*, and of taking on the risk of imaginatively dwelling in a lethal environment, should lead to an ethical appreciation of how she undergoes a process of testing the resources of her knowledge and imagination for responding to a sense of being haunted by the mortality that an environment promises.

I am suggesting that we should read Rukeyser's book as haunted by "harmful material substances" as harbingers of a catastrophe, one that is felt sharply and is responded to with playfulness. I'll offer one example. In the second section of the book, as she is locating the events of the poem in "West Virginia", she names the historical residents of the region and some of the events that took place there in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and then she writes:

But it was always the water  
the power flying deep  
green rivers cut the rock  
rapids boiled down,  
a scene of power.

Done by the dead.  
Discovery learned it.  
And the living?

Live country filling west,  
knotted the glassy rivers;  
like valleys, opening mines,  
coming to life. (Rukeyser, 2005: 75)

"Done by the dead": is she talking about the work of those who created the tunnel and were exposed to lethal amounts of silica? Or those who created the "military telegraph" mentioned in the passage just above this one? (Rukeyser, 2005: 75) It is

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<sup>6</sup> I'd like to clarify here that I do not mean to argue that sensitivity to the bodily dimensions of environmentality and concern about environmental crisis are mutually exclusive. My argument is that assessing the ethical significance of Rukeyser's work should involve recognizing that she is confronting mortal danger.



not clear – the reader is invited to play with answers. But her association of the “power” of the river and the dead registers the way in which the environment is a *memento mori*, a reminder of mortality. Rivers cut, rapids boil – metaphoric actions that are grand on the scale of landscape but threatening when brought to an encounter with a human body. She turns from this to “the living”. And she imagines the earth as “coming to life” in its relation with people. The glassy quality of the river is one of the first instances in the poem in which she connects by implication glass with silica, out of which glass can be made. Her perception of the environment is haunted by the fateful story she has to tell. But she finds a place for the living among the “valleys, opening mines”, one in which the relationship between human and environment is perilous but which also leaves room for both “life” and “the dead”. To fault her for not being sufficiently environmentalist in her expression of concern for environmental justice is in my opinion not to register that her serious but playful experience of the environment of West Virginia could be and was meaningfully haunted.

## Brenda Hillman’s ecopoetics

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In 2013, Hillman published the fourth and ultimate book in her tetralogy based on four elements: earth, air, water and fire. The relation of her work to environmental crisis is complex and polyvocal, but her idea as expressed in a recent interview of how environmental crisis should be understood indicates a definite sense of what is and isn’t appropriate to the concept:

Yes, surely we can think differently about the word “crisis” than we did even a decade ago. I’m thinking of Naomi Klein’s work here; the concepts of “crisis” and “emergency” call to mind a single episode or set of episodes that can be fixed, but we find ourselves amidst conditions on earth that involve not only the ignorant choices we have made as humans but a kind of dispersal of those activities, in tiny particles of implication, throughout the planet (Hillman, 2012: 756).

What Hillman has in mind when she mentions “tiny particles of implication” can be inferred from one of her poems of toxicity in the first book of her tetralogy, *Cascadia*. The poem “Dioxin Promenade” plays with the trope of dioxin, the carcinogenic compound that almost all humans have been exposed to – primarily through food – as notes for a dance:

Colors get married and dancesteps try  
 but a dancestep is selfish. Diagrams  
 make dioxin look like a six-sided  
 dance with carbon prongs but dancesteps  
 won’t build up over time (Hillman, 2001: 22)

In the context of Hillman's implication that the consequences of anthropogenic toxicity should be understood in their relation to the planetary community of living beings, this simile raises Lawrence Buell's question in an article on "Toxic Discourse". "Is there", Buell asks, "something inherently problematic about converting pestilence into metaphor? My metaphor elides, derealizes, somebody else's pain" (Buell, 1998: 663). Hillman is playfully using trope at the site of a meditation on the inevitable threats that are posed to beings on the Earth who eat, the dangers of depending on an irreparably toxic environment for sustenance. But is this use of trope facilitated by a failure to register the gravity of the consequences for those human and nonhuman animals for whom the risks posed by dioxin have been – or will be – realized?

Hillman is clearly aware of this possibility. She writes a bit further in the poem:

Little worlds are  
images of big ones, crimes have  
poets, a metaphor is meant to  
self-destruct. Dioxin stays in a body

seven years, a lump forms in  
the friendly tissue near her heart  
like the last time she wants  
to see someone's car (Hillman, 2001: 22)

The metaphor is "meant to / self-destruct" because it is inappropriate to some, and perhaps all, circumstances of dioxin exposure. But the end of one metaphor does not mean the end of using figurative language. As soon as one metaphor self-destructs, another simile arises. Hillman is modeling a resiliency of imagination that is a significant resource for dealing with matters of environmental risk. In a risk society, writes Iain Wilkinson, anxiety is "a reaction to social processes and cultural experiences in which our doubts and uncertainties are encountered as a threat to our personal security" (Wilkinson, 2001: 9). His echo of John Keats's definition of the negative capability of poets draws attention to the ways in which the indefatigability of trope as manifest by Hillman's poem can be a positive resource in the poetry of toxicity.

In the book focusing on air, *Pieces of Air in the Epic*, the motif of air is often connected with the most pressing public issue of the book's period of composition in America, the U.S. invasion of Iraq. At a couple of points the theme of war and the theme of air converge, perhaps most directly in the mention in "Air in the Epic" of Iphigenia, daughter of Agamemnon who is sacrificed to win favorable winds from

the gods. But it is in the more clearly located poem “On Carmerstrasse” that air itself becomes first the source of lighthearted playing and then the facilitator of danger:

Beneath balustrades selected against  
 your going, a breezened  
 day anticipates a hope;  
 then the walk into  
 each word is infinite  
 and navigates the stumble.  
 under the porticoes at  
 childhood’s edge where half-said  
 sentences assemble in bombed  
 or not bombed corners (Hillman, 2005: 41)

The playful use of trope here is of speaking or writing language as like a walk on the streets of Berlin. The balustrades and porticoes are emblems of the civilization of the place, and also perhaps in their weighty presences above the speaker of some conservatism in the place or in language that make possible the rebelliously playful neologism “breezened”, which brings together breezy and – seasoned? Wizedened? As in Rukeyser’s poem, the reader is invited to playfully guess which other words are being suggested, or more likely to make his or her own choice – the reader is involved by a crucial indeterminacy in the poet’s playing. The speaker of this poem is not only impacted by the architecture of the street, though, but also haunted by the cultural memory at this place of bombings. At childhood’s edge, within the living memory of some with whom she shares the street, there are bombed and, only slightly less ominously, not-bombed corners. The air that anticipates hope has become the air that bombers navigate and from which they waft in memory their deadly materials.

The speaker then turns to apostrophe, addressing a you who is hurrying to a poem, and remarks that “a trance has been / cast over the world”. It is as if she is invoking a companion with which to make sense of the distressing historicity of this scene of aerial destruction. She ends the poem this way: “From a / chained bench, the soul / turns to its example. / FOR JOACHIM SARTORIUS” (Hillman, 2005: 41-2). The placement of the dedication at the end of the poem makes that part of the text an inclusion in the poem itself, and that his name comes just after the speaker’s turn towards an example suggests that he might be taken as that example. The fact that Sartorius is a

German poet and translator suggests a turn towards the international community of makers of literature has freed the speaker from the chained sort of emplacement that historical awareness of the corners around Carmerstrasse has brought her to. The walking has stopped, but the air has lightened again as the speaker has found, through apostrophe and dedication, a kind of example for making sense of a walk through a contemporary Berlin where relatively recent history recalls the haunting and utterly present theme of aerial bombardment for an American poet, one of the dangers of the air.

In Hillman's last book of the tetralogy, *Seasonal Works with Letters on Fire*, some poems use an oblique kind of personification for the central element, as in "Equinox Ritual with Ravens & Pines", in which the earth's precarious relationship with the sun on which almost all living beings depend for warmth and energy is celebrated with a ritual fire but also warily assessed through the Jungian concept of the shadow. The sun's "shadow", perfectly balanced in a way on the occasion of the equinox, is in a Jungian sense the repository of those aspects that are not manifest in its perceptible way of being but remain a crucial part of it, ones that are split off from ordinary expression (Hillman, 2013: 20). In a somewhat paradoxical way, the sun's shadow that brings "bad news", as the poem calls it, is not the quality of darkness or coolness but of destructive expansion – the threat of too much fire, of an exploding red giant. The poem ends this way:

In the woods, loved ones tramp through  
 the high grass; they wait in a circle  
 for the fire to begin;  
 they throw paper dreams & sins upon  
 the pyre & kiss, stoking the first  
 hesitant flame after touching a match  
 to the bad news – branches are thrust back  
 across myths before the flame catches –;  
 ravens lurch through double-knuckled  
 pines & the oaks & the otherwise;  
 a snake slithers over serpentine  
 then down to the first  
 dark where every cry has size – (Hillman, 2013: 20)

The celebrants of this ritual are surrounded by combustible materials – pines, oaks, high grass and paper. There is a precariousness to their playing with fire. But they are also part of a landscape that is perceived through a mythic consciousness. Not only are the "branches ... thrust back / across myths", but the snake is in touch with a primordial darkness, one in which the shadow that has haunted the poem in the first

two stanzas becomes something archetypal. The Jungian play of the poem finds a resource not only in the concept of the shadow but also in theories of the collective unconscious, a mode of experiencing that gives one access to a timeless realm. The cry at the end of the poem recalls Hopkins's implication in another seasonal poem, "Spring and Fall", that the source of any person's seasonal sadness at the finitude of mortal things is actually a sense a grief for oneself. But it also more pointedly recalls the cry at the end of another poem with shadows and ravens, Poe's "The Raven", which ends this way:

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, *still* is sitting  
 On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;  
 And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon that is dreaming,  
 And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;  
 And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor  
 Shall be lifted – nevermore! (Poe, 1996: 244)

The cry of "nevermore!" in Poe's poem is evoked by allusion in Hillman's. But she reworks his ending in a way in which the cry of the raven is transposed from the temporal realm in which it is evocative of the finality of death and taken into a timeless spatial realm, where it has size, where it is realized as individual and enduring. In the Jungian field of the poem, Hillman's allusion to Poe's poem rewrites the message of a raven's cry, from the haunting message of the finitude of life to rediscovery in an archetypal space where, as she says earlier in the poem, it is in a mythic and eternal sense that "*it exists!*", and by extension, so do those of us who recognize the importance and impermanence of the equinox (Hillman, 2013: 20).

"In highlighting how we are made up of and surrounded by the elements", writes Laurel Peacock in an appreciation of the first three books of Hillman's tetralogy:

Hillman creates a poetics of environment that demonstrates an openness to being affected by (and often depressed by) the environment, rather than deploying its elements in the service of a transcendent meaning. Poetry is a medium that heightens the openness of language to things and to environment, as well as the ability of language to affect and to be affected by its elements. (Peacock, 2012)

Apocalyptic ecopsychology can learn from Hillman's imaginative engagement with language and the material world, whether from her hopeful dedications, her restorative allusions or her playful use of the resources of trope<sup>7</sup>. Confronted by a sense of finitude and powerlessness at various occasions of writing about her

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<sup>7</sup> My interpretation of her eco-poetic play differs from Timothy Morton's. Morton says that her poems "try to become non-poems, turning back into physical objects" (2012: 165).

environment in an elemental way, she does not move into the apocalyptic rhetoric of crisis. Instead she works in what I think is appropriate to call a transitional space, in which her way of seeing and speaking leads to a sharpening of thought and a capacity for a range of emotions and responses to the experience of vulnerability to an environment. It can be threatening to be aware of being in a place in the world now, sensitively and thoughtfully – but there are alternatives to oppressive anxiety offered by Hillman’s indefatigable art.

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