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The materiality of writing beyond the writing/materiality binary

Abstract:

Donna Haraway and Timothy Morton invite us to think about writing, and other notionally anthropogenic texts, as ecology: not writing as a metaphor for ecology, or vice versa, but writing as a product of, and an agent in, a material world, rippling, reproducing and changing in its relations with its neighbours and its constituents.

While arguing for the materiality and the organicity of texts, these writers foreground the materiality of their own texts by conscripting our attention to their form. The reader is pressed to ask *how* these texts mean, before, or alongside, asking what they mean. In this paper, I examine the poetics of Haraway's and Morton's philosophical writing, the ways in which they enlist parts of speech (the perpetually present-tense gerund in lieu of the noun, for instance) and rhetorical forms (negation, aporia, etc) in order to enact what their writing is otherwise about, indeed, to enact the idea that writing is material, evolving, and relational. I argue that these writers *demonstrate* that writing is never purely representational, that writing *is*. I attempt to show how the concept of "creative writing" is itself tautological, that writing is inherently creative.

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For as long as Enlightenment humanism has posited the dualities of culture and nature, the mind and the body, language and its supposed referents, there have been voices within Western culture (and, of course, from without: see Morrow 2009 on indigenous anti-dualism) that have worked to dismantle these same categories, arguing for an ontological flatness, in which mind, matter, culture, nature, language, and the stuff language is supposed to refer to, are equally real – or, in some formulations, equally ideal. Charles Darwin’s account of sexual selection is one of the most pivotal of these dismantlings. In *Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Darwin describes how the preferences of birds have shaped their sexual and reproductive lives, and thus reconstituted their species’ embodiment: the gaudiness of male parrots has come about, Darwin suggests, because of the aesthetic choices of female parrots. The improbably colourful plumage resulting from these aesthetic choices shows the extent to which the parrot mind can shape the future parrot body. In turn, it suggests an obverse question: a question about where the parrot mind acquires its aesthetic preferences. Darwinism does not allow us to answer, simply, ‘the parrot’s body’. Rather, Darwinian evolutionary theory propounds a relational ontology: the idea that relata do not pre-exist their *intra-action* (Karen Barad’s alternative to *interaction*, her attempt to avoid the idea of discrete pre-existing objects implied by the preposition *inter* (2007)). Darwinism attributes the becoming of ‘species’ to the infinitely complex interplay of environmental influences (where ‘environment’ means not just that which environs an organism, but that which the organism itself environs – its biological inheritance and the effects of its experience). The parrot body is constituted by the weather, the colour of plants, the presence or absence of predators, of competitor species, of microbial communities, the thickness of the skin of local fruits, et cetera, literally, ad infinitum. So what makes a parrot’s, or anyone’s aesthetics? The answer, under Darwinism, is dispersed throughout an ecology. Darwinism threatens, therefore, the idea of the transcendent artistic imagination, the idea of singular autonomous authorship, and the idea that aesthetic practices (not only feather-growing or selecting, but writing, reading, blowing air through pipes or dabbing paint onto canvas) occur on a separate plane from our biology.

This paper is about the poetics of, and implicitly demanded by, what I am calling ‘ecological thinking’ – a way of thinking about how objects or processes are constituted through profoundly far-reaching interrelationship. It offers an account of the relationship between ecological thinking and language and writing, arguing that everyday language and everyday ideas about language obstruct the kinds of prehensions ecological thinking reaches towards; in turn, it analyses how ecological thinking challenges ideas about everyday language and how ecological thinkers practice language. This analysis of the poetics of ecological thinkers, finally, leads to an account of the challenges ecological thought puts to some commonplaces about creativity, authorship, language, and writing.

I have begun with Darwin because Darwin’s work is foundational to that of the two names that are to be coupled here, Donna Haraway, who describes herself as ‘a dutiful daughter of Darwin’ (2003: 15), and Timothy Morton, whose book, *The Ecological Thought*, returns repeatedly to Darwin, ‘because it is Darwin who thought through many of the complex and hard-to-face issues that confront the ecological thought’

(2010a: 18). However, despite the fact that both Haraway's and Morton's writing is explicitly shot through with Darwin's influence, and although Darwinism inevitably haunts any critique of dualism post-1859, this paper is not to be about Darwin's own writing, except in this disavowal. For Darwin fails to reach for the poetics his ecological thinking requires. Although he famously fretted over select turns of phrase ('The term "natural selection" is in some respects a bad one, as it seems to imply conscious choice', he wrote (1868: 6)), he did not seriously apprehend the need to rethink the language he inherited from the Enlightenment, a language profoundly unsuited to the ideas he was trying to think. The word 'species', for instance, is conspicuous in his vocabulary, and yet what he tries to say irreparably confuses, and renders redundant, the idea of species; the word 'natural' looms large in his 'natural selection', and yet one of the implications of his theory is that humans are not separate from nature, and, therefore, that the idea of nature, which depends on the human/nature or culture/nature binary, should collapse. Ignoring the obvious thorniness of these words, he did not get anywhere near where Haraway gets, in her Darwinian critique of nouns (that essentialise species, which would be better understood as gerunds, or becomings) or in her embrace of metaplasma as a rhetorical figure for, and enactment of, her ontological philosophy. While Darwin acknowledged that his theory spoke for language (writing in *Descent of Man* that 'The formation of different languages and of distinct species, and the proofs that both have been developed through a gradual process, are ... the same' (1871: 18)), he did not apparently apprehend that this meant his own language should be subject to the sort of scrutiny that he brought to bear on other organic phenomena.

Haraway and Morton, however, are deeply attentive to how *their* language means. For them, language participates in the ontological flatness of naturecultures (Haraway) and ecology (Morton). Their foregrounding of the role of *form* in their meaning-making is an enactment of the idea that language is not a second-order reality that merely represents the real, but made out of the same kinds of stuff (or, more importantly, through the same kinds of processes) as that which it is supposed to represent. It is, thus, to be as much the object (and subject) of attention as anything else. The fact that Haraway's and Morton's monism attends to language differentiates their work from that of many in the broad church of neomaterialist philosophy, and it is this that has encouraged me to bring them together in this essay, despite the fact that they are not otherwise obvious partners (with Haraway espousing a relational ontology, whereas Morton has arrived, certainly in the last few years, at object oriented ontology or OOO). That is, I marry them because they both hale from deconstructivist schools, whereas many new materialists see the dualism that new materialism attacks as having been reinscribed by deconstruction or the much-decried 'linguistic turn'. Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, for instance, claim that a dualism 'between nature and culture, matter and mind, the human and the inhuman' is 'central to our (post-)modern thinking' (2012: 93). The post-poststructuralism of the last decade has seen philosophers who have interpreted the poststructuralist critique of logocentrism as a form of ontological chauvinism. In their complaint, poststructuralism is made out to say something like this: language is *not* subservient to nonlinguistic reality; in fact, there is no nonlinguistic reality – only language. One such critique surfaced in Karen Barad's early work (although Barad has, arguably,

since forged an alliance with poststructuralism). Her ‘Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter’ begins with this riposte to poststructuralism: ‘Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every “thing” – even materiality – is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation’ (2003: 801). Barad was and is working to make matter matter (matter *does* matter, in all sorts of crucial respects), but she had, as she has since indicated, picked a fight with the wrong philosophy. For poststructuralism does not produce a binary between nonlinguistic matter and immaterial language. There are early manifestations of this fact in poststructuralist gender theory, as in Judith Butler’s *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’*, which demonstrates both that culture changes the materiality of bodies and that the materiality of bodies writes the meaning of identity.

Morton’s and Haraway’s work also illustrates possible configurations for an allegiance between poststructuralism and new materialism. As Morton writes, while some arrived at a position roughly similar to his ‘in spite of deconstruction’, he ‘backed into’ it ‘through deconstruction’ (2011: 166). His and Haraway’s accommodation of language in their neomaterialist ontology is why I want to find a category for them less blunt than ‘new materialist’. My solution, ‘ecological thinking’ derives from Morton’s *The Ecological Thought*. Morton defines ‘the ecological thought’ through figures of excess or negation. That is to say, he does not ‘define’ it. To define is to delimit, and the point of ecological thinking is its dam-bursting. ‘It goes beyond self, Nature, and species’, he writes (2010a: 8). ‘It isn’t just to do with the sciences of ecology ... it is to do with art, philosophy, literature, music, and culture ... it also has to do with factories, transportation, architecture, and economics’ (2010a: 9). The form of Morton’s writing, its definition-eschewing attempts to introduce what the ecological thought is, or could be, through accounts of what it ‘goes beyond’, what it is ‘to do with’, and his mobile referent, ‘it’, enact the conditions of ecological thinking, namely, a refusal to pin the object in place or dissociate it from the cohabitants of its ecology. Indeed, Morton draws attention to the importance of poetics, or form, to ecological thinking, writing: ‘the *form* of the ecological thought is at least as important as its *content*. It’s not simply a matter of *what* you’re thinking, but also a matter of *how* you think. Once you start to think the ecological thought, you can’t unthink it: it’s a sphincter – once it’s open, there’s no closing’ (2010a: 9). The tongue trips over the phonetic similarities between unthink, thinker, and sphincter. That tongue is as overtly material a part of the reader’s body as the sphincter with which Morton metaphorically treats the ecological thought: he thus uses linguistic form, the sonic slip between think and sphincter, to lodge thinking in the reader’s body. The text enacts the materiality of language.

Both Morton and Haraway re-envisage deconstruction’s encounter with the material world: not only is matter text, but text is material (Morton, 2010b), and it is subject to the same processes as all matter, which, in Haraway’s account, means that it is constantly changed through its relationships. Haraway’s deconstruction of the language/materiality, culture/nature, human/nonhuman binary manifests in the first coinage of *The Companion Species Manifesto*, ‘naturecultures’ (2003: 1), a term that

puts the gap between these hitherto antithetical concepts under erasure. For Haraway, the products of human ‘culture’ (including writing, broadly conceived) are apiece with the material world (‘nature’). Morton, meanwhile, argues for abandoning the concept of nature altogether. “‘Nature’ fails to serve ecology well,’ he writes (2010a: 3). ‘Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration’ (Morton 2007: 5). By implying something that is not-Nature, ‘Nature’ is an impediment to recognising the ineluctable interconnectedness of everything in an ecology (that is, the universe): language, tractors, squirrels.

Morton and Haraway publish under the label of theory. They are in turn badged as theorists. Theory is often conscripted into a binaristic relationship with practice. Theory is to practice as, perhaps, content is to form. But as we have begun to see, Morton and Haraway are both conspicuously attentive to form, to the *how* of meaning as well as to the *what*. In what remains of this paper, I argue that the pressure their writing puts on the form/content binary is an enactment of the pressure their philosophy puts on the matter/language or nature/culture binary. I wish to consider ‘the ecological thought’ (‘the thinking of interconnectedness’ (Morton 2010a: 15)) plays out in these authors’ poetics. And I wish to consider, finally, what happens to the words ‘creative writing’ if the ecological thought is to be thought seriously, if it turns out that writing is never ‘about’ only either form or content, if aesthetics are a material matter, and if authorship is as dispersed as a relational ontology suggests.

Poststructuralist linguistic philosophers have established a tradition of writing that enacts philosophy instead of (or rather than merely) representing it. Derrida’s puns are enactments of the free play of signs, for one obvious instance. That the writing of a philosophy of language needs to mind its Ps and Qs seems by now obvious. Writing *about* language is also necessarily writing *in* language. Writing *about* language is automatically declaring that language matters, that it matters enough to write about. It would be strange, or at least disappointing, to see a writing about language that is inattentive to the language of its writing, although how we would intuit inattentiveness itself begs the question.

Morton and Haraway are philosophers of language, insofar as they are the children of deconstruction, but they are also philosophers of everything (as Morton argues especially beautifully in ‘Ecology as text, text as ecology’ (2010b)). That is to say, their philosophy of language is that language is everything, or rather, that everything is in a constantly iterative intertextual relationship. My paraphrase is not nearly as clear as Haraway’s own writing ~~about~~ reality:

Reality is an active verb, and the nouns all seem to be gerunds with more appendages than an octopus. Through their reaching into each other, through their ‘prehensions’ or graspings, beings constitute each other and themselves. Beings do not preexist their relatings. ‘Prehensions’ have consequences. The world is a knot in motion. Biological and cultural determinism are both instances of misplaced concreteness – i.e., the mistake of, first, taking provisional and local category abstractions like ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ for the world and, second, mistaking potent consequences to be preexisting foundations. There are no pre-

constituted subjects and objects, and no single sources, unitary actors, or final ends. (2003: 6)

There is no room for doubt that this theory is practice, for every sentence practises (or tries to practise) what it theorises. Advised that the nouns of reality are gerunds (parts of speech that function grammatically as nouns but semantically as verbs, so that they trouble the distinction between objects and processes), we read ‘Beings do not preexist their relatings’, a sentence in which both the terms that might have been nouns are formulated as gerunds. The meaning of the sentence is locked into its grammar. The gerund form reveals the processual nature of both being and relating. ‘Relatings’ is plural, to allow for the multiplicity of co-constitutive relationships. The verb uses the continuous present tense, foreshadowing Haraway’s later observation that there are no ‘final ends’. Although so overtly attentive to form, Haraway is also tripped up by form: ‘The world is a knot in motion’ is a sentence which does not do what it says, or what it apparently tries to say. It contains three nouns, one of which, ‘world’, implies boundaries/limits – even if they are far away. Really, natureculture thinking should be limitless: the world is not the edge of the knot, the knot reaches beyond the world – the world is made by its relationship to things unworldly, otherworldly, via gravity, for instance. So Haraway wobbles between a language that enacts her thought, that is the thought made material, and a language that cannot enact, that has to merely represent, or try to. The wobbling draws our attention to the thinginess of the language. It is in the same level of reality as all matter: that is to say, not that it is solid and abiding and fixed, but that, like matter – it is a knot in motion.

I am reminded, by Haraway’s refusal or inability to eschew nouns entirely, of a digression in the opening of *A Thousand Plateaus*. The authors put to themselves the question of why they have kept their own names when they don’t believe in the objective unitary self: ‘because it’s nice to talk like everybody else, to say the sun rises, when everybody knows it’s only a manner of speaking’, they reply to themselves (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 1). It is nice to talk like everybody else. However, talking like everybody else does not work to disrupt how everybody else thinks or assumes. When what everybody else thinks and assumes is limited, disruption is necessary, and the foregrounding of form – the foregrounding of the materiality of language – is a mechanism for disturbing those limits, pushing them wide open, in ways that perhaps content alone could not effect. But there we are: I have posited form and content as opposites, implied the possibility that content can exist somehow without form. When we talk about a text’s ‘content’, we are thinking of its language as second-order reality, mere representation of something out there, beyond the text, in the world; but if we introduce the idea that the ‘content’ has or is form, then we are recognizing the materiality of the language, bringing it back into the first-order (the only) level of reality. Ecological thinking makes form and content inseparable. Morton and Haraway work this by the foregrounding of form, by making language strange, which has a special way of disturbing the readerly viscera.

In the case of *The Companion Species Manifesto*, the readerly viscera are disturbed into an apprehension of the materiality and the organicity of texts, an apprehension that both complements and complicates the stories Haraway goes on to tell of human/nonhuman consubstantiation. The reader is pressed to ask *how* these texts

mean, before, or alongside, asking what they mean. In *The Ecological Thought*, Morton presses to similar effect. What is this text about? Interconnectedness (performed in the text's hypertextual poetics, its antilinear habit of return, its apparent digressions); Morton's deconstructive understanding of ecology, as a network (or 'mesh') of relations (performed in the text in the Derridean rhetorical forms of negation and aporia); and the falseness of the nature/culture binary, or indeed his complete dismantling of the idea of nature, a theme that manifests in, for example, Morton's comparing his contemplation of ecology with his contemplation of HAL 9000, as though hyper-technology and what is habitually construed by others as 'nature' are in continuum (2010a: 59).

Haraway and Morton *demonstrate* that writing is never purely representational, that writing *is*; they demonstrate it and it is the subject of their diegesis, that writing and materiality are inextricable. This is true for both theory (commonly understood to be 'about' content) and it is true for poetry (understood to be 'about' form): indeed, the truth that writing *is at least as real* as that which it is understood to represent or 'be about' recommends a dismantling not only of the distinction between content and form, but also of the distinction between theory and poetry. In any textual encounter, form affects meaning, form *is* meaning, form is, I reiterate, content. The term poetry (which is what the Romantics called what contemporary academic culture now calls 'creative writing' (see, for instance, Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Defense of Poetry*)), has been used (as 'creative writing' is used) to suggest a qualitative distinction between some texts and others. There are some ingenious recuperations of the term 'creative writing', as in Paul Dawson's approaching 'Creative Writing not as a practice (creativity), or as a synonym for literature, but as a discipline: a body of knowledge and a set of educational techniques for imparting this knowledge' (2005: 2). In the academy, however, where 'creative writers' produce 'creative writing' (a category which is often allowed to include 'creative nonfiction') and another kind of writing ('critical work' or 'exegesis'), 'creative' is clearly demarking a special quality, the meaningfulness of form. But if in all texts form means, if all texts are themselves something more than representations, then 'creative writing' is a tautology.

Having said which, there is, of course, a difference between a garden variety text in which form means because form always means, a text that attempts to conceal the materiality of its language, and, on the other hand, a writing that makes its language strange. Garden variety writing, that which works to conceal its constructedness, is also known as realism. The difference alluded to above, then, draws a line between poetic or creative writing, on the one hand, and realism, on the other. Haraway's and Morton's extra attentiveness to form is an anti-realist move that demonstrates the perils of pitting 'creative' or 'poetic' writing against 'critical' or 'theoretical' writing, a demarcation which, were we to accept it, would throw *The Companion Species Manifesto* into the category 'creative writing' and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, exemplar of nineteenth-century realist fiction, into some other category inhabited by mainstream news reportage and conventional history essays.

These territorial disputes are largely academic. I mean that in both senses. They are disputes that matter most in the academy, which has forged a distinction between 'creative writing' and other sorts of 'content-based' writing, a distinction that ramifies

in the gap between the death-of-the-author theory taught in literary studies departments and the presumption in creative writing departments that an examiner can safely gauge authorial intention. And they are also academic in that they do not much matter, certainly not in comparison to the other impacts that anti-dualist ecological thinking poses to ideas about writing and authorship. Ecological thinking, both the flattening of the distinction between mind and matter, language and thing, and the idea of the co-constitution of *relata*, makes more serious trouble for what writing is and how it occurs.

Ecological thinking makes trouble for representation full-stop. If language is as much a thing as the thing language is conventionally supposed to refer to, then its own thinginess will intrude on its representational work. This is, obviously, a conclusion that poststructuralism has already arrived at. ‘Mimicry is a very bad concept, since it relies on binary logic to describe phenomena of an entirely different nature’, Deleuze and Guattari wrote, over twenty years ago, in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987: 12) (an ironising pun on that arch-essentialist and anti-representationalist, Plato? A thousand Platos?). ‘The crocodile does not reproduce a tree trunk, any more than the chameleon reproduces the colors of its surroundings.’ This crocodile is a clue. Things cannot stand for (mimic) other things, because: for them to do this, to take the semantic form of a simile, they would have to insist on their difference. It only makes sense to say that ‘the sun is like an orange’ if the sun is not an orange. The statement, ‘an orange is like a variety of citrus fruit’, is a nonsense because the form of the simile presupposes the nonequivalence of its terms. Things do not stand for other things. When I suggest an ontological flatness between language and the supposed referent, I do not mean what crass realism would understand of such flatness, that the word ‘chair’ is the same as the chair; rather, that the word ‘chair’ has a material reality that puts it into the same category as the chair, but also as crocodiles, hairbrushes, beagles, papal bulls, quadratic equations.

Ecological thinking makes trouble for the idea of the originating author. Again, poststructuralism has been here before, with Barthes, of course, claiming in ‘Death of the author’ that a text is not a work, does not presuppose a singular autonomous author, but is, rather, a tissue of quotations. The Darwinian account of how ‘the parrot’ ‘writes’ his spectacular plumage – an ecological account – describes the dispersal of authorship in the material world. The parrot is not the author of his own feathers; rather, they are an effect of the co-constituents of his ecology. And so it is with my essay or your poem. Ecological thinking deprives us of our sole authorship. Our ‘works’, rather, are ‘written’ by the cabbages your ancestors ate that kept them alive long enough to reproduce, by the fossil plants that power your laptop, by the micro-organisms in your digestive tract that turned your breakfast into food and allowed you to stay awake through the day, and also, of course, by the co-conspirators more usually identified by theorists of intertextuality, by all the essays and poems against which your poem and my essay declare their difference. If authorship is dispersed, and the text is also dispersed, then we must ask both where the ‘creative’ and the ‘writing’ in ‘creative writing’ lodge. The writing of this text that you read has been in progress for all time, and I am no more creator than created, a bundle of effects-and-causes in infinitesimally complex and constantly changing interaction.

Thirdly, finally, ecological thinking stands to make trouble – as it does for Haraway – with the very parts of speech we deploy. Her apprehension of the untenability of nouns, parts of speech that hypostasise the objectivity and singularity of processual becomings, is itself not tenable – as we see when she lapses back into using them. How to write the collapse of subject/object, when our language is predicated on things doing things to things? How to resist delimitation, when the very function of words is to bring within more or less narrow limits a concrescence of meanings?

It is unsurprising, entirely unsurprising, that a philosophy that bursts open the wall between nature and culture, matter and mind, language and substance should in turn destabilize writing. The destabilization of language that Morton and Haraway both perform is as instructive as it is disorientating. What is perhaps surprising (to me, at least) is my inability to move away from a conventional essayistic grammar in my own encounter with ecological thinking, and, indeed, the difficulty with which I peel my thoughts away from static transcendent objects. It is a measure, I think, of how profoundly thought is mired in linguistic forms, and thus the urgency of linguistic disruption.

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