

Article

Recovering World-Welcoming Words: Language, Metaphysics, and the Voice of Nature

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Abstract: This article presents a theological–literary response to a concern in contemporary theory with heeding and articulating the speech of nonhuman things. Drawing from Rowan Williams’ metaphysics of poetic addition, I argue that an ‘ecothological’ literary practice challenges us to become attentive and responsive to the language of the nonhuman, by creatively performing the comingling of nonhuman and human language. Drawing from Jean-Louis Chrétien’s phenomenology of the voice, I propose a theological conception of language as a gift of hospitality to the voice of nonhuman things that is also a gift of poetic addition—a ‘saying more’ which, adding being to the world, also manifests its gift-like nature. In contrast to recent critical approaches, I argue for the qualified retrieval of ‘nature’ as a figure both literary and theological, a voice that gives voice to things and speaks by means of human literary production. Through a reading of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, I show that the paradoxical and poetic ambiguities of the literary sense of ‘nature’ serve precisely to shed light on its suspect modern iteration, while at the same time taking us beyond critique to enable a cautious yet attentive retrieval of its poetic and symbolic scope.

Keywords: ecotheology; theology and literature; ecology and religion; nature; Rowan Williams; Jean-Louis Chrétien; Timothy Morton; metaphysics of language; Shakespeare; *King Lear*



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1. Introduction

For many of us, encounters with the nonhuman world have been enriched through an engagement with literature. Writings from contemplative theological and spiritual traditions, poetry, and prose, as well as ‘nature writing’, have all contributed to a sense of the sacred presence, mystery, and dignity of the nonhuman. Whereas contemporary critique presses emphasis on alarming scientific analyses and clamours for a political response, pointing to looming catastrophe and demanding environmental justice, such writings, it seems, can fulfil a different function—one that is ethical, as well as reflective and spiritual. By teaching us to look, to listen, and to feel, such literature can attune us to the enduring mystery of the nonhuman and awake in us a profound sense of responsibility. Yet it is also often assumed that such writings, for all their artistic worth, remain primarily descriptive or evocative—relaying an experience, a sense of the wondrous or the awesome, or adding, with poetic flourish, an aesthetic, ‘sublime’, or mystical dimension to the ‘thereness’ of the real. Yet is this really fully to account, from a theological perspective, for the phenomenon of language and its encounter with the things and beings of the world? Could such words, as well as teaching us to listen, also be teaching us to *speak*? Could there be an ‘ecological’ sense in which words, beyond the technical rhetoric of science and the strained discourse of politics, become not merely indicative of the presence of the nonhuman, but active bearers of its language? How might literature be an active participant in a dialogue with the nonhuman world? How do we hear, write, and speak with the voice of things?

This question of the voice of things, of how to hear their speech or even ‘make’ things speak, has recently come to the fore in contemporary theory. A key aspect of the posthuman project is to encourage new modes of relationships with the nonhuman world based on creating conditions in which things and objects, freed from anthropocentric biases, can

unfold their own beings. Yet in calling for such a radically new approach, perhaps too few scholars have acknowledged that they are in fact also gesturing to a very old one. To give an example, it seems to some posthuman critics that our current situation demands the return of the ‘old metaphor of the book of nature’; that the universe is not at all a bare, mute, indifferent material reality but a library waiting to be read (Morton 2007, p. 178). This ‘old metaphor’, however, cannot so easily be wrenched from the premodern literary–theological contexts from which it stems, simply to be made to accord with postmodern concerns. Indeed, the premodern, theological figure of ‘nature’ emerges from a complex interplay between literary forms, as well as philosophical and theological writings (Economou 2002). This rich and manifold tradition, where nature can in turn appear as a ‘book’, speak through the voice of a ‘goddess natura’, or even be figured as participant in a ‘cosmic liturgy’, crosses the boundaries between theology and literature, suggesting that an ecotheological approach to the nonhuman world may well also entail considerations of a literary nature, bringing into question the relationship between human linguistic creativity and nonhuman things and beings.

To explore this question, this essay will begin by outlining the literary–theological metaphysics of language sketched out by Rowan Williams in his book *The Edge of Words*, where poetic representation is presented as an ‘addition’ to being, a saying ‘more’ that is also paradoxically a coming to reveal the inexhaustible nature of the real. To illuminate an ‘ecopoetic’ dimension of Williams’ thought, I will explore his metaphysics of poetic addition in terms of the indwelling of nonhuman things *in* human language, showing how the speech of the nonhuman is both ineliminable from and continuous with human linguistic activity. To reflect on the theological import of the crossovers between nonhuman and human language, I will draw on a specific aspect of Jean-Louis Chrétien’s phenomenology of call and response, which is that of *hospitality*. As Chrétien puts it, “Hospitality is, first and foremost, the hospitality that we give each other, exchanging words and silences, glances and voices. This conversation cannot take place in a vacuum; it is in the world, this world that we never cease to share—among ourselves but also with other forms of presence, the presence of animals, of vegetables, of things. In our speech, we are equally responsible for them, just as we respond to them” (Chrétien 2003, p. 1). To give hospitality, the human voice must thus become receptive to the other voices that always already inhabit it. Such reception, for Chrétien, also coincides with another mode of giving, for “the world is heavy with speech, it calls on speech and on our speech in response, and it calls only by responding itself, already, to the speech that created it” (p. 129). To respond to such speech with poetic creativity is to *give voice* to the speech of world precisely by making manifest its own deeper nature as a divine gift, its own primordial attunement to “the speech that created it”. This approach to language as hospitality and gift thus further suggest the eco-theological aspects of ‘poetic addition’—partly an attentive listening to the voice of things, and partly a poetic production where nonhuman things are figured as gift.

The notion that the nonhuman world always already crosses over into the literary will also lead to the retrieval of an aspect of the premodern, theoliterary conception of ‘nature’ mentioned above. Beyond its colloquial connotation of ‘birds and trees’, the notion of nature has a rich and at times bewilderingly diverse philological history (Lewis 2003, pp. 24–64). In recent times, however, this concept has come under fire because of its perceived implication in suspect anthropocentric and male-centric ontologies built on a neat reliance on the modern division between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ as two ‘purified’, alienated realms. As Michael Northcott notes, “it is this distinction . . . which is at the core of the failure of the nations to respond to the ecological and climate crises”, a distinction to which theological approaches too often fail to respond and appropriately critique (Northcott 2017). While this may be true of nature understood as one of the ‘purified’ fields of early modern philosophy, I will seek to retrieve the premodern sense alluded to above—as a figure that is both literary and theological, nature can be presented—heard—as a *voice* that also gives voice to things. The paradoxical and poetic ambiguities of the literary sense of ‘nature’, I will argue, serve precisely to shed light on its suspect modern iteration, while at the same time

taking us beyond critique in order to enable a cautious yet attentive retrieval of its poetic and symbolic scope.

To perform such a retrieval, I offer a literary–theological reading of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, where ‘nature’ appears initially as a problematic and socio-culturally oppressive concept conveniently used by characters to justify their actions. As the tragic action of the play unfolds, this concept is deconstructed in the play’s central scenes; however, in the play’s final acts, ‘nature’ is recast as a symbolic realm signified in a gesture of mutual blessing between Cordelia and Lear. In the play, the concept of ‘nature’ does not vindicate a frozen, hierarchical ‘chain of being’; rather, through a careful interplay of allusions, Shakespeare presents human language as a paradoxical, in-between site of mutual interfusions between human and nonhuman worlds. The play, I will show, ends up suggesting the need to recover a theological kind of poetics, where language offers the gift of hospitality to nonhuman things, heeding the voice of nature and responding to it, through poetic addition, by re-casting nonhuman things as gifts.

2. ‘Nature’, Language, and the Metaphysics of the Nonhuman

As suggested above, the speaking of things has become a concern for contemporary theory. Western metaphysics and science, we are often told, have constructed an abstract, detached objectivity, validating a stance of human exceptionalism and technopolitical abuse to the point that the world that surrounds us, in all its sensuous, perplexing, bewildering diversities, is simply no longer being heard. Coming off our anthropocentric perch means to forego such traditional metaphysical divisions, of beings and objects, of animate or inanimate, in order simply to let the abiding strangeness of reality—understood in its Anglo-Saxon sense of ‘thinghood’—speak for itself in all its startling difference. Calls from many parts of the contemporary theoretical spectrum (object-oriented ontology, speculative realism, actor–network theory, etc.) have attempted to map out this move towards new modes of attention and kinship with things, often stressing the environmentalist implications of their approaches (Bennett 2010; Stengers 2010; Bryant 2011; Morton 2018; Latour 2018). Technological control, industrial domination, rationalising philosophy, and even Biblically sanctioned ideas of benign and responsible stewardship are ultimately tagged with the same suspect anthropocentricity—by silencing the world in order to control it, Western metaphysics has robbed things of their dignity.

It is perhaps the case that many of these theorists are not altogether aware (or unwilling to recognise) that their approaches, for all their contemporary gloss, echo a long, premodern theological ‘logos’ tradition (Cole 2013). For theologians, the sense of a speaking nonhuman world is not a new notion; theological writings abound with images and suggestions of the linguistic character of nonhuman and material beings, from the idea of the ‘book of nature’ (Hugh of St Victor) to that of a ‘cosmic liturgy’ (Maximus Confessor). Importantly, those figures are not merely pointing to a reality ‘out there’, but one that is also mediated via human *poiesis*—whether Hugh invites us to read the ‘book’, or Maximus to celebrate the ‘liturgy’, the sense of literary contemplation and of a sacred dramaturgic performance is inseparable from our being with things. In such traditions, the nonhuman world prompts continuity with the human by means of literary performance. In this way, ‘to read’ suggests more than merely a gathering of information by a detached reader, but an attentive, contemplative, and reverential activity; whereas ‘to praise’ implies the poetics and performative practices associated with doxology. The theological issue that the ‘voice of things’ suggests is one of continuity between the speech of nonhuman things and human language—at play is a question of poetic ontology. The relationship with ‘creation’, with the nonhuman world, brings with itself the question of human language.¹

It is such an ambitious project that partly inhabits Rowan Williams’ *The Edge of Words*, a volume which grew out of his 2013 Gifford Lectures. The well-known remit of those prestigious events, to promote and shed light on ‘natural theology’, is given a poetic twist in Williams’ exploration of linguistic phenomenon. His work suggests that a ‘natural’ theology is in fact also a ‘poetic’ theology—in a consciously performative, allusive, and

open-ended style, the book weaves an argument that material reality is linguistic just as language is irreducibly embodied, and that the interweaving of these two dimensions is of theological significance. Paradoxically, the argument's ambitious reaches are inversely proportional to the tentative open-endedness of the style of writing, for if poetry is material and the material poetic, there is something in their mutual expression which must honour time; hence, both language and matter remain open, provisional, elusive, and enigmatic.

First, Williams makes clear that it is unhelpful to understand language contrariwise; that is, through a 'reductionist' account of matter. Naturalistic attitudes to human consciousness (often using terminology replete with words borrowed from linguistics, such as coding, data, information, etc.) fail to account for what is distinctive about language—its ability to 're-present'; that is, "the practice of transporting kinds of perceived life across the territorial boundaries of initial strict description" (Williams 2014, p. 67). As key features of embodied conscious life, linguistic practices can often say what they say only by saying it differently; such 'non-identical repetition' is drawn upon in order to illuminate (and not merely describe) the real. As such, Williams invokes scientific and philosophical accounts that tend to demonstrate affinities between poetic, analogical, and symbolic modes of speaking and the ways in which our bodies and brains happen to be (drawing, for example, on the celebrated work of Iain McGilchrist). Going beyond the reductive account of language also means going beyond a reductive account of matter, and Williams attempts to show that language intimately involves us as material speakers, as embodied beings, in a disclosive practice that always ultimately involves the imaginative and the symbolic. Rather than an epiphenomenal reality in an otherwise mechanical or random universe, "the act of speaking or making sense is inseparably part of the order of things" (p. 106), because 'sense' always already appears as at issue for both matter and language. To speak of the world is already to *be* the world; it is belonging to and enacting the continuum in which the material and its underlying or 'implicate' order (after David Bohm) utters itself.

Williams is here resolutely post-epistemological—if speech arises not out of some posited prior 'private' self but as a feature of a shared, embodied world, there is no clearly marked epistemic gap between mind and matter. Language is not a translation of sense-perception 'stimuli' into imperfect concepts, haunted by a skeptical anxiety that the world as 'given' somehow forever escapes us, yet neither is it at the opposite, 'Faustian' end of the spectrum a magical tool for grasping the 'essences' of the objective world—both views imply an objective reality malleable to human control. The world is not a given 'thing' to be seized upon, and thus it is not the business of words to perform a capture. As 'active bearers of the agency' they enact and represent, words must be more than labels employed to congeal reality into fixed, malleable concepts (p. 111). That the nonhuman slips out of the grasp of words does not however suggest some kind of abysmal failure of language so much as it gestures to an open kind of co-expressive concreteness, where human speech becomes "a way of prolonging or extending in another mode the life of the environment we inhabit" (p. 109). Speech is, thus, prompted, moved, and impinged upon by the being of things, and this prompt is a call to attention, to articulation, to precision rather than a deferral to an unspecified, inexpressive 'oneness'. As such, language becomes fully what it is not in spite of incompleteness, but *because* it is incomplete; because it is a poetic venturing, a staking-out into genuine newness, it most accurately reflects the shapes of the real in time. In this sense, matter and language are both 'apophatic'—they are both open towards the gift of time, towards a future. The medium of time becomes not the site of a perpetual deficiency of plenitude, but of the actualising potential of renewed expression. The 'strangeness' or mystery of things offers 'the possibility of recognition in and through the reality of what at first is felt as strange' (p. 153).

As accounted for in Williams' metaphysics of process and event, the very 'apophatic' aspect of matter and language become, paradoxically, also the energy of poetic addition. To encounter matter in language is not to contrast subject with object but to co-inhabit a world itself always already in the process of "producing innovative structures as paths to future goals, agencies moving towards new and optimally intelligible convergence"

(p. 101). Encountering our material world, in a sense, is always already speaking or responding, exploring a continuity in 'style', in gesture, and in agency that probes toward kinds of intelligibility, as "systems finding their way in interacting with one another and constantly refining and elaborating this rather than settling in an eternal equilibrium". It is in this sense that "conscious life . . . is a development entirely consistent with this story" (p. 101). Indeed, the creative aspects of language are sites where the imprint of the open-endedness of the material world can be glimpsed 'at the edge of words', by probing spaces where language reaches 'beyond' itself towards a sense of affinity with this ongoing process—spaces that escape the dominion of the descriptive and the prosaic, that must be seen and felt in order to be elaborated. Poetic practice, then, also suggests a particular kind of attention to and feel for such a process and for the surprising, unexpected affinities between language and matter that show up at 'the edge of words'.

Lest this strange poetic–apophatic affinity should appear too neat, too linear, too constructed, this constant and refining elaboration is precisely a warning against the stale metaphor, the assumed correlation and the lure of the all-encompassing system. Poetic expression is a paradox of structure and openness, of restraint and freedom. Matter in this sense is similar to poetry of a modernist kind; a dance in which formal structure offers a stable background against which fresh, unexpected assonances and affinities between words and worlds are discovered—yet always privileging spontaneity and creativity over the achievement of formal balance (Pickstock 2015, p. 609).; thus, searching for a middle ground between creative expressiveness and form, matter's speech is poetic, for it speaks not by communicating its objective reality, but by constantly exceeding the syntax of 'subject–verb–object' (p. 105).

From this point of view, the specific work of the poetic and the literary is not an escapist flight of fancy into an aesthetic play-world, but rather an intensification of our properly human practice as embodied conscious beings. By speaking, humans reflect the 'excess of significance' of all things themselves, an excess which is also an aspect of their being. Rather than being quantified as ontic presence, matter demands the dislodging of frozen literalisms, just as it challenges mindsets locked in descriptive modes. The material world, one might say, 'prompts' its own poetic re-iteration.

That the material world speaks, and the speaking world embodies, may be what Williams seeks to illuminate, but can this notion of the poetics of the material world really be associated with the umbrella term 'nature'? As many commentators have noted, our current ecoscientific crisis can be traced to the advent of modernity and its reduction of the nonhuman world into a mechanised realm, devoid of meaningful order and amenable to an order imposed from without. Indeed, the idea of 'the modern', so Bruno Latour's familiar argument goes, is based precisely on its artificial conception of 'nature' and 'culture' as two purified categories, two separate fields of existence, the former devoid of meaning and the latter its meaning-giving arbiter (Latour 1993). Since Latour's work, and in line with the contemporary call to 'let things speak', many commentators have rightly warned us of the ontological difficulties associated with the category of nature (Morton 2007; Žižek 2008; Albertson and King 2010; Purdy 2015), which by presenting itself as the objective 'other' of culture, too easily underwrites assumptions of human exceptionalism. Paradoxically, it is the modern idea of 'nature' that entails a distrust of embodiment and an abasement of women and femaleness (Merchant 1980), and which translates in the arts and literature into a disturbingly anthropomorphising, male-centric aesthetic. For the ecocritic and 'object-oriented' philosopher Timothy Morton, the concept of nature in literature is bedevilled by the sin of 'ecomimesis', a form of aesthetic fantasy, which while figuring the natural world as an idealised, pure, quasi-mystic realm, can never go beyond an 'inside–outside' distinction that projects the nonhuman as an object available for control (Morton 2007, p. 77–78). Functioning as this religious figure worthy of adoration on an aesthetic pedestal (particularly, he thinks, in Romantic contexts), the 'ecomimetic' concept of nature vouchsafes dangerous normative manoeuvres, which in turn direct our moral agendas and biopolitical practices. Nature is only and ever nature *for us*, a fetish in turn to

be aesthetically adored and sadistically abused. Hence to be ecological, for Morton, is to be ‘without nature’; to go beyond this aesthetic stance into an intensification of the strange wildness of the nonhuman—a radicalising of its otherness and an abiding acceptance of its oftentimes disconcertingly inert, indifferent, and sometimes even ‘disgusting’ ways (Morton 2007, p. 195).

From this point of view, only by ridding ourselves of the aesthetic–metaphysical category of nature can we become open to the call of things *as* things, denuded from aesthetic and objectifying oppression, in respectful mindfulness of their abiding mystery. Yet object-oriented ecocriticism also affirms that this openness cannot, properly speaking, lead to any form of genuine *relation*. To safeguard their dignity, things are assumed to have an aspect that is forever withdrawn and inaccessible; thus, relations between things can only be aesthetic, and any communication is guaranteed not by any possible kinship between thing and thing, or between word and thing, but by a kind of sensuous contact made possible by an obscure occasionalism. The business of literature, then, is to affirm this ‘sheer coexistence’ without connection, forcing us a “to acknowledge that we coexist with uncanny beings in a groundless yet vivid reality without a beyond” (Morton 2012, p. 222). To go ‘without nature’ thus also means to maintain that things have no genuine purchase with our words—human literary constructs must cease to chase the dream of ‘mystic’ kinship and instead bow to this infinite withdrawal.

Yet, as Jacob Sherman has recently argued in the pages of this journal, in denying a genuine aspect of relation between human and nonhuman worlds, one ends up with a sort of ‘substance-less Cartesian dualism’ in which the nonhuman is freed from the purified abstractions of modernity yet continues to exist in a kind of de-poeticised, de-ontologised, estranged spectral presence. “Such an ontological wilderness”, notes Sherman, “because it offers no genuine communion, and is in its depths unreachable, is ironically just the kind of wilderness that makes itself available to human exploitation” (Sherman 2020, p. 205). The history of Western culture, as mentioned above, has consistently shown how muteness and exploitation have come together. Hence, granting dignity to things cannot simply mean respectfully shutting the door to what in their presence calls for affinity and relation but, paradoxically, to enrich the idea of language and matter as a poetic process discussed above with a sense of the inviolable dignity of ‘substance’ or thinghood.

This is why, despite its strange nihilism, there is also perhaps something of a theological import in Morton’s suggestions (Kotva 2018). For in making the nonhuman object ‘strange strangers’, is there not perhaps also an appeal to a renewed mode of listening or attending, a manner of being with and alongside things that the modern notion of ‘nature’ and the cosmology from which it stems have obscured? Is there not here the call for a manner of heeding the nonhuman, *of listening* to the real in its astounding, mysterious uniqueness—a listening that also calls for some form of response?

It is here that the recovery of the figure of nature, understood in its premodern theological, literary, and symbolic sense (rather than its suspect early modern counterpart) can be fruitful. There is, alongside the *liber naturae* strand mentioned above (which Sherman invokes), a theological–literary tradition which portrays nature as a speaking being or a *voice*. One can appeal, for example, to Hildegard of Bingen’s polyvocal nature, Alain de Lille’s *De Planctu Natura*, or Bernardus Sylvestris’ poem *Cosmographia*, all of which allude to the figure of nature as a divinely sanctified teacher of wisdom, whose Biblical roots extend to the Wisdom literature and whose literary and metaphysical heritage emanate from such ancestry as the figure of Lady Philosophy in Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* (Economou 2002, pp. 23–28). The theological–literary form that can be glimpsed in such literature portrays nature not in the mode of passive victimhood implied in aesthetic ‘ecomimesis’, but with a divinely ordained, active mode of agency, who offers insight and guidance as well as consolation and compassion. This premodern portrayal is also enriched by theological voices such as Maximus or John Scotus Eriugena, both of whom encounter nature as a fellow speaker, a partner in a conversation modelled on the *exitus–reditus* scheme, a dialogue whose ultimate end is salvific and in which “nature furnishes us with

the stuff of which the conversation between God and self is made, and only by engaging nature can the conversation truly get under way” (Otten 2020, p. 30). Hence, it is through a performed dialogue with the voice of nature—rather than in its isolation as a thought object in a metaphysical or aesthetic project—that the human self becomes truly constituted in the light of a relationship with the divine.

If our own speaking is constructed amidst the irreducible enmeshment of a conversation with things, the voice of things shares with the divine its speaking at the contours of our understanding, its speech shimmering ‘at the edge of words’. In this sense, nature is not a convenient name for a static material order that happens to be divinely sanctioned, but a voice heard at the mysterious foundation of our very language; rather than a blunted ‘ecomimesis’, the speech of nature understood in this way suggests an attentive and responsive *ecopoiesis*, because the voice of things can be heard only when *our own voice* too is heard differently.

Thus, if things genuinely speak, they speak ‘always already’—human language arises in the context of a world already articulating itself into further being. For Jean-Louis Chrétien, to speak is first and foremost to respond to a call—a call that also calls our language, becoming voiced in the response, and even *as* the response (Chrétien 2007). It is a response that is born not from an urge to deploy a monologic voice, but first and foremost from attending, from listening to the voice of things, the address that also constitutes our own speaking—for the voice hears before it speaks. As he puts it:

Every voice, hearing without cease, bears many voices within itself because there is no first voice. We always speak to the world, we are always already in the act of speaking, always in the world still, so that the initiative to speak always comes calibrated with past speech, with a charge to speak, which it accepts and takes on without having given rise to it. (Chrétien 2003, p. 1)

As that in and through which we speak and yet does not belong solely to us, because it is already inhabited, the human voice is imbued by the calling presence of the nonhuman—we are given voice so that we may give voice. For Chrétien, this gift of voice given in order to voice things ultimately means to “illuminate how things stand with speech and how things likewise stand with the world, the world that gives itself to speech, the world that gives itself through speech”. (Chrétien 2003, p.113)

To imagine language in this mode of gift is also to imagine receiving the mysterious strangeness of things not as alienated others, but as welcome guests. Language must mean first of all an ability to give the gift of reception in the double sense of a grateful acceptance that also accommodates and receives, offering one’s own words, gestures, and silences as modes of dwelling. As Chrétien puts it, “The first hospitality is nothing other than listening. . . . It is the first hospitality, to be sure, but nobody has ever inaugurated it. No man has ever been the first to listen. We can offer it only because we have always already been received in it (Chrétien 2003, p. 9). Thus, if language can be a sanctuary for things, it is primarily because it is the place of words to let things speak through the gift that is hospitality. As hospitality, this is a listening that remains perilous, because the door of our language must remain open for the ‘strange stranger’ to come in.

As both giver of hospitality and bearer of poetic addition, language both receives and gives. Insofar as the voice is permeated by the inviolable dignity and agency of things, it receives the nonhuman world by sheltering it, by offering hospitality. Conversely, insofar as it participates in the process of ‘poetic addition’, it gives back the gift of poetic utterance, ‘adding to’ material reality by revealing aspects of its deeper nature as a gift from the divine. It is in this sense that we can hear the figure of ‘nature’ speak again, in an ‘ecothologically’ attuned manner; nature’s speech is also our challenge to attend to, welcome, and offer back its strange yet intimate language.

3. Nature in King Lear (1): Immanent Power and Powerless Curses

Hence, the literary becomes a specially illuminating field for an ecotheology in the sense that theologically speaking, the originary gift of language is a gift of hospitality that

receives by ‘adding’ and adds by receiving. Understood in its literary sense, the figure of nature is a symbolic realm whose own voice is heard ‘culturally’, as an ‘other’ that is also, paradoxically, a founding aspect of human language.

To illustrate and supplement this approach, I offer a literary reading of the complex presence of the figure of nature in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Shakespeare does not of course seamlessly continue the medieval tradition of *natura* (a continuity perhaps better glimpsed, for example, in Spenser), but rather, in accordance with the Renaissance re-evaluation of human art, explores how the mutual relations of self, world, and God are to be re-constituted and revived through *poiesis* (Gerlier Forthcoming). Indeed, the premodern notion of *natura* depended on a complex cosmology of participation as well as on the monastically influenced poetics of early medieval culture, in which nature functioned as a symbol that both participated in and pointed towards its divine source (Otten 2004). By Shakespeare’s day, however, the modern notion of *natura pura* as an objective, independent entity, ‘purified’ from symbolic participation and separate from the order of grace, had already and irreversibly inflected Western metaphysics (Dupré 1993, 178ff). The emergence of an idea of pure nature also coincided with the delineation of a semantic field proper to modern science (‘natural philosophy’), which demanded a reduction of the truth-bearing possibilities of language to the purely descriptive (Dupré 1993, p. 110). While humanists, poets, and rhetoricians alike were engaged in a ‘cult of words’, the purview of their linguistic practice concerned mainly ethical questions. Outside of literary–humanist pursuits, the system of signs privileged was one based on mathematics, as ‘natural philosophy’ demanded a kind of prose that appeared to exemplify the sobriety of mathematical exactitude. The ‘purification’ of the domain of nature, then, also demanded the purification of language, in the name of a supra-linguistic and supra-natural *mathesis universalis*.

It is in light of this situation, I suggest, that Shakespeare presents nature in *King Lear*. Although its medieval iteration had long vanished, Shakespeare, I want to argue, retrieves and revises the tradition of nature as a wisdom-bearing linguistic phenomenon, energising his work with ‘the sense of excess, of the irreducible untidiness and slipperiness’ of the natural world (MacFaul 2015, p. 2). Yet if in Shakespeare, as MacFaul argues, ‘organic connectedness is all, and the sense of connection involved is always related to and mediated through something excessive and supplementary’ (MacFaul 2015, p. 2), that excessive quality shows up through the underlying transhuman qualities of the gift of language, in the sense of a finite repetition of infinite grace (Gerlier Forthcoming; Baker 2020). The wisdom of nature, one might say, calls on human language to become the welcoming receptor of its wisdom, being partly constituted by and partly constituting the gift that it receives and returns.

This is why, as I will show below, the play deconstructs every stable conceptual framework of nature ‘purified’ of linguistic ambiguities, only to leave us, on first reading, with a disorienting mismatch of notions, as the ecocritic Gabriel Egan well notes; “*King Lear* . . . invites us to mock those for whom human affairs and the wider cosmos are inextricably bound together; however, it is also seems intent on making us reconsider this mockery and to see merit in the mocked view” (Egan 2006, p. 133). In response to this, I suggest that Shakespeare’s paradoxical poetics (Platt 2009) work to unsettle static, ‘purified’ conceptions of nature by showing its deeply problematic aspects, only to invoke a conception of human language as giver of hospitality to the voice of things and as a site where the wisdom of nature can be heard. *King Lear*’s pagan setting functions precisely to cast light on the problematic sense of a ‘purified’ nature that was becoming prevalent in Shakespeare’s day. To create, with *King Lear*, a pagan–archaic world order in which Goddess Nature ‘rules’ is not to construct an ‘immanent religion’ (Knight 1930, pp. 171–208) but precisely to anticipate modernity’s onset.

As is often pointed out, the natural world of *King Lear* seems to be drawn in a similar direction to the dramatic arc of its characters. Initially referred to with pastoral imagery, “with shadowy forests and with champaigns riched/with plenteous rivers and with wide skirted meads” (1.1.64–65), the nonhuman world transforms, as Leah Marcus points out,

into “a teeming world of shrubs, trees, barren heath, rats, dogs, pond slime, thunder, whirlwinds, and other elemental forces swirling about the humans—a presence that is so palpable to its characters that it almost deserves the status of an additional member of the cast” (Marcus 2016, p. 422). Nature, in this wild aspect, becomes eerily present and vocal in the play precisely as its foreclosed, rigid norm-validating conceptions break down.

This transformation also mirrors the conditions and possibilities of language, as figured in the love trial that inaugurates the play. As is well known, Cordelia, Lear’s favourite daughter, refuses to participate in a rhetorical pageant that the king had organised to abdicate his rule and transfer the kingdom to his three daughters. For Cordelia, love is a kind of bond with nature, a bond that grounds words and cannot be supplemented by hyperbolic excess (1.1.91–104). For Lear, on the other hand, nature dictates the obligations of familial bonds—love is not a quality that springs from a prior accordance with nature, but is an affect superadded to a tightly-knit, static, and sterile political cosmology (1.1.105–39). In such conditions, words of love are a mere tactful flourish on the real. Under the pressure of the politics of rhetoric suggested by the play’s opening scene, love turns from a gift freely given into an apophatic sign, a ‘nothing’, as Cordelia awkwardly puts in answer to her father’s question, “What can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters” (1.1.85–86).² Lear’s disowning of Cordelia and banishment of his loyal servant Kent signal that the gift of love has been excluded from the order of words, meaning that language soon becomes groundless, prey to the manipulative tactics of various warring factions. Just as the wild aspect of nature comes to the fore as the play progresses, language too enters a wilderness; as Ted Hughes puts it, words in *King Lear* are given a ‘saturnalian freedom’, fracturing both rhetoric and custom to express what is really at stake (Hughes 1993, p. 278). Split apart from its gift-bearing faculty by the tyrannical use of norms underwritten by a conception of nature as mute, and used to justify the worst excesses of violence and brutality, human language henceforth seeks a multitude of creative, oblique ways to re-align itself to the gift that constitutes its own being (Gerlier Forthcoming).

As the stable and fixed conception of nature wanes, so does language become involved in a saturnalian excess that is a parody of gift. Shakespeare puts the fading hold of the customary view of nature together with the rising force of brutal rhetoric in a well-known passage. Shocked by Lear’s banishment of Kent and Cordelia, and tricked by Edmund into believing that his ‘natural’ son Edgar is out to betray him, Gloucester bemoans the breaking apart of his cosmology of nature:

Gloucester: These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us; though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects; love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide; in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked ‘twixt son and father. (1.2.104–12)

Edmund: An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition to the charge of a star! My father compounded with my mother under the dragon’s tail; and my nativity was under Ursa major; so that it follows, I am rough and lecherous. Fut! I should have been that I am had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing. (1.2.126–33)

For Gloucester, the ‘reasoning’ that flows from his sense of nature as cosmic harmony justifies a strict hierarchical order based on family bonds and obligations. Yet it is just this reasoning that also prevents him from sensing that it is the bond between words and world that is cracked—uprooted from its ground in love, language has become unfeeling of nature’s own voice and dignity, as Cordelia knew. This allows the ‘unnatural’ son Edmund, born as an illegitimate child, to fully assert the hypocrisy beneath his father’s cosmology. For him, the word ‘nature’ his father uses so reverently refers to an easily manipulable idea, a concept used to justify a primal thirst for lust and power.

He is, of course, partly right. As Gloucester’s ‘illegitimate’ son, Edmund had been introduced to Kent, with ill-timed humour, as a ‘knave’ and ‘whoreson’, whereas Edgar,

his other son, had been recognised ‘by order of law’, and is, thus, ‘natural’ (1.1.17–34). However, soon after having been tricked to believe Edmund’s lies, Gloucester transforms the initially undesired ‘whoreson’ into his ‘natural boy’ (2.1.84), just as, conversely, Edgar, whose father ‘so tenderly and entirely loves him’ (1.2.96–97), is very soon branded a ‘villain’ whose character can easily be blamed on an absent mother (2.1.78). This transfer of values occurs with similar speed for Lear. Cordelia, once closest to Lear’s heart, becomes in the space of a few lines an illegitimate ‘sometime daughter’; Regan and Goneril, soon afterwards, are branded ‘unnatural hags’ (2.2.466). Nature, it seems, stands as the lexical foundation for a family of oaths and curses, hasty banishments and easy investitures.

As such, nature is only *overtly* the symbol for cosmic harmony, and *covertly* the justification for a loveless, unjust cosmology masking primal drives for power and desire. Edmund’s first soliloquy, an invocatory appeal to a ‘goddess nature’ that is also profoundly ironic, exposes this underlying situation.

Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moon-shines
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? wherefore base?
When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous, and my shape as true,
As honest madam’s issue? Why brand they us
With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base? (1.2.1–10)

The confident appeal to nature as a power lurking beyond ‘the plague of custom’ belongs to a tradition of sophistic rhetoric formed around the *phusis–nomos* debate at least as old as Thrasymachus’ speeches in Plato’s *Republic* and frequently deployed in the Renaissance. Here, a familiar diatribe against convention soon modulates to concerns with derivation and deprivation; initially animated by a cry for liberty, Edmund’s speech gradually becomes imprisoned in its own language. Obsessive repetitions of the various terms associated with the sociocultural semantic field of derivation—‘legitimate’, ‘base’, ‘baseness’, ‘bastard’, and ‘bastardy’—show the dependence of Edmund’s thought on the very conventions he seems intent to challenge, just as his argument against ‘custom’ is in fact a customary Renaissance thesis against humanist orthodoxy (Cousins and Derrin 2018, p. 11). This is language looking for freedom, yet without a genuine relationship with the voice of nature underwritten by the order of gift, words are caught in a self-defeating circularity.

This sense of the powerlessness of language is also mirrored in Lear’s usage of ‘nature’. If, for Edmund nature is merely the affirmation of wilful self-power, for Lear the mutual social obligations that constitute his cosmology are guaranteed by the looming threat of nature’s revenge. This barbarous, blasphemous underlay soon reveals itself, as his kingly oath-making, initially deployed to disown Cordelia and banish Kent, degenerates into wild curse. Confronted by Goneril’s ingrateful behaviour, Lear too appeals to the ‘goddess nature’:

Hear, Nature, hear, dear goddess, hear;
Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful.
Into her womb convey sterility.
Dry up in her the organs of increase,
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honour her. If she must teem,
Create her child of spleen, that it may live
And be a thwart disnatured torment to her . . .
Turn all her mother’s pains and benefits
To laughter and contempt, that she may feel

How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child. (1.4.267–81)

Here, Lear seeks to disnature his relationship with Goneril by cursing it; since she has dared to step outside the bonds of natural kinship through ingratitude, Lear uses the prerogative of a king to demand that nature itself turn vengeful. However, just as with Edmund, the appeal to the goddess remains self-referenced, circular, and powerless. Sensing the ineffectiveness of his words to move his daughter's hardened will, Lear exits in a rage, but against the conventions expected of a king, soon re-enters, fuelling the curse to excess—"blast and fog upon thee/The untended woundings of a father's curse/pierce every sense about thee!" Here, as Bjorn Quiring puts it, 'the curse is cursed with the need for its own endless repetition' (Quiring 2014, p. 4). The appeal to nature for justice is gradually overwhelmed by the language of the curse, which once again parodies the mysterious excess of a genuine gift economy.

As the generative aspect of nature is invoked only to be urged to thwart itself, so do the very powers of language wane, condensed in a wild yet self-defeating curse. Cut to the heart by filial ingratitude and treated horrendously by his own children, Lear in the storm calls upon nature itself to curse its own being, to self-destruct, invoking the creative potential of the nonhuman world to be derailed in the name of a primeval, all-consuming curse. Words become saturated by a life-denying blasphemy, "Strike flat the thick rotundity of the world/Crack nature's moulds, all germens spill at once/that make ingrateful man!" (3.2.7–9). At his most obscure moment, and in accordance with Shakespeare's paradoxical poetics, Lear sees rightly that it is an 'ingrateful' humanity, a lack of genuine response to the gift of the real, that creates a mortal, cosmic discord. However, such insight, for him, remains only partial. Indeed, the search for an immanent justice, or an analogical relationship between the principles of the cosmos and the norms of filial obligation, is for him ultimately fruitless; "let them anatomize Regan", he will later despair, "see what breeds about her heart—is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" (3.6.73–75). The gratitude he searches for cannot be mapped out—the gift cannot be wrenched as a result of dissecting nature. The immanent logic of *natura pura*, parcelled out according to the logic of the grid and unfit to receive the excess of the gift, soon implodes on itself.

As such, neither 'nature as power' nor 'nature as norm' succeed in invoking nature at all. Without love as the heart of language, nature is made mute, transformed into an easily disposable value validated by a suspect cosmology. Having been absorbed by sophistry and rational control, nature's sacred difference is no longer heeded, no longer present in words. It turns out that a play which constantly invokes nature is in fact a play that exposes the idea of being 'without nature'—a world reimagined as a brutal, indifferent wilderness once it is no longer seen to serve human ends. In such a world, language consequently degenerates into self-denial. Yet beneath and beyond the restriction of the network of sterile conceptions that orbit around its very conception in the play, the voice of nature calls, speaks, and beckons. As I will show below, what seems to be 'viciously' uncontrollable turns out to be gracefully unpredictable, a sign of the openness to further iteration, which as Williams shows, characterises both matter and language—an openness to the gift, to grace.

4. Nature in King Lear (2): Wild and Sustaining Gifts

The play does not end at this nihilistic muting of the natural world, absurdly celebrating a brutal, anthropocentric insight into an indifferent and lustful *natura pura*. The tremendous barbarism unleashed in its central scenes vividly exposes the tragic underlay of this notion, which is in fact espoused by the various factions in conflict. If the initial action gestures at the cracks beneath a loveless, uncreative, and unjust cosmology by revealing the 'wild' aspect of both language and nature, the actions of characters such as Edgar, Kent, and Cordelia work towards the possibility of restitution of an order made deeper and more dynamic by genuine love. Accordingly, 'wildness' modulates from a signifier of a primal 'natural' violence and brutality to suggesting instead "an irreducibly strange dimension

of matter, an outside" (Bennett 2010, pp. 2–3), which also manifests a genuine, intimate kinship between words and world.

As Cordelia returns from France to save her father from the actions of her sisters, she finally spies Lear, whom she had been seeking, wandering lost in the countryside.

Cordelia

Alack, 'tis he: why, he was met even now
As mad as the vex'd sea; singing aloud;
Crown'd with rank fumiter and furrow-weeds,
With bur-docks, hemlock, nettles, cuckoo-flowers,
Darnel, and all the idle weeds that grow
In our sustaining corn . . .
What can man's wisdom
In the restoring his bereaved sense?
He that helps him take all my outward worth.

Doctor

There is means, madam;
Our foster-nurse of nature is repose,
The which he lacks; that to provoke in him,
Are many simples operative, whose power
Will close the eye of anguish.

Cordelia

All blest secrets,
All you unpublish'd virtues of the earth,
Spring with my tears! be aidant and remediate
In the good man's distress! (4.4.1–19)

Having returned to Britain to restore her father's kingship, Cordelia encounters him as king of the heathland, crowned by 'idle weeds', the productions of 'wild' nature. This is a crown that both evokes the medieval figure of the holy hermit drawn from romance literature and the spiritual aspects of 'living in the wild' inherited from a tradition that stems from the desert fathers (Steffes 2016, p. 234). As Michael Steffes has shown, these traditional references intimate something more than a nihilistic condemnation of human intrusion punished by nature's harsh indifference and allude instead to a spiritual journey of purgation and regeneration possible *only in and with the wild*. From this point onwards, the play turns from stressing the wild aspect of the sustainable only to gesture to the sustainable aspect of the wild. The presence of the weeds amidst plants that nurture humans allude to the deeper union towards which Cordelia's prayer will subsequently gesture; the enmeshment of wild and cultivated aspects of nature as well as words, or the mysterious, excessive presence of nature's own speech as always already entangled in the linguistic productions of the human world.

If by being banished by his own daughters, Lear is brought closer to those who live close to 'wild nature' in the play, 'the poor naked wretches' of whom he has taken 'too little care' (3.4.25–28), his adventures in the wild do not yet bring him to a renewal of expression. The language of love having been banished from the outset, Lear does not encounter in nature the mysterious speech of things, but only the confirmation that his own speech-world has hidden an unpleasant truth' "Through tattered clothes great vices do appear/Robes and furred gowns hide all" (4.6.160–61). To claim as he does that "nature's above art" (4.6.86), is only to discover the partly salutary insight that conventions have become nefarious if they do not heed and honour nature's sacred difference. Without love as the heart of language, Lear comes to imagine a nature as only bare necessity, devoid of superfluity, with no openness to or participation in gift. To be natural, for Lear, is to be like Tom O' Bedlam, whom he had branded "unaccommodated man"; a "poor, bare, forked animal" and "the thing itself" (3.4.95–96): it is to be naked and destitute.

Cordelia's words suggest a way forward. Moved by the doctor's remark that the powers of nature also bring rest and peace to human nature, she prays to the earth. Her prayer, however, is no oath-taking—her words address nature not as the vengeful, filial-ingratitude-hating goddess, but primarily as the elusive power figured forth in the healing virtues of its productions. In the language of prayer, virtues are not energies ready-to-hand to manipulate, but first benedictions to revere 'apophatically'—"blest secrets" and "unpublish'd potencies". The blessed virtues and goodness maintain their innate secrecy; they are not named, but they appear in her language as the sacred excess to which and with which Cordelia raises her prayer, just as the idle weeds appear in the sustaining corn. For Lear, to be natural is to be naked and barren; for Cordelia, to be natural is to respond with reverence. The gifts of the earth are encountered in this prayer, voiced in and as the response, as Chrétien might say, but the prayer springs from the promise of the gifts of the earth.

It is easy to feel in such words an affected return to 'romance', an idealised pastoral language, perhaps sounding somewhat shaky in the light of the momentous suffering unleashed on stage. Yet precisely for this reason, they are especially significant—after all the vociferous invocations to a goddess nature which turned out to be an icon of human desire for control, Cordelia's prayer inaugurates the counterpoint of a language tuned to a deeper grammar.

When Lear awakens from his slumber, he is unsure of his *own* nature. Is he material or spiritual? Is Cordelia a human or an angel? (4.7.45–57). Cordelia kneels to him, asking for formal blessing, "O look upon me sir / And hold your hands in benediction o'er me!" she entreats him, before adding awkwardly, "No sir, you must not kneel" (4.7.49–57). Caught in a middle-realm between spirit and material worlds, Lear cannot distinguish between material gesture or spiritual utterance. As such, his embodied response accommodates both; by kneeling to and with she who is asking for blessing, he blesses by asking also for a blessing—the economy performed here being that of mutual gift-giving. His response violates the social customs that had become frozen (nature as norm) and interrupts his philosophical nihilism (nature as power). In the furtive gesture of awkward mutual kneeling, Lear and Cordelia enact the wisdom ordained by the coincidence of the secret and the proclaimed, the wild and the sustaining, in nature.

Thus, the journey into wild nature nourishes the birth of genuine human expression as a form of gift; the healing of filial ingratitude coincides with the birth of paternal gratitude. Having touched this truth for a moment, Lear longs to non-identically repeat it, over and over again. His being sent to prison with Cordelia by Edmund is of no concern. Instead, he calls upon what he understands to be genuine linguistic expression; "When thou dost ask me blessing / I'll kneel down, and ask of thee forgiveness" (5.3.10–11). Lear has seen how, with Cordelia, he can endlessly re-enact this natural economy of gift-exchange. Fruit of the "unpublish'd virtues" of the earth, this economy of love must be matched by an economy of language. Hence, he no longer desires to pronounce oaths, sentences, and curses, but hopes for prayer, song, story-telling, and listening, the modes of a cosmic liturgy; "So we'll live, and pray, and sing, and tell old tales . . . and hear poor rogues, talk of court news, and we'll talk with them too" (5.3.11–14). This form of language incorporates Lear's journey into 'wild nature', yet transposes the darkness into insight; hence, "to take upon's the mystery of things" means primarily to attend to things precisely as 'mysteries', to welcome them as 'strange strangers'. In a theological sense, it is to heed what Thomas Merton calls an "underlying heavenliness", which is paradoxically both "the real nature of things" and "not their nature, but the deeper truth that they are a gift of love and of freedom, and that *this* is their true reality" (Merton 1988, pp. 43–44).

With the death of Cordelia, Lear's vision of another world of gift and counter-gift fades, for to truly speak in this way requires a community of genuine kinship, of mutual blessing and thanksgiving. Without the possibility granted by this communal sense, without the possibility of speech granted by love, Lear calls for one last poetic gesture—to sing a lament that would 'crack' heaven's vault and break the heart of 'men of stones' (5.3.257). At the

play's ending, the possibilities for the reunion of the voice of nature with the voices of humans is not yet available; prayers and tale-telling belong to a vision of another world. The healing gesture here is to extend this insight in order to attempt to dwell with things in order to 'sustain' the 'gored state' (5.3.319). As Edgar puts it in his final lines, "the weight of this sad time we must obey/Speak what we feel, not what ought to say" (5.3.322–33). Paradoxically, this couplet appeals for genuine utterance beyond the oppressive language of norms, yet it also relinquishes another sense of 'feel'—speaking must be speaking what we *sense*, what calls to be voiced and is already something that we feel at the 'edge' of our words which, as I have argued, is the voice of nature. The weight of such sad times invites us again to feel the ponderous density of things, their abiding presence with us. Before imprudently acting towards building a new world, we must heed the cry of nature as it speaks to us now; thus, we are invited to recognise that the cosmic injury performed by the withdrawal of love from language and from the world must take time to heal—the answer is to 'stay with' the wounded world, and learn to attend, to hear and discern again that nature itself is a gift from the divine, speaking its own unique language.

5. Conclusions

Throughout this essay, I have suggested that the realm of the literary, from an 'ecothological' point of view, becomes especially relevant in exploring the co-mingling of language and things, of world with words, and of being and gift. The register of language I have appealed to, ultimately, is the doxological; it is invariably linked with "the intention of uttering a prayer of cosmic praise—offering the world to God" (Chrétien 2003, p. 113). This offering depends on a receiving. The first hospitality, as was mentioned above, is listening; hence, our first task is to sustain the 'gored state' by attending to the ponderous weight of things. Perhaps in this sense we can be in sympathy with the post-natural project championed by ecocriticism, to discover things as 'strange strangers' in accordance with the strange mystery at the heart of our own nature, the mystery of language. Thus, only through the spiritual discipline of the genuine listening that is hospitality can the call of things be distinguished. As the play teaches us, conceptions of nature as an object of wilful control must be exploded for a new mode of responsive 'poetic addition' to offer itself, "a developing understanding of how our thinking and feeling become "de-centred", dispossessed of controllable material" (Williams 2014, p. 174).

As we have seen, to be hospitable, to attend to the call, means also genuinely to respond. That response is 'natural' in the sense that it is a responding to and a furthering of the material world's own poetic pathways. As Williams shows, the nonhuman world linguistically unfolds and becomes further revealed in and through literary engagement. If language is embodied poetic addition, the apophatic element of the world is a revealing aspect of the being of things, and not merely a warning to epistemic humility in the name of an ontological withdrawal. The intractable strangeness of things is a distance which is not an unsurmountable obstacle, but a welcome gift, a presence 'at the edge of words', which is paradoxically also a central aspect of language.

With this in mind, we should be mindful not simply to do away, in the name of political hygiene with a rich, polysemous symbol such as 'nature', which gestures to a host of literary, spiritual, and theological traditions, all of which probe, invoke, or enact delicate crossovers between 'nature' and 'culture'. To quote Williams once again, "one of the foundational impulses of art is to increase the 'pressure' on habitual discourse or description in order to dismantle the world of fixed concepts and self-enclosed objects" (Williams 2014, p. 122). To counter the hidden dogmatism that the characters in *King Lear* affirm means not simply to opt for the counter-dogmatism Lear chooses before his healing encounter with Cordelia, that of a world 'without nature'. The play shows that those two opposites simply cancel each other out; indeed, as Mary Midgley notes, "if you try to sling Nature—or indeed the whole idea of nature—out through the door, she always comes quietly back down the chimney" (Midgley 2014, p. 83). Beyond this opposition, Shakespeare gestures to a dynamic, open-ended interaction with the nature traditions,

accounting for both its insightful and problematic aspects in a dynamic re-iteration and refusing to settle for either a foreclosed, univocal sense of nature or an irreducibly equivocal, indifferent otherness with no possible contact.

Finally, this suggests that an ‘ecothology’ may well be irreducibly literary, since to think of the nonhuman, before we think of politics, is to think of nature’s poetics, not merely to offer theological comment on a looming ecological catastrophe, but more challengingly, to move towards a mode of speaking *with* nature, a mode of language hospitable to the voice of things, attentive yet reflective, strange yet intimate, which partly voices things and partly is voiced by them, which is partly revealed by and partly reveals the mysterious excess that illuminates words and world alike.

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- ¹ In this essay, I will maintain the distinction between ‘creation’, a term implying a contingent relationship to a creator, and the twinned yet distinct tradition of *natura* which, as I argue, emphasises nonhuman speech and agency. On the former, see (Soskice 2013).
- ² My text here and throughout is the Arden Edition (Third Series) of *King Lear*, see Shakespeare (1997).

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