Can David Wagoner, Poet of Nature and the Environment, Qualify as Eco-poet?

Ron McFarland
University of Idaho

In the sixty-odd years following publication of his first collection of poems, David Wagoner has produced nearly twenty books of poetry. He served as a chancellor of the American Academy of Poets for more than twenty years, edited the influential magazine *Poetry Northwest* for thirty-six years, and taught at the University of Washington for more than fifty years. Over those decades, Wagoner also turned out ten novels, a novella, a dozen solid short stories, numerous essays, and two plays. With the exception of W.S. Merwin, no poet of stature can be said to have matched Wagoner for sheer volume and variety, but he will most likely be remembered for his range of voices as a poet of nature and the natural world. Over the past thirty years, however, the rise of "eco-poetry" and the concomitant field of "eco-poetics" have brought about new ways of regarding poems concerning the natural world, and Wagoner's contributions have, so far at least, been overlooked, or perhaps dismissed. In what follows, I describe the attributes of David Wagoner's poems concerning nature and the environment, reflect upon the emerging topics of eco-poetry and eco-poetics, and invite some speculation as to whether Wagoner's voice ought to be included in the ongoing conversations.

Wagoner's Range as Poet of Nature and the Environment

From his first book, *Dry Sun, Dry Wind* (1953), which was dedicated to Theodore Roethke, his mentor from his undergraduate days at Pennsylvania State University, David Wagoner has been a nature poet, whatever that increasingly nebulous term might mean. At least half of the thirty poems that comprise that volume, none of which have made it into his subsequent collections of selected poems, would be described, at least loosely, as "nature poems" that generally depict an all but sterile Midwest landscape. The fact that several of them reflect the powerful Roethke influence may explain why Wagoner has excluded them, but they offer solid testimony to his promise as a young poet. He would turn twenty-seven years old that year, having completed his master's degree at Indiana University in 1949 and, having been born in Ohio, he was still a Midwesterner. That would change when in January of 1954, while at Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, he received a call from Roethke to join him on the faculty at the University of Washington.

Four years passed before his next book, *A Place to Stand* (1958), announced that Wagoner was firmly ensconced in the Pacific Northwest where he would stay throughout his career and until his retirement in 2002, although he has continued to teach graduate classes in poetry writing over the past dozen years through the Richard Hugo House and the Northwest Institute of Literary Arts on Whidbey Island. Over the years, many have regarded him as the "Dean of Northwest Poetry."

As a "nature poet," Wagoner does not speak with a single voice or from the perspective of a single persona; to represent him properly as a would-be, or perhaps as a would-not-be, eco-poet requires that I describe at least his most prominent voices as a poet of nature and the environment. Metaphorically speaking, at one extreme of the visible spectrum (red-orange-yellow-green-blue-indigo-violet) are poems featuring domesticated nature, the outdoors of the familiar backyard environment, often a suburban landscape like that in which Wagoner lives. Among those poems would be "Moving into the Garden," from *Sleeping in the Woods* (1974): "Moving into the garden, we settle down / Between the birdbath and the hollyhocks / To wait for the beginning" (*Traveling Light* 39). Such poems would include the moving "Elegy While Pruning Roses," with its epigraph for Theodore Roethke, which appeared in the 1979 collection, *In Broken Country*; "Falling Asleep in a Garden," from *Landfall* (1981); "In a Garden," a love poem for his wife Robin Seyfried, along with such poems as "Planting a Red Maple" and "For a Row of Laurel Shrubs," all from the new poems on *Traveling Light* (1999); and on to poems like "The Cherry Tree" and "In a Greenhouse" from his most recent book, *After the Point of No Return* (2012). Wagoner does revel in such "mild delights" of the natural world, as phrased by a commentator. But while such poems may possess powerful resonance, they are unlikely fare for an anthology devoted to eco-poetry or fodder for eco-critical investigation.

A second category of Wagoner's poems dealing with nature, however, focuses on the individual in the wilds, albeit not necessarily in what might be described as officially designated wilderness. Writing of his 1986 initiation into the Cascades for his autobiographical essay in *Contemporary Authors*, he observed that "I had never seen or imagined such greenness, such a promise of healing growth. Everything I saw appeared to be living ancestral forms of the dead earth where I'd tried to grow up" (405). About getting lost while hiking on the Olympic Peninsula, he wrote: "I didn't know what I was, but I was certain I'd been more or less lost all my life without knowing it. It was the beginning of my determination not to be lost in any of the woods, literal or figurative, I might explore after that" (406). He committed himself to discovering and studying the fauna and flora of his new place and to expressing his new appreciation in his poems, which often deal with an individual alone

in a natural environment that can variously, at times simultaneously, appear to be welcoming or threatening.

With respect to the mentioned metaphorically applied spectrum, those poems that feature the individual at ease in the environment might be said to reflect the red blending into the orange range. For example, in poems like "Sitting by a Swamp," from *In Broken Country* (1979), the first-person speaker gradually comes to an awareness of where he is as the "motionless water" is disturbed by a sunfish, the silence by "a muttered frog-call" and the "chap of a marsh wren," and his own presence detected by "a fox sparrow" warily eyeing him as he waits: "To be what they want me to be: / Less human. A dragonfly / Burns green at my elbow (*Traveling Light* 153). A lifelong birder, Wagoner often directs his gaze closely on a variety of avian species perceived from the objective distance of a third-person viewpoint, as in "Bittern," "Winter Wren," "Marsh Hawk," and "Loons Mating," all included in the first section of his 1977-1987 new and selected poems, *Through the Forest*.

The first-person speaker in "Wading in a Marsh," from *Landfall* and *Through the Forest*, could be said to epitomize the circumstances of a conventional "nature-lover" at ease in an explicitly defined natural environment—in effect, a familiar ecosystem, as details of the poem demonstrate. Often a certain kind of learning results, but it often falls short of what might be called "enlightenment," a kind of visionary experience that pertains to another category of Wagoner's nature poetry that I will reflect upon presently. When the speaker mentions the plant-life of the marsh, we recognize that he is an expert: milfoil, watercress, water starwort are named in the opening stanza (other plant species follow). His mention of Barr Mountain later in the poem suggests a location near Barr Creek in Skagit County, off Washington State 20. The marsh, he perceives, is "the climax of a lake" that is dying and is filled with weeds, "The exploring and colonizing shapes of a world / Too good at living for its own good" (*Through the Forest* 36). In this natural world, the speaker finds himself "Out of order," a "moving object with much less use" to the birds (he mentions wrens, kinglets, and spruce grouse), but the birds seem to "decide" what he is and to "excuse" him in his search for "how to belong / Somewhere, to change where all changing / Is a healing exchange of sense for sense" (37).

I maintain that his kind of depiction of man-in-the-natural-world is distinct from another of Wagoner's categories, where the character feels threatened, a kind of poem that coincidentally would fall into the yellow range of the visible spectrum, as though it might embody a cautionary tale. Poems like "Staying Alive," the 84-line title poem of his fourth collection, published in 1966, portray an individual alone and lost in a confusing and potentially deadly world where "you" must "Eat no white berries" and where

the speaker's voice appears to taunt the reader as projected character in the poem as "your" eyes strain to make out "The unidentifiable noises of the night" and sense "Bears and packs of wolves nuzzling your elbow" (*Traveling Light* 4). The speaker in this poem seems to abandon the projected lost character at the end, leaving him or her with the advice to "be prepared to burrow / Deep for a deep winter" (6). In the nine-poem sequence, Travelling Light, from the new poems in his 1976 *Collected Poems, 1956-1976*, the titles are suggestive: "Meeting a Bear," for example, or "Missing the Trail," which ends with "you" left "past the middle of nowhere, / Toward your wit's end" (254).

Unlike the serene experience recounted above in "Wading in a Marsh," the second-person character from "Walking in a Swamp" evinces none of the confidence of the first-person speaker, or one might more aptly say that the sinister persona of the not-so-friendly guide allows for no such confidence:

When you first feel the ground under your feet
Going soft and uncertain,
It's best to start running as fast as you can slog
Even though falling
Forward on your knees and lunging like a cripple. (*Collected Poems* 252)

The not-necessarily-reliable guide advises the trapped character to lie down and yield to the circumstances, at which "your sunken feet will rise together, / And you may slither / Spread-ottered casually backwards out of trouble." The wordplay on "spread-eagled" may be regarded as a typical Wagoner gesture that will undoubtedly delight some readers and aggravate others.

The perilous circumstances of an individual at least temporarily trapped in an unfamiliar natural environment figures in several of Wagoner's poem sequences, which are somewhat reminiscent of the renowned North American Sequence that opened the posthumous volume, *The Far Field* (1964) of his mentor Theodore Roethke. The poem "Walking in Broken Country," from The Journey sequence of *In Broken Country* (1979), finds "you" in a place where "The shortest distance between two points doesn't exist" (*Through the Forest* 44). Other titles in the twelve-poem sequence include "Standing in the Middle of a Desert," where "you" are configured as "An executioner / Like that crook-backed creosote whose poisonous roots / Kill its own seedlings" (*Through the Forest* 46-47) and "At the Point of No Return." In "Seeing Things," readers fall prey to mirages and ultimately seem to become mirages themselves, mere "towering apparitions" that would disillusion all "beholders" (*Through the Forest* 51).

The metaphorical yellow range just described constitutes a sort of transitional category, as the sequences, along with such poems as Wagoner's

signature piece, "A Guide to Dungeness Spit," often come to what may properly be called a "visionary" conclusion—the green range of the spectrum. Literary scholar Hyatt Waggoner, in *American Visionary Poetry* (1982), asserts that Wagoner's poems treat "experience in nature more concretely and more realistically than Whitman, less subjectively than Roethke" and that the poems "explore the natural world and our relation to it without apparent preconceptions or psychic idiosyncrasies" (196). While he finds David Wagoner to be a "religious visionary poet," he also maintains, paradoxically, that he is "consistently empirical and skeptical" (180). "A Guide to Dungeness Spit," first appeared in the *Hudson Review* in 1962 and then in his third book, *The Nesting Ground* (1963), and again as a single-poem Graywolf Press chapbook in 1975; it is included in his collected and new poems, *Traveling Light* (1999). The poem features the voice of a congenial, well-informed guide who directs a tyro of sorts on what amounts to a visionary journey or quest through a vividly realized natural landscape. The guide's voice in this poem varies radically from those that we encounter most often in the sequences cited above.

"A Guide" features undulating lines that may remind readers, appropriately, of the movement of waves on the shore; however, Wagoner has employed that line pattern frequently over the years, as for instance in "Staying Alive" and in most of the poems in his Travelling Light sequence. Dungeness Spit is a National Wildlife Refuge extending from the Olympic Peninsula into the Strait of Juan de Fuca:

> Out of wild roses down from the switching road between pools
> We step to an arm of land washed from the sea.
> On the windward shore
> The combers come from the strait, from narrows and shoals
> Far below sight. To leeward, floating on trees
> In a blue cove the cormorants
> Stretch to a point above us, their wings held out like sky-sails.
> Where shall we walk? First, put your prints to the sea,
> Fill them, and pause there . . . (*Collected Poems* 20; *Traveling Light* 24)

What follows, in part, might be described as a catalog of the biota of the local ecosystem: after the cormorants, kelp, Canada geese, loons, sandpipers, and Bonaparte's gulls in the first sixteen lines come sponges, grebes, goldeneyes, cockleshells, crabs, snowy plovers, sand fleas, and a snowy owl. The speaker and his lover, as we discover in the closing lines, are headed toward the lighthouse, a break from the carefully charted ecosystem, and "a stairway past the whites of our eyes" that will end with enlightenment, presumably resulting from their recognition of themselves as "lovers" (21; 25).

Similarly, the concluding title poem of his Travelling Light sequence rescues "you" from the "graceful coup de grace" in the final line of "Being

Shot" (*Collected Poems* 258; *Traveling Light* 54) following a sort of healing hiatus in the brief "Waiting in a Rain Forest." But "Travelling Light" constitutes much more than a rescue for the character/reader from an uncertain sojourn in the natural world. The speaker now accesses a first-person plural perspective in which the travelers are clearly lovers "travelling in the winter" after a blizzard that appears to have simplified "this most difficult world": "We will make fire, then turn in each other's arms, / Embracing once more" under "this living firtree" (*Collected Poems* 260; *Traveling Light* 56). In the morning, staring into each other's eyes" and then into the white distance, the couple finds the beginning

> Of the place we were always looking for: so full of light,
> So full of flying light, it is all feathers
> Which we must wear
> As we had dreamed we would, not putting frostbitten hands
> Into the freshly slaughtered breasts of birds
> But snowblindly reaching
> Into this dazzling white-out, finding where we began,
> Not naming the wonder yet but remembering
> The simply amazing
> World of our first selves where believing is once more seeing
> The cold speech of the earth in the colder air
> And knowing it by heart. (*Collected Poems* 261; *Traveling Light* 57)

In his close reading of the sequence, Laurence Lieberman describes "Travelling Light" as an "adventure into the metaphysics of cold" (174) where the lovers voyage into "a snow Elysium" and experience a "passage upward into the cold heaven of purification" (177). He commends Wagoner's ability "to evoke otherworldly resonances with undistorted naturalistic detail" (178).

The concluding poem of Landscapes, "In a Field of Wildflowers," features the first-person plural perspective of lovers in a world "As luminous as the dawn of the first day" (*Traveling Light* 266), but the idyllic vision is troubled by an awareness that the field "where lovers have run barefoot, / Carefree and laughing, into each other's arms" appears only in "ads and commercials" (267). The speaker proposes that in the real world of "miniature badlands and broken shale" and in "the tough, embedded patches of weeds fighting / For root-room and sunlight," lovers like themselves "would trip and fall, crumpled in pain." Faced with the compromised earth as it is, and perhaps (thinking here of Wagoner as he turned seventy) the speaker offers a flurry of rhetorical questions starting with "what's left here for us / In the short season before the petals wither / . . . Should we sing or dance?" The closing lines might strike us as equivocal in some ways, perhaps hopeful, but not terribly confident. Should we "quietly presume," Wagoner writes:

> Out of honest destitution to share the wealth
> Of emissaries with roots and nests and wings
> Without their consent
> For as long as we can imagine through a clear
> Benevolent afternoon that has no end? (*Traveling Light* 267)

Perhaps we should not be so presumptuous. The ending implies a disjuncture between the human and the nonhuman world wherein humans are destitute, and the nonhuman world appears to have been imposed upon. As I also read it, the poem closes with a sort of wishful thinking for a longed-for eternity. In an interview with the editors of *Crazy Horse* conducted in 1972, Wagoner commented, "In the woods, along mountain streams, by the seashore, I've tried hard to find my place *among* (not above, like most of our floundering, foundering fathers) all animate and inanimate matter" (41; McFarland 167).

There remains another category, another place on the spectrum, the blue, if one follows the metaphor, when it comes to David Wagoner's poems of the natural world: the poems of environmental protest. The foregoing has been an effort to account for what readers might regard as traditional nature poetry. But Wagoner has also made substantial contributions to the poetry of "environmentalism." By most definitions of the term, given their political stance, Wagoner's environmental poems would include the likes of "Report from a Forest Logged by the Weyerhaeuser Company" and "An Address to Weyerhaeuser, the Tree-Growing Company." In "Elegy for a Forest Clear-Cut by the Weyerhaeuser Company," appearing in the 2003 edition of the Norton contemporary poetry anthology and first published in the small-circulation magazine *Kayak* and then in *Sleeping in the Woods* (1974), the angry first-person speaker laments what he regards as "The immoral equivalent of a forest fire" and observes that the creek, swollen with rain and snow, will gouge out new gullies. Mocking the foresters' claims of "selective logging" practices, he concludes, "As selective as reapers stalking through wheatfields, / Selective loggers go where the roots go" (*Collected Poems* 228).

What in Wagoner's canon I would qualify as "environmental poems" range in tone and voice from angry to elegiac. In "After the Speech to the Librarians," which opens *Through the Forest*, the first-person speaker finds himself somewhat lost "at the end of a road" and facing the locked gate to a dude ranch (3). The poem is unaccustomedly understated. After reflecting on the barbed wire, "a cracked water tank / And a wrecked shed," he deduces that the locked gate means "No Thank You" and "Not Today," but he celebrates the fact that the natural world in the form of a marsh hawk and "sparrow-sized water pipits" are "easily" and casually "trespassing" and are "extremely happy" to be there. More typical is the anger of "To a Farmer Who Hung Five Hawks on His Barbed Wire": "Tonight I aim this dream

straight at your skull / While you nestle it against soft feathers" (of a pillow). In his imagined dream, the farmer's "breast shatters"

> Suddenly, and you fall, flapping,
> Your claws clutching at nothing crookedly
> End over end, and thump on the ground.
> You lie there, waiting, dying little by little. (*Through the Forest* 14)

So harsh a sentiment seems hardly appropriate, one might indicate, for any poet, although it might ring resonant of Robinson Jeffers' "inhumanism" as it lodges in his most frequently quoted passage, from "Hurt Hawks": "I'd sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk" (165). A question that may arise with "To a Farmer" and similar poems is does Wagoner's use of the second-person pronouns risk implicitly accusing or implicating the reader of the malfeasance of the farmer? I propose that the second personal pronouns draw readers into the poem, causing them at times to feel complicit (as here) and in other cases to feel empathetic, to feel intimately involved in the scenarios Wagoner constructs (as in "Getting There," above).

Among the poems of environmental complaint in the elegiac mode are "Stump Speech," from *First Light* (1983), which parodies the familiar British nursery rhyme, first printed in 1755, "This is the House that Jack Built." A more recent lament, "A Pastoral Elegy for Pasture," appears in *A Map of the Night* (2008). "Our natures," the speaker observes, show up "in the forms of two surveyors, / their transit, a bulldozer, and an earth-mover," which combine to turn what was left of a spring pasture into "four-square foundations / of houses-to-be" (51). Heaped in with those houses, Wagoner writes, are "these few words" that will "contain no anguish" and "no diatribe against the responsible / irresponsible gods," but simply "a brief silence." In effect, in this poem one receives the impression that after decades of decrying environmental abuse and bewailing the degradation of the natural world, David Wagoner, who turned eighty-two years old the year the poem was published, has quietly yielded to the inevitable.

Surely, however, the most poignant of Wagoner's nature laments must be "The Dead"; it closes a section of twenty-three nature poems (the traditional term) in his most recent collection, *After the Point of No Return* (2012). Set up in nine, terse, clipped couplets, the poem begins with a series of intentional syntactic fragments, as if the grieving speaker cannot form whole sentences: "Always finding them on the shore. The grebes and scoters. / The salmon at ease at last on their cold sides" (88). Some of the animals, like the salmon, have died of natural causes; others, like roadkill raccoons and possums or the hawks "hung upside down on the barbed wire," have not. "They go on and on," the speaker mourns:

dying and waiting for me to do something
instead of just saying they'd begin again,

be beautiful again, that empty promise,
that momentarily tasteful mouthful

of dust I've fed on all these years. They're still
dead back there and are still becoming

dead as long as I last and will keep on dying
till there isn't anything left to remember with.

Careful readers and formalists might notice here that Wagoner no longer cap-
italizes the left margin of his poems, a decision that he apparently made quite
recently, in 2008, with the poems of *A Map of the Night*. Exactly what that
gesture means is debatable, but the convention of free-verse poets to retain
the tradition of the capitalized left margin has tended to indicate some alle-
giance to the integrity of the poetic line. It would not be much of a stretch to
speculate that in his mourning for the deaths of animals and his rejection of
the premises of resurrection and life everlasting for them, Wagoner includes
himself among the animals of the nonhuman world.

Wagoner and the Evolving Field of Eco-Poetry and Eco-Poetics

After the foregoing, I return to the query posed in my title, wheth-
er David Wagoner may lay claim to a place among the poets of the new
"eco-poetry," the indigo range of the visible spectrum. So far, his opus has
clearly been either overlooked or discounted by those who have critics and by
eco-poetry anthologists, as his name is excluded from publications by those
who in the past twenty or so years have been defining what has come to be
known as "eco-poetry," along with its burgeoning sister in the world of crit-
ical theory, "eco-poetics." His name is missing in what purports to be "the
most comprehensive collection yet of American poetry about nature and
the environment," Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street's *The Ecopoetry
Anthology* (2013); it runs nearly seven hundred pages and includes the work
of 176 poets. Wagoner and his poems are similarly absent from Joshua Co-
rey and G.C. Waldrep's *The Arcadia Project: North American Postmodern Pastoral*
(2012), a work that numbers about 550 pages and includes the work of more
than one hundred poets. Moreover, in what one might describe as the foun-
dation texts of eco-poetics, Leonard Scigaj's *Sustainable Poetry* (1999), J. Scott
Bryson's *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction* (2002), and Scott Knickerbocker's
Ecopoetics: The Nature of Language, the Language of Nature (2012), Wagoner and
his poems are likewise neglected. The purpose of what follows is to inquire
into the phenomena of eco-poetry and eco-poetics to come to some under-

standing of Wagoner's apparent exclusion as well as to express some optimism that his work may eventually become part of the conversation.

Fisher-Wirth and Street observe that "ecological poetry" is "more elusive" than the other two categories that they include in their anthology (nature poetry and environmental poetry), and they suggest that eco-poets are particularly engaged with "questions of form." Noting its connections with "postmodern and poststructuralist theories associated with L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry and the avant-garde," the editors submit that eco-poems tend to be "self-reflexive" and "can look strange and wild on the page" (xxix). Before commenting on this observation, however, I think it worthwhile to inquire into some of the efforts made so far to define this new movement. In *Sustainable Poetry* (1999) Leonard Scigaj argues, "We can no longer conceive of nature as a bucolic idyll" (there went Virgil's *Georgics*), as "a rational exemplar of God's harmonious design" (good-bye to William Cullen Bryant's "To a Waterfowl"), or as "a romantic refuge from urban factories" (farewell Wordsworth). "We need," Scigaj asserts, "a poetry that treats nature as a separate and equal other and includes respect for nature conceived as a series of ecosystems—dynamic and potentially self-regulating cyclic feedback systems" (5). He further observes that we need "a poetry that does not ignore nature or simply project human fears or aesthetic designs on it."

Before returning to Scigaj for additional observations, I will shift to J. Scott Bryson's stab at a definition of eco-poetry offered in his introductory essay for *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction* (2002): "Ecopoetry is a subset of nature poetry that, while adhering to certain conventions of romanticism, also advances beyond that tradition and takes on distinctly contemporary problems and issues, thus resulting in a version of nature poetry generally marked by three primary characteristics" (5-6). I will paraphrase those characteristics thus: (1) maintenance of an "ecocentric perspective that recognizes the interdependent nature of the world"; (2) necessity of "humility in relationships with both human and nonhuman nature"; (3) adoption of "an intense skepticism concerning hyperrationality" and along with that a tendency to indict "an overtechnologized modern world" and to warn of "the very real potential for ecological catastrophe." Bryson suggests that any definition of the term "should probably remain fluid at this point." I do not propose that Scigaj would affirm Bryson's definition, even though Bryson does cite Scigaj among others.

Jonathan Skinner, who edited the literary journal *Ecopoetics* between 2001 and 2009, indicates in his brief online statement that "ecopoetics is not a matter of theme, but of how certain poetic methods model ecological processes like complexity, non-linearity, feedback loops, and recycling"; he reflected these premises in his magazine, which foregrounded "poetic ex-

perimentation." As Nerys Williams observes in *Contemporary Poetry* (2011), Skinner "notes the difference between nature writing and ecopoetry:" for Skinner, the former indicates empathy for the environment, while the latter "suggests how economic forces create an impact on the environment" (158). In the online piece, "The Language Habitat: An Ecopoetry Manifesto," James Engelhardt asserts that eco-poetry "does share a space with science," that one of its concerns is "non-human nature," though paradoxically it is a "human product," and that it speaks not from a "spiritual space," but from "a bodied connection to the world." He asks, but does not answer, the question: "Is there a rhetoric to ecopoetry?" In his closing statement, to the effect that we must "push the range of our language," I at least detect the implied premise that eco-poets must do what Ezra Pound so famously enjoined the Modernist poets to do: "Make it new."

Back to Scigaj, he posits as a central question whether "nature can ever be anything more than an impossibly alien 'other,' trapped in a dualistic paradigm, that humans must subjectivize and personify, imbue with human qualities, in order to understand." He suggests that true eco-poets reject that "dualistic paradigm" and "record moments of nondualistic inhabitation in specific places where the experience occurs only when the noise of human ratiocination . . . has been silenced or revel in moments of phenomenological participation of Being where the activity of seeing intertwines the human and nonhuman worlds" (8). Scigaj regards "the phenomenological dimensions of nondualistic silence and sight as distinctive features of environmental poetry and ecopoetry" (9). Citing Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), he maintains all nature poetry "is obviously not automatically environmental poetry," and proposes, first, that "the nonhuman environment cannot simply function as a background or framing device but must act 'to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history'"; second, that "human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest," which suggests a shift away from "anthropocentric thinking"; third, that "human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation"; and fourth, that the environment must be regarded as a "process rather than a constant" (11). Eco-poets, Scigaj stresses, "present nature in their poems as a separate and equal other in dialogues meant to include the referential world and offer exemplary models of biocentric perception and behavior" (11).

Another observation from Scigaj's commentary is pertinent regarding David Wagoner's exclusion from the canon of eco-poetry. In citing Karl Kroeber's definition of ecocriticism, Scigaj refers to the "knotty question of what attitude toward language, what poetic best serves the purposes of ecocriticism." Scott Knickerbocker confronts this "knotty question" in his 2012 book, *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language*, where he pro-

ceeds from the premise that "if poststructuralists are on the side of language, then ecocritics have largely been on the side of physical reality." He adds, "The power of language to make nature matter to us depends precisely on the defamiliarizing figurative language and rhetorical devices too often associated with 'artificiality.' Ecological poetry posits a relationship between ethics and aesthetics." He considers eco-poetics to be a "'natural' place to strive for a rapprochement between ethics and aesthetics" (3). Humans, he proposes, are paradoxically "distinct yet inseparable from the rest of nature" (4). His study concentrates on the traditionally canonical Modernist poetry of Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, Richard Wilbur, and Sylvia Plath. Like others involved in eco-poetry, he makes no reference to David Wagoner's poems.

Within the dictates of eco-poetics in regard to Wagoner's nature and environmental, if not ecological, poems, the argument might run that he, his speaker or personae too often project "human designs" on nature in such metaphysically or mystically charged poems as "Travelling Light," or that they "subjectivize and personify, imbue with human qualities, in order to understand," or that they are guilty of "anthropocentric thinking" or, perhaps, that they somehow fail to treat nature as a "separate and equal" other.

Consider, then, a final example of what I take to be an ecological poem by David Wagoner, "Thoreau and the Mud Turtle," from his most recent book. This poem follows seven others on Thoreauvian topics that appeared in *The House of Song* (2002) and that are drawn from his reading in Thoreau's journals. Written in the conventional narrative third-person, the poem dramatizes Thoreau's dilemma upon encountering a lone hatchling turtle that has not made it from the nest to the brook. Wagoner's source for this poem appears to be a 16 September 1854 journal entry, where Thoreau takes a lone, stranded mud turtle from its nest and leads it to the edge of a stream: "It was so slow that I could not stop to watch it, and so carried it to within seven or eight inches of the water." Eventually Thoreau loses patience and slips the turtle into the stream where "it was at once carried down head over heels by the current" (44).

In Wagoner's poem, the renowned naturalist attempts to nudge the turtle along and eventually carries it to the shore, but there Thoreau hesitates, "afraid / he might be thwarting nature's merciless plan / that had left the weakest to die / for the sake of stronger, smarter, / and quicker turtles to come" (*After the Point of No Return* 77). He sets the turtle down and lets it "choose"; it enters the current and spins away downstream. Here we find no anthropomorphizing of nature, but what may be regarded as a human intervention, or an ethical moment or a nexus of the aesthetic and the ethical of which Knickerbocker might approve. The human, empowered by his understanding of Darwin's concepts of natural selection and survival of the

fittest, imposes his will on the natural world, but then steps back. Thoreau, as a character, makes a judgment about the nature of nature, perceiving it to operate on "a merciless plan." A question therefore arises: does such an event constitute the imposition of a "human design" on the natural environment?

Perhaps this is not the right question. The decisive factor when it comes to determining what defines the eco-poet may concern form. When it comes to the rising tide of eco-poetry, it is, as often with new movements, that eco-poets maybe feel the need to be "exclusive." They are struggling to define themselves apart from an ancient tradition of "nature poetry" and from the more recent conventions of Romantic nature poets—even from the contemporaneous phenomenon of environmental poetry. It may be that while David Wagoner makes his poems exceedingly well, he does not make them "new." It could be that they lack the "experimentation" that those who are defining the movement often request. That, at any rate, is a conclusion that I have reached from scanning several issues of *Ecopoetics* literary magazine and from Corey and Waldrep's *The Arcadia Project* (2012). It may be axiomatic that those who attempt to define a movement will strive for exclusivity, at least in the early stages, whether they are Surrealists à la Breton or Imagists à la Pound. Wagoner has placed poems in the magazine *Ecotone* (the term refers to the transition zone between different plant communities), but its editorial tastes do not seem to run in experimental directions. "We embrace and celebrate these ecotones," the editors maintain, "by breaking out of the pen of the purely literary and wandering freely among the disciplines." The ecotone is "a place of danger or opportunity," the editorial statement reads, "a testing ground." So far, however, editor David Gessner has not presided over any radical departure from the well-made poem.

To represent a clearly demarcated eco-poem to represent the indigo range of my metaphorical spectrum, I will turn to Joshua Corey and G.C. Waldrep's anthology of "postmodern pastoral" poems, *The Arcadia Project* (2012). In their introductory statements concerning the "contemporary versions of pastoral," the editors indicate they have sought out poems that are "Eaarthly [the spelling and concept derive from Bill McKibben's 2010 book, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*], combating cynicism, apathy, and despair with their fierce commitment to the intersection of the present tense with the boundaries of historical and ecological knowledge" (xx-xxi). "Ours is a virtual world of overlapping simulacra," Corey and Waldrep write, echoing Fredric Jameson's foundational study, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), "in which the very concept of 'nature' is challenged, denatured, filtered, and reborn" (xxi). To write poems pertaining to the "elusive reality" of the present world, they maintain, is to be "a digital native with dirt between one's toes": "They do not use language to paint pictures of a

natural world that is 'out there' somewhere; after Language poetry, words and syntax, like the pastoral itself, form a hybrid terrain of human and nonhuman elements to be negotiated and explored" (xxi-xxii).

Whatever such poems and their presumptive poetics will be, they will not be traditional or conventional. Whether the eco-poem, from which I intend to quote passages roughly equal in length to those that I have taken from Wagoner's "Guide to Dungeness Spit," strikes the reader as novel and exciting, or as disorienting (perhaps irritating) is not here at issue. It may be that new movements yearn for the avant-garde. Maybe, following a period of exclusivity, the Eco-Poetry Movement will become more inclusive and David Wagoner's poems will find a place therein. Whether he wishes for such a place is not pertinent here.

Let us then consider the opening and closing lines of Rusty Morrison's "Field Notes: 1-6," first published in *Whethering* (2004). The poem begins with two epigraphs, one by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995), the other by Russian poet Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938). Because I tend to "count" the epigraph as part of the poem itself, I will quote them as given: "[A] sum but not a whole, Nature is not attributive, but rather conjunctive: it expresses itself through 'and' . . ." (Deleuze); "And around the thing the word hovers freely, like a soul around a body that has been abandoned but not forgotten" (Mandelstam). Like Ms. Morrison, I find these passages quite striking.

But now to the opening ten lines (if that term is appropriate here, which it may not be):

cloudless sky   what will not yield to memory

expands   opposite of seeing   all tang   no tangled
                              into discernible
the after-image of being
isn't reason

          spider's web in wind   stretched the width of a trail

here is resembling
that erasure
                              if kept curious   will linger
at the threshold before pattern   becomes   experience
(322)

Useful commentary on the meaning of this poem may be as hazardous as attempts to grapple with its poetics, but it is perforce obvious that its poetics, or prosody, asserts itself most forcefully. The poem offers no apparent narrative, no identifiable characters or "speaker" in any conventional sense, nor does it provide much in the way of imagery, or sonic appeal. The poem is clearly a-syntactic, if not anti-syntactic. Recreating it visually is quite challenging, but printers were similarly challenged and probably annoyed with E.E. Cummings's poems nearly a century ago. Each "stanza" is composed of five fractured "lines" often presented in gap-line form. The length of space between stanzas appears to vary somewhat. Is this poem more effective when read aloud, or as seen on the page?

As the second line indicates, the poem "expands," like the "cloudless sky," in ways that are "opposite of seeing," but that preserve the "tang," the flavor or essence of the thing, resulting in an "after-image" that is irrational, that is to be discerned but not fully comprehended. Thus, the reader enters into a necessary conversation with the text. It is not my intention, however, to attempt an interpretation, or even to take a stab at understanding the poem, but rather to somehow summarize it. In the third stanza—again I maintain that conventional prosodic terms seem here only faintly applicable—we encounter a "sound of // rabbit from no rabbit," wind, and "trail-dusted underbrush," with the suggestion that "the meaning" has been blown away from "the thing said" (323). In the fourth "stanza," Morrison proposes that the still landscape "acquires // depiction," and here she employs "spiders" as a verb that sends its "skein / of thought" of what is "seen"; the result is not to illuminate, but to eliminate "the looking." In the fifth stanza, the "horizon" is presented as an "illusion // made with god poultices." Again, she draws some tension between meaning in the world ("significance") and what is seen ("sight"), with the result that "vision" (an obviously loaded term) comes off as "opaque and endless." As I read it, "sight" here trumps "significance" as it applies to the image of "a little dove under cloud," an image that seems to plead for conventional symbolic reading.

The final section runs six lines, and I will fully quote it, as I quoted the final lines of Wagoner's "Guide to Dungeness Spit":

redwood's fissured bark   the artery

of a lark's cry   no clear path through the tactic of no other
than this
                    and make it mean   sweat brings me
back to skin
          to outline's porosity (324)

Readers will not be surprised to find no period at the poem's end. In these

closing lines, my ear for a lyrical gesture of some sort is finally somewhat rewarded by the sonic play of bark/artery/lark's; it could be argued, however, that such euphony is more coincidental than intentional. This poem seems uncommitted to sing for us; after all, based on the editors' observations, this is a "postmodern pastoral." One detects resistance to meaning/significance in the phrase "*make* it mean" (emphasis added—and yes, one could, with a different reading in mind, stress the word "mean"). The concluding reference to "porosity," to the idea of perhaps some semipermeable membrane of meaning, resonates in various ways with the suddenly personal intrusion of the speaker as "me" made intimate with reference to "sweat" and "skin." Yet, as Sir Isaac Newton once stated, "I feign no hypotheses" here.

In their collaborative prefatory note to their collaborative poem, "Redstart" (a variety of warbler), published as a small book in the University of Iowa's Contemporary North American Poetry Series (2012), John Kinsella and Forrest Gander wrestle with the "disease of Western subjectivity" as it pertains to the natural world (vii). Kinsella particularly contests "the super validated self as 'authority' or 'reliable' configure of experience" and proposes that the "I" should "always be under pressure" (viii). He asserts that poems ought to be "about resistance" and they should "induce troubling self-criticism. When they fail in this and become a gloss of 'experiencing nature,' they are joining the big lie," at which point Forrest Gander adds, ". . . whether lived, visited, or imagined," to which Kinsella responds, "The writer communing with nature can so often mean the death of nature" (ix). On the other hand, in his "Note on Ecopoetics," which appears just before the twenty pages devoted to the title poem, Kinsella begins, "I have grave doubts that an 'ecopoetics' can be anything but personal" (37). "Collaborative writing," he suggests, "can be redemptive." Not surprisingly, perhaps, the poem (or poems) that follow will strike most readers as innovative and experimental in nature. Gander's poem (or "movement") picks up from Kinsella's image of "straggling sheep" moving in search of water in the Australian outback. The appearance of the poem on the page is reminiscent of Rusty Morrison's poem (above):

                        At the edge of benevolence
            by means of affiliation. And   held up
                                    there   in an experience given
                  multiple entries like hatches
    of periwinkles. Or   given a "moment's pause
                        with the color of it,"   but still
        insensible to the signature
                        changes   that fling us
                                    into an assertion   of
                  ourselves   in a garden lettered
    with birds. (44)

The birds of Gander's poem are a flicker and yellow grosbeaks, seemingly responding to the "red-tailed black cockatoos" of Kinsella's poem (or "movement").

Gander and Kinsella's observations in *Redstart: An Ecological Poetics* express or imply two relevant matters with respect to the question I have previously asked. First, while eco-poets will necessarily be in some sense "personal," they must resist any impulse to promote themselves as authority figures; rather, they must feel the pressures of self-criticism. Those poets who content themselves with communing with nature will be, presumably, barred from the movement. From my survey of Wagoner's spectrum, I believe that, while some of his poems would not qualify, many of them do. The personae of such poems as "A Guide to Dungeness Spit" and "Travelling Light" do appear to undergo what might be called a mystical or transcendent experience of the sort that implicitly comes of "communing with nature," but in other poems, like "Standing in the Middle of a Desert," "To a Farmer" and "A Pastoral Elegy for Pasture," the elements of resistance and self-criticism are palpable.

Second, if the Eco-Poetry Movement primarily defines itself in terms of its poetics (its eco-poetics), as opposed to its "politics," that is, to its conceptual thrust, then my questions regarding David Wagoner's possible niche in that movement are answered ipso facto. Wagoner, like Merwin, Oliver, Berry, Snyder, and many others, has sustained Theodore Roethke's commitment to craft and to the implied tenets of the well-made poem. To the extent that the eco-poetry and eco-poetic doctrines demand formal innovation and experimentation, Wagoner has not complied, and I herewith reserve the ultimate, violet end of the visible spectrum for whatever it is that follows the Eco-poetry Movement. Nevertheless, I propose that Wagoner's poems of nature and the environment do require serious consideration by the movers and shakers of eco-poetry and eco-poetics, and I think they merit inclusion in forthcoming anthologies of such poems. Whether the poetry at issue be said to concern nature, the environment, or matters ecological, David Wagoner's voice deserves to be heard.

Works Cited

Bryson, J. Scott. *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction.* Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 2002. Print.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995. Print.

Corey, Joshua and G.C. Waldrep, eds. *The Arcadia Project: North American Post-modern Pastoral.* Boise: Ahsahta Press, 2012. Print.

Engelhardt, James. "The Language of Habitat: An Ecopoetry Manifesto," 2007. Web.

Fisher-Wirth, Ann and Laura-Gray Street, eds. *The Ecopoetry Anthology.* San Antonio: Trinity UP, 2013. Print.

Gander, Forrest and John Kinsella. *Redstart: An Ecological Poetics.* Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2012. Print.

Gessner, David. *Ecotone.* Web. 15 Mar. 2017.

"An Interview with David Wagoner." *Crazy Horse* 12 (Autumn 1972): 38-46. McFarland 167. Print.

Jameson. Frederic. *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.* Durham: Duke UP, 1991. Print.

Jeffers, Robinson. *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers.* Ed. Tim Hunt. Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 2001. Print.

Knickerbocker, Scott. *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language.* Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2012. Print.

Lieberman, Laurence. "David Wagoner: The Cold Speech of the Earth." *Unassigned Frequencies: American Poetry in Review, 1964-77.* Champaign: U of Illinois P, 1977. 152-81. Print.

McFarland, Ron. *The World of David Wagoner.* Moscow: U of Idaho P, 1997. Print.

Morrison, Rusty. "Field Notes: 1-6." *The Arcadia Project.* Eds. Joshua Corey and G.C/ Waldrep. Boise: Ahsahta Press, 2012. 322-24. Print.

Scigaj, Leonard. *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets.* U of Kentucky P, 1999. Print.

Skinner, Jonathan. "What is Ecopoetics?" Web.15 Mar. 2017.

Thoreau, Henry David. *The Journals of Henry David Thoreau*, Vol. VII. Eds. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949. Print.

Waggoner, Hyatt. *American Visionary Poetry.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1982. McFarland 10, 87. Print.

Wagoner, David. *After the Point of No Return.* Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon, 2012. Print.

---. *Collected Poems: 1956-1976.* Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976. Print.

---. "David Wagoner." *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, Vol. 3. De-

troit: Gale Research, 1986. 397-412. Print.

---. *First Light*. Boston: Atlantic Monthly, 1983. Print.

---. *The House of Song*. Champaign: U of Illinois P, 2002. Print

---. *In Broken Country*. Boston: Atlantic Monthly, 1979. Print.

---. *Landfall*. Boston: Atlantic Monthly, 1981. Print.

---. *A Map of the Night*. Champaign: U of Illinois P, 2008. Print.

---. *The Nesting Ground*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1963. Print.

---. *A Place to Stand*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1958. Print.

---. *Sleeping in the Woods*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1974. Print.

---. *Staying Alive*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1966. Print.

---. *Through the Forest: New and Selected Poems, 1977-1987*. Boston: Atlantic Monthly, 1987. Print.

---. *Traveling Light: Collected and New Poems*. Champaign: U of Illinois P, 1999. Print.

---. *Walt Whitman Bathing*. Champaign: U of Illinois P, 1996. Print.

Williams, Nerys. *Contemporary Poetry*. Edinburgh: U of Edinburgh P, 2011. Print.