



“A PEREMPTORY ADIEU TO BIODIVERSICALS”: ECOLOGICAL DECLINE AND EXPERIMENTATION IN PETER READING'S -273,15*

“BİYOLOJİK ÇEŞİTLİLİĞE MUTLAK VEDA”: PETER READING'İN -
273,15 ADLI ŞİİR KİTABINDA EKOLOJİK YOK OLUŞ VE
DENEYSSEL ŞİİR BİÇEMİ

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Abstract

Pronounced as “the unofficial laureate of a decaying nation, Junk Britain” by the Irish poet and literary critic Tom Paulin, Peter Reading (1946-2011) has always been concerned with environmental deterioration, climate change, and decline of the species in many of his works from the 70s onwards. His poems of the new millennium advocate a more robust critique of the neo-liberal economic systems and human beings' involvement in the current ecological crisis. Reading's -273,15 [Absolute Zero] revisits his decades-long efforts to experiment with various poetic forms, registers and a grief-stricken tone presiding over most of his previous work regarding the complexities of anthropocenic experience. Reading's text combines his efforts not only to experiment with various poetic and non-poetic materials, registers, but also to look for ways to cope with an approaching catastrophe. The verbal and visual collage pieces as the most frequently employed procedures in Reading's poetry draw his poetry closer to the 'entropological register' Skinner puts forward and bring together the sources to show how Reading's environmental agenda is conscious of its shortcomings. Drawing on Lynn Keller's recent work on eco-poetics and the concept of the “self-conscious Anthropocene,” this paper aims to explore how Reading's ecological agenda and experimental practices in -273,15 might forge an improved understanding of the connections between contemporary poetry and environmental justice.

Öz

İrlandalı şair ve eleştirmen Tom Paulin tarafından “yok olan Britanya'nın gayri resmî milli şairi” olarak nitelendirilen Peter Reading (1946-2011), şiir kariyerinin ilk yıllarından itibaren eserlerinde, çevre felaketleri, iklim krizi ve türlerin yok oluşu gibi Antroposen döneme ait temalara yer vermiştir. Reading, 21.yüzyılın başından itibaren yazdığı şiir kitaplarında ise neo-liberal ekonomik sistemlerin ve insan türünün, yaşanan çevre felaketleri üzerindeki olumsuz etkilerini daha güçlü bir sesle eleştirmektedir. Bu çerçevede, Peter Reading'in ölmeden önce yazdığı son iki kitabından biri olan -273,15 [Mutlak Sıfır] başlıklı şiir koleksiyonu, ağıtsal bir ton ve deneysel şiir yöntemlerini kullanmanın yanı sıra, iklim değişimine bağlı yaşanan çevre felaketleri ve önerilen çözüm önerilerinin ele alınışında hali hazırda kullandığımız dilin ve edebi yöntemlerin yeterliliğini sorgulamaktadır. Peter Reading'in şiirleri, yaklaşan bir felakete başa çıkma, kaos ve yok oluş gibi temaları Nuh Tufanı hikayesini yeniden yazarak ele almakla birlikte, farklı şiirsel öğeleri ve dilsel kesitleri harmanlamaktadır. Reading'in kitaplarında sıkça kullandığı sözsözsel ve görsel kolaj çalışmaları, bu koleksiyonda da Skinner tarafından entropolojik biçem olarak tanımlanan eko-şiir türüne örnek oluşturmakta ve şairin ekolojik duruşundaki yetersizlikleri de sorunsallaştırmaktadır. Bu çalışma, Lynn Keller'in eko-şiir alanındaki son çalışmalarında öne sürdüğü “öz bilinçli Antroposen,” (self-conscious Anthropocene) kavramına odaklanarak, Peter Reading'in son dönem şiirlerinde üzerinde durduğu ekolojik tahribatla ilgili kaygılarını, çevre adaleti ve çağdaş şiir biçimleri arasındaki bağı irdelemeyi hedeflemektedir.

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(After the heatwaves: Heat Death, Entropy, Absolute Zero)

Nothing can ever be done,
 Things are inextricably thus,
 Those having precognition suffer
 Heat Death beforehand.
 (Reading, Poem 8¹)

Introduction

These opening lines from Peter Reading's penultimate poetry collection, *-273,15*, recapitulate his cynical attitude towards the planet's future and the futility of the poet's occupation in wailing the loss. Pronounced as "the unofficial laureate of a decaying nation" or "Junk Britain" by the Irish poet and critic Tom Paulin (1988, p. 204), Reading has always been interested in major concerns of the Anthropocene from the early 70s onwards in his poetry projects such as *Water and Waste* (1970), *For the Municipality's Elderly* (1974) and *Nothing for Anyone* (1977), even before the popularization of the term Anthropocene in the cultural and literary scene. His poems of the millennium, such as *Faunal*, [untitled], *Vendange Tardive*, *-273,15*, however, become more concerned about the recent antropocenic anxieties and the possible poetic means in expressing the complexity of the environmental degradation. In his interview with Alan Jenkins, Reading defied the critics who found his work pessimistic and claimed that art in general should boldly deal with the serious issues at hand: "If you want art to be like *Ovaltine* then clearly some artists are not for you; but art has always struck me most when it was to do with coping with things, often hard things, things that are difficult to take" (1985, p. 7). Quite contemptuously, as would be expected of Peter Reading, there is a degree of self-conscious truthfulness, despair, or what Joan Retallack calls a "poethics of complex realism" in his work at the expense of draining the readers' hopes for posterity (2003, p. 196). This paper sets out to explore how Peter Reading's poetry collection *-273,15* responds to the challenges of the Anthropocene in multimodal poetic procedures and embraces the complexity of the current ecological crisis. Through a parodic retelling of the catastrophic Noah's flood, found materials employing scientific facts about climate change, fragments of field notes, and collage practices he names 'climate collage', Reading explores antropocenic themes

¹ Leaving most of his texts as unpaginated is a distinctive stylistic device used by Peter Reading. To avoid confusion, the poems cited in this article are enumerated from the first page of the collection.

such as the destruction of the forest habitat, impacts of massive fires, mass extinction of the species, toxic consciousness, and the possibility of entropy in - 273,15.

Varied registers used in Reading's poems playfully stress the importance of species and vegetation for the biosphere and climate-driven alterations irreversibly affect fragile ecosystems. The scientific discourse mainly organized through found texts informs, reiterates and at times shocks the readers through its handling of the uncertainties around the recent environmental deterioration. By the lens of Lynn Keller's recent study on ecopoetics and the concept of the "self-conscious Anthropocene", this paper aims to interrogate the connections between Reading's ecological agenda and experimental practices, with the hope of an improved understanding of how the prevalent anthropogenic environmental crisis is handled in his late poetry. What makes this collection appealing is Reading's unflinching insistence on showing how neo-liberal practices are drawing the earth to its demise, all the while looking for ways on a formal level such as the play of registers, shift between unidentified speakers, inter-intra-textual relations, and imposed silences disseminating throughout the text to foster an alternative ethic-aesthetic paradigm.

Ecopoetics and 'Self-Conscious Anthropocene'

In *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene*, Lynn Keller (2018) proposes the phrase, "self-conscious Anthropocene", to advocate a renewed form of mindfulness about how human activity has impacted recent ecological catastrophes. She points to the fact that the term "Anthropocene" now produces "much weariness among ecocritics as among geologists", and overusing the term may essentialize the human over other life forms (p. 7). Carefully outlining the theoretical challenges in the field, Keller justifies her use of the phrase in marking a "pervasive cultural awareness of anthropogenic planetary transformation that distinguishes the self-conscious Anthropocene" (pp. 8-9). The so-called anthropogenic planetary change is now an indispensable part of human life and environmental humanities. The poems of the 'self-conscious Anthropocene' selected by Keller largely represent this contemporary fervour over "the scale and complexity of the environmental problems we humans face and the responsibilities we in the industrialized world must assume" (p. 24).

Resorting to Frederick Buell's notion of "dwelling in crisis", Keller identifies a sort of consciousness of the ecological concerns which are imbricated by chaos and crisis (p. 98). Buell (2004) employs the metaphor of crisis from a particularly ethical

perspective to forge a more cooperative effort and to address this huge set of apocalyptic visions. Viewing the environmental crisis as an unalterable fact might lead to a self-absorbed handling of it and possible risk mitigation. Thus, such an attitude would produce “*an absence of collectively pursued and (even more fundamentally) collectively supported solutions*” (p. 204). In its place, Buell reinforces “*a way of dwelling actively within rather than accommodating oneself to environmental crisis*” (p.206). The apocalyptic vision comes with its paradoxes considering its historical roots; while it has the potential to motivate the masses, it may also lead to self-inflicted paralysis. For Keller (2018), the consciousness of the apocalyptic means “*being embedded and embodied in damaged ecosystems*”, and writing through such an awareness might “*counterbalance cataclysmic vision with kinds of perception that make it more bearable and less emotionally exhausting*” (p. 28).

Furthermore, the poems of the ‘self-conscious Anthropocene’ in Keller’s book are critically separated from traditional nature writing in its treatment of nature/culture and human/non-human dualisms. Jonathan Bate (2000) reminds us of “*the role of ecopoiesis*” as an aesthetic endeavour “*to engage imaginatively with the non-human*” (p. 199). The self-conscious ecopoetics recognises this symbiotic relationship between the human and the non-human; moreover, the poets of late ecopoetics are alert about the risks of anthropomorphic assumptions about nature and the planet. Keller further stresses that these poets adopt a more active engagement with the environmental crisis:

they seek to better understand the nature and scope of the changes on human and nonhuman bodies and lives; they are interested in exploring how current environmental problems are rooted in received ways of thinking and speaking... Using a range of formal strategies, they try to imagine how already evident anthropogenic environmental changes will continue to affect the planet through geological as well as human time (2018, p. 24).

Amidst chaos and uncertainty, the major responsibility lies in imagining and building sustainable futures for all living organisms on the planet. These poets, writing through “*a changed recognition*” may initiate a paradigm shift or produce fresh ethical perspectives, using experimentation as their main source (Keller, 2018, p. 2, 26). Such an altered perception requires a dismantling of the ways and means in which earlier modes of writing and reading are shaped and disseminated. One of these examples is Joan Retallack’s envisioning of “*poethics*” that implement

an ethic-aesthetic model incorporating the “*complexity*” both in form and subject-matter (2003, p. 207). The poems Keller focuses on in her book are configurations of “*a poethics of complex realism*” in which “*active processes of mutability and multiplicity are valued over simpler, more stable illusions of expressive clarity*” (Retallack, 2003, p.219). These procedures will also change the role of the readers as they actively engage in the meaning-making processes and opening the text to competing interpretations.

The ecological problems which require immediate solutions are beyond the control of a single individual. So, an individual, the solitary reader of these poems have limited means to locate oneself amidst those complexities and may wrestle with the apocalyptic vision presented. As Timothy Morton (2016) claims, “[e]cological awareness is dark, insofar as its essence is unspeakable ... as illumination leads to a greater sense of entrapment” (p.110). Moreover, the sentiment of ‘entrapment’ is also fuelled by the fact that the heightening human fragility in the face of anthropogenic planetary crisis is the outcome of their own actions and policies. Sam Solnick similarly maintains that “*the critical hyperawareness*” might also lead to “*a paralysing self-critique*” since the individual might be overwhelmed by one’s involvement in the worsening of the situation (2017, p. 44). Keller puts an emphasis on this fact as well and argues that the poems of the self-conscious Anthropocene do not fall into hopeless melancholy but try to adopt a rhetoric which “*counterbalances the grief and despair of apocalyptic awareness through deliberate cultivation of pleasures grounded in immediate physical experience and perception*” (2018, p. 98-99).

Jonathan Skinner’s categorization of late ecopoetics might be fruitfully linked to Keller’s discussions on the conceptual challenges. Skinner (2004/2005) identifies four distinct types of ecopoetic engagements in his “Statement for ‘New Nature Writing’” to traverse the diversity and entangled relations in recent ecopoetic practices: ‘*topological*’, ‘*tropological*’, ‘*entropological*’ and ‘*ethnological*’ (p.128). The formal procedures Reading employs might draw his poems closer to Skinner’s third category of ecopoetics, “*entropological poetics*”, which could be defined as “*a practice engaged at the level of materials and processes, where entropy, transformation and decay are part of the creative work*” (2004, p. 128). Alison Gibbons (2019) traces the initial use of the term in Lévi-Strauss’ *Tristes Tropiques* and argues that as a blending of entropy and *anthrop-ology* Lévi-Strauss draws attention to the “*humankind’s transformative (disruptive, corrosive) impact... [which is] intimately*

intertwined with the fate of local cultures, human civilization as a whole, and the greater cosmos" (p.281). Skinner, however, adopts Robert Smithson's envisioning of "entropological" practices in ecological writings/projects. Within the scope of ecopoetics, entropological register involves the foregrounding of self-conscious procedures in poems while contemplating the environmental deterioration. These texts enter into a disintegration process and are structurally left indeterminate.

Solnick (2017) propounds that the poems produced in the Anthropocene are not solely thematically-driven or concerned with delivering a message, but they are self-consciously questioning their processes and instrumentality (p. 57). Sarah Nolan reconceptualizes this type of poetry as "*unnatural ecopoetics*", drawing attention to how "*self-awareness*" and "*experimentalism*" together "*emerge as tools by which the poem recognizes its own medium*" (2005, p. 22). The entropological nature of Reading's work draws attention simultaneously to the materiality of the text and the metapoetic procedures employed. -273,15 epitomizes this specific awareness fostered especially in the last two decades—"a truly pervasive (and often anxious) consciousness of really radical anthropogenic planetary change" which is handled through innovative poetic engagements (Keller, 2018, p. 8). Yet, entropological register and formal inventiveness as we find Reading's work might force us to question our habits about producing and reading poetry, or to invent, innovate and investigate new forms of expression.

Reading's Engagements with Environmental Crisis and Experimentation

Against the backdrop of Keller's discussions in *Recomposing Ecopoetics*, we can observe that, through self-conscious metapoetic choices and formal experiments, Reading's -273,15 'dwells in crisis' and is immersed with the idea of apocalypse through the de- and recontextualization of a range of scientific, scriptural, and artistic sources. Despite its disorienting nature, lack of pagination provides an open surface of immersion or exclusion, and an endless list of possibilities to find connections between the poems of interest. The only quilting point of the pervading sense of catastrophe is maintained through a humorous reiteration of the flood narrative. Reading chooses "*a central account of catastrophe in Western tradition: the biblical narrative of the flood and Noah's ark, recounted in Genesis (6.1-9.17)*" (Schlutz, 2018, p. 801). As Schlutz argues, Reading's parodic "*retelling*" is located within a more "*secular and modern world that faces the twin catastrophes of climate change and mass species extinction, and with them the possibility of an absolute zero*" (p. 801). The approaching threat as the title of the

book suggests is hitting the lowest possible temperature which will bring about the demise of all living beings, with the “*frail planet undergoing its sixth great extinction*” largely due to human activity (Reading, 2005, Poem 2).

In this respect, -273,15 responds to the impact of rapid environmental changes on all living organisms and “*locates the contemporary humankind in the midst of the ‘world’s death’... with the current population witnessing the final, lethal stages of ongoing disasters*” (Keller, 2018, p.104). Actually, quite cynically and through a morbid tone, Reading views the approaching catastrophe as the humanity’s self-destruction and suggests that the measures to reverse it were launched too late (“*too tardy for this catastrophism*” and “*it’s muckle late*”) (Reading, 2005, Poem 33, 8). Reading’s rendering of the Biblical story works through “*one of the plays performed in the Chester mystery cycle, Noye’s Fludde*”, rather than the Biblical version and “*the play’s content [is] diverted from presumed scriptural authority*” (Schlutz, 2018, p. 801-802). Reading plays with the assumptions of originality by disregarding the Biblical narrative and employing a reinterpretation of the source. His inter-and intra-textual efforts might be focusing on the sense of belatedness and failure of the public to respond immediately to climate change and save the species at the “*Brink of extinction.*”

Noye, Noye,
 Could you handle,
 Atop t’others,
 337 species of *Pheidole*
 New to Science
 And recently charted
 By Edward O. Wilson? (Reading, 2005, Poem 1).

In this poem, the poetic voice penetrates into the matter-of-fact and unemotional diction of scientific texts, remediating various scripts in the field of biodiversity, biology, ornithology and environmental sciences. Edward O. Wilson referred to in the final line of the poem is a renowned American biologist and recognised as the leading specialist on ants. He published a book in 2003 entitled *Pheidole in the New World: A Dominant, Hyperdiverse Ant Genus*, of which Reading was most probably aware at the time he was working on this collection. In the poem, the implied persona who is possibly one of Noah’s men boarding the vessel parodically talks like a scientist who follows the latest news in science and is informed about Edward Wilson’s recent discovery of a special ant species. As Wilson mentions in the introduction of the book he registers “*624 species, with 337 new to*

science added to the 287 previously named, altogether representing ...somewhat more than 6 percent of the entire known world ant fauna” (2003, p. 1). Alluding to Wilson’s study in 2003, the poem both celebrates the hyperdiversity of the ant species registered by Wilson and also hints at the fact that they will soon face demise if not embarked on Noah’s vessel. Sadly enough, some of the species will be lost even before they are discovered. Capturing the scientific facts from Edward O. Wilson’s work on biodiversity and ant species, Reading seems to pay homage to “*this marvelous monotreme/ all elegant biodiversity*” (Reading, 2002, p. 11).

‘Chuck ‘em aboard;

Chuck ‘em aboard me bucko mate (Reading, 2005, Poem 1)

...

Ahoy! Noye! *Oimoi!*

32% of world’s amphibian species,

Brink of Extinction.

...

Clang, clang, clang: All aboard for Ararat (Reading, 2005, Poem 12).

The cries of pain, grief, dread—“Ahoy! Noye! *Oimoi!*”— are scattered throughout the text. Amongst dramatically intensified cries of panic, the cargo procedures reveal an ongoing race within and between the species that will be accepted and boarded or rejected and abandoned (*‘Chuck ‘em aboard me bucko mate’*). As inferred from the actions of the Noye figure as the captain and his mates, the decision-makers in our societies are quite uninformed about the severity of the situation and wrongfully handling all conceivable survival strategies. The onomatopoeic “*clang, clang, clang*” in Poem 12, moreover, might metaphorically stand for the final warning to those who are still able to avoid the apocalyptic future. In these scenes, nautical terms and a pseudo-patois slightly defamiliarize the theological backdrop of the story the readers are familiar with:

For it is My Likinge

Mankinde for to anoye (Reading, 2005, Poem 12).

Now,

Here’s a choice item!,

Here *is* a choice specimen!

This here li’l’ lady

Stands just 95 cm high,

Lived in a goddam *cave* for chrissake!,

H. floresiensis

Any chance, Noye?

...

No space, matey,

For the deceased;

Get over the gunwale yerself,

Or else stay there and drown (Reading, 2005, Poem 24)

Piss off;

We got more than enough, more than enough.' (Reading, 2005, Poem 26).

As seen in the lines above, the vessel will only save the chosen few or the privileged (“*a choice item*”, “*a choice specimen*”), and the decisions made by the leaders will be most possibly biased and uninformed (“*No space, matey, For the deceased*”). As Alexander Schlutz puts forward, for *Noye* as the authority figure in the embarkation process, it might be “*unlikely to make well-informed [choices,] in chaos and in a mass-extinction event such as the one we currently experience*” (2018, p.804). *Noye* might be representing the failing human subject who is complicit in the environmental destruction, fails to understand the gravity of the matter and unable to implement measures to avoid its worst impacts. The complicity is multifaceted, as implied by Reading, we still think, speak, consume and act in the very language, social and economic systems fostered by ourselves. Likewise, Reading’s text operates through a self-cancelling humour underlining a failure of the religious institutions in producing solutions to the current environmental problems: “*For she hateth the notion of God, preferring physics*” and “*(Not for the first time, Genesis goes all to shit)*” (Reading, 2005, Poem 4, 22).

Moreover, Reading discards the lyric register in his reiteration of *Noye*’s flood story, particularly in the catalogue of species to be hauled up and the ones to be abandoned. There are constant switches between unidentified speakers to reflect on the chaotic hustle and bustle of loading the vessel and “*the poetic*” register is largely maintained by paratactically organized catalogues of the species under threat and to be reserved on the ark. Noah’s stevedores count the species to be stowed, assuming the role of a biologist or a biodiversity specialist. These cargo items loaded and discharged from the vessel also serve an aesthetic function as a saddening eulogy:

Oil, Oil,
 I got a ruck of Echidnas 'ere
 (They stink like shit,
 But they gotta place,
 Just same as you'n me);
 Also a bunch of Amsterdam Albatrosses,
 Blue Petrels,
 Black-faced Sheathbills,
 King Penguins,
 Northern Rockhopper Penguins,
 Salvin's Prions,
 Eaton's Fulmar Prions,
 Kerguelen Petrels,
 Kerguelen Shags [*Phalacrocorax verrucosus*] (Reading, 2005, Poem
 20).
 ...
 2x
 Alpine Chough,
 Cheetah,
 Chihuahua,
 Chub,
 Chiffchaff,
 Plain Chachalaca (Reading, 2005, Poem 35).

Reading, as an avid birdwatcher, lists a number of birds along with other animals in the poems above. As Lynn Keller (2018) contends such “a species list” in the poems “*might be heard as a grimly memorializing gesture like reading the names of the war dead at an antiwar rally... or might be solely an elegiac gesture*” (p. 45). Even though Reading might be honouring the species lost or facing demise in near future, he is also validating the role poetry can play to monumentalize natural life in all its diversity. These catalogues of species scattered around the page space produce an anxiety-ridden impasse between “*hopeful reimagining of collective responsibility*” (Solnick, 2017, p. 134) and bidding “*a peremptory adieu to biodiversicals*” as one of Reading’s speakers admits in the 28th poem. Reading’s apocalyptic discourse is “*mockingly metapoetic and self-consciously ambivalent*”, putting forward “*a shared awareness of embodied embeddedness*”, as Keller contends, which is “*registered most through human connections to nonhuman animal species and their destinies, while paying attention to oncoming disaster in the context of ongoing crisis requires most especially the pleasures of humor... mixed with pain*”

(Keller, 2018, p. 99). Reading's parodic handling of the embarkation process is quite resourceful in terms of mixing the humorous register with the morbid tone.

Stylistically, the verbal and visual collage pieces in -273,15 draw Reading's poetry closer toward the 'entropological register' and self-consciously reveal the shortcomings of Reading's environmental agenda. Reading orchestrates incomplete recontextualization of scientifically informed documents about global warming mainly from scientific journals and newspaper articles such as David Stipp's CNN article titled "The Pentagon's Weather Nightmare" (Poem 7, 25), science spotlights of pseudo-scientific journals such as *Global Sentinel* (Poem 27), and research outcomes of Rothamsted Research Centre (Poem 3). The verbal collages encompass a mixture of several voices introducing damage assessment and meanwhile propagating immediate action. The Anthropocene topics covered in the verbal collages are wide ranging such as massive fires, 'sharp decline' of species, warming of the 'Great Ocean Current,' heatwaves 'followed by deepfreeze,' drought, and other drastic weather changes. The apparent scientificity of these pieces is enhanced by the inserted inner thoughts of the unidentified speakers or at times an imposing expert voice:

thus we know that Global Warming, rather than causing gradual, centuries-spanning change, will push the climate to tip-point, fast. The ocean/atmosphere system controlling their frail planet's climate will change things radically — maybe in less than a decade [*The struggle naught availeth.*] ...since about 1970, the decline of the North Atlantic's salinity reduced over past forty years, the possible effect of this on the Great Atlantic Current, the cooling of much of Europe and the U.S. if the flow ceased, the droughts, the dust-bowls and the ashes ... [*You, at the back, should've sat up and fucking well paid attention*] (Reading, 2005, Poem 7).

The earth is threatened by its own population...

Western Industrial Man is facing, now,

not just a challenge but a climacteric...

(*Those in the front seats should have paid attention.*) (Reading, 2005, Poem 27).

These largely incomplete texts oscillate between the scientific discourse lacking political agency and a possible poetic voice in the brackets and parentheses claiming certain agency and call for action. Reading here presents an

“*unsentimental*” and solemn voice, yet “*suspended between present and future in the liminal temporality of poetic prophecy*” he “*spells out the implications of hard, empirical science in uncompromising verse*” (Schlutz, 2018, p. 788, 789). The passage opens with an assured and matter-of-fact attitude to the current state of affairs and inalterability of the climate crisis: “*thus we know that Global Warming...will push the climate to tip-point, fast*” (Reading, 2005, Poem 7). However, the verbal collage makes it clear how this common scientific knowledge won’t lead to any policy change in the near future. More dramatically, “*You, at the back*”, or “*Those in the front seats should have paid attention*” is a sort of call to the public, especially to those who do not “*pay attention*” to how climate change will soon change the course of things quite dramatically. The italicised “[*The struggle naught availeth.*]” stands as a reminder of failing efforts of possibly embarking the ark, saving the species, or identifying the scale of loss. It is almost too late that those “*sitting in the front seat*” are policy-makers who fail to understand the severity of the situation and succumb to indolence, thus deserve to be attacked and rebuked by the persona.

Some of these long passages also turn into pieces of a depersonalized stammering subject, materializing the stuttering on the page by the omission of certain letters from some keywords, unusual line breaks, or unevenly distributed punctuation marks. The act of reading is rendered sporadic by trimmed wording, pastiche sentences, wrestling with the melting of “*Arctic ice cap*” and “*the most dramatic oceanic change*”:

nk that major climate *nset* of an ice age, took *rs* to unfold. Now they know *ansitions* can occur in less The probable trigger of abrupt *ges*, at least i the Northern *e*, is the shutdown of a huge ocean he Atlantic Ocean. The *cur* is dense, salty water that flows north *e* tropics and sinks in the North At h water is pumped into the h can occur. from b Atlantic. if fres northerly ... the most dramatic oceanic change ever measured... (Reading, 2005, Poem 16).

Certain words here are separated by line breaks; there are unexpected interruptions due to the missing letters; the sentences become less intelligible by conscious misspellings. All these formal tactics foreground “*a counter-recognition of the limited powers of both language and human mind, particularly in the face of environmental disruption of a scale and complexity previously unknown*” (Keller, 2018, p. 32). Experimental procedures in this piece are double-edged: verbal collage of scientifically driven texts have been brought together without a distinct reference

to its source meanwhile the words are dishevelled and scattered around. Susan Nolan’s approach to “unnatural ecopoetics” also explains Reading’s attempts at both self-reflexivity and entropological nature of his assemblage—the medium, the language and material practices, he uses to express the almost inexpressible. The stammering foregrounded by the omitted letters in the text above “leads to a text that is utterly true to the disjointed, fragmentary, and multiplicitous nature of lived experiences in the world because of its self-awareness and acceptance of its own inadequateness” (Nolan, 2015, p. 100). From this perspective, these verbal collage pieces demonstrate a sense of entrapment within the scale of destruction explored thematically and its representation in scientific-poetic and linguistic tools.

In his collage works, Reading playfully combines various found texts with scientific documents of journalistic pieces; furthermore, he makes use of topographical tactics such as blotching, scribbling, overlapping different found documents, or even inventing new ones. As Susan Howe (2003) writes in *The Midnight*, the collage as an aesthetic practice involves “assembling materials for a recurrent return somewhere. Familiar sound textures, deliverances, vagabond quotations, preservations, wilderness shrubs, little resuscitated patterns. Historical or miraculous. Thousands of correlations have to be sliced and spliced” (p. 85). Such transformation and decay as observed in Reading’s verbal collages are visually processed in the following assemblage:

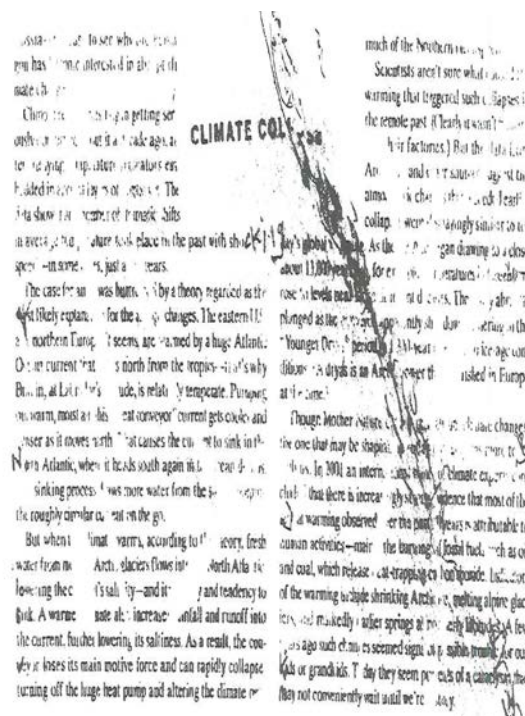


Figure 1. Reading, P. (2005). -273,15. Northumberland: Bloodaxe. Poem 14.

The first collage piece shows us that the “*traces and surface alterations*” in the verbal-visual collage pieces are both “*manipulative and reproductive processes*” and destructive as they reflect a “*material deterioration*”: “*writing-as-process and writing-as-decay*” (Klawitter, 2008, p. 201). Moreover, Reading seems to acknowledge “*the inadequacy of his eco(poetic)-interventions*” (Solnick, 2017, p. 13) or the prevalent scientific facts in creating a healthy public opinion. If we could relate this collage work to his evocation of entropy in the text, it is possible to see that the text is slowly wearing down to the point of its self-conscious break-down. Reading, as a collage artist at work, is hesitant about introducing a new label to represent his work: “*climate collage*”, half of the word “*collage*” blotched by indistinct scribbles. The traces of the photocopied scientific report or a journal article related to climate change are hardly visible, foregrounding some key words such as “*sinking*”, “*can rapidly collapse*”, “*warming that triggered such collapse*”, “*scientists are not sure ... (illegible words) warming observed*”, and “*attributable to human activities*”. Climate collage displays the anxiety of the artist at work in laying bare the processes of anthropogenic change. The text undergoes an “*erosive process*”, as Isabel Martin calls, through which the page space dissolves into incomprehensible blurb, “*(i)ndividual letters already sink and fade*” even “*to the point of illegibility*” and “*[s]ome letters are thickly smeared, others have vanished*” (2000, pp. 241-242). Hereby, the entropological procedures in climate collage images foreground Reading’s background as a visual artist and open up his texts to varied formal possibilities to accommodate the complexity of the situation:

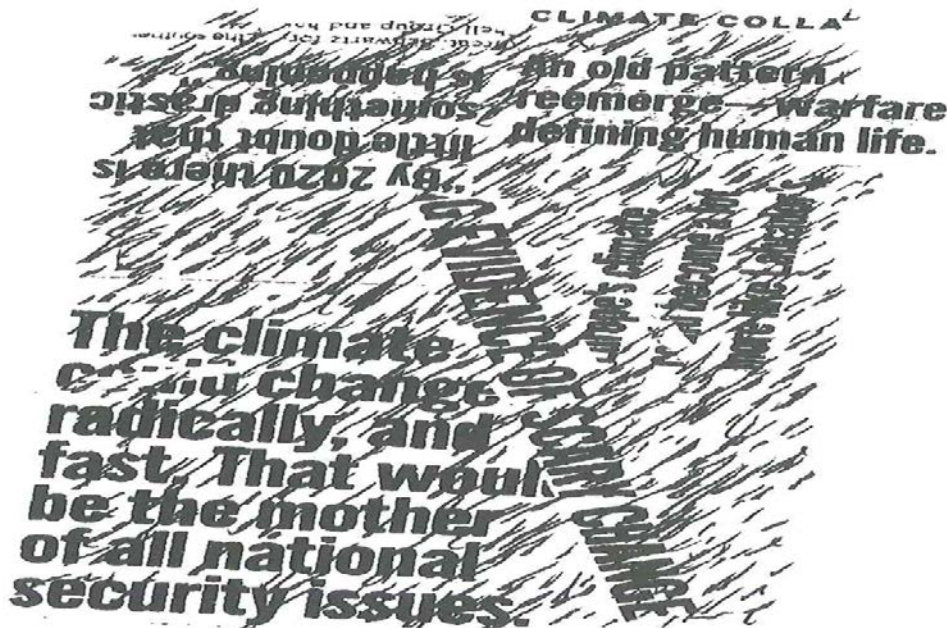


Figure 2. Reading, P. (2005). -273,15. Northumberland: Bloodaxe. Poem 25.

The page here turns into a “*plastic medium within which*” traces of “*non-linear modes of information*” related to planetary climate change are juxtaposed (Keller, 2018, p. 23). The text once more underlines increased anxiety through catchphrases from preceding found materials: “*The climate change could change radically, and fast, That would be the mother of all national security issues*”; “*evidence of scarry change*”; “*By 2020 there is little doubt that something drastic is happening*”; “*an old pattern reemerges-warfare defining human life*” (Reading, 2005, Poem 25). What messages does Reading convey through these overused journalistic phrases and style? Apart from the communicative function of the found materials about the potential dangers of global warming, this collage piece mediates a certain “*dynamism*” through “*an emotional spectrum ranging from homage to the writers cited ... to satirical use of found text (with a kind of hatred, often accompanied by anger)*” (Tarlo, 2009, p. 119). The word collage is itself incomplete, pushed to the edge of the paper, and offered as a formal alternative what is so far said or explained in plain diction. All in all, Peter Reading’s collage pieces create a “*process of an affective and dynamic compositional field*” in which the lyric subject is discarded and the visual product on the page could be seen as the “*constellation of textual elements: not voice, but voicings*” (Bernstein, 2012, p. 288). These ‘voicings’ are consciously disseminated throughout the text to intensify the textuality of all the sources available to the distressed human subject.

-273,15 [*Absolute Zero*] closes by the field-notes conceivably scribbled by the poet and two incomplete poems composed of repeated catchwords. The scrawled lines adopt an apocalyptic discourse for a final time and announce the approaching storm, perhaps as a metaphor for the irremediable damage. The text itself is left broken, malfunctioning, and inconclusive:

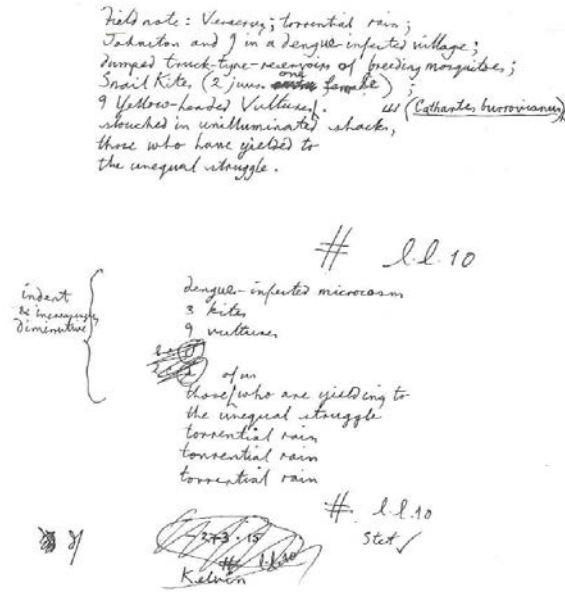


Figure 3. Reading, P. (2005). -273,15. Northumberland: Bloodaxe. Poem 36.

The ending of the collection by field notes, validating the poet's presence in the text not only, provides a certain degree of agency, yet the possibility of absolute zero formerly announced in the title of the work to foreground a "double awareness of crisis and apocalypse" (Keller, 2018, p.135). The text also draws attention to its materiality and metapoetic procedures: potential titles the poet thinks of, some of which are under erasure, including -273,15, and inclusion of the word "stet" at the bottom, self-reflexively referring to the procedure used by the poet: "Let it stand (used as an instruction on a printed proof to indicate that a marked alteration should be ignored)" (OED). So, the erased materials retain their presence on the page space foregrounding the metapoetic means of decision-making processes of the alleged poet. It is possible to see the poet's failed attempts to poeticize and aestheticize the catalogue of species "who yieldeth to the unequal struggle" under "torrential rain" or approaching decline of the earth. The final text holds a repetitive structure as several lines are offered with various alternatives: the species facing decline are noted down through a scientific impulse and the poetic medium is introduced only in the form of the poem through caesuras, enjambments, and formal outlook of the text. The date of composition "(1.11.10)" is repeated twice to mark the collection's attempts to make a critical contribution to the dramatic changes taking place at the moment.

Conclusion

Stemming from his deep interest in natural history, and particularly ornithology, the natural world has always been a presiding theme in Reading's oeuvre. Even though he is not truly considered an ecopoet, his poems critically grapple with the environmental issues and numerous themes of the Anthropocene. -273,15 [*Absolute Zero*], in this respect, interrogates how the human activities have brought about tremendous changes on the planet, what we have done so far and whether we failed to reverse the situation. All these propelling questions have been dealt with through a prevailing sense of truthfulness about "the ineluctible" fate of the planet and the humorous rendering of the story of the Noah's Ark and the Great Flood (Reading, 2005, Poem 9). Reading's climate change discourse entails an ethical stance through which one could question the habits of reading and thinking. The cynical poetic agent in Reading's poems consciously steps away from offering solace or harnessing hope, continuously reminding the readers of the fact that dreaming of a better future is not only deceitful but also groundless. The inevitability of the catastrophe, as depicted in the poems, produces great anxiety and chaos on the thematic plane, as Reading unfolds the grimmest environmental issues such as global warming, oceanic temperature changes, the decline of the species, toxicity and wild fires in collage practices. On the stylistic plane, the process of decay is integrated into Reading's experiments and is aestheticized through reiterations, alterations and erasures. Additionally, climate collage emerges as a critical and aesthetic practice in -273,15, which could be associated with Lynn Keller's concept of the 'self-conscious Anthropocene' and the ecopoetics of the twenty-first century. In climate collages, all voices—scientific, journalistic, academic, poetic—compete with each other, all the while laying bare the processes of decay and hinting increasing levels of eco-anxiety. As in many of his earlier poetry collections, -273,15 closes through paratactically organised field notes kept by the poet-figure and a deepening silence. The silence is not simply the surrender of the poet, but it is disruptive of the processes of writing and thinking about the established connection between the way things work.

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Summary

The present study aims to analyze Peter Reading’s poems from his penultimate poetry collection -273,15 by the lens of Lynn Keller’s concept of “self-conscious Anthropocene” and Skinner’s categorization of “entropological ecopoetics.” In his poems of the twenty-first century, Reading revisits his career-long experimental practices such as verbal and visual collage, sudden shift of registers, implementation of found materials through a growing awareness of the effects of climate change and environmental deterioration. Therefore, this paper sets out to explore how Peter Reading’s poetry collection -273,15 responds to the challenges of the Anthropocene in multimodal poetic procedures and embraces the complexity of the current ecological crisis.

The theoretical focus of the paper is the concept of “self-conscious Anthropocene” proposed by Lynn Keller which refers to a renewed form of consciousness about how human activity has impacted recent ecological crises. Wary of the exhaustive use of the term Anthropocene, Keller argues that it is possible to discern “a pervasive cultural awareness of anthropogenic planetary transformation” in the twenty-first century ecopoetics and such a change is also an indispensable part of human life now (2018, p. 8). The apocalyptic vision in writing might lead to communal action, as well as paralysis in the readers due to the emotional burden of the matter. Therefore, she hopes to advocate an idea of “dwelling actively” in crisis rather than surrendering to emotional apathy and inaction. In a climate of unprecedented change, chaos and loss, the writers should look for ways to question old habits and dismantle the ways in which earlier modes of reading and writing are shaped. The formal strategies used in ecopoetics accordingly may enable an imaginative plane where the human and the non-human actively engage. Moreover, the poems of the self-conscious Anthropocene, according to Keller, are not simply submerged into melancholy and despair, however, alleviate the weight of the apocalyptic vision through self-conscious procedures and formal inventiveness. Jonathan Skinner’s third category of ecopoetics, “entropological poetics”, additionally offers a theoretical stance, through which Reading’s handling of “entropy” is examined. The process of decay both thematically and formally lies at the heart of Reading’s experiments and is aestheticized through reiterations, alterations and erasures. The text thus self-reflexively shows the destructive nature of human relations and turns into a plane of contemplation about environmental deterioration.

Reading’s morbid tone and unyielding pessimism are accompanied by a critical stance over the grimmest environmental issues such as global warming, oceanic temperature changes, the decline of the species, toxicity and wild fires. In this respect, by retelling and parodying an old Biblical story, Noah’s Flood, Reading draws attention to the immediacy of the approaching catastrophe and the failing policies to prevent the ecological disasters. While the process of embarkation is administered by Reading’s persona ‘Noey’, the text catalogues and pays homage to the species facing neglect and decline. The Biblical story is stripped of scriptural weight and the Noah figure fails to cope with the situation at hand.

The apocalyptic vision in the poems is handled by humour, self-reflexive irony, inconsistencies and formal playfulness.

Reading also introduces a new concept of “climate collage” in -273,15, which can be considered as an aesthetic attempt to discover new means to cope with the handling of the climate change discourse in poetry. In the collage pieces, he incorporates found texts and alleged scientific reports into field notes and journalistic materials which present different perspectives to the humankind’s involvement in the current ecological crises and failing policies on both national and international level. Accordingly, climate collage has a two-fold function in Reading’s poems: it expresses the poet-artist’s efforts to articulate a new formal plane where all voices compete with each other, all the while laying bare the processes of decline and decay and hinting an increased anxiety.

All in all, Reading’s poems of the millennium reiterate his unwavering suspicion of the human language to represent the complexity of the situation. Reading is therefore blatant about questioning the legacy of language and writing and pushing his texts to the limits of extinction. Reflecting a ‘complex realism’ blended with formal experimentation, -273,15 investigates the Anthropocenic themes through a “*critical hyperawareness*” and at times “*a paralysing self-critique*” (Solnick, 2017, p. 44). Despite a chronic sense of belatedness and critique of inaction, Reading’s poems motivates the readers to question the means through which they think and act.