The Affective Affordances of Ecopoetry. Notes from Simon Armitage's *Cryosphere*[1]

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Abstract

Scientific communication about the ongoing ecological crisis is not working effectively; other approaches are needed in order to reduce psychological distancing and indifference. The article moves from the premise that ecopoetry is such an approach because it has the ability to provoke an emotional reaction in readers—that is, it carries affective affordances. But how does an ecopoem engender affective engagement in readers? Theoretically, the article brings together hitherto disconnected disciplinary perspectives from ecocriticism, psychology, affect theory, and ecology, to build theoretical grounding for the arguments that affective engagement is crucial in environmental communication, and therefore ecopoetry is uniquely positioned to address ecological topics. Analytically, the article focuses on the poems by UK Poet Laureate Simon Armitage included in the *Cryosphere* pamphlet. It identifies and discusses a set of narrative and thematic approaches—developing a sense of place; activating the senses through synaesthesia; stimulating emotional connection through individuation; inviting participation in melancholia; and embracing vulnerability—which are deployed to engender affective engagement in readers. In so doing, the article contributes to create a better understanding of the affective and ecological potential of poetry.

Keywords: Ecopoetry, affect, emotions, ecology, Simon Armitage.

Resumen

La comunicación científica sobre la actual crisis ecológica no está funcionando de manera efectiva; se necesitan otros enfoques para reducir el distanciamiento psicológico y la indiferencia. El artículo parte de la premisa de que la ecopoesía es un enfoque de este tipo porque tiene la capacidad de provocar una reacción emocional en los lectores, es decir, conlleva posibilidades afectivas. Pero, ¿cómo genera un ecopoema un compromiso afectivo en los lectores? Teóricamente, el artículo reúne perspectivas disciplinarias hasta ahora desconectadas de la ecocrítica, la psicología, la teoría del afecto y la ecología, para construir una base teórica para los argumentos de que el compromiso afectivo es crucial en la comunicación ambiental y, por lo tanto, la ecopoesía está en una posición única para abordar temas ecológicos. Analíticamente, el artículo se centra en los poemas del poeta laureado del Reino Unido Simon Armitage incluidos en el folleto *Cryosphere.* Identifica y analiza un conjunto de enfoques narrativos y temáticos: desarrollar un sentido de lugar; activar los sentidos a través de la sinestesia; estimular la conexión emocional a través de la individuación; invitar a la participación en la melancolía; y la aceptación de la vulnerabilidad, que se utilizan para generar un compromiso afectivo en los lectores. De este modo, el artículo contribuye a crear una mejor comprensión del potencial afectivo y ecológico de la poesía.

Palabras clave: Ecopoesía, afectar, emociones, ecología, Simon Armitage

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The Power of Ecopoetry

The language, media and registers used to inform and sensitize the public about the ecological crisis are not working effectively (Marshall). Harrowing statistics, catastrophic scientific data and shocking images leave us numb, non-responsive, bored or even irritated. New strategies are needed to communicate ecological urgency and reduce psychological distancing and indifference (Varutti, "Claiming Ecological Grief"). If the tragic truth of scientific information no longer moves us, something different, more subtle and tangential, might be better suited to the task. Something like poetry.

UK Poet Laureate Simon Armitage holds that "poets can convey what's happening with climate change in a way that scientists and journalists can't" (Youngs np). Together with growing numbers of scholars, authors, and readers, I suggest that poetry, and more specifically ecopoetry, is ideally positioned to address ecological issues. Ecopoetry is "poetry that addresses, or can be read in ways that address, the current conditions of our environmental crisis" (Walton 1). In the European context, the field of ecopoetry has become especially vibrant following the appointment of Simon Armitage as UK Poet Laureate in 2019. In line with his long-standing commitment to ecological and societal issues, Armitage has declared the ecological crisis the focus of his Poet Laureate 10-year tenure.[2] Through initiatives such as the Laurel Prize for Ecopoetry, Armitage has brought increased relevance and visibility to the ecopoetic movement in the UK and internationally.[3]

This article is concerned with how emotions are mobilized in ecopoetry as a tool to communicate the environmental urgency. Elsewhere (Varutti, "Poetry and Ecological Awareness"), I have argued that one of the goals of ecopoetry can be broadly understood as engendering ecological awareness in readers, that is, awareness of human-nonhuman connections and interdependence, as a basis for motivating pro-environmental action. My stance resonates with that of philologist Wit Pietrzak, who noted that "lyric poetry offers not only a means of linguistic expression of the interdependence of all elements in any given ecosystem but also constitutes a language *capable of swaying human modes of thinking* in favor of the Terrestrial" (290, emphasis added). In other words, ecopoetry can be *agentive*, it can do something to the reader, it can provoke a change, a shift, a reaction. I suggest that ecopoetry can achieve this by engendering an affective response in the reader.

These statements call for a qualification of the positions and roles of the poet-author and the reader of the ecopoetic text. The poet is not necessarily the sole producer of the poem in that the poet's agency (their agenda, sensitivity, skills,

[2] In Armitage's own words "There is no greater challenge for a contemporary laureate and geography graduate than to contribute artistically to a conversation about the natural world and the state of our planet, and to praise those things that are wonderful and of wonder" ("Landscapes").
[3] This growing interest for ecopoetry is unfolding against the backdrop of a more generalized recent increase in sales of poetry books in the UK (Ferguson; Brooks; *The Economist*).

imaginal projections etc.) do not exist in a vacuum, but are instead the result of ongoing interactions with the world—interactions that ecopoetry is particularly well positioned to capture and evoke. The theoretical current of material ecocriticism urges us to pay attention to "matter both *in* texts and *as* text" (Iovino and Oppermann 2, emphasis in the original). Increased awareness of the ongoing conversations and collaboration between human and more-than-human agencies in the production of narratives (including in ecopoetry) invites a revision of established notions of agency and authorship as solely attributed to humans, in favour of expanded understandings of narratives as resulting from the collaborative endeavour of humans and more-than-humans (for instance John Charles Ryan illustrates the point through the case of human-plants poetic collaboration).[4] This article subscribes to this theoretical positioning, even though the text will often, inevitably, refer to "the poet"—Simon Armitage in this case.

Similarly, although this article focuses on the analysis of how affective engagement is woven into the poetic text (therefore focusing on the production of the poem), the participation of the reader is highly relevant. For instance, a poem invites the participation of the reader through its rhythmic and performative character. A poem is never just "read" or "listened to," it is always performed. Whether we attend a poetry event, listen to a podcast, or silently read a poem to ourselves, the text is giving way to a performance: if only in our mind and imagination, words carry sounds, rhythm, harmony and musicality (or not), they impose emphasis and accents, sharpness and softness in voice and intonation. According to Pietrzak, a poem does not relate a narrative or (re)evoke life events, rather, the poem *materializes* a theme, it gives it body, sound, tonality, rhythm. Through the act of reading, the poem becomes an event in its own right and a generative, productive act. Pietrzak notes:

> it is this nature of poetry as a performative event that makes it particularly suited to alter or complicate our worldview in favor of what Latour has recently termed the Terrestrial: a network of interweaving actors of various ilk, human and non-human but also animate and inanimate. (293)

For ecopoetry to be agentive in the sense evoked in this article, the reader needs to be willing to receive the ecopoetic message. A superficial, impatient reading will hardly produce the reaction the ecopoem intended to engender. The ecopoem calls for a reading that is attentive, close and patient, which lets the poem breath, allowing words and images to reverberate and produce an emotional resonance; this is an empathic reading, implying a reader positioned not as external observer, but as affectively engaged participant.

It could be argued that ecopoetry demands a lot of the reader: it demands attention and participation—both cognitive (through efforts at understanding and engagement of the imagination) and affective (through openness and vulnerability). Zoë Brigley and Kristian Evans note that poetry "calls us to stay awake, to find the words to describe how it feels, to sing to what hurts, to reach out, to attend more closely and with more care, to each other, and to our fellow species, to see all things

[4] I thank the anonymous reviewer for bringing my attention to this point.

as our kin" (10). I propose that in order to engage with the ecopoem, readers do not necessarily need to be experts or lovers of poetry, nor already environmentally committed (though, of course, this helps), but they do need to be willing to make themselves receptive. This open, vulnerable, empathic stance of the reader suggests that affective engagement is not so much a single-handed accomplishment of the poet, as a dialectic relation that is ideally established between the poet, the world, and the reader. This is of course a hypothetical, "ideal reader" who cannot be taken for granted. Creating this kind of readership is a long-term process that requires sustained effort from ecopoets and the sectors that revolve around ecopoetry. These are long-term, challenging, in part aspirational, but not naive goals; denying ecopoetry an impact in this sense amounts to questioning the very foundational tenets of poetry itself.

It may seem trivial to state that a skilled use of language is central to ecopoetry: minutely curated imagery, shocking metaphors, evocative sounds and rhythm (among others) are deployed to evoke the whole spectrum of emotions, from marvel and awe to the horror of environmental destruction, fuelling environmental imagination and our ability to re-imagine our relationship with the environment (e.g. Buell; Jasanoff). What appears to be less clearly articulated is the role of emotions in the ecopoem. Studies in ecopsychology show that emotions empower environmental messaging: for instance, messages focusing on "active hope" (hope combined with concrete tips and suggestions for possible solutions) have proven to be particularly effective in motivating pro-environmental action (Chapman et al.); in addition, emotions make environmental messaging effects last longer (Goldberg). In the light of these studies, it seems legitimate to argue that the more the ecopoem engenders emotional responses, the further the reach of its ecological message.

In parallel, scholarship in the field of ecocriticism (Hume and Osborne; Farrier; Reddick; for an overview of the field see also Bladow) has revealed the ecological potential (that is, the ability to address key problematic aspects of collective inaction and to motivate positive change) of literary forms such as ecopoetry. In particular, the emerging interdisciplinary field of affective ecocriticism (e.g. Bladow and Ladino; Weik von Mossner) is gradually shedding light on the place and role of emotions in the dissemination of ideas related to ecology. Affective ecocriticism sets to

> identify the emotions that circulate around environmental issues today, to clarify how that circulation works, to acknowledge the powerful role environments themselves play in shaping affective experience, and to identify new affects emerging in our contemporary moment. (Bladow and Ladino 3)

This article aims to contribute to affective ecocriticism theory through a focus on the meta-level of ecopoetry's affective affordances.

This focus is motivated by an observation: a survey of recent ecopoetry collections (such as Kent and Baylis; Brigley and Evans; and Simpson, among many others) reveals that, despite a staggering variety of linguistic forms and communication strategies, a distinctive feature of ecopoetry is its ability to touch the reader emotionally in order to set the conditions for, and to motivate, pro-

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environmental action. One of the key ways through which the ecopoem attains its ecological goals, I argue, is through affective engagement. I approach affective engagement as an affordance of ecopoetry, that is, what the ecopoem enables and has the ability to engender; I use the concept of affordance as a tool to account for the agentive potential of ecopoetry. This article examines how—through which narrative and thematic approaches—the ecopoem creates affective engagement in readers. In doing so, it aims to cast light on the affective affordances of ecopoetry.

The theoretical framework of the article is multilayered: I draw on different disciplinary and field perspectives from ecocriticism, psychology, affect theory, and ecology, in order to build a cross-disciplinary—hitherto lacking—theoretical grounding for the argument that affective engagement is crucial in environmental communication, and therefore ecopoetry is uniquely positioned to address ecological topics. I approach the topic through the work of UK Poet Laureate Simon Armitage. I specifically focus on the poems gathered in the pamphlet *Cryosphere* (Armitage) which were written in occasion of Armitage's visit to the Arctic in July 2023, and express the poet's response to the dramatic climate disruptions experienced first-hand during the visit. I will occasionally juxtapose poems from the *Cryosphere* to other poems by Armitage to better exemplify a point, or to highlight continuities or hiatuses.

The article's ultimate aim is to contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics through which ecopoetry emotionally affects readers. This endeavour has relevance on several levels. Engagement with ecological issues is recasting poetry by showing that poetry has something to say about, and to contribute to, current ecological debates. As David Farrier noted: "if we might perhaps profitably think about the Anthropocene in light of the operations of poetry, we most certainly must think differently about the poem as a consequence of the Anthropocene" (5). Yvonne Reddick and Mandy Bloomfield further provide insights into how poetry is being re-configured through ecological engagement (for instance, by importing narrative techniques such as poetic collages, on the example of Herta Müller's work, see Marven). Involvement with ecological topics has the potential to transform how poetry is being written and written about, read, discussed and taught in some sections of academia; how it is produced, promoted and disseminated in the publishing sector (by poets, agents and publishers); and in what manner and how frequently it is read by the wider public, and therefore its impact on society. All this is consequential as in the face of worsening ecological conditions and public and political inaction, there is an urgent need for experimenting with, and promoting new strategies and tools able to enhance individual and collective ecological awareness and responsiveness.

Affective Engagement and Ecopoetry

Scientific knowledge of environmental degradation is not enough to motivate pro-environmental action, yet at the same time, many people feel unable to cope emotionally: the anxiety, the fear, and the despair paralyse us and lock us into passive, depressive states (see Lertzman; Varutti, "Claiming Ecological Grief;" Varutti,

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"Anthropocenic Emotions"). However, through emotional engagement we may begin to enter into an affective relationship with the world (Varutti, "(Re-)Learning to Relate to the Planet"). Emotions are the cornerstones of a constructive ecological response: they are key to resilience and adaptation, central to well-being and environmentally responsible decision-making (see Brosch for an overview of the literature). Crucially, emotions are also central to the goals of ecopoetry: studies are beginning to show the power of poetry to foster socio-ecological resistance (e.g. Fernández-Giménez; Odendaal).

In this article, I adopt the definition of ecopoetry provided by Samantha Walton whereby ecopoetry is broadly understood as poetry addressing the environmental crisis. I also subscribe to John Shoptaw's argument that ecopoetry should be both environmental (its subject-matter being the environment)[5] and environmentalist, that is adopting a pro-environmental, non-anthropocentric stance. As American poet Jorie Graham incisively noted, ecopoetry is needed now more than ever because it offers a way to make the environmental damage *felt* and it offers tools to *imagine* a different course of action (40). In fact, ecopoetry's "primary task is to help readers imagine [...] different ways of living on earth" (Hume and Osborne 10). Or, to put it in Shoptaw's words, "ecopoetry is nature poetry that has designs on us, that imagines changing the ways we think, feel about, and live and act in the world" (408). A full presentation of the theoretical debates around the concept of ecopoetry—its distinctive features and aims, how it relates to poetry, and what it contributes to ecocriticism—transcends the scope of this article.[6] What is of relevance here, instead, are the ties between ecopoetry and emotions.

Ecopoetry is a language of feeling and participation: it is affective because it is written from the standpoint of the poet being affected; it propels imagination because it is born out of an imaginative flight. Psychology and neuroscience studies show that emotional engagement enhances attention (e.g. Markovic et al.; Öhman et al.; Pourtois et al.). When something touches us emotionally, we tend to be more attentive: the emotional experience opens a window of awareness and therefore an opportunity for connection (with our inner feelings, other human and nonhuman beings, and the world), and for imagining how things could be different in a desirable future. Ecopoetry is uniquely equipped to engage readers emotionally, its highly evocative, intimate, precise and distilled language sets it apart from other communication forms such as drama or novels.

One of the key tools used in poetry to engender emotional connection are metaphors. A metaphor, Marco Caracciolo et al. explain, is:

[5] In a strict ecological sense, the concept of environment refers to the habitat of organisms, which include both the physical habitat and the organisms living in it (Sharma 1). Conversely, in the context of this quote (and by extension, in this article), I understand the concept of environment through socio-cultural lenses which refer to the relationships societies entertain with nature (following Sutton 15).
[6] Interested readers may refer among others to Bryson; Shoptaw; Greene; Walton; Hume and Osborne; Farrier; Martínez Serrano et al.; and Reddick.

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> a cognitive tool that allows language users to think about reality in ways that would not be available in purely literal discourse. Metaphor discloses new perspectives on the world and is thus central to knowledge production. (356)

As we shall see in Armitage's poems, metaphors carry affective affordances, in the sense that they can engender affective engagement. As Caracciolo et al. note, "metaphorical language and affective responses are crucial to the narrative negotiation of the human-nonhuman divide in the face of climate change" (354). The metaphor translates abstract, complex, hard-to-imagine-and-understand issues, into accessible, familiar, relatable images (Caracciolo et al.). The affective affordances carried by the condensed poignancy of ecopoetic metaphors—versus the more narrative metaphorical language of other literary forms—are key to the mechanisms through which ecopoetry helps us to learn to engage emotionally.

Metaphors are just one among many poetic features which can enable readers to get better at identifying and expressing their emotions, a skill known as emotional granularity. Emotional granularity is the ability to identify emotions with precision, to make fine distinctions between emotional experiences, and to draw on conceptual and semantic knowledge in order to express these distinctions (Barrett et al.). High levels of emotional granularity (for instance the ability to distinguish fear from anguish, loneliness or anger) indicate that we have a better understanding of our emotional state and are therefore in a better position to cope with it (Kashdan et al.; Lukic S. et al.). Language and linguistic abilities are important to emotional granularity. As Sladiana Lukic et al. explain: "People who are high in emotional granularity must not only have access to a rich semantic library of emotion concepts, but they also must use that knowledge effectively to select the words that capture their inner experiences and to reject those that do not" (1406). Emotional granularity is considered a facet of emotional expertise; it is a skill that can be learnt and cultivated (Wilson-Mendenhall and Dunne).

Emotional granularity is also a key feature of poetry: the capacity to express an emotion with great precision, using the most accurate language to communicate the infinite nuances and complexity of human feelings, lies at the core of the poetic endeavour. The concept of emotional granularity opens a fresh analytical angle on poetic skills. In poetry, emotional granularity finds expression through the poet's sensibility and ability to choose the most evocative words and imagery. As the discussion of Armitage poems (below) exemplifies, language is deftly used in varied ways in order to engender emotional responses in the readers. Yet we should remain alert to the important contributions of the material ecocriticism perspectives mentioned above. Material ecocriticism helps us see the poetic gesture (and poetic skills such emotional granularity) in a new light: as being not only and not so much an individual achievement, but as resulting from the interaction with the world, and therefore as stemming from the enmeshment of human and more-than-human agency.

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Crucially, through reading poetry, readers become exposed to emotional granularity and emotional responsiveness. By providing easily accessible, repeated opportunities for emotional engagement, the ecopoem helps the reader to *learn* to respond emotionally. Learning to connect emotionally with the non-human world is a skill: studies in ecology and ecopsychology reveal that we can learn to connect with Nature (e.g Barbiero). These insights cast a new light on ecopoetry: the ecopoem is not just expression of literary skills and creativity, but a powerful pedagogical instrument, as it enables readers to *cultivate* an affective relationship with the planet, both *in situ* (immersed in a more-than-human landscape) and remotely (when we sit and read a poem at our desk for instance).

The repeated acts of writing and reading poetry with ecological relevance offer a path to learning to emote with and for the environment. The importance of engaging in this kind of affective dialogue with the world should not be under-estimated: as ecopsychologist Sally Gillespie notes "healing our world and ourselves requires a resumption of conversation not only about, but also with the places and beings that shape and sustain us. This brings us home to the realization that the world is an integral part of our inner life and being" (75). Ecopoetry greatly facilitates a conversation of this kind since in the ecopoem the establishment of a connection with the world is work the poet has already done for the reader: the poet has already experienced and felt that connection (however painful or compromised that might be) and found the most resonating words and metaphors to evoke it. Through the poem, we can immerse ourselves in a bundle of affectivity woven by the poet for us. As mentioned, what is required from the reader is engagement with the ecopoem: read it with full attention and let words sink into consciousness, touch us emotionally, and fire our imagination. Reading and listening to ecopoetry can train one's skills of emotionally partaking in some else's (human or more-than-human) existential condition.

Affective Affordances in the *Cryosphere*

How does an ecopoem engender affective engagement in readers? And what are the affective affordances of ecopoetry? To begin addressing these questions, I examine how affective engagement is engendered in Simon Armitage poems included in the pamphlet *Cryosphere*, as well as other poems by Armitage by way of comparison and contextualization. In the Summer 2023, Simon Armitage was invited by the British Antarctic Survey to visit the UK Arctic Research Station in Ny-Ålesund, on the Norwegian Svalbard archipelago, around 1300 kilometres from the North Pole. The visit provided Armitage with opportunities to experience first-hand the declining glacier ecosystems and engage in conversations with scientists at the Research Station. These conversations were recorded in a series of documentary programmes for BBC Radio 4 (available as podcasts) and prompted Armitage to write a series of poems in response to his experience. Three poems—"The Cryosphere," "Birds of the Arctic" and "Polar Bear"—were published in the pamphlet *The Cryosphere* (Armitage),

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a fourth poem, "The Summit," appeared in *The Guardian* (Armitage). The decision to focus on Armitage's *Cryosphere* poems to illustrate my arguments is dictated not only by Armitage's prominent role in the international ecopoetry movement, but also by the suitability of the poems to exemplify a range of diverse affective affordances. The fact that they were all written roughly at the same time, as a result of a specific lived experience of the poet, lends them an internal coherence that allows for, and invites, a transversal reading of the poems. Emotions were central to Armitage's experience in the Arctic; this is evident in the *Cryosphere* poems, which were written with the aim to sensitize readers to the fast-paced, largely irreversible destruction. Below I identify and discuss a cluster of approaches (thematic and stylistic) that exemplify the ecopoetic affective affordances, that is, approaches that are meant to enable and invoke affective engagement in the reader.

Feeling the Arctic

The Arctic is first and foremost a place where humans and more-than-humans live (though, it is worth reminding, this is a completely abstract concept). In the *Cryosphere* poems, Armitage takes much care in creating a sense of place; this seems appropriate as place is deeply linked to, and inflected by notions of belonging and feeling, as Kate Rigby has shown. In Armitage's *Cryosphere*, a sense of place is created through images, situations and sensory experiences that may give readers not only an idea, but also a *feeling* of being there. We must begin with feeling the Arctic—Armitage seems to imply—if we are to feel *for* it.

The opening of the titular poem takes the reader right into the heart of the matter: "Then we headed north in a small red boat / and swung in a white curve to the world's end. / In that far place the fjørd grounded itself" (3). As we read these lines, we might imagine a red dot in a vast landscape of greys and whites. The swinging movement suggests a wide circumnavigation, so wide as to bring us to "the end of the world:" the most remote destination, yet now, a no longer so remote point in time. We must follow the poet and push our imagination right to the end of the world, because it is there, Armitage tells us, that we will find the fjørd: "grounded," reaching for depth and wishing for stability. The journey appears to be tentative and laborious, as the small boat nudges and noses through the ice, drifts along, bobs and stops, moving "at the same pace as the sleepwalking afternoon" (3). We are brought to imagine the boat gradually slowing down to motionless within the icebergs thickening the sea; this is not a battle, but a letting be, a "drifting along," a "sleepwalking," where pretensions of control over movement and time are being relinquished. Through its grounding in place, the poem also grounds us in time, it teaches us the skill of being present, of dwelling in the interstitial and ephemeral space of the present moment. This meditative, contemplative mode of presence lies at the core of ecopoetry, as much as it lies at the core of ecological awareness: only by slowing down and anchoring ourselves in the now, can we notice and reflect, and allow ourselves to feel. In fact, in the "Cryosphere," the poet sits in stupor, and the final description of destruction

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makes us understand the stupefied response: the Arctic is a mass of ruins, a wreckage, half-sunk galleons, ancient empires perilously tipped, palaces shunted into the water, smashed altars, broken tombs, and toppled ice whose secrets are forever violated. The closure of the "Cryosphere" poem evokes an almost physical sensation of a world sliding away, sinking, forever lost beyond hope for recovery.

In this same affective tone, we can sense almost resignation in "The Summit's" honest, forlorn, rhetorical questioning of the poet's reasons for the Arctic journey: "and to do what" (1) he asks, almost mocking ambitions to "experience" the Arctic ("to breathe / its cool breath" [1]), and distancing from egocentric needs to leave a trace of our vanity ("scratch a name / in the visitors' book" [1]). The poet retreats from any absurd, touristy pretension to capture and distil the "essence" of the Arctic in a poem. He knows better and tactfully shatters self-complacency with the words: "In any event / I was too late" (1). Through Armitage's words, we grasp the destruction of the Arctic, though this is not achieved through detailed descriptions of what the poet sees, but rather how the landscape makes him *feel*.

It is interesting to juxtapose the obvious linguistic skills and terminological mastery of Armitage—exemplifying high levels of emotional granularity—with the poet's own admission of lacking words to fully describe the scene and his emotions. Armitage uses language to signal the very limitations of language in conveying the full sensory and affective experience of being in the Arctic: we "sat stupefied" (3), the glacier has "a colour we couldn't name" (3), an "unsayable blue" (4). The majesty of the landscape is conveyed through its power to surpass the poet's linguistic abilities, whilst the very notion of Arctic seems to withdraw, eluding words, resisting description. We are left to imagine a silence, perhaps awed or terrified. It is almost as if the inadequacy of language to render the Arctic landscape, opens up a space where communication can happen through emotions, where words become conduits of affective wavelengths reverberating out of the images the poet has created.

Synaesthetic Unease

As the temperature rises, the Arctic is morphing. The *Cryosphere* poems are a gathering of synaesthetic cues that something is wrong, incongruous, twisted; there is something deeply unsettling about this landscape, as if it were "a place out of place." Armitage draws on metaphors to provide readers with a jarring sensory feel for the Arctic. The poems appear to align with Brigley and Evans's argument that "poetry invites us to fine-tune our senses, to pay attention, to feel more carefully for the pull of things" (9); yet it can be deeply disquieting to fine-tune on something incongruous and dissonant.

Armitage is keen on playing with synaesthesia (elsewhere describing for instance the colour of clouds through their sound, as in the verse "bone-snapping

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black clouds," from the poem "70 Notices").[7] In the "Cryosphere," he conjures "cindery mountains capped by iron peaks / and the sky's glass lid made a green lagoon / of the sea" (3), we visualize the ash-grey mountains with their dark peaks (no longer snow- and ice-capped) as hard as metal, under the sky vault (a lid, protective or suffocating ?). The Arctic landscape is "rusty," made of "loose scree," we can almost touch its frail dryness; the elicitation of the haptic sense is dear to Armitage, who has deployed it in other poems as well, for instance in "70 Notices," readers are brought to imagine textures such as "the rawness of quarried hillsides" (3) in a moor made of gritstone and "looted for gold teeth" (4). We are even invited to imagine the abnormal heat, as the Arctic landscape is set under the heavens in which "the sun got stuck in the sky" ("Polar Bear" 8)—an effective and disconcerting image of climate change.

In "The Summit," "washy clouds and a weepy sky / floating upside down/ in a silver lake" (1) conflate contrasting sensory perceptions: the effect is one of sea and sky merging and creating optical illusions, as if the Arctic, like the desert that it more and more resembles, could provoke hallucinations. The soundscape of the "Cryosphere" is made of "spitting and hissing" (10) sounds of melting ice, reminiscent of a forest fire. The paradoxical juxtaposition of ice and fire is powerful in suggesting that something is not as it should, there is a sense of an excessive noise as the ice is melting at accelerated rate and carrying with it the same destroying rage of a forest fire. Armitage skilfully finds a way to remind us also of what he is *not* given to sense and experience, the sensorial encounters that eluded him, for instance in "The Summit," "[t]here was no coming together/of skin and ice" (1), the tactile dimension of this encounter with the Arctic is missing, forever lost to climate change.

The idea of something out of place is even more explicitly evoked in "The Summit" verses: "in a valley more like a Scottish Glen / along hillsides more at home/ in the English Lakes" (1), and in the poem "Polar Bear," where everything about the bear seems inadequate: "the coat too heavy, too baggy, too hot" (8). The poems are not descriptive nor prescriptive, but talk to us tangentially by playing with our senses and confounding them in order to communicate a deeper sense of disquiet. We are not offered a (re)solution; instead, we are left in the company of a feeling of unease, as something that it is worth reflecting upon and dwelling in.

Emotional Connection through Individuation

In the *Cryosphere* poems, the bear, the glacier, the sky are personified, they become individuals we can relate to. For instance, in "The Summit," the sky is "weepy" and the glacier has a "bridal train," a "face," "a human form:/tongue, body, mouth and heart…" (1) conflating poetry and glaciology technical terms as in "the mouth of the glacier." In a sense, this formulation might be read as anthropocentric, projecting human features onto the more-than-human, though the empathic feelings that the poem evokes counterbalance the anthropocentric critique with an affective

[7] Source: http://www.simonarmitage.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/70-Notices-by-Simon-Armitage.pdf

connection that first and foremost brings the reader closer to the more-than-human, which might be a first step towards the recognition of its alterity.

In "Polar Bear," the poet wandering in the Arctic comes to meet another wanderer, emerging from a hollow as "A pile of stones and old snow" (7), only to reveal himself later as a polar bear. This sombre entrance strips the animal of all exoticism, but gives him back his individuality. Armitage addresses the bear with the personal pronoun "he," and to further individuate him, he adds "He's a large male" (7). Armitage carefully builds an affective connection with the bear. We are brought to empathize with him as we imagine the sense of heaviness and fatigue about the bear. Not only does he look like "A pile of stones and old snow," he also *moves* like one, "dragging his feet," "lumbering down" the mountain, "tramping," "wheeling" ahead, his body a "battle-cannon" made of "heavy boulders and worn rocks" (7), producing grinding sounds. The path of the bear appears to be an endless, vacant, desperate quest: heading "to the tip of the island / then rounding the point" (7), circling the Pole over and over. There is infinite sadness in this wandering; he is a prisoner ("the fleet of life-rafts has sailed," 8), a caged animal, constrained and contained now by a hostile and shrinking habitat made of "tighter corners" and "pencil-line ledges" (8). His hunger, his gut carrying a "sludgy paste of rubble and grit" resonate with the aridity of the "rusty," dry landscape made of "loose scree," lacking the succour of the ice cover (7). The intimidation of a desert returns to mix with an image of death as the glacier is reduced to a "rotting carcass of ice" (8). Granted, the warming conditions of the Arctic might have changed the outer look of the bear and his habitat, but Armitage gives him back his core identity with the incandescent verse: "but the bear in the bear in the bear / keeps padding on" (7).[8]

Writing about the paradox of the presence-absence of animals in literary animal studies, Kári Driscoll notes: "we have to be attentive to the gaps and spaces left behind by the feline absences in the text, which also includes the myriad ways cats and other animals have traditionally been 'interpreted out' of texts by literary scholarship" (166).[9] Armitage appears to be indeed attentive to this, he refrains from a depiction of the bear, balancing instead on the side of evocation of his presence-absence. In an almost impressionist mode, Armitage sketches *the idea of* the bear through images that evoke the animal and its movements ("a pile of stones," "heavy boulders and worn rocks," "a patch of off-white," "a vague cloud-shadow,") yet at the same time also invoke for him emotional empathy.

In this sense, the use of the subjects "I" and "we" (as in "Then we headed north," from the "Cryosphere" [3], or "When I met the glacier" from "The Summit," [1]) invites a connection between the reader, and the poet and his companions. And so, readers may empathize with the poet and the bear, lonely beings straddling the Arctic land—the bear all the more lonely, a "tribe of one,'' a "nomad" following "his own scent." Empathy is even more effectively elicited by the poem's extraordinary closing image:

[8] The verse echoes Gertrude Stein's "a rose is a rose is a rose," thus tapping into a universally shared image (I thank the anonymous reviewer for this point).
[9] I thank the anonymous reviewer for bringing my attention to this point.

the bear, in an act of ultimate desperation, hangs perilously from the North Star. The definite closure is sealed by the final words "till it dissolves" (8), till the North Star's demise. No hope is left, only the dreamy image of the bear dangling from the North Star remains imprinted in our imagination. Empathy for the loneliness and despair of the bear is the affective bridge built by Armitage.

It is interesting to juxtapose the narrative strategy of individuation deployed in the "Polar Bear" poem, with the disquietingly detached narrative of "Birds of the Arctic," which reads as an autopsy report imbued of dark irony. We read for instance that "[p]rospectors drilled into the snowy owl and struck oil" (5); a hint of cynicism is quickly wiped away by the overwhelming sadness of the image, a sadness where death itself is only surpassed by the brutality and nonsense of life sustained by death, "deadening life" (5). "Monster trucks," "saffire mines" and "battery acid" (5-6) are among the poisons found in the birds' bodies, poisons upon which "civilisations bloomed" (6). Armitage had used a similar narrative tone in the poem "Ark," where readers are presented with nightmarish images of "bergs and atolls and islands and states / of plastic bags and micro-beads /and the forests of smoke" (36).[10] No doubt the *Cryosphere* poems are written from a grieving standpoint (Armitage comments "I felt as if I were writing elegies," Youngs) but unlike individuation eliciting empathy, this approach leverages emotional response through shock, disgust, rage, and irony; here, images and words serve a narrative of the absurd and the grotesque, yet still ultimately designed to move readers and shake them out of indifference.

Partaking in the Melancholia

When Armitage finds himself in front of a glacier, what he relates in the "Cryosphere" poem is a battle scene between the ice and "the forces of heat" (3). We are made to see the grandeur of an "ancient empire of snow" (3), we see "temples, / pavilions and winter palaces" (3) tipped, shunted, crumbling, forever lost. Altars and tombs (4) suggest this empire was sacred, a profanation its demise. What should have been protected and treasured in the depths of ice is now exposed, turned upside down, violated and forced to surrender and reveal its long held "secret": the "unsayable blue" (4), a secret so deep that not even a poet can translate it into words.

The scene is imbued with melancholia: a mix of sadness, fatigue, nostalgia, decadence, especially in the images of white pages hovering in the air off the cliffs, and "bergs like half-sunk galleons snared by frost" ("Cryosphere" 3), and perhaps a hint of "Anthropocene nostalgia" (Relidzyńska 172). We perceive the crepuscle of an era, the end of glaciers and of the Arctic as we know them—in fact, the end of our planet as we know it. With this devastating scene, the poet turns the reader into a witness, we are not allowed to close our eyes or look away. Instead, we are brought right into the middle of the ruins, we are made to feel the destruction, remember our insignificance ("laughably small" ["Cryosphere" 3]), and bear witness to the ecocide slowly

[10] Source: http://www.simonarmitage.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Amended-Ark.pdf

unravelling around us. In this same spirit of calling readers to participate, in the poem "The Summit" Armitage opens a direct line of connection with the reader by inscribing himself in the scene through a dramatic construction: "the eyes looking up from the water were mine" (1). There is a suggestion of disbelief in this sentence, a struggle to reconcile what the senses are perceiving, and the meaning of that perception. Readers are almost pulled into the scene, impelled to stand next to the poet and bear witness.

Embracing Vulnerability

The ecopoems in the *Cryosphere* bring us to see how ecopoetry can see through our fears and the defences and excuses we erect to avoid facing reality, and by this very act of exposure, the poem can help counter these obstacles. Anthropologist Tim Ingold observed that the posture of openness proper to "many so-called 'indigenous peoples'," but also most children whose minds are yet to be subdued by adult disciplinary oppression" entails vulnerability but this "is also a source of strength, resilience and wisdom. It allows for ongoing responsiveness" (31). I suggest this statement can be extended to poets: poets know—as Armitage does—that by showing their own vulnerability, they throw a lifeline to the reader: there is immediate recognition, understanding and empathy.

The vulnerability of the poet-observer is a thematic thread running across the *Cryosphere* poems; Armitage uses different registers to evoke it, including among others, what I discuss here as direct images (e.g. the red boat), threatening metaphors (the forest fire), and perspective-taking, that is, bringing the reader to see the world from a specific perspective. Vulnerability transpires most directly in the titular poem's opening image of a small red boat wandering at the world's end, releasing control to the boat's compass, drifting along in the maze of icebergs; the image makes humans "laughably small." In the same poem, vulnerability is also evoked by the condition of being stupefied into silence with the poet losing his words in the face of the power of the elements. But it is probably the metaphor of melting ice "spitting and hissing" like a forest fire, that most powerfully brings about a feeling of vulnerability and danger, a vaguely threatening, upsetting feeling of not being in control, exposed to the unpredictable dynamics of this damaged landscape.

In the poem "The Summit," Armitage uses a different, less direct and more subtle strategy: the vulnerability of the poet-observer is evoked through a distant, disembodied gaze onto the poet, who becomes an observer within a larger frame, his relevance diminished by the larger scale of the landscape. This perspective is brought forth in the verse "and the eyes looking up from the water were mine" (1). There is an innocence in this image, almost a surprise in finding oneself in that place, at that time, suddenly realizing the witness role the poet is called to. The repeated closure "and the eyes staring out of the water were mine" comes to reinstate and intensify this silent stupor, as if sealing off the witness statement. Armitage's poems also evoke vulnerability in the broader sense of the fragility of the Arctic ecosystems. Indeed, all the *Cryosphere* poems can be read as illustrations of the vulnerability of Arctic

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environments, from the haunting image of the gaunt, lonely polar bear in the eponymous poem (reminiscent of, yet refracting, the established image of the polar bear as icon of climate change discourse, as according to Heise), to the shockingly violent images of "Birds of the Arctic," perhaps one of the most graphic and distressing depictions of the vulnerability of Arctic fauna.

Yet, the *Cryosphere* poems show us that vulnerability does not necessarily translate into weakness. Whilst feelings of over-confidence can be detrimental as they can enhance risk,[11] vulnerability reminds us of our deep interconnectedness with the planet as it can be understood as a state of openness to external influence and to emotion. Seen in this light, vulnerability is a vantage position since the condition of exposure goes hand in hand with increased attentiveness, alertness, receptivity, and openness—hence opportunities for increased awareness. Embracing vulnerability means accepting with equanimity the full gamut of emotions we experience in response to ecological destruction. This is crucial as it is through engagement with these emotions—acknowledging and identifying them, expressing them, stepping back and reflecting upon our (non)response—that we can carve a way out of indifference and towards ecological awareness and motivation for action.

The Transformative Potential of Ecopoetry

I have drawn on Simon Armitage's *Cryosphere* poems to illustrate some of the affective affordances of ecopoetry, that is, strategies through which ecopoetry can engender emotional responses in readers. The strategies discussed above—developing a sense of place; activating the senses through synaesthesia; stimulating emotional connection through individuation; inviting participation in melancholia; and embracing vulnerability—are examples (by no means exhaustive) of affective affordances, meant to create a bond with the world we live in. Affect is nested right at the heart of that bond; it is what engenders and sustains it.

Thanks to its affective charge, ecopoetry offers us an affective language through which we can identify and express a wide spectrum of emotions, ranging from despair and grief for ecological losses, to wonder and awe at the sublime complexity of earthly ecosystems. In this way, ecopoetry can enhance our emotional granularity. But there is more: composing and reading a poem constitutes a practice, a *training* in being (in the) present, paying attention, becoming aware of our embeddedness in the world, feeling with and for it; we learn to tune in with our feelings, and we learn a vocabulary and a grammar to express them through engagement with the ecopoetic text. Engaging in this kind of practice has the potential to reframe the relationship with the world around us (Varutti, "(Re-)Learning to Relate to the Planet").

[11] Climate campaigner and writer George Marshall points out that, paradoxically, one of the obstacles to climate change action are feelings of invulnerability that may give the false impression of being above or beyond risk.

I have aimed to show, in this article, that affective affordances are that which invite and enable the engagement of the reader with the environmental message of the ecopoem. The poem, through its affective affordances, is the portal through which we can learn to *feel* with the poet in an act of emotional joining. Seen in this light, ecopoetry is much more than literary expression; it is a tool of gentle assertion and a source of emotional resilience, it is an act of care and political activism (Gräbner and Wood). As Scottish poet Kathleen Jamie phrased it, ecopoetry is "an act of resistance to the forces of destruction" (xvi).

Upon return from his Arctic journey, Simon Armitage commented: "Words were my only trophies; I returned with a handful of poems. But as a member of a species inflicting such degradation and humiliation on the natural world, my shame and embarrassment were far greater" (Youngs). The poet's "trophies" are his gift to readers: poems that encapsulate the poet's emotions and offer them to readers as tools for self-awareness and transformation.

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