

IRENE GAMMEL AND JOHN WRIGHTON

“Arabesque Grotesque”: Toward a Theory of Dada Ecopoetics

Upon honeysucklefists

Arabesque grotesque

Basks—drumming as it lists

Beetle

—Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, “Arabesque” (124)

Thank God, nature is going to die. Yes, the great Pan is
dead.

—Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature* (25)

Introduction: Ecopoetics and Dada

Imagine this unique ecosystem in New York, 1918: in a cold-water tenement on Fourteenth Street near the Hudson River, the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (1874–1927), a German émigré Dada poet, cultivated an intensely close relationship with animals—living with several dogs and other assorted animals, refusing even to kill rats, insisting instead on feeding them.¹ The menagerie was housed among her art objects, mostly *objets trouvés* collected from the streets of New York, relocated and repurposed within the apartment. The room was “crowded and reeking with the strange relics which she had

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purloined over a period of years from the New York gutters," as the painter George Biddle recalls. "Old bits of ironware, automobile tires, gilded vegetables, a dozen starved dogs, celluloid paintings, ash cans, every conceivable horror, which to her tortured, yet highly sensitized perception, became objects of formal beauty" (140). A 1915 photograph of Baroness Elsa in her Greenwich Village studio shows a birdcage with her canary hanging from the ceiling (rpt. in Freytag-Loringhoven, *Body Sweats* 95, pl. 2.10), just as Duchamp hung his snow shovel from the ceiling as a readymade. As an originary "posthuman," a concept that has emerged contemporaneous with the postmodern and phenomenological revisions to subjectivity, Baroness Elsa blends organic, artful, and technological materials to produce a new aesthetic and gendered sensibility, one that challenges the mechanomorphic machine images dominating New York Dada. Anticipating postmodern concerns, as Alex Goody writes, "Baroness Elsa's poetry parodies the omnipotence of an American technological teleology, [and] considers how the consumer products of a modern America confuse and blur the integrity of the human form" (116). Thus, she translated her "house" into a functional Dada-ecosystem, and lived according to ecological principles that she would also deploy throughout her poetry. Radically reconfiguring and expanding the notions of "nature" poetry and the lyrical subject, the Baroness's poetry presents a prescient anticipation of postmodern ecopoetics.

In an opening statement for the 2001 inaugural issue of *Ecopoetics*, Jonathan Skinner describes ecopoetics as a combination of "eco," "the house we share with several million other species," and poetics, "as *poiesis* or making" (7). Yet the move toward a politics and aesthetics of ecopoetics is contested.² For Jonathan Bate, in *The Song of the Earth* (2002), the *oikos* created by the poem is "the place of dwelling" (75), and the qualities of poetic language are attuned ecologically such that the "metre itself—a quiet but persistent music, a recurring cycle, a heartbeat—is an answering to nature's own rhythms, an echoing of the song of the earth itself" (76). The poem as house-making in this tradition means re-accommodating the lyric "I" within its natural habitat; poetry becomes an experience wherein the subject is rehabilitated in the natural order of things and beings. Much is at stake in the development of an ecopoetics which is read with pressing urgency as a response to the contemporary environmental crisis.³

At the same time, many ecocritics have abandoned a notion of nature that hinges on a bifurcation of nature and culture (Bryson; Costello; Latour; Morton; Wrighton). The posthuman in ecology has been the focus of recent studies including a collection of essays edited by Stephanie LeMenager and her colleagues, *Environmental Criticism*

for the *Twenty-First Century* (2011), a collection dedicated to exploring, as the editors explain, “history as an ecological as well as human drama [to] uncover the complex relationships between nonhuman systems, foundational ideas of nature, and historical literary practice” (1). As Lawrence Buell notes in its foreword, the collection recognizes “the always-already fusion of human with [the] nonhuman in *nature-culture* (Bruno Latour’s term)” (xiv). Surveying the evolution of post-human thinking and its relevance to ecology, Louise Westling identifies the cyborg posthumanism of N. Katharine Hayles and Donna Haraway, and the posthumanism that dismantles the boundaries between the human and animal proposed by Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari. Moreover, Westling reads the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as “prepar[ing] the way for an ecological sense of human immersion” (34), while Jed Rasula, in his book *This Compost: Ecopoetical Imperatives in American Poetry*, explains: “The post-human—the posthumous Homo Sapien—passes from cosmos to chaos. But chaos has always been with us, intrinsic to cosmos if not to cosmology (words about the world)” (43).

The Baroness’s Dada, born in the World War I (WWI) era, produced a presciently posthuman aesthetic that has remained remarkably unexplored in its environmental and ecological dimensions.⁴ As a rebel art that emerged in the wake of the mass destruction and ecological carnage brought about by the Great War of 1914–18, Dada anticipated the posthuman and postmodern reconceptualizing of the nature/culture relationship by radically deromanticizing it in prose poetry, lyric poetry, visual poetry, sound poetry, poetic manifestoes, and also in poetic collages and assemblages (Ball; Richter). “Nature is neither beautiful nor ugly, neither good nor bad. It is fantastic, monstrous, and infinitely unrestrained,” as Zurich Dadaist Hugo Ball provocatively asserts in a diary entry of November 1915. “Being in harmony with nature is the same as being in harmony with madness” (46). As an antibourgeois protest against the madness of the era, Dada practice engaged with nature in new hybrid forms, even though, as Jennifer Mundy remarks, “Biomorphism is a term that sits uneasily in the lexicon of modern art movements” (60). Far from advocating romanticized biophilic philosophies and aesthetics, Dadaists with an organic focus in poetry and art, such as Hans (Jean) Arp (1887–1966) (*I am born in nature: Poems*), Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948) (*Merzbau*, begun 1923), and Sophie Taeuber (1889–1943) (*Dada Head*, sculpture, 1920; New York, MoMA), for example, championed anti-Romantic and anti-pastoral concepts of nature that ask for a redefinition of nature itself.

Whereas Dada ecopoetics cannot be consigned to a single artist, and explorations of organic forms are diverse among practitioners of

Dada, none was as organically innovative or immersive as Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, known simply as “the Baroness,” whose legendary self-displays in glorious nudity and costumes of her own making contributed to her status as “the first American Dada” (Heap 46). Writing against a pastoral figuration of poetic naturalism, the Baroness centers on a base naturalism of the body, replete with all the unsavoury squelches and stench ignored by a more pristine, idealized nature. The Baroness’s poetics shift the focus from a vision of nature totally defunct by WWI onto a new vitality of the body, a desacralized biosphere onto which the anxieties of modern (and postmodern) subjects could be mapped. Insofar as the experience of early-twentieth-century modernity was one subtended by a greater reliance on the machines and technologies that structured urban life, the Baroness’s poetry reinvigorates the integration of nature and art in her radical proclamations of the body as site and source of artistic production, informed by, responding to, and incorporating the congestion of filth, noise, detritus, and refuse that corresponded to modern urban life and its emergent technologies in the first decades of the twentieth century. Thus the city (as the seat of culture, often glossed as the hermeneutic antithesis of nature) posed a radical affront to traditional concepts of “nature” (represented by the pastoral) and the “organic,” all of which permeate the Baroness’s posthuman aesthetic. Just as the Baroness forces the body into her poetics, so too does she accommodate the congested metropolis into her ecology. Through dismantling boundaries of the urban and rural, the animate and inanimate, the organic and technological, the Baroness projects a new kind of “nature” into the city space.

With the Baroness’s body poetics as a guide, and with reference to other Dadaists, this study advances a theory of Dada ecopoetics, exploring a number of crucial themes such as a radical dismantling of nature/city boundaries; a desublimated trash aesthetic; a multisensorial immersive perspective; an antipastoral aesthetic; and ultimately, a radical ecopoetic liminality. While modernism and its avant-garde are often excluded from studies of environmental or ecological concerns (Botar and Wünsche 2),⁵ associated mostly with modern technologies, urban life, and expanding media, this essay in contrast proposes that the arc that culminates in postmodern ecopoetics extends backwards to WWI-era Dada ecology. From a gendered perspective, the Baroness’s lyric oeuvre in Dada simultaneously challenges the dominating machine focus of male Dadaists (exemplified in mechanomorphic machine drawings [Zabel]) and the vitalist *Lebensphilosophien* of the fin de siècle,⁶ giving both a radical Dada twist of her own. Opening a new field at the intersection of poetry, ecology, and Dada,

this essay explores a poetics of porous boundaries within a progressive and transgressive aesthetic, ultimately contributing to reconfiguring modernism's avant-garde and its relationship to the environment.

"City Stir": Urban Ecology and Embodied Poetics

In the introduction to their collection of essays *Transcultural Spaces: Challenges in Urbanity, Ecology, and the Environment in the New Millennium* (2010), Stefan L. Brandt and his colleagues assert that "modern cities represent transcultural spaces in which the confrontations of urbanity, ecology, and the environment emerge most visibly" (x). In this book, Lawrence Buell calls for an understanding of the city as both biological and cultural entity, drawing attention to the "dependence of urban thought and experience *vis-à-vis* ecological matters upon embedded, often unacknowledged, tropes that function not only as conduits for verbal expressions but also often constitute the conceptual structures in terms of which environmental strategies get thought through" ("Nature and City" 18). The tropes structuring the conception of the metropolis in ecological discourse include the "city/nature as binary; city as holistic macro-organism; city as fragmentary assemblage; as palimpsest; as network; and as apocalypse" (Brandt et al., "Introduction" xi). Hoping to construct a viable urban ecology, the collection introduces the concept of a "transcultural interzone" to describe the space between urbanity and "pristine nature" (xii).

Likewise confronting the triad of "urbanity, ecology, and the environment," the Baroness's eco-poetics performs a radical dismantling of the nature/city binary to create such a "transcultural interzone" in poetry. Just as the Baroness brings New York City's urban landscape into her own ecosystem in the production of her lyrics, so she brings her unconventional body into the body-congested city, breaking the boundaries of nature and cityscapes. Thus, her poem "Tryst" counters the idealized Hudson River School tradition of Romantic landscape painting, which is traditionally positioned outside of, or in opposition to, the city, with a deromanticized vision of the Hudson as a profoundly embodied, sluggish "Bloodshot— / Beetling— / Snorting— / River—" (104–05).⁷ Far from an idyllic vacation resort, the Hudson River is an "Icefanged," "Glowing," and "Hoary" beast, a new hybrid creature whose "Groggy / . . . / Quest" is a "Tryst" with the "Ocean" (104, 105). The poem's original manuscript registers the indelible influence of place. The poem is written in her very distinct hand, evocative of German poet Stefan George's aesthetic typology, on Hotel Hudson letterhead, underneath the address, "102 West 44th Street,

New York, bet. Broadway and Sixth.” The caption “IN THE HEART OF NEW YORK” stages the metropolis through the poem’s paratext, a rhetorical gesture that performs a dismantling of the nature/city dualism (rpt. in Freytag-Loringhoven, *Body Sweats* 106, pl. 3.2). The influence of place, read through the Baroness’s urban ecology, demonstrates a profoundly interesting comparison to Hans Arp’s biomorphic sculptures, produced nearly a decade later. The Baroness’s city ecology and Arp’s rural artistry evoke alternate, but sympathetic, senses of the “transcultural interzone” noted above. Whereas the Baroness’s New York City is recast as a radically new artistic ecology, Arp’s plaster (later cast in bronze) *Sculpture to Be Lost in the Forest* (1932, 1958; Tate), for instance, sublimates human artistic energies into a form that visually passes as natural, rather than produced, dissolving the boundary between nature and culture in a different direction.

Also offering an embodied transcultural interzone, the Baroness’s 1920 city poem “Appalling Heart” puts on display her vibrant, multi-sensorial ecology. “Appalling Heart” disrupts conventional paradigms of the city by articulating instead a space of bodily and perceptual immersion. Refusing to take advantage of the urban sublime afforded by the new vertiginous skyscrapers, or the speed of the city, as the more masculine, machine-oriented Dada does (Zabel 24–25), the poem relies instead on the ear as the site of perception and corporeal immersion, thereby also eschewing the dominance of the eye as the more distancing and traditionally Romantic organ of aesthetic perception and sublime encounters. With the night sounds of the city penetrating the speaker’s ear and consciousness in the first line (“City stir—wind on eardrum—” [103]), as though through a trumpet-like amplifier, the poem turns the entire cityscape into a vibrational field of “dancewind . . . / rustling— / tripping—swishing—frolicking” (103–04). Resonating these sounds, the speaker’s body swings in unison with the city while transferring that swing to the reader.

On one level, the Baroness’s poetic ecology can be said to create an “organic sublime,” defined by Paul Outka as the individual’s recognition of the “radical equivalence between self, body and environment” (31). For Outka, “the ‘organic sublime’” occurs “when an individual experience[s] . . .] an often profoundly disconcerting awareness of the radical material identity between his or her embodied self and the natural world” (31).⁸ In “Appalling Heart,” this connectedness between “the embodied self and the natural world” is strategically projected into the city, a space traditionally defined as the quintessential modernist space of alienation, inhabited by atomized and isolated city dwellers. By thoroughly dismantling the conventional binaries of lyrical nature poetry, the Baroness proclaims a new kind of nature that

is purposefully located at the heart of the city. She reclaims the organic sublime as a city phenomenon, establishing an experiential connection between subject and object, yet without idealizing the metropolis as a holistic mega-organism.

In "Appalling Heart," the immersive experience involves the body's senses. In the rhythmically vibrating space of sensorial interconnectedness, underscored by the internal rhyming of "limbs—lips," "Appalling Heart" offers an almost Bateian evocation of nature's rhythms in language, except for the fact that these embodied rhythms are experienced ostensibly not in a "natural" landscape but in the "city stir" of the metropolis. Adding to the sonic rhythms of the big city is the Hudson, depicted as a "tinfoil river," an image that calls up the early-twentieth-century sonic technologies, when phonograph cylinders were wrapped in a tin foil on which the song was engraved. In this simultaneously urban, organic, technological, and sonic space, boundaries are porous and traditional binaries disappear. The "moon—riding!" becomes the poetic speaker's sororal double: "in space blue—rides she away from mine chest— / illumined strangely— / appalling sister!" (104). In this nightly dance of connection and disconnection, the poem also performs a linking of the subject with the city-body in and through its compound words which, in turn, are conjoined through dashes: "Herbstained—flowerstained— / shellscented—seafaring— / . . . /rides heart from chest— / lashing with beauty" (104). After her exalted night flight, the final, off-set line "Bless mine feet!" (104) literally and figuratively grounds the speaker through her lower bodily limbs. Her unpoetic "feet," the lowly organs of locomotion, connect her with the city as an urban wanderer, a flâneuse whose perceptions and identity are shaped by her nocturnal walks through the metropolis, her sensorial experiences linking her with the horizontal and vertical planes of the urban universe.

As a poesis, "Appalling Heart" is a radically experimental space of home-making which reconfigures dwelling within the writing of the metropolis as a transcultural interzone, or what Stacy Alaimo terms a zone of "trans-corporality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" (2). The notion of "trans-corporality" appropriately evokes a mobile space across various bodies and sites. Like the Hudson River in "Tryst," so the city in "Appalling Heart" is embodied, its lively "limbs" described as "swishing," vocabulary that also depicts the Baroness herself on her daily promenades through the metropolis equipped with her *Limbswish* sculpture (the title a pun on "limbs wish" and "limb swish"). Made of a certain tassel and a large spiral, and worn attached to her belt (Jones 198), the *Limbswish* body sculpture functions as a "technogenesis" (the

idea that “humans have co-evolved with tools” [Hayles 265]), or as a “prosthesis” (Goody 116) that extends beyond the body itself. The Baroness’s eco-poetics thereby projects her own body into the city, and conversely, the city into nature, practicing a radical breaking of the boundaries of poetry, art, and city life. Likewise, by wearing a costume of gilded vegetables, such as carrots or beetroots, alongside technological objects, such as a blinking battery taillight on the bustle of her dress (Gammel 190–91, 196), she does more than conjure up the city as a fragmentary assemblage: she gestures toward a corporeal integration of fragments and oppositions, fusing the technological with the organic body.

“Earthrubbish”: Litter Poetics as Sustainable Ecology

The Baroness performs a similar assault on the nature/culture binary through a radical eco-poetics of recycling, as her work is consistently made from reclaimed rubbish, reabsorbing and recycling linguistic, organic, animate, and technological litter and waste into her art and poetry. In her postmodern apotheosis of rubbish, Patricia Yaeger writes: “We are born into a detritus-strewn world, and the nature that buffets us is never culture’s opposite” (323). Likewise, Marcella Durand, in her article “The Ecology of Poetry,” combines environmentalist and poetic discourses to further conceptualize “poetry as ecosystem itself” (60), “recycling” and reinscribing cultural detritus onto poetic and aesthetic discourse. Ecocritics advocate an activism that also intersects with the larger social project of Dada, a movement Dadaist Hans Richter describes as a protest against the era’s ecological waste of life and mass destruction caused by the world’s first industrial war (Richter 25, 65). The Baroness would systematically scour the streets, recycling the city’s refuse for her poetry and visual art, so that her litter poetics advance a sustainable ecology that communicates an awareness of the value of waste when recycled and repurposed.

As a devotee of rubbish, the Baroness was not alone in her pioneering art practice. Hanover Dadaist Kurt Schwitters also famously collected refuse and waste as raw material for art as an expression of a pioneering Dada ecology. Thus, Roger Cardinal describes Schwitters as “an unrepentant scavenger, . . . who would return from his excursions with pockets and bags crammed with paper litter and other varieties of refuse” (73). Responding to the devastation, both environmental and psychological, of WWI, artists across Europe were compelled to re-think human inter-relationship with the physical environment. Schwitters found materials in the streets, in cafés, in

shops, in cellars, which he would use to create his collages and sculptural assemblages, including his monumental antimonument *Merzbau* and abstract collages, or *Merzbilder*. His method was to strip each found item of its *Eigengift*; by introducing fragments of rubbish, the material was entered into a new aesthetic unit without, however, sublimating the trash into pure art (Cardinal 82).⁹ In the *Merzbilder* collages, a radical rubbish aesthetic brought fragments—political, quotidian, and mass-produced—as part of the material texture of the canvas, deploying practices similar to the Baroness's scavenging of found words and materials. Likewise, Sophie Taeuber created wooden Dada heads, and tapestries in which organic shapes morph from the human to animal, whilst Hans Arp shifted from a purely surrealist interpretation, renewing the spatial relation between aesthetic form in the organic morphology of his stone and plaster sculptures, simply titled *Human Concretion* (1935; New York, MoMA).

Undergirding the Baroness's ecopoetics is a provocative but purposeful scatology that radically challenges the purified rationalism of modernism, using tropes employed by fellow Dadaists to expose interiors and challenge exteriors, and to problematize the boundaries of traditional aesthetic materials. Her work displays a strategic focus on the lower bodily parts (especially digestive organs—the stomach, colon, and bowels) as poetic subjects equal to the mind, the traditionally elevated seat of consciousness, cognition, and rationality. This ecology is evident in *God* (1917; rpt. in Dickerman 344, pl. 313), a controversial collaborative assemblage sculpture consisting of a bathroom plumbing trap used to flush grey water. Baroness Elsa found and dismantled the defunct drainage trap in a decrepit house in Philadelphia and bestowed to it its sacrilegious title and conceptual meaning, whilst Philadelphia painter Morton Livingston Schamberg mounted the sculpture upside down on a miter box and varnished it with silver machine paint (Taylor 288–89). Art critic Michael Kimmelman has read a spelling of the lower-case letters g-o-d in the curlicue twist of the lead pipes, which suggests that the Baroness has turned the sculpture into poetic text. Visually mimicking the dense swirls of bowels in a profound gesture of Dada embodiment, the artwork's brass and lead machinery fuses modern technology with biology, spirituality, and poetry. Assaulting boundaries of acceptability, the technological waste product turned *God* is metallic and sleek yet grotesque, confronting the viewer with the “shock” of Dada, what Walter Benjamin has described as Dada's “ballistic” effect that “touches” (304) viewers' emotions in ways that resonate in the postreading experience often long after the original art encounter.

In considering the Baroness's litter poetics, we are also reminded of Dadaist Hans Richter's argument in *Dada Art and Anti-Art* that in order "to cure the madness of the age" (31) a new kind of poetry was required, one that "springs directly from the poet's bowels or other organs, which have stored up reserves of usable material" (30). The baser naturalism of the body, frowned upon by traditional lyric poetry, was integral to the Dada vision. Thus, the Baroness takes pleasure in spoofing the western dominance of the Cartesian mind-body split. "If I can write—talk—about dinner—pleasure of my palate—as artist," as she asserts in her prose poem "The Modest Woman" (first published in *The Little Review* in 1920), "[I] can afford also to mention my ecstasies in toilet room!" (286). She queries further: "Why should I—proud engineer—be ashamed of my machinery—part of it?" (286). Likewise, in her poem "Lofty Logic," she outrageously instructs her reader to develop "Affection toward thine excrements" (169) in an effort to become "acquainted / With thineself" (169), lampooning the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*. Recycling entropic energies, these poetic ecologies gesture toward the Baroness's conception of a trash aesthetic that firmly anticipates postmodern eco-poetics in which "an old opposition between nature and culture has been displaced . . . by a preoccupation with trash," as Yeager explains in reference to the postmodern art scene (323).

Within the ecology of recycling and sustainability, language itself is a cultural litter to be recycled and renewed, while culture as a rich compost for poetry is subject to the ecological laws of decomposition and recomposition. In *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Eco-poets* (1999), Leonard Scigaj argues that "[f]or eco-poets language is an instrument that the poet continually refurbishes to articulate his originary experience in nature" (29). Thus, eco-poetry refers us "in an epiphanic moment to our interdependency and relatedness to the richer planet whose operations created and sustains us" (42). The Baroness presents such poetics of sustainability with a distinct Dada twist that alerts us at every turn of the critical limits of anthropocentrism. In the Baroness's poem "Fix," for example, the speaker's self extends into the universe in a seemingly Whitmanesque gesture, conjuring up a world in which each atom, and each self, is integrated within a larger whole, exemplified by the language of the cosmos: "Single cosmic miracle— / Unreasonable sensuous omnisciences / Balancing universe. . . . / Manifest within / Myself — — —" ("Fix" 156, 157). Yet far from proclaiming a pantheistic transcendence of an ever expansive lyrical "I," such a "cosmic miracle" is undercut by the poem's ironic polyvocality, to which the reader is alerted even by the poem's pointed title: "Fix." Looping back to the title, the poem ends with satiric profanity and an

open-ended rhetorical question that signals her biting skepticism about the messy human predicament: "I / Say: / 'Suck— / Fuck— / Chuck— / Lorr! / What / For?'" (157). Ultimately, the centrality of the "I" is queried, along with anthropocentric, cosmic "centrisms" of all kinds.

A sustainable ecology based on a recycling of cultural and literary "litter" is at work in "Orchard Farming," a poem that also presents a Dada antipastoral of sorts, recycling the sedimentation of a centuries-old tradition of pastorals. The poem's title associatively recalls images of the treed garden or German *Streuobstwiesen* (meadow orchards) that hark back to the Garden of Eden (Ecclesiastes 2.5, "I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all *kind of* fruits"), and to the Greek and Roman pastoral tradition of nature writing including Theocritus's *Bucolic* and Virgil's *Eclogues*.¹⁰ "Orchard Farming" evokes agricultural production as well as the production of poetical nature traditions, yet its satiric tone is far removed from Bate's poetic and pastoral dwelling place in nature. Ostensibly, the poem is set up as a didactic "Lesson" to "Youth snobs," who are instructed in the inexorable law of aging and decay: "Each / Age / Has / Countenance / Gesture / Expression / *Face*."// That / Droops / With / Wilted / Bloom" (127). The poem continues: "Is: / Springshell / Ghosttree / Earthrubbish" (127). The oxymoronic compound "Springshell" speaks to the deterministic inevitability of spring and youth as always already marked by the shadow of death, carrying within them the seed for becoming "Earthrubbish," refuse, waste, trash, and litter. Within this hybrid interdependence of the fruits of labor—meaning both human intellectual creativity and nature's procreation—can be located the ethics of the posthuman: "To / Seed / Shall / Be / Cast / It's Dung / Space / Burning" (127–28).

"Orchard Farming" recycles kinetic energy from the sedimentation of shared cultural meanings to reveal in the natural ("Dappled / Dimpled") a complex interdependence with the industrial ("Sulphur / Brick") (128), a posthuman resource as capital.¹¹ As the ethical philosopher Emmanuel Levinas writes, "A thing exists in the midst of its wastes"; an observation which, Morton suggests, is "profoundly ecological" (qtd. in *Ecological* 51). By the end, "Orchard Farming," like "Fix," suggests a satiric vision, with a creator "Boss" ingesting his creation: "Mongst / Pridebeaming/ . . . / Gossiping / Greenery // Rife / With / Lore // Frisks / Boss / Munching // Creation" (130). Roaming within the layered "lore" of nature, the frisky "Boss" enjoys the lushness of the "Greenery," chewing up ("Munching") and ruminating on the fodder of millennia-old creation myths, legends, and pastoral poetry. The visual layout with stanzas arranged horizontally and vertically across the full page pictures the capricious and unstable back and

forth of the “Boss” overseeing and ingesting his “Creation” in a never-ending cycle of decomposition, sedimentation, and new creation.

“Arabesque Grotesque”: Dada Ecopoesis and Multisensorial Nature

In his provocatively titled book *Ecology without Nature* (2007), Timothy Morton warns of the obsession with reifying “Nature” in literature, or nonfiction writing, to evoke an “authentic” experience (33). Instead, he gestures toward an anti-Cartesian philosophy that links the perceiver with the perceived. He writes: “Environmental art makes us aware of our ears, just as much as it makes us aware of the atmosphere. But in so doing, it nudges us out of the vulgar Cartesianism, like phenomenological philosophy” (44). Also carefully transcending notions of “authentic” nature, Timothy Chandler turns to ecophenomenology, particularly in the work of German aesthetic philosopher Gernot Böhme. “Aesthetics,” Chandler writes, “is not a form of alienation from nature, not a stance for distanced appreciation, but an engagement of perception as the interaction that binds the world together” (556). This transformative apperception is central to the dada ecological methodologies discussed throughout this essay, from Arp’s organicist approach to art, making growth and metamorphosis the theme of his biomorphic Dada,¹² to the Baroness’s ecopoesis. Arp’s commitment to Dada ecology is suggested by the names applied to sculptures or to collections of poetry such as *Die Wolkenpumpe* (cloud pump), indicating fluid boundaries between art and *techne*. Chandler’s words resonate with the earlier integrationist discussion of “Appalling Heart,” as well as with the Baroness’s lyrical nature poems, in which, as Chandler identifies in Böhme’s philosophy, “language is a spatial and a bodily art form and is hence atmospheric” (561).

To address the multisensorial dimensions of the Baroness’s Dada ecopoesis, through which perceiver and perceived are linked, consider her poem “Arabesque,” whose title announces the theme of nature as visual art. Conjuring up the ornamental in both spheres, the word “arabesque” denotes the seemingly unceasing patterns of natural foliages found, for example, in the colorful ornaments of Islamic Mosques and European decorative arts, revealing the biocentric and Neo-Romantic influences of the *fin de siècle*. The central use of the arabesque gestures furthermore to the Baroness’s indebtedness to the philosophical writings of the German Romantic critic Friedrich Schlegel. Building on the allegorical extensions of an ornamental semantics of the arabesque from Philipp Otto Runge, and especially J. W. von Goethe’s 1789 essay “Von Arabesken,” Schlegel, as John

Daverio has explained, “intended the arabesque as a specific genre of ‘modern’ literature” (154). In arabesque, floral patterns are repeated ad infinitum, stems emanating from the tips of leaves in the manner of honeysuckle vines that twine without end. The arabesque in the tradition of German Romanticism introduces the relation of form and matter as a philosophical counterpart to aesthetic considerations which would become a central concern for modernist art practices. Daverio explains Schlegel’s reinvention of the arabesque: “In a limited sense, the arabesque refers to humorous, witty, or sentimental digressions that intentionally disturb the chronological flow of a narrative” (151). By interposing the natural universe onto the narrative plane of the verse, the Baroness draws attention to the work’s own artifice and artful drama: “Blue sweeps higher lapping lake / Crimson drops cardinal / Blossom fire—blossom flake” (124). Like the colorful arabesque ornament of Art Nouveau, which tends to engulf its object in a never-ending curvilinear rhythm,¹³ so nature is depicted in “Arabesque” as a continuous movement (“sweeps higher”). The rising action of the poem is congruent with Daverio’s description of Schlegel’s arabesque, which, “as a total form . . . tempers a seemingly chaotic diversity through a deliberately concealed logical process” (151). With the fluid rhythm mirrored in the liquid / l / ’s (“Blue . . . lapping lake”) of the first stanza, a picture is drawn of a blue horizon extending the limits of the lake, which is punctuated by the reflective whiplash of a crimson red sun that doubles as the cardinal flower. *Lobelia cardinalis* prefer wet ecosystems and hence grow near water; the flower’s dramatic “blossom fire—blossom flake” creates a reflection (a “flake” denoting a horizontal platform erected in water) in the “lake.” Despite the restless movement of the scene, there is a balance and stillness that befits the “arabesque” as a work of visual art. Indeed, Schlegel’s “witzige Konstruktion” (witty construction) involves “motivic links” which, as Daverio suggests, are “unfolded as part of an ongoing organic process” (159).

The second stanza, cited in this essay’s first epigraph, complicates the poem’s ecology by immersing the reader in a multisensorial ecosystem with the honeysuckle (sweet scented) and beetle (drumming and vibrating), introducing new sensory experiences: olfactory, sonic, and haptic. One type of arabesque is actually named honeysuckle, upon which the Baroness’s imagery plays with a subversive Dada twist: “Upon honeysucklefists / Arabesque grotesque / Basks—drumming as it lists / Beetle” (124). On one level, the poem appears to confirm a biocentric vision by suggesting a biologist interpretation. Some beetles communicate by drumming, “tapping their foreheads (frons) on the substrate,” whereby the male beetle “moves a short

distance, taps once or twice, and turns repeatedly in response to a dueting female" (Hill 162).

Yet the poem's spatial form (what Gernot calls "Der Raum des Gedichts" [Chandler 561]) suggests something else. The "Beetle," who is not named until the poem's final line, announces itself sensorially, "drumming as it lists," yet prevented from sucking the nectar from tightened "honeysucklefists." This startling compound announces itself as an aesthetic manipulation and calls to mind Marie de France's lai "Honeysuckle," wherein she describes the love relationship between Tristan and Iseut as "like the honeysuckle vine, / Which around a hazel tree will twine, / Holding the trunk as in a fist" (61–72). Yet while Marie de France's simile captures the physical intensity of love, here the "honeysucklefists" point to rupture, the "fist" itself an incongruous Dada image in juxtaposition with the flower. The ironic perspective disrupts a holistic view of nature and subverts any biomorphic unity, dismantling notions of nature's teleology and gesturing instead toward nature as a performative and aesthetic space.¹⁴

Transcending traditional dichotomies of nature and culture, the poem's language "conjures up" (*beschwört*, in Böhme's words; qtd. in Chandler 560) a specifically Dada atmosphere that purposefully stages a communicative play as disrupted and disconnected,¹⁵ thereby also extending the poem's space into an "arabesque grotesque." The word "grotesque" is derived via the Latin *crypta*, meaning hollow, and from the Italian *grotta*, meaning cave. Through the accidental discovery of the Domus Aurea (mistakenly categorized as a natural grotto), the word became associated with curvilinear decorative art. Thus, "grotesque" was originally used as a synonym for "arabesque," so that "arabesque grotesque" signals something of an aesthetic overload. But the "grotesque" also signals the monstrous and bizarre, exemplified by Edgar Allan Poe's *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840). Such deliberate reveling in hybridity—ornamental/bizarre, attractive/repulsive, teleological/purposeless—is evocative of the Baroness herself as a figure of Dada simultaneously seductive and grotesque (Goody 155). More generally, the "arabesque grotesque" formula gestures toward a kind of interpenetration of subject and object (perceiver and environment). The perspective solicited is immersive, and the poem "atmospheric" in Böhme's sense, as "a product of [its] own materiality and of the conjuring up of a second ghostly atmosphere through signification," as articulated by Chandler (561).

"In the Midst—": Ecopoesis as Radical Liminality

According to Morton, the guiding motto of ecocriticism is "not [to be] afraid of nonidentity" (*Ecology* 13). "This encounter with

nonidentity, when considered fully, has profound implications for ecological thinking, ethics, and art" (14). Ecological thinking involves human entanglement with nonhumans in the "mesh," as Morton explains in his 2010 book *Ecological Thought*: "It is a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite center or edge. It is a radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings, sentient and otherwise" (8). If "ecology is about radical coexistence" (*Ecological* 10), as Morton insists, then Dada aesthetic embraces such liminality with a distinctive vengeance, and the crossing of boundaries of all kinds is perhaps the most demarcating feature of its eco-poetics. In trying to articulate a new order that would counteract the madness of the era to "restore balance between heaven and hell," as Richter formulated the Dada goals (25), the Baroness's Dada ecology corresponds to Morton's "dark ecology," which includes "negativity and irony, ugliness and horror" (*Ecological* 17). As Morton reminds us, "Irony involves distancing and displacement, a moving from place to place, or even from homey place into lonely place" (*Ecology* 98).

The Baroness's unexplored and only recently published poem "In the Midst—," in which several eco-poetic themes coalesce, conjures up ecology as inevitably tethered to geography, biology, temporality, psychology, and culture. The poem is set on a transoceanic ship, itself a threshold space that becomes an extended metaphor for her entire progressive and transgressive aesthetics of the mesh. Its dramatic and elliptical title, "In the Midst—," alerts the reader to the poem's thematizing of unraveling binaries and dualisms through interconnections: spatially (a meeting place for different geographies), temporally (for different time periods in the speaker's life), and psychologically (for different identities). By grafting together multiple sites (Kentucky woodland, deck of the ship, ocean waves) with their respective geometries (reflective solitude of the woodland, liminal space onboard ship, speed of steam travel), the singular place-making of the poem also performs a space of ecological complexity.

The opening lines of the poem are emotionally detached from the lyric subject, an unnamed subject looking up to the shifting green leaves of the wooded canopy: "If breeze will stop mop / Azure roof with each treetop" (125). Yet the idyllic sensation evoked by "azure roof" is ruptured by *re-emplacing* the poem "On board ship—" (126). The poem's voice moves closer to embodying a speaking subject who asks the shipmate working his mop "To permit— / To vomit— / Into / weather— / Spit— / Into dragon green billows guffawing froth—" (126). As the head plummets downwards in altered perspective to look below into the churning waves of the ocean, the peaceful azure turns green in the mocking billows of "guffawing froth." The fresh

photosynthesis of a rarefied altitude in the leafy canopy becomes the putrid stench of a nauseous vomit, a reminder of Richter's depiction of the Dadaist verse as one that "springs directly from the poet's bowels or other organs" (30). The first stanza concludes: "I— / Ain't loathe to admit: / It may be worth / Existence to nurse / Along with native sheet iron hearth / In cabin in Kentucky" (126). With literally nowhere to go on board the ship (up to six passengers shared a single cabin), and denied the American promise of new freedoms, the Baroness found herself especially hopeless in Kentucky in 1910, the place to which the poem returns in existential crisis.¹⁶

"In the Midst—" describes an environment that is *made* in the poem (it is *poiesis*) through a co-construction of place: a new subjectivity and its altered perceptual apparatus are constructed interdependently with the new technologies of modernity, namely, the advances of steam travel. More than accelerating time and reducing space, the modern steamships created a new liminal stage where the modernist subject was held in suspended animation for the 11-day duration of the voyage. As modernist scholarship has shown (Danius), new technological advances subject the body to new sensorial experiences and crises that are negotiated in modernist literature. Thus, it is appropriate that the title "In the Midst—" should construct a threshold space that announces a crisis.¹⁷ The Baroness's emergent *poiesis* does not fit easily into the mode of a Romantic or pastoral nature poetry where, as Bate suggests, "metre . . . echo[es . . .] the song of the earth itself" (76) to re-orient us in a "revelation of dwelling" (266). Rather, there is a shifting of epistemological foundations in the poem, which textures the home-making as a double emplacing.

In reversing the pastoral lyrical tradition, the rural hamlet of Sparta, Kentucky, is presented as an inferno. Not only is the traditional pastoral of the rural countryside not able to effect a Thoreauvian renewal of the soul, but the rural countryside embodied in the small hamlet that was home to the Baroness when she first arrived in the United States instead performs the subject's entrapment, figuring prominently in her psychological crisis, the suicidal despair ("Should it quell to lie prone to death— —") she feels in the game of her life ("In mess of lifechess") (126). "Sparta" is the *objet trouvé*, the metonym of her wounded unconscious mind collaged into the poem as its *leit-motif*. Pushing against the persistent closing refrain of the repeated place name of "Kentucky," "In the Midst—" ends in a dizzying twirl that is playful Dada, whilst refusing a revolutionary breaking-free from the "Firmament—eternal": "Rounding—surrounding—infernal / All wee me— — — / Gee! / Honest / Nay— / <Shit!> / Cross my navelpit— / It's hell / That-a-way— / Ain't it / In Sparta—Kentucky?"

(126–27). The poem's crosshair focuses on the compound word "navel-pit" — announcing birth, sex, and the appetite as the driving forces of being— whilst alluding to the naval transatlantic passage onboard the ship and the stomach's semantic contents spewed forth overboard the Pul—or Push— "pit" (nautical terms for the waist-high, rigid tubed railings to which a boat's lifelines are mounted along its stern). Baroness Elsa's avant-garde poetics is subversive in its presciently postmodern play. By creating a liminal space within patriarchal hierarchies, she introduces a radical element of instability into the cultural logic that results in an alphabetical vomit.

Conclusion: Toward a Dada Eco-poetics

Ultimately, what is distinctive to the eco-poetics advanced in this essay is the making in language of a place that is not exclusively "nature" but which recognizes that everything, including art, urban life, and modern technology, is part of the environment. Rather than negating social hegemony through resistant bodies (individual, political, or collective), the Dada body performs altogether more radical "emancipatory strategies" called for by postmodern environmental thinking.¹⁸ It is in reading the avant-garde experimentation with language, performance, and identity from the vantage point of a post-modern ecocriticism that this essay finds a radical eco-poetics proleptic of the ethical possibilities of the posthuman, one that is responsive to the demands of postmodern ecocriticism. As David W. Gilcrest concludes: "The environmental poem can thus be found, in theory anyway, at the confluence of the three principal tributaries of Western intellectual inquiry: epistemology, poetics, and ethics" (5).

Eco-poetry is looking for its literary history. In its form, instead of an over-reliance on a Wordsworthian Romantic (and male) tradition, it can look to the Dada expressions as pioneering practice of a radical eco-poetics. Dadaists, including the Baroness, Arp, Schwitters, and Taeuber, worked with the malleable and constructible materials of modernity, whether that be wood, stone, plaster, cardboard, paper, or oil, even salvaging from everyday domestic refuse and corporate waste, intentionally insouciant to the totalizing boundaries between art and the natural environment. For whilst Dadaists like the Baroness take solace in a return to nature and the organic body, they do so subversively; the experimentations with form anticipate the "posthuman," incorporating the new technologies and ironic perspectives of the twentieth century in a complex notion of ecology. In this, the work theorized in this essay provides a positive and novel relation between ecology and the poetic (a thinking through the processes of making),

all the more significant given the ecological concerns about navigating an “endangered world,” to use Buell’s term. As the Baroness formulated her poetics against a backdrop of unprecedented devastation in the WWI and post-WWI eras, for the Baroness and her Dada colleagues, nature and art were inextricably intertwined: in her “strangely” “illuminated” city, she transformed nature into her very own “arabesque grotesque,” ultimately dismantling the boundaries of nature and art toward a Dada eco-poetics.

NOTES

1. This information is based on first-hand accounts provided by George Biddle (140); Djuna Barnes (in Gammel 283); and William Carlos Williams (in Jones 7–8).

2. See Bryson’s *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction* (2002) for a critical survey of the different positions and debates, some of which are introduced below.

3. *Can Poetry Save the Earth?: A Field Guide to Nature Poems*, John Felstiner asks in the title of his 2009 book; *Writing for an Endangered World* is Lawrence Buell’s programmatic 2003 title.

4. Among the recent flourishing of scholarship on New York Dada (e.g. Sawelson-Gorse 62–69; 142–72; 442–75), the studies most pertinent to this essay include Jones’s focus on “[i]mmersive Dada” (200) and Goody’s focus on Dada’s posthuman dimension (93–117); although they do not discuss ecological themes, Jones and Goody lay the foundation for such an exploration.

5. In the introduction to their volume of essays *Biocentrism and Modernism* (2011), the editors Oliver A. I. Botar and Isabel Wünsche note that this exclusion is “unfair,” for “many members of the various Modernist cultural movements were early adherents of the emergent environmental consciousness that permeated *fin de siècle* culture” (2).

6. Botar and Wünsche discuss turn-of-the-century *Lebensphilosophien*, vitalist theories advanced by Henri Bergson, Ludwig Klages, and others.

7. Some of the Baroness’s poems, such as, for example, “Appalling Heart” (discussed below), were published during her lifetime in avant-garde periodicals, such as *The Little Review*, side-by-side with the first serializing of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*; however, the majority of poems have appeared posthumously in *Body Sweats* (2011).

8. The sublime was popularly understood in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to capture the spectator’s experience of awe, fear, terror, or pain in the encounter with nature, conceptualized by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant in contradistinction to the experience of a “beauty” which imitates life.

9. Like the Baroness, Schwitters, in *Merzbau*, also transformed his own house in Hanover into a work of art, an evolving artistic endeavor he began in 1923 and continued over the next years (the house was eventually destroyed in 1943), thereby concretizing a physical interaction of dada eco-poiesis.

10. Generally written in the form of a dialogue (or eclogue), pastoral poetry traditionally celebrates rural country life as bucolic, with herdsmen

performing music and singing in the dusk of the day about their world whilst also creating a cosmology in poetry. See Saunders's book *Bucolic Ecology* (2008).

11. As Murphy suggests, we need "to move beyond the limitations of the distinctions between things-in-themselves and things-for-us where Marxist theory tends to stop" (148). The "corollary concept of us-as-things-for-others," he writes, includes "any material entity, including humans, animals, and biospheres" (148–49).

12. In his biography, *The Art of Jean Arp*, Herbert Read recalls: "Arp had always liked to see his sculpture in a natural setting. Towards the end of his life, in his garden in the Ticino, he carved large slabs of stone into circular shapes like millstones, pierced with his characteristic motives. Arp loved this stone country, where his work merged insensibly into the natural background. There the organic growth of his work came into final fruition" (102). The centrality of the notion of concretion in Arp's aesthetic, as Lyons explains, denotes "something that has grown . . . (through) the natural process of condensation, thickening, growing together" (quoted in Lyons 261).

13. Tschudi-Madsen describes the arabesque in Art Nouveau art: "the ornament may flame, grow, coil, or nestle caressingly round [*sic*] the object. The style, in fact, has a tendency to engulf and transform the object and its material, until this material becomes an obedient mass in the thrall of linear rhythm" (15). The arabesque is also caught in a paradox of moving continuously, yet "striving to subdue movement by means of a well-balanced harmony" (15).

14. See Knickerbocker *Ecopoetics 2* for more on nature as an aesthetic space, an artifice composed in terms of a "sensuous poesis."

15. On failure and dysfunctionality as a central trope of Dada, see Jones, especially the chapter "Dysfunctional Machines/Dysfunctional Subjects," 116–66.

16. See Gammel 148–53 for an account of the Baroness's marriage to Felix Paul Greve, their settlement in the small, barely populated bush country town of Sparta, in the Bluegrass Region of Kentucky State, and the subsequent dissolution of the marriage.

17. In writing about the traumatic breakdown of her marriage with Greve in her memoir (posthumously published as *Baroness Elsa* in 1992), the poet uses strikingly similar words, noting that Greve left her "—in the midst of the county [*sic*] of Kentucky in the small farmcountry" (66; emphasis added). One is also struck by the parallel between the title "In the Midst—" and the opening lines of Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy: Hell*, "Midway this way of life we're bound upon, / I woke to find myself in a dark wood, / Where the right way was wholly lost" (Canto 1: lines 1–3), an allusion further amplified by the poem's explicit referencing of the "infernal" ("In the Midst—" 126) and "hell" (127) toward the end. "In the Midst—" may well be a mid-life poem with multiple converging timelines, sparked by her transatlantic travels in 1923 on the SS *York*, when she returned to Germany at the age of 48.

18. See Murphy, who adapts Patricia Yaeger's feminist concept of "emancipatory strategies" to ecology (148).

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