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“Piping in their honey dreams”: Towards a Creaturely Eco-poetics

When considering the prospects for a coming together of zoopoetics and eco-poetics, and, more broadly, environmental humanities and animal studies, there can be few critters better to think with than bees. Bees abound in contemporary poetry, albeit, as Driscoll would insist, *in absentia*,¹ as marks on a page, legible only within the code of written human language, even if some of those marks, when spoken aloud, might echo the sound of apian movement, opening the purely human text up to a type of “multi-species event” (Moe 8). However rendered, bees have been leaving their honeyed traces in the literary and visual texts of diverse human peoples pretty much ever since some of our ancestors took to inscribing meaningful marks on cave walls, and almost certainly for long before then in the songs and stories of oral cultures, some of which persist into the present (despite the depredations wrought by sundry imperialist regimes).

Within European cultural history, bees have also figured significantly in a major strand of poetic literature: namely, in the pastoral and Georgic traditions. In this essay, I propose a melding of zoopoetics and eco-poetics in the guise of a “creaturely eco-poetics” that I trace back to Romantic neo-Georgic and counter-pastoral, literary innovations that participated in the wider movement of re-conceptualizing and re-imagining human relations with nonhuman others and more-than-human environments that attended the emergence of industrial modernity. In particular, I will be homing in on the verse of the English laboring-class poet, John Clare, whose free-living poet-bees we are invited to witness “piping in their honey dreams” (“Wild Bees” 14) as well as suffering human depredation upon their homes and handiwork.

The art of creaturely eco-poetics, pushing back against the hyper-separation of humans from other animals, entails forms of imaginative “kin-making” and “sympoiesis,” as Donna Haraway puts it, that have gained salience and urgency as the ecocidal impacts of the fossil-fueled industrialization of the Earth continue to drive ever more critters to extinction, as well as creating ever more hazardous conditions for vulnerable human populations (commonly, and unjustly, those who have done least to cause the damage).

¹ Cf. the contribution of Kári Driscoll to this volume.

As I hope to show below, creaturely ecopoetics conjoins zoopoetics and ecopoetics by disclosing continuities and connections among humans and other animals in the making and sustaining, alteration and ruination, of those environments in which our lives are inextricably entangled—ecologically, ethically, and biosemiotically—in multispecies matrices of (rarely untroubled and inevitably risky) co-becoming.

Carol Ann Duffy's collection *The Bees*, her first as British Poet Laureate and winner of the Costa Prize for Poetry in 2011, is one of an increasing number of bee books of various kinds, including non-fiction nature writing (e.g., Goulson), fiction (e.g., Kidd), and verse (e.g., Borodale). One does not have to be an avid environmentalist (although it helps) to know that this arresting efflorescence of textual bees is, in large part, an index of the troubling decline in apian critters beyond the page. Indeed, Duffy tells us as much in the sixth poem in her collection, "Ariel," which reworks one of Shakespeare's most mellifluous couplets to read:

Where the bee sucks,
neonicotinoid insecticides
in a cowslip's bell lie.... (11)

Duffy's trashing of the rhythm, rhyme, and meter of Shakespeare's original lyric ("Where the bee sucks, there suck I, / In a cowslip's bell I lie" [5.1.88-89]) echoes, at the level of poetic form, the depredation of Earth's life-sustaining "discordant harmonies" (Botkin) by those industrial farming practices that are unquestionably contributing to the current crash in honey-bee populations, as well as threatening many wild bee species (along with other insects and the wider ecological networks in which they are key players). This is, without doubt, an explicitly environmental, even ecopolitical poem, which cuts its figure not only against Shakespeare, but also any number of earlier bee poems, including the sequence, implicitly also recalled here, in Sylvia Plath's collection *Ariel*, in which bees are set to work for anthropocentric purposes. But what interests me about Duffy's "Ariel" as an ecopoetic text is the way in which the unadorned naming of a prime suspect in the damage that the poem targets—neonicotinoid insecticides—performs a disruption of the pastoral register of Ariel's famous song: a song that could well be classed as zoopoetic, moreover, and one that recalls a considerably earlier figuration of human-nonhuman relations in the midst of a play, which, more than any other in Shakespeare's oeuvre, problematizes entrepreneurial ambitions to colonize, tame, and exploit more-than-human worlds in his own

day (specifically, in Borlik’s fascinating eco-historicist reading, the watery world of England’s Fens).

Pastoral figurations of more-than-human worlds are commonly charged with being fanciful; and so they might well be, to varying degrees. Yet to level such a charge is effectively to make a category error, to the extent that the counter-factually idyllic nature of the pastoral is, of course, precisely its point. Recalling the foundational work in this genre, Theocritus’ “little pictures” of rural life (“idylls,” Gk. *eidyllion*, diminutive of *eidōs*) mediated an “idea” (*eidein*) of human-nonhuman relations that stood in stark contrast to the socio-ecological contingencies of the cosmopolitan world of Alexandria in the third century BCE, in which the poet was writing. Nonetheless, recalling as they did the singing competitions of herdsmen from his natal homeland of Sicily, these were hardly works of pure imagination (were such a thing even possible). And while there might well have been an element of nostalgia, and potentially ideological compensation, in the sophisticated urban poet’s playful appropriation of rustic oral traditions, nostalgia can also offer a site of resistance to a given *status quo* and its likely trajectory; nostalgia can be oppositional, even radically so (Soper). It is along these lines that Ken Hiltner (taking up, and taking issue with, Paul Alpers’ magisterial *What is Pastoral?*) discerns the socio-critical edge of Renaissance (neo-)pastoral, as Jonathan Bate, and before him, Raymond Williams had done previously for Romantic (counter-)pastoral. Whether this might also be claimed for Theocritus is a question that I will have to leave to ecocritical classicists to debate. What I do find enchanting and important to ecopoetics in the *Idylls*, however, is Theocritus’ acknowledgement of the indebtedness of the pastoral poet’s lyric voice to the prior *poiesis* of bees.

In the *Idylls*, as in much subsequent pastoral literature, bees are invoked as part of the retinue of summer in the meadows: “sure bedstraw there doth thrive / And fine oak-trees and pretty bees all humming at the hive” (1.104; 19). As such, they are recruited to provide a kind of virtual mood music. From an eco-phenomenological perspective, however, this is hardly trivial. “Humming” is of course onomatopoeic, and in this way the written text bears a zoopoetic trace of an other-than-human voice. In conjunction with other metonymies of place and time (the grasses and wildflowers offering “bedstraw,” soft ground on which to lie, under the shady green canopy offered by the “fine oak-trees”), this apian mood music summons the “atmosphere” (in the technical sense of Böhme’s phenomenological “ecological aesthetics”; cf. also Rigby, “Gernot Böhme’s Ecological Aesthetics”) of dreamy, drowsy easefulness arising from a creaturely somatic-affective responsiveness

to particular socio-environmental conditions: noon, in a shady spot in the meadows, on a warm summer's day, when you are released, however briefly, from your labors (or, as in the admittedly idealized case of the Theocritus' imagined rural laborers, when the work itself allows periods of leisure), and in the absence of any overwhelming physical or emotional discomfort.

In the *Idylls*, as in much subsequent pastoral, this *locus amoenus* does nonetheless get wedded to a potential source of considerable suffering, as well as intense pleasure: namely erotic love. Here, too, bees play a part, and an interestingly ambivalent one at that. In the embedded narrative recounted in Idyll 19 (apparently invented by Theocritus), mischievous young Eros gets stung while stealing honey from the hive. When he runs complaining about this to his mother, Aphrodite wryly observes "What? ... 'art not a match for a bee, and thou so little and yet able to make wounds so great?" (19.1; 235) Here, bees are entertainingly construed as resisting their recruitment to the service of human amorousness as instigated by the honey-hungry boy-god, giving him a taste of his own medicine with a painful piercing, the diminutive counterpart of his love-dealing arrows. That Eros is said to have encountered such apian opposition might be related to the widespread assumption that bees did not reproduce sexually, an ethological error that led to their later association with the medieval Christian veneration of the Virgin Mary, and the notion that they alone of all creatures had escaped from the Garden of Eden untainted by the Fall (Preston 76-78).

The classical poet, however, was happily untainted by the Christian hierarchical dualism of Eros and Agape (while heir to a panoply of Greek terms that helpfully differentiated several other types of love). This is evident from the first Idyll, in which Theocritus enlists bees, not for their presumed chastity, but rather in service of the love-sick goatherd Daphnis, prototype for all subsequent pastoral poets. Having pledged himself exclusively to his first love, Daphnis is pining away for love of another, possibly Aphrodite herself, but is graciously fed by bees when incarcerated by a malicious king. The humble goatherd shares this distinction with several Greek deities, including the big boss, Zeus himself, who was fed by bees as an infant after his mother hid him in a cave to protect him from his violent father, Kronos, earning him the sobriquet, *melissaios*, bee-man, from the Greek for honey-bee, *Melissa*. Melissa also became the name of a bee nymph, and in some accounts, it was she who hid the baby god and fed him honey. Pan and Dionysus, key figures in the mythic landscape of pastoral literature, were also fed exclusively by bees as infants, and it was the latter who is said to have taught humans how to keep bees. Dionysus, like the Roman

—it behooves us to recognize, belatedly, that we are all bee-fed, to some degree; and that in the absence of the *poiesis* of the more-than-human world, in which bees are such key singers in the choir, there would be no *poiesis* of merely human words.

Bees are thought to have evolved in tandem with the glorious appearance of flowering plants during the Cretaceous era, possibly as early as 130 million years ago. Sometime over the next 50 million years, some bee species had developed a social lifestyle, with remarkable artisanal proclivities and communicative capacities. There are—still—an estimated 20-25,000 species that are known to science, but only a small number of these are honey bees: the kind in which sweet-toothed humans have understandably been most interested (Goulson 42-51; Preston 7-8). Although the oldest surviving written works concerning beekeeping are Hittite texts from around 1,300 BCE, it seems that bees had already begun to be domesticated—to the extent that they ever have been, which is not entirely—in Egypt from around 4,500 years ago. That this practice was subsequently most avidly taken up in Europe has less to do with any special human bee-taming prowess in those parts, than with propensities of a particular bee species found there: namely, the Western honey bee (*apis mellifera*), who is a gentler critter than many other honey bees, although armed with that infamous sting, which constituted one of many unpleasant surprises for First Nations Australians, previously accustomed only to stingless bees, following the invasion of their country by resource-hungry Europeans and their generally mightily disruptive biotic entourage. For, having proven particularly amenable to cohabiting with humans in artificial hives, *apis mellifera* was thence later transported to all the parts of the world European nations have colonized (Preston 10).

Beekeeping enters European pastoral literature in its more labor-intensive moiety, namely the Georgic, pioneered by Vergil in his famous work of that name from around 29 BCE, but pre-figured in Hesiod's *Work and Days* (c. 700 BCE), a farmer's almanac in which honeybees are recruited to provide an exemplar of cooperative rural labor (with the exception of the drones, which to poet likens to good-for-nothing women and sluggards). In his *Georgics*, Vergil composes an agrarian counterpart to the more "idyllic"—albeit by no means untroubled—world of his earlier *Eclogues* (42-37 BCE), which responded more directly to the Theocratic prototype. Celebrating "husbandry," the *Georgics* endorse a human (and, like Hesiod, specifically male-gendered) dominion, an attitude that became infused with a biblical mandate in later Christianized variants of this pastoral sub-genre (Gifford 20); but the Georgic poet also warns against hubris by insisting that success-

ful farming demands close attention to the peculiarities of weather, water and soil, and the ways of vegetal growth and animal conduct. Nowhere is this acknowledgement of the potentially resistant agencies of the nonhuman more pronounced than in Book 4, which is entirely devoted to the art of bee-keeping. This is shown to entail the orchestration of a kind of pastoral idyll for the free-living bees as a way of luring them to make themselves at home in the artificial hive, which should be sited near “clear springs and moss-green pools” (19), surrounded by their favorite flowering plants growing in a shady nook, with appealing access provided by little bridges of carefully positioned stones and willow-branches strewn across the hurrying brook. In this “ecopoetic” (Rigby “Ecopoetics”) vision of multispecies creation, bee-keeping is conceived as ideally benefitting all concerned, on the premise that if the bees are not happy with their treatment and surroundings, they can and will simply up and leave (a privilege not shared by more thoroughly domesticated livestock).

Following the recovery, recasting, and repurposing of classical pastoral during the Renaissance, the Virgilian dyad of Georgic and bucolic modes gave way during the eighteenth century to a stark divide between the idealizations of Augustan pastoral and the subversive realism of laboring-class “anti-pastoral,” as exemplified by Stephen Duck’s *The Threshers’ Labour* (1730) (Gifford). The genius of Romantic neo- or counter-pastoral verse at its best was that it forged a new synthesis, celebrating the more-than-human life of the countryside—and sometimes even, as in William Wordsworth’s London Bridge sonnet, of the city—in the shadow of industrialization, from a standpoint of resistance to the encroaching objectification, instrumentalization and commodification of the natural world (Rigby, *Topographies* 234-56). The late Romantic poet John Clare carried forward the vision of present pleasure and immanent holiness of Wordsworth’s earlier verse, while introducing a whole new attentiveness to the particularities of the poet’s other-than-human fellow creatures, and the varied perils that they faced. For pioneering ecocritic Jonathan Bate (153-68), Clare’s verse exemplified the art of *eco-poiesis*, understood (with Heidegger) as the verbal “making of the dwelling place,” in that it resembled the bird’s nests that abound in his work: it opens a space, woven of words, within which life can come forth and be nurtured. But is this to put too parental a spin on it? After all, most of the animals that haunt Clare’s extensive zoopoetic oeuvre are not domesticated, and they are commonly framed both as strangers, respecting their other-than-human alterity, and as neighbors, with the full ethical freight that concept carried in a Christian culture (where neighborliness was of course always meant to

be extended to the stranger, but in which that welcome, when practiced at all, had historically been largely confined to other humans). In my reading, then, Clare's ecopoetics is less about nesting, connoting care for your own kith and kin, than about kin-making across the boundaries that separate different kinds: a tricky practice of multispecies world-making beset by friction, fraught with risk.

The bees that leave their traces in the two poems I want to discuss here are identified from the outset as "wild," suggesting that we are in the territory of pastoral idyll rather than agrarian Georgic. Yet, while this might be partially true of the earlier of this contrasting pair, it is definitely not the case with his untitled sonnet from the 1830s, and both are in differing ways hybrid forms. Although only lightly sketched, the apian others of "Wild Bees" (c. 1820s) differ from the generic critters of earlier pastoral in being clearly differentiated into diverse kinds. So attentive is Clare to the particularities of his strange apian neighbors that the entomologist, Jeff Ollerton, has been able to identify most of them with a reasonable degree of zoological confidence as, respectively, the male and female Hairy-footed Flower Bee (*Anthophora plumipes*), the Buff-tailed Bumblebee (*Bombus terrestris*), the Red-shanked Carder Bee (*Bombus ruderarius*), and the Common Carder Bee (*Bombus pascuorum*). This element of close observation is no less ethically significant than it is formally innovative, namely as an index of Clare's perception and presentation of his rural environs as a multispecies *oikos*, rather than as scenery, a mere backdrop for human dramas. This poem nonetheless stays close to earlier pastoral in its recollection of Daphnis' "pipe of honey breath." Here, though, it is the bees themselves that are identified in the opening stanza as "pipers":

These children of the sun which summer brings
As pastoral minstrels in her merry train
Pipe rustic ballads upon busy wings
And glad the cotters' quiet toils again. (1-4)

That the happy hearer of the bees' balladry is not a herdsman but a toiling cottager—a rural laborer, perhaps, as was Clare himself—nonetheless throws us into Georgic terrain, but without any hint of human appropriation of the fruits of apian labor. Instead, what Clare presents is a gift economy, where plants "shed dainty perfumes and give honey food" to the bees, whose piping cheers the cottager. The first-named "white-nosed bees" and their "never absent couzin [sic], black as coal" (7) also avail themselves of unintentional human beneficence by nesting in "mortared walls," and it is there, "in their

holes abed at close of day / They still keep piping in their honey dreams” (14). In equally unintentional return, these and other “sweet poets of the summer fields” greatly delight the speaker as he strolls “along / The narrow path that hay laid meadow yields, / Catching the windings of their wandering song” (20, 22-23). The human poet, taking up the “pastoral” ballad of the bees, responds in kind with his own gift of words in honor of his apian counterparts. Foregrounding his musical kinship with these apian others, Clare implicitly offers his verse as a work of *sympoiesis*, inspired and enabled by the summery symphonies of wild bees, which are in turn inspired and enabled by floral flourishing.

In “Wild Bees,” Clare provides a vision of *symbiosis* that does not demand a return to putative paradise, in which, according to the Christian conceit, for example, in Wordsworth’s “Vernal Ode” (1820), the bee had not yet acquired its sting. Here, as elsewhere, Clare admits conflict and suffering as an inevitable dimension of creaturely existence, remarking the propensity of the “russet commoner who knows the face / Of every blossom that the meadow brings” to startle the “traveller to a qu[i]cker pace / By threat[e]ning round his head in many rings” (32-35). The risky dimension of multi-species world-making might also be discerned in the bees’ very piping: for while this might recall Daphnis, and by extension, the mythic pastoral *locus amoenus* governed by Pan, it could also connote a cause, if not necessarily for panic, then at least for caution, as “piping” is the term used by beekeepers to refer to the noise coming from the hive of social bees busily preparing to swarm. It is as much in such recollections of a shared capacity to inflict and receive harm as in the invocation of more felicitous forms of co-becoming that Clare’s ecopoetics is distinctively “creaturely.”

In the sonnet that begins, “The mower tramples on the wild bees nest” (c. 1832-37), the moment of threat has become predominant, and, as in other animal poems from this period, it is humans who are the primary aggressors. The first line locates us firmly in a Georgic world, but one in which the focus is not on the human craft of working with sundry, sometimes resistant other-than-human actants to make a living from the land, but rather on the price exacted on wildlife by human activities in rural places. This is foregrounded starkly in the opening line: “The mower tramples on the wild bees’ nest.” The damage in this case (as in Robert Burns’ famous “To a Mouse”) is evidently accidental and regretted, for the mower “hears the busy noise and stops the rest.” The rest of the poem, however, focuses on the actions of those who do not share the mower’s consideration for the wellbeing of others, who instead “careless proggle out the mossy ball / And

gather up the honey comb and all.” That this is not just a matter of subsistence, but of an excessive form of consumption, “careless” of consequences, is made clear by the repeated description of not simply honey gathering, but of taking “the honey comb and all” (4, 11). And while the speaker of the earlier poem simply garners pleasure from the “symphonies” piped by those bees who avail themselves of the fruits of human labor by nesting in walls, the schoolboy of the sonnet “knocks his hat agen the wall / And progs a stick in every hole he sees / To steal the honey bag of black nosed bees.” There is also an element of carelessness in the description of the schoolboy who, in gathering a wild harvest of dewberries, comes across poison berries (of the *Solanum dulcamara*, or nightshade plant), which he “lays on the hedge,” risking their consumption by other children or animals. At the same time, the reference to poisonous berries resonates with the threat of the bees’ defensive sting, which is alluded to in the following lines, describing the schoolboy driving the bees out of the hay with his stick, while the maiden who “goes to turn the hay ... whips her apron and runs away.” Here, human violence towards other species is implicitly allied with male sexual aggression towards females: There might be an echo of the Theocratic analogy between the bees’ sting and Eros’ arrows, both in turn carrying phallic connotations; but there is a darker strain here that undercuts the pleasurable promise of libidinous dalliance amidst the hay so familiar from earlier pastoral.

While the forms of (inter-and intra-specific) friction and injury alluded to here might be described as run-of-the-mill dimensions of rural life, which Clare also targeted in his counter-pastoral critique of traditional practices such as badger-baiting and hedgehog eradication, the tender attentiveness to the lives of fellow creatures that is evident in these bee poems also informs his response to the enclosures that were rapidly transforming the Northamptonshire countryside during his lifetime. In “The Lamentations of Roundoak Waters” (1818), for example, the felling of woodland, straightening of waterways, and conversion of moors and meadows to commercial crop production are shown to affect not only subaltern humans (gypsies and the rural poor), but the entire multispecies collective that co-constituted the commons: humans, animals (wild and domesticated), diverse plants, and even the free-flowing brook itself, whose watery lament it is that the poet translates into human words. This commodification of land and its ever-more intensively farmed produce constituted a form of internal colonization during the era that Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway have dubbed the Plantationocene which began with “the devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive

and enclosed plantations, relying on slave labor and other forms of exploited, alienated, and usually spatially transported labor” (162). Beginning in the sixteenth century, “the Plantationocene continues with ever-greater ferocity in globalized factory meat production, monocrop agribusiness, and immense substitutions of crops like palm oil for multispecies forests and their products that sustain human and nonhuman critters alike” (162). Among its victims are bees, who have in the meantime been subjected to a whole new regime of industrial exploitation, nowhere more thoroughly than in the US, where they are bred and transported around the country wherever required to pollinate some \$40 billion worth of cash crops annually, representing around one-third of all food consumed (Hagopian). These bees have become vulnerable to a lethal mix of parasites and pests, pathogens, pesticides, reduced genetic diversity, and poor nutrition—including, obscenely, being fed on corn syrup in place of their own honey—contributing to the appalling phenomenon of Colony Collapse Disorder. Meanwhile, many of their free-living counterparts have declined dramatically as a consequence of the loss of their food sources, together with toxins ingested from flowering crops, and the impacts of climate change (Miller-Struttman). Among these are the Red-shanked Carder Bee, celebrated by Clare as the “russet commoner who knows the face, / Of every blossom that the meadow brings,” which has seen a huge decline throughout its range (Ollerton).

If the “honey dreams” of Clare’s buzzing minstrels still carried the ancient cultural connotation of the Delphic oracle, today’s apian messengers have become prophets of a different sort. As Preston observes mournfully, “the substances they gather in water, nectar pollen and even blood gas [are now] analyzed for ecological changes and health hazards. As animal monitors of these various toxins and dangers, bees are likely to perish in the very act of bringing us the dire tidings of our own terrible technologies” (166). There is an appalling irony in all this. Following Karl von Frisch’s pioneering work on the role of dance in honeybee communication, zoosemiotician Thomas A. Seboek, has shown that “bee-speak” entails the use of symbolic (or “arbitrary”) as well as indexical and iconic signs, thereby subverting the great divide between humans as the sole *animal symbolicum*, as Ernst Cassirer put it, and all the rest (Bühler 71-72). And it appears to be precisely because of their communicative intelligence and collaborative way of life that bee colonies are so vulnerable to neonicotinoid poisoning: “Bees take the contaminated nectar and pollen spread through the plant’s DNA back to the hive, creating a highly toxic living environment for all the bees. Toxicity builds up destroying the Central Nervous System, causing further disorientation and

bees ultimately can neither fly nor make it back to the nest” (Hagopian). How comes it that a culture which has historically glorified the human species precisely for our alleged superior intelligence, should have placed its techno-scientific know-how so thoroughly in thrall to corporate profits that we are stupefying a kindred species, upon whose intelligence we are ourselves dependent? This seems to be as clear an indication as any that the so-called “environmental crisis” should indeed be recognized as a “crisis of [what we have taken to be] reason” (Plumwood).

Pushing back against the death-dealing logic of the Plantationocene, Haraway avers that “[i]f there is to be multispecies ecojustice, which can also embrace diverse human people ... we have a mammalian job to do, with our biotic and abiotic sym-poietic collaborators, co-labourers. We need to make kin sym-chthonically, sym-poetically. Who and whatever we are, we need to make-with–become-with, compose-with–the earth-bound” (161). In this moment of danger and possibility, the kind of creaturely ecopoetics penned by Clare in the shadow of enclosure acquires an added salience, modelling in verse modalities of multispecies world-making that we are now called upon to put in practice beyond the page.

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