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Impartiality and Attachment: Ethics and Ecopoiesis in Children's Narrative Texts

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Social movements taken up in children’s literature since the 1960s have foregrounded the ethical concerns of changing societies in a range of areas that includes environmental and ecological issues. While philosophers align ethical responsibility with a need to be impartial, fiction will routinely violate impartiality because of social and emotional attachments deemed desirable for personal and general well-being. Such attachments are rendered strongly in children’s fiction because of the textual dominance of heavy character focalisation in both first person and third person narratives, and thence a basis for reader response analogous to an interpersonal relationship. Questions of ethics, attachment and representation come together in a recent strand, or sub-genre, in environmental literature in which issues in environmental ethics are explored by constructing a parallel between ecoconsciousness and interpersonal human relationships of various types according to the age of the participant characters. A common narrative strategy in such texts is to construct parallel narratives underpinned by a metonymic interrelationship, whereby threatened or damaged nature is matched by threatened or damaged lives. The thematic outcome blends an interweaving of nature and culture with a more pragmatic environmentalism than usually pertains in children’s texts.

Key words: Ethics, ecopoiesis, environmental literature, young adult fiction.

Discussions of children’s literature and its relations to social life are pervaded by an assumption, more often implied than articulated, that the literature is primarily about ethical understandings of social life. Programs for the development of individual subjectivities entail a strategy for social transformation which, as Claudia Mills has elegantly argued (2002a, 2002b), is apt to pivot on the development of moral perception, or what Lawrence Buell has described as ‘the self conceived as an ethical project’ (9). Because the literature has maintained such a focus, and because it has a long association with pedagogy, neither the literature nor its criticism has explicitly engaged with the debates over ethical criticism which played a large role in shaping literary and cultural discourses.
through the second half of the twentieth century. There is no equivalent for our field to the elaborate symposium staged in *Philosophy and Literature* in 1998 in which Wayne C. Booth, Martha Nussbaum, and Richard Posner debated the relative status of ethical and aesthetic criticism. Indeed, when Mills began her ‘Portrayal of Mental Disability’ paper with what she suggested might be the ‘controversial thesis’ that ‘all literature expresses values and must be judged at least in part on the values it expresses’ (2002b, 531), it is unlikely that the proposition seemed controversial to many readers: the point had been made in terms of the ideology of text since Bob Dixon’s work in the late 1970s (McCallum and Stephens 359). All aspects of textual discourse, from story outcomes to the expressive forms of language, are informed and shaped by ideology, so it is incumbent upon criticism to look carefully at the ethical dimensions of both what is said and how it is said.

It remains a truism that literature should not be didactic, as Mills reminds us (2002b, 532), and the common injunction to ‘show’ not ‘tell’ has meant that since the mid-twentieth century ethical behaviours have been modelled by plot and narrative rather than explicated by narrators. Nevertheless, social movements across the sphere since the 1960s have foregrounded the ethical concerns of changing societies, especially in the areas of racism and multiculturalism (with a sharpened perception in holocaust literature), feminism and gender studies, environmental and ecological issues, and, most recently, biotechnology and the post-human. All are pressing, continuing concerns for the field of children’s literature, and their ethical dimension has been, from time to time, explicitly addressed (for recent examples, see Guerra [2009]; Oziewicz [2009]; Sawers [2009]). By the century’s end, as Booth (1998) argues, there was a renewed interest in ethics in literary studies generally, that is, in a moral or social value-oriented approach. While, as Booth conceded, there is no hard evidence that a particular story can be the cause of moral transformation in a reader, as critics we will judge a work’s potential moral or ethical efficacy according to how ethically framed actions are realised.

There is a profound ethical implication in the massive textual transformation that took place in children’s literature after World War II – that is, in the emergence on the one hand of first person narrative as a predominant mode in realist fiction, and on the other, the preponderance of heavy character focalisation in third person narratives and a backgrounding of narrators. Because, apart from a short period through the late 1980s and into the 1990s, third person narrative usually admits only one focalising character, reader experience of textuality became patterned on experiences of self-other relations, or intersubjectivity, as readers engaged in imagined dialogue with focalising characters (including first person narrators). As Gabriele Schwab observes, readers may experience ‘a strong psychic cathexis’ with a literary text generated by ‘the intimacy of voice, the intensity of fictional lives and internal states of characters, or the density of an imagined world’ (162). This shift in textuality preceded the development of the various reader response criticisms that were influential in the criticism through the last quarter of the century, but proved
to be very compatible with them, although there was always apt to be a tension between notions of reader agency and the valorisation of resistant reading, on one hand, and an assumption that reader resistance is unethical (a symptom of poor reading and ethical immaturity). Lawrence Buell’s remark, with reference to general literary studies, that ‘the model of reading experience as a scene of virtual interpersonality that enacts, activates, or otherwise illuminates ethical responsibility may nonetheless prove one of the most significant innovations of the literature-and-ethics movement’ (16) is strikingly resonant with children’s literature.

My textual focus in this paper is on a recent strand in environmental literature, a sub-genre that appeared after the mid-1990s in which ethical issues are negotiated by constructing a parallel between ecoconsciousness and cathetic relationships (in this context, relationships grounded in the ideational and emotional investment one person has in another, which may range from pre-teen close friendships to young adult incipient romances). In other words, the intersubjectivity of reciprocated cathexis mirrors an interpenetration of individual consciousness and natural environment. The crux of this relationship is the inherent contradiction between the notion that ethical thought and action operates impartially and what Barbara Herman characterises as ‘the relationships and structures of attachment that constitute good or normal human lives’ (777). This contradiction is enacted by the sixteen-year-old narrator/protagonist of Kristen Chandler’s *Wolves, Boys, and Other Things that Might Kill Me* (2010). Assigned the role of editor of her school newspaper, for which she writes a column about some wolf packs recently reintroduced into nearby Yellowstone Park, KJ must aspire to journalistic impartiality. Her growing attachment to Virgil, a newcomer to the town and its school, and a wildlife photographer and environmentalist, draws her into her first experience of affective life – ‘the life constituted by feeling, intimacy, connection’ (Herman 777). A narrative strategy employed in this novel, as in other examples of the sub-genre (for example, Carl Hiaasen’s *Hoot* [2002], Deborah Savage’s *Summer Hawk* [1999], and Abby McDonald’s *Boys, Bears, and a Serious Pair of Hiking Boots* [2010]), is to construct parallel narratives underpinned by a metonymic interrelationship, whereby threatened or damaged nature is matched by threatened or damaged lives. The pattern is also emerging in recent film – for example, it nuances the otherwise flatly conventional plot of James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009).

The structure is clearly established in the coming of age story of *Summer Hawk*. The protagonist, Taylor, a misfit in the small town she has moved to with her sculptor father, is set on a developmental path when she finds an injured hawk in a fallen tree. The hawk’s need of rescue jolts Taylor out of the impartial stance she has been cultivating as a mechanism to cope with her isolation. The slow healing of its broken wing becomes a thematic centre around which revolves a constellation of human problems: the floundering marriage of Taylor’s parents; her mother’s sense of entitlement and obsession with Taylor’s ‘right’ to self-realisation and educational privilege; the post-traumatic stress that plagues the father of Rail, Taylor’s eventual love-interest; the emotional restlessness of
Rhiannon, suffering unresolved grief for her dead daughter and sexually involved with Taylor’s father; and the physical abuse endured by one of the other girls at Taylor’s school. *Summer Hawk* is replete with social issues, like many YA novels, and although not all of these can be resolved, a symbolic healing occurs when Taylor witnesses the annual hawk migration and sees the now-recovered hawk she had helped rescue. As the narrative moves towards closure, Taylor’s sense of unity with the hawks implies an ecofeminist perspective that subjective wholeness in social relations parallels ecoconsciousness, as Taylor has grown away from ego-driven self-regardingness to altruistic cathexis with both natural environment and people. The ‘almost unbearable excitement’ she feels when she looks at the hawks in the sky—‘Boiling. Moving. Rising, falling, swirling. Dozens of specks against the sun-bright clouds’ (291)—an excitement enacted in the sequence of participles and quickening rhythm, leads to a sense of oneness: ‘I ran toward the bluffs, filling my lungs with the cold October wind, letting the air hold me the way it held the hawks. I did open my arms then, and whirled until I was dizzy and laughing…’ (291). The interweaving of nature and culture is further confirmed when the incident continues with Taylor and Rhiannon watching the flying hawks together and healing the estrangement between them caused by the affair.

As the characters’ names and the focus and convolutions of the plot of *Summer Hawk* suggest, the YA fiction examples of the sub-genre have been hybridised with ‘chick-lit’ romance, the kind of fiction in which, as Jennifer Botkin-Maher explains, ‘feminist pop culture critics are skilled at unearthing progressive potential in what might at first appear to be patently sexist or otherwise conservative depictions of women’ (194). Coming of age thus includes a developed awareness of one’s feminine attractiveness. The metonymic interrelationship of parallel narratives in Chandler’s *Wolves, Boys, and Other Things that Might Kill Me* emerges through a loose parallel-cum-contrast between the unfolding story of a subordinate wolf nicknamed ‘Cinderella’ and KJ’s coming of age story. KJ, motherless, with a lack of dress sense, uncontrollable blushing, and suddenly grown breasts, has a sense of inferior femininity that declares her a Cinderella type. When down-trodden ‘Cinderella’ unexpectedly turns on her biological sister, the pack’s alpha female, and mortally savages her, the incident is structurally and thematically a catalyst for KJ’s decision to confront a young man she realises is responsible for a series of violent actions against people deemed sympathetic to the presence of the wolves. An ethical pivot between the incidents is Virgil’s gloss on the apparent viciousness of ‘Cinderella’:

They’re wolves. Do you get that? That’s how wolves are. You don’t have to be like that.’

[KJ]: ‘I’m not.’ (335)

At various points of the novel impartiality has been thematised: the impartiality of KJ’s column is continually called into question, and her classmate Addie defends an act of anonymous violence by asserting, ‘There are all kinds of laws, KJ. And around here, taking care of your own is at the top of the list’ (187).
It might seem easy to condemn this position as unethical, but Herman makes the point that impartiality is routinely violated whenever those close to us are favoured over strangers in the distribution of some good. In a rite of passage more reminiscent of a male coming of age narrative, KJ confronts Will, the perpetrator of violence, far from shore on a near-freezing lake. After being struck with an oar and knocked into the water, she scrambles back into her boat and goes on to save the life of her attacker. The novel’s climactic action thus reprises, with crucial difference, the climax of the wolves’ story, and instantiates the moral perception KJ drew from that story: ‘In that moment I know there is a place between fighting and backing away, a place that transcends fear and creates the possibility of change. It’s the very same place in me where I love Virgil’ (335). The judgement of readers will vary as to whether the novel is successful in establishing a paradox of impartiality and attachment as a solution to the thorny problems it introduces concerning ethical environmentalism and situated, empirical habitation of place. But insofar as it problematises the ethical conflicts amongst different interests, it is a bold attempt to avoid the simplistic ethical assumptions of much ‘environmental’ literature for young adult readers.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, as environmental issues, especially global warming, were recognised as the greatest threat to the continued survival of human beings, the concepts of ecopoiesis and ecocriticism were developed in literary and cultural theory from earlier discourses about ‘the environment’ or ‘nature writing’. Environmental issues—habitat protection, ecosystem conservation, pollution prevention, resource depletion, and advocacy of harmonic balance between human beings and natural environments—became major social concerns. There is now, in most parts of the world, a recognition that the continued survival of human beings depends on a harmonic balance between human subjects and natural environments. Literature for young people usually depicts the search for balance as a local issue concerning a particular environment and a local community’s conflicted relationships to it, although fantasy film and anime may tend to favour a more global and apocalyptic perspective. A capacity to move attention from the local to the global requires not only an understanding of a particular ecosystem but also a willingness to think beyond oneself and one’s own immediate environment and interests.

As in the wider cultural concern with this area, the texts of children’s literature and culture and the criticism that addresses them have had to deal with some crucial problems of understanding and representation: first, that fictive texts are inescapably homocentric, and perceptions of the natural environment are framed by plot, characterisation, point of view, conflict amongst characters and the pragmatics of dialogue (Rigby 2004, 427; Stephens 2006, 40); and second, that an ethical formulation of the interactions between ecological integrities and environmental exploitation is a major problem often elided in the fictive texts by a taken-for-granted moralism (cf. Bradford et al. 95). The sub-genre which I refer to here as ‘the econarrative of dual cathexis’, in which ethical problems of impartiality and attachment are explored through a parallel between cathectic relationships and ecoconsciousness, seems to be
emerging to challenge taken-for-granted postures in environmental ethics. In general, the principal focalising characters are social outsiders or misfits whose eventual, hard-won integration into society is gained through their developing eco-awareness and the actions they consequently pursue. The outsidedness of focalising characters—their consciousness of difference and of the otherness that exists outside-of-self—can then be used to convey a sense of the autopoiesis (self-fashioning) of an individual mind in response to an unfamiliar or de-familiarised place and community. Finally, an analogy may be implied or perceived with an ecological system as an autopoiesis, or a self-fashioning and self-disclosure, to which narrative fictions may strive to respond as ecopoiesis (cf Rigby 438), that is, in creating a mode of writing that is to some extent mimetic of nature’s self-disclosure. Such ecopoiesis is perhaps only evident in rare moments, as, for example, when the text represents an interpenetration of subject (focaliser) and object (world), in which the focaliser becomes the locus for a perception of the haecceity (‘thisness’ or self-immanence) of the phenomenal world.

In contemporary young adult fiction, such as McDonald’s Boys, Bears, and a Serious Pair of Hiking Boots (2010), such rare moments of perception are validated by a more nuanced ethical perspective than has generally been enabled by the uninterrogated moral assumptions of much environmental fiction. Insofar as ethics is already grounded in a response to alterity (what is outside-of-self), it is also already implicit in both cathectic relationships and ecoconsciousness. These fictions play out an evolution of a character’s subjectivity through an encounter with alterity which at first threatens to cast the subject into an ontological void but then cracks open the subject’s solitude/solipsism and brings him or her into relationship with social and natural worlds. The process is acted out literally in the post-disaster anime Gin-iro no kami no Agito (2006; 銀色の髪のアギト—‘Agito the Silver-Haired’, henceforth Agito) when the eponymous hero, having transformed into a tree, is reborn from a seed pod with the mission to bind humankind and nature. The subject’s encounter with alterity thus transforms him into an ethical subject whose heroic striving becomes more clearly an ethics of care—an empathic relation with what is outside-of-self in which the subject commits himself/herself to being responsible and caring. The ethics of care which underpins this outcome is indebted to ecofeminist principles, that is, an ethic that ‘makes a central place for values of care, love, friendship, trust and appropriate reciprocity—values that presuppose that our relationships to others are central to our understanding of who we are’ (Warren 143; see also Gilligan 63, and d’Eaubonne 251).

While such values are at times echoed in the texts—as in the lyrics of the closing song of Agito, ‘The reason I can be who I am/is because you are here’—the sub-genre as a whole is not distinctively ecofeminist, and only Savage’s Summer Hawk and, to a much lesser extent, McDonald’s romance Boys, Bears, and a Serious Pair of Hiking Boots seem influenced by ecofeminism. In contrast, Kristen Chandler’s self-consciously ecological narrative Wolves, Boys, and Other Things that Might Kill Me (2010) is often antithetical to ecofeminist tenets.
McDonald and Chandler are nevertheless both wary about depicting an ethics that espouses impartiality, is abstracted from life, and which may entail a willingness to sacrifice people for the sake of a doctrinaire notion of 'what's right' (*Boys, Bears* 276). This wariness is clearly represented in *Boys, Bears* in the contrapuntal development of the narrator, Jenna, and her best friend, Olivia. Ideologically naïve, urban 'Teen Greens' at the beginning of the novel, their individual trajectories drive them apart: Jenna, unexpectedly isolated and alienated in a small rural community, must forge an ethical perspective that understands that for culture and nature to coexist there will be a need for intelligent compromise. The narrative strongly affirms this perspective. Olivia, on the other hand, spends her time with idealistic, would-be eco-warriors from whom she derives an apocalyptic view of ecological change that spawns a contempt for human, cultural values which is passed off as impartiality. Jenna formulates their difference during their final conversation: ‘Her summer has taken her to the extreme of our environmentalism, just as I’ve realised the other side to my beliefs: compromise and priorities’ (276). Olivia’s inability to cathex with humans because of her eco-ideology suggests that her commitment is a form of narcissism which Jenna has outgrown as she has developed a more pragmatic environmentalism.

The various texts I locate within ‘the econarrative of dual cathexis’ share a pragmatic approach to environmental issues which, I suggest, is consonant with four recent developments in literary and cultural studies: the rise of ecocriticism (and ecofeminism); a renewed interest in the place of ethics in literature (see Zapf 2009); developments in cognitive poetics (as a systematic theory of the mind which sees literature as central to the understanding of human psychology); and a shift away from the ‘grand theories’ of the second half of the twentieth century to a practice of working with non-totalising concepts, which is already characteristic of ecocriticism, ethical criticism and cognitive poetics. The focus of children’s texts on social issues, its concern with values, its representation of minds weighing up the way things are and considering alternatives, and finally the modelling of behaviours these processes entail, allows the literature (and its criticism) to sit comfortably within such a critical practice.

Both the representations of place and the situation of objects – human and non-human – within a place are mediated: there is always a perceiver and an object of perception. The question of ethical perspective enters into consideration as an aspect of the process of perception, insofar as perception is not value-free but already informed by assumptions and ideologies. So while the cultural products of the imagination sustain the capacity of individual minds to think and feel and to share thoughts and feelings with others, those thoughts and feelings are already being shaped by narrative forms. Some very pertinent suggestions about the imbrication of ethics and literature have been recently made by Hubert Zapf (853), and I would like here to explore their implications for children’s texts.

First, Zapf reminds us that narrative provides ‘a medium for the concrete exemplification of ethical issues that cannot adequately be explored on a merely
systematic-theoretical level’. This is particularly relevant to children’s texts, where ethical insight is much more likely to inhere in narrative processes and teleologies than in overt philosophical utterance, and where these effects are often mirrored intratextually by a principal character’s own engagement with writing (Summer Hawk and Wolves, Boys are examples). Second, because narratives are always engaged with and mediated through some form of represented perspective, they reflect an ‘indissoluble connection between ethics and the human subject’, and that subject is not a mere site of enunciation but a self ‘implicated in multiple interrelationships’. As I remarked earlier, this effect is particularly strong in contemporary children’s fiction, in which perspective is limited to (usually) a single focalising character (as in Hoot) or to a first person participant narrator (the main characters in Summer Hawk, Boys, Bears and Wolves, Boys). In film, the story is told from the perspective of one or more characters, whose outlook or position may be reproduced by camera placements that emphasise the character’s narrative centrality in scene or depict the scene as the character sees (as in shot reverse shot sequences that commences with the character, for example).

Third, Zapf makes the point that the fictional staging of other lives ‘provides a forum for the enactment of the dialogical interdependence between self and other, and beyond that of the irreducible difference and alterity of the other which is central to ethics’. In each of my sample texts, the possibility or desire for emotional engagement faces seemingly insuperable obstacles, and the outcome is not necessarily a continuing relationship. Hoot, for example, opens with the main character, Roy, a stranger in a strange town, focalising ‘the strange boy running along the sidewalk’ (1). Known for most of the book as ‘Mullet Fingers’, the mysterious boy is depicted as a ‘wild child’ and becomes an object of deep concern for Roy, in whom he ignites empathy and an ethics of care. Roy’s attempts to find the boy are frustrated by his unwillingness to be found and by protective measures taken by his tough, burly half-sister, Beatrice. The boy is without a home or family, and doesn’t wear shoes or attend school, but when Roy does get to know him and learns of his passion for protecting local ecology, Roy is in turn inspired to play a pivotal role in saving a colony of burrowing owls threatened by illegal development. The interdependence of the three the campaign fosters does not elide their irreducible differences, however, and while companionship of a loose kind does develop amongst Roy, ‘Mullet Fingers’ and Beatrice, none of them seeks a bond closer than that inspired by their common ethical imperative. At the novel’s close, Roy has begun assimilating into his new community, while ‘Mullet Fingers’ has once again disappeared. The large public events of the novel have been fully resolved but the interpersonal relations remain at best tenuous. This situation is outlined metonymically when in the Epilogue Roy stops by to watch Beatrice playing soccer: ‘Beatrice . . . noticed him sprawled in the bleachers. When she waved, Roy gave her two thumbs up and chuckled, because it was pretty funny – Beatrice the Bear waving at Tex, the new kid’ (289). This affable open-endedness leads into Zapf’s fourth point: literature and art do not simply illustrate moral ideologies but are also ‘symbolic representations of
complex dynamical life processes, whose ethical force consists precisely of their resistance to easy interpretation and appropriation’.

Events and situations in ecological narratives frequently present their characters with ethical dilemmas. Can a viable environmental ethic, which incorporates a biophilic and responsible conception of nature, step outside social law to protect the natural environment, as the ideal of impartiality is displaced by attachment? If so, how might this be narratively justified? The actions of the wicked characters in *Hoot*—the businessmen who conceal a negative Environmental Impact Statement and exchange bribes, and the school bully, Dana Matherson—are clearly depicted as unethical, and such characters are reduced to cartoon-like comic stereotypes. Dana, for example, is the object of beatings, minor injuries, humiliation (as when Beatrice strips him to his underwear and ties him to the school flagpole), and eventual incarceration. This comic representation, in conjunction with the ineptness of the law, serves to condone the illegal methods employed by Mullet Fingers to protect the burrowing owls, and comic irony also masks the more morally dubious acts of the budding eco-warriors—most notably, Roy manipulates Dana's vices to get him arrested, charged with the acts of sabotage carried out by Mullet Fingers, and imprisoned. Readers are left to ponder the ethical implications of performing a bad deed for a good end.

In *Boys, Bears*, Olivia’s attempt to intervene in an act she deems environmentally unfriendly is rather depicted as unethical: when she learns her hosts plan to remove a spruce tree growing in the garden she declares an ‘environmental emergency’ and telephones the Environmental Protection Agency. The scene is rather melodramatic and implausible, but has two main functions. First, the palpable doctrinaire foolishness of Olivia’s behaviour serves to affirm Jenna’s evolving pragmatic environmentalism that involves compromises and choices and recognises that a responsible conception of nature might require humans to locate themselves ecologically in a more holistic way. Second, it dismisses environmental apocalypticism, implicitly agreeing with Greg Garrard’s conclusion that it ‘fosters a delusive search for culprits and causes that may be reductively conceived by conflating very varied environmental problems within the concept of a singular, imminent “environmental crisis”’ (106–107). Jenna had a little earlier been struck by Olivia’s relentless rhetoric: ‘Every word that comes out of her lips is so bleak, so extreme, it’s like she can only see the bad things … She just seems on some mission to recite her list of the world’s wrongs’ (263). In the contrast between Olivia’s extremism and Jenna’s eventual understanding of the principles of ‘compromise and priorities’, *Boys, Bears* reveals itself as much more than a romance with an ecological plot, but rather as a mirror of a particular account of the history of environmentalism, from radical beginnings to a ‘sustainable biosphere’ model. As sketched by Holmes Rolston, this model hinges on the idea of quality of life in a quality environment: clean air, water, stable soils, attractive residential landscapes, forests, mountains, rivers, rural lands, parks, wild-lands, wildlife, renewable resources (140).

In each of the examples I have found of ‘the econarrative of dual cathexis’, this sustainable biosphere model is the foundation for the text’s environmental
As the protagonist matures in understanding of interpersonal relationships, he or she also comes to question their received assumptions about the world, from naïve versions of environmental action (*Boys, Bears; Wolves, Boys*) to Western concepts of the right to self-development and to self-realisation (*Summer Hawk*). At the same time, an ecological ethics seems guaranteed by a cognitive model that affirms a continuity and interpenetration of anthropocentric subjectivity and ecocentric awareness. The natural world and the human mind function as metaphors for each other, in the sense that textual apprehension of the natural world must be mediated through linguistic forms. That is the only way the perceiver can acquire special insight into the world outside-of-self.

When, early in *Boys, Bears*, Jenna has an encounter with a moose while she is driving on an isolated road, the text discloses that the Teen Green from New Jersey has no actual affinity with any form of ecology: ‘the thing in front of me doesn’t disappear; it just swishes its tail and sniffs the asphalt. It’s utterly surreal, seeing something up close that’s only ever been on my TV or in a magazine’ (58–59). Her lack of affinity is emphasised in four ways: the moose is a ‘thing’, but she has no sense of its ‘thingness’ (haecceity); she has no idea what to do, other than locking the car doors; she is describing her encounter to her friend on her cell phone; and the incident is an allusion to a similar moment in Elizabeth Bishop’s poem, ‘The Moose’ (and perhaps to Jonathan Bate’s perceptive discussion of the poem in *The Song of the Earth*):

> A moose has come out of the impenetrable wood and stands there, looms, rather, in the middle of the road. It approaches; it sniffs at the bus’s hot hood.

Bate’s comment that ‘Though awe-inspiringly “Grand, otherworldly”, the she-moose elicits not fear but “joy”, a joy that in connecting us to nature connects us to each other’ (202) is, coincidentally, an apt account of ‘the econarrative of dual cathexis’. Jenna must undergo a hard learning experience before she reaches such a point. This happens when her love-interest, Reeve, takes her to see a secluded lake fringed with water lilies:

> I look around, trying to burn everything into my memory. The hot glare of the sun through the edge of my shade, the gorgeous blanket of flowers lapping gently around me, the way my every step sends clouds of mud billowing in the clear water . . . and Reeve, still watching me from the shore. I exhale a slow, shivering breath. (233–34)

Just as when Bishop’s moose comes out of nature into culture (‘the middle of the road’) and Bishop can only find similes from culture to describe her, so Jenna’s language is still hopelessly inadequate to express the haecceity of the scene. Jenna (or McDonald) falls back on clichés: ‘hot glare . . . gorgeous blanket of flowers lapping gently . . . clouds of mud billowing’. And yet the moment does work as ecopoiesis, as Jenna’s own encounter with a moose had not, partly because readers are aware of the gap between language and object, and because Jenna
is conscious that an other perceives her within nature and that nature connects them. This is a frail and tenuous moment in the evolution of the character’s subjectivity, but, I suggest, it is nevertheless what sustains the ethical vision of the sub-genre.

If the econarrative of dual cathexis I have sketched here does turn out to be a distinctive sub-genre in environmental fiction, it should have the potential to develop its underpinning paradox of impartiality and attachment as a critique of a range of cultural and environmental discourses and a site on which to build and articulate an ethical ground for intersubjective relations with others: human others, other creatures, natural environments. In the process, it seems to be bringing together an interweaving of nature and culture and a more pragmatic environmentalism than usually pertains in children’s texts.

NOTES

1. At present there appears to be a broadening of narrative modes to bring back narrator-centred narratives with intermittent (often plural) character focalisation, a tendency evident in some of the most significant contemporary writers such as Neil Gaiman, Philip Reeve, Terry Pratchett, Cornelia Funke (both in German and English translation) and Geoffrey Maguire. The interpersonal relationship of reader to text is then mediated by the narrator.

2. For a detailed examination of multistranded and polyfocalised narration in this era, see McCallum’s Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction.

3. Ecopoiesis is used in different disciplines in two unrelated senses. The term was first coined by Robert H. Haynes, as the science fiction idea of terraforming was taken up in speculative science writing about possible futures. Ecopoiesis is there defined as ‘the fabrication of an uncontained, anaerobic, biosphere on the surface of a sterile planet’ (Fogg 416). The sense in which ecopoiesis is used in this paper derives from Jonathan Bate’s redefining of the term in The Song of the Earth (75) with reference to creative art that gives a ‘voice’ to the realm of nature. For Bate, it is ‘an attempt to transform into language an experience of dwelling upon the earth’, a mode in which language ‘does ecological work’ (199–200).

4. An allusion to Momo-Taro (桃太郎, ‘Peach Boy’), the story of a child who rids his land of monsters, seems obvious. As with its several visual references to Superman films, Agito transforms superheroes into ecowarriors.

5. The apparent similarity of the titles, Boys, Bears, and a Serious Pair of Hiking Boots and Wolves, Boys, and Other Things that Might Kill Me, reflects their affiliations with romance genre, rather than any relationship between them (they were published by different houses four weeks apart). Chandler’s title apparently playfully echoes that of a background book she recommends to her readers: Mech, L. David and Luigi Boitani, eds. Wolves, Behavior, Ecology and Conservation. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

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