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## In Search of a Pathographical Eco-poetics: A Study of Elizabeth Tova Bailey's *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*

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### Abstract

*What connects a pathography (an illness narrative) with the school of eco-poetics is poesis: the Greek for “the act of creation”. Pathographical eco-poetics is “creation-with” the natural surroundings during illness. As opposed to Thoreau’s Walden where we find an autobiographical account of one’s relationship with nature, in pathographical eco-poetics the same relationship is unfolded through pathos (the Greek for “pain”) and disease. Illness as a method helps in bracketing out our pre-reflective involvement with the natural surroundings and paves the way for newer ways of understanding nature. As opposed to various other intersections between medicine and ecology, like ecopsychology, ecotherapy or green cure, there is a sense of Keatsian spontaneity and aesthetic wonder in pathographical eco-poetics. Elizabeth Tova Bailey’s *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* (2010) is one such account. Her debilitating illness, with “severe neurological symptoms”, brings her close to an unremarkable wild snail. Her world starts to get entwined with the world of the snail. The work is a curious admixture of illness memoir, biology, art, environmentalism, and more importantly a deep sense of compassion and empathy for the natural surroundings.*

*The paper will explore the concept of eco-poetics with the help of Bailey’s pathographical account. *The Sound of the Wild Snail Eating* as a pathographical eco-poetics is away from the techno-scientific gaze of not only modern medicine but modernity in general. Bailey’s world of illness finds effortless connections with the world of the wild snail: her spatial and temporal confinement is attuned to that of the spatio-temporality of the snail. Both the worlds posit a challenge to the speed and “homogeneous, empty time” of modernity. Both the worlds keep the enchantment and mysteriousness of the natural world alive. In general, the work provides an alternative space in the metanarrative of 21st century modernity and techno-capitalism.*

**Keywords:** Pathography; pain; eco-poetics; kinship; modernity

Humanity is exalted not because we are so far above other living creatures,  
but because knowing them well elevates the very concept of life.”

— Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia*

A pathography, Anne Hunsaker Hawkins writes “is an extended narrative situating the illness within the author’s life and the meaning of that life” (Hawkins, 1999, 13). What connects a pathography, “a form of autobiography or biography that describes personal experiences of

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illness treatment, and sometimes death” (Hawkins, 1999, 13), with the school of eco-poetics is the phenomenon called *poiesis*: the Greek for the act of coming into being or the act of creation. The word “pathography” comes from the Greek *pathos* meaning pain and *graphia* meaning writing, and the word “eco-poetics” comes from the Greek *oikos* meaning home and *poiesis* meaning creation. A pathographical narrative is different from the typical pathological reports and medical surveys although, it may be confused for one. For Hawkins:

Pathographies not only articulate the hopes, fears, and anxieties so common to sickness, but they also serve as guidebooks to the medical experience itself, shaping a reader's expectations about the course of an illness and its treatment. Pathographies are a veritable gold mine of patient attitudes and assumptions regarding all aspects of illness. These narratives can be especially useful to physicians at a time when they are given less and less time to get to know their patients but are still expected to be aware of their patients' wishes, needs, and fears. (Hawkins, 1999, 127-129)

Away from the “hegemony” of medical records and the disinterested study of the ill, the pathography accounts for the lived-experience of the suffering subject. Pathographical eco-poetics, furthers this study by considering the broader framework of intra- and inter-relations with the environment that entangle the ill bodies, as and when they are diagnosed, sick, diseased, and ailing. In another sense, pathographical eco-poetics is being-with or creation-with the natural surroundings during illness. It is also different from general autobiography, as it moves away from autopoiesis to what Donna Haraway would call sym-poiesis (or “making-with”). Illness becomes a condition for sym-poiesis—the humanist closed *self* to open itself to the *other* in order to create or to just *be* with the surrounding, animate or inanimate alike. Pathography cannot be called as a “medical history”, but an alternate historiography—a personal account of the body in pain, but it is also not “totally” free from medical history (Sarkar and Basu, 2019, xv). Neither is pathography free from its immediate environment in which it is borne and experienced, as the natural world and its mystifying orders of action are difficult to code but are felt and remembered by the body which suffers.

Seasonal changes, allergies, toxicity, and other twisted discrepancies of the natural kind may affect health and well-being, bringing in unwanted maladies, death, and disruption in orderly life. Although, in contemporary writings much attention has been given to modern livelihood's connection to ecological precarity and the accelerated damnation of the environment as perpetrated by human actions. In the recent years, a number of writers have creatively worked with illness narratives to express their complicated bodily relations in confrontation with a hostile nature, whose entanglements with pollution have resulted in grotesque disfigurements—both of the human body and the natural world. In Samanta Schweblin's novel *Fever Dream* (2017), we come across an ‘ecohorrific’ narration of toxicity and transfigurations caused by the unleashing of hazardous chemicals in the environment. The feverish body of the narrator, who is half-dead and half-alive, is compelled to investigate the source of damnation that had caused a large-scale poisoning of humans and nonhumans in their locality. The body of the narrator and the topographical body composed of poisoned lakes and land surfaces, become sites of violent metamorphosis, in the backdrop of the mutative potential of toxic wastes that pervade the ecosystem which living beings may collectively encounter.



The ‘ailing body’ is a recurring image in contemporary mediascapes which variously represent the human and nonhuman condition in the Anthropocene. Bodies that suffer, that lie tormented, that are ill or in pain, that wither and are abandoned, that have been killed and whose immobile remains haunt the living, have been envisioned across multiple mediums (or transmedia) for a number of reasons. Images of tormented bodies, in their entangled tribulations whether they are distressed mentally or physically have an immediate affect on the viewers. Some graphical ones may illuminate a collective suffering, be it about those who are agitating for a political cause— to stop wars, or to declare one; to demonstrate displeasure for a particular law, or their agony for the absence of one. Many images of the diseased and the severely sick, also make their way into works that are about the ailing planet, seeking to affect the way we should consider our predicament, hoping that it somehow disrupts the collective nonchalance towards the severity of such warnings. The representation of bodies in pain do have a jarring affect, whether watching bodies numb and helpless, awaiting a sinister death in the hands of serial killers, or when one watches the grotesque bodies of the dead making their way back into the world of living in *World War Z*. While they reconcile us with our own approaching mortality, the intertextuality of several such narratives also invoke a sensitivity towards the natural world, reconciling us about how the planetary body is severely sick. Whether the malaise is immediately visible or invisible, the narrativization of these suffering bodies reveal something striking about who we are, and their layered semiotic connotations of pain may also codify our collective predicament. Both the ill and the illness are in one way or the other connected to the environment which they inhabit.

For instance, in the poetry of Miroslav Holub, pathography and ecopoetics come together to form accounts of suffering bodies that belong to humans and non-humans alike, subjected to war, trauma and medical surveillance:

Holub comments on the failure of equality, fraternity, patriotism and history to thrust mankind towards a state of peace. Like how lab animals and microbes are tortured and sacrificed to attain wisdom, similarly, the death and loss of many individuals secure profit or power to the ones in control of the system. Holub finds similarities in the fate of microorganisms and common men who are trapped in the agendas of control politics, and in the greater picture, how the system is designed to operate by surveilling, dominating and exploiting. Many pathological poems by him circle around the idea of death, through a variety of approaches. He explores death of the physical body, of a wish, of non-living beings and aspects that surround the event of death, like suffering, illness, pain, as well as literal and philosophical ideas that reconceptualize existing notions (Sarkar, 2021, 77-78).

As a poet-scientist, Holub was empathetically invested in the lives and lived-experience of sufferers: being confronted first-hand with post-war scenarios, and his experiences in the often despondent and disquieting atmosphere of hospitals. Holub wrote vehemently on the suffering bodies of nonhumans—those that were subjected to medical experimentation without their consent, and in their pathetic helplessness, he also projected visions of larger ecological systems in deeper pain and anguish.

As opposed to Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854) or the works of John Muir (1898-1914) where we find autobiographical account of one’s relationship with nature, in works like Virginia Woolf’s *On Being Ill* (1926) and more recently in works like Elizabeth Tova Bailey’s

*The Sound of the Wild Snail Eating* (2010), Ranae Hanson's *Watershed: Attending to Body and Earth in Distress* (2021) and Josie George's *A Still Life: A Memoir* (2021) the same relationship is unfolded through *pathos* (the Greek for "pain") and dis-ease. Since pathographical ecopoetics is characteristically different from auto/biographical ecopoetics, it also entails a different understanding of the "self" and "psychosomatics"—a paradigm shift from health to illness. Hanson's work juxtaposes her personal tryst with Type 1 diabetes with the ongoing climate crisis the world is facing. Divided into four sections 'Winter', 'Spring', 'Summer' and 'Autumn', George's work also traces her journey with debilitating chronic illness over the course of a year. In the same vein, Porochista Khakpour's *Sick: A Memoir* (2018) and Susanne Antonetta's *Body Toxic: An Environmental Memoir* (2001) can be cited as examples of pathographical ecoprecarity in which the emphasis shifts from eros to thanatos, and from *poiesis* to precarity. Both the works are less about the *poiesis* of ecopoetics and more about the degeneration of the body because of toxic and polluted natural environment. The genre pathographical ecopoetics is usually associated with but certainly not limited to female writers and poets. Richard Mabey's *Nature Cure* (2005) is a good case in point. Mabey's work deals with him finding solace in natural landscape in Norfolk amidst clinical depression. In recent literary studies, works like *John Keats and the Medical Imagination* edited by Nicholas Roe (2017), Marta Mc Dowell's *Emily Dickinson's Gardening Life: The Plants and Places that Inspired the Poet* (2019) Polly Atkin's *Recovering Dorothy: The Hidden Life of Dorothy Wordsworth* (2021) and other attempt a heuristic analysis of the intersections between the art and the artist through the prism of ecology and medical humanities. *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction* (2014) by Heather Houser, *Ecoprecarity: Vulnerable Lives in Literature and Culture* (2019) by Pramod K Nayar and *The Bloomsbury Handbook to the Medical-Environment Literature* (2022) edited by Scott Slovic, Swarnalatha Rangarajan and Vidya Sarvesaran also explore the uncharted territories between ecology and medical humanities.

Illness as a method<sup>3</sup> helps in bracketing out our pre-reflective involvement with the natural surroundings and paves the way for newer ways of understanding nature. Like Husserlian *epoché*,

[I]t brackets out the natural attitude and brings forth a critical attitude but unlike *epoché* or any other philosophical interrogation, illness is non-volitional and painful. Notwithstanding this involuntary entanglement with pain and suffering, illness can still be seen as a philosophical mode, as a form of *phronesis*—Aristotle's word for "practical wisdom" in *Nicomachean Ethics* (Sarkar and Basu, 2021, xiv).

Illness affects "being-there" (*dasein*): the way one lives in-the-world and with-the-other. The perspective of ill self is characteristically different from *mens sana in corpore sano*; the narratives of the ill are characteristically different from the narratives of the healthy. Involuntarily, it changes the way one perceives everything around, both man-made and natural surroundings. Man lives poetically on the earth, says Hölderlin but an ill's poetry is unlike that of the well. Medicine and ecology intersect not only epistemologically but also ontologically. As opposed to various other intersections between medicine and ecology, like ecopsychology (Greenway 1963; Shepard 1982; Roszak 1992; Metzner 1993), ecotherapy (Clinebell 1996) or green cure, there is a sense of Keatsian spontaneity and aesthetic wonder in pathographical ecopoetics. The narrative of finding refuge in nature or nature as caregiver, that we often find in

<sup>3</sup> Sarkar, *Illness as Method* (2019)



ecotherapy or green cure is overtly singular, utilitarian and reductionist and is characteristically different from the narrative of pathographical ecopoetics.

Elizabeth Tova Bailey's memoir *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* (2010) is one such pathographical account. It is an illness narrative but also has the "the potential to inform and encourage conservation biology" (Fulton, 2012, 217). Bailey's debilitating illness, with severe neurological symptoms, brings her close to an unremarkable wild snail. A pathological and malacological account, her meditation on a life with terminal illness overlaps with her detailed study on snails and mollusks. Her world starts to get entwined with the world of a gift she receives from a friend, a white lipped forest snail (*Neohelix albolabris*). The work is a curious admixture of illness memoir, biology, art, environmentalism, and more importantly a deep sense of compassion and empathy for the natural surroundings. The work is a call for what the French philosopher Michel Serres would call "biogea", a complex of life and earth. It is a call for evolving, taking a cue from Serres again, a megaphone for listening to the foreign language of *Gea*: "seas, rivers, lands, glaciers, volcanoes, winds" and that of *Bio*: "rats, wolves and jackals— fauna, apple trees, wisteria, oaks and lindens— flora" (Serres, 2012, 197). The act of listening to the sound of a wild snail eating is like listening to the sound of the earth, and life on the earth.

We find that *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* is a narrative of search where the two species are in search of a new home with the help of each other. It also introduces the concept of home not as a Euclidean space with fixed contours but as a topological space of altruism. In Bailey's case, we find of altruism of ecopoetics as well as altruism of ecopoetics. The prefix 'eco-' comes from the Greek *oikos* meaning "home" and the author finds a new home in ecology. It is also found that, as she travels through illness, she takes an existential leap from being-in-itself to being-with-ecology. The suffix '-logy' comes again from the Greek *logos* meaning word or language and understanding the sound of a wild creature is to be at home with ecology. In the presence of the wilderness, world-making of the author becomes "making-with" or "worldling-with". The wilderness of the snail enters into the *bios* of the author and becomes a part of her worldling and helps in making of a world— a posthuman interspecies cosmopolitanism comprising of the human, the mollusk and the pathogen. Bailey's ecopoetics has a sense of ecopoethics to it: a complex of ecology, ethics and poetics.

*The Sound of the Wild Snail Eating* as a pathographical ecopoetics is away from the techno-scientific gaze of not only modern medicine but modernity in general. Moving beyond the human self/nonhuman other binary, her illness enables her to explore interspecies kinship between gastropods and homo sapiens. It becomes a condition for species-species interaction, a complex of relational ontologies, here in case between the macroontology of the human and the zoontology<sup>4</sup> of the snail and also that of the microontology<sup>5</sup> of the pathogen that affects her. Bailey's world of illness finds effortless connections with the world of the wild snail: her spatial and temporal confinement is attuned to that of the spatio-temporality of the snail. Any debilitating illness is characterized by the shrinking of lived-time and lived-space, as is the case with the author: "My bed was an island within the desolate sea of my room" (Bailey, 2010, 84). Her bodily movements are restricted, and she is confined to her bed: "When the body is rendered useless, the mind still runs like a blood hound", she points out. There occurs a

<sup>4</sup> Wolfe, *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (2003)

<sup>5</sup> Hird, *The Origins of Sociable Life: Evolution after Science Studies* (2009)

complete cessation of movement across space and a complete breakdown of the continuum of time. In such debilitating condition the author and her *leib* (lived-body) finds a queer connection, a relational temporality, with the being and time of the humble creature. We find traces of this strange meeting between disability and animality in certain sections of her pathographical account.

Bailey's work is not only an exploration in other than human time but also more than human time—the nonhuman animal time but also deep time, making the human subject turn into a planetary subject. It provides an alternative to the human time which is markedly dictated by techno-capitalism. Taking a cue from Robert MacFarlane's *Underland* (2019), Amit R Baishya writes,

Bailey powerfully reflects on viewing human beings as “part of a web of gift, inheritance and legacy stretching over millions of years past and... to come,” thus rendering it an exemplary text that considers the vicissitudes of living with others in the geological epoch of the Anthropocene. A deep time reflection on individual finitude is juxtaposed with the examination of finitude at the level of species being and the inhuman history of the biome (Baishya, 2022, 60).

The snail is connected to the earth the way humans are not: “The humble snail and its clan have a far older — and stickier — foothold on the earth than we more recent creatures” (Bailey, 2010, 90). It is an embodiment of deep time. Bailey's work ceases to remain only an illness narrative or an exploration of gastropod culture but as Mandy-Suzanne Wong points out “is a philosophical meditation on matters such as time, illness, confinement, solitude, and wastefulness—a meditation inspired by snail watching” (Wong, 2013, 9). The eco-poetics of gastropod literature moves beyond the restrictive economy of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, in its understanding of animal subjectivity, and also human-animal intersubjectivity.

Both the worlds posit a challenge to the speed and “homogeneous, empty time” (Benjamin) of modernity in general and health in particular. ‘Health’ is a discursive practice and is frequently associated with modernity. Both the worlds keep the enchantment and mysteriousness of the natural world alive. Max Weber likens modernity's technological rationale to disenchantment (*Entzäuberung*) but illness restores and keeps the enchantment of the world around alive. An illness narrative concomitantly restores the enchantment of wilderness and the eco-poetics of ecology. The snail's world of wilderness and the modern world of the author conflate and become one. Bailey's work belongs to the tradition of Virginia Woolf's *On Being Ill*, and like Woolf's illness memoir portrays an alternative space to the metanarrative of modernity and techno-capitalism.

Health is associated with worldling or world-making, illness deworldling. However, in dealing with long term illness, as in the case of Bailey, the deworldling transforms into newer modes of world-making. At a certain level, illness as a condition is marked by continuous vacillation between deworlding and reworlding, between withering away of old worlds and finding newer ones. Both the author and the snail suffer from a sense of unheimliness (*unheimlich*) in their new surroundings: “the snail and I were both living in altered landscapes not of our choosing: I figured we shared a sense of loss and displacement”, she writes. They both are not ‘at home’. There is a sense of loss of home which in the snail's case is the loss of the wild and in Bailey's case the loss of health. Although the human and the snail lose their respective homes, the



human through illness and the snail through displacement, the two creatures create a new shared space, a new society of interspecies kinship:

Illness isolates; the isolated become invisible; the invisible become forgotten. But the snail...the snail kept my spirit from evaporating. Between the two of us, we were a society all our own, and that kept isolation at bay. The snail was missing, and as the day waned, I was bereft (Bailey, 2010, 132).

Bailey calls her new friend “snail” and abstains herself from using proper names. The politics of giving human names to ecological components is act of colonization and hence a form of structural violence. Amitav Ghosh in his *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, taking a cue from the science fiction writer Jack Williamson, calls this phenomenon “terraforming” or landforming, but in a completely different context.<sup>6</sup> Through terraforming, Ghosh outlines how nature and culture that is indigenous to a place is declared *terra nullies* and then reshaped and well carpentered for the optimum extraction and exploitation.

Bailey therefore refrains committing semantic and morphological violence by terraforming and anthropomorphizing the wild snail. Here co/poetics thus not only believes in non-anthropomorphic and non-utilitarian ways of looking at natural environment but also provides agency and autonomy to the same. Her pathographical eco-poetics does not belong to the humanist tradition where ecology is only meant for only human consumption but rather where humans are only seen as a part of biosphere, a species amidst the ecological network of interspecies linkages. Her pathographical eco-poetics helps us to explore this new genre and a new phenomenological tool of doing eco-poetics.

## Disclosure Statement

*The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.*

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<sup>6</sup> Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse* (2021, 49)