Towards a Postnaturalist Ethics of Fiction: Misanthropocene and the Commons in Pond (2015) by Claire Louise-Bennett

Andrei Bogdan POPA

Universitatea „Babeş-Bolyai", Facultatea de Litere
Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Letters
Personal e-mail: 3andreipopa@gmail.com

Towards a Postnaturalist Ethics of Fiction: Misanthropocene and the Commons in Pond (2015) by Claire Louise-Bennett

Abstract: This article conceptualizes a postnaturalist ethics of fiction in order to trace the interconnections between anthropogenic effects on the environment and the reading and writing of texts as thematized in Claire Louise-Bennett's collection of short stories Pond. Starting from different theoretical formulations regarding epistemological "gaps," I explore theoretical links between Jacques Rancière's notion of fictional democracy, its relation to micro-events, and Steven Vogel's concept of the artifact as the practice which changes an already socially built natural environment. I then build upon this framework by relating it to Paul de Man's theory of unreadability and its effects upon the space of reading. In applying this framework on the close reading of the volume, what first surfaces is a tacit self-consciousness regarding the complicity between human practices upon a rapidly declining environment and the consumption and production of text, which following Vogel, is just another artifact in our fragile, dysfunctional Commons. Moreover, the protagonist's fascination and longing for the apparent autonomy of the natural world is threatened by the traces of sociality she invariably finds in the environment. The subsequent section of the textual analysis addresses Pond's ecological brand of misanthropy and notion of belonging and emplacement, social dialogue, mobilization, and democracy that are all calibrated according to the threat of climate change. I will thus argue that Bennett's texts, in their anti-social, tense escapism to environmental thinking, can re-valorize the concept of Misanthropocene by expressing a frustrated but honest disillusionment regarding the apparently nonsocial autonomy of nature.
Keywords: postnaturalism, narrative ethics, unreadability, Misanthropocene, the Commons.

Citation suggestion: Popa, Andrei Bogdan. „Towards a Postnaturalist Ethics of Fiction: Misanthropocene and the Commons in Pond (2015) by Claire Louise-Bennett". *Transilvania*, no. 3 (2022): 57-66.
https://doi.org/10.51391/trva.2022.03.07.

Introduction

Throughout this paper, I will argue that Claire-Louise Bennett's *Pond* foregrounds the ideological contradictions that inform the alienation of the modern subject from the builtness of her environment. Instead of "an ideological critique of the ideology of the individual,"[1] as argued by Daniel Hartley, the volume will reveal itself as a tense meditation on the internalized ideology of "nature" itself. It is not only "objects" that are "socially mediated,"[2] but the whole of the natural environment is as well. The essay will thus aim at a dialectical reading of the narratives through which Bennett thematizes the "kind of distance that you don't experience any more," which is "the one between yourself and the cosmos, or the world." [3] In turn, the political implications inherent in the postnaturalist claim whereby the world "the world surrounding us is always already something that human beings have transformed"[4] might be challenged via the notion of a "savage sense of yourself, and desire really and those uncomfortable things that we've made kind of civilized."[5] Rather than discarding one perspective in favor of another, I will investigate the ways in which they work together to create the tension which seems to lie at the heart of Bennet's collection of short stories. In my view, *Pond*'s narratives circle around the aporia whereby the

protagonist's intimate connection with nature is predicated upon the sociality that, though alienating (and sometimes even irritating) to her, still seems to haunt nature in its wildest corners. I think that, in thematizing processes whereby even storytelling has physical effects upon the world we share, this textual dynamic sheds light on the anthropogenic practices that have shaped the natural environment as we know it.

To this end, I first argue for the theoretical development of a postnaturalist ethics of fiction, which would investigate the possible interferences between notions such as "unreadability"[6] (Paul de Man, as read by J. Hillis Miller) and "micro-events"[7] (Jacques Rancière) with Vogel's conception of the "artifact."[8] Then, I apply this framework to reveal the complicity between the reading of texts and our actions upon the environment. Though these stories will prove, through their action, to illustrate Rancière's conception of *micro-events*, this section will focus on textuality, rather than narrative. It is in the next section that I analyze how the reading of narrative complicates the subject's relation to her environment, its sociality, and its history. As the narrator's reading (of texts and of reality in general) comes from a deep-seated obsession with the nonhuman in all of its materiality, this very fascination becomes a place of refuge from an alienation of the society. However, this line of flight hits against the very human, historical forces that have built the natural landscape into the supposedly autonomously nonhuman space it is today. In this sense, *Pond* is an undogmatic, and thus easily misunderstood, account of how the Anthropocene disempowers individuals from organizing in the name of the Commons, that is, the resources and modes of production that a community uses and shares collectively. The volume has been both praised for its "witty misanthropy,"[9] and criticized for its "potential blind spot: an underestimation of the social connotations of everyday objects."[10] This paper goes beyond both of these assessements in order to argue that, if *misanthropy* is to be valorized, it is by showing its potential in transforming past conceptions of the "Misanthropocene"[11] (with its emphasis on the right wing complicity in climate change) into the positive notion of a human collective aware of both climate denialism and ecological deadlocks that are facing the Commons.

The Postnaturalist Ethics of Fiction

Vogel's account of postnaturalism starts from the Marxist conception whereby the notion of "nature" itself is "a symptom of alienation", according to which something that is "built through human practices" comes to be viewed as "natural, eternal, untouched by human action"[12]:

> "The problem is that it is the environment, and not nature, from which we are alienated. By 'environment' I mean the world that actually environs us; and as I have argued earlier, that world is always already one that we have changed, and in that sense is a built or socially constructed environment. *We are alienated from the built environment, not from nature*."[13]

This why he posits the current perception of "the market" as equivalent to the contemporary understanding of climate change, or scientific truth in general, each of these being part of a world that "is simply given and beyond our control,"[14] gaining almost a mystical power over our feeble practices. In consequence, the market, science and climate change are not so much problematized, as they are perceived mystically. More precisely, once we have stopped recognizing the "sociality of the practices" upon which our natural enviornment has been built since the dawn of humanity, these same human practices – such as, for example, the engendring of commodities – appear "like things of nature."[15] Vogel argues that idea of alienation from nature essentially emerged from "a desire to find a normative standard outside human practices that could be used to evaluate those practices." Likewise, the "antihumanism" of this notion appears to the theorist as being just another strand of "anthropocentrism," "tied to a deep human exceptionalism," since it basically implies that "[humans] are able through their building activities to transcend nature." [16] As such, the notion of nature as being autonomous from sociality is something which implicitly excuses us from true responsibility for the intended, threatening consequences of our practice. This is because, Vogel claims: "Practices that are self-conscious about their significance—aware that they do transform the environment, and aware that they are always implicitly social in their preconditions, their normative structure, and their consequences as well—will be different practices from the ones we engage in under conditions of alienation."[17]

The postnaturalist practice to which the fragment refers gains a clearer conceptualization when understood spatiotemporally: the environment which is seen as "implicitly social" will also be regarded with an eye to "its rootedness in the past," and the objects it houses for human use are themselves "built by previous practice." Therefore, if the environment is "always built and (...) natural, both at once,"[18] it is by abandoning this outlook, and by thinking directly of our practices upon nature, that we can really start imagining a Commons that is ethical towards human and nonhuman beings alike.

This is why Vogel looks to the "construction of the artifact," which always inevitably includes a "gap" between "the intention with which the builder acts and the consequences of her acts." If we, as humans, are to relate to any "wildness," meaning "operation of forces in an object or organism that operate unpredictably and beyond the grasp of any human actor," such a phenomenon can only reside in this ineliminable gap, because every artifact is produced by "allowing processes to come into play that then operate independently to bring about a result." Moreover, the temporality of this act necessarily includes a period of human "waiting," while "unimaginable processes" result in its unalienably distinct effect. It is in guiding our practice around and towards this "wildness," as well as our adjacent "waiting," that we can build a landscape in which it can be maintained. More precisely, the "restoration process" (bringing nature will always house this very "wildness."[19] Thinking of environmental issues this way could

help us move beyond what Vogel deems to be the "religious idea" whereby humans are so separate from the world that there is a difference "between that part of the world that they have walked upon and changed and built and that part where they haven't."[20] Here, I claim that Vogel's theory of the artifact might bridge the gap between postnaturalism and the study of fiction in ways that could, paradoxically (as fiction, too, is an artifact), further undermine the anthropocentric perspective. Would this "bridge" actually be more of an ecocritical "Trojan horse"? For the purposes of this paper, I would rather settle for a tense, but steady linkage between the two fields of critical theory, as it will be demonstrated further on.

Over in the domain of narrative ethics, Jacques Rancière defines a different gap: "one through which stories arise, through which the story is written as differing from, but also as belonging to, life and composed of its materials," and "not what one habitually believes to be that which usually gives rise to the story":

> "And what [João Guimarães Rosa's] stories talk to us about is fiction itself, fiction and the suspension that it entails not simply the suspension of disbelief – the simplest one, all-too-simple – but the suspension of that which had sustained belief itself; that is, the usual order of time, the customary way of occupying a space, of identifying oneself as an individual, of inscribing oneself in relations of filiation and of relating to forms of use and to objects of possession."[21]

He constructs this notion to conclude his criticisms of the type of narratives which escape the Aristotelian principle of fiction, with its clear beginnings and endings, which means that actual "fiction" creates "spaces where an entire sense of the real is lost along with its identities and its points of reference."[22] Works of fiction such as these narrate "true life," because they do not aim at "linking what is anticipated and what happens," as the "subject of the tale here enters into contradiction with the necessity, which is anyway its own, to extend itself between a beginning and an end" – it is "a life that has precisely no edges and that thus contravenes the Aristotelian principle of fiction."[23] Consequently, this process takes place in the "time of the unbegun, which, by definition, cannot be stopped," [24] and which is always the duration in which fiction is created. In Rancière's conception, the "Marxist science of history," even when applied to literary fiction, cannot shake off its Aristotelian influence, as it works "by opposing, once more, the time of active men, who grasp the linkage of causes and inscribe their undertakings within it, to the time of passive men, whose material occupation obliges them to remain in the cave."[25] Something else is needed for a truly ethical and democratic account of fiction, and that is a movement outside of "grand history" and into "the universe of sensible micro-events" which Rancière defines as "fictional democracy."[26] This latter notion might be a very useful addendum to Vogel's conception of our current "tragedy of the commons,"[27] wherein our only escape would be a collective dialogue about sacrifices that each of us our willing to make.

Is this conception of narrative ethics incompatible with Vogel's theory of the artifact? Far from it, I would argue. Through "intention" and "consequence" and be seen as "edges," the act of writing fiction, nor that of simply storytelling, ever escape those outside perfective moments. It is rather the content, the consequence of the act that is "edgeless," and outside the Aristotelian principle of fiction. As such, Rancière's conception of "'true' stories"[28] can be said to harbor something akin to the very "wildness" to be found in the artifact. It thus shows how Marxism itself creates an "alienation" to narrative itself, and thus, to the ethics of fiction. Thus, it can create a mode of reading within which Vogel's account of postnaturalism can escape the narrative of "grand history"[29] and show how "micro-events" are in themselves small artefacts which participate in building our environment. We could potentially see how "wildness" interferes with "true life," emerging "through a rupture of the temporal relations in accordance with which individuals depend upon one another,"[30] and allowing for a thought of the Commons outside the Aristotelian dichotomy of active versus passive individuals.

However, if this tentative theoretical linkage ties the ethics inherent to the act of storytelling as seen by Rancière to the sequentiality of the artifact as seen by Vogel, where does this leave the ethics of reading? First, I have to note that, rather than letting "nature" stand in for "difference," for something that is in a "perpetual fugacity of final clarity,"[31] and always outside of human practice, postnaturalism sees it as "the familiar and necessary characteristics of those very practices through which we come to be who we are and the environment we inhabit comes to be what it is as well."[32] Nonetheless, this does not mean that *différance* disappears as well. On the contrary, I aim to show that Vogel's conceptualization of the artifact can be aligned with Paul de Man's notion of "unreadability," as understood by J. Hillis Miller. We can see this in the very wording that Miller uses to define the "ethics of reading," meaning the dimension of the text which requires "a response to the text that is both necessitated, in the sense that it is a response to an irresistible demand, and free, in the sense that I must take responsibility for my response and for the further effects."[33] As this paper will prove, the effects springing from the act of reading might also interfere with our anthropogenic practices.

As such, just like the consequences of the wildness which produces the artifact, the act of reading contains within itself something that is at once "bound to take place," and simultaneously "unexpected." In fact, the "predictability, the necessity of its occurrence," is the only thing conveying truth to the reading, assuring its "understanding" and its "affirmation as an ethical value" respectively. Moreover, if postnaturalism posits nature as being always already anthropogenized, this falls very much in line with de Man's argument that "reading ... turns empty space into a locus where something unique and unforeseen has occurred, has entered into the human world, and where it will have such effects as it will have."[34] These "effects" are based on the inherent "unreadability"

of experience, the "the law of the failure to read," since "ethicity" is, for de Man, a "discursive mode among others."[35] Nonetheless, this latter understanding of ethics does not in any way set us free of the ethical demand.

As de Man subsumes this law to all reading, bringing attention to the "errors" inherent in each interpretation, such a conception would bring some nuance to Vogel's skepticism regarding the "ventriloqual action" in which some environmental philosophy seems to engage: once we speak "in the name of" an entity that could never "speak for itself," this entity becomes a "dummy," because the speech that is being translated, say by fervent voices in ecocriticism, can never be replaced with its "first-person speech." This process gives the "intermediaries" the "power to command without the responsibility to justify," which must be viewed critically."[36] Here, too, Vogel's critical environmental philosophy might be extended into Rancière's notion of "fictional democracy," as "literature, for its part, gives singular speech to those who cannot evince it, to those who are absolutely unable to speak."[37] Indeed, an attention to the workings of fiction might be of help in forging a truly democratic way out of the tragedy of the commons.

Textuality and Artifacts

In this section, I will look at how *Pond*, through the actions of its narrator-protagonist, thematizes the interaction between the act of reading and the anthropogenization of the environment. The narrator is a literary academic whose career, she tells us early on, fell apart a few years back, around the time when a speech she had read during an event at prestigious university had garnered an unenthusiastic response..

As Andrew Gallix, among others, has pointed out, the reader of these stories "[gets] to know the narrator" very well, while simultaneously "[knowing little] about her"[38] (meaning concrete facts regarding her biography). As I will attempt to show throughout this chapter, such a disintegration of identity based on secrecy is a formal, narrative manifestation of the character's drive to makes herself unreadable, which is in itself a process that interacts with the artifacts she creates through her gardening and house chores. Indeed, these narratives can be read as the micro-events theorized by Rancière, with Meghan O'Rourke even pointing out that they aim at "making you question why so many of our everyday experiences go undescribed."[39] There might be a certain postnaturalist insight to be found in the text's vividly detailed mundane reality of anthropogenic practice, shrouded as it is in a secretive narrative voice.

However, before moving on, I have to point out that my reading will at least attempt to avoid the totalizing perspective that Bennett has called "parochial anthropocentrism,"[40] and in turn reveal the ideological import of Anthropocentrism to be observed in the "existential tension" deftly observed by O'Rourke throughout the stories: the volume relies on the acknowledgement that childlike daydreaming cannot be fully accessed and maintained, "because of course adults are meant to become adult."[41] Thus, if Vogel makes a point to "[avoid] the appeal to "nature" as a "metaphysically significant category with intrinsic moral implications,"[42] the narrator comes off as almost a satire that such a postnaturalist approach would draw up of environmentalists who find metaphysical meaning in a "nature" that has supposedly resisted anthropogenization. However, as we will see, narratives such as those in *Pond* have a distinct power to effectively subvert such anthropocentric readings, while nonetheless hinting at the unattainability of true ecological attunement. This dichotomy, I claim, might be valuable to the cultural dialogue around climate change.I will thus start from a postnaturalist perspective and then look at how the short story "Pond" hints at a way out, while simultaneously lending itself to Vogel's concepts in quite a productive way. At one point, the narrator gets extremely irritated at the sanitizing forces which have sullied the natural mystery of a pond near her house by having "the word pond scrawled on a poxy piece of damp plywood right there beside it" as a warning for potential children. She claims she "would be disgusted to the point of taking immediate vengeance" if a moment of solitude in this "purportedly magical place" was spoiled by such anthropogenic logocentrism, and she makes sure to clarify that this disgust towards the builtness of this environment is far from malevolent: "it's not that I want children to fall into the pond per se, though I can't really see what harm it would do them." What follows is a lament of the "meddlesome scaremongering signs" overwriting "earth's embedded logos," the symptom of an Anthropocene which sees the environment as a "a colossal and elaborate deathtrap."[43] Interestingly, enough, she also seems to find inner, pre-linguistic kinship with the nonhuman below: "the shapes of insurrection are only somewhere in my mind; a place that has become obscured in much the same way that the mounting formation of dissenting earth chuck is routinely concealed by the modifying application of concrete filler and whitewash."[44] Nonetheless, I would suggest that the ending of this story actually subverts a straightforwardly ecocritical reading of this story. As the narrator comes to chuck something that she "needed to get rid of fast, a broken, precious thing" into the lake, the shallowness of the water keeps it from fully sinking: "It just sort of wedged itself and was horribly visible."[45] Therefore, this focus on "visibility" and "scaremongering signs" actually points to a contradiction, whether intended or not, between the subject and her built environment: it is simultaneously as if the builtness of "nature" stifles its true readability, and as if no readability is to be desired anyway. However, this chucking of a commodity into the pond is in itself an artifact. The intention has been to make the object disappear into nature, and, in spite of her waiting, the "wildness" of the pond has rejected this plan.

However, *Pond* also stages the process of gardening itself in a similarly logophobic manner, and it is telling that Vogel himself gives the example of the gardener when illustrating the difference between thought, or act, and result, as the laborer waits "for a series of unimaginable processes to operate so as to bring forth the hoped-for plant."[46] The narrator admits

that "as with most mensurable areas of life [she] demonstrated no ambition whatsoever as a grower and selected to cultivate low-maintenance crops only."[47] This is sentence foreshadows a certain ecocentric bend throughout the volume. However, as we see further on in "Gloves Off," one cause for this lack of gardening productivity again has to do with the attachment to a pre-linguistic state, and a repulsion to all things "artificial": even though "the supermarkets have a habit of putting shelving units full of grow-your-own gardening kits right in front of the automatic doors," such products "deter rather than inspire" the narrator:

> "They frequently have a lot of excessively cheerful writing on them and look so manufactured I just can't conceive how anything natural and enduring could possibly spring from them."[48] This appeal to a pre-capitalistic nature is subverted later on in the same story, when the narrator learns that the reeds used by the small town's thatchers come from Turkey, rather than the nearby river Shannon, and that this is because, although this water had "indeed been a prime source of water reed until about twenty years ago":
>
> "Since then widespread use of intensive farming methods has increased the use of fertilisers and these run down from the fields with the copious rain and contaminate the waterways so that while the nitrates force the reeds to grow fast and long they grow too fast and too long and so are actually quite brittle and prey well useless and in fact wouldn't last very long at all up on a roof."[49]

Thus, natural landscape itself reveals itself to be already anthropogenized, already "tamed," but in a way that accidentally interferes with human agency. The "wildness" that results in the effect of contamination is something that the farmers had not foreseen, but neither particularly cared about. However, the thatching industry obviously did not strive after this event, probably throughout all of Ireland, if the import comes from Turkey. As the narrator is faced with this realization, along with the increasingly self-evident artificiality of gardening itself, the story progresses to a climactic scene in which the act of pruning becomes the more authentically ecocentric alternative to gardening. However, before continuing with analysis of "Gloves Off," it should be first noted that the narrator's affinity for "[deracinating] thick and fuzzy weeds" had been announced earlier in the volume, and, even though she doesn't know exactly "what drove [her]" to this act, she notes that "the first time in [her] adult life other people knew exactly what [she] was doing."[50] This time, in the quite uncomfortable presence (and gaze) of her male neighbor, the act of pruning gains an existential intensity, though it progresses naturally, from a drive that is again stated in a way that is not unlike Vogel's account of the artifact: "This is mindless, I thought, and very unflattering—stop it at once. But I didn't stop because I was so curious to find out what changed if I carried on." She soon realizes that "really hate all this stuff and it is a very normal and human thing to wish to crush it." This statement is not one springing from ecophobia, so much as from a certain ambivalent death drive, as it will become clear. What follows is, I would argue, a potential addendum to Vogel's plea against the mystification of "nature":

> "Oh, fuck the leaves and fuck the flowers! I want to see naked trees and hear the earth gasp and settle into a warm and tender mass of radiant darkness. I want to see the marks of hooves, not eleventh hour disposable barbeques. I want most of all to get inside there. That's right, that's always been true. It's the first thing I can remember. Standing at the back window, looking at the lawn, and knowing exactly everything beneath it and wanting to get back there."[51]

Thus, maybe the builtness of our environment, as well as our pretense at "readability," are to be understood less as alienation or false consciousness, but as something that would be there in any potential timeline where capitalism does not exist but language still does. O'Rourke even sees this scene as "the narrator practically [erasing] herself in favour of words, words, words,"[52] while Jia Tolentino argues that the "narrator osmoses into her [environment] completely," in contrast to "Thoreau's psychologically industrious self-reliance"[53] in *Walden* (the comparison between the two texts has been drawn by many reviewers and, as such, will be excluded from this paper until further research). However, the reading of the text as specifically thematizing unreadability is, I think, only reinforced by the deeply modernist, stream of consciousness passage to follow, as it spirals into a distortion of the origin myth. To quote just one sentence of this excursion, "This being the way and irreversible homewards now was a lifted skeletal thing of the past, without due application or undue meaning."[54] Seeing as how both Jia Tolentino and Bennett herself have pointed to the volume's Beckettian influence, it would be useful to read this "*nostalgie de la boue*"[55] through Mark Byron's theoretical assessment of Beckett's "geological imagination," which "probes the porous boundaries between human and mineral realms." Such an approach might suggest a different relationality to the very nonhuman forms of agency which shape the wildness of the artifact.

Thus, the text's geology of gaps (narrative, linguistic, artifactual) might be likened to the meditations upon the nonhuman which can be found in Beckett's later prose, as here, too, "lithnic vocabulary draws attention to complex textual stratification" [56] (the "earth's embedded logos" being only one obvious instance of such imagery). Therefore, if some kind of autonomous nature is "not far away, but beyond the way of return,"[57] maybe the narrator's ambivalence towards both the Commons and the Anthropocene actually do point to the sort of ungraspable wildness of our practices, because the "stratified nature of memory and textual production" can be seen as the very narrative wildness with which both Beckett and Bennett are concerned, or what the latter calls the "savage sense of yourself, and desire really and those uncomfortable things that we've made kind of civilized."[58] Maybe the text itself wants to stage the wildness of its making,

and thus continuously reveals the steeped in ideological contradictions in our relation to the environment. Moreover, if Byron argues that, in Beckett's late prose, the "focus extends beyond and beneath the history of human habitation to the geological forces giving its shape and structure," [59] one could also make the case that those forces are still subsumed to the realm of human practice, but that, despite our lack of agency over such matters, they still remain deeply "familiar" to us. In the following section, I will investigate the distance that this "familiarity" creates between humans and their environment in the practice of creating and maintaining a Commons, democratically, within the Anthropocene.

Misanthropocene and The Commons

Now that I have looked at how the protagonist and nature alike are embroiled in the artifacts staged by the volume's narratives, I have to return to Bennett's interest in the "kind of distance that you don't experience any more," meaning "the one between yourself and the cosmos, or the world."[60] Such a "distance" might bring an addendum to Vogel's understanding of "the tragedy of the commons" as a situation in which "a collective "organized" only as a set of private individuals is unable to turn itself into a true collective that decides together, using language, how to act."[61] This is because, although *Pond* as a whole is symptomatic of how this "tragedy" reverberates at a deeply private level, the text's narrative drive toward representing the "distance from yourself and the cosmos" could be just a microcosm of our relationship to the "wildness" in the practices which shape up our Commons.

In this section, I will therefore argue that the text thematizes the reading of narrative fiction in tandem with its narrator's inability to emotionally, and thus linguistically, assimilate into a country, primarily due to the tension between the narrator's relation to the nonhuman and Ireland's history of national trauma. More specifically, there is a contrast between the country's history of depopulation (due primarily to the Great Irish Famine), which left countless landscapes vacated of human inhabitants, and the narrator's meditation upon the possibility of a pristinely non-human natural environment. As it will become apparent, an alienation toward the builtness of "nature" is again at play here, as the material enchantment it produces works as a sort of refuge from the cultural barrier that keeps the protagonist from entering into any real dialogue with her interlocutors. As such, the spectral threat of climate change is emphasized by a political impotence created by past collective trauma. Moreover, Bennett's project to destruct the notion of selfhood itself might point to a more ethical notion of how the "Commons" should really be thought of: it might be that "ridding oneself of the superego/organized social self"[62] might not go against an ethical collective approach to tackling climate change; however, it might not do much good either – it might breed a level of passivity and obliviousness that postnaturalism decries as only facilitating the blindly extractivist practices of the Anthropocene. For whom will these Commons work, and what linguistic traps have the power to endanger the very "rational"[63] dialogue that Vogel pleas for in our struggle with climate change? I think that a postnaturalist ethics of fiction might start to be developed starting with the very challenge that is Bennet's *Pond*. As O'Rourke claims that the volume is "haunted by a feeling of semi-tragedy,"[64] I think that this spectrality is really that of the tragedy of the Commons, as understood by postnaturalism.

To start with, the narrator's relation her environment only gets more bewildering in "Control Knobs," where a malfunction of a commodity reveals that the mystification of a "nature" outside of human experience, with its supposedly "metaphysical"[65] significance, is simultaneously a mystification of all supposedly artificial objects that humanity has constructed through natural resources. While Gallix argues that the volume aims at a "re-enchantment of the world"[66] I will make the claim that the text is self-consciously wary of the implications presupposed by such ecologically charged pretensions. This textual ambivalence can be seen in the narrator's addressed monologue to "Salton," the brand name of a slow cooker whose all but one control knobs have fallen, thus complicating her eating pattern. However, before analyzing this part of the text, I have to look at how this monologue is deeply informed, not only by her appliance mishap, but also by the narrator's memories of the "impressions"[67] that Marlen Haushofer's *The Wall* had made on her. This novel is a survival story in which a woman discovers that she is the last person on earth and has to make do with the natural resources at her disposal. Here, I would suggest that, if de Man sees every act of reading as something which "turns empty space into a locus where something unique and unforeseen has occurred"[68] and which will have certain consequences, the effects in the case of the protagonist are once again directed towards some outside nature that is beyond human comprehending. My interpretation is best supported by a scene in the story where the protagonist is clipping her toenails as she imagines the ending that the novel does not provide, but leave ambiguous:

> "Since her death is not dealt with in the book the only place it can occur is in my head, and I feel as though something is still haunting me or even that I am still haunting something, which means the book carries on beyond where it ends, and no doubt this was the author's absolute wish. ... What exactly, I wondered, would death entail for her and how on earth could anyone even try to represent it? ... If we have lost the knack of living, I thought, it is a safe bet to presume we have forfeited the magic of dying."[69]

If we read this passage through Rancière's theory of the "edges of fiction," we can see how, though obviously skirting the Aristotelian principles of narrative, with their perfective beginnings and endings, the text also stages the failure (wherein, following de Man, any reading is a failure) to accept the porous edgelessness of a given survival story. The narrator gives it an *edge*, an ending, while again decrying the loss of enchantment with the object world that the modern era has engendered. This reading has the effect of maintaining

the protagonist in the position of what Vogel calls "ascetic locavorianism,"[70] the decision to dwell among nature, only consuming local grown vegetables – a practice which is less than impotent in the face of climate change. In a way, *Pond* candidly flaunts this distance between the decision to isolate oneself in a "natural" environment and actual ecological practice. I would even argue that this type of discourse, which many readers and reviewers have deemed to be "misanthropic," is actually a deeply honest, and thus helpful, mode of engaging in the dialogue around climate change. Thus, I would call for the revalorization and repurposing of the term "Misanthropocene,"[71] which has been coined in 2013 by Raj Patel to denominate the far-right extremism which has been an accomplice to capitalistic extractivism throughout the last decades. In turn, I would propose an anticapitalistic, democratic Misanthropocene, which would not only reject climate denialism, inaction, and ecological ventriloquism alike, but also shed light on how collective traumas inform the emotional basis of any real environmental mobilization.

This takes us back to the addressed monologue she directs at "Salton," the name on her faulty kitchen appliance. On the one hand, the confession she imparts to the reader regarding this event does echo Vogel's conception of the artifact: "it is a very rare occasion indeed when I've channeled any of this awareness into direct action and thereby altered the course of events so that they might progress more favorably."[72] On the other, her speech in this passage oscillates between that of a pen pal and of devotee: "Oh Salton of South Africa, do you even exist?"[73] Once again, it should be noted that reviewers like A.N. Devers see that text as enthusiastically and unambiguously embracing "re-enchantment:" "These personal objects, house fixtures, handmade things, body parts, and trees, are all considered nature in Pond—everything is wild and alive."[74] However, a different image emerges if one analyzes the discursive tensions within this monologue addressed to a commodity. Soon enough, she presents her thoughts upon her environment to this kitchen appliance, a product of global capitalism. She mentions the "lousy weather," the "bad infrastructure" and the country's "history of starvation which did in fact take many hundreds of lives hereabouts and beyond," though she emphasizes that "the exact spot where [she lives] is pleasant overall." The narrator then excuses herself to the kitchen suppliance, on account of her potentially insensitive mention of the famine: this was "simply because [her] mind is currently more susceptible to images of hunger" due to her control knob mishap. Nonetheless, she later on returns to images of the famine further on in the story, after relating to "Sulton" the awkwardness she had experienced at a dinner party, the alienation she feels towards the people of Ireland, herself being English. Here, Bennett's goal to represent different kinds of "vanishing behind the physical world" gain a disturbingly morbid dimension: "There would hardly be any trace of them, nothing to take hold of. Imagine that, Salton—already so wasted away there was nothing remaining to pull out and carry off."[75] Is this an effect of her past reading, regarding the character whose death we do not see? Are both these instances of imagining an unrepresentable death symptomatic of the same alienation to "nature" which posits the nonhuman as an almost spiritual force? Though Tolentino is right to point out that, in this instance, the narrator is "sensitive to the point of being porous, but she is also lucid, practical, and excruciatingly cognizant of what is normal,"[76] I would add that what surfaces in this imagery, albeit grounded in her "lucidity," is both a clear acknowledgement of the unreadability inherent in all experience, and a similar acknowledgement of an unreachable prelinguistic state of being, regardless of the narrator's desire to attain such a mode of life.

Nonetheless, though I have previously argued in favor of this type of environmental honesty at the level of cultural dialogue, I would also remind the reader that, within the text, this conflictual yearning for belonging to a community on the one hand, and attaining some prehuman state of being on the other, is very ironically confessed to "Sultan," the South-African brand of mini stoves. Moreover, since the Irish Great Famine of the 19th century was essentially a tragedy of the Commons, an asymmetrical breakdown in collective mobilization against a natural threat, the landscape in which the character struggles with her desire to "vanish behind the physical world"[77] engages with a landscape whose supposed nonhuman autonomy is in a very real sense the product of mass hunger and immigration, the political result of imperialist indifference and immorality. The tacit, misanthropic self-awareness that guides the protagonist's interactions with her environment is attested by the fact that such simultaneously morbid and geologic imagery erupts in a story about globalization and the world of commodities. It is for this reason that, in my view, *Pond* falls in line with what Rancière calls "the suspension of what makes belief possible... of identifying oneself as an individual." Her stories are "true," [78] because they narrate the very gaps in experience, the places that do not look like the stuff of narrative, and they do so while painfully revealing the confines of an identity which is alienated from the builtness of its environment, giving voice to a Misanthropocene that traverses the ideologically fractured identities of global capitalism. I argue that staging our ecological predicament in this way is actually a helpful step towards setting the stage for a real dialogue-driven mobilization that nonetheless keeps the acknowledgement of unreadability somewhere in the development of its practice.

Conclusion

Pond by Claire-Louise Bennett intricately thematizes the reactions between acts of reading and acts of anthropogenic transformations of the environment. It is in these *micro-events* that a postnaturalist ethics of fiction can start to be defined, as we recognize how the (always necessary, but singular) errors of our reading interfere with an always already human-built natural world. These readings shape our sense of belonging, the spaces we inhabit, and the ways in which we define our

identity. It is for this reason that, if climate change compells us to move towards a collective mobilization based on dialogue and individual sacrifices of commodity, the *fictional democracy* which inform this cultural discourse will have to also recognize the validity of misanthropic narratives which struggle with the very ideological contradictions engendered by the mystification of nature. It might be time to think of a new Misanthropocene.

Note

1. Daniel Hartley, "Claire Louise-Bennett's Pond (Review)," *Music and Literature*, February 11, 2016. https://www.musicandliterature.org/reviews/2016/2/10/claire-louise-bennetts-pond. Accessed December 15, 2021.
2. Ibid.
3. Claire-Louise Bennett, "Claire-Louise Bennett's exquisite words and dark thoughts," interview by Ian Maleney, *The Irish Times*, April 29, 2015, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/claire-louise-bennett-s-exquisite-words-and-dark-thoughts-1.2190902. Accessed December 15, 2021.
4. Steven Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2015), 55.
5. Claire-Louise Bennett, "Claire-Louise Bennett's exquisite words and dark thoughts," interview by Ian Maleney, *The Irish Times*, April 29, 2015, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/claire-louise-bennett-s-exquisite-words-and-dark-thoughts-1.2190902. Accessed December 15, 2021.
6. J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* (New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1987), 41.
7. Jacques Rancière, *The Edges of Fiction,* translated by Steve Corcoran (New York: Wiley, 2019), 133.
8. Vogel, *Thinking*, 95.
9. Dwight Garner, "'Pond' Makes Misanthropy Compelling," *The New York Times*, July 15, 2016, https://nytimes.com/2016/07/15/books/review-pond-makes-misanthropy-compelling.html. Accessed December 15, 2021.
10. Daniel Hartley, "Claire Louise-Bennett's *Pond* (Review)," *Music and Literature*, February 11, 2016, https://www.musicandliterature.org/reviews/2016/2/10/claire-louise-bennetts-pond. Accessed December 15, 2021.
11. Raj Patel, "THE MISANTHROPOCENE?," *Earth Island Journal* 28, no. 1 (2013): 21–21.
12. Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall,* 80.
13. Ibid., 69.
14. Ibid., 81.
15. Ibid., 86-87.
16. Ibid., 77.
17. Ibid., 103.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 111-113.
20. Ibid., 237.
21. Jacques Rancière, *The Edges of Fiction*, translated by Steve Corcoran (New York: Wiley, 2019), 154.
22. Ibid., 157.
23. Ibid., 154.
24. Ibid., 156.
25. Ibid., 130-131.
26. Ibid., 133.
27. Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall*, 202.
28. Rancière, *The Edges of Fiction,* 156.
29. Ibid., 133.
30. Ibid., 159.
31. Miller, *The Ethics of Reading,* 47.
32. Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall,* 128.
33. Miller, *The Ethics of Reading,* 43.
34. Ibid., 52-53.
35. Ibid., 41.
36. Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall*, 190.
37. Rancière, *The Edges of Fiction,* 150.
38. Andrew Gallix, "Pond by Claire-Louise Bennett review – a stunning debut," *The Guardian*, November 18, 2015, https://theguardian.com/books/2015/nov/18/pond-claire-louise-bennett-review. Accessed December 15, 2021.
39. Meghan O'Rourke, "A Debut Novel Traces a Woman's Life in Solitude," *The New York Times*, July 24, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/24/books/review/pond-claire-louise-bennett.html. Accessed December 15, 2021.

40. Claire-Louise Bennett, "The Mind in Solitude: An Interview with Claire-Louise Bennett," interview by Philip Maughan, *The Paris Review*, July 18, 2016, https://theparisreview.org/blog/2016/07/18/the-mind-in-solitude-an-interview-with-claire-louise-bennett/. Accessed December 15, 2021.
41. O'Rourke, "A Debut."
42. Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall*, 236.
43. Bennett, *Pond*, 23.
44. Ibid., 31.
45. Ibid., 32.
46. Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall*, 114.
47. Bennett, *Pond*, 7.
48. Ibid., 92.
49. Ibid., 94.
50. Ibid., 6.
51. Ibid., 98.
52. O'Rourke, "A Debut."
53. Jia Tolentino, "A Work of Fiction That Will Make You Feel Pleasantly Insane," *New Yorker*, July 11, 2016, https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/fiction-that-will-make-you-feel-pleasantly-insane. Accessed December 15, 2021.
54. Bennett, *Pond*, 99.
55. Gallix, "Pond."
56. Mark Byron, *Samuel Beckett's Geological Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 1.
57. Bennett, *Pond*, 99.
58. Bennett, "Claire-Louise Bennett's."
59. Byron, *Geological Imagination*, 2.
60. Bennett, "Claire-Louise Bennett's."
61. Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall,* 220.
62. O'Rourke, "A Debut."
63. Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall,* 235.
64. O'Rourke, "A Debut."
65. Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall,* 236.
66. Gallix, "Pond."
67. Bennett, *Pond*, 65.
68. Miller, *The Ethics,* 53.
69. Bennett, *Pond*, 58.
70. Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall,* 205.
71. Patel, "THE MISANTHROPOCENE?," 21.
72. Bennett, *Pond*, 58.
73. Ibid., 62.
74. A. N. Devers., "Domestic Disobedience." *The New Republic*, August 1, 2016. https://newrepublic.com/article/135696/domestic-disobedience. Accessed December 15, 2021.
75. Bennett, *Pond*, 62-63.
76. Tolentino, "A Work."
77. Claire-Louise Bennett, "Modes of Solitude, Embodiment and Mystery," interview by Susanne Stich, *The Honest Ulsterman*, June 2015, https://humag.co/features/claire-louise-bennett. Accessed December 15, 2021.
78. Rancière, *The Edge of Fiction,* 156-157.

Bibliography

Bennett, Claire-Louise. *Pond.* Dublin: The Stinging Fly, 2015.

Bennett, Claire-Louise. "Claire-Louise Bennett's exquisite words and dark thoughts." Interview by Ian Maleney. *The Irish Times*, April 29, 2015. https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/claire-louise-bennett-s-exquisite-words-and-dark-thoughts-1.2190902

Bennett, Claire-Louise. "Modes of Solitude, Embodiment and Mystery." Interview by Susanne Stich. *The Honest Ulsterman*, June, 2015. https://humag.co/features/claire-louise-bennett.

Bennett, Claire-Louise. "The Mind in Solitude: An Interview with Claire-Louise Bennett." Interview by Philip Maughan, *The Paris Review*, July 18, 2016. https://theparisreview.org/blog/2016/07/18/the-mind-in-solitude-an-interview-with-claire-louise-bennett/.

Byron, Mark. *Samuel Beckett's Geological Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Devers, A. N. "Domestic Disobedience." *The New Republic*, August 1, 2016. https://newrepublic.com/article/135696/domestic-disobedience.

Gallix, Andrew. "Pond by Claire-Louise Bennett review – a stunning debut." *The Guardian*, November 18, 2015. https://theguardian.com/

books/2015/nov/18/pond-claire-louise-bennett-review.
Garner, Dwight. "'Pond' Makes Misanthropy Compelling." *The New York Times*, July 15, 2016.
https://nytimes.com/2016/07/15/books/review-pond-makes-misanthropy-compelling.html.
Hartley, Daniel. "Claire Louise-Bennett's *Pond* (Review)." *Music and Literature*, February 11, 2016. https://www.musicandliterature.org/reviews/2016/2/10/claire-louise-bennetts-pond.
Miller, J. Hillis. *The Ethics of Reading*. New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1987.
O'Rourke, Meghan. "A Debut Novel Traces a Woman's Life in Solitude." *The New York Times*, July 24, 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/24/books/review/pond-claire-louise-bennett.html.
Patel, Raj. "THE MISANTHROPOCENE?" *Earth Island Journal* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 21–31.
Rancière, Jacques. *The Edges of Fiction.* Translated by Steve Corcoran. New York: Wiley, 2019.
Tolentino, Jia. "A Work of Fiction That Will Make You Feel Pleasantly Insane." *New Yorker*, July 11, 2016. https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/fiction-that-will-make-you-feel-pleasantly-insane.
Vogel, Steven. *Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2015.