The Two-Faced Trope: Prosopopoeia in Denise Levertov, Margaret Atwood and Louise Glück

By Poppy Haynes

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Abstract

What does it mean to speak for a non-human? The following thesis addresses this question by looking at how prosopopoeia—the trope that confers a human voice on a non-human speaker—operates in poem sequences by three poets: Denise Levertov, Margaret Atwood and Louise Glück. Prosopopoeia, this thesis argues, is a “two-faced” trope. It promises to advocate or speak for the non-human figure in a way that resists anthropocentrism; however, the trope’s promise is inevitably compromised by its own appropriative flipside. In the very act of giving voice the poet cannot but appropriate the non-human other because the poet can only confer voice within a framework of human speech, human thought and humanising anthropomorphism. This thesis demonstrates the inevitability of such appropriation by showing how each poet’s distinct approach to speaking for the non-human cannot, ultimately, move beyond such anthropocentrism. Furthermore, attempts to forestall appropriation do not retrieve prosopopoeia’s promise. While Levertov’s failure to engage with her own appropriation makes her prosopopoeias problematic, Atwood’s self-reflexive acknowledgement of appropriation creates the new problem of the narcissistic foregrounding of the self. Even the meta-self-reflexive interrogation of the narcissism of self-reflection that Glück undertakes, rather than diminishing this problem, instead traps the poet in a closed circuit of narcissism that leaves no room for the alterity of the non-human other. There is, however, one figure who embodies hope for salvaging prosopopoeia’s promised challenge to anthropocentrism: the reader. This thesis concludes that a real possibility for deconstructing anthropocentrism and acknowledging alterity can be retrieved in the reader’s singular encounter with the otherness of the text.
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Introduction: Prosopopoeia as Advocacy and Appropriation

“Giving voice to something that does not speak is a challenge we should not take lightly”
—Linda Vance, “Beyond Just-So Stories”

“Even the most faithful (shall we say selfless?) attempt at imitation involves appropriation, introjection, infidelity, and a relation to the other that is neither premised on identity and mutual recognition nor ethical”
—Haun Saussy, “Death and Translation”

Since the 1970s the question of whether it is possible, or even desirable, to speak for someone else has become one of the foremost concerns of fields ranging from feminism to postcolonial and critical race studies, to the study of ethics and literature. From early concerns with the poet Jerome Rothenberg “putting words in their [native Americans’] mouths” and violating the rules around “presenting the words and ideas of others” (Bevis 695; Clements 195; my emphasis in both), to the splash made by, and subsequent reprintings of, Linda Alcoff’s influential 1991 essay “The Problem of Speaking for Others,”1 the appropriative aspects of speaking for have become a significant concern for scholarship and activism in many fields. The most recent reiteration of this debate, within the fields of ecocriticism and animal studies, has extended the question of speaking for beyond the human, to ask what it may mean to speak for non-human animals and nature. This extension of the debate brings to the fore new problems. One such problem, for example, concerns the authority with which humans can presume to speak for nature, as is evidenced in Lawrence Buell’s comment that “it is self-evidently more problematic for an ecocritic to presume to speak for ‘nature’ than for (say) a black critic to speak for black experience” (8). Another problem that arises when speaking for non-human nature concerns the appropriative (anthropocentric) anthropomorphisms that seem to plague this form of representation, which Dorothy Nielsen highlights when she states that “silencing the other is not

1 Since its first publication in Cultural Critique Alcoff’s essay has been revised and widely reprinted. See, for example, Roof and Wiegman, Weisser and Fleischner, Blumenfeld and Bell, Jackson and Mazzei, and Jaggar.
an issue in ecological advocacy. But projection is” (“Prosopopoeia” 695). Within the context of speaking for non-humans, however, the appropriative quality of speaking for is most often depicted as a trap or pitfall to be got around by the savvy writer or critic, not (as I will argue it is) as inextricably intertwined with advocacy. Additionally, while these fields are certainly not blind to the complexities of speaking for non-humans, so far, surprisingly, they have only addressed the issue with reference to texts which “speak for” in the sense that they represent non-human others from a human perspective, but not, paradoxically, with reference to texts which “speak for” non-human nature in the most literal sense: texts which adopt the perspective and the first-person I of a non-human other, a trope described by the rhetorical term prosopopoeia. Yet it is the texts which use prosopopoeia to literally speak for non-humans that, I argue, provide potent opportunities for fields such as ecocriticism and animal studies to (re)consider what it means to speak for non-human nature more generally. That as of yet little has been said about this trope is curious (particularly in the context of the “greening” of many areas of literary criticism) because prosopopoeia, at first glance, seems to promise so much: it is a trope that not only highlights and engages with concerns around anthropocentrism and the human/non-human binary, but also, through dethroning or diminishing the figure of the human poet, seems to offer a way to advocate for non-human nature that escapes the anthropocentrism afflicting other forms of representation.

This thesis begins from the premise that Barbara Johnson’s claim that “rhetorical [...] and political structures are profoundly implicated in one another” is true of more than just the importance of rhetorical apostrophes for the abortion debate, which she discusses (“Apostrophe” 39). It is my contention that prosopopoeia is a rhetorical structure that is, to borrow from Johnson, “profoundly implicated” in the political structure of advocacy. Prosopopoeia has been characterised as “the master trope of poetic discourse” (de Man, “Hypogram” 33), “the trope of autobiography” (de Man Rhetoric 76), “the figure for reading” (Johnson, Persons 14; emphasis original), and “a trope of survival” (Guyer 13). While all are compelling descriptions, above and before any of these functions, I argue, prosopopoeia is the trope of advocacy. It is the advocatory act of “speaking for” crystallised into a rhetorical figure. Prosopopoeia functions as an act of advocacy in both a rhetorical (poetic) and political sense. Because advocacy involves speaking for another, speaking by proxy, prosopopoeia’s very structure (the poet speaking by proxy for the imagined non-human subject) is advocatory. Just as legal advocacy is, in Charles P. Curtis’s words, “a special case of vicarious conduct,” the lawyer vicariously stepping into the shoes of the client, so too does prosopopoeia entail the “vicarious conduct” of the poet stepping into the shoes (or, perhaps more accurately, paws, claws and
trotters) of the non-human and speaking for the non-human as a kind of human proxy. This literal form of advocacy also entails a political form of advocacy in that, by conferring voice on a non-human, the poet endows the non-human with the ethical and political status of a speaking subject rather than a voiceless object. Prosopopoeia confers on the non-human subject not only the ability to critique humans, but also the status of something (someone?) with its (his? her?) own other-than-human perspective.

It is because of the way prosopopoeia’s advocacy troubles the human subject that the trope should, I suggest, arouse interest from areas such as ecocriticism and animal studies. Both fields exhibit a growing distrust of simplistic divisions between the categories of “non-human” and “human,” and reject the anthropocentric worldview that relies on this binary. This distrust is exemplified in, for example, Matthew Calarco’s recent book Zoographies, which argues that “the human-animal distinction can no longer and ought no longer be maintained” (3; emphasis original), and Helen Tiffin’s contention that because “the human/animal ‘boundary’ is a socially and culturally contingent construction” (35), the Humanities need to move “towards the interrogation of the species ‘boundary’ and its dismantling” (40). The problem with most forms of advocacy for or representation of non-humans is that their very structure reinforces this human/non-human (self/other, subject/object) binary, which underpins anthropocentrism and the marginalisation of non-human nature. Accordingly, even though a poem “spoken” by a human persona might, for example, aim to advocate for a non-human subject, it perpetuates the privileging of the human because it retains as central the figure and voice of the human, and the human point-of-view; the non-human remains marginal and voiceless, unable to contest its construction within the human imagination. “If the power of discourse,” Harriet Ritvo explains, “lies in its inevitable restructuring and re-creation of reality, the ability of human beings to offer counterinterpretations places inevitable limits on the exercise of that power. Animals, however, never talk back” (5). Prosopopoeia, by contrast, is different, in that interrupts this exercise of power by hypothesising a scenario where the non-human does “talk back.” The trope requires the poet to adopt a voice outside of a human perspective, and imagine herself into a non-human perspective: an apparently ecocentric task. In this way, prosopopoeia’s very structure can be seen to be anti-anthropocentric, for it renders marginal the traditionally central voice of the human poet. Prosopopoeia therefore functions as an extension and literalising of the way

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2 These concerns are not limited to ecocriticism and animal studies, and indeed exist within the context of a broader ethical turn in the Humanities—as illustrated, for example, by Graham Huggan’s description of “the typical concerns of the ethical turn” as including “an analysis of the relationship between self and other; [...] an interrogation of human subjectivity and, in some extreme cases, a challenging of the category of the ‘human’ itself” (“Postcolonialism” 162).
“ecofeminists and their allies,” Andrew McMurry explains, “work toward the elimination of
dualistic thinking and the pitiless culture of domination that such thinking presumably
inculcates” by “incorporating non-humans into the commonwealth of speaking subjects” (54).
The difference is that the metaphorical voice attributed to nature by the ecofeminists McMurry
references becomes a very literal depiction of voice in prosopopoeia.

Theoretically, at least, prosopopoeia thus seems to offer the possibility of deconstructing
the human/non-human binary and calling into question the human subject to whom the non-
human is usually subordinated. By conferring voice on, and thus prioritizing, the traditionally
mute and secondary non-human, prosopopoeia can be seen to take the first step of Derridian
deconstruction and invert the values inherent in a binary that inevitably reduce a Not-A to a
defining A. This inversion or “overturning” is necessary, Derrida explains, because “in a classical
philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of vis-à-vis, but rather
with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or
has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a
given moment” (Positions 41). Prosopopoeia promises a form of advocacy that undermines
the anthropocentrism of this “violent hierarchy,” which has traditionally cast non-human nature as
the negatively valued Not-A, because the trope repositions non-humans as central, as the A, and
positions humans as outside this new non-human perspective and standard, that is, as the Not-A.
This inversion needs to precede the displacement of the binary in order to prevent the
hierarchical structure itself being left intact. Derrida explains:

To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating
structure of opposition. Therefore one might proceed too quickly to a neutralization that
in practice would leave the previous field untouched, leaving one no hold on the previous
opposition, thereby preventing any means of intervening in the field effectively. We know
what always have been the practical (particularly political) effects of immediately jumping
beyond oppositions, and of protests in the simple form of neither this nor that. (Positions 41;
emphasis original)

Thus, prosopopoeia’s promise of anti-anthropocentric advocacy (advocacy that undermines the
human/non-human binary) is grounded in its recasting of the values assigned to each side of that
binary. Furthermore, by featuring the non-human as a speaking (thinking) subject (and thus
overriding the conventional means of differentiating human from non-human), prosopopoeia
also enacts the second step of Derridian deconstruction, displacing the binary itself by
destabilising the very opposition of self/other, subject/object, human/non-human.
Because prosopopoeia removes the mediating figure of the human speaker who conventionally would focalise the poem, the trope seems to have potential to unravel the whole problem of appropriation that afflicts advocacy. If advocacy or speaking for non-human nature suffers from the danger that the advocate may end up appropriating the primary position, relegating the non-human recipient of the advocacy once again to the peripheries, then prosopopoeia’s depiction of the non-human subject as speaking for itself appears to remove this danger. Moreover, because this promise (of dethroning the human) implicitly takes the form of a deconstruction of the human/non-human binary—the non-human speaks using human language—the danger of appropriation seems to be dissolved in a further way: if the problem of appropriation that is associated with a self speaking for an other arises from the binary distinction of self and other, which itself is contingent on the historical devaluation of the other (as not-self), then by troubling the self/other, human/non-human binary, prosopopoeia seems to promise to (dis)solve the problem of appropriation.

The central concern of my thesis is: does prosopopoeia live up to all it seems to promise? Does the trope offer a way to a form of advocacy that resists anthropocentrism? Denise Levertov, Margaret Atwood, and Louise Glück are three poets who all, in different ways, take up prosopopoeia’s anti-anthropocentric promise, providing cases to test whether the trope’s promise can indeed be realised. I focus on three prosopopoeic sequences: Levertov’s 1981 Pig Dreams, an illustrated collection of seventeen poems, sixteen of which are spoken by Sylvia, a Hampshire pet pig (in the final poem the goddess Isis replies); Atwood’s “Songs of the Transformed,” a sequence of ten poems first published in You Are Happy (1974), in which nine speakers are animals and the tenth is a corpse; and Glück’s 1992 Pulitzer Prize-winning The Wild Iris, which comprises a three-way conversation between flowers, a gardener and God. Levertov’s, Atwood’s and Glück’s non-human prosopopoeias tap into the trope’s anti-anthropocentric promise in that they highlight, and are sometimes used to unsettle, an anthropocentric worldview and the implicit speciesist hierarchy encoded in the binary separation of humans and non-humans. The prosopopoeic sequences unsettle, even begin a deconstruction of, the binary itself. They use prosopopoeia to critique the inhumanity of humans and valorise the otherness of non-humans. They also highlight various forms of interrelatedness between humans and non-humans, and sometimes imagine other, more ecocentric ways for humans to engage with non-human nature.

What a closer analysis of Levertov’s, Atwood’s, and Glück’s sequences reveals, however, is that even though prosopopoeia is different from other modes of speaking for, it is still not immune to the problem that afflicts those other modes: namely, appropriation. Prosopopoeia’s
anti-anthropocentric promise in fact goes hand in hand with an appropriative flipside that is both inescapable and anthropocentric. Prosopopoeia ultimately promises more than it can offer, functioning as a form of advocacy which is paradoxically contingent on appropriation, in that the more successful the (illusion of) speaking for the non-human is, the greater is also the appropriation of non-human voice. If, on the surface, prosopopoeia seems to offer the ultimate form of advocacy, closer analysis reveals it to be a two-faced trope, characterised by a doubleness that complicates the very advocacy it enacts. The rhetorical advocacy, or literal speaking for, is undermined by the trope's unstable nature. Prosopopoeia is an unravelling device that necessarily falls short of its own goal: it cannot confer speech (or create the illusion of doing so) in an uncomplicated way. While the figure of the poet may be momentarily effaced by prosopopoeia's ability to conjure a different persona, this can never be sustained; the illusion always breaks down and the poet and the reader share the tacit acknowledgement that the disguise is imperfect. In this way, the trope presents a speaking voice that is inevitably doubled because the voice the reader encounters evokes both the imagined non-human speaker and the “real” speaker: the poet speaking from behind a non-human mask. This doubleness is captured in both the trope’s etymology—the Greek “Prosopōn” means both face and mask, so prosopopoeia can be translated as both “to confer face” and “to confer mask”—and in de Man’s observation that “Our topic deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, figure, figuration and disfiguration” (Rhetoric 76).

This doubling of voice is true of any first-person fiction, but the effect seems much more pronounced in poetic prosopopoeias than in, say, prose fiction. This is arguably due to the different conventions attached to each form: because first-person narration is an accepted convention in prose fiction, the author does not haunt the first-person “I” in the way the poet seems to haunt the prosopopoeic voice. Conversely, because mainstream poetry is overwhelmingly dominated by the lyric form, which nearly always situates the first-person speaker as either the voice of the poet, or the voice of an amorphous speaker very like the poet, a poem that breaks this norm to adopt the voice of a fictional character cannot so easily efface the human poet. Moreover, a poem that adopts the voice of a fictional non-human character foregrounds the poet's own voice even further: by conferring voice on something incapable of speech the poet draws attention to herself as the person doing the conferring.

It is the fact that the speaking voice is doubled, that the poet cannot completely efface or escape her role as the creator of the prosopopoeia, which causes prosopopoeia’s rhetorical instability and doubleness to extend into an ethical and political ambivalence. If we return to Curtis’s description of “vicarious conduct,” the appropriative connotations of the word
“vicarious” complicate what initially might seem unproblematic advocacy. A prosopopoeia, and particularly a non-human prosopopoeia, is never just rhetorical. There is always a political stake in this kind of representation, a power dynamic that cannot be ignored. “Vicariousness” suggests a going-beyond the self, an appropriation of experiences that cannot legitimately be claimed as one’s own. Prosopopoeia’s vicariousness means that while it promises to offer ultimate advocacy to the non-human, it paradoxically also facilitates the ultimate consumption of the non-human; while it promises to offer a way to imagine or experience non-human otherness, it does this by reducing the non-human into human terms. The advocacy enacted by the trope is always-already unravelling because prosopopoeia operates in a space of ambivalent potential in which the possibility of conferring voice onto a non-human subject also entails the reductive appropriation of that voice: speaking-for implies a kind of violence and appropriation that form a darker underside to apparently harmless face of advocacy.

The trope’s very medium—human language—necessarily translates the non-human into human terms. Prosopopoeia therefore creates the dilemma that in order to preserve the otherness of the non-human the poet must forego meaning—a dilemma that is vividly illustrated by the Scottish poet Edwin Morgan in his prosopopoeia of the Loch Ness Monster (248):

Sssnnnwhuffffll?
Hnwhuffl hhnnwfl hnl fl?
Gdroblbobl hobngbl gbl gl g g g gbgl.
Drubhlaflabhaflabhafl gabaflaflfl fl fl —
gm grawwwww grf grawf awfgm graw gm.
Hovoplodok-doplodovok-plovodokot-doplodokosh?
Splgraw fok fok splgrafhatchgabrlgabrl fok splfok!
Zgra kra gka fok!
Grof grawff gahf?
Gombl mbl bl —
blm plm,
blm plm,
blm plm,
blp.

In order to retain the non-human otherness of the Loch Ness Monster, Morgan must do away with accessible meaning, even accessible pronunciation. Because the poem uses punctuation and is titled “The Loch Ness Monster’s Song” (rather than, say, “The Loch Ness Monster’s Scary Noise”), Morgan preserves a sense of untranslatable meaning behind the poem. The monster
asks questions and makes exclamations, but what they are we cannot know. The final, heartbeat-like “blm plm, / blm plm, / blm plm,” forms the only common language in the poem—a communication not of meaning, but simply existence. Prosopopoeia, Morgan’s poem seems to illustrate, must either retain non-human otherness and sacrifice meaning, or create meaning but sacrifice otherness. The promise of prosopopoeia—anti-anthropocentric advocacy—relies on, and therefore is always-already undercut by, the appropriation that arises from imagining the non-human in human terms and human language.

This thesis enters conversations about advocacy and speaking for at a time when advocacy’s appropriative underside has become hard to ignore. It also enters these conversations at a time when individuals who speak for others in a range of ways, not least creative writers, are expressing frustration with the heightened suspicion around “speaking for”—perhaps a reaction to a popular critical approach that itself reacts against the homogenising dangers of identity politics and instead prefers to reject the act of speaking for others outright. I do not, however, endorse such a wholesale rejection, and instead argue that the dangers of prosopopoeia are inextricably tied up with advocatory possibilities that are complicated, but not necessarily entirely invalidated, by the trope’s doubled function. While prosopopoeia’s appropriative underside prevents Levertov, Atwood and Glück from overcoming anthropocentrism in a conclusive or uncomplicated way, it is easy to overlook the logical flipside to this problem, which is that, albeit in an inconclusive and complicated way, prosopopoeia does enable a degree of resistance to anthropocentrism. It is my contention that, although on the page this resistance is inevitably married to the trope’s own appropriation of otherness, the act of reading opens up new possibilities for this appropriation to be resisted.

Atwood’s, Levertov’s and Glück’s sequences in different ways highlight and succumb to this problematic ambivalence of prosopopoeia’s advocacy, ultimately demonstrating that the trope’s promise of anti-anthropocentric advocacy is inseparable from its appropriative (and thus anthropocentric) underside. In the following chapters I do not approach the sequences chronologically, but rather in terms of the way they function in my own particular narrative about prosopopoeia. In each chapter I look first at how prosopopoeia seems to fulfil the poet’s interpretation of the trope’s promise, then I illustrate how prosopopoeia’s appropriative underside compromises this promise and, finally, I look at how the poet responds to the problems prosopopoeia presents. I turn first to Levertov’s *Pig Dreams* and show how Levertov’s use of prosopopoeia, while apparently the purest example of advocacy in its effacing of the

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3 See, for example, Stephen Henigan’s “‘Appropriation of Voice’: An Open Letter” and “The Terrible Truth About ‘Appropriation of Voice’.”
human poet, ultimately illustrates the impossibility of fully escaping from either the trope’s rhetorical unravelling or its anthropocentric appropriation of the non-human. *Pig Dreams* provides a striking example of prosopopoeia’s appropriative underside. Of the three poets I focus on, Levertov seems the most likely ‘poster child’ for the politically concerned fields of ecocriticism and animal studies: she has a whole volume of poetry on environmental and animal welfare themes (*The Life Around Us*); in an interview with Jean Ross she listed “all the environmental problems” as one of her “greatest social and political concerns” (Levertov, *Conversations* 170); and she was, as Jewel Spears Brooker notes, “a major participant in [...] the green movement,” among a range of other causes (xiv). It is difficult to think of another poet of Levertov’s generation who better fits the description “poet-advocate,” and critical discussions of Levertov’s animal- and environmentally-themed poetry certainly affirm this role. However, these discussions tend to neglect *Pig Dreams*, or if they do mention the book, they discuss only what it achieves, failing to pick up on what I suggest is an appropriative underside of Levertov’s attempt to speak for the sequence’s protagonist: the pig Sylvia. The book’s prosopopoeias, I argue, offer an important qualification of Levertov’s role as poet-advocate, ultimately highlighting Levertov’s inability to avoid appropriation entirely, because, paradoxically, the feature that makes her book the most advocatory of the three texts analysed in this thesis (her uninterrupted prosopopoeia of animal voice) is also the feature that makes her book arguably the most appropriative.

In Chapter One I argue that for Levertov, prosopopoeia seems to promise a way out of anthropocentrism by enabling the poet, through “active empathy,” to feature the non-human as an “ecological subject” who speaks for herself. While this privileging of a non-human voice does enable Levertov to challenge anthropocentrism with Sylvia’s contrastingly ecocentric “pig-wisdom,” I show how the very construction of Sylvia as a character in the book is contingent upon Levertov’s arrogation of Sylvia’s non-human otherness. Levertov, I argue, responds to this problem by endowing Sylvia with a doubleness to match the trope’s own doubleness. She blurs and destabilises Sylvia’s relationship to reality, while at the same time insisting on Sylvia’s realness, in an attempt to have her cake and eat it too, or, rather, have her (real) non-human, and speak for it too. The book’s pastel illustrations, however, by reemphasising Sylvia’s non-human otherness, highlight the limitation of Levertov’s response, demonstrating that it engages only with the trope’s poetic ambivalences and fails to acknowledge the anthropomorphic arrogation of otherness into which prosopopoeia forces Levertov.

I then explore how Atwood’s and Glück’s sequences, by contrast, do recognise the appropriation inherent in their acts of speaking for non-human nature, each using self-reflexivity in an attempted escape from the critique of political naivety that can be levelled at Levertov. In
Chapter Two I turn to Atwood, whose much more self-reflexive use of prosopopoeia offers one example of an attempt to engage with prosopopoeia’s own ambivalences. Atwood’s interpretation of prosopopoeia’s promise is, unlike Levertov’s, not so much based on the trope’s (in)ability to access the real, but rather on the trope’s ability to deconstruct the human/non-human binary. In “Songs of the Transformed,” the deconstruction of the human/non-human binary seems to promise a way for Atwood to resist and critique the Canadian animal-victim tradition. This resistance is, however, complicated by prosopopoeia’s own re-victimisation of the non-human, which lies in its anthropomorphic translation of the non-human into human terms. Atwood uses self-reflexivity to acknowledge this appropriation, but paradoxically, her self-reflexive response only replicates the ambivalence of the trope itself: while it does undermine her own use of prosopopoeia on both poetic and political levels, it also returns the text to the (human) self, resulting in a textual narcissism that reintroduces the anthropocentrism that the self-reflexivity sought to undermine.

In Chapter Three I look at how, like Atwood’s sequence, Glück’s volume also seeks to address the problems of appropriation inherent in prosopopoeia. Glück seems to interpret prosopopoeia’s promise as a way of resisting and revising the anthropocentric narcissism of the neo-Romantic lyric tradition. Here again, though, prosopopoeia’s ambivalence emerges. While prosopopoeia does enable Glück to resist the anthropocentrism of lyric narcissism, it also necessitates pathetic fallacy, through which, in Glück’s melancholic use of it particularly, (anthropocentric) narcissism returns. Like Atwood, Glück uses self-reflexivity to demonstrate an awareness of prosopopoeia’s doubleness and its appropriation of non-human otherness. She goes a step further than Atwood, however, for she thematises and critiques narcissism itself, thus pre-empting and undermining the narcissism of her own self-reflexivity. Rather than dissolving the problem of this appropriative narcissism, however, Glück’s meta-self-reflexivity ultimately confines the poems in a closed circuit of narcissism, in which self-reference or self-critique only increases the focus on the self at the expense of the non-human other.

I conclude with a coda that examines how in all three texts the reader creates opportunities for ethical resistance to, or revisioning of, the act of speaking for non-humans. I argue that, while the reader might risk replicating the poet’s ambivalent advocacy, the reader also, and importantly, brings new possibilities for breaking the cycle of prosopopoeia’s appropriative gesture. Levertov’s, Atwood’s, and Glück’s sequences are not seen as (un)conventional “open texts” and their more mainstream appeal has caused critics to neglect the importance of the reader as a co-producer of meaning and effect, an aspect usually reserved for the analysis of more experimental texts. The reader does, however, play a central role in the three poets’
prosopopoeias. The reader not only brings an entirely new and singular set of variables to the text, but is also confronted by the otherness of the text itself, and, in this encounter with otherness, can allow him- or herself to be unsettled by the text and to undergo what Derek Attridge describes as the “subjective refashioning” a text can bring about in a reader. I suggest that the act of reading a prosopopoeia can prompt or enhance this subjective refashioning in a way that other modes of representing non-humans cannot do—providing at least one way in which prosopopoeia can be said to make good on its promise to advocate for, rather than appropriate, the non-human other.

By analysing the importance of the reader as an active participant in the prosopopoeias, I finally call into question different politics of reading, demonstrating the need for a critical reading practice that is neither an overly naive embracing of the trope nor an overly suspicious rejection of prosopopoeia. Neither a naive celebration of empathy and the sympathetic imagination, nor what Rita Felski describes as a “hermeneutics of suspicion” can adequately deal with the slippery, unravelling advocacy enacted by prosopopoeia (“After” 29).
Pig Dreams: Prosopopoeia and Appropriative Empathy

The poems are my life with my pig as told by my pig. It really is that simple [...]. To me this is a very pure book.
—Liebe Coolidge, email to Poppy Haynes

The truth is rarely pure and never simple.
—Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest

Denise Levertov’s 1981 Pig Dreams is an illustrated sequence of seventeen prosopopoeic poems, sixteen of which are “spoken” by a Hampshire pig called Sylvia about different events throughout her life. Like the other two sequences in my study, Pig Dreams reveals a particular interpretation of prosopopoeia’s anti-anthropocentric promise to dethrone the human subject. For Levertov, the promise seems to be straightforward: prosopopoeia offers her a way to efface herself as poet and present a (real) non-human as a thinking, feeling, and most importantly speaking subject, thereby contesting an anthropocentric worldview that denies the subjecthood of non-human nature. Of the three poets in my study, Levertov most enthusiastically “buys into” this promise to efface the self and privilege the non-human other. While we might expect Pig Dreams to illustrate the cultural shift in which speaking for others—the appropriation of voice—was increasingly being questioned, Levertov’s use of prosopopoeia seems more an attempt to circumvent, or at least a decision not to engage with, both the poetic and political ambivalences of the trope. Whereas most writers respond to the trope’s unravelling quality—its inability to ever really present a voice different from the poet’s—by self-reflexively pointing to themselves within the text, and sharing with the reader an acknowledgement of the trope’s artifice, Levertov’s prosopopoeic poems work to resist the disintegration of the non-human mask. But the trope’s problematic ambivalences cannot be entirely suppressed, and so Pig Dreams ultimately reveals its own critical blindspots—blindspots which both Atwood and Glück attempt to deal with in different ways. I look first at the ways in which prosopopoeia, by representing Sylvia as a subject, seems to fulfil its anti-anthropocentric promise. Second, I demonstrate how prosopopoeia’s fictionality necessitates anthropomorphism and therefore inevitably leads Levertov into an arrogation of Sylvia’s non-human otherness. Finally I show
how, while Levertov’s own response to prosopopoeia’s ambivalences fails to address the problem of appropriation and is therefore unable to retrieve the trope’s anti-anthropocentric promise, the illustrations in the volume, by contrast, enact a fuller response to prosopopoeia, and point the way for prosopopoeic poems themselves to do the same.

The poems that make up Pig Dreams, which form a whimsical Bildungsroman narrative, are different in tone from almost all of Levertov’s other environmentally themed poems. This tonal difference can probably be explained, in part, because the poems did not arise primarily from animal rights or environmental concerns but instead were inspired by pastel drawings and anecdotes of a real pig called Sylvia.\(^4\) The difference in tone is also, however, undoubtedly due to the fact that because prosopopoeia promises Levertov a way to dethrone herself and instead use empathetic imagination to construct a tonally distinct voice for Sylvia, her usual poetic voice is sidelined. Despite its difference from Levertov’s other environmental poems, Pig Dreams shares with those poems an anti-anthropocentric politics. The year before Pig Dreams was published Levertov gave a speech in which she argued for the need to “revise” an “arrogantly anthropocentric view of life which leads mankind to exploit Nature instead of respecting and harmonizing with Nature,” and stated the responsibility of poets to contribute to this re-visioning: “If poets cannot understand this, who will? And if we do understand it then indeed we have a role to play, a task to perform: we must use our poet’s imagination and our gift of language to bring these realizations to others” (Light 183–84). In her sequence, as I will show, Levertov deploys the empathetic potential of her “poet’s imagination” and the exclusively human “gift of language” in order to undertake an act of anti-anthropocentric advocacy.

It is not just the sequence’s critique of anthropocentrism that locates Pig Dreams in the context of Levertov’s eco-poetry, but also (and more importantly) the way the poems work to construct the non-human as a subject. By representing Sylvia as a subject, Levertov unsettles the subject/object (human/non-human) binary and hierarchy, thereby also unsettling anthropocentrism. Humans’ privileged status as “subject” is a relational identity that relies on non-humans occupying the status of “object.” The dominant, anthropocentric way humans have conceived of the relationship between humans and non-humans distinguishes between, in Derrida’s words, “the human subject, on the one hand, and the nonsubject that is the animal in general, on the other, where the latter comes to be, in another sense, the nonsubject that is subjected to the human subject” (Animal 126). By emphasising her own subjecthood, Sylvia thus not only de-objectifies herself but also dethrones and deconstructs the figure of the human

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\(^4\) This information is provided on the book’s dust-jacket, and corroborated in an email sent to me by the artist, Sylvia’s owner, Liebe Coolidge.
subject: she refuses to feature as an object in opposition to which the human subject defines itself. As Dorothy Nielsen explains, “Levertov’s poetry attempts to dehierarchize human to non-human relationships by constructing the other as a subject” (“Prosopopoeia” 697). Nielsen, however, looks only at examples where Levertov creates non-human subjects by “fashioning the relationship between the [human] speaker and [non-human] other as a kind of intersubjectivism” (“Prosopopoeia” 697). In Nielsen’s analysis, for Levertov “to construct the non-human other as subject” she must “fashion the poet [or speaker] as visionary” (“Prosopopoeia” 692). While Nielsen calls the personification that occurs in the non-prosopopoeic poems she analyses “prosopopoeia,” she uses the term in a much broader sense than I do here, and there is an important difference between the poems which use a mediating, visionary human speaker and the poems in Pig Dreams in which Sylvia is represented as speaking directly for herself.

I want to suggest that it is the lack of a mediating, visionary (human) speaker which seems to hold the most promise for Pig Dreams to resist anthropocentrism in a way that Levertov’s other environmentally themed poems do not. By making Sylvia the poetic speaker, Levertov is able to depict her as a “subject” without having to invoke a mediating human speaker to confer that subjectivity.

Many of the poems in The Life Around Us, a selection of Levertov’s poems on ecological themes, use the figure of the poet-visionary. In “Protesting at the Nuclear Test Site,” for instance, it is the visionary human speaker who perceives the “anguish” of the landscape and sees how “it turned to the human world a gaze / of scorn, victim to tormentor” (21–22).

Likewise, in “Against Intrusion,” the poet-visionary speaking the poem has a privileged ability to hear what the mountain “speaks”: “Respect, perspective / privacy, it teaches. Indulgence / of curiosity increases / ignorance of the essential” (72; emphasis original). The presence of this mediating poet-visionary seems to undermine the poems’ own resistance to anthropocentrism, by both foregrounding the human speaker (and privileging that speaker’s perspective), and therefore giving the human persona the power to endow (or not endow) nature with subject-status.

Andrew McMurtry identifies this danger inherent in the use of poet-visionary figures, highlighting

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5 A number of critics, such as Nielsen and James Paxon, use the term prosopopoeia as a synonym for personification. Others are unclear about the sense in which they use the term, or, as in the work of Paul de Man and Michael Riffaterre, use the trope generally but not exclusively to reference the fictional conferral of voice on something usually incapable of speech. I prefer a narrower definition of prosopopoeia because it enables us to talk about the trope of giving voice as distinct from other forms of personification. The narrower definition of prosopopoeia that I use also occurs in the work of Gavin Alexander, Sarah Guyer, and Barbara Johnson, and is informed by Pierre Fontanier’s likewise specific description of the trope in his important rhetorical work, Les Figures du discours: “Prosopopeia that must not be confused with personification, apostrophe or dialogism, [...] consists in staging, as it were, absent, dead, supernatural or even inanimate beings. These are made to act, speak, answer as is our wont. At the very least these beings can be made into confidants, witnesses, accusers, avengers, judges, etc” (trans. in Riffaterre 107).
the problem that in such relationships “nature must remain the junior member in the human/non-human dichotomy, reliant upon its voluble other to discern through layers of inarticulateness a hard kernel of meaning” (60).

*Pig Dreams*’ prosopopoeias seem to promise a way to circumvent this structural anthropocentrism by removing the mediating human speaker and foregrounding and privileging the non-human subject as the poetic speaker. Imaginative empathy is central to Levertov’s direct presentation of Sylvia’s voice in *Pig Dreams*. Levertov’s prosopopoeias here constitute what she describes as the “kind of political poem [that] demonstrates active empathy—the projection of a nonparticipant into the experience of others very different from himself” (*Light* 121). “For Levertov,” as Anne Dewey explains, “empathy is essential to cultural richness as well as to physical survival” (70). Dewey sees *Pig Dreams* as an example of how “Levertov’s own poetry seeks through chameleonlike translation into other perspectives to foster such imaginative empathy as both ethical imperative as esthetic [sic] pleasure” (71). In thus using prosopopoeia to project herself into the experience of Sylvia the pig, Levertov attempts to enact this active empathy, a form of what the Romantics described as “the sympathetic imagination” (McCarthy 36). She thus seems to find a way to represent the non-human as subject, without having to invoke the anthropocentric device of visionary (human) persona.

**Sylvia as Non-Human Subject**

Of the three texts in my study, *Pig Dreams* can be seen as the purest example of “speaking for” (or advocacy) because Levertov makes the greatest attempt to efface herself, and to foreground and sustain the non-human voice conveyed through her prosopopoeias. Levertov’s construction of Sylvia as a subject requires that prosopopoeia’s decomposing nature be resisted, and the inherent doubleness of the prosopopoeic voice be suppressed. Levertov creates the illusion of Sylvia’s subjectivity by emphasising her existence as not merely a fictional character, but as a real pig. The front flap of the book’s dust jacket includes an explanation of how “Coolidge’s pastels of her pet pig, Sylvia, combined with her anecdotes of Sylvia’s life in Vermont, inspired Denise Levertov to write these poems.” This emphasis on reality occurs not only in the paratext on the dust jacket, but in the way both poet and illustrator describe the poems. Both Levertov and Liebe Coolidge (the illustrator, and the real Sylvia’s “she-human”) emphasise the poems’ representation of a real non-human subject. Coolidge describes how “It was magical having Denise come over to my house to read the poems to me. It was as if Sylvia was speaking herself” (email to Poppy Haynes, 15 Feb. 2010). She sees the poems as a result of Levertov
Levertov rejected the idea of Sylvia functioning as a vehicle for a “universal message,” even when Gish responded, “I don’t even know so much if intention has anything to do with it” (Conversations 172). Levertov asserts that the Sylvia in the book represents, first and foremost, the real Sylvia who lived on Coolidge’s Vermont farm. Moreover, by describing Sylvia as a “character” (in the sense of “personality,” although the allusion to dramatic character is also fitting), Levertov reinforces Sylvia’s subjectivity, depicting her as the antithesis of the Cartesian hypothesis of the “animal machine,” which, as Wallace Shugg explains, proposed a view of animals “as unthinking, unfeeling machines that move like clockwork” (279). Sylvia, by contrast, is a thinking, feeling animal who possesses not just consciousness, but “character.”

This construction of Sylvia as subject is continued in the poems themselves. The poems resist prosopopoeia’s decomposing nature in order to sustain Sylvia’s presence as a non-human subject. Levertov uses narrative as a way to flesh out and sustain Sylvia’s character, and to attempt to prevent the non-human face from collapsing and revealing a human poet in a constructed mask. The sequence of seventeen poems forms an episodic Bildungsroman-narrative, charting Sylvia’s growth from “piglet among piglets [...] chosen to live without dread of slaughter” into an adult pig who reflects on death, human-violence, and her place in the world (10). As she grows, Sylvia develops relationships with fellow creatures, is initiated into the world of sexuality and desire, and has her own litter of piglets. She prays to the goddess Isis (23, 45), secretly hoards “beautiful tins, nutshells, ribbons” as an “inheritance” for her piglets (24), and enjoys the ecstasy of mud and chocolate (39). Sylvia’s narrative of physical, social and philosophical growth furnishes her character with a comprehensiveness that discourages the reader from seeing Sylvia as a fixed mask Levertov can put on and take off at will.

This sustained representation of a single, multifaceted character also resists prosopopoeia’s decomposition because Sylvia is represented as existing within time. While a single prosopopoeic poem only depicts the non-human persona in the moment they are

successfully accessing Sylvia’s personality: “The poems are my life with my pig as told by my pig. It really is that simple” (email to Poppy Haynes, 29 Mar. 2010). Levertov, similarly, insists on the centrality of the real pig. In a 1990 interview with Nancy Gish, in which Gish proposed a feminist reading of the sequence, Levertov rejected Gish’s approach, protesting:

Sylvia was always a pig to me [...]. She was a Hampshire pig, black and white, and she was absolutely a character. And now that a person can read a universal message that has more to do with human females than pig females into these poems is okay, but I as the author am taken aback at that intention being attributed to me. (Levertov, Conversations 171–72)
represented speaking that particular poem, Levertov’s sequence depicts a character who is allowed to speak at different times and in different situations, and is not contained within any single poem. By writing a narrative sequence built from lyric poems, Levertov creates a character who resists lyric atemporality. Because Sylvia is not contained within a single one-page lyric but is depicted in different poems in different moods, at different stages of life, and engaging in different relationships, *Pig Dreams* resists the deprivation enacted by lyric’s atemporality, and Sylvia emerges as a dynamic character. The amount of detail the sequence provides about Sylvia seems to be self-sustaining, prompting the reader to flesh out her character further, to fill in the gaps with their own imagination so that Sylvia ultimately does not exist as a simple sum of her parts, but as an autonomous character. Levertov’s use of narrative thus seems to resist anthropocentrism because it allows Sylvia to emerge as a dynamic character, thus making the reader give greater consideration to the non-human subject by eliciting a deeper or longer suspension of disbelief than a one-poem prosopopoeia may elicit.

Further, where her use of an episodic narrative structure enables Levertov to represent Sylvia as a multifaceted subject, her use of neologistic language enables her to intimate the non-human otherness of Sylvia’s perspective. Unlike the lyric(al) meditative speech that characterises the poems in *The Life Around Us*, the language used in *Pig Dreams* is exuberant, onomatopoeic, and uses sound-words and neologistic compound words to estrange Sylvia’s voice from human speech. Sylvia coins “Sweetsqueal” to describe piglet-noise (10), creates the adjectives “moonbrightest / snowdeepest” to describe a winter day (18), and uses the compounds “dogbrothers, catpigs, / cud-chewing cowfriends” to describe her animal companions (32). The poem “Her Secret” contains numerous neologisms that support prosopopoeia’s construction of a pig-perspective (24):

In the humans’ house  
fine things abound:  
furniture, rugs by the hearth,  
bowls and pitchers, freezer and fridge,  
closets of food, baskets of apples,  
the Musical Saw on which  
my He-human plays

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6 Lyric has traditionally been characterised as atemporal, in contrast with narrative’s temporality, because it is seen to create “an indefinitely suspended present moment” (M. Morgan 302). Culler explains how both the lyric’s tendency to use apostrophes (as Sylvia does when she apostrophises Isis), which situate the addressee in a “timeless present,” and its invitation to apply synecdochical or allegorical readings, which transcend the event depicted, create this atemporality (66).
the songs I dream...

This stanza contains a number of examples of what Sylvia in the third-to-last poem describes as “Piggish”: where we might say “violin,” Sylvia substitutes, in the mode of an Anglo-Saxon kenning, “the Musical Saw”; where we would say “cupboard” or “pantry,” Sylvia describes “closets of food”; where we would say “Sylvia’s owner,” Sylvia uses “my He-human.” These kenning-type expressions constitute a Shklovskian form of estrangement that de-normalises (and therefore deconstructs the anthropocentric privileging of) human culture and objects. By referring to the people by species (“In the humans’ house”), Sylvia levels the status of the “He-human” and “She-human” with that of her “Dogbrothers,” “Catpig,” and “Jersey cowfriend” (mentioned in other poems). Additionally, although Sylvia herself may revere the humans, her mode of speech does not cast her as an object of human possession. She does not describe her “owners’” house but her “humans’” house; the humans can potentially belong to her as much as she belongs to them.

Sylvia’s non-human perspective is also figured through a rejection of conventional sentence structure in favour of a listing of images and sensory experiences. The first stanza of the poem that opens the sequence, “Her Destiny,” uses this mode of description:

The beginning: piglet among piglets,
the soft mud caking
our mother’s teats.
Sweetsqueal, grunt:
her stiff white lashes, the sleepy
glint of her precious
tiny eyes.

There is no first-person “I” here, no singular speaking subject. Instead, the poem collages together fragmentary descriptions that evoke a non-human sensory experience of the world through allusions to touch (“soft mud”), sight (“sleepy / glint”), and sound (“Sweetsqueal, grunt”). Sylvia even seems to use a grammatical logic that is at odds with human speech: there is no obvious grammatical relationship between “Sweetsqueal, grunt,” and “her stiff white lashes,” but Sylvia separates these fragments with a colon, as though one follows logically from the other. By using this paratactic listing effect, Levertov makes the poem’s form reflect the phenomenology of piglet experience, into which she has imagined herself.

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7 It seems apt to invoke Viktor Shklovsky’s concept of estrangement here; Shklovsky actually discusses animal focalization as one form of estrangement. He describes one instance of estrangement “where the story is told from the point of view of a horse” and explains that “the objects are enstranged [sic] not by our perception but by that of the horse” (7).
In “Pigsong” Levertov returns to the paratactic, sensory phraseology of Sylvia’s piglet voice. In eschewing conventional syntax and diction, she emphasises the non-human otherness of Sylvia’s subjecthood by emphasising her ability to experience sensory and aesthetic pleasure as a collage of images and sounds (37):

> Walnut, hickory, beechmast
> apples and apples, a meadow
> of applegrass dapple.
> Walnut, hickory, beechmast.
> And over the sunfall slope,
> cool of the dark mudwallow.

The language is not ruled by a conventional structure of subjects and verbs but is instead organised by repetition and rhythm. The list of trees (“Walnut, hickory, beechmast”) creates a kind of refrain, and a rhythmic contrast to the rest of the song, which has a largely dactylic, sing-song rhythm. Here, Sylvia seems to take pleasure in sound over meaning, using strong rhyme (apple/dapple), and alliteration (“sunfall slope”), and coining neologistic “piggisms” (“applegrass,” “mudwallow”) to give the language an economy and exuberance that distinguishes it from the speech of Levertov’s human poetic speakers.

In the poem “Dogbrothers” Sylvia’s “piggisms” again distinguish her voice both in diction and in attitude toward non-humans from the traditional human lyric voice, and emphasise her existence as a specifically non-human subject. She describes her escape from the loneliness of being “Sylvia Orphan Onlypig” by discovering cross-species friendships: “But then I found / my Dogbrothers. / Bark and growl, / dog-laugh” (13). Sylvia’s descriptions of her canine friends as “Dogbrothers,” whose noise is not, as humans would perceive it, a meaningless bark but a “dog-laugh,” identify Sylvia as not only a non-human subject, but as a non-human version of what Nielsen terms an “ecological subject”: a subject who turns away from the lyric subject’s effort “to transcend materiality and to assert its separation from others” and who instead “defines itself as biologically interdependent” (“Ecology” 128). Much of Sylvia’s speech defies anthropocentric logic by emphasising this biological interdependence. Dewey argues, for example, that Sylvia’s use of compound words illustrates a “hybrid quality of the imagination formed through contact with others” that is a manifestation of Sylvia’s inter-personal or relational identity (68). This is certainly true of a neologism like “Dogbrothers,” in which the hybrid word arises from Sylvia’s hybrid, relational identity as the sister of her “Dogbrothers.” Just as important, though, is the fact that this “hybrid quality of the imagination,” as Dewey describes it, is outside of anthropocentric conventions: the compound words combine concepts
in a way that defies human(ist) logic. For example, in the human world, the word “brother” is usually only applied to human relationships. Animals are described as having “siblings,” which connotes genetic kinship, but not “brothers” or “sisters,” which connote emotional kinship. So Sylvia’s neologism “Dogbrothers” is not just a use of language that defies human norms, but a perspective or mode of thought that is also outside a human-centred, or anthropocentric worldview. By depicting cross-species brotherhood (the dogs as Sylvia the pig’s brothers) the compound “Dogbrothers” seems accordingly to resist the value-hierarchies of speciesism.

By imagining her way into Sylvia’s perspective—the perspective of an ecological subject—Levertov is thus able to answer her own call for poets to “use our poet’s imagination and our gift of language” to bring “realizations” (of alternatives to anthropocentric viewpoints) “to others” (Light 183–84). The realisations that Levertov arrives at through “active empathy” with Sylvia take the form of what, speaking as the goddess Isis in the final poem, she describes as “pig-wisdom” (46). This anti-anthropocentric “pig-wisdom” comprises utopian imaginings or “dreams” of a world of “justice” in which “every pig / could be cuddled” (11), as well as a valuing of species-differences, an ecological subject’s acknowledgement of “biological interdependence,” and a rejection of the human practice of breeding animals—in Sylvia’s words:

[...] not that our life
may be whole, pig-life
thriving alongside dog-life, bird-life,
grass-life, all
the lives of earth-creatures

but that we may be devoured (41).

In these ways prosopopoeia seems to deliver its promise of anti-anthropocentric advocacy. By deploying “active empathy” with the real pig, Levertov seems, as the above readings of her poems indicate, to have successfully effaced herself and captured Sylvia in language as a thinking, feeling, and distinctively non-human subject. There is, however, a significant problem in thus reading Levertov’s effacing of self as equivalent to either an escape from an anthropocentric viewpoint or an unmediated act of advocacy for Sylvia the (real) pig. In the next section, I will unpack how prosopopoeia’s overreach—its promise to speak in ways in which it ultimately has no authority to speak—leads Levertov’s approach of “active empathy” in many ways to fail to depart from an anthropocentric viewpoint.
Inaccessible Otherness: Empathy’s Appropriative Underside

By using “active empathy” to channel Sylvia’s voice, and therefore depict her as a subject (specifically an “ecological subject”), Levertov might appear to have found a way to speak for Sylvia that deconstructs, rather than reinforces, the subject/object, human/non-human binary. Prosopopoeia, however, cannot offer such straightforward advocacy. In what follows I will show how—genuine as Levertov’s attempt at “active empathy” may be—her approach places her in an inescapably compromised situation, in which prosopopoeia’s necessary fictionality leads to Levertov’s arrogation of Sylvia’s otherness.

Empathetic identification is increasingly being questioned. As Kathleen Lundeen explains, “Writers or readers who appear to empathize with another’s life experiences are often accused of arrogating a cultural authority to which they have no natural claim” (83). Thomas McCarthy even goes as far as to state that, in a “paradoxical” way, “an act of sympathy or empathy is fundamentally about the self at least as much as it is about the other” (15). Moreover, if, as Suzanne Keen explains, “To those who contest its value, empathy occludes the others’ true feelings,” and even “erases the subjectivity of the other” by “imposing Western ideas about what ought to be felt,” then in the context of human/non-human interactions, empathy is even more questionable, absorbing, not another culture, but an entirely different species, into a Western paradigm. Because the experience of a non-human subject is even more of a mystery than the experience of a human subject of a different culture, the appropriation engendered by empathy is greater. It is perhaps because of this arrogation of otherness that Jonathan Lamb, discussing human sympathy with non-humans, concludes that “we should worry not about extending sympathy, but that it is already too disgracefully extended” (166).

Levertov’s approach of “active empathy” seems, on closer analysis, to confirm these misgivings. As we saw in the previous section of this chapter, Levertov insisted on the centrality of the real pig within the poems, but, because Levertov cannot actually access the perspective of the real Sylvia, her imaginative construction of Sylvia’s voice relies on an appropriation of Sylvia’s perspective and an anthropomorphic (and so anthropocentric) recreation of Sylvia in human terms. Levertov’s prosopopoeias of Sylvia, while resisting anthropocentrism on one level, reinforce it on another. The poems suffer from a double bind described by Nielsen—the problem that “While the construction of the non-human other as subject resists placing the human being at the centre of the universe, it measures the other in the terms it uses to measure itself” (“Prosopopoeia” 694).

On the most basic level, the poems are afflicted with the problem highlighted by Morgan’s “The Loch Ness Monster’s Song”: by simply conferring human language on the non-
human figure they erase the otherness of that non-human. Even Sylvia’s piggisms, which on one level seem to affirm Sylvia’s otherness, belie human origins: her neologisms—“Dogbrothers,” “Onlypig,” “skyfoam”—are not truly new words, but compounds of existing English words. Likewise, if we return to the excerpt from “Her Secret,” which we looked at above, we see that, while the words that stand out are the non-standard “kennings,” Sylvia also uses many words in a standard way: “house,” “rugs,” “bowls,” “freezer.” The poet’s human voice is still dominant, and this is reinforced by the final item on the list of things inside the humans’ house: “the songs” Sylvia “dream[s].” While this indented line could be read literally to suggest that Sylvia dreams her songs (the poems of Pig Dreams) when she is inside the house in her role as “pet,” it also points to the poem’s human origin: the non-human perspective is, in the end, an illusion, and the poems are ultimately trapped inside the human perspective, represented here by the humans’ house.

Language is not, however, the only way prosopopoeia requires that Sylvia be constructed in the terms of the human self. An obvious, and important, upshot of prosopopoeia’s inability to access real non-human otherness, is that the trope necessitates anthropomorphism of Sylvia’s thoughts. Often such anthropomorphism is used to challenge or resist anthropocentrism (as we saw in the first part of this chapter). The fact that Sylvia thinks with human concepts such as “brother,” “friend,” or “justice” enables Levertov to turn those human concepts in on themselves, challenging or reimagining the human paradigm from which they are taken. Levertov’s anti-anthropocentric advocacy is thus, paradoxically, grounded in an (anthropocentric) arrogation of Sylvia’s otherness. Her very ability to challenge an anthropocentric viewpoint in Pig Dreams is paradoxically contingent on anthropomorphisms that, inasmuch as they translate Sylvia into human terms, also affirm a human-centred view of the world.

This inescapability of anthropomorphism is illustrated by Sylvia’s religious vision in the poem “Her Vision”:

My human love, my She-human,
speaks to me in Piggish. She knows
my thoughts, she sees my emotions
flower and fade, fade and flower
as my destiny unrolls
its carpet, its ice and apples.

Not even she
knows all my dreams.
Under the russet sky
at dusk
I have seen
the Great Boar pass
invisible save to me.

His tusks are
flecked with skyfoam.
His eyes
red stars. (43)

The first stanza sets out the possibility of accessing non-human experience (the promise of prosopopoeia itself), exemplified in the She-human’s knowledge of “Piggish” and ability to “know” Sylvia’s thoughts and “see” her emotions. The rest of the poem, however, seems to set limits to this access, depicting Sylvia’s vision of the “Great Boar” as an aspect of her non-human experience that is “invisible” and unknowable to humans, and perhaps even to other species. By thus delineating an aspect of Sylvia’s non-human experience to which humans have no access, the poem functions as what John Simons calls “strong anthropomorphism,” a form of representation which anthropomorphises “in such a way as either to show how the non-human experience differs from the human or to create profound questions in the reader’s mind as to the extent to which humans and non-humans are really different” (120). In this context the function is the former: Levertov signifies the otherness of Sylvia’s experience; however, the only way she can do this is by attributing to Sylvia the human experience of the religious vision. Moreover, even this allusion to inaccessibility is contradicted to some extent by the prosopopoeia offering the reader, if not the vision itself, then at least Sylvia’s description of it.

In her attempt to construct Sylvia as a multi-faceted subject, Levertov confers on her not just the anthropomorphisms (such as human language) necessary to convey her non-human otherness, but other anthropomorphisms that seem to paint Sylvia more as an imprint of human experience than an attempt to imagine pig experience. “Her Vision” is one of only a few instances where Levertov uses Simons’s “strong” form of anthropomorphism to depict inaccessible non-human otherness. Sylvia’s worship of the goddess Isis, her main religious focus, takes a weaker, or what Simons would call “trivial” anthropomorphised form of human-like devotion: an anthropomorphism that “does not press against and force us to question the reality,
or otherwise, of the boundary of the human and the non-human” (119). In Sylvia’s entreaties to Isis Levertov makes her adopt a decorous, archaic tone, studded with the *thys* and *Os* of traditional Christian prayer and liturgy. In “Her Task,” Sylvia entreats, “O Isis, bless / thy pig’s piglets” (23), and in “Her Prayer,” she again appeals to Isis in highly formal language:

O Isis my goddess,

my goddess Isis,

forget not thy pig. (45)

Here, the repetition of “my goddess” and the formality and archaism of the diction (“thy”) and syntax (“forget not”) anthropomorphise Sylvia as having a human form of spirituality. In other poems this heightened language functions not only to anthropomorphise Sylvia, but also to give Sylvia an inappropriate (and so comical) level of formality and solemnity. This is the case in “Her Delight,” for example, in which Sylvia describes for her piglets how she has been

[... ] given to eat

a food of human magic, resembling mud

and tasting

of bliss: and its holy name

is chocolate. (39; emphasis original)

When reading an anthropomorphism such as this, the human reader is probably less likely to reflect on the possibility of extending reverence to sensory pleasure than to be amused by the comic cuteness Levertov confers on Sylvia through this inappropriate religiosity toward chocolate (“bliss,” “holy”). Sylvia’s reverence seems to work overall as a kind of stock comic naivety—a joke Levertov shares with the reader. So even though she does not self-reflexively foreground herself in the poems, Levertov cannot entirely efface herself either, and even though she insists on the centrality of the real pig, Levertov cannot resist (perhaps cannot escape) inflecting Sylvia with anthropomorphisms that arrogate her non-human perspective in a range of ways.

A number of these anthropomorphisms link Sylvia with repressive and patriarchal attitudes to sex and feminine purity, and, in a more general sense, with the human: they anthropomorphise Sylvia in such a way that works against her animal-estrangement. In “The Bride” (20–21), for example, Sylvia’s “A-frame,” as it is described elsewhere in the book (24), becomes her “maiden chamber,” and the boar she is bred with is unlike Sylvia’s other animal companions: not a mutually-affirming equal but “My Lord Boar,” an “imperious” male who “dwelt in majesty” (20). Sylvia eventually returns home pregnant, portly, and shameful because,
as Kinnahan points out, “Erotic pleasure, in this narrative, allows only shame and repentance” (176):

Back home I headed for my 
private house, the house of Sylvia— 
and my swill-swollen body 
would not enter, 
could not fit.

In shame I lay 
many nights 
on the ground outside my Humans’ window 
and passed my days silent and humble 
in the bare pasture until I was lean again, 
until I could enter 
my maiden chamber once more.

Sylvia’s “shame” for allowing herself to be “brought low [...] into the depths / of desire” in the week of “passion and feasting” is an anthropomorphism that overwrites Sylvia with a Western patriarchal (human) society’s attitude toward females, feminity and female sexuality. In “Her Nightmare,” a poem in which Sylvia recounts a Freudian dream of blood, Levertov likewise anthropomorphises Sylvia with anxieties about gender and sexual maturity that seem entirely human. Although Sylvia is transformed and humanised, the gendered (human) female identity overlaid onto her character is uncha(lle)nged. While Kinnahan’s argument that *Pig Dreams* functions as a “maternal and sororal mythopoesis” that “allegorically speaks of the woman writer in a male tradition” may be a somewhat reductive reading of the book, her highlighting of this allegorising of specifically human gender concerns is important. Ronald Hepburn points out that “Against anthropomorphism it can be argued [...] that it is not legitimate for us to treat the natural world as if it existed solely for our gratification, material with which to play out our fantasies” (270). In poems like “The Bride” and “Her Nightmare” Levertov seems to use Sylvia primarily to “play out” human gender concerns. In poems such as these, the “fundamental” anthropomorphisms necessary in a prosopopoeia (the use of human language, for example) extend into further anthropomorphisms. Prosopopoeia thus seems to set up a slippery slope: by requiring a degree of anthropomorphism it creates the risk that the poet will be seduced into further anthropomorphising the non-human, in ways that may actually reinforce the privileging
of the human subject, rather than call into question the human subject and the anthropocentric human/non-human binary.

Levertov’s attempt to make herself a mouthpiece for Sylvia—to allow Sylvia to speak through her—inevitably results (at least sometimes) in the opposite: Sylvia becomes a mouthpiece for Levertov and Levertov’s animal rights concerns. While this might on the whole seem a justifiable appropriation in the spirit of anti-anthropocentric advocacy, there is at least one instance where Levertov’s appropriation of Sylvia’s voice perhaps goes a step too far: Sylvia is made not only to criticise humans for their treatment of animals, but to exempt Levertov from this criticism:

I love my own humans and their friends,
but let it be said,
that my litters may heed it well,

their race is dangerous. (“Her Judgement” 41; emphasis original)

By beginning the poem in this way Levertov effectively exempts Coolidge and herself from Sylvia’s criticism of humans, thus revealing an (in my view) erroneous conceptualisation of advocacy that separates it entirely from appropriation.8 Furthermore, Sylvia’s caveat that she loves her “own humans and their friends” effectively reintroduces an aspect of the poet-visionary device for which prosopopoeia eliminated the need, and, in doing so, seemed to promise less anthropocentric advocacy than Levertov’s other environmental poems, which relied on the device. In this stanza Levertov constructs the poet/artist as visionary not only in the sense that Neilsen sees Levertov constructing the poet as visionary in other eco-poems—“as one who can hear and transcribe the ‘voices’ of nature” (“Prosopopoeia” 691)—but also in the sense of visionary as an “enlightened,” and “forward-thinking” person who opposes the majority of “their race” who are “dangerous” to non-human nature.

This self-fashioning, in which Levertov as poet is separated from the criticised majority of her “race,” has parallels with, and can be illuminated by, the conflict that led to Levertov’s famed falling-out with her friend and mentor Robert Duncan. The controversial argument and eventual dissolution of friendship between the two poets that “came to a head in an angry exchange of long letters in the fall and winter of 1971–72” is, as Marjorie Perloff explains, “much less an ideological difference than it is a question of how poetry positions itself vis-à-vis politics” (209). Duncan objected to the polemic element of the poems later collected in To Stay Alive, in particular to what Perloff describes as the “us-versus-them attitude” of the poems

8 The paratextual information makes clear that Coolidge was the “real” Sylvia’s “She-human,” and Levertov was Coolidge’s friend.
— an attitude that seems to recur in Pig's Dreams’s dichotomy of humans as either enlightened, ethical, and ecological or as anthropocentric individuals with “unclean [...] minds” who “plan for slaughter” and “corrupt their prey” with their own greed (41–42). Duncan accused Levertov of “moralizing” and of “displaced bigotry” (in Bertholf and Gelpi 666), an accusation Levertov vehemently rejected. Referring to the poem “Tenebrae,” in which Levertov criticised the masses not protesting the Vietnam war as “not listening, not listening” (Selected 92–93), Duncan suggested that “it is the poem itself that is not listening, that has turned to the vanity that all moralizing is” (in Bertholf and Gelpi 666; emphasis original). Just as Levertov might, in a different way, be guilty of the same thing of which she accuses the consumerist targets of “Tenebrae” (i.e. “not listening”), she might also, in a different way, be guilty of the same thing for which the humans in “Her Judgement” are criticised: producing animals that they “may be devoured” (41). Although in the first stanza Levertov uses Sylvia as a mouthpiece to exempt herself from this criticism, she cannot escape the fact that her anthropomorphic representation of Sylvia also facilitates Sylvia’s consumption—not as food, but as art. As Kinnahan explains, “Sylvia most condemns the human disdain for otherness, their drive to possess and make objects out of everything nonhuman” (177), yet, ironically, the thing that enables Sylvia to make this condemnation is Levertov’s arrogation of Sylvia’s otherness in her use of Sylvia as a mouthpiece for her own anti-anthropocentric politics.

Paratext, Dreams, and Pictures: Levertov’s Politically Naive Response

It is clear, then, that Pig Dreams does not escape prosopopoeia’s appropriative underside. Levertov’s attempt to speak for Sylvia is compromised by the trope’s own illusory nature, which leads Levertov to anthropomorphise, and therefore appropriate, the figure of Sylvia. Levertov can, I suggest, be seen to build a response to prosopopoeia’s ambivalence into the book, but it is a limited or politically naive response in that Levertov acknowledges the disjunction between the real Sylvia and the poetic Sylvia, but fails to link that disjunction to the appropriation it entails. Levertov’s response to the poetics (but not the politics) of prosopopoeia is expressed in her unsettling of Sylvia’s relationship to reality. On the one hand, Levertov uses paratextual allusions to the “real” Sylvia to frame the speaker of Pig Dreams as a faithful representation of the real pig. On the other hand, however, she juxtaposes these allusions against obvious anthropomorphisms in the paratext, and further unsettles them with numerous allusions to dream within the poems themselves. Levertov thus blurs and complicates Sylvia’s relationship to reality, paradoxically insisting both on Sylvia’s reality and her fictionality. By, at times, breaking the illusion of Sylvia’s
reality Levertov might be seen also to break her appropriative arrogation of Sylvia’s voice, but this is not, in fact, the case. Levertov answers appropriation with further appropriation, failing to recognise that puncturing the (appropriative) illusion of Sylvia’s reality relies on (appropriative) anthropomorphisms. It is Levertov’s failure to acknowledge and respond to this arrogation of Sylvia’s otherness that makes her response to prosopopoeia a limited or politically naive response. Further, and significantly, although a fuller response to prosopopoeia’s ambivalences may be found within the book (a response that works against appropriation, retrieving Sylvia’s non-human otherness), this fuller response is provided by the illustrations rather than the poetic text itself. I conclude by suggesting that Coolidge’s images, by highlighting the inextricability of advocacy and appropriation, and returning emphasis to Sylvia’s animal alterity, point the way for a more ethical and less-anthropocentric response to prosopopoeia—a response that calls the self and the very act of representation into question.

Levertov promotes the authenticity of her advocacy by using the paratext to link the poems with the real pig who inspired them. She also, however, alludes to dream as another mode of reality in which Sylvia is situated—a pluralising move that forestalls potential criticisms that Sylvia, as she is depicted in the poems, does not neatly map onto Sylvia as she would have existed in real life. Although a number of paratextual features provide important complications to Levertov’s use of prosopopoeia, previous criticism on Pig Dreams has generally overlooked the first, illustrated publication of the sequence, and instead cites from a later reprinting of the poems as one section of Candles in Babylon (see, for example, Dewey and Kinnahan). But to do so misses the complicated, and perhaps contradictory, way in which Levertov situates Sylvia both inside and outside of reality.

The paratextual background information on the book’s dust jacket unsettles the fictionality of Sylvia’s character by referencing a “real” Sylvia. This is corroborated by comments Levertov gave in a 1990 interview, and by information provided by the illustrator, Liebe Coolidge (Conversations 171–2; emails to Poppy Haynes, 15 Feb. and 29 March 2010). This information adds authenticity to Levertov’s advocacy: she is not just speaking for a fictional creation from her own imagination but for a real pig. The allusion to the real pig seems to confer legitimacy on Levertov’s prosopopoeias; however, it also creates the problem of the impossibility of actually accessing or translating the experience of the real pig. On the back of the book’s dust jacket is a two-paragraph message from Levertov that gives a more detailed description of the real pig. Levertov does not distinguish the character who speaks in her poems from the “real” Sylvia; she does not describe being inspired by Coolidge’s pig, but rather describes being “inspired to translate Sylvia’s outlook on life into these poems”: she professes to
have access to Sylvia’s thoughts and feelings. Her author’s commentary blurs the real and the fictitious in a way that is humorous because it, somewhat unsettlingly, conflates the real pig with the fictional pig who speaks in the poems. Levertov begins, “Sylvia, a Hampshire pig, came to live with the artist Liebe Coolidge in North Eastern Vermont when she was a very young piglet.” There is nothing here to make us question the truth of the statement. The next sentence, however, with its allusions to a tradition of “Learned Pigs,” introduces a kind of knowing, tongue-in-cheek tone that suggests the author, while still describing a real pig, is not being strictly scientific: “A brilliant animal, in the tradition of the Learned Pigs of the 18th and 19th centuries, she was not only house-trained (a considerable achievement for the porcine physiology) but, when she grew up and became a mother, she also house-trained her own piglets just as a cat trains its kittens.” While we might not doubt that the real Sylvia was house-trained, and did in fact house-train her piglets, in what follows from here we seem to be further from reality, and the sense of anthropomorphic fictional embellishment becomes stronger:

Athletic and philosophical, Sylvia was highly peripatetic and loved to take long, brisk cross-country walks with her human and canine friends, as well as to muse and meditate with Kaya the cow (whose devotion to Isis Sylvia shared, rather than worshipping the more usual goddess of pigs, Ishtar) or John the cat (whose black and white markings curiously and, as it were, mystically, resembled her own). It was only with old age that Sylvia was obliged to curtail her outdoor expeditions and also (due to regrettably inconvenient dimensions) the amount of time she spent in the human indoor environment which she was so interested in studying and to which her presence added such charm.

Levertov’s use of the abstruse term “peripatetic” creates a sense of false seriousness. Her attribution to Sylvia of meditation, goddess worship, as well as the ethnographic study of humans, are clearly anthropomorphisms, but these are blended with descriptions that seem true to the real pig (that Sylvia lived to “old age” and as she got bigger had to spend less time in “the human indoor environment”). The real pig translated into the pastels by Coolidge, which then inspired Levertov’s poems, seems, in some ways, to evaporate and be replaced by the fictional character of Sylvia. But this erasure is only partial. The paratextual references to the real Sylvia preserve her as a spectral presence behind the poems. By introducing the notion of a “real” pig who both is and is not the pig represented in the poems, Levertov unsettles and complicates Sylvia’s relationship to reality in what appears to be an attempt to get around the problem of the inaccessibility of the real pig—a response that is limited because it deals only with the
decomposition of prosopopoeia’s illusion of non-human speech, and not with the appropriation underpinning the illusion.

By incorporating numerous allusions to dream and dreaming into her sequence, Levertov breaks the illusion of the real pig talking—an illusion which, most of the time, she sustains incredibly tightly. Whereas the paratextual allusions to the real pig position Sylvia with at least one trotter in the real world, the sequence’s allusions to dream have the same effect as the paratext’s anthropomorphisms, destabilising this relationship to reality. The book’s title (Pig Dreams), as well as Sylvia’s reference to the songs she “dream[s]” and her description of herself as “Sylvia the Dreamer,” seem to frame the poems themselves as dreams—perhaps not needing to map onto reality because they exist outside reality in the world of dream (24, 20). In the first poem in the sequence Sylvia describes herself as “the pig of dreams, the pig / any of us could be” (10), linking dreams with a positive potential, even utopianism, not present in reality. “The pig of dreams” has multiple allusions, most literally highlighting Sylvia’s ideal fate in being “taken out of the sty, / away from the ravaged soil of pig-yards, / freed from boredom and ugliness / [...] chosen to live without dread of slaughter” (10): for a pig, the dream fate. But the phrase can also identify Sylvia as the pig who dreams (in a later poem Sylvia describes a Freudian nightmare of blood), and the pig of the imagination—the pig of Levertov’s dreams. The ambiguous status of dream thus blurs and confuses the relationship between the real pig and the pig in the poems. The real pig is still present as an authenticating presence, but exactly how present, exactly where reality leaves off and dream or poem begin, is unclear. Levertov’s response to prosopopoeia’s ambivalences thus seems best described as an attempt to have her cake and eat it too—or, rather, an attempt to have her (real) pig and speak for it too.

By unsettling Sylvia’s relationship to reality, Levertov might forestall the obvious criticism that she makes her pig think and say things a real pig would not think and say (a “pig of dreams” does not, after all, have to conform to the rules of the real world); however, her response fails to acknowledge the ethical and political dimension of the trope’s doubleness: the fact that Levertov’s advocacy relies, paradoxically, on appropriation. I am not suggesting that Levertov herself is naive about the potential appropriation of non-human otherness. On the contrary, much of Levertov’s eco-poetry, as Nielsen explains, “rarely uses prosopopoeia [by which Nielsen means personification] without unsettling its conventions in some way, by questioning its colonizing effects, or by foregrounding the issue of its ontological validity, or by disturbing the line between the human and the non-human on which it turns” (703). Pig Dreams is an apparent anomaly in that it enacts the most literal form of “speaking for” in the most uncritical, unselfconscious way. “Her Judgement” criticises human exploitation of pigs and “Her
Destiny” alludes to the “boredom and ugliness” of the destiny Sylvia was rescued from, but none of the poems problematise the actual prosopopoeias. This may offer one explanation for why Levertov chose not to include any of the poems from *Pig Dreams* in her collection *The Life Around Us: Selected Poems on Nature*. The poems in *The Life Around Us* tend to preserve the otherness of non-human nature, as in “The Cat as Cat”:

The cat on my bosom
sleeping and purring
–fur-petalled chrysanthemum,
squirrel-killer–

is a metaphor only if I
force him to be one,
looking too long in his pale, fond,
dilating, contracting eyes

that reject mirrors, refuse
to observe what bides
stockstill.

Likewise

flex and reflex of claws
gently pricking through sweater to skin
gently sustain their own tune,
not mine. I-Thou, cat, I-Thou. (4)

In this poem Levertov alludes to the violence of “forcing” or transforming the animal into an easily digestible metaphor. The cat is left to continue with its “own tune,” rather than being made to act as a mirror for the human persona, and the final relationship between human and cat is not one of imitation, interpretation, labelling or possession, but rather a relational, reciprocal Buberian I-Thou.⁹ While the relationships depicted within *Pig Dreams* might enact this kind of Buberian, and ecological, relationality between humans and various species of non-

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⁹ Buber’s I-Thou (as distinct from I-It) describes a kind of encounter or dialogue between two beings in which the “I,” rather than objectifying the other, recognises the being of the other holistically. In contrast to a concept like, say, Levinas’s face-to-face, Buber’s I-Thou is not restricted to human relationships and applies equally to non-humans: “it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It. The power of exclusiveness has seized me” (58).
humans, prosopopoeia’s attempt to access Sylvia’s perspective prevents Sylvia from retaining non-human otherness in the way the cat in the above poem does. Prosopopoeia thus seems to preclude the possibility of an I-Thou between human and non-human. Therefore, even though prosopopoeia’s replacement of the more usual human poetic speaker with a non-human speaker seems to promise a less anthropocentric advocacy than other forms of eco-poetry, the trope’s arrogation of non-human otherness arguably makes it more anthropocentric than other forms of eco-poetry. We might even read Levertov’s omission of Pig Dreams from The Life Around Us as a silent acknowledgement of this problem.

Even though Levertov herself does not address the problem of prosopopoeia’s appropriative flipside, the book itself can, I suggest, be seen to contain a fuller response to prosopopoeia’s ambivalences: Coolidge’s pastel images of Sylvia both reclaim Sylvia’s non-human otherness, and problematise the very act of representing a non-human subject. While the poems seem to translate the real pig into a knowable, consumable dramatic character, the images operate in tension with the poems, reasserting Sylvia’s animal alterity, and drawing attention to our own position as reader-consumers. The pastel illustrations are by no means photographic or realistic depictions of Coolidge’s pig, and neither are they simple, illustrative representations of the scenes and events described in the poems. Instead of (as illustrations conventionally do) working in harmony with the text to create a unified portrayal of the character and setting, the images provide a different way to conceive of Sylvia, another version of events in which the unknowableness of the real pig plays a greater part.

Whereas the poems do not foreground the limitedness of language as a medium, the images do highlight their own materiality and the imperfection of their representation of reality. Take, for example, the poem “Her Sister” and the accompanying image (34–35). In the poem Levertov uses a Williamsian “triadic variable foot structure” to create a kind of rhythmic mimesis of a “stately walking cow” (Levertov, Conversations 139):

Kaya, my gentle

Jersey cowfriend,

you are no pig,

you are slow to think,

your moods

are like rounded clouds

drifting over the pasture,

casting

pleasant shadows
This poem seems underpinned by a confidence in the ability of its own medium to capture Sylvia’s voice. There is no authorial intrusion, nothing that works against the illusion of Sylvia’s speech—except, perhaps, the faint reminder that, if there is such a distance and difference between a cow’s thoughts and a pig’s thoughts, then the chasm between pig and human that prosopopoeia attempts to bridge must be even wider. Overall, though, Levertov’s use of a “concrete” poetic form here seems designed to support, rather than deconstruct, Sylvia’s voice, using indentation and line breaks to make Sylvia’s speech reflect the temperament of her “cowfriend.” This, at least, is how Dewey reads the poem, arguing that the “slow, stepwise form” creates a lulling rhythm that “embodies [...] ruminant contemplation” (68).

The image on the facing page, however, suggests we should be more sceptical of the poem’s ability to truly embody non-humanness (Figure 1). Whereas the poem works from the assumption that its medium (language) can give us access to some aspect of cow-consciousness and Sylvia’s relationship with Kaya, the image on the facing page foregrounds not the ability of the medium (here, pastel drawing) to capture reality, but its own limitations.

Figure 1: Illustration p. 35.
Coolidge’s drawings are not lifelike. They fit into a tradition—characterised by a childlike deviation from realistic use of colour, perspective and proportion—that has been variously called “folk art,” “naive art,” and “primitive art” (“naive art”). Levertov herself described Coolidge as “a very primitive kind of artist” (Conversations 171). The naive style of the image accompanying “Her Sister” makes obvious the limitations of the medium as a true-to-life depiction of reality. Wavering pencil lines show through the pastel in the figures of Sylvia and the human. The human figure appears flattened, two-dimensional, the face a smooth plane and disproportionately big for the body. The black pastel line marking the crest of a hill shows through the human face, and two more intersecting pastel lines ghost up through the cow’s body. This gives the human and the cow a transparent, phantom-like quality. They are not as fully fleshed-out as, arguably, they are presented in the poems. Instead, the unfinished quality of the picture marks the figures as pastel constructions, not as imprints of reality. Their ghostly transparency seems to foreground the picture’s inability to capture the subject. The poem attempts to provide unmediated access to Sylvia’s relationship with Kaya, but the drawing, conversely, highlights its own inability to capture anything more than a distorted shadow of the actual subject.

This discrepancy between the perspective depicted in the poems and the perspective depicted in the images suggests to the reader that Levertov’s claim to speak for Sylvia is not entirely warranted. If the pictures were an attempt to transpose Levertov’s poetic approach into a visual medium they would be images from Sylvia’s perspective—a pig’s-eye view of the world. But the drawings were made before the poems, rather than as subsequent illustrations of them, and they do not depict the world as it might be seen by Sylvia, but instead depict Sylvia from an outside perspective. Sylvia is the object of the reader’s gaze, while the object of Sylvia’s gaze is almost always invisible, outside the frame of the picture. The pictures allow us only to see Sylvia seeing the things around her. By refusing to let us see the world through Sylvia’s eyes, as the poems claim to do, the images highlight prosopopoeia’s artifice and appropriation of the non-human perspective.

The dissonance between the perspectives offered by the poems and illustrations is particularly pronounced in the poem “Her Task” (22), and the accompanying image (Figure 2). In the poem, Sylvia describes how “my piglets cling to me, / perfect, quickbreathing, plump— / kernels of pearly sweetcorn, / milky with my milk,” then vows to “housetrain” her piglets and implores Isis to “bless / thy pig’s piglets.” The accompanying image, however, is curiously incongruous with the poem. Although the link to suckling is implied through Sylvia’s prominent teats, she is not depicted with her piglets clinging to her; the piglets are not even present. She is
standing isolated on a road, apparently looking down the road (although the irregularities of proportion and perspective do make her left eye seem to look straight out from the drawing, Picasso-like, at the reader).

Figure 2: Illustration p. 22

In the drawing, unlike the poem, there is nothing that obviously anthropomorphises Sylvia. Her entreaty to Isis is not matched by a personified imploring gesture; she is not looking up or clasping her trotters. She is, in fact, behaving the way a real pig (one who did not speak human language or address human gods) would behave. In this way the image functions as a competing representation of Sylvia. Levertov’s claim to speak for Sylvia in the prosopopoeia is called into question by the image’s failure to confirm and expand on what is depicted in the poem. If the poem seems to gives us access to Sylvia’s thoughts and experiences, the image opposes this access, providing a contesting representation of Sylvia that is silent and unknowable. The discrepancy between the poem and the pastel image, furthermore, encourages us not only to be
sceptical of prosopopoeia’s claim to present unmediated voice, but also, more broadly, to be sceptical of any mode of representation, especially one that purports to offer us access to non-human nature.

There are also features within the images themselves that call into question Levertov’s attempt to step into Sylvia’s trotters. The drawing accompanying “Her Judgement” (Figure 3), for example, uses the device of a literal frame or lens (the four-paned window) to emphasise the distance between a human perspective and a non-human perspective. Furthermore, it emphasises that any act of representation—this very drawing, even—is mediated through a particular frame, from a particular perspective. The window frame acts as a concrete reminder of the human lens through which we view Sylvia:

Figure 3: Illustration p. 40

Levertov’s inescapably appropriative use of prosopopoeia does not, therefore, go completely unchallenged. The images highlight the appropriation inherent in Levertov’s act of speaking for Sylvia. Levertov can only imagine and construct Sylvia’s voice in human terms; she is trapped
within an anthropocentric framework of human language and humanising anthropomorphism. By using prosopopoeia to construct Sylvia as a subject Levertov can be seen to trouble the subject/object, human/non-human binary to some degree. But her anthropomorphisms, combined with the fact she does not call herself into question (and, in fact, uses Sylvia’s voice to exempt herself from criticism), prevent *Pig Dreams* from enacting a fully realised deconstruction of the human subject. Levertov’s response to prosopopoeia’s inevitable unravelling—her troubling of Sylvia’s relationship to reality—is insufficient in that it fails to address the problem of appropriation. The images, by contrast, reinstate the inaccessible otherness of Sylvia’s perspective, and call into question the very act of representation itself. The images thus both highlight prosopopoeia’s inevitable appropriation (the fact that the trope attempts to represent the perspective of a non-human other who can be imagined in human terms but not in his or her own animal alterity) and point the way for the poems themselves to better address this problem. Atwood, to whom I turn next, provides an example of what happens when a poet more closely follows the example set by Coolidge’s images, and, while setting out to speak for the non-human, simultaneously and self-reflexively calls this act of advocacy into question.
“Songs of the Transformed”: Prosopopoeia, Victimhood, and Consumption

This above all, to refuse to be a victim.
—Margaret Atwood, Surfacing

Like Levertov’s, Atwood’s use of prosopopoeia clearly displays an anti-anthropocentric politics, but while Pig Dreams does not engage with prosopopoeia’s political dimension—its appropriative underside—Atwood’s “Songs of the Transformed” demonstrates an awareness both of the trope’s inevitable doubleness, and its appropriative nature. While Pig Dreams seems to interpret prosopopoeia’s anti-anthropocentric promise in terms of its ability to speak for and facilitate empathy with a real pig, “Songs of the Transformed” interprets the trope’s promise in a markedly different way. The sequence, I will demonstrate, can be seen to make use of prosopopoeia’s ability to deconstruct the human/non-human binary in order to unsettle a literary tradition dominated by pathos-filled animal victims. However, just as the very nature of prosopopoeia ultimately hampers Levertov’s project, so does the trope complicate and interfere with Atwood’s challenge to the animal victim tradition. “Songs of the Transformed,” like Pig Dreams, illustrates that prosopopoeia’s anti-anthropocentric promise cannot be separated from its appropriative underside. In fact, the very methods Atwood uses to resist animal victimisation paradoxically re-victimise the animal by appropriating its voice and perspective, and transforming it into a consumable object. Atwood, I argue, recognises this appropriation within her poems and responds to it by self-reflexively pointing to the poetic and political problems in her use of prosopopoeia. But while self-reflexivity certainly enables Atwood to critique prosopopoeia, it cannot undo the trope’s corollary of appropriation. Instead, through a narcissistic, anthropocentric foregrounding of the human, her self-reflexivity reinstates a degree of the anthropocentrism that the poems in other ways work so strongly against.

Richard Hunt points out that “Critics have tended to see Atwood’s use of nature primarily as a metaphor for human relationships” (233). The limited amount of criticism on “Songs of the Transformed” that exists is no exception to this rule, although a small number of critics do identify an anti-anthropocentric politics in the sequence. Hunt himself argues that “Songs of the Transformed” both calls our attention to our fundamentally dysfunctional
relationship with the natural world and implicitly demands that we take action to avoid the dire results of that dysfunction” (238), and Estella Lauter argues that the sequence constitutes “Atwood’s clearest insistence that humans are not superior to animals” (192; emphasis original). While I agree with these anti-anthropocentric readings of the sequence, I think that Atwood’s use of non-human prosopopoeia also has a more specific function. By tapping into prosopopoeia’s inherently fictional nature, and its promise of deconstructing the human/non-human binary, “Songs of the Transformed,” I suggest, interrogates and resists the victimisation of animals in literature. Such an argument may seem counter-intuitive on a first reading of the sequence—after all, many if not all of the speakers are victims. But closer analysis, I argue, reveals that Atwood’s prosopopoeias invoke the figure of the animal-victim in order to call it into question. As Atwood herself explains, “a book can be a symptom or reflection of a [victim] position [...] or it can be a conscious examination of it,” which is “less fatalistic” and contains the possibilities of resisting that position (Survival 41; emphasis original). The prosopopoeias of “Songs of the Transformed” seem very strongly situated in this latter category, functioning as a way to unsettle the animal-victim tradition from within.

It is particularly curious that the limited critical material that exists on “Songs of the Transformed” says little about the treatment of victimhood in the sequence, given the importance of victimhood across the body of Atwood’s work (poetry, fiction, and non-fiction), most of which, as Martine Brownley explains, “has valorized refusals of victimhood” (8). The final chapter of Atwood’s 1972 novel Surfacing (from which the epigraph for this chapter is taken), begins, for example, with the protagonist’s epiphany about the need to resist victimhood: “This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief [...]” (191). The Handmaid’s Tale, probably Atwood’s best known and most widely read novel, is likewise read as underpinned by ideas of victimhood, as encapsulated in Jamie Dopp’s argument that “the dominant subject-position offered by The Handmaid’s Tale is a victim-position” (par. 1). Atwood’s non-fiction, too, exhibits what Marge Piercy describes as Atwood’s “passion for becoming conscious of one’s victimisation and ceasing to acquiesce” (66). Atwood demonstrates a particular interest in the figure of the animal-victim in her survey of Canadian literature, Survival, which was published two years before “Songs of the Transformed” and which contains the most sustained articulation of her ideas and arguments about victimhood. Atwood devotes one chapter of Survival to an exploration of why “the animal as victim is a persistent image in Canadian literature” (79). Whereas “English animal stories are about ‘social relations,’ [and] American ones are about people killing animals[,] Canadian ones,” Atwood notes, “are about animals being killed, as felt emotionally from inside the fur and
feathers‖ (74). Animals in her national literature, Atwood argues, are predominantly helpless victims, whose suffering is infused with a “pathos” which “demands that an innocent victim suffer” (75).

While Jerome Rosenberg is accurate in describing “Songs of the Transformed” as “the songs of victims—victims of others and of themselves” (75), Atwood’s speakers are not simple replicas of the victimised “furry corpses” that she sees dominating Canadian representations of animals (Survival 75). Instead, they interrogate and resist this tradition. Atwood’s prosopopoeias give voice to non-human figures who refuse to suffer silently, and who instead make use of prosopopoeia’s ability to trouble the human/non-human binary in order to complicate and resist their own victimhood. The trope’s troubling of the human/non-human binary is central to this task because it enables Atwood to call into question the very assumptions that seem to lock non-humans into a victim position: the assumption of non-human passivity or powerlessness, the anthropocentric assumption of human superiority over non-humans, and the assumption of the absolute separation between humans and non-humans which implicitly legitimates human domination of non-human nature. For Atwood, the victimhood of non-humans in literature is characterised by a hopeless lack of agency from which writers operating within the animal-victim tradition, such as Earnest Thompson Seaton and Sir Charles G.D. Roberts, “rarely offer their victims even a potential way out” (Survival 75). Victimhood is equated with muteness and powerlessness: conditions which might seem unavoidable in a non-human figure but which prosopopoeia’s fictional conferral of voice and agency promise to reverse. Through prosopopoeia, Atwood grants her non-human figures a right of reply to their human victimisers, as well as an ability to denounce human brutality, refute anthropocentric assumptions, and emphasise their own agency.

Unsettling the Animal-Victim Tradition

The most significant way Atwood’s prosopopoeias challenge the animal-victim tradition is by troubling the anthropocentric human/non-human binary. Of the three sequences I look at, Atwood’s provides the clearest example of the two stages of Derridian deconstruction: inversion and displacement. By both inverting the binary’s implied hierarchy and displacing or troubling the human/non-human (victimiser/victim) distinction itself, Atwood’s prosopopoeias resist what she describes as “the almost overwhelming pressures of the great Canadian animal-victim tradition” (Survival 85), in which “the animal is always a victim” (75). By using prosopopoeia to speak from behind non-human masks, Atwood inverts anthropocentrism’s hierarchy by
privileging a non-human identity over a human one. As Donald Pollock explains, “the mask is normally considered a technique for transforming identity, either through the modification of the representation of identity, or through the temporary—and representational—extinction of identity” (582). Pollock’s description certainly seems true of Atwood’s non-human masks, which work to temporarily extinguish Atwood’s identity, effacing the poet herself behind the non-human persona evoked by the prosopopoeia. This basic inversion is extended in the content of the non-humans’ speech. “The sequence,” Lauter explains, “is a biting criticism of the assumption of human superiority which leads us to kill bulls for sport, trap foxes, feel contempt for pigs, rats and worms, and live our lives politically, without hope, murdering and being murdered despite our protestations and calls for help” (193). In their songs Atwood’s speakers criticise humans and humans’ violence toward each other and toward non-human nature, and in doing so break out of the role of the passive victim by functioning as the “witnesses, accusers, avengers, judges” that Pierre Fontanier sees prosopopoeia creating (in Riffaterre 107). The Pig, for example, accuses the human addressee:

This is what you changed me to:

a greypink vegetable with slug
eyes, buttock
incarnate, spreading like a slow turnip. (144)

The Crow judges:

You have too many leaders
you have too many wars,
all of them pompous and small, (147)

and the Worms promise vengeance:

Soon we will invade like weeds,
everywhere but slowly;
the captive plants will rebel
with us, fences will topple,
brick walls ripple and fall,

there will be no more boots.
Meanwhile we eat dirt
and sleep; we are waiting
under your feet.

When we say Attack
you will hear nothing
at first. (149)¹⁰

The speakers de-privilege humans by foregrounding their inhumanity: their violence, self-interest and greed. They emphasise this paradoxical inhumanity by frequently employing a diction that inverts the human/non-human hierarchy. A number of the speakers, for example, describe humans with negatively connotative words that are conventionally reserved for describing animals. In “Crow Song” (147), the Crow, addressing “my people,” describes how “you flock and squabble,” thus applying the impulsive and self-interested connotations of the words “flock” and “squabble” to human behaviour. Likewise, in “Song of the Hen’s Head” the human “feet and hands” that chase after the beheaded Hen’s body are depicted in avaricious terms as “scavengers” (153). By recontextualising the vocabulary that traditionally maintains the hierarchical elevation of humans over non-humans, the speakers undermine the anthropocentric norm used to justify human victimisation of non-humans.

Even when not applying derogatory animal-specific terms to humans, the speakers’ blunt criticisms of humans trouble anthropocentrism’s privileging of the human by casting humans as the object of an estranging, appraising non-human gaze. This reversal of the gaze comes through particularly strongly in the poems where the non-human speaker uses apostrophe to address (and accuse) a human “you.” “Rat Song” is one such apostrophic use of prosopopoeia and provides a good example of this recasting of the human as object, rather than subject. The human apostrophised in the poem is a philistine: it goes to “get the rifle down” when it hears “singing.” It is an uncoordinated (“you always miss”) “stupid humanist” with a “greasy person voice” who is the subject of “crystal hatreds.” It is not, significantly, even a “he” or “she.” Because the second-person pronoun is ungendered we are prevented from describing the human with the “he” or “she” pronouns that carry implicit subjectivity. We can talk about the Rat as a “she” but the only way to describe the human is as an “it”: an object.

This estrangement of the human figure can be described in Sartrean terms as the human becoming the object of the non-human gaze, or what Sartre describes as “the revelation of my being-as-object for the other” (232). Of course this is not the same as the actual gaze of a real animal, analogous but different to Derrida’s description of finding himself “caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal” (Animal 3). In Derrida’s case a cat rests actual eyes on him. In Atwood’s prosopopoeias the gaze is imaginary and is mediated through language, conveyed not through the eye, but through the voice, through the speaker’s insistent invocation of “you.”

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¹⁰ All references given for the poems in “Songs of the Transformed” are taken from Eating Fire: Selected Poetry 1965–1999.
However, the gaze is not, Sartre points out, dependent on an actual eye, but can be given by sounds or objects that “represent the eye” in that they represent the possibility of appraisal by another (234; emphasis original). The speakers’ criticisms of humans in “Songs of the Transformed” certainly seem to signify appraisal, and, moreover, the etymology of the word *prosopopoeia* suggests the trope’s ability to confer a gaze: “prosopopoeia” can be translated from the Greek as not only “to confer a mask,” but also “to confer a face,” as emphasised in de Man’s translation of the trope: “prosopon poien, to confer a mask or a face” (*Rhetoric* 76; emphasis original). This rhetorical face (the non-human character evoked by the trope) is not a visible pair of eyes but is implied through language which “represent[s] the eye” in that it represents the gaze being reversed and turned on humans. In this way prosopopoeia endows the speakers with agency through reasserting their ability to be not only victims of the gaze but also purveyors of it. It also emphasises the individuality of the non-human speakers. If the human gaze sees all rats as the same, the non-human gaze in “Rat Song” emphasises the singularity of the speaker. The Rat speaks not as a generalisation or personification of all rats, but as an individual with a distinctive personality (or, rather *animality*). She is unapologetically blunt: “when you set out the poison / I piss on it”; “I don’t stick around to be slaughtered.” She even uses rhyme to emphasise her most provocative words: *miss/piss/dangerous, right/parasite*. She is confident, putting words in the human’s mouth without hesitation—“You think: *That one’s too clever*”—and abusing the human: “stupid humanist.” She is obstinate, using anaphora and repetition to continually reiterate her condemnation of the human: “*When you hear me singing*”; “*and when you set out the poison*”; “*Right, I’m a parasite, I live off your / leavings [...] I take without asking*”; “*You’d do the same if you could, / if you could afford to share*” (my emphasis). John Berger writes that “animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance” (14). The Rat’s unsympathetic depiction of humans reacts against the permanent location of animals as “the observed,” thus inverting the hierarchy that locks non-humans into an unquestioning victim position by reaffirming Berger’s observation that “they can observe us” too.

“Songs of the Transformed” inverts the human/non-human, victimiser/victim binary by not only deprivileging humans, but simultaneously recasting the non-human as the site of valued qualities. The non-human speakers often have greater insight or morality than the humans they describe. Whereas the humans frequently “mistake” the nature of non-human behaviour (“Pig Song,” “Song of the Fox”), the non-human speakers can decode human behaviours and intentions. The Crow, for example, diagnoses the causes of human conflict:

[...] my
baffled people, you have been through
too many theories
too many stray bullets
your eyes are gravel, sceptical (147)

The Crow here displays a level of insight the humans do not have. Whereas the “baffled” people are blind (their eyes “are gravel”) to the damage done to them by “theories” and “stray bullets,” the Crow sees and understands all. This inversion is taken even further in “Song of the Fox,” where the Fox, traditionally the hounded pest, strips humans of the dominant position of hunter by depicting the so-called hunt as a “dance” or “game” the Fox plays with the humans:

Dear man with the accurate mafia
eyes and dog sidekicks, I’m tired of you,
the chase is no longer fun,
the dispute for territory
of fences and hidden caverns
will never be won, let’s
leave each other alone.

I saw you as another god
I could play with in this
maze of leaves and lovely blood,
performing hieroglyphs for you
with my teeth and agile feet
and dead hens [...] (152)

The Fox here challenges the myth of human dominance over nature. The humans think they are hunting the Fox, whereas in actuality they are being “play[ed] with” by a creature who views them as equals: “another god” (my emphasis). From the Fox’s non-human perspective, humans have significantly less power and authority than they would assume themselves to have. The land from which the humans attempt to rid the Fox is not owned by humans (as the humans would assume it to be), but rather is a disputed “territory” over which humans have no prior claim. Moreover, the tracks and telltale “dead hens,” which the humans would perceive as a sign of the Fox’s ignorance (its inability to conceal its whereabouts), are, on the contrary, signs of intelligence: the Fox does not involuntarily leave tracks, but rather performs “hieroglyphs,” symbols in which meaning is intentionally encoded. Atwood thus makes the Fox impossible to typecast as an animal victim, despite its human enemies classifying it as hunted pest.
As well as inverting the “violent hierarchy” within binaries, in which “One of the two terms,” (here, human) “governs the other [...] or has the upper hand” (Derrida, Positions 41), “Songs of the Transformed” also troubles or displaces the binary itself by depicting actual transformations, which pose a challenge to binaries, species, categories. By troubling the very division between humans and non-humans, the poems unsettle the animal-victim trope, which depends on a stable human/non-human distinction. As the title suggests, each of the speakers in “Songs of the Transformed” has undergone or is planning some kind of metamorphosis, although the type of transformation is never the same between two speakers. In “Pig Song,” the speaker has been debased by confinement and overfeeding at the hands of humans: “This is what you changed me to” (144). But in “Bull Song” (145) the transformation is from life to death, and “Owl Song” depicts a more mythic kind of translation; the Owl is at first the transformed “heart of a murdered woman” and later in the poem, “the lost heart of a murderer / who has not yet killed” (150). The Owl paradoxically embodies both murdered and murderer, victim and victimiser. While the speakers’ transformations occur in different forms (fantastical, mythical, metaphorical), their overall effect is to trouble a binary distinction between two terms: human/non-human, animal/vegetable, life/death, victim/victimiser. The transformations are not transcendent; they do not resolve in a stable hybrid or third space, but rather, to borrow a phrase from Homi K. Bhabha, form a “dialectic without transcendence” in which both categories are called into question (110).

Atwood deconstructs the human/non-human binary by depicting transformations in the form of a grotesque kind of species-permeability. By depicting species as categories that fail to fully contain or define living organisms, Atwood undermines their authority and so, by extension, implicitly calls into question the absolute difference between the species Homo sapiens and the rest of the species that constitute non-human nature. In “Song of the Worms,” for example, the Worms “remember” when they “were human,” and the Pig in “Pig Song” describes having become a “vegetable.” While the Pig’s imagery may seem more figurative than literal, the Bull describes a kind of permeability between species-boundaries that cannot so easily be written-off as a figure of speech:

“Bull Song”

For me there was no audience,
no brass music either,
only wet dust, the cheers
buzzing at me like flies,
like flies roaring.
I stood dizzied
with sun and anger,
neck muscle cut,
blood falling from the gouged shoulder.

Who brought me here
to fight against walls and blankets
and the gods with sinews of red and silver
who flutter and evade?

I turn, and my horns
gore blackness.
A mistake, to have shut myself
in this cask skin,
four legs thrust out like posts.
I should have remained grass.

The flies rise and settle.
I exit, dragged, a bale
of lump flesh.
The gods are awarded
the useless parts of my body.

For them this finish,
this death of mine is a game:
not the fact or act
but the grace with which they disguise it
justifies them.

Atwood begins the poem with figural or poetic transformations which prefigure the main species-transformation in the fourth stanza. The poem begins with transforming imagery. The identification of flies and cheers evolves: at first, the cheers are “like flies,” “buzzing,” but in the next line the simile is flipped around and the figurative flies turn back into cheers, “roaring.” Sounds also transform. The onomatopoeic “buzzing” (onomatopoeia is itself a transformation
between codified language and raw imitative sound) retains its vibrating ζ-sound but transforms into “dizzied” two lines later. These smaller poetic transformations are then extended in the Bull’s allusion to a more literal kind of transformation in the form of inter-species permeability: “A mistake, to have shut myself / in this cask skin, / four legs thrust out like posts. / I should have remained grass.” This curious self-chastisement challenges the traditional naturalization of absolute species-divisions. The Bull’s identity is not defined by his species, but, conversely, extends beyond his incarnation as a bull to a time he existed as “grass.” In this way Atwood literalizes ecological interconnectedness, troubling the species-division between Bull and grass by highlighting how the former is constituted through the latter: the Bull’s growth and survival depends on his consumption of grass.

“The Bull Song” provides one example of how Atwood often deploys this literalising of ecological interconnectedness in order to highlight the usually obfuscated relationships created by consumption. Atwood not only depicts conventional relationships of consumption, which align victimising with the consuming human and victimhood with the consumed non-human, but she also uses consumption to unsettle the human/non-human binary, and focuses on forms of consumption where the tables are turned and the human becomes the consumed. In the same way that the Pig’s declaration, “If you feed me garbage, / I will sing a song of garbage. / This is a hymn,” literalises and reinforces the aphorism “you are what you eat,” the Bull’s self-chastisement that it “should have remained grass” depicts an identity at least partially constructed through consumption: the Bull consumed grass, and so its life began not with its own conception or birth, but had an earlier incarnation in the form of grass. The fifth stanza in “Bull Song” describes how “the gods are awarded / the useless parts” of the carcass, implying that the human “them” of the final stanza consume the useful parts. Unlike the Bull, the humans would not recognize what they consume as constitutive of their identities, but the Bull’s affiliation with grass presents a paradigm in which, by eating the Bull, the humans’ identities implicitly become connected (infected?) with the Bull’s identity. The poem thus highlights the instability of the human/non-human binary. This troubling is, however, dependent on human consumption of the non-human: a very physical form of appropriation that seems equally to reassert humans’ dominance over non-humans victims. Atwood complicates this appropriation in “Song of the Worms,” where consumption works in the opposite direction, not constituting human identities, but (literally) breaking them down. The Worms, who remember when they “were human,” had an earlier incarnation as the human bodies they eventually consumed. The Worms’ plan to physically overturn civilisation (“the captive plants will rebel / with us, fences will topple, / brick walls ripple and fall”) is a literal extension of the overturning they already enact, in their
transformation of humans from consumer to consumed, from victimiser to victim. Through (re)turning the humans to a non-human state the Worms exhibit their own form of agency: they might be crushed by the “soles of boots” but also ultimately exert their own power over the bodies that wear those boots.

The final poem in the sequence, which is not spoken by an animal (or, in the Siren’s case, partial animal), picks up on the transformative nature of death in order to pose a further challenge to the binary distinction of (victimising) humans and (victimised) non-humans. “Songs of the Transformed” concludes with “Corpse Song,” in which the Corpse returns via dream to the land of the living, bringing “something you do not want: [...] news of your future.” The Corpse speaks of death, the inevitable transformation through which all humans are deprived of power and agency, and so, like the non-human victims depicted in the sequence, succumb to their own mortality. By concluding the sequence with this transformation, which is not a mythic metamorphosis but an inescapable fact of life, Atwood displaces the human/non-human, victimiser/victim binary by illustrating its inevitable collapse: the binary is not essential or eternal because every human eventually, though death, is deprived of the power and agency that is used to distinguish humans from non-humans, victimisers from victims. Death, as “Corpse Song” depicts it, is not a full stop, a tying off of the category of “human,” but rather a form of transformation through which every human-victimiser eventually becomes a victim of his or her own mortality. As Jennifer Howard explains, “Humans’ pride of place is reinforced by the separation of ‘human’ and ‘animal’ into separate, even opposed, categories” (par. 6). By foregrounding how death—the great leveller of all living beings—breaks down these categories, “Corpse Song” reveals this “pride of place” dependent on the supposed impenetrability of the category “human” to be a fallacy.

Atwood’s emphasis on suffering has the same function as her emphasis on death—deconstructing the human(victimiser)/non-human(victim) binary by highlighting how vulnerability to pain, like mortality, is shared by humans and non-humans alike. The speakers in “Songs of the Transformed” experience suffering of a violent and physical nature, which is directly caused by humans: the Pig is incarcerated, the Bull killed for entertainment, the Rat and the Fox are hunted, and the Hen beheaded and violated. The strong emphasis on death and suffering evokes the spectral presences of real animals within or behind Atwood’s non-human masks because suffering transcends anthropomorphism. It is the single most important aspect of conscious experience that we know humans share with animals. The experience of suffering,

11 It seems particularly appropriate to think of the Worms’ revolution or overturning as a form of deconstruction, considering that Derrida used Heidigger’s term Umdrehung, which means a turn or revolution (“Umdrehung”), to describe deconstruction: “the Umdrehung must be a transformation of the hierarchical structure itself” (Spurs 81).
as Peter Carruthers explains, can “occur in the absence of phenomenal consciousness” and therefore cannot be restricted to human experience (100). From Jeremy Bentham’s famous statement, “the question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? But, Can they suffer?” (283; emphasis original), to Peter Singer’s precept that “the capacity to suffer [...] is the only defensible boundary of concern for the interests of others” (9), suffering has been invoked as the experience that links humans with animals. Kathleen Vogt is perhaps thinking of Atwood’s depictions of death and suffering when she describes the sequence’s invocation of non-humans, arguing that “one is invited to see both animals and humans when responding to the imagery” (169). Thus, while the Bull’s post-death meditation on human brutality is an anthropomorphism, a way in which Atwood transforms the Bull into human terms, the Bull’s allusions to pain and confusion are not anthropomorphic transformations, but rather emphasise a link between human and non-human experiences. The Bull’s description of suffering—being “dizzied / with sun and anger, / neck muscle cut, / blood falling from the gouged shoulder”—draws on the universality of suffering to call into question the absolute conceptual separation of human experiences from non-human experiences.

In a number of ways, then, prosopopoeia enables Atwood to challenge the Canadian animal-victim tradition by troubling the binary that underpins it. By both inverting the anthropocentric hierarchy and displacing the binary itself, Atwood confers on her non-human speakers the ability to challenge their victim status. The speakers take up the right of reply offered by prosopopoeia to thus resist passive victimhood in a number of ways: they break out of the pathos of silent victimhood by protesting their mistreatment and expressing their contempt for humans; they de-privilege humans, turning a critical Sartrean gaze back toward them; they assert their own intellect and agency; and they also foreground forms of transformation, ecological interconnectedness, consumption and shared vulnerability that displace the human/non-human binary itself, calling into question the validity of the ontological separation of the two categories.

**The Return to Victimhood: Prosopopoeia as Transformation and Consumption**

By creating prosopopoeias that deconstruct the human/non-human, victimiser/victim binaries, Atwood might seem to have effectively tapped into the trope’s anti-anthropocentric promise: a de-victimisation of the non-human figure. However, just as Levertov’s attempt to advocate for and empathise with the real pig is thwarted by prosopopoeia’s inability to access the real (and resultant arrogation of otherness), Atwood’s attempt to challenge the animal-victim tradition is
likewise complicated by the trope’s own nature as a form of transformation and consumption. Prosopopoeia, I argue, operates in these poems in a paradoxical way. On the one hand, as we saw above, the non-human voices Atwood constructs enable her to deconstruct the human/non-human binary, and the Canadian animal-victim tradition. On the other hand, however, Atwood (like Levertov) is trapped within a human framework that means that, in order to invoke the non-human speakers, she must transform them into consumable terms: they must speak in human voices about recognisable (that is, human) thoughts and emotions. Thus, in attempting to free the animal from one form of victimhood, Atwood necessarily subjects it to a new form of victimhood through the transformation and consumption entailed in its representation.

Atwood herself acknowledges that “‘realism’ in connection with animal stories must always be a somewhat false claim, for the simple reason that animals do not speak a human language; nor do they write stories. It’s impossible to get the real inside story, from the horse’s mouth so to speak” (Survival 74–75). This impossibility of accessing the “real inside story” leads to the poet appropriating, even invading, the non-human perspective. Thus, by conferring voices on the (imaginary) non-humans in what seems an act of empowerment that overcomes victimisation, prosopopoeia also, paradoxically, facilitates their renewed victimisation, through what Susan McHugh describes as the “sacrifice” of the animal through its “representational consumption” (489). Atwood’s non-human speakers are not only frequently consumed within their fictional worlds as food, but are also consumed outside the fictional world as anthropomorphised disguises: to the fictional human addressee the Pig is “a skin you stuff so you may feed / in your turn,” and to Atwood it is “a skin” she “stuff[s]” with herself, using the non-human figures as disguises or masks through which to filter her voice.

The most significant way in which Atwood’s prosopopoeias transform or translate the non-humans into familiar terms is, obviously, through language. The non-human figures are not only constructed through language in the most basic sense (they exist only on the page), but are also endowed with an anthropomorphised human voice. Their speech is not even estranged—more so than in Levertov’s Pig Dreams, the syntax is conventional and the idiom is recognisable. There is very little to suggest non-human otherness here. Thus, prosopopoeia’s translation of non-humans is not translation as it is usually thought of—it is not translation as straightforward mimesis, a preservation of an original—but instead operates in the way Haun Saussy sees translation functioning, as “a low fidelity circuit” that consumes and digests (rather than simply reiterates) the original (119). Saussy could almost be describing prosopopoeia itself when he writes of translation: “biting, digestion, and selective uptake together form a circuit of
synecdochic, then metonymic, and finally metaphorical appropriation” (125). Just as Saussy sees translation from one language to another as enacting “a process of digestion and decay,” so prosopopoeia’s translation of the non-human into human language likewise performs a process of digestion (124). Even while, for example, “Song of the Hen’s Head” can be seen to situate the speaker in a physiological reality through the poem’s refusal to mince words in its graphic, even grotesque, description of the hen’s coveted flesh (153), it is the very same words that enact Saussy’s “metaphorical appropriation”:

Feet and hands chase it, scavengers
intent on rape:
they want its treasures,
it’s warm rhizomes, enticing sausages,
it’s yellow grapes, its flesh
caves, five pounds of sweet money,
its juice and jellied tendons.

Even independent of the allusion to rape the portrayal would be repulsive, but this repulsion arises not so much from the hen’s death, as from the grotesque metaphors used to describe it: “warm rhizomes,” “yellow grapes,” “sweet money.” The carcass is transformed through figurative imagery from animal flesh to “sausages” and “caves.” While the nauseating effect of the imagery might seem to resist the hen’s consumption as allegory by emphasising its bodily existence (nausea itself being something that reverses consumption: ingestion becomes expulsion through vomiting), the body is inevitably translated into consumable terms: human language, human metaphor, perhaps even the human construction of the violated animal-victim. Moreover, just as a number of Levertov’s characterisations of Sylvia might be seen as somewhat gratuitous ways of constructing her as a comic figure, Atwood’s strongly graphic translation of the hen’s body into grotesque metaphors might be seen as a gratuitous way to induce a shock-effect in the reader—the prosopopoeia becomes less about the non-human and more about the effect the poet’s representation of it can produce.

The speakers’ hostile criticisms of humans offer a further example of how Atwood’s attempt to deconstruct the trope of the Canadian animal-victim paradoxically translates and consumes the non-human in a way that, even as it seeks to empower the non-human, leads to its re-victimisation. Atwood’s construction of her non-human speakers as critical of humans, contemptuous and even belligerent enables her to invert the anthropocentric hierarchy and overtly break with the tradition of the passive animal victim; however, this inversion relies on Atwood’s appropriation of the non-human as a means to reflect and refract human behaviour.
The non-human, even when liberated of its enforced passivity, is still not allowed to exist on its own terms, but must have its existence defined in relation to humans. The speakers’ criticisms, contempt, and plans of retribution are unquestionably anthropomorphisms. Moreover, their songs are not about animal concerns or experiences, but always about a relationship with humans, and frequently directly address the human victimiser, or human reader. Even though the speakers criticise humans, humans are still, paradoxically, privileged, in that humans remain the central focus of each of the ten songs. “Pig Song,” for example, is not really a “song of roots and noses,” but a reproach addressed to a human “madam,” who, although the Pig “offends” her, continues to feed it “garbage” so, as the Pig perceives, “you may feed / in your turn.” “Crow Song,” likewise, is not about roosting or scavenging or other behaviours natural to crows, but is a prophetic address to “my people,” “my baffled people,” about the causes and outcomes of their human folly. Thus, the criticisms Atwood puts in the mouths of her non-human speakers both anthropomorphise the animals and maintain the centrality of humans.

There is a further way the critiques voiced by Atwood’s speakers transform the non-humans into consumable human terms: the critiques can be seen to construct a fetishised notion of animal insight. This fetishised form of non-human knowledge endows the speakers with a superior wisdom or ethic, which is nonetheless modelled on human intellect and almost exclusively directed toward humans. The speakers, with their aphorisms and prophesies, thus become depicted in exotic terms. “Exoticism” in a postcolonial context, as Graham Huggan explains, “may be conventionally understood as an aestheticising process through which the cultural other is translated, relayed back through the familiar” (Huggan, Postcolonial ix). The concept can also, I suggest, be applied to humans’ anthropocentric ways of perceiving and representing non-humans. Depictions of animals can be an aestheticising consumption of otherness—another form of the “commodification” Huggan identifies—in the same way that exotic representations of humans are an act of commodification (vii). Thus, the Crow’s oracle-like speech, albeit resisting the anthropocentric myth of human superiority over non-humans, revictimises the figure of the Crow by constructing it the exotic terms of possessing a fetishised insight into human affairs.

While Atwood’s speakers can certainly be seen to deconstruct the anthropocentric normalising of the animal-victim figure, the tactics Atwood uses to both invert and displace the binary paradoxically also re-victimise the non-human by transforming it into consumable human terms. Atwood’s speakers are not, therefore, truly liberated from victimhood: they are used as masks or disguises; they are constructed through human language into anthropomorphic reflections or refractions of human issues; they are even, perhaps, consumed as exotic non-
human prophets. This re-victimisation presents a serious complication to Atwood’s anti-
anthropocentric project. It is not, however, a complication she is oblivious to, and in what
follows below I will look at how Atwood uses self-reflexivity to respond to the problem of the
transformation and consumption (i.e. appropriation) of the non-human that makes
prosopopoeia’s advocacy inescapably ambivalent.

**Resisting (Re)Victimisation: Self-Reflexivity and the Problem of Narcissism**

Whereas, in Levertov’s sequence, it is only the images, and not the poems themselves, which can
be seen to address the problem of appropriation, in “Songs of the Transformed” Atwood, by
contrast, does demonstrate an awareness of the appropriation inherent in speaking for non-
human others. A response to both the poetic and political problems of her prosopopoeias can, I
suggest, be found in Atwood’s use of self-reflexivity, through which she points to the pitfalls of
prosopopoeia and highlights (and thus pre-empts) her vulnerability to these pitfalls. If Levertov
mostly attempts to diminish or conceal prosopopoeia’s problematic duplicity (a duplicity upon
which the trope’s appropriation hinges), Atwood almost overacknowledges the trope’s illusory
nature, and the appropriative dangers which attend it. I will look first at Atwood’s
foregrounding of prosopopoeia’s artifice, and then, more specifically, at how she self-reflexively
addresses the appropriative problems of prosopopoeia. Finally, however, I will demonstrate that
self-reflexivity does not, in fact, provide an adequate solution to prosopopoeia’s anthropocentric
appropriations because it (narcissistically) foregrounds the human self, occluding the non-human
figure behind the reemphasised poet. Self-reflexivity, I suggest, multiplies and disperses the
figure of human poet within the text, with the result that any act of reading inevitably arrives
back at the human. Davies et al. describe self-reflexivity as creating the sense of “being held
within a hall of mirrors—the hall of mirrors that enthrals us in sideshow alleys at fairs and
amusement parks” (386). The danger of self-reflexivity is that, in constantly setting up “mirrors”
that reflect and replicate the human, the device overwrites and envelops the non-human,
becoming something that, to borrow from Nielsen, “purports to represent the other while it
actually talks about the self” (“Prosopopoeia” 696). Atwood’s self-reflexive response, I suggest,
does not retrieve the anti-anthropocentric advocacy prosopopoeia promises because it makes
that advocacy something that necessarily “talks about the self.”

There are a number of points in “Songs of the Transformed” where Atwood invokes and
emphasises prosopopoeia’s doubled voice in order “reveal the device” and draw attention to the
sequence’s prosopopoeias as deception, illusion, and disguise. “Crow Song,” for example, enact
this self-reflexivity in a way that emphasises humans’ susceptibility to such artifice. Here it is the Crow (the creature the scarecrow is designed to scare) who recognises the scarecrow for what it is, warning the humans that “That overcoat / on sticks is not alive,” and it is the “baffled people” who succumb to the disguise, mistaking the scarecrow for an angel. The Crow’s warning self-reflexively highlights the pretence of prosopopoeia itself: a trope that, like a scarecrow, masquerades as something it is not (147–48). This laying bare of the device is reinforced in “Siren Song,” a poem in which it is difficult to tell where the Siren’s voice leaves off, and Atwood’s voice begins. In “Siren Song” Atwood seems to allude to her own performance of “looking picturesque and mythical,” and, self-reflexively, asks “will you get me / out of this bird suit?” (151). The line almost invites us to read it as Atwood’s own direct speech: the voice of the poet who has put on the “bird suit” to look “picturesque and mythical.” Atwood thus pre-empts the inevitable disintegration of the fictional speaker by self-reflexively foregrounding prosopopoeia’s deception, as well as her own role in that deception. An even more overt moment of self-reflexivity occurs in the final poem, “Corpse Song,” where the corpse explicitly foregrounds its own construction through prosopopoeia: “I became this illusion, / this trick of ventriloquism” (155). As in “Siren Song,” the voice emerging here from the corpse mask speaks in a doubled way: we hear not only the voice of the fictional character but also the voice of Atwood-as-poet, pointing to her presence behind the non-human mask—her function as ventriloquist.

Atwood’s self-reflexivity in the sequence does not just take the form of overt self-referentiality. By lifting an image or idea from one poem, and embedding it in another poem, Atwood highlights the constructedness of the sequence, and the fact that while all the poems purport to speak in different voices, they are actually all different versions of the same voice. Atwood seems to create an echo of the “overcoat / on sticks” mentioned in “Crow Song,” in the “winter coat the children / thought they saw” in the later “Corpse Song” (154). Likewise, she transforms the Fox’s allusion to “dead hens harmless and jolly / as corpses in a detective story” into a less-jolly depiction of a dead hen in the poem on the facing page, “Song of the Hen’s Head” (153). In “Owl Song” and “Siren Song,” the two poems preceding “Song of the Fox,” Atwood again transforms and transposes a key motif. The Owl is actually a woman’s heart transformed into a bird: “I grew feathers and tore my way out of her; / I am shaped like a feathered heart.” Likewise, the Siren is also a woman partially transformed into a bird: in Ovid’s version of the Persephone myth the Sirens are originally companions of Persephone who are later turned into birds with women’s faces (Richardson). Atwood makes the Siren seem a revision or rewriting (a transformation or translation) of the Owl. Likewise, she echoes the
Siren’s woman’s face in the (female) Hen’s Head. By transforming and transposing these motifs so that they create echoes across the sequence, Atwood thus draws attention to her own transformations from one disguise to the next, and emphasises the echo of her own voice in the doubled voices prosopopoeia creates.

Atwood not only acknowledges and pre-empts prosopopoeia’s formal or poetic ambivalence (the trope’s inevitable disintegration), but also addresses the ethical and political problems of giving voice. She demonstrates an awareness of the dilemma Saussy identifies in translation: that “even the most faithful (shall we say selfless?) attempt at imitation involves appropriation, introjection, infidelity, and a relation to the other that is neither premised on identity and mutual recognition nor ethical” (128). One form that Atwood’s acknowledgement of this “appropriation, introjection, [and] infidelity” takes is a self-reflexive foregrounding of language itself as a potential instrument of violence. In this way Atwood acknowledges, perhaps even pre-empts, the criticism that, by simply constructing non-humans through human language she has already transformed and consumed (and so re-victimised) them. In “Song of the Hen’s Head,” Atwood alludes to the violent reductiveness of converting a non-human figure into language. The beheading of the hen is translated into linguistic terms: “the abrupt collision / with the blade, the word.” Here, language is the weapon that separates the hen’s head from its body. If the head stands for the mask or face evoked by prosopopoeia, then prosopopoeia takes on a violent quality: the trope’s medium, “the word,” is used to sever and excise the mask or costume (in “Pig Song,” the “skin you stuff”) from the rest of the animal. Language becomes an instrument of death, and the evocation of the animal through language, Atwood suggests, becomes something that will always be violent and incomplete: it gives us a severed head, not a whole animal. In the last lines of the poem Atwood offers a further reason not to trust her evocation of the animal through language: language itself is not stable and can be violated. The final lines reveal the specific word upon which the hen has been reflecting:

I contemplate the Word,
I am dispensable and peaceful.

The word is an O,
outcry of the useless head,
pure space, empty and drastic,
the last word I said.
The word is No.
The poem enacts what Davies et al. describe as a feature characteristic of poststructuralist reflexivity: “a certain serious play with language, a play that recognizes its deadly force, its capacity to contain and restrain thought” (364). Atwood’s language play here is a form of self-reflexivity that draws attention to how the simple elision of a letter can transform the meaning of a word, and how a slight change to reported speech can do violence to the intended meaning. Just as the Hen has been beheaded, so too has her final word, “No.” With the n sliced off, the Hen’s final statement is transformed from its intended meaning of refusal and resistance to an apostrophic O. The “word” is transformed from a last act of defiance (a rebellion that resists passive victimhood) to the pathos-filled “pure space,” of the O. Atwood thus instructs the reader to be suspicious of language, and suspicious of the prosopopoeia itself—suspicious of its implied authenticity.

Atwood makes even more overt allusions to the violence of her appropriation of non-human voice in other poems. She ends “Rat Song,” for example, with a self-reflexive allusion in which she seems to indict herself for trying to appropriate or “drown” the Rat for whom she speaks:

It’s your throat I want, my mate
trapped in your throat.
Though you try to drown him
with your greasy person voice
he is hiding / between your syllables
I can hear him singing.

From behind the Rat-mask, Atwood self-reflexively critiques the violence that her “greasy person voice” can perform by overwriting the non-human other with the human self. This erasure of the non-human seems to be a significant concern for Atwood. She alludes to this danger not only in the Rat’s reference to the “person voice” drowning the Rat’s mate, but also in “Siren Song,” where she suggests that advocacy can appeal to an advocate’s vanity and thus become more about the self than the other. The song highlights the seductiveness of the role of the advocate—how “a cry for help” is “irresistible” to “everyone”—but also implies that this irresistibility does not necessarily arise from selfless altruism, and, rather than being selfless, the desire to speak for another can, in fact, be self-centred. Rescuing (advocating for) the victim can morph into an exercise in self-fashioning (as “advocate”), as is illustrated by the recurrence of the second person pronoun in the final lines of the poem:

I will tell the secret to you,
to you, only to you.
Come closer. This song is a cry for help: Help me!

Only you, only you can,
you are unique

at last. Alas it is a boring song but it works every time. (151; my emphasis)

Through the mythic figure of the Siren Atwood transforms apparent victim into powerful victimiser, whose “cry for help” is actually the eponymous “siren song”: bait to lure the real victim, the would-be advocate. The Siren’s song seems to echo the lure of prosopopoeia itself: the opportunity to make oneself “unique” by responding to “a cry for help.” Likewise, the danger the Siren represents (the certain death of anyone who responds to her plea) seems also to echo a different kind of danger, the danger of an unthinking response to a perceived cry for help: appropriation. By alluding to the vanity to which any act of advocacy, including prosopopoeia, can appeal—“Only you, only you can, / you are unique // at last”—Atwood thus calls into question her own motives, suggesting she herself may not be immune to advocacy’s siren song.

By responding to prosopopoeia’s ambivalence with self-reflexivity, highlighting not only the trope’s illusory nature but also its problematic flipside of appropriation, Atwood might seem to have achieved what Levertov could not, and found a way to speak for non-humans that effectively deals with the problem of appropriation. What the “Songs of the Transformed” finally demonstrates, however, is that self-reflexivity provides no antidote to prosopopoeia’s appropriation of the non-human. Like Levertov, Atwood cannot retrieve all that prosopopoeia seems to promise. While self-reflexivity enables Atwood to acknowledge the problems in her own acts of speaking for non-human animals, it does not defuse these problems. Wasserfall argues that “Reflexivity is not in itself a process for overcoming distortion or exploitation” (25), and while she bases her discussion on a critical methodology of reflexivity in anthropological research, the limitations of self-reflexivity seem equally to apply to the kind of textual self-reflexivity Atwood employs. Self-reflexivity does not enable Atwood to move away from appropriation because self-reflexivity inevitably returns the text to the (human) self. Levertov wrote in 1973 that “self-reproach can be a form of self-indulgence” (Poet 145), and, while Levertov’s avoidance of such “self-reproach” is by no means free from problems, Atwood’s
more politically-aware response of “self-reproach” or “self-reflexivity” is, if not “self-indulgent,” at least self-centring.

Self-reflexivity thus operates as a kind of narcissism—a function highlighted in the title of Linda Hutcheon’s study of metafictional (self-reflexive) fiction, *Narcissistic Narrative*. While, like Hutcheon, I specify that “it is the [...] text, and not the author, that is being described as narcissistic” (1), I do not celebrate the term in the same way that Hutcheon does. At least in the context of speaking for non-humans, self-reflexivity does not resolve the problem of appropriation, because its own textual narcissism functions in an anthropocentric way. Atwood’s allusion to her own “greasy person voice” in “Rat Song,” for example, although alluding to the appropriation prosopopoeia enacts, also returns attention to herself, prioritising the human voice and marginalising the rat-voice. Nielsen identifies the risk of such anthropocentrism, asking, “Does the advocate ever really speak for the other, or does she always end up speaking about herself?” (“Prosopopoeia” 695–96). “Songs of the Transformed” seems to illustrate that the advocate, perhaps inescapably, always ends up “speaking about herself” in some sense: prosopopoeia leads the poet to speak about herself (or, at least, about her species) by transforming the non-human into human terms. Moreover, when the poet self-reflexively acknowledges this appropriation she continues to speak about herself by referencing her participation in this appropriation. Even as Atwood’s self-reflexivity draws attention to the poetic and political problems of prosopopoeia, the textual narcissism of her self-reflexivity also sidelines the non-human characters, re-centring the roles of the human poet and reader. Thus, while Atwood’s self-reflexive allusions to her “bird suit” or “trick of ventriloquism” might on the one hand function as an attempt to call prosopopoeia into question, on the other hand, they diminish the non-human figures to illusions and costumes, breaking the non-human masks to return every speech-act to the human poet behind it.

Moreover, the dangers of self-reflexivity extend beyond the prioritising of the human figure. Self-reflexivity can also be used to pre-emptively excuse appropriation by drawing attention to it. Alcoff argues that those who speak for others “must interrogate the bearing of our location and context on what it is we are saying” (25). While Atwood’s self-reflexivity might begin this kind of interrogation, it cannot escape simultaneously functioning as one of the “deformed” ways in which Alcoff sees advocates superficially undertaking this interrogation: as “a disclaimer” or “a kind of apologetics” that implies that by foregrounding the potential problems in one’s advocacy one has effectively dealt with them (25). This pre-emptive function of self-reflexivity creates a further problem that haunts “Songs of the Transformed”: by narcissistically pointing to the poetic instability and appropriative transformations within the
sequence, Atwood’s self-reflexivity pre-empts, and therefore also appropriates, the reader’s position as analyser and potential critic of the sequence.

Like *Pig Dreams*, “Songs of the Transformed” illustrates the inescapability of prosopopoeia’s ambivalence. The prosopopoeias in “Songs of the Transformed” both advocate for and appropriate the non-human, critiquing but finally perpetuating anthropocentrism. While the sequence may overtly interrogate and unsettle the Canadian animal-victim tradition, the unsettling of this form of victimisation paradoxically entails Atwood’s participation in another form of victimisation: what McHugh would call the animals’ “representational consumption.”

Attending to the paradoxically de-victimising/re-victimising dynamic in “Songs of the Transformed” leads us to an important question: if, as *Pig Dreams* demonstrates, not engaging with prosopopoeia’s ambivalence (its inevitable appropriation) is problematic, and if, as “Songs of the Transformed” demonstrates, self-reflexively foregrounding issues of representation in prosopopoeia creates the new problem of (anthropocentric) narcissism, is there any way to effectively respond to the trope’s curiously appropriative form of advocacy? *The Wild Iris*, to which I will turn next, illustrates a third possibility.
The final text in my study is Louise Glück’s 1992 Pulitzer prize-winning volume *The Wild Iris*. The book, which plays out a three-way debate between plants, a spiritually frustrated gardener, and an Old Testament-type God, is very much a concept volume, structured in the characteristically Romantic form of the lieder cycle or “song cycle” (Garf 682). The book is temporally, tonally, and thematically rooted in a seasonal cycle of death and regeneration. Of the volume’s fifty-four poems, eighteen are prosopopoeias of plants, who are identified by the poems’ titles—“Witchgrass,” “Clover,” “The Red Poppy”—while approximately fourteen are prosopopoeias of God (in several poems the speaker could be either God or the human gardener) and bear titles that label the “vehicles” through which God speaks—“Clear Morning,” “Spring Snow.” The remaining poems are spoken by the human gardener and are mainly framed as a prayer-sequence through the repeated titles “Matins” and “Vespers.” Like “Songs of the Transformed,” *The Wild Iris* uses prosopopoeia to respond to a literary tradition. While Atwood employs the trope to interrogate the Canadian tradition of animal-victims, Glück’s prosopopoeias respond to the neo-Romantic lyric tradition. *The Wild Iris*, I argue, utilises prosopopoeia’s ability to deconstruct the human subject in order to challenge and break out of the anthropocentric narcissism of the conventional lyric poem. The volume, which Glück herself describes as “deeply lyrical” (“Magnificent”), operates from within the lyric tradition; all the poems fit M.H. Abrams’s definition of the lyric as a “short poem, consisting of the utterance of a single speaker, who expresses a state of mind, or a process of perception, thought, and feeling” and is often “represented as musing in solitude” (108). But while Abrams alludes only to human speakers, Glück’s prosopopoeias create non-human lyric-subjects. *The Wild Iris*’s prosopopoeias both invert and displace the human/non-human binary, re-imagining the lyric in a form that no longer, as it does conventionally, depends on the silencing and appropriation of non-human nature. However, just like Levertov and Atwood, Glück is faced with prosopopoeia’s doubleness—the fact that its anti-anthropocentric promise always comes with a corollary of appropriation. The pathetic fallacy required by prosopopoeia, which enables Glück
to trouble the human/non-human binary and resist lyric narcissism also, paradoxically, entails the appropriation of the non-human as a projection of, or mirror for, the melancholy of the human world. Like Atwood, Glück responds to prosopopoeia’s doubleness by self-reflexively foregrounding the poetic and political problems in her sequence; however, she also goes further: Atwood’s self-reflexive response, I argued in the previous chapter, ultimately falls prey to the anthropocentric narcissism inherent in self-reflexivity’s foregrounding of the self; Glück, by contrast, is not simply self-reflexive about her use of prosopopoeia, but self-reflexive about the narcissism of self-reflexivity itself. Yet even this meta-self-reflexivity, I will argue, does not provide a way to escape prosopopoeia’s oscillation from advocacy to appropriation, but rather traps the volume in a closed circuit of narcissism—an (infinite?) regress into the self.

The Wild Iris can be seen as a response to the potentially narcissistic self-focus and self-elevation of lyric poetry. Lyric’s very structure means that, arguably, it always contains an element of narcissism. Because the lyric is by nature a “concentrated expression of individual emotion” from an implicitly unified and inevitably human lyric subject (Brewster 1), it gives rise to the narcissism of self-focus. Moreover, because, traditionally, “the self of lyric strives to transcend materiality and to assert its separation from others” (Nielsen, “Ecology” 128), the lyric tradition gives rise to the narcissism of transcendent individualism. It is important to note that this narcissism is not necessarily synonymous with self-indulgence, vanity, or any of the other charges often laid against (particularly confessional) lyric poems. Nor does it necessarily totalise the lyric form; I am not suggesting that the lyric is only or straightforwardly narcissistic, but rather that narcissism forms one level of the lyric’s function. Lyric narcissism, then, describes the foregrounding of the self (as speaker and purveyor of the gaze), and therefore a marginalising of the other (as the object of speech and gaze). As Nielsen explains, “Ideally, lyric is monologic. Since it purports to encapsulate the experience of an ‘I,’ it relies on the repression of the ‘not-I’” (“Ecology 130). It is because of this hierarchic structure that, Nielsen argues, “the lyric subject has ecological implications” (“Ecology” 127). These ecological implications arise, I think, from the particular form of narcissism that seems most embedded in the lyric form: anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism can be thought of as narcissism played out at the level of species; it is the narcissism of a culture rather than an individual. Individual narcissism is implicitly anthropocentric because, for the narcissist, the world only has meaning in relation to the human self. Thus, the narcissism inherent in the lyric’s form also makes the lyric, by nature, anthropocentric. Although Glück does not express an explicit anti-anthropocentric politics in the way Levertov and Atwood do, the natural world is a significant presence in her work—
Leonard Scigaj, for example, includes Glück in a list of ecological and environmental poets (6).\(^\text{12}\) Moreover, Glück is certainly awake to issues of literary narcissism, as is demonstrated in her 1997 essay “American Narcissism.” In this essay Glück critiques what she sees as a problem afflicting contemporary, particularly American, poetry: a focus on the self that “adopts and extends Romanticism’s attentiveness to the soul, or the inward” into a narcissistic “transfixed infatuation” (10), in which “the identification on which narcissism depends” leads to a poetry where “nothing is not the self” because anything outside the self becomes “a mirror, an icon of purity, a blankness onto which the self can be projected” (12). Glück presents this “literary narcissism” as a “mutation” or distortion of the lyric peculiar to her own literary-historical context (11), and afflicting poets who (unlike herself, presumably) fail to employ strategies such as modesty, detachment and humour to foil narcissism (12). However, *The Wild Iris*, in which Glück is almost certainly exploring the issues that will later inform her essay, reveals a more complex attitude toward lyric narcissism. Whereas the essay depicts narcissism as a disorder of the lyric which can be avoided, the poems reveal a greater sense of the pervasiveness of narcissism—a sense of their inevitable complicity in some form of narcissism—and an awareness of how the narcissism of the lyric tradition, played out in its tendencies to transcendentalism, projection, and pathetic fallacy, is also a form of anthropocentrism.

*The Wild Iris*’s response to lyric narcissism takes account of, in particular, the narcissistic dangers of the lyric’s characteristic trope: the apostrophe. Apostrophe, although a cousin of prosopopoeia (they both hypothesise the animation of the non-human, through listening and speech respectively), operates differently from prosopopoeia. Whereas prosopopoeia can be seen to confer agency and subjectivity through its conferral of speech, apostrophe can be seen to disenfranchise the non-human by rendering it silent. Apostrophe thus privileges the human poet’s voice in an unmitigated way. The poet is the subject and the (frequently non-human) addressee is the silent and silenced object. Moreover, apostrophe reinforces the human/non-human hierarchy not only by underscoring humans’ exclusive possession of the power of speech, but also by enabling the human figure to project onto or absorb the non-human world around it. As Culler argues, apostrophe “can in fact be read as an act of radical interiorization and solipsism, which either parcels out the self to fill the world [...] peopling the world with fragments of the self, or else internalizes what might have been thought external” (66).

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\(^{12}\) Maggie Gordon’s argument that while “Glück’s foremost concern is poetic rather than political,” through a “kind of ‘absence of intention’ [...] an ecofeminist vision shapes her poetics and informs her poetry” (229), provides a useful framework in which to think about *The Wild Iris*’s challenge to anthropocentrism. I hesitate to attribute an intentional anti-anthropocentric politics to Glück, but even in the absence of such intention *The Wild Iris*’s critique of narcissism has consequences for an anthropocentric worldview.
Prosopopoeia, because it displaces the apostrophising human persona, supplanting the human speaker with a non-human speaker, thus promises to undo the anthropocentrism produced in part by lyric’s propensity to apostrophe. In what follows, I will unpack some of the ways Glück attempts to realise this promise.

Resisting Lyric Narcissism

In The Wild Iris, Glück uses prosopopoeia’s ability to both invert and displace the human/non-human binary in order to unsettle the traditional role of the lyric speaker and revise the anthropocentric narcissism of the lyric form. In The Wild Iris, the lyric I is no longer the exclusive realm of the individual, or even the human. As Harrison DeSales explains, “the lyric voice must suffer a radical transformation. This new voice [...] enunciates itself from a place outside the poet, and the poet in turn assumes the role of listener or scribe” (195; emphasis original). Instead of belonging exclusively to the poet or a single poetic speaker, the first-person I in The Wild Iris is dispersed across multiple speakers: the plants in the garden, the gardener, and God. It is through this decentralisation and dispersal of the lyric subject that Glück’s prosopopoeias undo the lyric’s anthropocentric silencing of nature, a silencing which reinforces the anthropocentric privileging of the human subject. Christopher Manes sees nature’s silence in contemporary Western society as caused by and complicit with an unjustifiable humanism. In an essay that argues for the need to reject “the rhetoric of humanism” (25), he describes how “Nature is silent in our culture (and in literate societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative” (15; emphasis original). Manes suggests that we must “reanimate nature [...] even if it puts at risk the privileged discourse of reason” (24). Because its prosopopoeias reanimate nature by literally rendering nature as a speaking subject, The Wild Iris appears to oppose the anthropocentric silencing of nature commonly associated with lyric and apostrophe. Glück’s prosopopoeias further contribute to an inversion of the human/non-human hierarchy by enabling non-human nature to assert its priority over humans. The speaker in “Witchgrass” (22–23), for example, not only speaks, but asserts its resilience and promises to outlast human civilisation:

I don’t need your praise
to survive. I was here first,
before you were here, before
you ever planted a garden.
And I’ll be here when only the sun and moon
are left, and the sea, and the wide field.

I will constitute the field.

Whereas, in the lyric tradition, the power lies with the human subject to evoke (or not, as he or she chooses) non-human nature through “praise,” “Witchgrass” illustrates how prosopopoeia inverts this hierarchy, enabling the “unwelcome” weed (an unlikely subject for admiring lyric apostrophe anyway) to be made present as a speaking subject, rather than an addressed object.

While the poem revises the anthropocentrism of the traditional apostrophic structure, it also seems to resist the new incarnation of solipsism Ann Keniston identifies in apostrophes of the nineties. In a 2001 essay she argues that “Apostrophe in the lyric of the last ten years downplays the optimism (or perhaps the delusion) of traditional apostrophe—the faith that the other is there and can hear—by foregrounding the absence of its addressee” (“Fluidity” 298; emphasis original). By contrast, in The Wild Iris the conventionally silent addressees of apostrophe (God and Nature) are there. The Witchgrass asserts its presence independent of praise or acknowledgement, and the gardener’s pessimistic focus on God’s absence is undercut by the fact that around a quarter of the poems are spoken in God’s voice: the human calls God “unreachable father” (3), and an “extended absence” (37), only for God to appear in first-person voice a few pages later. As Keniston explains, “Glück’s decision to allow the rebuttals into her volume converts the conventionally silent other of apostrophe into an actual other and helps unmake the self-pity and solipsism that Glück’s essay [“American Narcissism”] condemns in much lyric” (“Buried” 86). The volume’s polyvocality thus works against an anthropocentrically solipsistic assumption that the only real presence is the self.

The book’s inversion of apostrophe’s anthropocentric hierarchy even extends to a reversal of the traditional apostrophic relationship, a reversal which makes non-humans now apostrophise humans. While the most important trope in The Wild Iris is prosopopoeia, it is almost always prosopopoeia in an apostrophic form. The plants and God do not simply speak, but nearly always address their speech to a particular addressee. God paternally addresses his apostrophes to “human beings” (58), who are his “poor inspired / creation” (40), his “children” (45), his “little ones” (46). The plants address a “you” who is at different times (sometimes simultaneously) the human gardener, humans in a general and collective sense, God, and, occasionally, the reader. Some of the plant speakers even deploy the vocative O or Oh that apostrophe uses to announce itself, such as the Red Poppy (29), who apostrophises humans: “Oh my brothers and sisters.” By creating this heteroglot or debate of apostrophic prosopopoeias, Glück interrogates apostrophe while employing it, using apostrophe, in Keniston’s words, “to
critique apostrophe” (“Buried” 72), and in particular to critique the anthropocentric form of narcissism that seems inevitably to underpin human addresses to non-humans. The Wild Iris thus appears to undo the anthropocentric power relationships sustained by apostrophe—relationships that rule out any right of reply, making the poet or human persona the sole and privileged speaker and, for example, Blake’s “Sick Rose” and Shelley’s “Wild West Wind” silent (silenced?) listeners.

Related to the volume’s reversal of lyric’s conventional speaker-addressee relationship is its reversal of the gaze as it conventionally operates in the lyric. The Wild Iris uses prosopopoeia to both invert and displace the human/non-human binary by depicting the human as the object of a critical non-human gaze. Like both Levertov and Atwood, Glück taps into the anti-anthropocentric possibilities that arise from humans being cast as the objects, rather than purveyors, of the gaze. It may seem odd to discuss the gaze in relation to plants. Whereas the animal-figures upon whom Levertov and Atwood confer voice would (if they were real) have eyes and be able to issue a gaze, Glück’s flowers would not. But, as we have already seen, the gaze is not so much created by a real eye, but by things that signify appraisal. Glück’s flowers, in their appraisal of the human, issue a gaze that is created through language: the Hawthorn Tree even describes how “I watch you / walking in the summer garden—things / that can’t move / learn to see” (18). Like Atwood’s and Levertov’s speakers, the flowers do not let this opportunity for criticism pass them by. They invert the anthropocentric human/non-human hierarchy by critiquing human arrogance and narcissism, and thus imply the superiority of a non-human perspective. The Scilla, speaking as a collective “us,” chastises the human’s obsession with individuality: “Not I, you idiot, not self, but we, we—[...] why / do you treasure your voice / when to be one thing / is to be next to nothing?” (14). Under the Scilla’s gaze the human emphasis on individuality and uniqueness fails to create true differentiation: to the Scilla, the humans are “all the same to us, / solitary, standing above us, planning / your silly lives” (14).

The gaze of the Lamium presents the anthropocentric privileging of human rationality in dubious terms; the plant critiques “You and the others who think / you live for truth and, by extension, love / all that is cold” (5). Not only is truth is associated with coldness but it is not even a certain entity; the gardener only thinks she lives for truth. The Witchgrass, too, deploys a critical gaze thereby inverting humans’ dominance over nature. The Witchgrass depicts the gardener’s weeding, a seemingly benign act, as a vain attempt to maintain order:

[...] One of your precious flowers
dies here almost every day
and you can’t rest until
you attack the cause, meaning

whatever is left, whatever
happens to be sturdier
than your personal passion—

It was not meant
to last forever in the real world.
But why admit that, when you can go on
doing what you always do,
mourning and laying blame,
always the two together.

Humans here are criticised for arrogance, for trying to sustain what was “not meant” to be, and when that fails, reverting to scapegoatism: “mourning and laying blame.”

Glück’s deployment of a non-human gaze, like Atwood’s, not only a reverses the hierarchy that attends the human/non-human binary, but also displaces the binary itself by highlighting the biological interdependence that, for Nielsen, defines the anti-anthropocentric “ecological subject” in opposition to the anthropocentric lyric subject (“Ecology” 128).
Prosopopoeia’s non-human gaze highlights this interdependence by emphasising the fact that humans do not exist in a vacuum but in relation to non-human nature. As Sartre explains, the gaze emphasises situatedness and relationality in that one is always seen in relation to one’s surroundings: “To apprehend myself as seen is, in fact, to apprehend myself as seen in the world and from the standpoint of the world. The look does not carve me out in the universe; it comes to search for me at the heart of my situation and grasps me only in irresolvable relations with instruments” (239; emphasis original). This emphasis on situation and relationality contests the lyric’s anthropocentric emphasis on individualism and transcendence by strongly paralleling the deep ecological view that “There is no such thing as an individual, only an individual-in-context, individual as a component of place, defined by place” (Evernden 20). By casting the human gardener as the object of their non-human gaze, the plants not only revoke the privileged position of viewer from humans, but also highlight the fallacy of the gardener’s obsession with the autonomy of the self and with transcendence by showing her to be interrelated with the natural world.

While the non-human gaze provides one way for the sequence to challenge lyric’s anthropocentric individualism, the paradigms of the flowers’ world—collective identities and
cyclical patterns of life and death—offer a further challenge to the traditional lyric subject. At the levels of both form and content the volume pits the dispersed, cyclical, and collective against the traditionally privileged unified, transcendent and singular qualities of the lyric “I.” Both the seasonal cycles represented and the cyclical structure of the volume itself offer an implicit challenge to the primacy of the unique lyric subject. The presumed uniqueness and individuality of the lyric voice is challenged by the flowers who both pluralise and complicate the lyric I, and critique the human-character’s narcissistic emphasis on the autonomous self and the transcendent individuality of “the soul.” The flowers themselves embody this decentring or dispersal. At least half the plant speakers are rhizomes, bulbs or perennials: in contrast to the solitary human gardener they are parts of wholes. The flowers of rhizomatic plants (Iris, Trillium and Daisy) are linked across space with flowers stemming from the same rhizome; the flowers of bulbs and perennials are linked across time with the flowers of those same plants from past seasons and future seasons. As well as decentring and pluralising identity, the flowers decentre and pluralise voice, reducing the lyric to one form of voice among many. The plants challenge narrow conceptions of voice by conceiving of their voices in a physical, embodied way. The White Rose explicitly states “I have only / my body for a voice” (47), and the titular Wild Iris describes the voice it returned “from oblivion” to find as its own bloom: “a great fountain, deep blue / shadows on azure seawater.” God, too, alludes to another form of voice, inaccessible to humans, explaining, “I cannot answer you / in speech you accept as mine” (57).

The main tension between the human voice and the plant voices is played out in the contrast between the plants’ affirmation of collectivity and the human’s resolute individuality. While the dominant mode of the human-speaker is a singular lyric I, a number of the plant-characters speak in first person plural. The Violets (21), Field Flowers (28), Clover (30), Daisies (39), and Scilla (14) speak in terms of “we” “us” and “our.” Even flowers that speak in the first person voice—like the Lamium who begins “This is how you live when you have a cold heart. / As I do: in shadows”—also acknowledge a collective identity. Later in the poem the Lamium shifts to first person plural: “Some of us make our own light” (5). Any simple division between ideas of individuality and collectivity are complicated by the Snowdrops, the Field Flowers, the Clover, and the White Lilies whose speech involves slippage between singular and plural pronouns. In the same sentence the voice in “Field Flowers” shifts from a collective “us” to a unified “I”: “Certainly / you don’t look at us, don’t listen to us, / on your skin / stain of sun, dust / of yellow buttercups: I’m talking / to you [...]” (28, emphasis mine). The same shift occurs in the final stanza of “Clover,” where a line break provides the hinge between plural and unified identities: “when you swagger among us / I hear two voices” (30, emphasis mine).
“Snowdrops” and “The White Lilies,” despite being identified in the title as plural, the speaker in each uses only the singular first person voice: “Do you know what I was, how I lived?” (6); “It doesn’t matter to me / how many summers I live to return” (63). By creating slippage between singular and plural identities, the poems offer a different model for identity, implicitly challenging the insistent individuality of the lyric voice and thereby displacing the binary.

The Wild Iris not only challenges the human lyric subject’s privileged individualism but also dispels the anthropocentric myth of the lyric subject’s transcendence. By breaking apart this myth of transcendence the sequence enacts the second stage of deconstruction, displacing the human/non-human binary that underpins lyric narcissism by unsettling the very opposition upon which the binary depends. While there are moments in the volume that displace the human/non-human binary by depicting an affinity between humans and nature—the Red Poppy (29), for example, refutes a clean division between humans and nature by addressing humans as “my brothers and sisters” who “were like me once, long ago, / before you were human”—the main way the sequence displaces the binary is by dispelling the lyric’s myth of the transcendent human subject who has greater access to the divine, and who is elevated over, and therefore has God-like mastery over, the natural world. In The Wild Iris, the human is no longer distinguished from the rest of creation by a capacity for transcendence. In “Violets” (21), for example, the myth of human transcendence is undercut by the flowers who describe themselves as

[...]

who would teach you, though
you kneel and weep,
clasping your great hands,
in all your greatness knowing
nothing of the soul’s nature

Here, the transcendent knowledge of the “soul’s nature” is possessed not by humans, but instead by “nature” itself. By describing this transcendent knowledge with the word “nature” the Violets even seem to suggest proximity between (living) nature and (the soul’s) nature. The Violets’ allusion to the human’s “greatness” might seem to affirm a transcendent elevation of the human, but attention to Glück’s polysemous diction reveals that this is not necessarily the case: as much as greatness can refer to pre-eminence, it can also refer to physical size, and the Violets’ emphasis of their own smallness earlier in the poem helps to evoke the latter reference.

By endowing the natural world with speech, Glück’s prosopopoeias refute the notion of absolute human mastery and demonstrate how spiritual transcendence is not, just as the status of the speaking subject is not, an exclusive human possession: the Wild Iris refers to its soul (1), the
Jacob’s Ladder announces “I too desire / knowledge of paradise” (24), and the Red Poppy has a relationship with its own version of the deity, who may or may not be another incarnation of the gardener’s God (29):

    [...] I have
    a lord in heaven
    called the sun, and open
    for him, showing him
    the fire of my own heart, fire
    like his presence.
    What could such glory be
    if not a heart?

Transcendence and reverence are here imagined in a physical form: the Poppy’s red petals become a form of passionate adulation, even a heart itself, thus contesting the gardener’s narcissistic assertion to God that “I am uniquely / suited to praise you” (38).

While the flower-prosopopoeias dispel the anthropocentric myth of the transcendent human lyric-subject by foregrounding their own forms of transcendence, the poems spoken by the human gardener (a figure with biographic parallels to Glück herself) dispel the myth in a further way. The gardener, albeit in an obsessive, perhaps narcissistic way, focuses on her failure to commune with God, that is, her failure to transcend. As a human she is “exiled from heaven” (3) and “can’t conceive” of the God with whom she tries to have a relationship (12). Despite her continuing accusations, apologies and questions, the gardener is deaf to God’s responses. She describes to God himself this failure to transcend: “everywhere I am talked to by silence // so it is clear I have no access to you” (55). Her failure to transcend prompts the gardener to adopt a more humble diction that collapses the hierarchical distinction between humans and non-human nature. She describes herself to God as the “lowest of your creatures” and a “disposable animal” (26, 31; my emphasis), and by framing herself as part of, rather than separate from, non-human nature, the gardener continues the plants’ displacement of the human/non-human binary.

There are, then, a number of ways in which prosopopoeia’s anti-anthropocentric promise enables Glück to resist lyric narcissism. By endowing nature with voice and with a critical gaze, Glück unsettles the human/non-human binary, revising the anthropocentric narcissism of the traditional lyric voice. Her poems undo the silencing of nature that lyric’s apostrophes reinforce. By deploying the non-human gaze Glück inverts anthropocentrism’s hierarchy. Moreover, by affirming humans’ location within in the world, in undissolvable relations to other aspects of non-human nature, she displaces the human/non-human binary. This adoption of non-human
perspectives enables Glück to set the plants’ paradigmatic alternative of dispersal, plurality and circularity in opposition to the lyric’s narcissistic emphasis on individualism. It also enables her to challenge the anthropocentric myth of the transcendent human lyric subject, thereby displacing the binary in a further way. Glück’s multi-faceted revision of the traditional lyric form thus certainly seems to affirm Harrison DeSales’s argument that in *The Wild Iris* “the primary lyric self, the autobiographical I, has undergone a fundamental decentralization. It can no longer wield a superior authority over perspectives that see the poet as you” (195). Yet it is too simple to see *The Wild Iris* as entirely escaping the narcissism embedded in lyric. *The Wild Iris*, as I will show in the next section, is afflicted with prosopopoeia’s flipside of appropriation—an appropriation that, paradoxically, reinstates the very anthropocentric narcissism the book critiques.

**Inescapable Narcissism: Glück’s Melancholic Pathetic Fallacy**

The title *The Wild Iris* contains a curious paradox which, I think, encapsulates an important feature of the sequence: even though the book ostensibly begins with the voice of the non-human other (the Iris), the “I” of the human (gardener/poet/reader) surfaces in the title: it is the first syllable we sound in the word “Iris.” This emergence of the self (the “I”) at the very start of the sequence captures, I suggest, the narcissism that runs through the sequence as a whole. Like Atwood’s, Glück’s particular interpretation of prosopopoeia’s promise is, to a degree, thwarted by the very nature of prosopopoeia. Whereas Atwood’s utilization of the trope as a way to undermine the Canadian animal-victim tradition is complicated by prosopopoeia’s translation of the non-human into consumable terms, Glück’s interpretation of prosopopoeia’s promise as a means to resist and revise lyric narcissism is complicated by the narcissistic device inherent in any prosopopoeia: pathetic fallacy. I have opted to use the term *pathetic fallacy* rather than restricting myself to *personification or anthropomorphism*, not because of the term’s pejorative history (John Ruskin, who coined the expression, was deeply critical of the device), but because *pathetic fallacy* seems especially to connote the projection of (human) emotions onto non-human entities, and it is in particular the *emotional* (specifically melancholic) projection in *The Wild Iris* that causes the sequence, as Keniston explains, to not only interrogate, but also to participate in “the narcissistic tendency to convert others into mirrors of the self” (“Buried” 73).

Glück’s pathetic fallacy is necessarily stronger than either Levertov’s or Atwood’s, because, whereas Levertov and Atwood (for the most part) speak for non-humans who have some level of consciousness, Glück’s plant prosopopoeias attribute voice to entities without
minds. The Red Poppy explicitly emphasises this, beginning its poem with the statement “The great thing / is not having a mind.” Not all of the thoughts or experiences Levertov and Atwood attribute to their non-human speakers are necessarily pathetic fallacy. The attribution of suffering to non-humans does not, for example, anthropomorphise them. By contrast, everything about the flowers’ experiences is a projection of human consciousness, and human emotion. William Davis is perhaps not overstating the situation when he describes the sequence as “pathetic fallacy with a vengeance” (48).

While The Wild Iris succumbs to the general narcissism inherent in pathetic fallacy’s transformation of non-humans into mirrors of human emotional states, it is in particular the melancholic nature of the projection that dominates the volume, and the narcissism at the heart of such melancholia, that makes prosopopoeia’s flipside of appropriation emerge so clearly in the volume’s pathetic fallacies. While pathetic fallacy can certainly be seen as inherently anthropocentric—translating, as it does, the outside world into knowable human terms—arguments can equally be made for the device’s potential for resisting anthropocentrism. Brian Moore, for example, argues that while “anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism have long worked in tandem,” in actual fact “anthropomorphism is not automatically connected with anthropocentrism” and “may be and often is a tool to undercut anthropocentrism” (12–13). A key way anthropomorphism or pathetic fallacy is seen to “undercut” anthropocentrism is by proposing a wider, more ecologic model of self—a model of “expansive” selfhood of the kind that underpins Warwick Fox’s notion of transpersonal ecology, where “one’s ecological, wider, or big Self” is created “through the process of identification” (198, 249). Neil Evernden certainly seems to be following such a model when he argues that “once we engage in the extension of the boundary of the self into the ‘environment,’ then [...] the Pathetic Fallacy is a fallacy only to the ego clenchers” (19).

The overwhelming melancholy of Glück’s prosopopoeias, however, makes The Wild Iris’s pathetic fallacy less the relinquishing of the ego that Evernden celebrates, than an anthropocentric, narcissistic replication and dispersal of the (human) ego. The sequence’s all-pervading melancholia, I suggest, succumbs to the risk of narcissism—a risk that Glück herself identifies in an essay entitled “Fear of Happiness”: “What unhappiness tends to perpetuate is an isolating and, usually, limiting fixation on the self” (58). To demonstrate this, I would like to first outline the nature of the melancholia that runs through The Wild Iris, and then examine why Glück’s melancholic form of pathetic fallacy (in particular) enacts narcissistic projection.

Melancholia is the prevailing theme and tone in The Wild Iris—an aesthetic which Keniston identifies, remarking that “Glück’s volume expresses melancholia—an impulse to both
cling to what is gone and acknowledge its absence” (“Buried” 91). The gardener-poet is deeply melancholic; the plants in the garden often reflect or echo this melancholy, and even God seems to have a depressive nature: he could be describing the volume itself when he calls the “chaos of the living world” his “vision / of deepest mourning” (60–61). The melancholic aesthetic of The Wild Iris seems in particular to reflect Freud’s conception of melancholy as “the reaction to the loss of a loved object” (84), which pathologically (and narcissistically) internalises that which has been lost, and “like an open wound, draw[s] to itself cathetic energy from all sides” (290).

The volume is suffused with a deep sense of sadness which is melancholic in quality (rather than simply mournful) for two reasons. First, the sadness is melancholic because it is based in a loss that is not accepted (as it is in mourning) but instead is “clung to” and assimilated within the self (Freud 284). The losses mourned in the book are numerous: the loss of life and voice (through inevitable death), the loss of God or access to God (a cause of grief for both the gardener and God), the fall of Romanticism, the failure of the lyric. While the gardener mourns her isolation from God (“Once I believed in you” [36]) and the antiquation of the Romantic lyric (“let them / bury me with the Romantics” [13]), God mourns the loss of his children, and their failure to grow as he hoped:

*You wanted to be born; I let you be born.*

*When has my grief ever gotten in the way of your pleasure?* (10)

A number of the flowers, such as the Ipomoea (48), mourn their own mortality:

*What was my crime in another life,*
  *as in this life my crime*
  *is sorrow, that I am not be*
  *permitted to ascend ever again,*
  *never in any sense*
  *permitted to repeat my life,*
  *wound in the hawthorn, all*
  *earthly beauty my punishment*

Such melancholic sadness seems to be an inevitable condition of life in the world of The Wild Iris. The volume is almost obsessive in its distribution of and dwelling on loss. God tells the unhearing humans “grief is distributed / between you, among all your kind” (20), and even God’s vision of the young lovers is not allowed to escape the volume’s pervasive melancholy:

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13 The strong parallels with Freud’s notion of melancholy seem unlikely to be coincidental, given that Glück herself was familiar with his ideas and significantly influenced by her own experience of psychoanalysis, stating that “it would be impossible for me to speak of my education without speaking of this process” (Proofs 12).
even here, even at the beginning of love,
Her hand leaving his face makes
an image of departure

and they think
they are free to overlook
this sadness. (16–17)

Here, the “sadness” prefigured in the “image of departure” seems also, almost, to be predetermined by it: so all-pervasive is the volume’s melancholy that the only space for the young couple to appear in is the context of their future losses.

If the first feature that makes the sequence melancholic is its basis in a loss the sufferer refuses to accept, the second is the excess, or disproportionality, of the response. In melancholia the grieving is out of proportion with the cause; the melancholic condition is distinguished as “fear and sadness [...] without cause or without sufficient cause or occasion” (Radden 12), explained in Freudian terms as a response to an “unknown loss” (285). This melancholic sadness without apparent cause is the defining trait of the Trillium (4), who discloses the following experience of melancholia:

[...] I didn’t know my voice
if one were given me
would be so full of grief, my sentences
like cries strung together.
I didn’t even know I felt grief
until that word came, until I felt
rain streaming from me.

By expressing an apparently innate melancholy the Trillium seems to corroborate Walter Benjamin’s argument that “It is a metaphysical truth that all nature would begin to lament if it were endowed with language” (329). But whereas, for Benjamin, nature’s inherent melancholy arises from its violation by being named and contained within impure human language, for the most part Glück’s plants do not express any sense of such violation. A doggedly anti-anthropocentric reading of The Wild Iris might see in the Trillium’s apparently causeless grief a melancholic longing for the non-human otherness or alterity that was lost when “voice” and “word” were “given” to it, but such a reading seems to me more a projection onto, rather than an interpretation of, the sequence. In fact, the Trillium seems to point to a more anthropocentric and narcissistic source of the melancholy. The Trillium’s melancholy, a careful
reading of the poem reveals, is not innate: note that the grief is attributed not to the Trillium directly, but to the “voice” that was given to it. Melancholy from an outside source, in other words, has been obtruded onto the plant.

The distinctively melancholic pathetic fallacies of the plants make them, I want to suggest, a reflection of the human world’s despair—perhaps, even more specifically, a reflection of the despair of the sequence’s gardener who, in “Matins” (26), describes herself as pathologically broken-hearted, isolated by a “quarantine of affliction,” and who compares herself to “the sick rose”—a comparison which, by invoking William Blake’s poem of the same name, increases the atmosphere of pathological loss. Linda Gregerson describes how “God and the flowers speak with the voice of the human; the human writer has no other voice to give them” (117). Both the literal meaning of Gregerson’s description (the plants speak in human voices) and its implication (the plants speak in replications or echoes of the human gardener’s/poet’s voice) seem accurate. Several critics have characterised the plants’ voices as simply projections of the volume’s human figure. Keniston, for example, argues that “Glück’s speaking flowers and seasons” are “the fantasies of the speaker/poet” and therefore “confirm rather than undermine her narcissism” (“Buried” 87). Daniel Morris also situates the plants within the unified voice of Glück as poet: “The tonal similarity of these voices suggests that the dialogism of these grouped lyrics is really a foil for an internal conversation—the self attempting to exert a degree of control over the literary remains by acting as ventriloquist for each of them” (230). Seen in this light, the melancholic flowers, often chastising the gardener-poet, seem to function as “one part of the [human’s] ego” that, in Freud’s notion of melancholia, “sets itself over against [sic] the other, judges it critically, and, as it were, looks upon it as an object” (286). Whatever the role of Glück’s own “self” in the volume, the “tonal similarity” that Morris identifies is important. Regardless of whether or not the volume’s pervasive melancholy can actually be read as a projection of the internal state of the human gardener, or of Glück herself, the melancholic filter through which all the poems pass does not allow the plants an alterity distinct from the human presence in the sequence. The plants’ melancholia coheres with and reinforces the human’s melancholic state. Even those plant-speakers who do not seem to echo the melancholy of the human world are made to respond to it: the Witchgrass, for example, critiques the human for “mourning,” and the Violets’ speech is focused around how “we do not grieve / as you grieve, dear / suffering master” (21); just as melancholia is by nature all-consuming, inconsolable (an “open wound”), so the flower-speakers are not allowed to exist externally to this mood or

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14 What I read as the God figure, Keniston sees as simply a collection of natural phenomena, including “seasons”—an interpretation which, I think, does not sufficiently account for either the consistency of that speaker’s voice, or his numerous allusions to creation, souls, and punishment.
aesthetic, but instead are made to either replicate and echo, or engage with and respond to, the melancholy that dominates the volume.

In this way, the volume’s overall aesthetic replicates and extends a narcissism that is inherent in melancholy itself. In Freud’s conception of melancholy, “insistent talking about himself [...] predominates in the melancholic” (286), because the melancholic person has incorporated, or internalised, the lost object in an act of “narcissistic identification” (288). This narcissistic identification arises when the loss becomes “transformed into a loss within the ego” and therefore the obsessive focus on the loss becomes an obsessive focus on the self (287).

Such narcissistic self-focus is played out on one level by the gardener’s “insistent talking” about herself in the twenty-two non-prosopopoeic poems. It is also, however, extended and assimilated into the volume’s overall structure in that the ego, or cohering force, at the heart of the sequence internalises—and thus appropriates—non-human nature, turning the plants and flowers into narcissistic mirrors of a dominating human melancholy.

While The Wild Iris might in some ways function as a debate, it is a debate in which all the voices are unified by and assimilated within an aesthetic of melancholy. It is this thematic and tonal harmony, most likely, that makes the speakers, for Willard Spiegelman “all sound the same” (“Are You” 6), and it is the absence of tonal disjunction—the absence of any gaps in the sequence’s homogenising aesthetic of melancholy—that makes the melancholic pathetic fallacy not Fox’s expansion of self beyond the human, but rather a narcissistic introjection of the non-human within a unifying human framework of melancholy: another version of the “radical interiorization and solipsism” that Culler identifies in apostrophe (66).

**Self-Reflexivity, Meta-Self-Reflexivity and the Closed Circuit of Narcissism**

Glück, like Atwood, demonstrates an awareness of prosopopoeia’s paradoxically appropriative form of advocacy. Just as Atwood ultimately acknowledges that her attempt to de-victimise the non-human paradoxically cannot but re-victimise the non-human (through the transformation and consumption entailed in representation), Glück demonstrates awareness of the problem that in critiquing and resisting the narcissism of the conventional lyric form, she succumbs to narcissism in another way—in particular through the projection of human emotions onto the natural world, the most anthropocentric form of which we examined above in the sequence’s melancholic pathetic fallacy. Like Atwood, Glück responds to the appropriation in her own use of prosopopoeia by self-reflexively foregrounding the trope’s doubleness and fictionality, preemptively alluding to her own role as ventriloquist. She does, however, take her self-reflexivity a
step further than Atwood, in that, by self-reflexively highlighting and thematising the narcissism itself, including the narcissistic dangers of self-reflection and the inward gaze, Glück even seems to pre-empt the problem of narcissistic self-focus afflicting Atwood’s self-reflexive response: Glück’s response to prosopopoeia’s paradoxically appropriative form of advocacy can thus be seen to be not only self-reflexive about this appropriation, but also meta-self-reflexive. In what follows I will briefly outline some of the ways Glück self-reflexively thematises and critiques narcissism—first, with regard to the narcissism of aesthetic projection, and second, in terms of the narcissism of this very self-reflection (or self-reflexivity).

_The Wild Iris_ uses a self-reflexive foregrounding of speech, rhetoric and figularity to confront head-on the central dilemma of prosopopoeia: the problem that the poet can only confer voice through a narcissistic form of ventriloquism that, much as it might seek to move beyond anthropocentrism, inevitably appropriates non-human otherness. _The Wild Iris_ draws attention to its fictionality, alerting us to the fact that the “garden” depicted in the poems, to quote God, “is not the real world” (39), as well as to the inherent double-voicedness of prosopopoeia. Twelve of the eighteen plant speakers reference speech or voice in some way and of these at least half directly reference their own speech or voice in a Shklovskian revealing of the device that highlights the artificiality of prosopopoeia’s non-human voices. 

15 The Trillium, as we saw above, even explicitly describes being “given” a voice. The sequence thus draws the reader’s attention to the doubleness of the prosopopoeic voices (both the voice of the persona, and behind that, the voice of the poet). When the Clover addresses the human gardener, the voice, in a doubled way, also seems to address the poet herself:

[...] when you swagger among us

I hear two voices speaking,

one your spirit, one

the acts of your hands (30)

Similarly, the Daisies’ warning to the gardener seems as much a warning to the reader of the prosopopoeia about the trope’s anthropocentric but inescapable human core:

As for what you’re actually

hearing this morning: think twice

before you tell anyone what was said in this field

and by whom (39)

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Both these excerpts reference doubleness—“two voices”; “twice”—thus drawing attention to the doubleness of prosopopoeia. Just as the Clover hears “two voices speaking,” so the reader of that poem also encounters a doubled voice: both the fictional voice of the Clover, and from behind that mask, the voice of the poet creating the prosopopoeia. The Daisies’ (or is this really the poet’s?) instruction to “think twice” before identifying “what was said [...] and by whom” itself carries a two-pronged message about the doubleness of a prosopopoeic voice. “Think twice” is most obviously a figure of speech for “think carefully,” but its literal meaning also applies: the reader must interpret in a doubled way, must constantly “think twice,” reading the voice presented not only as that of the fictional speaker, but also as the narcissistic self-projection of the human poet. Glück thus self-reflexively signals her own narcissism, prompting the reader to be alert to it, and so shifting the responsibility of dealing with this anthropocentrism from the poems to the reader.

Like Atwood, Glück uses self-reflexivity to foreground the appropriative function of her pathetic fallacy; however, she deviates from Atwood by framing this appropriation as an attempt to convert the non-human other into a narcissistic mirror for the self, rather than simply framing it as an appropriation of the subject-position of the non-human. By thus depicting prosopopoeia’s appropriations in narcissistic terms Glück pre-empts the problem of the narcissism of self-reflexivity. This self-reflexive thematisation of narcissism occurs in many poems: for example, in “Retreating Wind” God tells the humans: “you will not find yourselves in the garden, / among the growing plants” (15). On the one hand, this statement is ironic: the “growing plants,” after all, seem to function in the sequence principally as reflections of human spiritual and emotional states; the garden, as it is represented in The Wild Iris, seems an entirely likely place for the human figures to “find” themselves. On the other hand, however, God’s warning points to the otherness of non-human nature (“your lives are not [...] like theirs”), and so, by implication, suggests that to “find yourself” in the garden would be based on some fallacy, an act of narcissism that not only overwrites the otherness of the plants, but incorporates the plants into the self. This appropriation is highlighted even more explicitly in “Song” (27), a poem spoken by the human gardener, which highlights what Gregerson describes as “the moral and aesthetic dilemmas of sentimental projection” (115). In the first half of the poem the protagonist sets up an analogy between the rose and the human heart, but halfway through, Glück allows an antagonist to challenge this identification:

[...] But John

objects, he thinks

if this were not a poem but
an actual garden, then
the red rose would be
required to resemble
nothing else, neither
another flower nor
the shadowy heart.

By emphasising the distinction between the “poem” and the “actual garden,” John points to the poet’s appropriation of the flower. The poet cannot allow the rose to exist for itself in the physical world, but is compelled to translate it either into a mimetic representation—“another flower” (a flower constructed through language)—or a metaphoric representation that projects a distinctively human symbol and concept onto the flower—“the shadowy heart.”

The thematisation of narcissistic projection in “Song” is further extended in Glück’s construction of the God figure. Glück presents the creator’s motivations as distinctly narcissistic, thus alluding to the potential narcissism that attends her own acts of creation. A number of critics have focused on what Willard Spiegelman has called the book’s “serious religious questing” (“Nineties” 229); however, despite the significant presence of God in the sequence as both addressee and prosopopoeic speaker, The Wild Iris’s ultimate focus seems to be not on theology or metaphysics, but on poetics. Just as, in Riffaterre’s view, prosopopoeia is a hypothesis, so Glück hypothesises God in order to investigate the relationship between creation and narcissism (110). Isaac Cates supports this view, arguing that “we should not align The Wild Iris too strongly with the devotional” and that “Glück’s version of the Deity is mainly a projection or speculation, a version of her own poetic voice” (466).

God, the ultimate creator-figure, is a self-reflexive echo of Glück herself, and, as such, plays out the narcissism bound up in the act of creation, which the poet herself, Glück seems to suggest, may be in danger of. Both God and Glück are creators; both have, in different ways, created the garden in which the book is set. By foregrounding how God speaks “through vehicles only” (7), Glück highlights her own God-like, and narcissistic, use of the natural world as a vehicle for her voice. The poet’s assumption of a God-like role (of anthropocentric mastery) is most obviously referenced in “Retreating Light,” where God describes completing the creation of humans in his own image, allowing them to mirror his creative power: “I was tired of telling stories. / So I gave you the pencil and paper [...] I told you, write your own story” (50). By the end of the poem the humans seem to be following in God’s footsteps: “Creation has brought you / great excitement, as I knew it would, / as it does in the beginning” (50).
By emphasising parallels between God and the volume’s human creator, Glück’s poems highlight the risk of narcissism that attends poetic creation. Glück’s frustrated God succumbs to such narcissism. He cannot countenance alterity from himself, telling the unhearing humans, “You were / my embodiment”; “you are / too little like me in the end / to please me” (34, 40). For this God, as perhaps for any creator, acts of creation are simultaneously acts of self-creation. However it may be disguised, the poems seem to imply, the poet casts herself as a kind of God figure, the original, unifying presence behind the poem. The narcissism of the poet’s potential god-complex is further highlighted by the fact that Glück, in The Wild Iris, literally does cast (in the dramatic sense of the word) herself as God.

The Wild Iris’s self-reflexivity does not, however, simply highlight and so pre-emptively seek to excuse the narcissism of the sequence’s pathetic fallacy; it also, through a kind of meta-self-reflexive thematisation of narcissism itself, anticipates the narcissism of this very self-reflection. This meta-self-reflexivity is most apparent in “Field Flowers” (28), in which the flowers explicitly reference the solipsism of self-focus:

I’m talking
to you, you staring through
bars of high grass shaking
your little rattle—O
the soul! the soul! Is it enough
only to look inward? (28)

By calling into question the validity of Glück’s own self-reflection or “inward” gaze—“Is it enough / only to look inward?—the flowers seem to build into the sequence an acknowledgement or response to the potential criticism that Glück’s self-reflexive use of prosopopoeia can be seen to perpetuate, rather than ameliorate, the narcissistic privileging of the self. In “Midsummer,” God’s criticism of humans for having “your incidental souls / fixed like telescopes on some / enlargement of yourselves” likewise seems to provide a moment of meta-self-reflexivity in which Glück again alludes to the narcissism of her own inward gaze (35). Even the Scilla’s reprimand, “Not I, you idiot, not self” seems to hint at the dangers of self-reflection.

This meta-self-reflexivity does not, however, neatly deal with the narcissism that seems to pervade all levels of The Wild Iris. Linda Finlay identifies a “destructive” potential in the act of being “reflexive about one’s own reflexive analysis,” in that such meta-self-reflexivity emphatically returns focus to the self (222). The Wild Iris symptomises this problem. Glück’s meta-self-reflexive thematisation of narcissism seems to acknowledge the double-bind in which her own self-reflexivity places her: the double-bind that, in order to acknowledge her narcissistic
appropriation of the non-human other, the poet must narcissistically foreground herself and her act of creation. What *The Wild Iris* cannot, however, escape is the perpetuation of narcissism created by such meta-self-reflexivity. Self-reflection—intense and critical as it may be—cannot ultimately get outside the self so as to make room for the alterity of the other. In fact, by attempting to call into question the self, or even the self’s own self-reflection, self-reflexivity can be seen to “elbow out” the other; it cannot but exclude the other in its hermetic self-enclosure. Thus, *The Wild Iris*’s thematisation of narcissism, and self-reflexive foregrounding of its own susceptibility to narcissism, finally locates the volume in a closed circuit of narcissism. The very act of acknowledging narcissism is itself (arguably) a further act of narcissism; attempting to acknowledge this further narcissism would extend into an infinite regress which increasingly marginalises and diminishes anything beyond the self. Glück, in other words, can acknowledge her narcissism, and even the narcissism of that act of self-reflection, but she cannot neutralise or escape it. Thus, although Glück’s meta-self-reflexive response to prosopopoeia can be seen as the opposite of Levertov’s un-self-reflexive response, the problem undermining Levertov’s attempt to speak for the real pig—the inability to truly suppress or get outside the self—is the same problem that makes Glück’s critique of narcissism itself narcissistic.

By radically pluralising and dispersing the lyric subject, Glück’s use of prosopopoeia thus certainly resists and revises the anthropocentric narcissism of the traditional lyric form. Like both Levertov’s and Atwood’s, however, Glück’s prosopopoeias bring with them an inevitably appropriative underside. Because the trope necessitates pathetic fallacy, it enacts the narcissistic projection that the personified non-human speakers, in other ways, seem to work against. Moreover, because Glück’s pathetic fallacies cohere within and reinforce an overarching aesthetic of melancholy, the plants’ function as critics of the human is undermined by their function as projections of a unified (human) emotional state. By self-reflexively foregrounding the anthropocentric narcissism of such projection, and even the narcissism of that very self-reflexivity, the poems acknowledge, but fail to provide ways out of, prosopopoeia’s two-faced narcissistically anthropocentric advocacy. If Glück’s use of prosopopoeia, like both Levertov’s and Atwood’s, is therefore inescapably appropriative, this leads us to an important question: is prosopopoeia, in the end, any better than other forms of poetic representation at speaking for the non-human in a way that deconstructs, rather than reinforces, the anthropocentric human/non-human binary? To answer this, I suggest, we need to move beyond the words on the page, and examine whether the possibility of prosopopoeia “making good” on its ethical, ecological promises lies, if not in poems themselves, then, perhaps, in the act of reading those poems.
Coda: Reading, Singularity, and the Retrieval of Otherness

The act of reading enacts an ethics and a politics in its own right, rather than being a displacement of something more essential that is taking place elsewhere.

—Rita Felski, Uses of Literature

“The poem” comes into being in the live circuit set up between the reader and “the text.”

—Louise M. Rosenblatt, The Reader, the Text, the Poem

For Levertov, Atwood, and Glück, prosopopoeia’s anti-anthropocentric promise goes hand in hand with an appropriative, and so anthropocentric, flipside. Each poet’s interpretation of prosopopoeia’s promise is in some way thwarted by the very nature of the trope itself: Levertov’s attempt to advocate for a real non-human subject is frustrated by the trope’s necessary fictionality; Atwood’s attempt to resist and revise the Canadian animal-victim tradition is unsettled by prosopopoeia’s re-victimisation of her poetic subjects; and Glück’s attempt to escape lyric narcissism is mired by the return of narcissism through prosopopoeia’s pathetic fallacy. Moreover, each poet’s response to this problem, rather than restoring prosopopoeia’s original anti-anthropocentric promise, creates new problems: Levertov’s blurring of real and fictional worlds suffers from political naivety about her arrogation of Sylvia’s non-human perspective; Atwood’s self-reflexive response does acknowledge the issue of appropriation, but does not provide a way out of this anthropocentrism because self-reflexivity necessarily foregrounds the human at the expense of the non-human; and, finally, Glück’s meta-self-reflexive response, although demonstrating awareness of these narcissistic (anthropocentric) dangers of self-reflection, ultimately operates in a closed-circuit of narcissism, in which the very foregrounding of narcissism itself begins an infinite regress into the self.

Thus far, it seems, even when deployed with the best of intentions, prosopopoeia brings with it a corollary of appropriation that prevents the trope from fulfilling its promise to advocate for non-humans in a way that escapes the anthropocentrism afflicting other forms of representation and advocacy. However a poet might try to feature the non-human other through prosopopoeia, she is ultimately trapped within an inescapably anthropocentric framework of
human poet, human language, and humanising anthopomorphism. Thus, even while the trope is often employed in apparent attempts to deconstruct the self/other, subject/object, human/non-human binaries, it seems unable to enact this deconstruction fully: even as the trope dethrones the human subject in one way, it reinstates it in other ways—in *Pig Dreams*, through Levertov’s arrogation of (the real) Sylvia’s non-human otherness; in “Songs of the Transformed,” through human-centring self-reflexivity, and in *The Wild Iris*, through narcissism’s regress into the self. Yet, even if prosopopoeia’s advocacy, as it is enacted on the page, inevitably goes hand in hand with (is even reliant upon) such anthropocentrism, what I want to suggest in this coda is that the reader of a prosopopoeia (per)forms an opening in the seemingly closed system of anthropocentrism, and the event of reading contains possibilities for a less anthropocentric, possibly even ethical, interaction with the text. I suggest that what makes prosopopoeia distinctive as a trope, and what enables it to call into question the privileged notion of the human subject, is not so much what prosopopoeia “does” to the non-human figure it represents, but rather, what occurs in the interaction between text and reader. In what follows I will first outline the general political and ethical potential that inheres within any act of reading, then, in a second step, look more specifically at what the act of reading a non-human prosopopoeia might “do” to the reader to enhance this effect.

The act of reading can, I suggest, disrupt prosopopoeia’s apparently inevitable narcissistic return of the human to itself for two reasons: first, because each reader introduces an entirely new and singular layer to the text, and second, because the text, in return, confronts the reader with something entirely new and singular—something “other” to, or outside of, the reader. A prosopopoeia as words on paper might seem inevitably to be trapped within an anthropocentric framework—but the words on paper do not fully account for the poem: as Louise Rosenblatt explains in outlining her influential theory of transactional reading, “‘the poem’ comes into being in the live circuit set up between the reader and the ‘text’” (14). The words on the page may be stable, but the reader’s encounter with those words is unique and unpredictable. Thus, because a poem, as Rosenblatt argues, “must be thought of as an event in time” which “happens during a coming together, a compenetration, of a reader and a text” (12), the figure of the reader seems to offer a final way in which prosopopoeia’s promise might be realised: if the problem underlying Levertov’s, Atwood’s and Glück’s prosopopoeias is all three poets’ inability sufficiently to dethrone or marginalise themselves whilst giving voice to the non-human, the reader, as an element of unpredictability and newness entering the text, punctures the poet’s dominance within the poem. The poet (try as she might) is unable to withdraw herself from the poem sufficiently to feature non-human otherness without reducing it into the anthropocentric
framework of the self; the reader, however, does something the poet cannot do: the reader introduces a component to the text that is beyond the grasp of the poet.

Not only does the reader introduce newness and unpredictability to the text, but the poem, in a reciprocal gesture, introduces the reader to otherness. This otherness is not, however, (as we might expect) the otherness of non-human beings, but the otherness of the text itself. In the act of reading, I argue, the text functions as, to quote Derek Attridge, a “creatively generated other,” even a “stranger” (“Innovation” 25–26). The otherness of the text arises from the simple fact that the text exists outside the reading self. Its language, expressions, images, and ideas arose from outside the reader’s consciousness, and represent the world beyond the limits of that consciousness: “Bristling with meaning, layered with resonance,” Rita Felski argues, books “come before us as multi-layered symbols of belief and values; they stand for something larger than ourselves” (Uses 32). So while Levertov’s, Atwood’s and Glück’s prosopopoeias seem unable to bring the reader into an encounter with non-human otherness, the poems do confront the reader with what we might think of as “textual otherness.” Poetry in particular, I suggest, embodies this textual otherness, in that its resistance to totalising interpretation, achieved by the irreducibility of its possible meanings and significations, the importance of the pause—the white space, the unsaid—and its play with language’s polysemous functions, all bring the reader into an encounter with something that cannot be grasped or defined in its entirety, and something that in different encounters offers different sides of itself. Reading therefore “is akin to an encounter with a generalised other” (Felski, Uses 32), in that the reader must encounter the unknown; the content of the next line or the next page cannot be anticipated, and thus has the potential to startle or surprise the reader.

It is in this interaction or “transaction” (to use Rosenblatt’s terminology) between the reader and the text that an ethical potential in prosopopoeia can, I contend, be found. A number of critics—illustrating an intersection of reader-response theories with literary criticism’s growing ethical turn—have turned their attention to the ethical potential or responsibilities that inhere within the act of reading. J. Hillis Miller, for example, in The Ethics of Reading, sees “a necessarily ethical moment” in the act of (specifically deconstructive) reading (1), and Martha Nussbaum, focusing by contrast on the emotionally affective potential of reading, argues that “stories cultivate our ability to see and care for particulars [...], to respond vigorously with senses and emotions before the new; to care deeply about chance happenings in the world” (184). The ethical potential I want to focus on, however, is grounded in the otherness the reader brings to the text and the otherness with which the text confronts the reader. This potential is best illuminated by Derek Attridge’s conception of reading as an encounter with a text’s singularity in
which the diligent reader “attempt[s] to respond to the otherness of the other” and in doing so can allow him- or herself to be affected by this otherness (“Innovation” 25).

This is not to say that any way in which a reader is affected by a text is a realisation of this ethical potential. One of the most theorised ways the encounter between text and reader has been conceived is in terms of emotional affect: in particular, the inducement of empathy. Yet empathy (especially when non-human subjects are represented) is arguably the form of readerly affect most fraught with the danger of appropriation. Empathy may still have a positive role to play in literature, even with regard to humans’ relationship with non-human nature, but empathy also seems to replicate the ambivalent blend of advocacy and appropriation I explored in the preceding chapters: it creates the “ethical dilemma” that Kathleen Lundeen identifies as inherent in empathy, that is, the problem of “forever finding oneself either too close or not close enough to the object of self-identification” (91). Even Lori Gruen, who advocates “engaged empathy” as a way to interact with non-human nature, acknowledges the appropriative danger “that empathy reduces to a kind of ‘narcissistic projection’ of our own interests and desires onto others, particularly non-verbal others” (32).

What I want to focus on, then, is not how the reader illuminates and infuses the text with his or her own experience of the world (as empathy seems to lead the reader to do), but rather, how reading the text can disrupt, or broaden the horizons, of the reader’s worldview. This disruption is not, of course, guaranteed, and depends on the reader’s own willingness to be attentive to otherness and to allow him- or herself to be called into question by the text. This potential for what Attridge calls “subjective refashioning” nonetheless exists (Singularity 81), and is eloquently captured in his following description of creative reading:

To read creatively in an attempt to respond fully and responsibly to the alterity and singularity of the text is to work against the mind’s tendency to assimilate the other to the same, attending to that which can barely be heard, registering what is unique about the shaping of language, thought, and feeling in this particular work. It involves a suspension of habits, a willingness to rethink old positions in order to apprehend the work’s inaugural power. [...] In its encounter with the other, an encounter in which existing modes of thought and evaluation falter, creative reading allows the work to take the mind (understood in the broadest sense) to the borders of its accustomed terrain.” (Singularity 80)

16 As is suggested, for example, in P. Wesley. Schultz’s study, which found that “when viewing images of animals being harmed by nature, participants instructed to take the animals’ perspective expressed significantly higher levels of biospheric environmental concerns than participants instructed to remain objective” (402).
What Attridge would call a creative reading of a prosopopoeia would cause the reader to “rethink” dominant (anthropocentric) paradigms, and to question established ideas about humans and non-humans to the point where they “falter.” In this way a creative reading could bring the reader into a confrontation with the anthropocentric human/non-human binary. A creative reading could de-naturalise the privileging of the human subject, and in taking the mind “to the borders of its accustomed terrain” could prompt a consideration of less hierarchical (more eco-centric) ways of conceiving the relationship between humans and non-humans.

In Attridge’s model the onus for this ethics of reading is almost entirely on the reader. The text must provide sufficient singularity or alterity for the reader to respond to (something that, for Attridge, not all texts provide), but beyond this, the interruption to “mechanical and instrumental interpretation” depends on “readerly hospitality, a readiness to have one’s purposes reshaped by the work to which one is responding” (80). Without diminishing the importance of each reader’s singular response to the text, what I want to suggest—in an extension of the general potential for subjective refashioning that Attridge discusses—is that certain features of prosopopoeia can also prompt or enhance this subjective refashioning, providing one way in which prosopopoeia is distinct from other tropes. Linda Vance suggests that “the test [...] for determining whether the voice we give to animals is accurate will lie in the behaviour it calls forth from humans” (183). Although in this thesis I do not in any way subscribe to the notion of an “accurate” representation of a non-human voice, I would support an altered version of Vance’s claim: a test for determining whether the voice given to a non-human subject is ethically or politically justifiable could, I suggest, lie in the response the text prompts in the reader. Does the text, in other words, elicit appropriative identification, or does it initiate an unsettling of the reader’s own identity and way of knowing the world? In what follows I want to sketch a brief outline of some of the ways in which, while sometimes risking the former, prosopopoeia can also at times achieve the latter. I will focus in particular on the reader’s utterance of the text, as it occurs in the moment of reading.¹⁷

The features that distinguish prosopopoeia from other tropes—the use of first-person voice, and the non-human identity of the fictional speaker—enable the trope to unsettle the reader, prompting or beginning Attridge’s subjective refashioning by troubling the reader’s own subjectivity and identity. All reading, but in particular the reading of a poem, is a temporal event. Attridge emphasises that a distinct “factor in poetry or the poetic” is that “the verbal singularity that is performed by the reader includes a sense of its real-time unfolding” (Singularity 71; emphasis

¹⁷ I will discuss utterance in terms of reading out loud, but the same arguments apply to reading as sounding in one’s mind (see Attridge, Singularity 71).
What is distinct about the unfolding of a prosopopoeia as it is read is that it creates a pocket of time in which the reader no longer speaks as him- or herself, no longer, even, speaks as a human being. Prosopopoeia’s first-person voice draws the reader into the poem, and in making the reader the mouthpiece for the non-human protagonist, unsettles the reader’s own identity as human. This unsettlement is facilitated by a trick of grammar. The first-person pronoun (“I”) is what Roman Jakobson calls a shifter, a word that “cannot be defined without a reference to the message” (131). The meaning of “I” depends upon who says it. As Jakobson explains, “I means the addressee (and you, the addressee) of the message to which it belongs” (132; emphasis original). When the reader gives voice to the poem the identity of the non-human protagonist is therefore superimposed over the identity of the reader. The meaning of “I” is thrust into a kind of flux: the poet, non-human speaker, and reader all have some claim on the word. Likewise, the identity of the reader who speaks the “I” is thrust into a similar flux in which elements of human and non-human, and components of poet, speaking persona, and reader coalesce. Thus, when the reader becomes the mouthpiece for Glück’s “Snowdrops,” for example—“I didn’t expect / to waken again, to feel / in damp earth my body / able to respond again, remembering / after so long how to open again” (6),—the reader’s identity is unsettled by the imagined plant and real poet ghosting up through the first-person speech.

De Man alludes to how prosopopoeia in this way takes over the reader’s voice; he identifies a “latent threat that inhabits prosopopoeia [sic],” couched in the trope’s supplanting of the reader’s voice with the speech of the (in my examples, non-human; in de Man’s, dead) character given voice through the prosopopoeia: “by making the death [sic] speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death” (Rhetoric 78). In other words, by uttering the prosopopoeia, the reader relinquishes his or her own voice to the otherness of the words on the page. We might even think of the reader’s voice becoming hostage to the constructed non-human voice—a voice, which, as we saw above, does embody otherness, albeit the otherness of the text rather than the otherness of a real non-human. The reader can be thought of as hostage because he or she has no choice over the words read aloud (or in his or her mind); in fact, the reader does not even know what these words will be. Because of this, prosopopoeia can be seen to ventriloquise the

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19 This situation of being hostage to the prosopopoeia seems to parallel—and perhaps even contains some of the ethical significance of—Levinas’s description of being “hostage” to the other as “an authentic figure of responsibility” (Otherwise xiv), in which the self is not allowed to dominate the other but instead becomes “for the other” as a hostage (11). Just as the self held hostage by the other is compelled to acknowledge the singularity of the other before asserting his or her singularity, the reader held hostage by the text is compelled to give priority to the words of the text over the thoughts and speech of the self.
reader—putting into the reader’s mouth words and noises the reader would never otherwise say, and even criticisms of the reader’s own species that the reader may not, of his or her own volition, make.

I should note here that a more suspicious or sceptical view of the trope might frame the act of reading as one of appropriation rather than the unsettling of the self. Gavin Alexander, for example, describes prosopopoeia as a “mask [that] is lifelike, but not alive, and because it remains a mask, we can think about putting it on ourselves, about performing (if only in our minds, as readers) the lyric ‘I’. We then take over the prosopopoeia” (111; my emphasis). What prosopopoeia ultimately does, I suggest, is impossible to pin down. We cannot say definitively whether I take over the prosopopoeia, or whether the prosopopoeia takes over my voice. There are, however, a number of ways in which the trope can “bite back” and evade or retaliate against readerly appropriation, which lend themselves to the latter scenario.

A prosopopoeia which uses an I-You structure to address either a single human or humans in general (as many of Atwood’s and Glück’s prosopopoeias do) prevents the reader from completely identifying with the non-human speaker. Like “I,” “you” is Jakobsonian shifter: when addressed to the reader, it implicates the reader. While we might read the “you” addressed in Atwood’s “Rat Song” as a fictitious human character, the slipperiness of that pronoun means that the character who owns the rifle and flashlight, and the human reader of the poem, are blurred into one persona. Even as the reader speaks the poem, he or she is also, on another level, addressed by the preponderance of “you”s. The poem becomes not merely address, but self-address: I-the-reader, having put on the mask that makes me speak as I-the-rat, address myself, as the “you” engaged in hostilities with the rat. This splitting or layering of the reader’s identification with both speaker and addressee troubles or interrupts the reader’s identification with the non-human and with the human—a doubling of voice in which human and non-human voices speak through and refract each other, thus enacting a deconstruction of human subjectivity. The tripartite structure of Glück’s volume (in which flowers, the gardener and God address each other) extends this unsettlement even further. Because each addressed “you” in turn also speaks, the reader cannot identify with the “you” of one poem without being displaced by that addressee actually speaking a page or two later. Similarly, because the lyric I is dispersed across multiple speakers the reader cannot comfortably cast him- or herself as any one first-person speaker, and must instead switch back and forth between different roles: human/non-human; creator/creation; individual/group. The use of the second-person forms one (but not the only) way prosopopoeia can co-opt the reader’s voice, tricking the reader into self-accusations, and self-deprecation. To speak a non-human prosopopoeia is often to critique
humans and human narcissism and so, implicitly, to critique oneself. Thus, the reader of Glück’s “Retreating Wind” is made to describe humans as a disappointment to their creator: “Your souls should have been immense by now, / not what they are, / small talking things—” (15), and the reader of Levertov’s “Her Judgement” is made to criticise the corruption of the human species who “plan for slaughter” with “unclean minds” (41–42). The reader is thus put in the ambivalent position of speaking with a guilty conscience, speaking having been accused (having accused oneself) of something shameful, and by being thus called into question, may be prompted to undertake the subjective refashioning of Attridge’s creative reader.20

The reader thus becomes included in the appraising non-human gaze, and the reader is made to confront his or her role as an object, and not just a purveyor, of the gaze. The reader can even be implicated in a less general, more personal way. The image accompanying “The Catpig” from Pig Dreams provides an example of how this can be achieved outside the confines of the poem.

![Image]

Figure 4: Illustration p. 17

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20 Both a bad conscience and shame have been argued to contain a productive transformative or ethical potential. See, for example, Levinas’s “Bad Conscience and the Inexorable,” Elspeth Probyn’s Blush: Faces of Shame and Sarah Ahmed’s “The Politics of Bad Feeling.”
In the picture Sylvia, John the Cat, and the “She-human” are all depicted looking directly out of the picture, as though startled by a fourth figure, or posing for a photograph (16–7; Figure 4). By simply looking at the picture, the reader steps into the shoes of this fourth figure and is made aware of him- or herself intruding in the scene by the three pairs of eyes returning the gaze. So while the poem allows the reader inside Sylvia’s thoughts about how “John the Cat / is most my brother / almost pig,” and inside her memories of how “She-human gave us / our milk from / our pitcher,” this illusion of inside-access is unravelled by the picture’s location of the reader at the end of Sylvia’s own gaze. The picture could even be seen to create something analogous to a Levinasian face-to-face between Sylvia and the reader.21 By confronting the reader with Sylvia’s face, the image can bring about in the reader the subjective refashioning Attridge describes. The reader’s confidence in his or her subjectivity, and the reader’s cheerful possession of the world, are called into question by the face that directly returns the reader’s gaze, confronting the reader with an alterity that cannot be appropriated. By locking the reader’s gaze with her own, Sylvia, in this picture, makes the reader hostage, forcing the reader to meet her as a face—a face that issues ethical demands.

While a face-to-face like that created by Coolidge’s illustration may not be present in the poems themselves, a similar ability to call the reader into question, and demand the reader’s subjective refashioning, does exist within the poems. A striking example is found in Atwood’s “Rat Song” (146), where the reader, already implicated by the insistent use of second person throughout the poem, is, in the final stanza, drawn into the poem in a further way. The poem ends with the following lines:

It’s your throat I want, my mate
trapped in your throat.
Though you try to drown him
with your greasy person voice
he is hiding / between your syllables
I can hear him singing.

Suddenly the fictional human character has all but dissipated and the rat’s address seems overwhelmingly directed at the reader. Especially if the poem is read out loud the reader has been articulating the syllables of a “greasy person voice,” complete with the rat-like aspirate

21 For Levinas, in order for a being to present a face, it must “break through its form,” becoming naked, uncategorisable. This breaking through is achieved through the eyes and the look (Collected 20). Even though Levinas himself rejected the possibility of a face-to-face with a non-human, a number of critics have proposed a rethinking of Levinasian ethics to incorporate non-humans (see, for example, Atterton, Davey and Calarco [“Faced”]). Coolidge’s image, with its arresting foregrounding of Sylvia’s face and eyes, seems to provide an example of how this more ecocentric version of the face might be expressed through art.
hisses and other sounds that exist “between [...] syllables.” The caesura, marked by a slash, in the middle of the penultimate line, emphasises the final punch-line (the menacing connotations of “punch line” seem curiously appropriate). By the caesura the reader seems, in a grotesque transformation, to have been transported into the poem and become the human figure. In this way the final lines turn the reader’s attention to his or her own syllables, making the reader hyper-aware of his or her own voice. The poem functions like the trick where someone tells you that if you say “gullible” slowly enough it sounds like “green beans,” forcing you to seek something new in your own speech. “Rat Song” makes the reader return to his or her own voice and look for traces of the singing rat between the syllables. The reader’s function moves towards self-address. The very accusation, “between your syllables / I can hear him singing,” seems, in prosopopoeia’s characteristically doubled way, to both refer to, and actually perform the rat’s “singing” hidden in the human “syllables.” The imaginary rat seems to have inflected the human reader’s voice, and this confusion about who is speaking for or through whom unsettles the simple advocatory relationship whereby the reader speaks by proxy for the rat. For the reader, finding oneself thus implicated in the poem may elicit surprise, even shock, and, as Felski suggests, it is possible for shock “to blur the distinction between self and other, to unravel the certainty of one’s own convictions rather than sustaining them” (Uses 110). Thus, the shock of the reader’s sudden implication within the poem functions as a way the otherness of the text—its capacity to surprise or shock—can elicit from the reader a subjective refashioning, playing out in the singular meeting of reader and text the deconstruction of the human subject that prosopopoeia seems to promise.

This rhetorical sleight of hand, which causes the reader’s voice to not merely enunciate the human-language words of the poem, but also to signify or perform something beyond the human self (in the above poem: the fictional rat trapped in a human throat), provides one example of how, by co-opting the reader’s voice, a prosopopoeia can infuse that voice with not access, but “proximity” to the non-human, causing the reader to “become-animal” in Deleuze and Guattari’s use of the term (275). Becoming-animal captures the complexity and unsettlement of reading a non-human prosopopoeia; it describes neither empathetic reader identification nor mimesis or imitation. Becoming “concerns alliance,” and is “involutionary” (238). It can only be achieved in a “molecular” (and not a “molar” or all-encompassing) sense. Most importantly, it is process-oriented, and not determined by an end-point:

For if becoming animal does not consist in playing animal or imitating an animal, it is clear that the human being does not ‘really’ become an animal any more than the animal ‘really’ becomes something else. Becoming produces nothing other than itself. [...] The
becoming-animal of the human is real, even if the animal the human being becomes is not; and the becoming-other of the animal is real, even if that something other it becomes is not.” (238)

In speaking a non-human prosopopoeia the reader can be made to “enter the zone of proximity” with the non-human represented in the prosopopoeia (275). This zone of proximity echoes the proximity of a Levinasian ethical encounter. Proximity describes an encounter that does not involve appropriation or introjection, and does not annul the alterity of the other. Levinas uses proximity to describe an encounter that is not “fusion,” but, rather, “it is contact with the other. To be in contact is neither to invest the other and annul his alterity, nor to suppress myself in the other” (Otherwise 86). In being proximate to the other the reader does not dominate or engulf the other, but, in paradoxically separate closeness with the other, may be affected by the other. Thus, becoming-animal, by creating such proximity, seems to take on ethical significance in the relationship it creates between self and other.

The act of reading a non-human prosopopoeia can, I suggest, create such proximity between the reader and the non-human figure. A significant way becoming-animal occurs is through sound and rhythm, as exemplified in Levertov’s use of sound-words and distinctive rhythms, and the echoing of bird calls in Atwood’s Owl and Crow prosopopoeias. Thus “Owl Song,” for example, without making the reader actually mimic an owl, gives the reader’s voice Deleuze and Guattari’s “molecular proximity” to the sounds made by owls (275). The owl describes its “death song” like this: “it says Why Why.” The soft consonants of “why,” the repetition of the word, and the pauses between the “why”s (evoked by the extra spacing between the words) create an alliance with the “who-who” call of an owl. Similarly, the repetition of “how I was lost, / how I was lost” is proximate to the repetitive pattern of an owl-call, thereby enabling the reader to “become-owl.” “Crow Song,” similarly, uses rhythm to create proximity, rather than outright mimicry or representation, between human and animal. In the following lines the repeated “if” functions as the kind of corpuscle or molecule that aligns the reader’s voice with a crow’s voice, without mimaetically representing it:

Not much here for you, my people,
but there would be
if

Note that Leonard Lawlor’s envisaging of what it would mean to become-animal also hinges around sound and rhythm: “The least we could say is that writing like a rat (like any animal writing) would be a writing that struggles to escape from the dominant forms of expression. It would extract the function of teeth gnashing, the phonic traits of teeth gnashing, in order to reiterate them at a speed that is faster or perhaps slower than the gnashing of rat teeth [...]” (181).
Likewise, the anaphoras throughout the poem, which create a repetitive rhythm contiguous with the “caw-caw” call of a crow, also use rhythm to bring about Deleuze and Guattari’s transformation. The becoming-animal enacted by the poems unsettles the reader’s identity by, in these “molecular” ways, allowing something other-than-human to infuse the reader’s voice and transform the reader (if only momentarily) from a stable human subject into a state of becoming.

How, then, should we (re)think prosopopoeia in the light of the role of the reader? What I have emphasised throughout this thesis is that prosopopoeia’s promise of advocacy is contingent upon a corollary of appropriation. On the page, the trope’s promise, like the folkloric pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, inevitably seems to recede. Prosopopoeia does not, therefore, provide the ultimate solution to advocacy’s dilemma of appropriation—on the contrary, it suggests that perhaps any form of advocacy would reveal a flipside of appropriation if analysed rigorously. Yet, the act of reading, while certainly risking a replication of the poet’s appropriative advocacy, can create an opening in the text through which otherness may emerge. The anthropocentric framework of the text may be inescapable on the page, but the act of reading can unsettle the reader’s role and identity, refracting it through its encounter with the other. This refraction might lead to a subjective refashioning in which the reader confronts and reconsiders his or her own anthropocentrism and sense of self. Therefore, while prosopopoeia’s ethical, anti-anthropocentric promise is compromised in so many ways, in the figure of the reader there remains hope for that promise to be realised. This hope depends on the reader approaching the text with hospitality: undertaking a truly singular reading that is open to the alterity of the text.

Because prosopopoeia’s promise depends on the singularity of the encounter between reader and text, it is important to insist on the trope’s ambivalence and not subject it to a prefabricated reading strategy. Despite the appeals of animal and environmental advocacy groups for individuals to speak for non-human nature, a naive embracing of prosopopoeia’s advocacy is not an adequate response to the trope. Nor, however, is what Felski describes as “the practice of suspicious reading,” characterised by a “spirit of disenchantment” expressed through “a desire to slay false gods by exposing art’s complicity with oppressive social arrangements” (“Remember” par. 3). Such approaches operate on a general level, and are unable to account for the singularity and unpredictability the reader brings. Prosopopoeia cannot be reduced to a definition of either “ethical” or “unethical,” either “advocatory” or “appropriative,”

23 As is captured, for example, Peter Singer’s assertion in *Animal Liberation* that “we have to speak up on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves” (xii), and in the motto shared by Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in many countries: “We speak for those who cannot speak for themselves.”
and so, in responding to the trope, we should temper our optimism with suspicion, but we should also not allow our suspicion to overwrite the singularity of a prosopopoeic poem and bring us to speak for the poem in a totalising way. Prosopopoeia must be read with hospitality. We should not, in other words, appropriate the poem to make it confirm our analysis, but rather—preserving the impulse to the unknown and unknowable—work to make our analysis account for the complexities, even contradictions, within the poem. What I hope to have offered in this thesis is a reading of the trope that is characterised neither by naivety, nor by suspicion, but by this hospitality.
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