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**Designating the Environment:
Deixis and Nature Writing
in the Poetries of Philip Whalen and Merrill Gilfillan**

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Here is the poet Merrill Gilfillan writing about The Great Serpent Mound in Ohio:

here,
[...]
when the words tire
and it is just pre-June,
just post-glamour,
when only the cuckoos
and the yellowthroats sing,
stitch through the day,
the steady, all-summer songs,
unhurried,
unfooled.

(Gilfillan, 2002 24-25)

The speaker is trying to render the atmosphere of a natural spot, making himself the spokesman for nature, so to speak. He gently mocks his own effort to “write nature” by observing that what has often been considered as a privileged language of nature—birdsong—can take over from words quite effectively, once these have reached the outer edge of their power of expression. Unlike humans presumably, the birds, Gilfillan says, are “unfooled,” i.e. un-deluded about the power of their songs. He points at his immediate surroundings: “here...” He uses the environment of language to make his language of the environment more effective. The theme of the relationship between signification and ostension is taken up later in the poem: “the beginning,/the Great Plan conceived,/the talking/ and the pointing” (Gilfillan, 2002 25).

This essay is based on the observation that linguistic “indicators of ostension” or “deictics,” commonly grouped under the heading of *deixis*, are a conspicuous feature of nature-related writing.ⁱ When *Walden*’s speaker wishes to convey the strong sense of place that lies at the core of his philosophy, he makes ample use of this “ensemble of ‘empty’ signs that are nonreferential with respect to ‘reality’” but “are always available and become ‘full’ as soon as a speaker introduces them into each instance of his discourse” (Benveniste 218). “I wonder what the world is doing now. I have not heard so much as a locust over the sweet-fern these three hours [...] Was that a farmer’s noon horn which sounded beyond the woods just now? [...] Hark! I hear the rustling of the leaves” (Thoreau 170). He adds: “Why do precisely these objects which we behold make a world?” (171) In the opening paragraphs of “Sounds,” a chapter rich in deictics, the same speaker refers to “the bloom of the present moment” and notes that he “[has] realized what the Orientals mean by contemplation” (83). Thoreau’s awareness of Eastern thinking leads him to stress the importance of the “here and now,” and may be the reason why he especially valued the “fullness” of presence that *deixis* enabled him to achieve in his nature writing, as the extracts above show.

Along with onomatopoeias and pictographic characters (logograms), but in a completely different way since their challenge to the arbitrariness of the sign does not come from an intended resemblance between signifier and signified, deictics are a means whereby the referent is transfused into language: hence the “filling” of these words described by Benveniste.

If deictic density has been even more noticeable in nature-related *poetry*, this is probably because increased complementarity between text and thing was brought about by the rapidity and segmentivity or gap-creation that successive waves of Modernism made a common feature of this division of literature.ⁱⁱ The following poem, taken from George

Oppen's 1965 collection *This in Which*, shows it even less unambiguously than Gilfillan's above-quoted poem:

PSALM

Veritas sequitur. . .

*In the small beauty of the forest
The wild deer bedding down —
That they are there!*

[...]

The small nouns

*Crying faith
In this in which the wild deer
Startle, and stare out.*

(78)

Clearly, the deictics are meant here to suggest greater proximity to *veritas*.ⁱⁱⁱ To broaden the perspective, one could recall Agamben's view as expressed in *Language and Death*, to the effect that the original theme of philosophy may be the attempt to express Thisness, as Hegel's concern about *das Diese nehmen* or "taking the This" well demonstrates (Agamben 14-15). The focus of this paper is much less wide-ranging. However, that philosophy's original theme should be described as a wish to capture what is im-mediate is certainly worth bearing in mind when one's proposed theme of study is the switch from "nature" to "environment," albeit a minor aspect of it.

The two poets whose work I propose to compare with respect to *deixis* in nature poetry—shorthand for nature-related poetry—are Philip Whalen and Merrill Gilfillan. My choice of their work in particular stems from an interest in those periods in the history of American poetry with which the two poets under consideration have durably been associated and which correspond to times when environmental concerns either surfaced for the first time or emerged once more: the Beat Generation in Philip Whalen's case, and the

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E moment in Merrill Gilfillan's.^{iv} At first sight, these appear radically different from an aesthetic standpoint: this is plain enough from the surface of the poems, and whether or not it actually translates into different uses of *deixis* called for further consideration.

For my present purposes, I will have to make do with a working definition of what we mean when we say "nature." It is non-man-made, non-engineered reality; and it is out there: it can be a place, a season, even our own body. Gilfillan comes up with an indirect and acerbic definition of the notion based on people's response to the signifier "Nature": "Those who pull a face at the mention of 'Nature' are uncannily like those who pull one at the mention of 'Poetry,' and reacting from an identical skewed hearsay: Blind Spot Sanctified" (Gilfillan, 2002 119).

As to "the environment" as it appears in this essay's title, it is to be understood firstly as what surrounds the speaker physically or as what s/he feels close to, although irremediably separated from it: "The externality of the world is articulated by Thoreau as its nextness to me," writes Stanley Cavell (107). Buell, quoting John Hanson Mitchell, speaks of the "undiscovered country of the nearby" (262). Secondly, the word is intended to refer to the concern about conservation which became a public issue in the wake of the work of such pioneering figures as H.D. Thoreau and John Muir.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis has written extensively on the subject of *deixis*, first in *Drafts 1-38* with "Draft 33: Deixis," later on in "Two more thoughts about deixis," a note concluding a correspondence with William Watkin.^v The two extracts below, from *Drafts 1-38*, read as an inventory of the beliefs in the magic of *deixis*, first among which ranks the possibility that it could be an environmentally friendlier type of language or even a substitute for words?

*Is it that Words are Waste?
Will sheer pointing
save the place?
[...]
to show, shining*

*wordless, pointing to
pierce thru absolutes of here,*

(DuPlessis, 2001 221).

*It is a site where language hangs
over itself vertiginous*

*and locks
(did you expect lacks? or luck?
did you want leaks? or loot?)*

*Where the key fits to a door in the middle of nowhere
(now here)
and turns itself, like a riddle.*

*This is the deictic click
opens the corridor down which words
travel their wandering annals,*

(DuPlessis, 2001 223)

In “Two more thoughts” about Charles Olson’s “One Word as the Complete Poem,” which consists of the single word “dictic,” Blau DuPlessis further isolates what must have fascinated the author and poets in general about *deixis*: “There is perhaps a utopian message of immediate apprehension, epiphanic imprinting, a flash transferred via that pointing [...]”^{vi} But she immediately points out that “this is utopia without sociality,” possibly owing something to “Poundean [i.e. didactic and imperious] modes of instant apprehension.” As a democratically-minded alternative to Pound’s directed flashes, she offers Walter Benjamin’s method in *The Arcades Project*, which consists in collecting and setting forth; this allows “a myriad flashes to be generated,” but, to quote Blau DuPlessis’s words, opens up an “interactive space between the images” which then become “dialectical.” In other words,

Benjamin's method is "a showing forth that is also transactional," thus meeting the precondition to even the most elementary kind of environmental awareness.

A writer's focus on nature does not necessarily result from, or go hand in hand with, an environmentalist's agenda. While the former often comes with an ahistorical, vertical sense of the sublime and a revisiting of the pastoral without offering any deep challenge to the human being's central place in nature, the latter will unfold along horizontal lines, stress the systemic and reciprocal inclusion of the human and the non-human—"No single stranded cut-off thing" (Gilfillan, 2003 104), and insist that practical environmental reform be implemented. In short, if the environmentalist is also a writer, his/her work will tend to meet the criterion of "dual accountability to imagination and to object-world" (Buell 278). It might be argued that the general drift in American writing about nature has been towards more environmentally-conscious stances. Eleni Sikelianos's *The California Poem* stands as a foremost example of this.

With the focus here on *deixis*, one would expect to find both in Whalen's and in Gilfillan's poems demonstratives pointing an accusatory finger at man-made environmental damage. Initially, the hypothesis came to mind that their increased frequency in the later poet's work – due to mounting concerns about mankind's *oikos*—could be a telling sign of the switch from nature-oriented to environmentally-aware poetry. However, this was not found to be the case. If anything, Whalen is occasionally more vocal than Gilfillan on the subject. On the other hand, scrutinizing the way each of the two poets uses deictics yielded historical insight into how their respective generations wrote about nature, discreetly heeding the environmentalist agenda, though in different ways.

Deictics root language in the Here and Now or in the Then and There. This focus is strong in Oriental poetry, which itself is nature-oriented.^{vii} While less renowned as a nature

writer than his lifelong friend Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen is probably the one who, among the Beats,^{viii} went the furthest on his study of Eastern culture: he was ordained a Zen priest in the latter part of his life. The concluding lines to a 1965 poem show T'ang era China standing as an exemplar for Whalen, one with which the United States compares unfavorably: "289 years the T'ang Dynasty (A.D. 618-905)/USA, 176 years & still functioning?" (488)^{ix} In "White River Ode" (490), he writes about "Consciously imitating the saints/ Li Po, Po Chü-I, Tu Fu, Su-tung Po." By way of confirmation that it makes sense to examine the use of deictics in Whalen's poetry, here is the poem written by Robert Creeley as a tribute to him and entitled "Hiccups for Phil." The benchmark status of the silent referent, of the world out there, is clearly underlined:

*Outside is in,
that's where it all begins
and where it seems to end.
[...]
An echo, a genial emptiness,
a finally common place, a bliss
of this and this and this.*

(Rothenberg & Winson 2)

The case of Merrill Gilfillan is more intriguing. Although he made his name as a nature writer, Ron Silliman listed him among those who could have made equally valid contributions to his anthology of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E moment, *In the American Tree*, published in 1986. It would be impossible to combine the neglect of the referent which characterized early L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry and the attention to the outside world that nature writing calls for. To be sure, one would expect Gilfillan's nature writing to differ from that of poets who do not see the referential dimension of language as a central issue, like the Beats whose gaze at the world out there is informed by Oriental Poetry and Zen Buddhism. Consequently, taking Whalen as a point of comparison against which the distinctiveness of Gilfillan's nature writing could be measured, seemed to make sense.

Interestingly, the magazine which, according to Ron Silliman, marked the start of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E was entitled *This*, “a pronoun of presence which foregrounds the referential dimension of language” (xv). Yet, the issue of reference was raised by the poetics that emerged at the time (1971) on a previously unheard-of scale. *This* was in fact an intentional misnomer redirecting the attention to “what a poem is actually made of” (Silliman xvi), that is to say written words, as opposed to the then more prevalent assumptions that poems have a natural relationship with speech and that they refer to things. Out of the *This* breakthrough achieved by editors Barrett Watten and Robert Grenier came Language Poetry, or Lang’ Po’ as it has sometimes been called.

Philip Whalen’s “Scenes of Life at the Capital”^x is rooted in very different ground. Written during a long stay in Kyoto, the poem shows belief in the power of *deixis* to render immediacy and emphasizes the sometimes comic way in which nature challenges control. Even if Whalen’s speaker is obviously aware of the illusion involved in this belief, he never dismisses the latter because it fits into the author’s general approach to writing as the organic, not primarily disjunctive work of a human hand.

What follows is a more detailed analysis of Whalen’s use of *deixis* in “Scenes.” The distinctive use that Gilfillan makes of it should then become all the more apparent.

Praying mantis moored to top of a flower stalk
Grooms itself like a canary
Preens
Two tailfeathers.

(601)

Gentle rain from grey-black lump clouds
Fine pale blue sky
Three-color cat sits on weedpile
Near but not under the largest branch of Mt Koya pine

All I can say this morning is a dance.

(623)

Apart from what is most likely a reference to Zukofsky's praying mantis poems,^{xi} the different snapshots of which these excerpts from Whalen's poem are comprised, match Blau DuPlessis's description of the attraction of *deixis* as "epiphanic imprinting, a flash transferred via that pointing" (Blau DuPlessis & Watkin). This is achieved through the use of the simple present, which gives the impression of watching a sequence shot of a Benjaminian collection^{xii} with, in the second passage, the time reference – "This morning"—leaving the reader in no doubt as to the simultaneity effect intended. This is what has come to be regarded as standard nature writing.

The delusion of immediacy, however, is short-lived as it is immediately undermined: "All I can say this morning is a dance" is followed by the words "Which can't be recorded here." Likewise, immediately preceding the "shot" of the praying mantis, we are told that:

*There is a wonderful kind of writing
Which is never written NOW
About this moment. It's always done later
And redone until it is perfect.*

(601)

In other words, the immediacy effect is a time-mediated process.

A different way of mediating immediacy through nature-related *deixis* consists in staging confrontations of the word with the world. The seated speaker of "Scenes" tells us about a "Wasp in the bookshelf" rejecting "Walt Whitman,/Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, The Goliard Poets" (589)—the list goes on—all of them authors and texts which one guesses are dear to the writer. After enumerating all the books ignored by the wasp, the

speaker's gaze then becomes one with the insect's, losing itself first in the window glass which, from the wasp's point of view, makes more entertaining reading, then beyond it, returning to the garden. Here *deixis* consists in listing the authors and titles in the order in which they were visited and neglected by the wasp. The linear order of the poem reproduces the wasp's movement in space so that the reference gap is bridged. Of course, distancing is introduced *via* the humorous subject of the wasp uninterested in the nectar of poetry.

Nature-writing-related *deixis* is also harnessed by Whalen to point at the more material aspects of writing. The second deictic appearing in "Scenes"—"there"—refers to the page as a space where writing and nature have just confronted each other: "An enormous drop of pure water there/Right in the center of preceding page/ [...] The line was ruined" (587-588). The mysterious phrase "Belt hair. A bend is funnier" may be meant to inform the reader about the type of scribbling on the page which the writer-speaker has just been forced to do in order to counter the adversarial agency of nature, i.e. to hide the water stain.

Like many Reed College graduates of his time, Whalen was trained in calligraphy. A few collections of his work were published as facsimiles of handwritten poems, most of the time including more or less elaborate doodles and drawings. His long stays in Japan afforded him the opportunity to practice Eastern calligraphy and to experience at first hand the poetic power of logographs, initially invoked by Pound and sinologist Fenollosa. Inasmuch as longhand is closer to the physical practice of writing, it can call attention upon itself—be "dictic"—as being more natural, more organic, a middle course between telling and showing. This probably explains why the subject is broached so quickly in "Scenes"; the first deictic to crop up—"here"—does not refer to nature but to handwriting as original, i.e. natural, and therefore non-reproducible: "Here is original done once/not to be reproduced nor electronically remembered" (587). There follows a blank line, itself followed by two

notations—"Loosen up Festoon." The blank line may be the material result of the loosening up, and the festoon, what the writer of the lines feels like creating, also with a view to loosening up; or else the words stand for the festoon in the manuscript which could not be reproduced in the printed version. Confirmation that such was the case comes later in the poem:

*To my horror & chagrin I see that I've suppressed
Lots of goody in the process of copying from ms to typewriter;
Mike warned me years ago, "You should always
Make them reproduce your handwritten pages."*

(594)

More overlapping of writing and nature occurs when Whalen evokes Kyoto's yearly festival which, held on August 16th, is known as Daimonji: five giant bonfires are lit on the city's hills, three of which form giant Chinese characters. As a way of rendering this blending of nature and writing, the Chinese character after which the festival is named is reproduced on the page, which therefore becomes a hill. It is then no wonder either that the speaker should announce at some point: "I greet you from the very top of the page" (602).

As the reader may see, much in Whalen's use of *deixis* is in fact meant to draw attention to the inextricable interrelations between language and space or language and nature rather than to an illusory "out there." The poem ends with considerations on plum blossoms. "Japan," the speaker maintains, "is a civilization based upon/An inarticulate response to cherry blossoms/ So much for Western Civilization" (647). We are then immediately informed that it is the same "Deity who presides/ Over plum blossoms and calligraphy and scholarship" (647). From Whalen's fascination with this constant blending/non-blending of nature and language come such striking images as "Dirt produces infinite weed babble"^{xiii} while "Hands read garden" (640).

Although no shrill sloganeering appears in such passages, one finds in them distinctive aspects of environmental writing. True to the “aesthetics of relinquishment” (Buell 143-178), Whalen stages himself as, if not defeated, at least seriously challenged by a drop of water. The environmental mimesis in the description of the route followed by the irreverent wasp performs the same function: mankind and its major works are displaced from center stage. *Deixis* contributes to a favorable reassessment of the weight of the non-human. An earlier poem foreshadowed this inclination: “Leaf and branch twist and wave in the breeze/This pen swings over the page, an equal/Meaning, neither one intelligible” (316).

Gilfillan’s *Selected Poems* covering thirty-five years of writing—1965-2000—was published in 2005. It is divided into three sections: “Early Work (1965-1975),” “River Through Rivertown,” and “Satin Street.” Sections 2 and 3 are selections from and named after the two eponymous collections. Other collections published from 1975 up to the present day were not excerpted. Gilfillan must have thought that *River Through Rivertown* and *Satin Street* were representative enough of his progress.

The “Early Work” section makes it sound as though, at least in his poetry, Gilfillan first tried to stretch writing-about-nature to regions that had not been explored as yet. The titles of some early poems do refer to times, places, or the animal kingdom—“Dawn,” “Août 72,” “May,” “Locusts, 1965,” “Tanager,” “The Starfish at Heart,” “Mesa Verde (Paeon),” “Platte River”—but they often do so very indirectly or in unexpected ways. “Tanager,” for instance, does not feature any tanager: a bold step away from Wallace Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” in which the blackbird is occasionally absent from some sections.^{xiv} “The Starfish at Heart” has no starfish in it either but for the fact that it consists of five short poems and that a starfish has five arms. In other poems – as in “Finding the Islands”—the place referred to remains unidentified. The feel and foci of the poems sometimes

verge on the hallucinatory: the quasi-Gothic locust plague in “Locusts, 1965” is fairly typical. Out-there is a world where the naturalist’s sightings may border on visions. One would be tempted to coin yet another useless label: “meta-nature writing,” to describe “Platte River” which, after a deictic start—“Out here, a pretty remote stretch” – leads to fanciful considerations factoring in American space, sex, and poetry: “If he [Whitman] had had more concrete lovers, maybe one in every place he hung around ... If Hart Crane had been born 50 years earlier America would have its own Verlaine-Rimbaud thing and one of the most incredible psycho-sexual geographies in the world” (Gilfillan, 2005 22). Unlike many of the language poets’ early work,^{xv} Gilfillan’s poems abound in visual images, but it is obvious that more than a few liberties have been taken with the referent. A departure from former writing is clearly being attempted as there is only one poem, entitled “An Ingratiation (WCW),”^{xvi} in which *deixis* is used in a standard pre-environmentalist way. It takes the pretext of an attempted “ingratiation” with the Paterson luminist for Gilfillan to pen a restrained account of “Things out the window//snow, a shadowbox of trees [...] / all the frail *non sequiturs*/at once” (Gilfillan, 2005 4). *Deixis* is played with in other ways, in “Verdi” for instance: “on days like this one, or two [...]” (Gilfillan, 2005 13). The qualification partly invalidates the impression of immediacy.

Gilfillan appears to have gradually made his peace with more referential nature writing. His anthology’s selections from the 1982 collection *River through Rivertown* lean towards a more precise sense of location. The sequence entitled “Red-Haired Boy” reads like an expansion of the first part of the earlier “Platte River,” for it includes several pieces about rivers. Despite the generally more visible link between sign and referent, the consciousness of the relation’s arbitrary nature is still acute. The following prose passage—from “Red-Haired Boy”—raises the issue explicitly: “With a name like Earlywine you could ... what? [...] Ideally, you could turn out the first, freshest vintage in town [...]. That sort of Synch went out

with animal speech. Although somewhere there must be a baker named Baker who can lead you to a talking mule” (Gilfillan, 2005 64-65). As well as continued awareness of the arbitrariness of the sign, *River Through Rivertown*’s repetitive title^{xvii} points to the relationship between proper noun—here a toponym—and common noun: a proper noun is always more absolute than a common one; the echo between “River” and “Rivertown” recalls the paradoxical nature of deictics, can at once stand for what is really real—here the proper noun—and fit any situation—the common noun; they fully refer to what is actually there and are empty enough to be “filled” by any situational data.

Compared with Whalen’s, a more abstract form of nature-writing *deixis* also appears to be at work in “The Rights of Man,” another sequence from *River through Rivertown*: it includes two sections respectively entitled “St. Vicinity” and “St. Vicinity 2.” As was often the case in the earlier work, the poems read like descriptions of an unnamed place. Assuming that “St.” stands for “Saint,” which is plausible since another section of the sequence is entitled “St. Vitus,” the reader assumes that the speaker must think there is something holy about vicinity. “Vicinity” can be defined as what is close at hand. This is probably why the two poems include an inordinate number of “the”’s whose function as deictics is strongly emphasized. The following lines are from “St. Vicinity 2”:

*The ford, the face,
the eddy. The gap
at the bend. [...]*

The dork. A cove

*on the lee. The spring.
The wallows. The fall.
The range from a ville
in the gulch. The roll.*

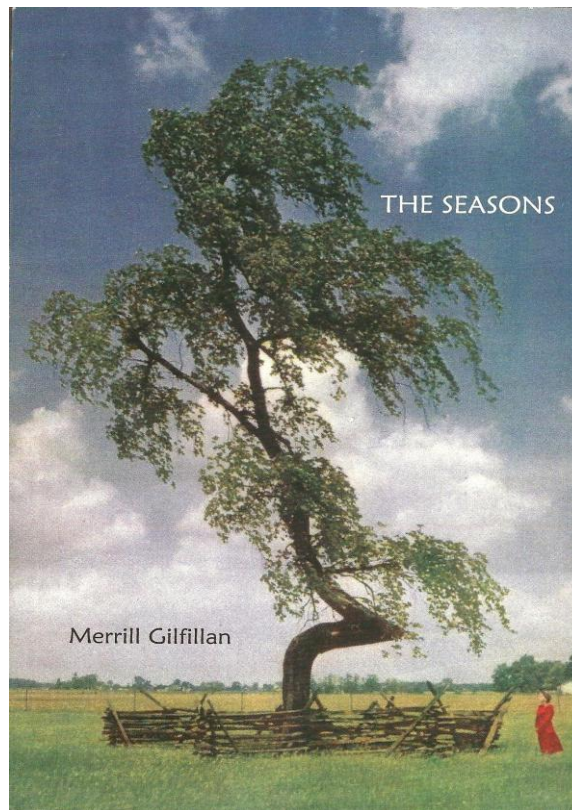
(Gilfillan, 2005 57)

Some elements in the inventory appear out of place: “The dork” is one. However, the insistent use of *deixis* within what seems intended as the description of an unspecified place suggests a boiling down of description to its bare bones, to signs of it instead of the “real thing,” *deixis* being one of the formal features of nature writing similar to those found in the first extracts from Philip Whalen’s work analyzed above — where they are meant to suggest immediacy — are also prominent in the poems included in “River through Rivertown”: clipped, field-note, or logbook shorthand syntax, verbs in the simple present, all of them relying on an implicit deictic delusion or on trust in the power of *deixis*.

By 2002, Gilfillan’s poetic persona could state: “Since I cut back/to birds and rivers, life is smooth,/days surer, words flow/ (or seep)” (Gilfillan, 2002 16). This confidence was already perceptible in the section comprised of poems from *Satin Street* (1997). Here is a sampling of deictics from this collection: “But now in December/we have the travelessness” (Gilfillan, 2005 80); “Days like this remind me of the forties” (83); “Now here is a sunrise/they will speak of many centuries/ down the line” (94); “We sit idling in calm sun and whistle cheap imitations of oriole songs just good enough to bring the males in” (117). Not surprisingly, given the well-established association^{xviii} between nature poetry and Far Eastern poetry, Gilfillan’s notations occasionally echo similar ones in Whalen’s “Scenes”: “Nocturnal train whistles/are to this continent what/plum blossoms are to Japan” (107). In the same vein, there is a reference to a major poet of the T’ang dynasty: “The apple boughs bow.//‘We go out in the night and cut/ young onions in the rainy darkness –’/Tu Fu and friend, that we” (93).

The 2002 *The Seasons*, whose title was probably meant as a tribute by a writer of Scottish descent to an illustrious Scottish poet – James Thomson (1700-1748), the author of *The Seasons* (1730) – appears as a harmoniously balanced celebration of nature using the full

array of language, from description to ostension. Here it is worth pausing to examine the book cover and the poem that serves as a commentary on it.



A part of the “Summer” sequence, the discreetly meditative description of the book’s cover comes as the third item in a list of designations: “This is a whirlwind worm [...] //These are maps [...] // And this is a postcard/from forty years” (Gilfillan, 2002 75-76). The—to this reader—thrilling point is that, as with a set of Chinese boxes, *deixis* in the text points to a postcard showing

an “Indian tree” [...]
bent to mark a trail,
[...]
The elm points day
after day
this part of the world: off up there,
off over her shoulder,
Sandusky, and seabird places north.

(Gilfillan, 2002 76-77)

The choice of a picture representing a pointer tree for this book's cover is perfectly logical. It points to the most perfect blending, the most seamless interplay of nature and writing, thanks to the "validity and holism of aboriginal place-sense" (Buell 275). Hence the metaphor extending the non-metaphorical reality of a tree-sign: "Its branches curl and roll—to quote prevailing winds" (Gilfillan, 2002, 76). There is in Gilfillan's nature writing a general attuned-ness to the murmurs of an always-already language-inhabited or sign-inhabited world, evidence of which never stops surfacing in chance encounters arranged by witty and happy geniuses:

Reservoir ice pings, pops and moans—

*Suburban imitation of
The great Minnesota master,
Lac Qui Parle.*

(Gilfillan, 2002 92).

This accounts for the possible pun which occurs in an Irish bed-and-breakfast: "Fried plaice" [...] / Happy early morning tongues. / 'I'll have the plaice. Fried'" (8). Not entirely coincidentally, it is echoed by Whalen's "Fried-A! and why not" (799). Merrill Gilfillan and Philip Whalen have in common a taste for good food. "I think of you/as the tarts come out/of the oven—Ohio butternuts/from Ohio butternut/trees" (Gilfillan ,2005 79). Food writing can often appear as nature writing once removed. Gilfillan's "Bull Run in October," a poetic sequence, begins by evoking a "[I]one persimmon" with a fruit-laden crown; the speaker contemplates knocking down a few persimmons (Gilfillan, 2003 104). It ends with a description of the fruit at close range as the same speaker makes his repast of them. Tying up previous loose remarks on the subject, the poem's last line (quoted earlier) reads: "No single

stranded cut-off thing.” The persimmons have indeed been ingested by the speaker. No more need of *deixis* then.

Despite the various distancing devices deployed by Gilfillan in his writing about nature, which may have owed much to the reflexive spirit of the time that witnessed the flourishing of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and turned its back on Romanticism, an unmistakable tone of mellow friendliness and trust in some form of loosely-defined community can be sensed in his poems, suggesting an environmental consciousness. If indeed environmental texts “practice restorationism” (Buell 267) and aim at repairing something, Gilfillan’s do so in large part through a pacified and artifactual, heterotopic version of the environment that includes the linguistic.

It may be instructive to close on the subject of *deixis* with a quote from a poem Gilfillan inscribed to a friend:

*And sundown today
(I’ll think of you
when those hens come out
of the oven), sundown
this year, you have word,
finally, and we have
a sky
the color of milk
that blueberries
have been in;*

(Gilfillan, 2005 81)

The poem illustrates and confirms the view offered by Rachel Blau DuPlessis in her correspondence with William Watkin that “deixis cannot be theoretically sustained by [...] a strong separation of here and there, but by [...] the additional ethical acknowledgment of ‘of–the of-ness or relationality, intersubjectivity, betweenness” (DuPlessis & Watkin, 2008).

This makes perfect sense in a context of friendship and food-sharing, and not just because economical pointing at the salt-cellar makes words a waste.

What of the hypothesized difference in deixis between Whalen and Gilfillan? Obviously, Gilfillan, more consistently than Whalen, keeps pointing at “what a poem is actually made of” (Silliman xvi), an ever-useful legacy of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E moment: rivers have mouths, do they not?^{xix} As to Whalen’s reflexive (nature) writing, it can probably be traced back to what Leslie Scalapino identifies as “the Buddhist concept of free-fall, which recognizes all supposition, perception, and phenomena as having no actual order of occurrence except that imposed by the mind as its own context” (xxxix). *Deixis* is then more a matter of experimenting with the present of which words are a part. The influence of Zen should of course not be discounted either, with respect to its emphasis on designation.^{xx}

Have Whalen and Gilfillan come a little closer to capturing “This-ness?” It certainly feels like they have dealt with distance in refreshing ways. Indulging in a final about-turn, one could see the use of deictics in nature-related writing as “the ultimate extension of the romantic dictum of discovering greater truths within particulars: the universe from the grain of sand” (Buell 264).

Deixis appears as the essence of synecdoche, that figure of speech best suited to highlighting “the immense significance of the minute life-form” (Buell 264) next to us.

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- i “Deixis is reference by means by means of an expression whose interpretation is relative to the (usually) extralinguistic context of the utterance, such as: who is speaking; the time and place of speaking; the gestures of the speaker; or the current location in the discourse.”<http://www.sil.org/linguistics/GlossaryOfLinguisticTerms/WhatIsDeixis.htm>
- ii William Watkin: “A gap is as much of a mark, as much of a thing, within the segment, as the mark [...]. Deixis sends text out to the thing, and it’s the first utterance of outside space in language. It says ‘this,’ it says ‘it.’ Language enunciates itself by the indication of a thing that is not within it: the outside world.”
<http://jacketmagazine.com/36/watkin-duplessis.shtml#fn5>
- iii Without explicitly referring to deixis, Burt Kimmelman’s analysis of the poem in the light of Heidegger’s notions of truth as “appearing” and of the centrality of “astonishment” in philosophy provides an insight into the phenomenon of linguistic ostension. <http://www.bigbridge.org/BB14/OP-KIM.HTM>
- iv The two writers were born at a generation’s distance: Philip Whalen was born in 1923 and Merrill Gilfillan in 1945. Whalen died in 2001.
- v <http://jacketmagazine.com/36/watkin-duplessis.shtml#fn5> .
- vi All quotes in this paragraph are taken from <http://jacketmagazine.com/36/watkin-duplessis.shtml#fn5>
- vii “A haiku is not a poem, it is not literature; it is a hand beckoning, a door half-opened, a mirror wiped clean” (Blyth 272).
- viii Alongside Gary Snyder and Lew Welch, his two friends and fellow Reed College graduates, Whalen took part in the famous reading at the Six Gallery in San Francisco on October 7, 1955, during which Allen Ginsberg read the epoch-making “Howl.”
- ix All references to Philip Whalen’s poems are taken from the book edited by Michael Rothenberg (2007).
- x Henceforward abbreviated as “Scenes.”
- xi “Mantis” and “Mantis, An Interpretation” (Zukofsky 65-73).
- xii As characterized by DuPlessis.
- xiii We are not that far from “Leaves of Grass,” especially since a “weed babble” has to it the universal ring of a “weed babel.”
- xiv Section 12 for instance: “The river is moving/The blackbird must be flying.”
- xv It has often been pointed out that many of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets use visual images sparingly, with distrust. Cf. William Keckler’s blog: <http://www.blogger.com/profile/09492547054986452311>
- xvi The initials stand for William Carlos Williams.
- xvii A similar highlighting of repetitive, redundant relations between toponyms and common nouns is found in another poem entitled “Song: Mouth of the Poplar.” “And these poplar trees at Poplar/where Poplar River squeezes through/carry their Tinkerbelle namesake load/with perfect (mouth-of-Poplar) ease.// - *Poplar, Montana*” (Gilfillan 2005, 101).
- xviii Since the early twentieth century, with the Imagists’ emphasis on it.
- xix See “Mouth of the Whosis” (2005, 124-134).

^{xx} Suzuki describes “the Zen way of escape—or, better, of solution—[as] direct apprehension or grasping ‘it’ or ‘this.’ ‘This’ is pure subjectivity, or being-in-itself or absolute self. It is also called ‘the one passage to the highest’ or ‘the one solitary way of escape’” (1978).