


8-3-2018

The Larger Conversation: Contemplation and Place by Tim Lilburn

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Recommended Citation

Shaw, Emory (2018) "The Larger Conversation: Contemplation and Place by Tim Lilburn," *The Goose*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 1 , Article 22.
Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol17/iss1/22>

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A Much Needed Conversation

The Larger Conversation: Contemplation and Place by TIM LILBURN

The University of Alberta Press, 2017

\$34.95

Reviewed by EMORY SHAW

Europeans got it wrong from the moment they set foot in America. This statement, which might lack nuance to some yet remain a platitude to others, is at the core of the politico-poetic message that Tim Lilburn expounds in *The Larger Conversation: Contemplation and Place*. The monograph presents an unusual detour through Western thought to establish a new direction to dwell more sustainably and constructively amid indigeneity and Indigenous peoples in North America.

Underpinning Lilburn's work is a despair regarding a familiar yet "unacknowledged colonial war in Western Canada" (58). As told in Chapter 5, this runs parallel to a pair of philosophical concerns that question "how to see things as they seem to themselves" despite a need for "foundational certitude" in one's perspective when "all seems in cultural flux, therefore doubtful" (58). Integral to what he sees as an ethical need to address these concerns is a sense of place and dialogue, which no section more clearly synthesizes than Chapter 1. Here, Lilburn establishes the intrinsic bond between feeling at home in the world and caring for it. Without a sense of place, settler identity is "never fully developed[,] resulting in an anger that is "nameless" and "unhoused" (16). Throughout the book, Lilburn establishes this problem as a "daze," a "rootlessness" (x), or an "unsettledness" (60), that drives those afflicted by it to lay waste to land and

to those indigenous to it. Settler society's inability to feel at home in North America is at the source of—and is consequential to—its inability to engage in open conversation with Indigenous culture at large. Lilburn pegs this pathology on a range of paradigms that have shaped the Western psyche, and which offer "no chthonic or sapiential mooring" (xi): from Christianity and capitalism to Enlightenment and Modernity. The author contrasts a resultant "liberal individualism" with a more ideal "contemplative individuation" (43): proposing the latter as a means—a project—towards a resolution of this problem and a hopeful opening to decolonization.

Fundamental to this project, as argued in the opening chapter, is a "nurturing of the genuine self" (4), understood here as a political responsibility and necessary precursor to effective dialogue. From the "moral efficacy" (6) of this dialectic inevitably emerges a new politic. Lilburn illustrates a failure of such dialogue in Chapter 10 with a conversation between Socrates and Glaucon in Plato's *The Republic*. Socrates, Lilburn argues, was not advancing "explanatory systems" in his teachings to Glaucon, but instead had a therapeutic intent as an intimate orator. For Lilburn, this conversation is really "an account of an attempt to transform an individual charmed by geometrical thinking and Achillean political idealism" (138). Glaucon, who remains untransformed, represents Western society hungover by Modernity, and Socrates, an indirect purveyor of decolonization via dialogue.

Chapter 11 follows a similar thread by straddling Modernity itself. Lilburn concludes that Husserl's thesis and critique of Descartes was insufficient since his ambitions, like Descartes', were ultimately

architectonic and hegemonic. It is up against this that Lilburn drives home that “it is the self in the kenotic individual[,]” as argued by the 12th-century Sufi scholar Ibn’ Arabi, in Chapter 4, rather than the exclusionary and romanticist “saving intuition” of artistic practice lauded by Heidegger, that steers one’s interiority (41):

We must look elsewhere for our paradigms of comprehension, attention, feeling, while not, however, straying, with or without imperial entitlement, from what is ours. (68)

Indeed, most of the book attempts to flush out a “Platonic contemplative tradition in its Christian, Islamic and Judaic manifestations” (9), a reading which Lilburn sees as key to unlocking a constellation of contemplative phenomenologies. Chapter 3 embarks on this by presenting Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, and John Ruusbroec as exemplary for their exegesis. As practical analogies for his own present work, Lilburn shows how the practice of each of their own deep readings produced an emptying of the self that made them ripe for contemplation. After the method of “reading,” Chapter 5 introduces “prayer,” and Chapter 6 brings together Suhrawardi, a 12th-century Persian mystic, and Mandelstam, a 19th-century Russian poet, to then introduce “poetry” as a method for enacting and communicating such interiority. In praise of Neruda’s work, whose “inducement of empathy through specificity” creates “new erotic allegiances to things that are unlike and beyond the self” (114), Chapter 8 explores poetry as a political “pneumatic force” and a “floatation device for lifting apparently unbudgeable cultural and psycho-political

problems” (110). The chapter that follows responds by addressing the flaccid political ambitions of contemporary poetic forms that “mock the scale of the attempt” (116). Lilburn then argues that “song,” like prayer, represents “a knowledge achieved by means of proximity” (121). These “ways of knowing” (163) are further elaborated by presenting their direct relevance to monastic rules (“The Rules of Benedict,” Chapter 12), and to writings on the daily life of monks (Thomas Merton and Richard Kearney, Chapter 13). In Chapter 15, the author mobilizes Teresa of Avila’s concept of hunger towards a sense of place, indicating that it be productive in bringing settlers to “learn the original human language of” (205) and engage in an “apprenticeship to a particular place” (203).

Lilburn flanks this journey through “feral European mystical thought” (11) with his own personal story (Chapter 2) and family history (Chapter 16), appropriately anchoring the scale of his own attempt within his particularly theological and regional life experience as a settler in rural Western Canada. In Chapter 14, the reader witnesses an exciting reminder of how Lilburn’s vision of a new politic is inspired by a tangible precedent in Western Canada: Sara and Louis Riel’s struggle for a Métis polis of *Assiniboia* (also the title of Lilburn’s 2012 book of poems), which was a “newcomer’s response to and a working toward this broad imaginary state” (191). This is presented in an equally-refreshing discussion between Lilburn and Shane Rhodes, a Canadian poet who questions Lilburn’s internal philosophical focus and literary style. Indeed, even these contextualizing interludes hardly save readers from the author’s esoteric, stream-of-consciousness prose, which not only obscures the decolonizing premise of the

book, but also its intended effect as a “psychagogical device aimed at interiority” (162). In addition, and despite the book’s title, “place” emerges as a relatively underdeveloped theme. Despite this, Lilburn, within a strictly Western framework, successfully validates a too-often neglected series of contemplative devices, in turn legitimizing very similar practices rooted in many Indigenous traditions. As an enticing and original literature review, drawing from an enormous range of sources, the piece is incomplete. Despite this, Lilburn’s thesis,

which builds on his previous written work, is more than enough to make the book worthy of exploration for anyone interested in phenomenology, humanistic geography, theology, environmental philosophy and decolonization.

EMORY SHAW is a researcher at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. His work explores how diverse worldviews gather in specific places and how mapping can help to understand this. He maintains a keen interest in the geohumanities and in humanistic notions of place.