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### **Heliocentric Utopianism: Ecological Imagination and Utopian Longing in Inger Christensen and in Contemporary Danish Literature**

This essay discusses the relationship between Inger Christensen's work and contemporary Danish eco-literature. Christensen can seem like a towering predecessor. Yet, the relationship is more complex than a question of anxiety of influence. This essay argues that Christensen and contemporary Danish literature exhibit differing ecological imaginaries, and that this becomes clear when one examines Christensen's utopian writing, her heliocentric utopianism, of the late seventies and early eighties, and when one examines how ecological threats are depicted in her work. For Christensen, the paradigmatic threat to the world is the nuclear bomb and its excessive use of energy, for today's literature it is the feedback loops of pollution, exemplified in the threat of climate change.

*Keywords: Inger Christensen, Danish Literature, Utopianism, Ecological Imaginaries*

The shadow of Inger Christensen sometimes seems to be overwhelming for contemporary Danish literature, looming so large that many younger authors approach her major works with caution or only obliquely. If one tries to find works that are in explicit, intertextual dialogue with her *oeuvre*, for instance, the most obvious have clearly taken pains to distance themselves from her tone and

ambitions.<sup>1</sup> This is the case in Kristina Nya Glaffey and Maja Lee Langvad's "Madalfabet" ["Food Alphabet", 2019], which rewrites parts of "alfabet" (1981) but substitutes the original works' lists of phenomena of the world with words pointing towards a very Copenhagen-centered fixation on gourmet food. The famous first line of the work is thus no longer "the apricot trees exist; the apricot trees exist", but "the apricot tarts exist; the apricot tarts exist".<sup>2</sup>

It is also the case in Martin Larsen's "Parasitsonetterne" ["The Parasite Sonnets", 2017], a conceptual work which transforms Christensen's "Sommerfugledalen" ["Butterfly Valley", 1991] into beautiful graphs and illegible strings of text. As a last example, Mette Moestrup repeatedly quotes the first words of "Sommerfugledalen" in the poem "Hvad betyder det for sommerfuglen" ["What Does It Mean for the Butterfly" from her collection "Dø, løgn, dø", 2012]). However, Moestrup does not let the fluttering of butterflies trigger analogies between insect and planet, or awaken memories of a past that almost magically cover the reality of death, as Christensen does. Instead, she calls forth the name for "butterfly" in various European and non-European languages in an open-ended meditation on the meaning of cultural and linguistic difference for the natural world—a question that seems foreign to Inger Christensen's work.<sup>3</sup>

But even if one looks beyond the realm of direct intertextual allusions, the legacy of Christensen's work seems pervasive in recent Danish literature. Her essays and books are easily posited as precursors—perhaps towering precursors—to the massive resurgence of eco-poetry in the last fifteen years of Danish literature. When writers such as Amalie Smith, Nanna Storr-Hansen, Theis Ørntoft, Lea Marie Løppenthin and—in prose—Jonas Eika attempt to reimagine the relationship between society, language, consciousness, and our material surroundings, they do so in ways that seem to echo the work of Inger Christensen. They share her idea that any attempt to see human civilization as the opposite of a pristine nature is untenable. Like her, they insist upon describing how geological, biological and chemical rhythms and processes traverse human consciousness, language and society. Like her, they use literature as a privileged site for the articulation of such a re-imagining of the relationship between what was once called nature and culture.

Furthermore, even though they do not share her interest in procedural form, they do share her interest in a poetic vocabulary of shifting or collapsing scales. Like her, they are interested in images that show how cosmic, societal, linguistic, and cellular planes of existence are conflated, and sometimes even mirror

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, this seems not to be the case in the international reception. See for instance Sofia Roberg's discussion of the international, poetic reception of Inger Christensen's "alfabet" in "Besvärge världen. En ekopoetisk studie i Inger Christensens alfabet". Roberg (2022: 201f.).

<sup>2</sup> Glaffey / Langvad (2019: 5): "abrikostærterne findes; abrikostærterne findes".

<sup>3</sup> Moestrup (2012: 56-58).

each other. “[E]t digt star / mellem lamellerne / og damper / svampene vokser sig gigantiske / midt i forhaven / de vil tale / samme sprog / som huset” [“a poem stands / between the gills / and oozes / the fungi grow gigantic / in the middle of the garden / they want to speak / the same language / as the house],” writes Nanna Storr-Hansen in the poem “Blåhvid slim” [“Blue-white Mucus”, from “Bøgetid”, 2022],<sup>4</sup> producing a Christensen-like mirroring of nature (fungi) and culture (house) through language, understood as a thing they could have in common.

Yet, as I will try to show in this essay, even though this new generation does inherit a specific set of interests—the reexamination of the relationship between nature and culture through poetry and literature; a decentering of human subjectivity; an interest in an imagery of shifting and collapsing scales—from Inger Christensen, the writers do not share the presuppositions behind Inger Christensen’s specific way of conflating nature and culture. More specifically, they do not share her conception of what threatens to deform or stop the rhythms and processes of biological space. They do not inhabit quite the same ecological imagination as Inger Christensen did. To fully see these differences, I think one must begin by revisiting Christensen’s poetological writings from the 1970’s, her work on what she called a “utopian vocabulary”.

### *Heliocentric Utopianism*

It is well known that Inger Christensen insisted upon a continuity between literary form and biological processes. This insistence—and the poetic practice that has been its result—has most often been interpreted as a poetics of “mimicry”, that is, a poetics insisting that literary form can mimic or elucidate the forms and processes of a biological world, just as the patterns on the wings of a butterfly can mimic the eyes of a larger animal.<sup>5</sup> Closely related to this argument is a focus on Christensen’s philosophy of language, and its thesis that human language should be understood as an extension of biosemiotic processes. As Anne Gry Haugland has shown, however, for Inger Christensen, the relationship between language, poetry and the processes of nature exceeded questions of representation. The potential of language and art are not just the reenactment of natural processes; by elucidating these processes, art also became the site where “biological space, the world, uses the word ‘I’ in order to know itself,” as Christensen writes in the essay “Afrealisering” [“det er ikke personen ‘jeg’, der taler, men det biologiske rum, verden, der bruger ordet jeg for at kende sig selv”]<sup>6</sup>. It is the site

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<sup>4</sup> Storr-Hansen (2022: 128). Translation: T.A.N.

<sup>5</sup> See Lyngsø (1997).

<sup>6</sup> Christensen (2019: 203). Translation: T.A.N.

where the processes of the world fold in upon themselves and thus attempt to come to some kind of self-consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

Christensen's poetological writings span several decades, however. Even though there is a remarkable consistency in her core ideas and convictions, the emphasis changes from text to text. I would argue that at least in some of her essays, she articulates a vision that is not just about an aesthetic or linguistic *mimicry* of natural forms and processes, but extends her discussion to forms of life and forms of society. Consider this passage from the late essay "Silken, rummet, sproget, hjertet" ["Silk, the Universe, Language, the Heart"]:

Måske det, at formerne i forvejen eksisterer i verden. Et træ eksisterer i sin træskikkelse, og derfor kan også mit liv, eller hele min families liv, antage denne skikkelse. Men på en måde ikke som en sammenligning, snarere som en form, der er den samme. Og som også kunne være en digtform. Og her skal former ikke betragtes som statiske, men som fortløbende processer, der indimellem tydeliggøres.

Forms already exist in the world. A tree exists in its tree-configuration, and so my life too, or my whole family's life, can take on that configuration. But not as a comparison, rather as a form that is the same. And one that could also be the form of a poem. And here forms must not be considered as static, but as ongoing processes, occasionally made clear.<sup>8</sup>

Here, too, poetry is thought as something that is able to mimic nature's forms, or, to be more precise, mimic a series of structured processes running through biological space. Here, however, mimicry is not only or primarily a question of poetry or language, but an argument about forms of individual and interpersonal life. It is not just a question of linguistics and literary aesthetics, but of ethics and politics, a question regarding how we can find better ways of living. Furthermore, the argument does not hinge upon questions regarding the nature of language, but around a choice. Our lives and our poetry could extend the processes of nature, but—at least implicitly—they could also not do so.

I suspect that the critical reception's focus on biosemiotics, and on Christensen's philosophy of nature and poetry, and on the ideal of a poetry that can somehow elucidate already existing forms and processes of nature have obscured this political—utopian—aspect of Christensen's ecopoetics. It has also obscured their temporal aspect, that is, Christensen's attempt to think forms of poetry, life and society not just as a mimicry, but also as *extensions* or *elaborations* of the processes of nature. As it turns out, the utopian and the temporal aspects are closely connected.

<sup>7</sup> See Haugland (2014a and 2014b). I should note there are significant differences in the interpretation of Christensen's philosophy of nature within the critical reception. One fault line is, as Fjørtoft has shown, whether one understands Christensen's philosophy of nature through a metaphysical or a neo-materialistic lens. Fjørtoft (2011).

<sup>8</sup> Christensen (2019: 44). Translation: T.A.N.

The temporal and political aspects of Inger Christensen's thinking is most forcefully articulated in five short essays written from 1979 to 1981, called "Forsøg til en utopisk ordbog" ["Attempts at a utopian dictionary"]. These were originally written for the magazine "Krise og utopi" ["Crisis and Utopia"] that Christensen co-edited with Niels I. Meyer and Ole Thyssen from 1979 to 1984, and then reprinted in Christensen's first collection of essays "Del af labyrinten" ["Part of the Labyrinth", 1982]. Each essay examines a specific word, often one considered central to the political and economic horizon of seventies and post-seventies Europe, and tries to redefine it. There are thus essays on "work", on "growth", and—as the third—on "energy". This third essay begins with a description of the sun's rays hitting the earth. It then describes biological life as the attempt to "soften" or "smoothe" ["udglatte"] the shock of the transformation of solar energy from light to heat.<sup>9</sup> Christensen writes:

planterne med deres omvendte pyramider har løftet jorden op mod lyset for at mildne processen, men i selv mildningen ligger allerede differentieringen, i differentieringen tallene, og i tallene genkendelsen og intelligensen.

The plants with their inverse pyramids have lifted earth up towards the light in order to soften the process, but in this softening already lies differentiation, in the differentiation the numbers, and in the numbers recognition and intelligence.<sup>10</sup>

In a—for Christensen—typical argumentative move, what is often thought of as distinctively human attributes (the use of numbers; intelligence) turns out to exist in the growth patterns of prehistoric plant life. As the essay goes on, it also turns out that humanity ought to be thought not as a discontinuous break away from this primordial logic, but rather as its continuation, or, to be more precise, a further elaboration of it. Man is neither more nor less than the (to date) final curvature of earthly life's primordial "softening" of the sun's energy. We too are a detour in energy's flow from light to heat.

Jeg forestiller mig videre, at de dynamiske situationer der styrer udviklingen af naturfænomenerne er de samme som dem der styrer udviklingen af mennesket og af menneskenes samfund. At mennesket er en del af det jordiske livs forsøg på at mildne chokbølgen fra solen. At vi ganske vist ikke har planternes umiddelbare stofskifte med lyset. Men at vi yderst med vores bevægelige tilnærmelser til sandheden differentierer den entydige nedbrydning af sollyset. Således er vi med vores kroppe som dele af det biologiske rum en slags afbøjning, en underdrejning af et brat og udifferentieret varmespild, en slags omvej, en rumlig forsinkelse af solens død, som er det vi kalder liv. [...] Vores trang til fremtid, vores forplantning og vores arbejde, hele vores utopiske funktion er vores evne til at transponere energi og formilde, måske ligefrem forskønne nedbrydningen ved vores blotte eksistens. [...] Det vi må sætte alt ind på er de smukkeste, de omstændeligste og mest lærerige omveje til målet.

Furthermore, I imagine that the dynamic situations which govern the development of natural phenomena, are the same that govern the development of humanity and

<sup>9</sup> Christensen (2019: 211). Translation: T.A.N.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Translation: T.A.N.

of human societies. That humanity is part of earthly life's attempt to soften the shockwave from the sun. That we might not have the immediate metabolism of plants with light. But that we, with our movable approximations to truth, are an outermost differentiation of the unambiguous breakdown of the sun's light. Thus, as part of biological space, we with our bodies are a kind of bending, a twisting and dragging on of a sudden and undifferentiated heat waste, a kind of detour, a spatial delay of the death of the sun, which is what we call life. [...] Our craving for future, our reproduction, and our work, all of our utopian function is our ability to transport energy and mollify, perhaps even beautify decomposition through our mere existence. [...] [W]e have to wager everything on the most beautiful, the most circumstantial and the most instructive detours.<sup>11</sup>

This is the idea I would like to call Inger Christensen's heliocentric utopianism. It is an image not so much of a new society and its institutions, but of a way of life guided by the principle of extending and elaborating the "softening" of the sun's energy already present in the photosynthesis of plants. As described in the essay, the flow of energy is at the same time a movement towards death (or, to be more precise, entropy), and biological life itself: the evolution of life is here conceived as the ever more differentiated elaboration of the movement towards entropy. The utopian function is the way we insert ourselves into, but also extend this constant differentiation—the detour of biological life—of solar energy's cosmic push toward death. A utopian civilization would be one which has this constant extension and elaboration (rather than, for instance, economic growth) as its ultimate guiding principle. Poetry would be one of the ways we as humans enact this extension, but so could new ways of living be.

Such an extension would follow the same principles of softening and delaying as the plants from the beginning of the essay. In this limited sense, Inger Christensen advocates for a mimicry of biological processes. But the emphasis is not on reproducing the forms or processes of nature, nor on the world gaining a kind of self-consciousness through language. It instead highlights processes of elaboration and extension as they happen in time, and on a kind of utopian impulse or principle pointing toward further, future elaborations.

Why is this called utopian? And why this quite strange expression "utopian function"? At a general level, the essays articulate a vision, however much *in nuce*, of a better way of living together. Their premise is that Western societies in the late twentieth century do not take form as a continuation of the processes of biology but are built around a misrepresentation of nature as unformed, as something which needs to be controlled, mastered and exploited by humanity. Inger Christensen's utopian dictionary thus calls for a different, better, more beautiful form of collective life.

More specifically, and without knowing for sure, I suspect an inspiration from the German thinker Ernst Bloch in this passage from Inger Christensen. Bloch was one of the most important theoreticians of utopian longings in the twentieth

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Translation: T.A.N.

century, and one of the first to focus more on the principles and affects behind utopian longings than on the specific outline of an imagined utopian society. There is a passage from his opus magnum “The Principle of Hope” (1954) that not only uses the expression “utopian function”—which Bloch uses quite frequently—but also shows uncanny affinities with the passage from Christensen’s essay on energy. Bloch discusses how physical reality itself can foreshadow a coming utopia through what he calls “real-ciphers”:

[...] such real-ciphers exist precisely *because the world-process itself is a utopian function, with the matter of the objectively Possible as its substance*. The utopian function of humanly conscious planning and change here represents only the most advanced, most active outpost of the aurora-function circulating in the world: of the nocturnal day in which all real-ciphers, i.e. process-forms still occur and are located.<sup>12</sup>

As one can see, the connection between utopian longings and futurity—that is, between utopia and a temporal push towards something new that is somehow prefigured in what already exists—is a central premise in Bloch’s writings. And even though Bloch’s formulations are certainly enigmatic, it seems clear that he articulates a vision where human activity is just an aspect of the world’s movement towards something better, in his work articulated as a coming dawn. The “real-cipher” is thus his term for the ways the processes of the world themselves point towards a better future, and at the same time function as signs of the forward movement towards this future.

Nevertheless, and in spite of passages such as these: “The Principle of Hope” is primarily focused on the future-orientedness of *mankind* and of human consciousness. And even in the quote above, Bloch’s image is of a sunrise, of the dawning light, of the sun as perceived from earth and by sentient beings. In Inger Christensen, human utopian impulses are instead an extension of the solar energy running through the earth. In that sense too, the utopian vision of Christensen is heliocentric.

### *Threats against the Extension of Life*

Within the literary oeuvre of Inger Christensen, the five essays from “Krise og utopi” are closely connected to “alfabet”, which was published in 1981 and written the same years as the essays. Even though “alfabet” as a book is incredibly bleak rather than utopian, it is easy to read it as an attempt to produce a literary version

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<sup>12</sup> Bloch (1986: vol. I, 177). Italics: T.A.N. In the German original: “Es gibt eben deshalb solche Real-Chiffren, weil der Weltprozess selber eine utopische Funktion ist, mit der Materie des objektiv Möglichen als Substanz. Die utopische Funktion der menschlich bewussten Planung und Veränderung stellt hierbei nur den vorgeschobensten, aktivsten Posten der in der Welt umgehenden Aurora-Funktion dar: des nächtlichen Tags, worin alle Real-Chiffren, das heisst Prozessgestalten noch geschehen und sich befinden.” (Bloch 1959, vol. 1: 203).

of the processes of extension and elaboration described in “Energi”. At the same time, the book articulates the antithesis of such a process.

“alfabet” depicts the growing forth of a world, and shows biological and human life as a constant temporal process of formal echoes, but also of elaborations and differentiations. The book enacts this unfolding through a continued, intricate complication of its own formal and syntactic patterns, and through a constant complication of its own grammatical and semantic resources.<sup>13</sup> As part of this process, the book’s evocation of a growing world ends up including a series of phenomena which threaten to destroy the world. The most important of these is the nuclear bomb. When the bomb is evoked the four-beat rhythm the preceding parts suddenly stops, and the book makes its decisive break away from the paratactic listing of things that “exist”.

Why the nuclear bomb? There are, of course, historical reasons; “alfabet” was written during the cold war. But there is also what one could call a conceptual reason. If biological life is conceived as the softening of energy’s transformations, as the “delay” or the “detours” of solar energy flowing through the earth’s system, then its antithesis would be the fastest and most direct discharge of energy possible, the one with the least detours. In “alfabet”, the nuclear bomb becomes an image of such intensity and haste, perhaps most clearly in the passages prefiguring the nuclear explosion in the ending of the poem “ice ages exist”. Interestingly, a similar dichotomy is repeated in an unfinished poem called “oil”, clearly written to be part of “alfabet”, but not included in the final composition of the book, and now published in the recent collection of Christensen’s unpublished drafts “verden ønsker at se sig selv” [“The World Wants to See Itself”, 2018]. I will just quote some excerpts.

Olien findes; ornamenterne, orglerne,  
 olien findes, orkideerne findes;  
 jorden og dens omveje findes  
 orkideernes omveje, orglernes omveje, oliens  
 og ornamenternes sammenslyngede omveje –  
 [...]

Nu tænder vi lyset. Bruger et sted  
 noget sammenstuvet plankton. Forbruger  
 som mennesker millioner af somre i døgnet

Opruster. Opkøber somre. Overvåger  
 somre. Fastsætter prisen på somre.  
 Truer med at lukke for somrene  
 én gang for alle. Oplagrer somre  
 så priserne stiger. Afbrænder somre. [...]

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed analysis of the “formal narration” of “alfabet” and how it adheres a principle of constant extension and elaboration, see Nexø (1998).



For at opvarme den korte industrisommer.  
 For at opvarme den hektiske banksommer  
 For at opvarme hele denne vestlige sommer,  
 hele denne helige militærsommer. Der er  
 krig. Det er derfor der er krig. Der er  
 hele tiden krig.

Oil exists; the ornaments, organs  
 oil exists; orchids exist;  
 earth and its detours exist; the detours  
 of orchids, the detours of organs, the oil's  
 and the ornament's entwined detours—  
 [...]

Now we turn on the light. Somewhere use  
 some plankton crammed together. Consume  
 as humans millions of summers a day

Arm up. Buy up summers. Monitor  
 summers. Decide the price of summers.  
 Threaten to close down the summers  
 once and for all. Store summers,  
 so the prices go up. Burn up summers. [...]

In order to heat the short industrial summer.  
 In order to heat the hectic bank summer.  
 In order to heat this whole western summer,  
 this whole holy military summer. There is  
 war. That is why there is war. There is  
 always war.<sup>14</sup>

There is a lot to say about this poem, especially with regard to its aggressive, angry tone, so alien to the final version of “alfabet”.<sup>15</sup> Here I just want to note that it confirms a clear opposition in Christensen’s ecological imaginary. On the one hand, you find the utopian ideal of life and literature as an extension of the processes and forms of biology. Christensen understands this extension as the continuation of biological life’s primordial “softening”, the way it is a “detour” of the energy of the sun. On the other, you have the threats to this extension, which in “alfabet” and in “oil” are understood through the image of a too fast, too direct discharge of energy. “Consume / as humans millions of summers a day”, as the poem states, before it directly connects oil to war and death.

The sun is thus both an image of life and death in these texts. The nuclear bomb’s blinding light is like the sun and is at the same time in opposition to the

<sup>14</sup> Christensen (2018: 127f.). Translation: T.A.N.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the relation between the unpublished drafts and the finished book, see Nexø (2020).

life created by the sun in “alfabet”, mainly because it cannot be delayed or softened. And oil is repeatedly described as the product of “summer”, that is, as compressed organic material originally produced through photosynthesis. Yet, in its burning, it is the opposite of life, because its discharge of energy does not allow for any detour.

### *Explosion or Pollution*

I want to make clear that I think this is an exceptionally powerful and original conception of the relationship between biology, society, and literature, and of the normative principles that an ecological utopianism might have as its core. I also think that there is something slightly dated to it. Read today, it is striking that Christensen writes about the energy of the sun transforming itself into heat—and then doesn’t write a word about global warming. Apparently, the rise of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and the threat of global warming were not part of her horizon around 1980, when “Energi” and “alfabet” were written. At a more abstract level, I would argue that the concept of pollution is peripheral to her ecological imagination. The idea that processes (industrial or agricultural or of consumption) have harmful byproducts that undermine or deform the possibilities of surrounding life is not something Christensen ignores, exactly, yet it is nothing she actively conceptualizes. Her ecological imagination is more interested in recursive processes—the same structures repeated and transformed within themselves—rather than in feedback loops, where a process intervenes in its own conditions of possibility.

Here I would like to return to contemporary Danish literature. I think the distinction between nuclear explosions and their too hasty movement of energy on the one hand, and pollution’s unwanted feedback loops on the other, allows us to see how the ecological imagination of contemporary Danish literature is different from the one found in Inger Christensen. While these texts depict humanity’s entanglement with their physical and biological environment, too, and are written so as to refute any clean dichotomy between culture and nature, the threats against the processes of nature are depicted differently. Pollution and the consequences of pollution are the foundational premise of the recent outpour of eco-poetry in Denmark. Often explicitly written within the horizon of anthropogenic climate change and a crisis in biodiversity, the premise of these works is the examination of a “nature” which has ceased to function like it used to do, that has undergone weird and fundamental transformations as a consequence of feedback loops caused by humanity. Their premise is, one could say, an ecological imaginary that seems more interested in a historical moment of “post-nature”, a state of being that bears many resemblances to the concept of “the mesh” as developed by the literary critic and theorist Timothy Morton, but is at the same time an image of a historical change. In that sense, the contemporary writers do not share Christensen’s conception of culture or language as the extension of

natural processes, but depict how humanity's activities seem to change the fundamental processes of nature.

Much of this can be seen in the Danish writer Theis Ørntoft's second book of poetry, "Digte 2014", where he writes as if disaster has already struck, not in the form of a bomb, ending all life, but rather in a kind of change in the balance or boundaries between what we would consider nature and culture. The first, untitled poem of the book begins with the killing of nature as a mother-like figure:

I nat, i år  
 et sted imellem alle sine atomer  
 døde det man kaldte min mor.  
 Det siges at hun stadig sang mens de skar hende op.  
 Det siges at olien dryppede fra hendes lever.

Tonight, this year  
 some place between all its atoms  
 what they called my mother died  
 It is said that she still sang while they cut her up.  
 It is said that oil dripped from her liver.<sup>16</sup>

However, in this book the death of "nature"—described as something in between a gaia-like figure and a large whale—does not lead to a world of industry, artifice and design, but to a radical instability of any dividing line between the processes of nature and its others, be it civilization or consciousness. As in Inger Christensen, there is still a sense of collapsing scales, but rather than describing language or human activities as extensions or elaborations of the processes of nature, Ørntoft excels in surreal images that mix up the boundaries between inside and outside, and let history, natural processes, technology, and bodily existence mingle in incongruous ways:

Verdenshistorien fortalt for mine efterkommere: Omkring kridttiden flød en gruppe stamceller hen over bunden på et fluorescerende ocean og nåede frem til noget andet end gæller. Omkring stenalderen udslettede man en insektart med et tryk på en knap. [...] omkring år 2090 skiftede man alle lufthavne ud med insekters vejrtrækning i grønne, kvadrerede rum, omkring år 3000 var mennesket ikke længere fysisk, lad os sige det var sådan, og sådan blev det sandt, lad os rejse en grædemur fyldt med huller, der uafbrudt føder albinobørn, lad os lægge os på bunden af Marianergraven og læse vækstrater med infrarøde støj i øjnene; den er ikke falder i åndedrættets afgrund og farer vild i majsmarkerne dernede, er endnu ikke klar til at være levende.

History of the world told to my descendants: around the Cretaceous Period a group of stem cells floated across the floor of a fluorescent ocean and arrived at something other than gills. Around the Stone Age a species of insects was wiped out with a push on a button. Around the Book of Exodus someone spat blood into my amniotic fluid. [...] around 2090 all airports were replaced with the breathing of insects in green rooms with square patterns, around the year 3000 mankind

<sup>16</sup> Ørntoft (2014: 5). Translation: T.A.N.

were no longer physical, let us say that is how it was, and that is how it became true, let us erect a wailing wall filled with holes, constantly birthing albino children, let us lie on the bottom of the Mariana Trench and read growth rates with infrared noise in our eyes; the one who does not fall into the breath's abyss and gets lost in the corn fields down there are not yet ready to be living.<sup>17</sup>

As several critics have noted, there are clear affinities between Ørntoft's apocalyptic visions and the concept of "dark ecology" as it is theorized by Timothy Morton.<sup>18</sup> Morton, too, is interested in swapping an older conception of "nature" with what for him is a proper form of ecological thought. This way of thinking would highlight interconnectedness, highlight processes that run through both humans and our surrounding environment, but also highlight a sense of collapsing temporalities and scales, and the experience of phenomena that are both incomprehensible and strangely intimate. For Morton, ecological thought is one that accepts that "the insides of organisms teem with aliens", as he writes in his attempt to explain the structure of "the mesh", his word for everything's interconnectedness, rather than a world where "forms already exist in the world," as Inger Christensen wrote in "Silken, sproget, rummet, hjertet", and are recognizable and repeatable.<sup>19</sup>

Rather than Inger Christensen's vision of dynamic, structured processes running through the world and repeated and extended by us, Ørntoft's poems attempt to show how we—human subjectivities—are enmeshed in something radically strange, something where everything seems interconnected without producing a stable whole. This ecological imaginary, this interest of strange interconnectedness and incongruous mixing of scales is one he shares with a whole generation of Danish writers of ecological literature, including those who write in less apocalyptic, even mundane or idyllic tonalities. They too are more interested in images highlighting the collapse and intermixing of different scales rather than images highlighting the repetition of patterns and structures at different scales of existence. In "Bøgetid", for instance, Nanna Storr-Hansen describes her boyfriend lighting a fire in the stove of the rural house they have recently moved into, and depicts the smoke with a metaphor that seems both similar to and very different from anything found in Inger Christensen.

vi sender en tarm a sod  
op i æteren  
en lille befrugtning

we send an intestine of soot  
up into the ether  
a small impregnation<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ørntoft (2014: 53). Translation: T.A.N.

<sup>18</sup> See for instance Thomsen (2015 and 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Morton (2010: 36).

<sup>20</sup> Storr-Hansen (2022: 129). Translation: T.A.N.

The metaphor—chimney smoke as an intestine—highlights the billowing movement of smoke, perhaps especially smoke as it would be depicted on a kid’s drawing. It also highlights the idea of soot being a kind of polluting waste, of smoke being so to say the excrement of fire. It enacts a both slightly brutal and slightly comical mixing of tonalities—the meeting of lowly intestines with the somewhat high style of using “ether” for air or the sky—and of the outside environment and bodily interiority. Such incongruity is, I would say, more in line with Morton’s concept of “the mesh” than with Inger Christensen’s ecological imaginary.

One should also note, however, that both Theis Ørntoft and Nanna Storr-Hansen write about a post-natural world, a world where the balances between nature and its others have shifted, and where nature is never seen in itself, but always mixed with the processes and detritus of human existence. While Morton’s vision of “the mesh” is a vision of a new ontology, these works are attempts to envision an epochal change happening with “nature”. They describe a natural order that has been pushed, slightly or more dramatically, but always irrevocably, into new and stranger states of being.

### *Utopia in the Mesh?*

Let me end this comparison between Inger Christensen and contemporary Danish ecological writing by noting how their differing ecological imaginaries lead to different ways of letting ecology intersect with utopia. No contemporary Danish works attempt to produce that kind of temporal push towards new “detours”, that Inger Christensen theorized in her essay “Energi” and formally tried to enact in “alfabet”. In fact, to the extent that one finds utopian moments in contemporary Danish literature, these are local rather than extensions of supposedly global processes. They typically consist of images of small communities—sometimes just mother and child—finding ways of living with a “nature” that is broken or changed.

The most interesting of these can be found, I think, in Jonas Eika’s collection of short stories called “Efter solen” [“After the Sun”, 2018]. One of its stories, the very strange, speculative “Bad Mexican Dog”, is about a global group of young “beach boys” working at a beach club in Cancún, Mexico, living lives caught in what one of them calls “én stor soløkonomi” [“one big economy of the sun”].<sup>21</sup> “Soløkonomi” has a double meaning here. One is local: the group of boys earns money servicing sunbathing tourists, fetching them water and snacks, applying sun lotion to their bodies and so on. The other meaning is global: sun economy is the way the energy of the sun filters through the world, but a world which is depicted as fundamentally broken, both ecologically—all Eika’s stories

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<sup>21</sup> Eika (2018: 146); Eika (2021: 181).

depict nature as mutated and polluted—and economically, depicting a system of exploitation that only gives room to the most precarious of lives.

The beach boys are depicted as a close-knit, fragile community. They seem to share all money they make. They are far from being adults. They have intense, tender feelings for each other, which seamlessly move from caresses to collective masturbation to sex—it is as if sex for them is just another form of cuddling. They also have some kind of supernatural ability or at least access to strange energy sources. When they masturbate, they produce a life-inducing ooze, which they collect in a pool of stagnant water. At one point they penetrate themselves anally with the stubs of parasols and chant songs in order to bring one member of their community back from the dead. Later on, they do the same with the things of the beach—they bring sunscreen and reclining chairs back to life, even though these are objects that have never lived.

In that sense, the story depicts a world that no longer respects the boundaries between natural and artificial, and between natural phenomena and objects produced for profit. Neither does it respect the boundary between human and non-human. Gradually, the prose of the story mutates into strange visions of the beach boys becoming—or transforming into—shrimps, so that they are both beach boys servicing tourists and crustaceans cleaning other animals in a polluted ocean, far away from the rays of the sun. They are trying, one could say, to make vital connections to each other and to the things around them, ignoring all distinctions between living and non-living, natural and manmade. At the same time, they are trying to liberate themselves from “the economy of the sun” understood both as the social organization of the beach club and the forms of life directly connected to the energy of the sun. As they chant in one of their rituals:

Efter solen, efter solen  
 er tingene ved siden af sig selv  
 tavse, uden nytte, sat fri  
 til det ukendte liv vi spørger til  
 Hvorfor starter gribben altid med øjnene?  
 Hvilke sider af dig så vi ikke  
 liggestol, eftersol, Para-sol  
 får det bedste ud af det der er  
 efter solen, efter solen<sup>22</sup>

After the sun  
 after the sun  
 things are beside themselves  
 quiet, futile, set free  
 into the unknown life we're asking about  
 Why does the vulture always start with the eyes?  
 Which sides of you didn't we see

<sup>22</sup> Eika (2018: 155).

beach chair, after-sun, Para-sun  
 making the best of the things that are  
 after the sun, after the sun . . .<sup>23</sup>

Is this a utopian vision? I think it is interesting to try to read it as one.<sup>24</sup> It shares with Inger Christensen the ambition to connect utopian longing with an ecological imagination. Both connect utopia to cosmic, material energies. However, in Eika, utopian collectivity is not seen as a continuation of the energy of the sun. It is instead seen as a liberation from it. Furthermore, there is no temporal push, no idea of an extension of the existing energy flows of the world, but rather an image of the world as a mesh of degraded, “broken” processes—degraded and degrading for the lives caught within them—and a magic or impossible alternative. Utopia is no longer depicted as a principle for a new society, but as a local enactment of new, strange connections, whose building bricks are the material of this polluted mesh. Here, too, the differing ecological imaginaries produce very different aesthetic and political visions, hiding, so to say, in texts reacting to the same core issues: humanity’s interconnectedness with surrounding processes of nature and the ways we seem to threaten their continued existence.

One final thought: in Inger Christensen’s essays and poetry, the utopian function is at the same time threatened and unambiguous. Her work and poetry never doubts the attractiveness of poetry written or lives lived as extensions of the processes of biology. I do not think Eika’s depiction of the community of beach boys is ironic, but I do think it raises a different kind of question for its readers: from what position in the world would this community of beach boys be viewed as unambiguously attractive? What situation—economically and ecologically—has forced such a longing into being? It is, then, an ambiguous utopia, letting utopia be a warning as much as a dream.

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<sup>23</sup> Eika (2021: 193).

<sup>24</sup> Thomsen and Friis (2020: 92f.) also discuss the community of “beach boys” as a utopian space, based in a queer and non-capitalist re-evaluation of the products of a capitalist and environmentally broken world.

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