

# The Soul Might Well Have Been Dreamed by Cicadas: Inger Christensen's Speculative Realism

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### **Abstract:**

In this paper, I reconstruct Inger Christensen's poetical thinking in a dialogue with the speculative turn in contemporary continental philosophy. Christensen's poetry has been philosophically interpreted in line with the Romantic tradition. However, I argue that by reframing the context to present day debates in continental metaphysics, Christensen's position can provide the building blocks for a new hybrid model – an object-oriented philosophy of nature. First, the relation between language as a transcendental semiotic system and reality as

a mind-independent realm is addressed not as a correlation between humans and world but as a companionship between two aspects of nature itself. Second, Christensen advocates a generic model of becoming where the engine is fueled by the irreducible “state of secrecy” that generates beings, forces, events on a flat ontological and political plane without ever itself being revealed.

**Keywords:**

The speculative turn, philosophy of nature, new materialism, poetry and philosophy, Inger Christensen

**Introduction**

The speculative turn in contemporary continental philosophy can be characterized as an intellectual prison break — a trespass of the bounds of reason set up by Kant or an escape from the transparent cage of consciousness (Wolff 1997), the correlation between thinking and being (Meillassoux 2009) or simply an attempt to think beyond the human and humanity more generally (Bryant et al. 2011). Not only the nonhuman but the “inanimate world” is a crucial orientation for any realist metaphysics (Grant 2011: 41). Two of the major figures in the speculative turn, Graham Harman and Iain Hamilton Grant, share this ambition but pursue it in two different ways. According to Grant, his disagreement with Harman concerns their approach to the following question put forth by Giordano Bruno: “Is there a relation of anteriority between substance and potency in the nature of matter?” (Ibid.: 41). Harman says no, Grant says yes (Ibid.: 45). While Harman proposes a flat ontological model known as object-oriented ontology (OOO), where the cosmos is inhabited by nothing but independent autonomous objects irreducible to their components and effects, Grant proposes a genetic depth model in line with Schelling’s philosophy of nature where the conditions of objects are placed outside these objects to make possible the becoming of being (see, e.g., Grant 2006; Harman 2018). While Harman (2017) accepts and expands the Kantian limits to count not only for the human-world correlation but in any relation between two objects whatsoever, Grant attempts to think beyond these limits by invoking Schelling’s idea of nature as that which precedes and gives rise to this limited capacity in the first place: “nature disputes that ‘where word breaks off, no thing may be’; deep, geological time defeats a priori the prospect of its appearance for any finite phenomenologizing consciousness” (Grant 2006: 6). In this sense, is it possible to

make the horizontal (flat) axis of individual objects meet with the vertical (generic) axis of potencies anterior to matter?

The Danish poet and essayist Inger Christensen (1935–2009) addresses a similar problem in her poetry and essays. While Christensen is well-known in Scandinavian literary milieus, she is rather unknown in international philosophical circles. In *My Struggle 2*, the Norwegian novelist, Karl Ove Knausgaard writes: “‘However,’ he said as we were going through the station barriers and entering the escalator, ‘Inger Christensen was unique. She was utterly fantastic. In a league of her own. Although everyone says so, and you know what I think of consensuses, she was’” (2014: 172). In a national context, Christensen is associated with the Danish neo avant-garde of the 1960s, third-phase modernism, experimentalism, biosemiotics, and what has been called systematic poetry. Through various non-anthropocentric focal points in a universe of matter unfolding through enigmatic engines, her poetry invokes a weird hybrid speculative realist position of its own.

In the following, I present what I call Christensen’s speculative realism. Christensen’s poetry is speculative in the sense that it presents a reality beyond the bounds of human reason akin to the different attempts we find in the speculative turn: “Speculation in this sense aims at something ‘beyond’ the critical and linguistic turns. As such, it recuperates the pre-critical sense of ‘speculation’ as a concern with the Absolute, while also taking into account the undeniable progress that is due to the labour of critique” (Bryant et al. 2011: 3). Christensen addresses the same problem field — the tension between language and reality. However, the project is not to break free of the correlational circle, not because it is impossible, but because the circle is already porous to the core. Unlike most of the thinkers in the speculative turn (except for Meillassoux), Christensen accepts the correlation between thinking and being and at the same time describes a reality that goes beyond, beneath, and before any such correlation. She does not absolutize the correlation (Hegel) nor the facticity of the correlation (Meillassoux) but co-realizes the Absolute as a non-all multiplicity of things that exist again and again with fellow natives of the cosmos without advocating panpsychism nor by favoring the human as the border patrol of what count as real.

I take my point of departure in Christensen’s most philosophical work — *it (det)* (2006) originally published in 1969 by addressing this very issue between poetry and philosophy, language, and reality. Then, I present what I take to be her core philosophical insight through two main traits: *irreducibility* and *generativity*. Christensen’s

work reveals a realist position with a certain ground color (nature) and several dry spots (the state of secrecy) that makes up the very engine of her speculative realism. Finally, by turning toward her prose poem *Alphabet* (2001) originally published in 1981, I qualify Christensen's position as a political flat ontology. I argue that the key elements of the generic and the object-oriented model come together in what I have called an *object-oriented philosophy of nature*.

## Poetry and Philosophy

Christensen's poetry does not merely describe or construct a world of fiction by means of the written word but reflects upon its own mode of understanding, which is different from other forms of knowledge. This mode of "understanding" is situated in the secret bond between language and reality, in what Christensen with a term borrowed from Novalis calls "the state of secrecy" (Danish: *hemmelighedstilstanden*, German: *Geheimniszustand*) (Christensen 2009: 40). The poem's words might not be true at all, but they contain the possibility of truth because the reality they accompany is true. This is not a correspondence theory of truth. The word is a denial of itself because it is not one with the world it describes (Christensen 2006: 49). Language is both in continuation with and different from reality because, like anything else, language is a semiotic process. The relation between language and reality is a *companionship* not a correspondence. Words can reveal something true about the real because language is itself part of the real, but in describing something other than itself the revelation must be indirect since it is not identical to what it describes. The gulf between language and reality in this sense is the condition of secrecy, a black box with a labyrinthine infrastructure:

It is shadows arising near word walls of logic  
biological forms spread as they decompose  
revealing a madness that underlies language  
razed gardens behind iron fencing that grows. (Ibid.: 34)

The idea here is not that nature in terms of "razed gardens" underpins the symbolic world of language like a *substratum*, because "even though darkness is defined by light and light by darkness something's always left out. And even if this something is 'defined' as razed gardens behind iron fencing that grows the logic is always left and..." (Ibid.: 50). Something withdraws from the realm of presence, or the attempt to incapsulate it, with language. Instead of

Descartes' immortal phrase that became the sesame of modernity, "I think, therefore I am," Christensen suggests a baroque version of the same dictum, "I think, therefore I am part of the labyrinth" (1992: 62). This labyrinth (razed garden) is described as a common thinking (*tankegang*), a Möbius strip between humans and world but note that it is only one labyrinth among others (Ibid.). That which is always left out resembles what Grant in line with Schelling and the mystic tradition of Jacob Böhme would call the non-ground (*Ungrund*), but they are not identical since Christensen's "state of secrecy" is a shape shifter.

In *The Age of the Poets* (2014), Alain Badiou discusses the connection between poetry and philosophy and points to the poem's power to reveal and restore the thing to its un-thought, even though it is a power based on a certain powerlessness: "The poem's power of revelation encircles an enigma, so that the pinpointing of this enigma makes up the real powerlessness of the power of truth" (Badiou 2014: 7, 53). There is always something the poem cannot reveal, something that will stay concealed in this revelation. In a Heideggerian tone, Badiou explains: "the mystery is, properly speaking, that any poetic truth leaves at its centre something that it has no power to bring to presence" (Ibid.: 54). In a section from Christensen's *it* named "Stage: connectivities," we find an "I" in quotation marks who expresses what she calls a true powerlessness. For example:

"I" do not want to see any more universes appear  
 within the bounds of reason  
 "I" do not want to hear any more fire alarms ring  
 every time the sun rises... (Christensen 2006: 52)

This particular poem ends with the following line: "This is a criticism of every 'poetics' because it's a criticism of the fear of true powerlessness" (Ibid.). On the one hand, there is a powerless "I" trapped within the bounds of reason. What happens outside this fence is beyond the reach of the I. On the other hand, what happens in the poem is not separated from the world "outside" the symbolic order. Rather, what we might call the "material world" is also a semiotic world, a bounded domain of sense-making activities: "I have to find meaning in the world, not because it is something I decide to do or because it is even something I want, but because I, as any other native, in the same way a tree is native, yes, really like a deep-rooted part of the world, cannot avoid creating meaning..." (Haugland's translation in Svare et al. 2016: 92; Christensen 2009: 12). Put differently, language is itself material and the activity of

writing is itself a manifestation of matter, as Iben Holk (1983: 79) remarks when she points to the title of *it* spelled with small letters and set in a typewriter font that emphasizes the productive and raw material reality of keys being pressed against the blank sheet (*tastslagets rå materielle virkelighed*). The poem's power to produce is based on its powerlessness of revealing the enigma. What does this engine room look like, then? Badiou: "They (sc. poetic figures) organize a consistent machine in which the poem assembles the sensible presentation of a regime of thought: subtraction and isolation for Mallarmé; presence and interruption for Rimbaud" (Badiou 2014: 49). To this, I would add: *irreducibility* and *generativity* for Christensen. Let us unfold these two terms in more detail.

### Engine/ering: Irreducibility and Generativity

In a recent anthology, Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen places Christensen's poetry along the deep ecology of Arne Næss in what he in more general terms call "Nordic Natures." The biocentrism of deep ecology is given poetical form in Christensen's *Butterfly Valley: A Requiem [Sommerfugledalen: et requiem]* (1991) (Stougaard-Nielsen 2020: 177, see also Haugland 2012). However, Christensen is not consistent in her use of terms like "reality," "nature" and "world." Sometimes they are used interchangeably and sometimes as different ontological domains. Occasionally, "the world" refers to "the social world," but in a draft from a recent collection of Christensen's papers published posthumously she describes the earth as an orphan under the heading "the post-world" [*efterverden*] (Christensen 2018: 842). From the point of view of the present, this sounds like an anticipation of what Alan Weisman (2008) has dubbed "the world without us." On the other hand, the very title of this collection — *The World Wishes to See Itself (verden ønsker at se sig selv)* suggests that the world here equals nature or reality as such.

It is tempting to suggest that Christensen subscribes to a Romantic and/or idealist notion of nature, because nature, for her, is a self-organizing breeding process of life unfolding, changing, developing in a poetic plasma (Holk 1983: 86; see also Svare et al. 2016). However, I would argue that while Christensen indeed seems to be oriented toward a concept of nature, her position can neither be called "naturalism" in any reductive sense, à la "physicalism," nor in the sense of a totalizing philosophy of nature with *physis* as the guiding principle. Her system is an autonomous engine with a coachwork composed of different intertextual pieces alluding to all kinds of different positions within science, literature, and philosophy.

It would be adequate to emphasize but not “totalize” the role of nature in her poetical thinking.

If we turn to *it*, Christensen’s major philosophical prose poem from 1969, we get a poetical genesis in its systematic form. As Anne Carson remarks in her introduction to the English translation, it is both a cosmogony as well as a cosmology. “Cosmogony,” Carson continues, is composed of the word *kosmos*, “cosmos,” and *gignesthai* “to come into being,” that is, “the birth of things out of nothing,” while “cosmology” is composed of *cosmos* and *logos* and refers to “the system by which things makes sense to us” (2006: x). The poem is divided into three main sections — PROLOGOS, LOGOS, and EPILOGOS and is further composed through the following mathematical ordering (see *Ibid.*: xi):

section	number of poems	number of lines in each
1	1	66
2	2	33
3	3	22
4	6	11
5	11	6
6	22	3
7	33	2
8	66	1

The divisions of PROLOGOS, LOGOS, and EPILOGOS are interesting because they explicitly put the relation between language (*logos*) and reality as something that precedes language (*prologos*) into play. Carson refers to a 1970 newspaper article where Christensen explains the idea behind this division. Christensen:

In the beginning I actually acted as if I weren’t there, as if it (“I”) were just some protoplasm talking, acted as if I were just something that went along while a language, a world, unfolded. That’s why I called the first part PROLOGOS: the part, even if it’s only fictional, that comes before the word, before consciousness. Background, starting point, vantage point. Prologue, in the theater. (*Ibid.*: x)

Christensen maintains that what the word produces or describes is not reality as such but, as we saw previously, it cannot be said to be fundamentally different from reality either. Unlike other candidates for the origin, *per se*, such as “chaos” (Hesiod), “*Khôra*” (Plato) or “*logos*” (Book of Genesis), Christensen suggests a far more anonymous starting point — “it.” The poem begins like this:

It. That's it. That started it. It is. Goes on. Moves. Beyond. Becomes. Becomes it and it and it. Goes further than that. Becomes something else. Becomes more. Combines something else with more to keep something besides something else and more... (Christensen 2006: 3)

The first "it" is a pronoun without a reference to a subject. Hence, it immediately announces itself *as* a malfunctioning word by standing isolated without any reference and by the same token it indirectly appears in its naked raw materiality stripped of all function. "It" *is* without yet saying that it is — it is more anonymous than Levinas's *il y a* or Heidegger's *es gibt* since it is neither a positive nor a negative statement. It is not a statement at all. "It" is a word (logos) that insists on being a non-word, a malfunctioning sign, a pro-logos. The next phrase: "That's it" literally says "It was it" (*Det var det*), marking a temporal beginning. In the first "it," the alien element is akin to what Badiou calls "the unnameable" — that which withdraws and cannot be brought to presence by the poem. But this absence is itself made present in its absence. "It" should refer to a subject but it does not, which means it is neither identical to what it should describe (a subject) nor to what it actually describes, which is "nothing" (the lack of the subject). "It" is not nothing, but neither is it just a word since it lacks its linguistic function. "It" is a lacunary word manifesting itself in its own reality, not the reality it is designed to describe. It is irreducible to a corresponding subject or reality, but this irreducibility is the engine of what becomes — it and it and it as a generative alterity. It is "a landslide turned inward, a muted mutation" (Ibid.: 34).

Even though we soon realize that "it" also refers to nature when it says "It's burning. It's the sun burning," the first part of PROLOGOS is an unidentifiable metaphysical limbo (Ibid.: 4). The first "it" is not identified as anything, but as soon as we move beyond the threshold of the first punctuation we enter a primordial soup of being ("it is"), becoming ("Goes on. Moves. Beyond. Becomes"), quantification ("becomes it and it and it"), event ("it happens"), and alienation ("It would never have happened without the alien element") (Ibid.: 3). The irreducible state of secrecy makes up the engine of the generative productive self-organizing system, which might be called "nature." The question is, then, how is this relationship itself organized?

Here we must distinguish between *content* and *form* in the poem, that is, "what" is described and "how" it is described. The form (the font, the textual organization, the division into PROLOGOS,



LOGOS, EPILOGOS, the experimental style and the malfunctioning pronoun, etc.) becomes a material manifestation of an ontological point. As the very “engine” of the real, “it” refers to the state of secrecy in PROLOGOS (the gulf between language and reality) but the infra-structural makeup of “it” as the very form of what comes-into-being changes through LOGOS and EPILOGOS. Nothing and no one can enter the state of secrecy — it is “designed like a garden but with no entrances paths or exits.” Like a black hole, the surface area or event horizon can increase (or change) if more radiation and matter fall into it (see Ilachinski 2002: 637; Christensen 2006: 77).

In PROLOGOS, “it” is merely a play of *forms* and the content is merely a metaphysical primordial soup of forces, being, beings, events, and becoming. In LOGOS, we enter a manifest world of mountains, plants, houses, people, a social lifeworld, and the cosmos *in concreto*. “The state of secrecy” now takes a different form. In “Stage: variabilities,” it says:

Does no interstice exist  
                   that’s not an empty zone  
                   and not a battle zone  
                   just a play of lines  
                           intermediate shadows  
                           positions  
                           things  
                   an interregnum  
                           where we all can go  
                                   lie down  
                                   and be  
                           outside ourselves  
                   joined in comprehension of the joint incomprehensibility  
   I’m talking about the inchoate forms of communication  
                   The interfaces of thought  
                   talking about the interbeddings of feelings  
                   Why shouldn’t that be the only world.  
 (Christensen 2006: 60–61)

The idea of a certain structural and dynamic interface of thought and a play of lines — topological demarcation of the in-between under the heading of logos, points to a logical frame of thinking that is not static but dynamic. The dislocated composition of the lines emphasizes this point, as if the words themselves were constantly moving. It is the transcendental as *organon* — an organic biological

and political matrix of a socio-epistemological in-between space. In chapter thirteen of *The Kantian Catastrophe* (2017), Catherine Malabou discusses her new book *Before Tomorrow* (2016) in a conversation with Anthony Morgan where she presents a similar interpretation of Kant's concept of the transcendental. She takes her point of departure in a brief but severe passage in § 27 of *The Critique of Pure Reason* from 1781 (Kant 1998), where Kant discusses the origin of the categories. To explain how the categories are neither innate nor empirically founded, he introduces the concept of *epigenesis*, a term borrowed from biology. The categories are epigenetic, which means that they contain in themselves the principle of their own development (Malabou 2017: 242). Malabou interprets this idea in light of what happens in *The Critique of the Power of Judgement* from 1790 (Kant 2000), where Kant explicitly turns to biology and living beings: "in the third *Critique* the transcendental is analyzed as a living being" (Ibid.: 244). Hence, she concludes: "So if we can compare the structure of our cognition to a living being, it suggests that the transcendental is transformable and is in itself its own justification" (Ibid.).

In the same sense, if we take *logos*/LOGOS to refer to a transcendental web, it too is transformable, buoyant, living, organic, but it remains a riddle whether it has been spun by something other than itself. On the level of content, Christensen's long prose poem seems to play with the idea that *logos* — language, word, reason, or the transcendental — originated in something that preceded it, a *prologos* that provides the frame for the origin of the natural world as well — the sun, the earth, and so on. On the level of form (the font, textual organization, experimental style, etc.), *prologos* or "it" does itself occur within a systematic frame, namely PROLOGOS. Does this leave us in an *aporia* about the origin? For Christensen, there is an irreducible companionship between a *pro-logical* onto-generic origin from "it" (content) and a *logical* epi-generic generativity of the transcendental (form): "It's a matter of indeterminate points <...> where language and the world brush inform deform or whatever each other" (Christensen 2006: 40). It is a constant play between nature as generative "engine" and language as "engineering," but not as opposite poles; rather as an *irreducible engine/ering* where form and content reciprocally affect one another constantly swirling around the black hole of an enigmatic withdrawn source of creativity — the state of secrecy. The plasticity of form and content relies on the following reciprocal dynamic.

PROLOGOS begins from a view *sub specie aeternitatis* of a universe unfolding from an unidentifiable "it" (form) and "a primordial soup of forces and matter" (content).

In LOGOS, the ontological makeup has been affected and changed into “the interstice” (form) and “a concrete universe of things — stars, mountains, societies, wars, etc.” (content).

Finally, in EPILOGOS, “it” turns into “anxiety” (form) and “the existential condition of being human as a part of a non-human world” (content).

The state of secrecy changes form in a metonymical relation to the development just described beginning as an abstract form — “it” (PROLOGOS) and then takes the shape of “the interstice” (LOGOS) for finally to become “anxiety” (EPILOGOS). In the English version, it says “fear” but that is a poor translation of the Danish “*angst*,” which means “anxiety” or “dread,” but not “fear” (*frygt*).

There is a developmental pattern in the poem but the dark green plasm evolving from “it” is filled with wormholes that leads into new worlds, new beginnings rebooting matter, taking place at the event horizon of “it.” EPILOGOS begins like this:

It / That’s it / It’s the whole thing / It’s the whole thing in a mass  
 / It’s the whole thing in a mass of difference / It’s the whole thing  
 in a mass of different people / In fear [*angst*] / But it’s not a whole /  
 It’s nowhere near finished / It’s not over / And it hasn’t started / It  
 starts / In fear [*angst*]... (Christensen 2006: 223)

The system is not a monism with innumerable modifications put in motion but a multiple ontology of an in/organic unfinished, excessive, and porous whole: “...it could be words / the matter we still share with each other / the matter that can expand the mind / and the senses <...> the cells are words...” (Ibid.: 234). We learn that language is part of biology (Ibid.: 225) but also a certain vision: “that the abyss / between us / is filled / how / how / to let this / parallel language / grow...” (Ibid.: 235 ff). However, this idea of filling the gap that makes up the intersubjective space or the dark gulf between any object in the cosmos by a parallel language is impossible: “this parallel language / that does not / exist / and never / will / I’m afraid / It starts / It starts again / It starts in me / It starts in the world / It starts in world after world / It starts far beyond the world / It starts in fear / and beyond fear...” (Ibid.: 236 ff). The irreducible abyss that can never be filled keeps generating new anarchic beginnings without any hierarchical priority: “It starts” (birth as an abstract metaphysical beginning in a pro-logical pronoun), “It starts again” (rebirth), “It starts in me” (transcendentalism — logical order), “It starts far beyond the world” (onto-genesis — chronological/pro-logical order), “it starts in fear” (the existential condition).

On the one hand, Christensen seems to subscribe to a concept of “nature,” or a philosophy of nature, without pledging troth to any existing philosophical position or scientific paradigm. She seems quite close to a Grant-Schelling account of a non-all generic ontology of nature as self-organizing matter. On the other hand, she would agree with Morton when he says: “True, I claim that there is no such ‘thing’ as nature, if by nature we mean some thing that is single, independent, and lasting” (2006: 19–20). Christensen’s system is an unfinished whole, not a closed totality. She describes the state of secrecy as razed gardens without identifying it with nature as such. She defines language as a part of biology without invoking a hardcore physicalist-reductive framework. Rather, the motoric engine/ering of “it” is more akin to what Mary-Jane Rubenstein, with a term borrowed from William James, calls the “multiverse,” where something always escapes and no single principle rules, that is, “for the pluralist, then, the world is irreducibly a ‘multiverse’—a set of different phenomena, relations, and connections that cannot be assembled under a single principle” (Rubenstein 2016: 4). Already in PROLOGOS there is a surplus in being that contains openings into different worlds: “It finds a place in the world and hesitates in another world” (Christensen 2006: 5).

In Christensen’s model, we get a non-all generic philosophy of nature where the real is accompanied by language and generated by the state of secrecy, which is itself a dynamic form(ation). The prose poem *it* clearly tends toward a position where energies, forces, processes, change, difference, and repetition play a crucial role, but when we look closer into her poetical universe, Christensen tends just as much toward the “things themselves” as *things* rather than forces. We get what I call an object-oriented philosophy of nature with a hybrid house sigil composed of elements from other camps, such as object-oriented ontology, vibrant matter, and political thinking weaved into the fabric.

## Melted Wax Wings: A Political Ontology?

Christensen’s ontological system is not a neutral theory about the structure of reality. The “political” is placed at the core of the engine: “There are feverish manifestos / offerings of flowers and wine / white-clad doves in cages / virgins hidden in coffins / migratory anecdotes carried on / from high to high / grass that turns brains green / blithering beauty / the original political initiative [*inderst det politiske udspil*]” (Christensen 2006: 115). The political is not something that first occurs within the realm of human activity but

is in “the innermost being” (*inderst*), which tells us that the ontological realm is also a political realm. The “political” refers both to practical politics, the political structure, and the political, per se, as an ontological category. In the part of LOGOS labeled “Action — integrities,” we find a criticism of the political structure of society in terms of a rigid babushka-like logic of Kafkaesque bureaucracies:

Inside the first factory there is a second, inside the second there is a third, inside the third a fourth factory etc.

Inside factory no. 3517 a man stands by a machine

In factory no. 1423 a man stands by a machine

Man no. 8611 has been spinning fables all this time about freedom

At the end of all the united factories stands a man making money. (Christensen 2006: 141)

In the following sub-poems, the factory is replaced by barracks, institutions, parliaments, offices, banks, companies, and finally societies that all follow the same logical pattern. At the end of the barracks sits a mad general and at the end of all the other institutions is a committee of experts, a well-paid advisor, a well-paid hidden observer, a smart speculator, a financial dynasty and finally: “At the end of all the united societies sits Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ smiling, *‘I’m very pleased to meet you. You are my very first patient’*” (Ibid.: 142–48). The poem itself contains a diagnostic attitude and critique of the organizational, administrative infrastructure of the capitalist system as well as contemporary practical politics in the sixties and the past century that resulted in the Hiroshima bombing, the Vietnam War, and so on.

However, if the political gambit is located in the engine itself, it means that the primordial soup in PROLOGOS is already a political ecology. Here, Christensen’s description is close to Jane Bennett’s idea of vibrant matter. According to Bennett, the world is “a swarm of vibrant materials entering and leaving agentic assemblages” (2010: 107). Furthermore, for Bennett, a political ecology is an ontologically heterogeneous “public” exactly because “human culture is inextricably enmeshed with vibrant, nonhuman agencies” (Ibid.: 108). This does not mean that every “member” of this public is equally a participant. It means that the question about the political cannot be

isolated to the realm of human activity but belongs to a broader collective that includes different actants like plants, animals, machines, or humans with different agentic capacities and degrees of power (e.g., the “small agencies” of worms whose accumulated effect might turn out to be rather big) operating in the demos, understood as an indeterminate wave of energy that exceeds the particular bodies involved (Ibid.: 96, 102, 106). For Christensen, the ontological claim seems stronger because the nonhuman is not only a co-participant in the political sphere, but is co-constituent of the engine/ering as such—“It’s all something I’ve borrowed from the world”—and of the human sphere in particular: “it’s with that kind of sentence that the world creates its image of me” (Christensen 2006: 63). In short, it does not make sense to separate the human sphere as an isolated ontological domain because the nonhuman is already a part of that domain: “the soul might well have been dreamed by cicadas” (Christensen 2000: 50).

Furthermore, it is not the case that Christensen divides the world into two opposed yet interacting poles, for example, the human versus the nonhuman. Rather, she advocates the same type of flat ontology as suggested by Manuel DeLanda in the version adopted and modified by OOO: “an approach in terms of interacting parts and emergent wholes leads to a *flat ontology*, one made exclusively of unique, singular individuals, differing in spatio-temporal scale but not in ontological status” (DeLanda 2013: 51). The idea of a de-hierarchized ontology is the final goodbye to onto-theological models where one entity is placed on the peak of mount real granting ontological status to other beings down the hill. Ian Bogost captures the essence of flat ontology in this programmatic formula: “*all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally*” (2012: 11). In the OOO literature, we often find random lists of things to illustrate the first part of the definition concerning the ontological equality, for example: “we ourselves are of the world as much as musket buckshot and gypsum and space shuttles” (Ibid. 8), or “coral reefs, sorghum fields, paragliders, ant colonies, binary stars, sea voyages, Asian swindlers, and desolate temples” (Harman 2005: 3). The point is that no specific entity—the human mind for example—is favored as the main object of inquiry but all things are considered from the beginning where none of them has ontological priority over another.

In *Alphabet* (1981), Christensen presents a similar list. In a certain sense, the poem is nothing but such a list of things that exist. It is however, not randomly organized but is structured in alphabetical order and by means of the Fibonacci sequence where the number

of lines equals the addition of the two previous lines: 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, and so on. It begins like this:

- 1 apricot trees exist, apricot trees exist
- 2 bracken exists; and blackberries, blackberries;  
bromine exists; and hydrogen, hydrogen <sup>1</sup>
- 3 cicadas exist; chicory, chromium,  
citrus trees, cicadas exist;  
cicadas, cedars, cypresses, the cerebellum
- 4 doves exist, dreamers, and dolls;  
killers exist, and doves, and doves;  
haze, dioxin, and days; days  
exist, days and death; and poems  
exist; poems, days, death

(Christensen 2001: 11-14)

The first line is a simple statement: “apricot trees exist” followed by a repetition: “apricot trees exist.” The poem’s tone with its repetitive rhythm is almost chanting like prayers rather than statements. Yet, the common denominator of all the things listed is that they *exist*. The poem is a long list of different things that do not exist equally but as soon as they exist, they *equally* exist. Christensen presents a flat ontology but combines it with a generic model. In section 9, she talks about a “re-lost paradise” where everything is white, “but not white like the white that existed when fruit trees existed, their blossoms so white” (Christensen 2001: 21). Considering this description, the apricot tree in the beginning could be a reference to the Garden of Eden — an orchard where fruit trees exist. It begins in nature with a mythical association and then moves on to more vegetation (bracken) and fruit (blackberries) along with chemical elements (bromine and hydrogen) before we enter the animal kingdom of cicadas and cormophytes (citrus trees and cedars), minerals (chromium), and finally the human brain (cerebellum). In the fourth sub-poem we get doves, a figure loaded with religious symbolism and dreamers, killers, and dolls as well

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<sup>1</sup>The problem with the English translation is that it cannot capture the alphabetical consistency. Hydrogen starts with an “h” and not a “b” like the Danish word *brint*. The same goes for “killers” (*dræberne*), “haze” (*dis*) and “poems” (*digtene*) (Christensen 2009: 394, 396).

as atmospheric phenomena like haze but also toxic products like dioxin followed by death.

Death from pollution, toxic waste, and nuclear weapons like the atomic bomb, the hydrogen bomb, and the cobalt bomb runs through the poem like a constant thread. The rhythmic repetition of the flat ontological point, “every thing equally exists,” is accompanied by interactions between these things and the possible destruction of the world as we know it. In that sense, the ontological statement: “things exist” resonates as an appeal: “things, exist!”

In section 6, we return to the apricot trees but with a further qualification: “apricot trees exist, apricot trees exist / in countries whose warmth will call forth the exact colour of apricots in the flesh” (Christensen 2001: 16). It is no longer merely an ontological statement about an object that exists but is an ontic qualification about an object and its context. Further, in section 8 we return to the brain but in the context of being born by another — an object: “...and the whole heliocentric haze that has dreamed these devoted brains, their luck, and human skin...” (Ibid.: 18). The human brain originates from nature, that is, from the animal kingdom (dreamt by cicadas) or the biosphere as such (dreamt by the heliocentric haze), but as soon as it exists it equally exists along other entities — cicadas, cedars, cypresses, the cerebellum. *Objects exist as individual entities and they exist in relations.*

If we return to section 9: “an ibis will exist, the motions of mind blown into the clouds / like eddies of oxygen deep in the Styx” (Ibid.: 20). The ontological point is that the mind might exist as an entity among others and not at a VIP table in the club of reality, but also as an entity enmeshed in nature. However, the ontic point is far more political. Section 9 begins with the following: “ice ages exist, ice ages exist / ice of polar seas, kingfisher’s ice; / cicadas exist, chicory, chromium” (Christensen 2001: 20). As Keld Zeruneith (1983: 182) argues, the long prose poem as a whole contains a twofold temporal structure, that is, a contemporaneity of an eternal repetition of different ground patterns and a more linear chronological time leading toward an apocalypse. With the contemporaneous temporality in mind, the ninth section alludes to the present age of the Anthropocene with the thread of mass extinction. The section is framed by the ice age at the beginning and melting eyes at the end. The pollution of the planet and possible destruction of species are also present here. We begin with “ice,” then “the chicory sky, like bluing dissolving in water,” and then a hint of death when the mind blown into the sky is compared to the river Styx (Ibid.: 20). The hubris of humanity is invoked in terms of Icarus: “Icarus wrapped in the



melting wax / wings exists, Icarus pale as a corpse / in street clothes, Icarus deepest down where / doves exist, dreamers, and dolls” (Ibid.: 21). Mythological tropes are relocated in a profane setting — Icarus in street clothes — along with a death motive and religious symbols that testify to our self-destruction: “...indeed we will exist, with oxygen on its crucifix. / as rime we will exist, as wind, / as the iris of the rainbow in the iceplant’s gleaming / growths, the dry tundra grasses, as small beings / we will exist, small as pollen bits in peat, / as virus bits in bones...” (Ibid.: 21).

As we saw in *it*, the question of form is an important part of *Alphabet* as well. As Zeruneith (1983: 182) argues, when Christensen (2001: 27) compares “words” to “chromosomes,” she also points toward the potential danger of the molecular encryption errors generated by chromosomes that makes things grow against their natural telos. Put differently, language, like everything else in the world, has been exposed to pollution and radiation when humans turned nature against itself by splitting the forces and compressing the released energies into multinational destructive nuclear weapons. We see a splitting of nucleus in language itself by the division of stanzas and the accumulation of the number of lines that simulate cancer and atomic processes (Zeruneith 1983: 185). Further, due to the Fibonacci sequence, the poem cannot go through all the letters of the alphabet. However, it ends with the letter n, which according to Zeruneith (Ibid.: 181) is a reference to the symbol of the half-life of radioactive materials. The trope of a re-lost paradise returns at the end of the poem where a radiant hare stares at a group of children seeking shelter in a cave where they hear the wind tell of the crops burned to ashes: “...as if they were children in childhood’s / fairy-tales they hear the wind tell / of the burned-off fields / but they are no children / no one carries them anymore” (Christensen 2001: 76–77).

The narrative of *Alphabet* is a dark ecological story beginning with apricot trees — a paradisiac state of nature ending with the thread of mass destruction, extinction, death, and terracide. The structure is a combination of an onto-generic impulse accompanied by language, somehow similar to the one we find in *it*, but constantly informed by the dictum of flat ontology “things exist” echoed by the ontico-political plea: “things, exist!” Christensen’s poetical thinking takes its point of departure in a decentered multiple focal point, in a tension between language and reality that makes up the alien element — the state of secrecy. The last line in *Letter in April* from 1979 captures this point: “Who knows, maybe things themselves are aware that we’re called something else” (Christensen 2011: 146).

## Conclusion

In the speculative turn in contemporary continental philosophy, nature and the nonhuman world have become a serious subject matter. The importance of language, cognitive capacities, and transcendental analysis is downplayed in favor of new systematic theories of everything — matter, objects, nature, and so on. How is reality itself structured? Is it composed of individual objects (Harman) or a processual development of nature as such (Grant)?

In Inger Christensen's poetical thinking, we get a hybrid model where language (logos, cognition, transcendental structure, etc.) and reality (nature, objects, etc.) constantly accompany each other, orbiting around an organic gulf in formation (the state of secrecy). For Christensen, form and content, poetry and reality, objects in all scales and nature as a living semiotic system blend together in ever new formations, constructions, de-constructions, truths, fictions, alternative worlds, hopes and dreams, anxieties, orchards, doves, killers, politics, plutonium without a single organizing principle. The real is both considered to be a non-all generic totality in motion (nature) and a composition of individual entities existing on the same flat ontological and political footing. In this sense, her poetry seems to occupy a speculative position in-between Harman and Grant, or what I have dubbed an *object-oriented philosophy of nature*.

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