The Eco-Poetics of Hyper-Objects: Evelyn Reilly’s *Styrofoam*

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*Hyperobjects* is the name Timothy Morton has given to long-lasting phenomena like radioactive pollution or materials like styrofoam that have been recently produced by humans, substances that are in some cases already being absorbed into our bodies and yet are “beyond the normal scope of our comprehension” (*The Ecological Thought*, 131).

“Hyperobjects stretch our ideas of time and space, since they far outlast most human time scales, or they're massively distributed in terrestrial space and so are unavailable to immediate experience” (Morton, “Hyperobjects”). Pointing out that “alongside global warming, ‘hyperobjects’ will be our lasting legacy,” Morton asserts that “the ecological thought must think the future of these objects,” a future that extends at least tens of thousands of years (*Ecological Thought* 130). Ten thousand years is an inconsequential length of time in a geological context, yet almost beyond imagining for the human being, whose life span is unlikely to exceed a century.

In contrast to conventional environmentally concerned poetry, which has tended to focus on human experiences of sublime or soothing nature, on human attachment to place, and, recently, on connecting the human to other animal species or biotic webs, Evelyn Reilly’s experimental volume from 2009, *Styrofoam*, takes on the immense challenge of trying to confront the reality and nonhuman scale of “styrofoam deathlessness.” In heavily collaged pages that juxtapose the periodic table of thermoplastics with received notions of cornucopia, images of styrofoam art with photos of roadkill and internet data on environmental accidents, meditations on the creation of latex with consideration of the creation of epic poetry, Reilly works to develop an ecopoetics that can highlight interactions and relations among things and “usefully represent the unrepresentable.” She aims to produce work that is “dis-enchanted” in the sense of “being free from the mesmerizing spell of the transcendent” (Reilly, “Eco-Noise and the Flux of Lux”), yet her volume alludes frequently to several works in which enchantment and the transcendent loom large—in particular, Melville’s chapter from *Moby Dick* on “The Whiteness of the Whale,” Coleridge’s “Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner,” and D. H. Lawrence’s “Ship of Death.” I will focus my analysis on Reilly’s construction, partly through these allusions to works in the Romantic and humanist tradition, of a kind of anti-sublime that decenters the human and ties the reader’s feet to the ground where s/he must stare directly at “MATERIAL CHANGE THE PILOT / UNCONTROLLED GROWTH THE SERIES” and think the future to which they point.