



**HAL**  
open science

## Review by Claire Omhovère

Claire Omhovère

► **To cite this version:**

Claire Omhovère. Review by Claire Omhovère. *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, 2024, 62, pp.266-268. hal-04687477

**HAL Id: hal-04687477**

**<https://univ-montpellier3-paul-valery.hal.science/hal-04687477v1>**

Submitted on 4 Sep 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Tim Lilburn, *Numinous Seditions: Interiority and Climate Change*. Edmonton: U of Alberta Press, 2023. 177 pp.

Reviewed by Claire Omhovère

Tim Lilburn's fourth collection of essays – following *Living in the World as if It Were Home* (Saskatchewan Non-Fiction Book of the Year, 1999), *Going Home* (2008), and *The Larger Conversation* (2017) – continues to bring poetry and philosophy into a dialogue, this time to reflect on the guidance they may provide in the advent of climate change. The book opens on reminiscences of the sideration the 2021 Northwest heat dome caused among those who lived through it, part of which came from the magnitude of a disaster with consequences impossible to fathom. If collapse of knowledge is the corollary of the environmental collapse that has now begun, then “where shall we turn for instruction?” Lilburn asks (6).

The poet declines the invitation given to artists and writers to sound the alarm, to imagine new ways of living less detrimental to the earth, or even to invent the scientific prodigies that will save the planet from ecological doom. Legitimate as they may seem, these demands far from questioning the more dubious achievements of modernity, still assert a trust in progress, science and human ingenuity that fosters a “quick, depthless, palliative hope” (12). For Lilburn, escapism thus distracts us from the realization that we have little (if any) purchase on the developments of the climate crisis in the future. And neither can the same attitude prepare us to face its immediate consequences in the present.

As a result, the twelve essays in the collection do not offer remedies, but directions to shift one's inner gaze from external circumstances beyond one's control and cultivate the interiority necessary to face the new sadness arising with the catastrophe. Lilburn is not writing *about* climate change in a conventional sense, that is as if the intellect could pin down the phenomenon, and hold it at a safe distance to dissect its entanglements. Instead his essays develop a “writing *into* climate change” (also the title of a workshop he cotaught at St Peter's college in 2018) that finds its impetus in the transformative pedagogy inherited from the West's contemplative tradition. Because the end of the world has happened before for sizable portions of humanity, because life has resumed its course after natural disasters, cultural extinctions and genocides, no matter how tenuously, the teaching hoarded over times of hardship has deposited into a fund of wisdom that may provide solace as well as help us engage with change unprecedented in scale but perhaps not in essence.

The first sedition undertaken in these essays is philosophical in essence. It consists in a reviving of the maieutic method developed by Socrates, the turning against itself that empties common opinion out of its apparent wisdom while opening a breach for renewed conceptions. Taking a stance against the Western philosophy that has dominated the past four hundred years, Lilburn calls upon traditions the Enlightenment eclipsed, from the Pythagorean origins of Platonism and its ramifications in medieval monasticism to esoteric Judaism and Sufi mysticism (145). The intent is not to come up with a digest, syncretic version of teachings as manyfold as those of Socrates, Augustine, Damascius or Ibn' Arabi, but to put their voices “in a colloquy that will be inevitably oblique” (78). The argument takes circuitous routes as it meanders through the translations and the commentaries of philosophers and poets, from Ancient Greece to today's Saskatchewan, that Lilburn deftly brings into a conversation across

their respective historical contexts. The discussion moves on in ample, recursive developments. Lilburn's poised, incisive style keeps readers alert to the next turn in a demonstration which confronts arguments through comparison and contradiction, and reaches conclusions to be shared rather than professed. Lilburn recurrently calls upon the model of conviviality to illustrate the pedagogy he seeks to emulate. Learning requires a disposition akin to an appetite. Thoughts and ideas are less transmitted than tasted, he explains, owing to exercises and reading practices that do not present knowledge as content to be acquired, but as thought-morsels to be chewed over. Slowness is of the essence. Intellectual mastication will help to absorb the substance of this volume – a roborative feast of the mind which will be best enjoyed if consumed in “small bites” (x). Lilburn's ruminative pace is conducive to attention, especially when he discusses texts and traditions contemporary audiences are likely to be unfamiliar with. Readers are thus enticed to slow down and make themselves available to the essays' full reach, from spiritual to philosophical.

But sedition is not without a political dimension too. On several occasions does Lilburn warn against the dangers of a sentimentality which exonerates from a sense of political responsibility (155). The impossible task of “saving the planet,” a doxological injunction with increasing indisputable force, arouses so much frustration and fear that we are only beginning to see the consequences of its unattainability. A case in point is the spread of populism across the world, a clear cause of concern for the essayist (17, 145, 154-155). The core argument that preparing for climate change requires an inward turn should therefore not be mistaken for a disinterest in action, a passivity encouraging a retreat from the world, or even for political quietism (109).

One political insight shared in these essays stems from Lilburn's interest in the foundational Benedictine virtue of *stabilitas*, “a staying where you are, identifying the gifts and needs of a particular neighborhood and shaping your work to them” (9). Starting from the principles of *ora et labora* (pray and work) which Bernard of Clairvaux erected into pillars of monastic rule, Lilburn enhances the grounding effect of *stabilitas*. The practice of meditation compounded with small, local, everyday actions such as walking, gardening, or maintenance chores make one receptive to the particulars of place. Affection grows out of attention. The writing of poetry similarly effects stability in place through the scrupulous scrutiny of things and the net of words deployed to catch their manifestation, as evinced by the poets Lilburn invites into the collection, most memorably Don Domanski and Anne Szumigalski who are each granted an essay.

For Lilburn, philosophy and poetry operate in conjunction to restore a bond with place which has been stretched thin by the mobility at the heart of modern lifestyles, colonial exploitation and mature capitalism. Modern restlessness with its attendant psychological disorders, depression and the fretting despondency Lilburn relates to medieval *acedia*, can also be cured by a contemplative discipline that does not estrange, but returns us to the world. In an illuminating re-reading of Plato's *Symposium*, Lilburn observes that the Western disconnection from the earth may originate in our conception of existence as a longing for a lost plenitude in place. This combination of factors, historical and ontological, has been detrimental to the European understanding of autochthonicity, particularly in North America where incoming waves of settlers have displaced Indigenous populations along with the elaborate diplomacy – the decorum and ceremony – through which First Nations relate to the

land. “The grace of coming from one’s ground” (44), Lilburn notes, is not granted or even accessible to all. Many will apprehend autochthonicity as “this difficult task of coming from one’s place” (46). It is with this awareness in mind and in preparation for the harrowing times ahead that Lilburn concludes the volume with a glossary and a reading list, less a bibliographical compilation than an open invitation for readers to come to the table of the symposium, sit down, and start thinking into climate change.

Claire Omhovère teaches at Paul-Valéry University Montpellier 3 (France)