

**Edge Landscapes in Post-Millennial British Fiction**

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**August 2016**

**99,764 words**

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## **Thesis Abstract**

Post-millennial Britain is a locus of flux and uncertainty, defined by environmental concerns, fears regarding terrorism, and the destabilisation of European politics on the one hand, and increasing globalisation, liberal approaches to minority groups, and rapid technological advances on the other. The fiction that is being created at this point, in this place, reflects these issues in numerous different manners and through a variety of thematic shifts. One of these developments is a renewed literary interest in British rural landscapes, particularly those landscapes that are in some regard problematic, either literally or figuratively. These landscapes are defined as edges.

This project examines the manner in which four novels employ British edge landscapes. Each chapter focuses on a particular novel and a particular landscape type, examining how the landscape functions within the text, and how the novel's use of its place reflects post-millennial concerns. The project places the novels within a wider context of ecocritical principles and literary criticism, identifying both approaches specific to each individual text and prevailing tendencies that link the corpus. Ultimately the project delineates a preoccupation with uncertainty, and an attendant interest in the depiction of the particular, the individual experience and the local; it interrogates the ethics of this attention and marks the manner in which these texts both represent and remain complicit in the cultural elision of the consequences of human inhabitation in and interaction with their surroundings.

The project concludes by considering the manner in which the prevailing concerns of the texts reflect an attention that self-reflexively marks itself as difficult, personal and flawed, and the manner in which the texts reflect environmental concern and insecurity while resisting the urge toward polemical trajectories.

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## Acknowledgements

A part-time research degree is an extraordinarily long journey, and renders an equally long list of people to whom thanks are due. This is an incomplete, but appreciative, summary.

### With sincere thanks to:

**Dr Stephen Benson;** whose rigour and compassion have been equally necessary, and equally appreciated. Stephen, your teaching opened my eyes to the possibilities of the contemporary in the first place; now, over a decade later, here we are. Thank you.

**Tim and Janet Harris;** for support financial, practical, academic and emotional; for love, tough and otherwise; for the medicinal application of sea air; for everything. This would not have happened without you: thank you so much for the opportunity.

**The entire Harris-Bone-Jones-Quigg-Muir clan;** I wish that you had all seen it finished— but your support has ensured that it was. I owe you all dinner, and many conversations that *do not* include the thesis.

**And last, but never least, Charlie Quigg;** we took this very long and often unmade road together, and without your navigational skills (and the occasional piggyback), I would have left it long ago. I look forward, as ever, to the next one.

## Introduction: 'A Pervasive Uncertainty'

*'If only the new millennium had somehow dawned on an earth made magically fresh. Instead we passed that long-awaited midnight on the same planet, tattered with the abuse of the last century'.<sup>1</sup>*

In the eyes of anyone from one hundred years ago, the Great Britain of 2016 cannot fail to seem a very strange place indeed. As I put the finishing touches to this work, the everyday British citizen can pay for transactions on the high street with a tap of a card, transfer money instantly from person to person, video call friends and relatives on the other side of the world, and in general access information on almost any topic under the sun within a few seconds. Peter Childs and James Green call this the 'unprecedented degree of interconnectedness [of] the last century';<sup>2</sup> 'interconnectedness' is an excellent word for the enmeshing quality of the global systems of communication, finance and influence that inform twenty-first century culture. We are connected more intimately and consistently than ever before, both to each other and to the rest of the world.

And yet British society is poised at a point of uncertainty, where increasing liberalism and multiculturalism, on the one hand, is faced with an equally proliferating strain of right-wing extremism<sup>3</sup> and aggressively conservative insularity.<sup>4</sup> A referendum on Britain's position in the

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Slovic, *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2008), p.83.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Childs and James Green, *Aesthetics and Ethics in Twenty-First Century British Novels* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.253.

<sup>3</sup> The excellent *The New Extremism in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain*, edited by Robert Eatwell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010) is a particularly cogent collective discussion of the mutual rise of extreme right-wing groups like the British National Party and the English Defence League in the context of the growing diversity of British society: most useful in this context are chapters 9 and 10 and the excellent and informative introduction.

<sup>4</sup> On UKIP and its crusade for 'British values' and independence from the European Union, I recommend *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain* (ed. Robert Ford and Matthew J. Goodwin (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014)): particularly chapters three, four and five on the social roots of the increase in radical right-wing supporters.

European Union, which occurred under two months before this work was due to be completed, has left the country uncertain about its future; an independent Scotland is once again an increasing possibility.<sup>5</sup> Our part in the global community, it seems, brings with it a recidivist focus on ‘traditional’ values, and fear of the unknown: Robert Ford particularly highlights, in his examination of the rise of British right-wing extremism, that ‘the popular understanding of British identity continues to incorporate ideas about culture, heritage and religion’ and the pervasive and damaging consequences of ‘perceptions that the distinctive cultural heritage of the ethnic majority group is under threat from migration and multiculturalism’.<sup>6</sup> Graham Huggan explicitly links the pressing conflict of these two themes—fear of a loss of national identity and the exciting possibilities of new technologies—to the turn of the century, suggesting that ‘in the run-up to the new millennium...discourses of novelty/innovation (especially those associated with ‘revolutionary’ technologies) jostled for place alongside discourses of nostalgia (for what is ‘Englishness’ after all?)’.<sup>7</sup>

Hubbard’s ‘discourses of nostalgia’ are evident in many spheres of popular culture, not least the post-millennial resurgence of semi-traditional folk music.<sup>8</sup> Andy Letcher has argued that, ‘part of folk’s appeal is that it

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<sup>5</sup> Chris Gifford’s article on ‘The UK and the European Union: Dimensions of Sovereignty and the Problem of Eurosceptic Britishness’. (*Parliamentary Affairs* 63.2 (2010): 321-338) is a good starting point on the challenges surrounding UK sovereignty issues and the EU: particularly the summation of the consequences of Scottish independence on p.328. Since the EU Referendum result on 23 June 2016, the situation has become, if possible, even more febrile and uncertain; how the relationship between Britain and EU develops is, at the point of writing, impossible to predict.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Ford, ‘Who might vote for the BNP?: Survey evidence on the electoral potential of the extreme right in Britain’ in *The New Extremism in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain*, ed. Robert Eatwell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp.145-169, p.145.

<sup>7</sup> Graham Huggan, ‘Virtual Multiculturalism: The Case of Contemporary Britain,’ *Britain at the Turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Spec. issue of *European Studies: A Journal of European Culture, History and Politics*) 16 (2001): 67-85, 68.

<sup>8</sup> While in part this resurgence has been at the grass-roots level of traditional folk concerts and clubs, it is interesting to note that there has also been a trend towards folk themed chart music, often given a twenty-first century spin to suit contemporary tastes: the so-called ‘nu-folk’ and ‘folk rock’ aspects of the work of groups such as Mumford and Sons

confers alterity through identification with tradition and the past. The past tends for the most part to be heavily romanticized as a rustic, pre-industrial or prelapsarian golden age'; Letcher defines folk as 'something old and other, at odds with modernity and urban living. Most of us now live in towns and cities, but folk music typically expresses a desire for the supposed rooted certainties of the countryside'.<sup>9</sup>

This yearning to reclaim the 'supposed rooted certainties' is not new; but the unique twenty-first century context of Internet-enabled communication, globalisation and economics is. While the recidivism of reactionary extremism and the resurgence of nostalgic musical forms are fairly simple reflections of these fears and insecurities, the manner in which the publishing world has mirrored these prevailing preoccupations has been both subtler and more complex. Popular interest in texts directly engaging with aspects of non-urban British landscapes has become overwhelming.<sup>10</sup> While Letcher suggests a recidivist element to the desire for roots and a romanticised past in music, the literary response combines this yearning with our ever-growing awareness of the environmental consequences of human actions, resulting in a complex body of nature-

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and Frank Turner, to name but two popular examples. The latter released an album titled *England Keep My Bones* in 2011, which meditates on the allure of the British countryside and small towns, and cites the work of British nature writer Robert Macfarlane as one of his influences. (Jilly Luke and Robert Macfarlane, 'Into the Wild,' *Varsity*, 28 February 2014. Web: full website details given in bibliography). The problematic politics of this movement have been explicitly noted, as David Sweeney points out: 'Writing in the aftermath of the 2011 UK riots... Joe Kennedy indicted New Folk—particularly the band Mumford and Sons—for peddling a comforting nostalgia which seeks to ignore the uncertainties and complexities of life in Britain...following the financial crisis of 2008' ('Your Face Looks Backwards': Time Travel, Cinema, Nostalgia and the End of History,' *Thesis Eleven* 131.1 (2015): 45-53, 47).

<sup>9</sup> Andy Letcher, 'Paganism and the British Folk Revival,' *Pop Pagans: Paganism and Popular Music*, ed. Donna Weston and Andy Bennett (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp.59-109, pp.91, 108.

<sup>10</sup> Joe Moran's excellently clear article, 'A Cultural History of the New Nature Writing' tracks the development—and popular appeal—of the so-called movement particularly effectively. (*Literature and History- Third Series* 23.1 (2014): 49-63). Particularly interesting in the context of the cultural movement surrounding the literary one are pp.60-61.



focused work that celebrates, mourns and interrogates aspects of British landscape simultaneously.<sup>11</sup>

It is in this unsteady and rapidly changing Britain, with its uncertain position between the old and the new, the nearby and the far away, that my work is situated. I have chosen to focus in particular on the manner in which the fiction of this febrile and difficult-to-prophesy social moment attempts to contend with, and to represent, its surroundings. It is appropriate in the context of those fears regarding national identity, and nostalgia for an apparently lost vision of Britain, that my work particularly engages with the manner in which this fiction can depict and interrogate British landscapes. In paying particular attention to the manner in which some post-millennial British fiction attends to its immediate surroundings, I must also mark that this fiction is part of a widely documented and rapidly widening field of work from a multiplicity of genres, which focuses on both the significance, and endangered status, of ‘nature’ in the twenty-first century.

In 2008, *Granta*, the quarterly literary magazine dedicated to showcasing new writing, published an issue devoted entirely, and titled for, *The New Nature Writing*.<sup>12</sup> The contents list reads in 2016 like a roll call of semi-legendary British non-fiction writers: Roger Deakin, Robert Macfarlane, Mark Cocker, Kathleen Jamie, Richard Mabey and Philip Marsden all feature. Interestingly, many of these writers were, in 2008, already established figures, or on the way to becoming so, in the nature-writing canon: Mabey had already published over ten books, including *The Unofficial Countryside*, which remains both widely read and widely cited in current scholarly articles;<sup>13</sup> Macfarlane had already published the

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Implicit in the heterogeneous and discursive registers of the new nature writing, perhaps, is a sense that the complexities of the ecological crisis need to be met by open-ended and polymorphic forms of writing which combine ecopolitical engagement with a personal voice’: Joe Moran, ‘A Cultural History’, p.59.

<sup>12</sup> Jason Cowley, ed., *The New Nature Writing*, spec. issue of *Granta: The Magazine of New Writing* 102 (2008).

<sup>13</sup> Richard Mabey, *The Unofficial Countryside* (Dorchester: Little Toller Books, 2010).

seminal first volume of his ‘loose trilogy’ of literary nature writing, *Mountains of the Mind*;<sup>14</sup> Mark Cocker was already known for a number of non-fictional works, including the widely acclaimed *Crow Country*.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps most strikingly, Roger Deakin had actually died in 2006, two years before the publishing of Granta’s *New Nature Writing*; the victim of a brain tumour at the age of only fifty nine.<sup>16</sup> His works were already seminal in the nature writing field, but sadly would not be followed with more of the same.

The fact that none of these writers could be considered particularly *new*, and since Deakin’s inclusion makes it clear that they were not chosen entirely for their *future* potential, it follows that the ‘new’ of the Granta title is intended more as a commentary on something within the writing, rather than the status of its creators. *The New Nature Writing*, then, purports to make a case for the existence of a difference between the work it identifies and the existing British nature writing canon that preceded it. Jason Cowley, in his editor’s letter at the start of the volume, states that when commissioning for the issue began they ‘...were interested less in what might be called old nature writing—by which I mean the lyrical pastoral tradition of the romantic wanderer—than in writers who approached their subject in heterodox and experimental ways’.<sup>17</sup> Cowley identifies these writers as ‘a new generation...[who] share a sense that we are devouring our world, that there is simply no longer any natural landscape or ecosystem that is unchanged by humans’.<sup>18</sup>

The Granta publication, by chance, sits perfectly evenly between 2000 and the current moment; it records the shift of the tide of nature writing away from the provinces of the aristocratic pastoral tour and toward a mode that

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: A History of A Fascination* (London: Granta Books, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Mark Cocker, *Crow Country* (London: Vintage, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Ken Worpole, ‘Obituary: Roger Deakin,’ *The Guardian*, 29 August 2006. Web: fullwebsite details given in bibliography.

<sup>17</sup> Jason Cowley, ‘Introduction,’ *The New Nature Writing*, Spec. issue of *Granta: The Magazine of New Writing* 102 (2008): 7-13, 10.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

engages with the principles of the form in manners designed to interrogate and subvert its traditions. In the years since its publication, the genre has become both increasingly popular and increasingly urgent. One of the most notable features of the writing that I have loosely thus far described as non-fictional nature writing is the broadness of its scope: in an article written for the *Guardian* in 2013, Richard Mabey describes ‘current nature writing’ as ‘the broadest of secular churches’; any attempt to make sweeping generalisations, Mabey suggests, is ‘an indiscriminate homogenisation’.<sup>19</sup> Kathleen Jamie’s two volumes of essays, *Findings* and *Sightlines*, access the natural world via, to name but a few examples, a microscope, a cruise ship, a window and an operation to clean whale skeletons exhibited in a museum of natural history.<sup>20</sup> Oliver Morton, on the other hand, uses a combination of scientific discourse and environmental musing in order to examine photosynthesis—and the consequences of its removal from the lifecycle—in *Eating the Sun*.<sup>21</sup> Robert Macfarlane traditionally gives accounts of walks, books and people, often shifting between personal account and critical analysis with barely a shift in tone.<sup>22</sup> In *Waterlog*, Roger Deakin documents his swims through wild British waters.<sup>23</sup> In *H is for Hawk*, Helen Macdonald combines a biographical examination of T H White, a raw description of her own grief following the death of her father, and an examination of the intersection of person and nature that occurs during the training of a bird of prey.<sup>24</sup> While all of these have been, at one time or another, or by one critic or another, described as ‘nature writing’, they approach the intersection of people and world that that phrase, ‘nature writing’, implies, from diverse angles. Robert Macfarlane, writing in defence of the ‘new nature writing’ in *The New Statesman* in September 2015, suggests that,

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<sup>19</sup>Richard Mabey, ‘In Defence of Nature Writing,’ *The Guardian*, 18 July 2013. Web: full website details given in bibliography.

<sup>20</sup> Kathleen Jamie, *Findings* (London: Sort Of Books, 2005); *Sightlines* (London: Sort Of Books, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Oliver Morton, *Eating the Sun: How Plants Power the Planet* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Robert Macfarlane, *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (London: Penguin, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> Roger Deakin, *Waterlog* (London: Vintage, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Helen Macdonald, *H is for Hawk* (London: Vintage, 2015).

‘in Britain we are living through a golden age of literature that explores relations between selfhood, landscape and ethics and addresses what Mabey has described as the “growing fault line in the way we perceive and talk about nature”’.<sup>25</sup> Macfarlane groups together non-fictional prose, fiction, poetry and all other forms tugging at the threads of the same issues together, claiming that:

The best of the recent writing is ethically alert, theoretically literate and wary of the seductions and corruptions of the pastoral. It is sensitive to the dark histories of landscapes and to the structures of ownership and capital that organise – though do not wholly produce – our relations with the natural world.<sup>26</sup>

The novels that form the main focus of this text are circling the same territory, but their starting point is different from the explicitly non-fictional ‘new nature writing’. Rebecca Raglon and Marion Scholtmeijer make the case that, ‘Works of fiction that successfully integrate nature and natural phenomena into human stories...allow nature to change the shape, direction, and outcome of the narrative’.<sup>27</sup> I do not necessarily agree with their subsequent suggestion that ‘nature writing has tended to show nature eluding human control by minimizing the human presence and focusing attention on the non-human world’; indeed, I think that the ‘new’ nature writing consistently makes the point, as Cowley suggests, that there is ‘simply no longer any natural landscape or ecosystem that is unchanged

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Macfarlane, ‘Why we need nature writing,’ *The New Statesman*, 2 September 2015. Web: full website details given in bibliography.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Rebecca Raglon & Marian Scholtmeijer, ‘Heading Off the Trail: Language, Literature, and Nature’s Resistance to Narrative,’ *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, ed. Karla Armbruster (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), pp.248-262, p.254.

by humans’, which makes the possibility of returning the focus of attention completely back to the non-human, sadly, impossible.<sup>28</sup> 2016 is the year in which we are to be designated as officially living in the era of the Anthropocene; that is, in Byron Williston’s accessible phrasing:

...the age of inevitable human intervention in Earth’s macro-systems. For as long as we remain on the planet—indeed, given the lifespan of carbon atoms in the atmosphere, possibly well after we’re gone—our activities will affect these systems in significant and discernible ways.<sup>29</sup>

If this is the case then there is no way in which either fiction *or* nature writing can encounter a ‘non-human world’, since we have converted, it seems, the entire world into a human resource. Yet Raglon and Scholtmeijer make a valid point. *Non-fiction* bears the burden of ethical and critical veracity, a responsibility to maintain an element of critical distance: ‘even with the loosest of definitions, our expectation of nature writing does not allow a writer, a writer’s emotions, or a writer’s conflict with meaning to become our main concern’.<sup>30</sup> However varied the canon may otherwise be, ‘nature writing’ is expected to keep the ‘nature’ centre stage: human reactions to it must remain explicitly or implicitly on the periphery; this kind of minimizing *is* unavoidable.

Fiction, on the other hand, can represent and interrogate the behaviours and motivations of humans within nature, rather than nature *around* and affected by humans.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.257.

<sup>29</sup> Byron Williston, *The Anthropocene Project: Virtue in the Age of Climate Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.24. There is a wider discussion regarding the Anthropocene as a cultural moment as well as a geological one in the Conclusion.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.24.

This is not to suggest that the ‘new nature writing’ ignores the human—indeed, one of its key features is the frequent centralisation of an author-figure whose experiences give the texts structure. But this relationship is given ethical legitimacy by its self-interrogatory nature; it is an appropriate non-fictional lens through which nature and landscape may be examined *because* it self-reflexively portrays both the process of existing in place and the wider issues surrounding that process. In Robert Macfarlane’s *Landmarks*, which considers the language we use to represent places, he considers his relationship with his home terrain in south Cambridge:

...I barely registered the bastard countryside on my doorstep. Why would I have? My eyes and dreams were all for the Highlands, Snowdonia, the Lake District, the Peak... Disruptive of the picturesque, dismissive of the sublime, this was a landscape that required a literacy I didn’t then possess: an aesthetic flexible enough to accommodate fly-tipping, dog shit, the night-glare of arc lights at the park-and-ride... as well as the yapping laugh of green woodpeckers through beech trees.<sup>32</sup>

Macfarlane’s language reflects the difficulty of a transition to a new home in a manner that richly represents the pain of adaptation. The ‘bastard countryside’, illegitimate on the grounds of its lack of kinship with the mountains he craves, and the list of the waste products of human inhabitation, is a powerful depiction of the strain of uprooting that could comfortably belong in a novel. These descriptions do indeed bear some relationship to the distinctions drawn in the novels I will consider later—

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<sup>32</sup> Robert Macfarlane, *Landmarks*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2015), p.237.

particularly the way in which Jeremy Page's *Salt* addresses the contrast between the saltmarshes and the fens.

But Macfarlane's account is not simply a representation of a man's struggle to acclimatise to the oddities of Cambridgeshire. It is knowingly employing that representation to point out the need for different languages of landscape, that consider non-traditional features. His point that his new landscape is 'disruptive of the picturesque, dismissive of the sublime' is designed to demonstrate that traditional visions of landscape are not enough, and, as the rest of the book points out, leave us at risk of dismissing landscapes that do not fit our parameters for beauty. His discussion of his own struggle with Cambridgeshire's features segues into a discussion of 'the art and literature of what contemporary conservation calls 'nearby nature': the work of English hedge-visionaries and foot-philosophers including...Richard Jefferies. Jefferies was absorbed by what lay hidden in plain view'.<sup>33</sup> This critical discussion of the explicitly political and the explicitly analytical is

Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk*, which performs the difficult task of commenting on nature while also being a memoir, approaches the decentering of the human in a different way; by keeping herself firmly as the text's subject but depicting her changing relationship with the world around her. The human is central, but once again the text is designed to both give an account of her experience of nature and to critically evaluate that account in the context of wider questions related to people and nature, often through the lens of analysis of the work of other nature writers. Discussing her evolving relationship with Mabel, her goshawk, Macdonald writes:

...Aldo Leopold once wrote that falconry  
was a balancing act between wild and tame  
– not just in the hawk, but inside the heart

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p.238.

and mind of the falconer... I am starting to see the balance is righting, now, and the distance between Mabel and me increasing. I see, too, that her world and my world are not the same, and some part of me is amazed that I ever thought they were.<sup>34</sup>

Macdonald's change in tenses delineates the shift from discussion to recounting, as she moves from Leopold's thoughts to her own, and in the process emphasizes both the analytical manner in which she approaches her relationship with the hawk and the fact that the text is discussing wider questions than the development of falconry skills. Her final note, that 'her world and my world are not the same', and the expressed surprise that she has thought differently about it in the past, is a self-reflexive acknowledgement of the distance between human and nature *and*, simultaneously, a recounting of the evolving of her comprehension of the space between.

Where these texts draw upon their authors'—and often earlier authors'—experiences in order to consider wider questions, and to provide fodder for critical evaluation and examples, the fiction at the centre of my work remains, of course, purely imaginative.

Richard Mabey argues, writing about Kathleen Jamie's depiction of peregrines in *Findings*, that, '[l]ike all great nature writing...it searches for shared roots, for common ground, for a place that is neither pure bird nor pure human, but 'bird-in-the-world''.<sup>35</sup> In this thesis I will argue that fiction is an appropriate and important form for the conveyance of considerations of what it means to be 'person-in-the-world'. Where Jamie's consideration of peregrines is designed to allow us an apparent

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<sup>34</sup> Helen Macdonald, *H is for Hawk*, p.234.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Mabey, *A Brush with Nature: 25 Years of Personal Reflections on Nature*, (London: BBC Books, 2014), p.189.



access to the world-of-the-bird, removing us from human concerns, the novels I consider are designed to *forefront* human concerns as they appear when placed in the context of tricky, and often dangerous, landscapes. Freed from the need to both model and represent the consequences of the human role in the natural world, fiction can provide imagined visions of what could, or might, be: they can also employ the lyric and the descriptive without the contingent need to ‘ground’ the text in grittier, or harsher, realities. In other words, the imagined worlds of the fictional texts allows license for considerations of the potential, and the encouragement of the beautiful, without the limiting necessity of self-conscious moderation.

I have chosen to focus my attention on fiction which employs as its setting British landscapes that require something extra from their human inhabitants and/or visitors; I have called these ‘edge’ landscapes, to delineate both the physical and symbolic marginality of these places. Later in this Introduction I will discuss this nomenclature more thoroughly; for now it is enough to suggest that the novels at the heart of my work all share a particular kind of concentration upon places that resist categorisation, and insist upon the application of attention.

The twenty-first century has seen an extraordinary proliferation of fiction, particularly due to the rapid expansion of the ebook market; I have chosen, instead of approaching this vast body of work in the widest and most general terms, to focus my attention particularly on four post-millennial novels, chosen both for the (either literally or figuratively) difficult landscapes that they represent and for their very particular attention to aspects of these landscapes. In each chapter one of these novels takes centre stage; I have performed close readings that elucidate the detail of their settings, both in relation to the narratives themselves and to the specific nature of the landscapes within a wider context. I have then linked these close readings to a more general discussion of post-millennial preoccupations as the novels reflect them. The thesis as a whole marks the existence of particular thematic concerns within the fiction of the present

day, ranging from ethical considerations and environmental concerns to aesthetic matters, in relation to the world in which that fiction has been born and must live.

The first chapter focuses on the 2003 novel *Thursbitch*, by the English novelist Alan Garner. Set in parallel timelines in the present day and the eighteenth century, the novel focuses minutely on the business of life in the eponymous Thursbitch valley, which sits in the Cheshire Pennines. Perhaps one of the most localised novelists of the present day, Garner has lived a few miles from the valley all his life, and his scrutiny of its character is based in decades of personal experience, so the novel is both highly specific in its focus and rich with detail. The edge landscape type with which the novel contends is the ‘wilderness’, and most particularly with the unique challenges engendered by the attempt to navigate, and thus to live, within a landscape so resistant to human inhabitation; in this discussion questions of epistemological certainty and the nature of dwelling are encountered.

The second chapter is devoted to North Norfolk, and Jeremy Page’s 2007 fictional account of a family’s local heritage, *Salt*. The novel encounters one of the rather forgotten aspects of the British coastline, the saltmarsh; a landscape mostly defined by its indefinability, since it exists in a half state between the water and the land. It is a place resistant to standard envisionings of the British countryside, since it is demonstrably muddy and often bleak in its flatness; in *Salt* it becomes an uncertain setting and scapegoat for the novel’s narrator. My examination of *Salt* takes into account both questions of the ethical ramifications of proximity and the implications of the urge for certainty in relation to place, placing the argument in the context of the related preoccupations of Chapter One.

In the third chapter I mark a turn from novels where the landscape takes the absolute centre stage, acting almost as characters within the text, and toward novels where the particularity of their settings is instead reflective

of the human preoccupations with which they contend. In Amy Sackville's *Orkney*, I consider a novel which combines myths with a detailed and lyrical consideration of a problematic marriage brought into relief by its setting on one of the islands of the Orkney archipelago; I examine the ways in which the novel employs the edge landscape of the island as an intersection between land and water to disrupt conventional assumptions regarding the physical and symbolic significance of his surroundings. I then consider the manner in which *Orkney* engages with the related and contrasting genres of fairy- and folktale in order to interrogate questions regarding the ethics of the authentic and the proximal, and particularly the capacity of narrative for erasure, when applied to place. In this discussion Chapter Three extends the discussions begun in Chapters One and Two, regarding the problematic relationship between representation and place, and the marked and explicit uncertainty with which the novels of this corpus encounter this relationship.

In the fourth chapter I interrogate the Kent garden that forms one of the pivotal settings in A. S. Byatt's 2006 novel, *The Children's Book*. Perhaps the least literal and most symbolic of the edge landscapes featured in my research, this garden acts as both a representation of the protagonists' preoccupation with the honest and the local, and as a theatrical stage on which those preoccupations can be tested, interrogated and examined. I consider the ethics of honesty in relation to this central garden, and the manner in which the novel disrupts the hierarchic nature of the relationship between artifice and honesty. This disruption, of course, echoes many of the issues with which my previous chapters have engaged. In *The Children's Book* this issue takes the form of nostalgia, both in its Arts and Crafts and Fabian setting and in its attention to the manner in which those concerns are reflected in the twenty-first century. In this discussion I attend to the social rise of the 'New Ruralist' approach in the present moment, and its roots in that same Arts and Crafts movement.

In all of these chapters some themes are marked and consistently present: questions related to the depiction of the local and the proximal; the attention paid to the miniature, the particular and the individual; and the marked uncertainty, both within the narrative and in its metapresentation to the reader, with which the novels encounter these issues. These considerations of specific novels have illuminated a range of prevailing trends and preoccupations, as well as some fascinating divergences in approach and philosophy. But these considerations of the specific have also entailed a complex analysis of the link being made between the physical British landscapes and the mimetic narratives that claim to reveal them; in doing so, this work has encountered questions regarding the wider ethics and aesthetics of the representation of the ways we inhabit those landscapes, and the concomitant human qualities that inform those practices.

Because the peculiar landscapes that this project interrogates are of such specific and differing types, each chapter must engage with a wide variety of cross-disciplinary principles; for that reason I have constructed the remainder of this introduction to approach and delineate the key histories and themes of the major fields that have informed my research: most specifically, the field of contemporary fiction and its relationship with the post-millennial moment; the rise of the field of ecocriticism and its roots in environmentalist and literary intersections and the more general field of cultural geography. Finally, I have considered the principle of the 'edge' as a concept applicable to landscape and the mimetic significance of edge locales. By the end of this introduction, I will have provided a theoretical matrix demonstrating the points of intersection between the disciplines, the texts and the physical environment with which all of these theoretical principles must, at some point and in some way, interact.

By flagging my concern with the post-millennial in the very title of this work, I have clearly delineated my conviction that the British novels of the twenty-first century are in some respects distinct from their immediate predecessors. This belief is based upon my personal and critical observations of the very particular and significant distance between the Britain of the pre- and post-millennial periods, and the concurrent consideration that these differences are inevitably reflected in the fiction contemporary to those moments. I consider that, although the fiction of the present moment is for the most part generally considered as part of the wider canon known as ‘contemporary fiction’, and is certainly intimately informed by that canon’s tendencies and preoccupations, that there are some distinct features of the post-millennial corpus that render it in some respects particular and differentiated. None of this preamble is intended to suggest that there is a gigantic divide between the fiction of the pre-millennial ‘contemporary’ and the post-millennial. The changes I will demonstrate in the following section are subtle, and delineate the ‘post-millennial’ as a subsection, or progression, of ‘the contemporary’. This does not render these changes unimportant, it must be said; they are perhaps more important because they form a cohesive group *within* the multiplicities and heterogeneities of ‘the contemporary’.

In order to elucidate the features of this grouping, I will briefly sketch the principles of ‘contemporary fiction’, before continuing to demonstrate the manners in which its post-millennial subject alters and at times resists these principles.

Contemporary fiction is, in simple terms, what ‘happened’ to fiction after, or concurrently with the fading of, postmodernism. When exactly this shift occurred is a matter of uncertainty, as changes in literary and artistic trends so often are; as James F. English noted in 2008, ‘Until quite recently, it was common practice to treat “contemporary” British fiction as

synonymous with fiction of the entire postwar period', a period which suggests that 'contemporary fiction' as a grouping also encompasses the postmodern.<sup>36</sup> Others, however, identify key shifts in approach in the 1970s and 1980s; as English continues to point out, 'Starting in the mid-1980s, such influential writers as the historian Eric Hobsbawm...and the literary critic Fredric Jameson published major works that pointed to the 1970s as the fulcrum point of a decisive historical shift'.<sup>37</sup> In a similar vein, Patricia Waugh, writing in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Culture*, states with confidence that, '[a]ssuming a date of 1980 as the beginning of the contemporary...'; later Waugh links this dating to the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1981.<sup>38</sup>

In his brief but helpful summary text, *Contemporary Fiction: A Very Short Introduction*, Robert Eaglestone identifies three major features of contemporary fiction:

The first is a retreat from the wilder edges of postmodernism towards a stronger sense of narrative. This retreat, however, has not forgotten the lessons of postmodern fiction: these texts are still playful, still complex over issues like textuality and closure. The second is a renewed interest in techniques of high modernism, associated with Woolf and Joyce. The third involves the demolition of

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<sup>36</sup> James F. English, *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p.1.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p.1.

<sup>38</sup> Patricia Waugh, 'Contemporary British Fiction,' *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp.115, 116.

the barriers between the realms of fiction and non-fiction writing.<sup>39</sup>

Rod Mengham and Philip Tew, conversely, describe the contemporary novel as not just a *retreat* from postmodernism but in some respects as a directed reaction to it, stating that, ‘It seems increasingly that postmodern dogmatism about the impossibility of grounding culture and aesthetics is itself being challenged in fiction’.<sup>40</sup> Patricia Waugh, however, identifies a more general set of trends in contemporary fiction, which are more internal qualities than to do with a relationship to other movements:

Whether experimental, poetic, or closer to traditional realism, engaging with the death of the author or the rebirth of the storyteller, what runs as a common thread through the enormous diversity of contemporary novels from 1980 to the present is a preoccupation with the crossing of boundaries or borders, of space, time, histories, ontologies, races, genders, class, species, persons.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to the handful cited above, there are various guides, commentaries and studies exist that focus on ‘Contemporary British Fiction’, or ‘Modern British Fiction’, or even ‘The Novel Now’; even a cursory scan of their contents pages makes for some very interesting reading. Dominic Head’s *Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* identifies questions of ‘Gender and Sexuality’, ‘National Identity’, ‘Class and Social Change’; questions that are echoed in Lane, Mengham and Tew’s *Contemporary British Fiction*, from 2003,

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<sup>39</sup> Robert Eaglestone, *Contemporary Fiction: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.22.

<sup>40</sup> Philip Tew & Rod Mengham, ‘Modern Lives, Contemporary Living: Introduction,’ *British Fiction Today* (London: Continuum, 2006), p.1.

<sup>41</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Contemporary British Fiction*, p.136.

and Richard Bradford's 2007 addition, *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*. Head's later text, *The State of the Novel*, from 2008, repeats the same preoccupations, although with one significant addition that will be discussed in a moment. Even more strikingly, almost identical arguments can be found in Steven Connor's *The Novel in History 1950-1995*, which once again includes chapter titles such as 'Origins and Reversions', 'Conditions of England' and 'Outside In', the latter of which engages with questions of multiculturalism and hybridity.<sup>42</sup>

Even with all of these political and cultural issues and challenges to contend with, the 'contemporary' as an artistic atmosphere is also a prevalent presence, which James F. English identifies as a space in which 'contemporary British fiction could be embraced as the scene of something radically new and decisively more important and vigorous than what had come before'.<sup>43</sup> Rod Mengham notes that, 'during the last thirty years [1973-2003]... the contemporary has been linked to a sense of endless change, to the rapid turnover of novelties...attitudes to the past have been influenced by marketing, by a consumer demand for the *retro*'.<sup>44</sup> Dominic Head suggests, in his earlier text, that 'the novel is the major literary mode at the end of the twentieth century...the novel, by its very nature, is a form

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<sup>42</sup> It should be clear that these texts, which ostensibly focus on the 'contemporary' period in which they are being written, rather avoid engaging with particularly fraught issues at the moment of writing: there is a startling lack, in these texts, of questions regarding the economic crisis of the first millennial decade, the increasingly right-wing politics of the British public in regard to the EU, the perceptible effects of global warming or, in many respects, the effect of the Second Gulf War. This is not the case, as I will show in a moment, with studies that focus explicitly on the post-millennial, which encounter these issues with much more confidence. This will become of particular importance in the context of the ecocritical movement in later chapters, but it is important to note at this time that Head, Tew, Mengham et al. are much more at home confronting the politics of the pre-millennial than the post. This distinctly fragmented discourse regarding the current moment attempts, I suggest, to sanitise the twenty-first century into a type of conformity with the political shifts that have gone before, rather than engaging with the issues of the immediate moment, and that might lie ahead.

<sup>43</sup> James F. English, *A Concise Companion*, p.2.

<sup>44</sup> Rod Mengham, 'Introduction,' *Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. Richard J. Lane, Rod Mengham & Philip Tew (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p.1.



that continually evolves',<sup>45</sup> and in the later, *The State of the Novel*, he resists defining the features of the contemporary form altogether.

Head's early view, combined with his reluctance to provide a definitive set of limiting boundaries, rather ties in to Richard Bradford's helpful examination, in *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*, of David Lodge's 'now famous image of the novelist at the crossroads' from 1971, noting that, 'in Lodge's view...contemporary novelists would simply 'hesitate at the crossroads' and then 'build their hesitation into the novel itself'.<sup>46</sup> Yet, Bradford notes, by 1992 Lodge had 'conceded that the situation of the novelist... bore less resemblance to a figure standing at a junction than a person in an "aesthetic supermarket" facing an unprecedented abundance of styles, techniques and scenarios...What had once been the stark contrast...between realism and modernism had been sidelined; hybridity now occupied the centre ground'.<sup>47</sup> Head and Bradford, then, are both examining the contemporary novel not as a definitive *stylistic* group but as a collection of texts unified by a moment and by their own multiplicity. Particularly interesting in this context is the fact that many of these texts insistently place the fiction of a turbulently progressive half-century into an apparently homogenous group, rather wilfully disregarding the seismic cultural shifts occurring at the same time. As I have noted previously, it is important to recognise that, precisely because 'the contemporary' as a literary movement is delineated by its lack of boundaries, the way in which fiction responds to wider changes during the contemporary period is notable for its subtleties and nuances, rather than a schism of some kind. Particularly notable in this context is the ways that 'groupings' of texts, bounded either by characteristics, or a response

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<sup>45</sup> Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction: 1950-2000*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.5.

<sup>46</sup> Richard Bradford, *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p.6.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p.7.

to a chronological moment appear *within* this heterogenous proliferation of literary responses.

This becomes a particularly urgent point when considered in relation to the disjunction between the world of 1980, when Patricia Waugh claims that the contemporary novel began, and the world of 2016; this distancing of a relatively recent era is in no small part due to the cultural and technological progression that surrounded the turn of the last century. On the face of it, the dawning of the new Millennium was most notable for its lack of effect; in some respects, it was a gigantic (and for Britain, expensive) experience of a complete non-event. The Bug that purported to be the catalyst for our technological downfall did not manifest; the world did not end. Indeed, in retrospect it would almost seem foolish to suggest that something as minor as the inevitable (and arbitrary) turn from one year to the next could have the devastating (or reparative) effects that were often touted, before the event, as almost inevitable consequences. And yet in the run-up to the New Year, the Western world waited with a mixture of expectation and anxiety. Literary circles were not immune to the spectre of the transformative Millennium; as Nick Bentley points out, '[m]illennial anxieties were...channelled into a proliferation of alternative forms: from global warming to wayward asteroids to millennium bugs'.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the anthology of essays on *British Fiction of the 1990s* in which Bentley makes this comment devotes an entire section to 'Millennial Anxieties', while other essays in the collection also reference the destabilising literary effect of the approaching *fin-de-siècle*. Rod Mengham notes in his introduction to the collection of essays entitled simply *Contemporary British Fiction* that, 'the millennial shadow set a formal limit on an era whose own history had been dominated by political narratives that were either exhausted or under threat' and Italo Calvino, writing before his death in 1986, had turned his thoughts to the coming date.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Nick Bentley, 'Introduction,' in *British Fiction of the 1990s*, ed. Nick Bentley (London: Routledge, 2005), p.6.

<sup>49</sup> Rod Mengham, *Contemporary British Fiction*, p.1.

In the papers that he wrote in preparation for the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, Calvino argues that, ‘Perhaps it is a sign of our millennium’s end that we frequently wonder what will happen to literature and books in the so-called postindustrial era of technology’.<sup>50</sup> ‘For the time being,’ he asserts comfortably in the opening lines of the same introduction, ‘I don’t think the approach of this date arouses any special emotion’; yet at the close, before embarking on his subject, he notes that ‘I would...like to devote these lectures to certain values, qualities or peculiarities of literature that are very close to my heart, trying to situate them within the perspective of the new millennium’.<sup>51</sup> Even Calvino’s apparent ambivalence toward the year 2000 is tinted with anticipation.

While Mengham is discussing the Millennium in hindsight and Calvino as prophecy, they share a sense of its importance as an approaching moment, rather than as one that had (or in Calvino’s case, *would* have had) more influence in retrospect. In other words, the Millennium was far more important in literary terms, as a possibility in 1999 than as a memory in 2001. Partly, of course, this is because, as Peter Boxall points out, ‘the time we are living through is very difficult to bring into focus, and often only becomes legible in retrospect’.<sup>52</sup> How some novels have responded to cultural changes, however, is palpably related to the issues, both literary and political, that have surrounded their development. In order to examine the novels that form this thesis’ core canon, it seems important to consider the social points that surround their writing, and the ways in which the texts engage—or in many cases, resist engaging—with their cultural surroundings.

There is a small but increasingly vocal group of literary criticisms that have begun to identify the Millennium as a moment of peculiarly intense

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<sup>50</sup> Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (London: Penguin, 2009), p.1. The lectures were published posthumously, and indeed, in ‘the next millennium’.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p.1.

<sup>52</sup> Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.1.

cultural and aesthetic change, which perhaps begins to explain why texts of the ‘post-millennial’ display some distinctive features of their own. Philip Tew, for example, takes the opportunity in the second edition of *The Contemporary British Novel*, to note characteristic features of ‘British fiction of the new millennium’, stating that it ‘appeared to be marked initially by dark yet whimsical novels, some look back the recent past, narratives recalling the 1970s and 1980s’,<sup>53</sup> while in their 2013 anthology, *Twenty-First Century Fiction: What Happens Now*, Siân Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard begin by noting that, ‘The first decade of the 2000s has been remarkable for its literary creativity and diversity’.<sup>54</sup> Peter Boxall makes the case for the diversity of global literature as, in itself, a defining characteristic:

...if there is no collective movement among these writers [of the twenty-first century], no shared sense of a project and no consensus about the role or purpose of the novelistic imaginations, it is nevertheless the case, I think, that these writers together respond to the predicament in which we found ourselves, and to the rapid transformations in the way that global time and space are produced, measured and mapped.<sup>55</sup>

Adeseshiah and Hildyard state that, ‘[t]he peculiarly rich features of twenty-first century writing include not only the implications of beginning a new century, but *also the particularly potent symbolic evocations that*

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<sup>53</sup> Philip Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (London: Continuum, 2007), xv.

<sup>54</sup> Siân Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard, ‘Introduction,’ in *Twenty-First Century Fiction: What Happens Now?*, ed. Sian Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.1.

<sup>55</sup> Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, p.7.

*arise from the turn of the millennium*' (emphasis mine).<sup>56</sup> The millennium is important not because of the things that we expected to happen, but because of the things that occurred that we did not: Adiseshiah and Hildyard particularly identify 'millennial and post-millennial discourse, the catastrophic events of 9/11, the War on Terror, and the 2008 financial crash and its aftermath'.<sup>57</sup>

Of these 'symbolic evocations' perhaps the one with the widest implications in retrospect, has been 9/11. Dominic Head's *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond* devotes a whole chapter to 'Terrorism in Transatlantic Perspective', to 'investigate whether or not 9/11 really does mark out a moment of cultural change, and a new era of literary history'.<sup>58</sup> He argues that for many writers and critics, the destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001 created a cultural schism that changed the face of the literary landscape. Although the catastrophic act of mass violence is not directly related to the novels that form the core of this thesis, the advent of mass terror as a mode of warfare *is* intimately related to the societies who lived through it and then went on to write novels about a changed world. As Bentley suggests, 'The symbolic collapse of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center reverberated around the world, and has had a particularly profound impact on British culture'.<sup>59</sup> Of Martin Amis and *Yellow Dog*, Head writes '[Amis] reports coming back to it, refreshed, on 10 September 2001, 'then the event happened and, like every other writer on earth, the next day I was considering a change in occupation.''.<sup>60</sup> Philip Tew, too, uses *Yellow Dog* as an example of the principles involved in post-9/11 fiction, stating that it is in this novel that, 'at least symbolically, Amis designates the end of the postmodern, reducing it to a series of

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<sup>56</sup> Siân Adiseshiah & Rupert Hildyard, 'Introduction,' p.1.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, p.1.

<sup>58</sup> Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), p.99.

<sup>59</sup> Nick Bentley, 'Introduction,' p.3.

<sup>60</sup> Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel*, p.100.

stylistic gestures and thereby foregrounding its failings, its paradoxical homogeneity'.<sup>61</sup>

Dominic Head also considers James Wood's argument that, as also suggested by Tew and Amis, the destruction of the World Trade Centre demonstrated weaknesses in the prevailing trends of literary fiction. Wood states that in the wake of 9/11, he wishes to see a proliferation of 'novels that tell us not "how the world works" but "how somebody felt about something"'.<sup>62</sup> In this context, the 'discernible shift towards the domestic sphere' that Head identifies is not so much a schism but perhaps an acceleration of the 'end [of] a particularly confident phase',<sup>63</sup> as he puts it; in effect, part of a gradual destabilising of our long-engrained prioritisation of one mode of narrative over another. The contribution of 9/11 to this story of a dissolving of boundaries was to give a timely 'reminder', as James Wood puts it, 'that whatever the novel gets up to, the "culture" can always get up to something bigger'.<sup>64</sup> Ultimately, the disaster creates a sense of literary uncertainty that creates an opening for the 'diversity' identified by Adiseshiah and Hildyard and Boxall's lack of 'consensus about the role or purpose of the novelistic imaginations': a sense of uncertainty given by disaster a shape rather different from, though not unrelated to, the proliferative array of questioning texts that had come before.

Engaging directly with the events that caused this upheaval has consistently been a difficult and often problematic undertaking. Head identifies a number of novels, including Ian McEwan's *Saturday* and John Updike's *Terrorist*, which make an attempt to engage with the post-9/11 Western world, yet he makes it clear that none of them are entirely capable of doing so. Even *Saturday*, which Head claims shows McEwan '...feeling

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<sup>61</sup> Philip Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel*, p.203.

<sup>62</sup> James Wood, 'Tell Me How Does It Feel,' *The Guardian*, 6 October 2001. Web: full website details given in bibliography.

<sup>63</sup> Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel*, p.100.

<sup>64</sup> James Wood, 'Tell Me How Does It Feel.'

his way beyond the central dilemma [of the novel's role in social commentary] that haunts the post-9/11 novel in the hands of other prominent writers', is still 'incomplete, and for some readers unconvincing'.<sup>65</sup> Robert Eaglestone, writing in the excellent anthology *Terror and the Postcolonial: A Concise Companion*, uses *Saturday*, Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* to demonstrate contemporary novelists' 'inability to address the terror that is their proclaimed subject...and at the same time, as the other side of the coin, their refusal to come to terms with it leads to a simplistic refusal to engage with the otherness of the terrorists and their ideas.'<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, as Peter Boxall points out, 'It is in the fiction written in response to the terrorist event that...one can see the beginnings of a new way of thinking about global relations, a new and ethically challenging way of mapping the tensions between political radicalism, violent insurrection, literary innovation, and the power and force of the global market place'.<sup>67</sup>

Eaglestone goes on to note that all of these novels 'feature a significant break-in to a home', which he equates to an 'allegory of how world history cannot be excluded from the domestic'.<sup>68</sup> I would suggest, as an alternative, that these domestic invasions are symbolic in some respects, of the effect of the terrorist act as an invasion of the West's cultural home, the city itself. The city has long been a cipher for modernity—indeed, Lane and Tew configure 'the post-modern' as 'a short-hand label for a whole new phase of writings concerned with the tensions of the city'.<sup>69</sup> In the wake of 9/11 and, in the case of Britain, of the July 7<sup>th</sup> 2005 bombing of

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<sup>65</sup> Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel*, p.126.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Eaglestone, "'The age of reason was over...an age of fury was dawning": Contemporary Fiction and Terror,' *Terror and the Postcolonial: A Concise Companion*, ed. Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p.367.

<sup>67</sup> Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, p.123.

<sup>68</sup> Robert Eaglestone, 'Contemporary Fiction and Terror,' p.362.

<sup>69</sup> Richard J. Lane and Philip Tew, 'Introduction: II: Urban Thematics,' in *Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. Richard J. Lane, Rod Mengham and Philip Tew (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), pp.71-73, p.72.

the London Underground, the internal tensions of the city, ‘the amorphous anonymity imposed by urban density...and...the indifference of contemporary city-dwellers towards those around them’, are rendered both more urgent by the schism of mass terror and, as aspects of ‘the most routinized and over-written environments—inner London’, almost irrelevant.<sup>70</sup> The anonymity of the city is no longer a way to examine human interactions: it is now inextricably related to otherness, the ‘alien and resistant’. The city has been rendered unsafe; partly because simplistic binaries that render the nearby and homogenous safe, and the distant and Other untrustworthy, have been disrupted, and partly because the places where these ‘alien and resistant’ others can now cause harm are not traditionally places of risk. They touch us where we were once secure: our cities, pinnacles of civilisation, catering for all bodily needs, are suddenly in themselves dangers.<sup>71</sup> Boxall sums up the effect of this by suggesting that if we can discern:

...the outlines of a new kind of body that emerges in the contemporary novel, a new way of weaving time and history and embodiment together, then it is in the relationship between fiction and contemporary terrorism that the political context for such an effort is at its sharpest, and most urgent.<sup>72</sup>

The facet of this relationship between terrorism and fiction that is of particular interest in the context of my research is its destabilising effect on the way in which issues relating to contemporary culture are addressed. In reflecting both the zeal of the terrorist, and the almost equally extreme response of the increasingly provocative right-wing groups I mentioned

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p.72.

<sup>71</sup> Kate Lyons and Caroline Davies, ‘How do I... live in the shadow of terrorism?’, *The Guardian*, 20 November 2015. Web: full website details given in bibliography.

<sup>72</sup> Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, p.123.



earlier, the fracturing effect of terrorist activity in Britain and Europe is intimately related to the proliferation of nostalgia for a cleaner, simpler, (perhaps fictional) more rural Britain. If cities are frightening, the countryside becomes once more a refuge; if the heterogeneity of post-millennial British culture appears to be threatening, a return to an apparently homogenous culture of small, close communities can be attractive. In this context terrorism contributes to the manner in which fiction attempts to engage with British non-urban landscapes, adding both an element of fear, and an element of yearning, in equal and disturbing congruence.

For some, however, the question of terrorism in relation to fiction is a shallow one; a question based on solely human values.<sup>73</sup> For an increasingly vocal collection of critics from a variety of different disciplines, the most important issue to be examined in fiction and other cultural products is that of 'today's apparently unprecedented and accelerating rate of environmental degradation'.<sup>74</sup> In addition, anxieties regarding our apparent lack of concern for our planet's survival have led to wider questions regarding our representations of nature and the world. It is for this reason that the interdisciplinary school of ecocriticism has been gaining steady credence and weight over the last fifty years. In the context of the post-millennial novel, it is particularly notable that none of the guides and studies of contemporary and post-millennial fiction noted above engage directly with the question of the environment as it appears within the field. In fact, only one of these overview texts engages with the

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<sup>73</sup> There is an interesting informal essay on this subject published on the *Ecospherics Ethics* website, which collects a variety of informally written but passionately argued long form meditations on ecocentric ideologies. Particularly helpful in the area around the intersection of discourses regarding terrorist activities and environmentalist approaches is 'Terrorism is as Terrorism Does' by Paul Watson. Full website details given in bibliography. The language is colloquial but the sentiments are recognisably based in fundamental tenets of the ecocritical tradition.

<sup>74</sup> Jill K. Conway, Kenneth Keniston and Leo Marx, 'The New Environmentalisms,' in *Earth, Air, Fire, Water: Humanistic Studies of the Environment*, ed. Jill K. Conway., Kenneth Keniston and Leo Marx (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), p.2.

ecocritical move at all.<sup>75</sup> But while the field of literary criticism has hesitated in engaging with its ecocritical sibling, the reverse has not been true. Ecocriticism has long been engaged in critical studies of fiction, and its influence is no longer at the fringes of cultural studies. In the next section of this introduction, I will examine the significance of the ecocritical movement in relation to the literary, defining its major features and stating the position of this thesis in the context of the wide political and theoretical aims of the discipline.

*Green Past, Grey Present, Grim Future: A Brief History of Ecocriticism and the Pastoral*

The term ‘ecocriticism’ is widely attributed to William Rueckert’s 1978 publication, ‘Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism’. As Cheryll Glotfelty explains, he ‘coins...[the] term...to describe his endeavour, proposing to ‘discover something about the ecology of literature’, that is, about the way that literature functions in the biosphere’.<sup>76</sup> It might be reasonably expected, then, that Rueckert would be widely cited as a founding father of the ecocritical movement; yet in Greg Garrard’s otherwise thorough and scholarly New Critical Idiom text, *Ecocriticism*, Rueckert’s essay does not even merit a mention in the bibliography. Nor is this omission the exception to the norm: in the post-millennial ecocritical era, Rueckert’s name almost seems to have been forgotten. The essay is even difficult to source directly, although Glotfelty

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<sup>75</sup> The second edition of Peter Barry’s classic teaching text, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002). Barry added a chapter on ecocriticism for the second edition, noting that this addition makes the edition, ‘the first book of its kind to register the increasing interest in ‘Green’ approaches to literature’ (xii).

<sup>76</sup> Cheryll Glotfelty, ‘Introduction,’ in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (London: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xv-1, xxviii.

reproduces it in full in her *Ecocriticism Reader*, which remains a vital and seminal text in the field.

What does Rueckert's surprising absence from much of the new canon of ecocritical literature suggest about the way that the discipline began, and has gone about defining itself? For one thing, it suggests that the word 'ecocritical' itself is extraordinarily contested: in *The ISLE Reader*, the anthology of articles from the first decade of the journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*,<sup>77</sup> Michael P. Branch and Scott Slovic note that, even as late as the early 1990s, 'most green literary critics squirmed and balked at the use of the term', noting that 'it felt somehow too trendy, too vague. To some the term implied too much familiarity with the science of ecology'.<sup>78</sup> Stephanie Sarver states that, 'As a scholar of literature, [she is] not comfortable co-opting the name of a discipline in attempting to describe broadly [her] work'.<sup>79</sup>

In part this discomfort with the term seems to be intimately related to greater uncertainties concerning ecocriticism as a theoretical movement: what actually *counts* as ecocriticism, or what principles inform its proponents, is a matter of discussion and troubling vagueness. It is not a simple question of referring to a particular starting point or authoritative figure; as Stephanie Sarver notes, even the *term* ecocriticism is 'vague and perhaps misleading', covering '...a range of approaches'.<sup>80</sup> Scott Slovic too delineates a particular multiplicity of definitions in relation to the term, stating that, 'There is no single, dominant world-view guiding ecocritical

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<sup>77</sup> *ISLE* is the 'house journal' of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment. The ASLE website provides numerous scholarly resources concerning ecocritical thinking.

<sup>78</sup> Michael P. Branch & Scott Slovic, 'Introduction,' in *The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism, 1993-2003* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), xiii-xxiii, xiv, xv.

<sup>79</sup> Stephanie Sarver, 'What Is Ecocriticism?,' suggested definition given and recorded as part of a roundtable discussion at *Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice: 1994 Western Literature Association Meeting* (Saltlake City, 1994). Web: full website details given in bibliography.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

practice – no single strategy at work from example to example of ecocritical writing or teaching’.<sup>81</sup> Peter Barry considers this ‘well-known remark’ from Scott Slovic in the chapter on ecocriticism that he added to his undergraduate reader on essential theories and principles in literary criticism, *Beginning Theory*, in 2002. Barry notes that ‘it is striking that there is no single figure within ecocriticism who has... dominance – ecocriticism itself is a diverse biosphere’.<sup>82</sup>

It is also not possible to say that ecocritics are heading towards the same place or moment: its aims are as diverse as its origins in this respect. Greg Garrard highlights this point by comparing Cheryll Glotfelty’s oft-cited definition of ecocriticism as, ‘the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment’ with that of Richard Kerridge, who states that, ‘Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis’.<sup>83</sup> For Garrard, the sheer scope of the foci of the analysts that identify with the ecocritical mode is one of ecocriticism’s defining features. He identifies in the list of questions that Glotfelty uses to expand her definition,<sup>84</sup> ‘a clear trajectory: the first question...is very narrow and literary... The questions grow in scope as the list continues, with several

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<sup>81</sup> Scott Slovic, ‘Containing Multitudes, Practicing Doctrine,’ In *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. Laurence Coupe (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.160-162, p.160.

<sup>82</sup> Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory*, p.269.

<sup>83</sup> Cheryll Glotfelty, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, xviii; Greg Garrard, *The New Critical Idiom: Ecocriticism* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004), p.4.

<sup>84</sup> This list of questions is lengthy, but productive; its *en bloc* presentation adds to its visual impact and so is reproduced faithfully here: ‘How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? In addition to race, class, and gender, should *place* become a new critical category? Do men write about nature differently than women do? In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind’s relationship to the natural world? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literatyre and popular culture? What view of nature informs U.S. Government reports, corporate advertising, and televised nature documentaries, and to what rhetorical effect? What bearing might the science of ecology have on literary studies? How is science itself open to literary analysis? What cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, art history, and ethics?’ Cheryll Glotfelty, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, xix.

of the later ones suggesting gargantuan interdisciplinary studies such as Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory*'.<sup>85</sup> When considering Kerridge's argument, Garrard notes that, 'the broad specification of the field of study [is] essential'.<sup>86</sup>

The field is intimidating in its sheer diversity, full of pitfalls for the academic seeking certainty, but if its very indefinability is an aspect of its identity, then clearly there are some features of the ecocritical that form a cohesive and more general whole: the 'diverse biosphere' that Barry describes. It is impossible not to begin with an examination of these features as they appear in the definitions given by Cheryll Glotfelty in the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, an anthological collection that has become canonical for ecocritics and described by Michael P. Branch and Scott Slovic as being 'at the foundation of this burgeoning field'.<sup>87</sup> Glotfelty asks:

What then *is* ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective... ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies.<sup>88</sup>

That this hugely important statement directly references literature is a strong sign of the literary roots from which ecocriticism grew, although the movement has extended to encompass consideration of the wider field of the creative arts in general. Glotfelty's reader followed the formation of

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, pp.3-4.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p.4.

<sup>87</sup> Michael P. Branch & Scott Slovic, 'Introduction,' xvi.

<sup>88</sup> Cheryll Glotfelty, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, xviii.

the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment, which Greg Garrard, Timothy Clark and Michael P. Branch and Scott Slovic all identify as one of the key moments at which ecocriticism became ‘a defined intellectual movement’.<sup>89</sup> Branch and Slovic give an account of the ASLE’s launch, stating that the intent was to ‘start a new organization to promote environmentally oriented work in the humanities’.<sup>91</sup> They go on to track the contingent development of the ASLE and ecocriticism (which *they* originally define as ‘scholarship that is concerned with the environmental implications of literary texts (or other forms of artistic expression)’).<sup>92</sup> It is interesting to note that, although in recent years ecocriticism has expanded to encompass many points of intersection between the humanities and the ecological, its roots are firmly entrenched in literature.

Part of the simultaneous development of the ecocritical school and the ASLE entailed, in 1994, ‘a roundtable session... asking approximately twenty scholars ranging from graduate students to senior critics, to offer one-page definitional statements about “ecocriticism”’.<sup>93</sup> These ‘definitional statements’ are published on the ASLE’s website, along with a further selection of ‘position papers’ from a further meeting in 1995. ‘By this time,’ Branch and Slovic state, almost as a side-note, ‘resistance to the term “ecocriticism” was already subsiding’.<sup>94</sup> Kent C. Ryden’s definition is of particular interest:

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<sup>89</sup> Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.4.

<sup>91</sup> Michael P. Branch & Scott Slovic, ‘Introduction,’ xiv.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, xiv.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, xiv.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, xv.

Ecocriticism, and the texts upon which ecocritical scholars focus, provide perhaps the most clear and compelling means we have of literally grounding the study of literature in the vital stuff of life--the earth that surrounds and sustains us. The ecocritical stance reconnects literary study to both the processes and the problems inherent in living on this heavily burdened planet, focusing our attention anew on the ground beneath our feet, on our complex relationship to that ground, and on the implications of our behavior toward that ground...<sup>97</sup>

Ryden's definition above seems particularly apposite in the face of the questions regarding ecocriticism's necessity in the contemporary moment. The principle of 'literally grounding the study of literature in the vital stuff of life', with the aim of dividing 'literary scholarship from the realm of rarified word games' is appropriate, one might suggest, in the face of the concerns regarding twenty-first century fiction that were raised earlier in this introduction. The idea of 'grounding', of once more emphasising the need for the link between cultural representations and 'the processes and the problems inherent in living on this heavily burdened planet', that is, the stuff of twenty-first century *life*, seems intimately related to Peter

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<sup>97</sup> Kent Ryden, 'What Is Ecocriticism?', suggested definition given and recorded as part of a roundtable discussion at *Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice: 1994 Western Literature Association Meeting* (Saltlake City, 1994). Web: full website details given in bibliography.

Boxall's claim regarding the need for a new approach to representing 'the rapid transformations in the way that global time and space are produced, measured and mapped'.<sup>101</sup> If Ryden's definition seeks to present ecocriticism as a new way of linking life and art back together, then it is not too great a leap to suggest that the ecocritical mode can be considered as a way to return a sense of 'the world' to literature. It is also important to note the point made by Ian Marshall that, 'if ecological awareness means either scientific or spiritual recognition of the interconnections of living things... then what we're doing really is not entirely new'.<sup>102</sup> This is a vital point to recognise in the context of the ecocritical movement; that the acts of recognition and representation entailed by ecocritical focus are not, in themselves, a new idea. What *is* new is the 'unprecedented challenge of things like climate change or overpopulation— issues at the same time of morality, ethics, biology, 'animal rights', statistics, geography and politics', which renders the ecocriticism of the post-millennial moment more urgent than ever before.<sup>103</sup>

If we were to map some of the definitions of ecocriticism that have entered into the field's admittedly short history, we would find that they fall into distinct regions. In particular, there is a clear distinction between those who see ecocriticism as a way to engage with ecologically or environmentally conscious artworks— as Cokinos and Dean argue:

Ecocriticism is the critical and pedagogical broadening of literary studies to include texts that deal with the nonhuman world and our relationship to it. (Such a definition, of course, draws on the work of critics like

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<sup>101</sup> Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, p.7.

<sup>102</sup> Ian Marshall, 'What Is Ecocriticism?', suggested definition given and recorded as part of a roundtable discussion at *Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice: 1994 Western Literature Association Meeting* (Saltlake City, 1994). Web: full website details given in bibliography.

<sup>103</sup> Timothy Clark, *Cambridge Introduction*, p.203.



Glen Love, Cheryll Glotfelty, and others.)

...<sup>104</sup>

Eco-criticism is a study of culture and cultural products (art works, writings, scientific theories, etc.) that is in some way connected with the human relationship to the natural world. Eco-criticism is also a response to needs, problems, or crises, depending on one's perception of urgency.<sup>105</sup>

For Glotfelty and Ryden, however, ecocriticism entails an ecologically or environmentally focussed approach to 'any literary text, even texts that seem (at first glance) oblivious of the nonhuman world'.<sup>106</sup> Scott Slovic, too, argues that:

In my introductory talks on nature writing and environmentally conscious literary scholarship, this is what I said about "ecocriticism": "the term means either the study of nature writing by way of any scholarly approach or, conversely, the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature relationships in any literary

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<sup>104</sup> Christopher Cokinos, 'What Is Ecocriticism?,' suggested definition given and recorded as part of a roundtable discussion at *Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice: 1994 Western Literature Association Meeting* (Saltlake City, 1994). Web: full website details given in bibliography.

<sup>105</sup> Thomas K Dean, 'What Is Ecocriticism?,' suggested definition given and recorded as part of a roundtable discussion at *Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice: 1994 Western Literature Association Meeting* (Saltlake City, 1994). Web: full website details given in bibliography.

<sup>106</sup> Scott Slovic, 'What is Ecocriticism?,' suggested definition given and recorded as part of a roundtable discussion at *Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice: 1994 Western Literature Association Meeting* (Saltlake City, 1994). Web: full website details given in bibliography.

text, even texts that seem (at first glance)  
oblivious of the nonhuman world.<sup>107</sup>

Stephanie Sarver, on a slightly different tangent, argues that even the *term* ‘ecocriticism’ is misleading due to its predication on the scientific principles of ecology rather than upon the inherently political doctrines of environmentalism:

Generally, literary ecocriticism seems concerned with the ways that the relationship between humans and nature are reflected in literary texts. This concern, however, is better labeled an environmental approach to literature (or simply environmentalism) than ecocriticism. Popular culture often conflates ecology and environmentalism, but within the academy, ecology is a scientific discipline that studies the connections between organisms and their environment. As literary scholars, our work may be informed by environmentalist concerns, but we ultimately study texts, not organisms.<sup>108</sup>

She clearly identifies, however, the two sides of the ecocritical coin: the inherently neutral envisioning of the earth as an organism with which we maintain a relationship that includes cultural products, versus the politicised reappropriation of cultural criticism to reprioritise environmental concerns within the critical field.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Scott Slovic, ‘What Is Ecocriticism?’.

<sup>108</sup> Stephanie Sarver, ‘What Is Ecocriticism?’.

<sup>109</sup> Stephanie Sarver, ‘What Is Ecocriticism?’.

Both of these approaches, of course, have the same goal: to examine the relationship between man and earth via its representations in art of any form. Timothy Clark notes that '[a] broad archive is now building up, tracing different conceptions of nature and their effects throughout the history and cultures of the world'.<sup>110</sup> But the nature of this process, and how exactly we go about this particular pursuit is a more complex question. For one thing, engaging with art as a representation of nature can be a distinctly problematic process. For Laurence Coupe, whose *Green Studies Reader* was a groundbreaking collection of writings when it was published in 2000, the point of ecocriticism is to change the *approach* to depictions of nature in writing. The problem, which he identifies in the introduction to the *Green Studies Reader*, is that, '[i]n various schools...the common assumption has been that what we call 'nature' exists primarily as a term within a cultural discourse, apart from which it has no being or meaning'.<sup>111</sup> 'In other words,' Coupe clarifies, 'it has been assumed that because mountains and waters are human at the point of delivery, they exist only as signified within human culture. Thus they have no intrinsic merit, no value and no rights'.<sup>112</sup> This approach is not, he points out, intended to 'challenge the notion that human beings make sense of the world through language, but rather the self-serving inference that nature is nothing more than a linguistic construct'.<sup>113</sup>

Coupe's approach is certainly one way of engaging with the thorny question of art as representative of the world in general, but it is not the only one. Ecocriticism may be a particular way of examining literature, but it is also almost unique in its simultaneous fertility for other political approaches. Val Plumwood and many other ecofeminist critics have claimed ecocritical territory, denoting distinct similarities between the attitudes faced by 'marginalised groups such as women and the colonised'

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<sup>110</sup> Timothy Clark, *Cambridge Introduction*, p.4.

<sup>111</sup> Laurence Coupe, 'General Introduction,' in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.2.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, p.2.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, p.3.

and nature.<sup>114</sup> That the issue of resistance against such marginalisation has become more urgent, she identifies as both a social and ecological issue:

We must find ways to rework our concepts and practices of human virtue and identity as they have been conceived, since at least the time of the Greeks, as exclusive of and discontinuous with the devalued orders of the feminine, of subsistence, of materiality and of non-human nature. The master culture must now make its long-overdue homecoming to the earth. This is no longer simply a matter of justice, but now also a matter of survival.<sup>115</sup>

In addition to the political and conceptual space offered by ecocriticism, it is no surprise that the geographical location of proponents is more important, for obvious reasons, in ecocritical thinking than in any other literary-critical field. It is widely agreed that the USA was the place where the definable movement began to gather steam with a focus upon the darlings of American nature writing, as Peter Barry notes, 'Ecocriticism, as it now exists in the USA, takes its literary bearings from three major nineteenth-century American writers whose work celebrates nature, the life force, and the wilderness as manifested in America, these being Ralph Waldo Emerson...Margaret Fuller...and Henry David Thoreau'.<sup>116</sup> Garrard too notes that 'where British ecocriticism focused on Wordsworth in its early explorations, American ecocriticism identified Henry David Thoreau as a key figure'.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.5.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, p.6.

<sup>116</sup> Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory*, p.259.

<sup>117</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, p.48.

Peter Barry argues that '[t]he infrastructure of ecocriticism in the UK is less developed than in the USA' and that 'the founding figure on the British side is the critic Jonathan Bate, author of *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*', published in 1991, even though 'British ecocritics also make the point that many of their concerns are evident...in Raymond Williams's book *The Country and the City*', which was published in 1973.<sup>118</sup> But the movement has gathered steam with increasing speed, and particularly since 2000: Barry argues that 'the provision of relevant course options on undergraduate degree programmes is becoming more widespread', going on to note the existence of 'the definitive UK collection of essays (having equivalent status in the UK to that of Glotfelty...)' in the shape of Laurence Coupe's *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*.<sup>119</sup> Coupe's preface, too, notes the relative youth of the British ecocritical school, stating that *The Green Studies Reader* 'is intended to be a pioneering publication'.<sup>120</sup> Coupe's consideration of this point is based, he suggests, in the need to give British ecocriticism a kind of conceptual backbone: 'The fact that literary and cultural studies departments in United Kingdom universities have begun only recently to introduce courses in 'ecocriticism' means that the subject is in need of clarification and organisation'.<sup>121</sup>

Although, as I have shown, ecocritical thinking regarding the relationship between the environment and the arts has developed particularly urgently in the last two decades, the literary canon has been responding to this relationship internally for centuries. While the ecocritical corpus attends to this relationship from a critical perspective, literature has its own, creative, mode of response, which directly encounters and questions the way in which landscape can engender, or conversely hinder, creativity and the production of art. This mode is the pastoral, a term that has come to

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<sup>118</sup> Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory*, p.260.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, p.260.

<sup>120</sup> Laurence Coupe, *The Green Studies Reader*, xi.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, xi.

mean a plethora of approaches that range from the unsubtle and naïve to the complex, multi-faceted and deeply political.

‘The term ‘pastoral’’, Terry Gifford claims in his *New Critical Idiom* study of the pastoral, ‘is used in three broadly different ways’.<sup>122</sup> Gifford identifies the specific literary form of ‘the pastoral’, which ‘up to about 1610...[referred to] poems or dramas of a specific formal type in which supposed shepherds spoke to each other, usually in pentameter verse, about their work or their loves, with (mostly) idealised descriptions of their countryside’; a ‘broader use of ‘pastoral’ [that] refers to any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban’; and the use of the term as ‘pejorative, implying that the pastoral vision is too simplified and thus an idealisation of the reality of life in the country’.<sup>123</sup> By the very nature of the fact that this thesis is focussed on novels of the twenty-first century, we are broadly focussing on the second and third of Gifford’s definitions, although the implications of the first described here are also resonant.

This broader envisioning of the pastoral tradition—particularly in the latter half of the last millennium—is causing a certain element of disagreement and tension around the use of the term. Terry Gifford notes the concern of ‘the editor of the Macmillan Casebook on *The Pastoral Mode*...Brian Loughrey...that there is an ‘almost bewildering variety of works’ to which modern critics attribute the term, ranging from anything rural, to any form of retreat...’.<sup>124</sup> Indeed, ecocritic Lawrence Buell concisely defines the pastoral in *The Future of Environmental Criticism* as, ‘a stylized representation of rusticity in contrast to, and often in satire of urbanism’.<sup>125</sup> Despite this succinct—and apparently simple—definition, Buell continues to discuss the manner in which pastoral ‘has become increasingly complicated, though it was never wholly straightforward to begin with’,

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<sup>122</sup> Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.1.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p.1.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, p.2.

<sup>125</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p.144.

noting Leo Marx's identification in 'British-American literary culture' of both simple pastoral, 'wishfully oblivious to and tacitly complicit with the advance of technoculture' and 'complex pastoral, which uses pastoral to politically oppositional ends'.<sup>126</sup> In their 2009 text, *New Versions of the Pastoral*, David James and Philip Tew confront the question of pastoral's difficulties head on, by beginning with William Empson's description of the pastoral "as putting the complex into the simple".<sup>127</sup> Annabel Patterson, in *Pastoral and Ideology: Virgil to Valery*, simply rejects the idea of giving a full definition altogether: 'Nor will this book launch another attempt to define the nature of pastoral—a cause lost as early as the sixteenth century...and...reduced to total confusion by modern criticisms search for "versions of pastoral" in the most unlikely places'.<sup>128</sup> Paul Alpers, writing in *What Is Pastoral?*, suggests that:

...most modern studies define pastoral simply by saying what it is. It turns out to be a number of things. We are told that pastoral "is a double longing after innocence and happiness"; that it is based on the philosophical antithesis of Art and Nature; that its universal idea is the Golden Age; that its fundamental motive is hostility to urban life; that its "central tenet" is "the pathetic fallacy"...

It is not the purpose of this thesis to untangle the development of the pastoral from 'high-cultural hegemonic formation' to a point where 'there

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid, p.145.

<sup>127</sup> David James and Philip Tew, 'Introduction: Reenvisioning Pastoral,' in *New Versions of the Pastoral: Post-Romantic, Modern, and Contemporary Responses to the Tradition* (Cranbury: Rosemont Publishing, 2009), pp.13-28, p.13.

<sup>128</sup> Annabel Paterson, *Pastoral and Ideology: Virgil to Valery* (Berkeley: New Haven University Press, 1984), p.7.

<sup>129</sup> Paul Alpers, *What Is Pastoral?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p.10.

are as many versions of pastoral as there are critics and scholars who write about it', but it is perhaps helpful to examine in brief the pastoral's documented origins.<sup>130</sup>

The pastoral's beginning can be found in the work of Theocritus, who created, in the words of Terry Gifford, 'a vision of simplicity of life in contact with nature'.<sup>131</sup> Greg Garrard suggests that 'There are two key contrasts from this period that run through the pastoral tradition: the spatial distinction of town (frenetic, corrupt, impersonal) and country (peaceful, abundant), and the temporal distinction of past (idyllic) and present ('fallen')'.<sup>132</sup> While Theocritus' vision of the Sicily that he had lost was the pastoral's birthplace, it was the influence of Virgil, much later, which cemented the form as part of the European literary consciousness. Gifford writes that Virgil 'created the literary distancing device of Arcadia that has become the generic name for the location of all pastoral retreats'.<sup>133</sup> Arcadia, Gifford continues, is 'a poetic paradise, a *literary construct* of a past Golden Age in which to retreat by linguistic idealisation' (emphasis mine).<sup>134</sup> Though named for a real region of the 'Peloponnesus peninsula of Greece', Arcadia is not a portrayal of it but a textual retreat, rather than a physical one. Garrard notes, too, that Virgil's 'is a more systematic and self-conscious approach, incorporating a pointed contrast of rural retreat and the harms consequent on civilisation'.<sup>135</sup> This systemic and self-conscious approach transforms the themes of Theocritus' *Idylls* and transforms them into a schematic that would be tested, replicated and questioned over hundreds of years. The pastoral has developed further in the intervening centuries, as Lawrence Buell notes, 'In the early modern and romantic eras...pastoral becomes more mimetically particularized', and that 'pastoral starts to fuse with a georgic poetics of work, but in high

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<sup>130</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, p.145; Paul Alpers, *What Is Pastoral?*, p.8.

<sup>131</sup> Terry Gifford, *Pastoral*, p.15.

<sup>132</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, p.35.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid*, p.18.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*, p.20.

<sup>135</sup> Terry Gifford, *Pastoral*, p.20; Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, p.36.



culture they tend to fuse on pastoral terms, such that canonical Anglophone poetry and painting...typically imagine landscapes that are spaces of aesthetic pleasure contemplated at leisure rather than working landscapes'.<sup>136</sup>

This shift is not only one of approach, but of form; Buell's reference to 'painting', above, makes it evident that we are no longer dealing solely with the poetic pastoral form but a broader artistic corpus. Paul Alpers emphasises that pastoral fiction and its differing ancestral modes should be considered as separate forms: 'Unlike other forms of pastoral, pastoral novels are conceived and motivated as novels and not in terms that derive from the bucolics of Theocritus and Virgil'.<sup>137</sup> There is a clear distinction between the pastoral as a physical/textual framework and the pastoral as a collection of connected thematic elements. The development of the pastoral in this broader sense has elements of political tension, of course, and also of ecocritical concerns related to the aestheticizing (and fetishizing) of particular landscape types in verbal art; these ramifications of the pastoral will be examined in much greater deal in the body of this thesis. For now, it is enough to state that the inherently problematic nature of pastoral becomes particularly apparent when, in Lawrence Buell's words, pastoral becomes 'more given over to representation of country ways that are being displaced by enclosure and/or urbanization'.<sup>138</sup> '[A] concurrent instance of this turn from fictive Arcadia toward material referent,' Buell continues, 'was for the sites of European colonization to be conceived in pastoral terms, as areas of nature and even edenic possibility'.<sup>139</sup> As Leo Marx puts it, referring to the European colonisation of America, '[w]ith an unspoiled hemisphere in view it seemed that mankind actually might realize what had been thought a poetic fantasy.

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<sup>136</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, pp.144, 145.

<sup>137</sup> Paul Alpers, *What Is Pastoral?*, p.375.

<sup>138</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, p.144.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

Soon the dream of a retreat to an oasis of harmony and joy was removed from its traditional literary context'.<sup>140</sup>

In other words, the move from the placing of the pastoral elements within a distanced and knowingly artificial context (the Virgilian Arcadia) to a closer, and materially existent locus, is a distinctly problematic one, particularly in canonical British and American texts. Andrew V. Ettin's description of the pastoral as 'an ironic form, based on a perceivable distance between the alleged and the implied' relates back to both Arcadia and to the Sicily of Theocritus. These places are configured as contrasts to the site of their performance and publication, and use ironic distancing to criticise these same urban centres.<sup>141</sup> When Buell's 'turn from fictive Arcadia toward material referent' occurred, it 'helped give rise to different forms of pastoral nationalism'; this, in conjunction with the tendency to prioritise 'landscapes that are spaces of aesthetic pleasure contemplated at leisure...that tend to delete workers in order to enhance the idyll', has resulted in a troubling relationship between reality and apparent representation.<sup>142</sup>

One of the earliest ecocritical texts of all, Raymond Williams' now canonical *The Country and the City*, is founded upon a study of the problematics of the nostalgia of English pastoralism. One of Williams' most famous claims is that we are on 'what seemed like an escalator', whereby at every point in history we yearn for a lost past, 'an Old England' that had just vanished from view.<sup>143</sup> Williams' following critique of the pastoral and envisioning of a counter pastoral argument is well known, but is particularly helpful here:

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<sup>140</sup> Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p.3.

<sup>141</sup> Andrew V. Ettin, *Literature and the Pastoral* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p.12.

<sup>142</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, pp.144, 145.

<sup>143</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Hogarth Press, 1993), pp.9-12.

What we can see happening...is the conversion for conventional pastoral into a localised dream and then, increasingly, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, into what can be offered as a description and thence an idealisation of actual English country life and its social and economic relations.<sup>144</sup>

As Garrard puts it, ‘we may...identify a marked tendency for the classical English pastorals influenced by Theocritus to present a vision of rural life so removed from the processes of labour and natural growth that they constitute a persistent mystification of human ecology’.<sup>145</sup> Throughout the development of the pastoral mode (as opposed to the pastoral form), this deliberate erasure of the aspects of the world that resist idyllic representation remains consistently problematic. Garrard identifies that ‘Classic pastoral was disposed...to distort or mystify social and environmental history, whilst at the same time providing a locus, legitimated by tradition, for the feelings of loss and alienation from nature to be produced by the Industrial Revolution’.<sup>146</sup>

Terry Gifford trenchantly observes that this wilfully ignorant approach to the darker side of pastoral representation has two very particular effects: ‘the difference between the literary representation of nature and the material reality would be judged intolerable by the criteria of ecological concern... the difference between the textual evidence and the economic reality would be judged to be too great by the criteria of social reality’.<sup>147</sup> There are clearly, then, two concerns here: that the pastoral is capable of deliberately ignoring the physical reality of the world in favour of a sanitised ‘nature’; that the pastoral is capable of deliberately ‘delet[ing]

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid, p.26.

<sup>145</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, p.38.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, p.41.

<sup>147</sup> Terry Gifford, *Pastoral*, p.1.

workers' to maintain an illusion of social harmony. Garrard's description of 'manipulative pastoral kitsch' is a distinctly unsettling summation of the concerns that, with our contemporary, more environmentally and socially aware, perception, traditional pastoral cannot fail to raise.

In the following chapters, several elements of the pastoral mode will recur: most particularly, questions of nostalgia and Raymond Williams' 'escalator'; of the idyll and of the hope for redemption. Not coincidentally, these are features that Greg Garrard identifies as 'orientations of pastoral in terms of time':

...the *elegy* looks back to a vanished past with a sense of nostalgia; the *idyll* celebrates a bountiful present; the *utopia* looks forward to a redeemed future.<sup>148</sup>

In none of the twenty-first century novels at the centre of this thesis are these orientations examined simply. The post-millennial relationship with the pastoral is ever more complicated by our knowing and difficult relationship with our environment; what makes the pastoral so interesting in this context is that it is a point at which our aesthetic urge for a 'localised dream' and our physical interaction with our surroundings cannot fail to intersect. One of the key pieces of thinking behind this thesis is the unsettling understanding that 'naivety' is no longer possible in our relationship with our world; we know too much about it, and about our effect upon it, so that our contemporary experience of our surroundings is inevitably self-conscious, uncertain and often guilty. As Richard Mabey notes of the 'new nature writing':

To the extent that nature writing has a common spring, it is defiantly anti-pastoral.

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<sup>148</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, p.37.

It emerged not out of a desire to return to some ruralist golden age, but to repudiate such fantasies—the tweekness of "country lifestyle" magazines... the belief that agriculture and its colonial embodiment, "the countryside") are unimpeachable sources of moral value. Hence the passion for the unfarmed wild, for the small, the particular and the local...<sup>149</sup>

It is in these forms that ecocriticism is coming to terms with the knotty problem of the pastoral, and in these forms are its contemporary credentials ideally located. Ecocriticism is a still identifiably young critical mode—in part because of the avowedly political nature of its claims, but also because of its interdisciplinary nature. Sitting at the crossroads between the arts and the apparently scientific mode of the geographic community, ecocriticism has the undeniable (and, perhaps, thankless) job of bridging not only the divide between two different departmental modes but two consistently opposed disciplinary philosophies. But the ecocritical position, with its geographic slant on the explicitly human, is only one side of a multifaceted disciplinary intersection. The other—that is, the human approach to the geographic—is a more developed but equally contested approach: the politically savvy and philosophically complex school of cultural geography.

### *People in Place: Cultural Geographies*

Cultural geography as an offshoot of human geography has a colourful history. Unusually, there is a remarkable level of consensus regarding its origins; most of the overview texts that offer an introduction to the discipline begin with the same starting point. The development of cultural geography (in North America in particular), they claim, owes much to 'one

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<sup>149</sup> Richard Mabey, 'In Defence of Nature Writing'.

particular school (the 'Berkeley School') and one remarkable man, Carl Sauer'.<sup>150</sup> Kent Mathewson calls Sauer 'the key figure in establishing cultural geography in North America', and points out that Sauer's legacy is far-reaching: 'The enterprise he founded and tended (the Berkeley School of cultural-historical geography) includes a large portion of the self-identified cultural geographers in the United States'.<sup>151</sup> Sauer's 1925 essay, 'The Morphology of Landscape', changed the general approach to questions of landscape, bringing influences from anthropologists and European philosophers to bear on questions that had previously, almost exclusively, been grounded in the language of scientific enquiry.

Within this essay Sauer defines 'landscape' as 'an area made up of a distinct association of forms, both physical and cultural', stating that 'we may follow Bluntschli in saying that one has not fully understood the nature of an area until one "has learned to see it as an organic unit, to comprehend land and life in terms of each other"'.<sup>152</sup> The principle at the heart of this essay- as Sauer puts it, that 'a good deal of the meaning of area lies beyond scientific regimentation'- informs cultural geography from this point onwards.<sup>153</sup> The overall *idea* of a subjective, qualitative aspect to the previously exclusively scientific field of the geographic was not entirely new; Sauer himself points out that 'the best geography has never disregarded the esthetic qualities of landscape... Humboldt's "physiognomy", Banse's "soul," Volz's "rhythm," Gradmann's "harmony" of landscape, all lie beyond science',<sup>154</sup> and took his cues from European geographical traditions, 'borrowing from German geographers'

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<sup>150</sup> Peter Jackson, *Maps of Meaning: An Introduction to Cultural Geography* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p.9.

<sup>151</sup> Kent Mathewson, 'High/Low, Back/Center: Culture's Stages in Human Geography' in *Concepts in Human Geography* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), pp.97-126, p.98.

<sup>152</sup> Carl Sauer, 'The Morphology of Landscape' in *The Cultural Geography Reader*, ed. Timothy S. Oakes & Patricia L. Price (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), pp.97-104, p.98.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p.104.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

distinction between the natural and cultural landscape'.<sup>155</sup> But Sauer's approach—and the work of the Berkeley School that followed—'produced some of geography's most durable...enduring monuments of scholarship'.<sup>156</sup> Sauer's influence was essential in the disintegration of the 'materialist and functionalist approach to landscape' that Mariusz Czepczyński, among others, identifies in 'early 20<sup>th</sup> century America': as Czepczyński puts it, 'Sauer explores geography as imprints of *genre de vie* onto landscapes, while culture is understood in its widest sense as the entirety of human experience, including spiritual, intellectual and material experiences'.<sup>157</sup>

Although Sauer's influence is widely acknowledged, his work is now equally widely contested: Timothy S. Oakes and Patricia L. Price, for example, argue that Sauer was 'something of a lightning rod in the "culture wars" within geography', noting that 'his name is still sometimes invoked as the paradigmatic example of the kind of cultural geography that many geographers since the 1980s have seen themselves moving beyond'.<sup>158</sup> Peter Jackson's 1989 work, *Maps of Meaning: An Introduction to Cultural Geography* critiques the work of Sauer and the Berkeley School, arguing that Sauer's explicitly historicist approach to cultural geography 'was that of geology and the earth sciences rather than history and the humanities', and also that his 'anti-modernist tendency...went hand-in-hand with a fundamentally conservative outlook. Culture was equated with custom...'.<sup>159</sup> Jackson's critique ultimately focuses on Sauer's tendency toward a vision of culture as a 'super-organic' entity, 'at a higher level than the individual...governed by a logic of its own, and...actively constrains

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<sup>155</sup> Kent Mathewson, 'High/Low, Back/Center', p.105.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid, p.113.

<sup>157</sup> Mariusz Czepczyński, *Cultural Landscapes of Post-socialist Cities: Representation of Powers and Needs* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), p.20.

<sup>158</sup> Timothy S. Oakes & Patricia L. Price, 'The Morphology of Landscape': Editors' Introduction' in *The Cultural Geography Reader*, ed. Timothy S. Oakes & Patricia L. Price (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), pp.96-7, p.97.

<sup>159</sup> Peter Jackson, *Maps of Meaning*, pp.15-16.

human behaviour'.<sup>160</sup> Jackson specifies the work of James Duncan, who 'argued that the super-organic mode of explanation reifies culture', meaning that 'culture can be explained only in its own terms. It cannot be reduced to the actions of individuals or explained in terms of social forces other than those of culture itself'.<sup>161</sup> Jackson concludes that Sauer's legacy has had far reaching consequences: 'Following Sauer, cultural geographers have adopted an unnecessarily truncated view of their subject, confined to mapping the distribution of culture traits in the landscape'.<sup>162</sup>

In the wake of Sauer's starting points, the schools of cultural geographies have extended in a variety of fascinating directions. Some have raised questions about the nature of society's relationship with space, from Gaston Bachelard's 'lived experience' approach to architecture in *The Poetics of Space* to Henri Lefebvre's *La Production de l'Espace* and its vivid polemic on the need to refocus human attention away from questions of chronology and toward space and place instead. Others have focussed on the political nature of place-making, from queer geographies to questions of geofeminism (most famously by Doreen Massey in *Space, Place and Gender* and Geraldine Rose's *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*) and postcolonial geographies. Others still took postmodern approaches to questions of space, focussing, like Edward Soja's *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, on the intersection between human perceptions of place and physical geographies. Works like Yi-Fu Tuan's *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* intersect the directives of spatial studies and cultural questions, and demonstrate the ascientific and vitally interpretive approach to life in the world: as Tuan puts it,

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid. Peter Jackson is referencing general principles from James Duncan's journal article, 'The Superorganic in American Cultural Geography,' *Annals, Association of American Geographers* 70 (1980): 181-98.

<sup>162</sup> Peter Jackson, *Maps of Meaning*, p.19.



‘*Topophilia* is the affective bond between people and place or setting’.<sup>163</sup> Works such as those mentioned above all focus on principle and theory, as opposed to observing or delineating methodologies for enquiry. Empirical observation is considered important— Tuan states that, ‘systematized findings are invaluable for they give precision to the hunches of common sense’<sup>164</sup>— but in the last twenty or thirty years more and more credence has been given to the values of individual interpretation and subjectivity, as opposed to the vision of geography as a ‘science’ governed by detached objective data and reasoning. By 1986, R. J. Johnston was describing the humanist approach to geography, stating that:

The basic feature of humanistic approaches is their focus on the individual as a thinking being, as a human, rather than as a dehumanized responder to stimuli in some mechanical way, which is how some feel people are presented in the positivist and structuralist social sciences.<sup>165</sup>

This shift can be tracked, too, by the changes in the language used by members of the cultural geography discipline in order to access their material. Stephen Daniels and the brilliant cultural geographic commentator Denis Cosgrove identify this in 1993, stating that:

The present cultural turn in human geography has introduced metaphors and analogies more in keeping with an emphasis on meaning than function, and consequent

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<sup>163</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), p.4.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid*, p.3.

<sup>165</sup> R.J. Johnston, *Philosophy and Human Geography: An Introduction to Contemporary Approaches* (London: Edward Arnold, 1986), p.55.

abandoning of cybernetic and biological analogies. System and organism give way as metaphors to spectacle, theatre and text.<sup>166</sup>

It is obvious from this statement that this move brings geography of this kind closer—much closer—to the arts. This change in direction has not, of course, been entirely uncontested: Edmunds V. Bunkše points out that ‘The problem with accepting the imaginative works of humanists into the practice of geography...as valid and important sources of truth and insight is that geographers perceive them to represent individual, idiosyncratic subjectivities, lacking in universal significance and theory-building possibilities’.<sup>167</sup> But it is precisely this individualism that allows the artistic humanist elements to access a perspective on geographies that the scientific mode may lack. As Bunkše states:

The importance of literary-artistic humanism...resides in the fact that it examines and illuminates precisely those values that concern thoughtful people in the closing years of the twentieth century, that is, questions of ontology, significance, and the human condition in general...Both factual reality and transcendence are addressed by it...<sup>168</sup>

Yi-Fu Tuan, too, argues that, ‘In the capacious mind of a novelist, there is room for concrete details and large generalizations’, before making the

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<sup>166</sup> Stephen Daniels and Denis Cosgrove, ‘Spectacle and Text: Landscape Metaphors in Cultural Geography’ in *Place/Culture/Representation*, ed. James Duncan and David Ley (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.55-77, p.57.

<sup>167</sup> Edmunds V. Bunkše, ‘Humanism: Wisdom of the Heart and Mind’ in *Concepts in Human Geography*, ed. Carville Earle, Kent Mathewson & Martin S. Kenzer (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), pp.355-81, p.362.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*, p.360.

bold and vital claim that this ‘comprehensiveness... is itself of high intellectual value; places and people do exist, and we need to see them as they are even if the effort to do so requires the sacrifice of logical rigor and coherence’.<sup>169</sup> This general feeling that the intersection of artistic representation and geographical enquiry is both a rewarding and philosophically valid approach to the interplay of people and their surroundings makes it important to consider the particular facet of cultural geography related to the study of landscape. It is this particular point of ‘crossover’ that will be most significant for this thesis.

Denis Cosgrove memorably described landscape as ‘an imprecise and ambiguous concept whose meaning has defied the many attempts to define it with the specificity generally expected of a science’.<sup>170</sup> In the same year, John Brinckerhoff Jackson stated that, ‘What we need is a new definition. The one we find in most dictionaries is more than three hundred years old and was drawn up for artists...when it was first introduced (or reintroduced) into English, it did not mean the view itself, it meant a *picture* of it’.<sup>171</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, in his seminal text, *Landscape and Power*, laid out a set of ‘theses on landscape’ that include, ‘1. Landscape is not a genre of art but a medium’, ‘2. Landscape is a medium of exchange between the human and the natural, the self and the other’ and, perhaps most strikingly:

4. Landscape is a natural scene mediated by culture. It is both a represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame

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<sup>169</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, ‘Geographical Theory: Queries from a Cultural Geographer,’ *Geographical Analysis* 15 (1983): 69-72, 71-72.

<sup>170</sup> Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscapes* (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), p.13.

<sup>171</sup> John Brinckerhoff Jackson, ‘The Word Itself: from ‘Discovering the Vernacular Landscape’ in *The Cultural Geography Reader*, ed. Timothy S. Oakes & Patricia L. Price (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), pp.154-58, p.154.

contains, both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package.<sup>172</sup>

Landscape, then, is a difficult area; an ethical problem. It is, as Cosgrove reminds us, 'a *social* product, the consequence of a collective human transformation of nature'.<sup>173</sup> Mitchell, Cosgrove and Jackson all describe the danger of landscape representation, with Mitchell actively espousing a 'darker, sceptical reading of landscape aesthetics' (Mitchell 1994, p.6).<sup>174</sup> He continues to note that 'There are two problems with [the] fundamental assumptions about the aesthetics of landscape: first, they are highly questionable; second, they are almost never brought into question, and the very ambiguity of the word "landscape" as denoting a place or a painting encourages this failure to ask questions'.<sup>175</sup> The heart of the issue is that traditional landscape aesthetics have a tendency to assume a single and unproblematic vision; as Cosgrove puts it:

It offers a view of the world directed at the experience of one individual at a given moment in time when the arrangement of the constituent forms is pleasing, uplifting or in some other way linked to the observer's psychological state; it then represents this view as universally valid by claiming for it the status of reality. The experience of the insider, the landscape as subject, and the

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<sup>172</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Imperial Landscape' in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.5.

<sup>173</sup> Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation*, p.14.

<sup>174</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Imperial Landscape,' p.6.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid*, p.8.

collective life within it are all implicitly denied.<sup>176</sup>

For Mitchell this principle is intimately linked to questions of imperialism, and the implicit rendering of the Other as irrelevant in the face of a single, colonial vision, as can be seen throughout *Landscape and Power's* collection of essays. In ecocritical terms, however, it can also demonstrate an anthropocentric approach, rendering the physical location less relevant than the representation of it.<sup>177</sup> The point, however, is that landscape is not just one thing- a vision or a view. It is a contested space, 'not merely the world we see...a construction, a composition of that world. Landscape is a way of seeing the world'.<sup>178</sup> It is *also*, as Cosgrove powerfully claims in a 1988 essay, 'a uniquely valuable concept for a humane geography. Unlike place it reminds us of our position in the scheme of nature'.<sup>179</sup>

Discussions around landscape, in the sense of a human perception of an area of land, have taken many different forms. In the first few pages of this introduction I mentioned a number of recent 'nature writing' texts, including the work of Robert Macfarlane, John Lewis-Stempel, Roger Deakin, Tim Dee, Mark Cocker and others. What all of these books have in common in their relationship with landscape is their use of synecdoche, using one small element of the gigantic range of points and problems that make up landscape in order to make wider points about the nature of the human-land relationship that landscape as a concept both represents and embodies. This thesis will perform a similar conceptual move, by taking the concept of 'edges' and 'edge landscapes' and using the literary representations of these landscapes to make some wider suggestions about

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<sup>176</sup> Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation*, p.26.

<sup>177</sup> Laurence Coupe gives some interesting pointers on the anthropocentric issues surrounding issues of landscape in his 'Introduction' to *The Green Studies Reader*. This problem of the inevitability, and problematic ethical consequences, of anthropocentric approaches informs many of my close readings throughout the text.

<sup>178</sup> Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation*, p.13.

<sup>179</sup> Denis Cosgrove, 'Geography is Everywhere: Culture and Symbolism in Human Landscapes' in *Human Geography*, ed. Derek Gregory and Rex Walford (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), pp.118-35, p.122.

some of the most provocative ways in which twenty-first century fiction engages with questions related to the rural British landscape in the twenty-first century.

*The Intersection of Vertices: Edges*

The Oxford English Dictionary, with its usual thoroughness, has three main types of defined edge nouns:

I. A cutting edge

II. Things resembling a cutting edge (\*with regard to sharpness)

III. The boundary of a surface

Within these (very) broad categories, there are twelve smaller limitations and an even greater number of more detailed subsections. Most are fairly obvious, but this is distinctly pertinent: ‘the line in which two surfaces of a solid meet abruptly’.<sup>180</sup> Not two areas meeting at a line, but two planes, two surfaces. This implies three dimensions, an intersection between one directional reality (horizontal, say) and another (vertical). But the word has an astonishing number of permutations, many of which resist the sense of categorical definition.

Edge. On edge. Edgy. On *the* edge. Selvedge. Fringe. Boundary. Border. Margin. ‘To have an/the edge’. Edge away.

From the word ‘edge’ these other terms and phrases fan out along a spectrum of meaning; they extend the original term’s meaning and its influence, blur its own edges as its repercussions cross disciplines and shift

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<sup>180</sup> ‘edge, n.,’ *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, June 2016). Web: full website details given in bibliography.

from the physical to the metaphorical and back again. There are some notable interdisciplinary consensuses: the ‘border’, again, imposed by societies to prevent a blurring between, say, one nation and another, and the manmade ‘selvedge’ on a piece of fabric, which is designed to prevent fraying, to stop the clean edge becoming indistinct. There are some notable points of difference: think of the opposition between ‘fringe’— one state or space threading into another, an edge that is *defined by its own lack of definition*— and ‘border’, with its implications (contested or not) of absolute demarcation and distinction. There are also some more disconcerting points of congruity. Note how many of the uses above signify risk, danger or emotional disturbance. To be ‘on edge’ is to be nervy, frightened; to be ‘on *the* edge’ denotes teetering, indecision, the possibility of danger (or perhaps of opportunity). A blade’s edge is its killing side, as opposed to the punitive but non-fatal ‘flat’.

To play with these words for too long becomes in itself risky and perplexing; an exercise in construction and deconstruction, of creating paired meanings and then pulling them away. ‘Boundary’ and ‘border’ seem to fit together, to form a natural and almost synonymous pair; seem to, that is, until we consider the distinction between, say, a field boundary and a herbaceous border. Both delineate, but the border has something extra: an overt element of construction. A ‘border’, be it a checkpoint, a fence or a strip of flowers designed to demarcate areas within a garden, demonstrates and symbolises the existence of the boundary. The boundary is an imagined thread that lies between ‘this’ and ‘that (not-this)’: the border gives that imagined line a physical presence. Not the same at all. Far apart but still together, connected by their relationship to the same edge.

The most obvious example of this problematic principle within the British landscape is probably the cliff-edge: a literal horizontal-vertical intersection of land and sea. We walk on them, use them as lookout posts; cliffs are sites of both long sight and high perspective, but also of

crumbling earth beneath the feet, stumbling off into thin air and high winds. They are, then, both *literal* sites of risk and danger and also consistently constructed as a symbol of uncertainty, being on the brink of change (as a result of approaching invaders *or* as a receding vision of a safe past *or* a beckoning return home *or* as a result of falling). In both a literal and a metaphorical sense, then, the cliff edge fulfils this principle of two surfaces, two planes, two *dimensions of existence* meeting abruptly. The cliff also, through the intersection of its physical and symbolic properties, demonstrates a conflict between the possibility of emotional and intellectual gain and the risk of physical damage. This rather suggests that these physical edges also constitute an edge between the needs of our physical selves and the emotional demands of our consciousness.

It is notable, too, that the definition offered by the OED delineates the ‘edge’ as the boundary of a surface, not two; not delineating between ‘this place’ and ‘another place’, then, but a distinction between ‘this place’ and *everything else*. This edge is definitively not a between, but an outer limit, an extremity. The boundary is configured from the inside of it: from the outside it appears a boundary of exclusion, not of betweenness. One is not inside the wasteland that surrounds the Garden of Eden, for example: one is *outside* the Garden itself. From the inside, approaching the edge constitutes approaching risk, wildness, a world unlike the gentle one maintained inside; from the outside, it symbolises probable rejection, invasion, and exclusion. In the same way, our cliff from before from the bottom (i.e. the outside) symbolises danger, hard physical work, the risk of failure and the need to change direction and mode of transport (a ship, for example, is going nowhere when confronted by a cliff); from the top it symbolises a look into the future, as we watch incoming tides, weather and invaders, risk, warning and impending trouble.

What we see, then, is that an even bigger definition of an edge, beyond the three broad brushstroke categories denoted by the OED, is a line that



denotes some kind of *change*, physical or not. I have considered the principle of change already, but it is vital to consider, before going any further, what we are meaning by a line. Tim Ingold, in *Lines: A Brief History*, singles out ‘threads and traces’, being ‘a filament of some kind...suspended between points in three dimensional space’ and ‘any enduring mark left in or on a solid surface by a continuous movement’ respectively.<sup>181</sup> But neither of these feels like our edge. He also points out, though, something that may be of more use to us. Ingold notes that ‘the line of Euclidean geometry, in the words of Jean-Francois Billeter, ‘has neither body nor colour nor texture, not any other tangible quality: its nature is abstract, conceptual, rational’’.<sup>182</sup> That definitely seems closer to the ‘line’ of the edge definition, which we just can’t seem to define comfortably. Just as interestingly, Ingold turns to Vasily Kandinsky, who:

noted that ‘a particular capacity of line [is] its capacity to create surface’...The example Kandinsky uses is of how the moving, linear edge of the space cuts the surface of the soil...*creating a new, vertical surface in the process.*<sup>183</sup>

So Kandinsky is suggesting that lines, particularly in the context of edges, can create surface: that is, that what lies on either side of the line is some way manifested, or giving meaning, by the line. I suggest that the best way to consider the problem is actually to turn it on its head: in the case of an edge, its ‘line’ is given meaning by the nature of the things that it sits between, whether that is ‘this dimensional plane and that plane’, ‘here and everywhere else’ or even between ‘this state and another state’. Our tendency to talk about non-linear edges, in terms of emotional states- being on the brink; being on edge; being edgy- would seem to support this

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<sup>181</sup> Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp.2, 41, 43.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, p.47.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid, p.45.

principle. When we talk about edges in this sense, we imply this feeling of being at a point where two different modes of existence confront one another, rather than the line that literally constitutes this confrontation. So perhaps my preliminary working definition of a line that denotes change should be altered further. An edge in the context of this thesis, then, should perhaps be defined as *a locus that signifies change*. One of the edge's major characteristics, then, is quite clearly a distinct resistance to definition.

My research, and this project, is entirely about landscape, which is itself an edge, a point of abutment between the arts and geographical studies. When we talk about the edge of a place, we have so far considered only places that are in themselves literal edges, of one sort or another. Yet when we discuss an edge location, we are not always talking about an obvious place, like a cliff top. We can be referring to our own mode of being, our own ontological state, at that particular location: symbolically positioned in abutment to different types of existence, physically positioned in a landscape that *necessitates* different ways of existing. In a non-literal sense, then, the word 'edge' can suggest something about both human ontology and the relationship between humans and the world. If a film, or a fashion, or a person, has an edge, it signifies something of the 'sharpness' noted in the OED's second definition of the edge; they are not rounded off, they have something about their personality that is not softened or eroded by their environment. To be 'on edge' is similar; although the phrase signifies a mental state, it is one often engendered by something out of sorts in one's surroundings. Being 'off the edge of the map' carries the explicit connotation of topography (albeit of the artificial cartographic variety), *and* a sense of being somewhere entirely without certainty or geographical pinpointing.

In this sense, landscapes can carry the nuances that signify an edge without being a literal line between two diametrically opposed planes. The term can be employed to demonstrate that relationship between environment

and attitude that was considered in the paragraphs that introduced this discussion. A geographical feature can be an edge simply by engendering that feeling of cross-graining—a possibility and an uncertainty, a step off the cliff, a casting-off. Here, then, is an ‘edge’ definition that takes into account all of the points that I have raised:

**A location, physical and/or symbolic, that engenders an alteration in ontological state for the perceiver, resulting in an impression of possibility and uncertainty. The line that constitutes the edge does not necessarily entail a physical mark, but the resulting state of being that constitutes existence within or on the edge location.**

My work rests on the principle that the fiction at the centre of my research employs, in a multitude of complex ways, landscapes of these kinds in order to interrogate the manner in which people use, interact with and encounter their places. By depicting places that engender uncertainty, the novels can place this relationship in the foreground, focussing on it directly or employing it to question aspects of behaviour. The subject is almost turned a degree out of physical concordance with their environment, hyperaware of its significance. In some of the texts this tendency is both explicit and central, in others it is tangential, though no less important; in all of them it is resonant, interrogative and telling.

**‘Which is the Valley, and Which is Me’: Navigating the Wilderness  
in Alan Garner’s *Thursbitch***

*If the wild were to come close to extinction, its final fastnesses would be the mountain-tops, and the valleys they protected. These were places that, in the main, still kept their own patterns and rhythms, made their own weathers and their own light.*<sup>184</sup>

The idea of the wilderness, in one way or another, is as old as we are. It is one of the most tenacious landscape types in Western literature: it is the ‘cursed...ground’ where Adam and Eve are left when ejected from Eden;<sup>185</sup> is where Gilgamesh roams while mourning his lost friend Enkidu;<sup>186</sup> is even a reasonable description of the oceans traversed by Odysseus.<sup>187</sup> We apply the word to sandy deserts, the Arctic tundra, European mountainsides, heathland, salt flats, the great forests of America and Canada. There are, quite literally, thousands of places that have been called wildernesses, and the term has even come to signal a period of professional exclusion.<sup>188</sup>

This breadth of referents is, in part, due to the fact that no one can entirely agree on what a wilderness quantifiably *is*. More particularly, most general definitions of a wilderness do not describe any feature of the land itself. The Oxford English Dictionary suggests ‘A wild or uncultivated region or

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<sup>184</sup> Robert Macfarlane, *The Wild Places* (London: Granta Books, 2008), p.58.

<sup>185</sup> *The New International Version Bible* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1978), Genesis 3.17.

<sup>186</sup> Anonymous, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. Andrew George (London: Penguin, 2000). Tablets IX and X cover Gilgamesh’s journey through the wilderness in particular (pp.70-87).

<sup>187</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey* trans. Robert Fagles (London: Penguin, 1997). Regardless of the ocean’s important role in Greek food provision, it and its edges are consistently described throughout *The Odyssey* in terms of desolation: ‘a salty waste so vast, so endless’ (Book 5 l.112-3), ‘dark gulfs...grim coast’ (Book 7, l.316, 319), ‘barren sea’ (book 10, l.197).

<sup>188</sup> Being ‘in the wilderness’ and ‘the wilderness years’ are experiences most frequently afforded to politicians who have transgressed public or party opinion.

tract of land, uninhabited, or inhabited only by wild animals; ‘a tract of solitude and savageness’.<sup>189</sup> What this definition describes is not something about the place, but something about the way that it is used, inhabited, thought about by people. ‘Wildness’, ‘uncultivated-ness’, ‘uninhabitation’, are all words that have more to do with the way we are using- or not using- the land than they do with features of the place itself. The wilderness is somewhere that is not suited to us, friendly to our needs; the idea of ‘the wilderness’, in short, is not about the land; it is about us.

Roderick Frazier Nash addresses exactly this point in his own attempt to frame the principle of wilderness, stating that:

There is no specific material object that is wilderness. The term designates a quality...that produces a certain mood or feeling in a given individual and, as a consequence, may be assigned by the person to a specific place. Because of this subjectivity a universally acceptable definition of wilderness is elusive.<sup>190</sup>

Max Oelschlaeger, in his seminal text, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*, takes this idea a step further and gives a description of the shape that Nash’s ‘certain mood or feeling’ takes when it is applied: ‘a terra incognita,’ he calls it, ‘a forbidden place, a heart of darkness that civilized people have long attempted to repress’.<sup>191</sup> This repression, Oelschlaeger points out, is an evolved tendency: ‘The problem is that we are through and through civilized human beings who have drawn

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<sup>189</sup> ‘wilderness, n.,’ *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, June 2016). Web: full website details given in bibliography. I have included the OED definition as the most commonly used ‘authority’ on general usage, but the Collins and Chambers definitions— ‘a wild, uninhabited, and uncultivated region’ and ‘1. an uncultivated or uninhabited region. 2. any desolate or pathless area’, respectively— and those critical definitions that I have provided in the text, demonstrate the general nature of this tendency to focus on the anthropological, rather than topographical, aspects of ‘the wilderness’.

<sup>190</sup> Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind: Fifth Edition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p.54.

<sup>191</sup> Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p.1.

rigid distinctions between ourselves and the wilderness...Human beings have not always done so'.<sup>192</sup> J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson concur, describing 'the "received wilderness idea"—that is, the notion of wilderness that we have inherited from our forebears'.<sup>193</sup> Oelschlaeger also points out, however, that we have come to envision the wilderness as 'other': something opposite.<sup>194</sup> In other words, if the idea of wilderness is something that is part of *us*, it is part of ourselves with which we have a long and complex history of rejection, fascination and compulsion.

The fascination of the wilderness is an equally engrained facet of our relationship with it. Indeed, in some cultural contexts, wilderness spaces can function as environments in which their (respectful) visitors can experience a kind of transcendental epiphany. The obvious reference here is the work of the Romantic poets—the awe and literary inspiration invoked in the receptive imagination is well-worked critical territory.<sup>195</sup> Roderick Frazier Nash's chapter on 'The Romantic Wilderness', in *Wilderness and the American Mind*, is particularly clear in its examination of this tendency; he notes that, 'With the flowering of Romanticism in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, wild country lost much of its repulsiveness. It was not that wilderness was any less solitary, mysterious and chaotic, but rather in the new intellectual context these qualities were coveted'.<sup>196</sup> Nash goes on to point out (in typically wry fashion) that the

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid, p.5.

<sup>193</sup> J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson, 'Introduction' in *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, ed. J. Baird Callicott (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1998), p.2.

<sup>194</sup> Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, p.8.

<sup>195</sup> Roderick Frazier Nash is, of course, particularly focussed on the relationship between Romantic writing and the *American* wilderness, though the quotations provided here in the text do elucidate the general tendencies of Romantic writers and philosophers on both sides of the Atlantic. For an in-depth, though less concisely useful, examination of the Romantic envisioning of the wild, often in Europe termed 'the natural Sublime', Catherine E. Rigby's excellent *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004) provides thorough insight. Particularly interesting are the section on Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' (pp.160-164) and the brief note on Thomas Burnet's *Telluris Theoria Sacra* (1681), which Rigby identifies as an early envisioning of the 'pleasing horror' caused by landscape that would become known as 'sublime', and that 'educated Englishmen and Germans would seek in...wild and inhospitable places' (pp.137-138).

<sup>196</sup> Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness*, p.44.

relationship between wilderness and the Romantics is, far from rejecting the wilderness, based on a rejection of social mores and productions:

Wilderness appealed to those bored or disgusted with man and his works. It not only offered an escape from society but also was an ideal stage for the Romantic individual to exercise the cult that he frequently made of his own soul. The solitude and total freedom of the wilderness created a perfect setting for either melancholy or exultation.<sup>197</sup>

From a more aesthetic perspective, J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson consider the Romantic aspects of the ‘American Transcendentalists’, noting that:

Wilderness landscapes were supposed to be awe inspiring, the clear and magnificent handiwork of a beneficent and powerful god, instantiations of beauty as well as the very standard of the beautiful itself, and providing solitude so as to evoke profound spiritual self-reflection.<sup>198</sup>

Barry Lopez, writing more recently about one of the most enduring world wildernesses in *Arctic Dreams*, addresses the rejuvenating epiphanic effect of the human/wilderness relationship rather differently, although there are

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid, p.47.

<sup>198</sup> J. Baird Callicott & Michael P. Nelson, *The Wilderness Debate Rages On: Continuing the Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2008), p.6.

certainly echoes of the Romantic urge for the imaginative space afforded by the solitude, mystery and chaos Nash identifies:

The physical landscape is baffling in its ability to transcend whatever we would make of it. It is as subtle in its expression as turns of the mind, and larger than our grasp; and yet it is still knowable. The mind, full of curiosity and analysis, disassembles a landscape and then reassembles the pieces—the nod of a flower, the color of the night sky, the murmur of an animal—trying to fathom its geography. At the same time the mind is trying to find its place within the land, to discover a way to dispel its own sense of estrangement.<sup>199</sup>

My focus on the twenty-first century requires, however, some examination of the way we see wildernesses now. Oelschlaeger, whose work is focussed on tracing the evolution of the relationship between society and the idea of wilderness, suggests that there is a renewed interest in wilderness principles in what he terms ‘the Age of Ecology’. He also notably emphasises that this interest and its origins is more complex than it first appears:

If the hypothesis that the idea of the wilderness is linked with the developing character of human existence is cogent, then contemporary wilderness philosophy represents more than an extolling of the recreational value of wild nature, retrograde romanticism, or mystical escape from an

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<sup>199</sup> Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams* (New York: Vintage, 2001), xxii-xxiii.



over-populated, industrialized, anxiety-ridden, polluted, and violent world.<sup>200</sup>

The idea that wilderness is still a topic for debate in the twenty-first century is clearly marked by the proliferation of texts, both academic and more popular in tone, focussing on the continuing appeal of the wild. I will consider those publications that focus on aspects of British landscape in a moment; but considering those volumes with a more universal emphasis on the *idea* of the wilderness, one can track a contemporary interest that encompasses environmental, conservational debate and theoretical examinations of wilderness politics,<sup>201</sup> and a continuing public fascination with mountains, deserts and wastelands.<sup>202</sup> Callicott and Nelson, introducing *The Wilderness Debate Rages On: Continuing the Great New Wilderness Debate*, the sequel to their canonical *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, state that '[s]ince that first publication [in 1998], scores of scholars and wilderness defenders have weighed in on the great new wilderness debate with a considerable number of provocative (sometimes even vituperative) and mostly thoughtful essays'.<sup>203</sup>

Oelschlaeger focusses, for the most part, on universal questions of wilderness: on the ways that wildernesses have historically been represented and discussed on a really global scale, and particularly on the canonical influence of the wilderness *idea*. Nevertheless, his influences in

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<sup>200</sup> Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, p.5.

<sup>201</sup> Texts such as *The World and the Wild*, ed. David Rothenberg & Marta Ulvaeus (Terra Nova: University of Arizona Press, 2001) and the enduring popularity of the works of deep ecologist and philosopher Arne Naess, who died in 2009 (*Ecology of Wisdom*, a comprehensive collection of Ness' essays, was published posthumously in 2010) conflate questions regarding wilderness landscapes with wider questions of man-environment relationships.

<sup>202</sup> Listing recent popular texts that focus on the escapades of men and women in wilderness environments would be a lengthy exercise, but I do think that the proliferation of these biographical adventure narratives—particularly I would mention Aron Ralston's *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*; Jon Krakauer's account of the travels and death of Christopher McCandless, which both focus on the perils of American wilderness exploration; Sara Wheeler's *Terra Incognita: Travels in Antarctica* and Ranulph Fiennes' *Cold: Extreme Adventures at the Lowest Temperatures on Earth*—is a notable tendency in popular non-fiction.

<sup>203</sup> J. Baird Callicott & Michael P. Nelson, *The Wilderness Debate Rages On*, p.1.

terms of wilderness philosophy are primarily American and Canadian: Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold and John Muir, whose Scottish childhood Oelschlaeger largely leaves to one side in order to focus on Muir's experiences on the other side of the Atlantic. Oelschlaeger is not alone in this particular emphasis on American wilderness ideas, but while they are valuable, and also important in my own thinking on the wilderness idea, there are undeniably international differences in the way that wilderness is envisioned. In *PrairyErth: A Deep Map*, William Least Heat-Moon records a scathing comparison of English ideas of wilderness and the American equivalent:

I've been thinking about English landscape today: that tidy garden of a toy realm where there's almost no real wilderness left and absolutely no memory of it. Where the woods are denatured plantings. The English, the Europeans, are too far from it. That's the difference between them and us. Americans derive from recent wilderness...<sup>204</sup>

One of the most obvious misconceptions about the British—and most particularly English—rural landscape is this: that it is uniformly a green and pleasant one; tidy, genteel and lacking in anything that constitutes real wild nature. Paul Farley and Michael Symons Roberts, writing in *Edgelands: Journeys into England's True Wilderness* (emphasis mine), expose the disjunction between their lived experience and this mythos, arguing that, 'rather than...the rolling hills of biscuit-tin lids, the meadowlands and glades in the framed, reproduced pastorals our parents hung on our living-room walls', the wilderness that they recognised was

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<sup>204</sup> William Least Heat-Moon, *PrairyErth: A Deep Map* (New York: Mariner Books, 1999), p.618.

‘back lanes or waste ground...an old path leading through scratchy shrubland, or the course of a drainage ditch’.<sup>205</sup>

There are two complexities at work here. First, that the received idea of the English countryside is not as dramatic as wilderness would apparently require: Farley and Symons Roberts dryly describe ‘the sunlit uplands of jigsaw puzzles and Ladybird books’, which rings with the implication of the ‘tidy garden’ and ‘toy realm’ of Least Heat-Moon’s description.<sup>206</sup> Second, and perhaps most uncomfortably, that where it has existed, we have methodically removed it; Francis Pryor links the perceived lack of British wild places directly with our occupation of it, stating that, ‘In the simplest possible terms, the intimate scale of the British landscape and the huge size of the British population mean that the one is inevitably threatened by the other’, and, as a consequence, ‘Almost the entire British landscape has been transformed at some time by man’.<sup>207</sup> Farley and Symons Roberts argue, similarly, that, ‘At their most unruly and chaotic, edgelands make a great deal of our official wilderness seem like the enshrined, ecologically arrested, controlled garden space it really is’.<sup>208</sup> In short, Farley and Symons Roberts displace the ‘official’ wildernesses, now ecologically protected and controlled, and instead suggest a cultural focus upon the manmade edgelands that are both more accessible, more truly anarchic, and, they theorise, ignored. As far as they are concerned, ‘true’ wilderness of the conventional sort is no more ‘real’ than the rolling hills of the biscuit-tin lids.

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<sup>205</sup> Paul Farley & Michael Symons Roberts, *Edgelands: Journeys into England’s True Wilderness* (London: Vintage, 2012), p.2.

<sup>206</sup> This is an astonishingly narrow view of the rural UK that to me emphasises the consistent tendency to assume that the gentle features of the Home Counties are representative of the entirety. None of the landscapes I examine in the course of this thesis conform, and they cover only a fraction of the alternative, problematic places that litter the British mainland. I concede that the point for Farley and Symons Roberts is to emphasise the discord between their urban ‘edges’ and Britain ‘as advertised’; the absence of ‘true’ wilderness from this account is extraordinarily telling.

<sup>207</sup> Paul Farley & Michael Symons Roberts, *Edgelands*, p.2.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid*, p.8.

George Monbiot concurs, passionately, that where British wild places *can* be identified, the process of apparent protection is forcing upon them a single vision of the ecological state of development that we deem most appropriate.<sup>209</sup> He argues that:

...the choice of favoured ecosystems [for conservation] appears arbitrary, guided by impulses which have been neither widely examined nor properly explained. The decisions we have made are historical, cultural and aesthetic, dressed up in the language of science.

I would not object to this – the way in which we engage with nature will always be mediated by culture – were it not for the fact that some of the upland habitats we have chosen to conserve seem to me to be almost as dismal, impoverished and lacking in structure or complexity as a parking lot. This is not an entirely subjective view. Without trees, large predators, wild herbivores, rotting wood or many other components of a thriving ecosystem, these places retain only a few worn strands of the complex web of life.<sup>210</sup>

In other words, what British wildernesses there seem to be are managed to fit with our expectations of wilderness. Nor are Monbiot, Farley and

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<sup>209</sup> While Farley & Symons Roberts use the same ‘edgeland’ phrasing that informs my thinking, their focus is very different. Their interest is in the literal edges of human habitation—the margins of our urban constructions— as opposed to landscapes that fulfil the symbolic and metaphorical purpose of the edges.

<sup>210</sup> George Monbiot, *Feral: Rewilding the Land, the Sea, and Human Life* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p.20.

Symons Roberts alone in their discomfort with these constructed wilderness sites: even twenty-five years ago, photography journal *Aperture* published a special issue entitled ‘Beyond Wilderness’, which, the editors suggested, ‘attempts to direct public debate away from questions of preserving an artificial wilderness and toward a new and enlightened stewardship of the earth—our only earth, where we and our children live’.<sup>211</sup>

Yet perhaps ‘real’ wilderness, that is neither a human-made wasteland or a carefully managed ecological site, does still exist here. There are still areas of the British landscape that conform, in one way or another, both to Max Oelschlaeger’s ‘terra incognita’ and ‘forbidden place’ and to Barry Lopez’s vision of ‘a place where the common elements of life are understood differently’ that permits ‘an altered perspective’, and the finding and celebrating of them is one of the many preoccupations of the new wave of nature writers. Robert Macfarlane, writing in 2007, openly addresses the numerous dismissals of the possibility of British wilderness, noting that, ‘An abundance of hard evidence exists to support these obituaries for the wild’;<sup>212</sup> his response, however, is very different from that of, say, Farley and Symons Roberts, who attempt to refind the emotional stimulus of the wilderness by looking for it elsewhere. Macfarlane, alternatively, ventures in search of locations where it might yet remain, with the fixed intention to draw up ‘a prose map that would seek to make some of the remaining wild places of the archipelago visible again, or that would record them before they vanished for good’.<sup>213</sup>

The idea of rendering wildness visible again and, more chillingly, of recording it before it vanishes ‘for good’ is a very telling one. I mention it here because its combinations of intentions—to showcase and explore the profoundly important and forgotten corners of the country, and to demand attention for their attendant crisis—is an essential part, I am convinced, of

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<sup>211</sup> The Editors, ‘Beyond Wilderness,’ *Aperture: Beyond Wilderness* 120 (1990): 1,1.

<sup>212</sup> Robert Macfarlane, *Wild Places*, p.9.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid*, p.17.

the intent behind the renewed scrutiny of British landscapes in fiction. The writer on whom this chapter focuses, however, has been ahead of this particular curve since midway through last century: although I will focus on one of his comparatively few post-millennial works, he has been ‘prose mapping’ his particular wild place all his life.

Since the late 1950s, Alan Garner has been writing fiction set almost entirely in his immediate surroundings. ‘I have spent the whole of my life, so far,’ he states, ‘on the Pennine shelf of East Cheshire...And, in this particular place, I find a universality that enables me to write’.<sup>214</sup> Unlike the Romantic poets I mentioned earlier, however, his relationship with his location is not simply one of inspiration: Neil Philip, in *A Fine Anger*, his collection of critical essays on Garner’s work (the only one to, so far, exist), points out that, ‘The local researches have been carried on ever since [Garner’s first novel, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*]. Garner’s knowledge of the area’s history, pre-history, geology and geography is minute’.<sup>215</sup> If this is not prose-mapping at its most intensely personal and local, then what is?

Alan Garner’s work has always been based in his intimate understanding of the physical characteristics of the area he inhabits and the lives and livelihoods of the people who lived there before. Much of Garner’s writing—particularly his older novels, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, *The Moon of Gomrath* and *Elidor*—is based in the local folk narratives, particularly the Arthurian ‘The King Asleep Under the Hill’, that are part

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<sup>214</sup> Alan Garner, *The Voice That Thunders* (London: Harvill Press, 1997), p.4.

<sup>215</sup> Neil Philip, *A Fine Anger: A Critical Introduction to the Work of Alan Garner* (London: Collins, 1981), p.13. Philip’s book is to an extent endorsed by Alan Garner, in that he volunteered Neil Philip for the position: “He wasn’t at Crewe,” says Garner, “before I was on the phone saying to my editor—get that man—other people had been making moves to write critical works about me and I didn’t respect their scholarships or insights” (Sam Griffiths, ‘Beset by Bunk and Flummery,’ *Times Higher Education*, 12 June 1998. Web: full website details given in bibliography). Philip met Garner while writing his doctoral thesis: he was granted an unusually high level of access to Garner’s papers due to his request that he interview Garner and ask ‘questions of fact only’ (Sam Griffiths, ‘Beset’).

of the area's history, and were told to him by his family.<sup>216</sup> Partway through his writing career, however, a marked turn can be seen as Garner moves towards more complex examinations of the relationship between people and place: *The Stone Book Quartet*, published initially as four novellas in 1979, imagines a day in the life of four different generations of Garner's own family, connecting their existence with the landscape that he still inhabits. Though many of the issues and questions that his work raises are universally important, their focus remains intently, fiercely, on his own locale.

*Thursbitch*, the novel that I will focus on in this chapter, takes Garner's already acute focus on the landscape of his surroundings and narrows it to an almost microscopic level, centring entirely on the eponymous Pennines valley and its uncanny history. Garner tells its story through two narrative strands that focus on chronologically separate protagonists in Thursbitch and their parallel experiences of it. Despite the separation of the characters in time, their stories overlap and intertwine throughout the novel; while the protagonists move away from it and return, however, the narrative remains in the valley and its close environs.<sup>217</sup>

Although the novel was published in 2003, Garner stated in a lecture given to celebrate its publication that the novel's seed was planted much earlier, during a hill-run undertaken in his teens: a run which unwittingly propelled him close to the actual valley of Thursbitch, high in the Cheshire Pennines

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<sup>216</sup> Raymond H. Thompson & Alan Garner, 'Interview with Alan Garner,' *The Camelot Project* (Transcript), 12 April 1999. Web: full website details given in bibliography. These novels are generally also marketed as children's fiction, though Garner himself has consistently expressed frustration with the narrowing of perspective caused by delineating fiction as suitable for one age group or another. Nonetheless, Garner himself admits that his work often speaks most clearly to children. He claims that, 'Readers under the age of eighteen read what I write with more passion, understanding, and clarity of perception than do adults. Adults bog down, claim that I'm difficult, obscurantist, wilful, and sometimes simply trying to confuse. I'm not; I'm just trying to get the simple story simply told... I didn't consciously set out to write for children, but somehow I connect with them. I think that's something to do with my psychopathology, and I'm not equipped to evaluate it'. (Raymond H. Thompson & Alan Garner, 'Interview').

<sup>217</sup> Alan Garner, *Thursbitch* (London: Vintage, 2004). All further page references will be given in the text.

and near his lifelong home. Essentially, the adolescent Garner encountered a memorial stone, close to Thursbitch, which leaves more to the imagination than it records: on one side it reads, ‘Here John Turner was cast away in a heavy snowstorm in the night in or about the year 1755’. The other side, even more obscurely, reads, ‘The print of a woman's shoe was found by his side in the snow where he lay dead’.<sup>218</sup> From that moment, Garner argues, he ‘was, from time to time, hunted and haunted by that moment in the hills. The print of a woman’s shoe was in the snow where he lay dead’.<sup>219</sup> The connection with the valley of Thursbitch, which lies close to that memorial stone, was made clearer to him later, while engaged in some unrelated research with a friend:

[He] was pointing at the most desolate, remote, hemmed in by packed contours, bleakest farm of them all, far from any track. By it was the word, “Thursbitch”. The elements are Old English *Pyrs* and *bæch*: “demon”; “valley”... This was no Romantic conceit. For the people of those hills in the fourteenth century that valley was frequented by a *Pyrs*: a demon.

[...]

I’d not been to the concealed valley, but now  
I saw where it lay in my physical and  
emotional geography. I’d passed by its  
mouth on that afternoon, and now could see

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<sup>218</sup> The stone’s existence is well-documented (and photographed) and there is, I have found, very little actual evidence surrounding its wording. Garner states that ‘John Turner’ is an elusive figure: ‘of all the Turners...the only one for whom there’s no record but the memorial stone’. See reference below.

<sup>219</sup> Alan Garner, ‘The Valley of the Demon,’ *alangarner.atspace.org*, transcript of lecture, 4 Oct. 2003. Web: full website details given in bibliography.



the route up out of Saltersford over the moor to John Turner and the print of a woman's shoe in the snow where he lay dead, three quarters of a mile from the valley of the demon.<sup>220</sup>

I have reproduced these sections of Garner's account because they demonstrate the intermingling of his ideas about the land and its past inhabitants with his own 'physical and emotional geography'. In the same lecture, Garner states that a vicar who had once looked after the small chapel near the Thursbitch valley told him, uncannily, that 'the people of Saltersford [the nearby village] think of it as "no good place", "not right", "not safe". He ... said, "I wouldn't like to go up myself. I think the valley needs feeding".<sup>221</sup> Oelschlaeger's vision of the wilderness as 'a forbidden place' is echoed in that terminology of the 'valley of the demon'.

Valleys like Thursbitch have their own history of wilderness tendencies: inaccessibility is, in itself, forbidding, and this valley's depth and steep sides render it both unknown and unknowable. Within the novel, the fictionalised valley is no less forbidding than its literal counterpart:

Thursbitch was in shadow by the time they reached the entrance. Only the high tops and the ridge held the sun. Andrew's Edge was black. The first sheets of mist were lying among the reeds. The sky was blue metalled

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<sup>220</sup> Alan Garner, 'The Valley of the Demon.' It is impossible, of course, to judge whether Garner is telling the 'truth'—wholly or partially—about the novel's birth; in the context of this chapter, however, it is perhaps not entirely a fair question. The lecture from which these remarks are taken should be taken as another link, like the rich folk tale context that Garner references extensively throughout, between the literal Thursbitch and the Thursbitch of the novel.

<sup>221</sup> Alan Garner, 'The Valley of the Demon.'

above and in front, and behind them red  
without cloud. (p.84)

Robert Macfarlane suggests that valleys, ‘provoke in the traveller who enters them ... the excitement of the forbidden and the enclosed. ... Accounts exist within the literature of Western exploration of those who entered these spaces for the first time. They are accounts of wonderment and fear’.<sup>222</sup> Macfarlane’s description of the emotions of the valley-finding traveller makes a particularly telling point: these wilderness valleys are not easy to traverse, and are rarely places that are habitually moved through as part of a journey. Movement, and particularly a motion so vulnerable and exposed as walking, is restricted— by treacherousness of footing, by weather patterns— and so the very particular nature of the connection created by the act of walking, is disrupted and changed by the place. Knowing where to walk (and where not to walk!) becomes the difference between survival and death, and in doing so, becomes a telling signifier in the relationship between people and surroundings.

The importance of motion in the ways in which we interact with wildernesses is reflected clearly in both *Thursbitch* and Alan Garner’s account of its inception in his imagination. As well as the hill-run that led him to the memorial stone for the first time, Garner wryly describes his first travel away from it, noting that, ‘The hills took on a starker force... I’ve no means of checking, but I would assert that, if the distance from the stone to my bedroom could have been measured and my covering of that distance timed, the figures would still be in the record books’.<sup>223</sup> By this token, the novel was conceived in the context of movement, on foot, both toward and away. The novel begins, too, with two chronologically distant walks into the valley: the final walk of one protagonist, and the first walk of his twentieth century counterparts. (pp.1, 10). The uninhabited nature of the Thursbitch valley means that the narrative cannot progress *without*

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<sup>222</sup> Robert Macfarlane, *Wild Places*, p.47.

<sup>223</sup> Alan Garner, ‘The Valley of the Demon.’

walking: without walking, the characters and the valley cannot be together. In other words, both the existence of the novel and its content hinge on the principle of motion; not only that, but they hinge equally on the idea of making progress through a landscape notable for its uncanny particularity and difficult topography.

As a novel of the twenty-first century, *Thursbitch* is in some respects something of an anomaly; it is a slight book (in size only), written by a man who is, in the 2016 anthology of essays *First Light*, which marks his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, described on at least two different occasions, as ‘parochial’.<sup>224</sup> That word, with its roots in the ancient English system of myriad parishes, all deeply individual, is not a word that is heard much in secular, post-millennial Britain. But one of the key discourses that will return repeatedly throughout this thesis, is that of a particularly contemporary fascination with the small in the novels I discuss; the everyday; the extremely local and the extremely specific. And as David Almond says of Alan Garner:

He goes under the parish to fetch out stones,  
he cleans them, he inspects them, he shapes  
them with exquisite care, he turns them to  
steeple and into walls, he lifts them to the  
stars above.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> *First Light: A Celebration of the Life and Work of Alan Garner*, ed. Erica Wagner (London: Unbound, 2016), pp.9, 80.

<sup>225</sup> David Almond, ‘At the Edge’ in *First Light: A Celebration of the Life and Work of Alan Garner*, p.9.

1: 'A Glittering Mist, Worse Than Fog': Finding the Way, Knowing the Way

*Thursbitch* is structured around two parallel narrative strands, which portray very different experiences (in some respects, at least) of the eponymous valley. For the seventeenth-century protagonist, Jack Turner, whose story reflects the unsettling words carved into the stone Alan Garner found, the valley is a familiar place; for the twenty-first-century Sal and Ian, it is a new and unfamiliar location at the opening of the novel; somewhere, too, that they have come to visit, rather than to inhabit. The manners in which these characters navigate the valley's environs and challenges reflects the difference in their prior experience of the valley. Jack, raised in sight of the valley and deeply involved in his village's relationship with it, knows the way; Sal and Ian, who have never visited before, have to find it.

What does it mean to *find* the way, as opposed to knowing it? In both geoinformatic and cognitive-psychological circles, there is often no distinction: Martin Raubal and Stephan Winter are not alone in using 'wayfinding' as a general term, noting that 'Human wayfinding research investigates the process that takes place when people orient themselves and navigate through space'.<sup>226</sup> Reginald G. Golledge, editor of the seminal anthology, *Wayfinding Behavior: Cognitive Mapping and Other Spatial Processes*, suggests the following definition:

Wayfinding is the process of determining and following a *path* or *route* between an origin and a destination. It is a purposive, directed, and motivated activity. It may be *observed* as a *trace* of sensorimotor actions

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<sup>226</sup> Martin Raubal, & Stephan Winter, 'Enriching Wayfinding Instructions with Local Landmarks' in *Geographic Information Science*, ed. Max J. Egenhofer and David M. Mark (Berlin: Springer, 2002), pp.243-259, p.244.

through an environment. The trace is called  
the *route*.<sup>227</sup>

In the same volume, Gary L. Allen sets out a more complex taxonomy of wayfinding that includes three versions: travelling to a destination that is already familiar; navigation with an exploratory purpose (and no fixed destination); navigation to an unfamiliar destination.<sup>228</sup> All of these descriptions conflate different versions of movement through surroundings under the common umbrella term of ‘wayfinding’ but this seems, to me, to elide some of the richer connotations of the way we move through the world by ignoring the etymological implications of the term.<sup>229</sup>

I argue that ‘finding the way’ is distinct from ‘knowing the way’; that the difference is not only significant but utterly vital to understanding the ways in which our motion through space are related to our understanding of place. The syntactical distinction between finding and knowing, which I will set out below, is one that Golledge, Raubal and Winter, and Allen, and anthropologists such as K.V Istomin and M.J Dwyer (who also use ‘wayfinding’ as essentially synonymous with ‘human spatial orientation’) do not require: their focus is upon the scientific implications of the act, as opposed to the specifics of the term itself.<sup>230</sup> But dissecting the finding of the way as an active, rather than passive, principle seems valuable.

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<sup>227</sup> Reginald G. Golledge, ‘Human Wayfinding and Cognitive Maps’ in *Wayfinding Behavior: Cognitive Mapping and Other Spatial Processes*, ed. Reginald G. Golledge (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp.5-45, p.6.

<sup>228</sup> Gary L. Allen. ‘Spatial Abilities, Cognitive Maps, and Wayfinding: Bases for Individual Differences in Spatial Cognition and Behavior’ in *Wayfinding Behavior: Cognitive Mapping and Other Spatial Processes*, ed. Reginald G. Golledge (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp.46-80. Particularly pp.47-50.

<sup>229</sup> I suspect that the dissonance between these views and my own is a question of disciplinary difference: my interest, of course, is in the etymological distinction between the two, but also the intangible difference in psychological affect, rather than the scientific processes by which they occur.

<sup>230</sup> K. V. Istomin & M. J. Dwyer, ‘Finding the Way: A Critical Discussion of Anthropological Theories of Human Spatial Orientation with reference to Reindeer Herders of Northeastern Europe and Western Siberia,’ *Current Anthropology* 50: 1 (February, 2009): 29-42.

Locating paths— actively doing so— is one of the primary ways in which human beings connect with space and therefore transform it into place.

The key distinction between *finding* the way and *knowing* the way is that the former implies unfamiliarity; one does not need to search for a path already found. As such, finding the way is a process peculiar to people who are, in themselves, unfamiliarly placed; they are automatically distanced from their locale. The present tense of this finding implies, too, the sense of action and motion.<sup>231</sup>

In a wilderness environment like the Thursbitch valley the process of wayfinding is foregrounded by the physical challenge of the terrain. In *Thursbitch*, Garner emphasises the effort entailed for the walker: the ‘steep of the valley’ (p.14) is not widely traversed; Sal and Ian, newcomers to the environment of Thursbitch, notably climb over a fence to access it, and Garner emphasises the contrast between the valley and the more populated routes left behind: ‘At once they were on blanket bog and cotton grass. Behind them woollen hats bobbed for a while. The wind was the same, but there was a stillness that the path did not have’(p.10). It is a ‘hidden valley’ (p.10). The minimal evidence of previous human travel is degraded and not usable: ‘A track cut down across the steep of the valley, brown on green, more than a path. It had been made, though rough; too mean and rushy to walk, but the bank thrown up to the side was firm enough to wobble on’(p.14). In short, there is no well-worn, established path through Thursbitch: the wilderness landscape demands the most proximal and

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<sup>231</sup> This condition of action and motion is one explicitly denied by Darken and Peterson, who make a distinction between wayfinding, ‘the cognitive element of navigation’, which ‘does not involve movement of any kind but only the tactical and strategic parts that guide movement’, and motion, ‘the motoric element of navigation’; ‘navigation’, they claim, ‘is the aggregate task of wayfinding and motion. It inherently must have both the cognitive element (wayfinding) and the motoric element (motion).’ (Rudolph P. Darken & Barry Peterson, ‘Spatial Orientation, Wayfinding, and Representation’ in *Handbook of Virtual Environments: Design, Implementation, and Applications*, ed. Kay M. Stanney (London: Taylor & Francis, 2008), pp.493-518, p.494). This definition is inherently problematic, as the distinction constructed in the body of the text between the activity implied by ‘finding’ is opposed to the possibility of stillness inherent in ‘knowing’; Darken and Peterson’s definition, while interesting, relates very strongly to their focus upon *virtual* environments and wayfinding in the context of virtualisation.

primary form of wayfinding since Sal and Ian must almost create their own way (pp.16, 17). The wilderness environment throws the finding of the way into the foreground; in making it necessary, it also makes it explicit; in this manner, Garner exploits the contingent necessity of attention to the landscape so that it becomes a principle thematic and aesthetic concern throughout *Thursbitch*'s narrative.

Finding the way also entails a sense of estrangement; one does not 'find the way' in their home environment. 'Wayfinding' must, by its very nature, be undertaken by aliens; it is thus characterised by displacement and dislocation.<sup>232</sup> In the context of Yi-Fu Tuan's definition of place as what happens to space when we 'get to know it better and endow it with value', then the process of finding the way is, in this sense, rendered as one of the key methods by which place can, quite literally, be made.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold draws a distinction between what he terms 'inhabitant' and 'occupant' modes of existence, which are intrinsically linked to the ways in which people travel through environments.<sup>233</sup> The inhabitant, Ingold argues, 'is...one who participates from within in the very process of the world's continual coming into being and who, in laying

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<sup>232</sup> The 'strangeness' that I mention here is, of course, reminiscent of the unfamiliarity and not-being-at-home that is termed by Martin Heidegger as '*unheimlichkeit*' or 'the feeling of not being at home'. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that this sense of 'strangeness' is related to the anxiety of the realisation that Dasein, the state of human being, is, to use Hubert Dreyfus' term, '*dependent upon a public system of significances that it did not produce*' (Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-In-The-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991), p.177.): in other words, they come to realise that their existence within the world is based entirely upon interpretations, not concrete at all. They are not-at-home, literally in the sense of their position in an unfamiliar environment and metaphorically, in that the difficulties inherent in attempting to know Thursbitch mean that 'Everyday familiarity collapses ... Being-in enters into the existential 'mode' of the "*not-at-home*".' (Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), p.233). While it is, of course, with Sigmund Freud that the Uncanny really begins, I have focused on the Heideggerian aspect because of his explicit linkage of the *unheimlich* with the ontology of dwelling.

<sup>233</sup> Tim Ingold, *Lines*, p.73. Ingold begins by describing two patterns of movement: the first, which he terms a 'trace', follows a continuous pattern that is 'intrinsically dynamic and temporal'. The trace is continuous, 'free to go where it will, for movement's sake'.

a trail of life contributes to its weave and texture'.<sup>234</sup> Despite the recency of *Lines*' publication, Ingold's vision of inhabitation seems almost old-fashioned; indeed, his examples of 'inhabitant' movement prioritise the traditional behaviours of small indigenous groups and envision principles of daily travel in routine patterns through fairly stable landscapes. There is a discourse of nostalgia inherent in this discussion that, while not invalidating Ingold's distinction, should be kept in mind.<sup>235</sup> Ingold equates the occupant, conversely, with 'imperial powers' who colonise, 'throwing a network of connections across what appears, in their eyes, to be...a blank surface'.<sup>236</sup> He or she 'moves along lines that are 'tied to specific locations. Every move serves the purpose of relocating persons...and is oriented to a specific destination'.<sup>237</sup> Their trajectory 'goes from point to point, in sequence, as quickly as possible...every successive destination is already fixed prior to setting out, and each segment of the line is pre-determined by the points it connects'.<sup>238</sup>

Ingold suggests that these different ways of moving through the world also represent our experience of epistemological progression. Primarily he argues that 'the knowledge we have of our surroundings is forged in the very course of our moving through them, in the passage from place to place and the changing horizons along the way'.<sup>239</sup> Ingold suggests that we have come to see, in the contemporary era, the 'occupant' methods of travel and knowledge-building as standard, stating that:

Many geographers and psychologists have argued that we are all surveyors in our everyday lives, and that we use our bodies ... as the surveyor uses his instruments, to

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid, p.85.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid, p.81.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid, p.73.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid, p.87.



obtain data from multiple points of observation ... from which it assembles a comprehensive representation of the world—the so-called cognitive map.<sup>240</sup>

Ingold himself, however, categorically gives primacy to the inhabitant mode, insisting that it ‘it is fundamentally through the practices of wayfaring that beings inhabit the world’ and that ‘to understand how people do not just occupy, but *inhabit* the environments in which they dwell, we might do better to revert from the paradigm of the assembly to that of the walk’.<sup>241</sup>

In *Thursbitch*, the dichotomy posited by Ingold becomes, at the novel’s start, a loose binary consisting of Jack Turner on the one side—that of the inhabitant, with complete knowledge of his landscape gained from empirical experience and inherited understanding—and Sal and Ian on that of the visiting occupant, viewing the valley as a place in which to walk, in which to have an occupation, rather than to live. Despite the fact that they are not there to colonise the valley, Sal and Ian are, at the opening of the novel, perhaps the perfect avatars of the occupant (finding-the-way) mode of active geographic knowledge-gaining: the way in which the occupant gains knowledge of place is by making inferences about fixed points, building an overall knowledge in layers of extrapolative—and most vitally, static—observation. Sal and Ian deride those around them, who are so focussed on the process of connecting A and B, achieving an arrival at an aimed-for destination (‘doing the Tors’) but they too focus on the fixed landmarks that pepper the valley: the natural outcrop of the cave, Thoon

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid, p.88. The principles of cognitive mapping are considered most explicitly in the work of spatio-cognitive psychologists; Edward Tolman’s essay ‘Cognitive Maps in Rats and Men’ (see Bibliography) is widely considered to be the first use of the term, but the introduction to the anthology *Image and Environment: Cognitive Mapping and Spatial Behaviour*, written by the editors, Roger M. Downs and David Stea is particularly helpful, as is the chapter in the same publication entitled ‘On Mental Maps’ by Peter R. Gould. The concise essays of Donald R. Griffin and Kevin Lynch in the same anthology are interesting visions of the issues surrounding spatial orientation.

<sup>241</sup> Tim Ingold, *Lines*, p.89.

(p.11), the standing stones (p.16) and the wellspring (p.17). They are committed to the same process of point-by-point travel, albeit to a less extreme degree; they navigate, rather than live, their movement. To do so, they employ contemporary technology: the minute pictorial focus of the Ordnance Survey map, and, perhaps most significantly, a portable global positioning system (p.24).

The GPS is a powerful geo-locationary tool, and one that has evolved rapidly and perhaps unpredictably in the twenty-first century. Developed by the United States Department of Defence:

The GPS is almost the perfect map; impartial, and with no axes or limits to be set by human intervention. The politics surrounding the *agency* of mapping do not apply: the GPS is in no respect an interpretive representation, but an aggressively neutral envisioning... As John Pickles notes, 'The integration of the technology of accurate location ... would permit an improved geography to be developed, a three-dimensional representation (a geography in depth) accurately pegged to the material world around us'.<sup>242</sup>

The fact that the GPS works on a vertical basis—by bouncing signals upwards and downwards—is particularly telling in the context of Tim

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<sup>242</sup> John Pickle, 'Representations in an Electronic Age: Geography, GIS, and Democracy' in *Ground Truth: The Social Implications of Geographic Information Systems*, ed. John Pickles (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995), pp.1-30, p.7. There have been numerous discussions of the ethical difficulties engendered by the process of mapmaking: particularly useful are J. B. Harley's essay, 'Cartography, Ethics, and Social Theory' (see bibliography) and *Mappings*, edited by Denis Cosgrove.

Ingold's distinction between the ways in which his inhabitant and occupant accrue knowledge of their surroundings:<sup>243</sup>

According to this view, [occupant] knowledge is integrated not by going *along* but by building *up*, ... by fitting these site-specific fragments into structures of progressively greater inclusiveness.<sup>244</sup>

[For the inhabitant] a way of knowing is itself a path of movement through the world: the wayfarer literally 'knows as he goes' ... along a line of travel.<sup>245</sup>

In *Thursbitch*, the GPS' function is dramatically negated. As Sal and Ian walk in Thursbitch, 'the low cloud caught them before they were aware, and they were in a glittering mist worse than fog. The valley had gone' (p.24). They are left without the benefit of their long-range sight, but Ian shrugs off this demonstration of nature's undeniable influence: "It's no problem," he said. "The GPS will give us a fix" (p.24). The GPS, of course, does not; Sal and Ian are forced to admit that the unwarrantable failure of the human technology is a result of their surroundings: "It's not picking up on the satellites. The valley may be too steep" (p.25). The tools that entail a distanced perspective are thus disrupted; preventing a virtualised form of navigation and requiring a process based upon direct sensory interaction on the part of the wayfinders. This rejection of the simulatory tools of the twenty-first century broadly articulates the shift that I identified in the

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<sup>243</sup> Michael Pacione, *Applied Geography: Principles and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.596. The ethics of precise geolocation as a norm are still being contested as social networking sites allow public self-location; this area of discussion will, no doubt, expand as technology advances. In the meantime, most references are related to concerns of hyper-surveillance: a good resource on the topic of increasing surveillance in social circumstances is *A Report on the Surveillance Society*, written for the Information Commissioner by the Surveillance Studies Network.

<sup>244</sup> Tim Ingold, *Lines*, p.88.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid*, p.89.

Introduction as a symptom of the literary response to the qualities of uncertainty and self-reflexivity that are coming to characterise the present moment; that is, the shift towards the attempt to ‘tell a story, which instead of seeking to offer truth, deep meaning, or philosophical belief, depicts particular aspects of the modern world refracted through the life experience of individuals’.<sup>246</sup> In the *Thursbitch* GPS, we see the discourse of the neutral, the wide-angle and the apparently global perspective of the technology subverted and replaced by the individual sensory experience.

The failure of the GPS also highlights the tensions created by Ingold’s ‘occupant’s’ accretion of knowledge; moving across the land, navigating via a representation of the valley, rather than navigating *through* the place itself, does not provide the same epistemological insights. Instead it offers only a distanced representation of it. The characteristics of the valley itself disrupt the GPS’ production of landscape and, in the process, the novel depicts the removal of the apparent (though tenuous) security that contemporary technology can offer. In a sense, the removal of the technology represents the uncertainty that inhabits all of the novels considered in this work. Peter Boxall argues that, ‘...if the novel today tells us anything about the future, it tells us ...to think about a time for which we have no vocabulary and no measure’.<sup>247</sup> Garner manifests a scenario in which his post-millennial characters lose the vocabulary and measure of their technological aids, enabling him to portray for the reader the experience of uncertainty at its most immediate, and the ethics of localist proximity and its most urgent, as Richard Lehan suggests, by ‘affirming primitive values, especially undoing the connection between human elements and technology’.<sup>248</sup>

In order to evolve from this point of uncertainty and progress towards an apparently secure inhabitative mode, Garner suggests that Sal and Ian

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<sup>246</sup> Peter Childs, *Contemporary Novelists: British Fiction since 1970* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p.14.

<sup>247</sup> Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, p.214.

<sup>248</sup> Richard Lehan, *Literary Modernism and Beyond: The Extended Vision and the Realms of the Text*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), p.241.

must, in Ingold's terminology, learn to 'know as they go'. In other words, knowledge is gained by proximity to the land; removing the technology means removing the abstract representative layer that it presents between the person and the place. Ursula Heise relates the story of a professor who finds to his horror that while his students can 'converse knowledgeably about chlorofluorocarbons and the ozone hole but most can't tell a pine from a fir'.<sup>249</sup> She goes on to note that:

The fact that the students who fall short in their identifications of local plants do seem to have a fairly detailed understanding of larger-scale ecological phenomena...is dismissed here as too abstract a kind of knowledge. The basis for genuine ecological understanding...lies in the local.<sup>250</sup>

Proximity, without the distancing inherent in the GPS, allows a level of epistemological depth impossible otherwise; the fact that the technology removed is a product of millennial modernity implies that this proximity is something that we are, in one way or another, in danger of losing, as Heise's anecdote suggests, and with it, the localist 'basis for genuine ecological understanding' that she identifies.

If the loss of the GPS (and, for that matter, the visibility to use the (unusable) map), is the first way in which Garner documents the transference of Sal and Ian from the state of finding to the state of knowing, then the second is the gradual erosion of the relevance of scientific knowledge. This again reflects Heise's suggestion regarding the necessity

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<sup>249</sup> Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.28.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid, p.28. It should be noted that Heise does continue to critique this vision of the overwhelming need for the local; nonetheless, the fact remains that this, in Heise's words, 'insistence on individuals' and communities' need to reconnect to local places..., as well as long-standing ambivalences about the global are...formative and characteristic dimensions of American environmentalism' (pp.28-29).

of disrupting the hierarchy of apparently ecological comprehension that currently prioritises the students' 'chlorofluorocarbons'. Sal, a talented and irascible geography academic, is dying, degenerating with a terminal neuromuscular disease.<sup>251</sup> Particularly notable in the context of this chapter is the effect that the disease has upon her memory. During section Three - the first to feature Sal and Ian, and covering their first visit to Thursbitch- Sal examines the rock feature of Thoon:

“My God, my God, I know this. Marsdenian R-Two. ... The freeze thaw doesn't penetrate through, nor does the sub-vertical master joint. Which suggests. Wait. Wait. I know. The master joint can't be tectonic. So the horizontal layered joints have developed weaknesses in the bedding and the cross bedding by freeze-thaw processes. Which means. Am I still making sense?” (p.11)

Sal's knowledge is intermingled with her uncertainty: her fragmented syntax and exhortations to 'Wait' despite the fact that she is speaking uninterrupted demonstrate the fragility of a knowledge deeply engrained in her memory; she looks to Ian, who has no geographic background, for reassurance; she constantly checks the accuracy of her statements: “Am I still making sense?” (p.11), “Was I right?” “Am I gabbling?” (p.12). Garner emphasises the process of Sal's degeneration by consistently referring back to this original visit through Ian, who keeps meticulous notes of what she has said so that she may have evidence of her repeated

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<sup>251</sup> The unofficial Garner website's 'Thursbitch Tangents' section (accredited by Garner himself, who fact checks there regularly) contains notes pertaining to Huntington's Disease (also known as Huntington's Chorea), a mature onset genetic condition that affects motion, mental function and speech, and it seems reasonable, therefore to tentatively examine this as the cause of Sal's decline. Garner's fact checking is mentioned by him in a personal communication, which is reproduced in full in the Appendix.

remembered facts: “Wait.” He opened his bag and took out a notebook. “Marsdenian R-Two. That’s what you said on the outcrop.””(p.39).

The valley itself, conversely, becomes the only point of stability in her increasingly fragmented world, again suggesting the disruption of the artificial hierarchy of the scientific overview versus the sensory experience of the proximal:

“Time is breaking,” she said. “I can’t read any more. Three pages and I’ve forgotten what the book’s about. It’s the same with the telly. I can watch a film over and over, and don’t know what’s going to happen next. I can’t keep enough in my head to follow a reasoned paper, not even when it’s written by someone I once taught... And here. At first it was as bad as anywhere. But I’ve remembered even what I’d forgotten. Don’t you see what that means to me? Outside, all I have is what I knew before this started. Now, nothing stays. I feel safe with the valley.” (p.84)

Garner’s point is that, for Sal, the present is tenuous; except, of course, within the environs of Thursbitch. By abandoning her previous accretions of information, and relating the valley consistently back to her previous experiences of the valley *itself*, however, Sal represents the fundamental shift from anthropocentric (and egocentric in this case) spatial cognition to a geocentric approach; she also represents the connection between this shift and the accretion of the localist, proximal knowledge. In her sickness, too, Sal reflects a very particular version of the rejuvenating possibilities of contiguous interaction with landscape, which Heather Houser describes (most particularly, in her analysis to be found in Abraham Verghese’s

memoir, *My Own Country: A Doctor's Story*) thus: 'only a timeless harmonious environment, one free of the sociocultural and historical contingencies that affect inhabitants' sickness experience, nurtures the belonging [Verghese] seeks'.<sup>252</sup>

Sal, then, learns to 'find the way' constructively in an environment that resists approaches that entail only physical interpretation. She is forced to also take into account the necessity to, in that classic phrase from Yi-Fu Tuan, 'get to know it better and endow it with value'; a phrase that emphasises, once again, this prevailing insistence on personal proximity.<sup>253</sup> She learns to contextualise herself in relation to it; in other words, she place-makes by way-finding and way-finds by place-making. It is notable that this is almost the polar opposite of the point that Tuan is making when he uses the phrase quoted above. He suggests that 'if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place'.<sup>254</sup> This is, of course, somewhat opposed to Ingold's perception of knowing (and, therefore, its precursor, finding) as a fundamentally active mode of being— although Tuan nods to Ingold's argument by suggesting that place is related to the space's potential for motion.

In the Thursbitch wilderness, action is necessary, but it must be the right *kind* of movement; the variety with frequent pauses for reflection and perception, and the kind that focuses on the land that contains the way, not simply on the path as a directive to an end. In this sense Thursbitch's requirement for a cessation of the purposeful point-by-point progression that Ingold identifies as the mark of the occupant; this insistence on the need to pause the relentless trajectory is reminiscent of Peter Boxall's suggestion that in the twenty-first century '...we find ourselves...at a

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<sup>252</sup> Heather Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary American Fiction: Environment and Affect* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p.37.

<sup>253</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p.6.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*



historical juncture in which historical and spatial narrative has lost its bearings'.<sup>255</sup> In this moment of lost bearings, the inevitable necessity of the pause, and the attendant stock-taking, is evident, and thrown into high relief. When this occurs, it is possible for the occupant to become an inhabitant; in the case of Sal, and to a lesser extent, Ian, this shift is finalised by an overnight period spent in the valley. To become an inhabitant is to know the way. This 'particular kind of "situated knowledge," the intimate acquaintance with local nature and history...', Heise notes, 'develops with sustained interest in one's immediate surroundings':<sup>256</sup>

This type of knowledge is often portrayed as arising out of sensory perception and physical immersion, the bodily experience and manipulation of nature, rather than out of more abstract or mediated kinds of knowledge acquisition.<sup>257</sup>

This is exactly the kind of 'knowledge' that *Thursbitch* appears to prioritise; the Thursbitch valley within in the novel, actively prevents, as I have shown, those 'abstract or mediated kinds of knowledge acquisition'. It may seem, at this juncture, as if Alan Garner is rather wilfully using the valley's wilderness credentials to create a hierarchy that valorises inhabitant knowledge while demonstrating the inadequacies of the occupant equivalent. As Jonathan Bate argues, with a slightly wider emphasis, 'An 'ideology' based on a harmonious relationship with nature goes beyond, in my ways goes deeper than, the political model we have become used to thinking with'.<sup>258</sup> In this context it is easy to recognise the temptation of a somewhat recidivist notion of a return to an existence based

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<sup>255</sup> Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, p.43.

<sup>256</sup> Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place*, p.30.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Jonathan Bate, 'From Red to Green' in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. Laurence Coupe (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), pp.167-172, p.170.

on nostalgic ideas of co-existence—as Bate puts it, ‘[b]y recuperating the Wordsworthian pastoral’—instead of the instrumentalist version of use-based interaction with our surroundings.<sup>259</sup> Yet the novel’s engagement with the principle of localist, inhabitant epistemology is significantly more complex than this simple formulation of the urge to recoup a lost, valuable resource. Garner’s depiction of both the day to day experience of the inhabitant wayfarer, and its ultimate subversion, disrupts the apparent hierarchy of understanding that Garner has concurrently produced via the contrasting experiences of Sal and Ian and the seventeenth-century Jack Turner.

By Garner’s account of discovering the memorial stone near Thursbitch, the relationship between Jack Turner and the valley is placed at the very heart of *Thursbitch*’s generation; the manifestations of this interaction inform every one of the seventeenth-century chapters so that the plot of the novel, too, centres on this relationship. Jack’s involvement with the valley within the novel is not, as it is with that of Sal and Thursbitch, a new phenomenon. Within the novel’s scope, it is a well-established interconnection: Jack has inherited a detailed knowledge of the seasonal rituals undertaken by the village community in order to interact on a symbolic level with what that community believes to be the sentient spirit of Thursbitch, and as such holds a quasi-shamanic position as a form of invested mediator between the valley and the population (pp.48-49). There is a concern that the role is damaging to its incumbent: Jack Turner’s father warns, “Last time, he took John Pott. And John Pott was three days a-dying.”; Jack dismisses his concerns, noting that “Maybe it’s not but right to pass it on, so as young uns can learn, and it’s not lost” (p.48) The relationship between man and valley is hereditary but communally so— a result of familial inhabitation with the valley for long seasons, and with a view to the future of the community as inhabitants. Life and the Thursbitch valley are thus intertwined by Garner: the process of living in the vicinity

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

of the valley is bound up so intimately with the valley itself that there is no sense of the community without it.

The possible consequences of entry into the valley, even for one of its inhabitants, is evidenced by the fact that Garner chooses to arrange the novel's fractured chronology so that the reader's first meeting with it is Jack Turner's final, suicidal one; when the reader first encounters him entering the valley after this, the journey is referred to casually, though the true reason is absolutely serious: "I'm for Thursbitch on a job of me father's. Are you coming?" (p.28). The use of the term 'job' renders the task an everydayone, denoting the manner in which the rituals concerned with the valley are bound up with the practice of the everyday. Turner and his lover, Nan Sarah, walk to the valley through fields, signs of cultivation that deny the wilderness nature of their destination, and emphasise the British, fertile rurality of their immediate surroundings.<sup>260</sup> It is not until they reach Thursbitch itself that its preternatural significance is clear:

High stones marched into Thursbitch from all around, gathering the ways from the hills down and through the valley: from Longclough, from Osbaldestone, from Jenkin, each to be seen by another but none by all, marking every brink; Two-Johnny Goiker on Andrew's Edge, and Sprout-kale Jacob over Redmoor; Biggening Brom under Catstair; each line and double way coming to Bully Thrumble at the fork at the ford below

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<sup>260</sup> Garrard relates Heideggerian dwelling to the tradition of the Georgics, and it is true that what Garrard refers to as an 'emphasis on the relationship of agricultural productivity and ritual observance' (Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, p.109) is closely related to Garner's emphasis on interconnection between the village's agricultural mode of being and their ritualistic approach to Thursbitch; agriculturalism is another *active* form of land knowing, although it lacks the overt forward motion associated with the walking and running at the centre of this chapter.

Thoon. And Lankin stood at the mouth.  
(p.28)

It is interesting to note that this passage contains an extraordinary number of different visual perspectives; through the fields, up to the point where the valley's mouth becomes clear, the march of the standing stones (p.28). Then, as Jack and Nan Sarah approach, 'The hills drew towards Bully Thumble. It stood near the head of the valley, yet was its heart. The stone pillar, not the height of a big man, was the first and the last of the eye's every journey' (p.29). Tim Ingold addresses the sequential nature of opening views ('the eye's journey'), suggesting that, '[a]s James Gibson argued, in laying out his ecological psychology, we perceive the world along a 'path of observation'.<sup>261</sup> He also suggests that 'proceeding on our way things fall into and out of sight, as new vistas open up and others are closed off. [...] Thus the knowledge we have of our surroundings is forged in the very course of our moving through them.'<sup>262</sup> Displaying Thursbitch through the steadily progressing vision of its inhabitants in this manner directly contrasts with the 'plodding' of Sal and Ian, and their point-by-point navigation by the landmarks, 'the cube of rock', and 'the track' (pp.10, 15).

'The wind was light from the east,' Garner's third-person narrator notes, 'so he went up by Redmoor and along the side of Andrew's Edge to Sprout-Kale Jacob' (p.45). That casual conjunction, 'so', emphasises the conscious nature of the adaptation of the protagonist's trajectory: the wind is a particular wind, from a particular direction, and *so* Jack Turner makes a particular journey into the valley—the implication being that this route, 'up by Redmoor and along the side of Andrew's Edge', is chosen instead of *another*. The fact that this decision is a result of the Thursbitch weather patterns demonstrates the advantages of the inhabitant mode in unpredictable environments, where the changeable weather can and does

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<sup>261</sup> Tim Ingold, *Lines*, p.90.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid*, p.87.

have a tangible effect on the physical landscape and therefore on the ability of the human to move through it.<sup>263</sup>In the single word, ‘so’, is encompassed a decision, a conditionality of navigation related in an absolute sense to the land being traversed and Turner’s ability to discern—as a habitual routine—preferable combinations of weather, location and journey coordinations. In other words, Garner describes Turner’s trajectory through the valley in terms related closely to Ingold’s ‘inhabitant’ mode of knowing and travelling: Turner ‘knows as he goes’, and ‘knowing the way’ in this sense is a combination of comprehending the physical landscape and also knowing the less literal ‘way’ or ‘nature’ of the land in all circumstances and all times- the Way, as well as the way. The function of the pagan-religious rites that Jack engages in within the valley are designed to cement the reciprocity of the existing connection between the community and the valley; as the officiator of the rites, Turner is part of that connection as well as a producer of it (pp.45, 46). When he walks the valley circuit with the stone head of Crom, he does so with the avowed purpose of place-making (pp.73, 74). He reinforces the valley’s significance in the cognitive map of the community, thus increasing its ‘place-ness’ in Yi-Fu Tuan’s requisites of ‘endowing with value and getting to know it better’; this also, however, constructs a perception of place that is based in an anthropocentric imagination of a relationship founded in reciprocal understanding and collaboration.<sup>264</sup>

Important in this notion is the principle of function. Function—or purpose—is a feature of both ‘occupant’ and ‘inhabitant’ modes of waymaking, but there is a distinction between their presentations: in the former, the purpose is centred in the concepts associated with generalised space, while the latter focuses insistently upon a functionality related to place and person specifically (*a* valley to walk in, *the* valley / *a* location with a function, *the* location and its associated function). For Jack Turner,

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<sup>263</sup> It is interesting to note that the weather changes through *Thursbitch* are carefully described: wind direction and strength, visibility and precipitation levels are all described in detail. The use of synaesthetic metaphor to describe meteorological effects is striking, and is considered at greater length in the final section of this chapter.

<sup>264</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place*, p.6.

for whom ‘Thursbitch’, Garner suggests, is a strange collective of quasi-deitic *genius locii* and worked environment, engaging actively with the land in its own right *is* his function, not just a way in which to fulfil it; inhabitation of this place requires this active engagement.

‘To inhabit’, much like the term ‘to dwell’, entails, then, day to day life processes, and mundane transitions from action to inaction and back again. Both of these terms, dwelling and inhabitation, have been used critically to describe a mode of existing and understanding within the world-‘inhabitant’, of course, has been discussed extensively already as part of Tim Ingold’s argument concerning navigation, and ‘dwelling’ is a phrase now intimately associated with Martin Heidegger’s seminal work, *Being and Time*.<sup>265</sup> To discuss the way in which the principle of ‘knowing the way’ is presented formally and thematically by Alan Garner requires a consideration of both these critical positions, and how they relate to the manner in which ‘knowing the way’ functions as an epistemological and geographical connection.

In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger argues that human existence in the world is a state *of* dwelling and is, primarily, different from that of unconscious objects, which have ‘the kind of Being which an entity has when it is ‘in’ another one, as the water is ‘in’ the glass...’.<sup>266</sup> The ‘being-in’ of Human Being, however:

... is a state of Dasein’s Being; it is an  
existentiale. So one cannot think of it as the

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<sup>265</sup> I do not have the space to provide a truly thorough and deep reading of Heidegger’s approach to dwelling; instead I have employed his writing on the subject to provide an alternative and interesting envisioning of the relationship between people and place. Instead I have aimed for a compromise; where the necessity arises, I have applied Heideggerian thinking and approaches (either directly from *Being and Time* or mediated (and perhaps crystallised) through the illuminating commentaries of Hubert Dreyfus and George Steiner) to my core texts. Joan Stambaugh has published a more recent translation of *Being and Time*, but the phraseology of Macquarrie and Robinson, for the purposes of this chapter, more concisely reflect the points in question and is therefore used as the primary Heidegger text. I have given the details for both editions in the bibliography, but all quotations are from the Macquarrie and Robinson translation.

<sup>266</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.79.

Being-present-at-hand of some corporeal Thing (such as a human body) 'in' an entity which is present-at-hand. [...] The entity to which Being-in in this signification belongs is one which we have characterized as that entity which in each case I myself am [bin]. The expression '*bin*' is connected with '*bei*', and so '*ich bin*' ['I am'] means in its turn "I reside" or "dwell alongside" the world, as that which is familiar to me in such and such a way.<sup>267</sup>

In terms of function, then, Jack Turner's function *is* his dwelling, and as such *is* his being, since "*Being-in*" is thus the formal existential expression for the Being of Dasein, which has Being-in-the world as its essential state'.<sup>268</sup> If his dwelling coalesces into motion, then Turner's entire mode of being and knowing is founded on his ability to move through his landscape, and to move through it purposefully. In this sense Alan Garner conforms to the Heideggerian discomfort with idleness, and particularly with chatter; in Greg Garrard's terms, 'it discloses both language and beings to us as mere instruments of our will; disposable words correspond to a world of disposable stuff'.<sup>269</sup> By being purposeful in his relation with the world, Jack Turner is solidifying both his own endowing of value and the indisposability of the world: that is, he cements the ontological relationship between himself and his land through his active motion within it. Wayknowing *is* Being-in-the-world.

When Jack Turner walks in the valley and is engaged in the process of knowing the way, he is actively Being-in-the-world, then; but the 'world' in this context is not the physical environment of the valley. It is the

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid, p.80.

<sup>269</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, p.31.

communal worldhood of ritual trajectory and his private interaction with his surroundings; as Heidegger points out, ‘... “world” may stand for the ‘public’ we-world, or one’s ‘own’ closest (domestic) environment’.<sup>270</sup> This means that Jack’s perception of the valley as an active participant with whom he has a conscious relationship is fundamentally misplaced: what he considers to be a response to the valley is in fact still simply a response to the complex matrix of cultural referents and traditions that constitute ‘dwelling’ in Thursbitch. In other words, dwelling in the Heideggerian sense implies a different but no less human distancing from the actual valley; Jack Turner’s wayknowing is still based within the context of his own cognitive map, and is no less distanced from his surroundings than Sal and Ian.<sup>271</sup>

Up to this juncture, this chapter has seemed to be edging towards the idea of a hierarchy of active knowing, where inhabitation claims a form of ethical superiority over occupation as a way to know, and a way to know via movement in particular. In the preceding examination of the behaviour of Sal and Ian, it was suggested that Garner *appeared* to be creating this kind of hierarchy, and it cannot be denied that, to an extent, Garner does indeed prioritise the inhabitant mode of behaviour; there is a strong sense that the occupant attitude is, by the standards of Garner’s fiction, a step on the path to a greater and in some sense more worthy mode of way-knowing, one which engenders the localist proximity that I mentioned earlier, and which will continue to return to this work. But if Thursbitch appears to portray a simplistic envisioning of a contemporary rejection of virtual tools in favour of true sensual interaction with the surrounding environment, and a concurrent ascension to a nostalgic and simple mode of being ‘person-in-the-world’, then it is also an uncomfortable consideration of the effects of an assumption of anthropocentric epistemological security where not enough exists. If Jack Turner possesses a greater (in a qualitative rather than quantitative sense) knowledge

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<sup>270</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.93.

<sup>271</sup> ‘In’, in this case, once more being used to refer to Heidegger’s own use of ‘in’ as a shorthand for ‘dwell’ (and ‘Being-alongside’), rather than ‘in’ in the sense of ‘within’.



because of his intermeshed understanding of the land *and* the land's place in his community's psyche (in this sense, the landscape) then it becomes abundantly clear as the narrative progresses that this knowledge is not enough. The fact that even Jack Turner's undoubted spiritual and inherited connection to the valley (his dwelling, and state of being-in-the-world) are still evidently one between a man and his own web of interpretations and contextual value judgements suggests that Garner's text demonstrates that human contextual understanding is in some sense not enough, however deep its attempts to connect with the land go.

Turner's narrative opens, as I mentioned, with an idyll of harvest, marriage and pregnancy, symbols of fertility and communal harmony: a pastoral tradition, which Lawrence Buell notes, 'has become almost synonymous with the idea of (re)turn to a less urbanized, more "natural" state of existence'.<sup>272</sup> This is a view of the pastoral that can be aligned with an envisioning of Garner's text as an elegy that, in Greg Garrard's terms, 'looks back to a vanished past with a sense of nostalgia'.<sup>273</sup> But the trajectory of the *Thursbitch* narrative takes a vital turn away from this kind of recidivism with the death of Turner's pregnant wife (p.117), performing the same subversion of the traditional pastoral that Richard Mabey identifies in 'the new nature writing'.<sup>274</sup> Most importantly, Nan Sarah's death occurs in the valley: Turner takes her there for respite, "I know a place as'll suit us well", but she dies after drinking water from the wellspring (pp.116, 117). Garner's depiction of Turner's response to her death is particularly noteworthy:

Then he stood. He looked up into the red eye  
of the Bull, with the moon in its horns, and

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<sup>272</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), p.31.

<sup>273</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, p.37.

<sup>274</sup> Richard Mabey, 'In Defence of Nature Writing'.

he roared and lifted rocks from the ground  
and hurled them at the sky.

“You nowt! You nowt! False have you  
flummoxed me! You never said! You never  
said as this was yon night! You never said as  
poison was tonight!”

He flung the cup from him into the valley.  
(p.117)

Turner’s exclamation that “You never said!” is addressed to the Bull, one of the village’s pagan avatars, but also to the valley: it is a reproach based on his belief that the relationship between himself and Thursbitch is one of reciprocal obligation.<sup>275</sup> In other words, now more than ever it is clear that Garner represents Turner as a believer in the sentience of the valley but also in himself as the mouthpiece of that sentience when it relates to the community. He makes an assumption that his knowledge of the way in the valley is complete: he takes Nan Sarah to Thursbitch as a refuge and an attempt at healing. His earlier warning to his wife that, “At times such, don’t you ever go Thursbitch. [...] Never. It’ll take a life as lief as give. It’s all the same road for it up there”, not only displays a confidence that he knows what the valley is capable of, but also in his understanding of the *timing* of Thursbitch’s unpredictabilities; a confidence that is ultimately fatally refuted (p.75).<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> In the context of a transactional relationship it is particularly important to note the previous bargain made by Jack Turner with the valley; he takes full responsibility for the rapacious actions of ‘the land man’ in order to prevent the souring of the relationship between the community and Thursbitch. (pp.108-112)

<sup>276</sup> It is interesting to note this point in relation to Garner’s description of the neighbouring area where he spent his childhood: ‘The Edge is a Beauty Spot in summer and at weekends, but its long history and prehistory make it unsafe at all times. It is physically and emotionally dangerous. No one born to the Edge questions that, and we show it a proper respect.’ (Alan Garner, *The Voice That Thunders*, p.4.)

Buell argues that ‘pastoral has sometimes activated green consciousness, sometimes euphemized land appropriation. It may direct us toward the realm of physical nature, or it may abstract us from it.’<sup>277</sup> Garner’s emphasis upon Turner’s absolute security in his only knowledge of the appropriate way—both the literal way and the non-physical Way referred to earlier—argues that this geocultural certainty in the form of the pastoral has created a situation where Turner is indeed performing a form of ‘euphemized land appropriation’ under the illusion of a reciprocal interaction with his environment.

Having made a claim for Jack Turner’s Heideggerian dwelling within his landscape, it now becomes clear that dwelling and inhabitation are perhaps not states that can be envisaged as a purer, more connected way of being-in-the-world at all: in fact, Jack Turner comes face to face with the same *unheimlichkeit* that previously affected Sal and Ian. He is faced for the first time with a world that does not function as he expects; in Heidegger’s terms, ‘When something available is found missing ... circumspection comes up against emptiness, and now sees for the first time what the missing article was available *with*, and *what* it was available *for*’.<sup>278</sup> As Dreyfus argues:

In effect the world has been like a tool for inauthentic Dasein. Dasein has taken up the equipment provided ... hammers for building houses to feel at home in, and for-the-sake-of-whichs like being a carpenter to know who one is—all this to turn away from its preontological sense of unsettledness. ... In anxiety, inauthentic Dasein experiences the

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<sup>277</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p.31.

<sup>278</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.75.

world as an instrument that has failed to do  
its job.<sup>279</sup>

Heidegger notes that ‘Anxiety...takes away from Dasein the possibility of understanding itself... in terms of the “world”’; this anxiety is reminiscent of the ‘apprehension’ that Peter Boxall identifies as the result of the way in which ‘[o]ur sense of our place in the world in the new century...is intimately shaped by our increasingly fragile planetary environment’.<sup>280</sup> Garner demonstrates that Turner’s fatal belief in his own knowledge—and the disastrous revelation of its paucity—leads to his subsequent rejection of Thursbitch and his belief in his own knowledge of the literal and symbolic way through it. He engages with radical Christianity, and returns to the community to preach a corrupted version of the Christian message (p.128).

During this time, Turner does not enter the valley at all. While giving a sermon in the new chapel— which functions also as a grounding, a location for Jack’s new faith (as opposed to the valley, which is both totem of and location of the village’s rituals)— the valley, or perhaps Turner’s imagining of the valley, comes to him. Garner demonstrates that Turner has not lost his way, only abandoned it: the fact that the land reaches out—that is, takes an active role rather than traditional ecological passivity— argues for Garner’s insistence on equivalence between human and land. Garner argues that “if you were to put me into a corner, I would say that my attitude is... animistic”.<sup>281</sup> He does not anthropomorphise in the way that Nietzsche warns against:

Let us beware of attributing to [the Earth]  
heartlessness or unreason or their opposites:

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<sup>279</sup> Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-In-The-World*, p.178.

<sup>280</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.232; Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, p.216.

<sup>281</sup> Alan Garner quoted in Robert Chalmers, ‘‘There is a Light at the End of the Tunnel’’: Why Novelist Alan Garner’s Reality is Tinged with Mysticism’ in *The Independent*, 26 Sept. 2010. Web: full website address in bibliography.

it is neither perfect, nor beautiful, nor does it want to become any of these things; in no way does it strive to imitate man! In no way do our aesthetic and moral judgements apply to it!<sup>282</sup>

By his own admission, Garner's belief in 'sentient landscape' is strong: 'Geologists and geographers, when they feel themselves to be among friends, will talk of the concept of a "sentient landscape". Since I'm neither, I've no trouble over using the term. It describes my experience'.<sup>283</sup> This view is explicitly contained within the text: "If you do enough fieldwork, you can't avoid it. Some places have to be treated with respect, though that doesn't get written up in the literature" (p.87). Jack Turner, in short, knows something although, crucially, not everything about the valley; *but* Garner argues that to a certain degree, the valley knows back, although in a manner completely Other to human ways of experiencing and knowing. I do not entirely espouse this vision of an animistic approach—I have entered into a longer and more detailed discussion of these principles in Chapter Two— but in this radical destabilisation of the power balance between the person and the place I recognise the fundamental insecurity that our uncertainty about the ecological future engenders, and which is reflected in many ways in the fiction and criticism of the twenty-first century. Here Peter Boxall connects the the ecological and existential insecurities:

At the heart of this body of [ecocatastrophic] fiction is the perception that the narrative mechanics which have allowed us to negotiate our being in the world...have failed. With the stuttering collapse of the ecosystems that have sustained life on the

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<sup>282</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: with a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.109.

<sup>283</sup> Alan Garner, 'The Valley of the Demon'.

planet, these fictions suggest that we see also  
the stalling of the engines that drive human  
civilisation...<sup>284</sup>

When Thursbitch returns to claim him and the locus of the new faith in which he is standing at that moment, Turner once more reclaims his way-knowing; but crucially, this time, with less certainty (pp.142-143). He asks his father for advice, “How must I mend? Bull shall be vexed, and Crom”, as opposed to his earlier conviction that he is in possession of the right secrets and the right Way: “I was lifted up. There’s always someone as knows corbel bread and bilberries and piddlejuice; and the rest of that caper” (p.44). Even when Turner returns to the valley, however, his father is acutely aware of the consequences of Turner’s bargain-making with Thursbitch:

“... Bull and Jack are one folk, think, at this  
time o’ day. ... And he went and said sorry  
and as how he’d take it on his self to see right  
by Bull. But yon was a gate as he didn’t  
know he was taking...” (p.131)

Although Jack Turner tells his father that the valley has told him ‘nothing’ when he returns from his first visit after his rejection and the death of Nan Sarah, and that he was ‘too previous with yon corbel bread’ that purportedly ‘open[s] een and ears and tongue’ to Thursbitch, he clearly knows what must be done to ‘pay Bull full dole’ by the final chapter (pp.148, 146). Walking the familiar route with his string of ponies, Turner deliberately turns off the path and, instead ‘getting down bank’ and into Saltersford and safety, walks into the valley in the middle of a snowstorm. The way to pay the debt he believes that he owes to the valley is to *deliberately* lose the way: not to deny his knowledge, but to use it, paradoxically, to reject itself. In the concluding section of this chapter, the

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<sup>284</sup> Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, p.217.

nature of waylosing will be considered, both with relation to the plot of *Thursbitch* and its context in the philosophy and literary position of Alan Garner.

## 2: 'Here is My Place of Understanding': Losing the Way in Thursbitch

In *Thursbitch*'s final chapter, both Sal and Jack Turner walk into the valley alone, and with the same purpose. They both commit suicide, allowing themselves to die of exposure inside the valley. Turner does so to ensure that the elements of the valley anthropomorphised in his village's religious observances continue to remain in harmony with the community, believing that 'what wi' yon caper at Jenkin, and land man promising all sorts, Bull needs a hand... to set him back in his place' (p.154). Sal's suicide is precipitated by the news that her degenerative disease has progressed, Ian telling her that, "Your neurologist has written to say that you can't be treated where you are any longer. You'll have to go into hospital next month" (p.137). Sal fears dying in hospital, "I'm a coward, Ian. I'm scared of the dark. I don't want the mirrors without the sky", and tells Ian that, "If you must know, I would stay here. Here is my place of understanding" (pp.150, 152). Death is the single most individual moment of a person's existence; the conscious choice of Sal and Jack to situate theirs within Thursbitch is also to separate this moment from the ways of their societies. This is not an unusual ecocritical narrative trajectory, as Heather Houser notes: 'Literary sickness often implies a narrative arc that travels from a negative condition of social, physical, or environmental dysfunction to redemption through healing and restored function'; in following passages, Houser specifies that these 'ideals of human-environment connectedness often shade into body-land *merging* in environmental discourse'.<sup>285</sup> I suggest that it is this principle of merging, of pushing the proximity principle to its absolute extreme, that is depicted in *Thursbitch*.

Sal rejects the context of her community and its expectations of her decline and eventual mortality, while Turner saves his community by becoming something extraneous to it. He steps away, off the path both literally and figuratively, "...else each night of winter we can't see the grandest tale as is ever told in these parts, or any other, I shouldn't wonder: the tale as

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<sup>285</sup> Heather Houser, *Ecosickness*, p.178.



shows as how Bull shall never die, choose what ranters and land man do” (p.152). Ultimately, his argument suggests, the valley will continue whether or not the villagers convert to Christianity or the ‘land man’ fences its sides and builds a farm there: that the occasional interaction of the human being who sees it as something more important, when “the sky’s slippy; and every so often yon moon and stars get out of sorts, and it’s given to folks same as us to fettle ‘em and put ‘em back on their high stones”, is enough to secure the relationship between man and land; there will always be a way to find and know (p.153). But the death of Jack Turner implies that sustaining this way’s existence can be to lose the concretely set modes of being engrained in communities; either the actual, local community or the anthropologically pluralist human community, in favour of an examination of the land itself and the engagement of the individual within it; we see here the prioritisation of an account of the individual response in a highly miniaturised and focussed variety of localist interaction, over a polemical discussion of the possibility of community changes. We have returned to ‘person-in-the-world’, rather than ‘people-in-the-world’.

Turner and Sal abandon dwelling, and being-in-the world, altogether, in pursuit of the deepest possible connection; Houser describes this as the shift from “spatial closeness”, which is tantamount to oneness, to fusing with the more-than-human’.<sup>286</sup> Hubert Dreyfus suggests that Heidegger sees an embracing of the world as a form of ‘disowning the self. After growing up... Dasein can succumb to the temptation actively to embrace the distracting social practices of the public in order to flee anxiety’.<sup>287</sup> In doing so, ‘Dasein becomes a one-self, which presumably means making oneself at home in the world’.<sup>288</sup> ‘The alternative,’ Dreyfus suggests, ‘to fleeing anxiety is to hold onto it. Dasein lets itself become paralyzed by the revelation that all that it accepted as serious does not matter at all’.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-In-The-World*, p.315.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

In other words, to reject the public interpretation, the conglomerative cognitive map, is to ‘become paralyzed’; to stay still.

The interesting differentiation between finding and knowing the way and *losing* it is the nature of the action; or, in the case of way-losing, the inaction. The active nature of way-finding and way-knowing entails movement, in particular, a trajectory: this is particularly notable in difficult environments like the Thursbitch wilderness because they are always places of activity, not rest or long-term habitation- always the site of non-stationary human behaviour. As Jonathan Maskit notes, ‘[Wilderness] often must have a certain remoteness to it. It should show no (or few) visible signs of civilization—roads, houses, power lines, and so on are all things that make a place less wild’.<sup>290</sup> On the other hand, the environment is a self-propagating obstacle: it is, as we began this chapter considering, difficult to traverse, unpredictable and extreme. Paradoxically, it insists on motion while simultaneously obstructing it. When Jack Turner and Sal *lose* the Way, they do so by accepting the valley’s obstructions and remaining stationary. Sal waits at Thoon, ‘She was not in the cave. She had got herself onto the slab. She stood, leaning forward on her poles, her right foot in the print, striding above the valley’, and Turner makes his way to ‘the pillar of Osbaldestone’ through the snow, and remains there: ‘He swam to it and sat next to its strength, facing Thoon. He pulled his hat down against the blizzard and was still’ (pp.157, 153).

Being still in Thursbitch is both an active and a passive behaviour. To be so requires decision, a conscious choice, and one that takes the effort of walking into, and through, the valley itself; an action that has already been established to be obstructive and difficult. But it also requires a distinctly extreme level of patience: the death-by-exposure suicides of Sal and Jack Turner are not efficient, objective methods of ending life, but a final

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<sup>290</sup> Jonathan Maskit, ‘Something Wild? Deleuze and Guattari, Wilderness, and Purity’ in *The Wilderness Debate Rages On: Continuing the Great New Wilderness Debate*, ed. Michael P. Nelson & J. Baird Callicott (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), pp.461-484, p.462.

spiritual engagement with the valley and with death as a not-unwelcome finale. Losing the way, then, is a combination of a decisive action and a decisive inaction but both are clear rejections of the anthropocentric way: they step *off* the path and then remain still, and in doing so they ignore human ascribed trajectories and abandon the customary traditions of the wilderness environment: primarily, its nature as a transitory location, not a habitation. It is interesting to note that both Sal and Jack Turner have spent a preliminary night in the valley without mishap, indicating that mere presence is not the root of their apparently epiphanic deaths: passivity, their ultimate inaction, must follow a decisive change.

Ingold argues for a horizontal/vertical distinction between inhabitant and occupant; Garner argues, one might suggest, for a certain amount of hierarchisation of inhabitant over occupant so, logically, a vertical mode of knowing (occupancy) is demonstrated to be inferior in relation to a horizontal one. But Ingold omits, due to his particular focus on the line of motion, the implications of a stationary relationship and, in the same way, Garner subverts the hierarchy he has implicitly imposed by destroying the foundational knowledge assumed by Jack Turner. Or alternatively, the hierarchy is not subverted as much as it is demonstrated to have limitations; limitations that are overcome by a moment of stillness, a moment where a way is lost because its trajectory has been made irrelevant, or even non-existent. This chapter has considered Sal and Ian and Jack Turner as discrete examples of different ways of being but in the final scenes of their narrative threads Sal and Turner have become equals. They are inadequate in their natural states to truly claim knowledge of Thursbitch, and yet, through an acceptance of this inadequacy, closer to solving it than ever before. Alan Garner has said that the writing of *Thursbitch*'s narratives "...was as if I was simultaneously walking on both sides of a Mobius strip, and I kept coming round to the same place but in another time. I realised I was wrong to think of linear time".<sup>291</sup> The book,

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<sup>291</sup> Erica Wagner, 'The Valley of the Living Dread' from *The Unofficial Alan Garner Website*, orig. published *The Times*, 20 September 2003. Web: full website details given in bibliography.

too, comes to this 'same place but in another time': in the final chapter, the deaths of Sal and Jack Turner occur almost simultaneously. This sense of both temporal and spatial disruption combining to give a sense of an alternative, if terrifying, possibility, is reminiscent of Boxall's argument that '...in the twenty-first-century depictions of global disaster, the novel prizes open a gap in the world, opens a passage, in Gramsci's resonant words, from the 'old that is dying' to 'the new that cannot be born''.<sup>292</sup>

Now another participant must be added; the reader, too, is in a similar position of epistemological inadequacy. Garner's peculiar mixture of apparently literal events and synaesthetic imagery is combined with an explanation for *almost* all of the supernatural events occurring within the text; crucially, not all of them. Although the suprahuman events of the Bull ceremony and Beltane are explained by the hallucinogenic mushrooms and fermented bilberry juice ingested by the village participants, Jack Turner and Sal and Ian all *see* one another during the course of the novel (pp.48-58, 82-83; 26, 91, 99, 148). These occasions remain uncomfortable, disturbing and distracting: *Thursbitch's* unexplained peculiarities are the reader's moments of assumption and reckoning and they create the same understanding of inadequacy as the clear signs given to Jack Turner that his knowing is lacking. The elusive nature of these scenes in the novel is emphasised by Garner's careful rationalisation of others; they are thrown into relief, rather than fitting into a seamless examination of an apparently supernatural landscape. Through these moments of apparent dissonance *Thursbitch* becomes something other than a panegyric on the subject of land relations: it is neither smooth nor comfortable in either its plot or its disjointed form. The novel reflects the valley's difficulties, and in doing so, forces the reader to admit their own search for something concrete to know in the text.

It has been established that *Thursbitch* is a text deeply involved with the process of actively living in a place, and in particular, in a place that resists

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<sup>292</sup> Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, p.225.

the assumptive disposability of long familiarity; it, is, on the other hand, the narrative of a part of the world with which Alan Garner is immensely familiar. In effect, the point to which this chapter has come- the rebuttal of the superior hierarchical position apparently bestowed upon inhabitant knowing- emphasises the greatest paradox of *Thursbitch*'s existence as a novel about a well-known and well-researched part of the world: Thursbitch, the real valley, resists attempts to know it, and so does the Thursbitch of the novel- yet the novel's purpose, in a sense, is to encourage attempts at knowing.

Garner himself would dislike this argument, one suspects— much as he emphatically dislikes much about academic engagement with his texts in general. In an article pithily entitled 'Beset by Bunk and Flummery' by Sian Griffiths, Garner is cited as protesting the academic use of 'a manufactured language, a warping - where the warping is used ... either to hide what it does not wish to say, or to hide that there is nothing to be said';<sup>293</sup> of his own writing, he has said that he believes that as time passes, 'the text is cleaner and cleaner and cleaner'.<sup>294</sup> Garner is referring to the process of his writing, but the word 'clean' is apposite in relation to his work. Even before *Thursbitch* was published in 2003, Philip argued that 'every word which is not entirely necessary has been jettisoned. [...] His words are absolutes. There is no qualification, no hesitation, only the clean edge of necessary speech.'<sup>295</sup> At the same time, however, *Thursbitch* is hidden behind words throughout. Garner uses language to veil what the valley *is*, both through Sal's academic vernacular, and through the interchange between illusory dialect and poetic- and synaesthetic- imagery and the fact of the valley's landmarks.<sup>296</sup> One can never be entirely sure

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<sup>293</sup> Sian Griffiths, 'Beset by Bunk and Flummery'.

<sup>294</sup> Raymond H. Thompson & Alan Garner, 'Interview'.

<sup>295</sup> Neil Philip, *A Fine Anger*, p.18.

<sup>296</sup> Sian Griffiths's article on Garner's dissatisfaction with academic jargon notes that he compares the masking language of academia with that of the American military, arguing that 'More linguistically destructive (than military language) is the pomp of would-be intelligence bluffing its vacuities into power' (Sian Griffiths, 'Beset By Bunk and Flummery'). Sal's academic terminology works as an obscuring device in much the same way, although it masks (temporarily) something that needs ultimately to be discovered, rather than a lack of substance.

what the fictional valley looks like, or how much of its supernatural atmosphere is related to the shamanic use of hallucinogens by Turner and the delusory effects of Sal's disease.

It is Garner's quicksand-like use of language that creates the boundless uncertainty of what the reader is able to know; while his lexis is, viewed at the level of the sentence, as purely clean as both he and Philip suggest, its meaning consistently shifts between the literal and the metaphoric so that the valley's peculiarities are just as uncertain. Garner employs a sparsity of overt imagery throughout the novel; metaphor only abounds, and then in such congruity with the surrounding text that the images appear to be more literal than indicative: 'He rose in a clean move, and stood. The song of the sun and the chiming clouds covered all noise, and the wind was still cross-scented. He went on down'(p.46). The synaesthetic nature of this particular passage demonstrates the nature of *Thursbitch's* conceit: does the sun sing, does Turner hallucinate that the sun sings, or does Garner expect the reader to extrapolate the atmosphere of the valley from the metaphor? In effect, *Thursbitch* accomplishes all three, leaving Garner's meaning multiple and irresolute—despite his apparent resistance to language intended to obscure. Garner believes that 'All words are metaphor, not statement: metaphor; not simile, which is a quite disparate phenomenon. Unless words are metaphor, they are dead'; if all Garner's words are metaphor, then *Thursbitch* is the height of his engagement with this belief: the novel is one huge metaphor for the inscrutable valley; tangled, impossible, inaccessible and at the same time crystalline in its pointed clarity.<sup>297</sup>

It is through the duality of dialect and academic terminology, and the metaphors that Garner employs instead of more symbolic, nonliteral frames of imagery, that Garner simultaneously displays the valley, and the

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<sup>297</sup> Alan Garner, 'Old Men's Trousers and the Making Strange of Things' (transcript of lecture given to The Manchester Grammar School Philosophical Society on 14 Sept. 1999) from *The Unofficial Alan Garner Website*. Web: full website details given in bibliography.

culture, of the Cheshire Pennines and obscures it. The novel's complexity forces a greater engagement from the reader; the offering of understanding combined with its simultaneous obfuscation- dialect made comprehensible, mixed with cryptic phraseology that remains disguised- entails a constant process of critical observation and textual interaction. In many ways, this act of focussed reading is intimately related to the process of successful wayknowing; it also insists on the specificity of the individual response, reflecting both the novel's preoccupation with the miniature and the close, and what Dominic Head refers to as 'the lonely voice that predominates in late twentieth-century and contemporary fiction'.<sup>298</sup>

The active engagement with the text/landscape, punctuated with hiatuses for consideration, with a strong focus on the text's body in and of itself, rather than simply as a vehicle for the route of plot from beginning to end, seems to relate to the principles of careful, considered active knowing; the novel's resistance to conventional interpretation and relation to other contemporary fiction, including Garner's own discomfort with such comparisons, is a convincing parallel with the apparent uselessness of OS maps and GPS devices.<sup>299</sup> While both the novel and the map *and* the GPS all share an attempt to represent something of the valley, only the novel can be said to interrogate the ethics of that attempt at the same time. It does not claim knowledge, only the possibility.

The reading of a novel like *Thursbitch* is based firmly in an ability to pause to consider, and to focus on the novel's *form* as well as its content. Its bare syntactical and lexical bones, its contours, are as important to examine as the thread of plot that runs through it like a track, and only an awareness of them can lead to a successful finding of the way through its complexities. This is particularly, of course, true in the context of a novel that resists easy interpretation, masked by fogs of dialect and with

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<sup>298</sup> Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel*, p.37.

<sup>299</sup> Raymond H. Thompson & Alan Garner, 'Interview'.

obstructive meanders in chronology that confound a strict linear reading. *Thursbitch* is all of these things. To find a way through it is to navigate alone, without critical texts.<sup>300</sup> The reader, like Jack Turner, is in a position of apparent knowledge that is ultimately undermined: the only method by which they may wayknow in Garner's novel is to lose it; that is, to accept their difficulty and open to it. From a twenty-first century perspective, this discourse of uncertainty is both disconcerting and familiar. In the Introduction I suggested that we had perhaps entered into a cultural state of insecurity—due to our growing understanding of the consequences of climate change, the invasion of a particular kind of war-at-home with terrorism and other similar unsettling aspects of everyday life—that was different from either the post-war trauma of the early to mid- twentieth century or the active disruption of the status quo engendered by classic playful postmodernist approaches. *Thursbitch* speaks to that insecurity by noting the inadequacy of our epistemic assumptions about our relationship with place, but also, reassuringly, pointing out the ways in which that relationship can, in one way or another, offer spiritual succour and rejuvenation. The valley's inscrutability is frightening, but it is also reassuringly rich with meaning.

So the reader, Turner and Sal are all provided with a way in which they can gain the deep comprehension of the valley that, for different reasons, they all need. The best term for the effect of waylosing, that is, the mode of being that waylosing allows, is receptive ignorance: an admission of concurrent unknowing and openness. Losing the way permits the land and the person to interact without the contextual cluttering of communally-held universals and personal assumptions. The fact that the reader, Sal and Jack

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<sup>300</sup> Garner is, as I have mentioned, often ignored as a children's writer, a tag that he finds deeply problematic. The critical literature that does exist tends to focus on his work in this context: particularly notable is *Four British Fantasists: Place and Culture in the Children's Fantasies of Penelope Lively, Alan Garner, Diana Wynne Jones, and Susan Cooper* by Charles Butler (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2006), but the inclusion of Garner with three authors who self-identify as children's writers is in itself contentious. In 2016 the aforementioned anthology of essays, short stories and poetry, *First Light*, was published by Unbound Books after a crowdsourced funding campaign, which may herald a shift in perspective regarding his work.



Turner all attempt to know through action, and fail— and in failing, know more than at any other moment— leaves only one major character who walks repeatedly in Thursbitch who has not been considered. Ian, Sal's Jesuit priest, doctor, carer and ex-partner: where does Ian fit into this schematic? He leaves the valley alive, and Jack Turner sees him do so in one of *Thursbitch's* moments of achronological congruence. Turner describes him to his father: 'He had an odd-strucken sort of twist to his face, full of grief and good. I swear as I saw a broken man, but one as could mend' (p.148). Perhaps Ian is Garner's receptive ignorance embodied: he does not question the valley, or seek to know it: it is valuable to him, simply for what it is- including whatever it was about Thursbitch that marks Sal so deeply: "This is where you feel the need to be. You hold here to be sentient. It is only proper for this place to take you' (p.156). In accepting his own ignorance, and remaining open to the fact that the valley has more significance than he can understand, Ian fulfils a different way of knowing that is passive, accepting of something beyond his understanding. It is of no surprise, perhaps, that Ian is deeply religious: he is used to believing that he knows something beyond his power to prove. It is emphatically *not* his Christianity that helps him in the valley.

In a sense, Ian is the acceptingly unknowing survivor of the transcendent realisation of knowing that overtakes Sal and Jack Turner. As Dreyfus notes:

To be a self at all, Dasein must somehow get back into the public world, not by feeling into distraction, or pseudoserious choice, but in some other way. Dasein must arrive at a way of dealing with things and people that incorporates the insight gained in anxiety that no possibilities have intrinsic

significance ... yet makes that insight the  
basis for an active life.<sup>301</sup>

If one equates significance with knowledge, that no possibilities are ultimately certain, then Ian is the unwitting example of Heidegger's authentic Dasein, inasmuch as one can be claimed to exist. Dreyfus argues that 'if Dasein accepted its nullity, the same structure that seemed to threaten all its secure projects and its very identity would be seen to be challenging and liberating. Anxiety then would not be paralyzing like fear but would make Dasein clear-sighted'.<sup>302</sup> Ian is *not* sacrificed to the valley; he acknowledges the dangers of unquestioning faith, but does not push to know what lies beyond it. He tells Sal, "I am the selfish one," he said. "You have called into question all that I had come to accept without hesitation or consideration. And I have no answer" (p.156). Though he speaks to Sal, the words could equally be addressed to the valley. Ian never knows the valley, but he does survive; he is the spirit of compromise, admitting his own ignorance and accepting it as a state of being.

Ultimately, then, Garner draws the reader and his protagonists to a point of epiphanic comprehension and interaction that seems to be the crux of the novel as a consideration of place—and then allows them to die, or to pass from their wilderness crucible unscathed yet unenlightened, though profoundly changed. This seems to me to represent the nexus of connection between the individual perspective that I have proposed as the preoccupation of a number of post-millennial novels, and the anxiety that Houser argues to accompany the strain of apocalyptic narratives that also thread the current literary moment; as she describes, particularly with reference to Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, 'The narrative...positions Connie on several edges: of time, of neurological manipulation, of environmental cataclysm, and of a revolution that ushers in the preferred future. But the narrative itself is along on the edge: of

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<sup>301</sup> Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-In-The-World*, p.316.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid*, p.317.

time...and of anxious affect'.<sup>303</sup> Yet this anxiety, and the *possibility* of apocalypse (personal or global) can provide a radical opening for understanding, as Garner shows and Boxall, writing on Cormac McCarthy's now genre-defining post-millennial apocalypse novel, *The Road*, lyrically emphasises:

It is this clearing...between an ancient music formed from the ashes of the old world and a formless music that reaches us from the age to come, that shapes the novel's relationship with the future.<sup>304</sup>

The novel, its characters and its readers are prey to a final formal paradox within this apparently triumphant conclusion: to know one must accept ignorance; to *actively* know, one must accept inactivity; ultimately, death, the shedding of all possession, human contact and future must be accepted. The novel denies the apparently possessive aspect of wayknowing and landknowing, while simultaneously demonstrating the appropriate way in which these ways of understanding may be attained. Although he has accepted his own inadequacy of understanding, Turner's final words are a discourse of ownership: "Tell them as how Sun and Moon held crown for me; as how Cats Tor and Shining Tor were me parsons, quickthorns me witness; and all to the singing of a thousand birds and the sky my torches" (p.158). The final lines of the *novel*, however, are of the valley's wilderness landscape alone: 'And out over Thoon above Bully Thumble the high lord hanging holy under heaven. And Crom asleep in the ground' (p.158).

Knowing, Garner argues, is overrated: in the valley of Thursbitch, knowledge and the assumption of certainty, lead to endings, closings and death. Although it is the deepest possible connection with the land, it also

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<sup>303</sup> Heather Houser, *Ecosickness*, p.172.

<sup>304</sup> Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, p.225.

exists only transiently. Being lost in moderation, actively and knowingly waylosing and accepting the limitations of human interconnection with land, marks the way to understanding. This mode of being creates room for openness, possibility, and an acceptance that the land is something *beyond* its uses—not in relation to human modes of being, but external to them. Losing the way opens new ways- in reading, in walking, in writing. In these questions of an acceptance of the necessity of an open kind of ignorance lies, perhaps, the novel's ultimate polemic: that the relationship between man and land is fundamentally oxymoronic, irrational and outside of a realm of confident knowing. Knowing the way is still only a way of applying human principles to an inhuman object; abandoning it is to admit that there is no way in which man can truly know the land, and that the attempt to is fundamentally wrong. Ostensibly, Garner's argument is recidivist nostalgia for a pre-Enlightenment era when untutored communities and their environments engaged in a symbiotic, non-self-conscious relationship; yet there is no sense that Garner is critical of the attempt to understand. Indeed, Sal's attempts to comprehend the valley's importance for her are sympathetic, though tragic. Garner encourages the active interpretation of the novel by the reader, too, and so the insistent nature of his paradox is part of engagement with *Thursbitch* as well as of Thursbitch.

Perhaps more than anything, *Thursbitch*'s oppositional, awkward approach to questions of knowing reflects Garner's own conflicted position between his rootedness, (perhaps his extreme focus on his locality) and the wider ranging nature of his academic bent: between focus and polymathy. In the act of creation that resulted in *Thursbitch*, a 'birth', to use his term, with a gestational period of thirty years or more, Garner has made his own attempt to know the valley, and to make it known; its paradoxical relationship with questions of active knowing become a symptom of Garner's own comprehension of the problematic nature of the exercise- and his own fascination with the valley's literal and symbolic epistemological position within its community: as he suggests in *The Voice*

*that Thunders*, ‘...it was imperative that I should know my place. That can be achieved only by inheriting one’s childhood landscape, and by growing in it to maturity. It is a subtle matter of owning and being owned’.<sup>305</sup> Garner’s final words on *Thursbitch*’s creation seem to suggest that the novel is only one step in his own attempts to comprehend the difficult, wild land he inhabits, and his own acceptance of the impossibility of truly knowing and possessing its essence: “A novel may be finished. A journey is not.”<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> Alan Garner, *The Voice That Thunders*, p.4. Garner’s use of the term ‘owning’ in this sense is a difficult one, considering the discomfort with aspects of possession demonstrated throughout *Thursbitch*. It is probably fair to suggest that his use of the term seems to relate more to a reciprocal form of giving over of oneself to the land in which one is raised and an acceptance of it in return: a form of understanding of relations, rather than a transactional approach.

<sup>306</sup> Alan Garner, ‘The Valley of the Demon’.

**'Sparse in its Emptiness, Luxuriant in its Detail': Uncertainty,  
Proximity and Blame in Jeremy Page's *Salt***

*'The world is never still. The sea is never still, the marshes are never still, the soil is never still—and never has been'.<sup>307</sup>*

In the preceding chapter I considered the way in which a landscape type that is primarily defined by human perception is represented in a British literary context. Now I intend to focus on an environment that is much more clearly defined, if just as problematic: the saltmarsh. Despite the large area of coastline that saltmarsh constitutes, it seems relatively ignored among the rocky stretches, the classic sandy beaches and the seaside resorts; the cynical might suggest that the marsh is less immediately aesthetically pleasing, and it might also be fair to say that the saltmarsh's unique navigational challenges (which will be considered later in this chapter) render it difficult to visit. Whatever the reason, this particular landscape is both half-forgotten and vital for the ecological health of our shoreline.<sup>308</sup>

What, then, is the saltmarsh? They are in fact found all over the world's temperate zones (in tropical areas the same peripheral space is filled by mangrove swamps) and are sometimes referred to instead as estuarine marshes. The saltmarsh is found on the periphery of large bodies of saltwater; as Paul Adam puts it, 'Coastal saltmarsh occupies the interface between land and sea'.<sup>309</sup> Typically wide and extremely flat, the saltmarsh forms a 'low energy coastline', where water washes, rather than crashes, in

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<sup>307</sup> Ian Scott. 'An Even More Vulnerable Place' in *The Return of the Tide: On the Saltmarsh Coast of North Norfolk*, ed. Ian Scott and Richard Worsley (Fakenham: JIG Publishing, 2010), p.2.

<sup>308</sup> See *Saltmarsh Ecology* by Paul Adam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); *Ecology of Dunes, Salt Marsh and Shingle* by J. R. Packham & A. J. Willis (London: Chapman & Hall, 1997).

<sup>309</sup> Paul Adam, *Saltmarsh Ecology*, p.2.

all but the most extreme conditions. The sheer flatness of the land means that there is no true delineation between the land and the water; the line between solid and liquid, too, is (for want of a better word) muddied and constantly shifting. The area is alternately flooded and exposed by tides, meaning that the soil is waterlogged and highly saline; the majority of the plants that grow there are, by necessity, halophytic and unaffected by regular submersion. Despite the fact that the composition of the land itself is constantly in flux, the environment is in the climax community stage of the ecological cycle. In other words, the saltmarsh exists in a state of equilibrium maintained by constant change.<sup>310</sup>

Despite the remarkable nature of the saltmarsh's character, in Britain, for many years, they were 'considered useless and prime areas for waste disposal or conversion to agricultural, commercial and recreational uses'.<sup>311</sup> This vision of the saltmarsh as wastes, lacking in intrinsic value themselves, led to the draining of many saltmarsh areas to create *new* land for agriculture, industry or urban development.<sup>312</sup> The word used for this process, often with no hint of irony, is 'reclamation'. The latter decades of the twentieth century, however, provided new insight into the role of saltmarshes in wider ecological systems: as habitats, sea defences for other delicate environments and as part of the circulation of nutrients that fuels wider biogeochemical cycles.<sup>313</sup> They are, despite the barrenness of their outward appearance, extraordinarily rich and varied:

...saltmarshes are widely held to act as  
nursery areas for some species of fish, which  
tend to move inshore at planktonic stage

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<sup>310</sup> See *The Ecology of a Salt Marsh*, ed. L. R. Pomeroy & R. G. Wiegert (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1981); particularly, in this context, Chapters 1 and 2, which give a particularly thorough account of the physical characteristics of the saltmarsh.

<sup>311</sup> Stephen W. Broome et al. 'Tidal Saltmarsh Restoration,' *Aquatic Botany* 32 (1988): p.2.

<sup>312</sup> See Paul Adam, *Saltmarsh Ecology*, pp.371-374.

<sup>313</sup> Susanna E. King & John N. Lester, 'The Value of Salt Marsh as a Sea Defence,' *Marine Pollution Bulletin* 30.3 (1995): 180-189, 183-186.

while others visit at high tide on a seasonal basis. [...]

High numbers of waders and wildfowl, many making seasonal use of the rich invertebrate fauna and associated plant life, feed on the mudflats at the outer boundaries of the vegetated area and use the saltmarsh and grazing marshes as shelter, roosting grounds and in some cases feeding grounds at high tide.<sup>314</sup>

British saltmarshes do also support a wide range of human activity; the reclaimed marshes that comprise a large part of Morecambe Bay, for example, are widely used for agriculture, while the East Anglian marshes are ideal for reed-cutting, eel-fishing and, once upon a time, widely populated with drainage mills. Jules Pretty notes that these are long abandoned, although they still form part of the area's chequered history: 'The mills now seem lonely: an old trick on the Norfolk marshes was to set the sails of windmills dead upright to indicate that the customs men of Yarmouth were on their way'.<sup>315</sup> Although obviously the saltmarsh is not suited to high intensity industrial farming (either arable or livestock), sheep and cattle do graze there, and the marshes are also harvested for samphire.<sup>316</sup> This is what the saltmarsh consists of and what it, for want of a better word, does. What it *is*, and what, in human terms, it represents, is more complicated.

Due to its lack of obvious fertility the saltmarsh does, of course, carry many of the connotations of 'wilderness' that I considered in the last

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid, p.186.

<sup>315</sup> Jules Pretty, *This Luminous Coast* (Framlingham: Full Circle Editions, 2011), p.238.

<sup>316</sup> See Galton Blackiston, 'Think Global, Eat Local' in *The Return of the Tide: On the Saltmarsh Coast of North Norfolk* ed. Ian Scott and Richard Worsley (Fakenham: JIG Publishing, 2010), pp.131-140, pp.133-134.



chapter. More interesting, however, are the distinctive meanings ascribed to British ‘wetland’ environments and, more specifically, to our saltmarshes. Tristan Siple, writing on the depictions of the Romney marshes in Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, notes that, ‘the association between wetlands and vice has its deep roots in the western imagination’.<sup>317</sup> Siple particularly singles out the commencement of Pip’s narration:

...the dark flat wilderness beyond the church-yard, intersected with dikes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant, savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.<sup>318</sup>

This is, of course, also where Pip’s relationship with the convict Magwitch begins; Siple suggests that ‘Sea, wind, rain, mud and the East all coalesce into the figure of Magwitch’ and that his ‘violence seems to confirm the destruction inherent in the environment and reinforce the criminality of the marsh’.<sup>319</sup> A mere fifty years after the publication of *Great Expectations*, Arthur Conan Doyle describes Dartmoor’s ‘Great Grimpen Mire’, an

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<sup>317</sup> Tristan Siple, ‘The Revenge of ‘Swamp Thing’: Wetlands, Industrial Capitalism, and the Ecological Contradiction of *Great Expectations*’, *The Journal of Ecocriticism* 3.1 (2011): 17-28, 22. While I have some concerns about Siple’s conclusions regarding the ways in which Dickens uses Romney Marsh as a setting (and about his casual definition of Beowulf as ‘the urtext of British culture’), his fairly general tracing of a linkage between words for wetlands and parallel implications of confusion and danger is, I think, valid.

<sup>318</sup> Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Margaret Carwell, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.3-4.

<sup>319</sup> Tristan Siple, ‘The Revenge of ‘Swamp Thing’’, p.23.

inland wetland rather than saltmarsh, in similar terms of confusion, danger and wet ominousness:

Rank reeds and lush, slimy water-plants sent an odour of decay and a heavy miasmatic vapour into our faces, while a false step plunged us more than once thigh-deep into the dark, quivering mire, which shook for yards in soft undulations around our feet. Its tenacious grip plucked at our heels as we walked, and when we sank into it it was as if some malignant hand were tugging us down into those obscene depths, so grim and purposeful was the clutch in which it held us.<sup>320</sup>

This ‘motif of evil as wet dirt’, to use Martha Grace Duncan’s phrase, is a long-standing one: Duncan cites John Bunyan’s ‘Slough of Despond’ in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and Boethius’ famous description of the ‘mire’ in which ‘wickedness wallows’ as earlier examples of the same linkage.<sup>321</sup> Not all descriptions of these wet places, however, are quite so focussed on the apparent immorality of the place: particularly in the last few decades, and the attendant development of landscape thinking beyond this kind of anthropomorphising, many instead focus upon the unpredictability and confusion of the wetland as features without a linked moral judgement and, instead, as characteristics that engender certain behaviours and questions. In Graham Swift’s classic novel, *Waterland*, the Fens, another British wetland, are described thus:

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<sup>320</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (London: Penguin, 1981), p.161.

<sup>321</sup> Martha Grace Duncan, *Romantic Outlaws, Beloved Prisons: The Unconscious Meanings of Crime and Punishment* (London: New York University Press, 1996), p.133.

...they did not forget, in their muddy labours, their swampy origins; that, however much you resist them, the waters will return; that the land sinks; silt collects; that something in nature wants to go back.<sup>322</sup>

This feeling that the land—whether reclaimed or only uncovered at some points in the tidal cycle—is always at risk, always at the mercy of the returning water, manifests as a combination of uncertainty and resultant clinging recidivism. It could be described as a simultaneous distrust of, and hoarding of, memory. In Andrew Michael Hurley's *The Loney*, which depicts the creeping horror of the Morecambe marshes, the narrator argues that:

I often thought there was too much time there. That the place was sick with it. Haunted by it. Time didn't leak away as it should. There was nowhere for it to go and no modernity to hurry it along. It collected as the black water did on the marshes and remained and stagnated in the same way.<sup>323</sup>

If the British approach to saltmarsh is one of distrust and disturbance, then that effect is further concentrated on the Norfolk Saltmarsh Coast, The Norfolk marsh has a unique significance, because it combines the sense of peril and distrust that I have marked as associated with British wetlands, and the equally fascinating (and peculiar) position of Norfolk in terms of regional social and cultural perspectives. The Saltmarsh Coast is a physical edge, where land and sea merge in a strange, half-way mixture of solid and

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<sup>322</sup> Graham Swift, 'Waterland' in *Waterland and Last Orders* (London: Picador, 1999), p.17.

<sup>323</sup> Andrew Michael Hurley, *The Loney* (London: John Murray, 2015), p.31.

liquid; as the edge of Norfolk, however, it is also the boundary of an area already symbolically configured as marginal.

North Norfolk is the round hunched back of England's south-eastern flank, a relatively flat expanse of marsh, fen, and low-lying agricultural land. Despite being closer to London than the industrial centres of Birmingham and Manchester, the spread of industry essentially passed Norfolk by. It has remained a popular vision of rurality: not wild, or particularly dramatic in its desolation, but an inward-looking backwater, where life has maintained a similar course for decades. Ian Scott paints a vision of a mid-twentieth century Norfolk defined by its isolation, both geographic and cultural, from the wider scope of British society:

Fifty years ago agriculture was still a major employer, Branthill Farm fielded a cricket team... [t]he year was still punctuated by traditional festivals... There were few holiday cottages and even fewer weekenders but then there was no M11, there was no dual carriageway in the county and London seemed a long way off although you could get there and back from Wells by train the same day.<sup>324</sup>

Glynis Anthony, too, suggests that, 'there has long been a local attitude of insularity, of people lacking curiosity about other places. It causes local people to accept what they have: "that'll do", "thass good enough" are common phrases'.<sup>325</sup> Scott and Anthony are not alone: for generations of

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<sup>324</sup> Ian Scott, 'An Even More Vulnerable Place', p.1.

<sup>325</sup> Glynis Anthony, 'Growing Up on the Saltmarsh Coast: A Tale of Two Anthonys' in *The Return of the Tide: On the Saltmarsh Coast of North Norfolk*, ed. Ian Scott and Richard Worsley (Fakenham: JJG Publishing, 2010), p.106. Of course, the timelessness of the Norfolkian way of life is in the main a myth: local communities speak of the deep-rooted concern that the inrush of 'weekenders', purchasing houses while not living in and

writers, East Anglia and Norfolk in particular has symbolised something off-kilter, not quite in key with mainstream British culture. D J Taylor refers to East Anglian landscapes as possessing ‘ominous self-containment’.<sup>326</sup> The East Anglian horizontals are certainly oppressive in their sheer unrelenting space, but ‘ominous’ suggests something else. Taylor argues that ‘the infinitely sinister quality of M. R. James’s East Anglian ghost stories has quite as much to do with the flat, undeviating countryside – brooding heaths, murky sea-shores, low, desolate hills – as the antiquarian horrors that lurk beneath’.<sup>327</sup> The OED notes that the term ‘ominous’ can mean either ‘indicative or suggestive of future misfortune’ or, with reference to ‘sound, atmosphere, etc.: menacing; awful; unsettling’: the first meaning, arguably, resulting in the second.<sup>328</sup> The feeling that Taylor means is the crawling sense of trouble approaching, and approaching without hope of dramatic thunderous climax: the only release is a clammy, disturbing unveiling like the lifting of a fog. It is a slow, inexorable and—to use the word again—*unheimlich* process.

In literary terms, Norfolk has taken on a strange position in the British landscape: that of repository. Richard Mabey calls East Anglia, ‘the awkward corners of a room that no one bothers to sweep’.<sup>329</sup> Similarly, Kazuo Ishiguro uses Norfolk as a metaphorical home for lost things in his 2005 novel, *Never Let Me Go*, where the children of Hailsham School, always searching for their own identities amid a world where their role is only to exist, and to die, take seriously the idea that the lost may be found in the East Anglian flatlands.<sup>330</sup>

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contributing to the local economy, are killing the rural East Anglian culture. The fear is that the influx is emptying towns and schools—yet at the same time tourism brings much needed cashflow to the area.

<sup>326</sup> D. J. Taylor, ‘Foreword’ in *Dead Men Talking: Stories From East Anglia*, ed. D. J. Taylor (Norwich: Black Dog Books, 2007), v-viii, vii.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid*, vii.

<sup>328</sup> ‘ominous, adj.,’ *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, June 2016). Web: full website details given in bibliography.

<sup>329</sup> Richard Mabey, *Nature Cure* (London: Vintage, 2008), p.7.

<sup>330</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), pp.59-60.

Norfolk, then, is characterised a locus of the exiled and dispossessed, where misplaced things and people may be found or left, or go themselves. Richard Mabey freely notes that his stay in Norfolk is a result of a crippling depression that meant that he ‘couldn’t work, used up most of [his] money, fell out with [his] sister— [his] house-mate— and had to sell the family home’; now a lost thing himself, Mabey flees to Norfolk, where what he has lost may be found—— or where he may discard his own sense of being for a while.<sup>331</sup> It is no accident that in leaving for Norfolk, he abandons most of his worldly possessions and the wood that has been central to his sense of self. For a plethora of other writers, too, Norfolk has been a place of retreat for holidays, working or recuperation, including John Betjeman, Wilkie Collins, Clement Scott and John Paston.

If this is Norfolk, then it only follows that the Saltmarsh Coast, Norfolk’s ‘frayed edge’, should exhibit those traits in abundance, and so it does.<sup>332</sup> The isolation and apparent solipsism of the saltmarsh way of life, and the strange angle of locals’ foci of attention, alien to external eyes, is striking. ‘Murky’, the word D. J. Taylor uses to convey the East-Anglian sea-shores of M. R. James, sums up the saltmarsh rather effectively. It is not a landscape that can be couched in Romantic terms of drama and terror: nor can it be softened by the comforting pastoral phrases used for traditional British Home Counties vistas. It is muddy, wet and often greyed by the incoming tides and the cloudy North Sea skies: the halophytic plants that inhabit it are scrubby, dark and lacking in floral or leafy abundance. It is harsh, but not awe-inspiring; huge but not grand. It is dark at night, grim at dusk, and battered by constantly damp weather. It enforces sticking close to home, especially after dark, as roads become uncertain and paths become invisible; equally, however, it creates an understanding of the world based on a horizon that is both distant and extremely visible. This shift and stretch of vision, both literal and the metaphorical vision of social

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<sup>331</sup> Richard Mabey, 2008, p.4.

<sup>332</sup> Nicholas Hills, ‘The Built Environment’ in *The Return of the Tide: On the Saltmarsh Coast of North Norfolk*, ed. Ian Scott and Richard Worsley (Fakenham: JJG Publishing, 2010), pp.85-94, p.85.

understanding and community, between what is nearby and what is visible, and very far away, creates the disturbing feeling of combined insularity and danger that East Anglian fiction seems at all times to espouse.<sup>333</sup>

Richard Mabey says of East Anglia in general:

I've seen enough of wet places to know that they can be mercurial and unpredictable. By contrast with the cryptic, measured rhythms of woods, they have a vividness and immediacy, a sense that they might at any moment turn into something else. Very often they do.<sup>334</sup>

In the saltmarsh, this 'immediacy' is a result of the intensely tidal nature of the wetland. It is in a state of constant flux, from tide to tide and weather pattern to weather pattern. The North Norfolk Saltmarsh Coast is particularly notable because of its contrast with the shorelines that surround it; Ian Scott states that the Saltmarsh Coast '...is bookended by the red-and-white chalk cliffs of Hunstanton and the chalk white cliffs of Kelling'.<sup>335</sup> There is a clear delineation between *these* coasts and the Saltmarsh Coast: for one thing, the cliffs of Hunstanton and Kelling are easily, and clearly, divided from the sea. For another, they have the advantage—or, perhaps in these years of accelerated erosion, the disadvantage—of elevation. This second point is, perhaps, part of the reason for the apparent isolation of the marshes, and the supposed peculiarities of its people: there is an odd kind of difference between

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<sup>333</sup> I have not provided a citation here, since this is a very personal assessment of my own feelings about the Saltmarsh Coast, which I have known well for a decade and have observed in all kinds of weather. Nevertheless, the surrounding references should make it apparent that my observations of the character of the landscape are not at odds with others.

<sup>334</sup> Richard Mabey, *Nature Cure*, p.11.

<sup>335</sup> Ian Scott, 'An Even More Vulnerable Place', p.1.

looking down on the sea, and staring into (and, in terms of saltmarsh inhabitation, walking within) its open mouth.

The flatness, the horizontal nature, that is so characteristic of the saltmarsh means that the weather is not just something that happens to the land: it is an intimate part of its character. On the saltmarsh, line of sight can extend to the true horizon: it is both huge and arrestingly empty. Kevin Crossley-Holland notes that:

Our landscape is seven-eighths sky: a vast inverted arena, a sky-dome in which there are often several simultaneous theatres of action. It's a landscape of horizontals—skyline, ribbed fields, decaying ribs of boats—in which verticals, including human beings, often look arresting.<sup>336</sup>

The unnerving flatness, that unrelenting stretch of purely horizontal ground that seems to bend with the Earth until it reaches the horizon, is at the same time terrific in its sense of pure space and, conversely, horrifyingly claustrophobic. Crossley-Holland's 'vast inverted arena' is at once a space of unearthly proportions and a goldfish bowl, round and enclosing and crushingly difficult to escape. Just as an absence of landscape features means that anything punctuating the skyline becomes, in Crossley-Holland's words, 'arresting', the sky takes on a greater significance. Its shifts—both due to weather and to the time of day—can change everything, and frequently do. Land and sky, both moving constantly: as Mabey puts it, 'The wet is older than the wood, but it is the domain of the present, and sometimes, it feels, of the future'.<sup>337</sup> It is an old landscape, apparently at its ecological climax and yet still populated with

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<sup>336</sup> Kevin Crossley-Holland, 'What Inspires Us?' in *The Return of the Tide: On the Saltmarsh Coast of North Norfolk*, ed. Ian Scott and Richard Worsley (Fakenham: JGG Publishing, 2010), p.185.

<sup>337</sup> Richard Mabey, *Nature Cure*, pp.11-12.



primeval plantlife, never becoming mature woodland. Its emptiness and silence (from the noises of the human population, at least) make the marsh feel prehistoric: its age ('older', as Mabey puts it, 'than the wood') immense, and its position immovable. And yet immovable is exactly what the marsh is *not*. It is 'never still', as the quote from Ian Scott at the beginning of this introduction shows. No facet of the marsh is ever stationary: and, more than that, nor is the land beneath it; as Richard Mabey notes, 'this is East Anglia's creation myth: a world built on shifting sands'.<sup>338</sup> It is this essential transience that creates the great tension at the heart of the saltmarsh's temporality: it is *old* – rooted old, sunk deep into both the land's geological composition and its cultural position – and yet every day it is washed away by the ebbing tide and renewed when it comes back in. In some senses, the saltmarsh never exists in the same way from one moment to the next. It is in this locus of uncertainty and transience that *Salt*, Jeremy Page's first novel, begins and ends.

*Salt* is the history of Pip, a first-person narrator whose family are intimately connected—one might say entangled—with the saltmarshes of North Norfolk.<sup>339</sup> The narrative covers the family's existence from the meeting of Pip's ill-matched grandparents, Hands and Goose, through the disastrous marriage of his parents and his mother's suicide, to Pip's own return to the marshes. Although the main narrative is strictly chronological and linear, Pip's narration constitutes a network of allusions both to events *within* the novel and external historical events, which creates a dense matrix of backward and forward temporal references. In the sections that follow I will examine the manner in which the novel encounters its saltmarsh setting and employs it as both a physical and symbolic presence in the text, before widening my focus to discuss the critical and ethical implications of this depiction.

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid, p.8.

<sup>339</sup> Jeremy Page, *Salt* (London: Penguin, 2008). All page numbers will be given in the text.

1: *'The Ceaseless Choreography of Tides, Creeks, Birds and Salt': The Complicated and Complicating Saltmarsh*

*Salt* begins with the extraordinary image of 'a man buried up to his neck in mud': '[t]hat,' the reader is told immediately, 'is how it's meant to have started' (p.1). The man in the mud is a German pilot, a 'bomber', his aeroplane brought down on Morston Marsh in the midst of the Second World War; he is Hans/Hands, the troubled narrator Pip Langore's grandfather. The young woman who will extricate him, a few sentences later, is Goose, Pip's grandmother. This is their first meeting, and Pip's note that 'this is...how it started' marks it explicitly as the beginning not just of the novel itself, but of the story that Pip wishes to tell.

That beginning seems like a simple enough opening; it is, as Pip himself notes, 'a pretty start to a story', a neat summation of historical moment and setting. It also demonstrates the two central obsessions of Pip's story: the complicated tangles of his family's history, and the equally complicated saltmarsh. The marshes first appear, after the rescue of the drowning man, through the eyes of a newcomer to Norfolk: narrator Pip inhabits an imagined version of the consciousness of his grandfather (that same sinking man), describing his first clear view of the saltmarsh landscape, 'this misty edge of England' (p.9). The language of this description is not entirely encouraging, and certainly distances the view from both the pastoral British ideal *and* the hilly wilderness of *Thursbitch*:

...a rough mudslide slips into the Morston channel. Clearly able to carry a sizeable boat, but draining to a trickle at low tide. Beyond it, a flat mile of saltmarsh until the branchless masts of other boats... He sees the first of the luggers there, assembled on the quay, deciding which mudpool to dig their bait. A dreadful living. Beyond them the

saltmarsh stretches as far as the eye can see,  
making its own horizon... (p.9)

Pip imagines his grandfather identifying the landscape's dramatic tidal changeability, and siting the human landmarks in relation to the few permanent natural features: 'the river flows through a village called Cley next the Sea, an odd name in any language' (p.9). The isolation implied in this description is immediately obvious; those few 'luggers' are the only people that Hands can see, over a mile away.

There is also, perhaps most importantly for this chapter, a sense that the saltmarsh is playing by different rules from the rest of the countryside: that mention of the marsh making 'its own horizon', the implication that its boundaries are set internally, that there is no link to anything beyond the marsh, is distinctly telling. As Pip suggests earlier, still inhabiting the perspective of his grandfather, 'the landscape fails to make sense – the sky is so watery blue and the sea so cloudy grey that just to look at it makes him feel upside down' (p.1). Kevin Crossley-Holland's description of it as 'a vast inverted arena' is echoed here. Hands, clearly, is not-at-home; he is also, it is clear, struck by the saltmarsh's peculiarities as a landscape, despite not yet knowing it at all. Like *Thursbitch's* wilderness, *Salt's* saltmarsh takes its central place in the novel from the outset; as in *Thursbitch*, too, the reader is provided with a dislocated stranger whose new perspective on the landscape is an internal echo of our own. The contrast between the certainty of Hands' rescuer, Goose, the 'marsh woman', who Hands finds 'to his surprise...wasn't made entirely of mud', and Hands himself, who climbs the roof to see his surroundings from above, is also a contrast between the saltmarsh and everything else (p.9).

The contrast between the saltmarsh and the rest of the country – even the county – is made explicit when Lil' Mardler, Pip's mother, and her soon to be husband, Shrimp Langore, flee the area as a result of Lil's pregnancy

and settle in the Fens.<sup>340</sup> On their first morning in their new home, Lil' watches the sun rise over the strange new landscape: Page describes, through the medium of Pip imagining the thoughts of his mother, her vision entirely in terms of the contrast between her new surroundings and the marsh she has left behind:

At first the mist looks like the pea-souper banks of a North Norfolk sea-fret. Then, lifting through the mist, the solid mast of a ship turns out to be a tall brick chimney, several miles away...She sees water, not in the labyrinthine pattern of the creeks on the Morston saltmarshes, but water in straight unnatural lines as far as she can see... The land is absolutely flat, relentless, mud brown and dull green; not the soft level of the marshes, but a rigid, carved geometry of lines, furrows, paths and roads. (p.63)

The terms that describe difference here are those of scale and shape, organic and constructed: the mast of a ship— moving, transient, emblematic of travel and distance and the uncertain far away—transforms into a heavy, permanent symbol of domestic solidity in the shape of a chimney. The water that Lil' understands, has grown up negotiating through space is, in the Fens, contained in 'straight *unnatural* lines'; human agency extends through the two essential elements of the marsh, earth and water, and presses ('carve[s]') them into shapes that are not their own. This is factually accurate: much of the fenland, which is now mostly reclaimed land, is arranged almost in squares, bordered by sharply

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<sup>340</sup> And Lil' asks again, 'But are we still in Norfolk?'... Yes, it was still Norfolk. Norfolk's broad in the beam, full of soft fields and quite up to thwarting an escape. But they nearly made it' (p.64). It is important, I think, that there is a distinction here between the saltmarsh and the rest of Norfolk.

demarcated dykes, with steep straight banks of inarguably artificial construction.<sup>341</sup>

It is particularly notable that the language Pip employs to describe Lil's vision of the fens resembles that he employs in the guise of imagining Hands' first glimpse of the saltmarsh: 'absolutely flat, relentless, muddy brown and dull green'; 'a rough mudslide slips into the Morston channel... Beyond it, a flat mile of saltmarsh until the branchless masts of other boats... Beyond them the saltmarsh stretches as far as the eye can see' (pp.63, 9). Although Pip contrasts the 'absolutely flat' fens with the 'soft level of the marshes', Hands' focus on horizons, the shifts created by the incoming tide, *is* just as insistent on the relentlessness of the marsh's flatness. When inhabiting the viewpoint of both of these displaced characters, Pip uses the language of the incomer, incapable of seeing the detail of the locus; they remain on the outside of the landscape, looking in.

There is a difference, however; while the reader is never permitted access to a 'known' Fens—despite the fact that the family remain there for years, Pip never gives a real sense of the Fens as a lived environment—Hands' rooftop view of the saltmarsh from above is directly contrasted with the 'lived' marsh, as it is experienced by Goose and Lil' Mardler. Hands is portrayed at the opening of the novel as quite literally 'stuck in the mud'; he is afraid for his life, and the saltmarsh itself is about to engulf him. He is saved by Goose, who uses the produce of the marsh—the ever-present samphire—to conceal him, and then hauls him to safety (pp.1-3). He remains stuck, surrounded by broken boats and mud he cannot traverse. By contrast, when the reader is reintroduced to the saltmarsh in the company of Goose and Lil', they are tellingly *in motion* in the saltmarsh,

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<sup>341</sup> As Ian D Rotherham puts it, 'our view today [of the Wicken Sedge Fen] is across a largely barren, dry vista of intensive agri-industry; devoid of its ecology and deprived of its native peoples...much of the great wetland was still here in 1600, but was virtually annihilated by 1900'. (*The Lost Fens: England's Greatest Ecological Disaster* (Stroud: The History Press, 2013), p.1.) The physical characteristics of the reclaimed fenland I can vouch for myself; they were the site where most of the research and writing of this project took place.

with the added challenge of darkness. They 'press onwards..., picking through the mud and crossing the creeks on planks so slick with damp it's as if the earth itself is full of steam' (p.36). This is not to say that the mud is not still present, or just as prevalent:

Here they come – two beads of torchlight across the marsh. One held slightly higher than the other, both trained on a ground so thick with mud it seems to swallow the light before it's fallen. (p.36)

The mud is still deep, but Goose, unlike her short-term partner Hands, can move across it freely even in the dark; so too can her daughter, Lil', who will ultimately be Pip's own mother. She has inherited, evidently, her mother's skills for surviving in the saltmarsh; Pip goes on to describe in detail her ability to do so:

She's learned how to walk in mud with her heels pointed down, the depths of the creeks and the strengths of the tide, knows where mud cracks are so deep you might break a leg—it's as if she has it all etched on the back of her hand. She knows the calendar by the buds on sea blite, the flowers on campion and dry seeds on curled dock. By the number of joints on a stem of samphire. And she never treads on a tern's egg, even though its shell is made of shingle. (p.50)

The language Pip uses to describe his mother's understanding of her environment demonstrates the knowledge that she has gained, but also reinforces the sense of the saltmarsh's uncertainties and its resistance to traditional methods of measuring. The 'depths' and 'strengths' of the

water, in the shapes of ‘creeks’ and ‘tides’, are not discerned in accepted scientific fashions: Lil’ ‘knows’, rather than measures. Her calendar is not a socially accepted set of days, but a series of natural events, all related to ‘buds’, ‘flowers’ and ‘dry seeds’: fertility in the saline-rich barrenness of the saltmarsh.

This framing of George and Lil’s move away from the saltmarsh to the Fens as literally a move from a form of authenticity to a composed reality takes on particular significance as the life that Lil’ and George attempt there is exposed as, in a sense, being equally constructed. George, for example, changes his name on their first morning in the Fens, “I don’t want to be called Shrimp no more. I was christened George, and so I’m George now”, and Lil’s inability to change her own name too, ‘She’d like to be called May, she wants to leave Lil’ behind, but she feels this is his moment to feel right about himself’, seems emblematic of her inability to consciously construct an identity in the way that her husband does (p.64). George, too, throws himself into life in ‘...the Saints’, engaging in his social life and his new employment, ‘George talked nervously about pheasant rearing, training, pen design and bloodstock heredity’ (p.65). It is notable, too, that his new job based in the solid, steadiness of the lands of a feudal heredity system, ‘a position of gamekeeper-cum-stockman...at the Stow Bardolph Estate’: employment that, crucially, is of a kind that is impossible in the marsh, based as it is in a type of solid gentrified agricultural community alien to the solitary subsistence-level habitation of the saltmarshes they have left (p.64).

Two contrasts are at work here; the first, the comparative ontological certainty and uncertainty of Goose and her daughter, and Hands, as they engage with the saltmarsh: the second, between the different depictions of the two outsiders. Both of these pairings hinge on representations of differing levels of proximity; on the proximity of the newcomer and the inhabitant and, equally, the *possibility* of proximity in the very different landscapes of the saltmarsh and the Fens. Partially this question of

proximity is one of the practical, physical nearness of person and place. It is notable that Hands looks at the saltmarsh from a distance—from the roof of Goose’s cottage—while Lil’ sees the Fens appearing out of a deep fog. These symbolic views, distanced from the place observed, are the epitome of Ingold’s occupant, surveying the land without its contextual significances. But it is also a question of a less literal form of proximity; the same proximity that I identified in Chapter One as afforded to Alan Garner’s Sal and Ian, by the elimination of the GPS: an apparently unmediated closeness to place that permits deeper connection.

What is made more evident in *Salt* than in *Thursbitch* is the complexity of this proximity in the twenty-first century. Partially, this complexity is due to the fact that proximity has, historically, become linked to a wider scheme of principles: Ursula K Heise notes that:

...certain features recur across a wide variety of environmentalist perspectives that emphasize a sense of place as a basic prerequisite for environmental awareness [...] Many of them... associate *spatial closeness*, cognitive understanding, emotional attachment, and an ethic of responsibility and “care”.<sup>342</sup>

As Heise notes, Zygmund Bauman, Hans Jonas and John Tomlinson, among others, have described this as an ‘ethic of proximity’.<sup>343</sup> This ‘ethic of responsibility’ or of ‘proximity’ is a mindful echo of the theory that informs Aldo Leopold’s ‘Land Ethic’. That is, the principle of—in Leopold’s own words—‘the extension of the social conscience from people to land’.<sup>344</sup> Proximity, in these terms, breeds a sense of

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<sup>342</sup> Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place*, p.33.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

<sup>344</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), pp.209-210.



responsibility and care that informs much environmentalist polemic. In *Salt*, this is manifested, in particular, in the manner in which Goose and Lil's understanding of the marsh is valorised; especially in the context of the contrasting narrative of Hands' introduction to the marsh.

These contrasting descriptions of his ancestors' various approaches to the saltmarsh are not, fairly obviously, neutral. Hands, the outsider, is immobile, ignorant and taking his bearings from the human points of reference that he can hope to understand; Goose and Lil' are insistently the opposite, at one with the marsh, persistently mobile and focussed almost entirely on the landscape in one way or another. In this sense *Salt* follows the line of Leopold's 'land ethic', prioritising the proximal and the epistemology of the local; yet on the other hand—and this is the point where the novel's twenty-first century uncertainties become evident—the saltmarsh is also configured as a site of insularity and entrapment. While it is undoubtedly the case that the saltmarsh is directly contrasted with the Fen landscape throughout *Salt*, the ethical ramifications of that contrast are not necessarily divided by a simple binary between the constructed/natural, authentic/false or, in fact, the ecocentric/anthropocentric. As *Salt*'s narratives unfold, Jeremy Page threads asides and questions, which disrupt the casual construction of a set of easy conclusions, within the apparently predictable.

A discourse of insularity is first, vividly, evident in the manner in Pip's positioning of himself as a marsh-dweller. His use of extremely localised idiom like his mother's nickname, which means one 'who tells tales (p.29), and reference to purely local traditions, jobs and circumstances (p.163) implies that clarification is unnecessary. He speaks with easy familiarity of the specifics of samphire cooking and harvesting (pp.6-7), and describes the ways to move through the marsh in as much detail as if he was born in it: 'That being the usual path in Norfolk and this being the usual way of the marsh' (p.2). His language remains in insistent proximity to the marsh;

his descriptions of it emphasising his assumption of local knowledge and comprehension:

*Needless to say* the longshoreman had spent too many years staring at the horizon, talking to fish heads hanging from his hook or herring strung from his belt (p.2). (emphasis mine)

The effect of this on the reader is paradoxical. Pip's casual assumption of local understanding in his reader suggests a belief on his part that the whole world is like the saltmarsh, that no-one could be ignorant of these things. And yet the effect, instead, is distancing. The reader is outside the insular marshworld, looking in at it, as bemused as Hands, and smothered in about as much confusing and muddy detail as he is.

This semantic exclusion of the reader is one of the most obvious signs that *Salt*'s distinction between the inhabitant and the visitor is subtler, and more complex, than is apparent at first glance. There are, however, others; its entrapping effect is echoed by Goose, who embodies much of the saltmarsh; when she notices that 'Hands *liked* looking at the horizon', Pip tells us, '[s]he had a problem on her plate. She had a man...and he was already looking into the distance' (p.14). Goose's response is to refocus his attention nearby, to distract him from the marsh's one boundary, the encircling horizon:

She made him work on things close at hand, made him hunt for pins on the floor, pointed out a speck of dust and asked him what it was...He peered closer each time, completely unaware that his lovely long sight was being reeled in from the horizon like a sleeping fish at the end of her line.

Unaware that his world was becoming her  
cottage. (pp.14-15)

This ambivalence is repeated. Pip's narration is laced with the knowledge of threat, and danger, based in the saltmarsh from the beginning of the novel; Goose, in the first few lines, 'sees [the clouds] all right, saw them the second they appeared, and for a moment she doesn't know what to do—should she run? She thinks better of it because she knows it's too late' (p.1). Hands, entering Goose's cottage for the first time, 'smelled the nets down by the creek, the cheap grease of candlewax and the fear and loneliness that was huddled on this bleak North Sea coast during these long dark nights' (p.7). I have already discussed the painfully grim description of the marsh that Pip ascribes to Hands' first view of it in the morning. Lil' Mardler 'inhabits a landscape that is so big and flat it seems the edges slope up into the sky all round, where mud meets cloud banks and seems to continue up there till traces of creeks and water can be seen there too—she often thinks she stands in some vast and dreary dish which has no end' (p.50). Inescapable, dreary, unpredictable and dangerous.<sup>345</sup> The symbolic effects of the marsh, too, are portrayed as inescapable; as Pip notes, as his mother stares at her new home landscape, 'Norfolk is broad in the beam, full of soft fields and quite up to thwarting an escape. But they nearly made it' (p.64).

There is no sense, here, of the queasily problematic pastoral landscapes of the past, or even of the sense of an opening of understanding that I identified in *Thursbitch*'s complex examination of man-land relationships. Although the spirit of ethical proximity remains in Pip's insistence on prioritising the epistemology of the local, and on placing the saltmarsh hierarchically above the Fens, it is tempered by a sense that this landscape is difficult to be proximal *to*. Any sense of closeness is tempered by the

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<sup>345</sup> D. J. Taylor's description of the landscape as 'ominous' is, of course, relevant again here. My personal impression of the saltmarsh- a landscape I in fact know very well- is that it is both hugely colourful, within a palette of blue and grey and green, and full of life, but it is undoubtedly true that it is also extraordinarily strange.

saltmarsh itself. There is a fascinating distinction between the way in which *Salt* disrupts the ‘ethics of proximity’ argument and the way in which that argument is disrupted within the ecocritical sphere. Zygmund Bauman argues that the ‘morality of proximity’ is ‘inherited from pre-modern times...and as such is woefully inadequate in a society in which all important action is an action on distance’.<sup>346</sup> Ursula K. Heise, too, suggests that ‘the ethic of proximity...relies on the assumption that genuine ethical commitment can only grow out of the lived immediacies of the local that constitute the core of one’s authentic identity’, before going on to identify the reasons for disrupting this narrative of commitment and localism with aid from McKenzie Wark’s arguments regarding the ecological use of computer modelling techniques at both a scientific and entertainment level: ‘such software tools,’ Heise states, following Wark, ‘...enable an understanding of global ecology that is very difficult to attain through direct observation and lived experience’.<sup>347</sup> Wark himself ultimately suggests that ‘It is only by becoming more abstract, more estranged from nature that I can make the cultural leap to thinking about its fragile totality’.<sup>348</sup>

I cannot entirely agree with Wark’s belief that abstraction is the *key* to ecological understanding and concern; on the other hand, Heise’s belief in an ‘eco-cosmopolitan approach’ that will ‘also [in addition to the existing focus on the local] value the abstract and highly mediated kinds of knowledge and experience that lend equal or greater support to a grasp of biospheric connectedness’ has value. It is, however, a great contrast to the disruption of the localist polemic as it appears in *Salt*. Heise attempts to reconcile the ‘ethic of proximity’ with the increasingly virtual post-millennial world, which renders the geographically distant both relevant and, though still literally faraway, symbolically and practically immediate; Jeremy Page, however, derails the prioritisation of the local by invoking

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<sup>346</sup> Zygmund Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1993), p.217.

<sup>347</sup> Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place*, pp.42, 62.

<sup>348</sup> McKenzie Wark, ‘Third Nature,’ *Cultural Studies* 8.1 (1994): 115-132, 127.

an environment that resists definition, disallowing the connection that Heise identifies as ‘arising out of...the bodily experience and manipulation of nature, rather than out of more abstract or mediated kinds of knowledge acquisition. Walking through natural landscapes, observing their flora and fauna, hunting, fishing, gathering fruits or mushrooms’ are, she suggests, methods by which a connection of this kind can supposedly be produced.<sup>349</sup> In *Salt*, however, these activities are described, but do not offer either the epistemological or ontological certainty that the ethic of proximity can apparently offer the human side of the equation.<sup>350</sup> Rather than the disruption occurring because the world has changed, which is Heise and Wark’s argument, Page seems to suggest that the saltmarsh itself is resistant to solidity or certainty. The ethical proximity argument, I suggest, is based on an idea of a landscape that is defined by its stillness, both temporal and, essentially, physical. I opened this chapter with Ian Scott’s statement that ‘The sea is never still, the marshes are never still, the soil is never still—and never have been’; in that world, it seems impossible to experience—or manipulate—nature in a way that promotes a certainty that can constitute real connection or understanding of it.<sup>351</sup>

Within the novel, this lack of certainty (and stillness) is in part depicted by the complexity of the manner in which Pip and his family describe and engage with the saltmarsh: it is both difficult and protective, home and alien, dangerous and a locale of refuge. It denies the application of definitive binaries of is/is not, and also denies the certainty of absolute definition to its inhabitants. It also, however, resists the application of these uncertainties to a wider setting: although *Salt* constantly disturbs the idea of localised knowledge as a form of ecological connection, it remains insistently, obsessively local: it does not aim to make wider, global claims

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<sup>349</sup> Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place*, p.30.

<sup>350</sup> The point of the ‘ethic of proximity’ is, of course, to celebrate a consciousness of environment that will encourage greater ecological protectiveness. As Heise, rather dryly puts it, this process ‘put[s] the emphasis on the (usually male) individual’s encounter with and physical immersion in the landscape, typically envisioned as wild...In its more literary version, this vision leads to individuals’ epiphanic fusions with their natural surroundings’ (2008, p.29). This, the implication is, will lead to a greater level of environmentalist understanding.

<sup>351</sup> Ian Scott, ‘An Even More Vulnerable Place’, p.2.

about the way in which places can be experienced, only to question the viability and efficacy of this local knowledge as an ontological mode in this specific place. *Salt* does not question a greater grand narrative, or even argue for the absolute impossibility of knowledge: like *Thursbitch*, it maintains an insistent and uninterrupted focus on the miniature and the specific, but one that attends, always, to the myriad ways in which that miniature is fragmented, unsure, and unsettling. The novel also, however, does widen its attention to the metafictional level (though still with its minute focus on the particular): the lack of stillness, permanence and attendant surety that *Salt* identifies in its locus is also reflected in the ways in which the saltmarsh is internally *told*: not just to the reader, but among the characters themselves.

It is important to note that Pip's statements about the saltmarsh, its dangers and uncertainties included, are, themselves, based on an inherited idea of it; and, at that, an inherited idea that he signposts himself as a source of great *uncertainty*. It is notable that up to a point almost halfway through the novel, Pip has never in fact *been* to the saltmarsh. Pip makes no secret of his absence from the first third of the novel; indeed, his absence from it is made acutely conspicuous by his frequent metaleptic presence within the text; 'You know—I think she's stumped' (p.39). This means, of course, that all of those first descriptions of the saltmarsh are highly constructed; his detailed descriptions of the world seen by Hands, Goose and his mother in her childhood are based on his own much later experiences of it, and their own stories (which would, perhaps, be less problematic were the reader not consistently informed of the inconsistencies, 'murky untruths' in Goose and Lil's stories) (p.30). The authority with which Pip contrasts the apparent authenticity of the marsh with the artifice of the fens is, in itself, a construction; but one that is not, explicitly, challenged or derailed other than through Pip's own asides that contrast the imaginative and factual elements of his narrative.

Pip is well aware of the hazy nature of the reality created for him by the tales he is told, particularly by his grandmother. She tells and tells until the family are 'all lost at sea along with Hands'; her embroidery of the memories, 'adding pieces and patches, new clauses, new asides', is so extensive that 'none...who listened could find their way out' (p.34). The family are kept together, netted by the web of the family mythologies; 'After all,' Lil' thinks when she hears her mother tell them for the first time since she leaves Norfolk, 'stories have bound them from the start. This baby is just the next step in the myth' (p.93). When Pip speaks of Goose's dense nexus of stories, it is in terms of a physical matrix, an object that obfuscates the 'real' in favour of the 'fabricated':

Of that magical sail there is no remnant, no scrap of the scraps that it was made of, no thread of the threads that tied it together. There are no photographs. The only sail is the sail of my grandmother's stories, much fabricated with the collected junk of the marsh and the sea until it resembled the landscape of North Norfolk: muddy, wooded, sparse in its emptiness, luxuriant in its detail. (p.33)

That lovely phrase, 'sparse in its emptiness, luxuriant in its detail', bears a little more examination; Pip uses it to link, inextricably, the North Norfolk landscape with his grandmother's stories, describing both as deeply, minutely detailed while still in some way unfilled. The marsh is full of tiny certainties—the wildlife, the big sky, the water and the mud—while the big things—the shape of the land itself, the weather—are still entirely lacking in constancy. Goose's stories can, and do, incessantly, give the minutiae, but they are empty of the certainties that Pip is searching for: where his grandfather went; why his mother commits suicide; why they left the saltmarsh in the first place. Nor is Goose alone in this tendency:

My mother is telling me the events of her youth and, before them, of Hands and Goose on the edge of the marsh. She tells me how bleak she felt when she had to leave North Norfolk and about the first night she spent on the lawn behind the house. [...] She tells me about Norfolk's skies, the saltmarsh, about fish and crablines, meals of tongue and samphire. (p.99)

Again we see the focus on the miniature, without the 'big' details in place; Pip, when he tells his own story attempts to add these, linking up the events of his narrative to wider events in the world—the moon landing and his birth, for example (p.89)— but still cannot 'ground' the story entirely. Without a solid foundation in its place, the narrative slips, still empty of its certainties and both Pip and Goose, in their separate ways, deal with the lack of foundation by weaving their own. When he speaks of Goose 'faithfully taking over the stitching of the quilt, adding pieces and patches, new clauses, new asides over the years until none of us who listened could find our way out', Pip is describing both his own experience of his attempts to decipher his past from Goose's patchwork of truth and story and imagining and the process that he has, himself, begun to engage in (p.34). The inherent difficulty is that in fabricating his own 'sail of stories' Pip must rely on second hand evidence. His relationship with the past is marked by distrust and perplexity, and that past is inevitably related to, stored in and configured around the saltmarsh itself. Pip envisions the web of his family narrative as 'a complicated fabric' and, much earlier in the text, as a 'quilt...in the murk of [his] grandmother's mind'; as if the stories told by Goose form an overlay that covers the saltmarsh (p.34). Yet even Pip admits that this metaphor suggests too great a division between marsh and narrative, noting that, 'all of us who listened realized that what Goose was talking about was not a quilt or a sail or a man who left her in the agonies of giving birth. She was talking about Norfolk itself' (p.35).



The intimate linkage between the narratives and the saltmarsh are entirely explicit; the family 'stories,' Pip claims in the final few paragraphs of the novel, 'started in the mud here, they've grown over time, they're speaking with their own voices now' (p.319). It is evident that we have returned full circle to the beginning of the novel, where the 'man buried up to his neck in mud' is 'where it is supposed to have started' (p.1). These stories, he suggests, are a cycle; 'it had happened again, family history circling like the storms round the North Sea' (p.275). Goose fears these cyclical storms, believing that they come back 'across the centuries in regular rhythm, bringing with them the dead and drowned back to the saltmarsh' (p.318).

In this way it is clear that the novel shows Pip's family as aware of the ways in which their narratives of it form part of the landscape even as they describe it; in other words, that their representations of the saltmarsh are both images of it and part of it. At this metafictional level, *Salt* explicitly denotes the way in which fictional images of landscapes are able to comment upon the various ways in which their landscape is mediated by human narratives, even while simultaneously contributing to that mediatory layer. Where the land is not certain enough, Pip and Goose rather argue, narrative will inevitably fill the gaps.

Believing too strongly in the narrative's ability to plug these apertures of geography, of course, is the thing that leads to disaster in *Thursbitch*; Jack Turner believes too strongly in the filling-in of certainty provided by his village's folklore. I will return to this thought, but for a moment I wish to suggest that Pip and family's relationship with the saltmarsh is attempting the same process; that by weaving their fabric of stories over the saltmarsh, Goose and Pip in particular are attempting to shape the land that resists their proximal attempts at knowing it. I suggest that the cloud-reading that he and his grandmother both use as a way, they claim, to see the future, and his mother's obsessive, peculiar flower planting, which is never fully explained, are all part of this same effort; That by affecting or 'reading' the landscape, they are attempting to create a version of proximal

understanding. Until he enters the saltmarsh for the first time (p.155), for Pip, a landscape of the past; its present physical reality subsumed beneath the stories of his grandmother. As he lives within it, gaining an understanding of its physical characteristics and translating its uncertainties into a narrative of his own, the marsh is translated into a present, focussed on Pip's movements there: 'We crossed the marsh, my boots getting heavier with the mud... The sky was vast and cold and luminous' (pp.162-163). To an extent, the narrative becomes more conventional, more centred on the moment of narrative presence, while Pip relates his growth and education (pp.192-195). But it is clear that this is never an absolute; with the arrival of Elsie (Pip's own ghost from the past) in the saltmarsh, his narrative slips again. Signs from his past appear, he glimpses the future in the clouds, and he begins once more to reference elements of the plot that occur later (pp.202, 209, 235). When Pip reverts, with Elsie's arrival, to his own uncertainties and manners of coping with them, this is reflected in his return to 'filling in' the saltmarsh's interpretive aporia with his own.

In a post-millennial context this is a fascinating discourse that resists polemical politicisation. The possibility that we perhaps react to personal doubt by attempting to remove wider doubts is interesting; moreover, this thought suggests that we also occlude the uncertain with a fabric of derived assumptions, representations that attempt, in one way or another, to obscure under the guise of revelation. In both *Thursbitch* and *Salt* we can see this approach to landscape, as groups of people—Jack Turner's village, Sal's academic community, Pip and his family—create a version of landscape's mysteries that celebrates a controlled system of absences and mystery in order to obscure a greater, and perhaps, I might argue, more disturbing underlying ineffability. It is to this greater ineffability that the receptive ignorance I formulated in Chapter One allows access, of a limited and entirely unpredictable variety.

The manner in which the characters within the novel cope, to any degree, with their inability to really know their places is dependent upon many things; in *Salt* it is a question, perhaps, of how they themselves configure that relationship. In the final chapter of the novel, Pip outlines the symbiosis of the relationship between family and saltmarsh with unusually definitive clarity:

All of them living and losing their way on this thin strip of saltmarsh which can never be called land and never be called sea. With a legacy of madness and hurt which must be out there among the creeks and samphire, blowing in the wind. This coastal living has formed them, made them extraordinary, and killed them off.

A thin vein of salt running through all these lives, unquenched and resolute, like a filigree of bone, growing in us all, connecting us with each other and the land that's made us. (p.307)

This extraordinary place, Pip suggests, is more than just a setting imbued with the uncanny and symbolic of danger. It is, he claims, the *cause* of his family's trials and behaviour; a catalyst, a reason. In the second half of this chapter I will consider the nature of this greater ineffability as it appears in *Salt*; that is, I will examine the ways in which the idea of the saltmarsh's influence in Pip's family's life is used by Jeremy Page to ask wider, more difficult questions about the way in which we interact with these difficult landscapes.

## 2: 'Out There Among the Creeks and Samphire': The Location of Danger

The saltmarsh, as it appears in *Salt*, is a mess; a desperate tangle of possibilities, problems, meanings and questions. I have established that the saltmarsh functions as both a refuge and a labyrinthine prison for Pip and his family; a paradoxical combination of fear and fascination. Its 'edge' characteristics are obvious in this tension between possibility and danger. It is, Pip tells us, dangerous but also home; it is beautiful, but consistently, emphatically, primarily constituted of mud; it is isolated, empty even, but peopled by characters who remain inescapably entwined in each other's lives. It is a constant presence in the novel, even when the characters move away from it. It is absolutely, utterly central to the novel, and yet it remains entirely elusive. Page's characters emphasise the impossibility of their relationship with it, blaming the marsh, its weather, its peculiarities for their complex, difficult lives. They populate it with their memories, fill it with anthropocentric significances. It is both the focus of their lives and their scapegoat, the reason for their problems and the location that they return to in attempts to solve them.

This perplexing locus translates, as I have shown, into a landscape narrative that hierarchises the 'natural' over the constructed, while simultaneously undermining that same valourisation. *Salt* insistently constructs and disrupts visions of the 'authentic' way of life in the marsh, leaving the reader as deeply uncertain of their 'place' as the characters themselves. In the second half of this chapter, I intend to further unpack Page's vision of the connections between his characters and their saltmarsh, widening my focus to consider the critical implications of the ways in which those relationships are portrayed.

I concluded earlier that Pip's narration configures the saltmarsh as something that his family both represent and create in their ways of engaging with it, and that that process is dependent on a prioritisation of proximity (despite the fact that that proximity is also, ultimately, rendered

as problematic). What it is clear is important to Page's protagonists is the idea of daily life, of the achievement of the everyday, and the ways in which those processes are altered by the location that they inhabit. The obvious comparison is with the Heideggerian 'dwelling' that I discussed in relation to *Thursbitch*, and the deconstruction of the apparently 'authentic' approach of Jack Turner. I mentioned, in that context, the suggestion of Hubert Dreyfus in reference to Heidegger's *Being and Time* that, 'in effect the world has been like a tool for inauthentic Dasein', a suggestion that I would argue is a particularly apposite statement in the context of Jeremy Page's descriptions of the Fens, which have quite literally been created by tools, and certainly convey a sense of inauthenticity.<sup>352</sup> Conversely, the *unheimlichkeit* that Heidegger identifies as a feature of Dasein's most functional and fulfilling relationship with the world is a fairly obvious connection to make with the peculiar and distinctly unsettling landscape of the saltmarsh.<sup>353</sup> In the terms of the seminal Heideggerian scholar George Steiner:

Uncanniness declares those key moments in which *Angst* brings *Dasein* face to face with its terrible freedom to be or not to be, to dwell in inauthenticity or strive for self-possession.<sup>354</sup>

In *Thursbitch*, uncanniness is the enlightening sense that Jack Turner receives as a result of a brutal demonstration of the limitations of his understanding: his sense of 'at-home'-ness has been destabilised. But crucially, the nature of the wilderness valley *enables* this opening of

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<sup>352</sup> Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-In-The-World*, p.178.

<sup>353</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp.233-4. 'Anxiety individualizes Dasein and thus discloses it as *'solus ipse'*. But this existential 'solipsism' is so far from the displacement of putting an isolated subject-Thing into the innocuous emptiness of a worldless occurring, that *in an extreme sense what it does is precisely to bring Dasein face to face with its world as world, and thus bring it fact to face with itself as Being-in-the-world'*. (p.233) (emphasis mine)

<sup>354</sup> George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p.100.

understanding, but does not cause it. Similarly, Sal says of the valley that it is '*her* place of understanding' (emphasis mine); it is a place where she can understand, rather than a place that bestows understanding.

Yet where the point of this contrast in *Thursbitch* is to create and then to destabilise the idea of a hierarchy of human knowledge about their surroundings, this is not the case in *Salt*. The dichotomy Page presents is different; where Garner contrasts the behaviours of different people in the same place, Page compares two places, one altered irrevocably by human intervention (the Fens), the other not (the saltmarsh). The onus, in *Salt*, is on the differences of the place rather than the people; and thus the differences in behaviour are due not to internal changes in the characters but to the place in which they occur. Pip claims that the 'legacy of madness and hurt' is '*out there*' (emphasis mine); a feature of the saltmarsh that cannot fail to affect its residents, rather than an inherent weakness in the people themselves. That 'thin vein of salt', a physical symbol of the saltmarsh's effect on the lives of his family, is an invasion of the land into the human, an intrusion. The reference to a 'filigree of bone' speaks of spurs, the growth of bone (usually supportive, vital) in a different, wrong, direction, causing pain. Pip lays his family's troubles at the door of the saltmarsh, directly accusing the land and their life on it of 'kill[ing] them off'. Unhomeliness, estrangement, has, in *Salt*, shifted from being a reaction in people to a place that requires a certain kind of attention, to being a quality of that place. By Steiner's definition above, uncanniness and angst are human states; both powerful, but still parts of being human. I am reminded of *Thursbitch*'s Jack Turner's furious accusation after the death of his wife that the eponymous valley 'never said!', claiming that the land a) *can* tell and b) *should* tell. In *Thursbitch*, Turner's claim is a demonstration of his ignorance; the novel's climax demonstrates that he learns that the land does not tell at all. But Pip's claim that the saltmarsh is the active source of his family's doom is, at the novel's climactic moment, an apportioning of blame.

D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini identify a spectrum between what they term 'causal responsibility and overt expressions of blame'; that is, between the sense that an object is 'to blame' for an event and 'some sort of overt action, perhaps telling someone that his behaviour is substandard'.<sup>355</sup> The blame that I refer to in the context of *Salt* is definitively the latter; there is no sense in Pip's language of the abstract variety of responsibility that can be apportioned to a malfunctioning alarm (for example) that is 'to blame' for a late start. Instead, Pip's approach—and Goose's approach, for that matter, is more in line with Kelly Shaver's simple definition of the term: 'Whatever their other features, negative events demand explanation, a demand frequently satisfied by finding someone who is *answerable* for the occurrence'.<sup>356</sup> It is also a question, ultimately, of judgement and, in Tognazzini and Coates' terms, '*evaluating*'. When we blame others, we see them as having dropped below some standard that we accept (or perhaps that we think they should accept), whether of excellence, morality, or respectful relationships'.<sup>357</sup>

Naturally, applying this kind of responsibility and moral expectation to a place requires the blamer to engage in a certain level of the kind of anthropomorphism I mentioned earlier; but it is also impossible without a certain amount of emotional investment. As P F. Strawson notes, in his groundbreaking essay, 'Freedom and Resentment':

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<sup>355</sup> D. Justin Coates & Neal A. Tognazzini, 'The Contours of Blame' in *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*, ed. D. Justin Coates & Neal A. Tognazzini (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp.3-26, p.8.

<sup>356</sup> Kelly Shaver, *The Attribution of Blame: Causality, Responsibility and Blameworthiness* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1985), p.1. I have used Shaver's opening definition of 'blame' here as a clear denotation of the need to find someone with a form of responsibility for an occurrence. Shaver's later chapters on 'Dimensions of Responsibility' and 'Attribution of Responsibility' provide a much more detailed account of the nature of responsibility that are worth examining for a truly thorough account. Shaver's work is rather more legalistic (and drier) in tone than Coates and Tognazzini's more up to date examination of similar ground, but as a clear delineation of the limits of the various natures of 'blameworthiness' is still valuable.

<sup>357</sup> Coates & Tognazzini, 'The Contours of Blame,' p.9.

To adopt the objective attitude...cannot include the range of reactive feelings and attitudes which belong to involvement or participation with others in inter-personal human relationships; it cannot include resentment, gratitude, forgiveness, anger...<sup>358</sup>

Expanding on Strawson's point, R Jay Wallace points out that, 'Resentment, indignation and guilt are essentially tied to expectations that we hold ourselves and others to'.<sup>359</sup> In other words, Pip's apportioning of blame to the saltmarsh tells us both that he views it as having human qualities, even if not in the standard anthropomorphic sense, and also that he has invested considerable emotion into his relationship with it—not just in the standard sense of caring about a place, but in terms of an interpersonal relationship.

In order for this relationship to exist, the manner in which Pip's family envisions the saltmarsh must be called into question. One cannot blame, as I have suggested, the inert or the passive; in other words, the apportioning of blame also requires the apportioning of, in some sense, a form of consciousness. It could, of course, be argued that this is an utterly universal tendency, and I do not deny that this idea of overlaying is in some respects the underlying conceit of 'landscape', or the art of representing physical non-constructed places; what I think *is* pertinent here that cannot be seen everywhere is this idea of culpability, which I think is particularly noticeable in

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<sup>358</sup> P. F Strawson, 'Freedom and Resentment' (1962), in *Free Will*, ed. Gary Watson, 1<sup>st</sup> edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p.66. The overwhelming majority of secondary texts that examine Strawson's seminal lecture cite the reprinted text from this anthology. In accordance, this is the version of the text that I have referenced, since earlier versions seem virtually impossible to locate.

<sup>359</sup> R. Jay Wallace, 'Emotions, Expectations and Responsibility' in *Free Will and Reactive Attitudes: Perspectives on P. F. Strawson's 'Freedom and Resentment'*, ed. Michael McKenna and Paul Russell (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), pp.157-186, p.160.



these edge places: I do not, for example, blame the hill outside my home every time I trip on the incline.

Graham Harvey, writing in his introduction to *The Handbook to Contemporary Animism*, identifies two strands of belief that focus on the principle of conscious or enspirited landscape, distinguishing between a 'religious practice or experience which involved encounters with tree-spirits, river-spirits or ancestor-spirits', which he suggests is 'metaphysical', and an animism that is 'a shorthand reference to...efforts to re-imagine and redirect human participation in the larger-than-human, multi-species community'.<sup>361</sup> 'This animism', Harvey continues, is 'relational, embodied, eco-activist and often "naturalist" rather than metaphysical'.<sup>362</sup> In the same volume, Val Plumwood argues, similarly, that 'an animist materialism... advises science to re-envision materiality in richer terms'.<sup>363</sup> 'Forget,' she argues, 'the passive machine model and tell us more about the self-inventive and self-elaborative capacity of nature, about the intentionality of the non-human world'.<sup>364</sup>

Christopher Manes configures the distinction between this 'naturalist' animism and the traditional Western Enlightenment envisioning of the person-earth relationship as one based in the difference between silence and articulacy, arguing that, in Western thought, 'Nature *is* silent in our culture (and in literate societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative'.<sup>365</sup> 'The language we speak today', Manes suggests, 'the idiom

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<sup>361</sup> Graham Harvey, 'Introduction' in *The Handbook to Contemporary Animism*, ed. Graham Harvey (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp.1-14, p.2.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid, p.2.

<sup>363</sup> Val Plumwood, 'Nature in the Active Voice' in *The Handbook to Contemporary Animism*, ed. Graham Harvey (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp.441-453, p.449.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid, p.449.

<sup>365</sup> Christopher Manes, 'Nature and Silence' in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryl Glotfelty & Howard Fromm (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp.15-29, p.15. Manes' original publication seems to have fallen out of print; most critical sources referencing his work refer back to *The Ecocriticism Reader*; since *The ER* has become perhaps the most well-known (and well-regarded) collection of ecocritical writing in totality, I am content to cite their reproduction of Manes' essay.

of Renaissance and Enlightenment humanism, veils the processes of nature with its own cultural obsessions, directionalities, and motifs that have no analogues in the natural world'.<sup>366</sup> Carolyn Merchant emphasises the traditional notion of a fundamental shift in environmental attitudes in the Enlightenment; as Val Plumwood notes, Merchant 'contrasts the mechanistic account of nature arising with the Enlightenment with earlier respectful and organic models of nature as a living, maternal being'.<sup>367</sup> Plumwood then suggests that:

...[t]his revolution opens the way for our modern view of nature as a purely material world empty of agency, mind and purpose, the 'object' or 'clockwork' background to the master element of human consciousness and endeavour.<sup>368</sup>

Others have taken this distinction between earlier 'respectful' approaches and a later 'empty' material world further. J. Baird Callicott, writing in his controversial collection of essays, *In Defence of the Land Ethic* describes the 'attitude to nature [of] modern classical European natural philosophy' thus:

In sum, nature is an inert, material, and mechanical continuum exhaustively described by means of the arid formulae of pure mathematics. In relation to nature the human person is a lonely exile sojourning in a strange and hostile world, alien not only to his physical environment, but to his own

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<sup>366</sup> Ibid, p.15.

<sup>367</sup> Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.48.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid, p.48.

body, both of which he is encouraged to fear  
and attempt to conquer.<sup>369</sup>

In contrast, Callicott suggests that the 'typical traditional American Indian attitude was to regard all features of the environment as enspirited. These entities possessed a consciousness, reason, and volition, no less intense and complete than a human being's'.<sup>370</sup> In this suggestion, Callicott is well beyond my suggestions of the animist approaches inherent in either *Salt* or *Thursbitch*; he pushes the principle to its logical extreme. In doing so Callicott makes claims that skirt the edge of the most usual criticism of the animist approach: that is, the imbuing of the non-human with recognisably human motivations, behaviours and personality traits. While the animist principle of 'enspiritedness' is certainly a feature of the language of *Salt*, and in some respects of *Thursbitch* too, in both cases the anthropomorphic elements are more subtle than a basic equivalency of 'consciousness, reason, and volition' between the human and the 'natural world'.

At no point in *Salt* is the saltmarsh depicted as in possession of reason or volition; yet the family still blame the saltmarsh for their collective bad luck. This is an ascription of blame that depends not on the blamed being sentient in nature, but on the way in which the blaming parties respond to an external factor. In other words, the responsibility that Pip, his family and their friends ascribe to the saltmarsh has nothing to do with an anthropomorphising ascription of human motives to the land, but is founded in the way in which the saltmarsh's inhabitants take their own mistakes and difficulties and find reasons, explanations, that focus on the marsh as the cause of their problematic behaviours. They create a *vision* of the saltmarsh that renders it non-neutral, an active, if not sentient, player in their lives; they overlay the physical reality, the fact of the marsh, with this non-physical version.

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<sup>369</sup> J. Baird Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p.182.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid*, p.189.

Unlike the inherent animism of Callicott's natural world, Page's vision of the saltmarsh clearly divides the saltmarsh itself and the collective vision of it that the family blame for their misfortune; again, we see the principle of the marsh's true, neutral ineffability obscured by a complex matrix of peculiarities and mysteries created by the family. This suggests that, despite the insistence of the family (and particularly Goose and Pip) that the saltmarsh holds the answers, in the clouds or in the land, once again the answers are instead to be found in themselves. Blaming the land is, in Jeremy Page's configuration, ultimately always a self-reflexive gesture.

Pip's narrative reflects this self-reflexivity as he fluctuates in his relationship with the saltmarsh's non-neutrality. Pip is aware of the fact that his grandmother 'tell[s] Norfolk', overlaying the inherently neutral physical marsh with the distinctly *non*-neutral shroud of human history, imaginings and mythologies; Pip also recognises that this telling obscures both the truth of the family's history *and* the marsh. Yet despite his overt comprehension of this tendency, Pip too blames a similar 'version' of the saltmarsh for his family's misfortunes. He ascribes their problematic lives to a vein of salt, to a legacy that is 'out there among the creeks and samphire' (p.307). Indeed, he ascribes his actions, some of the key moments in his journey towards a type of maturity—the trip to a dead whale with his sister, the murder of the twins, the attempted murder of his uncle—to recognising signs in the clouds over the marsh that align with drawings he made during his childhood and clouds he has seen before (p.235). He references these signs of the future before they occur, attempting to give them a kind of legitimacy based in these repeated appearances, as if weaving them throughout the narrative will encourage the reader to dismiss Pip's behaviour as inevitable in the way that he claims to. Pip argues that he is looking for them; at the apposite moment, he claims, the marsh's weather provides (p. 298).

Of course Pip's apparent signs of the future are the same as almost any other predictive signs: he believes that the marsh is providing him with

pointers to show him direction; that he knows what he should do next because he sees the sign from his childhood drawings. But of course there is more to it than that; Pip is looking for a whale-shaped cloud, and so he finds one. Infuriatingly for the reader, despite his recognition of his grandmother's obscuring narratives and claims, Pip reports these signs as confirmations of the inevitability of his actions instead of recognising, or even mentioning, the inherent problem with this approach: he locates the 'vision' of his future in the clouds and the marsh rather than in his interpretation of them. He makes an interpretive leap, in other words; he uses the clouds and his drawings both as the justification for his actions and as their cause. The characters of *Salt* inscribe meaning onto the physical 'surface' of the saltmarsh: it is dangerous, changeable, treacherous, a bad place, a difficult place, a place that does not let go. *But* they then react to these inscribed meanings as if they are inherent qualities of the marsh itself: they overlay Nature with Culture, but then respond to the layer of Culture as if it is Nature itself. Nor is it only the dangerous, difficult marsh that is a construction: Lil learns to live in the marsh—lessons she passes on to Pip, of course—but what she really learns is how to survive as a human in a place that is, *from a human perspective*, problematic.

I am not, I should note, suggesting that all human behaviour is unnatural; only that it is *natural* not because of the place, but because of what it entails to be human in that place. We place the requirement for the behaviour in the place, when actually the need for the behaviour is in the person: in *Thursbitch*, for example, the requirement for Jack Turner to perform the rites that help the farmland prosper is not a requirement for the valley; it is a pre-requisite of survival for people within it. The behaviour is about humans, not about places. Being able to live successfully within a place is not a function of accessing the reality of a place, engaging with its true essence, as much as it is creating a schema of human behaviour that can be successfully performed in a particular location; how this schema relates to the location is the intersection between human and place, and it is where

the creation of the landscape occurs; this landscape, like Pip's predictions, is fundamentally a human interpretation of a natural phenomenon, which ultimately is taken to be the thing itself.

This principle is evocatively familiar; it is, of course, the basis of Roland Barthes' unsettling definition of what he terms 'myth':

We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature... What causes mythical speech to be uttered is perfectly explicit, but it is immediately frozen into something natural: *it is not read as a motive but as a reason.* (emphasis mine)<sup>371</sup>

Barthes is concerned particularly with the way in which 'myth' changes the semiotic layers of signification. The traditional 'sign', which is the sum of a signifier [say, the word 'tree'] and a signified [the tree the word is used to refer to] is, in Barthes' framing of myth, taken as a whole and made the signifier in a further, 'mythical', system, which takes the sign and makes it, as a whole, a signifier for *another* signified—say, a concept, like 'life' or 'Nature'.

The problem with this tendency, Barthes suggests, is twofold. We can see the consequences of taking the interpretation of a phenomenon as natural in *Salt* when Pip kills the twins. He does so because he sees a cloud that, to him, looks like a scene that involves their cuddy: 'in the rag cloud above I can make him out. Cliff, Sandy and two other people sitting in that phantom boat... Meanwhile the rag cloud's changing. One of the figures is standing and while the others watch, the whole cloud splits in two. The men are going to drown' (p.235). When he recognises the same moment in reality, he precipitates the drowning. The cloud does not actually signify

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<sup>371</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 2009), p.154.

the necessity of killing the twins; the cloud is quite simply a cloud. The connection between the cloud and the death of the twins is entirely Pip's own. The cloud is nature; the future Pip sees in it, culture. As Barthes puts it:

In the...(mythical) system, causality is artificial, false; but it creeps, so to speak, through the back door of Nature. This is why myth is experienced as innocent speech; not because its intentions are hidden—if they were hidden, they could not be efficacious—but because they are naturalized.<sup>372</sup>

His motive, the emotion that propels him to kill them, is recognition of the shape, and his irrational belief that the clouds show the future. He claims this to be a reason, his conscious goal to fulfil the future dictated by the cloud. But the future apparently dictated by the cloud is not a natural phenomenon; it is a human one, dictated by the cultural tics taught to him by his grandmother. Pip makes the same mistake as Barthes' 'reader': 'Where there is only an equivalence, he sees a kind of causal process: the signifier and the signified have, in his eyes, a natural relationship'.<sup>373</sup>

The second problem with this mythologising is this: the process of converting the original *sign* (the word tree + the tree it is referring to) (or even a *picture* of a tree) into the myth-level signifier is that the former loses its existing meaning when it becomes the latter; it 'empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains'.<sup>374</sup> The sign 'contained a whole system of values: a history, a geography, a morality, a zoology, a Literature [in the case of Barthes' example]. [The myth-level signifier] has put all this richness at a distance'.<sup>375</sup> In the

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<sup>372</sup> Ibid, pp.155-156.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid, p.156.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid, p.141.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid.

context of the saltmarsh, this is evidenced by Pip's family's need to 'place' all the responsibility for their troubles and failures in it elides the (everything else) that the saltmarsh is *beyond* a site of human disturbance and uncertainty.

As I made evident earlier, Jeremy Page's narrative emphasises the complex and fluctuating nature of landscape mythologizing; the complicated way in which Pip addresses his grandmother's storytelling makes this explicit:

I thought of my mother telling me stories of Goose and the man Hands who became my grandfather. How this area had briefly united these two very strange people and how Goose had subsequently buried the whole landscape in a complicated fabric of stories, lies and mythologies until no one knew what was true anymore. (p.155)

Pip, and thus the reader, is well aware that the physical *reality* of the marsh is buried beneath the stories; that it is, essentially, subsumed. Although the wording is different, this reflects the Barthesian claim that the mythologising of a thing entails the emptying of its intrinsic history, meaning and context. Whether emptied out or buried, what we see is an erasure and a replacement- a deletion of land and a replacement with landscape. As Denis Cosgrove points out, 'Landscape denotes the external world mediated through subjective human experience...Landscape is not merely the world we see, it is a construction, a composition of that world'.

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<sup>376</sup> Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation*, p.13.



This is not new, or revolutionary; we know that this is what landscape is, once we move beyond the simplistic idea of landscape-as-what-we-see. But what *is* different in the Barthesian land-with-superimposed-myth, which I am suggesting that *Salt* begins to engage with, is the clear sense that by insisting on investing attention (and emotion) into the landscape, the land itself is obscured. Cosgrove does note that ‘the elision of landscape with wilderness or nature untainted by human intervention is a recent idea generally involving a rejection of the evidence of human action’; but the way that Pip sees Goose’s stories not just as *creating* a version of the marsh—‘she was telling Norfolk itself’—but as *burying* it is a step further; we have moved from what I suggested was a plugging of landscape apertures with narrative to obscuring the landscape, whole or holey, with narratives of it.<sup>377</sup> In the context of wider post-millennial writing, this is a discomfiting principle; could it be argued that the proliferation of nature writing that apparently *celebrates* British rural landscapes is, in fact, burying those same places?

Pip is not alone in his distrust of these creative entombings; Kipper, George/Shrimp, even Pip’s own mother, highlight the problematic nature of Goose’s stories. Pip even attempts to experience different versions of Norfolk from Goose’s; he travels with a troupe of actors, engages with aspects of the tourist and walking scene on the coast through Elsie, works in the crab factory in Cromer (pp.257-258, 196-198, 276). All of this demonstrates that the ‘authenticity’ of Goose’s vision of Norfolk is no less manufactured than tourist-Norfolk or industrial-Norfolk or artistic-retreat-Norfolk. Pip’s narrative as a whole represents an attempt to order the jumble of Goose’s mythologies of Norfolk and the saltmarsh. This is particularly evident in Pip’s careful references to existing material evidence that supports his version of the narrative, ‘I have a photo from one of these nights in 1945’, and the hanging of his fabulated story on external events, moments in history that exist outside (both the saltmarsh *and*, come to that, the novel) (pp.26, 89). He needs evidence to give his

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<sup>377</sup> Ibid, p.14.

tale the grounding that Goose's lacks. Pip attempts to give his own narrative the authenticity he has denied his grandmother's, despite recognising the dangers of doing so.

Pip's effort, as Page clearly signposts, is doomed to failure; his obvious uncertainty is betrayed by his consistent tendency to use terms such as 'I imagine' and 'I expect', in almost direct opposition to those photographic fragments of objective narrative 'truth'(p. 81, 93). We are left reminded that Pip's narration is no different from Goose's: still an attempt to order the unorderable; still a process that erases. As I identified in the first half of this chapter, *Salt* disrupts, consistently, the idea of the hierarchical proximal and authentic as modes of being-in-place; now I suggest, further, that the novel actively fragments the very possibility of coherent landscape. Every attempt is destabilised: Goose's by Pip; Pip's own by his own uncertainty. And in that uncertainty, Pip repeats the problematic approaches Goose employs (cloud reading, blaming the saltmarsh itself, attempting to tell the saltmarsh rather than telling the way people live there), and ultimately repeats the cyclical mistakes of his family. In fact, more generally, Pip repeats the pattern of claiming the landscape as a reason, rather than a motive. Indeed, the huge storm that Goose fears arguably is a physical manifestation of that inevitable, cyclical approach:

...she began to hear the noises she'd been dreading. Along with the wind...she heard the moans of all the people who'd drowned in that storm over the centuries. [...] Bales of Norfolk wool—five hundred years old—rolling in the waves outside. Sheep too—so she says. And against the awful din of the storm she even claimed she heard the death throes of a mammoth—one of Norfolk's last, she supposed—which had drowned in the

same storm fifty thousand years before.  
(p.45)

The mammoth signals the inevitability of this pattern, Goose still blaming something intrinsic in the saltmarsh, prehuman, beyond control or escape. But then, at the climax of the novel, when Pip has committed murder and fled to the saltmarsh, this cyclical pattern reaches its climax as he returns to a boat that has been a refuge for the family from Hands, Lil' Mardler and George/Shrimp to Pip and, eventually, Elsie. Pip undergoes a strange, prolonged hallucination or fever dream that entails an encounter with all his family members, living and dead. They consider his progress and give him, one way or another, a form of closure. Perhaps most striking is his encounter with the shade or memory of his dead mother:

Why did you do it? I say to her. But I've told you love, I've told you already – it was the way out. It was the path I'd never seen before. I think you're on the same path now, aren't you love? She smiles as she begins to fade away. (p.317)

This section is similar in its revelatory tone to the epiphanic deaths that conclude *Thursbitch*; the casual reader might be forgiven for assuming that death is the inevitable result for Pip also. He has his epiphany, sure enough:

I've come home, I thought—you don't need anything else, just the touch of something you understand in the middle of nowhere. A wrecked boat in the darkness. An acceptance. I leaned against the metal and for a moment felt my story in all its entirety, and all the stories that had made it, bending out into the night in calm pathways. And you

keep on going. She's right, that's all there is  
to it. (pp.322-323)

Yet Pip does not die. Instead he leaves the marsh, signalling the search parties out hunting for him so that he can return to human civilisation (p.323). He is freed from the legacy of the family, and freed from the saltmarsh. That final 'she's right' refers to Goose who, when she appears in his fever dream, tells Pip that 'I ain't got nothin' to tell you 'cause there ain't a wise bone in my whole body. All I ever learned is you got to keep on goin'. Thass the sum of all I know. Juss keep goin'' (p.314). All the questions that have been raised about the way Goose's stories cover the saltmarsh; all the ways Pip questions that obscuring; all the ways in which Jeremy Page questions the blame placed on the saltmarsh by the family: all of these are abandoned in Pip's epiphanic fever, and Pip himself ultimately leaves unscathed, and headed for human justice. The saltmarsh is forgotten, made irrelevant, as Pip envisions '[his] story...and all the stories that had made it' as abruptly separate and distinct from their setting, 'bending out into the night in calm pathways'. His moment of understanding finally disentangles saltmarsh and people; but *can* they be disentangled in this fashion?

This, of course, is a highly speculative and miniaturist envisioning of a deeply political and difficult environmentalist question; how exactly do we disentangle people from world? And if we can, *should* we? Certainly in the early eras of ecocritical writing this problematic issue was often posited in terms of a harsh, and ethically loaded binary between anthropocentric and ecocentric ecological visions. To use the helpfully concise descriptions given by Robyn Eckersley:

The first [anthropocentric] approach is characterized by its concern to articulate an ecopolitical theory that offers new opportunities for *human* emancipation and

fulfilment in an ecologically sustainable society. The second [ecocentric] approach pursues these same goals in the context of a broader notion of emancipation that also recognizes the moral standing of the nonhuman world and seeks to ensure that it, too, may unfold in its many diverse ways.<sup>378</sup>

This is, of course, a very basic description of a complex and multi-faceted distinction, but this is the crux of the debate: whether the ‘nonhuman world’ as Eckersley puts it, ‘is considered to have instrumental value only’ or can be valued ‘for its own sake’.<sup>379</sup> The ecocentric vision of the world is most famously—or perhaps notoriously—outlined by Arne Naess, who coined the term ‘deep ecology’ in the early 1970s to create a differentiation between two different approaches to implementing ecologically minded and environmentalist changes to policy. With the help of George Sessions, in 1984, Naess created what became known as the ‘Deep Ecology Platform’, a set of eight principles that delineated the fundamental principles of the movement; the most pertinent of these principles for the purpose of this chapter are the following:

- The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: inherent worth, intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.
- Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive...<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> Robyn Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Toward an Ecocentric Approach* (Albany: State of New York University Press, 1992), p.26.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid.

<sup>380</sup> Arne Naess & George Sessions, ‘The Deep Ecology Platform’, (originally published 1984). Reproduced on *The Deep Ecology Foundation*. Web: full website details given in bibliography.

What I find particularly interesting about the *language* of the platform is that it emphasises a distinction between human and nonhuman life and, even more tellingly, between a human and nonhuman *world*. This seems like a fairly obvious delineation, except for the fact that this distinction is the key element that Naess' later work claims to wish to, and aims to, elide. 'The rich reality,' he argues in *Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Living in the World*, 'is getting even richer...; we are the first kind of living beings we know of that have the potentialities of living in community with all other living beings'.<sup>381</sup> He also notes that '[i]t is more a question of community therapy than community science: healing our relations to the widest community, that of all living beings'.<sup>382</sup>

This type of 'community therapy' is, emphatically, *not* the type of healing and closure that occurs in *Salt*. The relationship between people and their place is not a simple one of recuperation and healing, and in this I suspect it is a closer imagining of the reality than Naess' hopeful vision of a 'living in community', a phrase that rings in my mind with the familiar reverberation of those animist envisionings that I mentioned earlier. Indeed, Page ensures that both focussed anthropo- and eco-centric approaches are destabilised with equal surety. Anthropocentric solipsism in the saltmarsh, focussing solely on man, leads to drowning and death; the twins, who fish carelessly and dangerously with dynamite, and Kipper Langore, who treats the marsh and the delicate coexistence between it and its inhabitants with careless, self-serving focus, die (pp.234, 52, 203).<sup>383</sup> Pip's mother, who understands the marsh and how to inhabit it without marking or affecting its surface, fades into depression and marsh fever when she turns her back on it—she does not go far enough, since Norfolk is 'quite up to thwarting an escape' (p.64). Yet the characters who focus

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<sup>381</sup> Arne Naess, 'Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World' in *Selected Works of Arne Naess: Volumes 1-10*, ed. Alan Drengson and Arne Naess (Dordrecht: Springer, 195), p.530.

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid*, p.527.

<sup>383</sup> The key points here are, in particular, the two visits made by Kipper to the wreck of the *Hansa* (pp.52, 203): in both, Pip's narration clearly configures Kipper as interloper and invader, disturbing the water and the people, 'making a big fuss'.

themselves on the marsh to the exclusion of all else, Goose and, to some extent, Pip, gain no greater sense of equilibrium. Both are haunted by the past and by their attempts to gain control over a way of life made uncertain by their own stories, and by the constant, swirling quagmire that constitutes the saltmarsh as a lived environment. The marsh is not a fixed point on which human inferences, memories or assumptions can be grounded (or indeed, tested); where in *Thursbitch* the land is still, allowing its inhabitants (relatively) permanent locations to which they can affix ideas and principles, even though assumptions that this process constitutes knowledge of the place constitutes disaster, the marshes of *Salt* resist even this. Thus those characters—Goose, Pip—who base their sense of self (and their sense of their own history) upon it are bound to uncertainty, to footing that shifts, and to a landscape that always changes. In fact, change is part of the saltmarsh's equilibrium, and to base an existence on it is to accept a constant state of flux. And, of course, in human terms, uncertainty. Pip's ultimate emancipation is based not upon plumping for a totally anthropocentric or totally ecocentric vision, but rather notes the absolute impossibility of either, and instead suggests that coherence can be found in accepting distance, the individuality of that relationship, and the importance of the touch (not the grasp) of the familiar.

In short, the narrative of ecocentrism that is promulgated by the deep ecologist factions is still anthropocentric in that it focuses, still, on a narrative of ecological existence dictated by human understanding and (often) assumption. As Neil Carter puts it, 'all ecocentric accounts ultimately employ some form of anthropocentric argument...Attempts to develop an ethical code of conduct based on the existence of intrinsic value in nature have...fallen back onto hierarchies of value which always concede priority to human interests'.<sup>384</sup> Without doubt this narrative—and the attendant problem of the inability to separate ourselves far enough from our humanity without indulging in behaviour that smacks of

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<sup>384</sup> Neil Carter, *The Politics of the Environment: Ideas, Activism, Policy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp.35-6.

misanthropy— is important, but it still cannot render a convincing vision of a total, pure ecocentricity. It is not, and never has been, as simple as ignoring our own needs in deference to the perceived needs of the 'nonhuman' world; in part because, when our assumptions about those needs are challenged or in fact debunked, the crisis that follows is not just a practical one; shaking our assumptions about the world we live in engenders a crisis that is essentially existential in nature. Daniel Botkin phrases this well:

As long as we could believe that nature undisturbed was constant, we were proved with a simple standard against which to judge our actions, a reflection from a windless pond in which our place was both apparent and fixed, providing us with a sense of continuity and permanence that was comforting. Abandoning these beliefs leaves us on an extreme existential position we are like small boats without anchors in a sea of time; how we long for a safe harbor on a shore.<sup>385</sup>

Jeremy Page's active disruption of the methods by which we engage in landscape creation is a subversion of the animist and deep ecological principles, fragmenting as they do the idea of a holistic proximity-led relationship between people and land. The focus on the intimate miniature, however, also allows *Salt* to emphasise the fact that, despite the messy, difficult nature of the relationship between person, landscape and land, it is also necessary. The novel does not approach an environmentalist polemic, any more than *Thursbitch* can claim to; yet both novels, despite the complexity of their depictions of their difficult landscapes, insist

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<sup>385</sup> Daniel Botkin, *Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twenty-first Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp.188-89.



without exception on their value: intrinsic or not, it is of deep importance, and deeply connected to the way we experience it.

Pip's final understanding about the separation between his people and his place—that final revelation—emphatically suggests that no single ideological vision or polemic can 'solve' the problem of how we live, where we live. In the twenty-first century resistance to the definitive that I have identified, Jeremy Page's novel is a deeply appropriate envisioning of multiplicity, and the importance of the individual, though connected, engagement with landscape. Perhaps Pip *is* one of Botkin's 'small boats without anchors', but, with the freedom of disengagement from the communal assumptions about the saltmarsh, he is able to celebrate both his family and his saltmarsh without fear or terror; as in *Thursbitch*, a very limited access to the genuine interpretive mystery of the place beyond the landscape is more comprehensible than the imposed codex of anthropogenerated mysticism.

**‘Sometimes Luminous, Sometimes Obscure’: Telling Islands in Amy Sackville’s *Orkney***

*‘I dream of the dangers and curiosities we try to predict, measure and bag, coming towards us on this small isle, over the sea, through the sky and across outer space’.*<sup>386</sup>

In the preceding chapters, I have considered two novels in which the relationship between people and their surroundings explicitly takes centre stage; where ignoring this aspect of the text is absolutely impossible. Now I intend to turn to another pair of novels, Amy Sackville’s 2013 novel, *Orkney*, and A. S. Byatt’s *The Children’s Book*. The landscapes in these novels are, though of vital significance as far as I am concerned, subtler in their appearances. Their edge characteristics are less literal (though neither is entirely devoid of physical ‘edginess’) and more metaphorical in nature; they are novels where the landscape’s character *reflects* action, rather than necessarily being in some way actively complicit in it. The first, *Orkney*, depicts a catastrophic honeymoon that takes place on one of the eponymous islands.

Islands, as Denis Cosgrove puts it, are ‘the loci of the imagination’; a pretty phrase, but one that does not entirely (or, in fact at all) give an idea of what an island really *is*.<sup>387</sup> The obvious answer to that question is the plainest, as given by the Oxford English Dictionary: an island is ‘a body of land surrounded by water’.<sup>388</sup> Most general definitions follow this formula; Stephen A. Royle, in his recent island-focussed monograph, cites the ‘UN convention on the Law of the Sea’, perhaps the definitive practical

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<sup>386</sup> Amy Liptrot, *The Outrun* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2016), p.241.

<sup>387</sup> Denis Cosgrove, ‘Review of John R. Gillis: Islands of the mind: How the human imagination created the Atlantic world,’ *Geografiska Annaler* 87B (2005): 302-03, 302.

<sup>388</sup> "island, n.," *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, June 2016). Web: full website details given in bibliography.

instruction on the designation of island status, which follows the same line as the OED:

An island is a naturally formed area of land, surrounded by water, which is above water at high tide.<sup>389</sup>

It is notable, however, that the Law of the Sea expands the terms of the dictionary definition, adding the requirement of permanent exposure even at high tide; Royle adds, furthermore, that the Vikings had a further distinction, that the prospective island must be over a certain distance from the mainland.<sup>390</sup> As these extensions of the definition show, the terms that define 'islandness' are perhaps not as simple as they seem; on further inspection, indeed, the OED's terms seem to elicit more questions than they answer. How large, for example, must a 'body of land' be; is a rock surrounded by water an island? How *small*, conversely, must a piece of land be to 'count' as an island; is a continent surrounded by water an island? The answer to both of these questions is no, instinctively no; yet I must admit that there is no substantive distinction, within the broad-scope definitions that I have identified, which confirms my reflexive response.

It is also notable that some islands are only maintained as inhabited places by connection with the mainland; this connection is quite literally the only thing that makes island living possible. As Godfrey Baldacchino notes in an 2006 article on small island territories, 'The stark truth of various small, mainly island, jurisdictions today is that they thrive mainly on...*external* relations.'<sup>391</sup> Some of these island communities could not exist, for example, without regular supplies, or electricity brought through sea-bed

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<sup>389</sup> Stephen A. Royle, *Islands: Nature and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), p.8.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid*, p.8.

<sup>391</sup> Godfrey Baldacchino, 'Managing the hinterland beyond: Two ideal-type strategies of economic development for small island territories,' *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 47.1 (2006): 45-60, 48.

wiring; so maintaining a state of 'islandness' can only occur with appropriate mainland sanctions.

Despite this apparent dependence on mainland aid, island dwellers tend to maintain a sense of their own identity, even if they are not really entirely islands in a physical sense: changes to the geographical 'islandness' of an island are not necessarily enough to change its *human* 'islandness'. The Isle of Skye, for example, has been connected to the mainland by a bridge for decades; it is possible to get across to the island without any real understanding of crossing the intervening water yet the cultural maintenance of its 'islandness' is evident even to the most casual observer. This need to maintain an identity inherently based in separatism has historically often been characterised as a negative trait; 'islandness', a term that I have used already in this introduction, has become increasingly used in place of, Baldacchino points out, 'the more commonly used term of 'insularity': 'The latter has unwittingly come along with a semantic baggage of separation and backwardness. This negativism does not mete out fair justice to the subject matter'.<sup>392</sup> Islanders, then, recognise their particularity; mainlanders, equally, recognise it also. That the nature of this indefinable quality is so varied in its affect, depending on the relationship between the observer and the island, suggests that the nature of 'islandness' is only in part quantifiably definable; that there is something about islands that is not entirely about the land itself, and more about the manner in which we engage with it. I have no easy answers for this conundrum, or for those who feel it unsatisfactory that we have no 'clean' ways of defining islandhood or its lack.

The crux of this point is that 'island' is a human term, based upon human designations and human needs. To define an island simply by its geographical aspects ('body of land' and 'surrounded by water', for example), is distinctly problematic in that context. We do know, of course,

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<sup>392</sup> Godfrey Baldacchino, 'The Coming of Age of Island Studies,' *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 95.3 (2004): 272-84, 272.

of uninhabited islands. Yet even these are designated by the fact that they are, essentially, negative space: defined by their *uninhabited-ness*. Stephen Royle identifies a number of ‘inescapable geographic characteristics’ of what he calls ‘islandness’; I would prefer, I think, to see these aspects as human ways of engaging with particular geographic physical features since they focus for the most part on human concerns:

These include being surrounded by water, boundedness, discretion (islands can be hidden from outside gaze), relative powerlessness and, usually, their small scale...Islands are also at least relatively remote because, even if close to the mainland, even if bridged, they still lie off the edge of the continent.<sup>393</sup>

The recurring and unavoidable nature of human involvement—and the uncritical way in which the purely physical (surrounded by water) and the purely anthropological (discretion, relative powerlessness) are mixed, are clear both in Royle’s list and a similar one focussing on the ‘fascination factors’ of islands specifically in the North Atlantic (given originally by Tom Baum<sup>394</sup> and paraphrased here by Stefan Gössling and Geoffrey Wall): ‘remoteness; small, discrete size; across the sea but not too far; different but familiar; slower pace, back a bit in time;...wilderness environment; water-focused society’.<sup>395</sup> These are unavoidable signs of the mediation inherent in our relationships with island discourse, a point that Royle himself admits. Godfrey Baldacchino, conversely, begins his 2003

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<sup>393</sup> Stephen Royle, *Islands*, p.29.

<sup>394</sup> Tom Baum, ‘The Fascination of Islands: A Tourist Perspective’ in *Island Tourism: Trends & Prospects*, ed. D.G. Lockhart & D. Drakakis-Smith (London: Pinter, 1997), pp.21-35.

<sup>395</sup> Stefan Gössling & Geoffrey Wall, ‘Island Tourism’ in *A World of Islands: An Island Studies Reader*, ed. Geoffrey Baldacchino (Malta: Agenda Academic (in assoc. with Insititute of Island Studies, University of Prince Edward Island, Canada), 2007), pp.429-53, p.430.

assessment of the state of Island Studies by making a baldly scientific set of claims for ‘islandness’:

At face value, an island’s ‘signature’ is its obvious optic: it is a geographically finite, total, discrete, sharply precise physical entity which accentuates clear and holistic notions of location and identity (Brunhes 1920, pp. 160–161); it exacerbates species interactions in conditions of relatively higher densities (Caldwell et al. 1980); and induces a more acute competition for more limited, and less diverse, resources.<sup>396</sup>

Even here, however, the possibility of objective categorisation without reference to human concerns is almost immediately disrupted; Baldacchino points out mere paragraphs later that ‘things are not that simple’, before turning from the scientific and ecological to the intersection of the geometric and the philosophical:

Rather than designating the sea as a boundary in the Euclidian sense of the word – that is, as a sharply dividing linear entity between matter and non-matter – it is pertinent to adopt a fractal perspective. Mandelbrot urges us to consider how the reality of nature is one of irregular continua, of anything but perfect figures: Clouds are not spheres, mountains are not cones,

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<sup>396</sup> Godfrey Baldacchino, ‘The Coming of Age of Island Studies,’ p.272.

coastlines are not circles and bark is not  
smooth...<sup>397</sup>

Islands, then, are contested: where they are, what they look like, and indeed, *what* they even are, are issues of contestation. For the purposes of this chapter, I intend to focus particularly on, to use a broad brushstroke, what an island *feels* like, and most particularly on the characteristics of loci that fall into Françoise Péron's satisfyingly defined 'small, inhabited islands': '...those specks of land large enough to support permanent residents, but small enough to render to their inhabitants the permanent consciousness of being on an island'.<sup>398</sup>

In other words, this chapter will focus on islands on which it is impossible to forget that one is on an island. In scientific terms, this is a useless definition; in cultural and literary terms, a vital one. Péron's description is based not on a quantifiable designation of surface area, height above sea level, depth of surrounding water or any other helpfully empirically measurable statistic. Instead it is a definition that is vague, nebulous, and, from a human perspective, totally comprehensible.

Although the idea of the island is a difficult and complex one, what is more certain is the important role that they play in our literary imagination; particularly, I might suggest, in Britain. It is not, I think, necessary to expend too many words on convincing that islands hold a strange and surprisingly tenacious position in the way we—by which I particularly mean the British—encounter our home. The obvious referents are mainland Britain and the island housing Eire and Northern Ireland, but the tiny islands that string around the shores are also part of that group; Shetland, Orkney, the Hebrides most particularly. When the British refer to themselves as living on the British Isles, it is a political as well as a geographical designation: we are describing the physical characteristics of

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<sup>397</sup> Ibid, p.273.

<sup>398</sup> Françoise Péron, 'The Contemporary Lure of the Island,' *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 95.4 (2004): 326-39, 328.

our homeland, but also denoting the distinction between our Isles and the Continent (of Europe, of course). Island is not just a statement of fact, but of independence, of self-sufficiency, of an 'apartness' that is fundamental to a sense of national identity. Even though our island is too big to render that consciousness of being on an island a permanent state, the consequences of our 'islandness' are engrained in our history, our politics and our identities.<sup>399</sup> We struggle with questions of immigration, consider ourselves peripheral to the EU (or perhaps, consider the EU peripheral to *us*).<sup>400</sup> We may be part of it, but we also remain outside it because of our separating sea. 'Islandness' is intrinsic to British culture.

This fascination with islandness, and our recognition of its importance to us, translates into cultural and literary tropes and discourses. Heidi C. M. Scott argues that '[i]slands fascinate us by reorganizing elements of known experience into bizarre and extraordinary'; while this reorganisation often comes in thematic forms peculiar to the island, there is also often a series of echoes of the features of the pastoral archetypes I have considered already.<sup>401</sup> Many of the same ideas are at work: a creative retreat, a focus on removal from urban or centralised life, the depiction of a physically separated and distinct locus pervaded with history of renewal and rejuvenation; the island, in Yi Fu Tuan's words, 'symbolizes a state of prelapsarian innocence and bliss, quarantined from the ills of the continent'.<sup>402</sup> The reason for the retreat may be more serious than recreational: to flee persecution; to create a more socially progressive

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<sup>399</sup> On the subject of British islanders' approach to their islands, Jodie Matthews and Daniel Travers' (eds.) excellent collection of essays on the subject, *Islands and Britishness: A Global Perspective* is a helpful starting point; most of the chapters focus on specific non-mainland British islands, but the general discussion in the Introduction and throughout is helpful. (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).

<sup>400</sup> Since the time of writing, this tension regarding our relationship with the European Union has become at once more urgent and more overt; I have briefly related some of my impressions regarding the result of the EU Referendum on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2016 in the concluding chapter, but have retained this earlier discussion since I do not think that its essential substance is rendered incorrect or irrelevant by the new turn of British politics.

<sup>401</sup> Heidi C. M. Scott, 'Havens and Horrors: The Island Landscape,' *Isle* 21.3 (2014): 636-57, 638.

<sup>402</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia*, p.118.



community; to engage in spiritual practices based in simplistic living in isolation.

Lindisfarne, colloquially known as Holy Island, is a classic historic example, but there are others deeply involved in English and Scottish history and folk history in particular: the Christian community on Iona, the retreat of St Columba *from* Iona to a smaller, even less populous isle known as ‘Hinba’, which is often thought to be Jura. The psychological effect of these ideals-based retreats to islands have consistently featured in literature too. John Fowles’ *The Magus* is a classic example, but the twenty-first century has engendered other novels based on the principle of the artistic retreat: Benjamin Wood’s *The Ecliptic*, which features an island retreat that is only open to those recommended by others who have visited, and whose artistic work will benefit from the process of retreating, is a striking example.<sup>403</sup> Even if the journey is not *seen* as a retreat, the visit often has transformative effects similar to the pastoral retreat; as in *Treasure Island*, of course, which utilises and conglomerates severally the notions of the exotic, of the escape, of the *Bildungsroman* narrative, and uses the destination island, with all its promise, as a cipher for all of them. This culminates in the coming of age of Jim Hawkins and the abandonment of the problematic father figure of Long John Silver.<sup>404</sup>

The peace of the idyllic island retreat is often just as complex. Even when at first configured as sites of paradisaic bliss and/or peaceful contemplation, the islands often become places to escape. The islands of *The Odyssey*, to widen to a founding Western mythical example, continually entrap Odysseus, preventing his homecoming: one of the central threads of the tale is the equal risk posed by the surrounding seas and the land itself.<sup>405</sup>

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<sup>403</sup> Benjamin Wood, *The Ecliptic* (London: Scribner, 2015).

<sup>404</sup> Heidi C. M. Scott’s excellent essay, from which I have already quoted, has a superb section on the implications of many of the really well-known ‘island novels’. (pp.642-54)

<sup>405</sup> Much of *The Odyssey* encounters this tension of equal, though different, dangers of land and sea; particularly notable, perhaps, is Odysseus’ arrival on the shore of Phaeacia, when, ‘adrift on the heaving swells two nights, two days’ (Homer, *The Odyssey*. Book 5:

The islands of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* are described in terms of exotic beauty, yet act as microcosmic stages for the darkest aspects of human behaviour; their temporary inhabitants ultimately only saved by escape. The island's self-contained nature allows it to act as a representation of a bigger world, while engendering danger and frustration on its own terms.

The contested impressions we receive of islands in these Western examples are similar, in many respects, to the mixed signals that we give regarding wildernesses: the allure and the challenge, the conspicuous romanticism and equally conspicuous practicalities, the nostalgic recidivism and the rejection of postmodern urbanism. All of these problematic principles are then tangled, on islands, with other questions regarding the relationship between sea and land. There are boats which are capable of holding a bigger population than some of the islands of Orkney; oil rigs that certainly do, so the land itself is only a very small fraction of the world in which these islanders live. Which becomes most relevant to these communities? The land under the feet, or the surrounding sea? Suzanne Thomas argues for the linking of the island experience to the heterotopias as defined by Michel Foucault, noting that in recording and describing her own island experience she gazes:

...from vantage points looking inward towards the shore and outward towards the horizon—to depict *detritus*, that which is washed ashore, and to record what is observed from a boat, as *heterotopia*. Foucault (1967) in his writing, *Of Other Spaces*, makes reference to the boat as countersite— 'a floating piece of space, – a

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l.429), he sights land; swimming towards it, however, he is caught by 'roaring breakers crashing down on an ironbound coast' and encounters 'nothing but jutting headlands, riptooth reefs, cliffs' (Ibid, book 5: l.443-48).

placeless place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea”<sup>406</sup>.

Thomas is thinking about the experience of being in a boat as part of the island experience; I would perhaps argue further, that the small island bears many of these same markers of heterotopic existence. Foucault’s main point in considering the heterotopia is that he is ‘...interested in certain ones that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect’.<sup>407</sup> I would like to suggest that small inhabited islands do just this: they mirror the mainland’s social communities, yet through the peculiar circumstances of their existence within their location, also subvert their norms. A sensible example would be the way in which the land, site of survival, becomes less fertile than the sea that surrounds it: the sea that is seen as the desert. The prioritising, depending on perspective, of the surrounding water or the surrounded land that I mentioned earlier is another part of this argument: that the apparently clear, ‘geographically finite’, boundaries of the island are entirely mutable depending on one’s priorities. On many so-called ‘coldwater islands’, like those off the British coasts, the sea is the primary source of livelihood, so the idea of ‘island living’ entails not just being on the land but being on the sea. These coldwater islands on the United Kingdom’s periphery are astonishingly numerous, considering the comparative size of the British mainland; even disregarding the larger landmasses like the Isle of Wight and the Isle of Man, there are many islands on which it is impossible to forget that one is, in fact on an island: Anglesey, for example; the Hebrides, and, of course, the Northern Isles of

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<sup>406</sup> Suzanne Thomas, ‘Littoral Space(s): Liquid Edges of Poetic Possibility,’ *Journal for the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies* 5.1. (2007): 21-9, 24.

<sup>407</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces,’ trans. Jay Miskowiec *Diacritics*, 16.1. (1986): 22-7, 24.

Shetland and Orkney. It is the latter islands with which this chapter is primarily concerned.

The islands of Orkney lie approximately sixteen kilometres off the coast of Caithness, the northernmost edge of Scotland. There are seventy islands within the archipelago—most sources give this as an approximate figure, harking back to the problems of defining islands at all—and twenty or so are inhabited, and have been since at least 6,500BC. The islands are of particular interest to archaeologists and early historians because the low level of modern building and lack of high-intensity industry or agriculture has left an unusually high number of well-preserved prehistoric dwellings. Population levels on the islands have always been relatively low, although in the last couple of decades native Orcadian inhabitants have been joined by a larger number of incoming residents—some seasonal and some permanent.

The islands themselves lie in the North Sea, an inhospitable body of water that sits between the United Kingdom, Norway and the Arctic Circle. Leslie Burgher describes the ‘scatter of green and brown islands’ as ‘of a gentler and more fertile form’ and notes that: ‘the variability of the weather gives an ever-changing play of light across land and water with often brilliant colours and dramatic open skies, unobstructed in this low, treeless landscape’.<sup>408</sup> Due to the passage of the Gulf Stream, the climate of the islands of Orkney is surprisingly mild, though the winds are famously harsh and the presence of dangerous tidal currents makes the sea itself particularly difficult to navigate. There are few trees—a fact usually ascribed to the aforementioned winds—with moorland taking up much of the higher non-cultivated areas of the islands, although the soil was once fertile and though the islands are rich in wildlife, it is wildlife adapted to harsh and difficult conditions. The semi-feral sheep of North Ronaldsay, the most northerly of the islands, have evolved to survive on seaweed;

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<sup>408</sup> Leslie Burgher, *Orkney: An Illustrated Architectural Guide* (Edinburgh: Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland, 1991), p.3.

though they are nominally partially domesticated, they are a breed apart.<sup>409</sup> While they are, of course, of particular interest to biologists and geneticists, they are also a symbol of life on the islands even for its human inhabitants: adaptation to the surroundings is vital, and hardiness essential. A combination of flexibility and resistance characterises the locale.

The nomenclature of the islands is specific and often contested. Those not from the islands often refer to them as ‘the Orkneys’: locals deny this terminology fiercely, using the term ‘Orkney’ to describe the archipelago, and an island’s individual name to refer to it in singularity. The term ‘mainland’ does not, for Orkney inhabitants, mean the British mainland-Scotland, the closest ‘mainland’ is referred to as ‘Scotland’ and the largest island is *named* ‘Mainland’. Both of the largest settlements, Kirkwall and Stromness, and the archipelago’s airport, are all located here. Other islands are accessed by ferry, for the most part.

The use of the term Mainland to describe the largest island elucidates the inward focus nature of the Orkney islands: Scotland is less relevant than Mainland, in the grand scheme of things.<sup>410</sup> In a report for Historic Scotland, Angela McClanahan notes that ‘many people would tell [her] during the course of [her] fieldwork’, “We are Orcadian first, and Scots second”.<sup>411</sup> This is in part, arguably, to the mixed nature of the islands’ international heritage: annexed by Norway in AD 875 and settled by the Norse, the islands were only handed over to Scottish rule as part of a Danish dowry to James III of Scotland in AD 1468. The local language, which remains as dialect throughout the islands, is called Norn, and shows direct relationships with Old Norse, and the Norwegian connection remains evident through archaeological and historical sites all over the

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<sup>409</sup> Ibid, p.99.

<sup>410</sup> It is notable that the Orkney archipelago does, perhaps, have the luxury of a little more independence from the Scottish mainland; simply because the fertility of the islands’ soil allows a greater level of self-sufficiency.

<sup>411</sup> Angela McClanahan, ‘The Heart of Neolithic Orkney in its Contemporary Contexts: A case study in heritage management and community values’ on *Historic Scotland*, p.25. . Web: full website details given in bibliography

islands. Maggie Ferguson, in her biography of Orkney poet George Mackay Brown, notes that, ‘The vastness of space [that characterises the archipelago] is matched by an awareness of a great sweep of time, stretching back well beyond the scope of history, and even of legend’.<sup>412</sup>

There have been a number of interesting literary accounts of Orkney, including, in 2016, Amy Liptrot's memoir of returning to Orkney to recover from alcoholism, *The Outrun*. Perhaps the most well-known authorial figures to have come from the islands are the aforementioned George Mackay Brown and his mentor and friend, Edwin Muir. Writing in his autobiography, Mackay Brown says of Orkney, ‘they are beautifully shaped islands, little green and brown hills rising out of the sea, or low green islands fringed with sand beaches’.<sup>413</sup> He also notes that, ‘The two rhythms of land and sea I have tried to weave into my work; they are, in one sense, different and opposed, and yet, once taken into the imagination, they beget a pattern and a harmony’.<sup>414</sup> Interestingly, in her biography of Mackay Brown, Maggie Ferguson makes an aside that identifies one of the key points of intersection of the two: ‘In Orkney legend, seals are the key to the inextricable unity of sea and land. ‘Selkies’ swim ashore at night, throw off their pelts, and dance like humans on the sand.’<sup>415</sup> Edwin Muir, in his autobiography, states that ‘The Orkney [he] was born into was a place where there was no great distinction between the ordinary and the fabulous; the lives of living men turned into legend’.<sup>416</sup>

The Selkies, which will be important later in this chapter, are not the only Orkney legend to focus on the ‘inextricable unity’ of the islands’ two media of earth and water. The Finfolk, who Sigurd Towrie trenchantly describes as ‘a race of dark and gloomy sorcerers, feared and mistrusted

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<sup>412</sup> Maggie Ferguson, *George Mackay Brown: The Life* (London: John Murray, 2006), p.9.

<sup>413</sup> George Mackay Brown, *For the Islands I Sing: An Autobiography* (London: John Murray, 2013), p.4.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid*, p.5.

<sup>415</sup> Maggie Ferguson, *George Mackay Brown*, p.4.

<sup>416</sup> Edwin Muir, *An Autobiography* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000), p.4.

by mortals'; Towrie also notes that, '[t]heir boating skills were unparalleled and as well as having power over storm and sea, they were noted shapeshifters'.<sup>417</sup> One of the most well-known stories of the Orkney land is that of the walking stones; the Stone of Quoybune at Birsay is one of a number that apparently, at Hogmanay, walks to a nearby loch and bends its head to drink.<sup>418</sup> The land apparently literally drinks water from the loch.

Amy Sackville's 2013 novel, *Orkney*, like the work of George Mackay Brown and Edwin Muir, is deeply engaged with these legends, weaving its primary narrative with mythical references and implications: indeed, its narrator, a honeymooning middle-aged man identified only as 'Richard', is a professor who specialises in courtly fairy tales; his mysterious, island-born wife is his 'most gifted student'.<sup>419</sup> In this chapter I intend to draw two critical and, as I will show, connected comparisons between thematic aspects of the text: one, between the two physical elements of the island that I mentioned earlier, the land and the sea; the other, between two ways of engaging with and describing landscapes.

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<sup>417</sup> Sigurd Towrie, 'The Sorcerous Finfolk,' *Orkneyjar: The Heritage of the Orkney Islands*. Web: full website details given in bibliography.

<sup>418</sup> Angela Maclanahan ('The Heart of Neolithic Orkney') cites this story from a collection of folktales apparently collated by 'Thomas Muir', but no citation details are provided. The story is a well-known folk narrative, and Sigurd Towrie also recounts the story of the Quoybune stone (and others) on his detailed website devoted to Orkney culture (see bibliography).

<sup>419</sup> Amy Sackville, *Orkney* (London: Granta, 2014), pp.2, 23. All further page numbers given in the text.

1: 'The Sea Was All that We Could Hear': Orkney's Land and Water

*Orkney* is a relatively unusual novel in that—aside from a few minor interjections—it depicts only two characters. Internally, this limited cast is rationalised by the obsessively narrow focus that the narrator, Richard, turns on his (notably unnamed) new wife. There are few other characters (although several are introduced through Richard's memory) because Richard has, quite literally, no interest in anyone else. From an external perspective, *Orkney*'s minute attention to the discourse of the particular is another facet of the preoccupation of the individual and the intimate that I have already identified as a feature of the post-millennial novels that I have examined thus far. *Orkney*'s engagement with its eponymous island is slightly different from the comparative examinations of *Salt* and *Thursbitch*, in that the island, though an important part of the novel's trajectory, is less emphatically complicit in the events depicted in the narrative. It is also rendered visible through a lens of extremely narrow focus; even more so than the limited range of Pip's narratorial angle in *Salt*. In this first half of the chapter, I will consider the manner in which the island's two constituent parts—land and water—appear in *Orkney*, and how their duality is allied to human concerns.

One of the most interesting points about the portrayal of the landscapes in *Orkney* is the extent to which they are, almost aggressively, mediated. Where both *Thursbitch* and *Salt* purport, in a sense, to offer a vision of their environments as something *beyond* their narrators' and protagonists' envisioning of them, *Orkney* stubbornly refuses to do so. What the reader is permitted to see, essentially, is the island as Richard perceives it; and, of course, as he describes his wife as seeing it: as the novel progresses, this bipartite vision and experience becomes central, both to the narrative and to the way the island itself is revealed.

Because Richard's primary—one might say *only*—focus is on his wife, the landscape is manifested in the novel as permanently contextual; it is



consistently relative, primarily present in order to reflect her, and him, through action and change. Its arbitrariness reflects her strange behaviours; its bleak beauty is a foil for hers. In some regards, this constitutes a particularly traditional novelistic use of landscape: the classic ‘stage set’ on top of which human action can be played out; even the old pathetic fallacy, the reflection of the novel’s mood or events in its weather, that, as Sarah Perry trenchantly notes, was ‘roundly condemned in [her, and my] student days’.<sup>420</sup> Yet in *Orkney* the relationship is at once more complex and more explicit than this; as with both *Thursbitch* and *Salt*, the apparently traditional envisioning of a rural landscape is disrupted. Yet it does so with a number of contrasting approaches to these other contemporary texts.

From the commencement of the novel, ‘she’, the unnamed wife, is consistently and insistently connected with the water. The novel opens with a beach; or, rather more specifically, it begins with Richard, standing indoors, watching ‘her’ standing on the beach beyond the window. ‘She’s staring out to sea now,’ he tells the reader in the book’s first sentence; a paragraph later, in a line carefully separated from those surrounding it: ‘In the meantime, I watch from the window, as she stares out to sea’ (p.1). Richard, too, envisions the few yards as a more decisive separation than it first appears; ‘Soon,’ he notes, ‘the beach will be reduced to a strip of narrow sand and she will be forced to retreat to the rocks; and then, I think, she’ll come back to me’ (p.1). That he views her return as ‘forced’, and necessitated not by her will but by the encroaching water, suggests, obviously, his insecurity in their separation; it also, however, explicitly signposts the strength of her attraction to, and fascination with, the sea. This opening *also* constructs the opposition around which the novel will ultimately centre; of the land-bound husband inside, separated from his sea-focussed wife. His consistent hope to coax her back to land, and her equally consistent yearning to be close to the water, forms one of the key

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<sup>420</sup> Sarah Perry, ‘I was wonderstruck; transfixed by strangeness,’ *The Guardian*, 2 July 2016. Web: full website details given in bibliography

tensions in the novel's progression. At times this is an internal tension, as the narrator protests— 'You were out on the beach so long, I said. I'm checking for barnacles' (p.3)— and at others, the source of the novel's narrative tension, as she becomes more and more fascinated by the water and concurrently more and more distant from her new husband.

The trajectory of the narrative pivots on page 135, when 'she' requests that her new husband holds her under the water in their bathtub. From the beginning of the novel, her fear of being *in* the water has been signalled repeatedly by Richard (pp.2, 11). Her request, that Richard helps her with her fear by submerging her under the water is, obviously, a peculiar thing to ask, and Richard himself is evidently disturbed by it. When he does hold her under the water, she essentially begins to dissolve; she becomes steadily more immaterial, disappearing into the island and its surroundings even as she moves into the water, 'She stands at the tide-mark and does not draw back from it' (p.225), paddling in it, 'It laps at her toes and she allows it, allows the sea to kiss her bare feet' (p.225), and entering it during a storm:

I saw she'd reached the water's edge, and she didn't hesitate, she ran right in, laughing, and then she dived under...For a moment I stood and watched her, the water up to my thighs...she seemed entirely at peace, in her element. As if she'd waded out into her nightmare and found it after all only a dream (p.215).

I have thus far in my work emphasised the principle of proximity between people and place, and the ethics and aesthetics of representing this relationship; in *Orkney*, this relationship is insistently the focus, as Richard obsessively observes his wife's developing engagement with their surroundings. As I have briefly sketched above, the process by which 'she'

begins the novel unable to enter the water— “No, no,” she tells Richard urgently, “I won’t go *in*. I can’t swim. I’m scared of the water. I can’t go in” (p.2)— and gradually moves closer and closer to the sea, starting with submersion in the bath (pp.135-136) before finally entering the water as the novel heads towards its climax (p.215) is the central thread of the novel’s plot. In this sequential gaining of proximity by the strange, unnamed woman, a key shift from the similar relationships that characterised both *Thursbitch* and *Salt* can be observed; rather than scrutinising the disruption of an already ‘rooted’ proximity, *Orkney* is preoccupied with the emergence of this relationship. This much is evident both from the novel’s trajectory and the linguistic tendencies of the narrator; as the novel progresses, Richard’s narrative insistently foregrounds her connection with the water and its growing depth.

Richard, and by extension, Sackville, do not stint on the significance of the watery and liquid imagery that is used for her—and that her literary narrator uses—to describe her: she is translucent, her skin ‘opalescent’, and between ‘each of those narrow, knuckly, fine-tapered fingers, there is a trace of webbing. A blue-veined membrane stretched between’ (pp.10-11). Richard himself signposts the significance: ‘You were born for the sea, I tell her’ (p.11). She is, he insists, ‘a daughter of the sea...she is a spined and spiky urchin...she is a frond of pallid wrack, a coral swaying in the current, anchored to the sea-bed’ (p.22) It is also impossible to ignore the fact that the vast majority of the nicknames that he uses for his new wife are almost all related to figures with a connection to water: Nimue, the lady of the lake; Melusine, whose transformation into a water-snake is witnessed by her husband in her bath; nymphs and nereids, often connected to springs and streams, ‘a Thetis’ (p.22).

Even in terms of her role in the novel—as wife and as material human being—her fluidity is emphasised: she is consistently shaped as resistant to categorisation. The webbing between her fingers means that she cannot wear her wedding ring, so that her marital status remains indefinable

(pp.10-11); strangers mistake her for Richard's daughter. In emphasising her connection to the water as the central point of the depiction of the person/place relationship, Richard self-consciously depicts that same relationship as a thing of instability and of mystery. The connection of 'her' to the water also demonstrates, in Richard's language, the conflict between water's creative and destructive properties: 'spined and spiky', dangerous, painful and resistant to pressure; 'pallid' and 'swaying', changing shape to move with the flow; as Nathaniel Altman notes, 'Water has always inspired a sense of awe because it is a natural element that has a multitude of vastly different identities'.<sup>421</sup> There is a consistent shifting from peril to softness, which Dennis Slattery identifies thus:

Water has two sides to its nature: what it says reflects the fashion of the age; what it seems to reveal and betray hides the stuff that lies underneath. It is both deep and shallow, calm and murderous, and has the ability to purify as well as cleanse.<sup>422</sup>

In *Orkney* this tendency appears most interestingly as an apparent malleability (the ability to shift shape to fill a vessel, most specifically) that translates into a fluidity that allows it to remain uncontainable; 'she' is apparently happy to fulfil the roles he gives her, 'laughing a soft and mocking laugh, the laugh of a much older woman' (p.75) as they discuss the seductive dangers of Tennyson's Vivien; 'It seems I effected some transfiguration' (p.99). Yet the concern of her indefinability shines through, consistently, and despite his rhetoric of attempts to define and perhaps thus to control, 'she is Protean...a shape-shifting goddess who must be subdued', the lexis of inscrutability pervades the text: 'she goes on shifting no matter how tight I grip' (p.22). If Richard's wife is anything,

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<sup>421</sup> Nathaniel Altman, *Sacred Water: The Spiritual Source of Life* (Jersey: Hidden Spring, 2002), p.13.

<sup>422</sup> Dennis Slattery, *Harvesting Darkness: Essays on Literature, Myth, Film and Culture* (New England: iUniverse, 2006), p.74.

she is elusive in history, in presence and in character; as Richard says at the climax of the novel, describing his now-vanished wife to a local policeman:

This sky of yours, this sea, that is how she  
seemed— like that, like the light changing.  
You tell me, if you know what the sea will  
do. (p.242)

Anne Buttimer, writing on the relationship between Heideggerian principles and water symbols, points out that:

If one is justified in construing Heidegger's  
notion of dwelling as metaphor for stability  
and settlement in space, then one can surely  
construe water symbols as metaphors for  
adventure and journey, for an element which  
lubricates, emancipates, renews and  
recreates human existence through time.<sup>423</sup>

Buttimer's use of the water symbol is as an ostensible key to universal engagement with questions of interpretation; noting, 'if there can be a universal conception of dwelling on the earth...it must include this fluid, liberating element. If not, the conception must fall short of that wholeness toward which Heidegger himself pointed'.<sup>424</sup> She suggests, with ambition, that the symbolism of water can 'be a catalyst for holistic understanding, or a potential facilitator of improved communication', and that 'it is in [an] emancipatory lubricating sense that water symbolism may yield its greatest

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<sup>423</sup> Anne Buttimer, 'Nature, water symbols, and the human quest for wholeness' in *Dwelling, Place and Environment: Towards a Phenomenology of Person and World*, ed. David Seamon & Robert Mugerauer (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers: Dordrecht, 1985), pp.259-80, p.260.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid.

gift...a thirst for something beyond those circumscribed wholes in which we all now “dwell” in our worlds of experience and expertise’.<sup>425</sup>

It is, of course, impossible to ignore the gendered implications of a narrative duality that places the woman so explicitly on the side of the fluid, the mysterious and the indefinable; indeed, it is traditional to gender water as female and land as male. Kelly Oliver, writing on Luce Irigaray’s *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (a title that itself relates the sea and the feminine), describes Irigaray as writing ‘from the side of the feminine...from the immemorial waters out of which we were born—the sea and woman’s womb’.<sup>426</sup> Michel Odent, similarly, states that ‘*Homo Sapiens*... will turn towards the ocean to see the water, the most powerful, the most deeply rooted of all his symbols. And this symbol is feminine’.<sup>427</sup> In this context, the aggressively mystical and liquid language applied to ‘her’—not *by* her, it should be noted—by her older husband, combined with her obviously deep connection to the marine water, could appear as a particularly unsubtle assertion of mystical femininity. This emphasis on the relationship between the water, the feminine and the mystical is, in some respects, a traditional one. It emphasises the depiction of mystical woman and nature as innately, ‘naturally’ paired; as Marnie M. Sullivan puts it, ‘the by now familiar binaries of Western thinking—culture/nature, male/female, mind/body...’.<sup>428</sup>

Just as I suggested that Pip does to the saltmarsh in *Salt*, Richard follows the Barthesian model of myth, emptying the meaning from his wife in order to fill her shape with a meaning that reassures him, taking the signified of the woman and filling its complexities with the old-fashioned

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<sup>425</sup> Ibid, pp.263, 261.

<sup>426</sup> Kelly Oliver, *Womanizing Nietzsche: Philosophy’s Relation to the Feminine* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p.83.

<sup>427</sup> Michel Odent, *Water, Birth and Sexuality: Our Primeval Connection to Water and its Use in Labor and Therapy* (W. Hoathly: Clairview, 2014), p.119.

<sup>428</sup> Marnie M. Sullivan, ‘Shifting Subjects and Marginal Worlds: Revealing the Radical in Rachel Carson’s Three Sea Books’ in *Feminist Ecocriticism: Environment, Women, and Literature*, ed. Douglas A. Vakoch (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books: 2014), pp.77-92, p.79.

security of the binary characteristics of the fluid, mystical feminine; as Patrick D. Murphy suggests, however, '[t]hese paired terms are not even actually dichotomous or dyadic but only indicate idealized polarities within a multiplicitous field...These terms have never adequately expressed the range of human practices for working through human—nature relationships'.<sup>429</sup> In encountering this mystification of the woman and the water, Richard obfuscates, much as Pip does, the true complex mystery of the relationship between people and place beneath a culturally imposed envisioning of a simplistic discourse of gendered mysticism.

Yet the device of the literary, professorial narrator, with his florid and self-consciously referential style precludes this simplistic dismissal. As he foregrounds the construction of his vision of his aqueous wife, he destabilises its apparently natural source in her behaviour and appearance. On the island, where, in Sullivan's words, '[d]ualities blend and boundaries between land and sea blur so that subjects, whether life form or landscape, become indistinguishable one from another', the problematic binary oppositions appear both foregrounded and destabilised.<sup>430</sup> In that context, the watery language and behaviour is perhaps more dimensional than a clumsy attempt to utilise a gendered variety of pathetic fallacy.

In the novel's construction, and subsequent deconstruction, of these traditional-felling binaries, Sackville creates two simultaneous, problematic narratives: that of the watery woman who vanishes (apparently into the sea) at the novel's climax, much as the Orkney selkies do, and that of the woman who dissolves into nothing, whose materiality is limited from the outset. This distinction between the subtly different narrative strands emphasises the schism between Richard's culturally informed envisioning of 'her' as the successor to his range of fictional women, and the actual nature of the relationship that he seeks to

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<sup>429</sup> Patrick D. Murphy, 'Otherness and Inhabitation in Recent Multicultural American Literature' in *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*, eds. Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells (London: Zed Books, 1998), pp.40-52, p.41.

<sup>430</sup> Marnie M. Sullivan, 'Shifting Subjects,' p.78.

understand, between ‘her’ and her island. She resists the simplification of the waterwoman/landman divide, shifting from begging for the sea to excitement about the island (she claims not to remember where she lives, ‘Anywhere. I don’t care. Near the sea’ (p.87); then ‘she let out a breath, kissed me, and whispered excitedly, ‘Orkney!’...[and] a discourse on firths and mountains, I think, on low and highlands, snow and islands’ (p.7)). Even while she is fitted into the mould of her husband’s myth, she resists it, leaving the beach on which he consistently locates her—‘I’m sorry I moved beyond your frame, Richard...I’m sorry I didn’t stay in the picture, today’ (p.165)— and maintaining an inner life that, despite his attempts, Richard cannot subsume beneath his mythologizing.

In this resistance to categorisation, ‘she’ drifts closer and closer to the island not as a strictly distinct opposition of the land and the sea, but as a place where neither can be examined without the other; not as a binary of opposition, but a holistic combination of both together. Writing on bridges in particular, which are symbolically linked to both ground and water, Sana Badescu notes the importance of the land/sea opposition:

One cannot think about land (continents, islands) without thinking about water (seas, oceans, rivers), and without considering the opposition and complementarity of land/water, solid/liquid, stable/unstable, safe/unsafe and so on.<sup>431</sup>

In the same volume, Terry Cochran points out that land and sea are a particularly potent symbolic combination, suggesting that considering these opposed geographic constants, ‘poses a number of thorny difficulties because...[they] are completely interwoven: each is unthinkable without the other...Land and sea inevitably mean land and what separates land

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<sup>431</sup> Sana Badescu, ‘Introduction: On the Symbolism of the Bridge’ in *From One Shore to Another: Reflections on the Symbolism of the Bridge*, ed. Sana Badescu (Cambridge Scholars Publishing: Newcastle, 2007), pp.1-11, p.1.



from other land, it signals a certain stability face-to-face with the unknown, the unpredictable, the life-threatening, and so on, notions that vary according to degrees of superstition, historical understanding or just simple experience'.<sup>432</sup> While Badescu insists upon framing the combination as a (fairly simple) opposition, in Cochran's description of the 'interwoven', 'unthinkable without the other' joint context, we may see the island, partly one, partly the other, flexing and shifting in their primacy. This destabilising of any kind of hierarchy of nature is reminiscent of the manner in which Sullivan describes the similarly complex shore views of Rachel Carson's 'Sea Novels':

The sea books are imbricated with an incredibly flexible network of absolute specificity and extreme ambiguity in the demarcation of borders and zones. The edge of the sea includes both indeterminate spaces and spaces clearly discernible by difference.<sup>433</sup>

On the island, where it is impossible to forget either the land or the sea, this mixture of the indeterminate and the clearly discernible is constantly present: the island resists the oppositional categorisation that creates those 'idealized polarities' that Murphy identifies. In this sense, Orkney depicts the same uncertainty that the other novels that I have considered also encounter. In this uncertainty can be found a destabilisation that reflects both a literary and ecocritical concern regarding the impossibility of a return to a more categorically definitive mode of expression, as Murphy continues to suggest:

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<sup>432</sup> Terry Cochran, 'The Earthly Thinking of Planetary Unity' in *From One Shore to Another: Reflections on the Symbolism of the Bridge*, ed. Sanda Badescu (Cambridge Scholars Publishing: Newcastle, 2007), pp.12-25, p.12.

<sup>433</sup> Marnie M. Sullivan, 'Shifting Subjects,' p.80.

Existing paradigms do not seem to encompass the range of environmental literature that has been written and is being written today, nor for critiquing the diversity of expressions of human—non-human relationships, of the generation of geopsyche, or of the ecosystemic situatedness to be found in contemporary literature.<sup>434</sup>

Murphy's envisioning of the inadequacy of traditional binary paradigms is reflected in *Orkney's* destabilisation of those same traditional constructions. In the last chapter, I suggested that *Salt* depicts the burial of an environment that, from a human perspective, appears problematic beneath a layer of culturally produced depictions of itself; I argued for the existence of attempts to create certainty via the 'plugging' of landscape apertures—the interpretive gaps where our view of a place is not quite secure—with narratives purportedly about it. *Salt* disrupts this process by highlighting the ways in which these landscape discourses, which claim to elucidate the process of living in difficult places, both obscure the land itself and shift responsibility from the people to the place. In *Orkney*, Richard begins with a highly artificial, literary vision of the landscape, neatly binarised, and the wife who personifies it; the Barthesian land-with-superimposed-myth is not just his view of the island, but of 'her', too. I might, although it is perhaps stretching the point just a little too far, argue that she is an embodiment of his approach to places like the Orkney islands, with their 'deep time' connection to their own history and myth: she constitutes a sexually desirable, submissive, tantalisingly accessible mystery; she represents both the literary tropes of sirens and mermaids that fascinate him and a freedom from analytical, critical dissection of them.

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<sup>434</sup> Patrick D. Murphy, 'Anotherness and Inhabitation,' p.42.

In Richard's obsessive alignment of her only with the water, the land is forgotten, demoted to a material catalogue that can be used and occupied with non-introspective certainty, while the water's 'lubricating emancipation', to use Anne Buttimer's phrase, personified in her, allows the concurrent vision of a spiritually rejuvenating connection to the world. *Orkney's* land is peculiarly described, in the sense that its appearances in the text are far rarer than other aspects of the protagonists' surroundings. The sea returns to the narrative again and again, as I have already shown; the sky is almost as inescapable (pp.27, 65, 69, 70-71, 151, 161). Even the inside of the tiny cottage that the newly-weds share is more vivid in its appearance (pp.30-31). While the descriptions of the land are detailed, when they do appear, they are, in a sense, uninterested. Not here the fulsome meditations on the exact colours of the water; the land, more than anything, appears most as something to be used:

[the house is] ...built on the flat scrubby links  
which leads down to a shallow bank, from  
which it is a short hop to the rocks that slope  
in turn to the pale sandy shore. (p.29)

Although Richard's descriptions of land are detailed in their envisioning of the materiality of his surroundings, they also lack the depth with which he imagines the mythologies and implications of the sea and the sky. Instead of 'a cloud over the sea blood-purple like an omen' (p.65), we are given 'scrubby, warreny, rabbit- and sheep-soiled grass and nubbins of dried out sea-flowers' (p.92); the description goes no deeper than the observations of a man accustomed to identifying the minutiae of the material. Richard remains resolutely on the surface. His relationship with the island is one of physical cataloguing, 'The wide-winged grey-white birds all about us...the bright, crisp sunshine, the shush of the waves', and almost always related to either his own materiality, 'I following after, trying not to puff' or through the focalising lens of his wife (p.92). His descriptions of the island are, as I suggested, detailed. Yet they remain shallow in both

geographical and historical terms; when the descriptions of the island turn to its deeper presence, it is explicitly with reference to 'her' knowledge:

We came to a great square chunk hewn out  
of the cliff, a geo she called it, with a hard g,  
a word from an ancient language, that she  
half-knows or understands. (p.92)

When I say that Richard remains on the island's surface, I do not mean this in terms of his physical position, but of his relationship to the island as a four-dimensional space, with a palimpsestic history and culture beyond its topographical 'reality'. Richard recognises this, 'We are quite out of time. It could be the present, or any time in the last thousand years of the past' (p.184), but only accesses this deeper world via the information his wife gives: 'She says that it's bad luck to whistle, to imitate the wind; she says that if a glass sounds a note when no one has touched it, it means a death at sea' (p.184).

She diffuses further and further into the island; Richard, however, stays on its surface; a fact visible in both the shallowness of his imagery of the place external to its connections with her, shown above, and in their interactions with the local cultural manifestations. She becomes steadily more connected with the islands; she begins to tell him anecdotes about her father (a native Orcadian), then requests local sweets, 'a bag of 'soor plums', in an impressive, and I think unconscious, Scots accent', because her 'dad used to buy them when [she] was little...He used to have them when he was a bairn...' (pp.154-156, 105-106).<sup>435</sup> These references, little signs of her connection to the islands, proliferate in number. Richard, conversely, struggles with the local accent: "A guid braykfast, yir lassie needs,' she said, 'hid's a muggry day the day'. Or something to that effect' (p.51). He remains resolutely dismissive of the ways in which life on the

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<sup>435</sup> Note that this is also the first time that she explicitly employs a dialect word. 'Bairn' is a classic Scottish (and North-East English) term for a child, a corruption of the Norse word 'barna'.

island differs from his home: 'News, unlike newspapers, travels fast here it seems' (p.65).

Though Richard records these moments, his interest in them is eclipsed by his insistence on her relationship with the water. Her vanishing material presence frightens him, but his response is to catalogue insistently her features and behaviours; 'She was wearing one of her vastest cardigans, the sleeves flopping disconsolately from her wrists like two useless tentacles. Her head was retracted into the hooded collar, her nose and eyes peering over the wool' (p.220) 'She', like Goose's quilt, covers the whole, but only represents the fragments prioritised by the quilt's creator. Yet as the girl herself vanishes, she gains greater and greater proximity to the island as she wishes to, while Richard attempts to maintain his envisioning of her; as she gains proximity, however, she moves further away from him.

The ultimate disruption of Richard's envisioning occurs when, of course, 'she' vanishes in the night, after a series of encounters with seals that imply the Selkie myths of the island. For the reader, this is not a surprise; it feels inevitable, her final disappearance, the last step in her gradual slippage into the island and its sea. For Richard, of course, her vanishing is disastrous. The careful flamboyance of his tone is gone; his confidence and self-conscious literariness disappear. Sentences are fragmented, or left half-finished; blank pages appear; time fluctuates (pp.233-253). Richard's own pedagogical, didactic textual identity begins to disappear as he searches for her; interestingly, however, he is abruptly more connected to the *island* and its sea than he has been before. He abandons the symbolism of the water, does not call her by the names of his watery women; his descriptions of the sea are no longer rampant with the 'Kraken' he imagines has been 'slaughtered in his absence' (p.64). Instead he perceives the water in front of him without the lens of his literary references: 'I watch its shifts and changes. It is powder-blue, it is amethyst, it is black, bruised, blood-purple, garnet; calm and flat, harmless, or biding its time' (p.249). That this moment disrupts his cultural matrix is evidenced in the text; in her absence:

'I try to read but can't make my eyes focus... I go through my notes and shuffle my index cards and can find neither purpose nor meaning' (p.247). At the commencement of the novel, his narration is certain, sure: his writing on his academic specialities full of authority. But as the novel progresses the situation changes. The blank spaces appear within the narrative that appear within the novel are emblematic; a textual conceit that signifies not only his growing uncertainty but also, perhaps, the opening of those *gaps*, of interpretive widenings that have opened in the wake of her appearance.

I have suggested that Richard's attempts to obscure the landscape and his own insecurity by the construction of the highly symbolic, mythically informed representation of the island are countered by the disruptive effect of the island's resistance to insistent human categorisation. When this countering reaches the climax that I have noted above, it not only emancipates Richard from his assumptions and allows him to engage with greater proximity. His narrative now encounters the island as a whole, rather than via the strict demarcations inscribed by the cultural cues that he has imposed himself; freed from the tyranny of the myth, he may encounter the island's bounded fluidity. Where before he has moved through the place shallowly, experiencing it as a theatrical setting for his grand romance, now it is a thing of three dimensions, a physical reality that must be interrogated for clues. This is more than just a case of methodical, practical searching for her:

I seek her footsteps, I scour the sand for  
traces, and there are none. I sift it through my  
hands and find nothing, nothing but shards  
of dead shells, I can't feel my fingers, I am  
numb, numb. (p.234)

I circle the island round, and cannot find her.  
I call on beach and rock and cliff, and cannot

find her. I peer into the caverns, I call from the heights, I bellow on the highest crag and the sea rushes below me, and I hear only her name echoed back, empty. And the crabs edge off sideways, telling no tales, and the sorrowful seals tell no secrets. And the sky lowers, closing in. (p.238)

In the novel's final pages, more of the pages are left empty than are filled with Richard's narrative. As he draws closer to the island, the text is abandoned; in Richard's gradually disintegrating narrative, we see the same diffusion occurring. Through her rejection of his mythos and disappearance into the island, she opens the possibility of the same disappearance to her mourning husband. His penultimate words lie alone on the page; facing them, his final lines are equally bereft of company:

I have found at last a mark in that book of hers, a last blue line of biro underlining. It is just this: 'Best leave the paper blank'.  
(p.253)

In this final statement, both her verbal silence and Richard's progression to the same point are encapsulated. He has shed his matrix of referents; he follows her closer and closer to the island, and away from the text. Proximity is once more at the heart of the novel's concern with place, and once again, as in both *Thursbitch* and *Salt*, the reader is left with the understanding that only unmediated proximity is capable of rendering the relationship genuine, vital and whole. Richard is in this way faced instead by the 'terrible freedom to be or not to be, to dwell in inauthenticity or strive for self-possession' that Heidegger identifies as a tendency for inauthentic Dasein as I have also mentioned.<sup>436</sup> Anne Buttimer locates this rendering of wholeness—and its surpassing—as qualities of water, as I

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<sup>436</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp.233-4.

suggested above; engendering ‘a thirst for something beyond those circumscribed wholes in which we all now “dwell” in our worlds of experience and expertise’.<sup>437</sup> Buttimer suggests that water allows access to something beyond the apparently ‘whole’ world, which we have lost access to as we distance ourselves from the natural. I would rather argue, as *Orkney* suggests, that the world—water, land, and the rest—allows this. And the Orkney island allows the proximity, and fluidity of boundaries, to permit this to render itself evident through the text’s empty spaces.

Problematically, of course, *Orkney* is as much as complicit in the production of this coverage (quilt, sail, mystical woman) as it is disruptive of its effect. I have identified in both *Thursbitch* and *Salt*, too, these strains of tension between form and content as they manifest: subverted through depictions of characters encountering surroundings imbued with human disjunction and concerns; and constructed and commodified in their textual, cultural format. Whenever these difficulties appear, the novel is implicated in its own problematic attempts to engage with the post-millennial uncertainties about the nature of the world of its contemporary moment. Yet in its attention to the problem, the novel, as both of those that have followed before, disrupts its own role; it subverts itself. ‘There is in the fiction the new century’, as Peter Boxall notes, ‘...a strikingly new attention to the nature of our reality—its materiality ...one can see the emergence of new kinds of realism, a new set of formal mechanisms with which to capture the real, as it offers itself as the material substrate of our being in the world’.<sup>438</sup> *Orkney*, like *Thursbitch* and *Salt*, insists on mining its own foundations, aware of its distance from the real and of the tenuous and unsure nature of that material substrate itself. Thus *Orkney*’s fearful uncertainty is representative of both a complex approach to the relationships between people and places and a conscious examination of the shifting ground on which the novel as a manner of representation exists in the present moment. In this I have followed with Boxall, who suggests

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<sup>437</sup> Ann Buttimer, ‘Nature, Water Symbols,’ p.261.

<sup>438</sup> Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, p.10.



that '[i]t is this narrative gestation of an unthought time to come, threaded in the seams of the world we know, which [he has] traced through the fiction of the early twenty-first century'.<sup>439</sup> That 'unthought time to come' is Richard's future, but it is also ours.

Richard's new future is not welcome to him, of course; nor is he concerned with the ecocritical significance of his abruptly extended vision of the Orkney island. In this sense the novel resists the possibility of polemical extraction of environmentalist values from its plot; yet still the encountering of the difficulties and ethically problematic engagements that constitute place-related fiction by its very nature reflects the predominant concerns of the fiction's moment. In losing his future, which Richard has already decided to focus on her—'I will devote myself to her only from hereon' (p.199)—his closed, cultural world has been opened to the natural world, and Sackville has brought the novel around to face the kind of open uncertain future that Peter Boxall identifies as a 'future that is unreadable... a mark of the contemporary moment and that makes of the first years of the century a transitional epoch'.<sup>440</sup> As Boxall continues to point out, although this transitional epoch is 'a hesitantly utopian age...it is also a dystopian moment, a moment that is overshadowed by the threat of imminent and total destruction;...the ongoing, unassailable, slow motion destruction of the planet heralded by climate change'.<sup>441</sup>

The solution, as advised rather lyrically by Scott Slovic, is to be found in the heralding of proximity; 'the only true antidote,' Slovic advises, '...for the angst of unbelonging is a walk through sage and rabbitbrush, through vanilla-smelling Jeffrey pines, collecting the dust of here and now on my sandal-clad feet'. Here, one might suggest, is an authenticity of experience unmediated by the cultural cloaking of the text; yet Slovic argues, too, that 'Literature is a lens through which we're able to sharpen our understanding of the world's vital problems'; if so, then perhaps the narrative is the way

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<sup>439</sup> Ibid, p.225.

<sup>440</sup> Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, p.215.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid, p.216.

in which its own insecurity can be determined, and a proximity can be represented that encourages its reproduction in general life beyond the novel.

In the second half of this chapter I will consider the ways in which different narratives—the literary fairytale, from Richard, and the located oral folk tale, from ‘her’, work in the context of a landscape narrative; in the process, I intend to sketch a discussion surrounding the role of narrative in relation to place, and the different modes in which that relationship can function.

2: 'Do You Want to Hear a Story? It's My Turn': Orkney's Stories, and the Search for Authenticity

*Orkney*, like *Salt*, is a novel that is full of stories; there is, however, a crucial difference. While *Salt* revolves around a network of stories created around and about the central family, *Orkney* features an array of folk tales, Arthurian legends and Victorian poet-myths. The eponymous island is not just a backdrop for the story of the middle-aged professor and his young bride, but also a landscape against which these other narratives are displayed: in some cases, this combination of setting and story is both apparently fitting, and suggestive; in others, it is a contrast that shows the edges of both story and setting in high relief. Most particularly, it is evident and telling that the self-conscious nature of the protagonist-narrator's commentary and literary allusions also applies to his relationship with these internally related stories; Richard and his wife interrogate the tales that they tell themselves, creating a layer of meta-textual discourse *about* the stories, even as they inhabit them.

Storytelling in edge places, as is shown in my consideration of *Salt*, has the potential to interrogate and—conversely and/or simultaneously—to elide. In *Orkney*, the stories that are told within the novel's main narrative are supposedly not all 'about' the specific place at all; yet the manner in which they are told, and their relation to the rest of the novel, emphasise the fact that narratives told within a place cannot avoid also, in one way or another, telling *it*. It is notable that the stories told within *Orkney* fall into two very clear groups; Richard's, and 'hers'. One of the key differences between the stories is the way in which they do—or do not—relate to the locale of their telling.

This distinction between the stories that are told by Richard and those told by 'her' is an important one, and one that is marked both by their difference in form and content, and by a chronological divide. Richard is a prolific storyteller, and for the first two thirds of the novel they dominate; in the

final third, however, his stories dry up and are replaced by hers. Richard's storytelling is a feature of the relationship from its beginning, and Richard tells the reader that she has told him the Orcadian words for landscape features, but *her* story-telling, which sees her become the teller, rather than the receiver, does not begin until after the submersion in the bath, the point at which the novel's trajectory shifts (p.135). I will consider the content of the stories in a moment, but it is important also to note that in formal terms, the stories that she tells are immediately differentiated from Richard's by their reproduction in the text: unlike his own stories, which are integrated without distinction into his narrative, the stories that 'she' tells are recounted as extended quotations, as if Richard is recounting her tellings verbatim. This has the effect of maintaining her tales as oral artefacts, rather than—as with her husband's stories—rendering them within the body of text itself.

This distinction, between stories that appear as text and those that appear as speech, is particularly noteworthy in this case, because it is also one of the key differences between two very particular categories of narrative; namely, the literary fairy tale and the folk tale. This particular distinction is, of course, fundamental in fairy-tale and folktale studies: in brief, the folktale is considered the 'root' of the tradition; usually oral, often 'earthier' and more rooted in a particular locale than their more literary fairy-tale counterparts.<sup>442</sup> Jack Zipes delineates the most basic distinctions thus:

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<sup>442</sup> I give here in brief the basic and fairly universally accepted differences between these two genres, which are of course deeply connected, in the main body of the text, but there is neither the scope nor the need to delve deeply into the politics surrounding the difference, which is widely documented. In *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, the prolific fairy-tale scholar Jack Zipes states that 'Almost all critics who have studied the emergence of the literary fairy tale in Europe agree that educated writers purposely appropriated the oral folktale and converted it into a type of literary discourse about mores, values, and manners' (2<sup>nd</sup> edn) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008) p.3) Maria Tatar, too, maps the literary fairy-tale and the oral folktale separately (*The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn) (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003) p.34). (Tatar also differentiates between the oral folktale and the folk tale (note the separating space), which focuses primarily on 'naturalistic settings' and sets stories among the *volk* as opposed to a focus on magic and the supernatural.)

<b>Folklore</b>	<b>Literature</b>
Oral	Written
Performance	Text
Face-to-Face Communication	Indirect Communication
Ephemeral	Permanent
Communal (event)	Individual (event)
Re-creation	Creation
Variation	Revision
Tradition	Innovation
Unconscious Structure	Conscious Design
Collective Representations	Selective Representations
Public (ownership)	Private (ownership)
Diffusion	Distribution
Memory (recollection)	Re-reading (recollection) <sup>443</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*, revised edition (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2002), p.14.

This is important in the context of the way in which *Orkney* engages with its island because, as I pointed out in Chapter Two, the manner in which narratives interrogate their setting (and the locus in which they are told) is a vital part of the process of landscape creation. Where the dialectical tension in *Salt* is related to the possibilities—and challenges—of narratives about a consistently inconsistent place, in *Orkney* this tension is more closely related to the way in which different *types* of narrative cohabit with the places they are related about and within. The manner in which fairytales and folk tales differ in relation to place is complex, of course: as Zipes’ list suggests, the folktale is a matter of public, and community, ownership and sharing; the literary fairytale, conversely, privately owned and received, and communicated indirectly. Obviously in the context of the ethics of proximity that I described in Chapter Two, this distinction also denotes the folktale’s localism; as P. Mary Vidya Porselvi puts it, ‘Folktales are illustrations of rural people’s mindscape that are in close proximity with their landscape’.<sup>444</sup> A book, the theory goes, can be read anywhere; out of place, dislocated from its origin and its setting. An oral telling is a matter of a moment and a location.

In *Orkney* these two different modes of narrative are both present, and the way in which this duality functions is key to the novel’s trajectory. If I have given a clear picture of *Orkney*’s protagonists, it will come as no surprise that Richard, professor and grandiloquent narrator, is the teller of the courtly, literary fairytales within the novel. In fact, he is not simply their teller; his work is the critical analysis of these tales, and his ultimate professional aim the completion of his *magnum opus*. ‘I,’ Richard proclaims, ‘am writing a book of enchantment’ (p.20). The culmination of ‘forty years’ thought’, Richard argues, the book is ‘one great compendium...’ examining ‘enchantment narratives in the nineteenth

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<sup>444</sup> P. Mary Vidya Porselvi, *Nature, Culture and Gender: Re-reading the Folktale* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p.25. Porselvi also identifies this relationship of proximity to the natural world and the folktale as an explicitly female province, arguing that ‘Nature proximity empowers women, children and the marginalised people’ (p.70).

century' (p.21). This 'old obsession', as Richard terms it, colours his experience:

Transformations, obsessions, seductions; succubi and incubi; entrapments and escapes. The angel in the house become the maiden in the tower, the curse come upon her. Curses and cures. Folktales and fairytales retold. And all the attendant uncertainties, anxieties, and aporia. Do I wake or sleep? Fantasy and phantasm. Beautiful terrible women. Vulnerable lonely cursed women. Strange and powerful women... (p.21)

He tells the stories that are his life's work to her and his new wife encourages him to do so, asking specifically for him to tell her the tales that are his focus:

'Let's have some more stories, then,' she said last night... 'I want to know more about these magical women of yours, getting all the attention.' [...] I trawled for something to tell her. Tales of sea-serpents. Beautiful Lamia, who only wanted to be alone with her love...her Lycius, besotted, who would show off his prize, and die for the loss of it. Melusine denounced by her husband as a water-snake before his court. (p.99)

Until the final third of the novel, however, 'she' does not tell stories. She is *told* stories by her new husband, which is a feature of the relationship from its beginning, and Richard tells the reader that she has told him the

Orcadian words for landscape features, but *her* story-telling, which sees her become the teller, rather than the receiver, does not begin until after the submersion in the bath, the point at which the novel's trajectory shifts (p.135). Crucially, the tales she tells are explicitly Orcadian in nature: they are folktales, the highly localised stories of the Orkney archipelago, recounted by a born Orcadian (and told to *her* by a native Orcadian, her vanished father), in their native environment: "This is a tale of Finfolkaheem,' she said, her voice modulating to a soft, low lilt' (p.186). In textual terms, the stories she tells are immediately differentiated from Richard's by their reproduction in the text: unlike his own stories, which are integrated without distinction into his narrative, the stories that 'she' tells are recounted as extended quotations, as if Richard is recounting her tellings verbatim. This has the effect of maintaining her tales as oral artifacts, rather than—as with her husband's stories—rendering them within the body of text itself. In this way her stories are marked repeatedly as the 'real thing'; the oral folktale, related on its home turf and in its original register. Unlike Richard's stories, they are not attributable; in Vladimir Propp's terms, folktales 'should not be likened to literature but to language, which is invented by no one and which has neither an author nor authors'.<sup>445</sup>

This shift from his stories to hers follows the general trajectory of the novel that I have marked already: as Richard's certainty fades, hers appears; as Richard's interest in his texts vanishes, she begins to tell her own stories. As the couple spend time on the island, their roles shift: he moves from storyteller to listener, even as she moves in the opposite direction; he becomes desperate for the knowledge and understanding that, for the majority of the relationship, *she* has looked for from him. Her need to learn from him fades concurrently. It is evident that Richard's dense discourse of literary allusion and pedagogical critique is disrupted as she draws closer to the island itself; conversely, her narrative voice becomes evident

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<sup>445</sup> Vladimir Propp, 'The Theory of Folklore' in *The Theory and History of Folklore*, ed. Anatoly Liberman, trans. Ariadna Y. Martin & Richard P. Martin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.7.



only as she gains greater proximity, after the submersion in the bath that will allow her, finally, to enter the sea.

In terms of their ability to voice their narratives, then, it is evident that both Richard and 'her' are affected in their storytelling by their relationship with the landscape within which they are telling. Richard originally believes that 'if I am to spend some of these precious hours of our honeymoon lost in stories, drifting through myths and listening for echoes, then I could hardly have asked for a better retreat'(p.21); the implication is that the travel to the island also constitutes a journey for Richard to the 'authentic' water folktales. The locus provides him with an access to these stories without the mediation of more cultural interference. It is, quite literally, a case of 'going back to the source':

I bought...a book of folklore, tales of the trows and faeries and witches and mermaids that it is not hard to imagine still haunt these islands; the book has a stand of its own and was the work, I gathered of a local author...I'm working on folktales, fairytales, myself, I said to him. (p.63)

Richard envisions the island's proximity to those folktales as providing him with more insight with which to fill his book of enchantment, as if the island's localist folktales will add to his authority on the subject. Yet as their stay continues, it is evident that the island is less than conducive to his work; 'It seems somehow unlikely, somehow increasingly incredible that there is any land beyond this shore. A world of industry and administration and ordinary things' (p.223). As I have suggested, he loses that same authority and certainty; as they gain greater proximity to their island, he loses his ability to tell his constructed, literary fairytales. 'She', conversely, gains her voice and, when she disappears—the implication being that she is the child of a Finman, searching half-unwittingly for

Finfolkaheem and her father—the Orkney tales are embodied in her disembodiment (p.210). They become, in one sense, real; their roles as 'authentic' folktales goes a step beyond the provision of the localised authenticity that their telling can offer, and gives it physical form. Richard's envisioning of his progress on the island is brutally disrupted, as he is given insight of a kind far more literal than the simple purchasing of a collection of local folktales can provide.

I have already argued that she resists being bound entirely to the water and thus forced into a simplistic binary model, but the novel does not free her entirely from the idea of 'authentic' interaction, or indeed from the envisioning of the natural as a female province. Feminine nature-bound mystery versus masculine rapaciousness; Gaia versus industrialisation. The island becomes the liminal setting for this classic tussle of approaches, ending with the proximal, localist, feminine polemic 'freeing' both itself, and the male possessor from his long held views and ideas. This is the ultimate disruption of the contemporary envisioning of ecological problems, as described by many ecofeminist polemics; as Vandana Shiva puts it, 'we live in times when...the voices of women and Mother Earth are being silenced for a short-term myopic and violent project called 'development'... 'mal(e)development''.<sup>446</sup> In *Orkney*, those voices are given priority as the voice of the mal(e)development is silenced.

This strikes me still, however, as too simple, too tidy. This is not to say that the novel does *not* uphold this vision of dualities; I am in no doubt that it does. I do feel, however, that the disruption and interrogation of those differing factions bear more consideration. Shiva argues that '[c]apitalist patriarchy denies the creativity of nature, and hence the rights of Mother Earth. It is therefore anthropocentric'; in the same volume, Porselvi describes 'folktales as life-affirming discourse that cares for Mother

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<sup>446</sup> Vandana Shiva, 'Foreword' in *Nature, Culture and Gender: Re-reading the Folktale*, P. Mary Viday Porselvi (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), viii.

Earth'.<sup>447</sup> This valourisation of the folktale as the narrative form that reflects a 'deep ecological' engagement with land seems to also reflect the way in which the narrative of *Orkney* engages with storytelling; Richard's constructed, literary tales do not have a locus in the world beyond the text, no fixed point of connection beyond their words. They are all based in his academic work but the texts in which they are included *are* their world; these textual sources are divorced from locale. 'Her' folktales, conversely, are exactly the opposite; promoting the ethic of proximity, and Heise's 'lived immediacy of the local'<sup>448</sup>. It should be noted that, unlike the courtly figures of Richard's fairytales (p.99), the human characters in her stories are engaged in exactly the 'hunting, fishing, gathering fruits or mushrooms' that Heise describes as the proximal behaviours that create the connection valourised by the localist polemic: 'This autumn afternoon, Donald went down to the rocky shore to look for limpets for his dinner. And when he'd nearly filled his bucket...' (p.187).<sup>449</sup> In *Salt*, as I suggested, these behaviours are represented but do not offer the certainties that are supposedly offered to the human participator by the ethic of proximity. In *Orkney*, these behaviours are not shown but are recounted; and it is the act of telling tales about them that is held up, as by Porselvi, as capable of offering a kind of authenticity and primacy. This is a distinctive and distinctly problematic shift, which argues that the representation of the ethic of proximity (and its localist behaviours and values) is as capable of rendering the representer as authentically proximal as engaging in those behaviours firsthand. In part, I would argue, this is because the discourse of 'authentic' proximity is, without a doubt, less ecocritically problematic than its alternative. This can be seen by a brief diversion into considering the subjects of Richard's fairytales.

It is evident, firstly, that when he tells his tales he is also explicitly recounting the framing narratives into which he wishes to fit her, to

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<sup>447</sup> Vandana Shiva, 'Foreword'. viii; P. Mary Viday Porselvi, *Nature, Culture and Gender*, xi.

<sup>448</sup> Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place*, p.42.

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid*, p.30.

configure her in terms that, for him, symbolise his own knowledge and a particular kind of analytical certainty. They have been his life until her appearance; indeed, Richard frames his relationship with the women of these stories in terms of a historical nostalgia for early sexual experiences: 'I still remember,' Richard notes, 'those first febrile encounters...that undergraduate ardour' (p.21). From these women, 'Lamia, La Belle Dame, the Lady of Shalott', he turns directly to his new wife: "Always the women," she says. I'm afraid so, I say. Her precedents' (p.21). It is evident that 'her' presence supercedes her written precedents; Richard loses interest in them when their new, embodied ancestor is in front of him, 'one', as I quoted above, 'of his own'. (p.22). The reassuring distance of the imaginary women, safely contained within his texts, is less beguiling than her uncertain proximity; yet, as I noted in the first half of this chapter, he attempts repeatedly to pin her down, to classify her, 'adding to [his] endless index of her' (p.22). 'Placing' her into the terms of his academic and personal history allows him to shape her, but also reiterates his need to fix her in place, to maintain her position within his maintained schema, a tendency his wife explicitly identifies: 'She sighed. 'I'm sorry I worried you,' she said. 'I'm sorry I moved beyond your frame, Richard.' My frame? 'The window,' she said. 'I'm sorry I didn't stay in the picture, today' (p.165). Internally, by this she means her visibility from the window of the cottage from which he watches her on the beach; from an external perspective it is clear, too, that she moves from his frame in her behaviour as she disrupts the fairytale that he spins around her presence. Beguiling as her mystery is, Richard is still driven to analyse; to define her and thus, ultimately, to attempt to reify her into his comfort zone. If this discourse of transformative petrification seems familiar, that is because it is distinctly reminiscent of the abortive attempts that Pip makes to form certainty from Goose's amorphous stories. Just as the saltmarsh resists the attempt, so too does Richard's strange wife as I have already shown; yet the attempt continues. Though he values her proximity, he still attempts to fit her tidily into his narrative, distancing 'her' from his reader, who can also only view her through his 'frame'.

The frame into which Richard attempts to fit ‘her’ is a patchworked combination of the two prevailing mythical women in Richard’s canon: Vivien, of Arthurian provenance, particularly as she appears in Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*; and Melusine or Melusina, the subject of Jean d’Arras’ *Melusine: Or, the Noble History of Lusignan*. Before I consider the connotations of Richard’s use of these stories, I will first give a very brief sketch of these two very different sorcerous women. Both were originally the subjects of European folktales and have since been ‘converted’ into courtly, literary, fairytales. Melusine, or Melusina, is cursed, for various complex reasons, with a serpent’s tail every Saturday; when she marries, she lays a charge on her new husband never to disturb her or watch her on a Saturday. He agrees, but of course breaks the promise; when in anger he calls her ‘serpent’ in front of their court, she transforms fully and permanently into a dragon and leaves, never to be seen again. In the most famous literary version of the tale, that of Jean d’Arras, Melusine’s history is worked into a colourful history of the Lusignan dynasty. As Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox note in their preface to their 2012 translation of *Melusine: Or, the Noble History of Lusignan*, d’Arras, ‘masterfully retells the amazing story of the Lusignans in mythico-legendary dress, as a magnificent fiction of the dynasty’s founding by a supernaturally gifted Great Mother’.<sup>450</sup>

Tennyson’s Vivien is similar in origin; a re-formation of the legendary and problematic Arthurian figure Nimue, she is the antagonist of the sixth poem cycle of Alfred Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*. Sent by King Mark, perpetual enemy of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, Vivien arrives at Camelot intent on sowing the seeds of dissension. Having attempted (and failed) to seduce King Arthur himself, she turns her attentions to Merlin, the aging ‘great Enchanter of the Time’.<sup>451</sup> Bullying,

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<sup>450</sup> Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox, ‘Preface’ to *Melusine: Or, the Noble History of Lusignan* (Jean d’Arras) (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2012), vii.

<sup>451</sup> Alfred, Lord Tennyson, ‘Merlin and Vivien’ in *The Idylls of the King* (London: Penguin Classics, 1983), l.214.

pleading and loving by turns, she cajoles him to give her the secret to 'a charm,/ The which if any wrought on anyone.../ The man so wrought on ever seemed to lie/ Closed in the four walls of a hollow tower,/ From which was no escape for evermore'.<sup>452</sup> Merlin is reluctant, distrusts her professions of love, but ultimately, weary, depressed and desperate, succumbs. Vivien, of course, immediately uses the charm on Merlin himself: 'shrieking out 'O fool!' the harlot leapt/ Adown the forest, and the thicket closed Behind her,/ and the forest echoed 'fool.''.<sup>453</sup>

*Orkney's* Richard, drifting for a moment into the pedagogical tone of his professorial career, notes that:

Tennyson's Vivien is a wilful, scheming, vengeful soul...In other versions of the legend, under other names, it is Merlin who pursues her...whose obsessive, possessive love so exhausts her that at last, in a desperate bid to be free of him, she tricks him and traps him. (p.74)

The women of the fairytales are, of course, very different; yet Richard uses their names incessantly in his discussions of his wife. Much like the watery lexis I examined in the first half of this chapter, the use of the nicknames related to Richard's stories denotes his need to 'create' her; to define her in linguistic terms, in order to define her more essentially. Although Melusine and Vivien are very different in some regards, they are both resistant, wilful, and insistent upon maintaining an element of agency; in Melusine's case, through her private bathtime; in Vivien's, via the gaining of Merlin's spell. Both narratives describe a form of possessing, and attempts to possess; both denote knowledge as the transactional value linked to that possession. In placing her within this framing context that

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<sup>452</sup> Ibid, 1.204-8.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid, 1.970-2.

emphasises *singular* possession, Richard shapes ‘her’ in a manner that engenders, for him, a form of certainty. He shapes her mysteries into a mystery that he understands; he ‘places’ her ambiguity in a frame that renders it both comprehensible and conquerable; his narratives, ultimately, are those of possession; a possession, too, that is so overwhelming that it renders everything beyond it irrelevant. He marks his lack of interest himself, ‘I like to look at you, I said, catching up to her. There’s nothing I’d rather look at. Everything else is just backdrop’ (p.166). Richard is not simply anthropocentric; he prioritises her with such focus that everything else—other people, locale—becomes, as he suggests, decorative backdrop to their narrative. He frames this as a signal of his devoted attention; yet for the reader, as, perhaps, it is internally for ‘her’, it is also a betrayal of his continuing uncertainty (I might suggest that a similar combination of devoted attention and uncertainty is reflected in the novels that I discuss in this work as they engage with issues related to landscape). The dressing of her in the garb and characteristics of Vivien and Melusine is both a justification of that need and a performance of it; an insistence on her mystery, her apparent power, and a way to subsume it.

Obviously this possessive approach to, and focus on, ‘her’ entails a distancing from everything else; as Richard himself notes ‘her view is encompassed by mine; it is not merely the sea that I see, it is the sea that she is seeing. Something at last takes the empty place at the centre of my perspective’ (p.29). Here there is no ethic of proximity, no localist interest in the physical world; neither Richard’s narratives nor, as I mentioned earlier, his behaviour and observations suggest an attempt at connection with his surroundings. In this context of rapacious possession, and Richard’s evident disconnection from the locale in which he is telling the fairytales, her ‘located’ folktales, with their focus on specificity, localised occupation do seemingly constitute a far more proximal (and perhaps ethical) connection of place and tale. Porselvi’s vision of the folktale as an aspect of a feminine connection with (in her words) ‘Mother Earth’ is here fairly clearly represented.

The obvious interpretation of this series of events from the perspective of its relationship to the land is that the primacy of their two types of story changes in relation to their 'proximity' to the island. His stories—the literary, courtly romances—recede as hers are foregrounded. As 'she' deepens her connection to the island the folktales *of* the island are spoken; their telling is predicated on proximity, on connection. Richard's literary tales, conversely, can be told on the island, or in London, or written down as text and transmitted to any reader anywhere without any change in their telling. The fact that these tales and his interest in them are erased as *Orkney's* narrative progresses suggests that experience of those 'authentic' tales of Orkney that she provides while they are located there elides his more 'artificial' stories.

The island, between the land and the water, between the solid safety of the material and the dangerous possibility of the fluid, is also a site where in the sense of creativity can be renewed. The fact that Richard and his wife are on their honeymoon is equally suggestive of a moment of liminality that will foster creativity and renewal; I mentioned Foucault's idea of the heterotopia earlier in the context of the nature of islands in general, but the honeymoon is another. Foucault particularly points out the importance of the 'honeymoon trip', taken so that a new wife's loss of virginity can occur somewhere 'other'; as Foucault himself puts it, 'The young woman's deflowering could take place “nowhere” and, at the moment of its occurrence the train or honeymoon hotel was indeed the place of this nowhere, this heterotopia without geographical markers'.<sup>454</sup> Richard and his wife's unnamed Orkney island sits between located and nowhere; partly 'placed', but still absent. It is part of culture (named as an Orkney, located within the schema of Orkney folktales and dialects) and at the same time, outside it (no absolute pin to place on a map; no definite set of human co-ordinates). It is an ideal location on the edge of culture in which the deep

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<sup>454</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', pp.24-5.



folktales can be accessed at their most authentic, in the locus and still outside it.

This trajectory from the constructed to the 'authentic', the distanced to the proximal, appears, on the face of it, as a more traditional version of the ecocritical polemicisation of the pastoral experience that I have shown as disrupted in both *Thursbitch* and *Salt*. I suggested in both of those cases that the twenty-first century uncertainty and prioritisation of individual experience over depictions of more universal tropes are manifested via this disruption; yet, also, that both of these novels add to the cultural layering that of landscape evocation that they claim to critique. They interrogate issues of 'authenticity', of the 'real thing', in a way that *Orkney* rather does not, entirely; despite its admissions of its own uncertainties, it insists on the possibility of some kind of proximity and it is this that 'she' and Richard achieve in their dissolution from the text.

I have, with much care, only used the word 'authentic' with those mitigatory quotation marks. The authentic, in the Oxford English Dictionary's sense of, 'The fact or quality of being true or in accordance with fact; veracity; correctness. Also... accurate reflection of real life, verisimilitude', is problematic in many ways.<sup>455</sup> In relation to the folktale, the word has become risky; as Stephen Benson points out, 'the authenticity of ... [literary fairytale] collections has long since been questioned, along with the notion of authenticity itself in relation to the transcribed folktale'.<sup>456</sup> In part this questioning has arisen in response to an (at one point almost obsessive) *need* to establish authenticity in relation to folk narratives; Regina Bendix suggests that '[i]n the discipline of folklore the idea of authenticity pervades the central terms and canon of the field', and that the search for authenticity is vital as a legitimating principle for the

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<sup>455</sup> "authentic, adj. and n.". *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, June 2016). Web: full website details given in bibliography.

<sup>456</sup> Stephen Benson, *Cycles of Influence: Fiction, Folktale, Theory*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), p.43.

school of folklore studies: ‘Mathematics,’ she argues,, ‘can proclaim a finding right or wrong; that powerful dichotomy legitimates its claims to scholarly knowledge and authority. Discerning what is and what is not authentic material is an analogous claim’.<sup>457</sup> This attitude, Bendix argues, which sees the identification of the authentic as a legitimising principle, has the added (and problematic) effect of creating a rigid hierarchy: ‘At best, the inauthentic held the status of being unworthy of scholarly attention; at worst, it was decried as an agent spoiling or harming the carefully cultivated, noble ideal’.<sup>458</sup> What the word itself means is also a question of conflict. I am fascinated by the 2009 essay collection, *Authenticity in Culture, Self and Society*, which covers a dizzying number of contemporary identifications of what ‘authenticity’ can mean.<sup>459</sup> In that collection, Alessandro Ferrara argues that ‘Authenticity is a protean concept in philosophy and in the social sciences, ironically always at risk of luring us into the opposite path, into a somewhat “inauthentic” use of authenticity’.<sup>460</sup> The protean image is, of course, distinctly appropriate in the context of *Orkney*’s shapeshifting men and women.

In the twenty-first century, attitudes towards ideas of authenticity are increasingly complex. Bendix, writing in 1997, suggests that, ‘as we approach the year 2000, the world is saturated by things and experiences advertising their authenticity’.<sup>461</sup> Writing in 2004, Vincent John Cheng prefaces his thoughtful examination of ‘*The Anxiety Over Culture and Identity*’ (emphasis mine) by identifying ‘a deep and widespread concern’ around ‘issues of personal and national identity’ in both Europe and the

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<sup>457</sup> Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (University of Wisconsin Press: London, 1997), pp.8, 131.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid*, p.4.

<sup>459</sup> *Authenticity in Culture, Self and Society*, ed. Phillip Vannini & J. Patrick Williams (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009). I found Phillip Vannini and Sarah Burgess’ chapter on ‘Authenticity as Motivation and Aesthetic Experience’ (pp.103-19) and Alessandro Ferrara’s chapter, cited below, particularly helpful.

<sup>460</sup> Alessandro Ferrara. ‘Authenticity Without a True Self’ in *Authenticity in Culture, Self and Society*, ed. Phillip Vannini & J. Patrick Williams (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), p.21.

<sup>461</sup> Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity*, p.3.

United States of America.<sup>462</sup> Mattijs van de Port, on the other hand, points out that regardless of our fascination with it, authenticity remains a contested and problematic area:

Say that something is ‘authentic’ or ‘true’ and a multitude of anthropologists...will set out to explain to you how you failed to recognize the constructedness of this ‘authentic something’ of yours.<sup>463</sup>

I see in my own discussion of *Salt* this same tendency to distrust, to identify the cultural in the thing identified as natural and to, as van de Port goes on to suggest, ‘show how all that was presented to us as natural, God given, common sensical, and of-times-immemorial is in in fact made-up’.<sup>464</sup>

What does this diversion into questions of ‘authenticity’ have to do with *Orkney*? I mentioned that it is a form of authenticity that the novel seems to be straining towards, bringing Richard face to face with the ur-narratives behind his courtly arrangements. Unlike those anthropologists that van de Port identifies, Sackville’s text does not insist upon questioning the principle of the authentic. Indeed, I would suggest that the entire text focuses upon the principle of *not* questioning the authentic, but the constructed; the transformative effects of the experience for Richard are predicated on an implicit hierarchic positioning of the constructed/artificial/literary and the ‘authentic’ experience of the oral folktales. In other words, the subtle step that notes the false certainty

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<sup>462</sup> Vincent John Cheng, *Inauthentic: The Anxiety Over Culture and Identity* (Rutgers University Press: London, 2004), p.1.

<sup>463</sup> Mattijs Van de Port, ‘Registers of Incontestability: The Quest for Authenticity in Academia and Beyond,’ *Authenticity: Beyond Essentialism and Deconstruction* (*Etnofoor Anthropological Journal* 17.1 (2004): p.7.

<sup>464</sup> *Ibid*, p.8.

imparted by Jack Turner's folktales and strips that layer of apparent 'authenticity' is missing from *Orkney*.

I might argue that this approach is a powerful one regardless of *Orkney*'s less complex interrogation of its hierarchic structure of authenticities. It is undoubtedly true that in the twenty-first century it is impossible to ignore the fact that much of the cult of authenticity that is valorised by the cultural imperatives Regina Bendix et al identify is based on a vision of 'the authentic' (the 'natural', the 'unspoiled') that is inherently constructed (as Mattijs van de Port so clearly points out). However, as van de Port continues to suggest, this is perhaps not entirely the point:

I am increasingly unsatisfied with what I perceive as a constant incentive to argue the made-up-ness of life worlds, ie to focus on the make-believe rather than the act of believing itself.<sup>465</sup>

Perhaps it is this element of the argument around 'authenticity' that feels less than convincing; although it is obvious that so much of what we deem to be authentic is, in fact, no less artificial than everything else. Van de Port suggests that 'Time and again we are told (or in one way or another reproduce the statement) that symbolic worlds are in disarray', but the 'act of believing' itself does not vanish. In other words, regardless of how much we destabilise the concept of the authentic, we are still going to wish for it and look for it. Richard, and *Thursbitch*'s Ian, may not experience the totally 'authentic' experience of true landscape proximity, but they are left, perhaps, with a greater sense of what it might look like. Van de Port quotes Charles Lindholm, writing on the relationship between authenticity and ideas of the sacred, thus:

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<sup>465</sup> Mattijs Van de Port, 'Registers of Incontestability,' p.8.

...the human desire for the experience of the divine spark does not vanish simply because that experience becomes difficult to achieve. Instead, it is more likely that the quest for a felt authentic grounding becomes increasingly pressing as certainty is eroded and the boundaries of the role lose their taken-for-granted validity.<sup>466</sup>

When authenticity is threatened by a proliferation of uncertainties, constructions and possibilities, it becomes increasingly more important. When our relationship with the land is placed in question by the myriad difficulties, distances and dangers that are constituted by climate change and the loss of the rural, we search more intensely for the locations in which that relationship is still reassuringly manifested. In other words, I wonder whether *Orkney*'s acceptance of a traditional shift of insight and its rejuvenative, opening encounter with the proximal and the authentic effects of its edge landscapes is perhaps a more honest, in some respects, envisioning of a particular kind of post-millennial yearning. Both *Salt* and *Thursbitch* focus on the disruption of the yearning, noting its existence and, simultaneously, critiquing both its production and its effect. In other words, the first two novels I have considered focus on, in Van de Port's words, 'the make-believe'; *Orkney*, conversely, turns to 'the act of believing itself'.

From an ecocritical perspective, the novel's prioritisation of the localist and the proximal is, of course, an echo of the deep ecological envisioning that I have discussed before; indeed, the novel's emphasis on mermaids, selkies and their ilk argues for an approach that promulgates a kind of transformation which can allow an even deeper connection. Yet the novel itself does not exercise this proximity; the land remains distant, an

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<sup>466</sup> Charles Lindholm, 'Authenticity, Anthropology and the Sacred' in *Anthropological Quarterly* 75.1 (2002): p.336. (cited in Mattijs Van de Port, 'Registers of Incontestability,' p.10)

instrument of a wider human narrative, still, rather than inherently endowed with value 'for its own sake'. I have wondered throughout this work, in a self-reflexive fashion, whether all of these post-millennial novels elide their landscapes even in their attempts to elucidate and celebrate them; *Orkney* does so in a fashion very different from either *Salt* or *Thursbitch*. It maintains a vision of a landscape that is important, beautiful, and difficult, yet the absence of an added layer of critical interrogation of the final gaining of proximity by its protagonists allows *Orkney* to remain a fairytale. Despite its self-consciousness about the form, it never quite eludes it; in the language of the selkie myth, the landscape never locates its fur coat and escapes back into its sea.

**‘Nature Arranged’: The Role of the Garden in A. S. Byatt’s *The Children’s Book***

*We think and feel that we are making something natural when we make a garden, something that, if come upon unexpectedly, is a pleasure to behold; something that banishes the idea of order and hard work and disappointments and sadness, even as the garden is sometimes made up of nothing but all that... I seem to believe that I will find my idyll more a true ideal, only if I can populate it with plants from another side of the world.<sup>467</sup>*

The garden is unique among the environments considered thus far, for the simple reason that it is a landscape characterised by its construction; where other chapters have focussed on the imprinting of human values onto existing ‘natural’ topographies, this one begins with a topography entirely created by human labour, for human purposes. What, then, qualifies the garden to feature in my gallery of edges and difficulties? Quite simply, it is perhaps the sharpest edge of them all: the precipice between sites of human habitation and the world beyond them; the cultivated, mediated frontier between the decorated interior and the dangerous world beyond the gates. The garden, often, is the fringe of human inhabitation.

I have already made it clear that I believe the edge tendencies of these landscapes to be figurative, rather than literal; I have also noted that they are not always easy to define. The garden, however, is an edge that is almost always clearly delineated. Garden historian John Dixon Hunt, whose seminal work, *Greater Perfections: The Practice of Garden Theory* has been of particular help for this chapter, perceives the garden’s clearly denoted limits as integral to its definition:

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<sup>467</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* (Washington DC: National Geographic, 2007), pp.188-9.

Either [the garden] will have some precise boundary, or it will be set apart by the greater extent, scope and variety of its design and internal organization; more usually, both will serve to designate its space and its actual or implied enclosure.<sup>468</sup>

Hunt references the work of Anne van Erp-Houtepen, noting her argument that ‘all European, Indo-European, and Slavic languages derive their words for gardens from roots that signify enclosure’.<sup>469</sup> A landscape defined by its own limits, which sits between two other extremely distinct environments: the interior of the house and the exterior of the world-at-large.

The garden forms a point of interaction between the external world and human existence that nominally exists under human control. Unlike the exchange that occurs when people enter the wilderness proper, or venture into a saltmarsh, the role of the garden is prescribed by a human and the element of uncertainty, of risk, removed. One will not die of exposure or drown in an unfriendly tide here: the the garden’s referential nature extends only to those elements of the experience that are chosen as being appropriate and harmonious. The garden’s status of enclosure means that it constitutes a nominally external space with the literal guardian boundaries of the internal and, concurrently, a symbolically internal space that is physically outside. If ‘inside’ can reasonably be said to denote both safety and restriction, then ‘outside’, by the same token, stands for both freedom and risk. The garden, sited evenly between the two, carries with it all of these connotations. Yet its human construction—the fact that we create, maintain and exist within the garden of our own volition—makes

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<sup>468</sup> John Dixon Hunt, *Greater Perfections: The Practice of Garden Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), p.15.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid, p.16. As van Erp-Houtepen’s essay has not been translated into English, I am relying on Hunt’s translation and summary.



it much easier to ignore the more problematic connotations of the garden's existence.

Robert Pogue Harrison makes a compelling case for this argument in *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition*, noting that 'a garden sanctuary can be either a blessing or a curse depending on the degree of reality it preserves within its haven', adding that '[Hannah] Arendt writes: "Flight from the world in dark times of impotence can always be justified as long as reality is not ignored, but is acknowledged as the thing that must be escaped"''.<sup>471</sup>

The garden, then, is a shelter from the hardships beyond it, but cannot fulfil this role successfully if it does not simultaneously acknowledge this reality beyond its borders. In this way, the cultural expectations of the horticultural space exert an extraordinary pressure on the fringe of human domesticity. The garden survives the pressure by consistently maintaining a position between the outward and the inward; by a systemic network of referents related to what lies within the dwelling attached to the garden and without the boundary fences that create the garden enclosure: 'Garden enclosures both define their spaces and appeal across boundaries—by way of representation, imitation, and allusion—to a world dispersed elsewhere'.<sup>472</sup>

So the garden looks outwards, drawing cues from agricultural models and uncultivated nature. This point is tied firmly to the ideas addressed in earlier chapters of wilderness theory. Gardens have consistently been created to mimic these external environments in a fashion that denotes both the referent landscape and, by dint of its constructed nature, the possibility of human control and influence. As Harrison points out:

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<sup>471</sup> Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p.71.

<sup>472</sup> John Dixon Hunt, *Greater Perfections*, p.29.

An essential tension is lost when gardens do not have porous, even promiscuous openings onto the world beyond their bounds... the inspirational power of gardens...owes as much to the permeability as to the consistency of their boundaries. Isolate them completely and you take away their havenlike character.<sup>473</sup>

In the preceding chapters I noted the myth of the ‘green and pleasant’ English countryside; the ‘biscuit-tin lids’ and ‘the sunlit uplands of jigsaw puzzles and Ladybird books’ of Paul Farley and Michael Symons-Roberts’ envisioning of the stereotypical view of the rural United Kingdom.<sup>474</sup> I consider it particularly resonant that the interest in the British garden, the ‘haven’ of the domestic cultivated outside space, has persisted even as, concurrently, the idea of the British countryside as *itself* the ‘tidy garden’ of William Least-Heat Moon’s jibing description has persisted.<sup>475</sup> Nonetheless, the British garden *has* persisted.

In terms of the development of British gardening, the horticultural interests of the ancient civilisations are vitally important. Christopher Thacker notes that pre Roman invasion, horticulture tended toward the productive, either in terms of food or spirituality:

...the early Britons did not make gardens. Their agriculture was far from primitive, and archaeologists have found ample evidence of farming activity round many pre-Roman sites, yet these did not, apparently, include any distinctively ‘garden’ areas. While the

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<sup>473</sup> Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens*, p.57.

<sup>474</sup> Paul Farley & Michael Symons Roberts, *Edgelands*, p.2.

<sup>475</sup> William Least Heat-Moon, *PrairyErth*, p.618.

desperately vague references in Celtic mythology talk of ‘sacred waters’, the ‘magic quicken-tree’ (the rowan)...they leave us gardenless.<sup>476</sup>

When the Romans invaded, though, the garden took on a completely different form. Jenny Uglow notes that, ‘By the time the Romans were building their first towns in Britain, gardening was fashionable... Gardening flourished first here in the countryside, around the luxurious rural villas of the late first century’: they ‘brought the legacy of the ancient cultures of the Mediterranean and Middle East’.<sup>477</sup> As British history draws on, the Romans disappear, and the British sociocultural landscape shifts and changes, taking its understanding of the garden with it: the Dark Ages left few records, but Uglow notes that ‘the Benedictine abbeys in England *needed* substantial gardens to feed the community’ (emphasis mine), and cites the Latin to Anglo-Saxon translations of Aelfric of Eynsham, which includes the translation of a ‘common term for garden, *amoenus locus*, as a *luffendliche stede*, a lovely place’, which clearly denotes the existence of a garden that has a function beyond production.<sup>478</sup> So the pleasure garden came to Britain as a direct result of European influence, and remained when its introducers vanished again: as Uglow notes, ‘the great Roman legacy disappeared, to be discovered again in centuries to come’.<sup>479</sup> The European horticultural links remained, and it is in the earliest moments of the Europe-wide Renaissance that Hunt finds seeds of thought about the theory of gardens: not, that is, in terms of their design, but in relation to their *role*:

Long before any complete treatise was devoted to the art of making pleasure

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<sup>476</sup> Christopher Thacker, *The Genius of Gardening: The History of Gardens in Britain and Ireland* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1994), p.10.

<sup>477</sup> Jenny Uglow, *A Little History of British Gardening* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2004), pp.10, 9.

<sup>478</sup> *Ibid*, p.23.

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid*, p.15.

gardens, their increasingly conspicuous place in sixteenth-century life attracted the attention of commentators. Some addressed largely practical concerns [but] [o]ther writers at about the same time...tried to come to terms conceptually with this new *art* form.<sup>480</sup>

Hunt goes on to consider the position of the garden in relation to its landscape, noting that many modern garden theorists have ‘generally neglected this view of gardens as part of larger landscape; as a result we tend to miss the importance of setting and understanding the garden in a context that is at once topographical and conceptual’.<sup>481</sup> He examines the principles of Cicero, who believes in a second nature, ‘what today we would call the cultural landscape: agriculture, urban developments’, and ‘uses the phrase *alteram naturam*, an alternative nature...his etymology therefore implies that there is also a first nature. This is “the natural world”... “within” which his second is created’.<sup>482</sup> The garden itself, in Hunt’s configuration, is a *third* nature:

Gardens now take their place as a third nature in a scale or hierarchy of human intervention into the physical world: gardens become more sophisticated, more deliberate, and more complex in their mixture of culture and nature than agricultural land, which is a large part of Cicero’s “second nature”.<sup>483</sup>

This is important because the configuration Hunt describes points out that the garden’s position between what is ‘out there’ and what is ‘in here’ is

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<sup>480</sup> John Dixon Hunt, *Greater Perfections*, p.32.

<sup>481</sup> *Ibid*, p.32.

<sup>482</sup> *Ibid*, pp.32, 33.

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid*, p.34.

not just physical but conceptual: Hunt is, in fact, pointing out the cultural edge that the garden inhabits. Later, his argument makes the point about the location of the garden between home and away explicit:

...the Renaissance garden saw the establishment of axial lines of sight leading from the geometry of the central palace or villa and through gardens...Eventually this line would be extended outward, past perhaps less clearly formalized spaces of groves, orchards, or “wildernesses”, into agricultural land and even into relatively untouched countryside where the axis would usually discover its other termination in some distinctive feature of the topography.<sup>484</sup>

So the garden looks outwards, drawing cues from agricultural models and uncultivated nature; this tendency, and how it is arranged within the garden, is one of the key ways in which shifts in garden design tendencies can be tracked. The extension of the axial lines that Hunt refers to reached its zenith in the development in the 1700s of, in Uglow’s words:

...what we now call ‘landscape gardening’...; the straightforward softening of formality and opening of the garden to the country; then a pictorial, classical, allusive style; and finally the radical parkland of Capability Brown and his followers.<sup>485</sup>

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<sup>484</sup> Ibid.

<sup>485</sup> Jenny Uglow, *A Little History*, p.128.

It is the later reaction *against* Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown that will particularly inform this chapter, but it is important to note that the point of Brown’s work was to ensure that the appearance of the great estates and large gardens of Britain ‘—at least at first glance—was all nature’.<sup>486</sup> In fact, of course, Brown’s work involved huge landscaping, the creation of lakes and hills that, as his nickname suggests, were ‘capabilities’ of the land ‘which he might’, in the words of Christopher Thacker, ‘be able to bring into proper prominence if allowed to undertake the task’.<sup>487</sup> For Brown the key task of the landscape gardeners was the manufacturing of landscape features that undertook to render the land around a house as close to that which lay beyond its borders as conceivably possible. The purpose of the garden was to bring the outside closer to the inside, regardless of the actual artificiality of the illusions created to ensure that this was achieved; rivers were diverted, hills and valleys created, grass cultivated right up to the houses themselves.<sup>488</sup> It was not ‘natural’ gardening that Brown attempted, but the appearance of Nature; Charles Quest-Ritson notes that his critics consider him ‘a destroyer of all that was good—a one-idea man who churned out the same formula...and, in so doing, defaced the landscape of all England’.<sup>489</sup>

After Brown’s death many continued his approach, but ultimately the course of British gardening was fundamentally changed again in the 1800s by the rise of the ideas of Victorian ‘cult of the garden’, which combined

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<sup>486</sup> Ibid, p.159. It should be noted that Uglow is conflating a large and more diverse group than it would appear, and she rather skips over (perhaps in the pursuit of concision) the fact that Brown’s work was rather, as Charles Quest-Ritson argues, ‘the culmination of a steady movement towards greater naturalness which began with Addison and Pope and worked through Bridgeman and Kent’. (*The English Garden: A Social History* (Boston: David R. Godine, 2003), p.131) However, Brown remains the star of the landscape garden, both for its supporters and its detractors.

<sup>487</sup> Christopher Thacker, *The History of Gardens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p.209.

<sup>488</sup> For an excellent and concise description of Brown’s work, Christopher Thacker’s chapter on Brown in *The Genius of Gardening* is particularly helpful (pp.214-235). Also of use is *The Genius of the Place: The English Landscape Garden 1620-1820*, ed. John Dixon Hunt and Peter Willis (London: The MIT Press, 1988).

<sup>489</sup> Charles Quest-Ritson, *The English Garden: A Social History* (Boston: David R. Godine, 2003), pp.13-4.

consumerism and a democratisation of horticultural endeavour.<sup>490</sup> The irascible garden expert William Robinson and his protégée and colleague, Gertrude Jekyll. Robinson, as Quest-Ritson puts it, ‘revolted against ‘the death-note of the pastry-cook’s garden’ (that is to say, the system of massed bedding of annuals, called elsewhere ‘garden-graveyards’).<sup>491</sup> Jane Brown describes the way in which Robinson’s ‘sympathetic advocacy of hardy and native plants and wild gardening’ has become synonymous with the concurrent rise of the ‘Arts and Crafts architects’; in this way ‘the small garden attained the zenith of its popularity during the 1890s and the Edwardian years’.<sup>492</sup> This wild gardening requires a focus on the natural erased by Capability Brown’s landscaping efforts; the triumph of nature with a small ‘n’ over the grand idea of Nature with a capital; a discourse of flowers and plants permitted to flower and die down on their own terms, with ‘full freedom of growth at all stages of their life-cycle’.<sup>493</sup> As Jane Brown notes, summarising the theories of M. H. Baillie Scott, ‘beauty...requires working with nature and growing the natives of the soil, a wild garden, and then perhaps an orchard underplanted with spring bulbs’.<sup>494</sup>

It is this moment in the history of gardening that I am particularly concerned with in this chapter; the moment of intersection between one of the most seismic and enduring shifts in British domestic and social aesthetics and the concurrent horticultural polemic of the ‘wild’ and the ‘natural’. This intersection is personified by the twin figures of the close

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<sup>490</sup> David Stuart, *The Garden Triumphant: A Victorian Legacy* (London: Viking, 1988), p.7. Stuart’s discussion of the rise of gardening among the middle and lower classes of Victorian society emphasises the combined successes and disasters of the Victorian proliferation of gardening interest; as he terms it, ‘the nasty and the marvellous’ (p.9). This is important because it is both the ‘nasty’ and the new ‘free[dom] from the Georgian canons of ‘chaste’ good taste’ (p.7) that inspired the vituperative responses of William Robinson.

<sup>491</sup> Charles Quest-Ritson, *The English Garden*, p.279. Quest-Ritson argues for the relationship between the work of Robinson and Forbes Watson; Robinson is perhaps the most celebrated of those working in a rather wilder field than the usual idea of ‘individual genius’ would suggest, but none of these garden experts is working entirely in a vacuum.

<sup>492</sup> Jane Brown, *The Pursuit of Paradise: A Social History of Gardens and Gardening* (London: Harper Collins, 1999), p.157.

<sup>493</sup> Christopher Thacker, *The History of Gardens*, p.280.

<sup>494</sup> Jane Brown, *The Pursuit of Paradise*, p.156.

friends Gertrude Jekyll and Edward Lutyens; gardener and architect in philosophical and aesthetic harmony.<sup>495</sup>

This combination of garden and home as part of a holistic expression of taste, aesthetics and, indeed, ethics, informs this chapter particularly because the book on which I will focus, A. S. Byatt's 2006 novel, *The Children's Book*, which describes the wide and complex web of social and cultural discourses centred around the artistic and philosophical movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This chapter will consider the garden as both the arena in which we may examine and represent our relationship with our natural surroundings and our interactions with them, and also its role as a physical manifestation of our need to do so. After all, the garden is neither inside nor outside, constantly referencing the world beyond its gate but not quite that world in itself; in providing ourselves with a space in which to maintain a grasp on the environment, we also provide a space in which we can find room to examine the nature of that grasp, and the choices and consequences that accompany it.

I will consider the particulars of Byatt's representation of these questions—particularly in the context of gardens—in the first half of this chapter, with a focus on the role of the Arts and Crafts movement and attendant political and social theories in the formation of a relationship between people and their surroundings. In the second half of this chapter, I will consider the importance of these questions in a post-millennial novel, and what other considerations the depiction of these movements may lead us to examine in the context of contemporary environmental and representational concerns.

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<sup>495</sup> This is, of course, a simplification; there are many complex occurrences, alliances, fallings-out and shifts in approach and opinion around this horticultural trajectory. David Stuart's *A Garden Triumphant* and the chapter 'The Rise of the Small Garden' in Jane Brown's *The Pursuit of Paradise* are particularly helpful.



1: 'Detected Play-Acting': *The Representation of the Garden in The Children's Book*

*The Children's Book* begins in 1895, with the relocation of Philip, a homeless child with a fascination with pottery, to Todefright, the home of the comfortably off Fabian-aligned Wellwood family situated in 'Andreden, in the Kentish Weald'.<sup>496</sup> Byatt thus allows the reader's first sight of the house—and crucially from the perspective of this chapter, the garden—to take place through the eyes of a stranger to it. From this first moment, Byatt emphasises both Todefright's fruitful nature-filled prosperity and the human construction that informs it both as a dwelling place and as a principle; and, more particularly, places it firmly within the canon of the Arts and Crafts and early Modern architect, William Richard Lethaby. Once a farmhouse, it 'had been tactfully extended and modernised by Lethaby...respecting (and also creating) odd-shaped windows and eaves' (p.17); Byatt's straight-faced parentheses denote that authentic irregularity is desirable in the Wellwood approach to domesticity—to the point where haphazardness is *created* if not immediately obvious. Even etymologically the Wellwood residence is, if such a paradox is possible, artfully natural:

Andred was the old British name for the forest. Andreden meant a swine pasture in the forest. Their house was called Todefright. In fact they had changed it from Todsfrith, but the change was etymologically sound. Fryth, in the old language of the Weald, was a word for scrubland on the edge of a forest. The local Kentish word for that was 'fright' (p.17).

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<sup>496</sup> A. S. Byatt, *The Children's Book* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2009), p.17. All further page numbers given in the text

The parallel between this deconstruction of the Wellwoods' created nomenclature and a garden is clear, here: the cleared patch in the centre of a naturally existent landscape, the conscious creation of the house's name from the organic phrases of a localised, historically grounded dialect, feel distractingly similar to the creation of a garden, particularly in the context of the Arts and Crafts Movement's insistence upon a type of nostalgic 'authenticity' and local flora so championed by William Morris; as Anne L. Helmreich notes:

As part of his plan to reform modern civilization through the close study of nature and the honest use of materials, Morris called for the return of "old-fashioned" flowers, such as columbines, china-asters, and snow-drops...<sup>497</sup>

The garden should appeal, in other words, to nature in its smallest, most particular form; the flora and character of the local area, used in an 'honest' fashion. There is, of course, a resonance here of those same ethics of proximity that have threaded their way through my previous chapters in this language. William Morris also states, in 'Making the Best of It', that the garden 'should by no means imitate either the wilfulness or wildness of Nature, but should look like a thing never to be seen except near a house'; here we can see the combination of the constructed and the natural that the naming of Todefright represents.<sup>498</sup>

Indeed, Todefright is full of this combination of the apparently natural and the clearly constructed; 'earthenware plates and mugs...with a border of

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<sup>497</sup> Anne L. Helmreich 'Re-presenting Nature: Ideology, Art, and Science in William Robinson's "Wild Garden"' in *Nature and Ideology: Natural Garden Design in the Twentieth Century, Volume 18*, ed. Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn (Washington D.C: Dumbarton Oaks, 1997), pp.81-112, p.88.

<sup>498</sup> William Morris, 'Making the Best of It' in *Hopes and Fears for Art: Five Lectures Delivered in Birmingham, London, and Nottingham, 1878-1881*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Ellis & White, 1882), p.128.

black-eyed daisies'(p.20), a large earthenware vessel covered in 'waterweeds, and a dashing horizontal rhythm of irregular clouds of black-brown wriggling commas, which turned out...to be lifelike tadpoles with translucent tails' (p.23). Philip, who has grown up in the pottery factories of Burslem, works in the opposite direction: instead of, as the Wellwoods do, imprinting images of the natural onto the constructed elements of the house, and thus blurring the line between outside and in, he considers the new world of countryside and garden in terms of human artifice:

He looked out of the window, and there were the branches, lit by the moon on a dark blue, cloudless sky, with their fish-shaped leaves overlapping, and just trembling. He translated the shapes into a glaze, and puzzled over it briefly. (p.22)

Byatt's use of Philip's perspective—and his tendency to translate the apparently natural into terms of human construction (particularly pottery)—foregrounds the difficult relationship between the created natural and 'unspoiled', and the careful handiwork that acts as its concealed foundation. This central tension, between the *impression* of the natural and its obscured construction, is at the heart of *The Children's Book*, which forensically examines the relationships between a mixed and complex collection of families at the turn of the twentieth century. It is also deeply relevant to the external and internal pressures that I have already ascribed to the rest of the novels I have considered; the concomitant trajectories of the celebration of the natural and the inevitability of the artificial are at the heart, in one fashion or another, of all of them.

The Todefright garden is one of many settings in an extraordinarily rich and dense novel, but it is an important one. It is the setting for several of the set-pieces of the novel that set out both the polemical convictions (and concurrent complications) of the socially aware protagonists, and its

features are telling regarding the guiding aesthetic and ethical principles that inform their philosophies. We first see the garden as it is prepared for the Wellwood family's Midsummer Party, a process that explicitly demonstrates the use of the garden as a staged scene. Byatt focusses the narrative gaze on the outside of the house during the preparations: the house is in uproar, 'no one was to have anything for lunch except bread and cheese' (p.36). All the chairs, symbols of the Wellwood brand of domesticity, are removed to the garden, the list provided giving a clear intermingling of interior and exterior furnishings—'wicker chairs, deckchairs, schoolroom chairs, the nursery rocking-chair, cane and metal garden chairs'— where they are placed in 'little cosy, or conspiratorial, groups of chairs in picturesque places' (pp.37,36). These groupings, of course, are akin to a stage set: they encourage conversation through the impression of enclosure, of safety, while also remaining informal enough to promote a feeling of being beyond social restraints. The movement of the chairs from inside to out, the commingling of the furniture, contributes to this feeling of a place between the safety of the interior and the social delimitation of the exterior.

[The chairs] were placed in arbours, in the clearing at the centre of the shrubbery, even in the orchard. Then the lanterns were swung from branches, and half-concealed in clumps of tall grasses, and decorative thistles in the herbaceous borders. (p.37)

In this description, the reader is also given ample opportunity to see the constructed details of the garden itself. The thistles, symbolic of wildness, of weeds adulterating carefully planned planting, are 'decorative': a word that signifies the intentionality of the presence of this most often *natural* (read: *unintentional*) garden inhabitant within a human schema. In this way it is made evident that the material fabric of the garden is as implicated in this idea of a staged natural space as the way in which it is used; the natural

and the constructed are mingled both in concept and in form. It is also notable in this context that the aforementioned lanterns are, in the majority, covered with natural images – ‘a crescent moon and a black bird-shadow’; ‘hunched crows’, ‘daisies and blue bells’, ‘tadpoles’, ‘a long sly snake’ (pp.38, 24).

John Dixon Hunt envisions the garden as providing a particular kind of license for these staged performances, noting that, ‘[g]ardens offered themselves as spaces where stage and auditorium, theater and world, were constantly interchanged...and where social artifice was “naturalized” amid the garden’s greenery in ways that it could never exactly be indoors’.<sup>499</sup> ‘One aspect of role-playing in gardens,’ he continues to point out, ‘...is the blurring of private and public worlds’.<sup>500</sup> It is this blurring that the conscious positioning of the Wellwood chairs in order to openly promote a paradoxical sense of privacy makes explicit: the garden ‘invites, even requires or compels its owners or its visitors to “perform,” to entertain a new self or to exploit the full potentialities of an old one’.<sup>501</sup> The layout of the Todefright garden for the party is designed to both invite private ‘conspiratorial’ conversation and also to publicly demonstrate its desirability. The behaviour of the guests, too, is both personal and public: the adults ‘gathered on the lawn’, a public arena, to discuss politics, ‘shocking news from London’ (p.46). What is interesting about the depiction of this conversation, though, is that Byatt intermingles public statement (both internal to the text and external to it: the surprising fall of the ‘Liberal government’(p.46) did occur, on 21<sup>st</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> June 1895) and both private gossip, shared between characters, and private thoughts *of* characters, shared by third person narrator and reader:

Leslie Skinner spoke in an undertone...  
Violet Grimwith made a clucking sound and  
gathered together those children who were

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<sup>499</sup> John Dixon Hunt, *Greater Perfections*, p.163.

<sup>500</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>501</sup> *Ibid.*, p.165.

listening, leading them away to taste fruit cup. (p.46)

Basil Wellwood saw no one with whom he could discuss the effect of the events on the Stock Exchange. He thought he was amongst a curious clutch of people, all tinsel and fake gilding. (p.46)

Matters of public knowledge—both the fall of the Liberal government and the related trial of Oscar Wilde are discussed in privacy (particularly away from the children, removed by maternal figures as above) and with a focus on the personal angle: ‘Skinner asked Steyning’s impression of the trial. “...His flesh has fallen into folds. He cannot sleep”’ (p.47). Private rows on subjects apparently political (but of course, personal), however, are discussed absolutely publicly:

Basil and Humphry Wellwood had begun to argue...They came across the grass, breathing wrath and rhetoric, pointing decisive fingers into the evening air. (p.57)

The garden’s function as a forum for ordinarily private interactions is clear here—the suggestion of rhetoric confirming an existing feeling of *performance* by all the participants. This is made entirely explicit when attention turns from personal conversations to group wide entertainments—a puppet theatre, set up in the garden that is both unplanned, ‘a surprise gift’, and incredibly elaborately made from ‘fine porcelain...real human hair...a frou-frou of finely stitched skirts’ (pp.45, 49); dancing and music, ‘Geraint on the flute, Charles with the fiddle, and Tom, who does what he can with a tin whistle’(pp.45-46). Artful artlessness is evident here, a kind of construction intended to appear natural; The garden is both the stage for this concept’s practice, and an

intensely important part of the narrative's *mise-en-scene* as the dancing continues:

When they stopped the whole sky went on hissing in a circle, the planets and constellations, the great wheeling moon, the whipping branches of the trees, the blurry flame of all the lanterns. (p.64)

The perspective encompasses the outside of the garden (planets and moon), the trees that stand within it and the 'lanterns' that are entirely human work (but still, as mentioned earlier, linked to the garden through their representations of plants), integrating its influence on multiple levels: a point that is reflected in the marionette performance of *Aschenputtel*, or Cinderella, where a fruiting tree (planted by Cinderella herself) takes the place of the fairy godmother (p.50).

When the human entertainment directly intrudes on the garden, as one of the paper lanterns sets fire to one of the herbaceous borders, the intermingled nature of the domestic and the exterior, the planned and the natural, is made explicit in the contents of the flower beds:

...a mixture of ferns, brackens, fennels and poppies, both the great silky Shirley poppies and self-sown wild ones. It was a very English piece of semi-wildness, at the centre of which was a huge alien clump of pampas-grass...(p.65)

In the same vein, the reaction of the partygoers is emblematic of the same mix: the ever-practical, domestic Violet 'said she would go for a bucket', while calculatedly artless, natural Olive 'said...[w]hen it died down, they should leap over the ashes. It was a real Midsummer bale fire, a propitious

sign.’ Byatt’s wording as usual, is deadpan: “We must jump,” said Olive, charming and beckoning...It was magical. Everyone agreed, it was magical.’ (p.66). There is no magic, of course, only the artful naturalness of the Wellwood party—and the design of their garden is both intended to be artless in its construction and to foster behaviour of this kind.

This performance is, in itself, a nostalgic one: ‘...it was a magical midsummer bonfire, like the ones made by Stone Age people and mediaeval witches on the Downs... Toby Youlgreave could tell them all about bale fires’.( p.65)

The combination of the Midsummer ritual, performed not with real belief, but with a kind of artistic appreciation— ‘It was magical. Everyone agreed, it was magical’ (p.66)— with Toby Youlgreave’s education on the history of the idea portrays a strange mixture of knowingness and nostalgia. In the same way, the etymological change of the house’s name, combines a scholarly understanding of the historical roots of English place-names with a sentimental urge for absolute locality, from ‘the old language of the Weald’ to ‘the local Kentish word’ (p.17). The nostalgia of the Wellwoods and their friends is very apparent, but tempered with a self-consciousness that adds a further dimension: this is no simple wishing for a golden age of simple living with the land, but a complex repossession of ancient rituals in the name of the creation of a new kind of inhabitation.

Many of the rituals that the Wellwoods use the orchard space—and the rest of the garden space—in which to perform are echoes of old, ancient, events, festivals and rituals. The Beltane fire-jumping, the libations poured on the grave of a family member, are particularly notable here. Where once these ceremonies had a literal purpose (p.37), they are now an actual performance, a symbolic and metaphorical return to the ways of past communities, rather than a literal one. Indeed, Philip senses this immediately when Phyllis, one of the older Wellwood offspring, takes him to see the grave of one of the other children: ““We bring her flowers on her



birthday. We pour out libations of apple juice for her. We don't forget her..." ... She bent her head reverently. Philip, without putting it into words, detected play-acting'(p.37). Philip's instinct is, of course, right: Byatt's syntactical choice of 'libation' for the child Phyllis, whose gestures 'belonged to a child younger than she seemed to be' clearly signposts the adult thinking, and staging, behind a family ritual that seems, in the context of late Victorian and early Edwardian funeral and death rites, artless: personal, rather than scripted by social expectation; 'natural', evolved from the family's home and circumstances, rather than artificially formed by a set of moral and religious designs (p.24).<sup>502</sup> Yet the 'play-acting' is clear.

The approach of the Wellwood household as a whole seems intimately related to the principles that lie behind a successful garden: the naturalistic impression based upon a heavy (and for the most part, hidden or ignored) grounding of construction and hard work, both literal and imaginative. Alan Crawford, writing in *Design Issues*, confronts this tricky relationship between the 'Arts and Crafts idea that buildings and objects should express their functional and structural character without pretense, that they should be "honest"', and the more difficult underlying principles and questions.<sup>503</sup> Speaking of an example of Arts and Crafts architecture, Crawford notes that its designer 'meant you to read the front as honest' but adds, acutely, that 'it is complex and contradictory, what children would call "pretend" honesty'.<sup>504</sup>

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<sup>502</sup> Considering the funeral traditions of the late-Victorian and early-Edwardian period, Julie-Marie Strange notes that 'there was a sense in which burial was a public rite and the bereaved were expected to fulfil shared norms of what constituted a 'decent funeral' ... Joseph Barlow Brooks observed, 'However poor one might be, public opinion and personal pride forbade that there should be anything shabby about the clothes, coffin, coaches or meal at the funeral of one's own relatives'; clearly this has not been observed in the case of the Wellwood family's baby. (Julie-Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.116.)

<sup>503</sup> Alan Crawford, 'Ideas and Objects: The Arts and Crafts movement in Britain,' *Design Ideas* 13.1 (1997): 15-27, 16.

<sup>504</sup> *Ibid*, p.16.

It is particularly interesting to consider the position of the orchard in the context of this attempt to describe a kind of constructed 'nature'. It is not functional, in the strictest sense: when Philip picks up fallen apples from the grass, Phyllis tells 'him to watch out for wasps. 'You get all sorts of worms in them, popping their little black heads out at you'' (p.37). The Wellwood orchard is an echo of the Arts and Crafts titans: The Red House, William Morris' first family home, was 'envisaged as a house within an orchard' and 'Morris and [Philip Webb, commissioned by Morris] were delighted to discover a site that could be built on with scarcely any destruction of the trees'.<sup>505</sup> At Todefright, where Philip throws 'several of the hard little apples into the bramble patch' (p.37), the orchard's produce are wasted, used for recreation and not for subsistence, and the same is true in the Red House, where 'the apples...became a kind of legend. There were battles of the apples... a well-aimed apple gave Morris a black eye'.<sup>506</sup> The apples at the Red House symbolised the permeability of the boundaries between house and garden for Morris and his compatriots: 'On hot autumn nights the ripe apples bounced in through open windows from the overloaded branches right into the house'.<sup>507</sup>

The Todefright orchard is 'an unkempt, raggedy place' (p.37) that harks back to the human heritage of the house and gardens by virtue of its very existence; surely at some point the orchard must have functioned *as* an orchard? Instead its purposes are now mixed: it functions as classroom for the younger children and a space for the summer party, roles that, again, suggest the permeability of the boundary between interior and exterior domestic spaces (p.214). This moment of liminality is reflected in the blurring of public and private evidenced by some of the other roles played by the orchard. It is the private burial spot for the stillborn daughter and where the family perform their apparently naturalistic mourning ritual (an aspect of this space to which we will return shortly) (p.37). It is also

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<sup>505</sup> Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), pp.154-55.

<sup>506</sup> *Ibid*, p.155.

<sup>507</sup> *Ibid*.

decorated for the Midsummer party, giving it another public role, and is also the site of many of the tree-houses, the most significant of which (located in the woods surrounding Todefright) is the most secret and private location available to the children (p.92).

So the orchard's range of roles in the novel demonstrates the notion of garden as intermediary space—a point of intersection between inner and outer/public and private/function and recreation. But the orchard, while it may be a hive of Wellwood activity, also creates a more problematic implication—one compounded by its historical forbears. These orchards are no longer orchards, though they retain, with some pride on the part of their owners, the name. Instead of a productive, fruitful space that is cultivated and tended to aid survival, to provide for the garden's human creators, it has become a space between recreation and function, named for purpose and used for anything but. There is almost a reminiscence of the rituals undertaken by Jack Turner in *Thursbitch*; yet the integrity of Turner's rituals lies in their focus on reconnection with the land, rather than the instrumental use of the land in order to create an artificial simulacrum of those reconnecting ceremonies. This is rather like the set dressing of Barthes' 'reality effect', which peoples settings with material objects that are meaningful in their meaninglessness; 'Flaubert's barometer, Michelet's little door finally say nothing but this: *we are the real...*'. The very absence of the signified,' as Barthes terms it, 'to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism'.<sup>508</sup> The ceremonial man-land interactions that, for the community of *Thursbitch*, signify proximity and good faith (however much these beliefs are disrupted), in *The Children's Book* signify nothing other than the 'honest' mode of life of which they are part. Alan Crawford's essay on the Arts and Crafts movement makes the point that 'the primary focus of Arts and Crafts ideas was not so much objects as personal experience', having also noted that the 'real importance of joy in labor in the Arts and

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<sup>508</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect' in *The Rustle of Language* trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp.148.

Crafts...was not that they guided the act of signing, but that they served as myths of personal endeavour'.<sup>509</sup> In this sense the garden, too, is designed not for the sake of the changed land but for the experience of those within it— its creators and its users.

Both the Wellwood orchard and that of Morris' Red House are preserved landscapes, a constructed garden type saved from destruction, and part of a human interaction with the land. But the fact that it no longer maintains the same function, of subsistence and productivity, instead becoming a stage on which a simpler human existence may be enacted or performed, is definitely suggestive. In a sense, the adaptation, rather than destruction, of a pre-existing embedded environment that is part of a locus' history and heritage is a particularly striking example of the Morris's (et al). philosophy of garden design. The focus is not so much on the *geographical* integrity, in the sense of remaining true to a pre-human interference 'version' of the landscape, but on the *historical* integrity of the garden in the context of its identity within its national and local heritage.<sup>510</sup>

Most particularly, it makes it very clear that the purpose of Morris and of the Wellwoods is definitively *not* about forging a closer relationship between man and his environment. If anything, the urge here is to mould the garden, or return it, to a point of cultivation that allows it to become the correct setting, or stage, for the mode of *human* existence that the Arts and Crafts movement espoused. While the urge to reconnect is clearly present, and genuine, it is performative rather than substantive. There is no environmentally political urge, here, but a humanist one: a conviction not regarding the health of the planet but the health, both personal and social, of its humans.

Byatt's Wellwoods construct their garden and world as a way to amalgamate a kind of Arcadian mysticism with a very real nostalgia for a

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<sup>509</sup> Alan Crawford, 'Ideas and Objects,' 20, 18.

<sup>510</sup> It should be clear that *The Children's Book* is dealing with a historical moment that could comfortably be described as pre-environmentalist.

simpler, cleaner historical moment: the way in which the garden is constructed ensures that the perfect world constructed within the garden remains clearly segregated from the rural countryside that surrounds it. While they imagine the one to be intimately related to the other as with Olive's extension of her constructed 'reality' of the Todefright idyll to also include the Downs—in fact they are entirely separate, and the alien nature of the world outside is made clear, first by Tom's effective disappearance into it (p.202) and then ultimately by his suicide in the sea at Dungeness (p.533). Though they purportedly are attempting to live closer, more honestly within the land, in fact they are maintaining the cycle of Arcadian pastoral fantasy that has gone before, by creating a representative space that intends to make room for a kind of creative regrowth. The fact that for the Fabians of *The Children's Book*, the location of this Arcadia is, quite literally, their own back garden, signals again the tendency toward the amalgamation and 'conversion of conventional pastoral into a localised dream': a tendency that, while apparently celebrating the opportunities for creative freedom available in the rural environments it espouses, also insists upon ignoring inconvenient truths about those same places. Terry Gifford confronts a similar set of questions as he describes a text which inhabits the mode of the 'idealised pastoral' as:

...complacent and comforting  
representations of nature that strategically  
omit any sense of elements that might be  
counter to this positive image.<sup>511</sup>

This is, of course, what Olive attempts with both her stories and with her house and garden: within her own spaces, textual and literal, she chooses to create environments that 'fit' with her needs at the time of creation. The stories, both those that she publishes, those that she writes for her own children, and those that she maintains only internally, *are* unsettling and difficult but place her insecurities and dangers within one of the spaces

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<sup>511</sup> Terry Gifford, 'Pastoral'.

that she controls: ‘She had packed it [her past] away in what she saw in her mind as a roped parcel, in oiled silk, with red wax seals on the knots, which a woman like and unlike herself carried perpetually over a windswept moor’ (p.84).<sup>512</sup>, As Byatt’s narrator ominously notes, ‘She could not, and did not, imagine any of the inhabitants of the walled garden wanting to leave it...though her stories knew better. And she had to ignore a great deal, in order to persist in her calm...’ (p.301)

Olive Wellwood, then, works hard to maintain a reality that is separated from the *actual* reality that surrounds it. The two ‘realities’ in that sentence, clumsy as they may be, clearly denote the issue at the heart of garden creation; the Wellwood garden *is* a physical reality, but one expressly designed (for the most part, by Olive herself) to avoid the struggles of the equally real world beyond its boundaries:

In weak moments she thought of her garden as the fairytale palace the prince, or princess, must not leave on pains of bleak disaster. They were inside a firewall, outside which grim goblins mopped and mowed. (p.301)

John Dixon Hunt conceptualises this principle by arguing for the garden as a site of ‘virtual reality’: ‘...[t]here is the palpable haptic place, smelling, sounding, catching the eye...; then there is also the sense of an invented or special place’.<sup>513</sup> Olive, the writer of children’s stories, is very aware of the constructed nature of the garden and the way of life that it represents. ‘She had,’ Byatt’s narrator notes, ‘constructed her own good picture of the Todefright family...This she had made, as surely as she

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<sup>512</sup> Olive herself recognises the need for both the unsettling and its limit, ‘you could make a truly eerie tale for children, but you must be careful, she knew, not to overstep some limit of the bearable’(p.83); some of the tales she does not tell are distinctly frightening. Others are clearly merely too personal, ‘These things were not spoken of, or written about’ (p.142), though her internal narrative uses much the same tone (p.83) as that of the tales Byatt actually includes in the novel (p.303), despite being designated outright as ‘not a story’(p.84).

<sup>513</sup> John Dixon Hunt, *Greater Perfections*, p.37.

made the worlds of fairytale and adventure' (p.301). She has cemented this idea of a dual garden, virtual and physical together, within the family's sense of its own identity; the garden, like the house, contains some of the doorways between the real world and Olive's imagined ones for the children, 'Dorothy's alter ego, a stalwart child called Peggy, had found a wooden door, with iron bolts, in the root system of the apple tree in the orchard' (p.80). The value placed on one single tree is on the 'honest' manufactured object (the tree deliberately planted in a particular place); the tree as a natural living thing (covered in other plants and brambles 'snaking in from the wilds and in places smothering everything (p.37)); the tree as a part of the garden's network of symbolic signs, stating Arts and Crafts aesthetics and Fabian social permissiveness (particularly the 'odd structures ...made from planks and bits of rope...old tree houses'(p.37), denoting play and children in plain sight), and the tree as part of Olive's created 'other world', which overlays Todefright altogether: 'All of them, from Florian to Olive herself, walked about the house and garden, the shrubbery and the orchard, the stables and the wood, with an awareness that things had invisible as well as visible forms' (p.81).

Olive imagines that this 'firewall' of the garden, imaginative and physical separation, is adequate defence against the intrusion of reality, since it is not only fairytale goblins that it defends against: Olive and her sister Violet have come from destitution, from industrial wasteland, and are painfully aware of the disjunction between their present and their past. 'She and Violet alone,' we are told, 'knew that both worlds were constructed against and despite the pinched life of ash pits, cinders, rumbling subterranean horrors and black dust settling everywhere' (p.301). The England beyond the palace of the Todefright garden is, Olive is only too keenly aware, a very different place from the one that she has cultivated within. She has turned inwards, fearing the permeability of the boundary between the garden and what lies beyond it. The dangerous world that Olive knows too well is placed into her fantasies, while she imprints Gifford's ideal of

‘fertility, resiliences, beauty and unthreatened stability’ onto her physical surroundings.

As Byatt’s narrator so baldly delineates here, pastoral idealism is a dangerous and politically problematic temptation; to, in Terry Gifford’s terms, ‘strategically omit’ those aspects of the world that oppose the idyll, can, obviously, mean the denial of all manner of evils, from political issues to environmental disasters. In horticultural terms, to make the boundary between the garden and the outside *too* effective means a kind of wilful ignorance regarding the world beyond, and also, notably, renders the ‘honest’ garden meaningless without its connected referent. Indeed, the ‘reality effect’ of the ways Olive and her family use the garden is not as innocent as I suggested that it could be before; intended, in their performance, to create a holistic matrix signifying a general honest mode of dwelling, they in fact empty out—in the manner of the Barthesian principle of myth that I discussed in Chapter Two—the meaning that once filled them. The noble social goals of the Morrisian garden, with its insistence on return to simpler, less industrial dwelling and (of course) a return to the ethics of proximity have been turned to the purpose of the individual, and a purpose designed to obscure the unpalatable, rather than to celebrate the remaining beautiful.<sup>514</sup>

To indulge a brief moment of fancy here, it would be fair to suggest, I think, that William Morris would have been appalled by the suggestion that this was the ultimate stretch of the philosophies that he espoused: indeed, Morris saw the nostalgic recidivism of works of his like *News from Nowhere* not as a yearning for a return ‘home’ but as a call for seismic social shifts.<sup>515</sup> It is not a stretch to say that the Arts and Crafts world he

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<sup>514</sup> It should be made clear at this point that I am not suggesting that Morris himself is a figure of total social nobility; it is noted repeatedly (see Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris*) that Morris’ social ideals were often ignored in his treatment of his own workers. Undoubtedly the classic tension between the ideological goal and the practical reality cost him dearly.

<sup>515</sup> Jane Morris claimed that *News from Nowhere* was ‘a picture of what [Morris] considers likely to take place later on, when Socialism shall have taken root’. Jane Morris



inhabited and insisted upon was directly opposed to the changes in the British countryside (and society) that can be attributed comfortably to the Industrial Revolution, but in its diffusion, his left-wing principles became rather diluted by the more tempting (and accessible) ideas of recouping a lost innocence in landscape and livelihood. Indeed, Byatt's narrator continues to say that, 'They wanted to go back to the earth, to the running rivers and full fields and cottage gardens and twining honeysuckle of Morris's *Nowhere*' (p.391); nostalgia, land (both wild and domestic) and William Morris are explicitly linked. In the first half of this chapter I discussed the ways in which Byatt's depiction of the Wellwoods' gardens relates to the work and philosophies of William Morris, and confronts some of the ethical limitations of the Morris & Co. approach. Now, Morris' utopian and socialist Romance, *News from Nowhere*, is referenced directly. Fiona MacCarthy describes *News from Nowhere* as one of 'Morris's dream narratives',<sup>516</sup> and links some of the principles that it describes to the ideas of the earlier 'Young England' movement, whose 'ideas Morris worked on and developed'.<sup>517</sup> Most pertinently for this chapter, MacCarthy correlates the dreams of *News from Nowhere* with the Young England set's desire 'to extract from medieval England those elements from which the Victorian age could learn'.<sup>518</sup>

*News from Nowhere*, in its simplest form, is a lengthy prose fantasy documenting the discoveries of 'William Guest' in a utopian pastoral idyll (much of the plot, such as it is, centres around pastoral pursuits such as 'hay-harvest').<sup>519</sup> Fiona MacCarthy argues that its location 'is and is not England'.<sup>520</sup> For Morris this was an optimistic view of the possible future; more particularly for the purposes of this chapter, it is a dream of a kind of neo-ruralism, a wiping clean of the landscape of the heavily populated and

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to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, quoted in David Leopold's 'Introduction' to *News from Nowhere*. xxvii

<sup>516</sup> Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris*, p.584.

<sup>517</sup> *Ibid*, p.63.

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>519</sup> William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.177.

<sup>520</sup> Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris*, p.585.

industrialised Thames and the grim, dirty factory cities of the North. In this sense, *News from Nowhere* is a view of a future England that is also actively, even joyfully regressive: as MacCarthy puts it, ‘the countryside has been *reclaimed* from industrial squalor and pollution’.<sup>521</sup> This sense of *regaining, repossessing*, is echoed in the text of *News from Nowhere* itself:

The soap-works with their smoke-vomiting chimneys were gone; the engineer's works gone; the lead-works gone; and no sound of riveting and hammering came down the west wind from Thorneycroft's. [...] Behind the houses, I could see great trees rising, mostly planes, and looking down the water there were the reaches towards Putney almost as if they were a lake with a forest shore, so thick were the big trees...<sup>522</sup>

That *News from Nowhere* is referenced in *The Children's Book* explicitly in relation to a yearning for a different kind of physical environment makes this connection with Morris' work once more extremely important in the context of this chapter. The nostalgia that Byatt describes, a nostalgia which simultaneously wishes for advancement into a brighter future and for regression to a simpler time, is also at the heart of Morris' work: that Byatt simply refers to ‘Morris's Nowhere’ seems a dry reminder that the world yearned for by the Edwardians (a world that should exist about now, in the prophesies of *News from Nowhere*: a bridge across the Thames was put in ‘...in 2003’) really had no basis in reality.<sup>523</sup>

It should also be noted that for Byatt's Wellwoods, as for Morris himself, the concern is not for the survival of the earth as an environmental principle but as an aesthetic one. As Fiona MacCarthy notes, ‘Morris

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<sup>521</sup> Ibid.

<sup>522</sup> William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, pp.7-8.

<sup>523</sup> Ibid, p.8.

writes as a man acutely conscious of the beauty of the earth, both inherent and manmade’, continuing to describe Morris as ‘a ferocious...protester against the despoliation of the landscape’.<sup>524</sup> Tellingly, though, MacCarthy continues to describe Morris as ‘a critic of what he came to see as the social iniquities behind that despoliation’; it is not the earth’s fate that concerns Morris here, but of those who live within it.<sup>525</sup>

From an ecocritical perspective, there are some key points about the Wellwood garden that need to be addressed. It should be clear that the claims towards a simpler living, surrounded by items constructed from natural materials and made by human hands, are not based in environmental concerns but in anthropocentric ones: changes to the world—the urge to, in Byatt’s words, ‘go back to the earth, to the running rivers and full fields and cottage gardens’ (p.391)—are based not on the need to preserve the *world*, but to preserve (or refind) a state of existence within it. The garden at the heart of *The Children’s Book* is a setting in which this way of life may theoretically be arranged; a stage on which a simpler mode of being may apparently be rediscovered.

The nostalgia that informs the construction of these gardens, then, is not a nostalgia for a bygone prehuman era: this is no *Walden*, and the Arts and Crafts focus in the garden is not a tabula rasa. Here we see the distinction between William Morris and the Rousseauian approach, as Christopher Thacker suggests (referencing William Robinson’s principles particularly); ‘These ideas go back, of course, to Rousseau, advocate of an early form of ‘wild’ gardening... of ‘herborising’—we might call it ‘nature study’—not in gardens, but in the countryside, as a means of leaving the social world and entering the world of nature’.<sup>526</sup> Morris and Robinson, who both advocate the garden approach most particularly, instead formulate an approach to wild gardens that never deny their human construction; they are a celebration of a simple age, but a simpler *human*

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<sup>524</sup> Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris*, p.143.

<sup>525</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>526</sup> Christopher Thacker, *The History of Gardens*, p.279.

age. In fact, it is perhaps less a *nostalgia*, that is a longing for a lost home, but solastalgia, a human condition described first by Glenn Albrecht et al thus:

...solastalgia refers to the pain or distress caused by the loss of, or inability to derive, solace connected to the negatively perceived state of one's home environment. Solastalgia exists when there is the lived experience of the physical desolation of home.<sup>527</sup>

This reflects the anthropocentric element of the Arts and Crafts resistance to the industrialisation of the British countryside at its most overt, but where Albrecht explicitly links the condition to 'profound environmental change', Morris and his counterparts are more inclined to blame the changes in society for creating aesthetic, rather than ecological, destruction. The garden is intended to right (in some small way) *this* wrong, rather than a wider environmental threat; he is concerned with the loss of the particulars of the British countryside, rather than the possibility (now a reality) of an even more fundamental threat to home. Indeed, as I mentioned earlier, Morris believes it to be important for gardens to *not* imitate the wider, greater, 'wildness of Nature': the ideal garden 'should in fact,' Morris continues, 'look like part of a house'; its purpose is to recover the natural within the miniature sphere of the domestic.<sup>528</sup>

In *The Children's Book*, however, Byatt depicts the garden not only as an example of the Arts and Crafts type, but as the almost inevitable corruption of it into a deeply dangerous myth of honesty and perceived proximity that elides just as much as the verbal 'sail' of Goose's stories and professor Richard's vision of the rejuvenating authenticity of folktale and island life in *Orkney*. In this sense the garden of *The Children's Book* is a physical

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<sup>527</sup> Glenn Albrecht et al, 'Solastalgia: the distress caused by environmental change,' *Australasian Psychology* 15 (2007): 95-98, 96.

<sup>528</sup> William Morris, 'Making the Best of It,' p.128.

version of these stories' textual attempts to shape the landscape to individual purpose, even under the guise of attempting greater proximity to the place itself.

I have demonstrated the manner in which *The Children's Book* utilises its garden setting within its late nineteenth century and early twentieth century context; in the second half of this chapter I will turn to consider the manner in which that garden functions as part of a twenty-first century novel, and how it contends with the tensions and uncertainties that I have identified as post-millennial concerns.

## 2: *'Backwards and Forwards, Both': The Post-Millennial Nostalgia of The Children's Book*

In the first section of this chapter I examined the central garden of *The Children's Book* within the confines of the historical moment that the novel depicts. I described the manner in which the novel employs the aesthetic horticultural aims of the Arts and Crafts movement in order to interrogate the manner in which the design principles reflect ethical and social tensions. I focussed on the manner in which the creation of the garden can erase or elide in its 'virtual' capacity while still claiming to reinstate or reinforce aspects of the surrounding countryside in its physical components; I concluded by suggesting that the garden functions much like the storytelling principles that I have examined in prior chapters, covering the existing land with a claim to represent and thus depict, while simultaneously obscuring the original source (that is, apparently, being revealed). In this section I will consider the manner in which *The Children's Book* fits within the matrix of texts that I have thus far constructed, focussing particularly on the ways in which the novel attends to its twenty-first century contexts.

*The Children's Book* has been claimed by scholars as a 'Neo-Victorian' text; in fact, the novel begins (with characteristic precision) on the 19<sup>th</sup> June 1895, but finishes in 1919, weighting its chronology heavily on the Edwardian side of Victoria's death in 1901.<sup>529</sup> Siân Harris calls it 'an imposing socio-historical chronicle of the *fin-de-siècle* condition, and a

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<sup>529</sup> Louisa Hadley explicitly places *The Children's Book* into the neo-Victorian genre in *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.2; as does Marie-Luise Kohlke in her chapter, 'Gothicizing History: Traumatic Doubling, Repetition, and Return in Recent British Neo-Victorian Fiction' in *Twenty-First-Century British Fiction*, ed. Bianca Leggett & Tony Venezia (Canterbury: Basingstoke, 2015), 61-81. The purpose of this thesis is not to consider the sociocultural distinctions of the *fin-de-siècle*, but the difference between the two is, as Byatt states in the novel itself, marked: 'The sempiternal Queen was gone, in all her manifestations...[t]he new King was an elderly womaniser, genial and unhealthy' (p.391). This focus on *The Children's Book's* Victorian characteristics rather suggests that there is a temptation to place the novel within a canon that it only partially contends with.

darkly imaginative insight into the creation (as well as the consequences) of art and literature’, firmly placing it as a novel dealing with a particularly historical moment, while simultaneously suggesting its metafictional aspects.<sup>530</sup> It is impossible to talk about a novel that is both historical—in the sense that it addresses as its most obvious subject a temporal moment separated from that of its creation—and engaged in grappling with questions regarding art, and narrative in particular, without mentioning Linda Hutcheon’s definitive examination of the postmodernist phenomenon of the ‘historiographic metafiction’: that is, ‘those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages’.<sup>531</sup> Although it should be clear by this point in this thesis that I am suggesting a move well beyond the postmodern for fiction, Hutcheon’s definition of a particular kind of novel that destabilises our comfortable definitions of ‘history’ and ‘fiction’, purporting to be involved in some way with both while insisting on their impossibility in the same breath, still holds water. *The Children’s Book*, which engages with the realities of fictionalising the ‘real’ while at the same time performing exactly the same formal move, bears many similarities to the texts at the heart of Hutcheon’s essay: indeed, many of Byatt’s earlier novels are widely considered to be shining exemplars of the type of formal writing that Hutcheon describes.

I am comfortable with the principle that *The Children’s Book* bears many resemblances to Hutcheon’s historiographic metafictions. Byatt’s career has spanned the period between the late postmodern (now a viable moment for historical fiction in its own right) and the post-millennial world that this thesis is examining. In some respects her work has shifted with the times; in others, Byatt maintains a strong sense of artistic identity from text to text: there are features that can be traced throughout her oeuvre. Sian Harris, for example, notes that ‘[b]y integrating her writer-protagonists so

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<sup>530</sup> Sian Harris, ‘Imagine. Investigate. Intervene?: A consideration of feminist intent and metafictional invention in the historical fictions of A. S. Byatt and Marina Warner’ in *The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction*, ed. Katherine Cooper & Emma Short (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp.171-188, pp.171-2.

<sup>531</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1988), p.5.

thoroughly among their real contemporaries, Byatt manages to authenticate and legitimize their quasi-historical status. There is a chameleon quality to her writing that allows her to skilfully, almost seamlessly, graft her fictions onto the facts of history', while noting that '*Possession* (1990) incorporates a literary canon of invention and intertextuality'<sup>532</sup>. *The Children's Book's* position as a knowingly self-conscious historical narrative is cemented, in my mind, by its lengthy excursions into aspects of the historical moment: in his review of *The Children's Book* for the *London Review of Books*, James Wood notes that, 'a peculiar kind of postmodern 19<sup>th</sup>-century omniscience is one of the elements of Byatt's knowingly archival Victorian-and Edwardianism (she has used the phrase 'self-conscious realism')'.<sup>533</sup> In this sense, Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction lives on; yet I am not convinced that this is the whole story of *The Children's Book*.

The point of the postmodern attention to the destabilisation of the 'notoriously porous genres' of history and fiction is based on an intention to disrupt the grand narratives that inform both general and literary history; there is certainly an element of this insistence on the disruption of assumptive certainty in *The Children's Book*.<sup>534</sup> But there is little in Byatt's novel to disrupt overtly the grand narratives of the fin-de-siecle, beyond her classic mixing of characters based on the real people whose names they bear and those who are pure invention: we remain within the province of the creative middle classes and political activists; we are consistently reminded of the literary and aesthetic importance of the works they create, even while we are also prompted to recognise the personal cost of the endeavour. Where the disruptive influence remains, however, is in the novel's insistence on reminding the reader *when* they are. Hutcheon does argue that '[p]ostmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or to represent the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to

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<sup>532</sup> Siân Harris, 'Imagine. Investigate. Intervene?,' pp.171, 174.

<sup>533</sup> James Wood, 'Bristling with Diligence,' *London Review of Books* 31.19 (2009): 6-8. Web: full website details given in bibliography.

<sup>534</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p.107.



the present' but she suggests that this tendency is 'to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological'; in the case of *The Children's Book*, however, I consider that its 'opening up to the present' of the history is rather intended to open up the present, than to destabilise the past.<sup>535</sup>

This is subtly different, I would argue, from the historiographic metafictional insistence on reminding the reader of the *fictional* nature of their textual surroundings and of the unsteady nature of the history that informs them. The former *requires* the latter, of course, in that reminding the reader of their own historical moment requires a reminder of the novel-being-a-novel, but the focus is not on its fictional distance from reality, but on its chronological distance. This is a disruption of the suspension of chronological awareness, rather than a disruption of the suspension of awareness of fictiveness. The latter disruption, I might suggest, is almost taken for granted by the moment of the post-millennial.<sup>536</sup> *The Children's Book*, then, is saturated with references that simultaneously evoke the internal time period of the novel while also consistently drawing the reader's attention to their own distance from it. The novel's consistently shifting perspective, which changes between character-focalizations and omniscient third-person observation almost seamlessly, prevents the reader from settling too comfortably into the novel; a tendency that is particularly noticeable due to the often panopticon-like multiple examinations of the same scene from different perspectives.<sup>537</sup> Byatt will not allow her audience to forget that they are twenty-first century readers being shown a post-Victorian Edwardian world.<sup>538</sup>

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<sup>535</sup> Ibid, p.110.

<sup>536</sup> I have suggested already that some of the more striking characteristics of the postmodern approach are retained within the general character of the twenty-first century's literary tendencies; in many cases, however, these once revolutionary tactics

<sup>537</sup> This is particularly noticeable when Byatt shifts without narrative break from the internal thoughts of one character to another's: '...said Dorothy, speaking out what had been going around in her mind for some hours...Philip was silent. Things turned over in his mind. He frowned...' (p.28). See below for notes on James Wood's concerns regarding this narrative device.

<sup>538</sup> In the review quoted above, James Wood criticises this tendency of Byatt's to maintain a strong sense of the omniscient narrator, noting that 'Of course, this particular authorial examiner has always insisted on talking over her characters' (p.6).

I mentioned the excursions taken throughout the novel into aspects of the history and social context of the period: distance, in this way, is cleared between reader and characters, author firmly ensuring that there is no sense of uncertainty regarding their- and our- relative positions. Yet this is not to suggest that Byatt argues for a complete disconnection between the messages of the novel and its readers: this is not a novel that is designed to show off a past world in isolation. Indeed, the most prominent of these shifts into a kind of pedagogical essay, which categorically emphasises the dependence of the Edwardian moment of the novel on its position between chronological bookends. In other words, it is conscious that the significance of the novel's moment is related to both its past and its present. Situated at the start of the third section, 'The Silver Age', this impromptu lecture is comprised of a detailed dissection of the pre-World War European consciousness, in a four page essay that signifies a vast leap in the narrative from the avowedly particular and personal to the emphatically general (pp.391-397). 'Backwards and forwards, both,' it begins, noting with typical Byatt brevity the strange position of the Edwardians between the overwhelming presence of the Victorians and the rapid onset of technology (p.391). Byatt is blunt in her descriptions of the Edwardian consciousness of their own liminal position: 'It was a new time, not a young time. Skittishly, it cast off the moral anguish and human responsibility of the Victorian sages' (p.391). Yet if there is a strong sense of a conscious rejection of the recent past, there is an even stronger nostalgic desire for a historical moment that is out of reach—if it ever existed at all:

They looked back. They stared and glared backwards, in an intense, sometimes purposeful nostalgia for an imagined Golden Age... They want to go back to the earth, to the running rivers and full fields and cottage gardens and twining honeysuckle of Morris's Nowhere. (p.391)

This is, of course, highly reminiscent of Raymond Williams' depiction of the 'escalator' which takes us back through history, identifying the repeated assertions of a myriad Golden Ages, all '[j]ust back, we can see, over the last hill'.<sup>539</sup> As I mentioned in the first half of this chapter, this focussed nostalgia on an 'imagined' perfect moment of culture and nature in tandem is a deeply-held tenet of the Arts and Crafts movement, and one that is intimately related to the manner in which the Wellwood family's garden functions as a place. Yet though Byatt identifies this as a tendency of the historical moment she is describing (that 'they' is the social group she keeps at the novel's centre), it is evident from Williams' approach that these fin-de-siecle groups are not alone in this nostalgia. Williams continues to suggest that:

...what seems an old order, a 'traditional' society, keeps appearing, reappearing, at bewilderingly various dates: in practice as an idea, to some extent based in experience, against which contemporary change can be measured.<sup>540</sup>

Byatt, too, describes the Edwardian age with great focus on how the 'idea' Williams describes appears within it; yet through carefully (self-consciously) placed slippages of her tenses, she trenchantly forces her twenty-first century readers to note the clear similarities between the nostalgia of her Fabians and our own yearning for a past moment:

They did love the Earth ... Ford Madox Ford wrote movingly about digging the bones of a buried Viking out of the cliff at Beachy Head. Ford's bones in the cliff are like the human bones in Kipling;s chalk... They *are*

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<sup>539</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, p.9.

<sup>540</sup> *Ibid*, p.35.

a dream of humans as part of the natural  
cycle, *as they no longer seem to be.*  
(emphasis mine) (pp.391-92)

She may be discussing the Edwardians, but she does not couch her statement about the role of humankind in the ‘natural cycle’ in the past tense that she has employed to describe the historical moment that is ostensibly her focus. The concern in the narrative voice is as twenty-first century as it is post-Victorian; more so, in fact, because she has spent so much of the novel consciously reminding us that *we*, outside the pages, are not Edwardian, or post-Victorian. While the pedagogical discussion of the Edwardian psyche at the start of ‘The Silver Age’ is deliberately distinct from the character driven narratives of the rest of the novel, there are moments throughout where Byatt deliberately interleaves the particular with the general; describing, for example, Julian Cain’s experience of the Grande Exhibition Universelle in 1900—‘At the Exposition he discovered a European self...He found his velvet jacket sitting more sharply on his shoulders. He thought he might buy new shoes’—before immediately diverting into a discussion of the work around him: ‘Siegfried Bing, from Hamburg, had introduced Japanese art to French connoisseurs...His pavilion was a make-believe small mansion. It was later transported to Copenhagen’ (p.253). That ‘later’ is only ‘later’ to the reader; to Julian, whose consciousness we have inhabited only lines before, that ‘later’ is still in the future.

In this fashion Byatt consistently reminds the reader of their own position: a conceit that Isobel Armstrong, writing in response to James Wood’s largely critical review of *The Children’s Book* in the *LRB* describes by stating that, ‘This is not a postmodern novel as Wood suggests, but a major experiment in writing from the *outside*’ (emphasis mine).<sup>541</sup> Not only is the novel written ‘from the outside’, but it insists on the reader maintaining

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<sup>541</sup> Isobel Armstrong, ‘Letter,’ in *London Review of Books* 31.20 (2009). Web: full website details in bibliography. p.22.

their own sense of exteriority.<sup>542</sup> Interestingly, this narrative tendency, which Wood claims is part of ‘a familiar Byattian world, in which the author dances, with leaden slippers, around the thought-sleep of her characters’ is rigorously defended by Isobel Armstrong in a responding letter in the same journal. Armstrong continues to suggest, ‘The opposite of the puppet-master [an image from the novel that Wood accuses Byatt of, essentially, using as a metaphor for her own contrived role in the narrative] is the potter, shaping material self-evidently from the outside’. The reader, like the observer of the potter’s finished object, does not climb inside it, but is continuously aware of their own exterior position.

All of this preamble is intended to demonstrate that when we consider the gardens within Byatt’s text, we must do so with the understanding that Byatt intends us to envision them from our own moment; so much so, in fact, that she deliberately removes the temptation to do otherwise. Examining the garden of the Wellwoods from a contemporary perspective, then, must entail examining Byatt’s depiction of an insistently knowingly twenty-first century representation of the Arts and Crafts garden. In this sense, my aim in this section of my thesis is to examine the major themes and implications of Byatt’s depictions of the Todefright garden as they apply to our contemporary relationship with our landscape, endeavouring to demonstrate the relationship between our current position and the ecocritical questions and concerns raised in the first half of this chapter. I will particularly focus on the persistent question of nostalgia, and the role of the garden as a representative intersection between people and their surroundings. It is not difficult to see the focus on nostalgia that Byatt presents in *The Children’s Book*. For one thing, as I noted earlier, the novel’s omniscient narrator spends approximately six and a half pages (pp.391-7) discussing the proclivity of the Edwardian intellectual ‘set’ for a particular type of nostalgic impulse; *The Children’s Book’s*

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<sup>542</sup> Ibid.

preoccupation with the consequences and resonances of nostalgia is explicitly and repeatedly marked.

In the context of this chapter, the most important of these ‘things’ that Byatt’s Edwardians want to ‘go back to, to retrieve, to reinhabit’, must be related to the relationship between people and their surroundings (p.391). If the Edwardians and Victorians as described in *The Children’s Book* were yearning for a simplicity that they connected with aspects of the medieval period— MacCarthy identifies some of these as ‘a small-scale quasi-monastic system of community; the return to the country; principles of shared work and work-as-holiday...; architecture as the measure of civilisation and the means by which the people reconnected themselves with the past’<sup>543</sup>— then what is the corresponding site of twenty-first century nostalgia? Is this longing for a particular historical moment? Or, like Byatt suggests, for an ‘imagined’ time? The answer, of course, is that it is a little of both. The ‘imagined Golden Age’ of Byatt’s Edwardians is firmly based on visions of a medieval England; a misty and romanticised medieval England, to be sure, but nonetheless, a recognisable moment in history. But the historical moment that is influencing contemporary nostalgia is that of William Morris and his counterparts: the cultural shift back in the direction of the Arts and Crafts approach to gardens and interior design, in particular, has been notable.

This is particularly evident in American and British public forums, where questions of the rise of, for want of a better current term, New Ruralism have been prevalent for much of the post-millennial decades. Writing in *The Guardian* in 2012, Paula Coccozza states that,

‘Everywhere you look, the countryside has crept into cities and towns – the way we shop, eat, read, dress, decorate our homes, spend our time. Street food is sold out of

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<sup>543</sup> Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris*, p.63.

revamped agricultural trucks, or from village-delivery style bicycles. City-dwellers are booking into a growing number of courses on rural life; urban bees and chickens are commonplace (though do keep up: ducks are where it's at now).<sup>544</sup>

The link to Morris and his colleagues can be felt in the section of the article discussing home interiors:

‘Not surprisingly, the most exalted woods in current design are not the exotics but humble pine and oak. Earthenware, with its coarser texture, is preferred to porcelain. Rushwork, basketwork, anything woven, raffia and wool, the sorts of tufty stuff your fingers bump and stumble over.’<sup>545</sup>

Cocozza’s tone is doubtful, in part because her article quite clearly identifies the class-based nature of the turn toward a New Ruralism.<sup>546</sup> The way in which this turn is manifested in contemporary aesthetics in both garden and interior design is also relentlessly capitalist; as Cocozza points

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<sup>544</sup> Paula Cocozza, ‘The new ruralism: how the pastoral idyll is taking over our cities,’ *The Guardian*, 18 November 2012. Web: full website details given in bibliography.

<sup>545</sup> Ibid.

<sup>546</sup> Cocozza references a text message suggesting a ‘country supper’ between then-Prime Minister David Cameron and former *News of the World* editor Rebekah Brooks. The involvement of both in the ‘Chipping Norton set’, a group of influential political and media figures all with country homes around the small Oxfordshire town, was a particularly remarked-upon aspect of the 2012 Leveson Enquiry into media ethics (see also Daniel Boffey’s article, ‘David Cameron put on the spot by cosy text messages to Rebekah Brooks’ in *The Observer*, 4 Nov. 2012) The ‘country supper’ reference is used by Cocozza to point out the clear link between cosy middle-class affluence and the incipient pastoralism she describes. It is fair, I think, to suggest that the ‘country supper’ image is not only New Ruralist but heavily nostalgic for exactly the sanitised kind of rural pursuit I have been discussing throughout this work: Robert Macfarlane, too, ‘charges [David Cameron] with “encouraging a cosy, cupcakeified, Hunter-wellied vision of the rural landscape with which the brutalities of austerity politics can usually be softened and foliated”’ (Jilly Luke and Robert Macfarlane, ‘Into the Wild’).

out, 'It seems a little sad that, for many, the most instinctive way to access the best of the countryside is as consumers; as if what we are really buying into is a sort of processed pastoral'.<sup>547</sup> This criticism, valid or not, does rather make the same point that Byatt's entire novel makes about the apparently pastoral yearnings of the Wellwoods and their circle: it is only good to be close to the earth, to do a solid day's work on the land, when appropriate sanitation is available—and when certain aspects of cultured civilisation are upheld. As Coccozza rather drily notes, 'It is a supremely clean way of getting a bit of rural life under your fingernails'.<sup>548</sup>

Whether one shares Coccozza's concerns about this 'new ruralism', its existence is evident. Indeed, the term New Ruralism has been part of cultural geographic dialogues for an extended period, having been 'coined as an obvious phrase', he claims, by Alexander R. Cuthbert in 1997.<sup>549</sup> As Joan Ramon Resina notes, the opposition between country and city is longstanding, pointing out that, 'Renewed interest in non urban spaces... is in all probability a phase in the long history of this dialectical pair [urban/rural]'.<sup>550</sup> For Resina, too, 'the new ruralism is not a new modality of nostalgia for a lost paradise, but a turn in the history of this dialectical pair brought about by large-scale processes...'.<sup>551</sup> Cuthbert uses the term particularly to refer to the effects of tourist activity on already rural areas, particularly in the developing world, defining the New Ruralism as 'the effect of global tourism on cultural production and built form in rural areas, particularly where first-world travellers descend on the tribal or feudal societies of the developing world and the rural areas of their own'.<sup>552</sup> When, however, he lays out the 'implications [of his 'New Ruralism'] for built form',<sup>553</sup> some of his points show a clear correspondence to the points

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<sup>547</sup> Paula Coccozza, 'The new ruralism'.

<sup>548</sup> Ibid.

<sup>549</sup> Alexander R. Cuthbert, *The Form of Cities: Political Economy and Urban Design*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p.123.

<sup>550</sup> Joan Ramon Resina, 'Introduction: The Modern Rural' in *The New Ruralism: An Epistemology of Transformed Space*, ed. Joan Ramon Resina & William R. Viestenz (Madrid: Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2012. p.7

<sup>551</sup> Ibid, p.7.

<sup>552</sup> Alexander R. Cuthbert, *The Form of Cities*, p.123.

<sup>553</sup> Ibid, p.124.



I have already made, and those cultural phenomena identified so vividly by Paula Cocozza.

In particular:

4. The conscious exploitation of the cultural uniqueness of place as a revenue-raising activity (landscape, traditions, architecture, flora and fauna, etc.).

5. The nostalgic use of traditional and symbolic forms as an architectural...design vocabulary.

6. The expansion of the term 'heritage' to cover entire local environments and their lifestyle.<sup>554</sup>

What Cuthbert's definition fails to take into account is that the effects of a nostalgic 'ruralising' urge are even more striking when applied to the ways in which people live—particularly on how they 'dwell', in the Heideggerian sense—in their own places. Turning for a brief moment to America, Brett Wallach identifies this nostalgia in the still-apparent yearning for 'the family farm', noting that, 'Too much work, too little reward, and urban alternatives. Those are the things that killed the family farm... Still, Americans regret its passing. The proof is that developers can still make a lot of money promising a more comfortable version of what Eugene Hilgard once called "the native values of rural life"'.<sup>555</sup> Wallach continues to identify the points about the New Ruralist environment that

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<sup>554</sup> Ibid, p.124.

<sup>555</sup> Brett Wallach, 'Designing the American Utopia: Reflections' in *The Making of the American Landscape*, ed. Michael P. Conzen, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2010), pp.451-66, p.455-456.

note not a return to an old way of life, but a refashioning of it to suit both the twenty-first century and the Romantic vision of a lost simplicity:

This, however, is not the rural America where men farmed, mined, and logged. This is a landscape where we have so mastered nature...that we can relax and enjoy the view. The wilderness no longer howls; it purrs. We may hunt or fish, but not for food. We do it for the experience of what some enthusiasts have called “Absolute Unitary Being”.<sup>556</sup>

The image of dwelling—of inhabiting, to use Ingold’s term—within, not on the surface of, the environment that surrounds one is clearly the aim, here; yet the function is lost. The Arts and Crafts gardens of Byatt’s Wellwoods, full of their twisty old apple trees and local flowers, are stages, nothing more; in the same way, Coccozza’s ‘village style delivery bikes’ and ‘urban bees and chickens’ may perform a function, but they do so as part of their staging role, rather than through actual necessity. If this sounds dismissive of the many valuable effects that a return to the countryside can have—and indeed, far be it from me to suggest that a returning emphasis on green spaces and local flora and fauna is a bad thing, by any means—then it perhaps should not. This discussion resonates, it should be clear, with the tensions and problems that I have engaged with throughout my work; the concurrent possibility of elucidation and deletion presented by attempts to represent—either in text or in gardens—the ‘true’ nature of the land-man relation.

*The Children’s Book* is, evidently, clear about the danger of erasure inherent in the aesthetic tendencies characterised by the garden of the Wellwoods; yet Byatt’s narrator is also sympathetic to its attempts. They

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<sup>556</sup> Ibid, p.462.

can be both sceptical of the violence of the Edwardian nostalgia while still sharing their rueful fears about the loss of a human-nature connection (p.392). ‘They did,’ she points out, ‘love the earth’; and though she destabilises the idea of noble conservation approaches, ‘[i]t is a sad fact that military camps...tend to preserve wild species, birds and plants, by excluding curious and loving humans along with human predators’, she does also wistfully note that ‘they loved the earth...for its smells and scents and filth and bounce and clog and crumble’ (pp.391, 392). However sensibly we can see the damage caused by the Edwardians’ approaches, the impulses beneath them, Byatt’s narrator suggests, are genuine and inescapable.

I examined, earlier, Olive Wellwood’s envisioning of the house and garden as a locus akin to an enchanted castle—a space of safety (p.141). I noted that Byatt’s narrator remains critical of this tendency, but it is also true that the image of the house and garden as sanctuaries is compounded within the novel by the experiences of the characters in external environments: suicides mar beaches (pp.457-459); mining, the grime of industrial towns and—of course—the Great War infect other places (p.578). Remaining within the Todefright garden, I suggest, may be ethically problematic in its attempts to ignore what lies beyond (in the guise of referencing and celebrating it); and yet *The Children’s Book* is honest in its assessment of the darkness beyond the garden’s walls as a very real danger. In this more complex approach, I consider that Byatt follows the approach of Raymond Williams, who as Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy puts it, ‘resists the simplifying conclusion that this [nostalgia for a Golden Age] is just idealizing the past into a stick for beating the present’.<sup>557</sup> Instead, McCarthy suggests with Williams, we must ‘recognize that different cultural moments have brought different cultural problems to this reflex embrace of fading rural values’.<sup>558</sup>

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<sup>557</sup> Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy, *Green Modernism: Nature and the English Novel, 1900 to 1930* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p.125.

<sup>558</sup> *Ibid*, p.125.

In my discussion of William Morris and the Wellwood garden I referenced the idea of solastalgia, the psychological distress caused by the realisation of the environmental destruction of our home environments; I suggest that this is the central fear that inhabits our twenty-first century gardens. More complex than a simple recidivist approach that yearns for a perceived loss of simplicity, we recognise not only the loss of a way of life in the way that Williams suggests, but our own complicity in its loss and the seemingly impossible task of preventing further disaster. This is certainly the point that Coccozza and Wallach hope to make: that our post-millennial emphasis on smallholdings and wild gardens in cities is a sop intended to salve our consciences regarding the largescale consequences of twenty-first century consumption. To return to Resina's suggestion that 'new ruralism' is merely a symptom of another 'phase' in a 'long history' of the binary of urban and rural, returning to aspects of gardens like the Edwardian Todefright allows us to stake a claim on both urban *and* rural. The comforts of civilisation, while promoting the rural; the convenience (and the safety) of the manmade, with the conscience clearing environmental standards of the rural.<sup>559</sup> Yet the garden, in the very construction designed to emulate 'the rural', demonstrates not just the constructed nature of its own existence, but by extension, the inherent artificiality of the idea of 'the rural' that it espouses. Within that elision, however, is the knowledge (and the fear) of our own culpability for the disaster it hides; just as Goose's stories in *Salt* hide her own problems, and Pip uses his narrative to blame his saltmarsh surroundings for his family's problems. So the Wellwood garden allows its creators to ignore the complex and problematic nature of the social and creative impulses they espouse, and yet its presence is a consistent reminder of those problems.

Within *The Children's Book* Humphry Wellwood voices the concern that the group of characters at the heart of the narrative are merely 'porcelain

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<sup>559</sup> The point here, partially at least, is that the idea of 'the rural' is far more attractive than the less sanitary, and more threatened, reality. Again we see the elision of the genuine situation under an apparently invested and passionate representation.

socialists’, a phrase which another character attributes to Dostoevsky (p.70).<sup>560</sup> In the context, the phrase seems to suggest the distinction between the porcelain that depicts pastoral scenes—‘the pleasant and frangible vista on a teacup’—and the ‘earthenware plates, bearing the marks of the fingers that made them’, that are ‘William Morris’s diktat’ (p.70): here is the argument between the landscape gardens of Capability Brown (the ‘pleasant and frangible vista’ made flesh!) and the ‘honest’ gardens of the Arts and Crafts mode. These *are* honest in the marks of their construction and purpose, but still as bound to an aesthetic based in perception as the other. This spurious openness is as guilty of romanticising the people and the work implicated in its construction as the Sevres and the Capability Brown is of ignoring them (note that Philip Warren, whose mother painted porcelain and died from ingesting the lead, ‘[stands], looking sullen, taking in the argument, thinking of his mother’) (p.70).

In the context of the text, then, the ‘porcelain socialist’ principle appears thus: the ‘porcelain’ novel depicts an ideal, a vision of a world, and sweeps the work that must be done to maintain it away; the integrity of the aesthetic that it represents is maintained at the expense of its integrity as a material object. The earthenware insists upon reminding its user of its form, its history, and its substance: in short, its materiality and its purpose are represented as well as being physically existent. I am reminded here of Peter Boxall’s idea that the post-millennial novel engenders, ‘a strikingly new attention to the nature of our reality—its materiality...’.<sup>561</sup> Its reality, as an object constructed, consistently intrudes upon its observer and its user; an approach that *The Children’s Book* applies both internally and externally, as it exists as a narrative which reminds one consistently of its

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<sup>560</sup> I suspect that this is a reference to a famous comment of Dostoevsky’s from an entry in *A Writer’s Diary*, “Do you really think that the golden age only exists on porcelain teacups?” (Fyodor Dostoevsky, *A Writer’s Diary Vol. 1: 1873-1876*, trans. Kenneth Lantz (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1994), p.308). The way that the phrase appears in *The Children’s Book* suggests the same implication: that for some creating a vision of the ideal is the limit of their actions, whereas for others the insistence is upon constructing, or moulding, the ‘real’ into that ideal.

<sup>561</sup> Peter Boxall, *Twnty-First-Century Fiction*, p.202

construction, of its existence exterior to the events that it depicts. This is the same ‘dance...with leaden slippers’ that Wood dislikes so much; it may appear as a clumsy approach, but, as Armstrong instead argues, rather than breaking the wall between characters, author and reader, Byatt reinforces it and uses it to make her aesthetic point.

If we move back from thinking about the text to thinking about the garden, then she suggests that we must see it not from the side of the house, but from beyond its fence. We must stay outside its border, which means remaining aware that it is *still* representing a vision of honest construction, even when the work and production required to maintain it are indeed also honest. In the last chapter I considered the ethics of authenticity, and considered Van de Port’s suggestion that we perhaps have become too focussed on our distrust of ‘life worlds’; that perhaps we should think further about ‘the act of believing’ than on the ethical problem of the ‘made-up-ness’. Obviously in the context of *The Children’s Book* this discussion takes a slightly different shape; Byatt consistently reminds the reader of the ‘made-up-ness’ of both the Wellwood garden and her text, so the identification of its lack of authenticities is open to see. Yet still the mimetic engagement with our need for ‘the act of believing’ requires attention.

Within *The Children’s Book* the combination of material object and cultural symbol is often foregrounded. Phyllis, referring to the trees at the centre of the aforementioned orchard, foregrounds this intersection: “These two trees are the magic trees from the story. The golden apple and the silver pear. You can only see the gold and silver in certain lights, you have to believe. These two are the centre” (p.37). The tree is an ‘honest’, authentic one: crooked, deconstructed, and ramshackle; yet in removing the ‘pretence’ of a garden full of perfectly manicured trees that claim to be a forest while bearing little resemblance to one, the Wellwoods have replaced it with another pretence—but one that ensures understanding of its fictional nature, ‘from the story’. The tree is concurrently both the

earthenware and the porcelain, one claiming honesty, one claiming art, both applied to the material landscape.

John Dixon Hunt links the representative aspects of the garden to the work of Foucault in *Les Mots et les choses*, arguing that a ‘garden is both a thing represented and a thing representing’, and continuing to suggest that

self-consciousness and self-referral, which a critic like Foucault would locate in a picture, a garden, or any other sign, involves above all an answering self-consciousness on the part of viewers; they find an object, like a garden, and make it a sign by analysing it and acknowledging that it derives meaning by virtue of that analysis.<sup>562</sup>

Hunt’s use of Foucault is designed to point out that the garden’s role must be always to be an artifice: that, in his terms, ‘Gardens must declare their art’.<sup>563</sup> ‘The contents’ of the garden, he also notes, ‘are made visible only because they are represented (re-presented) in landscape forms’, suggesting that a garden ‘tends to conceal its message... [if] no gap, in Foucault’s terms, has been created between the objects represented (trees, waters, hills, etc.) and their presentation anew’.<sup>564</sup> This is the meaning of William Morris’ contention that the garden must look like something that will never be seen away from a house; it must signpost its artifice. But this can be done in several ways: first, as the earthenware, by announcing the construction behind it (in thumbprints, in fences); second, as the porcelain, by being impossible to mistake for anything other than artifice (as in the

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<sup>562</sup> John Dixon Hunt, *Greater Perfections*, p.79.

<sup>563</sup> Ibid, p.80.

<sup>564</sup> Ibid.

Sevres). Byatt uses both approaches within the novel, as it signposts its honest construction and simultaneously creates the obviously artificial.

Where Capability Brown, and Olive Wellwood, fall down in this process is by obliterating, or hiding, the natural beneath the idea of the 'Natural'; similarly the risk of the New Ruralist is that, in hiding the natural itself so neatly behind the consumer-driven *idea* of the Natural, the reality will fade away entirely; rather as 'she' vanishes in *Orkney*. Byatt herself notes this possibility as she suggests that:

Those great masters of the description of the English earth, Richard Jefferies and later W. H. Hudson, who can describe the whole expanse...so that we think they are our guide to the unspoiled green and pleasant land—both of these are in fact men of a Silver Age, elegiac. (p.392)

Yet as *The Children's Book* points out, this is a fundamentally anthropocentric viewpoint; it may be hidden from *our* vision, but it remains, nonetheless; although we are in danger of damaging it irrevocably, we cannot ignore it. It will always, to adapt that neat phrase from James Wood that I used in the Introduction, 'get up to something bigger'.

I have suggested throughout this work that our uncertainty with the post-millennial world that we inhabit extends to our verbal art; that the idea of total epistemological certainty about the world that we inhabit is insistently being portrayed as an absurd one. In *Thursbitch* this message is categorical; in *Salt*, it appears as an attempt to obscure the bigger mysteries of the land with a mystery of the human; in *Orkney*, our lack of understanding is depicted in the shattering of Richard's surety. In *The Children's Book*, we are shown that however much we attempt to shore up



our borders against the bigger fears and mysteries of the world beyond them, it will always eventually show itself. All of the novels, also, interrogate issues of authenticity in our relationship with place, and in that interrogation they remind us once more that the honesty we search for is a human concern, not an ecological one.

John Dixon Hunt suggests that in the garden we make the trees and plants that form its contents visible; while their form may be artificial, whether in the earthenware or the porcelain fashion, they are an important reminder. But they do not make the world visible, but our need for it, and our reliance upon it. While it is without doubt under threat, our solastalgic, reflexive returns to the world we believe we are in the process of losing are really simply reminders of the human consequences of its destruction. That is why, as McCarthy points out, we are always returning to the idea of the rural; we are frightened, and we cannot avoid our obsessive returns to examine what we may have done. 'The Golden Age,' Byatt points out rather glumly, 'was when no humans interfered with anything' (p.392); it is an impossible, golden dream, but the dreaming of it may help to remind us what it is that we have to lose.

## **‘Concentration is an Ethical Act’: A Conclusion**

*A game of checkers ends. The weather never does. That’s why you can’t save anything. Saving is the wrong word, one invoked over and over again, for almost every cause... Saving suggests a laying up where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt; it imagines an extraction from the dangerous, unstable, ever-changing process called life on earth.<sup>565</sup>*

One of the key challenges related to researching and writing a thesis centred on twenty-first century fiction while living through the twenty-first century has been the rate of social and cultural progress during the time of writing. This may seem like an obvious point, but when I moved from full-time research to a part-time schedule, for reasons both financial and health-related, it came as a shock to recognise that the United Kingdom of 2009, when I began, and 2016, when I will finish, were in themselves immeasurably different. In part this difference is reassuring; it confirms my hypothesis that the disjunction between the world of the 1990s and the world of the 2000s merits treating post-millennial fiction as possessing features that render it distinctive *within* the context of the wider grouping of ‘the contemporary’. If the world of 2009 seemed distant from the pre-millennial one, then the world of 2016 is even further removed.

What has happened in the meantime? When I first sketched this concluding section at the beginning of 2016, I focussed particularly on the surge of nationalistic pride that accompanied the London Summer Olympics in 2012, and the concurrent strands of ruralism and recognition of the results of domestic terrorism in the Opening Ceremony.<sup>566</sup> I also mentioned that

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<sup>565</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (New York: Nation Books, 2005), p.59.

<sup>566</sup> Danny Boyle, *London 2012 Olympic Games Opening Ceremony Guide* (London: The London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games Ltd., 2012). Of particular interest is the ‘idea of Jerusalem’; the opening section, entitled ‘A Green and Pleasant Land’, and the following depiction of the Industrial Revolution named ‘Pandemonium’; even when the British celebrate our history, we do so with one eye on its uncertainties. Also the minute of silence, which was dedicated in the BBC commentary

the threat of domestic terrorism had intensified even in the last two years; the current UK threat level is ‘Severe’, having been escalated from ‘Substantial’ on 29<sup>th</sup> August 2014.<sup>567</sup> The devastating terrorist attacks in Paris on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2015 and Brussels on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2016 have not aided matters; newspaper reports ask how we ‘...live in the shadow of terrorism’, and note that ‘London has felt like a very jumpy city since mid-November [2015]’,<sup>568</sup> identifying ‘a lurking paranoia...panic attacks over abandoned suitcases and horrific nightmares, while the headlines scream of the possibility of dirty bombs and extra armed police’.<sup>569</sup> This is a far cry from ‘the Britain of *The Wind in the Willows* and Winnie-the-Pooh’ celebrated in Danny Boyle’s ‘Green and Pleasant Land’, and emphasises the uncertainty that I have identified as an initiating factor for that turn back towards our rural edges.

But, as James Wood puts it, and as I quoted in the Introduction, ‘whatever the novel [or in this case, the thesis] gets up to, the “culture” can always get up to something bigger’.<sup>570</sup> Since the beginning of 2016 the United Kingdom has been altered, fundamentally and materially, by the seismic result of the Referendum on membership of the European Union on June 23<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>571</sup> Fifty-two percent of those who voted, voted to Leave; forty-eight percent to Remain. The shattering results of this event for the political elite—the resignation of Prime Minister David Cameron, the tumultuous process of the leadership election that followed, the splintering of the Labour Party—have altered the complexion of British politics in a matter of (at the time of writing) under four weeks.<sup>572</sup> Much of the Leave

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of the event to those who died during the 7/7 bombing, which occurred the day after London was awarded the 2012 Olympics.

<sup>567</sup> ‘Threat Levels,’ *M15.gov.uk*. Web: full website details given in bibliography.

<sup>568</sup> Kate Lyons & Caroline Davies, ‘How do I... live in the shadow of terrorism?’, *The Guardian* 20 November 2015. Web: full website details given in bibliography.

<sup>569</sup> Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett, ‘Let’s be honest about terrorist attacks. They make us feel scared,’ *The Guardian* 7 December 2015. Web: full website details given in bibliography.

<sup>570</sup> James Wood, ‘Tell Me How Does It Feel’.

<sup>571</sup> The full results of the ‘EU Referendum’ can be found on the website of *The Electoral Commission*. 24 June 2016. Web: full website details given in bibliography.

<sup>572</sup> The timeline provided by *The Times* covers the salient points of the chaotic political vacuum that followed the Referendum with clarity: ‘Timeline: Tories’ post-Brexit chaos,’ *The Times*, 11 July 2016. Web: full website details given in bibliography.

campaign focussed on emotive statements regarding issues of sovereignty, which tapped into the undercurrent of the same nostalgic recidivism for a lost Golden Age that Raymond Williams identifies.<sup>573</sup> More campaign material utilised xenophobic images and statements that often emphasised some of the extremist approaches that I referred to in the Introduction.<sup>574</sup> These approaches, and the anger that characterised the entirety of the campaign on both sides, have left much of the population of the United Kingdom disconcerted and unstable; what will occur in the near future, general and literary, is equally uncertain. If the post-millennial era ushered in what Dominic Head calls the ‘end [of] a particularly confident phase’ then it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the post-2016, post-‘Brexit’ British literary scene will herald a continuation of this destabilisation. I predict a continuation of the proliferation of writing angled towards encounters with British nature. I anticipate a continuation of two parallel strands in particular: one that purports to, to paraphrase Robert Macfarlane, render forgotten rural landscapes visible again, or to record them before they ‘vanish for good’; and one that, as Farley and Symons Roberts attempt, seeks to destabilise perceived aesthetic hierarchy of the rural and the urban by celebrating and making visible the landscapes of towns and cities. I also expect that the strand of fiction that I have considered in my work, which engages tendentiously and specifically with the uncertainties and problems of the world in which we dwell, will continue and flourish.

From an explicitly ecocritical viewpoint, the seven years of my research has seen literary approaches to issues related to the environment change immeasurably. When I began in 2009, the *Granta* edition focusing on *The*

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<sup>573</sup> Michael Lloyd, writing on nostalgic nationalism in the Leave campaign before the referendum result, identifies the key points about this tendency very clearly in a long form piece, ‘Nostalgia, xenophobia, anti-neoliberalism: the roots of Leave’s nationalism’ on the *BrexitVote* blog maintained by the London School of Economics and Political Science. (*BrexitVote*, 15 March 2016. Web: full website details given in bibliography.)

<sup>574</sup> Aditya Chakraborty’s opinion piece in *The Guardian* describes both the bigotry of the Leave campaign and the consequences of it in ‘After a campaign scarred by bigotry, it’s become OK to be racist in Britain’ (*The Guardian*, 28 June 2016. Web: full website details given in bibliography.)

*New Nature Writing* that I referenced in the introduction as a signpost towards the huge rise in the popularity of post-millennial nature narratives had been published for fourteen months; Robert Macfarlane, doyen of the post-millennial British nature writing movement, had only published two of his now canonical works.<sup>575</sup> I once mentioned to a friend of a relative, early in my research, that I was working on non-urban landscape in post-2000 fiction; “Oh,” she said, “Is there any?”. I struggled to find a wide canon of literary ecocriticism with a post-millennial focus. I read about the less recent landscapes of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, and the urban landscapes of Will Self and Iain Sinclair, and wondered with faint terror when I would be able to find criticism that addressed the very recent, non-urban, questions that preoccupied me. The answer, of course, was that I was in the process of writing it; to my relief, it has been increasingly evident that others have been too.

Now, in 2016, the literary response to questions about environment and landscape—and critical writing examining that response—has proliferated beyond any hope of reading all of it. Certainly if I were to be choosing the novels to form my core bibliography now, I would be hard-pressed to choose: from those that I *have* featured; Alan Garner’s final, sublime conclusion to the trilogy begun with *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen, Boneland*; Paul Kingsnorth’s *The Wake*; Melissa Harrison’s *At Hawthorn Time*, Sarah Hall’s *The Wolf Border*, Andrew Michael Hurley’s *The Loney*, Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant*, all from 2015; Daisy Johnson’s *Fen* and Sarah Perry’s *The Essex Serpent* from the first half of 2016. All of these texts have fascinating relationships with the landscapes they depict; all touch on the same, difficult issues that I have highlighted in my writing: authenticity, honesty, the epistemological resistance of landscape; the ethical, and aesthetic, queasiness of writing about the natural world now; the turn toward the nature of the relationship between the *individual* and their immediate surroundings. Nature writing of the non-fictional variety has, too, flourished in a manner that has been

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<sup>575</sup> *Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination* (2003) and *The Wild Places* (2007).

tremendously exciting. In practical terms, this abundance has led to an introductory literature review that at time has felt positively Sisyphean in nature, as I have attempted to maintain the contemporaneity of the texts that I have referenced. Critical writing that engages with the ecocritical tendencies of post-millennial fiction is still thinner on the ground; still, articles in the ISLE journal, and others, are showing an abundance of work in this area that is deeply encouraging.<sup>576</sup> There is also a heartening current of work focussed on the position of minority groups in relation to ecocritical concerns; for reasons that will become obvious later in this Conclusion, I have been particularly interested in the appearance of several articles based on considerations of disability studies in conjunction with ecocritical discussion.<sup>577</sup>

In part this abundance, the media fascination, the accolades heaped on the *new* New Nature Writers, such as Melissa Harrison, Olivia Laing and John Lewis-Stempel, have been reassuring: I feel justified in my preoccupation with ecocritical discourses, and part of a general community for whom these issues are not just questions of theory, but of ideological possibility, aesthetics and emotion. Yet increasing focus on the field has also signalled the danger: as Richard Mabey puts it, '[w]riting about this is difficult and skiddy work, prone to anthropomorphism'.<sup>578</sup> It is also prone to the perils of Olive Wellwood's garden, which claims honesty, authenticity and deep roots in its land, while simultaneously constituting a barrier to it. Do these texts, which celebrate the richness and variety of the United Kingdom's rural landscapes in one way or another, constitute a barrier in themselves?

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<sup>576</sup> Simon C. Estok's essay, 'Ecocriticism in an Age of Terror', was deeply enlightening on the relationships between terrorism and ecological concern (*CLC Web: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15.1 (2013). Web: full web details given in bibliography); I have also found fascinating, recently, Paul Harland's considerations of 'Ecological Grief and Therapeutic Storytelling in Margaret Atwood's *Maddaddam* Trilogy' (*ISLE*. Advance Access published March 7, 2016, doi:10.1093/isle/isw001) and Andrew H. Wallis' 'Towards a Global Eco-Consciousness in Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*' (*ISLE* 20.4 (2013)).

<sup>577</sup> Two essays from a fairly recent issue of *ISLE* have focussed on this area; Elizabeth A. Wheeler's 'Don't Climb Every Mountain' and 'The Ecosomatic Paradigm in Literature: Merging Disability Studies and Ecocriticism' by Matthew J. C. Cella (*ISLE* 20.3 (2013): 553-573; 574-596). Though they differ in their angle, both engage on the tensions found when disability studies and ecocriticism encounter one another.

<sup>578</sup> Richard Mabey, 'In Defence of Nature Writing'.

Do they claim to provide insight into the relationship between people and their places, while forming a canonical nexus that masks the dreadful, dangerous consequences of that relationship? Equally, do the historical settings of three of the novels—*Thursbitch* (in part), *Salt*, *The Children's Book*—and the ahistorical setting of *Orkney*, allow them to avoid engaging with contemporary environmental concerns?

This scepticism does not come naturally to me. I do, entirely unacademically, care deeply about these novels, and the places that they represent; more critically, I believe that they all constitute attempts to represent in text an experience that is difficult to explain: that of connection and conflict, rootedness and challenge, all occurring in the one place. Their flawed characters, with their equally flawed and contentious manners of engagement with their places, are deeply resonant in their imperfect approaches, despite their insistence on individual experience. Alan Garner's depictions of the difficult aspects of life in the Cheshire Pennines remind me of a conversation with William Bone, my grandfather and a master lead-worker, who—in a discussion about my thesis subject—told me about the feeling of working on the great lead gutters of a church roof in the *Durham* Pennines in a high wind. "I know what you're saying about edges," he told me; "Sitting up there, you're between the roof and the sky. You're not in the building, you're not away from it. And you can see—you can feel..."<sup>579</sup> He understood what it meant to confront the edges of our 'place' in our landscape, and the inherent difficulty of expressing it; he found it in his day to day inhabitation of his lifelong home. All of the novels, regardless of their lyricism and the beauty (and otherwise) of the landscapes they depict, use their edge landscapes in order to interrogate the manners in which people engage with their British rural surroundings; they prevent the reader from ignoring the ways in which characters

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<sup>579</sup> I have paraphrased a conversation that I was, sadly, too slow to record at the time and failed to repeat before his death in 2014; I have checked with other family members who were present that my sense of his wording is accurate. I mention the conversation in particular as an apt example of the manner in which my research has touched upon the vital importance of the experience of the individual, while also attempting to capture a sense of the more general impressions and tendencies that inform those experiences.

navigate their places. They insist on focus; upon the miniature and immediate responses and impressions of the individual person-in-the-world.

The other consequence of the contemporary abundance of literary responses to questions of landscape and living-in-the-world has been a greater pressure to claim, and to maintain, a political position. Throughout the research and writing phases of this thesis I have (perhaps stubbornly) insisted that my purpose is identify, and to interrogate, the practices by which post-millennial writing represents, questions and intersects with ideas, preconceptions and approaches to landscape: that my position is neutral, my preoccupation in no way related to a political or ecological standpoint. I do not claim a polemical position, only an analytical one. I would still claim this now; I am fascinated, most particularly, by the ways that the verbal art of the twenty-first century reflects the manners in which we love and live with our landscapes, regardless of the status of the landscape in question. But personal experience during the course of my research has, perhaps, changed the way in which that neutrality operates in my critical thinking.

When I began my research I already suffered from intermittent joint pain, which was sometimes severe but generally fleeting in duration. By the beginning of 2013, approximately the mid-point of my research period, I was in terrible pain every day, medicated with opiates that barely mitigated the agony and left me thick-headed and slow. I slept little at night, wrenched my way through the paid work that made the research possible, and fell asleep over my computer when I sat down to write. My finger joints swelled, making typing excruciating, and at times I could barely sit for ten minutes at a time without pain. It took another year for a rheumatologist to diagnose a condition rather misleadingly labelled as ‘Joint Hypermobility Syndrome’, which is effectively a congenital disorder that renders my connective tissue too flexible. My joints slip in their sockets and connections, grating and partially dislocating; I suffer



terrible fatigue because my muscles must work harder to keep my joints relatively stable; my muscles strain easily; my digestion, circulation and eyesight are all affected by the greater reactivity of my blood vessels, ligaments and tendons. It is a surprisingly common condition in varying degrees of severity, but largely invisible. Now, two years from that diagnosis, it is (mostly) managed by a regime of mixed painkillers that mitigate a certain amount of everyday pain, and care in my choice of activities; the fogginess caused by pain medication and attendant short-term memory and verbalisation problems remain, as does a certain background level of pain that cannot be avoided.<sup>580</sup>

This is relevant to the changes in my critical perception because, as my pain levels increased and my general health deteriorated, the landscapes that have always been personally important to me began to drift from my grasp. I could no longer go for the day hikes that punctuated my childhood and young adulthood; I could barely walk up the hill outside my house without pain and fatigue. The Norfolk beaches that were so close to my parents' new home became a struggle as sand and shingle, which give and shift, betrayed my uncertain feet. Cold and damp weather made my joints far worse; I strained muscles that took a long time to heal; the outside was, frighteningly and inexorably, becoming lost to me. Even progressing stop-start around levelled and manicured crazy golf courses, always a favourite family activity, became an excruciating and increasingly bad-tempered trial by ordeal.

I grieved for place. When I was capable of taking steps, I did; standing in the park outside our back door, limping to the beach. I took photographs of the countryside, carefully mediated to show only the loveliness that seemed out of my grasp more often than not. The loss I experienced when divided from my places by illness was not the only kind of landscape bereavement I encountered at that time; when my maternal grandparents

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<sup>580</sup> The clearest, most accessible scholarly discussion is 'The Clinician's Guide to JHS' by Alan J Hakim, who has made a lifetime's study of the condition. *Hypermobility Syndromes Association*, 27 August 2013. Web: full website details given in bibliography.

died in 2012 and 2014 respectively, one of the things I grieved for (among many others) was the severing of my inhabitant connection with the Durham Pennines, which existed through their constant, deeply localised, love for their place. I felt shame as I scattered the ashes of three of my grandparents, who all died during my research, in rural spaces that we had loved together, and simultaneously greedily stored away the beauty, the fresh air, the sharp Yorkshire and Durham winds, the smell of grass and sheep and wet rocks: all of which sometimes felt as distant as the relatives I had lost.

I took, probably unsurprisingly, some months of intercalation to recover a little of my lost resources of energy and health. When I came back to my research, I cautiously went back to read what was already done; I encountered my younger, more inexperienced self in my writing with fury. I found my glibness in the face of *Thursbitch*'s Sal's decreasing ability to engage with the place she loved impossible (p.37); how, I asked myself, could I have written so neutrally about the bereavement of losing place? How could I have ignored the symbolism of her frustration with, and the humiliation of, her human body's failure to allow her access to that world? How could I skip over the importance of access to an outside place you know well, and that knows you? How could I have drifted past the horror of Jeremy Page's Goose being removed to an old people's home, even if it *does* retain a 'view' of the saltmarsh? (p.281) How could I forgive Olive Wellwood's garden, that keeps its surroundings so safely distant? (p.301) I read Amy Sackville's description of *Orkney*'s 'her' dipping her hands into the water and running them through her hair, 'waiting for a transformation', and saw my own need to limp to the sea and wet my feet; I recognised her obsessive focus on the beach and the water, which she cannot enter, in my own hopeless, angry isolation from the British landscapes that I loved (p.226).

My critical interest in the conditional, imperfect manners in which the novels at the centre of this thesis had not (and has not) altered; I still

celebrate their focus on the forgotten aspects of difficult landscapes, and their sometimes faltering steps beyond the ‘the rolling hills of biscuit-tin lids, the meadowlands and glades in the framed, reproduced pastorals our parents hung on our living-room walls’ derided by Paul Farley and Michael Symons Roberts.<sup>581</sup> I could no longer, however, critically elide the inherently political nature of the loss that they inherently include. I read these novels, which grieve in different manners for different aspects of different places, while grieving for my own places. Those places were lost to me by a failure of the human; in my case, my own body. Similarly, in the texts that I have examined, unpicking their visions of the inhabited landscape, their inherent grief is not only for their losses, but for the equally human failures and mistakes that lead to them: Jack and Richard’s misplaced certainties and assumptions; Pip and ‘her’, searching for an ‘authentic’ transformation that will make sense of vast mysteries; Goose and Olive, creating representations to mask the uncertainties of their surroundings. In none of these novels is this loss explicitly an environmental one, nor do they (aside, perhaps from Byatt’s pages of lecturing on the Edwardians) stray too far into the polemical. Yet the novels remain, in their visions of small, individual losses and separations from a way of living within the world, synecdochic fragments of a larger literary response to the existential concerns that follow the progression of those scientific causes and effects.

In the Introduction to this work I briefly mentioned the idea of the Anthropocene, the principle that we now inhabit a world so fundamentally changed by human inhabitation that we constitute a geological event. As Colin Waters et al. point out in the scholarly paper that, at the start of this year, heralded one of the most concerted efforts to formalise this distinction, ‘the term “Anthropocene” is currently used to encompass different geological, ecological, sociological, and anthropological changes in recent Earth history’: in other words, the Anthropocene is not simply a

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<sup>581</sup> Paul Farley & Michael Symons Roberts, *Edgelands*, p.2.

question of marking human handwriting in the geological recording of the earth's history.<sup>582</sup> It is also about concurrent moves in the humanities and—though I suspect this might be a matter of some perplexity to the term's scientific originators—the arts. As Robert Macfarlane notes, 'Literature and art are confronted with particular challenges by the idea of the Anthropocene. Old forms of representation are experiencing drastic new pressures... The indifferent scale of the Anthropocene can induce a crushing sense of the cultural sphere's impotence'.<sup>583</sup> Yet perhaps the cure for that impotence is on bringing our eyes down from the global, and that same 'indifferent scale', and back to our locations.

In the Introduction, I mentioned the argument of Richard Mabey for the existence, in the 'broad secular church' of the new nature writing, of a 'passion for the small, the particular and the local'. This is the trajectory of the new nature writing, towards a content of multiplicities, faceted enquiry, narrow foci; they are myriad in approach, opinion, experience and solution. Many ground their impressions of the future of the countryside in polemical essays; many more do not. In the same section of this work I mentioned James Wood's yearning for 'novels that tell us not "how the world works" but "how somebody felt about something"'.<sup>584</sup> It is at the intersecting edge of these principles that I propose to locate the novels that I have considered; preoccupied with the response of the individual to their surroundings, which resist both categorisation and generalisation. The novels make a case for a threaded trajectory of verbal art toward dialogues that reject the inherent elisions constituted by the pastoral, while creating a representative vision of the non-urban that is difficult, personal and flawed. It is, of course, an anthropocentric thread in its origin: yet in its acceptance of its narrow perspective, and the equivocal presentation of its individuals, it is also a thread that renders the reader consistently conscious

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<sup>582</sup> Colin Waters et al, 'The Anthropocene is functionally and stratigraphically distinct from the Holocene,' *Science* 351.6269 (January 2016), p.137-146, p.138.

<sup>583</sup> Robert Macfarlane, 'Generation Anthropocene: How humans have altered the planet for ever,' *The Guardian*, 1 April 2016. Web: full website details given in bibliography.

<sup>584</sup> James Wood, 'Tell Me How Does It Feel'.

of its particularity, and its position as part of a wider literary grouping of concern, disturbance and uncertainty.

These novels, which require the reader to focus their own attention on the minutiae, resist the temptation to polemicise, and so shall I. As Robert Macfarlane points out:

Literature can lead to activism and can feed into policymaking. But as Jonathan Bate has written, it need not explicitly “pronounce an ecological message” to perform ecological work.<sup>585</sup>

Timothy Morton argues that ‘Along with the ecological crisis goes an equally powerful and urgent opening up of our view of who we are and where we are...the environment entails a radical openness’.<sup>586</sup> It is this existential uncertainty that the novels encounter, and represent; a small, but vital, part of the gargantuan processes of environmental change. These smallest, most individual ways in which those processes—and their consequences—can be manifested are still vital; as Diane Ackerman, writing in 2014, suggests, ‘...our relationship with nature is evolving, rapidly but incrementally, and at times so subtly that we don’t perceive the sonic booms, literally or metaphorically’.<sup>587</sup> If the (cultural) Anthropocene is, as Timothy Clark puts it, ‘an expanded question mark’, then perhaps the novel is uniquely placed to ask the questions it punctuates.<sup>588</sup> ‘Art,’ Timothy Morton writes, ‘can help us, because it’s a place in our culture that deals with intensity, shame, abjection, and loss’.<sup>589</sup> The personal loss of our living-in-the-world is still a loss to be grieved, and it is also an

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<sup>585</sup> Robert Macfarlane, ‘Why We Need Nature Writing’.

<sup>586</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010), p.10.

<sup>587</sup> Diane Ackerman, *The Human Age: The World Shaped by Us* (London: Headline, 2015), p.13.

<sup>588</sup> Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p.3.

<sup>589</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, p.10.

incipient loss that, by its very nature, leads to a greater awareness of other, more global losses.

Robert Macfarlane, again, mentions that ‘we mostly respond...with stuplimity: the aesthetic experience in which astonishment is united with boredom, such that we overload on anxiety to the point of outrage-outage’; he suggests that ‘Art and literature might, at their best, shock us out of the stuplime’.<sup>590</sup> Byron Williston, writing on his belief in ‘the abiding importance of a triad of virtues rooted firmly in Enlightenment soil’ in the Anthropocene era, states that:

We have not faced the climate crisis squarely in large part because we have failed in respect of these three virtues, and the only way forward for us is to learn, or relearn, how to be genuinely just, truthful, and hopeful people.<sup>591</sup>

This is where my thesis begins and ends: in the small, the particular and the local; the imaginative focus on the representation of human uncertainty, failure, fragility and confusion in the face of the need to, in one fashion or another, focus the attention upon the many faces of person-in-the-world. These novels make no case, plan or policy for the conservation of the planet; they merely attempt to remind us of its existence, and the uncertainty of our position within it. ‘Concentration,’ Robert Macfarlane states, ‘is an ethical act’: the production of this concentration, in the represented and representative landscapes in the novels at the heart of this work, is their ecocritical legacy.<sup>592</sup>

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<sup>590</sup> Robert Macfarlane, ‘Generation Anthropocene’.

<sup>591</sup> Byron Williston, *The Anthropocene Project*, p.50.

<sup>592</sup> Robert Macfarlane, ‘Why We Need Nature Writing’.

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## Appendix

From: Alan Garner [email address redacted]

To: Rebecca Harris

Date: 2 April 2010 at 14:13

Subject: THE RANDOMNESS OF RANDOM HOUSE

Dear Rebecca Harris

Random House is well named. Your letter of 27 January has finally reached me.

Thanks for your kind words, and I wish I could help you more, but, without specific questions, I don't see how I may.

The best I can offer, in that it gathers together a great deal, is <http://alangarner.atspace.org/> especially, the 'Thursbitch' Tangents section. The site has nothing to do with me, except that I correct errors of fact. So, unlike most other web sites of this kind, it's not a disguised commercial. There's some interesting knocking copy, if you look.

For a more rambling account you may find something in a Yahoo group, which is very much a curate's egg of subjectivity and varying literacy and perception, including a pirating of my own writing by an obnoxious man called Andy Roberts, who is totally unreliable, except where he's using my words as his own. You're safer ignoring anything he has to claim. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/alangarner/messages>

I wish you well with your work, and hope this hasn't come too late. The most important thing to remember is that, if a book is of any value, each reading is unique, since it is, or should be, a creative act between text and reader.

Examiners tend not to be comfortable with that.

Alan Garner.