



‘ENUNCIATING THE LAND’: TOWARDS THE NEW NATURE NOVEL

A Creative and Critical Writing PhD by Katya Johnson



2015-2018
ABERYSTWYTH UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH & CREATIVE WRITING
COMMENTARY WORD COUNT: 20, 490
(WORD COUNT EXCLUDES BIBLIOGRAPHY, FOOTNOTES, APPENDIXES, COVER
PAGE & CONTENTS PAGE)

Table of Contents

Commentary Introduction	4
Chapter One	7
Exploring Theory: What’s the Problem with the Nature Novel?	7
1. Nature Writing as Nonfiction: Thomas Lyons and Lawrence Buell	8
2. The Critical Backlash: The Fiction of Non-Fiction Nature Writing.....	11
3. Responding to the Theoretical Problems of the Ecocentric Text	13
4. Conclusion: In Defence of Environmental Fiction	16
Chapter Two.....	18
Working Towards a New Genre: The New Nature Novel in Britain	18
1. The Pastoral and the Post-Pastoral.....	20
2. <i>The Valley at the Centre of the World</i> : Fictional Regionalisms	21
3. <i>At Hawthorn Time</i> : A Contemporary Pastoral?	24
4. <i>Pollard</i> : The Language of Trees.....	28
5. Conclusion: Defining the ‘New Nature Novel’, Boundaries and Fences	31
Chapter Three.....	35
From Theory to Practice: <i>Wolf’s Leap</i>	35
1. ‘Wild Wales’ and the Cambrian Mountains: The Setting of the Novel.....	37
2. The Theme of ‘Man-Made’ Nature in the novel.....	39
3. Going ‘Feral’: Human and Non-Human Nature in the Valley	42
4. Social Ecology and ‘Dwelling’ in Nature: The Idea of Community	46
5. Representing Rural Life: Country vs. City	50
6. Conclusion	52
Commentary Conclusion	55
Looking Forward: ‘Uncivilised art’	55
Bibliography	58
Appendix.....	65

‘Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature? He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him; who nailed words to their primitive senses, as farmers driving down stakes in the spring...’

– From ‘Walking’ by Henry Thoreau, 23 April, 1851

‘Questions about preservation of the natural environment are not just technical questions; they are also about what defines the good and moral life, and about the essence and the meaning of our existence. Hence, these are not just academic or technical matters, to be settled in elite dialogues between experts. These are fundamental questions of defining what our human community is and how it should exist.’

– Robert J. Brulle, *Agency, Democracy, and Nature: The US Environmental Movement from Critical Theory Perspective*, 2000

‘Enunciating the Land’: Towards the New Nature Novel

Commentary Introduction

It is interesting that the first entry listed under the word ‘Novel’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites the now-obsolete, medieval meaning ‘The new shoot of a tree’ (1440).¹ Yet this sense of the intrinsic interconnectedness between the novel form and the environment is not an attitude that is reflected either by contemporary ecocritical discourse or mainstream creative writing practices. In fact, a clear historic bias against the novel within literary ecology is demonstrated both by the theoretical dismissal of the novel form by leading ecocritics such as Lawrence Buell, and by the trend towards nonfiction ‘New Nature Writing’ in contemporary British treatments of the environment. Therefore, the basic problem and paradox that both my thesis and novel explores is: why is there so little recent precedent for nature fiction in Britain and what kind of form could such a creative undertaking assume?

This commentary will begin by examining the basic philosophical and literary-theoretical issues impeding the ‘New Nature Novel’ as well as defences of environment-oriented literature offered by leading ecocritics such as Patrick Murphy (Chapter 1: Exploring Theory). It will then consider how some pioneering British fiction writers have approached the task of re-inventing nature writing for a modern readership (Chapter 2: Towards the New Nature Novel), before finally analysing how these ecocritical and literary theoretical problems have been brought to bear on my own creative work in terms of its overall design and content (Chapter 3: Applying Theory to Practice). Thus, the contested status of the novel form as a vehicle for green ideas and concerns, will form the investigative heart of this commentary – helping to define the terms on which my own ‘New Nature Novel’ can be founded.

The design of this practice-led research project will encompass both creative and critical methodologies. Theoretically its discussion will be informed by a number of British and American ecocritical scholars such as Dominic Head, Timothy Clark, Greg Garrard, Lawrence Buell, Dana Philips, Astrid Bracke, Richard Kerridge and Daniel Weston. As well as exploring diverse ecocritical perspectives on the novel form, this commentary

¹ See *OED* online, under search term ‘novel’, accessed 24.12.2016.

acknowledges the post-structuralist, constructionist and formalist schools of thought that have shaped literary theory since the 1950s, contributing towards an understanding of how literary texts create and disseminate meaning. The overall strategy and design of this commentary aligns with my own conviction that literary theory and ecocriticism can provide powerful analytical tools for readers and thinkers, but that the answers to the research questions proposed by this commentary can also be solved by the pragmatic approaches of the writer-maker in the workshop. This conviction coincides with Dominic Head's belief that 'a textualizing process, for the novel, belongs to the creative as much as the critical sphere, and that, far from producing alienation it may indicate the necessary route to an invigorated Green materialism'.²

In reaching towards a new kind of realist ecological grammar – referred to as the 'New Nature Novel' – this commentary practices an equivalent task to Buell's mission to 're-theorize nonfiction' (p.2) in *The Environmental Imagination*, except with the aim to re-theorize ecological fiction.³ However, unlike scholars such as Head and Weston who call for exploration in this field and examine the reasons for the neglect of the realist novel by ecocriticism and creative writers alike, this thesis takes that investigation one step further by formulating methods for the practical realisation of the British New Nature Novel – as shown by the final chapter of this commentary. In some ways this investigation is a direct response to the challenge Head addresses to the reader (and writer?) in his essay 'Ecocriticism and the Novel':

Can we, then, imagine a novel which incorporates contemporary environmental concerns; which traces the intersection of time and space; which shows how personal time and personal identity are implicated in both social and environmental history; and does all of this – not *despite* – but *because* of its self-consciousness about textuality?⁴

As such, it is crucial to acknowledge that the basic attitude of this commentary is speculative: it documents a process of epistemological working-towards. My 'New Nature Novel' is a concept in construction. This commentary charts the journey towards an understanding of its

² Dominic Head, 'Ecocriticism and the Novel' in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. Lawrence Coupe (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 235-24 (pp. 236-7).

³ Though the 'New Nature Novel' is a personal coinage, the terms have developed from Daniel Weston's appellation 'Nature novel', the demise of which he discusses at length in relation to postwar British fiction. See Daniel Weston, see Chapter 7, 'Nature Writing and the Environmental Imagination' in *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction since 1945* ed. David James (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 110-126 (p.111).

⁴ See Dominic Head, 'Ecocriticism and the Novel' in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. Lawrence Coupe (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), p.239.

design and functionality given the constraints of ecocriticism, literary theory and conventions affecting literary treatments of nature.

While a broad historical understanding of European and North-American nature writing and criticism informs this thesis, for the sake of focus and clarity, this research project is focussed on primary works of British nature-oriented fiction, rather than that of internationally published ecofiction. As the thesis is interested in how fiction writers can respond to the challenge of representing millennial or post-millennial nature, it will prioritise where possible works of ‘contemporary’ nature fiction and eco-criticism published since 1990. As discussion of the novel form is at the heart of this research project, it will proceed with a working definition of the ‘novel’ supplied by the OED: ‘A long fictional prose narrative, usually filling one or more volumes and typically representing character and action with some degree of realism and complexity; a book containing such a narrative.’⁵

⁵ See OED online, dictionary reference ‘novel’

Chapter One

Exploring Theory: What's the Problem with the Nature Novel?

Today when the Novel has imposed upon itself the studies and the duties of science, it can demand the freedoms and immunities of science.

– From the Preface to Edmond and Jules de Goncourt's novel *Germinie Lacerteux* (1864)

There is a long history of marginalising the novel form in debates within ecocriticism. Dominic Head says as much when he stresses that making 'the novel relevant' to ecocriticism, is the 'greatest challenge' it faces as a critical field ('Ecocriticism and the Novel', p. 236). Patrick Murphy contextualises the 'Neglect of the Environmental Novel' in his book, *Further Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature*, which surveys the critical reception history of environmental fiction since the early 1990s. Murphy explains how the editorial agenda of American ecocritical publications, the revered status of the American nonfiction nature-writing canon and American syllabuses of higher education have all contributed to the historical neglect of the novel within US-led ecocriticism.¹ He explores how many early seminal ecocritical publications such as *Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) by Lawrence Buell and *The Norton Book of Nature Writing* (1990) edited by John Elder and Robert Finch, effectively forestalled and side-lined discussion of fictional genres, by defining nature writing as 'nonfictional prose'. Though, more recently, writers on genre within ecocriticism such as Astrid Bracke, Dominic Head, Richard Kerridge as well as Murphy, are restoring the balance by initiating debates about nature-oriented literature as opposed to nature writing within ecocriticism, the notion of modern novelistic treatments of the environment, and especially the 'return to realism' within ecofiction, remains a contentious topic.⁶

Since the reconciliation of the novel with ecology is of paramount importance to the horizons of literary studies, ecocriticism and my own research project, the question that remains is: How is the novel deprived by ecocriticism? Does the literary treatment or mediation implied by fiction necessarily draw us further away from the environment itself?

⁶ See Dana Philips's polemical critique of realism in *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture and Literature in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

As such questions form the theoretical crux of my practice-as-research project, the first chapter of this commentary explores them in detail. As a starting point this chapter will begin by considering what generic, literary-theoretical and ecocritical issues obstruct the novel form from being easily appropriated by nature writers and ecological writers, before mounting a defence of the Nature Novel by drawing on the arguments of Astrid Bracke, Patrick Murphy, Raymond Williams, Mikhail Bakhtin and Dominic Head. Its conclusion, which is concerned with definitions of nature writing as well as the heuristics of the novel form itself, will balance these countervailing claims, attempting to reach a firm conclusion about whether the novel form is ‘compromised as a vehicle for Green Ideas’ (Kerridge, *Writing the Environment*, p.27).

1. Nature Writing as Nonfiction: Thomas Lyons and Lawrence Buell

In the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, varieties of nonfiction nature writing such as biographical narratives, literary essays and field journals have dominated literary treatments of the environment as well as critical analysis of them. Timothy Clark notes that: ‘Environmental nonfiction in the tradition of Thoreau remains a major if hardly exclusive concern of twenty-first-century ecocriticism’.⁷ Why has this preference for nonfiction ‘nature writing’ at the expense of fictional modes, arisen? In his essay ‘A Taxonomy of Nature Writing’, Thomas J. Lyons attempts to deal with these problems. His schematization of nature writing – written in the context of American rather than British literary traditions – offers valuable clues about where the boundaries of Nature Writing lie for him. Though Lyons admits that nature writing is ‘not ... a neat and orderly field’⁸ but a ‘spectrum’ in which the more objective, scientific discourses of ‘natural history’ collide and intermesh with the more subjective humanistic possibilities of personal and ‘philosophical interpretations of nature’, he is still able to present the reader with a gamut of clearly differentiated nature writing typologies.⁹ Such a classification system begs questions in and of itself. For instance, can socio-cultural texts that deal with nature only very abstractly properly be called examples

⁷ Timothy Clark ed. *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.35.

⁸ Thomas J. Lyons, ‘A Taxonomy of Nature Writing’ in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, eds. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (USA, University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. 276-281 (p.276).

⁹From left to right he names sub-genres such as ‘Field Guides and Professional Papers’, ‘Natural History Essays’, ‘Rambles’; adventure and travelogues and ‘Farm Life’ narratives, to more wide-ranging philosophical texts that deal with ‘Man’s Role in Nature’ such as John Burroughs’s *Accepting the Universe* (1920). See fig. 1, Appendix.

of ‘nature writing’? But the most notable absence, even on the fringes of Lyons’s schema are any examples of works of poetry or narrative fiction. This omission raises questions: Is the chronicler of farming life more deserving of the appellation ‘nature writer’ than Walt Whitman or William Faulkner? However, what Lyons’s taxonomy suggests is that, firstly, for him ‘nature writing’ is a genre in which nature or an experience of nature, must constitute the undisputed heart of the text and secondly, that this experience of Nature should not be putative or fabricated but demonstrably anchored in the ‘real’ experiences of ‘real’ human beings. Lyons’s classification system also reaffirms another prevalent belief in literary studies: nature writing constitutes a branch of nonfiction and derives its authority from the status of these ‘modes of discourse taken as more directly representational’ (Clark, p.38). Nature writing may be articulated in ‘literary’ creative-critical and belle-lettristic modes such as the essay, but it is never expressed in the form of the poem, novel or short story.

Writing in the same year as Lyons and in the context of growing concern about climate change, Lawrence Buell’s seminal ecocritical work *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) also side-lined purely fictional forms in his discussion of environmental writing in preference for prose nonfiction. In Chapter 8 entitled ‘Place’, Buell frankly admits that narrative fiction does not put enough emphasis on ‘place’ or setting, and traditionally allots greater significance to characterisation and human-driven plot-lines (see p. 225). For Buell, fictional modes like the novel are necessarily homocentric and thus at a severe disadvantage when it comes to prioritising representations of non-human nature. There have also been many voices, Dominic Head’s among others, that have been quick to point out how Buell’s famous ‘rough checklist’ for the components of ‘an environmentally oriented work’, also appears to exclude the novel. Of the four criteria which he cites in *The Environmental Imagination*, Buell’s first stipulation which asks that ‘1. *The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history*’ (p.7), seems to present the greatest challenge to the would-be nature novelist.¹⁰ Is it possible to write a novel in which the nonhuman environment is given the same level of priority as the human one? For Buell, the fundamentally human-oriented form of the novel is incompatible with the objectives of a true environmental poetics. As he writes:

¹⁰ Other stipulations include: 2) ‘The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest’ 3) ‘Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation’ 4) ‘Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in this text’ (*Environmental Imagination*, p.7).

What sort of literature remains possible if we relinquish the myth of human apartness? It must be a literature that abandons, or at least questions, what would seem to be literature's most basic foci: character, persona, narrative, consciousness. What literature can survive under these conditions? (p.134).

Buell's sceptical attitude towards the novel form is entirely in-keeping with his self-positioning as an advocate for environmental issues in literature and with the broader aims of ecocriticism which Greg Garrard calls 'an avowedly political mode of analysis' in which ecocritics 'tie their cultural analyses explicitly to a 'green' moral and political agenda'.¹¹ In fact, Buell's preference for the ostensibly less human-inflected genre of nonfiction nature writing makes more sense when seen against the backdrop of Garrard's observation that: 'Much ecocentricism has taken for granted that its task is to overcome anthropocentrism, just as feminism seeks to overcome androcentrism' (p.176). Apart from Buell's belief that the human-oriented biases of the novel form do not serve the interests of either ecocriticism or Deep Ecology,¹² what Head calls 'Buell's championing of nonfiction',¹³ as the medium for ecological writing in such a field-defining work is also connected to Buell's personal quest to reconnect literature with the material world. Such an aim participates in the broader objectives of ecocriticism, but in this respect Buell is more cautious. If his rejection of fictional forms, such as the novel, risks alienating fiction writers, an insistence that texts about nature have the ability to accurately reflect the 'real' external world of nature risks making highly dubious claims about literature's power to distil an authentic essence or point of origin in the material world that have been disputed by literary theory since the 1950s.

Buell ends up adopting a half-way-house position between realism and post-structuralism which he calls 'mutual constructionism' (p.6). It is an uneasy marriage, but it is also one that Garrard insists is to a certain extent inevitable: 'The challenge for ecocritics is to keep one eye on the ways in which 'nature' is always in some ways culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists, both the object and, albeit distantly, the origin of our discourse' (p.10). Buell's insistence on the referential nature of texts also explains his preference for nonfiction. Using Thoreau's *Walden* as an example, Buell goes on to argue that nonfictional texts, making use of the 'outer mimetic function' (p. 97), may

¹¹Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2012), p.3.

¹² A concise definition of 'deep ecology' is offered in the opening pages of Timothy Clark's *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*: 'Deep ecologists urge a drastic change in human self-understanding: one should see oneself not as an atomistic individual engaged in the world as a resource for consumption and self-assertion, but as a part of greater living identity. All human actions should be guided by a sense of what is good for the biosphere as a whole' (p.2).

¹³ Dominic Head, 'The (im)possibility of ecocriticism' in Kerridge, Richard and Neil Sammells eds. *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature* (London: Zed, 1998), pp. 27-39 (p.33).

present a bridge between text and world. As Head clarifies: ‘From an ecocritical perspective, the advantage of nonfictional nature writing is that it simplifies the processes of discursive mediation in putting readers in touch with the outer reality that is represented’ (‘Ecocriticism and the Novel’, p. 237). For Buell, it is ‘the stylized image’ of literary nonfiction ‘which has the greater capacity to put the reader or viewer in touch with the environment,’ than the language of prose fiction (p.97).

2. The Critical Backlash: The Fiction of Non-Fiction Nature Writing

Buell’s writing on nonfiction and fiction in *The Environmental Imagination* and the broader generic questions raised by it have invited heated response from critics ever since its publication, both in the form of endorsement and oppositional critique. The most obvious weakness in Buell’s argument rests on his problematic assumptions about the referential authority of nonfiction. An immediate source of self-contradiction is implied by Buell’s choice of primary texts. *Walden* by Henry Thoreau, is, if not a novel, at least very self-consciously literary and highly stylized. The subject of seven revisions, this journal is an intertextual tapestry of verse, doggerel rhymes and prose that Leonard N. Neufeldt describes as ‘a multitext in search of a form’.¹⁴ Additionally, Thoreau’s observations of nature frequently encourage the reader to view the environment as a text. ‘Much is published, but little printed’, writes Thoreau of the natural world (p.84). Such meta-textuality already places *Walden* at a certain distance from the traditional path of ‘nonfiction’. Timothy Clark is also sceptical about the pretensions towards referentiality in nonfiction texts such as *Walden*. He calls upon readers to question ‘the status of literariness and artifice’ (p.38) in works of nonfiction like *Walden* or Barry Lopez’s *Of Wolves and Men*, which he says deliberately create an ‘illusion of immediate observation’ and depreciate or ‘downplay writing as an implicit intrusion of artifice’ in the natural environments they depict. Clark goes on to argue that: ‘the very concept of nonfiction is evidently fragile and even undecidable: how much adding of second-hand material, embellishment, shaping, rewriting and so on will lead people to regard a work as fictional rather than nonfiction?’ (p.38). Murphy concisely refers to this fallacy as ‘the fiction of nonfictionality’ (p.50) and quotes David James Duncan’s remark that ‘the kind of imaginative writing known as ‘nonfiction’ is, by any name, inextricably

¹⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden or Life in the Woods* (Eldritch Press: Internet Bookmobile, 2004), <<http://www.eldritchpress.org/walden5.pdf>> [accessed 24.12.2016], p.32.

entangled in the kind of imaginative writing we call ‘fiction,’ and vice versa, and those who like their categories clean may well start wringing their hands’ (Qtd in Murphy, p.25). In this case, the hierarchy that Buell posits between fiction and nonfiction, resting on a clear distinction between them, becomes untenable.

Another aspect of *The Environmental Imagination* which has generated controversy is related to Buell’s zeal to reverse the damage done ‘by the de-emphasis on mimesis in literary studies’ (p.32). Buell goes knowingly against the grain of dominant postmodernist theoretical discourses, premised on Derrida’s concept of *différance*, that view literary Nature as inescapably dematerialised. He calls this the ‘premise of intractable textuality’ (p.11). In advocating this ‘return to realism’ (Philips, p.586), he commits a number of literary theoretical *faux-pas* that have invited scathing criticism from ‘postmodernist’ ecocritics such as Dana Philips (see below).

We can see why Buell’s ideas have attracted criticism when they have been broadly repurposed in the language of less prudent scholars. For example, echoing Buell, Frank Stewart writes, ‘nature writing at its best is a literary art as rigorous as natural science, with a similar allegiance to verifiable fact. As literary artists, nature writers interpret and vivify their observations through aesthetic language’.¹⁵ Stewart’s formulation makes the philosophical lacunae of Buell’s ambidextrous position of ‘mutual constructionism’ glaringly obvious and unwittingly highlights all the hermeneutic difficulties associated with casting works of ecological nonfiction as quasi-scientific enterprises with a literary ‘finish’. There are a number of problems here, not least of which is what Philips calls the ‘realism-cum-positivism’ of Buell and Stewart’s claims that nonfictional ecotexts enjoy a privileged, direct and mimetic relation with the real world of nature (p.585). For Philips, Buell’s ecocritical agenda ignores half a century’s advance in formalist and structuralist scholarship and brazenly ‘flout[s] the warnings of theory about the naiveté of realism’ (Ibid).

One ironic consequence of Buell’s failure to fully justify his programme of nonfictional environmental writing in the context of the formalist critique of realism, is that it provides an unexpected opening for the Nature Novel. Though we can sympathise with Buell’s frustration with theory – ‘Must literature always lead us away from the physical world, never back to it?’ (p.11) – it might be that it is the novel, rather than the nonfiction nature text that resolves what Dominic Head calls ‘the confrontation between deep ecology and post-structuralism’ (‘The (im)possibility of ecocriticism, p.27). But how can this be? Can

¹⁵ Frank Stewart, *A Natural History of Nature Writing* (Washington: Island Press, 1994), p.xix.

fictional modes put us in touch with a material 'outer' reality? Ironically, perhaps formalist and other literary critics would be more willing to accept prose fiction's ability to depict ecological 'realities' through the mediating processes of allegory, symbol and metaphor, than positivist nonfictional nature writing texts, which uncomfortably straddle the disciplines of science, natural history and literature. This is certainly Murphy's view. He cites the interesting example of the American author Wendell Berry as a case-in-point. Berry is a farmer and environmental activist, as well as a 'multigenre' author of environmental publications including nature writing essays, nature poetry and ecological fictions such as *Remembering* (1988) and *A Place on Earth* (1967). Comparing Berry's essays and fiction writing, Murphy remarks:

Much would be lost if critics and readers affected by a nonfiction prejudice focussed only on Berry's essay collections in order to learn about nature and environmental issues and ignored the rest of his writing. Yet overall his fiction has been slighted by critics, who tend to define him as either an essayist or a poet rather than a multigenre author. (p.26).

Murphy goes on to remark that the non-didactic and perhaps less politically 'direct' mode of novelistic discourse is an even more effective communicator of environmentalist concerns than the polemical and rhetorical forms of the essay. He suggests that the answer to the question 'How shall we live?' so fundamental to ecology, might be presented in a more palatable form to the general reader in fiction than nonfiction (p.25). He concludes by suggesting that the ecological output of authors like Berry in a range of literary forms suggests that 'environmentally concerned writers consider fiction just as truthful, and often as factual, as nonfiction, and the novel or short story more appropriate for some narratives and themes than the essay' (p.25).

3. Responding to the Theoretical Problems of the Ecocentric Text

This discussion of Berry brings us to the final major objection to the environmental novel, first asserted by Buell and explored further by Dominic Head: that is, its ineluctable homocentricism. Although it is not difficult to substitute Buell's embattled notion of 'the stylized image' and its 'direct' mimesis for the indirect, though potentially more open, signification processes of the novel, the grounds for Buell's other main resistance to the novel, its inherent emphasis on human character, seem much more difficult to surmount. Indeed, it seems undeniable that most novels prioritise human journeys, human communities and personal development as themes and that it is precisely '[t]he tendency of the novel to

focus on personal development, and on social rather than environmental matters (and on time rather than place) [that] is sometimes said to create an impression of alienation from the natural' (Head, 'Ecocriticism and the Novel', p. 236).

There are different ways of thinking about this challenge to the construction and underlying validity of the New Nature Novel. The first is that, as Dominic Head points out, Buell's call for ecological texts, in which nature not man, takes centre stage (or equal first place), has rarely been achieved in practice. As he writes: 'One can think of very few novels in which this principle is sustained throughout, and the logic of this requirement may contradict the novel's role as a social medium' (Ibid, p. 237). An extension of this line of argument is that the few cases where authors have genuinely attempted to construct novels which eclipse as far as possible anthropocentric themes and storylines (Raymond Williams's *People of the Black Mountains*, [1989], is one literary example), are necessarily highly experimental. They hardly seem to satisfy the mission of ecocriticism or environmentalism: to make the re-privileging of the environment a concern of the mainstream. Returning to the precise wording of Buell's 'environmental checklist', it is more plausible to imagine an ecological narrative which '*begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history*' (my emphasis), i.e. which stresses the themes of co-dependency between humans and non-human nature rather than as treating them as categories in isolation. Such a work consciously registers the ideological shift from an anthropological perspective (which regards 'Man' and 'Nature' as separate entities) to an integrated ecocentric one, which roots human narratives within the larger context of the biosphere.

Thus, if we accept the premise that the ecological crisis we are faced with today is also a social crisis – not only precipitated by human beings, but by social and cultural attitudes and behaviours – and that it is important to foreground the importance of human narratives, actors and human participation in ecological discourse, it could be argued that, contrary to the thinking of Buell and Lyons, the novel form is not only a theoretically possible vehicle for Green ideas, but, given the crisis of climate change, an effective and appropriate one too. Such reasoning is extrapolated from an observation that Williams presents in *The English Novel*, namely that the emergence of the novel form signals 'the crisis of the knowable community', and that the periods in which the novel form has flourished have been times of marked social crises, such as those that marked Britain in the middle of the nineteenth century and latter half of the twentieth century.¹⁶ In this context it

¹⁶ Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (London: Hogarth Press, 1984), p.1.

may be well worth asking whether it is precisely in this post-millennial epoch of climate change where the question ‘How shall we live?’ (see Murphy) seems more pressing than ever before, that writers are advised to endorse the novel form, writing on behalf of both man *and* the environment.

In fact, this view of the novel is supported by eminent thinkers (Bakhtin, Williams, Head, Bracke, Murphy) who argue that the novel is not the least appropriate and reliable vessel for exploring real social crises, but the best. Bakhtin celebrates the novel’s ability to open out discourse, in contrast to the deadening effects of the ‘epic’ genre’.¹⁷ This vindication of the novel follows Lukács’ diagnosis of the novel form as inherently ‘dissonant’ and ‘imperfect’: a product of industrial relations and thus the mirror of an alienated world.¹⁸ However, for Bakhtin the fallen status of the novel constitutes an advantage rather than a disadvantage. In his 2015 reappraisal of the novel, Peter Boxall also celebrates the discursive and critical possibilities of the novel, on account of its intrinsic emphasis on sociability and community. He notes, ‘the world-making power of prose fiction arises from the capacity of the novel to reject or suspend the forms of community that it helps to create’.¹⁹ In this case, Boxall not only refers to the community of fictional characters, but the ‘real-world’ community of readers and writers with which this fictional world bisects and collides. Astrid Bracke also discusses the heteroglossia of the novel form as a strength rather than a weakness in the context of debates about environmental representation. She observes that: ‘[t]he novel’s truths are not reducible to a formulation, a proposition. They are partial, provisional. ...The novel’s wisdom is the ‘wisdom of uncertainty’.²⁰ For Bracke this ‘epistemological uncertainty’ is well suited to the unsettled and unsettling era of climate change, fake news and postmodern representation. For me, it highlights a key distinction between forms of environment fiction and nonfiction, in terms of their rhetorical possibilities. This is not an evaluative statement. Of course, environmental fiction should not be seen as ‘better’ alternative to nonfiction, but it should be seen as a viable literary alternative, with its own specific formal strengths and weaknesses.

¹⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (USA: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 42.

¹⁸ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (London: Merlin Press, 1971), p. 71.

¹⁹ Peter Boxall, *The Value of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.11.

²⁰ Astrid Bracke, ‘The Contemporary English Novel and Its Challenges to Ecocriticism’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 425.

4. Conclusion: In Defence of Environmental Fiction

As a conclusion to this opening section of my critical commentary I would suggest that a careful examination of the arguments both denying and supporting the validity of the New Nature Novel have revealed that there are few robust arguments to prevent the novelist from adopting the ideas and concerns of ecology. Though there is certainly less precedent for transforming ecological themes into narrative fiction, it is neither conceptually impossible, nor does it suggest a dangerous de-privileging of the environment. Rather it makes the continuum man-nature its central concern and uses human voice and perspective to explore different modes and praxes of engagement and interaction with nature.

This opening section of the commentary has upturned historic objections to the novel form in the context of ecology and suggested that it might be that fiction is just as suited to ‘nature writing’ as nonfiction. This is certainly the view of ecocritics such as Timothy Clark and Patrick D. Murphy who argue against the idea that ‘some forms of writing are more natural than others’²¹ and point towards the fact that ‘the stress on nonfiction ha[s] led many ecocritics to neglect a vast body of ‘nature-oriented literature’ in other forms’ (Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, p.39) that could be equally informative, beneficial and educational. Murphy concludes by pointing out that ‘the really salient features of an environmental literary work may be its impact on the reader’s point of view, which can be accomplished through fictional stories as well as nonfictional ones’ (Ibid). In fact, the truth claims inherent to the quasi-scientific sub-genre of the country ramble or field diary, are, from a semiotic point of view, more problematic than the novel, which positions itself clearly as fiction from the outset. Fiction side-steps the epistemological issues of pseudo-scientific nature writing which posits a direct, mimetic relationship with the natural world. It gives the author the agency to shape landscapes and communities in a way that reflects powerfully and (ideally) non-didactically on the complex ecological crises with which we are faced today.

It is the same underlying optimism and belief in the transformative power of literary fiction that underlies Peter Boxall’s own spirited ‘ethical defence of literary value’ (p.2) in which he argues that ‘it becomes not only timely but also necessary to produce a new means of understanding what kind of thing literature is – how it differs from other forms of

²¹ Timothy Clark, ‘Nature, Post Nature’ in the *Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 75-89 (p. 81).

representation, how it makes meaning, how literary form allows us to imagine and represent the cultures in which we live' (p.8). Dominic Head is also an advocate of the project to reconcile the novel form to ecological principles. For Head, the fundamental revolution is not one which re-centres the environment in the novel, but 're-centres the human subject' in ecocriticism ('Ecocriticism and the Novel', p.239). In conclusion, I would suggest that just as Leo Marx argues for the centrality of the 'pastor' or shepherd figure to his definition of traditional pastoral literature, ecological novelistic literature should not eschew its necessary dependence on the human element, but celebrate it. However, the real arena in which the success or failure of the New Nature Novel will be determined is not the critic's desk, but the creative writer's workshop. It is there that the possibility of an 'invigorated Green materialism' (Head, pp. 236-7) will truly be decided.

Chapter Two

Working Towards a New Genre: The New Nature Novel in Britain

Marie Laure-Ryan predicts that postmodernity will lead to ever more forms of ‘cross-breeding’ between fiction and nonfiction leading to the proliferation of the former at the expense of the latter.²² However, in British ecological poetics, the obverse is true: the publishing market is saturated with non-fiction and ecological creative non-fiction (as attested to by the commercial and critical success of the New Nature Writers)²³ – and comparatively few attempts to write nature novels.²⁴ Richard Kerridge also remarks on this strange phenomenon:

Why has literature – the realist novel in particular – been so slow to respond to environmentalism? In public debate, environmental issues have been a conspicuous presence for at least three decades. One would expect a cultural development of this magnitude to register strongly in literature. ... In Britain, at least, this has been slow to happen. ... But in literary fiction environmental preoccupations have not yet made a very noticeable appearance.²⁵

In this regard, it is telling that the British titles listed in the appendix of Jim Dwyer’s *Field Guide to Ecofiction*, such as Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) and Richard Adams’ *Watership Down* (1972), are notably dated, whereas other examples cross geographical boundaries, as well as boundaries of style and genre including J.R.R. Tolkien’s fantasy trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*.²⁶ Some notable exceptions to this include John

²² Marie-Laure Ryan, ‘Postmodernism and the Doctrine of Panfictionality’ in *Narrative*, Vol.5, No.2 (1997), pp. 165-187 (p.165).

²³ The subject of involved commentary both in the public press as well as among writers and critics, Mark Cocker has called the expansion of New Nature Writing one of ‘the most significant developments in British publishing this century’. Mark Cocker, ‘Death of the Naturalist: Why is The “New Nature Writing” so Tame?’, *New Statesman*, 17 June 2015, Nature section, <<http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/06/death-naturalist-why-new-nature-writing-so-tame>> [accessed 12 December 2016].

²⁴ A number of British ecocritics have commented on the dearth of British realist ecological fiction, see Bracke (p. 434, 425) and Weston’s commentary on ‘the apparent death of the nature novel’ in Britain (Weston, Daniel, ‘Nature Writing and the Environmental Imagination’ in *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction since 1945* ed. David James (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.111. This sentiment is also echoed by Dominic Head who discusses the waning significance of ‘the regional and provincial novel’ (pp. 13-14) in his chapter ‘Mapping Rural and Regional Identities’ in the same anthology edited by James.

²⁵ Richard Kerridge, ‘Ecothrillers: Environmental Cliffhangers’ in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* ed. Lawrence Coupe (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 242-251 (p.242).

²⁶ Jim Dwyer’s *Where the Wild Books Are: A Field Guide to Ecofiction* (2010), identifies over 100 of the ‘best’ ecofictional titles published globally in the past one-hundred and fifty years, see the appendix, pp. 185-188.

Berger's trilogy of short-form fiction *Into their Labours* (1979), Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), Bruce Chatwin's *On the Black Hill* (1983), Jenny Diski's novel *Rainforest* (1987), Julian Barnes's arguably ecological collection of short stories *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989) and Ian McEwan's *Solar* (2010). But as Kerridge notes, many of these novels and books of short fiction, 'do not approach environmentalism directly, or engage with its strongest desires and anxieties, its eroticism, its politics. They tend to subordinate it, treating it as background or period-colour, or as subsidiary to the main concerns of each work' (Ibid, p.243). Equally, many of these examples of ecological fiction are set in non-British territories and urban locations, such as *Solar* and *Rainforest*, and the vast majority were published over thirty years ago, in the 1980s and 1990s, decades which witnessed a modest Renaissance in ecological fiction.²⁷ The dearth of contemporary examples of British ecological fiction has led critics such as Astrid Bracke to call for an expanded notion of the British environmental canon, arguing that texts such as David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* can be read ecocritically.²⁸ However, her rehabilitation of such texts, seems to stretch the definitions of ecological literature beyond any meaningful limitations.²⁹ So is there any precedent for the contemporary Nature Novel in Britain, a novel that takes the relations between human and non-human nature as its primary focus; and if so, what does it look like?

This chapter will begin by discussing approaches to modern ecofiction recommended by authors such as Greg Garrard in his writing on 'post-pastoral' literature before undertaking a close analysis of three works of recently published British ecological fiction: Malachy Tallack's *A Valley at the Centre of the World* (2018), Melissa Harrison's novel *At Hawthorn Time* (2015) and Laura Beatty's novel *Pollard* (2008). It will evaluate the successes and failures of these books as works of ecological fiction and suggest what implications they offer for my own creative practice.

²⁷ In addition to the examples named in the above list, see Raymond Williams' experimental novel *People of the Black Mountains* (1992) and Adam Thorpe's novel *Ulverton* (1992).

²⁸ See Astrid Bracke, 'The Contemporary English Novel and Its Challenges to Ecocriticism' in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 423-439

²⁹ While climate change and the evils of consumerism feature as a major theme of *Cloud Atlas*, its kaleidoscopic, transhistoric scope and multiplicity of narrative modes; ensure that environmental concerns constitutes only one element in a complex, anti-linear work. Other major themes of the novel include Artificial Intelligence and the ways in which personal and social histories are constructed through narrative, genre and voice.

1. The Pastoral and the Post-Pastoral

In the penultimate chapter of *Ecocriticism*, Greg Garrard projects a vision of the pastoral to suit the complexities of twenty-first century life. Garrard names this contemporary pastoral idiom the 'post-pastoral'. Such a vision is premised on the assumption that the conventional pastoral is now redundant, or as Leo Marx declared, 'dead' altogether (quoted in Garrard, p. 174). As Garrard writes: 'the pastoral has become not only a 'contested term', but a deeply suspect one, is the cultural position in which we find ourselves' (p.147). Garrard's tentative formulation of 'a mature environmental aesthetics' in the form of the post-pastoral takes shape in a set of six convictions or aesthetic predictions. For Garrard this set of criteria is trans-historical (i.e. elements of the post-pastoral aesthetic can be identified in Wordsworth) and don't necessarily all have to be present in a work for it to be viewed as post-pastoral. As succinctly as possible, Garrard's criteria for a post-pastoral work include: i) a respect for nature (p.152); ii) a recognition of the dynamic, 'creative-destructive' nature of the universe (p.153); iii) a recognition of the microcosm (Man's) relation to the macrocosm (Nature); iv) an awareness of 'both nature as culture and of culture as nature' (p.162); v) an awareness of our moral duty to protect nature; vi) an acknowledgement that forms of social and environmental exploitation are connected. In many ways Garrard's attempt to define the potential bounds of an as-yet unrealised genre mirrors my own quest towards a novel-based ecological aesthetics. Indeed, Garrard's itemised criteria could prove a helpful tool in helping me define the parameters of my own New Nature Novel. This is especially true given that, though there is nothing about these criteria that prevent them from being adopted by prose fiction, *the vast majority* of 'post-pastoral authors' that Garrard identifies, including most prominently Ted Hughes but also 'Blake, Wordsworth, Muir, Thoreau, Lawrence, Le Guin, MacLean, Heaney, [Gillian] Clarke and [Adrienne] Rich', are poets or early-twentieth century fiction writers (p.169). This, again, is compelling evidence for the absence of contemporary examples of realist post-pastoral fiction, and perhaps lends weight to Head's provocative remark that 'In the face of a gathering millennial angst, the post-pastoral novel becomes increasingly fraught, haunted by the sense of its own impossibility.'³⁰ So how have

³⁰ Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 194.

contemporary British fiction writers responded to the challenge of representing post-pastoral nature? It is time to look now, at three of the few examples of recently-published British fiction which I believe live up to the specific terms of the New Nature Novel and thus provide templates for my own creative practice.

2. *The Valley at the Centre of the World: Fictional Regionalisms*

The Valley at the Centre of the World (2018) is a work of contemporary regional fiction by the Scottish author Malachy Tallack. It centres on the lives of a small rural community living in a remote corner of the Shetland Islands known as ‘The Valley’. The novel features a cast of characters whose lives are explored through a series of third-person perspectives. They include Shetland indigenes such as David and Mary and their would-be son-in-law Sandy, and incomers to the area such as Alice, a middle-aged crime fiction writer who withdraws to a house in a valley to write, following the death of her partner Jack. As the whole, the novel offers a convincing portrait of rural continuity and change in the context of twenty-first century existence on the island. David is the central representative of the island’s traditional values and farming culture. As well as owning a number of properties in the Valley, he acts as Sandy’s working mentor, and stands at the head of his family in the position of a traditional patriarch. The narrator explains that: ‘This valley shaped his thoughts. Often it *was* his thoughts. ... It was part of him, and he could no more leave his place than he could become someone else’.³¹ Such a conventional and perhaps, romantic portrait of a rural crofter embedded in the landscape that surrounds him, is complicated by his own tragic awareness of the precarity of the life that he lives and the legacy that he leaves behind. Contemplating the future of the valley, David acknowledges that ‘he was the only one left who’d grown up here. ... It felt like a responsibility, a weight that couldn’t be lifted’ (p.30).

In fact, David helps to illustrate a decidedly anti-pastoral vein in the novel, expressed through its down-to-earth portrayal of rural working life. A good example of this is the novel’s opening scene, a vivid tableaux illustrating the slaughter of lambs.³² The narrator explains how Sandy and David ‘cleaned the mess, bundling skins and guts and heads into

³¹ Malachy Tallack, *The Valley at the Centre of the World* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2018), p.30.

³² There are great parallels here with the opening vignette of John Berger’s *Pig Earth* (1979), entitled ‘A Question of Place’, which illustrates in graphic detail the slaughtering of a cow. See *Into Their Labours: A Trilogy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), pp. 3-6.

black bags, scraping the jellied slick of blood from outside and brushing detergent over the blotched floor' (p.10). Through the use of sonic techniques such as alliteration of the bluff 'b' consonant ('bundling...black bags...brushing...blotched'), sibilance ('scraping...slick'), onomatopoeic language ('blotched') and jarring adjectives 'jellied', Tallack uses poetic means to forge description injected with realism (hence the unconventional allusion to chemical detergents). Such writing demonstrates a commitment to present the harsh, rugged realities of farming life devoid of pastoral beautification, but infused with lyrical power. Counterpointing the more familiar, stock characterisation of David and Mary as rural 'pillars of the community', honouring the age-old traditions of husbandry and custodianship of the land (Mary is a keen gardener and patient, loving wife and mother), are the forces of modernity in the novel. These are presented through a matrix of 'outsider' values which threatened to undermine the cohesion of Valley life. Ryan, in particular, embodies these selfish and exploitative traits. Having moved to the 'Valley' from Lerwick, he dishonestly takes advantage of David's low rate of rent in order to bolster his own income. Terry, another incomer to the area and second-home-owner, is a less nefarious influence in the novel than Ryan, though he still represents ways in which the callous immorality of urban life can adversely affect the countryside. His chronic helplessness and incompetence, expressed through his addiction to alcohol and alienated, toxic relationship with his son, incur terrible consequences in the novel. Not only is he unable to upkeep the house in the valley that he has bought for himself, and historically belonged to David's family, but he is responsible for the destruction of Sandy's cottage Gardie, after starting a house fire during a drinking binge. *The Valley at the Centre of the World* is an example of classic regional fiction shot through contemporary themes, such as the migration of young people away from the countryside, the potentially corrosive effects of profit-driven rent culture and the differing values that exist between millennials and their parents, the baby-boom generation.³³ It is a portrait of a rural way of life under threat and perhaps in danger of extinction, unless it can be endorsed and supported by a younger generation of non-native urban pioneers such as Sandy.

³³ Despite its contemporary status and themes, *The Valley at the Centre of the World* also shares many of the hallmarks of nineteenth-century regional fiction. For example, its use of Shetland dialect and carefully transcribed 'Glossary' of local vernacular is a key feature of traditional regional literature shown to brilliant effect in the opening chapters of *Adam Bede* (1854). The Map of the Valley that Tallack provides for us is reminiscent of the maps of Thomas Hardy's Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex, first published in the Macmillan edition of *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1929). Finally, the omniscient narrator who presides over the novel's multithread narrative and is able to penetrate the thoughts and feelings of the various inhabitants of the Valley is reminiscent of the 'web' of characters and lives illustrated in *Middlemarch* (1871) by George Eliot.

One of the most interesting functions of *The Valley* as a ‘New Nature Novel’ is that it offers an extensive meta-commentary on the modalities of fiction and non-fiction writing on place and the environment. This is mainly articulated through the character of Alice, a retired crime fiction author whose quest to write a non-fiction book about the Shetland Islands is a playful inversion and re-mirroring of Tallack’s own status as an established non-fiction writer on the Shetland Islands writing his first novel about the same place.³⁴ What is emphasized through Alice’s quiet mode of existence are the vicissitudes of her internal life, particularly her struggles to overcome the loss of her husband, and to create her work of nonfiction writing on the Shetland Islands that Tallack has self-reflexively named *The Valley at the Centre of the World*.³⁵ We are told that ‘This place was the story she wanted to tell’ (p.22). However, the ‘place’ of the valley proves more resistant to textualisation than Alice foresees. Initially, Alice struggles to condense all the material she has collected on aspects of the Valley’s natural history, flora and fauna, and botany into one cohesive narrative. ‘The book kept growing’ (p.23), she reflects. Subsequently, following her discovery of the recently deceased Maggie’s diaries and journals, the progress of her book is derailed once more. Alice realises that her project to give artistic expression to the spirit of place, is incomplete without allusions to the Valley’s social history and human ‘content’ too. Thus, using Maggie as her key, Alice attempts to ‘write’ this component into her book – a choice of which David, as Maggie’s former friend, bleakly disapproves (‘Ah’m no sure du understands whi du’s writin about’ (p.241)). Ultimately David is proved right and Alice is forced to concede that her investigation into Maggie’s past has been fruitless:

Everything Alice had written about Maggie she discarded a few days later. ... What she’d written, she realised, amounted to nothing, illuminated nothing. ... Geology, history, natural history: those were the bedrock on which the place rested. Having fixed them in words, as well as she could, there was, perhaps, no need to do more (p. 321).

Through Alice’s obsessive pursuit after the fugitive figure of Maggie and her quest to incorporate her into her book, Tallack explores the role of human actors in landscape and particularly, in literature about landscape. How much, his text metafictionally asks, can human stories tell us about our environments and are they ineluctably conjoined? Such a

³⁴ Tallack’s other previously published nonfiction works on the Shetland Islands include: *Sixty Degrees North* (2015) and *The Un-Discovered Islands* (2016).

³⁵ As a self-effacing character that struggles with insecurities and isolation, Alice shares an affinity with the introverted characterisation of Rhoda in *The Waves*. There is certainly a Woolf-esque flavour in the way she is depicted: ‘Alone in front of the screen ... dizzied by the passing of time, straightjacketed by the endless motion of the world’ (p.73).

question is at the heart of matters discussed in the first chapter of this commentary. However, ultimately his novel transmits deeply ambivalent, even contradictory, messages on this front. Though Alice's conclusion is clear enough; and her decision to embrace natural history (non-fiction) rather than human history (non-fiction and fiction) as the means to illuminate place, provides her with a sense of inner restfulness and calm; the status of the 'real' text *The Valley at the Centre of the World* as a novel, seems to confound these conclusions. Perhaps, Tallack's Borgesian sleight-of-hand is to suggest that everything constructed has a human agent and human 'story' behind it, and his own personal achievement, through the postmodernist Alice story-line is to amalgamate elements of non-fiction and fiction together in his novel.

3. *At Hawthorn Time*: A Contemporary Pastoral?

Melissa Harrison's critically acclaimed novel *At Hawthorn Time* (2015), suggests a different approach to the construction of the New Nature Novel. Though, in common with *The Valley*, it offers a close analysis of life in a small community and features fast-paced shifts in perspective from characters 'with different accents, different houses, different lives',³⁶ it is generically closer to the rural murder mystery than traditional regional fiction. As the title of the book suggests, the action of the novel is enclosed within a single month in the season of spring, and thus like Greek tragic theatre it has a very controlled frame. Its opening is also dramatic; offering a proleptic vision of a terrible car collision on the road leading away from Lodeshill: '*You switch off the engine, and as it dies you realise what every day of your life so far has led you to: two cars, spent and ravished, violence gathered about them in the silent air. One wheel, upturned, still spins*' (p.2). The cinematic quality of the novel's prologue and its 'tour'-like tone (utilising an unconventional second-person narration), creates a highly effective narrative hook. The reader continues the text with a profound sense of dramatic irony; their knowledge of future events shaping and colouring their reading of present action. The tragic, violent underpinning of the novel belies the pastoral simplicity of its title and reminds the reader that spring is a time of rebirth, connoting death as well as life.

At Hawthorn Time rests heavily on the dichotomy between the city and countryside. The opening pages of the novel feature a panoramic view of Jack, the novel's chief 'Green' protagonist, a young vagrant and former environmental protestor, leaving London behind him

³⁶ Melissa Harrison, *At Hawthorn Time* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p.38.

and heading towards the rural idyll of Lodeshill on foot. In contrast to the city of London which is associated with glaring lights and wide-eyed night-time revellers, the small hamlet of Lodeshill is presented as an oasis of calm retreat and rural productivity, surrounded by four asparagus farms. Jack reflects that, 'There was some lovely countryside up that way, quiet and slow and unvisited, and not too busy with day trippers ... It was an in-between, unpretentious place' (pp. 10-11). At other points in the narrative, Lodeshill is presented as a timeless pastoral setting, a distillation of Merry Little England unaffected by the vagaries of modernity: 'As he reached the top of the rise a church bell began to toll... tolling the living and long-gone villagers in from the fields and farms as it had done for century upon century, gathering them in as night fell' (p.104).³⁷ However, of all the locations in the village, it is Culverkeys, the old dairy farm, which is presented as the novel's most idealised pastoral landscape. The farm holds sacred, Edenic significance for Jamie; it is a terrain which he associates with the innocent, pre-lapsarian days of his boyhood friendship with Alex (see pp. 35-6). Thus, on one hand, Harrison's Lodeshill is a deeply idealised literary geography populated with overly-loaded symbols and landmarks such as the Green Man pub, farms, Elizabethan manors, rustic hedgerows, and overlooked demarcators of ancient significance, both Roman (such as the Boundway) and pre-Roman, (the holloways and 'Puck trails' that criss-cross the village and the ancient perimeter of the parish that the village community discover on their Rogation Walk). However, in other ways, Lodeshill is presented as a fallen landscape, where anti-pastoral elements encroach with ever increasing frequency on the rural idyll. This 'fall' is epitomised by the Harland family's disintegration, the Culverkeys farm sale, and perhaps most starkly, by the tragic suicide of Philip Harland himself. But the antipastoral is also expressed in a myriad of other ways in the novel, through changes shown to affect village life, both within the community and on its fringes. For example, the threat posed by developers and gentrification is suggested by the changing use of buildings within the village (p.16) as well as lavish, privileged lifestyles enjoyed by moneyed Londoners such as Kitty and Howard who move to the countryside from the city. The auction of Culverkeys farm betrays an anxiety about the end of the traditional farming economy (p.42) and an ambivalence about the future prospects of the land, as does the prevalence of non-native 'cash crops' like oilseed rape.

³⁷ Such descriptions are redolent of the heavily romanticised setting of Little Hintock in Thomas Hardy's *Under the Greenwood Tree*.

However, such elements of socio-economic and cultural change shown to impinge upon the hamlet, are trivial in comparison with the aberrant developments evolving in the peripheries of the village. In this sense, *In Hawthorn Time* subscribes to the classical structure of the Pastoral genre, in which a tragic awareness of ‘modernity’ and the corrupting influences of city life are present even within the rural idyll. Such a perspective is suggested by the view that Jamie glimpses from his prospect at Babb Hill, ‘Further out was the full stain of Connorville and the glittering motorway, and then the bluish rumour of hills’ (p.197). The negative connotations of the term ‘stain’, suggestive of long-term damage, in conjunction with the half-rhyme found in the awkwardly paired construction ‘full...Connorville’, juxtaposed against the assonantal liberated aura of ‘bluish rumour’, creates a sharp and value-inflected division between the geographies of toxified city and wild, liberating countryside. This is also suggested by the negative evocation of the newly developed urban topography of Connorville which Kitty glimpses on her way to the camera shop, typified by new estates, roundabouts and bypasses (p.133). However, the novel’s boldest metaphor for the damaging effects of anti-pastoral modernity is Mytton Park, a ‘huge distribution centre just off the motorway’ (pp.36-7), where Jamie works. Descriptive passages concerning it are rife with symbols of synthetic, toxified nature. We are told that ‘Bindweed was rampant in Mytton Park’ (p.142), that the nearby koi carp lake is shallow and replete with ‘overfed’ fishes and ‘scraggy’-feathered herons (p.143). In the passage where the centre is first introduced to us, it is didactically characterised as an ‘affront’ to the countryside in which it ‘squatted’, an anonymous and vast, ‘low grey mass’ (pp.36-7). In a wider sense it is Jamie’s uninspiring role working there as a ‘Warehouse Operative’ and the limited opportunities and bleak prospects for the young illustrated elsewhere in the novel through references to unaffordable housing (p.38), that are held responsible for the tragedy at the end of the book – the fact that Jamie cannot imagine any more meaningful way to invest his small income than ‘souping’ up his Corsa.

The novel’s most significant anti-modern content is channelled through the figure of Jack. In general, he is presented as violently antipathetic to forms of modernity which destroy nature such as tarmacked roads and modern conurbations. Fittingly, he prefers to take less travelled routes, navigating by a ‘telluric instinct’ (p.25) along ancient by-ways and footpaths. Jack’s characterisation is dense and multi-layered: he is the ‘Green Man’ of the

novel,³⁸ and also a Romantic wayfarer, who like Wordsworth has a predilection for composing iambic verse during his walks. However, he is also an agent of political change, since he continues to rove the countryside despite the risk of imprisonment and a number of past convictions for trespassing.³⁹ Thus Jack is hailed as a defiant symbol of Britain's ancient nomadic cultures and right-to-roam, 'less like a modern man and more like the fugitive spirit of English rural rebellion' (p.6). Another important part of Jack's Romantic characterisation is his close identification with nature and wildlife. This is suggested by the fact that he is able to see and feel things in nature that other characters in the novel cannot, for example, he espies 'a thrush's nest in a hedge with four blue eggs; spoil from a rabbit scrape rich with little shells from deep in the soil' (pp.27-8). Jack's profound understanding of nature is also suggested by the notation of landscape he makes (redolent of field journal entries), inserted as the novel's chapter titles e.g. *'Milkwort, cranesbill. Pedunculate oaks – first flower tassels. Spring weather: sunshine and showers'* (p.95). In sum, Jack is presented a man whose history is full of blanks, whose roving, nomadic lifestyle and congress with nature has fundamentally rewilded him. The ancient and mystical aspects of land culture and communion that he personifies, are reinforced by the fact that he is discovered by Kitty on her ancient 'Puck trail'.⁴⁰ His exhortation to her, 'You're just no looking properly' (p.154), leads to her artistic epiphany 'that she could, somehow, connect' her own painterly practice to modern nature (p.210). In this sense, Kitty's journey towards understanding acts as a self-reflexive allegory for what Harrison achieves herself, through the writing of this nature novel.

Overall, *At Hawthorn Time* is an ambitious, genre-defying work which admixes crime-fiction and nature writing, to offer a rich and varied discourse about nature. The anti-pastoral threads in the novel alert us to the fact that Harrison does not only write a novel about nature, but also about the ways patterns of living in the countryside have changed and are changing still. However, the Romantic and political threads of the novel, suggest another, perhaps more evangelical purpose at the centre of the text: an exhortation for the reader to enact their own form of rural rebellion and rediscover forms of kinship with the earth, like

³⁸ There are a number of allusions to the Green Man in *At Hawthorn Time*, one of the most significant of these is Kitty's sighting of the pagan god on one of the roof bosses of her local church in Chapter Six of the novel (p.51).

³⁹ Possible models for this characterisation of Jack include the seventeenth-century land protestors called the Diggers and Levellers, and perhaps, in more recent times the activist Stephen Gogh, imprisoned several times for his naked rambles across Britain.

⁴⁰ See p.153, 'On the other side of the little flood crouched a bearded man, looking directly at her through her viewfinder.'

Jack and Kitty do. Echoing the great words of *Howards End*, the novel functions as a plea for ‘Connection’.⁴¹

4. *Pollard*: The Language of Trees

Both *At Hawthorn Time* and *The Valley at the Centre of the World* constitute New Nature Novels, but both also prioritise the exploration of human relationships. For example, in *The Valley*, Sandy’s personal and familial relationships and Alice’s bereavement, form emotional and structural cruxes of the novel. *At Hawthorn Time* is a fast-paced, plot-driven narrative, where cameos of human drama and intrigue, such as Howard and Kitty’s failing marriage, are adeptly combined with discourses about rural nature. *Pollard* (2009) by Laura Beatty, takes a different approach. The novel tells the story of the rather unconventional heroine, Anne’s, survival in her local woodland over a number of years and her transformation from urban dweller to ‘survivor’ in the context of modern-day Britain. Of course, Anne’s retreat to the woods might be read as a modern re-phrasing of the *Walden* narrative, except that Anne doesn’t choose her lifestyle like Thoreau, as a result of a conscious or political decision, but as a result of an instinctual feeling of ‘belonging’ to the hanging wood, and feeling ostracised, due to her mental health issues, from her family and community (see p.18). Overall, *Pollard* is a more challenging and abstract novel than either of the aforementioned texts, and comes closer to creating what myself – and perhaps other ecocritics such as Buell and Bates – would consider a genuine poetics of the earth, than they do.⁴² This effect is not only achieved through a plot design which prioritises description and exposition of nature above ‘action’ and ‘characterisation’, but also by virtue of the choice of the novel’s protagonist, Anne, who has a limited ability to interact with humans, and thus, whose relationship with nature becomes the central pivot about which the plot turns.

Beatty’s prioritisation of nature’s voice is obvious in the way that she has chosen to compose her novel. The novel has an intercalary structure, interleaving accounts of Anne’s daily life and the challenges of her back-to-basics lifestyle with the perspective of the woods. The ‘Chorus of Trees’ sections tend to be much shorter and more overtly prose-poetical in

⁴¹ The use of this word in a literary context (see the passage quoted above), cannot help but connote the famous epigraph to E.M. Forster’s celebrated novel *Howards End* (1932): ‘Only connect!’ This novel is an apt comparison to Harrison’s *At Hawthorn Time*, since it shares many of its themes and preoccupations, contrasting timeless aspects of the British countryside with forces of change in modern life such as evolving class, sexual and gender values.

⁴² At the end of *The Song of the Earth*, Jonathan Bate issues an invocation for contemporary writers to formulate a contemporary green poetics commensurate with what the Lake Poets did in the early eighteenth century.

their form, than the sections which concern Anne. Like the Greek tragic chorus, this choir enacts a symphony of voices which both comments on the human drama of the novel and stands utterly removed from it. For example, one passage reads: ‘We are rooted, say the trees. Rocking, lifting, shifting, fluttering. Tangling their tops above Anne’s head. Always moving, going nowhere’ (p.35). The ‘voice of the trees’ is characterised by verbs in the present tense (‘standing, springing, dropping’) and the use of imperatives, suggestive of a universe of immediate action and being. The trees contain the ‘secret of transformation’ (p.35) and are capable of extending their awareness across the whole ecosystem, ‘I am what I am, it says to itself. ... Feel my hold loosen where the badgers squeeze a passage round my roots. Lift my crown in the wind. Pass it on to the next. Pass it on.’ (74). The trees speak poetically, through metaphor, metonymy, repetition and powerful associations. This form of non-human vernacular is in itself representative of the core value they encapsulate in the novel – the value of interconnectedness.⁴³

Such attempts to write from the trees’ point-of-view represents an obvious attempt within *Pollard* to delineate human stories alongside purely ecological ones, and thus to break down the hegemony of the anthropocentric perspective inherent to most novels, with a different kind of voice – an eco-voice and eco-grammar. However, another ‘call and response’ passage in the novel between Anne and the trees, is particularly interesting in this regard:

It must be easy being a tree, Anne said, and she rested her head against the bark of the next. She walked up the rides, to take the edge off her own pain, through long lozenges of green light. Tell me how to survive.’ [...] ‘We sit on our hands mainly. But Anne couldn’t hear. We are above and below. [...] We balance you, while you don’t think of us. So you don’t need to worry. Just know, when you walk down here, that you walk on our interlaced hands (p.132).

In this passage the doctrine of the interconnectedness of nature that the trees appear to assert through the collective pronoun ‘We’, is extended to ‘human nature’ too. If the ‘hanging wood’ is characterised in the novel as a supportive network, a network of connections and dependencies; as we can see from the quotation, humans are considered to be part of this network, not divorced from it (‘We balance you, while you don’t think of us’). Such a contention refutes the provocative, opening proposition of the novel, ‘There are no similarities between a man and a tree. As far as we can see’ (5) and instead asserts a non-

⁴³ Of course, the use of the phrase ‘non-human vernacular’ is not meant to imply that Pollard eschews human language, or the English language, altogether in her writing. Rather, an estranged, de-familiarised version of standard English prose is used to demarcate ‘the language of trees’ in *Pollard*.

dualistic Gaian or Deep Ecological conception of the universe – a theory of radical assimilation between human and non-human nature.⁴⁴

The most salient example of the positive congress between human and non-human nature, is the bridging figure of Anne herself. Throughout the novel it is obvious that nature thrives under Anne's care and custodianship. For example, at the pool she constructs beside her hut, the narrator notes 'there was a constant flutter of little birds hopping and paddling' (p.134). Her obsession with the young boy 'Peter Parker' is an extension of her instinctual love of nature, as she perceives in his 'cocky, destructive, sunlit' (p.196) demeanour, a congruence with the bold and vital innocence of the woodland around her. Of course, she also demonstrates an innate love for the wood itself, and deeper than this, a need to be part of it. At one point, Anne reflects that, '[The trees] just were, and that was what Anne thought she'd do too, just be. For the moment' (p.36). The language of the novel also emphasises the similarity between Anne's nature and that of the trees. For example, it is claimed that she 'holds her history, in time-rings of her own' (5) and that 'she speaks bird' language (6). Anne's journey to be part of the forest, leads her finally towards a material, arboreal transformation. The narrator observes that: 'Her fat limbs hung loose and sinewed. Her fingers became jointed and knobbled like roots. Hard as wood she was now' (p. 148). This process of Ovidian metamorphosis is prefigured by a scene at an earlier stage of the novel, where Anne, ill with delirium, experiences a hallucination in which she becomes part of the biosphere, 'as she watched, her fingers did burst and out from knuckle and fist and finger end pushed little leaves. Greening all over, in an agony of birth, her hands put forth shoots' (p.93). Thus *Pollard* posits, through the figure of Anne, a literal re-'greening' of modern man and woman.

However, Anne's struggles to survive in the sometimes, deeply inhospitable environment of the wood, also illustrate the ways that 'nature' can be intrinsically resistant to human existence too. As the novel's narrator tersely notes at the novel's conclusion, 'survival doesn't come naturally to us anymore' (p.304). This is particularly evident in the early stages of the novel when Anne hasn't yet acquired the skills and know-how to fend for herself. We are told 'She had cramps from nettles and beets and uncooked potatoes. Her breath was fetid. Her belly was tight and balled with wind' (p.39). Anne sees her desperate struggle to survive in tandem with other animals of the forest, 'thin as pipe cleaners, sucking on bones, nibbling,

⁴⁴ Greg Garrard discusses the 'Gaian' conception of the universe in the first chapter of his *Introduction to Ecocriticism*. See pp.

whatever' (p.91). The obstacles inherent in the total absorption with nature that Anne undertakes, touches upon a philosophical quandary at the heart of the novel: Is it possible for modern men and women to live in a state of harmonious, non-hierarchical relations with the earth? When she considers the impact she has made on the environment of the wood, the incursion of her hut and garden, such questions disturb Anne in the 'Boiling I' chapter of the novel (p.155). Certainly, the allusions to the rapacity and wastefulness of modern society inherent to the existence of the 'dump', and the advance of neo-liberal capitalist exploitation of the wood in the form of the Woodpecker café, newly installed pedestrian paths and 400 metre-long treetop walkway, denote the ways that modern society undermine and instrumentalise nature. Ultimately, the ecological message of the novel is ambivalent. *Pollard's* Epilogue (an authorial intervention), features a hopeful message of ecological restoration. Beatty argues that if we build a more caring and loving society we are capable of valuing the forest – and nature – properly: 'There is still the wood. More or less. ... although we have lost the knack of living in it. ... But it will take you, if you let it, like it took Anne' (p.304). However, such a redemptive message is undermined by the bleak concluding events of the narrative itself. Despite Anne's personal transformation and radical self-education in survival, she is eventually ousted from her natural home by a vast socio-economic mechanism which she does not have the power to overcome because it does not owe its origin to the forest. This mechanism is personified in the hypocritical, hostile figure of the forest 'Ranger' who exploits and harasses Anne. As she notes despairingly towards the end of the novel, 'she will never get free of the threat he represents' (p.162). Thus, from a narrative point-of-view the novel's outlook is intensely pessimistic: Anne's rejection from the woodland and her time in a psychiatric ward, and then as a homeless 'bag lady' on the streets suggests that there is no longer space in modern life for us to truly 'return to nature'. Natural spaces are being co-opted by capitalism and individuals who make a conscious or unconscious decision to withdraw from the system are inevitably punished for it.

5. Conclusion: Defining the 'New Nature Novel', Boundaries and Fences

Quoting Marx, Buell predicts that 'the 'wholly new conception of the precariousness of our relations with nature [are] ... bound to bring forth new versions of pastoral' (p.51). However, in attempting to formulate these alternative models, it is important to understand that this calls for a reconsideration of 'the relationship between topography and textuality, spatial

depiction and our own sensuous engagement with fictional craft' (James, *Contemporary British Fiction*, p.2). Evaluating how forms of the pastoral suitable for a modern context have been brought into being and reconciled with the novel, has been the central purpose of this chapter. In general, in Britain it appears that recently published authors such as Harrison, Beatty and Tallack have risen to the challenge of realizing new fictional versions of the pastoral for the modern age, more concerted and successfully than anyone else. Certainly, their output shares a clear affinity with my own campaign to fuse the 'homocentric' novel form with modern ecological subject matter. But how have the creative possibilities of fiction been harnessed to express ecological content in these novels and how effective are they?

First and foremost, all three novels are set in rural or natural locations within Britain. This is the case whether the authors draw on 'real', regional geographies, as Tallack does in his novel set in the Shetland Islands, or a generalised fictional location such as the village of Lodeshill in *At Hawthorn Time*. As such, the New Nature Novel is capable of exploiting aspects of regional writing which Bentley defines as exemplifying 'A detailed faithfulness to reality, a conscientious presentation of phenomena as they really happen in ordinary life on a clearly defined spot of earth, a firm rejection of the vague, the high-flown and the sentimental, an equally firm contact with the real',⁴⁵ but it is not limited to this approach. Another key feature of the way that rural settings are developed in these novels, is that they are illustrated in relation to urban or suburban territories. Thus, as readers we are always aware of the urban infrastructure that exists on the peripheries of the 'hanging wood' in *Pollard*, as we are made aware of how the social conditions of Lerwick affect 'Valley' life in Tallack's novel. In other words, these post-pastoral novels are not only concerned with rural realities, but the inter-relation between town and countryside.

Thematically, all three novels illustrate both positive models of co-dependency between human and non-human nature and ways in which social structures, behaviours and values undermine nature. In other words, they assimilate both pastoral and anti-pastoral content. Positive models for the harmonious relations that can exist between human and non-human nature are suggested through 'nature-loving' characters such as David in *The Valley*, Anne in *Pollard* and Jack in *At Hawthorn Time*. However, the nefarious, deleterious impact of social systems, structures and behaviours are also suggested by the presence of technology and modern developments such as motorways and corporate buildings. All the novels

⁴⁵ David James, *Contemporary British Fiction and the Artistry of Space* (London & New York: Continuum, 2008), p. 47.

prioritise the exploration of human relationships in tandem with the exploration of the human relation with nature. However, a satisfying balance between the exigencies of plot, character, setting and ‘natural content’ is achieved with varying success in the novels. For example, as Tallack’s novel proceeds, its focus drifts arguably too far away from the natural environment of The Valley and Shetland Islands, to focus on petty human events and dramas, such as the housewarming party at the Red House and the abortive love affair between Jo and Sandy. In contrast, it’s possible to argue that Beatty’s focus on ‘natural’ content and her relegation of plot in her novel, make it a less immersive reading experience.

The differences in mode, genre and structural design that we discern between the novels, illustrates the range of stylistic modalities that the New Nature Novelist might adopt. For example, *At Hawthorn Time* and *The Valley* adopt a conventional, realist approach to express ecological subject matter, recounting evolutions in rural community life and labour, through a linear chronology.⁴⁶ The authors also harness various well-established literary genres such as crime fiction or regional fiction in order to provide narrative frames and hooks for their action and human-drama-based plot-lines. Contrastingly, *Pollard* adopts a magical realist mode and an unconventional intercalary structure, in order to evoke Anne’s particular way of seeing the world in conjunction with the perspective of the forest. Both of these approaches have their limitations: while the ‘realism’ of Harrison’s novel is uncomfortably strained by the layers of metaphor and allegory that she builds into her text,⁴⁷ Beatty’s magic-realist, experimental approach, prevents her from expressing a normative response to nature, deeply inflected as Anne’s perspective is, by issues surrounding mental health.

So how has my reading of these texts helped me to define the key characteristics of the emergent sub-genre I am calling the New Nature Novel? I conceive the New Nature Novel as a home-grown, British, ecofictional phenomenon that looks back towards the realist tradition of Hardy and Lawrence but is updated in a contemporary, post-pastoral spirit. Though many creative choices pertaining to genre, setting, mode and characterisation remain open to the author, the New Nature Novel should be set in rural or natural locations within Britain and thematically illustrate both positive models of co-dependency between human and non-human nature and ways in which social structures, behaviours and values undermine nature. My own nature novel will draw upon the examples of the aforementioned authors. Like Beatty’s *Pollard* it will be ruthlessly honest and critical of preceding literary idioms that trade

⁴⁶ This is true of *At Hawthorn Time* with the exception of the proleptic frame of the novel.

⁴⁷ For example, through the many-layered characterisation of Jack.

on an idealised or symbolic form of 'nature' (pastoralism, Romanticism, the Sublime). As in *A Valley at the Centre of the World*, it will exploit aspects of regional writing and as in all three novels, it should seek to illustrate the conflicting values that exist between the city and the countryside. One feels that an ecological poetics such as this could not fail to satisfy even Buell's stringent criteria. One way of achieving this goal would be to design a modern novel of community set in rural location, which attempts to dramatise the complexity, contradiction and beauty of modern man's relationship with nature. The next step is to test this hypothesis in practice.

Chapter Three

From Theory to Practice: *Wolf's Leap*

The novel *Wolf's Leap* represents my own attempt to resolve some of the problems raised in this commentary and to arrive at a 'mature environmental aesthetics' (Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, p.148) in novelised narrative fiction. Set in present-day Wales, *Wolf's Leap* tells the story of a city-born protagonist's journey into the heart of the Welsh 'wilderness', a remote part of the Cambrian Mountains, and the alternative community life that she encounters there. The plot focuses on the rough rigours of near feral living at the smallholding known as the 'caban' and the story of Lucy's growing intimacy with the novel's central characters, enigmatic Jason, introverted, mystical Sedge and Jason's 'wildest' dog, Kettle. Through the novel's central focalizer, Lucy, the novel explores complex issues such as how modern people relate to their environment, the politics and practicalities of sustainability, and the meaning of 'returning to nature' in a contemporary context. The novel incorporates elements of the ecoromance and ecothriller genres,⁴⁸ but is also a novel of community life and dwelling. Thus it resists easy generic categorisation and eschews moralistic, or what the ecocritic Scott Slovic calls, 'jeremiadic' (or overly didactic) content (Qtd in Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, p.89). *Wolf's Leap* portrays the darker ecological realities of twenty-first century life and offers a self-critical commentary on what Jonathan Raban calls 'second nature'.⁴⁹ It explores the complex links between modern man, ferity and wilderness, as well as what rural life means in a modern context. Neither utopian, dystopian nor ecotopian, this novel is rather a contemporary articulation of the regional novel. It presents a 'post-pastoral' vision through an elucidation of the limits, distortions and possibilities offered by the countercultural dream of 'going back to the land'.

As a work of ecofiction the design and execution of *Wolf's Leap* was shaped by a number of influences and critiques already discussed in this commentary, including Garrard's six criteria for post-pastoral fiction, Buell's four criteria for ecological texts, the examples of contemporary British nature fiction discussed in Chapter Two, and my own conviction that

⁴⁸ For examples of ecoromance novels see *The River Why* (1983) by David James Duncan, *Animal Heart* (2004) by Brenda Peterson and *Animal Dreams* (1990) by Barbara Kingsolver. Examples of ecothrillers or mysteries include *The Last Paradise* (1998) by James D. Houston, *At Hawthorn Time* (2015) and *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* (1992) by Peter Høeg.

⁴⁹ See Jonathan Raban, 'Second Nature: the De-Landscaping of the American West' in *Granta: The New Nature Writing*, Vol: 102 (2008), pp. 56 – 73. For more discussion of this term, see Chapter Three, section two, 'The Theme of Man-Made Nature in the Novel'.

ecological literature does not have to prioritise ‘nature’ over human stories but it does at least have to demonstrate a contiguity between them. An evaluation of my ability to respond to these challenges will be interwoven throughout the discussion in this chapter and specifically addressed in its conclusion.

Other factors which determined the design of the novel pertain to questions of setting, style and form. *Wolf's Leap* is set in the Welsh countryside and is a work of social and psychological realist fiction. I understand that these choices are subjective and bounded by the priorities of my own research rather than generically ‘necessary.’ Indeed, it is obvious from any survey of modern ecofiction that realist fiction – my chosen approach – is only one possible response to a subject that in reality can, and has already, produced a range of different fictional voices, styles and sub-generic classifications.⁵⁰ My own creative direction has been informed by my strengths and preferences as a writer, a desire for my novel to be accessible and engaging, and finally by the creative challenges that the perceived dearth of contemporary ecological writing in the form of the novel and realist mode has instigated. Thus this approach responds rather literally to Mike Vasey’s definition of ecofiction as:

stories set in fictional landscapes that capture the essence of natural ecosystems ... [They] can build around human relationships to these ecosystems or leave out humans altogether. The story itself, however, takes the reader into the natural world and brings it alive. ... Ideally, the landscape and ecosystems – whether fantasy or real – should be as ‘realistic’ as possible and plot constraints should accord with ecological principles.⁵¹

The following chapter will proceed to discuss and analyse the various ways in which environmental consciousness permeates my novel, in relation to theme as well as elements of character, plot and setting. This discussion will be structured under five sub-headings which endeavour to capture the most significant ecological content of *Wolf's Leap*: i) the novel’s setting in Wales and the Cambrian Mountains, ii) the theme of man-made nature in the novel,

⁵⁰ See Jim Dyer’s contention that ‘Ecofiction is a composite subgenre made up of many styles, primarily modernism, postmodernism, realism and magic realism, and can be found in many genres, primarily mainstream, westerns, mystery, romance, and speculative fiction’ (*Field Guide*, p.3). Such generic subdivisions are echoed by Murphy who subdivides contemporary American ecofiction into four major categories: (1) historical and realist novels, (2) postmodern and magic realist novels, (3) mystery and detective novels, (4) science fiction and fantasy novels (*Boundaries and Fences*, p.79). Kerridge goes one step further in his essay ‘Ecocritical Approaches to Literary Form and Genre: Urgency, Depth, Provisionality, Temporality’, by inserting a table which suggests which genres suit certain approaches or treatments, and the advantages and drawbacks of each (see Appendix, figure 2).

⁵¹ Jim Dwyer, *Where the Wild Books Are: A Field Guide to Ecofiction* (Nevada, University of Nevada Press, 2010), p.3.

iii) feral elements in the novel's plot, iv) the significance of 'community' to the novel, v) representations of 'rural' life in the novel.⁵²

1. 'Wild Wales' and the Cambrian Mountains: The Setting of the Novel

The strong associations that exist between Wales and the concept of 'wilderness' is reflected in the history of art, by the number of early and late British Romantic artists who sought inspiration in its rugged landscapes, including J.M. Turner and Richard Wilson; but also in the writing of George Borrow who penned what is still, perhaps the most famous traveller's account of Wales in 1862 entitled *Wild Wales: Its People, Language and Scenery*. In the book's introduction he avers that, 'thought not very extensive, [Wales] is one of the most picturesque countries in the world, a country in which Nature displays herself in her wildest, boldest, and occasionally loveliest forms' (p. xxiii). Cultural stereotypes about Wales as a rugged, wild and undeveloped nation, pervade much twentieth-century and twenty-first century writing about the country too. For example, on the occasion of buying a sheep farm at Dyffryn, Snowdonia in 1940, the Englishman Thomas Firbank, author of *I Bought a Mountain* writes: 'the wild, remote setting had already captured my fancy, and will hold it till I die'.⁵³ In *Deep Country*, Neil Ansell's 2012 account of living for five years in a remote cottage in the Brecon Beacons, it is not so much the wilderness of Wales itself that attracts him as the opportunity his secluded home provides for self-improvement and observation of the natural world. He boasts in the book's preface that 'Unless you know where to look the cottage is singularly hard to find, and that's the way I like it,'⁵⁴ and continues a little later on, 'The world may be filling with people, but there are still a few places that buck the trend and are being left behind, abandoned by the gathering crowds' (p.4). In both cases, it is the English authors' perception of Wales as a western frontier and horizon of wildness, and the possibilities that such remoteness offers – of reflection, cultivation of the land, a new life in harmony with nature – that lead them to settle in Wales permanently or semi-permanently. As an English author living in Wales, I have been keen to avoid such simplistic stereotypes about the Welsh landscape. Rather, *Wolf's Leap* captures a prism of different responses to the 'wildness' of Wales: exploring both romanticised outsider perspectives such as Lucy's and

⁵² It should be noted that this is a necessarily selective 'green' commentary on my novel, which I am confining myself to due to word restrictions. With more space to develop discussion I would also explore the themes of national identity and class, and the binary of magic and technology, which are also key aspects of this novel in terms of its literal and symbolic orientation.

⁵³ Thomas Firbank, *I Bought a Mountain* (London: George G. Harrap & Co Ltd, 1940), p.11.

⁵⁴ Neil Ansell, *Deep Country* (London: Penguin, 2012), p.viii.

‘insider’ perspectives, such as the Welshman Eurig Evans, a carpenter by trade, who lives in the Elan Valley.

The decision to locate the narrative in the Cambrian Mountains of mid-Wales is relevant because as a region it has its own particularly strong mythology and set of cultural associations. The Cambrians extend over rugged, upland sheep farming country and they have a reputation for desolation. Looking out over the Cambrians, Ansell observes that ‘This uninhabited swathe of the Cambrian Mountains right in the very heart of the country has been called the green desert of Wales, its empty quarter’ (p.3). In a slightly more lyrical vein in his *Welsh Journal*, Jeremy Hooker notes: ‘I welcome the austere Welsh uplands – they have a massive, alien integrity, as though nothing I do or say or think could ever cling to them or change them into the stuff of consciousness’.⁵⁵ Although the desolate picture of this hilly expanse fulfils one aspect of the rather problematic and culturally-constructed notion of ‘wilderness’,⁵⁶ more recent, science-informed writings on the Cambrian Mountains by the naturalist author George Monbiot in *Feral*, create another impression altogether:

With the exception of the chemical monocultures of East Anglia, I have never seen a British landscape as devoid of life as the plateau some local people call the Cambrian Desert.⁵⁷

Monbiot writes with a tangible sense of disenchantment. Far from romanticizing the Cambrians as a wild expanse, he insists that it is an area of strikingly low biodiversity, a land brutally deforested and ‘flayed’ by intensive monocultures and sheep grazing. It is precisely this paradox, and the multiple, overlapping associations that the Cambrians have accrued – as ‘austere’ wilderness or brutally over-farmed ‘green desert’ – that make this region a suitable location for a post-pastoral nature novel. Indeed, rather than buying into clichés about pristine Welsh wilderness, *Wolf’s Leap* retards them: insisting on the constructed nature of the Cambrian landscape and thereby disqualifying received literary conventions of nature such as the epic sublime, pastoral or wilderness tropes.

Thus, as a setting, I chose to locate my novel in a ‘Valley’ in a remote part of the British countryside as Tallack does in *A Valley in the Centre of the World*. Unlike the ‘pastoral’ setting that Harrison opts for in her quaint evocation of English Lodeshill, the valley in which *Wolf’s Leap* is set is presented as rugged and austere, as Tallack’s is. The conscious positioning of the novel in a ‘real’ Welsh geography of the Cambrian Mountains

⁵⁵ Jeremy Hooker, *Welsh Journal* (Bridgend: Seren, 2001), p.102.

⁵⁶ See Chapter 4 on ‘Wilderness’ in Greg Garrard’s *Ecocriticism* reader (2012), pp. 66-86 and William Cronon’s essay ‘The Trouble with Wilderness’ in *Uncommon Ground* (1996).

⁵⁷ George Monbiot, *Feral: Searching for Enchantment on the Frontiers of Rewilding* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), p.65.

(albeit with fictional and fabricated elements added to it)⁵⁸ endows it with regional particularity, but more than this, the low-density population of the area and the intimate love of place that both Sedge, Jason and increasingly feel for the Valley and land around *Wolf's Leap*, allows the novel to become assertively about kinship and identification with the earth, in a rural area which is both 'wild' and developed as a result of human need and habitation.

2. The Theme of 'Man-Made' Nature in the Novel

In an article included in the 'New Nature Writing' issue of *Granta Magazine*, Jonathan Raban refers to the 'second nature' that he sees as endemic to the landscape of England. He explains:

all landscape is land-shaped, and all England is landscape – a country whose deforestation began with Stone Age agriculturists, and whose last old-growth trees were consumed by the energy industry of the time ... where barely a patch of earth can be found that hasn't been adapted to a specific human use.⁵⁹

Raban's scepticism about the existence of 'wildness' in Britain, is echoed by a host of other ecocritics writing in a global context. 'Where today can wilderness be 'left' – and yet still be found? In a world of zoomable maps and satellite phones, what might such terrain look like?' asks Leo Mellor.⁶⁰ Scepticism about Britain's wild places has led naturalists like Richard Mabey to seek nature in urban spaces and cityscapes,⁶¹ or writers like Macfarlane to concede that wilderness may be as discoverable 'within a mile or two of [his] home', in the developed areas of the Fens, say, as in the wilds of the Outer Hebrides.⁶² It is precisely in this liminal space between 'wilderness' and developed, densely populated Britain that Beatty positions her novel. The novel's setting of the 'hanging wood' is an environment where wild deer still roam, yet which is being quickly developed and impinged upon by walkers, joggers and the disruptive youth from the nearby council estates who play on its edges.

Since an understanding of 'secondary' nature is so vital to an honest evaluation of rural life and twenty-first-century nature politics, it is articulated through a number of key

⁵⁸ This composite 'real' and 'imagined' geography is a feature of novelistic treatments of place that we also see echoed in Tallack's evocation of his own 'Valley' in the Shetlands and the village and community life of Rhulen, on the Welsh-English border, that Chatwin describes in *On the Black Hill*.

⁵⁹ Jonathan Raban, 'Second Nature: the De-Landscaping of the American West' in *Granta: The New Nature Writing*, Vol: 102 (2008), pp. 56 – 73, (p.56).

⁶⁰ Leo Mellor, 'The Lure of the Wilderness', in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*, ed. by Louise Westling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 104-118, (p. 104).

⁶¹ See Richard Mabey, *The Unofficial Countryside* (Dorset: Little Toller Books, 2010).

⁶² Robert Macfarlane, *The Wild Places* (Cambridge: Granta Books, 2008), p.317.

locations or topographies in *Wolf's Leap* including: pine forest plantations, sheep grazing pastures, allusions to the Red Kite breeding programme, the 'secret garden' and the enclosure. Indeed, Lucy's true understanding of the landscape around her and the realities of modern rural life through her encounters with these man-made environments, are an important aspect of her education at the smallholding. On her way to the Hafod estate, Lucy is struck by the fact that her perception of the valley as a wilderness is illusory:

the valley was no different. It was considered wild and untamed but actually it was pastoral: manipulated and controlled; a land of sheep-grazing and forestry. ... farmers and husbandry men had been managing and controlling the land for hundreds of years. Why should it stop now? (p.75)

In fact, so central was the theme of secondary nature to the original conception of the novel that the working title for early drafts was 'The Red Kite Project' – a title that deliberately foregrounds issues of human intervention in the landscape. Red kites are glimpsed at several intervals in the book, including by Jason through the windows of Cerys's house in Chapter Seven, and over Trisant bog on the way to Elan in Chapter Eleven. The presence of red kites in the book is a fitting regional emblem of the paradox of the 'wild': since they are a native, predatory species whose resurgence in Wales following a period of near-extinction is entirely indebted to the efforts of conservationists from the 1980s onwards.⁶³

It should be noted that the section of *Wolf's Leap* in which the conflict between primary and secondary nature is dramatized most clearly is in Chapter Eight, where Lucy goes foraging for wild mushrooms with Sedge. In this chapter, Sedge insists that they must first drift through the plantations of Sitka spruce before their arrival in the 'real', mixed Welsh woodland and meadowland where they can hunt for liberty caps. Metaphor and figurative language is deployed to emphasise the contrast between these primary and secondary forests. Whereas martial metaphors and metaphors of synthetic consumerism are deployed to signify the forestry plantations – 'The forestry bore signs of the human hand as palpably as factory-production goods for retail. The trunks of the conifers were as straight as arrows and planted at regularly spaced intervals like a platoon of Roman soldiers' (p.55) – descriptions of the broad-leaved Welsh woodland are characterised by assonance and open vowel sounds: 'The earth smelt pungent, fresh and full of the mushroomy odours of moss' (p.56). In contrast to the degraded quality of the forestry plantation where 'whole squares and rectangles [of conifers] had perished' (p.55), the broadleaved woodland is presented as rich, colourful and biodiverse, 'the forest floor fermented in a rich heap of rotting leaves,

⁶³ For further discussion about this remarkable conservation project see the RSPB website: <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/red-kite/conservation>.

twigs and mulch, like one large, disorganised compost heap that needed turning’ (p.56). The forestry, in particular, continues to play a major role in the novel. It is the environment in which one of the novel’s most dramatic scenes – the pursuit of Basha, Jason’s second dog – unfolds in Chapter Twenty-Two. In this climactic scene, Lucy acknowledges the complex significance that the forestry holds for her. She sees it as ‘a dark theatre ... a place she loved and feared, hated and accepted’ (p.181). Such references to the forestry plantations refers back to a rich heritage of Welsh writing in which they are embedded, including the works of R.S Thomas and naturalist William Condry.⁶⁴ The contrast between the two woodlands in the novel is also reminiscent of the contrast that Harrison establishes between the sterile, over-managed atmosphere of Ocket Wood and the thriving, biodiverse ecosystem of Copping Wood in her novel (see pp. 151-2). The prominence of woodland in general in *Wolf’s Leap*, acknowledges the central role that forest and woodland has played throughout human history – in myth, literature and spiritual and religious ceremony – as a place of magic, delight and transformation.⁶⁵

The forestry plantation is generally presented as a forbidding place in *Wolf’s Leap*, a symbol consistent with the notorious darkness of the shade created by the canopies of these industrially-farmed trees and well as their function: neo-liberal capitalist exploitation of the land for financial gain. However, not all man-made natural environments are depicted negatively in *Wolf’s Leap*. A case-in-point is the ‘secret garden’ that both Lucy and Jean Daniels go to such lengths to revive. Lucy’s husbandry and custodianship of the land, shown in her perseverance with gardening and trying to make a productive, fruitful space in the smallholding, is seen as an overwhelmingly positive force in the novel. Jason commends her for her efforts and finally Lucy’s perseverance is rewarded when her germinating seedlings in the vegetable bed become a symbol for the environmental and social regeneration of the caban that follows Sedge’s departure:

Jason plucked something from the soil and put it into her hand. The moonlight shone on a small green stem in her palm. A seedling.

“What’s that?” asked Lucy.

“It’s a winter start Lucy,” he said looking at her. “It’s a start.” (p.223).

Far from being an unwanted imposition, Lucy’s willingness to cultivate the garden instantiates the possibility of a more positive and sustainable model of valley life: the

⁶⁴ For examples see R.S. Thomas’ poem ‘Afforestation’ (1993: 130) and chapter 4 of William Condry’s book *The Natural History of Wales* entitled ‘The Native Woodlands’ (pp. 98-125).

⁶⁵ For further discussion on this topic please see Robert Harrison (1992) and James Frazer (1929).

beginning of self-sufficiency, where human needs and nature's resources co-exist harmoniously with each other. Thus, the inhabitants of the valley live in a un-idealised, twenty-first century 'wilderness' landscape; an environment where nature is both constructed and serves human purposes, where small pockets of indigenous woodland border large areas of countryside exploited for commercial gain, where nature is complex and forms it takes are diverse. *Wolf's Leap* does not present an anti-pastoral or pastoral, but a post-pastoral vision.

3. Going 'Feral': Human and Non-Human Nature in the Valley

Human communion with nature, representing the interface between the human and non-human worlds, is an important theme of *Wolf's Leap*. In the novel, all three central characters – Lucy, Sedge and Jason – are associated with different elements of the biological and animal world. As the previous paragraphs have shown, trees and plants are used as recurrent symbols and motifs in the novel. Sedge is closely associated with the woodland which he treats as both home and sanctuary, and Lucy and Jason are both closely identified with trees. While Jason, a carpenter, works with trees, Lucy becomes increasingly associated not only with the mirror-like pool of Wolf's Leap but also the rowan tree that hangs above it.⁶⁶ Jason and Lucy's twinned identification with trees is also mirrored in their use of figurative language: in Chapter Ten of the novel, Lucy realises that 'she wanted to be androgynous, powerful and real, like one of Sedge's trees' (p.74), while in the final chapter of the book, Jason frames his request for Lucy to stay in the valley using the symbol of the tree, "The best things in life come from staying. Just staying Lucy, like trees do" (p.223). The symbiosis between human and non-human world is also expressed in the novel, through the attribution to human beings of material qualities of the landscape which surrounds them. Thus Lucy is both amazed and frightened to discover on her foraging expedition that Sedge's 'calloused face, scored with lines and wrinkles, was lined with soil and grime like silt in a river bed. He had an earth face' (p.57). Such a characterisation echoes the arboreal transformation and 're-greening' that Anne experiences in *Pollard*. However, consistent with his characterisation as the authentic 'green man' of the novel, Jason is the character who is most often associated through metaphor and imagery, with the natural world. Thus in Chapter Twenty, Jason's eyes are said

⁶⁶ Rowan was associated with protection from evil spirits in the past. For more discussion about this see Fiona Stafford, *The Long Long Life of Trees* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2016), p.59. Furthermore, Lucy's growing interest in the wild landscape of the Valley and her use of the pool as a sanctuary to retreat to is redolent of the way that Kitty's vision of Jack by the pool in *At Hawthorn Time* is the catalyst to her own personal epiphany.

to be 'brown as hazelnuts' (p.159) and in Chapter Six, they are 'lustrous and impenetrable as teak' (p.45).

In addition to the cross-pollination between the human community and 'green' world of nature, the relation between human and non-human nature is played out in the novel through the theme of 'ferity' and the human community's relationship with Jason's dog pack. Jason's affinity with nature and his identification with the non-human is an important plot point in *Wolf's Leap*. The significance that the dog pack holds for Jason is implicit in his behaviour towards them; for example, in his decision to live beside the dog enclosure rather than in the human-dominated environment of the cottage, his anxiety about their wellbeing and also his habit of communicating with them. Lucy's initial view of Jason's 'wildness' and his resistance to the trappings of civilisation, are also deeply coloured by her perception of his closeness to his dog pack:

In fact, when Lucy summoned Jason to her mind, the first image that came to her was that of him walking his pack across the heathland and forestry with Kettle sprinting on before him, Mess, Odin, Basha and Shiva following behind, straight-backed; face unscrubbed, tangled hair tied back, a little scarf knotted about his neck (p.20).

But of all the relationships depicted in the novel, the relationship between Jason and his favourite and 'wildest' dog, the wolf-breed, Kettle, is one of the most fundamental. Jason admits the close level of psychic identification he feels towards Kettle in Chapter Fourteen, where he characterises her as his doppelgänger, perhaps even his alter-ego: 'Kettle was more than his dog, she was his *familiar*, his mirror, half of him' (p.91). Structurally, the dog pack functions as an important plot barometer and when something goes awry in the world of the animals it usually indicates that something will soon occur in the human world too. The conflict that the dogs create in the rural community in which they live provides the novel with one of its main catalysts for action. For example, Jason's sense of allegiance to Kettle and the pack is one of the reasons for his and Cerys's separation, as well as a point of contention between himself and Lucy as he suspects that she has been trifling with the enclosure. It is also the reason that the neighbourly relations with John Daniels, the sheep farmer, breaks down. Finally, Lucy's ability to act as Kettle's nurse when she is dangerously wounded is one of the key turning points in the novel and paves the way for Jason's re-evaluation of her as a potential love interest.

In contrast to the natural environment whose 'wilderness' is shown to be deeply compromised by the activities of man, Kettle is the closest thing to a symbol of 'pure' wilderness in *Wolf's Leap*. Unlike other dogs in the pack such as Basha and Shiva who are more manageable and domesticated, Kettle is 'a belligerent, wild dog' (p.41). At the end of

the novel, Jason characterises Kettle to Lucy as ‘a distillation of the whole wild world’ (p.208). It is indeed this ‘wildness’ that Jason finds so attractive in Kettle, as he notes in Chapter Fourteen, ‘there was a part of him that could not help but admire the bitch’s untamed wildness, her refusal to conform to his or anybody else’s expectations’ (p.104). Following Jason’s close physical and psychic identification with Kettle, it is this quality of ‘wildness’ that the novel suggests that Jason, on some level, shares. Certainly, an equivalent for this feral ‘wildness’ in the human social world is represented in the novel by Jason’s refusal to conform to the expectations of mainstream society in the way that he lives and the values he holds – for example, he lives in an off-grid, back-to-basics fashion, eschewing commodities, the routine of work and the expectations of family provider and fatherhood. It is precisely this drive for total autonomy which leads to the separation with Cerys – a fact which is implied though never explicitly stated in the novel.

In his essay ‘Ferality Tales’, Greg Gerrard characterises ‘the feral man’ as a ‘species boundary’ because ‘to shape ourselves *to* ourselves we need animals, because man is ‘a constitutively ‘anthropomorphous’ animal ... who must recognize himself in a non-man in order to be human’ (p.243). He goes on to explain that ‘if the domestic animal is the one who affirms our power and sovereignty most unambiguously, perhaps the feral animal is the one who, like the feral man, refuses to face us, and in doing so, frustrates our preening self-identification’ (Ibid). Within ecological fiction as a whole, the theme of ‘ferity’ constitutes one of the genre’s most enduring and popular motifs as can be seen in animal-oriented children’s literature and adult fiction classics such as *The Call of the Wild* (1903), *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) and, more recently, *H is for Hawk* (2014). Certainly many nature novels feature heroes and heroines who have turned feral and been partially re-wilded, such as Anne in *Pollard* and Jack in *At Hawthorn Time*. In *Wolf’s Leap*, Jason’s kinship and sense of personal identification with his dogs problematizes the traditional binary between the human and non-human worlds. Just as Jason exhibits qualities of the untamed Kettle, Kettle is shown to assume some of the attributes of the human community, clear from her ‘communications’ with Lucy.

For a millisecond, mad though it seemed to her afterwards, Lucy swore that a communication passed between them. *We are one*, Kettle’s eyes seemed to say, *we are one*. Kettle was no longer just an animal, but a person trapped in animal form. (p.42).

Ultimately, it is precisely Lucy’s ability to commune and relate to Kettle that enables Jason to find her romantically attractive, as it is a sign and symbol that she is able to commune and relate to him. In fact, this testifies to the novel’s inversion of the tradition binary of extrinsic

nature and subjective man. Rather, following Gary Snyder's exhortations about the 'wildness' of human language and the human mind in *The Practice of the Wild*, *Wolf's Leap* shows that we can still locate a basic condition of 'wildness' in civilized man and woman. This is most clearly illustrated by the personal transition that Lucy undergoes in the course of the novel: both through her immersion and appreciation of nature and her communions and ministrations to Kettle. In *Wolf's Leap*, the 'wild' is only partially extrinsic; the novel suggests, it can also lie within.

In his essay on Mary Freeman's ecological fiction, Terrell Dixon discusses John Fowle's concept of the 'green man':

The green woman, or green man... has the power of 'melting' into the trees, of fitting into the forest. This green man or woman exists, at least potentially, in all of us... The green woman part of the self connects with the natural world in ways that keep nature from becoming 'frontiered and foreign, separate'.⁶⁷

In *Wolf's Leap*, though it could be said that both Jason, and increasingly Lucy, through their associations with trees and wood, are presented as both 'green man' and 'green woman', in reality it is Sedge who is presented as the ultimate culmination of this close communion with nature.⁶⁸ Sedge is depicted as a hybrid vegetable-man, whose sense of identification with the non-human leads him into patterns of behaviour and speech that are more extreme than Jason's. For example, Sedge is said to sleep in the woods for nights on end, and, as the final chapters of the novel show, he is completely unable to control his behaviour and basic impulses which include violence and sexual appetites. Similarly, though in one sense the 'feral man' of the novel is definitely Jason, it is Sedge who exhibits the traits that we casually, or pejoratively associate with the adjective 'feral', taken to mean 'in a wild state, especially after escape from captivity or domestication'.⁶⁹ In Chapter Fifteen, Sedge is depicted as being both frenzied and ungovernable, compared to a 'tiger chasing its own tail' (p.112). Thus, though the novel as a whole problematizes and weakens the binary of human and non-human nature by presenting interstitial states, as well as positive examples of hybrid green men and women and hybrid animal men and women, it also suggests the dangers implicit in surrendering all social, 'civilised' norms – and thus the need, for a healthy

⁶⁷ Quoted in Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace ed, *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* (Charlottesville and London, University Press of Virginia, 2001), pp. 162-3.

⁶⁸ Such an assertion does not refute my earlier contention that Jason is the 'authentic' Green Man of the novel (see p.43), as Sedge's return to nature is presented as leading to unhealthy and unproductive consequences, as the rest of this paragraph explains.

⁶⁹ Definition quoted in the epigraph to *Feral* by George Monbiot (2013).

compromise between immersing oneself in the world of nature and the world of productive and healthy human society.

4. Social Ecology and 'Dwelling' in Nature: The Idea of Community

One of the initial difficulties faced in the planning and design of the novel was the question of character motivation. Under what pretext would a group of metropolitan and worldly protagonists want to move to the countryside in the twenty-first century? An answer to the question was suggested by Chapter Forty-Four of Bruce Chatwin's *On the Black Hill*, which portrays a community setting up camp in the rural Welsh backwaters of Rhulen (pp.214-5). Though this is a satirical sketch, it reflects a real sociological phenomenon, which is the attraction felt by counter-cultural groups towards Wales, the subject of a 2015 exhibition at Aberystwyth's Ceredigion Museum.⁷⁰ In fact, since the time of Coleridge's walking tour in Wales in the late eighteenth-century when he went scouting for a site on which to found his utopian 'Pantisocracy', 'hippies', 'utopianists', idealists, ecologists, environmentalists and individuals of all countercultural persuasions have dreamt about founding alternative communities in Wales. George McKay observes that in the years following the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, at the time of the free festivals, Wales was firmly established on the countercultural radar.⁷¹ Attracted to life in Wales due to perceived abundance of nature there, the relative cheapness of the land and Wales's association with ancient Celtic customs such as druidic tree worship, the legacy of this steady stream of counterculture flowing through Wales in the 1960s and 1970s is clear to this day. In 1993, Coates *et al* estimated that there were 'at least a hundred alternative communities in England and Wales'.⁷² Salient local (mid-Wales-based) examples include: The Centre for Alternative Technology in Powys; the aforementioned Tipi Valley in Carmarthenshire; and Lammas Eco Project in Carmarthenshire, all of which were visited in advance of the writing of *Wolf's Leap* and help to inform its realisation.

But what connection does the existence of communes in Wales have with the natural environments and semi-feral characters of *Wolf's Leap*? The answer lies in the relationship

⁷⁰ See Jez Danks' exhibition and book *Towards the West, A Varied Crowd: Stories and Images from those who Travelled West in the 70s* (2015).

⁷¹ George McKay, *Senseless Acts of Beauty: Cultures of Resistance Since the Sixties* (London, Verso, 1996), pp. 53-4.

⁷² Quoted in David Pepper, *Modern Environmentalism: An Introduction* (London and New York, Routledge, 1996), p. 318.

between environmentalism and social ecology, and also in the overall rationale behind the novel. One of my own priorities in writing a work of ecological fiction was not just to write a nature novel (a novel set in a rural or wilderness area), but to present an environmentalist work of fiction which presents alternative models or methods of living sustainably in nature for a post-millennial context. The intention was to avoid the aesthetics of ‘resignation’, defeatism and sensationalism implicit in apocalyptic econarratives that Kerridge discusses,⁷³ or the evasion of key issues such as ‘how should we live’ implicit in genres such as ecothrillers. Thus, as well as being a book about the complex reality of twenty-first-century nature in Britain (which is something that plenty of nonfiction writers have also done), and the possibilities and limitations inherent in the way we relate to nature (hybridity, ferality), I wanted *Wolf’s Leap* to be about how human beings can, and do, live in nature, both responsibly and irresponsibly – a theme which joins together the fundamentally ‘social’ form of the novel and ecology.⁷⁴

Overall, three communities are featured in the novel: the transient ‘Clan’ community which coincides with Lucy and Sam’s original trip to the smallholding; Tipi Valley in Chapter Twenty-Two; and the unofficial community formed by the triumvirate of Sedge, Lucy and Jason at the smallholding in the valley. The first type of community, referred to in *Wolf’s Leap* as ‘Clan’ is modelled on the Rainbow Gatherings which occur worldwide in secret locations. Just like the real-life transient, pop-up gatherings on which they are based, Clan offers Lucy the experience of a short-lived, though intensely experienced, utopia. Based on the concept of willing exchange and reciprocity, a non-hierarchical power structure and the importance of creativity, ritual, spirituality, community and low-impact, ecological dwelling, the Rainbow Gathering-derived ‘Clan’ fulfils many of the criteria that Hakim Bey calls the TAZ (‘The Temporary Autonomous Zone’).⁷⁵ However, despite the counter-cultural, subversive energy of the Clan gatherings and their ‘contemporaneity’, they don’t propose a serious environmentalist alternative to mainstream life because of their inherent transience. Structurally, they resemble a holiday or fair – an ecological carnival. This is one reason that the Tipi Valley Chapter was inserted. Tipi Valley which self-defines as a community that is ‘part of nature, living within nature’, consisting of ‘about 70 hippies, some of us ‘originals’’,

⁷³ See Richard Kerridge ‘Narratives of Resignation: Environmentalism in Recent Fiction’, in *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature*, ed. John Parham (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2002), pp. 88-101.

⁷⁴ This connects back to Murphy’s arguments about the central purpose of nature-oriented literature, i.e. to answer the question ‘How shall we live?’ See my discussion in Chapter 1, section 4.

⁷⁵ For further discussion see, <http://nomadism.org/pdf/taz.pdf> Hakim Bey ‘The Temporary Autonomous Zone’ and Great, Hakim Bey’s *TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*

represents a successful project of Deep Ecology in which community-owned land ‘has already reverted to temperate rainforest.’⁷⁶ The Edenic and utopian qualities of Tipi Valley, in which human dwelling coincides with natural regeneration, is celebrated in this section of the novel and suggested both by the ‘strange fruit’ that Poppy, Jason’s mother, offers Lucy, and Lucy’s own reading of Poppy’s polytunnel as a ‘paradise’ (p.173). Whether or not this is strictly true in reality, in the novel Tipi Valley is presented as the fulfilment of the dream of Deep Ecology, which David Pepper characterises as featuring ‘decentralized, small-scale, autonomous, self-reliant regions and communities. It emphasizes ‘reinhabitation’, that is, re-learning a sense of *place* – feeling part of that place and its community, caring for it, and appreciating and enhancing its unique sense of identity’ (Pepper, p.26). Responding to the aura of fecundity and growth that Tipi Valley exudes, it is therefore not surprising that one of the key turning-points of the novel occurs there: it is the site of Jason and Lucy’s romantic consummation.

Both of these positive models of ecological dwelling are foils to the central ‘community’ featured in the novel, which is the unofficial community space of the rural smallholding. The rather dark turn of events there arose organically as a result of the characters that I had placed in close proximity to each other and the relative hostility and bleakness of the landscape by which they are surrounded. However, this dark vision of community also arises out of a fundamental problem with the concept of literary utopias – the fact that every pastoral implies, and to some extent is defined by, an antipastoral.⁷⁷ The second trouble arises from the formal challenges and constraints of the novel. In writing *Wolf’s Leap*, I felt sure that I did not simply want to depict a straightforwardly utopian or dystopian vision. It was also evident that a condition of dwelling or a sustainable lifestyle choice, in itself does not generate sufficient novelistic interest (where it can do in nonfiction, for example in Roger Deakin’s *Notes from Walnut Tree Farm*). All novels feed on conflict and drama; they also require opportunities for character growth and self-development. My community couldn’t remain a static utopia or dystopia in any case. Determined not to write a pessimistic story of utopia transforming into dystopia (the narrative arc inherent in novels

⁷⁶ See the Diggers and Dreamers website, <http://www.diggersanddreamers.org.uk/communities/existing/tipi-valley>.

⁷⁷ The presence of the ‘anti-pastoral’ within the pastoral has a long history, stretching back to the earliest ancient pastoral writings. For example, in Virgil’s *Eclogues* the harmony of the rural idyll is always threatened by the distant, corrupting influences of the Roman city. Gifford acknowledges as much when he characterises the ‘[p]astoral [as] essentially a discourse of retreat which may... either simply *escape* from the complexities of the city, the court, the present, ‘our manners’, or *explore* them’. See Gifford, Terry, *Pastoral* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.49.

such as *The Beach* by Alex Garland (1996) and *Jean de Florette* by Marcel Pagnol (1986)), I opted for the second choice – depicting a dystopia transforming into a future utopia. The cottage as it is originally depicted, therefore, would not measure up to any Deep Ecologist’s conception of healthy environmentalist living. This is something that Lucy admits to herself at an early stage of the novel:

Where was the fruit bowl that used to be here? The smell of freshly baked bread?...Had all these vestiges of rational and healthy living disappeared with Cerys? (p.40).

Though historians of the novel such as Raymond Williams have argued that all novels on some level, propose and construct ‘community’, in his autobiographical account of community life published in 1952, John Middleton Murray suggests that fundamental problems are inherent in all communities based on the supposition of shared values and identities.⁷⁸ How has *Wolf’s Leap* adjusted itself to the intellectual obstacles of *gemeinschaft*? It accepts that a work of ecofiction can still be environmentalist without depicting all aspects of its human community as whole, happy and psychologically fulfilled. Arguably, a realistic projection of ecological life is more helpful to Green Literature than a static utopian model. In any case, as soon as you apply the central tenets of novelistic realism – psychological and emotional realism – to Utopia, the patina of perfection is quickly eroded. The need for psychological conflict and challenge in the novel is mainly dispensed through the maleficent character of Sedge, a self-styled mystic and guru, whose true fidelity to cottage life is shown to be motivated by self-interest: a desire to hide from the law, a jealous attachment towards Jason and a hostile attitude to the outside world, especially the world of women. While Sedge’s presence and the domination he exerts over Jason with his ‘technics’, creates dark undercurrents in the novel, it is at least a realistic depiction of some of the social challenges faced in ‘alternative’ communities such as substance abuse and the delusional or over-inflated egos of some communards, as testified to by Murray in *Community Farm* (1952) and the accounts of numerous communards recorded in the Centre for Alternative Technology’s oral history project.⁷⁹ It is also this darker, psychedelic aspect of alternative community lifestyles that T.C. Boyle illustrates to powerful effect in his evocation of the California-based utopia Drop City. Sedge’s habit of using his knowledge as a way to dominate and finally terrorise, is a critique of the more mystical, non-pragmatic veins in some alternative

⁷⁸ John Middleton Murray, *Community Farm* (London: Peter Neville Ltd, 1952), p.148.

⁷⁹ A portion of this archive is available to access online as well as at The National Library of Wales: <http://archive.cat.org.uk/index.php/voices-from-a-disused-quarry>

subcultures. The novel's 'authentic' green pragmatist is, of course, Jason; who is able to express his values and his affinity with nature in a way that is not harmful or sociopathic, but benefits the wider community – as shown by his 'open-doors' policy at the cottage.

The evolution of the cottage away from the darkness of pseudo-science, magic and lack of productivity, and towards the light of self-conscious and sustainable living with the land, also establishes one of the deepest allegorical or meta-narratorial layers in text: the suggestion that we are moving through a dark period of disunited environmental action in the face of climate change, towards a brighter future, founded on the premise of sustainable and compassionate living. Despite, therefore, some of the difficulties incumbent on writing about communities in fiction, it is arguably still one of the most effective ways of articulating green messages and creating an appropriate stage for green narratives within contemporary realist fiction.

5. Representing Rural Life: Country vs. City

The history of the British rural novel or what Daniel Weston calls the 'Nature Novel' is one in which the 'city' and the 'country' are held in tension with one another. This is certainly true of nature novels discussed in Chapter Two of this commentary, as it is of the prewar rural novels written by Thomas Hardy and D.H. Lawrence. We are always aware of the towns and cities that lie just beyond the rural, self-contained woodland community of 'Little Hintock' in *The Woodlanders*, for example, and the great industrialising forces at work in the land, just as we are made aware in novels such as *Lady Chatterley's Lover* of the grim contrasts between vernal oaky woodland of the gamekeeper's lodge and the collier's pit. For many critics, the strength of Hardy and Lawrence's rural writing lies in the fact of its being what Head calls a 'complex pastoral',⁸⁰ acknowledging that 'The country and the city are changing historical realities, both in themselves and in their interrelations'.⁸¹

Wolf's Leap is not a rural novel – if rural novel is taken to connote provincialism, a 'conservative discourse ... a way of evading industrial modernity',⁸² but it does participate in what Head calls the 're-evaluation of pastoral' implicit in Hardy and Lawrence. Rather than evoking, as *Middlemarch* does, an English indigenous population's rural ways of life in a

⁸⁰ Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p.189.

⁸¹ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 2011), p. 289.

⁸² Martin Ryle, 'After 'Organic Community': Ecocriticism, Nature, and Human Nature' in *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature*, ed. John Parham (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2002), p.18.

village, *Wolf's Leap* presents a more modern and cosmopolitan rural reality: Welsh countryside over-run with incomers to the area such as Lucy, and where even many locals are also recent incomers such as Jason and John Daniels. The rural world of the novel is globalised, interconnected and networked, a setting in which new age travellers are just as likely to be seen strolling through the commons, as the Welsh woman Cerys Evans or the English sheep farmer John Daniels. Such an evocation of globalised rural communities is also present in *A Valley at the Centre of the World*, where incomers from London such as Terry, Alice and Sandy's mother, make up as significant a portion of the 'local' population as indigenes such as David. Though the cottage in *Wolf's Leap* is decidedly remote, inaccessible and off-grid, technology is not absent from the novel – Lucy does what she can to get phone signal up on the hill and Sedge goes to great trouble to rig a solar panel up on the roof to power his computer.

The contrasts established in the novel between 'natives' and 'incomers' is highly relevant to today's metropolitan, geologically autonomous and multi-cultural world. The countryside is no longer the setting for the kinds of 'organic community' that Sturt envisages, one in which 'members of old-world communities ... had handed on, from father to son, the accumulated lore of experience...' (p.17). The concept of such a racially and linguistically homogenous community, dwelling on and farming the same bit of land for generations is anachronistic, especially in the context of Wales, where we are told in *Autobiographies* that R.S. Thomas's search for a genuinely Welsh-speaking parish is foiled time and again,⁸³ and where, as we have seen there has been a steady countercultural 'invasion' of incomers since the 1970s. Thus, it is very important that the novel's protagonist is from the city and even Jason, the 'green man' of the story is of English heritage. The novel's only 'genuine' Welsh characters are Bryn, Eurig, Aled and Cerys. The competing ideologies that incomers to the area, such as Jason and Philip Daniels hold about 'dwelling' in the rural context – emblematised in the novel by the tension over dog-walking near sheep grazing land – demonstrates the ways in which diverse 'rural ways of life' are imagined and constructed, then subsequently enacted by a metropolitan 'outsiders' turned 'insiders'. The novel also suggests, following Jason's admission that he bought his land with family money, that the real motivations that drive modern people towards the wilderness may be, to some extent, class and culture-conditioned. In the novel, Sedge also articulates this through his frustration

⁸³ See R.S Thomas's frustrations with his non-Welsh-speaking, 'Welsh' congregation in Eglwysfach, Ceredigion (pp.64-68) and his growing irritation with the surge of non-Welsh speaking tourists visiting his home in Abderdaron on the Llyn Pensiynula (p.99).

with Lucy: “You come here with your bourgeois values and your feeling for the landscape and your fairy stories. Now you think you matter to him more than I do. It’s bullshit!” (p.189).

Though Jason’s commitment to an anti-commoditized, self-abnegating way of life is initially seen by Lucy as heroic, the novel offers several alternatives to the extreme ‘rural’ isolation of his lifestyle in the quasi-wilderness of the Cambrian Mountains. Cerys’s inhabitation of the nearby small town of Trisant provides an important counterpoint to the austere and dramatic version of countryside existence that Jason enacts. Cerys’s ability to balance the interests of community life with family, work and the outdoors presents a happy compromise between the town and country. Occupying a position in the centre of a community in which she is valued and respected, and to which she contributes economically, socially and artistically, Cerys’s life choices present a kind of implicit critique of Jason’s decision to immerse himself in ‘wild nature’ (see p.109). In contrast to the abortive way of life that Jason establishes in her absence, in the valley with Sedge, Cerys’s empathetic and sustainable way of living in the rural town of Trisant, bears fruit. Thus the ‘baby shower’ scene at the end of the novel, overseen by the child’s father, a local mechanic, Aled, is not only a key emotional turning point for Jason and Lucy, but it also stands for the potential advantages of taking a middle-ground between living with nature *in extremis* and living in a large, alienating city with no immediate sense of community. The total rejection of civilisation or the *metropole* implicit in Sedge and Jason’s existence at the smallholding is counter-productive as demonstrated by their failure to sustain themselves emotionally and psychologically, and also by their failure to grow food and maintain a good living standard in the farmhouse. The novel suggests that productive and healthy rural life needs to be social and integrated within a wider community. Thus, rather than risking alienating ‘an increasingly urbanized population’ (Head, ‘Problems’, p.66) and readership, *Wolf’s Leap* attempts to depict how fruitful marriages between country and town can exist, and how ‘rural’ life can encapsulate a more diverse population and lifestyle alternatives than might have been depicted in some of the traditional rural novels of the past.

6. Conclusion

Over the course of this chapter, I have demonstrated how environmental discourse pervades my novel and have tried to outline some of the major challenges that were faced, including the question of how to reconcile community-centred narratives with the novel, a form which

necessitates dynamism and conflict. I have explicitly focussed on ways in which *Wolf's Leap* expresses the continuum 'man-nature', through its discourse on ferality and human immersion in the landscape, and ways in which, particularly through the dog pack, human and animal life are seen as mutually dependent. This commentary has also shown the difficulty faced in trying to imagine eco-narratives which deal with human habitation of the environment that escape the determinism of archetypal, underpinning narratives such as the Eden myth. *Wolf's Leap* has attempted to distance itself from sterile binaries such as 'Paradise' or 'Paradise lost' in relation to humankind's engagement with the 'natural', by trying to cultivate a post-pastoral view of nature: unidealised, diverse, shaped by human culture. As such, *Wolf's Leap* subscribes to Terry Gifford's view of post-pastoral literature which he briefly summarises as 'works that successfully suggest a collapse of the human/nature divide while being aware of the problematics involved' (qtd in Westling, p.26). The theme of man's co-existence with the natural and the attendant struggles this creates, is the major theme of this book. Thus *Wolf's Leap* might be described as a nature-oriented novel: ⁸⁴ one in which the human and non-human world of nature are not presented as 'frontiered...foreign, separate' (Armbruster, pp. 162-3), but integrated; mutually empowering, enabling and sometimes, debilitating. While it is true that *Wolf's Leap* is a novel about human nature, it is also a novel about how human nature corresponds to the world of non-human nature; and by prioritising this relationship as a theme it must satisfy even Buell's stringent criteria for the 'truly' ecological text.⁸⁵

Yet the need to describe a convincing social and natural reality was always held in tension with the need to imbue the novel with an ecological and environmentalist meaning. The novel responds to the idea that 'The Anthropocene represents ... the demand made upon a species consciously to consider its impact, as a whole and as a natural/physical force, upon the whole planet' (Westling, p.84), but it also registers the difficulty of these imaginings. Can the novelist really imagine positive models of human co-existence with nature that have not yet been enacted in real life, or imagined in the social sciences and world of politics? Some critics believe that writers are capable of this. Speaking of the Romantic poets, McKusick observes that:

By envisioning alternatives to the unsustainable industrial exploitation of natural resources, these writers provide hints, clues and intimations of different ways of dwelling on Earth. They offer pathways to a better future than we might otherwise be able to imagine.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ See the introduction of Patrick Murphy's book *Further Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2000), which establishes this label as preferable to 'nature writing'.

⁸⁵ For a complete list of Buell's 'conditions' for the ecological text, please see Chapter 2.

⁸⁶ James C. McKusick, *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (New York: St Martins Press, 2000), p. 228.

This is a hopefulness that Rebecca Raglon and Marian Scholtmeijer share, ‘Under the uncompromising instruction of the natural world, literature is capable of making amends for past mistakes. We are able to create new stories and fresh meanings’.⁸⁷ However, as a writer, this has been a less-than-simple textualising process. Is it possible to dispense with the outdated literary-environmental conventions of the past and realise a more sustainable literary vision for mankind’s relation with nature? One solution to this problem was suggested by the metaphor of gardening and land custodianship implicit in nature narratives such as *The Secret Garden* (1911) by Frances Hodgson Burnett. In the novel, custodianship and guardianship of the land reverse the spiralling destruction to Jason’s humanity and living conditions that his deepening ferality brings. One of the final, overarching messages of the novel is that dwelling in place and a sustainable respect for nature, does not only benefit the environment, it benefits us – it teaches us to become more human. This is what Lucy and Lucy’s approach – responsible guardianship – teaches Jason. Thus, it is not literary conventions for the representation of nature such as the ‘master metaphors’ of Eden, the wilderness or the pastoral that this novel endorses, but the metaphor of the secret garden. *Wolf’s Leap* is one attempt to realise a sustainable fictional utopia. It is an essay, a ‘leap’ – a novel of social ecology that represents a step in the right direction, though certainly not the final word on the matter.

⁸⁷ Rebecca Raglon and Marian Scholtmeijer, ‘Heading Off the Trail: Language, Literature, and Nature’s Resistance to Narrative’ in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, ed. by Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2001), pp. 248-262, (p.249).

Commentary Conclusion

Looking Forward: ‘Uncivilised art’

‘Thinking and writing about nature and the environment is a grown-up task, and it requires all the subtlety, complexity and sophistication writers can muster.’

– Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace

Since the publication of Lawrence’s Buell’s monograph *The Environmental Imagination* in 1995, much has changed in the world of ecocriticism and ecological fiction. The publication of Dwyer’s *Where the Wild Books Are: A Field Guide to Ecofiction* (2010), Patrick Murphy’s *Further Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature* (2000) and the success of novels such as Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behaviour* (2013) are a sign of the changing times and the growing ecocritical and public appetite for ecological fiction. Though many of these books were published by American publishers (University of Nevada, University of Virginia presses respectively), British commentators on ecological literature like Dominic Head and Glen Cavaliero still focus more on the status of the historic British nature novel or rural novel rather than focusing on modern British equivalents of US ecofiction, what this commentary calls the Nature Novel. However, with the commercial success of novels such as *Pollard* and *At Hawthorn Time*, as well as small printing and publishing outlets such as Dark Mountain press (tellingly popular with liberal American audiences and newspapers such as the *New York Times*),⁸⁸ there is further evidence for the growing impetus behind ecological fiction in Britain too. In fact, during a conversation with a member of the Dark Mountain editorial team in June 2017, it appears that more and more ecofiction, rather than nonfiction forms such as literary essays and articles, are drifting their way. This growing interest in ecological fiction is also reflected by the presence of genre writing such as ‘cli-fi’ online, as well as the increasingly more fiction-oriented contents of Dark Mountain issues, as seen by the presence of innovative stories such as ‘Truppe Fledermaus’ by Nicholas Kahn and Richard Selesnick. The sea-change is already beginning.

How to write creatively about modern society’s relationship with the environment in Britain and abroad is indeed what Armbruster and Wallace call a ‘grown-up task’. It necessitates that the author engage with ecological issues and nature directly but not didactically, avoiding clichés of historical literary treatments of nature and with full

⁸⁸ This popularity with American audiences is the cause of interest and speculation in the open pages of *Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto*, 2014, p. vii.

awareness of the seriousness of the ecological disaster facing us. The challenges facing the author who wishes to write about ecological lifestyles are considerable. Is it possible to ‘write in’ solutions and visions in art that do not exist in ‘real’ life, or only at the furthest possible fringes of society? Is there logical coherence (or simply a dereliction of social duty) implicit in Jonathan Bate’s remark that ‘The dream of deep ecology will never be realized upon the earth, but our survival as a species may be dependent on our capacity to dream it in the works of the imagination’? (Quoted in Dwyer, p.7). This commentary and my own stumbling progress towards the realisation of my own work of ecological fiction, registers these difficulties. *Wolf’s Leap* is one literary response to the problem this commentary announces; but it is by no means the only solution. Rather, it is an attempt which responds to the optimism of Head’s remark that ‘the modern novel, with its emphasis on private feeling as the source of public action, can be an appropriate vehicle for a Green agenda, whether creative or critical’ (‘Ecocriticism and the Novel’, p.240). An honest confrontation and exploration of our global ecological reality is something that can be countenanced both in art and in life. Literature, and the novel in particular, has a part to play in redressing the balance between nature and civilisation and envisioning sustainable alternatives to the consumer-driven society of advanced capitalism.

It also appears that ecofiction, especially in the age of the Anthropocene, will be inherently diverse, refusing to be straight-jacketed into one particular style or point of view. This conviction results from Clark’s observation that what arises from the Anthropocene is ‘a sense of the plurality, multiple agency and unpredictability, and compromised condition of the natural world’ (pp.80-81). There is nothing conventional in the mode, narration or presentation of the pieces of fictional work submitted to the Dark Mountain anthologies. They are necessarily short-form, but they are also postmodernist and formally experimental.⁸⁹ Reflecting on this, perhaps the major limitation of this research project is written into its makeup. Is fiction of the Anthropocene really suited to the novel form? The novel inheres a ‘knowable community’, a world which is cogent and coherent, where a network of relationships and ideologies builds an easily resolvable portrait of a society. Fiction of the Anthropocene may require new fictional forms altogether, ‘wild imaginings’. It is salutary to observe that this also seems to be the conclusion that the Dark Mountain editors also arrive at. They espouse a similar project to ‘pick up the threads and make the stories new... starting

⁸⁹ See ‘A Stone and a Cloud’ by Brendan Byrne (pp. 61-68), and the magical-realist piece, ‘Parable del *Payaso*’ (pp.87-9) in *Dark Mountain* Issue 9, Spring 2016.

from where we are' (*Manifesto*, p.20). In response to their observation that the topic of ecocide has drawn a paltry response from artists ('Where are the novels that probe beyond the country house or the city centre? What new form of writing has emerged to challenge civilisation itself?' (ibid, p.21) they advocate what they call 'Uncivilised art':

Writing, in short, which puts civilisation – and us – into perspective. Writing that comes not, as most writing still does, from the self-absorbed and self-congratulatory metropolitan centres of civilisation but from somewhere on its wilder fringes. ... Writing which unflinchingly stares us down, however uncomfortable this may prove... (p.22).

I cannot help but feel that *Wolf's Leap*, for all its many limitations, meets these requirements.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- Ansell, Neil, *Deep Country* (London: Penguin, 2012)
- Barnes, Julian, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (London: Picador, 1990)
- Beatty, Laura, *Pollard* (London: Vintage Books, 2009)
- Berger, John, *Into Their Labours: A Trilogy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979)
- Borrow, George, *Wild Wales* (London: John Murray, 1901)
- Boyle, T.C, *Drop City* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004)
- Chatwin, Bruce, *On the Black Hill* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982)
- Dark Mountain* Issue 9, Spring 2016
- Diski, Jenny, *Rainforest* (London, Penguin Books, 1998)
- Farley, Paul and Michael Symmons Roberts, *Edgelands* (London: Vintage, 2012)
- Firbank, Thomas, *I Bought a Mountain* (London: George G. Harrap & Co Ltd, 1940)
- Hardy, Thomas, *The Woodlanders* (London: Macmillan, 1974)
- Harrison, Melissa, *At Hawthorn Time* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015)
- Hooker, Jeremy, *Welsh Journal* (Bridgend: Seren, 2001)
- Jamie, Kathleen, *Tree House* (London: Picador, 2004)
- Jamie, Kathleen, *Sightlines* (UK: Sort of Books, 2012)
- Kingsolver, Barbara, *Animal Dreams* (London: Abacus, 1992)
- Leopold, Aldo, *A Sand Country Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968)
- Macdonald, Helen, *H is for Hawk* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2014)
- Macfarlane, Robert, *The Wild Places* (Cambridge: Granta Books, 2008)
- *The Old Ways* (London: Penguin Books, 2013)
- Mabey, Richard, *The Unofficial Countryside* (Dorset: Little Toller Books, 2010)
- Morris, Jan, *A Writer's House in Wales* (Washington: National Geographic Society, 2002)
- Murray, John Middleton, *Community Farm* (London: Peter Neville Ltd, 1952)
- Oswald, Alice, *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006)
- Tallack, Malachy, *The Valley at the Centre of the World* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2018)
- Thomas, R.S, *R.S. Thomas: Collected Poems* (London: J.M. Dent, 1993)
- Thoreau, Henry David, *Walden or Life in the Woods* (Eldritch Press: Internet Bookmobile, 2004), <<http://www.eldritchpress.org/walden5.pdf>> [accessed 24.12.2016]

Secondary Sources

- Alpers, Paul, *What is Pastoral?* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1996)
- Alcorn, John, *The Nature Novel from Hardy to Lawrence* (London: Macmillan, 1977)
- Armbruster, Karla and Kathleen R Wallace ed, *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2001)
- Bakhtin, Mikhail, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (USA: University of Texas Press, 1981)
- Bate, Jonathan, *The Song of the Earth* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 2002)
- Boxall, Peter, *The Value of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)
- Buell, Lawrence, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1996)
- The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005)
- Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press, 2001)
- Cavaliero, Glen, *The Rural Tradition in the English Novel, 1900-1939* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1977)
- Coates, Chris, *Utopia Britannica: British Utopian Experiments, 1325-1945*. (London: Diggers & Dreamers Publications, 2001)
- Cohn, Dorrit, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999)
- Condry, William M, *The Natural History of Wales: A Survey of British Natural History* (London: Bloomsbury Books, 1991).
- Coupe, Lawrence ed. *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000)
- Cowley, Jason ed. *Granta 102: The New Nature Writing* (London: Grove Press, 2008)
- Clark, Timothy ed. *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)
- Cronon, William ed. *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996)
- Danks, Jez, *Towards the West, A Varied Crowd: Stories and Images from those who travelled West in the 70s* (Ceredigion Museum, Aberystwyth, 2015)
- Dark Mountain Project, *Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto* (UK, Bracketpress, 2014)
- Dubé, Steve, *Welsh Farming Life* (Ceredigion: Gomer, 2009)
- Dwyer, Jim, *Where the Wild Books Are: A Field Guide to Ecofiction* (Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 2010)

- Evernden, Neil, *The Social Creation of Nature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992).
- Frazer, James, *The Golden Bough* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1929)
- Garrard, Greg, *Ecocriticism*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2012)
- ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)
- Gifford, Terry, *Pastoral* (London: Routledge, 1999)
- Goffman, Ken and Dan Joy, *Counterculture Through the Ages* (London: Villard, 2005)
- Glotfelty, Cheryl and Harold Fromm eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (USA: University of Georgia Press, 1996)
- Head, Dominic, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)
- Harrison, Robert Pogue, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilisation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992)
- Haycock, Marged and trans, *Prophecies from the Book of Taliesin* (CMCS, Aberystwyth, 2013)
- Heffernan, Julián Jiménez et al, *Community in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)
- Hochman, Jhan, *Green Cultural Studies: Nature in Film, Novel and Theory* (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1998)
- James, David, *Contemporary British Fiction and the Artistry of Space* (London & New York: Continuum, 2008)
- James, David, *Contemporary British Fiction and the Artistry of Space* (London & New York: Continuum, 2008)
- Kerridge, Richard and Neil Sammells eds. *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature* (London: Zed, 1998)
- Leavis, D and Thompson, F.R, *Culture and Environment* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1942)
- Lodge, David, *The Novelist at the Crossroads and Other Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (London: Ark, 1986)
- Lukács, György, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature* (London: Merlin Press, 1971)
- Maguire, Sarah, ed. *A Green Thought in a Green Shade: Poetry in the Garden* (London: The Poetry Society, 2000)
- Marx, Leo, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964)
- McKay, George, *Senseless Acts of Beauty: Cultures of Resistance Since the Sixties* (London: Verso, 1996)
- McKibben, Bill, *Eaarth* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2011)

- *The End of Nature* (New York and London: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1989)
- McKusick, James C, *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (New York: St Martins Press, 2000)
- Monbiot, George, *Feral: Searching for Enchantment on the Frontiers of Rewilding* (London: Allen Lane, 2013)
- Morton, Timothy, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007)
- Mumford, Lewis, *Technics and Civilisation* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1934)
- Murphy, Patrick D, *Further Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2000)
- *Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies: Fences, Boundaries, and Fields* (New York, Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2009)
- Cerys, Jean-Luc, *The Inoperative Community* (Theory and History of Literature), Volume 76, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991)
- O’Leary, Paul and Iestyn R. Hughes, *Wales of One Hundred Years Ago* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing Limited, 1999)
- Parker, Mike, *Real Powys* (Bridgend: Seren Press, 2011)
- Peate, Iorwerth C, *The Welsh House: A Study in Folk Culture* (Cribyn: Llanerch Publishers, 2004)
- Pepper, David, *Modern Environmentalism: An Introduction* (London and New York, Routledge, 1996)
- Philips, Dana, *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture and Literature in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)
- Ryan, Marie-Laure, *Avatars of Story* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2006)
- Ryle, Martin, ‘After ‘Organic Community’: Ecocriticism, Nature, and Human Nature’ in *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature*, ed. John Parham (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2002)
- Simmons, I.G, *Interpreting Nature: Cultural Constructions of the Environment* (New York: Routledge, 1993)
- Soper, Kate, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995)
- Snyder, Gary, *A Place in Space* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1995)
- Stadler, John, *Eco-fiction* (US: Pocket Books, 1971)
- Stewart, Frank, *A Natural History of Nature Writing* (Washington: Island Press, 1994)
- Stafford, Fiona, *The Long Long Life of Trees* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016)
- Weston, Daniel, *Contemporary Literary Landscapes: The Poetics of Experience* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2016)
- Westling, Louise, *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014)

- *The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction*
(Athens, GA and London: University of Georgia Press, 1996)
- Williams, Raymond, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (London: Hogarth Press, 1984)
- *The Country and the City* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 2011)
- *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* (London, New York: Verso, 2005)
- *Writing in Society* (London: Verso, 1983)

Articles

- Clark, Timothy, 'Nature, Post Nature' in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 75-89
- Bracke, Astrid, 'The Contemporary English Novel and Its Challenges to Ecocriticism' in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 423-439
- Garrard, Greg, 'Ferality Tales' in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 241-260
- Head, Dominic, 'Ecocriticism and the Novel' in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. Lawrence Coupe (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 235-241
- 'Mapping Rural and Regional Identities' in *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction since 1945* ed. David James (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 13-27
- 'The (im)possibility of ecocriticism' in Kerridge, Richard and Neil Sammells eds. *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature* (London: Zed, 1998), pp. 27-39.
- Kerridge, Richard, 'Ecothrillers: Environmental Cliffhangers' in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* ed. Lawrence Coupe (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 242-251
- 'Narratives of Resignation: Environmentalism in Recent Fiction', in *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature*, ed. John Parham (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2002), pp. 88-101
- 'Ecocritical Approaches to Literary Form and Genre: Urgency, Depth, Provisionality, Temporality' in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 361-367
- 'Nature in the English Novel' in *Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook* ed. Patrick Murphy (London, New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 148-157
- Lyons, Thomas J. 'A Taxonomy of Nature Writing' in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, eds. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (USA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. 276-281
- Marx, Leo, 'Pastoralism in America', in Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehleneds. *Ideology*

- and *Classic American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 36-70
- Meeker, Joseph W., 'The Comic Mode', in *The Ecocritical Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (USA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. 155-169
- Mellor, Leo. 'The Lure of the Wilderness', in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*, ed. by Louise Westling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 104-118
- Moran, Jo, 'A Cultural History of the New Nature Writing' in *Literature and History*, vol.23 no.1 (2014), 49-63
- Philips, Dana, 'Ecocriticism, Literary Theory and the Truth of Ecology' in *New Literary History*, vol.30, no.3 (1999), pp. 577-602
- Raban, Jonathan, 'Second Nature: the De-Landscaping of the American West' in *Granta: The New Nature Writing*, Vol: 102 (2008), pp. 56 - 73
- Raglan, Rebecca and Marian Scholtmeijer, 'Heading Off the Trail: Language, Literature, and Nature's Resistance to Narrative' in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, ed. by Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2001), pp. 248-262
- Ryan, Marie-Laure, 'Postmodernism and the Doctrine of Panfictionality' in *Narrative*, Vol.5, No.2 (1997), pp. 165-187
- Walsh, Richard, 'Fictionality and Mimesis: Between Narrativity and Fictional Worlds' in *Narrative*, Vol. 11, no.1, January 2003 (Ohio: Ohio State University Press)
- Williams, Raymond, 'Socialism and Ecology', in *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*, ed. Robin Gable (London and New York: Verso, 1989)
- Weston, Daniel, 'Nature Writing and the Environmental Imagination' in *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction since 1945* ed. David James (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 110-126

Websites

- Caine, Sian, 'How to Write a Memoir: Jeanette Winterson and Helen Macdonald', *Guardian*, 4 June 2015, Books section, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jun/04/how-to-write-a-memoir-jeanette-winterson-and-helen-macdonald>> [accessed 12 December 2016]
- Cocker, Mark, 'Death of the Naturalist: Why is The "New Nature Writing" so Tame?', *New Statesman*, 17 June 2015, Nature section, <<http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/06/death-naturalist-why-new-nature-writing-so-tame>> [accessed 12 December 2016]

- Garner, Dwight. 'Review: Helen Macdonald's 'H Is for Hawk,' a Memoir on Grief and Falconry', *New York Times*, 17 February 2015, Books sectionhttp://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/18/books/review-helen-macdonalds-h-is-for-hawk-a-memoir-on-grief-and-falconry.html?_r=0 [accessed 12 December 2016]
- Mabey, Richard, 'In Defence of Nature Writing', *Guardian*, 18 July 2013, Science and Nature section, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jul/18/richard-mabey-defence-nature-writing> [accessed 12 December 2016]
- Macfarlane, Robert, 'Why We Need Nature Writing', *New Statesman*, 2 September 2015, Long Reads section, <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/nature/2015/09/robert-Macfarlane-why-we-need-nature-writing> [accessed 12 December 2016]
- Moss, Stephen, 'Helen Macdonald: a Bird's Eye View of Love and Loss', *Guardian*, 5 November 2014, Books section, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/05/helen-macdonald-interview-winner-samuel-johnson-prize-falconry> [accessed 12 December 2016]
- Poole, Steve, 'Is Our Love of Nature Writing Bourgeois Escapism?', *Guardian*, 6 July 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jul/06/nature-writing-revival> [accessed 12 December 2016]

Appendix

Fig.1

This table is taken from Thomas J. Lyons' article 'A Taxonomy of Nature Writing' in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (USA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), [p.278].

Fig.2

This list of recommendations for approaches to writing ecological fiction is taken from Richard Kerridge's article 'Ecocritical Approaches to Literary Form and Genre: Urgency, Depth, Provisionality, Temporality' in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 372-3.