

THE NEW BRITISH NATURE WRITING:  
FORMS, THEMES AND ECOCRITICAL APPROACHES

In this paper I want to propose that new nature writing offers ecocriticism the chance for an extension that is long overdue. Perhaps because the genre suggests a return to ecocriticism's roots, it seems to be assumed that current ecocritical approaches are unproblematically suited to new nature writing. I find this highly peculiar since on the one hand, critics have noted new nature writing's experimental form and concern with non-traditional natural landscapes, while on the other, ecocriticism has shown itself ambiguous, if not outright dismissive, of both form and non-traditional nature. In fact, true engagement with these typical aspects of new nature writing has been largely avoided so far. As part of a larger project on which I'm working, I want to offer some suggestions today about the ways in which ecocriticism can come to terms with these formerly problematic aspects. This project is very much a work of progress, which I'm happy to receive suggestions about.

Like many critiques of ecocriticism, my suggestions for an expansion on the field touch on earlier debates on the 'theory' or 'methodology' of ecocriticism by, to name a few scholars, Dana Phillips, Terry Gifford, Timothy Morton, Simon Estok and Serenella Iovino. It often seems, however, that many of these critiques interpret the 'criticism' part of ecocriticism as environmental critique or evaluation, rather than criticism of the textual artefact that for instance a novel is. As Serpil Oppermann has noted, ecocritics "expect of writers that "they inscribe ecological viewpoints in their work" ("Ecocentric Postmodern Theory" 230). Yet what are the specific concepts that we apply as ecocritics when we ecocritically study texts? What does our terminology consist of? What are our ecocritical tools? Of course, these questions have been asked before over the past decades, particularly in overviews of the field. However, in practice, these questions are often not engaged with, and only rarely do ecocritics attempt to provide an answer to them - with Estok's "ecophobia" and Gifford's "pot-pastoral" as some exceptions. Frequently, to repeat an argument made over a decade ago by Dana Phillips, the question is how *critical* ecocriticism is - also of its own methods. For instance, how much of our ecocritical scholarship is deemed ecocritical because it focuses on nature? And how much actively criticizes and challenges constructions of nature *methodologically*, as well as the methodologies of ecocriticism itself?

Such issues are particularly pertinent with the emergence of new nature writing, and ecocriticism's embrace of the genre. In the rest of this paper I'll focus particularly on narratological form, an issue which is slowly gaining more attention in ecocriticism - for instance through the work of Adeline Johns-Putra on genre, the explorations of the intersections of narrative theory by Markku Lehtimäki and Erin James, as well as some of my own work.

Placing greater stress on form benefits ecocriticism in several ways, of which I will mention two. Focusing on literary and narratological elements anchors ecocriticism more firmly in literary criticism, a significant part of achieving the kind of professional recognition and legitimation that Buell

identified as one of the main challenges to ecocriticism in 2005 (*Future* 128-29). Moreover, form increases ecocriticism's potential of creating awareness of the nonhuman natural world. When, as ecocritics, we study the ways in which humans perceive and represent nature, we are essentially concerned with the ways in which the natural world is narratologically conceived – while never losing sight, of course, of the fact that this world externally exists.

A list of questions can be devised which form the narratological-ecocritical counterpart of the questions asked by Glotfelty in her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*. For instance, how does genre shape and determine a text's representation of the natural nonhuman world, or its depiction of environmental crisis? Why are certain narratives combined in a work? What is the effect of that? Moreover, how do specific literary elements and conventions emphasize or undermine any environmental messages expressed in the novel? What is the role of a work's structure in the way it portrays nature? And what is the effect of using narratological devices such as the framework narrative? How do focalization and narrative perspective work together to achieve a certain view of nature, or juxtapose and contrast it? Does the narrator, for instance, challenge or confirm ideas about the natural world expressed by focalizing characters? What is the role of the narrative's rhythm and pace? Also, how successful is the author in his or her use of literary elements, and what is the effect of this on the text's representation of the natural world? And how do a medium's specific characteristics influence its depiction of nature? Despite early ecocriticism's dislike of textuality and postmodern theories, which still seems to throw its shadow over the field, such questions need not draw attention away from nature at all. As Bonnie Costello has suggested, "a [rhetorically oriented] criticism can involve real-world concerns in that it reveals the entanglement of nature and culture, the interplay between our desires, our concepts, and our perceptions, and possibilities for renewal and vitality within that entanglement" (14).

So, to return to the focus of this paper on new nature writing, how does narratological form shape the representation of contemporary natural landscapes and particularly the possibilities these spaces hold for human-nature connection?

A good example of this is described by Robert Macfarlane, who conceived of the form of *The Old Ways* as emphasizing its content: "I wanted to ... write a book that proceeded by pattern rather than by plot, that was formally full of path crossings, recurrent images, prefigurings and recollections, doubles and shadows – and in this manner to make language and form perform some of the recapitulations and overlaps I had experienced while walking these paths" (in Stenning 78). The ways in which structure enhances and foregrounds a work's concerns can also be seen in other examples of new nature writing, such as Olivia Laing's *To the River* (2011), and Charles Rangeley-Wilson's *Silt Road* (2013).

Both Laing and Wilson explore rivers as cultural landscape features. Laing frames her exploration of the Ouse partly in terms of Virginia Woolf's 1941 suicide in the same river, and Wilson's

exhaustive exploration of the Wye includes urban planning and sanitation issues, as well as twenty-first-century council minutes and a shopping centre called Eden.

At the same time, their appeal for both authors lies in their non-human dimensions, their wildness. Recalling a picture of an English stream in an encyclopedia of angling which he was given as an eleven-year-old, Wilson notes “the river’s wildness gently tamed but not vanquished” (8). Laing has a similar experience when she observes the “strangeness” of water in her journey: “There is a mystery about rivers that draws us to them, for they rise from hidden places and travel by routes that are not always tomorrow where they might be today” (7). The river’s wildness, in other words, is something which escapes human agency, continues to exist despite us and subverts our attempts to dam or bury it. This is how we like our nature best: as something which continues no matter what, implying a force bigger than ourselves that is both benevolent - cleaning up our mess - and malevolent - striking back, punishing us for making the mess. Rivers, then, are good examples of contemporary natural landscapes: both nature and culture, experienced as nature, yet acknowledged to be man-made.

Looking out over the Downs at the river Ouse making its way through the landscape, Laing reflects: “This was the land I loved best, planate with water, their histories conjoined” (103-04). This intersection of the land and the water, as well as the humans that lived on the land, and the river that runs through it, is not only central to the narrative, but also informs the structure of *To the River*. Or perhaps, it’s better to say that the structure of the work emphasizes the many interconnections and interrelations between humans and nature that Laing discovers in her journey. To take the second chapter, when she sets out the Ouse, as an example: it begins with Laing travelling to Slaugham, and the source of the Ouse. Her descriptions of her first day tracking the Ouse are interspersed with a reference to her failed relationship, the poetry of Seamus Heaney, classical mythology, Leonard and Virginia Woolf, the filmmaker Derek Jarman, overheard conversations at the pub and the development of early geology. This combination of narratives achieves two things: narratological form reflects the work’s subject, the river; and it disabuses us of the belief that nature exists. Both these effects also hold true for *Silt Road*, which, like Laing’s work, combines a multitude of narratives, ranging from Wilson’s personal story of the death of his mother and his search for greater happiness, to the history of the mills on the river Wye and High Wycombe, and Victorian naturalists. Both narratives meander, like a river through a landscape, and compared to Kathleen Jamie’s essay collections, or Jean Sprackland’s beachcombing, even Macfarlane’s journeys, *To the River* and *Silt Road* demonstrate a looseness and baggyness that reflects the movement of the river as well as the ambiguity of rivers in our contemporary landscape.

A significant contribution of new nature writing to ecocriticism is the way in which the genre’s focus on humanized landscapes disabuses us of the existence of “nature”. Wilson’s description of discovering the river in a small wood, miles away from any other human being, illustrates this particularly well. [HANDOUT] “It seeped from within a spinney of beech, oak and willow, sprouting tall and thin from a cleft in the valley floor. The fields beyond rose in soft curves and either side of the

channel rounded terraces slumped into the watery hollow ... And there in the silent space of that small wood I heard the first voice of the river, the uncorrupted river as it had always been. Water wept from every quarter of the hollows, from under the roots of trees, over shelves of flint and chalk. Or it welled up within the channel as dancing lenses of water swelling over bright holes in the bed of the stream, so that the damp scoop of land became, within only a few yards, a stream. And where the stream spilled over tangles of twigs or shelves of stone, it spoke" (126). Wilson's account of his solitary exploration of the wood and the river is a typical example of nature writing, with its minute attention to natural detail. At the same time, it is an intensely self-reflexive passage that foregrounds the constructedness of our perceptions of nature. Note the way in which he first describes the spring of the river, in "Water wept", which he follows with another, no less dramatic sentence, starting with "or". Contemporary nature writing is, the author suggests here, does not try to avoid the ways in which nature is framed. There's no such thing as a natural landscape in new nature writing, only contemporary natural landscapes, saturated by culture and nature, humankind and non-human elements. In awe at his discovery, Wilson takes out his iPhone – the 21<sup>st</sup>-century equivalent of Marx' machine in the garden - to record the sound of the river. When he listens to it later he hears "the soft noise of the river - the only noise I was aware of at the time - and the long-drawn-out wail of a police siren. It doesn't come closer or recede, but is there, welded as it were into the softer sound of the stream" (126). While here in *Silt Road* the realization that nature is constructed and non-existent remains implicit, it is clearly voiced in *To the River*. Looking out again over the river, Laing concludes: "For the last ten years, I'd laboured under the impression that this view was almost natural, and now I felt a fool" (177). "Almost natural", indeed.

In fact, both *To the River* and *Silt Road* are more about the people that happen to have somehow become associated with the river, than the river itself. Is this still nature writing, then? In both texts, nature is not so much the main topic, but more of a guiding spirit, presiding over the human events unfolding along the banks of the rivers. Compared to more traditional nature writing, then, new nature writing offers almost a photographic negative of the older genre, foregrounding the human involvement in nature rather than emphasizing nature over the human. How should ecocritics, who often strive to offer an ecocentric perspective, respond to this? New nature writing, I want to suggest, does not merely require ecocriticism to extend in terms of narratological form and non-traditional nature, but particularly also to include more of the human in ecocriticism. This challenge is not just about emphasizing the intermingling – as in feminist and material ecocriticism, for instance – which has the peculiar effect of reinstating us to nature, somehow obliterating our 'apartness'. Although I don't have space to explore this further right now, I also believe that new nature writing – and contemporary experiences of nature in general – require a different way of engaging with dualities than has hitherto been suggested by early ecocritics, environmentalists and, most recently, material and feminist ecocritics.

Along the lines of the argument made in *Edgelands* – spaces have to be seen and imagined in order to exist – the contemporary natural landscapes of new nature writing also carry a sense of possibility, perhaps even hope, for the future. Despite calls to reshift our focus from Nature with a capital N to what Scott Hess calls “everyday nature”, much ecocriticism, environmentalism, and the popular imagination is still concerned with the “over yonder”, a Timothy Morton has put it. There are many objections to be made against new nature writing – the position of privilege that the authors are in, for instance – but one of its biggest achievements is that it shows the value of contemporary natural landscapes. And that, perhaps, might lead to the reconnection between humans and nature we so desperately need. Or, to use Laing’s words: “Perhaps we will be able to accommodate ourselves to this world after all, instead of chipping away at it until the foundations collapse and the whole thing comes tumbling down” (179). That is the possibility of new nature writing, and it is up to ecocriticism to develop the tools to highlight and foreground this.