

Introduction: European New Nature Writing

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'I can remember being called a "nature writer" for the first time, and flinching at the implication that this was different from simply being a writer', wrote the longest established contemporary British nature writer, Richard Mabey in 1984 (Mabey, Clifford and King xi). Mabey's writing has always been concerned to engage with nature as both embedded throughout culture and materially challenging cultural forms and representations, so a category that marginalised his work on one side of an assumed binary seemed to defuse its cultural and political power. Although Jos Smith traces the earliest British usage of 'Nature-writing' to 1922, its contemporary sense is probably an import from the US. A newer generation of British writers, who are now aware of the American tradition of nature writing, retain Mabey's unease whilst recognising that they are part of a long Anglo-American tradition (Smith 6). "Nature writing is an unsatisfactory term," admits Cambridge academic and nature writer, Robert Macfarlane, "for this diverse, passionate, pluriform, reviving tradition—but it is the best there is, and it serves as a banner to march beneath" (Macfarlane, "Call of the Wild" n.p.). Here is a voice that seeks to shake off the escapist associations with a self-indulgent pastoral tradition carried by the term 'nature writing' in England (Gaelic and Celtic traditions are more complex) to revive a tradition with a new passion and with new, diverse, forms. This is a voice that has come to be characterised in Britain as 'new nature writing' that would include, for example, archipelagic literature, psychogeography, narrative scholarship and radical landscape poetry.

Following our special edition of *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* on 'New Nature Writing' (17.1, Feb 2013), we were curious about what wider European developments in nature writing might be. But when we came to frame the call for papers for this special issue of *Ecozon@* we found that 'nature writing' was not a category that translated easily in the rest of Europe. Indeed, the term 'pastoral' was often a cultural mode more associated with music than with literature. The lone writer, such as Robert Macfarlane, making trips into the countryside for personal epiphanies of engagement or enlightenment, often in dialogue with a writer from the past, was not a common mode of literary production in mainland Europe. So we called for "ecocritical essays that explored what has been happening in wider Europe in relation to new forms and modes of representations of nature in the arts, including non-fiction travel, memoir, landscape and nature writing, but also including fiction, ecopoetry, painting and land art." The

result has been more diverse and surprising than we might have imagined including forms that range from the essay to the novel to photography.

While some of the subjects of this collection are writing in the Anglo-American nature writing tradition, their perspective is often that of an outsider paying attention to other perspectives. This allows for the writer to act as a sensitive mediator for other cultural responses to nature in a spirit that is noticeably more communal than the individualistic Anglo-American model. Such a collective perspective might suggest a stronger shared national sense of nature and the countryside where families, in southern Europe, for example, often retain a connection with family property and land beyond the cities. In fact, the relationship between nature and 'home' in mainland Europe may well be a much more complex and cosmopolitan one than we had anticipated.

Richard Kerridge has identified precisely this issue as one which New Nature Writing in the UK should be addressing:

For some years now there has been talk of a 'new nature writing', a refashioning of the genre in response to our contemporary ecological crisis. Essential to this project is a careful examination of the ideologies that nature writing has sometimes carried. The love of wild nature must be wrested away, for example, from two related conservative impulses that have often found expression in the genre: wistfulness for pre-industrial feudal life and fear of democratic, multicultural and cosmopolitan social space. (Kerridge n.p.)

Indeed, the tensions of nature and place, especially in relation to representations of the rural past and cosmopolitan present, in a global environmental culture can be seen to be addressed by the response to our call for papers. As pressure on Europe's borders increases through conflicts in Africa and the Middle East, issues of European identity must be subsumed by what it means to be an inhabitant of Earth.

Recently ecocriticism has been preoccupied by questions of whether attention to nature as 'home' is adequate to the global scale and long-term temporal nature of environmental problems. Judging by the essays in this special "European New Nature Writing" issue of *Ecozon@* many writers have moved beyond the binary of local and global, challenging and illuminating diverse understandings of place. Tim Robinson's Ireland is seen as a history of planetary geology in Pippa Marland's illuminating essay; Hoffman's trans-boundary park includes areas of Greece and Albania; Marrero Henríquez's Macaronesia encompasses Portugal, Spain, and Cape Verde. W.G. Sebald and Peter Handke's local places extend across European and natural history, including both country and city, present and past times.

But despite these writers' awareness of nature's disregard for man-made borders, a consideration of national and regional identity is relevant given the operation of political and cultural environmentalisms at this scale. Many discussions of the environment are inextricably linked to politically fraught issues of national identity, economic health and belonging. The archipelagic location of the critic and poet José Manuel Marrero Henríquez in Gran Canaria provides a local platform from which to engage dominant European and North American versions of environmentalism. Marrero Henríquez writes on Spanish and Spanish American texts; many Spanish critics in

Europe with an environmental interest write on transatlantic texts. He notes, in the interview with Ellen Skowronski, that Hispanic ecocriticism mostly occurs in North American universities. Why is this? He considers that, in Europe, traditional Christian and technocentric attitudes to nature as resource exclude environmental concern. For himself, Arne Naess's deep ecology was a route to ecocriticism; comparative literature and post-colonialism offer other paths. While his own criticism includes the environmental and personal implications of Spain's history, he proposes a Canarian ecocriticism, where "compared to the interior closure of the area from Castilla to the Pyrenees, the Atlantic Ocean can be understood as a revitalizing symbol, promoting a Spanish literature open to dialog and permeable to democratic ideas."

Are Gran Canaria's human and non-human occupants in conflict, given the scale of tourism to the island and despite recent movements towards ecotourism? Simone Schröder considers the impact on Corsica's wildlife of human activity since the nineteenth century, through W.G. Sebald's narrative *The Alps in the Sea*. Island writing poses particular challenges and possibilities for the ecocritic. In Pippa Marland's essay on Tim Robinson, she considers whether there can be such a thing as an 'archipelagic literature'. In Britain this critical movement stems from a recent interest in the Celtic and Gaelic traditions, as a way to challenge dominant anglocentric approaches. Archipelagic literature may offer clues as to how to combine an interest in the local specificities with global networks and interrelations.

According to Maris Sörmus, the Estonian author Andrus Kivirähk, in his popular novel *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*, suggests the possibility for a renewed cultural identity through awareness of the rural past in opposition to the impacts of war and political destabilisation. In doing so, his playfully postmodern approach transcends the escapist connotations of the pastoral. There are good reasons to believe that cultural diversity, on regional, national and international levels, is linked to ecological health. Robert Macfarlane's latest work, *Landmarks*, suggests the appeal and importance of retaining a shard lexicon of nature within a particular geographic range, with the implication that this encourages a concern that leads to action.

And yet a national culture based on ancestry and rootedness has a dangerous historical precedent by way of the Nazi appropriation of regional *Heimat*. In Simone Schröder's essay, the perspectives of Sebald and Peter Handke, as migrants sensitive to cultural and environmental change, highlights the social and cultural damage of nationalist thinking. In Sebald's essay *The Alps in the Sea* and Handke's *Lesson of Montagne Sainte-Victoire*, she argues, the digressive essay form, based on explorations on foot, is particularly appropriate for conveying transregional identities with nuance and care. This perspective Schröder calls 'transient dwelling'.

Like Sebald and Handke, the British author Tim Robinson explores landscape through walking. Pippa Marland's essay on the *Stones of Aran* series of books considers Robinson's use of postmodern metanarrative and hybridisation to present his relationship with the rich human and natural history of the island of Árainn (Aran). She argues that Robinson moves beyond the Romantic tradition to consider the materiality of the landscape. Drawing on recent developments in urban literature she playfully

baptises his multidisciplinary method, which focuses on the author's self-conscious approach, as 'psycho-archipelagraphy'.

Broader in scope is the Spanish critic Alberto García-Teresa's essay which highlights the ecosocialist perspective of acclaimed poet and philosopher Jorge Reichmann. While the impact of global capitalism is felt differently in different European regions, García-Teresa highlights how Reichmann's perspective illuminates the possibilities for resistance based on a culture of empathy (with all life and all generations), gratitude and solidarity. In his poetry, García-Teresa argues, Reichmann puts into practice views expressed in *El socialismo puede llegar sólo en bicicleta*, but the poetic form itself demonstrates limitations of the individual that are masked by capitalist ideology. For Reichmann, poetry offers different rhythms from the urgency of the quest to make profit; he urges us 'to be able to stop and see / at least once'. For García-Teresa, Reichmann's work encourages us to see that solidarity is the only way for us to regain our inherent dignity:

Perhaps, from a moral point of view, it is our inability to accept otherness, limits and death that is at the heart of the crisis of contemporary civilization. The inability to respect differences and accept their own being, of the other sex, of another ethnicity. [...] Inability to accept the otherness or alterity of nature, and therefore subdue blind impulse. [...] Inability to accept the other in ourselves. (*Canciones* 166)

Julian Hoffman approaches 'otherness' in his writing about a liminal zone of Albania and Greece. In his interview with Deborah Lilley he presents his need for deliberate 'stillness' to detect fluxes of the lifeworld, of animals and people. Hoffman's approach, skilfully elicited by Lilley, suggests how to combine local response with global concern. That we include two interviews with authors at the edges of critical attention but who directly address our questions, suggests that there are many other writers considering these issues that we have yet to encounter.

Hoffman employs the essay form to successful effect. The essay form—perhaps a great- great- grandparent of nature writing—demonstrates how walking can serve as a form for considering human-nature relations at different scales. As Simone Schröder suggests in this issue, both Sebald and Handke find interconnections between particular natural and cultural places through their meandering explorations. Here are examples of how a mode—the walking narrative—associated with the escapist pastoral pole of nature writing can be used as a self-aware act of re-engaging at the deepest levels in what might be characterised as a post-pastoral practice of writing. It is significant that Schröder's critical attention to form achieves these insights which might have been dismissed by categorical dismissal of walking narratives. Perhaps the scarcity of critical attention to the essay form is also due to prejudice against the discussion of 'inner nature' that accompanies this form of wayfaring.

Julian Hoffman also considers the opportunities that blogging offers to the nature writer as a way of recording the changing particulars of place and reaching new audiences. Other forms can combine awareness of the tantalizing inadequacy of language with urgency to convey the emotional significance of our felt relations with nature. Fiction, both as a device in 'nature writing' and in its own right, can draw on

uncanny coincidences and commonalities between nature and culture. Andrus Kivirähk's highly inventive fiction that evokes the interspecies language of 'Snakish' draws on the perception that we need a language adequate to our sense of relatedness to non-human nature. As Maris Sörmus explains within the perspective of materialist ecocriticism, Kivirähk's novel can be both read as a search for the relations between language and national identity, and also suggest the 'intra-activism' of nature and culture in particular places.

Once again, European writing that addresses our constructions of nature defies categorisation in its originality and its playfulness with form. Maria Pia Arpioni demonstrates that Giovanni Pasinato's photography, while embedded in the Italian School of Landscape Photography, aims to renew awareness of the natural landscape for those familiar with the formal and thematic conventions. The absence of a single European cultural response to nature suggests, perhaps, not only the failure of global capitalism to subsume our imaginative lives, but the originality and diversity of art that subverts it. Many of the forms considered in this issue of *Ecozon@* would defy a marketer's categorisation. More importantly, the plurality of forms considering human-nature relations indicates a resurgence in subjective appreciation of what is beyond commerce. As Riechmann urges, "Capital wants us to believe that we are what we sell. But we are what we give."

The ecocritics contributing to this special issue use their skills with language to bring new authors to a global audience. We believe it is important that Spanish poet and philosopher Jorge Riechmann is brought to the awareness of writers and thinkers in other traditions. Maris Sörmus has translated an Estonian author into English, despite the challenge of his characters' desire to speak 'Snakish'. In this issue *Ecozon@* has revealed, yet again, how much remains to imaginatively challenge our local and national conventions and perspectives as we search for ways to write that outflank dualities and categorisations.

In this sense, this collection of essays attempts what the Spanish ecocritic and poet Marrero Henríquez calls, in his interview with Ellen Skowronski, 'Aerial ecocriticism'. Marrero Henríquez aims in his own writing to focus on an inter-cultural experience, 'the process by which literature proves to be the ultimate result of the natural evolution that rewards those who are able to grasp its beauty'. Seeking a cross-cultural basis for ecocriticism involves, for Marrero Henríquez, finding temporal and spatial affinities between entirely opposed world views. He emphasises 'words that breathe', which consists in 'investing literature with the perfection that a pre-linguistic breath or an onomatopoeic sound gives of nature'.

While Marrero Henríquez traces a pre-cultural and pre-linguistic response to nature in the breath, Riechmann shows the need for the ecocritic to be aware of cultural context, as Tim Robinson also suggests through his idea of the 'good step', to be at once aware of our material and cultural existence. And yet, like many of the authors discussed this collection, both Riechmann and Marrero Henríquez suggest the possibilities for art to produce collective action and solidarity. Riechmann sees the process of poetry as the

urge to 'lend a hand to the fragile beings, the discontinuous and vulnerable beings we are'. As Julian Hoffman explains:

[T]he community of fellow writers and artists is equally sustaining on a personal level. I see their work as a window; each one opening onto a different view of the world. Together their words and art enable a broadened vision of our place in that world. Each writer has his or her own 'patch' as it were—themes they work through, places and patterns they explore – and reading their words is a way of attuning myself to other landscapes and realities, other species and shades of light.

The writers and artists discussed in this issue show the challenges of approaching place. Yet the material and imaginative paths they lay offer us possibilities for future explorations. We hope that this issue of *Ecozon@* contributes to the 'sustaining' community of writers, artists and ecocritics who are exploring the imaginative diversity of what 'nature writing' can be in Europe today.

Works Cited

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