'THE EARTH-HAUNTED MIND': THE SEARCH FOR RECONNECTION WITH NATURE, PLACE AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN THE POETRY OF EDWARD THOMAS, T. S. ELIOT, EDITH SITWELL AND CHARLOTTE MEW

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the relationship between modernist poetry and nature, place and the environment. Challenging reductive notions of modernism as predominantly anthropocentric in character and urban in focus, it argues that within British modernist poetry there is a clear and sustained interest in the natural world and environmental issues. The poets studied in this thesis were writing during a period of significant changes in human/nature relations following the disruptive experience of war and modernity. This thesis considers how each poet responds to these changes and examines the various poetic techniques and approaches employed in order to achieve physical, psychological and artistic reconnection with the non-human world.

An ecocritical approach is used to show the importance of nature in the work of Edward Thomas, T. S. Eliot, Edith Sitwell and Charlotte Mew. This approach focuses on the poetic treatment of nature and involves: examining representations of non-human life in both rural and urban environments, identifying the poetic techniques and approaches used to modernise poetic descriptions of the natural world, and charting the growth of an environmental consciousness in each poet.

This thesis reveals the importance of nature, place and the environment to British modernist poetry and in doing so contributes to knowledge of an under-examined aspect of the movement. It shows the ability of ecocriticism to provide valuable insights into areas of literature not immediately associated with environmental issues and produces original readings of each poet's work.

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thesis is to highlight the importance of nature, place and the environment to British modernist poetry by examining the poetry of Edward Thomas, T. S. Eliot, Edith Sitwell and Charlotte Mew from an ecocritical perspective.[1] The central premise of this thesis is that British modernist poetry has a strong but under-examined preoccupation with the non-human world which challenges conventional notions of modernism as predominantly anthropocentric in character and urban in focus. By examining this selection of poets from an ecocritical perspective this study aims to confirm the importance of environmental concerns to modernist poetry and to demonstrate ecocriticism's ability to provide new insights into areas of literature not immediately associated with the natural world. I will argue that each poet in this thesis possesses, as Edgell Rickword observes, an 'earth-haunted mind' which is evident in the search for physical, psychological and artistic reconnection with nature.[2] Each poet was selected because their writing forms a critique of the environmental consequences of modernity which manifests itself through a broader poetic re-examination of how modern experience informs human/nature relations. In line with ecocritical principles, I will demonstrate the importance of the non-human world to modernist poetry by focusing primarily on the depiction of nature in each poet's work and the techniques and approaches employed to describe the natural world. I will analyse individual and social attitudes towards nature and environmental change, and examine the impact of war and modernity on the relationship between humans and their physical environment.

This ecocritical analysis of modernist poetry is important because, although several key studies by critics including Alexandra Harris, David Arnold, Carol H. Cantrell, J. Scott Bryson and Charlene Spretnak have addressed the relationship between modernism and the environment, there has yet to be an extended exploration of British modernist poetry from an ecocritical perspective. This is a significant omission given that modernist poets were writing during a period of critical importance in terms of the relationship between the human and the non-human world as Britain continued its transition from a rural to an urban nation. Modernist poets directly confront the experience of modernity and its impact on both the physical

[1] Edward Thomas's more complex relationship to modernism and modernist poetry will be discussed in Chapter 3.
[2] Edgell Rickword, 'Terminology' in *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), p. 68.

environment and human relationships with nature. They were instrumental in creating new ways of perceiving the physical world: especially the modern city, the multiplicity and sensation of which was reflected through innovative linguistic and formal experimentation. Although modernism is not commonly associated with environmental issues, re-examining modernist poetry from an ecocritical perspective reveals a shared feeling of the loss of something vital in modern life and an acknowledgement of the continuing importance of nature to society, culture and the individual. Therefore, recognising and examining the significance of nature to British modernist poetry is vital in terms of ecocriticism's continual expansion into new areas of literature, and it also contributes to modernist studies' ongoing recognition of the plurality of the movement and the diverse range of interests within it. This thesis aims to engage with, and intervene in, debates within both ecocriticism and modernist studies to produce an ecocritical analysis which foregrounds the importance of nature in British modernist poetry.

Guided by the central principles of ecocriticism, my primary focus will be on the depiction of the natural world in the work of each poet: the language and poetic techniques used to describe place, the personal and cultural significance of the non-human, and awareness of and reaction to environmental change.[3] My understanding of nature and the natural will not be restricted to the countryside but will also, in keeping with the importance of the city to modernist poetry and the significance of recent developments in ecocriticism, examine the representation of nature in urban environments and the ways in which modern experience informs new approaches to understanding and representing place. It has been necessary to set geographical and temporal boundaries to my research given that the central subjects of this thesis, modernism, ecocriticism and nature, are each such complex and substantial areas of study. This analysis will focus predominantly on British modernist poetry produced between 1914 and 1944.[4] The decision to limit the scope of this thesis to British modernism was rooted in my interest in examining a range of poetic responses to the natural world within a shared environment.[5] In addition to geographical proximity,

[3] Although there is no single, unified approach to examining literary texts from an ecocritical position, some shared principles are evident throughout ecocritical practice. This is an issue that will be discussed in the Chapter 1.

[4] 1914 being the year that Edward Thomas began writing poetry and 1944 the British publication of Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

[5] Although T. S. Eliot was born in America I have chosen to include his work within British modernist poetry on account of his permanent residency in Britain and the value of his poetic exploration of British landscapes and society. Eliot's nationality and his relationship to Britain will be discussed in more detail in the Chapter 5.

the choice to focus specifically on British modernism was also informed by the particular character and ethos of British ecocriticism which is centred on the need to continually extend the theory into new areas of literature.[6] This progressive ethos reflects the aims of this thesis to widen ecocritical interest to modernism in order to produce important insights into the relationship between humans and nature after the disruptive experience of war and modernity.

Summary of Chapters

In the first chapter I will explain the historical, critical and theoretical context in which this thesis is situated. This contextual analysis will open by defining some central terms, 'modernism', 'modernity' and 'ecocriticism', in order to identify my specific understanding of each in relation to this thesis. I will then return to modernism to chart how developments in modernist studies have allowed for new approaches and interpretations of the movement. An overview of the social, historical and cultural background of modernism, with a particular interest in the First World War, modernity and associated developments in the countryside and the city, will provide further contextual detail about the period in which the poets in this thesis were writing. I will then chart the progress of ecocriticism from its early interests in rural-centred literature to its expansion into urban ecology and areas of literature which present a more complex relationship with nature such as modernism. This analysis will outline the different factions and positions active within ecocriticism before describing the character of British ecocriticism, with particular reference to Raymond Williams and Jonathan Bate, and its importance to this thesis. The aim of this opening chapter is to engage with, and intervene in, current debates within both modernist studies and ecocriticism in order to situate my research within the broader critical context and show how it contributes to current understanding of the relationship between British modernist poetry and nature, place and the environment.

In the second chapter I will analyse key critical texts by Carol H. Cantrell, David Arnold, Charlene Spretnak, J. Scott Bryson and Alexandra Harris. My aim in doing so will be to examine their different approaches to analysing the importance of nature to modernist literature and to explain how their insights shape my own understanding of the subject. I will argue that these studies support my central premise that modernist literature should be a key area of interest for ecocritics

[6] British ecocriticism and its relation to this thesis will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 1.

because it explores important issues surrounding changes in human/nature relations in the opening decades of the twentieth century. Providing a survey of recent literature in this area will also allow me to clarify the originality of my research and its place within the wider critical field.

My examination of Edward Thomas's poetry in the third chapter centres on identifying important tensions and concerns relating to human/nature relations which are further developed by the other poets in this thesis. Thomas's poetry is significant to this thesis because it exemplifies a modern way of writing about the countryside which responds critically to modernity and engages with the psychological complexity of human relations to place. It also shows that a modern sensibility is not dependent on an urban setting. In order to foreground the modern character of his poetic representation of nature I will consider Edward Thomas's relationship to both Georgian and modernist poetry. My analysis will then focus on his depiction of the British countryside at the outbreak of war, the psychological aspect of his need for regular contact with nature and the tensions between dissociative modern lifestyles and the desire to have meaningful contact with the natural world. Thomas's very modern engagement with nature provides a useful context in which to examine modernism's complex relationship with place, and his insistence on the continuing importance of nature foreshadows post-war modernism's search for physical and artistic reconnection with the non-human world.

My examination of *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* by T. S. Eliot aims to show that environmental awareness and a preoccupation with the natural world are not purely marginal interests within modernism, but are also evident in the work of leading modernist poets. In analysing Eliot's poetry from an ecocritical perspective my aim is to show how successful the theory can be in terms of revealing the importance of nature in the work of a poet more commonly associated with urban spaces, social commentary and linguistic experimentation. I will argue that in his poetry and essays Eliot asserts the importance of nature to all aspects of human experience and critiques the environmental, cultural and social damage which results from divisions between the two. My analysis of *The Waste Land* will propose that in creating an image of society estranged from nature, the poem can be understood as an expression of concern for the potentially damaging human and environmental consequences of such a division, as well as confirming the continued importance of nature to modern society. I will also suggest that within the poem there is a prescient awareness of the possibility of environmental collapse which leads to an affirmation

of the need for environmental responsibility which is strengthened by reference to myth, history and tradition. In my analysis of *Four Quartets* I will shift critical attention from the symbolic to the literal meaning of the poem's landscapes in order to demonstrate the importance of the actual experience of contact with nature in each location. I will examine Eliot's attempts to achieve reconnection to place through engagement with the physical landscape of each location as well as with its historic, personal and cultural meaning. I will also consider the impact of religious faith on perception of place and consider its influence on the development of the poet's environmental consciousness.

Edith Sitwell's poetry is important to this thesis because of her use of abstract modernist experimentation with the sound, rhythm and texture of language to create new ways of writing about nature. The focus in this chapter will be on the use of such techniques to challenge inherited perceptions of nature and create new ways of seeing the physical world which recognise the impact of war and modernity on human/nature relations. Concentrating particularly on the poetry of the 1920s, I will argue that rather than creating an escapist fantasy world in her poetry, Sitwell used form and rhythm to replicate the infinite patterns and systems within the natural world and so encourage re-enchantment with nature as a challenge to the dissociative pressures of war and modernity. Sitwell's work is important to this thesis because it revitalises traditional country house settings by searching for new ways of writing about rural landscapes capable of representing the contradictions and complexities of the present. This shows that modernist experimentation does not necessitate a distance from the natural world, but can refresh understanding of it by replicating the sensual experience of contact with nature first experienced in childhood. I will also consider her later poems in terms of their shift from a sense of hope in the regenerative cycles of nature to deep environmental concern following the devastation of the Second World War and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Charlotte Mew's distinctive poetry is most strongly associated with themes of gender, sexuality, identity and alienation. However, in this chapter I will argue that an ecocritical analysis of her work reveals a sustained preoccupation with nature which is particularly interesting because it is expressed from the position of those on the margins of human society. I will suggest that this perspective offers an alternative account of nature and the experience of modernity from a decentralised position. One particularly interesting aspects of Mew's work is her depiction of the city as a space which is inhabited by both human and non-human life, and also her portrayal of

urban people as environmentally aware and strongly attached to their surroundings. I will also examine how Mew challenges traditional poetic depictions of rural areas by showing them to be hostile and judgemental to those who are different.

To conclude, the aim of this thesis is to foreground the importance of nature, place and the environment to British modernist poetry. The poets in this thesis were chosen because each contributes to understanding of the importance of environmental concerns to modernist poetry by examining the changing relationship between human and nature after the dislocating experiences of war and modernity. My aim is to examine a range of different poetic responses to nature in modernist literature in order to show the rich diversity of the movement's engagement with the non-human world. However, all are united by wider concerns surrounding the consequences of human actions on the environment and a sense of unease rooted in feelings of the loss of a previous closeness to the natural world. This shared anxiety concerning human relationships to the physical environment, and the mutual recognition of the cultural and historic significance of nature indicates a broader environmental consciousness within modernism which needs to be acknowledged in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of both modernist poetry and the context in which it was written.

CHAPTER 1. CRITICAL AND THEORETICAL CONTEXTS

Providing details of the critical and theoretical context in which this thesis is based is important because by examining modernist poetry from an ecocritical perspective I am uniting two complex, substantial and continually evolving areas of literary studies. Detailing the key issues and debates within both ecocriticism and modernist studies is necessary in order to situate my research within the broader context of this field of scholarship and show how my argument engages with and develops discussions within both modernist studies and ecocriticism.

1. 'Modernism', 'Modernity' and 'Ecocriticism'

'Modernism', 'modernity' and 'ecocriticism' are central terms within this thesis and as such require additional comment at this point in order to clarify future references to them. Each terms remains highly contested and subject to ongoing challenge and redefinition which means that it is important to specify my particular understanding of each in relation to the key interests of this thesis.

Modernism

The difficulties of defining modernism and identifying shared characteristics within the movement have been increased by the recognition of the existence of a range of modernisms rather than a unified whole. Monroe K. Spears describes modernism as 'an impossible subject' with 'special difficulties' which make attempts at definition liable to result in distortion.[7] It is often characterised as cosmopolitan, international, abstract, complex and informed by developments in other fields such as psychology and anthropology. Literary modernism tends to be associated with a break from nineteenth century literary conventions, such as realism in prose and the iambic pentameter in poetry, in favour of experimenting with avant-garde techniques to represent modern experience. Connected to this experimentation is the emergence of new art movements such as Symbolism, Imagism, Dadaism, Futurism and Vorticism whose radical break from the past embodies the spirit of Ezra Pound's rallying call to reject inherited or stale modes of artistic expression and 'Make it New!'[8] Such a broad summary of modernism identifies some of the central characteristics of the

[7] Monroe K Spears, *Dionysus and the City: Modernism in Twentieth-century Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 3.
[8] A common mantra throughout modernism, but also the title of Ezra Pound's 1934 collection of essays.

movement, but within modernist studies new approaches have drawn attention to a wide range of modernist interests which provide additional difficulties in interpreting a complex and often contradictory artistic movement whose definition has become, as Lawrence Rainey observes, 'something of an academic obsession'.[9]

This difficulty in identifying core modernist values or practices raises questions as to whether modernism possesses sufficient cohesion to even be recognised as a movement: 'modernism is more a transitional phenomenon than a period or movement'.[10] Even attempting to define its temporal boundaries is problematic. Carol H. Cantrell locates modernism 'between the turn of the century and the beginning of World War II' with an epicentre of 1922.[11] This provides a useful timeframe in which to consider modernism, but any concept of a definitive 'modernist period' risks excluding earlier texts which exhibit modernist traits, or failing to recognise its continuing influence on contemporary literature. Even if a broad consensus, of for example the period between 1890 and 1935, can be achieved this too can be deconstructed to reveal the existence of several distinct stages of modernism. Tim Armstrong demonstrates this by identifying 'a politically-engaged, radical avant-garde modernism before 1918', followed by 'the more conservative "high" modernism of the 1920s', which is distinct from '"late" or second-wave modernism' in the 1930s'.[12] However, whilst critical recognition of modernism's plurality has made it increasingly difficult to find consensus, it has increased awareness of previously marginalised or alternative modernisms, and allowed different critical and theoretical positions, including ecocriticism, to suggest new ways of reading modernist texts.

The emergence of new modernist studies and the creation of the Modernist Studies Association contributed to awareness of the existence of alternative and previously marginalised traditions within the movement. Current interest has diversified to include textual studies and material cultures: genetic criticism, thing theory, history of the book, and the study of modernist institutions and magazines. There is interest in modernism's relationship to popular culture, and a move towards re-reading the middlebrow in order to assert the value of texts previously dismissed

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[9] Lawrence Rainey (ed.), *Modernism: An Anthology* (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2005), p. xx.
[10] Richard Sheppard, 'The Problematics of European Modernism' in *Theorizing Modernism: Essays in Critical Theory* ed. by Steve Giles (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 1-52 (p. 4.).
[11] Carol H. Cantrell, 'The Locus of Compossibility: Virginia Woolf, Modernism, and Place' in *The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism 1993-2003*, ed. by Michael P Branch and Scott Slovic (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2003), pp.33-48 (p. 33).
[12] Tim Armstrong, *Modernism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), p. 24.

as uninteresting or uninformative. Research continues into global or transnational modernisms, informed by ideas of distance reading as a method of revealing the true scope of modernism. The relationship between modernism and postmodernism also remains important, with resistance to historicising modernism leading to debate over whether the modernist era continues to the present and if, in light of this, post-modernism should be understood as a point of crisis rather than departure.

These developments in approaches to modernism along with the practice, dating back to Frank Kermode in the late 1960s, of referring to a range of modernisms rather than a singular monolith have brought critical attention to previously marginalised interests and voices within the movement.[13] Geographically the scope of modernism has extended beyond the axis of Paris, London and New York to include Berlin, Vienna, Copenhagen, Prague, St. Petersburg and beyond.[14] Two studies which have been central in recognising transnational character of modernism and its cultural and national variants are *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* by Peter Nicholls and *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity* by Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel. Nicholls acknowledges the achievement of feminist, post-colonial and queer theorists in revealing the diversity and ironies of modernist writing which confirm ‘modernism is not one thing but many and that its divergent forms are profoundly determined by specifities of time and place’.[15] Developing this further, Nicholls traces the familiar account of modernism from its roots in nineteenth century Paris through to its manifestations in Futurism, Symbolism, Dada and Surrealism, and then goes beyond Anglo-American dominance to explore previously under-examined areas such as African-American modernism. In *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity*, Doyle and Winkiel promote ‘a locational approach to modernisms’ engagement with cultural and political discourses of global modernity’, and in doing so discover a correlation between modernist experiments in marginalised texts and more mainstream versions.[16] By extending understanding of modernism ‘well beyond familiar accounts of race, politics and primitivism’ they reveal modernism to be a global phenomenon which is better understood not as a fixed term, but as ‘a contested and historical referent that

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[13] Astradur Eysteinsson and Vivian Liska, ‘Introduction: Approaching Modernism’ in Eysteinsson and Liska (eds.), *Modernism* : *Volume One* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), p. 2.
[14] Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, *Modernism: a Guide to European Literature 1890-1930* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 36.
[15] Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. viii.
[16] Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel, *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 3.

suffers pressure from the affiliations, indifference, or antagonism of diverse twentieth-century writers and artists'.[17]

As Andrew Ross observes, such work on transnational modernisms have contributed significantly to awareness of 'numerous and disparate understandings of modernisms in the plural' and challenged old geographical, temporal and material limits to allow scholars to 'work with new materials, new regions, and new questions'.[18] However, although the global character and variations of modernism have been recognised, less attention has been paid to the more immediate relationship between writers and their physical environment. Queer and post-colonial theorists have brought attention to previously marginalised modernist voices, but the representation of nature, which Jonathan Bate refers to as 'the original Other', has not received adequate critical attention.[19] This thesis aims to address this omission and contribute to the ongoing recognition of the diversity of interests within modernism by producing an ecocritical analysis of modernist poetry which highlights the importance of the non-human world to literary modernism.

Modernity

An awareness of the processes and ideologies of modernity is essential in order to understand the context in which modernism evolved and the source of the anxieties expressed by the poets in this thesis concerning their relationship with the physical environment. My particular interest in modernity is based in its impact on the physical environment and on how humans experience the world. I am also interested in the way in which it influenced wider attitudes towards the role of nature in modern society. In broad terms, modernity can be seen to represent 'a way of living and experiencing life which has arisen with the changes wrought by industrialisation, urbanisation and secularisation'.[20] Modernism responds directly to changes brought about by modernity in both form and content. Modernist poetry acknowledges the increased importance of urban centres, new technology, advances in transport and communication and changing work patterns. The disorientating speed and sensations these changes engender are mirrored in the rhythms and forms of modernist poetry as well as in its experimental use of fragmentation, collapsed time periods and multiple

[17] Doyle and Winkiel, p. 5.
[18] Andrew Ross, 'Introduction: The Missing Link' in *Modernism and Theory: A Critical Debate* ed. by Andrew Ross (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 1.
[19] Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000), p. 35.
[20] Childs, Peter, *Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 14-15.

voices. In addition to reacting to its visible impact, modernist poets also respond to the wider attitudes and ideologies of modernity: the most relevant of these being the dominance of scientifically based understanding of the world, celebration of rationality and support for technological progress over superstition, spirituality and tradition.

However, similarly to modernism, modernity is an 'imprecise and contested term' which is open to conflicting interpretations.[21] Much of its complexity stems from the fact that its meaning 'varies greatly and depends on the historical narrative one is constructing'.[22] Tim Armstrong's understanding of modernity is as a 'historical shift which begins as early as the seventeenth century, producing new forms of capitalist organizations; social relations, government and technology and rise of a discourse which actively promotes the modern against the inherited' and, importantly, calls for 'the abolition of superstition and the mastery of nature'.[23] Each poet studied in this thesis presents a critique of modernity in terms of its negative impact on human/nature relations. This is a critique which also unites the majority of ecocritics. Ursula K. Heise defines ecocriticism as an 'attempt to think beyond conceptual dichotomies that modernity, the Enlightenment, and science were thought to have imposed on Western culture—the separation of subject and object, body and environment, nature and culture'.[24] Ecocritics consider modernity a predominantly destructive ideology rooted in assumptions of dominance and superiority which position humans within their 'rightful role as objectively knowledgeable, powerful, gloriously unbounded rulers of ourselves and all life on Earth'.[25] Charlene Spretnak identifies modernity as the deep structure behind 'corporate capitalism [...], profit-driven technology [...] industrialism, materialism and consumerism' which separates humans from 'respect for spiritual concerns' and leads to 'the repression of the real' and the development of a worldview built on abstract notions of economic progress.[26] Such thinking reduces humans to economic beings whose well-being can be satisfied by mass production and consumption, and only values the non-human world in terms of its potential to create human wealth.[27] The appeal of modernity is in its promises of 'world peace, freedom, and fulfilment if we would just trust in an

[21] Childs, p. 14.
[22] Armstrong, p. 2.
[23] Armstrong, p. 2.
[24] Ursula K. Heise, 'TheHitchhikers Guide to Ecocriticism' *PMLA* (2006), vol. 121, no. 2. pp. 506-7.
[25] Charlene Spretnak, *The Resurgence of the Real: Body, Nature and Place in a Hypermodern World* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), p. 196.
[26] Spretnak, p. 5.
[27] Spretnak, pp. 219-221.

instrumental rationality and never look back at out past, so embarrassingly superstitious, communal and constraining'.[28] However, as Tim Armstrong states, these 'emancipatory promises' are never fulfilled, and instead of these freedoms 'alienation, standardization and loss of individual autonomy' occurs.[29]

Unease about the devaluation of nature, spirituality and community and the parallel growth in reverence for technological and scientific achievements is evident in British modernist poetry. A sense of alienation rooted in lifestyle changes caused by modernity motivates attempts to reconnect artistically and physically with the natural world. However, whilst the poets in this thesis present a critique of modernity, within modernism as a whole there are different degrees of acceptance or protest. Italian Futurists wilfully rejected the past in favour of a new birth of self through modernity. Their radical manifesto fetishised speed and technology and glorified youth, masculinity and war. But such triumphing of the mechanical over the natural was not universal. Charles Baudelaire, who first introduced the term 'modernity', offers a more nuanced response. He immersed himself in the modern city and warned that an artist who excludes the modern world in favour of purely studying antiquity 'will no longer have the present in his mind's eye; he throws away the value and the privileges afforded by circumstance; for nearly all our originality comes from the stamp that time presses upon our sensibility'.[30] Yet whilst acknowledging that for art to be alive it must be involved in the present, Baudelaire also recognised the need to 'extract from fashion the poetry that resides in its historical envelope, to distil the eternal from the transitory'.[31] For Baudelaire, modernity was 'the transient, the fleeting, the contingent' which 'is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable'.[32] Tim Armstrong views modernism and modernity as 'bound together in a relation which is often homologous rather than antagonistic'.[33] Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane describe modernism as 'the art of modernization', but rather than acting simply as a mirror, they recognise that its character is shaped by various responses to modernity.[34] Approaching the subject from an ecocritical position, Carol H. Cantrell argues that 'a critique of Western

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[28] Charlene Spretnak, *States of Grace: The Recovery of Meaning in the Postmodern Age* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 12.
[29] Armstrong, p. 4.
[30] Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life* trans. by P. E. Charvet (London: Penguin Books, 2010), p.19.
[31] Baudelaire , p. 16.
[32] Baudelaire, p. 17.
[33] Armstrong, p. 1.
[34] Bradbury and McFarlane, p. 27.

understanding of reason, particularly as it is based on the separation of perceiving mind from the perceived world' is 'implicit in the modernist aesthetic project'.[35] Modernity's failure to improve life in 'many of the deepest senses' is identified as a key factor in inspiring modernism's search for 'new, or perhaps recovered, modes of understanding our nature and the relation between our species and the rest of the natural world'.[36]

The experience of modernity encouraged a significant re-evaluation of the meaning of nature in modern society and in art which an ecocritical analysis can highlight and examine. The poets in this thesis all register the impact of modernity and respond poetically to its effects on society, the individual and the environment. Modernity was a creative stimulus which generated new modes of artistic expression which were needed to describe modern experience, but this need for poetry to address the contemporary situation is balanced with apprehension about the devaluation of other aspects of human experience such as spirituality, localism and tradition. In relation to modernity, nature stands as an alternative model to its homogenous drive and renewed interest in the natural world represents an act of protest against the devaluing of aspects of human experience which are not linked to ideas of profit or progress.

Ecocriticism

Since the creation of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in North America in 1992, ecocriticism has been continually growing and redefining its boundaries and purpose. Its interests have extended beyond an initial interest in nature writing and Romanticism to examine a broader range of texts and environments. The resulting diversity of interests within the theory has made the task of adequately defining it problematic. Cheryl Glotfelty's commonly cited definition of ecocriticism as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment' retains a necessary openness whilst also confirming the theory's central aim of shifting understanding of nature as being symbolic or referential to recognising its physical reality and autonomy.[37] Scott Slovic emphasises the seemingly limitless scope of the theory in his definition of ecocriticism as 'the study of explicitly environmental texts by way of any scholarly approach or, conversely,

[35] Cantrell, p. 34.
[36] Spretnak, *The Resurgence of the Real*, p. 12.
[37] Cheryll Glotfelty, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (London: University of Georgia Press, 1996), p. xviii.

the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature relations in any literary text, even texts that seem, at first glance, oblivious of the nonhuman world'.[38] This is confirmed by Michael P. Branch who states simply that 'every literary work can be read from a "green" perspective'.[39]

Such open definitions have given ecocritics freedom to examine almost any text from an earth-centred perspective and have encouraged the extension of ecocritical practice beyond more explicitly nature-centred texts into areas of literature, such as modernism, which have more complex relationships with place. However, ecocriticism's openness of interpretation has made it difficult to find consensus on its central aims and beliefs: leading to accusations that the theory is not united by definite theoretical standpoints or shared methodologies, but by a more general focus on the environment. Patrick Murphy criticises ecocriticism for remaining 'theoretically unsophisticated' and claims that 'too often, there remains an anti-theoretical, naive, realist attitude' in the work of ecocritics.[40] John Parham agrees, stating that 'from its inception ecocriticism adopted a belligerent attitude towards critical theory'.[41] In particular, he identifies the need to redress simplistic divisions between nature and culture in ecocritical thinking, to develop theoretical ideas around scientific ecology and to avail of opportunities to advance the social and political dimensions of the theory.[42] Lawrence Buell attributes the degree of ambiguity surrounding ecocriticism's theoretical foundations to its 'history *both* of strong position taking by individual spokespersons *and* of reluctance to insist on a single normative, programmatic definition of its rightful scope, methods and stakes'.[43] For David Mazel, the absence of definite theoretical values is damaging because it means that the movement lacks a unity of purpose: 'No matter how it is defined, ecocriticism seems less a singular approach or method than a constellation of approaches, having little more in common than a shared concern with the

[38] Scott Slovic, 'Ecocriticism at the MLA: A Roundtable', *ASLE News,* 11 (1), 1999, p. 6.
[39] Michael P. Branch and Scott Slovic (eds.), 'Introduction: Surveying the Emergence of Ecocriticism' in *The Isle Reader: Ecocriticism, 1993-2003* (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 2003), p.xix.
[40] Patrick Murphy, *Literature, Nature, and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), p. 165.
[41] John, Parham, 'The Poverty of Ecocritical Theory: E. P. Thompson and the British Perspective', *New Formations* no. 64, spring 2008 pp.25-36, p. 25.
[42] However, Parham does recognise *The Song of the Earth* by Jonathan Bate as having 'a degree of theoretical sophistication that remains unusual in ecocritical work': referring in particular to is success in 'reasserting the place of 'place' […] in cultural and literary theory.' (p. 29).
[43] Lawrence Buell, 'Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends' *Que Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 19, Number 2 Spring/Summer 2011 (pp. 87-115), p. 88.

environment'.[44] Stephanie Sarver agrees, regarding 'ecocriticism' as 'an unfortunate term because it suggests a new kind of critical theory' whereas in reality ecocritics 'draw on a variety of outside theories, such as feminist, Marxist, post-structuralist, psychoanalytic and historicist, rather than creating their own'.[45] However Gillian Rudd resists the idea of forcing definitive theoretical standpoints on the theory on the grounds that they are incompatible with its essential character: 'ecocriticism cannot be a school that seeks to create and maintain a single, uniform outlook. Central to ecological thinking in general is a recognition of the importance of diversity – of species, of environments and even of approach'.[46]

Tracing this anxiety back to the theory's inception, Alex Goodbody and Kate Rigby argue that 'it is hardly surprising that the theoretical space opened up by ecocriticism was, in the first place, largely antipathetical to theory in its then prevalent modality'.[47] They dispute 'the oft-repeated allegation, that until recently, ecocriticism has been universally atheoretical' by maintaining that 'the charge of ecocritical theory-phobia fails to recognise the theoretical moment that is implicit in the admittedly widespread rejection of the then dominant mode of critical or cultural theory by most first-wave ecocritics'.[48] Much of ecocriticism's character has been shaped by its origins as a challenge to post-structuralism's reduction of nature to a social or linguistic construction which has 'no being or meaning' except for as 'a sign within a signifying system'.[49] In opposition to this ecocritics are united by a commitment to addressing the realities of environmental crisis: 'the point is not just to speak *about* nature but also to speak *for* nature'.[50] However, the assertion of the importance of the material does not equate to the rejection of theory or denial of the cultural aspects of the environmental crisis. As Laurence Coupe clarifies, ecocriticism 'does not challenge the notion that human beings make sense of the world through language, but rather the self-serving inference that nature is nothing more than a linguistic construct'.[51] Ecocriticism 'debates "Nature" in order to defend

[44] David Mazel (ed.), *A Century of Early Ecocriticism* (Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2001), p. 2.
[45] Mazel, p. 2.
[46] Gillian Rudd, *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 3-4.
[47] Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby (eds.), *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), p. 2.
[48] Goodbody and Rigby, p. 1.
[49] Laurence Coupe (ed.), *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2000), p . 2.
[50] Coupe, p. 4.
[51] Coupe, p.3.

nature'.[52] There is acceptance within the theory that as well as existing independently, nature 'is a human idea, with a long and complicated cultural history'.[53] However, failure to recognise the existence of nature beyond the text risks detaching cultural practice from environmental responsibility and separating the reader from the writer's immediate experience of the world. Ecocritics reject the idea of the non-human world as an anthropocentric cultural concept, but their aim in doing so is not to reduce 'complex linguistic performances' to 'the level of merely pointing at things', but to resist diminishing nature to the level of a literary device with no intrinsic value beyond human usage.[54]

Like modernist studies, ecocriticism is a 'plural school with practitioners across the world, both vastly extending its scope and reconsidering its basic concepts'.[55] Scott Slovic recognises that 'ecocriticism has no central, dominant doctrine or theoretical apparatus' but argues that 'ecocritical theory, such as it is, is being re-defined daily by the actual practice of thousands of literary scholars around the world'.[56] In response to claims of ecocriticism having 'no "theory", no substance' Slovic replies: 'if you're looking for ecocritical theory, look for it in our practice'.[57] However, as Slovic admits, there is no unified approach within methodology either: 'there is no single, dominant worldview guiding ecocritical practice – no single strategy at work from example to example of ecocritical writing or teaching'.[58] Timothy Clark also acknowledges that 'looking over the body of environmental literary criticism as a whole it is still hard to see any specific "ecocritical" method emerging'.[59] However, some general approaches to analysing literature from an ecocritical perspective, which will be used in this thesis, can be identified. Ecocritics tend to re-read both canonical and lesser known texts in a way which emphasises the reality of the material world beyond the text. They examine different literary representations of nature and the relationship between the human and non-human world. They focus on the environmental aspects of texts and distinguish between 'environmentally useful emphases on the human component of the human-nature

[52] Coupe, p. 5.
[53] William Cronon, *Uncommon Grounds: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. (New York: Norton, 1996), p. 20
[54] Coupe, p. 2.
[55] Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 202.
[56] Scott Slovic, 'Ecocriticism at the MLA: A Roundtable', *ASLE News*, 11, 1999, p. 6.
[57] Slovic, p. 6.
[58] Slovic, p. 6.
[59] Clark, p. 202.

relationship from a merely anthropocentric and harmful focus on the human'.[60] It does not restrict itself to the close reading associated with 'New Criticism', but critics 'move freely in and out of their chosen material to debate questions as diverse as representation and responsibility' within a context which is 'simultaneously geographical and historical, spatial and temporal, climatic and institutional'.[61]

This thesis aims to contribute to the development of ecocriticism by applying the theory to an area of literature not immediately associated with environmental issues. In doing so it aims to show the ability of the theory to provide valuable insights into any area of literature. The absence of any definitive theoretical or methodological framework for doing so allows for a certain amount of freedom in approaching each poet. However, guidance has been provided by examples of critical responses to the relationship between modernism and the environment detailed in the following chapter. In analysing British modernist poetry from an ecocritical perspective this thesis will focus on the reality of place in the poetry, the different literary representations of nature, the relationship between the human and non-human, and how each poet communicates awareness of the consequences of human actions on the environment in their writing.

2. Modernism

Following my brief definition of modernism and summary of recent developments within modernist studies, I will now return to the subject to provide a more detailed account of the movement and its attitudes towards nature, place and the environment. Despite emerging during a period of significant advances in science and technology, modernism is often seen to represent 'not just change but crisis' as the industrial revolution and the parallel rise of capitalism ushered in the final phase of Britain's transformation from an agricultural to an urban society.[62] A large part of this sense of crisis can be attributed to a 'sense of dislocation between the material, the human and the metaphysical'.[63] Tim Armstrong situates modernism within the 'second industrial revolution': a period characterised by rapid urban growth, increased bureaucracy, expanding capitalist markets and the rise of new technology and developments in

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[60] Steven Rosendale (ed.) *The Greening of Literary Scholarship: Literature, Theory and the Environment* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), p. xvii.
[61] Coupe, p. 253.
[62] Childs, p. 14.
[63] Richard Sheppard, 'The Problematics of European Modernism' in *Theorizing Modernism: Essays in Critical Theory,* ed. by Steve Giles (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 26.

areas such as banking, transport and communication.[64] These changes contributed to a sense of discontinuity from the past which strongly informs the character of modernist literature. Freedom from restrictive literary conventions created exhilarating potential for artistic freedom, but this was coupled with a sense of dislocation and disillusionment at the loss of these same stabilising structures. Bradbury and Macfarlane recognise the tensions inherent in the removal of previous boundaries, observing that 'experimentalism does no simply suggest the presence of sophistication, difficulty and novelty in art; it also suggests bleakness, darkness, alienation, disintegration'.[65] This sense of unease is embodied in the archetypal modern figure: intelligent and sensitive but also alienated, self conscious and neurotic almost to the point of full blown breakdown. Monroe K. Spears describes the emergence of the modern 'mass man':

> [...] anonymous and rootless, cut off from his past and from the nexus of human relations in which he formerly existed, anxious and insecure, enslaved by the mass media but left by the disappearance of God with a dreadful freedom of spiritual choice.[66]

In this climate of cultural and personal exhaustion, 'the great modern monster' of ennui was not simply a literary affectation, but its characteristics of boredom, weariness and general dissatisfaction with life were also symptoms of neurasthenia: a depressive condition which many writers of the period, including Edward Thomas and Charlotte Mew, were diagnosed as suffering from.[67] However, this pervasive dissatisfaction also inspired a search for meaning and continuity which often involves a re-evaluation of the role of nature in modern society.

Modernism is commonly associated with a preoccupation with 'the new' and identified by the linguistic and formal experiment which stem from this interest. However, each poet in the thesis also recognises the continuing importance of roots and traditions. An interest in anthropology, mythology and the rituals of primitive cultures is evident throughout modernism and relates to a broader impulse towards reconnecting with the personal and cultural past in order to better understand the complex present. Harold Rosenburg recognises the 'creative absurdities' of modernism's contradictory impulses towards both the old and the new, coining the phrase 'the tradition of the new' to describe a movement where, 'under the slogan,

[64] Armstrong, p. 24.
[65] Armstrong, p. 26.
[66] Spears, p. 74.
[67] Nicholls, p. 10.

FOR A NEW ART, FOR A NEW REALITY, the most ancient superstitions have been exhumed, the most primitive rites re-enacted'.[68] However, importantly, despite experiencing 'ambiguity and anguish' in response to the changes of modernity, as Marshall Berman observes, modernist writers did not react by indulging in the escapism of 'numerous nostalgic myths of pre-modern Paradise Lost', but used the past to fully engage with the realities of the present and their evolving relationships to place.[69]

Georgian Poetry and the Impact of the First World War

Although the roots of modernism precede the First World War, the conflict was undoubtedly a catalyst for profound changes in culture and society which also had a significant impact on poetic representations of nature. The modernist era is marked by profound grief over the catastrophic losses of the First World War, as well as the practical and emotional difficulties of the return of physically and psychologically damaged soldiers into a society struggling to accommodate post-war social change into pre-war structures. The First World War called many previously celebrated notions of progress and rationality into question and was the impetus for social, political and cultural change. New methods of warfare, including the use of chemical weapons, and the unexpected length of the conflict brought about 'a deep distrust in the foundations and institutions of Western culture' as well as foregrounding the darker side of the human character.[70] This created a desire to separate from the beliefs which had led to war and prompted artists to look forward to the new world rather than facing the painful prospect of reflecting on all that had been lost. In this way modernism can be seen as rooted in a deep sense of grief for the loss of the pre-war world and the prospect of an uncertain future. Carol H. Cantrell describes the war as 'the most visible evidence of a fault line of catastrophe which utterly reshaped reality and their sense of reality'.[71] Tim Armstrong also acknowledges the 'temporal rupture represented by the Great War'.[72] He views its impact as momentous in terms of 'upsetting the dynamic relationship between past, present and future which constitutes modernity; locking its protagonists in the present; rendering the past a

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[68] Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), pp. 9-10.
[69] Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), p. 15.
[70] Cantrell, p. 33.
[71] Cantrell, p. 33.
[72] Armstrong, p. 1.

mythic "before"; and displacing the hopes involved in the future'.[73] The fracturing effect of war is also recognised by Alan Bullock who describes the Great War as 'so shattering in its impact, so far-reaching in its consequences, that it is profoundly difficult to recapture what preceded it'.[74]

In terms of poetic representations of the natural world, differences between pre and post-war approaches are distinct. The impulse to romanticise the pre-war years as a period of innocence and tranquillity is recognised but not wholly discredited by Paul Fussell, who describes the summer before the war as 'warm and sunny, eminently pastoral'.[75] In contrast to the idyllic summer preceding it, the war is described as 'the ultimate anti-pastoral': although it 'takes place outdoors and always within nature' its horrors make it the antithesis of the innocence, hope and regeneration embodied, in many ways, by the pastoral tradition.[76] Artistically the impact of the war was momentous. For Paul Fussell, the common claim that 'Georgian complacency died in the trenches' rings true.[77] Fussell describes pre-war British poetry as being 'steeped in both a highly sophisticated literary pastoralism and what we can call a unique actual ruralism'.[78] In particular he refers to the abundance of flowers in British poetry: explaining that the poetry anthologies soldiers read in the trenches would have been filled with 'roses, sunflowers, lilies' as well as 'sheep and shepherds, birds, bees, poppies, gardens, "vales" and wood-nymphs'.[79] The difference of this type of poetry to what followed is stark:

> [...] there was no *Waste Land*, with its rats' alleys, dull canals, and dead men who have lost their bones: it would take four years of trench warfare to bring these to consciousness [...]. One read Hardy and Kipling and Conrad and frequented worlds of traditional moral action delineated in traditional moral language.[80]

The war prompted an overhaul of poetic language and technique and brought about a new energy through protest. The war poets introduced a new diction into poetry through their unflinching depiction of rats, mud, corpses and the reality of the impact of modern weaponry on the human body. From this point modernists went even

[73] Armstrong, p. 16.
[74] Alan Bullock, 'The Double Image' in *Modernism* ed. by Bradbury and McFarlane, p. 58.
[75] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 231.
[76] Fussell, pp. 23-4.
[77] Fussell, p. 36.
[78] Fussell, pp. 231-2.
[79] Fussell, pp. 231-2.
[80] Fussell, p. 23.

further in their use of 'creative violence' to shock people out of their complacency and find new ways of addressing their changed world through art.[81]

The momentous impact of the war and its aftermath is evident in the work of the poets in this thesis. The response of each poet recognises that war has somehow disconnected humans from the cycles of nature and caused disharmony with the non-human world. From this point new strategies and approaches for achieving personal and artistic reconnection are explored. Each poet in this thesis responds poetically to the personal, social and cultural impact of war. However, Edward Thomas's life and poetry are most strongly shaped by the experience. His nature-centred poetry responds sensitively but directly to the influence of war on the physical landscape and examines how the conflict shapes human relations to place. In recording this vital moment of transition, the themes and preoccupations of Edward Thomas's poetry provide a bridge between pre and post-war Britain against which the work of the other poets in this thesis responds.

The Countryside and the City

The growth of urban centres in the nineteenth and twentieth century generated renewed interest in the countryside as a possible source of stability amidst such rapid developments. However, rural Britain was also undergoing significant changes. During the war the countryside continued as a working landscape, but its appearance was altered as the need for food for the troops which resulted in much available pasture being ploughed to grow grain and potatoes. The dynamics of agricultural labour altered as men and horses left for France, leaving women, children and prisoners of war to make up the work force. Those who returned were often physically and mentally altered by war and struggled to find work. As peacetime operations returned, British agriculture suffered from a flood of imports which caused grain prices to collapsed in 1920; a situation worsened by the system of guaranteed prices being abolished in 1921 leading to increased union membership and general unrest.[82] The number of men permanently employed in agriculture in January 1918 dropped by twenty eight point seven per cent below the figure at the beginning of the war and continued to decline throughout the century as education levels increased and workers sought employment in towns and cities.[83] In the countryside tractors were taking the place of horses and more scientific methods

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[81] Fussell, p. 3.
[82] G. E. Mingay, *A Social History of the English Countryside* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 200.
[83] Caroline Dakers, *The Countryside at War 1914-18* (London: Constable, 1987), p. 156.

were being used to increase productivity in farming. In cities and towns country migrants often faced low wages, dangerous working conditions and unsanitary housing. The growth of London and its suburbs created fears about the future of the countryside leading to the formation of the Council for Preservation of Rural England in 1926. But despite efforts to curb the expansion of towns and cities, Britain's identity as an agricultural nation was being challenged by the realities of urbanisation.

Artistically, poetry's relationship with the countryside after the war was also changing and there was a shared recognition of the need to find new ways of representing the natural world which could accommodate these alterations. Idyllic images of rural Britain had been an important tool for encouraging men to enlist and protect a particular idea of Britain associated with childhood, innocence and tradition, but the brutal realities of war brought this use of rural imagery into question. For George L. Mosse this shift in traditional associations of nature are exemplified in the contradictory symbolism of the poppies growing on the battlefields. The flowers flourishing amidst the carnage of the battlefield symbolise new life, resurrection, hope, but they also show the essential autonomy of nature as it continues in its cycles irrespective of the human context.[84] Such tensions were a challenge to Georgian representations of a harmonious relationship between humans and nature in an ordered, safe and stable world, and highlighted the need for a new type of poetry to acknowledge and confront these changes.

The term 'Georgian' was originally used by Edward Marsh, the editor of the popular anthology *Georgian Poetry* which ran to five volumes, to describe work that was 'new', 'modern' and 'energetic'.[85] The term's decline into a more derogatory term for old fashioned or sentimental writing excludes some talented poets within the movement, but following the deaths of Victorian poets such as Tennyson in 1892 and Swinburne in 1909, British poetry had a conservative, safe and unchallenging tone which modernists found unfit for the purpose of representing the post-war world. The stability and sense of wellbeing located in the countryside was challenged not only by the social and economic realities of agricultural depression, but also by the increased importance of international events and movements. T. S. Eliot describes 'the situation of poetry in 1909 and 1910' as 'stagnant to a degree difficult for any

[84] The same idea is evident in the opening lines of *The Waste Land.*
[85] Timothy Rogers (ed.), *Georgian Poetry 1911-1922: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. xi.

young poet to imagine'.[86] Pound called it 'a doughy mess of third-hand Keats, Wordsworth, heaven knows what, fourth-hand Elizabethan sonority, blunted, half melted, lumpy' and set out to overthrow it.[87] Georgian literature occupied the cultural mainstream during the war, but its conservatism and insularity was inadequate for describing post-war Britain and the associated changes in the city and the countryside. The poets studied in this thesis recognise this need to revise poetic representations of nature and to create new ways of speaking about the natural world which can acknowledge the severe disruptions within the human sphere.

In contrast to the tradition and nostalgia associated with the countryside, for many modernist writers 'the city was the place to be modern'.[88] The city was the great phenomenon of modernism and both its physical environment and its growing reputation as a meeting place for artists to exchange new ideas and collaborate made it a powerful stimulant for writing. Improved communication and transport systems also meant that the 'culture-capitals' of Europe drew international artists: fuelling new thinking and new art.[89] The dissonance of urban and industrial life became the medium of representation as well as its subject, 'the very analogue of form', with the noise and pace of the modern city being mirrored by the form and rhythms of poetry.[90] The increasing importance of the city was a challenge to a nation whose self image was of a rural country with long held traditions and values. The strength of this national idea of self persisted despite the fact that the Industrial Revolution and Britain's imperialist history had created a society which, as Raymond Williams notes, 'had already become the first predominantly urban-dwelling people in the long history of human settlements'.[91] The rapid growth of urban places is charted by Williams:

> [...] by the middle of the nineteenth century the urban population of England exceeded the rural population: the first time in human history that this had ever been so, anywhere [...] by the end of the nineteenth century, the urban population was three-quarters of the whole.[92]

The impact of these changes is also noted by Monroe K. Spears who describes 'the urbanization of our culture' as 'the major sociological phenomenon of the last

[86] T. S. Eliot, 'Introduction' *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound,* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p. xiii.
[87] Ezra Pound, 'Hell' in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound,* p. 205.
[88] Tew, p. 113.
[89] Michael Bradbury, 'The Cities of Modernism' in *Modernism* ed. by Bradbury and McFarland, p. 96.
[90] Bradbury, p. 97.
[91] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), p. 2.
[92] Williams, p. 217.

century'.[93] But this process of urbanisation was not reflected in the character of Victorian or Georgian poetry which remained, predominantly, focussed on the countryside. By making the modern metropolis a central subject for poetry, modernist poets directly confronted the immediate environment of the majority of the population and shaped their experience of it through the creation of new techniques and approaches which sought to capture its noise, pace and diversity.

The city became the ground on which to examine modern society and modernism came to represent 'an art of cities' which was inseparable from the 'urban climates, the ideas and campaigns, the new philosophies and politics that ran through them'.[94] For Desmond Harding, the status of the city is such that it became 'the protagonist' of modernist literature: with modernist writers demonstrating 'a self-conscious awareness of historical and social relativity that played on the archetypal and historical features of the city in order to challenge the idea of the metropolis as an essentially static, fixed, and, ultimately knowable object'.[95] The city contains multiple contradictory characteristics evident in the range of responses it inspired in the poets in this thesis. It was the location of heightened tensions between the past and the present; at once 'generative environments of the new arts', but also sites which possessed 'a well-established humanistic role' which made them 'traditional cultural and artistic centres'.[96] In this way, although the techniques used to describe are often experimental and original, modernist urban poetry was not wholly 'new' but connected to a separate tradition within British literature: 'the pull and push of the city, its attractions and repulsion, have provided themes and attitudes that run deep in literature'.[97]

This thesis does not challenge the importance of the city to modernism. The city was undoubtedly a central stimulus for creativity during the period. However, it was not the only place of interest to modernist poets and neither was there a singular vision of the city in the movement, but its multiplicity is mirrored in the range of responses it provoked. Within this thesis there is also a clear interest and awareness of the importance of nature in the city which challenges the idea of the modernist city as lacking natural presences and urbanites as devoid of an environmental consciousness. Instead these poets recognise the presence of nature and natural

[93] Spears, p. 73.
[94] Bradbury, 'The Cities of Modernism', p. 96.
[95] Desmond Harding, *Writing the City: Urban Vision & Literary Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 11.
[96] Bradbury, 'The Cities of Modernism', p. 96.
[97] Bradbury, 'The Cities of Modernism' , p. 97.

processes in urban spaces and the existence of complex ecosystems which are vulnerable to human interference. Rather than the antithesis of the countryside, Claude Lévi-Strauss's description of the city as 'at one and the same time an object of nature and a subject of culture', as opposed to where one end and another begins, is a more productive way of approaching modernist understanding of place.[98]

3. Ecocriticism

Following my previous, brief, discussion of the definition of ecocriticism and its theoretical and methodological standpoints, I will now conduct a more detailed analysis of the theory in order to illuminate current debates and ideas which have influenced this thesis. Although nature has been an enduring and universal theme throughout literature, the creation of a formal theoretical movement dedicated to examining literary representations of the non-human world has been relatively recent. Ecocriticism emerged after a series of conferences and articles on the subject in North America led to the creation of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in 1992; accompanied by its American journal ISLE. Its formation united environmental practitioners by providing a central forum for sharing ideas and introducing others to their literary and environmental ambitions. Naming this type of 'earth-centred' approach to literature provided a degree of unity for individuals in the field and a growing, though by no means undisputed, theoretical cohesion.[99] From these beginnings in North America, interest in ecocriticism spread globally and has led to interdisciplinary research throughout cultural studies.[100] However, ecocriticism encompasses multiple ideas and positions which are important to explore in order to situate my examination of modernist literature within the broader theoretical and critical context of ecocriticism.

As previously discussed, ecocritics have experienced difficulty finding consensus on many aspects of the theory and this disagreement extends to its name. Lawrence Buell regards 'ecocriticism' as 'convenient shorthand' for discussing literature and the environment, but finds it inadequate and misleading in some respects.[101] Buell concedes that the term is 'less cumbersome and (so far) much more widely used' than alternatives such as 'environmental criticism' or 'literary-

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[98] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (Middlesex: Penguin Classics, 2011), p. 124.
[99] Glotfelty, p. xvii.
[100] ASLE now has several international affiliated branches in countries including Japan, India, Korea and Taiwan.
[101] Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 12.

environmental studies', but he has concerns that the name implies 'a non-existent methodological holism' which 'overstates the degree to which the environmental turn in literary studies was ever a coordinated project'.[102] Some alternative suggestions to the term 'ecocriticism' have included 'environmental criticism', 'literary ecology' and 'literary environmentalism', but the most useful alternative has been Laurence Coupe's suggestion of the term 'green studies'. The main benefit of 'green studies' is that it is not specific to literature, but examines the role of nature across cultural studies. This allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the meaning and representation of nature across the arts and beyond to politics and philosophy. Although the terms 'green studies' and 'ecocriticism' are often used interchangeably, green studies has become particularly associated with the interdisciplinary, inclusive and forward-looking character of British environmental criticism and will be used in this thesis, in combination with 'ecocriticism', in recognition of this.[103]

As well as difficulties in adequately naming and defining the theory, ecocriticism's central subject matter, 'nature', is also a highly complex subject which is difficult to define precisely. Raymond Williams describes 'nature' as 'perhaps the most complex word in the language', encompassing as it does: '(i) the essential quality and character *of* something; (ii) the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both; (iii) the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings'.[104] The degree to which humans can be considered part of nature is an important question for ecocritics and for modernist poets whose poetry expresses anxiety about feeling increasingly divided from the natural world. Terminology is also an issues in speaking about nature. 'Nature' is an evocative term which lacks neutrality and is laden with personal and cultural associations. The emotional response 'nature' elicits can be a useful tool for a theory wanting to encourage a sense of environmental responsibility; however it is also vulnerable to distortion or romanticisation. Raymond Williams recognises this danger, noting that the cultural associations of the term 'nature' in Britain since the eighteenth century have been inseparable from ideals of 'goodness and innocence'.[105] This is concerning because within this context 'nature has meant the "countryside", the "unspoiled

[102] Buell, pp. 12-13.
[103] In a forthcoming article Laurence Coupe proposes the term 'green theory' to cover both ecocriticism and green studies.
[104] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana Press, 1988), p. 219.
[105] Williams, *Keywords*, p. 223.

place", plants and creatures other than man' and as a result has strengthened the dualism between country and city and humans and nature. [106]

In *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Timothy Morton argues that these aesthetic associations of 'nature', rooted in Romantic poetry, are so dominant that a radical revision of ways of thinking about humans and nature is required. Morton believes that 'the very idea of "nature" which so many hold dear will have to wither away in an "ecological" state of human society' because 'the idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art'.[107] Sven Birkerts suggests this can be made possible through a change in terminology:

> Nature and its preservation is what occupies most ecocritics. And this imposes a kind of programmatic simplicity upon the whole movement [...]. How much more interesting and controversial would be an ecocriticism pledging itself to the more inclusive idea of "environment".[108]

However, although 'environment' does not discriminate between city and country, or all places in between, it is not wholly neutral because it still refers to what surrounds humans and so continues to put humanity at the centre. It is also problematic because of the strength of its association with crisis. In this thesis a range of terms will be used to describe different aspects of the non-human world and each poet's relationship to it. The term 'nature' will be used, with awareness of its complexity, because its emotional potency is an important part of the modernist desire to reconnect with the natural world and its cultural and personal meaning informs the development of each writer's environmental consciousness.

Deep Ecology

To understand the debates within ecocriticism it is important to recognise the influence of wider discussions underpinning contemporary environmental thought. A useful approach to understanding the different factions within environmentalism is to view them as progressing from shallow to deep; or from light green to dark green. At the shallow or light green end of the scale are environmentalists whose wish to

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[106] Williams, *Keywords*, p. 223.
[107] Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 11.
[108] Sven Birkerts, 'Only God Can Make a Tree: The Joys and Sorrows of Ecocriticism' *The Boston Book Review*, 3.1 Nov/Dec 1996

address the environmental crisis, but only with the aim of raising the standard of living for humans and sustaining much needed resources. This form of environmentalism has been criticised for regarding the natural world as a resource for humans, and although it tries to defend the environment from over exploitation it does so from an anthropocentric stance: addressing the most pressing and visually obvious environmental issues whilst ignoring the root causes and ideological structures behind them. At this level of environmental commitment, radical social and political changes are not advocated; nor are the values of nature placed above human needs.

At the other end of the scale, dark green or deep ecologists offer an abrasively earth-centered and controversial proposal of change which has had a strong influence on American ecocriticism. The philosophical ideology of the movement is accompanied by a call for practical action to overthrow the anthropocentric ideological structures of the individual and state in order to create a fundamental shift from anthropocentricism to biocentrism. Deep ecology stems principally from the teaching of the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss, whose mountain dwelling lifestyle inspired his belief that all living things have the right to live and flourish independent of their usefulness to human beings. Næss encourages the constant questioning of the meaning of human life, society and nature: believing that we injure ourselves by distinguishing human from nature and that we should respect the interconnectivity of all living things rather than thinking ourselves superior to non-human life. Central to his Ecosophy T is the celebration of the interconnectivity of ecosystems, denouncement of industrialisation's catastrophic impact on such sensitive balances, and insistence on the importance of contact with nature for spiritual well being and enlightenment.

The most prominent supporters of Arne Næss's philosophy have been Bill Devall and George Sessions. Clarifying and developing Næss's thinking, Sessions argues that 'to be fully human we must protect and nurture our wildness' through 'bioregional living, intimate contact with wild animals and plants in wild ecosystems, animalistic perceptions, primal nature rituals'.[109] Devall and Sessions' eight point summary of the beliefs of deep ecology states that all non-human life forms have value in themselves which humans have no right to reduce 'except to satisfy vital human needs', that the flourishing of both human and non-human life requires 'a

[109] George Sessions, 'What is Deep Ecology?' in *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century* ed. by George Sessions ,(Boston: Shambhala, 1995), p. 6.

substantial decrease of the human population', that fundamental changes must be made in both government policies and in the way we live (or dwell), and that all supporters of deep ecology are obliged to work towards these changes.[110] These points are accompanied by deep reverence for wilderness areas and admiration of Native Americans, Taoists, Buddhists traditions which are considered exemplary models of human communities living in close communion with nature within sustainable societies.

Deep ecology's call for a radical change in environmental thinking and policy is important in identifying the inherent anthropocentricism of Western societies and reinvigorating debate over the human/nature relationship in light of the environmental crisis. Lawrence Buell situates deep ecology within the 'first-wave' of ecocriticism which was concerned with re-orientating literary critical thinking towards a serious engagement with non-human nature.[111] This was combined with a broader aim of cultivating an 'ecological consciousness' which puts humans in direct contact with the wilderness and questions dominant, anthropocentric world views. [112] However, the celebration of wilderness areas, dismissal of the value of urban environments and the claim that those who do not have contact with wild places are somehow lacking in their humanity devalues the place-experience of the majority of people. Devall and Sessions provide deliberately loose definitions of certain aspects of deep ecology in order to stimulate further discussions, but this ambiguity has led to some points, particularly in regards to the controversial issue of population control, raising damaging accusations of misanthropy and elitism. Deep ecology has been criticised for failing to acknowledge the realities of modern society, for disregarding the fact that the immediate environment for the majority of people is urban and that prolonged contact with the wilderness is only available to the few. Its notion of the isolated intrinsic worth of nature is also problematic as it is in conflict with the key environmental concept of the interconnectivity of ecosystems and so reinforces the separateness of humans rather than their connections with nature.[113]

Deep ecology's privileging of wilderness areas has been contentious. The idea of wilderness is central to deep ecology and more generally to American culture and identity, but prioritising sparsely inhabited places to the detriment of urbanised,

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[110] Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Utah: Gibbs. M. Smith, 1985), p. 70.
[111] Buell, *Que Parle*, p. 93.
[112] Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology,* p. 8.
[113] This also clashes with Næss's awareness of the interdependency of ecosystems.

or more densely populated areas has attracted criticism.[114] Martin Ryle warns that 'the celebration of wild nature and the other-than-human, which constitutes the tone of much writing by ecocritics, does not necessarily encourage reflection on the forces and processes that threaten nature and humanity alike, or on our own participation in these'.[115] It also risks compartmentalising the theory and excluding large numbers of people from discussions of the environmental crisis. *Uncommon Ground*: *Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* edited by William Cronon has been central to this debate. Cronon draws attention to the potentially damaging consequences of wilderness fetishism by warning that fantasies of escape from the modern world avoids responsibilities to the places we live in which are dismissed as less valuable than the unblemished wildernesses beyond them. In an effort to redress this imbalance, Cronon highlights the importance of recognising 'the wildness in our backyards, of the nature that is all around us if only we have the eyes to see it'.[116] He argues for the deconstruction of dualisms which enforce environmental hierarchies and encourages a celebration of nature in all places; especially the places we called home. This plea for a broader understanding of the ubiquity of nature has direct implications for the scope and focus of ecocriticism. Creating divisions between different areas ignores the long history of mutual dependency and interaction between places; especially in Britain where the dense population and geographical proximity of town and country have led to the continual movement of people, ideas and goods between the two. It is also particularly relevant to modernist literature where the immediate environment for the majority of writers was urban and retreating to isolated pockets of Britain could have meant a failure to confront the impact of modernity on human-nature relations.

Social Ecology

Founded in the 1960s by Murray Bookchin, social ecology's central belief is that ecological problems stem from social problems and violence against the natural world is a symptom of the oppressive hierarchy of human systems. Rooted in Marxist ecological thought, social ecology or social ecocriticism considers environmental damage in relation to the capitalist treatment of the poor: both being seen as cheap resources exploited for profit. For social ecologists, environmental

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[114] This is not a concern restricted to American ecocriticism. Jonathan Bate also voices his anxieties about the 'psychological mechanism which attracts us to places which seem to be purer than the cities in which the majority of moderns spend their working lives'. *The Song of the Earth*, p. 36.
[115] Martin Ryle, 'Materialism and Ecocriticism' in *Modernism and Theory* ed. by Ross, p. 50.
[116] Cronon, p. 86.

degradation is inseparable from issues of racism, poverty and oppression; with humans not only dominating the environment but also each other. This correlation between treatment of workers and the state of their environment often relates to urban or industrial areas, making social ecology the area of ecocriticism which has come closest to establishing an urban ecocriticism. Social ecologists argue that excluding city dwellers from environmental discussions silences a large demographic and denies the importance of their relationship to place. The simplistic rejection of human concerns such as social life, economics and class politics is also viewed as erroneous because it denies environmentalism the adequate scope of enquiry needed for a comprehensive understanding of the crisis.[117]

Social ecology shares deep ecology's belief that Western capitalism causes damage to the environment and significant political changes should be made to remedy this. However, social ecology is distinguishable by its defense of both nature and people, and its insistence that social and environmental problems cannot be divorced as both stem from the prevailing socio-economic system.[118] Social ecology challenges deep ecology's anti-urban, ecocentric stance and advocates an alternative approach which 'integrates the study of human and natural ecosystems through understanding the interrelationships of culture and nature'.[119] Social ecologists recognise the interrelated dependency between humans and non-humans: arguing that 'it is impossible to separate defense of people from defense of the planet, human rights from ecological survival, justice from sustainability'.[120] This need to find connections between humans and nature in urban as well as rural areas relates strongly to the particular character of British modernist poetry. It is also a stance which has become central in helping 'ecocriticism grapple with one of its central conceptual challenges – understanding nature and culture as interwoven rather than as separate sides of a dualistic construct'.[121]

The practical arm of social ecology is the Social or Environmental Justice Movement, which campaigns for the rights of people whose health and living conditions are being damaged by environmental change. They dispute that there is a

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[117] Steven Rosendale, *The Greening of Literary Scholarship: Literature, Theory and the Environment* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), p. 61.
[118] David Pepper, *Eco-Socialism: From Deep Ecology to Social Justice* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 232.
[119] Michael Bennett, 'From Wide Open Spaces to Metropolitan Places' in *The Isle Reader*, p. 298.
[120] Laurence Coupe, 'General Introduction' in *The Green Studies Reader,* p. 5.
[121] Armbruster, Karla and Kathleen R. Wallace (eds.), *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* (Charlotteville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), p. 4.

difference between domination of the environment and domination of other humans, and argue that some environmental legislation is distinctly anti-human. The breadth of their concerns is apparent in their definition of the environment as: ‘the place you work, the place you live, the place you play’.[122] The Environmental Justice Movement raises important issues about the environmental impact of race, class and wealth by revealing the uneasy truth that the poorest people live with the highest risk of environmental health damage. This means that the target of their action is often heavily industrialised urban areas that deep ecologists overlook in favour of protecting less densely inhabited areas. The Environmental Justice Movement regards humans as part of the chain of interdependence in the ecosystem and demands the same rights as deep ecologists advocate for non-human species to be given to humans whose lives are also at risk as a result of environmental damage. It challenges the notion that a strong sense of community and pride in your local area are qualities principally found in rural locales and rejects the idea that people living in poor areas do not care about their surroundings. This deconstruction of ideas of cities as unnatural and their inhabitants as disinterested in their environment correlates with aspects of modernist poetry: particularly in the poetry of Charlotte Mew whose writing communicates an intense attachment to the city and the nature within it.

British Ecocriticism

Although ideas from deep ecology and social ecology have helped in forming my approach and analysis of modernist poetry, this thesis is most closely aligned to the ethos of British ecocriticism. Differentiating European ecocriticism from its American counterpart, Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby identify Europe’s relatively dense population as a key factor in shaping a form of ecocriticism which is ‘primarily concerned with cultural landscapes, with the pastoral rather than wilderness’ and ‘more open to perspectives departing from traditional ecocritical assumptions about the dichotomy of nature and culture’.[123] This stance reflects Jonathan Bate’s claim that ‘although we make sense of things by words, we do no live apart from the world. For culture and environment are held together in a complex and delicate web’. [124] Anna Stenning and Terry Gifford also recognise

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[122] Giovanna Di Chiro ‘Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice’ in *Uncommon Ground*, p. 301.
[123] Alex Goodbody and Kate Rigby (eds.), *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), pp. 2-3.
[124] Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000) p. 23.

differences from American ecocriticism, identifying British and Irish approaches as 'less spiritual and more concerned with natural history, perhaps less internally and externally focused'.[125] For Goodbody and Rigby, the close geographical proximity of different language, societies and cultures throughout Europe has increased sensitivity to considerations of the relativity of cultural responses to nature. In contrast, American ecocriticism is seen to associate nature with national identity more strongly than in Europe, where strong affiliations to place based on nationality are treated more cautiously in light of Nazi ideologies of 'Blood and Soil'. This unease about political associations between national identity and land is noted by Lawrence Buell, who suggests that the right-wing tendency of a few British country writers in the interwar period made British ecocritics cautious about pastoral modes and directed their interests towards the physical and social realities of landscape and their representation in literature.[126]

British ecocriticism has been shaped by the country's physical geography and by the impact of historical events including the industrial revolution, wars, urbanisation and the mechanisation of farming on attitudes to the countryside and the city. Britain has wild places but not the vast wilderness areas which are so central to America's concept of itself, and this close proximity between town and country can be seen to have contributed to British ecocriticism's emphasis on interrelations rather than differences between the two. This is evident from the first edition of ASLE UK's journal *Green Letters* (2000), where British ecocritics stated their aim to make 'the category of nature as central to the humanities as class, race and gender are at present'.[127] The definitions of the theory offered by contributors and their hopes for its future set the tone for much of British ecocriticism. Jonathan Bate's commitment to 'Romanticism and its afterlife' encourages an interest in contemporary literature which connects to the modern environmental crisis, rather than looking back to a period of supposed harmony in a pre-industrial age. [128] As Bate explains, the prospect of so many possible subjects for ecocriticism means that the 'potential scope is endless'.[129] Richard Kerridge draws attention to the importance of investigating 'the lines of demarcation between pastoral and industrial attitudes to the countryside' and

[125] Anna Stenning and Terry Gifford, 'Editorial: Twentieth-century writing in Britain and Ireland', *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism,* 17 (2013), pp.1-5 (p.1).
[126] Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, p. 15.
[127] Laurence Coupe, 'Editorial' *Green Letters,* 1(Spring 2000), p. 3.
[128] Jonathan Bate et. al., 'What is Ecocriticism?: UK Perspectives' *Green Letters* 1, 2000, (pp. 4-6), p. 4.
[129] Bate, 'What is Ecocriticism', p. 4.

recognising that in Britain 'nature' is 'always in close proximity to urban and suburban life'.[130] Dominic Head also emphasises the importance of 'extending boundaries' to ensure that ecocritics do not 'confine themselves to the study of poems about trees'. [131] He confirms British ecocriticism's 'spirit of extension' by encouraging ecocritics to 'investigate the relevance of various approaches to urban experiences' when defining what is 'natural' in order to develop a 'forward-looking ecocriticism' which is interdisciplinary and ambitious.[132] Such a unified move towards extending ecocriticism to new areas of literature avoids the limitations of deep ecology or the specific political ideology of social ecology in favour of an open exploration of the environmental knowledge which can be gained from reading all texts from an ecocritical perspective. This approach is particularly appealing when considering modernist literature because it offers the freedom to explore a range of responses to nature within the movement in a way which does not limit understanding of the variety of human relations to place or the complex intersections between culture and nature.

The distinctive character of British ecocriticism owes much to its founding texts: *The Country and the City* by Raymond Williams and *Romantic Ecology* and *The Song of the Earth* by Jonathan Bate. Both Williams and Bate examine the cultural construction of place and the role of literature in confirming or challenging attitudes towards different environments. They also integrate the physical aspects of place with its social history in order to reach a more comprehensive understanding of its realties. In *The Country and the City* (1973), Raymond Williams deconstructs literary representations of both the countryside and the city to expose the political and social realities behind their fictionalised representation in literature. By tracing the shifting historic identities of the countryside and the city and challenging the cultural opposition existing between the two, Williams shows the interconnections in what 'has to be seen ultimately as a common history'.[133] Williams identifies a nostalgic impulse to return to a mythical 'Old England' embodied in the image of rural Britain as a persistent theme throughout British literature, but one which is strongest in times of social change and uncertainty.[134] This is rooted in associations of the country with 'peace, innocence, and simple virtue' in contrast to the 'noise,

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[130] Bate, 'What is Ecocriticism', p. 4.
[131] Bate, 'What is Ecocriticism', p. 4.
[132] Bate, 'What is Ecocriticism', p. 4.
[133] Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 288.
[134] Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 1.

worldliness and ambition' of the city.[135] Williams criticises literature for contributing to the perpetration of false dichotomies by creating fictions of urban and rural life which show 'an insolent indifference to most people's needs' rather than emphasising 'the variety which exist in both and the interconnections between the two'.[136]

The Country and the City has been central in highlighting the need to interrogate and challenge fictionalised representations of place against the realities of working conditions, power structures, social order and other contextual issues. Williams was also important in arguing that the city is central in shaping attitudes to place: finding a correlation between the growth and development of urban centres and the emotional value placed on the countryside.[137] Lawrence Buell views *The Country and the City* as moving British ecocriticism most closely towards 'socialist ecology'.[138] Williams's work directed early British ecocriticism towards an exploration of the means of production and political structures behind a text and prompted renewed awareness of the position of the writer in relation to place. Although Williams could be accused of an anthropocentric bias in his interest in the social and political realities of place, his exposure of false representations of the country and the city has been integral in shaping British ecocriticism's rigorous interrogation of literary depictions of place. This thesis aims to continue his challenge to binary oppositions between country and city and humans and nature, but it also aims to deconstruct similarly ingrained associations with modernism which have led to erroneous understanding of the movement as antithetical to environmental issues and uninterested in the natural world.

Jonathan Bate describes *The Song of the Earth* (2000) as a study of 'modern Western man's alienation from nature' and 'the capacity of the writers to restore us to the earth which is our home'.[139] Like Raymond Williams, Bate is interested in 'the complex relations between humankind, nature and society' and the problem of how to reconcile the traditionally opposed forces of 'culture' and 'nature'.[140] Both critics recognise the damaging potential of literary creations of rural fantasies to mask the oppression and exploitation of agrarian economies. Such false depictions are seen as

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[135] Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 1.
[136], Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 84.
[137] Williams also examines the contradictory representation of the city as a place of 'learning, communication, light' in contrast to the countryside's 'backwardness, ignorance or limitation.'(p. 1).
[138] Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, p. 15.
[139]Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p. ix.
[140] Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p. ix.

rooted in a nostalgic yearning for an ‘imagined better life’ which exists somewhere in the indistinct past.[141] However, Bate does not completely disregard nostalgia as a dangerous distraction from reality, but argues that pastoral narratives of redemption through contact with nature hold the potential to increase environmental responsibility. Nostalgia is understood to be rooted in a sense of loss of ways of life ‘in which people *live in rhythm with nature'*.[142] In support of this analysis, Bate refers to Thomas Hardy: attributing his continuing popularity to the novels' representation of a time when people lived in close contact with nature in small, ‘quasi-mythic’ communities.[143] This sense of nostalgia is particularly relevant to the modernist era when, despite the majority of the population living in cities, most people were only a generation or two removed from the countryside and so remained closely connected to it in terms of family history and individual identity.

The Song of the Earth has been influential in asserting the potential for literature to reconnect humans to the natural world and to become a tool with which to address the environmental crisis. In relation to this thesis, Bate's awareness of the importance of psychological impulses, cultural constructions and the role of the writer in shaping perception of the world and provoking the reader to revise and reconnect with place has been central. Bate's work takes a vital step in reclaiming the reality of the landscapes which inspired the Romantic poets and challenging problematic divisions between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ which obscure the reality of place. However, Bate supports his argument for the importance of ‘ecopoetics’ in restoring human relations to the natural world with examples drawn primarily from the Romantics.[144] Such poets foreground environmental issues and speak directly about their beliefs in poetry's ability to help cultivate a closer relationship with the non-human world in response to the damaging environmental impact of the industrial revolution. However, by restricting his analysis to those who are already firmly recognised as ‘nature poets’, Bate fails to account for the environmental value of urban poetry or to consider how the work of poets who are less immediately connected with environmental issues can also provide insights about the complex relationship between humans and nature.

[141]Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p. 1.
[142] Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p. 3.
[143] Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p. 23.
[144] Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p. 42.

Urban Nature

One of the most important developments in ecocriticism has been the extension of the theory to urban environments and urban literature. It is a development Lawrence Buell places within the context of 'second wave ecocriticism': characterised by a move beyond the limitations of 'genre, geography and historical epoch' to open the theory to 'the whole sweep of Western literary history from antiquity to the present'.[145] Rejecting the anti-urban stance of deep ecology, urban ecocriticism argues that an urban landscape is not a barrier to ecocritical enquiry, but fertile ground on which to examine 'the meeting point of nature and artifice'.[146] Urban ecocriticism challenges our concept of 'nature' and calls for closer observation of the natural processes evident throughout the city. As Anne Whitsun Spirn argues, rather than being a purely human environment, 'nature pervades the city, forging bonds between the city and the air, earth, water, and living organisms within and around it'.[147] Ron Freethy agrees, stating that cities 'support a remarkable complexity of wildlife, with opportunities for ecological management and education almost as interesting as those of a primitive forest'.[148] B. Ashton Nichols proposes the term 'urbanature' as a way of describing the complex web of interdependency and interrelatedness between humans and nature in the city and allowing us to 'see urban and nonurban spaces as equally worth saving'.[149] He argues that 'nature and urban life are not as distinct as human beings have long supposed' but are 'linked in a complex web of interdependent interrelatedness'.[150] Developing the terminology used to speak about urban experience, Nichols uses the term 'roosting', as opposed to Heidegger's concept of 'dwelling', to describe the often mobile, temporary nature of human habitation in a way which correlates to the behaviour of non-human nature.[151] Nichols argues that a temporary home does not necessarily result in a diminished awareness of place, but the idea of 'roosting' implies 'a home that affects, and is affected by, its inhabitants and their wider surroundings' and by local knowledge and

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[145] Buell, *Que Parle*, p. 92.
[146] Lévi-Strauss, p. 124.
[147] Anne Whitson Spirn, *The Granite Garden: Urban Nature and Human Design* (New York: Basic Books Inc., Publishers, 1984), p. xi.
[148] Ron Freethy, *The Making of the British Countryside* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1981), p. 212.
[149] B. Ashton Nichols, *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism: Towards Urbanatural Roosting* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p.xvi.
[150] Nichols. p. xiii.
[151] Heidegger's concept of dwelling will be examined in more detail in my analysis of Edward Thomas.

ecological responsibility.[152] This way of thinking is a challenge to deep ecology's celebration of localism and rootedness, although not all pre-modern societies venerated by deep ecologists as models of ideal human/nature relations were bound to a single place.

Andrew Ross observes that 'the environmental movement has been a haven [...], for straight, white, middle-class males', but widening its interests to urban environments could allow for more diverse voices, including the voices of those who left rural places in search of the freedom and tolerance of the city.[153] Failing to recognise the presence of nature in the city severely restricts our knowledge of the environmental crisis as well as limiting the potential for ecocriticism to speak for all places. However, despite these benefits, Michael Bennett finds ecocriticism has 'been slow to survey urban environments' and develop beyond its associations as 'a body of work devoted to nature writing, American pastoralism, and literary ecology'.[154] In *The Nature of Cities*, Bennett and Teague set out to challenge the 'self-limiting conceptualizations of nature, culture, and environment built into many ecocritical projects by their exclusion of urban places' in order to 'remind city dwellers of our placement within ecosystems and the importance of this fact for understanding urban life and culture'.[155] Refuting deep ecology's claims for the enlightening potential of contact with wilderness, Bennett points out that those who live in rural areas are not always the enlightened, fully actualised human beings that deep ecology envisions, but often people who hunt for sport, are closed minded on issues of race or sexuality, or are human-centred in regards to environmental decisions. In contrast, urbanites are often well informed and fully committed to environmental issues and have a sense of personal responsibility in terms of their impact on the world. Bennett argues that deconstructing stereotypes of place is essential in order to recognise the socio-political construction of all places and to protect nature in urban areas rather than seeing it as something which exists 'elsewhere'. Bennett focuses predominantly on North America in his examination of tensions between the urban and rural. However, British ecocriticism has tended not to be so polarised in this respect: concentrating instead on the relationship between town and country and the need to deconstruct culturally created dualisms in order to

[152] Nichols, p. xvii.
[153] Andrew Ross (Interviewed by Michael Bennett), 'The Social Claim on Urban Ecology', in *The Nature of Cities,* p. 25.
[154]Michel Bennett and David W. Teague, 'Urban Ecocriticism: An Introduction' in *The Nature of Cities*, p. 3.
[155] Bennett and Teague, p. 4.

appreciate the reality of place. This thesis aims to develop the work of urban ecocritics by reassessing modernist representations of urban environments with a specific interest in attitudes to nature and human relations to its presence in the city.

Developments within both ecocriticism and modernist studies have allowed for the possibility of communication between the two. The pluralism of modernist studies and the recognition of a range of interests within the movement have helped deconstruct the idea of modernist literature as a singular entity. Similarly the continual extension of ecocriticism beyond nature writing into new areas such as urban literature have required a continual development of ideas about the representation of nature throughout a range of literary texts. These parallel developments make this a suitable time to examine modernist literature from an ecocritical perspective. Building on the ideas and approaches outlined in this chapter, this thesis aims to extend ecocritical thought by applying it to modernist literature in order to reveal the strong environmental concern within the movement evident in the work of each poet in this thesis. The move towards examining modernist texts from an ecocritical perspective has been gradual, but as the next chapter shows the research which has been undertaken has been successful in arguing for the importance of nature to modernist literature and the ability of ecocriticism to identify and examine it.

CHAPTER 2. MODERNISM IN ECOCRITICAL THOUGHT

The developments within ecocriticism and modernist studies detailed in the previous chapter have broadened the scope and understanding of both areas allowing for new connections to be made between them. The potential benefits of such dialogue between the two are numerous. For modernist studies, an ecocritical perspective can contribute to the ongoing awareness of the plurality of the movement by highlighting the currently under-examined importance of place to individual writers and across the movement as a whole. For ecocritics, extending their interests to modernist literature proves the theory's ability to gain environmental insight into areas not immediately associated with nature. Examining literature which presents a more complex representation of place also extends ecocritical understanding of the intricate interrelations between culture and nature, and directs interest towards how different literary movements respond to these. However, despite recognition of the plurality of modernism within modernist studies and British ecocriticism's commitment to extending the theory into new areas of literature, there has been very few ecocritical readings of modernist literature in general and even less of British modernist poetry in particular. In this chapter I will be examining existing research in this area in order to assess the success of the different approaches to the subject and to situate my thesis within the broader critical field. The five studies examined in this chapter relate more generally to the relationship between modernist literature and nature, but within subsequent chapters I will also be examining environmental readings of each individual poet.

Awareness of the lack of research into the relationship between modernist literature and the environment and possible reasons for this omission has been discussed. Alex Davis and Lee Jenkins note that 'recent theoretical debate has served to enhance our understanding of the plural basis of poetic modernism, and yet the construction of modernism as an international, urban and yet placeless, phenomenon remains for the most part, a critical given'.[156] These deeply embedded associations of modernism with urban environments are also acknowledged by Robert Crawford, who argues that 'a cursory account of modernism stresses its cosmopolitanism and internationalism, presenting it as a facet of "high" metropolitan culture. But there is

[156] Alex Davis and Lee Jenkins, 'Locating Modernisms: An Overview' in *Locations of Literary Modernism Region and Nation in Britain and American Modernist Poetry* ed. by Alex Jenkins and Lee Davis, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 3.

also another equally important side of Modernism that is demotic and crucially "provincial"'.[157] Failure to recognise the range of responses to place within modernism not only excludes modernist representations of non-urban landscapes from discussions of the movement, but also limits understanding of the variety of poetic responses to the city that modernism contains. Urban ecocriticism has helped to challenge ingrained ideas of cities as unnatural environments, but their insights have yet to be applied to literary modernism. Robert Kern insists that ecocriticism must extend to all literature, even when it requires an element of 'reading against the grain'.[158] For Kern, ecocriticism becomes 'more interesting and useful [...] when it aims to recover the environmental character or orientation of works whose conscious or foregrounded interests lie elsewhere'.[159] Kathleen R. Wallace and Karla Armbruster also support the extension of ecocriticism beyond texts which deal explicitly with nature. They argue that 'a viable ecocriticism must continue to challenge dualistic thinking by exploring the role of nature in texts more concerned with human cultures': particularly texts that 'revolve around these less obviously "natural" landscapes and human attempts to record, order, and ultimately understand their own relationship to those environments'.[160] As Andrew Thacker acknowledges, even the simple act of re-reading modernist texts with an awareness of the physical reality of place creates a shift in understanding modernist writers as artists who were 'living and experiencing "new times" not in abstracted location of literary history but in specific spatial histories: rooms, cities, buildings, counties and landscapes'.[161] This thesis aims to reconsider British modernist poetry from an ecocritical perspective and bring attention to this under-examined aspect of the movement in order to represent a more comprehensive understanding of modernist responses to the environment.

As detailed in the previous chapter, there is no singular approach to analysing texts from an ecocritical perspective. However, in discussions of the relationship between modernist literature and the environment the term 'place' recurs as a useful way of approaching the subject. Lawrence Buell describes world history as the process of 'space becoming place' and supports the use of the term 'place-

[157] Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 218-9.
[158] Robert Kern, 'Ecocriticism: What is it Good For?' in *The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism 1993-2003*, ed. by Michael P Branch and Scott Slovic (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2003), p. 260.
[159] Kern, p. 267.
[160] Armbruster and Wallace (eds.), *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* (Charlotteville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), p. 4.
[161] Andrew Thacker, *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 13.

attachment' as a useful, though not completely unproblematic, way of thinking about our relationship to our lived environments.[162] 'Place' is useful because it includes the presence of both human and non-human life and can be used as a neutral term to discuss both rural and urban environments. It is also particularly useful in discussing modernism's ecocritical credentials because it is a direct challenge to accusations of the movement as essentially placeless. Jeremy Hooker emphasises its inclusivity by explaining that 'places may exist in landscapes, and may be seen as landscapes, but they are not landscapes. Places are where people live, where they are enwombed, embedded in the communal and the familiar'.[163] Carol H. Cantrell also recognises the benefits of 'place' as a democratic term which 'necessarily includes the human presence': being where 'our embodied selves experience the world'.[164] For Cantrell, 'place' is free from the rigidity and inherent elitism of other terms such as 'landscape' or 'wilderness': possessing an 'open-ended identity negotiated by multiple voices, not just one, and not just by human voices'.[165] It 'cuts humans down to size' as the human perceiver 'is conceived of as being within something that surpasses her – that is, place – not the other way around'.[166]

The link between 'place' and creativity is strong. Cantrell insists that 'any writing – any product of human creativity – will bear the imprint of interactions between human and world', and this makes it a particularly useful approach for thinking about modernist writing where '"place" is a problematic, not a given'.[167] In addition, thinking about 'place' connects to the related issues of displacement which accommodates the sense of alienation felt by many modernist writers who Cantrell describes as 'famously expatriates, wanderers, exiles [...]; rooted in the shifting ground of the twentieth century rather than in local and national traditions'.[168] This displacement does not bar such writers from thinking about the meaning of 'place' because 'place' does not purely relate to stability or regionalism but is 'a condition of being alive'.[169] For modernism, the benefit of such a democratic concept as 'place' is that it implies human habitation without disregarding the presence of nature or

[162]Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 63.
[163] Jeremy Hooker, *Writers in a Landscape* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), p. 5.
[164] Carol H. Cantrell, 'The Locus of Compossibility: Virginia Woolf, Modernism, and Place' in *The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism 1993-2003*, ed. by Michael P Branch and Scott Slovic (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2003), pp.33-48 (p. 34).
[165] Cantrell, p. 39.
[166] Cantrell, p. 39.
[167] Cantrell, p. 37.
[168] Cantrell, p. 33.
[169] Cantrell, p. 36.

natural processes. It is broad enough to include all relationships between humans and the natural world, whether in urban or rural areas, and it can accommodate the stories, mythologies and local knowledge which create attachment to place. In regards to this thesis, the absence of value judgements associated with 'place' and its accommodation of human as well as non-human activity make it particularly suitable for speaking about modernist poetry's shifting relationship with the physical environment. In this thesis I will be referring to 'place' to speak about each poet's relationship to their surroundings. However, because I am interested in their representation of different environments in literature and will be examining the relationship of each poet to specific landscapes, this will be combined with the use of language and terminology which distinguishes between urban and rural subjects.

Five critics who have begun to address the environmental issues within modernism are Carol H. Cantrell, J. Scott Bryson, David Arnold, Charlene Spretnak and Alexandra Harris. Their work provides examples of different approaches to understanding modernist literature's relationship to nature, place and the environment, and strengthens the argument that modernist literature is an interesting and important subject for ecocritical enquiry. In '"The Locus of Compossibility": Virginia Woolf, Modernism, and Place', Carol H. Cantrell directly addresses the apparent incongruity between modernism and ecocriticism by acknowledging that modernism's associations with the abstract and formal would suggest that 'modernist art, including modern literature, would seem to be hostile territory for a student of literature and the natural environment'.[170] However, Cantrell argues for the suitability of modernism as a subject of ecocritical enquiry by contextualising modernist writers as 'uniquely situated as witnesses to the profound changes in human relations with the planet which have become visible in this century'.[171] In particular, Cantrell acknowledges the role of the First World War in raising questions about inherited values and driving 'a revolutionary change in "the given" we call nature'.[172] The rejection of conventional modes of perceiving the world creates the need to 'invent new ways of seeing, new ways of registering the perceptual shock of change, new ways of being readers and viewers, and to respond with new urgency to questions about the consequences of human creativity'.[173] Like ecocritics, modernist are interested in 'alternative conceptions of perception', the 'exploration and

[170] Cantrell, p. 33.
[171] Cantrell, p. 33.
[172] Cantrell, p. 33.
[173] Cantrell, p. 34.

representation of various kinds of otherness', and the 'multiple territories which lie outside of language'.[174]

Cantrell explores these aspects of modernism in relation to Virginia Woolf whose writing, she argues, can be seen as a series of experiments aimed at finding new ways of representing human relationships to the real through foregrounding the natural world. Although Cantrell's central subject is Woolf's novel *Between the Acts*, her assertion that modernist writers demonstrate an awareness of the fragility of place in their work and create order by 'making and remaking' their world through art, is also relevant to the poets in this thesis who all respond poetically to the reality of the physical world and human interactions with it.[175] Cantrell's analysis is also important because it suggest that the abstract and experimental nature of modernism, which could be seen as antithetical to ecocritical values, actually allows writers to better understand the complexity of the real rather than distancing them from it. Ecocriticism rightfully encourages a move towards recognising the reality of place, but the use of symbolism, metaphor and other forms of experimentation as techniques in communicating the complexity of a landscape are also important because they reflects how humans think about and act upon different environments. Recognising the use of experimentation and cultural referencing in representing the physical environment does not equate to a dismissal of the reality of place; rather it can offer a deeper understanding of the complex interactions between the human and non-human which are central in understanding how modernist writers respond to their environment.

David Arnold's article 'Sensuous Surrealism: Writing Reanimated', moves beyond the issue of whether it is possible to analyse modernist texts from an ecocritical perspective to question why it is not already central to modernist studies: 'Why is it that ecological concerns are so marginal to the expanded field of modernist studies?'[176] The answer, he suggests, could simply be that the theory has surfaced too recently to have reached all areas, or that modernist critics may have inherited a scepticism for Romanticism which has led to a wariness of 'any critical practice that appears to encourage a "return" to nature'.[177] Arnold also criticises several missed opportunities and false starts which have meant 'ecocritical concerns

[174] Cantrell, p. 34..
[175] Cantrell, p. 47.
[176] David Arnold, 'Sensuous Surrealism: Writing Reanimated' *Green Letters*, 14, 2011, (pp. 81-97), p. 82.
[177] Arnold, p. 82.

rest at the margins of the diversification of modernist studies'.[178] He refers to the importance of David Bradshaw's acknowledgement in *A Concise Companion to Modernism* that ecology is a 'modernist preoccupation', but expresses disappointment that this is not a subject Bradshaw feels the restrictions of his study will allow him to pursue.[179] Bonnie Kime Scott's discussion of green modernism in Stephen Ross's *Modernism and Theory* is also seen as failing to fulfil its potential because her focus on Anglo-American ecofeminism presents a 'restricted view of the opportunities for ecocritical readings of modernism'.[180] Kime Scott's critique of the dominant masculine values of modernism is not seen as unwelcome or 'wrong', but Arnold raises concerns that presenting 'only *critiques* of modernism as eligible for ecocritical enquiry' misses 'some of the nuances' of modernism's response to modernity.[181] However, although Bonnie Kime Scott's primary object is to challenge the dominant masculine values of modernism, her assertion that modernist writers took 'an abiding interest in nature, human interdependencies with it, and even in its preservation' is an important statement within a study of modernism and theory.[182]

David Arnold's interests are themselves quite specific. In his article he examines the importance of 'setting in relation the experimental writing practices of early Surrealism and the ecophenomenology of David Abram'.[183] Arnold argues that the two, seemingly unrelated, areas are united by a critique of modernity and an attempt to create new ways of representing the non-human world through art. In particular, he refers to the practice of automatic writing as an example of how modernists had not lost touch with the sensuous world but experience it 'through something akin to a traumatic structure, whereby the more-than-human-world, repressed by modernity, communicates in skewed, uncanny ways'.[184] By producing such an original account of this particular area of modernist practice, Arnold strengthens the case for further research into the environmental aspects of modernism. Similarly to this thesis, Arnold identifies green aspects of an area of literature associated predominantly with human concerns and argues for ecocritical interests to be part of the diversification of modernist studies.

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[178] Arnold, p. 82.
[179] David Bradshaw (ed.), *A Concise Companion to Modernism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003), p. 3.
[180] Bradshaw, p. 3.
[181] Arnold, p. 82.
[182] Bonnie Kime Scott, 'Green' in *Modernism and Theory,* p. 219.
[183] Arnold, p.83.
[184] Arnold, p. 94.

Like Carol H. Cantrell, J. Scott Bryson's ecocritical exploration of literary modernism centres on Virginia Woolf.[185] His main argument is that Woolf displays a degree of ambivalence in relation to the idea of the ordering function of art because such a system can only represent a limited number of perspectives so risks excluding the perspective of the non-human. Focussing on the "Time Passes" section of *To The Lighthouse*, Bryson offers an ecocritical reading which examines the encroaching presence of nature within the empty house, Mrs McNab's failure to perceive any connection between herself and the natural world, and Lily Briscoe's error in seeking a single vision. Although Bryson concentrates on the modernist novel, he makes connections between Woolf's recognition of the limitations of presenting a single artistic vision and T. S. Eliot's 'ruptured poem that offers numerous voices and visions in an attempt to discover meaning within the chaos' which make his argument relevant to the interests of this thesis.[186]

Bryson also finds a correlation between modernist alienation and modernity: arguing that this sense of estrangement 'results directly from a fundamental uncertainty about the relationship between human and non-human nature'.[187] Similarly to this thesis, reaction to modernity is identified as a major stimulus for environmental awareness in modernist literature. Modernity is understood as a process which led to disenchantment with the natural world and produces a sense of separation which is 'emblematic of the "wastelandic" state of affairs that literary modernists attempted to address during the first half of the twentieth century'.[188] Bryson argues that modernists reject modern science's perception of the world as 'a machine to be studied' with the associated implication that 'they themselves were merely mechanistic parts of a great machine, rather than central and significant members of an organic, interdependent, symbiotic world full of meaning'.[189] The role of ecocriticism is seen to be vital in revealing this aspect of modernism. Bryson argues that 'ecocritical methodology has much to offer as an approach to modern literature, not only because modern artists displayed a significant interest in natural elements in their work [...], but also because a central question for artists and intellectual in the early part of the twentieth century became how humans could

[185] J. Scott Bryson, 'Modernism and Ecological Criticism' in Eysteinsson, Astradur and Vivian Liska (eds.), *Modernism: Volume 1* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), pp. 591-604.
[186] Bryson, p. 602.
[187] Bryson, p. 591.
[188] Bryson, p. 592.
[189] Bryson, p. 592.

somehow render their experiences with a more-than-human world'.[190] This search for alternative modes of speaking about the non-human world in order to better represent changes in human/nature relations in modernist literature is also a key interest of this thesis.

In *The Resurgence of the Real: Body, Nature, and Place in a Hypermodern World*, Charlene Spretnak criticises modernity's negative impact on the global economy and national stability, and exposes the inadequacies of its promise of 'freedom from the vagaries of the body, the limits of nature, and the provincial ties to place'.[191] Dominant beliefs in progress and rationality are seen as devaluing a significant amount of human experience and in response to this Spretnak champions 'ecological postmodernism' as a means of resistance. This includes a rejection of the idea of a 'mechanistic universe' in favour of 'cosmological processes', understanding of 'nature as subject' rather than 'nature as opponent', and recognition of the complexity of ecology in opposition to reductionist thinking.[192]

The Resurgence of the Real is important in terms of this thesis because Spretnak traces the impact of modernity back to modernism and argues that within modernism there was opposition to its harmful effects on human relations to nature. Spretnak identifies two distinct strands of modernism: 'one that embraced the mechanistic, minimalist Machine Age (pro-modern Modernism) and one that challenged that worldview (counter-modern Modernism)'.[193] She argues that counter-modern modernism 'belongs in our survey of spiritual and/or ecological resistance because it sought to cut through ideologies of denial and to embrace the real'.[194] This is evident in the rejection of 'grand schemes of schematic explanation' in favour of 'fragmented, discordant, and random experiences in life'.[195] Similarly to Cantrell and Arnold, modernist experimentation is viewed as providing a way of developing a deeper understanding of the real rather than having a distancing effect. Modernists are seen to have:

> [...] set out on their own quest for deep engagement with the real by embracing the fragmentary and discordant in order to allude to the

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[190] Bryson, p.591.
[191] Charlene Spretnak, *The Resurgence of the Real: Body, Nature and Place in a Hypermodern World* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), p. 2.
[192] Spretnak, *The Resurgence of the Real*, pp. 73-4.
[193] Spretnak, *The Resurgence of the Real*, p. 8.
[194] Spretnak, *The Resurgence of the Real*, p. 171.
[195]Spretnak, *The Resurgence of the Real* , p. 170.

> mysterious mesh that links all being and event but is far more subtle than mechanistic ideologies.[196]

Again, similarly to Cantrell and Bryson, Spretnak connects the central modernist emotion of alienation to the devaluing of basic elements of life to the extent that 'after two or three generations, the sense of loss is diluted and felt only as a deep pool of unease that occasionally rises in the mind'.[197]

Referring to the historical context of modernism, Spretnak acknowledges that advances in technology, science and engineering diminished many of the main threats to humanity. However, they can also be seen to have disconnected people from core aspects of life, and the recognition of this has led to a move towards reconnecting with 'the knowing body, the creative cosmos, and the complex sense of place'.[198] Spretnak claims that a renewed awareness of 'the actual presence and power of body, nature, and place *are* now asserting themselves and poking large holes through the modern ideologies of denial'.[199] But the roots of this reaction against modernity and towards the natural world are present in aspects of modernism as well, and Spretnak's recognition of this strengthens awareness of the range of responses to modernity it encompasses. However, Spretnak's description of the city as a place where modernist accepted 'anonymity and a heady autonomy in exchange for nearly everything else' is too general and simplistic a description of the complex and diverse reactions of modernist writers to the city. Throughout modernism there are examples of writers expressing strong affiliations to urban centres and using them as the ground on which to re-examine their relationship with place. Even when the artificiality of the city is heightened in order for the artist to explore the prospect of humans becoming completely isolated from nature, the negative consequences of such a scenario provide a powerful argument for retaining meaningful contact with nature and protecting all environments.

Alexandra Harris's study *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* is important in drawing attention to the importance of nature, place and the environment to modernism. Challenging reductive understanding of modernism as an avant-garde movement which wilfully discarded the past, Harris foregrounds an alternative aspect of later modernism which

[196] Spretnak, *The Resurgence of the Real*, p. 172.
[197] Spretnak, *The Resurgence of the Real,* p. 2.
[198] Spretnak, *The Resurgence of the Real, p. 2.*
[199]Spretnak, *The Resurgence of the Real* p. 4.

is characterised by a 'passionate, exuberant return to tradition'.[200] Harris's study focuses on modernist artists of the 1930s and 1940s who reacted against the 'fiercely experimental ethos of high modernism' and its associated minimalism, cultural elitism and internationalism by turning their attention to local subjects and rural crafts: 'the crowded, detailed, old-fashioned and whimsical'.[201] This movement, centred upon ideas of 'going home' and reconnecting 'with the headily abandoned past', is evident across multiple cultural practices including art, literature, cookery and architecture.[202] Reflecting on the environmental aspect of this trend, Harris suggests that this 'imaginative claiming of England' was motivated by a sense of responsibility, as Europe moved towards the Second World War, for preserving place by gathering 'souvenirs from an old country that may not survive the fighting'.[203] She argues that this fear of losing central aspects of British culture through war, as well as through the subtler process of modernisation, inspired a move to preserve and record Britain so that it could survive in art; if not unchanged in reality.[204]

Romantic Moderns confirms the variety of ideas and beliefs which exist within the umbrella term 'modernism', and is particularly important to this thesis because it asserts the importance of nature in modernist thought. However, the description of early modernists as having sought the 'absolution of roots' in order to rise above 'accidents of personality and environment to seek universal myth on which to subsume history' implies a strong rejection of tradition and heritage.[205] As Harris observes, early modernism is notable for its experimentalism and cosmopolitanism, but 'the desire to invoke tradition' also featured strongly.[206] For example, Harris refers to T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* as an example of this move to 'significant soil' in the 1930s, but *The Waste Land* can also be understood as a, perhaps more complex, exploration of place which attempts to understand the city by exploring a range of cultural and historical responses to it. Although Eliot utilises experimental techniques to capture the complexity and multiplicity of the city, this is not a bar to examining ideas relating to tradition and heritage. As I hope to show in

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[200] Harris, Alexandra, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper,* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2010), p. 10.
[201] Harris, pp. 10-11.
[202] Harris, p. 10.
[203] Harris, p. 10.
[204] In *The Old Ways*, Robert Macfarlane also recognises how 'The shock of the Great War provoked intense British interest in the old ways', but he notes that this interest was not limited to artists and writers, but also explains that 'returning soldiers, wounded in body and mind, retreated to the English countryside, hoping that by recovering a sense of belonging rooted in nature and place they might dignify their damaged lives [...]'., p. 21.
[205] Harris, p. 11.
[206] Harris, p. 11..

Chapter Four, Eliot's poetry does not correspond to the observation, made in relation to the more extreme practice of Futurists, that 'on all sides history and geography were jettisoned'.[207] Rather the experimentation of early modernists became a way of re-engaging with ideas of 'home' after the dislocating experience of war and modernity. This 'journey home' evolved into a more pronounced, direct and united movement in the 1930s and 1940s, but earlier modernists also express the desire to preserve the usable past and to gain a greater understanding of their roots.[208] Their approach to doing so can be seen as less reactionary that that of later modernists. Following the First World War, modernist writers of the 1920s did not retreat to the countryside and villages in response to instability, but wrote about the social reality of the modern city and engaged with international movements and ideas. When they did examine rural areas they rejected outmoded poetic conventions, rather than tradition as a whole, and attempted to find new ways of representing nature which recognised the impact of war and social change on human relations to place. The writers examined by Alexandra Harris are mostly graduates of early modernism, so rather than understanding their move towards localism and tradition in the 1930/40s as a reaction to previous practices, it may be more beneficial to approach their work as a continuation and development of earlier modernist themes.

These five studies provide examples of how the expansion of both ecocriticism and modernist studies has allowed for fruitful interactions between the two. The findings of each have been very influential on shaping my approach to the subject and important in revealing the role of nature within modernism. Interestingly, these examinations of different aspects of modernism share certain ideas surrounding the relationship between modernity and alienation, the usefulness of the term 'place' and the possibility of linguistic and formal experimentation providing new insights into the non-human world. All five challenge the idea of the movement being disengaged from environmental issues: arguing for modernism's importance in producing new ways of understanding the world which could unite the material reality of the physical environment with human experience of place. Having acknowledged the importance of these studies in relation to my own area of interest, this thesis will now develop the ideas discussed in this chapter in relation to the representation of nature in the work of the individual poets in this thesis.

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[207] Harris, p. 11.
[208] Harris, p. 11.

CHAPTER 3. EDWARD THOMAS: THE PATH TO ECOLOGICAL MODERNISM

In his commitment to authentic representation of the British countryside and his understanding of place as a balance between human and non-human presences, Edward Thomas's writing embodies several fundamental ecocritical values. In recognising the autonomy of the natural world, Edward Thomas rejects the impulse to embellish or distort the reality of place. Acknowledging the independence of nature also challenges anthropocentric beliefs in the superiority of human knowledge and accepts the limitations of human language in fully representing the natural world. Thomas's interest in nature extends beyond the picturesque to form an appreciation of common or overlooked aspects of the countryside. He also understands rural places as human landscapes and details encounters with marginalised country figures whose presence and knowledge informs his understanding of the British countryside at the outbreak of war. In depicting rural Britain as a composite of human and non-human presences, Thomas recognises imbalance between the two, as a result of war and modernity, and in response to such disruption he emphasises the psychological, environmental and cultural importance of maintaining close contact with the natural world.

Edward Thomas's poetry is significant in terms of the wider interests of this thesis because many of the environmental themes, tensions and anxieties examined in the poems are further developed in post-war modernist literature. Thomas proves the ability of rural-centred poetry to engage with the modern world. The importance of his writing is in combining a rural context with a modern examination of the social and environmental impact of war and modernity, the experience of displacement and the subsequent desire for reconnection with place, and the complex psychological connections between humans and their environment. Thomas's poetry represents a modern way of writing about nature which responds critically to modernity and engages with the psychological complexity of ideas of 'home' and nation at a time when the vulnerability of both was magnified by war. In this way, Edward Thomas's poetry marks the beginning of a modern re-engagement with nature and a search for new modes of representing place and achieving physical and artistic reconnection with the non-human world which is further development by modernist poets succeeding him.

1. Relationship to Modernism

The difficulties of placing Edward Thomas's poetry within a specific literary context or viewing his work from either a Georgian, as defined in Chapter Two, or modernist perspective are recognised by David Daiches who suggests that if Thomas had lived 'he would have founded no school, for he was an individual poet'.[209] However, considering Edward Thomas's poetry, and in particular his treatment of nature, within the context of Georgian and modernist literature is useful in clarifying the individuality of his approach and his importance in modernising poetic representations of the British countryside. Comparison to Georgian poets' 'debilitated rural verse' distinguishes Thomas from many of his contemporaries by drawing attention to the psychological aspect of his engagement with place and his rejection of fantasy in favour of the realities of modern rural life.[210] Identifying modernist themes and approaches in Thomas's work shows continuity rather than division between the two which challenges understanding of modernism as an essentially anthropocentric and urban-centred movement.

Although Edward Thomas has been 'erroneously labelled' Georgian by some critics, this association applies far more to his earlier prose writing than to his poetry.[211] Thomas's development from a 'precious prose writer into a plain and lucid poet' mirrors his progression beyond the impression of writers such as Richard Jefferies, Walter Pater and Georgian influences like Walter de la Mare to find his own pared down and direct poetic voice.[212] Although Thomas shares a rural focus and a lack of extensive formal experimentation with the Georgians, comparison beyond these shared characteristics is potentially damaging because of the negative associations of Georgianism as conservative, whimsical and limited in scope. Matthew Hollis explains that at its simplest Georgian poets were those who appeared in the five volumes of Edward Marsh's *Georgian Poetry* anthology.[213] Edward Thomas was omitted from inclusion on account of Marsh's rule not to publish poets posthumously, but his presence within the anthology would have been incongruous for several other reasons as well. Matthew Hollis describes Georgian poets as having

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[209] David Daiches, *Poetry and the Modern World: A Study of Poetry in England Between 1900 and 1939* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), p. 72.
[210] Rennie Parker, *The Georgian Poets: Abercrombie, Brooke, Drinkwater, Gibson and Thomas,* (Plymouth, Northcote House, 1999), p. 1
[211] Jonathan Barker, 'Introduction' in *The Art of Edward Thomas,* ed. by Jonathan Barker (Mid Glamorgan: Poetry Wales Press, 1987), p. 7.
[212] Jan Marsh, *Edward Thomas: A Poet for his Country,* (London: Paul Elek, 1978), p. xii.
[213] Matthew Hollis, *Now All Roads Lead to France: The Last Years of Edward Thomas* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), p. 13.

‘looked to the local, the common place and the day-to-day’ with an ‘innocent, intimate and direct’ style which attempted ‘to convey rapture in the modest miracles of life’ with lightness and charm.[214] David Daiches describes Georgian poetry as uncontroversial, ‘quiet, unambitious verse, restrained in mood and low in temperature [...] written on a single level, posing no problems and solving none’.[215] F. R. Leavis attacked the loose craftsmanship, vapid musings about the English countryside and tendency to retreat into dream worlds which made it ‘not so much bad as dead’.[216] J. P. Ward offers a similarly dismissive overview of Georgian poetry, describing it as having ‘no psychological or social interests, no root in nature, religion or myth, neither radicalism nor a communally-rooted conservatism, and little self awareness’.[217] Such comprehensive dismissals do not allow for the initial innovative aims of Georgian poetry or the achievements of some Georgian writers, but they illustrate the degree to which Edward Thomas’s poetry differs from his contemporaries; particularly in relation to the depth and complexity of his engagement with nature.

In terms of an ecocritical understanding of Edward Thomas’s poetry, one of the most important aspects of his writing is a consistent awareness of the autonomy of the natural world, the limits of human understanding of nature and the impossibility of fully representing the complexity of non-human life through language. P. P. Raveendran recognises Thomas’s poetry as possessing ‘an uncommonly precise choice of words’ which ‘constitutes the newness of Edward Thomas’ sensibility’ and the ‘stark originality of his perception’.[218] In rejecting the artifice he found in both Georgian poetry and in his own prose, Thomas developed a more rigorous, direct and honest way of speaking about the British countryside and his relationship to it. F. R. Leavis had the foresight to recognise that ‘Only a very superficial classification could associate Edward Thomas [..] with the Georgians’.[219] Importantly Leavis bases this distinction on Thomas’s representation of nature, that he describes as possessing ‘great technical subtlety’ and ‘exquisite particularity’ which ‘distinguishes it from Georgian “nature poetry”’.[220] David Gervais detaches

[214] Hollis, p. 13.
[215] Daiches, p. 39.
[216] F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1950), p. 55.
[217] J. P. Ward, ‘The Solitary Note: Edward Thomas and Modernism’ in *The Art of Edward Thomas* (see Barker above), pp. 51-60 (p. 52).
[218] P.P Raveendran, *Poetry and the New Sensibility: Readings in Thomas, Owen and Rosenberg*, (New Dehli: Arnold Associates, 1996), p. 47.
[219] Leavis, p. 55.
[220] Leavis, p. 55.

Thomas's poetry from his peers on the basis of his continuous examination of self and environment, which make his poems 'vehicles for exploration, not decoration'.[221] This is a point of departure Matthew Hollis also recognises, observing that a 'Georgian poem about a songbird or a wild animal would embalm the little creature that it had intended to "free" in the imagination of the reader' with the result of capturing 'the poet's dubious decoration' rather than the essence of the animal.[222] In contrast, Thomas shows a more subtle awareness of the complexity of human/nature relations and the autonomous value of nature, which recognises 'that as a human being he must always remain outside of the experience of the animal, as if knowledge was uncertain, guessed at, and yet still possible to catch for the careful listener'.[223]

Edward Thomas's poetry is also notable for its sensitivity to changes in the countryside and to wider national and international events. Roger Ebbatson finds that 'Edward Thomas situates himself consciously within a specifically English line rooted in an oral culture', but whilst preserving connections to tradition and to the past Thomas is also fully engaged the present.[224] Peter Sacks recognises the quiet way in which Thomas's poems 'increasingly (yet obliquely, and without rancour, self-pity, or hysterical opinion) collide with an adverse historical world – the destruction of a beloved rural environment, the carnage of mass warfare in which the poet himself would be killed'.[225] Jem Poster finds evidence of these external conflicts in the fabric of the poems, drawing attention to the 'equivocations, hesitancies, questions and qualifications which reflect not merely Thomas's personal psychology but, more broadly, the concerns of the age'.[226] In this way, Thomas's engagement with nature and the countryside does not signal a retreat from the wider world, but a reassertion of the importance of the places and people made vulnerable by the destructive forces of war and modernity. Margaret Thompson recognises this aspect of his work, describing Thomas's poetry as 'a plea, quietly spoken, to live a less

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[221] David Gervais, *Literary Englands: Versions of 'Englishness' in Modern Writing* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 46.
[222] Hollis, p. 14.
[223] Hollis, pp. 191-2.
[224] Roger Ebbatson, *An Imaginary England: Literature and Landscape, 1840-1920* (Cornwall: Ashgate, 2005), p. 89.
[225] Peter Sacks, 'Introduction' in *Edward Thomas: Collected Poems*, ed. by R. George Thomas (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), pp. xi-xxviii (p. xii).
[226] Jem Poster, 'I Cannot Tell: Edward Thomas's Uncertainties' in *Branch-Lines: Edward Thomas and Contemporary Poetry,* ed. by Guy Cuthbertson and Lucy Newlyn (London: Enitharmon Press, 2007), pp. 43-50 (p. 43).

destructive life'.[227] Having witnessed Georgian poets being mostly silenced by the outbreak of war, Thomas 'was struck by the futility of attempts to live apart from the realities of human affairs'.[228] Thomas's urban roots and personal involvement in the war provide him with a modern outlook which differentiates him from other writers of the period who lost relevance to the contemporary situation by 'trying to write as if there were no such thing as a Tube'.[229]

In recognising the impact of modernity on rural communities, Edward Thomas challenges the myth of the countryside as a permanent model of pre-modern bliss. Paul Thompson describes Thomas's poetry as embodying 'the beauty of decay' in the overgrown paths, unchecked weeds, wild flowers and abandoned barns.[230] The emptiness and quietness of the countryside enables the speaker to hear the trees whispering and birds singing, but it also reveals the ongoing consequences of the agricultural depression of the 1870s which occurred as a result of a culmination of urbanisation, poor weather, cheap food imports and bad harvests. Changes in the agricultural economy meant that in the 1900s over three quarters of the population lived in towns or cities and only seven percent were employed in agriculture.[231] The ongoing decline of British agriculture in the twentieth century and the subsequent depopulation of areas of the countryside are reflected in the poems' depictions of solitary journeys through the landscape which are only occasionally disrupted by the welcomed appearance of other people.

Edward Thomas's most famous poem 'Adlestrop' has been understood as an elegy for an idyllic pre-war England lost forever by the carnage of war and the advent of a new and less innocent age. Initially the poem appears to embody Matthew Hollis's understanding of Thomas's poetry as 'a necessary stillness in a world of bewildering speed'.[232] However, as Hollis recognises, a closer reading shows the countryside to be already subject to the forces of modernity and change. The brief 'minute' at the station which allows the speaker to notice '[...] willows, willow-herb, and grass, | And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry', and to hear '[...] all

[227] Margaret Thompson, 'Autumn Event 2012 Report' *The Edward Thomas Fellowship Newsletter*, 69 (2013), pp. 7-11, (p. 11).
[228] John Dunn, *A Bleak But Honest Resolution: A Personal Reading of the Poetry of Edward Thomas* (Milton Keynes: Study Press, 2006), p. 21.
[229] Edward Thomas, Review of 'Nets of Love' by Wilfrid Gibson in Longley (ed.), *A Language Not to be Betrayed: Selected Prose of Edward Thomas* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1981), p. 202.
[230] Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 24.
[231] Thompson, p. 26.
[232] Hollis, in *Branch-Lines* (see Poster above), p. 140

the birds | Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire' is striking because the stillness and silence is in contrast to the usual noise and speed of the express train.[233] The expansion of the railways into the countryside in the previous century, which met with strong opposition from environmental writers such as Ruskin and Wordsworth, shows how developments in transport and mobility were already impacting on the English countryside and shaping human encounters with nature.

Andrew Motion positions Edward Thomas 'left of centre – drawing much from the Georgians but also anticipating the Modernists in important respects'.[234] A. C. Ward finds Thomas '[...] entirely original, and his originality is itself strangely original, though there is nothing freakish either in manner or matter'.[235] The quiet nature of Thomas's innovative approach to nature writing is described by Peter Sacks as representing not the 'swagger of "make it new", but the humility, attentiveness, and open clarity of perception to "find" it so'.[236] Although Edward Thomas never knew modernism by that name, Guy Cuthbertson argues that factually 'the poetry does belong on our side of the 'MCMXIV' watershed, since it was written after the war had started'. [237] As Edna Longley notes, Thomas was 'a theorist as well as a practitioner' and his professional role as a leading literary critic not only meant that he was aware of the direction in which figures such as Ezra Pound and the imagists were taking British poetry, but also that he was constantly refining his own ideas about the craft.[238] Jan Marsh finds a clear correlation between the development of Thomas's poetic style and the wider literary context:

> When in 1912-13 Edward Thomas began to alter the nature of his prose writing, relinquishing the quest for beauty and escape in favour of actuality and a plain, unrhetorical style, he was clearly mirroring the changes that were taking place elsewhere in literature, and preparing himself for his eventual appearance as a modern poet.[239]

Edward Thomas has been separated from modernist writers on account of his modest formal experimentation. However, in his use of 'direct treatment, a pared language, a

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[233] Edward Thomas, 'Adlestrop' in *Edward Thomas: Collected Poems* ed. by George Thomas (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 27.
[234] Andrew Motion, *The Poetry of Edward Thomas (*London: The Hogarth Press London, 1991), p. 2.
[235] A. C. Ward, *Twentieth Century Literature: 1901-1940*, (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1946), p. 185.
[236] Sacks, p. xii.
[237] Guy Cuthbertson, 'Introduction: Edward Thomas, Modern Writer' in *Branch-Lines* (see Hollis above), p. 21.
[238] Edna Longley, 'Going Back to Edward Thomas' in *Branch-Lines* (see Cuthbertson above), pp. 29-42 (p.32).
[239] Marsh, p. 95

relatively free verse' Matthew Hollis finds not only 'sharp distinctions from the gentle Georgians' but also 'language stripped down to the bone' like imagists.[240] This is an association Andrew Motion also makes by arguing that the six imagist qualities Amy Lowell identified are evident in Thomas's poetry.[241] Although he did not practise radical formal and linguistic experimentation, Thomas did experiment with syntax, lineation and speech rhythms, and modified poetic forms in way which reflected his personal 'refusal to bow to nostalgia or to a moral convenience' and mirrored the 'restlessness, the unresolved endings' of the time.[242]

The most prominent modernist characteristic in Edward Thomas's poetry is his preoccupation with the theme of alienation from self, community and place. Richard Sheppard identifies 'a sense of dispossession, of not being at home' and 'of radical alienation' in Thomas's work which is also 'central to the modernist experience'.[243] Born in London to first generation Welsh migrants, Edward Thomas experienced a sense of exile from Wales which was only partly resolved by his later identification with the 'distinct bio-region' he termed the South Country.[244] This pervasive sense of 'exile from one's native place' connects to a wider feeling of alienation in twentieth century literature which is so prevalent that it is considered 'a precondition for much modern writing'.[245] In understanding himself as one of 'those modern types who has no home' Edward Thomas writes from within the experience of modernity.[246] His father's work on the railways which led to the family's relocation to London locates him as 'part of the great dispersal of population that accompanied mid-nineteenth-century economic developments'.[247] Robert Macfarlane understands this experience as translating to an increased sensitivity to tensions between 'mobility and displacement' and the difficulties of 'dwelling and belonging'.[248] In *The South Country* Edward Thomas confirms his personal understanding of the contradictory impulses in modern man which made it 'hard to make anything like a truce between these two incompatible desires, the one for going

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[240] Hollis, *Now All Roads Lead to France*, p. 15.
[241] Motion, p. 3.
[242] Hollis, *Now All Roads Lead to France*, p. 224.
[243] Richard Sheppard, 'The Problematics of European Modernism' in *Theorizing Modernism: Essays in Critical Theory,* ed. by Steve Giles (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 26.
[244] Robert Macfarlane, *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (St. Ives: Hamish Hamilton, 2012), p. 39.
[245] Alex Davis and Lee Jenkins (eds.), *Locations of Literary Modernism Region and Nation in Britain and American Modernist Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 12.
[246] Edward Thomas, *The South Country*, (Dorset: Little Toller Books, 2009), p.5.
[247] Marsh, p. 1.
[248] Macfarlane, p. 9.

on and on over the earth, the other that would settle for ever, in one place as in a grave and have nothing to do with change'.[249]

Although examining Edward Thomas's poetry in terms of its difference from Georgian writing and similarities to modernism is useful in clarifying aspects of his approach: as Jonathan Barker's notes, 'a new generation of critics have come to see the old divisions between Modernist and native traditions as increasingly irrelevant'.[250] Neil Corcoran also finds past divisions between modernist and non-modernist texts based on the radicalism of modernist forms to be too rigid, particularly in regards to poets such as Charlotte Mew and Edward Thomas who not only show that 'traditional form may be so originally wrought as to become something quite different from itself', but are also more successful in their 'articulation or realisation of things which Modernism itself could not articulate or realise'.[251] Laurence Coupe describes Edward Thomas as 'usually called "modern" but not "modernist", on the grounds of the modesty of his formal experimentation as a poet; but there is no doubt that he is responding critically to "modernity", or the modern condition'. [252] The term 'modern' is repeatedly used to distinguish Thomas from his Georgian peers. F. R. Leavis recognises Thomas as 'a very original poet' with 'a distinctly modern sensibility'.[253] Matthew Hollis describes Edward Thomas as 'a modern writer in still-modernising times' whose distinct poetry 'contains not only the Edwardian or Georgian world, but also Edward Thomas's perception of it and of himself, and it is this that many people have in mind when they refer to the poetry as modern'.[254] Guy Cuthbertson suggests that Thomas's continuing influence on contemporary poets is evidence of his modern relevance, suggesting that 'one could even argue that in Britain Thomas is more modern than Pound because more people read his poetry than read Pound's'.[255] Edna Longley argues that Edward Thomas is modern because he questions 'what modernity might endanger' without rejecting 'intellectual modernity'.[256] She also finds Thomas's achievements to be greater than later modernists in terms of finding 'continuity rather than breakdown

[249] Edward Thomas, *The South Country*, p. 161.
[250] Jonathan Barker, 'Introduction' in *The Art of Edward Thomas,* ed. by Jonathan Barker (Mid Glamorgan: Poetry Wales Press, 1987), p. 78.
[251] Neil Corcoran (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 3.
[252]Laurence Coupe, 'Introduction' in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 61.
[253] Leavis*,* p.55.
[254] Hollis, *Now All Roads Lead to France*, p. 224.
[255] Cuthbertson, p. 22.
[256] Longley, 'Going Back to Edward Thomas', p. 32

between ourselves and the past'.[257] In particular Longley refers to Thomas's 'strong imaginative roots in English literature and the English countryside' which enabled him 'to discover more than T. S. Eliot's cosmopolitan "fragments", to establish a genuinely organic continuity'.[258] In this way Thomas proves 'urban imagery is no necessary badge of the modern poet' and suggests contact with nature as a way 'to define and sometimes heal, the isolation of urban man [...]'.[259]

2. Ecocritical Importance

Despite the central role of nature in Edward Thomas's life and work, Edna Longley believes his importance as an environmental poet and thinker is underestimated: 'where ecology is concerned, criticism has indeed taken time to catch up'.[260] Longley focuses particularly on Thomas's belief that 'consciousness entails responsibilities' and on the dark symbolism of his poetry which not only reflects 'the condition of rural England and conditions in France' but also 'forebodes what is now termed "environmental apocalypse"'.[261] Although such a reading involves imposing contemporary understanding of the environmental crisis onto the poems, Thomas's acute sensitivity to changes in the countryside and his intellectual engagement with modernity show a prescient awareness of the possibility of crisis. In 'The Swifts', for example, the speaker's celebration of the swifts who return 'The same year after year' is undermined by an intangible anxiety about the vulnerability of human and non-human life:

> With other things I but fear
> That they will be over and done
> Suddenly
> And I only see
> Them to know them gone.[262]

In terms of ecocritical interest, Edward Thomas's recognition of the impact of technological modernity on human/nature relations and his awareness of a particularly modern desire for rootedness and belonging has led ecocritics to consider his work in relation to Martin Heidegger's ecological poetics. Edward Thomas's emphasis on the importance of nature in response to changes brought by modernity

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[257] Edna Longley (ed.), *Poems and Last Poems* (Plymouth: Macdonald and Evans, 1978), p. 1.
[258] Longley, *Poems and Last Poems,* p. 1.
[259] Longley, *Poems and Last Poems*, p. 12.
[260] Longley, 'Going Back to Edward Thomas', p. 31.
[261] Longley, 'Going Back to Edward Thomas', p. 34.
[262] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, p. 125.

corresponds to Heidegger's identification of certain poetic texts presenting 'a radical alternative to productionist thinking and the world of techno-science'.[263] Heidegger supports the role of language and poetry in reconciling modern people to place because it involves understanding and appreciation of non-human life rather than mastery or subjugation. Jonathan Bate connects Thomas and Heidegger through their shared preoccupation with the concept of 'home' and 'dwelling.' Referring to the poem 'Home (2)', Bate identifies Thomas's use of the verb 'to be' as possessing 'full Heideggarian weight' in describing the experience of complete integration into place.[264] In this moment the speaker enters into 'the simple oneness of things' and experiences the dissolution of divisions between human and non-human so that 'there is "no bar" between the mind and nature, the self and the environment'.[265]

However, as Jonathan Bate acknowledges, the elation of feeling completely at home in the world is heightened by knowledge of the opposite experience of 'homelessness': 'so many of his poems are about not-dwelling, about roads rather than homes'.[266] The complexity of the word 'home' and Edward Thomas's shifting understanding of it led to three of his poems sharing it as a title. In 'Home (1)' it represents the speaker's final destination which is both longed for as a place of belonging and feared because of its essential placelessness:

> My home, I have never seen:
> No traveller tells of it,
> However far he has been.[267]

The appeal of the dissolution of self is balanced against fear of its absolute finality which triggers anxiety that having left this world the speaker may experience 'dreams of return | Here, to the things that were'. In 'Home (3)', understanding of the meaning and value of 'home' is gained through the experience of literal rather than emotional displacement as a result of war. Despite its subjectivity, the word connects the soldiers returning to the 'cold roofs' of their army camp.[268] The word 'homesickness' also plays across the speaker's mind in recognition of the pain of separation, but the war is also shown to have clarified understanding of roots and belonging:

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[263] Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 97.
[264] Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000), p. 275.
[265] Bate, p. 275.
[266] Bate, p. 275.
[267] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, p. 43.
[268] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 104.

> The word 'home' raised a smile in us all three,
> And one repeated it, smiling just so
> That all knew what it meant and none would say.

A fundamental ecocritical value present in Edward Thomas's poetry is respect for the autonomy of nature and awareness of the limits of human understanding of the non-human world. Edna Longley describes the 'ecocentric structures' of Thomas's poetry and his 'eco-historical' perspective as challenging anthropocentric assumptions by making 'the 'I'-speaker, of human consciousness or the human figure, relative to other phenomena'.[269] An example of this is in Thomas's preoccupation with birdsong as an alternative form of communication which contains knowledge which can be sensed but never fully understood by the human listener. In 'March', unable to discern any signs of spring the speaker asks: 'What did the thrushes know?'[270] Importantly, Edward Thomas does not attempt to translate the birds' song or humanise its message, but neither are the birds completely separate and the speaker acknowledges their shared presence in place and their sensitivity to seasonal change: 'Something they knew- I also'. The significance of non-human language is explored again in 'The Word', where despite having forgotten facts learnt in school such as the 'names of mighty men | That fought and lost or won in the old wars', the speaker can still recall the 'empty thingless name' of 'a pure thrush word'.[271] Again the central paradox of the bird's call is that it is both meaningless and filled with meaning, and despite being unable to define or fully understand it, the call has outlasted several human voices in the speaker's memory. The appealing otherness of nature and the strangeness of memory also informs 'The Unknown Bird' where the 'Three lovely notes' which haunt the speaker are both completely separate from the self and mysteriously connected to the speaker's personal sadness:

> Sad more than joyful it was, if I must say
> That it was one or other, but if sad
> 'Twas sad only with joy too, too far off
> For me to taste it.[272]

Again no translation or narrative is imposed on the bird's song in order to reassure the speaker or provide a sense of completion to the poem. The sound and the mystery

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[269] Longley, 'Going Back to Edward Thomas', p. 33.
[270] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 8.
[271] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p.77.
[272] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 32.

of its source are sufficient in bringing the speaker out of himself and making him 'Light as that bird, wandering beyond my shore'.

Edward Thomas's search for authenticity in writing about the natural world is confirmed by his close friend Robert Frost, who describes Thomas's poetic aim as being 'to touch earthly things and come as near to them in words as words would come'.[273] Edward Thomas's wife Helen relates this desire for a pared down, truthful language to his personality: describing how he 'hated ostentation, snobbery, hypocrisy, affectation and sentimentality'.[274] Thomas himself confirmed this intention to his friend Eleanor Farjeon, telling her of his aim to 'get rid of the last rags of rhetoric and formality' from his writing.[275] He also stated the intention explicitly in his poetry through his pledge to use 'as the trees and birds did, | A language not to be betrayed'.[276] Edna Longley distinguishes between Thomas's poetry and prose in this respect, commenting that whilst his 'prose partly succumbs to conventional tropes, his self-critical instinct ensured that he would see and work through them' in his poetry.[277] Emphasising the difference between Thomas's prose and poetry, she describes the relationship as 'coals to diamonds'.[278] Jan Marsh connects the development of Thomas's poetic treatment of the countryside in comparison to his earlier prose as reflecting the growth of his personal awareness of the realities of rural life, suggesting that 'years of living in the country taught him to distinguish the reality from the dream'.[279] Thomas's dual commitment to language and to the countryside is most strongly stated in 'Words':

> Out of us all
> That make rhymes,
> Will you choose
> Sometimes —
> As the winds use
> A crack in a wall
> Or a drain,
> Their joy or their pain
> To whistle through —
> Choose me,
> You English words?[280]

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[273] William Cooke, *Edward Thomas: A Portrait,* (Derbyshire: HUB Publications Ltd, 1978), p. 47.
[274] Edward Thomas, *The South Country*, p. 10.
[275] Eleanor Farjeon, *Edward Thomas: The Last Four Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p.110.
[276] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 111.
[277] Longley, 'Going Back to Edward Thomas', p. 32.
[278] Longley, 'Notes' in *Poems and Last Poems*, p. 140.
[279] Marsh, pp. 38-9.
[280] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 77.

The poem is notable for its humility and its understanding of the connections between nature and language. Like nature, language is described as:

> Strange and sweet
> Equally,
> And familiar.

Natural imagery is used to describe the character of words which are:

> Tough as oak,
> Precious as gold,
> As poppies and corn

This places an emphasis on connections between nature and culture rather than divisions, and suggests language can be used to gain greater understanding of the natural world. The poem also retains a balance between preserving traditional language and continuously renewing it for the present so that it is 'Worn new | Again and again'. The poem also shows the development of Edward Thomas's national identity. Peter Sacks places Thomas within 'a distinctly English plain style coursing from Chaucer to George Herbert, through early Wordsworth, John Clare, and Richard Jefferies, to Thomas Hardy'.[281] This shift in sensibility in terms of national identity is evident in 'Words' where although 'some sweetness | From Wales' is retained, the dominant commitment is to the English countryside and its birds, villages, trees and weather which shape Edward Thomas's poetry.

The role of language in understanding nature's connections to culture and memory is also examined in 'Old Man' where a single plant triggers a complex exploration of lost connections. The scent of the plant elicits a strong psychological response connected to the loss of an essential memory. The resulting engagement with modern issues of identity, dissociation and slippage then connects to a wider cultural history. The curious etymology of the plant and the lost connection between its physical appearance and its multiple and contradictory names mirrors the speaker's inability to access their own memories: 'Old Man, or Lad's-love, — in the name there's nothing | To one that knows not Lad's-love or Old Man'.[282] The smell of the plant is the signifier of something half remembered which cannot be traced and leads nowhere. Robert Macfarlane likens the elusive memory to 'certain kinds of knowledge which exceed the propositional and which can only be sensed, as it were,

[281] Sacks, p. xii.
[282] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 9.

in passing'.[283] A lost key to self knowledge is a recurrent theme throughout Thomas's poetry and here, although the speaker attempts to 'Sniff them and think and sniff again and try | Once more to think what it is I am remembering', it ends in vain: 'I have mislaid the key'. The poem exemplifies the depth of Thomas's engagement with nature beyond the surface appreciation of the Georgians and reveals the complexity of human connections to nature which make it a stimulus for self-examination. The initial curiosity about the name of a plant ends in a state of irresolution where the search for self knowledge through memory disconnects the speaker from both self and the world:

> No garden appears, no path, no hoar-green bush
> Of Lad's-love, or Old Man, no child beside,
> Neither father nor mother, nor any playmate;
> Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end.

Edward Thomas's search for knowledge about nature and the British countryside also includes an interest in the human history of the landscape. 'Lob' develops an initial meeting with an archetypal countryman with 'An old man's face, by life and weather cut | And coloured, —rough brown, sweet as any nut' into a condensed examination of rural history centred on the possibility of identifying an essential quality of Englishness.[284] For Edward Thomas, 'England was more than a geographical expression' and this is evident in the search for a quintessential country man, 'my ancient', who can clarify the speaker's understanding of England in a period where many were dying to protect it.[285] Lob's identity dissolves and reforms in a maze of names and places which suggest both ubiquity and elusiveness: 'Everybody has met one such man as he'. Lob is partly a projection of the speaker's own desire for a better understanding of the country and the connection between the two is evident in Lob's poetic renaming of flowers:

> Calling the wild cherry tree the merry tree,
> The rose campion Bridget-in-her-bravery;
> And in tender mood her, as I guess,
> Christened one flower, Love-in-idleness;

As both a legendary Green Man figure and a common soldier 'dying at Waterloo, |Hastings, Agincourt and Sedgemore', Lob's most important characteristic is his

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[283] Macfarlane, p. 51.
[284] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* pp. 57-62.
[285] Edward Thomas, *The Happy-Go-Lucky Morgans* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1983), p. 123.

resilience which shows faith in the continuity of British country life after the war. Jonathan Bate recognises this relevance to the contemporary situation, describing Thomas's reference to 'no-man's land' as:

> [...] remarkable in its compounding of the original sense of no man's land as waste land or common land, that is not possessed by an individual [...], and the terrible new sense of the word being invented in Flanders as Thomas became a poet.[286]

Raymond Williams criticises 'Lob' as a 'historical stereotype' and an 'intellectual projection' which merges 'all countrymen, of all conditions and periods' into 'a singular legendary figure'.[287] However, in constructing an imaginative history of England shaped by rural legend and folk tales, Thomas can also be seen as creating an alternative history of the British countryside which may contain as many 'truths' as an official version. Anticipating the rural revival of the 1930s and 1940s, Thomas voiced his hope that one day there would 'be a history of England written from the point of view of one parish'.[288] This interest in the perspective of marginalised communities during a period of rapid urbanisation confirms Edna Longley's understanding of Thomas as producing 'a rounded, ultimately poetic approach to history – through- geography' and a 'pioneering ecological philosophy' which is consciously formed as an alternative to official versions of history.[289]

3. The British Countryside

Edward Thomas's poetic representation of the British countryside is important because it recognises rural places as working landscapes subject to change and disruption rather than as static idylls. As an atheist Thomas understood that 'the pleasantest of English country men made by chance or design' and it was this human interaction with the land, rather than the actions of a divine force, which interested him.[290] The removal of God from perception of place allows for a focus on the physical realities of place and on human rather than religious narratives. For Thomas, history started 'with people rather than with books' and his engagement with country life involves a search for community and local knowledge through engagement with place.[291] This interest in 'the humanness of place' can be seen in 'Bob's Lane' where

[286] Bate, p. 112.
[287] Williams, p. 257.
[288] Edward Thomas, *The South Country*, p. 134.
[289] Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* ((Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1986), p. 57.
[290] Edward Thomas, *The South Country*, p. 57.
[291] Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, p. 54.

Thomas explores how human actions shape the landscape.[292] The poem traces the history of a disused lane to 'shovel-bearded Bob' who planted elm trees along it. The simple act is motivated by his love 'of most living things | But a tree chiefly'.[293] In planting the trees the farmer creates a legacy which ties him to place even after his death: 'the name alone survives, Bob's Lane'. His actions also shape the present landscape and the human experience of place as 'travellers hear from the slow-climbing train' the stormcock singing from the elms.

Whilst the name of the farmer survives, his physical absence from the lane mirrors the disappearance of countrymen from the land in several of Thomas's poems. In 'Man and Dog' an encounter with a jobless labourer connects to wider issues concerning social conditions in the countryside. The unnamed wanderer's eventful life and his nomadic lifestyle reveal much about the lack of reliable employment following the agricultural depression of the previous century:

> His mind was running on the work he had done
> [...] navvying on dock and line
> From Southampton to Newcastle-on-Tyne,—
> In 'seventy-four a year of soldiering
> With the Berkshires, —hoeing and harvesting
> In half the shires where corn and couch will grow.[294]

His sons are at war and apart from the loyalty of a mongrel dog who is 'company, | Though I'm not' he is alone. A parallel is suggested between the dog's poor hunting skills and the man's struggle to survive which has left him marginalised despite his service to the country and hard physical work. Jan Marsh sees the poem as evidence of Edward Thomas's development from idealised representations of 'archetypal figures of the landscape' to men who possess 'individuality and dignity' and even a sense of humour in accepting their circumstances.[295] However, at the end of the poem the man and dog disappear 'for good | Together in the twilight of the wood' and leave the reader with a disconcerting sense of absence. The disappearance of country figures is evident again in 'May the Twenty-third', where the speaker's encounter with 'Jaunty and old, crooked and tall' Jack Noman is 'welcome as the nightingale'.[296] The encounter is brief and casual, but the specific date remains with the speaker's head as 'The day Jack Noman disappeared'. The elegiac nature of these

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[292] Lucy Newlyn in *Branch-Lines* (see Cuthbertson above), p. 185.
[293] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p.120.
[294] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 34.
[295] Marsh, p. 132.
[296] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 40.

departures communicates a wider anxiety towards the depopulation of the countryside and the wellbeing of those on the margins of society; as well as prefiguring the Thomas's own impending absence from the landscape.

Edward Thomas's interest in marginalised aspects of country life also applies to his focus on 'unpoetic' parts of the countryside such as decaying barns, nettle patches, abandoned lanes and other seemingly innocuous 'holes and corners'.[297] Rejecting the picturesque, Thomas's attention focuses on small, overlooked or understated aspects of nature as seen in his study of spring:

> The shell of a little snail bleached
> In the grass; chip of flint, and mite
> Of chalk; and the small birds' dung
> In splashes of purest white ('But These Things Also')

This originality of perception is also evident in 'November' where the speaker's attention is drawn to the muddy paths composed of 'Twig, leaf, flint, thorn' and patterned by the tracks of men and animals.[298] The speaker finds these muddy paths that 'Few care for' to be 'the prettiest things on ground' because he recognises how their dark density clarifies the sky's 'cloudless heavenly light':

> Another loves earth and November more dearly
> Because without them, he sees clearly,
> The sky would be nothing more to his eye
> Than, he, in any case, is to the sky;
> He loves even the mud whose dyes
> Renounce all brightness to the skies.

This holistic appreciation of each aspect of nature is central to Edward Thomas's relevance to ecocriticism and connects to his commitment to representing the reality of place rather than fantasy. The impulse to project human narrative onto place is explored in 'The Chalk-Pit' where the atmospheric surroundings trigger an imaginative response and a fantasy of the empty chalk-pit being once full 'Of life of some kind, perhaps tragical'. Although a local denies that any such event has occurred there, the first speaker continues to prefer to 'make a tale' which distorts the reality of the pit with images of 'another place, | Real or painted'. Reflecting Thomas's own commitment to authentic representation of place, the local man he is conversing with rejects falsity in favour of wanting 'the truth | Or nothing'. For him, and for Thomas, the reality of the landscape does not require additional decoration

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297 Gervais, p. 28.
298 Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 6.

because his sensitivity to place allows him to recognise a more fundamental mystery inherent in the otherness of nature:

> And trees and us – imperfect friends, we men
> And trees since time began; and nevertheless
> Between us still we breed a mystery.

This idea of fantasy as a negative distraction from the reality of place is repeated in 'Sedge-Warblers'. Again the beauty of place triggers an impulse to 'dream 'of 'a time | Long past and irrecoverable' and of a mythical woman with 'beauty, divine and feminine | Child to the sun, a nymph [...]'.[299] However, before this fantasy overrides reality the speaker recognises the need to get 'rid of this dream, ere I had drained | Its poison'. As in 'The Chalk-Pit', the reality of the place holds sufficient interest without embellishment, and free of false perception the speaker finds the water 'Clearer than any goddess'. The sedge-warblers' 'Quick, shrill, or grating' calls are also preferred to the more poetic lark simply because they are part of the place and their song fits 'the heat | Of the strong sun, nor less the water's cool'. Again birdsong relates to alternative forms of knowledge and an elusive meaning recognised by Edna Longley: 'in suggesting nothing, it suggests everything'.[300] Fantasy distances the observer from the reality of place and is a bar to insights into the natural world. In disregarding fantasy the speaker achieves a deeper engagement with place and through observation of the unmelodic 'small brown birds' recognises nature as a means to alternative forms of understanding: 'Wisely reiterating endlessly |What no man learnt yet, in or out of school'.

Rejecting an archaic fantasy of rural England necessarily involves acceptance of the countryside as a landscape subject to continuous change. Noting his awareness of nature's resilience and adaptability, Robert Macfarlane observes how Edward Thomas understands that 'the old persisted alongside and despite the new, surviving as echoes and shadows, detectable by an acute mind and eye'.[301] In 'First Known When Lost' changes to the landscape result in increased attention to place. Initially the speaker criticises himself for not noticing the 'narrow copse' of willow until it was cut down.[302] However, its absence causes the speaker to look more closely at the new clearing and the absence of the willows reveals: 'That the small winding brook, |

[299] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 74.
[300] Longley, 'Notes' in *Poems and Last Poems*, p. 282.
[301] Macfarlane, p. 478.
[302] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 40.

A tributary's tributary, rises there'.[303] In 'The Barn' Thomas's attention is again drawn to overlooked human marks on the landscape. The crumbling barn 'that Job Knight built in '54' to keep corn has become its own ecological microcosm: overtaken first by starlings who 'chattered | And whispered and kissed' before becoming so full of holes that it became 'the turn of lesser things'.[304] The disused buildings and thriving wildlife reveals the struggling agricultural economy and absence of workers to maintain the land, but the continuity of various forms of life within the structure of the decaying barn demonstrates the ability of nature to adapt around human actions.

The idea of human marks on the landscapes also informs Edward Thomas's love of paths and roads. Robert Macfarlane explains the dual importance of paths as physical and imaginative connectives: 'They relate places in a literal sense, and by extension they relate people'.[305] They also tie the past to the present in an imaginative sense as the idea of 'little-used roads' known 'to lovers, thieves, smugglers, and ghosts' links to folk tales and local legends which inform a sense of place.[306] They also connect to Thomas's sense of emotional homelessness and ease his alienation by connecting him to a wider community of travellers and wanderers who also understood roads as 'a silent companion always ready for us, whether it is night or day, wet or fine, whether we are calm or desperate'.[307] In 'Roads', Thomas states his affection without ambiguity: 'I love roads'.[308] Part of their appeal is their permanence which is in contrast to the temporary presence of individuals in the landscape:

> Roads go on
> Whilst we forget, and are
> Forgotten like a star
> That shoots and is gone.

Roads also suggest a choice of destinations, but here the decision to enlist has narrowed the speaker's journey to a single, unknown road where 'The next turn may reveal | Heaven' or 'may Hell conceal'. Roads connect Thomas's Welsh heritage, 'Helen of the roads, | The mountain ways of Wales | And the Mabinogion tales', to

[303]The cutting down of the copse is also tied to the context of the poem as farmer cut down hedges and other divides between fields in order to make it easier to work on the land with a reduced number of workers.
[304] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 42.
[305] Macfarlane, p. 17.
[306] Macfarlane, p. 3.
[307] Edward Thomas, *The Icknield Way*, (London: Wildwood House, 1980), p. 2.
[308] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 96.

his future: 'Now all roads lead to France'. The danger of this new road is acknowledged but eased by the possibility of return to the roads where 'the dead | Returning lightly dance'. The importance of roads in Thomas's prose and poetry is confirmed by the final simile found in his notebook: 'Roads shining like river uphill after rain'.[309]

Roads and paths have dual meaning in Thomas's poetry as both the literal tracks on the landscape and the pathways which allow the speaker to travel beyond the physical world. Robert Macfarlane describes the dual appeal of paths to Edward Thomas in offering 'cover from himself: proof of a participation in communal history and the suggestion of continuity, but also the dispersal of egotism'.[310] In 'The Path', the track which is 'houseless, and leads not to school' reflects a solitary journey in contrast to the community of the road.[311] Thomas's repeated use of the forest as a metaphor for death reveals its appeal, but also its mystery. Edna Longley describes death as an event which 'links man and Nature, or situates man in Nature', but it also represents absolute estrangement from the physical world.[312] The prospect of such a departure encourages a fantasy of death as a path into the woods which may lead:

> To some legendary
> Or fancied place where men have wished to go
> And stay.

However, this romanticisation of death is tempered by the reality of the path: 'sudden, it ends where the woods ends'. The image of a pathway which is 'marked by someone gone to the forest' and 'never come back' is explored again in 'The Green Roads'.[313] The disappearance of solitary children and old men into the forest suggests its true purpose as a place where 'memories are lost', but despite the mystery of their destination, the image of the forest and the presence of Thomas's favourite bird betrays the continuing temptation to follow: 'The old man, the child, the goose feather at the edge of the forest, | And hear all day long the thrush repeat his song'.

Robert Macfarlane observes how Edward Thomas and his poetry have imprinted additional meaning onto the landscapes they describe. In *The Old Ways: A*

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[309] Edward Thomas, *The South Country*, p. 12.
[310] Macfarlane, p. 309.
[311] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p 52.
[312] Longley, 'Going Back to Edward Thomas', p. 35.
[313] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 121.

Journey on Foot, Macfarlane retraces Thomas's journey on the ancient Icknield Way, hoping 'to summon him by walking where he had walked' but eventually realising the difficulties of achieving imaginative connection with such a complex figure: 'It was to be miles and years before I understood the difficulties of such a recovery'.[314] Through the creative act of walking Macfarlane understands Thomas to have drawn a 'kind of dream-map: an act of cumulative but uncentred imaginative cartography, a composite chart of longing and loss projected onto the actual terrains of his life, and onto the Downs in particular'.[315] Echoing Thomas's own preoccupation with ghosts and his 'near-morbid fascination with the marks of the long dead' on the landscape, Macfarlane describes Thomas as having 'ghosted' his travels.[316] In his continued presence in the landscape, Macfarlane comes to understand Thomas as a 'Lob-like figure glimpsed now and then at a bend on the path or through a hole in the hedge, still enigmatic'.[317] However, although Thomas seems inseparable from the landscapes of his poetry, Macfarlane is also aware that rather than 'a pastoral poet, celebrating place and belonging' his 'true subjects are disconnection, discrepancy and unsettledness'.[318]

The roots of this disconnection are in Edward Thomas's 'accidentally cockney nativity' which informs his sense of being an outsider constantly searching for belonging in the countryside.[319] Although he claimed 'London made no impression', Thomas's urban roots are fundamental in terms of shaping his attitude towards the countryside.[320] Thomas understood that the majority of his country books sold to urban people separated by a generation or two from their country parents or grandparents, and he identified himself as belonging within this group of modern people who have 'no tradition about them' and live 'in no ancient way'.[321] In this respect, although his journeys are solitary, they articulate a much broader modern desire for reconnection with the natural world. Thomas regretted being born in London rather than being a farmer's son from 'the real country at Swindon' like his hero Richard Jefferies.[322] However, his dismissal of London for having 'no exercise,

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[314] Macfarlane, p. 44.
[315] Macfarlane, p. 310
[316] Robert Macfarlane, 'Introduction' in *The South Country*, (pp. 7-12), p.10.
[317] Macfarlane, *The Old Ways,* p. 326.
[318] Macfarlane, *The Old Ways*, p. 25.
[319] John Moore, (ed.), *The Life and Letters of Edward Thomas* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1983), p. 277.
[320] Edward Thomas, *The Childhood of Edward Thomas: A Fragment of Autobiography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 74.
[321] Edward Thomas, *The Heart of England* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008) p. 8.
[322] Edward Thomas, *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*, p. 66.

no air' seems disingenuous given that his love of nature started on the South London commons.[323] Thomas claimed the countryside was 'supernaturally beautiful' to him because it had 'London for a foil and background'. [324] This idea of London may not relate purely to the physical city but to its significance as the location of his difficult relationship with his father. His description of towns as 'complicated and divided; they end in confusion' could also suggest a dislike of urban areas in terms of their similarities to the complexities of his own personality.[325] Despite failing to acknowledge their influence, the 'waste of gorse and hawthorn-thickets' of Wandsworth Common which first engaged his interest in nature may also have shaped his taste for wild rather than cultivated landscapes.[326] However, Thomas was aware that 'a country life is neither more easy nor more simple than a city life'.[327] He recognises that despite his unfavourable attitude towards it 'Countrymen [...] still admire London'.[328] He is also not immune to its impressiveness and states that 'the sublimest thing I know is the sea, and after that London, vast, complex, ancient, restless and incalculable'.[329] Margaret Thompson explains that Thomas 'rejected London and its values but depended on it for work and friendship'.[330] As the cultural centre, Thomas was required to regularly visit the city to meet friend and acquire commissions. These trips provided respite from the strain of domestic life and in 'Good-Night' a rare expression of affection is expressed for the 'homely streets' of the town where the voices of children are 'Sweet as the voice of nightingale or lark'.[331] Despite the cacophony of 'the noise of man, beast, and machine' drowning out the skylarks and nightingales the speaker finds a 'strange welcome' which eases his sense of being 'homeless' and shows the 'friendless town is friendly'.

4. Examination of Self through Nature

Edward Thomas's intense psychological self-examination is a particularly modern aspect of his poetry which proves the possibility of rural landscapes as sites of interrogation rather than escape. John Lehmann finds the 'intensity of suffering' in Edward Thomas's poems to be the element which 'sets his poetry apart from the

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[323] R. George Thomas (ed.), *Letters from Edward Thomas to Gordon Bottomley*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 174.
[324] Edward Thomas, *The Happy-Go-Lucky Morgans*, p.38.
[325] Edward Thomas, *The Country*, (London: B.T. Batsford, 1913), p.13.
[326] Moore (ed.), p. 1.
[327] Longley, *A Language Not to be Betrayed*, p. 201.
[328] Longley, *A Language Not to be Betrayed,* p.22.
[329] Edward Thomas, *The Country*, p. 5.
[330] Thompson, p. 11.
[331] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 46.

great mass of pleasing nature writing/poetry which has been produced since the World War'.[332] John Silkin also recognises this 'basic connection between his inner life and his response to nature which is consciously realized, and with which the Georgians were not at all concerned'.[333] Thomas's modern engagement with the experience of alienation, depression, uncertainty and rootlessness within a rural context highlights the ability of nature poetry to examine contemporary issues. However, this intense examination of self is balanced against an awareness of the fundamental separateness of nature and its neutrality to human emotion. F. R. Leavis found the psychological aspect of Thomas's work to be the dominant feature: 'the outward scene is accessory to an inner theatre'.[334] Michael Schmidt disagrees, finding the 'evocations of nature have the vividness not of an internal but an external landscape'.[335] Edna Longley goes further in arguing that the 'outer scene is not only accessory to an inner theatre: it also calls anthropocentric theatricals into question'.[336] Whilst ecocriticism values the autonomy of nature, the psychological aspect of Edward Thomas's understanding of place is also important because it reflects the complexity of modern attitudes towards the countryside and suggests a connection between contact with nature and psychological well being.

Jonathan Bate describes how for Edward Thomas 'pastoral was not a myth but a psychological necessity, an underpinning of the self, a way of connecting the self to the environment'.[337] Thomas's compulsive need for contact with nature goes beyond the pursuit of leisure or aesthetic pleasure. Immersion in the countryside was the most effective way to ease his regular depressive episodes and he wrote to his friend George Bottomley that he was 'never so well as when I am rid of the postman & all company walking 20 or 30 miles a day'.[338] Nature also provides language and imagery for Thomas to communicate his experience of depression and alienation. In 'Aspens' an affinity towards the trees others find melancholy reveals much about the speaker's character. The identification is stated explicitly as the aspens 'shake their leaves and men may hear | But need not listen more than to my rhymes'.[339] Neither tree nor speaker can control the association of their quiet, persistent voices with grief,

[332] John Lehmann, *The Open Night* (London: Longmans Green + Co, 1952), p. 83.
[333] John Silkin 'The Poets of the First World War' in *Twentieth Century Poetry: Critical Essays and Documents* ed. by Graham Martin and P. N. Furbank (Milton Keynes: The Open University Press, 1975), p. 169.
[334] Silkin, p. 169.
[335] Schmidt, p. 641.
[336] Longley, 'Going Back to Edward Thomas', p. 33.
[337] Bate, p. 115.
[338] Bottomley, p. 163.
[339] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 84.

but an acceptance of self is achieved through the analogy. However, this affiliation with the trees which stand outside the village rather than with 'The clink, the hum, the roar, the random singing' of the people in the inn reveals the essential loneliness of the speaker and his inability to rid himself of the sadness which binds him to the trees:

> Whatever wind blows, while they and I have leaves
> We cannot other than an aspen be
> That ceaselessly, unreasonably grieves,
> Or so men think who like a different tree.

Nature can often ease the dissatisfaction which characterises Thomas's work. In 'Beauty' the speaker is 'Tired, angry, and ill at ease' and bleakly composes an epitaph for himself as 'all that no one loved of him | And that loved no one'.[340] The speaker likens their mood to a river 'At fall of evening while it seems that never | Has the sun lighted it or warmed it'. However, even whilst describing this disconnection 'some fraction' of the speaker 'happily | Floats through the window even now to a tree' like a 'dove | That slants unswerving to its home and love'. The moment of separation from self and connection to nature eases the self reproach and in a rare moment of acceptance the speaker recognises 'Beauty is there'. However, although contact with nature can produce greater self knowledge and a reassuring sense of identification, its autonomy and separateness can also deepen the sense of estrangement from the world. Robert Macfarlane explains this experience:

> What he has come to understand, painfully, is that one may too easily take the natural world as companion, friend and salve. Nature can cure but it can also be brutally mute, shocking in its disinterest: the river's seawards run, the chalk's whiteness, the hawk's swivelling stare.[341]

Jan Marsh suggests that Thomas's 'melancholy stemmed from his inability to convey his delight in the country as vividly as he felt it'.[342] In 'Health' the speaker cannot celebrate the perfect spring day which 'Promises all and fails in nothing' because its perfection accentuates his sense of failure.[343] Restricted by his physical capabilities and debilitating depression the speaker knows he 'could not be as the wagtail' who is 'twittering | Happily and sweetly'. However, some value is found in being separate from the rest of nature because unlike the birds who 'know not the sun' or the sun

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[340] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 35.
[341] Macfarlane, p.339.
[342] Marsh, p. xii.
[343] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 65.

who 'regards not the bird' the speaker is conscious of the whole scene: 'I am almost proud to love both bird and sun, | Though scarce this Spring could my body leap four yards'. In 'The Glory' the speaker again finds himself lacking in comparison to 'The glory of the beauty of the morning' which 'invites me, yet it leaves me scorning | All I can ever do, all I can be'.[344] The beauty of the day provokes characteristic indecision in the speaker who cannot lift himself out of his 'discontent'. The experience described is of being dwarfed by the magnificence of nature to the extent that it prevents full immersion of the self into the world: 'I cannot bite the day to the core'.

Edna Longley describes Thomas's poems as reflecting a 'peculiarly modern' sense of 'alienation from ourselves and the universe'.[345] This sense of estrangement is most strongly expressed in the *The Icknield Way* where Thomas describes a particularly severe bout of depression exacerbated by a solitary night spent listening to a downpour of rain: 'I am not a part of nature. I am alone. There is nothing else in my world but my dead heart and brain within me and the rain without'.[346] Like many of his poems, 'Rain' was adapted from this prose passage and retains its sense of complete despair and desolation. The speaker describes the relentless 'Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain' which drowns all but 'the love of death' which 'Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint'.[347] Discussing the poem, Edna Longley describes the dual presence of a death wish and a life wish which centres on the attraction of the dissolution of the poetic 'I' into a state of unconsciousness.[348] The attractive prospect of escape from self is evident in Thomas's description of death in terms of the unconsciousness of sleep or the 'impassable night' of nothingness at the end of memory: 'A sweet darkness enfolds with a faint blessing my life up to the age of about four'.[349]

Thomas's treatment of death shifts in the poems from an imaginative possibility to an immediate probability after enlisting in the army. In 'Lights Out' the prospect of death elicits genuine fear which is eased through the familiar imagery of night, forests and sleep. However, despite the increased prospect of death in war, Thomas retains his atheism and resists the lure of an afterlife by recognising death as an absolute:

[344] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 70.
[345] Longley, 'Preface' in *Poems and Last Poems*, p. 12.
[346] Edward Thomas*, The Icknield Way*, p. 281.
[347] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 95.
[348] Longley, 'Note' in *Poems and Last Poems*, pp. 313-3.
[349] Edward Thomas, *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*, p. 13.

Here love ends,
Despair, ambition ends;
All pleasure and all trouble.[350]

Death is ‘the unknown’, but with characteristic honesty and bravery Thomas accepts ’I must enter, and leave, alone’. In his last published poem ‘Out in the Dark’, the prospect of death is explored again through imagery of night: ‘Stealthily the dark haunts round’.[351] The sense of oblivion where ‘all else is drowned’ provokes alarm: ‘fear | Drums on my ear’. However, this is tempered by a familiarity with the night and a welcomed unity of ‘star and I and wind and deer’ which prevents despair from overwhelming the final stanza:

How weak and little is the light,
All the universe of sight,
Love and delight,
Before the might,
If you love it not, of night.

4. War

Enlisting in the army confirmed Edward Thomas’s commitment to the countryside and clarified his sense of national identity. Jean Moorcroft Wilson reflects that ‘motives for enlisting seem to me especially important in the case of the First World War poets, since they dictate (ultimately) the kind of war poetry each of them writes’.[352] This is particularly relevant to Edward Thomas who rejects the politics of war and is sensitive to the distortion of patriotic discourse: ‘the papers tell no truth at all about what war is and what soldiers are’.[353] Thomas’s continuing focus on the English countryside rather than the battlefields in France challenges the view that ‘Great War poetry’ is synonymous with trench poetry’.[354] The war provides Thomas with a sense of purpose and eases his feelings of displacement as he found himself ‘slowly growing into a conscious Englishman’.[355] Thomas explained to his friend Eleanor Farjeon, whilst crumbling soil between his fingers, that he was fighting

[350] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 129.
[351] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 132.
[352] Jean Moorcroft Wilson, ‘Edward Thomas: From Adlestrop to Arras’, *The Edward Thomas Fellowship Newsletter*, August 2011, pp. 14-23 (p. 14.).
[353] Cooke, p. 49.
[354] Longley, ‘Going Back to Edward Thomas’, p. 36.
[355] Letter from Edward Thomas to Jesse Berridge in *Letters of Edward Thomas* ed. by Anthony Berridge (London: Enitharmon, 1983), p. 74.

‘Literally, for this’.[356] The war shifts Thomas’s commitment to the countryside from an act of creative to physical preservation which clarifies his understanding of place:

> All I can tell is, it seemed to me that either I had never loved England, or I had loved it foolishly, aesthetically, like a slave, not having realised that it was not mine unless I were willing and prepared to die rather than leave it [...]. Something, I felt, had to be done before I could look composedly at English landscape [...].[357]

Other reasons for Edward Thomas volunteering for a position in the notoriously dangerous gun batteries in the Royal Garrison Artillery have been suggested. Thomas admitted that his decision was partly informed by the financial security it would provide for his family, but the difficulties he experienced with domestic life may also have pushed him to leave. In *Now All Roads Lead to France*, Matthew Hollis argues that a confrontation with a gamekeeper was central to his decision to enlist. Thomas disliked gamekeepers because they ‘represented the privatisation of nature, to him, the possession of the living ground and the animals to which it gave a home, the miracle of the earth patrolled for the benefit of the few’.[358] Following a dispute over trespassing, when threatened with a shotgun Robert Frost stood his ground, but Thomas backed away. As someone ‘prone to excessive self-examination’ Matthew Hollis argues that this incident was the central motivation for Edward Thomas’s decision to enlist in order to prove his bravery and amend for what he perceived as cowardice in his instinctive response.[359]

Although Thomas’s poetic focus remains on the British countryside rather than the trenches, this does not represent an escape from war but an engagement with its impact at home. Discussions of the war intrude into his encounters with rural people and with friends: ‘We turned from men or poetry | To rumours of the war’ (‘The Sun used to Shine’). There is a shift in sensibility which involves an awareness of events beyond the local and compassion not only for jobless wanderers but also uprooted soldiers fighting in France. The change in perception and response to nature is evident in ‘The Cuckoo’ where unrest in the human world overshadows the speaker’s perception of the natural world. The cuckoo’s call, which traditionally marks the coming of summer, is displaced by the memory of the voice of a country

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[356] Farjeon, p.154.
[357] Edward Thomas ‘This England’ in *A Language not to be Betrayed*, pp. 268-271, (p. 271).
[358] Hollis, pp. 164-5.
[359] Hollis, p. 181.

man who 'died that Summer'.[360] Bird song is previously understood in Thomas's poetry to signify a mysterious connection between the poet and the animal. However, the immensity of human events disrupts this balance, resulting in 'deafness' to the cuckoo's song which is 'drowned by the voice of | my dead'.

The changes to the countryside resulting from war are physical as well as emotional. In 'The Cherry Trees' the abundance in nature contrasts to the absence of new life in the human sphere:

> The cherry trees bend over and are shedding,
> On the old road where all that passed are dead,
> Their petals, strewing the grass as for a wedding
> This early May morn when there is none to wed.[361]

Rather than the prospect of weddings suggested by the confetti-like blossom, the bent branches suggest mourning and the disruption of the potential for new life in spring. 'In Memoriam (Easter 1915)' the impact of war leaves physical traces on the landscape:

> The flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood
> This Eastertide call into mind the men,
> Now far from home, who, with their sweethearts,
> should
> Have gathered them and will do never again.[362]

The disparity between the abundance of nature and the loss of human life marks an imbalance in human/nature relations. The embedded cultural and religious associations of Easter with regenerations and new life are also, as Eliot would later observe, severely disrupted by war. The emphasis on 'should' confirms the importance placed on the countryside as a composite of human and non-human presences which has been permanently disrupted by the finality of death which means the men who should have gathered the flowers 'will do never again'.

This compassion for displaced soldiers is also present in 'A Private' where the speaker mourns for a 'ploughman dead in battle' in a foreign land who had previously known his home county so well that he could identify the single bush he slept under 'Many a frozen night, and merrily'.[363] The experience of soldiers fighting outside in the trenches is contrasted to the relative comfort of the speaker in 'The

[360] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 30.
[361] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 112.
[362] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 63.
[363] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 27.

Owl'. Spending the day outdoors out of choice rather than necessity, the speaker describes his condition as 'hungry, and yet not starved; | Cold, yet had heat within me'.[364] His needs are readily fulfilled and having gained food and rest his conscience is troubled by the repeated call of the owl. Again, war transforms his reading of nature. In contrast to the previous mystery of birdsong, the owl's 'melancholy cry' carries an unambiguous message of 'what I escaped' and sparks compassion for soldiers 'poor, unable to rejoice' who, the poem suggests, the speaker will soon join. Even when the war is not mentioned explicitly it interrupts readings of Edward Thomas's poetry, as shown in 'The Gallows' where the dead animals who 'hang and flap in rain and wind' become a grim reflection of dead soldiers caught on the wire in no-man's land 'Without pain, without pleasure'.[365] Edward Thomas also anticipates his own disappearance from the landscape. 'As the Team's Head-Brass' initially appears to describe a typical rural scene, but the rippling consequences of war and the question of enlisting develop the poem into a far more complex examination of the implications of war. The fallen elm which the farmer will not be able to move until the unknown time 'When the war's over' reveals how the absence of farm workers subtly alters the rural landscape.[366] Even a single death has repercussions, and the ploughman muses that 'Everything | Would have been different.' had his friend not died. Some aspects of country life continue as the lovers go into the woods and the farmer continues ploughing. However, the reference to the horses 'stumbling' as they start out 'for the last time' foreshadows endings not only for Thomas as he leaves for war, but also for the particular rural scene which will disappear with the mechanisation of farming and further depopulation of the countryside.

Edward Thomas's poetry is important to this thesis because it shows how modern ideas and anxieties relating to human relationships to place can be examined within a rural context. Edna Longley suggests that had Edward Thomas lived 'he could have been an important creative counter-weight to Modernism (in England) during the twenties'.[367] However, there is continuity as well as divisions between Edward Thomas and modernism which challenges understanding of modernist poetry as purely urban in focus and anthropocentric in character. In modernising nature poetry, Edward Thomas displays a degree of foresight in recognising the importance

[364] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 44.
[365] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 123.
[366] Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems,* p. 115.
[367] Longley, 'Preface' in *Poems and Last Poems,* p. 11.

of maintaining balance in human/nature relations and succeeds in retaining an awareness of both the autonomous value of nature and its importance to human happiness.

CHAPTER 4. T. S. ELIOT: *THE WASTE LAND*

The Waste Land is not a poem which would initially appear to be a suitable subject for an ecocritical reading. T. S. Eliot's depiction of a city which is both polluted and polluting would seem to confirm negative associations of the metropolis as an unhealthy, contaminated and sterile environment which lacks any potential for providing insights into human relations to the natural world. The poem's preoccupation with linguistic and formal experimentation and Eliot's use of high-culture references and allusions would also appear to distance it from non-human concerns. However, an ecocritical analysis reveals a strong critique of the impact of modernity on the physical environment and a sustained argument for increased awareness of the non-human world and associated traditions and beliefs. Eliot's depiction of a spiritually depleted society which is fundamentally disconnected from its surroundings warns against the cultural, psychological and environmental consequences of becoming consumed by human self interest. An ecocritical reading of the poem charts the correlation between the emotional and spiritual state of society and attitudes towards the environment in order to emphasise the connection between the two. Understood in this way, the poem can be seen as first identifying the crisis in human/nature relations, then attempting to reconcile the two through a process of re-engagement with place which recognises the complex interconnections between the human and non-human world.

In approaching the poem from an ecocritical perspective, my focus will be on the physical reality of the landscapes of *The Waste Land* and the impact of re-reading the poem with an emphasis on the material. Although the physical reality of place will be the central focus, I will also consider how Eliot's environmental concerns are strengthened by additional symbolic associations of place which reflect the complex ways in which humans relate to their environment. The argument for a green reading of *The Waste Land* will be made with reference to the work of critics including Nancy Duvall Hargrove, Robert Pogue Harrison, Laurence Coupe and Craig Raine. An interesting idea which has arisen from these studies is the suggestion that the poem prophesises environmental crisis and climate change brought about by intensive farming and the depletion of natural resources by industry. This interpretation connects to the contrast Eliot constructs between the exploitative use of natural resources in the present and a more balanced relationship with nature in the past. Within this juxtaposition references to myths and legends emphasise the

fundamental importance of nature to all aspects of human life and suggests an alternative ideology to modernity gained by recovering a close relationship with the natural world for the benefit of both human and non-human. *The Waste Land* is an important subject for ecocritical enquiry because in illustrating the severe consequences of disconnection from the physical environment, Eliot creates a strong argument for the continued importance of nature in modern society. Rather than preventing an ecocritical analysis, the representation of the city as a place where humans are completely disconnected from their surroundings communicates the urgency and reality of the environmental crisis. Similarly, modernist techniques and an interest in linguistic and formal innovation do not obstruct an ecocritical reading, but produce new ways of speaking about the crisis in human/nature relations in modern society which then confirms the validity of ecocritical interest in modernist literature.

1. Reasserting the Real

An important study in terms of reasserting the reality of place in Eliot's poetry is Nancy Duvall Hargrove's *Landscape as Symbol in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot*.[368] Although the title implies a non-ecocritical focus on the symbolic meaning of place, Hargrove is interested in 'the actual geographical locations which are the sources of the poetic landscapes'.[369] She criticises the fact that 'despite the central role it plays throughout the poetry, landscape has not received the direct and sustained critical analysis that it deserves'.[370] In response to this she argues that the 'pervasive use of landscape requires a reconsideration of Eliot's poetry and its sources'.[371] Maintaining that 'Eliot uses landscape to represent much more than scenery or a setting', Hargrove examines the role of the initial private experience of place on the poet and claims that this aspect holds equal importance to its symbolic meaning.[372] In shifting critical emphasis to the material, the landscapes of Eliot's poetry are understood to have 'a life, a reality of their own, for they are real places with recognizable landmarks'.[373] This recognition of the importance of the reality of place to both the poet and the reader is combined with an acceptance that the landscapes of the poems

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[368] Although this study predates the emergence of ecocriticism as a unified theory Hargrove pre-empts several aspects of the ecocritical approach, including a focus on the reality of place and the direct experience of nature on the poet.
[369] Nancy Duvall Hargrove, *Landscape as Symbol in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1978), p. xiii.
[370] Hargrove, p. xiv.
[371] Hargrove, p. 7.
[372] Hargrove, p. 11.
[373] Hargrove, p. 14.

‘also stand for something more than themselves; they are symbolic of universal emotional or moral states’.[374] It is this recognition of both the reality of place and its cultural resonance which strengthens the communication of Eliot’s environmental message and encourages re-evaluation of modern attitudes towards the physical world.

Nancy Duvall Hargrove’s argument for the importance of recognising the role of the actual places described in the poem is an important step in shifting critical interest from the symbolic to the material. However, Hargrove’s understanding of Eliot’s landscapes as a ‘major element in the communication’ of ‘the full horror of a civilization that has rejected both human and divine love and that consequently is physically, emotionally, and spiritually sterile’ is problematic.[375] Such an understanding fails to acknowledge that far from being simply a means of communicating human problems, one of the central problems facing modern society is the state of the land itself. The disconnection between the inhabitants of *The Waste Land* and their surroundings and the associated decline of community and tradition is not a consequence of the malaise and unhappiness of society, but a major cause of it. Hargrove’s anthropocentric understanding of the role of nature as a way of speaking about the human condition fails to acknowledge Eliot’s concern about the impact of modernity on the physical environment which is a recurrent theme throughout his poetry, essays and lectures. In contrast to Hargrove’s interpretation of the role of nature in T. S .Eliot’s poetry, my analysis of the poem will centre on the argument that the state of the land is not purely a way of speaking about the state of human society, but is in itself a major concern of the poem.

In *Forests*: *The Shadow of Civilization,* Robert Pogue Harrison recognises the physical state of the environment as a cause rather than symptom of modern decline. Harrison discusses the prevalence of wastelands as both emblems and physical landscapes in modernist literature, and suggests that in this context *The Waste Land* can be read as a prophecy of ecological disaster. This is a reading centred on the recognition of a connection between the emotional or spiritual state of society and its treatment of the environment: ‘If desertification occurs within, the forests cannot survive without’.[376] These ‘mirrors’ between the physical landscape and human psychology show that humans are not separate from nature, but rather that ‘soul and

[374] Hargrove, p. 14.
[375] Hargrove, p. 61.
[376] Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 149.

habitat […] are correlates of one another'.[377] This interest in the interrelations between internal and external environments is evident again in *Choruses from 'The Rock.'*[378]

> The desert is not remote in southern tropics
> The desert is not only around the corner,
> The desert is squeezed in the tube-train next to you,
> The desert is in the heart of your brother.[379]

The most interesting aspect of Harrison's discussion of *The Waste Land* is his understanding of the poem as anticipating the greenhouse effect. This is important because such a reading necessitates a move beyond understanding the poem as 'a testimony of despair over a civilization in spiritual decay' to seeing it as a poem about 'the spiritual effects of a changing climate and habitat'.[380] Harrison suggests that the poem can be read as 'a harbinger of the greenhouse effect': making 'the greenhouse effect, or desertification of habitat in general, the true "objective correlative" of the poem'.[381] In proposing such an original reading, Robert Pogue Harrison concedes that predictions of environmental crisis he finds in Eliot's work are veiled and 'like oracles [...] couch their message in the language of enigma'.[382] But he maintains that 'as the external environment undergoes transformations, poets often announce them in advance with the clairvoyance of seers'.[383] Although Harrison does not refer to Eliot's prose writing, evidence can be found to support his argument in *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) where Elliot argues:

> Organisation of society on the principle of private profit [...], is leading both to the deformation of humanity by unregulated industrialism, and to the exhaustion of natural resources, and that a good deal of our material progress is a progress for which succeeding generations may have to pay.[384]

By basing his green reading of the poem on the idea that poets possess a 'sixth sense' about such things, Harrison risks strengthening criticisms of ecocriticism for lacking

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[377] Pogue Harrison, p. 149.
[378] This sense of interconnectedness is also a fundamental aspect of ecology.
[379] T. S. Eliot, *The Collected Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 149.
[380] Pogue Harrison, p. 149.
[381] Pogue Harrison, p. 149.
[382] Pogue Harrison, p. 149.
[383] Pogue Harrison, p. 149.
[384] T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (London: Faber and Faber, 1942), p. 31.

critical vigour in its analysis of texts.[385] However, Harrison's importance in reinvigorating discussions of *The Waste Land* overshadows these concerns and proves ecocriticism capable not only of extending its analysis to modernist literature, but also of providing new insights into the environmental aspects of both its canonical and marginal texts.

Laurence Coupe also challenges the idea that modernist writers use the natural world 'merely as a source of metaphors for a spiritual state'.[386] Referring to Robert Pogue Harrison's work, Coupe reiterates the importance of moving beyond understanding modernist landscapes as 'wholly symbolic' to approaching *The Waste Land* not as a metaphor for spiritual and cultural decline, but as an expression of 'a literal state of drought and desiccation'.[387] This is an interpretation supported by Eliot's long term interest in 'the damage which agrarian capitalism was doing to the land'.[388] Allowing for the possibility that in the poem Eliot was 'thinking of the way that unbridled technological progress renders the earth arid and inhospitable' creates potential for an 'interesting and vital' ecocritical reading.[389] Extending understanding of the landscapes of *The Waste Land* beyond their symbolic values and 'taking the title on its own terms' can then 'reveal a sense of malaise expressive not only of cultural impoverishment, but also of alienation from the earth itself'.[390] This observation again connects to the mirroring of the external state of the land with the internal health of the people which is communicated in the poem through the presence of the Fisher King. Growing awareness of the consequences of climate change mean this is an interpretation of the poem which has 'acquired greater relevance over the decades, as more and more of the planet has been "laid waste"'.[391]

In his analysis of the poem, Craig Raine also calls for a shift in emphasis to the reality of place by stressing that 'one should never underestimate actual experience in the making of poetry'.[392] Referring to Eliot's criticism of the environmental consequences of industrialism and misguided clearance methods in *After Strange Gods: A Primer on Modern Heresy* (1934), Raine suggests that 'Eliot was probably drawn to the emblematic potential of the waste land because he had

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385 Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society, p. 31.*
386 Laurence Coupe, *Myth* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 187.
387 Coupe, *Myth*, p. 187.
388 Coupe, *Myth*, p. 188.
389 Coupe, *Myth*. p. 187.
390 Coupe, *Myth* p. 188.
391 Coupe, *Myth, p. 188.*
392 Craig Raine, *T. S. Eliot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 83.

actual experience of ecological disaster' which influenced his theme 'of a rift between man and his natural surroundings'.[393] In *After Strange Gods,* Eliot describes the different landscapes he travelled through on his lecture tour of America: from the lush hills of Vermont to the 'half-dead mill towns' of New England which led him to conclude that the ideal landscape was not a wilderness or even an area with the most fertile soil, but one in which rather than human exploitation and domination 'the long struggle of adaptation between man his environment has brought out the best qualities of both'.[394] Interestingly, Raine's discussion of the similarity of the imagery of *The Waste Land* to 'the desert and great dust bowl storms' which Eliot did not witness until his American tour in 1933 alludes to the same sense of prophecy that Robert Pogue Harrison identified in *The Waste Land*. However, Raine is more cautious about the idea of prophetic powers and notes that Eliot would have been 'aware of the soil erosion caused by the Homestead Acts of 1862 and 1909' which encouraged farmers to 'pulverise the topsoil' of infertile land in the mistaken belief that 'intense cultivation of soil conserved moisture'.[395] The link between witnessing these changes in the environment and Eliot's views of the responsibilities of poetry to address such issues is strengthened by Eliot's belief in the 'moral principles of literature'.[396] The drought of 1921 which occurred during the period in which Eliot was writing *The Waste Land* has also been identified as an influence, with the extreme weather leaving 'much of the country looking like an arid wasteland, conditions which have been cited as one of the inspirations for Eliot's poem'.[397] Craig Raine refers to the line: 'I will show you fear in a handful of dust' as an example of a direct expression of Eliot's environmental concerns. However, an ecocritical analysis has the potential to go further than identifying the environmental meaning behind single lines. The poem as a whole can be seen as having an overarching environmental message which raises concerns about the broadening gulf between humans and nature and critiques the environmental impact of modernity before calling for meaningful re-engagement with place in order to address it.

A move towards recognising the importance of the physical landscapes of *The Waste Land* is encouraged by Eliot's confirmation of the role of real places in his

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393 Raine, p. 84.
394 T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer on Modern Heresy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), p. 17.
395 Eliot, *After Strange Gods, p. 17.*
396 Eliot, *After Strange Gods*, p. 29.
397 Paul Simons and Oliver Moody, 'South East is Suffering its Worst Drought for 90 years' *The Times*. <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/weather/article3369987.ece> [accessed 20th April 2013]

poetry: 'my poetry, like that of other poets, shows traces of every environment in which I have lived'.[398] Helen Gardner remarks on Eliot's fidelity to the reality of place by commenting on how recognisable and familiar the physical landscapes of his poems are to readers who visit them. For Gardner they are:

> [...] landscapes of experience and of memory, not created to express a mood or a vision, but perceived, penetrated, and understood, are at once highly personal and particular and also general: that is common. For you and I can visit these places and recognize what the poet saw there.[399]

Again reaffirming the importance of real places to Eliot's experience and their subsequent communication to the reader, Gardner argues that 'knowledge of a poet's country is an enrichment of our understanding of his poetry' and consequently 'the meaning of the poem is enriched by the actual scene that had inspired it'.[400] Failing to recognise this aspect of poetry impoverishes understanding of the work as a whole. Eliot is described by Gardner as 'a poet of places' and recognising this aspect of his work is fundamental in fully appreciating the poetry.[401] T. S. Eliot is not usually considered in terms of being a landscape poet, but Nancy Duvall Hargrove suggests that 'while he is a landscape poet he is unusually original, provocative, and exciting. Indeed, he has given a new meaning to the term "landscape poetry" and has opened new and unexplored uses of landscape'.[402]

2. The Crisis in Human/Nature Relations

The influence of place upon the poet in *The Waste Land* reaches its fullest expression in Eliot's urban imagery. Eliot describes his childhood home of St Louis, Missouri as having scenery which was 'for nine months of the year [...] almost exclusively urban, and a good deal of it seedily, drably urban at that'.[403] He later learnt through Baudelaire and LaForgue that such an environment was not a barrier to poetry, but offered a range of poetic possibilities: 'the essential advantage for a poet is not to have a beautiful world with which to deal: it is to be able to see the boredom, and the horror, and the glory'.[404] St. Louis, and in particular the Mississippi, had a lasting

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[398] T. S. Eliot, 'The Influence of Landscape upon the Poet' *Daedalus,* 89.2 (1960), p. 421.
[399] Helen Gardner, 'The Landscapes of Eliot's Poetry', *Critical Quarterly*, 10 (1968), 313-330 (p. 317).
[400] Gardner, 'The Landscapes of Eliot's Poetry', p. 320.
[401] Gardner, 'The Landscapes of Eliot's Poetry', p. 330.
[402] Hargrove, p. 207.
[403] T. S. Eliot 'The Influence of Landscape on the Poet', p. 422.
[404] T. S. Eliot, 'Matthew Arnold' in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 98.

impact on Eliot's poetic imagination and, as a poet who valued tradition and heritage, the city remains important despite the later influence of other cities: 'My urban imagery was that of St. Louis, upon which that of Paris and London have been superimposed'.[405] Eliot's American upbringing also influences his impressions of England. Robert Crawford suggests Eliot's preconceptions of England may have been shaped by his early introduction to English literature: arguing that it is 'hard to overestimate the importance of Eliot's childhood reading'.[406] In particular he refers to the influence of English writers such as Thomas Malory who provided Eliot's first introduction to Arthurian legends, and Arthur Conan Doyle whose Sherlock Holmes stories presented a vision of the capital where 'London is often set against the natural world which invades it with a violence from beyond civilization'.[407]

Eliot's identity as an outsider also influenced his impressions of London. Although it was initially circumstances linked to the outbreak of war in Europe rather than deliberate choice which brought Eliot to England, over time his relationship with the country developed to the point where he found England and the English landscape had become 'as significant for me, and as an emotionally charged' as that of childhood.[408] But his feelings towards England and particularly London were not static. Eliot first came to England to study at Oxford and summed up the experience by saying 'Oxford is very pretty, but I don't like to be dead'.[409] In contrast he found that London 'grows upon me more and more'.[410] Eliot recognised London as a centre of culture, telling the Boston hostess Isabella Gardner: 'I want to live in London, and if one is to do anything in literature this is the best place to be'.[411] These early impressions of the city as 'delightful and beautiful' and 'healthy' seem at odds with the dark and desperate city which appears in the poems, but his later attitude was influenced by a failed marriage, poor health and financial difficulties.[412] Grover Smith regards these personal difficulties as having a significant influence on the poem: '*The Waste Land* centres on the sufferings of Eliot in his marriage, on the lost opportunity hinted at in the "Hyacinth garden" passage'.[413] Recognising the impact

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[405] T. S. Eliot, 'Matthew Arnold', p. 98.
[406] Robert Crawford, *The Savage and the City in the Work of T. S. Eliot* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 27.
[407] Crawford, p. 11.
[408]Eliot 'The Influence of Landscape on the Poet', p. 422.
[409] Valerie Eliot (ed.), *The Letters of T. S. Eliot: Volume 1, 1898-1922* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 74.
[410] Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot: Volume 1,* p. 94.
[411] Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot: Volume 1,* p. 107.
[412] Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot: Volume 1,* p. 92.
[413] Grover Smith, *The Waste Land* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 55.

of personal unhappiness on perception of place helps to explain how the city Eliot was initially so impressed with came to 'represent the inner landscape of the soul: sordid, chaotic, barren hell'.[414] However, Eliot does not regard the countryside as a potential salve for this unhappiness. He and his wife Vivien spent periods of time in the countryside during her illness, but the experience had little restorative effect and did not suggest itself as an antidote to personal or cultural fatigue. Instead the reality of cold cottages and long commutes into London meant that the countryside only became meaningful to Eliot later in life when this troubled period was behind him. This is significant because despite the pressures of urban life, in *The Waste Land* Eliot does not resort to the pastoral narrative of retreat to the countryside, but confronts the isolating experience of modernity and its associated dislocation from nature from within the epicentre of modernity.

The city is central to the communication of Eliot's environmental concerns. The disconnection from nature identified in the opening lines of *The Waste Land* does not lead to a retreat to the countryside, but an examination of the impact and consequences of modernity within the urban environment. This marks both a clear departure from the rural character of Georgian poetry and a commitment to reinvigorating poetry by using experimental techniques to represent the pace and sensation of modern urban experience. In *The Waste Land* a clear connection is made between modernity and the modern city. Nick Selby describes the poem as 'an examination of the root causes of the anxieties of modernity' which is achieved through affecting a continuous comparison between modern urban lifestyles and a more harmonious relationship with the environment in the past.[415] The city is an effective base for Eliot's critique of modern society because it is so closely associated with progress and human achievement. Monroe K. Spears describes the city as 'a symbol of modernity' which 'both constitutes and symbolizes the modern predicament'.[416] Nancy Duvall Hargrove agrees, seeing the city as the major phenomenon of the modern age and 'a highly effective symbol for the complexities of modern existence'.[417] Ann-Catherine Nabholz extends this observation by suggesting that the allure of the metropolis for modernists lay in its opportunity of presenting 'a highly evocative frame for dramatizing the individual's struggle with what Nietzsche termed the "machine age" and the urbanite's profound sense of

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[414] Hargrove, p. 61.
[415] Nick Selby, *The Waste Land* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1983), p. 91.
[416] Monroe K Spears, *Dionysus and the City: Modernism in Twentieth-century Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 74.
[417] Hargrove, p. 36.

alienation'.[418] This is made explicit in the descriptions of machine-like office workers at the end of the working day: 'then the eyes and back | Turn upwards from the desk, when the human engine waits'.[419]

As a representation of urban modernity, Eliot's description of London can be understood as being connected to a broader critique of both the human and environmental impact of modernity. *The Waste Land* highlights the negative personal, cultural and environmental consequences of society's increasing sense of disconnection from the natural world. The beginning of *The Waste Land* immediately recognises this fundamental change in attitudes towards nature. The schism between the human and non-human identified in the opening lines extends to the relationship between poetry and the natural world. This break is communicated through the rejection of traditional literary associations of spring with new life and hope:

> April is the cruellest month, breeding
> Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
> Memory and desire, stirring
> Dull roots with spring rain.
> Winter kept us warm, covering
> Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
> A little life with dried tubers.

Despite marking a significant break between the human and non-human world, the impact of the opening lines relies on the reader's recognition of deeply engrained connections between the coming of spring in the natural world and a sense of regeneration in the human. In this way the rejection of spring provokes an emotional response which reminds the reader of the continuing importance of nature in the human imagination and its continued ability to communicate truths about the state of society. The desire to remain in stasis, numbed by 'forgetful snow' and insulated against the future implies a major psychological disturbance because the season's associations with new life are so firmly embedded in the human consciousness. Although nature itself is autonomous and neutral, a change in human understanding is implied in the description of the regenerative processes of spring as 'stirring', 'breeding', 'mixing'. This language implies a degree of disenchantment or even

[418] Ann-Catherine Nabholz, 'The Crisis of Modernity: Culture, Nature, and the Modernist Yearning for Authenticity' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Basel, 2007), p. 3.
[419] T. S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land' in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), pp. 59-81,

repulsion towards the natural world in contrast to the sense of magic and later religious expression connected to the season within myth and legend.

The roots of this sense of disconnection from the natural world are not specified, but the subsequent journey through modern London and the portrayal of its inhabitants' listless, habitual behaviour would imply that the monotony of modern work patterns, loss of religious faith and rise of consumerism are significant contributors. The absence of community, lack of awareness of place and loss of cultural memory are also important factors in terms of the pervasive sense of rootlessness and alienation which characterises modern urban society. This contrasts to the relationship with nature in the past which provokes painful memories of lost opportunities for happiness which are sharpened by the sterility of the present. In the opening of the poem the past is most strongly present in the image of unity between human and nature embodied in the 'hyacinth girl'. The image, which is that of a girl laden with flowers before its meaning is widened by associations of the hyacinth with fertility, is so overwhelming that the speaker is struck senseless:

> 'You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
> 'They called me the hyacinth girl.'
> - Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,
> Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
> Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
> Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
> Looking into the heart of the light, the silence.

The 'hyacinth girl' is the single vision of beauty, youth and fertility in the poem, but her presence is painfully juxtaposed with the absence of love or closeness to nature in the modern city. The failure to respond to these emotions means the potential for fulfilment is wasted and the speaker is left with the emotional emptiness of the present.

Eliot's use of a predominantly urban setting may account for *The Waste Land* being subject to relatively few ecocritical studies. As detailed in the examination of urban ecocriticism in Chapter One, the city is commonly associated with human concerns and portrayed as dissociated from the natural world. In *The Waste Land* Eliot confirms and even exaggerates this stereotype by excluding London's numerous parks, gardens, squares and commons from his depiction of the city. These green spaces are part of the daily experience of most Londoners and form an important part of the city's geography. However, Eliot's decision to exclude them in

order to create a heightened portrayal of 'the alienating experience of the industrial landscapes of modernity' should not be considered an obstacle to ecocritical insight, but as a strategy undertaken in order to strengthen his argument for the negative impact of living separately from nature.[420] By choosing to exclude the city's green spaces, Eliot produces an exaggerated yet recognisable representation of the modern London which depicts the near future for the city if technological modernity remains unchecked. In creating a vision of a society completely severed from the natural world Eliot asserts the continuing importance of nature, beyond its use as a resource for industry, at a time when the majority of the population lived in urban areas and were no longer directly dependent on the land for their livelihood. Understood in this way, the poem shows that an urban landscape does not diminish the poem's environmental resonance, but sharpens it by providing a sense of urgency in the need to address the roots of an environmental crisis in the nation's capital.

Despite overlooking the city's parks and green spaces, *The Waste Land* gains much of its poetic power from being rooted in the geographically accurate and immediately recognisable landscape of modern London. As Ann-Catherine Nabholz explains, the connection Eliot makes between modernity and environmental change is strengthened by this choice of setting because the modern metropolis is 'a realistic reminder of the growing distance between nature and culture' and the recognition of this division within the city means 'the crisis of modernity can indeed be viewed as an environmental crisis'.[421] Although Eliot states that Tiresias is the most important 'personage' in the poem, London itself holds equal if not greater claim of importance: even to the status of being its main character or at least its unifying centre.[422] For Hugh Kenner, *The Waste Land* is held together by a 'geographical unity' rather than a mythical one. [423] Nancy Duvall Hargrove also remarks on the geography of the poem, observing that Eliot displays 'a remarkable fidelity to the materials' when representing modern London, which resists any 'attempt to elevate or glorify his subject matter'.[424] As Monroe K. Spears notes, the poem is 'permeated by the physical presence of the city of London'.[425] The reality of the setting is

[420] Ann-Catherine Nabholz, 'The Crisis of Modernity: Culture, Nature, and the Modernist Yearning for Authenticity' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Basel, 2007), p. 45.
[421] Nabholz, p. 3.
[422] T. S. Eliot, 'Notes on The Waste Land' in *T. S. Eliot: Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 60.
[423] Hugh Kenner, 'The Urban Apocalypse' in *Eliot in his Time: Essays on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of The Waste Land* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 28.
[424] Hargrove, p. 5.
[425] Spears, p. 81.

confirmed by the naming of specific roads, boroughs, landmarks and churches, as well in references to the familiar 'brown fog' and use of Cockney dialect. Peter Barry contextualises this emphasis on the particularity of place within a development 'from the urban-generic of the early poems' to the 'loco-specific' use of actual streets, buildings and districts.[426] Although Eliot considered poetry 'an escape from personality', the setting of *The Waste Land* is not a departure from personal experience but one which reveals Eliot's individual map of London and particularly the area around the City where he worked for seventeen years.[427] The poem reflects the daily experience of Eliot's working life and his growing familiarity with the individual character and associations of different locales.[428] Recognising Eliot's experience as part of the crowd of commuters crossing the river each day to go to office jobs is important in understanding how direct experience of place informs the poem. Such an approach places Eliot, an employee of Lloyds Bank, as part of the machinery of modernity but also highly sensitive to its dispiriting effects. The lived experience of the city allows for an intimacy with the rhythms and sensations of London which are vital to an ecocritical reading because the use of an instantly recognisable environment in a study of changes in the relationship between people and place forces the reader to confront a crisis close to home.

Eliot's critique of modernity is strengthened by his allusions to the cultural and symbolic meanings of place. Recognising this aspect of Eliot's writing does not invalidate the poem's ecocritical credentials, but reflects the reality of London as a complex composite of personal, historic and cultural associations. This is evident in the class associations implicit in the seduction of a woman from the middle class area of Highbury which occurs as the boat passes through the upper class gardens of Richmond and Kew:

> Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew
> Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees
> Supine on the floor of the narrow canoe.'
>
> 'My feet are at Moorgate, and my heart
> Under my feet. After the event
> He wept. He promised "a new start."

[426] Spears, pp. 49-50.
[427] T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and Individual Talent' in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1972), p. 58.
[428] This familiarity with the City is confirmed in 'Notes on The Waste Land', where Eliot comments that Saint Mary Woolnoth's bell ringing with 'a dead sound on the final stroke nine' was 'a phenomenon which I have often noticed', (p. 59).

I made no comment. What should I resent?'

The fine line between gentility and barbarity is crossed, and the woman's numbed reaction is communicated through an expression of geographical displacement of her heart from the past refuge of Highbury to the slum area of Moorgate. The event is heightened by the reader's association of each place with expected codes of behaviour and Eliot's knowledge of the characteristics of these different areas of London which allows him to communicate displacement through place associations.

In terms of an ecocritical understanding of the poem, one of the most important sections of *The Waste Land* is the description of the crowds crossing the river over London Bridge:

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.

The business men with their heads down and eyes fixed on their own feet are oblivious to the Thames and all its history flowing beneath them. Their minds are consumed by human concerns to the extent that they have forgotten their history and their connection to the land and as a result have become spiritually depleted. The crowds in the city produce a collective experience but lack beneficial communal relationships. They embody what Eliot referred to as the 'urbanisation of the mind' in their alienated urban consciousness and failure to connect with anything beyond their own lives.[429] The city offers many insights into a more meaningful way of living, but the inhabitants are too insular and trapped by routine to recognise community not only between humans, but also with the natural world. In *The Waste Land* London itself is diverse, historic and occasionally beautiful, but the people who live there are alienated from each other and the natural world so fail to see the interconnections between themselves, their environment, myth and history. A critique of the influence of modernity is implicit in this depiction of urbanites who have discarded old rituals and superstitions but have not replaced them with anything meaningful or spiritually fulfilling, and as a result are neurotic, rootless and unhappy.

[429] T. S. Eliot, 'A Commentary', *Criterion,* October, 1938, p. 60.

The greatest natural force in the poem is the Thames, which has a striking physical and symbolic presence in the centre of modern London. The river, which the business men cross daily without even noticing, is a powerful and ancient force which is inseparable from the political and cultural history of the city:

The river sweats
Oil and tar
The barges drift
With the turning tide
Red sails
Wide
To leeward, swing on the heavy spar.
The barges wash
Drifting logs
Down Greenwich reach
Past the Isle of Dogs
Weialala leia
Wallala leialala
Elizabeth and Leicester
Beating oars
The stern was formed
A gilded shell
Red and gold
The brisk swell
Rippled both shores
Southwest wind
Carried down stream
The peal of bells
White towers
Weialala leia
Wallala leialala

The river is a potent source of cultural and historic knowledge, but it is also a reflection of modern attitudes towards nature which reveals the real environmental consequences of modernity in the 'dusty trees' and the industrial pollution of 'Oil and tar'. The contrast between attitudes towards the river in the present and the past are illustrated by an awareness of the river's cultural history which reaches beyond the human pollution of 'empty bottles, sandwich papers, | Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends' to the 'Sweet Thames' of Spenser's wedding ritual.

Moving beyond the city, the river flows into a more ambiguous body of water. In 'Death by Water' the sea's transformative power is seen in its ability to obliterate worldly concerns of 'profit and loss'. As an autonomous force of nature the sea has no reverence for human attributes such as youth or beauty, but consumes

Phlebas: ‘A current under sea | Picked his bones in whispers’. The sea is a reminder of the power of nature to clear away what is worldly and trivial, but Phlebas’s similarity to effigies placed in the sea to encourage rebirth also allows for the possibility of regeneration. The importance of water as a symbol of spiritual rebirth makes the speaker’s inability to find meaning through contact with the sea even more devastating:

> On Margate Sands.
> I can connect
> Nothing with nothing.

This image of complete desolation gains additional resonance with the knowledge of the happiness Eliot associated with the seaside and sailing as a result of childhood holidays in Cape Ann on the New England coast.

3. Mythology, History and Ritual

One of the main ways in which Eliot critiques modern attitudes towards the natural world is by contrasting them with a more harmonious relationship of the past. In *The Waste Land* the juxtaposition of the past with the present creates ‘double visioning’ which reveals that whilst modernity has led to a degree of freedom from direct reliance on the land, this has been accompanied by a corresponding decline, or even collapse, in several key aspects of human life and society. [430] This is an interpretation supported by Lawrence Buell who goes even further by describing *The Waste Land* as ‘one of the first canonical works of modern Anglo-American literature to envision a dying society in the aftermath of world war’.[431] However, as Edmund Wilson notes, comparisons with the past make Eliot liable to accusations of ‘living half the time in the real world of contemporary London and half the time in the haunted wilderness of the medieval legend’; with the inevitable result of everyday reality failing to live up to an idealised and partly imagined past.[432] Eliot insists that his understanding of tradition does not equate to being ‘hostile to change’ or indulging ‘in a sentimental attitude towards the past’, but represents an intellectual engagement with the question of ‘what in the past is worth preserving and what should be rejected’.[433] In *The Waste Land*, one of the aspects of the past which continues to

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[430] Peter Barry, *Contemporary British Poetry and the City* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 49.
[431] Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination; Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 288.
[432] Edmund Wilson, ‘T. S. Eliot’ in Nick Selby *(ed.), T. S. Eliot The Waste Land: A Reader’s Guide to Essential Criticism,* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), p. 37.
[433] Eliot, *After Strange Gods*, pp. 18-19.

hold contemporary relevance, as shown in the detrimental impact of its absence, is a close relationship with nature.

Laurence Coupe identifies, in particular, the role of myth in allowing modernism to comprehend its 'cultural breakdown' through awareness of a comparative 'primitive harmony'.[434] Mythology is important in emphasising this diminished connection between the past and the present because it asserts the importance of a close union between man and nature to ensure the wellbeing of both. In *The Waste Land* the juxtaposition of nature-centred mythology with an image of a society which has neglected these ties strengthens the argument for nurturing this relationship. F. R. Leavis was one of the earliest critics to identify Eliot's concerns with modern society's dislocation from the natural world and the discordance between 'natural rhythms' and the rhythms of the city.[435] Leavis draws attention to Eliot's references to 'vegetation cults, fertility ritual' and 'sympathetic magic' as a reminder of 'a harmony of human culture with the natural environment' and the role of communal rituals to 'express an extreme sense of the unity of life'.[436] Leavis blames the impact of industrialisation for the perceived disintegration of the quality of modern life, believing that the 'Machine Age' led to the final 'uprooting [...] of life rooted in the soil'.[437] But in *The Waste Land* Eliot is more ambivalent as to where the blame lies and less definite about how the connection with nature can be repaired, although the use of myths which centre on the state of the land indicates that the first step towards reconciliation is to address the environmental impact of modernity. F. R. Leavis understood *The Waste Land* as an expression of a 'yearning to return to a simpler and more integrated culture'.[438] For Leavis the poem suggests that 'the archetypal pattern for human culture is an organic relationship to the very land itself, a sort of agrarian utopia of mutually beneficial production'.[439] Terry Eagleton reacts against this reading by arguing that 'Leavis manipulates Eliot's radical scepticism about the relationship of tradition and modernity to fit his own politics of nostalgic agrarianism', and it is noticeable that in the poem the

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[434] Laurence Coupe, *Myth* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 26.
[435] Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of the Contemporary Situation* (London: Penguin Books, 1950), p. 72.
[436] Leavis, p. 72.
[437] Leavis, p. 71.
[438] F. R. Leavis, *The Living Principle: 'English' As a Discipline of Thought* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975), p. 35.
[439] , Leavis, *The Living Principle,* p. 99.

countryside is not explicitly advocated as a solution to the misery of modern life.[440] The city itself is rich with history and culture, so the fault can be seen to lie with its human inhabitants who, possibly because of the deadening effect of modernity in mediating their contact with their environment, are ignorant of both the city and the narratives of mythology which could revive the relationship between people and place.

Eliot's use of mythology as a guide to understanding nature and its processes can also be seen as a challenge to modernity's anthropocentric view of humans as the dominant force in their environment. In contrast to this science-based understanding of the world, mythology contains narratives in which humans 'revere the earth as a source of continuing revelation' rather than exploiting it for profit.[441] Eliot defines the 'mythical method', in relation to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, as a system of 'manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity'.[442] The technique highlights the central contradiction of modernism as simultaneously highly experimental and constantly looking to the past. For Eliot, in an aesthetic sense, myth presents a way of providing structure in the absence of traditional narrative methods and so constitutes a 'step towards making the modern world possible for art'.[443] It also reflects the desire for 'hierarchy, completion, order' in response to the destabilising impact of modernity.[444] What is seen to have been lost in the 'futility and anarchy' of contemporary history is the stabilising sense of community structured around shared beliefs and behaviours. In the myths and legends which inform *The Waste Land,* rituals and ceremonies centre on the processes of nature and create a heightened sense of the connections between humans and non-humans which recognises their co-dependence. In modern society, scientific rationality and an emphasis on technological progress are seen to have motivated a damaging process of 'demythologization'.[445] In *The Waste Land*, communal narratives of mythology are seen to have been replaced by individualism and materialism, and fulfilment sought in lower forms of mysticism and meaningless sexual encounters. From an ecocritical perspective, Eliot's use of mythology is important because it connects a very modern poem to a much older need for contact with nature and, through

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[440] Terry Eagleton in Nick Selby (ed.), *T. S. Eliot The Waste Land: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan), 1999, p. 41.
[441] Coupe, *Myth*, p. 214.
[442] T. S. Eliot, 'Ulysses, Order, and Myth' in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot,* ed. by Frank Kermode, (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 178.
[443] Eliot, 'Ulysses, Order, and Myth', p. 178.
[444] Coupe, *Myth*, p. 25.
[445] Coupe, *Myth*, p. 10.

comparison with the technological, secular and capitalist nature of modern society, suggests that the loss of the type of close relationship with nature represented in myth has contributed to society's emotional and spiritual collapse.

In his notes on *The Waste Land,* T. S. Eliot draws attention to two major sources of the poem: Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* and Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*.[446] The vegetation rituals and sympathetic magic described by Frazer take place within societies which are dependent on nature for survival, and where each member of the community recognises 'how intimately his own life is bound up with the life of nature, and how the same processes which freeze the stream and strip the earth of vegetation menace him with extinction'.[447] The struggle for survival against the elements is seen to unite communities and provide clear roles for each individual that provide a sense of value and purpose. The particular geography of each community shapes their character and their social hierarchy, and the well-being of the community relies upon detailed knowledge of the local environment for successful hunting and farming. The need to be highly alert to the cycles and variations of the natural world in order to survive also contributes to understanding of the patterns of life and death which inform the rituals that mimic seasonal cycles in order to encourage good harvests and stimulate new growth. The sense of community and respectful knowledge of the environment embodied in myth is absent in modern London and the prospect of reviving such communities in modern Britain is acknowledged to be highly improbable. However, Jessie L. Weston reveals that many nature rituals associated with 'primitive' societies were later adopted into Christian traditions; forming a living example of how the past can retain a clear value and purpose in the present.

Jessie L. Weston concentrates specifically on tracing the images and symbols of the Grail legend back beyond their supposed Christian origins to show that 'narratives which had previously been taken to be purely Christian had in fact originated in vegetation ceremonies' or 'Nature Cults'.[448] Weston emphasises the importance of the land as a unifying aspect within the different versions of the Grail legend. In the Gawain version, not enquiring about the nature of the Grail results in the failure to restore the wasteland to fruitfulness, the Perceval version focuses on the importance of healing the Fisher King in order to revive the land, and only in the

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[446] In regards to Frazer's work, Eliot is particularly interested in the stories of Attis, Adonis and Osiris
[447] Frazer, James Sir, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1973), p. 324.
[448] Coupe, *Myth*, p. 21.

Galahad version is the hero successful and the land not central to the story. An important part of Weston's analysis is the argument that the environmental aspects have not been given adequate attention, and as a result 'the misfortunes of the land have been treated rather as an accident, than as an essential, of the Grail story, entirely subordinate in interest to the *dramatis personae* of the tale'.[449] The Fisher King's plight in particular shows how closely human fate is bound to the condition of the environment and his presence in *The Waste Land* encourages the reader to evaluate the state of the people by the state of the land. Helen Gardner recognises this, arguing for the recognition of the Fisher King as a human archetype with universal and contemporary significance: 'The single figure of the fisherman with the arid plain behind him is a type of all humanity waiting for the rain to fall, for the fertilizing showers, which may be floods and great waters'.[450]

In the story of the Grail, the Fisher King is a wounded, impotent leader whose beleaguered state is mirrored by his land and whose fate will have direct consequences on the wasteland. Weston describes him as 'semi-divine, semi-human, standing between his people and land'.[451] Interestingly, the Fisher King's beleaguered state is not a purely physical affliction but is described as a 'doleful sickness' which leaves him sorrowful and in a state of 'languishment'.[452] This melancholy suggests a connection between the psychological health of humans and the physical state of the environment in a way which connects Weston's interpretation to the purposeless urban dwellers in *The Waste Land*. Again the connection between the state of the land and the state of the people is paramount, and the mirror between the two is confirmed in the observation that 'the wounded "Fisher King" and the "Waste Land" are one'.[453] In *The Waste Land* the Fisher King appears as a solitary figure 'fishing in the dull canal', who is ignored and has no quester seeking him out to attempt to ask the correct questions in order to heal him and restore the land. His presence is a reminder of how closely the fate of humans is bound to the fate of the land, but the inhabitants of *The Waste Land* are so focused on the present and on human concerns that they do not see beyond their own lives to observe their surrounding or address the sickness in their society. The poem represents a search for meaning in the unmagical atmosphere of the modern world, where the diminished importance of myth is measurable by the lack of concern about

[449] Coupe, *Myth,* p. 63.
[450] Gardner, p. 90.
[451] Weston, p. 136.
[452] Weston, p. 16.
[453] Coupe, *Myth*, p. 23.

the environment. In the post-war city technological innovations are seen to have progressed to the point where there is no a direct reliance on the land for survival, but the unhappiness of people reduced to consumers and bureaucrats shows the human need for connection on a deeper level.

The Grail legend emphasises the importance of asking the right questions to heal the land, but even when modern people do search for answers they look in the wrong places and ask the wrong questions. The tarot reading by the charlatan Madame Sosotris is merely a diversion from the search for true spiritual meaning. Madame Sosotris is unaware of the weight of her words and although she prophesises the rocks, the sea and the fisherman who appear later in the poem, she does not have the cultural knowledge or spiritual authenticity to link the fragmented symbols and drifts into banalities:

> [...] Here, said she,
> Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,
> (Those were pearls that were his eyes. Look!)
> Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,
> The lady of situations.
> Here is the man with three staves, and here the Wheel,
> And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,
> Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,
> Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find
> The Hanged Man. Fear death by water.
> I see crowds of people walking round in a ring.
> Thank you. If you see dear Mrs. Equitone,
> Tell her I bring the horoscope myself:
> One must be so careful these days.

Madame Sosotris is an inferior counterpart to the mythical Sibyl whose plea for death opens the poem, and throughout the poem modern women are seen as lesser versions of their mythical counterparts. The dignity of Diana's procession and the bath which blinded Actaeon is cheapened by the caricature of Mrs. Porter guarding against venereal diseases by bathing in 'soda water' and distorting Diana's identity by presenting herself as a hunter of men. The poetically beautiful distress of Dido is contrasted to the 'photographic' hysteria of the woman in 'A Game of Chess' who repeatedly demands to know 'What shall I do?'[454] The apparent hysteria of nameless women is particularly interesting because it presents itself through a distorted relationship with the natural world evident in her being at once suffocated by being

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[454] Ezra Pound's annotations to the manuscript in Valerie Eliot (ed.), *The Waste Land; A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts* (New York: Harcourt , 1971) p. 11.

indoors and nervous of the outside world: 'What is the wind doing?' Her threat to break through the convention of polite society and 'rush out as I am, and walk the street | with my hair down' has the potential to break out of the confines of class, but the opportunity for change is denied by a return to the dull routine of controlled contact with nature: 'The hot water at ten.| And if it rains, a closed car at four'. Alexandra Harris observes that 'the twentieth century threatened to alienate people from their weather', and Eliot's description of city dwellers protected from the weather by closed cars, stuffy interiors and controlled contact with water supports this.[455]

The anachronistic presence of Tiresias in modern London allows Eliot to speak through the voice of a mythical figure who can make a direct contrast between the past and the present; as shown in his account of the sexual encounter between the typist and the clerk:

> Endeavours to engage her in caresses
> Which still are unreproved, if undesired.
> Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
> Exploring hands encounter no defence;
> His vanity requires no response,
> And makes a welcome of indifference.
> (And I Tiresias have foresuffered all
> Enacted on this same divan or bed;
> I who have sat by Thebes below the wall
> And walked among the lowest of the dead.)

Similarly to Virgil's role in *The Divine Comedy*, Tiresias becomes the guide to Eliot's vision of purgatory. Having lived a life full of transformation, divine encounters and rich experience, he is now reduced to watching the unresisted 'assaults' between the bored typist and the 'small house agent's clerk' whose demeanour is of the new money arrogance of a 'Bradford millionaire'. The union, described by Hugh Kenner as 'an unreal automation of Love itself', illustrates the degree to which the relationship between the sexes has been debased. [456] It also confirms the mechanisation of the human body and mind as evident in the typist's debilitating apathy following the clerk's departure: 'She smooths her hair with automatic hand, | And puts a record on the gramophone'. The event has minimal

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[455] Pound, p. 11.
[456] Hugh Kenner, 'The Urban Apocalypse' in *Eliot in His Time: Essays on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of The Waste Land,* ed. by A. Walton Litz (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 31.

impact and when she 'looks a moment in the glass' the only 'half-formed thought to pass' is "Well now that's done: and i'm glad it's over"'. The scene confirms the separation of love from the sexual act and again emphasises the emptiness of the present in contrast to references to the great love stories of Anthony and Cleopatra, Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Leicester, and Tristan and Isolde.

The debasement of myth in modern society is seen again in the opulent interior in the opening of 'A Game of Chess.' The grandiose comparison of the unnamed woman's chair to Cleopatra's 'burnished throne' and the allusions to the generosity of Dido's hospitality are cheapened by the gaudy decorations and artificiality of the scene:

> The chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,
> Glowed on the marble, where the glass
> Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines
> From which a golden Cupid peeped out
> (Another hid his eyes behind his wing)
> Doubled the flames of the sevenbranched candelabra
> Reflecting light upon the table as
> The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it

Figures from mythology are present within the furniture of the room, but their crass reproduction completely distances them from their original meaning. The Cupidons lose their erotic overtones to become whimsical clichés with eyes coyly peeping from behind wings and the rape of Philomel is depicted as a pretty 'sylvan scene'. The female occupant of the room sits buried amongst her possessions. Her 'strange synthetic perfumes' clot the air and unnerves the speaker who is 'troubled, confused' and 'drowned' by the potent scent. The possibility of transformation, symbolised by Tiresias's change from male to female and Philomel's metamorphosis from human to bird, is unimaginable in modern London where myth is deadened to 'withered stumps of time'. Nature is similarly devalued, with the song of the nightingale which has previously inspired great art being debased to 'Jug jug' by modern ears. Throughout the poem interiors are claustrophobic human spheres, and although the city is polluted and grey, outside there is at least the freedom to wander the streets, catch snatches of music and, potentially, begin to read and understand the city.

4. The Desert

Following the journey through modern London, the poem ends in a desert landscape where the desire for water brings heightened awareness of the state of the land. The

harsh landscape of the desert is an important contrast to the city because it strips away all the trivialities of modern life, represented by the ‘Falling towers’, to reveal a clear desire for something which is both fundamental to human life and exists beyond it. Approached as a literal expression of environmental concern, the ‘cracked earth’ of the final section can be understood as a warning of environmental crisis: the end point of modernity which is the total exhaustion of the natural world and environmental collapse. The desperate state of the speaker travelling through this depleted landscape then becomes an explicit reflection of how humans damage themselves by damaging the environment and how ultimately the fate of the earth determines the fate of humans. In placing the desert as the end point of the poem, Eliot forecasts the decline in human relations to the non-human world, traced in the poem from respect and reverence in the past, to contemporary exploitation, and finally future collapse. Understanding the poem in this way then strengthens an ecocritical reading of *The Waste Land* as a warning against exploiting and neglecting the natural world by foregrounding both its cultural value and our ultimate reliance on it for survival.

Again Eliot unites the physical landscape with its symbolic associations in order to strengthen the environmental message. Symbolically the desert is a reflection of the spiritually parched nature of modern man who is searching the empty landscape of modern life for meaning. The desert’s associations with trials and hardships which have to be negotiated in order to achieve spiritual enlightenment raises the possibility that close observation of nature can lead to an understanding of the divine. However, faith and salvation are not assured. ‘What the Thunder Said’ begins in the suspended time between death and resurrection which is signaled by references to the crucifixion:

> After the torchlight red on sweaty faces
> After the frosty silence in the gardens
> After the agony in stony place.

Allusions to the suffering at Golgotha, Mary’s ‘maternal lamentation’ and ‘the third’ person on the road to Emmaus all suggest that Christianity could potentially present a way of ending spiritual drought. However, the poem remains situated between the death of the old world and the birth of the new and the continued struggle with faith is evident in the cock’s crowing and the observation that the ‘thunder of spring’ still remains ‘over distant mountains’. In the Christian narrative this situates the last

section of the poem within the Easter Triduum where there has been a death but not yet a resurrection or new life in faith; this will come to fruition in later poems

As the central element in baptism, water holds the potential for change and its importance is both literal and symbolic. The word 'water' becomes an incantation as its meaning broadens from a physical to a spiritual requirement:

> Here is no water but only rock
> Rock and no water and the sandy road
> The winding road above among the mountains
> Which are mountains of rock without water
> If there were water we should stop and drink
> Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think

Water exists in *The Waste Land* as both a physical reality and a symbolic representation of permanence, transformation, cleansing and spiritual fulfilment. Similarly to the vision of the hyacinth girl, the painful absence of water in the present is heightened by memories of it: 'sound of water over a rock | Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees'.[457] The realisation of complete dependency on nature for survival stimulates a renewed attention to the environment and the extreme need for water is eventually relieved by 'a damp gust | Bringing rain'.[458]

The absence of water, the extremity of the landscape and the removal of the distractions of the city provoke a hyper sensitive awareness of the environment. In 'The Fire Sermon', Eliot describes how the wind 'Crosses the brown land, unheard', but in the desert, in addition to a feverish desire for the 'Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop' of water, the speaker's senses become acutely attuned to their surroundings as they notice 'the cicada | And dry grass singing' and the whistle of bats 'with baby faces'. Again knowledge and guidance on how to live is communicated via the non-human world. In the city the urbanites were too ignorant of their history and surroundings to understand this, but free of these distractions the speaker can finally hear a divine voice speaking through the thunder. The response is physical, 'blood shaking my heart', and shows a development from the numbed response to spring in the opening of the poem. The spiritual reawakening is the result of engagement with the natural and supernatural which offers a deeper possibility of fulfillment than material wealth or worldly acquisitions. The possibility of faith frees

[457] The hermit-thrush has relevance to Eliot's own life because it is the state bird of Vermont, New England, contrasting to earlier references to the English nightingale.
[458] However, the resounding warning to 'Fear death by water' is a reminder of the ambiguous potential of the rain.

the speaker from the empty rituals of modern life and after a journey through cities and wildernesses the poem ends in an unknown place or utopia.

At the end of the poem the Fisher King is still on his own, 'Fishing, with the arid plain behind me' suggesting that his healing and the subsequent regeneration of the land has not yet occurred. However, the possibility that he will be approached and asked the right question becomes more probable as awareness of the environment provokes the speaker to ask important questions:

> What is that sound high in the air […]
> Who are those hooded hordes […]
> What is the city over the mountains.

This is a significant development from the neurotic questions of the hysterical woman in 'A Game of Chess' who expresses a fear of nature. The collapse of 'London Bridge' symbolises a break from the world of commerce and material wealth represented by the commuters in 'The Burial of the Dead'. The intention to 'set my lands in order' is a reminder that changes to the environment are passed on through generations and the impact present society makes on the land will have consequences for the future. The declaration also refers to a final act before death that implies that a new life or resurrection, which may result in the regeneration of the land, is imminent. This potential is strengthened by the reference to the swallow, 'Quando fiam uti chilidon – O swallow swallow': the bird's associations as a harbinger of spring suggests a longing for new life in contrast to the rejection of the season in the poem's opening lines.[459] The final lines, 'Shantih, shantih, shantih', show that, whilst not yet achieved, an ideal of perfectibility and peace has been recognised and can now be moved towards.

An ecocritical reading of *The Waste Land* reveals the importance of the natural world to T. S Eliot's poetry. In the poem, Eliot argues for an increased awareness of the environment and an acknowledgement that human lives remain intrinsically linked to nature despite the advances that have pushed modern lifestyles further from it. The fact that such a central modernist figure explores these green issues is important in terms of challenging the idea of modernism as disinterested in the natural world. It also reaffirms that rather than preventing environmental insight, the city is both a means of communicating the negative consequences of separation from nature and also a real place which presents a genuine challenge to how to

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[459] It also refers to the opportunity of finding a new voice in relation to the myth of Philomel.

combine closeness to nature with modern urban lifestyles. *The Waste Land* critiques the ideology of modernity by asserting the continuing importance of nature to psychological and spiritual wellbeing. The poem takes the form of a journey through the landscapes of modernity to identify what is still valuable and worth preserving in modern life, and at the end of this journey nature is shown to be a central component in achieving knowledge and fulfilment.

It could even be suggested that Eliot shows a degree of ecological prescience in recognising that a society which focuses predominantly on material wealth and is unconcerned about causing damage to the environment may eventually suffer both physically and spiritually. Understood in this way, *The Waste Land* encourages awareness of nature and natural processes in the city and beyond, and argues that if humans live only for themselves and pollute and damage the natural world in order to gain material wealth they will remain spiritually destitute and leave a dangerous legacy for subsequent generations. After *The Waste Land* Eliot's Christian faith took an increasingly central role in shaping his ideas about nature and the environment, but the lack of definite or defined faith in *The Waste Land* allows the landscapes of the poem to remain open to numerous interpretations and the poem is energised by the breadth of possibility. The peace that cannot be found in The *Waste Land* is finally outside the city in the predominantly rural places in *Four Quartets*. However, the roots of Eliot's environmental consciousness and spiritual awakening are firmly grounded in *The Waste Land.*

CHAPTER 5. T. S. ELIOT: *FOUR QUARTETS*

In terms of the development of T. S. Eliot's environmental thought, *Four Quartets* mark the culmination of a search for reconnection with the natural world which reaches fulfilment in the recognition of not only the fundamental importance of nature to all aspects of human life, but also its essential autonomy. The predominantly rural settings of *Four Quartets* are a significant departure from the metropolitan geography of *The Waste Land*, but although the poetic move beyond the city reflects a shift in sensibility, the poem is also a continuation of the search for reconciliation between the human and non-human which has its roots in Eliot's earlier poetry. Whilst *The Waste Land* critiques the impact of modernity on society, *Four Quartets* offers alternative, environmentally responsible models of living centred on aspects of experience devalued by profit-driven modernity such as religious faith, respect for the past, close community and a strong relationship with place. Although T. S. Eliot's commitment to Christianity and his poetic move away from the city can be interpreted as a retreat from contemporary events, the emphasis on the personal, cultural and historical importance of place in *Four Quartets* can also be understood as a challenge to dominant ideologies of modernity and an attempt to assert the significance of alternative aspects of human experience. However, in reconnecting with nature through contact with rural areas, Eliot simultaneously devalues the city as the antithesis of 'natural' life and as a result fails to engage with the question of how the environmental awareness gained in the countryside can be meaningfully translated to modern urban experience.

An ecocritical examination of *Four Quartets* challenges understanding of the poem's landscapes as purely symbolic by redirecting attention to the reality of place and the immediacy of the poet's experience. Although principally a poem about the challenge of achieving religious faith in the modern world, an analysis of Eliot's representation of the real locations of the *Quartets* reveals the significant impact each place has on the poet's spiritual, creative and environmental consciousness; to the extent that the lasting impression of the poem is its landscapes. Initially the progress from feelings of alienation and discord in relation to the natural world in *The Waste Land* to achieved balance and reconnection in *Four Quartets* appears sudden, but the relationship between the two is better understood as a journey which begins in the identification of disconnection between people and place in London and culminates in the return to 'significant soil' in *Four Quartets*. The first part of this chapter will

form a discussion around the critical debates surrounding the *Quartets* including: the influence of faith on Eliot's representation of place, the connection of the poem to the broader rural revival of the period, issues surrounding nationality and representations of England, and the idea that Eliot's construction of an ideal rural society can be understood as a challenge to the environmentally destructive processes of modernity. The second part of the chapter will present ecocritical readings of each quartet which focus on the representation of place, the impact of each landscape on the poet and the development of the speaker's environmental consciousness.

1. Critical Discussion

One of the most fundamental influences on T. S. Eliot's life and poetry was his conversion to Anglicanism in 1927: 'I am an Anglo-Catholic in religion, a classicist in literature and a royalist in politics'.[460] In *Four Quartets* Eliot presents an overtly Christian perspective that continues to divide critical opinion because, as Stephen Spender observes, 'the poetic statement becomes inseparable from the religious'.[461] Donald Davie also notes the influence of Eliot's foregrounded Christian perspective on the poem's reception, concluding that the critical response does not adhere 'along any line of literary fact, but is flagrantly ideological; the religiously inclined applaud the *Quartets*, the more or less militantly secular and "humanist" decry them. As simple as that'.[462] Left-wing critics in particular were disappointed by the impact of Eliot's religious orthodoxy on his poetry. George Orwell found Eliot's later work to be diluted by Christianity as if 'something has departed, some kind of current has been switched off'.[463] For Orwell, Eliot had escaped from individualism into church and as a result had a 'cramped, blinkered outlook' which did not result in 'any fresh literary impulse' because, Eliot did 'not really feel his faith, but merely assents to it for complex reasons'.[464] This resulted in 'faith, but not much hope, and certainly no enthusiasm'.[465] Opinion was divided between those who found the poem a much needed source of spiritual comfort during the war and others who felt the *Quartets* represented 'a simple minded Tory retreat into traditionalism or an exhausted

[460] T. S. Eliot, 'Preface' in *For Lancelot Andrewes* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1928), p. ix.
[461] Steven Spender, *Eliot* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1975), p. 154.
[462] Donald Davie, 'T. S. Eliot: The End of an Era' in *T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets: A Casebook*. ed. by Bernard Bergonzi (London: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 153-168 (p. 153).
[463] George Orwell, 'T. S. Eliot', in *T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets* (see Bergonzi above), pp. 81-87 (p. 81).
[464] Orwell, p. 86.
[465] Orwell, p. 83.

personal retreat into Christianity'.[466] The wartime publication of the poem informed its reception because it addressed contemporary anxieties surrounding ideas of faith and national character. John Cooper acknowledges that the poem fulfilled a spiritual need for many people: '*Four Quartets* spoke about the spirit in the midst of this new crisis and, not surprisingly, there were many readers who would not only allow the poem to carry them with it, but who also hungered for it'.[467] However, whereas the ambiguity of *The Waste Land* allowed for disparate and even antithetical literary and political interpretations, Eliot's public pronouncement of faith and his assertion that society 'must be scrutinised on Christian principles' narrows the scope for interpretation substantially.[468] This overarching Christian perspective would initially seem problematic in terms of Eliot's understanding of the non-human world: nature being translated into terms of Christian symbolism or else used as evidence for the presence of God in the material world. However, the representation of the natural world in *Four Quartets* is far more complex and the poem not only traces the speaker's religious development, but also the growth of an environmental consciousness which leads to deeper understanding of nature and recognition of its autonomous value independent of the speaker's personal beliefs.

Although often understood as an intimate study of 'the individual alone with God', *Four Quartets* also demonstrates a continued concern with environmental issues.[469] Helen Drew describes the *Quartets* as having a 'double relationship — to the world of nature and to the world of spirit' which includes an exploration the consequences of 'the *lack* of relationship'.[470] The consequences of the absence of a relationship with nature are evident in Eliot's representation of modern London in *The Waste Land,* but in *Four Quartets* there is an attempt to reconcile this division by returning to places which hold personal significance to Eliot in terms of either his ancestry or his journey to faith. The parallel relationship between the growth of Eliot's religious faith and his environmental conscience is discussed explicitly in *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) where Eliot argues that a religious life 'implies a life in conformity with nature'.[471] Although the question of what is 'natural' is

[466] Jed Etsy, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England*, (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 109.
[467] John Xiros Cooper, *T. S. Eliot and the Ideology of Four Quartets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 23.
[468] T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (London: Faber and Faber, 1942), p. 33.
[469] Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*. p. 11.
[470] Elizabeth Drew, *T. S. Eliot: The Design of his Poetry* (London: Eyre and Doaba House, 2000), p. 147.
[471] Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, p. 61.

contentious, its opposite is clearly defined as the mechanised forces of modernity which characterise 'the kind of society in which we are now living'.[472] The connection between Eliot's Christianity and his sense of environmental responsibility are stated unambiguously: 'I mean only that a wrong attitude towards nature implies, somewhere, a wrong attitude towards God, and that the consequence is an inevitable doom'.[473] Although informed by a religious belief, this assertion recognises the reality of modern industry's environmental impact and expresses prescient concern that unchecked industrialism could ultimately mean that, separate to any personal preference, reversion to the type of simple agricultural society described by Eliot in the lecture 'may well happen in the long run — from natural causes, and not from the moral will of men'.[474]

Eliot suggests the parish, the 'traditional unit of the Christian Community in England', as the most beneficial model for society.[475] The parish represents the ideal of 'a small and mostly self-contained group attached to the soil' with 'interests centred in a particular place' and consisting of 'a nexus of direct personal relationships'.[476] It is a 'community unit' firmly rooted in an environmentally responsible and sustainable ethos which corresponds to central ecocritical ideals about human/nature relations.[477] A particular feature of this type of community is its close adherence to the natural world which distinguishes between 'the *use* of natural resources and their exploitation'.[478] The exploitation Eliot refers to relates to his long term concerns with intensive farming and industrialism which have led to 'the exhaustion of natural resources' and the 'exploitation of the earth, on a vast scale for two generations, for commercial profit: immediate benefits leading to dearth and desert'.[479] These environmental concerns are evident in *Four Quartets* in the speaker's awareness of the vulnerability of each landscape to human interference and the growing threat of environmental crisis. The idea of the parish provides an alternative to modern agricultural practices, which are environmentally damaging. Such a community of people living on the same land for generations and remaining united by shared rituals and traditions is in sharp contrast to contemporary urban society, where 'prosperity in this world for the individual or for the group has

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[472] Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society,* p. 9.
[473] Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, p. 62.
[474] Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, p. 32.
[475] Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, p. 29.
[476] Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* p. 31.
[477] Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, p. 30.
[478] Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, p. 33.
[479] Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, p. 61

become the sole conscious aim'.[480] The 'materialistic philosophy' of highly industrialised countries such as Britain is understood to have a detrimental human impact because it leaves men and women from all classes 'detached from tradition, alienated from religion, and susceptible to mass suggestion'.[481] The decline of the parish and urban migration is also understood to have impacted on the spiritual health of the nation because Christianity is 'primarily a matter of behaviour and habit'.[482] The resulting decline of Christianity in Britain is seen as regrettable because, for Eliot, faith and its associated lifestyle 'gives apparent meaning to life, provides the frame-work for culture, and protects the mass of humanity from boredom and despair'.[483]

Jed Etsy identifies Eliot's primary themes in *The Idea of a Christian Society* as 'the possibility of reestablishing a proper (premodern) relationship to God and nature'.[484] This is problematic because it fails to identify how such an outmoded social model can usefully inform contemporary society. This is a limitation Eliot acknowledges: 'the parochial system is not one designed for the kind of community in which the greater part of our population now live'.[485] Such a system is incompatible with modern urban society, but also with rural communities which have been significantly altered by developments in agricultural technology and farming techniques. Rather than searching for ways in which the idea of the parish can usefully inform the present, Eliot places them in opposition to each other: 'the natural life and the supernatural life have a conformity to each other which neither has with the mechanistic life'.[486] However, Eliot denies that his intention is to motivate a 'complete reversion to any earlier state of things, real or idealised.'[487] In 'Little Gidding' he states:

> We cannot revive old factions
> We cannot restore old policies
> Or follow and antique drum.[488]

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[480]Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* , p. 13.
[481] Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, p. 21.
[482]Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* , p. 30.
[483] T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1962), p. 34
[484] Etsy, p. 124.
[485] Etsy, p. 127.
[486] Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society,* p. 61.
[487] Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, p. 31.
[488] Eliot, 'Four Quartets' in *T. S. Eliot:The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), pp. 169-199.

In *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), Eliot again acknowledges the impossibility of imposing outdated structures on modern society, but argues that the past can inform and shape the present:

> Any local "cultural revival" [...] would hardly be more than an artificially sustained antiquarianism: what is wanted is not to restore a vanished, or to revive a vanishing culture under modern conditions which make it impossible, but to grow a contemporary culture from old roots.[489]

However, concrete detail on how this can be practically achieved is lacking and whilst urbanisation is criticised no viable alternative is suggested.

T. S. Eliot was not alone in his desire to reconnect with aspects of rural life threatened by modernity. In engaging in broader cultural debates about tradition and national identity Eliot's thoughts reflect a wider interest in 'how to reconnect with the headily abandoned past' and make 'the journey home'.[490] Alexandra Harris identifies *Four Quartets* as part of the rural revival of the 1930s and 1940s which was characterised by 'an acute sense of place' and 'deep responsiveness to the environment of reading and writing'.[491] The motivation for this 'countryside invasion' of artists hypothesising about England was not only the threat of urbanisation, but also war.[492] The need to artistically record and preserve the countryside gained momentum in 1942 when German bombing strategies, described as 'Baedeker raids', concentrated on destroying the most beautiful and historically important parts of Britain.[493] However, Eliot's interests in rural affairs have an earlier origin. Harris identifies him as a forerunner of environmental thought: referring in particular to his recognition of the 'dissociation of sensibility' in literature which heralded 'a fatal break between language and experience'.[494] Eliot's response was not purely intellectual but also took the form of a physical investigation of the British countryside: 'He therefore turned himself into an antiquarian explorer, visiting houses and churches, taking photographs, reading the inscriptions on gravestones, and listening by roadsides for sounds from the past'.[495] This act of rediscovery had

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[489]Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* , p. 53

[490] Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper,* (London, Thames and Hudson, 2010), p. 10.

[491] Harris, p. 148.

[492] Steve Ellis, *The English Eliot: Design, Language and Landscape in Four Quartets* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 80.

[493] Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age: T. S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century* (Delaware: ISI Books, 2008), p. 278.

[494] Harris, p. 140.

[495] Harris, p. 203.

personal resonance but it also spoke to wider anxieties by suggesting that 'the tired, dissociated, over-civilized Westerner in search of a more vital culture could look at the traditions grown out of, and fast dying back into, his native soil'.[496]

However, this rural revival was an urban-centred movement which risked editing out the realities of agricultural labour and 'the quotidian hardships and boredoms of village life' which had lured so many country people to the cities in the first place.[497] Harris identifies F. R. Leavis as a critic whose ideas of an 'organic community' were based in a 'mythology of rootedness and organicism' in the rural past.[498] Eliot can also be accused of idealising the rural past and using it as tool to criticise the present. However, both men are careful to make the distinction between learning from the past and using it as a form of escapism. Eliot states that 'it is not of advantage to us to indulge a sentimental attitude towards the past', but that it should be used 'to discover what is the best life for us not as a political abstraction but as a particular people in a particular place'.[499] Eliot's 'historical sense' centres on 'not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence' and one of the most important aspects of the past he feels should be retained is a balanced and sensitive relationship to the natural world.[500] Laurence Coupe reminds us that the 'word "nostalgia", coming from two ancient Greek words, *nostos* and *algos*, really means "homesickness" which is an emotion with powerful potential to incite the desire to pursue an improved relationship with place in order to guard against 'the unrestrained growth of technology'.[501] The idea of 'radical nostalgia' differs from sentimental inaction because it involves a 'critique of the present through evocation of the past' which can become a strategy for resistance.[502] Alexandra Harris also acknowledges this aspect of the nostalgic impulse, arguing that 'what can be read as a sign of retreat can also, perhaps, be read as an expression of responsibility – towards places, people and histories too valuable and too vulnerable to go missing from art'.[503] In this context *Four Quartets* can be seen as 'poems of 'recovery'' rather than retreat and Eliot's celebration of the relationship between humans and

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[496] Harris, p. 185.
[497] Harris, p. 180.
[498] Harris, p. 180.
[499] T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer on Modern Heresy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), p. 19.
[500] Eliot, 'Tradition and Individual Talent' in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1972),, p. 14.
[501] Laurence Coupe, *Myth* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 194.
[502] Harris, pp. 194-5
[503] Harris, pp. 12-14.

nature in a pre-industrial age as an important critique of the destructive practises of the present.[504]

It is surprising that there is not greater interest in the physical landscapes of the *Quartets* given that Eliot repeatedly voices concerns about environmental issues in both his poetry and prose. Helen Gardner finds this lack of attention troubling because the 'sense of the actual' in *Four Quartets* has 'great relevance to understanding' which risks being lost if 'we concentrate on his philosophical and religious thought and his literary sources'.[505] However, critics tend to focus on these theological and philosophical themes as well as the poem's relationship to music, its self-reflexive examination of the process of writing and Eliot's treatment of the passage of time and his own mortality. When the landscapes of the *Quartets* are discussed it is primarily in terms of their symbolic meaning. This is limiting because, as Helen Gardner points out, 'these poems do not begin from an intellectual position, or a truth. They begin with a place, a point in time, and the meaning or the truth is discovered in that process of writing'.[506] The *Quartets* are 'poems of place' which trace 'an out-and-back movement, from England to America and back to England'.[507] Although published as a single work in 1943, the idea of writing a series of four interlinked poems did not emerge until the first two movements were written. However, the sequence gains cohesion through the association of each landscape with a correlating season and element which means that nature is not only central thematically but also structurally. This is revealed in C. K. Stead's summary of each movement which associates 'Burnt Norton'(1935) with the element of air, with the mind, the garden and innocence, 'East Coker' (1940) with earth, houses, fields and fertility, 'The Dry Salvages'(1941) with water, chaos and death, and 'Little Gidding' (1942) with fire and the holy spirit.[508]

Although critical studies have failed to pay adequate attention to the physical landscapes of *Four Quartets*, attitudes towards the countryside and the city have influenced the poem's reception. As a poet who was closely associated with the urban landscapes of modernity, Eliot's poetic move to obscure rural locations was seen by many as synonymous with his change from an experimental high modernist

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[504] Harris, p. 203.
[505] Helen Gardner, 'The Landscapes of Eliot's Poetry', *Critical Quarterly*, 10 (1968), pp. 313-330 (p. 329.)
[506] Helen Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot,* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1968), p. 57
[507] Etsy, p. 137.
[508] C. K. Stead, 'The Imposed Structure of the *Four Quartets' in T. S. Eliot Four Quartets*, (see Bergonzi above), pp.197-211.

whose work represented a radical engagement with society to a conservative churchman who had retreated from the public life. Although Eliot's earlier poetry indicates that his search for meaning may find resolution in an allegiance to a particular faith, the poetic move to rural landscapes was a less predictable development for a poet whose writing had powerfully shaped perceptions of the modern city. The idea of rural modernism seems paradoxical, as Alexandra Harris acknowledges:

> It seems counterintuitive to describe English villages as centres of the avant-garde. We are used to the idea of progressive thinking emerging from the crucible of the great modern cities [...]. Measured against these the village hall does not seem a promising place to go for modern experiences, but it certainly cannot be left out of the account.[509]

Four Quartets forms part of modern experience because it reflects the broader impulse to return to the countryside and reconnect with nature. Harris refers to Eliot as 'the poet as farmer, or at least as champion of agriculture' on account of his personal interest in rural affairs and his commissioning of a number of country books whilst at Faber and Faber.[510] This was an intellectual rather than a practical engagement, but for Eliot the two were not exclusive and he recognises 'culture and agriculture as mutually dependent' and consequently 'the degradation of one to be disastrous for the other'.[511] However, beyond its relevance to art, Eliot also acknowledges the real issues facing British agriculture and raises practical questions concerning 'how to grow enough food' and 'how to obtain a proper balance between country and town life'.[512]

Four Quartets also provokes debate surrounding their representation of England and Englishness.[513] Although naturalised as a British citizen in 1927, Eliot's American roots prompted questions over the authority of an American to speak for the nation and the impact of his 'un-Englishness' on 'his poetic and cultural stance'.[514] The issue was not only Eliot's American origins, but also the fact that the majority of his time in Britain had been spent in London and the South East. Eliot

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[509] Harris, p. 169
[510] Harris, p. 183.
[511] Harris, p. 184.
[512] T. S. Eliot, 'A Commentary', *Criterion,* October (1938), p. 482.
[513] My use of the terms 'England' and 'Englishness' as opposed to 'Britain' and 'British' is intended to reflect the problematic exclusion of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland from discussions of nationhood in *Four Quartets.*
[514] Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000) p. 221.

understood the frustration of London-centric figures dominating rural affairs and, despite the fact that he was arguably at the forefront of this movement, noted that enthusiasm for a revival of village life came predominantly from 'people who have an urban outlook'.[515] Eliot confessed that he would 'find it as difficult to live in the country as to give up smoking' because his 'urban habits' were 'pre-natal'.[516] This essentially urban character was vital in developing 'London-based modernism' because his intimate knowledge of the moods and variations of urban life strengthen his depiction of the city in *The Waste Land*.[517] However, in *Four Quartets* his status is as a visitor and admirer of the countryside rather than an inhabitant. For John Betjeman this has a noticeable impact on the poetry. In Betjeman's opinion although Eliot took 'delight in local-ness' he was essentially 'a poet of London' which is evident in *Four Quartets* because 'the villages they describe might be everywhere'.[518] Hugh Kenner agrees, stating that 'he was always a city poet, not a country poet, his affinity rather with Baudelaire than with Wordsworth'.[519]

Donald Davie does not question Eliot's right to 'speak as an Englishman' but does query 'how well he knew the country and the people he meant to speak for' given that his 'sense of Britain is offensively metropolitan'.[520] For Davie, the *Quartets* are evidence that Eliot's 'England is to all intents and purposes London, or at the most the Home Counties' and this London-centric view means he is unable to provide a sense of 'what it is like in the twentieth century to *live* in any of these places'.[521] In addition to his limited awareness of the reality of rural life, Davie also finds Eliot's representation of England reductive in terms of its exclusion of the industrial centres of the Midlands and the North. Eliot's ideal society 'envisages the working class as agricultural, and the worker as peasant', but as Davie points out, during the period in which the *Quartets* were written and in the present 'England had not, and has not' a peasantry.[522] The failure to recognise the role of the industrial proletariat in shaping England's transition from an agricultural to an industrial nation implies a retreat from the realities of contemporary society into a fantastical rural past which results in a false representation of war time Britain. Davie is particularly

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[515] T. S. Eliot, *Criterion*, (1938), p. 482
[516] Eliot, *Criterion*, p. 482
[517] Esty, p. 3.
[518] John Betjeman, 'The Usher of Highgate Junior School' in Richard Tambimuttu (ed.), *T. S. Eliot* (London: Marsh Frank & Cass Co. Ltd.,1965), p. 90.
[519] Hugh Kenner, 'The Urban Apocalypse' in *Eliot in his Time: Essays on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of The Waste Land* (New Jersey :Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 27.
[520] Donald Davie, 'Anglican Eliot', in *Eliot in his Time,* (see Kenner above), pp. 181-182.
[521] Davie, p. 182.
[522] Davie, p. 183.

troubled by Eliot's proclamation in 'Little Gidding' that 'History is now and England' which he views as evidence of the reduction of England to a remote village in the countryside untouched by the processes of the modernity.

However, if *Four Quartets* is understood as a personal account of religious experience which is rooted in landscapes which have a profound effect upon the poet, rather than as a deliberately constructed projection of England, then Eliot can be defended against Davie's criticism. The location of each movement of the *Quartets* is connected to an aspect of the poet's life: 'East Coker' to Eliot's ancestors, 'The Dry Salvages' to childhood, and 'Burnt Norton' and 'Little Gidding' to personal moments of intense spiritual experience. The personal connections to each place and the involuntary occurrence of spiritual experience mean that the choice of setting is beyond the poet's control, and in response to Davie's criticism of the exclusion of the North and the Midlands it could be simply argued that they were omitted because Eliot had no personal connection to the areas and they were not the places where religious experience occurred. This commitment to authenticity is confirmed by Eliot's friend John Hayward who recounted how in response to his question as to why he chose autumn weather and its poetic significance Eliot had replied that it was ''Autumn weather' only because it was autumn weather'.[523] Eliot's pronouncement in 'Little Gidding' that 'History is now and England' also needs to be understood within the wider context of the poem. Donald Davie understands it as claiming that the character of England is represented by a remote village in the South. However, the pronouncement is prefaced by qualifiers and specific details which ground the statement in a single moment of personal epiphany:

> [...] history is a pattern
> Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails
> On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel
> History is now and England.

Within the broader context of the poem this marks a moment of atonement between past and present which is intended to reflect the spiritual achievement of the individual in time and place rather than to as a comment on the essential character of the nation.

Steve Ellis also finds Eliot's treatment of patriotism and the concept of the nation more complex and critical than Davie allows. Rather than perpetuating myths

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[523] Gardner, *The Composition of Four Quartets*, p. 29.

of rural England, Ellis argues that Eliot is ‘distancing himself from a narrowly chauvinistic conception of England and attempting indeed to dismantle the opposition between the English and the ‘foreign’ in various ways’ in order to ‘synthesize the connotations of either side of the Atlantic into a unified Christian outlook’.[524] The idea of projecting a singular Christian ideology over the complex subject of nationality is problematic, but Ellis suggests that this standpoint is central in shaping Eliot’s contribution to the ‘keen polemic waged with particular vigour during the 1930s and 1940s, over what might constitute a definition of “England”’.[525] Ellis acknowledges that within this movement ‘England’ did tend to be located in the villages and coastlines of the South, but he distinguishes *Four Quartets* from propagandist patriotic works of the period by describing them as ‘an attack on and debunking of the ruralism they partly embrace’.[526] Evidence for this view can be located in the poem: the fleeting moments of illumination and repeated references to their transient nature suggesting that any concept of England and Englishness is ‘a relative rather than an absolute value’.[527] The American landscapes of ‘The Dry Salvages’ are also important within this debate on nationality. In acknowledging his American roots Eliot embraces his identity as an outsider who has the advantage of providing a fresh perspective on the country. As Alexandra Harris explains, Eliot ‘is always a visitor, approaching from elsewhere. When he arrives, the gardens are deserted and the landscapes are not fully understood. He is left as an exile turning over clues’.[528] Whilst this may restrict his understanding of place, it also gives an informed and original perspective on the experience of displacement and placelessness which provides an alternative perspective on the ‘whole concerted project of national self-discovery’.[529] Eliot understood the benefits of being an outsider and enjoyed his status as a ‘resident alien’.[530] He could have been speaking of himself when he said of Rudyard Kipling that his ‘foreignness [...] gave him an understanding of the English countryside different from the understanding of a man born and brought up in it’.[531]

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[524] Ellis, pp.77-8.
[525] Ellis, p. 79.
[526] Ellis, p. 79.
[527] Ellis, p. 91.
[528] Harris, p. 204.
[529] Harris, p. 10.
[530] Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy From Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* (London: Vintage Books, 2009), p. 221.
[531] T. S. Eliot, *A Choice of Kipling’s Verse* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1945), p. 26.

What Eliot recognises and responds to in Kipling is his ability to see with the 'freshness of vision of the stranger'.[532] However, whilst the brief visits to rural places in the *Quartets* are described as positive and invigorating experiences, Eliot's representation of the city is noticeable for its unbroken negativity. Eliot originally planned to title the poem *South Kensington Quartets* in reference to where the poems were written. The original title is 'a reminder of the central role that London continues to play in Eliot's work' and of the essentially urban perspective which informs his poetry.[533] However, although present in *Four Quartets,* the city is relegated to an anonymous urban space constructed as the negative antithesis to the countryside in a way which reinforces binary oppositions of the city 'as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition' in contrast to the countryside's 'peace, innocence and simple virtue'.[534] Jed Etsy discusses Eliot's 'preoccupation with the lost balance between town and country', but the *Quartets* exacerbate rather than reconcile the two.[535] Although urban life is depicted as spiritually draining in *The Waste Land,* the possibility of redemption is visible in the fabric of the city's history and landscape. In *Four Quartets* the depiction of the city is far more narrow and the poetic voice judgemental and closed. This is despite the fact that the moments of mystical experience at the centre *of Four Quartets* have their roots in an urban environment. Eliot's biographer Lyndall Gordon describes the first of these 'timeless moments' occurring in a busy Boston street where the twenty-one year old poet was suddenly 'plunged into a strange silence like a parting of the sea'.[536] The experience was recounted in Eliot's 1910 poem 'Silence':[537]

Along the city streets,
It is still high tide,
Yet the garrulous waves of life
Shrink and divide
With a thousand incidents
Vexed and debated:—
This is the hour for which we waited—

This is the ultimate hour
When life is justified.
The seas of experience
That were so broad and deep,

[532] Eliot, *A Choice of Kipling's Verse,* p. 30
[533] Etsy, p. 137.
[534] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), p. 2.
[535] Etsy, p. 125.
[536] Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 23.
[537] T. S. Eliot, *The Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-1917*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 18.

So immediate and steep,
Are suddenly still.
You may say what you will,
At such peace I am terrified.
There is nothing else beside.

Denying the possibility of mystical experience or spiritual enlightenment in the city in *Four Quartets* is damaging because it deepens divisions between the countryside and the city and sets urban and rural in opposition rather than considering how the improved relationship with the natural world and increased environmental awareness gained in the countryside can be meaningfully translated to urban life.

2. Readings

2.1. 'Burnt Norton'

Nancy Duvall Hargrove describes 'Burnt Norton' as 'the first and most crucial of the *Quartets*'.[538] The experience of spiritual enlightenment achieved through deep engagement with nature resonates throughout the subsequent movements as the speaker attempts to understand the full meaning of the mystical experience within time and place. The central landscape of the movement is the garden which represents order, serenity and the 'fusion of nature and man into perfect inter-relationship'.[539] The potential for enlightenment in the garden was suggested but unfulfilled in the image of the hyacinth girl in *The Waste Land,* but in 'Burnt Norton' the speaker is able to respond fully to the experience. The garden is significant because it represents cultured nature and reveals the degree to which certain landscapes are associated with the human imagination. Helen Gardner observes that the enchanted garden is one of humanity's most constant myths, and the magical aspect of the garden in 'Burnt Norton' alludes to other fantastical gardens such as the Queen of Heart's garden with its painted roses in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and Frances Hodgson Burnett's healing *Secret Garden*.[540] The walled garden of Eliot's childhood home may also have been influential. These personal and literary associations with the garden and the idea of nature as 'magical' could be understood to distance the speaker from the reality of place. However, they also reflect how cultural influences affect how humans respond to certain environments and the idea of magic or enchantment can challenge reductive scientific explanations

[538] Hargrove, p. 133.
[539] Drew, p. 153.
[540] Gardner, *The Composition of the Four Quartets*, p. 70.

of nature by recognising the limits of human knowledge. The garden also has strong religious associations which connect childhood impressions of nature to the innocence of the 'first world' of the Garden of Eden. Such allusions risk deviating into escapist fantasy, but the idea of a 'perfect relationship between God, man and nature' before it was 'clouded and darkened' also has potential as an environmentally sustainable ideal which may motivate a desire to create a better relationship between the human and non-human world.[541]

The roses in the garden are a symbol of perfectability within this idyllic landscape. They represent both divine and earthly love and their presence reflects the regenerative possibilities implicit in the history of the manor.[542] The possibility of incarnation is confirmed in the reference to the lotos rose which symbolises the ability of the divine to exist in the material world without being sullied by its context'.[543] Helen Gardner describes 'Burnt Norton' as the 'most abstract and philosophical of the poems' and the symbolic meaning of the rose-garden is important in communicating the spiritual experience.[544] However, Gardner is also careful to point out that the 'literary echoes and allusions are less fundamental as sources than places, times, and seasons, and above all, the circumstances in which the *Quartets* were written'.[545] Beyond its symbolic resonance 'Burnt Norton' is a poem grounded in Eliot's experience of visiting the manor house and gardens in Gloucestershire in the summer of 1934. The roses are the real flowers in the garden and the speaker's emotional response to them reflects the influence of nature on the poetic imagination. The experience in the garden is intensified by Eliot's urban character which makes 'Burnt Norton' a poem of first impressions, but although the garden is unfamiliar the use of concrete imagery grounds the spiritual experience in the material world. Helen Gardner's personal experience in the garden reflects the accuracy of Eliot's description:

> The moment I entered the garden of Burnt Norton I recognized it. I felt that if I had been blindfolded and dropped there by helicopter, and the bandage taken off had been asked to say where I was, I should have replied at once that I was in the garden of Eliot's poem.[546]

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[541] Drew, p. 153.
[542] The original mansion was burnt down by Sir William Kyte, the property's owner, in. In the context of the war, this gives the location additional significance as a symbol of regeneration following destruction.
[543] Drew, p. 136.
[544] Gardner, *The Composition of the Four Quartets*, p. 134.
[545] Gardner, *The Composition of the Four Quartets*, p. 31.
[546] Gardner, 'The Landscapes of Eliot's Poetry', p. 320.

Nancy Duvall Hargrove agrees that 'the poet portrays a concrete view of the actual garden' and this emphasis on the reality of place holds equal value to its personal, religious and cultural meaning.[547]

The mystical experience in the garden is heightened by the presence of the ghosts who suggest the possibility of incarnation and the intersection between the natural and the supernatural:

> There they were, dignified, invisible,
> Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,
> In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air.

Their presence reflects Eliot's desire to unite 'the timeless and the temporal' in order to heal the dislocation between the two which exists in *The Waste Land.* [548] The formal movement of the ghosts leads to an awareness of broader patterns in the natural world:

> The dance along the artery
> The circulation of the lymph
> Are figured in the drift of stars
> Ascend to summer in the tree
> We move above the moving tree
> In light upon the figured leaf
> And hear upon the sodden floor
> Below, the boarhound and the boar
> Pursue their pattern as before
> But reconciled among the stars

Helen Gardner explains this passage in detail:

> [...] the movement within our bodies, which are ever in flux , is akin to the movement we perceive amongst the stars, drifting in the milky way like the atoms of Democritus, and to the flow of summer sap in the trees.[549]

This is important because it marks an epiphany in the speaker's understanding of themselves as part of the natural world which then leads to growth in their environmental consciousness which informs the speaker's contact with nature in subsequent movements.

[547] Hargrove, p. 135.
[548] T. S. Eliot, *Tradition and Individual Talent*, p. 14.
[549] Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot*, p. 161.

However, the image of a perfect union between the natural and supernatural, and past, present and future breaks down even as it is created. The ghosts are essentially insubstantial, the too perfect roses gain a disconcerting 'look of flowers that are looked at' and the birds in the garden caution against the 'deception' of fantasy which is indulged in because 'human kind: | Cannot bear very much reality'. The ever present prospect of faithlessness and spiritual emptiness is represented by the deserted house and the dusty 'bowl of rose-leaves' which show how fleeting moments of spiritual fulfilment can be and the futility of attempts to artificially preserve them. The feverish atmosphere of 'the autumn heat, through the vibrant air' allows for a brief escape from reality, but the fragile stillness of the moment is undercut by the difficulty of sustaining faith in the modern world. Therefore whilst Eliot represents the gardens of 'Burnt Norton' as an ideal landscape which holds the possibility of supernatural incarnation, he concurrently criticises the impulse to construct such ideals and recognises them as a respite from the pressures of reality. The mirage in the pool reflects this tension between the real and the illusory:

> Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
> And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
> And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
> The surface glittered out of the heart of light,
> And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
> Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.

A trick of the light produces an illusion of water which briefly overshadows the reality of the pool and shows the risk of moving too far into fantasy. The fleeting illumination is an illusory moment which contrasts with the reality of 'concrete' which not only emphasises the permanence of the material over the temporal, but is also a reminder of the urban landscape which forms the speaker's own reality. The cloud which ends the mirage and darkens the scene is the other side of faith which is doubt and the inescapable truth of the 'one end, which is always present'.

The appearance of the city in the third movement of 'Burnt Norton' creates a striking juxtaposition to the stillness and beauty of the garden. Although Eliot describes the struggle with words which 'slip, slide, perish', the depiction of the city is unambiguously negative. In contrast to the multidimensional portrayal of London in *The Waste Land*, the city is reduced to a single aspect as 'a place of disaffection'. The journey of morning commuters whose 'strained time-ridden faces' show the

stresses of modern urban experience is unambiguously associated with spiritual emptiness:

> Distracted from distraction by distraction
> Filled with fancies and empty of meaning
> Tumid apathy with no concentration.

The commuters are dismissed as 'unhealthy souls' whose spiritual state reflects their 'unwholesome' environment. They are described as insubstantial like the ghosts in the garden, but they lack the controlled movement and sense of purpose the ghosts possess and are instead 'whirled by the cold wind' like bits of paper. In their lack of thought the commuters confirm Eliot's conviction that secular society is characterised by the absence of 'a philosophy of life' which is accompanied by 'apathetic decline'.[550] The city is portrayed as a place where people are completely separated from meaningful contact with God or nature and instead follow the 'metalled ways' of urban modernity. As a result they are denied the opportunity for happiness or spiritual revelation. This seems disingenuous given that Eliot, someone who had achieved religious faith, chose to live in the city and was part of this crowd of commuters. Yet despite understanding the attractions of urban life, in his depiction of modern London Eliot reinforces rather than challenges conventional oppositions with the countryside: dark against light, mechanical against natural, human against divine. The construction of the city in this way is problematic because it succumbs to the allure of elsewhere rather than searching for meaning in the lived environment. The city and its inhabitants are excluded from participation in the natural or supernatural world with the result that the insights gained in the garden seem completely disconnected from the realities of modern life.

2.2. 'East Coker'

T. S. Eliot visited East Coker in early August 1937 and completed the poem in 1940. The village's personal significance as the place where Eliot's ancestors departed for America in the seventeenth century connects to the search for roots and heritage which has its beginnings in *The Waste Land*. Eliot's return to the village is itself part of a broader interest in the patterns and cycles of life and reflects his long term interest in the influence of the past on the present. In addition to its personal connection, East Coker also has an aesthetic appeal which connects to wider cultural

[550] Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, p. 23.

interest in English villages during the period and involves it in discussions of the village as 'the true locus of England, representing continuity, stability and order threatened by the alien values of technology and modern urbanization'.[551] East Coker's thatched houses, twelfth-century church and narrow lanes are conducive to a lapse into 'a primitive rural fantasy' far removed from the reality of the modern world.[552] However, although there are problematic aspects to Eliot's vision of an ideal rural community, identifying closeness to nature as a fundamental aspect of a happier society is significant in terms of an ecocritical understanding of the poem. Eliot's acute sensitivity to the subtleties and variances of nature are central to 'East Coker':

> Whisper of running streams, and winter lightning.
> The wild thyme unseen and the wild strawberry,
> The laughter in the garden [...].

Such passages not only draw attention to Eliot's achievement as a landscape poet, but also disprove earlier criticism that he had an 'insensibility to the beauty of the world'.[553]

Whilst 'Burnt Norton' examines the spiritual experience of the individual in the rose-garden, 'East Coker' examines the ideal of a community tied to place through generations. The most striking aspect of Eliot's ideal community is its closeness to nature and adherence to natural cycles and processes. In the description of the London underground in 'Burnt Norton' the commuters are constructed as an internal reflection of their external environment. Similarly the dancers in 'East Coker' are products of their environment and so considered more 'natural' than urban people because they are more closely connected to the land and participate in its cycles of regeneration and decay:

> In my beginning is my end. In succession
> Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
> Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
> Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.
> Old stones to new building, old timber to new fires,
> Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth

[551] Ellis, p. 84.
[552] Harris, p. 186.
[553] Joseph Warren Beach, *The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth Century English Poetry* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1936) p. 554.

The vision of the dancers is important in terms of the development of the speaker's environmental thought in *Four Quartets* because their unity with the land prompts the realisation that 'man is part of the processes of nature' and 'not only involved in time as an abstract progression of past, present, future, but in the cyclical pattern of its practical aspect as birth, maturity, decay and death'.[554] Recognising humans as part of nature then extends to the realisation that in damaging the earth we essentially damage ourselves.

In contrast to the upper class gentility of the house and gardens of 'Burnt Norton', the village is a working landscape grounded in the elemental facts of 'Dung and death'. As a lived environment literally composed of generations of agricultural workers the village has closer connections to Britain's agricultural history than the pristine but uninhabited garden of 'Burnt Norton'. However, Eliot does not make a claim for the village as an archetypal reflection of national character, but places it within a more personal 'fight to recover what has been lost'. The vision of the dancers who are so closely connected to each other and to the land is central to this idea of recovery:

In that open field
If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close,
On a summer midnight you can hear the music
Of the weak pipe and the little drum
And see them dancing around the bonfire
The association of man and woman
In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie –
A dignified and commodiois sacrament

The essential earthiness of the peasants contrasts to the fragile dignity of the ghosts in 'Burnt Norton'. The dancers are literally part of the land, 'Earth feet, loam feet', keeping time by 'living in the living seasons' and fulfilling the speaker's ideal of a community where 'nature and man seem part of an indestructible unity and harmony'.[555]

However, this ideal rural community is an illusion provoked by the combination of the 'Hypnotised' atmosphere of the 'electric heat' of dusk and the speaker's own desire to reconnect with the past. Despite describing the ghosts in terms of their earthiness, the fragility of the vision is exposed by the speaker: 'If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close'. This insistence not only relates

[554] Drew, p. 163.
[555] Drew, p. 154.

to the delicacy of the apparition, but also to the distance needed to make the dancers inscrutable and 'obscure enough to be malleable to present emotion'.[556] F. R. Leavis felt that the dancers were presented as 'yokels, clumsy, gross and incapable of the spiritual or cultural graces'.[557] For Leavis they present a highly reductive portrait of the 'country-folk of pre-industrial England' in contrast to the more sophisticated and educated nature of Eliot's 'Tudor namesake' whose writings are included in the passage.[558] David Gervais raises the important point that Leavis's own strongly held views about 'organic community' make it 'increasingly hard to draw a line between where Leavis is making genuinely objective criticisms of the poetry and where his own preoccupations sway and colour his sense of Eliot's.'[559] However, Steve Ellis also highlights the problematic nature of Eliot's description of 'land-based peasantry firmly fixed in their neo-feudal station; dour, anonymous, transient and deromanticized'.[560] The dancers are the product of an urban fantasy with very little in common with modern rural life. Their faceless anonymity and their physical and temporal distance from the speaker means they can only be referred to as 'them'. This removes any sense of individuality beyond a reductive construction of character as a mirror of their environment: 'rustically solemn or in rustic laughter'.

Whilst Eliot's depiction of the dancers is problematic in terms of their distance from the reality of modern rural life they do not, contrary to F. R. Leavis's views, reflect a contemptuous or disdainful attitude towards the rural peasantry. Their sense of community and ordered performance of meaningful rituals has strong similarities to the ideal community described in *The Idea of a Christian Society*. In contrast to the 'time-ridden' commuters, the villagers are 'Keeping time' and living within 'natural' patterns rather than mechanistic ones:

> The time of the seasons and the constellations
> The time of milking and the time of harvest
> The time of the coupling of man and woman.

They also display the virtue of humility which is identified as having continued importance in the present: 'The only wisdom we can hope to acquire | Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless'. The virtue of humility is important in terms of an

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[556] David Gervais, *Literary Englands: Versions of 'Englishness' in Modern Writing* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 137.
[557] F. R. Leavis, *The Living Principle: 'English' As a Discipline of Thought* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975), p. 196.
[558] Leavis, p. 195
[559] Gervais, p. 142.
[560] Eliis, p. 103

ecocritical reading because it challenges ‘Adam’s curse’ of a constant desire for knowledge and progress by encouraging moderation and an understanding of the individual as part of larger systems within the natural world. The realisation that ‘In order to arrive at what you do not know | You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance’ suggests an alternative to the arrogance of anthropocentricism which is characterised by an emphasis on progress which often involves dominance of the environment and a rejection of the ‘primitive’ past. Part of this process of humility is accepting the death of self. The dancers’ fate of ending up ‘under the hill’ may seem bleak, but after the image of purgatorial commuters crossing London Bridge and the Sybil suspended in unwanted immortality in *The Waste Land,* death is accepted as a larger natural cycle where the body achieves complete reconnection by going into the earth and ‘Nourishing the corn’. The description of the earth as constructed of ‘[...] flesh, fur and faeces | Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf’ confirms humans as fundamentally part of nature and acknowledges the depth of the connection to place.

As in ‘Burnt Norton’, the virtues of rural life are emphasised by their comparison to the spiritual emptiness of the city which is illustrated in the moment in the underground:

> Or as, when an underground train, in the tube, stops too
>   long between stations
> And the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence
> And you see behind every face the mental emptiness
>   deepen
> Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about

The stillness does not lead to an epiphany or a vision, but to an empty silence that exposes the hollowness of those who live only for themselves. The city is associated with ambition and material success, but these achievements are seen as worthless in comparison to the sense of faith and community embodied in the dancers. Without faith the worldly achievements of ‘captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters, | The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers’ come to nothing and the faithless all ‘go into the dark’. However, despite this unsettling spiritual elitism, poetically the city still presents Eliot with powerful imagery. The descent of the lift to the platform offers a useful metaphor for the shut off souls of unbelievers and the darkness of life led only for human needs, whilst the sudden rush of cold air from the exits is a detail drawn from Eliot’s own daily commute from Gloucester Road tube station into the City which betrays a greater knowledge of the daily

experience of commuting in London than that of the lives of rural people in Somerset.

An interesting aspect of 'East Coker in terms of an ecocritical reading is the prophetic imagery of climate change in the second section which shows an alertness to unsettling disturbances in the natural world. The section begins with an expression of unease towards the disordered seasons:

> What is the late November doing
> With the disturbance of the spring
> And creatures of the summer heat,
> And snowdrops writhing under feet
> Red into grey and tumble down
> Late roses filled with early snow?

This anxiety about the apparent discord and disruption of natural cycles then extends to the 'dying starscape':[561]

> Deployed in constellated wars
> Scorpion fight against the Sun
> Until the Sun and Moon go down
> Comets weep and Leonids fly
> Hunt the heavens and the plains
> Whirled in a vortex that shall bring
> The world to that destructive fire
> Which burns before the ice-cap reigns.

This image of apocalypse is immediately excused as a 'periphrastic study', but the imagery unsettles the sense of permanence established in the depiction of the village. The discord in nature and the depiction of environmental collapse are a reminder of the fragility of place which is expressed in the simile of the moment between scenes in a theatre where 'the hills and the trees, the distant panorama | And the bold imposing façade are all being rolled away'.

2.3. 'The Dry Salvages'

In 'The Dry Salvages' Eliot returns to the familiar landscape of his childhood in the industrial city of St. Louis and coastal region of Cape Ann, Massachusetts. The element associated with the quartet is water and more specifically the Mississippi River and the North Atlantic Ocean. Both the river and the sea have been interpreted

[561] Katherine Ebury, "In this valley of dying stars': Eliot's Cosmology', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 35 (2011), p. 142.

in terms of their symbolic meaning, but reaffirming the reality of both bodies of water is important in emphasising their continuing influence on both the poet and those who live in the landscapes they dominate. A focus on the reality of place is encouraged by the recognition of the autonomous power of the river and the sea in the poem which challenges anthropocentric assumptions of the ability of humans to control their environment. In addition to their physical presence, the river and sea have a powerful psychological influence connected to the vivid impressions they made on Eliot in childhood. This combination of a child like sense of wonder at the natural world and an adult knowledge of the impact of natural forces on human communities results in a sensitive and compassionate portrayal of place which reasserts Eliot's American roots and their continuing influence on his creative imagination.

The river is a reminder of the presence of nature in the city. Even though it is described as 'almost forgotten | By the dwellers in the cities' the river still holds potential as an autonomous and ambivalent force capable of significant violence. In running through the centre of the city the river is a reminder of human vulnerability to natural forces even in modern society. In 'Burnt Norton' nature provides a way for the speaker to gain a greater understanding of God, but in attempting to comprehend the true character of the Mississippi in 'The Dry Salvages' this idea is reversed and the concept of a god suggests a way of achieving greater understanding of the mysteries of the river: 'I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river | Is a strong brown god – sullen, untamed and intractable'. Deification as a method of understanding nature is problematic because it relates everything back to human understanding. However, it also communicates respect for the river and its essentially unknowable character in a way that challenges anthropocentric assumptions of human mastery of nature and encourages humility in recognising 'the power and terror of Nature, and the isolation and feebleness of Man'.[562]

Eliot's account of the destructive possibilities of the river is based in personal observation: 'at least twice in St. Louis, the western and the eastern shores have been separated by the fall of bridge'.[563] In the poem the consequences of the flooding are seen in the river's macabre 'cargo of dead negroes, cows and |chicken coops'; the river making no distinction between inanimate object, animal or human. Robert

[562] Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: with an Introduction by T. S. Eliot* (London: The Cresset Press, 1910), p. xv.
[563] Twain, p. xiii.

Crawford argues that the spring floods had a direct influence on Eliot's representation of April as 'the cruellest month' in *The Waste Land* because witnessing the duality of nature as a force of both creation and destruction meant that 'even as a boy, he knew the cruelty of the spring freshet elementally disturbing the life of the city, bringing revival, but also fatally dangerous'.[564] Eliot explains how 'a very big and powerful river, is the only natural force that can wholly determine the course of human peregrination' and even when calm the river dominates the city as a major geographical presence. However, despite its central role in shaping the history and character of St. Louis, the status of the river has declined from a 'god', to a 'frontier', then a 'conveyor of commerce' and a 'problem' for 'builders of bridges' before becoming largely forgotten by 'worshippers of the machine'. Modern lifestyles produce an illusion of protection from natural forces, but the Mississippi remains a challenge to the arrogance of modernity as a powerful 'reminder | Of what men choose to forget'.

Eliot describes St. Louis as having 'affected me more deeply than any other environment has done' and this is predominantly due to the presence of the river:

> I feel that there is something in having passed one's childhood beside the big river, which is incommunicable to those who have not [...]. I have spent many years outside of America altogether, but Missouri and the Mississippi have made a deeper impression on me than any other part of the world.[565]

As the 'most powerful feature of Nature in that environment' the Mississippi is remembered 'with the peculiar vividness with which we remember the landscape of our childhood'.[566]

> His rhythm was present in the nursery bedroom
> In the rank ailanthus of the April dooryard,
> In the smell of grapes on the autumn table
> And the evening circle in the winter gaslight.

Nancy Duvall Hargrove understands the river as 'a negative symbol' which 'represents the inexorable movement of time towards death', but the river is also the life force at the heart of the city and within the speaker.[567] The river is both a

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[564] Crawford, p. 13.
[565] M. W. Childs, 'From a Distinguished Former St. Louisan', *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 15 October, 1930.
[566] Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot*, p. 159.
[567] Hargrove, p. 170.

‘treacherous and capricious dictator’ and a reassuring symbol of childhood. [568] The use of personification and symbolism to speak about nature can be problematic because it places non-human forces within a human sphere of reference, but in ‘The Dry Salvages’ the different attempts to understand the elusive reality of the river results in deeper understanding of nature as an independent force beyond total human comprehension.

The distinction between the river and the sea in ‘The Dry Salvages’ is psychological as well as physical: ‘The river is within us, the sea is all about us’. Although there is a clear acknowledgement that ’the river is never wholly charitable’ it is a familiar presence which city dwellers navigate and interact with daily.[569] Whereas the river is understood as a ‘god’, the sea is more ambiguous and has ‘Many gods and many voices’; revealing the multiplicity of its moods and character. The particular seascape of ‘ The Dry Salvages’ is the coast of Cape Ann and the small village of East Gloucester on the coast of New England where Eliot spent family holidays during childhood.[570] In this deep sea fishing port Eliot peered into rock pools, learnt the names of birds, sailed, talked to the fisherman and watched them work. The familiarity of the seaside is evident in the speaker’s acute sensitivity to the subtle soundscape of the coast:

> The sea howl
> And the sea yelp, are different voices
> Often heard together: the whine in the rigging,
> The menace and caress of wave that breaks on water
> The distant rote in the granite teeth
> And the wailing warning from the approaching headland
> Are all sea voices

The description of the coast combines concrete detail with symbolic allusions to the transformative power of the sea. The ‘starfish, the horseshoe crab, the whale’s backbone’ washed up on the beach are curiosities for a child to explore, but the tide also returns more ominous signs of human activity at sea:

> It tosses up our losses, the torn seine,
> The shattered lobsterpot, the broken oar
> And the gear of foreign dead men.

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[568] Hargrove, xii.
[569] Eliot, ‘Introduction’, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* p. xiii.
[570] Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 11.

These are fragments of a larger narrative of human history which relates not only to tragic accidents of sailors and fishermen, but also to the collective conscience in relation to war by returning evidence of the underlying barbarity of man to the surface.

The title of 'The Dry Salvages' refers to 'the ragged rock in the restless waters' off the New England coast. The rocks have been seen as symbolic of the perils inherent in the journey to faith, but after visiting the coast Nancy Duvall Hargrove argues that the symbolic value has been overemphasised over the 'true nature of the literal rocky shelf' and that acknowledging their real presence 'enriches and deepens our understanding of the poems as a whole'.[571] For those who 'suffer the trial and judgement of the sea' the dangers of the rocks are certainly literal rather than symbolic. Their particular danger is their shifting visibility: 'On a halcyon day it is merely a monument, | In navigable weather it always a seamark', but when concealed by fog or in a storm it is 'what it always was'. The danger of life at sea evokes compassion for sailors and fishermen which is in sharp contrast to the poetic treatment of urban dwellers. Similarly to the villagers in 'East Coker', this suggests that character and virtue have a strong correlation to environment. As in the fate of Phlebas in *The Waste Land*, the sea has the power to strip away trivialities to reveal the essentials of life, death and faith. This is not an easy or secure faith, but one which is valued more highly because it persists despite despair and adversity. The speaker recognises that faith does not ease grief and that the 'faded song' of the future predetermines the continuous repetition of human suffering. The childhood impressions of place are qualified by new understanding of the hardship of life, but the final impetus to 'fare forward' and continue the struggle of attaining faith in the world confirms that it is not the acquisition of faith which is 'the fruit of action' but the struggle.

The appeal of the river and the sea is in their impression of permanence and their ancient connection to human history which has fostered a psychological as well as physical reliance. However, as in 'East Coker', there is an anxiety about the impact of human actions on the environment and a prescient affirmation of human dependency on nature and the devastating potential of environmental crisis:

> We cannot think of a time that is oceanless
> Or of an ocean not littered with wastage
> Or a future that is not liable

[571] Hargrove, p. 214.

Like the past, to have no destination.

We have to think of them forever bailing,
Setting and hauling, while the North East lowers
Over shallow banks unchanging and erosionless
Or drawing their money, drying sails at dockage;
Not as a trip that will be unpayable
For a haul that will not bear examination.

It is likely that by 'wastage' Eliot was referring to remnants of human activity, but if it is interpreted as industrial waste then the section can be seen as a warning against the consequences of polluting the sea. The effect of pollution is imagined in the fear of fishermen 'making a trip that will be unpayable | For a haul that will not bear examination'. The prospect of 'a time that is oceanless' is unthinkable because of the degree of physical and psychological reliance on the permanence of the sea. Reiterating the sentiment in 'Burnt Norton' that 'human kind: | Cannot bear very much reality' the speaker retreats into the imagined assurance of 'shallow banks unchanging and erosionless' and fisherman 'forever bailing, | Setting and hauling'. However, the reference to 'a Northeaster (a nautical term for a storm or high wind from the northeast)' reveals that the anxiety is not completely dissipated.[572]

2.4. 'Little Gidding'

Unity between individual and place reaches fulfilment in the final movement of the *Quartets*. For Eliot, the importance of Little Gidding is as a model of a religious community which unites place, history and faith. However, the speaker's response to nature, developed through the preceding movements, eclipses religious feeling as the speaker recognises the autonomous value of nature beyond its Christian symbolism. This is an important realisation because it acknowledges that nature is not purely a means of strengthening religious belief, but that religious faith can also lead to a deeper understanding of the non-human which can translate into an increased sense of environmental responsibility. The role of poetry in communicating this connection between environmental responsibility and religious faith is confirmed by Eliot's conviction that the writer should apply 'moral principles to literature'.[573] The chapel in 'Little Gidding' is important as a place of pilgrimage assigned to prayer and religious observation, but although the idea of a sanctuary necessary involves a retreat from the modern world, the idea that certain places are sacred reinforces the

[572] Hargrove, p. 175
[573] T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods*, p. 13.

importance of place to humans and the need to protect them. The reconciliation of the individual with place in 'Little Gidding' marks the completion of a physical and creative journey which began with the identification of destructive disconnection from nature in *The Waste Land* and motivates a search through different physical and psychological landscapes in order to achieve balance between time, place and faith. The final achievement in 'Little Gidding' is the dual recognition of both the autonomy of nature and the human as a part of it.

Little Gidding is a small village in Huntingdon where Nicholas Ferrar and his family formed the first Anglican community after the Reformation. The small community centred around the chapel continued its lifestyle of devotion and faith throughout the turbulent period leading to the Civil War and provided sanctuary for King Charles in the seventeenth century. The community's symbolic value as a place of calm and order amidst political turmoil and the idea of faith as offering protection against destructive forces in the world had strong resonance in wartime. The inscription above the chapel door reading: 'This is none other but the house of God and the gate of heaven' would also have appealed in presenting the reassuring possibility of the divine presence in the material world during a period of uncertainty.[574] The poems open with a meditation on time and place communicated through observation of the strange beauty of the specific moment of arrival:

> Midwinter spring has its own season
> Sempiternal though sodden towards sundown,
> When the short day is brightest, with frost and fire,
> The brief sun flames the ice, on pond and ditches,
> In windless cold that is the heart's heat

Although Little Gidding is linked to religion, nature not only communicates 'the intersection of the timeless moment' but gains autonomous value beyond its meaning to the speaker. The importance of recognising the direct impact of place on the poet is encouraged by the reference to the specific season of Eliot's visit. The vibrant intensity of the moment between winter and spring creates striking clashes between darkness and light, heat and cold which heighten the speaker's awareness of place. The season is suffused with a cold light, 'more intense than a blaze of branch' which illuminates 'the dark time of year'. The boundaries between seasons are broken with the result of strange illusions such as the hedge seeming to flower with a 'blossom | Of snow'. The response of the speaker is not cerebral or theological, but a physical

[574] Hargrove, p. 186.

reaction which recognises that human and non-human share the same 'life-bearing element': 'The soul's sap quivers'.[575] This moment of recognition provokes a desire for the transformative power of spring and an acceptance of the possibility of regeneration that had previously been rejected in the opening lines of *The Waste Land.*

Whilst 'East Coker' and 'Burnt Norton' focus on a single moment outside of time, the permanence of Little Gidding is central to the speaker's response to it: 'It would always be the same'. The assurance that it will remain unchanged is evident in the precise instructions on how to reach the chapel and the details of seasonal change:

> If you came this way,
> Taking the route you would be most likely to take
> From the place you would be likely to come from,
> If you came this way in may time, you would find the hedges
> White again, in May, with voluptuary sweetness.

The specific directions and the direct address to the reader create 'a sympathetic sense of participation in the actual experience of the poet'.[576] The emphasis on 'Here' and 'Now' accentuates the 'sense of actuality, the present, the immediate' which confirms Little Gidding's importance as a real place where pilgrims have travelled to for generations with a clear purpose: 'You are here to kneel | Where prayer has been valid'.[577] Eliot felt particularly sensitive to such sites, explaining that 'for some of us, a sense of place is compelling' and if a landscape has religious significance 'then it retains an aura'.[578]

However, although Little Gidding is a place of sanctuary, its association with fire has ambivalent meaning as both the cleansing fire of the Holy Spirit and the destructive fire of war seen in the 'disfigured' streets of London: 'the dark dove with the flickering tongue'. The description of the city in the aftermath of a bombing raid relates to scenes Eliot had witnessed in his role as fire warden: 'during the Blitz the accumulated debris was suspended in the London air for hours after a bombing. Then it would slowly descend and cover one's sleeves and coat with a fine white ash'.[579] The city which was so crowded and kinetic in *The Waste Land* is now damaged,

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[575] Hargrove, p. 189.
[576] Gardner, *The Landscapes of Eliot's Poetry*, p. 317.
[577] Gardner, *The Landscapes of Eliot's Poetry*, p. 328.
[578] William Turner Levy and Victor Scherle, *Affectionately, T. S. Eliot: The Story of a Friendship:1947-1965* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Limited, 1968), p. 41.
[579] Turner Levy and Scherle, p. 15.

silent and empty; heightening the dreamlike atmosphere of the 'urban dawn'. The scene is a reminder that it was cities rather than rural villages which were most at risk from destruction and the contrast is stark between the whispering children's voices in the trees of 'Burnt Norton' and the 'metal leaves' of shrapnel scrapping across the asphalt in London. The passage has echoes of the visions of the fall of the city in *The Waste Land*, but the move from figurative to literal destruction undermines the sense of permanence located in Little Gidding. The 'burnt roses' announce the end of the innocence and idealism of the garden of 'Burnt Norton', and the cycle of regeneration described in 'East Coker' is halted by the fragility of habitation: 'Dust inbreathed was a house'.

Again the city brings engagement with the contemporary situation and associated environmental concerns. The scene of destruction in London is rooted in the Blitz, but it also connects to wider anxieties, present throughout *Four Quartets,* about the prospect of environmental collapse. This is evident in the evisceration of each element in the aftermath of the bombing. In particular the references to 'flood and drouth' are explicitly linked to Eliot's concerns with over farming: 'the parched eviscerate soil | Gapes at the vanity of toil'. The image of the devastated city in 'the uncertain hour before the morning' highlights the precariousness of the future. The 'death of earth' is no longer a poetic image but a vision informed by the destruction of the city. The bombed buildings 'where a story ended' mark 'the death of air' to be followed by 'dead water and dead sand' and finally 'the death of water and fire'. The exhaustion of each element as a result of human destruction foretells of the 'death of earth.' The conclusion drawn from this: 'The only hope, or else despair | Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre - | To be redeemed from fire by fire' may suggest an evasive escape into religious conviction, but Eliot's poetry and prose could also be understood to unite religious faith with a duty of environmental responsibility.

Four Quartets represents the fulfilment of T. S Eliot's search for connection between the human and non-human world. The central theme of the *Quartets* is the challenge of achieving religious faith in the modern world, but this question is firmly rooted in specific and personal landscapes whose beauty and meaning often eclipses the larger philosophical and theological themes of the poem. Following the disconnection from nature in *The Waste Land*, the *Quartets* chart a physical journey to significant places in order to reconcile the individual to nature and to unite spiritual experience in the material: 'And the fire and the rose are one'. The journeys

are an act of rediscovery and re-enchantment with nature which result in a fresh vision of place:

> the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.

Eliot's ability to read a landscape and communicate its layers of historic and cultural meaning is evident in his earlier poetry, but here beauty is the defining characteristic of the landscapes and Eliot shows himself to be highly sensitive to the nuances and variations of the natural world. The move beyond the city could be understood as a retreat from contemporary social issues but, as Nancy Duvall Hargrove argues, it is also instructive: 'Eliot's poetry as a whole and *Four Quartets* particularly offer us a significant way of living on earth'.[580] The shared history of people and place shown in *Four Quartets* develops Eliot's interest in the possibility of an alternative model of society based on balance between nature, faith and community in order to restore hope and meaning to life and to prevent environmental damage. In this way faith does not create distance from the physical world but translates to environmental responsibility. It moves emphasis from anthropocentric concerns and encourages a re-engagement with place as a way to greater fulfilment. The continuing importance of nature in modern society is confirmed in the personal and creative journey of *Four Quartets* which concludes with the knowledge that all exploring 'will bring us back to the worlds of nature and man'.[581]

[580] Hargrove, p. 184.
[581] Drew, p. 189.

CHAPTER 6: EDITH SITWELL

Edith Sitwell's reputation as a literary celebrity at the social centre of 1920s literary modernism has overshadowed her pivotal role in revitalising poetic representations of nature, place and the environment after the First World War. Recent revisions of Sitwell's work have tended to focus on her treatment of gender, sexuality and the body, but far less attention has been paid to the external landscapes of the poetry. Edith Sitwell is important to this thesis because of the originality of her poetic response to war and modernity. This involves the reinvigoration of poetic language through experimentation with the sound, texture and rhythm in order to reflect and reaffirm the continuing vitality of the nonhuman world. Sitwell shares a recognition of the need to find new ways of writing about nature with the other poets in this thesis. However, her foregrounding of sound over meaning as a way of communicating the concentrated essence of nature and the sensuous experience of contact with the non-human world is a strikingly original response to changes in human/nature relations. The fantastical landscapes of Sitwell's early poetry would seem incompatible with ecocritical principles regarding the autonomy and reality of nature. This fantastical element, however, aims to increase environmental consciousness by reawakening a childlike sense of wonder towards the natural world which reasserts the importance of aspects of human life devalued by modernity such as love of nature, creativity, imagination, humour and spirituality. The prioritising of sound over content creates new ways of writing about nature which capture the essential character of the natural world and provides further evidence of importance of nature to modernist poetry.

This chapter will focus predominantly on Edith Sitwell's earlier poetry of the 1920s and in particular on *Façade*, *Bucolic Comedies* and *The Sleeping Beauty*. My analysis of this early poetry will centre on the use of experimental techniques to reproduce the 'country world' of Sitwell's childhood.[582] I will trace the development of critical responses to Sitwell's poetry beyond the initial focus on personality to the recognition of the poems' wider social engagement illustrated by the critical analysis of Jack Lindsay and Richard Greene. My own ecocritical reading of the poems will centre on the argument that Edith Sitwell's abstract sound experimentation

[582] Edith Sitwell, 'Some Note on My Own Poetry' in *Edith Sitwell: Collected Poems* (London: Duckworth Overlook, 2006), pp. xv – xlvi (p. xxxii).

reinvigorated poetic representations of nature to accommodate changes in human/nature relations. An ecocritical analysis of the poems reveals the continuing vitality and importance of nature, and the need for closer attention to the natural world in order to counter the destructive experience of war and modernity. In the later poems this hopefulness is diminished by the experience of the Second World War and the use of nuclear weapons. However, the desire for reconnection with nature and the awareness of the importance of developing a sense of environmental responsibility remains a central concern of the poetry.

1. Critical Response

Marsha Bryant summarises Edith Sitwell's ambiguous position within British modernism by describing her as 'the most successful of Britain's modernist women poets' and a 'canonical misfit'.[583] Despite her literary celebrity, Sitwell remains notably absent from many anthologies of modernist poetry and has lacked adequate critical attention for her highly accomplished and innovative poetry. As Richard Greene observes, 'Edith Sitwell achieved a dazzling degree of originality in life and art', but an imbalance between the two has caused her personality and appearance to overshadow the writing.[584] F. R. Leavis caused particular damage in this respect by dismissing Sitwell and her brothers as belonging to 'the history of publicity rather than poetry'.[585] This criticism fails to acknowledge Sitwell's generous promotion of upcoming poets through her editorship of *Wheels,* but more importantly it detracts from the technical achievement of her writing and the originality of her particular form of modernism. An emphasis on Sitwell's character, class, gender and appearance has meant that despite the deliberate exclusion of a personal or confessional voice in her poetry, 'personality and poetry form a single impression'.[586] The damaging consequence of such an assumption is a limited understanding of Edith Sitwell as an upper class eccentric whose detachment from the lives of ordinary people is evident in her production of fantastical 'nonsense' poetry.

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[583] Marsha Bryant, 'Sitwell Beyond the Semiotic: Gender, Race and Empire in Façade', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature,* 26 (2007), pp. 243- 267. (p. 243).
[584] Richard Greene, *Edith Sitwell: Avant-Garde Poet, English Genius* (London: Virago, 2011), p. 6.
[585] F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of the Contemporary Situation* (London: Penguin Books, 1950), p. 58.
[586] Elizabeth Salter and Allanah Harper (eds.), *Edith Sitwell*, *Fire of the Mind: An Anthology* (London : Michael Joseph, 1976), p. 13.

Michael Schmidt allows that Edith Sitwell 'sometimes had a magical way with words', but criticises what he perceives as a defensive self importance which means 'her writing can be so funny when it least means to be, so flat when humour is her intention'.[587] Schmidt recognises the originality of Sitwell's experimental approach, but his comment that 'in England reinvention took many forms but none quite so eccentric as Edith Sitwell's', reaffirms the assumption of a connection between poetry and personality rather than considering the poems as responses to the wider cultural and political context.[588] Such limited understanding of Sitwell's poetry devalues her complex and technically accomplished poetic experiments by depicting them as a form of eccentric play devoid of any greater theory or purpose. Sitwell expressed frustration about this view of her work to Stephen Spender:

> It amuses – but at the same time infuriates me – the idea that certain reviewers have, about my lovely Ivory Tower, in which I have lived unspotted from the world [...]. That ivory tower of mine was simply practicing technique, and nothing but that.[589]

Edith Sitwell's poetry was also particularly vulnerable to fluctuations of literary fashion: 'the history of her reputation is very largely the history of what *kind* of poetry seemed the real right thing at a particular time or in a particular group'.[590] The emerging importance of left-wing political poetry in the 1930s jarred with Sitwell's abstract sound experimentation, her enchanted rural landscapes and 'seductive images of abundance'.[591] As John Press explains, it also impacted on critical reaction to her writing: 'divergences over Edith Sitwell are inseparable from the personal, cultural, social and educational principles and prejudices which have inspired them'.[592] Dilys Powell observes that in the 1930s there was a trend in criticism 'to regard poetry, not as existing by its own right, but as willingly conditioned by it social and political environment', and this resulted in a decline of interest in abstract experimentation: 'steadily sympathy decreases for verse which holds itself apart from the social and economic exigencies'.[593] Powell does not consider Edith Sitwell to be 'indifferent to her own times', but argues that 'her first care is poetry; and for

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[587] Michael Schmidt, *The Lives of the Poets*, (London: Phoenix, 1998), pp. 779-80.
[588] Schmidt, p. 77.
[589] Richard Greene (ed.), *Selected Letters of Edith Sitwell* (London: Virago Books, 1998), pp. 241-2.
[590] Victoria Glendinning, *Edith Sitwell: A Unicorn among Lions* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), p. 3.
[591] Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper,* (London, Thames and Hudson, 2010), p. 64
[592] John Press, *A Map of Modern English Verse* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 159.
[593] Dilys Powell, *Descent from Parnassus* (London: The Cresset Press, 1934), p. 104.

the propagandist poetry is not enough'.[594] However, accusations of estrangement from society are based on assumptions of class privilege which were challenged by left-wing critics and writers such as Jack Lindsay and Stephen Spender. Sitwell herself claimed to be highly compassionate to the less privileged: 'one feels one is being eaten alive – at seeing the hopeless poverty, the social injustices'.[595] She also felt poverty and suffering were not experiences exclusive to the working class:

> When I am told by the left-wing boys that I can't write poetry because I have no proletariat experiences, I often wonder how many of them, at the age of 17, have been sent to pawn false teeth – parental false teeth!!!!! You get 10/5 on them. And whisky was then 12/6d.[596]

The development of feminist literary criticism and the ongoing 'elasticising' of modernism would suggest renewed interest in Edith Sitwell.[597] However, as a writer she held a dubious position within the context of female modernism in Britain. Her particularly English landscapes and lexis distinguish her from international poets such as Amy Lowell, H. D. and Marianne Moore, and also from the wider cosmopolitan atmosphere of mainstream modernism. Her attitude towards women writers is also problematic. Sitwell described the majority of women's writing as 'simply awful – incompetent, floppy, whining, arch, trivial, self-pitying' and insisted on the necessity of female poets moving away from confessional or personal styles in order to write 'in as hard and glittering a manner as possible, and with as strange images as possible'.[598] Sitwell's own commitment to technical proficiency above sentiment can be understood as a necessary response to the prejudice she experience from male critics such as Geoffrey Grigson who Richard Greene describes as particularly misogynistic in his insinuation 'that her supposed failure as a poet proceeded from sexual inadequacy and childlessness'.[599] The repression of aspects of femininity in favour of surface imagery allows psychoanalytic and poststructuralist feminist critics to examine the poems as interior dream worlds which convey unconscious anxieties and desires centred on complex maternal impulses and socially disruptive expressions of female sexuality.[600] Such approaches encourage recognition of the underlying emotional impulses of Sitwell's complex poetry, but they also

[594] Powell, p. 104.
[595] Greene, *Selected Letters*, p. 241.
[596] Greene, *Selected Letters*, p. 277.
[597] Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle, *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 58.
[598] Greene, *Edith Sitwell,* p. 253.
[599] Greene, *Edith Sitwell*, p. 334.
[600] Bryant, p. 244.

extend understanding of Sitwell's work as a reflection of personality rather than an engagement with the external environment.

Edith Sitwell had an unusual supporter in the Australian Marxist critic Jack Lindsay, who was important in detaching the poems from the personality of the poet and arguing for recognition of Sitwell as a political poet who was fully engaged in the contemporary situation. In his introductory essay to a selection of her poems, Lindsay stresses the 'enormous importance' of Sitwell in eclipsing 'the spell of belittling mediocrity that hangs over our culture to-day'.[601] For Lindsay, Sitwell's poems do not represent a denial of reality or a retreat from social issues, but an effort 'to face up to the violent pressures of discord and contradiction in our world' and produce 'a new union, a new integration, into the falsity and failure of existing art-forms'.[602] Understanding Sitwell's experiments with dissonance and resolution as a reflection of tensions and disparities in society positions the poetry at 'the heart of this terrific moment of change'.[603] This radical form of social engagement also involves a firm rejection of Georgian poetry which Lindsay describes as wanting 'to evade conflict and make poetry safe for the new middle class, a week-end message that all is well on the village green and that cricket can overcome the forces of violence and terror at work in the world'.[604] Edith Sitwell confirms this intention and contextualised it within the wider modernist agenda:

> The violence of an epoch is responsible for the technical experiments of painters and poets today [...]. These experiments are, for the most part, of a violent order. And if you ask why the rhythms have become more violent, the answer is: this is an age of machinery, a wild race for time, confined within limits that are at once mad and circumscribed.[605]

This violence restores 'poetic energy to language' by 'killing-off a dead poeticality' and introducing 'new intensities and qualities, new colorations'.[606] However, the vivacity of the poems does not equate to empty frivolity and the 'rebirth of Joy in poetry' is balanced against the 'sense of the wrong done to life, the twisting of the loveliest things into sources of pain and discord'.[607]

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[601] Jack Lindsay, 'Introductory Essay' in *Façade and Other Poems 1920-1935* by Edith Sitwell (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, 1930) pp. 7-25 (p. 7).
[602] Lindsay, p. 8.
[603] Lindsay, p. 7.
[604] Lindsay, p. 13
[605] Sitwell, *Taken Care Of*, p. 142.
[606] Lindsay, p. 12.
[607] Lindsay, p. 17.

An important aspect of Jack Lindsay's analysis, in terms of an ecocritical reading, is his understanding of the poems as showing 'critical awareness of the social forces that break the bond of man and nature, man and man'.[608] Lindsay credits Sitwell with recognising 'the deep organic crisis in man precipitated by our divided society with its self-alienating process, a crisis which appears in poetry as a murder done to human wholeness and man's unity to nature'.[609] Whilst this concern with the divisive impact of modernity is shared by the other poets in this thesis, Edith Sitwell differs in her prioritisation of sound over meaning in order to 'grasp the ignition-point of man's deepest contact with nature'.[610] The originality of this approach is in the combination of avant-garde poetic experimentation with the retention of certain aspects of tradition such as the English country garden setting and the reworking of folk tales, nursery rhymes and popular songs. Lindsay notes that 'the whole basis of her imagery is very much set in the English landscape, the English scene', but beyond this geographical aspect it is also connected to an older English tradition.[611] Lindsay credits Sitwell with turning against 'a dead tradition to revive lyrically the rich tradition which has had its place usurped'.[612] This continuation of vital aspects of folk tradition means her writing was 'closely related to the vital tradition of English poetry and was seeking for uncontaminated community'.[613] The communal aspect of this folk tradition challenges the portrayal of Edith Sitwell as a socially disengaged aristocratic and positions her as a writer whose work recognises and responds to wider tensions in society.

In the first substantial study of her life produced for thirty years, Richard Greene also aims towards a serious revision of Edith Sitwell's life and work rather than 'a portrait of quirks or a compilation of quips'.[614] In his critical biography, *Edith Sitwell: Avant-Garde Poet, English Genius,* Greene moves beyond the outfits, eccentricities and literary feuds to state simply that 'Sitwell is a writer who matters – enormously' and who deserves critical reassessment on account of her significant contribution to British poetry.[615] Greene attributes the widespread critical dismissal of one of the 'great poets of her generation' to issues relating to gender, class and

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[608] Lindsay, p. 16.
[609] Lindsay, p. 15.
[610] Lindsay, p. 15.
[611] Lindsay, p. 15.
[612] Lindsay, p. 11.
[613] Jack Lindsay, 'The Latest Poems of Edith Sitwell' in *A Celebration for Edith Sitwell on the Occasion of her Visit to the US* ed. by Jose Garcia Villa (New Jersey: New Directions, 1948), pp. 44-5 (p. 45).
[614] Greene, *Edith Sitwell*, p. 5.
[615] Greene, *Edith Sitwell*, p. 5.

personality rather than quality of work: ‘Sitwell was easiest to knock off the pedestal. She was a flamboyant, combative aristocrat and, better still, she was a woman; therefore, she served as a critical soft target’.[616] An interesting aspect of Greene’s biography is the importance he places on the influence of the landscapes of childhood on Sitwell’s poetry. Greene particularly focuses on the impression made by Scarborough, where the family lived in the 1890s, as a place where ‘fashion and frivolity formed a thin façade beyond which lay grief and catastrophe’ as a result of the ship wrecks which regularly displayed ‘Nature’s menace’.[617] The theatricality of the town in summer also appealed to Edith Sitwell and the spectacle of ‘minstrels, bathing machines, contortionists, clowns, acrobats, and pierrots’ as well as the idea of the thin divide between fantasy and reality are central elements of the early poems.[618]

Greene’s interest in Sitwell scientific reading is also informative in terms of understanding how it shaped her environmental thinking. Greene credits Thomas Burnet’s ‘visions of deluge and apocalypse’ in *The Theory of the Earth*, with influencing the tone of Sitwell’s poetry after the Second World War, and the German philosopher Lorenz Oken with shaping her understanding of the interconnections between human and non-human life. Mark. S. Morrison describes Oken as part of the ‘*Naturphilosophie* movement’ whose ‘primary goal was to challenge mechanistic explanations of nature’ by theorising the unity of spirit and nature.[619] Oken presents an alternative to reductive scientific accounts of nature which strengthened Sitwell’s belief in the interconnections between all living things: ‘the animal contains all elements in itself, so also it contains the plant, and is therefore both vegetable and animal kingdom, or the whole solar system’.[620] A. J. Snow’s *Matter and Gravity in Newton’s Philosophy* also strengthened her sense of connection to the non-human world through his suggestion that the heat in animals originates from the sun: ‘And I feel, humbly, that even *my* blood must derive from that ray’.[621] Sitwell attributed Oken and other natural scientists with having ‘a very great influence on my poetry’

[616] Greene, *Edith Sitwell*, p. 5.
[617] Greene, *Edith Sitwell,* p. 20.
[618] Greene, *Edith Sitwell*, p. 20
[619] Mark S. Morrison, ‘Edith Sitwell’s Atomic Bomb Poetry: Alchemy and Scientific Reintegration’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 9, (2002), pp. 605-663 (pp. 615-161).
[620] Edith Sitwell, *Taken Care Of*: *An Autobiography* (London: Readers Union Hutchinson, 1966), p. 44.
[621] Sitwell, *Taken Care Of*, p. 46.

which can be seen in attempts to replicate patterns in nature within the rhythmical structure of her poetry.[622]

2. Façade

Edith Sitwell's first performance of *Façade* in 1922 involved her reading the poems, which were set to music by William Walton, from behind a curtain through a type of megaphone. Whilst the theatricality of the performance increased Sitwell's fame, it also furthered her reputation for eccentricity and distracted from recognition of the deeper poetic aims of the collection. Dilys Powell found the exotic imagery of *Façade* 'mere snobbery to a generation engrossed with the idea of a Marxist state' and her experiments with abstract pattern 'pointless for an age crying out for moral conflict'.[623] Sitwell asserts that it is not the role of the poet to 'cure human ills, to comfort the dying world' or become 'some sort of moral quack doctor'.[624] Instead she believes 'a lovely poem without philosophy is preferable to a bad poem with philosophy'.[625] However, Powell was incorrect in her belief that *Façade* held no relation to the context in which it was written. The humour, energy and musicality of the poems form a defence against the overwhelming despair brought by war and in this way the poems can be seen as positive affirmations of the resilience of humanity and the important role of poetry in providing 'increased vitality and a more passionate sense of life and power for living'.[626] Sitwell describes her poems as 'hymns of praise to the glory of Life' which celebrate the dignity of all life and allow for the possibility of redemption.[627] The poems do not, however, remain on a single note as Sitwell was keen to acknowledge: 'The gaiety of some masks darkness – the see-saw world in which giant and dwarf take it in turns to rush into the glaring light, the sight of the crowds, then, with terrifying swiftness, go down to the yawning dark'.[628] This theatrical play between darkness and light shows the poems were not forms of escapism, but creations of new spheres in which to examine wider tensions between good and evil, creation and destruction, and order and chaos.

[622] Greene, *Selected Letters*, p. 288.
[623] Powell, p. 104.
[624] Sitwell*, Alexander Pope*, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1948), p. 12
[625] Sitwell, *Alexander Pope,* p. 491.
[626] Edith Sitwell, 'Experiment in Poetry' in *Tradition and Experiment in Present-day Literature: Addresses Delivered at the City Literature Institute* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929), pp. 74-98. (p. 82).
[627] Sitwell, 'Some Note on My Own Poetry', p. xlvi.
[628] Sitwell, 'Some Notes on My Own Poetry', p. xviii.

Despite the lack of direct references, Maurice Bowra recognises that in Sitwell's poetry war 'is never really far from her. It raises the problems she has to solve and it provides the bitter experience of suffering which makes her heart and mind so alert and quick to understand the agonies of others'.[629] Jack Lindsay describes the war as 'only a symptom in a deeper conflict of good and evil which confirmed but did not create her revolt'.[630] The landscapes of *Façade* initially appear idyllic, but there are 'areas of tension' within the rural landscapes which defamiliarise the reader and allow for transgressive and anarchic possibilities.[631] In *Façade* as well as 'a tremendous delight in living' there is also 'a sense that evil forces twist this joyous thing to their own purposes'.[632] A sense of darkness often clouds the speaker's perception of nature, as in 'Rain' where loneliness and detachment drains the colour and energy from the landscape:

> Beside the smooth black marble sea
> You and I drift aimlessly.
>
> Each blade of grass springs pale, alone,
> Tuneless as a quartertone . . .[...].
>
> We are two ghosts today, each ghost
> For ever wandering and lost;
>
> No yesterday and no tomorrow
> Know we, neither joy nor sorrow,
>
> For this is the hour when like a swan
> The silence floats, so still and wan, [...][633]

The pallid colour palette which foregrounds the connection between the psychological state of the speaker and the state of the land is also evident in 'Bells of Grey Crystal':

> Bells of grey crystal
> Break on each bough —
> The swans' breath will mist all
> The cold airs now.
> Like tall pagodas
> Two people go,
> Trail their long codas

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[629] C. M Bowra, *Edith Sitwell* (Paris: Lyrebird Press, 1971), p. 42.
[630] Lindsay, 'Introductory Essay', p. 16.
[631] Deborah Tyler Bennett, *Edith Sitwell: The Forgotten Modernist* (Sheffield: PAVIC Publications, 1996), p. 24.
[632] Lindsay, 'Introductory Essay', p. 16.
[633] Sitwell, *Collected Poems*, p. 134.

Of talk through the snow.
Lonely are these
And lonely am I. . . .
The clouds, grey Chinese geese
Sleek through the sky.[634]

However, the dominant tone of the poems is a lively affirmation of the possibility of regeneration and renewed vitality in life which forms an alternative response to the despair which characterises many other modernist responses to war and modernity. This can be seen in 'When Cold December' which opens with a brittle description of the cold:

When cold December
Froze to grisamber
The jangling bells on the sweet
    rose-trees — [...]
the bristling stars shine
like a gilt porcupine — [...][635]

Despite the freezing conditions and the thick snow on the landscape, there is hope for regeneration in spring and an awareness of the life buried underneath the frozen ground:

Only the snow slides
Like gilded myrrh —
From the rose-branches — hides
Rose-roots that stir.

This sense of hope in the regenerative possibilities of nature has an interesting relationship to Edgell Rickword's proposal of an alternative 'mythical method' to Eliot's tragic vision. In 'The Returning Hero', Rickword argues that 'the literature of disillusionment is reaching its last stage' and suggests 'a Hero would seem to be due' who has 'so much vitality that his thought seize all sort of analogies between apparently unrelated objects and so create an unbiased but self-consistent, humorous universe for himself'.[636] This form of 'comic release' through myth 'wilfully contradicts' T. S. Eliot's tragic vision; as Sitwell's humour and energy in *Façade* contrasts to the apathy and despair of *The Waste Land*.[637] Sitwell is

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[634] Sitwell, *Collected Poems*, p. 135.
[635] Sitwell, *Collected Poems*, p. 136.
[636] Edgell Rickword, 'The Returning Hero' in *Edgell Rickword: Essays and Opinions: 1921-1931* (Cheshire: Carcanet, 1974), pp. 177-180 (p. 179.)
[637] Laurence Coupe, *Myth* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 38-9.

unapologetic about the humour of *Façade,* describing it as ‘a work for the most part of gaiety’ at which the ‘audience is meant to laugh’.[638] However, she denies that the use of humour made her ‘an eccentric and heartless fool’ who cared ‘nothing for the state of the world and the misery of my fellow-men’.[639] Instead humour is seen as a central part of human experience which holds potential to revitalise culture and society. Hugh Ross Williamson describes Edith Sitwell as ‘Romantic and anarchic while Mr. Eliot is Classical and traditional’, but as Jack Lindsay argues, *Façade* also connects to a distinctly English tradition.[640] The difference between the two is that Sitwell’s tradition is that of, what Edgell Rickword terms, the ‘mass folk-imagination’ of ‘the old culture’ whereas Eliot looks to a more formal literary tradition.[641] Rickword and Sitwell’s visions are also united by the idea of ‘endless comic play between nature and humanity and between reality and imagination’ which identifies unity rather than division between humans and nature.[642]

Edith Sitwell claims the ‘poems in *Façade* are *abstrac*t poems’ which explore patterns of sound by way of ‘virtuoso exercises in technique of an extreme difficulty’. [643] This foregrounding of sound, however, also expresses an engagement with the impact of modernity on the pace and noise of life: ‘this is an age of machinery, a wild race for time, confirmed within limits which are at once mad and circumscribed’.[644] The experience of modernity is not present in the content of the poem but in the rhythms which are ‘heightened, concentrated and frequently more violent than those of the poets who had preceded us immediately’.[645] A rejection of the homogenising tendencies of modernity is also evident in the poems. Sitwell’s belief in the dignity of the individual is clear in her anger towards those who satirised or attacked her: ‘Of course one wants the people one care for to see one – not humiliated, but beautiful and noble, which is what one really is’.[646] For Sitwell, modernism involves the rejection of ‘things that are in the mass’ and modernist writers are described as ‘passionately interested in the fulfilling of the destinies of the single individuals that make up the mass – whether these individual are men, or

[638] Sitwell, *Taken Care Of*, p. 123.
[639] Sitwell, *Taken Care Of*, p. 123.
[640] Hugh Ross Williamson, *The Poetry of T. S. Eliot* (London: Hodder & Stoughton Limited, 1932), p. 15.
[641] Rickword, p. 180.
[642] Coupe, p. 41.
[643] Sitwell, ‘Some Notes on My Own Poetry’, p. xvi.
[644] Sitwell, ‘Some Notes on My Own Poetry’, p. 142.
[645] Sitwell, ‘Some Notes on My Own Poetry’, p. xv.
[646] Glendinning, p. 49

leaves or waves of the sea'.[647] This importance of individuality of perception informs Sitwell's imaginative response to place and also breaks from the dullness and uniformity found in Georgian representations of the countryside:

> Birds became a cult. Any mention of the nest of a singing bird threw the community into a frenzy. Dreary plaster-faced sheep with Alexandra fringes and eyes like the eyes of minor German royalties, limpid, wondering, disapproving, uncomprehending, these were admired, as were bulldogs weeping tears of blood.[648]

In response to this inanity Sitwell proposes to 'leave the known and the safe safe, and find another land'.[649] This led to the use of heightened fantastical imagery aimed at re-enchantment with nature after the deadening experience of war and modernity.

The use of fantasy in *Façade* draws attention to the beauty and mysteriousness which already exists within nature: 'It is certain that until one begins to understand that there are Secrets in nature, one will get nowhere. And every great artist is, as you say, in some sense a Magician'.[650] Sitwell believes 'Art is magic, not logic' and similarly her understanding of nature is rooted in an imaginative rather than a rational scientific response to its patterns and variations.[651] The importance of regaining a sense of wonder in nature can be understood in relation to what Max Weber describes as the disillusioning process of 'disenchantment' with the material world as a result of scientific progress and intellectualisations:

> [...] principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for who such mysterious powers existed.[652]

Challenging this process involves foregrounding the beauty of nature and suggesting that it may have a role in easing suffering and grief following 'the slaughter' of the First World War. [653] In response to criticism of *Façade* as empty and meaningless, Edith Sitwell defends the continuing importance of beauty in modern poetry:

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[647] Sitwell, 'Experiment in Poetry', p. 83.
[648] Sitwell, *Aspects of Modern Poetry*, p. 19.
[649] Sitwell, 'Experiments in Poetry', p. 95.
[650] Sitwell in Greene *Edith Sitwell*, p. 305.
[651] Sitwell, 'Experiments in Poetry', p. 85.
[652] Max Weber, 'Science as a Vocation' in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology,* ed. by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 139.
[653] Sitwell, *Taken Care Of,* p. 77.

> They were useless. They were butterflies. They were spivs. And yet I cannot but remember that when the great seventeenth-century naturalist John Ray was asked, 'What is the use of butterflies?', he replied, 'To adorn the world and delight the eyes of men, to brighten the countryside, serving like so many golden spangles to decorate the fields.[654]

Sitwell felt that in retaining a quality of beauty in her poetry her approach differed from the Bloomsbury circle who she felt had 'civilised all their instincts away' and 'civilised their senses away, too'.[655] Although Sitwell considered herself a modernist, the move away from beauty in poetry was an aspect of the movement she rejected: 'In the 1890s "superior" people discovered that ugliness is beauty. But the modern intellectual is a bigger fool than that. He has discovered that everything is ugly – including beauty'.[656] In *Façade,* Sitwell uses the beauty of nature and its connection to the human imagination not as a means of retreating from social reality, but to encourage reconnection with the physical world in response to the dissociative pressures of war and modernity.

3. Poetic Aims

Edith Sitwell is important to this thesis because her experiments with sound, texture and imagery produce new ways of representing the non-human world which challenge conventional perceptions of nature in order to encourage a deeper engagement with the natural world. For Sitwell, modernism represents a 'great chance of exerting an individuality in seeing' which extends beyond the artist's personal vision to expand 'the consciousness of the race'.[657] Sitwell explains that modernist poets 'do not try to force out way of seeing upon people. What we try to do is to give the people their own way of seeing – to remove fear'.[658] Sitwell's focus on technique and experimentation was partly a reaction against the 'rhythmical flaccidity, the verbal deadness, the dead and expected patterns, of some of the poetry immediately preceding us'.[659] Richard Greene suggests this rejection of the previous generation extends beyond the literary context: 'The image of a generation frustrated or betrayed by its elders captured Sitwell's sense of the Great War and of her own

[654] Sitwell, 'Some Notes on My Own Poetry', pp. xvii-xviii.
[655] Greene, *Selected Letters*, p. 96.
[656] Greene, *Selected Letters*, pp. 96-7.
[657] Sitwell, 'Experiments in Poetry', p. 83.
[658] Sitwell, 'Experiment in Poetry', p. 82.
[659] Sitwell, *Taken Care Of*, p. 123.

family disasters'.[660] In response she aimed to 'disorganise these inherited perceptions' and create new ways of seeing.[661] Sitwell confirms this aim to 'unsettle or subvert the lethal normalcy of our perceptions' by challenging understanding of the physical environment.[662] Like other modernist writers, Edith Sitwell was influenced by French poetry which taught her 'to seek out images that are fragmentary, sometimes dreamlike, suggestive rather than representative, and synaesthetic'.[663] This type of allusive and evocative imagery is evident in her magical and languid landscapes. However, her depiction of nature also aims for clarity in identifying the essence of each living thing. Stephen Spender recognises this aspect of her approach in his observation that although Edith Sitwell's 'imagery may not be photographically representative of nature, it is true to a very real experience'.[664] The originality of Sitwell's approach is in combining this concentrated visual imagery with the associated sound and texture of each aspect of nature to reproduce the experience of the natural world as a cornucopia of colour and sensation. Sitwell describes her approach as revealing:

> [...] attributes which at first sight appear alien, but which are acutely related – by producing its quintessential colour (sharper, brighter than that seen by an eye grown stale, and by stripping it of all unessential details)'.[665]

In the introductory essay to her *Collected Poems,* 'Some Notes on My Own Poetry', Edith Sitwell provides a detailed explication of her poetic aims and techniques with a particular focus on rhythm as 'one of the principal translators between dream and reality' which 'shapes and gives new meaning' to the world.[666] The need to 'find rhythmical expressions for the heightened speed of our time' shows a commitment to engaging with modernity as well as with alternative patterns and systems in the natural world:[667]

> The poems appeared strange, sometimes because of the heightened imagery and sometime because, to quote a phrase from the scientist Henri Poincaré, 'the accident of a rhyme can call forth a system'. To this I would add – sometimes a planetary system.

[660] Greene, *Edith Sitwell,* p. 149.
[661] Greene, *Edith Sitwell,* p. 149.
[662] Greene, *Edith Sitwell*, p. 111.
[663] Greene, *Edith Sitwell*, p. 76.
[664] Stephen Spender, 'Images in the Poetic World of Edith Sitwell' in *A Celebration for Edith Sitwell*, p. 12.
[665] Sitwell, *Taken Care Of*, p. 49.
[666] Sitwell, 'Some Notes on My Own Poetry', p. xv.
[667] Sitwell, 'Some Notes on My Own Poetry', p. xv.

Some of these poems are about materialism and the world crumbling into dust; some have a protagonists shadows, or ghosts, moving, not in my country world, but in a highly mechanised universe [...].[668]

Rhythms and rhyme are central components in Sitwell's ambition to replicate the patterns and systems of nature in order to reawaken a sense of wonder in relation to the natural world:

> The immense design of the world, one image of wonder mirrored by another mirror of wonder - the pattern of fur and feathers by the frost on the windowpane, the six rays of the snowflake mirrored in the rock-crystal's six-rayed eternity.[669]

In *Bucolic Comedies* (1923), Sitwell challenges inherited poetic perceptions of nature and defamiliarises the natural world in order to encourage a deeper engagement with the landscape: 'the swan-bosomed sky' ('Spring'), 'Green wooden leaves clap light away' (Springing Jack'), 'The dark air sparkled like a sea' ('King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid'). The poems combine avant-garde poetic experimentation with a traditional country setting in order to reinvigorate conventional representations of the natural world: 'the wonderful thing about Sitwell has always been how she took old animism by the throat and made it produce'.[670] This revitalisation of poetic language, which allows the reader 'to feel nature's fullness in sensuous terms', can be seen in the full rhymes and playful rhythms of 'Spring'[671]:

> By a maiden fair as an almond-tree,
> With hair like the waterfalls' goat-locks; she
>
> Has lips like that jangling harsh pink rain,
> The flower-bells that spirt on the trees again.'
>
> In Midas' garden the simple flowers
> Laugh, and the tulips are bright as the showers,
>
> For Spring is here; the auriculas,
> And the Emily-coloured primulas.[672]

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[668] Sitwell, 'Some Notes on My Own Poetry', p. xvii.
[669] Sitwell, 'Some Notes on My Own Poetry', p. xix.
[670] Reuel Denney 'Ideas of Nature: The Poetry of Edith Sitwell', *Chicago Review*, 3 (1949) , pp. 5-6 (p. 6).
[671] Denney, p. 6.
[672] Sitwell, *Collected Poems*, p. 14.

In 'Spring', the lively couplets replicate the vitality of the season and confirm the continuing existence of regenerative processes in nature. This celebration of the new season also shows the difference of approach between Sitwell and Eliot; Sitwell still finding hope in the season's vitality in contrast to Eliot's portrayal of spring as a painful marker of the stagnancy of humans. The poem 'Green Geese' is also characteristic of *Bucolic Comedies'* combination of avant-garde technique with a more traditional English country garden setting:

> The trees were hissing like green geese...
> The words they tried to say were these:
>
> 'When the great Queen Claude was dead
> They buried her deep in the potting-shed.'
>
> The moon smelt sweet as nutmeg-root
> On the ripe peach-trees' leaves and fruit [...][673]

The poem combines richness and economy in the use of synaesthesia, 'The bee-wing's warm afternoon light roves | Gliding her hair (wooden nutmegs and cloves)', to encourage imaginative re-engagement with nature through the sensual experience of the garden at evening

Sitwell's use of synesthesia or 'sense-transfusion' has a central role in challenging conventional perceptions of nature and reanimating poetic imagery:[674]

> It was said that the images in these poems were strange. This was partly the result of condensement – partly because where the language of one sense was insufficient to cover the meaning, the sensation, I used the language of another, and by this means attempted to pierce down the essence of the thing seen, by discovering in it attributes which at first sight appear alien but which are acutely related.[675]

David Abram recognises the potential of synesthesia to reconnect the modern reader to 'primordial contact with the entities and elements that surround us'.[676] This 'interplay of the different senses' creates a crossover or 'chiasm' between the body and the earth which reflects 'the reciprocal participation – between one's own flesh and the encompassing flesh of the world – that we commonly call perception'.[677] Jack Lindsay also understands how the technique affects the reading of the poems:

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[673] Sitwell, *Collected Poems*, p. 23.
[674] Sitwell, *Taken Care Of*, p. 49.
[675] Sitwell, 'Some Notes on My Own Poetry', p. xix.
[676] David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), p. 60.
[677] Abram, p. 128.

‘The word has to be broken open, so that the nexus of meaning can beget inside it’.[678] This act of re-seeing the world by challenging sense perception produces increased sensitivity to the natural world which Edith Sitwell likens to a reawakening of the senses:

> Sometimes you find a consciousness that has been like that of a blind person, becoming aware – intensely aware – of the nature of a tree, or of a flower, or of the way in which rain hangs of falls from certain objects, for the first time, and, through that nature, guessing that there is a reason, a design, somewhere outside this present state of consciousness.[679]

Such new ways of seeing demand concentrated attentiveness towards nature and a corresponding revision of modes of representation in poetry.

Despite the divisive influence of modernity, Edith Sitwell’s continues to assert the importance of fundamental connections between humans and animal: ‘Sometimes you find a terrible groping animal consciousness, a consciousness which knows only the flowering and urge of its own hot blood and desires, and, through this, its relationship to other material aspects of the world’.[680] This connection is examined in ‘Dark Song’ (*Façade),* where the exhausted servant-girl’s desire for freedom connects her to the energies of both bear and fire. The girl’s ‘obstinate spirit-of-life that will not be beaten down however it is cruelly oppressed’ also relates her struggle for survival to all other living things and in doing so reveals the ‘ultimate union of the girl and the earth’.[681] Sitwell describes the girl, ‘whose blood has the dark pulse and instinct of the earth’, as an embodiment of the poem’s central subject of ‘the beginning of things and their relationship’.[682] The poem dissolves the boundaries between the human and non-human to speak about all forms of constraint and the unifying desire for freedom of all living things:

> The fire was a furry as a bear
> And the flames purr . . .
> The brown bear rambles in his chain
> Captive to cruel men
> Through the dark and hairy wood.
> The maid sighed, ‘All my blood
> Is animal. They thought I sat
> Like a household cat;

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[678] Lindsay, ‘Introductory Essay’, p. 12.
[679] Greene, *Selected Letters*, p. 96.
[680] Greene, Selected Letters, p. 96.
[681] Lindsay, ‘Introductory Essay, p. 18.
[682] Sitwell, ‘Some Notes on My Own Poetry’, p. xxviii.

> But through the dark woods rambled I . . .
> Oh, if my blood would die!'
> The fire had a bear's fur;
> It heard and knew. . . .
> The dark earth furry as a bear,
> Grumbled too! [683]

Edith Sitwell defines her poetic landscape as 'a country world, a universe of growing things, where magic and growth are one, [...] a world of rough, fruitful suns, and the age of the innocence of man'.[684] It is a setting which is characterised by harmony and balance between humans and nature as 'people live the life of growing things rooted deeply in the mould'.[685] This rural setting differs significantly from the environment of her adult life where she lived on the fifth floor of a rundown building in Bayswater, West London. Geoffrey Elborn recognises this disparity, describing Sitwell as someone who 'hated the country' but was also 'a country poet'.[686] Julian Symons felt this gulf between her poetic landscape and her daily reality was s a major limitation which demonstrated an 'inability to see and hear what is around her'.[687] Victoria Glendinning also recognises that although 'sensuality in Edith Sitwell's poetry is expressed in vegetable terms' she was 'in no sense a "nature poet" as the term is generally understood'.[688] Rather than photographic replication, Sitwell uses nature as 'spurs to imagination' and in this respect 'a glance, a glimpse, a colour, a botanical name, was enough to set her alight. Exterior nature was a source for fantasy, sound and symbol'.[689] Sitwell's cousin Veronica confirms this aspect of her character, remarking that she 'didn't care much for flowers unless she could make a phrase of them'.[690]

The fantastical element of Edith Sitwell's representation of nature and her lack of direct contact with the landscapes of her poetry could be seen as problematic in terms of ecocriticism's focus on the writer's commitment to representing the reality of place. However, Sitwell's imaginative re-engagement with nature can also be seen as a necessary response to the disruptions in human/nature relations caused by the reductive character of scientific modernity. In opposition to the deadening

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[683] Sitwell, *Collected Poems*, p. 149.
[684] Sitwell, 'Some Notes on my Own Poetry', p. xxxii
[685] Sitwell, 'Some Notes on my Own Poetry', p. xxxiii.
[686] Geoffrey Elborn, *Edith Sitwell: A Biography* (London: Sheldon Press, 1981), p. 19.
[687] Julian Symons, 'Miss Edith Sitwell Have and Had and Heard' in *Critical Observations,* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), pp. 24-39 (p. 35).
[688] Glendinning, p. 92.
[689] Glendinning, p. 93
[690] Glendinning, p. 93.

rationality of modernity, Sitwell uses fantasy as a means of inspiring re-enchantment with nature which can lead to increased value being placed on the importance of the non-human world. The disparity between Sitwell's daily life in London and her rural landscapes can also be understood as reaffirming the importance of childhood and of a child's freedom of perception on this process of re-enchantment. These childhood impressions possess a freshness of vision which allow nature to be described in the most condensed and precise way possible: 'I have tried to make my images exact – though heightened'.[691] The use of fantasy and heightened imagery can then be understood not as a retreat from the reality of nature, but as a means of achieving a more accurate way of communicating the concentrated essence of each living thing.

4. *The Sleeping Beauty*

Edith Sitwell used Jean Cocteau's phrase to describe her poetry as 'the poetry of childhood overtaken by a technician'.[692] It is an aspect of Sitwell's poetry Victoria Glendinning also recognises in describing her as thinking 'magically, as a child thinks before it has learnt to conceptualize'.[693] Sitwell also acknowledges the importance of 'the green landscapes of my very early youth' to her poetry.[694] In the early poems there is a childlike sensitivity to nature which expresses wonder and surprise in the natural world. The landscapes of the poems are based on the woods and gardens of her family estate of Renishaw Hall in Derbyshire and her grandmother's house and gardens at Londesborough Lodge in Scarborough. So central are these landscapes to Sitwell's poetic imagination that John Piper supposes her 'senses must have had some sudden blow' in a garden during childhood which she has been trying to recapture in poetry ever since.[695] Renishaw Hall's dark, shuttered rooms full of antiques created an 'air of a melancholy dream' which had a profound influence on Sitwell's imagination.[696] Discussing the geography of Renishaw, Victoria Glendinning describes Sitwell and her brothers as having 'lived in an enchanted castle, in a world of planned grace and beauty, but beyond the gates lay that other world of stunted poverty and industrial ugliness'.[697] Despite the sense of isolation in the poems, the house was only eight miles from the centre of Sheffield

[691] Sitwell, 'Some Notes on my Own Poetry', p. xxxiv.
[692] Sitwell, 'Some Notes on My Own Poetry', p. xvii.
[693] Glendinning, p. 92.
[694] Sitwell, *Taken Care Of*, p. 70.
[695] John Piper, 'The Garden and the Harvest' in Jose Garcia Villa (ed.), *A Celebration for Edith Sitwell on the Occasion of her Visit to the US* (New Jersey: New Directions, 1948), p. 54.
[696] Greene, *Edith Sitwell*, p. 25.
[697] Glendinning, pp. 18-19.

and the mining industry literally underpinned the Sitwells' lives as coal was mined deep under the lake in the house's park.[698]

Despite the proximity to the industrial city, Sitwell saw the house and garden as mysteriously disconnected from the outside world: 'Here it is very different, and strange and beautiful, everything has a remote air, like something in a legend'.[699] In particular, the Hall's tapestry was a source of fascination in its depiction of 'palaces with gardens full of pools and fountains, with 1690 nymphs and queens and goddesses wreathed with pearls and crowned with feathers walking, sitting, and being mirrored in the water'.[700] This form of preservation through art mirrors Sitwell's poetic preservation of an idealised version of her childhood. Despite spending her adult life in London, the impact of her childhood experience of nature remains vividly close to her: 'the gardens, the lake, the bluebells in the woods in May, the carefully sited statues, the long vistas, the wilderness, the quietly coloured flowers and trees [...] were the stuff of childhood, the raw material of Edith's inner life.[701] Richard Greene observes that 'as the years passed. Sitwell came to present her early life in mythic terms'.[702] After a childhood marred by parental rejection and humiliation, the landscapes of childhood could eventually be imaginatively revisited from the safe distance of adulthood and her new life in London. This allows a degree of control, impossible during childhood, which is evident in her imaginative transformation of the adults who shaped her early life: her grandmother into the Dowager Queen of *The Sleeping Beauty*, a maid with 'a face like a large red strawberry, covered with silvery hair' into one of the 'Three Poor Witches', and a retired Major who tutored her brothers to Colonel Fantock.[703]

In Sitwell's 'modernist fairy tale' *The Sleeping Beauty* (1924), the setting is the familiar enchanted woods and gardens of *Façade* and *Bucolic Comedies*, but the tone and technique of the poem is distinctly altered.[704] The 'experimental pyrotechnics' are absent and there is a shift in emphasis from the sound and texture of language to its ability to express mood and emotion.[705] The gardener who relates

[698] Glendinning, pp. 18-19.
[699] Greene, *Selected Letters*, p. 69.
[700] Greene, *Selected Letters,* p. 69.
[701] Glendinning, pp. 12-3.
[702] Greene, *Edith Sitwell*, p. 11.
[703] Sitwell, *Taken Care Of,* p. 64.
[704] Greene, *Edith Sitwell*, p. 178.
[705] Glendinning, p. 96.

the tale is a familiar character within Sitwell's poetry, but here he is placed within a more sinister landscape:

> Among the boughs with silent feathered feet, —
> Spraying down dew like jewels amid the sweet
>
> Green darkness; figs, each like a purse of gold,
> Grow among leaves like rippled water green, and cold.
>
> 'Beneath those laden boughs,' the gardener sighs,
> 'Dreaming in endlessness, forgotten beauty lies.'[706]

Victoria Glendinning suggests that the change in tone may have come with the realisation that the 'prelapsarian summer garden of childhood had been just a veneer over the awful truth of life, as the park at Renishaw covered the coal mine'.[707] Edith Sitwell describes the poem as 'largely about my life as a child and young girl', but there is an adult perspective which informs the narrative and a preoccupation with 'man's guilt' which recognises the difficulty of continuing to retain the innocence of childhood.[708] This exile from the landscapes of childhood is accompanied by a sense of alienation and loneliness which connects to Sitwell's personal life. Although she was a central figure in the London literary scene, Sitwell she saw herself as an outsider in both art and life: 'I just walked alone – as I have always walked alone'.[709] She understood herself as a 'Changeling' existing on the periphery of the human society.[710] For Glendinning, this created a sense of compassion: 'one result of her unhappiness was the way in which Edith came to identify herself with the sad, the lonely, the scared, the outsider, the mistreated, whether human or animal'.[711] Sitwell also describes herself as 'both bird and child'.[712] This identification with children and animals can be understood to stem from a lack of extensive formal education which distinguishes her understanding of the world from the 'dry reflections of the scholar who has no knowledge of the earth, who know only [...] the small and unstirred dust of his schoolroom'. [713] Instead she claims to have learnt 'from the world, not from

[706] Sitwell, *Collected Poems*, pp. 51-110.
[707] Glendinning, p. 98.
[708] Sitwell, *Taken Care Of*, p. 60.
[709] Sitwell, *Taken Care Of*, p. 27.
[710] Sitwell, *Taken Care Of*, p. 20.
[711] Glendinning, p. 15.
[712] Glendinning, p. 87.
[713] Edith Sitwell, *The Pleasures of Poetry*: *A Critical Anthology* (London: Duckworth, 1934), p. 235.

maps' and as a result developed an environmental awareness based in the belief that 'all living beings, human, animal, or plants were my brothers'.[714]

Reviewing the poem shortly after its publication, Edgell Rickword comments that 'a legendary subject is the most fertile for poetic treatment' because 'the familiarity of the story allows the greatest freedom to the poet's gift, the interpretation of experience in the language of universal emotion'.[715] The fixed narrative of *The Sleeping Beauty* also draws attention to the points at which the poem deviates from the story to introduce a personal reflection on the themes of memory, childhood and the battle between good and evil. The eleventh movement of the poem is particularly personal: 'When we were young, how beautiful life seemed! — | The boundless bright horizons that we dreamed'. Rickword defines the poem's principal theme as the 'subjection of the youthful vision' and the 'impossibility of retaining the perceptions in their early purity [...]'.[716] Boundaries between the real and imagined past dissolve, and an adult sense of disillusionment shapes the speaker's understanding of the reality of the physical world:

> Then all the beauty of the world lay deep
> Mirrored within the beauty water-clear
> Of flowering boughs; Helen and Deirdre, dreamed
> And fading, wakened in that loveliness
> Of watery branches. In that dead wild spring
> Through the bird's shaken voice we heard God sing.
>
> But age has dimmed our innocent paradise
> With a faint shadow, shaken dust within our eyes —
> And we are one now with the lonely wise,
> Knowing the spring is only the clear mirage
> Of an eternal beauty that is not.

In addition to the personal significance of the poem, it also connects to communal memory and to the 'romantic nostalgia which lies very deep in human nature'.[717] This allows for an understanding of the tensions and complexities within the poem as a reflection of wider discord in society which has altered perceptions of the non-human world:

> Now that the summer only seems the sad
> Mechanical dull action of the light

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[714] Sitwell, *Taken Care Of,* p. 44.
[715] Edgell Rickword, 'Sleeping Beauty', *Times Literary Supplement,* 3rd April 1924, p. 204.
[716] Rickword, 'Sleeping Beauty', p. 204.
[717] Rickword, 'Sleeping Beauty', p. 204.

And shadow playing over a dead world —
Dead as my heart — it seems too long ago
For the remembrance of the beauty and the world we
used to know;

As Edgell Rickword observes, no prince charming appears in the poem to offer easy resolution. The poem ends with a rejection of the past as a painful reminder of lost happiness, but also rejects the present in favour of remaining in the unconscious state of sleep. Victoria Glendinning suggests that 'once Edith had written out her childhood themes and dreams, she had nowhere else to go'.[718] The position mirrors the wider modernist experience of alienation from the past and uncertainty about the present which is voiced by the gardener at the end of the poem:

'[...]And of, far best,' the gardener said,
'Like fruits to lie in your kind bed,
To sleep as snug as in the grave
In your king bed, and shun the wave,
Nor ever sigh for a strange land
And songs no heart can understand.'

5. Later Poetry

After the 'playful aestheticism' of her early poetry, world events such as the Second World War and the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima brought a new gravity to Edith Sitwell's poetry and a shift in the poetic voice from expressing childlike enthrallment with the world to announcing 'the winter of the world and Man's fresh Fall':[719]

I who was once a golden woman like those who walk
In the dark heavens — but am now grown old
And sit by the fire, and see the fire grow cold,
Watch the dark fields for a rebirth of faith and wonder.[720]

Reuel Denning describes the later poems as showing 'a new stage in the growth of her allegorical style' and a move from earlier abstraction to a 'forthright message' expressed in 'simple and serious' language.[721] The influence of Edith Sitwell's entrance into the Catholic Church in 1955 can be seen in the dominance of religious imagery in the poems: particularly in the use of images of apocalypse and the

[718] Glendinning, pp. 97-8.
[719] Schmidt, p. 781.
[720] Sitwell, 'Invocation' in *Collected Poems*, p. 257.
[721] Denney, p. 5.

overarching theme of sin and redemption. Religion also shapes the poetic representation of nature as Sitwell explains to the critic Maurice Bowra: 'Your sentence "The earth is more than a garment of God: it is a manifestation of God Himself" is wonderful, and it is the truth that lies beneath all my poetry'.[722] This form of 'Christian pantheism' represents a strengthened environmental commitment because it sees damage to the earth as a sin against God.[723] However, it also limits understanding of nature as an autonomous life force by constricting its meaning to a single interpretation: 'I see the spring like that, - like Christ covered with the scarlet coloured blood of all the martyrs'.[724]

The human and environmental devastation of war became the central subject of Sitwell's later poetry. She describes the experience of having lived through two world wars as having 'seen two Pandora's boxes opened. One contained horror, the other emptiness'.[725] In the poetry the impact can be seen in a growing sense of disenchantment with the world and with the human character which was previously vigorously resisted in her poetry. The change in seasons from the predominance of spring and summer in the earlier poetry to 'The time of the cold heart and the world's winter' ('Metamorphosis') shows the extent of this shift in perspective. Whereas the earlier poems celebrate new life in the summer, now the impact of war has altered its meaning: 'But the hearts of the young are now the dark treasure of Death, | And summer is lonely' ('Street Song'). The distance from the enchanted gardens of the earlier poems is clear: 'Could we fortell that land was only earth, | Would it be worth the pain of death and birth' ('The Hambone and the Heart'), and traditional poetic associations with nature are questioned: 'your lips, the bright | Summer-old folly of the rose' ('Serenade: Any Man to Any Woman').

However, the desire for new life brings hope into the poems. In 'Lo, this is she that was the world's desire', there is a yearning to feel again 'The violence, the uproar of bursting buds, the wild-beast fire | of spring in my veins'.[726] In 'Metamorphosis' regeneration is achieved when the 'fire of spring' breaks through winter: 'Yet with an infinite | Wild strength the grass of spring still finds the light'.[727] In 'Green Song', spring can still provoke a strong response in the speaker: 'bird-

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722 Greene, *Selected Letters*, p. 254.
723 Bowra, M., 'The War Poetry of Edith Sitwell' in *A Celebration for Edith Sitwell*, p. 28.
724 Greene, *Selected Letters*, p. 243.
725 Sitwell, *Taken Care Of*, p. 75.
726 Sitwell, *Collected Poems*, p. 322.
727 Sitwell, *Collected Poems*, p. 221.

blood leaps within our veins'.[728] The primal connection of natural cycles to stages of human life allows for the possibility of redemption, 'the vernal equinox in the veins', which can bring about a revival of community and tradition:

> And voices speak in the woods as from a nest
> Of leaves — they sing of rest,
> And love, and toil, the rhythms of their lives,
> Singing how winter's dark was overcome [...]

However, identification with nature involves acceptance of the self as part of the cycle of life and death, and the knowledge of the coming of winter:

> [...] Are we not all of the same substance
> Men, planets and earth, born from the heart of darkness,
> Returning to darkness [...]

Edith Sitwell describes *Three Poems of the Atomic Age* as being about 'the fusing of the world into warring particles, destroying and self destructive' and heading 'towards the final disaster'.[729] Mark S. Morrison understands the poems '*as science'* and Sitwell as 'a thinker who complicates our sense of the interaction between public and scientific cultures in the immediate post-World War II era'.[730] Retaining her fundamental belief in the dignity of all forms of life, Morrison sees Sitwell as bringing both scientific and moral considerations to 'the cold and intellectually detached realm of atomic physics'.[731] 'The Shadow of Cain' contains visions of environmental apocalypse and 'great oscillations | Of temperature' leading to an 'epoch of the Cold'. The subject of the creation and use of nuclear weapons is approached through an explicitly Christian perspective which interprets the environmental fallout of 'violence of torrents, cataracts, maelstroms, rains' as prefiguring the second coming: 'He walks again on Seas of Blood, He comes in the terrible Rain'. In 'The Canticle of the Rose' nature again marks the diminishment of the moral character of humans. The rose remains a subject of wonder in assimilating light from the sun:

> I rise upon my stem
> The Flower, the whole Plant-being, produced by Light

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[728] Sitwell, *Collected Poems*, p. 299.
[729] Sitwell, *Taken Care Of*, p. 153.
[730] Morrison, p. 607.
[731] Morrison, pp. 607-8.

With all the Plant-systems and formations . . . .As in Fire
All elements dissolve, so in one bright
Ineffable essence all Plant-being dissolves to make the
Flower.[732]

However, it is ignored by the people in the hellish market who have turned from nature to focus on profit, greed and consumerism:

‘And in Famine Street the sellers cry
‘What will you buy? [...]

‘A box of matches!
For the machine that generated warmth
Beneath your breast is dead [...]

The rose symbolises redemption through religion: ‘From my little span |I cry of Christ, Who is ultimate Fire’, but ‘the world’s incendiaries’ have created a significant division between the two.

In ‘Dirge for the New Sunrise’ the religious imagery, ‘I hang between our Christ and the gap where the world was lost’, again sharpens criticism of environmental damage.[733] Destruction of the earth is understood as a form of matricide which has been motivated by a desire for knowledge which has a parallel to the expulsion from Eden:

Of Man, still redder Nero that conceived the death
Of his mother Earth, and tore
Her womb, to know the place where he was conceived.

The scientific advances linked to the production of nuclear bombs are contrasted to the innocence and trust in the beginning of the world:

There was a morning when the holy Light
Was young. The beautiful First Creature came
To our water-springs, and though us without blame.

The environmental destruction questions modernity’s celebration of ‘progress’ which has altered human understanding of nature from being sacred, ‘in the tree | were

[732] Sitwell, *Collected Poems*, pp. 377-79.
[733] Sitwell, *Collected Poems*, pp. 368-70

springs of Deity', to being insignificant in relation to the anthropocentric goals of scientific modernity:

> And the ray from that heat came soundless, shook the sky
> As if in search of food, and squeezed the stems
> Of all that grows on the earth till they were dry
> —And drank the marrow of the bone:
> The eyes that saw, the lips that kissed, are gone
> Or black as thunder lie and grin at the murdered Sun.

The later poems reveal the degree to which world events shape Edith Sitwell's poetic representation of the physical environment. In contrast to the identification of hope and regeneration in nature in the poems of the 1920s, Sitwell's final poems are overshadowed by war and the possibility of mass destruction which permanently disrupts the balance and harmony between humans and nature which was celebrated in the early poetry.

Edith Sitwell is important to this thesis because her early poetry recognises the need for new poetic approaches to representing nature following the disruptive experience of war and modernity. In prioritising sound over meaning in order to communicate the texture, colour and character of the natural world, Sitwell creates an original response to post-war society which challenges inherited perceptions of nature and forces a re-engagement with the non-human world. This awareness of the regenerative possibilities within nature then suggests hope of similar revitalisation in the human sphere. Whilst the later poetry is overshadowed by fear of environmental collapse caused by human actions, the desire for reconnection with nature remains a central concern throughout the poetry and the idea of redemption allows for the possibility that balance between humans and nature can yet be achieved.

CHAPTER 7. CHARLOTTE MEW

Charlotte Mew's poetry demonstrates a sustained interest in nature, place and the environment which recognises the presence and importance of nature in urban as well as rural places. Mew's approach is particularly interesting because she speaks from the perspective of those on the margins of society whose decentralised position, she suggests, creates a deeper understanding and identification with the non-human world. This alternative perspective on nature and society challenges traditional associations of the city and the countryside, and shows that a strong attachment to nature is possible in both places. Mew is important in depicting cities as shared spaces and urban people as possessing a deep attachment to place which results in acute emotional distress in response to environmental damage. Mew also offers an alternative perspective on rural areas by questioning traditional associations of the countryside as a place of refuge and showing the darker aspects of such communities in terms of their prohibitive attitudes towards those who are different. Charlotte Mew is also important to an ecocritical analysis of modernism because she explores how trauma, grief and otherness shape understanding of the non-human world and create new ways of thinking about nature which disrupt conventional understanding of human/nature relations.

Summarising critical responses to Charlotte Mew's poetry, Joseph Bristow describes the tendency 'for critics to dwell on a dismal life story in the name of characterizing her as a victimized, marginal, and, from some perspectives, queer individual [...]'.[734] This chapter aims to go beyond issues of biography in order to shift attention to the external landscapes of the poetry. Mew's intense but complex identification with the non-human world offers an alternative perspective on the modernist theme of alienation from society which recognises the impact of psychological distress on attitudes towards nature. An ecocritical analysis allows for an examination of how human events can impact on an individual's perception of place and on their level of environmental responsibility. In this chapter I will analyse the ways in which Mew challenges conventional understanding of the countryside and the city in her essays and poetry. I will consider how the experience of alienation

[734] Joseph Bristow, 'Charlotte Mew's Aftereffects', *Modernism/Modernity*, 16:2, (2009), pp. 255-280 (p. 261).

and trauma shapes attitudes towards nature in the poems. I will also explore the ways in which Mew's poetry responds to the First World War and examine how grief disrupts the relationship between humans and nature

1. The City

Charlotte Mew's representation of the modernist city as a place of both human and non-human presences is important in dispelling reductive associations of the modern city as a purely human sphere and urban people as lacking environmental awareness. Mew was born in central London and lived there all her life. Her grandfather was a surveyor whose firm was responsible for several buildings in the city and this connection to the capital was deepened by her early awareness of the diversity of city life which she gained from her daily walk from her home in Bloomsbury through Camden Town's slums to school.[735] Michael Schmidt describes Charlotte Mew as 'temperamentally a city poet' and in adulthood the city afforded her the freedom to dress in masculine clothes, smoke and use slang without comment.[736] It also allowed her to take on the role of the flâneuse: an observer of urban life who could wander the streets unchaperoned in order to visit friends and writers. This idea of London as a place of freedom, self expression and refuge shows an alternative perspective to T. S. Eliot's representation of city life as shaped by habit and tedium. Rejecting this version of the city, in both her poetry and prose Mew reveals London to be a colourful microcosm of both human and non-human life which energises the observer with its infinite creative possibilities.

The city's reviving assault on the senses is described in the opening of Mew's short story *Passed*:

> The splendid cold of fierce frost set my spirit dancing. The road rung hard underfoot, and through the lonely squares woke sharp echoes from behind. This stinging air assailed my cheeks with vigorous severity. It stirred my blood grandly, and brought though back to me from the warm embers just forsaken, with immeasurable sense of gain.[737]

This portrait of the city as fully alive and sensuously invigorating is again seen in her description of 'The Hay-Market' which depicts the area off Piccadilly Circus as a

[735] Alida Monro, 'Charlotte Mew: A Memoir' in *Collected Poems of Charlotte Mew*, (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1953), p. xi.
[736] Schmidt, Michael, *The Lives of the Poets*, (London: Phoenix, 1998), p. 575.
[737] Charlotte Mew, 'Passed' in *Charlotte Mew: Collected Poems and Prose*, ed. by Val Warner (Manchester: Carcanet, 1981), p. 65.

bustling centre where artists, traders and consumers congregate, and also as an economic meeting point between the city and the countryside. The market is alive with a cacophony of human and non-human voices: 'The Square was full of voices and sharp sounds which show the fullness of life and activity in the city: dogs yapping, the clatter of boots on the stones, the clash of shrill and piping voices'.[738] The presence of non-human life is also noticeable in the descriptions of horses, sparrows, pigeons, trees, dogs and even the grass which 'shoots up through the clefts of the cobble-stones'.[739] These natural presences are particularly valued by children who create new landscapes on the street by 'making gardens on the grass of the cobble-stones with match-box sides for paths and wisps of straw for the garden trees and ponds in the crevice [...]'.[740]

Mew's depiction of the city does not, however, stay within a single tone, but explores the complex variety of modern urban experience in terms of how it shapes an individual's perception of place. Mew spoke of experiencing 'pavement dreams' which she defines as 'those thoughts that come sometimes in cities, of the weary length or terrible brevity of life'.[741] This sense of exhaustion is present in 'Not for that City' where the city's dazzling vibrancy and its 'golden streets and glittering gates ablaze' exhausts the speaker.[742] The unrelenting glare of the 'shadeless, sleepless city of white days, | White nights' awakens the wish to retire from the exposure of its brilliance into the null placelessness of 'some remote and quiet stair'. The excessive stimulation of the city is both an attraction and a challenge. The contradictions and complexities of urban spaces are also explored in 'Le Sacré-Coeur (Montmartre)' where the speaker considers Paris from the distance of Montmartre. The central associations of the city are with its paradoxical mix of qualities: 'A thing of gaiety, a thing of sorrow'; 'So old, so young and infinite and lost'.[743] The city's allure is in the availability of pleasure and transgression and it is described as a large market place where everything is available: 'Bought to-night, possessed and tossed | Back to the mart again to-morrow'. The modernist city of Paris is personified as a shameless temptress, 'Dear Paris of the hot white hands, the scarlet lips, the scented hair', who offers all things for sale, but also retains an essential autonomy which is

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738 Charlotte Mew 'The Hay-Market' in *Collected Poems and Prose*, p. 410.
739 Mew, 'The Hay-Market', p. 407.
740 Mew, 'The Hay-Market', p. 408.
741 Penelope Fitzgerald, *Charlotte Mew and her Friends* (London: Flamingo, 2002), p. 48.
742 Mew, *Collected Poems*, p. 37
743 Mew, *Collected Poems*, p. 31.

central to its mysteriousness: 'While half your charm is that you are | Withal, like some unpurchasable star'.

The originality of Charlotte Mew's poetic treatment of the city can be seen in 'I Have Been Through the Gates' where the male subject of the poem is described through urban imagery: 'His heart, to me, was a place of palaces and pinnacles and shining towers'.[744] The poem plays on traditional associations of urban spaces as masculine spheres by presenting the subject as embodying the characteristics of the city. Interestingly the use of urban imagery to create such a positive portrait of the subject again requires the reader to identify positive associations with the city. The poetic possibilities of using urban imagery to speak about human life are shown in the correlation of the fate of the unnamed man to the fall of the city:

> His heart is a place with the lights gone out, forsaken by great winds
> and the heavenly rain, unclean and unswept,
> Like the heart of the holy city, old, blind, beautiful Jerusalem,
> Over which Christ wept.

By explicitly naming the city as Jerusalem at the end of the poem, Mew brings in wider cultural and religious associations with the city which reminds the reader of the history and meaning of urban spaces.

A particularly important aspect of Charlotte Mew's city poetry in terms of an ecocritical reading is her deep attachment to natural presences within the city. James Persoon describes Mew as possessing an 'environmentalist's sense of the fragility of nature'.[745] In her London poems, Mew shows a deep affection for the city which is founded on a close affinity with urban nature which is expressed most strongly through a love of trees. Trees and their historical significance to humans is also the subject of two of Mew's essays: 'Men and Trees I' and 'Men and Trees II'. The essays are anthropological studies of the historic relationship between the two which stretches across countries, cultures and religions. In 'Men and Trees II', Mew traces the cultural importance of trees to human experience: 'Life and death, good and evil have always been bound up closely with the tree [...]'.[746] Recognising the deep rooted and complex human associations with nature, Mew describes trees as related to 'health and healing', but also being 'a thing of shadows' where strange occurrence

[744] Mew, *Collected Poems*, p. 35.
[745] James Persoon, *Modern British Poetry: 1900-1939* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999), p. 110.
[746] Charlotte Mew, 'Men and Trees II' in *Collected Poems*, p. 394.

have taken place 'beneath its shade'.[747] The essay emphasises how central trees have been to mythology and to religion: being seen as 'inhabited by spirits' which made them sacred and worthy of great respect.[748]

This historic reverence for trees is contrasted to their heartless destruction in modern London which Mew describes in 'Men and Trees I'.[749] The essay again reaffirms 'The ancient and almost universal worship of trees' which created 'a world of tree-haunted men and men-haunted trees'.[750] Mew even allows for the possibility that 'Man himself [...] is descended from a tree'.[751] In relation to this vital connection, Mew's reaction to the 'butchery' and 'tree-murder' in London is vitriolic:

> The London trees are all prisoners of men, some unreasonably mutilated like the lopped crowd in Greenwich Park, while, now and then, there is a wholesale massacre such as that of the seven hundred in Kensington Gardens, which took place, no one knows why, some thirty years ago, against which even the executioners protested and perhaps the homeless rooks as vainly. In my own wooded neighbourhood one after another falls; progress pulls down the old spacious shabby houses and puts up flats for the half-world; a popular draper rears a proud red monument to success; the green vanishes: even tomorrow one may miss the familiar plane of yesterday, and the birds go with the trees.[752]

The passage shows the depth of feeling the 'massacre' elicits and also demonstrates Mew's understanding of the ecological impact of their removal on the wider ecosystem.

The felling is also recorded in Mew's poetry. In 'The Trees are Down'. The poem's religious epigraph lends moral authority to her environmental critique of the destructive ideology of urban modernity: 'and he cried with a loud voice: | Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees —(Revelation)'.[753] The distress caused by the men 'cutting down the great plane trees at the end of the gardens' is reflected in the long lines of the poem which threaten to spill over with grief at the fate of the trees and the callousness of the men felling them:

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[747] Mew, 'Men and Trees II', p. 394.
[748] Mew, 'Men and Trees II', p. 394.
[749] Mew, 'Men and Trees II', p. 395.
[750] Mew, 'Men and Trees I', p. 389.
[751] Mew, 'Men and Trees I', p. 389.
[752]Mew, 'Men and Trees I', p. 388.
[753] Mew, *Collected Poems*, p. 48.

For days there has been the grate of the saw, the swish of the branches
as they fall,
The crash of the trunks, the rustle of trodden leaves,
With the 'Whoops' and the 'Whoas', the loud common talk, the loud
common laughs of the men, above it all.

These coarse human voices replace the ‘whispering loveliness’ of the trees and alter the auditory as well as the visual landscape of the city. The felling prompts the memory of finding a dead rat during spring:

I remember one evening of a long past Spring
Turning in at a gate, getting out of a cart, and finding a large dead rat in
the mud of the drive.
I remember thinking: alive or dead, a rat was a god-forsaken thing,
But at least, in May, that even a rat should be alive.

The association between the trees and the rat initially seems obscure, but the grief for both shows Mew’s proto-environmental belief in the dignity of all non-human life irrespective of human attitudes towards them. The compassion for the dead rat is such that the speaker describes how the experience ‘Did once, for a moment, unmake the Spring’. Sadness for the rat temporarily disrupts the happiness of the season, but the destruction of the trees causes a permanent scar: ‘It is not for a moment the Spring is unmade to-day’. The connection between the human and non-human world is so deeply felt that it is described as a physical sensation: ‘my heart has been struck with the hearts of the planes’. The intensity of the speaker’s reaction shows an acute dependency on the trees for stability which relates to a shared history: ‘Half my life it has beat with these, in the sun, in the rains | In the March wind, the May breeze’. As in ‘Men and Trees l’, the wider environmental impact is also recognised:

There was only a quiet rain when they were dying;
They must have heard the sparrows flying,
And the small creeping creatures in the earth where they were lying -
But I, all day, I heard an angel crying:
“Hurt not the trees.”

The trauma of the incident is confirmed by the return to the subject in Mew’s short poem ‘Domus Caedet Arboreum’:

Ever since the great planes were murdered at the end of the gardens,
The city, to me, at night has the look of a Spirit brooding crime;

As if the dark houses watching the trees from dark windows
Were simply biding their time. [754]

The felling of the trees is understood as an immoral act and a betrayal of the historical connection between humans and trees which results in polluting the whole atmosphere of the city. The central anxiety of the poem is the possibility of further environmental destruction which again proves that rural living is not a prerequisite for environmental commitment or a close affinity with nature. Both 'The Trees are Down' and 'Domus Caedet Arboreum' protest against environmental damage not only in terms of the destruction of the trees, but also because their felling represents the diminishment of our own humanity. Mew's response to their destruction challenges ideas of the city as devoid of natural presences and shows an alternative, environmentally engaged representation of modern London in modernist poetry.

2. The Countryside

Alida Monro recounts how Charlotte Mew 'fully enjoyed London life, every minute of it, however much in her mind she appeared to long for the country'.[755] As well as affirming Mew's love of the city, Monro's comment also reveals the 'warring pair' of contradictory desires within Mew which are evident throughout her poetry. [756] In relation to place, these desires are between the lively attractions and relative freedoms of the city, and the possibility of rest and retreat in the countryside. At points in Mew's poetry the noise and pace of city life and the pressures of polite society threaten to overwhelm the speaker. At such times the countryside appeals as a place of escape and privacy. However, in her depiction of rural landscapes there is a clear awareness of the distance between fantasy and reality in terms of the experience of country life for those who are different.

In the city Mew was part of the group of writers centred around Alida and Harold Monro's Poetry Bookshop, and she enjoyed the admiration of several leading writers including Virginia Woolf, Thomas Hardy and Walter de la Mare. However, her fear of revelation in terms of her family history of financial troubles and mental illness prevented Mew from fully entering into the group. The threat of gossip and scandal motivates the wish to retreat to the countryside which is occasionally expressed in her poetry. In 'Afternoon Tea' the speaker voices a desire to escape the

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[754] Mew, *Collected Poems*, p. 40.
[755] Monro, p .xiv.
[756] Monro, p. xiv.

triviality of city society and 'lie under tall elm-trees' contemplating 'why the tossed shadow of boughs in a great wind shaking | Is such a lovely thing'.[757] This simplistic idea of the countryside as offering refuge and seclusion from the city contrasts to the dominant representation of country life and country people in Mew's poetry as restrictive and closed minded. This idyllic portrait of rural experience is disrupted even as it is created in 'Afternoon Tea'. The speaker's wish to lie 'Very still on my brackeny bed' expresses a desire for close contact with nature, but it also implies that for those on the margins of society peace may only be possible through a more literal and absolute return to the earth.

In 'The Farmer's Bride' and 'Saturday Market' the countryside is revealed as a place that is hostile and unfriendly to those who are different. The vulnerability of women in patriarchal rural society is particularly important to the poems because it connects to both women's greater identification with the natural rather than human world. Mew's rural dramatic monologue 'The Farmer's Bride' explores several key themes in Mew's poetry such as transgression, desire and otherness. In the poem the rural setting and West Country dialect initially suggests a conventional description of country life, but the poem darkens into a study of sexual obsession and the restrictions placed upon those who do not conform to the norms of society. The speaker is a farmer who is bewildered at the strange behaviour of his silent young bride and battles against his unreciprocated desire for her. Taking on aspects of both genders, Mew's sympathies are for the farmer whose dangerous desires threaten to transgress personal and moral boundaries, and also for the fearful young woman trapped in the patriarchal institution of marriage and terrified of male sexual advances. The poem is set in a claustrophobic rural community where difference is not accepted. What is interesting in the poem is the contrast between the two attitudes towards the natural world. The farmer's livelihood is based on the land and his familiarity with the natural world is evident in the comparison of his wife to aspects of nature:

> Shy as a leveret, swift as he,
> Straight and slight as a young larch tree,
> Sweet as the first wild violets, she,
> To her wild self. But what to me?[758]

[757] Mew, *Collected Poems*, p. 54.
[758] Mew, *Collected Poems*, p. 1.

However, whereas the farmer's relationship with the land is based on economic gain, even his selection of a wife having to be hurried because the priority was the harvest, his nameless wife has a more secretive, intuitive and emotional affinity to the natural world which the farmer finds unfathomable. What is striking about the experience of otherness in 'The Farmer's Bride' and other poems is the degree to which those on the margins of human society associate themselves with nature rather than humans. For the bride, the safety of nature contrasts to the threat of her husband, but her identification with it also marks a fundamental difference in her character which alienates her from human society. The unsettling tension between these two perspectives is in the realisation of the probable fate of a woman categorised as non-human or 'other' in a society based on anthropocentric domination of nature. This powerlessness is made clear when she attempts to escape the constraints of rural society and is hunted down like an animal and locked away:

> We chased her, flying like a hare
> Before our lanterns. To Church-Town
> All in a shiver and a scare
> We caught her, fetched her home at last
> And turned the key upon her, fast.

The source of the woman's strangeness is seen by the male speaker and the rural community to be in her refusal to fulfil her prescribed role as wife and mother. In this way she is incomprehensible to her husband who tries to understand her by categorising her in turn as a leveret, a fay, a mouse. Being an outsider who does not fit in with society is a painful and isolating existence, and the woman's silence in the poem reflects her lack of a voice within society. She occupies a suspended state between humans and nature: having her freedom restricted by humans like an animal, but also being subject to unwanted desires due to her human form. Interiors are often dangerous spaces in Mew's poetry and here the tension of the domestic sphere is intensified by the proximity of the farmer to his terrified wife which threatens to overspill into sexual violence. This implies further trauma for the girl and a bleak future for women who do not comply with the norms of patriarchal society:

> She sleeps up in the attic there
> Alone, poor maid. `Tis but a stair
> Betwixt us. Oh! my God! the down,
> The soft young down of her, the brown,
> The brown of her-her eyes, her hair, her hair!

The cruel treatment of an outsider by a rural community is also the subject of 'Saturday Market'. The poem foregrounds Mew's central themes of alienation and fear of revelation for women in the countryside. Again the female subject's own voice is not heard, nor is the particular nature of her shame described, but the suggestion is that she is attempting to hide evidence of either a miscarriage, an abortion or infanticide:

> See, you, the shawl is wet, take out from under
> The red dead thing —. In the white of the moon
> On the flags does it stir again? Well, and no wonder!
> Best make an end of it; bury it soon.[759]

The fear of revelation is expressed through the vivid corporeality of the blood soaking through the woman's shawl, but the specific trauma remains ambiguously concealed behind the 'red dead thing' with its associations with an array of feminine 'sins' and shame. The poem is set in a tight knit rural community where the inhabitants are gathered at the weekly market to trade goods and gossip. Mew views the market from the perspective of the outsider, describing it as a nightmarish bombardment of sights, smells and sounds combined with disconcerting sexual undertones: 'Pitchers and sugar-sticks, ribbons and laces, | Posies and whips and dicky-birds' seed'. In contrast to the idea of rural people as simple and friendly, here the locals leer voyeuristically at the unnamed woman. This is the darker side of rural life where there is a constant risk of scandal spreading through small communities and of personal trauma being turned into gossip:

> What were you showing in Saturday Market
> That set it grinning from end to end
> Girls and gaffers and boys of twenty — ?
> Cover it close with your shawl, my friend —
> Hasten you home with the laugh behind you,

The rejection of the woman from human society leaves her exiled and vulnerable to the duplicitous suggestions of the unidentified speaker who urges her towards suicide. In contrast to the judgment of society, nature's neutrality offers respite and a degree of comfort:

> Bury your heart in some deep green hollow
> Or hide it up in a kind old tree
> Better still, give it the swallow

[759] Mew, *Collected Poems*, p. 33.

When she goes over the sea.

However, the opportunity of concealment is denied by the sinister voice, representing society, which denies her the opportunity or any such retreat:

> Think no more of the swallow,
> Forget, you, the sea,
> Never again remember the deep green hollow
> Or the top of the kind old tree!

As in many of Mew's poems, interiors are associated with burial or enclosure and the chance of possible salvation through nature is shut off from the woman as the speaker ambiguously encourages 'a long, long rest'. The poems show an alternative view of the countryside from the perspective of an outsider who feels greater kinship with nature than with humans, but is denied full contact with either and so is left displaced and isolated. The result is an alternative perspective on the modernist theme of alienation which complicates traditional associations of the countryside as a place of refuge and shows the benefits of modern urban life for those on the margins of society.

In 'Ken', an outsider's difference is again expressed through, what rural society considers, an abnormal relationship with nature. Unlike the farmer's bride, Ken's difference is physical as well as psychological and the speaker initially shares wider society's shock at his appearance which they describe as showing barely 'a trace | of likeness to a human face'.[760] However, there is a recognition of Ken's essential humanity in his compassionate eyes which 'looked at you | As two red, wounded stars might do'. Again the poem is a study of how society treats outsiders, but the difference in 'Ken' is that the speaker takes the position of someone within society who is struggling with guilt for failing to speak up against Ken's internment because of their own fears of revelation. Mew again associates those on the margins of society with a closeness to nature. Ken is described as half human, half animal. His huge form and jarring movements lead the speaker to liken him to an 'uncouth bird'. The description dehumanises Ken in order to ease the speaker's guilt over their part in his fate, but it also reveals Ken's harmless, even feminine, character beyond his intimidating physicality.

[760] Mew, *Collected Poems*, p. 15.

However, the town's people are unable to look beyond his outer appearance and unconventional behaviour which marks him out as a danger to convention. Mew challenges prejudice against those who are different by suggesting that Ken possesses more humanity and compassion than the other members of society who are described as 'black clad people walking in their sleep'. These attributes are shown in Ken's gentleness towards children and animals who also lack a clear voice in society. Ken's inability to behave within the prescribed limits of the community is interpreted as a sign of ungodliness, but Mew suggests that his innocence, gentleness and final persecution create strong parallels to Christ. His cry to 'Take it away' at the sight of the crucifix in church is seen as evidence of his profanity, but it is also an instinctive and pure expression of compassion in response to an image of violent death.

'Ken' is interesting in ecocritical terms because it again associates difference with a deeper understanding of nature. Ken's sense of belonging to place is such that despite his marginalised position he sees himself at the centre of human and non-human society:

> [...] all the children and the deer,
> Whom every day he went to see
> Out in the park, belonged to him.

He also has the ability to perform acts of creative reconstruction through his unrestricted imaginative engagement with nature which allows him to perceive a whole from a fragment:

> Nothing was dead
> He 'said "a bird" if he picked up a broken wing,
> A perished leaf or any such thing
> Was just "a rose"; and once when I had said
> He must not stand and knock there anymore
> He left a twig on the mat outside my door.

Such creative acts mirror the poetic technique of synecdoche and suggest poetry may offer an alternative way of speaking for those who lack a clear voice in society. Ken's actions also give value to overlooked or disregarded aspects of nature by showing their poetic potential and the possibility of new connections and insights being gained from considering the natural world from a decentralised perspective. However, the speaker rejects this opportunity for communication in the fear that their own difference may be revealed.

In light of Ken's love of place and the creative potential of his understanding of nature, confining him in 'that red brick barn' on account of his difference is a significant cruelty. Interiors are often prisons in Mew's poetry and by locking Ken away from sight the town exposes its fear of those who are seen as different or who do not observe the rules of society. Nature at first seems to mourn his absence as 'the last thrush stiffened in the snow', but the seasons move on 'to talk of May' and only the speaker is left wondering what happens 'Beneath those twenty windows in a row'. The internment of Ken is a way for society to hide those who disturb its sense of self or challenge the norms of behaviour. The speaker is implicit in Ken's imprisonment and is left with the image of his eyes as he called their name. The poem recognises the need to repress difference in order to gain acceptance in human society, but concealing alternative voices that are capable of producing original and insightful perspectives on nature limits new ways of seeing which could provide important creative possibilities for poetry.

3. Nature, Otherness and Trauma

The treatment of alienation in Charlotte Mew's poetry is interesting because it is often characterised by a greater identification with the non-human than human world which results in alternative perspectives on nature that questions the divisions between the two. This interest in difference and otherness is also discussed in Mew's essays which examine the character of other literary outsiders. In particular there is a deep admiration for Emily Brontë, whom Mew describes as 'one of nature's outcasts' who 'stood alone'.[761] Her fascination and compassion for Brontë stems from recognition of the loneliness that comes from possessing such a separate nature. In her essay 'The Poems of Emily Brontë', Mew connects Brontë's distance from human society to her intense relationship with the natural world which she describes as her 'passion and only love'.[762] In the absence of human company, Brontë is seen to have filled her life with 'spirits of storm and cloud, of sun and darkness' which are 'her sole companions'.[763] Nature exists in Brontë's mind as both a physical reality and an imaginative stimulus which is valued for its separateness, but also relied upon emotionally as 'guardians against an ever-threatening despair'.[764] Mew may also have found similarities to her own nature in her description of Brontë as a figure

[761] Charlotte Mew, 'The Poetry of Emily Brontë' in *Collected Poems*, p. 358.
[762] Mew, 'The Poetry of Emily Brontë', p. 358.
[763] Mew, 'The Poetry of Emily Brontë', p. 358.
[764] Mew, 'The Poetry of Emily Brontë', p. 366.

‘hardly human in its self-sufficiency and aloofness, and yet more than human in its compassionate gentleness for the doomed and erring’.[765]

Charlotte Mew also has a mutual appreciation of Thomas Hardy who she refers to as ‘her King of Wessex’.[766] Hardy’s compassion for outcasts or those who hide shameful secrets and his recognition of the hardships of rural life for such people connects to several of Mew’s poetic themes. This engagement with alternative aspects of rural life also draws Mew, like Edward Thomas, to the nature writer Richard Jefferies. Jefferies’s spiritual devotion to the English countryside is matched by his recognition of the autonomy of the natural world and the fact that it will continue, without grief, unfazed and unaltered, when he dies. In her essay ‘A Country Book’, Mew refers to Jefferies as a type of exile: possessing ‘a heart too large to find a home on earth, which yet never reached as far as heaven, and so wandered on, with widely-opened but sun-blinded eyes upon its endless way’.[767] Her response to Jefferies’s last collection of essays, *Fields and Hedgerows*, reveals much about Mew’s own attitudes towards the countryside. She praises Jefferies’s ability to recognise nature ‘not as a great picture but rather as a living world’ which can rebalance the modern mind: ‘the tint of this man’s mind was sadness, though the tint of Nature – which above all other things he loved – is joy’.[768] She also responds to his assertion that understanding of nature cannot be achieved through books but requires an openness of the mind and a degree of instinctive response. It could also be added that poetry may provide a path towards communicating the essential character of the natural world:

> ”What is the colour of the dandelion?” he asks, “not yellow, nor orange, nor gold.” And so he turned to books to find it. There was much about assorted wools and soldiers’ uniforms, but “the dandelion remained unexplained”. “So many, many books – and such a very very little bit of Nature in them.” He found from the dandelion that there were “no books” to teach the names and mysteries of beauty, only “five thousand books to unlearn”.[769]

These writers shape Charlotte Mew’s appreciation of nature and provide a sense of context and identification which eases her own isolation. However, her

[765] Mew, ‘The Poetry of Emily Brontë’, p. 358.
[766] Warner, ’Introduction’, in *Charlotte Mew: Collected Poems and Prose*, ed. by Val Warner (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1981), p. xii.
[767] Charlotte Mew, ‘A Country Book’ in *Collected Poems,* p. 411.
[768] Charlotte Mew, ‘A Country Book’, p. 411.
[769] Charlotte Mew, ‘A Country Book’, p. 411.

poetry remains highly original in its treatment of nature and one particularly individual aspect of her approach is her interest in the impact of trauma and grief on perception of place. In 'The Fête' trauma completely alters a young man's perception of place and permanently damages his relationship with nature. As in the majority of Mew's poetry, specific details about the traumatic event are not revealed, but it appears that some form of sexual encounter has caused a fundamental disruption in the speaker's mind. The traumatic event occurs as a result of the arrival of the fair in town whose exotic performers and colourful acts break the ordinary routine of the community. The carnival atmosphere offers the possibility of transgression which ends the young man's innocence and permanently disconnects him from his sheltered childhood. It is significant that the incident takes place in the woods because this is a setting traditionally associated with deviant sexuality and danger: 'There were only wolves' eyes in the wood'.[770] One of the consequences of the event is that nature loses its neutrality and is considered somehow complicit to the crime. Nature and in particular the trees become witnesses to the speaker's shame and in his paranoia they 'seem to stare' at him accusingly. In other poems those who have suffered psychological disturbance find comfort in nature, but here the speaker's inability to separate the event from the landscape where it took place causes a deep aversion to the woods: 'All my long life how I shall hate the trees!'. The event also causes division between the past and the present and the speaker acknowledges that 'Nothing will be the same again':

> All my life long I shall see moonlight on the fern
>   And the black trunks of trees. Only the hair
> Of any woman can belong to God.
> The stalks are cruelly broken where we trod,

The trauma leads to a retreat from nature into small rooms in the city, but even at this distance the estrangement with the natural world remains and emerges as a loss of love for nature and a lack of care for the environment which means the speaker will 'not care | As I used to do when I see the bracken burn'.

In both 'The Quiet House' and 'In Nunhead Cemetery' trauma causes each individual to question traditional poetic associations of nature. In 'The Quiet House' conventional understanding of the countryside as a place of innocence and virtue, and the city as a place of vice and transgression are reversed as the speaker suffers a distressing event in the countryside which she attempts to heal in her retreat to the

[770] Mew, *Collected Poems*, p. 3.

city. After a period of grieving for the loss of her mother and siblings the unnamed speaker goes to the countryside to find respite but whilst she is there an encounter leads to a traumatic experience:

> He frightened me before he smiled —
> He did not ask me if he might —
> He said that he would come one Sunday night,
> He spoke to me as if I were a child.[771]

Similarly to 'The Fête', the incident is not clearly defined, but there is a suggestion of a non-consensual sexual act which is so distressing that it can only be recollected through fragments of memory. The countryside where the speaker originally went to seek comfort has left her 'burned and stabbed half through': connecting to the wider theme of the divided self which runs throughout Mew's poetry. The speaker returns to the city and shuts herself away, waiting for the day when 'I shall not think; I shall not be'.

The trauma fundamentally alters the speaker's perception of the natural world. In the city she watches nature from her window, but her profound psychological distress and prohibitive father prevent her from interacting with the outside world:

> The sparrows fly across the Square,
> The children play as we four did there
> The trees grow green and brown and bare

The trauma is shown to have disturbed the speaker's perception of the world to such an extent that the colours in the sky have intensified:

> The colours of the world have turned
> To flame, the blue, the gold has burned
> In what used to be such a leaden sky.

The incident in the countryside also shatters traditional associations between nature and culture. Roses, which are traditionally connected with femininity and romantic love, become emblematic of the pain caused by the real consequences of unchecked desire. Dissociated from poetic romance they become weapons which 'stab you across the street | Deeper than any knife'. The deconstruction of the rose to a raw 'scarlet flower' is the final rejection of its previous symbolism, but the speaker's hypersensitivity to colour means that roses continue to dominate her

[771] Mew, *Collected Poems*, p. 17.

perception of the world to the extent that they provoke a painful physical sensation: ‘Red is the strangest pain to bear’. The crimson that ‘haunts you everywhere’ is then internalised as the boundaries between the self and the world dissolve: ‘I think that my soul is red’. At the end of the poem the intensity of the speaker’s inner turmoil is at odds with the monotony of her daily existence and this split in her identity denies her the opportunity to recover from the experience in the countryside: ‘ghosts of reddened swords’. Concealing the psychological distress isolates the speaker from the world and causes such a divide within them that death seems the only hope of reunification: ‘I think it is myself I go to meet’.

‘In Nunhead Cemetery’ has an interesting relationship to ‘The Quiet House’ because it examines male rather than female grief, but in both cases the experience results in a distorted view of the physical world. In the poem the speaker is suffering extreme grief as a result of the death of his lover. The cemetery he refuses to leave represents a borderland between the living and the dead which reflects the speaker’s own suspension between sanity and madness and his inability to re-engage with life: ‘This is not a real place’.[772] Again Mew’s interest is in the psychological impact of trauma and the ways in which it can alter perceptions of nature. The difference in the speaker’s relationship to nature in the past to the present is sharp:

> But still it was a lovely thing
> Through the grey months to wait for Spring
> With the birds that go a-gypsying
> In the parks till the blue seas call.

These memories of a time when spring was anticipated contrast to the rejection of life in the present and the desire to remain in stasis with the dead in the graveyard. The poem also shares the rejection of traditional associations of roses with ‘The Quiet House’. The romantic flowers seem charged with malice: ‘There is something horrible about a flower’. Grief has altered their meaning from a symbol of love to a callous reminder of the way nature can reproduce seemingly perfect copies of itself in an illusion of immortality: ‘He threw it in just now: it will not last another house; | There are thousands more: you do not miss a rose’. The accumulation of ‘fields and fields of roses’ on the graves are repulsive to the speaker in comparison to his acute sense of loss for an individual.

[772] Mew, *Collected Poems*, p. 8.

Grief also alters the perception of the city which is imprinted with memories of past happiness: 'We were like children, last week, in the Strand'. London symbolises life, but the speaker shuns the city because, like the woods in 'The Fête', it has become inseparable from memories of the past and the lost lover's associations with the different landmarks:

> [...] you used to care
> For the lions in Trafalgar Square,
> Who'll stand and speak for London when her bell of judgement tolls –
> And the gulls at Westminster that were
> The old sea-captains' souls.

As in other poems there is the desire to escape from pain through death: 'Put me to sleep'. However, the masculine grief also reveals itself as more violent than the female speaker in 'The Quiet House' and there is also a rage against nature as the speaker attempts to force a resurrection by the strength of his love:

> Now I will burn you back, I will burn you through,
> Tough I am damned for it we two will lie
> And burn, here where the starlings fly.

In 'The Quiet House' and 'In Nunhead Cemetery' grief causes a deep divide between each speaker's relationship with nature and distorts their perception of the natural world. However, Mew also shows that such suffering can bring about a freshness of perception and a renewed understanding of nature. In 'I So Liked Spring' the speaker reflects on how their understanding of spring was influenced by another person:

> I so liked Spring last year
> Because you were here;-
> The thrushes too –
> Because it was these you so like to hear—
> I so liked you.[773]

Love had previously shaped their perception and the value of the birds became linked to its association with a particular person. But the New Year is poignantly called 'a different thing' and after a period of mourning comes the ability to see the world with more clarity. The speaker now likes spring 'because it is simply Spring | As the thrushes do'. A period of suffering has resulted in a new purity of perception and an appreciation of nature which is free from human associations and refined by suffering.

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[773] Mew, *Collected Poems*, p. 42.

Whilst ‘In Nunhead Cemetery’ and ‘The Quiet House’ explore division from nature, and ‘I So Liked Spring’ shows the recovery of recognition of the neutrality of the season, ‘The Changeling’ shows difference from human society as creating an intense and irreversible identification with the natural world. ‘The Changeling’ draws ecocritical interest because it focuses on an individual who exists on the borders between the human and non-human world. This peripheral position results in an alternative perspective on the modernist idea of alienation whilst also suggesting that those who are different may be capable of greater understanding of the natural world. In Edith Sitwell’s poetry there is a desire to regain a childlike response to the landscape which is based in a belief that children have a freshness of perception and a close and highly imaginative relationship with nature. In ‘The Changeling’, Mew re-imagines this connection through the image of a child whose identity is painfully divided between the human and non-human world. This perspective on the modernist experience of alienation involves complex associations of nature with fairytale imagery and supernatural horror to communicate the experience of complete disconnection from society:

> One evening, too, by the nursery fire,
>   We snuggled close and sat round so still,
> When suddenly as the wind blew higher,
>   Something scratched on the window-sill.
> A pinched brown face peered in – I shivered;
>   No one listened or seemed to see;
> The arms of it waved and the wings of it quivered,
>   Whoo – I knew it had come for me [...][774]

Here difference is not something that is celebrated but is a painful and isolating state which feels, at times, unbearable. Nature does not offer comfort to the child because its autonomy makes it essentially detached from all human emotion. In ‘The Changeling’ the child cannot resist his essential ‘wild’ self, but this sense of belonging in the amoral realm of nature prevents the possibility of acceptance in human society and also restricts his opportunity for religious redemption as the human idea of God has ‘nothing to do with us fairy people’. The cold separateness of nature and the denial of religious absolution leaves the child alone in the woods:

> Why did they bring me here to make me
>   Not quite bad and not quite good,

[774] Mew, *Collected Poems*, p. 13.

Why, unless They're wicked, do They want, in spite, to take me
Back to Their wet, wild wood?

As in 'Ken', the child's difference is also marked physically with the its illegitimacy being visible in the 'queer brown face' which reveals him to be only 'half your child'. However, this peripheral identity does allow for a heightened, almost animalistic, sensitivity to nature:

You can hear the whole world whispering;
The shy green grasses making love,
The feathers grow on the dear grey dove,
The tiny heart of the redstart beat,
The patter of the squirrel's feet,
The pebbles pushing in the silver streams,
The rushes talking in their dreams,
The swish-swish of the bat's black wings,
The wild-wood bluebell's sweet ting-tings,
Humming and hammering at your ear,
Everything there is to hear

This sensitivity can be seen as a defence against the stigma of mental illness by recasting it as a way of allowing the individual to enter into a magical world of altered perception. However, it is also a painful experience and the theme of the divided self is again explored as the desire to remain in the comfort of the nursery with 'the fire's red gleam' is pitched against the child's true wild nature which calls them to their 'own old home' with the fairies. The choice to be part of nature is fully understood as one that will bring loneliness and distress in a place that is 'Black and chill', but their innate nature cannot be repressed:

I shall grow up, but never grow old,
I shall always, always be very cold,
I shall never come back again!

The speaker exists in a kind of limbo which characterises much of Mew's poetry: looking through the window at human society but feeling completely estranged from it. However, the narrative of the changeling can also be interpreted as a defence of the marginalised and a statement about the innate nature of difference that means that certain desires or ways of living are not a matter of choice but are beyond an individual's control. Similarly, the idea of the changeling can also be seen to have a broader relevance to the wider sense of alienation caused by modernity which fails to accommodate difference and places limitations on those who propose alternative ways of seeing.

4. The First World War

Although Charlotte Mew often employs dramatic monologue or creates separate personas to explore the themes of grief, alienation, psychological distress and repression, her poems are frequently regarded as reflections of private experience rather than as a broader engagement with the wider world. However, as Michael Schmidt observes, Charlotte Mew 'did not create a fantastic escapist world' but reacts directly to the contemporary situation and 'engaged with reality at its most vulnerable and exposed'.[775] In many of these poems this engagement is expressed through her exploration of the experience of alienation from human society and division from the natural world which is shared by other modernist poets. In her war poems though her reflections on society are more explicit and direct: proving that her interests extend beyond expressions of private experience. The poems are informed by Mew's characteristic compassion for those who suffer and her understanding of the complex impact of grief on the human relationship to nature. She also continues her interest in those who lack a direct voice by addressing the loss of those grieving privately at home.

War poetry is a difficult area for female poets because of their lack of direct experience of the conflict and also because the jingoistic poetry of a few women writers had drawn fierce criticism from poets such as Sassoon and Owen. Jeredith Merrin credits Mew with writing about the war with sensitivity and care:

> Mew presses her private experience of pain into the service of a wider but not a facile or presumptuous empathy. She shows us how passion (in the sense of solitary suffering) can become compassion (in the etymological sense of suffering with) [...]. [776]

The grief of war leads Mew to express an ambivalent response to masculine concepts of patriotism and victory. Her interest is in the psychological consequences of loss and the disruption to human/nature relations makes the poems particularly interesting in ecocritical terms. In 'The Cenotaph' Mew considers public and private expressions of grief through the explorations of different forms of memorial. The freshness of the conflict is acknowledged through the description of the physical marks of war on the French landscape: 'Not yet will those measureless fields be

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[775] Schmidt, p. 576.

[776] Jeredith Merrin, 'The Ballad of Charlotte Mew', *Modern Philology: A Journal Devoted to Research in Medieval and Modern Literature*, 195 (1997), pp. 200-217 (p. 217).

green again'.[777] This temporary disruption to the land contrasts to the permanent loss of 'wonderful youth' which has resulted in not only the public demonstration of grief represented by the erection of the cenotaph, but also the hidden and private grief of wives and mother who have been irreversibly wounded: 'But here, where the watchers by lonely hearths from the thrust of an inward │ sword have more slowly bled'. Mew does not celebrate victory but finds the 'small, sweet, twinkling country things' brought from 'the little gardens of little places where son or sweetheart was born' which are placed around to the base of the cenotaph to be a more humble and moving tribute than the official monument itself.

In 'May, 1915' the devastation of the war is examined in terms of the disruption between human relations to nature. Again the environmental scars of the battlefields' 'scorched, blackened woods' and 'wounded trees' are connected to the emotional scars of those who are grieving.[778] The speaker looks for comfort in the assurance that 'Spring will come again' with all its connotations of regeneration and renewed hope. Comfort is sought in the certainties and permanence of nature: 'Sure of the sky: sure of the sea to send its healing breeze, │ Sure of the sun', but the war has brought all previous assumptions about the world into question and the speaker's assurances weaken to a tentative hope that 'Surely the Spring, when God shall please, │ Will come again [...]'. But in the immediate aftermath of war, the crisis of the human world has blocked awareness of nature and shut off the prospect of new life in the future:

> To those who sit to-day with their great Dead, hands in their hands,
> eyes in their eyes,
> At one with Love, at one with Grief: blind to the scattered things and
> changing skies

This alienation from nature and the seasons is also present in 'June, 1915' where the speaker asks: 'Who thinks of June's first rose to-day?'[779] In the aftermath of war, beauty and the arrival of summer can only be noticed by 'some child' whose age and innocence protects them from world events. For adults, war has caused a schism in their relationship with nature which makes the rose and all its associations with love and beauty 'as far away | As are the fearless stars from these veiled lamps of town'. The cold neutrality of nature towards human life is now reflected by the

[777] Mew, *Collected Poems*, p. 35.
[778] Mew, *Collected Poems*, p. 42.
[779] Mew, *Collected Poems*, p. 42.

lack of interest from humans in the natural world and a clear divide is shown between adults, child and season:

> What's little June to a great broken world with eyes gone dim
> From too much looking on the face of grief, the face of dread?
>   Or what's the broken world to June and him
> Of the small eager hand, the shining eyes, the rough bright head?

The unidentified speaker also notices the first rose of the season, but importantly does not prescribe a simplistic return to nature in order to relieve suffering. Instead there is acceptance that human catastrophe has overshadowed traditional associations with the season for this year.

Nature is also central to wider considerations of death in Charlotte Mew's poetry. In 'The Poetry of Emily Brontë', Mew describes death as a respite and an end to despair: 'Death solves and absolves all'.[780] In her poetry, death suggests an escape from the struggle of existing on the margins of society or being marked by difference. However, the temptation of death is balanced against attachment to nature which makes the idea of permanently departing from the natural world a painful one. In 'From a Window', the speaker contemplates leaving the world and faces the prospect bravely: 'I mean to go through the door without fear'.[781] However, the allure of escaping the pain of life is tempered by the realisation that there may be nothing as beautiful as the trees beyond it: 'I shall miss the sycamore more, I suppose, | Than anything else on this earth that is out in green'. This sentiment is repeated but extended to all of nature in 'In the Fields' where the speaker questions whether 'there is a heavenlier world that this?' and whether beyond death there will still be a memory of beauty of the physical world: 'Will the strange heart of any everlasting thing | Bring me these dreams that take my breath away?'.[782]

Charlotte Mew died alone in a nursing home in London, in a room with a single window with a view of 'only bricks where no sun came'.[783] She valued freedom and had said that 'one can bear things under the open sky', but now she was separated from the familiar landmarks of London which connected her to childhood, friends and writing.[784] She had previously said 'it makes all the difference to me to

[780] Mew, 'The Poetry of Emily Brontë', p. 359.
[781] Mew, *Collected Poems*, p. 37.
[782] Mew, *Collected Poems*, p. 37.
[783] Sims, George, *A Life in Catalogues and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Holmes Publishing Company, 1994), p.157.
[784] Fitzgerald, p. 224.

be in the right place' and the bleakness of her final environment is in stark contrast to the death of a Breton shepherd in one of her favourite stories who died outside and found final reunification with nature by transforming into a pile of leaves.[785]

Charlotte Mew's poetry is important in understanding the complex environmental aspects of British modernist poetry because it voices the experiences of contact with the human and non-human world from the perspective of those on the margins of both. Mew rejects simplistic understanding of nature as source of comfort to those who suffer and instead examines boundaries between humans and nature and the painful rejection experienced by those who transgress these boundaries. The marginalised voice challenges conventional perceptions of the world and shows the creative potential for greater understanding of nature from those who hold a decentralised position in society. This alternative view of place relates to both urban and rural environments and is especially important in challenging preconceptions of the modernist city as a place devoid of natural presences and the countryside as an untroubled refuge for all.

[785] Monro, p. xvii.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has shown that within British modernist poetry there was a clear and sustained interest in nature, place and the environment which forms a challenge to reductive notions of modernism as predominantly anthropocentric in character and urban in focus. Understanding the ways in which modernist poets responded to place is important because they were writing during a time of fundamental changes in human/nature relations following the dislocating experiences of war and modernity. This ecocritical analysis of modernism has revealed a strong environmental consciousness and deep anxiety regarding disruptive changes in the relationship between humans and nature. It has shown that an ecocritical reading can extend knowledge of this under-examined aspect of the movement. It has also produced new insights into each poet's work by examining the different techniques and approaches used to modernise poetic representation of nature and re-evaluate human relationships with place.

The aim of this thesis is to foreground the importance of nature in British modernist poetry and to examine a range of responses to the natural world across a selection of poets. The result of this analysis reveals a unifying interest in finding new ways of writing about the non-human world capable of communicating the tensions and complexities of modern attitudes towards place. The selection of poets was grounded in a desire to show a range of creative responses to nature and to environmental change. This diversity has shown modernism to be a rich subject for ecocritical study. Edward Thomas's poetry introduced several of the issues, themes and anxieties which informed later modernism. His importance to this thesis was in providing a model of how to write about nature and changes in human/nature relations in a modern way and within a rural context. The tensions Thomas explores between dissociative modern lifestyles and the desire to have meaningful contact with the natural world have continuing relevance to the environmental preoccupations of later modernists. He provides a critique of modernity which centres on the psychological need for contact with nature and is important in reassessing poetic language in order to find more truthful modes of representing the natural world.

As the principal figure in this study, T. S. Eliot's poetry was vital in showing that environmental awareness and an interest in the poetic possibilities of place were not purely marginal interests, but were also evident in the work of leading

modernists. An ecocritical analysis of Eliot's poetry revealed a prescient awareness of the possibility of environmental crisis as a result of exploitative human actions on the earth. In response to this threat Eliot created an image of society estranged from nature in order to show the devastating spiritual, cultural and environmental consequences of such a division. In *The Waste Land,* Eliot exemplifies the importance of modernism's treatment of place by using formal and linguistic experimentation to communicate the noise, pace and sensation of the modern city. An ecocritical analysis of these modernist techniques showed that finding new modes of poetic expression did not represent a rejection of the reality of place, but created new ways of re-energising language and form in order to challenge outdated poetic conventions. Eliot's environmental commitment was confirmed in *Four Quartets* which continued the search for reconnection to place by returning to landscapes which had shaped his character and thinking. In approaching the poem from an ecocritical perspective, the emphasis was placed on the literal rather than the symbolic meaning of its landscapes. The resulting reading confirmed Eliot's concerns surrounding the vulnerability of the environment to human destruction, but also provided alternative, environmentally responsible models of living.

Edith Sitwell's avant-garde experiments with the sound, rhythm and texture of language provided another example of a modernist poet searching for new ways of writing about nature that could also engage with tensions and developments within wider society. Like Eliot, Sitwell shows that poetic experimentation can produce new ways of writing about nature which are capable of challenging inherited perceptions of place and re-engaging the reader with the sensuous experience of contact with the non-human world. Sitwell's poetry has also been important in proving that the use of heightened or fantastical imagery does not prohibit an ecocritical reading, but can create new ways of representing place which capture the energy and character of living things rather than simply producing a photographic reproduction. The resulting poetry challenged conventional ways of thinking about nature and reinvigorated its poetic representation in order to increase the environmental consciousness of the reader.

An ecocritical analysis of Charlotte Mew's poetry revealed a sustained interest in nature and a strong critique of the environmental damage caused by urban modernity. The originality of Mew's approach was identified as her examination of nature from the perspective of those on the margins of society whose decentralised position produced new ways of thinking about human/nature relations. Charlotte

Mew's poetry is important in challenging negative representations of the modern city by recognising the shared presence of both human and non-human life in the capital. Similarly her alternative perspective of rural life challenged traditional associations of the countryside by foregrounding the experience of those on the periphery of human society whose difference offers new perspectives on the natural world.

The poets examined in this thesis were selected on account of the depth of their poetic engagement with the natural world and the importance of their insights into human/nature relations during this period. The aim of this thesis was to explore a range of poetic responses to nature from both central figures in modernism and more marginal voices. However, whilst each poet offers a highly individual response to the natural world, there are recurrent themes and preoccupations which unite all four. Most significantly, the poets studied share a recognition of the continuing importance of nature, place and the environment to the individual and society, and all attempt to achieve physical, emotional and artistic reconnection with the natural world through their poetry. All four poets demonstrate an awareness of place as composed of both human and non-human presences and of nature possessing autonomous value independent of human needs. There is a mutual acceptance that both rural and urban environments are subject to continual changes and that nature has the ability to adapt to many of the ways in which humans shape the landscape. However, all four poets voice concerns regarding the disruptive impact of war, modernity and urbanisation on the delicate balance between human and non-human needs. This anxiety is expressed through a shared sense of displacement and alienation which motivates a search for new ways of writing about human/nature relations in modern society which can also recognise the impact of wider events on environmental thinking. The resulting linguistic and formal experimentation challenges the dualism between nature and culture by showing how poetic experimentation can lead to a deeper understanding of the natural world. This exploratory aspect forms part of a fundamental re-engagement with the natural world which confirms the continuing importance of nature to poetry of this period.

Edgell Rickword's phrase the 'earth-haunted mind' has particular resonance to modernist poetry's search for physical, spiritual and artistic reconnection with nature.[786] Modernist poets were writing during a period when, for the first time, more people lived in the city than the countryside in Britain and so consequently had less

[786] Edgell Rickword, 'Terminology' in *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), p. 68.

direct reliance on the land for their livelihood and survival. In light of this development, the continuing desire for contact with the natural world reveals something essential about the deep and complex relationship between humans and nature that means that even in the modern age 'we still *need* that which is other than ourselves and our own creations'.[787] The poets in this thesis revitalised poetic representations of nature in order to reaffirm its continuing importance to modern society and encourage a sense of responsibility which could challenge environmentally destructive aspects of modernity. The strength of each poet's environmental commitment not only challenges misconceptions of modernism as a movement which has minimal interest in nature, but also informs how we continue to think about nature and the role of poetry in reconnecting us to the natural world.

[787] David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), p. ix.

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