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## Post-Nature Nature Writing? A personal view of what nature writing might break in case of an emergency.

There's a big clump of royal fern, *Osmunda regalis*, growing in the railway cutting at Edgeley Junction just outside Stockport. Seeing it from the train window in the morning has become a kind of ritual: I try to get a seat on the starboard side of the carriage to keep watch for it, recognising landmarks, anticipating, never quite certain of the exact location until it appears – whoosh, a near subliminal image. In winter it's a pile of sticks, in spring the crosiers unfurl bronze-green, in summer it's majestic carrying 'flowers' of russet spores, in autumn it flames yellow. I find the plant fascinating: is it relict of a pre-railway world or was it planted? It has an uncanniness in the landscape, it reminds me of other places and times when I've seen royal fern; it has a rich natural history and cultural references. And so, I make notes about it for a piece of writing I haven't worked out yet.

Now, do I write about this particular fern because it's beautiful and weird and I'm enchanted and developing a bit of an obsession with it in a literary sort of way, or am I using it as a symbol (ecosemiotics) for a range of environmental ideas that may have some purchase on public consciousness if they relate to real experience? Either way, my experience of the Edgeley Junction *Osmunda* in its fleeting trackside landscape is of a small pulse-ripple with a kind of gothic characteristic John Ruskin described as a *disquietude*; it is a taking-notice, a bearing witness, a celebration that inspires advocacy for a vegetation that is often overlooked and under-appreciated. This, I think, is what nature writing can do.

But is that enough? You won't need reminding that there's a lot of nature writing about at the moment. What has been termed New Nature Writing, to distinguish it from the more traditional countryside, naturalist, pastoral canon, is a publishing phenomenon concerned with identity and authenticity, balancing political and ethical interests, and taking steps to explore ecopoetics, fiction, speculative reality, critical theory and new thinking in science and philosophy - a literature emerging from a cultural space on the brink of environmental collapse. However fascinating this is, and although I'm not sure I know or care about where my own writing fits in the evolving genre, I don't think (to answer the question above) it is anything like enough.

Much new nature writing is still heavily influenced by the pastoral, which poet and ecocritic Terry Gifford describes as a mediated relationship with Nature. The pastoral is a

relationship negotiated between an outer Nature (the environment) and an inner (human) Nature within ourselves, played out through a nostalgic attachment to the land, which of course is also what nature conservation is. As the pastoral declines, Gifford now sees the post-pastoral as a combination of the following conditions: an awe leading to humility when faced with Nature's creative-destructive forces; an awareness of culturally loaded language used about country; an acceptance of human causes of Nature's dilemmas; the exploitation of Nature is linked to the exploitation of the less powerful people in society.

There is plenty to argue about with new nature writing but that's a healthy part of its development and writers often only know what they think by writing about it. Personally, I don't want my writing to be simply a Cartesian meditation on wildlife through which I come to understand my own existence in relation to place. I don't want writing to stand in for Nature in a proprietorial way, but to stand up for it as advocacy, making a space in which Nature reveals itself. Even though I am part of the royal fern's ecologically connected existence, this particular fern matters despite ways in which it may (or may not) matter to me. In this extinction emergency, attempts to articulate non, other or more-than-human existence have to acknowledge that its imminent loss is being caused by human existence. Writing creative nonfiction, as an application of branches of knowledge in the humanities, has to acknowledge the literary culture of humanism which Robert Pogue Harrison describes as 'an ideology that so thoroughly divorced the human from the animal species and considered the Earth as a whole the former's natural inheritance.'

That humankind's self-centredness would eventually lead to its extinction was predicted in the 1950s by Californian poet Robinson Jeffers who proposed a nature writing based on 'inhumanism.' 'We must uncenter our minds from ourselves/ We must unhumanize our views a little...' (*Carmel Point*). This kind of anti-humanism attracted writers from the left and the right and although largely lost in obscurity, re-emerged in movements away from the anthropocentric such as deep ecology. What is now posthumanism – not the technoscientific enhancement of human capacity through artificial intelligence etc., but the implications of extending the circle of moral concern beyond the human species – is having to tackle ideas about a non-anthropocentric Nature differently. The notion of dark ecology from Timothy Morton and Paul Kingsnorth and others is an interesting example; so too is the object-oriented ontology of Graham Harvey who has said, 'The world is not the world manifest to humans, to think a reality beyond our thinking is not nonsense but obligatory.'

When such an obligation is applied to writing, it may be part of a rewilding of culture and address the danger of nature writing becoming a nature reserve, like wildlife films that have become zoos, an enclosure for preserving Nature as artefact, memory created through the symbiotic relationship between cultivation and civilisation. There comes a point when what is written about wildlife and habitats becomes more real than what is left of it in the wild, until it becomes like John Clare's landrail (corncrake), 'tis like a fancy every where/ a sort of living doubt.' The bird has an enigmatic presence in the commonplace of Clare's 19<sup>th</sup> century English countryside because it's heard but not seen and now, apart from a reintroduction to the Nene Washes, it's heard about but not seen because it's locally extinct. Much of the wildlife of these islands is now 'a living doubt' and no amount of transcendental writing or reimagining or monumentalising lists on war memorials to the fallen species will undo what we have done. Writing about Nature is replacing the Nature that's written about.

Articulating Nature beyond the nihilism of extinction, the narcissism of how it makes me feel, or the capitalism of its resource value *to* biodiversity, *for* ecosystem services *as* natural capital - is a most urgent challenge for any cultural project. Readers of *Ecos* will be aware that the same is true of nature conservation. That which often appeared to protect the Nature we like for fear of the Nature we don't was a preference-led kind of conservation concealed within a pragmatism that had itself become an ideology. If I conserve the Nature I like because it matters to me, I end up persecuting the Nature I don't like because it may harm what does matter to me. Orthodoxies in conservation come and go; ideological pragmatism spawned a wave of neoliberal, neo-environmentalists that say science proves Nature is resilient and adapts to human disturbance; large ecosystems can't be saved nor should they be, new habitats arise from destroyed old ones; technology can save us; ecosystem services, including ferns growing by railway tracks, can be priced. Instead, I feel that in a post-secular world - one in which the secular and the spiritual co-exist in a multi-cultural way - there is a sacredness to Nature that I have to try and articulate and admit that, as the philosopher Alan Holland says simply, 'Nature is good, even when it's not good for us.' Nature writing is riddled with riddles like this.

Describing myself as a nature writer sounds like a confession to a self-help group in which my peers suffering from proper addictions, such as poetry, prose fiction and scriptwriting, finally have someone they can feel sorry for. For them, being inspired or

charmed or challenged by Nature releases a creative response. For me, I have to get angsty about what nature writing's good for because it's an argument: what is Nature anyway and how the hell do you write about it? My own writing may be influenced by a broad range of poets, novelists, filmmakers, painters and musicians as well as those connected through the unreliable nomenclature of nature writing but just ducking out of it by saying it's all just writing anyway feels like a betrayal of what I'm writing for. This has been shaped by a passion for natural history shared with many writers, that began in childhood as a formalised excitement and enthusiasm for nonhuman beings that seemed to escape the reductionism and determinism of science and yet fostered an intense way of seeing the world. For those of us on the green left, natural history, nature conservation and liberation politics converged in a hopelessly Romantic but rather beautiful entanglement.

Friedrich Nietzsche described natural history as the history of the war of the spiritual-moral forces against fear and superstition and he admired the way it was narrated by distinguished English scholars, 'with their natural science textbooks for the lower strata of the people...' This 19<sup>th</sup> century flourishing of natural history literature democratised science and provided a framework of specialist knowledge with its own language, producing a culture of amateur naturalists whose legacy is still in evidence in Springwatch, citizen science projects and the membership of conservation organisations. The Guardian newspaper's Country Diary that I contribute to has been running a countryside column with the soul of an amateur naturalist for over a hundred years. Its longevity is down to the writing from a diversity of voices and places and the appetite of readers to take a respite from the noise of politics and current affairs in a glimpse into a reality that is otherwise not represented in the media. These 350 word daily pieces of flash nonfiction represent a kind of nature writing of the ephemeral, they cannot be sustained like books or essays or poems, like things seen fleetingly from train windows.

The tribal, hunter-gatherer practices of muddy-boots natural history – birders, botanists, entomologists etc. in the field - waxes and wanes but the appetite for a vicarious or voyeuristic view of wildlife on film seems insatiable. It's unlikely that natural history is seen as a spiritual-moral force for enlightenment today but literature that foregrounds Nature requires a level of scholarship and a commitment to environmental principles that feels obvious only when it's missing. Although there are those trying to shoulder natural history into the curriculum to encourage an ecological literacy in a post-truth, nature-deficit

world, recent action by young people involved in climate strikes and extinction rebellion shows that their childhood has an urgent, anxious love of Nature. They may well say that if natural history provided such a detailed and passionate understanding of wildlife, why couldn't it save it from extinction? A quick scroll through a Twitter feed is enough to know the war on fear and superstition (like that on drugs or terrorism) has been spectacularly lost. It is from these young people making a stand now that a new literature of Nature will emerge.

Anna-Marie Young is researching New Nature Writing for a PhD at Bristol University, her thesis concludes, 'With the clear history of omission and ignorance leading up to the current environmental crisis, there is no place for a literature of nature that does not serve the natural world actively, purposefully, and most importantly truthfully and with responsibility.' For Young and other emerging writers, a new literature for Nature must come from the humility of understanding that humans are equal to and not greater than natural objects; eliminating exploitation of human minorities and the natural world; acknowledging an interdependence with Nature and understanding that creative-destructive cycles in Nature and in humans are not the same; elevating consciousness of the environmental cause which respects all those fighting to save the natural world. The project for nature writers in an emergency then is to break out of the pastoral, because even New Nature Writing may be harming what it's writing about. Post Nature nature writing – post-humanist, post-pastoral, post-secular – are paradoxes that will break open like chrysalids when they emerge from the emergency. In the meantime, this is a story dedicated to a clump of royal fern, *Osmunda regalis*, that grows in a railway cutting at Edgeley Junction, Stockport.

Anna-Marie Young, 'Liminality & Post-Pastoralism in New Nature Writing' PhD thesis, Bristol University 2020.

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