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Schoene, Berthold  (2024) Degrowth Aesthetics and the Barely-There Novel: Reading Sara Baume. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. ISSN 1076-0962

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isae074>

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Version: Published Version

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BERTHOLD SCHOENE 

Degrowth Aesthetics and the Barely-There Novel: Reading Sara Baume

My article reads the work of Sara Baume as a potent example of literary degrowth aesthetics. In content, outlook, and style Baume's work embraces an ethos of radical ecological sustainability, which places it in stark opposition to extractivist realism's traditional championing of progress, self-development, and almost limitless "desire expansion" (Gunderson, 1580). Her third novel *Seven Steeples* (2023), of which this article provides an in-depth analysis, also rejects what I have defended elsewhere as the Anthropocene novel's ongoing preference for "individual psychobiography as enabling our comprehension of the human within a new multi-scalar configuration of more-than-human meaning-making" (587). In *Seven Steeples*, rather than incrementally crystallizing, human individuality steadily wears away.

Baume's creative approach casts doubt on Amitav Ghosh's contention in *The Great Derangement* (2016) that "serious fiction" must inevitably fall short of capturing the human condition in the Anthropocene. From the outset, by installing a mountain at the center of her narrative, Baume relinquishes ultimate jurisdiction over all that unfolds in *Seven Steeples* to the authority of what Ghosh identifies as "phenomena that were long ago expelled from the territory of the novel—forces of unthinkable magnitude that create unbearably intimate connections over vast gaps in time and space" (84–5). Similar to the "new novels of a newly self-aware geological epoch" identified by Kate Marshall (2015) as exemplary of

ISLE: *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 00.0 (2024), pp. 1–21

<https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isae074>

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contemporary Anthropocene fiction, *Seven Steeples* “understands itself within epochal, geologic time and includes that form of time within its larger formal operations” (524). Realism’s heroic anthropogenic world-making is superseded by characters quietly seeking sustainable accommodation within a geologically framed and embedded world. The human imperative is no longer to aspire towards or dominate from a vantage point of uncontested hegemony but to seek ecological contentment—not to strive and self-fashion but to yield and (flourishingly) be.

Having turned their back on society, Baume’s protagonists no longer subscribe to the realist ideal of socialization as self-fulfilment. Taking its cue from their refusal to “work” (in what turns out to be much more than the original sense of the word), my argument opens with an excursion into post-work theory. A key premise for developing her degrowth aesthetics is that Baume can release her protagonists from the vice-grip of work as a principal capitalist benchmark for meaningful human existence. In the article’s second section I then provide a close textual analysis of *Seven Steeples* to show the radicalism of Baume’s aesthetic innovation at work. The article concludes with an investigation into the influence British land artist Richard Long’s ethics of daily living as “barely-there” artfulness has had on Baume’s degrowth aesthetics. Like Long’s art, Baume’s work enacts a radical lightening of the burden of western humanity on the planet.

My insertion of the novel into current degrowth debates also intends to make a small literature-led contribution to political economists and degrowth experts Hubert Buch-Hansen and Iana Nesterova’s eco-political project of theorizing deep transformations beyond capitalist growth, greed, and despoliation. According to Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, “if we are to exist in harmony with ourselves, other beings and nature, changes in what we value, aspire for and dream of are required.” As they go on to explain, “human practices and social structures are unlikely to become ecologically sustainable unless deep and widespread transformations unfold in the selves of human beings” (2024, 1). While Buch-Hansen and Nesterova do refer to “our abilities to *imagine* and create non-capitalist alternatives” (2, emphasis added), their search for “enablers” that might help usher in a more sustainable future surprisingly includes no reference to the transformative power of literary fiction. A vague recommendation to “read philosophy” (6) appears to be as close as they get.

Post-Work Theory and Ecological Idleness

Western modernity regards work as of such indispensable centrality to its understanding of both society and the self that questioning it

might not occur to us very often, if at all. Post-work theory challenges “the celebrated prominence of work in the cultural, ethical and political life of advanced industrial societies” by investigating the lives of individuals who have turned their back on work as “the pivot around which identities are properly formed” (Frayne 2022, 14, 15). According to David Frayne (2016), individuals are enthralled by work not only because “it grants access to income,” which makes it a necessity for many, but also and more importantly, “in light of the dearth of alternative forms of social solidarity, [work] is also the most socially approved way to make a social contribution, carve out an identity, and become part of the pattern of other people’s lives” (197). The questions of who one is and what one does for a living are inextricably linked; indeed, in advanced industrial societies these questions knot into a powerful presumption about human identity, which post-work theory aims to untie. Insisting that work is “a social and historical construction,” post-work theory embarks on “the task of *denaturalising* work—this most central and taken-for-granted feature of our lives” (Frayne 2022, 17). It does so by subjecting work to an array of probing questions, all of which together aggregate into one fundamental challenge: “What is work for, and what else could we be doing in the future, were we no longer cornered into spending most of our time working?” (13).

Post-work theory contests the notion that unemployment is injurious to mental health and corrosive of the human spirit. Unemployment is widely deemed to harm individuals by depriving them of “a structured experience of time, a sense of collective purpose, status, identity, and regular activity” (Frayne 2024, 23). Conversely, post-work theory explains the alleged “suffering of unemployment” by pointing to “the deadening effects of employment itself, which has the potential to erode human capacities and leave people without interests and networks to fall back on” (24). According to Frayne, an open debate interrogating work *qua* work is also obstructed by the fact that among artists, writers, and scholars “the term work [...] is often used in its noun form, ‘my work’, meaning the material embodiment of my talents and sensibilities” (18), thus pitting society’s thought leaders against the majority of their fellow citizens whose experience of work—far from resonating with them in self-fulfilling and identity-enhancing ways—is that work eats away at their lives. Were it not for “incentives like income, security and prestige” (Frayne 2016, 200), the majority would most likely choose not to work. Far from “a source of joy or a form of self-expression,” work represents to many “that blank part of the day

which must be endured until five p.m. [...] when work releases its grip and we can finally be ourselves again" (Frayne 2022, 18).

In the era of climate change, one would expect a debate on work to have considerable traction due to what Maja Hoffman, co-authoring with Frayne, identifies as "the profound ecological significance of work" (4), and indeed the unsustainability of work in its current form, exacerbated by "the ecologically harmful time-use, consumption, infrastructure and mobility patterns work necessitates and commands" (5). Perpetually replenishing itself, work renders individuals dependent on products and services of which they avail themselves with ever-increasing compulsion. People feel entitled to being indulged and to treating themselves as a reward for all the hard work they do, but also because suitable amends must be made for the work-induced alienation they have come to stomach without much demur. As Frayne puts it, a work-centered society creates "individuals who are financially resourced for consumption, but cut-off from the non-financial resources (such as time, skills or community relations) required to meet needs without spending" ("Stepping Outside the Circle," 204). Only in a post-work world could there be any real hope for humanity to "disengage from the convenience industries, and [...] participate in more environmentally sound, but time-intensive practices" (205). Complementing Frayne's vision of post-work sustainability, in *Post-Growth Living* (2020) Kate Soper speculates that as soon as society overcomes its work-centeredness, consumption might likewise lose its appeal and "commodities and services and forms of life once perceived as enticingly glamorous come gradually to be seen instead as cumbersome, ugly and retrograde, thanks to their association with unsustainable resource use, noise, toxicity, or their legacy of unrecyclable waste" (158). Soper's argument is informed by the view that combating climate change necessitates substantial lifestyle changes, not just concerning western society's habits of consumption but, even more urgently, its attitudes toward work.

Soper builds her argument for degrowth on what she terms "alternative hedonism." No sustainability campaign can ever hope to be a success unless it demonstrates that how people let work, consumption, and ceaseless growth rule their lives harms *them* in the here and now, *as well as* the environment and future generations. As Jason Hickel (2019) warns, the degrowth agenda must never sound like "an economics of scarcity" (54). Instead of painting degrowth as marked by frugality, self-sacrifice, and asceticism, sustainability needs to be invoked as liberating and fun, that is, as "an opportunity to advance beyond a mode of life that is not just environmentally disastrous but also in many respects unpleasurable, self-denying and too

puritanically fixated on work and money-making" (Soper 2020, 1). Soper envisages not simply incremental lifestyle changes but the emergence of a "new political imaginary" (67), echoing Frayne's concept of "'post-work imagination' [as] a style of thinking that strives to create a sense of critical distance from the conventions of today's 'job-centred society'" while opening up "futures with a radically different rhythm, quantity, valuation and distribution of work" ("The Post-Work Imagination," 4, 8).

Of course, it is easy to dismiss post-work theory as starry-eyed and impractical. Frayne himself refers to its core propositions as "remote and lofty from the perspective of the here and now" ("Stepping Outside the Circle," 210). It also deserves to be borne in mind that, as Buch-Hansen and Nesterova (2023) point out, transitioning to post-work living is bound to be experienced by many "accustomed to the Western norms of consumption" as "troublesome, difficult, caus[ing] great anxieties, inner conflict and doubt" (4). It is therefore crucial to understand post-work theory's chief priority not as "an instant, top-down change in policy, but a more gradual process of collective exploration and open debate." In other words, post-work theory's "primary function in the present is to stimulate the imagination" ("Stepping Outside the Circle," 210). Not so dissimilar from literary fiction, then, post-work theory invites workers to suspend their possible disbelief so that they are free to explore what it might be like to resist "the idea that the current social functions of work—as a main source of survival, prestige, identity and sociality—represent an unalterable reality" ("The Post-Work Imagination," 29). The key provocation at the heart of post-work theory is for one to develop, if one has not done so already, "a theory of radical abundance" (Hickel, 65) that scrutinizes "productivism and the glorification of 'hard work,'" envisioning instead "pleasurable ecological idleness" (Hoffman and Frayne, 7).

Whereas post-work theory must appear outlandish to the establishment, it resonates powerfully with a younger generation, not just in terms of the ecological dimension sketched out above but also because the world of work no longer works for them. As Tedd Siegel explains, the current system alienates young people because it "requires each of them to take out a mortgage on the self that they know they can never pay off." Thwarted by a logic of work predicated upon "the deferral of most personal goals to an imagined future," it ought not to surprise anyone that ever larger numbers of millennials are inclined "to refuse the conditions of work-as-we-know-it" (50). And yet, instead of somehow alleviating this growing despondency, western education seems ever more bent on "stratifying the population into groups of employees, preparing and certifying young people

for the assumption of a work role" (Frayne 2015, 78), the only exception—according to Siegel—being possibly the Republic of Ireland. To Siegel's evident delight, in a speech delivered to launch the Irish Young Philosopher Award in 2017, Irish President Michael D. Higgins comes across as perfectly attuned to the principles of post-work theory declaring that "the fullness of life as a citizen should not be confined to the work setting. To do so would constitute a colonisation of the life world." As Higgins goes on to deplore, "a failure to question, to scrutinise and to challenge the highly individualised projects of accumulation, and self-centred ideals of consumption" that defined the Irish economic boom of the so-called Celtic Tiger years from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s has resulted in a "loss of authenticity" and "a terrible alienation" within Irish society (Siegel, 91-2).

Born in 1984 Baume seems ideally positioned to give voice to this crisis of authenticity and alienation. As a millennial writer Baume is acutely aware of a newly emergent structure of feeling among her peers whose coming-of-age coincided with the opening of a glaring disconnect between political discourse and everyday life. At the same time as the neoliberal ideals of the boom years regarding educational attainment and hard work continued to dominate, they were increasingly experienced as a sham by young people and in particular anyone hoping to carve out a future in the arts. Thus, despite distinguishing herself as an overachiever all her life ("always top of the class as a child"), in an article in *The Irish Times* Baume discloses that "I've mostly been on the dole since finishing college, that the last time I was in paid employment was as a waitress earning minimum wage." Even though most jobs available to her generation turn out to be "thankless, pointless, inappropriate, soul-crushing or poorly paid," society continues to be as work-centered and consumption-crazed as before: "You must have a job, any job. With the money you earn from your job, you must buy stuff, as much stuff as possible, to create jobs for other people" ("Sara Baume's Cautionary Tale"). Baume's second novel *A Line Made by Walking* (2017), her first to be overtly autobiographical, introduces as its protagonist a recent arts graduate who finds herself at odds with society's expectations. "I'm okay in my own bones," Frankie says, "but I know that my bones aren't living up to other people's version of what a life should be, and I feel a little crushed by that [...] a little confused as to how to align the two things" (133). Whereas Frankie appears content to do nothing much, at least for a while, she understands that this will never suffice to make her "an acceptable member of society" (134). Her realization that regular employment does not suit her and indeed makes her ill is pathologized by the establishment. Prescribing anti-depressants, her

doctor is convinced that Frankie will feel better as soon as she finds a job—*any* job.

Readers of Baume's work have been intrigued by the worklessness of her protagonists. While 57-year-old Ray in *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* (2015) is unfit for work due to childhood trauma, the lives of 25-year-old Frankie and the slightly more mature couple Bell and Sigh in *Seven Steeples* overtly draw on Baume's own biography. An article by Aran Ward Sell exemplifies how Baume's fiction has been received. Ward Sell welcomes how younger Irish writers "undermine the idea that a contemporary existence depends upon a [...] relationship with remunerative labour." However, as Ward Sell discovers, Baume's portrayal "constitute[s] more of an elision of capitalism's core logic than an explicit revolt against it" (18). Living off "her late grandmother's dead dog Joe—her grandmother having put €5000 into a savings account to cover Joe's ongoing veterinary costs, and Joe not outliving his owner by long enough to put a dent in them," Frankie "simply does not want to engage with a world where people have to get jobs" (21). Similarly, it is tempting to identify Bell and Sigh as misanthropic good-for-nothings who live parasitically off the society they despise, mere drop-outs whose reclusive lifestyle emblemizes the neoliberal dictum that there is ultimately no such thing as society. What they do, or rather what they do *not* do, makes no difference to anyone or anything. "Bell and Sigh are not out to corrupt society, to heal it, or to overthrow neoliberal capitalism," Ward Sell writes. "They are out only to elide social obligations, to do no more housework than necessary, and to walk their dogs several times a day among the changing seasonal rhythms of the rural south coast of Ireland" (20–21). According to Ward Sell, more or less the same political inconsequentiality appears to apply to Baume as well. "For the most part," he concludes, "the author simply remains as noncommittal as she began" (20).

The worklessness of Baume's protagonists gives rise to both concern and confusion. Whereas deliberate, politically motivated unemployment can be celebrated as a heroically anti-capitalist gesture of defiance, post-work worklessness as it is on display in Baume's novels risks being misconstrued as little more than a manifestation of plain idleness. This inclination to categorically dismiss the importance of simply doing nothing is of course determined by capitalist ideology, which distinguishes sharply between what it values as "leisure" and what it denigrates as "laziness." "Whereas leisure is generally something consistent with existing, hegemonic social arrangements, and is even sanctioned within capitalist relations of production," Siegel emphasizes that "idleness is [...] considered to be a vice, something thought to be identical with, or at least akin to, laziness, which these

dominant interests everywhere aggressively oppose" (110). By certifying Baume's protagonists as lazy, readers become complicit in reinscribing work as an absolute moral benchmark while failing to respond to the bold imaginative provocation at the heart of Baume's post-work vision. One risks doing Baume a huge disservice by overlooking and undervaluing the ambitiousness of her project, which aspires to envisioning *post-work* humanity. Eschewing the sanctioned relief of capitalist leisure as well as the ardent posturing characteristic of *anti-work* critique and representation, Baume successfully extricates her protagonists from the vice-grip of work as a principal measuring stick for meaningful human existence.

An important attempt to rehabilitate idleness comes from Dublin professor Brian O'Connor who unshackles idleness from its traditional definition as a mindset and practice irreconcilable with humanist ideals of freedom and autonomy. In opposition to denunciations of idleness as undignified self-abandon, O'Connor coins the term "idle freedom," proposing that "idleness may, in certain respects, be considered closer to the ideals of freedom than the most prestigious conception of self-determination found in philosophy" (2). Fired up by this scholarly defense, Siegel seizes on idleness as a potent emancipatory antidote to neoliberalism that enables individuals to resist "grand projects of self-realization, with their disciplined self-monitoring, internal struggles, and self-overcoming" (130). While Siegel does concede that "human beings realize their full potential through significant effort," he contends "that 'our best effort' also requires periods of idleness" (135). Siegel identifies idleness as a method of self-care, "an essential element in our process of being useful to ourselves" (135). I would like to go one step further and venture that human idleness is also always excellent news for the planet. I agree with Ryan Gunderson who declares that regarding sustainability, humanity can do no better than allow itself to run idle. There are "no more 'environmentally friendly behaviors' or forms of 'sustainable consumption' than idling or doing nothing." According to Gunderson, "the underexplored low-impact leisure (in)activity of idling" throws a spanner in the works of capitalism's promulgation of insatiable "desire expansion" (1575, 1580).

While Baume's novels prove ineffectual as an anti-capitalist call to arms, her writing constitutes exactly the kind of imaginative action Frayne regards as post-work theory's most provocative forte, with Bell and Sigh in *Seven Steeples* assuming the role of Soper's "alternative hedonists." Like Siegel who enthuses over President Higgins as a surprise proponent of post-work theory, it is curious to find that Soper, too, zooms in specifically on Ireland as "instantiat[ing] an economic

and cultural evolution very pertinent to [a] reconceptualization of progress and modernity" (143). According to Soper, "peripheral nations can on occasion function as sites of an 'alternative Enlightenment' where ideas of the modern are intellectually tested, creatively extended, radicalised and transformed" (143–4). What Soper is getting at here is not that contemporary Ireland qualifies as a perfect degrowth utopia; rather, the country's unique promise lies in its traditional national imaginary and self-understanding which, according to Soper, might render it more receptive to degrowth ideas and hence better equipped to think progressively about life in the Anthropocene. In this light, it is illuminating to observe how in *Seven Steeples* Baume deploys a backward-looking and somewhat quaint imagery of bucolic Irishness as the setting for a twenty-first-century novel that is socio-politically provocative and informed by remarkable aesthetic innovation. As shall be discussed, Baume mobilizes what Soper terms "avant-garde nostalgia" (155) for projecting a future good life capable of reconciling planetary sustainability with emancipatory humanism, multispecies survival with human hedonism, and wistful nostalgic retrospection with a radically progressive vision of the future.

Degrowth Aesthetics

Seven Steeples records seven years in the lives of Bell and Sigh, a couple who abandon their menial jobs in the city where "he worked in the packaging section of a television factory [while] she waited tables in a restaurant" (12–13) to move to a cottage by the sea where they spend most of their time doing nothing much, gradually settling into a lifestyle that is "post-consumerism" (240). The city they leave behind is environmentally moribund, marked by "hundreds of sterile cherry trees [...] a foul river and a declining population of house sparrows" (12). Exposed to the kinds of human interference and casual despoliation typical of agricultural production and the tourism industry, their new environment is no pristine idyll. However, the reader is left in no doubt that the couple's decision to quit work, the city, and indeed society as a whole has significantly improved their quality of life. As they set out to "explor[e] the possible rewards of a slower-paced and less materially encumbered way of living" (Soper, 108), Bell and Sigh come to exemplify Soper's vision of a healthier, more sustainable and enjoyable future way of life that "replace[s] a work-centred understanding of prosperity and individual worth with one centred on engagement in intrinsically valuable activities that have no economic purpose, measure or outcome" (87). As already noted, Baume's fiction tends to

be intimately inspired by her own life, and this seems particularly true of *Seven Steeples*. As Baume has revealed in an interview with Margarita Estévez-Saá, like her protagonists she, too, fled the city with her partner to start a new life in a “shabby little house” by the sea (121). Yet the apparent parallels between Baume’s fiction and life are far from straightforward; if anything, they accentuate the manifold discrepancies between the two. Dropouts Bell and Sigh have little in common with Baume and her partner who are artists leading busy lives full of industry and purpose. Indeed, Baume says she chose rural seclusion over life in the city so that she could apply herself more to her work. Both couples live on the dole, yet Bell and Sigh do not engage in any additional paid work—the kind of “crappy part-time jobs” Baume mentions to Estévez-Saá. Nor, at first glance at least, do Bell and Sigh possess any notable creative talent or ambition.

What Baume does share with her protagonists is an uncompromising refusal to conform. In *A Line Made by Walking* Frankie remembers doing battle with her mother over attending school, which she loathed, declaring that “I knew precisely what things I wanted to do—and when and why—and I was deeply resentful of other people’s attempts to enforce structure on my days” (116). Yet whereas Baume’s “utmost priority is sustaining a daily existence in which I can write and make, the only things which matter to me” (“Sara Baume’s Cautionary Tale”), *Seven Steeples* seems devoid of creative pursuits, except for a few tantalizing references to “activities” and pencils. But what precisely are readers to infer from “the residue of Bell and Sigh’s daily activities: wheatgerm and pencil shavings, linseed and dandruff” (63–4)? Or the observation that “Sigh had been sorting pencils, one afternoon,” leading to the revelation that “Bell liked the 4Bs and over, whereas Sigh liked the 3Bs and under. She was graphite and charcoal; he was every kind of H” (96)? In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, Bell and Sigh’s life could not appear any more random, mundane, and inconsequential. They have a car and go shopping for food and other essentials. They engage in some (minimal) gardening. They fish and swim in the sea, cook, recycle, and converse with each other, though the novel records next to nothing of their dialog. The main activities dominating their routine are dog-walking, eating, and sleeping, their daily schedule comprising “the morning-walk parcel; the morning-after-the-morning-walk parcel; the lunch parcel; the post-lunch-and-pre-walk parcel; the evening-walk parcel; the post-walk-and-pre-dinner parcel; the night” (60). Bell and Sigh excel at whiling the hours away, “[standing] at the gate for hours passing the binoculars between them, watching an unusual shape on the surface of the sea” (118). As some of their activities solidify into “daily

ceremonies" (110), Bell and Sigh's existence sheds even its distinctly human character. The boundaries begin to blur between the couple and their canine companions, Voss and Pip. Baume's attention to the dogs' lifeworld accentuates the mindset of their owners: "Voss liked to keep constantly mindlessly busy," we are told, and "was scrupulous in the execution of his pointless activities; he was passionate [whereas] Pip was more inclined to kill time by sleeping" (113–4).

Baume's decision to evacuate her novel of references to both work and art appears even more deliberate in light of *Handiwork* (2020), a memoir-like account of her practice as an artist and novelist, published two years prior to *Seven Steeples*. The two texts can be read as companion pieces, but I believe Baume's decision to craft them into separate works, discrete in focus and orientation, rather than dovetailing art and life into one as she did in *A Line Made by Walking*, serves to intensify not only the fictional quality of the novel but also its ethical and aesthetic provocation. Though the settings of memoir and novel are largely identical, in *Handiwork* the cottage is introduced from the start as "a house of industry" (16). Rather than becoming ever more dilapidated due to a lack of maintenance as in *Seven Steeples*, this alternative home assumes shape around Baume's artistic needs "as if the walls and floors and furniture are somehow sympathetic to my preoccupations and repetitions and observances; as if this house has diligently ordered itself around [. . .] my daily handiwork" (24). The lives of both Bell and Sigh, as well as Baume and her partner, follow a strict routine. However, in *Handiwork* the fundamental necessities of life, which govern Bell and Sigh's schedule, are experienced as a bothersome distraction:

There are periods of each day that I am forced to set aside from work: pendulous phases devoted to nothing greater than the general preservation of my body and perpetuation of its functions.

From sleep to sleep, an awful lot of time is suspended in this way, maybe even most of it. [. . .] Even when I am [. . .] walking my dogs, swimming in the sea [. . .] even when I am enjoying time—especially when I am enjoying time—I perceive my real life to have stalled. (54)

In terms of their outlook on work, *Handiwork* and *Seven Steeples* are diametrically opposed. While the memoir deplors that "every day is a day-long crusade to correct this imbalance between productivity and drudgery, stimulation and stagnation" (55), the novel—impervious to the tribulations and aspirations of either work or art—rehabilitates "drudgery" and "stagnation" by eliding their negatively loaded

semantics and incorporating them, acceptingly and without irritation, into the simple repetitive quotidian stuff of which human lives are made.

The post-work outlook of *Seven Steeples* interferes with what remains of the novel's realist credentials. The product of a work-centered society, the realist novel—especially in its *bildungsroman* and *künstlerroman* manifestations—has traditionally relied on its characters' striving for self-growth and self-completion, usually negotiated through the accrual, assertion, or redistribution of wealth and social status that work facilitates. This is where, in terms of identity-formation and world-creation, capitalist work and the realist novel reveal themselves to occupy common cultural and socio-economic ground. How then might the novel form handle and cope with characters that turn their back on work, running idle with lifelong conviction while refusing to subscribe to realism's equation of self-fulfilment with social integration? Put more bluntly, to what extent does a novel depend on its characters "working"? Stripped of vital realist prompts such as need, desire, and ambition, and thus evacuated of most things traditionally deemed worthy of narration, *Seven Steeples* must at first appear the opposite of progressive. There is no drama and next to no dialog; there is nothing to resolve. Since no effort is made to achieve anything, there can be no failure. With no goals in mind other than *to be* (rather than to become or to fulfil) themselves, the protagonists appear inured to discontent and frustration. How then, seemingly unaffected by the urge to grow and achieve, does Baume go about narrating human experience? "There would be so much more," the reader is informed following Bell and Sigh's first month at the cottage. "And they would see it as soon as practically nothing had continued to happen for a slightly longer time" (33). This throwaway prolepsis not only purposely messes with realism's devotion to linear development but also thwarts any readerly desire for suspense, let alone teleological thrust. As the years go by, the scenario unfolds into full-scale other-worldly disjunctiveness as *Seven Steeples* uncouples from the world-as-it-is-known, which is also the world forever remade by the realist mode. After seven years "they missed the changing of the clocks" prompting Bell and Sigh "to continue as they were [and] create a time zone unique to the house" (211).

Post-work fiction necessitates a fundamental recalibration of the novel form as it prioritizes degrowth and sustainability over development and progress, which is not to say it must lapse into regression. *Seven Steeples* is a degrowth novel that lays the foundations to a new, alternative realism by resisting narration as world-making. Instead of getting swept up in a vortex of compulsory becoming, Baume's

degrowth protagonists are afforded time and space to settle into what they already are. The emphasis is not on launching themselves into the world, or propelling the world itself forward, but on finding sustainable accommodation within the world as it already is. Degrowth protagonists perpetrate no notable intervention. They are no trouble, and the management and eventual resolution of “trouble” has of course traditionally been the mainstay of realist narration. On examining *A Line Made by Walking* and *Seven Steeples* in comparison, the human benefits of championing alternative degrowth representation are immediately clear. Confined within a traditional *künstlerroman* Frankie languishes precariously in temporary lodgings as she struggles to find her place in the world and contends with depression, disorientation, and self-doubt. Her understanding that “the world is wrong” and she is “too small to fix it” (27) perpetuates a vicious circle of paralysis and failure as “doing nothing” leads to “feeling worse” (183). In *Seven Steeples*, by contrast, Baume’s representation fosters what Buch-Hansen and Nesterova (2024) designate as “deepgrowth,” that is, the inner self’s creative, spiritual, and ecological flourishing, or—put differently—“the processes through which a human [...] becomes a harmonious being” (2). Carefree world-dwellers rather than nervously agitated home- and self-makers, Bell and Sigh are content and at peace. The reader witnesses them cultivate doing nothing almost as if this might in itself constitute an art.

From the outset the human in *Seven Steeples* is radically decentered. Geological deep time, embodied by the mountain that dominates the landscape, is introduced as the novel’s principal center of gravity. The mountain owns the panoptic lens that reveals the world for what it is: “The mountain alone looked up, down and around, seeing everything at once [...] The mountain was a colossal, cyclopean eye that never shut” (9). Each chapter concludes by reasserting this all-in-one multitudinous perspective as it zooms in on one of the mountain’s innumerable “miniature eyes” (9), be it a hole carved in a tree, a gap in the hedge, a spider’s web, a saucepan, an open doorway, rainwater-filled hoofmarks, or the stars in the sky. This is the world without humanity at its center, an indifferent and impassive world that receives Bell and Sigh as if they were little more than figures “made of wool and boots and hair” (10) newly inserted within an enormous world-size diorama. Their own human gaze as they “paused to appraise the view” (10) is of negligible significance, just another partial outlook always already contained within the all-encompassing multifacetedness of the mountain’s view. Degrowth humanity as embodied by Bell and Sigh lacks the impulse for domination, happy to let the mountain be, with no plans to climb and conquer it. Even at the level of syntax,

Seven Steeples yields to the pull of more-than-human forces, be they exerted by space, motion, time, or nature. Designed to observe and depict the mountain's view rather than disrupt it by mobilizing a human-made plot, each paragraph unravels in conclusion inscribing the transitory impermanence of all human articulation within the world at large.

Resisting self-formation or community building, Bell and Sigh live in seclusion, their individualities diminishing instead of crystallizing. Such incremental disappearance does come naturally to Bell and Sigh, and in their case might even be construed as self-completion. "They had each in their separate large families been persistently, though not unkindly, overlooked," the reader is advised, "and this had planted in Bell and Sigh the amorphous idea that the only appropriate trajectory for a life was to leave as little trace as possible and incrementally disappear" (18). After a year "the letters of their names had faded" on their makeshift letter box (37); another three years on and "the faded sign had become unstuck; their old, full names lost" (122). Mirroring their human companions' increasing amalgamation, Voss and Pip, too, begin mistaking themselves for each other: "Pip saw herself as a ragged terrier and Voss wholeheartedly believed he was a handsome lurcher" (39). By year five, a fat ball blocking the drains—"part Bell, part Sigh, part dog" (176)—hints at the possibility of this multispecies family reaching a hitherto unprecedented degree of intimate human/nonhuman assimilation. Recalling Soper's concept of avantgarde nostalgia, Bell and Sigh's existence harks back to an earlier Indigenous way of life more harmoniously attuned to nature while also pointing to a new beginning beyond the current environmental crisis. Increasingly divorced by habitat, lifestyle, and desire from the species of *anthropos* that gives the Anthropocene its name, the couple embrace their new life of radical degrowth so wholeheartedly that it renders its unsustainable counterpart not just unappealing but downright inconceivable: "They talked about how small their life had become, almost nothing; about how unlikely it seemed that some society other than that of their rooms still existed, out there" (241). Bell and Sigh may not yet qualify for classification as a new species of Anthropocene humans. However, as "certain words [fall] out of service—escalator, bus-strap, payslip" (118) and the couple begin to "[speak] in a dialect of their own unconscious creation" (187), it is important their story is read not as a tale of misanthropic regression but as the possibility of an alternative, more sustainable evolution.

Enclosed within geological deep time, *Seven Steeples* transports its readers simultaneously through twelve months, four seasons and seven years. Yet Baume's innovation is not that she permits a pattern

of cyclical recurrence to override traditional narration's preference for teleological progress. Rather, in *Seven Steeples* the novel's traditional preoccupation with society and the self falls away to promote environmental mindfulness and a slow appreciation of each seasonal display. That said, the novel does conclude with a significant plot development as "after eight years of having lived there, [Bell and Sigh] finally climbed the mountain" (249). However, so intimately attuned have they by then become to their natural surroundings that at that point their view seamlessly blends in with the mountain's. What they see—"a land broken, wasted, positioned at the very end of time, or perhaps, at the very beginning, and still in the process of being formed" (251)—positions them simultaneously as both a postlapsarian Adam and Eve and an Anthropocene pair of survivors. While they can now "see everything," the revelation is not without its tinge of apocalyptic doom as "everything" is only "all that was left" (253).

The greatest challenge facing degrowth narration is to discover ways of accommodating humanity within a world that does not need humans, that is known to suffer from our insertion, and that might ultimately be better off without us. Can the novel form in all its anthropogenic splendor let go of its inbuilt anthropocentrism and begin taking its cue from the more-than-human world without placing humanity invariably at its center? What I have in mind here is not a disanthropic posthuman world (Garrard), a future that has somehow rid itself of the human, as pictured by Virginia Woolf in the "Time Passes" interlude in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Rather, I am thinking of a world where the human endures but its presence would not—be it by design or inadvertently—generate the kind of interference that must jolt the planet irrevocably off course, resulting in ecological chaos and miserable environmental despoliation.

Artful Living in the Anthropocene

Seven Steeples is held together by various New Materialist tropes that have come to characterize the Anthropocene novel. Baume exploits these traits to conjure from Bell and Sigh's ecological idleness an increasingly sustainable human/nonhuman rapport. For instance, Bell and Sigh's lifeworld is depicted as full of sound. Their washing line is likened to an instrument, reverberating with "the flapping of wet fabric, the dull jangle of the wooden pegs, the ping of weathered springs as they came apart." Meanwhile, their house resembles "an orchestra—of pipes and whistles, of cymbals and chimes, of missing keys and broken reeds. [...] Sometimes its music was a kind of keening and, other times, a spontaneous round of applause" (32).

No opportunity is missed to draw attention to the musicality of Bell and Sigh's environment, and as we witness them "[listen] to the house in full voice—to the rustle and drip, the whistle and howl" (44), it cannot escape us that the protagonists themselves chime with this nonhuman music simply by being who they are, namely the *bell* and the *sigh* of the tale. To cite another example, we find Bell and Sigh engage in cross-species and indeed human/nonhuman communication, "put[ting] voices to the birds as they put voices to the dogs as they put voices even to inanimate things." Treating language as only one voice in a chorus of creaturely and indeed worldly self-articulation, not only do the couple verbalize bird song and dog noise, they also "translated the thuds and clicks, creaks and ticks—speaking up, speaking back on behalf of the house" (219). While one might want to dismiss this as mere anthropomorphic play, I argue that Baume's anthropomorphism exposes the harmful "anthropodenial" that underpins the way western humanity has come to relate to the world. Frans De Waal (1999) coined this term to condemn "the *a priori* rejection of shared characteristics between humans and animals," calling it "a blindness to the human-like characteristics of animals, or the animal-like characteristics of ourselves" (258). Instances of affirmative anthropomorphism in Baume's work deserve to be read in precisely this spirit of asserting human/nonhuman connectivity and kinship where it has come to be categorically disavowed.

Yet another device for weaving Bell and Sigh into the environmental tapestry of *Seven Steeples* is to invoke what Stacy Alaimo terms "trans-corporeality," the concept that "'the environment' is not located somewhere out there but is always the very substance of ourselves" (4). As Bell and Sigh take to swimming in the sea, Baume notes that "they did it as a means of remembering their bodies; of being reminded that they were each made out of bodies [...] they did it as a means of remembering their surroundings; of being reminded that they were each made out of surroundings" (125). Trans-corporeality makes a significant difference to humanity's traditional self-positioning at the center of the world. According to Alaimo, "understanding the substance of one's self as interconnected with the wider environment marks a profound shift in subjectivity" (20). Additional decentering of the human is achieved by disclosing the inherent vibrancy of things which, rather than depending for their actualization on human initiative, are animated by a life of their own, interrelating and reacting to one another independent of, and at times contrary to, human design:

The scarves knotted their tassels around the curtain rail.
The pictures sank through the white emulsion and into

the plaster. The turquoise arabesques of their best throw blanket wove into the twisted script of the Latin sofa. The spindly roots of the plants clawed out through the perforated soles of their pots, pierced their allocated surfaces and burrowed, gathering strength, penetrating the timber-imitation lino, the wood boards, all the way down to the concrete foundations of the house (162).

Rather than excluding humanity from such processes of mutual adaptation and assimilation, Baume explores how we might partake of them. Hence, once again, Baume's vision must not be mistaken for a disanthropic attempt to imagine the world without humanity comparable to Woolf's "Time Passes." Rather, her aim is to envision convivial human co-existence with(in) an ecologically autonomous environment.

Baume's degrowth aesthetics contributes to lightening the burden of western humanity on the planet. In this respect her fascination with the work of eminent British land artist Richard Long provides an important key. Notably, *A Line Made by Walking* derives its title from Long's eponymous artwork, which he completed in 1967 at the age of just 22. The original work consisted of a walk through a field of grass, executed by Long in solitude. It remains accessible in the form of a documentary black-and-white photograph, which shows the imprint Long's walk left behind in the grass. In interview Long has referred to "A Line Made by Walking" as "made of nothing and disappear[ing] to nothing. It has no substance, and yet it's a real artwork," its ethical dictum being "leave no trace" (172–3). Long's innovative practice has redefined how art is thought to operate in relation to the world. Divested of world-making or indeed any sort of *making*, his practice instantiates human *being*, human movement, and human living within the world, importantly without causing a lasting interference—an interference that would produce precisely the kind of anthropogenic record commonly cited to justify designating "the Anthropocene" as a new geological era in the history of our planet. As Frankie explains:

Long doesn't like to interfere with the landscapes through which he walks, but sometimes he builds sculptures from materials supplied by chance. Then he leaves them behind to fall apart. He specialises in barely-there art. Pieces which take up as little space in the world as possible. And which do as little damage (262).

Land art is Long's way of orienting himself within the world as he finds it one moment at a time. The special allure of his art comes from visualizing the elemental transience of all human world-making. Orlaith Darling suggests that Long's influence on Baume has to do with the way his work accentuates "the distinction between art as a process of conscious creation, and the results of undirected human interaction with the already existing world" (354). Indeed, it is the aesthetic rendition of the latter that animates *Seven Steeples*. Set up like a dioramic installation into which Bell and Sigh are inserted as wholly recyclable figures, Baume's novel operates precisely like a barely-there work of art. With neither a creative or professional legacy nor any human offspring to their name, Baume's protagonists are "touching the earth lightly," to quote Nicholas Serota on Long's commitment to environmental sustainability and his art's radically decentering take on the human. "Few artists make us more aware of the power and the fragility of the earth," Serota continues, "or, indeed, our own brief passage across its face" (29). This also neatly sums up the ethics and aesthetics of *Seven Steeples*, a novel that emulates Long's artistic ethos of barely-there-ness in content, outlook, and style.

Written by a novelist who is also an artist, *Seven Steeples* benefits from being read simultaneously as a literary text and as an installation. By the latter I mean that not only does Baume's novel invite immersion, it is also open to being viewed and experienced as an ecological scenario that "revers[es] the signposts that mark the crossroads between art and life" (Kelley 2003, xii). Similar to Long's art practice, *Seven Steeples* is perhaps best understood as a "lifework," which is how Jeff Kelley describes the revolutionary work of Allan Kaprow, the founder of contemporary performance art. In Kaprow's art, Kelley finds, "the contents of everyday life [. . .] are more than merely the subject matter of art. They are the meaning of life" (xii-xiii). The synergies between Baume's life and her two distinct creative practices—writing and art-making—reach beyond Ondřej Pilný's prompt "for all her output to be viewed as an artist's extended contemplation of her life and work" (8). The way her life connects with her art and writing, and vice versa, is at once more immediate and more intimate. As Baume declares in *Handiwork* citing William Morris' aesthetics, "art must arise from daily life [. . .] it must synchronously be a product of [the artist's] will, their pains, their talents, their tenderness" (127). Or, as Anna Pigott, Owain Jones and Ben Parry put it in *Art and Creativity in an Era of Ecocide* (2024), "when it comes down to it, art and life are inseparable" (4).

Far more productive than “contemplation” to characterize Baume’s practice is the concept of “artfulness” as defined by Erin Manning in *The Minor Gesture* (2016). Arguing that finding art only in the object misses the point, Manning urges us “to reclaim the processual [...] [and] engage first and foremost with the manner of practice and not the end-result” (46). Long’s post-hoc photograph must forever fall short of the artfulness involved in the actual gesture of making a line made by walking because, Manning explains, “art is before else [...] an operative process that maps the way toward a certain attunement of world and expression” (47). It is “as manner [...] [that art] invents new possibilities for life-living” (53). As we retrace Long’s and Baume’s creative maneuvers, their interaction with the world might spark our own artful living by affording us momentary glimpses of an entirely new lay of the land and, indeed, a new lay of the world as we know it. As we proceed in their barely-there footsteps, our own human impermanence begins to transpire. Yet this ought not to be experienced as purely unsettling; rather, we should find it reassuring as it enables a wholesale re-orientation of the human within “the glorious, crushing, ridiculous repetition of life” (*Handiwork*, 215). In the end it is Bell and Sigh’s degrowth living that comes to fill the space left open by Baume’s excision of both work and art from her novel. Their recurrent dog-walking, their trips into town or to the beach, anything at all they do, all the quotidian routines that together constitute the barely-there artfulness of their existence, unfold within their naturally given environment as an affirmation of quintessential humanity, just like Long’s line made by walking.

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ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment, 2024, 00, 1–21

<https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isae074>

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