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Back to the Future: The “New Nature Writing,” Ecological Boredom, and the Recall of the Wild

Abstract

The “new nature writing” has been seen as a response, especially in the UK, to the growing sense that earlier paradigms of nature and nature writing are no longer applicable to current geographical and environmental conditions. At the same time, some writers who have been associated with the “new nature writing” dislike the term, criticizing it for its residual parochialism, its continuing class and gender biases, and its paradoxical adherence to the very categories—particularly wildness—it wishes to confront. This article does not set out to dismiss the “new nature writing” or to assess which writers might be the best fit with it; instead, it looks at its indebtedness to the earlier literary and cultural traditions it claims to interrogate and deconstruct. This debt is often expressed in terms of belatedness, whether acknowledged or not, in relation to earlier notions of wilderness and wildness—inherently slippery categories that multiply and ramify in the “new nature writing,” which has neither managed to dissociate itself from wildness nor to redefine it for our ecologically troubled times.

Keywords

Belatedness, ecological turn, environment, new nature writing, wilderness, wildness

Epigraphs

Recall [...] **1** The action or an act of calling someone or something back; a summons to return to or from a place; esp. a request for the return of a faulty product, issued by a manufacturer to all purchasers concerned.

Shorter Oxford English Dictionary

Really, there is no such thing as “nature writing.”

Kathleen Jamie

Introduction: Nature writing after nature

In July 2013, there was what can only be described as a rancorous exchange in the pages of the British daily newspaper *The Guardian* between the journalist Steven Poole and the nature writer Richard Mabey, at the heart of which was a battle over one of Britain’s most-loved literary genres. Poole sourly acknowledges the abiding popularity of nature writing, but suggests that—in Britain at least—much of it constitutes little more than a form of bourgeois escapism, tending “to whitewash the non-human world as a place of eternal sun-dappled peace and harmony” while

conveniently forgetting that “nature has exterminated countless members of her own realm through volcanic eruption, tsunami, or natural climate variation, not to mention the hideously gruesome day-in, day-out business of parts of nature killing and eating other parts.”

Mabey, one of the UK’s most respected nature writers, understandably takes umbrage at this. He acknowledges Poole’s point that nature today is increasingly commercialized, but otherwise feels “insulted and traduced” by Poole’s indulgent caricaturing of a highly diversified genre. “Current nature writing.” Mabey insists, “is the broadest of secular churches” and, moreover, it has a distinctly anti-pastoral flavour to it, emerging “not out of a desire to return to some ruralist golden age, but to repudiate such fantasies—the tweekness of ‘country lifestyle’ magazines, the soulless, technically obsessed imperiousness of natural history television, the belief that agriculture and its colonial embodiment, ‘the countryside’ are unimpeachable sources of moral value.” Hence today’s “passion for the unfarmed wild, for the small, the particular and the local, and the affirmation that ‘new’ nature writing [is] not new at all, but embedded in a long tradition.”

Mabey is right, up to a point, but even he might be forced to admit that British nature writing is currently under something of a cloud. There is a growing sense that “older” pastoral forms no longer apply, while their “newer,” anti-pastoral counterparts are kicking against the same traditions they rely upon. British nature writing, suggests another acclaimed contemporary practitioner of the genre, Robert Macfarlane, might be running the risk of “withering away,” and this decline is all the more apparent when it is measured against the continued success of nature writing in North America, where “the best-known living practitioners—Barry Lopez, Gary Snyder, Richard Nelson, Terry Tempest Williams, Annie Dillard—are treated midway between

celebrities and shamans by the US literary press” (Macfarlane, “Call”). “Why has all the good nature writing crossed the Atlantic?” Macfarlane plaintively asks, and his provisional answer is that “British nature writing has been depleted because British nature has been depleted” (“Call”). While North America boasts spectacular scenery, and parts that no one has ever seen, Britain “has no peak over 1,500 metres, no glaciers, diminishing areas of moorland, and in terms of woodland it is one of the most radically scalped of all the world’s countries”—Britain, in short, is both literally and metaphorically over-grazed (“Call”).

It soon emerges, however, that Macfarlane does not really believe in his own arguments. It is a false perception, he says, that the UK is “simply all out of nature and wilderness,” while there is increasing evidence in the early twenty-first century that “a revival of the British [nature writing] tradition is under way” (“Call”). In fact, he believes—somewhat counter-intuitively—that British nature writing is in rude health even if the nature it writes about is not; and that it has re-found its sense of mission at the same time as it interrogates some of its earlier assumptions, and at the same moment as ideas of nature are undergoing radical re-assessment in what some philosophers and cultural commentators have recently taken to calling a “post-natural” age (McKibben; Merchant; Morton).

Some of these contradictions are folded into the catchy label, the “new nature writing” (henceforth NNW). In one sense, NNW is not new at all, merely reconfirming nature writing’s longstanding ontological indeterminacy,¹ but then harnessing this to an environmental urgency that makes it “vital and alert to the defining particulars of our times” (Cowley). NNW is much closer in spirit to Lawrence Buell’s confrontational notion of the “environmental text” (Environmental 7) than it is to Jonathan Bate’s consolatory post-Romantic view of nature writing as a

“recreational space in which we can walk and breathe and play” (64). And like earlier forms of the genre, it counter-poses nature writing’s “extreme literalism” (Buell, *Environmental* 89) to the fantasies of the pastoral imaginary; after all, nature writing also has its roots in natural history, that most empirical of sciences which, even in its most vivid flights of classificatory fancy, remains steadfastly accountable to the materiality of the natural world.²

But as Buell admits, it is becoming increasingly difficult to know what the “natural world” is, and thus to gauge the “environmental mimesis” that might account for it (*Environmental* 114). NNW, in this last sense, is in constant search of its own object—an object it will never quite manage to capture or define. It is also attuned to what Bill McKibben grandiloquently calls the “end of nature”: not so much the wholesale destruction of the environment (though this destruction is certainly part of it) as the seemingly irreversible demise of an idea of nature as stable, reassuring, and above all independent, for “nature’s independence is its meaning, [and] without it there is nothing but us” (54; emphasis in the text). Notwithstanding, I will go on to show that this idea is less confirmed than challenged in NNW, which takes strong issue with McKibben’s view that “the comfort we need is inhuman” (198), and which generates much of its momentum from broadly ecological understandings of the mutual entanglement of the human and the non-human and the profoundly cultural attitudes and assumptions embedded in the natural world.

In this and other respects, NNW belongs to what might loosely be called the “ecological turn” in environmental theory. This turn is demonstrated in the influential work of the contemporary British eco-philosopher Timothy Morton. For Morton, himself a Romanticist, “nature writing is Romantic insofar as it tries to ‘get back to nature,’ and knows that this possibility is forever excluded” (124). Nature writing is

given repeatedly to register the impossibility of its own promises, and it does so in part by performing a kind of prestidigitary “eco-mimesis” by which it maintains, but also paradoxically dispels, the illusion of immediacy and the impression of being direct (125). Other forms of “eco-mimesis” are possible, however, that work with ecology rather than militating against it, and that may succeed in conjuring up a sense of surrounding atmosphere—what Morton calls an “ambient poetics”—rather than rehearsing the inevitable failure of setting up nature “as an object ‘over there’” and, in so doing, reinstating the very divisions it is looking to bridge (22, 125).

One need not necessarily subscribe to Morton’s views to recognize that NNW is belated, both with respect to the earlier literary traditions it rehearses and to those natural processes that, now irrevocably altered under straitened environmental circumstances, it nonetheless represents and replays. In what follows, I will concentrate on three related aspects of this belatedness. At one level, NNW is caught up in literary postmemory (Hirsch)—that congeries of connected processes by which contemporary writers attempt, through a surfeit of mnemonic representations, to compensate for their inability to gain direct access to the past. At another level, NNW is inescapably post-pastoral (Gifford). It is bound up, that is, in an ecological awareness of the porous boundary between “inner” and “outer” worlds and the renewed environmentalist responsibilities that come with that awareness—the marrying of ecological consciousness and environmental conscience, as the British environmentalist critic Terry Gifford, who is generally credited with the term “post-pastoral,” suggests (146-174). And at still another level, NNW is post-primitivist (Torgovnick), both in the sense that it is unable to resolve its own counteracting impulses towards pastoral retreat and primitive engagement, and to the degree that it is ironically disabused of the same primitive longings it embraces and plays out.

One of the arguments I am looking to make here is that these longings are crystallized in conflicting conceptions of wildness and the wild, which have long been key categories for Western nature writing. “The wild” is a difficult term and, as might be expected given its different cultural inflections, there is little critical agreement about what it signifies. Gary Snyder’s influential 1990 book, *The Practice of the Wild*, offers an umbrella definition of the wild as “the process and essence of nature, [which is] also an ordering of impermanence” (5). For Snyder, wildness is not just a particular quality that can be ascribed to ways of experiencing the world; it is the world itself, which offers a place or, perhaps better, a myriad of possible places where the wild potential of all living beings may be examined and expressed (12). Wildness, in this sense, is ubiquitous; for unlike wilderness, which may erode, wildness endures, and can be found at all levels, both biotic and abiotic: in ‘the wind, the desert sands, [or] the millions of tiny seeds of original vegetation [that are] hiding in the mud on the foot of an arctic tern’ (16).³ Wildness is also within, and what Snyder seeks is a “bonding of the wild [within] ourselves to [the wild] process of the universe” (ix). For this to happen nature must be “admitted from within, as a quality intrinsic to who we are” (194); it cannot be objectified—hence Snyder’s ambivalence about nature writing, which he sees as a primarily descriptive mode that depends too much on the “habits of collection and classification” that are the accompaniments of civilized life (23).

Clearly influenced by Snyder, Jack Turner’s *The Abstract Wild* (1996) goes even further in its attack on a hyper-managed modern world in which we have lost contact with the wild as both a certain (affective) category of experience and a particular (moral) “form of character” (91); this loss, he says, does much to explain the contemporary environmental crisis, which is “not, at the roots, caused by

industrialism, capitalism, and technology, but by a particular form of the human self” (104). There is much to object to in Snyder’s and Turner’s respective views of the wild, not least their shared tendency to see their own situated experiences as universal, and the moral arrogance—elitism masquerading as egalitarianism—with which they assume that we all share an “elemental wildness” (79) from which cultural differences are emptied and in which socio-economic inequalities, many of them directly caused by the very agents that Turner de-privileges, are absorbed.⁴

Their work is useful for all that in drawing attention to some of the key semantic associations of wildness, which Snyder lists—turning negative dictionary definitions on their heads—in terms of the following positive attributes: “free agents (of animals), self-maintaining (of plants), sustainable (of food crops), consensus- and custom-based rather than legislation-based (of societies), following local custom, self-reliant (of people/individuals), spontaneous, unconditioned, fiercely resisting confinement/exploitation, openly sexual (of behavior)” (10-11). Perhaps the most important etymological association here is that between “wild” and “self-willed,” for, closely following Thoreau, Snyder and Turner both see wildness as a relational term, which more specifically invokes the “relation of free, self-willed, and self-determinate [beings] with the harmonious order of the cosmos” (Turner 82)—an order which their post-Thoreauvian transcendentalist philosophy justifies and aspires to, but to which most modern ecological thinkers are resolutely opposed.

On the contrary, and in keeping with its ecological remit, NNW describes an inherently messy world in which “pure” experience is inaccessible, and where wildness reverts to its more negative association with confusion, even violence, and unruly behavior of different kinds. Such forms of wildness recall primordial states, but nature writing (whether “new” or not) recognizes its own incapacity to restore

these; as Lawrence Buell elegantly puts it, it practices a “conceptual restorationism that reorients the denaturalized reader, not to a primordial nature, which we cannot recover either in fact or fantasy, but to an artifactual version of environment [that is principally] designed to evoke place-sense” (Environmental 267). This view of nature writing (again, whether “new” or not) is charitable to the extent that it implicitly accepts the genre’s persistent impulse to compensatory nostalgia—its residual pastoral leanings—at the same time as it invokes a post-primitivist primordialism that recalls the wild even though it knows that primordial wildness is out of reach.

Such performative primitivism is more in evidence in US than in UK nature writing—the part effect of a “place-sense” that continues to be fashioned very differently in both countries. Here, a related if non-identical term, wilderness, has been key in registering a particular form of American exceptionalism that opposes “New World” to “Old World” experience. One version of this is the cultural-nationalist view that wilderness constitutes a precious “American asset, [both] a cultural and moral resource and a basis for national self-esteem” (Nash 67); another is the more challenging idea that “there is almost no real wilderness left [in the UK] and absolutely no memory of it. [...] The English, the Europeans, are too far from the wild. That’s the difference between them and us” (Least Heat-Moon, quoted in Macfarlane, *Wild Places* 9).

Such blanket distinctions, like Snyder and Turner’s respective claims to a direct experience of the wild, are primarily ideological. They also tend to mistake wilderness for wildness, assuming that the geographical attributes of the one can be mapped on to the moral qualities of the other; and that, in Roderick Nash’s more inclusive language, again indebted to Thoreau, “wilderness [represents a vast] reservoir of wildness vitally important for keeping the spirit of wildness alive in man”

(88). The “new nature writing”—and it should hopefully be clear by now that I am referring first and foremost to contemporary British nature writing—offers a strong ideological counter-current to the American wilderness ethic. It refutes the view that there are no wild places left in the British Isles; it also conjures up distant memories of wilderness. Perhaps more than either of these, though, it plays between alternative ideas of wildness as these have moved through time; indeed, for many of the so-called “new nature writers,” wildness is as much a temporal as a spatial category, and their engagement with the wild is not so much an act of remembrance as a telescoping of human and non-human history that allows for an exploration of the recesses of deep time.

Paramount among these is the East Anglia-based writer-academic Robert Macfarlane, who has probably done more than anyone to make a case for NNW as a distinct British enterprise.⁵ It seems reasonable to start, then, with an analysis of Macfarlane’s most detailed examination of the wild to date, his celebrated 2007 travelogue *The Wild Places*, which I will read in terms of both the physical geography and imaginative archaeology of wildness—as a multi-faceted attempt at salvage in which the past is not necessarily recoverable and the histories it discloses are never pristine or pure. I will go on to look at two more contemporary British works which, even if they fit less well than Macfarlane’s into standard definitions of NNW, still look at similarly conflicted ideas of wildness—Jay Griffiths’ *Wild: An Elemental Journey* (2006), and George Monbiot’s *Feral: searching for enchantment on the frontiers of rewilding* (2013). I will then close with some thoughts on a recent animal-centered text, Helen Macdonald’s *H is for Hawk* (2014), which struggles, as Macfarlane, Griffiths, and Monbiot all do, to reconcile itself to a vision of the wild as something that exists, but is beyond human capacity to understand.

Salvage geography

A brilliantly realized twenty-first-century version of the medieval wonder voyage, Robert Macfarlane's contemporary nature odyssey *The Wild Places* (henceforth WP) sets out to rediscover wildness in a series of affectionately rendered British landscapes which, together, form a kind of memory map that links multiple histories to one another: histories of the planet, histories of the nation, histories of the self. The map constitutes less a rational grid than an emotional cartography that attaches feelings to stories and vice versa, seeking out "lost way[s] of proceeding within a landscape" that shuttle between human memory and natural form (143-144). As befits this cartography, the structure of the text is both linear and recursive, moving from one landscape to another but returning insistently to the feelings and memories that link them within a "web of wild places" that stretches beyond the shores of Great Britain to take in the wider world (292). At other times, the web contracts, framing more familiar places, experiences, and acquaintances, and rediscovering the wild in the familiar, in what Macfarlane calls "the little places" (237): backyards, roadsides, hedges; the domestic world of "semi-nature" (227) in which wildness is replayed in a minor key.⁶

As suggested above, WP is written against the view that there are no wild places left in the British Isles, and that wildness must be associated with wilderness, with Romantic sublime notions of "wide spaces, remote and figureless" (7). It is also written against the idea that the only tradition that counts in British nature writing is that of pastoral elegy, in which a heavily reworked national landscape only occasionally discloses "suppressed memories of a more ancient archipelago," and wild places are no longer marked, even if they have not definitively disappeared (10). Instead, Macfarlane's task is to bring these places back to life, to salvage them and

uncover their secrets; also to aestheticize them, for WP is the carefully crafted work of a naturalist-connoisseur who is as much interested in the shape and sound of words as in the landscapes they describe. The term “landscape” itself, with its connotations of embellishment, confirms that there is hardly “a single [...] natural system that has not, for better or worse, been substantially modified by human culture,” but it also provides a reminder that such systems have provided the raw materials for some of the world’s finest art (Schama 7).

The wild, in this context, is very much a fashioned idea, a human projection onto the non-human world with which it is irrevocably entangled; but as WP shows, it also contains within it an entire history of ideas that have “moved immensely through time” (Macfarlane 30). Early on in the text, Macfarlane compares two seminal ideas of wildness, as a “quality to be vanquished” and as a “quality to be cherished,” connecting both to illustrative stories (30). According to the first story, “wildness has been perceived as a dangerous force that confounds the order-bringing pursuits of human culture and agriculture. [...] Wild places resist conversion to human use, and they must therefore be destroyed and overcome” (30). In the second, by contrast, wildness is “an energy both exemplary and exquisite, [and] wild places are realms of miracle, diversity and abundance” (31).

It seems clear where Macfarlane stands: for what he later calls “the wildness of natural life [...] vigorous and chaotic” (316); but it is much less clear, at least initially, how he positions wildness in relation to human time. In this last context, WP might best be described as moving from one thesis on wildness—that “to reach a wild place [is] to step outside human history” (7)—to another: that “thousands of years of human living and dying have destroyed the possibility of the pristine wild” (127). The text gravitates towards this second view, which recognizes that “every islet and

mountain-top [in the UK], every secret valley or woodland, has been visited, dwelled in, worked, or marked at some point in the past five millennia” (127). “The human and the wild can [no longer] be partitioned,” Macfarlane concludes—if they ever were (127).

There is more, though, for as Macfarlane acknowledges, “the wild prefaced us, and it will outlive us” (316): there is thus a different temporal order of wildness that extends beyond the human into the “shifting sedimentary histories” of geological deep time (247). WP sifts through these histories, some of which are accessible only to the imagination; even travel overland comes to have an oddly subterranean dimension to it, as if the experience of wildness were less a process of immersing oneself in place than of submerging oneself in time (217). As Macfarlane suggests, there is a geological logic—a “geo-logic” (242)—in his journeys by which the history of Britain and Ireland can be comprehended “through the history of its six great rock types—granite, sandstone, slate, chalk, limestone and flint” (243). These rock types form the metaphorical backbone, “the strong mineral skeleton,” of the archipelago, and Macfarlane consoles himself with the knowledge that “whatever we did to the skin of the country, the skeleton would remain” (244).

In keeping with this “geo-logic,” excavation metaphors can be found throughout the text, which also literally goes to ground in a variety of cavities and hollows: the sunken roads (holloways) that “constitute a labyrinth of wildness in the heart of arable England” (218); the vast natural ossuary that is the Burren in Ireland, its cracked limestone surface riddled with unmarked graves (170). At different levels, and on different time-scales, WP thus performs what—adapting James Clifford—we might call a salvage geography, which is not so much about rescuing particular places, rather about rescuing a particular way of thinking and feeling about place that

has become eroded over time (143).⁷ Salvage geography is an act of reclamation that recognizes wildness has been lost, but may yet have the potential to re-seed itself (281); it is also an act of reconnection that joins place to place and people to each other and the wider natural world (314). At the same time, salvage geography, in attaching memories to place, also recognizes that place outstrips the capacities of human memory. Hence Macfarlane's energetic attempts to conjure up an ancient world in the hope of narrowing a gap he fears may be unbridgeable—attempts which join a post-pastoral consciousness of continuing histories of environmental damage to a postmemory sensibility of ordinary loss.

In this and other ways, WP struggles against its own Romantic impulses, and is repeatedly drawn back to the very histories of violence and exploitation from which it claims to want to escape (7). Wildness is the multivalent codeword for this struggle, which can never be won, in part because the violence it instantiates is unappeasable; yet this same violence supplies the dynamic link between wildness's "tutelary harshness" and its "exuberant vegetable life" (176). Macfarlane thus comes to recognize that there is no essential difference between a "human" wildness, which exhilarates, and an "inhuman" one, which annihilates (157); for both must be accommodated if wildness is to be appreciated, across its different registers, as an intensification of experience, an apprehension of the physical and emotional density of the natural world. Similarly, Macfarlane is brought to the realization that if in wildness is the preservation of the world, it is also a symptom of its destructiveness—hence the circular logic of his closing aphorism that "we are fallen in mostly broken pieces [but] the wild can still return us to ourselves" (320).

Primitive passions

A very different kind of disquisition on the wild is Jay Griffiths' eponymous *Wild: An Elemental Journey* (henceforth WEJ), which harnesses the anarchic, if not necessarily destructive, attributes of wildness to a deliberately ramshackle travelogue that veers between the Amazon and the Arctic, imitating the four cardinal elements it tracks. WEJ appears initially to have little in common with WP, and although Griffiths is British by nationality, hers is a travel text written mainly in the American transcendentalist tradition of writing about the wild.⁸ However, like Macfarlane, Griffiths is interested in the etymology of wildness, its connections to a variety of folk traditions, and its popular associations with vitality and freedom, the exhilaration that comes from openly defying convention and taking risks that are potentially life-threatening, but that also serve to confirm the value of life itself. WEJ operates in this vitalist tradition as an unruly miscellany of self-willed terms, in which "wild" is less an adjective or a noun than a verb: one synonymous with transgressive actions and with those kinds of directionless travel in which vagrancy is a form of deliverance, destination is of no importance, and to follow the open road is to follow what Griffiths alliteratively calls "the fire-fare-forwards of life itself" (312).

Throughout WEJ, women are championed as the ultimate wanderers, although they have historically been vilified for doing so, while their male counterparts are negatively associated with the type of phallic adventurism that fuses masculinity, nationalism, imperialism, and military might (345). Griffiths' own adventures are of a different kind, not least because she inhabits a different body, and the mythical figure of the "wild woman" features frequently as the embodiment of an Amazonian desire for something beyond human society, just as the Amazon itself becomes an objective correlative for Griffiths' own "personal wilderness, filthy, earthy, jungly, roaring with

its waterfalls, its white cascades—a self-willed, claggy swamp” (61). Here as elsewhere in WEJ, Griffiths seems happy to recycle clichés about women as “forces of chaos, changeable as the seas, surprising, capricious, fickle” (217). Indeed, a distinctive feature of the text is that it appropriates derogatory female stereotypes and turns them back again into virtues, especially those surrounding “the wild mobility of women” (306), whose sexual freedom has been reinterpreted as licentiousness, and whose thinking and conversation have been judged as unnecessarily rambling and digressive, as if designed deliberately to infuriate the hyper-rationalist masculine mind (306).

Griffiths’ own language, accordingly, takes pride in making huge intuitive leaps between different ideas, and much of the text is as unruly as its own subject, simulating a chaotic energy it seems both unable and unwilling to contain. The chapter on “Wild Water,” for instance, moves from maps to whales, then to a short riff on utopia, with oceans—the ostensible link between these—being seen as a vast “theatre of desire” (233). As in other chapters, the pathetic fallacy pervades, so that the entire natural world is seen as an extension of personal feelings, and “inner” and “outer” experience are made to mirror one another, any nominal boundary between them definitively undone: “[It] is real liberation to know the wild boundlessness of the oceans within, played out in the oceans of this blue world. [...] I know I am oceanic. I fathom it in other women too. I know we can speak at the shoreline and feel it in our depths” (214).

Passages like this one suggest that WEJ has more in keeping with late twentieth-century Anglo-American eco-feminism than it does with the ecological dimensions of the “new nature writing”; still, the text’s phenomenological emphasis positions nature writing after the “affective turn,” which explores how emotions are

lived and experienced in bodies, and how organic bodies interact with larger systems of non-organic life (Ahmed; Alaimo; Halley and Clough). Such writing rejects the blandishments of pastoral, preferring instead to focus on a wild vision of nature as confused and disorderly, but also fecund and dynamic, doing as it pleases, refusing to be told (Griffiths 49-50). For Griffiths, wild nature is free, and it also nurtures other fundamental freedoms: “freedom of will, freedom of time, and freedom of thought” (87). She sees such freedoms, problematically perhaps, in some of the world’s indigenous peoples, whose own fights for another kind of freedom—political freedom—she passionately supports (370). Her political sympathies are with the underdog, and she is drawn throughout her travels to spend time with people whom she sees as living at the “emotional” center of a world where others, with greater economic and political power, “rationally” position them at the edge. She recognizes, at the same time, that such people are very much part of a modern world that depends on them—and on the natural resources that fall within their ancestral heartlands. Thus, while at times WEJ sounds like Gary Snyder in its universal support for “nature-not-programmed” (373), at others it echoes Rachel Carson in its situated rage at nature desecrated and exploited, like the mountain at Freeport which, sacred to local West Papuan peoples, is used by an American mining company as a convenient dump for toxic sludge (398).

WEJ emerges, in contexts like these, as an extended diatribe against what Griffiths calls “the taming of the [...] self-willed human spirit” (376)—a spirit that resides in all of us, but that relatively few of us have the courage to enact. One term for this untamed spirit is the primitive, and WEJ—at first sight at least—is nothing if not a primitivist text. Almost point for point, Griffiths’ text matches Marianna Torgovnick’s checklist of popular western primitivist tropes, echoing their counter-

modernist longings for a world in which we are reconciled to “our id forces [and] our untamed selves” (Gone Primitive 8). WEJ also matches the more gendered aspects of Torgovnick’s later work on primitivism, e.g. her 1998 study *Primitive Passions*, where she looks at the primitive in terms of the desire to fully inhabit the body, to enjoy the sensual pleasures it offers, but also to transcend bodily limitations in search of a higher self.

In other respects, however, WEJ is a post-primitivist text in all but its most illusive registers. Its post-primitivism shines through in the overriding sense that the “primitive world” is dead, even if its myths live on in the sometimes pathological desires of moderns to live “like primitives” (MacCannell); and in the more restricted sense that—as Griffiths painfully witnesses on the shores of the Amazon—“the last tribal people are [now] living in slums, morosely selling postcards of how they used to live” (95). Some of Griffiths’ more riotous invocations of the wild—her drug-addled, pseudo-shamanic vision of herself as a “jaguar’s apprentice” (98-102); her closing Rabelaisian assertion of the subversive power of “wild comedy” (409-421)—need to be balanced against these melancholic insights, which read less like reinvigorated Rabelais than second-hand Lévi-Strauss. And, like Lévi-Strauss, Griffiths locates the wild as a function of a desire that tacitly acknowledges its own self-deceptiveness. In a short section of Chapter 2 (“Wild Ice”), Griffiths cleverly juxtaposes Lévi-Strauss (*The Savage Mind*) and Jack London (*The Call of the Wild*) to make the case for an originary human wildness. In *The Call of the Wild*, Buck the dog hears wolves calling and is precipitated back to his own pre-domesticated origins. We too hear that call, London suggests, and it lives on in us because we, unlike dogs, have never been domesticated: because wildness is our original state (Griffiths 149–150). In *The Savage Mind*, similarly, Lévi-Strauss recalls the human mind “in its

untamed state,” prior to society’s civilizing influence: “What then is the wild human,” he asks rhetorically, “Is it savages? It is us!” (Quoted in Griffiths 149). Griffiths appears to miss the point that both London and Lévi-Strauss are being ironic. Original wildness is only accessible in memory. After all, London’s wild animal “remembering” is inevitably projected through human memory, while these secondary memories are filtered further through the “citational memory” processes by which Griffiths recalls London’s and other previous texts (Plett). But perhaps that is Griffiths’ point: that wildness is only ever experienced second-hand, through our apprehension of others’ wildness, and through the strategic appropriation of that wildness for ourselves.

Rewind/rewild

So far I have been arguing that the “new nature writing” practices what Simon Schama felicitously calls a “primitivist pastoralism”: a hybrid aesthetic mode, characterized by its ironic consciousness of belatedness, which recognizes the need for human interference in nature, but still believes—at some deeper level—in the self-regulating capacities of the natural world. More specifically, the self-willed character of the natural world is mapped on to the individual that apprehends it, so that wildness becomes both the spectral projection of a repeatedly frustrated desire for personal freedom and a complementary confirmation of the reciprocal, historically shifting connection between nature and culture, world and self.

This dual idea of wildness is central to the work of the contemporary English environmental writer-activist George Monbiot, whose most recent book, *Feral: searching for enchantment on the frontiers of rewilding* (2013; henceforth *Feral*), doubles as an angry denunciation of a “dewilded” world [sic] that severely “limits the range of [human] engagement with nature, [pushing] us [all] towards a monoculture

of the spirit” (154), and as a sustained paean to the wild energies of nature and their capacity to reinvigorate human life. Feral offers a characteristically impassioned account of “the rewilding of human life” (10), which Monbiot attaches both to his own personal quest to find a way beyond the deadening experience of “ecological boredom” (7, 54), and to a collective attempt to “rewild” natural ecosystems that have become seriously depleted, some of them apparently beyond repair. Rewilding is not the romantic idea of restoring such systems to their putatively original state, which is recognized by its practitioners as illusory; rather, it refers to the pragmatic need to boost their inbuilt capacity for regeneration, e.g. by performing reintroduction experiments that might encourage natural ecological processes to restart (8).⁹

The ecosystems Monbiot primarily has in mind are those of Great Britain, which he dolefully sees as an ecological disaster zone, all but ruined by intensive agriculture and other industrial attempts to “manage” the countryside, and marked by a longer history of environmental destruction in which successive acts of enclosure have led to a drastic shrinkage of the commons and a concomitant diminishment of the imaginative potential of social life (167-168). For Monbiot, modern conservation strategies are not enough to repair the damage caused by centuries of environmental abuse, which has usually gone hand in hand with the maintenance of (landowning) class interests; on the contrary, conservation is part of the problem in so far as it “manage[s] nature as if it were tending a garden,” and thus ends up by “freez[ing] living systems in time” (8).

Enter rewilding, which Monbiot ambitiously invests with the collective hopes of a “positive environmentalism” that “offers new freedoms in exchange for those we have sought to restrict” (12); and in which less emphasis is placed on protecting things that are already there—which he reductively sees as being the primary,

curatorial purpose of conservation—than on permissively creating the ecological conditions under which things can come back (224). Like other popular apologists for rewilding, Monbiot is prone to see it as a panacea for disastrous times, though he does well to resist the moral grandstanding of Caroline Fraser, whose 2009 account sees rewilding as nothing less than the main arm of a global “conservation revolution” in the context of the Sixth Great Extinction (Fraser 5), and who melodramatically envisions it as “a Marshall Plan for the planet” (14) through which, having previously played the part of destroyers, we humans now have the chance to refashion ourselves as creators, “recovering wastelands and making them whole” (281).

Monbiot recognizes the absurdity of such claims, and he also sees the pitfalls of a global rewilding philosophy that seeks to impose itself on people and/or parts of the world that may not necessarily be benefited by it, and which in some cases may almost certainly be harmed (Monbiot 12). Still, Feral offers an idiosyncratic view of rewilding, heavily motivated by its author’s curious obsession with British “zoophobia” (112)—an ascribed national deep fear of wild animals—and his almost visceral, eco-anarchic antipathy for management of any kind. As the scientific literature suggests, rewilding theory is often simplistic in its social analysis and insufficiently attuned to the competing moral obligations it sets in play (Brown, McMorran, and Price; Hintz). At worst, it is also seemingly oblivious to its own managerialism, despite being clearly based on an interventionist approach to nature in which the “intended re-introduction” of species always risks turning into an “unintended invasion” (Van Andel and Aronson 26-27)—an especially good example, this last, of the contradictions embedded within the culturally constructed category of wildness, which are embarrassingly laid bare when nature really does find its own path (Lorimer and Driessen).

Feral is arguably open to all three charges, especially the third, but to accuse Monbiot of getting rewilding wrong is to overlook its imaginative function within what might generally be described as the text's animated archaeology: its multiply replayed attempts to uncover links to prehistoric nature-cultures that are still part of who we are (Monbiot 39). Probably the best examples of this are in the early scenes in which we find Monbiot in Pembrokeshire (Wales), equipped with kayak and spear, almost comically rehearsing the hunting instincts of his Mesolithic forebears, though he claims with all due seriousness that what he is experiencing is "a genetic memory," and that what he is doing is uncannily like "something I had done a thousand times before" (33-34). Monbiot's excursus on rewilding is linked, here as elsewhere, to a wider debate on evolutionary memory in which palaeoecology becomes "a portal through which we may pass into an enchanted kingdom," and present ecosystems are intuited as "the spectral relics of another age, which, in evolution's timescale, is still close [to our own]" (93).

As in *The Wild Places*, the search for wildness morphs into an imaginative exercise in deep time in which individual and ecological revival—the twin purposes of rewilding in *Feral*—are experienced in ancestral terms (Monbiot 255). At the same time, Monbiot recognizes that thought experiments of this kind are exactly that; and that there is something irresponsible about the whole idea of an epic vision, replete with "struggles with the beasts of prehistory" (139), which looks to clear imaginative space even as the real spaces of the present are increasingly circumscribed and constrained. Hence his skepticism towards surely one of the oddest contemporary experiments in rewilding, Pleistocene Park in Siberia, where a plan is apparently being hatched for the reintroduction of the woolly mammoth, which is envisioned, Jurassic Park-style, as being resurrected by injecting genetic material from frozen

corpses into Asian elephant eggs (142). Such sensationalist ventures may light imaginative fires, but they are difficult to justify; they also draw attention to the moral vacuity of reintroducing “exciting” species (lions, elephants, and other so-called charismatic megafauna) irrespective of whether or not they are ecologically well matched (139-140).

There is thus a sense in which Monbiot is slightly disabused of his own imaginative project to rewild the world, although it is clear that he stands by his more grounded “exploration of nature’s capacity to regenerate itself” (268), and that he truly believes that his witnessing of “the potential for wildlife to return to the places from which it [has] been purged” has enriched his own personal life (268). Whether Feral provides a more general antidote to ecological boredom is another matter: Monbiot’s text is too self-centred, too thrill seeking, and too concerned with its own unfulfilled yearnings for “improbable glory” (259), for that. Monbiot’s wild is, precisely, his wild, as it has been for generations of nature writers, and in fact it is this insistence on the validity of personal experience that helps make it a highly effective piece of nature writing, if not a particularly convincing environmental text. It is both of these, of course, and many other things besides; but as with so many examples of the genre, both “new” and not, the writer’s “dual accountability” (Buell, *Environmental* 91)—to the object world and to the imagination—is folded into a greater accountability to the self (91).¹⁰

Conclusion: Recalling the wild

The wild means different things to different people: a quality of self, a relation to the world, an atavistic memory. The “new nature writing” explores the broken connections between these, reinterpreting them in the light of a global environmental

crisis characterized by a destructively changing climate and by devastating species loss. In its more specifically British form, it also reinterprets the national narrative, revisiting the primal violence that accompanies it and challenging the pastoral images behind which that violence hides. To recall the wild is to expose oneself to such violence and to the conflicted histories that lie behind it; for far from glorifying an imaginary “Old England,” “a landscape built from words, woodcuts, films, paintings, picturesque engravings” (Macdonald 265), the wild offers an unwanted reminder of the violent underside of English pastoral nostalgia—of the bloody wars that have been fought to create and protect often wrongheaded ideas of national belonging and bucolic calm. As the English nature writer Helen Macdonald puts it, “I wish that we [English] would not fight for landscapes that remind us of who we think we are. I wish we would fight, instead, for landscapes buzzing and glowing with life” (265).

H for Hawk, the 2014 study from which this is drawn, struggles with two contradictory ideas of wildness. In the first, the wild is something that can be found anywhere and reconciled with domestic existence (252); in the second, the wild is something that exists, but is beyond human capacity to capture or comprehend (275). The two ideas come together in Macdonald’s moving account of her attempt to train a wild goshawk while struggling to come to terms with the death of her own father. Neither is fully achieved, and the urge to “flee to the wild”—“It was what people did. The nature books I’d read told me so”—is exposed as “a beguiling but dangerous lie” (218). The wild, Macdonald concludes, is “not a panacea for the human soul. There is too much in the air to corrode it” (218); instead, it is much more like a “conversation with death” (209) in which the hawk, itself a “thing of death” (275), acts as silent interlocutor. Gradually, Macdonald comes to realize that the ideas she has been projecting onto the hawk are a function of her own desire (200); also of her own fears

and anxieties, for even if the hawk seems to offers the opportunity of “a communion with something lost and forgotten” (105)—of an encounter with primordial wildness—that communion is only ever temporary, a momentary discovery that reconfirms the sense of loss (106, 117, 181).

The eventual lesson learned is that it is dangerous to mistake “the wildness we give a thing for the wildness that animates it” (275). The hawk is wild, but it is not an emblem of the wild—or if it is, then its wildness cannot be categorized. At one level, “wild things are made from human histories” (200); at another, they are beyond human cognition, reminding us that we are human by showing us that they are not (275). A similar lesson might be taken, in more general terms, from the “new nature writing,” which is drawn to the wild because—as Monbiot and others argue—it offers the exhilarating possibility of a more vital life.¹¹ At the same time, recalling the wild is an impossible necessity: impossible because the idea of the “pure” wild was never accessible in the first place, and necessary because we all need to understand the histories, both human and non-human, that have made us who we are. Perhaps it is not quite time yet to recall the wild in the negative sense of returning a flawed product. But it is certainly worth remembering that wildness, however we might choose to define it, is a risk, both to others and ourselves.

9,046 words (including Notes)

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¹ Nature writing is notoriously difficult to define, not least by its own practitioners, at least some of whom reject a generic label that covers very different kinds of writing with equally different personal motives and/or political ends. The American critic Don Scheese usefully defines nature writing as a three-way conversation between natural history, travel writing, and spiritual autobiography (6), though this definition probably holds better for US nature writing, which operates within a more readily identifiable set of often religiously inflected cultural traditions, than it does for nature writing in the UK. The problem is exacerbated with the “new nature writing” in so far as it tends to challenge earlier assumptions about the genre and, indeed, about nature in general: as Tim Dee puts it, the “end of nature” crisis has “vastly lengthened the nature-writing booklist [to include] poetry, polemic and scientific prose,” sometimes all of these combined in a heady mixture, while the “old taxonomies, hierarchies and clarities” that accompanied earlier forms of British natural history writing have effectively disappeared. The Scottish writer Kathleen Jamie, who has been harshly critical of attempts to corral different writers into schools with catchy labels such as “the new nature writing,” is even unsure whether her own work is “nature writing”: “I don’t think there is a category [for it],” she muses in her collection of prose essays, *Findings* (2005), while elsewhere she wonders aloud whether there is such a thing as “nature writing” at all (“Four Fields”). See also Note 11 below.

² Natural history is one of the foundations for what might conservatively be seen as a “Great Tradition” of British nature writing, where the key foundational figure is arguably neither Clare nor Wordsworth but the now largely forgotten eighteenth-century English parson-naturalist, Gilbert White (Worster). Natural history television à la David Attenborough has taken over this mantle, which looks to trade, as

Attenborough himself does, on a distinctively English mix of professional charm and affable amateurism; but it should not be forgotten that American nature writing is also indebted to natural history, and that natural history's combination of encyclopaedic knowledge and empirical method would also have a profound influence on its own foundational writers, notably Henry Thoreau (Buell, *Environmental*).

³ Attempts to distinguish wildness and wilderness have proven as varied, and ultimately as inconclusive, as attempts to define the two terms themselves. As Lawrence Buell helpfully explains in the glossary at the back of his book *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), "wild, wildness, and wilderness all share the sense of 'undomesticated.' [But although] wildness and wilderness can be used synonymously [...] wilderness literally refers to a spatial area, whereas wildness is a term of quality rather than location. [...] Wildness is [also] a quality humans share with nonhuman entities [...] whereas wilderness [typically] denotes terra incognita, [...] the abode of beasts rather than humans: a place where civilized people supposedly do not dwell" (148-149). Like wildness and wilderness themselves, attempts to differentiate wildness from wilderness are often ideological, signs of a desire either to shore up the distinctive features of civilization or to create dividing lines between civilizations or cultures—and signs in turn of the cultural investments placed in nature itself.

⁴ To be fair to Snyder, there is a cosmopolitan dimension to his work that holds his American ethnocentrism in check, while in Turner's defense, the over-emphasis on personal rather than social transformation is balanced by an ecological understanding of the natural world as an ensemble of "non-linear dynamical systems" (Turner 125) which outflanks any individual attempt to calculate and control it—a very different worldview to the self-oriented transcendentalism that informs his conception of

wildness as a redemptive “journey of the soul” (Turner 101). Still, it is impossible to agree with Turner that “our ecological crisis is a crisis of character, not a political or social crisis” (20); and impossible—at least for me—not to feel profoundly irritated by his own distinctly Californian brand of nature mysticism, which turns its back on the materialism from which it profits, and which risks being seen as a form of anti-establishment narcissism in which the wild is little more than “a project of the self” (107).

⁵ Some critics have seen a parochial element in the “new nature writing” in so far as it looks to concentrate on particular places and locales, re-embedding national history in regional landscape while also displaying an attentiveness to human ecological interference, not least by choosing to stay close to home (Cowley; Watts).

Macfarlane, who seems more comfortable with the NNW project than most, admits to wanting to rebuild a national tradition that has fallen on hard times, but rejects the “little-islandism” that might endorse it, while he defends parochialism by reconnecting it with universalism, that close scrutiny of the particular that might allow us to grasp fundamentals. “All great civilisations are based on parochialism,” he quotes from the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh, and “in the world of poetic experience it is depth that counts, not width” (Kavanagh, quoted in Macfarlane, “Wild Things”).

Macfarlane’s defence of NNW is characteristically articulate and heartfelt, but it arguably overlooks, not so much the relation of the parochial to the universal, as the relation of the local to the global which can be found in nearly all the best nature writing, however place-specific its action and from whichever location it is written and read. Moreover, this relation of the local to the global is a feature of his own writing, which is drawn repeatedly to contemplate the natural and cultural

consequences of movement over time. For further discussion of this, see section 2 below.

⁶ I read WP as being influenced less by a “post-natural” view of the environment than by arcadian conceptions of “semi-natural” landscape that are based on a long tradition of human interference with the natural world (Harris and Van Diggelen; Schama; Worster). Semi-natural landscapes can be placed midway on the continuum between the wild and the domesticated (Westhoff). Given Britain’s environmental history, it is hardly surprising that many of its landscapes qualify less as “wild” than as “semi-natural.” Indeed, as Donald Worster suggests, much of the history of British nature writing can be read as a literary record, refracted through arcadian ideas and philosophies, of human encounters with semi-natural systems of different kinds.

⁷ I am drawing here on Clifford’s popular notion of “salvage ethnography.” For Clifford, ethnographic texts are “inescapably allegorical” (Clifford and Marcus 99), and one of the primary allegorical modes they enact is that of salvage, the means by which the disappearing “other,” in imminent danger of being lost in “disintegrating time and space,” is effectively rescued in the text (112). Salvage ethnography is usually redemptive, i.e. it seeks to rescue putatively “threatened” cultures for posterity; but it can also be ironic, reflecting on the impossibility of textual retrieval and on world history as a process of decay (119). “Salvage geography” is a less-used term, although it emerges from time to time in social science fieldwork, less as a mode of rescuing than of constructing social life (MacDonald). In WP, salvage geography operates in semi-ironic mode as a means of exploring the contradictory qualities of wildness. The allegory of salvage is not entirely shorn of its redemptive function, but the text also exhibits a heightened awareness of the inadequacy of its

own strategies of retrieval—an inadequacy expressed predominantly in post-pastoral and post-primitivist terms.

⁸ Both Snyder and Thoreau are referred to repeatedly in the text, while the lengthy Thanks section at the end cites the author's indebtedness to David Abram, Rachel Carson, Barry Lopez, and David Rothenberg—all Americans—although Macfarlane, who also supplies a puff on the back cover, gets an acknowledgement in his turn. I am not convinced myself that WEJ's succès de scandale has been fully merited; but it is certainly an engrossing and, for all its snide remarks about scholarly language, deeply erudite text.

⁹ Rewilding obviously means very different things in different contexts; indeed, a properly contextual understanding of rewilding—of what it is appropriate to do and in which context—is integral to its success. The formal theory of rewilding is usually understood to have emerged from American conservation biology in the 1990s; and while it is now reasonably well established in Europe, it remains controversial there—including in the British Isles (Brown, McMorran, and Lewis 289). While there is some empirical support for its main contentions—that biodiversity is best served through “the protection of species at or near the top of the food chain in large, connected areas” (Brown, McMorran, and Lewis 289), and that such protection has a knock-on effect for other species—there is also evidence that it may cause social problems, particularly when rewilding initiatives are pursued without consent or when the competing demands of local people and imported animals are mismatched (Caro and Sherman). It is important to see rewilding as not just a biological but an ecological phenomenon, closely linked to the pursuit of sustainable development in industrially altered landscapes such as those of the UK. Again, the ultimate goal of rewilding, which notionally involves the move from reclamation to rehabilitation to re-

establishment (Fraser 283), will vary from context to context, and even its most fervent apologists recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

¹⁰ It is sometimes argued that nature writers “participate in a mental movement from an ego-centered to an eco-centered perspective” (Scheese 135). Not so: nature writing, “new” or not, and irrespective of its motives, remains—much like travel writing, from which it substantially differs but to which it is significantly indebted—very much a self-oriented form. The so-called “ecological turn” (see Introduction above) has not altered this, though it has otherwise transformed understandings of the role of human subjectivity and agency in a materially expanded world.

¹¹ As I have been arguing throughout this article, what qualifies or not as “new nature writing” is moot, and of the three examples I have chosen here, only *The Wild Places* would generally be accepted as belonging to a category that is seen by some—notably Kathleen Jamie, whose excoriating 2008 review of Macfarlane’s text has become notorious—as prescriptive and privileged, performing the backslapping rituals of a predominantly East Anglian men’s club. Ironically Jamie, even as she has disowned the label, has much in keeping with the supposed imperatives of “new nature writing,” e.g. the interrogation of conventional understandings of wildness and the challenge to formative ideas of “nature” and “nature writing” itself. Other “new nature writers” who actively dislike the term include Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, whose 2012 study *Edgelands* offers a rigorous unscrambling of the wasteland/wilderness dichotomy that Griffiths only partially debunks (see section 3 above). My larger point is not to argue that “the new nature writing” is a viable category or that some authors are better suited to it than others, but rather to suggest that it is self-consciously continuous with the literary and cultural traditions it otherwise claims to deconstruct. It is belated, in other words, as can also be seen in *H for Hawk*, which is

explicitly designed to pay homage to *The Goshawk*, T.H. White's now-classic 1951 work.