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‘Thinking Like a Mountain’: Ecocritical Perspectives on Norman Nicholson’s Mountain Dramaturgy

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Abstract

Cumbrian poet and verse dramatist, Norman Nicholson (1914-1987) deserves to be adopted as a ‘permanent poet-in-residence’ by those committed to environmental activism’ (Beattie 2016, 18). This article proposes that Nicholson’s credentials as an ecopoet are as richly illustrated in his plays, as they are in his more acclaimed poetry. Though they represent an important contribution to what we define in this article as ‘mountain eco-dramaturgy’, Nicholson’s dramas have been repeatedly overlooked. His most well-known play, *The Old Man of the Mountains* (1946), has seen scant interest from contemporary critics and the later play, *Birth by Drowning* (1960), is virtually undiscussed, despite its radical approach to the dramatisation of the more-than-human and its site-specific premiere in a quarry. Here we provide a close reading of both plays underpinned with a discussion of Aldo Leopold’s influential essay, ‘Thinking like a Mountain’ (1949), written between Nicholson’s two plays. How far does Nicholson achieve the elusive aim of thinking like a mountain? What are the notable characteristics of his mountain dramaturgy? And should he equally be adopted as a permanent *playwright-in-residence* for followers of culture and environmentalism?

Keywords: Norman Nicholson; eco-dramaturgy; mountain dramaturgy; ecocriticism; Cumbria

Introduction: locating Norman Nicholson

Norman Cornthwaite Nicholson (1914-87), Cumbrian poet and verse dramatist, is perhaps best known for being unknown. A contemporary of Ted Hughes, Charles Causley, Philip Larkin and T.S. Eliot, the latter provided supportive but firm critique of his work as his editor at Faber. But despite receiving numerous Prizes and Awards,¹ Nicholson never achieved the level of recognition and approval bestowed upon his peers, a source of disappointment and frustration to him throughout his life. This lack of profile has sometimes been attributed to the fact that Nicholson spent his entire life in the same location (Jones 2013).² Millom, Nicholson's hometown, is an austere former iron-ore mining and iron-making centre on the remote south-west edge of Cumbria, far removed in character, if not in distance, from the romantic and sublime Wordsworthian image of the Cumbrian 'Lake District'. While others have countered the narrative of Nicholson operating in the margins (Cooper 2008),³ his lifelong presence in this outlier town led to scathing accusations of 'provincialism' (Jones 2013). Outwardly he shrugged off such criticism, defending the direction of his life, perhaps embracing it even, as Andrew Frayn suggests (2023), by entitling his 1954 BBC Home Service radio lecture, 'On Being a Provincial', and his memoir, 'Provincial Pleasures' (1959). But as his biographer Kathleen Jones notes, such defences sometimes sounded uneasy, and his poetry reveals echoes of regret for some of the choices he made (2013, 12).

Such notions of a pejorative provincialism are clearly outdated and in opposition to more recent place-based thinking which celebrates rather than condemns localised creative perspectives.⁴ Site specific practice research is perhaps the most striking example of this prizing of local knowledge and

experience, work by practitioner-researchers such as Louise Ann Wilson and her ‘socially engaged scenography in rural landscapes’ (Wilson 2022), for example. For Wilson, practicing in many of the same Cumbrian landscapes as Nicholson references in his poetry, the value of her art is in it being ‘inextricably linked to the place in which it is made’, so much so that ‘it ceases to exist outside of that place’ (2022, 24).

Nicholson’s *literary* site specificity has been acclaimed in numerous academic full-length books and papers in the last two decades (e.g. Cooper 2008, Gibson 2017, Frayn 2023) and his legacy buttressed by a very active, scholarly community centred around the Cumbria-based Norman Nicholson Society, formed in 2006.⁵ But where there has been significant reassessment of the value of his poetry, little research has been undertaken on his four verse dramas (*The Old Man of the Mountains*, 1946; *Prophecy to the Wind*, 1950; *A Match for the Devil*, 1955; and *Birth by Drowning*, 1960). Philip Gardner’s unpublished PhD thesis (1969) offers the most comprehensive study, focusing on the Christian significance of each play and written with the support and cooperation of Nicholson himself. But its unpublished status does little to suggest broad interest in Nicholson’s dramatic endeavours.⁶

The description of Nicholson as an ‘ecopoetical’ writer was first coined by academic and former Chair of the Norman Nicholson Society, David Cooper (2009, 173), highlighting how Nicholson’s poetry reveals deep concern for the destruction of the natural landscape by humankind. The use of the term ecopoetry only came into common usage after 1990, so Cooper, in Samantha Walton’s parsing of ecopoetics, is positioning Nicholson’s work as ‘that which

has been claimed or reclaimed' as ecopoetic, where the form itself is broadly defined as 'poetry that addresses [...] the current conditions of our environmental crisis' (Walton 2018, 536). Viewed as such, Nicholson's poem *Windscale*, is a caustic response to the disastrous 1957 fire and subsequent radioactive fallout at the Windscale (now Sellafield) nuclear site - and the poem has since become an 'anthem' for those opposed to nuclear power (Boyd 2008). Adding to Cooper's nomenclature, geologist Brian Whalley suggests plainly that Nicholson was an 'ecologist' (2018), and Jones notes how he was 'green before the word was coined', and an 'environmental writer of some significance' (2013, 232). Through academic papers and presentations Alan Beattie long advocated for Nicholson's voice to be heard as a 'permanent poet-in-residence' (2016, 18) for the environmental movement and for his poetry to be regarded as a form of environmental activism or prescient commentary on climate breakdown.

Recent critical thinking on Nicholson, then, recognises both his rootedness in the immediate surroundings of West Cumbria and his capacity to paint poetic pictures on a much bigger canvas. This scaling up from the local to global is consonant with Walton's observation that ecopoetry:

may draw attention to specific places in order to deepen understanding of natural processes and cultural histories, or reflect on the kinds of attachments and feelings people experience in relation to the more-than-human world (2018, 536)

With its focus on ‘thinking like a mountain’, this article addresses directly the practicalities of a poetry - specifically a *dramatic* poetry - whose purpose is to vivify the more-than-human.

Common to the evaluations of Nicholson’s green credentials is the overlooking of his dramatic work - an omission we seek to correct here.⁷ Nicholson’s dramas, and specifically what we term here his *mountain dramaturgy* – expressed in his first and last plays, *The Old Man of the Mountains* (1946/1950)⁸ hereafter known as *Old Man*, and *Birth by Drowning* (1960) – offer substantial evidence for the exploration of ecopoetic and, by extension, eco-dramatic concerns. Mountains for Nicholson were fundamental in the communication of his Christianity. They provide a meeting point between the Cumbria he was hefted to all his life and the historical locations of the bible. They operate in starkly different ways: as dramatic backdrop, massive metaphor and leading character. And, most pertinently, here, they highlight the interconnectedness of the environments Nicholson created. The aim of this discussion, then, is to understand better the dramatic representation of mountains in Nicholson’s plays, in order to unlock the complex blend of eco-dramatic mystery he constructs. We can then assess whether, following Beattie, he should equally be adopted as a permanent *playwright-in-residence* for followers of literary ecocriticism.

Mountain dramaturgy and mountain thinking

Before we move to our analysis – in two separate sections dedicated to the selected plays – the framework for our enquiry needs establishing and the two key terms, mountain dramaturgy and mountain thinking explaining.

In *Performing Mountains* (2020), I (Jonathan Pitches) compared eleven plays in six arbitrary pairings, chosen by the longitudinal mapping of the plays' mountain locations. The guiding principle for selection, from a corpus of some 120 plays⁹, was for the mountains in the selected plays to be 'as animate[d] as the people who inhabit them' (2020, 81), a subjective measure, but one which helpfully excluded dramatic pieces which used mountains only as a cosmetic, scenographic backdrop. Some very distinct themes emerged in this global analysis, which, viewed collectively suggested a model of 'mountain dramaturgy':

- (1) Mountain dramatists shape their plays in response to the topographical details of their chosen site.
- (2) Literal attempts to recreate mountains on stage are fraught with problems.
- (3) Mountain plays harbour spirits, magic makers, Gods and demons: miraculous things can happen in them.
- (4) Mountain dramas trade in ambivalence, defining places of nurture and destruction, of power and impotence, of sacredness and secularity.
- (5) Mountain plays engage in wider critiques – of male tropes of heroism for instance.
- (6) Mountain plays express a deep and prophetic concern for the mountain's health. (Pitches 2020, 121)

Some of these tropes of mountain dramaturgy are in evidence in Nicholson's drama (most clearly elements 1, 2, 3, and 4, as we shall see) but of these six elements, it is the last, the question concerning the mountain's health,

which helps define the subset of mountain dramas we call mountain eco-dramas in this article. Assessing the overall value of this definition (using evidence from the plays), will form the substance of our conclusion.

Since Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm co-edited *The Ecocriticism Reader* in 1996, its reach has extended to ‘take in film, television, theatre, animal stories, architectures, and scientific narratives’ (Hubbell and Ryan 2022, 179). The subcategory of ecocriticism which focuses on mountain literature is small, and dramatic writing on mountains which may benefit from ecocritical thinking (mountain eco-dramas) makes up an even smaller sample. One notable figure who sits across both domains – ecocriticism and (dramatic) mountain literature – is Terry Gifford, a climber, poet, teacher and, according to Peter Barry, writing in the early twenty-first century, one of the ‘most active British proponents of ecocriticism’ (2009, 242) hailing from the new university and colleges of the UK higher education sector. Gifford founded a national mountain literature festival¹⁰ at Bretton Hall College, forerunner of the School of Performance and Cultural Industries where both authors of this article are based. In an inspiring piece outlining his teaching of creative writing at an immersive residential in the Lake District, Gifford draws out a key aspect of his mountain-inspired ecocritical pedagogy:

Look [I say], everything is joined to everything else, sometimes in ways that are invisible. In front of us there are invisible chains that make the most unlikely connections. What is the chain that connects these rocks with those clouds? Make a list of the chain that links any three things (e.g. clouds, rocks, ferns). Now make a list that links any eight things, but make the chain return to

the first thing (e.g. clouds, rain, wind, rocks, earth, roots, ferns, *clouds*). (2002, 42)

Thus, Gifford takes a fundamental principle of ecocritical thinking – that components of a work may productively be considered as an eco-system, or ‘chain of relationships’ – to provide the basis for generating new creative work, in this instance poetry and short stories.

This act of envisaging invisible chains may be helpfully mobilised in the analysis of eco-dramaturgy, Theresa J. May’s term to describe a practice of ‘theatre and performance making that puts ecological reciprocity and community at the centre of its theatrical and thematic intent’ (Arons and May 2012, 4). For May, the question of scale is critical, ‘ecological stories take place on the scale beyond the human’ she argues ‘so even when a playwright strives to foreground ecological issues on stage, the stories are hard to contain’ (4). May gives examples of this scalar challenge: dramatising the life of an eight-hundred-year-old tree or of capturing the ecological catastrophe of hurricane Katrina, phenomena, she says, which ‘stretch [...] to the far reaches of human attention’ (4).

Challenging though it is, this stretching of attention, the task of scaling up to dimensions beyond the human imagination, may be perceived as a prerequisite for ecocritical thinking – an argument that philosopher and ecologist Aldo Leopold makes in his famous essay ‘Thinking like a Mountain’ (1949), from Part 2 of *A Sand County Almanac*. Writing contemporaneously with Nicholson’s work on *Old Man*, though from the very different context of

Wisconsin, in the US, Leopold helps us define how philosophically important mountains are in the work of ecocriticism. For Environmental Humanities scholars Hubbel and Ryan, his essay is a paradigm of ecological thinking ‘train[ing] our imagination to scale up our habits of mind so that we can think *across* complex, linked, multi-scale systems and manage the paradoxes and contradictions of being human in the Anthropocene’ (2022, 178, our emphasis).

Leopold opens his essay as follows:

A deep chesty bawl echoes from rimrock to rimrock, rolls down the mountain, and fades into the far blackness of the night. It is an outburst of wild defiant sorrow, and of contempt for all the adversities of the world.

Every living thing (and perhaps many a dead one as well) pays heed to that call. To the deer it is a reminder of the way of all flesh, to the pine a forecast of midnight scuffles and of blood upon the snow, to the coyote a promise of gleanings to come, to the cowman a threat of red ink at the bank, to the Hunter a challenge of fang against bullet. Yet behind these obvious and immediate hopes and fears there lies a deeper meaning, known only to the mountain itself. Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf. (1949, 129)

Over 75 years ago, Leopold invites us to modify our perspective radically, from the short term, personal investments of a deer, a tree or a herdsman, to the deep time of a mountain’s experience. Thinking like a mountain demands the eco-critic scales up their perception beyond atomistic self-interest, to see instead ‘the dynamic balance of interdependent populations necessary to sustain an ecosystem’ (179). For Leopold historian Don Scheese,

These mountains, we must emphasise, are walking the stage as they voice Nicholson's delicate verse. They do not just exist on the page. This truism recalls Carl Lavery's warning that performance-related ecocriticism needs to go beyond simply 'decipher[ing] what the theatre text means' and instead must 'focus on what the theatre medium "does"' (Lavery 2018, 2). While, we do not have an extensive production record to draw on, focusing our attention on Nicholson's stage craft, on the 'doing' of his drama (remembering that dramaturgy, like metallurgy, is an active manipulation of material), leads us in this essay to the specific affordances of *ecodramatic* works, a step or two on from their interpretation as literary texts.

What evidence is there of an ethos of interconnectedness in his drama? How credible is the case for his mountain dramaturgy to be presciently eco-dramatic? To what extent does Nicholson channel the spirit of Leopold in his two mountain dramas?

The Old Man of the Mountains

Nicholson's first drama, *The Old Man of the Mountains*, a parable play written in part verse, part prose, transposes the Old Testament story of the prophet Elijah (1Kings 17-18) into a timeless Cumbrian setting. It was premiered by the Pilgrim Players as the opening production of a season of 'New Plays by Poets' in September 1945 at the compact 130-seater Mercury Theatre, London. Robert Speaight played the role of Elijah and T.S. Eliot attended the first night. A year later, in December 1946, it was staged for three performances at the Theatre Royal, Workington by the Playgoers Club and attended by Nicholson himself,

who observed afterwards that this Cumbrian company had bettered the London cast in at least one respect: the ‘authenticity of the dialect’ (Cumberland Evening Star, 1946). The play was performed again in September 1947, in Buckley, Flintshire, the first performance of *Old Man* in Wales. Shortly after, in 1948, it was translated into Welsh by poet and playwright Albert Evans Jones (known as Cynan), before being produced and toured by Ysgol Ddrama, Caergybi (Holyhead Drama School) (Robinson 2019). Up to two dozen productions followed, making *Old Man* undoubtedly the most frequently performed of Nicholson’s plays on the amateur dramatic scene, including outings in Denmark, The Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand.¹¹

As previously stated, this commentary on *Old Man* explores the play through two key lenses: firstly, the eco-dramaturgical, and then from the perspective of a model of mountain dramaturgy. *Old Man* opens with a monologue from The Raven, representing the voice of God and constructed as a chorus-like figure who speaks directly to the audience. This Raven’s-eye view looking down from the crags and fell tops depicts the unspecified, although clearly Cumbrian dale location, as naturally harmonious, an interconnected ecosystem alive with the voices of the ‘wind in the bare birches...the mice in the slate walls, the trees scratching their backs, the rain in the ghyll and the starling in the gutter’ (1950, 9-10). Importantly, Raven introduces us to the ‘gossiping of water’ - the Beck, personified as ‘three women’s voices’ - and it is through the water’s gossip that we assess the health of the land as the drama unfolds, the water dries up and drought takes hold. Nicholson’s intuitive sense of what would later be termed, ‘deep ecology’ (Naess, 1973),¹² is evidenced through Raven and Beck’s revelations highlighting the destructive environmental impact

of human-centred actions. We learn that the human inhabitants of the dale have consistently ignored nature's 'voices which are always speaking', (1950, 10) and where once they respected the earth 'as a mother', enjoying times of plenty as a consequence, they now pollute and defile it in pursuit of intensive farming and economic self-interest:

The Raven: But now your guts are tight with greed:

You tear the crops like hair from the living skin:

You drive the earth like a slave: you wring

The last drop of blood from the land till the soil is dried into
dust.

The hills which were your altars have become your middens:

The becks which were your temples have become your sewers. (1950, 12)

Raven's berating of humans for their destruction of the environment and its ecology is a measure of the influence on Nicholson of the anti-intensive agrarian policies of the *New English Weekly*, which took a hard line on such things as water pollution, the devastation of land through indiscriminate tree felling, and intensive animal farming (Gardner 1973, 117). These are synthesised in the play in the treatment of the drought, a key crisis running throughout which functions to highlight the connection between people and place, focusing attention on the responsibility of humans to co-exist respectfully with the more-than-human:

The Raven: You have forgotten that the becks are not made nor

bred;

They are not to be expected nor taken for granted;

That water is a gift and also rain. (1950, 12)

May (2007) identifies this kind of awareness-raising as an important test for recognising a play's eco-dramatic credentials and Nicholson's choices here, early in the drama, clearly focus attention on environmental damage caused by humans. In the scene that follows we gain insight into landowner Squire Ahab's disregard for the land through his insistence that it 'is made to pay' (Nicholson 1950, 19) even if it means polluting it with chemicals and burning down trees to make way for crops. Similarly, Nicholson's critical framing of this attitude chimes with two entries on 'first wave' ecocritic Lawrence Buell's four-point 'checklist' for an environmentally orientated work (Buell 1995, 7): we see how human influence on the non-human environment can scar and shape its past and future (point 1); and through warnings to Ahab from the prophet figure, Elijah, characterised here as a reclusive farmer, that he will regret the consequences of his destructive actions, Nicholson highlights the expectation of human accountability towards the environment (point 3). Only a handful of locals challenge Ahab; most, instead, actively agree with his ideology or consent to his bidding since he is their boss. The implications are starkly contemporary: the loudest voices are those that hold the greatest capital, and it is difficult, if not self-destructive, to express dissenting opinions further down the food chain.

Nicholson traces the decline in health of the dale through the gradual drying up of the Beck. In the second part of Act One it is awarded three key speeches punctuated by dialogue between other characters, and through Nicholson's onomatopoeic choices in these speeches we *feel* the Beck's desertification as the words become crisper and less lilting, until the final drop stops:

(1) We are the voices of the beck.

But slower, now, lower, now,

Sliding, gliding, pausing, posing,

Sauntering along and pondering in pools... (1950, 24)

(2) We are the voices, the voices of the beck.

Now we are tired, feeble, old.

We limp, limp from stone to stone... (1950, 26)

(3) We are the voices

Of the beck

Only a last

Trickle...

A last

last

drop

then

stop. (1950, 27-8)

Beck's third speech slows inexorably as the water dries up at source, representing a time shift of several months, during which Elijah sleeps. The dale is by now 'strangled with heat' (1950, 27) and its human inhabitants are suffering greatly. When Ben, a sickly child, dies inside his mother's house, Elijah seems to miraculously bring him back to life, although the audience are privy to the offstage voice of Raven issuing the command. On awakening, a physically well and rejuvenated Ben immediately pledges to climb Carmel Fell, 'the highest shoulder of the dale/ Hoisted midway between the earth and sea and sky' (1950, 49), as he seeks the life-giving energy stemming from this high place, and escapes from the debilitating physical constraints of the house at dale level.

Elijah's sensitivity to the balance of the dale's elements and species, is coupled with a mystical ability to appear and disappear, often described by other characters through reference to the play's high places and mountain context: 'It is as though' says Ahab's tenant, Obidiah, 'The Spirit of the Lord whirls him

from peak to peak' (1950, 47). A reckoning between Elijah (symbolising God) and Ahab (symbolising greed) is also fittingly located on Carmel Fell and Nicholson's evocation of the summit, where the 'fells are pushing their heads through the mist' (1950, 52), shows how it is an impressive place of judgement and truth:

Obidiah: Down in the lower dale there are a thousand gods

Embodied in the shadows, but here

The plain geometry of stone grants not a crack

For the myths to hide in. (1950, 52)

The mountain here is depicted as strong and resolute, mirroring Elijah's renewed faith in God and his promise to turn the people's hearts back to Him. Elijah's certain assurance to the people that rain will fall and restore health to the dale is made on Carmel Fell's summit. When the rain does indeed eventually arrive, and with torrential force, it reinforces the third element of mountain dramaturgy noted above - that miraculous things can happen in them. Furthermore, element 1 of the mountain dramaturgical model is also evidenced here through the ways in which the topographical features of this highest point in the dale reflect the harsh narrative challenges facing Elijah. As the dalesfolk turn against Elijah, Nicholson compares the character's spiritual endurance with the physical efforts needed to climb it:

Elijah: Boy, I am an outcast, vermin and game

For all the curs to bark at. To walk the lonning¹³ that I have

to walk

May be harder than climbing Carmel. (1950, 50)

Following a ‘stylised’ Interlude atop Carmel Fell, Ahab emphasises the climb in *physically* rather than *spiritually* exacting terms, and his dismissal of others’ claims to have variously heard, felt or seen something profound and mystical on its summit is weighted with scepticism, even though he briefly acknowledges that he too encountered something ‘super-normal’ (58). One character’s transcendental experience of hearing a wild, whirling wind whilst at the same time feeling no breeze, is explained away by Ahab as an inevitable headache caused by climbing three thousand feet; another’s intense feeling that the fells themselves were trembling is dismissed by him as the dizziness of romping up the fellside on a full stomach after breakfast; and a third’s vision of flames coming out of the rocks is scornfully explained by Ahab as the effects of the sun blazing down on his head. ‘Sacredness and secularity’ are clearly operating in tension at this moment in the play, when the mountain’s capacity for harbouring miracles and for producing dizzying effects on the human body co-exist.

The long-awaited rains arrive, temporarily restoring the health of Beck and the dale, and most of the dalesfolk quickly forget any gratitude towards either God or nature, returning to worrying about their everyday lives. It is Elijah who berates them this time, reminding them to scale-up their concerns:

When will you learn, when will you understand?

The mountains break around you and the sky is winged with fire;

The angels of lightning and the angels of thunder

Flock like plovers in the air, but you remember

Only your own kitchens and your own back gardens. (1950, 80-1)

Raven goes on to observe that through their daily toil the people will thrive, prosper and ‘blossom yearly like the damsons’, benefitting themselves as they continue to extract from the land, reflecting a positive Christian outcome and God’s reward in exchange for their ‘liturgy in their labours’ (1950, 82).

Through Raven’s final words the religious emphasis of the play’s message shows that the dalesfolk ‘however unconsciously, have become aware of [God] and properly related to the world in which they live’ (Gardner, 357). However, applying a Leopoldian lens highlights the longitudinal perspective necessary to see the dangers of failing to preserve and protect the natural environment. We see in this example the human failure to scale-up beyond self-interest: the ecology of the dale restored – *for now* – the dalesfolk have already forgotten their role in maintaining its balance, a prescient observation from Nicholson on how this carelessness may persist over generations. Restored and rejuvenated by the rain, Beck makes its final observation:

Raven: Is all wise and well, Beck, now that your limbs are lithe again?

Beck: Well?

wise?

well?

What is wise? What is well? We're blithe and lish in beauty now:

Busy, busy, busy, is that well? Is that wise?

No time to worry, now, no time to wonder... (1950, 84)

From a secular perspective the rains returning are not, of course, thanks to God (despite this inference being one of Nicholson's core Christian messages). In eco-dramatic terms, Beck warns that the reciprocal connection between humans and the more-than-human world is precarious and contingent on both worlds operating in interdependence. Put simply, in plentiful times, we must still be mindful of, and prepared for, the possibility of difficult times ahead. Nicholson's clear cut biblical eco-parable may have suited the 1940s and 50s, particularly given the short-term popularity of English verse drama in the period. But 21st century eco-inequities cut through this message and problematise a fix-the-roof-while-the-sun shines mentality. Late-stage capitalism has ensured that a tiny minority of the planet remains in perpetual plenty – *for now* - while the poorest can only dream of having a roof to mend.

Birth by Drowning

Nicholson's fourth and final play, *Birth by Drowning*, commissioned in 1957 by the Committee for Religious Drama in the Northern Province¹⁴ is, like *Old Man*, it is an allegorical drama, but this time based on the biblical story of Elijah's protégé, Elisha (2Kings 2-13). It was produced by the Committee's drama advisor, Pamela Kiely, and premiered at the open-air Quarry Theatre, Mirfield,

West Yorkshire on 9 July 1959, performed by an amateur company of theological students. A note in the pamphlet *Christian Drama* observes how the ‘acoustic difficulties’ (Robbins 1959, 28) of the quarry impaired vocal delivery but the play still provided ‘good entertainment’ for the vast crowd. Following this performance, Kiely took the production on a tour of church and secular halls in Manchester, Sheffield and Durham. A rehearsed reading of the play by students at the College of Wooster, Ohio, took place on 16 February 1962 as part of its Religion-in-Life Week (Editors, 1962).

A focus on *Birth by Drowning* strengthens the value of a Leopoldian reading, as ‘thinking like a mountain’ is an essential part of its dramatic construction. The play practices what David Boyd calls the ‘same conflation of Palestine and Cumbria’ as *Old Man* (in Gibson 2017, 90). Dothan, in the Samaria hills, and Shunem are set up in the play as counterpoint dales, with Elisha the Doctor-Prophet practising from the former location and Samuel, Miriam and their son Gehazi returning after seven years to the latter, to reclaim their farm. These valleys are demarcated by three peaks dramatised in visibly stylistic terms – in a way that perhaps only theatre as an artform would dare attempt – evidencing the second element of mountain dramaturgy, the avoidance of literalism on stage. The twin peaks of Ebal and Gerizim, of huge religious significance to this day, are accompanied by neighbouring Gilboa, the battleground between King Saul and the Philistines. In keeping with mountain dramaturgy’s tendency towards anti-naturalism, all three mountains are embodied on Nicholson’s stage by actors with no indication in the text as to how they might be distinguished from the (biblical) human characters. Like Raven and the three-voiced Beck in *Old Man*, the human and the more-than-

human are given equal theatrical weight in *Birth*, though it is clear that the three fells (dramatic renditions of the Wasdale mountains Great Gable, Scafell and Scafell Pike in the English Lake District) are the conduit for the word of God, communicating directly to Elisha, the potential occupation of Shunem by the invading bordermen:

Gilboa The word has come, Elisha.

We can tell you now.

Gerizim Over the brow

O Gilboa—

Gilboa Between the shoulders of the pikes--

Ebal Along the dykes--

Of the northern dales--

Gerizim The bordermen are chasing—

Ebal Racing

For Gilboa Gill. [...]

Gerizim Hurry

Gilboa Hurry

Gerizim and Ebal (*echoing*) Hurry.

Hurry. (1960, 33)

Nicholson must have known that the actual mountains of Gerizim and Ebal located in Nablus in the West Bank are famed for their natural acoustic vibrancy, described by visitor, J.W. McGarvey in 1879, as ‘a vast natural amphitheatre, in which the human voice can be heard to a surprising distance’.¹⁵

Birth by Drowning has several echoes with *Old Man*. Like the dale region near Carmel Fell, drought has befallen the valley of Dothan, lasting for a period of seven years. The waterways are also polluted, as Daleswoman, Hannah, makes clear in Act One Scene One: ‘Every lyle¹⁶ waterfall’, she declares to Elisha, ‘looks as if it had a bilious attack. It’s fair poison for beast or boggle¹⁷’ (1960, 25). While the cause of the pollution is not as clear as it is in *Old Man*, the mountains are much more directly influential in *Birth by Drowning* providing a miraculous solution by instructing Hannah, via Elisha, to add salt to the beck and its surrounding banks.

There is a liveliness in the characterisation of these peaks which belies their more-than-humanness and Nicholson himself stated in a letter to Philip Gardner during *Birth by Drowning*’s drafting that they may well ‘turn out to be more human than everyone else’ (1969, 451). But the fact that his mountains provide the defining focus of the play is not just a chance outcome of the writing process. Nicholson is consciously troubling the boundaries of the human and the more-than-human, lending the mountains a humour and vigour which is seldom evident in the rest of the often two-dimensional and schematic biblical characters. Gilboa, Gerizim and Ebal are given dramatic dominion over the play in multiple ways. As a chorus, they structure the play, bookending it and punctuating the scenes with reflective and well-crafted verse. Dramaturgically, they drive the drama forward, extending the traditional choric function associated with the Greek theatre form, and lending the peaks an agency no other character enjoys. They are the character-building force of the play, a point recognised by the returning Samuel after seven years away, whose son Gehazi is at a formative time in his development as an adolescent: ‘I didn’t want my lad to

grow up on mud - like a blessed bullrush. I wanted you to be brought up among the rocks... Same as the fell sheep' (1960, 12).

Even though the peaks are represented on stage on the same scale as the rest of the human characters, Nicholson gives them a weight and oversight, which are redolent of Leopold's essay – a longitudinal vision which affords them a unique perspective in the play. Only they can see the full history of the dale – much longer than Teresa J. May's eight-hundred-year-old tree, as Ebal says 'more years than anyone younger than a mountain can care to think on' (p.9). This elevated standpoint is presented in topographical as well as chronological terms, as it is on the shoulders of these peaks, in Act Two Scene One, where the Doctor Elisha and the young Gehazi rise above the threat of invasion by the Bordermen, their high vantage point reducing the soldiers from a threatening incursion to 'a forest of dwarf junipers' (1960, 34).

Perhaps the most beguiling theatrical choice Nicholson makes in relation to his agential mountains follows on from this scene. Playing with these small humans intent on invading the dale, Gerizim, Ebal, and Gilboa marshal the weather to immerse Naaman, Lieutenant and the Corporal in thick mist, leading them gently out of the valley in blind confusion. They do this in strikingly simple terms in Act Two Scene Two, first wrapping themselves in 'misty coloured muslin scarves' (1960, 44) and then blindfolding each of the invaders from behind with the same scarves. The scene teeters on farce, consciously so, as Gerizim overdoes his blindfolding covering the corporal's mouth as well as eyes, and the three soldiers 'wander around for a moment or two as in Blind Man's Buff' (46). The scene is concluded with all the peaks shouting

‘SURPRISE’ (48) and snatching off the scarves, quickly hiding themselves as the soldiers realise they have been led back to their own borderland, cloaked in mist.

There is a homespun theatricality to this scene, in keeping with the desire to entertain the local audience, one perhaps struggling to pick up nuance in the cavernous quarry. But the simplicity of the mime and the naivety of the props belie a more profound message. Mountains are fundamentally in charge in this play, responsible for dramatic shifts in the weather, just as they are in real life, and able playfully to resist human-led invasive forces. They do this in the knowledge that whatever domestic conflict is being played out on their shoulders, the perpetrators will be long gone in a tiny fraction of the lifespan of the mountain. Nicholson intimates this as the three peaks sing a version of *Oranges and Lemons* over the heads of the soldiers:

Ebal: Just serve ‘em right
 Say the screes on the height
Gerizim: They’ll learn when they’re older
 Says the lightning-struck boulder
Gilboa: Good-bye to them all
 Says my own waterfall. (1960, 48)

Where *Old Man’s* ending is laced with doubt - ‘Busy, busy, busy’ says the Beck, ‘is that well? Is that wise?’ (1950, 84) - *Birth’s* conclusion is altogether more decisive. Naaman is cured of leprosy as all three peaks douse him in water, the borderman thus the first outsider to be the beneficiary of a

miracle. Again, the mountains are the agents of change, effecting his rebirth by channelling the healing waters of the beck which flows between them. Then, ‘speaking as a new-born, clean-scrubbed, dale-bred baby’ (1960, 62) Naaman swears an oath of peace as Elisha concludes:

The Lord speaks not just to this dale

But to the broad world. The echoes sound

Far beyond the bounds of these mountains,

And ‘border men’ and ‘foreigner’ and ‘enemy’

Are words that have no meaning anymore. (1960,62)

Leprosy is the physicalised metaphor of the endeavour of the bordermen to harass and invade their neighbouring dale – a diseased power project which is summarily resolved in this final scene. Naaman’s miraculous cure, then, operates at a number of levels. In religious terms, it is a dramatic retelling of the bible story (2 Kings 5), in which the biblical commander of the army of Aram, immerses himself in the river Jordan at Elisha’s bidding. In terms of localised geopolitics, Nicholson resolves the enduring conflict between dales, bringing a precipitous peace to the region. And in ecocritical terms, the interconnectedness of the valley is reasserted. The three peaks are the water towers of the dales. They provide the spring and the source of the water which is used to heal the soldier. Where in the bible story, Naaman himself bathes in the river Jordan, Nicholson determines that the mountains have direct influence over the miracle in *Birth by Drowning*. Today one might find the categorical conclusion of *Birth* less satisfying than the watery uncertainty of *Old Man’s* final stanza¹⁸. But as a statement of mountain eco-dramatic intent, it is unambiguous: the three

characterised peaks in *Birth* are as emphatically ‘animate’, following our earlier definition, and as influential as one can imagine. Ebal, Gerizim and Gilboa, above all the characters in the play, including the miracle maker, Elisha, are the agents of rebirth.

Conclusion

We began this article promising to do two things: firstly, to install Norman Nicholson’s dramatic work into the much more established critical landscape dedicated to his poetry. Secondly, and relatedly, to establish whether his dramas indicate either a developed or emergent eco-dramatic purpose. We asked: how credible is the case for his mountain dramaturgy to be presciently eco-dramatic and, by extension, are *The Old Man of the Mountains* and *Birth by Drowning* nascent mountain eco-dramas?

As examples of mountain dramaturgy, *both* plays demonstrate five of the thematic areas we identified earlier and perhaps most notably offer genuine case studies of how ‘Miraculous things can happen’ in mountain sites (Pitches 2020, 121). The one missing criterion is the extent to which either play ‘engage[s] in wider critiques’, of masculine heroism, for instance. These are fundamentally conservative, religious verse dramas after all.

As a mountain *eco*-drama, which, as we have identified, foregrounds notions of the mountain’s health, we conclude that *Old Man* is the more potent example. Its references to water privatisation, to the danger of self-interested and divisive capitalism, to scaled up industrial models of agriculture or Big Ag (Bronson and Sengers 2022), as well as its suggestion of the possibility of new

forms of green energy, remain current, even if they are now being experienced on a far greater scale and with much less time to mitigate the dangers.

Birth by Drowning does, however, illustrate the extent to which Nicholson, either consciously or unconsciously had absorbed the spirit of Aldo Leopold's ecological thinking and his provocation in *A Sand County Almanac* to 'Think Like a Mountain' (1949), written just three years after *Old Man* was published and eleven years before *Birth by Drowning*. The three mountains in *Birth* are embedded in their ecosystem; they are delightfully sensitive to the multiple species which surround them, both human and more-than-human. They are the conduit for the voice of God, as well as the stable reference point for all the living beings which surround them. Most importantly, they represent the deep time scale, and expansive longitudinal perspective that both Leopold and May call for.

This first assessment of Nicholson's eco-dramatic credentials does not in our opinion grant Nicholson 'permanent residency' as a playwright for environmentalism. His entire output is too small and the evidence, as explored here, dependent on just two plays. As a Leopoldian thinker, though, with an intuitive understanding of 'mountain thinking' Nicholson's two dramas are distinctive. In this respect it is instructive to consider the Cumbrian poet's own life and immediate environmental context. While *Birth's* three peaks are based on some of the most visible and visited Lake District peaks, they cannot be separated entirely from the peak which dominated the view from Nicholson's Millom bedroom window for his entire life, the mountain which - for strikingly Leopoldian reasons - he appreciated so much:

Above the town heaves the hump of Black Combe, as completely recognisable in some of Wordsworth's more literal verses as if he had written them yesterday. Around are fells, woods, marshes, sands, shingle and the sea - much of it, apart from minor modifications, looking just as it must have done to my father when he was a boy. Some things - such as the main outline of Black Combe, which I can see if I turn my head as a I write - can scarcely have changed since the Ice Age. (Nicholson 1976, 56)

The mountain he came back to so often in his poetry, the fell he could see from his tiny office, the 'Ordovician catacomb' as he calls it in the poem 'The Shadow of Black Combe' (Nicholson 1981)¹⁹, must be seen as the most notable fixture of Nicholson's dramatic oeuvre. Humbling in its antiquity and prominent in the eco-system of his native Millom, Black Combe is the archetype of Nicholson's mountain eco-dramaturgy.

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Notes

¹ Thanks to Antoinette Fawcett for noting that Nicholson was awarded the first Heinemann Prize for Literature for *Five Rivers* in 1945 and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in the same year. He received the Cholmondeley Award for Poetry, several honorary degrees (Manchester, Liverpool, Lancaster, Open University) and an Honorary Fellowship (Manchester Polytechnic), as well as the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry (1977) and an OBE. He read and gave talks at locations all over the country, including at Poetry International (South Bank), and was featured on radio and television.

² During his late teens Nicholson spent almost two years at Linford Sanatorium, Hampshire whilst being treated for tuberculosis.

³ David Cooper suggests that Nicholson 'used both poetry and topographical prose to challenge the Wordsworthian model of a central, bounded space which has shaped post-Romantic thinking about the Lakes' (2008, 815), proposing instead, a geographical remodelling that includes Cumbria's industrial towns 'within the same spatial unit as the picture-postcard villages of the central Lakes' (816).

⁴ Nicholson himself made a strong case for the power of being embedded in a local community: 'I would claim', he said in *The Listener*, 'that the main contribution which the provinces can make to the culture of the nation is to remind us of the importance of that which is common to the lives of all of us, that which is ordinary and local; to remind us of the permanence of the commonplace' (August 12th 1954, 248).

⁵ <https://www.normannicholson.org/>

⁶ Gardner first met Nicholson in 1957 and remained a lifelong friend (Lambert 2024), going on to be an academic and published poet in his own right. In 1973 Gardner published the first full-length book on Nicholson's work which includes a chapter adapted from his 588-page PhD thesis on all four plays. Constituting less than a quarter of the entire book, this nevertheless remains the most detailed published study of Nicholson's verse dramas.

⁷ Even Brodie, who covers Nicholson's poetry, topographical writing and drama, cites only one of his plays briefly: *The Old Man of the Mountains*.

⁸ Nicholson revised the ending of the play for the 1950 publication, and we use this version in the article.

⁹ All plays were in the English Language or translated to English and were scoped by Ceri Pitches in 2018.

¹⁰ This ran from 1987-2008. Fittingly its last festival was brought to a close with a quote from Norman Nicholson: 'Mountains should not serve as an escape from reality. They are surely an escape back to reality.' <http://www.terrygifford.co.uk/festival/history.html>

¹¹ The Norman Nicholson archive at the John Rylands Library, Manchester holds programmes from 20 different productions; Gardner (1973) notes at least 24 productions.

¹² Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess coined the term to mean that humans are *part* of the complex interrelationships within nature rather than superior to them, and thus should protect and nurture them, and not interfere excessively with them, including through over-farming.

¹³ 'Lonning' is a Lakeland term for a rural lane or track. See: <https://www.normannicholson.org/jan-2017lonning.html>

¹⁴ By 1963 the Committee had become known as the Wakefield Diocesan Committee for Religious Drama, existing in cooperation with the Manchester and Ripon Dioceses to promote and commission new Christian dramas which would have contemporary appeal.

¹⁵ <https://www.bibleplaces.com/blog/2008/12/acoustics-of-mounts-gerizim-and-ebal/>

¹⁶ 'Lyle' (also 'Lile') is a Cumbrian term meaning 'little'. <https://eddonline4-proj.uibk.ac.at/edd/main.html>

¹⁷ 'Boggle' (or 'Bogle') is a Cumbrian term meaning 'an apparition; a ghost, hobgoblin, spectre' <https://eddonline4-proj.uibk.ac.at/edd/main.html>

¹⁸ In *Performing Mountains, I* (Jonathan Pitches) argue that *Old Man's* conclusion 'elevates Nicholson's drama above the simplicity of a morality play and beyond the sharply defined battle lines of its Old Testament source' (Pitches 2020, 98).

¹⁹ The poem 'The Shadow of Black Combe' was first published in the pamphlet *The Shadow of Black Combe*, 1978.

²⁰ <https://www.normannicholson.org/symposium-2024.html>