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Birdsong in a Time of Silence: *The New Nature Writing in Britain and Ireland*

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To my sweet son, Milo,

And to each child who has come and is yet to come.

[...] the sound in the silence is companionable, like a frail, strong light, guiding me home.

— Steven Lovatt, *Birdsong in a Time of Silence*

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INTRODUCTION

Glenn Albrecht asserts that we are currently facing a “global pandemic of depression” as people experience ongoing distress stemming from the loss of cherished “homes” (2019, pp. 10-11). Whether due to climate change, deforestation, or urbanisation, the widespread destruction of wildlife undermines our sense of belonging to the Earth and evokes profound grief. Similar to a pandemic, this ecological crisis impacts our collective well-being. Albrecht's urgent call to recognise and address these issues resonates with many others, highlighting the need to rethink our relationship with the planet. His proposed remedy for this affliction is reviving “positive Earth emotions” (2019, pp. 91-129), which is also a guiding principle throughout this entire thesis.

In this regard, Steven Lovatt writes: “One of our culture’s most ancient myths is that of Pandora’s box. As well as being among the oldest, it’s perhaps the most necessary and valuable story for times like these, since it insists that in a world full of pestilences biological and moral hope somehow persists” (2022, p. 135). His groundbreaking debut book, *Birdsong in a Time of Silence* (2021), presents a compelling example of this, offering a unique exploration of the unexpected positive outcomes of the Covid-19 pandemic. While “the national economy – that great consumption and distraction machine” slowed down, many people around the globe became more attuned to the spring sounds of birds, initiating a planetary reawakening to the wonders of the natural world (2022, p. 5). Strangely, during a time marked by global uncertainty, isolation and death, amidst collective grief, a newfound sense of vitality was quietly emerging – “A Light in the Darkness”, illuminating our paths with unexpected hope (2022, p. 133).

My study not only attempts to locate Lovatt's work within the context of the New Nature Writing – a predominantly nonfiction genre recently introduced by Jason Cowley in a thought-provoking issue of *Granta* (2008) – but also underscores the novel aspects of Lovatt's prose. This analysis contrasts the author’s book with the broader nature writing at first, and later with the new nature writers, culminating in a thought-provoking comparison with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1999) – a seminal work in contemporary

environmentalism whose dystopia, argues Lovatt, “in large part [...] really has come to pass” (2022, p. 130). This demonstrates Lovatt's innovative approach to dystopian storytelling, and the importance of fostering a “positive environmentalism” as articulated by George Monbiot, in the sense that “[w]e know what we are *against*, now we must explain what we are *for*” (2014, p. 12, emphasis added).

This dissertation offers a comprehensive and hopefully robust framework for exploration by integrating a diverse range of disciplines, including ecocritical analysis, cultural studies, affect theories and cognitive science. It specifically delves into the concepts of place, memory, imagination, perception, and language and their application in Lovatt's work, showcasing the interdisciplinary nature of the study. The research further examines enduring nature and environmental writing tropes, such as the use of bird imagery and the human-nature relationship.

Chapter 1 sets the stage for an exploration of the vital connection between literature and the environment through the lens of ecocriticism, touching on several topics that will be useful in reading the last chapter. This section traces the evolution of ecocriticism from its origins to its expansion into the broader field of the environmental humanities. It particularly emphasizes the pivotal role of cultural memories and imaginings in addressing the pressing ecological crisis and the challenges faced by contemporary culture in responding to environmental problems. Through this comprehensive analysis, the text aims to illuminate the transformative power of cultural media in shaping our understanding of ecological issues and contributing to the discourse on environmental sustainability. *Silent Spring* (Carson, 1999) played a key part in the development of these ideas – not only did it raise awareness about the dangers of pesticides, but it also successfully turned a scientific concern into a widely acknowledged ecological matter, showcasing how literature and non-literary cultural media can have a substantial impact on environmental awareness.

The concept of ‘place’ is central to discussing these issues. The chapter delves into the significance of natural spaces in literature – whether rural, wild, or urban – particularly exploring the emotional bond between humans and the natural world from the Romantic era to the present day. The influence of Romantic literary works on contemporary nature writing is also examined. Tracing this trajectory, the chapter

addresses concerns about the transition from nature-as-wilderness to nature-as-garden, signalling a move towards a technologically mediated environment and its potential consequences.

The chapter concludes by closely examining the significance of nature writing in influencing human perspectives on environmental concerns. It elucidates how dystopian literature, by portraying grim and distressing scenarios, has effectively encouraged critical thinking, prompting readers to scrutinize and reevaluate existing environmental systems, policies, and behaviours. However, the argument presented posits that while this approach has its merits, a balanced strategy that integrates both raising awareness and instilling hope is more likely to effectively nurture environmental consciousness. Therefore, the chapter introduces Lovatt and his model for “hope” as a powerful catalyst for inspiring readers to imagine a more promising future.

Chapter 2 explores the convergence of ecocriticism with affect studies, along with their connections to cognitive science. It serves as the cohesive element that holds the entire argument together. It begins by examining the concepts of place attachment and enchantment, which are key to understanding the work of Lovatt and the new nature writers. In particular, it discusses the evolving perspectives in ecocriticism regarding the significance of place in a globalized context, as well as the role of enchantment in prompting a deeper connection with natural spaces. The importance of being in touch with the wildness is explored through the revolutionary ideas of cognitive scientists Howard Gardner and Edward O. Wilson, with a specific focus on the ‘theory of naturalist intelligence’ and the ‘biophilia hypothesis’. Reflecting on Lovatt’s soundscapes and his emphasis on engaging in the direct experience of the natural world, the chapter discusses in what way technological progress has distanced human beings from the rest of nature. Moreover, by exploring the notion of attentiveness and the process of selective attention in psychology, the significance of sensory perception is also highlighted.

Chapter 3 contextualises *Birdsong in a Time of Crisis* within “The New Nature Writing”. This comprehensive exploration illuminates the literary implications of this contemporary genre while unravelling its origins and the crucial role it plays in current environmental and cultural discourses. The exploration begins with an analysis of Jason Cowley's insightful introduction in *Granta* and subsequently delves into the critical

literature of the New Nature Writing, especially that of Jos Smith (2017). This not only provides historical context but also engages with the complex debates surrounding this genre. Moreover, it examines the distinct characteristics of this emerging form, emphasizing its ability to uncover the extraordinary within the ordinary and to intertwine scientific observation with literary expression, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the natural world.

Another key aspect discussed is the rising popularity of the concept of ‘rewilding’ in Britain and its integration within the New Nature Writing. In this regard, the intersection of nature and culture is extensively examined, emphasizing its significance for the genre and the evolving concept of wildness in diverse contexts. The unique perspectives of influential new nature writers – such as Robert Macfarlane, Richard Mabey, Kathleen Jamie, Jonathan Raban, Matthew Power, Edward Platt, and Roger Deakin – are showcased to sustain this point. Each writer's distinct voice and experience bring richness and diversity to the genre, adding layers of depth to the exploration.

The influence of language on our perception and understanding of the nonhuman natural world is also thoroughly explored. This section critically examines the power of words in either distancing us from nature or connecting us more deeply to it, while highlighting the potential consequences of the diminishing of vocabulary related to nature in modern society.

Finally, the chapter offers a detailed comparison of the opening chapters of *Silent Spring* (Carson, 1999) and *Birdsong in a Time of Silence* (Lovatt, 2022). This comparison sheds light on the similarities and differences in the ways in which these authors portray the concept of silence, particularly in relation to birdsong, and allows for an in-depth exploration of the reasons behind the need for more optimistic literature in the context of nature writing.

I would like to remark that the analysis in this thesis is informed by the profound insights of leading figures in ecocriticism, such as Amitav Ghosh, Greg Garrard, and Axel Goodbody, who are instrumental in examining the rich intersection of literature, environmentalism, and cultural studies. The second chapter further enriches the discussion by drawing on the work of scholars like Jane Bennett and Glenn Albrecht, who have made significant and impactful contributions to environmental philosophy and

ecological thought by emphasizing the emotional and ethical dimensions of our relationship with the natural world. The work also discusses the contributions of George Monbiot and David Abram, who challenge conventional paradigms while exploring the intertwinement of culture, place, and ecology in literature. Robert MacFarlane is also frequently cited since he is widely considered to be a “vocal champion of nature writing today and one of its most ambitious practitioners” (Smith, 2017, p. 11).

It should also be noted that I sparsely mention climate change. This thesis is grounded in the idea that the ecological crisis is rooted in a broader cultural crisis, which deeply influences the entire exploration. Additionally, I only lightly touch on the Covid-19 pandemic itself. Despite its potential for extensive exploration, it did not align with the focus of this thesis.

CHAPTER 1

Cultural Memories and Imaginings in Ecocriticism

1.1 The Crisis of Culture: Place in Memory and Imagination

In *The Great Derangement* (2016), Indo-Anglian novelist Amitav Ghosh has called attention to the fact that contemporary culture struggles to address climate change. He clarifies that the literary response to this issue has been lacking in fiction, with climate change being discussed mainly in nonfiction works. Ghosh believes that our current climate crisis is not only an environmental problem but also a “crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” – he argues that culture influences our desires, providing examples of how literary and non-literary cultural matrix of collected memory may shape our yearnings (2016, pp. 103-104). However, while fiction is rarely seen as a means to address this crisis, even nonfiction works are seldom taken seriously. In fact, Greg Garrard argues that the “founding text of modern environmentalism”, *Silent Spring* (Carson, 1999), faced criticism from the agrochemical industry for its literary qualities, which they believed could not coexist with proper scientific rigour (Garrard, 2004, p. 5). Despite Rachel Carson collaborating with wildlife biologists and environmental toxicologists to study the problem of DDT toxicity in wildlife, *Silent Spring* went beyond scientific research and made a moral argument against the use of DDT. The book successfully transformed a scientific problem in ecology into a widely recognized ecological issue, which was debated “politically, legally, and in the media and popular culture” (Garrard, 2004, p. 6). Therefore, Garrard suggests that ecocriticism may not directly contribute to scientific debates about ecological problems, but it can assist in defining, exploring, and even resolving these problems in a broader sense. Nevertheless, perhaps due to the pretentious necessity of being strictly tied to scientific fact, the arts and the humanities are often excluded from such considerations. To gain terrain in this field, environmentally oriented scholars in interdisciplinary areas of research, such as the environmental humanities and

ecocriticism, are taking space in the environmental discourse “to justify humanistic research at institutions often prone to cut first in the humanities, and to bring the knowledge generated through humanistic research into the public sphere” (Heise, 2014, p. 19).

Ecocriticism, “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. xviii, in Garrard, 2004, p. 3), originated in the United States in the early 1990s – in 1992 precisely, when the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment was founded during a yearly convention of the Western Literature Association (Heise, 2014, p. 19). Particular attention in this field was initially given to American and English literature, as shaped by nonfictional nature writers such as Thoreau and romantic poets like John Clare, respectively. First-wave ecocriticism was seriously engaged with the history of destabilisation of nonhuman nature caused by urbanisation and industrial capitalism, typically privileging rural and wild spaces over the built environment. At the start of the new millennium, ecocriticism had included in its area of research a much more comprehensive selection of historical periods, regions of the world and genres until it grew to encompass neighbouring disciplines under the concept of environmental humanities over the last few years. Second-wave ecocriticism turned toward cultural studies and cultural theory, shifting the centre of gravity “from ecocriticism as textual practice to environmental criticism as cultural practice”, influenced by “a more complex grasp of the longer history of environmentalism itself” concerned with issues like public health, social justice, and waste disposal – that is, privileging figures as diverse as Charles Dickens and Rachel Carson (Buell, 2011, pp. 94-104). While first-wave and second-wave ecocriticism have tended to be “strongly region and community-oriented”, emergent ecocritical works of third-wave ecocriticism conceive placeness “less centripetally, in more cosmopolitan and global terms”, as one finds in Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2005; see Buell, 2011, p. 100).

Looking through the lens of cultural ecology – one of the most productive directions of ecocriticism developed in Europe, “which posits ecology as a paradigmatic perspective of knowledge not only for the natural sciences, but for cultural studies as well” –, the internal landscapes produced by literature and other non-literary expressive media are necessary “to continually restore the richness, diversity, and complexity of

those inner landscapes of the mind, the imagination, the emotions, and interpersonal communication” that comprise the cultural ecosystems of modern humans (Zapf, 2010, pp. 136-138). Literature, observes Hubert Zapf, is “a sensorium for what goes wrong in a society, for the biophobic, life-paralyzing implications of one-sided forms of consciousness and civilizational uniformity” and “a medium of constant cultural self-renewal, in which the neglected biophilic energies can find a symbolic space of expression and of (re-)integration into the larger ecology of cultural discourses” (2010, p. 138). Similarly, Axel Goodbody has attempted to converge ecocriticism as such to cultural studies developed by Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, and Jan and Aleida Assmann, thus uniting the approach to nature and space to the approach to history and time in the study of culture, the both of them sharing “interests in the interaction between personal experience and imagining on the one hand and collective values and identity on the other, and in textual mechanisms and techniques involving the adaptation and reinterpretation of received narratives and images” (2011, p. 55). Such “cultural memory approach to environmental texts” is thought by Goodbody to implement that critique much needed in contemporary Western values to envision alternatives and facilitate renewal. He writes:

This process of intertextual revisiting and reconfiguring of tropes, narratives and images plays a central role in the constant reshaping of public perceptions of nature and environment. Figurations of memory focusing on places serve as particularly important vehicles for the communication and redefinition of understandings of our relationship with the natural environment (2011, p. 59).

All these publications share the belief that the emotions readers feel when engaging with cultural texts are no different from those we experience in everyday life and “since emotions create memories and drive behaviour [...] such engagements might also resonate beyond the immediate reading or viewing experience” (Weik von Mossner, 2020, p. 133). Even though further research is needed to confirm or refute the idea that emotionally engaging with environmentally focused texts can have a meaningful impact on the planet we inhabit, recent studies in the field of empirical ecocriticism suggest that cultural texts can increase our level of concern for the health of the planet (Weik von Mossner, 2020). Goodbody believes that contemporary critiques in favour of an environmental consciousness grounded in a ‘sense of planet’ and global identification –

such as those of Lawrence Buell in *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005) and of Ursula Heise's *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008) "reinventing place-attachment on a planetary scale" (see Buell, 2011, p. 101) – are only in part justified. Even though Heise's eco-cosmopolitanism may be a more appropriate goal for an increasingly global nature of environmental crisis and a less anachronistic one compared to that of bioregionalism and local belonging, in Goodbody's opinion, ecocritics cannot afford to ignore place as a cultural phenomenon and a symbolic entity "remembered and imagined", rooted in sensual experience, as it could play a central role in environmental consciousness and an ethic of responsibility and care for the natural landscape (Goodbody, 2011, p. 57). In this way, Goodbody seems to converge the act of remembering to that of imagining – linking the real with the imagined and anchoring both in places facilitates "the generation of new structures of cultural perception" (2011, p. 59).

1.2 From Pastoral to Contemporary Nature Writing: Wilderness, Gardens and Birds

Nature writing prevailed long before environmental issues arose in literature and ecocriticism became an academic discipline, with nature being an especially important centre of attraction during the Romantic era. Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology* (1991) offers a "preliminary framework" for discussing this thinking layer in classical romanticism – poetry exists not only in language but also in the wilderness (see Lussier, 1996, p. 396). It serves as a channel for emotional exchange between humans and the natural world, not just as a mode of verbal expression. Romantic poets frequently lamented the absence of a spiritual bond between humans and nature, which Bate refers to as "emotional communication", following Hazlitt (1991, p. 17, in Lussier, 1996, p. 396). Aleida Assman writes about the importance gained by poetic imagination in place-based encounters of this period, both as a gesture of resistance to Enlightenment ideas of human progress and as a site of encounter with a forgotten past where individual and collective memory reinforce each other (1999, see Goodbody, 2011). In Assman's

opinion, since premodern cultures, “holy places” have shown to be a basic human need and although their symbolic meaning does not necessarily “entail a restoration of spiritual significance or reenchantment”, writes Goodbody, they may “serve as particularly important vehicles for the communication and redefinition of understandings of our relationship with the natural environment” (2011, pp. 59-60).

Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, a French anthropologist, introduced the term ‘participation’ to describe the animistic beliefs of indigenous societies (1985, p. 77, in Abram, 1996, p. 43). In these cultures, even objects typically considered inanimate, such as stones or mountains, are believed to possess life, and “particular plants, particular animals, particular places and persons and powers may all be felt to participate in one another’s existence, influencing each other and being influenced in turn” (Abram, 1996, p. 43). Glenn Albrecht, who calls such a state of total harmony and interconnection with place an “Earth-based spirituality”, suggests that “we could learn a great deal from indigenous people about what [it] consists of” (2019, p. 145). He writes:

I often drift into unconscious states such as daydreams and lose track of time. Bird-watching does it for me, and I can be “lost with the birds” for hours on end. When I return to consciousness, I remember that I was in a strange state, one that had me totally absorbed in the act of watching other beings and entering in their life forces. In religious traditions, such a state could be described as a form of ecstasy or euphoria, yet I do not feel as if I am in a hyperreal state, nor one that is enhanced by mind-altering substances. However, I am open to the idea that such a state of mind is “spiritual” in some sense [...] (2019, p. 127).

According to Albrecht, humans have undergone three stages of interaction with nature - engagement, alienation, and separation. Initially, humans were completely merged with nature, but this changed as technology developed: “second nature” replaced “first nature” (2019, p. 68). However, there is now a concern that humans are moving towards a “third nature” where there is a total “extinction of experience” (Pyle, 1993 in Albrecht 2019, p. 75). As nature fades, humans become even more integrated with the artificial and technologically mediated environment. The dystopian visions of the future that we see today not only express concerns over the large-scale alteration of ecological processes, such as species extinction and global warming, but also anxiety about the move away from “first nature”, or nature-as-wilderness, towards “second” and even “third nature”, or nature-as-garden – a “constructed, mediated and engineered” one (Hughes & Wheeler, 2013, p. 3).

Accounts of nature-as-garden that so represent our modern urban spaces, a “middle ground between nature and culture, a place that is at once of nature and unapologetically set against it” (Pollan, 1991, p. 53), have long been depicted in literary culture since the Industrial Revolution. For instance, Emily Dickinson's poem, “A Bird Came down the Walk” (1891), tells the story of a bird that finds its way into a humanised and domesticated environment (see Kern, 2009, pp. 331-332). While observing the bird as it struggles to adapt within the walls of the speaker's garden, she becomes fascinated by the fact that the animal eats a worm “raw”, creating a sense of anthropocentric asymmetry. Despite the bird's challenges in this environment, the garden is a testament to the successful integration of nature and human order (Kern, 2009, pp. 331-332). Moreover, some British Romantic literary works are seen as forerunners to modern environmentalist writing. They often portrayed the characters' moral development or degeneracy through their reactions to nature, specifically trees. For instance, novels like Ann Radcliffe's gothic masterpiece *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) sometimes differentiated between heroes and villains on the basis of their attitudes towards trees (see Hutchings, 2005, p. 16).

Contemporary nature writing tends to distinguish between ‘wilderness’ and ‘wildness,’ with a sometimes sceptical attitude towards the former's “almost sacramental value” (Garrard, 2004, p. 59). However, whilst it may seem to reject the idea of “the sublimity of wilderness”, it simultaneously explores what Neal Alexander calls *Theologies of the Wild* (2015, p. 2). Nature and environmental writer Robert Macfarlane, for example, “seeks to comprehend the ways in which nature and culture are intricately interwoven with one another” (2015, p. 8). He recognizes the presence of a certain untamed quality that exists beyond his own perception. This prompts him to reconsider the distinctions between the human and nonhuman, and between various versions of nature based on their level of wildness. He begins to focus on the idea that wildness is not something separate from human life, but it can instead be found unexpectedly “around and within it: in cities, backyards, roadsides, hedges, field boundaries and spinnies” (2007, p. 227, in Alexander, 2015, p. 8) – “paradoxically, however” Alexander writes, “this awareness also coexists alongside a conception of ‘wildness’ that is premised upon the radical absence of human [...] and cultural influences: in effect, an affirmation of

‘wilderness’ in its strong form” (2015, p. 7). From sightings of majestic birds in natural landscapes to their unassuming presence in suburban gardens, these writers seamlessly integrate “wild” animals into their everyday experiences, often regarding them as symbols of premodern values, “as ordinary but also charged with significance” (2015, p. 12).

1.3 Reviving Hope: The Role of Positive Narratives in Environmental Literature

Studies of place and memory, such as Simon Schama’s *Landscape and Memory* (1996), have extensively investigated the role played by individual imaginings of place in the cultural memory of the past. However, in his *Common Ground* column in *The Guardian*, Macfarlane proposes that “the real subject of landscape writing is not landscape, but a restructuring of the human attitude towards nature – and there can be few subjects more urgent or necessary of our attention than this”. Like Ghosh, Macfarlane insists, therefore, that “an imaginative repertoire is urgently needed by which the causes and consequences of climate change can be debated, sensed and communicated” (2005). Nevertheless, contrary to Macfarlane’s hopes, the majority of artistic responses have chosen to focus on apocalyptic scenarios. In their work, *Eco-dystopias: Nature and the Dystopian Imagination*, Hughes and Wheeler argue that most artistic response to climate change is communicated through the “language of disaster” (2013, p. 2). According to them, this trend is due to a growing “sense of urgency, by the awareness that ‘measured and prudent’ responses, to use Macfarlane’s terms, may not be sufficient to intervene in the course of events” (Ibid.). This has led to the development of dystopian literature – which has often “embraced the possibilities of apocalyptic soothsaying, from the Victorian era to the present day” – as a way to meditate on the progress and impact of climate change, expanding from science fiction to new eco-dystopian genres like ‘cli-fi’, and even to Indigenous literature – for example, Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book* (2013; see Albrecht, 2019, p. 68). In *The Environmental Imagination*, Buell argues that apocalypse is “the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination

has at its disposal” (1995, p. 285), and as Albrecht recently put it: “Everyone wants to look at a disaster” (2019, p. 147).

The latter half of the 20th century saw a ‘great acceleration’ in industry, agriculture, and technology. Unfortunately, this resulted in an upsurge in environmental pollution and the usage of harmful chemicals in industrial processes since the conclusion of World War II. Agriculture, once a naturally organic practice, underwent a rapid transformation due to the widespread implementation of agrochemicals and the introduction of fossil fuels. Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) is widely regarded as the starting point for modern environmentalism. With the first chapter, “A Fable for Tomorrow”, serving as the catalyst, this book is “a critical introduction to the field of ecocriticism” and its significance in contemporary environmental discourse (Garrard, 2004, pp. 1-3). The story begins with a town in America where humans and nature coexist harmoniously, reminiscent of the pastoral tradition. However, this serenity is quickly shattered by a series of disasters that destroy every aspect of rural life.

[The book ...] not only begins with a decidedly poetic parable, but also relies on the literary genres of pastoral and apocalypse, pre-existing ways of imagining the place of humans in nature [...] The rest of the book sets out to prove that such an apocalypse was already going on in a fragmentary way all over America, so that the doom befalling this mythical town of the future could be seen as a composite of lesser tragedies already known, and scientifically validated, in 1962 (Garrard, 2004, p. 2).

Carson attributed the cause of the problem to newly introduced synthetic pesticides like DDT, aldrin and dieldrin, which were effective in controlling pest insects after World War II. Her scientific claims have been largely supported by research, which has increased public awareness of pesticide contamination. This has led to stricter state regulations and the development of less persistent agricultural chemicals, making it clear that such claims play a significant role in shaping today's politics and culture. Despite the scientific content of Carson's work, she employs a variety of rhetorical techniques, including both pastoral and apocalyptic imagery and literary allusions, to shape her message. The collapse of bird populations is the most poignant section of the tale, with the “silent spring” serving as a metaphor for the impending environmental catastrophe. Lovatt, the author whom I focus on in this dissertation, writes:

In 1962, Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* warned of a world whose birds were being poisoned by pesticides, and consequently a world devoid of natural song – the silence of death. And in large part this dystopia really has come to pass. In Britain alone, there are 50 million fewer birds than there were when Carson wrote her book; imagine the sound of 50 million songbirds serenading the spring and you get an idea of what we are missing (2022, p. 130).

Although aware of the significant dangers birds face, *Birdsong in a Time of Silence* is not a doom and gloom environmental warning. Instead, it presents a hopeful outlook. The “time of silence” that reignited his interest in birdwatching was the initial lockdown in the UK due to COVID-19. Interestingly, the pandemic occurred “at just that moment in the natural calendar when birdsong resumes in full force” (2022, p. 5), in spring. Lovatt was not the only one who noticed birdsong during lockdown – thousands of people, with more free time and less traffic noise, started to appreciate it. By examining how birdsong improved people's lives during lockdown and how being mindful of the natural world can lead to increased care for it, Lovatt suggests that perhaps some positive outcomes can arise from this period of hardship:

Like many people during the pandemic, I've been discovering new, unhabitual paths, both material and mental. [...] The formula is simple and inevitable: when we attend to different things, we begin to think differently. There is surely an opportunity here that something good could come out of this time of uncertainty and suffering (2022, p. 6).

By the end of the book, he adds:

It's in this context that the wake of silence which followed the Covid-19 pandemic can be seen, despite everything, as an opportunity, perhaps even a gift, in the sense that it might restore our awareness of the natural world that is our only home. But this will only be true if the new attentiveness to what is really important in our lives can be retained and then acted upon. [...] This year, so strange and chastening for human beings, may end up being a very good one for birds. Despite reverses in some places, most species have fledged more young than usual, counteracting in however small a way the bigger picture of loss and depletion and, more valuable still, rebutting fatalism by showing that trends can be reversed. And if there's hope for them, then there's also hope for us (2022, pp. 131-135).

To tackle these concerns, there appears to be a demand for literature that exudes optimism. Not a “naïve optimism” but rather “the capacity for wonder [...], a certain forgetfulness [...] that temporarily eclipses the anxiety endemic to critical awareness of the world's often tragic complexity”, to use Jane Bennett's words (2001, p. 10). This kind of literature has the potential to revive a positive and imaginative approach to the Earth and its landscape, while also serving as a bridge between humanity and nature.

CHAPTER 2

The Affective (Re)Turn

2.1 Enchantment and the Sensual Experience

While none of the early scholars of first-wave or second-wave ecocriticism attended in any sustained way to affect studies, both have shown an interest in our affective engagements with environmentally oriented texts – “some sort of inherent affective if not also spiritual bond between individual humans and the nonhuman world”, writes Buell (2011, p. 90). First-wave ecocriticism “became especially identified with the project of reorienting literary-critical thinking toward more serious engagement with nonhuman nature” through a range of post-Heideggerian phenomenological theories according to which “human being and human consciousness are thought to be grounded in intimate interdependence with the nonhuman living world” (2011, pp. 89-90). Examples of this are Bate’s *Romantic Ecology* (1991) and *The Song of the Earth* (2000), as well as those of Buell himself, such as *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) (see Buell, 2011). On the other hand, as I have previously mentioned, second-wave ecocriticism’s growing interest in the global has not entirely subsumed the longstanding one in place attachment. However, the significance of “existential contact” with the environment in today’s context “tends to be more self-consciously framed as socially mediated, and the value set upon subjective individual experience of environment tends to be framed accordingly as a product of historical circumstance and acculturation” (2011, p. 90).

Along with Goodbody’s cultural memory perspective (2011), a number of edited collections show the continued relevance of place identity in an increasingly globalized world. Some ecocritics have incorporated affect theory in their work following Heise’s *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008; see Weik von Mossner, 2020, p. 129). They seek to explore the capacity of cultural texts to stimulate the imagination and evoke emotional responses. Engaging affects today are works such as Tonya K. Davidson,

Ondine Park and Rob Shields's *Ecologies of Affect* (2011), Christine Berberich, Neil Campbell and Robert Hudson's *Affective Landscapes in Literature, Art and Everyday Life* (2015), Lisa Ottum and Seth T. Reno's *Wordsworth and the Green Romantics* (2016), and that of scholars Salma Monani et al. (2017), who have demonstrated that place attachment can serve as a powerful means of raising awareness about climate change (see Weik von Mossner, 2020).

Contemporary affect studies show a growing interest in the concept of embodiment, viewing affect as something which “fuses the body with the imagination” (Davidson et al., 2011, p. 5). Moreover, ecocriticism has started to draw more consistently on cognitive science, focusing on empathy and perception in their analysis of our engagement with cultural texts and the environment. Among the most recent examples of this highly interdisciplinary endeavour are *Affective Ecocriticism* edited by Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino (2018), Albrecht's *Earth Emotions* (2019) and Alexa Weik von Mossner's *Affective Ecologies* (2020) (see Weik von Mossner, 2020).

The relationship between mind and matter has been the subject of much philosophical debate, especially in the context of materialism. In *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Jane Bennett describes enchantment as more than “a homesick variant of romanticism” but as “a condition of exhilaration or acute sensory activity”, thus a means of heightening experience through which one might exercise wonder as an “essential component of an ethical, ecologically aware life” (2001, pp. 32, 12, 99). The argument presented in this passage challenges the idea that the human mind exists separately from its physical surroundings. Instead, it suggests that the mind and the material world have a reciprocal influence on each other. This realization has important implications for New Materialism scholars, who must recognize that matter possesses its own agency and consider how humans engage with it (Johnson, 2014, p. 614). Drawing on the wisdom of influential thinkers and writers, the text also proposes that we refrain from dismissing spiritual aspects of these interactions as mere cultural constructs, but rather view them as part of a multifaceted and influential materiality that encompasses both culture and nature. In his writings, for instance, Henry D. Thoreau discusses that enchantment is essentially “the experience of spirit – a term that he largely understands in a secular sense that even today's scholars are likely to find tolerable: [...] a vital force permeating all matter”

(Johnson, 2014, p. 607). On the other hand, James W. Gibson describes the “culture of enchantment” as the process of revitalizing nature with a sense of spirit (2009, in Johnson, 2014, p. 629).

By acknowledging spirit as matter, we can overcome the traditional dichotomy between nature and culture, and better understand the interconnectedness of all things. This means imbuing the natural world with a renewed sense of wonder and magic, thus recognizing the intrinsic value and beauty of the environment. Proposes Lovatt:

without any greater exertion than sitting down and listening to birds, you may discover climates of the soul that you had forgotten existed, or that had been drowned out in the rush and clamour of everyday life. If it's preferable not to speak of the soul then let's call it something else – some novel electro-chemical stimulation. Either way, it's plainly mystical and profoundly ordinary (2022, p. 9).

Somewhere else in the book, he adds:

Within the syrinx are membranes of thin but tough tissue that vibrate when air is drawn over them, and it's these vibrations that produce birdsong. More accurately, they 'are' birdsong, and I find this helpful to remember whenever I reflect on the fact that our culture, if it admits the spiritual at all, insists on opposing it to what is physical and fleshy (2022, p. 28).

It is worth noting that Lovatt skilfully incorporates in *Birdsong in a Time of Silence* all the themes mentioned in this chapter. To begin with, according to the publisher's blurb offered on the back cover of the first edition of the book (2021), showing that “natural history and human history cannot be separated” seems to be the author's ultimate goal. Moreover, Stephen Moss's testimonial on the back cover of the latest edition (2022) describes it as “a delightful meditation on the wonder of birdsong” and, in reviewing *Birdsong in a Time of Silence* for *World Literature Today* in May 2022, Irish essayist and poet Chris Arthur concludes that Lovatt has the potential to rekindle our “sense of wonder”. In fact, Lovatt employs the word ‘enchantment’ and its derivative ‘enchanted’ five times in the book to describe his emotions towards birdsong and the natural world as a whole. He also uses these words to convey the magical and spiritual qualities of the landscape, as seen in this quote: “As though under *enchantment*, the walls and trees of the town have begun to speak” (2022, p. 81; emphasis added). However, Lovatt frequently substitutes these words with synonyms such as ‘wonder’, ‘awe’, ‘delight’, and ‘fascination’, which express “the mysterious sense [...] that the earth is something more

than a human estate” (2022, p. 79). The author’s writing is also rich in sensory descriptions – he is attuned to the subtler aspects of reality, and one could argue that he employs synaesthesia to bring his experiences to life on the page:

Although it’s most unscientific, I hold to a loose hypothesis that you can tell what a bird eats by the sound it makes. [...] isn’t it true that blackbird song is full and fruity like juicy worms or spoiling apples, while swallows and martins have thin, insectivorous voices? And that the very way we represent the calls of sparrows with ‘chirp’ is suggestive of a seed, with its fat full vowel sound tapering at either end to those sharp little consonants? (2022, p. 42)

2.2 The Biophilia Hypothesis and the Naturalist Intelligence at Risk

Lovatt's sense of place and belonging is intimately tied to the city of Birmingham, in the West Midlands region of England, where he spent his formative years in the 1980s. During this time, he was surrounded by a wide variety of birds, including wrens, martins, nightjars, and many others, towards which he feels “a great *affection*” (2022, p. 85; emphasis added). These cherished memories have left a lasting impression on Lovatt's psyche and continue to shape both his identity and his deep bond with his hometown to this very day.

This era also saw the emergence of fresh ideas from a new generation of scientists, such as Howard Gardner, with his ‘theory of naturalist intelligence’ and Edward O. Wilson, with his ‘biophilia hypothesis’, which laid the foundation for Affective Ecology (see Barbiero, 2014). Biophilia is “a set of innate learning rules” that help us form a beneficial relationship with nature, and its principles can be instrumental in developing naturalist intelligence (Wilson, 1984, in Barbiero, 2014, p. 23). Naturalist intelligence “processes information related to distinguishing among natural and manmade objects” – it is thus the ability to recognize and interact with living organisms and natural objects in subtle ways, which requires advanced sensory abilities, logical reasoning to differentiate and categorize, emotional sensitivity towards the natural world, and an existential understanding that connects all these qualities together (Gardner, 2006, in Barbiero, 2014, pp. 22-23). While biophilia denotes our capacity to connect with nature, naturalist

intelligence empowers us to leverage that connection to address environmental issues (Barbiero, 2014, p. 24). Simply possessing knowledge about nature is insufficient to develop an authentic appreciation for it. To genuinely comprehend our connection with the environment, we need to explore the emotional aspects that influence our behaviour as humans. This is where “Affective Ecology” (2014) plays a crucial role.

In *Affective Ecology for Sustainability*, Giuseppe Barbiero outlines the stages of a child's evolving relationship with nature according to developmental psychology as described by Piaget (1967; see Barbiero, 2014). Firstly, Barbiero explains what is termed “preoperatory phases”, when “the primary learning channel in children is fundamentally of an affective nature” – as early as six months of age “children are spontaneously attracted to living forms that move”, while at “around two-three years, an attraction towards the young of many vertebrates develops” (2014, p. 24). Interestingly, these phases correspond to Lovatt's early childhood experience, as he reminisces:

These three memories – of wren, martin and nightjar – are only the closest at hand of hundreds of recollections of birds and their songs. These memories begin consciously from the age of about three or four, when I watched those vast starling flocks sculpting the greasy dusk above Birmingham before they settled to roost. No doubt, though, I was aware of birdsong from even earlier days, in a cot now lost in time or even in utero – so loudly did the wood pigeons croon from our TV aerial (2022, pp. 124-125)¹.

Then Barbiero moves on to speak about the “operatory phases” that follow from the age of six, when “children also start to develop a cognitive interest for the natural world” which continues to expand between nine and twelve years of age, eventually leading to a mature ecological awareness by the start of adolescence (2014, p. 25). At this stage, Lovatt begins to show signs of an increased fascination with birds and the natural world as a whole, indicating a growing cognitive curiosity towards the environment:

I started watching birds when I was seven [...] I poured into this hobby the same vast, nerdish endowment that I'd previously invested in the cars and planes, and by my early teens I could identify most British birds by sight and sound, my knowledge growing as we came across different species on trips to the countryside and coast (2022, pp. 3-4).

¹ “Since our awareness of birdsong stretches far back into prehistory”, Lovatt also evokes “a third category of memory that both contains and underwrites what we think of as individual and cultural memories”; he calls this “species memory” (Lovatt, 2022, p. 120).

Later in the book, he includes the following information:

Between the ages of eight and ten, I spent a lot of time as a bird of prey. [...] As my knowledge of predatory birds grew, I incorporated it into my role play [...]. Although by this age I was interested in birds of all kinds, it was birds of prey that dominated my imagination, and I've since witnessed the same preference in other children, including my own. I doubt that this is coincidence, and I ascribe it to a developing desire for the self-sufficiency and wild freedom that raptors seem to represent for people (2022, pp. 70-71).

For children to fully develop these competencies, clarifies Barbiero, it is essential that they are provided with appropriate stimuli – it thus “becomes fundamental for the mental integrity of the child that contact with Nature ensues and accompanies a child along his/her entire developmental journey” (2014, p. 24). Richard Louv’s *Last Child in the Woods* delves into the negative consequences of children becoming disconnected from nature, a phenomenon he termed “nature-deficit disorder” (2008, in Albrecht, 2019, p. 74). This issue has been extensively researched and underscores the importance of fostering a connection between children and the natural world for their overall well-being and development. Louv and other experts suggest that physical and mental health issues among children, such as obesity and attention-deficit disorder, are closely linked to their separation from nature (see Albrecht, 2019, p. 74.). The biophilia hypothesis supports this idea, showing that people prefer natural over built environments, and experience lower levels of stress and blood pressure as a result (Kahn, 1999; see Tagnani, 2016, pp. 341). Roger Ulrich's studies (1993) found that natural settings have a restorative effect on the brain, as measured by alpha-wave activity, which “correlate with states of ‘wakeful relaxation’ [...] such as those evoked with meditation” (see Tagnani, 2016, pp. 342). To this regard, since attention seems to be one of the fundamental constructs of biophilia and fascination the fundamental property that an environment must possess to stimulate it, Barbiero has proposed a technique which “uses silent observation, as an instrument to develop self and body awareness” (2014, p. 27). Lovatt is familiar with these notions, as he cites clinical studies that link listening to birdsong with increased awareness, and references numerous online and print sources that report the peaceful and enjoyable effects of birdsong during the Covid-19 pandemic, highlighting its potential to alleviate anxiety and trauma (2022, p. 121).

In his review of *Birdsong in a Time of Silence*, Arthur reminds us that an important feature of Lovatt’s attentiveness is silence. Defining the book as an “elegiac meditation” he asserts that it “stems from – paying attention to something frequently unnoticed”, which extends beyond birds and encompasses all of nature². Writes Lovatt:

Birdwatchers, of course, can learn a lot about birds by watching them, but no doubt they can also learn a lot about watching – I mean the act or process of watching itself, and why we see what we see and miss what we miss (2022, pp. 44-45).

In fact, attention – as defined in psychology – refers to “the process through which some elements of sensory information are encoded and elaborated whilst other aspects of reality are neglected” (Valenza, 2002, in Barbiero 2014, p. 25). This means that although humans are constantly bombarded with overwhelming stimuli perceived by the senses, only a fraction of information is consciously integrated and given attention. In *Birds of a Feather*, Robert Kern suggests that the eye must be “silenced” in order to fully participate in nature’s harmony – he notes that even though the act of seeing “ordinarily involves neither voice nor sound”, it remains difficult to ignore the notion that it must be stilled in order to perceive and process the surrounding world in an accurate manner (2009, p. 328). The questions he raises are: “to what extent can the eye be regarded as an organ of vocality or audibility? Is the eye ever capable of not being quiet, or of voicing or otherwise sounding out its responses to what it sees?” (Ibid.). In his own way, Lovatt seems to answer these questions with the statement: “When I reach the park it’s full of song, and *I close my eyes the better to listen*” (2022, p. 7; emphasis added). As it can also be observed in the book’s title, which places emphasis on ‘birdsong’ as opposed to ‘birdwatching’, I would argue that Lovatt often prioritizes hearing over seeing, highlighting a world of memory and imagination that stems from sound, and suggesting how a significant role it plays in his perception of the world.

² E.g., “As I walk, I *pay attention* and receive *awareness* in return. The trees are renewed and improbably beautiful” (Lovatt, 2022, p. 7; emphasis added), or “Watching water is good for weary eyes; I’d like to unfocus completely, but always life compels the *attention*” (Lovatt, 2022, pp. 95-96; emphasis added).

2.3 The Threatened Sense-scape: a Critique of Technology and Digitization

Coinciding with the sudden decline in human activity during the pandemic, by the end of July 2020 seismologists reported “a wave of silence passing over the earth” – for the first time since the Industrial Revolution, writes Lovatt, “the crust of the planet ceased to judder with the noise”, allowing the earth to “hear itself think, and the voice of its thought was *song*” (2022, p. 130; emphasis added). The French verb *chanter* meaning 'to sing', is the root of the verb 'to enchant'. Enchantment, therefore, is an apt metaphor for the effect that sound can have on us, in order “to surround with song or incantation; hence, to cast a spell with sounds, to make fall under the sway of a magical refrain, to carry away on a sonorous stream” (Bennett, 2001, p. 6).

According to philosopher and ecologist David Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, our disconnection from nature is a result of limited direct experience, as we “consciously encounter nonhuman nature only as it has been circumscribed by our civilization and its technologies” (1996, p. 28). Abram's philosophy, grounded in phenomenology, highlights the importance of our unfiltered senses in experiencing the nonhuman. Lovatt echoes this sentiment when he bemoans the disappearance or decline of bird species that used to signal the arrival of summer, and that have today become “out of *sound*, out of mind” (2022, p. 75; emphasis added). According to the author's recollection, his grandparents could distinctly hear the calls of corncrakes and quails from the fields near their home in the English Midlands. During his parents' youth, nightingales and turtle doves could still be heard across the country. He claims, however, that he has never encountered these species in Britain, which for generations before him “probably distilled the very essence of what summer was; summer was experienced as summer, not only because it was warmer and the football stopped, but also because of this sound, now little more than a rapidly fading memory” (2022, p. 77). The author also posits that, in the absence of birds migrating due to increasing temperatures, we must resort to the “fiction of the Christmas cards” that show “robins perched on snowy branches” to evoke feelings of the winter season (2022, p. 76). Such a perspective underscores Lovatt's conviction that human perception is frequently intertwined with the natural world, emphasizing the

significance of its symbolic representations in shaping our understanding of the environment around us.

While today's sophisticated weather prediction technologies have given us a better understanding of the decision-making process of migratory birds, writes Lovatt:

in an age before satellites and computer modelling things were often the other way around, and it was close observation of bird and insect behaviour that enabled early meteorologists to make their tentative predictions (2022, pp. 60-61).

The author suggests that our blind reliance on technology poses a threat not only to the natural world but also to our cultural heritage, since “objects and practices [...] just as endangered by our uncritical acceptance of technology as the birds themselves” (2022, p. 128). In his opinion, “an age of enforced digitization” not only “impoverishes the common soundscape”, but also erodes the richness and diversity of our shared human experience (2022, p. 129). This point of view is sustained by Barbiero, who reminds us that our innate ability to connect with the natural world can become suppressed or altered “according to the needs of the new environments into which technology has catapulted humanity” (2014, p. 23). “In modern human culture, biophilia seems to assume the characteristics of an ex-adaptation”, writes Barbiero, meaning that a certain trait that originally served a specific purpose has become useful for other purposes, “such as recognizing automobiles from the sounds of the engines” (Gardner, 1999, p. 50, in Barbiero, 2014, p. 23).

Throughout the book, Lovatt draws parallels between his childhood experiences and the need to encourage his children to engage in outdoor activities that “keep them away from the computer screen” (2022, p. 111). He reflects on how our society arises “less and less from direct experience of the world”, with many people today never having seen an egg outside of a supermarket or frying pan (2022, pp. 7, 87-88). As Albrecht beautifully put it: “With such limited experience of first nature to pass onto the next generation, each generation accepts an objectively impoverished nature as the norm” (2019, p. 75). As generations pass, “the artificial becomes all-encompassing” and “nature ends up simply fading”, eventually leading to what Robert Pyle in 1993 referred to as “the extinction of experience”, and to that which Peter Kahn in 1999 has termed “environmental generational amnesia” (see Albrecht, 2019, p. 75).

CHAPTER 3

Locating *Birdsong in a Time of Silence* in “The New Nature Writing”

3.1 The New Nature Writing: “Contemporary Attitudes to Place in Britain and Ireland”

In 2008, Jason Cowley introduced “The New Nature Writing” in the 102nd issue of the British literary magazine *Granta*, which features articles by twenty different writers – some of the notable contributors include Robert Macfarlane, Richard Mabey and Kathleen Jamie among others – all sharing “some kind of journey of discovery” (p. 10). He distinguished this contemporary form from the “old nature writing” associated with the “lyrical pastoral tradition of the romantic wanderer” by emphasizing that these writers “have no need to travel to the other side of the world to understand more about themselves and their relation to the world they inhabit” (Ibid.). Instead, Cowley aligned this new genre with nature writers who focused on “the local and the parochial”, approaching their subject “in heterodox and experimental ways” through forms such as field reports, essays, memoirs, and travelogues which “are about the discovery of exoticism in the familiar, the extraordinary in the ordinary” (2008, pp. 10-11). He claims that this form of writing aims to generate “new ways of seeing”, striving “to see with a scientific eye and write with literary effect” (2008, pp. 9, 11). In fact, these new nature writers have been praised for their ability to “encompass and extend beyond both scientific and romanticized accounts of the natural world” (Lilley, 2017, p. 3; see also Alexander, 2015, p. 2).

The interaction between the scientific study of nature and its romantic interpretation has sparked debates among nature writers and critics alike, with the limitations of both having been extensively discussed in the literature. Critics of the New Nature Writing can be divided into two opposing views – some argue that it should focus solely on facts, while others suggest that it should embrace more ambitious literary forms (Smith, 2017, p. 22). On the other hand, practitioners of The New Nature Writing navigate this relationship firsthand in their texts, often deducing that a confluence of both adds

depth and meaning to their explorations. For instance, in a series of essays, Mabey revealed his own struggle between “the scientist’s desire to examine the natural world forensically, and the romantic’s desire to find human meaning in it” (2009; see Moran, 2014, p. 58). In other works, he explored whether the “exact observation” of nature could be combined with his “Romantic insistence on making feelings part of the equation”, maintaining that emotions can coexist with the scientific impulse without compromising its accuracy (2011, pp. 4-5 in Moran, 2014, p. 58). In this context, the interrelationship between culture and nature is crucial, as it allows the new nature writers to “express their feelings about place and nature in general,” as Mabey suggests (1996, p. 10 in Smith, 2017, p. 2). For this reason, the term ‘nature writing’ has been a point of discomfort for some British authors, as it seems to suggest a narrow focus on nature that overlooks the importance of culture (Smith, 2017, pp. 14-15).

Jos Smith's book, *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place* – which aims to explore the “contemporary attitudes to place in Britain and Ireland [...] and its meanings in the context of global environmental crisis and cultural and economic globalization” –, highlights the significance of the interplay between nature and culture in the advent of the New Nature Writing, tracing its origins back to the early 1970s when the environmental charity Common Ground was emerging (2017, p. 5). *Second Nature*, its first publication, explored the theme of “local distinctiveness” as “a way of thinking about the human relationship with the natural world that refuses to separate ‘Nature’ as an object isolated from everyday human affairs” (1983; see Smith, 2017, pp. 35, 65). This concept, which represents the unique character of a place that emerges from the interaction of nature and culture, is crucial in connecting “the personal and the political, the local and the global, and the past, the present, and the future” (2017, p. 35). In his introduction to his edited collection, Mabey stated that many people are well-informed about the world's ecological crises but lack a direct connection to their everyday lives – *Second Nature* was created to bring this argument “back home” to the local landscapes and their individual meanings (2017, pp. 35-36). Attention to the everyday continues to be a recurrent theme among the authors of *The New Nature Writing*, who are intrinsic elements of their “voice-driven” narratives. (Cowley, 2008, pp. 10).

Although some of the contributors to *The New Nature Writing* are hesitant to identify themselves within this specific genre, they all share a common concern about the disconnection between humans and the natural world that has grown since the early 1970s when the environmental movement began, while also reflecting broader trends and familiar features in British cultural history (see Moran, 2014, p. 50; see also Lilley, 2017, p. 4). These authors speak to the current ecological crisis while “critically engaging with the rich history of nature writing and thinking about the environment in Britain from the Romantic era onwards”, even more so by “combining both scientific, scholarly observation of nature with carefully crafted, discursive writing” (Moran, 2014, p. 49). Even though the relationship between this form and earlier works is unclear to many scholars, with some arguing that it does not represent “a radical departure from the practice and preoccupations of its antecedents” (Perrin, 2010, in Smith, 2017, p. 4), others believe that its uniqueness lies precisely in the unprecedented scale of environmental damage and the innovative ways British writers have responded to this crisis (see Moran, 2014; see also Lilley, 2017).

In essence, the current state of the environment has left many of these writers feeling a deep sense of loss. From Macfarlane's quest to recover the natural beauty of the British countryside in *The Wild Places* (2007) to the collection of thought-provoking essays in *Towards Re-Enchantment* (2010), there is a growing trend in the New Nature Writing that seeks to reconnect with the natural world (see Lilley, 2017, p. 3). David Matless' review of several books by the new nature writers highlights the recurring themes of “affect, enchantment, and animation” that have come to define this emerging genre (2009, p. 85, in Smith, 2017, p. 53). These testimonies aim to convey “the affective textures of lived experience in particular landscapes, of personal and more broadly cultural modes of engagement with the world”, while also acknowledging that our experiences are necessarily filtered through our human perspective, and that language, style and narrative have an influence on how these experiences are expressed (see Moran, 2014, p. 61; see also Neal, 2015, p.5). Moreover, these writers have all agreed that utilising the power of language in relation to the natural world can heighten our awareness of it and foster a greater sense of empathy (Moran, 2014, p. 61).

The contemporary attitude towards place revealed in these texts turns out to be characterised by a “tension between anxiety and uncertainty on the one hand and by a new-found sense of possibility and imagination on the other”, as per Smith's exploration (2017, p. 22). In *A Cultural History of the New Nature Writing*, Joe Moran shares Smith's opinion, stating that the genre arises from the environmental crisis “without sharing either the occasionally apocalyptic tone of [...the] first missives from the ecology movement or the ‘insipid romanticism’” often associated with traditional nature writing (2014, p. 55). According to Deborah Lilley's analysis, the new nature writers view the ecological crisis as a catalyst for change, adopting fresh perspectives on writing about nature that prioritize the significance of direct experience and embodiment in fostering environmental consciousness (2017, pp. 1-5). In short, the emergence of this new genre aims to inspire more awareness towards the environment without the pessimistic or romanticized tones of previous nature writings.

It should be noted that Lovatt's book is a remarkable example of all the characteristics described until now. As I have previously explored in my thesis, Lovatt's experimental writing style is masterfully crafted to express the fundamental constructs of real-life experiences. By employing ordinary landscapes and everyday habitats as a potent framework to explore the natural and cultural processes, Lovatt demonstrates his determination to reevaluate the overlooked aspects of our surroundings. His descriptions are strikingly vivid, showcasing a profound comprehension of the tangible and intangible traits of embodied experience. Moreover, his literary contribution combines scientific insights, cultural history and the literary tradition that traces back to the Romantic era, ultimately offering a distinct outlook on the pressing ecological issues of our time. Overall, Lovatt's book is a fascinating and insightful addition to the New Nature Writing.

3.2 Rewilding and its Cultural Implications

In recent years, the concept of “rewilding” has gained traction in Britain, “a future-oriented and experimental practice” which involves the recovery of the wild “with an

acute awareness of what has been lost and our role as humans in intervening”, as defined by Smith (2013, pp. 73-76). Precisely, he associates the New Nature Writing with “an intensification of activity out on the frayed edges of place, temporally, spatially and conceptually, that can feed the imagination as it destabilizes convention” – he calls this a “cultural rewilding” (2013, pp. 76, 100). The New Nature Writing further contributes to the ongoing dialogue about the intersection of nature and culture, and the evolving concept of wildness in different geographical and cultural contexts.

Jonathan Raban, in his essay “Second Nature” published in *Granta 102*, discusses the intimate entwinement of nature and culture, arguing that “in England, [...] their categorical separation is a false distinction” as human activity has transformed its landscape over thousands of years (2008, p. 55). The term ‘landscape’ itself implies that it has been “land-shaped” by humans, and since “the English have a genius for incorporating industrial and technological change into their versions of both nature and the picturesque”, he argues, “all England is landscape” (2008, p. 56). Raban uses the lake at Walhampton and the surrounding woods as examples of “second nature”, where humans have shaped and cultivated the environment to the point that it has become an integral part of the ecosystem (2008, p. 55). He then moves on to describe his experience relocating to the Pacific Northwest in 1990, expressing his bewilderment at the vast expanses of “primary nature” that were visible – having previously resided in England’s “secondary nature”, he found it challenging to interpret this new landscape (2008, p. 58). In fact, compared to the United States, in Europe “[t]he imagined purity of wilderness is less significant” because “the valued baseline tends more toward the premodern than the prehistoric” (Lorimer, 2015, p. 22 in Smith, 2017, p. 73). As a result, the idea of nature, let alone wild nature, faces various challenges in these regions.

This concept is explored in what Smith calls a “controversial manifesto for ‘Rewilding’”, George Monbiot’s *Feral*, which delves into the subject of conservation policy and practices in Britain and takes a critical look at the baselines that are set for these policies over time (2014, see Smith, 2017, p. 76). He proposes the idea of “Shifting Baseline Syndrome” coined by fisheries biologist Daniel Pauly in the 1990s, in which campaigners and scientists might call for the restoration of ecosystems “to the numbers that existed in their youth [...] unaware that what they considered normal when they were

children was in fact a state of extreme depletion” (Monbiot, 2014, p. 69). The book argues that landscapes which were previously subject to deforestation are presently being preserved as if the state of damage was, in fact, their pristine and unaltered condition.

Monbiot seems to refer to the phenomenon of ‘environmental generational amnesia’ which has been previously discussed in the second chapter of this thesis when he further warns that “[e]ach generation is normalising the erosion of our environment” and that “our collective memory is wiped clean by ecological loss” in his 2017 column for *The Guardian* titled “Our Selective Blindness is Lethal to the Living World”. He also raises serious concerns about our inattention towards the natural world, echoing Carson in portraying a bleak future where the melodious chirping of birds ceases to exist and people continue to lead their daily lives ignorant of the catastrophic changes happening around them. Drawing from his personal experience, Monbiot shares how he might be “transfixed” by the sight of a sparrowhawk, while others around him remain oblivious to the beauty of nature, wondering instead how “he could have failed to notice the new V6 Pentastar Sahara that just drove past” (2017). He asserts that “[t]o be aware of the wonder and enchantment of the world, [...] and to be aware simultaneously of the remarkably rapid destruction of almost every living system, is to take on a burden of grief that is almost unbearable” (2017).

Monbiot's exploration of these ideas is closely related to Macfarlane's *The Wild Places*, which reflects on the vanishing wilderness across the British Isles. He mourns the loss of untamed landscapes, describing how urbanization, climate change, and human activity encroach upon these spaces. He also discusses the impact of car culture and road atlases in modern Britain, which has resulted in “a certain landscape psychology that ignores most of what it passes through” (2008b, see Smith, 2017, p. 77). The author argues that “maps organise information about a landscape” in a way that creates biases in how it is perceived and treated (2008b, p. 10). According to him, this “distortive pressure upon the imagination” can lead to a separation between the human and the nonhuman, and a lack of appreciation for the beauty of nature – “the elimination of wonder” (2008b, pp. 10, 145).

In a similar vein, in “Ghost Species” published in *Granta 102*, he recounts a journey to the Norfolk Fens, a landscape that “feels like crossing a border into another

world” (2008a, p. 109). In this essay, Macfarlane discusses the concept of “ghost species” in conservation science and how it applies to both humans and nonhumans. Explaining how some species have been “out-evolved by their environments”, the article provides examples of such “ghosts” that are said to have “little prospect of avoiding extinction” due to hunting, habitat loss, and pollution, such as the soft-shell sea turtle, the desert bighorn, the tiger, and the sawfish (2008a, pp. 123-126). The article then goes on to discuss “place-faithful people [...] whose future disappearance [...] is almost assured” (2008a, p. 126). The author illustrates this point through a conversation with Eric, a ninety-eight-year-old farmer who represents the human connection to the land and the “ghosts” of past generations. Eric speaks about what has vanished from his village, including the sense of community among villagers and the abundance of wildlife (2008a, pp. 126-127). One poignant passage reads:

I asked him if the wildlife had changed. ‘Ah, well, nowadays you don’t see hardly no animals on the land. A hare or two, mebbe. No birds, hardly any birds. We used to have birds’ eggsses by the hundred in boot boxes, full of eggsses. Kestrels’ eggs, sparrowhawks’ eggs. One of those was a white egg, another was a red egg – we’d climb up trees for them. A little old tomtit, a little jenny wren, could lay fifteen or eighteen eggs. We had names for all the birds. The thrush was a fulfa. Mabish meant mistlethrush, or maybe it was linnets. If you walked up to a hedge there’d be about twenty or thirty birds’ nests about that time. They were thicker then, the birds. Tomtits, blue tits, jenny wrens, especially the jenny wrens. I don’t see the wrens any more.’ (2008a, p. 127).

The essay concludes with a powerful metaphor – the appearance of egrets, a new resident species of bird adapting to the transformed environment, their intense whiteness against the dark sky represents “a surprising sign of hope” as they fly northward (2008a, p. 128).

Concerns about the decline and transformation of wildlife, especially of birds, are frequently voiced by the nature writers featured in Cowley's collection. In the essay titled “Cherry Tree Garden”, Matthew Power fondly recounts his time living in the South Bronx, vividly portraying urban gardens and contemplating environmental history. Like Macfarlane, Power concludes the essay by illustrating the resilience and adaptability of two immigrant birds finding their place in the urban environment (2008, p. 232). Edward Platt's “The Migration” offers a compelling exploration of bird migration through Israel and the West Bank, documenting the “coexistence” – or “strange combination” – of birds and aeroplanes (2008, pp. 188, 191). While the essay does not directly address bird conservation, it indirectly underscores the importance of preserving habitats and

ecosystems that support these migratory journeys. Roger Deakin's selected notebook entries (2008), edited by Alison Hastie and Terence Blacker and introduced by Macfarlane, offer daily reflections, observations, and vivid depictions of the wildlife – including a variety of bird's species – in and around his Walnut Tree Farm situated deep in the country and distanced from the suburban sprawl. Deakin utilized his notebooks to cultivate ideas and imagery that would eventually form integral parts of his posthumously published work, *Wildwood*, which delves into the significant role that trees continue to play in our daily lives and collective imagination (Macfarlane, 2008, p. 234).

Suzanne Simard's *Finding the Mother Tree* (2016) begins with an epigraph from Carson stating: "But man is a part of nature, and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself". This book has unveiled the intricate web of life beneath the forest floor, resonating with the idea of ecological interconnectedness. The concept of the "wood-wide web", introduced by Simard in 1997, demonstrates that trees communicate through an underground system that connects their roots (2021, pp. 165-166). Her findings have shown that when a tree is sick or stressed, it can share information and nutrients with neighbouring trees, aiding in healing and mutual support (2021, pp. 3-6). According to Albrecht, the concept of "Mother Trees" regulating nutrient flows and information exchange within the forest mirrors the intricate balance of the human microbiome in maintaining overall health (2019, p. 99). She explains: "There is no clearly defined 'inside' and 'outside' of trees or humans, because, the closer we look, the more interaction between biomes we see, and the more permeable skin, leaves, and roots become" (2019, p. 100). In a very similar way, in the essay featured in *Granta 102*, "Pathologies", Jamie describes her visit to a pathology lab, where she had the opportunity to observe human body parts under a microscope. While looking down at a human liver, she evoked images of a flowing river or an estuary, "a map of the familiar [...] as seen by a hawk" (2008, pp. 41-42). In Jamie's account, "there is an imaginative landscaping of the human body that explores a beautiful but unnervingly vulnerable state of intimacy with corporeal wildness", which "share[s] the conclusion that the wild is closer to home than we might think" (Smith, 2017, pp. 92-93).

The new nature writers are advocating for the rewilding of the entire Earth's ecosystem, including humans. The disappearance of natural habitats is a stark reality that

puts animals, places, practices and people at risk. Lovatt's work reflects these concerns, addressing the impact on both the human and nonhuman world. As many of the works mentioned previously, *Birdsong in a Time of Silence* delves into the influence of the environment on bird behaviour and their songs, particularly in the wake of human intervention transforming natural surroundings into urban landscapes. For instance, Lovatt observes that the blackbird, which originally inhabited forests, has now become a common "garden bird" due to urban planning changes that have created a more suitable habitat for them (2022, p. 20). He argues that the ubiquity of this bird "is a good example of how nature and culture, far from running parallel, are always touching, intersecting and influencing one another" (2022, p. 21). The book also discusses how birds alter their singing patterns in urban areas to adapt to the sonic characteristics of their surroundings – to be audible over traffic noise, birds need to sing louder and higher (2022, pp. 47-48). Moreover, in a city, birdsong bounces off straight lines and reflective surfaces, which allows birds to recognize their surroundings differently than in natural habitats such as a "healthy woodland", which is "multi-storey chaos of trunks, branches, twigs, and leaves" (2022, p. 49).

However, Lovatt further suggests that these changes also apply to humans, raising the important question: "Aren't city-dwelling humans, too, overstimulated by light and sound, sometimes tempted into unnatural behaviour?" (2022, p. 50). While this question may seem fleeting, the theme of the disconnection between humans and the natural world is pervasive throughout the entire book. From disrupted sleep patterns to stress-induced behaviours, the disconnect is evident, yet Lovatt encourages us to listen with fresh ears and look with new eyes, bridging the gap between the human urban existence and the timeless rhythms of nature. Although Lovatt doesn't specifically delve into rewilding projects, his exploration invites readers to consider how they might rewild their own perceptions, attuning themselves to the full richness of the natural world. *Birdsong in a Time of Silence* is a powerful reminder of the importance of preserving nature for the generations to come.

3.3 *The Lost Words* in “the Grammar of Reality”

The disconnection between humans and the nonhuman world is determined by culture and its influence on perception, according to Smith (2013, p. 93). Language, as a fundamental element of culture, has the power to shape our understanding of the world. Through the words available in a particular language, individuals interpret their surroundings, emotions, and experiences. In his exploration of the New Nature Writing, Smith discusses “cultural rewilding” drawing specific attention to Macfarlane's *Landmarks* (2016, see Smith 2013, p. 100) – a book which the author himself describes as being “about the power of language [...] to shape our sense of place”, and that “allow[s] us glimpses through other eyes, permit brief access to distant habits of perception” (2016, pp. 1, 5). Macfarlane's work aims to “re-wild our contemporary language for landscape” – which, in his view, coincides with a form of “re-wonderment” – by preserving and circulating vernacular language that evokes a “vibrancy of perception” (2016, pp. 9, 25). In fact, this vocabulary of landscape “seems to offer more than just nomenclature; it suggests those particular affordances struck between people and land through long acquaintance” (Smith, 2013, p. 100).

Macfarlane refers to his “glossary of enchantment” as the “Counter-Desecration Phrasebook”, serving as a reminder of how the transformation of language in modern civilization is divesting the sacred character of words related to nature (2016, p. 32). He thus speaks of reclaiming “a kind of word magic, the power that certain terms possess to enchant our relations with nature and place”, which is rapidly disappearing in an increasingly urbanized society (2016, p. 4). Writes Macfarlane:

Language deficit leads to attention deficit. As we further deplete our ability to name, describe and figure particular aspects of our places, our competence for understanding and imagining possible relationships with non-human nature is correspondingly depleted (2016, p. 24).

Smith envisions the potential unfolding of a form of Shifting Baseline Syndrome stemming from the erosion of nature-related vocabulary (2013, p. 100). To this regard, Macfarlane has investigated the removal of specific words concerning nature from the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* – words which the Oxford University Press “no longer felt to be relevant to a modern-day childhood” – in favour of terms associated with the digital

age, arguing that these substitutions diminish children's ability to perceive and appreciate the natural world, "the outdoor and the natural being displaced by the indoor and the virtual" (2016, p. 3). This exploration has resulted in *The Lost Words: A Spell Book* (2017), which is an illustrated collection featuring twenty names for common animals and plants found in the British landscape that are vanishing from children's language¹. These creatures and plants are articulated as poems, or "spells", designed to be recited aloud to bring them back to life in the imaginations of children.

Interestingly, in *The Spell of the Sensuous* Abram argues that the compelling power of written letters is best exemplified by the dual meaning that the English word 'spell' took as the Latin alphabet spread throughout Europe (1996, p. 84). While today, it refers both to correctly arranging the letters of a name and to a magic formula, in the past, these meanings were not distinct – 'to spell' was to undergo a process that could be described as follows: identifying, naming, and exerting power over the entity being named. It involved coming under the influence of sound and exchanging "the wild and multiplicitous magic of an intelligent natural world for the more concentrated and refined magic of the written word" (Ibid.). According to Abram, the advent of written language has led us to distance ourselves from nature and to view it as something that can be possessed and exploited.

Macfarlane expresses caution about promoting "a taxonomic need to point and name, with the intent of citing and owning", on the contrary, he admits that "[t]here are experiences of landscape that will always resist articulation, and of which words offer only a remote echo - or to which silence is by far the best response", because nature "does not name itself" (2016, p. 10). Likewise, following Bate – who in *The Song of the Earth* stated that the "impossible task of the ecopoet [...] is to speak the silence of the place" – , Kern asserts that "observing a bird, and writing about it, are acts that can be totally at odds with each other" (2000, p. 151, in Kern, 2009, pp. 327, 334). He makes clear that

¹ "The Lost Words" identified by Macfarlane, with only a few exceptions, are all found in Lovatt's attentive observation of the natural world. These include frequently mentioned bird species such as *heron*, *kingfisher*, *lark*, *maggie*, *raven*, *starling*, and *wren*, creatures like *adder* and *weasel*, and natural elements like *conker*, *acorn*, *bluebell*, *dandelion*, *fern*, *ivy*, *bramble*, and *willow*.

“the difficulty” is not simply “one of fashioning a language that can justly or adequately express our experience of the natural world”, but rather:

it is a problem of [...] the weak or failed connection between language, regarded as a systematic structure or medium with a long cultural history, and our immediate sensory experience of the world, natural or otherwise, which cannot escape distortion or misrepresentation when we apply our words to it, weighed down as they are by the burden of all their pre-existent meanings and uses (2009, p. 334).

Kern takes as an example cultural anthropologist Richard K. Nelson, who in *The Island Within* writes: “I become distracted [...] by the urge to identify which species these birds are, straining to see minute differences in the color of their wing linings, bills, and feet. I pull out the book, then realize that in my compulsion to possess or categorize them with names, I’ve stopped seeing them” (1989 in Kern, 2009, p. 338).

As Bate and Kern similarly worded, in his review of *Birdsong in a Time of Silence* (2022), Arthur points out that “listening to birdsong is one thing; writing a book about it something else”. However, it is hard to disagree with Arthur when he asserts that Lovatt succeeds at “describing something that’s highly resistant to being put into words” (Ibid.). In fact, Lovatt sets himself apart from the typical birdwatcher by going beyond the simple task of listing species along with their scientific names and classifications. His experience stems from the realization that significance permeates all aspects of existence and that humans are integral components of this grand scheme.

I walked on, naming all the while: ‘meadow brown’ ‘wren’, ‘alder’, ‘ringlet’. It’s probably impossible to kick this naming habit entirely, but I can at least try to tone it down. This much feels necessary, because namers can’t be be-ers. Which is to say, if you can stop identifying things then you have a better chance of identifying *with* them (2022, pp. 99-100).

On the other hand, Lovatt suggests that “nature and a properly human culture are steadily going down together, along with the language that sustains and unites them”, and he implies that if it weren’t for the pandemic we might have left behind “an almost forgotten aspect of the grammar of reality” (2022, p. 130, 8). Abram also eloquently expressed:

As technological civilization diminishes the biotic diversity of the earth, language itself is diminished. As there are fewer and fewer songbirds in the air, due to the destruction of their forests and wetlands, human speech loses more and more of its evocative power. For when we no longer hear the voices of warbler and wren, our own speaking can no longer be nourished by their

cadences. As the splashing speech of the rivers is silenced by more and more dams, as we drive more and more of the land's wild voices into the oblivion of extinction, our own languages become increasingly impoverished and weightless, progressively emptied of their earthly resonance (1996, p. 59)

From such reflections it becomes clear that, in Albrecht's words, "language extinction goes hand in hand with endemic landscape and biota extinction" (2019, p. 69). For these authors, it would be unwise to assume that the written word should, regardless, be abandoned because when natural phenomena and entities are left unnamed, they gradually fade from our awareness (Macfarlane, 2016, p. 24). Therefore, it becomes increasingly urgent to name and acknowledge the natural world to preserve its significance and ensure its continued existence in our collective memory.

For those of us who care for an earth not encompassed by machines, a world of textures, tastes, and sounds other than those that we have engineered, there can be no question of simply abandoning literacy, of turning away from all writing. Our task, rather, is that of taking up the written word, with all of its potency, and patiently, carefully, writing language back into the land (Abram, 1996, p. 162).

3.4 From Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* to Steven Lovatt's *Birdsong in a Time of Silence*

During these months it's often occurred to me that there are two kinds of silence. There's the silence of shame, cowardice, inaction, loss and death; and there's the silence of contentment, rest and peace, which is also the sort of silence on which the attention can feed, and rediscover things it thought it didn't know (Lovatt, 2022, p. 130).

Since Carson wrote *Silent Spring* in 1962, the world has been warned about a future "devoid of natural songs" – a silence that Lovatt likens to death (2022, p. 130). The impact of this prophetic warning is starkly evident today, with the author noting a distressing decline of 50 million birds in Britain alone following the release of *Silent Spring* (Ibid.). Yet, the silence Lovatt experienced over 60 years since Carson's time is of a different kind. While Carson's silence acts as a cautionary tale about the irreversible consequences of environmental degradation, Lovatt's account captures the stillness that enveloped cities during the pandemic lockdown of 2020, which allowed people to reconnect with the natural environment. Although both authors touch on spring and the implication of its silence, a concept that holds significant meaning in their narratives, they

approach the topic from different angles and diverge in scope. Their differences and similarities will become immediately apparent when juxtaposing excerpts from their respective first chapters.

In the initial chapter of *Silent Spring*, titled “A Fable for Tomorrow”, Carson portrays a fictional town – a place she suggests “might easily have a thousand counterparts in America or elsewhere in the world” – plagued by a peculiar “blight” causing the death of livestock and a sense of hopelessness (1999, pp. 3-4). Carson hints at a spring devoid of the once vibrant voices of birds, a silence that is far from peaceful, but instead serves as a stark reminder of the ecological harm wrought by human activities. This fable premises an examination of the broader ecological impact of toxic chemicals, particularly DDT – subsequent sections of the book seamlessly integrate the historical aspects of ecology and human civilization with a wealth of related data about the harmful effects attributed to pesticides, herbicides and fungicides. This is an excerpt from “A Fable for Tomorrow”:

There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. [...] Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community: mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was a shadow of death. [...] There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example – where had they gone? Many people spoke of them, puzzled and disturbed. The feeding stations in the backyards were deserted. The few birds seen anywhere were moribund; they trembled violently and could not fly. It was a spring without voices. On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh (Carson, 1999, pp. 3-4).

Now, I wish to compare this with the opening of the first chapter in *Birdsong in a Time of Silence*, “The Strangest Spring”, which reflects on the repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic:

It’s six in the morning and still dark, the 24th of March, 2020. [...] the prime minister ordered a shut-down of public life that would entirely change society as we’d known it. [...] A new animal, a microscopic animal, given the name Covid-19, was racing around the world faster than even the sleepless global media could track it. Although invisible, it spread fear as effectively as any dragon from a folk tale. Nobody knew where it was, but it took its tribute of anxiety and silence all the same. So it was that, by government decree, normal life was suspended. Where I live, compliance was immediate and total. All traffic noise ceased, and you could hear litter cuffing down the empty streets. Paper rainbows began to appear in windows, painted as a token of hope by children kept indoors; but of the children themselves there was no sign. It felt less like a catastrophe than an aftermath, as if nine-tenths of the population had disappeared overnight. [...] But most of all, we

began to notice the birdsong. A little tentative and sputtering at first, by the end of March it filled the air (Lovatt, 2022, pp. 1-3).

In these passages, silence serves as a representation of the temporary pause in human activity that characterized urban landscapes during the lockdown in Britain and the world at large. The absence of noise, particularly the lack of children playing outdoors, initially underscores the gravity of the situation. Yet, amidst the crisis, the gradual emergence of birdsong eventually fills the air and amplifies the “strangeness” of “the most glorious spring that anyone could remember”, serving as a poignant symbol of renewal (Lovatt, 2022, p. 2). The restrictions that compelled people to stay indoors, limit outdoor exercise, and avoid contact with others, though “limiting and claustrophobic”, had unintentionally fostered a more abundant and harmonious habitat for urban wildlife (2022, p. 90). “It’s only my impression”, writes Lovatt, “but there seem to be more of everything” (2022, p. 100). The birds, in particular, seemed to thrive in the reduced human activity, as their presence began to increase. This contrast becomes a symbol of hope – a temporary pause in the “great consumption and distraction machine” led to a revival of nature (2022, p. 5).

Both Lovatt and Carson open their books by depicting a sudden disruption to normal life, capturing the sense of unease and upheaval brought about by unforeseen changes in their environments. However, their narratives follow divergent paths – Carson begins with a state of harmony which descends into catastrophe, a trajectory that echoes the irreversible consequences of environmental degradation, while Lovatt progresses from catastrophe to harmony, mirroring the path of recovery sparked by the pandemic.

As much as any book can, Carson’s *Silent Spring* changed the world – it launched the modern environmental movement and a host of green laws. Carson’s legacy lies in her scientific research and advocacy which continues to shape environmental awareness today. On the other hand, *Birdsong in a Time of Silence* focuses on the personal, individual experience of “this strangest spring”, suggesting that “even in the grimmest days” it will be remembered as “the time when we first heard the birds” (2022, p. 6). Despite this, he also takes a broader view of societal impact, continuing the conversation about environmental conservation ignited by Carson.

“Scientific evidence that we are living in an era of climate change, resource exhaustion, and potential ecological disaster is overwhelming” – writes Christof Mauch, the director of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, in *Slow Hope* – yet “the urgency of this message cannot be conveyed through scientific data alone” (2019, p. 38). According to Mauch, focusing solely on narratives “about extinction and the gloom of decline” may not provide us with the insight and motivation needed to identify effective solutions that can help us escape from “our often self-created ecological traps” (Ibid.). He suggests that “pessimistic stories about climate determinism and imminent collapse” can create a self-fulfilling prophecy, making people feel powerless to take action, and stifling innovative thinking and problem-solving (2019, pp. 3-6). *Slow Hope* recognizes the urgency while emphasizing that our capacity to change course takes time, and proposes that balancing awareness of ecological crises with hopeful narratives is essential.

A new nature writing is required that inspires and strives towards “a language of positive change, visions of a better future” – “subversive stories”, accounts which not only depict humans as exploiting the Earth but also as interdependent organisms living in harmony with it without disrupting its overall equilibrium (Mauch, 2019, p. 38). Moreover, argues Mauch, engaging in interdisciplinary dialogues through fields like the environmental humanities, which bridge science, culture, and activism, fosters deeper understanding and creative solutions (2019, p. 40). The impetus to overcome the crisis “will come from those who understand the power inherent in the way we tell stories, from people who think and act ecologically, from women and men who are inspired by slow hope” (2019, p. 41). “Hope without critical thinking is naïveté”, and “critical thinking without hope is cynicism” (Popova, 2015 in Mauch 2019, p. 39) – by weaving awareness and hope together, we can navigate ecological challenges while envisioning a more sustainable world.

Books, like landscapes, leave their marks in us. Sometimes these traces are so faint as to be imperceptible – tiny shifts in the weather of the spirit that do not register on the usual instruments. Mostly, these marks are temporary: we close a book, and for the next hour or two the world seems oddly brighter at its edges; or we are moved to a kindness or a meanness that would otherwise have gone unexpressed. Certain books, though, like certain landscapes, stay with us even when we have left them, changing not just our weathers but our climates (Macfarlane, 2016, p. 12).

CONCLUSIONS

You never know what a book holds until you reach its conclusion. In Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* the final chapter, "The Other Road", challenges us to rethink our path forward, stressing the importance of ecological balance and promoting alternative methods to the chemical "control of nature" (1999, p. 245). Ultimately, she has "offered a new ethic and a practical sort of hope", states Linda Lear in the afterword of the book, "with the romantic and perhaps naïve belief that if the public were made aware of the wonder and mystery of life, they would have less appetite to destroy it" (1999, pp. 253, 249). Akin yet distinct, in Steven Lovatt's last chapter, "A Light in the Darkness", this paradigm shift has already occurred. The once silent spring brimming with potential for renewal in *Birdsong in a Time of Silence* has eventually blossomed into the strangest "raucous summer" that George Monbiot could have imagined in *Feral* (2014, p. 12)¹ – this summer has, in fact, unfolded as "self-willed", not controlled by human intervention but governed by its own natural processes (Jay H. Vest, 1985, pp. 323-329 in Monbiot, 2014, p. 10).

The argument put forth by Monbiot underscores the importance of entirely "resisting the urge to *control nature* and allowing it to find its own way", something that translates into the "rewilding of natural ecosystems" (2014, pp. 8-9, emphasis added). This kind of rewilding is "not an attempt to restore them to any prior state, but to permit ecological processes to resume" – it "looks to the future" in contrast to traditional conservation efforts that dwell on a perhaps imperfectly remembered past and seek "to manage nature as if tending a garden" (2014, pp. 8-10).

Preserving environmental memory – by engaging with endangered words or cultural texts like those of the Romantic era, for example, as Lovatt and many of the authors previously mentioned did in their works – proves essential for contrasting

¹ In the book, Monbiot argues that: "Environmentalism in the twentieth century foresaw a silent spring [...]. Rewilding offers the hope of a raucous summer, in which, in some parts of the world at least, destructive processes are thrown into reverse" (2014, p. 12).

persistent amnesia. However, it is key to prioritize the collective imagination of a different tomorrow to resolve environmental issues and rethink the human's place in the world. "The reality of ecological curses seems far greater than the power of the hopes that are left at the bottom of Pandora's jar", yet "if we believe that nothing can be changed, then we are giving up all our opportunity to act", suggests Christof Mauch (2019, p. 38). Remembering informs our actions while imagining shapes our aspirations.

The continued exploration in this thesis regarding the intertwining of placeness with the notions of memory and imagination, as commonly found in environmental literature, particularly in the New Nature Writing and *Birdsong in a Time of Silence*, was no mere coincidence. It was indeed a valuable effort to formulate this conclusion. The concept of memory, often prevalent in Western culture, tends to reflect on events and experiences with a (sometimes flawed) fixed perspective, while imagination directs attention towards possibilities for the future and maintains an open dialogue. This forward-looking approach, which is particularly meaningful to indigenous and Eastern cultures, reflects an enduring resilience whose meaning has not yet taken a turn for the worse.

The emergence of the New Nature Writing in the twenty-first century has brought fresh perspectives and approaches to the genre. The present exploration has shown how it engages with urgent issues such as climate change, habitat loss, and species extinction while exploring local settings such as urban, suburban, and industrial landscapes, making it relatable to our everyday lives. Through the focus on the principle of 'local distinctiveness', this new form of nature writing pays particular attention to the intersections of space with time, considering how human experiences crisscross with natural cycles and historical contexts.

Monbiot's assertion that "[w]e know what we are against; now we must explain what we are for" resonates strongly within this genre (2014, p. 12). I believe that the New Nature Writing accomplishes this by shifting the focus from mere critique to constructive engagement. Instead of solely highlighting environmental issues or lamenting loss, this contemporary nature writing seeks to propose valuable alternatives and inspire positive actions and deeper connections with the natural world, carrying forward the conversation that was initiated by Carson.

In this thesis, I have illustrated how Lovatt adeptly contributes to this ongoing conversation. The interdisciplinary approach to this research has not only enriched it but also uncovered the relevance of Lovatt's work to a wide range of academic disciplines. Most importantly, however, it has shown how, amalgamating scientific knowledge, cultural history, and literary traditions, alongside the new nature writers, Lovatt engages the general public in a subject that should arouse the interest of not only experts but everyone – ecology.

Overall, *Birdsong in a Time of Silence* has demonstrated the possibility that “destructive processes” can be “thrown into reverse” (Monbiot, 2014, p. 12). If unintentional change has already occurred in the past – seems to imply Lovatt – one should imagine the potential impact if we wholeheartedly embrace the possibility of real change and move in that direction with our utmost intention. What if we stop treating nature as something to be managed like a garden? What if we embrace our innate connections with the natural world? What if we rewild our perceptions, language and actions? What if we embrace hope? I contend that in doing so, we can counteract the cultural crisis underlying the ongoing “pandemic of depression” (Albrecht, 2019, p. 10) and initiate the healing of nature, of which we are an integral part.

To fully realize Monbiot's vision of rewilding, Lovatt's story only needs one more element: “the rewilding of human life” (2014, p.10). Perhaps, in a cyclical manner, mirroring the changing seasons, the upcoming spring will usher in a wilder existence for human beings. This would bring about a full circle of transformation.

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SUMMARY IN ITALIAN

Oltre al cambiamento climatico, al degrado ambientale e alla perdita di biodiversità, la crisi ecologica globale ha un impatto significativo sul rapporto tra l'umanità e l'ambiente di cui è parte integrante. Amitav Ghosh si riferisce a questa crisi come a una crisi culturale, sottolineando i suoi profondi effetti sull'immaginazione (2016, pp. 103-104), mentre Glenn Albrecht parla di una depressione planetaria, paragonando le conseguenze dell'emergenza ecologica a quelle di una pandemia, che intacca non solo la sfera fisica e razionale dell'essere umano, ma anche il suo assetto emotivo (2019, pp. 10-11). Sebbene l'umanità sia responsabile dell'attuale crisi, secondo questi autori il sentimento prevalente è quello di sentirsi impotente. Difatti, mentre la letteratura scientifica affronta questi problemi con più disinvoltura, nella narrativa, ad esempio, essi emergono quasi esclusivamente nei generi della distopia e della fantascienza. Fin dall'età vittoriana la letteratura distopica funge da catalizzatore per il pensiero critico, ritraendo scenari indesiderabili che incoraggiano i suoi lettori a rivalutare sistemi, politiche e comportamenti esistenti. Tuttavia, gli scritti che ho selezionato parlano della necessità di riesaminare l'urgenza delle tematiche ambientali e, pertanto, di rivalutare una strategia che combini la sensibilizzazione collettiva con una visione propositiva.

La letteratura contemporanea che indago in questo elaborato, oltre alla crisi ecologica, rispecchia le preoccupazioni per un mondo sempre più tecnologico, una natura progressivamente antropizzata, e le relazioni che con essa intesse costantemente messe a dura prova. In particolare, la presente tesi si focalizza sulla prima pubblicazione dell'autore britannico Steven Lovatt, *Birdsong in a Time of Silence* (2021), e la contestualizza all'interno di un nuovo genere letterario individuato da Jason Cowley nel 2008, in un numero di *Granta* intitolato *The New Nature Writing*. Si tratta di un genere contemporaneo che Cowley distingue dai precedenti per via di un'attenzione particolare per ciò che è ordinario e locale. Gli autori che Cowley comprende nella sua raccolta vantano un amalgama di stili diversi, approcci interdisciplinari, e punti di vista sia individuali che collettivi. L'originalità di questo genere è stata dibattuta dalla critica, che

spesso rivela incertezza intorno all'effettiva novità dei temi trattati, nonché alla modalità nel comunicarli. Emerge, tuttavia, che ciò che contraddistingue il *New Nature Writing* dagli sforzi precedenti è innanzitutto il contesto, che certamente rivela un'urgenza significativa rispetto al passato, e in secondo luogo il messaggio in sé, che si permea della necessità di rivalutare i confini dello spazio e del tempo, della memoria e dell'immaginazione, del passato e del futuro, della natura e della cultura.

Il percorso tracciato per sviluppare le argomentazioni di questa tesi approfondisce un'esplorazione più ampia del genere, dalle sue origini nel Romanticismo, passando attraverso i primi movimenti ambientalisti moderni ispirati da Rachel Carson con *Silent Spring* (1999). Attingo dall'ecocritica, dagli studi culturali, dalle *affect theories* e dalla psicologia cognitiva con lo scopo di dimostrare che nessuna disciplina presa singolarmente possa effettivamente guidare verso una risoluzione dei problemi ecologici, o tantomeno verso una coscienza ambientale collettiva. Pertanto, l'interdisciplinarietà di questa ricerca si è rivelata fondamentale per affrontare la tematica ambientale nei testi letterari, che sin dalla pubblicazione di *Silent Spring* (1999) è stata rilegata unicamente alla scrittura scientifica, tagliandone fuori le discipline umanistiche. Persino il libro della Carson si è scontrato con l'opposizione dell'industria agrochimica per le sue qualità letterarie, che riteneva non potessero coesistere con un adeguato rigore scientifico. Solamente in tempi recenti si sta rivalutando l'importanza di coinvolgere l'ambito umanistico in questi discorsi. Una metodologia di indagine che coinvolga più discipline di studio – come quella dell'ecocritica e delle *environmental humanities*, le quali intersecano conoscenze e competenze diverse – ha il vantaggio di superare i confini tradizionali dettati dal pensiero scientifico sul tema ecologico, e una maggiore possibilità di rispondere adeguatamente all'entità della crisi.

La struttura di questa tesi delinea un progressivo sviluppo verso i temi principali del *New Nature Writing* e di *Birdsong in a Time of Silence*, dapprima individuandoli nel più ampio spettro dell'ecocritica e del *nature writing* in senso lato, poi collocandoli tra le teorie contemporanee degli *affect studies*. Il primo capitolo pone le basi per un'esplorazione del legame tra letteratura e ambiente, tracciando l'evoluzione della disciplina ecocritica. Il tema della pressante crisi ecologica viene in particolare affrontato sotto le lenti della memoria culturale e dell'immaginario collettivo dello spazio naturale,

come delineati da Axel Goodbody (2011). Il capitolo approfondisce il significato degli spazi naturali – siano essi rurali, selvaggi o urbani – nei testi letterari, esplorando in particolare il legame emotivo tra esseri umani e natura, dal periodo romantico fino ai giorni nostri. I luoghi che affiorano negli scritti che prendo in considerazione vanno trasformandosi, dimostrando una propria peculiarità al variare delle epoche e delle necessità, arricchendosi di significati e interpretazioni sempre diversi. Se nel movimento romantico il luogo ideale per scrivere della natura era la *wilderness*, una terra selvaggia e permeata di un carattere quasi mistico, sicuramente in qualche senso spirituale, nella scrittura contemporanea questo spazio diventa *wildness*, un luogo che conserva qualche carattere naturale, ma che in effetti resta relegato all'assenza temporanea dell'essere umano. Queste considerazioni segnalano il passaggio da un ambiente naturale in senso stretto, definito *first nature*, ad uno tecnologicamente mediato, *second nature*, e le sue potenziali conseguenze. Il capitolo si conclude introducendo l'opera di Lovatt (2021), e proponendo un'ecologia letteraria positiva, che viene esplorata nel dettaglio come ultima istanza nel capitolo finale di questa tesi.

Il secondo capitolo analizza la convergenza tra ecocritica e *affect studies* prendendo quindi in considerazione le interazioni tra umano e non-umano, con una particolare attenzione per l'aspetto affettivo ed emotivo di tali scambi. Questa riflessione pone l'accento su due concetti che ho ritenuto fondamentali per comprendere i testi presi in esame: quelli di *place attachment* e di *enchantment*. Nonostante i luoghi con cui l'individuo intesse legami affettivi sembrino avere confini sempre più sfumati nel contesto moderno e globalizzato, l'identità di luogo continua ad essere considerata un elemento di essenziale importanza per favorire una rinnovata sensibilità per la dimensione locale di sostenibilità. Di altrettanto rilievo nel risvegliare una coscienza ecologica sembra essere la capacità di questi luoghi di suscitare l'incanto e la fascinazione, di scaturire emozioni, risvegliare percezioni e connessioni più profonde con gli spazi naturali, altresì abbattendo le barriere concettuali tra materiale e immateriale, tra natura e cultura. Parlando di relazioni affettivo-emotive tra l'individuo e l'ambiente, mi sono servita in particolare delle teorie dell'intelligenza naturalistica di Howard Gardner, della biofilia di Edward O. Wilson, e quella dello sviluppo cognitivo secondo Jean Piaget per mettere in evidenza le tappe di interazione con le entità naturali, in particolar modo con

gli uccelli, che popolano le memorie di Lovatt e, più in generale, per sottolineare l'importanza di favorire il contatto e l'esperienza diretta con il mondo naturale sin dall'infanzia. Infine, riflettendo sui paesaggi sonori di Lovatt, il capitolo esamina come il progresso tecnologico abbia distanziato gli esseri umani dalla natura, concentrandosi soprattutto sulla sfera percettiva dell'interazione umano-ambiente.

Nel terzo capitolo dimostro come *Birdsong in a Time of Crisis* (2021) possa essere una valida aggiunta al *New Nature Writing*, proponendo una lettura comparata tra i contenuti di Lovatt e quelli degli autori annoverati da Cowley. Inizialmente, attraverso l'analisi della sua introduzione al *New Nature Writing in Granta* (Cowley, 2008), e della letteratura critica che lo riguarda, spiego il contesto, le origini, le caratteristiche distintive del genere, e i dibattiti che vi ruotano attorno. Propongo poi uno sguardo sul concetto di *rewilding*, discutendone la crescente popolarità e il suo risvolto culturale all'interno del *New Nature Writing*. In questa sezione, viene ampiamente esaminata l'intersezione natura-cultura, e l'influenza del linguaggio sulla percezione, sulla comprensione e sulla rappresentazione del mondo non-umano. Per concludere, il capitolo offre un confronto dettagliato dei capitoli iniziali di *Silent Spring* (1999) e di *Birdsong in a Time of Silence* (2021), mettendo in luce tanto ciò che li accomuna, quanto ciò che li contraddistingue. Questi due libri, scritti a oltre sessanta anni di distanza, pongono al centro della loro narrativa un silenzio che irrompe nella vita umana ordinaria, sollecitando riflessioni sul rapporto con la realtà circostante. In *Silent Spring*, l'assenza del canto degli uccelli diventa un simbolo potente, e ancora attuale, che rappresenta il monito lanciato dalla Carson per avviare una riflessione critica sull'uso dei pesticidi e, più in generale, un ripensamento sulle relazioni tra l'uomo e l'ambiente. Questo silenzio, quindi, non è soltanto una condizione fisica, ma una metafora che richiama l'attenzione sulla necessità di un cambiamento profondo e consapevole nei confronti della natura. In *Birdsong in a Time of Silence*, invece, è proprio il richiamo degli uccelli a colmare il silenzio causato dall'interruzione dell'attività umana dovuta alla pandemia di Covid-19. Altrettanto potente il suo significato, il cinguettio diventa una sorta di rinascita, un segno di speranza e di riscoperta della connessione tra individuo e natura. Pertanto, mentre il paesaggio sonoro della Carson rappresenta perdita e declino, Lovatt sfrutta il canto degli uccelli per suggerire una possibilità di riconciliazione e di rinnovamento.

Un rinnovamento richiederebbe due movimenti distinti ma paralleli per prendere forma. In primo luogo, è necessario trasmettere le conoscenze attraverso il ricordo: preservare la memoria culturale – individuale o collettiva – dell’ambiente naturale ha il potere di contrastare l’amnesia ambientale generazionale di cui soffre la civiltà moderna, e di reindirizzare il pensiero e l’azione “back home”, nella dimensione locale e ordinaria (Mabey, 2017, pp. 35-36). L’immaginazione, d’altra parte, apporta innovazione e inventiva, quindi la capacità di delineare soluzioni creative agli attuali problemi ambientali. Tuttavia, l’abuso dell’immaginario apocalittico che continua a rappresentare la società come sull’orlo di una catastrofe inevitabile è stato criticato da più fronti (Macfarlane, 2005; Ghosh, 2016; Albrecht, 2019; Mauch, 2019). Questo paradigma è accusato non solo di deresponsabilizzare gli individui, ma anche di essere controproducente, poiché può indurre un senso di impotenza anziché promuovere azioni consapevoli e positive. In questo contesto, l’atteggiamento del *New Nature Writing* verso i luoghi contemporanei è caratterizzato da una tensione tra angoscia e possibilità, evitando tuttavia sia i toni pessimisti che romanticizzati dei movimenti letterari che lo precedono (Moran, 2014; Smith, 2017; Lilley, 2017).

In definitiva, la tesi proposta sostiene che le diverse forme dell’immaginario, tra cui la letteratura – sia essa *fiction* o *non-fiction* –, rivestono un ruolo fondamentale nel configurare una coscienza ecologica positiva. Queste narrazioni hanno il vantaggio di coinvolgere emotivamente i lettori, offrendo prospettive sul futuro e trasformando l’occupazione di pochi in una questione collettiva. Inoltre, si dimostra come *Birdsong in a Time of Crisis*, unitamente al *New Nature Writing*, attraverso una ri-naturalizzazione del linguaggio, della percezione e, soprattutto, dello spazio relazionale tra umano e non-umano, proponga un impulso positivo all’azione, possibilmente lenta ma duratura – ciò che il direttore del Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society definisce “slow hope” (Mauch, 2019). Questi autori contemporanei, mezzo secolo dopo *Silent Spring* (Carson, 1999), riaprono simbolicamente il vaso di Pandora, manifestando una rinnovata speranza per tutti gli esseri viventi.