

10.2478/ewcp-2025-0012

Reviving a Canon in New Nature Writing:
The Cases For and Against
Edward Thomas' 'Country Essay'

STEFANO BRACCI TESTASECCA
Roma Tre University in Rome, Italy

Abstract

This article seeks to explore a tension within New Nature Writing, a contemporary British literary genre which has brought editorial success to literary non-fiction. On one side, a traditionalist group of authors who willfully enter in conversation with a previous, rediscovered canon of nature writing is identified; on the other, an opposing group which believes that new, unprecedented circumstances, aptly described by the term Anthropocene, require new sensibilities. Central to this debate, which echoes the friction between the first and the second wave of ecocriticism, is the legacy of Edward Thomas, a poet and essayist who has strongly influenced the work of Robert MacFarlane, and shaped the Romantic Ecology approach to non-fiction writing (the country essay, travel writing). The article will explore the influence of Thomas' essay writing and understanding of nature on MacFarlane's successful trilogy *Landscape and the Human Heart*, affiliated here with Jonathan Bate's idea of Romantic Ecology, while also analyzing Kathleen Jamie's widely shared response to his work succinctly titled "A Lone Enraptured Male," which stands closer to what has been recently called 'the Self-Conscious Anthropocene.' Edward Thomas' prose, in works such as *The Heart of England* (1906), serves as the backdrop to the negotiations of these new aesthetics and sensibilities within New Nature Writing.

Keywords: New Nature Writing, the Literary Essay, Edward Thomas, Robert MacFarlane, Kathleen Jamie, Romantic Ecology, Attunement, Timothy Morton, Ecocriticism, Self Conscious Anthropocene

Edward Thomas is known primarily as a War Poet, alongside Wilfred Owen, Ivor Gurney, and others. Only secondly is he known as a Georgian nature poet whose verses are steeped in the Romantic tradition, and with a clear influence on the later generation of poets, from “Larkin to Walcott to Hughes” (Wiśniewski ix). There is also a renewed interest towards him as an essayist – Thomas only started writing poetry near the end of his life, while training in the army, and already standing on top of a prolific, if only partially successful, career in commissioned writing and reviewing. The renewed interest in him as, specifically, an essayist focused on the English countryside, springs from the relatively recent editorial success of nature writing in the United Kingdom, a phenomenon labelled New Nature Writing, the primary promoter of Edward Thomas being author and academic Robert MacFarlane. However, New Nature Writing is not a genre free of debates – interventions by authors such as Kathleen Jamie and Mark Cocker have raised doubts over the legitimacy of a specific tradition accused of overly romanticising the environment, a somewhat hidden legacy which this article associates with Jonathan Bate’s concept of Romantic Ecology, Thomas being one of the main culprits.

This article will dive into this debate first by analysing how Thomas defines the country essay, and how this sub-genre of non-fiction writing about nature, whose traces are still present today, mediates representations of the environment. Secondly, it will read MacFarlane’s representation of nature in his trilogy *Landscape and the Human Heart*, consisting of works heavily committed to following traces of Thomas. Finally, it will show how the debate over Romantic Ecology and the attempt to promote Romantic and post-Romantic authors as examples of an ethical relationality with the environment finds its roots within literary theory – it is in

response to Raymond Williams's materialist critique of authors such as Thomas that Bate formulates his idea of Romantic Ecology in his book of the same name (1991). It is argued then that the debate over Thomas' legacy in contemporary British nature writing is particularly indicative of two currently competing epistemologies, a 'Romantic' and nostalgic understanding of ecology in conflict with the emerging poetics of the 'Self-conscious Anthropocene.'

Different Tendencies in New Nature Writing: Cases for and Against the Canon

Not long after its recognition as a genre in the late 2000s (Moran 49), authors of British New Nature Writing entered a dialogue regarding its aims and characteristics, primarily tackling the issue of how nature and the landscape should be represented in their texts. This is identifiable in opinion-pieces such as Cocker's "Death of the Naturalist" (2015) and Steven Poole's "Is Our Love of Nature Writing Bourgeois Escapism?" (2013), but, most importantly, Jamie's "A Lone Enraptured Male: The Cult of the Wild" (2008), a widely discussed review of MacFarlane's successful *Wild Places* (2007). These short articles deal directly with the responsibilities of the author in representing an environment in crisis, politicising the gaze through which the landscape is addressed. A main point of contention in this re-evaluation of the aesthetics of nature writing can be identified in the friction between a more traditionalist group, which seeks continuity with a canon of British nature writing, and a more progressive one, pushing for a new sensibility:

The Wild Places will be much loved because, for all its wildness, it's a deeply conservative book, and very English, in the long tradition of English settledness, whose pantheon includes Samuel Palmer and Edward Thomas, Wordsworth and Clare. It's not what you'd call wild-minded. It's a book about books: as much about the literature and reception of wild places as about the places themselves. (Jamie)

In a similar vein, Cocker writes: “The project of re-enchantment might restore to us a canon of lost writings about the eeriness and mystery of our landscape. Yet, as Emerson warned in his essay ‘Nature’, what worth is there in words that have no real soil at their roots?” (15). Both Jamie and Cocker are arguing against a nature writing which, they claim, relies too much on literary mediations – to Jamie this attitude betrays a conservative and anthropocentric bias, and to Cocker, as specified further in his article, it hides a tendency to depoliticize itself, weakening the role of the nature essayist in addressing urgent problems faced by British (and global) territories. On the other side of the debate stand, it could be argued, Richard Mabey, Roger Deakin, and MacFarlane, who have all been praised for the attention they have brought to lesser-known nature writers of the past, such as Gilbert White, Richard Jefferies, Edward Thomas, and Nan Shepherd. Mabey’s *Guardian* article “In Defense of Nature Writing” (2013), which sees him in agreement with MacFarlane, and MacFarlane’s own “Robert Macfarlane: Why We Need Nature Writing” (2015), if both still involved with the environmental ethics, are apologies of their strain of nature writing, openly indebted to a previous canon.

The role of the canon and of literary mediation is then central to this contention – as Cocker argues, looking back at previous authors can be a useful means to re-enchant landscapes and to promote a renewed interest in nature. Yet, it is considered risky to replicate Romantic and post-Romantic poetics of the environment, as the potential of misrepresenting our current circumstances increases the more they are mediated through secondary figures. Given his central role in shaping MacFarlane’s successful trilogy *Landscape and the Human Heart*, no one is more fit than Thomas for an analysis of the influence of essay writing concerned with nature and the landscape in contemporary representations of the environment, either positively or negatively. However, if Jamie’s criticism is directed at *Wild Places*, MacFarlane’s most significant reading of Thomas is present in his next book *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (2012). This article

will address them both, as well as the earlier *Mountains of the Mind* (2003), completing the trilogy.

The Politics of the Country Essay in Edward Thomas

For Thomas to be considered part of a “long tradition of English settledness” (Jamie) could come to many as a surprise, and yet his poetics, which will now be explored, can be seen in continuity with certain political positions. A prolific reader and reviewer, Thomas’s writings are extremely numerous, and his reputation as a quick-paced writer has led many to undervalue his major essayistic production accomplished before his career as a poet. As a matter of fact, critics, and even Thomas himself, did not see in the literary essay a definitive form: “In 1904 Thomas told his confidant, the poet Gordon Bottomley, ‘There is no form that suits me, & I doubt if I can make a new form’” (Thomas qtd. in Longley 11). Inevitably, Thomas’ quick consecration through his poetry made it so that his earlier essayistic work has been read teleologically, as if it were only a prelude to his later poetic production. Majorly influencing this perspective is a testimony of American poet, and friend of his, Robert Frost, who had encouraged him to dig out poems from his prose writings: “[H]e was writing as good poetry as anybody alive, but in prose form where it did not declare itself and gain him recognition. I referred him to paragraphs in his book *In Pursuit of Spring* and told him to write it in verse form in exactly the same cadence” (Frost qtd. in Longley 16). Thomas’ reputation as a nature essayist, his core identity throughout most of his literary career, had to cede ground to his view as a War Poet, a label only applicable to his very last production, while his nature writings found significance only in niches such as that of travel-writing, itself a genre in decline, where Thomas assumed even a cult-status.

A core group of Thomas’ essays can be identified in *The Heart of England* (1906), *The South Country* (1909), *The Icknield Way* (1913), and *In Pursuit of Spring* (1914), all retellings of journeys taken around England and Wales (with MacFarlane’s *The Old Ways* (2012) paying particular attention to the structure and

prose of *The Icknield Way*). The seemingly unorthodox genre of Thomas' essays, first person accounts of voyages through British territories interwoven with anecdotes, opinions, and occasionally even literary criticism, was not uncommon in the period; for example, MacFarlane points out that William Hudson "pioneered a pastoral psychogeography" (*The Old Ways* 20) in his travel journal *Afoot in England* (1909) and in the countryside descriptions of *A Shepherd's Life: Impressions of the South Wiltshire Downs* (1910), both praised by Thomas in his *In Pursuit of Spring* (150). Additionally, Thomas expressed appreciation of contemporaries such as A. G. Bradley and E. V. Lucas (*The South Country* 11), authors linked to the successful "literature of way-faring" related to the walking clubs' craze which emerged in the late 1800s (Macfarlane, *The Old Ways* 18).

But it is in Richard Jefferies' work that Thomas' poetics of nature writing find its greatest influence.¹¹ There are plenty of identifiable hints at Thomas' own *ars poetica* laid throughout his extensive bibliography, but it is arguably in his assessment of Jefferies that Thomas most clearly establishes the tropes and aims of the genre of the literary essay in relation to nature and the landscape, a perspective which, as it will be seen later, has significantly affected the poetics of New Nature Writing. In *Richard Jefferies: His Life and Work*, Thomas grapples with a subgenre referred to as the country essay, born of the desire of the literary man to deal with the natural environment in an intimate yet scientifically informed way:

In these early essays of 1875 and 1876 Jefferies sets himself the unusual and difficult task of reflecting in prose the solitary enjoyment of Nature, without any of the resources of these predecessors in sport or natural history, without the aid even of any passion, as of love, except what Nature herself inspires. (117)

Like Jefferies, Thomas himself lacked a formal education as a naturalist, despite his erudition on the local environment.² The actual object of the country essay is, however, not the portrayal of

nature in as accurate terms as possible, but the authentic impression that it imprints on the writer, in line with the use of sentimentalism made by the British Romantics: “the ‘unflinchingly true’ revelation of a human spirit” (Thomas, *Richard Jefferies* 198). Jefferies’ accomplishment lies, according to Thomas, in recounting his strolls in natural environments with the same spontaneity that characterises nature itself, forming a completely harmonious picture:

Things occur in his pages as they do on walks, haphazard, and often unconnected. Descriptions, portraits, narratives, arguments, odds and ends of superstitions, customs, curiosities, come together in Nature's own abundance. The writing is effortless, and in places slipshod; it hardly matters: the breath of elaboration might have made it less rustic. (Thomas, *Richard Jefferies* 140)

Thus, the writing works towards authentically replicating the wandering experience of the author, spurting into interesting and humorous anecdotes, topical observations, digressions into the history of the place, and, in the case of Thomas, even catalogues of folk songs and dialogues with nature poems. Significantly, this is an approach which scorns pastoralism, which is seen as a betrayal of authenticity: “All through the book [Jefferies’ *Wild Life in a Southern County*] he sees things like this, as they are, without a tinge of pastoral or other sentiment” (Thomas, *Richard Jefferies* 140). There is then a critical approach to certain elements related to a Romantic (and sentimentalist) understanding of nature, and an overall interest in an objective account of nature – the pastoral genre is not allowed to mediate the experienced landscape.³ However, the text is still firmly guided by the gaze of the author, and it is the author’s impression, even if alleged to be untampered by sentiments, which ultimately guarantees the authenticity of the writing, rather than an encounter with the objects on their own terms. The writing can then be only as authentically natural as the author’s gaze on nature (of course, whether the author is truly in touch with nature is debatable). Wordsworth, Jefferies, and Thomas, on their part, seem convinced that the attunement between mind

and environment is possible and constitutes an authentic experience, a stance which directly informs Thomas' prose: "A heron goes over solemnly, high up, and as if upon some starry business in that profound, bright air; the mind at once attunes itself to that majesty and directness and simplicity" (Thomas, *The Heart of England* 122). Ultimately, despite being sympathetic to the more scientific endeavours of naturalists, the country essay seems unable to give up an alleged harmony with one's surroundings as the ultimate guarantor of authenticity, making it prone to pathetic fallacy and even mysticism. It could be said then that the country essay is a genre more interested in the landscape as a product of the relation between the environment and the observer, rather than the land itself, and so it does not commit to an objective, unmediated, free-of-rhetoric description.

Since the model of the country essay, as Thomas inherits it from Jefferies, is constituted on the encounter between the author and nature, it relies on representations of nature more than nature in its aseity. This brings Thomas to complement his direct account of his travels with commentaries on other nature writers, digressions into the lore of the land, and the 'popular' history of the places he visits. Thomas scrupulously relates the histories of the depicted land, often picking up from local myths, an operation which culminates with the exhaustive archival research of *The Icknield Way*, oriented towards the rediscovery of the original location of the ancient road, the persons who had trodden on it, and what its importance was: "*The Icknield Way* is an unconventional book," writes MacFarlane in *The Old Ways*, "partly a guide to history and geography of the Way, partly a meditation on its metaphysics and partly a record of Thomas's own bleak unhappiness" (43). This fascination towards the historical and mythical aspects of places, a prose attempt to identify the *genius loci*, gives shape to a specific poetics very close to a local lore:

The spirit of the place, all this council of time and Nature and men, enriches the air with a bloom deeper than summer's blue of distance; it drowns while it delights the responding mind with a

magic such as once upon a time men thought to express by gods of the hearth, by Faunus and the flying nymphs, by fairies, angels, saints. . . . (Thomas, *The South Country* 13)

The writing, preoccupied with the irretrievable essence of a place, constantly attempts to evoke it through mythical images, giving the prose its distinctive melancholic tone, also a trademark of his later poetic production. Yet melancholy is not only a stylistic choice, especially in a non-fiction setting – it is an affect which can easily acquire political valence when seen in the wider context.

As mentioned before, Thomas' essays fit in the mould of the typical interests of his contemporaries. His love for travel by foot or bicycle corresponded with a societal fascination with walking, cycling, and a newfound appreciation of landscape – rambling, touring, and land husbandry (forestry) being practices of relatively recent invention. The same sentiment of the idealisation of nature, a haven from the grittiness of industrialised cities, was echoed in the Nature writing coeval to his work. As Williams writes in *The Country and the City* (1973):

In Britain, identifiably, there is a precarious but persistent rural-intellectual radicalism: genuinely and actively hostile to industrialism and capitalism; opposed to commercialism and to the exploitation of the environment; attached to country ways and feelings, the literature and the lore. (36)

These were practices which were not exempt from ideological affiliations – a love for place and a nostalgia for times past, itself a reaction to the modernization of Britain, eventually developed political characteristics.⁴ Organicism, a form of agrarian conservatism heavily invested in rural communities, professed also by T. S. Eliot,⁵ stands close to a reactionary form of nationalism due to its focus on bioregionalism, “an idealisation of settlement, of neighbourhood, as if it were the only reality of community” (Williams 84). The same applies to the Irish Revival, a movement with clear nationalist characters, which strongly influenced Thomas, specifically through the towering figure of W. B. Yeats. Edna

Longley writes: “And, while never seeking a surrogate religion, Thomas shared Yeats’s objections to the triumph of scientific modernity: ‘Myths have been destroyed which helped to maintain a true and vivid acknowledgement of the mystery of the past’” (22).

An example of Thomas’ framing of the rural landscape as a saviour from the industrialised city is already present in *The Heart of England*, a journey which begins from escaping “[H]ouses in unbroken rows and arranged in pairs, . . . so much alike that the street resembled a great storehouse. . . .” (1). Beyond that, Jamie’s criticism of an idealizing (and thus misleading) British ‘tradition of settledness’ can ring true in complementary rural passages invested with the idea of the countryside as a fading but surviving remnant of authenticity: “His house, dark with panelling and heavy furniture of every generation since it was built, would be gloomy were it not for his blithe sentiment about the past” (67), or “Those elms had come unconsciously to be part of the real religion of men in that neighbourhood . . .” (Thomas, *The South Country* 64).

Political meanings behind the practice of narrating a place and digging up all its lore become explicit also when one reads *The Icknield Way* next to Ezra Pound’s “Provincia Deserta” (1915), which, despite being in conversation with the French region of Provence, is also a journey bent on reliving the places inhabited by a culture’s ancestors. Significantly, both Pound’s and Thomas’ works are heavily indebted to Charles Montagu Doughty’s *Travels in Arabia Deserta* (1888) (Thomas, *The South Country* 153), and the connection between the nostalgic reconstruction of a place and the nationalism which would define the 20th century can plausibly be inferred if one takes into consideration Pound’s subsequent involvement with fascism and Doughty’s later work, *The Dawn in Britain* (1906). It is this sentiment, after all, which brings Thomas to declare that “Chaucer seems to remind us of what once we were. His seems a golden age” (Thomas, *The South Country* 109), or to partake in journeys which seek to relive the places which were inhabited by older authors, as seen in *In Pursuit of Spring* and *A Literary Pilgrim in England* (1917).⁶

Casting an eerie shadow on the apparently spontaneous genre of the country essay is then a nationalist reading. In this case,

further analysis can be done in reference to his biography. It is not uncommon today to stumble upon Thomas through the much better-known figure of Frost, specifically through his internationally renowned poem "The Road not Taken," which not many are aware that it is addressed to Thomas. The poem, not without a hint of irony, recounts Frost's and Thomas' joint walks, but, as a widely shared anecdote tells us, Thomas might not have grasped its humoristic tone, interpreting it instead as a condemnation of his indecisiveness, particularly regarding the war, a fatal misreading which led him to (unnecessarily, given that he was beyond the mandatory drafting age) enlist in the army; yet, after having transferred to France, Thomas would be killed on the front on the first day of the Battle of Arras, 9 April 1917. It would be incorrect to assume that the decision to join the army instead of, as Frost suggested, emigrating to the United States, was something like a coin-flip, or beyond comprehension, as many of his friends claimed (MacFarlane, *The Old Ways* 344). Instead, many elements present in Thomas' poems and essays can be read in light of the same nationalist sentiment which led him to join the army. For example, the secluded nationalism of his poem "Home" avoids taking a straightforward route to patriotism, evoking instead a feeling of shared, familial community through the landscape:

Often I had gone this way before:
But now it seemed I never could be
And never had been anywhere else;
'Twas home; one nationality
We had, I and the birds that sang,
One memory. (lines 1-6)

This nationalist sentiment inevitably shows a relation between seemingly innocuous poetics and a strongly political context. In the words of Williams, who is referring directly to Thomas here:

The underlying pattern is then clear. A critique of a whole dimension of modern life, and with it many necessary general questions, was expressed but also reduced to a convention, which took the form of a detailed version of a part-imagined, part-

observed rural England. . . . Very few country writers, in the twentieth century, have wholly escaped this strange formation in which observation, myth, record and half-history are so deeply entwined. (261)

To Williams, Thomas' original sin lies in his recreation of a falsified version of England and its countryside, eclipsing the actual existing one. The primary agent of this falsification is the very own subjective gaze of the texts, which, even if they preach authenticity in seeking to carefully reconstruct the histories of places, inevitably succumb to alluring romanticization in close dialogue with the nationalist ideologies characteristic of early 20th-century politics. In his materialist cultural analysis, informed by Marxism, Williams pits a lore of places, enchanted narratives revolving around the mythical significance of local folklore, against the materialist understanding of history, interested in the structural and economic aspects of land. However, to Thomas, myth is one of the very foundations onto which his poetics of place manifests itself.

To conclude, Marxist criticism is responsible for pointing out how the seemingly innocent genre of the country essay is, not despite, but because of its attempts to establish a harmony between author and nature, particularly susceptible to nationalist and reactionary stances. This is the critical element which, in the re-discovery of Thomas, and of his approach to essay writing, became a point of contention in the New Nature Writing debate.

MacFarlane's Use of Thomas in His Trilogy

MacFarlane's *Landscape and the Human Heart*, a strikingly widely-researched non-fiction trilogy recounting journeys to, mostly, British places, is, starting from its very objective, indebted to the work of Thomas. It shares with it the same interest in the harmonisation with nature that defines Thomas' Romantic Ecology – MacFarlane's attention is particularly drawn to examples of culture and land interlinking each other. Overall, MacFarlane is very explicit about the objective of his writing, a goal which, as he admits, comes directly from Thomas: "To Thomas, paths connected

real places but they also led outwards to metaphysics, backwards to history and inwards to the self' (MacFarlane, *The Old Ways* 26). Again, this feeling returns in his other books, in *Mountains of the Mind*: "Mountains also reshape our understanding of ourselves, of our own interior landscapes" (MacFarlane 266), and in *The Wild Places*: "I admired the ways in which their [the Peregrini] spirituality found expressions and correlations in the physical world" (MacFarlane 39). It is the search for an attunement with nature which structures each of the chapters dedicated to a different landscape:

I have long been fascinated by how people understand themselves using landscape, by the topographies of self we carry within us and by the maps we make with which to navigate these interior terrains. We think in metaphors drawn from place and sometimes those metaphors do not only adorn our thought, but actively produce it. (MacFarlane, *The Old Ways* 26)

The landscape then, defined as a natural space mediated by human perception – as it is named, observed, inhabited – obtains precedence over the actual environment. This explains MacFarlane's consistent fascination with disparate possibilities of representing the land, the enticing alternatives to the rigid regular maps. An example of a representation of a land mediated by the subjective experience of its traveller is Thomas' own "dream-map," which is seen as an "act of cumulative but uncentred imaginative cartography, a composite chart of longing and loss projected onto the actual terrains of his life," and which guides MacFarlane's own journey through *The Old Ways* (310). Beyond that, there are many others, as the Inuit 'story maps,' which, in opposition to the sterile Cartesian 'grid,' "represent a place as it is perceived by an individual or by a culture moving through it" (MacFarlane, *The Wild Places* 125), or even the Aboriginal Songlines famously described by Bruce Chatwin in the book of the same name (MacFarlane, *The Old Ways* 98). Discussed twice, in *The Old Ways* (22) and in an entire chapter of *The Wild Places*, are the holloways, ancient sunken roads in Britain formed by the continuous treading

of human and animal steps throughout centuries. What fascinates MacFarlane (and Deakin, an occasional companion in travelling), is the palimpsestic memory that they offer – much like Thomas' *The Icknield Way*, the allure of the space is the possibility of entering into contact with the past: “these pasts felt excitingly alive and coexistent – as if time had somehow pleated back on itself” (MacFarlane, *The Old Ways* 22). MacFarlane's imagination reacts to traces and signs of previous travellers and inhabitants – the more a land is infused with historical and literary narratives, the more it is considered “deep.” The purpose of this dynamic is analysed by MacFarlane himself with Gaston Bachelard, a phenomenologist of space and imagination. Bachelard is directly quoted: “Each one of us should make a surveyor's map of his lost fields and meadows. . . . In this way we cover the universe with drawings we have lived. These drawings need not be exact. But they need to be written according to the shapes of our inner landscapes” (qtd. in MacFarlane, *The Wild Places* 200). It is the inner landscape, then, which takes precedence over the actual land – MacFarlane's poetics are structured around this idea of territorializing the real land with the imaginary and the symbolic, enchanting spaces with personal, literary, and philosophical narratives.

Sensing perhaps the unwanted affiliations with right wing politics of this Romantic land-consciousness, MacFarlane expresses distaste for the nationalist character of certain travellers in *The Old Ways*:

The use of old paths to navigate terrains both real and imagined has attracted a rabble of delusionists, bigots and other unlovely maniacs. I've read with distaste the work of multi-purpose misanthropes, of nationalists peddling wrong-headed theories of race, and of nostalgists who demonstrate a preference for the biddable dead over the awkward living. (23)

There is then an overt attempt to build distance from the national character of Thomas's books, which are described not as works “celebrating place and belonging,” but observations on “disconnection, discrepancy and unsettledness” (25), distancing

Thomas from Georgian pastoralism and bringing him closer to the themes of Modernism. But even so, in approaching the theme of attunement less idealistically, through the lens of an irretrievable loss, it is still the attraction of myth which determines how nature is approached – see for example Thomas’ famous poem “Old Man,”⁷

As for myself,
Where first I met the bitter scent is lost.
I, too, often shrivel the grey shreds,
Sniff them and think and sniff again and try
Once more to think what it is I am remembering,
Always in vain. I cannot like the scent,
Yet I would rather give up others more sweet,
With no meaning, than this bitter one. (lines 24-31)

Here, severance with the past is framed as an inevitable truth, yet significantly more meaningful than any ‘sweeter,’ newer narrative. The disconnectedness, the failure to relive the past, does not absolve Thomas from partaking in the celebration of place and belonging, but it merely shifts the tone from sentimentalist ode to melancholic bitterness. The prefiguration of myth as an impossibility may give nuance to Thomas’ perspective, which is revealed as being not wholly idealistic, but eventually fails to elevate it as a work operating above anthropocentrism and misrepresentation. MacFarlane goes as far as equating his journey towards Thomas with Thomas’ own chase for the mythic Lob: “I had set out to come to know Thomas by walking where he had walked, but he had mostly eluded me, remaining a Lob-like figure glimpsed now and then at a bend on the path or through a hole in the edge, still enigmatic” (MacFarlane, *The Old Ways* 326). Lob, a folklore character, here assumes the role of prosopopoeia of the whole local lore, the submerged ancient knowledge which constantly escapes the melancholic author. In Thomas’ homonymous poem, Lob comes to represent the very way in which nature was observed by its inhabitants, a tradition lost with modernization:

... Before all other men
 'Twas he first called the Hog's Back the Hog's Back.
 That Mother Dunch's Buttocks should not lack
 Their name was his care. He too could explain
 Totteridge and Totterdown and Juggler's Lane:
 He knows, if anyone. Why Tumbling Bay,
 Inland in Kent, is called so, he might say. ("Lob," lines 72-78)

Lob is then the lost archive of place-names which would have been able to give us the true perspective of the ancient dwellers of the land. Interest in the act of naming is a *topos* in Romanticism, as the act of giving a name is particularly exemplar of a subjectivity shaping and inhabiting a world, as in Emma's Dell or Joanna's Rock in "Poems on the Naming of Places" by William Wordsworth, which, as Jonathan Bate points out, act "[to] protect and preserve a sacred, secluded place" (94).

Again, an encounter with this past, even through brief glimpses of an older world, is framed as the highest point of enjoyment. It is no wonder then that, as a climatic point of the whole trilogy, MacFarlane concludes the last book, *The Old Ways*, with a poetic encounter with this past, a final exhilarating attunement, represented by the literal act of stepping where once the primeval inhabitants of England used to tread:

I stop by the last footprint, 5,000 years after setting out, my track ceasing where his does. I look back along the track-line to my south. The light tilts again and suddenly the water-filled footprints are mirrors reflecting the sky, the shuddering clouds and whoever looks into them. (364)

Just as Thomas' work is only seemingly apolitical, the gaze of this poetic moment of attunement can now be safely read with the conservative bias that Jamie accused him of. If MacFarlane's books are often precise and offer many critical narratives of the environment, accuracy often gives way to imagination due to a fundamentally Romantic approach which sees in encounters with nature and wilderness opportunities for introspection and growth of

character, moving the gaze from the contemplated objects to the ecstasies of the act of contemplation itself. The Nature under discussion in this type of Nature writing could be seen as overly passive – as MacFarlane himself writes in his introduction to *The Old Ways*: “Above all, this is a book about people and place: about walking as a reconnoitre inwards, and the subtle ways in which we are shaped by the landscapes through which we move” (xi). It is this inwardness, which, as seen all the way back to Thomas’ country essays, functions as the inevitable mediator of the land. As this approach seems to have the tendency of favouring the theme of ‘nature representation’ more than nature itself, the rich literary quotations and the extensive intertextuality develop richly and naturally in MacFarlane’s works, which brings Jamie to write, in her damning review, that “Cambridge is still the centre of the world: we started there and will end there.”

Framing the Conflicts of Aesthetics

The debate that emerged inside New Nature Writing echoes perfectly what, years before, occurred around Thomas’ figure in literary criticism, that is, how and whether Thomas’ conception of nature, at the root of his poetics, should be politicised. On the one hand, there are critics such as Bate, admired by Mabey, who considers his *Song of the Earth* (2000) “the UK’s first indigenous work of eco-criticism,” and by MacFarlane, who quotes him in his “Why We Need Nature Writing.” This is the side which sees in Thomas an eminent Romantic ecologist, an overall positive model for relationality with nature. On the other hand, in Marxist criticism, as seen in books such as William’s *The Country and the City*, Thomas’ *oeuvre* is seen as tainted by dangerous misconceptions that, in a straightforward application of Marxism, function as an ideology which hides the real structure of society.

In *Romantic Ecology* (1991), Bate sees no issue in reading Romanticism as a helpful ecological sentiment, even insisting that there is no danger of abstraction:

In sharp contrast to the so-called 'Romantic Ideology', the Romantic ecology has nothing to do with flight from the material world, from history and society – it is in fact an attempt to enable mankind the better to live in the material world by entering into harmony with the environment. (40)

The Romantics are thus seen as perfectly helpful guides to a harmonious relationship with nature, potential misrepresentations of the environment being innocent lies whose positives outweigh the negatives. Locality and attention to the closest surroundings are also identified as a rightful reappropriation of space through a more ethical relationality, in opposition to the industrialist exploitation of nature: "Such poetry derives from place; it 'repays its debt to geography by spiritualising the sites which are its source'" (Bate 87), and it is here that the figure of Thomas, "one of the most place-conscious of twentieth-century English poets" (87), becomes central. Romanticism, which exalts the natural character of place, is then posited to be a perfect match for the set of environmentalism which sees in bioregionalism the ticket out of the dangers posed by the Anthropocene. Bate also addresses the criticism that could be moved against this Romantic approach to ecology, that is, that nature is being downplayed and seen merely as a 'sounding board' for the poet's subjectivity (7-8). The problem with Romantic Ecology would be then that, in its self-centeredness, it cannot help but construct nature as an aid to the writer's musings, its concern limited to a transcendent imagination detached from nature.

But it is exactly this criticism that Williams, writing almost twenty years before, brings forward – neither Romantic projections nor a refusal to engage with capitalism (be it industrialist, be it neoliberal) are, to him, good enough reasons to elevate Thomas' place-consciousness as a good ecological model. This is Williams' major claim regarding representations of nature in English literature as laid down in his seminal *The Country and the City*, a work deeply embedded in the milieu of Marxist cultural criticism:

There was that uncritical, abstracting literary anthropology, within which folktales and legends became part of that

unlocalised, unhistorical past; or the uncritical interest in myth, which made the land and the people a scene and characters into which anything could be projected, with or without inclusion of scraps of a classical education. . . . It is then not only that the real land and its people were falsified; a traditional and surviving rural England was scribbled over and almost hidden from sight by what is really a suburban and half-educated scrawl. (258)

The myth remains, despite all best intentions, a myth, a betrayal of history, and the Georgian poets to whom Williams is referring here, even in their scrupulous anthologizing of folk histories and local lore, are victims of a sub-urban delusion. Positionality is also found to be particularly relevant – it is often the urban authors, directly fighting industrialist alienation, who seek to make myths, a golden past, and folklore the preferred mediators of nature. As through historicism and materialist cultural analysis the aesthetics of a text can never truly be apolitical, Williams cannot help but see Romantic Ecology as a Romantic Ideology, making the relationships with reactionary political movements become evident. This brings us to the premise which supports Williams' book – that the idealisation of the past and of the countryside is not truth but rhetoric: "When we moved back in time, consistently directed to an earlier and happier rural England, we could find no place, no period, in which we could seriously rest" (Williams 35).

According to Lawrence Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (2005), there are two distinguishable waves of ecocriticism. In the first one, the primary focus is on European and North American texts, the idea of 'nature' is still distinguished as something separate from human culture, and the main ethical approach is that of environmental preservation. Bate thus neatly fits into the criteria of first-wave ecocriticism. A second wave, however, seeks to overcome the nature/culture dichotomy, identifying in the very definition of 'nature' a fundamentally wrong conceptualization – this is the case for Timothy Morton's influential *Ecology without Nature* (2009). Trained in mostly English Romanticism, up to and

including Thomas, Morton openly addresses the fallacies of Romantic Ecology in representing the environment:

A form of ecocriticism has emerged from Romantic scholarship, in the work of writers such as Jonathan Bate, Karl Kroeber, and James McKusick. . . . It is itself an example of a certain aspect of the Romantic literary project to change the world by compelling a strong affective response and a fresh view of things. (Morton *Ecology without Nature* 9)

This approach is strongly criticised, starting from the deconstruction of the very idea of Nature, which to Morton is not a universally applicable concept but a Romantic construction. Indeed, a place-consciousness based on localism and Romantic myths, just as in Thomas' time, should not have been the answer to capitalist alienation, should not be today the answer to "the encroachments of modern and postmodern 'space'" (Morton *Ecology Without Nature* 11). Morton dares authors and critics to move beyond such simple categories of space – a proper apprehension of the ecological catastrophe can be only expressed by focusing on scale, interrelationality, and hybridity, as explained also in Morton's equally influential book *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013).

Ultimately then, disturbing the revisiting of a looked-over canon of nature writing into New Nature Writing, in itself a noble effort of recovery of minor figures, is the very idea of uncovering the political unconscious inherent in their poetics, a task which, according to Morton, must be a fundamental aspect of ecocriticism: "Instead, ecological criticism must politicize the aesthetic" (205). Jamie's review of MacFarlane's *The Wild Places*, which doubles as a sparking intervention on the ethics of the whole genre, runs parallel to this criticism, sharing similar points of contention. A first criticism comes in the over-use of 'I':

The danger of this writing style is that there will be an awful lot of 'I'. If there is a lot of 'I' (and there is, in *The Wild Places*) then it won't be the wild places we behold, but the author. We see him

swimming, climbing, looking, feeling, hearing, responding, being sensitive, and because almost no one else speaks, this begins to feel like an appropriation, as if the land has been taken from us and offered back, in a different language and tone and attitude. (Jamie)

The use of the term ‘appropriation’ clearly wishes to define the imagination of the author as illegitimate, wrongful, an obstacle to a narrative which should be focusing more on nature than on to its – even if poetic and beautifully written – representation. In addition, the complaint about the excessive use of the first person is also a form of criticism which addressed the positionality of the author, a complaint also voiced by New Nature Writing author Poole in his article “Is Our Love of Nature Writing Bourgeois Escapism?.” Inevitably, such self-centredness can be read as a betrayal of Nature, which is idolized and used for personal advantage or even atonement: “The ‘thing’ we call nature becomes, in the Romantic period and afterward, a way of healing what modern society has damaged” (Morton, *Ecology without Nature* 23), a trope featured in many popular books belonging to New Nature Writing, such as Mabey’s *Nature Cure* (2005). Ultimately then, Romantic Ecology is seen not only as inaccurate, but also as self-serving, deceitfully masking itself as an ethical attunement.

Unaddressed by MacFarlane but glaringly obvious to Jamie is also the topic of politics. The idea of a charming, individualist (a lone traveller in a deserted landscape) approach to travel writing is also a framing device actively interested in a polished version of a wider reality. To Jamie, the barren places that MacFarlane traverses, are purposefully crafted to support a Romantic aesthetic, all their noisy elements written out of the final copy. This implies that the very idea of wilderness in *The Wild Places* is constructed: “Wild is a word like ‘soul’. Such a thing may not exist, but we want it, and we know what we mean when we talk about it. And yes, we’re drifting here towards the religious” (Jamie). This is exactly why, to Morton, the retirement of the very concept of ‘nature’ must be brought forward: “Ecology, if it means anything at all, means being without nature. When we drag it front and center, against our

ideological interests, it stops being a world in which we can immerse ourselves” (Morton, *Ecology without Nature* 204). When used, ‘nature’ would fit the definition most favourable to whoever is using it – in the meantime, an environment which is far richer stands unaddressed. What the environment requires, according to Jamie, is not to be identified with nature and used as a panacea; it must be dealt with in its uncompromising difficulty, strangeness, tedium. Jamie’s intervention in New Nature Writing is fundamentally a political one, devoted to the inclusion of an explicitly ecological approach which actively resists the Romantic temptation to turn to imagination, as it only benefits the human side.

The debate in New Nature Writing can then be identified as a disagreement between, to return to Williams, two different structures of feeling, each interested in different affective relationships with the environment and, inevitably, each consisting of two discordant poetics. Thomas’ and MacFarlane’s aesthetics have so far been identified with Bate’s Romantic Ecology – Jamie’s objections instead, like Cocker’s and Poole’s, could fit inside what has been called by Lynn Keller the ‘self-conscious Anthropocene,’ a poetics concerned with the “recognition of the thorough entanglement of ‘nature’ and culture,” an “awareness of environmental injustice,” a “repositioning of humankind in relation to more-than-human worlds,” and an “information-based attention to specific environmental degradation” (Keller). Indeed, positionality, political self-consciousness, and the awareness of the entanglement with all sorts of organisms and objects at every scale within one’s environment all become explicit responsibilities shared by the authors. It is, in a way, a direct effort to disenchant the Romantic (and post-Romantic) perspective of nature and to reduce the space given to a therapeutic, seductive imagination. The imaginary gives way to the real: “Waiting to be discovered is a wildness which is smaller, darker, more complex and interesting, not a place to stride over but a force requiring constant negotiation” (Jamie). Only when a recognition of this dynamic takes place, which is framed as the necessary abdication of the hegemonic lone white British traveller (an author rich in imagination but blind to

politics), can nature writing finally apprehend the current environmental circumstances.

Notes

¹ However, Lucy Newlyn argues in “The Strange Romanticism of Edward Thomas” that “Edward Thomas had more in common with Wordsworth than with any other writer, including Richard Jefferies” (410).

² MacFarlane, who has read the work of Helen Thomas, his wife, who has published the memoirs *As It Was* (1926) and *World Without End* (1931), writes that it was he who taught her how to pay attention to the local flora and fauna: “She can’t at first tell a beech from a birch . . . he teaches her calls and songs so she can know without seeing. They press and label flowers: tormentil, byrny, harebell, bedstraw, milkwort” (*The Old Ways* 335).

³ Other readers of Thomas, however, insist on his use of the pastoral genre – see Jonathan Bate: “For Thomas, as for Wordsworth, pastoral was not a myth but a psychological necessity” (Bate 115).

⁴ A link between conservationism and politics has been studied by cultural historian Simon Schama in his *Landscape and Memory*.

⁵ “In the middle of the twentieth century, T.S. Eliot, defining an idea of a Christian society, could say that ‘on the whole it would appear to be for the best that the great majority of human beings should go on living in the place in which they were born’” (Williams 84). For further information, see Jeremy Diaper’s *TS Eliot and Organicism*.

⁶ For a wider discussion on English Neo-Romanticism and conservative political ideologies, see Frank Trentmann’s “Civilization and Its Discontents: English Neo-Romanticism and the Transformation of Anti-Modernism in Twentieth-Century Western Culture.”

⁷ “Old Man” here refers to the *Artemisia abrotanum* plant, which has a distinct pungent scent.

Works Cited

Bate, Jonathan. *Romantic Ecology (Routledge Revivals): Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*, Taylor and Francis, 2013.

- Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Blackwell, 2005.
- Cocker, Mark. "Death of the Naturalist: Why is the 'New Nature Writing' so Tame?" *New Statesman*, vol. 17, 2015, p. 15.
- Diaper, Jeremy. *TS Eliot and Organicism*. Liverpool UP, 2018.
- Jamie, Kathleen. "A Lone Enraptured Male." *London Review of Books* 6, 6 Mar. 2008, www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v30/n05/kathleen-jamie/a-lone-enraptured-male. Accessed 25 Jan. 2025.
- Keller, Lynn. "The Poetics of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene." *The Routledge Companion to Ecopoetics*, edited by Julia Fiedorczuk et al., Routledge, 2023, pp. 9-19.
- Longley, Edna. *Edward Thomas: The Annotated Collected Poems*. Bloodaxe Books, 2008.
- Mabey, Richard. "In Defence of Nature Writing." *The Guardian*, 18 July 2013, www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jul/18/richard-mabey-defence-nature-writing. Accessed 25 Jan. 2025.
- Macfarlane, Robert. *Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination*. E-book ed., Vintage Books, 2009.
- . *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot*. Vol. 3. Penguin, 2012.
- . *The Wild Places*. Penguin, 2008.
- . "Why We Need Nature Writing." *New Statesman*, 2 Sept. 2015. Updated 6 Sept. 2021, www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/09/robert-macfarlane-why-we-need-nature-writing
www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/09/robert-macfarlane-why-we-need-nature-writing. Accessed 25 Jan. 2025.
- Moran, Joe. "A Cultural History of the New Nature Writing." *Literature and History*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2014, pp. 49-63.
- Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Harvard UP, 2009.

- . *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. U of Minnesota P, 2013.
- Newlyn, Lucy. "The Strange Romanticism of Edward Thomas." *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 67, no. 4, 2017, pp. 410-439.
- Poole, Steven. "Is Our Love of Nature Writing Bourgeois Escapism?." *The Guardian*, 6 July 2013, www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jul/06/nature-writing-revival Accessed 25 Jan. 2025.
- Schama, Simon. *Landscape and Memory*. HarperCollins, 1995.
- Thomas, Edward. "Home." *The Annotated Collected Poems*. Bloodaxe Books, 2008, p. 121.
- . *In Pursuit of Spring*. Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1914.
- . "Lob." *The Annotated Collected Poems*. Bloodaxe Books, 2008, p. 111.
- . "Old Man." *The Annotated Collected Poems*. Bloodaxe Books, 2008, p. 46.
- . *Richard Jefferies: His Life and Work*. Little, Brown, 1909.
- . *The Heart of England*. JM Dent and Company, 1906.
- . *The Icknield Way. With Illustrations by A. L. Collins*. Constable and Company, 1916.
- . *The South Country*. JM Dent and Company, 1909.
- Trentmann, Frank. "Civilization and Its Discontents: English Neoromanticism and the Transformation of Anti-modernism in Twentieth-century Western Culture." *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 29, no. 4, 1994, pp. 583-625.
- Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. Vol. 423. Oxford UP, 1975.
- Wiśniewski, Jacek. *Edward Thomas: A Mirror of England*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008.