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Nature (-advocacy) in the 21st century English novel: *The Illusion of Separateness* and *Atonement*

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Abstract: The fictional discourse entails seemingly casual reflection on the bond between human beings and nature. The novel genre magnifies a utilitarian view on resources which, essentially, treats the world we live in as a mere commodity. One way or another, human welfare amounts to a cultural narrative that has always considered our survival means. Inadvertently or not, fictional narratives address such issues in the unfolding of their plot. Grand events which claim to develop from first-hand experience into storytelling are particularly informative of the nature trope in creative writing. For example, the historical backdrop of the Second World War provides the reading public with the iconic vision of ravaging our European habitat and, for once, with a fresh and compelling side-effect. Namely, with nature (writing) as it is shown to bear the brunt of military action.
Keywords: Sustainability, sustenance, nature-advocacy, anthropocentrism and anthropomorphization, speciesism.

Much of our modern culture is built on the (Cartesian) divide between man and nature (Soper, 1995). The rationale behind this characteristically western cultural policy essentially pitches science against the world we live in. This narrative is largely indebted to the concern with (the discourse of) sustainability. Inadvertently or not, mainstream fiction addresses such issues. For example, the interrelation between the novel's plot and setting is straightforward and largely forgotten in current postclassical narratology. Explicitly, the construction of the fictitious geography meant to accommodate eventfulness is, most of the times, thought to be unproblematic enough to be taken for granted. Nonetheless, whether or not a cultural construct, nature writing sets up a benchmark, rather than a backdrop, against which social intercourse is envisaged. The fictional discourse goes along with mainstream nature-advocacy, which essentially states that humankind's means of living threaten wildlife and poison sea and land.

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Even if most of the times it goes unmentioned, sustenance drives our species to tell the stories that ultimately study the principles of (social) reality. For example, they set surrounding objects and phenomena in obvious contrast to civilization. Framed one way or another, the reflection on nature in Western thought has quite a long history which effortlessly worked its way throughout various walks of life and public means of expression:

> [it] has been conceived as a product of divine economy or art with appropriate characteristics of simplicity and harmony, as a consequence of atomic chance, as a causal continuum, as a workshop of active substantial powers, as a passive system of mechanisms, as an evolutionary generation of novelty, as a manifestation of probabilities. (Crombie, 1996:2)

This wide-spread historical belief that our environment provides enough cultural (and, possibly, scientific) meaning to instantly make sense for any and all readers is processed by storytelling. Everything is done in a diffuse manner which certainly appropriates philosophical insights alongside experiential knowledge.

I find that the aesthetic paraphrasing of momentous events in history is particularly useful for understanding the politics of nature representation. The attempt to re-experience the issue of environment delineation in public narratives (narrative fiction included) is a contentious topic the average reader seems to have been trained not to give second thought to. As far as the address of literature is concerned, the popular fear of ecological apocalypse signals anxieties concerning personal and collective welfare. Such worries are definitely exposed by the aesthetic discourse otherwise commonly believed not to take sides in what is essentially economic policy-making. What is more, literature grants to these ethical rationalizations of mostly the countryside an educational licence to circulate in the public arena.

Grand events which claim to develop from first-hand experience into storytelling are informative of the way the nature trope is used in public narratives and, consequently, in mainstream culture as well. Surprisingly or not, the long-established humanities convention of text interpretation turns out to make available a compelling example of academic practice when it comes to eco-critical readings. I mean that these new circumstances may very well be judged on the basis of some already known facts. The strategy is that of reasoning by extrapolation. Plainly said, a number of figures of speech (allegories, symbols, metonymies, etc.) particular to literary language are found by eco-critics "to name large-scale, underlying cultural metaphors of nature" (Garrard, 2004: 184). The aesthetic communication details what is believed to be the customary property of everything that happens or exists independently of people. Stories which depict hostile contention, armed conflict, best disclose a survival paradigm oddly centred on the concept of habitat, otherwise endowed almost exclusively with the utilitarian function of sustenance.

One of the readily available choices, likely to exemplify the previously said, is the Second World War and its afterlives in 21st century creative writing. From this

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perspective, two novels I set out to read fit the profile of a so-called environmentally-neutral account of the past. Besides that, they share a common language of social and moral responsibility (I will later come back to) which has something to do with the nature-writing frame of reference. What is more, the 2013 Simon Van Booy's "The Illusion of Separateness," to a large extent, actually revisits Ian McEwan's 2001 "Atonement". For one, the readers of both novels face the war from the perspective of its cultural and psychological outcomes and are subjected only incidentally to actual fighting episodes.

But what really matters is the blatant speciesism of fictional invention – to use a buzzword of postcolonial eco-criticism. In other words, the literary texts turn out to be informative of nothing else but "prejudice in favour of one's own species" (Garrard, 2004: 184). That is to say that the human race is notoriously self-centred. The narrative voices are in the habit of looking upon the world exclusively in relation to the said homo sapiens. The allegedly rational man is irrationally self-absorbed in his obtrusive use of the first person singular that borders on boastfulness. In a psychoanalytical manner which is bound to conclude on the probable paranoid condition of the author, the appreciation of beauty (to be found in our various artistic endeavours) fails to deliver aesthetic thrills. Rather, it is tantamount to a compulsive grand narrative that makes an inventory of our (false) needs and (true) desires. This is a deep-seated rhetorical and ideological practice most readers have learned to take for granted. The self-centredness of humankind is hard at work in the aesthetical discourse of fiction. Accordingly, eco-criticism does its best to expose such cultural conditioning for what it is worth on its own as well as in relation to literature, animals, and the environment (Huggan and Tiffin, 2010).

Coming back to the common language of my primary sources, I have to admit to the somewhat circumstantial genealogy I devise between the two stories. Primarily, although they both use the literary motif of war, it is not safe to say that they are necessarily war-novels. Yet, their discourse is patently similar in at least two ways. That is, in the treatment of the environment and in the handling of some moral questions, respectively. These can only be raised by war which is an effective trigger of fictional invention. Without the hostilities pretext, the representation of the landscape would not have been mediated by the familiar threat of loss, pain and death. Effectively, the narrative of danger defamiliarizes the ordinary perception of the scenery. Anyway, these threats identify roughly the same consequences human action has on the natural world.

In so many words, the English novel's tradition of the historical novel is renewed. In the process, it seeps out in the American context with Simon Van Booy's "The Illusion of Separateness". The contemporary English born writer, presently living in the United States, distils the already sophisticated statement made by Ian McEwan's author in "Atonement". Ultimately, they both shed light on the topic of reading western cultural memory from the perspective of the current relation literature pictures between human beings and nature. Their historically-informed plots magnify the

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individual fate of individual characters. Though mostly portrayed outside the battlefields of Europe, they remain scarred for life by the cultural and ecological disaster intimated by war. Everything amounts to the unfolding of the plot. Keeping that in mind, I feel that, for example, the point made by the very title of "The Illusion of Separateness" has already been suggested by "Atonement". Of course, in each novel the stress is laid on somewhat different cultural/ideological particulars. Nonetheless, when assembled, they delineate the same underpinning theme: that of the "mother nature" stereotype. The benchmark of our natural surroundings, as they are abused again and again by our species' all-out war, brings the rhetoric and the message of the two novels together. Both texts argue that, although events are obviously chaotic (while at war), there is consensus on a number of issues. Above all, on the use and the significance of our European habitat which successfully accommodates the unfolding of the war/plot.

Furthermore, the agreement is on the issue of collective responsibility. The characters need to find evidence of design or even moral purpose in both their biography and in the world they live in. Sooner or later, most, if not all, of them are shown to be at one with each other. Their togetherness is candidly stated by Simon Van Booy's title. This warm feeling has everything to do with their comprehension of an original sin or act of mercy. These events are located in their past and much of the plot investigates their magnitude. Here lies the social/moral responsibility I already said the novels share. These are the landmarks which brings them together (both the novels and their fictional personae) through acts of selflessness and expiation. The teleological belief that everything has meaning and use in society and, appropriately, in nature is of great consequence for the social mandate the novel genre carries out. The statement made by these two novels is supposed to lead to a feeling of social harmony epitomised by the characters' conduct. There is a sense of solidarity they exhibit in terms of naïve belonging to the same symbolic community. Importantly, they act on what they think they are supposed to do according to this togetherness. The characters membership in this morally-idealized version of society is dramatized so that the readers understand, firstly, the positive message of the novel. Secondly, the literariness (i.e., the futility) of the social service fiction provides for the public. The very title of one novel is employed to convey the previously said: "a MoMA ad on the side of a New York City bus with the show's name THE ILLUSION OF SEPARATENESS" (TIS[1]: 70). I am tempted to keep on counting exclusively for the sake of professional readers this time: thirdly, the readers are invited to recognize a likely paradigm shift of the novel discourse. In early 21st century, the genre is bound to seek for a change in the generic formula of the late 20th century fiction. Of course that it is difficult, if not impossible, to speak about one specific type of fiction that may safely be labelled characteristic of the last century's final decades. However, the readers' weariness of the rhetoric most common in public narrative is obvious. The perception is that of a

[1] McEwan, I., 2001, *Atonement*, London: Vintage Books, 2007, hereafter *A* in quotations only.

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conspicuous change, which must take place in the field of humanities. Even more, current bibliography argues that the said reform of fictional narrativity and, generally, of public narratives is in progress. The present-day meanings given to the notion of narrative reveals the frustration with classic narratology and postmodern writing: "narrative as formal system, narrative as ideological instrument, and narrative as rhetoric" (Scholes, R., Phelan, J., Kellog, R., 2006: 284). They intertwine and encourage the reader to hope for the better, i.e., to hope for a way out from what we have insistently written and read lately. Both novels I approach necessarily pave the way for gradual change: their narratives look back, simultaneously, on the conventions of realism and postmodernism in order to try and come up with something new (at least, by comparison with our immediate past).

Anyway, the sense of belonging and moral responsibility of their characters ranges from friendship to something of a mutual understanding. The narrative voices follow the way our species (re)discovers such feelings, particularly at times of war and against the backdrop of forests, fields, beaches, etc. Therefore, I find that the highly politicized trope of nature in current creative writing is accurately exemplified by "The Illusion of Separateness" and "Atonement", although it does not have much to do with the ideology of typical eco-criticism. Namely, with what is summarized and over-simplified by the incitement to acknowledge "the value of the living world for its own sake" (Nichols, 2011: 124). What sets apart their fictional address from the said philosophy is that there is no room for the transcendental construal of nature (nature for nature's sake) in the plot curve. The position that the narrators and the authors of Ian McEwan and Simon Van Booy embrace is closer to that of traditional cultural studies. That is to say that the interpretative communities these narrating instances belong to work in order to produce cultural knowledge and to negotiate social meaning in their politics of nature representation.

The logical sequence that structures the (cultural) consistency of the fictionalized environment is steeped in the narrative convention which reconstructs the reader's awareness of the material world. Specifically, the novel genre makes a seemingly incidental inventory of the references which help assemble the regular contextualizing devices of the narrative address. Obviously, they are meant to set in (empirical) perspective characters and plot. For example, they prompt speculation over the function of landscapes and, importantly, over the meaning commonly assigned to them. Ultimately, everything seems to boil down to the agricultural products the earth provides. Nature maintains life and the undertones of surviving suggest environmental concerns. Once more, a figure of speech by which a less comprehensive term is used for a more comprehensive one (synecdoche) serves to name the commonsensical representation of culture which makes instant sense to the average reader of current literature:

> She came the closest she would ever be to the battlefield, for every case she helped with had some of its essential elements—blood, oil, sand, mud, seawater, bullets, shrapnel, engine grease, or the smell of cordite, or damp sweaty battle

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> dress whose pockets contained rancid food along with the sodden crumbs of Amo bars. (A[2]: 304)

Explicitly, mainstream culture narratively expounds daily life and biography as well as what originally must have been the academic language of scientific findings and philosophic judgements. Presently, the former forefront of investigation carried out by the academe in the past is part and parcel of pop culture. The everyday language of social intercourse operates with such underlying sets of assumptions gained through exposure to ascertained values and beliefs. To name only a few of the rather confusing, if not conflicting, opinions about the trope of nature available in media and, generally, in public narratives (our two novels included), I mention: the poststructuralist stance towards nature as a cultural construct (Braidotti, 2010), the Cartesian dichotomy man versus nature or the current return to nature (Dallmayr, 2011) preached by various brands of eco-criticism. In "The Illusion of Separateness" and "Atonement" nature writing is determined by similar inconsistencies, which paradoxically do not impinge on the effectiveness of the literary theme. The self-contradictory packaging of the subject matter in fictional discourses is the tell-tale sign of its cultural assemblage meant to mirror the grand social narrative. Specifically, the incidental references to the setting of the novels replicate the convention of human needs and purposes. Largely neglected, our environment turns out to have always been the focus of a storyline able to legitimize the realist convention. The 21st century currency of the issue is further proof of its present significance too.

As far as the novelistic discourse is concerned, it openly relies on folk memory as a means to contextualize the plot. Furthermore, it borrows our prevailing view on social reality that inescapably features the material world of collective phenomena and objects with which we interact on a daily basis. The narrators go to great lengths to ensure that the familiar communication routine of pop culture is made available for the readers. For example, they take into account a force which seems to keep together earth itself. Of course, this entity is most of the times spoken of as if it were a person. A tombstone poem in Simon Van Booy's text summarizes this optimistic view on the universe: "When days are darkest, the earth enshrines/the seed of summer's birth/The Spirit of man is a light that shines/deep in the darkness of earth" (TIS: 31). Such presumptive evidence has something to do with making deductions from well-known circumstances. Obviously, these known facts are distorted in accordance with the values and beliefs of western 21st century society. Anthropomorphism goes further and encompasses all living things. For instance, toys made in imitation of recognizable reality convey the awareness of the cultural mediation our species needs in order to access nature:

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[2] Van Booy, S., 2013, "The Illusion of Separateness", Harper Collins e-books, EPUB Edition, hereafter *TIS* in quotations only.

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> "the model farm spread across a deep window ledge consisted of the usual animals, but all facing one way—toward their owner—as if about to break into song, and even the farmyard hens were neatly corralled." (A: 5)

There is this deep-rooted "reflexive assumption that animals are like us" (Daston and Mitman, 2005: 1) which the literary text half-humorously circulates: "there were insects living in the cupboard, but they were there before me, so I tried not to disturb them" (TIS: 50). This leads to the anthropomorphism that complements what I already hinted at is the anthropocentrism of our environment writing. Whatever we have come to take for granted with respect to the anthropocentrism (Boddice, 2011) of our worldview is now, once more, under review. The (realist) novel genre has a say in the matter because of the social service it performs for the community. Conclusively, the (somewhat compulsive) opinion that humans are the only yardstick of success against which to judge all surrounding beings and phenomena is advertised by fiction too.

The two novels under scrutiny convey a sense of familiar use made out of the world that accommodates the protagonists' exploits. The dynamics of nature in contemporary humanities is significant of the cultural paradigm readers of literature are invited to witness to. The study of the natural world, as a matter of principle, appropriates environmentalist and ethical concerns. The extent to which the storyline of fictional discourses addresses the issue is informative of our beliefs and values. It also conveys the attempt of the contemporary novel genre to keep in touch with the current mood of our (green) late 20th century cultural history. The quotation of universally acknowledged literary/cultural language, customarily used to define for public usage the trope of "nature" has always been the intertext of creative writing. Implicitly, contemporary storytelling too is caught in the middle of the battle between contending parties.They uphold one or the other of the previously mentioned ideological views on nature (alongside many other that obviously went unmentioned). Convincingly, the literary discourse foregrounds the way in which its own plot is shaped by popular representations of the environment. Simon Van Booy's novel discusses the personal redemption of soldiers which is set against the background of traditional war stories (the ones populated by the wounded and the deserters):

> "John awoke in a stew of mud and dead leaves with a fierce pain in his foot. […] Here was a landscape John has always loved. Roots poked up through the ground on their way to deeper earth. Heavy mosses wrapped dead branches and smoothed the gnarls of dying trunks. It was an old wood that had seen many wars, and once even hosted a gang of deserters from Napoleon's Grand Armee, whose uniforms and weapons were still tucked into the hollow of a dead tree." (TIS: 54)

The two 21st century novels I read side by side revisit the traditional motif of the forest as refuge from danger and pursuit. Its existence lessens the apprehension of personal doom and promises opportunities for survival. Historically, the woods have been considered able to offer sanctuary for the hunted, and, as both of our stories go,

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to actually provide safety from gunshot. This notion of subsistence is not just individual but also encompasses environmentalist awareness. It is so because the said geography stands for archetypal wilderness at its best. Under the shelter of the green canopy the Second World War infantry experiences the same safe haven their forefathers (at war or not) have always longed for in their times of need. Landscape representation is here reactionary, a backward-looking stance which caricatures current commitment to nature advocacy. "Atonement" unashamedly restages this primeval routine for the use of the informed 21st century readership:

> "He walked a few steps into the tree cover, and sat in the new undergrowth with his back to a birch sapling. His only thought was of water. There were more than two hundred people sheltering in the woods…" (A: 238)

"The Illusion of Separateness" stays on the beaten track and gives a lengthy account of a similar event to the one of Ian McEwan's plot. Only that, instead of the foot soldiers who took shelter in the woods, the readers get to know more about the perspective of the plane which hunted them down. To be exact, the account focuses on an American B-24 shot down by antiaircraft fire over France. The convenient wooded area where the bomber crushes down is set up to accurately convey the already familiar setting. Significantly, these underlying associations are complemented by the actual site of the crush description. The episode is phrased in the (media celebrated) language of an ecological disaster, language that mostly relies on sweeping statements. What catches the eye are the understated costs for farming in the years to come, as they are weighed by the American soldiers: "a field of wreckage and the farmer for years to come, tripping on twists of charred metal" (TIS: 46). This is a sudden calamity scenario:

> "[he] marvels at how it cut through thick trees, then plowed the earth with its glass nose. His father said the forest beyond the pasture is too expensive to clear." (TIS 24)

The authors' assent to the aesthetic proposal traditionally made by storytelling (and, to some extent, by the realist novel too) is liable to amount to a cultural quotation of mythic stereotypes. First and foremost, the woodland is a space of opportunity and adventure. It pledges to deliver a sense of freedom unattainable elsewhere and provides the readers with the endless rhetoric reconstruction of the promised-land in literature.

Moreover, the site of the forest further develops the narrative of a welcoming topography, usually outside socially-sanctioned behaviour. This is a place which thrives on its (supposed) wilderness and peculiar set up in mainstream culture. Notably, its commonsensical construal readily accommodates the notion of illicit practices: (armed) banditry, organised crime, etc. Not to mention that it does the same when it comes to harbouring the wrongdoers and to taking in those who may pursue them on behalf of the law. Ultimately, when reading about fictionalized woods we are summoned to

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acknowledge the location that resisted most to the expansionist policy of civilization. The forest is subjected to the political language of imagining the world in accordance with the prevailing (i.e., with our) worldview. On the one hand, the narrators celebrate the development of such areas and, on the other, they state the preservationist agenda of safeguarding them for the future (especially if it is too expensive to do otherwise, as the narrator of "The Illusion of Separateness" plainly says).

The political economy that enables various undertakings relative to land-use is the attribute of joint-effort between those concerned. This may very well be the notion of fellowship, of belonging together both writers address: Simon Van Booy openly states it while Ian McEwan hints at it in terms of atoning for one's sins. The idea of working together for the common greater good is easily noticeable in the grand designs of public engineering as they set out to change the face of the (remaining) earth. As such, in the mainstream British public imagination, nature advocacy versus nature development probably help put together a sense of national identity. In fact, they help chart and un-chart the symbolic territory of our habitat. Conclusively, this is a feat of reality editing achieved by means of literary language and narrative production of identity.

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