

Nature's Beauty: Legitimacy, Imagination and Transcendence in Hepburn and the New Nature Writing

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Ronald W. Hepburn's seminal 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty' (1966) is widely acknowledged as renewing interest in the aesthetics of nature, and setting the agenda for the development of environmental aesthetics in the latter part of the twentieth century.¹ The importance of this field has only grown over the past two decades with the development of the now burgeoning interdisciplinary field of the environmental humanities, whose fundamental aim is to reconceptualise nature and the place of humans within it.² This field, which naturally incorporates environmental aesthetics, seeks to address the long-running and increasingly-acute environmental crisis. The environmental humanities reject any characterisation of humanities-based approaches to nature as being of lesser value than those of the natural

1 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty' in Bernard Williams and Alan Montefiore (eds), *British Analytical Philosophy* (London, 1966), 285–310; Isis Brook, 'Ronald Hepburn and the Humanising of Environmental Aesthetics', *Environmental Values*, 19 (2010), 265–71; Allen Carlson, 'Ten Steps in the Development of Western Environmental Aesthetics' in Martin Drenthen and Jozef Keulartz, (eds), *Environmental Aesthetics: Crossing Divides and Breaking Ground* (New York, 2014), 13–24; idem, 'Environmental Aesthetics' in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/environmental-aesthetics>, accessed 1 October 2019; Yuriko Saito, 'Future Directions for Environmental Aesthetics', *Environmental Values*, 19 (2010), 373–91; Yrjö Sepänmaa, 'From Theoretical to Applied Environmental Aesthetics: Academic Aesthetics Meets Real-World Demands', *Environmental Values*, 19 (2010), 393–405; Emily Brady, 'Ronald W. Hepburn: In Memoriam', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 49 (2009), 199–202.

2 Prominent initial publications in the environmental humanities include: Sherry B. Ortner, 'Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?', *Feminist Studies*, 1 (1972), 5–31; Bruno Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes: Essai d'anthropologie symétrique* (Paris, 1991); William Cronon, 'The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature', *Environmental History*, 1 (1996), 7–28; Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martínez-Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South* (London, 1997); Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995); Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco, 1990); Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London, 1991).

sciences, and instead argues for their fundamental importance in setting the context in which technical and scientific knowledge is deployed.³ A quarter of a century before the development of this field, Hepburn had already argued for the legitimacy of the aesthetic appreciation of nature, and made the claim that metaphysics and the imagination ‘delineate the wider context in which science itself has its place’.⁴

Given Hepburn’s importance in both establishing the discipline of environmental aesthetics, and his prefiguring of the development of the environmental humanities, it is surprising that his work has not been applied in aiding our understanding of the present-day renaissance in British nature writing, known as the new nature writing. Equally surprising is the fact that new nature writing itself has not sought to employ Hepburn in the context of its own creative non-fiction, to articulate its own aims. The context of the environmental humanities, therefore offers a fortuitous framework to carry out this comparative project between Hepburn and new nature writing. This has the benefit of both illustrating Hepburn’s aesthetic philosophy in action, and of bringing the key elements of new nature writing’s implicit philosophy of environmental aesthetics, expressed in its aesthetic output, into relief.

This examination will apply a range of elements from Hepburn’s aesthetic writings to the analysis of new nature writing. In particular, it will focus upon two key themes in Hepburn’s work on aesthetics and nature. First, Hepburn argues for the legitimacy of what he calls a humanised understanding of nature, which has often been dismissed as subjectivism, and therefore incapable of rendering an accurate depiction of nature. Hepburn defends humanisation on the basis that it allows for the dispositional power of natural objects to be appreciated yielding insights otherwise unavailable to the discursive natural sciences. New nature writing also asserts the legitimacy of this aesthetic form of appreciation through a defence of the first-person account of the individual in nature. Second, Hepburn offers a defence of what he calls the metaphysical imagination, an aesthetic form of understanding nature with the ability to disclose how the world actually is. New nature writing also works

3 Robert S. Emmett and David E. Nye, *The Environmental Humanities: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, Mass., 2017), 7–11, 71–92; Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London, 2002), 38–61; Jeremy David Bendik-Keymer and Chris Haufe, ‘Anthropogenic Mass Extinction: The Science, the Ethics, and the Civics’ in Stephen M. Gardiner and Allen Thompson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Ethics* (Oxford, 2016), 427–37.

4 Ronald W. Hepburn, ‘Landscape and the Metaphysical Imagination’, *Environmental Values*, 5 (1996), 191–204, 194.

to legitimise the importance of the imagination, arguing that it allows us to understand and find a place within nature. However, before exploring how new nature writing illustrates Hepburn’s aesthetics of nature in action, and how the environmental aesthetics of new nature writing is brought into relief by Hepburn, this consideration will first offer a brief characterisation of the movement known as new nature writing.

1 New nature writing

The past decade has witnessed a flourishing in the genre of non-fiction nature prose in the United Kingdom. In 2008 *Granta: The Magazine of New Writing* published an issue titled ‘The New Nature Writing’, recognising the development of a movement that has since grown exponentially.⁵ The year before marked the founding edition of the occasional literary magazine *Archipelago*, which has acted as an organ for many of the movement’s contributors. Numerous contributions to new nature writing have appeared upon UK best-seller lists. In 2014 the Wainwright Prize was established in association with the National Trust to acknowledge this emergent genre. The movement has many contributors, among whom its most-recognised writers are Kathleen Jamie, John Lewis-Stemple, Helen Macdonald, Robert Macfarlane and Richard Mabey. Collectively their contributions have been acknowledged within the wider literary scene by garnering awards such as the Samuel Johnson Book Prize, the Costa Book Award, the Scottish Arts Council Book of the Year and the E. M. Forster Award for Literature. To describe new nature writing as a genre is problematic. One can find contributions to the body of its work classified under natural history, travel writing and geography. Foremost, however, in its most popular expression as creative non-fiction, its form is the memoir, and one of its defining characteristics is the voice of the author in nature.⁶

Numerous and diverse contributions have been made to new nature writing as it has emerged over the past decade, and although the variation is wide,

5 Jason Cowley, ‘Editors’ Letter: The New Nature Writing’, *Granta*, 102 (2008), 7–12; Claire Armistead, ‘Happiness to Mindfulness, via Wellbeing: How Publishing Trends Grow’, *The Guardian*, 14 March 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/mar/14/happiness-to-mindfulness-via-wellbeing-how-publishing-trends-grow>, accessed 1 October 2019.

6 For a more extensive description of the movement see Alexander J. B. Hampton, ‘Post-secular Nature and the New Nature Writing’, *Christianity and Literature*, 67 (2018), 454–71.

it is possible to group them into four broad categories which can provide an overview of the movement. The first of these categories expresses a singular sensitivity and awareness of place that leads to detailed and diligent articulations of natural experiences.⁷ Of central concern to the works in this category is the way we know places, not just the places themselves. As such these works often include human geography, history, folklore and etymology, interwoven with natural history. The second category is similar, but is rooted more firmly to a single place.⁸ These works depict an intimate relationship between the writer and a location, and cultivate a deep connection for the reader as well by describing the overwhelming complexity and depth of a single place. A third category is similarly concerned with the re-integration of the self into nature, but its active ingredient is not the disposition to embark on an excursion, or discover a single place anew. Rather, in these works, the natural world provides a way for individual authors to deal with the experience of crisis. In these instances nature is not the place for the projection of one's emotions, but instead the space whereby depression is overcome through a restored sense of participation in a nature greater than the self, yet in which one belongs.⁹ Finally, the fourth category of new nature writing tells its story by focusing on a particular animal species.¹⁰ These texts, through the experience of the author, introduce readers to curious, fascinating and often unknown aspects of everyday wildlife. These works argue for a renewed kinship with nature by illustrating how certain species impact human lives in complex and seemingly mysterious ways.

7 Roger Deakin, *Waterlog* (London, 1999); Kathleen Jamie, *Findings* (London, 2005); idem, *Sighlines* (London, 2012); Robert Macfarlane, *Wild Places* (London, 2007); idem, *The Old Ways* (London, 2012); Philip Marsden, *Rising Ground* (London, 2014); William Atkins, *The Moor* (London, 2014).

8 Stephen Moss, *Wild Hares and Hummingbirds* (London, 2010); John Stempel-Lewis, *Meadowland* (London, 2014); idem, *The Running Hare* (2016); Mark Cocker, *Claxton* (London, 2014); Rob Cowen, *Common Ground* (London, 2015); Tim Robinson, *Connemara: Listening to the Wind* (Dublin, 2006); idem, *Connemara: The Last Pool of Darkness* (Dublin, 2008); idem, *Connemara: A Little Gaelic Kingdom* (Dublin, 2011).

9 Richard Mabe, *Nature Cure* (London, 2005); Helen Macdonald, *H is for Hawk* (London, 2014); Amy Liptrot, *The Outrun* (London, 2015); Katherine Norbury, *The Fish Ladder: A Journey Upstream* (London, 2015); Michael McCarthy, *Moth Snowstorm: Nature and Joy* (London, 2015).

10 Mark Cocker, *Crow Country* (London, 2008); Tim Dee, *The Running Sky* (London, 2009); Miriam Darlington, *Otter Country* (London, 2012); Patrick Barkham, *Badgerlands* (London, 2013); Dave Goulson, *A Sting in the Tail* (London, 2013).

2 The aesthetics of humanisation

One of Hepburn's main concerns is the dismissal of the aesthetic appreciation of nature as subjective. In his article 'Nature Humanised: Nature Respected' (1998), Hepburn writes that the legitimacy of nature's aesthetic appreciation is often considered as failing to offer a true description of nature because it involves a range of reactions that are considered to be subjective.¹¹ These reactions include 'sentimentality', 'anthropomorphism', 'narcissism', and 'emotionality'.¹² The natural sciences, on the other hand, engage in a process of resolutely stripping away these elements. Though its depiction may seem to lack emotional resonance and figurative satisfaction, the representations of natural science can nevertheless claim a kind of analytic objectivity. Accordingly, we are left in a position where there is only one defensibly accurate depiction of nature itself. Hepburn's goal is to defend our aesthetic non-scientific interactions with nature as a legitimate form of knowing nature.

This generalised account offered by Hepburn bears itself out in the development of British nature writing in the twentieth century, which increasingly moved away from first person accounts of nature, and evermore toward a supposedly reliable scientific account.¹³ In opposition to this, the new nature writing seeks to recognise the value and legitimacy of personal aesthetic accounts of nature. Mabe, one of the main figures of the movement, expresses this aim:

It's become customary, on this side of the Atlantic, stiffly to exclude all such personal narratives from writings about the natural world, as if the experience of nature were something separate from real life, a diversion, a hobby; or perhaps only to be evaluated through the dispassionate and separating prism of science. It has never felt like that to me [...] it's seemed absurd that, with our new understanding of the kindredness of life, so-called 'nature writing' should divorce itself from other kinds of literature, and from the rest of human existence.¹⁴

11 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Nature Humanised: Nature Respected', *Environmental Values*, 7 (1998), 267–279.

12 Ibid., 267.

13 Richard Mabe, 'Introduction' in idem (ed.), *Second Nature* (London, 1984), ix–xix.

14 Richard Mabe, *Nature Cure* (London, 2015), 22–3.

Prior to the twentieth century, Romantic and Victorian nature writing centred upon the individual's experience of nature as described by Mabey. Popular figures such as William Wordsworth, John Clare, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Richard Jefferies and Edward Thomas, all offered first-hand, first-person, accounts of their experiences in nature. However, this perspective became increasingly unfashionable in the twentieth century. Novels such as Stella Gibbons *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) and Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop* (1938), respectively offered a devastating pastiche of countryside charm, and a mawkish portrayal of the dilettante naturalist.¹⁵ This reflected a changing public attitude to what was increasingly regarded as amateur naturalism, imbued with more fanciful anthropomorphism and emotional trivialities, than it was with accurate observation and dispassionate description. W. G. Hoskins, author of the influential *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955), expressed this sentiment when he wrote that his aim was to move beyond the 'sentimental and formless slush which afflicts so many books concerned only with superficial appearances.'¹⁶ As a result of these trends, by the mid-twentieth century the voice of the individual interacting with nature in popular British nature writing had virtually become silent, replaced by the disembodied, objective, impassive voice of the professional naturalist who offered an all-seeing abstract view from nowhere.

Both Hepburn's aesthetic theory and the practice of new nature writing seek to restore legitimacy to the individual voice, and challenge the accusation of its subjective inaccuracy. Hepburn argues for a more nuanced understanding of our non-scientific relationship to nature. Whereas all of what he calls our expressive responses to nature involve a human element, not all of these involve a form of subjective projection that obscures nature.¹⁷ To this end, Hepburn introduces the term 'humanising', which aims to describe a human relationship with nature, as opposed to a human imposed re-construction of it.¹⁸ Hepburn describes how humanisation is capable of yielding forms of understanding and appreciation toward nature that cultivate a greater respect for it:

15 Stella Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm* (London, 1932); Evelyn Waugh, *Scoop: A Novel About Journalists* (London, 1938).

16 W. G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (London, 1955).

17 Hepburn, 'Nature Humanised: Nature Respected', 268–71.

18 *Ibid.*, 267.

We may respond to a savannah as an expansive, exhilarating openness, or enjoy the comforting enclosedness of an ancient path between high hedges. Without categorising or seeing a mountain animistically as a reclining giant, or enormous lion, we can apprehend it, on our approach, as a majestic, serene presence evoking a solemn joy. Doubtless, this kind of mental disengagement allows all sorts of normally unconscious responses to resonate... there need be no illusion here, nor self-deception: rather, an opening to levels of response not often accessible. We are experiencing the dispositional power of the object (the mountain) to evoke human emotion and mood, without the mediation of a falsifyingly anthropomorphic interpretation. We humanise, yes, but without illusion, or loss of respect for nature itself.¹⁹

The process Hepburn describes here, where we disengage our subjective imposition upon the natural object of consideration, allows that object's own 'dispositional power' (i.e. its inherent character) to evoke an aesthetic response within us as observers. We can, Hepburn explains, excise what he calls 'inappropriately human' impositions upon nature in our observations, but we should in no way engage in a reductionist refusal to allow any subjective feeling or affect to shape our interactions with nature.²⁰ The result of such a denial of subjectivity, he argues, would be the impoverishment of our understanding of nature, and undermine the source of our respect for it.

New nature writing engages in a similar critique of the impoverishment of our intellectual and emotional relationship to the natural world. Throughout the literature, one finds concern over the loss of communion with nature, and its deleterious replacement with the utilitarian, instrumentalist view that is incapable of expressing wonder. This is expressed in Robert Macfarlane's *Landmarks* (2015), a book concerned with the loss and recovery of our nature vocabulary:

Our language for nature is now such that the things around us do not talk back to us in ways that they might. As we have enhanced our power to determine nature, so we have rendered it less able to converse with us. We find it hard to imagine nature outside a use-value framework. We have become experts in analysing what nature can do for us, but lack a language to evoke what it can do to us [...] This is not to suggest

19 *Ibid.*, 271–2.

20 *Ibid.*, 270.

that we need adopt either a literal animism or a systematic superstition; only that by instrumentalizing nature, linguistically and operationally, we have largely stunned the earth out of wonder.²¹

What Macfarlane describes is the loss of our ability to hear the dispositional power in nature that concerns Hepburn. Instead of the conversation with the natural world that occurs when we humanise nature, in Hepburn's terms, we are left with the monologue that Macfarlane describes. The result is a relationship incapable of the understanding and respect cultivated through humanisation.

Hepburn describes this state of affairs as a failure of respect and empathy that results from our inability to appreciate nature as it is. He writes:

If we are having any relationship with nature, it should be with nature as it is and not as we selectively, distortingly imagine it might be or might have been. For instance, to project inappropriate human emotional and social life on to a non-human animal – outside the storybook, that is – *is a failure of respect for the actual animal: a failure to empathise with its own proper way of being. We are failing to give it its due recognition for what it is – for its own nature. We would be using the animal, here, as a prop to our own fantasising.*²²

In opposition to this, Hepburn identifies two essential characteristics to a good humanising relationship with nature. Distance and affinity, he explains, make it possible to establish a relationship with nature that avoids the fantasisation and failure described. In terms of distance, Hepburn argues that there exists a never fully bridgeable gap between ourselves and the nature we observe. This does not mean that we are not fully part of nature. Rather, it means that nature is so possessed of its own distinct identity that it will always resist our attempts to fully comprehend it.²³ Alternately, in terms of affinity, he describes a relationship that allows us to recognise a kinship with nature, and the possibility of a dialogue with it.²⁴ The challenge is to achieve a balance between these two orientations. Hepburn offers the following description, which reflects both our distance from, and affinity to, nature:

21 Robert Macfarlane, *Landmarks* (London, 2015), 25.

22 Hepburn, 'Nature Humanised: Nature Respected', 271.

23 *Ibid.*, 269–71.

24 *Ibid.*

Certainly, we humanise still: as we make a more 'truthful' attempt to grasp or realise (still through aesthetic experience) nature as it is, but without seeking to overcome the working of analogies between nature's life and our own, we open ourselves, again, to *a diversifying and deepening of the range of our emotions*. [...] In a word, we move (for truth's sake) away from familiar forms of trivialising and distorting anthropomorphism towards recognition of the otherness of nature in a stronger and more stable sense than before; yet, that done, we still find human enrichment – in self-understanding or self-constructing – in the inward appropriation of nature's sights and sounds.²⁵

There can be no fast rule, Hepburn goes on to explain. Rather, there can only be a constant exercise of cognitive constraint that mediates the interaction between the self and the natural object.²⁶

A number of new nature writers describe a dynamic of distance and affinity with nature, yet one of the best representations of this is found in Macdonald's *H is for Hawk* (2014). The book describes a year the author spends training a goshawk following the death of her father. Consistently, Macdonald finds herself struggling with the raptor's resistance to the meaning she attempts to impose upon it. This occurs whilst she trains the animal, but it is also dramatically captured when the would-be owner first meets the bird of prey. The moment the breeder opens the box in which the hawk has been transported occasions a description which expresses her encounter with the hawk's distance from, and resistance to, the imposition of subjective meaning:

Concentration. Infinite caution. Daylight irrigating the box. Scratching talons, another thump. And another. *Thump*. The air turned syrupy, slow, flecked with dust. The last few seconds before a battle. And with the last bow pulled free, he reached inside, and amidst a whirring, chaotic clatter of wings and feet and talons and a high-pitched twittering and it's all happening at once, the man pulls an enormous, enormous hawk out of the box and in a strange coincidence of world and deed a great flood of sunlight drenches us and everything is brilliance and fury. The hawk's wings, barred and beating, the sharp fingers of her dark-tipped primaries cutting the air, her feathers raised like the scattered quills of a fretful porpentine. Two enormous eyes. My heart jumps sideways. She

25 *Ibid.*, 272.

26 *Ibid.*, 271.

is a conjuring trick. A reptile. A fallen angel. A griffon from the pages of an illuminated bestiary. Something bright and distant, like gold falling through water.²⁷

Here, the style of the sentence structure, which moves from past tense to present, from sentence fragment to run-on sentence, communicates the affective immediacy of her encounter with nature. The hawk is represented as an experience that neither Macdonald nor the reader can subsume into their own subjectivity. As Macdonald struggles to train the goshawk she first attempts to impose herself upon its nature. However, with time and through much trial and error, she comes to diversify and develop the emotions through which she relates to the hawk in manner similar to the process described by Hepburn. Later in the book, she compares the way wild animals are usually represented to her own real experience of them:

There is a vast difference between my visceral, bloody life with Mable [the hawk] and the reserved, distanced view of modern nature-appreciation... I've made a hawk part of a human life, and a human life part of a hawk's, and it has made the hawk a million times more complicated and full of wonder to me...²⁸

Of the hawk, Macdonald goes on to write: 'She is real. She can resist the meanings humans give to her.'²⁹ Here we can find at play the dynamic between distance and affinity that Hepburn describes as essential to the proper humanisation of nature. When this dynamic correctly functions, we are left open enough to realise that nature contains its own meaning, which, as Macdonald explains, is capable of both resisting and equally teaching us.

3 The aesthetics of the metaphysical imagination

In 'Landscape and the Metaphysical Imagination' (1996), Hepburn offers a further defence of our aesthetic appreciation of nature. Though the argument made in this consideration is focused upon the experience of landscape, its considerations can easily be extrapolated *mutatis mutandis* to include nature

²⁷ Macdonald, *It is for Hawk*, 53.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

in general. Hepburn's aim is to defend the imagination against what he calls 'a one-sided, science-dominated approach of nature', which abstracts the emotional and value-suffused aspects of our experience of nature to arrive at an abstract representation.³⁰ Imaginative representations of nature fail to fit within this established pattern of discourse because they invoke notions of sublimity and transcendence. Such notions, Hepburn explains, are the cause of significant embarrassment 'because this is taken to express a religious experience whose object is very indeterminate, whose description virtually fails of distinct reference, and which may lack adequate rational support'.³¹ This embarrassment is, however, unwarranted, Hepburn explains, and to attempt to have an aesthetic experience of nature free of any metaphysical element 'would be self-improving'.³²

New nature writing also defends the legitimacy of an imaginative relationship capable of integrating us within nature. Mabey writes 'I believe that language and imagination, far from alienating us from nature, are our most powerful and natural tools for re-engaging with it'.³³ Macfarlane describes the impact of the imagination in terms of a lost language of childhood, which we all once spoke, but have since forgot. There is a way, he explains, for 'all landscapes to be seen childishly, such that a wood – or a field, or a garden, or a house – can hold infinite possibilities in a single unfolding place'.³⁴ Lewis-Stemple in *Meadowland* (2014), also offers a defence of an imaginative relationship with nature, that establishes a personal connection to it. In this vein he argues for the validity of an anthropomorphism of kindredness:

I have never known a sow badger to be anything but an 'old girl', and when the gender of an animal is unknown it is always 'he', and never 'it'. And I wonder, is it really so difficult to enter, in some slight degree, into the mind-frame of an animal? Are we not all beasts?³⁵

He also defends the use of imagination more broadly in nature writing:

Some science Puritan will aver that British nature writing is diseased by 'species shift' [...] the placing of the author inside the head and body

³⁰ Hepburn, 'Landscape and the Metaphysical Imagination', 194.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Mabey, *Nature Cure*, 23.

³⁴ Macfarlane, *Landmarks*, 327.

³⁵ Lewis-Stemple, *Meadowland*, 113.

of the being described. The same lab-coated lobby invariably sign off with the dig that ‘nature writing’, and by extension, ‘nature reading’ are the habit of metropolitans detached from the real Nature of the red teeth and claws...³⁶

In opposition Lewis-Stemple makes the argument that the imagination is capable of opening one’s eyes to moments of beauty, complexity and wonder. This is something he captures in a prose diary of closely rendered observations of his Herefordshire farm’s meadow:

16 JULY Under the hazels in the copse a fox (the vixen, I think) sits washing its front legs, a small red ember in the dying sun. Ten yards away a rabbit sits on top of an anthill, wholly in the view of the fox. The rabbit is also washing itself, pars to face. They ignore each other. And the lion shall lie down with the lamb, the fox and the rabbit on this fantastic honeysuckled evening.³⁷

This description of a moment when nature is at peace with itself challenges a non-imaginative picture, which would render the same scene morally contentless, and operating under a survival-of-the-fittest logic that would fail to appreciate the beauty of a balanced ecosystem. The imagination in new nature writing is a faculty of re-integration, and an invitation to finding inherent meaning and value in nature without having to fear embarrassment. The argument for the imagination’s legitimatisation as an irrepressible part of our own animal nature is probably a key reason for the popularity of the movement.

Hepburn describes the imagination as having ‘a reflective cognitive element’ that distinguishes it from an a priori, idealist subjectivism.³⁸ As a result of this our imaginative experience of landscape is, Hepburn writes, ‘no less an element of the concrete present landscape-experience: it is fused with sensory components, not a meditation aroused by these’.³⁹ Furthermore, what is realised through the metaphysical imagination applies to the whole of experience, such that it is to be understood as ‘some indication, some disclosure of how the world ultimately is’.⁴⁰ Hepburn connects this to the notion of transcend-

36 Ibid., 111–12.

37 Ibid., 165–66.

38 Hepburn, ‘Landscape and the Metaphysical Imagination’, 191.

39 Ibid., 192.

40 Ibid., 191.

ence that manifests itself in both particular and ultimate forms. In the case of the first, an unfamiliar landscape may reveal something that is ultimately true, that familiar landscapes do not. We find a case of this in Jamie’s *Sightlines* (2012), in her description of a movement when she and a group of tourists stand upon a silent Greenland shore:

Slowly we enter the most extraordinary silence, a radiant silence. It radiates from the mountains, and the ice and the sky, a mineral silence which presses powerfully on our bodies, coming from very far off. It’s deep and quite frightening, and makes my mind seem clamorous as a goose. I want to quell my mind, but I think it would take years. I glance at the others. Some people are looking out at the distant land and sea; others have their heads bowed, as if in church.⁴¹

The moment of silence that Jamie describes is one where the experience of place brings her beyond particularities to an elemental experience of both herself, and herself in nature. A similar experience is recorded in Chris Yates’ *Nightwalk* (2012) in relation to time, in what he describes as a moment of ‘perfect solitude’ observing the dawn: ‘Normally, the present is just a transitory point, a bit of blur between one thing and the next, yet in the untroubled and mostly revealing dark past and future have less relevance and I can find myself in a place of endless immediacy, a place known to every wild animal, a timelessness’.⁴² Here, the daybreak experience brings Yates beyond time, but even more intriguingly, beyond his species’ particularity, to what he describes as the temporally immediate perspective of the wild animal that underlies our own human nature.

In the second, ultimate form of transcendence, the experience goes even further. Hepburn describes an experience that ‘may speak of a transcendent Source for which we lack clear words and concepts’.⁴³ We find such a passage in a remarkable moment in Tim Robinson’s *Connemara: Listening to the Wind* (2006):

Once when I was lying on the terrace of our house overlooking the bay, listening to music from the room behind me and watching a summer night subvert the scale of all things, I felt I could raise my hands and

41 Jamie, *Sightlines*, 4

42 Chris Yates, *Nightwalk* (London, 2012), 181–2.

43 Hepburn, ‘Landscape and the Metaphysical Imagination’, 191.

spread my fingers over the mountain range, solidly dark against the still wine-flushed sky, as if over the keyboard of a piano, and produce one tremendous, definitive Connemara chord. But Connemara tends to undefine itself from minute to minute, and this Beethoven moment quickly passed. The range of peak became sheet iron, two-dimensional, a serrated rim to the floor of the world, dangerous to the imagined touch.⁴⁴

Here, the area which Robinson describes in exacting detail through three volumes on the Connemara landscape, reveals itself as a single musical cipher that subverts human scale, only to withdraw almost immediately into a form too dangerous to touch. This is what Robinson elsewhere describes as ‘the boundary region between established truth and unstable imaginings that is my preferred territory.’⁴⁵

4 A legitimised aesthetics of nature

Central to the environmental humanities is the task of reconceptualising nature and our place within it. This urgent task is predicated not merely on the realisation of the present anthropogenic crisis, but the reality that this crisis has been recognised for the better part of a century. Our inability to successfully address it indicates a problem that goes far beyond any technical or scientific knowledge, bringing up questions of existential and metaphysical import. Both Hepburn and the new nature writing see the dismissal of our aesthetic appreciation of nature as a key element of this problem. By bringing both together we are better able to recognise the resources each offers. The aesthetic production of new nature writing demonstrates in practice what Hepburn describes in theory. Equally, the implicit claims of new nature writing’s philosophy of environmental aesthetics are brought into relief by the concepts Hepburn develops in his defence of an aesthetics of nature appreciation. Together, both realise the aim of the environmental humanities, which is to argue for the legitimacy of an aesthetic understanding of nature in the context of the urgent task of reconceptualising nature and the place of humans within it.

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44 Robinson, *Connemara: Listening to the Wind*, 362.

45 *Ibid.*, 374.