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Nature Trauma: Ecology and the Returning Soldier in First World War English and Scottish Fiction, 1918-1932

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Abstract

Nature has been widely represented in literature and culture as healing, redemptive, unspoilt, and restorative. In the aftermath of the First World War, writers grappled with long cultural associations between nature and healing. Having survived a conflict in which relations between people, and the living environment, had been catastrophically ruptured, could rural and wild places offer meaningful sites of solace and recovery for traumatised soldiers? In Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), Nan Shepherd's *The Weatherhouse* (1930) and Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Sunset Song* (1932), trauma severs emotional, social, and cultural relationships with the natural world. These interwar literatures offer counter-narratives to simplistic depictions of nature as a healing space and highlight the difficulties of returning to rural environments and 'reconnecting' with known and natural places.

Keywords

Ecology, Trauma, Interwar fiction, Warfare, Ecocriticism

Nature has been widely represented in literature, religion, and visual culture as healing, redemptive, unspoilt, and restorative. Pastoral tropes, deeply ingrained in Western art, faith and language, have long opposed rural environments to urban and social ones, emphasising the holistic, stable, and integrated qualities of nature and country life against the fragmentation, volatility, and combativeness of the city. In the twenty-first century, therapeutic movements including green care and ecotherapy have sought to quantify these ancient cultural associations with considerable success. Behavioural analysis of the effects of contact with nature on wellbeing and mental health promise to substantiate long-held assumptions about nature's restorative qualities. In the UK,

natural prescriptions are now being offered in select doctors' surgeries, while public bodies push to have nature and wellbeing provisions made standard in hospitals and school (Berto 2014; Bragg, Wood and Barton 2013). However, as diverse ecocritical analyses have contended, constructions of 'Nature' as pure, untouched, and separate to humanity have helped to distance the living world from human interest and concern. In our current moment, the myriad entanglements between the human (e.g. the economic, political, synthetic, scientific, and cultural) and nature (e.g. the geologic, atmospheric, biological, and hydrological) are being revealed in the crises of climate change, mass extinction, and soil, air and water pollution (to name but a few). Establishing a Romantic conception of 'Nature' as healing, sacred, or pure 'other' has failed to protect real world ecologies, which have rapidly declined and collapsed under conditions of industrial capitalism, extractivist development, and globalised modernity. As Timothy Morton states: "'Nature' fails to serve ecology well" (2010, 3).

In our own moment, turning to nature for healing and wellbeing is a paradoxical act. The closer we look, the more trouble we see. In the interwar years, the depth and severity of environmental crisis was not immediately apparent (diverse conservation movements were already well under way, but they are not referenced directly in any of the literature under consideration). However, interwar writers understood that turning to nature in a process of recovery could be a paradoxical act and potentially a re-traumatising one. This article explores how interwar writers understood trauma's impact on their characters' connections with the natural world and sought more sophisticated and ecologically grounded ways of depicting the difficulties of returning to rural environments and reconnecting with known and natural places. Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) exposes the futility of attempting to find solace in nature whilst bearing the weight of war memories. The construction of 'Nature' as a separate entity distinct from the human is challenged in Nan Shepherd's *The Weatherhouse* (1930), as the traumatised soldier experiences extreme forms of identification with non-human life. Similarly, in Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Sunset Song* (1932), violence against humanity is intimately connected with the devastation of natural environments and the communities and forms of fellowship they sustain. More than just a simplistic symbolisation of innocence sullied by humanity's destructive forces, nature is entangled in human history and in lively co-existence with its possible futures. At our current moment, in which responses to environmental crisis are often characterised by nostalgia (for a lost innocence, balance and human-nature sympathy)

and in which nature is once again being promoted medically, as a ‘healing space,’ these interwar literatures may prove instructive for cross-cutting environmental-health humanities research and green care approaches to health, wellbeing, and recovery.

Modernism, ecology and trauma

Modern ecotherapy and green care approaches have their roots in the therapeutic farms and gardens of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century asylum (Hickman, 2013; Brickell and Stock 2013, 108). By the time these novels were published, outdoor treatments had recently been developed by Arthur Brock at Craiglockhart Military Hospital on the outskirts of Edinburgh (well known as the hospital where war poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen received psychological care). Brock’s therapies focused on strengthening mind-body relations. Soldiers suffering from what is now known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) were encouraged to ‘rediscover their links with an environment from which they had become detached’ through occupational activities (golf, arts, and music), gardening, animal rearing, and farm work (Webb 2006).

Although none of the novels addressed in this article depicts outdoor therapies of the kind developed during the war by Brock, they are all concerned with issues of detachment and engagement, connection and withdrawal, personhood and environment. Interest in psychology is obviously evident in the choice to depict traumatised soldiers and more subtly in the range of modernist stylistic devices developed to catch the everyday abundance of life and portray emotional uncertainty, moral ambivalence, and perception. According to Peter Gay, the modernist novel’s originality ‘lay not so much in its discovery of the mental province as in re-mapping its territory; ... Cautious or bold, modern novelists sought to capture minds at work, dreaming, ruminating, hesitating, wishing, in conflict’ (2009, 190). For Virginia Woolf, modernism’s innovation lay in its capacity to capture the ‘luminous halo’ of consciousness: the mind, on an ordinary day, receiving ‘a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel.’ (1929, 186). In Scotland, Grassie Gibbon and Nan Shepherd were leading participants in a Literary Renaissance which brought Scottish writing into dialogue with international modernisms, both in its key figures’ adoption of Freudian models of consciousness and selfhood and their innovations in literary form inspired by hybrid genres and languages. West’s own ‘modernism’ lay in her adoption of Freudian ideas in *The*

Return of the Soldier. Although she eschews stream of consciousness forms of narration typically associated with modernism (as, indeed, does Shepherd), her fascination with multiple perspectives and her rejection of literature's tradition role of presenting a coherent, objective verifiable reality mean that her writing fits within a post-impressionist/modernism paradigm.

These classifications matter because of modernism's distinctive capacity to explore subjective experience of health and sickness (of benefit in the medical humanities) and to reveal synergies between human and more-than-human life. For example, drawing from the phenomenological philosophy of Merleau Ponty, the literary scholar Carol Cantrell insists on modernist writing's ecological potential. Rather than reproducing convention representations of reality with the human as foreground and the environment as backdrop, modernists depicted places that are continuous and transitional with the human. Reality is not shown as it is perceived by detached, evaluating human subjects, Cantrell suggests, but modernists—specifically Woolf—innovated by ‘dramatizing the involvement of the perceiver within what is perceived’ (2003, 34). Such depictions urge consideration of the materiality of the body and the environment with which is it continuous and the myriad other forms of human and non-human life with which we co-exist.

Cantrell's work sits comfortably with recent research in posthumanism and transcorporeality developed by Stacy Alaimo. For Alaimo, transcorporeality provides a check on humanist tendencies to see humans as separate from and raised above the material environment: the water, atmosphere, soil, chemicals, and nutrients that constitute us and constantly move through and across our porous bodies' so-called borders (2010). Water ‘models a mode of sociality that we, as human sovereign subjects, repeat—dissolving the sovereign self in a becoming-responsive to others, both human and more-than-human’ (Chandler and Niemanis 2013, 62). Writing on representations of water as a connective medium in Woolf's fiction, Janice MacLeod notes that her novels ‘can provide a feeling for the intimate intermingling of personal, ecological and social histories’ (2013, 56). As shall be seen, both canonical modernists like Woolf and ‘outsider’ innovators such as Shepherd, Gibbon and West addressed the capacity of close and sustained encounters with water and other connective mediums in order to alert people to ‘interconnections, interchanges, and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures’ (Alaimo 2010: 2). These transits, this article contends, reveal the falsity of cultural separations between ‘human’ and ‘environment’ and more

profoundly expose the psychological disturbance caused by a rupture of the humanist paradigm, which these writers see as at the heart of trauma.

The purpose of much contemporary ecocriticism is to urge movement away from binary framings of the 'human' and/in/vs. nature, in favour of integrated understandings of human entanglement or co-becoming in an ecological collective. These novels suggest that such understandings of human/nature co-dependencies were available in the interwar years and that (contrary to the positive adoption of transcorporeal thinking in much material ecocriticism) such awareness may be profoundly traumatising in its own right, and re-traumatising for people who have already suffered a disturbance to categories of nature/human, and self/other. In the post-WW1 context, as soldiers returned from the degraded environments of battlefields and trenches characterised by mud, filth, decaying human and animal matter, and the obliteration of plant life, authors were given particular occasion to reflect on what a co-mingling of human and more-than-human life might look and feel like in the most appalling extreme.

Co-becoming, for a start, is fundamentally deconstructive of the notion of the discrete, sovereign individual on which humanist notions of personhood rest. In *Mrs Dalloway*, for example, the intermingled shock and delight of transcorporeal awareness is integral to the experience of trauma. Traumatic identification with the natural world reveals a relationship of mutual influence and flow. Sound, light, nerve impulses, and wind energy constitute material exchanges between human and environment, contributing to a vivid experience of embodiment. The traumatised soldier, Septimus Warren Smith, hears a voice

close to his ear ... which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound which, concussing, broke.... A marvellous discovery indeed--that the human voice in certain atmospheric conditions ... can quicken trees into life!... leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down. (Woolf [1925] 2000, 19)

Septimus is clearly unwell and identifies with the world to a delusional extreme. However, the novel explores correspondences between Septimus' thinking and that of 'sane' characters. Their psychological experience is not in binary opposition to the 'insane' soldier but seen as on spectrum in which the identification is the same, just a differing intensity of feeling. As MacLeod points out, such insights are available to

Clarissa Dalloway as well who recognises herself as materially interconnected with the world: in ‘the ebb and flow of things ... she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there’ (qtd. in MacLeod 2013, 55). Septimus’ trauma, although it is experienced as an overwhelming rush of both joy and misery, communicates important and timely insights into ecological relations, signalling a shift in cultural understandings of how humans relate to their environments that were more significant than ever in the wake of the cataclysmically fragmenting experience of warfare.

Little of this connection has to do with reinforcing notions of reified nature, hence modernism’s ecocritical potential. Ecocriticism is fundamentally concerned with nature’s construction, evaluation, and changing significations across history and cultures, and how these link to its real world exploitation. In *The Ecological Thought*, Timothy Morton observes how Romantic and pastoral constructions of ‘Nature’ as culture’s ‘other’ have widened conceptual divides between ‘Nature’ and humanity’s interests and failed to offer a corrective to industrial and capitalist destruction of real world ecologies. Morton insists that we abandon Nature and attempt to think ecologically: ‘*The ecological thought* is thinking of interconnectedness’ (2010: 7), not of a reified, distant, even possibly salvageable ‘nature.’ In their novels, West, Shepherd and Gibbon do not attempt to salvage ‘nature.’ Their works examine how war disturbs ecological interconnectedness and how such disturbance impacts upon and is revealed through experiences of trauma.

The impossibility of the pastoral

In West’s *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), an upper-class officer, Chris, returns on medical leave suffering from traumatic shock characterised by amnesia. He has forgotten the war and the shell explosion that was the cut-off point between his life before and after any (obvious) experience of trauma. He has no memories of meeting and marrying his wife before the war or the birth of his two children, one of whom died as an infant. What he does remember, vividly, is a youthful romance with Margaret, the daughter of a river boatman and the idyllic island she lived upon. Unable to, and disinterested in, addressing the personal and political realities of the present, and to the horror of his wife, Chris rekindles his romance with Margaret. In spite of the far from ideal situation—their courtship is conducted in sight of his wife Kitty, actually in the grounds of his marital home—Chris finds brief peace and companionship.

However, Margaret recognises the situation's impossibility and succeeds in breaking Chris' amnesia by showing him the possessions of his dead child as a means of shocking him out of this traumatic amnesia. 'Cured,' he is restored to his wife but at the expense of his liberty. While on medical leave, he was relieved of war duties. Now he is recovered, his return to the front becomes inevitable.

West's tale of return is structured around nostalgia: for the lost pastoral idyll of the pre-War years and for relations between people and place. A local ecology—a home—is not simply a collection of physical coordinates but a place in which one feels one belongs, dwells, is a 'native.' As Richard Kerridge says of Thomas Hardy, 'Character is shown to be a product of continuous interdependency,' and the character who we might term 'native' are those who 'inhabit' a place, rather than 'gaze' at a landscape: natives are those who are 'deeply embedded in a stable ecosystem' (2004, 268). West's soldier hero experiences a twofold loss. Firstly, loss of the fantasy of unspoilt nature which is bound up with wider cultural nostalgia for the long-summer of pre-war Imperial Britain (an idyll, of course, only for those wealthy and politically privileged enough to have enjoyed its rewards). Secondly, loss of the experience of being 'native' to a place. The traumatic experience of return is as much concerned with his personal sense of displacement from a stable sense of ecology and place as the traumatic violence of the battlefield.

Soon after his return, the narrator (Chris' cousin, Jenny) follows Chris into a neglected corner of the grounds. This obscure space has become meaningful to Chris because it is the only place that looks and feels as it did when he was a child. The narrator describes how:

[he was] driven from the house by the strangeness of all but the outer walls, and discontented with the ground because everywhere but this wet intractable spot bore the marks of Kitty's genius. ... [W]ith a grim glare at a knot of late Christmas roses bright in a copse that fifteen years ago had been dark, he went back to the russet-eaved boat-house. (West [1918] 1987, 89)

Critics have admired West's novel for its staging of women's experiences of war and its 'rendering of the domestic repercussions of shell shock' (Covington 2014, 56). However, Chris's resistance to the feminine domestication and beautification of nature are heartfelt. What solace he can find is in dark, wet, and intractable spots. It recalls Morton's critique of constructions of 'nature' as all that is bright, sunny, cute, living, and beautiful: 'Where does this leave negativity, introversion, femininity, writing,

mediation, ambiguity, darkness, irony, fragmentation, and sickness? Are these simply nonecological categories?’ (2010, 16). Morton’s terms ‘dark ecology’ addresses these categories, both in order to disrupt binary thinking which prioritises ‘bright’ over ‘dark’ and to acknowledge strangeness and otherness within nature. Chris’ rejection of the designed and chintz does more than privilege ‘free’ nature over ‘synthetic’ culture; he seeks to renew contact and connection through immersion in all that has been othered and excluded from culturally validated ‘Nature,’ exemplified in the intensely landscaped cultural space of the English country garden.

When Chris temporarily renews his relationship with Margaret—now resident in the sprawling suburbs of Harrow (another reminder of early twentieth-century landscape change)—they temporarily immerse themselves in an environment that embraces otherness, ambiguity, and change. The narrator finds them having a picnic together in the forest outlying the grounds. She describes how Margaret has led him to

this quiet magic circle out of our life, out of the splendid house which was not so much a house as a vast piece of space partitioned off from the universe and decorated partly for beauty and partly to make our privacy more insolent, out of the garden where the flowers took thought as to how they should grow and the wood made formal as a pillared aisle by forestry. (145)

This movement mimics the movement from culture to nature characteristic of pastoral literature. The artificiality and snobbery of the household and its grounds are contrasted with the untamed forest, which is presented as a place of renewal and generative self-experience. However, West’s novel moves beyond the traditional pastoral by representing nature not as a backdrop for human existential renewal but a living habitat in which characters find a niche, like any other plant or creature. She emphasises distinctions between place and space: the house and gardens are space partitioned from social realities and natural interconnectedness, and the forest is a place whose ecological relations are revealed through (not centred around) the character of Margaret: ‘the sober thread whose interweaving with our scattered magnificences had somehow achieved the design that otherwise would not appear’ (145). This is how the young Margaret is encountered on the island: not as an idealised rural peasant or quasi-deified spirit of the woods but a working and loving inhabitant in the complex and integrated ecology of the island, at home amongst hens and swans, reeds and waterways, human and non-human kin.

While Chris experiences healing in his renewed contact with Margaret and the ecological connections she represents for him, time cannot be regained, place cannot be re-inhabited. West's staging of a reconnection with nature only serves to prove how thoroughly the connection has been severed during the long and ongoing horrors of industrial warfare (the novel was published in spring 1918 before the war's end that November). However, the original separation from her and from the island, which took place years before the war, is the cut-off point for Chris' last memory. Traumatic disconnection, West suggests, is a long process, absolutely entangled with modernity. It may have come to a climax in the war, but it also contributed to it in the severance of the human characters from self-generative, flourishing ecology and the formation of isolated, disconnected, insulated and alienated individuals, ignorant of their place in the 'ebb and flow' of things. West's novel marks not just a personally resonant moment in one man's experience of war but also a pivotal moment in the long history of industrial modernity, Imperial culture, the British class system, and the domination of nature.

No way back into ecological thinking is possible in the historic moment, except through material reintegration in death. West's narrator may be momentarily overjoyed seeing Chris and Margaret sitting peacefully in the forest, but her reflection on what he is spared from functions as a reminder of where he will ultimately have to return: 'No more did I see his body rotting into union with that brown texture of corruption, which is No Man's Land, no more did I see him slipping softly down the parapet into the trench ... They could not take him back to the Army as he was' (147). The image of the body rotting into union with the brown texture of corruption is a visceral interruption of the tapestry-like ornateness and fantastical dream-work of the scene. Although the vision is phrased in the negative ('No more did I see'), its vivid presentation is a reminder that it is exactly to this place and situation that Chris *will* soon return. Rather than receding, the landscape of No Man's Land further encroaches on the house. In the final scene, after Margaret has broken Chris' amnesia, the narrator states: '[t]here was nothing in the garden. Only a column of birds swimming across the lake of green light that lay before the sunset' (186). This contradictory statement comes close to articulating what had been, as was continuing to be lost in the encroachment of industrial modernity. The living sense of place and flourishing ecology that opened up briefly is shut down. Birds are 'nothing.' Water and sky is nothing. Their value and existence is obliterated by the insistent war. Like Margaret, they 'dissolved into the shadows' (187). In the sky, where the narrator could just see nothing, she now imagines

bullets: 'he would go back to that flooded trench in Flanders under that sky more full of flying death than clouds, to that No Man's Land where bullets fall like rain on the rotting faces of the dead' (187). The landscape of the battle penetrates the garden and home. Bullets fall 'like rain,' and the living world is revealed as fragile and on the brink of destruction.

Ruptured land

West's representation of trauma focuses on the experience of dissociation from place. Lewis Grassie Gibbon's 1932 novel, *Sunset Song*, shares some of West's concerns but extends consideration to agricultural land. The war brings devastating disruption to an Aberdeenshire crofting community, upsetting the lives and livelihood of characters, and their ecological and psychological relationships with the land. Before the war, the protagonist, Chris Guthrie, considered leaving her farm to go to university, but finds she can't because of the draw of the land. Land is not just property from which to extract profit but is shaped by and shapes the community living with it:

a queer thought came to her in the drooked fields, that nothing endured at all, nothing but the land she passed across, tossed and turned and perpetually changed below the hands of the crofter folk . . . Sea and sky and the folk . . . they lasted but as a breath . . . but the land was forever, it moved and changed below you, but was forever, you were close to it and it to you, not at a bleak remove it held you and hurted you. And she had thought to leave it! (Gibbon [1932] 1986, 97)

It is a particularly painful moment, as Gibbon insists on the impossibility of leaving the land a moment before the land must be left. The recruitment of the community's men takes place in a section of the novel called 'Harvest,' a title that emphasised the profound disruption of ecological and rural relations created by the war. Indeed, each section of the novel is named after an aspect of farming with the final section after the deaths of all leading male characters named, harrowingly, 'Unfurrowed Field.' Loss of fertility and a break in the cycles of farming and living with the land are some of the many repercussions of this appalling conflict.

Chris's beloved husband, Ewan, is enlisted, like all the other men in the village. He never 'returns home,' in spite of coming back once on leave. Although he is physically present during his short stay, a shocking turn to alcoholism and sexual violence disconnect him in all meaningful ways from Chris, from the community, and

the land he has left and lost. His traumatic dissociation is reversed later on the battlefield. Although he is physically present in the trenches of France, in a moment of delusional dissociation, he believes he is walking the fields in his rural home of Blawearie. This distortion of perception sees him standing up in the middle of battle and walking directly away from the front line, back towards Chris and village: '[i]n a flash it had come on him, he had wakened up, he was daft and a fool to be there ... So out he had gone for that, remembering Chris, wanting to reach her, knowing as he tramped mile on mile that he never would' (180). Ewan is arrested and court marshalled for this act. He is granted no mercy on the grounds of insanity. Indeed, his dissociative episode is represented as an experience of transcendent sanity in the 'madness' of war. Ewan explains all this to a friend the night before his execution: 'he started to speak of Blawearie then and the parks that he would have drained, though he thought the land would go fair to hell without the woods to shelter it' (180-1). What he misses is not aestheticized scenery or the beauty of Scotland, but tough, demanding land that he has worked and cultured, which 'held and hurted you,' whose welfare concerns him even on the eve of his execution.

At home, the land registers the devastation of war and the loss of the men whose hands changed and moved it. The trees (which were cut down for the war effort) protected the hills below, and Ewan is right: they are devastated by heavy rain. A painful reminder of the connection between violence against humanity and nature on the battlefield, and the disruption of human-nature connections in Scotland, Ewan is executed in France, in the 'laired fields'—the use of Scots here is significant—of a former farm that bears a degraded resemblance to his rural home (181).

Abject identification

Another key trope in interwar depictions of landscape, nature and trauma is abject identification. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Septimus experiences a feeling of continuity with trees, while in West's novel, the narrator presents the image of the body turned to earth. West is not alone in dwelling on this abject interpenetration of body and earth. War artists at the Front Line had to tackle the problems of perspective and pictorial representations of landscape that the battlegrounds posed. In the early stages of the war, traditional landscape painters like W.B. Wollen attempted, and failed, to render the scenes at the trenches convincingly. In his 1915 canvas, 'Defeat of the Prussian Guard, Ypres, 1914,' the still vivid autumn forest is a poor representation of the

ruptured, drenched, desiccated and visually muddled No Man's Land. Modernist artists came closer. In C.R. Nevinson's 'After a Push' (1917) and 'The Harvest of Battle' (1919), Gilbert Roger's 'Gassed. 'In Arduis Fidelis'' (1919), and Paul Nash's 'We Are Making a New World' (1918), a new visual register emerges, one characterised by high or absent horizons, oppressively reduced palates, and a visceral and uncompromising attention to the physical ruin of human and non-human forms. Roger Tolson describes how: 'In the work of Paul Nash, the combatants are overwhelmed and dislocated in a landscape driven and shaped by forces beyond their understanding and control' (2014, 6-7).

This new register found its counterpart in Nan Shepherd's 1930 novel, *The Weatherhouse*. Her book most viscerally addresses the difficulty of reconnecting with the land when the earth itself is visually and sensually associated with traumatic experience. The soldier Garry Forbes returns from the trenches on medical leave after being trapped overnight in a shell hole 'where up to his thighs in filthy water, he had tried to suck the poison from another man's festering arm' (Shepherd [1930] 1996, 53). Overcome with horror when the man dies, Garry thrusts the corpse under the surface. However, he soon begins to identify with the dead man and feels guilty for pushing him under. He tugs out the corpse and addresses him:

"Come out, you there. Myself. That's me. That's me. I thrust him in – I am rescuing myself. He was found towards morning in a raging fever, dragging a grotesque bundle at his heels... "Don't take him from me, you chaps. It's myself. ..." And he put his arms round the shapeless horror he had dragged bumping from its hole.' (54)

Garry's traumatic identification with the corpse is destructive of Garry's notion of himself as a corporeally discrete entity. Through the connective medium of water, the boundaries of body and self become porous. As Alison Lumsden states, this glimpse at the other poses 'a challenge to Garry's sense of identity and the very boundaries of the self' (2000, 62). The corpse has become part of the environment, a mass that has once sunk into the mud and has then been pulled out again. The shock of identification with the corpse is both a convincing horrible representation of trauma and an insight into the first shock and confusion of an encounter with the non-human world from which he has until then felt only a detached sense of superiority.

As in Woolf's novel, experiences of trauma challenge the notion of individual personhood in ways that prove both destructive of old and reconstructive of new ways

of being-in-the-world. Garry is an engineer and has been trained in a way of seeing the world that is rational and instrumental, making a clear division between subject and object, self and non-human world. His loss of a sense of physical boundaries speaks to the ambitious of his own employment and is representative of his burgeoning awareness of the relationship between the non-human environment and human community. For Garry, identifying with something that is like himself but not himself is the first traumatic step in fragmenting the detached and superior self and discovering the self is contingent and exists in relation to an environment, to a home in the full sense that was briefly discovered by Chris in *Return of the Soldier*.

After his initial breakdown and spell in a clinic, Garry recovers his old feeling of detachment and superiority. Returning to his rural home, he is disgusted by the land, which he sees as stagnant, dead matter populated by poor farmers who are at its mercy, made 'from the earth, dumb graceless, burdened': 'This place is dead,' he thought. The world he had come from was alive. ... Over there ... [o]ne was making the earth' (56). Garry the engineer still has faith in the human forces that seek to shape and control raw matter, but the irony and arrogance of such a statement is emphasised in comparison to the desolate, destroyed landscape of the kind that haunts his nightmares, as depicted by Nash in *We Are Making a New World*.

Full of zeal in the first weeks of his home leave, Garry throws himself into an old romance and the gossip of the village. Since he has been gone, a young woman started sharing the story that she was engaged to Garry's dead friend, another victim of the war. Arrogant and self-righteous, Garry sets about exposing the lies and weaknesses of the girl. As he storms around the village meditating on the wrongs of humanity, he finds himself on a high peak, staring out with Romantic elation over the land. At that moment, he perceives the land as 'essentialised' and 'insubstantial,' a 'distillation that light had set free from the earth' (112) in contrast to the 'primordial dark' of the gross and mired world he had looked down on with disgust before (113). An insubstantial world, one that humanity is not really a part of, coincides significantly with Garry's mood at his most detached and righteous.

Garry continues with his quest to expose the girl's lies, a campaign that escalates until she is humiliated in front of the whole village. However, he soon regrets his actions. He realises that his inflated sense of right and wrong, truth and falsehood, are simplifications and abstractions unable to account for the complexity of communities and the places they inhabit. His deepening understanding of his place in

relation with other people is connected to his changing perception of the land and the wider net of ecological relations of which he is a part. Having seen the landscape once as mass and darkness, once as substanceless and irradiated with light, Garry finally sees his environment as neither light nor matter, but both complexly intermingled: 'he saw it as neither crass nor rare, but both in one' (176). Moving beyond simple binaries, Garry approaches otherness and difference with love, astonished by what he can understand and what he cannot in the 'secret nature' of the world.

In each of these novels, changes in ecological relations are experienced as trauma, while trauma itself is treated as a lens through which interconnections between humanity and living world can be made perceptible. Woolf's character Septimus, like West's soldier Chris, experiences short-lived immersion in the ecological, but such awareness comes at the expense of his sanity. Sanity, after all, is guaranteed only on condition that the bearer conforms to a social order structured around stark binaries between human and world. Gibbon's novel of war treats return to the land as an impossibility for both the male characters who enlist and the female characters who remain. Those who formerly lived in profound syncopation with the land experience an irredeemable rupture with their home environment at the coming of war. Shepherd addresses extractivist and instrumentalised approaches to the natural world as raw material, which she sees as inseparable from the development of industrial modernity, of which the war was a product and symptom. What Shepherd offers in Garry's recovery is a pattern for the renewal of a mind, a community, and a home in the aftermath of the most traumatic collective experience her generation would know.

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