



Stenning, A. (2013) 'The search for a common ground between science and our 'visionary images' in *Nature Cure* by Richard Mabey and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard', *Green Letters*, 17 (1), pp. 42-53.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in *Green Letters* on 01/02/13 available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2012.750845>

ResearchSPAce

<http://researchspace.bathspa.ac.uk/>

This pre-published version is made available in accordance with publisher policies.

Please cite only the published version using the reference above.

Your access and use of this document is based on your acceptance of the ResearchSPAce Metadata and Data Policies, as well as applicable law:-

<https://researchspace.bathspa.ac.uk/policies.html>

Unless you accept the terms of these Policies in full, you do not have permission to download this document.

This cover sheet may not be removed from the document.

Please scroll down to view the document.

The search for a common ground between science and our 'visionary images' in *Nature Cure* by Richard Mabey and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard

Anna Stenning

ABSTRACT

Nature Cure presents Richard Mabey's attempts to reconcile his passionate personal reflections with a scientific perspective on human and non-human nature. This paper argues that Mabey finds an exemplar in Annie Dillard's classic of American nature literature, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. It questions how Mabey can draw on Dillard's text without ignoring the complexities of local nature, and in doing so explores the implications of the British author's reconciliation with science.

Arguing from the perspective of narrative scholarship, this paper proposes that *Nature Cure* can be understood as an appeal to our own imaginations rather than an objective presentation of the author's interdependencies with non-human nature. The paper addresses how, by examining the interpenetration of nature and culture in the artist's imagination, *Nature Cure* reminds us of our own cultural and imaginative relations with non-human nature. By focusing on particular renderings of sense perception in Mabey's text – principally vision – it is argued that Mabey's imaginative constructions are informed by local and global understandings.

Through the aesthetic device of rendering, Mabey and Dillard show that sight is prone to error. This paper concludes that through his aesthetic presentations of contact with non-human nature, Richard Mabey reminds us of the imagination's central contribution to ethical and scientific reasoning.

INTRODUCTION

This essay considers the role of 'vision' in Richard Mabey's 2005 memoir *Nature Cure* and traces its inspiration in a key text of contemporary American nature writing, Annie Dillard's 1974 text, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. In doing so, I will direct attention to alternative models of subjectivity in British nature writing that depend on an 'artful' or literary style, and towards an ecocriticism that extends beyond national borders.

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'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. (Mabey 2005, 22–23)

With *Nature Cure*, Richard Mabey proposes that 'personal narratives' can inform the fact-oriented realm of nature writing. By way of illustration, he describes both the personal and ecological

dimensions of his own displacement from the Chilterns. Mabey's dislocation followed the completion of *Flora Britannica* and an experience of severe depression, and inspired a relocation to East Anglia. Although this story of recovery by 'Britain's greatest living nature writer' (the Times) includes far more personal detail than his previous works, Mabey has always challenged the confines of our conventional natural historian. With its folk knowledge, *Flora Britannica* (1996) was far from a straight Linnean classification of Britain's plant life; *The Common Ground* (1980) includes political manifesto and his nature documentaries were more personal reflections than Attenborough-style spectacles. In *Beechcombings* (2007), he reveals ambivalence about his early education in biochemistry: 'I became uneasy about science when I started writing, fearful that in some way it might "contaminate" my imagination' (150).

I propose that *Nature Cure* and Mabey's later works reveal a new understanding of literary writing that makes it compatible with a particular variety of scientific endeavour. And this article argues that he found inspiration in US author Annie Dillard's 1974 work *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.¹ While Dillard's first-person narrative attempts to reconcile theodicy with evolutionary theory, she suggests an 'artful' way to present the accumulation of scientific evidence via dazzling evocation of sensory experiences. The result of this combination in Mabey's book is somewhat different: he is interested in an ethical re-alignment of scientific and literary endeavour, while Dillard's project is artistic and speculative. (There are other, literary differences that will be outlined below.)

But this interest in the inclusion of a personal narrative finds an enthusiastic reception in a 2008 edition of *Granta*. According to its editor Jason Cowley, there is a new species of wildlife writer offering an antidote to the escapism of Romantic nature writing: '[T]hey don't simply want to walk into the wild, to rhapsodise and commune: they aspire to see with a scientific eye and write with literary effect'. Cowley grasps the role for personal revelation: 'We also wanted the contributions to be voice-driven, narratives told in the first person, for the writer to be present in the story, if sometimes only bashfully' (Cowley 2008, 10).

Ecocriticism has so far neglected the multiple possibilities for generating environmental awareness within less avant-garde literary forms. *Nature Cure*, and those that follow its lead, such as *The Wild Places* (2007) by Robert Macfarlane, *Wildwood* (2007) by Roger Deakin, *The Running Sky* (2010) by Tim Dee and *Crow Country* (2007) by Mark Cocker, demonstrate an approach to subjectivity which challenges the idea that such writing is always escapist or encourages consumption of nature seen as irreconcilably 'other'. I propose the term 'scientifically informed nature writing' to encompass a particular line within the broader genre of nature writing that has exemplars throughout the twentieth century.² However, as well as continuing this tradition, I believe that 'New Nature Writing' (Coweley's term, which includes Mabey et al.) has found confidence in reasserting its ethical viewpoint by a re-reading of American nature writing. Mabey's links in *Nature Cure* to the Wilderness tradition are particularly pronounced, through references back to H.D. Thoreau, John Muir, Dillard and Gary Synder.

As Mabey notes, Annie Dillard highlights the subjectivity of her approach to the Blue Ridge Mountains and Tinker Creek in *The Writing Life*:

¹ When asked about the question of influence, Richard Mabey replied as follows: 'I first read *Pilgrim at Tinker* when it came out (1974) and was most struck by the free-range fantasy of her vision. It freed me up quite a lot, but I don't think it had much direct influence. It's too idiosyncratically itself to be "followable" in any way. It now seems prescient at quite a different level, in that the New Nature Writing is moving fast towards the "poetic science" that is such a feature of the book'. Richard Mabey, letter to the author.

² These include Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain* (1977), Jacquetta Hawkes's *A Land* (1951) and those inspired by the latter.

When Annie Dillard was writing her extraordinary odyssey into the meaning of evolution [...] she worked in a second-floor study carrel in Hollins College Library, overlooking a tar-and-gravel roof. "One wants a room with no view so imagination can meet memory in the dark." She shut the blinds and pasted on them a drawing she'd made of the view from the window: If I had possessed the skill, I would have painted, directly on the slats of the lowered blind, a trompe l'oeil mural view of all that the blinds hid. Instead, I wrote it. (Mabey 2005, 33)

This suggests that what Dillard offers is a 'rendering' of the environment as opposed to a representation, as Timothy Morton describes it in *Ecology without Nature*:

First and foremost, ambient poetics is a rendering [...] Rendering is technically what visual- and sonic-artists do to a film to generate a more or less consistent sense of atmosphere or world. After the action has been shot and the computer and other effects pasted into the film, the entire film is 'rendered', so that all the filmic events will simulate, say, a sunny day in the Alps. (Morton 2007, 35)

In what follows, I have picked out places where Morton suggests a helpful way of considering how 'rendering' actually works. His criticism of US nature writing seems to suggest that the 'journal-style' text, such as *Walden* or *Sand County Almanac*, are restricted to a narrow range of rendering devices: their use of a 'non-aesthetic' style is akin to the 'avant garde strategy of the minimalist painter who puts an empty frame into an art gallery' (31). However, my version of the journal text in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Nature Cure* foregrounds the artificiality of the literary text as product of the writer's aesthetic imagination: the site of the writing is the writer's inner landscape.

Morton also observes that ecocriticism often aims to 'evoke the here and now of writing' (which he calls ecomimesis) as an authenticating device, in the same way that the journal-style text 'wants to break out of the normative aesthetic frame' (31). While he is dismissive of this approach to ecocriticism for its problematic rhetoric, the emerging tradition of narrative scholarship offers an alternative perspective on the inclusion of personal narratives in nature writing.

Scott Slovic considers that ecocriticism should attempt to 'contribute to our lives out in the world' (Slovic s.d.a). This includes the following:

- (1) Storytelling: 'Encounter the world and literature together, then report about the conjunctions, the intersecting patterns'.
- (2) Values: 'We should, as critics and teachers of literature, consider how literary expression challenges and directs readers to decide what in the world is meaningful/important to them'.
- (3) Communication: 'I think ecocritics, of all people, ought to challenge themselves to use language with clarity in elegance'.
- (4) Contact: 'Ecocritics need contact not just with literature and not just with each other, but with the physical world'.

Terry Gifford extends 'narrative scholarship', as defined by Slovic, to 'an assumption behind nature writing since John Muir's first essays', and also suggests that Mabey's work counts (Gifford 2006, 108). He considers that 'this writing is generally frowned upon in the United Kingdom with the suspicion that such personal narratives are probably too self-indulgent and uncritical' (Ibid.).

In what follows, in a move that seeks to combine the analytical component of Morton's argument with the ethical positioning of narrative scholarship, I highlight how Mabey's nature writing in *Nature Cure* itself conforms to the features of narrative scholarship as defined by Slocic, while displaying the aesthetic sophistication of Morton's ecomimesis. I also aim to begin to show a more nuanced account of the idea of *contact* with nature via our sensory and linguistic relationships with the world, particularly sight. As Slocic suggests elsewhere, what I hope to offer is the 'process of pulling things (ideas, texts, authors) together', an ecocriticism that moves beyond borders (s.d.b).

SCIENCE AND SUBJECTIVITY

In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard establishes the 'place' of her writing as her mind. What she produces is, after Thoreau, a 'meteorological journal of the mind', in which she will observe 'the rather tamed valley' of the Tinker Creek which lead to the 'dim reaches and unholy fastnesses' of the mind (Dillard 1988, 11).³ She focuses on the internal states induced by vision, including the revelation of different scales: her horror in observing the horsehair worms (119), and the wonder of the muskrats, which is like finding a hidden penny:

I've been thinking about seeing. There are lots of things to see, unwrapped gifts and free surprises. The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand. But – and this is the point – who gets excited by a mere penny? If you follow one arrow, if you crouch motionless on a bank to watch a tremulous ripple thrill on the water and are rewarded with the site of a muskrat kit paddling from its den, will you count that sight a chip of copper only, and go your rueful way? (15)

Rather than seeking these experiences purely for amusement, Annie Dillard considers such encounters as a corrective for her timid school science which sentimentalises nature, and that it is necessary for her own spiritual development, which she follows via the mystic's journey of *via positive* and *via negative*.⁴ The wonders of knowledge and spiritual enlightenment coincide when she examines creek water in a white china bowl or under a microscope:

After the silt settles I return and see tracings of minute snails on the bottom, a planarian or two winding round the rim of water, roundworms shimmying frantically, and finally, when my eyes have adjusted to these dimensions, amoebae [...] I see the amoebae as drops of water congealed, bluish, translucent, like chips of sky in the bowl. (24)

Throughout *Pilgrim*, in order to achieve this union of science and enchantment, Dillard attempts to effect a kind of seeing that is 'unravelling from reason'. Such experiences can serve to overcome the biases brought about by undisciplined scientific reasoning – after all, 'Galileo thought comets were an optical illusion' (25). This can also produce delight. An unexpected perceptual experience, usually involving an experience of luminescence, engenders an imaginative encounter which the author describes in synaesthetic detail:

One day I was walking along Tinker Creek and thinking about nothing at all and I saw the tree with lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that

³ In his *Journal* entry for August 19, 1851, Thoreau uses this phrase (1962, 245).

⁴ Sandra Humble Johnson considers the role of *via positive* and *via negative* for Dillard in *The Space Between* (Johnson 1992, 5).

was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. (33)

The evocation of such visionary moments highlights the subjectivity of the narrator. Rather than being 'unscientific', Dillard and Mabey's texts, through their focus on the acts of sensation, combine awareness of the provisional status of scientific truths with an overarching confidence in the existence of the more-than-human world. After all, from Heisenberg, we know that 'method and object can no longer be separated' (Dillard, 203). Dillard and Mabey re-direct scientific evidence into a picture of our roles in the nature of the universe: Richard Mabey believes that 'a natural science confined to the naming of parts and simplistic models of cause and effect' is 'neither adequate nor particularly helpful in describing a world in which memory, feeling, spontaneity and a growing and necessary sense of the wholeness of things are intertwined' (2005, 173). Dillard's rigorous search for observations on the 'profligacy' and 'violence' of nature are compared with a broader metaphysical framework that includes speculations on 'the uncertainty of vision' and 'the flawed nature of perfection' (Dillard, 3). *Nature Cure* records the moment described in Mabey's later book *Beechcombings* of 'finding a common ground between respectful, objective views of nature and respectful views of our own visionary images' (Mabey 2008, 150). The common ground is the inner landscape: after depression, he finds 'nature entering [...] firing up the wild bits of my imagination' (2005, 224). The literary text, particularly one that renders 'visionary' moments, is uniquely suited to presenting this landscape.

THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF SIGHT

In both *Pilgrim* and *Nature Cure*, sight is principally revealed as a relation to the non-human environment in a particular place, which develops over time. Secondly, both authors include instances where the sensation turns inwards to the body and sense-faculties themselves, thus challenging human-nature dualism. Finally, the act of seeing becomes 'visionary' when perception is grounded on what are presumed to be external stimuli, but is, in part, constituted by our own imaginative powers. Removed from temporal and geographic contexts, rather than encouraging a reader to replicate the narrator's act of seeing and to imaginatively 'consume' a natural object, I argue that this highlights our own subjectivity and embeddedness in more-than-human *and* social worlds.

The literary features of the writing provide their social context. Writing becomes a representation in its political sense (Mabey 2005, 109–110). This is evident in Mabey's altered view of art 'not just as an end-product, but as an act of *making*, a drama that involved the artist in a moment of living, with moods, friends, weather and bills, as well as vision' (63). Elsewhere in the text, he refers to the business of nature writing as 'odd concoctions of personal and social memories, the old myths and new metaphors, the smatterings of science' and considers that he could be regarded as a 'local storyteller' (34–35).

Mabey is present in his book, far from bashfully. An established writer raising the issue of mental illness in a genre that has previously excluded personal narratives breaks new ground on two counts. Only when Mabey presents his early romantic adventures does 'personal' so dominate over the 'subjective' that it is possible to feel distracted, or even mildly alienated, from what the book is about. In the very few places, where this happens, Mabey seems to become 'confessional, self-conscious' which takes us away from the scholarly tone that allows us to engage with the exploratory nature of the text (Sarver s.d.).

But elsewhere, the social dimensions of our relations with nature are brought out more successfully. He links the 'senselessness' of his depression to societal alienation from nature (2). Mabey juxtaposes the happenings of the Iraq war with events in his new habitat; he also highlights how the anticipated return of the migrant swifts provides an observable link to the Middle East by way of their flightpaths over Iraq. But he believes that his encounters with his local environment are both parochial *and* sociable. He highlights the role of his friendship network throughout East Anglia in his recovery. Similarly, he foregrounds the social dimensions of natural events – for humans and other species – such as the coming of spring, the sharing of a meal.

For both Mabey and Dillard, sight is prone to errors that can be avoided over time. The process of learning to see involves awareness of the subjectivity of non-human nature: 'stalking' muskrats requires awareness that the animals 'prefer to have nothing to do with me' (Dillard, 192). Mabey learns to identify the different occupants of his new habitat: distinguishing between the different visual clues of the fens becomes the ability to 'read the subtle layers and textures of the vegetation' (182). Mabey described the process of 'being seen' in one of his ventures in a small woodland he once owned:

Once in my wood I had a face-to-face meeting with a female muntjac deer. It wasn't a sudden encounter, a collision round a bush and a moment of mutual fluster. We'd sidled up to each other both with that slight tilt of the head that universally signals curiosity, caution, an uncertainty about what may happen next, and an unwillingness to be either provocative or provoked. We got to about 10 feet from each other and then just stared. I looked into her large eyes and at her humped back and down-pointed tail, which signified she wasn't alarmed [...] She looked at my eyes and passed her tongue repeatedly over her face, wondering if I was dangerous or musty. (21–22)

This gives new meaning to narrative scholarship's idea of writer as 'spectator and spectacle' (Cohen s.d.). Elsewhere, the processes of seeing highlights other aspects of our subjectivity, including the developments of our affiliations and identities through time. Mabey talks later of the poet John Clare writing 'out of' his favoured places rather than distantly, about them', where the nightingale is not so much 'identified' as cherished (109–110). Bird spotting becomes instead 'diligent watchfulness' (Ibid.). For Mabey, observing a kite in the Chilterns becomes a bodily experience: 'It was so poised, so effortlessly muscular that I could feel my own shoulders flexing in sympathy' (114). The act of seeing a barn owl or summer migrants 'stands for continuity' and provides a structure around which he measures his own days and years (137).

Precise observation, for Mabey, counters the tendency in nature documentaries to represent evolution in 'stereotypes of aggression and competition' (104). Further, a scientific understanding can encourage our perception of beauty and interconnectivity, such as his extraordinary reflections on the progression of isophenes:

The primrose isophene for 21 March might join the Pembrokeshire cliffs and the north Devon lanes and wild gardens in central Norwich [...] Isophenes chart the progress of spring across the country, as it eddies erratically north and east like the edge of an incoming tide. (129–130)

Mabey's observations show that, contrary to those who challenge the ability of nature writing to respond to global environmental threats, natural events, such as spring, happen in a place we can relate to, as do environmental threats. Battery farming, exemplary of our 'institutional imprisonment' of other species and nations, is observable throughout the countryside: 'low forcing-sheds glow dimly from twenty-four-hour lighting systems designed to ensure the chickens stay awake, fattening up' (134). The enclosures, far from relinquishing us from the tragedy of the

commons, show our proprietorial attitudes to nature and have provided for the degrading effects of industrial agriculture (128). Global political events, such as the first shots of the Iraq war, are difficult to register, or remember without relating them to human and natural timescales, pace Ursula Heise (111).⁵ Relationships between individual organisms within a place count towards a properly ecological view, the one that assumes we speak on behalf of the more-than-human world as it actually exists. It is in this way that Mabey seeks to replicate John Clare's 'glimpse of a shared world' (110).

VISIONARY SEEING

Mabey describes a vista of cranes, hen harriers and pink-footed geese in an East Anglian arable landscape: this puts him in mind of 'a vision of quintessential East Anglia, with its windmill towers rearing out of the reeds into a vast, darkening sky, but with such a multitude of birds that we could have been on the African plains' (218). This illusion is not brought about by some temporary disruption to the environment, but by imagination operating along with the senses. Mabey also describes a 'visionary' experience in terms evocative of the sublime:

I saw more sparrowhawks working the stubbles – sometimes two at once – and immense flocks of fieldfares, every bird pointing and edging in the same direction, heads held high, chests out, onward, onward [...] Tomorrow the fields would be clotted with overblown cash-crops. Today they were dancing. (215–216)

Dillard's mystical experiences transcend Mabey's often more traditionally Romantic sentiment. However, elsewhere, Mabey highlights possibilities for an imaginative enhancement of an imperfect sense perception, which transforms our feelings towards an environment rendered as a 'fringe'.

I know the bareness of what is there, but in the half-light it retreats into the background, and I notice instead the brilliant fringes of things: tricks of light through the tracery of twigs; the swellings of the ground that will in just five months be exuberant vegetation again; the sparrowhawk, and not the vacuum that it seems to be drawn to. (219)

Such a distortion of the temporal frame, along with Dillard's disjointed perceptual angles, intensifies the tone of both texts. However, Mabey also conveys the limits to the visual sense. Sound offers an instance where Mabey can evoke a surrounding world – an idea that Morton describes as ambience (34). Mabey makes himself a sound-amplification tool, out of a microphone and a sound-recording device, to allow him to hear bird song after age-related hearing loss: '[P]aying for that artificial recapturing of youthful senses, I also heard, enormously amplified, the shattering roar of distant aircraft and the hum of traffic' (158). Sound offers the greatest sense of connection to an environment for Mabey – it is through his eventual use of acoustic amplification that he feels nature 'entering' his imagination. The incident of the 'auric' device suggests a reconstruction of self that challenges the idea of an essential 'human nature'.

⁵ Ursula Heise (2008) believes that knowledge of political, economic and ecological interconnectedness is more significant for environmentalism than local attachment. However, Mabey demonstrates that 'abstract' and 'mediated' knowledge are compatible with, rather than oppositional to, 'intimate familiarity' (Heise 2008, 50). Further, in her focus on the significance of displacement to identity formation, she overlooks the ways in which identity can be constituted by awareness of non-human trajectories, as well as human migration and displacement, as Mabey suggests through the relation of human disturbances to bird migrations (see Massey 2005).

In other places, a substance can mediate between the 'speaker' and the 'environment', as something that is simultaneously inside and outside the mind. For both Mabey and Dillard, water is elemental in the way that Morton describes under his idea of 'the timbral':

Before they became specific atoms in the periodic table, the elements were manifolds of what we conventionally separate as 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity'. The philosophy of elements bears strong resemblances to phenomenology. We still describe verse as liquid, rhetoric as fiery or earthy [...] The Classical elements (fire, water, earth, air) were about the body as much as they were about the atmosphere. (41)

This idea of the elements is of something that mediates between our senses of things 'as they are' in the world and as we perceive them. In this way, water, wetlands and salt marshes, with their physical mutability and 'mercurial' nature, are symbolic of the future, for both authors, and in being so they suggest the agency of the more-than-human other. In fenland, Mabey describes 'that sliding, glistening, immanent hint of water, stalking you, reminding you that even in the still moments of winter the world was "being about", hatching plots and surprises' (70). Fire, shadows, trees and totems serve similar roles elsewhere.

But there are particular instances where the imagination misinforms us, where it distorts what we might know from a systematic science or observation, and increases the distance between subject and object. Richard Mabey suggests that hen harriers can be understood as 'perfect distillations of wind and reed' (72); the 'massed fronds of horn-wort, fizzing with oxygen, jiffle against each other and sing like Aeolian harps' (187). The Selbourne yew becomes a 'sounding board' for our ideas. As non-human others are sentimentalised in this way, Mabey defends this as another instance of nature-human relations: '[W]hy should we try to be neutrals, when we are so inextricably and passionately involved? [...] I am sentimental. I talk to birds. I mark much of my sense of time and place with odd moments and fragments of the non-human world' (15).

STRUCTURAL FEATURES OF THE JOURNAL-STYLE TEXT

A sustained narrative voice that pursues a quest within a particular geographic region is an evolution out of the episodic journal-style text of Gilbert White and Thoreau, which unites an enquiry that is otherwise disjointed, which has always been used with a degree of artifice. The fragmentary structure can reveal scepticism towards systematic knowledge of external nature. As Mabey says of Gilbert White, his

'minute' watching is faultless, but the essays aren't scientific in any formal sense of the word. They're disorganised, anecdotal, affectionate [...] Some other purpose, some alternative to the subject/object, cause/effect preoccupations of conventional science was guiding White. (Mabey 2005, 170–171)

Mabey's visit to Tinker Creek, in the Shenandoah National Park, is in part literary pilgrimage:

I asked a guide at the visitors' centre where Annie Dillard's Tinker Creek was, and he pointed out a remote spot in the south-west corner. It looked as far away as New York, but added a little *frisson*. We walked out along one of the waymarked trails, well aware that what we should have been doing was packing a tent or a canoe. (211)

This suggests a tool for the ecocritic as narrative scholar, using his ability to draw on subjective experiences of place to enhance the 'the integrity, depth and authenticity of our engagement with

literature' (Branch s.d.). Furthermore, by using the language of personal encounter, we are able to demonstrate 'our experiences in and concern for the physical world of nature': 'The language of stories, charged with emotion and sensation, may be our best bet' (Slovic op. cit.).

LANGUAGE AND VISION

Despite its ironic talk of a 'nature cure', Richard Mabey's text is 'ecological'. Although he doesn't reject the word 'nature', his use of the word is nuanced and challenges human–nature binaries. He believes, along with Gary Snyder, that both the mind and writing are 'rooted' and 'wild':

[A]s in wild ecosystems – richly interconnected, interdependent and incredibly complex...Narratives are one sort of trace that we leave in the world. All our literatures are leavings.(Snyder 1995, 168)

Nature filters into culture and language: as well as informing weather stories, wood-peckers serve as 'exclamation marks' for our awareness (Mabey 2005, 176). Totem animals are 'good to think' with (88). Language itself is prone to instability and inaccuracy, yet generates new understandings. Mabey considers whether our reliance on language is likely to 'estrangle us from nature', and admits that words may obscure our sensual immediacy. Yet

[language and imagination are] also the gateway to understanding our kindedness [sic] to the rest of creation [...] to become celebrators, to add our particular 'singing' to the rest of the natural world. (37)

The frequency of natural metaphors in *Nature Cure* highlights our overlaps with other inhabitants of the ecosystem. Even the word 'animal' is a 'reminder of the time when mind and nature were not thought of as contrary entities' (20). But there is a danger, which Mabey hints at, that our act of linguistic recording can obscure a more playful attitude to nature: 'a little bit of me wished I had been the conker-player, not the census-taker' (51). Language assists Dillard's early observations in *Pilgrim*: she searches out evocative and memorable terms from other languages such as the German *augenblick* for 'a slant of light' (83 and 265) or *zugunruhe* for the 'restlessness of birds before migration' (243). Later, this contrasts with those examples where we are able to discern the world 'unravelling'.

VISION AND THE IMAGINATION

Mabey considers, perhaps as a result of his own estrangement through illness, that 'imaginative affinities are part of our ecology as a species'. He records the moment when his condition ceases making sense as part of even his understanding of illness, as something outside of the evolutionary picture (50). The Romantic writer's 'egotistical sublime' becomes painfully felt as a suffering self that obscures all else.

Overcoming this, Mabey finds the boundaries between self and nature are easily breached. Walking through the physical environment allows him to penetrate through the fen's 'membrane' (197) and become 'one of the company': 'I ferry seeds, stuck to my shoes. I make brief openings in the reed canopy every time I peer across at a pool' (186). He believes that while we may sometimes lack the sense mechanisms for detecting the aerial migrations of swifts or their song, it is through the environment and our senses that we are reminded of our connections with non-human nature. He

charts the inner and outer territory that we share. A bladder infection makes him aware of 'the wetland within' (179). As a result of exploring the ambiguous wildness of farmland around his new home, he finds himself pondering the desirability of a binary separation of 'wilderness experiences' in their original sense (212). Eventually, he finds a social understanding of his depression through Oliver Sack's characterisation of 'vegetative retreat' (55), which becomes part of a dawning awareness of a formerly neglected mental ecology, which he describes as a somewhat mysterious 'imaginative relationship with the world' (64). How can we build from this an ecocriticism that focuses on the 'ecology of the mind', that affirms that our connection with nature is always from our uniquely human perspective, but which allows us simultaneously to question what this perspective is?

The imaginative constructions of place are foregrounded by their relations to places real and otherwise, as texts are simultaneously placed in a network of textual relations. In Mabey's work, the idea of 'frontierland' connects his environment to the wilderness tradition of Dillard; as the 'footpaths' of his new habitat serve as the 'signature of every stretch of commonland on the planet' (23). The idea of his new home being a 'wasteland' connects Mabey's writing to other texts in the post-pastoral tradition, which combine awareness of hardships of living in a place and awe for its natural features. Earlier writers, such as John Clare, provide metaphorical paths that Mabey can seek to follow in a search for individual meaning, as Dillard refers to Transcendentalists, scientists and natural historians in hers. Similarly, Mabey describes how his sense of place becomes 'a personal map of connections and associations' (80). Constantly, he contrasts the sense for the 'proper order' of things and the unpredictability that we share with the more than human.

While writing (and reading) are seen by both Dillard and Mabey as social activities, the personal dimension, including the experience of aesthesis, dominates the political. This step establishes the works as sites for celebration and cooperative activity, rather than seeking a direct intervention towards more environmentally sustainable living. However, in developing our awareness of the creative and effusive aspects of nature, both authors recognise our own inner nature and its interdependence with outer landscapes. My interpretation of these two works seeks to demonstrate the role of the cultural artefact intervening outside of the 'creative' realm. For both Dillard and Mabey show that science need not strip the world of wonder.

CONCLUSION

Narrative scholarship suggests a model for understanding Mabey's text, in its emphasis on the story-like nature of all texts, and an 'artful' weaving of information into research and experience (Sarver s.d.). US ecocriticism is yet to consider the UK applications of this technique, and British ecocriticism has so far avoided 'nature writing' that includes this personal element, which is just one reason for ecocriticism that moves beyond national borders. Richard Mabey has transcended the limits of ecocriticism in both modes. Ecocriticism, if it is to represent the lived experience of its author, should not only consider those elements derived from a national tradition.

I have also argued that *Nature Cure* suggests a model for scientifically informed literature (or perhaps we should use Mabey's own term, 'poetic science') that has become a feature of new nature writing more generally. A focus on the role of vision in Annie Dillard's text, and its influence on Mabey's 2005 work, allows us to see the combined roles for literature and science in an alternative subjective valuation of the more-than-human world.

REFERENCES

- Branch, M.S.d. "Place and Narrative Scholarship in Ecocriticism." Accessed January 25, 2012. www.asle.org/site/resources/ecocritical-library/intro/narrative/branch
- Cocker, M. 2007. *Crow Country*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Cohen, M. P. S.d. "Narrative Scholarship." Accessed January 25, 2012. www.asle.org/site/resources/ecocritical-library/intro/narrative/cohen
- Cowley, J. 2008. "The New Nature Writing." Editor's Letter in *Granta* 102,7–12. London: Granta.
- Dee, T. 2010. *The Running Sky*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Dillard, A. [1974] 1988. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. New York: HarperPerennial.
- Gifford, T. 2006. *Reconnecting with John Muir: Essays in Post-Pastoral Practice*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Hawkes, Jacquetta. 1951. *A Land*. London: The Cresset Press.
- Heise, U. 2008. *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, S. H. 1992. *The Space Between: Literary Epiphany in the Work of Annie Dillard*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press.
- Mabey, R. 2005. *Nature Cure* [hardcover edition]. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Mabey, R. 2008. *Beechcombings*. London: Vintage.
- Massey, D. 2005. *For Space*. London; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Morton, T. 2007. *Ecology without Nature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sarver, S. S.d. "Narrative Scholarship." Accessed January 25, 2012. www.asle.org/site/resources/ecocritical-library/intro/narrative/sarver
- Shepherd, Nan. 1977. *The Living Mountain*. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press.
- Slovic, S. S.d.a. "Ecocriticism: Storytelling, Values, Communication, Contact." Accessed January 25, 2012. www.asle.org/site/resources/ecocritical-library/intro/defining/slovic/
- Slovic, S. S.d.b. "Ecocriticism with or without Narrative: The Language of Conscious Experience versus the Language of Freefall." Accessed January 25, 2012. www.asle.org/site/resources/ecocritical-library/intro/narrative/slovic/
- Snyder, G. 1995. *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics and Watersheds*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint.
- Thoreau, H. D. 1962. *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, Volumes I–VII*. New York: Dover.