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A PILGRIM'S PROGRESS:ENTANGLEMENT, KINSHIP AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE FISH LADDER

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**A PILGRIM'S PROGRESS:  
ENTANGLEMENT, KINSHIP AND SPIRITUALITY IN *THE FISH LADDER***

Katharine Norbury

A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Publication

July 2018

The University of Huddersfield

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A PILGRIM'S PROGRESS:  
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PART B) Norbury, K. (2016). *The Fish Ladder: A Journey Upstream*. London: Bloomsbury.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis comprises an exegesis entitled *A Pilgrim's Progress: entanglement, kinship and spirituality in The Fish Ladder* (Part A) and an original work of life writing: *The Fish Ladder* (Part B).

*The Fish Ladder* was published globally in English in 2015 by Bloomsbury Publishing. It has since been translated into German. It is a hybrid form which combines memoir, tales from Celtic mythology, fragments of poetry and a travelogue in which the 'I' character journeys through the east Atlantic archipelago, sometimes alone, sometimes accompanied by her daughter. At its heart is a journey from the sea to the source of the Dunbeath Water in Scotland and it is, to that extent, a quest story.

The accompanying commentary explores the influences that inspired *The Fish Ladder* and analyses the current debates within contemporary nature writing. I will show the way in which themes of entanglement and kinship in *The Fish Ladder* find their mirror in the writings of Donna Haraway and Timothy Morton. The notion of inclusive ecologies championed by those writers – ecologies that incorporate both human and other-than-human entities – can help to remove the sense of 'other' that the word 'nature' insists on. Informed by the writing of Malcolm Guite, I posit that a recent schism in nature writing has its roots in the Enlightenment. A third way, and an alternative to the polarised positions identified within the schism, can be gleaned by interpreting *The Fish Ladder* as an eco-spiritual journey within a mystical Christian tradition. In this respect *The Fish Ladder* contributes to our knowledge of the possibilities inherent in contemporary writing about place.

## INTRODUCTION

The book that was to become *The Fish Ladder* began, quite simply, as the account of one summer. It was spent – for the most part – on a beach in North Wales, and I was accompanied by my young daughter, Evie. We had a plan – a holiday project – which was to follow a river from the sea to its source. The articulation of this intention is the opening sentence of the book (Norbury, 2016: p. 3). Although I had never kept a journal before, I began writing because I couldn't get the hang of a new digital camera, and yet I wanted to record the summer. My daughter was of the age when seawater rock-pools could occupy an entire afternoon. We were reading *Swallows and Amazons* (Ransome, 2012) together for the first time. Evie had learned to catch mackerel with a spool and line. All of these things were exciting, and I didn't want to forget them. When it became apparent that the writing was spilling its boundaries and becoming a book, and that it might be of interest to a wider readership than my immediate family, I had to take stock.

I needed to choose a voice, a structure, a style, a genre. My husband was a novelist, so 'the novel', as a blueprint, was out. He had written an award-winning memoir, *This Party's Got to Stop* (Thomson, 2011), which I couldn't be seen to ape. When Alexandra Pringle, Group Editor-In-Chief of Bloomsbury Publishing, asked why I had chosen to tell what was in effect a memoir masquerading as a travelogue with a nod in the direction of new nature writing, I said that it had been imperative I created a style, voice and structure for storytelling that did not either borrow from, or mimic, the internationally published and critically examined canon (Pohl & Vardy, 2016) of my husband. 'Well, you've certainly managed that', was her reply.

I will therefore take the opportunity presented by this exegesis to illuminate some of the decisions made in the creation of *The Fish Ladder* and in so doing share the unique and particular insight that only the artist is in a position to offer. After looking at some of the influences that inspired the book, I will examine where *The Fish Ladder* sits in relation to other contemporary British writing about place and ask where, if anywhere, does it belong within the canon of what has come to be referred to as ‘new nature writing’. I will identify the current debates within nature writing and also ask what effect the current state of UK publishing has had on shaping both *The Fish Ladder* directly and the genre within which it finds itself. I will identify and explore the themes of ‘entanglement’ and ‘kinship’ both within *The Fish Ladder*, and within contemporary critical thought and the opportunities inherent in this perspective for a form that may have gone as far as it can under the banner of nature writing. Lastly, through a close examination of the text, I will demonstrate the way in which *The Fish Ladder* diverges from other contemporary archipelagic literature about place insofar that it can be read, not only as a family memoir and work of life writing, but as a spiritual journey. In this last respect *The Fish Ladder* differs significantly from the contemporary writing about place that surrounds it, because it is entirely possible to interpret the book as the account of a personal pilgrimage within a recognisably Christian tradition.



## CHAPTER ONE

### Influences

I have alluded above to the necessity for finding a way of expressing myself that was substantively different from the work of my husband, the novelist Rupert Thomson. Prior to publication, *The Fish Ladder* was described by Sara Maitland as ‘[a]n exquisite example of “new nature writing”’ (Maitland, 2015). In reviewing the book, Horatio Clare wrote: ‘[Norbury] takes nature writing down an intriguing path’ (Clare, 2015). I will return to nature writing presently, but two other generic influences shaped the writing, and they are poetry and film.

#### i. Poetry

The first draft of the *The Fish Ladder* was described by the publisher Jon Riley, when I asked him, as a friend, for his opinion of it in 2009, as ‘hyper-literary’. This was not, in the current publishing market, he implied, a good thing. The book was, in effect, an extended prose-poem. Author advances for all but the biggest names were declining and had been doing so since 2007. The industry was becoming increasingly conservative and remains, at the time of writing, risk averse. As a result of Riley’s advice, I revisited both the form and the structure of *The Fish Ladder* with a view to making the book more accessible to a general reader, whatever that term may be understood to mean.

Poetry remained influential on my writing, and I will return to this again when examining the *The Fish Ladder*’s relationship with theology. I had been particularly

influenced both by Richmond Lattimore's translation of *The Odyssey of Homer* (Homer and Lattimore, 2007) which had been my bedside reading and constant companion since the death of my father in 2001, and by Alice Oswald's poem *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* (2009).

*The Odyssey of Homer* impressed me with its lyricism, its economy, and in the quest at its heart: not that of the returning hero, Odysseus, but of his abandoned child, Telemachus, who searches for the parent he has never known in order that he might fully inhabit, or even begin, his adult life. For *The Fish Ladder* is also an adoption memoir, and the literal search for the 'I' character's origins – of 'who I was, and where I'd actually come from' (p. 8) finds its echo in this search of Telemachus for his father. However, rather than lean on Homeric myth, I chose instead to use Celtic mythologies: the Welsh poet Taliesin, the lives of certain Celtic saints including Saint Kentigern, or Mungo, as he is better known, and the *Irish Metrical Dindshenchas* (Gwynn, 2010) which tell the story of how certain features of the landscape – in this instance, the River Boyne – came into being. This story of the source of the River Boyne is also the story of the well at the world's end that tacks through *The Fish Ladder* and through Neil M. Gunn's novel of the same name (1951). That title was in turn borrowed from William Morris (1896) and this idea, of the mythical well, provided both the literary and literal starting and end points of my own physical journey in *The Fish Ladder*. To filter the influences even further, the quintessence of all of them can be found in the narrative of the salmon of knowledge – that elusive mythological fish that contains, in its flesh, 'all the wisdom of the world' (p. 127).

In Oswald's *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*, I was particularly struck by the confluence and interweaving of human and non-human voices as the 'I' character travels along the riverbank (2009). Oswald's voices 'begin' at the point at which the narrator encounters them, and both voices and narrator are in motion, either on the bank, or in the river, or the in the sky above. The most significant of these voices, in relation to *The Fish Ladder*, is what appears to

be the voice of the drowned child Hafren, venerated by the Romans as the goddess Sabrina, her virtue celebrated by John Milton in *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634*. She seems to be addressing the jealous queen, her step-mother, who murdered both Hafren and her mother, and it is this stanza that came to mind when standing outside the home of my own, unknown, birth mother near the source of the River Severn:

I am waiting for an old frayed queen  
To walk to that window...

She who stares at her dead child  
And never tidies away

It's rat-eaten cradle clothes... (Norbury quoting Oswald, 2016: p.246)

The theme of imperfect, incomplete knowledge that I encountered in Oswald's work echoes the heuristic knowledge picked up or overheard by any traveller/pilgrim/travel writer. I, too, consciously avoided the temptation to provide a fuller picture of the often fragmented information that I gleaned on my journeys. In this way, despite being rooted in a range of literary influences gleaned from years of eclectic reading, *The Fish Ladder* differs from works such as *The Old Ways* by Robert Macfarlane (Macfarlane, 2012), *H is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald (Macdonald, 2014) or *The Moth Snowstorm* by Michael McCarthy (McCarthy, 2015) where many hours spent in specific factual research are clearly evidenced in the writing. Fallibility, not knowing, and gaps in knowledge are themes within the *The Fish Ladder*. So too is the desire to inhabit the moment, to seek the transcendent in the transient: 'This moment, these moments, of recognition, they come so rarely; without hindsight, without forethought. Time passing even as we enter it.' (Norbury, 2016: p. 22).

## ii. Film

The other major generic influence that I must acknowledge is that of film. I worked in the cutting rooms of the BBC for several years as both an assistant film editor and sound editor, before leaving the cutting room, when celluloid fell out of use, and I became a script editor. I am a vestige of a bygone era. No-one, anywhere in the world, other than in a museum, cuts on film. I still have my white cotton gloves, chinagraph pencils, and 16mm joiner. But I am not left simply with a sense of nostalgia. The post-Restoration three to five act dramatic structure, so very familiar to Western television drama audiences and movie goers, is more or less hardwired into my psyche.<sup>1</sup> I doubt if I could write outside such a structure if I tried.

To give an indication of how this dramatic structure materialises within *The Fish Ladder* – the book begins with an uneasy equilibrium or stasis: the narrator, recovering from a miscarriage, needs to come up with a plan to get through an otherwise difficult summer. After losing her holiday reading (a disturbance to the equilibrium) she comes up with the idea of following a river from the sea to its source. In conceiving of this plan and attempting to carry it out, she emerges as the protagonist of the adventure. (End of Act One). The protagonist overcomes obstacles, delays, detours and complications and when she does, eventually trace her river from sea to source, there is a sense of completion (acts Two and Three). At which point there is an interval (the book is in two parts). In a terrifying reversal, the narrator discovers that she has a rare and aggressive form of breast cancer and thus a new set of complications and challenges emerges A critical moment (the desire for a full medical history) results in the protagonist's decision to trace her birth mother (Act 4). This, of course,

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<sup>1</sup> In part the pervasiveness of this structure in Western cinema is due to the work of practitioners such as Robert McKee, Christopher Booker and game maker Ed Stern, although all three arguably owe a substantial debt to the work of Joseph Campbell.

is an unmitigated disaster (the final act and main dramatic confrontation of the play) although the protagonist does, as a result, meet her half-brother, and a new equilibrium is established. The wheel has turned full circle. There is an epilogue, in which the author and her daughter finally visit the well at the world's end that inspired their journey in the first place. Various subplots tick along underneath the main action – the portrait of a literary marriage, the deterioration of the health of the protagonist's adopted mother which serves as a foil to the story of the protagonist's search for her birth mother, and the 'descent into hell' of mental illness.

There is one last filmic debt to acknowledge, in terms of style and structure, and that is to Adam Curtis, the brilliant and provocative polemicist and documentary maker. I had the privilege of working as an assistant film editor and sound editor on his award-winning documentary series *Pandora's Box* (Curtis, 1993). Curtis's method is to juxtapose archive, talking heads, music and voice-over/narration. He places often disparate and seemingly unrelated elements in such a way that a pattern is created, as hardy as tapestry, in an exquisite, vibrant weave. The sheer beauty of his filmmaking ensnares his viewer, holding them fast, while an invariably controversial line of argument enfolds them. I will return to this idea of a vibrant web when looking at the notion of entanglement in *The Fish Ladder*.

In terms of my own 'weave' – and debt to Curtis – the juxtaposition of elements such as memoir, description of landscape, poetry and Celtic mythology are placed alongside one another without explanation, without an attempt at contextualising transition, so that the reader is invited to make the connections for themselves, and is equally free to ignore them. The writing is laid out like a buffet, and the reader can be as proactive or passive as they choose. An example of this is the reference to the discovery of the bard Taliesin by a fisherman in 'Mersey': 'For though he was only one day old Taliesin miraculously spoke, chastising the man for being sad over his empty net, adding that in the time of need he,

Taliesin, would be worth more than three hundred fish.' (p.47). This myth foreshadows the story of my adopted mother's heart attack when, by chance, I was at her house when it happened, and able to call 999, thereby saving her life (p. 212).

## CHAPTER TWO

### Review of literature

#### i. Nature writing: new, New, and otherwise

In order to get a feel for where *The Fish Ladder* sits in relation to contemporary writing about place, and what has come to be referred to in the last ten years as ‘new’ nature writing, it may be helpful to evaluate it in relation to a clutch of generically similar books that were published a few months either side of it, and which share more or less family characteristics. In these books, a personal narrative is played out against a backdrop of something bigger, something ‘other’ than the ‘I’ character who narrates them. Specifically, either wildlife, or landscape, or a combination of the two.

In *Common Ground* (2015) Rob Cowen affords a fascinating insight into what it is to be a new father, watching his wife bleed out, almost fatally, while his new-born son lies in his arms. During the months before this birth and near-death Cowen had been exploring the wildlife, topography and history of the ‘edgelands’ around Harrogate. Amy Liptrot’s *The Outrun* (2016) describes the author’s illness with and recovery from alcoholism and the healing power of the natural world in facilitating that transition.<sup>2</sup> Robert Macfarlane’s *Landmarks* (2015) is a collection of essays marking the beginning of that writer’s ambitious

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<sup>2</sup> *The Fish Ladder*, *The Outrun* (Liptrot, 2016), Helen Macdonald’s *H is for Hawk* (2014) and Clover Stroud’s *The Wild Other* (2017) all have their ‘mad scenes’ and catalogue the protagonists’ mental torment. The emotional recovery of all four writers was facilitated to a greater or lesser degree through engagement with the natural world. Macdonald and Norbury share a common trigger to their respective descents into depression in the deaths of their fathers.

drive to conserve the language of place within the archipelago of Britain and Ireland. *The Moth Snowstorm* (2015), Michael McCarthy, perhaps one of the greatest investigative environmental journalists of recent years, reveals the heartache of looking after his alcoholic brother and ailing mother while bird-watching on the Wirral. James Rebanks' *A Shepherd's Life* (2015) tells the story of Rebanks' life as the charismatic Cumbrian hill farmer of the title. What all of these books have in common, apart from a certain viscerality, is that they were all shortlisted for the Wainwright Golden Beer Book Prize, described by its promoters as celebrating 'the best writing on the outdoors, nature and UK-based travel writing' (n.d.). All the books on the 2016 shortlist, to a greater or lesser degree, contain elements of memoir.

Although *The Fish Ladder* undoubtedly shares a familial relationship with the other books on the shortlist, it is the only one of the six which specifically – from the epigraph onwards – directs the reader along a contemplative, mystical path<sup>3</sup>. Human and other-than-human travellers are given equal weight: spiritual and material insights are regarded as inseparable from one another. The significance of this will become apparent when examining notions of entanglement and kinship within *The Fish Ladder*. In order to gain a fuller picture of the original contribution made by *The Fish Ladder* to contemporary archipelagic literature of place it will be helpful to gain an insight into some of the current debates.

- ii. 'Me and the birds, me and the bees, me and the birds and bees.'

Despite the judges' endorsement of memoir that was afforded by the 2016 Wainwright Prize shortlist, the form is not without its critics. In July 2015, the writer Tim Dee, appearing 'in

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<sup>3</sup> There are six epigraphs in *The Fish Ladder*, of which three directly refer to the spiritual life, (pp. 1, 8, 205) while the other three serve as metaphors for the spiritual life (Pre-leaf, 205, 258).



conversation' with the writer Philip Marsden at the Port Eliot Festival, made reference to an emerging phenomenon which he described as 'memoir with a bit of nature slathered over the top of it', and while it wasn't entirely clear what he meant by this, there was the implication, perhaps, that a previously male dominated (in the UK at any rate) quasi-scientific body of environmentally sound, eco-oriented, emotionally reserved literature had at some level been hijacked. Others commented on the subjective nature of these narratives. In 2016 Graham Huggan suggested that 'it is sometimes argued that nature writers "partake in a mental movement from an ego-centred to an eco-centred perspective."' (Schiele 135). Not so: nature writing, "new" or not, and irrespective of its motives, remains – much like travel writing, from which it substantively differs but to which it is significantly indebted – very much a self-oriented form.' (2016: p 169). Insofar as it is written in the first person this is of course true. In her 2017 essay 'New British Nature Writing', Deborah Lilley observed that 'a pervasive current of self-consciousness sets "the new nature writing" apart: one that must surely come with the understanding of human-nature relations that the knowledge of ecological crisis demands.' Countering the effects of what has come to be known as 'the Anthropocene' is arguably the main reason the debate has become so heated. It describes an objective truth of such enormity that it is guaranteed to elicit a subjective response from all but the most uninformed. In March 2018, Dee seemed to expand on his 2015 sentiment in an article for the blogsite *Caught By The River* when he wrote: 'I've begun to think that nature writing is moribund. In the last ten years every charismatic creature in Britain has had its book and every landscape has been written up almost unto death'. He followed this with a harsh but brief précis of the genre's latest offenders [Dee's word] from which the present author was relieved to find herself excluded.

Four years earlier, in the introduction to his Ph.D. thesis, Jos Smith had described 'new nature writing' as 'a considerable body of literature now and what is developing into

one of the most consistent and defined literary movements of the twenty-first century.’ (2012: p.1)<sup>4</sup> Yet by March 2018 Dee declared that

nature writing has suited a narcissistic decade and a time when we all began performing ourselves like never before. The autobiographical pedal pushing almost all of this writing (me and the birds, me and the bees, me and the birds and bees etc.) means that very often neither its well-made prose nor the intensive subjective experiences described lead us to a deeper factual understanding of what we are swooning over.

Well-made prose and intensive subjective experience are both, arguably, characteristics of *The Fish Ladder*. Whether or not we need a deeper factual understanding of what we are swooning over in order to care about it and act to conserve it is the essence of the debate at the heart of new nature writing. Whether or not *The Fish Ladder* belongs to new nature writing is also debatable, depending on how broad the church is, although Clare and Maitland, as previously noted, have welcomed it.

The term ‘new nature writing’ is generally attributed to Jason Cowley, the editor of *Granta 102: The New Nature Writing* published in 2008 and containing essays by Paul Farley, Kathleen Jamie and Robert Macfarlane. Smith, who revisited his subject in 2017 with the publication of *New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place*, attributes the first use of the words ‘new nature writing’, without the capitals, to Richard Kerridge in 2001.

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<sup>4</sup> One of the problems, Smith noted, with the term New Nature Writing (his capitals) was that ‘it does not seem to acknowledge the specifically American heritage of the term “Nature Writing”’ (Smith, 2012: p 23) with which I concur, but as the subject of this enquiry is the 21<sup>st</sup> Century ‘archipelagic literature’ which Smith was seeking, in my view successfully, to reframe I simply note this and move on.

(p.11). Smith himself dates a kind of nature writing that was substantially ‘new’ to the 1970s where he identifies a group of figures that includes Richard Mabey, Sue Clifford, Angela King and Tim Robinson with the emergence of exciting and influential new work from the period. In 1983, Sue Clifford and Angela King became the founder members of the charity Common Ground along with Roger Deakin, author of the iconic *Waterlog* (1999). Deakin’s work has enjoyed a popular posthumous following as a result of, I would suggest, the material success of Robert Macfarlane’s *The Wild Places* in which Macfarlane wrote movingly about his journeys with, and the subsequent untimely death of, Deakin (2007). The purpose of the charity was, and still is, according to their website ‘to seek imaginative ways to engage people with their local environment’ with the idea of ‘Local Distinctiveness... at the heart of everything [they] do.’ (Common Ground, 2018). There is a material and ideological connection back to Dee, here. The purpose of the article for *Caught By The River* was to promote an anthology that Dee had curated in partnership with Common Ground. Thus the reason for Dee’s championing of the charity’s values, with its emphasis on the human community beyond the ‘I’ becomes apparent (Ed. Dee, 2018).

What isn’t apparent is why it is that only a select group of contemporary writers are considered by Dee, and others, to be ‘doing it right’ (my quotation marks). Smith has restricted his enquiry to writers about place and therefore acknowledges that he has excluded a number of important writers for whom natural history and wildlife are their subject. Dee ‘names names’ in an extensive list, apparently criticising the work of a variety of well known, hardworking and conscientious writers.<sup>5</sup> Yet Miriam Darlington’s *Owl Sense* – which lyrically combines rigorous natural history with a difficult family history, and in which Darlington acknowledges that ‘[she is] learning about the kindness of people’, and also of the

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<sup>5</sup> Dee’s comments may be tongue-in-cheek, it’s hard to tell. Lack of humour as a feature of contemporary British nature writing was discussed by Clare and Macfarlane at the British Council Nature Writing Seminar in Munich in June 2018.

reciprocity that can exist between the human and the other-than-human – was published a month before Dee’s article. (Darlington: 2018: pp. 245, 155). The very human story at the heart of *The Fish Ladder*, which was published three years before Dee’s article, likewise challenges his assertion.

### iii. Charming Cerberus

The emotivism that is associated with nature writing, new or otherwise, is perhaps most apparent in a peculiar eccentricity of the form – namely that nature writing is riven with gatekeepers, consisting of peers, whom both new and experienced writers alike must negotiate in order to achieve recognition. For the literary critics of these kind of books are, for the most part, also nature writers. Reviews and cover quotes are deemed significant, by publishers, in determining the success of a book and sales are the determining factor in securing ongoing publishing contracts. Given how small the pool is compared with, for example, literary fiction, backbiting between its practitioners has become one of the genre’s defining characteristics. The schism is between those who that feel a separation of factual, measurable ‘truths’ from aesthetic considerations is imperative, and those who wish to push at the aesthetic possibilities of the form and take it further.<sup>6</sup> *The Fish Ladder*, if it is to be considered nature writing, is clearly in this latter group, and the significance of this will become apparent when we consider the allegorical value of the work.

In 2010, at a public lecture in Machynlleth, the writer Jim Perrin launched what Smith has described as a ‘volley of criticism’ (Smith, 2017: p. 22). His subject was the new nature

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<sup>6</sup> Smith discusses this debate in the introduction to *New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place* (2017: p. 22). I would add that many contemporary writers have successfully combined lyricism and rigour, and exist comfortably with a foot in both camps.

writing as it was represented in *Granta 102* (Ed. Cowley, 2008: pp. 7 – 12). Smith focussed on Perrin's outrage regarding the new writing's sense of aestheticism. Recalling a similar sentiment expressed by Henry Williamson in the foreword to his 1936 anthology of nature writing, Smith observed: 'Aesthetics and facts are opposed to each other, as are poetry and truth, in such a way that it is hard to imagine in relation to another literary form such as the novel.' However, the most revealing aspect of Perrin's outburst lies in the sheer nastiness of his diatribe both against Cowley and against the writers published in *Granta 102*. Perrin revealed much about his own character when he lambasted Cowley for 'a need to genuflect before contemporary gender-issues.' (Perrin, 2010). Whether or not Perrin was referring to the inclusion in the magazine of a now famous essay by the writer Kathleen Jamie or whether he was objecting to Cowley's lightly drawn skit of a nature writer as being 'a certain kind of man, and it would always be a man: bearded, badly dressed, ascetic, misanthropic' isn't entirely clear but there is neither humour nor generosity in Perrin's words. (Ed. Cowley, 2008: p.35 – 52, 7)

There were other public outbursts, including a spat in the national press between Stephen Poole, who described nature writing as 'bourgeois escapism', which was later countered by Richard Mabey, who called it the 'broadest of secular churches'. (2013).

Graham Huggan appeared to concur with Cowley's thumbnail sketch in suggesting that one might view – and according to Huggan the writer Kathleen Jamie did view – a certain kind of nature writing as being 'prescriptive and privileged, performing the backslapping rituals of a predominantly East Anglian men's club.' (Huggan, 2016: p. 11). I observed – in a short film made earlier this year to promote an anthology I am editing of women's writing about the natural world – that as a woman from the north of England, 'the field that I stepped into when I first began writing was filled, with all due respect, by men from the south-east of England'. (Norbury, 2018).

However, the gloves came off in 2015, just a few months before Tim Dee's comments at the Port Eliot Festival, when Mark Cocker published an essay in *The New Statesman* called 'Death of the naturalist: why is the new nature writing so tame?' (Cocker, 2015).<sup>7</sup> 'Culture and nature', Cocker insisted, must take precedent over 'literature [and] landscape which is as much an imagined as it is a real place'. Nature books, he insisted, 'have to navigate... between joy and anxiety'. Otherwise we are 'fiddling while the agrochemicals burn.' The attack was primarily directed against Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk* which had propelled the writer to fame and fortune the previous year after winning the prestigious Costa and Samuel Johnson prizes. (2014). Melissa Harrison, writing on her blog, wrote: 'Since the publication of Helen Macdonald's world-beating, genre-defying, utterly glorious *H is for Hawk* it seems as though barely a week has gone by without one of its elder statesmen opining in the press about the 'new' nature writing and attempting to decide who does, and who does not, qualify.' (2015). She added:

The authors who have taken side-swipes at what they consider to be a new kind of nature writing are without exception men whose books I admire (and in many cases have reviewed). They ride deservedly high in the sales charts, they have considerable authority, and yet there is in these definitions and criticisms of newer writers a defensiveness. But what is being defended? Why? And from whom?

Macfarlane, who also came under attack in Cocker's essay, in time published a response. 'Literature has the power to change us for the good, in both senses of the phrase', he wrote. (2015). 'Powerful writing can revise our relations with the natural world.' Quoting the

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<sup>7</sup> Dee's original comments were made partly in response to a question from the Port Eliot audience about Cocker's recent essay.

‘dazzlingly versatile thinker’ Gregory Bateson, he added: ‘We are not outside the ecology for which we plan’. I will explore the notion of inclusive ecologies presently. Macfarlane acknowledged the power, value and reach of an aesthetic sensibility, what Bateson had called an “ecology of mind”. ‘The steps towards such a mind, Macfarlane advised, ‘were to be taken by means of literature, art, music, play, wonder and attention to nature – what [Bateson] called “ecological aesthetics”’.

At the British Council Nature Writing Seminar in June 2018, curated by Macfarlane, the contributing writers were the poet and art critic Nancy Campbell, the travel and children’s writer Horatio Clare, the novelist Sarah Hall, the natural historian, poet and artist Helen Macdonald and the poet Helen Mort. As the Chair, Macfarlane acknowledged that ‘something extraordinary has happened in Britain over the last twenty years’. He described nature writing as pluriform, diverse, biodiverse, urgent and necessary. However, he also noted that ‘nature writing has served its purpose and also lost much of its meaning.’ (British Council, 2018). In the 2015 article referred to above he had described “Nature writing”... [as a] cant phrase’ and added ‘I would be glad to see its deletion from the current discourse.’

The choice of writers reflected Macfarlane’s championing of Bateson’s ‘ecological aesthetic’. The contribution that an eco-theological or eco-spiritual perspective might offer to the debate was not explored.<sup>8</sup> Among contemporary eco-literature of the east Atlantic archipelago *The Fish Ladder* is alone in its adoption of a recognisably Christian mystical journey, and I will explore this aspect of the work presently.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> When the UK Environment Agency asked environmentalists for ‘50 ideas that really could save the planet’, No. 2 was ‘Religious leaders need to make the planet their priority’. (Orr, quoting Foster and Shreeve, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Macfarlane has gestured towards animism throughout his own writing, with phrases such as ‘this gentle place had allowed me to use it as a home’ in reference to an island on which he had spent the night or that a particular mountain had ‘seemed almost to help me up’, although he has thus far stopped short of articulating a personal theology. (2007: pp. 183, 308).

Before leaving this survey of contemporary British writing it is worth asking where, if anywhere, *The Fish Ladder* sits within this carefully delineated and fiercely contested ground. Maitland and Clare have already been mentioned, and they both welcomed the book (2015). Cocker, in his 2015 *New Statesman* essay, referred to *The Fish Ladder* sharing ‘DNA’ with Richard Mabey’s 2005 memoir, *Nature Cure*. In 2017, I wrote to Jos Smith to ask his view, and he contextualised *The Fish Ladder* thus:

I would class it [The Fish Ladder] among works like *Nature Cure* (Mabey). The *Outrun* (Liptrot), *H is for Hawk* (Macdonald) that offer a personal take on nature writing, that refuse to see nature as something out there and ‘the self’ as in here. Self, one’s own life, past, body, is as much a mystery in these works as natural phenomena in landscape are in others. I see this as a genre within a genre I suppose. Not sure if I have a name for this though.

Smith’s Ph.D. thesis is concerned with ‘challenging the term ‘nature writing’’ and seeks to reframe the movement as an ‘archipelagic literature.’ (2012: p. 1). At one level this is an acknowledgement of the work of Andrew McNeillie, editor of the literary magazine *Archipelago*. The ground about which he writes has been known variously as ‘Britain, Great Britain, Britain and Ireland etc; even, too, too readily, the United Kingdom.’ (McNeillie, n.d.). First published in the summer of 2007, *Archipelago* espouses, as its chief concern, ‘the state of the planet’. The title pushes aside geo-political boundaries and the thorny associations of nationalism. ‘Archipelagic’, according to Smith, includes human beings, culture, and the element of community, that Dee, Smith, Mabey and Macfarlane have all identified as vital. The implication is that the sooner we start to include humanity and nature



within the same ecology, or to identify humanity as part of nature, the sooner we can begin to get to grips with the very real challenges that lie ahead for us as environmentalists, conservationists, human beings, Earth dwellers. In all the books cited in Smith's sub-genre, the 'I' is as malleable and open to interpretation as the landscape in which the narrators are situated, sometimes more so. Traveller and landscape are part of the same ecology. All of the books listed above involve travel, to a greater or lesser degree, within these islands. *The Fish Ladder*, in particular, explores the shorelines of the 'Celtic fringe' of Ireland, Scotland, North Wales and Liverpool Bay, with the 'I' finally being returned to the cauldron that is the metropolis of London. *The Fish Ladder* differs from the other titles in Smith's sub-genre by championing the journey, or walking, as a spiritual exercise in the Celtic Christian tradition. It contributes to knowledge by offering practical spiritual wisdom. With all this in mind, perhaps 'eco-archipelagic memoir' is as good a collective term as any for *The Fish Ladder* and those generically similar books among which it finds itself.

#### iv. Market forces

Smith acknowledges that there is 'a case to be made for certain forms prevalent in nature writing, just as could be said of so many forms in other genres, to have been determined by the literary marketplace.' (2017: p. 25). As has already been alluded to, the changes that happened within the publishing industry in 2007 – 9 had a direct effect on the writing of *The Fish Ladder*, both in terms of the book's content and structure. In a very literal way, the crisis in Part Two of *The Fish Ladder* documents the effect that those changes had on our family: 'Rupert's livelihood had been shattered by the first hard shock. His American publisher, for the first time in his career, had turned down a book.' (pp.208 – 9). However, it was also as a result of those changes that *The Fish Ladder* changed from 'prose poem' to its current form. By 2014 (the year in which the Global English publishing rights to *The Fish Ladder* were

sold to Bloomsbury) the books of Robert Macfarlane were selling by the hundreds of thousands. (Research Excellence Framework: 2014). *H is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald, published the same year, won both the Costa and the Samuel Johnson prizes, further augmenting what was fast becoming a literary trend. The commercial success of ‘new nature writing’, and its lyrical, hybrid, often first person narratives appealed to a conservative, cautious, risk averse literary marketplace.

The philosophy that good literature should be published for its own sake, despite a narrow readership, and subsidised by other kinds of writing (gardening books, cookery books) that was espoused by editors such as Liz Calder during her stewardship of Bloomsbury, is long gone. So too is the idea that breaking even, or achieving a 5% profit margin, might be acceptable. In June 2018, Philip Pullman, in his role as President of the Society of Authors, along with Anthony Beevor and Sally Gardner publicly deplored the share of publishers’ profits that are made available to writers, whose incomes have dropped by 15% in the last four years alone. (Kean, 2018). In contrast, publishers’ profits, in 2017, had collectively risen by 5% to £5.7 billion. (Campbell, 2018). In a post-Harry Potter, post-Net Book Agreement, post-global financial crisis marketplace, each writer must stand or fall on the success of their last publication, and all but a select and lucky few can afford to write without another source of income. The fact that writers might expect a royalty of 7.5% on a paperback book that is heavily discounted, often by their own publisher, means that it is all but impossible for the vast majority to recoup the advance they received against their royalties, unless that advance was minimal.

Writing has become a hobby.

Prizes raise a tiny handful to financial success and security, although it could be argued that the true power of the judges lies in their ability to wipe out the literary careers of those they overlook. As a result, a rash of books that are thematically or structurally similar,

and deemed likely to appeal to a general readership, is entirely to be expected when publishers are under pressure to produce a return of 10 –15% for their investors. (Flood, 2018).<sup>10</sup> Dee's criticism: 'me and the birds, me and the bees, me and the birds and bees' is therefore as much a reflection of the industry's conservatism as it is of any perceived deficit of imagination on behalf of the practitioners. In writing *The Fish Ladder* I was conscious that any esoteric subtext should be presented in such a way that it might 'slip beneath the wire', unnoticed by all but those who have eyes to see.

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<sup>10</sup> Even as long ago as 2009, Simon and Schuster's publishing director, Suzanne Baboneau, was quoted as saying: 'It is a fine line to tread. On the one hand we need to continue to take risks, but the market itself will be more conservative. It may be easier to say no to a book that we might have said yes to a few years ago.' (Tivnan, 2009).

## CHAPTER THREE

### The shift from Nature, and the shift from 'I'

#### i. Entanglement.

To be entangled doesn't just mean that we use things a lot, and it doesn't mean, just, that we're shaped by the things that we use. To be entangled is to recognise that the flow of agency moves both ways – we alter our tools as our tools alter us; we domesticate one another. We see these kinds of entanglements in nature all the time. (Hayler, 2018).

These words by Matt Hayler are from the Ambient Literature project. Jos Smith also reaches for the term 'entanglement', discovering it to be a vibrant concept within the conversation about the Anthropocene. Entanglement is helpful in circumventing the knotty and recurrent problem of nature as 'other' and the various attempts to identify ways in which we might regard nature afresh offered by writers such as Lawrence Buell. (Buell, 1996: p.267). Smith quotes geographer Jamie Lorimer, who in defining a notion of the wild wrote: 'We can think of the wild as the commons, the everyday affective site of human-nonhuman entanglement.' (Lorimer, 2015: p11).

Entanglement began to emerge as a buzz word, in terms of literary criticism, eight years before Lorimer's notion of the wild as commons, in 2007 – in the same year that Macfarlane's *The Wild Places* was published – when the feminist theorist and philosopher Karen Barad applied entanglement theory, more usually associated with a study of quantum

physicists, to both social and natural agencies. Also, in that same fertile year, Timothy Morton pushed the idea of human-nonhuman entanglement to its limits in *Ecology Without Nature*, by doing away with the idea of ‘nature’ altogether. Perhaps some of the discord that is almost a characteristic of what I have been referring to as ‘nature writing’ could have been avoided if its practitioners had only heeded Morton’s words: ‘nowadays, hardly anybody likes it when you mention the environment. You risk sounding boring or judgmental or hysterical, or a mixture of all three.’ (Morton, 2007: p. 1). Morton goes on to describe ‘nature’ as ‘an arbitrary rhetorical construct, empty of independent, genuine existence behind or beyond the texts we create about it.’ (pp. 21 – 22). Environmentalism is a similarly problematic term for him, and something that he describes as ‘broad and inconsistent’ (p. 9). It is the connected and interconnected concept of ‘ecology’ that Morton champions above both nature and environmentalism.

Three years later Morton published *The Ecological Thought* in which he defined his ecological view as being ‘a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite centre or edge. (2010). It is radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings, sentient and otherwise – and how can we so clearly tell the difference?’ (Morton, 2010: p. 8). ‘In an age of ecology without nature,’ he continues, ‘we would treat many more beings as people while deconstructing our ideas about what counts as people.’ Also in 2010, the political philosopher Jane Bennett wrote compellingly in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* about her vision of a new materialism, in which the world’s population is defined, not in terms of whether an individual is human or non-human, alive or dead, animate or inanimate, but by their agency – the extent to which individual systems or beings act on one another within an ecological framework.

ii. *The Fish Ladder* and the ecological net

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us.

Darwin, C. (1859) *Origin of Species*

Despite the generous hand offered to it (in terms of reviews and concrete acknowledgement) by writers and reviewers including Horatio Clare, Mark Cocker, Melissa Harrison, Sara Maitland, Jos Smith, and of course the booksellers and judges who selected the shortlist for the Wainwright Golden Beer Prize, I had struggled in trying to situate *The Fish Ladder* within the writing referred to as new nature writing. Melissa Harrison had described *The Fish Ladder* as ‘sui generis’. (Harrison, 2015). However, I instantly feel that the book is at home within the tangled web – or Morton’s sprawling mesh – of ecological literature. A close examination of the text taken from the first chapter of the book offers an insight into this.

One of the first images in *The Fish Ladder* is of the author and her friend waiting to fill their plastic water bottles at a natural spring on top of Tibidabo, the mountain behind Barcelona. The spring has been directed through a steel pipe and concreted into place. A sawn-off plastic container catches the overflow, which is lapped up by thirsty dogs, while old men, wearing orthopaedic shoes and carrying long cleft-tipped sticks for mushroom gathering, wait to fill their own, plastic, water carriers. (p. 5). In the next chapter an

uninviting swimming pool glitters in the darkness of a billionaire's garden, bits of debris floating on its surface. (p. 10). They are both examples of humankind's interference with the natural flow of water. One scene describes a public place, the second a private garden. In the first scene the author's friend wants to know why the old men are queuing. 'Is the water special?' she asks them. But the old men laugh and tell them: 'It's water, and it's free!' The well at the world's end – the Celts' well of wisdom, or fountain of knowledge – is hinted at in this interchange, but not developed. The dark cold swimming pool in the billionaire's garden is both a contained, unnatural pool that contrasts with the natural spring on the mountain, and it is also a reference to John Cheever's 1964 short story, 'The Swimmer', but again I don't develop or expand upon the reference. Instead I allow the central image, that of the water itself, to act as the medium of cohesion. The water on the mountain flows and is available to anyone who has the wherewithal to retrieve it. The water in the pool is cold, unused, fenced off and ultimately wasted (p. 207). Both images presage the story of the well at the world's end and the trip from the sea to the source of a river that constitute the quest story at its heart. Water recalls the amniotic fluid which was the 'I' character's last connection with, and refuge from, Mrs Thomas. It compensates for the broken maternal connection.<sup>11</sup> There is a challenge, throughout the text, to the proverb: *blood is thicker than water*.

The reader is free to enter into the spaces within this entangled net and take as much or as little from this 'image-hoard' as they choose. Some readers will register the reference to the well of wisdom in the author's hope that the well might have healing properties, or recall Neddy Merrill's cold abandoned swimming pool on what began as a summer's day but ended in a dreamlike, sinister autumn evening in Cheever's tale. Some may recall the 1968 movie of the same name starring Burt Lancaster as Merrill, the man who decided to swim across the

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<sup>11</sup> Much later on in the book there is a metaphorical rebirthing near the source of the River Severn when I fall into, and climb out of, a bog (p. 247).

county through the swimming pools of his friends. Many won't. Later, in *The Fish Ladder*, the reference to 'The Swimmer' is reprised, and this time it coincides with the 2009 crash and its direct effect on our family. This time, there is a concrete reference to the Cheever story (p. 208), thereby including all my readers, and introducing 'The Swimmer' to those who missed it earlier. There is a reminder of the late Roger Deakin, who was inspired by Cheever to make the journey that was to become *Waterlog*. (Deakin, 1999: p.1). In the same way, towards the end of the book, Evie and I visit the actual 'well at the world's end', near Golspie, in Caithness, and drink from it. On this occasion the reference to Gunn's novel is made clear (Norbury, 2016: pp.276 – 282).

At a practical level this quiet complexity, this multi-layered narrative that implies other stories and includes other storytellers is, as I have previously indicated, learned from the film maker Adam Curtis. It is also a conscious attempt to manifest, within the body of the text, the interconnectedness of all things. 'Nature' starts to seem irrelevant as a concept, since there is no differentiation in the mind of the writer between the significance of the actual water (the spring, the pool) or the wild mushrooms implied by the old men's sticks, the magpie feather that curls to the ground above the swimming pool and the women drinking champagne in the billionaire's brightly-lit living-room. There is no difference between the story – memoir – that is being shared with the reader, the story (myth) of the well at the world's end or the story (fiction) of Cheever's swimmer. The real, the imagined, the mythological, the natural and the engineered are all, in this extract, part of the same vignette. Human and non-human elements are likewise given equal weight, equal attention. There is no sense of nature as something that exists separately from other elements.

I will revisit the notion of the multi-layered narrative when exploring *The Fish Ladder* as a spiritual journey. Beyond this idea of Morton's enveloping mesh, and a reciprocal



entanglement among the elements of *The Fish Ladder*, there is an exploration of ideas about identity, family, and belonging, that inform the quest story at its heart.

iii. Kinship: Who am I and where do I come from?

This sentiment informs the epigraph at the start of *The Fish Ladder*: an injunction by St Teresa of Avila to her fellow sisters to ‘know who we are’. (p. 1) There is a clue, here, regarding the journey for spiritual kinship that the ‘I’ character subsequently embarks upon. In the first instance, I began with what is popularly referred to as ‘Aristotle’s question’: *How shall I live my life?* The flaw with this as a starting point lay with the ‘I’. *How can I discover how to live my life if I don’t know who I am?* This realisation provided sufficient of a disturbance to my equilibrium to warrant the search for my birth mother, who – in addition to being able to provide a medical history of our family – would also, I surmised, know the answers to my questions regarding my provenance. I can state here that although it occurred to me that she might have died, and I would therefore be unsuccessful in my quest, it simply never occurred to me that the woman referred to in *The Fish Ladder* as ‘Mrs Thomas’ would flatly refuse to co-operate. There is, therefore, something achingly pathetic in the letter that I wrote to her, quoted in *The Fish Ladder*, which makes this difficult to write about, with any degree of objectivity, even in this exegesis:

*I believe I have a moral right to know who I am, and where I come from, and that you have an obligation to tell me what you know. Are we Scottish, English, Welsh or Irish? Norwegian? Sailors or publicans? Gypsies or priests?... Let me see something of the fabric of who I am... Has it occurred to you that [my father] might be happy to know he has a child? (pp. 250 – 251).*

The failure to thaw the heart of my kinswoman pushed me to seek kinship elsewhere. But although the journey led to the discovery of a half, or possibly full, brother, it is the re-examination of the relationships with my existing family (daughter, husband), my adopted family – those ‘three hundred fish’ and that ‘time of need’ that Taliesin referred to – and the points of connection with both human and non-human beings that perhaps define *The Fish Ladder* and separate it from the other books on that Wainwright Prize shortlist.<sup>12</sup> (p.47).

Donna Haraway has written with great conviction about the imperative – if we are to survive as a species – to actively seek out other kinds of kinship and other sorts of families to the ones with which we are already familiar. ‘My purpose is to make “kin” mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy.’ (Haraway, 2015). Her concern is a practical one. She is responding both to the exploding population of our planet and to the deleterious state of affairs wrought by the Anthropocene. For Haraway one of the defining characteristics of the Anthropocene is ‘the destruction of places and times of refuge for people and other critters.’ She was writing in 2015. Today, in 2018, one might reasonably speculate that the word ‘refugee’ is in daily use throughout Western media and social media channels.<sup>13</sup> Haraway credits Anna Tsing with suggesting ‘that the inflection point between the Holocene and the Anthropocene might be the wiping out of most of the refugia from which diverse species assemblages (with or without people) can be reconstituted after major events (like desertification, or clear cutting, or, or, ...).’ (Haraway, 2015). It is refuge (rather than the ‘healing’ that informs Richard Mabey’s *Nature Cure*) that is precisely what the ‘I’

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<sup>12</sup> *The Fish Ladder* was, in 2015, already doing what Dee is now calling for: incorporating people into its narrative.

<sup>13</sup> A quick search on Twitter at 13.20 on 14 July 2018 for the word ‘refugee’ revealed ‘440 Tweets in the last hour’. Not ‘trending’, perhaps, but certainly part of the conversation.

character in *The Fish Ladder* is seeking to find in landscape. Refuge from that peculiar state of being that is ‘an adoptee’.

Whenever a baby was born, or a family idiosyncrasy discussed, or if an old photograph came to light, then I had always stepped back – by which I meant that I would get up and move – deliberately maintaining a respectful distance from what I perceived to be the genetic hum in the room. I had done it since my earliest childhood. If I didn’t move fast enough then there would always be someone who could, and generally did, point out the impossibility of the baby, or great-aunt, or whoever it was, ever looking like me, or me like them. What for others might be a moment of shared history was, for me, and ongoing reminder of my charity status. (p. 132).

Where I moved *to*, was generally ‘outside’, and the loss of this facility, the freedom to walk in a landscape, that resulted from the foot-and-mouth outbreak of 2001 was a contributing factor to the depression that followed my adopted father’s death.

On the day after Dad’s death I drove over the border into Wales... But when I reached Moel Famau the police had closed off the mountain with the same rustling plastic tape that they used to mark a crime scene... The foot-and-mouth outbreak would eventually cost the country around eight billion pounds. It cost me my sanity. (p. 177).

This, of course, makes a neat tale, but narrative is also a place of refuge and it is worth bearing this in mind when recalling the schism within nature writing between the quasi-

scientific, political and conservationist literature favoured by Cocker in his 2015 essay and the aesthetic, mythological, poetic and narrative engagement with the world that Macfarlane championed in his response. In *The Fish Ladder*, I quote Sara Maitland, who has referred to storytelling as ‘a very fundamental human attribute, to the extent that psychiatry now often treats “narrative loss” – the inability to construct a story of one’s own life – as a loss of identity or personhood.’ (Norbury, 2016: p. 133). Haraway observes that ‘we need stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections.’ (2015).

My purpose here is to explore Haraway’s concept of kinship as a means of surviving the Anthropocene and its relevance to an examination of *The Fish Ladder*, but the fact that I seem to have been immediately diverted by her thinking about refuge and about the role of narrative is indicative of how catholic, in the sense of all-encompassing, Haraway’s notion of kinship is. It also fits seamlessly into Morton’s all encompassing (and presumably seamless) notion of the ecological ‘mesh’. The thing about kinship is that all those other aspects are part of it: refuge (home), narrative (how does all this fit together?) and entanglement/mesh (reciprocity).

The primatologist Daniela Sieff has observed another kind of kinship in relation to trauma which has particular significance in a study of *The Fish Ladder*. Sieff calls the state of being traumatised – by loss, through adoption, or as a result of being a refugee – ‘Trauma-Narnia’. She regards its inhabitants as having a parallel existence to those ‘in the real world’ (my brackets) which has echoes, in the present study, of the Celtic Otherworld, although Sieff states that there is no way ‘back through the wardrobe’. (Sieff, 2016). However, ‘those who address their emotional wounds (an on-going and life-long process), can move beyond a trauma-world, whereupon they become a conduit for healing and compassion. To move ‘beyond’ a trauma-world does not mean being freed of these wounds; rather it means striving

to contain fear with more discretion, integrating that which has been dissociated, and endeavouring to shift shame. When people engage with this inner work, they create healthier and more compassionate relationships with themselves and with others. They also offer hope to those who are locked within trauma-worlds by showing that change is possible. Cycles of well-being are initiated.’ (Sieff, 2018). It was for this reason, the realisation that there are literally hundreds of thousands of children whose lives are affected by adoption or separation, often – at the time of writing – as a result of being refugees that I wanted *The Fish Ladder* to be published<sup>14</sup>. Because it is, in part, through literature such as *The Fish Ladder*, or Jackie Kay’s *Red Dust Road*, (Kay 2011) or Jeanette Winterson’s *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal* (Winterson, 2011), that those countless children who have grown up knowing themselves to be ‘different’ to their siblings and cousins can see themselves as belonging to a wider community. Indeed, it was as a result of writing *The Fish Ladder* that I met Sieff, who is one of many readers who have since shared their stories with me, which has been another kind of kinship.

The above have been examples of human kinship, either with one another or with the landscape. Haraway also advocates cross-species kinship and observes that ‘all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense’. Richard Powers has pointed out that we share 25% of our genes with trees. (2018). Suzanne Simard’s research into the way in which trees communicate through a ‘wood-wide web’ has created a fizz of excitement since being disseminated to a worldwide audience through Peter Wohlleben’s internationally best-selling *The Hidden Life of Trees*. (2017). Not that this is a new idea. Nine hundred years ago St Francis of Assisi was already ignoring species boundaries, famously entering into a peaceful contract with the wolf of Gubbio to the effect that it would stop harassing the citizens in exchange for regular food.

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<sup>14</sup> One can only speculate at the long-term effects upon the community of children that have been separated from their parents on the Mexican border under U.S. President Trump’s zero tolerance immigration policy.

According to his biographer, Adrian House, Francis ‘embraced the four elements as warmly as animate creatures’. ‘Sister Water was so precious to him that after washing he would not throw it away where it was liable to be trodden on.’ (2001: p. 181).<sup>15</sup>

When I reached the loch at the source of the Dunbeath Water, a similar respect for the water of the loch was apparent:

I had presumed... that I would swim to the centre, inhabit the water, make it my own, and yet even as my fingers began to tug at my clothes I knew that it was not going to happen... The strongest sense had settled on me... that, if I once disturbed the surface or entered the water, I would upset a balance both chemical and physical. I didn’t even want to contemplate how long it might take before the stillness of the loch could be recovered. (Norbury, 2016: p. 193).

Interestingly this ‘balance’ is perceived as being chemical, both in the sense of pollution – sun-tan lotion, perfume, sweat – and also physical, through the fluid mechanics of the water. And yet the implication is that this is a spiritual test. The well at the world’s end, which is never far from this narrative, drowned the goddess Boand when she made trial of it, so there is a thematic link. There are other relationships with other-than-human kin, that I encountered on the walk to the waterhead: an eagle, an owl, a frog, several deer, the salmon, but rather than continue to explore the idea of kinship in relation to Haraway’s essay, I will sidestep here into an exploration of *The Fish Ladder* as a spiritual journey, for it is in this aspect of the book that both the essence and the originality of *The Fish Ladder* are to be found.

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<sup>15</sup> One can hardly begin to imagine how St. Francis would have regarded a sewerage system that wastes five litres of drinkable water with every flush!

## CHAPTER FOUR

*The Fish Ladder* as a journey within the mystical Christian tradition.

Writing about the affective, subjective dimension of experience within the context of the academy is problematic. There are any number of reasons for this, from the wooliness of the concepts to the immeasurability, in any meaningful empirical sense, of the subject matter. Psychoanalysts, historians, and literary theorists continue to wrestle with this conundrum, although for the creative writer, the potential for ambiguity embedded within any vagueness of terminology can be useful. However, before going on, it may be helpful to clarify the way in which I am using certain words.

Spirituality:

The Catholic Encyclopedia describes *spirituality* as the adjective derived from ‘spirit’ which takes its name from the ‘Latin: spiritus, spirare, “to breathe”; Gk. pneuma; Fr. esprit; Ger. Geist’, noting that in the New Testament ‘it sometimes signifies the soul of man’ and that ‘[m]atter has generally been conceived as [being]... the limitation of spirit’.<sup>16</sup> The OED, referring to the noun, gives it as: ‘[t]he quality or condition of being spiritual; attachment to

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<sup>16</sup> Sharon Betcher (Kearns and Keller (ed), 2007, p.317) queries this limitation: ‘When we take account of the metaphoric registration of Spirit through the four ancient cosmological elements—fire, air, water, and earth—one element has gone missing in the Western Christian iconic repertoire: earth.’ She notes that ‘[t]he ecological wisdom of many indigenous religions we have come to admire... is carried in a Spirit matrix. So why and how did the Holy Spirit of Christianity become so averse to planetary life?’ (p.318). Betcher’s question is beyond the reach of this enquiry. However, the incorporation of ‘earth’, into a definition of ‘spirit’, in which air, fire and water are already present, lays the foundation for an inclusive, eco-spiritual theology, that has the potential to lift the veil of metaphor and permit a pantheistic vision, which fully embraces matter, to assert itself. (Isaiah, 14:8, KJV).

or regard for things of the spirit as opposed to material or worldly interests.’ (OED, 2019). By describing *The Fish Ladder* as a spiritual journey – the subtitle, *A Journey Upstream*, alludes to a metaphysical interpretation of the text, as well as to the material journey from sea to source – the notion of an inner, contemplative, psychological journey is established. While spirituality, used in this way, does not necessarily require a religious context, it does embrace the notion of an emotional, empathic attitude towards the physical journeys described.

### Mysticism:

Mysticism is more difficult to define. The theologian Bernard McGinn has devoted four substantial volumes to his history of Western Christian mysticism, the last of which attempts to provide an adequate definition of the term. He does however offer a brief ‘preliminary and heuristic notion’ of what he means by mysticism, while acknowledging that for the historian ‘there can be no direct access to experience’ (1991, p.xiv).

Rather than trying to define mysticism (any simple definition of such a complex and controversial phenomenon seems utopian), I prefer to give a sense of how I understand the term by discussing it under three headings: mysticism as a part or element of religion; mysticism as a process or way of life; and mysticism as an attempt to express a direct consciousness of the presence of God. (xv-xvi).

It is the last two of McGinn’s headings that are most useful in helping to define ‘mysticism’ in relation to *The Fish Ladder*. Walking, ‘the journey’, is the process. It is interesting to note that McGinn uses the phrase ‘presence of’ rather than the traditional ‘union with’ God (Dupré, 1989), although to borrow from the terminology used by Otto, ‘numen’, or ‘the



numinous’, is perhaps less culturally loaded than the word ‘God’, while still acknowledging the subjective nature of the experience (1923). I have tried, as did the writer of the Book of Esther, to avoid the use of the word ‘God’ wherever possible. (Carruthers, 2009, p.58). But it is in this often accidental<sup>17</sup> sense of being in the ‘presence of’ the numinous, which is separate from specific religious practice or conscious process, that I am situating my own understanding of mystical experience.

Psychopomp.

From the Greek, ψυχοπομπός, meaning ‘conductor of souls’. In Greek mythology the psychopomp guides the souls of the recently dead to their final resting place. I am using the word to describe the spiritual guide of a living person, be they real or fictional: Knowledge in *The Somonyng of Everyman* (Anon, n.d.), Beatrice in Danté’s *Divine Comedy* (2008), Marius Goring’s French aristocratic Conductor 71, sent to retrieve the misplaced soul of David Niven’s unexpectedly alive WW2 airline pilot in Powell and Pressburger’s film *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946). Within the context of *The Fish Ladder*, the hare at Spurn Point and Evie – both of whom perform the role of spirit guide in this narrative – are also living creatures. So too is the ‘I’ character. Thus the spiritual and material occupy the same domain.

i. Psychopomp: hare.

Everyman, I will go with thee, and be thy guide.

In thy most need to go by thy side.

The Somonyng of Everyman (Anon).

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<sup>17</sup> In the experience of Teresa of Avila (1987: p.119).

These words of comfort, offered to Everyman by the character Knowledge, are from the late 15<sup>th</sup> Century morality play that bears his name (n.d.), but I first came across them as a high school student in the classic texts published by Everyman's Library. Those two lines constituted my first exposure to a morality play, and to the concept of a psychopomp, and *The Fish Ladder* gestures to both the resonance and the fecundity of that exposure.

The idea of a spiritual guide makes its first appearance in *The Fish Ladder* in 'Humber' when the 'I' character notices a hare as it appears, seemingly out of nowhere, ahead of her on the path. (p. 26). At one level this is a clear nod to Robert Macfarlane, whose encouragement first inspired me to try my hand at writing. In *The Wild Places* Macfarlane reveals that the hare has 'long been my totem animal'. (2007: p. 302).<sup>18</sup> That hare reprises the final paragraphs of *Mountains of the Mind*, in which Macfarlane meets a snow hare: 'It seemed curious at this apparition on its mountain-top, but unalarmed'. (2003: pp. 277 – 8. ).<sup>19</sup> My own experience is similar: 'I turned the key. The hare looked up at the sound, enquiring, deer-like, but unruffled'. (p. 30). There is an implication of spiritual purity, and also a contrast with Old Testament teaching regarding the eating of unclean meat, in Macfarlane's 'clean white' hare, while the use of 'curious' reminds the reader of Lewis Carroll's White Rabbit. In *The Fish Ladder* it is the sound of the car ignition that attracts my hare's attention,

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<sup>18</sup> Macfarlane has defined the way he is using the word 'totem' as follows: "By 'totem' I meant, here, something like a metaphysical 'familiar'; a creature that keeps one company in memory and mind, and occasionally in the landscape itself -- and also that, if one were to imagine oneself metamorphosing into a more-than-human form, one would wish or tend to turn into. When Jackie Morris had to paint me into *The Lost Words*, she did so as a long-legged hare, standing tall on the first pages of the book, with goldfinches flying about its ears. I didn't tell her to do so; she chose the totem." (2019).

<sup>19</sup> It's interesting to note that Macfarlane regards himself as the apparition, implying that the hare inhabits the 'real world'.

and yet the word I have chosen is 'key' which likewise recalls Alice's adventure in Wonderland, and the door to the secret garden which that key reveals.

We have arrived quickly in the terrain not only of children's stories, but of Christian and Classical imagery and symbolism, while the allusion to a psychopomp signifies a quest [in both traditions] that reaches beyond the superficial travelogue that the subtitle – 'A Journey Upstream' – implies. There was, of course, a real hare – this is a work of life writing – and the reminder of the hare's factual existence gestures towards a material reading of any latent or speculative theology embedded in the text.

There is an echo of this hare as I begin the journey at Dunbeath Water. A diseased rabbit, eyes bulging, recalls the contrast with the 'wise and glossy sea-hare' of the Humber. (p. 166). The term 'sea-hare' refers to Grimms' fairy tale of the same name, KHM 191, and adds yet another layer to the symbolism already associated with the creature. In Christian iconographic tradition the hare is associated with fertility and virginity, resurrection and rebirth/vitality. (Tr. Hun, n.d.).

On the return journey I find a rabbit, headless and disembowelled, on the path and the psychopomp is again brought to mind: 'I...tried not to develop the idea that my spirit guide had left me.' (p.196). In the text, I speculate that the rabbit may have been left out to feed the raptors. However, it could just as easily have been left to poison them. The possibility that the narrator is unreliable, or mistaken, is left for the reader to surmise and the scene is a reminder that, despite having a guide or companion for parts of the way, the journey of the soul, like that of Everyman, or Orpheus, or Psyche, or Christ, is ultimately undertaken alone.

ii. The power of ecologies

It may be helpful to recall here the definition of a fish ladder (in the pre-leaves), and also the epigraph of St Teresa's injunction to her sisters to seek self-knowledge. (p. 1). While the definition of a fish ladder is factual, its proximity to Teresa's words places the book within a recognisably Judeo-Christian tradition – Jacob's ladder, the fish as Christian symbol, and the purification associated with water being the most immediate connections. The fact that a fish ladder is a physical structure again hints to a material reading of the book's theology while the proximity of St. Teresa's words encourages a mystical interpretation of the text.

Glen A. Mazis has observed that the term ecospirituality 'has been associated [in the recent past in the West] with augmenting and deepening the appreciation of the human relationship to other creatures in the surround – or at least other features of the biosphere, such as water, wind, soil and rock.' (Eds. Kearns & Keller, 2007: pp. 125). The shift in perception that writers such as Morton, Haraway and Bennett advocate – towards inclusive ecologies – can equally be applied to spirituality. Mazis refers to 'the kinship of these realms of being', insisting that kinship 'must be at the heart of an ecospirituality [in order that these realms] might be creatively forged into a new sensibility' and he acknowledges a like mind in Haraway. (p. 136).

Part of the shift away from anthropocentrism is towards a more complex materialism that considers these realms not in terms of 'mental capacities', but rather in terms of embodiment... If we are to see the bodies of humans, animals, and machines in their overlap and kinship, it is only as dynamic beings that these ties will emerge. (p. 136).

The inclusion of machines within ecologies fits comfortably into Bennett's 'political ecology of things' (Bennett, 2010) but also within a pantheistic and material spiritual ecology of things – if the divine is in everything, then the divine is in everything – including a fish ladder, or the machinery of the critical care unit where my adopted mother fought for her life, 'mechanically suspended in a space held open between life and non-life, an opportunity, a place of choosing'. (p. 214).

At the start of *The Fish Ladder* I describe the journey ahead, insisting that it is '[n]ot an abstract journey, or a metaphorical one, about who we are and what we're doing here. [It is a] literal one: a journey to the source of this, particular, life.' (p. 7). Despite writing these words I have grappled with them since, as does Jo Carruthers in her review of the book. If 'the walking is not... abstract or metaphorical. How, then, might we read it?' (Carruthers, 2015). Answering her own question, Carruthers writes:

Walking as a spiritual act is famously celebrated (if not described in such terms) by writers such as Wordsworth and Thoreau and more recently in Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust*... For Donne, the walk is no metaphor – the body must be pushed to action in order to unlock something vital. For Norbury, too, the search for her mother and the source of various waterways are both physical journeys. (Carruthers, 2015).

Ideas that taken in isolation may appear contradictory: walking as metaphor; walking as physical exercise; the spiritual, poetic or intellectual productivity of a body 'pushed to action' are comfortably accommodated within an ecology of 'complex materialism' (Mazis, 2007: p.136)

iii. Psychopomp: Evie.

It has already been noted that one of the book's epigraphs is St Teresa of Avila's injunction to her sisters to seek self-knowledge. On the 4<sup>th</sup> October, 1970, Teresa and St Catherine of Siena became the first female Doctors of the Roman Catholic Church. Even now, almost fifty years later, there are only four women in the whole history of Christianity to have obtained this distinction. Coincidentally – or perhaps not – if we accept the view of an interconnected ecological mesh of entanglement, 4<sup>th</sup> October is also the feast day of St Francis of Assisi, patron saint of animals and the environment, and the day on which I had life-saving surgery for breast cancer: 'The day of the operation was the Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi, and Evie lent me her gold medallion of the saint, which I am wearing even as I write.' (p. 232).

With the exception of St. Francis it is worth noting that *The Fish Ladder* is also very much a *female* spiritual journey, and the book was described by one reviewer as 'quietly gynocentric'. (Harrison, 2016). Although, according to his biographer, Francis did not differentiate between genders any more than he differentiated between human and other-than-human 'people'. In his 'final plea to [Pope] Innocent for the approval of his order Francis had publicly identified himself as a woman in his dream.' (House, 2001: p. 174). Likewise, his companion, St. Clare, candidly confided her dream of feeding at Francis's breast to her friend Philippa: 'what she tasted was sweet and indescribably delicious. After she had finished, the nipple from which the milk had flowed stayed between her lips.' (Proc. Can. Clare, III, 29). Before we raise an eyebrow at the erotic nature of the vision it is worth remembering that the most popular image of St. Teresa is arguably Bernini's representation of her ecstasy, to be found in Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. When discussing Francis's gender inclusivity and the erotic language with which Clare describes her vision, House reminds us that Teresa's own companion, St. John of the Cross, also chose the idiom of erotic love for his

devotional poems, in which his soul appears as a bride awaiting her much anticipated groom. (House, 2001: p: 173).

However, after this promising, mystical epigraph and all its associations, *The Fish Ladder* reverts into what is initially a by-the-book, post-Vatican II, workaday and orthodox ‘Catholicity’. In ‘Mersey’ Evie, Mum and I visit the Convent in Liverpool where I was born. There is a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, who is also the spirit of a spring, and a well-keeper of sorts. (p. 46). Evie and I say a decade of the Rosary at the tomb of my foster mother, Sr. Marie Therese. (p. 53). At Ffynnon Fawr I fight a sense of fraudulence. ‘I had no desire to hold this water in my mouth, or anywhere else, my anxiety over hygiene interfering significantly with my capacity for wonder... I felt certain that this couldn’t be the right well.’ (p. 74). Later I fail to engage Evie with a legend associated with the place. But it is Evie who cuts through the gobbledegook and forges a direct connection with the water.

I told Evie about the legend – the running round the church, the wishes. A veil seemed to pass across her eyes. The white mist pressed closely all around us, and I saw that she had no need for the miracle. All she wanted, she had before her. She took her water bottle, emptied it out, and then filled it from the silent well. She studied the contents, held them up, and asked me to affix the lid. (p.77).

Later Evie appoints herself well-keeper to a spring we find on the summit of the mountain behind our home. ““We need to bring gardening things and tidy it up properly,” she said. “What shall we call it?”” (p. 201). After my adopted mother’s life-changing illness, after my own life-changing illness, after the blighted search for my birthmother and its by-product of the discovery of a half-brother, we finally locate the Well at the World’s End referred to in Gunn’s novel of the same name. Once again, it is Evie who assumes the role of spiritual

director. As soon as we have finished drinking from the well, a soft wind blows through the wood in which we are standing.

A small wind entered the clearing, circling, rising, the trees behind the wicker fence creaking like halyards. We heard the ratchet laughter of crows and then, overhead, a bird with trailing legs flapped slowly above the circle of trees.

‘Is that a heron?’ Evie asked. The bird flew in an arc.

‘No, look at its head. The neck’s extended, and it’s white. It must be a stork.’

The trees were moving around us. The sky had turned porcelain blue. Sunlight streamed to the floor of the glade. The change was so sudden that I found myself laughing, and then a silence fell about us. A cloud settled over the sun like a dust-sheet. The trees shuffled back into stillness.

‘What do you think?’ I asked Evie.

‘I think the audience is over,’ she said. (p. 281).

Horatio Clare, in his review of *The Fish Ladder*, described this moment:

The vague signs and flickered wonders of [The Fish Ladder’s] course combine, at the end, in something transcendent and beautiful, an ‘audience’ as Norbury puts it, with what a Christian era would have termed the Holy Spirit, and what pre-Christians thought of as the world unseen. *The Fish Ladder* is further proof that even our beset and battered time will reveal marvels and mysterious patterns to someone who is resolved to find them and arrange them in a story. (Clare, 2015).



The word ‘audience’ is Evie’s, of course. It is extremely unlikely that a stork would have been in that part of Scotland at that time. Several people have written to point this out, not least among them Mark Cocker and Melissa Harrison. It is more likely to have been a great white egret although the wings appeared black and the neck was extended. I include the reference here, for three reasons.

- a) It is what I saw and said and this is, after all, a memoir.
- b) The very unlikeliness of the event, including the wind, refers back to a description of the Otherworld earlier in the book: ‘The Celts believed that the Otherworld was parallel to our own, and that you could step into it, or through it, at certain times. Only particular things, like a tree half covered in leaves, or a field full of black-and-white sheep, indicated that you were there at all. You had to look out for the signs. You had to know them.’ (p. 108). The sheer unlikeliness of the stork’s presence can be interpreted as such a ‘sign’.
- c) The schism within nature writing described in the first part of this essay is replicated within the theological writing of Malcom Guite, and for almost the same reasons. (Guite, 2012).

iv. ‘Epistemological apartheid’<sup>20</sup>

As a priest and a poet Guite regards the facility for poetry as humankind’s attempt to communicate with the divine using the inadequate medium of language. He explores ‘the power of poetry to renew vision by transfiguring the ordinary’. (Guite, 2012: p.2). It is worth

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<sup>20</sup> Guite’s expression, made in conversation with this writer, Kings Cross station, 7<sup>th</sup> July 2018.

recalling here both the original manifestation of *The Fish Ladder* as an extended prose-poem, and the influence of poetry throughout my text. In attempting to describe what it is that Western culture has lost, and ‘why there is an imbalance that needs to be redressed’, Guite looks to ‘the great cultural shift that occurred during the Enlightenment, ushering in a mistrust and marginalisation of imaginative and poetic vision and a particular suspicion of the ambivalent or multivalent language of poetry’. (p. 2). Noting that the attitude ‘is often traced back rhetorically to Francis Bacon’, or to Descartes ‘dividing the world between *res extensa* and *res cognitans*, a dualism from which science and philosophy are only just recovering’, Guite explores the influence of the Royal Society in concretely disseminating a prejudice against what he calls ‘the poetic imagination’ and regards Thomas Sprat’s *History of the Royal Society* – ‘really its manifesto’ – as a seminal text. ‘Sprat urges his readers “to separate the knowledge of Nature, from the colours of Rhetoric, the devices of Fancy or the delightful deceit of Fables.”’ ‘This advice,’ Guite tells us,

indeed the whole Enlightenment project that it represents, is in very sharp contrast to the wisdom of the previous age, which was rooted in the idea that fables, stories and myths were the medium that most completely embodied the deepest truths we need to know. Thus most of the wisdom of the ancient world, both Judeo-Christian and Classical, was embodied in myth, story and song. The notion of telling a fable in order to get at a truth went very deep indeed. (pp. 2 – 3).

The echoes of Perrin’s scathing outburst in *Machynlleth* in 2010, in which he quoted Fisher as part of an attack on new nature writing and its exponents, serves as a counterpoint to Guite’s observation.

Do these people really believe that the search for truth is less important than the search for poetry or art or aesthetic satisfaction or ‘happiness’? Do they not understand that the purest source of these imponderables is in the realms of fact, and that the establishment of facts is most simply done by the ancient methods of logical science? Once facts are despised, fancies replace them; and fancies are poisonous companions to the enjoyment and appreciation of nature. (Perrin, 2010, quoting Fisher).

Guite refers to this separation, which he describes as existing within poetry, but which I suggest can equally be found within ‘new nature writing’, as both cultural (Guite, 2012: p. 4) and epistemological apartheid. In conversation with him recently Guite explained it thus: ‘We privilege objective knowledge, that has no values or qualities, over subjective knowledge, which is perceived to be less real, less important [although] it [subjective knowledge] is where all the things are that make life worth living and give it any meaning.’ (2018). Guite’s particular interest, as a priest, is in the effect that the Enlightenment has had on faith, and he empathises with both Blake and Coleridge for having had to deal with the fall-out of this state of affairs.

Perrin’s claim, using Fisher’s words, is that any pathway other than that of ‘logical science’ as a way to get at ‘facts’ implies those facts are ‘despised’. This seems fanciful. Much of what we know about the natural world is predicated on what individual naturalists believe they have witnessed with their inherently unreliable sense data (Bridge and Paller, 2012). As to the assertion that ‘fancies are poisonous companions to the enjoyment and appreciation of nature’? Feelings, difficult to quantify and scientifically slippery, underpin our fascination with the other-than-human world. What draws a natural scientist or conservationist to their subject, in the first instance, if not some unquantifiable fancy?

Michael McCarthy's thesis, in *The Moth Snowstorm* (2015), is precisely that science has failed to persuade us to change our behaviour towards the other-than-human-world, and that the last hope for conserving a habitable planet is by appealing to our feelings rather than our reason; if butterflies make you happy, save them. The subtitle of George Marshall's enquiry into the demonisation of climate scientists is 'Why our brains are wired to ignore climate change'. There are sound psychological and evolutionary reasons, Marshall argues, to explain why we find ourselves unable to believe unpalatable 'facts' despite those facts being overwhelmingly accepted as irrefutable (2014: pp. 33-35). Both Marshall and McCarthy recognise the necessity for finding new, palatable, narratives that have the power to persuade us – where science is currently failing – to change our ways.

Theology, the 'spiritual journey' and 'mystical experience' occupy an inchoate realm of feelings and intuition. Scientifically unprovable<sup>21</sup>, they nonetheless offer an alternative narrative, and one that may prove illuminating. In relation to *The Fish Ladder*, and of the place of mystical theology within my own text, it is the attention that Guite draws to a conversation between J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and their friend Hugo Dyson, that took place one evening in 1931, that is of particular significance. Guite quotes Humphrey Carpenter, and I include Carpenter's account here:

Lewis had never underestimated the power of myth... But he still did not *believe* in the myths that delighted him. Beautiful and moving though such stories might be, they were (he said) ultimately untrue. As he expressed it to Tolkien, myths are 'lies and therefore worthless, even though breathed through silver.'

*No*, said Tolkien. *They are not lies.*

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<sup>21</sup> At the present time. The Neuropsychanalysis Foundation 'supports a dialogue' between proof-based neuroscience and the more nebulous psychoanalysis in its ongoing mission to discover 'the neurobiological underpinnings of how we act, think, and feel'. (NPSA, 2019).

Just then (Lewis afterwards recalled) ‘there was a rush of wind which came so suddenly on the still, warm, evening and sent so many leaves pattering down that we thought it was raining. We held our breath.’ (Guite, 2012: pp. 50 –51 quoting Carpenter).

There is no mention in this account of any particular attention being paid to the wind ‘which came so suddenly on the still’, but the echo with the scene at the Well at the World’s End in *The Fish Ladder* feels significant enough for the comparison to be worthy of note. As to stating a position: I concur with Tolkien.

I have demonstrated that the journey of the ‘I’ can be viewed as a spiritual journey, thereby inviting comparison with tales such as Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (2003), from which I have borrowed my title, the anonymous *Somonyng of Everyman* (n.d.), Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (2008) and more. Within the text of *The Fish Ladder* I compare my journey with that of the characters in Nikos Kazantzakis’s *Christ Recrucified* (2001) and the Mystery Play at its heart (Norbury, 2016: p. 159). The words of St. Teresa of Avila set the tone for the reader (p. 1). St. Francis of Assisi is referenced in the text as I describe the experience of watching an ‘orange glow’ seeming to emanate from my dying father: the followers of St. Francis having reported ‘just such an orange glow emanating from beneath the door of the saint’s cell while he was at prayer.’ (p. 183). References to the lives of Celtic saints are dotted throughout the text. (pp.162 – 163, 194). I have indicated that the ‘Catholicity’ at the start of the journey is ‘workaday’ and ‘orthodox’. If pressed to define the position which Evie or the ‘I’ appear to occupy by the end of the book I point to early Christian writings such as the *Gospel of Mary* (Tr. King, 2003: pp. 13 – 18), or the gospel of Thomas (Tr. Patterson, 2011) with their emphasis on the here and now and – in the *Gospel of Mary* – the clear authority

given to women as teachers. This is generally referred to as the Gnostic tradition, although King points out that 'there was no religion... called Gnosticism' and that the name came after the fact. (King, 2003: p. 155). However, *The Fish Ladder* isn't about 'religion' although it does describe a spiritual journey, and the word feels as unhelpful, and as limiting, within the context of this essay, as the word 'nature' has proved to be for Timothy Moreton.

## CONCLUSION

*The Fish Ladder* was forged in the crucible of new nature writing, a phenomenon that has gone from being what Smith described as ‘one of the most consistent and defined literary movements of the twenty-first century,’ to a place where nature writing, without the ‘new’, has been described by Dee as ‘moribund’, and by Macfarlane as having ‘served its purpose and also lost much of its meaning’. (Smith, 2012, Dee and Macfarlane, 2018). Commentators such as Huggan, Lilley and Dee have implied that it is a solipsistic medium, although if one follows that to its logical conclusion all forms of life-writing that take place in the first person, including travel writing, memoir and autobiography run the risk of being so-named. The conservatism of a risk-averse publishing industry focused on profit has also played a part in defining both *The Fish Ladder* and the genre. I have sought to demonstrate, through Guite’s concept of ‘epistemological apartheid’, that a debate over the perceived validity of different ways of writing about the natural world – ranging between the rational, the cultural and the political to the lyrical, the literary and the aesthetic – is centuries old, and that writers such as Blake, Coleridge and Wordsworth were robustly engaged in countering the effects of the Enlightenment on the poetic imagination throughout their lifetimes. The reason the stakes are so high, now, is because of the devastating and ongoing effects of the Anthropocene. The argument is really over ‘what is the most effective way to communicate the physical truth about the state of our planet’ in such a way as to persuade people to act differently, and to start so-doing with immediate effect. Inclusivity, not exclusivity, is, I have suggested, the key to success. In this respect *The Fish Ladder* shares common ground with Morton’s ecological ‘mesh’, and Haraway’s call to forge new models of kinship in ways that could, if only there was the will, unite all Earth dwellers.

*The Fish Ladder* offers a different path to those outlined above, by taking the concept of the spiritual journey and situating it beneath the umbrella of contemporary archipelagic eco-literature. It does this by utilising the power of image, myth and metaphor to convey essential truths and practical wisdom, conveyed in clear and accessible prose. When writing, it was my intention that the reader would never have to break their connection to the text by having to resort to a dictionary. *The Fish Ladder* reminds us of the ‘way of contemplation’ followed by the Christian mystics. Most of the journeys – including those made with my daughter – were undertaken in silence.

In the same year that *The Fish Ladder* was published Pope Francis published his encyclical *Laudato Si’: On Care for our Common Home*, in which he described his namesake, St. Francis, as

the example *par excellence* of... an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically... He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself. He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society and interior peace. (Francis, 2015: p11).

Past President of the Royal Society and Astronomer Royal, Martin Rees, who is by contrast an atheist, was one of the advisors to the Vatican on what was to become *Laudato Si’*. He observed:

Whatever one thinks of the Catholic Church, one can't contest it's got global range, a long-term vision, and concern for the world's poor. That statement, which spread around the world in the summer of 2015, and for which the Pope got a five-minute



standing ovation at the UN, was an important input to the Paris conference on climate change in December 2015. (Rees, 2017).

I will give the closing words to this essay to one of the voices that has most helped to shape it, that of the priest and poet Malcom Guite. In February 2018, Guite wrote in the *Church Times* that he felt a ‘kinship between the outer and the inner very strongly while reading... *The Fish Ladder*’ and he succinctly put his finger on quite why it so difficult for a writer to offer an exposition of their own work:

for a writer, the world’s end, and its beginning, is in the moment when we take up the pen, and our own deepest sources are hidden from us. We come to them afresh each time we take out a notebook, its blank pages open and empty, like two hands cupped at a well.

London, 29 July 2018

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