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Perpetual Vanishing: Animal Lives in Contemporary Scottish Fiction

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Abstract: Animals, writes Akira Mizuta Lippit, ‘exist in a state of perpetual vanishing’: they haunt human concerns, but rarely appear as themselves. This is especially notable in contemporary Scottish fiction. While other national literatures often reflect the ‘animal turn’ in contemporary theory, the number of twenty-first-century Scottish novels concerned with human–animal relations remains disproportionately small. Looking at a broad cross-section of recent and understudied novels, including Mandy Haggith’s *Bear Witness* (2013), Ian Stephen’s *A Book of Death and Fish* (2014), Andrew O’Hagan’s *The Life and Opinions of Maf the Dog, and of His Friend Marilyn Monroe* (2010), Malachy Tallack’s *The Valley at the Centre of the World* (2018), James Robertson’s *To Be Continued* (2016), and Sarah Hall’s *The Wolf Border* (2015) highlights the marginalisation of both nonhuman animals and texts centred on them. The relative absence of engagement with animal studies in Scottish fiction and criticism suggests new opportunities for reevaluating the formulation of environmental concerns in a Scottish context. By moving away from the unified concepts of ‘the land’ to a perspective that includes the precarious relations between humans, nonhuman animals, and their environment, these texts highlight the need for greater, and more nuanced, engagement with fictional representations of nonhuman animals.

Keywords: nonhuman animals; rewilding; fish; crofting; Independence Referendum; peripherality

1. Introduction

In John Burnside’s short story ‘Slut’s Hair’, Janice, an abused wife, sits alone in her flat after a grotesque scene of forced amateur dental extraction by her husband Rob. As she waits for Rob to return home, Janice believes she sees a movement in the corner of the room, ‘something vague and unfinished, [. . .] an animal, though what kind of animal she couldn’t say’ (Burnside 2013, p. 42). She first believes the animal to be a kitten, then a fox, before finally recognising it as ‘a small, long-haired, powder-blue mouse with tiny feet and a sharp, clever face, gazing up at her from the shadows’ (Burnside 2013, p. 43). The animal is known in its fear, and she feels a profound need to save it, despite not knowing how to catch a living animal, or what she might do with it. As she grabs for the mouse, she at first believes she has missed it entirely, but then sees its face, no longer scared, in her hand. Yet Janet continues to worry that the mouse ‘would vanish altogether, if she tightened her grip any further’ and, as Rob appears, the animal ‘melt[s] away, dwindling between her fingers to the merest clutch of hair and dust’ (Burnside 2013, p. 45). It is only at this moment that she realises that she has failed to catch the mouse at all, but grasped only dust and detritus, the titular slut’s hair, in its place.

The mouse in the story may be a hallucination brought on by painkillers; the apparent moment of cross-species identification, and recognition of shared vulnerability, is perhaps only anthropomorphic projection or wish fulfilment. In the space of a few pages, the mouse is represented in three distinct ways. It first appears as undifferentiated animal, occupying ‘the structural position that is the opposite of humanity’ (Boggs 2013, p. 49). The mouse appears simply as ‘other’, as Janice’s inability to

distinguish its species indicates. As Janice looks at the mouse, and it appears to return her gaze, however, it appears to represent some form of companionship or communion: mouse and human are unified by emotional affect and physical vulnerability. Its disappearance, however, is more troubling. The mouse becomes known by its lack of embodiment, to the extent that its very existence becomes indeterminate; as much as it seems to have either causal or metaphoric power, it is made peripheral to the action of the narrative. As Colleen Glenney Boggs writes, in the context of American literature, nonhuman animals often ‘generate a process of destabilization: the figurative points to the real, and the real asserts itself as figurative’ (Boggs 2013, p. 36). This dual movement is reflected throughout Burnside’s story, where the mouse simultaneously exists as itself, a marker of the real, and as a symbol or metonym for human experience. While this destabilisation is a common feature of literary representations of animals, however, the mouse’s inexplicable disappearance is curious not only in its own right, but also represents a general trend in contemporary Scottish fiction.

Nonhuman animals, writes Akira Mizuta Lippit, ‘exist in a state of perpetual vanishing’; in the context of climate change and environmental collapse, the absence or disappearance of animals is a sign of the crises of modernity (Lippit 2000, p. 1). The spectrality or peripherality of nonhuman animals is especially apparent in both twenty-first-century Scottish fiction and its critical reception. Numerous studies have reflected the so-called ‘animal turn’ in other national literatures and critical discourses. Kathryn Kirkpatrick, for instance, asserts the centrality of representations of nonhuman animals in Irish literature, claiming that critical animal studies

engages with and unsettles the boundaries and definitions of “nation” by exploring colonial, postcolonial, and globalized manifestations of Ireland as country and state as well as the human animal and nonhuman animal migrations that challenge a variety of literal and cultural borders. (Kirkpatrick 2015, p. 2)

As Robert McKay summarises recent work in the field of literary animal studies, contemporary research reveals ‘the omnipresence of human–animal encounters and ideas about the animal in cultural texts’ (McKay 2014, p. 638). For Kirkpatrick and McKay, and many others, the importance of examining the literary representation of nonhuman animals is not limited to cataloguing examples, but rather suggests how attention to nonhuman animals can destabilise pre-established categories of species, intellectual and cultural hierarchies, and ideas of region and nation.

Similar ideas are prevalent in much contemporary poetry and nonfiction writing, as well as its critical reception. Louisa Gairn, for instance, highlights the centrality of the ‘animal encounter’ not only in the poetry of Kathleen Jamie and John Burnside, but throughout the Scottish poetic tradition (Gairn 2015, p. 141). In Jamie’s essays, especially, animal encounters are mutually transformative. In ‘On Rona’, for instance, she describes her breathless excitement at spotting a pod of killer whales from a cliff-top, a sight that reminds her that she too has ‘an animal body, all muscle and nerve’, while later a seal gazes back, finding the watching humans ‘[o]bjects of fascination’ (Jamie 2012, pp. 199, 201). Humans and nonhuman animals share a world, and encounters with other species act as reminders of the centrality of creaturely experience. Such encounters reveal that anthropocentric perspectives are always partial; many of Jamie’s essays point to the limits of human understanding. Alexandra Campbell likewise charts the movement from a ‘singular anthropocentric “I” to a relational meshwork which blends and blurs the boundaries of human and animal life’ in Burnside’s poetry (Campbell 2016, p. 100). The proliferation of new nature writing and animal-centred memoirs, such as Amy Liptrot’s *The Outrun* (Liptrot 2016), likewise suggests the importance of nonhuman animals in Scottish writing more generally. The animal, observed and observing, is everpresent.

Similar ideas are, however, surprisingly absent from contemporary fiction, especially in more realist modes. In Burnside’s Gothic novels such as *The Locust Room* (Burnside 2002) and *Glister* (Burnside 2008), as in Iain Banks’s *The Wasp Factory* (Banks 1984), nonhuman animals, while present, are opposed to the sovereign, political, modern, and language-using human, almost always defined in such texts as male. In Gothic and fantastic novels by Alice Thompson and Kirsty Logan, including *The Falconer* (Thompson 2008) and *The Gloaming* (Logan 2018) respectively, nonhuman animals often

occupy a liminal place that reflects the human protagonists' own uncertain position in the world. Yet nonhuman animals make infrequent appearances in more traditional realist contemporary fiction: there are no obvious counterparts to Melissa Harrison, in England, or Sara Baume, in Ireland, to name but two. Additionally, Scottish contemporary literary studies has largely avoided any focus on animal representation in recent fiction. If 'the animal', as Kari Weil has influentially written, 'has functioned as an unexamined foundation on which the idea of the human and hence the humanities have been built', this relative absence suggests new opportunities for reevaluating the formulation of environmental concerns in a Scottish context (Weil 2012, p. 23).

In particular, when animals do appear in recent Scottish fiction, they are known through their peripherality, at the same time that they often appear in peripheral or under-studied texts. This article combines three pairs of recent novels that can themselves be considered peripheral in different ways. Ian Stephen's *A Book of Death and Fish* (Stephen 2014) and Malachy Tallack's *The Valley at the Centre of the World* (Tallack 2018), both first novels, concern human–animal interactions in crofting and fishing communities in the Scottish islands, emphasising the importance of animal life in particular to local environments. James Robertson's *To Be Continued* (Robertson 2016) and Andrew O'Hagan's *The Life and Opinions of Maf the Dog, and of His Friend Marilyn Monroe* (O'Hagan 2010), on the other hand, centre nonhuman animals in urban environments, but primarily for comic effect. Mandy Haggith's *Bear Witness* (Haggith 2013) is paired with the English writer Sarah Hall's *The Wolf Border* (Hall 2015), as both novels tackle the theme of rewilding in curious ways. The pairings are separated according to the three central categories into which nonhuman animals are traditionally placed: the agricultural, the domestic companion, and the wild. None of these novels have been extensively discussed in Scottish criticism; each might be considered, whether in terms of authorial profile, relation to the author's other works, or generic and political perspectives, to be somewhat marginalised. Looking at these six texts in relation, however, both reveals the necessity of incorporating key themes in literary animal study in Scottish criticism and illuminates the peculiar vanishing of nonhuman animals in recent fiction.

2. Island Animals

While Stephen's gargantuan *A Book of Death and Fish* gradually reveals itself as a *bildungsroman* concerning the first-person narrator Peter Macauley, for much of its length it avoids linear narrative, appearing as a series of stories about various aspects of life on Lewis in the twentieth century. From the opening pages, Macauley emphasises not only the centrality of the fishing industry to Stornoway, but its difference from the mainland. Immediately after describing his birth, he describes the 'cuddies' he caught as a child, the 'small fry of lythe, saithe, cod and whiting': 'Later I learned that the cuddy was strictly only the young of the saithe or coalfish. In other parts of Scotland, the word means horse. Coves from away are welcome to use the word any way they want but we know what it really means' (Stephen 2014, p. 7). As the novel's title suggests, fish are central to understanding this world—Macauley writes that he 'owe[s] his existence to herring' (Stephen 2014, p. 30) and so must be known in their particularity. The relation between fish and humans is individual and intimate, and particular to the island. Macauley's last will and testament, presented at the novel's end, includes a two-page discussion of the menu for his funeral, including recipes for gurnard, mackerel, and megrim. At the close of the novel, one of his friends comments not only on the instructions, but the vocabulary Macauley uses:

Some of Peter's stated provisions, particularly those relating to the menu, were somewhat challenging. But all involved carried out their duties to the best of their ability according to the availability of fish. [. . .] You may have been confused by Peter's use of the word *runag* for mackerel. My research informs me that this is a Gaelic term for 'sweetheart'. This seems to be a transliteration of the Gaelic word *rionnach* (mackerel) but perhaps, for Peter, the two meanings are fairly close. (Stephen 2014, p. 536)

Fish are an agricultural commodity, certainly—there is no scene in the novel in which a fish returns a human gaze—but they are also loved, and Macauley’s relationship with fish defines him.

Throughout the novel, the relation between fish and language is used to explain Macauley’s own place in the world. Midway through the text, he provides a recipe for sea trout with potatoes and parsley, beginning, more unusually, with instructions on the best way to poach a fish. He pauses his narration to reflect: ‘Let’s stay with this. Going to take a sea trout. Going out over the hill. This is research. You don’t want to postulate a pattern too soon. You don’t want to assume this is like that. This proves that. Or that causes this’ (Stephen 2014, p. 348). The paragraph functions as a description of the novel as a whole, which similarly avoids easy correlations. It also begins a peculiar sequence of digressions, starting with the specific island meaning of ‘cuddy’, as quoted above, moving to the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 and the question of responsibility for genocide, and finally circling back to a story about poaching sea trout. The unusual juxtaposition of local and global events is presented not only as an insight into Macauley’s thought processes but as a way to break down categorical boundaries between individual and community, human and animal, and past and present. Stephen implies that everything that happens matters, and to isolate particular events as of more or less importance would be to ignore the way the self is affected by myriad influences.

It is especially important that such passages, with which the novel is filled, always return to fish. As Anat Pick suggests, ‘the human-animal distinction constitutes an arena in which relations of power operate in their exemplary purity’ (Pick 2011, p. 1). The fish in the novel have no autonomy, certainly, or even individual characteristics: they exist to be consumed. Yet Macauley subtly suggests that there is a parallel, however loose, between his own fishing and NATO involvement in the Balkan conflict. There is certainly no direct mapping between the two events, but there is an implication that intra-human power relations operate along similar principles to human–animal ones. Just as importantly, however, Macauley’s narration suggests a principle of enmeshment as defined by Ralph C. Acampora:

We are not in some abstract, retro-Cartesian position of species solipsism where our minds seem just to float in a rarified space of pure spectatorship apart from all ecological enmeshment and social connection with other organisms and persons, wondering, as it were, if ‘there’s anybody out there.’ [. . .] Where we begin, quite on the contrary, is always already caught up in the experience of being a live body thoroughly involved in a plethora of ecological and social interrelationships with other living bodies and people. (Acampora 2006, pp. 4–5)

This is the position adopted by Macauley in his account of his life. The novel certainly can be read simply as the way one man is formed in relation to his community, and that community’s formation in relation to the fishing industry. As such, it follows a long literary tradition stretching back at least as far as Neil M. Gunn’s *The Silver Darlings* (1941) (Gunn 1969). Yet Stephen’s novel also suggests that the very ideas of major and minor narratives, or centre and periphery, must be rethought. An individual fishing expedition might be as important in the formation of an individual as a global conflict; likewise, paying attention only to human life is a misrepresentation of lived experience, which always involves the complex of interrelation described by Acampora.

While *A Book of Death and Fish* largely avoids nostalgia and takes account of changes in the fishing industry, it suggests at times that human–animal relations are fundamentally constant. Tallack’s *The Valley at the Centre of the World*, on the other hand, depicts a Shetland crofting community that seems on the verge of imminent collapse as its inhabitants depart for the mainland. Sandy and Emma, a young crofting couple originally from Shetland who meet in Edinburgh and return home in their twenties, originally suggest that they’re “‘tied to da islands by elastic”’: it is impossible to ignore their roots (Tallack 2018, p. 5). Their initial encounters with nonhuman animals are certainly not romanticised; the novel opens with Sandy and David, his father-in-law, killing and gutting a lamb. Although Sandy accepts that this is preferable to an abattoir—‘[e]verything was calmer and more honest this way’—the visceral detail of the following scene clearly indicates the absence of any pastoral idyll (Tallack 2018, p. 7). Sandy’s discomfort is combined with his sense that his relationship with sheep, combining care

with violence, is natural and appropriate. Yet he remains hesitant about his place in the valley; later he finds himself ‘trying to develop the habit of noticing the animals, but he wasn’t always sure what to notice’ (Tallack 2018, pp. 193–94). Sandy is aware of his relation to both agricultural and wild animals, and accepts their relevance to his own life, but lacks a perspective that can incorporate them into his own life.

These scenes of agricultural life are juxtaposed with the writing of Alice, an incomer who has come to the island after the death of her husband. In her account of the land around her, she recognises that

The story of the valley was much more than the chronology of what human beings had done here. It was everything that happened in this place, everything that belonged here and lived here. So she’d begun to learn, too, about the *natural* history, reading books on the islands’ birds and plants, then trying to find them for herself, describing and photographing them. (Tallack 2018, pp. 22–23. Original emphasis.)

Alice becomes overwhelmed as she realises that, to tell the truth of a valley, she must consider not only mammals, but also insects and other small creatures who contribute to the ecosystem. Moving past the limits of human discourse, she fears, may result in ‘a vast, shapeless mound’ (Tallack 2018, p. 67). Her account of the valley begins as an ‘insurance against loss’, a way to make the world permanent, but the book ultimately becomes ‘as much about herself as it was about her place’ (Tallack 2018, p. 189). Taking notice of the world in all its multitude, and in all its creaturely particularity, allows her to consider her own place in it. Sandy comes to a similar realisation, arguing that Shetland life is not restrictive, but lets him ‘feel like a different person now. I couldn’t be *this* person then because I wasn’t *here*’ (Tallack 2018, p. 158. Original emphasis). For both characters, learning to live in the valley is not simply a matter of being accustomed to a particular community, but necessitates reconsidering one’s own place in the world. As Donna Haraway writes, interspecies entanglement or ‘comingling’ is essential to both individual and communal identity formation: ‘the contact zones of companion species [are] where the situated work and play of myriad critters, including people, make history’ (Haraway 2012, p. 18).

Both Stephen and Tallack situate their novels precisely in such contact zones. The novels suggest that individuals can only be understood in relation to a larger community, human and nonhuman, and that a purely anthropocentric perspective needs to be replaced with one that takes account of the importance of interspecies connections. While both novels acknowledge the long agricultural heritage of their chosen regions, they do not dwell in nostalgia or romanticise the difficulties faced by the modern farming and fishing industries. Yet it is noteworthy that the communities they depict are both culturally and geographically insular: the continuity of this approach to the land appears only to be possible on the islands. It is perhaps surprising that mainland farming is almost untreated in recent Scottish fiction—Jim Carruth’s verse novella *Killochries* (Carruth 2015) and Jackie Kay’s children’s text *Strawgirl* (Kay 2002) are two of the few counter-examples—given that, according to government statistics, roughly three-quarters of total land area in Scotland is given to agricultural holdings.¹ Accounts of this land, however, are largely restricted to poetry and nature writing, and rarely appear in novels. The prevalence of agricultural land, however, challenges any straightforward separation between urban areas, largely Lowland, and wilderness, largely Highland: the majority of Scottish land is inhabited, but not solely by humans. Stephen and Tallack convey a sense of ‘home’ that involves a close connection and interrelation between humans, animals, and the land—indeed, it is the final word of Tallack’s novel—that is not frequently found in urban-centred stories.

¹ In total, 73% of the total land area in Scotland, or 5.7 million hectares, is agricultural. While less than 10% of Scottish land can be considered arable, the remainder is a combination of improved grassland, mixed agriculture, and rough grazing. See www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/AgricultureFisheries/agritopics/LandUseAll and www.hutton.ac.uk/learning/exploringscotland/land-capability-agriculture-scotland for more statistical information.

Even recent critical accounts, such as Cairns Craig's analysis of 'Highlandism', tend to overlook both the importance of agricultural land and the multiple species that inhabit it. Craig argues that the opposition between Highland and Lowland 'is too easily invoked' and 'ignores the extent to which many Lowland Scots are the descendants of Highlanders, and how many Lowland Scots, like Nan Shepherd, made the country's mountains the focus of their spiritual aspirations' (Craig 2018, p. 169). While he attempts to overcome a simplistic binary, however, Craig firmly positions the mountains as other, more conceived of than inhabited, and elides agricultural spaces entirely. Such a dichotomy goes back at least as far as Lewis Grassie Gibbon, who in the essay 'The Land' argues that Scotland possesses 'the most unkindly agricultural lands in the world', and life there 'is for no modern man or woman—even the finest of these. It belongs to a different, an alien generation' (Gibbon and MacDiarmid 1934, p. 295). Any return to agricultural life, he posits, is dreamed-up by urban 'pseudo-literary romantics' who have had their heads turned by kailyard fiction.² Instead, he argues that 'the real land' is that which is 'unstirred and greatly untouched by men, unknowing ploughing or crops or the coming of the scythe' (Gibbon and MacDiarmid 1934, p. 300). Likewise, he reflects briefly on the dearth of natural history in Scottish writing, but argues quite explicitly in favour of an anthropocentric focus:

We Scots have little interest in the wild and its world; I realize how compassed and controlled is my own interest, I am vague about sparrows and tits, martins and swallows, I know little of their seasons, and my ignorance lies heavily upon me not at all. I am concerned so much more deeply with men and women [. . .]. To me it is inconceivable that sincere and honest men would go outside the range of their own species with gifts of pity and angry compassion and rage when there is horror and dread among humankind. I am unreasonably and mulishly prejudiced in favour of my own biological species. (Gibbon and MacDiarmid 1934, pp. 304–5)

As elsewhere in *Scottish Scene*, Gibbon's sincerity in this passage may be limited; he details the horrors done to both domestic animals and livestock, and certainly his 'mulish' prejudice contradicts his assertions of human import. Yet the shift here from a hatred of agricultural life to a praise of the apparently (if not historically) untouched wilderness to an assertion of the value of human concerns over those of other animals still forms an undercurrent in much Scottish writing, in stark contrast to Stephen's and Tallack's novels. There may be more accounts of Scottish birds than in 1934, but in fiction, certainly, human concerns are still frequently removed from a concern with their environment, while those texts that depict the comingling of species often emerge from and depict lands remote from the urban population centres, and are, perhaps, given a marginalised position in the ensuing critical accounts.

3. Observant Animals

Domestic or companion animals make more frequent appearances in contemporary Scottish literature than fish and livestock. While James Robertson and Andrew O'Hagan have been firmly placed in the mainstream of contemporary Scottish fiction, their novels discussed here have received limited commentary, and might initially be seen, in their comedic focus, as departures from the writers' broader political and historic concerns. Both novels are less concerned with their animal protagonists than with challenging the distinction between fiction and fact. O'Hagan's *Maf*, a (real) Maltese terrier owned by Marilyn Monroe, begins his account by asserting that dogs 'have none of that fatal human weakness for making large distinctions between what is real and what is imagined. It is all the same, more or less' (O'Hagan 2010, p. 2). Mungo Forth Mungo, the (fictional) toad at the centre of Robertson's novel, likewise argues that 'all fiction' is 'thinly disguised autobiography' (Robertson 2016, p. 113).

² Kailyard fiction, as exemplified by texts such as J. M. Barrie's *A Window in Thrums* (1889) (Barrie 2005), is a popular mode of nineteenth-century fiction focused on nostalgic, often romanticized, visions of small-town and agricultural life.

The animal figures are used less for any insight into animality, or human–animal relations, than as conduits for discussions about the nature of fiction and representation. Likewise, both novels—much like Stephen’s—posit ‘digression as another creed’ (O’Hagan 2010, p. 8); their use of picaresque form, and often-convoluted, non-linear storytelling, opens an avenue to explore the importance of digressive narrative structures for reflecting human and nonhuman relations.

Throughout O’Hagan’s novel, Maf emphasises the accuracy of his own interpretation of the world, in contrast to the swirling babble of the human characters. At times, the novel appears almost as a checklist of mid-century cultural elites, usually drunk at parties. One party scene, at Alfred Kazin’s apartment, includes appearances by Carson McCullers, Marius Bewley, John O’Hara, Lillian Hellman, Robert Motherwell, Norman Mailer, Norman Podhoretz, F. W. Dupee, Stephen Spender, Ted Solotaroff, Irving Howe, Lionel and Diana Trilling, and Edmund Wilson, among others, discussing the work of Mary McCarthy, Jean Stafford, John Updike, Cyril Connolly, Edith Sitwell, Dwight MacDonald, D.H. Lawrence, Kenneth Koch, Allen Ginsberg, Mae West, Oscar Wilde, Ronald Firbank, Henry James, Greta Garbo, Samuel Beckett, Saul Bellow, Sigmund Freud, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Nikita Khrushchev. The density of allusions is overwhelming; even if the reader is familiar with most or all of the figures concerned, it is difficult to differentiate them in this context. Even Marilyn Monroe, who from the title on is posited as a major figure, is not described in a way that exceeds standard public perception. Instead, Maf draws attention to the elements that most interest him: other dogs. At a party with the actors Kim Novak and Peter Lawford, he gazes adoringly at the latter:

I loved him in *Son of Lassie*, the RAF pilot helped to safety across the snows of Norway by a dog whose eyes blazed with the strange existentialist thinking of Martin Heidegger. The dog was living for the moment, unsure whose side to be on, but Lawford made himself a likeable project and convinced the dog to gain its freedom by throwing off reason and morality. I gather this is not how the film is usually described. (O’Hagan 2010, p. 211)

Few readers, human or nonhuman, would identify *Son of Lassie* as Lawford’s greatest role, and likely none would find an echo of Heideggerian thought in it. Maf consistently draws attention to the hidden, but central, role that dogs play in human affairs, and the potential philosophical and cultural reverberations of this. At the same time, Maf’s response cannot be said to be typically canine, whatever that might be. Maf thus positions himself as equal to the cultural elite by whom he is surrounded, and more insightful than many of them, while also blurring species boundaries and assumptions.

As such, Maf both embraces and challenges the traditional symbolic function of the dog as ‘an interstitial creature, neither person nor beast, forever oscillating uncomfortably between the roles of high-status animal and low-status person’ (Serpell 1995, p. 254). Maf sees himself as the intellectual equal, at the very least, of those around him, but he is also, due to his inability to communicate with them through spoken language, relegated to a secondary status. This placement is particularly curious in terms of his insistence on the value of his Scottish heritage. He describes how his ancestors came from Malta to Leith, where his grandsire Muzzy ‘met a full Maltese bitch against the park railings on Heriot Row, right across from the house of Robert Louis Stevenson, whose cousin Noona once patted them both’ (O’Hagan 2010, p. 6). Maf likewise speaks of his fondness for Robert Burns’s ‘The Twa Dogs’, which his breeder, a Mrs Duff, used to send to government officials, as ‘it might take the innocence of dogs to put them straight’ (O’Hagan 2010, p. 265), and frequently mentions his respect for Greyfriars Bobby. Maf is as much an outsider by nationality as by species; while this theme is never developed in the novel, it is frequently reiterated.

O’Hagan never accounts for Maf’s enormous knowledge of cultural, historical, and literary material, and there is no attempt to position him as particularly doglike. Even more than Virginia Woolf’s *Flush* (1933) (Woolf 2009), itself mentioned in the text as an antecedent, the animal narrator is used only to reflect on human characters. There is no sense, as in much dog-centred fiction, that the animal exists for the psychological or emotional benefit of its human companions. Yet the function of the dog narrator here can be summed up, in part, by Marjorie Garber’s claim that at ‘a time in modern

culture when claims about the universal and timeless have to compete with the need for historical and cultural specificity [. . .] dog stories transcend the personal, permit thoughts about the general instead' (Garber 1996, p. 34). Even as O'Hagan's novel seems at times to be little but a list of historical and cultural specifics, many of which will be of limited interest to the reader, the value of its canine (and Scottish) focus is that it introduces a wry, peripheral voice which suggests the absurdity of much of the action. O'Hagan does not repeat the tragic overtones found in most accounts of Monroe's life, nor does he take the intellectual history of the twentieth century unduly seriously, but rather uses his narrator to suggest the fundamental absurdity of much of what he describes.

This sense of absurdity is compounded in Robertson's novel, not least by the placement of a talking toad at its centre. While toads may not be typically represented as companion animals, Mungo serves the same purpose here as Maf in O'Hagan's text: he is an observant figure used to make light of the self-seriousness of the human characters. Unlike Maf, Mungo does speak to multiple humans, yet there is no particular suggestion that the novel either requires the reader to believe in speaking toads, nor that it is a fantastic text: there is simply a speaking toad in this text. Robertson introduces the first of ten sections titled 'Conversations with a Toad' with a two-line section titled 'Stories': 'If someone tells you that there are already enough stories in the world, they are missing the point. The point is, the world *is* stories. Here's one more' (Robertson 2016, p. 54. Original emphasis). A talking toad makes for a good story.

The specific story Robertson tells is of Scotland immediately following the Independence Referendum of 2014. As one character says: 'The referendum may be over, but the question it addressed is neither over nor done with. How could it be?' (Robertson 2016, p. 252). Douglas Findhorn Elder, the novel's human protagonist, is commissioned to write a series of profiles of writers and philosophers—'writers who write serious books', rather than 'your usual crime, sex and swearing mob'—to be collected into a book called *The Idea of Scotland* (Robertson 2016, pp. 70–71). *To Be Continued*, however, is not a 'serious book' in any conventional sense, but liberally borrows from Compton Mackenzie in its farcical depiction of Highland life. While its human characters are preoccupied with midlife crises and multiple cases of mistaken identity, Mungo is the closest the novel comes to a moral compass, at one point even halting a bootlegging operation. The toad's significance is his consistent individual identity. As he explains himself on first meeting Elder: 'We [toads] are all uncommon. Each of us is an individual' (Robertson 2016, p. 62). Mungo has no interest in a national or even familial identity; while some of the human characters have two or three separate names and versions of themselves, the toad is simply himself. Like O'Hagan's Maf, his species-based separation from human affairs gives him greater insight than any of the other characters. This insight could be correlated with Craig's influential claim that the tension between the core and periphery is the central dynamic in Scottish literature. He argues in favour of a peripheral perspective that neither accepts the tenets of dominant cultures nor is seen as 'a poor reflection of the same fundamental structures', which he sees as fundamental to Robertson's own historical writings (Craig 1996, p. 30; 2017, p. 172). In this light, Robertson could be simply using the toad as a metonym for Scottish culture more generally.

At the end of the novel, however, the rationale behind Mungo's appearance becomes clear, albeit in a mediated form. Mungo's last words are not his own, but imagined for him by Elder, in a lengthy, impassioned speech:

'You think this belongs to you. With all your libraries full of books and universities full of accumulated knowledge, your internet and railways and great cities, you think you are here to stay. You have no idea! You have barely arrived. [. . .] You think that you know more than we do, that you have made a storehouse for your children, that you are greater than any other living thing. But the toad, the toadstool, the ant, the blackbird, the deer, the daffodil, the jellyfish—you are less than all these. That's it really. You know nothing and have nothing and are nothing.' (Robertson 2016, pp. 322–23)

Elder immediately dismisses his own fanciful notions. There is no precedent for this speech either in his own actions earlier in the novel, nor in Mungo's, and it could be treated as one more digression. The speech, however, in its placement at the end of the text, allows a retroactive reading of the novel that challenges the primacy of its human concerns. The nonhuman world is greater than the anthropocentric novel can encompass, and the convoluted stories of a novel such as *To Be Continued* may only be distractions from more significant concerns. If Stephen's and Tallack's novels demonstrate the importance of comingling, Robertson's and O'Hagan's equally demonstrate its difficulties. Karla Armbruster suggests, reflecting on the commonality of talking animals in contemporary fiction, that 'a yearning to genuinely know the otherness of nonhuman animals runs through most, if not all, talking animal stories': even when such texts ultimately adopt an anthropomorphic perspective, they are constructed from a desire to understand nonhuman animals (Armbruster 2013, p. 19). This, however, is not the case in O'Hagan's or Robertson's novels: they tell the reader nothing of what it might be like to be a dog or a toad. Rather, both texts use their animal protagonists to reflect on the arbitrariness, and often irrelevance, of human endeavours.

Burnside opens his utopian novella *Havergey* with the claim that the text maintains an anthropocentric focus because 'animals have no need of Utopia' (Burnside 2017). Robertson and O'Hagan go further, however, to suggest that not only are animals outside the human political sphere—an idea that can be traced back to Aristotle—but that animals reveal the essentially arbitrary nature of literary, political, and aesthetic concerns. Their novels do not illuminate animal life, or human–animal interactions, but rather highlight the marginality of what may, in their other novels, appear to be more significant human concerns. In their focus on the value of storytelling, however, they suggest the extent to which narrative is not restricted to humans. The anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing notes that while social scientists have frequently believed that 'talking animals are for children and primitives', storytellers from all cultures have often 'remind[ed] us of the lively activities of all beings, human and not human' (Tsing 2015, pp. 155, vii). Stories of talking animals not only allow humans to cease thinking of the natural world as a remote other, but also emphasise the way the world is constructed through storytelling. Maf's and Munro's emphasis on the value of story, rather than fact, is a way of including humans and nonhumans in the same narrative. While the comic tone of both novels might seem opposed to more serious explorations of interspecies relations, in Robertson's novel especially this is precisely the point: it is only the story told for its own sake that allows an escape from anthropocentric concerns. While these novels might not offer any insights into animality as such, then, they gesture, if no more, to the possibility of a more inclusive storytelling, narrated from the margins.

4. Returning Animals

Each of the novels discussed above focuses on animals primarily in relation to human endeavours. Insofar as the novel is inherently an anthropocentric form, this is inevitable and yet, as Tsing suggests, stories of animals are able to challenge not only preconceptions about species relations, but about the idea of nature as such. Just as Robertson and O'Hagan challenge the binary division between fact and fiction in favour of storytelling, Timothy Morton laments that the majority of ecological writing is in 'information dump mode': rather than relying on 'factoids', he suggests, ecological reality requires 'that we *don't* immediately "know" exactly what to do' (Morton 2018, p. 28. Original emphasis). That is, if facts about climate change, for instance, reify Nature as an abstract other, confusion may be a more honest way of inhabiting the world. As the texts above suggest, digressive narrative provides a potential pathway not to a more unified understanding of the world, but rather one that reveals friction, incompatibility, and difficulty as much as it shows the necessity of comingled existence. Nonlinear storytelling allows a space to explore the world, and all of the previously unheard voices in it, even as it often reverts to an anthropocentric norm. Indeed, as Alan Macpherson writes, 'our lack of ability to fully discern, understand, or predict the implications of our historical epoch [. . .] can produce a sense

of the world as enchanted' (Macpherson 2018, p. 247). This enchantment may be the proper place of fable and fiction.

Curiously, however, the two final novels to be discussed here, concerning efforts to reintroduce wolves and bears to Scotland, contain more linear narratives than the texts discussed above, and are more explicitly concerned with human politics. Hall's *The Wolf Border* and Haggith's *Bear Witness* tell remarkably similar stories: the protagonist, after extensive travel and discussion with sympathetic figures from a number of countries and backgrounds, finds a way to reintroduce predators to Scotland, where they must make their own way forward. Rewilding is positioned both in terms of human communication, as the protagonists must work with government and environmental agencies and resist the fears of the local population, and in the relinquishing of control, as the nonhuman animals must eventually be left to be wild. Both novels, too, wrestle with the complicated ideas of Scottish wilderness, and how it should be approached. They stand slightly apart from their authors' other works: while *The Wolf Border* is largely placed in the Cumbrian setting of many of Hall's other texts and shares similar concerns about ideas of nature, it is her most political novel and the only one to consider Scotland, while *Bear Witness* is Haggith's only novel set in the present, although it echoes the concerns with wild animals in Scotland found in *The Last Bear* (Haggith 2008) and *The Walrus Mutterer* (Haggith 2018). The striking similarities between the novels suggest recognition of the way individual, international, and nonhuman stories are always intertwined.

From its opening, Haggith's *Bear Witness* emphasises the way any idea of nature or wilderness is always mediated through the human. A tour guide, for instance, advises tourists that

'for a small extra charge, we can drive you out on to the moor to the south and see if we can spot any deer, or we can even take you to the wildlife reserve at Glenmathan to see if you can spot any of their big carnivores. That's for those of you who want to make your bears really realistic!!' (Haggith 2013, p. 34)

The 'really realistic' wild animal is the one transported to Scotland and kept in captivity. Scotland in Haggith's novel is—unlike her depictions of Romania, Russia, or Norway—no longer a nation conducive to the wild. As Esther Woolfson similarly notes in her memoir of living with crows in Aberdeen: 'There's little wilderness [in Scotland] because everything is owned, managed, controlled, reachable from any of the cities within a relatively short time' (Woolfson 2013, p. 150). The best that can be hoped for, in Haggith's novel, is the 'pretty wild' (Haggith 2013, p. 40). In Hall's novel, on the other hand, it is England—specifically the area of Cumbria forty miles south of Scotland where Rachel Caine, the novel's protagonist, initially reintroduces wolves—that is controlled by humans: 'She did not know it then, but in reality it was a kempt place, cultivated, even the high grassland covering the fells was manmade. Though it formed her notions of beauty, true wilderness lay elsewhere' (Hall 2015, p. 29). Scotland, on the other hand, is a place of freedom. This echoes the perspective found in nonfiction accounts such as George Monbiot's *Feral*, where he argues that in a context where 'large charismatic species' are being introduced everywhere in Europe 'except Britain and Ireland', rewilding projects are especially well-suited to the Highlands, where 'human beings are an endangered species' (Monbiot 2013, pp. 99, 109). Rewilding is in part an aesthetic project, designed to offset 'a dull world' and prevent the rise of monocultures (Monbiot 2013, p. 154). The Highlands, he argues repeatedly, are the perfect place for such work, both because of the degree to which the red deer population has expanded in size and because there are relatively few human inhabitants who might be inconvenienced.

While both novels present rewilding in a positive light, and wrestle with the question of how wild the Highlands might be thought to be, they curiously both posit a counterfactual independent Scotland as the necessary condition for rewilding. In Haggith's novel the protagonist Callis MacArthur explains that because "finally the people have voted yes [. . .] we might be able to start at least talking about reintroducing bears" (Haggith 2013, p. 115). The Highlands of Scotland, she notes "have a significantly lower population density than anywhere in Europe" and, as another character argues:

“Even Scotland’s better than [. . .] captivity” (Haggith 2013, pp. 206, 216–17). While the novel ends with the successful reintroduction of a mother bear and cub to the Highlands, this requires a lack of further human engagement: they can only be observed from afar. In order to create the necessary conditions, that is, humans must relinquish their own claim on the land, which Haggith suggests is only possible through a combination of political independence and European cooperation.

Hall makes the political stakes far clearer. For much of the novel, readers might be puzzled about the decision to refer to prominent politicians in the Referendum debate by different names, although in all other respects the novel is set in a very familiar present. Hall’s purpose becomes clear when, near the novel’s end, the Referendum is successful. Scotland then becomes a ‘beacon of progression’ in contrast to ‘a beleaguered England, an England no longer associated with Scotland’s great natural resources’ (Hall 2015, pp. 326, 416). Like the Scottish population, the wolves, once they escape from captivity in Cumbria, must make their own way: after ‘three weeks’ hard negotiations in the rich farmlands of the central belt’, they eventually make their way to Rannoch where, as planned—and suggested by Monbiot—they can control the local deer herds (Hall 2015, p. 430). Haggith and Hall both suggest that only an independent Scotland can make room for an independent population of nonhuman animals. Predator species cannot be accommodated in a United Kingdom that focuses on human concerns: taking nonhuman animals seriously as participants in a community requires substantial political change. While both writers include lovingly detailed descriptions of nonhuman animals, the focus is largely on the human: unlike the novels above, nonhuman animals cannot be seen either in terms of human benefit or as observers of human actions, but must rather be positioned outside human affairs. Animals can only return to the wild once the human need to pronounce on them dissipates.

5. Conclusions

These six novels are not the only ones to comment on nonhuman life in contemporary Scotland, but there are at best only a handful of others, largely restricted to Gothic and SF modes. While they are tonally and thematically diverse, they suggest the extent to which taking nonhuman animals seriously in fiction allows for different approaches to ideas of community, storytelling, and political engagement. Looking at nonhuman animals allows for new ideas of nature and the wild, and a different approach to the questions of land that have long dominated Scottish writing. The relative rarity of such approaches, and the corresponding lack of critical attention to nonhuman animals in fiction, despite the prevalence of ecocritical writing elsewhere (including in this special issue), suggests the possibility, and indeed necessity, of additional work in this field.

As Haraway writes: ‘Recuperation is still possible, but only in multispecies alliance, across the killing divisions of nature, culture, and technology’ (Haraway 2016, pp. 117–18). These novels suggest very different alliances, whether in Stephen’s and Tallack’s incorporation of nonhuman animals into a human community at the same time as the animals are fundamentally tied to consumption, Robertson’s and O’Hagan’s use of nonhuman animals as caustic narrators on human concerns, or Haggith’s and Hall’s suggestion of the possibility of the return of wilderness in a new political structure. All of them, however, suggest the immediate necessity of rethinking divisions between nature and culture, and overturning, to however limited an extent, the anthropocentric focus of much fiction. In their frequent use of digression, their incorporation of contemporary political concerns with much older concepts of community, and their simultaneous focus on nonhuman animals as both knowable through fiction and still partially remote from human concerns, they suggest a potential path forward for Scottish writing on nature and environmental concerns. Most of all, their focus on the value of marginal voices, and on the importance of literature as a space for including peripheral ideas, suggests the continued importance of the novel as a tool for highlighting the complexity of human–animal interactions.

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