The pastoral mode in the writing of Dermot Healy

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Signed declaration

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In memory of my parents,

Mary and Brendan

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Abstract

In this thesis, I address the dearth of scholarly engagement with the work of the late Irish writer, Dermot Healy. In doing so, I utilise the concept of pastoral as a mode, which I apply to his memoir, short fiction, novels and poetry. In a critical review of the scholarly engagement with the concept of pastoral, I argue that it is a mode of lasting value to literature, presenting a means of engaging seriously with themes such as dispossession and grief, that its inherent flexibility make it a valuable 'lens' through which to engage with a body of work as challenging and eclectic as that of Healy, and that the rapidly evolving field of ecocriticism owes a debt to the pastoral mode. This is followed by an in-depth engagement with Healy's writing, in which the pastoral mode is used as a framework for elucidating themes and preoccupations. His only memoir, *The Bend for Home*, is shown to share many traits with classic pastoral, such as a complex urban–rural divide and themes of grief and a lost Golden Age. In the short stories, we find a deeply anti-pastoral strain, reflected in rejections of the pastoral idyll in portraits of the natural world that emphasise human vulnerability. The novel *A Goat's Song* is considered as a pastoral elegy, in which we see its protagonist Jack Ferris successfully work through his grief over the loss of Catherine. Regarding the poetry, we find that while the early work, like the memoir, is characterised by classic pastoral traits, the last two volumes, in particular *A Fool's Errand,* reveal a distinctly post-pastoral sensibility. This is also the defining characteristic identified in Healy's final novel, *Long Time, No See*, which was written during the same ten-year time period as *A Fool's Errand* and which is presented here as an example of ecological art.

1 Introduction

At the start of his monograph *What Is Pastoral?*, Paul Alpers notes that many would ask why the subject is worthy of such attention. After all, since the second half of the last century, pastoral has come to be denigrated as having at its base 'a false vision' (Barrell and Bull, 1974, p. 4) of the rural world and the socio-economic relations underpinning its economic function, a defining characteristic of the form that serves only to obscure and even protect social inequality. However, more recent decades have seen the beginnings of a renewal of appreciation for the mode, one that comes with a more nuanced understanding of what the term pastoral actually means. Seamus Heaney's study of the poetry of Czeslaw Milosz highlights the potential capacity of the pastoral form in writing that engages seriously with the theme of human suffering, an observation that chimes with Alpers' own defence of pastoral. Recent studies have also shown its value when applied across a range of literary texts. Oona Frawley's *Irish Pastoral: Nostalgia and Twentieth Century Irish Literature*, for example, shows its usefulness as a framework through which cultural and historical developments can be illuminated, as they manifest across different writings. The conclusion we can draw from such recent scholarly engagements with pastoral is that it represents a robust and potentially powerful literary lens that can be usefully applied across a wide body of literature, especially that characterised by a preoccupation with themes of nature and landscape, as well as loss.

All of this makes the concept of pastoral an ideal framework for approaching the eclectic corpus of literature than makes up the writing of the late Dermot Healy, whose work spans the last three decades of the twentieth century and the first of this century, and who, despite a lack of critical engagement, especially outside of Ireland, has been recognised as one of the great Irish writers. The value of pastoral in considering his work is further elucidated in Chapter 2, which seeks to define pastoral, in a conceptualisation of the term that emphasises mode, rather than

genre or tradition, the emphasis here on attitude within the work of literature in question – the way or manner in which something is expressed – rather than the use of particular tropes.[1] The subsequent five chapters then apply this conceptualisation to Healy's only memoir *The Bend for Home*, a selection of his short stories, the entire corpus of his poetry, and two of his novels – *A Goat's Song* and *Long Time, No See*. The thesis thus seeks to achieve two aims: to address a dearth of scholarly engagement with the work of this acclaimed and under-studied writer; and to contribute to the small but growing body of research concerning pastoral (and the post-pastoral) in Irish literature. In doing so, it traces an evolution in Healy's writing, away from the more nostalgic, classic pastoral vision found in his memoir, *The Bend for Home*, and towards an increasingly post-pastoral sensibility. It also illuminates many of the tensions inherent in the concept of pastoral; for example, how anti-pastoral has always been an intrinsic element of the pastoral mode. Simultaneously, it shows how the pastoral found in Healy's writing is always a complex one and how, from those first short stories onwards, both the anti-pastoral and even the post-pastoral are a constant and defining aspect of his work, even within this evolution towards an increasingly post-pastoral gaze.

1.1 Genre and the pastoral mode

It is interesting to note that choice of genre seems to have had no bearing on the manifestations of the pastoral mode in Healy's writing, or the later evolution towards a deeply post-pastoral sensibility (see Chapters 6 and 7). As shown in Table 1 below, with the exception of short fiction, which, at least as reflected by its publication history, bookends his writing career, Healy switched between genres throughout his writing life. Across his memoir, short fiction, poetry and novels, we find in his writing: the Virgilian depiction of the natural world as a locale for

[1] According to Robert Scholes, in *Structuralism in Literature*, 'primary modes of fiction' derive from the way in which works of fiction 'imply attitudes' (p. 133)

treating the universal themes of grief and loss; significant and often ironic absences; and the complexity of human life illuminated. Across all these genres we also find the rural landscape being simultaneously being celebrated and challenged as a pastoral idyll. In his last decade, he wrote across three genres – the later short stories, the poetry volume *A Fool's Errand* and the novel *Long Time, No See* – and in all of these we find a marked deepening of a pre-existing ecocritical gaze.

Table 1: Chronology of works

Year	Publications	Genre
1982	*Banished Misfortunes*	Short fiction
1984	*Fighting with Shadows*	Novel
1992	*The Ballyconnell Colours*	Poetry
1994	*A Goat's Song*	Novel
1996	*The Bend for Home*	Memoir
1998	*What the Hammer*	Poetry
1999	*Sudden Times*	Novel
2001	*The Reed Bed*	Poetry
2010	*A Fool's Errand*	Poetry
2011	*Long Time, No See*	Novel
2015	*The Travels of Sorrow* (posthumous)	Poetry
2010+	Individual short stories	Short fiction

We do not argue, therefore, that Healy's choice of genre had an impact on the manifestations of the pastoral mode in his writing. In a sense, this is further proof of the robustness and inherent flexibility of the pastoral mode as a framework, or 'lens' through which to approach his varied and complex body of work. What we do see, however, in the analysis that follows, is the way in which Healy used the defining features of each specific genre in which he worked to achieve these effects. In the memoir, for example, we see how Healy made use of defining aspects of that genre, such as its episodic nature and emphasis on other characters, to achieve the distancing effect of Arcadia as a 'literary device', by emphasising the unreliability of memory and the relationship between fiction and memoir. In his short fiction, we find use of the Empsonian 'double plot', through which the complex human experience is reduced to a point where it can be captured within the containments of the short story. In the later short

stories, reader expectations regarding the form – that the story is fundamentally human-centric, that it recounts a person experiencing an irrevocable change – are exploited in the sense that these stories seem to initially adhere to such conventions, only to deliberately undermine them in the climax; in this way, Healy suggests that the human experience should perhaps not be seen as taking centre stage. In the novels, we find use is made of this longer fictional form to challenge the pastoral idyll and to express an increasingly post-pastoral sensibility. In *A Goat's Song*, for example, its experimental form alongside its treatment of conventions of grief, enable Healy to write a fictional narrative that is simultaneously an inherently elegiac work. In *Long Time, No See*, we find a critique of the novel within the novel, with its descriptions of people and place prioritised over the development of plot, through which it achieves a radical deconstruction of the typically anthropocentric nature of fiction. Finally, in the (largely lyric) poetry, we find use of defining features of this form – lyrical language, vivid imagery, sometimes involving metaphor and simile, as well as technical features such as rhythm and rhyme – to vividly evoke deeply bucolic scenes, which serve as a locale for grief. By representing the language of local people, its colloquial terms and phrases, Healy's poetry also draws attention to the inherent poetry that can reside in 'ordinary' language. Its sharp absences, typical of classic pastoral, is achieved through the use of deliberately narrow lines or economic couplets, while in some instances the appearance of a poem on the page is evocative of its subject, such as in 'A Ball of Starlings'.

This thesis does not include Healy's work in the genre of theatre – twelve original plays, as well as an adaptation of *Blood Wedding* by Federico García Lorca. This substantial body of dramatic works was considered outside the scope of this study, which limited itself to Healy's published prose and poetic writing. This is not to suggest, however, that the lens of pastoral is less relevant to his dramatic work. If anything, we might hypothesise that it will be at least as relevant there, and that it would be fruitful to how the pastoral manifests there, and in particular

his use of techniques specific to that medium. This assumption is partly based on the fact that the pastoral mode has proved relevant to all the other genres in which he wrote, and partly on a relatively recent paper on Healy's plays, which emphasised the highlighted how his dramatic works explore that 'the visceral impact of that which cannot be captured on paper, using sound, visual imagery and music' (Paull, 2016, p. 381). Paull's analysis also suggests that the plays, which like the poetry were written across Healy's entire writing career, reflect a similar preoccupation with themes relating to the defining characteristics of pastoral as a mode: the dispossessed and the disenfranchised, the questioning of a rural idyll. Focusing on two plays (*Metagama* and *Men to the Left, Women to the Right*), she highlights the 'careful physicalization' of such themes, and the highly visceral nature of these work, exemplified through stage directions which insist on incessant movement on the stage, and characters that are less three-dimensional (as we find in his fiction) and more functioning 'to demonstrate an attitude, a point of view and a feeling' (p. 371), so that the viewer is encouraged to direct their concern towards the social or political context to the human story of the play in question. In this vein, Healy's plays also make strong use of visual and auditory cues; in *Metagama*, for example, stage directions have clothes blowing in the wind on stage, thus 'almost inhabited by the wind, (they) become ghost-people, creations of the air' (p. 373). *Men to the Right, Women to the Left* could be described as pastoral in its ironic evocation of the idyllic rural scene (the 'harmless' separation of men and women in a dancehall in Ireland) which is set during the Second World War, and which through its sounds, images and language manages to indirectly evoke the worst of that dark context. In it, a similarly unsettling effect is created by an emphasis on the dark and the sounds of the wind and rain.

1.2 Outline of analysis of Healy's writing

Following the theoretical considerations of Chapter 2 (Defining Pastoral), Chapter 3 considers *The Bend for Home* as an example of classic pastoral. His only memoir, it is largely concerned

with his early childhood in the village of Finea, and the family move to Cavan town when he was a teenager. This move had a profound effect on the young Healy, who experienced extreme homesickness as a result; in *The Bend for Home*, he describes how he and his sister Miriam left their new town in the mistaken belief that they could walk home to Finea, only to find themselves, after hours of walking, back in Cavan: 'It was a great let-down to arrive back to those dark half-day streets, to hear the door open onto the gloom of the hallway' (Healy, 1996, p. 47). Many decades later, he recalled, 'initially, I didn't take to Cavan at all. … It was a leap from a village to a town, from a familiar world to an alien one' (O'Hagan, 2011). It was also in Cavan, two years after the move, that Healy's father died, heralding a period of emotional turbulence, which culminated in his dropping out of academic studies. In considering the pastoral in *The Bend for Home*, Chapter 3 shows how this homesickness for the rural home of his early childhood manifests in a deeply nostalgic (though not sentimental) vision of the rural world, with the memoir sharing traits associated with the classic pastoral writing of Virgil.

The Bend for Home was not Healy's first writing project; when he began writing in the mid to late 1970s, it was in the genre of short fiction that he worked. During a period of his life that saw him move frequently between Cavan, Dublin, Belfast and London, engaged in casual work and often living in squats,[2] he wrote a series of short stories, three of which were published in *New Irish Writing* and two of which – 'Banished Misfortune' and 'The First Snow of the Year' – won the esteemed Hennessy Award (in 1974 and 1976 respectively). In 1982, he won the ALCS Tom Gallon Trust Award for his short story, 'The Tenant'. The same year saw the publication of his short story collection *Banished Misfortune*, though Healy was not to return

[2] In a recollection that illuminates this point in his life as a kind of crossroads between his casual work and his career as a writer, Healy once described how his new publishers gave him the job of painting their office.

to the short story form until the 2000s. Chapter 4 is concerned with exploring the pastoral mode in Healy's short fiction from these two periods: the 1970s/early 1980s and the 2000s. It shows the short fiction representing a rejection of the pastoral idyll and clichéd representations of rural Ireland, while also highlighting an increasingly post-pastoral vision, particularly in the later stories, in which anti-climactic endings displace the human experience.

In 1994, *A Goat's Song*, his most highly acclaimed novel, was published. Described by Anne Enright as 'one of the big Irish novels' (O'Hagan, 2014), in that year, it won the Royal Society of Literature's Encore Award for an outstanding second novel and was longlisted for the Booker Prize. Chapter 6 considers *A Goat's Song* as an example of the pastoral elegy, as conceptualised by Peter Sacks in his monograph, *The English Elegy.* In doing so, it argues that the novel is representative of Sacks' successful 'working through' of the process of mourning, and thereby is a kind of survival story, wherein the narrator survives the threat of psychological (and possibly even physical) death that grief imposes on him by successfully deflecting his desire for the person he has lost through the creation of a substitute for them: a work of literature.

In 1989, Healy bought a cottage on the Maugherow peninsula outside Ballyconnell, County Sligo, marking the beginning of a more settled period of his life, which saw a significant increase in his output, across a range of genres. Most of his books of poetry were written in this second stage of his life. Chapter 6 analyses Healy's five volumes of poetry, in which an increasingly post-pastoral sensibility is also found, particularly in *A Fool's Errand*, the last volume published in his lifetime and one that depicts a network of human, animal, landscape, in place of the human-centric focus more typically found in Western poetry, alongside other post-pastoral traits such as a sense of awe reflected in the portrayal of a powerful and indifferent

natural world and the evocation of ‘deep history’, whereby human history is presented in the humbling context of history of life on the planet.

Finally, Chapter 7 applies Timothy Morton’s conceptualisation of ecological art in his book, *The Ecological Thought*, to Healy’s final novel, *Long Time, No See*. This illuminates how the novel is deeply post-pastoral in its vision. Importantly, it was written during the same ten-year period as *A Fool’s Errand*, and the two have been described as forming a diptych. I conclude by arguing, on the basis of my analysis of these two works, that a post-pastoral sensibility is *the* defining characteristic of Healy’s later writing.

2 Defining pastoral

2.1 Introduction

In recent decades, it has been noted by various commentators that the term pastoral has increasingly come to be applied to a vast range of features of writing. For example, Brian Loughrey, editor of *Pastoral as Mode* (1984), expressed a sense of frustration over what he saw as now being 'a contested term', one that is applied to any writing about the natural world, any writing about retreat in general, or any that upholds any kind of 'Golden Age'. William Empson's idiosyncratic and highly influential treatment of the subject, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1974) surely contributed in large part to this, arguing as it does that, in essence, the pastoral reduces the complex to the simple, an assertion I will return to later in this chapter. However, as one commentator has pointed out, 'modern pastoral poetry is not necessarily concerned with the natural world, while not all nature poetry is pastoral' (Williamson, 2012, p. 571). Greater clarity on the term is required. This chapter considers key relevant studies that have sought to elucidate the meaning of pastoral, and uses this analysis to develop a theoretical framework for the analysis of Dermot Healy's writing. An exploration of Terry Gifford's three kinds of pastoral — as historical form, as being about the urban–rural divide, as a pejorative term — leads to a consideration of how pastoral writing can effectively engage with serious human themes. This is followed by a deeper consideration of two important manifestations of the pastoral: the pastoral elegy and then the post-pastoral. In the latter, I consider the relationship and distinctions between the two related concepts of post-pastoral and ecocriticism. The analysis leads us to the conclusion that the most appropriate and useful way of conceiving pastoral is as a mode, rather than a tradition or genre, and that while the pastoral lens has been shown to usefully illuminate aspects of Irish literature up to the twentieth century,

we do not need to locate the writing of Dermot Healy firmly within any 'tradition' of nostalgia or societal loss in using the pastoral mode to analyse his writing.

2.2 Gifford's three kinds of pastoral

Terry Gifford's *Pastoral* (1999) posits that the word pastoral has three different meanings: a historical form, with a long history in poetry, that involves shepherds and an idealised representation of nature; a term for 'any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban' (p. 2); and its sceptical use, one that implies that 'the pastoral vision is too simplified and thus an idealisation of the reality of life in the country' (p. 2). This categorisation provides a useful basis to begin an attempt to define pastoral and develop a theoretical framework for this thesis.

2.2.1 Pastoral as a historical form

It is accepted that the history of pastoral began with the poetry of the ancient Greek poet, Theocritus (p. 316–260), specifically his *Idylls,* which comprises a series of bucolic poems based on the songs of goatherds in Theocritus' native Sicily, themselves preceded by Hesiod's *Work and Days*. Gifford tells us these poems were written for 'the sophisticated and decadent court at Alexandria' (p. 15), and that nostalgia was one of their defining features. David Baker (2007) explains how, from the very beginning, the pastoral has involved a 'double life', in the sense that Theocritus wrote poems about shepherds and pastures – rural, idealised worlds – but for an audience that could not have been more different than the poems' subjects – the 'cultivated city dwellers of Alexandria' (Baker, 2007, p. 135). As he puts it, they are poems 'about one kind of life or person intended for a very different audience'. Their success, therefore, partly depends on the audience's nostalgia for this idealised pastoral landscape.

But it was about two hundred or so years later, in the writing of Virgil, that the pastoral form evolved into something more nuanced and more powerful, something that would have

relevance over many centuries to come. For Gifford, Virgil's distinct contribution to the evolution of the form was his creation of 'the literary distancing device of Arcadia' (1999, p. 18) in order to make 'the artifice of project … transparent to the reader' (1999, p. 20). For David Ferry, author of a recent translation of Virgil's *Eclogues*, the distinction between the two writers is much greater than this. He writes:

> There's nothing in those Idylls of Theocritus that corresponds to the way that Virgil makes us aware of the world of politics, economics, and war, whose pressures are felt within, and upon, his pastoral world. ... The range of things that human beings actually experience, long for and lose are pervasively there in the Eclogues, and they are there in strangely beautiful and convincing ways because of their transformation and subordination to a poetic context. (Ferry, 1999, p. xiv).

The point Ferry is making is that Virgil moved beyond the merely idyllic of Theocritus' poems to incorporate suffering into them, to transcend being merely idyllic, but without breaking the spell of the song.

David Baker (2007) notes that since its earliest days, the pastoral has involved four main types of poems. The idyll is 'a short poem that deals "charmingly" with rural life – you just need a rural scene and some leisure time' (Baker, 2007, p. 134). The bucolic is 'the songs of cow herders' (Baker, 2007, p. 134) in its purest form. The eclogue is a poem involving a dramatic lyric – speech or song constructed as a dialogue between two shepherds, often in competition, while finally, georgic poems concern farming rather than herding, 'manual labour as opposed to ease/goofing off' (Baker, 2007, 135). Historically, looking specifically to English literature, these forms of pastoral, as well as the themes of nostalgia and a lost Golden Age, can be found in medieval pastoral, the literature of the Renaissance, the Elizabethan age, the eighteenth century, the Romantic era, through to the Georgian poets following the First World War, always relevant to the specific historic context and always with varying degrees of irony and realism/escapism (see Gifford, 1999).

A defining feature – a self-aware separation between the world of the poem and the world of the reader – may be one of the reasons the form has endured (Baker, 2007). It means it can adapt to the needs and preoccupations of different eras (Townsend, 2007). It has shown to be particularly useful during times of great loss or change (Baker, 2007, Frawley, 2005). For example, Baker describes how the sixteenth and seventeenth century poets 'reinvented the pastoral to their own purposes and rhetorical sensibilities' (Baker, 2007, p. 138); its playfulness was adapted. During the Romantic era, the pastoral continued to appeal to poets because of its capacity to emphasise strangeness, distance (between the world being evoked and the world of the reader), and a growing sense of alienation, which in itself can create a sense of melancholy:

> At the birth of the city, at the inception of the smoky Industrial Revolution, nature – the pastoral – had never been more appropriate or necessary as a haven, a place to grieve, perhaps to heal … a place to think, to meditate. (Baker, 2007, p. 139)

2.2.2 Pastoral as content: The urban–rural divide

This use of pastoral, according to Gifford, assumes 'a delight in the natural' and usually involves 'a celebratory attitude towards what it describes, however superficially bleak it might appear to be' (1999, p. 2). It involves a strong association between the pastoral and the natural world and generally implies the superiority of the countryside over the city. Even today, for some, this remains the basic definition of pastoral: that it inevitably pits the trappings of the city against the virtues of the countryside. Gifford's own analysis of pastoral as content focuses on the themes of retreat to the natural world and return to the civilised worlds in pastoral writing. And, in her study of the pastoral tradition in contemporary Irish poetry, Donna Potts writes, 'Pastoral poetry seeks to depict the human relation to the natural world, emphasizing the harmony between nature and human nature, the contrast between city and country and the underlying tension between civilisation and nature' (Potts, 2011, p. 2).

The pastoral tradition has always been associated with the natural world; since Virgil's Eclogues, most works of literature that have been taken as pastoral have involved scenes of nature. Pastoral poetry has always aimed to capture a universal notion of separation – the fall from Eden. The pastoral poem rests on there being a Golden Age, or space – somewhere that is missed, that leaves the individual feeling unwhole. As Plumley notes, 'The green pastures of the pastoral are reassuring; they are also defining as to our connection to and place in the nature of things' (Plumley, 2007, p. 148). For some this is a spiritual matter; Baker argues that the separation that is treated in pastoral is a spiritual separation from the divine: 'In pastoral, the closer the shepherd gets to the physical, the animal, the closer we get to the divine. … [There is an] archetypal link between physical desire and the holy, between sex and god' (Baker, 2007, p. 140). For others, it is about a Darwinian capacity for survival; in the beginning of his book *On Poetry*, Glen Maxwell (2012) notes that, according to evolutionary psychologists, we find beautiful that which we need to survive; over and over, studies have shown that children prefer pictures containing an open space, trees bearing fruit, a river, a path, animals and clouds to other vistas:

> What evolutionary psychologists … believe is that aesthetic preferences … originate not in what renders life delightful or even endurable, but in what makes life *possible*. (Maxwell, 2012, p. 10).

We argue that while engagement with the natural world is a defining feature of the pastoral mode, this does not necessitate that we limit our understanding of the term pastoral to only that writing which celebrates the natural world. Rather, it is the locating of a lost Golden Age within a natural landscape that defines the classic pastoral work of writers such as Virgil, a feature that suggests it is the individual enduring such a loss that is its real subject. On this point, Paul Alpers cites the 1795 paper by Friedrich Schiller, *On Naïve and Sentimental* Poetry, which

emphasises the importance of the Golden Age in pastoral poetry without necessarily equating it with the natural world:

> All peoples who possess a history have a paradise, a state of innocence, a golden age; indeed, every man has his paradise, his golden age, which he recalls, according as he has more or less of the poetic in his nature, with more or less inspiration. Experience itself therefore supplies enough for the depiction of which the pastoral idyll treats. For this reason it remains always a beautiful, an elevating fiction, and the poetic power in representing it has truly worked on behalf of the ideal. (Schiller, cited in Alpers, 1996, p. 33)

Similarly, William Empson's interpretation of a pastoral work, considered below in greater detail, centred on character over natural landscape. Alpers put this down to the fact that Empson had 'very little sympathy with religion or metaphysical views of the human condition' (Alpers, 1978, p. 112); for Empson, 'the human condition … is always historical and social, and on the highest throne in the world we are still sitting only on our own rump' (Alpers, 1978, p. 114). This view also echoes David Ferry's analysis of Virgil's Eclogues, where it is the themes of dispossession, loss and human vulnerability that he emphasises:

> In these pastoral situations our faults and virtues are written large; the pastoral structure simplifies what we all share and, by doing so, makes it more tolerable while at the same time demonstrating how vulnerable we are. It provides figures of refuge and ease, and of the precariousness of that refuge and ease (Ferry, 1999 p. xv).

Similarly, in Edna Longley's analysis of the pastoral tradition in Seamus Heaney's poetry, she writes about the poet 'restoring the seamless instinctive union between infant and world, between subject and object, in mourning for loss of the maternal body' (cited in Longley, 2001, p. 108). Alpers himself concludes that 'Separation and loss are the conditions of their utterance'; for him, 'pastoral landscapes' are those in which the 'human centres are herdsmen *or their equivalents'* (Alpers, 1996, p. 28, emphasis added). His contention is that 'we will have a far truer idea of pastoral if we take its representative anecdote to be herdsmen and their lives,

rather than landscape or idealised nature' (Alpers, 1996, p. 22). While it is arguable that this statement dismisses the significance of the natural landscape to pastoral perhaps *too* completely, it does remind us that the pastoral's natural world is *only* significant as a locale for a lost Golden Age.

Pankey (2007), in his analysis of the pastoral in contemporary poetry, emphasises the growing importance of pastoral as a meditative space. While the object of such meditation is still often the landscape, in today's world it is not necessarily so: since the Romantics, 'the pastoral has asserted itself as the time and space of the meditative utterance much more than as the bucolic landscape' (Pankey, 2007, pp. 142). He goes on to emphasise that it is about staying in the moment:

> By continuing to turn away from the conventions of closure through reflection, refraction, concentration, continuation and involution, by troubling the terms of an argument, by digressing, by spiralling or orbiting around the lyric moment, pearling the grit of that moment, one makes mutable the temporality of the meditative space. (Pankey, 2007, p. 142–143)

In doing so, the pastoral bridges time zones – the idealised past and the hard present; the idealised present and the idealised past; the hard past and the idealised future. Citing the work of Wallace Stevens, Pankey emphasises how 'the mind in conversation with itself constantly orders and shapes the meaningless, but what persists always are questions and not the balm of final thoughts'. According to Pankey, the pastoral mode is a meditative mode, and the meditative mode 'attempts to slow time down, to hold it still, to condense it or stretch it or twist it, without diminishing its vitality or precariousness' (Pankey, 2007, p. 145). On contemporary pastoral poetry, he writes

> The moment of meditative time,' he writes, 'is constant and ongoing. … At once descriptive, reflexive, discursive, lyric and narrative, the meditation gives density and gravity to moments of revelation (Pankey, 2007, p. 147).

The limited nature of this definition of pastoral – a simple celebration of the countryside over the city – is also explored in the analysis of those commentators who make a distinction between a simple pastoral and a complex one, like Raymond Williams, in his hugely influential book, *The Country and the City*, and Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden*. These works would play an important role in the emergence of the third category of pastoral: as a pejorative term.

2.2.3 'Pretenders to simplicity': Pastoral as pejorative

One of the biggest complaints made about the pastoral mode is that it cannot accommodate real suffering in the world. As early as the eighteenth century, Samuel Johnson described pastoral as 'easy, vulgar and therefore disgusting' (Johnson, 1970, p. 45). A similar attitude to the form emerged in the late twentieth century; according to the *Penguin Book of Pastoral Verse* (1974), for example:

> the pastoral vision is, at base, a false vision, positing a simplistic, unhistorical relationship between the ruling, landowning class, the poet's patrons and often the poet himself, and the workers of the land; as such its function is to mystify and to obscure the harshness of actual social and economic organization.
> (Barrell and Bull, 1974, p. 4)

This negative appraisal of the pastoral form has often been used as a rationale for the argument that it has seen its decline, and that therefore it is no longer a relevant means of describing literature, unless it is being used in a derogatory sense. It has also been the basis for the emergence of the concept of anti-pastoralism. An 'anti-pastoral' piece of literature, by its nature, contains a questioning of the pastoral idyll, an implied criticism of it. Many critics have used the term to describe poetry that eschews images and other features traditionally associated with pastoral poetry, such as idyllic, bucolic scenes of the natural world. In his analysis of the poem 'Dover Beach' by Mathew Arnold, Gifford defines the poem as anti-pastoral, in the sense that, 'the natural world can no longer be construed as a "land of dreams", but is in fact a bleak

battle for survival without divine purpose' (p. 120). Often, the term is adopted to praise work seen as being more truthful than 'traditional pastoral'. For example, in *Inventing Ireland*, his literary history of modern Ireland, Declan Kiberd describes *The Playboy of the Western World* as 'an uncompromising exercise in antipastoral', written while 'the pastoral' was being used in a highly conservative way by writers in Dublin, who in essentially propaganda exercises aimed in their work for nationalist purposes during the Revival (Kiberd, 1995, p. 482).

Often, it has been noted, a text may not set out to be anti-pastoral but that which involves a retreat into the natural world, followed by a return to civilisation (strong features of many pastoral works, according to Gifford), might find itself in the territory of anti-pastoralism, as a disillusionment, or stripping away of old, idyllic notions of nature take place:

> A pastoral retreat often involves exposure to the anti-pastoral, be it a physical journey or psychological one and will generate a questioning of previously held beliefs and untarnished perceptions. (Lavis, 2014, p. 18)

The concept of anti-pastoral also emerges in the works of Leo Marx (*The Machine in the Garden*) and Raymond Williams (*The Country and the City*). Marx, whose analysis relates to American literature in the post-industrial context, presents a distinction between 'sentimental pastoral' and 'complex pastoral' – 'the pastoral of sentiment and the pastoral of mind'. Sentimental pastoral relates to the conceptualisation of pastoral as a desire to return to nature, writing that celebrates the countryside over the city; in other words, that which falls into the category described in the section above (pastoral as content – the urban–rural divide). By contrast, 'complex pastoral' is closer to anti-pastoral, and refers to works in which 'a counterforce' undercuts the pastoral idyll: the return to nature is never as idyllic as anticipated. According to Marx, the best pastoral literature manages 'to qualify, or call into question, or bring irony to bear against the illusion of peace and harmony in a green pasture' (Marx, 1964, p. 25).

Raymond Williams, in *The Country and the City*, an analysis of pastoral throughout English literature, from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, which draws attention to how pastoral writing could seek to disguise a reality of exploitation and oppression by presenting an idealised description of the countryside, draws a similar distinction. In his chapter 'Pastoral and counter-pastoral' he acknowledges how the classical pastoral writers, Virgil especially, did not exclude the darker sides of rural life from their poems: 'there is almost invariably a tension with other kinds of experience: summer with winter; pleasure with loss; harvest with labour; singing with a journey; past or present with the future' (Williams, 1985, p. 18). He argues that this classical pastoral tradition was deliberately altered when, in the sixteenth century, Pope wrote:

> We must therefore use some illusion to render a Pastoral delightful; and this consists in exposing the best side only of a shepherd's life, and in concealing its miseries. (cited in Williams, 1985, p. 19)

The interest in pastoral moved the form away from one that was a means of representing of truth and towards one that prioritised artificiality, 'an idealisation of actual English country life and its social and economic relations' (1985, p. 26). Pastoral writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – 'pretenders to simplicity' (1985, p. 20) as Williams calls them – focused on creating abstracted and idealised poems, as activities became reduced to forms, 'whether the "vaile" of allegory or the fancy dress of court games' (1985, p. 21). (By contrast, 'Virgil … could raise the most serious questions of life and its purposes in the direct world in which the working year and the pastoral song are still there in its own right.') As Williams notes, this significant change in the tradition of pastoral:

> has been so prepotent … that the ordinary modern meaning of pastoral, in the critical discourse of otherwise twentieth century writers, has been derived from these forms, rather than from the original substance. (Williams, 1985, p. 21)

This does not mean that Williams is dismissing the form as irrelevant or obsolete; rather, he regretfully concludes that such distortions of the form take us away from the fact that 'the real history, in all that we know of it, would support so much more of the real observation, the authentic feeling, that these writers keep alive' (Williams, cited in Gifford, 2016). As Gifford puts it, 'Williams' devastating analysis [of the pastoral] had not revealed a complex pastoral, in Marx's sense, but a complexity of compromise that left the term "pastoral" as a pejorative in British literary discourse thereafter' (Gifford, 2016).

A similar narrative can be found regarding the related concept of anthropomorphism, which, like pastoral, has been (rightly) denigrated over recent decades for "the assumed falsity, arrogance or sentimentality of the imposition of the human on the non-human" (Paton, 2006, p. 210). The concept of critical anthropomorphism initially emerged from the fields of ethology and comparative psychology; introduced by Gordon Burghardt (1991), it seeks to recognise the potential value of a critical, more considered anthropological approach that seeks to understand the emotional experience of an animal. For Burghardt, and later commentators, such criticisms do not apply to all anthropomorphic writing; critical anthropomorphism involves a more empirically-minded approach, referred to by Burghardt as a process of 'predictive inference', which can indeed be a means of 'getting to the truth' (Paton, 2006 p. 209).

The concept of critical anthropomorphism initially emerged from the fields of ethology and comparative psychology; introduced by Gordon Burghardt (1991), it seeks to recognise the potential value of a critical, more considered anthropological approach that seeks to understand the emotional experience of an animal. Defending the concept required first of all distinguishing it from literary anthropomorphism in general, which, like pastoral, has (rightly) been denigrated over recent decades for 'the assumed falsity, arrogance or sentimentality of

the imposition of the human on the non-human' (Paton, 2006, p. 210). For Burghardt, and later commentators, such criticisms do not apply to all anthropomorphic writing; critical anthropomorphism involves a more empirically-minded approach, referred to by Burghardt as a process of 'predictive inference', which can indeed be a means of 'getting to the truth' (Paton, 2006), in the same way that post-pastoral writing can overcome the limitations of certain forms of pastoral.

The primatologist and author Franz de Waal has drawn interesting insights on the difficult subject of nonhuman animals' experience of emotions; acknowledging that the 'feelings [of animals] are clearly less accessible to science than [their] emotions', he nonetheless makes a compelling case for the central role of emotions in animal behaviour – 'considering how much animals act like us, share our physiological reactions, have the same facial expressions, and possess the same sort of brains', he notes, 'wouldn't it be strange if their internal experiences were radically different?' (de Waal, 2019, p. 278).[3] In drawing a distinction between emotions and feelings, de Waal emphasizes the often subconscious nature of emotions, which do not require language in order to exist, and the private, subjective and conscious nature of feelings, noting that the two do not always agree, and do not always have to agree (de Waal, 2019, p. 125). As with critical anthropomorphism, de Waal's insights seem supportive of Morton's 'flat ontology' perspective, emphasising as they do the shared experiences of humans and other animals.

The skewed perception of pastoral that essentially underpins the dismissive attitudes towards pastoral mentioned at the start of this section misses the point of pastoral in its classic

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[3] For De Waal, feelings represent our conscious experience of three levels of emotion: 'It is best .. to distinguish three levels of experience regarding emotions: (1) unconscious emotions, (2) centrally represented or felt emotions, and (3) reflected-upon feelings. We are most familiar with the third category, even though it represents only the tip of the emotional iceberg' (de Waal, 2011, p. 200).

(Virgilian) expression. It finds only form and artificiality – an attempt to idealise bucolic landscapes and the lives of the rural poor – and not its serious human themes, either because such themes tend to be implicit rather than explicit, or in the case of the 'pretenders to simplicity' of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, aren't there at all. This misperception is found at many levels, such as the common, and unhelpful, conflation of the literary terms 'pastoral' and 'lyric', found, for example, in Edna Longley's assertion that Georgian poetry, with its emphasis on bucolic scenes, is definitive of lyricism in general. Gifford (2017) describes as 'unfortunate' the fact that the classical Greek word 'eidullion', which originally meant a short, intricate and descriptive poem, led to our word 'idyllic'. According to Gifford, this misrepresents:

> the complex tensions of realism and myth, the rural and the urban, romantic courtship and raw sexual desire that actually characterise the *Idylls*. It was this complexity arising from dialogues between herdsmen that Virgil was imitating in his *Eclogues*, set in a time of disorder following a civil war where dispossession, as much as connection with the land and with nature, is a constant presence. (Gifford, 2017 p. 169)

As David Ferry's introduction to his translation of Virgil's *Eclogues* highlights, ever since Virgil, pastoral, specifically that of works that are rooted in the classical, has always encompassed the anti-pastoral, in the sense that it has always involved a critique, however implicit, of the idea that any Eden, or Golden Age, can exist without suffering. Similarly, in his study of pastoral elegy, Iain Twiddy, citing Ellen Zetzel Lambert, concludes that 'the pastoral ideal, from Theocritus on, has never been that of a *hortus conclusus*. Neither suffering nor death has ever been excluded from this paradise … [Pastoral] offers us a vision of life stripped not of pain but of complexity' (Twiddy, 2013, p. 4).

Often in pastoral writing, that which is absent is at least as significant as that which is present; and it is in this way that it seriously engages with the human themes of suffering and inequality.

Rather than ‘concealing its miseries’, to borrow Pope’s line, good pastoral writing actually does the opposite.

2.3 ‘Serious forces at work’

Many recent commentators have argued that the pastoral form is not only capable of accommodating real suffering, but that it can be the form most suited to doing so. One example of this can be found in Paul Alpers’ preface to his book, *What is Pastoral?* (1996), where he recounts an incident from *If This Is A Man* by Primo Levi. Levi has been given a brief reprieve from arduous labour (cleaning out the inside of a petrol tank) to assist another prisoner carry an empty soup container back to the kitchen. The other prisoner is a ‘Prominent’ – a prisoner with a minor supervisory position. But he is one of the most humane people in this role and they take a long route to postpone Levi’s return to work for as long as possible. Levi feels ‘unusually light-hearted’ (Alpers, 1996, p. 4). It is ‘warmish’ outside and smells bring the memory of a childhood beach holiday. The two men are free to talk and their conversation turns to Dante. Levi remembers some of the poet’s work, which he recites to the other man, who begs him to repeat these lines: ‘Think of your breed; for brutish ignorance / Your mettle was not made; you were made men / To follow after knowledge and excellence’.

Alpers highlights striking pastoral elements of this scene: two men on a journey, a sense of physical and conversational ease, the natural setting and ‘the free perambulation, with purpose temporarily suspended’ (Alpers, 1996, p. 6). He also highlights how it recalls Virgil’s ninth eclogue, in which Lycidas and Moeris wonder what became of the singer Menalcas, and in so doing, ‘hold out the possibility … that the song of an absent master can have power in our present circumstances’ (Alpers, 1996, p. 6). To Alpers, this vivid scene, so unexpected and heavily poignant in the context of *If This Is A Man*, shows the value of the pastoral as a mode, because it captures how a sense of space and time was necessary for the words of Dante to

come to Levi's mind in the context in which he was living. In this way, the story illuminates 'the sobering truth that literature can give us our sense of human worth only if we have the kind of space Levi and Jean … found on that midday in June' (Alpers, 1996, p. 6). Much later on in his book, Alpers argues that in pastoral poetry, 'situations and experiences of distress tend to be represented only insofar as they can be sung' (Alpers, 1996, p. 172). That which is absent is not necessarily being wilfully ignored. To sing about something does not necessarily mean to diminish it.

Seamus Heaney, in his essay 'Eclogues in extremis: On the staying power of pastoral', acknowledges that the fact a pastoral poem usually involves 'a self-consciously literary performance' makes it 'vulnerable to accusations of artificiality' (Heaney, 2003, p. 1). He then goes on to contest this view by applying the concept of pastoral, specifically eclogues, to poetry, particularly that of Czeslaw Milosz, to highlight how this form can be particularly valuable when addressing human suffering and even barbarity. Acknowledging the very real danger for pastoral to end up as 'fine writing', in his brief consideration of Virgil's *Eclogues*, he makes the important point that 'literariness as such is not an abdication of the truth' (Heaney, 2003, p. 5). Looking for the human value, as he puts it, of the pastoral, relates to 'the depth of the poet's engagement with considerations other than the technical and the aesthetic' (2003, p. 6). For Heaney:

> Pastoral cannot actually function as a mode without writer and audience being completely alert to the ill fit that prevails between the beautifully tinted literary map and the uglier shape that reality has taken in the world (Heaney, 2003, p. 6).

In the lyric sequence *The World*, Milosz returns to his childhood home and surrounding countryside, a place of innocence and happiness for him. He writes them, Heaney notes, 'at one of the most atrocious moments of World War II' (Heaney, 2003, p. 6). Four decades later,

Milosz described the poem as ‘a rather ironic operation’ and as ‘an act of magic to depict the exact opposite’ (cited in Heaney, 2003, p. 7) of the world at that time. He did so because ‘given the way the world was, if you actually wanted to say something about it, you’d have had to scream to speak’ (Heaney, 2003). (Or change the rules of language, as Paul Celan attempted in his poetry of the same period.) This analysis seems to highlight that the exclusion of ‘reality’ from the idyllic world of a pastoral poem can be an act of restraint rather than an act of artificiality – that it can allow a poem to resonate meaningfully with its absences at least as much as with what it present. That which is excluded from a pastoral poem can be as much part of it as what it includes.

David Baker (2007) also highlights the necessity of pastoral, in its true form. For him, ‘irony or willed ignorance’ (Baker, 2007, p. 138) are almost impossible to avoid in pastoral writing because the pastoral poem is really about the tension that exists in the implied opposition between ‘the simple and natural and the urbane or cultivated’ (Baker, 2007, p. 135). This self-conscious location of the urbane, cultivated world (i.e. the audience) outside of the world of the pastoral poem makes pastoral poetry deeply ironic, according to Harold Bloom’s definition of the word: ‘what happens to representation when altogether incommensurate realities juxtapose and clash’ (cited in Baker, 2007, pp. 139–140).

In fact, this has been a defining aspect of the pastoral poem since Virgil, as made clear in David Ferry’s introduction to *The Eclogues of Virgil*. He makes an important distinction between the work of Theocritus and Virgil; for him, Theocritus may have perfected the ‘fine writing’ or artificial, literary nature of the pastoral (and may therefore be the more natural predecessor to the pastoral tradition in sixteenth and seventeenth century English literature, as described by Williams), but it is Virgil who used these tools to impart something serious or, to use Heaney’s phrase, to engage ‘with considerations other than the technical and the aesthetic’:

> It is from Virgil's self-conscious handling of Theocritean representations and usages that the figure of the herdsman emerged as representative of both the poet and of all humans. … There's nothing in those Idylls of Theocritus that corresponds to the way Virgil makes us aware of the world of politics, economics and war, whose pressures are felt within and upon his pastoral world. (Ferry, 1999, p. xiv)

2.3.1 Reducing the complex to the simple

Possibly the Ur-text on the subject of modern pastoral, William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral* offers insight into how the pastoral manages to both sing so lightly about idyllic worlds, while also depicting, with great seriousness, some of the most painful aspects of human experience. According to him, a pastoral work is a process that consists of 'putting the complex into the simple' (Empson, 1974, p. 24).[4] For him, the pastoral operated as a structural device a kind of structural relationship – which, in the words of Brian Loughrey, editor of *The Pastoral Mode*, 'clarifies complex issues by restating them in terms which emphasise the universal at the expense of the accidental' (Loughrey, 1984, p. 21). This emerges as the central crux of Empson's thesis, one that he returns to again and again. In his essay on 'proletariat literature', he states:

> The essential trick of the old pastoral … was to make simple people express strong feelings in learned and fashionable language (so that you wrote about the best subject in the best way). (Empson, 1974, p. 11)

Later, in his essay on *The Beggar's Opera*, he notes:

> Pastoral … usually works like that; it describes the lives of 'simple' low people to an audience of refined wealthy people, so as to make them think first, 'this is true about everyone', and then, 'this is especially true about us' (Empson, 1974, p. 195–196).

[4] For this reason, Empson sees the pastoral tradition in a range of literary texts that on the surface appear very different from one another, including Shakespeare's sonnet 94, 'proletarian writing' and Alice in Wonderland.

For Empson, pastoral was not a peripheral category of literature. By describing the lives of '"simple" low people' in 'learned and fashionable language' (Empson, 1974, p. 136), the poet can, in a sense, tune out all the distracting detail that would be part of a portrait of a more complex subject and the reader is left with a clear reflection of fundamental human experiences. Thus he notes in his essay on Marvell that, 'you can say everything about complex people by a complete consideration of simple people' (Empson, 1974, p. 137).

Key to the pastoral for Empson was the 'double plot': 'the interaction of the two plots gives a particularly clear setting for, or machine for imposing, the social and metaphysical ideas on which pastoral depends' (Empson, 1974, p. 30). Zoning in on its use in Elizabethan plays, he describes it as 'an easy-going device' with the 'obvious effect … of making you feel the play deals with life as a whole' (1974, p. 27). It is the tension produced between the two strands, in particular, that creates such a powerful effect; for example, in the tragic-comic play, you find 'a marriage of the myths of heroic and pastoral, a thing felt as … necessary to the health of society' (Empson, 1974, pp. 30–31). Regarding the novel, *Wuthering Heights* is cited as a good example of the double plot 'both for covert deification and telling the same story twice with two possible endings' (Empson, 1974, p. 86).

For Empson, the fact that pastoral literature is about capturing a 'limited life' enables such works to say something fundamental about the inadequacy of life. In his essay on Shakespeare's sonnet 94, 'They That Have Power', he explains:

> The feeling that life is essentially inadequate to the human spirit, and yet that a good life must avoid saying so, is naturally at home with most versions of pastoral; with pastoral you take a limited life and pretend it is the full and normal one, and a suggestion that one must do this with all life, because the normal itself is limited, is easily put into the trick though not necessary to its power. … It is clear … that this grand notion of the inadequacy of life, so various in its means of expression, so reliable a bass note in the arts, needs to be counted as a possible territory of pastoral (Empson, 1974, p. 115).

A strong awareness of limitations, then, is a central feature of Empson's understanding of the pastoral process. The circumstances, nature and, crucially, the depiction of the subjects of pastoral poems are all defined by limitations – 'simple' individuals, usually poor. They tend to be solitary figures — Empson felt the Alice in Wonderland books represented 'a failure in the normal tradition of pastoral' because they often avoided this sense of isolation. Thus in one essay, he notes:

> The figure of pastoral corresponds to his position as hero [referring here to the albatross in *The Albatross*], cleanses the cluttered world of civilisation by magical influence and can do this *because* [he] is so completely cut off from it (Empson, 1974, p. 209).

As Paul Alpers notes, in summing up Empson's position on the pastoral, 'any human expression is bound up in its circumstances and indeed can get much power from dwelling fully within them' (Alpers, 1996, p. 103). Thus, highlighting a common human lot across very different social contexts plays a role in bridging such societal divisions. Citing Empson, Alpers argues that the pastoral has a unifying social force, that it is 'a means of bridging differences and reconciling social classes' (Alpers, 1996, p. 101). For Alpers, this connection between the two is 'real but loose', and Empson's idiosyncratic style of writing in *Some Versions* actually represents a deliberate attempt to connect 'literary style and social realities' (Alpers, 1996, p. 102).[5]

Not everyone agrees with Empson's conceptualisation of pastoral. According to Raymond Williams, for example, the idea that pastoral means 'the simple matter in which general truths are embodied or implied' and, by extension, that 'even a modern proletariat industrial novel

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[5] One commentator noted that on reading Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral*, he found himself 'continually adrift, barely able to notice the connections between the paragraph under my eyes and the overall movement of the book (one can hardly speak of a theme or a thesis)' (Wieck, 1962, p. 451).

can be pastoral in this sense!' (Williams, 1985, p. 21) is absurd. In order to acknowledge and understand the reality of the social and economic changes occurring in England associated with capitalist development, the representation of reality within pastoral literature must be taken seriously. For Williams, the power of pastoral literature lay in its capacity to lay bare the inequalities inherent in capitalist society; its danger in its distorted version that explicitly sought to hide oppression. Pastoral therefore cannot be reduced to form alone.

It could be argued that the two are not mutually exclusive – that form and content (or inner and outer form as Alpers calls them) in fact complement each other. Indeed, the critical engagements with pastoral cited above (such as those by Seamus Heaney, Paul Alpers and even William Empson himself) show that emphasis on form in defining pastoral does not necessarily equate with artificial, false treatments of the subject in question (the natural world as idyll). On the contrary, structural tensions and high level of irony, features achieved through aspects of form, can allow the writer to capture important truths of the human condition. One important example of how pastoral writing can achieve this is the elegy.

2.4 Pastoral as elegy

In the introduction to *The English Elegy*, Peter Sacks explores how mythical accounts of the origins of artistic expression 'converge on the event of loss' (Sacks, 1987, p. 2). In doing so, they show how loss can be survived: by accepting a substitute for the original source of desire, in the stories of Daphne and Apollo, Pan and Syrinx for example. In both of these examples, the new forms of the pursued must be 'further altered to yield a consoling sign or instrument', hence the emergence of the laurel wreath (rather than just a laurel tree) and the pan pipes (rather than just reeds). This, for Sacks, is heavily reminiscent of Lacan's child submitting 'to society's "symbolic order" of signs' (Sacks, 1987, pp. 8–10): 'The movement from loss to consolation … requires a deflection of desire, with the creation of a trope both for the lost object and for

the original character of desire itself' (1987, p. 7). Sacks goes on to show that the roots of the elegy lie in 'a dense matrix of rites and ceremonies', so that in a sense it has become the literary version of social and psychological practices around grief. Techniques such as repetition, refrains and rhythm serve many functions, both artistically and in 'the work of mourning'. They control the expression of grief, while keeping it active. They absorb an individual death into 'a natural cycle of repeated occasions' (1987, p. 24). They – particularly repetition – enable the mourner to believe that the loss has taken place. Finally, repeating the name of the dead is linked to 'a custom … of ancient vegetation cults' with the purpose of raising the dead. Regarding its use in the elegy, Sacks describes it as 'a form of verbal "propping"': 'the survivor leans upon the name, which takes on, by dint of repetition, a kind of substantiality, allowing it not only to refer to but almost replace the dead' (1987, p. 26).

Drawing attention to the association of the word 'text' with weaving, his analysis shows how the elegy has always tended to employ images of weaving in its (painful) attempts to use language in the search for a substitution of what or who has been lost – 'creating a fabric in the place of a void' (1987, p. 18). These conventions of the genre 'related as they are to a variety of ritualistic social and psychological actions, reflect and carry on such work of mourning' (1987, p. 2). This is about the elegy as an actual experience, or working through, of grief, for the elegist.

Certain images of the natural world perform relevant functions. Flowers, broken and returned, reflect castration and immortality; light, conquering darkness and outlasting human mortality, also can relate to castration, in the form of the sky god. The use of different voices in the elegy – including and outside of the formal tradition of the eclogue – can relate to the initial 'self-suppression' that comes with grief, the emphasis on dramatising and the 'confrontational structure required for the very recognition of loss' (1987, p. 35), through which the survivor is

forced to face their loss. It can also be related to the historic relationship between mourning and inheritance; relating this point to Virgil's *Eclogues*, in which poet–goatherds compete to assert themselves as heir to a poetic legacy, Sacks claims the elegy seeks to dramatise and clarify the true heirs of poetry. In relation to the evocation of vegetation deities in the elegy, Sacks argues that this is less pathetic fallacy and more an attempt to create the illusion that man controls the seasons and the passing of time, and to seek some kind of vengeance against his ultimate powerlessness in the face of nature:

> From this point of view, the elegy's elaborate observations of nature's decline are not the fallacious products of man's self-pity but rather the expression of his attempted mastery of and vengeance against nature, or more precisely change.' (Sacks, 1987, p. 21)

On the subject of the modern elegy, Sacks describes how it has become increasingly difficult to write a conventional elegy. Instead, modern elegists 'either have withdrawn yet further behind masks of irony or have maintained personal accents at the cost of admitting their reduced circumstances – forswearing traditional procedures of mourning, adopting deliberately unindealized settings, making smaller and more credible claims, if any, for the deceased themselves' (Sacks, 1987, p. 299). This chimes, to a certain extent, with the analysis of Jahan Ramazani, in his book *The Poetry of Mourning* (1994). Focusing specifically on modern poetry, Ramazani draws attention to how the genre flourished in the modern context by becoming 'anti-elegiac (in generic terms) and melancholic (in psychological terms)'. Acknowledging the risk of 'flattening out the complexities of the literary origin' (Ramazani, 1994, p. 9) of the elegy, and of simplifying or reducing the content and subtleties contained in many pre-modern elegies, Ramazani nonetheless points to a general distinction between the pre-modern and the modern elegy: while the pre-modern elegy reaches towards consolation, the modern elegy refuses to do so. Instead, it becomes anti-elegiac, violating the genre's norms, 'anti-consolatory and anti-encomiastic, anti-Romantic and anti-Victorian, anti-conventional

and sometimes even anti-literary' (Ramazani, 1994, p. 2). In particular, the modern elegist refuses to translate their grief into consolation. Their mourning is 'unresolved, violent and ambivalent' (Ramazani, 1994, p. 4). As well as refuting the traditional norms of their genre, they can also attack other people, themselves, even the dead. Sometimes, even their own work; one example of this can be found in Geoffrey Hill's work, whose elegies for Holocaust victims reflect a concern that 'his elegiac poetry, like other artistic, commercial, and historical memorials … might distance the atrocities by making them aesthetically and historically accessible' (p. 8).

Paradoxically, Ramazani's analysis of the work of more contemporary poets, such as Seamus Heaney and the American poet Amy Clampitt, points to a renewed engagement with the consolatory powers of the elegy. For example, he describes praise for the dead as one of the most archaic features of the elegy, before going on to show how it seems to have re-emerged in Seamus Heaney's later elegies. According to Ramazani, Heaney and others have 'reclaimed compensatory mourning by subduing its [the elegy's] promise' (Ramazani, 1994, p. 30). In other words, 'a more traditionalist mode of elegy may have become viable once again, so long as it is sufficiently tempered by the skepticisms of our times' (Ramazani, 1994, p. xiii). He concludes:

> Despite its melancholic proclivity, the modern elegy continues the ancient interplay between melancholic and consolatory mourning, some poems tending more in one direction, others moving dialectically between the two. (Ramazani, 1994, p. 31)

2.5 Ecocriticism and the post-pastoral

In his book, *The Environmental Imagination*, Lawrence Buell, a founding figure in ecocriticism, notes that the 'pastoral will be part of the unavoidable ground-condition of most of those who read this book. … [Although it also] interposes some major stumbling blocks in

the way of developing a mature environmental aesthetics, it cannot but play a major role in that endeavour' (Buell, 1995, p. 32). Not only does he thus acknowledge the debt owed by ecocriticism to the pastoral mode, he goes on to identify ecocriticism as its most recent evolution, describing it as an 'ecocentric repossession of pastoral' whereby pastoral's 'center of energy' has shifted from 'representation of nature as a theater for human events to representation in the sense of advocacy of nature as a presence for its own sake' (52). For Buell, the development of ecocriticism and the post-pastoral (even if this term is coined later) are one and the same thing.

Despite this acknowledgement of the importance of pastoral to ecocriticism, many other scholars have sought to denigrate the pastoral, to the degree that Giffords concludes 'that the pastoral has become not only a "contested term", but a deeply suspect one, is the cultural position in which we find ourselves' (p. 147). For him, this is at least partly due to a failure among ecocritics to meaningfully engage with classical writers of pastoral. This theme is returned to in a later essay, in which he questions Greg Garrard's designation of the term 'classical pastoral', for example, for including all pastoral writing up to the eighteenth century, as well as Garrard's description of Virgil's Eclogues as being characterised by 'harmony and balance'. He also levels criticism at the ecocritic Dana Philips for his 'multiple dimensions of misrepresentation' in engaging with scholars of the pastoral mode, such as Paul Alpers (Gifford, 2016). For Gifford, the tendency among such scholars is to equate the term pastoral with Marx's 'simple pastoral' without any consideration of Marx's complex pastoral, which is as we have seen, the basis for its lasting relevance. It is therefore relevant to this thesis to seek to understand the relationship between the post-pastoral and ecocriticism.

Although the term 'ecocriticism' was first used in the 1970s (Meeker, 1972), it was not until the 1990s that it took a real footing, quickly becoming a widely-used theory within the

humanities by the end of that decade, with key milestones in that early period including the founding of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) and later of the academic journal, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment (ISLE)* (Gladwin, 2019). The highly relevant context is, of course, the dramatic increase in manifestations of the ongoing climate crisis, which became increasingly reflected in global heating and weather-related disasters. In the US, its origins have been traced back to pastoral works such as those of transcendentalist nineteenth-century writers such as Emerson, Fuller and Thoreau. Influential US-based monographs from the nineties include Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), Glotfelty and Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) and the collection of essays, *Reading the Earth* (Branch, 1998), all of which are concerned with identifying a uniquely American tradition of pastoral. In the UK, the origins of ecocriticism (or green studies as it was at least initially known as there), is attributed to the Romantic movement of the later eighteenth century. UK counterparts in early ecocriticism include Jonathan Bates' 2001 *Romantic Ecology* and *The Green Studies Reader* (2000).

Despite (or perhaps because of) its rapid growth and influence, there is no single accepted definition of ecocriticism. By its nature an interdisciplinary field, broad-ranging and multifaceted, one commentator described it as 'a rather large tent, where work on nature writing can comfortably sit next to animal studies, and postcolonial theory rubs shoulders with ecofeminism' (Bracke, 2007). Nonetheless, a common ground for work conducted in this field has been identified:

> the assumption that the ideas and structures of desire which govern the interactions between humans and their natural environment (including, perhaps most crucially, the very distinction between the human and the non-human) are of central importance if we are to get a handle on our ecological predicament.[6]

[6] European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and Environment, 'What is ecocriticism?', at https://www.easlce.eu/about-us/what-is-ecocriticism/.

Ecocriticism, it is agreed, is an interdisciplinary means by which scholars can approach what is arguably the most important concern of our time – the global ecological crisis – via their critical engagement with literary texts (Gladwin, 2019). As one of its pioneers, Carol Glotfelty put it, it 'takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies' rather than the traditionally anthropomorphic approach. Glotfelty's definition of ecocriticism, back in 1994 when it was just beginning to gain a foothold, is also often cited:

> 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.' (Glotfelty, 1994)

Here we find echoes of Gifford's conceptualisation of post-pastoral, the pastoral's latest manifestation, as including both ecocritical analyses of works of literature and explicitly ecocritical literary texts which are as concerned with the welfare of Arcadia as they are with their dispossessed humans; ecocriticism as 'the frame of our age, informed with a new concern for "environment", rather than "countryside" or "landscape" or the "bucolic" (Gifford, p. 147).

It is also a concept that has evolved over its decades. Three waves have been identified, with the first wave according to Buell preceding its dramatic rise as an interdisciplinary field of scholarship during the nineties, and defined by a celebratory approach to the themes of 'Nature' and 'wilderness'. The most recent, third, wave is defined as a transcultural approach, characterised by a growing appreciation of ecocritical perspectives from the Global South, as well as an evolving ecofeminism and an emphasis on integrating literature with environmental activism (Slovik, 2010).

One field of thought that locates itself within this third wave is that of object-oriented ontology (OOO). From its material, realist perspective, the world is fundamentally non-hierarchical;

everything exists ‘on an equal footing’ (Wilde, 2020, p. 2). Morton’s emphasis is on the ‘interconnectedness’ of a world that has come into being through the process of evolution, which leads him to criticise the tendency of some of the earlier ecocritical writers to present ‘Nature’ as something that is Other, separate from ourselves. Rather than a backdrop to human life, Morton creates a frightening picture of reality, which he calls ‘the mesh’, in which we are all subject to ‘mutation and uncertainty’, where teleology is non-existent, where there is ‘no center and no edge’ and where everything is a ‘strange stranger’ to everything else – that is, a shared genetical basis, a deep physical intimacy and yet fundamentally unknowable to each other.

Locating the post-pastoral within ecocriticism

The term ‘post-pastoral’ was coined by Gifford, in his book *Pastoral*, in which he devotes an entire chapter to the concept. He sets out this definition of the post-pastoral:

> literature that is aware of the anti-pastoral and of the conventional illusions upon which Arcadia is premised, but which finds a language to outflank those dangers with a vision of accommodated humans, at home in the very world they thought themselves alienated from by their possession of language (1999, p. 149)

A post-pastoral work recognises ‘that some literature has gone beyond the closed circuit of pastoral and anti-pastoral to achieve a vision of an integrated natural world that includes the human’ (Gifford, 1999, p. 148). Describing his conceptualisation of post-pastoral as an ecocritical approach, Gifford elaborates that this ‘new movement’:

> seeks to define a pastoral that has avoided the traps of idealisation in seeking to find a discourse that can both celebrate and take some responsibility for nature without false consciousness. (Gifford, 1999, p. 148)

He goes on to set out six defining qualities of post-pastoral literature, which I will outline here because of their relevance both to the later work of Dermot Healy and to the framework we use for its analysis.

Firstly, a post-pastoral work contains an awe in attention to the natural world, that comes from 'a deep sense of the immanence in all natural things' (p. 152), Secondly, it involves a recognition of a 'creative–destructive universe equally in balance in a continuous momentum, of birth and death, growth and decay, ecstasy and dissolution' (p. 153). The third feature is that it reflects an awareness that 'what is happening in us is paralleled in external nature … that our inner human nature can be understood in relation to external nature' (p. 156). Here, Gifford emphasises the importance of humility, which he sees as a necessary steps towards regaining 'our place as part of the natural world'. Fourthly, it conveys an awareness of 'nature as culture and culture as nature' (p. 162). In other words, no distinction is perceived by the artist between the notion of nature and the notion of culture – all human enterprise is only another manifestation of the natural world. The fifth characteristic of the post-pastoral work is 'with consciousness comes conscience': an idea that stems from the fourth quality. If culture is nature, we are not being kept from Mathew Arnold's 'darkling claim' by culture; rather, we are still there, the only thing demarcating us from the rest of nature being our consciousness, which we should use to take responsibility for the survival of the natural world and for the ecological relationships within it. Finally, accredited to the work of ecofeminists, the sixth quality is that 'the exploitation of the planet is of the same mind-set as the exploitation of women and minorities' (p. 165). Post-pastoral writing is necessarily about social justice as much as it is about the protection of the environment.

One problem with Gifford's conceptualisation is its linearity, which seems to suggest that pastoral began with 'classic pastoral' and evolved over time into its current, post-pastoral state.

We argue that though this is part of the story of pastoral, the truth is more complex. As we have shown in this chapter, aspects of classic pastoral are still relevant and, as we will see in our analysis of Healy's writing, can be found in contemporary literature. On this, we draw from Buell, who wrote of 'the pastoral's multiple frames', and how within it, 'more often than not, accommodation and reform are interfused' (Buell, 1995).

A second potential problem with Gifford's conceptualisation of post-pastoral lies in its emphasis on advocacy, even activism; Gifford holds up as 'a masterpiece of the post-pastoral' a work by the writer Rick Bass which begins as fiction and ends as 'a plea for the reader to write a dozen addresses on behalf of the Yaak' (p. 165). This, if applied too stringently, could risk a reductive approach to analysis of contemporary writing that would exclude writers whose work would otherwise (like Healy) benefit from this relatively new concept, a point that Gifford does acknowledge when he writes that 'the danger that green literature becomes didactic in a simplistic way is really a danger that it loses its power as art and becomes reductive propaganda or vague "right on" rhetoric' (p. 172).

These caveats do not undermine the usefulness of Gifford's six qualities of post-pastoral. As shown in Chapter 5, they provide an illuminating framework for analysing Healy's penultimate poetry collection (and the last one published before his death), *A Fool's Errand,* as well as his later short stories (Chapter X). This analysis of his later work illuminates the inherently ecocritical nature of the post-pastoral. This is particularly evident in the chapter on Healy's final novel, *Long Time No* See, in which I apply the work of ecocritical scholar Timothy Morton to highlight the deeply post-pastoral sensibility that is to be found in Healy's work. Morton's ideas echo many of Giffords characteristics of the post-pastoral, such as the rejection of the notion of 'Nature' as other, a deep humility and acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of the human and the nonhuman. In this conceptualisation of pastoral as a

mode, which encompasses the post-pastoral, I am thereby locating this thesis, particularly those sections and chapters concerning Healy's later work, within this most recent wave of ecocriticism.

2.6 Pastoral as a mode

We have seen thus far that the concept of pastoral in literature has a complex history and is multifaceted in terms of its potential connotations regarding contemporary literature. It is also a concept that has stood the test of time. Despite its continued use as a pejorative term, something that arose out of its skewed evolution during the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the qualities that have made Virgil's *Eclogues* so enduringly valued – the tension between light and dark, its themes of dispossession and loss – make it still relevant today. Without such inherent qualities, the pastoral could never have provided a basis for the manifestation of ecocriticism or evolved into the post-pastoral, with its emphasis on humility and acknowledgement of the inherent tensions within the natural world.

These qualities do not fit neatly into any one literary tradition or genre; rather, they can be described as an attitude. For this reason, Paul Alpers holds that pastoral is best perceived as a mode, rather than a genre.[7] On the latter, he notes that literary genres tend to be:

> specific, definable and readily identified … A genre is conceived as a literary form that has clear superficial features or marks of identification and that is sufficiently conventional or rule-governed to enable us to say, for example, that a given work is … a Petrarchan love poem or a verse satire … and not another thing. (Alpers, 1996, p. 46)

[7] Pastoral is not the only area in literature in which such observations have been made. In the field of Gothic fiction, it has been noted that scholars are increasingly agreeing on use of the term 'mode' when discussing the 'porous nature' of the Gothic, with its acknowledged 'oncological instability' (Galiné, 2018).

Definitions of the term genre tend to focus on ‘a principle of matching matter and form’, whereas pastoral ‘seems to be one of the types of literature … which have generic-sounding names but which are more inclusive and general than genres proper’ (Alpers, 1996, p. 46). He goes on to note that definitions of the term ‘mode’ are rarer in literary criticism, but that when they do appear, ‘they tend to equate it with attitude’ (Alpers, 1996, p. 46). Later, he concludes:

> This sense of literary language – that there is a reciprocal relation between usages and attitudes – … makes us invoke the term “mode” to give a summary sense of a work or passage. It is the term we use when we want to suggest that the ethos of a work informs its technique and that techniques imply an ethos. “Mode” is thus the term that suggests the connection of “inner” and “outer” form; it conveys the familiar view that form and content entail each other and cannot, finally, be separated. (Alpers, 1996, pp. 48-49)

These observations are reflected in Harold Toliver’s observation (cited in Frawley, 2005) that texts being analysed under the framework of ‘pastoral’ do not need to be what we might call pastoral texts in the traditional sense; rather, what is important is that this mode enables ‘our discovering something in them through this lens that would be less noticeable through another’ (Toliver, 1984). It is therefore not proposed that Healy should be defined as a ‘pastoral writer’, whose diverse body of work defies any easy categorisation. Such a description, it is argued, would be reductive of the eclectic range of genres and themes in his work. Rather, we take the concept of pastoral as a *mode*, which forms a framework with which to critically engage with many of the common tropes and narrative devices that run through Healy’s work. This looser conceptualisation also enables us to identify pastoral within and across a range of distinct genres, with the pastoral elegy being perhaps the strongest example of genre meeting mode within the pastoral tradition, as explored in the chapter on the novel *A Goat’s Song.*

An Irish pastoral?

Before 2000, there was an almost complete absence of research literature on pastoral in the Irish context. Recent years have seen this redressed, with valuable contributions being made to

our understanding of pastoral in Irish literature, most notably by Oona Frawley's monograph on the subject, *Irish Pastoral: Nostalgia and Twentieth-century Irish Literature* (2005). Recent years have also seen an increasing focus on the post-pastoral in Irish literature, reflected, for example, in the 2010 collection of essays edited by Christina Cusick, *Out of the Earth: Ecocritical Readings of Irish Texts*.

In *Irish Pastoral*, Frawley emphasises the debt of Irish pastoral writing to classical writers, particularly Virgil. For her, the strong preoccupation with 'place, nature and landscape' throughout the history of Irish literature is tied to the country's history of colonialism and post-colonialism, which elicits a 'fraught relationship with the nature and landscape of their homelands'.[8] The pastoral tradition in Irish literature, therefore, can be 'read as a verbal charting of not only the physical but also the social landscape' (Frawley, 2005, p. 2). Later, she writes, 'the Irish pastoral mode continues … to function as a way of expressing cultural upheaval and the longing for lost or threatened culture' (Frawley, 2005 p. 157). This chimes with Gifford's general statement on pastoral:

> This is the essential paradox of the pastoral: that a retreat to a place apparently without the anxieties of the town, or the court, or the present, actually delivers insights into the cultural context from which it originates. … Thus the pastoral construct always reveals the preoccupations and tensions of its time. (Gifford, 1999, p. 82)

Frawley's analysis shows that, in Irish literature up to the twentieth century, the natural world is inseparable from a strong sense of nostalgia. In this way, it shows 'Irish pastoral' to be strongly linked to the earliest manifestations of pastoral: the writings of Virgil.

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[8] This country's distinct history, as a colonised country, might also explain why Raymond Williams' analysis, which sees agrarian capitalism as pivotal in the way pastoral writing moved towards a skewed and artificial version of itself during the eighteenth century, might have less relevance to our understanding of Irish pastoral.

Other commentators who have also traced a line between classic pastoral and contemporary Irish writing include Donna Potts' in her recent book, *Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Pastoral Tradition* (2010), where she draws parallels between classical pastoral and that of contemporary Irish poets. Gifford also highlights characteristics unique to Irish pastoral writing that show a debt to writers of antiquity. In doing so, he partly attributes this to the fact that the teaching of the classics persisted for longer in schools in Ireland than it did in the UK, which has enabled contemporary Irish writers to 'feel themselves to be writing in a continuous tradition of pastoral' (Gifford, 2017 p. 171). In relation to the pastoral elegy, Ramazani (1994) points to the relatively late decline, in the western world, of traditional mourning practices in Ireland (Ramazani, 1994, p. 23). Edna Longley (2001), in her essay on the subject, also notes the influence of Virgil in identifying a substratum within Irish pastoral writing – 'western pastoralism', though Longley's focus is on how the pastoral form enables the poet to explore 'the metaphysical as well as cultural problematics of home' (Longley, 2001, p. 127–128). This is exemplified for Longley by Yeats, whose work brings an 'otherworldly strangeness' to political chaos, who 'bequeathed … to his successors in western pastoral … a glimmering instability; and landscapes in which settlement and wildness interpenetrate, utopia is desired and doubted' (Longley, 2001, p. 121).

As the analysis that follows will show, certain insights regarding the pastoral in contemporary Irish literature are relevant to our consideration of some of Healy's work, particularly the relationship between landscape and nostalgia (Frawley, 2005) and the parallels drawn between classical pastoral and Irish contemporary writers (Potts, 2010). However, given the wide range of genres in which Healy wrote (fiction, poetry, memoir), and the way in which his work often defies categorisation, isolating our study of his work to the Irish tradition would be unnecessarily restrictive. The flexibility inherent in the conceptualisation of the pastoral as a mode rather than a tradition allows us to apply relevant findings from Irish literature studies

alongside other aspects or manifestations of the pastoral, including pastoral elegy and the post-pastoral.

3 Classic pastoral in *The Bend for Home*

The Bend for Home (*TBH*) is Healy's only memoir. First published in 1996, it takes an episodic approach, with five separate sections recounting his early childhood in the small village of Finea ('The Bridge of Finea'), his later childhood and adolescence in Cavan town ('The Sweets of Breifne', 'Out the Lines' and 'Sodality of Our Lady'), and a later period in the author's life, when as an adult he cares for his ailing and elderly mother and aunt ('It's Lilac Time Again'). In this chapter, we show how *TBH* shares many traits with the classic pastoral of Virgil (particularly the eclogues): in its treatment of the urban–rural divide; in its themes of loss, dispossession and human vulnerability that are conveyed in a buoyant and energetic tone; and in its deliberate emphasis on artifice, achieved through a preoccupation with the relationship between memory and imagination, in the representation of Finea village as a lost Golden Age.

3.1 A complex urban–rural divide

TBH, particularly the first section ('The Bridge of Finea'), is replete with detailed and bucolic representations of rural life in 1960s Ireland, reading in places as an ode to the rural world of Healy's early childhood. In one chapter, a scene of turf cutting is evoked: 'The wet clunk of the shovels begins. I find wild bilberries. We start tossing the sods of turf.' His mother arrives, carrying something 'wrapped in white linen, in the other hand she dangles a pail of buttermilk'. This is followed by a deeply evoked bucolic scene of people resting after labour:

> Westmeath is relaxing all round us. … Westmeath men are lying back and looking at the sky. Sheelin is quiet and blue. Insects keep up a mischievous drone. Everyone is wonderfully sated and tired. (p. 8)

In another scene in *TBH*, in the next section of the book ('The Sweets of Breifne'), the young Healy and his sister, after the move to Cavan, decide to walk home to Finea. It is also an eclogic scene – two people walking in the countryside, the atmosphere sense of leisure and, again, the

description emphasises the beauty of the natural world: ‘We stepped into the country. The haze smelt of May blossom’ (p. 44). As they take ‘take various shortcuts’ to Finea, on their way they pass ‘a mansion house’, ‘a woman carrying two pails of water’, ‘a horse [fleeing] down a meadow’. Descending into a valley, the evening comes on: ‘Swans dipped their heads in a flooded field. Blackbirds sang’ (p. 45); the moon comes out. When he asks his sister about the practicalities of where they will sleep, who has lit the fire for them, her answers are always positive and when they approach lights, she decides they are the lights of Finea. As they walk on, it becomes apparent that this is not so. Soon, they realise they are re-entering the town of Cavan. Their ‘real home’ (p. 46) has been lost to them again, and this time for good:

> We came round a corner and suddenly we were in Cavan again. It had not been Finea we’d seen at all. It was a great let-down to arrive back to those dark half-day streets, to hear the door open onto the gloom of the hallway, to walk through the white marble-topped tables of the restaurant. My sister turned on the light in the dark dining room. There we were, the two of us, back in the mirror. … I was trapped in Cavan for all time. (p. 47)

Already, Finea has gone from being the world itself, the only world known to the protagonists, to a place of mythology, somewhere it is no longer possible to reach in the physical realm. While unlike Virgil’s Arcadia, Finea is a very real place, once it is lost to the past, it is transformed into a kind of Arcadia, or Golden Age. In this light, there is no doubt that the move to the (relatively) large town of Cavan is being cast in a negative light here; that Finea is the lost Golden Age, Cavan town its urban opposite. Compare the above descriptions of the rural world of Finea to that of the town of Cavan on the family’s arrival there at the start of the second section of the book (‘The Sweets of Breifne’):

> We bombed into the empty streets of Cavan … I remember standing outside the closed Market House after the car stopped. There was a smell of seeds, oil and cement. I looked up and down the street – not a soul moved, signs swung in the breeze, the sun shone on one side of the road, a stray dog skidded to a stop outside Provider’s and smelt the bottom of the door. (p. 35)

Much later, as older women suffering from dementia (the final section of the book, 'It's Lilac Time Again), neither Maisie nor Healy's mother recall their days running the Milseannacht Breifne. 'The Milseannacht might as well have never existed,' he writes. 'It is as if Cavan was an aberration that occurred after they left Finea in their youth and before they arrived in old age in Cootehill' (p. 279).)

This is a clear positing of the rural village, a place of peace and beauty where every inhabitant is known by name, against the large town as a place of industrial smells and empty, indifferent streets. Even the verb used to describe the manner of their arrival ('bombed') contrasts jarringly with the quiet mood of 'The Bridge of Finea'. In Cavan, instead of the sounds of Finea to help him sleep, he hears children being beaten by their grandmother – 'Next door I heard the Burkes screaming as their grandmother beat them. They called for her to stop but it only got worse. I could hear the slap of the strap plain across their backsides' (p. 36). It is also in Cavan that life becomes more violent and traumatic for Healy. His father becomes ill and the young Healy starts mitching from school; eventually caught and forced by an angry aunt to return to school, he is promptly boxed in his ear by 'the brother I feared', the blow bursting his ear drum:

> I kept hearing things that weren't there. This sudden screech would shoot through my skull. Sometimes there were thunderings.' (p. 89)

Later in the same chapter, the narrative flashes forward to the author as a young adult in London, the most urban setting possible, where he takes acid until one day he unknowingly takes it laced with cyanide; in the terrifying trip that ensues, in great physical pain, he sees 'my own image opposite me, as I often saw my own reflection in the mirror in the Breifne. But there was no mirror' (p. 96), thereby linking the two urban settings. After this 'flash forward' to London, the narrative returns to Cavan where, following a period when the young Healy and his father spend an increasing amount of time together, the father dies.

None of this is to say, however, that *TBH* exemplifies that feature of what Leo Marx conceptualised as 'sentimental pastoral' whereby the countryside is idealised at the expense of a denigrated urban world. The pastoral idyll is subverted in a number of ways. Firstly, while the passages cited above certainly celebrate the beauty of the rural world, its less idyllic aspects are also represented. Take, for instance, this description of the world beneath the seven arches of the bridge:

> The seven arches under the bridge are caves where rain is always seeping. Human and animal turds steam there. … A family keeps eel boxes upriver and you can peer through the holes and see them, all moist and black and uncoiling. The fish-stench is over-powering. … Sonny Coyle cuts the heads off the eels on the step of his shop. Cats carry them off down the village with angry growls. (p. 4)

The plain language adopted in scenes such as this, the unpleasant nature of much of the imagery, the emphasis on realism, all ensure that *TBH*'s representation of rural Ireland is never an idealised one.

Secondly, while there is a stark contrast in the young Healy's experience of Cavan town, compared to Finea, and while at first glance the town may be depicted as industrial and less personal than the deeply bucolic descriptions of the village, the move there is no fall from Eden. Even the title of the section that recounts his move to Cavan – 'The Sweets of Breifne' – suggests a reward, or a kind of bounty. And what follows in this section, which depicts the author's continued childhood living above a bakery and restaurant run by his aunt and now his mother, is a vivid and nostalgic portrayal of the now lost world of a relatively large town in 1960s Ireland. Take for example this description of his first perception of his new home:

> I studied the photographs of old Slackes that hung on the walls of the corridor. I stopped at the altar that stood in an alcove at the top of the stairs. A Christ, with his head bound in thorns, dripped real blood, behind huge thick glass. I went into the upstairs sitting room. It had a deep reddish carpet, a long sofa, armchairs, a large radio, a tall photograph of Thomas and Elizabeth Slacke, a sideboard stacked with silver. There were two strange paintings of rivers. (p. 41)

The sensory overload continues as, after his breakfast, he watches the comings and goings of the bakery:

> The day was filled with clashing delft, the pounding of the rollers as the bakery girls beat the dough, the rattle of the industrial mixer, big as a cement mixer, as it churned and whipped sponge-cake mix and butter-cake mix. Batters sputtered. Creams were piped. The tall geyser in the kitchen sent spouts of steam onto the wet, heavily glossed ceiling. Lard hissed on the pan. (p. 42)

There is a town crier who the narrator as a young boy 'watched, amazed' as he walked up the street, 'a few children follow[ing] him. He rang his huge bell, then roared something incomprehensible' (*TBH*, p. 41). An entire chapter (14) of this section seeks to capture the variousness and richness of one afternoon in Cavan town, a day when the town shuts down at lunchtime, through a single, three-page sentence which recounts various individuals engaged in various activities, each linked by a semi-colon. 'Potato sacks were taken in, shop gates closed, grids pulled across displays; the restaurants closed; the bells on the doors of the grocers went quiet' (p. 77) it begins, ending with 'Frank Brady went into the bookies with a newspaper tucked into his pocket, shot back a shock of hair and put his glasses on' (p. 80). Here, the scene is all movement, with each named individual engaged in some activity, be it cutting a deck of cards, hanging clothes out to dry, or heading to a pub. There is a celebratory quality to this ode to an Irish town on an ordinary afternoon in the early 1960s. The scene mirrors several passages in 'The Bridge of Finea' that seek to preserve moments of village life, such as this one:

> I am amazed at the sounds of the village. Brian Sheridan coughing. Charlie Clavin closing his half-door. … The bicycle repair man still at work. A swan going over.' (p. 9)

In another such passage, similarly stream-of-consciousness in its style:

> … Mothers hung clothes out to dry; a dog sprinted across Breifne Park; … Reilly the barber brushed hair into a corner; butterflies flitted through the cabbages in Burke's garden; … my mother did her toes; the bishop's chauffeur collected his girl up Keadue Lane in the bishop's car; Mr P.A. Smith, draper,

> went quickly into Cooke's archway from the Fair Green and whinnied; there was a mongrel asleep outside Black's, the printers; Con Reilly tapped a barrel; … the barman in the Congo ran cold water onto a cut in his finger; the deaf Smith lifted the back off a radio and looked in (p. 9)

In this way, the town is never represented as a place less deserving of efforts to celebrate, or memorialise, than the countryside. Even though Finea clearly represents *TBH*'s lost Golden Age, and Cavan town (and, later, London) the terms of his separation from it, there is never any sense that he is positing the urban against the rural in any kind of simplistic or sentimental way; there is never any judgement, implicit or explicit, in the tone or language that seems to impose a value of one over the other.

The intensity of nostalgia in *TBH* makes sense given the context in which it was written; Ireland experienced radical change between 1960 and 1980, reflected in developments such as joining the EEC, the outbreak of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the economic boom of the 1960s onwards and a growing emphasis on women's rights, particularly during the 1970s. By the time Healy had reached adulthood, many aspects of the world of his childhood had gone forever.

A third way in which *TBH* subverts sentimental pastoral is its recounting (in 'Out the Lines') of how Healy and his friends often (and easily) left the town and entered the countryside by means of a 'cabby-car' along the railway, which they operated themselves. In doing so, the text undermines the idea of the countryside as a lost Arcadia, a place separated from the urban world. This is compounded by the strangeness and morbidity, in those countryside scenes, and in the people they encounter there. There is an old woman who lives alone, for whom they cut timber and bring coal 'leavings from the station' in exchange for buttermilk, whose 'false teeth sat steeping in a bowl on the window'; she had one blind eye; as she speaks to them, her 'whiskers silver' (p. 83). In 'the haunted house at the nun's lake', 'a noose … still [hangs] in the barn', from when the last resident killed himself. There, they clean the kitchen and eat sandwiches, as 'elderly cows with large horns' wander through the derelict building, 'the noise

of their eating fill[ing] the dark house' (p. 85). When a neighbouring farmer comes upon them, he tells them about two other deaths that occurred there – a nun, 'stray in the head', who walked into the lake, and a jockey who fell into the lake and drowned. This macabre series of encounters culminates at a cemetery back in the town, a sequence that unites countryside and town, weakening the notion of separation between the two. There, they 'studied the broad, brown bones under the collapsed tombs. Shoulder blades, said Matt Donnelly, that's what they are' (p. 87). Thus in another way, these scenes portray town and countryside as a single phenomenon rather than two distinct places. It is also notable that, despite the ghoulish end, the chapter ends with the same sense of movement and energy that defines the descriptions of the adventures in the countryside, when as they make their way home: 'Paddy Ronaghan was shooting with a pellet gun from his bedroom window. Ping! Ping! The pellets flew like sparks across the Markey Square' (p. 87).

3.1.1 Arcadia as a lost community

According to Derek Hand, 'while undoubtedly a story of the self … [*TBH]* is more a story of others, of rendering the public shared space as opposed to the inner intimacies of the individual' (p. 358). In this light, he describes *TBH* as a text that illustrates 'the end of the story of the singular self as being the only story worth telling' (Hand, 2016, p. 363). One passage Hand focuses on to illustrate this point is the description of the huge mirror in the family's new home in Cavan. Healy describes how it 'had given my family and me a second identity', how through the mirror, they 'learned faithfulness and duplicity from an early age' (p. 73). They watched themselves eating through the mirror. When a visitor came, they spoke to them through the mirror: 'Always there were two of you there: the one in whom consciousness rested, with the other, the body, which somehow didn't belong and which was always at a certain remove' (p. 74).

In this sense, the mirror symbolises how the narrative of *TBH* displaces the focus on the individual, leading to 'a move outward towards the world and others in the world' – as the self 'becomes lost in this endlessly reflecting hall of mirrors' (Hand, 2016, p. 360).

This 'reorientation of his writerly perspective outwards and away from himself' (Hand, 2016) captures an essential, defining aspect of the entire memoir. There is a focus on other people throughout, those surrounding the narrator and in particular, the local community. Finea becomes the 'lost Arcadia' of *TBH* largely because of the community there, and how the village operates as an extended family. In this way, the pastoral idyll is subverted a final time in the last section of the book ('It's Lilac Time Again'), when the rural home of Healy's now elderly mother (who has dementia) and her sister Maisie is portrayed as a place of separation, even of banishment, contrasting sharply with the strong sense of community captured in the 'The Bridge of Finea'. There, the sisters know no one, other than a third sister, Una, who lives in a farmhouse nearby. No mention is made of any neighbours, other than Una; even the town itself feels only an idea; the bungalow, and the world it contains, seems to exist in a vacuum. It is a place where the sisters get nasty head burns from 'a blasted radiator' when they fall out of bed at night. Physically and emotionally, this is the furthest they have come from the Golden Age that was Finea; they are living out their days in a kind of geographic and psychological exile. Even though they are back in the countryside, there are no bucolic descriptions of the landscape surrounding them; everything that is described takes place inside the bungalow. The only time the natural world surfaces in the narrative is when the narrator thinks of his new home, as an adult, which is on a remote western edge, in Sligo. These thoughts come to him when he is contemplating the notion of Hy Brasil, a phantom island of mythology, said to lie in the west of Ireland, which only emerges into view once every seven years, shrouded in mist:

> If I close my eyes I think I can see Hy Brazil, a little beyond Inishmurray Island, not exactly land, not even someplace eternal, but a place imagined by

> people long before me that I must imagine in my turn. … Because it doesn't exist we wish it into being because someone else did in another age. (p. 267)

But Hy Brasil remains elusive, as elusive as Finea was the day the narrator and his sister set off from Cavan town to go home.

> Like a star that appears every two hundred years, you watch for Hy Brazil every seven years but in truth it has no definite orbit, no mathematics can accurately predict its appearance. (p. 267)

As soon as he starts imagining it, 'my mind refuses Hy Brazil. The language won't budge. Instead I think of trivial things, irritations, domestic affairs … and a book that I can't finish writing … Nursing. Drinking. How the smell of my mother's waste made me retch as I cleaned her this morning' (p. 268). Trying and failing to think of it, he grows homesick for his home in Sligo, in doing so evoking the natural world, which seems far away in the bungalow in Cootehill:

> I sit there thinking of the cottage in the same way I used think of Finea before sleep. I go up the road that was taken away in the storm. The asses roar. The sea is thumping the rocks. (p. 268)

Later, in the same chapter, he returns to Hy Brasil, noting it is 'a place that is hard to imagine inland' (p. 274), though in the same sentence proving this untrue, in the vivid description of the place that follows: 'the impossible rising out of Sligo Bay, trailing seaweed and gravel'. Then he returns, in his imagination, to his adult home, his new Arcadia:

> But standing at the headland of Dooneel it's easy to imagine mermen strolling the rocks at night. It's easier there for the weather and the rushing light to make an imaginary island before a storm breaks. There is magic in the calm as far out as the black clouds. The swell rises into the air and salt lands on Moffit's field. A wave strikes the rocks from some disturbance far out. But there are days you don't even bother to look. You hang around indoors.
>
> There are days Hy Brazil rises when you're not there. (p. 274)

In *TBH* beautiful depictions of the natural world only occur when the author is trying to recall a lost home, his lost community. The Golden Age is, by definition, a time and place where community exists; home and community are inter-bound, and it is inferred such a close community can only emerge in a village or hamlet, where a small population is bound together by its natural surroundings. When the community is gone, then the Arcadia is lost, regardless of the natural setting. We see this in the final section of the novel, which ends with a description of the funeral procession of his mother, and that of Maisie, who died a year later. Both left the town of Cootehill, and went into Cavan town, where the cortege stopped for a moment outside(the restaurant which the family owned and above which they lived, after leaving Finea, the Milseanacht Breifne. Both hearses also stopped, a second time, outside the old family home in Finea.

> The day my mother was buried the fields were filled with snow. After we took the bend round Myles the Slasher's monument the house looked cold and damp and unlived in. All the trees had been cut. The ivy that used stir round the windows at night was gone. Aunty Nancy, the last surviving sister, turned away. We stopped, went on. As we climbed the hill over the lakes the Finea joined the cortege and Brian Sheridan, who had been in Babies' Class with my mother, came out of his one-room mobile home, tipped his cap to the funeral, and took a kick at his dog to keep him away while he fed a heel of bread to a swan he'd recently tamed. (p. 307)

Here, a return to Finea is a cause of sorrow rather than joy, and the place is so changed that its previous enchantment seems impossible to imagine. It looks cold and unlived in, and the ivy he used to listen to the wind whistling through at night is gone. The only vestiges of the old community are a last surviving sister, who 'turns away' and an old classmate of his mother who kicks a dog as the cortege passes. Here, the author is refusing an easy opportunity to engage in a sentimental pastoral that would falsely portray the old home; instead, it exemplifies Healy's refusal to generalise, or to seek any easy consolation, but to portray things as they simply are, without any embellishment or self-reflection.

3.2 ‘Just a wretched human being’

According to Paul Alpers, ‘we will have a far truer idea of pastoral if we take its representative anecdote to be herdsmen and their lives, rather than landscape or idealised nature’ (Alpers, 1996, p. 22). While Virgil’s shepherds ‘regularly come together for song and song is what unites them’, Alpers writes that it is ‘separation and loss [that act as the] conditions for their utterance (Alpers, 1996, xiv). On a similar note, David Ferry argues that in the *Eclogues of Virgil* (1999), it is the loss of the place being evoked that lends the poems their power: ‘The pastoral structure … provides figures of refuge and ease, and of the precariousness of that refuge and ease’ (Ferry, 1999, p. xv).

As Healy himself puts it in *TBH*, ‘The bad things that happen make people memorable’ (p. 30). This aspect of the pastoral mode is manifested in three central losses that define *TBH*. Firstly, there is the loss of Finea, when the family move from there to Cavan town when Healy is a young boy, which is manifest in the deeply nostalgic portrait of the village in the first section of the memoir, ‘The Bridge of Finea’. Secondly, there is the many anecdotes that pepper the manuscript, whose peripheral characters also concern these themes. Thirdly, there are the deaths of Healy’s parents.

Nostalgia is a defining feature of classic pastoral literature and, as Frawley (2005) has shown, of modern Irish literature. As we have already seen, *TBH* is no exception to this where nostalgia ‘steals material from the same source as fiction, and then leaves the reality wanting’ (Hand, p. 25). In ‘The Bridge of Finea’, the first section of *TBH*, a deep sense of nostalgia pervades its many bucolic descriptions, the imminent loss of the place made explicit throughout. This aspect was relevant to the consideration of the complex urban–rural divide, with the beautiful Finea pitted against an initially impersonal Cavan town, but it is also one of the ways in which the themes of loss and dispossession underpin the memoir.

In ‘The Bridge for Finea’, the village is portrayed as a refuge, a place of innocence and great natural beauty. A small village that lies beside two lakes – Lough Sheelin, ‘troubled over recent years by pollution from pig farms … then a powerful, whitewashed, lustrous lake’ (p. 4) and Lough Kinale, ‘always dark and magical’, it is a place where boys and girls swim in the river ‘tall cold water to our necks’ (p. 4), where ‘oil-skinned fishermen from abroad, with long dappling rods, steady each other as they climb collapsing walls’ (p. 5), where ‘you dive under someone’s legs and frighten a shoal of minnow’ and where ‘one day the cows ate the girls’ clothes’. When the young Healy and his father go for a walk, the description of the surrounding countryside is similarly characterised by a nostalgic gaze:

> He takes my hand and we go down along the river, over the stile and on out to the mouth where the perch bask, shoals of them, watching for small fry entering or leaving Kinale; duck glide out from the reeds and leave a shimmer behind them; an old boat rots; a dragonfly drones; my father sits on a spread handkerchief, pulls up his trousers and lights a cigarette.

After a while, when the father brings up their imminent departure. Despite his reassurances that they can return to Finea whenever they want, the way this passage ends, with the two characters looking towards another village in the distance, suggests a tension between the promise and reality:

> We’re going away, he says.
>
> …
>
> To where.
>
> Cavan.
>
> I don’t want to go.
>
> He flicks the match to and fro, breaks it and throws it away.
>
> You may not want to go now, but after a while you’ll be all right.
>
> He wipes back his hair. And we’ll always be able to come back. … Often as you want to. The house will still be here.
>
> We look out at Kinale.

Loss is also reflected in the author's insistence on naming the individuals who populate the village. In various stream-of-consciousness passages that mixes bucolic imagery with specific references to individuals this draws our attention to the vulnerability innate in the temporal nature of the individual:

> I go into Fitzsimon's and have a dish of culcannon with the haymakers. Real butter melts in the centre of the spuds. There are scallions and kale and milk fresh from the byre through the potatoes. Mrs Fitzsimon's says: *Take more.* Hay is being saved. To watch the men means moving through streams of seed. The bad things that happen make people memorable. A death paints the village white. Gerry Fitzgerald, son of Sonny, sits on a step drinking ice-cream soda. Noel Kiernan is kicking ball with Gerry Coyle. *Do you hear me looking at you?* Says Mr Clarke. And he sent me down the village to curse his neighbours. There is another eclipse of the sun. We gather in the middle of the village and look through blue-tinted paper.

The deep nostalgia for Finea continue on into the next section ('The Sweets of Breifne') when, trying to sleep in his new home in Cavan, he would 'call out the names [of the people of Finea] with fondness'. On his first night, in his homesickness and insomnia, he conjures all the 'village sounds' (p. 36), taking an imaginary walk through Finea to try to get to sleep:

> And all the insignificant things returned. I noticed flowerpots, lamps, upholstered chairs, the colour of front doors. I went by each house and named who lived in them to myself. I called out the names with fondness. Sometimes I'd be asleep before I reached Coyle's. Sometimes I'd only have to go as far as Doherty's. On good nights I'd need only cross the bridge. … But the best place of all to stop was at Kit Daley's door. Here there was quiet. I stood on the cement surround of the pump. The village was sleeping.

This can be compared to a passage of Virgil's first Eclogue, in which the shepherd mourns the loss of beloved aspects of his Golden Age, where we find a 'mossy cave' instead of flowerpots and front doors, a 'high cliff side' instead of a bridge, goats feeding on clover and willow, instead of a sleeping village. Just like *TBH*, this eclogue presents a similarly idealised representation of the countryside that is suffused with this sense of nostalgia and loss:

> Never again will I, stretched out at ease
> In the mouth of some mossy cave, see how, far off,
> Browsing you seem to hang from the high cliff side;

> No longer will I sing my songs; no more,
> My goats will I watch over you as you crop
> The flowering clover and the acrid willow. (Virgil, Eclogue 1, trans. Ferry)

As well as its bucolic descriptions, the theme of human loss and suffering is underlined in 'The Bridge of Finea' via many anecdotes of life in the village. What is notable about such anecdotes is the way they always involve a tension between the theme of human suffering and the buoyancy of the tone in which they are told. Sometimes, this contrast is achieved by the way in which the protagonist of the anecdote in question seeks and finds comfort or refuge in another person. For example, in one, a young boy, too frightened to return home to his rowing parents, and sick from smoking cigarettes, sneaks into another house, up the stairs and into bed with 'Old Mrs Sheridan … [who] used to sleep all day and read almanacs and American magazines … He climbed into bed beside her … He fell asleep in her heat, and got up when he felt better' (p. 13). 'The village was always sleeping around', the story concludes, 'You'd never know who you'd find beside you when you'd waken' (p. 13). This is followed by another story, recounted by Healy's father, of a time the same boy's father went missing. The following morning, his wife was eating porridge at the table when a stone fell into it. All the time, her husband had been hiding in the rafters; on seeing her eat he grew hungry. That time, in the row that followed, the boy ran to the Healy's for shelter: 'And even though I was not born at the time, still I felt I was there to greet him' (p. 14). This is also there in the recounting of Healy's parents' honeymoon, in which they encounter and befriend a woman called Milly Kane, who, recently jilted at the alter, does not leave their side for the entire honeymoon, so that his mother 'sat among the old maids' as his father danced with Milly.

In other anecdotes, this effect is achieved by an insistence on recounting minute detail of the physical backdrop to the event in question, to an extent that a sense of surrealism emerges. This can be found for example in the story of a man who committed suicide:

> I mind to see a man hanging from a tree. … I know it happened during Mass and I saw the rope. I can see the moose swinging this side of the repair shop where all the bicycles stood – upside down, sideways, without pedals, without wheels, with damaged spokes, saddleless. A butcher's table under the window. A footpump. Spiders' webs. A tin advertisement for tobacco on the wall.
>
> A body hanging from a tree in his Sunday best. (p. 14)

It is also present in the story told to you Healy by his mother who, aged seven,

> walked into the lower spirit-grocers to get mints. Behind the shop counter was the woman of the house. Behind the bar counter was the man, without a stitch on him. He had a black umbrella over his head.
>
> Why? I asked my mother.
>
> To get his own back on his wife, she told me, pressing her hands into her lap, then seconds later slapping her knees. (p. 6)

Sometimes, this emphasis on the physical takes on a scatological nature, like the description of the asylum where Healy's mother and aunt worked as maids when they were young, and their subsequent terror of madness, their tales of 'wild screeches', the woman who asked for her hair to be dyed black the night she died, gifts of urine being passed between residents:

> She was in Mrs McPherson's room when a knock came to the door. Outside stood Mrs Flood decked out in a prim suit. She was carrying a po of piss swathed in Christmas wrapping paper.
>
> Please, will you give Mrs Pherson my esteemed regards, said Mrs Flood, and handed my mother the chamber pot.
>
> In innocence my mother did as she was told.
>
> Mrs Pherson undid the wrappings.
>
> What is this? she asked.
>
> Appalled, my mother threw the contents out the window. … A few days later Mrs Flood was back at Mrs Pherson's door again. (pp. 22–23)

Sometimes, a macabre tone creeps in, even as the story simultaneously maintains its buoyant tone. One such example is the tale of Matt Reilly, who took money from distant American relatives to bury those sent home to be buried in Finea but, instead of providing individual

graves with tombstones of Connemara marble and ‘fine blue gravel from Harton’s quarry’, ‘tipped Yankee cousins he never knew into [an] unmarked plot, put a wooden cross into the ground and gone on drinking sprees in Granard’ (p. 19). When an uncle decides to come to Ireland to view the graves, Reilly is driven into ‘a fury of construction’ as, with a neighbour to help him,

> he walked to the graveyard with a spade over his shoulder and began digging up the dead. He bought a new plot and the old skeletons were dropped into it. … The stench of decomposing flesh reached the roadside. … Matt Reilly did a deal with a mason … for a mighty tombstone, he ordered gravel from Harton’s, cleaned his shovel off a clump of grass when the last Yank had been buried and fell over dead himself. (p. 19)

In other instances, such anecdotes are told briskly, often quickly moving on to a scene involving leisure and always movement, rather than lingering on the moment of trouble. One example of this is the way in which the scene in which a priest boxes the young Healy’s ear (discussed above) is directly followed by a description of friends playing handball in the dark, an image that is full of energy, movement and physicality:

> In the dusk we could hardly see the ball. Your hand toughened. The palm was like leather. You learned how to skim the walls. How to let the ball swerve off your cupped hand so that it made no sound. (p. 89)

In *TBH*, the pace of the narrative is as relentless as the world spinning on its axes; there is no time to slow down, to lick wounds; there is no choice but to continue, as a physical, temporal being. This feature is consistent with the way in which classic pastoral texts tend to represent ‘situations and experiences of distress … only insofar as they can be sung’ (Alpers, p. 172). As Heaney noted regarding the poetry of Milosz, a refusal to dwell on suffering, in a work that engages with serious themes, can be an act of restraint rather than an act of artificiality, allowing the work to resonate meaningfully with its absences at least as much as with what it present. Returning again to Alpers’ point, the emphasis remains squarely on the work as song,

with suffering as condition. Even when the suffering-as-condition moves away from the loss of Finea and into the death of Healy's father, recounted in the third section 'Out the Lines', the tone maintains its lightness, the emphasis always on description and dialogue as opposed to the emotional interior of the narrator; even in moving scenes such as this one, when the father and mother return home from their trip to Brighton, the emotional pain of the moment is only lightly touched on, the focus returning to the physical details of the scene:

> Blessed God, he said and he took me in his arms. I thought I'd never see you again.
>
> He dabbed his lips with a handkerchief. My mother in a canary-yellow outfit stood by a case in the hall. (p. 90)

It is a tender portrait of a close and deepening relationship between father and son in the years leading up to the father's death, but one that never risks moving the suffering from background to subject. Later comes a description of how he would help his father walk through the town and climb the steps of Cavan Cathedral. The journey, due to the father's ill health, is a slow journey; sometimes, as they climbed the steps, the glands on the side of his father's neck would swell so much, they could burst 'and a trickle of blood would run down his neck and onto his crisp shirt' (p. 106). On one occasion, the young Healy notes two young men 'pointing at the bleeding gland on my father's neck and laughing. I felt anger, shame, terror and pride, and a sort of violent loyalty' (p. 107). But again, we have the immediate return to the physicality of the scene; after they leave the church, the father 'lit a cigarette and we surveyed the town of Cavan again, a place that neither of us came from … We stood among the huge pillars of the vast cathedral looking down till he was ready for the journey home'.

In a later chapter, his father becomes bedridden; the narrator describes cycling home from school for his lunch break, so he could eat with his father. Before returning to school, he would bring his father's bets to the local bookies; they are described as 'intricate multiple affairs'

called credit bets. After school, he would sit on his father's bed and do his homework. 'We grew so close,' he writes, 'it was painful' (p. 111). The portrayal of his father continues to capture small moments of dialogue, of consciousness, like when the father might wake suddenly after dozing.

> Blessed God, he'd whisper.
>
> He'd sit forward and slap the sheets each side of him with the palms of his hands. For a moment we were strangers. He'd hold the newspaper tight. His breath would race. He'd look at me. Then with relief he'd find where he was.
>
> Dermot! he'd exclaim.
>
> Daddy, I'd answer.
>
> You're there.
>
> I am.
>
> He'd lie back and brush his lips with the handkerchief. His breath would subside. He'd fold his hands. (p. 112)

Again, we have the focus on the physical surface, at the expense of the emotional. The effect is scene after scene in which our gaze is always drawn to the characters' physical nature – their movement, their body.

In the last section, 'It's Lilac Time Again', the focus moves to his mother, who, at this point, is now in her eighties and suffering from dementia. In painstaking detail, the author describes her constant restlessness, her confusion and the challenges in caring for her, again capturing the theme of loss through a preoccupation with the surface of the world of that loss – the words people speak to each other, the movement of their bodies. At one point, she begs Healy to take her home, away from the hospital where she is being treated for a head burn, after falling against a radiator, 'a wad of flesh' to be taken from her thigh 'to fill the hole the burn made' (p. 237), in an exchange that captures a constant desire to leave, as well as her (new) incapacity to understand her situation.

> Get me out of here! she says.

> You're getting better, says Mrs English, who is in bed across the ward from her.
>
> Oh yes, says the mother, smiling sweetly, that's right.
>
> Don't leave me here, she commands me.
>
> I won't.
>
> But you're going.
>
> I have to go now, I say.

This is followed directly by another exchange, back in the bungalow, after she has been discharged from the hospital. It mirrors that which went before, compounding the effect.

> She sits opposite me in Cootehill, her eyes stalking the dark corridors of the subconscious.
>
> Bring me, she says, to the bed.
>
> Soon I will.
>
> Why had this to happen to me?
>
> You fell.
>
> That's right. So take me, she says, down to Una's.
>
> Una is away.
>
> Away where?
>
> America.
>
> *America* she repeats, unconvinced.

And on it goes. 'We sit here in a house she does not believe is home. At times I am no longer her son. We are all a cruel clique intent on denying her sleep, food, outings and peace' (p. 239). Later, he writes:

> She is no longer the sedate lady people speak of. But it remains somewhat in the delicate way she folds a towel, toys with a bracelet, pulls a comb through her hair or hangs her Sunday suit. They say that if someone you love is mentally available, then your self-image is enhanced. If they are not, then your identity is belittled. You'd be surprised at how much you once did was, in fact, a charade to meet with the bestowal of her favours. Now praise is not forthcoming. Looking after Mother is like watching language lose its meaning. (p. 280)

Again, even as the loss is acknowledged, we have the focus on the physicality of each scene. Sitting with their 'backs to the outside world, we are trapped' he writes at one point, 'in what apparently is. We cannot take off elsewhere' (p. 259). Even when his mother remarks on his constant writing, it is the physical aspect of the act that she notices:

> You're spending a lot of time with the pen in your hand, she says with extraordinary lucidity and I realize that while I've been watching her, she's been watching me. (p. 288)

With this focus on the physical, the human experience is often reduced to the biological in *TBH*. In particular, a frankness is to be found in the book's depiction of sex, a remarkable feature for a memoir of 1950s and 1960s Ireland, which, as Hand notes, tend to involve rather miserable representations of Ireland. In particular, a frankness is to be found in the book's depiction of sex, a remarkable feature for a memoir of 1950s and 1960s Ireland. Most notably, Frank McCourt's Angela's Ashes (1996) and Seamus Deane's Reading in the Dark (1996), as Hand notes, tend to involve rather miserable representations of Ireland. By contrast to these, *TBH* portrays Ireland of this period as 'not such a blighted place after all: there is music and money and lovemaking aplenty' (Hand, 2016, p. 355). This theme is strongest in the book's second section, 'Out the Lines'. In these chapters, the portrait of the town cinema as the site of sexual misadventures among the young is just as unflinching as any in the book:

> The females were restless and soft as the men on the balcony held them in their gasps, and let go, afterwards, with a sigh. From the back row came the moist slap of a kiss. … The arm of a seat broke. A bra snapped in the dark. A button shot open. The milky smell of semen spread like cuckoo spit.' (p. 99)

Later in the same chapter, he describes boys masturbating in the Fair Green, in a classroom, 'in full view of the class while Brother Cyril went through Irish grammar' (p. 102).

Clear, unsqueamish language is also used when reporting other bodily functions; like Healy as a child 'puking furiously' after eating a pound of butter. Returning to 'It's Lilac Time Again', this insistence on detailed rendering of the physical is found too in the depictions of his mothers worsening health.

> Oh God bless us! she says.
>
> I follow her into her bedroom.
>
> Will I put the radio on? I ask.
>
> Yes, she says, at least let's have music.
>
> Then I go clean the toilet. You'd be surprised how quick vomit sticks to porcelain. Why am I recording this? Because it's worth while telling that at the end of awfulness, there's always a generous spirit who says: At least let's have music. The music would not mean what it does if we had not been in the bad places. (p. 272)

As her condition slowly deteriorates, the narrative only dwells on the physical manifestations of this deterioration – its effects on the body:

> She cried bitterly when the nappies were put on. I lay her down and closed the cage around her.
>
> I'm helpless now, she said.
>
> She watched me sadly from her cage and turned away.
>
> At night she'd try to pull the nappies off. Eventually even the false teeth were gagging her. They had to go. Then the earrings. From that day on the mouth and the spirit collapsed inwards.

Again, as with certain passages from 'The Bridge of Finea' discussed above, there is an eclogic quality to these exchanges, with their sense of leisure and rural setting, even the theme of loss.

Throughout, *TBH*, the theme of suffering is further compounded in the way that, alongside all the bucolic imagery, the natural world is simultaneously portrayed as powerful and unpredictable (as well as beautiful) – a setting in which the human inevitably emerges as vulnerable. One example of this is to be found in 'The Bridge of Finea' when the young Healy, his father and an aunt and uncle take a boat trip and what starts as an idyllic outing quickly

turns into a dangerous one in which the inhabitants of the boat are almost completely powerlessness in the face of the storm, which is portrayed as powerful, frightening and swift:

> The unseen sun sends out a column of light from behind a dark cloud. Bad weather races towards us. Then the storm breaks. The boat, with a rattle of boards, goes dangerously high. Vexed waves splash in. Rain pelts down. … A dark mist falls. … The rumble seems to start underwater. Then the awesome crack. … The lightning strikes above Finea. It cracks across the lake. Then the sun shines. The water turns vexed again.

In this scene, all the verbs used to describe the storm suggest agency and power – races, breaks, pelts, splash, strikes, cracks. By contrast, the humans in the scene appear much more passive:

> We see nothing. … My father's face lights up like a stranger's. … Aunty Bridge is wearing a green sou'wester and wellingtons. Uncle Tom is wearing a straw hat. I sit between my father's legs. … We go round in circles.

When they do take advantage of an opportunity to help themselves, they 'grab the reeds gratefully' (p. 7).

Another example of this comes when the narrator describes the environment of his new home as an adult, in rural Sligo:

> There is magic in the calm as far out as the black clouds. The swell rises into the air and salt lands on Moffit's field. A wave strikes the rocks from some disturbance far out.

Here, again, all the power is given to nature; all the movement and actions belong to nature, and man (as symbolised by Moffit) is its victim or rather (because victim implies an interest on the part of the narrator) the hapless recipient of its actions. Whether such actions have a positive or negative effect is a matter of complete indifference to the natural world, of course; the swell in the sea does not care where the salt lands, or if at all.

This effect is compounded by the way in which human and animal are often presented in a way that minimises any material difference between them, thus highlighting both as being subject to the vagaries of a powerful and unpredictable natural world. For example, the stream-of-consciousness passage that comprises Chapter 14 is also remarkable for the way in which the activities of animals and insects are recounted alongside those of humans, with the effect that there is no material difference between either; man and beast share the same world, the same fate:

> … Mothers hung clothes out to dry; a dog sprinted across Breifne Park; … Reilly the barber brushed hair into a corner; butterflies flitted through the cabbages in Burke's garden; … my mother did her toes; the bishop's chauffeur collected his girl up Keadue Lane in the bishop's car; Mr P.A. Smith, draper, went quickly into Cooke's archway from the Fair Green and whinnied; there was a mongrel asleep outside Black's, the printers; Con Reilly tapped a barrel; … the barman in the Congo ran cold water onto a cut in his finger …

In another example, a description of him lying in bed as a child, waiting for his father to come, the description of the two is animal-like. As he waits in his bed, listening to his father chat to other men outside the house, 'the wind stirs the trees. The ivy shies to and fro. It's like lying in a bed of rustling leaves' (p. 9). When his father enters the room and lies down beside him, 'the bed rustles. There is only the sound of the ivy'.

In another example, following a bad acid experience in London, following days of being 'lodged in a rigid wakefulness', he finally sleeps; when he wakes, the final paragraph of the chapter has the author looking out his window, 'amazed to see the world still out there' (p. 98). His gaze falls on a cat: 'One of the wild cats that lived in a bomb site down the road headed up the middle of the street. It was huge. It sat, looked back and wondered' (p. 98).

Even when the narrator is still, it seems the movement can – must – continue, though an anthropomorphised cat. Identities leak into each other; where one ends and another begins is no clear matter, even when it comes to a man and an animal. It is a world of sensory and

emotional overload, where nothing emerges as more or less important or interesting or valid as anything else. The only incident in the book where the narrator escapes the physicality of being human, which is shown to ground all living beings in the world, is in a recurring dream in which he is flying over Cavan town:

> It was a wonderful feeling going by the high granite top piece that held the spire aloft – swooping, arching up, gliding. … Then it always happened. I'd get so happy that I'd forget and not see that the ability to fly was leaving me. … It was a terrible sensation to feel my wings were suddenly powerless. To know that I could not fly anymore. The air that held me so buoyantly a moment before was now letting me plummet to earth. Then just as the ground met me I'd find myself in bed, face-down, with my arms by my side. With relief I'd find I was just a wretched human being, safe in wakefulness, exhausted and sorry. (p. 108)

3.3 Pastoral as form: Transparent artifice in *The Bend for Home*

For Gifford, Virgil's distinct contribution to the evolution of the pastoral mode was his creation of 'the literary distancing device of Arcadia' (p. 18) in order to make 'the artifice of project … transparent to the reader' (Gifford, 1999, p. 20). In *TBH*, Healy makes the artifice of Finea as a lost Golden Age transparent to the reader in the way in which he draws the reader's attention to the unreliability of memory, thereby undermining the reader's confidence in the trustworthiness of the text. From the very first page of *TBH*, Healy forces the reader to consider the relationship between memory and creation. This is a particular feature of the first section, 'The Bridge of Finea', in which he not only dispenses with accuracy, but repeatedly draws attention to the fact that he is doing so.[9]

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[9] One exception is the section 'Sodality of Our Lady'. We learn in the previous section that Healy's mother has kept his diary from his adolescence, spent in Cavan town, which she presents to him as an

The memoir starts with the story of the author's birth, during which an inebriated doctor ends up falling asleep in his mother's bed, where she herself is lying, in labour. At the end of this, the narrator admits that 'till recently I believed this was how I was born'; in fact, the events recounted took place in a neighbour's house, with his mother acting as midwife. 'It's in a neighbour's house,' he concludes, 'fiction begins' (p. 3). This theme continues in the following chapter, with a description of a local hero, Myles the Slasher, who has a monument raised to him in the middle of the village. This character belonged to a clan of local high chieftains, 'and defended Westmeath against the enemy'. The story goes that in battle, after losing both arms, he continued to fight with his knife clenched between his teeth until he was decapitated 'on the Westmeath side' of the bridge of Finea, events we are told the young Healy 'used often imagine above in my bed'. Subsequently, however, we learn that Myles the Slasher never stepped foot on the bridge of Finea, something that Healy himself learned 'much later' in his life.

We find the same theme in a description that follows of a song by Percy French, called 'Come Back Paddy Reilly to Ballyjamesduff', supposedly written about 'a cabman who used to collect Mr French, the road-engineer, from the railway station there' (p. 9) until the cabman emigrated to America. Two lines in the song go, 'Just turn to the left at the bridge of Finea / And stop when halfway to Cootehill'. But this, explains the narrator, 'can't be done' (p. 10):

> No matter how you try you can't turn left at the bridge of Finea, unless you go up Bullasheer Lane which leads eventually to the banks of floating reeds on Kinale. … It's all cod. (p. 10)

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adult. 'Sodality of Our Lady', to all extents and purposes, appears as an extract of a diary, with each entry dated, with shorthand references to places and people, with precise details of nights out and places visited, etc. It is the subtitle of this section only that makes the reader wonder about the accuracy of its content: 'A version of a diary' it reads. Again, the reader is forced to wonder, how much of what is here is the actual diary and how much has been invented.

The narrator concludes, ‘For the sake of a song Percy French got his geography amiss.’ It seems that getting ‘a couplet true’ sometimes requires giving wrong directions; he concludes, ‘And that’s how I found out writers not only make up things, but get things wrong as well. Language, to be memorable, dispenses with accuracy’ (p. 10). And yet, the narrator claims, his mother once took French’s left turn ‘that doesn’t exist’ and found herself in Cootehill, just as the statue of Myles the Slasher found itself by that bridge.

It is perhaps significant that French’s lyrics (above) lead us to banks of floating reeds, because this is also where Healy takes us when he conducts his own blurring of fact and fiction, earlier in chapter one. Four pages after the description of the neighbour’s birth comes a startling description of the author on a boat with his father, uncle and aunt, on a lake, when a storm starts. There is a strong sense of danger, created by a ‘dark mist’ falling, ‘frightened ducks tak[ing] flight’, ‘the sky cracking overhead’, ‘vexed waves splash[ing] in’. An oar is lost and everything grows strange; lightning ‘lights up my father’s face like a stranger’s’, ‘The rumble [of thunder] seems to start underwater’ and ‘We go round in circles’. For a long time afterwards, his father pushes the boat with one oar through reeds until they at last touch land:

> Then the keel softly parts the reeds near Brian McHugh’s. We grab the reeds gratefully. Hauling reeds Tom whistles a cockney air. My father stands at the prow pushing us forward with the remaining oar. Darkness falls. The air pulsates. Frightened ducks take flight. We are in the reeds for a long time. I will never forget their sound. And the sky cracking over. At last we touch land. All in the boat, except me, are dead. (p. 33)

Reading on, it becomes quickly apparent that this was not so; the death of Healy’s father, following a long-term illness, is described in the later section, ‘Out the Lines’, and there is no further mention of the incident on the boat, or of his aunt Brigid or Uncle Tom, until ‘Out the Lines’, when Brigid is mentioned in the context of his parents’ trip to their home in Brighton. So, what actually happened? Healy deliberately creates a feeling of instability at the start of the book, much like that on the boat during that storm; he wants the reader to doubt the veracity of

what is being recounted, or at least to remember that memory does not always deal in fact. As Hand notes, these are 'self-aware acts of memory' (p. 351), with the 'operations of memory' placed in squarely in the reader's view; Healy is deliberately highlighting the fact that in recreating the past, he can and will turn to the tools of fiction, 'in order to be memorable or to be true, not just to reality, but to the demands of form' (Hand, 2016, p. 353). The past is always lost to us, but as Healy himself notes:

> What happened is a wonder, though memory is always incomplete, like a map with places missing. But it's all right, it's entered the imagination and nothing is ever the same. (p. 33)

In Virgil's *Eclogues*, he maintains a distance between the reader and the Golden Age evoked in this poems, both literal and literary (Gifford, 1999, p. 20), by setting his song competitions between shepherds in the distant and cut-off Arcadia region, which enabled him to create a rural world that was 'abstracted from the reality of a working country life' (Gifford, 1999, p. 20). Similarly, in *TBH*, Healy achieves a similar effect by drawing the reader's attention to the unreliability of memory. By presenting to the reader these stories in a manner that emphasises how fact and fiction can combine to form myth, from the very beginning of this memoir the author is reminding the reader that memory and the imagination are inseparable; that we cannot talk of memory without invoking the imagination. This pre-occupation with the distance that can exist between the actual past and one's memory of it, and how memory can mingle with imagination to create something as relevant to fiction as it is to fact, particularly at the beginning of a memoir, ironically making 'the artifice of project … transparent to the reader (Baker, 2007, p. 138). It is a defining characteristic of a pastoral work.

3.4 Conclusion

In an analysis of Healy's only memoir, *TBH*, this chapter has sought to show how this work shares many traits with the classic pastoral, particularly those identified in the writing of Virgil. Firstly, it highlights a complex urban–rural divide, in which an initial apparent idealisation of the countryside is undercut by other features of *TBH*: the inclusion of descriptions of negative aspects of the rural world; a celebration of the town; the way in which, by its depiction of the narrator and his friends frequently and easily escaping the town for the countryside, it undermines the idea that urban life means separation from the countryside; and the way in which the final section of the novel portrays a move to the countryside as an exile, thus highlighting the importance of community, perhaps more so than rural setting, in his lost Golden Age. Secondly, it considers the important themes of loss and dispossession of the memoir, another defining feature of classic pastoral, centred here around the loss of Finea when the family moves to Cavan, the death of the author's father and, much later, the death of his mother. Also characteristic of classic pastoral is the way in which the emphasis is on the physical world rather than the emotional pain associated with the loss, recalling Alpers' assertion that class pastoral represents 'distress … only insofar as it can be sung' (Alpers, 1996, p. 172). A representation of the natural world as an indifferent and sometimes unsafe setting compounds this sense of human vulnerability. Finally, this chapter explores how in *TBH*, Healy achieves the classic pastoral's Arcadia as 'a literary device' by repeatedly, and particularly in the first section whose subject is the lost Golden Age of Finea, drawing the reader's attention to the unreliability of memory and therefore of the text.

4 Short stories challenging the pastoral idyll

Dermot Healy had 21 short stories published in his lifetime, of which the majority – the 12 that make up his only collection, *Banished Misfortune*, as well as five occasional stories – had been published by 1982.[10] For the rest of his writing career, as noted by editors of the collected short stories, Keith Hopper and Neil Murphy, Healy focused on writing poetry, novels and plays, with only a further four short stories appearing between 1982 and 2013. The analysis in this chapter focuses on three stories from the earlier period ('First Snow of the Year', 'Banished Misfortune' and 'The Girl in the Muslin Dress'), as well as two from the later period ('Along the Lines' and 'Images').[11] These stories were chosen because their principal themes – dispossession, human vulnerability and human powerlessness in relation to the natural world – are representative of those that emerge across the entire corpus of Healy's short fiction, and because they are also highly relevant to the pastoral mode, particularly as it manifests both in classic pastoral and Gifford's conceptualisation of the post-pastoral.

The strongly pastoral nature of the short stories may relate to the fact that the limitations of the form make it ideal for work in the pastoral mode: its brevity imposes on the writer real restrictions in terms of the number of characters a story can sustain, as well as timespan and the number of settings. It is arguable that the very raison d'être of the short story form is to reduce the complex to the simple, in the sense that it must have a singlemindedness in terms of the effect it seeks to achieve, or 'be complete in itself' as an early commentator on the form put it (Dawson, 1909). Short stories also seek to capture the complexity of human life in a way

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10 This includes a published extract of a novel-in-progress, which Hopper and Murphy include in their *Collected Short Stories* because it is 'self-contained' and as such, works as a piece of short fiction.

11 The *Collected Short Stories* includes two versions of 'First Snow of the Year': the one that won the Hennessy Award in 1975 and a later version that was included in the collection, *Banished Misfortune.* Analysis of this story in this chapter focuses on the second version, unless otherwise stated.

that illuminates its universal themes, as well as its inadequacies, to return to another Empsonian concept associated with pastoral, recalling his observation (see Chapter 2) that the pastoral captures 'this grand notion of the inadequacy of life' (Empson, 1974, p. 115).

With regard to the emphasis on the natural world found in Healy's short fiction, Flore Coulouma, in her analysis of *Banished Misfortune*, emphasises the theme therein of 'finding oneself through the contemplation of nature' (Coulouma, 2016, p. 240), which she concludes is ultimately Rousseauian: 'Healy's dreamy representation of time, space and the natural world harks back to Rousseauist visions and the melancholic longings of the Baudelairean *flaneur*.' (p. 244)

The comparison with Rousseau is true up to a point, in that throughout almost all of Healy's stories, this preoccupation with the natural world can be found, with naturalistic descriptions often emphasising its beauty. Indeed, the only reference to the appearance of the contrasting urban world – Galway city – in the story 'Banished Misfortune' serves to accentuate the countryside's beauty by emphasising the ugliness of the urban world, this negative contrasting suggesting a superiority of the natural world over the urban: 'Not that Salthill was beautiful but ugly and plain and yet it was a necessary outing for them all' (p. 117). However, to interpret this as any kind of idealisation of the natural world or of humankind's place in it, or even to find any 'melancholic longing' for a lost Golden Age in these stories would be to overlook the way in which they show the natural world's power and its indifference to human fate. Rather than simply portraying what Gifford called 'a delight in the natural' (Gifford, 1999, p. 2), these stories can portray the natural world as a place of both beauty and vulnerability, peace and violence, as though the two were sides of the same coin. The key point that emerges from this analysis is that Healy's short stories demonstrate the contention that the anti-pastoral is not something that developed in reaction to a false vision of the natural world found in classic

pastoral; rather, classic pastoral is inherently anti-pastoral. As well as delighting in the natural, it never seeks to falsify our relationship with it.

4.1 Experimental versus traditional

A 1976 essay by the Irish modernist writer Francis Stuart posits a kind of battle between 'cosy realists' and 'subversive modernists' (Hopper and Murphy, 2016, p. xvi) in Irish fiction, with the former wishing to 'preserve communal cultural standards and present the national identity' and the latter aiming to 'preserve the true purpose of art as an instrument for the discovery of alternative concepts and new insights'. Hopper and Murphy use this theory as a basis to argue that realists have a more 'conventional poetry, [which] underpin[s] an inherently conservative politics' (p. xvi). By consequence, realist work uses language in a way that is 'naturalistic, descriptive rather than probing' while the language used by those influenced by modernism 'causes discomfort rather than cosy reassurances for the reader' (p. xvii). Applying this conceptualisation to Healy's short stories, they identify a 'rapidly evolving style' there, away from realism and towards a more modernist style, with the stories increasingly displaying an emphasis on 'phenomenological observation and impressionistic states of consciousness, mediated through free indirect discourse' (Hopper and Murphy, p. xviii).

Putting aside the obvious irony inherent in basing a conceptualisation of conservative versus radical politics in literature on the critique of the fascist Stuart, this observation does seem to initially hold up when we consider the two versions of 'First Snow of the Year', the first published in 1973 (in the *Irish Press*'s New Irish Writing pages) and the second in 1982 (in *Banished Misfortune*). The latter, as Murphy and Hopper note, contains a few notable differences to the first version – a greater focus on impressionistic views, less clarity regarding switches in point of view, for example. Indeed, a critique of *Banished Misfortune* concludes that the stories that 'set the tone' for the collection are those such as 'First Snow' – the ones

‘written with a denser obliquity’ and that ‘may owe something to writers like [Aidan] Higgins and [Tom] MacIntyre’ (Hogan, 1984, cited in Hopper and Murphy, p. xxiii).

When we consider the entire corpus of Healy’s short stories, however, the picture becomes more complicated. In particular, in his later stories, we find qualities more commonly associated with ‘realist’ fiction; ‘Out the Lines’ (2012), about an actor who has a nervous breakdown, follows a linear narrative, and is told from a single (third person) perspective, while in ‘Images’ (2009), which recounts a first person narrative of a woman called Jennifer driving a photographer around a valley, we also find a single point of view, naturalistic descriptions and plain language, again with a chronology that only moves forward. In neither of these stories is there anything that could be described as ‘a denser obliquity’. The same can also be said for his other two later short stories – the 2009 story/memoir piece, ‘The Smell of Roses’, which recounts a visit to Quito, and the longer 1999 story, ‘Before the Off’. By the same token, in some of the earlier stories, we find some features of what Hopper and Murphy call experimental writing; ‘Girl in a Muslin Dress’ and even the earlier version of ‘First Snow’ both contain ‘defamiliarizing images’ (xix) and shifting points of view not always clarified for the reader, while in ‘Banished Misfortune’, the narrative moves seamlessly and often abruptly across various points of view, as well as across place and time, again without any clear indication for the reader. Yet all clearly have unsettling effects, as shown in the analysis below, subverting notions of a pastoral idyll and clichés of rural Ireland, as well as displacing the human experience from its usual centre point in fiction.

On this basis, I argue that Healy’s short fiction usefully illustrates the limitations of Stuart’s distinction between ‘cosy’, status-quo-maintaining ‘traditional’ fiction and radical, non-conformist ‘experimental’ fiction in Irish literature. Regardless of style and techniques used, all of the stories considered below achieve the effects of defamiliarisation and strangeness, and

all succeed in challenging more conventional perspectives regarding the natural world and the human place within it.

Another reason why this point is important when considering Healy's writing through the pastoral lens is because a central aspect of this framework is the way in which a text successfully reduces the complex to the simple, to paraphrase Empson again; in other words, the way in which it condenses the human experience in a way that captures its complexity, while also allowing the reader to perceive that complexity. A defining stylistic characteristic of the pastoral mode, particularly in the classical sense, is its simplicity, or apparent plainness of expression (which of course is not the same as saying the mode is reductive). See, for example, Pankey's (2007) emphasis on pastoral as a meditative mode, 'at once … descriptive, lyrical, reflexive' (p. 147). This emphasis on simplicity of expression is what has always drawn criticism to pastoral writing, ever since Samuel Johnson described it as 'easy, vulgar and therefore disgusting' (p. 45). Yet, as illustrated by Heaney's analysis of the poetry of Czeslaw Milosz, it is this very aspect of pastoral that can give it such great value, when utilised in a serious engagement with the theme of human suffering (Heaney, 2007, see Chapter 2). This does not exclude so-called experimental works from being pastoral (especially when we use the term to mean a mode rather than a genre or form), but it does present a serious challenge to the argument that texts that favour clarity and plainness of expression are inherently conservative. Fiction that displays those features more commonly associated with so-called traditional or realist writing is not going to necessarily be jaded, unoriginal or conformist, just as apparently more fractured or explicitly stylised writing is not necessarily original, unsettling or radical; indeed, one piece of fiction, as is often the case with Healy's short stories, can contain traits associated with both categorisations.

4.2 Buried trauma in ‘Banished Misfortune’

‘Banished Misfortune’, which earned Healy his second Hennessy Literary Award (in 1975) and is the title story of his only collection, portrays the McFarland family from Northern Ireland travelling to Galway city for their annual holiday. A backdrop to this eclogic tale is that they have recently moved from the ‘rows of terraced houses’ (p. 118) of Belfast to McFarland’s childhood home in the countryside, a house built by his grandfather, which emerges as his Arcadia or lost Golden Age; talking to Judy towards the end of the story, he rues the fact that he has forgotten old stories and aspects of his original heritage:

> ‘I left home too young, that’s what bothers me,’ he spoke again. ‘There must be a thousand stories and songs about my own place that I hardly know. But when we return, woman, we’ll try. … In a foot of land, there’s a square mile of learning, Saul had said, and he had learned to build from a sense of duty to the beauty of the hilly Erne. (p. 124)

Two deeply bucolic portrayals of this home, which serve as bookends to the story, emphasise the beauty and lushness of the natural world, with a strongly Virgilian sense of bounty. In the opening paragraph, rain falls while the family sleeps ‘the whole night long. Though it was warm and brown among the damp shiny chestnuts, the weather had opened under the shadows of the rambling trees’ (p. 109). Later, the son watches ‘a weasel drink water from the cup of a leaf among the chopped timber’ (p. 111). This is followed by images of the children chasing each other ‘through the mist to the end of the garden, among the penitent crumbling apple trees’ (p. 110). On the road, they pass ‘the dark purple of the sloes, sour grapes, the blackberries tidily hung between the bronze leaves and yellow roots of the hedge’ (p. 111). The story ends in the perspective of Saul, the grandfather of McFarland who built the house, listening to ‘the knock-knock of a thrush breaking a snail in his new garden’, glad to see ‘that the cream-coloured mare of the gypsies was loath to leave the fine grass now that her time had come’ (p. 125).

Song, another common trope of classic pastoral, is also a recurrent feature of 'Banished Misfortune'. The father hums to himself as he sees to the car, and then, once on the road, the children sing. McFarland is a traditional musician who plays with other musicians during their holiday in Galway, while his wife prefers classical music. Musical performances are recounted, and the views of both McFarland and Judy regarding music come into the narrative; for example, we learn than Judy once said to McFarland that traditional Irish musicians were 'a crowd of drunken children'. The theme of music peppers the story through many other seemingly incidental details, like McFarland's 'tolerant, musical strides' as he helps his travel-sick daughter, and how he listens to traditional music on the journey while Judy recalls listening to Mozart and Fauré in concert halls when 'she was husbandless'. An essay by Sean Golden on the role of music in Irish literature identifies 'Banished Misfortune' as a 'turning point in Irish fiction'. In it, he notes how the narrative itself bears musical features, in the way it moves back and forth in time from the viewpoint of Saul, now dead, who built the house, to that of its protagonists – mostly McFarland but also Judy his wife and their two children. It also moves back and forth in space, from the house in Northern Ireland to which they have recently moved, to Galway, the location of their holiday. This approach leads to repetition, as well as variation, as the different viewpoints and points in time are interwoven in the story, tropes that are found in both music and the pastoral mode (the two points of view typically found in the eclogue being one example). Other commentators have also made this observation; Swainson emphasised its 'circular, musical form … used again and again' (Swainson, 2016, p. 189), while Thomas MacIntyre described it as 'an instance of imaginative energy and tremendous literary skills coming together to release a story that's *pure song*' (MacIntyre, cited in Golden, p. 21).

As considered in Chapter 2, the classic pastoral form essentially *is* song; Theocritus' *Idylls* are based on the songs of goatherds, and all of the early pastoral forms – especially eclogues,

bucolics and idylls – concern, in some way or another, the music of the world they seek to capture. This has been identified by such poets as Heaney and Ferry as the essence of the potential value of the pastoral as a mode: its capacity to address human suffering implicitly, while preserving the spell of the song, and how pastoral writing can resonate with its absences more than its explicit material. In other words, the other side of the coin of the inherent musicality of the classic pastoral work is the contrasting and almost invisible backdrop of human suffering – dispossession, war, vulnerability. Again, we find this balance in the pages of 'Banished Misfortune' where the Troubles in Northern Ireland are carefully alluded to but rarely engaged with directly. As noted in the introduction to *The Collected Short Stories*, 'although the Troubles are only fleetingly alluded to, the brooding force of the conflict thrums away in the background, colouring everyone and everything' (Hopper and Murphy, 2016, p. xx). Often, such allusions are made in connection to the theme of music, for example when, during a music session in a pub in Galway, McFarland refuses to talk about politics:

> 'Politics is the last thing in the world I want to hear about,' said McFarland in a pub where he was the centre of attraction as he laid his fiddle down. 'The very last thing.' (p. 119).

There are many other troubling and tacit references to buried trauma in the story. For example, there are Judy's concerns, firstly as to whether the holiday would be long enough for any of them to 'feel release … for they had burrowed down so deep in anxiety that happiness was nearly hysterical' (p. 117), then regarding her marvelling at a kind of triviality she cannot help but observe among 'a people unaffected by war' (p. 119), and, later, about her ability to 'give [to] the young' under the weight of a fear that is 'so addictive, consuming all of a body's time', a fear that pollutes the relief they have enjoyed on their recent move from Belfast to Saul's house in the countryside. There is a subtle hint that the elder daughter, Eileen, has poor health, something that may be aided by the move to the countryside, though whether or not this is

related to the conflict is not made clear. There is the occasional detail of the conflict woven into the narrative, all the more shocking for the calm way they are recounted, as in this description of the McFarlands' neighbour: 'Will Byrne, the sentinel of the hill, his brother murdered at his door, watched their activities with benign speculation' (p. 110).

Finally, and most significantly, there is the easily missed disclosure that the family's new home in the countryside has been burned to the ground while they are in Galway. In one of many flashbacks to the farmhouse that occur throughout the story, the fate of the house and, ultimately, of the family, is shown in a glimpse:

> Fuck ye away from that house, ye bastards,' old Byrne [the family's neighbour] was shouting out of his lighted window and the dogs were barking, the duchess [the family cat] breaking away with raised hair through the long wet grass from the circling flames. (p. 122)

Thus McFarland's family home is lost a second time and this time for good. A deep irony is thereby achieved in the story's ending, in which the couple lie in bed together talking, a sense of the beginnings of a hard-earned healing manifested in their shared hope for a return to home, while the reader knows (though the protagonists do not) that that home no longer exists. Significantly, the title of the story is in fact the title of a traditional Irish piece of music, which comes from a story about music and grief, recounted drunkenly to Judy by McFarland during this final scene, in which a piper marries a girl against her family's wishes, and shortly afterwards she dies; the coffin is put on a cart, pulled by a horse through Galway city, no one following, until:

> the piper began a lament, not too slow or too quick on account of his losses, and the men in the fever hospital counted four thousand mourners as they crossed Lough Atalia for Forthill graveyard. That's banished misfortune for you, said Jimmie Cummins (p. 123).

David Ferry's comment on Virgil's eclogues might as easily have been referring to this story: 'the pastoral structure simplifies what we all share and, by doing so, makes it more tolerable while at the same time demonstrating how vulnerable we are. It provides figures of refuge and ease, and of the precariousness of that refuge and ease' (Ferry, 1999 p. xv). A classic pastoral work, with this discordance between the beauty and leisure of the story and the reality that lies behind it, 'Banished Misfortune' illuminates 'the ill-fit between that prevails between the beautifully tinted literary map and the uglier shape that reality has taken in the world' (Heaney, 2003).

4.2.1 Traces of post-pastoral in 'Banished Misfortune'

Although McFarland emerges as the main character of the story, much of the narrative is given over to the perspective of his wife, Judy, as well as occasionally to their children, their neighbour and even the family pets. This refusal to settle on a single point of view reminds us of Gifford's emphasis on humility and the decentring of an anthropocentric perspective, which characterise post-pastoral writing. Of particular relevance here is the way that representation of the human protagonists is intermingled with that of its two animal protagonists, the cat and dog who have been left home alone. In the opening paragraph, insects and humans share the same fate of sheltering from the elements, something that is achieved simply by the description taking in both, within the same paragraph, without a change in tone:

> … And the insects thrived down there in the cave of leaves. Eileen slept facing east, young child limbs learning to fly and the people of Belfast looking up in wonder. The duchess [the family cat] hopped along the stairs, past the dusty quiet of McFarland's door where the mother turned often in her sleep down an empty and alien past, and the cat sat up beside the small, steaming window with the lead stripes to catch her breath, where the magpies had chewed the new putty (p. 109).

Later, the text moves from Eileen fetching a glass of water for her daughter, in the kitchen of the boarding house they are staying in in Galway, to the family pet dog, Friday, back in the

family home, finding a bone behind the shed, which he takes down ‘to the edge of the stream, where he drank out of his questioning reflection in the damp mossy shadows where the hesitant rain and leaves still fell’ (p. 116). The movements of the animals serve as a link back to the farmhouse, a means of connecting the two separate narratives. It is through this technique that the story brings to us the fatal glimpse of what happens to the farmhouse while the family are on holiday. The neutral presentation of the actions of the animals alongside those of the human inhabitants of the story seems to imply an absence of any meaningful hierarchy between the two (a technique also observed in *A Bend for Home*, see Chapter 3). Moreover, it emphasises the interconnectedness of humans and other inhabitants of the natural world, and reflects a humility – a refusal to take on an often unconsciously anthropocentric perspective.

‘Banished Misfortune’ also reflects a post-pastoral sensibility in its rich, evocative descriptions of the natural world that emphasise its beauty, while simultaneously acknowledging its power and, by extension, our relative powerlessness in relation to it. One way in which this is captured is the father’s repeated reading of ‘Scott’s final trip to the frozen Pole’, a story that evokes in him a sense of a ‘harsh ecstasy’, a story of explorers ‘held down by the winter, frozen and breathless and singing songs under the snow’. This image serves two functions: it contributes to the story’s emphasis on song and music, and it also presents a wider natural context for the story, outside of the ugliness of Galway city and the apparently benign beauty of the countryside location of the McFarlands’ new home, to remind us of the ultimate indifference in nature, the scene of the family’s catastrophe.

4.3 Harsh nature in ‘Girl in the Muslin Dress’

‘The Girl in the Muslin Dress’, another story from the 1982 collection, depicts a destitute couple walking in London in the early morning. Only seven pages long, its timespan is limited to one morning. Significantly, it opens with the female protagonist ‘singing “Under Milk

Wood" to an old Welsh air she had learned from her grandfather' (p. 43), thus referencing Dylan Thomas' radio play (originally broadcast in 1954) which is recognised as a pastoral work, with its rich evocation of the world and inhabitants of a small fictional Welsh village. As in 'Banished Misfortune', the main attributes of this story are those of classic pastoral, specifically its emphasis on the natural world (and within this an inherently anti-pastoral sensibility), its eclogic nature and its themes of human loss and dispossession.

A sustained emphasis on the weather, with the wind and the rain almost emerging as characters in their own right, means that 'The Girl With a Muslin Dress' retains a strong focus on the natural environment despite the urban context. 'The wind was strong enough … the rain … hopped off the bonnets of cars' (p. 50); as the sun rose, 'Whole streets moved into focus, filled with washed-out colours and, looking up, I childishly felt the helter-skelter of the rain on my face and saw the dark clouds separate slowly under the coarse morning light' (p. 50). Throughout the story's morning, the wind and rain do not let up: 'everywhere, the rain … falling flat out from a great height down the grey sky'.

This emphasis on the natural world in an urban context has two effects, both of them anti-pastoral. Firstly, it undermines and shows up the inherent falsity in the notion that the rural world is synonymous with the natural world (and thereby superior to the city). Secondly, the negative mood created by these ugly descriptions ('washed-out colour', 'coarse morning light'), as well as the way in which the cold weather increases the physical discomfort experienced by the main characters shows that living 'in nature' is not synonymous with a peaceful and idyllic life; by contrast, here (as in many other stories in the collection) the natural world threatens the wellbeing of the human inhabitants and heightens their vulnerability. Eden can be found on city streets as much as it can by a stream and in both cases it can offer sources of destruction and well as nourishment. Thus the story illuminates the natural world as somewhere that is at its best indifferent, at its worst hostile to its human inhabitants, however

beautiful (even in the most urban context possible) it might be. Such harsh depictions of the natural world subvert those more artificial aspects of 'sentimental pastoral' that have come to be criticised. They also locate the story in a Virgilian pastoral tradition.

The narrative is eclogic, in the sense that it portrays two people on a journey together, conversing, albeit in a fragmented, stilted manner. Intrinsic to this defining aspect of the story is the protagonists' destitution. Just as can be found in the eclogues of Virgil, the movement of the characters is bound up in their dispossession, or homelessness. As Coulouma notes, it exemplifies the 'recurring themes of solitary wandering, resignation and withdrawal' (Coulouma, p. 240) to be found in the collection *Banished Misfortune*. Their destitution is also the basis for the concern with the weather; as two homeless people, they are subject to the elements. The story is essentially a portrait of dispossession, with the protagonists depicted as exhausted, malnourished and always on the move:

> Alex and I [were] walking together now. We had begun talking in a slow, effortless manner, mixing up all kinds of words, faint-hearted, Alex's eyes so tired now, burned down to a hollow darkness (p. 54).

Each stage of their journey offers only further discomfort, via the inclement weather or their state of mind. The story begins with the male narrator following his female companion, constantly in a state of fear that he will lose her: 'In panic, I lengthened my stride to a near run till I had her in sight again' (p. 50). When he eventually catches up with her, in the doorway of a chemist, he finds her 'cold and wet, even the wind could not smuggle some colour into her bloodless cheeks' (p. 51). A church bell tells them it is six in the morning, and in the doorway they try vainly to win a brief reprieve from the inhospitable circumstances of their life:

> We … touched hands a bit while the rain beat down on those blue-grey tiles just short of our outstretched feet.
>
> A draught blew straight out from under the door and we had to shift tiredly about trying to avoid it (p. 51).

The characters end their weary journey at ‘the notorious house’ rather than somewhere they see as home; the story itself is a portrayal of the reality of living without a home. Here, home thus emerges as a Golden Age – an illusion, or something that may once have been real but once lost, lost for good. Two references are made within the story to the male character’s original, childhood home, but both suggest it was a place worthy of nostalgia: the memory of his father teaching him to dance in the kitchen, and a comment on the first page that he was tempted to take of his shoes and walk barefoot ‘to Victoria and Pimlico, even further’, but was prevented from doing so by ‘some loyal, affected passion [that] deterred me from abandoning them in a strange parish’ (p. 50).

Unlike ‘Banished Misfortune’, this story has no explicit theme of song to make its subject matter ‘more tolerable’ (Ferry, 1999, p. 5). However, it does achieve a similar effect via portraits of the individuals observed or encountered by the protagonists during their walk. These people seem to share the main characters’ social misfit status, something that is implied by their eccentric behaviour and by the fact that some of them seem to know the protagonists. Yet the descriptions of them consistently evoke themes of dancing and music. From the doorway, the narrator and Alex watch ‘a timid-looking man in jamboree … carrying a large box against his chest … dressed out in a squat yellow cape with a beret pulled down over his ears. … Music could be heard like a serinette for the lifeless city’ (p. 51). This is followed by a description of ‘a dapper black man … on a bicycle … swerving from side to side and laughing ridiculously to himself in a plaintive, nearly familiar, manner’. Later, the two, while admiring an Edenic painting, in the window of what seems to be a flower shop (‘Hundreds of rich flowers, long green stalks growing this way and that, a crevice of weeds, roses and tulips, strange wonders crowded the walls’ (p. 54)), are greeted by a man from inside the building:

> [A] huge round face appeared behind the glass, a Leviathan of a man looked out at us with curiosity, speaking away. He smiled with some kind of

> recognition, then these enormous hands turned the key in the lock, the door opened, the drug stalled. (p. 54)

They accept his invitation to come in out of the rain for tea and follow him down an almost hallucinogenic corridor, watching him 'hop … along nimbly enough, carrying his great weight with apparent ease. His child-cotton shirt round the armpits and down the small of his back were drenched with sweat and with his every movement muscles turning to fat rippled the length of his body' (p. 55). Other aspects of his strangeness are emphasised – the way he refers to himself in the third-person, his showing them his shower, and his tales of living in the circus 'the flap of the canvas tent, the mad ponies from Ankara steaming after the run, the heavy lion-smell from the cages, the women who drank with him swinging out of danger … and a thousand others' (p. 57).

The same effect is compounded by small details within the story that emphasise the importance of song over suffering. For example, when the two main characters encounter some people they know, and someone says to them, 'Penny for your thoughts', the male character's response is to dance: 'And I did a nice 1920s shuffle with the aged boots in reply, a rendering the father had taught me on the kitchen floor. 'My, my', they said, skipping away.' (p. 54)

The story's conclusion is sudden and bleak. Abruptly, on telling his stories, Kanka changes mood, telling the two main characters that they must leave and they are let out through his back door, where they 'climbed clumsily among the cold church-goers'. They make their way through an ugly London ('the twin chimneys of Battersea power station belching their thick black smoke, the shadows scudding along the swollen Thames' (p. 57)), exhausted by days of no sleep, until they reach 'the notorious house' mentioned earlier, where they fall into separate beds, he into 'a wasted man's bed', she into 'the old laundered bed', as 'the blessed sickness came on Alex, she bit into my arm, screaming' (p. 57). This is followed by a final two sentences that imply a future that may be safer, perhaps more conventional, but one that is also devoid of

any sense of connection between the two. In other words, a future even bleaker than the current comfortlessness of their lives, which at least offers brief moments of connection:

> Then, when the fit passed, she made me promise to never to let her go because she knew that that was what I wanted to hear. Now, back in normality, no dreams come, the future separates us (p. 57).

Despite the grimness of this ending, its very briefness, compounded by its juxtaposition against the vivid, colourful portrayals of characters such as Kanka, serve to diminish, or at least neutralise, its impact. With its depictions of fiercely inclement weather and colourful, larger-than-life characters, its effect is of a simultaneously bleak and wonderful landscape through which the two main characters wander. Just as music and the idyllic imagery of Virgil's Eclogues distract from the suffering that lies behind those worlds, so does this insistence on the colourful and the celebratory. The sense pervades that while suffering is an inevitable aspect of the human condition, this is never the complete story; and that while depicting such suffering, song remains a valid way of engaging with this central theme.

4.4 The illusion of home in 'First Snow of the Year'

Only one day passes within the confines of 'First Snow of the Year', a story that starts with the postman Jim Philips waking on the first day of his retirement, and from his bed watching 'light … hammering on the broken shutter' (p. 3) and ends with Owen Beirne sitting in a tent with his girlfriend Helen, outside 'the stars so low he could have blown them out' (p. 11). Setting is also limited – to two spaces presented in juxtaposition – the 'vast acreage of wind and cold' that is the exterior, or 'natural' world, and the apparently safe and warm interior of the pub. This serves to heighten the atmosphere of coldness, bleakness and cruelty that is conjured regarding the natural world and eventually presents the natural world as a place where civilisation breaks down, or is rendered meaningless, a place where our true nature is exposed.

In such a small canvas, the story's themes – loneliness, violence, grief, the illusion of home – emerge powerfully within the narrative.[12]

For William Empson, the double plot is one technique successfully employed in pastoral writing with 'the 'obvious effect … of making you feel the play deals with life as a whole' (Empson, 1974, p. 27, see Section 2.3 in Chapter 2). Specifically, the tension produced between two separate but related strands within a story has a powerful effect in terms of what Empson saw as the crux of the pastoral: 'putting the complex into the simple' (Empson, 1974, p. 24), or, as elaborated by Brian Loughrey, writing that 'clarifies complex issues by restating them in terms which emphasise the universal at the expense of the accidental' (Loughrey, 1984, p. 21). The double plot does this by introducing complexity – layering two narratives alongside each other – in a way that is nonetheless manageable within the constraints of fiction, in a way that still enables the writer to control the level of complexity involved, thereby avoiding too much clutter of 'the accidental'.

In 'First Snow', we see the double plot in the way the story comprises a parallel recounting of the same single day as experienced by two of its main characters: Owen, whose mother has just been buried, and Phildy, the ex-boyfriend of Owen's girlfriend, Helen, and father of her child. The experiences of the former contrast sharply with those of the latter; Owen attends the burial of his mother, then walks alone to a pub, leaving his pregnant girlfriend to make her own way home. Later, cycling home on a stolen bicycle, he is beaten up and then gets lost in the snow, finally finding his girlfriend in a gypsies' tent, babysitting their children. Phildy, by contrast, walks to the pub with his friend Jim, a recently retired postman, where he fulminates

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[12] The story contains a relatively high number of characters for a short story (11 plus several unnamed, fleeting roles), but the majority are severely restricted, with most of those in the pub scene given very limited dialogue or description, and serving only to set the scene and give it depth without distracting from the representation of the experiences of the main characters.

over the relationship between Owen and Helen. Finally, incensed by comments made by the local undertaker in the pub, he and two friends attack Owen, after which, 'anaesthetised by nature for a time', Phildy retreats. The story ends with Owen's painful journey back to the house he shares with Helen, which he finds empty, and then finding her in a gypsies' tent, where we experience its only moment of (hard-earned) human connection. Owen and Phildy are united thematically: they are both experiencing the pain of loss. Ultimately, the idea of home is denied both of them, suggesting that it is an illusionary concept, a fact laid bare by grief.

The double plot effect is further accentuated by the way the story intersperses the exterior scenes with the banter in the pub, as well as the way in which it begins through the point of view of an otherwise fairly peripheral character – Jim Philips, the local postman on his first day of retirement. Empson's comment on the effect of double plot in *Wuthering Heights* could easily apply here – by 'telling the same story twice with two possible endings' (Empson, 1974, p. 86), it captures something of the complexity of life, with its lack of a unified narrative or single meaning to be gained from one experience, with its multiple perspectives and experiences.

As with 'Girl with a Muslin Dress', great use is made here of the weather – specifically the wind and the snow – with these descriptions emphasising the beauty and strangeness of the natural world, while at the same time emphasising the vulnerability and frailty of its human inhabitants. For example, a description of Helen portrays her as almost helpless against the elements: 'Helen, so delicate a thing, trussed up in the snow beside the grave' (p. 9). This depiction of gypsies moving through an inhospitable landscape has a similar effect: 'the gypsies … stealing through the yellow gorse with rotten turf. The children moved from clownish tree to clownish tree out of the wind' (p. 3, v. 2 of 'First Snow'). Even portrayals of

nonhuman elements of the natural world seek to emphasise human fragility, as in this description of trees: 'The begging trees on the mountain crisp as a child's brain' (p. 9).

This emphasis on human vulnerability in an indifferent and sometimes dangerous natural world sets the scene for two scenes of violence in this story: a cockfighting scene (missing from the second version) and the scene where Owen is beaten up.[13] Significantly, both take place outside, in the cold winter landscape. The cockfighting scene describes in visceral, yet calmly-recounted, detail, the bloodiness of the fight, its extremity: 'the sixth bird lost an eye and a wing was slung in a ditch'. It also portrays the indifferent cruelty of those responsible for it: 'the handler picked blood and feathers out of the mouth of the seventh [bird] and breathed life back into him, sucked at his beak and rubbed his chin murmuring along the back of the fighter' (p. 6).

When Owen is beaten up, the coldness and bleakness of the environment serves to sharpen the suffering. It starts with him cycling home in the snow on a 'stolen bike crazily down the hill from the village, swerving in the torrents of snow', until suddenly he falls: 'As the wheels hit the grass margin deep down, he was carried round and round on his back a few yards down the road' (p. 9). This event is witnessed by Phildy, the ex-boyfriend of Owen's girlfriend, and two of his friends and their approach is reminiscent of wild animals approaching easy prey. The violence that ensues is rendered in plain, clear language:

> A snowdrift in a sheugh had nearly covered Owen, he surrendered gladly to the shock of the fall, lay quiet, swallowed blood from a cut on his lip. He gathered the feeling of pain back into his bones. He raised himself onto his elbows, moaning, onto his knees and stayed there awhile till gradually he focused on the dark figures silhouetted against the snow-tipped, serrated evergreens. … The man standing kicked him on the bottom of the spine. 'That's for Helen,' Phildy said. The others hammered into his face with the violent devotion of the obsessed. … Then … they went up toward Monasteraden their anger anaesthetized by nature for a time. (p. 9)

[13] Appendix 1 gives a short summary of the differences between the two published versions of this story.

This representation of the natural world as a place of violence and cruelty is reinforced again and again in the story. After the beating scene, the narrative seamlessly returns to the pub, where someone is recounting another violent incident, which also occurred in the natural world, which is again set against a context of cold, hostile weather and accompanying human (and animal) suffering:

> '"A few days later," Devine went on, "I took the gun and went down to Lough Gara and I shot some wild ducks, the urchin that I was, 'cause there wasn't a bit of food in the house … not a bit … Sure there was no eating in them … and that mad creature of a spaniel I had rose the poor things, and up they got fighting their cause. (p. 10)

The narrative shifts back to Owens, who is now continuing his journey home on foot. Wanting to be with Helen, he begins to run, 'terrified of the long drop into the bogholes' (p. 10) until 'his senses failed him, and he could make nothing and he could make nothing of this vast silence where the particles of the mind were dispersed so quickly'. This natural world contains no inherent comfort or reassurance; there is no sense of a higher power or benign force, but on the contrary it is a world devoid of greater meaning. As Owens stands, 'trying to get his bearings', the light from the snow is the same everywhere he looks, 'not the separate light toward which the individual can turn, shining in his own beauty, but dispersed so freely that a great weary record of endless detail began' (p. 10). It is only when it finally stops snowing, the sky clearing to reveal 'the brittle stars … so many' that he finds 'the gravel track on the far side of the bog as in a dream, all beaten up and restored, like the others of his tribe' (p. 11). It would be mistaken to interpret this sky-clearing as some kind of representation of the natural world as benign or capable of responding to human suffering: Owen's home, when he eventually finds it, is empty. Helen, significantly, is found in the temporary shelter of nomadic outsiders. The idea of home is revealed to be no more than a comfortable illusion.

The story shows grief to be one of the few human experiences that reveals the real nature of life – as fundamentally temporary and that no home provides any lasting refuge. While the story ends with this scene of peace, and easy harmony between Owen and Helen, the last line with its mention of death reminds us that this is not really a happy ending, or at least that all we can hope for are hard-earned reprieves, which can only be gained by connecting to another person:

> He came in and sat beside her. When the children woke, she spoke in gypsy talk to reassure them. He filled the stove with timber and turf, snow dripped from the black canvas. He laid his head on her shoulder and they kissed in a direct trusting manner. Soon John Cawley and Margaret Cawley came over the rocks singing dead verse. (p. 11)

'First Snow of the Year', in its representation of the natural world as an inhospitable and even dangerous place, is thus deeply anti-pastoral, in that it implicitly critiques works of fiction set in rural Irish contexts (or indeed any rural context) that present the natural world as idyllic or even benign. It represents the opposite of Leo Marx's 'sentimental pastoral'; rather than being about a desire to return to nature, it shows man being trapped in an essentially indifferent, dangerous world. From the image of Helen in the graveyard, 'so delicate a thing, trussed up in the snow beside the grave', to the gypsy children running through the cold seeking weak shelter from the 'clownish trees', to Owen's frightening journey back to Helen, never are we given a sense of reprieve or responsiveness to human concern from nature. In its rejection of the 'sentimental pastoral', the story also contains elements of the post-pastoral, particularly humility in the way it portrays humankind as, like other animals of the planet, vulnerable, rather than in control. This effect is compounded by other features of the story, like the absence of a single, central point of view, or obvious main protagonist, which denies the reader a human-centric vision that can often be taken for granted in literature. In its insistence on contextualising of human enterprise within the natural world, it also follows another of Terry

Gifford's identified qualities of post-pastoral writing, in that it shows human 'civilisation' to be just another manifestation of the natural world – any separation between the human world and the natural world (like the pub, Owen's home), are illusory, at best temporary reprieves. Finally, without resorting to didacticism, the story is a reminder of the onus on the human race to protect ourselves from the potential threats imposed on us by the natural world; in other words, to respect its power.

4.5 Retreat and return in 'Along the Lines'

As Lavis (2014) has noted, an anti-pastoral text can involve a retreat into the natural world, followed by a return to civilisation. Such works show a disillusionment, or stripping away of old, idyllic notions of nature. This notion is strongly related to Marx's distinction between sentimental and complex pastoral, the former presenting a simple celebration of the natural world as a place of peace and renewal, the latter involving 'a counterforce' that undercuts the pastoral idyll, where the return to nature is never as idyllic as anticipated:

> A pastoral retreat often involves exposure to the anti-pastoral, be it a physical journey or psychological one and will generate a questioning of previously held beliefs and untarnished perceptions. (Lavis, 2014, p. 18)

The 2012 story 'Along the Lines' is a strong example of an anti-pastoral text, a story that starkly challenges the pastoral idyll and is in direct opposition to those works that can be defined as 'sentimental pastoral', seeking to portray the countryside as superior to the city. Rather than present a simplistic and untruthful picture of the countryside as an idyllic place, heavy irony is employed to challenge the notions that the countryside is synonymous with a green pasture and contented shepherds. It tells the story of an actor, Joe O'Hehir, living in a rural location in the west of Ireland, who periodically travels to Dublin to perform in plays. The rural setting of the protagonist's home, so far from the urban world of theatre in which he works, implies that the

countryside once held some idealised appeal to him as a peaceful retreat from the city. There is also a suggestion of an unspoken trauma in Joe's past, though what this involved is never made explicit; it is implied only by the obvious incongruence between Joe's home and Joe's life. And that is the real concern of the story: presenting the lived reality, or one lived reality, of country life, specifically for someone who arrives there as a stranger.

In this story, the vulnerability of its main character is accentuated by the comfortlessness of his countryside home, which is as rural as can be imagined: a three-room house in 'an ancient place', 'to the side of a fort. Stone walls ran through the fields', his back yard 'a field of whins and grey gravel' (p. 196). Here the natural world is a place that offers little; its defining features seem to be its absences – of plenitude, of comfort, of solace. The image of the small house against a place of such indifference suggests a powerful natural world against a vulnerable and transient human. Through these sparse details, we also see that Joe (for a reason that is never shared) deliberately sought a place to live that was both physically isolated and immersed in the natural world. As the narrative recounts his daily life in this apparently self-imposed exile, his unhappiness and alcohol dependency are made clear. Every morning, he times his meals and drinks by the appearance of trains on the railway line far behind his house that runs between Sligo and Dublin, learning his lines as he watches. The third train means the first drink of the day, a shot of bourbon. In the afternoon, he goes to the local pub, which he has grown to hate for the 'talk of hard times' of its other frequenters', who are carpenters, painters and farmers. 'He could not enter that banter'; as he listens, 'his face grew grim'. Afterwards, he drinks and eats his evening meal in a local hotel, where 'old folk collect for meals alongside groups of young folk' (pp. 195). Again, his isolation is emphasised, as he eats and drinks alone, reading his novel or learning more lines. Thus, instead of a bucolic world of bounty and beauty, we have a natural world represented in grey monotones and a distinct absence of things growing;

instead of happy shepherds, we have the bleak world of the local pub, a place of complaining, talk of money and mirthless laughter.

The story then moves to Dublin, where he goes for weeks on end for rehearsals followed by performances. It culminates in its only dramatised scene (all the rest of the story is presented as a general summary of Joe's life), a kind of breakdown on stage, on the opening night of a play. After three minutes of silence, during which 'It looked like a tear appeared in one of his eyes', he suddenly:

> threw his head up and out of his mouth came all the mad laughs of Henderson's [the pub], the laugh at what was not a joke, out came scattered lines with always the Ha-Ha, Jesus, there's not a penny to be had, Ha!Ha! Bastards, give me a half one, Ha! Ha! He bobbed to and fro tossing imaginary glasses into his mouth, read imaginary papers for a second. Look at what's going on down there, he said, prodding the non-existent article, Ha! Ha! They know nothing, nothing, do you hear me, nothing! Win a stroll in Christ! And he roared laughing as the curtain slowly came down and the lights went off, ten minutes before they should have. (p. 197–198)

The significance of this moment is emphasised by the fact that it is the only scene in the story that is dramatised, while his mimicking of the 'banter' that he has listened to in the pub, the story seems to draw a direct, causal link between his experience of living in the countryside and this subsequent breakdown.

At no point in the short story is it made clear whether Joe's origins are in the countryside, even in the specific, west-of Ireland location to which he has moved, or if he comes from the city. Has he returned to the countryside, only to find his Golden Age or idyllic place no longer exists, but only in the past of his childhood? Or has his Arcadia always been a project of his imagination, fuelled by pastoral representations of the countryside, the natural world? The fact that the story contains no reference to any past memories stirred by, or contrasting with, his new home suggests it is the latter. There is a sense of a man, already burned out by life experiences and perhaps by a pre-existing drinking problem, who moved to the countryside in

the hope of being recharged and renewed by his proximity to nature. But instead, he returns to the city even more depleted than before, his mental health only further destabilised by his visit to what is represented as a kind of end of the world, with its pub talk about nothing and its bleak, indifferent landscape, through which every day trains draw a line back to the city. Even though it is never made clear where the character comes from, his displacement is very clear, permeating details of his life both in the countryside, and in the city. The train acts as a symbol here; always in the narrative something that Joe watches, apparently obsessively, as it moves back and forth from one place to another. Even in the city, 'He'd stand under the bridge down the street to hear the train pass over his head' (p. 197). Such details suggest an unspoken sense of a resistance to a loss in the past, something that he has not accepted, something that he believed (falsely) that the natural world would help him to adjust to, or even to restore what was lost.

The reason for his retreat is never explained. There is an unspoken trauma behind the events of the story; he has been struggling silently against a loss of something significant in his past and this, together with his failure to fit into his new world, leads to his utter displacement. His breakdown at the end could be seen as his first acknowledgement of the failure of his retreat and the extent of his displacement. In one of the last lines, he blames a genetic background for his mental collapse: 'I have inherited the gene, he said to himself as he ran down to his room, undressed and prepared to go' (p. 198), yet the story ends with the play's director asking him, 'What happened?' There is a case to be made for seeing this as a hopeful ending, in that the asking of the question, and Joe hearing it being asked of him, cautiously suggest that for the first time, he is in a position to begin thinking about how to answer this question. Such an exchange among the strangers and cold acquaintances of his rural home would be unimaginable; it is only back in the city that this thin hope can surface. In this interpretation, the breakdown can be seen as a cry for help, one only dared uttered in the world that he knows

best – the theatre – in which he intuits any hope of being helped. Thus, this story, it could be said, recounts a failed retreat to the countryside, a realisation that the notion that comfort and renewal is to be gained by immersing oneself in the natural world is, or at least can be, a false one.

4.6 The fragile human in 'Images'

'Images' (2013) recounts the experiences of Jack, a retired lecturer and photographer and Jennifer, his neighbour, travelling through a valley, while Jack takes photos of ruins. His car has broken down; hence the presence of Jennifer, who has agreed to drive him. Set in a rural landscape, many defining features of classical pastoral are manifest in 'Images'. As with 'Banished Misfortune', the story could be described as an eclogue: two people travelling together, the bucolic setting, a sense of leisure created through the light conversation, the non-urgent aim of the journey. The story can be described as a series of images, each one recounted, without any accompanying analysis or explanation. In this sense, its title ('Images') speaks to its theme of photography as well as the way in which the story is told.

Within each of these images, idyllic representations of the natural world emphasise plenitude and beauty; cherry blossom trees 'shake their wings' (p. 199) and the 'white flowers of wild garlic' (p. 199) are picked, their smell later filling the car. Within this bucolic context, abandoned buildings suggest dispossession; home as a lost Golden Age no longer accessible. For example, they happen upon a deserted cottage where, they later learn from a local farmer, two brothers once lived before suddenly emigrating to America in the 1960s. There they find:

> 'a kitchen table, with a bottle of Jameson whiskey – quarter full – sitting mid centre; then two chairs facing each other, an old metal ashtray and finally an *Irish Independent* newspaper from years back.' (p. 200)

After this, they come across what appears to be a ruin of an old schoolhouse, with its ‘eight glassless crucifixes on the window looking in on the dark’, where they try to imagine the children arriving for class. Then another cottage, where they find a piano, all the keys soundless. Jack asks Jennifer to play a tune, and she complies; as she plays, ‘he watched me stroking the silent notes’ (p. 200). Then:

> He looked fondly at the gutted armchairs, said something to himself, and a look like aggression came over his face as he smiled.
>
> How did they get a piano up here, back then? he said. The past is like a herd of deer. (p. 200)

Even the descriptions of these abandoned buildings evoke human loss, the the emphasis placed on ‘ivy-covered walls of roofless ruins’ (p. 200) and ‘old blue and yellow doors locked by chains and the darkness floating beyond the old window ledges’ (p. 200). At a deserted farmhouse, ‘a dog [is] barking out of one of the top broken windows at the tulips and mayflowers sprouting below. (p. 201). At another ruin, ‘fresh daffodils were shooting up among the debris in the garden. “Mortality is rife”, he said, as he caught an image of the flowers’ (p. 200).

After Jack has insisted on spending the night in the cottage with the piano, Jennifer, driving home, finds herself noticing more ruins everywhere she looks:

> My eyes wandered across the fallen walls, broken sheets of asbestos, crunched pillars, old lovers, black windows, shattered little iron gates, the tree shooting up alongside the chimney through where the roof once was. (p. 204)

This effect of destabilising any romantic or idyllic impressions of nature is cemented on the last page, when Jack tells Jennifer he has since learned that the building they thought was an old primary school was actually a place used to hold pigs before their slaughter, a bathetic

discovery that mocks any romanticisation the reader may have sought in the story's representation of rural Ireland.

> He rolled out a few photographs for me to look at. … Next came the interior – a long room behind the windows that contained cages made out of iron tin bars.
>
> What are those?
>
> Cages for holding pigs. There were no old desks. There was no school. A farmer informed me this morning that it was a blooming creamery and after it closed, the new owner brought in the pigs. (p. 206)

In the story, peripheral characters mostly appear to be homeless, or at least uprooted from their natural setting, a feature that deepens this theme of dispossession, like the older woman 'sat on her own in the passenger side of a jeep, slowly feeding light green rosary beads through two fingers' (p. 203), who they see on their way to lunch, or the person in a wheelchair who passes them on the road ('A girl in a motorized wheelchair went by with a small dog on a lead', p. 200). Also typical of classic pastoral, the story hints at hidden darknesses, such as loneliness, implied by the quarter-full bottle of whiskey in the brothers' house, and again when the two protagonists consider a big, abandoned country house:

> A big house makes you lonesome, he said. That place reminds me of my grandmother's home, he said, she lived alone with a dog, and when she was in her seventies she committed suicide. (p. 201)

This casually mentioned incident is never alluded to again and, again typical of classical pastoral, sits lightly within the lyrical yet plain language of the story, as does the hint of war in the backdrop, when they come across old newspapers in the cottage 'gone wet and black at the edges', with its 'wandering headline concerning Vietnam'.

As with the other stories considered here, even as the beauty of the natural world is captured, it is never idealised. In the context of early twenty-first century Ireland, there is no attempt made to whitewash out of its portrayal the way in which the countryside, no matter how remote

you get, is almost never devoid of marks of the modern world. So we are given 'cherry blossoms shak[ing] their wings' alongside 'broken sheets of asbestos' and waves stuttering under mist alongside an organic café that does a good fish soup. In this way, the natural world of 'Images' is both powerful and indifferent to the fate of its human inhabitants, whose portrayal emphasises their fragility and homelessness: the old woman alone in the car park, praying, the two brothers drinking whiskey before leaving their home, the person in the wheelchair on the road, Jack's grandmother who lived alone before committing suicide. Even the dog barking at the flowers from the ruin seems ineffective, almost comic in his doomed state (his ineffectiveness reminds us of the animals in 'Banished Misfortune', the cat 'breaking away with raised hair' from the fire and the dog barking futilely). By contrast, all the images of nature either portray healthy growth or strong force: the daffodils in the ruin, the ivy growing over the old walls, the choppy lake followed quickly by 'a rap of hailstones' on the windscreen.

There is a more crucial way in which this story seems to undermine any human-centric expectations we may have of it. Typically, a work of fiction is principally about its human protagonist(s), who within the narrative experience an irrevocable change. In 'Images', initially it seems that such expectations are to be met. After Jennifer has left the photographer overnight, an increasingly ominous mood begins to build. After picking up her children from school, she continues to be distracted by the sight of ruins as she drives them home, that at one point her son shouts at her to watch the road. This is followed that night by strange, disturbing dreams, that again evoke loss and separation: in the first, she tries unsuccessfully to bring a lost baby back to its mother, the dream ending with the baby biting her; in the second, she tries to help an old man walk around 'a strange town' – every now and then 'his head began to droop forward dangerously, and suddenly sometimes he'd go face down from the waist forward. No passer-by would help' (p. 204). The tensions seems to be heading to a climax when, the following morning, she arrives at the cottage where Jack was told her he would be spending

the night and finds it empty. Then she remembers Jack mentioned that he was planning to head to the old primary school in the morning, and that is where she finds him, alive and well:

> All of a sudden out of one of the black windows of the old primary school came the haversack thrown like a school bag, then with the camera round his neck Jack appeared at another window and waved, disappeared, then reappeared out through a door at the side of the building (p. 205).

Thus, despite the ominous mood in the second half of the story, the growing sense that something was going to go terribly wrong, both main characters find themselves safe and well, and essentially unchanged, by the end of the story.

This inherently anticlimactic ending has two effects: it demotes the protagonists to a kind of side-stage status and ensures that the lasting impression left by the story is its images of abandoned homes and the natural world. By moving the focus away from the human inhabitants in this way, it is as though the author deliberately created a suspenseful mood towards its end so as to appear to fulfil the expectations that tend to come with a piece of fiction – that it is about its human characters, that the emphasis is solely on them – only to destabilise such expectations by failing to fulfil them. The strongest impressions left by the story fall back on all the images it contains, which portray the natural world, as in the context of abandoned homes, of the natural world surviving, or even thriving, when humans depart. The implication is that this story was never about the people who inhabit it. On another lever, we could say it still concerns the human experience; by moving the characters off-stage, it is depicting humanity's true place in the universe – its relative transience.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter presents a detailed analysis of five of the 21 short stories written by Dermot Healy. These stories were chosen because their themes of dispossession, human vulnerability and powerlessness in relation to the natural world are both representative of all Healy's short fiction

and because these themes are so relevant to the pastoral mode. Questioning an argument recently put forward that the stories reflect a move by the author, over time, away from realist methods towards more experimental modes of writing, the chapter goes on to consider how Healy's short fiction is deeply anti-pastoral, representing a rejection of the pastoral idyll and of more clichéd representations of rural Ireland. In the eclogic 'Banished Misfortune', with its emphasis on song and leisure, we find references to a deep, buried trauma and the countryside as a site of violence. In 'Girl in a Muslin Dress', stereotypical perceptions of the countryside versus the city are undermined as the description in this urban story remains focused on the natural world, here represented by the wind and rain. It also exemplifies how the theme of dispossession is central to the pastoral mode, with the emphasis on the weather intrinsically linked to the protagonists' homeless state. In the anti-pastoral 'First Snow of the Year', we find the double plot, one of Empson's elements of pastoral, is effectively used to reduce the 'complex' human experience to the 'simple' in a story that portrays an inhospitable natural world in which the human is vulnerable and often powerless, where the idea of home is an illusion, and where civilisation emerges as another manifestation of the natural world, rather than something separate and distinct. In 'Along the Lines', the protagonist retreats to the (very bleak) natural world in order to heal from a past and never disclosed trauma, yet it is only when he returns to the city that we have any hint of a possible future recovery; thus the story represents another anti-pastoral that exposes the inherent falseness of the notion that nature is idyllic. Finally, in 'Images', another eclogic tale, home is revealed to be something that is always lost, a Golden Age that cannot be recovered, against a thriving and indifferent natural world. This post-pastoral story continues to displace the human experience when its anti-climactic ending fails to deliver on our expectation of a work of fiction, that the central character must undergo a fundamental change. In doing so, its lasting story concerns its images

– of abandoned homes in a natural world that never stops growing – rather than its human inhabitants.

5 *A Goat's Song* as pastoral elegy

5.1 Introduction

A Goat's Song (*AGS*), Healy's second novel, published in 1995, concerns the compelling but destructive relationship between Jack Ferris, playwright and fisherman from the west of Ireland, and Catherine Ferris, an actor from Northern Ireland and the daughter of an RUC officer. It is comprised of four sections. The first, which recounts the final break up of Jack and Catherine, ends with him resolving to recreate her as a fictional character. The remaining three sections are presented as the fruits of this enterprise: Section II describes Catherine's childhood, including a detailed portrait of her father; Section III concerns the years she and her family spent living in Belmullet, County Mayo; and Section IV concerns her relationship with Jack, ending with the same scene that begins the novel.

AGS is widely considered to be Healy's masterpiece; Gerard Dawe wrote of it, 'I cannot praise highly enough the intelligence and imaginative care that has gone into [*AGS*] … few writers from Ireland have written with such effect as Dermot Healy has in this powerful novel', while Terry Eagleton described it as 'one of the most powerful pieces of fiction to emerge from Ireland in the past few decades' (Eagleton, 2011). According to Tom Adair, 'this wonderful celebration and lament creates its own hunger, its own momentum' (Adair, 1994).

AGS has also received the most scholarly engagement of any of Healy's works.[14] These critical engagements with *AGS* have been principally concerned with the novel's political context – the

[14] This critical engagement comprises: the Dermot McCarthy essay, 'Recovering Dionysus: Dermot Healy's *A Goat Song*' (2000), which is most relevant to this chapter; the 1999 essay by Roberta Gefter Wondrich called 'Islands of Ireland: A tragedy of separation in Dermot Healy's *A Goat's Song*' (1999); and Kim Wallace's essay, '"Here it begins": Figuring identities in Dermot Healy's *A Goat's Song*' (2004). Relevant essays in the Dalkey Archive (2016) volume are: '"The orchestra of memory": Music, sound and silence in *A Goat's Song*' by Gerry Smyth and 'Dermot Healy's *A Goat's Song*: "To give some form to that which cannot be uttered"', by Neil Murphy.

significance of a relationship between a Protestant woman from Northern Ireland and a Catholic man from the Republic (see, for example, Wondrich (1999) and Wallace (2004)). A notable exception to this trend is Dermot McCarthy's 2000 essay, in which he considers the confluence of realism and (Greek and Celtic) mythology to be found in the novel.

In this chapter, I focus on the strongly elegiac elements of the novel, arguing that *AGS* can be accurately described as a pastoral elegy. McCarthy's essay is an important source in this exercise. However, the most significant work to inform this analysis is Peter Sacks' monograph, *The English Elegy*. In this, Sacks emphasises that an elegy is a work, 'in the more dynamic sense of working through an impulse or experience' (emphasis added). He is concerned with the importance of loss in mythopoetic accounts of the origin of poetry and music, something that has strong resonance for *AGS.* His study also involves comparing the genre of elegy to non-literary responses to loss; for example, rites and ceremonies and various social and psychological practices, which, as I seek to show, all has high relevance to *AGS.*

There is arguably some irony to be found in using Sacks' thesis as the theoretical framework of this chapter, given his dependence on a very traditional and English canon in his own analysis. However, I maintain that this does not represent a denial of the political charge of Healy's novel, or to depoliticise it. Moreover, I argue that to perceive the novel's value as lying only within its political relevance is a reductive approach, one that fails to fully appreciate its depth and complexity.

Considering as an elegy a novel whose title literally translates as 'tragedy' (McCarthy, 2000) may require some justification, however. The novel clearly falls within Aristotle's definition of a tragedy as a work that imitates an action that is 'serious and complete, achieving a catharsis through incidents arousing pity and terror' (Baldick, 2008). The significance of the title is made explicit at one point in the novel, when asked by Catherine what he writes, Jack's reply explicitly refers to goat song in the etymology of the term tragedy:

> "I pen songs of the buck. Billy tunes."
>
> "I'm sorry?"
>
> "Goat songs."
>
> "Is that so?"
>
> …
>
> "Tragedies. *Tragos* – goat. *Oide* – song. From the Greek. … In the early days the Greek goatherds used to put the bucks on one island and the nannies on another. Then when the nannies were on heat their smell would come on the breeze to the bucks who rose a mournful song." (p. 227)

Compounding this in-text emphasis on the novel as a tragedy, is the recurrence of theatre as a theme throughout – with Jack being a playwright and Catherine an actor – which evokes the historically dramatised nature of the tragedy. However, the above-cited passage does not only locate the work as a tragedy; it also, as McCarthy (2000) notes, evokes other mythic associations that are relevant to the story, such as the other legend that has tragedy arising from a choral ode sung during the ritual of Dionysus as he was dying. Moreover, the two terms are not mutually exclusive, particularly when we consider how, since Milton's *Lycidas*, the term elegy has come to denote a 'lament' (Baldick, 2008). A work can be both tragic and elegiac in nature, in this case the tragedy acting as the basis for the experience of mourning.

In the next section, I clarify further what is meant by pastoral elegy, in doing so engaging in a critical analysis of features commonly held to be distinct to the term 'pastoral elegy' before moving on to apply the concept to *A Goat's Song*.

5.2 Pastoral and non-pastoral elegy

According to Kennedy's (2007) monograph on the subject and the Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms (Baldick, 2008), it was only following the publication of the distinctly pastoral poem 'Lycidas' by John Milton (1637) that the term 'elegy' came to denote a work that laments

the loss of someone.[15] Prior to that, 'elegy' only denoted the metre of a poem, and said nothing of a work's mood or content. The concept of elegy, therefore, at least as we understand it today, has for centuries been bound to the concept of pastoral.

This is something we can see in critical responses to 'Lycidas'. Samuel Johnson famously detested the poem, a dislike that was firmly rooted in his rejection of the pastoral form, which for him was 'easy, vulgar and therefore disgusting'; of 'Lycidas' he wrote

> It is not to be considered as the effusion of real passion … Passion plucks no berries from the myrtle and ivy, nor calls upon Arethuse and Mincius … Where there is leisure for fiction there is little grief (Johnson, 1970, p. 190–191).

Two centuries later, this critical concern was to re-emerge in the 1930s essay by John Crowe Ransom, 'A poem nearly anonymous' (Ransom, 1933). In it, Ransom asks why Milton, so clearly capable of conforming to technical formality, should include several irregularities in the work, in terms for example of rhyme and rhythm. In his essay, Ransom, himself a strict formalist in his own poetry, places great emphasis on any perceived 'breaks' by Milton in the conventions of the pastoral elegy, some of which are so technical as to betray a deep rigidity in the significance of such conventions for Ransom. For example, he even raises that fact that the final stanza of 'Lycidas' does not conform to typographical norms for the pastoral elegy in that it is not italicised. In attempting to answer his questions, Ransom imagines Milton worrying over 'what sort of poem [it] would look like' as Battestin (1956) puts it: 'too perfect

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[15] Milton's 'Lycidas' is pastoral in the traditional, classical understanding of the word, with an undeniable artifice inherent in it. It depicts a shepherd (the poem's 'uncouth swain') mourning the loss of Lycidas. Many of its other features are also representative of the key conventions of traditional pastoral – its procession of mourners, the important symbolic role of flowers, the expression of consolation found in the belief in immortality and a critique of aspects of society, as well as the pathetic fallacy. Its grief, however, is real, with the poem having been commissioned to memorialise an old college friend of Milton, Edward King (King is represented by Lycidas, and it is presumed the 'uncouth swain' writing the elegy is Milton himself).

an art might look cold and dead; and though an elegy had to be about the dead, it did not want itself to look dead, but to display incessant energy' (Battestin, 1956, p. 224). Ransom concluded that Milton deliberately flouted the conventions of the pastoral form, so as to avoid 'appear[ing] as another author' of such work; that it was 'written smooth and rewritten rough' (Battestin, 1956, p. 226). On this basis he concludes that while 'Lycidas' is generally a great work deserving of its reputation, it is also sometimes 'artful and tricky'. As Klein puts it, his conclusion is therefore that Milton was thus a 'kinsman of the modern tortured artist', in that the work displays that struggle between the desire to 'invest the poem with sufficient energy to become an individual presence and yet to retain its creative anonymity' (Klein, 1994, p. 399).

Responses to Ransom's essay both praise and criticise. Battestin (1956) complains that Ransom relied on no sources outside the poem in making his 'extraordinary' claims about the poem and the intentions of its author, in doing so drawing attention to the limitations of the New Critical school, of which Ransom was a leading figure. He also refutes some claims of Ransom that Milton was breaking with convention, citing examples in Virgil's Eclogues. Ultimately, he concludes that Ransom's critique of 'Lycidas' is 'without foundation' (Battestin, 1956, p. 228). About twenty years later, Rubin (1974) argued that Ransom, in his interpretation of the poem as something that reflects Milton's struggles and concerns as an artist, rather than grief, was in effect writing about his own preoccupations as a poet:

> I am not at all convinced that Ransom's depiction of Milton corresponds to the biographical John Milton; but beyond a doubt it corresponds to the situation of John Crowe Ransom in the early 1930s. (Rubin, 1974)

Klein (1994), though admiring of many aspects of Ransom's essay, finds little reason to disagree with Rubin, noting, as did Battestin, that Ransom 'repeatedly claims to know what Milton did and why' (p. 402) without offering any evidence for such assertions. More recent

scholarly engagements with it, 'however, reflect its influence, with their emphasis on aspects of the poem such as its experimental form (Rutherford, 2012) and the political significance of his use (and abandonment) of rhyme (MacKenzie, 2009).

Ransom's critical engagement with 'Lycidas' is relevant to my thesis in a number of ways. Firstly, it illuminates how the pastoral elegy can act as cultural artefact – how both such works and criticisms of them can say much about the time in which they were written and the preoccupations of those who wrote them. Perhaps of even greater relevance to *AGS*, it illustrates how, since Milton, a defining feature of the pastoral elegy is the artist's almost obsessive self-reflection. Lastly, it shows how concerns over the supposed artificiality of pastoral writing have a long history, as well as the fact that our understanding of elegy is strongly rooted in the pastoral mode.

The latter is strongly reflected in the way Sacks' conceptualisation of elegy draws heavily upon the mythopoetic accounts of the origins of European poetry, which themselves are based on vegetation deities of ancient Greece, such as Pan and Dionysus. Thus, when comparing the elegy to the work of grieving, as well as its rituals and ceremonies that even today are associated with grief, Sacks places great symbolic significance on representations of the natural world, as well as other pastoral tropes such as pathetic fallacy. Despite this, definitions of 'pastoral elegy' tend to treat it as a sub-genre, one that is characterised by strict adherence to highly traditional features of pastoral poetry, particularly the use of artifice. For example, the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* goes on to provide this specific definition for 'pastoral elegy':

> A tradition … derived from Greek poems by Theocritus and other Sicilian poets in the third and second centuries BCE [which] evolved a very elaborate series of conventions by which the dead friend is represented as a shepherd mourned by the natural world. (Baldick, 2008)

Later, the same source describes the settings of such poems as ‘decoratively mythological surroundings’.

Two points seem to be emerging here: firstly, that elegy as a concept is inextricably bound up with the concept of pastoral, but; secondly, and despite this, commentators on the elegy identify ‘pastoral elegy’ as a subgenre of elegy which by definition involves the more traditional conventions of the pastoral form.

In his book *Pastoral Elegy in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, Iain Twiddy seems to move beyond this seemingly problematic approach, by identifying three forms of pastoral elegy: ‘artificial pastoral elegy’; ‘natural elegy’; and ‘anti-pastoral elegy’. In his ‘natural elegy’, more relevant to his consideration of the form in contemporary poetry, ‘nature is neither beneficent nor cruel, humans have no pre-eminent place in nature, and consolation may derive from the dispassionate changes endemic in natural processes’ (Twiddy, 2013, p. 5) – this form is more likely to be found in modern and contemporary poetry. In Twiddy’s third category, ‘anti-pastoral elegy’, the more traditional pastoral conventions ‘are deployed or alluded to, in order to suggest or declare the limitations of those conventions, or their downright falsity’ (p. 5).

One potential issue with this conceptualisation, however, is that it reduces the pastoral elegy to being manifested in one of these three ways, and precludes the possibility of one work displaying two or more of them. Twiddy’s ‘artificial pastoral elegy’ concerns the more traditional approach to writing an elegy and in fact this category is synonymous with the typical understanding of ‘pastoral elegy’. It also insufficiently acknowledges some of the fundamental characteristics of the pastoral mode, characteristics that Twiddy himself acknowledges when he describes the pastoral elegy as a work in which ‘the poet accepts death as natural, and achieves a renewal of the life-instinct, in line with the seasonal pattern of death and rebirth’ (Twiddy, 2013, p. 4) and later, when he identifies the pastoral elegy as ‘the particular form …

that has addressed ideas of environmental change, the relationship between humans and nature and the relationship between desire and loss' (p. 4). In other words, it loses the flexibility that comes with perceiving pastoral as a mode.

A brief analysis of two poems by WB Yeats – 'Goatherd and Shepherd' and 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory' – may further illuminate the problems around the notion of 'pastoral elegy' as a traditional sub-genre.[16] We focus on these two poems because, as Sacks argues, the former is one of the last, if not *the* last, strictly pastoral elegies ever written, while the latter is an elegiac poem in which, according to his conceptualisation of the term, the pastoral is absent. We contend that, in fact, several pastoral elements can be identified in 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory'.

The two poems share the same subject; both are elegies to Robert Gregory, son of Yeats' friend Lady Gregory and a close friend of Yeats himself, who died serving as an air pilot in the First World War. Yeats composed a total of four elegies to Gregory, of which 'Goatherd and Shepherd' was the first. Yeats himself described it as a 'pastoral similar to what Spenser wrote of Sidney' and felt (initially at least) that this attempt at transposing the Virgilian eclogue to a modern context represented 'a new form … for modern poetry' (cited in Witt, 1950, p. 113). It is a clear example of traditional pastoral, with Yeats even attempting to impose the Greek figures of a goatherd and a shepherd on a fairly vague representation of the Burren. These two figures converse – another traditional feature of pastoral, specifically the eclogue, with the entire poem presented, script-like, as a dialogue between the two, exemplified by the first few lines:

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[16] This seems fitting because, according to Kevin McCarthy in his interview with Healy, in order to reach the house where Healy lived, you took a right at Yeats' grave.

Shepherd: That cry's from the first cuckoo of the year.
I wished before it ceased.

Goatherd: Nor bird nor beast
Could make me wish for anything this day.

In a letter to Lady Gregory, Yeats wrote that he was trying to write a poem 'in manner like one like Spenser wrote for Sir Philip Sydney' (Sacks, 1987, p. 264) and in the poem, certain allusions are suggestive of Gregory as a deceased master, thus linking him to those mourned in the eclogues of Virgil, such as:

And now that he is gone
There's nothing of him left but half a score
Of sorrowful, austere, sweet, lofty pipe tunes.

According to Sacks, few modern poets have attempted to write such a literal version of the classic pastoral. And it seems that this is with good reason; as Sacks notes, 'our century has found scant solace in imagined dialogues of mourning herdsmen or in ceremonies based too explicitly or too derivatively on such fictions as that of the martyred god' (Sacks, 1987, p. 261) and Yeats' 'Goatherd and Shepherd' is generally perceived as one of Yeats' least successful poems. Peter Ure referred to it as 'perhaps the only thoroughly bad poem in Yeats' post-1914 collections' (cited in Witt, 1950, p. 114), while for Witt, interestingly given our focus, it fails because it does not achieve Empson's test of 'putting the complex into the simple' (Witt, 1950, p. 113); instead, it is 'conventionally laboured', its blank verse 'tedious and diffuse'. According to Sacks, the poem 'suffers from a chilly impersonation, as well as from a curiously unemotional and dogmatic rigidity which locks the poem to its solution' (1987, p. 262); he also criticises the poem's lack of specific location, its 'clumsy literalness', 'a near arithmetical insistence on trying to insert poetry into the shepherds' world' and the 'vague, conventional

and generalized' portrayals of the deceased (p. 266), as well as the fact that it contains an attempt to provide consolation.

Despite these shortcomings, and significantly for this analysis, Witt identifies strongly pastoral features found in 'Goatherd and Shepherd' that can also be found, albeit in a transformed state, in 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory'. This contention forms the basis for her conclusion that the writing of 'In Memory' was a long process, with 'Goatherd and Shepherd' actually representing a first draft of the later poem. The identified features include a brooding on the theme of immortality, the focus on dead friends preceding the death of the person being lamented, and the way in which it mimics the style of works by Spenser written as elegy to Sydney. This analysis shows that it is impossible to completely separate out traditional pastoral from more contemporary manifestations of the mode. Although 'Goatherd and Shepherd' exemplifies how a strict and literal application of the traditional features of pastoral is perhaps no longer appropriate, such traits nonetheless can and are absorbed into contemporary examples of the elegy. In our analysis of *AGS* that follows, we will show that this can even apply to the theme of consolation, that traditional feature of pastoral which is seen as least relevant to modern works.

To conclude, Sacks and others have seemed to draw a distinction between 'elegy' and 'pastoral elegy', defining the latter as those works which strictly and literally apply very traditional features of pastoral: the herdsman, dialogue between old and young herdsman, explicit martyrdom of vegetative deities, and the presentation of a consolation for the loss. However, the modern conceptualisation of elegy has always been bound up with notions of pastoral; moreover, even those modern elegies which on the surface appear non-traditional, in the pastoral sense of the term, emerge as containing many such traditions when studied more closely. Thus, the sub-genre of 'pastoral elegy' appears problematic on a couple of fronts, as it overlooks both the various nuanced and subtle ways that traditional pastoral features may exist

in contemporary works and the fact that the elegy is in many ways inherently pastoral. In light of this, and in the spirit of conceiving pastoral as a mode rather than a tradition or genre, this analysis is concerned with showing that *AGS* is an elegy, rather than a 'pastoral elegy' in the commonly understanding of this term, an approach which we contend is appropriate to the subject of this thesis.

5.2.1 Conceptualising the elegy

As discussed in Chapter 2 ('Defining pastoral'), in the seminal study *The English Elegy*, Peter Sacks' approach to his subject is unique in the sense that he defines the relationship between the language of elegy and the experience of loss 'as an event, or action, rather than finding absence or loss to be somehow already there in the language' (emphasis added). For Sacks, the language used by an elegist emerges from, and reacts upon, an originating sense of loss. He writes:

> One of the tasks of an elegy is to arrive eventually at some reconciliation between the individual dead on the one hand and a more consoling universal figure on the other. But the painful toil of that arrival is crucial, as is a residual tension between the claims of the historical person and the ideal figure to which he has been assimilated. (Sacks, 1987, p. 267, emphasis added)

In setting out this conceptualisation of elegy, Sacks shows how traditional figures of elegy – specifically those of Greek myth – epitomise the experience of loss and the search for consolation. A defining feature of these stories is the way in which the loss of a loved one is only survived if the mourner successfully deflects their desire via the creation of a substitute. For example, in the story of Daphne and Apollo, lovestruck Apollo follows Daphne to a riverbank, but as he takes hold of her, she turns into a laurel tree. Significantly, he gets no comfort from embracing this tree; such relief only comes after Apollo makes a wreath out of its branches – only then can he find a way to live with his loss: 'Since thou canst not be my bride, thou shalt at least be my tree' (cited in Sacks, 1987, p. 4). Similarly, in the story of the

goat-like Pan and Syrinx, Pan follows Syrinx until she reaches a stream, when, thinking he had just caught hold of her, he finds himself holding an armful of reeds. It is only when Pan further transforms the reeds – in this case, into a musical instrument – that he can recover from his loss. An important and defining aspect of the two stories is that the mourner's successful transformation of the lost one involves two stages: firstly, she becomes something of the natural world; and secondly the bereaved uses her 'new state' as a kind of 'base material' with which to create something new and unnatural. For Sacks, this 'seems not only to suggest a move from organic matter to the item of an unnatural, societal code but also to enforce and confirm that Apollo's consoling sign can never enjoy a purely organic relation to the object it signifies, or for which it substitutes' (Sacks, 1987, pp. 4–5). The second stage of the transformation can thus be seen as the creation of a 'consolation prize' or 'consoling substitute' for the mourner, by the mourner. By its nature, it is artificial:

> For a moment, Apollo and Pan embrace, respectively, the laurel and the reeds, according them the passion meant for the nymphs. Yet even in this moment, they recognize that they are embracing "something else" and that recognition is confirmed and reinforced by their subsequent inventions. Not only have the forms of their desired objects changed but the form of their desires must, in this moment of recognition and acceptance, change as well. (Sacks, 1987, p. 7)

Significantly for this analysis, these 'consolation prizes', which thus represent not only the lost beloved, but also the 'thwarted sexual impulse' of Pan and Apollo, essentially come to symbolise poethood. Therefore, when the poet creates such a substitute, he is simultaneously creating both 'a sign of his lost love but also of his very pursuit' (Sacks, 1987). The stories of Pan and Apollo both involve a 'turning away from erotic pursuits and attachments to substitutive, artificial figures of consolation' (Sacks, 1987, p. 6). Sacks points out that unlike other mourners in Greek mythology, Pan and Apollo are 'successful mourners', specifically because they 'accept their loss and can retain their identities by what may be called a healthy work of mourning, a work that, as Freud points out, requires a withdrawal of affection from

the lost object and a subsequent reattachment of affection to some substitute for that object' (p. 6). In other words, the very act of engaging in this transformation of the lost one constitutes in itself an acceptance of the loss (albeit via a painful process). At the core of this process, writes Sacks, lies 'the renunciatory experience of loss and the acceptance, not just of a substitute, but of the very means and practice of a substitution' (Sacks, 1987, p. 8).

As is clear from the language and terms used by Sacks in his analysis of these Greek myths, he draws heavily on psychoanalytic theory in his conceptualisation of the elegy, in doing so highlighting strong parallels across the two, not least of all the deeply patriarchal nature of this interpretation of the artist, something which also has its relevance to the story of Jack and Catherine, as explored below. On Freud, Sacks cites the Oedipal resolution, whereby the child submits to society's order of signs (Sacks, 1987, p. 8), as well as Freud's contention that narcissism lies at the heart of melancholia; and that the major task of the mourner lies in mending any damage to the ego. Freud's 'fort da' game is relevant here too, whereby the child is shown to acquiesce to separation from its mother only by manipulating signifiers that are actually removed from the actual mother (p. 11).[17] 'The child's imaginary, dyadic relationship with its prior "love object" is thus interrupted and mediated by a signifying system, which acts as a third term, much as the laurel sign or the pipes come between the gods and the nymphs' (Sacks, 1987, p. 8). Sacks also cites Lacan's 'mirror stage' during which (at six to eighteen months) an infant sees himself as possessing 'an idealized self' (p. 9), a development that involves a split 'in the constitution of the self' – one that comprises the idealized version, and the 'actual unformed and incompetent self'. As with Freud's Oedipal Resolution and fort-da

[17] In the 'fort da' game, Freud observed his eighteen-month old grandson repeatedly throw a cotton reel out of his cot, forcing his mother to retrieve and return it. Freud interpreted the sounds the boy made during this game ('oh' when throwing, 'ah' when the reel was returned by his mother to mean 'gone' and 'there'). In this way, the child would go from being unhappy, with no control over his situation, to someone happy and exercising agency – forcing his mother to return to him (Buchanan, 2010).

game, Lacan's mirror phase 'foreshadows the elegist's consoling construction of a fictional identity not only for the dead but for himself' (p. 10). The child 'manipulates signifiers which are at an obvious remove from the actual mother they signify. … The groundwork has [thus] been laid for his subsequent and more thorough submission to the laws of renunciation and symbolic codes' (Sacks, 1987, p. 11).

5.2.2 Death and the elegy

It is clear from the above section that the analysis of *AGS* that follows in this chapter is heavily reliant on Peter Sacks' conceptualisation of the elegy, particularly regarding the significance of Greek myth and psychoanalytic theory. However, there are two aspects of this analysis that represent a departure from Sacks. One is the fact that the protagonist of *AGS* does not grieve due to the death of his loved one, but rather because she has left him. It is Catherine's absence from his life that causes Jack pain, rather than her extinction. The second is the fact that *AGS* is a work of fiction; Sacks' analysis limits itself to works of poetry, with the apparent implication that an elegy by definition is a poem that concerns grief as actually experienced by the poet.

Regarding the fact that Catherine, the protagonist's lost love object, does not actually die, it is argued here that Sacks' conceptualisation is so elucidating when used as a 'lens', to use Toliver's term again, for exploring the novel, both in terms of its form and structure, that the novel emerges as an undeniable and fundamentally elegiac work. In other words, the analysis that follows is proof in itself of the value to be found in approaching *AGS* as an elegy. Therefore this analysis not only shows *AGS* to be a pastoral elegy; by doing so it also extends our understanding of the term elegy to potentially also concern a person's loss of a loved one that is not caused by their death.

Regarding the unorthodox nature of applying the concept of elegy to a work of fiction, rather than to poetry as is usually the case, it is generally acknowledged that fictional works of high literary value do draw on the author's experience, even if none of the fictional details apply to the author. On this, it is worth mentioning that a number of commentators have noted that *AGS* contains strongly autobiographical elements. Timothy O'Grady, for example, writes that 'the events of [*AGS*] … concur at several points with events in Healy's own life' (p. 122), while Dermot McCarthy, citing Healy's memoir *The Bend for Home*, identifies several auto-biographical elements of the novel, such as how the story of Matti Bonner came from Healy's childhood, how Jonathan Adams was based on Healy's maternal grandfather (see p. 24 of *TBFH*), and how Adams' long illness was based on that suffered by Healy's father, as well as many other aspects, such as the hallucinatory scenes, and Ferris dreaming of being a woman. It is therefore contended that it is reasonable to assume that, although *AGS* is fictional, it is a fictionalised representation of a very real loss (or losses) in the life of the author. I assert that *AGS* involves the author working through his grief just in the same way as a more traditional or obvious elegy involves the author working through their real grief. In this way, a third layer of *AGS* emerges: there is the author, Dermot Healy, grieving his own, personal losses, the character Jack Ferris grieving his loss of Catherine (Part I) and finally, Jack Ferris' fictionalised Jack Ferris grieving the loss of a fictionalised Catherine (Parts I–IV). From this view, the novel can be seen as a kind of palimpsest of grief, with the three layers effacing each other. This application of Sacks' elegy to a work of fiction represents a challenge to the assumption that, in literature, the term elegy concerns only poetry, in the same way as the fact that the protagonist's love object does not die in *AGS* challenges that aspect of Sacks' conceptualisation.

5.3 The work of elegy in *A Goat's Song*

As noted earlier, the novel involves fiction within a fiction. In Part I, we watch Jack Ferris go from an initial euphoria (because he has received a letter from his lover Catherine telling him she is coming back to him), to an anxious (and increasingly drunken) period of waiting for her arrival, to a descent into madness and despair as he realises she is in fact never returning. Towards its end comes his final encounter with Catherine, whom he has pursued (just like Apollo and Pan pursuing their nymphs) from the west to Dublin, following a stay in the psychiatric unit of his local hospital. He finds her on a street outside the theatre where she has been performing a role in one of Jack's plays (a role which he had created for her). Again like Apollo and Pan, once he has caught up with her, the Catherine he finds is changed from the woman he has pursued. The emphasis, in his impression of her, is on her wildness, as she lashes out like a cornered wild animal:

> 'What about the phone calls,' she said, turning on him.
> 'I'm sorry.'
> 'Do you understand half of the terror you caused?'

And then, when he tells her he has been in hospital, her reply is scathing:

> 'You were only there,' she answered, looking angrily at his hand, 'collecting notes for your next play.'

After walking away from him, she glances back in his direction, 'with wild agitated eyes' (p. 81) and, significantly, later on, back in his cottage, it is her 'wild eyes' (p. 83) he thinks of when playing over that last, painful meeting.

This effect – of Catherine changed to object – is compounded when Jack, having spent the rest of the day after that last meeting walking through the city, finally walks to her home in Dublin

and all that is presented of her is a brief, disembodied face at an upstairs window and her name, which remains unanswered:

> He knocked on the door. A curtain was drawn overhead and a face came to the window. Then the curtain quickly fell into place again. "Catherine," he called out. He heard voices in the hallway. Steps, whispers. All the quiet insignificant sounds that paranoia feeds upon. "Catherine," he called again. He listened for as long as he could bear then he walked off down Camden Street, feeling that he had at least discharged a psychic duty that was expected of him. (Healy, 1994, p. 83)

AGS has reached that initial, necessary stage of the elegy's loss and survival of that loss: the change of the lost one into an aspect of the natural world. This is reinforced by the fact that, at an earlier point in Part I, before that final encounter, Jack had tried and failed to achieve his mission of recreating her as a fictional character.

> He arranged himself at the kitchen table. He waited. As he had waited in the hospital. But as long as he loved her he could not begin writing again.
>
> The minute he put a word on the page he would stop loving her. Once it became a story it was over. Some other person would materialize. (Healy, 1994, p. 79)

As already shown, for Sacks a successful mourning means surviving the death of a loved one by deflecting desire for them via the creation and acceptance of a symbolic code or substitution, thereby, ultimately,

> defend[ing] the individual against death [as] … a forced renunciation prevents a regressive attachment to a prior love-object, a potential fixation on the part of the griever, whose desire in such cases for literal identification with the dead is another force very much like that of the death wish. Melancholia usually involves a lasting return to … regressive narcissism …, often including an identification between the ego and the dead such that the melancholic tends toward self-destruction (Sacks, 1987, pp. 16-17).

It seems that Jack is only able to begin the 'painful toil of [the] arrival' (Sacks, p. 267) at such an outcome *after* his final encounter with Catherine. Before then, he cannot acknowledge to

himself that he has lost her forever. He needs to see her, in her initially transformed state, before he is able to exorcise her from his own psyche. He has not yet clutched his handful of reeds, so to speak. It is only after that last encounter with Catherine in Dublin that Jack can commence his reimagining of her, because it is only then that he understands, with a final clarity, that without doing this he will not survive. As in the Greek myths, the first stage – transformation into a natural object – is a necessary precursor to the mourner's creative recreation of the person he has lost.

The second stage of the process begins when Jack returns home to his bleak cottage in the west, which smells of 'old distemper and stale potatoes'. After feeding his 'starving animals' sour milk and porridge oats, Jack lies down, 'the hopelessness … intense'. Straightaway he recognises the danger that he is in: 'The badness started. The veins on the back of his hands began to pulsate. He was back among the enemy. Future realities were being measured out in woeful doses. Jesus Christ!' He stands, puts away her letters, and only then utters the crucial sentence in which he acknowledges what he must do, when he says to himself, 'the only way I can free myself is to imagine her, not as herself, but as someone else, someone different, for then I can think of her without resenting her' (Healy, 1994, p. 83, emphasis added). This move 'from nature to artifice' is necessary to Jack's survival; in this assertion, he is consciously taking on the role of the elegist, thus acknowledging Sacks' remark (quoted above) that the elegy seeks to 'arrive eventually at some reconciliation between the individual dead … and a more consoling universal figure' (Sacks, p. 267).

To compare *AGS* again to those elegies from Greek myth, this scene can be paralleled to the point where Pan and Apollo realise that in order to survive the loss of their loved one, they must take the object into which she has transformed and transform it again themselves, this time by making an unnatural alteration, such as Apollo's severing and entwining of the laurel

so that it becomes a wreath. This realisation and resolution is repeated and confirmed in the final lines of Section I of *AGS*:

> Now he had to live on in a different world. To transcend. To enter a new story. She must be imagined. He opened a spiral-bound notebook and thought, Here it begins. (Healy, 1994, p. 84)

This second stage involves the creative transformation of that initially transformed version of the person the bereaved has lost into something less natural; something that they, the bereaved, have fashioned themselves out of that 'raw material'. In Greek myth, this substitute or 'consolation prize' comes to represent the person who has been lost, as well as a 'thwarted sexual impulse', and in itself a form of art, or symbol of poethood. In psychoanalytic theory, it is the means by which the child survives the loss of union with the mother (and thereby the threat of castration). Both perspectives are relevant to our understanding of this preparation for Parts II-IV, which are described by Neil Murphy as Jack Ferris's 'imaginatively reassembling [of] the life of Catherine' (Murphy, 2016, p. 287). Effectively, those parts constitute the second transformation stage that Sacks identifies in the elegy, whereby the mourner renunciates his loss by creating for himself a substitute out of the material of that loss – the person for whom they grieve. Through this perspective, the cyclical nature of *AGS*, with Part IV ending at the scene that begins Part I is highly pertinent; as Sacks notes, Theocritus' 'First Idyl', which is seen a poem that began the evolution of the elegy as a genre, starts with 'Begin again the pastoral song' (Sacks, 1987, p. 23).

5.3.1 A narcissistic grief

Sacks' conceptualisation of the elegy makes clear how grief can be narcissistic. The elegist, in grieving for the person who is being mourned, also mourns part (or even all) of their own self image: 'One of the major tasks of the work of mourning and of the elegy is to repair the mourner's damaged narcissism' (Sacks, 1987, p. 10). Narcissism is definitely a feature of

Jack's grief in *AGS*; as Dermot McCarthy puts it, 'Ferris's love for Catherine is inextricably bound up in his self-love and self-worth' (p. 138). This is something the novel itself alludes to in a playful aside:

> 'So you've lost your love-object,' says the psychiatrist.
>
> To hear Catherine reduced to such a crude nonentity was a comic blow to Jack's pride. He stared at the man defensively. (Healy, 1994, p. 68)

In his analysis of the novel, which also highlights the relevance of Greek mythology, Dermot McCarthy illuminates this point, showing how recovering from the loss of Catherine thus requires Jack to recover from the loss of himself, or at least a version of himself. In McCarthy's essay, it is the Greek myths of Dionysus and of Orpheus and Eurydice that he sees manifested in *AGS*, rather than those of Apollo and Pan but, interestingly, the same themes emerge. For example, McCarthy describes the story of Orpheus and Eurydice as 'a myth about grief in which the only way to deflect the loss of the beloved – which in Ferris's case is also the loss of self – is through the recreation of the lost one in the figure of a character, the Orphic singing of absence into presence and presence into absence' (p. 140). Clearly, the alcoholic Jack, prone to bouts of madness, could be described as a modern-day, even ironic and in some ways humorous representation of Dionysus, the suffering god of nature, who is ever persecuted, but who, significantly, ultimately survives death. Like the vegetation gods of Greek mythology who precede the elegy, his death and resurrection represent 'nature's self-regenerative power' (Sacks, p. 27). For McCarthy, Jack's dependent relationship with Catherine and with alcohol are 'symptoms of his narcissistic addiction to self' (McCarthy, 2000, p. 4). Indeed, at many points in the novel, the implication seems to be that Jack's self-image has become enmeshed in his relationship with Catherine. Even the separate islands for the nanny and the buck, the latter of whom 'rose a mournful cry' to be thus separated, every time the scent of the nannies reached them (a version of how the word 'tragedy' derives from 'goat', which Jack explains to

Catherine on page 227), he suggests are ‘the masculine and feminine dimensions of Ferris’s own psyche’ (McCarthy, 2000, p. 138). At one point in the novel, Jack, or rather the reimagined Jack of his own narrative of Catherine’s life, even finds himself becoming Catherine:

> Slowly, his transformation into Catherine took place. Since he could not win the war as himself, he would become everything that she loved in herself. Not that he knew this transformation was taking place. But often he would catch himself rise off a chair as she did, lift a cigarette in the same manner. He felt his back suddenly straighten like hers. It was just these incidental intimations told him that something was happening over which he had no control. (Healy, 1994, p. 321)

At another point, he finds himself ‘swept into the panic of non-being’ (Healy, 1994, p. 28) after having lost her. Such struggles, which made it difficult ‘to know this body belonged to him’ (p. 2) are all diagnosed as symptoms of the same cause: ‘the chief member of his audience was missing – Catherine’ (p. 28). When he is in hospital (Part I), Jack wonders if he has died. And later, back home in his cottage, on being told a journalist is ‘on the phone from Dublin’ his reply is, ‘I’m not here’, which we are told is ‘a true statement’ (Healy, 1994, p. 67).

McCarthy notes that, ‘If [Jack] is to pull himself out of this abyss of self-loathing, he must see past Catherine’s rejection, or see it in a way that does not condemn him to invisibility’ (McCarthy, 2000, p. 138). Hence that moment of real danger back in the cottage, after he has lost Catherine forever, and hence the rest of the novel, which can be described as a kind of exercise in submitting to a displacement of his prior attachment, a kind of survival story. Of course, doing so is not an easy task, and Sacks describes it as a ‘painful toil’. For Jack, the pain seems to manifest itself at least partly in an alcohol dependency, psychological instability and lack of basic self-care, features , that chime with Freud’s description of grief as a process that is ‘accompanied by sleeplessness and the refusal to take nourishment’ (Freud, 1917).

The recurrence of dreams of a castrated penis and clitoris throughout the novel have clear relevance to the notion of Jack's grief as a supreme narcissism. In Part I, we learn that for years Jack has had a recurring dream of a severed penis: 'Always in the dream of the severed penis, which had afflicted him for years, was the fear that overcame him as he tried hurriedly to fit his cut cock back into place only to find it coming away in his hands' (Healy, 1994, p. 63). This revelation comes in the context of him having just woken, in the hospital, having dreamed of Catherine's severed clitoris, which, in the dream, he had been holding in his hand. Significantly, it is 'the cry of the buck wailing' that brings wakefulness. Then in Part II, the young Catherine (as imagined by Jack) dreams of Matti Bonner's severed penis, after seeing his body hanging from a tree. This, it can be argued, is just another representation of Jack's own dreams, here given to Catherine – 'a revision of Ferris's dream at the hospital in Part I' (McCarthy, 2000, p. 145). Later in the same chapter, we are told that this image often returned to Catherine in her dreams: 'Often in years to come she would jump awake covered in sweat to recall that a second before she had been making love to a disembodied penis. It was the penis of someone who wasn't there. Only this male member jammed into her. She'd reach out to hold the person only to find him missing. The shock would bring her awake. … Her unease would be greater when she'd remember that the penis belonged to Matti Bonner. … A phantom penis had been sent to pleasure her in her sleep from the world of the dead' (McCarthy, 2000, p. 95). This could be seen as voyeuristic, an example of the 'male gaze', especially with the aggressiveness inherent in the verb 'jammed', were it not for the fact that, as McCarthy points out, these 'severed penis dreams' (within the context of Parts II-IV being Jack's re-imagining of events) are actually further representations of Jack's dreams of the severed penis and severed clitoris that appear in Part I.

This brings us to the way in which *AGS*, as a work of mourning, is very suggestive of Freud's Oedipal resolution, in the sense that the acceptance of mediation or substitution represents the

price of survival. According to the theory of Oedipal resolution, a child undergoes a 'symbolic self-castration' in order to ward off attempts by his father of an actual castration. This he does by creating a substitute for his original desire. Jack might be compared to Freud's child who desires to 'remain in the state of undifferentiated union with the mother … the extinction of desire itself, and for a state preceding … genuine individuation … [which makes it] closely allied to the death wish' (Sacks, 1987, p. 16). Of course, *AGS* is by no means an Oedipal story, in the literal sense; Catherine is not Jack's mother. In fact, it could be argued that the recursive and disturbing nature of these dreams, for Catherine, reflects the problematics of Freud's Oedipal resolution to the girl child. However, it clearly represents a kind of replaying of these themes of desire for an undifferentiated union, and how closely this lies to the death wish; alongside Jack's successful creation of a substitute for his original desire. On this point, in a novel that is clearly preoccupied with such themes, it does seem relevant that Jack's father is so remarkably benign and peripheral. He appears only twice in the novel, once when Jack calls home from the hospital to wish his parents happy Christmas, and then when Jack takes Catherine to meet his parents. In the former, he tells his father and not his mother that he is in a psychiatric hospital, news that leaves the father apparently unperturbed:

> 'I'm in a hospital. I didn't want to tell her.'
> 'Did someone put something into your drink?'
> 'Something like that.'
> 'Well, it happens to us all. If you want anything let us know.'
> 'I will, thanks.'
> He handed the phone onto the next patient (Healy, 1994, p. 54).

In the latter, the mother dominates in the conversation, with the father only offering innocuous comments, such as that he's 'a Comhaltas man' and that he notices 'the salmon in the fridge' (p. 267).

The next section, in identifying how the elegy's conventions are manifested in *AGS*, seeks to show the ways in which this novel exemplifies how the elegy represents the work of grief.

5.3.2 Conventions of grief in *AGS*

Sacks identifies several conventions of the elegy, which reflect the elegy as a work of mourning. These he likens to the act of weaving, thereby stressing the work-like nature of both the elegy and the grieving process, as well as the way in which the elegist 'must submit to the mediating fabric of language', which they use in the same way a weaver uses their material – to create 'a fabric in the place of a void' (Sacks, 1987, p. 18).

This notion of the text as fabric has an immediate resonance for the novels of Dermot Healy, which have been praised for their physicality (O'Hagan, 2011); it is the texture of these fictional worlds – their layers and the complex effects of their sounds, images and leitmotifs that lend them much of their strength, as opposed to their plots for example. Of *Long Time, No See*, Terry Eagleton once commented that 'Not much happens' (Eagleton, 2011). The same comment might be applied to *AGS*, albeit to a lesser degree.

As one example of its textuality, leitmotifs recur throughout *AGS*, both in the musical and literary sense of the word. In relation to music, Smyth defines the leitmotif as a 'short musical phrase intended to represent a particular presence – whether character, object or idea – within the developing action of the story' (Smyth, 2016, p. 265). He notes that in AGS, the word 'galvanize' appears thirteen times throughout the novel; according to him, this seems to perform no purpose in the novel other than to 'refer back to previous occurrences and forward to future ones' (Smyth, 2016, p. 266). This alone would qualify this particular leitmotif as an example of the textual nature of the writing. However, both meanings of this word, as verb, could arguably deepen the relevance in the context of *AGS* as elegy: to coat metal with a protective layer of zinc; and to 'shock or excite [someone] into taking action' (Oxford English

Dictionary, online). The relevance is clear when considered in the light of Sacks' conceptualisation of the elegy as a work or process which essentially seeks to protect the mourner from the erosion with which loss and grief threaten him.

Gerry Smyth also draws our attention to strong aural examples of the leitmotif of the wind and the roaring sea (Smyth, 2016, p. 265); in other words, the key presences in the landscape of the west coast of Ireland. This is discussed further in the section on the use of rituals below, but it is worth pointing out here that this is one of the way in which the physicality of Healy's novels comes through so strongly; the emphasis on capturing the weather draws the reader into the physical world.

Musical references represent another layer in *AGS* and a way in which the novel can be experienced as a textured, layered entity. Much of the novel's 'musical landscape', as Smyth describes it, manages to be apparently incidental while also contributing to this sense of the novel as a coherent whole, or 'fabric'. As Smyth notes, many of these musical references are 'ubiquitous': 'casual, incidental, a vague contributing element to the sonic backdrop but one lacking the presence or the attention to solidify into a significant symbol' (Smyth, 2016, p. 264). This is precisely the effect required in order for such references to serve the 'weaving' function so relevant to the elegy. On this basis, such references would arguably be frequent and to have this 'casual, incidental' aspect in Parts II–IV, which represent the *work* of mourning. And this is the case, from chapter titles that denote popular songs ("Madame George") to the naming of Part IV as 'The Musical Bridge', to the folk music played at the festival where Jack and Catherine meet, to the hymn soundtrack for Catherine's witnessing of Matti Bonner's body.

One immediate difference that strikes us between Part I and the other parts that make up *AGS* is the way in which, despite its numerous scenes in pubs, hotel bars and cafes, as well as city

streets in the Christmas period, Part I is remarkably bereft of music, containing only three such references: Jack's wishful vision, as he waits for her, of Catherine driving west, while 'African freedom songs play on the car stereo' (Healy, 1994, p. 9); a very fleeting mention of 'piped music' in a bar (p. 32); and, towards the end of his hospital stay (and by extension the end of Part I), when he hears coming from a fellow patient's radio the Cole Porter song, 'Every Time We Say Goodbye' (p. 67). Catherine listening to 'African freedom songs' in her car did not actually happen; rather this is something Jack imagines to soothe his mind as he awaits her, and could be described as a precursor of the attempt at recreating Catherine that constitutes Parts II-IV. The second instance (the reference to 'piped music') is possibly suggestive of the novel's foundation in Greek myth and, by extension, the elegy, though the reference is fleeting and does clarify whether it actual concerns of the pipe or simply 'muzak': 'But none of the pubs was right. Loud TVs, piped music, strange glances' (p. 32). In the last instance (Cole Porter's 'Every Time We Say Goodbye'), the music is dwelled upon, and thereby given significance: 'Jack grew to love those words. Especially the refrain – *the change from major to minor*' (p. 67). In this case, it seems to hint at the important change in tone soon required by the structure of the novel, when we stop witnessing Jack driven to madness and despair by his loss of Catherine, and encounter his fictional version of her, created so that he may save himself from this madness.

Sacks remarks upon how the image of a weaver is commonly found in elegies, from the Greek myths onwards, writing, 'It *is* worth noting the significant frequency with which the elegy has employed crucial images of weaving' (Sacks, 1987, p. 18). One example that might first strike us from Greek myth is that of Penelope weaving a shroud for Odysseus in her bid to ward off suitors while awaiting his return, in the night-time undoing her work of the day, while the most recent example Sacks cites is Wallace Stevens' elegy for Henry Church, 'Inventions of Farewell'. Notably, in *AGS*, two characters – Matti Bonner and Maisie Adams – are more than

once shown to be engaged in work similar to that of weaving. Perhaps most relevant is the depiction of Maisie sewing, because she is only shown to engage in this work when she is grieving for her husband, Jonathan Adams. Throughout Part II, Maisie Adams is depicted in work that aims to create a kind of picture, be it a garden or the interior of a house. After she marries Jonathan Adams, she is shown putting down apple trees and cherry, cultivating herbs and flowers – as well as breeding geese – and when they move to Belmullet peninsula, we see her decorating the family's new home there.

In these scenes, in almost a micro representation of the broad treatment of grief in the novel, we see Maisie survive her grief through the deflection of desire, as she seeks to become a young woman again:

> And though their mother was again speaking of their father, this merging of her present life with her younger self threatened the girls. She began to ask them intimate details of the love lives. From upstairs they heard the visiting women burst out into gales of laughter. Maisie Adams had, in a frightening way, returned to grow up alongside her daughters.
>
> She counted across the needle to find her place among the stitches. The heavy breathing started. (Healy, 1994, p. 216)

Matti Bonner also tends to be depicted engaged in physical acts suggestive of weaving, both in the repetitiveness of the work and the creation of a pattern or shape. These include harvesting (p. 99), putting down a new road (p. 107), house decorating (p. 108) and fence building. On the latter, Adams is more than once depicted erecting a high fence around his police station, something we learn is happening to all police stations in the North at the time. The act is clearly symbolic of the heightening of tensions in the period that preceded the beginning of the Troubles, yet we learn that any symbolic irony here is lost on Jonathan Adams:

> It did not strike [Adams] as ironic that a Catholic should put up defences that other Catholics would tear down, defences against which other Catholics would hurl stones, petrol bombs and … mortar bombs. (Healy, 1994, p. 129)

This effect is compounded by a symbolism inherent in the description of Matti Bonner hanging dead from a tree that lies between the Catholic and Protestant churches of the town; looking at the body, Adams notices 'tears the barbed wire had made in his trousers and the bloody welts across his thigh' (Healy, 1994, p. 136). In this final act of defiance, which is incomprehensible to Adam, Matti Bonner had 'run uncaring through fences' (p. 136). If, as Dermot McCarthy argues, Adams is a version of Jack, then Adams' failure to see the irony in the fact that the fence around the police station was being built by a Catholic perhaps reflects a failure by Jack to understand the nature of, and obstacles involved in, his relationship with Catherine.

Finally, it is worth highlighting (briefly, because this theme is explored elsewhere in this chapter) the multi-layered nature of the fictions within *AGS* as another manifestation of the novel's textuality. Its narrative-within-narrative approach, which is redolent of a complex pattern on a tapestry, or a set of Russian dolls, clearly contributes to the almost tactile nature of the novel, in this case it being the characters who are knitted together into this complex pattern, each layer a variation on that which went before. At the outer level, we are given Jack Ferris buckling under the threat of annihilation imposed on him by his loss of Catherine. Within this, we encounter his attempt to survive this threat by creating a fictional version of Catherine. Within that fictional version, we encounter a complex depiction of Catherine's father, Jonathan Adams, which includes a detailed recounting of his obsession with Irish myth that develops after the family moves to Belmullet. Contained within this, in the most experimental chapter, lie three versions of the Salmon of Knowledge myth, in which, as illuminated in Dermot McCarthy's analysis, fractured reflections of Jack and Jonathan are found, the latter ultimately being reflections of Jack as well.

It has already been shown how characters such as Matti Bonner and Jonathan Adams can be seen as surrogates of Jack himself. This aspect of *AGS* reaches a peak in the final chapter of the second part, *The Salmon of Knowledge*, which interestingly occurs literally halfway through

the novel, giving the whole work a 'hall of mirrors' sense, with the greatest fracturing occurring in its centre. On his death bed, Jonathan Adams' nurse, daughters and wife read to him three variants of the myth of the salmon of knowledge. In Dermot McCarthy's analysis of the novel, he shows how multiple representations of Jack can be found within these versions, as well as multiple versions of his relationship with Catherine. This becomes increasingly clear in the second version, and again in the third, where 'the hero-quester is a thinly veiled Ferris and the fish transforms into a woman' (McCarthy, 2000). Again, this theme is deeply indebted to classical mythology, such as those tales found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. For example, in a description that sharply reflects the narratives of Daphne and Apollo, Pan and Syrinx, and Orpheus and Eurydice – specifically, the moment when the pursuer believes himself to have finally caught the pursued – the last version ends with:

> Suddenly, he found the weight of the salmon on the line. Instinctively, he jerked the hook home and began to draw in. Then, fearing to hurt the mouth of the girl, he slackened off. The fish broke free. With one flick of its tail the salmon changed everything in the nature of itself, so that the traveller, if he must follow on, must also lose his sense of himself. (Healy, 1994)

For McCarthy, this epitomises how in these versions of the salmon of knowledge myth, as well as throughout the narrative of Parts II-IV of *AGS* as a whole, Ferris is 'working back through his obsession with Catherine to re-form it into a quest for self-knowledge' (McCarthy, p. 144). When this is approached using Sacks' conceptualisation of the elegy, it also becomes illustrative of how a work of mourning requires such a process; that such deflection of his object of desire is the way in which he survives her loss.

The textuality of *AGS* is not the only way in which the novel reflects conventions of the elegy. Two others identified by Sacks are also strongly present. Firstly, there is the use of rituals, similar to those used in ceremonies that developed around the death and rebirth of vegetation gods; what Sacks calls 'the residually ceremonial structure of the elegy'. Such narratives reflect

ancient rites of mourning, in that they involve passing through darkness and into consolation and renewal – the rebirth of the vegetation deity. Secondly, there is the use of repetition, particularly that of elegiac questioning.

5.3.3 A ritual movement

Sacks writes that 'the elegy follows ancient rites in the basic passage through darkness / grief to consolation and renewal' (Sacks, 1987, p. 20). In this way, the elegy can be seen to actually mime the death and return of the vegetation god. Dionysus is arguably the most well-known of the vegetation gods of Greek mythology. A god of vegetation, wine and ecstasy, he was referred to as 'the roaring one' or a 'bull-horned god' due to his manifestation as a bull. Dionysus was also associated with suffering and persecution. Conceived by Semele (or Persephone) and Zeus, tales of his conception portray Zeus manifested as a snake, which 'can penetrate the tomb, and in sloughing its own skin represent the resurrection of the dead'. He was said to have 'presided over the drunken frenzy of his devotees' (Coterell, 2003); described as 'the great remover of inhibition', while his (mostly female) followers 'engaged in riotous, ecstatic dancing on mountains, and performed ceremonies which involved the rending of flesh – even human flesh' (Coterell, 2003). The many myths about him concern madness, inebriation, creativity and the devotion of his followers. As a nature god, he is also associated with suffering and persecution. It is also relevant that he is said to have been born twice; initially born of Zeus and Persephone, different myths ultimately tell of him being torn apart and eaten by the Titans (either in infancy or adulthood), before Zeus sews Dionysus' heart into his thigh, where he grows a second time, later to be born of Zeus and Semele. Of relevance to this, according to Sacks it was through myths of Dionysus that the concept of the immortal soul first emerged.

It is not difficult to see how many of these features appear in the depiction of Jack in *AGS*, who clearly emerges as a modern-day, persecuted Dionysus, even if elements of the novel seem to parody the Dionysian myths. Dermot McCarthy pinpoints a number of attributes here: Jack Ferris engages in ritualistic drinking; he is a favourite of his father; like Dionysus, he is persecuted by unbelievers (in Jack's case, the strange gardener who betrays him to Catherine); he attempts to pacify others (specifically, while living in Belfast with Catherine, when he attempts to socialise with Protestants there); his repeated and almost cyclical movements eastward (from Belmullet to Belfast and Dublin); and the ultimate destructiveness of his passion (McCarthy, 2000). McCarthy also includes Jack's love of animals, but given that he tends to leave them for long periods without food, only on his return to feed them sour milk and porridge oats, many readers might disagree; for Jack, his appreciation of animals seems to be tied up in his narcissistic self-absorption – he likes what they can give him, but has no sense of duty towards them.

McCarthy notes that Ferris's cries during orgasm recall not only the title of the novel and that story concerning the origin of tragedy but also that 'Zeus … cried out 'Evoe!' as he came. That exclamation then became the ritual invocation of Dionysus by man' (McCarthy, 2000, p. 146). Jack's profession as a playwright can be added to this list, as well as Catherine's as an actor; Dionysus has also been seen as god of the theatre (Henrichs, 1984). Sacks notes that the 'capacity for identification' involved in the worshipping rites of the followers of Dionysus (the *Bakchoe*) 'may have provided the wellspring for dramatic acting' (Sacks, 1987, p. 30).

Significantly, depictions of Jack in Parts II–IV have him seem to emerge organically from the natural world, specifically the wild landscape of western Mayo. It is as if the heavy focus in the narrative on that wild landscape when the Adams first arrive there is a kind of paving the way for Jack's arrival. It was 'a small, safe enclave, surrounded by huge seas' (Healy, 1994, p. 141). When the family sow plants and trees in their new garden – 'pines, fuchsia, holly, …

camelias, roses, flame creepers and a single laburnum' they are to find, on their return the following spring that 'not one plant or tree had survived the winds. … Lilies did not appear, crocuses put their heads above ground and died. No snowdrops came. Then they knew they were in an elemental world, of winds and weather' (Healy, 1994, pp. 145–146).

The first mention of Jack comes during a conversation between the two sisters, when Sara tells Catherine that she met a man on the beach. Here, he seems to be an organic extension of the new and exotic wildness of the peninsula:

> I met a man raking seaweed into clumps below at low tide. He was very handsome. 'Are you local?' I asked him. 'No, Leitrim,' he replied. 'We're all mad in Leitrim.' Then he broke into a merciless laugh.
>
> 'Leitrim?' said Catherine. 'I doubt that he's attractive.'
>
> 'He is,' Sara said confidently. 'In a way.' (p. 181)

When he reappears, about forty pages later, as Sara's new driving teacher, we are told of all the fish he has given Sara: 'four turbot the first day, mackerel another, and one day cod' (Healy, 1994, p. 217). And on the next occasion he appears, this time directly addressing Catherine, the first thing he asks her is, 'Did you hear the corncrake this evening?' before later adding, 'Belmullet is one of the last parts of Ireland you'll find the corncrake' (p. 223). It is during the course of this same conversation that he explains to Catherine the origins of the word *tragedy* and the meaning of the name of one of his plays – *A Goat's Song*; when he leaves, she watches him walk away, as though back into nature, 'to a low field, partly flooded, dotted with rocks at both sides and patches of heather' (p. 229). Throughout Part II (*The Hares*), every instance in which Jack appears, at least part of the emphasis is on the natural world. This seems to reach a kind of climax when, one night, Sara goes out with Jack. Angry, Catherine eventually follows them, thus finding herself out of the house for the first time in months, in a dark and dangerous landscape, with the description creating a sense of Dionysian wildness, even chaos, while also

invoking the Greek myth of Leda and the swan, in which the god Zeus, in the form of a swan, rapes Leda:

> Overhead, four swans, like sheets clapping in the wind, were flying across the evening sky. There was a smell of rain on stones, of coarse unhampered growth from the ditches. … Darkness was rolling in from the sea with low, fast-moving clouds. The horizon gave off a thin sheen of electricity. … Catherine walked … to where the windswept grass ended and the rising furze of the bog began. Cold winds reached her. … Soon it would be pitch black. … The night was filled with coughing animals, and always, as she ran the last few yards, the impression of someone, stronger and more powerful than herself, gaining on her. (Healy, 1994, pp. 235-236)

Sacks points out that the death and rebirth of the vegetation god is thus counter to the pathetic fallacy in that, instead of giving nature and the seasons human characteristics (humanising nature), man is being naturalised, as Dionysus (or other vegetation gods) take on the characteristics of the natural world. As such, nature gods are, by extension, suffering gods, gods who, like nature, must go through death before they can be resurrected, something that is reflected in the fact that tragedies first came to be performed in festivals celebrating Dionysus. In *AGS*, both the weather and the changing light in Part I seem to reflect Jack's state of mind. Chapter 1 ('Waiting for Catherine') serves as an example. It starts with an ecstatic Jack awaiting Catherine's final and permanent return to him (as promised in an unexpected letter he has received from her). In the first two pages, Jack's initial relief which, we learn, has followed a period of tumult, is reflected in the fact that the day is still and clear, after 'the storm of the night before [that] had left the beach like a bed tossed in a nightmare' (p. 4). However as days pass without any sign of Catherine, we find Jack walking 'through falling dark' (p. 8) and later 'sat waiting in the darkened sun lounge' (p. 10) until it starts to rain. Later, he is 'standing in the rain … looking out at the violent sea' (p. 11), a passage that leads directly to his return to drinking alcohol after weeks of sobriety. On first glance, this feature of the novel might be misattributed to a kind of sentimental pastoral, or in some places the device of pathetic fallacy,

whereby human feelings are attributed to an aspect or non-human being of the natural world. However, if Jack Ferris is, as is argued here, a modern-day nature god, then this may in fact be turned on its head: what is actually happening in the text is that Jack is the personification of nature and, like nature, he can die and be resurrected. As Sacks puts it, in the elegy, 'man creates a fiction whereby nature and its changes, the occasions of his grief, appear to depend on him … thus the so-called pathetic fallacy of nature's lament, one of the prominent elegiac conventions so frequently criticized for artifice and contrivance, actually has a naturalistic basis in the notation of seasonal change' (Sacks, 1987, pp. 20-21).

AGS closely follows those ceremonial rites of passage found in the myths of Dionysus and other vegetation gods, echoes of which can be found in mourning rites up to this day. That which Sacks describes as 'the residually ceremonial structure of the elegy' can be found in the very narrative of *AGS*, which begins in darkness (the terrible bleakness of Part I), before moving into consolation and renewal. The final image the novel offers of him is heavy with symbolism of new birth; he is sitting, not in his depressing cottage but in the light-keeper's house, 'his world magically restored' (p. 408). Sitting there, he imagines his reunion with Catherine the following day:

> He saw himself waiting on the new bridge the following afternoon …
> [watching] her alight from the car and begin running towards him. Overcome with happiness he sat there in the December dusk. He hung the cloth out to dry on the line. The bark of a dog flew by. (Healy, 1994, p. 408)

It is typical of the layered, textured nature of this novel that even this final image should not be a straightforward one but rather involve this overlaying of two images: Jack in the light-keeper's house and Jack waiting on the bridge. Both contain themes of hope and consolation, though, so together they serve to intensify the theme of hope and new life, rather than undermine it. This final mood is further underlined by other aspects of the imagery in this final 'scene'. For example, there is the light in the light-keeper's house and the 'new bridge', which

carries connotations of a journey having been just completed as well as the possibility of a new one. The fact that it takes place in December is also significant; by citing the darkest month of the year in the context of such light-filled imagery arguably conjures a move from darkness into rebirth. By ending the novel in the same month in which we initially encounter Jack in Part I (December), the story has its own cycle of the seasons. It does not matter that it is only in Jack's imagination that Jack stands resurrected on this symbolic bridge; in fact it is fitting given that the entire novel is a working illustration of the healing power of the process of narrative poesis.

5.3.4 Elegiac repetition in AGS

Sacks explores the many ways in which the elegy is emblematic of the conventions of grief that we find in our rituals around dying and mourning. Some that have an obvious relevance to *AGS* concern the ways in which repetition serves to confront the mind with the loss – that which, as such, can be seen as an early attempt to survive the initial pain of grief. One such example is the repetition of the name of the person being mourned ('the lost love-object's name' (Sacks, 1987, p. 26)), which according to Sacks acts as a kind of 'verbal propping': 'The survivor leans upon the name, which takes on, by dint of repetition, a kind of substantiality, allowing it to not only refer to but almost to replace the dead' (Sacks, 1987, p. 26). The name Catherine appears an impressive 522 times in the course of the novel, a fact that suggests *AGS* does indeed exemplify this kind of 'verbal propping' typical of the elegy. Interestingly, the name Jack appears even more frequently than Catherine's (832 times).[18] This seems to further emphasise the narcissistic nature of Jack's love for Catherine, considered earlier, and the way

[18] This analysis was conducted by using the search function in an e-book version of the novel.

in which his grief is largely concerned with the loss of himself, following Catherine's abandonment of him.

Sacks writes that, 'an obvious function [of the elegy] is to set free the energy locked in grief or rage and to organize its movement in the form of a question that is not merely an expression of ignorance but a voicing of protest' (Sacks, 1987, p. 22). Another kind of repetition, which serves to release some of this energy, can involve an act or question reappearing throughout the text. This tends not to be a literal attempt to seek information or achieve something, but is rather 'a voicing of protest' (Sacks, 1987, p. 22) over the loss the mourner has experienced.

This is played out to an almost obsessive level in Part I of the novel, when Jack makes his repeated and always doomed attempts to make contact with Catherine. Significantly, there is a flatness, or lack of tension, in the depiction of all these attempts, as though Jack is not really expecting any of them to work but, rather, really is simply voicing his protest over his loss of her.

This begins with a short exchange with his postman: In Belmullet, he directs his questioning to the postman. 'Did you have some mail for me?' (p. 6). When that does not help, he directs these efforts to the theatre in Dublin, where Catherine is in rehearsals for the play he has written. First he asks for the play's director, of whom he asks, 'And Catherine's okay?' (p. 7). Later, he asks of a priest in the bar of the local hotel: 'You didn't, by any chance, pass a Lada on the road? … A blue Lada. Maybe it was broken down. And a woman. She'd be wearing a black scarf' (p. 11). In the next chapter, he calls the theatre again. 'Is Catherine there?' he asks (p. 16). He continues, 'Tell her I'm still waiting. … Tell her I'm sober. Tell her I'm sorry' (p. 16). Three pages later, he calls the theatre again. When he is told again that she will not speak to him, he says 'Tell her … that I'm the author of the bloody play' (p. 19). Later that day, when friends call, he asks them, 'I'd like to know … why she didn't come. I'd like to know what

kept her away' (p. 21). At the end of that chapter comes a third call to the theatre. 'Could I speak to Catherine Adams?' The question is unanswered. The fourth call to the theatre comes in Chapter Three, when he is picked up on the streets, drunk, and spends the night in a Garda station, from where he makes the call. 'Catherine … can you pick me up?' He is speaking not to Catherine though, but to 'a recorded voice repeating the times of various shows' (p. 35). Eventually, in that same chapter, he makes it to Dublin, where he gate crashes a rehearsal of his play. But Catherine is not there. '"Where's Catherine?" he asked. "She's free today." "That's a coincidence"' (p. 37). Another call to the theatre comes days later when, back in Mayo, he calls the theatre again. This time, Jack's voicing of protest becomes distinctly sinister; when the phone is answered, he whispers 'in a strong Northern accent, "There's a bomb in the theatre"' (p. 40).

Yet even after doing this, he is unable to stop himself. He calls again the following day, only to get a message from an answering machine. 'Leave a message after the beep! The tape turned, but he said nothing, only whispered, "Catherine"' (p. 43). A final call is made from a pub, the day before he admits himself to the psychiatric ward of the local hospital. He listens to a recording:

> A Happy Christmas' message, the beep that followed, followed again by 'dull sounds … Shrieks. Warbles. Screeches from demons in space. … He searched for further words to say. Something for Catherine. A message for Catherine. "Goodbye," he said. (p. 45)

In the final chapter of Part I, following his discharge from hospital, we see Jack resume his hopeless questioning, when he returns to Dublin, where he waits outside the theatre until Catherine comes out and they have their final exchange. Following this, he returns to the theatre, and when one of the other actors appears, he asks her, 'I was just wondering was Catherine about?' (p. 82).

This repeated questioning of Catherine's whereabouts in Part I is a typical example of Sacks' 'so frequent, formulaic Where were you? … [which] may thus mask the more dangerous Where was I?' (p. 22). Moreover, given the fact that this line of questioning culminates in Jack's attempt to survive her loss by writing their story, we can also find here 'the repetitive, incantatory nature of so much of this questioning [which] emphasizes the possibly exorcistic or expiatory element of the ritual' (p. 22).

5.4 Conclusion

In this analysis of *AGS*, I have sought to show that many of the defining characteristics and themes of this novel make it fundamentally elegiac. Firstly, there is its experimental form, in which the protagonist creates a fictional version of the person he mourns, which in itself is representative of Sacks' 'working through' of mourning. Secondly, many of the conventions of mourning can be found throughout the text: its deeply textured and layered nature, which reflects mourning as a work or process; the way in which it contains many aspects of ancient rituals or ceremonies surrounding grief, including through the depiction of Jack Ferris as a nature god; and its elegiac questioning.

By applying Sacks' conceptualisation of the elegy to *AGS*, a work of fiction in which the love object does not die, I have also sought to challenge some defining characteristics of the elegy that are implied in Sacks' analysis; namely, that an elegy in literature can only exist in the form of a poem and that it must directly concern the artist's loss of an individual, rather than a fictional treatment of the theme of grief.

For McCarthy, there are two ways of interpreting the 'duplicitous' ending of *AGS*: it is 'open and comic if parts II-IV are read as self-contained … but closed and tragic, if it is read as ending the whole narrative … [a] bitter repetition of the original disappointment' (McCarthy, 2000, p. 136). On the basis of the above analysis, I argue for a third interpretation – that the novel can

be read as a kind of survival story, whereby the narrator survives the threat of psychological (and possibly even physical) death imposed on him by grief through entering into and successfully completing the *work* of mourning, as conceptualised by Sacks, whereby he deflects his desire for the person he has lost by creating a substitute for them.

6 From classic to post-pastoral in the poetry

Dermot Healy wrote poetry throughout his writing life, with his first volume published in 1992 and the final emerging posthumously in 2014. It thus offers an opportunity to consider the evolution of Healy's writing through the lens of pastoral. This chapter compares the use of pastoral modes in each of the four poetry collections published in Healy's lifetime with contemporaneous non-poetic work, and analyses some of the posthumously published poetry. In this light, I consider the manifestations of the pastoral mode within each of the four volumes published during his lifetime, with reference to his other works published in the corresponding periods.[19] So, for example, his first two poetry collections, *The Ballyconnell Colours* and *What the Hammer* (1998), which are strongly classic pastoral in nature, are considered in the context of those pastoral themes identified in his memoir, *The Bend for Home* (1996). In both these and the subsequent collection – *The Reed Bed* (2001) – I also find elements of the pastoral elegy, which Chapter 5 shows to be a defining characteristic of Healy's second novel, *A Goat's Song* (1995). These first three volumes of poetry are also shown to share a preoccupation with challenging the pastoral idyll, a key feature identified in Chapter 4's analysis of the early short stories and, indeed, within this, traces of an emerging post-pastoral perspective. This chapter then goes on to consider *A Fool's Errand*, which was published ten years after the publication of the previous poetry volume, *The Reed Bed*, and in which we find a marked evolution towards a post-pastoral sensibility.

[19] This section also includes analysis of some poems comprising the posthumous work, *The Travels of Sorrow*.

6.1 Classic pastoral in the early poetry

Chapter 3 explored how Healy's only memoir, *The Bend for Home*, is strongly pastoral in the classic sense, specifically in terms of the characteristics it shares with Virgil's *Eclogues*. This section traces aspects of classic pastoral that are also to be found in the early poetry.

6.1.1 Evocative descriptions of the natural world

One important trait in this regard is an emphasis on bucolic representations of rural life that seek to emphasise the beauty of the natural world, and which often involve a journey being taken, and/or sense of leisure. The early poetry is equally replete with such descriptions. 'Nightfishing' (*TBC*), for example, recounts the journey of the narrator and his lover after they leave a pub to go fishing. As they 'cut a long arc / of silence' from the pub to the lake, the world of the lake at night-time is richly evoked – 'flat water closed over the moon', 'the deep shadows of fish', 'the acres of reeds' [that] … / close in before us and behind … / tick against the prow', 'the shifting mist', 'pike [that] shiver in the wet keel'. Similarly, throughout the poem 'Recovery' (*TBC*), despite its indoors location, the natural world constantly probes its way into the language: outside the narrator's window, 'the drunken gardener [is] falling / asleep under / the purple plum'; the character Charlie is described as the 'highest nut in the tree, / man of the limestone-white neck', a man who stays 'awake most of the night', thinking of his 'last horse stand[ing] in the gorse haggard / looking at the same spot for days' and his dogs that have 'strayed from you'. Veins in the back of the poet's head are 'gnarled roots'. When on one occasion Charlie leaves the hospital, he is 'like a man astray in the head / try[ing] to lure birds from the cliffs / that you might have some sign of the future'.

In 'The Blackbird' (*TRB*), we find more bucolic imagery:

> The whistling blackbird, first to stop in this bare place, has planted trees and rose hedgerows.

> She's set seeds. He's tilled, trimmed, brought in a harvest of treesong from way inland.

Often, there is a celebratory tone to these descriptions, as in the way 'The Hares on Oyster Island' (*TBC*) is prayer-like in its praise of the hares, full of triumphant declarations about the natural world. The poem is a kind of ode to the hares of the title, who 'curl on the stone beach', 'gone at last beyond the reach of dogs', who 'run short distances between bouts of contemplation'. Watching them somehow gives the narrator 'a moment to look back the way I've come / and feel, this time, I'm safe for a while'. His wish is 'to be like the hares that sit out there beyond smell / beyond touch, secure on their pads / as they sit up and remember!' The hares seem to epitomise a kind of Eden, or paradise, depicted as part of the natural world, yet beyond it too:

> Praise be the hares on Oyster Island!
> May the hares prosper!
> May the hares increase!
> Let the hare sit! Let the hare sit on the moon!

Such poems tend towards the eclogic, with such richly pastoral descriptions often provided in the context of a leisurely journey, like the relaxed boat trip of 'Nightfishing', Charlie's meandering walk through the countryside in 'Recovery' and in the narrator's apparently aimless night-time walk through town in 'Joe Donlon'. Indeed, journey is the explicit theme of the poem 'Footsteps' (*WTH*), which, in forty-four couplets, describes the narrator, in the early hours of the morning, thinking he has heard a footfall – 'a lone step' – outside his window. This leads him to recall the various footfalls he has heard throughout his life, from his bed, in different parts of the world: Brixton, Sligo, Pimlico, Leinster Road. The edge of the Atlantic Ocean, where 'only fishermen and divers /or spirits and birds / make the trek', is presented as the only context in which the world can become in any way comprehensible:

Oh it will always be
the plainsong
of the ordinary
that reduces whole cities out there
to a step
on the street
and contains them all
all those footfalls.

Echoing a feature of Virgil's *Eclogues* whereby travelling companions, conversing with each other, cite great poets of the past, the poem 'Recovery' also makes reference to an artist who has died, when 'a friend leaves by the bedside / Berryman's *Seven Addresses to the Lord* / which I must have asked for'. This recalls Eclogue IX, for example, in which Lycidas and Moeris wonder what became of the singer Menalcas, in so doing, 'hold out the possibility … that the song of an absent master can have power in our present circumstances' (Alpers, 1996, p. 6).

Healy's poetry has been praised for its simple language, its plainness of style and for the way it concerns itself with 'ordinary people': writing of *What the Hammer*, the critic Michael Smith praised how the poems 'project an open, rugged humanity, celebratory of common life' (cited in Healy, 1998), while Keith Hopper has admired the 'ceremonial elegance' of *A Fool's Errand* (Hopper, 2016). This can be seen as yet another manifestation in the early poetry of classic pastoral, reminding us of Empson's conclusion that the 'old pastoral' involved a process that consisted of 'putting the complex into the simple' (Empson, 1974, p. 24) – a means by which complex themes are made clear by their articulation 'in terms which emphasise the universal at the expense of the accidental' (Loughrey, 1984, p. 21). In particular, it recalls Empson's emphasis on the importance of the herdsmen of classic poetry – the '"simple" low people' (Empson, 1974, pp. 195–196), who he perceives as a conduit for this process. Again and again in Healy's early poems, dialogue between local inhabitants of his world are recounted, replete

with colloquial terms and phrases that might be considered the opposite of 'poetic language'. In such cases, an inherent rhythm and economy of language often serves to underline an effect whereby commonly used phrases are applied to an unusual context. In some cases, it is the poet himself speaking, an idiomatic language leaking into the poems from his own speech. In 'Party Line' (*TBC*), for example, he talks about 'the phrases I got in a / lucky bag from a priest'. Later in the same poem, come the lines, 'When I stopped praying / so many nightmares ago / I gave up solemn occasions'.

In other poems, he is quoting others. For example, the poem 'Loneliness' (*WTH*) posits serious questions about the nature of loneliness and of solitude, by zoning in on the words uttered by one individual, Jimmy Foley. Jimmy Foley could be described as a kind of peasant character – one of Empson's 'simple people' who posits stark, fundamental questions about the nature of being human, questions that are all the more arresting because of the minimalism of the composition, the plainness of the language. Arguably, Healy goes one step further than Empson's description; by quoting these characters directly, by mirroring their language in his own, by showing the elegance that can be found in colloquial speech – how it can engage with such human themes ('Loneliness' for example, is almost entirely in the words of the character Jimmy Foley) – he suggests that 'ordinary' or 'simple' people are no less complex than anyone else.

> I'm never lonely,
> said Jimmy Foley.
> I know that I'm here,
> that's all.

Chapter 2 of this thesis showed how, in the classic pastoral work of Virgil, such characteristics as beautiful evocations of the natural world and the recurring theme of journeys taken by friends, comprise not so much the essential element of those poems, but rather the means by

which the pastoral mode enables the writer to engage with serious themes. In the next section, I show how this is also the case in regards to the early poetry.

6.1.2 Natural landscape as context for the theme of grief

As we saw in Chapter 2 of this thesis, literary critiques such as Heaney's treatment of Czeslaw Milosz and David Ferry's critical introduction to Virgil's *Eclogues* illustrate that not only is it possible for serious writing to be achieved within the pastoral mode, but that many of the features of this mode make it particularly apt for approaching such themes. The question of seriousness is paramount, to paraphrase Empson on this point. In fact, it is its preoccupation with grief and displacement – through its evocation of lost golden ages – that is perhaps the key defining characteristic of the classic pastoral; the pastoral structure simplifies what we all share and, by doing so, makes it more tolerable while at the same time demonstrating how vulnerable we are. As Raymond Williams noted regarding the writing of Virgil, he 'could raise the most serious questions of life and its purposes … [within] the pastoral song'. This chimes with the conclusions of many other scholarly engagements on the mode, such as Paul Alpers' argument that in pastoral poetry, 'situations and experiences of distress tend to be represented only insofar as they can be sung' (Alpers, 1996, p. 172), and David Ferry's view that it is the subordination of such human themes to a poetic context that lends classic pastoral poetry work much of its power.

On this basis, the natural world in the pastoral mode emerges as being significant *only* as a locale or context for capturing the experience of loss. In other words, the real subject of pastoral works is its human inhabitants rather than its landscape. This was borne out in our analysis of *The Bend for Home* in Chapter 3, where we found that the narrative centred around losses – that of the village of Finea when the family moved to Cavan when Healy was a young boy, and then the death of his father and, much later, of his mother. In that work, features such as those

identified above, such as pastoral descriptions and leisurely journeys, serve as the means by which it engages with grief and loss. It was also a recurring feature in the analysis of the short stories in Chapter 4, for example in the eclogic 'Banished Misfortune', with its emphasis on song and leisure, in which references reside a deep, buried trauma.

Commentators have also observed this quality in Healy's poetry; Colm Tóibín, for example, has described it as a 'poetry of absences', likening the poems to the paintings of Miro (Tóibín, 2016), while Sean Golden has written of the 'deep-seated anxiety or apprehension for something gone or almost there, for the absence that is as important as presence, that haunts Healy's work' (Golden, 2016, p. 161). Here, I find that, as with *The Bend for Home*, and indeed the pastoral writings of Virgil, representations of the natural world do not serve to celebrate its beauty so much as to capture the human experience of loss. This is exemplified un 'Nightfishing' (*TBC*), when a boat temporarily gets caught in a bed of reeds, disturbing a sense of calm as panic temporarily overtakes the narrator: 'till eventually my life without you opens up before me'. This is followed by a lonely image of a car in the distant that 'pushes its headlights / through two hills … swings a sudden light round the lake', as the two characters 'reel in long memories'. In this poem, two separate griefs echo each other: the narrator's grief for his ageing father (barely but clearly alluded to in the line, 'My father has aged') and his grief for his relationship with the other person in the boat, which has just ended. At the same time, it also contains a sense of hopefulness in the sudden and complete, if brief, sense of union that arises between the two in the boat, when 'the panic in my heart / beats louder in yours' and, later, when together the two characters 'relax / from the hold of the water / turning under our feet, / the oars turning under our arms'.

'Recovery' (*TBC*) recounts a time when the poet recovered from a serious (unnamed) illness, while in the same hospital ward, his friend (to whom the poem is dedicated) is dying, a fact

that is alluded to plainly in this line, late in the poem: 'As I recovered, you lay dying'. As in 'Nightfishing', this poem is filled with two sorrows – that of 'heartbroken' Charlie's over losing his life and that of the narrator over losing his friend. Here again, much of the power of this poem resides in what is unsaid, or only alluded to, which is nonetheless captured through its tone, manifested in the imagery from the natural world that emphasises loss, like the dogs that have strayed and the haggard-looking horse, Charlie's observation that 'You can make any tree weep … / if you train it' (p. 17). While most of this poem takes place within a hospital ward, it also depicts the contrasting journeys – both spiritual and physical – of the two characters. Charlie's life before he becomes ill is shown – his 'lifetime in the air force / where he saw coffins come back from Vietnam / filled with dope', how he left his apartment in the States 'to come home and die in Ireland'. After he leaves the hospital, the poem describes his journey across the countryside 'like a man astray in the head' and, finally, his end in 'the Home'. By contrast, the narrator's journey starts in the hospital, with him almost dying – 'You're one of the lucky ones, says the doctor. / Usually they die' – and ends with his disconcerting experience of being unable to remember Charlie's funeral, the unsettling last line – 'It was nothing'. Nonetheless, and as with 'Nightfishing', this elegy manages to simultaneously offer consolation in the five narrow lines that come towards its end, when the poet finds himself healed and back home, with a loved one: 'In Killygowen / all rested and well / I feel another / heart beating by my side, / joy all round' (p. 22).

Returning to 'Loneliness' (*WTH*), we also find consolation in the words of Jimmy Foley, who describes how he 'might sit up till two / or three, happily' – 'a couple of hours / on my back / will do'. Lonely? He asks at the end of the poem.

> No.
> There's enough
> in my head

to do me
for a while longer.

There is a keen simplicity to this poem, a sense of the world being stripped back to these two men, mostly, to Jimmy Foley, awake through the night, not lonely because 'there's enough / in my head / to do me / for a while longer'. Once loneliness becomes unbearable, the poem seems to ask, must we die? It weighs loneliness against solitude, showing a kind of grace in living alone without succumbing to loneliness.

This consolatory feature also characterises those poems that consist entirely of a depiction of an aspect of the natural world, in doing so offering an analogy of the fleeting nature of any sense of connection, and the inevitable loss that such connection must entail. Take 'A Ball of Starlings' (*TRB*), for example. Here, 'a whispering ball of starlings / rises into / the blue night / like a shoal of sardines / gambolling underwater'. This whole poem (twenty-two unrhymed couplets) comprises one sentence; thus the poem mirrors the fluid movement of the starlings. This ball is fleeting – it 'rises into the vast dark / like hayseed / till the puff-ball / explodes and the birds / suddenly flip / again into nothingness'. The ending emphasises this sense of loss: 'then, chattering, the starlings spill / across the black fields'. By seeking to witness and capture starlings in flight, this poem depicts an astonishing scene of apparent unity, in doing so drawing our attention to how such unity, is only possible as a transitory experience. At the same time, there is hope in this vision that shows that such harmony between separate beings is not only possible but that it happens and that it is of value.

We have the same effect in 'The Reed Bed' (*TRB*), where the poet describes how he passes a reed bed daily, but as soon as he passes them 'and the rustling stops / somewhere behind me', 'they no longer exist' and he wonders what it is that he has lost. 'What was that … important

thing,' he asks, 'I left behind me on the dreaming road?' It is only on his return journey, when he sees 'my familiars' again, in a description that brings to mind Peter Sacks' (1987) emphasis on floral tributes in the pastoral elegy: 'sifting, by the dark tree … a tossed acre of amber reeds / feather-headed, / frail, summoning', that he remembers. This brief moment of glimpsing the reeds again is a kind of union – when 'the eye suddenly catches them / nodding in their bed / of cinnamon' and 'they truly exist'. But this, it seems, can only happen for a moment – the reed bed can only be seen when 'you come / upon them / at the last moment / and the eye / suddenly catches them / nodding in their bed'. Even within that moment, the reeds are 'getting ready / in a flurry of whispering / to leave you again'.

Many of the more explicitly elegiac poems in these early volumes involve journeys, and are eclogic in nature, involving as they do two people talking, their destinies often contrasting, with evocative images of the natural world providing an allusive backdrop for stories of loss and separation. Highly characteristic of classic pastoral, much of their power rests in the gaze, which, in falling on aspects of the natural world, evokes a sense of unease through disquieting imagery. The poem 'Joe Donlon' (*WTH*), for example, begins with the poet comparing himself to the man of the title: 'I stand in the doorway / like Joe Donlon before me, /hunched up huge'. Then he and a dog walk through a town at night, in a world that epitomises the unmooring nature of grief: in 'the broad black theatre / of the inland night', suddenly they seem 'to flounder', before moving 'a little across the street, / down darkness / by sheds, through grief'. Both a portrayal of grief and an act of empathy for the man who has died, they have entered 'a strange place / where the vastness closes in / as it must have, on certain nights, / around Joe Donlon'.

Similarly, the poem 'A Funeral' (*WTH*), composed of ten thin unrhymed couplets, is both *about* absence, in that it is an elegy to a man who has died, and *involves* absence, in the sense that it

makes no attempt to explicitly engage with the death of the man to whom the poem is dedicated or to describe him: significantly, there is a complete absence of any explicit reference to grief or loss. For the first six couplets, in a very pastoral scene – men digging earth – the emphasis is georgic, unsentimental, focusing on the physical labour involved. The men are digging a grave, while mourners look on:

> All together
> tap the dab,
>
> kick muck
> off a heel,
>
> toss old bones
> into a bag.

The symmetry achieved by the twelve shovels that 'dug the grave' (past tense) presented directly against the same twelve that 'fill it in' (present tense), with the internal rhymes (shovel/dug, fill/in), creates simultaneously a sense of neatness disturbed – by the verb change. Thus, this multi-layered image conveys a sense of time always moving forward – beneath the neat and apparently whole image is movement – always movement:

> Twelve shovels
> dug the grave;
>
> the same twelve
> fill it in.

Then, the scene is pushed beyond itself, in an otherworldly image that evokes the myth of Charon, the ferryman of whom Virgil wrote in the Aeneid, who carried the souls of Hades from the world of the living to that of the dead:

The shovels
work like oars

rowing the dead man
from this world

to the next.

Even in those ‘journey poems’ that are less explicitly elegiac, we find this pastoral preoccupation with loss. In ‘The Sky Road’ (*TRB*), two men (the poet and his son) return to a house in Dooneel on a summer’s night, in a heavy mist. The mist transforms their world, reducing it ‘down to a whisper’, and this creates a very otherworldly quality to the world of that poem. The sea is ‘swept up into a corner’, the ‘roof of a house shedding dew / floated by’ and ‘an orange light that once marked something / marked nothing at all’. The rest of the world ‘did not exist’. They find ‘a glacier’ by the house, ‘a long grave white road / that you would be tempted to walk on, reaching for miles / to the prow of the mountain’. Alone and above sea level, all landmarks gone, there is no sound ‘except for the low cough of a cow out there in the stillness’; the poet watches his son’s shadow grow longer than his own.

In ‘A Dream’ (*WTH*), the poet dreams that his friend Jimmy Foley ‘died / in the back room’, while the poet ‘lived out towards the front / oblivious to his hunger / for days and days’. When he tries to explain that he did not know, ‘my voice grew distant / and eerie’, even as ‘my anxiety was choking me / that I could have been such a fool / to let Jimmy die in my own house’. When he wakes to see ‘the light still burning / in his window’, his relief is followed by the memory of his ailing aunt, Maisie, waiting to be fed in her room (his mother had forgotten to bring her dinner to her). When (as a boy) he asked her, ‘Have you not eaten yet?’ her reply was, ‘It’s alright. Someone will come. Her faith shy and absolute’. This is a poem about ‘the world of dream’, where ‘anxiety can never be appeased’ and ‘someone is always dying of hunger’. A

straightforward narrative delivered in plain language, it nonetheless captures another universal, enigmatic human theme: a fundamental ill ease that we can meet face to face in the subconscious world of dreams. A similar effect is achieved in 'Grounded at Annie-Come-Ashore' (*TBC*) when, watching a car drive up a cul-de-sac before doing a U-turn, the narrator notes, 'someone has missed the bend for home. They keep going / till they could go / no longer'.

In some of these early poems, the grief being shown concerns the loss of a place, rather than a person. We find an example of this in 'Away with the Birds' (*TRB*), where the narrator, who is about to go on a trip to Kuala Lumpur, already feels homesick for his home, to which he is 'so glued', he gets 'light in the head at the thought of being elsewhere'. Again there is a sense of being displaced – of the narrator being forced to leave home against his wishes:

> all those half-heard notes
> of transience
> gather, the sough
> and regret.

The tug of home is strong; the sorrow caused by leaving is real: 'I'm finished', he says; 'life will go awry'. And he imagines, before he is there, 'the air conditioners / going up into a whine / in some hotel where / last night's lovers are still at it / salaciously in your bed'. The poem ends with the narrator comparing his attachment to home and dislike of travelling, with his younger self, when he 'couldn't wait / to enter / the vast strangeness'. It ends with an image of that younger self, 'before first light / already on the road / the thumb up / the world before me'. The loss being mourned here is not only of his home, but also of his youth.

'Father and Son' (*TRB*) describes a small hollow statuette of Jesus as a child, being held in Joseph's arms. It also depicts journeys: those of the statuette to different parts of the world ('to look down from kitchen walls / in farthest Cracow, / to light up when the driver strikes the

brake / of taxis in Quito'), and that of the person for whom the poet is waiting. This is another poem of longing, of love. 'May she come soon', he beseeches, 'that I do not resort to prayer!' Then: 'I'll put them on the step outside / to guide her home'. Ironically, the poem is a kind of prayer, even if uttered by one without faith. It is a depiction of the yearning of one human being for another, a homesickness experienced not by the person who has left, but by the person at home awaiting them.

6.1.3 Consolation and literary artifice in the early poems

We can see from the analysis above that consolation is a defining characteristic of many of the poems dealing with loss. For example, we have the brief union between the two characters of 'Nightfishing', a similar moment between the poet and his loved one in the elegy to his friend Charlie, 'Recovery' and the way in which Joe Donlon is resurrected through an act of empathy in the context of that poem. This consolatory feature places Healy alongside those modern poets identified by Jahan Ramazani who have managed to move away from the anti-elegiac aspect that defines the work of most modern elegists, without resorting to the solace of religious belief. Such work includes the later elegies of Seamus Heaney and that of the American poet Amy Clampitt. Ramazani's analysis shows how features more commonly considered archaic and pre-modern, such as praise for the dead, have re-emerged in the works of these poets. before going on to show how it seems to have re-emerged in Seamus Heaney's later elegies. According to Ramazani, Heaney and others have 'reclaimed compensatory mourning by subduing its [the elegy's] promise' (Ramazani, 1994, p. 30). In other words, 'a more traditionalist mode of elegy may have become viable once again, so long as it is sufficiently tempered by the skepticisms of our times' (Ramazani, 1994, p. xiii).

In Chapter 5, in which I consider the novel *A Goat's Song* as pastoral elegy, a consolatory effect is also found, and it is shown there that Healy achieves this by employing specific aspects

of the pastoral elegy, specifically those conceptualised by Peter Sacks in his book *The English Elegy*, with the narrator surviving grief by successfully completing the *work* of mourning, whereby he deflects his desire for the person he has lost by creating a substitute for them. In the early poetry, we find a different aspect of the pastoral mode enables this effect: its inherent irony, as explored in Chapter 2, in that it deliberately draws attention to its literary artifice to highlight the contrast between the idyllic world of the poem and the suffering inherent in the real world. This feature of Healy's poetry recalls David Baker's observation (2007) that a self-aware separation between the world of the poem and the world of the reader is a defining feature of the pastoral mode, and is probably one of the main reasons it has endured. As Heaney pointed out, 'literariness as such is not [necessarily] an abdication of the truth' (Heaney, 2003, p. 5).

Returning to 'A Funeral', though this poem begins as a simile ('The shovels / work <u>like</u> oars'), the way the poem continues suggests there is no distinction between this image and reality: 'rowing the dead man / from this world / to the next'. At the very least, there is an ambiguity to these lines; do they constitute a continuation of the simile of the shovels like oars, or is this what they are actually doing? The poem ends by returning to surface reality, as the mourners make their way home. This final image of lights returning to the West seems to contain a further echo of mythology, and the Roman goddess of dawn Aurora, who travelled from east to west each day announcing the arrival of the sun:

> Then the lights
> go back
> to the West.

Thus 'A Funeral' eulogises Jimmy Foley by showing the pain caused by his loss is too great to be done justice by explicit reference; instead, it must be transcended by breaking through

reality into myth. In this way, ‘A Funeral’ praises the deceased and it is within this praise that we find its consolation.

This form of deliberately accentuated literary artifice via a kind of magic realism, through which the reader is forced to acknowledge the ‘ill-fit’, as Seamus Heaney put it in his 2003 essay on pastoral, between reality and the idyllic world of the poem, is found in many other of the early poems. Journeys contain an otherworldly, or even magical, element to draw attention to the unreality of a scene devoid of suffering, thus representing the way in which pastoral writing deliberately makes its literary artifice obvious. ‘Winter Nights’ (*TBC*), for example, describes how the poet and his neighbour, Jimmy Foley, on winter nights, go out together to the pub, to a funeral, to see friends. Throughout, reference is made to the two characters’ wings: before they leave their homes they, ‘climb out of bed / and put on our wings’, down to the last line where, in Jimmy’s, they smoke and drink tea, ‘sitting by the fire / waiting on our wings to dry’. There is an extreme lightness in tone here, a simplicity to the description and a refusal to explain. The wings are contrasted with details of a very material reality from their day together – ‘There’s shopping to be done,/Fish gutted and salted’. On one level, the wings seem to celebrate the transcendent nature of these days the two friends share. On another, they are so unreal they draw attention to themselves, and to the way the poem pushes into language to make these scenes otherworldly, in doing so, conjuring their opposite.

A similar effect is achieved in the fairy-tale like ‘If It’s Twilight’ (*TBC*), which describes a park keeper making his way through a city park, ‘jingling his keys’ as he locks the park gates, the glasshouses. There are ‘butterflies singing around his head’ we are told, as he walks from his gate lodge through the park. It is twilight, a liminal period in many folkloric and mythological traditions – ‘the crack between worlds’. The keeper is ‘a man out of a tale / told to children’. In it, birds are ‘forever carrying the green of the trees / from tree to tree’. Again,

the hallucinatory aspects are Healy's 'transparent artifice'; his way of drawing attention to the way in which this scene of apparent pastoral perfection is at distinct odds with reality, a dream that is burst with its end of three short lines, when the park keeper 'closes the gates, pockets his watch. Enough is enough.' This fantastic version of reality that he seems to represent cannot be sustained beyond that one brief image (significantly, this poem is one of three entitled 'Photographs').

It is significant that the only one of Healy's poems that attempts to directly engage with the 'uglier shape of reality' is in fact a poem about its own failure to do so. 'Sunday, 16 August 1998' (*TRB*) describes the town of Omagh the day after the Real IRA carried out a car bombing there in 1998, killing 29 people and injuring hundreds. The narrator, walking or driving (it is not made clear) down the main street of the town, finds only, besides the debris, a 'lone cameraman, / taking a shot for the news' and the traffic lights, which, 'undisturbed by all that happened' continued to turn red and green 'though no one went, nor stopped, nor went again'. The gaze of the poet falls on the traffic lights, which keep 'urging traffic / through the crack that opened / between ten-after-three / and eternity'. The traffic never comes. The zoning in on the traffic lights suggests an attempt to use language to change what has happened but it fails. More specifically, the poem seems to be showing the ultimate impotency of language. Towards the end of the poem, the lights speed up, 'as if the bomb had damaged time itself' before slowing down, 'as if somehow they could go/back to normality', before going faster again, until the poem's poem's final line which falls outside the four-stanza shape Healy has established, a futile gesture of defiance against what has happened and perhaps of the poet's own attempt to address the horror directly: 'for Stop, for Stop, for Stop.' By failing to capture the horror of the bombing, this poem shows the particular power of the pastoral mode in addressing war from a different angle, in that it recalls Milosz' justification for his highly idealised pastoral poem sequence *The World* written during the Second World War as 'a rather

ironic operation … an act of magic to depict the exact opposite' (cited in Heaney, 2003, p. 7) of the world at that time.

6.1.4 Challenges to the pastoral idyll in the early poetry

As found in both Chapter 2 on the memoir and Chapter 4 on the short stories, there is a complexity to Healy's celebration of the natural world, with an initial apparent idealisation of the countryside undercut by other aspects of the writing that seek to challenge the pastoral idyll. *The Bend for Home*, for example, contains many detailed accounts of negative aspects of life in the rural village of Finea, as well as many others that both celebrate the town of Cavan and undermine the idea of the countryside being unattainable for urban dwellers. In its final section, the countryside is even portrayed as a place of exile. Regarding the early short stories, a deeply anti-pastoral strain is reflected, for example, in the depiction in 'Banished Misfortune' of the countryside as a site of violence. In some, such as 'First Snow of the Year', I identified traces of a post-pastoral strain in the portrayal of the natural world as often dangerous and always indifferent to its human inhabitants. Similarly, anti-pastoral is a defining feature of much of the early poetry.

In 'Father and Son' (*TRB*), the statuette of the child Jesus held in Joseph's arms, described as a mass produced thing 'out of pagan China or Korea', nonetheless manages to 'persist in being lovely' in this tender account that captures the way Joseph's skirt 'hitches up', how 'the red-haired child / is awake before anyone / else in the house – / up into his father's arm with him'. The rural scene they regard is anything but idyllic: 'the flooded fields – fences of storm-tossed / fertilizer bags, / black plastic, nappies', but Joseph's 'benign eye' is of one 'who has seen worse'.

In other poems, imagery highlights the dangers of the natural world. We see this in 'Grounded at Annie-Come-Ashore' (*TBC*), in which, while nature is the locale for loss, the opening

description of the sunrise of the sea conjures industrialisation rather than a bucolic world – with a horizon likened to 'a factory floor' and 'the day shift' passing 'the night shift on the second shore'. We also find it in 'Rust' (*WTH*), which depicts the fast-spreading and destructive effects of rust following a storm ('like all bad news, rust spreads fast'). When the rust spreads, 'hinges give and doors fall open / suddenly / in the middle of the night'. In 'The West End' (*TRB*), two men meet in a rural location and reminisce about their lost Golden Age of London in the 1960s. This poems takes place in a harsh natural environment, with its 'sleet / and churlish wind'.

In other places, this aspect of the first collection seems to go further than the anti-pastoral, suggesting the emergence of a post-pastoral sensibility. One way in which this is suggested is in the inherent passivity to be found in many of these poems, in which rather than the poet doing something, we read of things happening to him. The title poem of *TBC*, 'The Ballyconnell Colours', for example, begins with him waiting alone, in a house with a new door–window that makes it feel like a shop, until 'you come home'. That night, there is a storm and the house is likened to a ship, sleep to breaking free, 'brought out / across the bumping sea / beyond the bar / to a dangerous swell / of dangerous lights'. Then 'the gentle / tug of wakening' and 'you go down the road / we cast off nightly in our dreams'. People come, the talk turns to 'murders, suicides / and fairies'. Then the narrator finds himself again in 'the mindless / hallucinatory hours / of the afternoon, trying to find space for it all – 'yourself, the silence of gales, / the unyielding stars'. The overriding feeling here is that the poet has ultimately had no choice in living in this particular house, at this point in time. Things are happening to him, and he receives them, allows them to take place, from his place of 'mild comfort', as Tóibín put it – the waiting, the storm, the visitors, the waiting again. It is significant that the last image of this poem is of an animal, experiencing a similar kind of fate:

white seal pup on the rocks
thrown up here,
like myself
in a storm.

Sometimes, the imagery suggests human dependency on, or vulnerability to, the natural world. In ‘Grounded at Annie-Come-Ashore’, the narrator is ‘stranded … / stuck high and dry’, waiting ‘for the high waters of late September to make me buoyant again’. In the same poem, we have the image of a Polish ship ‘grounded / like a casino in Ballincar / love with all its lights on’. The above image of the seal also conjures both a violent separation from safety – from the home into the wild, and a sense of randomness to life – of being at the mercy of external forces, which are anything but benign.

The seal image also exemplifies another, related feature of Healy’s early poetry that announces the work as at least partly grounded in a post-pastoral perspective: critical anthropomorphism. This concept initially emerged from the fields of ethology and comparative psychology. Introduced by Gordon Burghardt (1991), it seeks to recognise the potential value of a critical, more considered anthropological approach that seeks to understand the emotional experience of an animal. Defending the concept required distinguishing it from literary anthropomorphism in general, which, like pastoral, has (rightly) been denigrated over recent decades for ‘the assumed falsity, arrogance or sentimentality of the imposition of the human on the non-human’ (Paton, 2006, p. 210). For Burghardt, and later commentators, such criticisms do not apply to all anthropomorphic writing; critical anthropomorphism involves a more empirically-minded approach, referred to by Burghardt as a process of ‘predictive inference’, which can indeed be a means of ‘getting to the truth’ (Paton, 2006), in the same way that post-pastoral writing can overcome the limitations of certain forms of pastoral.

The term ‘critical anthropomorphism’ can be applied to Healy’s poetry, where attempts to apply human emotions to animals or birds are rarely laboured, with a lightness of touch belying a restraint. On some occasions, a humorous tone alerts the reader to Healy’s awareness of the dangers of an unconsidered, incautious anthropomorphism, like these lines:

> When the cat died
> of cat flu, the kitten
> looked around anxiously
> at night
> waiting for the sneeze in the dark.

Not simply humorous, these lines simultaneously exemplify the themes of anxiety, loss and absence ever present in Healy’s poetry, as well as the way in which it also emphasises the commonality of experience shared by the human and other species. As Priscilla Paton found in her analysis of the representations of animals in Elizabeth Bishop’s short fiction, such nuanced examples of Healy’s anthropomorphism approaches, though rarely suggest knowing completely, ‘the mindedness of an animal, of an initially foreign consciousness’ (Paton, 2006, p. 211).

Occasionally, there is even a humility in a gaze that sometimes portrays animals as superior to human. In ‘Grounded at Annie-Come-Ashore’, when the natural world provides the serene closing image of the poem, ‘silent gulls in a gale. Hundreds, falling in one behind the other, / just above the water, for hours, / steadfastly’. Their ‘steadfastly’ flight is in direct contrast to the narrator’s restlessness and frustration, suggesting a note of envy: unlike him, the gulls display an artless union with their world. A similar feeling can be found in the poem ‘All the Meteors’ of the same collection (*TRB*), where again, there is a strong sense of dislocation, of the narrator having ended up where he is due to forces beyond his control. The ‘six swans’ that ‘cruise through the dark’ are sensed, not seen, ‘the whole thing is a blur’. It is the weather that

seems to have trapped him: he is ‘pinned / down here in a wind / from the south’. Other beings that populate this poem mirror his own sense of being trapped: the poor of Ecuador are ‘wooden’ and a cat has a limp. Again, the poet, alongside all the other living beings in this poem, seems completely passive, entirely at the mercy of external forces, with the poem ending with him waiting for ‘whatever in the wide world / awaits me after that’.

Then there is the way ‘On Looking Up at the Night Sky Above Lough Conn’ which, as though anticipating the themes of *A Fool’s Errand*, which was to come much later, invokes themes of the deep complexity of time and space in its past-tense presentation of stars that no longer exist, but which continue to shine:

> Stars
> that have gone back
> into history
> are shining like new towns
>
> for the traveller.

Clearly, both anti-pastoral and, to a lesser degree, post-pastoral can be found in the early poetry. However, as the next section will show, it wasn’t until Healy’s final volume published in his lifetime, *A Fool’s Errand*, that we find a marked evolution towards a post-pastoral sensibility.[20]

6.2 Post-pastoral in *A Fool’s Errand*

A Fool’s Errand was published ten years after the publication of the last poetry volume (*The Reed Bed*). Significantly, it was written alongside Healy’s final novel, *Long Time, No See*. The two were written slowly, over a ten-year period, and have been described as a diptych (McCarthy,

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[20] This section also includes analysis of some poems comprising the posthumous work, *The Travels of Sorrow.*

2016, p. 316). In naming them thus, McCarthy emphasises the shared west-of-Ireland geographic location, citing Louis MacNeice's description of that landscape as 'always more than matter … [inhabited by] brute and ghost at once' (McCarthy, 2016, p. 316). Here, I seek to extend this point by highlighting the strongly post-pastoral nature that binds the two texts; in doing so, showing that not only is the landscape relevant but also the sensibility that underpins its depiction, including of its human inhabitants.

Gifford writes of post-pastoral's 'mature environmental aesthetic', which, by its nature, recognises 'that some literature has gone beyond the closed circuit of pastoral and anti-pastoral to achieve a vision of an integrated natural world that includes the human' (Gifford, 1999, p. 148). For Gifford, post-pastoral reflects an awareness that 'what is happening in us is paralleled in external nature … that our inner human nature can be understood in relation to external nature' (1999, p. 156). On this point, he emphasises that humility is a necessary step towards regaining 'our place as part of the natural world' (1999, p. 156). Michael Cronin identifies similar characteristics when writing of geocentrism, according to which, the planetary must now be figured into all our thinking' (Cronin, 2016, p. 385). He states, 'It is no longer tenable to conceive of humans as a species apart'. Now, within the current context of global heating, humans need to begin to think of themselves as species; 'Anthropos must be de-centred' – it is out of this vision that we might reach, 'a notion of relationality and ontological equality that does not privilege one life form over another' (Cronin, 2016, p. 385). On this, he cites Braidott, who emphasises our need to take seriously our multiple connections to rational and material worlds. If we conceive of the notion of subjectivity to include the non-human … we need to visualise the subject as a transversal entity encompassing the human, our genetic neighbours the animals and the earth as a whole, and to do so within an understandable language. (Braidott, cited in Cronin, 2016, p. 386)

As Chakrabarty writes, ‘Humans are now a force of nature, in a geological sense’ (Chakrabarty, 2009, cited in Cronin, 2016, p. 383), a concept that posits humans as an actual condition of nature (rather than just subject to nature), due to the way in which we ‘dominat[e] and determin[e] the survival of many other species … [but] at the cost of the very survival of humanity’ (Cronin, 2016, p. 384). Not only is it ‘no longer tenable to conceive of humans as a species apart’, as Cronin puts it, our treatment of the environment has grown to mean that we ourselves have become one of the forces of nature.

In a description that chimes remarkably with these concepts, Sean Golden notes how, in east Asian poetry and painting, ‘the role of the human is reduced … to a minimum … all of the elements composing the scene [are lent] an equal weight’ (Golden, 2016, p. 162). In both post-pastoral writing and in east Asian art, the human must be displaced, off-centre – part of a general scene of the natural world, rather than its main subject. These are traits he finds in *A Fool’s Errand*, which considers the annual migration and return of barnacle geese to an island off the Sligo coast. Comprised of nine parts, each page presents a nameless sonnet, all of which are shaped on the page as rough mirrors of the V formed by the barnacle geese in flight. These poems flit between careful, sometimes almost hallucinatory depictions of the barnacle geese (likened, for example, to ‘a hieroglyph / in the grass’, to ‘nuns in shawls / with white beads running / through their shawls’) and, particularly in the earlier parts, the death of a friend. Throughout, there is no apparent distinction drawn regarding the significance of the lives of these geese and those of the human inhabitants of the poems. In this way, the work has, as Golden writes, ‘this east Asian sense of proportion, of man’s place in the world, not as a figure dominating the foreground, but as a contributory detail to the whole effect’ (Golden, 2016, p. 168).

Often, it is the natural world that takes centre stage; in ‘The Arrowhead’, for example, the barnacle geese and the stars make up the main event:

> At evening the geese
> make way for the stars
>
> and at morning
> the stars
>
> turn into a flock of souls
> that face back
> into the mainland
>
> to scatter
> the geese grass on borrowed land
> till again they were the heavens
>
> and, come dark,
> they turn
>
> with one last whoop
> into stars.

There is no evident metaphor or simile here in this pure image; no sense that this might be really about the human. Here, where stars become geese and geese stars, the emphasis is events of the sky. The absence of the human draws attention to how old this dance between birds and stars is – how it was taking place long before the human.

In order for a body of writing to be identified as post-pastoral, it must reject the pastoral idyll. This absence of idealisation is characteristic of depictions of the natural world throughout *AFE*, where there is never any expressed lament for the ‘loss of the Irish countryside’ in the face of urbanisation; as Cronin notes, Healy resists those romantic and idealised ‘outside time’ notions

of the west of Ireland that are promoted in its tourist market representations, the false representation of the west as 'a never-never land assuaging the consciences of anguished day trippers' (Cronin, 2016, p. 391–392). We saw in Chapter 4 that this is also a feature of Healy's later short stories, in which we find depictions of a thriving and indifferent natural world, with the the human experience displaced by anti-climactic endings. There, as well as in the poems, his natural world is never bucolic; on the contrary, nature emerges as indestructible; with as clear a presence in those with an urban setting as those with a natural one. More than that, Healy's poems represent a shift, at least in the Irish pastoral tradition, away from a human-centric way of perceiving the world, to one that acknowledges that the idea of god has been replaced by the fact of global heating, and that emphasises deep history and a necessarily vast perspective in which to properly perceive the meaning and role of the human. They represent a step away from nostalgia and towards what Braidott calls 'matter-realism' (cited in Cronin, 2016) – this idea of seeing the subject as part of a network of human, the animal and the earth. In 'An Ebbing Song', for instance, the following description is given of the 'birdsong' of barnacle geese:

> It's not a lonesome sound
> but a panic,
>
> a calling out to the others
> to see if they're there;
>
> …
>
> this is different, this is a broken family,
> the young go the wrong way,
>
> then, at daybreak, rise up and follow their elders
> with dread
> at the returning sound of the journey ahead.

Similarly, in the posthumous collection *The Travels of Sorrow* (*TTS*), nature is never depicted as an idyllic escape from reality, but rather as reality itself. It is the modern world that seems to be the escape. In 'The Off-button', we glimpse 'the TV on / in a sudden spot of rain' – its reflection in the window. In 'The Wife of the Moon', 'I've grown / complacent, hide out by the hearth, / tuck into wine, watch hours of TV' while outside, the moon is 'heaving at the door', 'paddling on top of every swell', 'grounding / down the rocks'. Always, the outside world rages on, always astonishing and always changing no matter how much we hide. The poems teem with fresh depictions of it, from wild birds ('the snipe of Finea / whisk the song / out of the feathers / in their tail') to the sea, to the sky, with its 'long acres of cloud / and star nests'. There is a lot of the sky in fact, which is 'dark, swirling' in one poem, in another, containing 'my mother's hair / … all the aged' in its moving clouds. As in *AFE*, the natural world is always moving, like 'the yard skiing with swallows' and the butterfly that 'blew by / like a sliver of ash'. It is time passing made visible. In 'The Fossils of Coral', coral stones are 'each filled / with a tropical sea / and the scrawl and dint of time'. In 'The Sentinel', 'the clout / of cold wind is waiting in the wings'.

Throughout Healy's poems about journeys, living creatures – human and non-human – are being subjected to forces beyond their control. This 'natural fatalism', we might call it, is applied equally to man and beast, with the resulting effect of an absence of hierarchy in the poems' presentations of humans and other living beings with whom we share the earth. Towards the end of 'The Voyage' the ambiguous 'we' is not clearly specifically human, in the lines, 'We have not been here before in this place / and yet we have, in this life, / and nestled down, / and made a home in someone else's home / who moved into the house we had left, as we all travelled back / to meet, for the first time again, / what will be taken / from us / to haunt the senses / in the years ahead.' The terms 'nestled down' and 'made a home' evoke the animal, while 'moved into the house we had left' evoke the human. In 'The Wild Goose Chase', we

have, ‘The past is at me. / It sits on my shoulder. The back is at me’ and ‘the Uncle who is haunting the / future for signs.’ Again, this comes alongside this displacement of the human, in, ‘The Aunt is content to become the pet / after living in the wild so long’. Constantly, the past is something that has to be faced again in the future –

> those things I’ve done
> will all have to be faced into again.
> Where I will be tomorrow is already over.
> The sorrow that turns to joy
>
> leads us on a journey, shoulder to shoulder,
> out to the island chapel
> where the congregations of geese in thousands teach the shadows
>
> that our first lie
> to ourselves
>
> was that the way ahead
> had not already happened.

We already saw traces of critical anthropomorphism in the earlier poetry, a note of humour sometimes highlighting the author’s awareness of the potential dangers of imbuing the non-human with human emotions. In *AFE*, the humour is absent, the losses emphasised, but again the anthropomorphic is always carefully entered, and used so as to emphasise the shared lot of human and animal. In ‘The Late November List’, the geese’s cries are ‘sad, triumphant’. In ‘The Arrowhead’, they ‘grow frantic / as their time comes / to leave the island / behind them for the Atlantic. / Forays are made, / they lose their way, argue. / Leaders falter beyond the cliff / as the stars / grow more rigid / in the direction / they have to go.’ In ‘An Ebbing Song’:

> By evening they are an army
> come back

after losing the battle,
lone soldiers
shouting out their distress.

Here, the emphasis is on the shared lot of the human and non-human – the journey of barnacle geese is one of hardship, with inevitable losses – rather than assuming human emotions behind animal behaviour. In *TTS*, a comic note underlies the same theme of human and animal being subject to the same forces in the hallucinatory 'The Souls', in which, 'on the way to a funeral / in Cavan' and to others after, animals and birds die through their encounter with the poet's car – a crow flying into the windscreen, a rabbit going under the wheel – until he decides: "I'm going to no more / funerals in Cavan. Soon there won't be a bird / or a badger left alive in the country."

Compounding this effect is an apparently casual transmogrification between human and animal, sea and human (Tóibín, 2016, p. 10), recalling the transmogrification found in Celtic mythology, with humans becoming animal and vice versa. In 'The Leavings', for instance, the poet moves seamlessly from human to goose, using male and female pronouns for both, without clarifying when the point of view has shifted. At one point, he weaves the sounds and movements of a congregation at a funeral with those of the barnacle geese, in a style that serves to blur the two scenes, to suggest that both are happening at once, or even that they are both part of the same spectacle:

footsteps of communicants
go to and fro to the tap of the hymn, keeping time in shoes,
heels, coughs, steps, the slow shuffle
and poignant sounds of little knocks from afar.
…
Another quick thread goes up and down the thrashing hair
of the singer as she faces into the screech,
mouth open, dress to the side. Away to the left, in the dark

on the cliff, sits
the other singer whose turn has yet to come.

Through these techniques, *AFE* successfully treats the myriad of dependencies and systems that make up the world in which we live, of which the human is just one part. As Michael Cronin notes, there is a

> continuity of the connectedness … [a] subtle decentring of Anthropos, running right through the collection. The working subject here is not a master of all he surveys, but a consciousness enmeshed in a world that no longer tolerates the condescension of anthropocentric largesse.' (Cronin, 2016, p. 393)

Cronin goes on to explain the concept of 'deep history', which involves converging human history with history of life on the planet. It is a view that leads to the dislocation (or perhaps more accurately the correct placement) of humans as species (Cronin, 2016); 'out of this vision,' he writes, 'comes a notion of relationality and ontological equality that does not privilege one life form over another' (Cronin, 2016, p. 385). Applying this concept to *AFE*, Cronin highlights the fluidity of Healy's natural world; not only are the geese moving, but so too are fossils, for example, and even the stars, in these lines for example where the geese become the stars – 'The movement of the stars / is infinitesimal / as they climb the stairs to the opening'. In this way, he is drawing our attention not only to the physical fluidity of the natural world, but also to the way in which the spatial and the temporal are ultimately connected; how starlight is something we see after a star has died.

Throughout *AFE*, the journey and the geese are presented as time itself. For example, in one of the stanzas, 'time stands drying its wings', while in another, they are 'the orchestra of memory … tuning up in front of the scarecrow / for their final appearance'. Towards the end, as they prepare for the flight back to Greenland, 'time is on the move'. As a congregation of thousands, they 'teach the shadows / that our first lie / to ourselves / was that the way ahead / had not

already happened'. In '3 The Beaten Sound', 'The future is what / happened only the once. / It will begin again / just after the ending.'

Not only is this emphasis on time not self-pitying, it also enables the poet to explore, and even call into question, the human experience as a temporal one. While we may accept that time is relative, that does not stop us from experiencing life chronologically, and here, Healy's long gaze means that the notion of time as a relative concept is treated successfully. By bearing witness to this annual flight that has been happening for thousands of years and that represents an obsession with the circular nature of the flight – both physically in that it involves the constant repetition of the same journey and temporally in that it happens every year, our usual, linear experience of time is disturbed. It is as though the subject of *AFE* – the annual flight of the barnacle geese – lifts the gaze to a deeper reality, where time is not linear, something that simultaneously fundamentally disrupts our perception of the human experience, while being portrayed almost as ultimately incidental. For example, in '7 The Late November List', this emphasis on an ancient flight raises questions of time, drawing into question the 'old arrogance of presentism' (Cronin, 2016), with the declaration:

> oh gosling, goose, barnacle!
> I still think you go back
>
> into the past, with your wing-beating,
> fierce left-handed sound,
> to a pub in Leitrim
>
> at closing time
> where the men are
> calling out their goodbyes
>
> to ghosts
> who believe in humans

> because
> they die.

For Cronin, this is representative of Chakrabarty's 'deep history', as Healy describes the journey of 'the freed fossils' tumbling 'in the rising tides', as they travel with the ice 'up the valleys (2016, p. 30):

> By moving heaven (stars) and earth (fossils), he makes the reader aware of the multiple timelines of the lived world and how alterations in the timeline of exploration and sensibility allow us to make sense of our post-Anthropocene present (Cronin, 2016, p. 392).

Just as the vast scale of the physical landscape of these poems reduces the human, so too does the vast depth of time they expose, which makes the human feel small, almost irrelevant, even as the writing resonates with human grief, in the lines that evokes men outside 'a pub in Leitrim', their ghosts believing 'in humans / because / they die.' Indeed, the very need for the use of the word 'human' in the above extract is unusual, distinctive; proving the point that the human is off-centre in this book. While you could say this perspective contains a kind of hope, in the sense that it evokes these scenes of goodbye a pub as eternal ones, it simultaneously evokes a sense of fatalism in the way it captures the vastness of the world (and the consequent smallness of individual human lives).

In section five of *AFE*, the inter-related themes of time and integration of the human and the natural become sharper, even becoming explicit at one point. 'We invent anew an old arrogance', he writes, contemplating what he sees as the arrogance of presentism: the assumption among the living that they are somehow superior to those of past ages:

> So the man in the 7th century took the man in the third for a fool.
> The woman in the 12th had little time for the handmaid in the back
> row at school. The 21st

sees the rest as cursed.

And the scientist in the 30th
Will see us as the worst.

Again, Healy uses his wide-angle perception of time to reveal the relative insignificance of our own time, while at the same time highlighting the significance of the damage 'our time' is inflicting on the natural world, damage that will go far beyond our short existences. Yet in *AFE*, a kind of consolation is also to be found in the annual return of the barnacle geese; this is suggested in the celebratory, even victorious tone to the descriptions of this; for example, in The Arrowhead, they 'come trumpeting singly / in from the sea / and, with fearful shrieks, / land, / and stand, facing back / the way / they came'.

Similarly, for all its sense of fatalism, *TTS* also occasionally contains a sense of celebration, even of hope, in poems that draw energy from the natural world they depict, even as in doing so they show the insignificance of the human. In 'In Songs for Digging' (*TTS*), the diggers sing 'Hosana, Hosana in the highest' as they 'curse / the blasted scutch / and dig / into the cursed bind"', a poem that ends with them laying "flag stones / up to the new door". In 'The Night Light' of the same collection, while recalling an old friend who has died, 'the way he smiled, / The 'I' that was a word / he never said', the poet goes outside to check the night light is working: "all was dark / until his voice / suddenly lit up / the yard.' At the end of another:

There's fresh onions
in the earth. The wounds
on the wrist are healing.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter shows how Healy's early poetry is characterised by classic pastoral traits: an emphasis on bucolic representations of the natural world and rural life; an eclogic tendency to

involve one or more people on a journey, often in conversation with each other; the use of such conventions to address serious human themes such as grief and loss; and the deliberate drawing of the reader's attention to its own artifice, which in Healy's case enables a consolatory note in his more elegiac poems. It also illustrates how the early poems simultaneously challenge the pastoral idyll, through detailed accounts of uglier aspects of rural life and an emphasis on harshness and indifference in depictions of the natural world. In some such poems, traces of an emerging post-pastoral sensibility can be found, such as an inherent passivity that suggests a human vulnerability in the face of an indifferent universe, and a critical anthropomorphism in the depiction of animals.

It then goes on to consider *A Fool's Errand*, which was published ten years after the previous poetry volume and in which we find a distinctly post-pastoral sensibility, manifested in the following ways: the poems' depiction of a network of human, animal, landscape, in place of the more typical human-centric focus; the absence of any pastoral idyll; the sense of awe reflected in the portrayal of a powerful and indifferent natural world; traces of critical anthropomorphism; and their evocation of 'deep history', whereby human history is presented in the humbling context of history of life on the planet.

The next chapter seeks to show how *Long Time, No See*, which was written during the same ten-year period as *A Fool's Errand*, is also a deeply post-pastoral work, by considering it as an example of ecological art.

7 *Long Time, No See* as ecological art

7.1 Introduction

This chapter considers Healy's final novel, *Long Time, No See* (*LTNS*), as an example of 'ecological art', as conceptualised by the ecocritic Timothy Morton.[21] In doing so, I argue that, alongside the fourth poetry volume, *A Fool's Errand*, both completed during Healy's last decade, it reflects a distinctly post-pastoral gaze. Particular attention is placed on prominent aspects of the novel that challenge and undermine the human-centric focus typical of fiction, while simultaneously illuminating a world in which there is no hierarchy of significance among beings, human or otherwise. These aspects include the absence of an explicit plotline, as well as many features of the novel's tone and execution. The latter include: a sustained emphasis on the surface of things, with dialogue, behaviour and the physical world consistently prioritised over interior feelings or thoughts of its characters; the way its characters make up a 'collectivity', rather than a more insular 'local community'; and the way in which images and descriptions consistently integrate presentations of the human with their 'environment'.

We begin with a brief overview of the emergence of ecocriticism and, within that, those key concepts that inform the critical analysis of *LTNS* that follows.

7.2 What is ecological art?

Chapter 2, in setting out the theoretical framework for this thesis, makes the case for conceiving of the post-pastoral as a manifestation of the pastoral mode, and therefore in which we can expect to find the nuances and tensions of classic pastoral. It also locates the post-pastoral in the context of the relatively recently emerged field of ecocriticism, in doing so arguing that ecocriticism owes a

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[21] Part of this chapter appeared in an article I wrote for the Dublin Review of Books: https://drb.ie/articles/only-connect/.

debt to pastoral. As noted there, expert opinions on this matter are divided, and I return to this issue here with a view to locating the analysis of this chapter within ecocriticism.

Greg Garrard, who edited the *Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (2014), has described pastoral as 'outmoded' (Garrard, 2012, p. 65) and therefore not relevant to our consideration of ecocriticism. By contrast, the work of other authorities on the subject, most notably Paul Alpers, who wrote the important monograph, *What is Pastoral?*, establishes pastoral as a mode with a permanent, rather than historical, relevance to literature. Terry Gifford has criticised critiques of pastoral in the field of ecocriticism for the absence of any obvious engagement with or appreciation of pastoral writers of antiquity (particularly Virgil), for simplifying the history of pastoral and for failing to appreciate nuances of Raymond Williams' ultimate (and reluctant) conclusion that over time, distortions of a potentially powerful and timeless mode led to it being undermined (Gifford, 2017a). In one essay, for example, Gifford writes of 'the brazen ignorance of some critics empowered by the new ecocriticism' (2016, p. 6), finding an 'ultimate irony' in the fact that so few ecocritics actually quote from the classical pastoral writers, such as Virgil and Theocritus, a fact that leads him to suspect that those who reject pastoral as obsolete 'do not know the nuances and complexities of the classicals texts' (2016, p. 6).

This position – that the emergence ecocriticism is at least to some degree related to the pastoral mode – is also grounded in an understanding of the deliberate tensions between myth and reality that we find in classical pastoral, the powerful sense of irony thus achieved in such works and how this defining feature of pastoral is the reason behind its 'staying power' (Heaney, 2003).

Gifford (2017) notes that one of the key ecocritical texts in the US – Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* – seeks to establish an American pastoral tradition while one of the most influential British texts – Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* – ultimately seeks to expose the history of pastoral there as being bound up in class inequalities.) Such differences, however, are

arguably transcended, at least to some degree, in the current 'second-wave' of ecocritics who, taking a critical theory approach, seek to 'gain perspective by defamiliarizing social constructions of "Nature" and the "natural" that are deeply intertwined with anthropocentric values of normativity and inherent good' (Dodson, 2011, p. 7) and to challenge the tendency of first-wave ecocritics to posit 'Nature' as other – something that is 'out there', a separate backdrop to human life – as well as its resistance to theory (Dodson, 2011).

In this wave, the contribution of ecocriticism from the Global South has also come to be increasingly, if belatedly, recognised. This development is reflected in the relatively recent publication of essay anthologies such as *Ecoambiguity, community, and development: Toward a politicized ecocriticism* (2014) and *Ecocriticism of the Global South* (2015). The critical importance of such work lies in the fact that both the scholars concerned and the authors of the literary works with which they are engaging come from those under-represented regions where the consequences of the climate crisis are already manifesting; what Slovic et al refer to as 'the front line of the human struggle to invent sustainable and just civilisations on an imperiled planet' (Slovic et al, 2015, p. i). This inherently postcolonial work shows in a way that writing from the West cannot – that 'there is no intrinsic separation between cultural and ecological concerns' (Slovic et al, 2015, p. 4). The illusive, or even delusional, nature of the nonetheless persisting notion of 'nature' as a place of retreat is revealed to a damning degree, particularly in work where nature is presented in the context of war or consequences of climate change such as drought, or even that which illuminates urban living as the norm for most people. Ecocriticism from the Global South also shows the way in which damage to the environment is inextricably part of the consequences of global capitalism, which are disproportionately borne by communities of the Global South. By its very existence, this vein of ecocriticism challenges the 'centrism' of ecocriticism from the West.

The writing of Timothy Morton has been particularly influential in regard to this second wave of ecocriticism. In the *Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (Garrard, 2014), Greg Garrard has described his work on ecology as having had 'a seismic impact'. As noted in Chapter 2, while Morton's work

has faced criticism, most notably for misapplications of certain concepts he relies on and for, in his emphasis on the Anthropocene as a collective human whole, failing to acknowledge inequalities within it, such as those related to gender, race and class (Blasdel, 2017), he is nonetheless regarding as 'probably the most influential theorist of ecocriticism today' (Garrard, 2014). Moreover, despite the criticism of his failure to recognised social inequalities, his conceptualisation of ecocriticism and ecological art does suggest an engagement with those issues highlighted by ecocritical scholars from the Global South, particularly in terms of showing the interconnection between cultural, social and environmental concerns, and how the notion of 'Nature' is ultimately delusional.

Morton's contribution to ecocriticism is grounded in object-oriented ontology (OOO). OOO is a relatively new development within the field of contemporary metaphysics (Wilde, 2020), comprising a small group of scholars (key among whom are Levi Bryant and Graham Harmon) who share 'the notion of a flat ontology where reality is viewed as non-hierarchical and irreducible. Everything which exists does so on an equal footing' (Wilde, 2020, p. 2). In his essay, 'The promise of object-oriented ontology', in which he seeks to defend the value of OOO to ecocriticism, Morton writes, 'OOO belongs to recent attempts to rethink realism in the wake of distinctly anti-realist philosophies that have held sway for some decades' (Morton, 2012, p. 164). This radical deconstructive approach informs all of his series of monographs on ecocriticism, which are concerned with elucidating the implications of the Darwinian concept of interconnectedness, in doing so undermining the idea of Nature as other. In *Ecology without Nature*, for example, he writes that the notion of Nature is 'wheeled out to adjudicate between what is fleeting and what is substantial and permanent' (Morton, 2007, p. 21), despite the fact that Nature can never be value neutral, as it is 'a potentially infinite series of other terms' that 'waver … between the divine and the material'. In *The Ecological Thought* (which was published after *Ecology without Nature* and is presented by Morton as a prequel to the earlier book), he traces back a mistaken 'othering' of Nature (or 'greenwashing' as he calls it) as something that began in the eighteenth century:

> Modern thinkers had taken it for granted that the ghost of Nature, rattling its chains, would remind them of a time without industry, a time without "technology", as if we had never used flint or wheat. But in looking at the ghost of Nature, modern humans were looking in the mirror. In Nature, they saw the reflected, inverted image of their own age – and the grass is always greener on the other side. (Morton, 2011, p. 5)

According to Morton, this 'othering' of Nature makes no sense when we fully incorporate Darwin's theory of the origins of life by natural selection into our understanding of life. 'What does it feel like to understand evolution?' he asks. 'Are we ready to admit the world of mutation and uncertainty that Darwin opens up?' (p. 18). This in a sense is his point: 'The ecological thought', Morton writes, 'is the thinking of interconnectedness … a practice and a process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings – animal, vegetable, or mineral' (p. 7). In the world of the ecological thought, 'every single life form is literally familiar; we're genetically descended from them' (p. 29) but form does not fit function and 'the apparent pointlessness of life forms … is their saving grace' (p. 30). Symbiosis is presented as a useful concept here; whereby, for example, a tree includes fungi and lichen and lichen is literally two forms of life interacting. The ecological thought reminds us that DNA always mutates randomly, that this is a world with 'no center and no edge', where because 'everything is interconnected, there is less of everything' (p. 33).[22]

In seeking to capture how this interconnectedness defines our existence, Morton devises a kind of analogous concept that he calls 'the mesh'. The mesh, according to Morton, is everything: 'all life forms are the mesh, and so are all dead ones, as are their habitats, which are also made up of living and nonliving beings' (p. 29). He goes on:

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[22] 'Adaptationism' is the term given to the common mistaken understanding about how evolution works, that life forms evolve to adapt to their environment, at least directly. What happens instead is that 'mutations are random with respect to current need' but that those ones that happen to be best suited to the environment are more likely to survive (Morton, 2011).

> The mesh consists of infinite connections and infinitesimal differences. … Scale is infinite in both directions: infinite in size and infinite in detail. … In a situation in which everything is potentially significant, we're lost. … The more we become aware of the dangers of ecological instability – extinctions, melting ice caps, rising sea levels, starvation – the more we find ourselves lacking a reference point. When we think big, we discover a hole in our psychological universe. (pp. 30-31)

If we are to 'really think' the mesh, we are obliged to let go of the idea that there is a centre, and to accommodate the reality that there is 'no definite "within" or "outside" of beings. Everything is adapted to everything else' (p. 39). The ecological thought, he asserts, 'permits no distance' (p. 39). It means 'thinking interdependence', and that means 'dissolving the barrier' between here and there. The mesh is intrinsically intimate, involving 'the entanglement of all strangers' (p. 47). Everything and everyone *is* the mesh, which means there is no background, which means no environment:

> When we think the ecological thought, we encounter all kinds of beings that are not strictly "natural". … What we call "nature" is a "denatured", unnatural, uncanny sequence of mutations and catastrophic events: just read Darwin. The ecological thought … is a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite center or edge. (p. 8)

This version of our world could not be more humbling:

> If you trace the history of evolution backward, you will see … no progress (no teleology) and no climax … Humans are not the culmination of anything; they aren't even a culmination of anything. All that we call nature is mutation and often pointless. (p. 44)

Acknowledging a debt to Jacques Derrida's concept of *arrivant*, Morton uses the term 'strange stranger' in referring to the other life forms we inevitably encounter within the mesh. Derrida conceived of the notion of the arrivant in the context of his work on difference and hospitality. In an essay entitled *Aporias*, he described the arrivant as follows: 'I am talking about the absolute *arrivant*, who is not even a guest. He surprises the host … enough to call into question, to the point

of annihilating or rendering indeterminate, all the distinctive signs of a prior identity … The *arrivant* does not yet have a name or an identity' (Derrida, 1993). Morton notes in *The Ecological Thought*, 'I develop the concept of the strange stranger from Derrida's *arrivant*, the ultimate arrival to whom one must extend ultimate hospitality' (Morton, 2011, p. 140). Part of the power of this term and its application to all life forms encountered in the mesh is that it draws our attention to the fact that 'species exists, but not that much' (p. 119) – in other words, there is greater interconnection between species than we tend to acknowledge. At the same time, it draws our attention to the ultimate unknowability of the other; the strange stranger is described as being not only strange, but 'strangely strange' (p. 41):

> Their strangeness itself is strange. We can never figure them out. … Do we know for sure whether they are sentient or not? Do we know whether they are alive or not? Their strangeness is part of who they are. After all, they might be us. And what could be stranger than what is familiar? (p. 41)

As there is no escape from the mesh, we are all, as humans, ethically obliged to care for the strange stranger. With no background or future, our concern can only be with 'considering others, in their interests, in how we should act towards them, and in their very being' (p. 123). The emotions of the ecological thought therefore are 'compassion as helplessness' (p. 126), curiosity, humility, sadness and tenderness (p. 125–126), a description that recalls Terry Gifford's conceptualisation of the post-pastoral, with his emphasis on the importance of humility, and the importance of such a work reflecting an awareness that 'what is happening in us is paralleled in external nature … that our inner human nature can be understood in relation to external nature' (Gifford, 1999, p. 156). And of course such notions are central in Morton's conceptualisation of ecological art. According to him, ecological art is that which, rather than present 'Nature' as something 'over yonder',

presents an integrated world, with no real hierarchy evident among its beings.[23] It shows an interconnection between the human and the nonhuman and might even suggest personhood to nonhuman beings, making it fundamentally concerned with a deep hospitality, but with a focus on the more open notion of collectives, rather than community, which can be closed and insular. Rather than being a 'plastic, solid thing' (p. 105), it might, like the mesh, be 'full of emptiness – gaps and openness' (p. 105). It might have no authority, might even 'be about an "unworking" rather than about the precious *work* of art as such … like an aura without an object' (p. 105). Ecological art lets 'consciousnesses slide into each other' (p. 107), human and nonhuman, as can be found in the fiction of Virginia Woolf. It might, like jazz, involve improvisation, which 'introduces adaptation to art' and in which 'the music listens to itself' (p. 108). Ecological art might also bring our awareness to the way in which the current ecological crisis has 'disrupted our normative sense of foreground and background'; here Morton cites the films *Solaris* (as well as the novel) and *Blade Runner*, as well as nineteenth-century texts such as *Bleak House* and *Frankenstein.* Ecological art might emphasise consciousnesses, which is about capturing the experience of 'being caught in the headlights of our awareness of the mesh' and is therefore ironic, 'full of darkness and shadows'.

In the analysis of *LTNS* that follows, we seek to show that such characteristics are strong, defining features of the novel. Doing so seeks to achieve two aims: to illustrate that *LTNS* is a example of ecological art and therefore a deeply post-pastoral work; and to show the value of Morton's conceptualisation of the ecological thought (and by extension ecological art) in attempting to engage with an experimental work of fiction whose gaze, unusually even for modernist writing, is not anthropocentric.

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[23] As an example of this, he considers the poem 'Old Man Travelling' by Wordsworth, which largely comprises a description of an old man walking down a road, remarkable seeming only in his ordinariness, until we learn at the end that he is on his way to visit his dying son, a soldier who has been fighting in the war, in hospital. 'The big picture in the poem,' argues Morton, 'is that war is environmental – it seeps into everything, even into the sight of an old man treading down a country lane' (49). In a world undergoing a global emergency, 'there is no safe place'.

7.3 *Long Time, No See* as ecological art

Long Time, No See (*LTNS*), Healy's last novel loosely centres on a young man called Philip, or Mister Psyche, recounting a summer in which he awaits the results of his Leaving Certificate. He passes the time doing odd jobs for various people in the small community in which he lives, but particularly looking after his uncle Joe Joe and Joe Joe's friend, the Blackbird. The almost unspoken backdrop is the tragic death of Mister Psyche's friend, Mickey, in a car accident, and Mister Psyche's processing of his grief. *LTNS* was written alongside Healy's penultimate poetry collection and last one published in his lifetime, *A Fool's Errand.* The two were written slowly, over a ten-year period, and have been described as a diptych (McCarthy, 2016, p. 316).

7.3.1 Dangerously relaxed? Absence of plot in *Long Time, No See*

While plenty of things happen throughout the course of *LTNS*, there is no sense of rising action to be found, no cause and effect, no climax or denouement. The events, or perhaps episodes is a better term, that make up the novel could be summarised as follows: Mister Psyche pays several visits to his grandfather Joe-Joe and Joe-Joe's friend the Blackbird; Mister Psyche builds a wall for his mother's new garden; a Stations of the Cross is held in Joe-Joe's house, Mister Psyche befriends an old woman living alone called Jilly who has a mysterious (and never explained) past with Joe-Joe; Mister Psyche spends time with his friend Anna; Mister Psyche and his parents spend Saturday evenings in Sligo town watching the revellers pass by; Joe-Joe worries that someone from his past called the General is trying to shoot him, though this eventually proves unfounded; the Blackbird grows ill and eventually dies in hospital. Very occasionally, an oblique reference is made to Mister Psyche's past trauma involving a fatal car accident. Many of these events occur concurrently, and there is never a suggestion that one event leads to another.

Critics have picked up on this conspicuous absence of plot line, even among those who praised the novel. Terry Eagleton noted (not necessarily disapprovingly) of *LTNS* that, 'nothing much happens' (Eagleton, 2011); 'There is no plot,' he writes, 'and no evolving narrative, just a montage of episodes. Life in this forsaken corner is not heading anywhere in particular, and neither is the novel' (Eagleton, 2011, p. 2). Eilis O'Hanlon admired how it tunes in so attentively to everyday life, as well as its rhythm and melancholy, while remarking that 'there's no plot to speak of, no character development' (O'Hanlon, 2011). A review in the *Guardian* describes the novel as 'stately and amusing', admiring its tenderness while also commenting that Healy 'prods us into our own plot interpretations' (Proulx, 2011, online). Eileen Battersby, while admiring how the novel integrates person and place, described *LTNS* as being 'at times dangerously relaxed' (Battersby, 2011, p. 10).

We would argue that to find the novel 'dangerously relaxed' on this basis misses an important point, especially when perceived through our lens of ecological art. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that seeing 'dangerously relaxed' as a negative quality misses the point. To have a plot line would mean to have some events and characters that are more significant than others. In other words, it would mean prioritising some beings over others. We could even argue that the existence of a plot in a novel cannot be separated from the world view in which there is a backdrop, an environment, because it requires a separating out of some events and 'objects' over others. By contrast, the absence of a plotline has the opposite effect: it evokes a world in which no such hierarchy can be found, a world in which no part is greater or lesser than another. In other words, a fictional world that is suggestive of the mesh.

Of course, even a novel such as *LTNS* is unavoidably contrived in the sense that it does draw our attention to particular characters – like Mister Psyche and the Blackbird for instance – more than others. It is also largely concerned with the activities of its human inhabitants than its

nonhuman ones. But even if it was possible for it to represent literally all the 'strange strangers' of its fictional world, what could be said of them? As Morton notes, how can we know what they are thinking, or even if they are thinking at all? What is distinctive about *LTNS* is the democratically neutral tone of the narrative that applies to everyone and everything and the absence of any sense of judgement. Even within the constraints of the form, this novel dispels with one of its defining features, and in doing so at least calls into question certain assumptions that are usually inherent in the novel form – that the only serious story is a human story, that some events and places are more significant than others, and that the concepts of foreground and background are relevant when trying to comprehend and encapsulate the world around us and the experience of being human.

This absence of plot we might describe as a structural starting point of *LTNS* in terms of it being ecological art. The rest of this chapter engages with aspects that are *present* in the novel which underpin this conceptualisation.

7.3.2 The surfaceness of things in *Long Time, No See*

By dispensing with plot in *LTNS*, Healy eschews conventions of literary fiction that automatically prioritise a anthropocentric perspective. In its absence, which by extension means an absence of suspense or any sense of momentum in the narrative, what we find is a sustained focus on the surface of things – people, animals, the landscape, natural or otherwise – that brings to mind Morton's observation of Darwin's insights: that he shows 'what is hidden in life form is right there on the surface'.

Despite the fact that throughout the period of the novel Psyche is grieving for his friend who was killed in a car accident the year before the narration begins, we rarely get a glimpse into

his mental state.[24] Indeed, we rarely get a glimpse into the mental state of any of its characters. In place of a protagonist's inner thoughts, we have an abundance of dialogue and movement: The novel's world is one of 'people [we might add animals] moving, conversing, working, going about their living and dying' (McCarthy, 2016, p. 316), with the aggregate effect being it is 'his most finely balanced song of life' (p. 328). In place of exploration of hidden emotions, we have an emphasis on the observable world of physical properties in which everything is constantly moving; in other words, scenes that play out within the landscape rather than against it.

The abundance of dialogue is one of the most immediately striking aspects of *LTNS*, and perhaps the key way in which it maintains its surface quality. In a review, Eagleton notes that the absence of quotation marks implies that the dialogue 'constitutes the central stuff of the book' (Eagleton, 2011, online). As he notes, it is mainly in this 'brilliantly inconsequential' dialogue that the novel's 'deftly underplayed absurdism', a feature of his writing that places Healy in a tradition of Irish absurdist literature, alongside his contemporary, the poet Paul Durcan, with notable predecessors including Flann O'Brien and Samuel Beckett. While this aspect of *LTNS* leads Eagleton to considering how modernism tends to take root and flourish in contexts of political turbulence and competing languages and culture, Morton's conceptualisation of ecological art prompts us to considering the *effects* of the improvised speech that makes up so much of *LTNS*. Considering the quality of improvisation inherent in some house music and jazz, for example, Morton notes that 'improvisation introduces Darwinism to art' (Morton, 2011, p. 108). What he means by this is that an emphasis on

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[24] Despite the protagonist being called Psyche, there is no suggestion within the text of *LTNS* that the Greek myth of Psyche and Eros has any bearing on it, or that it is being evoked in any way. The only commonality that I can identify between the two stories (other than the name Psyche) is that both concern an individual's grief for a lost one, though in *LTNS* this theme manages to be both central to the story while also being rarely alluded to on an explicit level.

'unintention', as he calls it, reminds us or draws our attention to (at least on some level) how in the process of adaptation, all mutations are random. 'When you think about adaptation,' writes Morton, 'it's like music that listens to itself' (2011, p. 108). We find this in *LTNS*, in the way the improvised speech of its characters is like music that listens to itself. Tending towards the strange, with emphasis firmly on style over meaning, the novel's absurdism is rooted in this quality of unpredictability – the sense that even those speaking don't know what they're going to say next until they've said it. Take for example this piece of dialogue that takes place between the local priest, Psyche and Joejoe:

> Always give into temptation, said Father Grimes. Isn't that right, sonny?
>
> Yes, I said.
>
> There is one good sign, Father, said JoeJoe.
>
> Is that so?
>
> Yes, I've stopped telling lies to people I know, said JoeJoe, but there's a down side, I've begun telling them to myself.
>
> Now.
>
> And that's worse.
>
> Indeed, Mister Feeney.
>
> JoeJoe, Father.
>
> Joejoe.
>
> Have you ever met the owl in the wilderness Father?
>
> I have.
>
> The sparrow on the house top?
>
> Yes.
>
> And the pelican in the wilderness?
>
> The priest looked at him. (p. 160)

We find the same comically erratic quality in another conversation at an impromptu gathering in Joejoe's house, comprising Joejoe, Mister Psyche, Anna, the three 'hippies' who work as gardeners for Miss Jilly, a Lithuanian couple who arrived unexpectedly to return Joejoe's pliers

and the town's local councillor. Most of these people do not know each other, yet the conversation flows in its own, unpredictable way. This is one small extract:

> I love Smirnoff, said Anna and she said the word again with a long f-sound.
>
> – Hallo there, said Joejoe –
>
> – Hallo –
>
> – You say Hallo very often in Ireland, said Dido –
>
> – We can't help it –
>
> – It's why we have put on so much weight, said Mister Townsend. I think it might rain. (p. 264)

There is a similar sense of randomness that nonetheless rings true in the following hospital scene:

> Ma put an unopened pack of cigarettes on his bedside table.
>
> He opened his eyes and looked at the fags. A drowned man is never found on his back, he said.
>
> …
>
> He pointed at a man in the first bed to the right and whispered: He fell in a bowling alley. … Are there still daisies in the ditches?
>
> There is, Anna said.
>
> Have the blackberries come?
>
> Up your road they're ripe, I said. (p. 373)

A second key way in which *LTNS*'s emphasis on the surface manifests itself is the nature of its descriptions of the natural world, which are so vivid and intensely wrought, with a gaze that betrays a deep democracy towards everything it takes in, the other side of that coin being an absence of any sense of hierarchy, either between the human and the animal or the human and the inanimate. These images involve an integration of the human and their environment, a world where there is no foreground and no background, with no real distinction drawn between the human and the non-human, or the 'natural' and the 'unnatural'. In such passages, the gaze is so intense there is often a heightened, even hallucinatory, quality to the scenes being captured:

> I walked the orchards where the large apples of the season were hanging, and I ate one looking out to sea, then at last Da gave in, and left the digger off the road in the haggard. It stood there like an old tall toy, with arms and head bent, beside the dark house. (p. 316)

Elsewhere, Psyche and his father use a digger to work on a sea wall built to protect the beach from storms. This scene is portrayed in a way that emphasises its strangeness, even uncanniness:

> The beach looked like it was inhabited by aliens. Piles of small rocks had come in with tall pods of seaweed flowering from them. The roots clenched the stones with a drowning man's grip. There were hundreds of them, standing up straight, going this way, going that. It was like a demented garden. I climbed into the bucket … It was freezing and full of draughts... (p. 139)

Indeed, almost all the text of *LTNS* reads as a kind of reportage, where the reporter, like an alien, perceives no distinction in terms of the relative importance of humans compared to seagulls, or even rocks, for example. This has the effect of democratising existence; it removes, or at least greatly reduces, the distinction between humans and their physical context which we normally find in fiction. Rather than the natural landscape, animals and birds being used as a backdrop to the human story, we are presented with a world in which no clear distinction emerges between any life form. Such images of the natural world almost always seem to feature something 'technical' or manmade, like the digger in the above-quoted passage. In this way, moving seamlessly from the bucolic to the synthetic, they capture the world as place in which the manmade is part of the natural world, where even the term 'natural world' emerges as a false distinction. Refusing judgment or expressiveness, the careful neutrality of the tone becomes a kind of enigma, and even the simplest snatches of description sound faintly strange, such as as in the many descriptions of the sea. This is an example from the first chapter:

> We stepped against the gable. The sea was leaping like a suicide over the lava rocks then scattering across fields of foam. A Mitsubishi Carisma drove by the

> gate, pulled in back of the beach, and a few souls went over the bank with cameras. (p. 6)

Always, the manmade and the natural environment are represented as part of the same:

> The light was coming and going. And there were sudden gusts of wind coming from the north-west. An empty bucket went flying across the field. A heave of salt flew across. Then up went a puff of sparks from the rusted transformer on the electric pole next to the house. The gust passed. The sky darkened. There was the one faraway cackle of seagulls. The island drifted out of sight. (p. 129)

Returning to Chapter 16, when Mister Psyche and his father are building a sea wall, we have this:

> A flock of gulls rose. The talking stopped. I took the wheel, and then he took the wheel. Till near dark we were there going to and fro, swivelling along the cluttered beach. The sea wall grew. The tracks of the machine dug deep into the sand. Sometimes when he'd give me a go, I'd watch his eye; but now when he took over, he went on by himself, working as if I wasn't there, foot in, foot out, pulling on the handle, lowering, then at last he'd stop a moment to see what we had built. (p. 319)

Such beach scenes almost always come after a storm, with people foraging alongside other creatures. This serves to underline the codependent nature of humans and the natural world. It also reinforces the notion of the human being as simply another animal, as well as the coexistence that is intrinsic to life by natural selection. In such scenes, human and non-human animals are often represented together, with no change in tone or emphasis underscoring the absence of perceived difference or even much significant separation. The consistency of the flat, democratic tone throughout the novel suggests that the human experience is more important than any other experience. In some places, animal and human are even shown to be engaged in a similar activity. We find this in descriptions of the beach, where Mister Psyche often goes to collect lobster:

> The beach was scoured clean by the high tide. The air was warm. The hawk was over Donlon's. Mary Joe was down on her hunkers on the sea shelf picking winkles into a plastic bucket. (p. 51)

> The tide was going out. A calm descended. All of a sudden, the Blackbird appeared out of nowhere on his bike carrying a bucket. He set off down the beach to pick winkles followed by his dog. … The dog sat in front of him and watched his every move.' (p. 142)

In the above-quoted scene, this strangeness is not attributed to the landscape alone, but also to the two human inhabitants, with the effect of landscape and human emerging as being of one and the same origin:

> Their job is to move the newly arrived rocks and add them to the existing sea wall, which they do slowly and painstakingly, like moon men going through the tall shoots of seaweed, pulling out from inland the debris from the storm, screeching in under one rock after another, all soaked black and blistered with fossils, the sand heaved and fell, the tracks screamed, we lifted, swivelled and trundled in.' (p. 141)

In another, which also follows a storm, Psyche walks along the beach 'to find what damage had been done' when he comes across 'this ancient stone wall' that had been revealed after the sea had 'dragged down the boulder clay', thus uncovering the wall. This wall reappears several times throughout the novel, as does a second, garden, wall which Psyche is building for his mother, the concept of a wall thereby serving as a motif that strengthens this linking of the natural world and the manmade.

Often, the surface descriptions that make up so much of *LTNS*, as we have seen in many of the passages cited above, portray animals alongside humans. In descriptions that evoke Burghardt's conceptualisation of a critical anthropomorphism, which he appraises positively against the 'assumed falsity' of literary anthropomorphism, as well as de Waal's work in acknowledging the emotional life of animals, the emphasis is as likely to be on the emotional state of the non-human as it is on the human. In one scene, for example, Psyche casually uses plural 'we' rather than 'I'

when describing a journey made with a donkey, again underlining the effect of human and nonhuman as fellow persons, rather than foreground and background. The same care is to be found when Psyche 'pushed on and rose a family of frogs in the grass' (p. 188), the same tentative identification of human emotions in the description of a deer who 'looked at us a long time then turned away as if he had grown tired at looking at us humans' (p. 81), and in this depiction of a hare (an animal that appears frequently throughout the narrative, a kind of leitmotif):

> The hare moved a little to the left and then sat primly. Go to dims, I said. He dimmed, the hare drummed forward and stopped, bounced left right, left right, then strolled into a ditch like a person entering a shop. (p. 211)

Towards the end of the novel, when the Blackbird finds himself in hospital but initially refuses to give his house key to Psyche, the outcome is that the Blackbird's dog, Timmy, stays locked inside his house for a period of days, during which time Psyche and his father can only feed the animal by pouring food through the letterbox. In these scenes, the dog's desperate situation and his energy form the core, the subject:

> I caught a hold of a chicken leg and pushed it through the letter box. The bone shot out of my hand and immediately I shoved in the bag of leavings, of bread, wings, sausages and ham. … There was a savage roar from the dog, then silence. (p. 210)
>
> Against the front door the dog pounded and leaped up towards the window in a frenzy of barking … With a stick he pushed in the flap of the post box. I got the bag of bones and meat, and shoved it in as the dog tore at it.
>
> This is scandalous. It's fucking pagan.
>
> The dog threw himself against the door. (p. 238)

Another example illustrates the strange balance to be found in critical anthropomorphism, in the hesitant 'wondering' ascribed to the sheep combined with an emphasis on the strangeness and ultimate unknowability of other beings:

> A woman power-walker strode by. In the field beyond, a magpie stood on a sheep, on the middle of her back, looking off into the distance, and the sheep had her head a little off the ground, wondering. (p. 16).

The cat forms a second motif throughout the novel, with several references made to a kind of resource book about cats, which Anna reads before passing on to Psyche's mother. Through this device, the emphasis is yet again placed on the interdependent relationship that can arise between human and nonhuman animals:

> Did you know that cats were first domesticated in Egypt around 2,000 BC. The export of domestic cats was prohibited by Egyptians because they were worshipped as goddesses. Now for you. (p. 29)
>
> She's not really a pet … She doesn't know us that long. … She'll kill mice anyway – whether – hold it – she's a pet or not. So why bother training her. Leave them in the wild to fend for themselves is what I say. … The poor Egyptian got lonely, you know. Out there in the desert. …
>
> So if the people had lived in the forest, I said, the cat would have stayed wild.
>
> Right, said Ma. I suppose.
>
> So that's the cat's story. (p. 102-103)

At one point in the novel, when Psyche arrives at the Blackbird's house to find it uninhabited, this attention to the presence of the non-human is even applied to the non-animate. This scene recalls Morton's identification of a similar quality in the description of an uninhabited house in *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf, which he identifies as an example of ecological art, because it 'undermines the idea that the house is a neutral stage set on which characters act. The essentially vivid presence of the house, its meaningless material inertia, emerges' (Morton, 107). Here is the relevant passage from *LTNS*:

> I skated along the hedge on the edge of the road back towards the Blackbird's. Stopped, and listened, and went on. Above my head were great black boulders of rain. All was black ahead of me. Then suddenly in the distance the Blackbird's chimney spat sparks and my heart went crossways. I ran like mad along the rain and the muck, then reached the low pebble-dashed wall at the front of the house. The cottage sat there idling in the dark. There was no light, and no sign of anybody. (p. 44)

7.3.3 The strange stranger in *Long Time, No See*

Morton's concept of the 'strange stranger' draws our attention to the paradoxical truth that there is greater interconnection between species than we tend to acknowledge yet the other is ultimately unknowable; when we encounter the strange stranger in the mesh, they are inescapably 'strangely strange'. In *LTNS*, the human inhabitants repeatedly come across as strange strangers to each other – people who cannot ever truly know or understand each other. One way it achieves this effect is an emphasis on the uncanny when one character's initial impression of another when they happen upon one another. This strangeness is a quality to be found in all encounters within the novel, suggesting that when the focus is on the surface rather than the human interior, and when it takes in everything present, human or nonhuman, the feeling cannot be anything but strange. For example, although Psyche is very close to his grand-uncle and visits him daily, often when he first sets eyes on him, his impression is one that speaks of an alienation, a mystery:

> He looked somehow like a wounded soldier. … He seemed to be looking directly at me. (p. 47)
>
> He was seated by the fire, the small accordion deflated on the floor beside him, a patch of ointment on the back of one hand and another on his cheek, and Timmy the dog in the other armchair, curled up with one steady eye. (p. 110)

A similar tone is struck when Psyche, walking the streets one night, passes his own father:

> I dropped into the bank doorway on my hunkers to study him. He was … pretending to be waiting on someone, the hat so low you could not see his eyes, the two hands in his jacket pocket. The legs crossed. The odd time he'd nod at someone and look up at the sky. … The hat rose as I passed. He smiled, but without any attempt at recognition. (p. 123)

In Chapter 15, we have this unsettling image when the electricity suddenly returns after an outage:

> Just then the electric lights came back on. … It was like someone had suddenly taken a photo of us. There was the three of us looking at Joejoe and he was standing with his arms out reaching in the wrong direction for the door. … We seemed to have leaped back into existence. … We had been … without faces … then suddenly we were in colour and the whole face was a surprise. (pp. 134-135)

There is even a scene in which Psyche seems to encounter himself, and when he does, the emphasis again is on distortion – the strange and uncanny:

> I got up and dressed and took the lantern and started walking. It was eerie. I was holding the lantern in my right hand by my thigh and as I walked the shadows of my two legs grew huge to my left. ... Another huge black version of me was walking the beach like a mad colossus. (p. 46)

At one point, the strange stranger is a person from the past. When Psyche dismantles a nearby ruin, using the stones to make a garden wall for his mother, carrying the stones, he imagines the person who made the original building (the ruin) building as he dismantles. In this way, the narrative evokes the strange stranger that is the human from the past, thus dispensing with the notion of time as it captures a strange, almost uncomfortable intimacy between Psyche and this unknowable man:

> As he dropped a stone into place, I lifted it and carried it away. I could feel the way he carried himself. … In his wall I came across chaffs of wheat that were still dry. The bones of coral. White marble. One clay pipe. (pp. 128-129)

This disturbing effect also characterises encounters with peripheral characters unknown to the protagonist. In one scene, when the Judge, one of the many people Psyche does odd jobs for, gives Psyche a lift and then picks up someone else he knows, the Judge goes into a shop, leaving the two men alone in the car. There is only a sense of alienation as they wait together:

> I waited with my companion in a long silence. … He was indifferent to everything. I thought his soul might burst at first or maybe mine I was so mad to say something, but I didn't. … When a lorry backed past us only inches

> away the man behind didn't budge as he fell into its dangerous shadow. (p. 189)

It is a feature that even manages to weave itself into the perspective of other characters, unsurprisingly via its dialogue. Here, for example, is Psyche's friend's Anna's description of strangers she encountered on the beach, who later turn out to be a film crew:

> Well when I arrived there was a funny crowd down the beach, all dressed up like. … One of them had a straw hat on. And a mask. … The others were like balloons… Hallo! I hollered, Hallo! … They never even looked in my direction. (p. 145)

At one point on the same night, a young woman, on her way out for the night, notices Psyche and his mother sitting in their car as she walks by. A friendly exchange follows, ending with the girl asking what they are doing. When they explain their unusual family ritual, carried out every Saturday night and Christmas Eve, whereby they drive into Sligo town, the father 'walking about, looking around him', while Psyche and his mother 'just sit … here' (p. 118), she politely decides that, 'That's weird' before continuing on her way. What Mister Psyche and his parents are doing is certainly weird. They are treating their own local and therefore familiar world as a strange and new one, one worthy of observing, of taking in anew every Saturday night. The ritual is in a sense emblematic of what we would argue is the novel's radical deconstruction of those conventions we find in even some experimental literary fiction that uphold the Anthropocentric perspective. It reminds us of the importance of irony in ecological art, specifically that which emphasises consciousness, or 'being caught in the headlights of our awareness of the mesh' (Morton, 2011, p. 105), exemplifying the 'weird, perverse aesthetics' characteristic of ecological art 'which forever puts me in a paradoxical relationship with other beings – there is always going to be an ironic gap between strangers. … Irony … [is] the way coexistence feels' (Morton, 2011, p. 124–125).

This ironic emphasis on the strangeness and unknowability of the other can equally be found in the depiction of encounters between human and animal. For example, take this plain yet careful description when Psyche meets a donkey:

> On the way back, a stray ass came out of the forest and followed me. He'd step up and bite at my sleeve. He had huge deep eyes and his hooves were bad. They were long and painful. At the road he jumped as motorbikes flew by. … he liked to put his chin nearly, but not quite, on my shoulder, then he'd tug at my elbow. (p. 74)

While the description seeks to present a clear portrait of the donkey, it stops short at making any claims about the donkey's state of mind. Similarly, in this interaction between Joejoe and a robin, there is no trace in the detailed, close description of the bird's movements of any suggestion about its internal reality or motives.

> The bird looked my way, then turned to him. It lifted one claw and looked at it, scattered its wings, closed them and brushed its breast with its beak. Then it looked off to the left as if remembering something, bowed quickly, hopped onto his knee, fidgeted, then back again to the toe of his boot. … The bird, shifting itself, lifted its head up and let go with one tweet then swung away to the woodpile. (p. 54)

In this description of starlings, Psyche's repeated 'hallo' is not answered by the birds; there is no indication that their 'flirty whispering' constitutes any kind of reply:

> A choir of starlings stood feeding on the seeds of the New Zealand flax that stood over my head in the next flower garden. Hallo, I called. Hallo, I called back. Then they began the flirty whistling. (p. 242)

Later, in a chapter called 'Stepping out into our finery', in which the main characters are invited to lunch in the town's 'big house', we have a description of a 'thin fox, swinging her tail, who came out of a hedge in her best and glanced at me in passing (p. 341). We might also usefully recall here the phrase 'looking off into the distance' in a description of a magpie, from a passage quoted earlier, which while suggesting a mind preoccupied with some private thought does not

go any further. Interestingly. this is not the only time this phrase is used in the description of an animal, reappearing in a late scene in which Psyche and his father tend to a sick cow:

> Myself and Da carried water in a tall milk can into the North meadow. We poured a few drops onto the lips of a sick cow. Then filled the stone basin. Lying on her stomach with her hooves in the air, she looked off into the distance. He patted her down.
>
> I like that animal.
>
> The cow continued to stare ahead.
>
> He stared into her eyes.
>
> Get better soon, he said. (p. 52)

Significantly, in all the above examples, either the animal or the human regards the other: the donkey puts his chin 'nearly, but not quite' on Psyche's shoulder; Joejoe's robin looked at Psyche then at Joejoe; Psyche calls out to the starlings; Da stared into the cow's eyes. Yet the texts always stops short at suggesting communication. Again illustrative of the paradoxical tension in the concept of the strange stranger, at the same time these passages seem to suggest that compassion, and with it hospitality, emerge organically from a perspective that, on a fundamental level, registers no distinction between the human and the nonhuman, and even between living beings and the environment in which they lived.

7.3.4 Collectivity instead of community

We noted earlier that Timothy Morton identifies the emotions of 'compassion, curiosity, humility, openness, sadness and tenderness' as most important to 'open[ing] us to the ecological thought' (p. 125-126); 'on the inside', he writes, 'true compassion might feel like helplessness' (p. 126). In *LTNS*, careful observation and hospitality, compassion even, emerge as two sides of the same coin. Above we saw the careful depiction of the donkey with his painful hooves; this again was followed by the animal being cared for, on this occasion by the Blackbird, who comes to cut his hooves:

> We went through all the hooves as Tom went round in circles and the donkey reared and then bit food off the palm of my hand. With each cut his eyes

> widened. No you're not upset said the Blackbird, we'll be there in a minute. The ass just stood and took it. Next thing it was over. (pp. 80-81)

The theme of hospitality emerges even more strongly in the novel's depiction of the behaviour of its human characters. The book contains an abundance of people and continually introduces new characters throughout the novel, as reflected in the equal emphasis on their 'surface' – their words, behaviour, actions – right up to the very last scene. All characters are also treated with the same detached (though not unfriendly) gaze, which never goes beyond their surface appearance. For example, as already noted, Chapter 10 ('Sightseeing') concerns what we learn is a regular activity of Psyche and his parents, which involves them driving to Sligo town on a Saturday night in order to observe the town and its goings-on. They see 'a whoosh of crows down from the monastery walls' (p. 115), 'a young lad in pumps and tweeds', people 'tumbling into the reflection' (p. 116) of the car's rear-view mirror, 'gangs … mostly ladies, in slim white boots, sipping cans' (p. 116), a 'policewoman … stood awhile on her own under the archway' (p. 116), a couple arguing, a woman arguing with a taxi driver, the chef smoking outside a Chinese restaurant. Always, the strangeness, the fundamental aloneness of the individual, is stressed:

> The people walking through looked very alone and strangely familiar. … Even as they talked together, squinting to the person on their left or right, they looked like animals entering new territory; and those who knew the place, and walked ahead through the dark with great confidence, were more alone than the strangers. I waved, but no one saw me. (p. 124)

The second point relevant to this theme is the way in which the social world of Psyche's small townland outside Sligo includes many 'outsiders': migrants from eastern Europe, a couple of Russian sailors, 'a pair of lucky men' (p. 208) whose boat sunk off the north-west Irish coast as well as hippies from out of town who work on Miss Jilly's estate, a German couple, to name but a few. It is also completely unconcerned with the notion of locality or community, at least

in the sense such words suggest a small, insular world inhabited only by people who were born and grew up in that same part of the world. Their inclusion, and the stubbornly democratic tone of the novel described above, with equal importance attached to all characters, whether new, peripheral or central, negates the 'outsider' label. In this way, *LTNS* celebrates 'collectivity, not community', to use Morton's phrase (2011, p. 127), illuminating within itself 'a collectivity of weakness, vulnerability, and incompletion'. Its preoccupation seems to be with representing the fundamental strangeness of being alive, an experience which is defined by encounters with other living beings.

It is through this collectivity that genuine hospitality arises. 'How to care for the neighbor,' Morton writes, 'the strange stranger, and the hyperobject, are the long-term problems posed by the ecological thought' (2011, p. 135). While *LTNS* does not concern itself, at least in any explicit way, with Morton's hyperobjects (the internet, global warming), it does concern itself with caring for others. Even the surface-level descriptions that include both the human and nonhuman, and that seem to acknowledge personhood wherever the gaze alights, are intrinsically hospitable. But alongside this, the novel is full of quiet, unquestioned acts of compassion and hospitality, both of human to animal and of human to human, which seem to arise naturally, inevitably even, from within its democratic gaze. One such example occurs when Psyche and his father offer the temporarily homeless Russian sailors their boat for the night ('I hope', says his father afterwards, 'that I am doing the right thing', p. 213). When Psyche, his parents and Anna organise the Stations of the Cross to be held in Joejoe's house in an attempt to lift the dark mood that has descended on him, emphasis is placed on the efforts to clean the house, the 'lilies and wild daisies' (p. 155) arranged in vases, in a scene that evokes a Dionysian-like pastoral ritual, with its abundance of food and drink:

> Next thing Anna arrived with two apple and rhubarb tarts and a few dozen sandwiches' 'She cut lemons and parsley, and chopped wild celery … Beside

> her Anna was making pea soup, with hoards of wild mint and coriander. … Ma started to make a second fish soup with mussels and lobster and mackerel I'd collected that morning. (pp. 156–157)

Guests bring their own food and drink, thus reciprocating the hospitality: 'Joe Currid came with fresh-cooked mackerel stuffed with prawn … Claus and Ingabore came with doughnuts and nut bread' (p. 159). In a later chapter, Psyche, his father and the Russian sailors clean Miss Jilly's chimney so that she can light a fire in the cold evenings again. Later, Miss Jilly invites them all to dinner to say thank you, with the emphasis again falling on the abundance of food and drink:

> Mister Lundy reappeared with a large plate of fish, followed by Da carrying a bowl of potatoes. … Miss Jilly … began meticulously laying out the food.
>
> Chives, iceberg lettuce, rocket, parsley and dill. … Next we have apple and celery. Potatoes and spring onion … crab claws and a taste of mussels. (p. 347)

These are just some examples; the story (insofar as there is one) essentially comprises one act of hospitality being followed by another, with each one unexplained and unjustified, something that underscores it as an expected, and therefore unremarkable, consequence of the novel's attitude of openness and humility. There is no greater or lesser significance attached to those hospitable acts carried out for family or friends – the Stations for Joejoe, putting the Blackbird up for the night and later helping him when he has been hospitalised – or those carried out for 'strangers', like when they help the two unknown men from eastern Europe to restart their car, or give the Russian sailors the boat to sleep in.

7.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have sought to show that *LTNS*, Healy's final novel, is a work of ecological art, as conceptualised by Timothy Morton. The analysis identifies key defining features of the novel that make it a strong example of ecological art, including: its absence of plot; the

sustained emphasis places on the surface of its material world (with landscape, animals and humans all emerging as different but connected manifestations of this surface world); the way in which encounters between both humans and human and animal characters emphasise the strangeness and ultimate unknowability of the 'other' (thus evoking Morton's strange stranger); and its presentation of a collectivity of characters, rather than the more insular local community, from which the theme of hospitality towards others seems to emerge inevitably. In doing so, it seeks to show that in LTNS, what we see is what we get, and no more, but that rather than a limitation, this is the novel's strength. It is the source of its radical capacity to deconstruct those conventions that unconsciously uphold what is being increasingly recognised as the flawed and ultimately inadequate anthropocentric perspective which defines most literary fiction.

8 Conclusion

Many significant authors and critics have acknowledged the value of Dermot Healy's writing. Seamus Heaney described him as 'the heir to Kavanagh', while for Aidan Higgins, he was the heir to an experimental narrative tradition in Irish literature which includes Joyce, Beckett and Flann O'Brien. Patrick McCabe described his work as 'truly revolutionary … high literary art', while Annie Proulx has described him as 'one of the best novelists of his time,' and Roddy Doyle as 'Ireland's greatest writer'. In the years leading up to his death in 2014, as well as the period following, the importance of his work became increasingly recognised in Ireland. In 2011, *A Fool's Errand* was shortlisted for the Poetry Now Award (sponsored by the Irish Times) and in the same year, RTÉ made a portrait of Healy in the Arts Lives documentary, *The Writing in the Sky*. In 2013, *Long Time, No See* was nominated for the Dublin Literary Award. In 2016, Dalkey Archive Press released *The Collected Short Stories*, *The Collected Plays* and *Writing the Sky* (eds. Hopper and Murphy), a volume comprising critical and personal responses to Healy's writing, in which many authors pay tribute to him, including Colm Tóibín, Michael Longley, Timothy O'Grady, Patrick McCabe, Tess Gallagher, Roddy Doyle, Philip Ó'Ceallaigh, Kevin Barry, Gerald Dawe, Molly McCloskey and Annie Proulx. Writing in an Irish Times article following his death, Eileen Battersby stated that, 'He is as important a social commentator as John McGahern and John B. Keane, he knew Ireland, better than that; he understood and loved it, without rancour and without a hint of sentimentality'.

Much of the praise concerns Healy's radical use of language. Of his last novel, *Long Time, No See*, Sean O'Hagan noted, 'As a reader, you have to surrender to a vernacular dialogue in which hardly anything is said outright and almost everything is hinted at. I have never read anything like it before' (O'Hagan, 2014). Many have also commented on 'his ability to write madness' (Roddy Doyle, cited in O'Grady, 2004, p. 123), particularly regarding the novels, with their

‘fractured interior world[s], with characters who often seemed haunted or on the verge of psychological disintegration’ (O’Hagan, 2014, online). Another feature often highlighted is the suggestive and sometimes hallucinatory power of his imagery. As Healy himself once said, ‘A lot of people are able to see … what’s there, but I might see what I think is there’.

Despite his acclaim in Ireland, however, elsewhere Healy remains ‘bafflingly unappreciated’ (O’Hagan, 2011). This is reflected in the paucity of scholarly engagement with his work, both in Ireland and abroad; besides the essays that comprise *The Writing in the Sky*, only a small number academic articles have addressed his work. Some have speculated that this lack of recognition may relate to the fact that he wrote across such a wide range of genres (Murphy and Hopper, 2016). Others have pointed to the complexity and experimental nature of much of his work; on this, Neil Jordan has commented that, ‘In an age of user-friendliness, he’s not that. He has been in an intense and private struggle with language and the imagination. … He writes facing the irreconcilable conflicts inherent in living. It’s the voice of tragedy’ (Jordan, 2016, x).

This thesis has sought to address this significant gap in Irish literary studies, by utilising the concept of pastoral as a framework for engaging with Dermot Healy’s diverse range of literary output. With the analysis covering his entire corpus of poetry, a selection of his short stories, his memoir *The Bend for Home* and two of his novels, *A Goat’s Song* and *Long Time, No See*, it represents an important step in addressing the dearth of scholarly engagement in the work of an important and under-studied modern Irish writer.[25] In doing so, it also makes a contribution to our understanding of the value and relevance of the concepts of pastoral and post-pastoral to contemporary Irish literature.

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[25] The only genre not included in this study is Healy’s playwriting, as the thesis specifically concerns manifestations of the pastoral mode in his published output (see Chapter 1 for further detail).

The pastoral mode works as a lens in this study of Healy's writing principally because of the relevance of what I identify here as defining characteristics of classic pastoral to the themes and preoccupations we find in Healy's work. A key one is the depiction of the natural world, leisure and conversation to create a locale for addressing the universal human themes of grief and loss. Alongside this, there is the significance of absence in his work, in the sense that such themes tend not to be explicitly explored in the 'song' of pastoral but, rather, are hidden, with deliberate attention drawn to a text's literary artifice in order to highlight the 'ill fit' between the work and reality. Finally, we find in Healy's work the Empsonian notion that pastoral's power lies in the way in which it reduces the complex to the simple; and, paradoxically, the anti-pastoral, by which I mean the rejection of the pastoral idyll, which I argue (in Chapter 2) is indeed a defining feature of the pastoral mode, rather than a reaction against it.

The pastoral mode is also particularly germane to Healy's writing in terms of its inherent flexibility, an essential characteristic when applying a conceptual framework to a body of work that spans as many genres as his. Of course, pastoral can be understood in a restricted sense but, as elucidated in Chapter 2, here I interpret the term as a mode rather than a genre or a tradition, with the emphasis on attitude in terms of the way in which the work of literature seeks to express itself rather than the use of particular tropes. So, for example, through this lens we see the complex urban–rural divide that undercuts an initial apparent idealisation of the countryside in the memoir *The Bend for Home*, as well as Healy's use of classic pastoral's Arcadia as a literary device when he repeatedly draws the reader's attention to the unreliability of memory and therefore of the text. We also find a deeply classic pastoral strain in the early poetry, while consideration of the pastoral mode in the short stories highlights a rejection of the pastoral idyll and of more clichéd representations of rural Ireland there, alongside the centrality of the theme of dispossession. We also find in the short stories the effective use of the 'double plot', one of Empson's elements of pastoral, in reducing the 'complex' human

experience to the 'simple', in stories that portray an inhospitable natural world in which the human is vulnerable and often powerless. By approaching the experimental novel *A Goat's Song* as a pastoral work, the analysis of that chapter illuminates its deeply elegiac nature, with Parts II-IV of the novel emerging as the 'working through' of the process of mourning, which for Peter Sacks defines the pastoral elegy.

On both the above grounds, the pastoral mode has proven to be extremely fruitful as a lens through which to approach this challenging and diverse body of work. This in itself represents the second outcome of this thesis, in the sense that it demonstrates (to use Seamus Heaney's phrase) the 'staying power' of the pastoral mode , thus showing that the pejorative meaning of the term pastoral is grounded in misunderstanding. On the basis of this analysis, we can conclude that to say a literary work is pastoral, in the classic, Virgilian sense of the word, is to say it is of real value.

A third reason for applying the pastoral mode to Healy's writing concerns the mode's relatively recent evolution to the post-pastoral, which (as discussed in Chapter 1), is one manifestation of the recently emerged field of ecocriticism. As shown in Chapters 6 (regarding *A Fool's* Errand) and Chapter 7 (*Long Time, No See*), as well as the analysis of the later short stories in Chapter 4, Healy's final works across fiction and poetry reveal a marked shift towards a post-pastoral sensibility. In doing so, this thesis locates the post-pastoral within the broader field of ecocriticism, highlighting the debt owed by ecocriticism to classic pastoral, which, as Terry Gifford has noted, tends to go unacknowledged, and again highlights the permanent relevance and value of the pastoral mode, both in literature as well as in terms of its legacy within the rapidly evolving field of ecocriticism.

Given this marked shift towards the post-pastoral, it might be worth ending by briefly considering the climate crisis in the context of globalisation, arguably the defining

characteristic of the decade in which Healy's later works were written. Our most recent manifestation of globalization has been defined as being 'inextricably bound' to the climate crisis, in the sense that the very 'carbon-intensive economic growth' that underpins its many outcomes such as GDP growth, urbanization and immigration, also underpins the Great Acceleration of the climate crisis, particularly regarding CO2 emissions and the ongoing deterioration of the environment. While this had been comprehended in the last century, it was in 2000 that the word Anthropocene was coined and made popular (National Geographic Society, 2019, online) and never before the 2000s had the reality of global warming hit as forcefully as it did in that decade of weather-related disasters, during which climate change went from being low down on a UN list of greatest threats to the planet (in 2000) to topping the international agenda in 2009 (Vidal, 2009).

In this context, it seems remarkably prescient that Healy's writing of the period is to such a large extent defined by themes of post-pastoral. We saw this in *A Fool's Errand* with its depiction of a network of human, animal and landscape, in place of the more typical human-centric focus, located within the humbling context of a powerful and indifferent natural world, as well as 'deep history', whereby human history is presented in the history of all life on the planet. In *Long Time, No See*, we found an example of ecological art, as conceptualised by Timothy Morton. This manifested through features such as: its distinct absence of plot; its sustained emphasis on the surface of its material world (with landscape, animals and humans all emerging as different but connected manifestations of this surface world); the way in which encounters between both humans and human and animal characters emphasise the strangeness and ultimate unknowability of the 'other' (thus evoking Morton's 'strange stranger'); and its presentation of a collectivity of characters, rather than the arguably more insular local community more commonly found in contemporary Irish literature, and from which the theme of hospitality towards others seems to emerge inevitably. Similarly, in the late short stories,

which expose the inherent falseness of the notion that nature is idyllic or even benign, and where home is revealed to be something that will inevitably be lost, a Golden Age that cannot be recovered, the human experience is again displaced against a thriving and indifferent natural world and the vast context of space and 'deep history'. Across all three genres, over and over again, we find in this surface quality a radical capacity to deconstruct the flawed and ultimately inadequate anthropocentric perspective and conventions that define most literary fiction whereby the human story takes front stage.

Interestingly, the Celtic Tiger is rarely alluded to in Healy's later work; neither is the recession that followed. What is addressed, however, alongside the themes of human smallness and fragility, an indifferent universe, is the issue of international migration. This is a theme that 'lies at the core of the ongoing process of globalization' (Kahanec and Zimmerman, 2008), with Ireland no exception. While emigration was a defining feature of the decades leading up to the end of the last century, the 'spectacular growth' (Gibney, 2017, p. 236) of the Irish economy during the Celtic Tiger in the 2000s led to an unprecedented demand for labour, with Ireland for the first time beginning to receive immigrants. Ireland's first period of sustained net inward migration began in 1996 and only ended in 2009 with the onset of the Great Recession (Gilmartin, 2013). This trend was particularly evident after the European Union's expansion into the former Soviet bloc in 2004 (Gibney, 2017, p. 238). Census data reveal that during this period, the proportion of the population who were born in Ireland decreased, while the proportion of those born in other EU countries (excluding the UK), Asia and Africa increased. By 2011, the year Long Time, No See was published, the number of people living in Ireland who were born outside the country had almost doubled in the previous nine years, from 400,000 in 2002 to over 770,000 people (Gilmartin, 2013). Ireland was finally becoming a multicultural country. (Up to the end of the last century, with the exception of the indigenous Traveller community, it had been overwhelmingly defined by the white settled population.) This

development is reflected in *Long Time, No See* not only in its inclusion of characters from other countries but, perhaps more importantly, the way in which the 'surface quality' alluded to above ensures that there is no distinction in the treatment of those characters and those who were born in Ireland. As Bennett writes, 'the seeker of asylum … is the ultimate manifestation of the stranger or foreigner, the representative of radical alterity' (Bennett, 2018, p. 323) and thus we are invited by Healy to imagine collectivity rather than community, the latter being arguably more typical of contemporary Irish fiction. According to Timothy Morton, moving from community to collectivity 'forces us to invent ways of living together that don't depend on self-interest' (Morton, 2011, p. 135); it is 'other beings', he writes, who 'compel us to imagine collectivity rather than community – groups formed by choice rather than necessity' (p. 135). In this way, Healy's later writing draws our attention to an irony of globalization: while it bears responsibility for much of the climate crisis we now face, one of its principal manifestations, immigration, contains the potential to push our perception of the world to a place where we better understand the interconnectedness of the world and the necessity of finding ways to live that guard, rather than threaten, the interests of others. Morton's sum-up of the ecological thought could as aptly be applied to the plotless and surface-heavy *Long Time, No See*, when he writes that ecological art 'has no authority. … [It] is an art of "whateverness" … [that] will foreshadow a future society based on the "whateverness" of the strange stranger, a society of hospitality and responsibility' (2011, p. 105). It is as though Healy's gaze absorbed both the threat of the climate crisis and the means by which we must engage in our new reality while this new and rapidly changing reality was still unfolding around him.

In this thesis, I have sought to analyse and interpret the wide corpus of writing by Dermot Healy using the concept of pastoral as a framework through which to do so. The analysis presented here thus adds to our understanding of the lasting value and relevance of pastoral as a mode, both in terms of its classic characteristics and in relation to its most recent evolution,

the post-pastoral. In doing so, it not not only shows the ‘lasting power of pastoral’ (to borrow Heaney’s phrase again), but equally illustrates the lasting power of the writing of Dermot Healy.

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Annex I: On the two versions of ‘First Snow of the Year’

Two versions of ‘First Snow of the Year’ were published; one in New Irish Pages (ed. David Marcus), in 1973, and the second in the collection *Banished Misfortune* in 1982. While the main substance of the narrative remains unchanged, there is a style difference between the two, with the earlier version favouring clarity, seen for example through inclusion of certain lines that make aspects like point of view and point in time clearer to the reader. As one example, there is a scene where one of the characters, Phildy, is being beaten up. Throughout the story, the narrative Phildy is juxtaposed with snatches of dialogue from the local pub, and in the earlier version, it is made very clear when the scene of Phildy being beaten on the road ends and the narrative returns to the pub:

> … The man standing did not answer … the job was done for him … and the fallen man gathered himself up and took the bog road, away from O’Grady’s, into the great empty silence.
>
> “Well, here’s luck to your good company,” said O’Dowd. (217)

In the later, *Banished Misfortunes*, version, the two scenes are interwoven in the text so tightly that at first it seems that the separate dialogues are of one scene:

> “Come back and fight, you cunts,” Owen shouted after the retreating ghosts. He gathered himself and roared helplessly, “One at a time,” he shouted after them.
>
> “And a few days later,” Devine went on, “I took the gun and went down to Lough Gara and I shot some wild ducks”. (10)

The very different effect is achieved by subtle as well as not so subtle changes; the inclusion of the double line break in the early version, for example, as well as the violence inherent in the story Devine is telling, which makes it feel more in tune with the previous scene.

Another difference is the inclusion of a family of gypsies, who serve as kind of bookends to the story, thus emphasising the theme of home (and homelessness) in the story. Here is the striking image of the gypsies from the first page:

> ‘He saw John and Margaret Cawley, the gypsies, stealing through the yellow gorse with rotten turf. Their children moved from clownish tree to clownish tree out of the wind.’ (3)

They reappear at the end of the story, the last sentence of the story returning to them:

> ‘Soon John Cawley and Margaret Cawley came over the rocks singing dead verse.’ (11)

The relative merits of each approach is a subjective matter. As Murphy and Hopper point out, the second version displays a strong emphasis on features such as fragmentation, and emphasis on juxtaposition of different images – a kind of montage effect. Arguably, each version could benefit from aspects of the other; it could be argued that an apparently deliberate obtuseness does not necessarily improve the value of a text; at the same time, the dreamlike quality and increased montage effect achieved in the second version, through the addition of images such as those of the gypsies, certainly gives the text a greater intensity.