VOX

The Writer and Nature

Martin MacInnes

The existence of the word is the beginning of the problem: 'Nature.' If we can name it, then we can say we are not it. We can create a distance, put nature outside of us. It's something else. We can look at it, point to it. It's limited. It's over there. It feels safe and reassuring to look at things this way. But it has led to disaster. And literature is as culpable in this regard as any of the arts.

Terms have been coined to describe novels that do not ignore climate catastrophe and ecological collapse: 'cli-fi', 'eco-fiction,' 'speculative fiction'. This is inevitable, and dispiriting. It ghettoizes the subject, claims it as marginal, a deviation from the mainstream. 'Cli-fi' is especially revealing, bracketing such stories alongside science fiction, as imaginative dystopias rather than the realism they increasingly appear to be. I don't think it's overwrought to suggest that, actually, the reverse is true, and it's novels that don't address what's happening that are fantasy.

Every writer is a nature writer, regardless of subject and intention; there's no way out of this. If it exists, it's natural. Artifice is just nature one step removed. Picture a familiar literary scene: a character sitting in an armchair, by a window in a room lit by a fire. It's the end of the day. The window looks out onto rolling fields, a flock of finches in silhouette against the last of the sun. The character remarks to himself that he is looking out onto nature, enjoying nature. But he isn't; he's wrong. The construction assumes a place, and a state, of non-nature for the character to be in, and this isn't possible. The character, like the fields, the finches,

the cloud of insects, is natural, hence vulnerable too. It's this gulf – this determination to see characters as outside of nature – that continues to make the climate emergency seem, for many, provisional, deniable, a non-ultimate threat. Whatever disaster is occurring on the other side of the window, the character, sheltering by the fire, is safe. He cannot be got at; he is a separate entity. This remains, in spite of all evidence, and in spite of the great damage it has done, a dominant philosophy in Anglo-American literature.

Picture another scene, a different kind of fire. An audience sits in a theatre watching the unveiling of a play. The characters are standing and moving and speaking on stage, beneath the proscenium arch. The play is about a disaster, a 'cli-fi' story. Though the actors speak, and look out over the audience, they don't interact with them. They are separate. The audience is protected from the firestorm enacted on the stage; they are neutral observers, existing in non-nature, in non-place. But something has gone wrong. There is a leak, a breach. The audience realises the fixtures they sit on are made of the same stuff as the stage. Everything is flammable, everything may perish. Not only the stage, but the whole theatre will be set ablaze. This is the performance; this is the play; this is the world. Only at the very last moment does any of this seem real. Even then, the audience is tempted to suspect a hoax, a clever piece of immersive theatre, a fabricated fiction. It isn't real. Any second now, we think, someone will intervene, the fire will be put out, the cast will bow and we will go back to our homes.