



Writers and Nature

Maria McCann

Written during the 2020 lockdown

LET ME COME CLEAN at once: I'm not a nature writer. But it seems to me that these are interesting times – all ambiguity intended – for people who write about nature. The increased awareness of impending ecological disaster has led to a growing interest in writing that champions new, or old, ways of living lightly on the earth, or more attention to, and connection with, nature. A quotation from Mary Oliver's 'The Summer Day':

Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

with its reminder of our animal nature, has become a meme.

That last comment isn't meant to disparage nature writing, which I find enlightening, connective, hugely enriching. What interests me is: how will it change now, along with our lives?

Recently I've been thinking about the Romantic concept of the Sublime, and how it connotes terror as well as beauty. I didn't understand how this combination could exist until I saw footage of a tsunami. I felt a sick dread as the thing reared itself from the sea, rising in terrible slow motion. As a child I'd dreamed of waves like this: now, nightmare had broken into reality. And yet, mingled with the terror, there was a thrilled admiration.



In Britain we rarely, if ever, experience the Sublime. We long ago tamed and domesticated – or exterminated – almost everything in our natural landscape. We fight for the preservation of ancient forests. We support rewilding. Nature is seen as entirely benevolent.

Our pre-Romantic ancestors, exposed to famine, plague, childbirth without anaesthetic and high child mortality, were unlike us in this respect: they had quite enough of nature in the raw. What *they* craved was cultivation, civility, the peace and protection represented by that popular mediaeval setting, the walled garden. Privileged and sheltered, *we* tend to assume that, on the whole, things are stable. Even now, there are still many climate-change deniers. Our ancestors drew from their experience the lesson that order was fragile. Any irregularity – a comet, say – might shatter it, unleashing chaos.

Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, written in the 1590s, depicts Nature as a veiled goddess, unknowable. Spenser himself sits on the fence, reporting what others make of her: 'some doe say' she is too blindingly beautiful to look upon, while 'others tell' that the veil conceals a terrifying lion's head. The arrival of Covid-19 is a pitiless stare from the lion-headed, predatory goddess. Chaos is come again — come straight out of nature, unless you believe, as I do not, that Covid-19 was manufactured. We grope around and find our ancestors' script lying to hand: people are already calling this virus 'the plague'.

How will nature writers respond to the global pandemic? I don't know. As I said earlier, I'm not one of them. But I look forward to reading the work that comes out of this time. If, of course, I'm still here to read it.