



**“I am *not* escaping to the countryside”:
Pastoral Awareness in British
New Nature Memoirs written by Millennials**

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Abstract

The pastoral tradition has been around in art and literature for centuries. The aim of this Bachelor's thesis is to find out how the pastoral tradition establishes itself in British New Nature Memoirs written by millennials. Previous research has mainly been concerned with New Nature Memoirs written by older generations. By examining New Nature Memoirs of three debut millennial authors, this study looks at whether the pastoral tradition is used in a different manner from before. It examines three separate characteristics of the pastoral mode in a close reading of three different memoirs: the notion of retreat and return is applied to *The Outrun* by Amy Liptrot, liminality to *Out of the Woods* by Luke Turner, and the Georgic to *Rootbound: Rewilding a Life* by Alice Vincent. The close reading demonstrates that all memoirs show a critical awareness of and an engagement with the pastoral tradition. Nevertheless, they do use the pastoral mode unironically. This leads to the conclusion that, unlike previous New Nature Memoirs, these three recently published British New Nature memoirs written by millennials can be classified as metapastoral texts.

Keywords: pastoralism, new nature memoirs, retreat and return, liminality, the georgic, metapastoralism

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Introduction

Imagine an afternoon in the countryside: the sound of water running down a small stream and birds singing in the trees. In autumn, you are surrounded by the falling and rustling leaves in orange brown colours. In winter, you bundle yourself up in front of a hearth in a wooden shed while a storm is raging outside. In spring, there are the endless colours of sweet smelling flowers on a wide field. It seems as though all of your troubles have disappeared, leaving only an abundance of space to breathe.

It is precisely this idyllic image of nature that has been around for centuries. Especially in the arts and in literature it is a reoccurring phenomenon. Still today, there seems to be an attractive quality about the idea of nature as a place to escape to – a place far away from everyday troubles. This idea of escaping into nature in Western literature is said to have begun with the *Idylls* of Greek writer Theocritus (c. 316-260 BC). In this text, Theocritus wrote about the song competitions of the shepherds in Sicily he experienced in his youth. This text is fundamental in the establishment of the nostalgia, escapism and idealisation in a countryside setting: qualities scholars now associate with a ‘pastoral’ text (Rowe 4). The idea of the pastoral text was further established by the Roman poet Virgil. In his *Eclogues* (42-37 BC), Virgil set out the land of Arcadia: “a Golden Age of the past that is set against the instability and alienation of the present” (Gifford, “Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral, Post-Pastoral” 3). In this landscape, the innocent life of shepherds and shepherdesses is central (Jenkyns 26). Later, this was extended by Virgil’s *Georgics* (36-29 BC), in which the emphasis lay on the relationship between humanity and nature by means of husbandry (Goodridge 4). These three texts became the foundation of what is known as ‘pastoralism’ today.

There are many definitions of, and associations with pastoralism. In his influential book *Pastoral*, Terry Gifford tries to explain the versatility of the term by distinguishing its use in four different types. The first refers to the historical and poetic form of writing which began in the works of Theocritus and Virgil, and which is about the life of shepherds and shepherdesses in the countryside (Gifford, *Pastoral* 3). The second use of ‘pastoral’ is much more extensively applied. This use refers to an implicit or explicit idealization of life on the countryside in contrast to the city, and can be written in any form of literature (Gifford, *Pastoral* 4). Thirdly, ‘pastoral’ can also be used critically to refer to the naivety and oversimplification of the treatment of nature in a text. In this sense, a text can for example be called pastoral when a

writer completely ignores possible environmental issues that are the consequence of the character's treatment of nature (Gifford, *Pastoral* 4-5). The fourth use of the term is much more neutral, as this refers to a description of farming practices (Gifford, *Pastoral* 5).

Throughout history, pastoralism has both been referred to as a genre and a literary mode. A genre has a fixed format while a mode is more malleable; having certain characteristics that can occur in different formats (Fowler). Up until the eighteenth century, pastoralism was commonly seen as a genre. The reason being that until this point, poetry about the (working) life of the shepherd and shepherdess was still widely read. This was typically written in the pentameter verse and included idealised accounts of the scenery (Gifford, "Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral, Post-Pastoral" 3). Since the eighteenth century however, published works in this format got out of fashion. This leads some scholars such as Renato Poggioli to claim that pastoralism died in the eighteenth century. They argue that after the industrial, scientific and political revolution in this era, only "unrecognisable imitations" of the pastoral ideal remain (Marx 209). On the other hand, there are scholars (such as William Empson) who treat pastoralism as a literary mode. These scholars say that: "the old pastoralism of shepherds, flutes and flocks changed into new terms" (Marx 210). According to them, even though the standard format of poetry about shepherds and shepherdesses in the countryside created by Theocritus and Virgil has changed, elements central to the pastoral tradition such as the idea of retreat and return, liminality and a heroic approach to working in nature, remain. The treatment of the pastoral in this Bachelor's thesis falls into the second category, as it aims to explore pastoral elements in modern British New Nature memoirs.

In recent British literature, there has been an increase in the popularity and release of New Nature memoirs. Take for example *H is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald, which has sold over 250,000 copies in the US alone within its first three years of release (Shute). *The Wild Places* by Robert Macfarlane also quickly became an international bestseller and won the Boardman Tasker Award as well as the Sundial Scottish Arts Council Non-fiction Award (Motion). New Nature memoirs such as these can be described as a recollection of experiences of the author in nature, usually with an episodic structure (Baldick 218). Since the late 2000s, some literary works have been categorized as "New Nature Writing" (Joe 49). Even though these works can have many different approaches to a text (e.g. a personal reflection in combination with folklore, prose poetry, psychogeography, cultural or natural history), these particular works have in common that they place an individual at the center of nature and merge the story of this individual with scientific insights about the environment or natural element that is central to the text (Joe 49). Its significance does not lie in the unusual and exotic, but rather

in the ordinary and everyday experiences with the natural world. In New Nature memoirs specifically, the engagement with nature works in tandem with a reflection of the self of the author.

This Bachelor's thesis will take a look at three recently published New Nature memoirs with the aim to answer the question: how does the pastoral tradition manifest itself in British New Nature memoirs written by millennials? In order to find an answer, I will examine three recently published British New Nature memoirs written by millennial authors (also known as generation Y, this generation concerns people born between 1980 and 1995): *The Outrun*, by Amy Liptrot, *Out of the Woods*, by Luke Turner and *Rootbound: Rewilding a Life* by Alice Vincent. All of these memoirs are publishing debuts by young, relatively unknown authors. The reason why I have chosen these, and not more popular and established works, is because the examining of a new generation of authors will give insight into one of the most recent approaches to pastoralism. This way, the differences and similarities between the use of the pastoral tradition in memoirs written by millennials and previous generations will become clear. In three chapters, the memoirs will be presented in order of their date of publication. I will perform a close reading for each memoir in which the focus will lie on one of three different inherent characteristics of the pastoral mode: the notion of retreat and return, liminality, and the georgic. In this introduction, a theoretical framework will follow with a brief explanation of each.

RETREAT AND RETURN

In the pastoral tradition, a central element is the idea of retreat and return. This could be either within the story itself (for example a retreat to the countryside to return to the city with more mental clarity), or outside of the text (Gifford, *Pastoral* 5). What is meant by this is that the pastoral retreat could be a way for the reader to gain new insight. In this case, it is the insight that is returned to the reader (Gifford, *Pastoral* 3).

LIMINALITY

The origin of liminal studies began in the field of anthropology. The term was first introduced in Arnold van Gennep's *Rites of Passage*, which he published in French in 1909. In his book, van Gennep noted that the essence of an individual's life is "a series of passages," by which he means social and cultural transitions (2-3). These passages could for example refer to the effect of ageing, switching occupations, or switching societal roles. These cultural and social transitions have a structure made up out of three elements: the pre-liminal, which refers to the

old or known structure of life, the liminal, which is the ambiguous stage in between, and the post-liminal, which is the altered and new way of (looking at) life (van Gennep 21). The liminal thus refers to the transitional state in between. The term “liminal” derives from the Latin *liminis*, and refers to a threshold passageway between two separate places (Carson 3). It refers to the crossing of the definitive and known border into an unknown, yet possibly transforming stage of life (Carson 3). The study of van Gennep became multidisciplinary when the anthropologist Victor Turner expanded it in his well-known work *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. Turner explained that the liminal-person, or “liminal personae” / “threshold people” moves away from the established structure of society (95). These persons might have a range of experiences in which the normal principles of everyday life are adjourned. To find oneself in a liminal process entails a sense of loss of familiarity and the security that came with the known structure of the past (V. Turner 95). Simultaneously, the future is not yet clear which may result in feelings of insecurity, anxiety or even depression (Carson 6). Conscious behaviour to solve these problems may not always work, since the liminal period cannot be rushed intentionally (Carson 6).

In pastoral literature, scholars usually associate liminality with the idea of the shepherd (Marx 212). The pastoral idea of the shepherd started when the Greek scholar Theocritus wrote about a competition of songs between shepherds he experienced in his youth. The Roman poet Virgil added to this notion when he created the idyllic retreat of Arcadia. Arcadia, which is the setting found in the *Eclogues*, is a utopian society of a landscape inhabited by shepherds and shepherdesses. It is often seen as the “literary construct of the location of pastoral retreat” (Gifford, “Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral, Post-Pastoral” 3). In Arcadia, the figure of the shepherd has an idealised function: they are distanced from society, yet not entirely removed from it. Rather than the relatively more negative connotations van Gennep and Turner have associated with liminality, in the pastoral tradition it is usually perceived as something positive. Even though the shepherds move away from the structure of society, this does not involve feelings of loss, insecurity or anxiety. The way the shepherd-figure is presented in pastoral literature is that they have the freedom to move away from societal rules. Because of their close connection to the people, however, they are not completely removed from society. The shepherds remained, after all, essential to the community because of their role of the protector. It is precisely this duality that makes the shepherd a liminal person. They are neither part of society, nor completely separated from it, which leaves them to be somewhere in between nature and culture. Leo Marx noted that in the eighteenth century, many overt links of the shepherd in literature went away (209). Yet the appeal of the duality of the shepherd survived. Since the eighteenth century, the

liminality of the shepherd seems to manifest itself whenever there is a conflict between two modes of living: “one identified with social complexity, the other with natural simplicity” (Marx 213). One could bring up the question whether the terminology of the liminal person is correctly used in pastoral studies because it differs so significantly from the original research by van Gennep and Victor Turner. Nevertheless, the shepherd is presented as a figure who is in-between two ways of living, it therefore does follow logically when one takes a more broad approach to liminality.

THE GEORGIC

The Georgic takes its term from Virgil’s *Georgics*, written in 36-29 BC. This was a didactically written verse with the purpose of “inspiring Romans to return to the labour of the land and away from their transition to militarized stage” (Cohen 155). The whole text is therefore in essence about the value of labour and hard work. Like pastoralism, a definition of the georgic is difficult to define. The working definition Antony Low set out in his book *The Georgic Revolution* probably comes closest. He defines the georgic mode as one that “stresses the value of intensive and persistent labour against hardships and difficulties; it emphasizes work instead of ease” (Low 12). Unique about the georgic is that it presents a positive, and even heroic view of labour, and promotes a relationship between nature and non-nature (Goodridge 5).

The heroic approach to labour can be traced back to Virgil’s *Georgics*, in which he portrayed the farmer as a heroic figure. According to Wilkinson, this has its origin in Virgil’s use of the myth of Prometheus and the Fall (24). Virgil describes the ‘primitive man’ as a species that lived in an earthly paradise where everything grew of its own accord (Wilkinson 24). This changed when Prometheus stole fire. In doing so, he angered Zeus. As his revenge, Zeus decided to make farming a difficult chore which only the skilled could perform. This way, the wits of mankind would be sharpened and his kingdom would never fall “in gross stagnation” (Wilkinson 24). Consequently, farming became like a type of warfare in which the farmer and ox became the soldiers and the overgrown land the enemy. Because of the sentiment that the farmer is the soldier that conquers the land, he is depicted as a hero. Working on the land therefore becomes a heroic activity. It is this heroic approach to labour that has been a common thread in the georgic mode throughout the centuries.

Even though the Georgic started out as a separate genre that was quite popular, in the British Romantic period (which took place between 1798 and 1832) it vanished quickly and unexpectedly (Heinzelman 182). Since then, elements of the Georgic tradition are often associated as a subset within the pastoralist mode, as both draw on an idealised relation between

humanity and the environment. Because this similarity between the georgic tradition and the pastoral tradition, in this thesis, the georgic will also be treated as part of the pastoral mode rather than a separate genre.

In a close reading of the memoirs in relation to these three inherent characteristics of the pastoral mode, I hope to gain a greater understanding of the pastoral tradition in recently published British New Nature memoirs. In the examining of a new generation of authors, I hope to make clear how the pastoral tradition is presented similarly and / or differently from New Nature memoirs that came before. In doing so, new insights about recent publications of New Nature memoirs could open up discussion for further research on the millennial generation and their approach to nature.

Chapter One

Retreating to a Pursuit: The Notion of Retreat and Return in Amy Liptrot's *The Outrun*

The Outrun by Amy Liptrot, published in 2015, is a memoir about coming to terms and recovering from drug and alcohol abuse. Liptrot grew up on the Scottish Orkney islands but decided to move to London when she was eighteen. Although she already started drinking alcohol as a teen, her addiction became significantly worse in London. When Liptrot saw her life falling apart because of it, she spend a short time in recovery meetings. However, she felt that she could not keep up her sobriety whilst living in the city so she went back on a visit to her parents. Here, she started to reflect on her past while spending time in nature. Her time was spent mostly exploring what was there on the island. As a result, she “swung from addictive alcoholism to strict sobriety, from inner city to outer isle” (Liptrot 274). Amy Liptrot never returned to the mainland, as the way of living on the remote islands mentally and physically did her so much good.

In *The Outrun*, the notion of retreat and return is central, yet not in the traditional sense associated with the pastoral mode. Even though Liptrot retreats to the isles, she never physically returned to the city, nor does the memoir have an emphasis on the insights the reader might gain from Liptrot's story. Instead, the whole memoir is heavily focussed on a self-reflection of Liptrot. It is precisely in this self-reflection that the reader is able to find instances of retreat and return. Hence, in *The Outrun*, even though Amy Liptrot never physically returns to the city, psychologically, there still is the pastoral idea of retreat and return in this memoir.

In the memoir, there are a lot of references to literature, folklore and history of the island. Liptrot seems to retreat to these stories only to return with a better understanding and acceptance of her own situation. One of the themes that is in close relation to the literature, folklore and history, is that of the washed-up (both objects and people). When Liptrot was still living in London, she got into an argument when she was drunk. In this argument, a woman called her ‘washed-up’: “She retorted by calling me ‘washed-up’. It stung because at that point it was fairly true. I was out of work, living in a tiny room in east London, not getting invited out, heartbroken and drinking alone” (Liptrot 265). This is relevant because even before Liptrot mentions this, the theme of washed-up objects and people is prominent throughout the memoir. This theme is always mentioned in relation to other stories: either in literature, folklore or the history of the island. One of these stories is *Moby Dick*.

Moby Dick, written by Herman Melville in 1851, is a novel that centres around the pursuit of a whale (Melville). Liptrot reads *Moby Dick* in London and later connects herself to captain Ahab, hunting (131). In the context of the chapter, she is hunting for the corncrake, a rare bird. Not to kill it, but to spot it on the island. However, I would argue that the theme of whale-hunting actually plays a significant role as well. In Liptrot's memoir, the whale seems to function as a metaphor for her addiction. Just like captain Ahab, she is on a journey to find it with the goal to eventually kill it or to get rid of it. At this point in the memoir, Liptrot therefore sees her addiction as something outside of her, something to hunt down. Paradoxically, Amy Liptrot is therefore retreating to a pursuit. Even though she wants to retreat from her day to day life and her longing thoughts of alcohol, she is simultaneously pursuing to eradicate her alcoholism. Essentially, this comes down to the same thing: remaining sober. This contradiction can be a representation of the friction Liptrot feels at this point in the story, in which she herself is still trying to find a way to deal with her alcohol cravings.

Later in the memoir, Liptrot connects the symbol of the whale to an event that occurred on one of the islands. She explains that in 1994, eleven sperm whales were stranded at Westray, one of the Orkney isles. At this point in history, whales were conserved rather than hunted, but the whales on the beach collapsed under their own weight and died (Liptrot 96). Liptrot's retreat to this story shows that her perspective on whales is changing. When one continues to read the whale as a symbol for her alcoholism, this demonstrates that Liptrot's perspective on her alcoholism is changing as well. She stopped trying to hunt it down, because it was too heavy under its own weight already. In the memoir, this is reflected in Liptrot acknowledging the urges she feels to drink. Unlike in the beginning of the memoir, she does not try to do anything about it, but accepts that it is there, and moves on (129).

Finally, Liptrot sees her alcoholism as a part of her. It is no longer the enemy that she has to kill, nor is she suffocating under its weight. This comes to the fore in the myth of the selkies. The selkies (also the Orcadian word for seals), are shapeshifters. While in the water, they are seal. Yet when they arrive on the land, they shed their skin and appear as beautiful human beings who dance under the moon. At a certain point in the memoir, Liptrot starts to connect herself to these selkies. When she went swimming in the icy cold sea she says "I feel invincible in the wetsuit, able to walk through nettle patches and wade across lochs. Back home, I peel it off like a selkies skin" (Liptrot 257). She changed her role from being a hunter into a selkie peeling of her skin. In this, it becomes clear that she accepted that her alcoholism has been part of her and that she is ready to move forward. Consequently, she realised that: "I might have been washed-up but I can be renewed" (Liptrot 276). This shows that she no longer has

the feeling that she is collapsing under the weight of the alcoholism, nor that she is fighting to kill it. Rather, she accepts her situation and sees the possibility for a different future without the self-destructive behaviours.

The stories Amy Liptrot retreats to, help her to form a better understanding of herself and her alcoholism. Rather than feeling like she had to hunt down an enemy, she eventually saw her alcoholism as part of herself that she could renew. Her more positive attitude and understanding towards her own situation becomes most evident in her reflection on the comment her friend made all those years ago about her being washed-up. In the reflection, she says: “these things were washed-up but they were not always useless. They had tales to tell” (Liptrot 265). With this response, Liptrot shows that she has learned something from the stories about (among others) the washed-up whales and selkies. Just like the washed-up whales and selkies, the alcoholism left her with her own tale to tell. Amy Liptrot retreated to the stories feeling battered and washed-up, but returned with the insight that she had something important to tell. The story of *Moby Dick*, the history of the washed-up whales on the island, and the myth of the selkies therefore helped her to understand and accept herself and her alcoholism.

Another form of retreat is one where Liptrot retreats to the engagement with her body. In doing so, she returns with the insight of the roots of her alcoholism. When Liptrot just got out of recovery, she found that being in motion could help her to ease her “churning thoughts” (228). In London, this meant riding on her bike at night to be able to experience this form of mental escape. When she arrived on the islands however, the relief of physical engagement in nature started to play a much bigger role in her life. Since she had nothing else to do, she started to help repair the drystone walls (also known as dykes) at her father’s house. In the beginning of the memoir, the retreat to the physical engagement with her body was a way of going on with her life in which alcohol now no longer played a part. It was a means to stay sober and have something to do while the urge to drink came and went. This is apparent in the following paragraph.

I’m repairing these dykes at the same time as I’m putting myself back together. I am building my defences, and each time I don’t take a drink when I feel like it, I am strengthening new pathways in my brain. I have to break the walls down a bit more before I can start to build them up again. I have to work with the stones I’ve got and can’t spend too long worrying if I’m making the perfect wall. I just have to get on with placing stones. (Liptrot 90-91)

As appears from this paragraph, the physicality in nature simultaneously functions as a reflection of her recovery. When she is talking about working with the stones she has got, she is indirectly talking about herself. Even though she might feel that she has to recover perfectly, this is not possible. She just has to go on, day after day, to stay sober. As the memoir continues, this role of physicality in nature starts to change. Rather than the labour she carried out in the beginning, which is reminiscent of the georgic mode, Liptrot started to be present in nature in different ways. She takes long walks, swims in the ice-cold water and follows rare birds. Even though the way Liptrot engages with her body in nature changed, nature continues to function as a reflection of her recovery. In the next sentences, Liptrot connects the raging sea to her father. Ever since she was a child, Liptrot and her family had to deal with the mental illness of her father, who was severely manically depressed.

The energy of waves, carried across the ocean, changes into noise and heat and vibrations that are absorbed into the land and passed through the generations. Since his teens, Dad has been treated on fifty-six occasions with electroconvulsive energy. (13)

In these sentences, Liptrot connects the vibrations and energy of the sea with the energy of mental illness in her family. The energy of nature seems to become Liptrot's form of electroconvulsive therapy. Being in nature helps her to understand herself and her own history. Eventually, all of the walks, swims, and work in nature lead to the realisation of the roots of her addiction. One day, when Liptrot walks on a hill, she connects her father's manic episodes to her own attempt to obtain the manic states she'd experienced through him (214). By the retreat of her body in nature, Liptrot returns with the knowledge of the roots of her problem. She was therefore able to reflect on herself by means of her surroundings and returned with a greater understanding of herself and the roots of her addiction.

When Amy Liptrot first came to the Orkney isles, it was not her intention to stay there. She explains that: "It wasn't my idea to come here to 'downsize' or 'get back to nature'. It was not my plan to return home for recovery, it was more that I came back for a visit and got stuck" (143). In this sentence, Liptrot ironically uses the notion of "going back to nature" and "to downsize". These terms could refer to the pastoral tradition, in which the nature is presented in a positive way opposed to culture, which is often more negatively portrayed (Strick 200). She therefore shows a critical awareness of this tradition and its idealisation of nature. Nonetheless,

retreating into nature actually did help her to psychologically return with a better understanding of herself:

I've made a breakthrough – stirred by the energy of the sea and the wind – in understanding my own behaviour. I didn't find it in a therapist's office, or by conscientiously working through the programme, or talking to Dee, but outdoors, watching the waves. (Liptrot 214)

In this paragraph, it becomes clear that it was the energy of the sea and the wind that helped her to understand her own behaviour. This energy can again be linked with the electroconvulsive energy her father had in order to help him. She did not need this rather contested and dangerous form of treatment, but she found her own by observing and researching the nature that surrounded her. On page 13 of the memoir (mentioned on p. 12 in this thesis), the waves are a means of referring to the intergenerational patterns of mental illness. In the sentences above, when Liptrot says she has made a breakthrough by watching the waves, this could therefore be a way for her to say that by watching the intergenerational patterns, she began to understand herself. This makes sense, considering that she began to see the roots of her alcoholism as a result of these intergenerational patterns, specifically as a response to the mental illness of her father.

In sum, even though Amy Liptrot never physically returns to London, there are still instances of the pastoral idea of retreat and return in her memoir. One of these is her retreat to stories, whether it was literature, folklore or the island's history. In this retreat she could give her alcoholism a tangible form. By doing so, she began to see the value of her alcoholism: even though some may have called her washed-up, it gave her tale to tell, just like the stories with washed-up whales and selkies. Amy Liptrot also retreats to her body in the form of physicality in nature. Eventually this led to her returning with the insight of the roots of her alcoholism. Despite the lack of the traditional retreat to nature and a return to the city with new insights, *The Outrun* therefore still manages to weave retreat and return as important elements into the story.

Chapter Two

A Dark in-Between: Liminality in Luke Turner's *Out of the Woods*

Luke Turner published his debut memoir, *Out of the Woods* in 2019. This memoir describes his search to come to terms with himself as a bisexual man and his traumatic history of sexual assault. The leading factor throughout the memoir is Epping Forest, the woods that are situated between Epping and London. Turner feels drawn to the forest but as the search for himself goes on, he loses himself deeper into the woods. After the (pre-liminal) relationship with his girlfriend fell apart, Turner found himself in a period where he had lost all sense of identity and had to face the traumatic experiences from his past. Consequently, *Out of the Woods* describes the liminal stage that followed. In the memoir, Turner is trying to find ways to deal with this liminal stage in his life. By looking at the pastoral tradition of retreating into nature, he hopes to return with a better understanding of himself. However, rather than finding the safe retreat as it is presented in pastoralism, the liminal period in his life turned out differently. In *Out of the Woods*, the expectations of the pastoral retreat are subverted by means of a realistic rather than a pastoral approach to liminality.

Luke Turner wanted to find the idealised version of liminality that is present in the pastoral mode. However, he ended up in a liminal stage in his life as described in the works of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. In *Out of the Woods*, the actions of Luke Turner reveal that he wanted to fit in the frame of the liminality that is present in pastoralism in the figure of the shepherd. This becomes most clear when Luke Turner visits the forest to meet up with a man who lives there.

In Epping Forest, Turner came to know of a man who permanently lived there in a tent. He refers to him as “the man in the forest” and explains that it was this man who initially drew him to the woods (L. Turner 40). Turner comes in contact with the man, who offers him the supposed natural simplicity of the forest against the backdrop of the social complexity of the city. Turner sees the man as a modern-day shepherd, as can be deduced from the following paragraph.

Our tea long finished, the man in the forest said he wanted to get his paper and head off to read in one of his favourite places – Village View. Many of the well-appointed suburban dwellings around these parts have names like Forest Side, Forest Edge or

Forest view, and I liked his inversion of the norm. I pictured him sitting there, trees behind him, looking at the sensible suburban lives passing by, and wondered what he thought of them all. (L. Turner 41)

In this paragraph, the man in the forest is presented as someone who stands outside of society. He does not belong to the masses who call the place Forest Side, Forest Edge or Forest view because he lives in the forest and therefore points out the village, rather than the trees. However, he is still on the edge of society. He can look at the passers-by and get on bus whenever he wants. The manner in which the man in the forest is presented, therefore resembles the associations with the liminal figure of the shepherd in pastoralism. Just like the shepherd, the man in the forest is both part of society, but simultaneously removed enough from it not to follow its norms and expectations. This is underlined by Turner when he says that the man is “no longer caring what anyone else thinks about [him] or where [they] come from” (40). Consequently, the man in the forest functions as a liminal figure as it is presented in the pastoral mode.

In his visits to the man of the forest, Turner holds onto the belief that nature could be the solution to his problems as well. The man of the forest told Turner about the way nature helped him to escape the depression that almost made him decide to end his own life. This story gives Luke Turner something to hold onto, as it shows him that his own similar depressive feelings can go away as well. The idea of going to nature to heal has not only been encouraged by the man in the forest who told Turner to “just plonk [him]self down in the forest for a while” (L. Turner 194). Turner explains that he also kept going back to the forest because “as an adult society had told [him] that ‘nature’ was the place to go when broken hearted or at a low ebb to be cleansed and healed” (L. Turner 188). The idea of going into nature to be healed plays into the pastoral idea of retreating into nature where to get away from society is seen as something that gives mental clarity and space to think and heal (Goodridge 3). This pastoral idea of an idyllic retreat led Turner to go into the forest with the intention to escape the liminal stage in his own life. However, the more Luke separated himself from the city and the community within, the more his traumatic experiences started to unfold. He did not see the forest as a place with lots of space, as he explains:

We tend to think of great open vistas as being edifying, capable of freeing the spirit. [...] But even in the daylight the murk of woodland can oppress and confuse, horizons being lost in the density of the trees. (L. Turner 116)

In these sentences, it becomes clear that Turner became aware that the pastoral ideal of the forest as a place of retreat, was merely that: a pastoral ideal. When he went to the forest in the liminal stage in his life, he experienced that the seclusion led the anxious, depressed and insecure feelings inside of him to become presented on the surface. The more he tried to press the liminal period, the more lost he became. As can be read in the sentences above, Turner felt that the forest became a place where he could not breathe anymore, since he got more and more lost in the complexity of his own mind. The liminal period as it unfolded in Luke Turner's life therefore resembles the liminality as described by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. Luke Turner did not experience the pastoral idea of liminality, which can be described as a positive experience, but found that the liminal period in his life was one of confusion, depression and a feeling of being lost. Turner hoped the forest would be his solution, but it only worsened the depression he felt in the liminal stage in his life. As a result, he did not experience the liminality that is present in the shepherd-figure of the pastoral mode, but rather the liminality associated with depression that is described in the works of van Gennep and Victor Turner.

In the epigraph of the memoir, Turner quotes *The Inferno*, Canto I by Dante. The parallels between this text and his own memoir are striking. In *Out of the Woods*, Luke Turner experiences the liminality as it is presented in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, rather than the liminality of the pastoral mode.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* is a long poem written in the 1300s. The work is about Dante's journey through hell, purgatory and eventually into heaven. Hence it was divided into three parts, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* (Dante). The dark forest is introduced in the *Inferno*, where it is situated as the gateway to hell. In the poem itself it is described as: "Midway through life's journey / I woke to find myself in a darkened wood, / Where the right road was wholly lost and gone" (Dante 47). This dark wood with no road, functioned as a threshold to the underworld (Mazzotta 2). It is a place in between – neither earth nor the spiritual world. Because of this, Dante's dark forest can be referred to as a liminal place. Dante's feelings of being forlorn and lost further underline this. As an individual, Dante feels lost because he is in a liminal stage in his life. Throughout the rest of the *Divine Comedy*, Dante's journey essentially leads him towards a better understanding of himself, but more importantly, towards the human condition (Mazzotta 2). Dante's journey seems to be in parallel with Turner's. This most obviously manifests itself in the setting. Turner's entrance to a metaphorical mental hell also started out in a forest. However, just like in Dante's work, it is the subjective perception of the setting that makes it truly dark. This becomes clear when Turner writes about the way he sees the forest:

Forests are giant carpets of death, trillions of leaves rotting down to soil, the fallen forms of old trees, the slimy and fetid remnants of decaying fungi, the bones of animals ripped apart by scavengers leaving lonely skulls winking up from the mulch, ready to be collected by walkers and taken home as ornaments. (L. Turner 62)

This paragraph immediately shows the way Turner sees the forest. His perspective of it is heavily coloured by his mental state. The forest is not inherently a place of death and decay, it can also be seen as one of life and constant new beginnings. However, because of Turner's mental state, he does not experience it as such. This can also be read in Dante's text, in which the forest is labelled as 'dark' while there are no real dangers in it. This falls in line with Warner's suggestion that the "dark appearance" of Dante's forest does not signal any inherent danger, rather the darkness is a reflection of "the pilgrims mind" (450). This certainly seems to be the case for Turner, who, for most of the memoir, only sees death and decay in the figures of the trees. Eventually, Turner seems to realise that the forest is not inherently a dark and twisted place, but that it became so because of his own perspective. He explains that "the forest, any forest, might become a complicated place if you take the litter of the mind in with you and are unable to dispose of it there" (L. Turner 219). Just like Dante, Turner's journey throughout the woods is essentially about finding a way to deal with his past and present. However, because of his mental state, rather than finding a pastoral retreat, he misplaced his traumatic experience on the outside world and experienced the forest in the same way Dante saw his Dark Woods.

Eventually, Luke Turner is able to accept his past and his state of mind. When he reflects on an image of a figure walking into the forest at the end of the memoir, he says:

This was no Arcadia. Yet he wasn't, as I had thought when I drove along the road that broken day a year ago, about to be swallowed by the forest. Now I saw him entering the woods to embrace the chaos, preparing to be transformed. (L. Turner 265)

Because Turner let go of his pastoral expectations of the forest, he was able to move on from the liminal to the post-liminal. He realises that his expectation of the forest as a healing place was heavily coloured by "the art and literature of what has gone before" (241). This can be seen in his reference to Arcadia, the idealised pastoral landscape from Virgil's *Eclogues*. In the

mentioning of Arcadia, Turner shows awareness that the pastoral mode as it is presented in art and literature, is not a realistic representation of humans in nature.

Ironically, the forest did support Turner in his healing process as it eventually helped him to face the traumatic experiences of his past. After he faced his greatest fears, his perspective on the forest changed: he would not be swallowed by it anymore - but transformed. This change in Turner's perspective shows that his mental state has changed as well. It becomes evident that even though the forest was a difficult and dark liminal place for him, without it, he would not have been able to move on to the post-liminal.

In *Out of the Woods*, the expectations of the pastoral retreat are subverted by means of a different approach to liminality. Rather than the ideal in pastoralism of the liminal-person as someone who is free of social structure yet not completely removed from it, Turner does experience the anxiety, fear and depression that Victor Turner and van Gennep originally contributed to the term. The more Turner projected his inside world on the forest, the more mentally dangerous it became. Rather than a pastoral retreat, Turner found a liminal place reminiscent of Dante's dark wood. For him, it became the beginning of a journey through a metaphorical hell, however, eventually it led him out of the woods into his acceptance of himself and of his past.

Chapter Three

Gardening against the Grain: The Georgic in Alice Vincent's *Rootbound: Rewilding a Life*

Alice Vincent's *Rootbound: Rewilding a Life*, published in 2020, is a memoir that contemplates on the generation of millennials. Vincent, being a millennial herself, reflects on the expectations she had of herself as a result of the expectations society had of her generation. She found a way to deal with the pressure of the feeling that she always had to move faster and do better through the means of growing plants on her balcony. Working with plants gave her what society could not: patience, time, and space to grow. This chapter will argue that *Rootbound: Rewilding a Life* (*Rootbound* in short) does not present a typically georgic heroic view of labour but that it does embody the value of working with nature.

Alice Vincent expresses an anti-work sentiment, thereby not presenting a typically heroic view of labour. However, she does find meaning in working with nature because it taught her to let things unfold. Contrary to the georgic mode and its heroic attitude towards work, Vincent actually seems to contradict the positive work-sentiment at first. In her memoir, she frequently talks about the extreme work ethic of her generation, explaining that;

It feels as if busyness is the constant of my generation. [...] We were young when we learned that working was good, and not working was bad. That job's weren't a means to buy comfort but a calling, a destiny that we must work endlessly for. That a career must be an extension of our personality, or else we had failed. (Vincent 224)

In this paragraph, Vincent expresses her awareness of the role that working plays in her society. Later, she responds critically towards the expectation of always working towards something more, saying:

Even the prospect of relaxing, of doing something fun, became a kind of project to be fulfilled, documented on social media and mined for digital attention. [...] I became fractious and bereft, infuriated by the fact that we apparently had everything on a plate, yet so little to eat. (Vincent 225)

Vincent explains here that in her generation, everything seems to be about striving to be more and do more – all to present a perfect picture life online. She herself participated in this behaviour as well. Both in her work and personal life, Vincent did everything she could to present a positive, and happy portrayal of herself (19). As a result, she began to feel as though her life had no real meaning because she was always living for the validation of other people and would never express how she truly felt. Rather than a heroic approach to work, Vincent therefore initially presents an anti-work ethic.

Paradoxically, as the memoir progresses, Vincent does find the value she feels her day to day life lacked in working with nature. When she started to grow plants on her balcony, she experienced that there was less room to hide her feelings and present an unrealistic, idealised image of herself (Vincent 39). Doing physical labour led her to be more aware in the present moment without anyone to prove herself to. Consequently, Alice Vincent began to look at the world differently. She took in what was surrounding her, rather than photographing it and posting it online. When Vincent went on a solo trip to Tokyo, for the first time, she consciously decided to take her own pace. Literally on her walks, but also socially. Instead of doing what she thought people wanted of her, she did what she wanted to do herself. She did not post heavily staged idyllic pictures of herself in nature on social media, but she “took the snow-covered bamboo forests and constant thrum of the nearby river for what they were, rather than a place of great enlightenment” (Vincent 284). This sentence shows that Vincent consciously decided not to play into an unrealistic portrayal of nature anymore.

Working with the plants on her balcony, helped Vincent to just allow things to be, rather than pushing them into frames of expectations and idealizations. Alice Vincent thereby does not present a typically georgic heroic view of labour because she is critical about the pressure to always work. Nevertheless, her text does embody the value of working with nature, as it helped her to allow things to unfold, rather than to present a fake, idealized version of life.

When looking at the source text of the georgic mode, Virgil’s *Georgics*, a character can be found who embodies the value of working with nature, yet who does not present a typically heroic view of labour. Just like Alice Vincent, this character is a gardener. Both the gardener in the *Georgics* and Alice Vincent appreciate the value of working with nature, but do not present a typically heroic approach to labour because they both diverge from societal norms.

In the *Georgics*, in the first half of fourth book, instructions on bee-keeping are interrupted by a personal recollection of the writer’s meeting with an old gardener: the Corsenex; usually known as the Corycian gardener (Clay 63). Even though, both the farmer

and the gardener work in nature, the contrast between the two is noteworthy. The main reason for this is that their values differ so considerably. The values of the farmer are mostly centred around materialism. The farmer reworks the land in order to gain something from it, namely, crops. With technology, he manages to tame the land and eventually consume the outcome. The farmer is therefore presented as someone who is relatively antipathetic to the land (Perkell 168). The antipathetic treatment of nature falls in line with the typically georgic way of presenting the land as something to be conquered – thereby creating a heroic image of the farmer. This is in stark contrast with the Corycian gardener. Rather than working against nature, the gardener is working with nature. He does not consume the outcome of the garden for himself, nor for his bees, but he creates the garden purely for the sake of beauty. In her analysis on the Corycian gardener, Christine Perkell notes that the role of the gardener is so significant and in contrast to the farmer because he deviates from elements that were central to the Roman tradition, namely materialism and militarism (168). When linking this claim to Vincent's memoir, a slightly more complicated picture arises. Like the Corycian gardener, Alice Vincent is also perusing an aesthetic ideal which ignores material function or profit. Yet, unlike the society the gardener lives in, in Vincent's world, aestheticism and beauty already play an important role in society. On social media, posting aesthetically pleasing photographs is desired and celebrated. Thus, making an aesthetically pleasing balcony actually draws on this tradition. Unlike the Corycian gardener, the true significance of gardening for Alice Vincent lies in the process, rather than the end result. Alice Vincent expresses that working with plants:

was an exercise of purpose, a way of doing things that I didn't, for once, have to plan or analyse for anything other than itself. To garden that space was as instinctive as dancing; one move followed the other through feeling and necessity alone. (Vincent 139)

In the process of gardening, which relies heavily on patience and time, a stark contrast arises with the fast-paced society Alice Vincent lives in. Growing plants is a slow process, rather than a quick fix. In Vincent's memoir, it is precisely this deviation from the societal norm where the significance of gardening can be found: it is an appreciation of the process, rather than the end result.

Both the Corycian gardener and Alice Vincent show the importance of their gardening because they diverge from the societal standard. They do not present a georgic heroic view of labour because they do not draw upon the georgic idea of the worker against nature in order to

gain material goods. Instead, the Corycian gardener strives towards beauty while Alice Vincent focusses on the slow process rather than the end result.

All in all, *Rootbound* uses the georgic tradition in its appreciation and value of working with nature. Be that as it may, Vincent's work differs from the traditional georgic mode because it does not include a heroic implication of labour. Initially, she even seems to reject a positive attitude towards working. However, as the memoir progresses, she does find meaning in working with nature since it taught her to just allow life to be, rather than present it in an unrealistic, idealised format online. The appreciation of working with nature is similar to the Corycian gardener in Virgil's *Georgics*. Both Vincent and the Corycian gardener do not present a georgic heroic view of labour because they do not strive to gain material goods. Instead, the value of working with nature is found in its beauty in the case of the Corycian gardener and in the slow-process for Alice Vincent. *Rootbound: Rewilding a Life*, can therefore be said to draw upon some elements of the georgic mode, yet not all. While Vincent does show the importance of working in nature, it is not presented in a heroic manner.

Conclusion

The First Step Towards a New Metapastoral Tradition

The objective of this thesis was to find out how the pastoral tradition established itself into British New Nature Memoirs written by millennials. To do so, I looked at three central elements to the pastoral mode: retreat and return, liminality and the georgic. I linked each of these elements with a different British New Nature Memoir written by a millennial: *The Outrun*, *Out of the Woods*, and *Rootbound: Rewilding a Life*. Even though only one specific pastoral element was examined for each memoir, the way these memoirs engage with the pastoralism, still put forward a common thread. In all three texts, there is an awareness of the pastoral tradition. Interestingly, this awareness goes together with the use of the pastoral mode itself, which leads me to the conclusion that these New Nature Memoirs can be classified as metapastoral texts.

In chapter one, I mentioned that Amy Liptrot says it was never her plan to go to nature to “downsize” or “get back to nature” (Liptrot 143). She is aware of the naïve implications of the common use of this word and phrase, which both refer to the pastoral idea of a retreat to nature. However, when Liptrot arrived on the Orkney isles, she found that a retreat to stories and a physical engagement in nature, did help her to stay sober and to return with a better understanding of herself and her alcoholism.

Chapter two looked at *Out of the Woods*, in which Luke Turner discusses how he thought the forest would be “edifying [and] capable of freeing the spirit” (Turner 116). Nevertheless, when trying to copy the pastoral ideal of the liminal period, Turner found that the forest “was no Arcadia” (265). He realised that his idea of the forest being able to heal him was just a pastoral ideal rather than reality. Eventually, the forest did turn out to play an important role in him coming to terms with his past and present as it became a means of moving to the post-liminal.

In chapter three, I discussed *Rootbound: Rewilding a Life*. In this memoir, Alice Vincent worked with the plants on her balcony. In doing so, she learned to accept the world around her for what it really is, rather than trying to create an unrealistic and idealised version of it. This idealised version of nature ties in with the pastoral tradition, in which the simplicity of nature is presented as opposed to the complexity of culture. Alice Vincent therefore gained awareness of this pastoral tradition by working in nature.

Even though each of these memoirs is aware of the pastoral tradition and its naïve and romanticized implications of nature, the pastoral mode is still present within the texts. Nature,

and the use of the pastoral elements of retreat and return, liminality and the georgic help the authors to get away from the fast-paced and overly technological twenty-first century. It leads them to understand themselves and the world around them in a different way. Be that as it may, all three authors are aware of pastoral shortcomings and voice this to the reader. This awareness is different from previous New Nature Memoirs. Take for example the well-established New Nature Memoir *H is for Hawk*, written by Helen Macdonald, who was born in 1970. This is a memoir that effortlessly uses the training of a Goshawk to show the cycle of grief. In the memoir, nature is not a background for the personal feelings of the author but it is presented in a way that provides new perspectives and insights. It almost becomes an active character that Macdonald submits to, but does not control. This is very similar to the use of nature in the three memoirs mentioned in the chapters. However, unlike these memoirs, Macdonald does not point out her awareness of the pastoral tradition in the memoir itself. Even though she more than likely possesses this knowledge, it is not explicitly mentioned. This is different from the three memoirs written by the millennial authors, who all do point out the pastoral tradition.

Interestingly, the three memoirs in this thesis are show a critical awareness of the pastoral tradition and their own pastoral qualities, yet they do not reject the pastoral mode. This paradox leads me to think that these memoirs are in fact, metapastoral texts. The term of metapastoralism was first introduced by Harry Berger in the 1980s. In his analysis, he explains that the metapastoral (or strong pastoral) text constructs “an image of their own generic traditions in order to criticize them” while simultaneously “perform[ing] a critique on the limits of its own enterprise even as it ironically displays delight in the activity it criticises” (Berger 4). Contrary to the strong metapastoral, he also introduces the weak pastoral. This is a form of pastoral which presents a very simplified version of “nature to culture, simplicity to sophistication, order to disorder” and which is unaware of its own naivety (Strick 200). It is important to note that the memoirs examined in this thesis do not present the pastoral tradition in an ironic way. They are aware of the overly simplified implications inherent in the pastoral mode, but they do use it in an positive and unironic manner. In this sense, they fall in between the strong and weak pastoral Berger creates; being neither ironic nor ignorant. However, because the memoirs are all self-referential, I would still argue that the term metapastoral is apt – they remain after all, pastoral texts that discuss the pastoral mode. Nevertheless, because of the unironic approach to the pastoral, the explanation of the term Berger puts forward should be slightly revised: metapastoral texts are texts that construct a critical image of the awareness of their generic traditions, while simultaneously displaying value in the activity they criticize.

To be able to fully prove this claim, further research should be done since this thesis merely looked at three British New Nature Memoirs. It only examined one of three elements inherent to the pastoral mode for each memoir and could have been expanded by exploring more pastoral elements for each text. For future research, it would be interesting to find out whether this form of the metapastoral will continue to develop, or whether it will go back to either the strong or weak versions of the pastoral mode Berger discussed. Has the occurrence of the metapastoral been occurring in other New Nature Memoirs, not only British ones, but globally? And why does it occur specifically in texts written by millennial authors in the 2010-2020s? After analysing the texts, I would argue that the renaissance of the pastoral mode in millennial writings could be explained by a number of reasons. First, and most prominently, the digital and technological overstimulation and the psychological complications that occurred because of the increased importance of the online world. In going back to nature, the millennial authors are able to take their distance from the constant online pressures and distractions, which is probably the reason why the georgic mode is such a prominent feature in these memoirs as well. Being physically active in nature forces the millennial authors to be present in the moment and to face their psychological problems, rather than being distracted by the online world.

No matter whether the pastoral awareness in pastoral texts will continue or not, these three memoirs are a first step towards a newly engaged form of the pastoral mode. One where the reader and the writer are aware of the overly simplified and romanticized notions of the pastoral tradition, yet where a version of the pastoral mode can still be celebrated and used. This way, nature will no longer be treated as the medicine, but as a helping hand in a healing process.

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