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Valeria Strusi, Loredana Salis

Soil-searching: Grief and Healing in Elizabeth-Jane Burnett's *The Grassling* (2019)

Abstract I: La frattura nel rapporto tra gli esseri umani e il mondo naturale necessita di essere sanata. La prospettiva antropocentrica inscritta in gran parte della codificazione occidentale della dinamica natura/cultura si basa sull'idea errata della preminenza dell'uomo sul resto del mondo naturale, che si è tradotta in azioni largamente sprezzanti e/o apertamente distruttive perpetrate entro i confini di una mentalità dominatrice (Eisler 2002) e nella (spesso intenzionale) noncuranza o mancanza di consapevolezza rispetto alle interconnessioni, alle influenze e alle interdipendenze che legano l'umano e il non umano (Milstein & Castro-Sotomayor 2020). Il presente articolo si propone di contribuire allo sviluppo di tale linea di indagine esaminando come la relazione umano/non umano sia messa in discussione, ridisegnata e ricostruita in *The Grassling* di Elizabeth-Jane Burnett. Difatti il testo, memoir ecopoetico imperniato sull'idea di lutto, sia personale sia ambientale, si serve della creazione, tramite metamorfosi, di un organismo ibrido uomo/pianta (il *Grassling* eponimo) come strumento di trans-corporeality (Alaimo 2010) per colmare e sanare la frattura esistente tra umano/non umano.

Abstract II: The rift in the relationship between human beings and the natural world necessitates healing. The anthropocentric perspective inscribed in much of the Western codification of the nature/culture dynamic is based on the misplaced idea of the pre-eminence of humankind over the rest of the natural world, which has resulted in largely dismissive and/or downright destructive actions perpetrated within the confines of a dominator mindset (Eisler 2002) and the (often wilful) disregard for or lack of self-awareness in regards to the environmental interlinkages, effects, and interdependencies which tie the human and the non-human (Milstein & Castro-Sotomayor 2020). This article seeks to investigate this specific topic by examining how this conflicting relationship is challenged, redrawn and restored in *The Grassling* by Elizabeth-Jane Burnett. The ecopoetic memoir, centred around a sense of grief both personal and environmental, employs the trans-corporeal (Alaimo 2010) device of a metamorphosed human/plant hybrid (the eponymous Grassling) to bridge, and ultimately heal the human/non-human fracture.

Keywords: Elizabeth-Jane Burnett's *The Grassling*, ecopoetic memoir, trans-corporeality, human and non-human relations, healing, nature/culture.

If the land, like a body, can hold a trauma […], it can also, perhaps, hold a healing
Elizabeth-Jane Burnett (2019: 149, *Elk-sedge*)[1].

1. "Reading transcriptions of soil song"

The nature/culture divide accounts for a large portion of the Western understanding of the world, the backbone of its modern constitution (Latour 1993) and it involves the pitting against each other of what have been deemed two separate ontological domains. Convention regards nature as a combination of mechanical and preordained processes, which operate independently of our human social life – an uncontested, hollowed background for our development (Alaimo 2010; Barad 2007). Culture, by contrast, is the product of man's uniqueness, a reified, past-tense catalogue of norms and conventions, devised by and for humans as a social group (Jones 2009b; Murphy 1992). Their separation has resulted in a wide range of ontological and empirical implications; chief among them is the outright dismissal of the existence of natural or non-human agency, followed by the exclusion of all but the dominant human perspective from "historical, political, and ethical formulations" (Jones 2009b: 309).

It can be argued that man's purported belief in his own uniqueness, the Enlightenment-born and all-human need to hold on to "a core identity as though it were a possession" (Haraway 1991, quoted in Milstein & Castro-Sotomayor 2020: xvii), combined with his reliance on nature to survive, is reminiscent, to some extent, of the Hegelian master-slave dynamic (Brennan 2007) which is yet to be solved. Mankind is, for its most part, still tightly attached to the dominator mindset (Eisler & Fry 2019) and to the power, control and profit it provides (Sullivan 2013)[2]. It is no surprise, therefore, that the preservation of its supremacy is still largely privileged over the embracing of cooperation and prosocial partnership models with nature (Eisler 2002; Eisler & Fry 2019), needed "for the attitude of domination to cede to the attitude of respect" (Brennan 2007: 525). The repercussions of this deliberate fracture are becoming evident in our present time, as several of "the perilous situations many sectors of global society appear to face in terms of ecological, economic, and cultural sustainability are, in part, caused by the nature/culture schism" (Jones 2009b: 309). Even today the existence of such a dichotomy has been largely criticised, altered, if not downright overturned[3]. However, it remains generally widespread (whether by denial, ignorance or design) and blatantly clashes with the current developments, in both natural and social sciences, that explain and support the need for a renewed understanding of the world as

[1] All quotations are taken from the 2019 Penguin edition of Burnett's book. Chapter titles are cited within brackets along with page numbers.

[2] The dominator mindset can be traced back to another pillar of modern thought, Descartes' mind/body (matter) dualism splitting the mind (capable of thought and language) from the natural human body as two different entities. Trickling down from this, the related dualisms of subject/object and agency/structure, made it easy to regard the cultural (the mind) as the agent and nature (the body) as the passive recipient of that action (and of the control that comes with it; Jones 2009a).

[3] One of such reworkings is Haraway's nondualistic concept of "natureculture(s)", which places nature and culture on a continuum, highlighting their inseparability, hybridability and interconnectedness (2003; 2008).

the "ongoing outcome of myriad entanglements of elements and processes" (Jones 2009a: 295) straddling both sides of the divide, and of life as the result "of complex interplays, or entanglements, between all manner of processes and elements – bio-physical, economic, cultural, technological, human and non-human" (Jones 2009a: 294).

A reverberation of the nature/culture divide can be detected also within the Western literary tradition. Amitav Ghosh contends that the divide is particularly visible (and still somewhat ongoing) in the novel, which starting from the late nineteenth-century, has been gradually sanitised of nature in its active, agency-driven capacity. Despite encountering a measure of resistance, the endeavour was particularly successful in the expunging of "every archaic reminder of Man's kinship with the nonhuman" (Ghosh 2016: 70). A suppression, Ghosh adds, born out of a myopic way of thinking in "discontinuities", which intentionally excludes entities and forces that fall outside the scope of contingent problems and, in turn, makes thinking in interrelations unconceivable (2016: 56). The exercise in spatial, temporal and existential parcelling and restricting down to human terms what is narratable (sometimes what is *worth* narrating) comes with the exclusion of anything that might elude such operations (De Cristofaro & Cordle 2018; Ghosh 2016). What the Anthropocene[4] has shown is the shortcomings of this mindset, demanding an immediate amendment to man's philosophical and practical dealings within the world (Lucci 2018). With long-believed inanimate entities and forces coming alive and demanding attention comes the reckoning for the nature/culture divide, as well as the impossible-to-ignore "awareness of the elements of agency and consciousness that humans share with many other beings, and even perhaps the planet itself" (Ghosh 2017: 63). Such systematic and deliberate marginalisation or exclusion from literary discourse leads to the discounting and silencing of the non-human voices (and agency) that inhabit the planet alongside man.

It is in restoring their agency that lies the crux of finally embracing the notion that the basis of life on Earth is relational rather than autonomous (Jones 2009a) and that humans are unceasingly participating "in crisscrossing sociocultural and ecological webs or life" (Milstein & Castro-Sotomayor 2020: xvii). The surge in critical discourse regarding the question of non-human agency, its definition and conceptual underpinnings has followed a parallel route with the considerable increase in literary works, both concerned with decentring the human and envisioning alternative, post-human, multispecies, new materialistic, trajectories[5]. As Amitav Ghosh asserts stories and man's ability to tell them are "signs of our animality rather than our uniqueness", vestiges of humanity's "pre-linguistic selves" (2022), and have been used to comprehend the world and channel that understanding (De Cristofaro & Cordle 2018). It seems crucial then, for it to be the same instrument that would help humankind reach a deeper and wider understanding of it.

Both the refranchising of the non-human and the healing of the fracture between the

[4] The term Anthropocene is as widespread as it is contested. It should be noted, however, that several alternatives have been proposed: the Capitalocene, the Plantationocene, the Chthulucene, the Oliganthropocene, and the Homogenocene (Vermeulen 2020).

[5] For a foray into the multifaceted critical discussion, see, among others, Alaimo 2010; Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Braidotti 2013; Kirksey 2014; Haraway 1985; 1991; 2003; 2008; 2016.

natural and the cultural are at the core of Elizabeth-Jane Burnett's *The Grassling* (2019). An ecopoet and an academic, Burnett dedicates her critical and creative work to the topics of nature and the environment. Her experimental poetry, appeared in poetry collections (i.e. *Swims*, 2017; *Of Sea*, 2021) as well as in several anthologies, fits in-between the "environmentalists who write paeans to the natural world and issue warnings", and the "historian-poets who plough up the mists of our folklore to be rehashed with the hyperlocal" (Sy-Quia 2019). Indeed, *The Grassling* interweaves the seemingly irreconcilable perspectives of the (eco) political, scientific sense of the activist and the aesthetic, almost reverent eye of the poet. Inspired by the Devonshire landscape surrounding the village of Ide, where the author was born and raised, *The Grassling* is a multifaceted and hybrid text, an unconventional memoir which combines nature with life writing, and poetry with science. The interlocking, sometimes conflicting, juxtapositions deployed by the author are ensconced into the *The Grassling*'s subtitle – "a geological memoir" – which testifies to Burnett's commitment to the subversion (and enmeshing) of conventionally unrelated domains. By using a profoundly human and human-centred narrative form such as the memoir, while shifting its focus on the geological sphere (a *natural* science), Burnett bridges the gulf between nature and culture, binding the two into a single text. Thus, *The Grassling* is at once a "nature memoir" (Pollard 2020), part of the recent flow of nature writing aimed at restoring the bond with nature humans have slowly disengaged with and responding to the "capitalism-fuelled climate crisis" (Pollard 2020). It is a "document on grief" (Pollard 2020), revolving around her visits to her ailing father (whose death closes the narrative flow), their conversations, and Burnett's effort to connect with his past. *The Grassling* is also a dictionary of the soil, a taxonomic effort aimed at mapping, through language, both the personal and the relational, the human and the non-human. It is in this way that the poet and the woman explore and articulate her twofold ancestry[6]. And in such terms, writing becomes an environmental act, with storytelling enabling a healing process of the fracture between the human and the non-human.

Thus viewed, Burnett's exploration of the acreage and Redland fields her paternal family has resided in and farmed for generations is not a mere pastoral walk of remembrance among trees and gurgling streams. Rather, *The Grassling* departs from "human-centred life writing to encapsulate the geological biography of the land" (Cousins 2020a) and delves further inside the natural dimension, first by unearthing, then by trans-corporeally (Alaimo 2010) reaching a place of renewed awareness of the interconnectedness of all life and all things. The gradual, material, metamorphosis into the eponymous Grassling, turns Burnett into a half-human half-vegetal hybrid entity, which effectively encapsulates and harmonises the human and the non-human. By inhabiting both dimensions at one and at the same time

[6] Half white British, half black Kenyan, Burnett's mixed-race ancestry ascribes *The Grassling* to the genre of Black British writing. Helen Cousins, however, notes that her exploration of heritage and roots is distinct from the more usual search for ancestry in Black British fiction. What hurts Burnett is the alienation that derives from her invisibility, in the light of her strong sense of belonging, both by merit of occupancy and of heritage. As such, Burnett's depiction of race in rural settings subverts the more usual representation, which would be characterised by a state of hypervisibility in an alienating landscape (2020a; 2020b).

the narrator manages to heal her personal and relational wounds; she eventually mends the nature/culture rift.

2. "It was a time of becoming, of beginning, bepersoning, begrassing"

On the surface, *The Grassling* chronicles Burnett's visits home to her ailing father as well as her mapping the fields of her youth and exploring "both the present life to be found there, predominantly the invertebrates found in and under the fields, and the past life that had passed through it" (Burnett & Thomas 2019: 258). At its core, the book provides a narrative of kinship – it is about the presence, the absence, the search for and the disappearance of it. Burnett's search for past and present life in the soil is essentially a multi-layered search for a sense of connection. Her exploration of the fields flows in interlocking routes of history, language and nature: as she follows a map of the area hand-drawn by her father, found at the back of his *A History of the People and Parish of Ide*, a book about those same fields, Burnett focuses on the way walking there might connect her to the places described by her father and to her paternal ancestors, she searches the language and local place names and how these came to be, she seeks to gain access to the spiritual and the natural legacy of those fields (Burnett & Thomas 2019).

The charting of heritage, language, and natural life into a single map occurs under the sign of grief, since her father's declining health prompts Burnett's visits home – this endeavour she recounts with the instinct of a migratory bird: "Just as a bird feels the moment to fly […] I feel the time when I must leave what I am doing and come" (Burnett 2019: 70, *Ritual*). Her father's health condition epitomises the unravelling of her connection to the land where she grew up – a land, a *soil*, which he embodies by virtue of a heritage going back generations, and which Burnett, despite sharing, perceives as "a mixed motion" (47, *Kulungu*), a push-pull between "all that is deeply knotted" (47) in her and the alienation she experiences on the part of "those there now, who cannot see into me" (47). British and Kenyan by origin, Burnett seemingly occupies an in-between space in her encounters with people[7]: her skin sometimes still makes her "unfathomable" (47) in Devon, despite having grown up there, *belonging* in her village and in its landscape through her father's lineage. The banishing of the "mixed motion" takes the shape of physically retracing her father's steps, using his map, his words, and his book as a guide, to feel closer to him "through being in a space that he has been in. A space where his father has been, and his father too" (147, *Elk-sedge*). Yet, her "return to this soil" (9, *Acreage*) becomes not only a way for her to walk along the length of her genealogy, but it turns into the chance of crossing a threshold into a different sort of kinship[8]. As physically as she perceives herself walking in her father's

[7] It is worth noting, however, that not all encounters Burnett has with people are marked by alienation or her perceived "unfathomableness". For example, although the Teign Valley museum employee appears to scrutinise her, so much so that, as she did when encountering the Ide villager, she longs for "a cyborg attachment making external form match internal" (79, *Teign Valley*), he "brightens" when she tells him her grandmother is from the area and does not question the notion (Cousins 2020a; 2020b).

[8] The imagery of boundaries in Burnett's relation to the landscape is recurring (Cousins 2020a) and it engenders in/out perspectives deeply rooted in the question of both natural and human belonging. In man-made maps the boundaries shrink and expand, overlap and separate mirroring the shifts in ownership and

footsteps, she gradually senses a change occurring in the fabric of her being when she begins to "dissolve into her environment" (Cousins 2020a) and the environment to integrate itself into her body.

At the start, Burnett experiences nature as a human would: she crosses fields and paths, noting colours, textures and sounds, she tracks animals and takes little handful of flowers back to her father. Not before long, her experiencing of the natural grows multi-sensorial and it deepens as she burrows her bare hands and feet into the soil or lies down on the forest floor under the rain. She thus knocks "on the door of the earth" (Burnett & Thomas 2019: 264); standing under the pouring rain, she leaves "bits […] that sank into the soil to decompose and channel nutrients through intravenous roots" (45, *Kulungu*). Her human substance becomes "ultimately inseparable from the environment" (Alaimo 2010: 2), to the point that she begins to challenge her own anatomy: "What do I need a body for now? Only to pass its nutrients on to another who needs them more" (46, *Kulungu*). Eventually, she decides to "draw the earth to my tongue" (84, *Under Wood*), so that soil-searching turns into soil-tasting. It is after this almost communion-like crossing, a literal incorporation, that the birth of the "Grassling" takes place through gradual metamorphosis: a hybrid both woman and plant, no longer a *she*, but a *it,* which "pushes up from the soil" (and this is how part Two of the book begins; 91, *Warren*).

The Grassling shifts and morphs over time, as Burnett's awareness of the flimsiness of the confines between herself and the soil sharpens. When, at first, her understanding of herself remains anchored to her human anatomy, "the organs that resist" (45), so is the Grassling's: "First its forehead […]. Nose, lips, chin […]. Shoulders, breasts, back" (91). Yet, once the metamorphosis reaches its peak, the Grassling (and Burnett) begin to share a single, hybrid anatomy:

> I feel my internal circuitry change: I am plant as well as animal. My blood transports oxygen; my chlorophyll produces it. Oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, phosphorus surge along tissue, torso, culm, to my blades. Blood blends magnesium as well as iron. I am grass made flesh. Grassling (148, *Elk-sedge*).

As one single entity at once human and non-human, the Grassling has its own blended anatomy (the *blades* both shoulder *blades* and *blades* of grass), a body which epitomises the profound interlinkages and interdependencies and which in and of itself subverts the nature/culture dichotomy. Its hybridity, the coexistence of human and non-human inside the same living form, the agency ensconced in the shift in pronoun, all challenge the idea of human exceptionality, of its right of precedence over all other living entities. Furthermore, with its own agency, the Grassling rejects the dominator mindset; all he yearns for is to find a piece of land in which to lie "in the dense gathering of organism, of processes" (96, *Warren*) and "not to fight the badger or the bird or the weasel, but to lie alongside them, to coexist" (94), joining in into a prosocial partnership mode of relations (Eisler 2002; Eisler & Fry 2019).

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belonging. An idea carried over in man's conceptualisation of nature: "The hedge delaying our admittance like somebody checking we are on the guest-list" (Burnett & Thomas 2019: 263).

Because it is "grass made flesh", the Grassling engenders a new understanding of the interlinkages between man and environment. With Burnett's metamorphosis, the natural world becomes part of her own self, effectively entangling the two on a physical level. The metamorphotic movement is not merely metaphoric but corporeal, a shift that "underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment'" (Alaimo 2010: 2). Inasmuch as the new materialistic perspective considers the body as being an "intra-active materiality" (Alaimo quoted in Kuznetski 2020; Barad 2007), the hybrid body of the Grassling can be rightfully viewed as an enhanced iteration of the transcorporeal, the conflation and continued interaction inside the same material body of the natural non-human and the cultural human, which brings about the subversion and healing of the nature/culture schism. As an entity, the Grassling embodies Alaimo's idea that "'the environment' is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves" (2010: 4).

The shifts in language and style mark the interweaving of nature and culture. In *The Grassling* language is a route Burnett takes while searching the soil: what ties her to her father is her fascination with the interrelatedness of places and language – a shared research interest[9]; being a poet, a self-proclaimed ecopoet, she uses language to convey the environment in her work. At first, the "etymological mining" that "draws me and draws him" (70) and "the language of the fields" (9) are forms of cultural iteration, however conscious of their own pitfalls. As Burnett progressively enmeshes herself into nature, her language changes, she becomes aware that words can serve to amplify the non-human.

The focal role of language in *The Grassling* is embedded into the very architecture of the text. On the surface, the title may seem a mere reference to the metamorphic entity emerging in the course of Burnett's explorations: a new-born, small, young sprout of grass. Yet, delving deeper into the word – mirroring Burnett's own interrogations of language – one can unveil another side to the Grassling, both title and creature. The suffix -ling, presumably derived from the Proto Germanic *-linga-, is used to form noun-derivatives linked to the concept of belonging to, coming from, descending from either places or people; for example, it was consistently utilised in Anglo-Saxon to designate origins or lineages[10]. The Grass-*ling* then, is not simply a small grass sprout, but it also forms part of a *natural* lineage: descended from grass, belonging to grass. Such considerations find an echo in Burnett's own search within her *human* heritage as well as her hunting for meaning in the stratifications of language in names and toponyms – both aspects which tether her to her father.

Similarly, the epigraphs Burnett uses to open her memoir contribute to the enmeshment. The three excerpts – from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), Monica Gagliano's personal website and Enid Blyton's children's book *The Magic Faraway Tree* (1943) – each represent a

[9] In relation to this sharedness Sy-Quia argues that *The Grassling* entertains an ongoing dialogue with the *History* Burnett's father authored, picking up from where he left off with the inclusion of a new outlook concerned with pinpointing how climate change and urban-dominant societies have impacted farming in the area. It maintains "a native reverence for our Anglo-Saxon forebears, but married with Snyder's sense of geological time-spans and elevation of the non-animal" (2019).

[10] "-ling", in https://www.etymonline.com/word/-ling.

thread in *The Grassling*'s tapestry, while simultaneously playing into the interlinkages the memoir encompasses. Carson's words on the centrality of the soil in the interplay of life are a testament to Burnett's ecological concerns and objectives; Gagliano's description of plant's bioacoustic mode of communication allows Burnett to introduce not only an allusion to non-human forms of language (the Grassling's voice), but also to "the astute scientific nous" (Sy-Quia 2019) which she weaves through her evocative ecological reflections. Lastly, Blyton's words feed into the channelling of non-human voices ("whisha-wisha-wisha-wisha") as well as Burnett's experimental *poiesis* in bringing them onto the page. Also present is a reverberation of Burnett's multi-sensorial, almost primal, search into the soil to decipher nature's secrets in the whispers of the trees by "pressing our left ears to the trunk of the trees" to "*really* hear what they say". Burnett's italicisation of "really" tells of her own aims: the promotion of a renewed understanding of those largely ignored voices.

The book is structured like a dictionary, with chapter titles in alphabetical order (from *Acreage* to *Zygote*) interspersed with three short interludes titled "Soil memoir of"[11] – Burnett's attempts at mapping with words specific, meaningful places. The construction of a dictionary-like memoir allows the author to slowly thin out the boundaries between the natural and the cultural. Even though both memoir and dictionary are manifestations of the human (and therefore the cultural) there is a profound difference in scope and aim: if the dictionary is meant for ordering and categorising an entire system or field of knowledge, the memoir, as a genre, is interested in relating the intimate, touchstone moments of a personal existence. Taking advantage of the discrepancy, Burnett employs the authoritative veneer associated with the codifying powers of a dictionary to structure her geological memoir and expands the intimate, human connotations of the memoir to include the depiction of the life of the not-exactly-human Grassling. The use of the dictionary configuration is particularly consequential not only because a *Dictionary of the Soil* was the author's working title for *The Grassling*, but also because, by exploiting the seal of legitimacy a dictionary can provide, Burnett is able to fulfil one of her objectives: "the soil needs its own dictionary" (66, *Protozoa*).

Burnett's dictionary pushes at the boundaries of convention: each entry has the form of an episodic chronicle or a pseudo-short story (Cousins 2020a) occasionally featuring experimental verses. The dictionary quality of the memoir is further bent out of shape and partially subverted by Burnett's approach. If part *One* (letters A-V) is composed of one chapter per letter, part *Two* is stretched out with 24 chapters for letters W-Z. Such an

[11] The soil memoirs are structured as a soil volume, which is "the basis of soil study by pedologists […] represented by a soil profile with its constituent horizons and layers. […] The character and arrangement of these horizons within the profile provide the morphological information which is the basis for distinguishing one soil from another and which enables soils to be classified and mapped" (Bridges 1990: 3). Burnett herself, in a note on *Soil memoir for Druid's Hill*, mentions that the concept of soil memoirs is based on the one described in B. Clayden, *Soils of the Exeter District* [*Sheets 325 and 339*], that is to say a combination of maps showing the distribution of soils, and memoirs, bulletins, and documents describing the characteristics of the mapped soils, from both a scientific and agricultural perspective. In *The Grassling* Burnett pairs her words with different horizons in an almost burrowing-like effect, as if her words are penetrating the soil. Moreover, the structure of the soil memoirs reinforces what the *The Grassling*'s subtitle purports, namely the juxtaposition of the geological (the scientific, the natural) and the human (the emotional, the cultural).

asymmetry undercuts the rigorous classification one expects from a dictionary. As Burnett morphs into the Grassling, her awareness expands and so does the dictionary of the soil she is compiling. And in expanding, she progressively goes deeper into both nature and language: chapters 37-45 all bear Anglo-Saxon titles (*e.g. Ymbgedelf*, digging around; *Yr*, the rune for bow, relating to the "perfect application of skills and knowledge to natural materials", 167, *Yr*), and the last two terms (and chapters) both pertain to the core of the natural world either geologically or biologically: *Zoic* and *Zygote*. This final shift right into the natural is especially revealing if one considers that the first chapter is entitled *Acreage* and is thus linked to the cultural sphere – a measurement for land is but a human convention (and one associated with ownership).

As the metamorphosis gains momentum, so does the shift in the very structure of the language, which steadily begins to incorporate elements no longer attributable to human norms. "The voice of the grass […] scorns punctuation" (95, *Warren*) and flows in a *continuum* (all words are joined when the voice is non-human): "whoisitwhatisitsbodyitsechoingspace-isithollowisitstrungisitgrassorwomanisitoneofussprungfromusorwhoisitwhatisit" (95). The trees have their own typography, seemingly arbitrary spaces and capital letters (Cousins 2020a; Bekers & Cousins 2021): "Shhhh sloe shhhh slow sOAK shhhh shhh will" (131, *Xylology*); the Grassling slowly discovers its new voice by imitating the birds in the fields, having "to forget what it has learned" (139, *Xylophone*) about speaking[12]; when the Grassling appears on the page, the layout shifts, the inside and outside margin are narrower; finally, the chapter *Elk-sedge*, where the metamorphosis reaches its peak, and Burnett acknowledges her transformation, momentarily interrupts the alphabetical order of the book – the birth of the hybrid disrupts man-made categorising.

This new language is made to "think outside the human" (17, *Culm*), and so the "densely wooded speech" (111, *Withy*) of the soil becomes both a bridge and a buoy, its words "the joins that graft" (120, *Words*). And graft they do. Her new language, the Grassling's new awareness, the book she is writing, each page "fleshy" (144, *Xylotomy*), are the scion on the stock of her father, his history and the soil they share. The grafting in Burnett's case coincides with writing herself into the soil of her father, in writing herself "into him" (149) and, "through a shared space and a shared narrative" (149), growing into an entity which contains them both, as well as the soil, and the Earth, to which they belong. Burnett's efforts at grafting herself onto her father, however, are also fueled by a second undercurrent, grief.

3. "Grief would break from its head like a bird from its shell"

The connection between Burnett and her father is layered in soil and language. The emotional undercurrent of her visits is mutable: as he edges in and out of health, so does her attitude shift from hope to a prescient sort of mourning. And he is so embroiled with the land and

[12] The creation of a new language, a hybrid just like the entity that first learns, then employs it, is part of the process of becoming, of becoming-with as Haraway (2003; 2008) and multispecies ethnography term it, as "the new kinds of relations emerging from nonhierarchical alliances, symbiotic attachments, and the mingling of creative agents […] often involve the development of hybrid, embodied and multisensorial languages to communicate across species boundaries" (Wright in https://www.multispecies-salon.org/becomings/).

the soil that "the fields call when he does" (70). There is always a sense of hope, at the start, for him to be beckoning her home, it must mean he is well enough to talk, to be left for a time as she explores the acreage he embodies. When she arrives, the fields "hold a sense of hope" (70), they are a place of resilience, of "holding on" (70). As she wanders, the deeper she goes into his history and into the soil, the more frequent the thoughts of her father "teetering on this side of the ground" (106, *Wills*) become. It appears evident how much her fieldwork, her research and her writing are an exercise in holding onto him: "*a moment more*, I whisper to him across the fields: *and for as many moments as you can*" (106). So pervasive become the thoughts about her father's impending death that they even start to seep into the Grassling's own consciousness: "it imagines itself without him. It has to" (110, *Withy*).

The inextricability of human and non-human, daughter and plant, from the Grassling's fabric even when it comes to something personal, and considered profoundly human like grief, is evident as the alchemy of hope and despondency soaks into the soil. Indeed, the grief and mourning she feels towards her father is slowly paired with an earthly sense of impending doom. As she explores, as she writes and metamorphoses, Burnett is slowly filled with a sense of bereavement for the nature of her youth she finds drastically altered by human action. She acknowledges with growing consternation the negative effects that farming has had on the state of the soil, causing its degradation and in turn the displacement of wildlife, pollution, and the upending of ecosystems. "One disappearance triggers another" (38, *Indigo*), she notes gazing at wild flowers, and thinks "how many more summers will the scene before me play out, as pollinators struggle to navigate extreme weather, the depleted flower habitats caused by intensive farming and urbanization, and harmful pesticides?" (38). The solastalgic (Albrecht 2005) scrutiny of a beloved place slowly vanishing relates to the other forthcoming bereavement: "It is a strange sensation to be watching something coming to an end" (38).

The twofold witnessing is what solidifies this connection: "Things are leaving and things will not be the same. He is leaving and it will not be the same" (111). Burnett's twofold grief is personal and planetary, and it triggers an equally intimate sense of mourning. The human and the non-human are thus once again intertwined. In grief-borne kinship both are presented as equally mournable subjects, a subversion of the widespread propensity to derealize the non-human from the realm of the grievable (Cunsolo Willox 2012; Cunsolo Willox & Landmann 2017). The only discrepancy lies in the degree of culpability the human carries when it comes to non-human loss. Ecological grief combines grief and guilt, a mourning for both what has been lost and for what has been destroyed (Menning 2017). "We lurch from hero to demon" (68, *Quarter*) within crises of our making "often overlooking the value in […] being neighbourly" (68); in essence, disregarding what is to be gained from espousing a prosocial, partnership-driven approach when relating to our environment (Eisler 2002), while experiencing the full brunt of the dominator mindset we have enacted in its stead.

The two threads of grief follow analogous trajectories towards further entwining and reaching to their culminating point. At her father's funeral, encapsulated in the last interlude, *Soil Memoir for St. Mary's Churchyard*, Burnett initially registers the silence in the wake of the severance: "When one voice falls away, they all do" (181). As the man is laid

to rest, all the connections he embodied rupture along with his ability to maintain them: "Where there are no words there is no join" (181). Subverting the words of the *Psalms* 103: 15-17 (KJV) recited at the funeral – "As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place shall know it no more" – Burnett declares that "this place knows him" (181). Her father's connection to the soil is remarked even in death as "the grass takes to him like a part of itself returning" (182). The Grassling, a mourner at the funeral, "bends into its end" and lets itself be "carried down into the falling ground", not knowing "how to get back up" (182). Born out of connectedness, the Grassling has reached the point of breaking as well as its highest achievement – it has accomplished its mission, relinking the human and the non-human right into the soil. In the aftermath, "it has begun to feel, without bitterness, that it may have served its purpose" (184, *Zygote*) and the metamorphic state (yet not its effects) starts to ebb.

A similar abrupt rupture takes place just before Burnett's father dies, when she goes wild swimming in Appledore. In waters that are tied to her family history, her own self "slips" (178, *Zoic*); she feels "expanded", part of a larger system, breath-bound to her ancestors. Burnett feels the environment breathing in its entirety and variety: animals and plants, stars and planets, the fields and the soil, chemicals and bacteria, all of them united in a choral and communal inhaling/exhaling. She settles and indulges in a current that is simultaneously physical and cosmic. Yet, as she "reverberate[s]" she is abruptly pulled out of the joint exhalation of life: "But I nudge a plastic bottle, and I stop. I end. How do I go on, when there is nowhere to come back to?" (179, *Zoic*). The contact with plastic, a pollutant, an inert, out-of-place material, breaks the human/non-human flow, the communal movement of expansion, plastic being the tangible proof of man's disruptive action upon the environment.

The encounter recalls Rachel Carson's words on groundwater pollution[13], and, in reciting them, Burnett, *transfert*-like, becomes Carson, first, and then she becomes polluted water: "I am that water. […]; I float on and in myself. […] will I ever, ever be clean?" (180, *Zoic*). Yet, Carson's words are able to defeat "the plastic spectre made manifest", having enough potency to rally Burnett to hope: "I am damaged, but it's not quite over. […] Here is a space for salvaging". Reminded of her "zoicness", her inextricable connectedness, Burnett becomes a vessel for a multitude of entities. Latching onto hope, her voice, the same that turned into Carson's, thickens and multiplies into "all the voices of the advocates. All the voices of my family. All the voices of the sea. There is still time" (180). The sublimation of voices marks both an intentional re-embracing of the holistic connection with the non-human and a purposeful foray into advocacy.

[13] "I hear the words of Rachel Carson pass through me as fluidly as my own. 'This groundwater is always on the move', I say. And I am Rachel Carson. 'It travels by unseen waterways until here and there it comes to the surface … all the running water of the earth's surface was at one time groundwater'. And I am that water. I hold not only my own fluid but all of the rocks' of all of the earth; I float on and in myself. I am zoic: containing fossils, with traces of animal or plant life. 'And so, in a very real and frightening sense, pollution of the groundwater is pollution of water everywhere'" (179-180, *Zoic*).

4. Conclusions: "all field, all dew, all hope"

The space for salvaging whose existence Burnett unhesitatingly acknowledges is to be understood as a space for action and hope, fostered by the restoration and amplification of non-human agency. Burnett's metamorphosis, born out of the need of accessing a deeper understanding of herself both as part of her family and of the landscape, conflates the natural and the cultural dimensions inside a hybrid body with its own agency, and bridges over the rift between the two, simultaneously disavowing the dominator mindset: "'What is it the Grassling leaves here?' That awful earthly clinging, that desperate human need to say 'mine' and fence in what that was never yours to fence" (186, *After*).

The space for salvaging can also be regarded as a place for storytelling, the *locus* of our interconnectedness from which that vestige of man's silenced animality can be reached. And Burnett effectively becomes an *advocate*[14] – for she can hear the non-human "language secrete under her feet a secret sequence" (60, *Osteoporosis*), amplify and replicate it. A mirroring which never subordinates it to a human understanding, nor does it try to make it digestible, therefore never discounting its significance or its legitimacy. Even when wondering "what do words add up to" (67, *Quarter*), she remains aware that "there may be a value in this amplification, in the bringing of these characters into the foreground, in changing the way they are looked, or not looked, at" (68-69, *Quarter*).

After her father's death, Burnett traverses the fields "uphill, for it will always now be uphill" (186), aware that "there is nothing left to fear" for the worst, his passing, has already occurred. What is left is his imprint on the landscape around her: "A skylark's flight, the flooding white, the glistening light: my father" (186)[15]. During her walk she dons his coat. The wearing of it becomes an adamantine statement on her part: "My father's coat stays on", she says. On the one hand, this may suggest her reluctance to let go of her father and what he represents – the tradition, the cultural *logos* he embodies. Yet, on the other hand, by using his pen to write his name on a blade of grass, by imprinting her touch on it, and leaving "a part of us there", Burnett quickly comes to a different understanding. The human now connects with the non-human, the time of "becoming, of beginning, of bepersoning, begrassing" is now a time of letting go:

> And as I have processed these multiple convergences, my shape, and the language of my shape, has changed. […] My blood has changed. As my DNA carries along stem, along stolon, along leaf, along rhizome, I am zygote, a cell formed by fertilization. But I have always known that to continue, part of me must break. I have felt the cracks form along my spikelets and moved with the strain, though only part of me has been prepared to let go (184).

The ebbing away of the most corporeal, visibly hybrid elements of the metamorphosis,

[14] From the Latin *advocatus* "one called to aid (another); a pleader (on one's behalf)". In Middle English "one who intercedes for another and protector, champion, patron" https://www.etymonline.com/word/advocate.

[15] The skylark's flight Burnett associates to her father's (now spiritual) presence in the natural world around her is reminiscent of P. B. Shelley's own parallel between Bird and Spirit in *To a Skylark* (1820).

however, does not entail a loss of the awareness gained in this newfound form. The spikelets detach, but the Grassling remains a "wider thing with strange beatings" (184). The term "zygote" is especially telling – and being also the last word/chapter of the dictionary, it is particularly crucial. The zygote is a cell resulting from the union of two distinct gene pools[16], Burnett's identification reveals how the experience of morphing into the Grassling has turned her into the synthesis of two differing domains, the natural and the cultural, a potential foundation for a new way of living, a healed, mindful one. It is no coincidence that her declaration: "I am zygote, a cell formed by fertilization" echoes the "I am grass made flesh" (148) of her metamorphosis. Thus, the moment of "unending, unbeginning, unravelling, unpersoning, ungrassing, unbuttoning" though bittersweet, becomes a time of healing and new realizations, of hope: "I had the joy of coming near […] and that is what does not end" (186). The reframing of possession and loss as deceptive notions and the attainment of a healing, both in personal as well as in planetary terms, through a new transcorporeal understanding of the continual profound human/non-human interactions, is in truth, the subscription to a partnership, a "coming near" in circular coexistence, one that does not end: "I have not lost him, because I never had him. People are not ours to own, we coexist if we're lucky" (186).

The notion of "that great continuing" (187, *After*) Burnett places at the end of both *Before* and *After* (respectively the first and the last sections of her soil dictionary) *de facto* opens and closes Burnett's soil-searching, and marks a time before and after metamorphosis, a pre- and post- healed understanding of all-encompassing interconnectedness. "It is no longer about what I know but what I have the capacity to feel" (187). And Burnett, in writing the name of her father and her family with the man's pen into the soil, in calling out to her father, to her family and "to the ground that gives and takes them" (187) finalises the inception of a new way of looking at and of advocating for the non-human. Her soil-searching, the voyage which brought her under the surface of her landscape and the heritage it safeguarded, and deeper still, into the depths of the Earth and its plight, delivered her of her grief, providing healing through the understanding of interconnectedness. From the ashes of (eco)grief "more than the day is beginning" (187).

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Valeria Strusi is a PhD student at the University of Sassari. Her research project explores the entanglements between life writing and nature writing in contemporary hybrid nonfiction from an ecocritical perspective. Prior to starting her doctorate program, she completed a Bachelor's degree in Cultural and Linguistic Mediation at the University of Sassari and a Master's degree in Euro-American Languages and Literatures at the University of Pisa, and two postgraduate one-year courses in Publishing (IULM, Milan) and Specialised Translation (Consorzio ICoN, Pisa).
v.strusi@phd.uniss.it

Loredana Salis (MA, PhD) is Associate Professor of English Literature at the University of Sassari. Her research interests include 19th century gender(ed) narratives, exile narratives and adaptations of the canon. She has published monographs on uses of myth (2009) and stage representations of the migrant other (2010) in contemporary Irish literature, and articles on Gaskell, H. Martineau, Dickens, G. Eliot, E. O'Brien, Carr, F. McGuinness, Morrissy, and Heaney. She has translated Dickens' theatre (2013), W. B. Yeats' prose (2012) and two plays by G. B. Shaw (2022). She has edited Constance Markievicz's *Prison Letters* (*Lettere dal carcere,* 2017) and is currently working on Markievicz's political writings. In 2019, she edited a monographic issue of *SIJIS, Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies* dedicated to the Irish Diaspora (2019).
lsalis@uniss.it