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Walking to Stay Alive: Sarah Moss's Lockdown Novel *The Fell*

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Abstract

Sarah Moss's novel The Fell *(2021), set during the second lockdown in Britain, is an instance of fiction's engagement with the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Written in the midst of the calamity, the novel presents events from the limited perspective of an individual whose personal crisis is intensified by her enforced isolation and confinement. Spanning only one night, the story recounts the protagonist's quarantine-breaking walk on the hills of the nearby Peak District as her way of coping with the overwhelming situation. This article analyses the character's retreat into nature as her instinctive reaction to societal pressures. Drawing on Frédéric Gros's* A Philosophy of Walking *and Henry David Thoreau's essay* Walking, *this article centres on the trope of walking in Moss's novel, positing that the heroine is an incarnation of Thoreau's "walker errant." It is argued that for Kate communing with nature, perceived as a site of otherness and an ever-renewing cycle of life and death, is vital for her spiritual balance, but it has also become a survival strategy during the current crisis.*

Keywords

Sarah Moss, *The Fell*, nature in literature, walking, pandemic literature, lockdown

Whereas there can be no doubt that the present Covid pandemic will be remembered as a milestone in twenty-first century history, it remains to be seen what mark the calamity is going to leave on literature. Several novels that attempt to capture the experience of living in the time of the pestilence have already appeared. Sarah Hall's *Burntcoat*, Gary Shteyngart's *Our Country Friends* and Sarah Moss's *The Fell* – all published in 2021 – take place against the backdrop of the ongoing pandemic. While a mere three novels do not provide sufficient grounds for generalising about how the Covid-related crisis will be portrayed in fiction, they do indicate a number of possible directions open to contemporary writers. Nevertheless, just as the experience of a pandemic has numerous historical antecedents, so there is a tradition of literary representations of such calamities within which contemporary novels may be inscribed. Mary Shelley's *Last Man* (1826), which envisages the demise of humankind resulting from the onset of a deadly disease, may be invoked in an analysis of *Burntcoat*. Sarah Hall not only reproduces aspects of living with the threat of a deadly virus that are familiar from our recent daily experience, but also "fantasise[s] apocalypse" by depicting widespread social disintegration.[1] Shteyngart's *Our Country Friends*, which portrays a group of people isolating together from the disease, contains more than an echo of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. By contrast, Sarah Moss's *The Fell,* although also deploying the motif of self-isolation, gestures towards a certain type of nature writing – rooted in the culture vs nature dichotomy, the protagonist's escape from societal pressures into the solace that the natural world offers constitutes yet another response to the disaster. Specifically, the freedom of open spaces functions as a life-saving alternative to the oppression of the lockdown.

With the goal of analysing the significance of nature in Sarah Moss's story, this article will take account of the novel's references to the present pandemic, but will try to circumvent an

1 Lara Feigel, "*Burntcoat* by Sarah Hall Review – Love under Lockdown," *The Guardian*, 8 October 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/oct/08/burntcoat-by-sarah-hall-review-love-under-lockdown>.

obvious reading of the novel as an instance of pandemic fiction. Even though the lives of all the characters are deeply marked by the ongoing disaster, the pandemic is not the sole cause of their current predicament; it would be truer to say that it has only exacerbated and amplified their existing problems. As Hephzibah Anderson observes, among the existential anxieties that trouble the heroine, "Covid itself is way down the list, functioning more as an intensifying trigger."[2] On the night the action takes place, this trigger brings Kate to breaking point and, literally, to the verge of death.

Moss has no ambition to place the pandemic in a wider context – instead, the novel offers a momentary insight into how a few individuals experience a prolonged state of crisis. The story captures the calamity *in medias res*, without endeavouring to sketch out its timeline. But the work itself was written from a vantage point located in the middle of the process, when no end of the pandemic was yet in sight. "Fiction," says Natalie K. Watson in her review of *The Fell*, "can be a way to engage with some of those memories that seem far away already and yet also too close for a perspective that allows these to be truly in the past."[3] Echoing this view, Beejay Silcox describes *The Fell* as "a literary time capsule" which "captures the listlessness and erosive interiority of lockdown" without enhancing "our understanding of these fraught years."[4]

Nor does the protagonist of Moss's novel have any clear notion of what is going on in the wider world. From her limited perspective, the experience of the lockdown (the context is specifically the second lockdown in Britain in November 2020) is confusing, unsettling and overwhelming. Kate appears to regard both the pandemic itself and the measures undertaken to deal with it as manifestations of contemporary civilisation having gone astray. It is the protagonist's belief that human intervention in wildlife is not only ruthless but also irrational and contrary to the workings of the ecosystem, of which humans are a part. Her example is the practice of farming mink for their fur and the subsequent disposal of their bodies in shallow pits, which contaminates groundwater – "it's just so typical of humanity in the twenty-first century and it won't end there, once it's in the mink it will be in the badgers and otters, those that survive the TB cull and the pesticides and gamekeepers and cars."[5] In *Dancing with Disaster* (2015) Kate Rigby draws a distinction between natural disasters and epidemics on the grounds that the latter are "hybrid" occurrences – partly natural and partly anthropogenic in origin and in their subsequent proliferation.[6] The protagonist of Moss's novel, however, locates the genesis of the problem firmly in modern civilisation rather than nature. Even though a natural pathogen is at the heart of the Covid crisis, its effect is so lethal and so widespread owing to the human misuse of the natural resources. Effectively, from the character's point of view, it is a self-imposed catastrophe.

2 Hephzibah Anderson, "*The Fell* by Sarah Moss Review – the Hills Are Alive with Pandemic Anxieties," *The Guardian*, 7 November 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/nov/07/the-fell-by-sarah-moss-review-the-hills-are-alive-with-pandemic-anxieties>.

3 Natalie K. Watson, "*The Fell* by Sarah Moss," *Church Times*, 26 November 2021, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2021/26–november/books-arts/book-reviews/the-fell-by-sarah-moss>.

4 Beejay Silcox, "Just a Sip of Outside. A Tale of Quarantine-breaking in the Peak District," *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 December 2021: 20.

5 Sarah Moss, *The Fell* (London: Picador, 2021), 31.

6 Kate Rigby, *Dancing with Disaster: Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 52.

The action covers one night, during which Kate, a middle-aged divorced mother, breaks quarantine to take a walk in the nearby Peak District. What was meant to be a short stroll has dire consequences – Kate falls off a fell, and, after several suspenseful hours during which she struggles to survive while a rescue team searches for her, she is found, badly injured but alive. The life-threatening situation Kate experiences comes as the culmination of her various other problems. The national lockdown has affected her personally – deprived of her regular wages, unable to go out to work or take part in social life, Kate feels acutely lonely and is driven to ruminate on the misfortunes and mistakes of her past. Her quarantine, following her contact with an infected person, comes as the last straw. Apart from a nerve-racking self-examination for symptoms of the disease, the protagonist feels both physically and mentally so oppressed by the domestic incarceration that she cannot resist the impulse to slip out for a walk on the nearby moors. Far from being a one-off whim, rambling through the wild countryside is for Kate a daily habit which appears to fulfil her vital need. Yet under the present circumstances she needs this escape more than ever, even at the risk of breaking the law, because, as she reflects, "walking a few more minutes, another mile or so, over the darkening hill makes it easier to stay alive."[7]

This article claims that the protagonist's need for intimate contact with nature is not only a way of coping with the pressures of the current predicament, but also puts her in a category of nature-lovers for whom walking is a prerequisite for both physical and spiritual well-being. The following discussion focuses on the trope of walking in the novel with reference to the literary tradition initiated, among others, by the English Romantics as well as eloquently eulogised by Henry David Thoreau. However, it is also argued that for Kate the deeply ingrained walking habit presupposes a view of nature that is closer to the contemporary biocentric approach than the traditional human-centred, romanticising vision.

The Nature of Walking

In his book *A Philosophy of Walking* (2014) contemporary French philosopher Frédéric Gros elevates the basic activity of walking to a means of achieving a sense of freedom since, as he contends, even a short stroll brings about a momentary liberation from "the burden of cares," "the constraints of work," "the yoke of routine."[8] Gros argues that our ideas about what is essential automatically change as we become preoccupied with "the weight of the rucksack, the length of the stages, the uncertain weather (threat of rain, of storms, of murderous heat), the primitive accommodation, things like that …" Indeed, even the physical discomforts that walking often involves lead to "micro-liberations."[9] Gros goes on to distinguish three kinds of freedom that can be gained while walking. The first, which he calls "suspensive freedom," consists in a temporary abandonment of routine, a short escape that ends in return. Hence, rather than changing the pattern of everyday life, the experience of suspensive freedom ultimately allows one to cope with it. The second, "aggressive and rebellious" freedom, entails a complete break with conventions, with the boredom of sameness and

7 Moss, *The Fell*, 64.

8 Frédéric Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 2014), 3.

9 Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking*, 3–4.

repetition, and with the sense of security. In this case, walking, or just heading somewhere far off, is a response to the call of the wild, the appeal of the great outdoors.[10] Without explicitly invoking the concept, Gros describes this freedom in terms of an encounter with the sublime: "the immense vigour of starry night skies, elemental energies," "abundances of beauty that turn the soul over, excesses of drunkenness on the peaks, the high passes (where the body explodes)." The "walking body" merges with nature, becoming "just an eddy in the stream of immemorial life."[11] The third, ultimate kind of the freedom of the walker comes in the aftermath of the first two, typically as a result of a lifetime of experience. This freedom entails renunciation and retirement into meditation and contemplation. Yet it is not clear from Gros's brief and rather nebulous description whether in his view this turn to inner life must be accompanied by a physical retreat to a remote place, in other words, if the idea of "withdrawal to the forest"[12] is to be taken literally.

The above reflections on the spiritual benefits of walking and communing with nature almost inevitably bring to mind the Romantic tradition. William Wordsworth's autobiographical poetry expresses his quest for a connectedness with nature during his perambulations in the countryside. In poems such as "Tintern Abbey" he reflects on his transition from a youthful, direct, sensuous delight in nature to a mature, self-reflective, contemplative response. In the words of Martin Ryle, "Wordsworth's poetry celebrates the power of nature to uplift, redeem, and console."[13] A similar belief in the redemptive power of the natural world permeates the writings of the American transcendentalists. Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), in which the writer records his two-year experiment in living in a secluded woodland cottage, has been categorised as a primary instance of "the retreat narrative."[14] However, as Randall Roorda argues, with Thoreau solitude is not the aim in itself; behind the flight from the mundane affairs of daily social life is a quest for "the extraordinary and transformative," for a life-changing encounter with the non-human world.[15]

In his extended essay *Walking* (1851), described by Gros as "the first philosophic treatise" on the subject,[16] Thoreau specifically extols the value of countryside rambles as a personal form of purification and an uplifting spiritual exercise. Elsewhere, in his *Journal* (1857), he writes: "I suppose that this value, in my case, is equivalent to what others get by churchgoing and prayer."[17] It would appear from Thoreau's essay on walking – which, in the words of Edward F. Mooney, "meanders along like a conversation or brook"[18] – that Gros's neat three-partite categorisation

10 Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking*, 5–6. The author cites the writings of Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder to illustrate the second type of freedom.

11 Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking*, 6–7. Gros extends here the meaning of walking to include extreme physical and mental experiences ("debauch of energy") such as those attained by means of drugs, drink, or sexual excess (7).

12 Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking*, 8.

13 Martin Ryle, "After 'Organic Community': Ecocriticism, Nature, and Human Nature," in *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature*, ed. John Parham (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 14.

14 Randall Roorda, *Dramas of Solitude: Narratives of Retreat in American Nature Writing* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 4.

15 Roorda, *Dramas of Solitude*, 10.

16 Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking*, 88.

17 Qtd in Edward F. Mooney, *Excursions with Thoreau: Philosophy, Poetry, Religion* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 37.

18 Mooney, *Excursions with Thoreau*, 37.

of the freedoms that walking supposedly affords is blurred in practice, as the activity is likely to generate an entire spectrum of sensations all at once.[19] A conflation of a temporary relief from "all daily engagements,"[20] a taste of the wild and the immense ("Give me the ocean, the desert, or the wilderness!"[21]), and the ability to see civilisation and human affairs from a distance[22] is what Thoreau appreciates about his walks. It is obvious that the writer refers to walking in a special, and restricted sense, as not every act of moving from place to place would qualify for this designation. As may be inferred from his meditations, walking proper is undertaken for its own sake, not for the practical purpose of reaching a certain destination. And, inevitably, walking entails moving away from the sphere of civilisation, and into the realm of nature: "When we walk, we naturally go to the fields and woods: what would become of us, if we walked only in a garden or a mall?"[23] Indeed, recurrent in Thoreau's meandering reflections is a perception of nature as opposed to culture, embodied by narrow domesticity and social constraints. Nature stands for "absolute freedom and wildness,"[24] or, as Mooney rephrases it in his commentary on Thoreau, "a domain more or less free of human control."[25] Hence, the physically and spiritually invigorating experience of walking becomes a way to "regain sanity and freedom."[26]

Walkers Errant – Walking away from the Lockdown in *The Fell*

The benefits of walking commended by Thoreau are of course not universally appreciated or universally shared. Nor are they, as the writer insists, universally accessible – one becomes a walker by "a direct dispensation of Heaven," or perhaps this is an innate disposition: "You must be born into the family of the Walkers."[27] People who are prepared to leave the comforts of their homes for the pleasures of roaming in the wild may be perceived as akin to medieval pilgrims, crusaders, or, most appropriately, as successors to the old order of knights errant.[28] Their lifestyle appears eccentric from the perspective of those who favour a stationary, indoor existence. Thoreau confesses that it is not unusual for him to succumb to the impulse to go out even late in the evening.[29] Although Thoreau is never explicitly invoked in Sarah Moss's novel, the experience that the American writer describes is familiar to her protagonist. Indeed, the action begins with Kate's irrepressible urge to taste the freedom of the wild fells. A walk after dark, apart from affording her the usual

19 It may also be observed that Gros's broad and inclusive definition of walking is implicitly limited to non-urban locations. On one occasion, he juxtaposes the walker with the city-dweller (*A Philosophy of Walking*, 4), which appears to exclude the phenomenon of the urban *flâneur*.

20 Henry David Thoreau, *Walking* ([Waiheke Island]: The Floating Press, 2008), 6.

21 Thoreau, *Walking*, 32.

22 Thoreau, *Walking*, 12.

23 Thoreau, *Walking*, 10.

24 Thoreau, *Walking*, 3.

25 Mooney, *Excursions with Thoreau*, 42.

26 Mooney, *Excursions with Thoreau*, 37.

27 Thoreau, *Walking*, 5.

28 Thoreau, *Walking*, 5.

29 Thoreau, *Walking*, 7.

enjoyment, on this occasion may have the added benefit of shielding the quarantine-breaker from the scrutiny of her neighbours.

Two of the four main characters in *The Fell* may be said to belong to Thoreau's category of walkers errant. As Edward F. Mooney explains in his analysis of Thoreau's essay, "To be errant is to stray from the usual path, wander from social expectations,"[30] which requires "the knack for wildness or lawlessness."[31] This is precisely what the protagonist Kate does by adhering to her passion for walking, and this is also what she does on this particular night by breaking the law for a taste of the wild. Apart from Kate, the novel features Rob, a volunteer member of the rescue team that eventually finds her. The few glimpses of his life that the narrative offers suffice to highlight a resemblance to Kate's situation. Still reeling from the breakdown of his marriage, Rob lives alone, earning his livelihood in a humdrum job and spending time with his adolescent daughter on allocated days. In contrast to his quotidian and unrewarding existence, his involvement in the voluntary rescue service in the Peak District is a continuation of his great passion for the outdoor life. Therefore, it is logical – though not of course inevitable – that these two characters' parallel lives finally intersect in their favourite haunt – up on the moorland. However, the novel does not continue beyond the moment of Kate's partial recovery, stopping short of offering a happy ending to a rather bleak lockdown story.

The two characters share a habit of walking in the wild.[32] Each of them is, as Kate's son thinks of his mother, "an outdoor person."[33] Night-walking is one of her favourite pastimes – it is the best opportunity to see badgers in the woods, watch the stars from the hills, and hear the sounds of the natural world.[34] In the situation described in the novel, Kate clearly seeks what Gros identifies as "suspensive" freedom – walking allows her to free her mind from worries and anxieties, or, as the French philosopher would put it, achieve her "micro-liberations" by an immersive preoccupation with her present physical exertion and her sensuous response to nature. During her solitary walk described in the novel, Kate relishes hearing the birds singing, feeling the wind in her face, and contemplating the autumnal colours of the vegetation.[35]

Indeed, in *A Philosophy of Walking* Gross claims that the concentration on the elementary exercise of walking brings the walker a sense of mental relief. He accounts for the experience by pointing out that "[y]ou're doing nothing when you walk, nothing but walking. But having nothing to do but walk makes it possible to recover the pure sensation of being, to rediscover the simple joy of existing."[36] It is clear from the description of her sensations that Moss's character seeks

30 Mooney, *Excursions with Thoreau*, 42.

31 Mooney, *Excursions with Thoreau*, 44.

32 The designation of the place as wild must, however, take account of the fact that no place in contemporary England is completely untouched by the influence of civilisation. After all, the Peak District where the action takes place is a national park, purposefully protected from urbanisation. As Timothy Clark points out, "In the limited sense of places unaffected by human activity there is no 'nature' as such left on the planet, but there are various 'environments,' some more pristine than others" (Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 6).

33 Moss, *The Fell*, 94.

34 Moss, *The Fell*, 11.

35 Moss, *The Fell*, 36–37.

36 Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking*, 83.

precisely this kind of experience. After several days spent in confinement, it gives her a simple and tangible pleasure to feel her body again working in harmony with the natural environment: "Kate is out and moving, going somewhere, the hill rising under her feet and the sky ahead of her. Wind in the trees and her body working at last, climbing, muscle and bone doing what they're made for."[37] For Rob, rock-climbing triggers a similar sensation when his whole world contracts to his body's life-and-death struggle with the rock, in a relationship the intimacy of which, as he reflects, can be compared to sex: "the kind when you're acting on instinct and instinct is right, one move to the next."[38]

Likewise, her own absorption in the exercise of walking leads Kate to a sense of communion with nature, as she begins to feel "almost airborne, part of the sky."[39] The delight of walking gradually transmutes to an encounter with the sublime – the vast expanse of the moorland seems like the swell of the ocean, and its appeal appears so irresistible that she feels compelled to keep on walking despite the rain and falling night. The immensity of the natural world both reminds the protagonist of her suicidal urges, and helps her dispel these thoughts as she seems to yield to a sense of oneness with the universe.[40] For Rob, the pleasure of climbing is also a liminal experience – the bliss of an instinctive bond with the rock beneath his body is achieved at "the constant and immediate risk of death."[41] While Kate does not envisage a mortal danger during her solitary rambles (although she does find herself on the brink of death on this particular night), she, too, accepts the usual physical discomforts that come with being out in the open: bad weather, fog, rain on her face, slippery stones and muddy paths. For people like Kate and Rob, these vexations are superseded by the gains: "The relief of it, being out, being alone, starting to warm up from her own effort, wind and sky in her lungs, raindrops on her face, weather."[42]

As Gros observes, to those who have not experienced it, the walker's condition – exposing oneself to the elements at the cost of domestic comfort – "appears an absurdity, an aberration, a form of voluntary servitude."[43] When Thoreau posits his category of walkers errant, he highlights the gulf between the perspectives of walkers and non-walkers. Claiming that a single day spent solely indoors is difficult for him to bear, Thoreau marvels at the power of endurance demonstrated by those who accept being confined to their houses, shops and offices.[44] Sarah Moss's novel echoes Thoreau's assertions in that the principal division between her characters is derived from their preference for outdoor or indoor life. For example, this difference seemed to be an important reason behind the breakup of Rob's marriage: "It's like trying to keep a wolf in the house, living with you, Liz used to say, you're not house-trained, you're barely even tame"[45]; "she wanted him on the sofa with her in front of the TV all night."[46] At the present moment, while searching for

37 Moss, *The Fell*, 55.

38 Moss, *The Fell*, 132.

39 Moss, *The Fell*, 62.

40 Moss, *The Fell*, 63.

41 Moss, *The Fell*, 132.

42 Moss, *The Fell*, 56.

43 Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking*, 4.

44 Thoreau, *Walking*, 7.

45 Moss, *The Fell*, 104.

46 Moss, *The Fell*, 86.

Kate, Rob perceives himself as an individual in opposition to the majority, each defined along the lines drawn by Thoreau: he relishes being up on the moors, feeling the vigour of his body pushing back against the wind – a freedom which is incomprehensible to those down in the valley, "shut up in their houses, in their beds, breathing each other's air and waiting for another day indoors."[47]

Without ever meeting Kate, he senses a kindred soul in the person he is trying to help. Rather than being annoyed at the recklessness of her solitary night-time escapade, Rob knows that in her circumstances he would have done exactly the same.[48] A person addicted to walking must find the lockdown unbearable. Another part of the novel, narrated from the point of view of Kate's son, proves Rob's guess correct. Just before she steals out for a ramble, after a week spent in quarantine, Matt observes her "basically losing it, hours spent pacing from the front garden through the house to the bottom of the garden and back, followed by the cat who is interested by people coming in and going out and apparently gratified to have the process on repeat."[49] Among the numerous abnormalities and miseries brought on by the pandemic, being confined indoors is the most oppressive for the heroine: "if the people in charge had any sense they'd be setting limits on how many hours you can spend inside, shooing people out into the wind and the fresh air instead of locking us in. When did we become a species whose default state is shut up indoors?"[50] The anti-social "social-distancing," omnipresent surveillance, "acting as if everyone's unclean and dangerous"[51] are other unnatural measures against the calamity.

Kate's transgressive perambulations are a momentary escape from the major impasse in social life. Her sense of both a personal and a collective crisis is captured in the title of one of the chapters – "Remember o thou man." This is the first line of an early-seventeenth century song by Thomas Ravenscroft – a reminder of time running out, and of the prospect of man's damnation following Adam's fall. Ravenscroft urges man to repent and seek God's forgiveness.[52] This song, which Kate used to sing with her choir, goes round and round her head. Viewed in the context evoked by the Ravenscroftian allusion, Kate's errant walk becomes a kind of private pilgrimage in search of the sustenance and renewal that nature offers. Or, to avoid an anthropomorphic bias, it would be more adequate to say that in communing with nature Kate seeks a release from her physical and mental incarceration.

The (Cold) Comfort of Nature

Just as Kate's personal plight is inextricably connected with the national disaster of the pandemic, so her moribund private perspective takes on a nearly apocalyptic dimension. Her bleak vision of living at the end of time blurs together with thoughts of her individual demise. The thought of

47 Moss, *The Fell*, 166.

48 Moss, *The Fell*, 103.

49 Moss, *The Fell*, 6.

50 Moss, *The Fell*, 57.

51 Moss, *The Fell*, 16.

52 Ravenscroft's song is a Christmas carol, first published in *Melismata* (1611). The lines that Kate recalls come from the first stanza: "Remember, O thou man, // O thou man, O thou man, // Remember, O thou man, // Thy time is spent" in *English Madrigal Verse: 1588–1632*, ed. Frederick W. Sternfeld and David Greer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 245–246.

suicide, although carefully suppressed amidst her daily activities, remains a feasible option – Kate keeps a repository of pills on hand as well as bears in mind the vicinity of places in which self-destruction would be easy to carry out – the railway line or a certain steep cliff. The prospect of individual death ties in with a vision of global extinction – the protagonist is convinced about an unfolding man-made ecological catastrophe. She recalls environmental pollution, the Chernobyl disaster, radioactive fallout, foot and mouth disease, the destruction of farm animals, "contaminated, poisoned blood and poisoned soil."[53] The pandemic is the latest manifestation of the unfolding catastrophe.

Even though the human and the natural worlds are clearly juxtaposed in the protagonist's mind, this opposition does not amount to a naive romanticisation or moral appraisal of nature. Typically, the contrast between nature and culture is rooted in the understanding of the former as "the non-human world, the non-artificial, considered as an object of human contemplation, exploitation, wonder or terror."[54] With her concern and respect for the environment, the heroine of Moss's novel appears to exemplify a modern shift in the understanding of the natural world, from an anthropocentric approach, which "takes the human as centre or norm,"[55] to biocentrism, which conceives of man as "a part of greater living identity" and affirms the inherent value of all natural life.[56] Whereas Kate seeks inner balance through a sense of integration with nature, she avoids the anthropocentric predisposition to imagine a reciprocal relationship. On the contrary, for her, nature represents an autonomous realm of being, independent of human meaning-making strategies. If she finds comfort and consolation while out walking, it is because she is capable of responding to the rhythms of nature, and not because the wild life responds to her. Indeed, Kate's fall proves that being a dedicated walker does not save her from experiencing the dangers of the wilderness.

Nevertheless, whether she feels sustained or threatened by the wild, she does not try to impose human constructs on it. The raven that lurks near her when she is injured and helpless is probably waiting to peck her eyes, but, as she reflects, "You can't blame birds."[57] Nature is not responsible for her current predicament – Kate acknowledges that in going on the fells alone, leaving behind her phone, and ignoring the weather forecast she violated the rules of common sense, so she can add to the catalogue of her mistakes. After the accident, with her whole being concentrated on her aching body, the protagonist again feels intimately close to the environment, which, however, now is likely to be the site of her death: "Kate can hear a heartbeat, feel it in the turf and heather, in the breaks in her bones, accelerating, louder and faster and nearer, in the rock."[58] Life and death – the novel seems to intimate – are part of the same natural cycle; human consciousness creates a distinction to which nature is indifferent.

53 Moss, *The Fell*, 110.

54 Clark, *Cambridge Introduction*, 7.

55 Clark, *Cambridge Introduction*, 3.

56 Clark, *Cambridge Introduction*, 2.

57 Moss, *The Fell*, 109. The cadaverous raven in Moss's novel is probably also a borrowing from Thomas Ravenscroft's poetry. Madrigal XX in *Melismata* features three ravens preparing to feast on the body of a slain knight (Sternfeld and Greer (eds.), *English Madrigal Verse*, 240–241).

58 Moss, *The Fell*, 163.

Without idealising nature, Kate appears to acknowledge the human connection with the natural succession of creation and destruction. In contrast to the Romantic vision, nature in Moss's novel is completely neutral morally. Yet, paradoxically, it is the otherness and distinctiveness of the natural world that offers the heroine some consolation. She is aware that whatever happens to her as an individual, life will be endlessly renewed. Likewise, irrespective of the major disruption in the human world caused by the present pandemic, the natural world Kate has escaped into (and nearly succumbs to) is certain to continue. Even though in November vegetation declines, signs of future rebirth can already be detected: "Colour is fading from the moor ahead, but the chestnut tree by the wall is full of starlings in loud conversation and the bumps of next year's buds already swelling on the branches."[59] Kate is not saddened by the winter ahead because she is sure of the return of light. She reflects that although the trees are now bare, their roots are still "working their way through the earth" and the decaying leaves will feed new life: "earth sodden and swollen with autumn's rainfall."[60]

Conclusion: Life Continues

Moss's novel is underpinned by the irony that the protagonist's walking "to stay alive"[61] ends in a life-threatening situation. The otherness and vitality of nature rejuvenate her body and momentarily relieve her mind of the oppressions and problems of her daily life, especially those of the lockdown, but her expectations are frustrated when she succumbs to the perils intrinsic to the wilderness. Thus, whereas Kate's (and Rob's) reflections on nature and the benefits of errant walking in the first half of the novel may be taken as an echo of the Romantic vision, the second part undermines any sense of nature's benignity. Escape into nature entraps the protagonist in a predicament which threatens to be her ultimate disaster. The only way to resolve this contradiction is to abandon an anthropocentric approach and accept, as Kate seems to do, that nature's attraction lies in its autonomy. A biocentric view – to which she implicitly subscribes – "accepts that what grows is decay, that in turn feeds growth; but neither growth nor decay dominate."[62]

Historically, this change in the perception of nature may again be traced back to Thoreau. Lawrence Buell reads the *Walden* project as a text that best illustrates the transition from anthropocentrism to biocentrism, a "record and model of a western sensibility working with and through the constraints of Eurocentric, androcentric, homocentric culture to arrive at an environmentally responsive vision."[63] Mooney concurs with this interpretation of Thoreau's writings, arguing that despite extolling the transformative and nurturing effect of nature, the writer refrains from sentimental idealisation: "Nature is not uniformly beneficent, and in some sense, not beneficent in a personal sense at all. […] But the terrain of "Walking" turns out for the most part to be

59 Moss, *The Fell*, 55–56.

60 Moss, *The Fell*, 37.

61 Moss, *The Fell*, 64.

62 Terry Gifford, "Towards a Post-Pastoral View of British Poetry," in *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature*, ed. John Parham (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 58.

63 Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 23.

impersonally nurturing, supporting him without doing him any special favors (or for that matter, harms)."[64] By contrast, Moss's character does come to harm, but this does not seem to alter her attitude to the natural world.

Notwithstanding her vision of a possible human-caused apocalypse, in the short term the wilderness of the Peak District remains a realm free from the confusion and constraints of social life. There is some comfort to be derived from the observation that whatever happens in the human world, the timeless cycle of nature continues. While the rescuers struggle to save Kate, the wildlife around her persists in its own process of endless renewal: "The Saukin Stone dries in the wind. Though the stone's feet are planted deep in the aquifers, in the bodies of trees a thousand years dead, its face takes the weather, gazes eyeless over heather and bog. Roots reach deep, bide their time. Spring will come."[65] Kate's survival is a parallel to nature's continuity, but it would be an expression of a sentimental bias to assume that there exists any reciprocity or causal connection between the two. Another parallel is forged by Kate's refusal to judge whether her personal survival is a good or bad thing for her. On regaining consciousness, she prefers to simply acknowledge the fact of continuity of life: "Life, then, to be lived, somehow."[66] It may be said that this plain acknowledgement tacitly affirms, on the one hand, Kate's intuitive affinity with the natural world, and, on the other hand, her appreciation of the separation between the world of nature and the world of human affairs. It is this separation that situates nature as a site of retreat for the Thoreauesque walker.

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64 Mooney, *Excursions with Thoreau*, 41.

65 Moss, *The Fell*, 177.

66 Moss, *The Fell*, 180.

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