

# The Lessons of Selborne: Gilbert White's Ruminations on Nature, Humans and the World

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## ABSTRACT

*The following paper analyses a classic work of 18<sup>th</sup> century nature writing, Gilbert White's (1720–1793) Natural History of Selborne (1789). It contextualizes the work in the cultural and philosophical discussions of its era, and stresses White's "economy of nature" as a continuum of spiritual, aesthetic, and economic dimensions of nature. The essay argues that this complexity presents the English naturalist's unique contribution to the rise of nature writing and ecological thought during the emergence of Romanticism. The final discussion here deals with the reception of White's work beginning in the late 1960s and its significance within the ecocritical debates of our day.*

## KEYWORDS

Gilbert White, natural philosophy, economy of nature, ecocriticism

## 1. Introduction

It may seem a rather strange coincidence that Gilbert White's (1720–1793) *Natural History of Selborne* was first published in the same year the French Revolution broke out.<sup>1</sup> Much of the work's charm for contemporary readers comes from the picturesque, pastoral image of pre-industrial England, so unlike the bleak reality of Victorian industrialism and the urban obsessions of the latter part of the nineteenth century. Given the calm and restrained tenor of the book, nothing at the time would have suggested it was about to cause such a seismic shift in the perception of the natural world and help prepare the ground for the rise of the Romantic "eco-logical" thought.

In the past 20 years a growing interest in Gilbert's work has re-emerged, variously emphasising his "split legacy" as a naturalist and a nature writer (L. Peterson),<sup>2</sup> tracing his importance for major Anglophone poets and thinkers like W. Wordsworth, R. W. Emerson, J. Ruskin, and O. Hill (D. W. Hall)<sup>3</sup>, or seeing him as a kind of first mover in a line of emerging "ecological ideas" (D. Worster).<sup>4</sup> The present essay draws on previous scholarship while stressing the unique continuum of the spiritual, aesthetic, and economic dimensions of the work. The final section focuses on Gilbert's notion of *imagination*, which combines two discourses – literary and scientific – into a true *work of art* which informs the mind and inspires the heart.

1 In fact, it was published in November 1788, and as it was the practice at that time, "books published in the closing months of the year could carry the following year's publication date." Gilbert White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, ed. A. Secord (OUP: Oxford, 2013), 38.

2 Cf. Linda H. Peterson, "Writing Nature at the Fin de Siècle: Grant Allen, Alice Meynell, and the Split Legacy of Gilbert White," *Victorian Review* 6/2, no. 9 (2010): 80–91. This double legacy has also been thoroughly reviewed in Ted Dadswell's *The Selborne Pioneer: Gilbert White as a Naturalist and a Scientist – a Re-Examination*. (Routledge: London, 2003).

3 Cf. Dewey H. Hall, *Romantic Naturalists, Early Environmentalists: An Ecocritical Study 1789–1912* (Ashgate: Farnham/Burlington, 2014), 20–27.

4 Cf. Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*. Second Edition (CUP: Cambridge, 1994), 3–25.

## 1. The Parson's Perspective: The Double Edge of the Pastoral

White's *Natural History of Selborne* is a complex work which can be variously described as an *epistolary diary*, an *essay in natural observation*, or simply a *lyrical prose* interspersed with occasional poems. It is written by someone who describes himself as a *stationary man*,<sup>5</sup> i.e., a man who has connected his life with a specific location.<sup>6</sup> The first letters focus on broader issues (i.e., the geographic and administrative delimitation of Selborne) and end up with a "pastoral" perspective. As *pastor* of this secluded place, White delineates the sphere of his action, ranging from the biological details of the inorganic world to the situation of his parishioners who are striving to adjust to the specific geographical and biological *genius loci*:

We abound with poor; many of whom are sober and industrious, and live comfortably in good stone or brick cottages, which are glazed, and have chambers above stairs: mud buildings we have none. Besides the employment from husbandry, the men work in hop gardens, of which we have many; and fell and bark timber. [...] The inhabitants enjoy a good share of health and longevity; and the parish swarms with children.<sup>7</sup>

The introductory chapters reiterate not only the *locus communis* of a Christian understanding of priestly vocation, but also the notion of *good husbandry* in relation to the non-human world as defined by the Parable of the Good Shepherd (John 10:11–18).<sup>8</sup> White fully identifies with his role as a *pastor*: he observes the world around him as *someone who cares* for the well-being of those who have been entrusted to him as well as for the various creatures inhabiting his little Eden-like world in the Anglican parish of Selborne.

This double reference to the human and non-human contexts demonstrates the "economic" core of his worldview as it was understood in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the logic of his priestly role, he combines the *pro-existent* logic of the divine revelation *for humanity*<sup>9</sup> with the notion that non-human creatures are similarly bound by *pro-existent* ties of inter-relatedness: from fish and cattle to the reptiles and insects. For example, cattle are drawn to water, where they find "coolness" and relief from the irritating insects while "dropping much dung, in which insects nestle; and so supply food for the fish, which would be poorly subsisted but from this contingency."<sup>10</sup> Such an observation is not a neutral, "scientific" statement, i.e., without reference to the specific situatedness or prejudice of the observer. In that sense, it does not represent merely a discovery about the nature

5 White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, 39.

6 Although White acquired a solid formal education at various institutions and could have pursued a prestigious position, he returned to the place of his birth and – as his biographer points out – died just a few yards from his birthplace. Cf. Richard Mabey, *Gilbert White: A Biography of the Author of the Natural History of Selborne* (Profile Books: London, 2006), 15.

7 White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, 50.

8 "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and know my *sheep*, and am known of mine. As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep. And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, *and* one shepherd." (KJV).

9 This is the concept of so-called *salvation economy*, i.e., the logic of the divine revelation *for humanity*.

10 White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, 21.

of things: it reiterates the philosophical (and theological) concept of the “eco-nomy,” i.e., acting in a way that is beneficial for all the agents and elements involved. Not surprisingly, the above-cited passage ends with an exclamation: “Thus Nature, who is a great economist, converts the recreation of one animal to the support of another!”<sup>11</sup> It is directly followed by a reference to a similar passage in a work of *poetry*, namely James Thompson’s (1700–1747) *Summer* from his famous cycle *The Seasons*.<sup>12</sup> Thus, we may conclude that the discourse of observation and the discourse of poetry for White are profoundly linked, as they both inspire awe in relation to the “wonderful oeconomy of Providence” (*sic*):

How wonderful is the oeconomy of Providence with regard to the limbs of so vile a reptile! While it is an aquatic it has a fish-like tail, and no legs: as soon as the legs sprout, the tail drops off as useless, and the animal betakes itself to the land!<sup>13</sup> [...] It is curious to observe with what different degrees of architectonic skill Providence has endowed birds of the same genus, and so nearly correspondent in their general mode of life!<sup>14</sup>

White’s predilection for poetic treatments of nature’s economy finds expression in his own works of poetry. At one point, his observation climaxes in a fully-fledged poem about his key object of observation at a particular moment, i.e., a group of birds. The verse is written in a style reminiscent of Thompson: the observing eye discovers the tacit bond of things, fitting everything into the wonderful, “full” orchestra composed of the various species of birds, led by “nice instincts.” The natural reality reveals the providential scheme of things in the “harmonious” *house of the world* as represented in the concept of *oikos*, the Greek origin for the prefix *eco-* as in the word *economy*:

When day declining sheds a milder gleam,  
 What time the mayfly haunts the pool or stream;  
 When the still owl skims round the grassy mead,  
 What time the timorous hare limps forth to feed;  
 Then be the time to steal adown the vale,  
 And listen to the vagrant cuckoo’s tale;  
 To hear the clamorous curlew call his mate,  
 Or the soft quail his tender pain relate;  
 To see the swallow sweep the dark’ning plain  
 Belated, to support her infant train;  
 To mark the swift in rapid giddy ring  
 Dash round the steeple, unsubdu’d of wing:  
  
 Amusive birds!—say where your hid retreat  
 When the frost rages and the tempests beat;  
 Whence your return, by such nice instinct led,

11 White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, 21.

12 “A various group the herds and flocks compose:  
 ... .. (*sic*) on the grassy bank  
 Some ruminating lie, while others stand  
 Half in the flood, and, often bending, sip  
 The circling surface.” [lines 485–9].  
 The work was first published in its entirety in 1730.

13 White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, 76.

14 White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, 170.

When spring, soft season, lifts her bloomy head?  
Such baffled searches mock man's prying pride,  
The GOD of NATURE is your secret guide!<sup>15</sup>

"All nature is so full"<sup>16</sup> and its fullness discloses the artistry of the Creator. Again, the tension between the strictly "natural"<sup>17</sup> and the "cultural"<sup>18</sup> seems to be more like a steady continuum rather than two separate worlds. The description of dusk ("goatsuckers glance in the dusk over the tops of trees like a meteor"<sup>19</sup>) has an almost impressionistic quality, while the "natural" sounds heard in Selborne can be defined in literally musical terms. White ruminates about hooting of owls and the tonal key in which this potentially sinister sound of nature comes to us:

A neighbour of mine, who is said to have a nice ear, remarks that the owls about this village hoot in three different keys, in G flat, or F sharp, in B flat and A flat. He heard two hooting to each other, the one in A flat, and the other in B flat. Query: Do these different notes proceed from different species, or only from various individuals?<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, White's prose here is not "poetic" in the sense of documenting the "pastoral," harmonious nature of all reality. In fact, he never gets carried away by the *lyrical* aspects of his parish district: his mind stays vigilant and calm, revealing a profound sense of scientific discipline. After all, his ideal is that of quiet observation focused on the primacy of truth, regardless how "disagreeable" or "unpoetic" it may turn out to be. The extract about owls is followed by a longer discussion on the "keys" in which the various species sing, or whether the "given key" may or may not differ in different individuals and thus be conditioned by the differences of the individual bodies:

The same person finds upon trial that the note of the cuckoo (of which we have but one species) varies in different individuals; for, about Selborne wood, he found they were mostly in D: he heard two sing together, the one in D, the other in D sharp, who made a disagreeable concert [...] As to nightingales, he says that their notes are so short, and their transitions so rapid, that he cannot well ascertain their key.<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, he is fully aware of the danger to overstate the "poetic," i.e., being driven by the notion of a mysterious sympathy between the natural and the cultural (or, "human"), as it is suggested by the various means of folk-lore, especially traditional medicine.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the "oeconomie" for him is not as a mysterious doctrine of sympathetic correspondences, but a form of knowledge attained by means of diligent observation and strict discipline.

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15 White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, 87.

16 White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, 78.

17 A "given" reality to be studied by "natural sciences."

18 Issues dealing with the 'man-made world' and studied by the humanities.

19 White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, 215.

20 White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, 147.

21 White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, 147.

22 For further discussion of the principles of Western medicine cf. Nancy G. Siraisi, *Medieval and Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice* (University of Chicago Press: London and Chicago, 1990), 1–16.

He admits that this observation proceeds and “progresses” slowly, given the limited scope of relevant facts discovered within a particular span of time,<sup>23</sup> but it is still vastly preferable to the shortcuts of folklore, or the seductive logic of popular “superstitions.” Thus, White doubts various stories of popular medicine based on sympathetic superstitions: in fact, he finds them harmful to his concept of truth rooted in “disinterested” observation. Only “real” truth may generate beneficial effects for humanity:

In my visit I was not very far from Hungerford, and did not forget to make some inquiries concerning the wonderful method of curing cancers by means of toads. Several intelligent persons, both gentry and clergy, do, I find, give a great deal of credit to what was asserted in the papers [...] but, when I came to attend to his account, I thought I discerned circumstances which did not a little invalidate the woman's story of the manner in which she came by her skill. [...] In short, this woman (as it appears to me) having set up for a cancer-doctress, finds it expedient to amuse the country with this dark and mysterious relation.<sup>24</sup>

For White, the boundary of the bearable is the notion of the “mysteriousness” of sacred folklore: nature is *eco-nomic* in being *transparent* to the observing eye of the pastor of Selborne. It defies any kind of “dark” sacredness or traditional arcane knowledge. In fact, only “real knowledge” is truly *economic*, since it addresses the issues of those who – as in this case – “daily languish” under various “terrible disorder(s).” “Scientific truth” presupposes inner transparency, and the lack of “dark mystery” allows for the beneficent use of nature. Such an endeavour tames the unknown and enlarges men's reign over nature.

With all this in mind, the link between the spiritual (theological), aesthetic and economic aspects of reality become clearer: the discovery made does not represent only a beautiful, divinely ordained framework, but also the possibilities of the more efficient use of its various sources and resources. The praise of the “God of Nature” and the “endless room for observation” also necessarily suggest the potentially “endless” use or, indeed, *misuse* of what nature may yield.

### 3. The Economy of Nature and the Economy of Men: What is the Use of Observing Nature?

Although White gives the impression of an English gentleman observing reality with a tender, loving and disinterested eye, at times he reveals that his passion for all things natural is something more than an innocent hobby of an aging nature-lover. The urge to make sense of the magical traditions in people's intercourse with nature suggests that Gilbert no longer understands scientific endeavor as merely delving deeper into the “O altitudo” of divine mysteries. For the influential English essayist **Sir Thomas Browne** (1605–1682) a century earlier, the end of all observation leads to meditating on the mystery itself, i.e., the sacred, and thus incomprehensible and ungraspable

23 “Though there is endless room for observation in the field of nature, which is boundless, yet investigation (where a man endeavours to be sure of his facts) can make but slow progress; and all that one could collect in many years would go into a very narrow compass” Gilbert White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, 134.

24 White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, 76–77.

core of the reality. "I love to lose myself in a mystery; to pursue my reason to an *O altitudo*,"<sup>25</sup> he says in his widely read treatise, *Religio medici* (1643). The text employs a refrains from the key text of the Vulgate version of Romans 11:33: "O altitudo divitiarum sapientiae, et scientiae Dei: quam incomprehensibilia sunt iudicia ejus, et investigabiles viae ejus!" ["O the height of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God: how incomprehensible are his judgments, and how untraceable are his ways!"]. White seeks to avoid the pitfalls of "analogous" reasoning<sup>26</sup> and sees the benefits of studying reality in a theologically more "earthly" context. The practical outcome of such studies is thus measured by the benefits it can bring to the well-being of the human race.

By the latter he means in particular pragmatic, utilitarian benefits, i.e., "activating" nature to yield its produce to humanity, and to thus potentially alleviate the age-old problem of the lack of food for certain populations. In a letter addressed "To The Honourable Daines Barrington" he emphasises the importance of studying the biological principles of "vegetation," since such an endeavour can maximize the economic effect in the future:

Vegetation is highly worthy of our attention [...] The productions of vegetation have had a vast influence on the commerce of nations, and have been the great promoters of navigation, as may be seen in the articles of sugar, tea, tobacco, opium, ginseng, betel, paper, etc. [...] But, without the knowledge of plants and their culture, we must have been content with our hips and haws, without enjoying the delicate fruits of India and the salutiferous drugs of Peru.<sup>27</sup>

Unlike earlier authors such as Browne, White forgoes further discussions on the mysterious core of all reality and the fundamental "givenness" of things. His sole focus is the "economic" significance and importance of studying plants and vegetation in general.<sup>28</sup> The following section demonstrates the utilitarian bias of his thought: all that relevant "science" needs to consider is its usefulness for the human race. In other words, the more research focuses on improving the human condition, the more valuable it becomes:

Instead of examining the minute distinctions of every various species of each obscure genus, the botanist should endeavour to make himself acquainted with those that are *useful*.<sup>29</sup> [...] The botanist that could improve the swerd of the district where he lived would be an useful member of society [...] he would be the best commonwealth's man that could occasion the growth of "two blades of grass where one alone was seen before."<sup>30</sup>

The final statement here is an allusion to a famous passage in the part two of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* in which the King of the fictitious land of Brobdingnag sees maximizing the profit for the benefit of humanity as a key goal: "that whosoever could make two Ears of Corn, or two Blades of Grass to grow upon a Spot of Ground where only one grew before, would

25 Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*. Ed. J. Winny (Cambridge: CUP, 1963), 11.

26 "[...] I delight very little in analogous reasoning, knowing how fallacious it is with respect to natural history... [...]" p. 94.

27 White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, 210.

28 Cf. Tomáš Jajtner. 'The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it': The Concept of Economy (of Nature) in Thoreau's Walden or Life in the Woods' in *Ostrava Journal of English Philology*, 2 (2021): 69.

29 The italics is mine.

30 White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, 210.

deserve better of Mankind, and do more essential Service to his Country, than the whole race of Politicians put together.”<sup>31</sup> Economic profit and emotional affection seem inseparable for White. In fact, they are two dimensions in the continuum of his *economic* logic: nature brings profound spiritual *solace* as a place of natural divine economy (i.e., where the divine reveals itself *for* the benefit of humanity); it also brings, however, enough concrete *subsistence*, and allows humanity to find ways to boost the earth’s fruitfulness.

This sense of continuum in White’s *Natural History* is omnipresent. The narrative is filled with allusions to the co-existence of the cultural and the natural, as if the biological rhythm of the countryside “fits” the cultural scene. The spires of various English counties make an “elegant” landscape, and the “chimneys and thatch of the neighbouring cottages” are beautifully covered with the migrating birds:

When I first saw Northamptonshire, Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire, and the fens of Lincolnshire, I was amazed at the number of spires which presented themselves in every point of view. As an admirer of prospects, I have reason to lament this want in my own country; for such objects are very necessary ingredients in an elegant landscape...<sup>32</sup>

Although scientific enquiry and the logic of repose in a beautiful environment seem to conflict (due to the danger of “wishful thinking” and the risk of perpetuating “popular superstitions”), in *The Natural History of Selborne*, the problem is held at bay. White keeps a “scientific” distance; nevertheless, he is not willing to run the risk of abandoning the pastoral equilibrium, i.e., the notion that the realities of nature must somehow fit the general *economic* design of the teleologically, i.e., *economically* minded Creator.

The key bridge between the two is the concept of *imagination*: at numerous occasions White refers to the “imagination of the poets” and to the fantasies of the “wild natives” that enliven the experience of the natural environment:

Some future faunist, a man of fortune, will, I hope, extend his visits to the kingdom of Ireland; a new field, and a country little known to the naturalist. [...] A person of a thinking turn of mind will draw many just remarks from the modern improvements of that country, both in arts and agriculture, where premiums obtained long before they were heard of with us.

The manners of the wild natives, their superstitions, their prejudices, their sordid way of life, will extort from him many useful reflections.<sup>33</sup>

As long as imagination is “engaged” in a “lively manner,” it is a good and “productive” faculty: indeed, pleasing landscape sceneries bring “pleasure” and a sense of proper form which can also inform the works of human culture. This is how White explains e.g., the need for pauses

31 Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, ed. C. Rawson and I. Higgins (Oxford: OUP, 2005), 124.

32 White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, 81, 85.

33 White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, 116.

in works of music,<sup>34</sup> or the logic of architectural or artistic production in works of art or the design of buildings.<sup>35</sup>

All in all, “culture” and “nature” are interpenetrable worlds in *The Natural History of Selborne*. White pleads for a form of *vitalism*, projecting a number of biological (i.e., “vital”) principles into the world of culture. Irish environmentalist Max Nicholson (1904–2003) sees the correspondence between cultural and natural contexts throughout the very tissue of the work. For Nicholson, it is the *work of art*, i.e., a work of *imagination* in the sense of the 18<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>36</sup> which makes the best use of both discourses (i.e., scientific and literary), while neither of the two takes precedence over the other:

*Selborne* [...] has the fine compression and vitality which can only be given to facts after long study and speculation by a vigorous, original mind. [...] It is a work of art, not all of the same merit but all in the same pattern. It includes nothing to break the spell of the imaginary world it creates. For Gilbert White's world is imaginary. It is not Nature. It is the finest and broadest and the most enduring bridge that can be built between Nature and civilization; it has elements of both, but it is in the last resort true to neither. It is perhaps the nearest approach to Nature which can be universally understood [...].<sup>37</sup>

The use of nature explains the use (and goal) of White's book: to provide a minute, detailed and sober introduction to “natural history” while serving the broad *economic* biases of the day. The divine economy has produced a world ready to be observed: the more precise such an analysis is, the more “useful” it can become for the human race. Nevertheless, this usefulness also invites artistic *imagination*: i.e., it never ceases to also represent a *poetic* object. The book is thus a real *work of art*, not just a machine-like description of reality, as some of the mechanistic concepts of the Enlightenment would suggest.<sup>38</sup> As Nicholson suggests, it has the capacity to “bridge” the discourse of science and “imaginative” literature in a truly *vital* mixture.

Not surprisingly, *Selborne's* second life in its various interpretations or in the works it has inspired has shown not just the genius of the author, but also the urgency of the fundamental relation between the human and the non-human worlds.

34 “[...] we may farther add that the pauses in echoes, when they cease and yet are taken up again, like the pauses in music, surprise the hearers, and have a fine effect on the imagination.” White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, 246.

35 “Should any gentleman of fortune think an echo in his park or outlet a pleasing incident, he might build one at little or no expense. For whenever he had occasion for a new barn, stable, dog-kennel, or the like structure, it would be only needful to erect this building on the gentle declivity of an hill, with a like rising opposite to it, at a few hundred yards distance; and perhaps success might be the easier ensured could some canal, lake, or stream, intervene.” White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, 206.

“[...] all the fading landscape sinks in night.” White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, 289.

36 For a fine discussion of the concept of imagination in 18th century English culture, see John Brewer *The Pleasures of Imagination* (Routledge: London 2013), esp. pp. 55–108.

37 White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, 287–288.

38 See e.g., the classic work of British Enlightenment philosophy Ralph Cudworth's *The Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678), in which adherence to the notion of the mechanistic formation of the universe is a prerequisite of the fundamental intelligibility of the world to the human mind. (See also the discussion in the *British Philosophy and the Age of the Enlightenment*. Ed. S. Brown. Routledge: London, 1996, pp. 21–24.)

#### 4. (Beyond) Conclusion: The Lasting Legacy of Gilbert White

The critical reception of Gilbert White's *opus magnum* has rightfully emphasized the originality of the work. Authors have praised his style, the work's relevance for the history of science and – last but not least – the human energy with which White as an “amateur naturalist” undertook his observations and descriptions. Moreover, this eco-logical impulse has been reconsidered in some of the key works of ecocriticism since the late 1960s<sup>39</sup> which focus on the various ways we communicate the “natural” in human language.

Considering reviews across the centuries,<sup>40</sup> the most enduring element – apart from the mentioned precision in the biological details – of *the Natural History of Selborne* seems to be the “enchanted” quality of the work, an aspect which links it to the tradition of “pastoral” in a more general sense, i.e., to the tradition of harmonious, sympathetic coexistence of the human with the non-human. The ecocritical impulse in the social sciences have made us more acutely aware of the need to refresh the vitality of our intercourse with nature, which can neither be confined by the strict rules of scientific discourse, nor by the naivety, or innocence of the dominant ideological views on nature, which often tend to justify various forms of exploitation. In that sense, the authentic, direct form of communication we find in Gilbert White's account of his country parish assumes a new relevance. The key task of the future is the recovery of the “unmediated encounter” with the natural world:

The problem is therefore to establish the role of simulation for an ecocritical perspective on the globe. For the poetics of authenticity, it is the unmediated encounter with the real world that rescues the subject from the corrupt modern world of representation and simulation.<sup>41</sup>

What makes the difference is the discovery of a language allowing a dialogue between *homo loquens* and the muteness of the environment, i.e., an *imaginative* language which has the capacity to open any reality *anew*. Gilbert White has succeeded in this goal: by letting his world speak, he has managed to reveal all things brutal, bright and beautiful.

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39 A well-chosen selection of these texts can be found in the classic edition Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (ed.) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (University of Georgia Press: Athens, 1996).

40 An exhaustive summary is provided in the 2013 edition of *The Natural History of Selborne* (226–293), edited by Anne Secord.

41 Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism: A New Critical Idiom* (Routledge: London, 2006), 168.

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