

«Every part full of these involvements»:
the intimate and the global in
Emergency (2022) by Daisy Hildyard

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Abstract

Il presente articolo si propone di analizzare *Emergency* (2022) di Daisy Hildyard per mostrare come il romanzo esplori la complessa rete di interconnessioni messa a nudo dal cambiamento climatico e dalla recente pandemia. Si osserverà come l'autrice faccia uso di modalità tradizionali (per es. il genere *pastoral*) per rivisitarne ed espanderne la portata in un'epoca in cui locale e globale coesistono.

Parole chiave: *Emergency*, Daisy Hildyard, rapporto umano/non-umano, pastorale, *slow emergencies*

Abstract

This article endeavours to analyse how Daisy Hildyard's novel *Emergency* (2022) explores the complex and often ambivalent enmeshing of life on Earth, bared by climate change and the recent pandemic. It will also be shown how the author uses traditional modes (i.e. the *pastoral*) to revisit and expand its scope in a time when the global and the local are always encroaching on each other.

Keywords: *Emergency*, Daisy Hildyard, Human/Nonhuman Relationships, Pastoral, Slow Emergencies

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1. The pastoral legacy: frameworks and new iterations

«The Pastoral Novel for the Climate Change Era» (Krishnan 2022) is how Daisy Hildyard's¹ 2022 novel *Emergency* has been billed and marketed after its publication.² The conjuring of the pastoral tradition,³ its idyllic, remote and serene imagery, seemingly clashes with the very different impressions evoked by the array of phenomena linked to climate change. It certainly raises the question of how two seemingly disparate modes of depicting nature can successfully coexist within the same text.

The history of the pastoral and its reception, within the folds of eco-critical thought is fraught with conflicting viewpoints. A state of affairs likely due to pastoral's «shift from a genre, to a mode and to a contemporary concept» (Gifford 2013, 17). The impact and durability of its presence within Western thought is made manifest in its evolution into «a species of cultural equipment» (Buell 1995, 32), whose powers can be used to both «direct us toward the realm of physical nature, or [...] abstract us from it» (Buell 1995, 31). It should come as no surprise, then, that the persistence of the pastoral within the realm of literary forms has elicited complex responses, especially when held up against the growing ecological concerns of our present age. The reproach it has gathered has mostly to do with its perceived artificiality and its propensity to overlook many of the historical,

¹ Before *Emergency*, Daisy Hildyard authored the novel *Hunters in the Snow* (2013) – which received the Somerset Maugham Award in 2014 – *The Second Body* (2017), a non-fiction work on the erosion of boundaries between the human and the nonhuman and climate change. In 2023, Hildyard won the 2023 Encore Award for *Emergency*.

² Unlike the UK edition (Fitzcarraldo Editions), the US edition (Astra House) actually bears the subtitle «A Pastoral Novel». In a 2022 interview Hildyard states that the subtitle «wasn't [her] idea» but, adds: «I was happy for the book to be described like that because I see it as a belonging to the tradition of its form, it's a respectful and loving extension of this, rather than a critique or a different mode entirely» (Whybrow 2022).

³ The pastoral tradition was largely established by Theocritus (c. 316-260 BCE) and his *Idylls* and further expanded and modified in Virgil's (70-19 BCE) *Georgics*. During the Renaissance it was mostly developed through drama (Gifford 2013).

social and economic implications inherent to rural landscapes, while promoting «outmoded models of harmony and balance» (Garrard 2011, 65). Seen as «ideologically compromised because of its deployment [...] in service of class and imperial or metropolitan interests» (Phillips 2003, 16) and «infinitely malleable for differing political ends, and potentially harmful in its tensions and evasions» (Garrard 2011, 37), the pastoral has been variously disallowed as a literary mode, seen as unable to move past the depiction of nature as a cyclical yet fundamentally unchanging collection of well-ordered landscapes.⁴

However, after a necessary acknowledgement of its historical pitfalls and limitations, it can be argued that the pastoral, as a concept, with its tensions and contradictions, can still fruitfully operate within ecocritical frameworks. According to Gifford, its inherent paradoxes are exactly what makes the pastoral so enduringly generative:

the pastoral can be a mode of political critique of present society, or it can be a dramatic form of unresolved dialogue about the tensions in that society, or it can be a retreat from politics into an apparently aesthetic landscape that is devoid of conflict and tension. It is this very versatility of the pastoral to both contain and appear to evade tensions and contradictions [...] that made the form so durable and so fascinating (Gifford 2020, 11).

The argument for an embracing of the pastoral's contradictory nature is the foundation for Gifford's «post-pastoral»,⁵ a conceptual expansion of the former, rather than, as the suffix post- would suggest, a derivation or response:

⁴ In addition, such a depiction of nature often concealed the fostering and promoting of particular social structures and statuses as equally everlasting and naturally ordained, and actively contributed to «the notion that humanity is “progressing” and on a separate, linear path» (Sullivan 2020, 21).

⁵ The term «post-pastoral» was first proposed by Gifford in 1994 in an essay aimed at placing the poetry of Ted Hughes within pastoral tradition. More generally Gifford acknowledges certain features in texts capable of backing a post-pastoral reading, such

«post» in the sense of being beyond the traps of the pastoral, of being aware of some of the problematics of the pastoral, of pushing into the complexities of celebration and responsibility, of being a part of nature and yet uneasy with relationships of ownership and exploitation (Gifford 2010).

In view of this, Gifford maintains that it is best used when describing «works that successfully suggest a collapse of the human/nature divide while being aware of the problematics involved» (Gifford 2013, 26). Thus, a post-pastoral approach does not disregard the deep-rooted inconsistencies ingrained in the pastoral, instead it endeavours to investigate them while «seeking a dynamic, self-adjusting accommodation to “discordant harmonies”» (Gifford 2013, 28).

Correspondingly, Daisy Hildyard’s *Emergency*, appears well-suited for a post-pastoral reading, insofar as the novel employs and dialogues with elements of the pastoral without shying away from displaying their limitations, instead going so far as to employ those same paradoxes to probe into contemporary modes of thinking about man’s relationship with nature. As this article endeavours to demonstrate, *Emergency* shows interest in «the recognition of a creative-destructive universe equally in balance in a continuous momentum of birth and death» (Gifford 2020, 175), while also displaying a «provisional and open to revision» (Gifford 2013, 28) quality to its approach in dealing with the enmeshed slipperiness of the present world, all features that align with a post-pastoral framework.

In addition, *Emergency* can be jointly observed through another contemporary reworking of the pastoral: the «dark pastoral» (Sullivan 2017), which, by unearthing the seemingly unseen (or ignored) repercussion of

as a sense of awe giving rise to humility in front of nature’s creative-destructive forces; an understanding of the layered and culturally significant nature of language relating to the countryside; an acceptance of responsibility for the state of human relationship with nature and the repercussion of such a state of affairs, and the recognition that the exploitation of nature goes alongside the exploitation of those less powerful who variously depend on it and its resources (Gifford 2012).

human-made systems and processes, operates «as a trope of *exposure*» (Sullivan 2017, 26; emphasis in the original). The dark pastoral was created as an «ecocritical trope adapted to the “new nature” of climate change» (Sullivan 2020, 19), the contemporary representation of which worries the line between Anthropocene-induced catastrophic scenarios and the still-present narratives centred around the refugial qualities of natural environments (Sullivan 2020).

Among the multiple new iterations of the pastoral,⁶ the dark pastoral appears to be singularly able to engage and rewire ecological thought (and action) in a direction more mindful of «“anthropocenic” materialities and human and non-human agencies» (Sullivan 2020, 19). It does so by combining – and balancing – the two souls animating contemporary ecological discourses: the «“dark” (ironic, posthuman, postmodern, polluted) and “green” (the sentimental and “artificial natural” of the pastoral that is also biophilic)» (Sullivan 2020, 20-21), avoiding both the over-sentimental and the nihilistic. Just like Gifford’s post-pastoral, dark pastoral’s effectiveness as a tool to parse through differing attitudes towards the environment resides in its ability to strike a balance. Privileging the «green» over the «dark» would result in idealization and in the failure to consider the colonial, social and political implications of landscapes. Conversely, favouring an utterly cynical outlook, privileging the «dark» over the «green», negates the evident «depth of appreciation» for the environment «and its lively non-human occupants whose lives/plights still drive much of environmental negotiations» (Sullivan 2020, 20).

Insomuch as it translates onto the page the perfect enmeshment of dark and green stances towards nature in the Anthropocene, Hildyard’s *Emergency* can be analysed through the lens of the dark pastoral. Indeed, as

⁶ There are many contemporary evolutions and iterations of the pastoral, including but not limited to «radical pastoral» (Garrard 1996), «necropastoral» (McSweeney 2011), «postmodern pastoral» (Corey and Waldrep 2012), «toxic pastoral» (Farrier 2014), «dark pastoral» (Sullivan 2017).

this article will be hopefully able to highlight, the novel, employing a *sui generis* iteration of the retreat and return movement, presents rural nature as both a resoundingly animated and fascinating mesh of agencies and processes and as the layered site of power plays, hierarchies, and influences.

Moving from an exploration of *Emergency*'s depiction of the planet as «fatally interconnected» (Hildyard 2022, 50), that is to say as a complex network of mutual influences in terms of both scale (global/local) and entities involved (human/nonhuman), the present analysis will firstly touch upon the question of agency, as evoked by Hildyard through the encounter-led progress of her narrator's recollections; secondly, the discussion will focus on analysing the novel through lenses informed by Rob Nixon's concept of «slow violence», to highlight how Hildyard does not shy away from the darker facets (and repercussions) of the planet's undeniable interconnectedness.

2. «Fatally interconnected»: the world as a network and questions of scale and agency

Having introduced the framework of reference for the present analysis of *Emergency*, that is to say, the contemporary reworkings of the pastoral (post- and dark pastoral) the novel dialogues with, the article will now focus on highlighting the way in which Hildyard operates within such frameworks: by expertly walking the line between nihilism and idealization, by depicting an open-ended, seamlessly-operating network of multi-scale influences and, finally, by opening up the scene to a multitude of previously ignored agents and entities.

In narrative terms, *Emergency* is almost completely bereft of plot, save for a thin outline, which sees a middle-aged narrative voice reminiscing on her childhood in rural Yorkshire during the 1990s, while forced within the confines of her city home, in mandatory isolation during an unnamed pandemic. The narrator's attention meanders from the past to the present,

from her apartment to the fields of Yorkshire, tracing paths through stories of both human and nonhuman life. Sometimes prompted by a specific event, a detail or an object, the narrator's present considerations and inputs merge into her reminiscing, drawing parallels or connections between the past and the present or providing insights.

The recollection of rural life is conducted in a river-like fashion, through the charting of many different stories inhabited by multiple characters (human, animal, vegetal), all converging through encounters into a sort of narrative ecosystem.

As Hildyard herself noted in an interview with Helen Whybrow for *Orion Magazine*, the digressive flow of *Emergency* is map-like in the way it forces readers to follow a story «until it crashes into something, where something else is going on» (Whybrow 2022) diverting their attention (along with the narrator's eye) to the new story on the page.

Both the flow and how it develops are central to the conceptual underpinnings of the novel. The two main interacting dimensions, the rural childhood and the urban middle-age (echoing the pastoral rural/urban contrast) simultaneously work as sounding boards and counterpoints to one another. If they appear to be so deeply conflated that it takes several pages for the narrator to disclose the circumstances that prompted her narration, it can also be argued that, once unveiled, the recounting of her past spent roaming through the village can be regarded as antipodal, perhaps antidotal, to her confinement during the pandemic:

There was something formal that I needed from this experience in my story – a counterpoint between the narrator, who is an isolated woman in a quiet house, and the almost obscenely profuse and flourishing world of stories she's telling about the outside world – the world she's interwoven with, or against (Whybrow 2022).

Moreover, the narrator's decision to look back on her childhood appears to be an attempt to remedy the keenly-felt interruption to the interplay between distance and proximity that the Coronavirus pandemic both engendered and exacerbated. Social distancing (the term alone a paradox) interrupted not only the familiar flux of human life, but also, and especially, its communal, encounter-filled, social dimension. It is such forced distancing that makes it so that «space no longer feels regular or continuous» (Hildyard 2022, 49), and it is to rectify space's «brokenness», to (re)establish some form of continuity, that the narrator attempts to weave together multiple stories, threads and dimensions, and thus look back on a time when proximity was absolute and attainable.

The significance of *Emergency*'s seamlessly shifting focus is twofold. On the one hand, having her narrator attempt to (re)establish some sort of proximity through the recollection of an encounter-filled past, while forcibly excluded from any sort of real contact with the outside world, allows Hildyard to explore the meaning of connection in a way that may be able to provide some insight into the present (particularly with regard to the scales of influence and actors involved in these processes and networks). On the other hand, the narrator's digressions from story to story, from encounter to encounter, accomplishes the retreat from urban confinement as well as the return to a place (albeit through memory) where (physical) closeness is, to all intents and purposes, the moving force.

Thus, it appears clear why, within *Emergency*, the encounter, as a physical event, is seminal for the flow of narration: it is the simplest manifestation of the interconnectedness of life. An interrelation, that, the novel is adamant to emphasise, encompasses all entities and processes on Earth, not just the human. A simple truth that the forced distancing imposed by the pandemic, by the virus, reiterated to the narrator:

Scientists on the news say that it evolved inside a pangolin's body, from a reservoir in a *Rhinolophus* bat. The novel virus, a chimera, crossed another species boundary at the end of last year, when it began to communicate itself through human bodies. Now it's here, in my surroundings, and we are all living inside that pangolin, everybody in my neighbourhood: pigeons, Klopp, squirrels, tomato plants, sound waves, books, bookshelves, sewing machine, blue waterweeds, and the lone woman on the top floor (Hildyard 2022, 50).

The world is «fatally interconnected» (Hildyard 2022, 50) in all its infinitely varied iterations. It is in light of this profound sense of entanglement that the narrator's childhood recollection can be regarded as a wider, macro and micro, tapestry of stories and characters, human and nonhuman, being tangled and reshaped through encounters, in line with the fact that existence on Earth is the «ongoing outcome of myriad entanglements of elements and processes» (Jones 2009, 295). The Anthropocene-related erosion of human pre-eminence and of its well-established ontological paradigms (e.g. nature/culture), in favour of the idea that humans are simply one of the many players in an intricate and perpetually ongoing interconnected web of biophysical, sociocultural, or technoeconomic processes (Milstein & Castro-Sotomayor 2020; Jones 2009) has made room for a renegotiation of relational dynamics and agency-related questions.

Emergency's preoccupation with the representation of life's porosity is also infused with Hildyard's own postulations on a form of relational, embodied involvement that she theorized in her essay *The Second Body* (2017). According to Hildyard, climate change has made it steadily less possible to reconcile the «different ways to exist in a body» (Hildyard 2017, 11), that is to say, its everyday lived-in, physical reality and the far-off ripples that such everyday existence generates in the world. Thinking of the human body as an entity neatly contained within the confines of its own skin ignores the way climate change has shown how «every animal body [is] implicated in the whole world» (Hildyard 2017, 13) by revealing

the network of interactions they are a part of. Essentially, Hildyard maintains that «every living thing has two bodies these days» (Hildyard 2017, 25). Simultaneously small and large scale, the living experience is not halved, rather made twofold: on the one hand, the first body «made out of your own personal skin», on the other the *second body*, that, despite being «not so solid as the other one, but much larger», is «your literal and physical biological existence» (Hildyard 2017, 25), not a conceptual emanation of a body, but an actual body, with its imprint and interactions:

Your first body could be sitting alone in a church in the centre of Marseille, but your second body is floating above a pharmaceutical plant on the outskirts of the city, it is inside a freight container in the docks, and it is also thousands of miles away, on a flood plain in Bangladesh, in another man's lungs. It is understandably difficult to remember that you have anything to do with this second body – your first body is the body you inhabit in your daily life. However, you are alive in both. You have two bodies (Hildyard 2017, 25).

The world conjured in *Emergency*, with its networks spanning across species divides and scales, attempts at «making the second body come into the first body» (Hildyard 2017, 26) by entwining the deceptively inconsequential, intimate and small-scale events with larger, often global phenomena (such as war, pollution, racism and classism), and depicting them as physically tangible in their interactions and repercussions. What *Emergency* projects onto its readers is the two bodies of every living thing interacting in co-constructive yet also destructive ways – akin to what Karen Barad would describe as «intra-active becoming» (Barad 2007, 170) – on the shared space of rural England and simultaneously everywhere else in the world.

If we consider that all living entities, including both humans and non-human beings, possess two bodies constantly interacting on a scale that is both seemingly remote (the global) and incredibly close (the local), it becomes apparent that the existing definitions of these two dichotomies (human/nonhuman and global/local) require reevaluation.

At the core of the novel, in shifting degrees of proximity, lies an interplay of enmeshed entities on levels both visible and invisible: the withered ash tree houses a cluster of mushrooms «engaged in the long process of digesting the wood» (16),⁷ making it so «that its deadness was irradiated with living» (16); the rusted tipper at the edge of the quarry is being taken over by «single-stalk plants» (55) and its seat has been turned into a nest by a thrush, which «flew in and out through a small, round hole in the windscreen [...] as though it had been created just for her» (55).

The gravel quarry is perhaps the most significant example within the novel of the dynamics between the first and the second body and, by extension, of the interplay between the local and the global scales of existence. The quarry, which produces gravel that is then shipped «all over the world» (19), sits at the intersection between a series of mutually altering actions: if «the requirements of Norwegian motorways and new cities in China determined the shape of the quarry and the size of the space it left» (19) – incidentally making the village economically and physically «subject to the caprices of the supply chain» (Sacks 2022) – the quarry, in its materiality, is able to physically reach larger scales of existence: «the place was dynamited apart and distributed throughout the world in vanishingly small splinters and particles» (19). What is more, along with the pieces of the quarry, the world at large is injected with the physical manifestations of those who interact with it: «Stones, single hairs, and skin-flakes from the workers' bodies and fragments of rubber from the old tyres of the quarry's two vehicles travelled the globe» (19).

Furthermore, the quarry also sits at the centre of another almost cyclical back-and-forth, one that takes place between the human and the nonhuman. During its phases of inactivity, the quarry is home to many species of animals, plants and mushrooms, which in turn disappear or are

⁷ Henceforth, all citations pertaining to *Emergency* (2022) will be marked only by the corresponding page numbers.

driven underground when noise and commotion in and around the quarry become too much. If the starts and stops of human life at the quarry are manifestly influenced by global rhythms and demands (foreign need for gravel or changes of ownership), the same can be said of nonhuman life, which is able to carve out its place only when the quarry is left alone by the world at large. It follows that, to a certain extent, nonhuman life is also influenced by the ebb and flow of the global.

The relational nature of all processes, the going «in both directions, in every direction» (19) in paths of mutual dependence and influence, is multifaceted and, if the narrator, as a child, «watched it go» yet «couldn't see where it went» (19), the experience accrued in time allows her present self to be aware of the implications of such relationships:

As an adult I have a stronger but still slight understanding of how my resources reach me, or how my life extends into the dams, logging operations, fulfilment centres, makeshift mining towns, oilfields, or containment facilities on which my daily life depends (19).

The significance of the quarry as a stage upon which the narrator can observe and investigate some of the relationships at play within the village (and beyond its confines as well) in both their macro and micro interactions and repercussions is highlighted by the fact that *Emergency* effectively begins at the quarry. Indeed, the novel opens with the narrator recounting of when, while sitting on the cliff overlooking the quarry, she saw a panel of clay detaching from the side and fall into the pool of water at the base of the excavation. The event reveals the interior of an animal's burrow «in relief, like a bombed house» (9) and precipitates the stand-off between a vole and a kestrel. The encounter, which effectively opens the novel's map-like progression, also introduces the question of agency. As Lauren Collee notes in her review, the predicament the vole finds itself in forces the narrator to confront «the problem of her own agency» (Collee 2022). The feeling of «a sense of love [...] as huge and widespread as the vole

was small and specific» (10) generates in her the awareness of having the means, and the opportunity, to intervene and «rescue him» (10). The bout of tenderness and affection – not directed at a generic animal, but at the vole in its individual specificity – exemplifies *Emergency*'s preoccupation with the depiction of the «many ways of being in this world, human as well as other-than-human» (Whybrow 2022). The recognition of her own ability to act, if she so chooses, informs the way the narrator regards and relates to the other entities around her. Although her point of view is inevitably shaped by her human condition, the narrator's eye bears no trace of superiority nor does it slip into anthropomorphism. An analogously significant episode concerns the fate of a litter of baby rabbits born in the narrator's childhood garden. Her fascination with the baby rabbits prompts her to select one and put it in her pocket, with the intention of showing it to her best friend Clare. In her mind, the «pocketing» of the baby rabbit, despite warnings from her parents that she «wasn't to touch them» (11) because the «rabbit would eat her babies if they had a strange smell on them» (11), is framed as an act of care:

I stepped away from the ladder and took the tiny rabbit out of my pocket. [...] The rabbit's ears lay flat. They were thin and fuzzy, like new leaves when they first push out of the bud. Clare said, «Put it back or it will die.» I told her that I was taking care of it and Clare groaned and rolled her eyes, extravagantly reasonable, and told me that I would learn the hard way (13).

So, when the next day she discovers that the entire litter has been eaten by their mother, her recollection is caught between acknowledgement of a fact of life and the weight of her responsibility for their fate:

She seemed calm, nibbling dandelion leaves, and I felt a sense of affinity with her because we had done it together, destroyed the babies with our colossal care (14).

The «sense of affinity» is underscored by the awareness of being in front of another entity with agency. The memory carries no trace of «othering», simply a kinship that makes the mother rabbit seem «very human in the way her principles forced her to self-destruct, and in the scale of her appetite, which far exceeded what she needed to survive» (14). The rabbit's actions and motivations are deemed humanlike not in an attempt at somehow translating them in human terms, but as the acknowledgement that what has been thought of an exclusively human prerogative, is instead fully actualised in another creature:

I don't mean that the rabbit was much like a person, more that principles and will, among most other qualities (memory, love), are not exclusively human traits by any reasonable definition. All creatures have character (14).

Propelled by the acknowledgement of agency and character in other-than-human entities, *Emergency* attempts at reaching «an expanded paradigm of meaning, which encompasses but isn't limited to our own» (Sacks 2022). Hovering over this endeavour is a constant battle with a sort of latent disconnect on questions of communicability and scale. The narrator recounts how, in a field, she chanced upon a clutch of eggs laid in a fresh wheel-rut imprinted on the mud, spurred by the strange behaviour of the mother bird that appeared to both beckon and repel her approach by flying in circles and warbling in her direction. When she eventually found the nest, the bird tried to attack her, despite the narrator's attempt at reassurance: «I won't touch the eggs, I silently promised her as I moved towards the nest» (121). The attack registers in the narrator's mind «with a sense of surprise» and the lapwing gains «real weight» when acting with agency: «she was capable of hurting me» (121). In the following weeks, the narrator notices that the same bird (who appears to slowly recognize and greet the narrator each time) insists on laying eggs along the same wheel-rut, only for them to be destroyed (either by cattle or tractors) in a trail of ravaged

nests. In light of this repeated devastation, the bird's initial display of protectiveness appears even more misplaced, nonsensical:

Her nest was reiterated, again and again, in almost the same place, and the effect in my mind, like the effect of repeating a single word over and over and over again, was of annihilating any possibility of meaning, and it gave me a feeling of meaninglessness that made me involuntarily laugh (127).

Strong in her belief «that creatures did not communicate with one another across the boundary of the species» (126), she nevertheless starts to be persuaded that «when that lapwing sang [...] she was singing to me» (126). The disconnect originates from trying to force human paradigms on meaning, language and thought upon other species' ways of being. What the narrator as a child believed was the lapwing «trying to deceive me, using strange forms of communication within and beyond my own language» (126), the adult, thanks to growth, distance and awareness, knows it to be simple misalignment of perspectives:

Then again, maybe she chose this place to nest not because she was too naive to know better but because her priorities didn't occur to me, or perhaps she didn't have priorities, perhaps there was nothing except the desire to make a good nest and lay and lay and lay and lay and lay and lay and lay. I had not known the two lines of mud, indented on the edge of the field, as anything other than a track for vehicles. I had not seen [...] that the deepenings where the tractor sank into softer mud were not only ruts but also cradles (127).

Nonetheless, there are instances when cross-species communicability happens effortlessly and the blurring of boundaries between human and nonhuman entities promotes an idea of communality as expansive and boundaryless. These moments take place when the child-narrator somewhat loses sight of accepted, human notions, and tunes into the world that surrounds her, «the squirrel's heartbeat or the roar of growing grass» (18), rejecting «the business of relentlessly prioritizing and deleting» (18) the

inputs she receives from her surroundings (Collee 2022). Relinquishing control over the «tidal wave of random information» (18) allows her to be open and attuned to whatever she sees, thinks or experiences in a way that minimises the distance between macro and micro perspectives.

The moss on the side of her friend Clare's house dilates her perception, instilling «a sense of stillness» (13), of being «out of step» (13) compared to «the mosses, somewhere beyond my timeframe, moved through their alien periods of torpor and spreading» (13). Similarly, when sat on a fence in a field of wild garlic, she suddenly experiences being «swept up in the air and into an aeroplane» flying over the fields and the lake, only to realise that «it was the wood, and not my mind, which took me through these scales, from the pinprick of nectar to the earth's surface» (39). The moss and the wood, or a toad whose decision the narrator's «body was suspended inside» (167), are an active part of these encounters in-between scales, contributing to the creation of new, communal meanings.

3. Slow emergencies: the pitfalls of an interconnected world

Expanding on the idea of small and large-scale interconnections and communal meanings, it can be argued that the eye of Hildyard's narrator, animated by child-like fascination, yet tempered by present-day awareness, appears to also fulfil the role Heather I. Sullivan had envisioned for the dark pastoral as a trope for the rewiring of environmental attitudes, i.e. operating as a tool of exposure. In her unearthing of the interplay among global/local and human/nonhuman, in *Emergency*, Hildyard never once balks at or attempts to sanitise its most disturbing effects. Instead, the narrator's perusal appears to always reveal a sense of latent peril, as if suffused with a sort of violence just enough out of reach to make it impossible to pinpoint its actual origin.

The world of *Emergency* appears as «forever on the verge of harm» (Whittle 2022), alive with dark undercurrents, which manifest themselves through radiations and chemicals in the air, silent illnesses and glimpses into private and systemic brutalities. At school, the children learn of how the clouds of radiation generated by the Chernobyl disaster are «hanging here [...] above our county» (73), ready «to warp or thwart all the living beings» (73), while at the same time being confronted with, and only vaguely tuning into, the signs of domestic violence on one of their teachers at school. Clare's battle with cancer and eventual death due to infection is attributed to the microscopic threat posed by a «tiny fungus that is present everywhere, in bins and compost heaps or damp in a house. We all have it inside our bodies all the time» (197) and, at the same time, it is painted as embroiled within larger and more obscure networks of influences (and harm). When the narrator asks her mother about Clare's death, the woman's list of possible reasons moves from the contingent to the genetic, never once settling on a definite cause:

«Well, there are things that could have happened to Clare which make her more likely to be poorly in the way that she was. Things in the air and food and medicines, X-Rays before you are born». Her voice got louder as though she was expressing growing certainty. «It runs in families. It's to do with poverty and that's a complex problem. It's not easy to explain. Some people call it bad luck but I wouldn't» (197-198).

The present day, as epitomised by the narrator's confinement, is being besieged by a virus «so tiny that it is impossible to see it on my lips and so huge that it is impossible to see it crossing continents» (50). Similarly invisible was the threat during the late spring «spraying days» of the past, when the narrator was forced inside by her parents to avoid the pesticide mist that loaded the air «with invisible poisons» and «crept into lungs» (28).

It is clear that *Emergency* is constellated by threats of harm at both the macro and micro levels of existence, whose effects are simultaneously environmental, cultural and social. They pervade the novel in a way that supersedes divide lines, for it is clearly discernible in both humans and non-humans, and in the points of contact between the global and the local. This pervasiveness is related to the fact that violence is never portrayed (nor felt) in overly explosive bouts, but rather presented as an almost physiological phenomenon, ebbing and flowing in and out of the narrator's perception (and recollection).

Over the years, in the fields, the wood anemones carry out a systematic, all-out assault against the wild garlic: from «a tiny pool [...] holding together in a sea of wild garlic» (171) the anemones manage to push the wild garlic «back behind their front line» (171), spreading «rhizome by rhizome» in «an incremental advance [...] hardly noticeable» (171), and now hang «their heads with a modesty which denied the fact that they had taken over and they weren't going anywhere; they were everywhere. They had won» (171). The anemones' slow advance exemplifies the type of violence *Emergency* is interested in exploring. Hildyard focuses on violence as a slow, attritional process whose destructiveness is «delayed and is dispersed across time and space» (Nixon 2011, 2). «Slow violence» both shapes and inhabits the past and the present, while remaining mostly out of sight as it continues to proliferate and affect the workings and processes of the world in incessantly new and broader scales. Conceptually, slow violence challenges the well-established notion of what constitutes harm, rejecting the idea of violence as «an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility» (Nixon 2011, 2), in favour of a more expansive delineation, able to «include the gradual deaths, destructions, and layered deposits of uneven social brutalities within the geographic here-and-now» (Davies 2022, 410).

The layered landscapes of *Emergency* are explored with an eye to both their past and their present, in a way that makes it possible to surmise how the interlocking ecological, social and cultural iterations of harm and violence have shaped and continue to shape reality. The digressive flow of the novel is particularly effective in unearthing connections and contaminations between processes and phenomena as well as the reach, scale and target(s) of their repercussions.

The back-and-forth between the dilating and narrowing of perspective is one of *Emergency*'s preferred modes of operation, allowing the narrator a certain degree of freedom of movement, as well as the chance to display how ingrained in the way of the world the impact of slow violence truly is. The tangible realization of the damage radius something that has become so commonplace as plastic can have reaches the narrator only when, in a picture of a dead seabird on the news, she recognises an «orange ring pull [...] from a limited-edition Fanta» (78) she «had last seen [...] twenty years earlier, arranged with some other rubbish on the concrete in my back yard» (79). That seemingly innocuous piece of plastic «had travelled many thousands and thousands of miles and made its way into the entrails of this bird that had died somewhere along the northern coast of Chile» (79); the time-lapsed shockwave of contamination, however, she realises, goes even deeper, to the molecular level: «particles of plastic from packets I opened when I was a child are circulating, right now, through the bodies of newly hatched birds» (79). Once again, the global and the local, as well as the human and the nonhuman, are brought together by the narrator's gaze as well as by the digressive, formal enmeshing of temporal dimensions.

The inhabiting of a world infused with violence, down to the molecular level, plunges its inhabitants within reach of multiple, interrelating «slow emergencies», whose contours and interconnections may be complex, but whose effects are tangible, if often «not only slow to emerge, but

[...] obtuse, obscured or even officially refuted» (Anderson, Grove, Rickards and Kearnes 2017, 635).

Ironically, or perhaps significantly, *Emergency* closes with an instance of eruptive violence and imminent danger, an emergency in its most common sense, as the building opposite the narrator's window, the one she observed time and time again during lockdown, catches fire due to an electrical malfunction. At first, the narrator barely registers the presence of the fire, and believes it to be a sort of residue of her recollection – which, in a mirroring motion, draws to a close with flames and smoke in the distance from a controlled fire in the fields around the village. Here, the flames are up close, yet, when faced with their presence, as they destroy the building in front of her eyes, she is filled by a sense of disconnect:

My smoke alarm, I realized, was pipping again, but I'd been ignoring that for months. Even now, from where I was sitting, the heat was only a gentle warmth on my skin. But the homes of my neighbours, in the flats opposite, had disappeared inside the blaze (218).

The image of the alarm going off, «pipping» for months on end yet being ignored, would seem to suggest once again the dynamics of slow violence, and the collective (often wilful) disregard for its signs and warnings – be it in relation to climate change or other systemic dysfunctions and inequalities. Alternatively, the image of the ignored alarm could perhaps be regarded as a foil to the sense of latent peril inherent in the narrator's recollections and present musings: while unearthing the interconnectedness of entities and processes and connecting the dots between global and local phenomena and systems, threading and analysing the violent and often ominous state of things, the narrator was ignoring a very present, concrete threat.

4. Conclusion

Overall, *Emergency* looks at the world, at the world in its entirety, with the kind of vibrant, demanding attention able to easily encompass the overarching and the specific with a single gaze. It succeeds because it chooses to do so without hierarchies of importance, without filtering out or sanitising. Instead, it dives deep into the tumult, eyes wide-open.

As this article has hopefully been able to convey, through *Emergency* Hildyard reveals an image of the modern world as a system based on co-existence and compresence of different (and contradictory) scales, entities and timeframes flowing into one another and ceaselessly interacting in co-constructive as well as destructive ways.

Honouring the compresence of the «green» and the «dark» that, as Heather I. Sullivan contends, is embedded into contemporary attitudes toward the environment, as well as the interplay between the first and *second body* of Hildyard's own devising, *Emergency* operates a recurrent dismantling of dichotomous constructions (e.g. past and present, global and local, human and nonhuman), by way of enmeshing – conceptually (unearthing the level of interconnection present at every level) and formally (devising a novel on whose page past and present, human and nonhuman, global and local flow into one another).

As previously remarked upon, the novel, despite being carried by a single human narrator, is substantially polyphonic in the way it shifts from story to story, from character to character, from voice to voice. All stories and all characters (be it farmers, plants or cows, among many) collide, tangle and scatter in ways that are bodily and tangible and completely autonomous from the human eye that perceives them (Collee 2022; Whybrow 2022). The nonhuman voices of *Emergency* are not being engulfed by human stories; rather, both are mutually assimilated into farther-reaching

networks of relations, stretching far beyond the easily identifiable confines of their surroundings.

The narrator does not assign meaning to the creatures and environments around her, instead she actively participates in the creation of new meanings, propelled not by «a sense of identification but a feeling that the body you are looking at is vital because it is distinct» (33), through new «regimes of perception» that allow to «consult nonhumans more closely, or to listen and respond more carefully to their outbreaks, objections, testimonies, and propositions» (Bennett 2010, 108).

The narrator's final recollection, before the fire takes her inexorably back to the present, is particularly effective in revealing how *Emergency* views the interplay between each living thing's distinctiveness and the networks of encounters that enmesh them into the relational, embodied construction of boundaryless communality that animates the world:

The moisture dribbled, the insects hovered, fingered, danced, mounted, entered, licked the plants which radiated outward, my eyes and my hair were just one incidental subject of their drenching and luring, every particle excited by every other. The movements were violent and hopelessly desirable, obliterating identities across individuals, species, kingdoms, with each exchange, and every swap was queer and excessively necessary (218).

The relational, «excessively necessary» movement of individuals (whose boundaries are constantly being rewritten via exchanges and encounters) also effectively disrupts any remaining notion of some sort of separation between the human and the nonhuman. If «every living thing has two bodies», as Hildyard posits in *The Second Body*, and all these double-bodied entities are encountering and influencing one another all the time on different scales, it would be illogical to expect ontological dichotomies like nature/culture, combined with the idea of man's pre-eminence and uniqueness among species, to still be a viable way of looking at the present world. Especially since *Emergency* does not shy away from exploring and

presenting on the page all of the reasons why many of the interconnections and processes in place today are *fatal* in their outcomes and repercussions. Using the pandemic as a starting point, with its unveiling of where these processes and interactions fail or deteriorate, allows *Emergency* the distance to explore instances of slow violence, «residues of most human processes» (89), and translate their dynamics on the page, successfully converting «into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody» – which Nixon believes to be one of the major challenges regarding the representation (and consequently the detection) of slow violence (Nixon 2011, 3).

Conclusively, while explicitly rejecting its most infamous tendencies of idealization and oversight – she writes that the village «wasn't pastoral, in spite of the meadows and the herds and flocks» (208) – *Emergency* does engage with the pastoral by way of updating and adjusting some of its mechanics in a way that allows them to be fruitful and effective when applied to Anthropocenic landscapes and new outlooks on the relationship between individuals and the environment. The retreat-and-return movement from the urban to the rural and back is adapted to take place through memory, in a time of unprecedented crisis that prevents any sort of physical repositioning. Such an adaptation, nonetheless, still upholds «the essential paradox of the pastoral» (Gifford 2020, 84), that is to say «that a retreat to a place apparently without the anxieties of [...] the present, actually delivers insights into [...] the preoccupations and tensions of its time» (Gifford 2020, 84). The retreat cannot be idyllic, for it takes place as a recollection within a timeframe that is currently dealing with the impossibility of ignoring not only the interconnectedness of all processes and entities on the planet, but also with the dawning realization that such a (re)discovery (at least by Western standards) requires a renegotiation of well-established ontological paradigms (e.g. nature/culture). Climate

change, racism, exploitation and pollution, among others, all find their way within the narrator's recollections, alongside the stories of cows in cattle farms, fox cubs and trees, in ways that highlight how the world, even at its most specific, is the result of a multitude of involvements, both «dark» and «green». The mosaic Hildyard creates returns the image of a world that is both fatally wounded and resiliently vital.

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