

IMPORTANCE OF ESTABLISHING A NEW FORM OF THINKING IN AMERICAN CLIMATE-CHANGE NOVEL INTO THE FOREST

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Set shortly after a major environmental disaster, *Into the Forest* tells the story of two sisters living in a remote Californian forest clearing. The elder of the two, Nell, narrates it, as she documents the mundane aspects of their lives and gradual adaption for survival. For Nell and Eva, the environmental disaster presents itself as an interruption to their normal existence. They experience it as a temporary interlude, wherein a sense of being is lost in the interim: 'This is our fugue state – the lost time between the two halves of our real lives' (2. p. 12). This experience of environmental destruction, which entails a feeling of loss, interruption and a halting of a way of being, suggests that they cannot regain an ontological certainty until they have revised their imagining. They wait expectantly for the return of their previous life, regarding it as 'weathering the storm'; believing that they 'would have our power back soon' (2. p. 87). It is the waiting for an identifiable way of being, for instance for 'the power to come back', which prevents them from the necessary redefinition of their beings to continue and escape from their ennui and oblivion.

Conceptions of the past perpetuate a false and problematic notion of the consequences of the environmental destruction:

We listened to talk about the sacrifices and hardships of the Pilgrims and the pioneers [...] I was even imagining carts and horses, as though, while we were waiting for the life we had known to start back up again, everyone had decided to play at retuning to a quaint and picturesque older world. (2. p. 17 & p. 79)

Nell believes it might be an opportunity to re-establish a present based on nostalgic, historic ideals. Yet the situation demands an entire new vision with no relation to previous forms. A backward perspective becomes restrictive:

The bewildered way that people clung to habit long after habit ceased to make sense – housewives trudging out every morning to check the mail half a year after the last delivery, men polishing their cars on Sunday afternoons even though it had been months since there had been water pressure enough to wash them or gas to drive them. (2. p.114)

By employing tropes and notions based upon a past sense and imagining, they can only continue in cognitive and locative displacement. As Nell notes, by staying at home and avoiding the town, 'some recognizable shape remains – even now – to our interrupted lives' (2. p. 18). Yet it is exactly that they remain attached to the 'recognizable shape' that leads to near existential and physical demise. They must find a new mode of thought in order to live in the present. David Wood, in an essay on Derrida and the conception of the future, suggests that the ecological crisis forces us to relate differently to the future:

And yet, for there to be hope at all, indeed for there to be life and experience here-and-now, we have no alternative but to go back to the future, and relate to it differently. It may not best operate as a legitimating horizon for projective planning, but we cannot but attempt a new dispensation, a new way of figuring the future. (1. p. 275)

Similarly, the sisters, only at the end of the novel begin to survive and dwell, after they recreate their understanding of their future and detach themselves from a previous understanding of their being. They, as Wood claims the crisis enforces, ‘reinvent in order to take forward.’ (1. p. 276)

Part of the sister’s limited capacity to dwell in the new ecological reality of their present is because of their dependency on fossil fuel. The novel engages with a post-carbon imagination and calls for an existence beyond fossil fuel dependency. In this novel, fossil fuel is parodied as integral to physical and emotional survival. The sisters are fixated by their desire for fuel, believing that it will alleviate them from their nonexistence: ‘what I really wanted to give Eva was gasoline. Just a little gas – enough to run the generator so she could play even a single CD’ (2. p. 7). It is comparable to ‘breathing’, as intrinsic and inseparable from daily existence, ‘when electricity still seemed as natural as breathing’ (2. p. 45). After believing that there is no more gas, the sisters discover a canister, ‘we found the source of power and travel, the fluid that changes everything! Today we found gasoline! I could fill this entire notebook with exclamation points and still not show how happy we are’ (2. p. 97). With knowledge of the fuel they are enabled to, temporarily, continue in an artifice of their previous existence.

Eva carries on with her ballet training and Nell with her preparation for her Harvard entry exam, both pursuits seeming absurd considering the societal collapse:

That’s what keeps me going. I keep dancing because I know we have that gas [...] That gas keeps it all close enough to believe in. Do you know that sometimes I sneak it out just to look at it? Sometimes I even open the cap and dab a little on me like perfume. (2. pp. 141-142)

Yet this knowledge entombs them psychologically, since they continue to conceptualise their existence in its previous form. Ziser suggests that understanding how energy informs our current sense of reality and finding a new way to envisage our lives without it is critically important:

Understanding the aesthetics of the new environmental Age of Transition to a lower-intensity energy regimes requires us to reflect on the parameters set by what William S. Burroughs (2000, 240) called the ‘gasoline crack of history’ in order to reimagine them for the future.(4. p. 182)

As we see in the novel, in order to survive the sisters must seek a world beyond fossil fuel dependency. Fossil fuel is represented as cognitively paralysing; it prevents them from leaving their home, the sight of demise and danger, and retains them in the past. Martin McQuillan argues that a new philosophy is needed to adapt to our future existence, ‘effectively the postcarbon epoch has already begun, since it is now a task of the critical imagination to envisage a world beyond the fractal distillation of petroleum. (3. p 271) Undoubtedly a society that does not use fossil fuels would look very different. In contemporary society these sources of energy have predicated our thinking, forming a basis for our culture, economy and globalized world. A new thinking and envisaging must develop. As McQuillan notes, such thinking must overcome its stricture in nonrenewable energies:

Rather, the task for thinking relates to the sort of world, being in the world, and thought concerning the world that an economy and culture based on the exploitation of hydrocarbons has given rise to, and what its prospects might be as this economy and culture inevitably weans itself off of petroleum and onto some other alternative energy source, while living with the inheritance of a century of intensive hydrocarbon use. (3. p 271)

In the penultimate scene of the novel, the sisters come to a similar realisation and use the gas to burn their home. It is only when home – a symbol of a previous civilization - and gas are depleted that the girls are able to find the means to survive in a new, sustainable existence. It liberates their imagination and they can begin to conceptualise their lives anew. Fossil fuel dependency and frivolous consumption must cease, and Nell comes to recognise this:

I never knew how much we consumed. It seems as if we are all appetite, as if a human being is simply a bundle of needs to drain the world. It's no wonder there are wars, no wonder the earth and water and air are polluted. (2. p. 135)

The novel aligns itself to principles of environmentalism such as revising their mental outlook, forging a sense of connection to the earth and adopting a new, simple lifestyle. Yet the change is more than one of lifestyle, as they must relinquish associations and imaginings relating to their previous existence, finding a new way of conceptualising to survive, not only physically but also ontologically. To reach any realistic degree of ecological integrity climate novels should and need to assist with the task of developing a post-fossil fuel imagination.

References:

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