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Poetry, Nature and Trauma during the COVID-19 Pandemic:
An Intersectional Examination of the Traumatized Subject and their
Relationship to Nature

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Abstract

This thesis explores the ways in which “Ides of March, 2020” (2020) by Didi Jackson, “Sing a Darkness” (2020) by Carl Phillips, and “Desert Lily” (2020) by Rigoberto González engage with concepts of nature and trauma. All three poems reveal poignant elaborations on human position and relationship to nature, and how nature might help the speakers dealing with the traumatic present of the pandemic. My thesis has two aims. One, it sets out to examine the three poems in terms of how they portray the nature and human relationship to nature. Two, I inquire how the three poems relate trauma and potential for healing to *their* concepts of nature. It is my hypothesis that an intersectional – Romantic Humanist, Ecocritical, and Trauma theoretical perspective - may help advance our understandings of the poems. Ultimately, this thesis shows how the Ecocritical and Trauma theoretical assumptions about uncertainty and the unspeakable may help advancing our understanding of the speakers’ relationship to trauma as well as to nature. The poems suggest that ambiguous concepts and understandings of human relationship to nature and trauma might be the best way in which one can understand the complexities of living in a time of crisis.

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Introduction

The three poems “Ides of March, 2020” (2020) by Didi Jackson, “Sing a Darkness” (2020) by Carl Phillips, and “Desert Lily” (2020) by Rigoberto González share two common denominators. One, they are part of the anthology *Together in a Sudden Strangeness: America’s Poets Respond to the Pandemic* (2020), that is edited by Alice Quinn. As the title *Together* maintains, the poems are written as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and they deal with the traumatic circumstances of it. Two, nature is a prominent theme in each poem. In “Ides of March, 2020” (“Ides”), the speaker reflects on the tragic circumstances of the present while wandering in nature. In “Sing a Darkness” (“Sing”), the speaker tries to look beyond cultural and aesthetic representations of nature, and in “Desert Lily” (“Desert”), nature is all there is – it is at the centre, and has agency. Each poem reveals poignant representations of, elaborations on, and reflections around the human position and relationship to nature, and how nature might help the speakers dealing with the traumatic present. The three poems echo some of the very legacy of Romantic Humanism – the idea that nature is good for humanity in times of crisis.

From an Ecocritical perspective, the poems also problematize concepts of, and human relationship to nature. To various extents, the poems present nature in conceptually ambiguous or paradoxical terms, thus, also undercut the idea that there is a link between nature and humans¹. The poems illustrate a major consensus in Ecocritical debate, namely the idea that nature can no longer be considered a healthy counterpart to humans in crisis. Taken together, the three poems reveal interesting interrelations and tensions between Romantic Humanist and Ecocritical ideas.

It is my hypothesis that an intersectional, conceptual framework of Romantic Humanist and Ecocritical perspectives on nature may advance our understanding of how nature is considered in “Ides”, “Sing”, and “Desert Lily”. But I will not stop there. Due to the three poems’ poignant representations of trauma, I will also consider relevant aspects of Trauma theory in my analysis.

However, issues arise when one attempts to expand theoretical and critical frameworks – things might get ‘messy’. The more concepts, theories, and critical stances one

¹ In this thesis, when I discuss human relationship to nature, that also entails mental health and trauma. The reason for the rationale is because I do not wish to conceptually separate the human body and mind.

takes into consideration – the more challenging it becomes to make fruitful intersectional inquires. For example, if an Ecocritical and Romantic theoretical framework is widened into also considering Trauma theory, parts of the framework might need to be generalised or made static. For example, Megan Lankford examines in “Nature and Grief” (2007) how nature is used in children’s picture books to conceptualise subjects of trauma – such as death. Lankford makes a seminal inquiry into the Ecocritical and Romantic aspects of how the picture books engage with concepts of trauma, and Lankford’s work is informative for a number of reasons. However, the Romantic Humanist part of Lankford’s framework is imbedded within the Ecocritical framework (Lankford 34-7). As a result, it gives little space to be considered for how it interacts with Ecocritical arguments. Lankford does not consider the ways in which the Romantic Humanist legacy both gravitates towards Ecocriticism and simultaneously pulls away from Ecocriticism. On a similar note, Daneshwar Sharma discusses the impact poetry may have on trauma during the COVID-19 pandemic in “Reading and rewriting” (2021). One of the remarks the author makes is that poetry about the pandemic may lead to the realisation that nature is a force to be reckoned with. According to Sharma, “COVID-19 is a reminder of the dysfunctional relationship we have developed with Mother Nature” (8). From an Ecocritical perspective, Sharma’s argument fails to consider the complexities and ambiguousness often stressed in Ecocritical discourse about nature and what is considered natural. Thus, the links Sharma makes between nature and trauma become too unproblematic – nature is simply ‘the Other’. In this thesis, I will be wary of making conceptual, critical, or theoretical assumptions for one main reason – the studies of nature and trauma necessitate it. I believe that a more comprehensive understanding of the speakers’ relationship to nature and trauma can be achieved if we expand the conceptual framework, while also considering something fundamental to both Ecocriticism and Trauma theory. Particular strands of Ecocriticism and Trauma theory both argue for the necessity to address and accept uncertainties and ambiguities pertaining to concepts of nature and trauma. In sum, it is my hypothesis that an intersectional and uncertainty-based inquiry may help illuminate the speakers’ complex relationships to nature and trauma in a time of crisis.

Thus, instead of taking *one* particular conceptual framework such as Ecocriticism, Romantic Humanism, *or* Trauma theory, I will broaden the framework and consider Romantic Humanism, Ecocriticism, and Trauma Theory. My thesis has two aims. One, it will set out to examine the three poems in terms of how they portray human relationship to nature. Two, I will inquire how the three poems relate trauma and potential for healing to *their*

concepts of nature. It is my hypothesis that an intersectional, and uncertainty-based inquiry may help illuminate the complexities of the speakers' relationship to nature and trauma.

This thesis will be explorative and interpretative in nature, focusing on how the poems *themselves* articulate and problematize concepts of nature and human relationship to nature. Since there is no previous research on the poems, I will base my analysis on conceptual frameworks proposed by Jonathan Bate (Romantic Humanism); Timothy Morton, Timothy Clark, and Katharina Donn (Ecocriticism); and Cathy Caruth (Trauma theory), among others.

From a Romantic Humanist perspective, Bate is relevant because his theories about William Wordsworth as an ecologically conscious poet/speaker are affirmative of the Romantic Humanist legacy. Moreover, Bate's findings on what distinguishes Wordsworth as a Romantic figure will be fruitful to consider in relation to how the poems engage with the Romantic Humanist legacy and Ecocritical dilemma. From an Ecocritical viewpoint, Morton's arguments about the need to revise certain concepts of nature are crucial to the thesis. Moreover, Morton also makes what to the thesis are relevant connections between Romanticism and Ecocriticism. Clark is another Ecocritical scholar. I will discuss some of the concepts that have been examined by Clark, such as anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. In terms of Trauma, Caruth is undeniably essential to Trauma theory. Her examinations of trauma in relation to literature and literary representations offer imperative guidelines for the thesis. In addition, Caruth is one of the scholars who are most intimately connected with the concept of the unspeakable. Such an ambiguous and open-ended concept is suitable for the aim of the thesis.

A holistic approach is utilised for the background section. Each conceptual, theoretical framework will be presented one by one. The body section will be holistic as well. I will discuss each poem separately in terms of how they engage with concepts of nature and trauma. Such an approach is consonant with Trauma theoretical and Romantic arguments that stresses subjective experience, and Ecocritical concepts of organic wholesomeness.

The thesis has been organised in the following way: first, I will introduce the three parts that make up the conceptual framework. Second, I will discuss each poem individually and how they portray human relationship to nature. Moreover, I will discuss how each poem relates to trauma and the potential for healing according to their concepts of nature.

Nature and the Romantic Humanist Legacy

What is the Romantic Humanist legacy? It is an idea, an ideology that stems from the Romantic era and identifies nature as an essential, yet lost part of humanity. The Romantic Humanist legacy is the idea that nature is good for us; and the ways we think about nature today, and the ways nature has been represented in Western literature over the last two centuries, in many ways, stem from this legacy. In this section, I will mainly discuss relevant concepts from Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology*. First, however, the section will start with a brief history and some of the underlying conditions that enabled the Romantic perspective on nature.

The ways in which nature was considered in cultural and aesthetic, pre-Romantic terms radically changed in the Romantic era. Before the industrial revolution and the entailing urbanisation, nature was considered a threat (Westling 2-3). It was not until humans became separated from nature due to urbanisation and growing quality of life that nature started to become something scenic. Westling argues that “[t]he aesthetics of Romanticism were made possible by relative privilege and environmental domestication at home” (3). Nature can only be idyllic when basic human needs are satisfied – when we are protected from cold, harsh winds, poor harvests, and lurking animal predators. This is the downside, or problematic aspect of the Romantic Humanist legacy that Louise Westling reminds us about. When humans do not have their basic human needs fulfilled, nature is not an idyll. And this is a fundamental assumption that needs to be emphasised, and re-emphasised, because without the protection from the very civilisation that is problematized in Romantic poetry, nature is not the human medicine we still make it out to be today.

Moving on, it would be counter intuitive to assume that the Romantic ideas about human relationship to nature are uniform or unified. The overarching idea – or how human relationship to nature is presented in poetry - is that there is a speaker who is separate from the natural world, yet argues that humanity needs to re-connect with nature on some level. One of the most prominent poets to make such an argument is William Wordsworth.

Wordsworth is one of the prominent poets of the Romantic era, and nature was part of the poet's frame of perception. Although there is much to be said about Wordsworth's poetry in minute detail, this thesis will mainly consider some broader, conceptual themes about what type of relationship Wordsworth's speakers have to nature, and how they perceive their existence as human beings in relation to nature. Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology* (1991)

highlights several Romantic Humanist ideas about Wordsworth and his perspective on nature. One of the benefits of considering Bate's reading of Wordsworth is that Bate is one of the critics who see the continued life and legacy of the Romantic era into the present. Bate's research becomes a leverage against several critics that seek to unravel and problematize the Romantic Humanist legacy².

Among the themes Bate discusses is the concept of "consciousness" (Bate *Romantic* 87) and "locality" (Bate *Romantic* 99). One of the things that distinguish a Wordsworthian speaker according to Bate is how the speaker is aware of being present in nature (Bate *Romantic* 99). Bate make an interesting observation.

Knowing, naming, and recording are closely related, but there is a progression through these categories towards the personal and towards consciousness, even self-consciousness. The people who know places best, who are most rooted in them, tend not to be those who give them names. They do not need to bother with maps. They are not likely articulate, to make a meal of, their bond with the place. They do not chant the names – Grasmere, Helvellyn, Glaramara – as if they have a kind of magic. Still less they record specificities of time and place, of their personal encounter with nature. (Bate *Romantic* 87-8)

What Bate interestingly argues is that the less "articulate" (Bate *Romantic* 87) the speaker is about their natural space as such – the less information that is mentioned - the more intimate can the speaker's relationship with that natural space be considered. Knowledge that exists yet is not made known, is a marker of closeness between human and nature.

Wordsworth's speakers let the reader know that they speak from a natural context that to them is real. They are not reflecting on elusive concepts of nature, rather, they are grounded in nature, and seek to establish a bond with their natural world (Bate *Romantic* 104-5, 115). What Bate argues in favour of is that getting in touch with nature requires presence in nature. The speaker is ideally represented as taking the scenery in, observing how the seasons shift, and watching animals going about their day, to mention a few examples. According to Bate, Wordsworth is part of the Romantic Humanist legacy because his

² A number of Eco-critics in particular argue in dis-favourable terms about the Romantic Humanist legacy. There is a major consensus in Ecocriticism that a 'Wordsworthian' view of nature is not sustainable from an ecological perspective. I will return to the subject in the following chapter.

speakers interact with nature in search for a union with the natural world (Bate *Romantic* 85-7, 96-104).

Moving on, thus far I have simply established that the Romantic Humanist legacy builds on the idea that nature is healthy for humanity, but I have not specified what that health is. According to Romantic Humanist ideology, the health benefits that can be derived from nature are made possible from the speaker re-aligning his or her perspective on nature. Bate argues that the “Wordsworthian ‘philosophy’” is the “theory that there is animation in and unity between all things” (*Romantic* 66). Humans need to perceptually synchronise with nature because humans are part of that larger, all-encompassing natural sphere; the function of poetry, thus, is to operate as an aesthetic device that educates the mind to connect with nature (Bate *Romantic* 82-3). In addition, Bate also argues that the aim is not to return to a pre-industrial way of living – as several scholars have argued – but to re-enter into an existence *within* the bounds of nature – the real “world” (Bate *Romantic* 40). In sum, health is considered in somewhat elusive terms, but is intimately connected with the assumption that there is a human and nature relationship that helps humans to “better [...] live in the material world” (Bate *Romantic* 40).

Associations and reflections pertaining to imagination and nature run within the body and the psyche. According to Christa Schönfelder, in the Romantic era, traumatic emotions were mainly yet loosely explored in the family sphere in prose fictional works, and represented as being felt in the body as well as the psyche (Schönfelder *Towards a Reconceptualization of Trauma* 317-8). Although the concept of trauma was not yet ‘invented’ in the Romantic era, Schönfelder points us to ways in which Romantic literary works began to elaborate on the internal/mental life and the external, natural one.

The Romantic aesthetic and cultural outlook on nature has in the broadest brush strokes possible survived into our contemporary context. The Wordsworthian spirit is present in the outdoorsy friend who metamorphizes the minute the hiking gears come on. And we can see in poetry (among other aesthetic media) how a speaker uses natural language and metaphors to express and interact with internal life. This will become evident in the cases of “Sing”, “Ides”, and “Desert”, for example. Nature is a *source*, as several critics have argued. There is something to be got from nature, with that a part of the legacy lives on.

However, there is one major difference between how Romantic poetry was conceptually understood, and how contemporary poetry engages with the Romantic Humanist legacy. According to Michelle Niemann, Romantic poetry was “holistic” or organicist seen to form and content (Niemann 100). Romantic organicism is the notion that poems are self-

germinating entities. Or, as Niemann phrases it: “Romantic poets and critics saw them [organistic poems] as whole, autonomous entities that fulfil their own internal principles of growth” (101). Joined together with the Romantic notion of nature as a stable space (Clark *Romantic* 14), Romantic poetry is not only about stable and wholesome concepts of nature. Rather, Romantic poetry is aesthetically built up from the ground as organicist. However, contemporary poems about nature are more concerned with problematizing inherited modes of perception, and disrupting notions of nature as stylistically, structurally and figuratively stable.

Returning to the concept of health, I will now elaborate on another concept of health that is loosely attached to the Romantic era – namely mental health. As previously stated, Romantics explore in many ways what will later become relevant to psychoanalysis and Trauma theory. Hartman argues that “the continued growth of a poet’s mind, which Wordsworth is the first to make his subject, involves ‘Nature’s’ capacity to repair trauma (‘internal injury’)” (Hartman *Trauma* 266). Hartman argues that although the language for discussing trauma had yet not been invented in the Romantic era, poets such as Wordsworth drew attention to psychic life and its capacity to stretch and change with time and in relation to nature. This thesis will consider the idea that Romantic Humanist ‘trauma’ is in a diachronic relationship with Trauma.

I will also consider the American Pastoral idea about the human relationship to nature. According to Clark, the American Pastoral tradition presents nature as an “acultural” or “wild” space, and such spaces may have healing properties (*New World* 25-30). According to Clark,

Throughout history, places such as deserts or forests have been conceived as sites of identity crisis and metamorphosis, as the domains of the monstrous and terrifying, places of religious insight or of rites of passage, as in the biblical ‘wilderness’. Such a space of disorientation may attract any number of meanings, hopes or anxieties. Some recuperation of the acultural is inevitable as soon as it enters human discourse. At issue here, however, is again the affirmation of wild nature as a scene of instruction or of the recovery or creation of a supposedly deeper, truer or more authentic identity, whether understood in spiritual, political or often nationalist terms. (*New World* 25)

What Clark points to is the similarity between Romanticism and the American Pastoral; namely, the idea that nature is a space that needs to be sought out and interacted with in order

for an individual to gain a sense of a balanced view on life. The Romantic and American Pastoral traditions attribute nature with the following properties: nature welcomes the imagination and provides healing. However, one of the main differences between the Romantic and the American Pastoral traditions is the type of healing that can be achieved. According to the Romantic Humanist legacy, we ought to seek nature out to re-configure a healthy perspective on the world – we are all one (as has been previously argued) – whereas the American Pastoral agenda is inventive. The American Pastoral view of nature works on the imagination as a “scene of instruction” (Clark *New World* 25). Such a scene can be metaphorically compared to a blank canvas where the speaker is the artist.

Aesthetic and cultural concepts travel. Consequently, this thesis will not emphasise clear distinctions between Romantic Humanist and American Pastoral. Instead, I will consider a conceptual crucible (of sorts) for the Romantic Humanist and American Pastoral takes on nature; the conceptual crucible will be termed the Romantic Humanist legacy. Only when relevant will I delve into the differences between the two traditions. Instead of focusing on what distinguishes the American Pastoral from Romanticist concepts of nature, the thesis will focus on one of the things that both traditions have in common: the idea that nature is a space to be sought out in order to improve some aspect of one’s life.

Moving on, John Clare has a somewhat different view of nature and the human relationship to nature compared to Wordsworth. Bridget Keegan makes the observation that Clare unlike Wordsworth conjures a natural world without human participation. According to Keegan,

Clare goes furthest in trying to discover how to escape the destructive opposition between human and nature. He tries to imagine if not a world entirely without us, at least a world where humans tread more carefully, where the opposition between us and our environment is less destructive. (Keegan 555)

One of the underlying assumptions of Keegan’s argument is the idea that aestheticizing nature equates appropriation of nature. In addition, a Clare-ian view on nature can be summarised as followed: if we love nature, and want to decrease our impact on nature we must let it be, aesthetically and materially (Keegan 555-8). Unlike Wordsworth, Clare eliminates or minimises the presence and impact of a speaker. The subjective speaker is pushed to the side-line in order to give space to the “natural object being perceived” (Keegan 555). By doing so, by hearing nature out, allowing it to “speak[...] for itself”

(Keegan 555), the reader's perspective shifts from the speaker to nature. Thus, nature receives primacy over the speaker.

Thus, nature is not considered an ideal or welcoming place for humans from a Clare-ian perspective. It is not a safe haven or resort, but a space that needs privacy and separation from human interference. I hope it is starting to become clear that there is no Romantic dogma pertaining to the concept of nature. In the Romantic era, there are Wordsworths, and Clares, among many others.

To conclude, I have presented the theoretical background pertaining to the Romantic Humanist legacy and nature. It is now time to bridge over to Ecocriticism, and to consider how Ecocritical theories position themselves in relation to the Romantic Humanist legacy, and concepts of nature and trauma.

Nature and Ecocriticism

In this section, I will map out some of the concepts and critical stances that will form a part of the conceptual, theoretical framework. Rather than outlining a close-edged theoretical framework, the frame will remain open-ended. One area of focus is on using terms, critical stances and theories that allow me to bridge over and also consider Ecocritical arguments in relation to nature and trauma. I will begin with mapping out some of the critical challenges around defining the field of Ecocriticism and the concept of nature. I will then move on to discussing how this thesis will consider the concept of nature.

Ecocriticism is a challenging field to map out for a number of reasons. First, there is no cohesive definition of the concept of nature. Second, the field is incredibly diverse and intersects with other disciplines, making it conceptually problematic to define as a one size fits all.

One of the reasons why nature is turning into such an unpredictable and ambiguous concept can be explained by post humanist theory. Timothy Clark points to the fact that technology is a factor that challenges concepts of what is human and non-human. According to Clark, a number of technologies such as smartphones challenge binary concepts of human and non-human. For example, smartphones provide us with information and flexible platforms form communication. As a result, the human body should not be considered

exclusively human. Due to smartphone technology for example, humans may be considered hybrids with their phones. Consequently, Clark argues that the role of technology in our lives disprove the idea that there is a clear boundary between human and technology, or human and non-human (Clark *Post-Humanism* 63-6). Clark's point is that previously held ideas that a human is separate from its environment – an essential unit – is false. And if the assumption that there are clear boundaries between humans and their environment is false, then we cannot assume that nature is an essential and separate unit either. Nor can we assume that an un-breakable border exists between human and nature (Clark *Post-Humanism* 70). It becomes imperative from an Ecocritical perspective to emphasise uncertainty, and ambiguity; where the human begins and where nature takes off is no longer obvious according to Ecocritical ideas.

According to Louise Westling, Ecocriticism “questions the very categories of the human and of nature” (Westling 2). The assumptions we might have about the human relationship to nature and how we define nature can according to Westling, among others, no longer be taken for granted. In addition, several critics have argued that it is imperative that we return to the concept of nature and challenge our ideas and assumptions we have about nature because historic notions of nature are out-dated (Clark *Literature and the Environment*; Morton *Ecology without Nature*).

Timothy Clark presents a method of how to re-examine the human relationship to nature. According to Clark, “environmental criticism [...] is best characterised in terms of its various challenges” (*Introduction* 3). For example, we need to problematize “inherited modes of thought and analysis” (Clark *Introduction* 4), and “pose new questions to given frameworks of critical thought, artistic practise and criteria of judgement” (Clark *Introduction* 4).

Ecocriticism is an incredibly complex and multidisciplinary field, and far more can be said about what it is and what it sets out to do. However, in my view, Westling's and Clark's arguments sum up what is central to the thesis quite efficiently. I will argue that it is imperative from an Ecocritical viewpoint to explore the ways in which the three poems engage with *their* concepts of nature. The main concern in this thesis is the individual speakers' *perspective*. The concept of nature remains theoretically and conceptually open and ambiguous. Nonetheless, in order to conduct an Ecocritical analysis, it is necessary to map out some relevant Ecocritical terms in order to efficiently and conceptually discuss how the poems interact with nature.

One concept that stands out in the human and nature examination is the *non-human*. For example, in the broadest brushstrokes possible, one may argue that nature is a specific object such as an animal, a plant, an ecosystem, for instance – as long as it is not identified as having human properties. To be non-human means to be the Other from a human point of view (Clark *Introduction* 7). According to Timothy Morton, “nature is all about: things that are not identical to us or our preformed concepts” (*Ecology* 7).

Furthermore, Clark stresses an important point about the concept of nature as non-human. According to Clark, it is, from an Ecocritical perspective, important to consider representations of nature, and such representations might problematize clear-cut binary oppositions between nature and humanity.

[E]very account of a natural, semi-natural or urban landscape must represent an implicit re-engagement with what ‘nature’ means or could mean, with the complex power and inheritance of this term and with its various implicit projections what of human identity is in relation to the non-human, with ideas of the wild, of nature as refuge or nature as resource, nature as the space of the outcast, of sin and perversity, nature as a space of metamorphosis or redemption. (Clark *Introduction* 6)

What Clark points out is that there are two aspects of nature that need to be examined anew (*Introduction* 6). One, it is necessary to consider how the Romantic Humanist tradition has represented and considered human relationship to nature, and two, inquire what *new* insights contemporary poetry may provide about the human and nature relationship. This thesis will follow in the vein of Clark and inquire how the three poems present and re-negotiate the human and nature relationship.

There are two other relevant concepts that will be used frequently throughout the thesis. The concepts I will refer to are deeply woven into the tapestry of Ecocriticism, namely: *anthropocentrism* and *ecocentrism*. Anthropocentrism is the idea that nature is a resource for humans to consume aesthetically and materially (Clark *Introduction* 2-3). Moreover, Clark argues that anthropocentrism is “the almost all-pervading assumption that it is only in relation to human beings that anything else has value” (Clark *Introduction* 2). Recent Ecocriticism argues that it is this ‘cursed’ view that hinders us from realising that value and agency exists in all things around us – way beyond the human border (Morton *Vegetables* 188; Clark *Mountain* 78). There is a want of general, certain knowledge – as is emphasised in Morton’s *Ecology Without Nature*. The fact remains that the

“anthropocentric” perspective – which we cannot escape – also prevents us from seeing non-human “agency, intelligence, sentience, or consciousness” (Morton *Vegetables* 188). This thesis will make a moral lesson out of Morton’s argument and reside with the idea that it is illogically and unethically defensible to make assumptions when there is uncertainty.

To consider nature as non-human, separate from humanity, and valuable only when humanity needs nature and its resources falls in line with the Ecocritical concept of anthropocentrism, and is the reason why the concept of nature is in need of revision. To take a Romantic Humanist example, the Wordsworthian speaker may be considered anthropocentric – they represent and acknowledge that they are separate from nature, and uses nature for their own benefits – to regain sense of balance. The anthropocentric viewpoint is prevalent in Romantic poetry and is one of the reasons why Ecocriticism seeks to problematize human perspective on nature. For example, Clark argues that such an aesthetic, anthropocentric perspective is “restricting the intellectual scope” (Clark *Romantic* 13) and presents a “false perspective” (Clark *Nature* 78-9).

The solution, according to several Eco-critics is to challenge aesthetic and cultural perspectives on nature in order to be able to create a more ethically defensible view (Garrard *Futures* 201-5; Clark *Nature* 77-87). The ecocentric/biocentric perspective, unlike the anthropocentric one includes or expands the human perspective into an interrelating existence with nature. Clark argues that

[O]ne should see oneself not as an atomistic individual engaged in the world as a resource for consumption and self-assertion, but as a part of greater living identity. All human actions should be guided by a sense of what is good for the biosphere as a whole. (Clark *Introduction* 2)

Ecocentrism is part of what several scholars aim towards – the need to re-align the human perspective on nature, to move from material and aesthetic consumption and exploits of various sorts, to seeing human existence as operating and existing within an ecocentric sphere. For example, Keegan observes that the poet Clare raises some of these concerns already in the Romantic era, and is consequently an early advocate for an ecological conscience. Consequently, Ecocriticism and Romanticism are not clearly marked off from each other, because some of the Ecocritical agenda was awakened already in the Romantic era. Jonathan Bate is another scholar who makes a similar observation in *Romantic Ecology*. In

several respects, Romantic and Ecocritical arguments overlap, and share a similar aim – to bring about environmental conscience (Bate *Romantic Ecology*).

For example, Bate stresses the need to consider the rhetoric and the ethos of Romantic poetry, focusing on what the speakers/poets are trying to achieve, and let go of the anthropocentric – anti-anthropocentric dilemma. According to Bate, what Wordsworth in fact sets out to do is attempting to elicit love and care for the natural world (Bate *Romantic Ecology* 15-25, 29, 31); in a sense, poetry is “emotional communication” (Bate *Romantic Ecology* 17). One of the things we can derive from Bate’s reading is that all aesthetic representations of nature inadvertently are anthropocentric, but we need to look beyond that in our Ecocritical inquiry. On a similar note, there is one scholar in particular who maintains the need to acknowledge the anthropocentric frame and the inescapability of said frame. That scholar is Morton. According to Morton, although one cannot step outside one’s personal and limited perception, it does not mean one cannot challenge one’s perspective. Instead, it may be fruitful to examine how the speaker interacts and values nature, and how they navigate such concepts such as scope, perspective and nature (Morton *Ecology* 84-139). Carducci restresses Morton’s point by emphasising the need to inquire how poetry aesthetically conceptualises nature (Carducci 633-5). In short, anthropocentric poetry about nature does not necessarily mean that the poem does not seek to challenge or work towards an ecocentric perspective.

A general consensus in Ecocriticism is that the Romantic notion of nature needs some revision (Clark *Romantic* 13-4). According to Clark, the Romantic poets were not particularly interested in nature as such; rather, the focus was on how nature informed imagination and the solitary genius’s identity (*Anthropomorphism* 198). Another reason why Ecocriticism is particularly interested in the Romantic Humanist legacy is because there is the idea that Romantic poetry depicts nature as stable. Clark argues that in the Romantic era nature was considered a “stable frame to give basic structure to human life” (Clark *Nature* 84). Now, however, we acknowledge to a greater extent the “sense of entrapment, unpredictability, and fragility” to be connotations of nature, and life more generally (Clark *Nature* 84).

Another concept that Ecocriticism also inquires into is *anthropomorphism*. Simply defined, anthropomorphism is “[t]he attribution of human form, character, or attributes to God or a god” (OED.com). The thesis will focus on the two former ones. What becomes interesting to consider, as maintained by Clark in “Anthropomorphism” is what such an anthropomorphic representation might say about the human’s definition of him- or herself, and how such an anthropomorphic representation might have something to say about the

human's relationship to nature (Clark *Anthropomorphism* 192-4). Attributing a non-human organism or entity with human language, characteristics, and/or thoughts, might say more about the speaker than the non-human (Clark *Anthropomorphism* 192-5) - but not always. If we do not consider language as a human property or "tool" (Clark *Language* 46), and instead consider it our "environment" (Clark *Language* 46, 50), the space that is (human) language can be used to voice non-human entities as well. Whether one considers anthropomorphism as human appropriation or an attribute belonging to the non-human depends on context, and not only then I would like to emphasise should the anthropomorphic interpretation be considered 'complete'.

Returning now to the discussion on ecocentrism, one step deeper into ecocentrism is the concept of dark ecology and the argument that humans are inessential to nature (Keegan 566-8). Keegan argues that poets such as Clare make it possible to imagine nature as liberated from humanity. Dark ecological representations such as nature being freestanding from the human race may ultimately discard the human perspective all together. Keegan maintains that by removing the "subjective speaker" – the "I" (Keegan 555), and their "visual consumption" (559), nature may take the front stage – nature may have "primacy and [...] immediacy" (556). Part of dark ecology is also the idea that humanity may perish, but nature will go on perfectly fine without us (Keegan 559-68). Such readings and arguments must, however, be read critically as well. If a poem engages with concepts of nature being freestanding from humanity, it does not necessarily mean that the poem is ecocentric. One of the reasons why is because ecocentric or dark ecological representations can also be considered anthropomorphic – those dark ecological forces are dressed in human language and use human reference to some extent.

As previously stated, nature is a difficult concept to define. The more we think about it, the more we try to specify what nature is, the more complex the pursuit towards a sound and cohesive definition gets. One of the reasons why nature is challenging to define is because of the issue of language. Morton aptly observes that

[t]he more convincingly I render my surroundings, the more figurative language I end up with. The more I try to show you what lies beyond this page, the more of a page I have. And the more of a fictional "I" I have – splitting "me" into the one who is writing and the one who is being written about – the less convincing I sound. My attempt to break the spell of language results in a further involvement in that very spell. (Morton *Ecology* 30)

Morton points to one of the obstacles we face when trying to textually present nature as something *real*. Although Morton objects to being classified as a postmodernist (Morton *Ecology* 5), part of his argument builds on the postmodernist notion that there is nothing authentic or tangible behind representations (*Ecology* 77-8). As previously argued, aesthetic representations of nature are simply that – representations. Nonetheless, it is imperative to the thesis is to consider how those *aesthetic representations* position themselves and navigate concepts of nature.

In short, when dealing with nature from an Ecocritical perspective, it is not a straightforward close-ended, analytical process. Instead, nature becomes a complex, oftentimes paradoxical phenomenon that refuses cohesive definition. We face issues about *reality*, authenticity, ambiguities of language, and the potential that (contemporary) poetry may problematize anthropocentric viewpoints, yet still be considered anthropocentric. The thesis will consider such ambiguities and uncertainties to a great extent. Another particularly interesting point that will be part of the Ecocritical framework is the notion that nature contains a level of untranslatability. Since we cannot take a birch tree to Starbucks and have a conversation, we will never be able to fully grasp the life of the birch tree. Untranslatability and uncertainty about natural identity is one of the main reasons concepts of nature must remain open-ended and unsolved. The three poems – “Ides”, “Sing”, and “Desert” - will provide evidence that nature might be as enigmatic as the human mind, but more about that in the following chapter.

Nature and Trauma Theory

In the following section I will map out the conceptual framework for trauma that will be part of the conceptual framework. Briefly put, the leading concept is that made by Cathy Caruth about the unspeakable/untranslatable. Caruth’s ideas about the unspeakable shares similarities with what Ecocriticism aims to do for nature: examining and acknowledging the fact that nature cannot be fully translated into coherent prose or verse. Considering Trauma theory and Ecocriticism together may open a joint understanding of nature in relation to trauma and vice versa. This is the premise on which the following section builds on.

Although nature and trauma are conceptually different in that trauma denotes a human experience whereas nature does not, the concepts of nature and trauma share similar challenges of language. Like nature, trauma has borders and is conceptually paradoxical. Like nature, trauma has its own relationship to language and representations.

But what is trauma? There is physical and there is mental trauma (forthwith trauma), and the thesis will focus on the latter one. Most briefly put, Trauma theory is the “psychological, philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic questions about the nature and representation of traumatic events” and how they re-occur in the mind of the subject (Lockhurst 497). In this thesis, I will mainly focus on the aesthetic aspect – how the poems present trauma. Since I will read the three poems against the context of the COVID-19 pandemic presented in Quinn’s edition *Together* (2020), I will consider trauma to be an effect of the pandemic. Trauma as a phenomenon and the ways in which it is represented in literature varies greatly. For instance, trauma as a result of sexual, physical and mental assault may be considered high up on the scale, and the most difficult one to talk about. But we may also consider what Hartman says:

Trauma study’s radical aspect comes to the fore less in its emphasis on acts of violence like war and genocide than when it draws attention to “familiar” violence such as rape, and the abuse of women and children. Above all, it does not neglect the explosive nature of emotion and daily hurt. For it is clear that accidents too – that is, apparently simple, daily events – uncover, or are drawn into, an atmosphere of trauma. (Hartman *Traumatic* 546)

In this thesis, I will not discriminate between levels of trauma, arguing that one poem articulates a more painful or disorienting sense of existence than the other ones. Instead, the focus will be on how the texts engage with concepts of trauma and how the poems represent trauma.

As I have already mentioned, a joint analysis of trauma and nature may offer fruitful insights into Ecocriticism and Trauma theory. One scholar in particular who makes an interdisciplinary inquiry into Ecocriticism and Trauma theory is Katharina Donn. The author makes an interesting discovery how un-aesthetically appealing concepts of trauma and nature may in fact lead to a healthier outlook on life, which, ultimately may lead to mental rehabilitation. According to Donn, it is the regenerative and cyclic properties of nature that stimulate and may carry the subject out of their “paraly[zed]” (564) mind (Donn 552, 555,

564, 561). Although Donn's reading might sound similar to the Romantic anthropocentric, and American pastoral considerations of nature for mental health, Donn analyses Modernist trauma literature.

Nature in modernist literature has certainly left the exalted sublime or pastoral idyll far behind, but it retains a more ambivalent metaphoric and creative energy that infuses these lines. An ecocritical reading of modernist trauma literature brings to the surface this generative energy of nature, but defines it not in a therapeutic sense. Rather, it is disruptive, at times almost violent, but because it still retains its organic and cyclic properties, nature becomes a space which integrates traumatic collapse and creative renewal simultaneously. (Donn 552)

Unlike Romantic works, Modernist representations of nature are not beautiful or balanced according to Donn. One of the things that Donn arrives at is the discovery that the subject comes to a *realistic* rather than ideal understanding and outlook on nature – it is the 'ugly' truth that will lead to rehabilitation, and not an idea of an aesthetically beautiful and harmonious view of nature (Donn 555, 561, 564).

On a similar, yet different note, Sam Durrant argues in favour of irresolution. Durrant argues that in order to do justice to trauma, literary texts need to "resist resolution by presenting anti-therapeutic forms of mourning" (97). The reader, ideally, should be left without a sense of closure or assumption that trauma poetry (for instance) has concluded on a balanced note. Instead, Durrant argues that trauma, and a desire to return to life before the traumatic event, must be "de-stabilised" – there is no idealised return to a stable past (98). Simply put, there is no ideal place of return because that place has been 'Othered' to the survivor. But what follows is for the victim the necessity to familiarise themselves with the new circumstances – to adapt (Durrant 97-107).

Although Donn makes a relevant point about nature as realistically regenerative space, the author does not take into consideration the complexity of anthropocentrism and the fruitfulness of considering the unspeakable as something valuable - the ways in which trauma and nature may inform each other. Donn argues:

Whereas a necessarily anthropocentric, psychoanalytical concept of trauma focuses on numbing, ecocritical approaches show how literary texts subvert this alleged unspeakability. The incessantly engendering natural environment is not only a

contrastive foil to the collapse and shock in the human mind, but becomes the source of a voice to express trauma. (Donn 555)

Donn argues that natural metaphors and language can be used to overcome the unspeakable in trauma (557-8). However, one of the main issues with Donn's argument about the healing potential nature may have derives from Donn's idea that Trauma theory and Ecocriticism are in "conflict" with each other (560). Donn considers nature a space that is greater than the anthropocentric perspective. In addition, Donn maintains that nature is a stimulating space for the traumatised subject. It becomes clear that Donn reads trauma- and nature texts from an Ecocritical perspective mainly, and does not consider the 'life' of trauma and how it creates its own space, its own language, and its own ways of bridging the subject to nature through its unknowable character. In short, Donn misses out on the ways in which nature and trauma may inform each other and how they share a similar concept on uncertainty.

Moreover, a relevant question to consider is how the traumatised subject in literary works interrelates to the external world. How are connections represented and forged between psyche and nature? For example, how does a fragmented, traumatised mind perceive of nature and use nature to make sense of the world? The Romantic Humanist legacy and the American Pastoral can be used to conceptually explain two different ways in which a traumatised subject may perceive of, and relate to nature. Clark, and Greg Garrard point to the fact that the American Pastoral tradition represents nature as a space for healing (Clark *New World* 25-34, Garrard *Pastoral* 53-63). According to Clark, a traumatised subject turns to nature to gain "psychological wholeness" (Clark *New World* 33) or to experience an "epiphany and renewal" (Garrard *Pastoral* 54). In sum, a traumatised subject may seek nature because it offers something different, something the subject may distract him- or herself with, or apply his or her trauma and imagination onto. Nature is considered for its rehabilitating properties; it is as I have argued previously, a blank canvas on which the traumatised mind may paint his or her worries out. A similar connection can be forged with the Romantic Humanist legacy. From a Trauma theoretical perspective, Hartman argues that Wordsworth's imaginative poetry is evidently about the poet's desire to connect through his "imagination" – or mental/internal life - with the external world (Hartman *Traumatic* 552), and that such an imaginary endeavour may be "creative symptoms of trauma, linked to reality-hunger" (*Traumatic Knowledge* 552). According to Hartman, nature functioned like an imaginary stimulation to Wordsworth, which is similar to Donn's observation I have previously discussed. Although the motives for turning to nature differs somewhat between a

Romantic Humanist work and an American Pastoral one, nonetheless, both perspectives share an underlying assumption that the reward of turning to nature is mental health. This is another reason why I will consider the Romantic Humanist legacy and the American Pastoral on similar terms: both the Romantic and the American perspective reveal an intimate, imaginary, and aesthetic *need* to connect with the external world – with nature.

Durrant argues that “the work of art must work *against itself*” (97). Durrant’s argument points to a major consensus in Trauma theory; namely, the idea that traumatic experience – in order to be considered truthfully as something complex – must be valued as an experience partially working against representations. Similarly, Caruth argues that trauma literature is about “an enigmatic testimony not only to the nature of violent events but to what, in trauma, resists simple comprehension” (6). According to Caruth, we should not dwell in the search to translate traumatic experience fully 1:1, because a major component of Trauma theory is precisely the part of trauma that cannot be expressed (Caruth 75-90).

Caruth’s emphasis on the unspeakable has faced some criticism. The criticism has not so much been directed to Caruth’s arguments as such – on the contrary, Caruth remains a prominent Trauma theorist. However, recent criticism seeks to move beyond the unspeakable. Among those critics are Barry Stampfl, Michelle Balaev, and Laurie Vickroy. What these scholars are interested in is broadening the perspective and inquiries into trauma literature. For example, they want to incorporate aspects such as multidisciplinary and socio-cultural discussions (Balaev 1-3, Vickroy 130, Stampfl 16). The key problem with moving away from the unspeakable and instead focusing on multicultural and multidisciplinary aspects is that such trauma theoretic approaches to literature do not consider the ways in which Caruth actually advocates the need for thematic, and disciplinary expansions (Caruth 26-56, 72, 75-90). What Caruth is talking about, and which is what recent Trauma theoretical criticism runs the risk of losing touch with is the conceptual complexity of trauma. One of the scholars who make a similar claim is Schönfelder who argues that

In literary theory, the clinical concept of trauma has been reduced to a cultural trope for postmodern attitudes to language and history; as a result, it has increasingly faced the danger of becoming meaningless. (Schönfelder 11)

Schönfelder talks about the ways in which traumatic experiences have been portrayed aesthetically and figuratively. The author’s concern is that postmodernist endeavours such as questioning literary representations of trauma are problematic. In addition to Schönfelder’s

argument, I would like to add the fact that we cannot translate or even begin to question the unspeakable in trauma. To a certain extent, we must find peace in ambiguity, while also considering how trauma functions in wider contexts. What Schönfelder is worried about is a legitimate concern, but aesthetic and figurative representations of what might seem like ‘meaningless’ portrayals of trauma may in fact have a great deal to say about traumatic experience.

I want to re-emphasise that Balaev, Vickroy, and Stampfl (among others) do not deny the value of the unspeakable/unknowable/uncertain. But the reality is, in my view, if we depart too much from the concept of the unspeakable, we run the risk of losing sight of some main understandings about the nature of trauma.

There are a number of things that need to be clarified in terms of how analyses of trauma work in practical terms. First, I want to re-connect to the concept of trauma, but consider it in relationship to literary representations. For example, Hartman points to one of the prevalent ideas in Trauma theory, namely the idea that a traumatic experience causes a “split” in the psyche, thus the split affects the ways in which a traumatised individual can aesthetically represent trauma (Hartman *Traumatic* 543). Similarly, Caruth argues that the “[v]oice” of trauma comes from “the other within the self” (8). The idea is that trauma causes a fractioning in the psyche wherein the self becomes partially alienated or unrecognizable. Thus, the speaker, for instance, who experiences trauma cannot give a fully translatable account of his or her traumatic experience because a part of their mental self has become estranged. Questions about language and representation become central aspects of the quest to understand how trauma is presented in literary works. If a part of the self is a stranger, then questions arise how the subject bridges over his or her internal life to the external world. According to Hartman, the method for studying trauma in literature is simply put about the study of the relationship between “words and wounds” (Hartman *Trauma* 259). Hartman, among others, suggests that one of the ways to conduct trauma literary analysis is to examine how figurative language is used in literature; for example symbol and metaphor (Hartman *Traumatic Knowledge* 540-1). In addition, one may also look into the subtext; “doubleness and [...] meta-texts” (Eaglestone 15). Another possible point of entry is to examine how trauma literature refuses or works against anticipations that trauma can be ‘solved’ or translated (Durrant 97-105, Caruth 90).

One of the fundamental things to remember is that trauma is inherently bound to be paradoxical and ambiguous. According to Caruth, trauma is a

fundamental enigma concerning the psyche's relationship to reality. In its general definition, trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena. Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness. The repetitions of the traumatic event – which remains unavailable to the consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight – thus suggests a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known, and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing. (Caruth 91-2)

Caruth argues that trauma is a paradox in that one becomes consciously dissociated from the traumatic event, as it simultaneously re-occurs. Moreover, Caruth also suggests that traumatic experiences cannot be made transparent; trauma resides within the subject's psyche as partially a stranger. On a similar note, Hartman argues that there are “possibilities and limits of seeing and understanding” (*Traumatic Knowledge* 537-40). Trauma is multidimensional, partially opaque yet transparent, it is intricate and never straightforward. Thus, uncertainty and the unspeakable are bound to be essential characteristics of trauma.

Moreover, Eaglestone maintains that “Trauma theory asks questions about the ‘structure of experience’ (17). For example, is the speaker in a poem concealing something from us readers? How is figurative language used to represent trauma? Are there other dimensions to the text that reach beyond the speaker? These are some of the elements one can apply when conducting trauma literary analysis (Eaglestone 15, Stampfl 16, Hartman *Traumatic Knowledge* 540-1). Stampfl potently argues that

[a] key aspect to be considered in the evaluation of the unspeakable in the context of trauma [...] must be the nature of the larger cognitive/affective process of which a particular evocation of the unspeakable makes up a part. (Stampfl 22)

Stampfl takes a middle ground of sorts, both acknowledging the value of the unspeakable, and wishing to place trauma into a wider frame and allow what can be said and depicted to be

part of the analysis. To a certain extent, the critic wants to consider how the poems structurally, explicitly, figuratively, and sub-textually articulate and mediate trauma.

Another issue that is worth considering very briefly is how far away from human subjectivity one can stretch the concept of trauma. Can it be considered in relation to animals? Can one argue that nature/the non-human experiences or conceptually represents trauma? Trauma leads to a sense of Other-ness in the psyche of the survivor, which consequently affects how one can translate the traumatic experience in text. Similarly, literary representations of non-human organicism may also be conceptually considered Othered to the human. The characteristic of Otherness exists in the human psyche as well as in nature. Trauma theory is centred on human subjectivity, but when appropriate, this thesis will consider how the poems which will be discussed interact with concepts of non-human trauma. If we can argue that the human mind to a certain extent is the Other, why not also argue that nature too in some broad, abstract way can be considered in terms of trauma.

“Ides of March, 2020” by Didi Jackson

In a literal sense, Didi Jackson’s “Ides of March, 2020” is about a speaker who navigates concepts of civilizational collapse while wandering in nature. The poem alludes to the Romantic Humanist idea that nature is good for us in that it presents a speaker who figuratively explores concepts of nature and continuity, and civilisation and death. Ultimately, the speaker gains a new perspective on the tragic circumstances brought about by the pandemic by blurring the boundaries between nature and civilisation. However, the poem is ambiguous. Through figurative representations of nature “Ides” sets up conflicting notions about what kind of relationship the speaker actually has to nature; the question where human identity and nature begin/take off together remains an enigma in the poem. Nonetheless, despite these ambiguities around the speaker’s relationship to nature, the poem concludes with the speaker marrying concepts of death with figurative representations of nature, thus suggests that the speaker has found a first step towards healing. However, whether this healing was generated through the speaker’s relationship to nature is, as I have stressed already, not revealed.

The poem introduces a highly Romantic Humanist and Wordsworthian topos, namely conscious dwelling (Bate *Romantic* 96- 101). The poem begins with a speaker who knows and is familiar with the context they are speaking from. The speaker identifies clear binaries between themselves and non-human entities. For example, the first lines are evident of such anthropocentric, self-conscious structures:

Two doves land in the moss
 below the feeder,
 sunbathe in the last light
 of an early spring day then huddle
 on the lower branch of the ancient
 hackberry tree where we wait to see
 them mate. (Jackson 1-7)

In terms of the speaker's self-conscious dwelling, the speaker signals their participation by articulating their subjectivity and relative position to nature. The speaker articulates that it is "we" (Jackson 6) – humans - who watch the "doves" (1) – non- humans. The doves, in addition, are not imaginary constructs. To the speaker, they are very much *real* and separate from the speaker - part of a tangible space they are standing in – in the proximity of a "feeder" (2) and a "hackberry tree" (6). In short, the speaker is a subject, perceiving objects moving in a space that is nature. The first seven lines present a certain timeless and from-civilisation-liberated perspective on nature. These lines, read in isolation, echo some of the Romantic poetic spirit.

Not only does "Ides" aestheticize nature in Romantic Humanist terms, the text also alludes to the fact that nature might have reviving properties for the speaker. The speaker identifies two themes that speak in favour of nature as a space that is mentally 'healthy'. First, the speaker registers how it is "spring"- time (Jackson 4). Second, the speaker anticipates seeing physical acts of evidence that it is spring – they "wait to see / [the doves] mate" (6-7). Spring, in that respect, signifies revival, and the speaker makes the same connotations by telling the reader about the "mat[ing]" (7) doves. Taken together, the season of spring and the concept of regeneration/revival depict nature as a space where life flourishes and continues.

This assumption then – that nature has properties of continuity and revival – is an antithesis to the COVID-19 stricken civilizational space according to the speaker.

We wait to see
 them mate. By today,
 the newest plague has killed
 thousands in Italy,
 so any life is good life. (Jackson 6-10).

The speaker, while being grounded in nature and observing the continuity and cyclic properties of nature, arrives at a humble appreciation of life. The speaker turns their outward gaze from springtime in nature and the “doves” (Jackson 1) to internally contemplating the tragic circumstances in Italy.

When the speaker moves from the “doves” (1) to the tragic circumstances in Italy (7-9) the speaker transgress in space from being present in the external, natural world, to turning their gaze inwards and towards the tragic circumstances in Italy. It is interesting how the speaker seems to be able to metamorphose throughout this journey: to landing in an appreciation for being alive (10). Moreover, as can be seen in the structure of the poem, the metamorphosis happens in a fluid stream – uninterrupted by line divisions or stanzas. The poem structurally mimics the fluidity and ease at which the speaker’s mind moves between external and natural environment, and their internal, mental thoughts.

The theme of spirituality is another interesting feature of the poem. The religious references in “Ides” are prominent. For instance, while being outdoors, “hik[ing]” (Jackson 15), the speaker registers the sky above his or her head as being “biblically blue” (15) and the wine they consume during their picnic “feels sacred” (13).

In addition, the reader is introduced to a diligent “chipmunk” (20), whose presence has a profound impact on the speaker. The chipmunk that the speaker interacts with, anthropomorphically, sees “the celestial movement / of the sun before digging what [the speaker] imagine[s] / are Christian catacombs” (21-3). This is how the speaker registers nature – as a space that is infused with spirituality: it stretches from the “biblically blue sky” above the speaker’s head, down under the ground they are hik[ing]” on, and through all living and material entities.

Consider how, in their interaction with the chipmunk, the speaker claims that “[h]e has a mission. / So should I” (Jackson 24-5). The speaker sees something in and through the chipmunk, namely, the speaker recognizes that they need to move forward with the times.

The speaker alludes to the ideas that having a “mission” (24) means having hope and to be able to re-adapt with the changing circumstances that is the COVID-19 pandemic.

The chipmunk can be understood as a source for how the speaker changes their perspective and attitude; the speaker makes a transition from negativity to appreciation and love.

I have complained about so much
for so often, how now do I love
that tiny fellow chipmunk. (Jackson 18- 20)

Apart from inspiring the speaker to move *with* the times, the animal also inspires the speaker with love. In a way, the chipmunk becomes a religious missionary – inspiring the speaker with hope and a new perspective on the world.

The speaker concludes in the final lines of the poem that “life as we know it” (Jackson 27) has come to an end. What began with the speaker observing the “doves” (1) “sunbathe in the last light / an early spring day” (3-4), ends moments later with the sun setting and “life as [the speaker] know[s] it” (27). The speaker acknowledges that they cannot return to a pre-pandemic life. Instead, the speaker has come to the realisation that life has changed so much that the only way forward is to let go of the past. The speaker makes a great realisation. As they look at the sunset they take their previous reflections about the pandemic, and their experiences from nature that day, and concludes that their pre-pandemic life is a thing of the past.

No rain today fell into the open
graves of the dead, only a sunset
and life as we know it. (Jackson 25-7)

The speaker marries their experiences of the day with nature – with the sunset and the ground. Nature provides the speaker with the type of inspiration and language - as Donne finds in postmodern trauma literature – in order to conclude that “life as we know it” (27) has come to an end. The final lines connect us to a tragic history in the making, and one can argue that the speaker can only conceive of this by allowing the continuity of nature to carry and take over some of the burden.

Although one may argue that the speaker makes an unsettling realisation, the speaker acts and reasons in a calm manner. As explained earlier, the speaker finds inspiration in nature, and re-gains a sense of perspective. The speaker never denies the tragic circumstances of the present and the changes those circumstances are causing. On the contrary, by articulating that “life as we know it” (Jackson 27) has come to an end, the speaker reveals an awareness about what is happening in the world around them. And by interacting with nature, the speaker realises that they need to move forward, to have a mission.

However, there is textual evidence that “Ides” challenges the Romantic Humanist legacy. For example, it is not clear whether spirituality emanates from within the speaker or from without (from nature). When the speaker interacts with the chipmunk and realises that they also should have a “mission” (Jackson 24) – with emphasis on *should* - it is not clarified what attitude the speaker has towards their realisation. The speaker does not articulate a determination to move with the times, nor do they deny the fact that change is inevitable. Although one may interpret the speaker’s exchange with the chipmunk as ultimately inspirational, it is not the only reading. In fact, the poem reveals an ambiguous relationship between the speaker and nature/chipmunk. The idea that nature helps the speaker re-gaining their perspective could be brought about from the speaker’s imagination.

Consequently, the spiritual elements in the poem make for two *different* understandings of the speaker’s relationship to nature. If we argue that the spiritual motifs are inherent to the natural world, that they emanate from nature and thus work as external forces on the speaker’s mind, nature can be understood as a source of divinity the speaker ought to re-unite with. If we instead consider the spiritual references in “Ides” as something that emanates from the speaker, the natural space becomes a blank canvas on which they can paint their internal thoughts and worries. The poem presents both interpretations as possible since there is no established correlation between spirituality and nature. Nature is as much the lost part of the speaker that they need to seek out, as it is a space for consumption and invention.

Moving on, the speaker moves with ease between the spaces of civilisation and nature, yet makes one comment that indicates that one space is more familiar than the other. Although the speaker interacts with nature to a great extent in the poem, the text argues that civilisation is the home of the speaker. For example, when the speaker says “we return home” (Jackson 17) he or she distinctly marks a dichotomy between him- or herself and nature. Home is not home *within* nature, as Bate probably would have hoped. Rather, home is somewhere *other* from where the speaker dwells.

Previously, I argued that the chipmunk represents and changes the speaker's attitude towards the little animal. One of the things that are significant is how the chipmunk, who instills the speaker with love and a new perspective on life, is referred to as a "fellow" (Jackson 20). This is not the only instance where the speaker makes references to a collective or plurality of organisms. For instance, there is at least one other participant who joins the speaker on their excursion to nature and then back home. The speaker is not a solitary dweller but accompanied by someone else – it is not "I" who watches the "doves" but "we" (6). The speaker does not return home alone. In fact, the text says that it is "we" that "return home" (17). The plurality of participants is imperative to examine from an Ecocritical viewpoint. What the speaker is implicitly saying when they refer to a collective of humans and by referring to the chipmunk as a "fellow" (20), is that humans and non-humans are interrelated, and that humans and non-humans share collective experiences, and are equal participants in nature.

The poem challenges binary representations between the humans and the non-humans in other ways. If we consider the "hackberry tree" (Jackson 6) in symbolic terms, it problematizes a binary notion of civilizational space and natural/wild space. According to the speaker, the tree is "ancient" (5).

Two doves land in the moss
 below the feeder,
 sunbathe in the last light
 of an early spring day then huddle
 on the lower branch of the ancient
 hackberry tree. (Jackson 1-6)

One can assume that the "hackberry tree" (6) is older than the bird "feeder" (2). Thus, one may also assume that the tree occupied the natural space *before* the feeder did. Unlike the tree, the feeder is – I would assume – built by human hands. By referring to the tree as something old, the speaker is implicitly suggesting that humans have interfered with the space around the "hackberry tree" (6). Thus, the symbolic representation of the "ancient" (5) tree in contrast to the "feeder" (2) marks civilization's interference with nature. Thus, in symbolic terms, one may argue that the "feeder" (2) represents human occupation and manipulation of natural orders – if we consider the fact that ecosystems do not require human interference in the shape of feeding-devices for animals. On a less radical note, the textual

evidence about the tree can also be interpreted as signalling co-existence. The speaker reflects on his or her existence in the world while standing in proximity to the tree and the natural space. Moreover, the feeder is a source of food for the doves. Thus, we may consider this space as a space for co-existence between civilisation and nature: both animals and humans can get ‘nourishment’ and co-exist in this space.

Returning briefly to the subject of regeneration, I have argued that nature in “Ides” is presented as a space of life and regeneration. Another way of seeing nature – which coincides with the regenerative properties articulated by the speaker – is to consider nature as a space of continuity. In nature, the animals are occupied with mating and digging tunnels. Nature is active in “Ides” and is considered an antithesis to the tragic reality in Italy (Jackson 7-9). More so, the antithesis between civilisation and nature also implies that nature – the space of continuity – is stable – a space where business continues as usual - whereas civilisation has its foundations shaken due to the pandemic.

Moving on, the subject of change is signalled in the title of the poem – “Ides of March, 2020”. But what is the Ides of March? The term stems from ancient Rome and connotes two phenomena. The first connotation of *the Ides* was an

ancient marker[...] used to reference dates in relation to lunar phases. Ides simply referred to the first new moon of a given month, which usually fell between 13th and 15th. In fact, the Ides of March once signified the new year, which meant celebrations and rejoicing. (Stezano, paragraph 2)

The Ides in the sense as phrased by Stezano, is a cyclic and natural phenomenon. When it comes to the second meaning of the Ides of March 15 March 44 BC, was when the assassination of Caesar occurred. As a result, Roman politics experienced major turmoil and changes. Both of these phenomena have the subject of *change* at their core; one however, represents natural and cyclic change, and the other represents political changes happening in a civilised society (caused literally by human hands).

But what is the significance of the two-fold meaning of change to Jackson’s poem? March 2020 was around the time when most countries went into quarantine due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus around the globe, causing major changes to peoples’ lives. This is the context the speaker is writing from – the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, it is my hypothesis that “Ides” sets up the dual concept of the Ides in order to present an element of ambiguity. In addition, such a dual understanding of the concept of change also says

something about how “Ides” relates to the subject of change – it is complicated and multidimensional.

Furthermore, the text subtly presents another perspective on the human and nature relationship - from the viewpoint of nature. As I have already argued, the text places the continuity in nature in opposition to the dis-continuity in civilisation. From a non-human point of view, such an antithesis suggests that humanity may perish, but nature will go on. Thus, if we as readers shift our focus from the perception of the speaker to the viewpoint of nature, the poem becomes a dark ecological one. For example, by considering the “chipmunk” (Jackson 20) in dark ecological terms, the animal turns into something rather ominous. The “catacombs” (23) the speaker “imagine[s]” (22) the chipmunk digging may be understood as the chipmunk preparing for humanity to perish.

I have complained about so much
for so often, how now do I love
that tiny fellow chipmunk who
on hind legs checks the celestial movement
of the sun before digging what I imagine
are Christian catacombs under our foundation? (Jackson 18-23)

Thus, something as a “tiny fellow chipmunk” (20) stops being a green emissary and becomes a gravedigger. The “catacombs” (23) the chipmunk is digging can from a dark ecological perspective be interpreted as the tunnels between human graves. The poem hints that in a post-civilizational apocalypse, nature may go on uninterrupted and oblivious of humanity. Actually, by pursuing the dark ecological reading, the chipmunk seems to welcome a human demise, preparing for it by digging the “catacombs” (23). In short, “Ides” also alludes to the fact that a hypothetical civilizational collapse will mean nothing from the perspective of nature; rather, nature may go on as it is doing in the poem – freestanding from civilisation.

The poem considers a potential civilizational collapse as perception altering for the speaker in the poem. The speaker articulates a rational and pragmatic understanding of living through a time of crisis. According to the speaker, “the newest plague has killed /thousands in Italy” (Jackson 8-9). It is notable how the speaker uses the archaic word “plague” (8) rather than pandemic. “[P]lague” (8) stands out from the otherwise relatively contemporary tone of the text. By using such an archaic word and by referring to it as the “latest plague”

(8), the speaker signals an awareness that this is not the first time a disease/virus spreads globally, nor will it be the last one. The speaker narrates and contextualises the current pandemic into a history of pandemics and plagues. By doing so, the poem establishes its own historic narrative about the Ides of March.

The speaker makes an interesting assumption about the nature of pandemics. The speaker claims that pandemics and “plague[s]” (Jackson 8) are natural. The speaker interrelates their dove-watching, and continuity in nature more generally, with the claim that “[b]y today, / the newest plague has killed / thousands in Italy” (7-9). By articulating such an awareness of the re-occurrence of “plague[s]” (8), the speaker shows a realistic and critically informed awareness of the *nature* of pandemics. The weather and nature give the speaker a language to understand the nature of the pandemic situation.

From a Trauma theoretical perspective, the chipmunk embodies and depicts the speaker’s trauma. By depicting the chipmunk as “check[ing] the celestial movement / of the sun” (Jackson 21-2) the speaker gives it anthropomorphic characteristics. First of all, the speaker assumes that the animal is familiar to him or her and understands religious or spiritual concepts such as “celestial” (21) and “Christian” (23). Second, it becomes clear that the speaker’s sense of perception – them observing the chipmunk is applied onto the non-human body that exists in front of them. Who is to say that the chipmunk is not catching a scent, for instance? One may argue that the speaker’s anthropomorphic chipmunk is nothing more than what Morton claims is an anthropocentric bias – that “we can never point to the purpose of” something non-human (Morton *Vegetables* 180). Ultimately, one runs the risk of only saying something about the mind-set of the speaker and nothing about the chipmunk. Thus, the anthropomorphic depiction of the chipmunk, one may tentatively argue, is really about the speaker externalizing and projecting onto the chipmunk because they need to. Their traumatic experience needs to find an outlet and something material to ‘hold on to’ – much in the way Donn argues that nature may stimulate a traumatised mind (555).

The speaker reveals a certain level of uncertainty when they are assuming that the animal has characteristics similar to humans:

I have complained about so much
 for so often, how now do I love
 that tiny fellow chipmunk who
 on hind legs checks the celestial movement
 of the sun before digging what I imagine

are Christian catacombs under our foundation? (Jackson 18-23)

Clark argues that in anthropomorphic scenarios, focus tends to remain on the human and not the animal/non-human who is the anthropomorphised subject (Clark *Anthropomorphism* 198). Considering that, one of the things that are happening here is that the speaker positions their view of the animal between what Simons terms “trivial” (qtd. in Clark 200) and “strong[ly] anthropomorph[ic]” (Simons qtd. in Clark 201). The interrogative sentence, more specifically the question whether the chipmunk is digging catacombs or not, reveals the speaker’s uncertainty about the identity of the animal; thus, the text is ambiguous as to the value of its anthropomorphic representation – whether or not it represents the speaker or the chipmunk as a free agent.

What other evidence does the text present about the speaker and trauma? Apart from the example about the chipmunk, the text indicates that the speaker’s distance to Italy might say something about the trauma theoretic concepts of denial and escapist behaviour. One may also argue that the speaker stands too close to the traumatic circumstances of the pandemic to be able to fully comprehend what is happening. Considering the title of the poem, we, as readers, know that at the time – March 2020 – America issued a state of emergency in regards to the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus. Considering the awareness of time and place presented in the poems, we must assume that the speaker knows that America too is suffering from the pandemic. Yet, they choose to reflect on the tragic circumstances on the other side of the globe – fundamentally stretching their focus of the pandemic as far as is geographically possible:

By today,
the newest plague has killed
thousands in Italy. (Jackson 7-9)

It is my understanding that the speaker – on a subtextual level – demonstrates what Caruth argues is the Trauma theoretical paradox of “seeing” (91) and “knowing” (92). The reality of the pandemic in America is too close to the speaker and too real. If we as readers consider the speaker as someone who tries to avoid their trauma that is associated with the civilizational space, that interpretation of the speaker’s behaviour indicates that the only way the speaker plausibly can deal with the traumatic present is to distance him- or herself from the pandemic reality of America.

Moreover, Donn's reading of Virginia Woolf's works in "Beyond the Wasteland" (2016) is applicable to "Ides". According to Donn, "because it still retains its organic and cyclic properties, nature becomes a space which integrates traumatic collapse and creative renewal simultaneously" (552). In "Ides", the re-generative and cyclic properties of nature correlate with the speaker's sense of balance, as explained earlier. Dwelling in a spiritually charged spring-time natural space, and observing the doves – the text suggests – are intimately connected or intertwined with the speaker's sense of balance. Thus, nature can for example be considered the *source* of the speaker's sense of harmony. The poem establishes a sense of an existing reality, where nature has a profound impact on the speaker's state of mind. By aestheticizing nature, the speaker reveals an important notion of how trauma presents itself in and through art – that it is "never simply one's own" (Caruth 24). When the speaker projects human properties onto the chipmunk, sees nature as cyclic, or considers a reality geographically far away from their own, the speaker also finds an outlet – in figurative language – for their trauma – something they can only get in touch with in nature and not "home" (17) in the space of civilisation.

The speaker dwells in a spiritually charged and cyclic nature, they extend their thoughts to the other side of the globe, they reveal their sense of rootedness "home" in their civilizational space (Jackson 17), and they show love and appreciation for nature and life more generally. All this evidence about the speaker's self-awareness and awareness about reality, conclude in an "open / grave" (25-6). The poem is the speaker's valediction; they are burying the past and preparing for an unknown future. But they are not breaking down because they stand with one foot in nature and one in civilisation – as the text gives evidence about. The speaker's farewell, thus, makes it possible to move into the future, but this is where the poem ends – it ends with the possibility for healing. The poem does not offer an antidote to trauma. Instead, it leaves the concept of trauma open-ended and refuses an easy solution in the same way Durrant stresses the need for trauma literature to "work *against itself*" (97). "Ides" ends with the burial of the past, and leaves the future uncertain.

“Sing a Darkness” by Carl Phillips

In a most literal sense, Carl Phillips’s poem “Sing a Darkness” (“Sing”) is a speaker’s long and fragile reasoning process. The speaker tries to make sense of the circumstances of the pandemic. There is a subtle sense of grief that the human perspective and language cannot express what the speaker is feeling. Although one can read the poem as the speaker’s attempt at working through the traumatic circumstances of the present, the speaker leaves the reader with a sense that potential progress is, if not impossible, a monumental task.

The speaker in “Sing” questions some of the main ideas pertaining to the Romantic Humanist legacy. One of the interesting aspects of “Sing” is how the speaker – quite objectively – represents various aspects of Romantic Humanist ideology, only to later problematize it. The poem begins with the speaker presenting how poetry – by engaging with concepts of nature is a means to reach an understanding of the human relationship to his or her surrounding world.

Slowly the fog did what fog does, eventually: it lifted, the way
veils tend to at some point in epic
verse so that the hero can
see the divinity at work constantly behind
all things mortal. (Phillips 1-5)

The speaker initially proposes that “epic / verse” (Phillips 2- 3) may lead to knowledge and clarity. Thus, the fog that is mentioned in the first line is not just literally creating an obstruction of sight, it is a metaphor for obscurity and want of knowledge. The speaker starts building towards the idea that poetry can bring clarity. By considering the context the poem is written against – the COVID-19 pandemic - I will argue that the “fog” (1) is a metaphor for the circumstances caused by the pandemic. In sum, the speaker’s want of clarity and the disruption of sight may be understood as effects of the pandemic and may be the reason why the speaker cannot ‘see’ the present clearly.

The poem opens on a grandiose note by presenting the assumption that the poets (speakers) – the searchers for clarity and understanding – are “hero[e[s]” (Phillips 3). The pursuit of the speaker is to dismantle divine obscurity, or the answer to human existence. The poem alludes to the Romantic poet, to the solitary genius who captures life, the vastness of

imagination and personal experience, into versed language. The alliteration at the beginning of lines two and three: “veils” (2) and “verse” (3), draws attention to the ways in which obscurity and poetry may be interconnected. The rest of the poem, however, does not continue in the path of the Romantic poet.

As previously mentioned, the poem is the speaker’s long and fragile reasoning process wherein the speaker tries to logically reason their way out of the traumatic present rather than accepting poetic language. The text is fragile because we – as readers and critics – cannot surgically remove coherent pieces of the text and place them in quotation marks. One almost has to read the poem in full and then paraphrase it if one is to discuss “Sing”.

Slowly the fog did what fog does, eventually: it lifted, the way
 veils tend to at some point in epic
 verse so that the hero can
 see the divinity at work constantly behind
 all things mortal, or that’s
 the idea, anyway, I’m not saying I do or don’t
 believe that, I’m not even sure that belief can change
 any of it, at least in terms of the facts of how,
 moment by moment, any life unfurls, we can
 call it fate or call it just what happened, what
 happens, while we’re busy trying to *describe*
 or *explain* what happens,
 how a mimosa tree caught growing close beside a house
 gets described as “hugging the house,”
 for example, as if an impulse to find affection everywhere
 made us have to put it there,
 a spell against indifference,
 as if that were the worst thing –
 is it?
 Isn’t it? (Phillips 1-20)

Trying to read lines 1- 19 aloud becomes a strenuous exercise; and the lines are evidently a representation of a speaker’s messy thoughts rather than ‘poetry.’

The modernist, stream of consciousness enjambed lines build up towards the climactic anticipation that the speaker will land in clarity and being able to see the “divinity” (Phillips 4) – understanding the circumstances of the present. However, what follows in lines 20 to 30 is bathos – an anti-climactic insight. Instead of finding a reasoned exit out of their current state, the speaker has to resort to Romantic aesthetic modes of expression – which, on a subtextual level are not enough to articulate all that the speaker is experiencing and feeling. Consider how the silence around the speaker’s question whether aesthetic language is or is not void of “affection” (15) stands out. “[I]s it? / Isn’t it?” (19-20) is the point where the long and fragile reasoning process comes to a halt, and by looking at the text, one can sense the silence that the speaker sinks into – contemplating whether aesthetic representations of trees for example may actually make any difference to a “fog[gy]” (1) mind that cannot write itself out of the crisis. But what is interesting is that what follows in the rest of the poem is, as previously stated, a resort to Romantic aesthetic representations in search for insight.

The fog lifted.
 It was early spring, still.
 The dogwood brandished those pollen-laden buds
 that precede a flowering. History. What survives, or doesn’t.
 How the healthiest huddled, as much at least
 as was possible, more closely together,
 to give the sick more room. How they mostly all died, all the same.
 I was nowhere I’d ever been before.
 Nothing mattered.
 I practised standing as still as I could, for as long as I could. (Phillips 21-30)

The stream of consciousness and enjambed lines (1-19) are nowhere to be seen here. Instead, the text is easy to read, and clear. In fact, the final lines (21-30) are fragmented, which is also a modernist technique. Moreover, intertwined with the speaker’s changed tone is no longer any resistance towards the Romantic Humanist legacy. Actually, the poem is both Romantic and Anti-Romantic. The speaker problematizes Romantic cultural aesthetics, yet ultimately represents it. Paradoxically, the poem is also anti-Romantic in that it emanates some of the modernist stylistic, and cynical ethos. Furthermore, the speaker articulates what they were just moments earlier questioning. I claim that the speaker enacts or represents two different

attitudes. The first one - which we are introduced to in the first 19 lines - is the speaker's mental/internal thought process; and the second one is a representation in contrast to the mental/internal thoughts, what comes out in verse when the poet has to filter and organise their thoughts.

Moving on, the speaker reflects on how attempts at trying to “*describe / or explain what happens*” (Phillips 11-2) for instance “how a mimosa tree caught growing close beside a house / gets described as “hugging the house,” (13-4) might be nothing more than an attempt at “veil[ing]” (2) “indifference” (17). What the speaker is getting at, I would argue, is the realisation that aesthetic representations are void of meaning. More specifically to Romantic poetry: if poetic language is void of any real sentiment, then aesthetic representations of nature in poetry holds no *real* or *authentic* healing properties for humans. The speaker does not make an ideal correlation between nature – the “mimosa tree” (13) - and mental health – the “spell against indifference” (18). The speaker sinks back into their inherited modes of expression and articulation about their existence and relationship to the surrounding world despite the fact that they seem to want to express something *more*. The boundaries have been tested and the conclusion is an apathetic sinking back into what the speaker already knows – their inherited cultural and aesthetic concepts of nature. Ultimately, and as I have previously argued, the poem ends with a bathos-like defeat of the prevailing Romantic Humanist legacy. The speaker cannot reason their way out of their cultural and aesthetic frameworks, nor can the speaker fully translate the complexities of their emotions. In a sense, “Sing” represents the failure of representation. Thus, one of the “divin[e]” (Phillips 4) truths that are un-“veil[ed]” (2) in the poem is that there are limits to language and representations. The poem represents some of the core concepts about aesthetic representation of nature and the arbitrariness of language that Morton discusses in *Ecology without Nature*.

One of the main arguments the speaker makes against Romantic Humanist poetry is that such modes of expression – involving nature – offer no healing for a traumatized mind. It is worth investigating what evidence the text gives us pertaining to the mental state of the speaker. The speaker – I would argue – is experiencing the current circumstances as depressing or traumatic. The speaker concludes near the end of the poem that “[n]othing mattered” (Phillips 29) as they reflect over the realities of the pandemic: “sick[ness]” and death (27) is a looming presence. Moreover, according to the speaker, the fates of the sick and the healthy are irrelevant, because “they mostly all died, all the same” (27). The

speaker's "impulse to find affection" (16) was a fruitless quest because in the end, "[n]othing mattered" (29) the speaker concludes.

As previously argued, "Sing" shares several similarities with Modernist literary works. The cynicism and depression that can be found in Modernist works such as T.S Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922) and "The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock" (1915) are similar to the depressing and cynical tone in "Sing". The speaker further embodies "indifference" (Phillips 17) by turning from their stream of conscious-like process of *thinking* to *articulating* what they can articulate in a fragmented mode of expression. The contrast between the speaker's long reasoning process, and their fragmented speech echoes and embody one of the features most central to Trauma theory: the inability to fully articulate the experience and life of trauma.

The speaker's indifferent state undercuts to a certain extent the validity of the Romanic Humanist legacy. What begins as an earnest questioning of the world around them and the insufficiencies of language to do so properly ends with the speaker surrendering to familiar modes of expression. What began as a seemingly distanced or objective speaker – ends with a definitively indifferent one: "nothing mattered" the speaker says (Phillips 29). As previously argued, the speaker comes to the realisation that a culture of "*describ[ing]*" (11, 14) does not lead to a truthful understanding of the present. One can turn it around and argue that the truth that the speaker arrives at – the what-is-behind-the-veil – the clarity of sight, is that there are limits to what language and nature can express. The speaker can question their existential framework but cannot reason or write themselves out of their position. Ultimately, the speaker's surrender to a culture of expressing themselves in and through natural language end in a fruitless, and cheerless state. Nature did not heal the indifferent speaker. If anything, the limits presented by (natural) language push the speaker over the edge into apathy.

The speaker argues that descriptive (11) language such as representations of nature (Phillips 11-4) depicts a framework for perception and nothing more. Poetry is a "veil" (Phillips 2) that hides an illusion of "divinity" (4); which (again), brings us back to one of the ways in which "Sing" aesthetically demonstrates Morton's argument that any attempts at challenging our frame of perception is a paradoxical quest (139).

The rhetoric of the poem sets the reader up into a state of uncertainty. Apart from the ambiguous nature of whom the speaker is addressing and how the speaker should position them in the debate about the value of poetic expression, the speaker also presents a level of ambiguity about where he or she stands. "I was nowhere I'd ever been before" (Phillips 28)

the speaker says, following their conclusion that essentially nothing matters, because death is coming for us all.

How the healthiest huddled, as much at least
 as was possible, more closely together,
 to give the sick more room. How they mostly all died, all the same.
 I was nowhere I'd ever been before.
 Nothing mattered. (Phillips 25-9).

The speaker arrives at a rather cynical conclusion. However, the ambiguity around the speaker's position (28) may be considered a 'tool' for creating an element of uncertainty. For example, the speaker's statement "I was nowhere I'd ever been before" (28) creates a moment of pause: where "was" (28) the speaker? I will argue that the "where" (28) draws closer attention to the position and mind-set of the speaker. "I was nowhere I'd ever been before" (28) is likely a response to the tragic and uncertain circumstances brought about by the pandemic. In addition, line 28 makes one reflect over the speaker's mental state: where the speaker might be psychologically.

The speaker argues that they are not making any mental health progress - the poem as a whole, claims otherwise. If we zoom out and look at the overarching developments, mental health is more tangible than we might initially think. On a meta-level, the poem suggests that making mental health progress takes time and that the slightest steps forward remain unacknowledged by the self. But what evidence is there supporting the claiming that the speaker begins to heal? The answer to that lies in the speaker's realisation and growing awareness of the uncertainty of the present. It is my hypothesis that the speaker makes progress. Although the speaker themselves claim that "nothing mattered" (Phillips 29), they are too close to the events in the poem to see that they are actually making improvements. Critically speaking, the speaker takes a step in the right direction when realising that there are limits to what one can perceive and articulate, but the realisation is not spiritually liberating or idealistic. Instead, the Trauma theoretical rhetoric that "Sing" uses is similar to Durrant's argument. Similarly to Durrant's analysis, the speaker in "Sing" does not return to a stable sense of existence. Instead, the speaker's transformation represents a more realistic and complicated path towards healing – it is not so much about spiritual healing as it is a plain, dry, and balanced perspective on life as difficult and uncertain. In extension, one may argue that the speaker's interaction with nature or natural objects such as the "mimosa tree" (13)

and “dogwood” (23) offer opportunities for the speaker to examine and explore their trauma. Nature is a space that offers healing, but since the speaker is too close to their thoughts, and/or events, they cannot see the subtle transitions happening inside their mind. The concepts of balanced perspective and proximity to their trauma are focal aspects of the poem.

The speaker’s final line: “I practised standing as still as I could, for as long as I could” (Phillips 30) make two Trauma theoretical points. Firstly, the line suggests that the present is difficult – it is a struggle to try and remain present when living in a time of crisis. Secondly, which also relates to the first point, the way the speaker experiences the events in the poem is in conflict with the present tense of the title “Sing a Darkness”; thus, the poem reveals a temporal discrepancy, which speaks of trauma.

I am now going to return focus to lines 20-21 – the interrogatives – to consider them in Trauma theoretical terms. Something happens between lines 20 and 21. Around the question “is it? / Isn’t it” (Phillips 19-20) is an aura of muteness – there is something that cannot be articulated rationally, or through poetry. It is my hypothesis that the speaker’s long and fragile reasoning process reaches depths in those lines (19-20) the reader cannot partake in. Implicitly and subtly, the speaker demonstrates entering into contemplations that cannot be mediated or voiced. The only way forward is to alter the structure and direction of the poem by modifying/altering their spiralling mind aesthetically into a self-coherent and balanced poetic expression. As a result, the speaker’s explorative attitude transforms into a certain one. After the speaker ‘resurfaces’ from asking whether “a spell against indifference” (17) is or is not (19-20) “the worst thing” (18) the speaker has become intelligible. What follows in the final part of the poem is a representation of speech. The effect is a sense that the poem becomes clearer, un-“veil[ed]” (2), and that the poem now has equilibrium. Thus, from a stylistic point of view, the poem presents chaos transcending into order, and that order in turn represents how the mind of the speaker progresses – stability is in the offing.

To challenge something is a first step towards progress. The speaker tests their boundaries, and returns, but they are not the same person they were when they set out to problematize the uncertainties of the present. As has been argued, the speaker – although failing at breaking out of their cultural and aesthetic perspective – undergoes change and comes to new understandings about their relationship to the world. The speaker cannot go against limits of representation, but they can re-examine and change how they perceive concepts of representation. For example, in Jackson’s adaptation of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, the Shire did not change, but Frodo did. The framework may be the same (the Shire,

or a Romantic Humanist frame), but the individual's journey to the edge may alter how one looks at life. Thus, as "Sing" maintains, the speaker's sinking back within their frame is not so much a defeat as it is a demonstration that the mind is flexible.

Although there is a great deal that speaks against the Romantic Humanist legacy in the poem, the speaker links nature and health together. The first part of the poem – lines 1 to 19 – starts with a metaphorical or literal fog, and what follows is the speaker's reflections on the current circumstances of the pandemic and the issues of representation. The fog is interconnected with the grand, existentialist and traumatised thoughts that the speaker deals with. Thus, one may argue that it is in fact the fog (nature) that gives the speaker the language they need to explore these difficult questions. This hypothesis is further strengthened by the fact that in lines 20-30, the speaker returns to the metaphorical or literal fog in order to establish themselves within the very framework the speaker first set out to problematize. It is interesting that although the speaker sets up such "indifferent" (17, 29) attitudes towards Romantic Humanist thoughts and articulations, the poem paradoxically also concludes that healing is found through a connection with nature. The aim of the Romantic Humanist legacy, which the poem questions ironically, also becomes the solution to the speaker's traumatised state. The poem makes a double turn in the argument it sets up about the validity of Romantic Humanism. This double turn is further emphasised in the speaker's proclamation: "I was nowhere I'd ever been before" (28). The speaker uses an ambiguous answer pertaining to their position to illustrate and articulate how, after all, they have not moved from where they started.

In terms of the subject of untranslatability or the unspeakable, the poem represents paradoxically how the speaker makes the unspeakable speakable, yet, cannot articulate or fully translate his or her traumatic experiences. As has been argued throughout, the speaker goes from thinking in lines 1-20 to articulating in lines 21-30; the fragile and long reasoning process transforms into something stable. A way of considering the transformation that takes place in the poem is to consider it as a representation of how the speaker aesthetically and figuratively articulates the unspeakable. The barrier or obstacle that presents itself to the speaker in lines 19-20 is circumvented or solved through poetry. Yet, the poem remains enigmatic as to what the speaker was thinking and experiencing between lines 20 – 21: what prompts the speaker to stop questioning, and becoming intelligible. The poem presents a way in which trauma can be taken "beyond the borders of the unspeakable" (Stampfl 16), yet, remain "enigmatic" (Caruth 6).

“Desert Lily” by Rigoberto González

Another poem that turns to nature is Rigoberto González’s “Desert Lily”. In a most literal sense, “Desert Lily” depicts a desert wind that takes a dress from a clothesline in an act to claim the dress from human ownership (González 1-18). The scene in the poem is a desert, and the backyard from which the wind takes the dress. The agent in the poem is also the wind; it has replaced a self-conscious speaker. Moreover, the wind objects to human desire, exploitation and civilisation in general. The poem concludes that the dress is free, and can use nature to “invent its own beauty” (González 22). The poem challenges the anthropocentric perspective in favour of an ecocentric one. But the text also presents a double perspective: an anthropocentric perspective or sphere as existing within an ecocentric one. Another interesting feature of the poem is the dark ecologic tone. The poem paints a scene void of humans, and as a result, nature is let alone.

The Wordsworthian type of speaker - often recognized as a “self-conscious” dweller” and imaginatively “possessor of place” (Bate *Romantic* 100), is nowhere to be found in “Desert Lily”. Instead, the poem substitutes such a human with a wind. In the poem, it is the wind that has agency, speaks, and reflects on its existence in relation to humanity.

This white dress will not be worn again, says the wind,
and the dress lets go of its fondest memory: clinging
to the clothesline as it made believe it was a kite.

How it soared, gull-like, through the sky, how it
cast a shadow independent of a body, and escaped
the human grasp like sunlight or a butterfly,

The past is a prison anyhow. As are names,
says the wind. (González 1-8)

The self-conscious “wind” (1) carries the dress throughout the whole poem to the final lines where the wind returns it to nature.

this white dress, can invent its own beauty
 for a change. It can dress itself. Here, a collar
 made of larvae. Here, a scorpion for a buckle. (González 22-4)

The wind demonstrates its agency by claiming something from humans – the “white dress” (1), and by taking control of the narrative.

According to the text, there are no humans to “covet or desire” (19) nature and/or the dress. Instead, the wind expresses feeling a “strange freedom” (18) being free from human observation. In sum, “Desert Lily” makes the argument that nature wants to free itself from the exploiting, human race.

Similarly to post-colonial theory, the wind can be considered ‘the Other’ that occupies the space of its oppressors – the humans. When the wind articulates its attitudes and thoughts such as: “[t]his white / dress, says the wind, belongs to no one” (16-7), it also occupies the language of humans. The poem argues that “freedom” (18) for nature is the following:

What

strange freedom this detachment from the living,

 from the scrutiny of eyes that covet or desire,
 from the touch and tug of human hands that value
 all they can possess or possibly destroy. (González 17-21)

The poem presents a radical environmentalist and deep ecological idea that human interference with nature must come to an end. “Desert Lily” presents nature as separate and freestanding from humanity while also arguing that the human race must change its anthropocentric treatment of nature. For example, the poem argues that human exploitations and consumption of nature must come to an end (González 19-21).

Although the poem does not explicitly claim that the space the wind is presiding over is a post-apocalyptic one, the wind itself, and several pieces of textual evidence suggest such an ominous reading. What we do know is that the wind – nature – claims something from humanity. In this case it is something rather trivial – a dress. However, there are real life instances when a wind can intensify into something dangerous. Are we not aware of how the elements can destroy individual human lives and whole cities and villages? What is, for instance, a house to a tornado? The wind in “Desert Lily” might seem rather innocent if

compared to a hypothetical, full-grown tornado coming towards us. But nonetheless, the text warns us about forgetting that nature can sweep in at any second and lay waste to our lives. The text says: “[t]he wind arrives not because it’s called / but because it’s forgotten” (8-9). Nature can also be an intruder the poem maintains.

The cynic rhetoric of apocalyptic writings leads to a sense of irresolution according to Garrard (*Apocalypse* 97-101, 113-6). What Garrard does not take into consideration – relevant to cases such as “Desert Lily” – is how apocalyptic narratives can unsettle and challenge representations of human relationship to, and perspectives on nature. “Desert Lily” represents a wind that frees the dress from humans (González 19-21). No human is present and able to interfere in the poem. With the assumed absence of a human agent/speaker, “Desert Lily” presents a possible, dark ecological reality: that nature can exist “without us” (555) – a world without

the scrutiny of [human] eyes that covet or desire,
from the touch and tug of human hands that value
all they can possess or possibly destroy. (González 19-21)

Apocalyptic and dark ecological narratives are similar in that they both eliminate or turn the focus away from the speaker who dwells in nature. Thus, from an Ecocritical perspective, and as the poem reveals, there is ethically, culturally and aesthetically speaking much to be gained in works of art that challenge human presence in art. “Desert Lily” challenges the readers’ ability to read the poem in strictly anthropocentric terms. Due to the ambiguity pertaining to the speaker’s agency, “Desert Lily” creates a general sense of uncertainty about the concepts of human perspective and human existence in the world. Thus, “Desert Lily” presents us with a rightfully truthful and confusing state of existence where human existence is not fixed or a given.

“Desert Lily” challenges our ability to argue whether or not it is the poem that serves the wind, or vice versa. It may be argued that the figurative language in the poem illustrates an anthropocentric human who anthropomorphises the wind, or that the figurative language is a result of the wind subsuming the human into writing and acknowledging the force and power of nature. It is imperative to bear in mind that either interpretation is possible, and that there is no one right answer. In short, the poem presents the human relationship to nature as ambiguous.

The final stanza of the poem further complicates any attempts to pinpoint who owns the human language.

This white dress, can invent its own beauty
for a change. It can dress itself. Here, a collar
made of larvae. Here, a scorpion for a buckle. (González 22-4)

In the previous sentences, the wind – who has a tone of demand – drives the events forward. It enables the dress to “soar[...], gull-like, through the sky” (González 4), and ultimately lands the dress on the ground, and “the dress comes alive even more” (12). In the final stanza (lines 22-4), however, the poem ends with the allusion that it is not possible to claim with certainty whether it is the wind or the speaker who gets the final word. What does this tell us? Previous textual evidence sets us up to assume it is the wind speaking – narrating how nature re-dresses the “dress” (22). The poem ends with a secret, or refusal to disclose who the uncontested speaker of the poem might be.

The title of the poem – “Desert Lily” – is significant. The “desert” flower is a metaphor for the dress (González 16), and it “will glow with moonlight” (16) the text claims. It is an intriguing and beautiful line, speaking to some of the Romantic sentiments towards nature. Yet, from the viewpoint of nature, the “desert lily” represents something quite different. The desert flower is freestanding from human gaze. No eyes can “covet or desire” (19) it. And if we take into account the poem’s overarching moral judgement of the human race, and its objection to humans aestheticizing nature, the poem can be understood as rising up against the Romantic Humanist legacy, or humanity more generally speaking.

desert lily that will glow with moonlight. This white
dress, says the wind, belongs to no one. What
strange freedom this detachment from the living,

from the scrutiny of eyes that covet or desire,
from the touch and tug of human hands that value
all they can possess or possibly destroy. (González 16-21)

The beauty that can be found in nature is distilled into the solitary flower. In addition, the “desert lily” (16) is on a subtextual level marked as the property of nature. It belongs in the desert – metaphorically and conceptually speaking – away from humans.

Another way of looking at it is to imagine what effects the poem might have on us readers. I will argue that one way of understanding the poem is to consider how it works on an imaginary level. The perspective that tends to originate from a human speaker is deferred to the reader, through the medium of the poem. If there is no human agent present, such an un-colonised or un-dwelled space may consequently be subjected to the reader. I will tentatively argue that the readers maintain the possibility to conceptualise and reflect ideologically on the natural scene if it is not clear that the poem does not have a speaker with agency. Thus, if we step into the poem imaginarily and claim the space for our internal eye, we enter into a simulation-like scenario. Consider the following passage:

Pebbles and sand erode from the cloth
and the white dress begins to flower once again, a

desert lily that will glow with moonlight. This white
dress, says the wind, belongs to no one. (González 14-7)

From a Romantic perspective, *we* – the readers – become the Wordsworthian dwellers who listen to the voice of the wind and watch life in the desert unfold before our imagination. So, instead of representing a speaker dwelling in their sense of place, the poem invites the reader to experience an imaginary journey through a vacant space. The text paints a scene by giving us just enough evidence to set the scene, such as: “[p]ebbles and sand” (14), “moonlight” (16), and a “glowing” (16) dress - as it returns to the elements. Another example is how the text also depicts the sky and how the dress moves with the wind:

How it soared, gull-like, through the sky, how it
cast a shadow independent of a body, and escaped
the human grasp like sunlight or a butterfly. (González 4-7)

One may argue that the passage illustrates a scene that is free from a speaker that has agency. I want to tentatively suggest that such descriptive and illustrative passages present the readers with an imaginary blue print on which we as readers can take the place of the Romantic poet.

The poem proves the prevalence and inescapability of our conceptual frameworks of nature (Morton 139) - the Wordsworthian, anthropocentric perspective - simply by removing the human from the centre. The want of a speaker with agency in the poem can rhetorically be understood to undercut a dark ecological reading. For instance, by removing the speaker from the centre, the poem has not truly accomplished a re-aligned and ecocentric perspective. Instead, the poem remains anthropocentric because the readers consume the space that traditionally a speaker with agency would consume. Following the line of reasoning that “Desert Lily” is inherently anthropocentric proves Morton’s argument that readers and critics are “stuck” within the anthropocentric scope of perception (139).

From a romantic ecological perspective, one may argue that the speaker is present in nature. The speaker can also be understood to have a deep connection with the natural space of the desert. As previously stated, Bate argues in *Romantic Ecology* that a speaker who is familiar with, and interconnected with the natural space in question, yet withholds information about that space, demonstrates closeness to nature (Bate *Romantic* 87-8). If we consider the fact that the speaker in “Desert Lily” withholds information or is not overtly providing details about what type of natural space they are dwelling in the same way Bate argues, one may hypothesise that the speaker in “Desert Lily” can be understood to be so close to the natural context. Yet, paradoxically, we as readers may also become invested in the desert space, precisely because the speaker may be invested.

The portrayal of the speaker as being invested in their natural space does however raise questions about environmental and ecological ethics. From the anthropocentric perspective of the speaker, the wind does not have agential status. Instead, the speaker can be understood to anthropomorphise the wind, its tone, speech act, and moral values: it is the wind that is being “dress[ed]” (González 23) by the speaker. For example, when the wind says that “[t]his white / dress [...] belongs to no one” (16-7), or that “[t]his white dress will not be mourned” (11), it is really the speaker who attributes a non-human entity with human characteristics. The main question remains whether or not the anthropomorphised wind is ethically sound from an ecocritical perspective. It is a Schrödinger’s cat scenario. Since we cannot find the answer (open the box), the wind exists in both states at the same time: it is both an agent, and in a similar vein what Clark phrases a human “projection” (Clark *Anthropomorphism* 200).

Continuing on the subject of the speaker’s relationship to nature, the beautiful, aesthetic observations that the speaker registers also say something about nature and continuity in contrast to civilisation. In “Desert Lily”, unlike in “Ides”, the speaker does not

contemplate death. Rather, the speaker in “Desert Lily” alludes to the environmentalist subject of exploitation. So, when the wind says that humans “covet or desire” (González 19), one may tentatively argue that the speaker also reflects over his or her own part in humanity’s exploitations of nature. The speaker opens for the moral discussion of humanity’s guilt, for example how much humanity has taken for granted, exploited, and consumed nature for our own benefits. From such a point of view, the poem articulates Bate’s ultimate argument in *Romantic Ecology*; namely, that interacting with nature may bring a sense of love for nature, thus, an ecologically sound perspective on nature (5-9).

From the viewpoint of a speaker, the poem reveals an ecological awareness. When the speaker sees the dress flying with the wind, the dress becomes so vivid it metaphorically gets a beating heart (González 13-4), the speaker reveals a level of compassion and connection to the space. Perhaps even a growing ecological conscience starts to grow in the speaker, or an awakened love for nature as Bate argues in *Romantic Ecology*. Thus, when the text says that humans are exploiters and consume nature (19-21), it is really the speaker who thinks along those lines about their own sense of guilt, and how they have exploited nature. The wind becomes a projection of the speaker. From such a viewpoint, the poem presents a speaker who begins to emerge out of their anthropocentric frame of perception, into an Ecocritical one.

The poem can also be read from a Trauma theoretical perspective. As has been argued already, we cannot tell with certainty whether there is a speaker present in nature. Nor is the (hypothetical) speaker is explicit about their “rooted[ness]” (Bate *Romantic* 87). One may argue in lines with several Trauma theoretic scholars that a fictional character such as the speaker in “Desert Lily” carries a traumatic burden they cannot fully translate to the reader. The speaker does not only leave out specifics about the natural space, they have also made away with their own subjectivity – as has been argued already. Thus, there is something highly traumatic about the levels of opacity in “Desert Lily”.

One may also explore the function of repetition in the poem. On the one hand, we have the scene and know what events unfold. For example, we know that there is a wind that receives almost exclusive attention, and that nature is central to the poem. But when we begin to examine what the poem might be saying on a subtextual level about trauma, things become a bit more complicated. As has been argued before, we cannot know with certainty that the poem is a traumatised speaker’s story. Instead, the reader must look into the subtext of the poem, among other things. According to Caruth, repetition is a common trope in trauma theory (Caruth 91-2); and we find evidence of that in the poem. The element of repetition is:

“says the wind” (González 1, 8, 11, 17). However, it is not sufficient to argue that repetition is an effect of trauma. Be that as it may, I want to tentatively explore how repetition functions in “Desert Lily” and how it may be related to a certain extent to trauma. For example, the wind is not just introduced at the beginning of the poem, and then moves the dress throughout the lines. Instead, the wind re-appears sporadically throughout the stanzas by making itself known again and again. “The wind arrives not because it’s called / but because it is forgotten” (8-9) the text says. The re-occurrence of the speaking wind, and the textual argument in the poem that the wind does not allow the speaker to “forg[et]” (9) it may be understood in terms of trauma theory – although it is not a throughout solid argument. It is worth considering however that the repetition of the speech act of the wind similarly presents the ways in which trauma operates: it cannot be forgotten because traumatic events reoccur in the mind of the survivor. Thus, the repetition taken together with the wind’s message that it cannot be forgotten, present how trauma reoccurs in the mind of the survivor. “Desert Lily” quite sophisticatedly presents trauma in the way Caruth considers trauma: as “refusing simple comprehension” (Caruth 6). It is not a given that the poem is traumatic, nor is it a given that it is not.

It is also interesting to consider if traumatic experience can be conceptually extended to encompassing non-human organisms as well. Morton and Clark both argue that there are limits to human perception and understanding of non-human organisms and the extent to which humans can understand the psychic life of non-human organisms (Clark *Mountain* 78, Morton *Vegetables*). In “Desert Lily” for example, one may consider the dress and the wind in terms of trauma. The text emphasises the dress and the wind as living entities. For example, the wind is central in the poem, and it has a voice. Similarly, the text depicts the “white dress” (González 1) as coming to life.

This white dress will not be mourned, says the wind,
and the dress comes alive even more. The ruffles

on the hem opening and closing like the valves
of a heart. Pebbles and sand erode from the cloth
and the white dress begins to flower once again. (Jackson 11-5)

The non-humans are presented with human properties. But not only that, the poem also suggests that they are suffering or have been suffering due to human exploitation and greed.

The dress begins to experience “freedom” when it is free from humanity (González 18). Moreover, the ultimate act of claiming its freedom and autonomy is presented in the final lines when the

white dress, can invent its own beauty
for a change. It can dress itself. Here, a collar
made of larvae. Here a scorpion for a buckle. (González 22-4)

The dress has taken on human form, a form that flourishes and starts to live when it is freed from human ownership. Its emancipation is a sympathetic narrative. The wind, on the other hand - as has been argued already - is characterised as an active force – deciding to take action by freeing the “white dress” (González 1). The natural scene that we see in the poem blends victimhood and survival. Nature – the dress and the wind – connotes a sentimental aspect as well as agency and the allusion that nature may be considered in terms of trauma and having a psychic life. Together, the dress and the wind give the natural scene a rounded, complex, and human spirit – or a spirit that we can interact with and begin to understand.

Conclusion

This thesis had two aims. First, it set out to examine how the three poems written during the COVID-19 pandemic, namely “Ides of March, 2020” by Didi Jackson, “Sing a Darkness” by Carl Phillips, and “Desert Lily” by Rigoberto González represent human relationship to nature. Second, the thesis made inquiries into the ways in which the three poems relate trauma and the potential for healing to *their* concepts of, and relationship to nature. This study was explorative and interpretative in nature, and the conceptual frameworks I used for the analysis of the poems were: Romantic Humanism, Ecocriticism, and Trauma theory. It was my hypothesis that an intersectional, and uncertainty-based inquiry may help illuminate the complexities of the speakers’ relationship to nature and trauma.

In “Ides” and in “Desert”, nature is a space of continuity and regeneration. Life in nature can continue without human interference according to the poems. “Desert” is slightly more controversial than “Ides” however in its tone. “Desert” argues that humanity has been exploiting nature for far too long, and it is now time that humans leave nature alone. Whereas “Ides” presents a more Wordsworthian relationship to nature, “Desert” argues that humans need to stay away from nature. While “Ides” is more accommodating in its tone, “Desert” is hostile. In “Sing” however, the speaker has a slightly more complex relationship to nature. The speaker in “Sing” problematizes the Romantic Humanist legacy, yet is unable to conceive of another type of reality. The speaker’s concerns are not so much about forging a relationship with as it wants to aesthetically and engineerically examine the relationship as such. “Sing” is the poem which most potently presents the Ecocritical and Romantic Humanist dilemma, and how Romantic Humanism both is a forced framework, and in need of revision.

Furthermore, the three poems also reveal their speakers to have a paradoxical, and uncertain relationship to nature. In fact, “Ides”, “Sing”, and “Desert Lily” rather undo than establish nature as solid ground, or stable in its entirety. Even in the most seemingly straightforward poem – “Ides” – nature is made ambiguous. Boundaries that on a surface level seem binary are essentially ambiguous. Interestingly, “Ides” and “Sing” conclude on a note that something potentially healthy might come out of these ambiguities and uncertainties. For example, the speakers in “Ides” and in “Sing” are not undergoing what might be considered ‘idealised’ types of healing; yet, nature provides the speakers with a sense of stability. Thus, the poems allude to the assumption that there is virtue in uncertainty

and ambiguity. Healing might come, but in a re-configured, less aesthetically pleasing way, and as readers we can only *in part* comprehend the improvements that the speakers are making. Moreover, in “Desert Lily”, it is both nature and the (hypothetical) speaker that can be understood to be experiencing trauma; the wind hurts as a result of human exploitation of nature, or the human hurts because of the pandemic. However, from a distinctly Trauma theoretical perspective, “Desert Lily” suggests that there is a deeply traumatised speaker behind the lines – one who realises that their exploitation of nature has caused hurt, thus, realises that something needs to change. In “Desert Lily”, the speaker’s relationship to nature may be considered the most sympathetic one – the human connects with nature and they both share their respective trauma – a trauma that cannot be made fully transparent to the reader. Still, in the sharing of trauma, the poem opens up a conversational space between the speaker and nature.

This study has shown that nature and trauma are presented on similar terms in each poem. From the perspective of the speakers, their interactions with nature, and from the perspective of the poems more generally, they suggest that one cannot fully understand nature or trauma. Conceptually speaking, the poems present nature and trauma as being partially “veil[ed]” (Phillips 2). “Ides” for example, is the poem out of the three, which most clearly establishes nature as the ‘Other’. Nature in the poem is a space for recreation and inspiration. However, “Ides” remains fundamentally ambiguous, as has been concluded already. For example, the speaker’s relationship to nature is left open to interpretation. Nor is it possible to fully claim that the natural space is a source for healing the speaker’s trauma. The poem pulls in all directions, thus, rather undoes and “fog[gs]” (Phillips 1) the possibility to make fully informed assumptions about nature and trauma. In “Desert Lily”, the scene is different, and the rhetoric in opposition to that of “Ides”. It is possible to attribute trauma both to the speaker and the wind because the boundaries between the human and the non-human are fused together. Consequently, trauma is not solely a property of humans, it also humanises nature. In “Sing”, nature is not so much a space as it is a conceptual framework, and a language. But the poem reveals obscurely, yet clearly, the paradox of existing within the anthropocentric sphere, and how trauma can be articulated and represented while also remaining unspoken.

The poems also present nature and trauma as sharing one similar property. Neither nature, nor the speakers can be fully defined. At the core of nature and at the core of the speakers’ trauma they all have a part of themselves that is ‘Othered’. The internal world (the speakers’ psyches) and the external world (nature) both have something foreign and

untranslatable at their core. “Desert Lily” is the poem that most poignantly presents the concept of uncertainty. Due to the fact that the poem is not clear as to who the uncontested agent of the poem is, it becomes challenging to talk about trauma, because we do not know who to attribute it to. Similarly, although nature is at the centre of the poem, we cannot establish what type of relationship a human speaker might have to the desert because the location and presence of the speaker is ambiguous. “Desert Lily” emphasises perspective or point of view, and how to some extent one cannot translate everything. “Sing” does not problematize or inquire into a natural space, rather, the speaker goes beyond that into the concept of nature as such. From the poem’s presentation of the Ecocritical and Romantic dilemma, the speaker re-emerge with the conviction that he or she cannot challenge their Romantic, natural framework, or that poetry can heal their trauma. On a meta-level, however, the poem suggests that the speaker makes improvements, but they cannot see it because they are too close to their trauma – there is a part of themselves that the speaker cannot understand. As such, “Sing” paradoxically represents or mimics the unspeakable and uncertainty without actually disclosing their trauma.

In sum, all three poems reveal in various ways how nature informs the speakers’ trauma and vice versa. The speakers find an outlet or a language in nature to express their traumatic experience. Consequently, they may potentially begin to heal and re-gain a sense of perspective on nature that is less human-centred. In that process, the speaker’s relationship to nature reveals an important truth that is applicable to both Trauma theory and Ecocriticism – that in order to be able understand nature and trauma, one must acknowledge the ambiguities pertaining to perception and self-understanding. The poems foreground the notion that there is virtue in uncertainty.

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