

ARTS AND HUMANITIES RESEARCH COUNCIL

‘Values of Environmental Writing’ - Research Network

Conversation 1: *‘Environmental Writing and Inspiration*

Preparatory Notes for Network Participants

At this event we intend to explore new and traditional ideas of literature as the inspiration for kinds of moral attachment to, and valuation of the environment.

Our thinking about this network began with a desire ‘to explore the kinds of environmental writing and writers’ voices (past and present) that prompt identifiable social responses and structures of value’. To try to put things in short and sharp terms: what kinds of environmental writing do communities and individuals value? Why do they value it? How do they value it? And, how are values defined, identified and transmitted?

Version of the same questions are posed in a recent distinctive and polemical text *Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto*, written by Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine. [* You can download this document as a pdf file from the ‘Conversation 1’ page of the website.] In encouraging participants to prepare for the upcoming event on Friday September 17th, we would like you to read this document in advance, so that some of our Conversation can be structured around it. We intend to pair the environmental Manifesto with a selection of works by a writer indelibly associated with ‘nature writing’—and who is, arguably, the moral inspiration for *Uncivilisation*—William Wordsworth.

Very soon, we will post a small selection of Wordsworth’s poetry to our website, some of which is specific to the West of Scotland, the physical location of this series of conversations. Out of this conjunction, or juxtaposition, we hope to provide inspiration for conversations that respond to the following cluster of questions:

- How might we explore the kinds of environmental writing and writers’ voices (past and present) that prompt identifiable social responses and structures of value?
- How are scale(s) of environmental change exposed and made affective?
- How does the representation of changing habitats and eco-systems inspire environmental action?
- Is there a continent-shaped, or differently arranged, geography characterizing the most influential texts in CEW? For example, North American or British traditions?
- What are the limits of CEW as inspiration for change or unity of purpose?

We hope that network group members will feel able to engage with these short readings and to come along ready to discuss the cultural and ideological questions that they raise. We hope to ensure that the event is one that is truly conversational and inclusive. Across the course of the day we hope to shape our own ideas of Inspiration and how these will anticipate our future Conversations on Communication and Action. From time to time

we will encourage our Network members to use the dedicated Blog section of the website to post further examples of environmental writing they find inspirational. It would be refreshing to hear about genres of writing not restricted to traditional notions of literature.

Finally, for anyone, seeking further prompts and provocation, below we've compiled a more detailed and longer list of questions that be bounced of the reading material.

Further Questions:

What kinds of inspiration are being sought in, and determined by environmental literature, and for whom?

To what degree can environmental writing be said to inspire/inform the cultural consciousness of a new age of anxiety?

What kinds of language, term and concept are demanded by, and created through the current environmental conjuncture?

Is it acceptable to work with Creative Environmental Writing (CEW) as a composite, literary/aesthetic category? What merits can come of the term's use?

What sorts of sensibility are being put to work in the articulation of environmental concern/crisis?

Does CEW denote a mood? Or, an approach to form and content?

What kinds of environmental narrative or genre are deployed for what kinds of literary-practical end? How are potency, variation and texture created?

Does writing differently inspire from other media (visual art; film and documentary) currently deployed to express environmental concern? If so, how so?

Are there particular dimensions to our longer literary history as an island nation (or island of nations) that make for a peculiarly *British* form of engagement, and vein of environmental inspiration? How far are we still happy heirs to a Romantic tradition?

How do environmental concerns/worries sit with an ever difficult-to-define condition of Britishness/Scottishness? How do readers in Britain/Scotland find their fit in a bigger picture?

Are internationalist efforts to inspire a global culture of 'campaigns for change to save the earth' doomed only to render environmental necessity as something insipid and dilute?

Does the innocent idea of 'inspiration' homogenize and delimit the kinds of imaginative response possible to the current environmental conjuncture?

Is inspiration too much shaped by a kind of encounter shaped by rapture, wonder, enchantment and awe, which venerates 'the natural world/the environment' as something to be saved, or redeemed, and kept as 'separate', 'untamed' and 'pristine'?

How far is the ideal of inspiration ecologically informed? How far do we remain wedded to anthropocentric ideas of 'calm' and an orderly equilibrium or "steady state"?

What might be said of styles of expression? How do we begin to judge between alarmist scare-mongering about ecocide, or didactic hectoring about social change? Is the light-touch or heavy-hand simply a matter of taste? Is there room for comic comment? For absurdist intervention? What place for science fiction, long the province of new environmental imaginings?