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Sylvie Mikowski

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## “Relinquishing the myth of human apartness” in Sara Baume’s *Seven Steeples* (2022)

*Le renoncement au mythe de l’exceptionnalité de l’espèce humaine dans Seven Steeples (2022) de Sara Baume*

Sylvie Mikowski

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## “Relinquishing the myth of human apartness”<sup>1</sup> in Sara Baume’s *Seven Steeples* (2022)

**Abstract:** It is difficult to categorise Sara Baume’s *Seven Steeples* from a generic point of view. It is neither a long prose poem, nor an essay, nor a pamphlet. Despite its featuring some of the basic ingredients of the novel genre, such as characters and narration, these elements are reduced to a minimum. The aim of this article is to show that this aesthetic choice is meant to “relinquish the myth of human apartness” to quote from Lawrence Buell, by decentering the narrative and diverting the reader’s attention from the human to the non-human – animals, plants, rocks, but also dust, garbage, rot – which surround the characters and make up the very fabric of their lives, undermined as they are by the same erosion as the other elements on earth, as a consequence of the passing of time. As a result, Baume’s novel seems to echo the ideas of “new materialist” philosophers who have emphasised the intermingling of the human and the non-human.

**Keywords:** Sara Baume, *Seven Steeples*, new materialism, ecocriticism, ecology, environmental awareness, nature writing.

**Résumé:** *Seven Steeples* de Sara Baume est difficile à caractériser du point de vue générique : ce n’est ni un long poème, ni un essai, ni un pamphlet, et, bien qu’il présente les caractéristiques de base de la fiction narrative, telles que la présence de personnages et d’un récit, ces éléments sont réduits au minimum, à tel point qu’il est difficile de parler d’un roman. L’objet de cet article est de montrer que le projet de Baume est d’abandonner le mythe de l’exceptionnalité de l’espèce humaine, pour utiliser une formule de Lawrence Buell : Baume cherche à décentrer le récit en déportant l’intérêt du lecteur sur le non-humain – animaux, plantes, minéraux, mais aussi poussière, déchets, pourriture – qui entoure les personnages et constitue le tissu même de leur existence quotidienne, soumise à la même érosion que les autres éléments sur terre, due au passage du temps. *Seven Steeples* semble ainsi faire écho aux philosophes du « nouveau matérialisme » qui insistent sur la nature inéluctable des interactions entre l’humain et le non-humain.

**Mots clés:** Sara Baume, *Seven Steeples*, nouveau matérialisme, écocritique, écologie, écrits sur la nature, littérature et environnement.

Sara Baume’s latest published book, *Seven Steeples*,<sup>2</sup> raises questions about what genre of writing the book belongs to and if it can be defined as narrative fiction at all. However, despite the beautiful language it deploys, the systematic use of repetition,

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1. From Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 425.
  2. Sara Baume, *Seven Steeples*, Dublin, Tramp Press, 2022.

the typographical layout which at times introduces cuts and run-on lines, and the creation of rhythm, it cannot be considered as a long prose poem either. The book still retains some of the basic tenets of narrative fiction, such as the succession of actions, albeit insignificant, and the staging of fictional characters, even though underdeveloped. Neither can it be called an essay, as it contains no moral, political or philosophical digression. It is not a pamphlet either, as it does not make any call for action on the part of public or private powers. The point of this paper is to show in what ways *Seven Steeples* is an attempt to place the non-human at the heart of the narrative, instead of using the traditional human perspective to tell a story about humans. Baume has challenged herself to eschew such basic ingredients of narrative fiction as characterisation, plot, dialogue, or interior monologue, because they all tend to produce an anthropocentric rendition of the world, whereby only the human characters are endowed with agency, and the world around them merely serves as an inert and passive background.

Instead, *Seven Steeples* invites the reader to acknowledge how humans and non-humans are not separate from one another but are utterly co-dependent and intermingled. It is especially through the emphasis on matter – in the most down-to-earth, material sense of the word – that the author casts light on the entanglement of our lives with the things, objects, minerals, plants, animals, dirt, mud, etc., which surround us and sometimes even blend with our bodies themselves, as is the case for bugs, germs, parasites, etc. By reminding us of the way humans and human culture are not separate from nature but are part and parcel of it, Baume's novel may read as an illustration of the ideas advocated in the last two decades by philosophers of "new materialisms", who wish to rework, and even break through, the dualism between body and mind, the living and the inert, nature and culture, to paraphrase Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin in a chapter entitled "The Transversality of New Materialism".<sup>3</sup>

The whole challenge for such a text as *Seven Steeples*, which does away with plot, psychology or characterisation, is to make an ordinary, uneventful, undramatic, repetitive kind of narrative interesting for the readers. Baume achieves precisely this by forcing the reader to pay attention to aspects of the characters' lives generally overlooked in narratives and deemed devoid of interest because they pertain to the non-human. As a result, she offers a possible answer to Lawrence Buell's question when he asked:

But what sort of literature remains possible if we relinquish the myth of human apartness? It must be a literature that abandons, or at least questions, what would seem to be literature's most basic foci: character, persona, narrative consciousness.<sup>4</sup>

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3. Rick Dolphijn, Iris van der Tuin, "The Transversality of New Materialism", in *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*, Ann Arbor, Open Humanities Press, University of Michigan Library, 2012, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/ohp.11515701.0001.001>.

4. Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination...*, p. 425.

*Seven Steeples* is indeed an attempt to invent a new kind of narrative that would not privilege the human experience, however fictitious, but would acknowledge the equal necessity for narrative fiction to represent and communicate with all the non-human and other-than-human elements of the world. The recognition that “matter matters”, the ever-growing academic interest for the materiality of culture and the agency of things, as well as the now widely shared awareness of environmental issues, have led contemporary artists and writers to seek new modes of relationships between art, literature and the existing, non-human world. As Donna Haraway has argued:

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.<sup>5</sup>

Ecocriticism, defined by Cheryll Glotfelty as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment [...] [which] takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies”,<sup>6</sup> has questioned not just the relationship between humans and their environment but also what means and devices art and literature can use to raise the reader’s awareness of the necessity to change their vision of their place in the world. According to Simon C. Estok in an article called “New Horizons in Materiality and Literature”, “One of the consequences of [the] new conceptualizations of materials and their dynamics is a new understanding of narrative itself”.<sup>7</sup> Ecocriticism has thus recently moved towards greater attention to narrative form, and has considered “how narratives can challenge readers’ conceptions of what it means to be human and how nonhuman characters and actants express their agency”, to quote Erin James and Eric Morel in their introduction to the special issue of *English Studies* entitled *Ecocriticism and Narrative Theory*.<sup>8</sup>

Being herself a material artist as well as a writer, it was inevitable that Baume should seek to devise a form of literature that would translate her care for matter, materiality, and the non-human into textuality. In consequence I would like to analyse the specific devices Baume resorts to in *Seven Steeples* in order to tell a story where materiality prevails over events, action, plot, drama, psychology or history, in other words over human-centered issues. My aim in this paper is to study how Baume “reworks” the traditional ingredients of story-telling and deviates

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5. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2016, p. 12.

6. Cheryll Glotfelty, “Introduction”, in *The Ecocriticism Reader. Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Cheryll Glotfelty, Harold Fromm (eds.), Athens – London, The University of Georgia Press, 1996, p. xviii.

7. Simon C. Estok, “Afterword: New Horizons in Materiality and Literature”, *Neohelicon: Acta comparationis litterarum universarum*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2020, p. 591.

8. Erin James, Eric Morel, “Ecocriticism and Narrative Theory: An Introduction”, *English Studies*, vol. 99, no. 4, 2018, *Ecocriticism and Narrative Theory*, p. 362, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2018.1465255>.

our attention from what happens to the human characters in order to dwell on the natural landscape, the animals, the plants, the objects or the weather which surround them and constitute the very fabric of their daily lives. By so doing, it seems to me that she participates in the creation of a type of literature that strives to change the reader's point of view on the place of humans in the world, at a time when the ecological disasters engendered by what scientists agree to call the Anthropocene have become all too evident.

Sara Baume is one of the most innovative Irish novelists to have emerged in the recent years. Having graduated both in fine art and creative writing,<sup>9</sup> she has confessed having hesitated for a while between becoming either a writer or a visual artist, a hesitation which to a certain extent is reflected by the evolution of her written work. Whereas her first published novel, *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*,<sup>10</sup> was based on a fully-developed character and contained a plot with a beginning and an end, therefore more or less abiding by the rules of traditional story-telling, her second book, *A Line Made by Walking*,<sup>11</sup> already departed from that pattern and included photographs of dead animals, as well as descriptions of existing contemporary works of art,<sup>12</sup> like as many ekphrases spread out through the narrative. She then published *Handiwork*,<sup>13</sup> a partially autobiographical narrative which alternates memories of her early life and of her family, especially of her dead father, and a reflection on her artistic work, with a focus on a collection of miniature wooden birds she made, represented in photographs included in the volume. The book also contains observations about actual birds and their migratory habits or songs.

Throughout her writings, Baume has continuously displayed great interest for nature and the environment, combining art with the promotion of a renewed type of relationship between humans and the world around them. Thus the story of *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* revolves around the odd companionship between a man and his dog, who by necessity undertake a road trip through Ireland and discover on the way new landscapes fashioned by the country's turn to neo-liberalism and consumerism. In *A Line Made by Walking*, the young female protagonist, suffering from a bout of depression, leaves the city to find shelter in her dead grandmother's isolated country house, where she spends most of her time observing the tiny details of her immediate environment.

*Seven Steeples* (2022) goes yet one step further in this singular form of nature writing. It tells the story of a couple who decide to leave behind their social and professional life in Dublin to establish themselves in an undefined region of the Irish countryside near the sea, in a run-down rented house facing a mountain. The novel – if, as it shall be discussed further, the word applies here at all – chronicles

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9. Sara Baume studied fine art at Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT) before completing a Master's in creative writing at Trinity College University.
  10. Sara Baume, *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*, London, W. Heinemann, 2015.
  11. Sara Baume, *A Line Made by Walking*, London, W. Heinemann, 2017.
  12. The title of the novel is that of a work by Richard Long, exhibited at the Tate Modern in London and dating back to 1967.
  13. Sara Baume, *Handiwork*, Dublin, Tramp Press, 2020.

the characters' daily lives over a period of eight years, during which nothing of any importance happens to them, except the passing of time and of the seasons. The couple does not seem to have any professional occupation and lives off welfare; they have cut off all their links with friends or relatives; they never leave the limited area around their house; nothing is reported about the evolution or ups and downs of their relationship. In fact nothing is said about the kind of feelings that bind them together, or even any feeling experienced by either of them. We do not know what made them decide to move away from their previous lives, jobs, friends, relatives. We actually know very little about these characters: the text provides only a few details about their background, education, personality. We do not know what they look like physically. Their moods, thoughts, psychological motivations remain untold. No conversation between them is reported through dialogue.

### An aesthetic of relinquishment?

According to Lawrence Buell, "the aesthetic of relinquishment", as he calls it, "fits environmental non-fiction better than lyric poetry and prose fiction", he argues, because these modes rely on "the most basic aesthetic pleasures of homocentrism: plot, characterization, lyric pathos, dialogue, intersocial events, and so on".<sup>14</sup> It seems to me that *Seven Steeples* embraces this "aesthetic of relinquishment" by abandoning and re-working one of the first "basic aesthetic pleasures of homocentrism", which is character.

Characters in the book are reduced to only two, and they are endowed with a minimum of character-traits, as is evidenced right away by their very names, shortened to a single syllable each: Bell and Sigh, deriving, as we are told incidentally, from the names Isabel and Simon, but which now sound like animals' names. The facts about their personal, individual lives before moving in together in the house by the mountain boil down to one or two. We thus learn that they were both born in large families but that "they neither had experienced any unusual unhappiness in early life, any notable trauma".<sup>15</sup> The remark reads like an ironic, dismissive allusion to a very traditional aspect of characterisation, that is to say the summary of the protagonist's childhood, such as can be found for instance in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), one of the earliest novels in the English language, which begins with "I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York, of a good family, though not of that country, my father being a foreigner of Bremen, who settled first at Hull". The comparison with *Robinson Crusoe* is not entirely irrelevant here as Baume's characters experience a kind of voluntary exile from society, and manage to re-build a world of their own in an isolated place. The reference to "trauma" also sounds ironic in an Irish context, if we consider the great number of Irish novels which tell

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14. Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination...*, p. 168.

15. Sara Baume, *Seven Steeples*, p. 17.

the story of an unhappy childhood (references that come to mind are for instance Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996), John McGahern's *The Dark* (1965), or Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007)). Here not only are the characters deprived of a background, whether it be family, education or friends, but they are also denied any psychological depth, as the narrator does not describe their feelings and the author makes no use of interior monologue to disclose the characters' inner lives and feelings. Neither are the characters defined by their speech, as there is hardly a line of dialogue throughout the text, contrary to what was deemed so essential to the genre of the novel by Bakhtin, for whom "[t]he good novelist manages to create a literary facsimile of that social dialogue which constitutes human language".<sup>16</sup> Here the human characters are not granted any individual voice, and dialogue, if any, is mostly summarised by the narrator, as in: "They talked. Their talk was mostly composed of the obvious, but sometimes it contained declarations and commands, or involved problem-solving, speculation, philosophy".<sup>17</sup>

Thus the "lyric pathos" defined by Lawrence Buell as one of the aesthetic pleasures proper to poetry and prose fiction is conspicuously absent from Baume's novel: such elevated or strong feelings as love, tenderness, attraction, anger, frustration, jealousy, hatred, etc., are never referred to, as we readers have no access to the characters' interior lives, either through interior monologue or stream of consciousness. Neither do we know whether they go through periods of unhappiness, elation, boredom, joy or regret, or whether their relationship undergoes any evolution. This type of information is not provided by the omniscient, unobtrusive, heterodiegetic third-person narrator, a narrative agency which does not allow the reader to have an understanding of the characters' experience through their own, particular point of view. As Bell and Sigh have deliberately cut off all their connections with friends or relatives, the "intersocial events" mentioned by Buell are also utterly absent from the narrative, except for a few limited interactions with their landlord or when they go shopping.

### Time and temporality as the basic structure of the narrative

On the other hand, one of the main narrative components that *Seven Steeples* has recourse to, and that Buell does not mention, is time and temporality, considered by Paul Ricœur as the very essence of narrativity. Ricœur takes "[...] temporality to be that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity and narrativity to be the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent. Their relationship is therefore reciprocal".<sup>18</sup>

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16. Anthony Wall, "Characters in Bakhtin's Theory", *Studies in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literature*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1984, Article 5, p. 49, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1151>.

17. Sara Baume, *Seven Steeples*, p. 83.

18. Paul Ricœur, "Narrative Time", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 1, autumn 1980, *On Narrative*, p. 169.



But Ricœur also insists on the importance of plot and emplotment as a means of imitating the human experience of time: by re-arranging the chronology of events, emplotment, he argues, creates the intelligibility and credibility of the narrative, and, by linking them together, plot renders events, agents and objects meaningful as part of a larger whole. But in *Seven Steeples* the notion of a plot, based on a chain of events that would be linked by causality, is superseded by the mere succession of days, seasons and years, dutifully recorded by the narrator. As a result, no meaning is assigned to individual events, those which traditionally make up the fabric of narrative fiction, or even of history as narrative. Here, what is recorded are the day-by-day tiny changes happening according to the natural succession of day and night, winter and spring, in other words of what Ricœur calls "cosmological time",<sup>19</sup> or the flow of time. Bell and Sigh are thus said to move in together on "the winter that followed the summer they met",<sup>20</sup> and the narrative is punctuated by numerous such references to the time of year, either through the name of the month, or of the season, which are accompanied by descriptions of the state of the vegetation or information about the presence or absence of insects, so that the book can be read as a kind of almanac, defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as "a publication containing astronomical and meteorological data for a given year and often including a miscellany of other information".<sup>21</sup> Calendar-time, in the sense of the mere succession of days, months and years, is therefore the only aspect of temporality taken into account in the narrative, excluding other types of temporality usually recreated in prose fiction, such as historical time, psychological time or social time. No allusion indeed is made in the course of the narrative to any historical period or event, except a random allusion to the presence in the vicinity of the house of a "Norman castle, a Victorian estate, a Famine graveyard, a prehistoric stone circle".<sup>22</sup> Likewise, the absence of any form of interiority granted to the characters precludes the creation of psychological time, a notion developed by Henri Bergson, which, he argued, is measured by *duration*, defined as the varying speed at which the mind apprehends the length of experiences according to their different intensities, contents and meaning for each individual.<sup>23</sup> The notion was central to modernist literature, as illustrated by the novels of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce or Marcel Proust. To the reader's knowledge, Bell and Sigh do not reminisce about their past lives; neither do they project themselves into the future, or make plans. Due to the couple's isolation, the return of social events, such as workdays, holidays, celebrations, anniversaries, and the like, remain for them meaningless ciphers on the wall calendar offered by the fuel company: "The oil man came at the start of every year with a fresh calendar".<sup>24</sup>

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19. Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit*, t. III, *Le temps raconté*, Paris, Seuil, 1985, p. 351.

20. Sara Baume, *Seven Steeples*, p. 13.

21. Merriam-Webster dictionary online: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/almanac>.

22. Sara Baume, *Seven Steeples*, p. 68.

23. Peter Childs, *Modernism*, Oxford – New York, Routledge, 2000, p. 49.

24. Sara Baume, *Seven Steeples*, p. 124.

## Entropy and decay

The decentering at work here involves the substitution of human, social, historical time, by the natural rotation of the earth, which entails the irrevocable entropy of all living beings. Indeed, in the same way as chronology and the repeated references to dates and seasons provide the text with its only structuring principle, time makes up the essence of the characters' everyday lives, thereby defining the limits of their existence, as the flow of time submits them to the same general process of ageing, eroding, and decaying affecting the whole of the universe around them.

Accordingly, the narrator keeps a detailed record of the signs of change, decline, obsolescence and disintegration observed in the objects, things, as well as animals, plants and even rocks surrounding the couple: "Outdoor, the lid of their biscuit-tin letterbox had rusted. The letters of their names had faded".<sup>25</sup> "By then, a green pelt had grown on the black plastic backs of the van's wing mirrors",<sup>26</sup> "the timber fenceposts [...] leaned and disintegrated, rotting from the inside out, caving in".<sup>27</sup>

By then the roof had shed three slates. Each lay in shattered pieces on the driveway like uncemented crazy paving. Two more tennis balls had become lodged in the moss-and-mulch-choked gutter. [...] The blue bath-mat, leaden with rain, had overwhelmed its stormproof pegs and slumped into the lawn. The silhouette on the BEWARE sign had faded to a ghost dog.<sup>28</sup>

The narrator does not fail to register the marks of gradual disintegration in the couple's bodies, stressing the characters' corporeality instead of their psychology:

Their teeth were blunted too, by then, broached by pinprick holes, sketched by hairline cracks. All day they licked out their respective cavities, unconsciously. By the force of their insistent tongues and the corroding acids and sugars they ate, the cavities deepened, widened – from pinprick to pinhead to the size of a particle.<sup>29</sup>

This unappealing description of bodily decay is quite symbolic of the book's general aim and strategy, which is to focalise on the most material, embodied aspects of life, and to show how humans and non-humans are subjected to exactly the same process of erosion, degeneration, disintegration, whether it be our teeth or the timber fenceposts, the roof, the gutter, the bath-mat or the letter-box.

## Matter matters

By reminding us readers that humans are not only spirits and souls but primarily bodies made of cells and particles which assemble, then dissolve and disintegrate,

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25. Sara Baume, *Seven Steeples*, p. 17.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

depending upon what kind of food we eat, the air we breathe, the germs, viruses and parasites which feed off our bodies, the dust which accumulates in the rooms we live in, Baume’s narrative illustrates Karen Barad’s idea that “[t]he very nature of materiality is an entanglement. Matter itself is always already open to, or rather entangled with, the ‘Other’”.<sup>30</sup> The weather conditions thus obviously shape the characters’ lives and determine their occupations, as they huddle inside the house in winter and stay outdoors to observe the starry nights when the weather is fine. The entanglement of the human characters with other-than-humans is also humorously emphasised by the co-presence of their two dogs, one male, one female, one brought along by Sigh and the other by Bell, whose one-syllable names Voss and Pip, echo their human companions’. The phonetic correspondence hints at the parallel Baume clearly means to establish between the human couple and the animal one, thus placing them on the same level, describing the dogs’ habits, behaviours, tastes and attitudes in as much detail as those of their human counterparts. However, it is not so uncommon to find dogs being promoted as full characters in prose fiction, as evidenced by numerous studies devoted to the relationships between pets and humans in literature.<sup>31</sup> Baume herself used a dog as her main character’s *alter ego* in her first novel *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*. But *Seven Steeples* differs from this kind of literature which tends to humanise pets and stages much more unusual animal companions, which however are very much part of our lives, such as insects, spiders, moth, mice, birds, larvae, worms, slugs, bugs – the recent Covid crisis having demonstrated if need be the inevitable entanglement of our lives with the existence of microscopic living agents. No element of the world surrounding the characters is thus too tiny or too insignificant to be duly recorded and described in the narrative, as in: “Both sides of the ragworms’ bodies were lined with legs through which they breathed. The lugworms were shorter and lighter, with hispid gills and mucus-coloured tails”.<sup>32</sup>

What is more, the inclusion of non-human, or other-than-human elements in the novel is not limited to animals. Much attention is granted to matter itself, however unaesthetic or repulsive it may be: thus puddles, mud, compost, dirt, discarded hairs, cobwebs, are all taken into account and make up the fabric of the narrative, as in: “Rain, cowshit and ash collected in its shallow cavities, forming a thin gruel that Sigh spilled onto the lawn one bright evening”;<sup>33</sup> or again when the couple buy a Hoover and find it too weak to absorb “five full years’ worth of

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30. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2007, p. 392.

31. See for instance Mario Ortiz-Robles, *Literature and Animal Studies*, London, Routledge, 2016; *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Animals*, Derek Ryan (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023; Monica Flegel, *Pets and Domesticity in Victorian Literature and Culture: Animality, Queer Relations, and the Victorian Family*, New York, Routledge, 2015; Philip Howell, *At Home and Astray: The Domestic Dog in Victorian Britain*, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2015.

32. Sara Baume, *Seven Steeples*, p. 100.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

the electric grit that had collected in the carpet on the stairs – the microscopic fibres of pine needles and pollen, sand and shale, splinters and mud”;<sup>34</sup> or again, when the narrator describes the filth gathered in one of the dogs’ fur: “Dewdrops, aphids, larvae, grains of rice and coarse flour, flakes of garlic skin, tissue, bran. Voss, like the carpet on the stairs, held a microscopic material archive within his ragged coat”.<sup>35</sup>

Again, the attention Baume grants to organic matter seems a direct response, not only to Barad’s injunction that “matter matters”, but also to Jane Bennett’s definition of “vibrant matter” when she argues:

Why advocate the vitality of matter? Because my hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies. These material powers, which can aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us, in any case call for our attentiveness, or even “respect” [...].<sup>36</sup>

Bennett’s call to apply our five senses to the detection of the vitality of matter around us finds an echo in *Seven Steeples* through the prevailing role attributed to vision in the text, and to the five senses in general. Much of the characters’ daily occupation consists in observing the evolution of the natural world around them. But Baume also manages to revert the balance of power which sets in between the observers – the humans – and the observed – the non-human – and which grants the observer a sense of superiority and domination. Indeed each chapter of *Seven Steeples* begins with a reference to the mountain facing the characters’ house, described right from the beginning as being capable of vision: “The mountain alone looked up, down and around, seeing everything at once, keeping watch. The mountain was a colossal, cyclopean eye that never shut, even when it was sleeping”.<sup>37</sup>

Even though these lines could be read as a classic example of personification, and therefore of anthropocentrism, I suggest we may interpret them precisely the other way round, as Baume here also reverts the traditional hierarchy according to which humans are the ones who have the power of seeing and observing the universe around them, thereby exerting a form of power and domination over nature, dissecting, classifying, exploiting and experimenting with natural resources for the alleged benefit of mankind. Framing each chapter with a reference to the mountain underlines its primacy over the humans, the permanence and immutability of its presence as opposed to the transience of all living beings. The fact

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34. Sara Baume, *Seven Steeples*, p. 156.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

36. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010, p. ix.

37. Sara Baume, *Seven Steeples*, p. 9.

that each year Bell and Sigh postpone their planned expedition to the mountain points at the unknowable nature of the mountain, the inscrutable mystery of its existence, which human intelligence and willpower fail to encompass. Each chapter in *Seven Steeples* also ends with a reference to a non-human eye: "They returned indoors, to the kettle and screens and stove, satisfied, leaving behind them, in the moss-slicked skin of the living tree, the green slit of an opened eye",<sup>38</sup> "The ground webs resembled pale vortexes that whorled down into central points, into pinprick holes. And at the core of every ground web, there was an entrance, an absence, an eye";<sup>39</sup> "the mountain saw the door of the house rupture into a sultry portal. Through the black quagmire of moths, it saw an opening, eye-like",<sup>40</sup> etc. One chapter ends with the phrase "a new eye" repeated on every line over a full one and a half page, in relation to the stars the couple are able to observe in the sky.<sup>41</sup> The insistence on that other-than-human, morphing "eye" can be set in relation with the undecidable identity of the omniscient narrative voice, so that we may wonder who tells the story and chronicles the changes in the characters' environment as their days go by; the fact that the mountain should be described as all-seeing opens up the possibility that the mountain itself could be the narrator.

### The materiality of the environment

In any case, "seeing, hearing, selling, tasting, feeling the fuller range of the non-human powers circulating around and within human bodies",<sup>42</sup> as Bennett puts it, seems to be the main activity the characters engage in all along the narrative, and to be the very motivation behind their existence in the house: "By the end of their first month, Bell and Sigh had started to notice how the undersides of soaring gannets against the sea-grey sky were astonishingly white",<sup>43</sup> "Every evening as they walked, Bell and Sigh described to each other the weather, scenery and character of their route, of the given evening",<sup>44</sup> "They stood at the gate for hours passing the binoculars between them, watching an unusual shape on the surface of the sea: a shoal of whales, a flock of shearwaters, a confluence of conflicting currents".<sup>45</sup> They pay great attention to the noises around them: "Inside their night bedroom, they would hear, and fail to hear, and think they heard: the clicking of hunting bats, the hoarse shriek of a barn owl, the night cows rattling their chains and a slow car on its way home from the pub".<sup>46</sup>

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38. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 213.

42. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter...*, p. ix.

43. Sara Baume, *Seven Steeples*, p. 33.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

They are also sensitive to the smells proper to the objects, things, animals and plants around them: “The pair of double duvets the dogs slept on had, by their fifth summer, begun to stink – of meat, feet, undergrowth”.<sup>47</sup>

The smells built up – the dog duvets, the damp and soot, the oils excreted by the frying of oily fish, the smoulder of sandalwood, cedarwood and eucalyptus-scented joss sticks – all together stewing into a perfume of their own: the smell of the house; the smell of their days.<sup>48</sup>

The intense focalisation on what Bennett calls the “detection” of the vibrancy of matter around them also fits Karen Barad’s idea that “‘We’ are not outside observers of the world. Nor are we simply located at particular places in the world; rather, we are part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity”.<sup>49</sup> *Seven Steeples* illustrates this idea as when Bell and Sigh go swimming in the nearby ocean: “They did it as a means of remembering their surroundings; of being reminded that they were each made out of surroundings”.<sup>50</sup>

The sense of place, which humanist geographers define as “a complex concept of emotion and attachment to the human environment which is created from people’s adoption and use of places”,<sup>51</sup> plays a major role in the text, even though no reference is made to any real place-name, apart from that of Dublin, where we are told Bell and Sigh used to live before moving to their new house, located near the sea. In fact, a large part of the text is devoted to a description of the house where the couple have retreated, defined as “[a] refuge, a cult, a church of two; this was their experiment”.<sup>52</sup> The important role granted to the house, described at repeated intervals, may remind us of Heidegger’s often quoted text “Dwelling Building Thinking”, in which the philosopher argued that the manner in which we dwell is the manner in which we are, we exist, on the face of the earth – an extension of our identity, of who we are. What is more, Heidegger insisted on the role of things in the act of dwelling: “[...] the basic character of dwelling is to spare, to preserve”, “dwelling itself is always a staying with things”.<sup>53</sup> In *Seven Steeples*, the narrative tightly intersects the chronicle of the couple’s existence in the house with the observation of the objects surrounding them, to which great attention is paid. Descriptions of pieces of furniture are traditional elements in a realist novel; but that a full paragraph should be focused upon an old bath mat and its evolution is more unusual:

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47. Sara Baume, *Seven Steeples*, p. 127.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

49. Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter”, *Signs*, vol. 28, no. 3, spring 2003, *Gender and Science: New Issues*, p. 828.

50. Sara Baume, *Seven Steeples*, p. 125.

51. Hashem Hashemnezhad, Seyed Abbas Yazdanfar, Ali Akbar Heidari, Nazgol Behdadfar, “A Comparison of the Concepts of the Sense of Place and Attachment to Place in Architectural Studies”, *Australian Journal of Basic and Applied Sciences*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2013, p. 221.

52. Sara Baume, *Seven Steeples*, p. 18.

53. Martin Heidegger, “Dwelling Building Thinking” [“Bauen Wohnen Denken”, 1951], in *Poetry, Language, and Thought*, Albert Hofstadter (trans.), New York, Harper & Row, 1971, p. 147, 149.

The mat was pure cotton, non-slip. [...] The blue bath mat had been on the washing line since the beginning. [...] They had forgotten its use. The bath mat had come to seem a small section of the steadfast panorama, an aperture popped out of the muddy blue. They had forgotten whether or not it had originally been blue. It seemed possible that it might not have popped out of the sea and sky, but soaked them instead.<sup>54</sup>

Here the description of the bath mat does not help construct the mimetic illusion, nor is it meant as a metonymy shedding light upon the characters' personality or social background. Rather, it reminds us of the difference Heidegger makes between things and objects, which led him to the idea that “things thing”. “The fact that the thing things means that it does something besides sit around as a target for human awareness of it”,<sup>55</sup> commentator Graham Harman explains. Theoreticians of new materialism have added a new dimension to the idea of the thingness of things, which in Jane Bennett's words has become “thing-power materialism”. According to the materialist philosopher, “things have the power to move humans”.<sup>56</sup> “Thing-power materialism”, she writes, “figures things as being more than mere objects, emphasizing their powers of life, resistance, and even a kind of will; these are powers that, in a tightly knit world, we ignore at our own peril”.<sup>57</sup> Her theory also emphasises “the closeness, the intimacy, of humans and nonhumans”.<sup>58</sup> The deliberate importance granted by Sara Baume to the old bath mat precisely draws attention to the objects which surround us but that we overlook and forget about, when they in fact constitute our everyday environment and make up the stuff of our daily lives. The detailed listing of the couple's everyday activities, of the things they see, eat or manipulate, emphasises the imbrication and entanglement of their lives as humans with that of the non-humans around them:

Like Voss, like the carpet on the stairs, Bell and Sigh gathered fragments of their environment: a blob of toothpaste on a collar first thing in the morning, a drip of soup in the lap later on, a sediment of mud sucked up from the wet cliff path ringing each trouser cuff. They wore them like badges of the day so far, of yesterday and the day before.<sup>59</sup>

Without the distraction of social demands such as work, family, friends, or implication in the life of the city, Bell and Sigh are able to “stay with things”, and to experience an intense awareness of the materiality of their environment:

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54. Sara Baume, *Seven Steeples*, p. 76.

55. Graham Harman, “Technology, Objects and Things in Heidegger”, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 34, no. 1, January 2010, p. 24.

56. Jane Bennett, “The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter”, *Political Theory*, vol. 32, no. 3, June 2004, p. 359.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 360.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 365.

59. Sara Baume, *Seven Steeples*, p. 173.

By then Bell and Sigh had come to know the surface of the facing field as well as they knew the surfaces of the house: the cooker top that went from breakfast's coffee pot to dinner's oil-licked pans; the draining board that went from tea-spoons and upturned cups to spatulas and full-moon plates.<sup>60</sup>

The narrative of Bell and Sigh's deliberate withdrawal from society is of course in line with Thoreau's experience at Walden: "They lived in a kind of retirement. They lived as if they were their own precious stuff-nearing the useful end of life",<sup>61</sup> a phrase which echoes Henry David Thoreau's famous line in *Walden*:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.<sup>62</sup>

It is no coincidence that the materialist philosopher Jane Bennett should have at first been a commentator of Thoreau. Jane Bennett's theory of thing power-materialism relies on Thoreau's notion of the Wild,

[...] that is, his idea that there is an existence peculiar to a thing that is irreducible to the thing's imbrication with human subjectivity. It is due to this otherness or wildness, says Thoreau, that things have the power to addle and rearrange thoughts and perceptions.<sup>63</sup>

Living in the era of the Anthropocene, where every scientist agrees that the industrial revolution and the development of capitalism have led to climate change which threatens the survival of the earth and all its inhabitants, the couple imagined by Baume obviously have different reasons from Thoreau's to draw away from society, even though those reasons are never spelled out. We can only speculate that the couple wish to flee the consumer society and its devastating effects on the environment; for instance, the couple seek to avoid the people who flock to the seaside during the summer:

The prolonged evenings lure people from their electrically lighted rooms. On the beach, on the cliff path, on their road, strangers appeared – in walking shoes and high-visibility vests, with silicone drinking bottles and fashionable dogs.<sup>64</sup>

Contrary to *Walden* too, *Seven Steeples* retains most of the features of prose fiction, even though Baume has reduced its traditional components, such as characterisation, emplotment, dialogue, interior monologue, etc., to a minimum, so as to avoid and suppress what Buell calls the "aesthetic pleasures of homocentrism". In the same way as Bell and Sigh try to invent a new mode of living in accordance

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60. Sara Baume, *Seven Steeples*, p. 118.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

62. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden or Life in the Woods* [1854], Germaine Landré-Augier (ed. and trans.), Paris, Aubier (Collection bilingue des classiques étrangers), 1967, p. 194.

63. Jane Bennett, "The Force of Things...", p. 348.

64. Sara Baume, *Seven Steeples*, p. 117.



with their environment, and to open themselves up to the “material powers” around them, Baume has sought to create a new kind of narrative, which would defamiliarise the reader used to the devices of narrative fiction. The exquisite language Baume uses, including when she mentions the unusual names of animals and plants that we may not be aware of – stitchwort, silverweed, hogweed, dunnocks, knapweed, auks, hoverflies, shield bug, etc. –, the numerous repetitions which structure the narrative, are all different strategies aiming at forcing the reader to change their way of reading, and to adopt a kind of “slow reading”, in response to the “slow life” sought after by Bell and Sigh.

Indeed Baume has managed to attract the reader’s attention not only to the materiality of the environment existing in the diegesis, but also to the materiality of the text itself, through the unusual lay-out of the text, which introduces unmotivated, random spaces in-between words, lines or paragraphs as if to allow the reader to breathe between words and take the time to weigh their vibrancy and power. The reader is thus invited to pay attention to the details of the text in the same way as Bell and Sigh pay attention to the minutest detail of their environment.

As a conclusion, we may say that nothing is resolved at the end of *Seven Steeples*, as the ending brings us back to the beginning, similar in that to the unending natural cycle of the seasons, except that eight years have elapsed in the characters’ lives. They finally decide to climb the mountain facing their house, where they discover that human time cannot compare to natural time:

It was a land broken,   wasted,  
                                   Positioned at the very end of time,  
 Or perhaps,   at the very beginning,  
 And still in the process of being formed<sup>65</sup>

Likewise, in *Seven Steeples* Baume deliberately confuses beginning and ending, and thus eschews the tenets of traditional narrative fiction, which is to provide an ending, the sense of which, as Frank Kermode has shown, is a defining aspect of classic narratives and a consolation in the face of our short lifespans.<sup>66</sup> Denying the reader this consolation is yet another way for Baume to deviate the focus of the narrative from human existence to that of the non-human and other-than-human. Fluctuating between poetry – thanks to the work on repetition, language and typography – and narrative fiction – through the presence of characters, and despite the absence of events, plot, dialogue or psychology – Sara Baume seeks new ways to affect us through her writing and perhaps to change our way of relating to the world around us, experiencing our lives not as separate and apart from nature, but organically united with it in all its diversity. *Seven Steeples* eschews what Lawrence

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65. *Ibid.*, p. 251.

66. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1967.

Buell called “the most basic aesthetic pleasures of homocentrism”<sup>67</sup> while giving us the pleasure of being immersed in a different kind of life, away from the human complications usually illustrated by works of fiction, such as love, family, success and failure, social injustice, social unrest, war and peace, etc., and close to the minutest evolutions of the material, non-human environment.

Sylvie MIKOWSKI

*Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne*

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67. Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination...*, p. 168.