



HAL
open science

Attention and the Post-Pastoral: Melissa Harrison's At Hawthorn Time

Jean-Michel Ganteau

► **To cite this version:**

Jean-Michel Ganteau. Attention and the Post-Pastoral: Melissa Harrison's At Hawthorn Time. 16th ESSE Conference, ESSE, Aug 2022, Mayence, Germany. hal-04523781

HAL Id: hal-04523781

<https://univ-montpellier3-paul-valery.hal.science/hal-04523781>

Submitted on 27 Mar 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

Attention and the Post-Pastoral: Melissa Harrison's *At Hawthorn Time*

Jean-Michel Ganteau

EA741-EMMA Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3

At Hawthorn Time is a haunted novel. It is turned toward the observation of everyday life in a small rural community and its natural environment while keeping an eye on the traces of the past that are still very much present for whoever is willing and/or able to attend to them and which help measure the loss of a secular world teetering on the verge of disappearance. As suggested by its richly polysemous title (which flaunts its idyllic connotations even while clearly sounding the theme of death, as the smell of hawthorn is associated with decaying bodies), the novel provides a mixture of the postpastoral and of the anti-pastoral, narratives in which nature has lost its idealised status as a protective entity and has come to harbour destruction and violence (Lilley 120), a far cry from any attempt at idealisation.

I want to address the issue of the novel's representation and presentation of an ecology of attention that does not privilege inward-attention or meta-attention—characteristics incisively studied by Alice Bennett (Bennett 8-9)—but rather openness to the other, including the natural environment, and which envisages attention not so much as concentration as disposition (Depraz 84). In other terms, I consider attention as a relational capacity that is both thematised and performed by the novel. In my demonstration, I start with attention to the

ordinary invisibilities and visibilities; I then move on to embodied and embedded nature of attention; and I end up on the ethical (and possibly) political pull of attention that teaches the readers to decide on *what matters*.

Distraction and even denial, are generally considered as the enemies of attention are thematised in the novel. They are instrumental in what Yves Citton has described as a “generalised crisis of perception” characteristic of the capitalist age (Citton 2014, 36; translation mine). Kitty and Howard, the neo-rural couple who settled in Lodeshill one year before the story begins, take great pains to avoid the trying yet inescapable truth that they are moving apart, distracting themselves from the truth in various ways. Similarly, the “huge distribution centre just off the motorway” (Harrison 2015, 36–37) where Jamie works, offers an example of what it is to repeat on a daily basis automatic tasks that distract him from his perception of his natural environment. It clearly smacks of what Jonathan Crary has described in his famous *24/7. Late Capitalism and the End of Sleep*: a type of alienating environment in which concentration on a repetitive task takes place at the cost of attentiveness to the world beyond and bars any opening to otherness. Still, *At Hawthorn Time* pushes such themes to its margins and starts from those margins, moving inwards to attend to another way of living, perceiving and experiencing that values direct perception.

The subject of the novel revolves around the attention to invisibilities that the contemporary (urban) readers, who are permanently solicited by a stream of

information fed to them through a regime of alert and emergency (Citton 2014, 12), are deprived or oblivious of. The narration relies on an impersonal narrator who privileges an impersonal mode and espouses the characters' perspectives even while allowing the readers to hear their voices and be privy to their thought processes. The first character that is introduced indirectly is Jack who has a dual status. He is an itinerant worker looking for jobs in farms, possibly the last of his kind, who has just moved out of prison. He had been jailed for trespassing on private properties while following the secular ways running through the country of which he has an instinctive knowledge. The first chapter opens on his departure from London, on foot, and his moving through the suburbs, then the edgelands before he reaches the countryside, remaining hidden from sight, "taking up the old Roman road north out of the city" (Harrison 2015, 10) only to join the open countryside in the next chapter devoted to his progress. As he is not respecting the terms of his conditional liberation, he has to escape from detection and to achieve invisibility. His connection with the past and the ancient ways and roads leads him to attend to details recorded in his memory and, apparently, in his bones, as if he were somehow akin to pigeons and other migratory birds: "As he passed under, and then away from, the big jets' flight paths far overhead he filed his knowledge of them somewhere beyond explaining, along with the invisible lines of lost causeways or underground streams." (Harrison 2015, 28) Along his journey, he is animated by a permanent attention to invisibilities, i.e. to what used to be visible but only retains a phantom presence, from derelict landmarks to ley-

lines. They refer to a lore that has become extinguished, that he may partly be able to share with older inhabitants of the countryside but that he is otherwise the only one to be in a position to retrieve and bring into visibility. From this point of view, on account of his acute perceptions and model of attention as concentration (Depraz 84), he fulfils some form of didactic function within the narrative economy, converting invisibility into visibility for the readers' benefit.

Still, he does not only attend to invisibilities as his gaze and all of his perceptions are attuned to the consideration of mundane objects that are not hidden, precisely, but there for him to stop and take into account. I am taking the word "consideration" in Corine Pelluchon's acceptance, as she opposes it to a bird's eye view, or domineering gaze and associates it with a humble perspective, close to the ground ('humble' shares its etymology with 'humus'), that allows for taking the object of perception into consideration in its singularity, as revealed by the notes that he jots down on his way featuring at the beginning of each chapter: "*Lady's bedstraw, sorrel, bee orchid. Ash bud-burst. Warm start; heavy showers later.*" (Harrison 2015, 124; original emphasis) Such enumerations, almost devoid of syntax, pinpoint the quality of his acute perception of singular items. They bring in a specialised vocabulary that may sound strange to the uninitiated readers, making them either reach for the dictionary or wonder at the poetry of these obscure terms all thrown into light by the observer's gaze. The effect is to induce some slowing of the reading pace that somehow imitates Jack's relation to the natural environment. The walker as witness thereby provides not only a

perception but also a description of his natural environment, offering an inventory of life past and present that fuels the novel's realism.

The multiplication of details builds up an “experiential density” (Depraz 25; translation mine) that the reader is allowed to share and that, according to Nathalie Depraz among others, is characteristic of attention. Such an experiential richness is premised on a close, unmediated observation. In turn, proximity and consideration are instrumental as operators of visibility. What I mean here is that not only the characters attend to invisibilities, thereby inviting the readers to train their perceptual and attentional capacities, but they also promote the practice of attending to visibilities, i.e. what French philosopher Sandra Laugier has in mind when she evokes the capacity and work of revealing “the non-visible importance of things and moments” (Laugier 2015c, 136; translation mine) that is present and expressed in “that which we cannot see but that is just under our eyes” (Laugier 2015c, 129; translation mine). In other terms, *At Hawthorn Time* “render[s] visible what precisely is visible” (Laugier 2015a, 220), thereby sharpening the readers' perceptual capacities, which is also a reminder that attention is precisely that, i.e. a capacity that should be trained and developed so that what is under our eyes is considered in its irreducible singularity. This is one of the conditions for the development of an ecology of attention that goes hand in hand with a respect for the subject's environment.

The first eleven chapters are each devoted to a single character's perception: Jack's, Jamie's, Kitty's, Howard's. Of course, the readers are apt to gather clues (if only place names) that indicate that their paths will cross at some point, and this is what takes place both thematically and structurally in Chapter 12 and the following ones that accommodate all members of the cast. Such a technique consisting in separating the better to connect is the mainspring of the novel's relational apparatus. The novel's performance of relationality is clearly echoed in its themes and motifs. In fact, in the same way as the readers get the *experience* of connecting and of connection, the characters are pulled into a relational mechanism that makes them attend to each other and to their natural environment. What I mean here is that they achieve some sort of community of experience that is deployed beyond the page and that makes it clear—and felt—that perception and attention are embodied capacities. In Depraz's terms, "attention is a corporal, tangible, and relational experience" (Depraz 2018, 49; translation mine). And this is precisely what *At Hawthorn Time* sets about showing, concentrating on the consideration of mundane visibilities, as suggested above. In fact, Citton's ecology of attention is defined in relation to several principles or maxims that he develops throughout his study. Among those features his "MAXIM OF CORPORAL PRESENCE," according to which "*only presential interaction directly uniting resonant bodies can optimise pedagogical practice*" (Citton 2017 133; original capitals and italics). From this maxim Citton derives various principles like that of proximity status, as seen above, and also, more precisely,

that of the “ADVANTAGE OF 1:1 SCALE” that he insists “*allows us to benefit simultaneously from the attentional asymmetries established by the media apparatuses, and to resize them to the scale of bodily presence in a situation of proximity.*” (Citton 2017, 140; original capitals and italics) In fact, the practice and/or adoption of the 1:1 scale in the consideration of elements of the natural environment is what is at stake in the novel, at least for the characters that were born and bred in the countryside.

Perhaps this is never envisaged more concretely and efficiently than in the passages when, through delicate strokes, the reader is made to focus on the characters’ attending to a minute detail that is encapsulated in sensory experience. This happens for instance when Jack “fe[els] the breeze play on the hairs on his arms and watches the sun rise slowly from a distant reef of cloud” (Harrison 2015, 9), or when a dog fox with a bird in its jaws “pass[es] close enough to Jack for him to hear fox-breath whistle through feathers” (Harrison 2015, 47). What emerges here is the sensorial density typifying the incarnated nature of attention that Depraz sees as an “attentional gesture that mobilises the body” (Depraz 49; translation mine) and thereby opens to the other, be it human or non-human.

Such openings to the non-human are rife and to be found on any page, and at times become coloured by radical exposures that postulate a continuum between all the members of the living world, whatever their categories or species. This is the case when, in the concluding line of the first chapter, the eponymous hawthorn is granted the powers of consciousness, feeling “the light on its new

green leaves and [thinking] with its green mind about blossom” (Harrison 2015, 48), or else when a “lost green lane,” “impossibly ancient,” “[seams] into the land like a crease in a palm” (Harrison 2015, 57), the simile failing somehow to signify mere analogy and suggesting hybridisation or even identity. By focussing on such minute encounters between elements of the natural world, both human and non-human, they partake of an ecology of attention in more senses than one. In fact, *At Hawthorn Time* also gets its readers to change their perceptions and espouse a new perspective on human subjects’ relations to their natural environment. What is put to the fore here is nothing less than what Stacy Alaimo calls “transcorporeality” (Alaimo 10). Such a vision prolongs that of other theorists and advocates of the post-human, as for example Rosi Braidotti’s for whom our very embodiment makes us open and dependent on our (natural) environment in which we are embedded. I would claim that this is precisely what the novel gets us to witness and also to experience, as the welter of passages evoking such moments of attentional intensity give the readers an immersive knowledge of what it is to be embodied and embedded in a system of interdependences that does not put the human on a pedestal but on a level with the other constituents and actants of the natural world. By presenting such moment of spontaneous openness, the narrative gets us to attend to the manifestation of interdependences that imply a responsibility for the natural environment, a practice very much endorsed by most characters. Far away from promoting a vision of attention as self-concentration, *At Hawthorn Time* envisages attention as a disposition towards alterity and gets

the characters and readers alike to look outside and privilege a type of exposure not unlike the “unselfing” recommended by Iris Murdoch (Panizza 87).

Clearly, opening readers’ eyes—or keeping them open—to various elements of rural life, both pleasant and unpalatable, is one of the ways in which fiction may deploy its ethical function: it presents readers with tangible situations and incarnated subjects so as to provide a concrete knowledge, far away from the abstractions of philosophy or other disciplines. In fact, in the same way as *At Hawthorn Time* manages to turn the tables on the long tradition of seeing the invisible, it also succeeds in rejecting all type of abstraction, thereby following the principles of Ordinary Language Philosophy, and more particularly of one of its main influences, i.e. Ludwig Wittgenstein. In *The Blue Book*, he stands against the “craving for generality” that, in his view, has taken hold of philosophy, and speaks in favour of a “descriptive” function of philosophy whose describe is not, like exact sciences, to generalise and reduce, but, precisely, to describe and inventory (Wittgenstein 1965, 18). Now, to be able to describe, one has to perceive first, and to perceive the ordinary elements and facts of the world around us, as Laugier, one of the main exponents of OLP in France, reminds us. For her, this has to be done through ordinary language, to be envisaged “as a perceptual instrument that allows for subtlety and adjustment in perceptions and actions” (Laugier 2015a, 232). This puts the onus on language (and I would argue literary language in its concreteness) as an instrument of perception and attention, hence

deploying the ethical function of language. This is what Laugier indicates when she specifies that “OLP is from the outset oriented towards social matters and *attention to the unseen, to neglected reality*. Its primary methodological ambition is a conceptual analysis that would make it possible to recognize the importance of context in the *practice* of language, thought and perception” (Laugier 2015a, 228; emphasis added).

Interestingly, this is what some novels do (and Harrison’s prominently so) when, through the concreteness of their language, they present readers with a practice of perception and attention that is not performed in the actual lives of most readers. And I am quoting Laugier once again: “OLP is the basis for redefining ethics as *attention* to ordinary life and care for moral expressivity” (Laugier 2015a, 218). This implies that the novel, in its realist version at least, may offer a presentation of attention to ordinary (in-)visibilities that is also a way of bearing witness to them. Said differently, such texts as *At Hawthorn Time* invite the readers to carry an “investigation” that is a necessary step as far as the ordinary is never given but must be sought for (Laugier 2015c, 72; translation mine). What the novel also performs is an inventory of the individual items of the natural and social environments that goes beyond abstractions and second-hand information. In other terms, a novelistic ethics of attention corresponds to and is effected by the selection of details that are considered in their singularity by a subject who attends to the ordinary life around him- or herself and who, in so doing, decides on his/her own what is important, i.e. what matters irrespective of prescription

and filters of various kinds. Thus, a novelistic ethics of attention would rely on the readers' sharing attentional gestures directed at objects considered in their singularity. This is what Laugier specifies when she speaks of "attention to the particular [that] may make us change our way to perceive reality" (Laugier 2006, 156; translation mine). In fact, this type of novelistic ethics is also an ethics of the particularist type which turns its back on abstractions, as already mentioned, and which finds its force in the "particularism of attention to details" (Laugier 2015a, 222). In other terms, what is right is not determined through reference to a decalogue or catalogue of principles and prescriptions but through the subject determining *what matters* on a singular basis, thereby bearing the onus of the decision.

[This is precisely what happens throughout the novel, as characters mobilise their attentional dispositions and capacities, as demonstrated above, whether they focus on the natural environment or on its human dwellers. By attending to such or such plant or tree that are there only for us to see, or to such ordinary events as that of vulnerable people needing special care, what the characters do is go through a *practice* of attention to ordinary details. The internal focalisation provides access to their thought processes and deliberations or spontaneous choices that are the gist of the elaboration of the decisions as to what matter that it is the novel's privilege to make the readers privy to. In other terms, *At Hawthorn*

Time provides an immersion into what the gist of an ethics of attention consists in.]