The agency of the idyllic landscape

The Agency of the Idyllic Landscape: Entanglement in Theocritus *Idyll* 21

Dogs that dream of bread; fishermen dreaming of golden fish. Stones singing against boots; the Cyclops who sings to the sea. A bird tied to a wheel as a love charm; death by falling statue. These are just some examples of the entanglements between the human and nonhuman world encountered in the *Idylls* of Theocritus.[1]

Theocritus, a Hellenistic poet operating in the third century BC, is largely known as the first pastoral poet, but as well as his bucolics he also produced urban mimes, poems on epic themes, and epigrams, and the boundaries of his poetic corpus are further blurred by the disputed authorship of many poems attributed to him. The *Idylls* of Theocritus stand between imitation and imagination, between the real world and story.[2] Through the framework of Material Ecocriticism we can see that Theocritus' 'possible world'[3] is complicated and enriched by material agency and the agentic landscape. Further, an attentiveness to 'dark ecology' in the *Idylls* reveals the cracks in the pleasantry of the *locus amoenus*. Dark Ecology was developed by ecocritic Timothy Morton. 'What is dark ecology? It is ecological awareness, dark-depressing.'[4] It is an aesthetic response to difficult and entangled environments, a pessimistic reading of the human condition. It is a way of expressing the porousness of boundaries that interests me in this article and that is at the heart of Morton's work. When we realise that we are not even separate from our surroundings, let alone in control of them, how do we express that in literature? When we focus on material agency, the idyllic landscape becomes a lot more threatening.

In this article, I focus on *Idyll* 21 and the strong connection it presents between fishermen and their environs. With this *Idyll* we can reflect on the imagined worlds of Theocritean poetry, how they map onto or diverge from the real world, and what we can learn from those narrative gaps or convergences. Throughout this article I engage with approaches

to imagination, especially new-materialist entangled perspectives which resonate with Theocritus' cast of characters that include nature and the nonhuman.

Monica Janowski and Tim Ingold in their 2012 book *Imagining Landscapes: Past, Present and Future* explore different approaches to imagination. Ingold begins his Introduction with Belgian surrealist artist René Magritte and historian Simon Schama, both of whom contend that all seeing is imagining.[5] We think we are seeing an outside world with our eyes, but Magritte and Schama would argue that this is an illusion. Rather, we are always seeing an inner world with our mind's eye. On the other side of the coin is James Gibson, psychologist of perception, who argues that the real world and the perceived world are one and the same. The mind does not give shape to what we perceive – the shape is already there, to be picked up by any creature that can perceive it. Gibson proposes a series of tests designed to differentiate the reality of the perceived world from its representation in images or the imagination.[6] The essential distinguishing point is that you cannot glean any more from an image than what has been put there in its creation:

> The real world is inexhaustible; the image contains only such information as the mind has already contributed to it. No amount of scrutiny will reveal what is not there. True, one might find in an image meanings of which one had not at first been aware, but this is to add to it by way of interpretation, not to discover more of what there is.[7]

With Magritte and Schama on one side and Gibson on the other – with perception and imagination the same, or perception as reality different from imagination – we are at an impasse. Or are we? Ingold offers a way out. A way that reunites perception and imagination, but also, crucially, shows that there is no distinction between 'outside' and 'inside', mind and world. That our knowledge of the world emerges from our involvement in the world:

> We will need to reconsider the significance of imagination: to think of it not just as a capacity to construct images, or as the power of mental representation, but more fundamentally as a way of living creatively in a world that is itself crescent, always in formation. To imagine, we suggest, is not so much to conjure up images of a reality 'out there', whether virtual or actual, true or false, as to participate from within, through perception and action, in the very becoming of things.[8]

This approach raises a whole host of interesting possibilities. It moves away from Schama's division between the interior and exterior, towards a much more entangled perspective. It dislodges the anthropocentric focus engendered by statements like Schama's 'landscape is the work of the mind',[9] instead foregrounding the collaborative interactions between mind/body and world. It takes us from an epistemological to an ontological stance: our knowledge does not operate in isolation but through involvement in the world. It sees the senses not as a top-down tool of 'shaping perception' but rather as an emergent property working in tandem with the world to be sensed, and it involves more senses than just seeing. It casts imagination not just as representation but as participation: as something not projected onto the world but devised in conjunction with it.

This description chimes with new-materialist and material-ecocritical approaches to imagination, landscape, and materiality. The New Materialisms have been gaining ground in disciplines from philosophy to sociology, art to archaeology, since their development in the 1990s.[10] There is a growing body of scholarship that has brought New Materialism into classical study, from Melissa Mueller's *Objects as Actors* to Ruth Bielfeldt's *Ding und Mensch in der Antike* and Amy Lather's *Materiality and Aesthetics in Archaic and Classical Greek Poetry* (to mention just a few works). New Materialism is essentially a body of post-humanist cultural theory that radically rethinks Cartesian dualisms such as nature/culture, matter/mind, human/nonhuman. It also resists the strong pull of Kantian correlationism,

which has come to reinforce the idea that objects and the nonhuman are blank screens for our anthropocentric projections.[11] It questions the primacy of the human subject, dislodging entrenched anthropocentric views and examining other agencies in the more-than-human world.

Janowski and Ingold see imagination as an emergent property working in tandem with the world to be sensed, and this resonates with works that have been key in the development of New Materialism. Karen Barad in her metaphysics book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* devises a definition of agency that encompasses the human and nonhuman, a definition by which 'agency is not an attribute' but a '"doing"/"being" in its intra-activity'.[12] Intra-activity or intra-action encapsulates the meeting of agencies halfway, the performative establishment of agency, the collaborative co-constitution of meaning between a variety of parties (not only the usually foregrounded human subject). Material Ecocriticism takes its cue from the concept of intra-action, showing its applications to literature.[13] Material Ecocriticism proposes a less human-centred approach to literature, suggesting that literature emerges from the 'intra-action' of human creativity and the narrative agency of matter. According to Material Ecocritics, human agency meets the narrative agency of matter halfway, generating material-discursive phenomena such as literature (and literary criticism).[14]

Let us turn now to our Theocritean case study, *Idyll* 21. The opening five-line frame addresses the *Idyll* to one Diophantus and sets the theme: poverty, πενία. Poverty leads to anxiety which stops a man sleeping, spurring him on to hard work and skill (τέχνη). Then with a seaweed bed, a plaited hut and a leafy wall, the fishermen are anchored in the environment. This is the poet's imagined landscape – and through a fisherman's dream, we are transported to a secondary imagined world embedded in the first. The fishermen's occupation is cast as a particularly material one: a job defined by its equipment, its paraphernalia, its clutter, and its close ties with the land- (and sea-)scape.

᾽Ιχθύος ἀγρευτῆρες ὁμῶς δύο κεῖντο γέροντες
στρωσάμενοι βρύον αὖον ὑπὸ πλεκταῖς καλύβαισι,
κεκλιμένοι τοίχῳ τῷ φυλλίνῳ· ἐγγύθι δ᾽ αὐτοῖν
κεῖτο τὰ ταῖν χειροῖν ἀθλήματα, τοὶ καλαθίσκοι,
τοὶ κάλαμοι, τἄγκιστρα, τὰ φυκιόεντα δέλητα,
ὁρμιαὶ κύρτοι τε καὶ ἐκ σχοίνων λαβύρινθοι,
μήρινθοι κῶπαί τε γέρων τ᾽ ἐπ᾽ ἐρείσμασι λέμβος·
νέρθεν τᾶς κεφαλᾶς φορμὸς βραχύς, εἵματα, πῖλοι.
Two old fishermen were lying down together
on a bed of dried seaweed strewn in their plaited hut,
and they were lying against the leafy wall. Near them
lay the tools of their labouring hands: baskets,
rods, hooks, seaweed-covered bait,
lines and weels and traps made from rushes,
cords and oars and an old boat on props.
A little mat for their heads, clothes, caps.
Idyll 21.6-13[15]

The two fishermen sleep on a makeshift bed of seaweed in a hut of plaited branches still with their leaves. It is an image of entanglement: joined together by their work and their poverty, the fishermen are a united pair (two together, ὅμως δύο); the hut is created through a process that is the very epitome of entanglement; they recline against the leafy wall, κεκλιμένοι τοίχῳ τῷ φυλλίνῳ, their bodies connecting with all parts of their nature/culture surroundings (raw yet constructed), a tactile closeness. The entanglement continues into the list of their

possessions, which are near them, ἐγγύθι δ᾽ αὐτοῖν: a phrase that intrudes into line 8, making sure the word order replicates the objects' proximity to their possessors. The list progresses from tools of fishing through to materials for the body, which comes into view in 'their heads', τᾶς κεφαλᾶς. The catalogue gives an impression of proliferation, with human (hands, heads: ταῖν χειροῖν, τᾶς κεφαλᾶς) and nonhuman parts intertwined. This gives a similar impression, albeit in miniature, to the final Days section of Hesiod's *Works and Days*, which has been treated by Will Brockliss in an article of 2018 under the aesthetic of dark ecology. Brockliss writes of the Days:

> It is very unlikely that ancient listeners (any more than their modern counterparts) would have remembered how each particular human, animal, plant, or human product mentioned in the section relates to each particular day. Rather, they would have taken away the impression of a mélange of bodies and objects…all of which follow in quick succession. Audiences would have sensed an assimilation of these different kinds of living and nonliving things to one another...But the passage also gives the impression of a numberless profusion, an effect similar to that of Morton's 'hyperobjects.' Listeners would have witnessed the general presence of these humans, animals, plants, and objects in the environments of the days section more readily than their individual instantiations.[16]

Morton's hyperobject is a material encountered not through 'individual instantiations' but as an overarching presence.[17] Radioactive waste is Morton's prime example: a substance that permeates not only what we might think of as the external environment but also our own bodies through toxicity.[18] The individual components of this list, then, like Hesiod's individual days, may not be as important, or at least may not be as striking to the reader, as

the overall material saturation in these lines. It is a cluttered scene with a pervasive materiality to it.

The objects in the catalogue are introduced as τὰ ταῖν χειροῖν ἀθλήματα. In the Loeb translation by Hopkinson this is rendered 'the tools of their trade'. According to editor, translator and commentator of Theocritus, A.S.F. Gow, the phrase might indicate 'the implements of their toilsome trade', or 'the implements they have laboriously fashioned' – either way, there is a strong connection between the people and their objects. I have translated the phrase as 'the tools of their labouring hands', in order to bring out ταῖν χειροῖν that is elided in Gow's formulations. The hands are crucial for a material-ecocritical reading and not to be overlooked. Hands point towards a haptic experience, a sensory engagement with the world that goes beyond the visual. Further, in ancient poetry the hands are often the porous and permeable boundary between the human and nonhuman, the point at which a hybrid agent can be created – and separated. Here I highlight the elided hands to point out just how smoothly human hands can disappear from notice when they are operating in tandem with material objects. We see this phenomenon in Homer's *Odyssey*, where effective rowing constitutes a hybridity between person and oar in which the hands disappear – hands that only come back into view when the hybrid agent is separated, the collaboration disrupted. [19] In *Idyll* 21 we have a phrase that sets up a collaboration of agents – the hands and the tools – and becomes a hybrid in translation.

One of the items listed is the λαβύρινθοι, on which Gow comments: 'the word is not elsewhere used of fishing apparatus but plainly denotes some form of trap like the κύρτος, the exit from which is hard to find.' This gives a cumulative image of enmeshment, the list drawing us into the fisherman's material world, from which we struggle to find our way out. With this labyrinthine list, we start to get lost in the fisherman's reality. The impression of proximity and entanglement, of human and nonhuman hinging together and operating in

close quarters, is enhanced in lines 17-18 when we get a clearer idea of the topography of the camp:

> οὐδεὶς δ᾽ ἐν μέσσῳ γείτων πέλεν, ἀ δὲ παρ᾽ αὐτᾷ
> θλιβομέναν καλύβᾳ τραφερὰν προσέναχε θάλασσα.
> No neighbour was near, and right up to their hut
> the sea confined and lapped against the land.

The sea and the land become one and the same, with the hut not so much a boundary as a continuation. As a temporary structure it doesn't seem like a fixed point but as fluid and fluctuating as its surroundings.

These are the environs created, imagined, by the poet. A representation of human/nonhuman entanglement – of fishermen embodying their craft, of material clutter, of land and sea conjoined, of sea lapping against human habitation. But this *Idyll* goes further, taking us into a twice-represented landscape – through the fisherman's dream. We are propelled into the imagination of a character, prompting us to reflect on the process of representation and the role of materiality and environs within it. First, the dream itself is added to the entangled narrative thus far, as it is equated with the fisherman's catch:

> ὡς καὶ τὰν ἄγραν, τὠνείρατα πάντα μερίζευ.
> Just as with your catch, share out all your dreams.
> *Idyll* 21.31

And the human and animal worlds intertwine when the dreamer offers a simile:

καὶ γὰρ ἐν ὕπνοις

πᾶσα κύων ἄρτον μαντεύεται, ἰχθύα κὴγών.

For just as all sleeping

dogs dream of bread, so I dream of fish.

Idyll 21.44-5

This is a peculiar line, as we would not suppose that dogs do dream of bread. The practical is, I would argue, different from the poetic. Dogs in antiquity *did* eat bread. Bread softened with milk, or dipped in grease. Supplemented with bones or scraps and, as a treat, meat.[20] But surely that's the point – that the treat is not the bread, but the meat? Surely meat, then, is what 'every dog' dreams about? The line might be more striking for a modern reader than an ancient one, but I suggest that it would wrongfoot the ancient reader too. In any case, it is not dogs who are characterised as bread-eaters in ancient poetry, but men.[21] Part of the characterisation of bread-eaters is that they have technology and culture. Bread is a product of a process, it is worked by human hands. The dog's and the human's dreams, therefore, are striking in their contrast: it is the human who receives an unadulterated product of the natural environment (fish) while (if our manuscripts are correct: see below) the dog receives an item processed by humans (bread), an item of culture.

Many alternatives for ἄρτον have been suggested, including ἄγραν, repeating the catch at 31 – but as that line makes clear, fish can also be classed as ἄγραν, and so this suggestion blurs the divide between the two parts of line 45. The result of this absurdity is that in the intertwining of human and animal, there is a slippage between the two, with either the animal approximating the human (dreaming of bread, a manmade product) or the two meeting in the middle (in the parallel 'catch'). This evokes the posthumanist idea of the humanimal, an image of hybridity and porosity on the same spectrum as the huma(n)chine, or

Donna Haraway's cyborg.[22] The question 'do dogs dream of bread?', then, is not all that different from the haunting question that makes up the title of Philip K. Dick's dystopian science fiction novel: 'Do androids dream of electric sheep?'[23]

The entangled environs are reiterated in the framing of the dream, as Asphalion is asked by his companion:

> τί γὰρ ποιεῖν ἂν ἔχοι τις
> κείμενος ἐν φύλλοις ποτὶ κύματι μηδὲ καθεύδων;
> For what is a man to do,
> lying in the leaves by the waves, if he can't sleep?
> *Idyll* 21.34-5

The first-degree landscape doesn't leave much space to manoeuvre physically, and poverty doesn't provide much opportunity for change – so the story casts us into a second-degree landscape through the medium of the fisherman's dream.

In the dream's opening image, Asphalion sees himself sitting on a rock, watching for fish and dangling his baited rod. We are then given a detailed and dramatic description of the fishing: a plump fish is hooked, the rod strains and bends, Asphalion slackens then tightens the line. Man and tools are in it together, both straining and striving, struggling and teetering on the brink of failure:

> τὼ χέρε τεινόμενος, περικλώμενος, εὗρον ἀγῶνα
> πῶς ἀνέλω μέγαν ἰχθὺν ἀφαυροτέροισι σιδάροις·
> Stretching out my hands, bending around, I found that I had a struggle
> to catch the great fish with my feeble tools.

Idyll 21.48-9

In περικλώμενος the body is contorting just like the rod, the hand stretching, τεινόμενος, just like the fishing line. The placing of τὼ χέρε (hand) at the beginning of line 48 and σιδάροις (iron) at the end of 49 encapsulates this passage as a collaboration of man and material, another expression of hand/object hybridity as well as a tactile engagement even in this dreamscape. Indeed materiality takes centre stage as σιδάροις, literally 'iron' but used to refer metonymically to various objects made of iron, sets up a material contrast with the fish – which turns out to be made of gold (52-3). Fearing the gods' wrath, the fisherman releases his catch: taking care that the gold doesn't catch on his fishhook (57). It is from a potentially hubristic act that the fisherman retreats – and this is materially manifest in the need to keep separate the 'iron' and the gold.

In his dream, the fisherman vows never again to 'set foot' on the sea, 59 πόδα θεῖναι, but instead to stay on land and rule over his gold, τῶ χρυσῶ βασιλεύσειν. With both hands and feet evident, the dream is embodied and physically grounded. Upon waking, the fisherman is troubled: he knows this is to undermine his very existence, rejecting his trade for wealth that he does not possess. His companion reassures him: the vision was nothing but lies (64), he needs to resist the allure of the elusive gold and instead focus on 'a fish of flesh', 66 τὸν σάρκινον ἰχθύν, continuing the pattern of material antitheses (iron and gold, gold and flesh). The dream rings true enough to frighten Asphalion – and he needs his companion to interpret, to uncover the falsehoods and set him back on the right path.

As the companion dismisses the dream as 'lies', the embedded imagined world dissipates, and Asphalion is brought back to a context of toil and poverty, of fish and flesh. As a reader of the poem, it is an unsettling experience to see a world created in words punctured, deflated in one cast. With Asphalion we come back down to reality with a thump

– yet is it his reality, or our own? How many story worlds have been ruptured? The moralising conclusion to the *Idyll*, which picks up the introduction, keeps us with the programme even as it ultimately seals off the poem as a self-contained entity. The fishermen have sorted out their interpretative problem, and they know who and where they are. But how fixed is that world? We might consider this in terms of its material landscape, and its durability. If we look back at the makeshift hut, the waves encroaching upon the land, we are met with hints of instability. Further, though the fishermen work with their natural world, there is a dissonance with their environs, as Asphalion begins to question the seasons. He calls those people 'liars' (22 ψεύδοντ᾽) who claim that the summer nights are short (he has already had countless dreams this night): the *topos* of falsehood resurfaces, seasonal sureties cast as fickle as dreamscapes. 'Do you blame the summer?' asks his companion (26 μέμφῃ τὸ καλὸν θέρος;) – Asphalion is casting aspersions on his environment, placing blame on seasonality. This is a compelling frame for the dream narrative, as it prefaces the embedded imagined landscape with doubts about the fishermen's own world. Asphalion begins to question everything – and leads the poem's readers to do the same. In *Idyll* 21 the landscape is shifting and illusory, the superimposition of one imagined environment onto another creating a shimmering, hazy effect that unsettles both character and reader.

And there is a further level to be probed. We noted at the outset that *Idyll* 21 is one of the pseudo-Theocritean poems: that is, one now considered to be spurious. This status brings its own questions about what is real. It prompts us to ask whether we can take *Idyll* 21 as representative of a Theocritean approach to materiality at all. Indeed, it prompts us to ask what is 'Theocritean'? The Theocritean corpus is diverse in terms of genre and content, stretching from pastoral poems to urban mimes to verses with heroic subjects. *Idyll* 21 isn't really 'idyllic' at all, framed as it is in terms of poverty and toil. The corpus is similarly diverse in its material environs: the environment of the shepherds is very different from that

of the women at a festival, for instance. And yet, I would argue that the picture of material agency that emerges from the Theocritean *Idylls* is a largely consistent and coherent one.[24] *Idyll* 21 is now not attributed to Theocritus. But its connection between fishermen and their environs recalls the fisherman and his rugged rock in the undisputedly Theocritean and more obviously idyllic *Idyll* 1 (to which I turn later in this article), and the imagined worlds it presents connect vividly with those of *Idyll* 7, a poem whose frequent autobiographical readings see Theocritus himself looming large.[25] The poems of the Theocritean corpus, irrespective of authorship, offer similar or at least complementary treatments of the relationship between bodies and materials, and it is for this reason that we can feasibly conduct a material-ecocritical analysis of the corpus as a whole, or approach one (spurious) poem as indicative.

In his 2009 book *Dreams and Experience in Classical Antiquity*, William Harris gives a summary of *Idyll* 21:

> Two poor fishermen discuss a favourable dream, taking it for granted that one can learn to interpret dreams; but the moral is 'If you want a golden fish, go catch it, don't just dream about it'. Even fishermen know that dreams are illusions – yet it is significant that this was thought to be worth saying.[26]

The 'even' here is disparaging, verging on the derogatory, and Harris elaborates in a footnote: 'Fishermen were by convention uneducated – did that make them suitable persons to think that a dream was worth discussing?'[27] An interesting question, and one we can address by reading Theocritean poetry from below.[28]

The Hellenistic roots of pastoral literature are inherently paradoxical. The elite patronage of Hellenistic poets. The urban backdrop for the composition of bucolic poetry.

The literary sophistication of the *Idylls* paired with their deceptively simple subject matter. There is arguably another imaginative layer here, in the elite creation of poetry specifically about non-elite characters. However, in revealing a detailed picture of material agency and a diverse cast of characters in the Theocritean *Idylls*, we can show that, despite its paradoxes, this poetry is not rarefied. Its urban backdrop, its elite perspective, and its 'ontological mystique' as Mark Payne has put it (that is, the irreducibility of the bucolic world's origins to either myth or reality alone)[29] do not negate its connections to materiality. Its material and environmental connections are mediated by context – but it is not *dis*connected. And whilst this challenges some customary approaches to Hellenistic poetry, it is not, I believe, to read the Theocritean corpus against the grain. There are enough clues within the poetry to facilitate this reading. It is, rather, a reading 'from below' – and that is what gives Material Ecocriticism its impact. The possibility of shifting our perspective, our worldview; decentring typically foregrounded agents and moving others to the centre or focusing on the margins. A reading of Theocritean poetry from below, a reading that reconnects with the land, that allows nature and materiality their agency, that foregrounds a wide array of agents, that sees objects and the labour behind them, can reappropriate that poetry for underrepresented groups. If we focus on women's objects in the domestic domain (see especially *Idyll* 15) we see the women more clearly. If we track created objects back through their processes to their raw materials (a system set out for us in *Idyll* 28) we see the work and workers at every stage. If we focus on fishermen's nets and huts, their lines and oars, we can better see the fishermen. Through the framework of Material Ecocriticism we can engage in meaningful ways with the material narratives of both the 'uneducated' fishermen and their environs.

Yet Harris' statement is too stark. Even fishermen know that dreams are illusions: this is not an entirely accurate reading of *Idyll* 21. Though his companion dismisses the dream, Asphalion is initially convinced by it. It is indeed 'significant that this was thought to be

worth saying': because his companion needs to convince Asphalion of the dream's illusory nature.[30] Here we come full circle to Magritte and Schama and the argument that seeing the outer world with our eyes is an illusion. The concept of illusion has been a preoccupation amongst both art historians and psychologists of vision, and again Ingold sets out the various approaches. On the one hand, in the Magritte/Schama camp, we have the contention that truth cannot be distinguished from illusion because we do not have direct access to the world. Our perceptions and imaginings are both projections, and the direction of projection is univocally from mind to world. On the other hand, with Gibson, imagination and illusion involve the perceptual system going into 'free-wheeling' mode: 'a system decoupled from its usual engagement with the world, and that has, as it were, turned in upon itself.'[31]

In both these treatments, then, illusion involves a separation between mind and world. New Materialism, Material Ecocriticism, Material Feminism and other related approaches, however, propagate an entangled view of mind and world, human and nonhuman, culture and nature. So what can these approaches bring to this debate about imagination and illusion, and what impact do they have on our understanding of Theocritean fishermen? We have already seen that Material Ecocriticism can bring 'even' these marginalised fishermen to the centre. And with them comes their environment: an environment with which they are inextricably enmeshed. Their bodies connect with their surroundings, their hands and tools collaborate, their coastal topography is fluid, and their λαβύρινθοι trap us in layers of material agency. The engagement of senses other than sight (specifically touch, in the case of *Idyll* 21) prompts the question: is all imagining seeing? Other senses are more immediately involved in co-creation and intra-activity, attesting more directly to entanglements. If we follow Material Ecocriticism in embracing multiple agencies, human and nonhuman, we end up with a fuller cast of characters in our reading of Theocritean poetry. We may also end up with something closer to the lived experience of these fishermen. Brockliss in his discussion of dark ecology

in Hesiod's *Works and Days* argues that, while modern readers to whom the harsh environments of the Greek world are alien might focus on the poem's more optimistic elements (construing Hesiod's advice as positive and constructive and human mastery over the landscape as ultimately achievable), ancient listeners would have focused on those passages that problematise distinctions between human and nonhuman, body and nature, and they would have followed the invitation to interpret these phenomena in a pessimistic way.[32] Our material-ecocritical reading, then, blurs the boundaries between person and thing, or body and nature, but it also gives weight to the dangers of the fishermen's world, foregrounding their experience and highlighting the darkness undercutting the idyll.

The land- and sea-scape of *Idyll* 21 is multi-layered. It is shifting and illusory. It is unsettling. It has inset stories and invitations into them. In this way, I would argue that it has much in common with *trompe l'oeil* or 'trick of the eye' painting. This is not to say that sight necessarily takes priority over the other senses in this poem – but we can usefully focus in on the 'tricking' of this sense to help us think through these questions of imagination, reality and perception. Gibson writes: 'A picture is always a treated surface, and it is always seen in a context of other, non-pictorial surfaces'.[33] It can be subjected to scrutiny, and when set in its material context its limitations in terms of reality are deduced. 'That', Ingold writes, 'is why the conceit of the trompe l'oeil painters, to have fooled us into mistaking their depictions for reality, rings hollow'.[34] But isn't it all really about the process of scrutiny and discovery? Let us return to a passage with which we started.

> The real world is inexhaustible; the image contains only such information as the mind has already contributed to it. No amount of scrutiny will reveal what is not there. True, one might find in an image meanings of which one had not at first been aware, but this is to add to it by way of interpretation, not to discover more of what there is.[35]

And this is where Janowski/Ingold and Material Ecocriticism part ways. The book *Imagining Landscapes: Past, Present and Future* is a work of anthropology and archaeology, rather than a study of literature. The editors bring in Magritte, *trompe l'oeil,* and art history as points of interest, but the book's focus is essentially on real-world interactions between people and things and environments. These may be interactions imagined and envisaged by anthropologists, but they are not primarily about landscapes created in and by artists or writers. Material Ecocriticism, on the other hand, is about material-discursive narratives.[36] '"Narrative" in this sense means the way our interpretation is itself intermingled with what it considers, in a material and discursive way…the emanating point of the narrative is no longer the human self, but the human-nonhuman complex of interrelated agencies.'[37] So far in this article we have approached perception as stemming from intra-action. We have treated imagination as coming from the dynamic interaction of mind and world. We have offered a redefinition of nature in terms of agency. Now we might see narrative as emergent and entangled too. Of course, anthropology and archaeology are about a certain kind of narrative, but arguably imagination does not loom quite so large as or perhaps operates differently than it does in literature. We have considered layers of worlds and realities, and the world of the text needs to be added in there too. This is all the more pertinent in light of the questions around the poem's authorship, as we have a pseudo-Theocritus imitating Theocritus in refracting a real world through an imagined world represented in a text (a tangled web indeed). In examining Theocritean imagined landscapes, then, the process of scrutiny is indistinguishable from the process of interpretation. Interpretation does add to a literary reading, and it may add meanings of which one had not at first been aware, but this does not necessarily preclude discovering more of what there is.

<Figs 1-3> Artworks by James Fraser.

Trompe l'oeil artist (and classicist) Cora Beth Fraser writes:

> *Trompe l'oeil* is a type of visual joke; it can be amusing, playful or even unsettling…Because *trompe l'oeil* subverts the viewer's expectations, there is a strong emotional component to the reaction, ranging from comfortable recognition to startled realisation…little visual jokes, when spotted, can give the viewer a feeling of recognition and familiarity which personalises the experience and makes an emotional connection between the person and the environment.[38]

Trompe l'oeil is characterised by its multiple layers and its illusions, just like the narrative of *Idyll* 21. The material realia of the *Idyll* are much like the piece of note paper the artist leaves that isn't, or the pen you could almost pick up (see Fig. 3 in which the reality and the illusion are laid side-by-side. The invitation to 'pick up' the painting shows that *trompe l'oeil* can trick senses other than sight.). The relationship between frame and inset narrative resonates with the artist's window or door opening onto a scene (Fig. 1 is wardrobe opening into Narnia, painted on a wardrobe). Further, the rupturing of story worlds echoes that process of realisation, and the emotional, affective component of the reaction resonates with both Asphalion's confusion and the reader's uncertainty (Fig. 2 shows a *trompe l'oeil* work that plays with the rupturing effect: the wallpaper appears ripped away, the wall punched through to a space scene, with the note in the corner reading 'We always said we needed more space'). Because Ingold misses the mark when he claims that 'the conceit of the *trompe l'oeil* painters, to have fooled us into mistaking their depictions for reality, rings hollow'. The visual tricks of *trompe l'oeil* draw a viewer into the painted environment, but their purpose is not to 'fool' us (or at least, not for long). Rather, they initiate a process of reflection on representation, on perception, on imagination – essentially, all the factors under discussion in this article. Further, they suggest those blurred boundaries that are so fundamental to New

Materialism and related theories. We do not have to be 'fooled' by these paintings in order to be prompted by them to think about ontological categories in entirely different ways.

The final piece of the puzzle is the link between visual art and literature. And the piece we are looking for, of course, is ekphrasis. As a final point, let us turn to another Theocritean fisherman, this time in *Idyll* 1. The first *Idyll* in the Theocritean collection begins with Thyrsis and the goatherd waxing lyrical about each other's music. The goatherd's piping is sweet like the sound of the pine; Thyrsis' song is sweeter than the water cascading down the rocks. Again the effect is multi-sensory, with hearing now taking centre stage, the kinds of imagining enabled by sounds and music. One participant should be rewarded with a goat, the other with a sheep. From the outset of the poem, music and man and animal and nature find equations and equivalences. The cup is the prize promised for Thyrsis' song, and is equated with it. It is a created object that emerges from nature, yet remains part of it. That features people and their stories: a woman fought over by two men; an old fisherman; a boy guarding a vineyard. The people in turn connect back to their environment: the old fisherman beside the rugged rock he resembles, the boy sitting on a drystone wall; the fisherman hauling nets to catch fish, the boy plaiting a cage to catch grasshoppers.

> τοῖς δὲ μέτα γριπεύς τε γέρων πέτρα τε τέτυκται
> λεπράς, ἐφ᾽ ᾗ σπεύδων μέγα δίκτυον ἐς βόλον ἕλκει
> ὁ πρέσβυς, κάμνοντι τὸ καρτερὸν ἀνδρὶ ἐοικώς.
> φαίης κεν γυίων νιν ὅσον σθένος ἐλλοπιεύειν,
> ὧδέ οἱ ᾠδήκαντι κατ᾽ αὐχένα πάντοθεν ἶνες
> καὶ πολιῷ περ ἐόντι· τὸ δὲ σθένος ἄξιον ἄβας.
> Near them are fashioned an old fisherman and a rugged rock,
> on which the old man hurries to drag his great net for a cast.

He is the very image of effort.
You would say that he was fishing with all the strength of his limbs,
so much do the sinews stand out all over his neck,
although he is grey haired. His strength is worthy of youth.
Idyll 1.39-44

This is the second scene on the cup: an old fisherman is hard at work, dragging his catch onto his rugged rock. He is both working with the sea and worn down by it. Man and rock are fashioned together, and are working together to cast the net.

The first line of the passage presents us with two fashioned elements: the fisherman and the rock. The spatial relationship between them is not immediately evident, not spelled out until the second line. In that first line, then, we meet two characters, two actants, initially presented as equals through τε...τε. Indeed, Gow points out that the verb τέτυκται 'is presumably singular rather than plural, and man and rock are thought of as forming a single scene'. This departs from the Homeric model:

ὡς ὅτε τις φὼς
πέτρῃ ἔπι προβλῆτι καθήμενος ἱερὸν ἰχθὺν
ἐκ πόντοιο θύραζε λίνῳ καὶ ἤνοπι χαλκῷ
as when some man
sitting on a jutting rock with line and gleaming bronze
drags a holy fish from the sea.
Iliad 16.406-8

This is a simile in which one of Patroclus' moves in battle (he stabs Thestor with a spear to the side of the jaw and through the teeth, hooking and dragging him with the spear over the side of his chariot) is compared with a man hooking a fish. The landscape is very different – from Homer's heroic bronze, Theocritus moves to rough environs; Homer's fisherman sits while Theocritus' is emphasised in his movement and exertion. And this latter shift also changes the interaction between man and rock. In the Homeric example, man and rock are juxtaposed (φὼς | πέτρῃ): but they are simultaneously separated by the line end, and it is only the man who is in the nominative case. The postpositive ἔπι has its syntactical effect, and conceptually it separates man and material. The rock in the dative case becomes part of the fisherman's toolkit, along with the line and hook (further datives: λίνῳ καὶ ἤνοπι χαλκῷ). Further, Homer's fishing man is left undescribed – he is 'some man', τις φὼς, none in particular, and lacking an attached adjective he has no distinguishing features. In this Homeric passage, the comparative impetus is between simile and main narrative – there is no suggestion that we should compare man with rock. We might also refer back to *Idyll* 21.41-3, part of the dreamscape: there the fisherman Asphalion sees himself sitting on a rock, ἐν πέτρᾳ. There is a clearer identity to the fisherman in 21, as he is one of the *Idyll*'s main characters, but his positioning parallels the Homeric situation, the preposition and dative marking out the relationship between the human and nonhuman, and, again, the rock aligning with the rod as part of the fisherman's accoutrements.

This changes in the lines from *Idyll* 1, in which the fisherman is aligned with the rock because they resemble one another. Both are rugged: a description as much aesthetic and haptic (rough, hard skin resembling the unyielding rock face) as it is characterising (hardy, resilient). Man and rock resemble each other also in terms of age. The fisherman is an old man (γριπεύς...γέρων; ὁ πρέσβυς), he is grey-haired (44 πολιῷ) – the emphasis serves to throw into relief his strength which is more worthy of a youth (44 τὸ δὲ σθένος ἄξιον ἄβας),

but it also connects him with the steadfast rock. The juxtaposition γέρων πέτρα is compellingly apt, the adjective as conceptually applicable to rock as it is to fisherman.

In this passage, as in *Idyll* 21, we are drawn into the fisherman's world. But the material-discursive narrative of *Idyll* 1 is markedly different from that of 21. Whereas in 21 the story is of two fishermen talking about one fisherman's dream (primary characters with a primary and an inset narrative), in *Idyll* 1 the story is about a cup – and the fisherman and his rugged rock are fashioned on that cup. This is an ekphrasis, and here we see the literary and the visual come together.

καὶ βαθὺ κισσύβιον κεκλυσμένον ἁδέι κηρῷ,
ἀμφῶες, νεοτευχές, ἔτι γλυφάνοιο ποτόσδον.
τῶ ποτὶ μὲν χείλη μαρύεται ὑψόθι κισσός,
κισσὸς ἐλιχρύσῳ κεκονιμένος· ἁ δὲ κατ᾽ αὐτόν
καρπῷ ἕλιξ εἰλεῖται ἀγαλλομένα κροκόεντι.
…
παντᾷ δ᾽ ἀμφὶ δέπας περιπέπταται ὑγρὸς ἄκανθος,
αἰπολικὸν θάημα· τέρας κέ τυ θυμὸν ἀτύξαι.

A deep ivy-wood cup, sealed with sweet wax,
two-handled, newly made, still fragrant from the chisel.
High up on the rim winds ivy,
ivy sprinkled with gold flowers; and along it
twines the tendril rejoicing in its yellow fruit.
…
All around the cup is spread pliant acanthus.

A marvel for a goatherd to behold; a wonder to amaze the heart.

Idyll 1.27-31, 55-6

When the cup is first introduced, it is given a multi-sensory description, driven by its materiality and its vitality. It is twined around with ivy and acanthus, the tendrils rejoice in their fruit, the wood is still fragrant from the chisel. This takes it beyond purely visual description, and indeed this ekphrasis is lacking the expected markers: as Mark Payne notes, 'Thyrsis is not invited to look at the bowl at this time, nor at any point during the ecphrasis. It is only when the song is over that the goatherd produces the object itself, and with a flourish invites Thyrsis to see if it matches up to his earlier description (149): "Behold the bowl; see, my friend, how sweetly it smells."'[39] We are prompted to think of the entire description in a different way. Gary Miles writes: 'We are not actually shown the bowl. We are presented a version of it as seen through the eyes of an inhabitant of the bucolic world'[40] – in this analysis, imagination (engaging multiple senses) takes centre stage, over visual description. Representation comes to the fore. A still different way to approach the cup is through materiality. Shifting away from a treatment of ekphrasis in terms of visualisation and imagination, we might turn our attention rather to ideas of affect and vitality, granting the cup full agentic licence within its material-discursive narrative. Payne argues: 'If the bowl only makes its entrance at the end of the poem this should remind us that the ecphrasis is more a response to a work of art than a description of one'.[41] It is the goatherd's response, told to elicit Thyrsis' response, engendering a response in the reader – and this all conducted by Theocritus, himself responding to an imagined object. The substitution of 'response' for 'description' is useful in that it points us towards a dynamic and multi-sensory interaction with this object, rather than a static visual appreciation of it.

<Figs 4 and 5> Artwork by Cora Beth Fraser, see further https://corabethfraser.wordpress.com/artwork/. Details from the project ‘The Impossible Library’

Figs 4 and 5 show the artist’s hand within the artist’s composition. And the composition itself is about text, image and imagination, as ‘The Impossible Library’ is full of books that no longer exist. Ekphrastic descriptions come from the hand of the poet. The cup is an object imagined and represented by Theocritus. But the vitality and material agency of the cup’s characters (and the cup itself) point towards that hand as a meeting point between person and thing, human and nonhuman nature. Escher-like, the hand comes back round to draw itself, as we reconsider agentic nature and the intra-actions that lie behind landscapes imagined – and dreamt – in poetry.

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[1] This article stems from research which finds its full expression in Canevaro forthcoming 2023.

[2] On 'the pastoral blurring of real and imaginary' see Segal 1981:3-24 (quotation from p.5).

[3] Fantuzzi/Hunter 2004:141.

[4] Morton 2016:5.

[5] See Schama 1995. As Ingold puts it, 'To perceive a landscape is therefore to imagine it' (Ingold 2012:2).

[6] Gibson 1979:256-8.

[7] Ingold 2012:3. Gibson 1979:257 the key test ‘is whether you can discover new features and details by the act of scrutiny’.

[8] Ingold 2012:3.

[9] Schama 1995:6.

[10] For introductions to New Materialism see Coole/Frost 2010, Dolphijn/van der Tuin 2012, Canevaro 2018:13–28.

[11] Particularly useful on correlationism as it has developed with and since Kant, especially its potential ecologically destructive effects, is Morton 2017. Morton discusses the correlationist ‘gap’ between beings, arguing that it forbids solidarity with nonhumans. He calls this gap ‘the Severing’ and posits instead the idea of interrelatedness: that beings are deeply reliant on each other.

[12] Barad 2003:815.

[13] As Material Ecocriticism is a nascent field, it is simultaneously narrow and nebulous, with a small number of publications under its explicit rubric, but with many interconnecting strands from Ecocriticism, New Materialism and Material Feminism, to name just a few areas. In a small number of publications, literary scholars have tested out interactions between Ecocriticism and New Materialism: one key example being the 2016 volume *Object Oriented Environs*, edited by J.J. Cohen and Julian Yates and focusing on Graham Harman’s Object Oriented Ontology. In an even smaller number of publications, scholars have tried to set out and synthesise this meeting point and its potential: this is more or less limited to the 2014 volume *Material Ecocriticism*, edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann.

[14] It also resonates with related approaches such as Material Feminism, which offers a model in which humans and the nonhuman world are entangled, and landscape is an active agent: ‘Rather than perpetuate the nature/culture dualism, which imagines nature to be the inert ground for the exploits of Man, we must reconceptualize nature itself. Nature can no longer

be imagined as a pliable resource for industrial production or social construction. Nature is agentic – it acts, and those actions have consequences for both the human and nonhuman world' (Alaimo/Hekman 2008:4-5).

[15] All Theocritus text is from Gow 1950; all translations are my own.

[16] Brockliss 2018:25.

[17] See Morton 2012:130-5. On the hyperobject in classical thought see Porter 2019.

[18] Toxicity and pollution are much discussed in Material Ecocriticism: see for example the chapters in Iovino/Oppermann 2014 by Dana Phillips ('Excremental ecocriticism and the global sanitation crisis'), Stacy Alaimo ('Oceanic origins, plastic activism, and new materialism at sea'), and Cheryll Glotfelty ('Corporeal fieldwork and risky art: Peter Gion and the making of nuclear landscapes').

[19] See Canevaro 2018:129-42.

[20] As Adrienne Mayor writes in her article 'Ancient Puppy Chow' for the 'Wonder and Marvels' online magazine, hunting dogs would have bread as part of their diet: 'Ordinary pups get barley bread softened with cow's milk or whey. But more valuable puppies eat their bread soaked in sheep or goat milk. You might add a little blood from the animal you expect your puppy to hunt. At dinner with your family, you scoop soft chunks of bread from the center of a loaf to wipe grease from your fingers—and toss them to your dog, supplemented with bones and other table scraps, perhaps even a basin of meat broth. After a sacrifice or banquet, you make a special treat: a lump of ox liver dredged in barley meal and roasted in the coals.'

[21] In Homer, the formula 'those who eat bread', σῖτον ἔδοντες, acts as an epithet of humans, differentiated from the immortals (*Il*.5.341, *Od*.8.222, 9.89, 10.101, 16.110). A related epithet σιτόφαγος is used of men at *Od*.9.191, to show what Polyphemus is *not*. At Hesiod *WD* 146-

7 the fact that the bronze race do not eat bread (οὐδέ τι σῖτον ἤσθιον) marks them out as something different from us Iron-Age humans.

[22] For further discussion of the humanimal and huma(n)chine and in particular their applications to Pandora see Canevaro forthcoming and Chesi/Sclavi 2020.

[23] One anonymous reader of this article noted that the more precise equivalent might be something along the lines of 'Do androids dream of lamb chops?'

[24] For full discussion see Canevaro forthcoming 2023.

[25] Similarly, the lithic agency prevalent in the spurious *Idyll* 23 can be found in the hybridity of the first *Idyll*'s fisherman and rock, or in the singing stones of *Idyll* 7.

[26] Harris 2009:167.

[27] Harris 2009:167n.262.

[28] I borrow the term 'from below' from a set of historical approaches that focus on people's history, the perspective of ordinary people rather than leaders and elites. In these Marxist-inspired approaches there is an emphasis on marginalized groups. I am interested in people's experiences on the margins – women, the working classes, emigrants – but I treat the idea of marginalized groups expansively as I move away from a strict 'people's' history and give weight also to nonhuman agents. It is for this reason that I use the term 'from below' rather than specifically 'people'. For an introduction to history from below see Thompson 1966.

[29] Payne 2007:15. For further discussion of the relationship between Theocritus' poetry, his world and his readers, see Berger 1984 and Li 2023.

[30] Similarly, in *Idyll* 11 Polyphemus does not distinguish between his dreams and his 'reality'. His unrequited love for Galatea is conveyed through rhetorical questions that blur the distinction: on the one hand 'Why do you reject the one who loves you?', on the other 'Why do you visit as soon as sweet sleep has me, but go away departing at once when sweet sleep releases me?' (*Idyll* 11.19-23). Payne 2007: 71 argues that Theocritus' Polyphemus is

to be identified with the herdsman of the bucolic poems: I pick up on this in Chapter 5 of Canevaro 2023 from the perspective of class and a reading from below, suggesting that both Polyphemus and the herdsman (and fisherman) are drawn together as 'the other'. They are disempowered yet threatening, showing the elite's discomfort with the working men on the margins of their world.

[31] Ingold 2012:6.

[32] Brockliss 2018:3.

[33] Gibson 1979: 281.

[34] Ingold 2012:5.

[35] Ingold 2012:3.

[36] On the term 'material-discursive' see Iovino/Oppermann 2014:8: the 'shared creativity of human and nonhuman agents generates new narratives and discourses'.

[37] Iovino/Oppermann 2014:9.

[38] Fraser 2020.

[39] Payne 2001:264. See also Li 2023 for a discussion of ekphrasis and ontology (though Li emphasises the distinctions between word and thing, rather than the blurring of boundaries between them).

[40] Miles 1977:147.

[41] Payne 2001:265.