



# “Attuned to Loss”: Rhetoric of Solastalgia in Richard Powers’ *Bewilderment* and Emmi Itäranta’s *The Moonday Letters*

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*Abstract:* This article analyzes two contemporary novels that reflect on the devastation of the Earth: *Bewilderment* by American author Richard Powers (2021) and *The Moonday Letters* (2020) by Finnish author Emmi Itäranta, arguing that both novels invite readers to engage with solastalgia – a distress caused by witnessing environmental changes. The evocation of solastalgia (as an environmentally-attuning readerly affect) is discussed by employing James Phelan’s rhetorical theory of narrative, particularly his and Matthew Clark’s model of three narrative components. Accounting for both content and form, the threefold analysis touches on the many similarities of the seemingly different novels: their Earth-centeredness, the theme of loss and how it is rescaled from personal to environmental, as well as storyworld-internal worldbuilding that repeatedly interrupts the progression of narratives. This reading contributes to discussions about the functioning and functions of fiction in the Anthropocene.

*Keywords:* Anthropocene fiction, Emmi Itäranta, Richard Powers, solastalgia in literature, rhetorical theory of narrative

## 1. Introduction

Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer’s “Anthropocene” (2000), though widely used, is not the only concept that emerged at the turn of the century to call attention to the interrelations between humans and the natural world. Introduced in 2003, “solastalgia” denotes the distress caused by experiencing environmental change, especially negative changes to a familiar place. Linking

the wellbeing and mental health of humans with ecosystem health, the Australian environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht invented the term to refer to “the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault (physical desolation)” (“Solastalgia” 45). Encouraged by his own “emplaced” pain, helplessness and other negative emotions, he started tracing such sentiments in the experiences of others, as well as in cultural production. In *Earth Emotions* (2019), Albrecht locates solastalgia within a larger emotional terrain – his “psychoterratic” typology maps out confluences of the emotional (psyche) and the ecological (Earth, terra). This classification of various emotions aims to empower his readers to articulate the emotional effects of life-teeming natural environments, or alternatively, of human-inflicted damage.

Such conceptual frameworks for relating to the natural world are necessary for changing the current environmental situation, which Albrecht calls “the age of Solastalgia” (*Earth Emotions* 10). Not only can language raise more awareness of one’s surroundings but Albrecht also advances an argument that the concepts denoting positive emotions can inspire love-fueled reparations of the environment. His work aligns with posthumanist thinker Donna Haraway, who in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) calls for new concepts, alternative ways of thinking and anti-anthropocentric practices, like creating, crafting, researching and making informed choices; storytelling is one such practice. Haraway seeks different stories in place of prevailing ones that are furnished by male heroes who triumphantly conquer nature; new “stories of becoming-with, of reciprocal induction, of companion species” (40) should aim to recognize nonhuman others and their entanglements with the human, and through this confront “the climate crisis, [which] is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (Ghosh 9).

Storytelling both reflects and shapes the “cultural matrix” (Ghosh 10) that informs prevailing conceptual frameworks; therefore, both ‘the what’ and ‘the how’ of literary representations matter. Jennifer Wenzel (2020) discusses the not necessarily positive effects that representations have on how humans understand, relate to and delineate nature. She conceives of (literary) mediation, representation, imagination, understanding and “acting upon the world” (6) as interrelated. This is why reading has something to do with – and to do for – the unevenly distributed environmental crisis; it can help move “from near to there: between specific sites, across multiple divides, at more than one scale” (2). Stories and narrative configurations have the power to break the “habits of mind that render distant crises unimaginable” (18).

One of the most thought-provoking questions within the field of environmental literary studies regards the possibility of representing the Anthropocene. However factual, this global processual phenomenon (stretching across time, space, and enveloping various facets of human and nonhuman existence) resists the grasp of practical everyday intelligence and poses a representational challenge with which contemporary literature must grapple (see Caracciolo; T. Clark; Heise; Ghosh; Trexler). Taking on the more familiar political, social, cultural, and economic realities that also constitute the Anthropocene can bring environmental issues closer to the reader. The novelistic mode does not shy away from such a broad scope. Having analyzed a

vast corpus of Anthropocene fiction,<sup>1</sup> Adam Trexler (2015) contends that the novel is, in fact, capable of “interrogat[ing] the emotional, aesthetic, and living experience of the Anthropocene” (6), as it extends across the past and present, the personal and public, the global and local, human and nonhuman without significant simplification.

With a broader aim to participate in the ongoing discussions about literature in the face of the environmental crisis, this article conducts a comparative reading of two Anthropocene fictions: American writer Richard Powers’ thirteenth novel *Bewilderment* (2021) and Finnish writer Emmi Itäranta’s third novel *The Moonday Letters* (first published in 2020 as *Kuunpäivän kirjeet*). Drawing on Albrecht’s observation that cultural production is capable of “transmit[ing] the very idea of solastalgic loss to the reader” (*Earth Emotions* 68), the analysis is driven by an interest in the intersections between lived experiences of solastalgia and contemporary fiction and examines what literary techniques can be used to craft an experience of this sentiment for the reader. It is important to underline that this article is not concerned with the portrayal of characters’ negative environmental emotions;<sup>2</sup> instead, it aligns with earlier studies of Anthropocene fiction that address the accord of form and content in the evocation of readerly affect. One such example is Karoline Huber and Geoff Rodoreda’s (2024) discussion of sudden suspensions of character development (“arrested narrative”) which, as a narrative strategy, parallels and “enhance[s] a deep sense of loss and distress over human-caused, environmental disruption and destruction that is portrayed at the story-level” (145). Attributing general affective power to literary configurations of environmental degradation, this article argues that as readers work through the selected narratives, they are gradually subjected to a solastalgic longing for their present moment in advance, especially because environmental losses are depicted as already taking place within the storyworlds of the novels.

Preoccupation with the Anthropocene, its representations and their possible effects indicates an ecocritical aspiration of the present article. Ecocriticism, the “earth-centered approach to literary study” (Glotfelty xviii), subsumes a broad variety of inquiries concerned with nature, culture and the global environmental crisis, and ascribes an environmentally-oriented “consciousness raising” (xxiv) function to literature and literary scholarship. Originally discussing realist representations or nature writing, ecocriticism has gradually become more inclusive as well as formally oriented (James 4; 12). More recent interest in human responses to environmental degradation has brought about affective ecocriticism, which probes various literary means and narrative strategies for inducing affect, for the sake of raising readers’ environmental awareness (Gaard 225).

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<sup>1</sup> “Anthropocene fiction” is Trexler’s suggested alternative to “climate fiction”. It refers to literature that puts into focus the experiential and emotional realities of climate change, the incomprehensible scope of the climate catastrophe, its complex timeline and multifarious implications. Trexler prefers the term “Anthropocene”, as it connotes tangibility and scientific verifiability, in contrast to the widely used “climate change”, the debates on which are concerned mostly with “issues of evidence, representation and belief” (3–4).

<sup>2</sup> For an example analysis of environmental character emotions (such as solastalgia) depicted in contemporary Finnish fiction, see Isomaa and Kortekallio (2024).

Ecocriticism is an interpretative framework rather than a method for analysis and so, in order to investigate the selected novels, this article takes the rhetorical approach to literature. Markku Lehtimäki (2013; 2019) suggests that this approach (endowed with insights from cognitive narratology) is a way to marry seemingly conflicting Earth-bound ecocritical and text-centric narratological interests. The rhetorical theory of narrative cultivated by James Phelan acknowledges the power of literature to have aesthetical, emotional and ethical influence on its readers (Clark and Phelan 19–22; Phelan 3–14). Narratives are handled as purposeful rhetorical acts designed in particular ways to communicate knowledge, ideas and values, and as such they can “say something worthwhile about environmental issues” (“Narrative Communication” 92). Phelan conceives of narratives as having three kinds of components. Although “simultaneous and interdependent” (Clark and Phelan 11), these components can be more or less foregrounded throughout the progression of a narrative. Progression corresponds to readerly engagement – different arrangements create dynamics that invite different emotional responses, ethical judgements or aesthetic appreciation (Phelan 5–6; Clark and Phelan 7–8). In line with these notions, bridging the distinction between form and content, all three kinds of analysis (mimetic, thematic, synthetic)<sup>3</sup> are conducted.

Published one year apart and explicitly grappling with environmental crisis, *Bewilderment* and *The Moonday Letters* (henceforth *ML*) are eminently dissimilar novels. The story of *Bewilderment* unfolds in the backdrop of the recognizable, yet slightly altered American milieu; among other things, the climate situation has worsened, while mind-mapping AI-powered “neurofeedback” technologies have advanced. A single plotline is developed through the first-person point of view of a scientist named Theo. He is the only caretaker of his preteen son Robin, who has behavioral challenges. The boy is captivated by the “living planet” (Powers 141) but also deeply troubled by environmental degradation. Unlike the realist setting of *Bewilderment*, Itäranta’s *ML* takes the reader to the year 2168. Earth’s environmental collapse has led humans to colonize the solar system. In search for her Mars-born missing spouse Sol (an ethnobotanist who has dedicated their life to “fix Earth”), shamanic healer Lumi Salo physically travels the various planets of the solar system, exercises “soul travel” and “walk[s] on the paths of the past, moving memories around” (Itäranta 177–8). Intimate, full of impressions, reflections, accounts of recent events but also reminiscences, Lumi’s diary-like letters to her missing spouse ponder their relationship, as well as Lumi’s childhood on the devastated Earth. The Earth-born protagonist’s reflections always circle around and back to her home planet – “at the center of the novel’s grander narrative, implicitly overarching the story of Lumi searching for her missing spouse, is indeed one about saving Earth” (Kraatila 38).

Produced by authors of different nationalities, these particular novels have been selected because of their different ways of offering “confrontation

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<sup>3</sup> First introduced by Phelan in 1989 to examine the roles of characters as literary elements, this idea was further developed to discuss narratives in general. As a threefold model for analysis (“MTS”), it was revised in the joint efforts of Phelan and Matthew Clark, where the latter critic argued for a more text-focused reconceptualization, suggesting that one can conduct three different kinds of analysis.

with environmental disturbance” (*Earth Emotions* 45). Discussing narrative strategies of Anthropocene fictions, Marco Caracciolo (2021) drafts a threefold distinction, according to which *ML* and *Bewilderment* represent different categories of Anthropocene fiction: Itäranta’s genre blending work clearly belongs to the category of speculative fiction, whereas Powers is listed among Caracciolo’s examples of major novelists who explore “human-nonhuman entanglements in a realistic setting” (143). The selection of these novels is therefore significant because, as this article displays, despite their differences in genre and form, they employ similar strategies to elicit environmentally-attuning “(emotive, ethical, and aesthetic) engagement” (Phelan 10). Understood as “rhetoric”, the specific techniques deployed by Itäranta and Powers to evoke solastalgia (an environmentally-attuning readerly affect) will be considered in line with Phelan’s interpretative model (“MTS” – mimetic, thematic, synthetic). Drawing parallels between the novels, the evocation of solastalgia will be accounted for by investigating the three components separately, and then discussing their dynamic on which the potential effects on readers rely – in this case, the raising of environmental-awareness through “psychoterratic” emotions. Drawing on Phelan’s idea that readers’ experiences correspond to the ways in which narratives unfold, “evocation” here refers to the “patterning of emotional experience” that correlates with how story-content is modulated by narrative form (Caracciolo 6). Arguably, this analysis can shed light on the means and ends of genre-spanning Anthropocene fiction that is rising in prominence.

The general premise that the narratives “transmit” a sense of solastalgia to their readers is grounded in previous academic accounts of the novels. For example, in their discussion of *Bewilderment*, Kanza Fatima Mirza and Rehan Ahmad (2024) investigate portrayals of environment-related emotions: biophilia (an “intrinsic affinity [to] nature and all living beings” (80)), as well as negative dimensions such as solastalgia and eco-anxiety (the “uneasiness and fear related to degradation” (79)). The novel’s characters and the depictions of their responses to ecological changes are used as a springboard to discussing the psychological wellbeing of actual people amid the climate crisis. In a review of Itäranta’s novel, Kaisa Kortekallio (2020) makes a brief case that it produces solastalgia – nostalgia felt by readers in and for the present, a feeling caused by the anticipation of future loss (48). Theorizing grand-scale speculative worldbuilding, Elise Kraatila reads *ML* as a heuristic tool that is “geared towards building grand-scale theories about the universe and humanity as part of it” (34). Relevant to this article is Kraatila’s claim that by enacting some relevant tensions, *ML* joins the debate on the purpose of stories in the Anthropocene. This article affirms and extends Kraatila’s argument by interrogating the ways in which fiction can evoke solastalgic appreciation of the natural world, taking a step towards restoring the idea of “deriving happiness from our relationship to the environment” (*Earth Emotions* 45).

## 2.1 The Mimetic Component

Mimetic analysis is concerned with characters and their storyworlds, and how readers respond to them emotionally (Clark and Phelan 11–13).<sup>4</sup> Phelan’s discussion of the mimetic component can be complemented by econarratologist Erin James’ (2015) insights.<sup>5</sup> James builds on cognitive-narratological research to argue that by tracing textual cues to reconstruct a storyworld, readers “transport” themselves to particular configurations of space and time – a process that can raise environmental awareness. Used interchangeably throughout *The Storyworld Accord* (2015), verbs such as “transport to”, “inhabit” or “immerse” refer to a cognitive procedure whereby readers negotiate between their understanding of the actual world and a storyworld projected by narrative progression (xii; 19–23).<sup>6</sup> In this process, the knowledge and values of individual readers are also at play, and so there is a possibility for an environmentally-positive “change in beliefs, values, and behaviors among readers” (254). This solastalgia-oriented mimetic analysis investigates the storyworlds of the selected narratives by looking at the meanings ascribed to these versions of the world by the first-person narrators.

The down-to-earth family realities of *Bewilderment* are colored by the characters’ preoccupation with nature. Theo is an “extremophile” astrobiologist who creates models of possible lifeforms on other planets. Through his observant and biology-versed point of view nature is depicted vividly, often elevating simple things into artworks (Powers 21; 172). His reflections and conversations with Robin mostly center on life or its absence: animals, plants, extraterrestrial life. Underscoring the richness of the biosphere, representatives of all kingdoms are listed throughout the novel (21; 32). At the same time, on multiple occasions the characters explicitly reflect on climate issues, especially on biodiversity loss. Nature, both father and son’s refuge from society (36), is endangered because humans are “breaking the whole planet” (229). Framed by the characters’ life-centered worldview, nature emerges as solace, yet their affinity for all nonhuman life is tinged with painful awareness of environmental degradation.

Stripped of its abundance, the Earth in *ML* is depicted as a lost home. The novel extrapolates the consequences of the topical problems of the actual world (Kraatila 34–6). Though still sparsely inhabited, Lumi’s home planet is devastated, it is polluted, ridden with wars, poverty, famine, illnesses and pandemics (Itäranta 107–8; 193). Due to environmental degradation, humans

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<sup>4</sup> In this article, “mimetic” is disentangled from “realistic”. Matthew Clark broadens Phelan’s initial model to include SFF (Science Fiction and Fantasy) (5–13; 53–64); the external possibility of events, to which Phelan initially referred, is less important than the belief-inducing coherency harnessed by SFF.

<sup>5</sup> Although maintaining her initial focus on storyworlds, in her recent study *Narrative in the Anthropocene* (2022) James has too embraced Phelan’s rhetorical definition of narrative, moulding it into “somebody telling someone else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened in some world” (19).

<sup>6</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan discusses similar cognitive procedures as the “principle of minimal departure”. She argues that since storyworlds are always incomplete, limited by the textual information provided, readers by default take the actual world as a prototype and fill in the gaps by drawing from their own experience; this means that the fictional world is imagined as in all ways corresponding to the actual world, unless it is explicitly indicated otherwise. See Ryan; James 251–252.

have sought to settle elsewhere in the solar system. The speculative storyworld of the novel hosts a variety of space settlements, but although adapted for habitation, outer space is ill-suited for humans. The protagonist recurrently points to the hostility of space and the artificially crafted settlements are compared to the Earth (22–3; 26; 110). Acute homesickness is a problem among the settlers: “People who were born and grew up on Mars long for Earth. For the horizon, the open sea, the sky and the sun ... A longing like that can ... eat a person from within” (193). This “birth-home syndrome” (ibid.) configures Earth as the ultimate home – not only for Lumi, but for the human species; yet, the home planet is lost due to destructive human activity, environmental degradation and resulting sociocultural problems.

Genre differences aside, both narratives are characterized by Earth-centeredness and explicitly point to destructive human activity. The protagonists of *Bewilderment* actively witness the richness of the realistically rendered American nature. Recognizing themselves as just one small part of Earth’s living organisms, Robin and Theo explicitly express their concern for the worsening environmental situation. Through the point of view of the narrator, the readers get to immerse themselves in wonder but also worry, for preteen Robin and for the Earth. Likewise, employing first-person accounts, Itäranta’s speculative future vision harvests the grimness of space colonization. The Earth-born, spacefaring protagonist perceives space settlements as inferior to the original home of humanity. Drawing on James, it can be argued that such storyworlds presented through the point of view of Earth-conscious narrators invite solastalgic appreciation for the home planet, its conditions and biodiversity that is under threat in the Anthropocene.

## 2.2 The Thematic Component

Thematic analysis investigates the ideological, philosophical or ethical issues and ideas that the narrative brings about or that characters, as representatives of different classes, embody. Thematic analysis also concerns meanings “direct and indirect, intended by the author or not” (Clark and Phelan 11). Powers’ and Itäranta’s novels exhibit an obvious environmental preoccupation (Mirza and Ahmad; Kraatila); arguably, concern for the environment is communicated not only directly, but also covertly, with the subtle movement from “near to there” (Wenzel 2), which can be traced back to a shared thematic emphasis – loss.

As much as *Bewilderment* revolves around life, throughout the narrative progression extinction becomes its thematic center. Repetition of events underscores thematic importance (Clark and Phelan 31–3), and the event of loss is indeed reiterated many times in the novel. Theo characterizes his son as “a boy attuned to loss” (Powers 9) in the context of Robin’s perplexment over the emptiness of the cosmos, and also because his mother Alyssa has died. Just like her, Robin prioritizes nonhuman life over his own, and so the novel concludes with Theo losing Robin. These and other events of loss are complemented by Robin’s awareness of the dying out of species, and his desperation to act on biodiversity loss. The novel’s thematic dimension is dominated by extinction – of species, but also of Theo’s family.

Caracciolo (2021) traces metaphorical patterns in Anthropocene fictions and argues that metaphorical language is a powerful tool in aiding the

understanding of very different yet intermeshed human and nonhuman agencies (139–177). Drawing on this discussion, it can be noted that Theo's personal losses come to be rescaled from the personal to the environmental by making use of thematically significant parallels between individuals and other forms of life. The names of characters are explicitly linked to certain species. Robin, for instance, is named after his parents' "favorite bird" (Powers 13), a connection which retains its significance throughout the narrative, while Alyssa's name refers to a flower (173). The surname of the family is "derived from Bran – raven in Irish" (15). What is more, Theo often regards others as planets (200; 239). This recurring metaphorical link is powerfully harnessed in the final page of the book:

this planet was a good one. And we, too, were good, as good as the burn of the sun and the rain's sting and the smell of living soil, the all-over song of endless solutions signing the air of a changing world that by every calculation ought never to have been. (326)

The scientist seems to refer here to the Earth and to the formation of its life that remains as a scientific enigma pondered by Robin. An equally probable interpretation is that he is reflecting on his unexpectedly conceived son – especially because of the past tense in an otherwise present-tense episode. Theo's ambiguous last words illustrate how the metaphorical coupling of individuals with the nonhuman moves the theme of loss away from the personal towards the environmental. As the narrative culminates with Robin's death, his unique species is made extinct, he as a whole planet is lost, and so Theo's grief for him is woven into the overarching sense of environmental loss.

Anticipatory grief for future environmental losses is made even more prominent by the novel's explicit focus on contrasting emotions. Desperate to help Robin without pharmaceuticals, Theo submits him to an experimental AI-powered biofeedback treatment, DecNef, "an empathy machine" (169) that trains patients to feel and replicate the emotions of others. Working with the recording of his mother's feeling of ecstasy, Robin gradually becomes more positive, serenely observant, and aware of the interconnectedness of all living organisms. His statement that "everyone's inside everyone" (226) can be compared to Albrecht's "merging of subject and object" (*Earth Emotions* 142) called "eutierria" – a "deep sense of peace and connectedness" (199) – especially as Alyssa's ecstasy is traced back to her deep reverence for the nonhuman. Theo eventually realizes that nature is the ultimate training resource (Powers 311), helping Robin to manage his behavior. However, having gained thematic significance, at the culmination of the novel the nature-derived sense of serenity is effectively inverted into its negative opposite, grief, defined by Theo as "the world stripped of something you admire" (107). The scientist's admiration is directed towards his son and wife, who Theo loses because they put the natural world first. Such dynamics of ecstasy and grief (especially as nature is rendered the ultimate source of unmediated blissful ecstasy) signals that large-scale planetary loss entails grief, as does the private loss of a loved one.

Likewise enveloping both the personal and the environmental, the theme of loss in *ML* is brought forth by its epistolary form. The letter form, as noted by Janet G. Altman (1982), predetermines certain narrative techniques and also exerts thematic pressure; among other things, she argues that



epistolary novels tend to thematize either absence and estrangement or coming together (13–15; 186). In the case of *ML*, epistolarity builds on absence and longing. When writing her letter-like notebook entries, Lumi states her wish to bridge the spatial and temporal gap between her and her spouse:

Let me prepare everything for you, Sol: set the stage and open the curtain, so in your thoughts you may settle next to me and be with me in this moment. You said once that writing is journeying beyond infinite distances; with these words I transport you to me across time and space. (Itäranta 17)

Lumi writes because of the lost presence of her spouse, and a clear intention of transcending distance puts thematic emphasis on absence-induced longing.

Longing is also overtly linked with the loss of home, where “home” comes to stand for multiple things. Brought in already by the novel’s dedication to “all those who have lost their homes,” the link between loss of home and loss of Earth comes to life with narrative progression. Throughout *ML*, numerous instances of loss punctuate the plot: the unexpected change that puts the whole narrative into gear is from Sol’s presence to absence. Embodying solace, Sol is the personification of homeliness: in their arms Lumi feels like they are “far away from home yet home” (179). Lumi also constantly recalls her and Sol’s first shared home that was destroyed, and her story climaxes with yet another loss of home – with the terrorist attack she loses Earth, as travel there is indefinitely forbidden. These losses of homes, or more generally, of sources of solace, point back to the idea of Earth as ultimate home.

The narrative is imbued with a sense of nostalgia. “Nostalgia” combines two Greek words: *nostos* (return to one’s native land), and *algos* (pain); having denoted “the sickness caused by the intense desire to return home when away from it” (*Earth Emotions* 29), it gradually came to signify “a sentimental desire to be connected with a positively perceived period in the past” (30). In *ML*, nostalgia in its original meaning stems from Lumi’s impossible wish to come home. Journeying through space, she longs for her home planet: “The longing. Like breathing. Most of the time I don’t pay attention to it, but sometimes it clogs and hitches and tightens into a knot” (Itäranta 193). What is more, her nostalgia is connected to memory. Another significant thematic emphasis, memory also has to do with the epistolary form – typical to letter novels is a preoccupation with the past, towards which the present moment of the writing act is oriented (Altman 124–8). Lumi longs for a feeling of home, and memory is where her lost homes are still accessible. Yet, as Altman puts it, memory cannot be re-presented (made present again), even by the act of writing (138). Because of this gap between what is present in memory but presently absent, the constantly reminiscing protagonist experiences nostalgia. It is multipart – nostalgia in the nowadays common temporal (no longer accessible past), the verbatim (Earth as the home Lumi cannot return to), and the personified sense (missing spouse who embodies homeliness). Readers of *ML* tap into a deep longing for what is lost with which Lumi’s letters are permeated.

Loss, a theme introduced by narrative progressions, is translated between different planes of experience. In *Bewilderment*, individuals are tied to the natural world by means of metaphorical language; *ML* merges the personal and the environmental in the notion of home, which comes to stand for both the Earth and the absent spouse. An intricately constructed thematic

focus of both narratives, the environmentally-charged preoccupation with loss is enhanced by other prominent themes such as emotions and memory. As the generally far-flung realities of the natural world are brought closer with the help of familiarity with personal loss, the typical human emotional responses to loss – grief and nostalgia – are rescaled to become linked with the environment. Through their thematic emphases, established by both form and content, Powers' and Itäranta's novels attune readers to the anticipated loss of their home planet and its biodiversity.

## 2.3 The Synthetic Component

Analyzing the synthetic component entails looking at a narrative's construction, from individual sentences to plots, all of which build the foundation for storyworlds and themes. While Phelan initially associates the overtly synthetic with the metafictional (in opposition to mimetic as realist), Clark sees all narratives as inherently synthetic (Clark and Phelan 19–24). Arguably, the artificiality of even the most “transparent” realist narratives can be foregrounded in certain instances, by particular narrative devices. This part of the article looks into one overly synthetic device that is part of the larger environmental awareness-raising communicative strategies of both novels.

Both first-person narrators indulge in plot-wise insignificant telling – vivid descriptions that are meant not to describe something within the storyworld, but to conjure up imaginary places. In *Bewilderment*, Theo invents planets and their lifeforms for his son's bedtime tales. In *ML*, the couple builds Moonday House, a conceptual place they imagine meeting in when thinking of each other. Such storyworld-internal thought experiments developed by character-narrators dispel the mimetic illusion of the narratives and bring forward the idea of their artificiality. It is so because they expose worldbuilding operations central to fiction. Discussing the rhetoric of speculative fiction, Hanna-Riikka Roine (2016) notes that speculative worldbuilding is a way to develop thought experiments, synthesize certain ideas or issues and put them forth for the reader to consider. She argues that in order to take in those ideas brought forward in and by SFF, readers need to imaginatively engage with narratives as mimetic illusions and as artificial devices at the same time. To phrase this in Phelan's terms, when both the synthetic and the mimetic components are foregrounded, readers are prompted to take in and reflect on the themes and ideas developed throughout a narrative.

Brian McHale (2018) sees SFF as a highly self-reflective genre. Developing the influential idea about the literalization of metaphors,<sup>7</sup> he argues that alongside poetic images, works of SFF tend to literalize narratological terms, narrative devices and structures, including the imaginative and intellectual processes of constructing a narrative world (327–9). Drawing on this notion, the storyworld-internal conjurations of the Moonday House and of alternative planets can be read as mirroring (and in this way exposing) the

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<sup>7</sup> Understanding SFF as inherently mimetic, in *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?* (2010), Seo-Young Chu proposes that the science fiction genre tends to make various poetic figures literally functioning in and even characterizing storyworlds.

authorial process of constructing a narrative and its storyworld, which remind readers of the artificiality of the novels.

Both the “bedtime stories of alien life” (Powers 163) and the Moonday House highlight the process of sharing personal experiences and making abstract ideas tangible via worldbuilding. There is an obvious correspondence between Theo’s emotionally turbulent life and his imaginative planets, which means that even when drawing on scientific data from planetary models programmed for work, the scientist is conceptualizing his experiences and challenges, inconspicuously relaying them to Robin. As shareable configurations of occurrences and emotions, Theo’s planetary models also point to the processes and purpose of speculative worldbuilding behind *Bewilderment* itself. Similarly, in *ML*, the Moonday House reflects Lumi’s emotional states, for example estrangement (Itäranta 255). It also enacts the authorial procedures of establishing a storyworld with the help of textual cues. The conjuration of the constantly developing Moonday House requires detailing marked by spatial deixis (95); the same is true for the authorial procedures of inventing a narrative world. *ML* is in itself an example of grand-scale worldbuilding which helps readers to grasp difficult phenomena such as climate change (Kraatila), and at the same time, storyworld-internal worldbuilding highlights the evocative power of descriptions – they are clusters of textual cues that allow the readers to imagine a storyworld’s environments, objects, and persons.

In both cases, the imaginative practices of the protagonists set into motion the mimetic–synthetic dynamic of SFF described by Roine: on one hand, the shared conversational routines make the storyworld more complex and vivid, potentially prompting immersion because they make the narrators’ sentiments more substantial; on the other, exposing procedures related to worldbuilding puts a spotlight on the synthetic component of the narratives. Such a double perspective (Roine 33–34; 61–70), entailed by storyworld-internal worldbuilding, self-reflexively points to the fact that the storyworlds of the novels are themselves carefully crafted thought experiments, in which readers also participate.

## 2.4 The Effect

The mimetic–synthetic dynamic explicated above brings forward the thematic component, which establishes the solastalgic resonance of the novels. Both Moonday House and the alien planets reflect things that are significant to the protagonists but which are threatened or already lost. The characters of *Bewilderment* are preoccupied with life and haunted by an awareness that the “endless gift of a place is going away” (Powers 241), so they invent planets for alternative lifeforms to thrive, this way escaping the grief of ongoing environmental degradation. The protagonist of *ML* is dealing with an acute homesickness that stems from travelling in unhomely space, being far away from her home planet and her spouse. What is lost or unavailable can be accessed in memory, which induces nostalgia, but in the act of writing about the Moonday House, she creates for herself a sense of homeliness in the present moment. These conversational routines point back to the environmental concerns underlying both narratives, as environmental issues are the source of

their lacking solace. As such, in the larger rhetorical designs of the novels, the storyworld-internal worldbuilding ties back to the novels' overarching environmentalism.

The novels also offer a commentary on the role of storytelling "in the middle of a vaster catastrophe" (Powers 153). In both cases, storyworld-internal worldbuilding allows the protagonists to process their experiences and even turn negative emotions (in this case grief and nostalgia) into something else: hope and awe, or a sense of being at home. This can be said to apply also to fictional storyworlds. As with the characters' conversational routines, storyworlds require engagement and interpretation; this makes reading a transformative activity. Reading allows readers to tune in to the experiences of fictional others, trying on their feelings and outlooks, which can have influence on their values and behavior in the actual world (James 14–5; 41–50). Then, reading too is "emotional telepathy" (Powers 108), because readers are "training on" the experiences and emotions of others: eutierria, but also a sense of loss, nostalgia and grief. This makes up the rhetoric of solastalgia – engaging with stories of loss told by Earth-conscious narrators might elicit distress, but also simultaneous appreciation for the endangered home planet.

### 3. Conclusions

Adopting Phelan's conception of narrative communication as being able to both inform and affect, this article explored the rhetoric of solastalgia by looking at the mimetic, thematic and synthetic aspects of *Bewilderment* and *ML*, arguing that in their dynamic, these aspects attune readers to environmental loss. Although representing different genres, both novels feature similar strategies to allow readers to experience a sense of the "homesickness you have at home" (*Earth Emotions* 27). Itäranta's and Powers' narratives project immersive storyworlds that put the Earth into focus. *Bewilderment* spotlights the still available but threatened abundance of Sol 3, whereas *ML* depicts the human-caused absence of this abundance. Firstly, involvement with such storyworlds guides the readers' attention and concern towards the human-suited home planet in its current state. Secondly, these "literary imagin[ing]s make environmental crisis legible" (Wenzel 18) by making it personal. The narrative strategies of both novels expose readers to the pain of personal loss, turning it into a springboard to contemplate biodiversity loss or the destruction of the home planet. The novels also reflect on the emotional consequences of loss, and as the characters recurrently conjure up substitutes for the lost source of hope, awe or homeliness, the environmental issues behind the protagonists' negative emotions are brought forward. In this way, environmental issues become related to the lack of solace in the characters' narrative present. At the same time, recurring instances of storyworld-internal worldbuilding invite readers to contemplate the narratives as artificial constructs that are designed to put something forth for them to simultaneously engage with emotionally as well as intellectually. In doing so, *ML* and *Bewilderment* evoke a sense of solastalgia – a pre-sentiment of what it means to lose the richness of the natural world. As this richness is still available in the readers' here-and-now, the novels transmit an "idea of solastalgic loss" (*Earth Emotions* 68) without ever mentioning it directly.

In exploring social and emotional bonds to others as well as the Earth, the novels analyzed in this article invite readers to tap into the appreciation, grief or nostalgia felt by the protagonists. Both novels can be read as actively participating in the same fight for foregrounding and refiguring environmental degradation as a matter of personal importance. In this attempt, Powers and Itäranta respond to Haraway’s call for a new kind of stories – stories that, without turning away from the issues, limitations and paradoxes related to the human-centered literary medium, teach readers to “feel their way across the species line” (Powers 131), because they productively underscore the interconnected threads that make up the personal, the societal, the cultural and the environmental. In doing so, these novels grapple with the comfortably “unimaginable” (Wenzel 18) – the overwhelming scale-spanning realities of the Anthropocene; at the same time, they self-reflectively touch on the role of storytelling in “crack[ing] the established disorder” (Haraway 130). With their solastalgic resonance, *Bewilderment* and *ML* “clarify, nuance, and subvert dominant ways of thinking about human-nonhuman relations” (Caracciolo 19), and thus invite readers to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway) of environmental crisis.

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