Narrative Middles
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Midway through Jane Austen’s *Emma* (1816), the title character finds herself waiting for a friend. Bored, her continually spurred inner narratives temporarily stilled, Emma begins to look outward at a street scene:

Mr. Perry walking hastily by, Mr. William Cox letting himself in at the office door, Mr. Cole’s carriage horses returning from exercise, or a stray letter-boy on an obstinate mule, were the liveliest objects she could presume to expect; and when her eyes fell only on the butcher with his tray, a tidy old woman traveling homewards from shop with her full basket, two curs quarrelling over a dirty bone, and a string of dawdling children round the baker’s little bow-window eyeing the gingerbread, she knew she had no reason to complain, and was amused enough; quite enough still to stand at the door. A mind lively and at ease, can do with seeing nothing, and can see nothing that does not answer.¹

The moment’s insistent ordinariness, its absence of a narrative principle, its sheer focus on the small detail—what mystery, what clue or hidden drama,
might these banal notations be shadowing?—present us with a curious paradox. It is a sign of Emma’s essential moral health; her ability to closely observe without spinning narrative is a sign of a “mind lively and at ease.” It is also a potential danger, as too much of such winningly quotidian detail might bring the novel itself to a halt. In this scene, as in others, Austen stages in Emma a dialectic that would go on to have a determining, if less openly advertised, presence in the nineteenth-century British novel: an ethical value to stilled observation without a principle of closure, and a fear that such minute observation might endanger from within the narrative drive of the text that values that observation.

With this dialectic in mind, I want to investigate what I believe to be the religio-ethical basis—and discursive forms—of the observational habits that this scene in Emma foregrounds. To do so, I will turn to two of Austen’s geographical and temporal near-neighbors: the late-eighteenth-century Hampshire naturalist Gilbert White, and the early-nineteenth-century Berkshire prose artist Mary Russell Mitford. In the discursive practices of White’s perennially popular The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne (1789), and the lay observations, or what I will call the “paranaturalism,” of Mitford’s Our Village (1824–32), which were, alongside Dickens’s Pickwick Papers, among the nineteenth century’s most popular sketch narratives, we can detect the trace and formation of both an ethics of close observation and a set of descriptive modes premised upon dilation of detail and delaying narrative drive. The novel’s descriptive operations and the ethics of close observation recall what John H. Brooke has called the theology of nature that implicitly undergirded much naturalist observation through mid-century: a worldview that saw nature as divinely created and the study of nature as a form of reverence, or a devotional exercise (and not explicitly a means to prove the existence of God).  

In absorbing the theology of nature’s emphasis on observation as a devotional exercise, I argue in the larger work from which this essay comes that the nineteenth-century British novel, and especially its long narrative middles and extended practices of observation, has a religio-ethical basis at the level of what we might think of as its genetic code. If Emma’s peculiar fascination for later nineteenth-century novelists was its neoclassical equilibrium between narrative drive and luxurious detail, we might, with White’s and Mitford’s examples in mind, understand better why the nineteenth-century novel usually sacrificed any hunt for a similar equilibrium to a desire for more dilation, more detail.

Long, detailed description is, after all, as problematic for classic narrative theory and novel theory as it is in Emma. Most canonical theories of realism—
those articulated by Peter Brooks, Roland Barthes, René Girard, and Fredric Jameson most notably—center on desire: the reader’s desire to get to the end of the reading experience, the protagonist’s desire to get to some goal. And that can make their accounts of realist fiction seem oddly foreshortened, as if there is only a beginning and an end to a novel, with the inconsequential middle to be gotten over. We might alternately consider the different kinds of readerly interest generated by lingering in narrative moments of protracted description: descriptive pause as opposed to plot. Novel theory, in its well-intentioned dedication to the abstractions of form, nevertheless neglects the single page or even paragraph that owes little or nothing to the advancement of plot but that instead might even be said to still narrative progress. In other words, what drops out of this dominant critical tradition is description—not only the fact of it, but precisely how in the reading experience description works against the headlong thrust towards closure. The long descriptive excursus, which lingers and dilates rather than presses on towards closure, constitutes an important and undertheorized portion of nineteenth-century British narrative. These descriptive pauses, constituted by what I term “dilatory description,” have the perceptual effect (in reading) of stilling time. It is my belief that the experience of reading in the lengthy, sometime still, middle of the nineteenth-century British novel should prompt us to think less about the operations of plot and more about the stillness of descriptive pause; it should also prompt us to consider that the pleasures of pause may claim us despite its frustration of desire.

Novelistic length, as Catherine Gallagher has suggested, has generally been inconsequential to narratology; citing Mieke Bal, Gallagher points out that “since the relation of parts to each other is the relevant question, the length of the novel ceases to count; the internal patterning of The Last Chronicle of Barset may be set down as concisely as that of The Turn of the Screw. Nothing in this sort of temporal analysis would help us develop a concept of length.” In considering length as a feature of narrative middles, this essay suggests the following historical origin for nineteenth-century novelistic length: a set of late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century descriptive practices that reflect an orientation towards the natural world stemming from the theology of nature, which saw the observation of nature as a devotional exercise. It is my contention that the formalist questions about novelistic length are best understood if we contextualize them with other prose genres (such as narrative natural histories), especially those genres that were as anxious as the novel was in the nineteenth century to apprehend and represent the everyday world. Narrative natural history was also rhetorically invested in describing the quotidian and the real, which was productive in that genre of description and length,
and I argue that the novel of everyday life shared natural history’s descriptive operations.

These genres, these descriptive practices, share a kind of self-appointed localism: White’s is a parochial natural history and Mitford’s is a village-chronicle. The fictional genre that is most closely related to these genres is the novel of everyday life, in particular the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell and Anthony Trollope, but not limited to them. That their localism, as recent work on Mitford and White has shown, must also be understood within a set of broader national and colonial contexts is an issue to which this essay will return. What might be called the “bounded ecologies” of Mitford, White, and the novel of everyday life take in what we have thought of as generically different narratives, but which share a common descriptive propensity towards dilation within their self-styled local context. The chronotope, to employ Bakhtin’s term, of these narratives is bounded and rural daily life, by which I mean to suggest their spatial demarcation and their temporal ongoingness. These bounded ecologies have in common descriptions of nature that are protracted, detailed, and positively valued; it is the larger claim of this essay that this kind of reverence for description is the function of the theology of nature, which, as Aileen Fyfe in *Science and Salvation* suggests, describes the close links between the investigation of nature and religion until the middle of the century. There were, as Jonathan Topham has shown, multiple “natural theologies” in the first half of the nineteenth century—and, more broadly speaking, something we might call a generally held consensus that nature was divinely created. That description may have been perceived as a form of devotion might help us better understand length and dilatoriness.

White’s and Mitford’s projects are observational texts that model and originate a rationale for dilatory description and a quotidian thematics, both of which have length as their formal by-product. The formal links between White’s narrative natural history and Mitford’s sketch narration have yet to be sufficiently theorized, though they have been linked since Raymond Williams by the common literary landscape that they share with Austen; White and Austen lived, at different moments, in abutting parishes, and with Mitford shared a common geography of roughly thirty square miles in northern Hampshire and southern Berkshire. My claim for Mitford’s and White’s importance to the history of novelistic length does not rest on their common geography with Austen. Their importance instead rests in the confluence I am arguing for between what I term the bounded ecologies of native natural history (White’s being the seminal example) and the nineteenth-century novel. Specifically, I am interested in the curious formal feature that Mitford’s and White’s texts share and that provides a template for the dilatory description that pervades
some iterations of the nineteenth-century novel: individual descriptions within the natural histories are protracted and detailed, while the texts as a whole are fragmented by their structures (in Mitford’s case the sketch, and in White’s, the epistolary form). The perceptual effect of verisimilitude as well as length produced by the individual descriptions is then contested by frequently recurring closure.

It may seem perverse to claim that dilatory description issues not from an uninterrupted long narrative form, but rather from a set of sketches and letters that only accumulatively produce long narratives. But seen another way, this formal feature of native natural histories might provide a key to understanding nineteenth-century novelistic length as an approved consequence of the merits of extended (even dilatory) description and quotidian subjects. Like the natural histories that accumulate length gradually amidst a state of frequently recurring closure, the individual building blocks of description in the long middle of the nineteenth-century novel seem to interrupt and close down the progress of the narrative, even as they exponentially add to the length of the narrative. These dilatory descriptions, as well as the thematic influence of the quotidian (within a bounded ecology that also finds its cognate in native natural history), might seem at first simply a hindrance to narrative momentum, but their accumulative power is far more intrinsic to these narratives than mere digression: these formal features contribute not only to the formal property of length but also to what we might call the pleasures of the middle in the nineteenth-century British novel.

To press the historical claim (perhaps into vulgarity): these narrative modes emerged in the earliest decades of the nineteenth century, when the novel’s propensity towards protracted length was beginning to take shape. It is perhaps important to acknowledge directly that the narratives written by White and Mitford are generically different as a whole from the novels that we often take to be metonymic of the long nineteenth-century British novel: White’s 110 letters are no match in volume to Dickens, Thackeray, or Eliot, and it is important to state unequivocally that there is an obvious and important generic distinction between a natural history and, say, a Bildungsroman. My point is not so much that the natural histories look much like novels at all, but rather that certain nineteenth-century British novels share with these natural histories a common feature: description that is protracted and detailed, where the lingering in protracted description is positively inflected. The elongated descriptive passages of the natural world with which any reader of Eliot’s Adam Bede, for instance, is familiar may be understood as a kind of cognate to the dilatory description that one finds subsumes the entirety of White’s and Mitford’s texts. And even though Anthony Trollope’s novels in the Barsetshire series do not
mimic natural history’s description of the natural world as Eliot’s *Adam Bede* does, they mimic the principle of everyday observation of a bounded locale that is so central to the native natural historical mode of White and Mitford. There is a spectrum, one might argue, within the nineteenth-century British novel in the degree to which novels work with a kind of narrative desire that is significantly different from natural histories; nevertheless, even nineteenth-century British novels that are highly invested in the machinations of plot may have learned from those histories the value of positively inflected lingering in protracted description and observation of the local and the quotidian.

One of the primary burdens of this argument will be to demonstrate that descriptive pause is derived generally from an observational impetus generated by natural theology, both in its direct application, as with White, and as it was popularly filtered and further secularized, as in Mitford. These heterogeneous prose pieces reflect in varying ways the general diffusion of the belief system of natural theology. The idea that knowledge of God is drawn from nature, as opposed to revelation, is the center of natural theology; as a result, observational projects of the natural world have the exalted purpose of demonstrating the inherent beneficence of God, of uncovering the mystery of a created universe. Thus to observe carefully and particularly, and to dilate upon that observation, had a built-in justification, for to observe the natural world was to demonstrate, as the title of John Ray’s 1691 volume posits, “the wisdom of God manifested in the works of creation.” In other words: there is an underlying principle or belief system that engenders bounded observational projects such as Mitford’s narrative sketches and White’s natural history. Here I will be most concerned with how natural theology, however overt or implicit, provided religio-ethical justification for the expansion of minute acts of observation into lengthy, and narratively static, descriptive prose. That the study of nature could be a pleasure and an act of piety might go some distance in explaining the cultural diffusion and persistence of the tenets and rhetoric of natural theology deeper into the nineteenth century than we sometimes tell ourselves. Indeed, the nineteenth-century British novel might be understood as the site in which, despite the novel’s inherent secular intentions, the secularization of this particular kind of piety—observation and description of the everyday of God’s creation—occurred. The bounded ecologies of White and Mitford function as a textual bridge between natural theology and the secular realist tradition of the nineteenth-century British novel, and point us towards a large claim: the ethical justification for and practice of description in the nineteenth-century British novel derives from the importance placed on quotidian observation by natural history informed by the theology of nature.
To return to the example of Austen with which we began: *Emma* might serve as a cautionary lesson not heeded by a less economical nineteenth-century narrative tradition. Some of Austen’s most vivid characters—Miss Bates, the endless talker, and Mr. Woodhouse, the hypochondriacal homebody—practice localism and dilation upon detail in such a way that they threaten both the rationality and progression of the narrative. Austen’s almost excessive transcription of Miss Bates’s speech seems a formal experiment in how much realist detail a novel can handle before it becomes a hindrance to narrative progression and interest. There is another lesson, however, embedded in *Emma*: Mr. Knightley is the novel’s close and accurate observer of the natural world, agrarian and otherwise, as well as of its inhabitants, and he models for Emma an alternative to what D. A. Miller has called her “novelizing imagination.”¹² If Emma is the figure who generates narrative in what is otherwise a rather still local place, Mr. Knightley is the figure who suggests how a restricted locale can generate observations that are anything but incidental. The potential danger that Austen seems to have perceived in dilatory description—that it was an abettor of novelistic realism, an ethical desideratum, and at the same time a potential hindrance to narrative momentum—is one that the nineteenth-century British novel more often ignored as it took up the charge of White and Mitford.

**Gilbert White, Natural Theology, and Description**

Natural theology—the theology based on reasoning from natural or observable facts rather than from revelation—is commonly understood as having developed coextensively with the “new science” of Galileo and Newton.¹³ It informed most natural history at least until the appearance of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859), and, as such scholars as Peter Bowler, Frank Turner, and Bernard Lightman have shown, natural theology was not eclipsed by a naturalistic understanding of evolution for more than fifty years after Darwin’s seminal publication.¹⁴ British natural theology’s classical age extended from the middle of the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, which is generally understood as the period that marks the demise of natural theology as the social grounding for the investigation of nature. Scientists and popularizers of science deep into the nineteenth century continued to use (in varying degrees) natural theology to provide a rationale for their scientific work and its contribution to the society that supported that work.¹⁵ As Frank Turner argues, “it may very well be that only as a secular or temporal theology replaced the religiously grounded social vision associated with traditional
natural theology could scientists pursue the investigation of nature without reference to the divine.”

It is not my claim that with the advent of Darwin and the eventual turn in professional science away from the natural theological worldview that the nineteenth-century British novel thus ceased to be long; length obviously remains a dominant formal feature beyond the 1860s. As I suggest above, we make too much of the supposed watershed moment of 1859—natural theology created a representation of nature that made it possible (for Darwin and others to follow) to easily substitute the hand of nature for the hand of God, and that image of nature and the strategies and reasons for representing the world did not change overnight.17 My point here is to work carefully against an older teleological approach that would tell this story as one of progress away from a traditional theological worldview to the liberal ideas achieved by Darwin; I do not wish to construct a teleological relationship between the nineteenth-century British novel and these natural histories insofar as one could then claim that, with the gradual shift away from natural theology, the novel correspondingly shifted. Rather, I would emphasize that nineteenth-century British novels learned from the narrative mode of natural history in the earliest decades of the century, when the propensity towards length (as well as detailed description) began to take shape. The genre of the novel learned from those histories the value of positively inflected lingering in protracted description, and observation of the everyday, and it was not a lesson that was suddenly lost on the nineteenth-century British novel when the process of replacing natural theology with a secular theodicy began to evolve in the second half of the century.

The rational observation of nature was made legitimate by natural theology, a shared theological paradigm that saw the study of nature as revelatory of a divine presence and the act of creation. Natural theology was so pervasive that, as Colin Jager has suggested, it “frequently operated less than explicitly, an assumed background to any theological discussion rather than a proposition that needed continued demonstration: one need simply refer to the beautiful complexity of the natural world, and one’s listeners could link it to its divine source.”18 One sees the discursive impact of natural theology in literary forms as well, least surprisingly perhaps in Gilbert White’s The Natural History of Selborne, a natural history whose parameters were limited to the single parish of Selborne. White’s text has almost always enjoyed interest; it has never gone out of print, and is considered British natural history’s “one literary classic, universally acknowledged . . . (apart from the Origin of Species) its one native sacred text.”19 Originally published in 1789, it was not until an 1827 reprint that it became widely successful; it has since gone through some two hundred
editions. What remains is an epistolary natural history, consisting of 110 letters, most of which are short in pages even as embedded descriptions within them expand in meticulous detail on specific objects. Although the letters have returning themes—swallows, in particular, are a favorite—there is neither a sense of telos nor an overarching ordering scheme; the telos, if one can call it that, confined to the goings and comings of a thirty-year-old tortoise (itself surely an emblem for the text’s deliberateness) that White marks across four discrete letters. It is only in one letter late in the text that White can almost be said to achieve a kind of end-directed narrative, which might be attributed to the fact that the particular weather phenomenon he describes in it—the “remarkable frost of January 1776 so singular and so striking”—has a built-in beginning and end.20

For White, the influence of natural theology is obvious and expressed; the writing of his bounded ecology, the act of (as he referred to himself and others) “stationary men,” found not only its ethical raison d’être but its technical propensity towards minute dilated description in natural theology. In his advertisement to the book, White states that “if the writer should at all appear to have induced any of his readers to play a more ready attention to the wonders of the Creation, too frequently overlooked as common occurrences; or if he should by any means, through his researches, have lent an helping hand towards the enlargement of the boundaries of historical and topographical knowledge . . . his purpose will be fully answered” (7–8). But even White’s natural theology by and large operates tacitly rather than explicitly, for generally his text is taken up with the particulars of description of the natural world, and not with theological questions.21 Certainly White’s observations of the natural world were intended to infer the existence and characteristics of God, but the study of nature’s design born of faith mingled easily, and could in fact be entirely expressed by, a “rational” or empiricist study. White’s text, to some extent devoted to ornithology, is capacious enough to devote attention to a wide variety of natural phenomena and rural practices; its primary mode is descriptive rather than synthetic. When he does invoke a theological impetus for observation, his rhetoric is unexceptional: “we may advance this extraordinary provision of nature as a new instance of the wisdom of God in the creation” (53). On another occasion he invokes natural theology as best expressed by the faith of a child listening to the calls of birds: “we remember a little girl who, as she was going to bed, used to remark on such an occurrence, in the true spirit of physico-theology, that the rooks were saying their prayers; and yet this child was much too young to be aware that the scriptures have said of the Deity—that ‘he feedeth the ravens who call upon him’” (235). And yet it is not in these discrete and rare citations of natural theology that one
best traces the influence of natural theology upon White’s project, but rather in the formal features of his naturalist description.

An example, in which White describes the house martin’s nesting habits:

After so much labour is bestowed in erecting a mansion, as Nature seldom works in vain, martins will breed on for several years together in the same nest, where it happens to be well sheltered and secure from the injuries of weather. The shell or crust of the nest is a sort of rustic-work full of knobs and protuberances on the outside: nor is the inside of those that I have examined smoothed with an exactness at all; but it is rendered soft and warm, and fit for incubation, by a lining of small straws, grasses, and feathers; and sometimes by a bed of moss interwoven with wool. In this nest they tread, or grounded, frequently during the time of building; and the hen lays from three to five white eggs.

At first when the young are hatched, and are in a naked and helpless condition, the parent birds, with tender assiduity, carry out what comes away with their young. Were it not for this affectionate cleanliness the nestlings would soon be burnt up and destroyed in so deep and hollow a nest, by their own caustic excrement. In the quadruped creation the same neat precaution is made use of; particularly among dogs and cats, where the dams lick away what proceeds from their young. But in birds there seems to be a particular provision, that the dung of nestlings is enveloped in a tough kind of jelly, and therefore is the easier conveyed off without soiling or daubing. Yet, as nature is cleanly in all her ways, the young perform this office for themselves in a little time by thrusting their tails out at the aperture of their nest. As the young of small birds presently arrive at their or growth, they soon become impatient at confinement, and sit all day with their heads out at the orifice, where the dams, by clinging to the nest, supply them with food from morning to night. For a time the young are fed on the wing by their parents; but the feat is done by so quick and almost perceptible a sleight, that a person must have attended very exactly to their motions before he would be able to perceive it. (136–37)

The beneficial contrivances of nature that White is at pains to point out are a tacit but nevertheless legible testimony to a divine creator. That the description dilates to include such details as the lining of the nest suggests more than a writer who is sure of his reader’s indulgence; rather, here detail is justified by it being further testimony to the harmony and variety found in nature: the nest is used in successive years, as “nature seldom works in vain.” The lengthiness of the description is a formal consequence of the value placed on observed
detail, which the passage directly invokes: “the feat is done by so quick and almost perceptible a sleight, that a person must have attended very exactly to their motions before he would be able to perceive it.” In attending carefully to the details of nature, White gains knowledge not only of house martins but of God; in recording that observation, the description has a religio-ethical purpose derived from natural theology’s emphasis on observation of the natural world.

The broad discourse of natural theology, operating both diffusely and explicitly, therefore provided impetus for acts of observation that could be construed as reverence. White, who spent twenty-five years making daily records of his specific locale (he stopped only ten days before his death), is especially interesting seen in this light.\(^{22}\) The journal recorded eleven different kinds of observations, including the collection of weather conditions (such as temperature and barometric pressure) and the observation of plants and animals within one’s locality. Although the late eighteenth century saw what Alan Bewell has described as an explosion of colonial natures that came from expeditions such as Cook’s, White’s example displays an observational project of a different, even contrary, scale than those natural history expeditions that took in vast new parts of the globe.\(^{23}\) White’s project, like the regional histories that came before his (most notably, Robert Plot’s *Natural History of Oxfordshire* in 1677), turned inward to Selborne, a parish in “the extreme eastern corner of the county of Hampshire,” which he described additionally as a “vast district” whose circumference would take three days to walk (19).

White’s observational project participates in a cosmopolitan natural history even as it remains, in fact, scaled to the local and the particular.\(^{24}\) Observation of far-flung natures complemented and informed observation of local natures; one of the two naturalists to whom White addresses his letters in *Selborne* is Thomas Pennant, whose *Indian Zoology* (1769) and *Arctic Zoology* (1784) are the converse of White’s in terms of scale and geography if not in method. The more extravagantly ambitious naturalists of the period, such as Alexander von Humboldt or Joseph Banks, also were understood to be testifying to the “wonders of creation.” In an age in which natural history and imperial ambitions and travel were intertwined, White’s localism represents a cosmopolitan methodology with a radically different scale.\(^{25}\) The far-flung colonial histories from beyond British shores, unlike native natural histories of which White’s is the seminal example, produced macroscopic modes of observation; as a model of observation—of the parish, or restricted locale—White’s localism provided an alternative scale more akin to British novelistic discourse (especially the novel of everyday life).

In placing an absolute value on observation, natural theology generates a narrative mode that I would term “purposeful focusing,” one that has an
underlying religio-ethical impulse in its claim to the divine. The production of detail by purposeful focusing would be inevitable, as we will see it was for White. The proliferation of details testified to the observational dictum, but it would also—and this is key—have the secondary effect of testifying to the truth claim of the narrative or the sense of the “real” in the text. Naturalist studies such as White’s could be so purposeful in their observation, so intent in their focusing, that details proliferated to the point of superfluity, or what Roland Barthes refers to as “narrative luxury,” which is essential to the effet du réel in a text.26 White’s own claims to verisimilitude rest, as do many nineteenth-century British novels, in the claim that the observation is close; he makes the further claim that he is getting a truer picture even though he is observing a more restricted locale, as if to say that to observe a small area is to get a greater sense of the whole: “Selborne parish alone can and has exhibited at times more than half the birds that are ever seen in all Sweden; the former has produced more than one hundred and twenty species, the latter only two hundred and twenty-one. Let me add also that it has shewn near half the species that were ever known in Great-Britain” (90).

As we will see, the effect of looking so closely and purposefully at specific objects in nature is twofold: the forward momentum of the narrative comes almost to a halt under the detail proliferation, even as the reality effect coheres because of what Barthes refers to as the luxuriousness, or superfluity, of detail. In a sense, the narrative’s forward momentum is sacrificed to the instantiation of reality. And yet as we will see in White and Mitford, the texts do not suffer for the sense of narrative pause or stillness produced by purposeful focusing, but rather model for nineteenth-century British novels a kind of positively inflected lingering in protracted description. Considering the popularity of White’s and Mitford’s texts, we need to consider that they do not succeed despite their neglect of the advancement of plot but because of that neglect—that they depend upon a different kind of desire, one based in the lingering in observed details that the text requires us to see, and not in the headlong thrust towards closure or some kind of secret knowledge. Knowledge, in naturalist description, is not deferred or held back; it is instead immediate, and constantly accumulating, producing the formal feature of length.

The sense of pause in much of White’s prose is the effect of a general naturalist procedure: the need to look, and describe, at protracted leisure. If the temporality of perception in natural history tends to produce stilled description, two of White’s practices are more unique and specifically influential to nineteenth-century natural histories: a first-person vantage point and, complementarily, a geographical restriction to the supposed range of that first-person observer. In an age that saw the attempt at universal natural histories (such as
those by the Comte de Buffon and Oliver Goldsmith) or natural histories that took in large parts of the globe, White's restricted locale distinguished him. An important consequence follows: White's ability to apprehend much of the bounded natural world under his purview expands his subject matter beyond natural “wonders” to the banality of the everyday. He concerns himself, for instance, with the depths of wells, the parish's fossils and soils, the abundance of hedgehogs and hares, a neat echo in one area, the severe frost of January 1776, the frugal Hampshire practice of dipping rushes in fat and using them in lieu of candles, the locale's hearthstones, even the effect of deforestation on the taste of the district's wood pigeons. Not only does the boundedness of White's study expand his subject matter, but it also enables more focused observations and more extensive descriptions within the context of the quotidian.

White's prose both dilates—it protracts, lengthens, or extends in time—and is dilatory: it seems to linger, or even describes the act of lingering, causing the sensation of delay or stillness. In other words, the “dilatory description” that is born of White's observational task and theological rationale produces a prose style whose detail is protracted to the point of stalled momentum. A further quotation from White may make this point more clear:

Those that are abroad on evenings after it is dark, in spring and summer, frequently hear a nocturnal bird passing by on the wing, and repeating often a short quick note. This bird I have remarked myself, but never could make out till lately. I am assured now that that is the Stone-curlew (*charadrius oedicnemus*). Some of them pass over or near my house almost every evening after it is dark, from the uplands of the hill and North field, away down towards Dorton; where, among the streams and meadows, they find a greater plenty of food. Birds that fly by night are obliged to be noisy; their notes often repeated become signals or watchwords to keep them together, that they may not stray or lose each other in the dark.

The evening proceedings and manoeuvres of the rooks are curious and amusing in the autumn. Just before dusk they return in long strings from the foraging of the day, and rendezvous by thousands over Selborne-down, where they wheel round in the air, and sport and dive in a playful manner, all the while exerting their voices, and making a loud cawing, which, being blended and softened by the distance that we at the village are below them, becomes a confused noise or chiding; or rather a pleasing murmur, very engaging to the imagination, and not unlike the cry of a pack of hounds in hollow, echoing woods, or the rushing of the wind in tall trees, or the tumbling of the tide upon a pebbly shore. When this ceremony is over, with the last gleam of day, they retire to the deep beechen woods of Tisted and Ropley. (234–35)
Natural theology is built into the temper of the passage; as Colin Jager writes in reference to the workings of natural theology, the “harmony-amid-variety of a beautiful scene . . . transparently inspired in the beholder a ‘natural’ feeling for the divinity behind it.” Here the stone-curlew and the crow alike are under his observational eye, though neither requires him to go to great lengths to see them. That the prose expands and lengthens under the pressure of an even more exaggerated localist gaze—at home, in the evening—is telling, for it suggests the general relationship between bounded observation, dilatory description, and prose length. In extrapolating from the call of the crow to a number of different images, the descriptive possibilities ramify; the call is a “confused noise or chiding,” or a “pleasing murmur,” and likened to the sound of three separate natural possibilities: hounds in an echoing wood, or wind in tall trees, or the sound of the tide on a pebbly seashore. That they are actually rooks (crows) and not any of these three possibilities is temporar-ily lost under the weight of the passage’s dilatoriness. It is only in the final moment of the passage, when the “last gleam of day” is invoked, that the literal natural object returns to our view, and closes down the passage: what else to say, except the sun has set and the crows have left? Dilatory description works against closure. And yet is it not the case that the passage’s investment is in the middle, the protracted moment of quotidian observation, and not in the emblematic sun’s setting?

The recording of everyday detail led White to a formal choice more in line with the fiction of his day than more normative natural histories. In eschew-ing chapters that separated out and organized natural observations (such as “Of Insects,” “Of Plants,” “Of Rocks”), White instead employed the more typically novelistic structure of the epistolary. It is as if White refused to get caught in conceptual systems of organization, but preferred the verisimilitude of embedded entangled naturalist description over the boundaries of abstract categories; he is able to integrate natural wonders with everyday observations and practices, the effect of which is to make his concerns seem embedded in an environment and his observations sometimes like the novelistic recording of everyday life. In terms of scientific history, this is what makes White the first “ecologist,” a word, however, that first appears much later, in 1873; in terms of literary history, this is what makes White’s prose one important model upon which the dilatoriness of nineteenth-century realist description is based.

To speak to the larger issue: to the extent that description is the building block of narrative length, it is from the almost undivided middleness of White’s descriptive prose that the expansiveness of nineteenth-century realist description is begotten. That middleness is thematically expressed by what Stuart Peterfreund has called White’s “sense of the ecological wholeness and
interactivity of the world,” but formally enacted by a refusal to generate categories.\textsuperscript{31} One entomological description is here exemplary:

There is a small long shining fly in these parts very troublesome to the housewife, by getting into the chimneys, and laying its eggs in the bacon while it is drying: these eggs produce maggots called *jumpers*, which, harbouring in the gammons and best part of the hogs, eat down to the bone, and make great waste. This fly I suspect to be a variety of the *musca putris* of Linnaeus: it is to be seen in the summer in farm-kitchens on the bacon-racks and about the mantle-pieces, and on the ceilings. (78–79)

Even if the novel of the late eighteenth century had not sufficiently evolved to encompass, as it would by Thomas Hardy’s moment, the everyday details of butchered pigs and how they might be spoiled, White’s naturalist text anticipates those realist effects as well as a later-nineteenth-century ecological sense. Linnaeus’s classification (the *musca putris*) is invoked, but unlike Linnaeus White’s prose is descriptive and contextually embedded. White’s employment of local observation, his generation of detail, and his prescient ecological sense invokes a set of resources that we have been taught to think of as exclusively novelistic, but which seem rather to be the consequences of natural theology’s ethics of description.

White’s commentary on his own methodology produces something close to what we might recognize as a theory of description relevant to the nineteenth-century British novel: a full description comes from being fixed in one place, actively engaged in the observation of manners, and willing to use a rich language field to describe what is observed. White writes that “faunists . . . are too apt to acquiesce in bare descriptions, and a few synonyms: the reason is plain; because all that may be done at home in a man’s study, but the investigation of the life and conversation of animals, is a concern of much more trouble and difficulty, and is not to be attained but by the active and inquisitive, and by those that reside much in the country” (125–26). Inquisitive observation of the natural world, and a desire to manufacture descriptions that are more than “bare” and without “synonyms”—a rich language field—produce what he understands as better observation and description. That he, not unlike a novelist, sees himself as a recorder of the life and manners of animals, and no mere cataloguer of the natural world, is patent.

If readerly interest in White’s description can be explained by reference to its consanguinity with fictional description, what can we say about the pleasure associated with this kind of narrative? White’s text seems to demand a different conception of readerly desire than one premised upon occult or secret
knowledges that are deferred until an ending, for it generates interest because of its stillness (and impediment to narrative progress) not despite this feature. We should ask rather: what is the interest associated with pause rather than plot? In the broadest formation, as I suggested earlier, the pleasure in reading White is engendered by the effet du réel, produced as it is by a superfluity of detail. More specifically, however, the particular kind of interest attached to texts such as White’s—those that are suffused with dilatory description, such as, notably, long novels of the nineteenth century—seems generated by what I will call accumulative pleasure. The pleasures of accumulation make dilatory description signally inapposite for normative narrative theories, which tend to assume, along the baseline model of the detective plot, that the function of narrative is to winnow detail into retrospective categories of significance and insignificance (i.e., the clue and the red herring). No such winnowing occurs in descriptive practices such as White’s that are premised on the absolute equality of all genuine details, and where the ongoing pleasure depends not on a game of hermeneutics (which detail will signify?) but on the sheer desire for more: more detail, more knowledge, in a horizon that is, theoretically at least, infinite. The pleasures implied by White’s descriptive practices may in fact suggest that detective fiction is a misleading model through which to theorize nineteenth-century realist narrative, that pause (not just plot) figures in the pleasure of reading in the middle, and that there is a religio-ethical imperative, derived from natural theology, built into the genetic code of description.

It might be useful to turn here at the close of this discussion of White to examples from the nineteenth-century novel, insofar as the connections I am trying to draw between natural history and the nineteenth-century novel imply not only a shared technique but also a shared “worldview.” Elizabeth Gaskell’s Wives and Daughters (1866) and Sylvia’s Lovers (1863) provide particularly strong examples of the way in which the nineteenth-century novel and natural history might dovetail, especially in their mutual commitment to the everyday and detailed descriptions, and the reverence for a created world which I claim is behind each discursive project. That they are narratives driven by pleasure in the pause associated with the long middle of the nineteenth-century novel seems clear—nothing much happens in Wives and Daughters, and to the extent that Sylvia’s Lovers devolves at times into melodramatic plots, it often anticipates the later Wives and Daughters’ total grounding in description of the everyday bounded ecology of the local place. Gaskell’s literary observational style (dilatory description and commitment to the everyday as subject matter) mimics the practice of natural history informed by natural theology and suggests a shared worldview. There is reverence, I argue, in Gaskell’s commitment to dilatory description, the everyday, and the length that ensues, although
in the case of Gaskell’s fictions we see an overt engagement with theological
issues. In Gaskell’s late fictions in particular, the description of everydayness is
a form of reverence, where the very act of paying attention to and observing
the world (the work of the nineteenth-century novelist, and of realism in the
novel of everyday life in particular) bespeaks a faith that to do so is to testify
to God’s existence.

_Sylvia’s Lovers_ is a novel that takes great pains to describe the knowable
world; its brief turn away from what I will refer to as the microhabitat of
Monkshaven to the heroic landscape of Turkey (in the section devoted to the
Siege of Acre) has tended to obscure the contribution of the rest of the novel,
for it has tended to be read as an artistic lapse rather than, as I understand
it, as an intentional generic contrast to the descriptive detail of Monkshaven.
The novel is steeped in a literary observational style that seems to mimic the
practice of natural history informed by natural theology; the long, almost
digressive passages of description of the natural world around Monkshaven
seem, in light of the implied concept of natural history through the Quakers,
to invoke natural history as a model for narrative. Examples abound of descrip-
tion of the natural landscape:

The coast on that part of the island to which this story refers is bordered by
rocks and cliffs. The inland country immediately adjacent to the coast is level,
flat, and bleak; it is only where the long stretch of dyke-enclosed fields termi-
minates abruptly in a sheer descent, and the stranger sees the ocean creeping
up the sands far below him, that he is aware on how great an elevation he
has been. Here and there, as I have said, a cleft in the level land (thus run-
ning out into the sea in steep promontories) occurs—what they would call a
“chine” in the Isle of Wight; but instead of the soft south wind stealing up
the woody ravine, as it does there, the eastern breeze comes piping shrill and
clear along these northern chasms, keeping the trees that venture to grow on
the sides down to the mere height of scrubby brushwood.  

Description of the natural landscape is accompanied by similar attention
to the human aspect of that ecology, as in the following passage:

The farmhouse lay in the shelter of a very slight green hollow scarcely scooped
out of the pasture field by which it was surrounded; the short crisp turf came
creeping up to the very door and windows, without any attempt at a yard
or garden, or any nearer enclosure of the buildings than the stone dyke that
formed the boundary of the field itself. The buildings were long and low, in
order to avoid the rough violence of the winds that swept over that wild,
bleak spot, both in winter and summer. It was well for the inhabitants of that house that coal was extremely cheap; otherwise a southerner might have imagined that they could never have survived the cutting of the bitter gales that piped all round, and seemed to seek out every crevice for admission into the house. (Sylvia's Lovers 35)

The detail in these passages are not exceptional moments in the novel, but are instead almost typical. And, like George Eliot’s Adam Bede, with which Sylvia's Lovers has much affinity, these long descriptions of the natural world are part of a more general commitment to the presentation of an entire world both natural and social, and in particular the everyday workings and details of place and person.

Wives and Daughters, even more so than Sylvia's Lovers, is a novel made up almost entirely of middles. Recourse to description of the natural world and the social ecology of village life is strongly reminiscent of Mary Mitford's work, as well as more generally the ethic of close and detailed description unencumbered by narrative momentum that is so constitutive of natural history. To make a more specific point: the value that natural history places on “observation” is mirrored by Wives and Daughters. One of the best examples of this occurs in chapter thirty-three, when Gaskell’s own observational powers and commitment to the description of natural detail appear side by side with the letter awarding Roger the scientific travel-fellowship; the letter says that he had “great natural powers of comparison and classification of facts; he had shown himself to be an observer of the fine and accurate kind.”

The observer (here, Dr. Gibson) is present in the scene, and the details that are enumerated reveal a sensitivity to the process of observation akin to a naturalist. In Wives and Daughters those people who are strong observers are distinguished from those who cannot see the truth; it is no accident that Roger
Hamley’s great error of judgment manifests itself as a failure of observation, one in which he cannot see the truth about a woman (Cynthia) but rather only a series of trite poetic images: she was a “a polar star, high up in the heavens, and so on, and so on; for with all a lover’s quickness of imagination and triteness of fancy, he called her a star, a flower, a nymph, a witch, an angel, or a mermaid, a nightingale, a siren . . . ” (388). The capacity to observe is equated in the novel with the capacity for truth—qualities most consistently present in Molly, the novel’s heroine, rather than the man of science. Detailed and indeed dilatory observation of the everyday, Gaskell’s work seems to imply, is as much the province of the novelist as the scientist.

Mitford and Novelistic Dilation

The most obvious link between White’s Selborne and Mitford’s Our Village is scale: the bounded ecology, or what Mitford appreciatively calls the “confined locality,” of her southern Berkshire town of Three-Mile-Cross echoing in its self-consciously limited space the small parish that White used to establish the notational practices of native natural history. 34 Invoking White and Austen right from the start—“nothing is so delightful as to sit down in a country village in one of Miss Austen’s delicious novels, quite sure before we leave it to become intimate with every spot and every person it contains; or to ramble with Mr. White over his own parish of Selborne, and form a friendship with the fields and coppices, as well as with the birds, mice and squirrels who inhabit them” (1. 2)—Mitford, in linking her Berkshire to their Hampshire, establishes for literary history a geographical zone with a definable character: a paradigm, rooted in the western and southwestern Home Counties, of bounded and local ecological spaces. 35 Not appreciated or understood in the context of naturalist writing, Mitford needs to be reconceived as a bridge between narrative natural history and the novel form, not least because she herself understood her work as the blending of the description of the natural and the social. One key way we might see this in Our Village is her use of the term “habitat,” which in the early nineteenth century was still a specialist term from natural history. The word had not yet evolved to become a maker of the social in nature, but Mitford employs it in her blending of description of the natural world and the social world of the village (2. 46). 36

But in moving from White to Mitford we move from naturalist writing to what I will call paranaturalism: a fictional style willing to use the capacious descriptive practices of White’s Selborne in the service of delineating a human community as well as copious natural scenes. Mitford for this reason—as well
as her contemporary popularity and how celebrated she was by some of the most important literary figures of the day—needs to be returned to a more central place in the story of early-nineteenth-century literature. Mitford’s capacious descriptive practices of the social and the natural worlds (her “paranaturalism”) in *Our Village* needs to be understood as a bridge genre between natural history and the nineteenth-century British novel. As expansive as any natural history—*Our Village*’s 1,500 pages and five volumes make White’s 101 letters seem austere by comparison—Mitford’s sketches engage a social ecology that presages the thematic concerns of the later realist novel. The starkest possible lesson of Mitford’s paranaturalism is that dilated, and dilatory, description is as necessary to social narratives as to natural ones. White had claimed that “that district produces the greatest variety which is the most examined” (51), and Mitford applies that lesson of geographical restriction and descriptive expansion to the social organism of village life in a text that is as close as possible to a continuous series of descriptive middles.

The shift from natural to social ecology, however, by no means erases the impact of natural theology or obviates the necessity for continued attention to nature. The overt rhetoric of natural theology within *Our Village* is subdued, but beneath the text’s observational practices rests the common intellectual background of natural theologies, expressed though an intellectual context in which it operated more as a kind of tacit backdrop to representations of nature than as an explicit rhetoric. Mitford’s demonstrable reverence for nature suggests the way in which natural theology through the Romantic period and beyond shaded into pantheism—this, I would argue, reflects the way in which what Aileen Fyfe has described as a theological understanding of nature persists in the first half of the nineteenth century and in varied discursive forms. To observe and describe, whether in an intentionally and explicitly reverent way (such as White), or whether under the general sway that to observe and describe is an affirmative act (as in Mitford): these are possible expressions under the large tent of the theology of nature. Indeed natural theology, as a pervasive background to discourses about nature at least until Darwin, legitimated and perhaps lent ethical weight to Mitford’s local naturalist observation; in claiming, as she does in the preface to *Our Village*’s first volume, that her “descriptions” were written “with the closest and most resolute fidelity to the place and the people,” Mitford also invokes the tell-tale language of natural theology: “She has painted, as they appeared to her, their little frailties and their many virtues, under an intense and thankful conviction, that in every condition of life goodness and happiness may be found by those who seek them, and never more surely than in the fresh air, the shade, and the sunshine of nature” (1. v–vi). Here the realist claim and natural theology’s emphasis on
an observable divinity at work in the natural world collude. Her descriptions are formed by the commitment to close fidelity and a “conviction” that in observing nature the “goodness” of the divine is intuited. Here we have perhaps the most direct trace of the formal connection between descriptive verisimilitude and the observational dictum in natural theology. In other words, realism gets its ethical impetus and its inclination towards dilated description from the legitimacy enjoyed by observers “never more surely than in the fresh air, the shade, and the sunshine of nature.”

*Our Village* returns continually and never apologetically to the minute and local description of the local natural world, as if a license for dilating upon this subject had been tacitly granted. It is important to understand that *Our Village* does not claim to be a natural history, and is in fact a kind of accumulation of various different prose stylings and genres, one of which, crucially for my purposes, is a kind of amateur naturalist observation. A statistical page-count of the first three volumes of *Our Village* reveals the following: 25 percent of the text is devoted to observation of nature. There is a falling-off in the final two volumes, but still some 20 percent of the entire five-volume *Our Village* is devoted to naturalist observation.38 This has gone generally unrecognized in writing on Mitford, which tends not to discriminate between the different narrative practices embedded within the whole, and which then recruits the whole for discussions variously of the idyll, enclosure, and the image formation of England as rural ideal.39 I am instead revisiting *Our Village* as a partially para-naturalist text, and provide an alternative account of what Franco Moretti, in his recent analysis of *Our Village*, calls “decorative”: “for each page devoted to agricultural labour, there must be twenty on flowers and trees, described with meticulous precision. If urban readers are made to share the village’s perception of space, then, it is also true that this space has been thoroughly gentrified; as if Mitford had traveled forward in time, and discovered what city-dwellers will want to find in the countryside during a brief week-end visit.”40 Moretti’s otherwise astonishing mapping of the social geography and buried politics of *Our Village* is hard-pressed to understand Mitford’s fascination with nature as anything other than the prerogative of the urban elite.

I understand this preponderance of pages devoted to “flowers and trees” differently, as the enthused narrative product of a particular kind of amateur and female observer of nature. Outside of the normal structures that codify and categorize work as “naturalist” or “scientific,” *Our Village* has simply gone unrecognized for what to some extent it is: a narrative instantiation of an everyday, amateur, and essentially uncredited naturalist.41 To understand *Our Village* in ecological terms and not only as Moretti does, in Marxist terms, is to historicize these popular sketches through a lens other than the national or
political; it is to suggest as well that Mitford was engaged in a kind of amateur natural history or sensibility (not unlike many of her moment), and that her descriptive practices were informed by those observational styles and dicta. The significance of this distinction to the form of the novel seems important: if we do not understand Mitford simply as a purveyor of English rural myth-making then we must begin to take account of her five volumes of sketches in other, more formalist ways. To my purpose, we find in Mitford’s text a link between narrative naturalist description and the fiction that was to follow.

Embedded as they are within a generically heterogeneous compilation, the paranaturalist portions of Our Village have gone unnoticed, not least because she was no gentleman of science. Contextualist histories of science have shown how science takes place not just in privileged recognized sites of inquiry but also in amateur and even unrecognized contexts, and have called for “a greater plurality of the sites for the making and reproduction of scientific knowledge” as well as a broader sense of what constitutes scientific activity, including natural history.42 A more plural sense of the sites of natural history extends to portions of Mitford’s text, especially descriptive passages devoted to botanical detail, which are conversant with vernacular terms. The distinction between a self-proclaimed naturalist and a less tutored, peripatetic observer of nature is, however, relevant, not least because Mitford and White themselves would insist on the distinction.43 Mitford certainly avoids claiming herself as a naturalist, but she does think of herself, like the “bird-catcher” in the sketch of the same name, as someone possessed of a feeling for nature: “there is about it much of the peculiar and characteristic beauty which almost all natural phenomena exhibit to those who have themselves that faculty, oftener claimed than possessed, a genuine feeling of nature” (3. 255).44 The “genuine feeling of nature” that Mitford possesses, alongside her local residence in the country, make her a habitual, if amateur, observer of the natural world.

Examples of Mitford writing in the vein of an amateur naturalist abound; the following examples are more representative than exceptional. In “Walks in the Country. The Shaw” Mitford notes the particular names of the trees and flowers, including the “wild scabious, or, as the country people call it, the gipsy-rose” (4. 87). In “Lost and Found,” Mitford loses herself in a beech-wood coppice; and tries to “count the countless varieties of woodland-moss” (3. 310). On other occasions, she is more particular about the numerous varieties under her gaze:

The Shaw, leading to Hannah Bint’s habitation, is . . . a very pretty mixture of wood and coppice; that is to say, a track of thirty or forty acres covered with fine growing timber—ash, and oak, and elm—very regularly planted; and
interspersed here and there with large patches of underwood, hazel, maple, birch, holly, and hawthorn, woven into almost impenetrable thickets by long wreaths of the bramble, the briony, the briar-rose, or by the pliant and twisting garlands of the honeysuckle. In other parts, the Shaw is quite clear of its bosky undergrowth, and clothed only with large beds of feathery fern, or carpets of flowers, primroses, orchises, cowslips, ground-ivy, crane's bill, cotton-grass, Solomon's seal, and forget-me-not ... the variety is much greater than I have enumerated ... the soil so different in different parts, that the sylvan flora is unusually extensive and complete. (4. 100–1)

At other times Mitford does a fair job at approximating in her prose the work of a botanist: “oh look! Look! I am sure that this is the wood-sorrel! Look at the pendent white flower, shaped like a snowdrop and veined with purple streaks, and the beautiful trefoil leaves folded like heart ... we began gathering, leaves, blossoms, roots and all, for the plant is so fragile that it will not brook separation” (2. 101–2). She has a naturalist’s eye for descriptive detail and respect for the work of other naturalists, including Gilbert White; her naturalist leanings, like White’s, almost manifest in her gardening—in one sketch, she sets out to find “a particular sort of mould” for compost for her geraniums (5. 185). What is clear is that Mitford’s presentation of nature as almost uniformly beneficent suggests that her descriptions function under the sign of natural theology.

The heterogeneity of Mitford’s text make the claims I have advanced specific to only portions of it (namely, the paranaturalist descriptions). Undeniably much of the social ecology—her presentation of village life, and its inhabitants—of Our Village could be construed as idyll, and certainly in these portions of the text Mitford’s position as a narrator between two (differently classed) worlds makes those portions of Our Village congruent with the genre of idyll. Nevertheless, what the unexpurgated Mitford reveals is that Mitford’s descriptive modes are far less indebted to the picturesque and the idyllic/pastoral than some of her most prominent commentators have supposed. Mitford’s expansion on the natural scenes around her cannot be contained by the vocabulary of the picturesque, for too much of Our Village turns on specific observations of a natural object or place and depends upon a mode, familiar from White, of local attentive observation. This is a mode of attention that Mitford herself urges upon her readers: she recommends drawing flowers as her friend does (she achieves a “wonderful verisimilitude”) as a pastime that encourages the ethical value of truth: “and, above all, it fosters and sharpens the habit of observation and the love of truth. How much of what is excellent in art, in literature, in conversation, and in conduct, is comprised in that little
word!” (3. 138). Here we can see an allusion to what Mitford sees her own art as performing: the approach to truth through the habit of natural observation and description.

Put another way, the dilatory description produced by these attentive acts of observation emanate from an observational dictum coming from natural theology, and not only, I would argue, from a conservative desire to falsely preserve hierarchical social structures. It is in the series of sketches titled “Walks in the Country” (a genre that appears in the first four volumes) that Mitford’s reverence for nature is established; these walks in the country have varying destinations or natural objects, but share a general sunniness and appreciation for the beneficence of nature that suggests what we might think of as a digested natural theology. The following example is from volume one, “Walks in the Country. Violeting”:

March 27th.—It is a dull grey morning, with a dewy feeling in the air; fresh, but not windy; cool, but not cold;—the very day for a person newly arrived from the heat, the glare, the noise, and the fever of London, to plunge into the remotest labyrinths of the country, and regain the repose of mind, the calmness of heart, which has been lost in that great Babel. I must go violeting—it is a necessity—and I must go alone: the sound of a voice, even my Lizzy’s . . . would disturb the serenity of feeling which I am trying to recover. (1. 102)

When Mitford arrives at her destination—a walk that takes her across a broad social and natural ecology, including the parish workhouse with its flowerless garden (not a rose tree or a currant bush!) and the bean-setters “stooping for six, eight, ten hours a day, drilling holes in the earth with a little stick, and then dropping in the beans one by one”—she encounters a bank of violets (1. 104). The scene is recuperative of energy lost in London, as she had forecasted, but also evocative of the divine:

Ah! I smell them already—their exquisite perfume steams and lingers in this moist heavy air. Through this little gate, and along the green south bank of this green wheat-field, and they burst upon me, the lovely violets, in tenfold loveliness! The ground is covered with them, white and purple, enamelling the short dewy grass, looking but the more vividly coloured under the dull, leaden sky. There they lie by hundreds, thousands. In former years I have used to watch them from the time the tiny green bud, till one or two stole into bloom. They never came on me before in such sudden and luxuriant glory of simple beauty,—and I do really owe one pure and genuine pleasure to feverish
London! How beautifully they are placed too, on this sloping bank, with the palm branches waving over them, full of early bees, and mixing their honeyed scent with the more delicate violet odour! How transparent and smooth and lusty are the branches, full of sap and life! And there, just by the old mossy root, is a superb tuft of primroses, with a yellow butterfly floating over them, and looking like a flower lifted up by the air. What happiness to sit on this turfy knoll, and fill my basket with blossoms! What a renewal of heart and mind! To sit in such a scene of peace and sweetness is again to be fearless and gay and gentle as a child. Then it is that thought becomes poetry, and feeling religion. Then it is that we are happy and good. Oh that my whole life could pass so, floating on blissful and innocent sensation, enjoying in peace and gratitude the common blessings of nature, thankful above all for the simple habits, the healthful temperament, which render them so dear! (1. 105–6)

The harmony, variety, and abundance of the natural scene evokes for Mitford religious feelings that seem “natural” in that they are inspired by the scene of nature. Mitford in situ is a describer whose dilations seem inspired by the reverence she accords the natural objects (here, violets) under her observation. The localness of Our Village is perhaps its most self-evident theme, considering that both the title and her preface announce, as it were, a particular chronotope: “the writer may at least claim the merit of . . . that local and personal familiarity, which only a long residence in one neighbourhood could have enabled her to attain” (1. v). Nevertheless, as both Franco Moretti and Elizabeth Helsinger have profitably shown, the text participates in larger political and cultural discourses through its representational choices; for instance, the sketch “The Incendiary” makes a brief but telling reference to the rick-burning in Berkshire following the armed uprisings in 1830 that the text had all but suppressed. Perhaps even more central to the localness of Mitford’s text is the fact that she lives in an unenclosed parish, which allows for freer movement and opportunities for observation; this, Moretti claims, “reverses the direction of history” by making her readers experience the world “according to the older viewpoint.”47 Certainly Mitford’s text may have had the effect of occluding the changes being wrought by enclosure, but it is also a historical fact that her observational vantage point was then unenclosed, which is a bit of good fortune to which she draws her reader’s attention in the aforementioned “Violeting,” one of her most canonical and anthologized sketches. Although Moretti sees Mitford’s country walks purely as a practice of leisure—which to some extent they are, considering that she records herself walking by people engaged in field work—we might also consider that Mitford was naturalizing as necessary labor, to gather material for writing. In part a Grub Street hack
needing to support her penurious family, Mitford was tapping into what David Allen in *The Naturalist in Britain* describes as a hungry new publishing market for natural history from the 1820s.48

Mitford was part of the literary culture, that is, and not just retroactively part of the process of mythmaking; this is important when we consider her possible contribution to the question of length and nineteenth-century narrative, because her work, if considered through a formalist and ecological lens, is at least an intriguing bridge between the description of the natural world (the purview of natural history) and the description of the social world (the territory of the novel). *Our Village*, like *The Natural History of Selborne*, embodies a localness that is in part a self-styling, but which nevertheless has an earnestness about it; in both cases, the boundedness of their subjects—the environs of a parish and a village—in combination with the observational dictum of natural theology produce what is almost a surfeit of description.

This surfeit produces a narrative practice that defeats normative critical approaches to fiction. One of the difficulties of analyzing Mitford’s text is its sheer length: not only the fifteen hundred pages of sketches, but also the way many of the sketches dilate under the observational dictum that drives them. In one (not atypical) sketch titled “The Freshwater Fisherman,” the plot of the courtship story between the fisherman and his bride is subjugated to a discussion of the Loddon, Kennet, and Thames rivers; the ratio of courtship to river, or plot and description, is 2 to 5. Moreover, it is difficult to abstract and abridge the relevant moment in Mitford given the length of descriptions and the accumulation of details that are lent little if any hierarchy; that is, our typical critical protocol of condensing text into quotable units, based in large part on the citation of lyric poetry, is defeated.49 The following is an example of the way that Mitford’s prose dilates under the pressure of observation, though admittedly, and symptomatically, this abstract from some eleven pages of description does not adequately capture the dilatoriness of the prose:

Never was water more exquisitely tricky—now darting over the bright pebbles, sparkling and flashing in the light with a bubbling music, as sweet and wild as the song of the wood-lark; now stretching quietly along, giving back the rich tufts of the golden marsh-marigolds which grow on its margin; now sweeping round a fine reach of green grass, rising steeply into a high mound, a mimic promontory, whilst the other side sinks softly away, like some tiny bay, and the water flows between, so clear, so wide, so shallow, that Lizzy, longing for adventure, is sure she could cross unwetted; now dashing through two sand-banks, a torrent deep and narrow . . . now sleeping, half-hidden, beneath the alders, and hawthorns, and wild roses, with which the banks are
so profusely and variously fringed, whilst flags, lilies, and other aquatic plants almost cover the surface of the stream. In good truth, it is a beautiful brook, and one that Izaak Walton might have sitten by and loved, for trout are there; we see them as they dart up the stream, and hear and start at the sudden plunge when they spring to the surface for the summer flies. (1. 136–37)

The passage is also footnoted, in which she refers to “a curious circumstance in natural history” in which she thought she was observing a bunch of flowers, which turned out to be “several clusters of dragon-flies, just emerged from their deformed chrysalis state, and still torpid and motionless from the wetness of their filmy wings” (1. 136). Mitford’s under-recognized orientation as a naturalist contributes here and throughout many portions of Our Village to description that goes on and on—stilling the text, and contributing literally and perceptually to its length. The effect of looking this closely and purposefully at this meadow and stream is twofold: the forward momentum of the narrative comes almost to a halt under the detail proliferation, even as the reality effect coheres because of the superfluity of detail. As in White, the accumulative pleasure at work here—and the lack of winnowing details into categories of significance and insignificance—makes the end seem insignificant, and the long middle everything.

Coda: Towards an Understanding of Length in the Nineteenth-Century Novel

The bounded ecologies of White and Mitford demonstrate how we get from naturalist description informed by natural theology to a secular novelistic tradition, and point us towards a large claim: the ethical justification for and practice of description in the nineteenth-century British novel (especially the novel of everyday life, where the quotidian is given its fullest narrative play) derives at least in part from the importance placed on quotidian observation by natural theological discourses. The sort of “accumulative pleasure,” thus, that we derive from reading the dilated middle of the nineteenth-century novel might be founded upon what amounts to a religio-ethical practice of observation. This is not to deny the novel’s secular vocation. Let us think instead how the formal mechanics of description in narrative may have a theological basis—that the religio-ethical imperative of natural theology is preserved in realism, and that it may no longer be tenable to describe the British novel as purely secular. In so doing I believe that we gain the following: a cogent explanation of why many nineteenth-century narratives linger in the humblest
of details and elaborate *ad infinitum* on their subjects. Length ceases to be a simple fact of the genre, but is rather a reflection of a sensibility and even a religiously sanctioned ethics: to observe, to describe, to elaborate or dilate is to 1) be reverent, and to 2) yield truths inaccessible to wider gazes. The realist mode of the nineteenth-century British novel preserves the religio-ethical imperative of natural theology by giving the quotidian detail (as a building block of length) a frankly literary and secular home. To what ends? Provisionally, the seriousness of purpose and loving lingering that we see in narrative descriptions such as George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* or Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* or Sylvia’s *Lovers* works—or even Trollope’s Barsetshire series with its elaborated social localisms—might be better understood if we allowed that description may be historically conditioned.

The risk the nineteenth-century novel would take as it expanded to ever greater lengths—as it capitulated, as it were, to the pleasures of accumulation and the instantiation of reality—was the risk of bogging down in the middle, of stilling the narrative’s forward momentum: as the headlong thrust towards closure is impeded, the length of the narrative balloons and the experience of reading it becomes ever more protracted. Although space here does not permit me to unpack this claim in additional recourse to examples from nineteenth-century novels, one need only think of the example of Trollope’s series fiction (and especially the Barsetshire series, with its dedication, à la White, to an intense locality) to begin to realize the implications: length is a by-product of the pleasures of accumulation, which were first learned in the positively inflected lingering in protracted description and everydayness of native natural history. Trollope’s series fiction seen in this light teaches us that the narrative motor is not the basis of all reading pleasure—indeed we need not see length and the lack of foreseeable closure as an impediment to narrative pleasure, but instead we need to reconceive of it as the pleasure of pause over plot.

A desire based on pause is a celebration of length, one that owes something to genres where dilatoriness is indigenous: to the narrative natural history of White, and Mitford’s paranaturalist prose. The formal descriptive practices of White and Mitford were justified by natural theology and enabled by a bounded perspective; it is from these native natural histories that I believe the impetus and ethical justification for dilated descriptions (the building block of length) ensued. Although neither generates much forward narrative momentum, they do not suffer for their dilatoriness; both were critically admired and repeatedly reprinted throughout the nineteenth century. It is telling that it is only the length of both narratives that proves to be a problem: in most nineteenth- and twentieth-century editions of *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* the antiquities section is dropped, and *Our Village* was quickly
edited and anthologized in later volumes into much shorter versions. In these expurgations one might find a caveat—untaken, one might add—for the nineteenth-century British novel: the dilatoriness of individual descriptions may be admired, but the accumulation of them over the vast expanse of pages may prove more troubling. In the meantime, for those of us who are so inclined, we linger in the pause begotten by description.

Notes


5. The larger implications of such a claim, which are beyond the reach of this forum, are that it may no longer be tenable to describe the British novel as purely secular. That our general consensus that the novel is wholly secular (true to a point, particularly thematically) should perhaps be reconsidered, especially in light of the formal mechanics of description in which theological energies may have found a home.

6. Seen from the vantage point of the present day, the most striking similarity of canonical theories of narrative and the novel, be they structuralist, psychoanalytic, or Marxist, is their reliance upon a language of “desire,” which in each case is understood as desire for conclusion: see Peter Brooks, Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1984); Roland Barthes, S/Z, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974); René Girard, Deceit, Desire, and the Novel (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966); Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981). Whether novelistic desire is essentially more akin to female than to male pleasure is a point worth considering but beyond the scope of this article. See Susan Winnett, “Coming Unstrung: Women, Men, Narrative, and Principles of Pleasure,” PMLA 105, no. 3 (May 1990): 505–18.


9. See Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes


21. Stuart Peterfreund goes considerably further by suggesting that White is not only writing in the long religious tradition of natural theology, but is (more specifically) writing providentially. Peterfreund’s argument is that the combination of severe weather White records and the political upheavals in France and America contribute to a catastrophic narrative, one in which White becomes to believe that the “last days” are upon them. Lucy Maddox, in contrast, argues that White was writing knowingly to an audience that shared his ideology, specifically about revolutionary sentiment; in this way, White, according to Maddox, is a quieter expositor of conservative values than Burke, but like him equally concerned with political disruption. Stuart Peterfreund, “‘Great Frosts and . . . Some Very Hot Summers’: Strange Weather, the Last Letters, and the Last Days in Gilbert White’s *The Natural History of Selborne,*” in

22. Inspired by the example of the natural calendar that Benjamin Stillingfleet introduced in 1762—a record of the year’s natural occurrences, seasonal changes, planting and harvesting—White began keeping detailed records of his local world. In 1768, the same year that Joseph Banks was to begin his circumnavigation of the globe, White went to work in earnest, adapting the design of Daines Barrington’s 1767 The Naturalist’s Journal to his own purposes: on January 1 he made his initial record, a habit that he continued for some twenty-five years and which did not cease until ten days before his death; the final record is June 15, 1793. See Gilbert White, The Naturalist’s Calendar; with observations in various branches of natural history (London: B. & J. White, 1795).


24. It would be a mistake to ascribe to White the status of a naïve and isolated localist, for he corresponded with a number of prominent naturalists; used the then current Linnaean taxonomy; and, through his brother Benjamin White (a prominent publisher of natural history in London), was part of what Tobias Menely has called “his period’s cosmopolitan natural history.” See Tobias Menely, “Traveling in Place: Gilbert White’s Cosmopolitan Parochialism,” Eighteenth-Century Life 28, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 48. For Benjamin White’s natural history publishing concern, see Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook, Selborne’s Cultural Landscapes: An Exhibition (Stanford: Stanford University Libraries, 1989). The bookshop and publishing concern was a gathering point for important naturalists, including White’s correspondents Pennant and Barrington; White is said to have met them here in his annual visit to London.


27. This is a subject to which he alludes in Selborne by praising fellow naturalist Giovanni Scopoli, and asserting (in reference to Scopoli’s 1769 Annus I Historico-Naturalis) that “men that undertake only one district are much more likely to advance natural knowledge than those that grasp at more than they can possibly be acquainted with: every kingdom, every province, should have its own monographer”(115). According to the White scholar and biographer Paul Foster, Giovanni Scopoli was a doctor and naturalist who wrote the 1769 volume Annus I Historico-Naturalis that White is alluding to in letters 6 and 7 of “Letters to Barrington.” Scopoli was the first to write a natural history of what White calls “Carniola,” which is now part of western Slovenia. As Foster writes, Scopoli “was valued by White as a monographer, as someone who restricted his observations to a limited field in an age which, generally, attempted universal natural histories.” See “Biographical Notes,” in The Natural History of Selborne, ed. Paul Foster (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 300.


29. The first part of The Natural History of Selborne consists of “Letters to Pennant,” and the second consists of “Letters to Barrington.” The letters do not always proceed chronologically—the first letter in the Barrington section is from June 30, 1768, and the last letter in the preceding Pennant section is from November 30, 1780—and some are not given dates at all.
30. As with many general monikers, the title (“founding father of ecology”) is shared by many. Although some historians trace the emergence of modern ecological thought to Aristotle and Theophrastus, others tend to locate the emergence of an ecological viewpoint in the eighteenth century, and single out Gilbert White and Alexander von Humboldt, who first showed the relation between observed plant species and climate (or vegetation “zones”), for the honor. Others cast White within a broader triad: “some historians have dubbed Linnaeus the father of ecology, together with English naturalist parsons such as John Ray (1628–1705) and Gilbert White (1720–93).” See Rausing, “Underwriting the Oeconomy,” 173.


34. Mary Russell Mitford, *Our Village*, vol. 1 (London: G. and W. B. Whittaker, 1824), 1–2. Hereafter cited by volume and page number within the text; the dates for subsequent volumes are as follows: volume 2 (1826), volume 3 (1828), volume 4 (1830), volume 5 (1832).

35. Martha Adams Bohrer refers to Gilbert White’s *The Natural History of Selborne* as a “tale of locale,” and connects it interestingly to Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent*. Bohrer is interested in reviving what she sees as a genre we have lost sight of, the tale of locale, and its influence on the Victorian novel, and in this way we share a common interest in White and his scientific context, as well as the relation between empirical observation and novelistic representation. Unlike Bohrer, I am not so much tracing a literary history back to a neglected Romantic genre as assessing the formal features of description and length by looking at the progenitive features of natural theology. See Martha Adams Bohrer, “Tales of Locale: *The Natural History of Selborne* and *Castle Rackrent*,” *Modern Philology* 100, no. 3 (February 2003): 393–416.

36. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the first usage for habitat as a 1762 natural history (William Hudson’s *Flora Anglica*); the more general usage of habitat as meaning a dwelling place or habitation did not evolve until the mid-nineteenth century.


38. Volume 1 (1824) has 292 pages, of which 81 pages (or 28 percent) are devoted to subjects of interest to the naturalist and paranaturalist description. Volume 2 (1826) has 311 pages, of which 76 pages (or 24 percent) are naturalist description. Volume 3 (1828) has 315 pages, of which 73 pages (or 23 percent) are naturalist in spirit and description. Volume 4 (1830) has 345 pages, with 58 pages (17 percent) naturalist-oriented pages. Volume 5 (1832) has 362 pages, of which 42 pages (or 12 percent) could be described as naturalist. Overall, the percentage of pages in Mitford’s narrative that directly address scenes and objects from nature is as much as 20 percent.


41. The work that the historian of science Anne Secord has done is germane here; her remarkable work on artisan botany uncovers an alternative site for science as well as a previously unacknowledged set of participants. Secord reevaluates the botany as practiced by a set of early-nineteenth-century Lancashire artisans, granting to their work an acknowledgment of its scientific contribution that internalist histories of science had neglected. See Anne Secord, “Science in the Pub: Artisan Botanists in Early 19th-Century Lancashire,” *History of Science* 32 (1994): 269–315. It is not my goal to have Mitford reassigned, as it were, to the category of naturalist, but rather to suggest that the arena of observational science was broader than we have imagined, and that the work of carefully observing and describing nature was not restricted to institutionally affirmed voices. In understanding Mitford’s marginal position within a broader discourse of science we might better contextualize her within other (including aesthetic and political) discourses of nature.


43. White draws distinctions between those who bring him observations and his own, more educated eye: “my Sussex friend, a man of observation and good sense, but no naturalist, to whom I applied on account of the stone-curlew, *oedicnemus*, sends the following account” (77). However, this is not mere snobbery on White’s part; he quotes his Sussex friend’s account in full, taking care to put the prose in quote marks, which gestures to White’s respect for the amateur observer but also to his own strictness about the difference between first-hand observation and second-hand information. White, that is, seems to value most the reliability of first-hand observation, and though he distinguishes “a man of observation and good sense” from a “naturalist,” he depends upon the former. Mitford too makes such discriminations, invoking with more authority published naturalists, but also quoting as well acquaintances, including her godfather, who “dabbled in natural history” and had a home museum (2. 256); in a comic sketch in the first volume titled “A Village Beau,” she catches her servant Harriet being courted by a Joel Brent, whose “birdcall” summons makes her father, a “dabbler in natural history” with an “ornithological iear,” almost record in agreement “with Mr. White, of Selborne . . . an original observation, in the Naturalist’s Calendar.” The humor of this original observation—a skylark singing in Berkshire in December—is based in a naturalist’s knowingness, and is typical of Mitford.

44. She also calls her father hunting for fossils at the seashore a “dabbler in science,” the most modest of accolades that she nevertheless does not bestow on herself: “now for a moment losing sight of the dear papa, and now rejoining him with some delicate shell, or brightly coloured sea-weed, or imperfect *cornua ammonis*, inquiring into the success of his graver labours” (5. 337).

45. See in particular Helsinger, *Rural Scenes and National Representation*. Helsinger’s politically suspicious mode of reading Mitford has been influential, but I would suggest that in folding the paranaturalist description into the whole, it mischaracterizes the impact—literary, ethical, and political—of some of Mitford’s descriptive work.

46. Helsinger acknowledges that Mitford’s “resolute commitment to literal, particularized description does . . . offer a kind of protection to her subjects from the uses to which generalizing or symbolizing writers like Cobbett or Wordsworth might put them.” Helsinger does say that “flowers, places, and people are described with a detailed specificity that insists on the importance of the unique individual” [and] “in this sense, . . . can be said to shield her subjects from some of the consequences of the dominant class gaze.” However, Helsinger does not consider what the impetus for these details might be—as I claim, the regime of
natural theology—and returns instead to a posture of suspicion: “Yet her immersion in detail also helps maintain the illusion that the rural scene exists apart from history, as the stage for a private quest for identity and security.” See Helsinger, *Rural Scenes*, 131–32.

49. See, for instance, Mary Poovey’s intriguing claim that the working procedures of contemporary critical work are geared toward lyric poetry rather than narrative, in “The Model System of Contemporary Literary Criticism,” *Critical Inquiry* 27 (Spring 2001): 438.