

ECOCRITICISM IN THE MODERNIST IMAGINATION

Although modernism has traditionally been considered an art of cities, *Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination* claims a significant role for modernist texts in shaping environmental consciousness. Analyzing both canonical and lesser-known works of three key figures – E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, and W.H. Auden – Sultzbach suggests how the signal techniques of modernism encourage readers to become more responsive to the animate world and nonhuman minds. Understanding the way these writers represent nature’s agency becomes central to interpreting the power dynamics of empire and gender, as well as experiments with language and creativity. The book engages with the longer pastoral tradition in literature, but also introduces readers to the newly expanding field of ecocriticism, including philosophies of embodiment and matter, queer ecocriticism, and animal studies. What emerges is a picture of green modernism that reifies our burgeoning awareness of what it means to be human within a larger living community.

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Forster, Woolf, and Auden

KELLY SULTZBACH



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Introduction

The silence of the land went home to one's very heart – its mystery, its greatness, the amazing reality of its concealed life. . . . The smell of mud, of primeval mud, by Jove! was in my nostrils, the high stillness of the primeval forest was before my eyes . . . All this was great, expectant, mute, while the man jabbered about himself. I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us two were meant as an appeal or as a menace. What were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us? I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn't talk, and perhaps was deaf as well. What was in there?

But I couldn't. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark – too dark altogether . . .

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

But the horses didn't want it – they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which the riders must pass single file; . . . the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view: they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, "No, not yet," and the sky said, "No, not there"

E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India*

And the stage was empty. Miss La Trobe leant against the tree, paralyzed. Her power had left her. Beads of perspiration broke on her forehead. Illusion had failed. 'This is death,' she murmured, 'death.' Then suddenly, as the illusion petered out, the cows took up the burden. . . . The cows annihilated the gap; bridged the distance; filled the emptiness and continued the emotion.

Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*

Woken, I lay in the arms of my own warmth and listened
 To a storm enjoying its storminess in the winter dark
 Till my ear, as it can when half-asleep or half-sober,
 Set to work to unscramble interjectory uproar,

Construing its airy vowels and watery consonants
 Into a love-speech indicative of a Proper Name.
 W.H. Auden, "First Things First"

This book attempts to answer a problem posed by the ending of one of the first modernist novels, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow's final, broken, faltering conversation with Kurtz's beloved prompts one to wonder what it is that couldn't be said. What innate, unspoken, presences might palpitate underneath the horizon line of dash? What grows from those little black seeds of ellipses? Of course, it has to do with telling lies about national motives and hiding human brutality, but the presence of the Congo also inserts itself in the new, halting rhythms of their dialogue. Their hesitations recall the astounding immensity of the "silence of the land," its "smells" and its "concealed life" becoming a vivified force – a "face of immensity" whose "mute" stillness is powerful enough to reduce human conversation to merely ignorant "jabber." Marlow's new consciousness of nature's presence shakes him to the core, provoking a series of unanswered questions about human and nonhuman identity that ripple throughout modern literature. Marlow's experiences in the African wilderness transform his understanding of civilization, morality, and even his ability to use language.

Experiments with modern interiority delve into perceived realities that are difficult to articulate, more felt than understood, and subject to change. As the framing narrator listening to Marlow's story on the deck of the *Nellie* struggles to explain, meaning is often "not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze."¹

The surrounding environment gains a new presence as modernism explores the boundaries of language and the possibilities of nonhuman lives that operate outside of human control. What emerges from some of the literature that follows Conrad is a sense of how the formal innovations of modernism construct humanity's understanding of itself within a fluctuating world of environmental actors – sentient others that are paradoxically both kin and alien to the individual characters encountering them. Although the modernist reactions to these new understandings of nature and the nonhuman varied – horror, hostility, and humility among them – the subjective voice of the nonhuman consistently asserts itself in distinctly new representations.

Modern British literature is concerned with all of these responses; a plurality of perspectives and viewpoints is typical for a period featuring a broadening expanse of authorial voices, a reason many scholars now refer

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to “modernisms” rather than “modernism.” Today’s ecocritical theoretical perspectives also contain a proliferating multitude of critical dialogues, as one can easily see in even a cursory perusal of Greg Garrard’s *Ecocriticism*, currently in its second edition. In an effort to reflect some of that diversity, *Modernism in the Ecocritical Imagination* focuses on three canonical writers, E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, and W.H. Auden, who trace a chronological arc from the beginning to the end of the period, and integrates different types of ecocritical theory: primarily pastoral ideology, ecophenomenology, and animal studies, while considering how they also interact with queer ecocriticism, eco-Marxism, as well as posthumanism and ecomaterialism. Synthesizing these interrelated strains of ecocriticism demonstrates how modernisms’ depictions of nature are complicated by the nexus of switches at the slippery exchanges of human, nature, and animal. Multiple nodes of modernist engagement with the environment emerge at junctures between not only human and animal, but also culture and nature, body and mind, as well as local and global identities. Accordingly, my project is designed to integrate a cluster of environmental inquiries into a larger picture of green literary modernism.

One issue Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* epitomizes is the presence of doubt within a modernist environmental consciousness. Thus, Thoreau’s famous statement of a writer’s duty to “speak a word *for* Nature”² becomes suspect. How does a human know what Nature would say? As Thomas Nagel famously queried in 1974, how do we know what it is like “for a *bat* to be a bat” and how do we attempt the endeavor without “deny[ing] the reality or logical significance of what we can never describe or understand”?³ Modernists began to broach these questions by simply imagining that nonhuman agencies with individual perspectives existed. What would a stream of cow-consciousness or storm-consciousness look like and sound like? To what extent are writers who attempt to “speak a word” on Nature’s behalf selflessly translating underrepresented perspectives and to what extent are they usurping the subjectivity of another to make it say what one might wish to hear? Are we making assumptions of “muteness” that belie the actual expressive, and sometimes even vocal, utterances of nature and the nonhuman, which we simply mistake as “mute” or “empty” due to our own ignorance for comprehending the cacophony of languages within it? Forster, Woolf, and Auden don’t negate the need for such doubts; to the contrary, the way in which their writing consciously investigates the knotty problems of agency and representation exposes the ethical basis for such uncertainty. In a distinctly modernist maneuver, nature’s voice is abstract, active, and not always readily interpretable by human characters.

As such, modernism is particularly relevant to contemporary discussions about defining “environmentalism.” As Ursula Heise and Allison Carruth have defined this term, historically nature was understood and represented as either “essentially stable, harmonious, and in balance outside of human interference,” or alternatively, as an apocalyptic “nature in decline.” In contrast, during the last quarter century the environmental sciences and humanities have been “foregrounding instead the inherent dynamism and patterns of constant change that structure natural systems,”⁴ undermining the binary reaction of harmony or loss with a more complex sense of humanity’s own relevance as an actor in an environmental community. Our membership in the Earth’s ecological community has ethical ramifications we are still attempting to conceptualize as we consider the global manifestations of humanity’s role in the geological epoch of the Anthropocene. Donna Haraway’s work has also attempted to trouble historical dualisms, reminding us that entrenched binaries about nature and technology create false divides: “Technophilias and technophobicias vie with organophilias and organophobicias, and taking sides is not left to chance. If one loves organic nature, to express a love of technology makes one suspect. If one finds cyborgs to be promising sorts of monsters, then one is an unreliable ally in the fight against the destruction of all things organic.”⁵ Many modernists were fracturing these environmental dualisms early on in ways that have sometimes escaped critical recognition. In part because the notion of modernity similarly suffers from a narrative that oversimplifies its “patterns of constant change” and fluctuation by relegating it to a singular movement away from one end of the binary, a Romantic foregrounding of organic nature, toward its opposite, the rise of an urban culture of detached aestheticism. Yet, when modernist texts are pressed through a sieve of ecocritical theoretical questions, they often offer startling representations of a more-than-human world that is in the midst of naming and breaking such binaries. A range of literary experiments depict the animate complexity of nonhuman agency and the spectrum of human reactions to what it means to be embedded within, rather than taking objective measurements outside of, the flotsam and jetsam of the creative, pulsating, flesh of the earth. Judith Paltin redefines the modernist shift to what she terms “anti-realism” – a stance traditionally associated with aesthete distancing from the physical world – by recasting it as an attempt to manifest the world’s actual instability. Older, prepackaged ways of knowing the world were dismissed in favor of the destabilizing processes of flux offered by biology and physics. Paltin explains, “Modernist nature operates as an agile breaching force, exploding

perceptual illusion and readerly comfort in a series of confrontational mimetic pulses”⁶ Further, these aesthetic ruptures of expected meaning are not always celebratory; instead, they often *trouble* placating assurances of nature’s capacity to offer humanity rapturous transcendence or a companionable mirror for our own emotions.

In a recent introductory anthology to environmental literature, Timothy Clark pinpoints a range of representational responses to nature which I argue Forster, Woolf, and Auden each illuminate. The first is a kind of feigning of environmental consciousness that is so reverent toward nature that it risks setting it up as an “other” that only has meaning in terms of how it reveals humanity’s failings, thus producing what he terms “a romantic *humanism*.”⁷ Forster’s early work begins in this register, using a kind of magical sense of nature’s noble morality to critique the short-sightedness of human greed, as if holding out nature as a looking-glass for humanity’s own reflection. Yet, his later work begins to acknowledge an increased sense of wonder and uncertainty, suggesting nature often exceeds the ability of humans to frame it with a handle. This second version of environmentalism Clark defines as “express[ing] the fact of an incalculable connection between bodies, human and nonhuman, across and within the biosphere,”⁸ noting that “new terms emerge for the nature/culture we inhabit, or are, such as Morton’s ‘the mesh’ or Stacy Alaimo’s ‘transcorporeality.’”⁹ Indeed, several of the works by Forster, Woolf, and Auden seem to acknowledge what Karen Barad might term intra-action, or, as Stacey Alaimo describes it, nature inherently in the body already: “any creature, ecosystem, climatological pattern, ocean current – cannot be taken for granted as simply existing out there.”¹⁰ In this way Woolf’s experiments with sketching the body’s pulsating awareness of waves and particles that both reflect changing notions of science and record flashes of embodied knowledge, also stretch toward an intra-action of the material world. Her work tends to represent a self-already-material – made from the world and knowing itself as a component of the environment’s meta-linguistic potential. For a modernist age that pondered the relevance of machine-made objects versus hand-crafted goods and grappled with conceptions of a molecular world teeming within what the human eye had previously seen only as a solid surface, ecocritical materialism is instructive. Drawing on Karen Barad and other experts in quantum physics, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann theorize the “dynamism inherent in materials of life encompassing a tremendously broad range of biological and material expressions that can admittedly generate complex narratives.”¹¹ While the terms for these representations of humanity’s relationship with

nature may be new, modernist texts attest to the presence of this ideology within the literary imagination at the turn of the century. Third, Clark posits that the next questions for environmental literature might take a shape already suggested by Auden's representations of human animals, when he asks, "What, however, if one implication of the Anthropocene were that our immediate sense of what being a person is, its scale of reference, its intentional contours, must now also emerge as having become itself an 'environmental problem?'"¹² As an ecocritical reassessment of some of Auden's work reveals, the scale of a mountain and those who would wish to plant a flag on top of it, the contours of syntactic patterning in mineral coding, and even the impact of atomic discoveries themselves, were forcing the literary imagination to reconsider the oscillating scales of microcosm and macrocosm, from the microbes living in pockets of human skin to the blown-up oil holes humans were putting on the earth's body.

Moreover, these modernists do not always present us with ethical relationships to nature or the nonhuman that are necessarily positive models. My goal is not to provide a glossy patina of celebratory green over these works; I have no desire to obfuscate the very conflicted reactions to environmental relationships and human responsibility that make them so productively messy. Solipsism, racism, and desire for escapism are also literary responses that present themselves to the ecocritical questions this book poses. Yet it is the complexity of these human ideals and human failings that most provocatively reveal how we as a species continue to grapple with our scientific and emotional understandings of the more-than-human world. Those nasty bits we would wish to eradicate from our politics and from ourselves are important to understand as well, and shouldn't diminish the ecocritical importance of these works of literature. To the contrary, the problematized "Nature" of modernist works helps ecocritical theory resist its own didactic tendencies to only favor literature that seems to offer a "solution." In *Material Ecocriticism*, Hannes Bergthaller critiques older forms of environmental criticism that too often became distilled into all-encompassing views of equality and union with nature, warning that new ecocritical trends may purport to offer new ideas but risk following in some of those same time-worn ruts:

It is especially important not to assimilate [ecomaterialism] too quickly into the "biocentric" worldview prevalent in much of contemporary ecocriticism, to simply replace "nature" with "matter" and leave the rest of the conceptual edifice undisturbed. This temptation is especially great because when they speak of their project, the new materialists sometimes do sound a

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lot like deep ecologists: they recommend the new materialist thought as an antidote to the anthropocentric hubris that has brought on the ecological crisis; they argue that it instills a salutary humility and allows us to grasp the scope of our dependency on the material world.¹³

These recognitions are undoubtedly significant for promoting an empathetic impulse that generates a more humble sense of humanity's ethical place on a shared planet, but in its most self-aware practice, ecocritical analysis should also readily admit the limits of human knowledge and notice when demarcations, differences, and exclusions are also a valuable component of ecological representations. As a result, this book draws on a variety of theories while also acknowledging the perimeters of their usefulness, and analyzes what is ecocritically progressive about a text while still pointing out competing readings suggesting where social constructs of gender, race, or a desire for tidy resolution create ethical trapdoors. This maneuver is not meant to dilute the environmental importance of the literature of Forster, Woolf, and Auden, nor undermine the potency of ecocritical theory. Rather, a heightened attentiveness to the cracks and crevices, like the porosity of Auden's limestone landscapes, are the moments where the niches of our own desires and morality most reveal where we have yet to go to understand our role within a world we can never fully comprehend. The lacunae of fear, dislocation, and loneliness are the outer boundaries of our contact zone with the environment and our ability to represent it. The breaks have always been what makes modernism new; likewise, it is in the literary contradictions and the philosophical sink-holes, where, I argue, critics and readers can find the green literary imaginative territory most interesting to explore. As Louise Westling states in her seminal work, which reassesses the continued legacy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in part by correcting misunderstandings of his ecophenomenology as an over-simplistic gesture of unification, "the relation of any creature to others within the flesh of the world is never fully realized or identical; this dehiscence or *écart* generates differentiation even as the intertwining of things and creatures ensures their kinship."¹⁴ It is the recognition of fleshly boundaries of bodies that allows us to touch and wonder at something that we must then begin to dance with, akin to Donna Haraway's "natureculture"¹⁵ – the back and forth exchange of companion species, which never fully become one, but create innovative relationships of communication because there is a mutual respect for the divide that creates the space for exchange.

Paradoxically, in the moments where modernist literature seems to be teetering on a dangerous pinnacle of anthropocentrism, it is often that very

vantage point that reveals a new perspective from which to criticize systems of power constraining both human and nonhuman actors. Forster, Woolf, and Auden often use the animate environment to critique cultural assumptions about scientific hierarchies, political power, and traditional forms of knowledge, associating formal innovation and natural imagery with an effort to express a larger consciousness of a diverse world – at times simply reinscribing anthropocentrism, but in other works provocatively superseding human solipsism. The muddled dialectics within their work only strengthen the ecocritical potential of their varied responses.

As ecocriticism has expanded beyond its early roots in American realist nature writing – in part due to Lawrence Buell’s inviting phrase “environmental unconscious,” which acknowledges the formation of environmental values in texts that aren’t overtly about the environment¹⁶ – several ground-breaking publications have assessed how ecocritical theory enlivens our understanding of Renaissance, Romantic, and Victorian texts. Ken Hiltner has published two Renaissance studies: *Renaissance Ecology: Imagining Eden in Milton’s England* (2008) and *What Else is Pastoral?: Renaissance Literature and the Environment* (2011) along with Robert Watson’s *Back to Nature: The Green and the Real in the Late Renaissance* (2007); Romanticism’s environmental inflections have been reassessed by Jonathan Bate’s seminal *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991) as well as Kevin Hutchings’ *Romantic Ecologies and Colonial Cultures in the British Atlantic World 1770–1850* (2009); continuing the trajectory, John Parham’s *Green Man Hopkins: Poetry and the Victorian Ecological Imagination* (2010) and Allen MacDuffie’s *Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination* (2014) have inaugurated similar inquiries into Victorian literature. The early twentieth century witnessed the advent of ecological science and some of its most salient literary themes revolve around place and human identity – for example, urban malaise, the legacy of Darwinism, concepts of home and colonial identity, the rise of mass tourism, and, most importantly, uncertainty about the status of language itself – making it ripe for a comprehensive study of how ecocriticism might intersect with these foundational modernist concerns. For every age, nature is a fertile subject of literary inspiration, but for each generation, the shifting perspective of new discoveries, the backward glance of nostalgia, and struggles within existing political frameworks pose different questions to the nonhuman world. In turn, each new set of cultural questions generates revised conceptions of how human beings value the natural world and define themselves within it.

Green modernism: Canonical themes and environmental questions

Testing boundaries has long been recognized as a defining attribute of modernism. To borrow Ezra Pound's famous phrasing, modern poets "make it new"¹⁷ by "break[ing] the pentameter,"¹⁸ resulting in formal ruptures that invite unspoken associative and imagist leaps of connectivity, expressing the roiling ambiguity of the age. Fiction writers prioritize what Forster terms "pattern and rhythm"¹⁹ over linear plots and distort narrative objectivity with stream of consciousness techniques, or what Woolf describes as "life not as a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged" but "an incessant shower of innumerable atoms."²⁰ By 1962, Auden describes poems' "formal nature" as "a hymn to Natural Law and a gesture of astonishment at the greatest of all mysteries, the order of the universe."²¹ If Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was one of the first novels to make these breaches within modern language, its radically disjunctive form is bound up in astounding new conceptions of the self within nature and the nature within self. Marlow's shattering recognition that the wild – operating both externally and internally in the novel – would not conform to British hierarchical structures of commerce or expected codes of honor initiated the first pauses and stutters of modernism. For many modernists, prior representations did not satisfy a cultural imagination shocked by world war and theories of being from Darwin to Einstein that so forcefully decentered the stability of prior truths. As a result, mirrors that had served to reflect prior visions of earlier ages – the solipsistic transfiguration of nature's dizzying grandeur into a figure of the immortality of the poet's creative capacity, the gilded rhetoric of supreme religious transcendence, the figure of Nature as silent woman coyly revealing her secrets to the scientific touch of human knowledge – were broken. Of course, the modernists may not have been quite as unique as their canonized slogans profess, as has been shown by those who have offered productive complications of how environmental imagery was being deployed within prior eras. In a similar fashion, this project acknowledges the stereotypes regarding modernist treatments of nature, which often include an emphasis on the abstract rather than the physical; a preference for urban environments rather than rural ones; and troubling conflations of certain categories of classes and races of humans with a mute and inaccessible nature, even when those rustic or primitive relationships are ostensibly praised. Yet, akin to the works above, this book also unravels exceptions, twists, and other attitudes that simultaneously challenge or divert those stereotypes. Likewise, as other comprehensive environmental literary

studies have shown how environmental consciousness necessarily impacts evolving attitudes that carry forth into other eras, this work aims to show how the modernist layers of thought build from earlier strata and provide the groundwork for existing ideology shaping twenty-first-century environmental consciousness.

I am not attempting to present Forster, Woolf, and Auden as “nature writers.” Instead I examine how their representations of environmental forces and nonhuman characters inflect a wide array of recognized modernist themes, including interiority, instability, and concerns of empire. In the pages that follow, “modernism” is defined more by differences of degree in rhetorical experimentation and themes of disruption than by any strict chronological time period. John Marx has articulated a definition of modernism that parallels my own: “Although there is no end of discussion about exactly when modernity occurs or exactly what it entails, critics generally agree that one of its pivotal features is the emergence of systems and networks that reconfigured modes of communication and the lived experience of time and space.”²² This book finds a strain of modernism in which writers question the role of human characters within a larger environmental system or experiment with how nonhuman voices interrelate with human modes of communication.

Although *Heart of Darkness* shuttles between spaces as divergent as the Thames and the Congo, modernism’s fragmented literary style has often been called “an art of cities,” defined by “urban climates, and the ideas and campaigns, the new philosophies and politics that ran through them.”²³ This book claims a more significant role for the nonhuman environment in modernism. My argument doesn’t deny the influence of the metropolis, but it does suggest that the palpable sights and sounds of any sensory environment have just as great an impact on modern literature as the ideologies of urban intelligentsia. As other critics synthesizing the significance of the era have noted, “The novelists sought not to banish the outside world but to register it with a heightened precision.”²⁴ Even modernism’s most famous encounters with metropolitan space – Mrs. Dalloway contemplating the mists stretching between branches on her way through Regents Park to buy flowers, or Leopold Bloom fingering the lemon-scented soap in his pocket as he meditates on the lives of gelded horses eating from feedbags – are mediated by a new awareness of the surrounding environment. As Bonnie Kime Scott explains, “modernists also discovered the impossibility of rejecting the natural world, given powerful early memories of place and sensation, and the experimental satisfaction that comes with imaginative merger of human and non-human