

Introduction
The Nature of Literature
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I.1 Art Imitates Nature

In his famous treatise *The Defense of Poesy* (posthumously published in 1595), the Elizabethan courtier-poet Sir Philip Sidney contends that poets are unique among artists and scholars in that they alone work “hand in hand with nature.”¹ After tracing the etymology of the English word “poet” from the Greek *poiein*, “to make,” Sidney positions the poet, a category understood to include all authors of imaginative literature, as “a maker” whose art parallels the creative activities of nature.² Listing a variety of common sixteenth-century intellectual and artistic pursuits – astronomer, mathematician, musician, natural philosopher, moral philosopher, lawyer, historian, grammarian, rhetorician, logician, physician, and metaphysical philosopher – Sidney suggests that most scholars are confined by the materials and patterns set forth by nature: “There is no art delivered unto mankind that has not the works of nature for his principal object, without which they could not consist, and on which they so depend as they become actors and players, as it were, of what nature will have set forth.”³ Relying upon the traditional opposition between art and nature (ancient Greek: *technê* and *physis*) set forth by classical authors like Horace and Aristotle, Sidney seems at first to imply nature’s superiority as the architect of the world’s great stage on which humans are simply “actors and players” performing plays of nature’s design. Nature, in Sidney’s usage, is both object and subject – raw materials to be observed and worked upon and active creative force responsible for generating and organizing the world. This bifurcated understanding of nature echoes the paired medieval Latin concepts of *natura naturata* (literally, nature natured) and *natura naturans* (nature naturing), which would later be employed in Baruch Spinoza’s pantheistic philosophy in the seventeenth century and by Romantic writers like Samuel Taylor Coleridge (as Samantha C. Harvey explores in Chapter 9 of this volume).⁴ Hemmed in by these forces, all human arts and sciences involve describing and imitating that which nature has already produced.

After seeming to assert the primacy of nature over art, however, Sidney reverses course in his description of the poet's unique relationship to nature:

Only the poet, disdainful to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow, in effect, into another nature, in making things either better than nature brings forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature, as the heroes, demi-gods, cyclops, chimeras, furies, and such like; so as he goes hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging within the zodiac of his own wit. Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too-much-loved earth more lovely; her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden.⁵

Here Sidney articulates the poet's freedom through and from nature. The poet is "hand in hand with nature," implying the parallel nature of their creative agencies, but also free – "not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts" – and thus capable of producing entirely new forms such as larger-than-life heroes and mythological beasts. In this way, Sidney moves beyond the familiar Aristotelian maxim "art imitates nature" – the standard English translation of Aristotle's notion of *mimesis*, which would inform much of literary criticism until well into the eighteenth century. Rather, Sidney follows Aristotle in positing deep structural similarities between the operations of nature and those of poetry.⁶ As the classicist Stephen Halliwell points out, Aristotle's view of poetry, developed in *The Poetics* and other works, involves a "naturalistic framework," in which "art follows procedures analogous to nature's, and . . . similar patterns and relations can be discerned in the workings of each."⁷ What nature and poetry have in common, according to Sidney and Aristotle, is that both operate according to a teleology based on their shared ability to produce things that progress toward the fulfillment of a rational design or purpose.

And yet for Sidney the poet outdoes nature. In the optimistic environment of the English Renaissance, the rise of humanist learning fostered a growing faith in the ability of the human arts and sciences to comprehend and improve upon nature's designs. It is this ethos, soon to be amplified by technologically augmented Baconian empiricism and the dualist ontology of Cartesian mechanism, that led to what the historian of science Carolyn Merchant refers to as "the death of nature."⁸ (Merchant's notion of the masculine scientific domination of a feminine nature is explored in detail in Chapter 5 by Mary Thomas Crane and in Chapter 14 by Greta Gaard.) Indeed, we can see in the gendered dynamics of Sidney's representation of

the male poet “lifted up with the vigor of his own invention” overcoming a feminine nature evidence of Merchant’s thesis.

Yet the poet’s struggle with nature never quite amounts to transcendence. The poet is able to improve upon nature’s designs and even produce new forms, but the processes followed are nature’s own. What the poet imitates are not only nature’s products but also its methods. The German intellectual historian Hans Blumenberg explains how Aristotelian mimesis involves “not only reproduction of the eidetic constant [nature’s fixed forms], but the mimicking of the productive processes of nature”; thus, the human artist is conceived not as an autonomous creative agent but as a vehicle for nature, which “duplicates itself by eternally reproducing itself.”⁹ Art, and particularly literature, according to Blumenberg, collapses into the larger category of nature. Sidney’s contemporary, William Shakespeare, supplies a particularly influential formulation of the art–nature homology in his play *The Winter’s Tale*, when Polixenes, the disguised king of Bohemia, asserts, “Yet nature is made better by no mean / But nature makes that mean. So over that art / Which you say adds to nature is an art / That nature makes.”¹⁰ Addressing Perdita’s distaste for crossbred flowers as “nature’s bastards,” Polixenes weaves a circular logic that folds human agency in gardening, as in composing literature, into nature.¹¹ Art is nature’s way of augmenting itself. As Polixenes concludes, “The art itself is nature.”¹²

Sidney articulates the poet’s relationship to nature somewhat differently: “The poet, disdainful to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow, in effect, into another nature.” Sidney’s suggestion that the poet grows into “another nature” that improves upon the first echoes Cicero’s idea of a “second nature” produced by humankind’s physical cultivation of the implied “first nature” of the world’s original state. Cataloguing the various ways that humankind modifies nature – including agriculture, irrigation, and hydraulic engineering – Cicero asserts that “by the work of our hands we strive to create a sort of second nature [*alteram naturam*] within the world of nature.”¹³ This distinction between first nature and second nature would become important to the philosophy of Hegel and Marx in the nineteenth century as a way of integrating human mental and economic activities into a scientific understanding of physical nature.¹⁴ Unlike the objectified second nature of Cicero, however, Sidney’s phrase “another nature” represents a subject position occupied by the poet himself, who through his creative art becomes a surrogate for nature. The poet’s creations, Sidney insists, improve upon, even as they parallel, those of nature. In the words of

George Puttenham, the author of another prominent work of early modern literary theory, *The Art of English Poesy* (1589), the poet “doth as the cunning gardener, that, using nature as a coadjutor, furthers her conclusions, and many times makes her effects more absolute and strange.”¹⁵ According to Puttenham, and to some extent Sidney, the poet and nature are creative partners, cooperating on the same designs, with the poet supplying finishing touches.

Sidney’s ideal poet, then, hovers between mimetic and idealistic modes, representing things in nature like “pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, [and] sweet-smelling flowers,” but making them more pleasing to readers than nature’s original creations. The poet, in other words, perfects nature, in the literal sense of bringing nature’s products to completion. The poet shows nature not only as it is but also as it could be in an ideal state of things. In Sidney’s succinct formulation, “her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden.” These lines recall the classical works of Hesiod and Ovid, but they also point to Sidney’s own masterpiece of pastoral literature, *The Arcadia*, completed around 1580 and later posthumously published in expanded form under the title *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia* (1593). (Terry Gifford explores Sidney’s *Arcadia* among other pastoral works in Chapter 2 of this volume.) While Sidney’s conception of poetry has a utopian dimension, it is never entirely divorced from the world of physical nature. The poet imagines what nature might be like under different circumstances. Reading these lines from the vantage point of the present, we might be reminded not only of the mythic golden age of ancient writers but also of the speculative climate fiction (or “cli-fi,” for short) of twenty-first-century authors like Margaret Atwood, Barbara Kingsolver, and Kim Stanley Robinson, who imagine a world transformed by global climate change. Such fictions are, of course, never entirely fictional. Rather, like the predictive simulations of mathematical modelers, they use knowledge of the present to envision possible futures. Indeed, in ancient literature, the myth of the golden age, while initially pleasant, is a declensionist narrative in which a benevolent and harmonious state of nature, the golden age, gives way to progressively worse versions of nature and society: the ages of silver, bronze, and finally iron.

This opening example from Sidney’s *Defense of Poesy* demonstrates the deep and enduring parallels between how we think about nature and how we think about literature. The “nature” found in Sidney’s text is not that of modern ecocriticism – the activist mode of literary studies rooted in the science of ecology and the ethics of environmentalism that formally emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in order to address the environmental

crises of the late twentieth century. Ecocriticism often evokes a distinctly modern version of nature, stemming from the idea that beginning with the advent of industrial modernity in the mid-eighteenth century (or sometimes the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) humankind has become alienated from nature as a result of the disenchantment produced by modern science and technology. This version of nature – influentially articulated by Max Weber, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, and others – is both materially and conceptually threatened and thus in need of protection. When Bill McKibben ominously heralded the “end of nature” in his influential 1989 book, he gave influential voice to the modern narrative of a pristine nature under human threat.¹⁶

Sidney’s version of nature is, conversely, a decidedly premodern formulation that weaves together Aristotelian philosophy, medieval theology, and thousands of years of literary history. Reversing the historical gaze, our analysis also demonstrates how aspects of Sidney’s representation of nature look forward to early modern developments like the mechanism of René Descartes and Robert Boyle and the vast metaphysical system of Spinoza. While in many ways Sidney’s text seems remote from modern ecocritical concerns, his focus on literature’s unique ability to reimagine humankind’s relationship to nature corresponds with some of ecocriticism’s foundational tenets. In his influential book *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995), Lawrence Buell points out that the “environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imagining nature and humanity’s relation to it.”¹⁷ For Sidney, the poet’s craft, itself modeled after nature’s creative processes, is uniquely suited to this task.

As this opening example makes clear, nature is an intersectional concept that draws together diverse materials, discourses, and philosophical assumptions. Nature, in its various cultural and historical iterations, is central to how we understand agency, relationships, and humanity’s place in the world. And literature has long been fundamental to how we conceive of nature and our relationship to it, from the ancient pastoral lyrics of the Greek poet Theocritus to the peripatetic musings of Henry David Thoreau to the everyday profundity of Mary Oliver. Nature is also, however, a concept notable for its capaciousness and ambiguity. Raymond Williams famously refers to “nature” as “perhaps the most complex word in the [English] language,” and the Americanist Leo Marx cautions that the word is “a notorious semantic and metaphysical trap.”¹⁸ Just as literature is

nearly impossible to define, so too is nature. Indeed, the “nature” of our introduction’s title, “The Nature of Literature,” is ambiguous, referring both to nature as essence and nature in the positivist sense that develops out of philosophical materialism as the physical world itself. In the former sense, the nature of literature is literature’s essential quality – a quality that, as we have seen, Sidney and Aristotle link directly to the processes of nature – and, in the latter sense, the nature of literature is how the world of physical nature has been represented in works of literature. As the chapters in this volume make clear, nature’s potency as a concept lies precisely in its expansiveness – its protean ability to assume different forms and evolve to thrive in different cultural and historical situations. Like Whitman’s famous poetic persona, nature contradicts itself and contains multitudes: It is at once both material and essence, immanent and transcendent, social construction and physical fact.

Gathering scholars of a variety of historical periods, critical approaches, and cultural traditions, *Nature and Literary Studies* seeks to clarify “nature” as a keyword in modern literary studies and critical theory with attention to the concept’s historical evolution and diverse contemporary applications. The book is not intended to supply an exhaustive account of nature’s role in literature and literary studies – a project that would fill volumes and require the collective efforts of a still wider array of specialists. Rather, *Nature and Literary Studies* functions as a field guide to nature’s role in contemporary literary studies, with attention to some of its most influential literary manifestations – the pastoral, wilderness, the book of nature, and so on – and its role in modern critical approaches such as ecocriticism, gender studies, critical race theory, postcolonialism, posthumanism, animality studies, science and technology studies, the digital humanities, narratology, and new materialism. Collectively the chapters form a mosaic of the protean and elusive concept of nature as it relates to the study of literature.

I.2 Nature, Ecology, and Environment

The keyword “nature” exists alongside a number of adjacent terms in the contemporary critical matrix. The most prominent of these are “environment” (as in “environmentalism” and “the environmental humanities”) and “ecology” (the “eco-” in “ecocriticism,” “ecopoetics,” and “ecofeminism”). Indeed, for many contemporary scholars of the environmental humanities – the twenty-first-century constellation of humanist disciplines focused on environmental issues – the rubrics ecology and environment have eclipsed

the concept of nature. One advantage of these terms is their relative novelty as concepts that came to ascendancy alongside awareness of the scope of the environmental crisis of the mid-twentieth century. The newer terms have helped to differentiate the activist brand of environmental criticism that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s – with significant precursors published in the decades previous, as we shall see in the next section – from earlier thematic studies of nature in literature.

Another, perhaps more consequential, advantage to the terms “ecology” and “environment” is that they include human as well as nonhuman beings. In many of its iterations, nature stands as humanity’s metaphysical other and is thus opposed to culture, technology, and (as we have seen) art. This dualist version of nature is often traced back to the seventeenth-century natural philosophy of Descartes, but it also has historically deeper roots in Platonic philosophy and Christian theology. The newer terms “environment” and “ecology” thus eschew nature’s tendency toward dualism and further ecocriticism’s common aims of demonstrating the interconnection of nature and culture and thus exposing the folly of the nature–human divide. As Leo Marx points out, the term “environment” has largely replaced “nature” in contemporary literary studies because of its “unequivocal materiality and inclusiveness. It refers to the entire biophysical surround – or environ – we inhabit; it encompasses all that is built and unbuilt, artificial and natural, within the terrain that surrounds us.”¹⁹ Likewise, ecology’s core tenet that “everything is connected to everything else,” to quote Barry Commoner’s influential first law of ecology, makes clear the inclusiveness of the concept.²⁰ Drawing upon the activist ecology of the scientist Rachel Carson and the deep ecology of the philosopher Arne Naess, among other ideas, ecocritics utilize the critical vocabulary and ethical program of the science of ecology. For example, in his foundational essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” (1978) – a work credited with coining the term “ecocriticism” – William Rueckert compares the energy-storing capacity of plants to literature’s ability to capture and channel the energy of readers.

Despite the manifest advantages of “environment” and “ecology,” both terms have potential drawbacks for scholars of literature. Ecology, for example, is a natural science rooted in empirical and quantitative methods. As Dana Phillips and Greg Garrard have both pointed out, scholars of literature tend to lack serious training in the natural sciences and thus often employ the technical concepts of ecology as loose metaphors or vague analogies.²¹ As for the rubric “environment,” while the term seems at first glance to manifest a scientific neutrality inclusive of all things – biotic and

abiotic, human and nonhuman, natural and artificial – a number of scholars including Michel Serres and Cheryll Glotfelty have pointed to the term’s implicit anthropocentrism. Parsing the word’s etymology and spatial imaginary, Glotfelty explains that “environment” “imply[ies] that we humans are at the center, surrounded by everything that is not us.”²² “Environment” thus reproduces the very ontological dualism that scholars find problematic in nature. Additionally, the terms “ecology” and “environment” often necessitate recourse to ideas of nature and the natural. Buell, who prefers the term “environmental literary criticism” to ecocriticism and introduced the concept of “the environmental unconscious,” points out that, despite objections, the nature–culture distinction “will likely remain indispensable” to the study of literature.²³ Indeed, attempts to avoid the words “nature” and “natural” in modern criticism have led to a dizzying array of negative formulations, most of which position the human as normative standard: the nonhuman, the more-than-human, the other-than-human, the inhuman. Eschewing such formulations, some theorists have forged entirely new ontologies, philosophical systems, and conceptual vocabularies for comprehending the world and humanity’s place in it.²⁴ What remains clear, however, is that nature’s ghostly presence continues to haunt modern critical theory and literary studies, rendered all the more palpable by its conspicuous negation.

Many books and articles published over the past thirty or so years focus implicitly on nature and literature through the frameworks of ecocriticism and environmental literary studies. Given the broad interdisciplinary nature of the field, many of the most influential works have been expansive edited collections that bring together the work of a diverse array of scholars. Such works notably include *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), edited by Glotfelty and Harold Fromm; *Reading the Earth: New Directions in the Study of Literature and the Environment* (1998), edited by Michael P. Branch, Rochelle Johnson, Daniel Patterson, and Scott Slovic; *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy* (2002), edited by Joni Adamson, Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein; *What’s Nature Worth? Narrative Expressions of Environmental Values* (2004), edited by Terre Satterfield and Slovic; *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* (2013), edited by Louise Westling; *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory beyond Green* (2013), edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen; *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader* (2014), edited by Ken Hiltner; *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (2014), edited by Greg Garrard; and *A Global History of Literature and the Environment* (2016), edited by John Parham and Westling. *Nature and Literary Studies* thus enters a vibrant

ecosystem of important collections devoted to the study of literature, ecology, and the environment, its unique niche being the direct examination of nature's conceptual origins, development, and applications. One notable exception to the dearth of collections and guides devoted directly to nature as a concept is *Keywords: Nature* (2005), edited by Nadia Tazi, which gathers the work of scholars from around the world in order to explore how different cultures conceptualize and relate to nature. It is an ambitious and illuminating book but of a different scope than our collection, which studies nature's historical development and applications in literary studies and critical theory.

There are a number of advantages to focusing our collection on the concept of nature rather than ecology, environment, ecocriticism, or the environmental humanities. First, nature has a much deeper history than ecocriticism, which is only a few decades old, or even ecology, which doesn't formally develop until the late nineteenth century. Indeed, nature is directly implicated in ecology's conceptual development through the early modern concept of "the economy of nature," a rubric employed by Linnaeus, Erasmus Darwin, Charles Darwin, and Ernst Haeckel in lieu of "ecology" (a term coined by Haeckel in 1866) in order to describe systemic interrelationships in the natural world.²⁵ "Environment," in the modern sense of "the environment" or "environmentalism," has a similarly shallow history, originating in the middle decades of the twentieth century with the recognition of the destructiveness of modern society.²⁶

Nature, on the other hand, has a vast and diverse history spanning centuries, if not millennia, and contains analogues, often directly cognate with the English word "nature," in many different languages. The English word "nature" is derived (probably by way of French) from the Latin *natura*, meaning essential or inborn qualities, which itself stems from the Latin verb *nasci*, meaning "to be born."²⁷ The Latin *natura*, in turn, supplies the rough equivalent and standard translation of the ancient Greek word *physis* (*φύσις*), meaning "the principle of growth, motion, or change." A palimpsest of earlier terms and ideas, nature supplies a conceptual bridge linking the Middle English poetry of Chaucer to the modern creative nonfiction of Annie Dillard. Owing to its ubiquity in literature, particularly during the Romantic period, "nature" was among the most important keywords in the literary scholarship of the first half of the twentieth century, which was rooted in philology and intellectual history and inspired by the work of scholars like Arthur O. Lovejoy, E. M. W. Tillyard, and R. G. Collingwood, as well as the process theology of Alfred North Whitehead.²⁸ In his influential book *The Great Chain of*

Being: A Study in the History of an Idea (1936), Lovejoy refers to nature as “the most pregnant subject for the investigations of philosophical semantics.”²⁹ Tillyard, in turn, takes up the idea of the orderly and hierarchical great chain of being or *scala naturae* (ladder of nature) in his famous study of the Elizabethan “world picture,” which shaped the literary works of writers like Shakespeare and Donne. In the early twentieth century, major literary studies journals like *PMLA* and *Modern Language Notes* frequently published articles with titles like “Nature and Shakespeare” and “Milton’s Treatment of Nature.” As this brief historical sketch demonstrates, nature was already an important subject in literary studies well before the formal development of ecocriticism, which is explored at length in the next section. Examining the concept of nature, rather than ecology or environment, thus enables us to bridge the intellectual history of the twentieth century with the environmental humanities of the twenty-first.

One of the principal challenges of studying “nature” is the word’s dizzying array of meanings. Samuel Johnson’s momentous *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) includes eleven definitions of the word “nature,” ranging from “An imaginary being supposed to preside over the material and animal world” to “the science which teaches the qualities of things.”³⁰ We might infer from the progression from Johnson’s first definition of “nature” to his last, the general Enlightenment shift from a theological and supernatural version of nature to a mechanistic version apprehensible through Newtonian mechanics. In the words of the poet Alexander Pope, whose couplet supplies an example of Johnson’s final, scientific definition of “nature”: “Nature, and Nature’s Laws lay hid in Night. / God said, *Let Newton be!* and All was *Light*.”³¹ Confining himself to aesthetic uses of the term, Lovejoy, the founder of the branch of intellectual history known as the history of ideas, traces and analyzes thirty-nine distinct meanings of the word “nature” in relation to art and literature. And *The Oxford English Dictionary* currently lists fourteen separate definitions of the noun “nature,” most containing multiple subdefinitions.³²

There have been many attempts to distill and clarify “nature”’s vast range of meaning. In *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976), Raymond Williams demarcates three principal domains of meaning in the word “nature”: essential quality, inherent force, and the material world itself (including or excluding humanity). Construed historically, these three definitions chart the shift from nature’s Aristotelian and theological roots as essential quality (telos, material) and inherent force (first mover, God) to its reified modern sense of the physical world itself. To this point,