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Michael Ziser

Excerpt

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*Introduction*  
*More-than-Human Literary History*

Often I feel that my head stands out too dry, when it should be immersed. A writer, a man writing, is the scribe of all nature; he is the corn and the grass and the atmosphere writing.<sup>1</sup>

There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity...<sup>2</sup>

In the U.S. public school system, the first exposure to a genuinely critical reading practice usually comes in high school or early college, when the rudimentary elements of rhetoric – trope, scheme, tone, and so forth – are presented for explicit discussion. Such terms can be quite difficult, subject to complications requiring the most sophisticated kinds of theoretical treatment, and I can still clearly recall my personal relief when an English teacher finally supplied what appeared to be one simple and straightforward way out of the darkness. Reaching back into her own early training, she categorically implored us to avoid falling for the *pathetic fallacy*, which to my young ears meant the sentimental ascription of meaning and agency to the myriad objects of the world. Soon I was ruthlessly noting every unscientific assignment of human characteristics to the non-human world I could find, exposing the soft ideological underbelly of whatever poetic claim was being made on the page. The pathetic fallacy in phrase and concept appealed to my desire to gain some conceptual leverage over the texts I was reading, and the derogatory secondary meaning of “pathetic” simply made the tropes of personification and anthropomorphism seem all the more self-evidently unworthy of serious attention. To Thoreau’s conceit about the corn “writing” I might well have said, smugly: “pathetic indeed.” With time, experience, and subtler teachers, I eventually modified my understanding to better accord with the complexity of John Ruskin’s original exploration of the way that the necessary “subjectivism” of art, if not reined in, can issue in absurd forms of prosopoeia that blur seemingly crucial distinctions between the world as it is

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and the world as we perceive it to be. Importantly for Ruskin, what was in some cases a form of falsity could in the right hands become a beautiful and profound rhetorical strategy for representing truth at a higher level than the coldly scientific. “The pathetic fallacy is powerful only so far as it is pathetic, feeble so far as it is fallacious, and, therefore, that the dominion of Truth is entire, over this, as over every other natural and just state of the human mind.”<sup>3</sup> Such nuance was often lost in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as what we might call an “anti-pathetic” reaction to the Romantic investment in the vitalism of the natural world became influential in American criticism and seeped into literary textbooks and the practices of modernist writers. Despite Ruskin’s parting cautions against denouncing a priori every instance of the pathetic and his deep opposition to simple forms of the fact/value distinction – he calls “objective” and “subjective” “two of the most objectionable words that were ever coined by the troublesomeness of metaphysicians” – his concept was ultimately conscripted to police the distinction between an objective view of the world, in which there are no nonhuman affects or agencies, and an expressive poetic one, in which we are temporarily permitted to pretend that there are.

Over the course of the past generation, however, the central premise of hardheaded “anti-patheticism” and affiliated attitudes – that nonhuman things, properly understood, are simply inert materials indifferently available for human social shaping – has begun to crumble in the face of strong challenges from an array of academic disciplines. Major philosophers, theorists, and historians, from Maurice Merleau-Ponty to Gilles Deleuze to Jane Bennett, have made thinkable (if not quite respectable) the notion that, to quote the last, “agentic capacity is...now differentially distributed across a wider range of ontological types.”<sup>4</sup> Contrary to what I had been taught at the outset of my critical career, there is no longer universal confidence in the idea that meaning can be disentangled from the putative objects that support them and the would-be subjects that project them: “things” and “humans” do not simply preexist their relations but are apprehended only as the precipitates of a prior condition of radical intermixture. At the same time, these thinkers leave little room for traditional defenses of natural and cultural interconnection that rely on a transcendental master signifier such as God, Nature, or Mind, ruling out any simple return even to the subtler forms of Ruskinian prescriptions concerning the proper compounding of Romantic inspiration and modern empiricism. To pin down the more radical forms of human–thing interactions, shared affects, and even harmonized voices, a rich new

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conceptual vocabulary has arisen to supplant the subject/object dualism of classic modern philosophy: for example, “intersubjectivity” (Husserl and Merleau-Ponty), “assemblages” (Deleuze and DeLanda), “vital materialism” (Bennett), “actantial networks” and “collectivities” (Latour), “mangles of practice” (Pickering), “naturecultures” (Haraway), “agential realism” (Barad), “hybrid geographies” (Whatmore), “new animism” (Abram), “partnership ethics” (Merchant), and “weak panpsychism” (Plumwood). Newer methods in sociology and science studies, like Actor-Network-Theory, are implicitly or explicitly keyed to such models of distributed agency and have become popular to the point of being incorporated into mainstream scholarly practice (Latour, Callon, Law). And environmental historians (Cronon, White, Worster, Steinberg) have self-consciously developed the theoretical and methodological tools for introducing a huge array of nonhuman actors into their popular historical narratives. For all of their important differences in genealogy, focus, and nuance, these scholars share a conviction that the habit of restricting the stories we tell about culture to the conventional human perspective alone leads to impoverished and inaccurate accounts of the world, in part because nonhuman entities possess at least a quasi-agency that must be taken into account and in part because “human agency” itself is a far less settled philosophical matter than our facile use of it sometimes suggests. None of these scholars would endorse a scientific critique of pathetic anthropomorphism such as the one I wielded as a teenager, and all are receptive to Thoreau’s radical suggestion that the authorship of some of the cultural texts that we take for granted as purely human social and cultural productions may in fact be shared with the material world, be it the grass or the atmosphere or any other nonhuman quasi-agent.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the significant scholarly groundwork that has been laid in this direction, particularly over the last decade, the implications of new theories of nonhuman agency have not yet been systematically read into a specifically *literary* history. The reasons for this are many and powerful, and it may be useful here to acknowledge them here as a measure of the challenge this book takes up. For most of its history, literary production (along with music and the visual arts) has epitomized the “higher” and more self-conscious forms of culture, while culture itself (following the classic formulation of Claude Lévi-Strauss) has been understood to be a universal phenomenon generated out of an act of explicit distinction from nature.<sup>6</sup> It follows that the combination “literary culture” is from the outset and in its most fundamental sense a site doubly alienated from the natural and the nonhuman. We do call its study the *humanities*,

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after all. What is more, literary humanists' primary object and medium is language, which in the standard structuralist view (and of most post-structuralist views built atop it) is an immaterial sign system produced arbitrarily by social convention and therefore incommensurable with the world of natural forces as described by science. Exacerbating matters is the mutual incomprehension and suspicion between C. P. Snow's "two cultures" – science and the humanities – which has profoundly shaped the twentieth-century academy and the knowledge it has produced and promulgated, progressively excluding empirical nature study from the humanistic curriculum (and vice versa). As a result of these institutional constraints, a humanist intellectual genealogy, and a deep suspicion of the ideological power of "the natural," literary criticism has tended to resolve environmental questions, when it treated them at all, into the formal or social and economic relations that structure languages and societies. In American literary scholarship, this has often meant that the nonhuman physical aspects of the American continent are assumed to appear in cultural productions only as occasions, backgrounds, or limits for the development of immaterial aesthetic, spiritual, and ideological discourses. On this nearly universal view, art and literature may well imitate the natural world or be about it, but they are never *of* it in the strong, positive sense of emerging through its agency.

To many, such a constraint on the ambit of literary studies will appear be simple common sense. Yet the articulation of new ontological frameworks in philosophy and their methodological exploration by environmental historians and historians of science offer no compelling reason to halt the cascading implications of a broader agentic array at the page margin. The first major aim of this book is to draw out those radical implications as fully as possible in exploring the viability of a more-than-human<sup>7</sup> literary-critical method. To be successful, such a project has to tackle basic questions about what may count as literary context, and indeed what "context" can mean in a world in which the material supports of any utterance or inscription can never be fully reduced to background. To proceed solely in such an abstract theoretical mode, however, would be to miss the invitation of radical materialism to recognize the contingent interactions of multiple agents over time – their *histories* – as central to their significance. The concepts that structure ecocritical theory – such as "environment," "ecology," "Nature," "matter," etc. – arise within historical ecologies and environments, and therefore a full understanding of ecocritical theory requires close engagement with the more-than-human contexts from which it emerged.

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While such more-than-human networks always have been and always will be forming, certain moments in this ongoing history have left behind more explicit, comprehensive, and influential records of the process than others. Thus the other goal of the book is to advance a more specific thesis about the role of the exploration and settlement of the “New World” as the catalyst for a dramatic and revealing transformation of the relation between words and things, one that has deep implications for our contemporary discussion of ecology and ecocriticism. Many literary traditions from the sixteenth century forward might provide illumination for such a thesis, but American literature, particularly in its pre–Civil War phase, is notable for the depth of the sustained attention it gives to the ways immigrant and frontier cultures dealt with the novelty of the environment into which they had come, as well as to how they tried to recreate their old environments under new conditions.<sup>8</sup> Before the era of European colonization, much of the messy complexity of the human–nonhuman entanglement had been, in Bruno Latour’s phrase, “black boxed” – that is, taken for granted for reasons of pragmatism or familiarity – by both European and native North American cultures. With the massive and relatively well-recorded epistemic disturbance of New World discovery and settlement, these black boxes had to be acknowledged and opened up to a degree and with a frequency much greater than before. The result was an age devoted to a wide array of epistemologies – scientific, literary, technological, economic, experiential, religious, and mystic – that register verbal and environmental changes with an unprecedented breadth and sensitivity. By reading the surviving texts that both record and instance such change, we have a rare opportunity to watch particular cultures and natures establish reciprocally deforming grips on one another.

The first task of *Environmental Practice and Early American Literature* involves identifying and addressing the key impediments to thinking of nonhumans as authors, whether these come from mundane institutional habits or deeper theoretical challenges; its second requires a careful examination of the material and historical contexts of particular texts, themselves selected from out of many potential topics for their relevance to established modes of literary scholarship. To these dual ends, each of the coming chapters centers on the eco-historical emergence of a different eco-theoretical issue. The logical first questions about more-than-human literary quasi-agents are: In what form is it possible for nonhuman agents to appear in written texts (beyond the paper and ink), and is it legitimate to understand this as genuine agency? My answer lies in Chapter 1’s exploration of tobacco’s unexpected subversion of the very logic of

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Western, writing-based dominance over the nonhuman world as it arose in the early colonial period. Undermining the metaphysics of presence long before Derrida made its contradictions explicit, tobacco exercises its quasi-agency by compelling the speech of the would-be sovereign and by foiling his every attempt to distinguish his “voice” from its own. Tobacco would seem to be an unusual case, and focusing on its subversive character leaves unexplained the historically real and indeed dominant concept of the nonhuman other as inert matter. Chapter 2, on the historical and philosophical dimensions of the “staple commodity,” details the extensive more-than-human networks that had to be suppressed before the “natural” object of commerce could be presented, shorn of its preexisting human and ecological entanglements. Exploring the logic of modern eating and the plantation agriculture supporting it, this chapter locates a key moment in the ideological conversion of the more-than-human world into the world of isolated subjects and objects, insisting that careful attention to the literary records of this phenomenon reveals its full ecological impossibility. Moving toward a different form of novelty, Chapter 3 investigates what happens when a well-known and deeply black-boxed object is thrust into a new ecological context and develops a new network of interactants, following the complexities unleashed by the materialization of the symbolic in the apple orchards of New England. Again exploring an imported environmental practice, in this case the mimetic structure found in a novel about a frontier beekeeper, Chapter 4 asks whether the more-than-human can intervene only at the level of utterance or can also shape literature at a higher level of complexity. The final chapter addresses the apparent disappearance of more-than-human literature as it moves into the modern period, pursuing this question through consideration of the large-scale actantial network embodied in the agricultural press of the nineteenth century.

Before we can get to those more detailed theoretical and historical studies, a fuller discussion of the ways in which my argument fits into existing larger conversations about the environmental humanities is in order. That discourse is often understood as an outgrowth of the study of nature writing (and indeed it has important genealogical connections to it), but in order to come to grips with the more-than-human world, this study will need to travel far beyond the precincts of traditional nature writing and into the archive of environmental practices, where “Nature” as a transcendental conceptual category is seldom seen. Part of the rationale for choosing such an archive – of plantation reports, horticultural manuals, and early U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) proposals – is pragmatic.

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It is in such venues that crucial interactions with “everyday nature” may be found. But such a move toward historically specific environmental practices and away from explicit ideological propositions about Nature – for example, “Nature is the symbol of the soul,” “in wildness in the preservation of the world,” “Nature teaches more than she preaches,” “All conservation of wildness is self-defeating,” etc. – also represents a deliberate intervention into the theoretical premises of contemporary ecocriticism. As several of the most astute recent eco-commentators have noted, invoking “Nature” as a transcendent, universal, and totalizing ground has numerous logical, ethical, and pragmatic drawbacks and must be thoroughly critiqued and mostly abandoned in favor of more-than-human alternatives.

## AFTER NATURE

The “Nature” usually spoken of in the post–Civil War tradition of American environmentalism, including many recent versions of ecocriticism, is a lost paradise. Most obviously, this historically specific concept of Nature responds to the ecological decline of particular nonhuman systems under the rapid growth of the U.S. population and economy – water pollution in the Northeast, topsoil loss in the Midwest, toxic mining tailings in the West, pesticide overuse across the agricultural landscape, and global climate change, to name but a few of the most significant episodes in the American environmental declension narrative. As Aldo Leopold put it in a resonant environmental reflection: “One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds.” This sense of being the helpless and solitary witness to a landscape of injury and loss accounts for the predominant effect of twentieth-century environmental writing, a mournful desire for lost plenitude. While the ecological losses are real, large, and far out of proportion to the human wealth for which they were incurred, it is important to ask whether a form of grieving that defines Nature as passive and victimized does not have a second, less obvious ideological motivation. According to the new materialisms cited previously, the primary, unendurable lesson of materialist ecology and ecological destruction – that humankind in body, mind, and spirit is irredeemably implicated in nonhuman processes – delivers its most grievous wound to the notion of autonomous, immaterial *human thought*. To recognize this is to begin to understand oneself not as “living in a world of wounds” but as oneself wounded, split open to the more-than-human in a constitutive and irremediable way. Such an intellectual trauma makes



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ecology the first and most thoroughgoing form of post- or antihumanism, one in which the “human” is not preserved in its cancellation (as in the technophilic versions of posthumanism) so much as revealed to be a fundamental error in thought. In this light, mourning a distinct and reified “Nature” is an essentially defensive and recuperative gesture: it grieves primarily for the ecological revolution’s *culturally* catastrophic destruction of the “natural order” in which humans are assigned a central and dominant role in the cosmos. The concept “Nature” as it is invoked in environmentalist discourse reflects an attempt to resecure a comforting anthropocentric fiction as quickly as the fleeting acknowledgment of ecological interdependence threatens it. In this deeply ecophobic movement, ecologism is reduced to a sense of *noblesse oblige* toward the natural world, well captured in a verse by George Herbert: “More servants wait on man / Than he’ll take notice of.”<sup>10</sup> (That poem goes on famously to state what could easily stand as the anti-slogan of ecological materialism: that “. . . man is one world, and hath / another to attend him.”)

This paradoxically anti-ecological “Nature” of environmentalism is present in the very précis of the inaugural (and long unsurpassed) statement of the modern environmentalist movement, George Perkins Marsh’s *Man and Nature* (1864):

The object of the present volume is: to indicate the character and, approximately, the extent of the changes produced by human action in the physical conditions of the globe we inhabit; to point out the dangers of imprudence and the necessity of caution in all operations which, on a large scale, interfere with the spontaneous arrangements of the organic or the inorganic world; to suggest the possibility and the importance of the restoration of disturbed harmonies and the material improvement of waste and exhausted regions; and, incidentally, to illustrate the doctrine, that man is, in both kind and degree, a power of a higher order than any of the other forms of animated life, which, like him, are nourished at the table of bounteous nature.<sup>11</sup>

What Marsh coyly alludes to as an “incidental doctrine” of human supremacy (but note its position in the rhetorical crescendo of the sentence) returns as a refrain throughout his book and, more importantly, has continued to persist through the majority of American environmentalism’s many theorizations. The managerial conservation movement Marsh presaged could of course scarcely recognize, much less advocate, the idea that nonhuman entities are mankind’s true commensals (to ecologize his table metaphor), with empirical claims to Being as indisputable as that of *homo sapiens*, much less that humankind might be understood as the meal at such a table. Neo-Romantic preservationism, despite its



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apparent retreat from the quantitative, managerial, and anthropocentric idiom of conservationism, clings even more fiercely to a vision of Nature as a sublime totality that confirms humankind's privileged access to infinitude. As John Muir wrote many times in many ways, "the clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness." Somewhat counterintuitively, then, Marsh's environmental thought provides the source of continuity between Romantic environmentalism on the one hand, and on the other the most compelling contemporary movement towards a new form of environmentalism, Environmental Justice (a late-twentieth-century phenomenon with analogues in progressive environmental reforms of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). In making few apologies for its prioritization of human needs, Environmental Justice is in at least one crucial respect openly traveling down the path laid out by our earliest environmentalists.<sup>12</sup>

Intellectual historian Carolyn Merchant's more thorough taxonomy of American environmentalisms comes to some of the same conclusions that I have gestured toward here: that whether emphasizing decline or recovery, American environmental narratives have rarely succeeded in articulating what she calls a true *partnership ethic* focused on the "mutual living interdependence" of human and nonhuman communities.<sup>13</sup> The branch of environmental thought that has tried hardest to avoid the "anthropocentric detour" around the brute determinacy of ecology for humankind is Deep Ecology. Expressly designed as a biocentric ethical program that places theoretically equal protections on all elements of the ecosphere (animals, plants, landscapes), the elaboration of Deep Ecological principles over the past three decades has made it clear that Deep Ecology (and associated formulations like Merchant's partnership ethic) can only bring the intrinsic anthropocentrism of environmentalism up to – and not beyond – its limit.<sup>14</sup> Its ultimate humanism, visible in its self-anointed role as "protector" of the earth, is no less significant for being denied and encrypted.<sup>15</sup> Predictably targeted by right/center neoliberals such as Ted Nordhaus, Michael Shellenberger, and Luc Ferry for what they see as fanatical, even totalitarian political values, Deep Ecology has also been more legitimately critiqued from the left precisely for its unwillingness to confess its contradictory nature. Slavoj Žižek, for example, notes with the deep-ecological Green movement in mind that "ecologically oriented 'decenterment' relies on a surreptitious *teleological* subordination of nature to man."<sup>16</sup> In attempting the impossible philosophical task of centering itself on de-centerment, Deep Ecology exposes itself to parody and derision. At the same time, every "hard-headed" philosophical or political

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critique that triumphantly names the flaw in Deep Ecology merely rediscovers what was evident at George Marsh's christening of the modern environmental project nearly 150 years and immense ecological destruction ago: that Leopold's challenge to "think like a mountain" is more difficult than even he imagined.

Such is the environmental impasse bequeathed to us in debates about anthropocentrism in environmental representation. On the one hand we have an earnest ecocentrism ill-equipped to reflect on its own first principles; on the other, a better-reasoned critique of "Nature" and of glib environmental ethics that ultimately opens no new method of engaging with the clamor of nonhuman-being to which ecocriticism *by definition* wishes to give a hearing.<sup>17</sup> Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature* is the most recent ecocritical work to really confront and clarify this predicament, and the work he does summarizing and critiquing the Romantic conception of Nature stands in constructive complement to the present study. But the major value of such an argument is also its limitation. In terminating the catastrophe-borne environmentalism of the modern West, Morton's ecocritique operates in the imaginary realm of an ecology-to-come where paradox rules and the more-than-human historical record (outside a selected range of scientific discourses such as evolution) has little significance. As a strenuous exercise of the eco-political imagination, such a project is absolutely vital. Yet it also risks understanding the more-than-human ecological world as an unfulfilled wish, to be approached after the collapse of capitalism, instead of the ontological truth of our present and past. This is the unresolved contradiction in Morton's proposed program of ecocritique, which is far from naïve about the enmeshment of the human and the nonhuman but that has little interest in the historical and phenomenological links that make up that mesh.<sup>18</sup>

Without opposing itself to the welcome theoretical advances of writers such as Morton or the laudable combination of environmental humanities and social justice found in the Environmental Justice Movement, this book aims to return to the one characteristic of ecocriticism that differentiates it from all other scholarly approaches: a willingness to entertain the possibility that some "human" cultural productions do not belong solely to human individuals and societies but in real and specifiable ways to a more-than-human community of humans and nonhuman others. The cogency of other ecocritical arguments makes it all the more important to remain faithful to that radical original commitment without falling into the outworn modes such scholars have exposed, such as the polite