



ECOLOGY

WITHOUT
NATURE

Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics

Timothy Morton

Ecology without Nature

♻️ RETHINKING ENVIRONMENTAL AESTHETICS

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For Kate

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Ecology without Nature



Toward a Theory of Ecological Criticism

Nobody likes it when you mention the unconscious, and nowadays, hardly anybody likes it when you mention the environment. You risk sounding boring or judgmental or hysterical, or a mixture of all these. But there is a deeper reason. Nobody likes it when you mention the unconscious, not because you are pointing out something obscene that should remain hidden—that is at least partly enjoyable. Nobody likes it because when you mention it, it becomes *conscious*. In the same way, when you mention the environment, you bring it into the foreground. In other words, it stops being the environment. It stops being That Thing Over There that surrounds and sustains us. When you think about where your waste goes, your world starts to shrink. This is the basic message of criticism that speaks up for environmental justice, and it is the basic message of this book.

The main theme of the book is given away in its title. *Ecology without Nature* argues that the very idea of “nature” which so many hold dear will have to wither away in an “ecological” state of human society. Strange as it may sound, the idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art. The book addresses this paradox by considering art above all else, for it is in art that the fantasies we have about nature take shape—and dissolve. In particular, the literature of the Romantic period, commonly seen as crucially about nature, is the target of my investigation, since it still influences the ways in which the ecological imaginary works.

Why Ecology Must Be without Nature

In a study of political theories of nature, John Meyer asserts that ecological writers are preoccupied with the “holy grail” of generating “a new and encompassing worldview.”¹ Whatever its content, this view “is regarded as capable of transforming human politics and society.”² For example, deep ecology asserts that we need to change our view from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism. The idea that a view can change the world is deeply rooted in the Romantic period, as is the notion of worldview itself (*Weltanschauung*). Coming up with a new worldview means dealing with how humans experience their place in the world. Aesthetics thus performs a crucial role, establishing ways of feeling and perceiving this place. In their collection of narratives on ecological value, Terre Slatterfield and Scott Slovic tell a story about President Clinton’s dedication of a wilderness area in Utah: “At the ceremony dedicating the new national monument [Grand Staircase-Escalante], . . . President [Clinton] held up a copy of [Terry Tempest Williams’s] *Testimony* and said, ‘This made a difference.’”³ Slatterfield and Slovic want to demonstrate how narrative is an effective political tool. But their demonstration also turns politics into an aesthetic realm. For Slatterfield and Slovic, narrative is on the side of the affective, and science, which they call a “valuation frame,” has blocked or is in “denial” about it.⁴ As well as producing arguments, ecological writers fashion compelling *images*—literally, a *view* of the world. These images rely upon a sense of *nature*. But nature keeps giving writers the slip. And in all its confusing, ideological intensity, nature ironically impedes a proper relationship with the earth and its life-forms, which would, of course, include ethics and science. Nature writing itself has accounted for the way nature gives us the slip. In *Reading the Mountains of Home*, for example, John Elder writes about how the narrative of nature appreciation is complicated by a growing awareness of “historical realities.”⁵ *Ecology without Nature* systematically attempts to *theorize* this complication.

Conventional ecocriticism is heavily thematic. It discusses ecological writers. It explores elements of ecology, such as animals, plants, or the weather. It investigates varieties of ecological, and ecocritical, language. *Ecology without Nature* does talk about animals, plants, and the weather. It also discusses specific texts and specific writers, composers and artists. It delves into all types of ideas about space and place (global, local, cosmopolitan, regionalist). Such explorations, while

valid and important, are not the main point of this book. The goal is to think through an argument about what we mean by the word *environment* itself.

Ecology without Nature develops its argument in three distinct stages: *describing*, *contextualizing*, and *politicizing*. The first stage is an exploration of environmental art. Along with books such as Angus Fletcher's *A New Theory for American Poetry*, which offers a poetics of environmental form, and Susan Stewart's *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, Chapter 1 develops a fresh vocabulary for interpreting environmental art. It moves beyond the simple mention of "environmental" content, and toward the idea of environmental form. Its scope is wide but precise. Without prejudging the results, or focusing on certain favorite themes, how does art convey a sense of space and place? Chapter 1 explores how ultimately, environmental art, whatever its thematic content, is hamstrung by certain formal properties of language. I consider the literary criticism of environmental literature itself to be an example of environmental art.

Chapter 1 lays out a vocabulary for analyzing works in a variety of media. I have taught several classes on kinds of literature that talk about some idea of environment, in which these terms have proved invaluable. But ways of reading the text intrinsically, with an eye to its paradoxes and dilemmas, are always in danger of themselves turning into the special, or utopian, projects they find in the texts they analyze. What I propose instead is that these close reading tools be used to keep one step ahead of the ideological forces that ecological writing generates. I outline a theory of *ambient poetics*, a materialist way of reading texts with a view to how they encode the literal space of their inscription—if there is such a thing—the spaces between the words, the margins of the page, the physical and social environment of the reader. This has a bearing on the poetics of sensibility out of which Romanticism emerged in the late eighteenth century. Environmental aesthetics is frequently, if not always, caught in this form of materialism.

Chapter 2 studies the history and ideology of concepts, beliefs, and practices that make up current obsessions with the environment in all aspects of culture, from wildlife club calendars to experimental noise music. *Ecology without Nature* is one of the few studies that speak about low and high environmental culture in the same breath, treading the path paved by such books as *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, which brought together a variety of thinkers in so-called theory and so-called ecocriticism. How did the current environmentalism arise, and

how does it affect our ideas about art and culture? This chapter analyzes the Romantic period as the moment at which the capitalism that now covers the earth began to take effect. Working forward from that moment, the book elaborates ways of understanding the dilemmas and paradoxes facing environmentalisms. In a somewhat more synthetic manner than David Harvey's *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, Chapter 2 accounts for why post-Romantic writing is obsessed with space and place. It employs my existing research on the history of consumerism, which has established that even forms of rebellion against consumerism, such as environmentalist practices, fall under the consumerist umbrella. Because consumerism is a discourse about identity, the chapter contains detailed readings of passages in environmentalist writing where a narrator, an "I," struggles to situate him- or herself in an environment.

Chapter 3 wonders where we go from here. What kinds of political and social thinking, making, and doing are possible? The book moves from an abstract discussion to a series of attempts to determine precisely what our relationship to environmental art and culture could be, as social, political animals. The chapter explores different ways of taking an artistic stand on environmental issues. It uses as evidence writers such as John Clare and William Blake, who maintained positions outside mainstream Romanticism. Chapter 3 demonstrates that the "Aeolian," ambient poetics outlined in Chapter 1—picking up the vibrations of a material universe and recording them with high fidelity—inevitably ignores the subject, and thus cannot fully come to terms with an ecology that may manifest itself in beings who are also persons—including, perhaps, those other beings we designate as animals.

Chapter 1 offers a theory of environmental art that is both an explication of it and a critical reflection. Chapter 2 offers a theoretical reflection on *this*, the "idea" of environmental art. And Chapter 3 is a further reflection still. This "theory of the theory" is political. Far from achieving greater levels of "theoretical" *abstraction* (abstraction is far from theoretical), the volume "rises" to higher and higher levels of *concreteness*. *Ecology without Nature* does not float away into the stratosphere. Nor does it quite descend to earth, since the earth starts to look rather different as we proceed.

Ecological writing keeps insisting that we are "embedded" in nature.⁶ Nature is a surrounding medium that sustains our being. Due to the properties of the rhetoric that evokes the idea of a surrounding

medium, ecological writing can never properly establish that this is nature and thus provide a compelling and consistent aesthetic basis for the new worldview that is meant to change society. It is a small operation, like tipping over a domino. My readings try to be symptomatic rather than comprehensive. I hope that by opening a few well-chosen holes, the entire nasty mess might pour out and dissolve.

Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration. Simone de Beauvoir was one of the first to theorize this transformation of actually existing women into fetish objects.⁷ *Ecology without Nature* examines the fine print of how nature has become a transcendental principle. This book sees itself, in the words of its subtitle, as rethinking environmental aesthetics. Environmental art, from low to high, from pastoral kitsch to urban chic, from Thoreau to Sonic Youth, plays with, reinforces, or deconstructs the idea of nature. What emerges from the book is a wider view of the possibilities of environmental art and criticism, the “widescreen” version of ecological culture. This version will be unafraid of difference, of nonidentity, both in textual terms and in terms of race, class, and gender, if indeed textual-critical matters can be separated from race, class, and gender. Ecocriticism has held a special, isolated place in the academy, in part because of the ideological baggage it is lumbered with. My intent is to open it up, to broaden it. Even if a Shakespeare sonnet does not appear explicitly to be “about” gender, nowadays we still want to ask what it might have to do with gender. The time should come when we ask of any text, “What does this say about the environment?” In the current situation we have already decided which texts we will be asking.

Some readers will already have pegged me as a “postmodern theorist” on whom they do not wish to waste their time. I do not believe that there is no such thing as a coral reef. (As it happens, modern industrial processes are ensuring they do not exist, whether I believe in them or not.) I also do not believe that environmental art and ecocriticism are entirely bogus. I do believe that they must be addressed critically, precisely because we care about them and we care about the earth, and, indeed, the future of life-forms on this planet, since humans have developed all the tools necessary for their destruction. As musician David Byrne once wrote, “Nuclear weapons could wipe out life on earth, if used properly.”⁸ It is vital for us to think and act in more general, wider terms. Particularism can muster a lot of passion, but it can

become shortsighted. The reactionary response to wind farms in the United Kingdom, for instance, has tried to bog down environmentalists with the idea that birds will be caught in the blades of the windmills. Yes, we need to cultivate a more comprehensive view of “humanity” and “nature.” Before I get accused of being a postmodern nihilist, I thought I would put my heart on the sleeve of this book. It is just that I aim to start with the bad new things, as Brecht once said, rather than try to return to the good old days. I wish to advance ecocritical thinking, not make it impossible. My work is about an “ecology to come,” not about no ecology at all. One should view it as a contribution, albeit a long-range one, to the debate opened up by environmental justice ecocriticism.

Actually, postmodernists have a few nasty surprises in store. I do not think there is a “better way” of doing the things I describe in artistic media. Much contemporary artistic practice is predicated on the idea that there *is* a better way of doing things, with an attendant aura of chic that puts down other attempts as less sophisticated. Supposedly, we should all be listening to experimental noise music rather than Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony. We should all be reading Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari instead of Aldo Leopold. From the point of view of *Ecology without Nature*, these texts have more similarities than differences.

I do, however, distinguish between postmodernism, as a cultural and ideological form, and *deconstruction*. *Ecology without Nature* is inspired by the way in which deconstruction searches out, with ruthless and brilliant intensity, points of contradiction and deep hesitation in systems of meaning. If ecological criticism had a more open and honest engagement with deconstruction, it would find a friend rather than an enemy. Ecological criticism is in the habit of attacking, ignoring or vilifying this potential friend. Walter Benn Michaels has tarred both deep ecology and deconstruction with the same brush.⁹ Hear, hear. There is indeed a connection between the two, and contra Michaels, I wish heartily to promote it. Just as Derrida explains how *différance* at once underlies and undermines logocentrism, I assert that the rhetorical strategies of nature writing undermine what one could call ecologocentrism.

Ecology without Nature tries not to foster a particular form of aesthetic enjoyment; at least not until the end, when it takes a stab at seeing whether art forms can bear the weight of being critical in the sense that the rest of the book outlines. No one kind of art is exactly

“right.” I do think that science would benefit from more grounding in philosophy and training in modes of analysis developed in the humanities. But in general the scientisms of current ideology owe less to intrinsically skeptical scientific practice, and more to ideas of *nature*, which set people’s hearts beating and stop the thinking process, the one of saying “no” to what you just came up with. Have a look at any recent edition of *Time* or *Newsweek*, which take *Nature*, one of the main science journals, even more seriously than the scientists. In the name of ecology, this book is a searching criticism of a term that holds us back from meaningful engagements with what, in essence, nature is all about: things that are not identical to us or our preformed concepts. For related reasons, I have avoided the habitual discussions of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism that preoccupy much ecological writing. These terms are not irrelevant. But they beg the question of what precisely counts as *human*, what counts as nature. Instead of pushing around preformed pieces of thought, I have chosen to hesitate at a more basic level, to lodge my criticism in the fissures between such categories.

Throughout this book, I read texts from the Romantic period, not only because they exemplify, but also because they do *not* accord with the various syndromes and symptoms that emerge from this very period. At the precise moment at which the trajectories of modern ecology were appearing, other pathways became possible. I have called on a multitude of art forms that deal with the idea of *environment*, even when this notion does not strictly entail nature in the way of rainforests or human lungs. A book so brief is only able to scratch the surface of the thousands of available examples. I hope that the ones I have chosen are representative, and that they illuminate the theoretical exploration of the idea of the environment. I have chosen to discuss authors of English literature with whom I am familiar: Blake, Coleridge, Levertov, Wordsworth, Mary Shelley, Thoreau, Edward Thomas. Though many agree that they are ecological authors, their attitudes are not simple and direct, however, especially in the contexts of the other writers I adduce. I employ a variety of philosophers to help make my case. It is to Marx and Derrida that I owe almost equal debts, for they have enabled me to create the frameworks with which the analysis proceeds. But I am also indebted to Benjamin, Freud, Heidegger, Lacan, Latour, Žižek, and in particular to Hegel, whose idea of the “beautiful soul” has become the single most important notion in the book. I use Theodor Adorno, whose writing has a strong, often explicit ecological flavor. Adorno