

# Ecocriticism in British Romantic Studies

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## Abstract

This article considers the theory and practice of ecological literary criticism, or “ecocriticism,” in British Romantic studies. Also known as “Romantic ecology” or “green Romanticism,” Romantic ecocriticism examines the ways in which Romantic writers and thinkers participated in and responded to the history of ecological science, environmental ethics, and environmentalist activism. The article begins by offering a general introduction to ecocriticism and its Romantic contexts. Subsequently, in a series of subtitled sections, it investigates the following topics: contemporary scientific discourses on nature; Romantic aesthetics and preservationist practices; Romantic naturalism and “deep ecology”; ecofeminist philosophy and Romantic gender politics; Romanticism and animal welfare; and the vexed relationship between Romantic “ecopoetics” and the politics of nature. The article concludes by examining some of the latest innovations in Romantic ecocriticism, including questions and problems associated with urban ecology, the politics of colonialism, and the concept of nature itself.

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## *Introduction to Ecocriticism*

As a field of literary inquiry, ecological criticism – or “ecocriticism,” as it is now commonly known – investigates literature in relation to the histories of ecological or environmentalist thought, ethics, and activism.<sup>1</sup> One of ecocriticism’s basic premises is that literature both reflects and helps to shape human responses to the natural environment. By studying the representation of the physical world in literary texts and in the social contexts of their production, ecocriticism attempts to account for attitudes and practices that have contributed to modern-day ecological problems, while at the same time investigating alternative modes of thought and behavior, including sustainable practices that would respect the perceived rights or values associated with non-human creatures and ecological processes. As Lawrence Buell puts it, literary texts function as “acts of environmental imagination” that may “affect one’s caring for the physical world,” making that world “feel more or less precious or endangered or disposable” (*Writing for an Endangered World* 2). Because Romantic literature often appears to value the non-human world most highly, celebrating nature as a beneficent antidote to the crass world of getting and spending, and lamenting its perceived destruction at the hands of technological industrialism and capitalist

consumerism, Romanticism has provided much fertile ground for ecocritical theory and practice. This article explores Romantic ecocriticism (also known as “Romantic ecology” or “green Romanticism”) with the intention of clarifying its basic contexts and concerns, considering in particular the relationships its practitioners posit between Romantic poetics and politics. Before turning to these topics in detail, however, it will be helpful to consider ecocriticism more generally, including the history of its establishment as a mode of academic inquiry, and some problems associated with its terminology, methods, and enabling assumptions.

Although Jonathan Bate deserves credit for pioneering the practice of ecocriticism in British Romantic Studies in the early 1990s,<sup>2</sup> the movement had its beginning somewhat earlier in the United States, where a diverse assortment of scholars worked in the 1970s and 1980s to investigate American nature writing in relation to explicitly ecological and environmentalist concerns. With the subsequent establishment of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in 1992, the founding of ASLE’s journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE)* in 1993, and the publication of *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* in 1996, ecocriticism quickly became a burgeoning field of inquiry in American academia and higher education.<sup>3</sup> Since its founding, ASLE has expanded into a truly international society, with chapters now established in Australia-New Zealand, Canada, India, Japan, Korea, and the United Kingdom, and a global membership of over a thousand scholars, creative writers, and activists. Recently, moreover, two new independent scholarly societies, the European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and Environment, and the Organization for Studies in Literature and Environment-India, have been founded to give ecocritics new venues for dialogue and the dissemination of research.

During its own brief history, the field of Romantic Studies has participated in and kept pace with these ecocritical developments, having convened a number of international conferences dealing with green Romanticism,<sup>4</sup> and having witnessed the successive publication of numerous ground-breaking monographs and special journal issues devoted to the topic.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, at least one anthology of critical theory – Peter Barry’s *Beginning Theory* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2002) – now includes an introductory chapter on ecocriticism, in which Bate’s work on Romantic ecology figures prominently (248–71).

If all of this scholarly activity is any indication, ecocriticism has not only arrived in academia and Romantic Studies, but it has already staked out a substantial and growing critical terrain – despite its very recent establishment as a mode of critical practice. As Buell notes, however, our present-day interest in ecocriticism is at least partly the product of a longer history predating both modern and Romantic contexts:

if environmental criticism today is still an emergent discourse it is one with very ancient roots. In one form or another the “idea of nature” has been a dominant

or at least residual concern for literary scholars and intellectual historians ever since these fields came into being. (*Future of Environmental Criticism* 2)<sup>6</sup>

One should note at the outset that “ecocriticism,” like all critical keywords, is a problematic and contested term. Consider, first of all, the subject of its discourse. Whereas, for example, feminist criticism and postcolonial criticism respectively presuppose feminist and postcolonial writing subjects, ecological criticism purports to speak not on behalf of a human constituency, but on behalf of non-human organisms and the biological processes that sustain them. As Bate aptly notes, the “ecocritical project always involves *speaking for* its subject rather than *speaking as* its subject” (*Song of the Earth* 72). Ecocritics must thus consider crucial questions of voice and representation, including potential problems associated with anthropomorphism (since, when speaking about the non-human, the writing subject cannot avoid projecting his or her own human and cultural concerns upon a realm that is difficult, if not impossible, to know with objective certainty). Furthermore, because the prefix “eco” tends rather narrowly to connote “the ‘natural’ *rather than* the ‘built’ environment,” ecocriticism runs the risk of ignoring, to its detriment, the inescapable interpenetration of urban and exurban, or human and non-human, realities and concerns (Buell, *Future of Environmental Criticism* 12, 22–3).

Putting these problems aside for the moment only, one might also note that the singular term “ecocriticism” also problematically suggests a homogeneity or consensus of critical practice that is belied by the field’s internal diversity, where dialogue and debate are common and polemical argument *de rigueur*. As a possible alternative to “ecocriticism,” “environmental criticism” is, for reasons similar to those already mentioned, not much better; indeed, because “environment” “presupposes an image of man at the centre, *surrounded by things*” (Bate, *Song of the Earth* 107), while implying human mastery over, and possession of, nature (Serres 7), numerous commentators have rejected the term as arrogantly human-centered or “anthropocentric.” Other suggested alternatives to “ecocriticism” have included “*literary-environmental studies, literary ecology, literary environmentalism,*” and “*green cultural studies*” (Heise 506), as well as “physical criticism” (Luisser 13) and even the rather awkward coinage “Enviromanticism” (Pinkerton 2–7). But none of these terms are immune to semantic problems; and since frequency of usage tends to determine terminological trends, “ecocriticism” is probably here to stay – despite the fact that the term may be “just as troublesome as it is helpful” (Phillips viii).

### *Romanticism and the Rise of Ecological Awareness*

Ecocritical practice is generally motivated by a sense of political urgency associated with the desire to investigate and remedy current environmental problems such as threats associated with anthropogenic pollution, deforestation, species extinction, and climate change. We witness some of

the first instances of a developing awareness of nature's ecological fragility, and the need for humans to reconsider their environmental practices, even prior to the British Romantic period. In the late seventeenth century, for example, the naturalist John Evelyn warned the Royal Society that English deforestation had reached epidemical proportions; in his book *Sylva, or A Discourse of Forest-Trees* (1664), he thus advocated the creation of laws designed to ensure "the preservation of our Woods" (Evelyn 108). And although human-caused air pollution was not widely understood as such until the late Victorian period, when John Ruskin published his pioneering work *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* (1884), anthropogenic toxins had been compromising air quality in and around London since the Medieval period (Ackroyd 431–8). But it was during the Romantic era, which witnessed a sharp rise in urban populations<sup>7</sup> and an increasingly industrialized economy, that environmental problems became much more severe and noticeable, taking on a new sense of urgency. Despite his modern reputation as nature's Romantic adversary, even William Blake complained about the "cities turrets & towers & domes / Whose smoke destroyd the pleasant gardens & whose running Kennels / Chokd the bright rivers" (lines 167–9);<sup>8</sup> and Percy Bysshe Shelley lamented both the contaminated water and "the putrid atmosphere of crowded cities," which he insightfully attributed to urban "filth" and "the exhalations of chemical processes" (qtd. in Morton, *Shelley* 133).<sup>9</sup> It is no wonder, then, that "the word 'pollution' took on its modern sense" during the Romantic period (Bate, *Song of the Earth* 137).

It was also during the Romantic era that the reality of species extinction first came to popular consciousness. In *The Natural History of Selborne* (1788–89), for example, Gilbert White noted that excessive hunting had eradicated local populations of partridges and red deer, and had caused the local "heath-cock, black-game, or grouse" to become "extinct" (White 21–22). The discovery of a diverse assortment of fossil remains in Europe and North America, ranging from "the strange and foreign forms / Of sea-shells" (250, lines 373–4) Charlotte Smith describes in *Beachy Head* (1807) to the bones of immense mammoths and dinosaurs, indicated "that species extinction could and did occur" in nature's realm (Hargrove, "Foundations" 164), which was previously thought to embody an unchanging perfection and plenitude associated with the providential order of creation. While George Cuvier attempted to reconcile geological science with anthropocentric biblical orthodoxy by linking the existence of fossils to catastrophic past events such as Noah's flood, geologists like James Hutton saw in the fossil record of extinct forms empirical proof that "the earth was far older than the 6,000 years assumed by the bible" (Ruston 176),<sup>10</sup> having "[w]ith respect to human observation . . . neither a beginning nor an end" (qtd. in Buchan 296).<sup>11</sup> Such an insight was certainly humbling. By accounting for the reality of species extinction and other profound transformations in the earth's natural history, moreover, Romantic-period geological science helped to encourage a new understanding of nature's fragility, thereby playing a key role in the

cultivation of what Eugene C. Hargrove calls “wildlife protection attitudes” (“Foundations” 164).

But it was Thomas Malthus’s widely read *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) that attracted widespread attention to the topic of extinction, giving it a particularly human relevance. A few years prior to the publication of this work, C. F. Volney had warned European readers that their own civilization might one day fall as a result of human social and environmental folly, just as the Ottoman dominions and the civilizations of Egypt and Syria had fallen in the past, leaving “rooted up trees, and ravaged . . . pastures,” as well as “villages deserted, and cities in ruin.” If this modern prophecy was not disturbing enough, Malthus’s predictions for the future were even more dire. According to Malthus, human population growth could not ultimately keep pace with food production (since populations increase geometrically or exponentially, while the production of food necessary to support rising populations increases only arithmetically). Among the implications of this frightening demographic insight was the notion that *Homo sapiens* was itself subject to ecological limits, that humans – despite their perceived status as privileged lords of earthly creation – were not immune to the possibility of future extinction through widespread starvation. Anticipating late-twentieth-century discourses regarding the global population crisis,<sup>12</sup> Malthus’s controversial insights played an important role in encouraging the development of ecological awareness during the Romantic period.<sup>13</sup>

### *Romantic Ecology and Enlightenment Science*

One should be careful, however, to avoid anachronism in discussions of issues germane to “Romantic ecology,” for ecological science as such is largely the product of a post-Darwinian paradigm of nature. Indeed, the modern concept of “ecology” was not introduced until 1866, when Charles Darwin’s German disciple, Ernst Haeckel, first coined the word itself to identify “that branch of biology which deals with the relations of living organisms to their surroundings” (*OED*). It is to ecological science that we owe our modern understanding that all organisms, objects, and processes in a given environment constitute, through their complex mutual relations, an “ecosystem” in which “every thing is connected to everything else” (Commoner 33).<sup>14</sup> According to this holistic model of nature, if we interfere with or change any single part of a given habitat we will introduce a ripple effect that inadvertently transforms the whole habitat (as in cases where the destruction of a single species affects the predators and prey associated with it in the larger “food chain” – thereby also affecting the various species that feed and feed upon these organisms in turn).

But if ecology is a concept that post-dates the Romantic period, “the *idea* of ecology is much older than the name,” its modern history having begun in the mid-eighteenth century with the quasi-scientific paradigm of “nature’s economy,” according to which all earthly organisms were thought to co-exist

in a system of complex interdependencies comprising “an interacting whole” (Worster x). This new holistic paradigm was given its preeminent articulation in Linnaeus’s essay “The Oeconomy of Nature” (1749), which was “widely read throughout Europe and America” (33).<sup>15</sup> Later in the eighteenth century, Joseph Priestley’s experiments in the chemistry of air helped to demonstrate “that animals needed oxygen but exhaled carbon, while plants needed carbon and gave out oxygen” (Ruston 26),<sup>16</sup> thereby lending further support to the notion that all biological entities exist in a web of mutual interdependency. Gilbert White explicitly endorses the concept of nature’s economy in order to validate the importance of even the “lowliest” creatures, arguing that the “most insignificant insects and reptiles are of much more consequence, and have much more influence in the economy of nature, than the incurious are aware of,” and adding by way of example that “Earth-worms, though in appearance a small and despicable link in the chain of nature, yet, if lost, would make a lamentable chasm” (196). The holistic concept of nature’s economy went on to exercise an important influence upon Romantic-era poetics.<sup>17</sup> Erasmus Darwin invoked it, for instance, as a central paradigm in “The Economy of Vegetation,” the first book of his immensely popular gardening poem *The Botanic Garden* (1791).<sup>18</sup> Arguably, moreover, Coleridge’s holistic concept of “the one life within us and abroad” and Blake’s proposition that “every thing that lives, / Lives not alone, nor for itself” both explore the paradigm of nature’s economy, emphasizing the interconnection of all earthly creatures and processes.<sup>19</sup>

This holistic paradigm should be scrutinized closely, however, for “economy” – which shares the same root as “ecology” – carries some important political implications in addition to its naturalistic ones. According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s etymology, “The word Economy, or Œconomy, is derived from *oikos*, a house, and *vouos*, law” (“Discourse on Political Economy” 367). Practitioners of Romantic ecocriticism often dwell upon the former term in this etymological pair, celebrating the Greek root *oikos* as earthly “dwelling,” and invoking it to suggest a material alternative to the idealist notion that the Earth is a mere way station en route to our true, heavenly dwelling place (an idealism tending to devalue material existence in favor of a spiritualized or anti-natural concept of human being). And yet, by pointing toward the realm of politics, Rousseau’s etymological reference to “law” suggests that something potentially more ominous may haunt the overall meaning of nature’s “economy.” Indeed, according to William Howarth, the Greek word for “economy,” *oikonomia*, refers not only to the management of a household or dwelling place but to the idea of house mastery (73). When extrapolated from the human household to the larger realm of nature, “economy” thus suggests an anthropocentric management of, or human mastery over, the *oikos*.

This assumption of human mastery suggests that “nature’s economy” maintained important conceptual and methodological allegiances to the Enlightenment’s scientific episteme (the contemporary system of thought

that “valorize[ed] . . . reason at the expense of other aspects of self and the nature within which that self emerges” [Lussier 51–2]). By firmly demarcating the human subjective world from the external realm of objects, classical science placed human subjectivity in privileged opposition to the observable universe, positing that the latter and its governing laws could be understood through observation and experimentation. According to this tradition, which derives from Francis Bacon’s empiricism, Isaac Newton’s physics, and René Descartes’s philosophical concept of a mechanistic, clock-work universe inhabited by thinking subjects, humans are radically separate from nature, and our proper role is to “dominate and appropriate,” to become the masters and possessors of the natural world (Serres 5–6). As the Baconian natural philosopher Joseph Glanville put it, the main purpose of scientific inquiry was to consolidate and extend “the *Empire of Man over inferior Creatures*” (188) by teaching humans the uses to which all objects might be put. To quote Mark Lussier, empirical science reduced “nature to inanimate matter, allowing it to function simply as grist for the mill of the industrial revolution” (49). If “man’s presumption of his own apartness from nature is the prime cause of the environmental degradation of the earth” (Bate, *Song of the Earth* 36), then the subject/object dualism informing empiricism was dangerous indeed.<sup>20</sup>

To some extent, however, the holistic concept of nature’s economy brought the subject/object opposition informing scientific inquiry into question, for if all things, *including humans*, are interconnected and interdependent, then the notion of scientific objectivity – with its assumption of the thinking mind’s separation from the world – its “utter heterogeneity from blind physical nature” (C. Taylor 347) – had to be reconsidered. But at the most basic level, eighteenth-century theorists of nature’s economy, like modern-day scientific ecologists, remained committed to the empirical method, their holistic concept of nature implying not an outright rejection of empiricism but a modification of its theoretical assumptions. And if the Romantic poets were attracted to and influenced by the holistic concept of nature’s economy, then, despite their well-known criticisms of science, they too must have retained some allegiance to scientific thinking. Lussier is thus correct to question the reductive notion that the “Romantics rejected . . . the foundations of science itself” (Eichner qtd. in Lussier 18).<sup>21</sup> Noting that Wordsworth called the poems in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) “experiments” (26), and that he saw scientific and literary pursuits as potentially complementary, Lussier asserts:

the disinterest of Romantic poets is not to science *per se*, but towards a science incapable of envisioning the type of events they perceive recurring in the mind’s engagement with, and emergence within, material reality. (18)

Accordingly, the Romantic deconstruction of Enlightenment science’s subject/object dualism – Romanticism’s understanding of the complex *interpenetration* of subject and object worlds – anticipates postmodern theories

of relativism and quantum dynamics, functioning thus to “re-fus[e] the split between observer and observed, subject and object, species and biosphere, consciousness and cosmos” (44).<sup>22</sup>

### *Picturesque Aesthetics and Romantic Ecology*

Despite Romanticism’s discomfort with scientific methods that severed human subjects from the realm of an objectified nature, Romantic nature writing and aesthetic practices did not easily escape the Enlightenment’s dualistic logic. Indeed, the contemporary craze for picturesque travel and its literary by-products – important forerunners of modern-day “ecotourism” culture – very much presupposed the subject/object oppositional dynamic so central to the scientific study of nature. Popularized in the writings of William Gilpin and such emulators as Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price,<sup>23</sup> picturesque aesthetics took principles from contemporary landscape painting and applied them to nature itself: the picturesque tourist would seek out particular natural settings in order to experience their sublimity and beauty, using optic devices like the Claude glass<sup>24</sup> to frame views or “prospect” for maximum aesthetic effect. As Bate observes, the “classic picturesque view is seen from a ‘station,’ a raised promontory in which the spectator stands above the earth, looking down over it in an attitude of Enlightenment mastery” (*Song of the Earth* 132). According to the economy of the picturesque gaze, therefore, “the perceiving, dividing eye stands above and apart from its ‘prospect’ ” (148). Although picturesque tourists were frequently motivated by a love of nature, they converted “natural objects into aesthetic instruments for the production of aesthetic experiences” (Hargrove, “Foundations” 172), becoming, in the process, avid *consumers* of the natural world. By turning natural settings – mountain ranges, lakes, rivers, woodlands, and pastoral vales – into aesthetic commodities or art objects, while at the same time pretending to value such settings most highly, “the picturesque took to an extreme a tendency of Enlightenment thought which has had catastrophic ecological consequences” (Bate, *Song of the Earth* 136).

But this ecocritical condemnation of the picturesque deserves at least some qualification. According to Hargrove, indeed, the contemporary fascination for “picturesque beauty” contributed in important ways to the development of attitudes favorable to wildlife protection:

In landscape . . . painting and poetry, the general desire that things of beauty be preserved was extended to include objects of beauty in nature, either actually represented in paintings and poetry or capable of being so represented. Natural history scientists . . . developed a common aesthetic attitude toward nature with painters and poets as a result of the artistic training they routinely undertook in order to be able to illustrate their fieldwork. (“Foundations” 160)

Hargrove resists the common notion that our modern-day preservationist practices stem directly from the development of ecological science in the

Victorian period, arguing instead that their historical roots are properly located in eighteenth-century aesthetic theory and practice. Thus he proposes that “our present wildlife protection attitudes would have developed even if ecology and evolution had not become part of biological science” (153).

An analysis of Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) might support this contention, for in this gothic novel Emily St. Aubert’s ardent love of nature’s sublimity and beauty is of a piece with her desire to preserve and protect the noble stands of trees that adorn her father’s estate (13).<sup>25</sup> Some historians suggest indeed that the kind of aesthetic sensibility Radcliffe attributes to *Udolpho*’s heroine helped, in its wider social manifestation, to encourage the legislative institutionalization of preservationist practices. William Cronon, for example, links the establishment of America’s first national parks with the Romantic desire to protect sublime and beautiful landscapes. This aspect of Romanticism’s ecological legacy, though to some extent admirable, merits critical scrutiny, for by fetishizing wilderness, the “Romantic Sublime” – a crucial component of picturesque aesthetics – tended to devalue or ignore non-spectacular landscapes like boreal forests and wetlands, the protection of which, as we now know, is vitally important to the Earth’s ecological health.<sup>26</sup> By advocating the protection of wilderness in distant parklands, people could feel more comfortable about exploiting, destroying, or disregarding urban and suburban ecosystems as well. Simultaneously enabling and undermining practices of ecological preservation, in short, the Romantic aesthetic sensibility remains an ambivalent feature of Romantic ecology.

### *Romanticism and “Deep Ecology”: The Critique of Instrumental Value*

Not unlike the picturesque tourists who “used” nature to trigger aesthetic experiences, Enlightenment natural philosophers sought above all to discover and demonstrate the usefulness of objects in nature’s realm. In doing so, they *instrumentalized* the things of this world (that is, they valued non-human objects and organisms primarily for the “useful” roles they could be made to play as “instruments” promoting human sustenance, wellbeing, and progress). Supported by technological innovation, natural philosophy thus helped to promote human mastery over nature, a state of affairs Bacon celebrated as the “dominion of the human race” (4:114). This anthropocentric instrumentalism was not entirely new of course; rather, it was co-extensive with, and worked alongside, earlier Biblical doctrine, which instructed humans to “subdue” nature, “have dominion” over it, and make use of its manifold productions (*Holy Bible*, Gen. 1.26–28).<sup>27</sup> According to the human-centered instrumentalism informing contemporary discourses of natural philosophy and religion, nature was not valuable in and of itself but merely as a means to an all-too-human end; existing simply as a commodity or “material *resource*,” in other words, it was “devoid of intrinsic value” (Oelschlaeger 94).

Because human dominion and nature's utility are important themes in William Blake's *The Book of Thel* (1789), a brief consideration of this poem can help to illustrate the conflict between instrumental and intrinsic modes of valuing the non-human world. Set in the pastoral Vales of Har, *Thel* portrays a series of encounters between its eponymous female protagonist and various sentient but non-human creatures. Although she is a young shepherd, Thel is haunted by a sense of her own uselessness, and she projects this subjective concern upon everything she meets in Har. In her first encounter, she engages in conversation with a "Lilly," a personified flower who seems to echo Thel's own sense of purposelessness when she calls herself a "weed" (p. 4, plate 1, line 16), a form of plant life generally deemed useless, if not altogether antithetical to human instrumental ends. In response to the flower's self-depreciation, however, Thel defends the Lilly as a valuable denizen of Har, observing that it feeds the lamb and cleanses its mouth of "all contagious taints," that it purifies the "golden honey," and that it "Revives the milked cow, & tames the fire-breathing steed" (p. 4, plate 2, lines 5–10). Although Thel's praise for these "valuable services" (Mellor, *Blake's Human Form Divine* 24) brings the Lilly's self-proclaimed status as a useless "weed" very much into question, it does not grant the flower any *inherent* worth: Thel values the Lilly merely for the various functions it performs in relation to other creatures in the economy of nature – all of whom ultimately exist to serve Thel herself, who occupies a "pearly throne" (p. 4, plate 2, line 12) at or near the summit of Har's cosmic hierarchy. During the course of the poem, Thel certainly comes to realize that "every thing that lives, / Lives not alone, nor for itself" (p. 5, plate 3, lines 26–7), learning that all creatures exist, in other words, to serve the needs of others in nature's complex economy of interrelationship and interdependency. But in order to understand and appreciate the possibility that all creatures are also imbued with *intrinsic* value, she must learn a lesson central to *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (p. 45, plate 25) and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (p. 51, plate 8, line 10): that "every thing that lives is Holy" – that value inheres, in other words, *in* each living being and not simply in the functions it performs in relation to other entities.<sup>28</sup>

Although Blake is notorious for his anthropomorphic system of cosmology, in which "every thing is Human" (*Jerusalem* p. 180, plate 34, line 48),<sup>29</sup> *Thel's* critique of instrumental value anticipates the twentieth-century concerns of "deep ecology," a radically egalitarian or "biocentric" discourse that "accords nature ethical status at least equal to that of humans" (Nash 9–10). Following the pioneering work of Arne Naess, deep ecologists generally differentiate their practice from mainstream or "shallow" modes of environmentalism by criticizing the latter's instrumentalist approach to the conservation or preservation of nature. Simply stated, an advocate of "deep ecological" practice does not strive to protect the non-human world because human life depends upon nature's wellbeing (regardless of the important truth of this proposition); rather, the deep ecologist's concern for nature

springs from an acknowledgment that all creatures deserve human respect and care because, as “teleological centers of purpose,” they are valuable in and of themselves and without regard to their (usually anthropocentric) uses (Hargrove, “Animal Welfare Ethics” xvii).<sup>30</sup>

But deep ecology’s thoroughgoing critique of anthropocentric value systems is not without its own attendant problems. For one thing, some form of instrumentalist evaluation and manipulation of the natural world is inevitable, since all “human beings . . . must use nonhuman nature instrumentally for their survival to some extent or other” (Biehl 52). Furthermore, value itself – whether conceived in instrumentalist or in non-instrumentalist terms – is a distinctively human concept. As J. Baird Callicott observes, “there can be no value apart from an evaluator,” because “all value is as it were in the eye of the beholder” (48). In other words, although the deep ecological critique of instrumental value involves a putative critique of anthropocentrism, it cannot escape the fact that the very notion of value is thoroughly human-centered. And even in instances where humans claim to value non-human creatures for their own sake, they often engage in “big-organism chauvinism” (Wilson 178), valuing large and aesthetically pleasing organisms over and above such things as vermin, weeds, and bugs (not to mention the kinds of disease-causing pathogens that Alan Bewell examines in his eco-materialist study *Romanticism and Colonial Disease*). In their panegyrics to nature, major Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge are not immune to such chauvinistic “speciesism.” But nature is, of course, not all daffodils and nightingales. Hence, poets like Blake – who celebrates such things as earwigs, maggots, fleas, tape-worms, and slugs (*Milton* p. 124, plate 27, lines 11–24) – and Robert Burns – who brings poetic attention to such unlikely creatures as mice and lice (135–7) – provide alternatives to an idealistic Romantic naturalism that “blithely disregard[s] all that is hateful in nature,” retaining “only the harmony, the beauty and the peace” (Ferry 133).

Deep ecology’s critique of anthropocentric systems of value that instrumentalize non-human creatures and natural environments has led some of its practitioners to advocate an alternative mode of identification with nature, one that eschews not only instrumental rationality but, arguably, any mode of self-reflexive engagement. According to Naess, in order to avoid tyrannizing over the non-human realm, human beings must adopt an ethic of “identification” with all things, a mode of relationship involving “an extension of sympathy that reaches so far and becomes so constant that the self loses any desire to differentiate between itself and the world” (Pite 362). In this “return to a monistic, primal identification of humans and the ecosphere” (Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 21) – in which the ecospheric whole is understood as a contextual extension of the human self – deep ecology certainly challenges the oppositional subject/object dynamic informing Enlightenment science. But such a profound identification with nature also entails a quasi-mystical surrender of critical self-reflexivity that has troubling

political implications. As John S. Dryzek succinctly notes, “willing immersion in a larger ‘Self’ is . . . surely the essence of totalitarianism” (105). As radical supporters of republican politics and the individual “rights of man,” many of Britain’s Romantic authors, including Blake, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, would likely have been troubled by this aspect of deep ecological philosophy.

### *Ecofeminism and Romantic Literature*

Like modern-day champions of deep ecology and the Romantic poets who anticipated aspects of their philosophy, ecological feminists – or “ecofeminists,” as they are commonly known – are in general highly critical of instrumental rationality and the role it plays in naturalizing practices of human “dominion” over nature. But according to ecofeminism, the generalizing tendency to see *anthropocentrism* as a major cause of the Earth’s ecological despoliation is dangerously imprecise: a closer analysis suggests that such despoliation in fact has a crucial *androcentric* or masculinist philosophical and practical underpinning. Drawing on insights derived from traditional feminism as well as environmental ethics and ecological science, ecofeminists identify parallels between the domination of nature and the oppression of women in patriarchal societies, seeing the two processes as complexly linked and mutually enabling.<sup>31</sup>

The earliest forms of modern ecofeminism often attempted to resist this two-pronged masculinist subjugation of nature and women by radicalizing traditional notions of femininity. According to this line of inquiry, women’s biological roles as mothers and nurturers – roles understood as stemming not from social conditioning but from “the truths of naturalism and the holistic proclivities of women” (qtd. in Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 24)<sup>32</sup> – make women supremely qualified to care for the natural world. Here, the feminine caretaker of hearth and home becomes the properly qualified caretaker of the *oikos* itself, the one best qualified to heal the biosphere in the wake of its violation at the hands of men and patriarchal systems of theory and practice. Grounded in essentialist concepts of gendered identity, however, this kind of ecofeminism would have greatly troubled the Romantic-era feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, whose manifesto *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) argued convincingly that ideals of femininity were primarily the products not of “nature” or biology but of faulty patriarchal education and social conditioning. In sharp contrast to Anna Letitia Barbauld’s mainstream feminist argument that “injured Woman” (35–6, line 1) could best defeat patriarchal oppression by refusing rationality (which Barbauld aligned with a corrupt masculine sphere) and asserting instead her “native empire o’er the breast” (line 4) (the feminine realm of emotion, which women could manipulate to exercise control over the men in their lives), Wollstonecraft wanted women to enjoy equal access to the enlightened rationalist education her society conventionally reserved for men. To achieve

emancipation, she argued, women should resist “mistaken notions of female excellence” (174), notions grounded in an essentialist correlation of female biology, moral purity, emotionality, and domesticity. Following in a tradition pioneered by Wollstonecraft, the most recent and sophisticated ecofeminist scholarship maintains an insistent critical focus on the social construction of women’s identities and roles,<sup>33</sup> while also demonstrating how the patriarchal systems of thought that have subordinated women have simultaneously facilitated the subjugation of a feminized realm of nature.

For Romantic ecocritics, however, Wollstonecraft’s feminist championing of reason requires at least some qualification, for the rationalist tradition informing scientific inquiry has itself played a role in promoting and maintaining the parallel subjugation of women and nature.<sup>34</sup> As Carolyn Merchant has shown, Bacon, the father of empirical science, envisioned nature not only as feminine but as demonic, a secretive entity who could be compelled to reveal her knowledge to the masculine scientific inquisitor in a process of interrogation resembling the contemporary torture of witches. Hence, Bacon’s occasional use of the phrase “*natura torturata*” (Rigby 19). This inquisitorial process is often explicitly sexualized, as, for example, when Bacon describes scientific inquiry as a “penetration” of nature’s “womb” (50, 100, 114). During the Romantic period, the great chemist Sir Humphry Davy used similar masculinist rhetoric, advising his fellow natural philosophers to “interrogate” a feminized nature “with power, not simply as a scholar, passive and seeking only to understand her operations, but rather as a master, active with his own instruments” (qtd. in Mellor, *Mary Shelley* 93).<sup>35</sup>

Among the major British authors of the Romantic period, Mary Shelley best understood the adverse sexual politics informing the use of such rhetoric. In *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* (1818, 1831), Shelley’s male scientists often use metaphors of mastery and sexual penetration in reference to their practice: echoing Bacon and Davy, Professor Waldman speaks of the “miracles” performed by modern scientists who “penetrate into the recesses of nature, and show how she works in her hiding places”; and Victor Frankenstein, describing himself as “always having been imbued with a fervent longing to penetrate the secrets of nature,” exclaims that he has “pursued nature to her hiding places” with “unrelaxed and breathless eagerness” (47, 39, 54).<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, Frankenstein imagines nature as actively resisting his sexualized advances: as if averse to his rational inquisition, she hides behind “fortifications and impediments” in order to prevent him and other scientists from entering her private “citadel” (40).

What do these related sexual and military metaphors tell us about Frankenstein’s overall attitude toward nature? Far from being based upon a sympathetic identification with his object of study, he approaches nature as a scientific *conquistador*, desiring, in a spirit of Baconian enterprise, to dominate and control nature for his own instrumental ends. The ghastly results of his endeavor are, of course, well-known. Negating the female role

in procreation, Frankenstein single-handedly creates a “monster” who murders everyone he loves, leaving him destitute of family and friends, and wandering through a desolate landscape of ice and snow.<sup>37</sup> Among the victims of Frankenstein’s scientific hubris are the women in his life: first his family’s loyal servant, Justine Moritz, and finally his beloved bride, Elizabeth Lavenza. Anticipating the early ecofeminist critique of masculinist rationality, Shelley’s novel thus allegorically correlates the scientific domination of nature and the violation of women, demonstrating the harsh consequences of “a masculine science founded on torture, cruelty, and rape” (Lussier 169).

Other notable works that explore the sexual politics of nature include Erasmus Darwin’s *The Botanic Garden* (1791) and Wordsworth’s “Nutting” (1800). In Book 1 of the former work, Darwin celebrates the masculinist engineer whose scientific and technological manipulations of the natural world contribute to the progressive improvement of human art and commerce. As Darwin’s speaker informs a personified Mother Nature, this “Mechanic Genius” gains his knowledge by “Pierc[ing] all your springs, and open[ing] all your wells” (“Economy of Vegetation” 3.324). Darwin further develops the passage’s phallic and yonic sexual imagery by depicting quasi-military “legions” of male canal builders as they tread Nature’s “swampy heath,” “Pierc[ing] with sharp spades the tremulous peat beneath” (3.463–4). These activities “alarm” not only the feminized earthly peat but “a thousand [surrounding] hills” (3.333),<sup>38</sup> suggesting (as in Shelley’s *Frankenstein*) that the sexualized encounter between man and nature is not consensual but violently rapacious.

In Wordsworth’s “Nutting,” which is also replete with imagery of sexual violence, the speaker retrospectively recounts a childhood outing in which he unaccountably destroyed a “virgin scene” (153–4, line 21). Like Victor Frankenstein, however (and unlike Darwin’s Mechanic Genius), Wordsworth’s speaker experiences a sense of guilt and remorse as a result of his environmentally destructive behavior. Thus the poem ends by articulating an overt moral: “move along these shades / In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand / Touch – for there is a spirit in the woods” (lines 54–6).<sup>39</sup> If Merchant is correct in her notion that Western science has caused the “death of nature” by constructing the cosmos as a lifeless machine – the clockwork universe of Descartes and the eighteenth century’s Deistical scientists – then Wordsworth’s poem, by imbuing nature with “spirit,” might be said to offer an alternative vision, affirming the inherent value of the non-human world.

Incidentally, the correlation of otherwise distinct forms of violence examined in this section is not a casual one: the word “rape” has been used since the eighteenth century to describe not only sexual violation but human acts of environmental plunder and destruction. According to ecofeminist writer Susan Griffin, this semantic coincidence suggests “a profound connection between the social construction of nature and the social

construction of woman” (225)<sup>40</sup> – a connection Romantic authors like Shelley, Darwin, and Wordsworth grappled with well before the rise of postmodern ecofeminist discourse.

### *Romanticism and Animal Rights*

Because of its interest in the relationship between the human and non-human worlds, Romantic literature often focuses on the animal kingdom, exploring the status of such creatures as insects, domestic and wild mammals, sea-creatures, and birds.<sup>41</sup> At a time when revolutionary discourses of “natural law” were formulated to support the proposition that all humans, regardless of race or ethnicity, were endowed with inalienable rights, it is hardly surprising that Romantic representations of non-human creatures often involved the consideration of “animal rights” as well, extending our moral obligations beyond a narrowly conceived human world and into the animal realm. To be sure, writers as ancient as Plutarch and Pythagoras had condemned human cruelty to animals (Oerlemans 75), but the topic entered public consciousness as a central ethical concern only in the late eighteenth century, when, as David Perkins has noted, “[k]indness to animals was urged and represented in sermons, treatises, pamphlets, journals, manuals of animal care, encyclopedias, scientific writings, novels, literature for children, and poems” (ix).<sup>42</sup> This literary activism played an important role in raising public consciousness concerning animal welfare; during the Romantic period Parliament outlawed the cruel treatment of cattle (1822) and made “sports” like bullbaiting and cockfighting a misdemeanor (1835). By 1824, moreover, public concern for animal welfare had led to the founding of The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (the forerunner of the RSPCA, which was established in 1840). Undoubtedly, all of this activity marked a notable shift in British attitudes toward the non-human world. While it remained possible for writers to mock those who strove to improve the condition of animals,<sup>43</sup> such activism had become increasingly acceptable during the Romantic era: by the 1830s, as Oerlemans observes, “to advocate laws on the behalf of animals ceased to be considered the work of revolutionaries or madmen” (75).

Among those who addressed the “rights” of animals was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who argues in his “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality” (1754) for “the participation of animals in natural law.” Although he acknowledges that animals, “being destitute of intelligence and liberty . . . cannot recognize that law,” Rousseau contends that animals “ought to partake of natural right” because they share with humans the ability to feel, and so are likewise deserving of compassionate treatment. Such an assertion represents a challenge to the Cartesian position that animals were soulless machines whose insensitivity to pain put them beyond moral consideration. Taking a far different stance, Rousseau asserts an expansive concept of “natural law” and its associated rights:

if I am bound to do no injury to my fellow-creatures, this is less because they are rational than because they are sentient beings: and this quality, being common both to men and beasts, ought to entitle the latter at least to the privilege of not being wantonly ill-treated by the former. ("Discourse on a Subject" 331)

The idea that animals partook of natural rights, though not universally accepted even among advocates for the prevention of cruelty to animals, was adopted by writers as diverse as Jeremy Bentham, Samuel J. Pratt, Humphry Primatt, Frances Hutcheson, William Drummond, Margaret Cullen, and John Lawrence.<sup>44</sup> Coleridge addresses the topic in his poetical address "To a Young Ass" (1794), where he invokes the republican ideals of the French Revolution – liberty, equality, and fraternity – to argue against the mistreatment of a domestic animal (10–11).<sup>45</sup>

Whether or not they advocate animal rights *per se*, numerous Romantic-era poems address the idea that humans are obliged to treat animals with compassion. Among the most famous of these poems is Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798), which modern scholarship has sometimes interpreted as a social allegory concerned to address the ills associated with European colonial expansion. And yet, the poem's literal concern for the mistreatment of animals (illustrated by the Mariner's killing of the albatross and his reviling of the sea snakes) was recognized by many of Coleridge's contemporaries. Late in 1828, for example, debaters at the Union addressed the question of whether the "Rime" would be "effectual in preventing Cruelty to Animals" (qtd. in Beer 21).<sup>46</sup> Like Coleridge, poets as diverse as William Cowper, Burns, Blake, Wordsworth, Robert Southey, and John Clare also wrote in favor of animal welfare.<sup>47</sup> As Timothy Morton has shown, Percy Bysshe Shelley went so far as to advocate moral vegetarianism not only to prevent the inhumane treatment of animals, but also to protest against a carnivorous mode of human sustenance that promoted social inequity and the waste of agricultural resources (*Shelley* 136–7).

Although contemporary concerns for animal rights and the humane treatment of non-human creatures are important aspects of Romantic ecocriticism, such concerns have sparked controversy in the modern-day field of environmental ethics. On the one hand, because animal welfare activists generally focus their attention upon *individual* (and mostly domesticated) animals, their discourse tends to be "atomistic or distributive"; because environmental ethics tends on the other hand to focus upon (mostly wild) animal *species* and the biotic communities or ecosystems in which they have their being, the concerns of environmental ethicists are usually considered "*holistic* or collective" (Callicott 59).<sup>48</sup> During the Romantic period, much of the literature dealing with animals involved the former, atomistic emphasis, foregrounding the condition of domestic animals, which were often perceived as "individuals, each with a unique life history and experience" (Perkins 70). At a time, moreover, when hunting was an important pastime for many upper-class gentlemen, legislative efforts to ban

or restrict the hunting of wild animals were sure to encounter opposition in the House of Lords, where aristocratic politicians held “the chase” in high esteem.

But this does not mean that the Romantic period was impervious to the condition of wild animals. As noted previously, writers like Gilbert White showed great concern for the perceived decimation of wild species such as partridges and red deer. Moreover, poets like Wordsworth and Clare – whose writings occasionally exhibited an atomistic concern for the wellbeing of individual and domesticated animals – became early pioneers of environmental ethics, demonstrating in poems like “Nutting” and “The Lament of Swordy Well”<sup>49</sup> a holistic sense of care for the welfare of the ecosystems that support wild species.

### *Language, Romantic Eco-Poetics, and the Politics of Nature*

During its brief history, Romantic ecocriticism has approached the study of literature from two markedly different and often conflicting theoretical perspectives. On the one hand, some ecocritics have privileged what Bate calls an “ecopoetic” – a mode of literary representation primarily concerned not with the politics of nature’s social construction in literature, nor with the rhetoric of ecological activism, but with the writer’s effort to communicate a sense of nature’s otherness to the human or cultural realm. (This turn away from the problem of nature’s social construction is predicated upon the argument that nature itself exists prior to, or apart from, human culture and ideology.) To quote Bate, the “role of ecopoesis . . . is to engage *imaginatively* with the non-human” (*Song of the Earth* 199); where successful, such an engagement ostensibly “effect[s] an imaginative reunification of mind and nature” (245),<sup>50</sup> thereby functioning to engender in the reader an attitude of respect for, and ethical care toward, the realm of non-human nature. According to Buell’s critical schema, this concern to examine and assess literary images of nature belongs to the “first wave” of ecocritical investigation, where the avowed aim is to consider nature *as such* rather than in terms of its discursive representation. On the other hand, “second wave” ecocritics have insistently emphasized nature’s relationship to the realm of politics – including the importance of such political categories as gender, class, race, sexuality, and environmental justice – in order to investigate nature’s ideological construction, including the ways nature is conceptually manipulated to “naturalize” and regulate human behavior *and* environmental practices.<sup>51</sup>

Despite their important differences and disagreements, both first- and second-wave forms of ecocritical analysis have had to deal with the shared question of language, for verbal representations, far from offering us access to nature’s reality or “essence,” function to mediate – indeed, to construct and produce – our views of the non-human world. While the term “ecology” is generally understood to denote nature and natural processes

(seeming therefore to encourage a consideration of nature as it exists *apart from* the realm of culture), its etymology suggests an inescapable connection in human experience between nature and language; for while, as we have seen, the prefix “eco” derives from “*oikos*” (meaning “house” or “dwelling”), the suffix “*logos*” usually signifies “language” (Harrison 200–1). Bate responds to the predicament implied in the word “eco-logy” by lamenting that

Language is itself a symptom of humankind’s apartness from other species and our consequent power to destabilize ecosystems. The poet is often more vagrant than dweller, for he finds his home in the *logos* and not the *oikos*. (*Song of the Earth* 149)

While Bate’s point has important implications for environmental and ecocritical practice, the notion that language separates us from nature arguably partakes of a primitivist nature/culture binary opposition that is itself open to question. Given the inescapability of language from the standpoint of human experience, an alternative way of conceptualizing the eco-logical condition might be in terms of a complex *interrelationship* between “ecology’s” constitutive roots *oikos* and *logos*, rather than in terms of an oppositional limit marking an impassable boundary dividing them (after all, the original meaning of “*logos*” is “relation”). To quote Robert Pogue Harrison’s analysis,

*oikos* and *logos* belong together inseparably, for *logos* is the *oikos* of humanity. Thus the word “ecology” names far more than the science that studies ecosystems; it names the universal human manner of being in the world. (200–1)

However we choose to conceptualize the relationship between *oikos* and *logos*, we must always bear in mind that language, far from being a neutral medium of communication, is thoroughly ideological, and that the various meanings we attribute to nature “are always produced in social contexts involving competing claims for definitive mastery” (Hutchings, *Imagining Nature* 8). For this reason, the notion that Romantic pastoral poetry might help readers to imagine or access “an unmediated, unalienated relationship with nature” (Bate, *Romantic Ecology* 29) seems naïve at best and politically dangerous at worst. But does an awareness of the inescapable politics of language *necessarily* imply that poetry only holds up a mirror to society, offering nothing but a narcissistic vision of ourselves and providing no glimpse of nature’s otherness?

In an effort to address the implications of language and the ideological baggage it carries, some Romantic ecocritics have attempted to theorize poetic representation as a potential meeting of mind and matter rather than an obliteration of the latter by the former. Adapting the concept of “ecotones” – liminal or hybrid spaces where distinct ecosystems meet, mingle, and differentiate themselves – to a consideration of poetic language, for example, James McKusick conceptualizes Romantic representations of nature as products of “a language contact zone (or linguistic ecotone)” (*Green*

*Writing* 50).<sup>52</sup> As a zone of dynamic contact between writer and world, the linguistic ecotone conceptually resists the idea that language involves a one-way imposition of meaning from subject to object, implying instead that subjective experience occurs in a space of dialogical encounter in which natural objects and processes have the power to unsettle and thus to revise – even as they are inscribed by – the discursive understandings humans inevitably bring to bear upon them. For Onno Oerlemans, the best Romantic poetry is precisely that which most forthrightly recognizes or reflects nature's ability to unsettle human assumptions about the natural world and our relationship to it. Toward this end, Oerlemans searches Romantic poetry for representations of the "material sublime," a radically empiricist mode of perception that occurs, in his view, "when consciousness recognizes that it cannot fully represent the material order (which is truly 'other') . . ." An "effect, not of representation or of an act of mind itself, but of the presence of the somatic," the "material sublime" as Oerlemans conceives it "allows writers and readers deliberately to approach the limits of language, so that one might recognize that language itself distorts and reproduces what it represents" (5, 4, 148).

In Kate Rigby's Romantic ecocriticism, it is also at the limits of language that one might gain a passing glimpse of "a more-than-human world that forever exceeds the human capacity to respond to it in words" (122). For Rigby, however, it is in the Romantic sacralization of natural environments that we may find a potential antidote to the Western dualistic tendency to dominate nature: "To view the topographies of the sacred that are disclosed within romantic literature as so many more or less arbitrary cultural constructs would be to consign nature once again to the position that it has always occupied within the history of Western dualistic thought: namely, that of passivity, in this case as a blank screen for human projections." To counter this critical tendency, Rigby scrutinizes moments in Romantic writing where landscapes are figured as actively calling forth the poet's feelings and ideas – moments where "the initiative lies with the phenomenon not with the gaze, repositioning the poet as recipient rather than as producer" – all the while keeping an eye on the ways in which the poet's experiences of the natural world "are inflected by cultural memory and social ideology" (13).

What ecocritics like McKusick, Oerlemans, and Rigby share is a sense of nature's *agency*, the idea that non-human creatures and environments have the active capacity to influence human thought and behavior. This proposition is well worth exploring, for a determined belief in nature's passivity risks closing down dialogue between the human and the non-human (or more-than-human) world before it can even begin, thereby transforming nature "from a voluble subject to a mute object" (Manes 17).<sup>53</sup> The notion that a formerly active, signifying nature has been somehow silenced is evident in *The Four Zoas*, where Blake's speaker laments that, in the fallen or postlapsarian world, "A Rock a Cloud a Mountain / Were now not vocal as in Climes of happy Eternity" (lines 134–5).<sup>54</sup> The notion that an articulate

nature can, if attended to, become a source of wisdom is also evident in Wordsworth's contention that

One impulse from a vernal wood  
 May teach you more of man;  
 Of moral evil and of good,  
 Than all the sages can. (lines 21–4)<sup>55</sup>

Some ecocritics attempt to recover nature's lost voice and the instruction it might offer humans by revisiting the ancient concept of the *liber naturae* or book of nature, claiming that "every piece of land is itself a text, with its own syntax and signifying potential" (Bate, *Song of the Earth* 237). Others adopt a more scientific approach: "Ecology leads us to recognize that life speaks, communing through encoded streams of information that have direction and purpose, *if we learn to translate the messages with fidelity*" (Howarth 77; emphasis added).

As the italicized clause in the previous sentence indicates, however, a major problem attending the notion of a signifying nature – and the ecocritical effort to "recover" nature's silenced voices – involves the question of translation and interpretation. If the non-human world actively speaks, this does not mean that humans are capable of understanding its language. Indeed, if ecocriticism is to be properly self-scrutinizing, it must consider the possibility that nature is, at least in our apprehension of it, an all-too-human "discursive construction . . . whose 'reality' derives from the ways we write, speak, and think about it" (qtd. in Heise 510–11).<sup>56</sup> From the standpoint of literary scholarship, the implications of such an insight are manifold: not only must ecocritics ground their readings of nature's representations in the historical contexts informing the texts under study (including an investigation of contemporary ideological structures and their relationship to extant paradigms of nature); at the formal level, they must also consider the ways in which literary genres, modes, and associated conventions color such representations.<sup>57</sup> Champions of an ecological pastoral must thus not forget the socio-generic concerns articulated by Raymond Williams, whose ground-breaking *The Country and the City* (1973) clearly demonstrates the ways in which politics and ideology pervaded eighteenth-century and Romantic pastoral literature, all too often to the detriment of peoples and natural environments.

For some of the pioneers of Romantic ecocriticism, the "constructivist" approach to literary analysis is anathema, deriving from an anti-ecological mindset that reduces the natural world to text, thereby disrespectfully effacing its material otherness. Consider the polemical attacks that Bate has aimed at Alan Liu, whose literary criticism he takes as an exemplary instance of all that is wrong with the politicized methodology of "new historicism." In *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*, Liu argues that there is "no nature except as it is constituted by acts of political definition made possible by particular forms of government" (Liu 104). Invoking environmental problems

associated with the modern-day despoliation of the earth, Bate's response to this assertion is as follows:

"Nature" is a term that needs to be contested, not rejected. It is profoundly unhelpful to say "*There is no nature*" at a time when our most urgent need is to address and redress the consequences of human civilization's insatiable desire to consume the products of the earth. (*Romantic Ecology* 56)

Bate makes an important point here, for if nature does not exist, if it is merely a product of ideology and so entirely continuous with the human realm, then how can we measure or evaluate the physical and biological consequences of our environmental practices? If there is no nature, in other words, then upon what literal ground may we establish an effective environmental politics? Unfortunately, by reducing Liu's complex quotation to the blunt assertion that "there is no nature," Bate sacrifices the ecocritical uses to which Liu's and other new historicist criticism might be productively put: "a project of questioning established *definitions* of nature, the modes of government that produce and support them, [and] their material consequences for biospheric and cultural diversity" (Hutchings, *Imagining Nature* 9).<sup>58</sup> By advocating a move in criticism "From 'Red' to 'Green,'" <sup>59</sup> in short, Bate and his followers have helped to polarize two modes of theory – ecocritical and Marxist analysis – that might otherwise potentially engage in productive and mutually enlightening dialogue. Fortunately, "second-wave" ecocriticism has moved beyond a polemical refusal of cultural and linguistic theory, attempting

to keep one eye on the ways in which "nature" is always in some ways culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists, both [as] the object and, albeit distantly, the origin of our discourse. (Garrard *Ecocriticism* 10)

By playing itself out "in the tension between these two extremes" (Heise 511) – by combining the empiricist insights of scientific ecology and the political insights of cultural theory – ecocritical investigation will find increasing relevance in academia and, perhaps, in the broader world of social and environmental activism.

### *New Directions in Romantic Ecocriticism*

In recent years, ecological critics have increasingly turned their attention to the question of urban ecology, criticizing ecocriticism's common tendency to ignore or oversimplify literary representations of cityscapes and to favor writing that celebrates an explicitly rural or wilderness ethos. But what is this thing called "urban nature"? Although the phrase may seem at first glance to involve "a contradiction in terms," it reminds us that cityscapes are themselves "governed by ecological relations extending in space and time, invisible in themselves yet revealed by the presence, persistence, and behavior of resident organisms" (Tallmadge 36, 45). To adapt John Tallmadge's recent insights for the purposes of this essay, we should also

remember that privileging, say, the Lake District or other exurban areas as the only true loci of nature makes it “easier to trash” a metropolitan center like London “and to tolerate, on a daily basis, the consequent ugliness, impoverishment, and filth” of cities (41).<sup>60</sup> Since the vast majority of the Earth’s human population now resides in urban environments, the reclamation and revaluation of urban nature must and will become an increasingly crucial component of ecocritical theory and practice.

In the context of British Romanticism, of course, ecocritics must face the fact that Romantic authors often condemn the city as the primary locus of human degeneration and corruption. Unlike the clean and uncrowded places of the rural and remote countryside, the city is for them a problematic if not entirely irredeemable space. In Wordsworth’s poem “Michael” (1800), for example, the eponymous shepherd’s son, Luke, who has been raised to value nature and rural ways of life most highly, falls into corruption and disgrace merely by moving to the city to seek gainful employment near the end of the poem (224–36). And whereas Romantic authors often see the rural *oikos* as a place of humane communitarian dwelling, the urban metropolis can become in their eyes a deracinated space of alienation. Writing of London, Thomas De Quincey lamented that “you are no longer noticed: nobody sees you; nobody hears you; nobody regards you; you do not even regard yourself” (qtd. in Buell, *Writing* 90).<sup>61</sup> Adopting a metaphor of disease and contamination, Leigh Hunt called London a “monstrous brick cancer . . . extending its arms in every direction” (qtd. in Poetzsch 1).<sup>62</sup> And in one of his most famous poems, “London,” Blake condemned the city he otherwise loved as a place of violence, oppression, and despair (26–7). Such indictments of the metropole are ubiquitous in the anti-urban discourses of Romantic literature.

And yet, if one looks closely at Romantic writing, it is possible to catch glimpses of something different. Hunt’s criticisms of London’s urban spaces are balanced, for example, by his acknowledgment of the value of urban nature. Whereas Wordsworth was an outspoken advocate for the creation of a national park to preserve the sublime prospects of the Lake District,<sup>63</sup> Hunt was, as Markus Poetzsch has recently reminded scholars, a humble advocate for the creation or preservation of urban green spaces, acknowledging “the vital role that gardens and parkland play in maintaining the ecological health of a city and its inhabitants” (Poetzsch 8). And according to Kate Rigby, even Wordsworth’s poetry sometimes offers a subtle “endorsement of urbanity” (253), wherein readers may trace an “urban topography of the sacred” (256). Similarly, an analysis of Blake’s great city of art, Golgonooza, might offer green Romanticists a model for urban dwelling that effectively deconstructs the problematic nature–culture binary opposition informing anti-urban modes of Romantic discourse.<sup>64</sup> As Romantic ecocriticism continues to hone its theory and practice, questions related to urban ecology are bound to play an increasingly important role in the field.

Another recent development in green Romanticism involves the study of various contemporary colonial ecologies and their representation in Romantic-era writing. In his ground-breaking *Romanticism and Colonial Disease* (1999), for example, Alan Bewell adopts an ecological-materialist perspective to explore the biomedical contexts of European colonialism, arguing that “colonization is not just a military undertaking but also a profoundly biological and ecological event” (xi). Accordingly, Bewell reminds us that images of disease in Romantic-period discussions of colonialism, far from being mere “metaphoric projections of racial and cultural anxieties” (7), often refer to palpable biological realities:

Colonialism was indeed structured by the notion of improving minds and cultures, but we should not forget that, under the banner of health, it also set out to improve colonial ecologies and the bodies (both foreign and indigenous) that inhabited them. (39)

More recently, Timothy Morton has expanded our understandings of Romantic culture by exploring the ways in which spices and the spice trade influenced consumerism and capitalist ideology during the Romantic period,<sup>65</sup> while Theodore Binnema and Kevin Hutchings have investigated some of the ways in which British Romantic concepts of environmental determinism informed aboriginal governance policy and related land-use practices in nineteenth-century Upper Canada.<sup>66</sup> The diverse studies mentioned in this paragraph are just a few examples of recent work helping to expand the limits of Romantic ecocriticism.

Of course, the concept of nature, which is so central to green Romantic studies, will always remain a slippery and potentially perilous one. Reminding readers of the diversity of global ecological realities during the Romantic period, Alan Bewell’s most recent work on “Traveling Natures” examines a plurality of “natures” in order to emphasize the era’s “multi-naturalism” (the fact that local ecosystems throughout Europe and the colonial world were quickly being transformed as plants and animals were systematically collected, exchanged, transplanted, and consumed to an unprecedented degree). Celebrated by cosmopolitan thinkers, but reviled by ecological nativists who wanted to maintain the ecological “purity” of their bioregions, the “traveling natures” of the period destroyed indigenous ecosystems and created new hybrid ones, thereby demonstrating “the capacity of human beings to change ecologies everywhere,” and to transform or annihilate cultures that depended on these ecologies. For Bewell, an understanding of

the historical changes that took place in the natural world during the Romantic period, the comings and the goings of natures, is thus a precondition for understanding the politics not just of nations and ideas, but of entire ways of life. (17, 19)

Where Bewell’s recent work reminds us of the need to consider the sheer global diversity of material natures during the Romantic period, Timothy Morton’s forthcoming book, entitled *Ecology without Nature*, urges ecocritics

to dispense with the concept of nature entirely. "Strange as it may sound," Morton argues, "the idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics and art" (1). For Morton, "Nature" is "a transcendental term in a material mask" (11); thus, under the guise of celebrating the material world, and of wanting to preserve or protect its ecosystems, ecocritics who deploy the concept unwittingly participate in a devaluation of the material realm. Moreover, because the term "nature" is thoroughly ideological, the ecocritical desire to recover or celebrate nature all too often involves an unwitting subscription to the various ideologies that the term encodes (10),<sup>67</sup> ideologies that have long served to surveil and regulate the politics of gender, class, race, and sexual orientation. If Morton is correct, ecocritics will need to reevaluate the most basic assumptions informing their theory and practice. For what will it profit us if, in attempting to rescue "nature," we inadvertently contribute to the despoliation of ecosystems *and* to the oppression of people?

### *Afterword*

To quote Lawrence Buell, environmental criticism is currently "in the tense but enviable position of being a wide-open movement still sorting out its premises and its powers" (*Future* 28). Hopefully this article has provided some indication of this state of critical affairs, and of the various and complex issues ecocriticism has wrestled with thus far in its brief and sometimes contentious history. The compelling and provocative arguments delineated in the previous section, and in other parts of this article, are sure to inspire much discussion and debate as the field of Romantic ecocriticism develops and matures. In the meantime, Romantic ecocritics would do well to keep some more basic considerations in mind, for, in the field of Environmental Studies, Romanticism has not always been viewed with a favorable eye. Indeed, contrary to the claims of some green Romanticists, the transcendental subject so often celebrated in Romantic poetry likely carries its share of philosophical culpability for the environmental crisis we face today. As Gary Harrison reminds us, therefore, the

dilemma for ecologically minded readers of Romantic texts is to reconcile the Romantics' love for nature with their sense of their autonomy from it and to sort out the Romantic acknowledgment of nature for its own sake from its treatment of nature as a means to aggrandize the human. ("Romanticism" 3:1064)

### *Short Biography*

Kevin Hutchings is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Northern British Columbia, where he holds an appointment as Canada Research Chair in Romantic Studies. As a teacher and researcher, Kevin specializes in British Romanticism, literary theory, ecocriticism, and colonial/postcolonial studies. He is author of *Imagining Nature: Blake's*

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### Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Kroeber first introduced explicitly ecological concepts to British Romantic Studies with his essay "Home at Grasmere." However, it was Bate's subsequent *Romantic Ecology* that brought "green Romanticism" to widespread critical attention, inspiring and provoking numerous critical responses, and setting the terms of much subsequent dialogue and debate within the new field of Romantic ecocriticism.

<sup>3</sup> For brief synopses of early developments in ecocriticism, see Barry 248–9; Heise 504–5.

<sup>4</sup> Both the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism's "Romanticism and the Physical" conference (Arizona State University, September 14–17, 2000) and the British Association for Romantic Studies' "Sustaining Romanticism" conference (University of Liverpool, July 26–29, 2001), while not strictly limited to ecocritical scholarship, were inspired by "green Romantic" concerns. More recently, the Centre for Romantic Studies at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, hosted a conference entitled "Romanticism, Environment, Crisis" (June 23–27, 2006), which was wholly devoted to the investigation of ecocritical issues in Romantic studies.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to Bate's *Romantic Ecology*, the early ground-breaking monographs in Romantic ecocriticism include Kroeber, *Ecological Literary Criticism*; Morton, *Shelley*; McKusick, *Green Writing*; Lussier, *Romantic Dynamics*. The special "green" journal issues include the *John Clare Society Journal* 14 (1995); *Studies in Romanticism* 35.3 (1996); *The Wordsworth Circle* 28.3 (1997); *Romantic Circles Praxis Series* (2001) <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/ecology/>>.

<sup>6</sup> I take Buell's phrase "the idea of nature" as a reference to the various ways in which "nature" has been represented in Western literary texts as external reality (i.e., setting) or invoked in literary criticism as a key philosophical concept (i.e., the idea that some literary practices – including the delineation of human character, the use of language, and the use of generic conventions – are "natural," while others are "artificial").

<sup>7</sup> For statistics regarding London's fast-increasing population in the early nineteenth century, see McKusick, "From Coleridge to John Muir" 39, endnote 1.

<sup>8</sup> Blake, *The Four Zoas*, in *Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* 390, "Night the Ninth." All subsequent references to Blake's writing are to this edition.

<sup>9</sup> Note 17 to *Queen Mab*.

<sup>10</sup> For a helpful discussion of Romantic-period geology and its implications, see 176–8.

<sup>11</sup> James Hutton, *Abstract of a Dissertation read in the Royal Society of Edinburgh upon the Seventh of March, and Fourth of April, 1785, concerning the System of the Earth, its Duration, and Stability*, reprinted ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1997), 4.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Ehrlich.

<sup>13</sup> For ecocritical discussions of Malthus's theory of population, see Morton, *Shelley* 207–15; Harrison, "Ecological Apocalypse"; Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 93–4.

<sup>14</sup> The quoted passage is Barry Commoner's "first law of ecology:"

<sup>15</sup> Although “The Oeconomy of Nature” was likely written by the great naturalist Linnaeus (also known as Carl von Linné), its authorship was attributed to Isaac Biberg, one of Linnaeus’s foremost disciples. See Biberg.

<sup>16</sup> Ruston notes that Priestley himself used the terms “vital air” or “vital gas”; it was Lavoisier who subsequently called this gas “oxygen,” naming it “after its acidity principle” (26).

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, McKusick, *Green Writing* 38–41; Hutchings, *Imagining Nature* 42–4, 76–113.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of Darwin’s conception of nature’s economy and its influence on William Blake, see Hutchings, *Imagining Nature* 90–102.

<sup>19</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “The Eolian Harp,” in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 10–11, line 26. All subsequent references to Coleridge’s writing are to this edition. And William Blake, *Book of Thel* 3–6, plate 3, lines 26–7.

<sup>20</sup> According to Mark Lussier, “Romantic writers like Blake, Wordsworth, or Shelley foresaw that the Enlightenment episteme “would likely create an ecological crisis for futurity” (*Romantic Dynamics* 52).

<sup>21</sup> Hans Eichner, “The Rise of Modern Science and the Genesis of Romanticism,” *PMLA* 97 (1982): 20.

<sup>22</sup> For more recent discussions of continuities between Romanticism and science, see Hutchings, *Imagining Nature* 120–4; Rigby, *Topographies of the Sacred* 17–38. Rather than opposing the worldviews of Romanticism and science, Rigby, like Lussier, examines some of the ways in which the former engages with, appropriates, and modifies insights derived from the latter.

<sup>23</sup> See Gilpin. See also Knight; Price.

<sup>24</sup> Named after the French landscape painter Claude Lorrain (1600–82), the Claude glass was a round mirror that picturesque tourists, turning their backs upon a favorable prospect, would hold up to frame or compose a view of the landscape behind them. Although it could not reproduce images in permanent photographic form, the Claude glass was to picturesque tourists what the camera is to modern-day eco-tourists.

<sup>25</sup> See Hutchings, “Don’t Call Me a Tree-Hugger” 16–17.

<sup>26</sup> On Cronon’s critique of the Romantic Sublime, see McKusick, *Green Writing* 6–11.

<sup>27</sup> For an ecocritical discussion of ecological problems stemming from the concept of human “dominion” in mainstream Christianity, see White. For alternative views of Christian belief and practice, see, for example, Clifford 5–6. See also Northcott 179–87.

<sup>28</sup> For a more detailed discussion of anthropocentrism and instrumental value in *The Book of Thel*, see Hutchings, *Imagining Nature* ch., especially pp. 86–9.

<sup>29</sup> For the environmental-ethical implications of Blake’s anthropomorphic cosmology, see Hutchings, *Imagining Nature* 68–71.

<sup>30</sup> For more on the distinction between so-called “shallow” and “deep” modes of ecological practice, see also Hargrove, “Foundations of Wildlife Protection Attitudes” 169; P. W. Taylor 99–100.

<sup>31</sup> For a helpful introduction to ecofeminist discourse and its various positions, see Karen J. Warren.

<sup>32</sup> Charlene Spretnak, “Toward an Ecofeminist Spirituality,” *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, ed. J. Plant (London: Green Print, 1989), 128–9.

<sup>33</sup> For a trenchant critique of anti-rationalist positions in modern ecofeminism, see especially Biehl 83–106. See also Garrard’s account of ecofeminist positions in *Ecocriticism* 23–7.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Merchant ch. 7; Jordanova.

<sup>35</sup> Sir Humphry Davy, *A Discourse, Introductory to a Course of Lectures on Chemistry* (London: John Johnson, 1802), 16.

<sup>36</sup> For informative discussions of Shelley’s feminist response to contemporary scientific theory and practice, see Mellor, *Mary Shelley* 89–101; Crouch.

<sup>37</sup> For brief ecocritical remarks concerning Frankenstein’s scientific education and his misogynistic treatment of nature and women, see Bate, *Song of the Earth* 50–1.

<sup>38</sup> For an expanded discussion of Darwin’s “Mechanic Genius” and his treatment of nature, see Hutchings, *Imagining Nature* 97–9.

<sup>39</sup> *William Wordsworth*. All subsequent references to Wordsworth’s writing are to this edition.

<sup>40</sup> On the related sexual and environmental meanings of “rape,” see also the opening paragraphs to Hutchings, “Gender, Environment, and Imperialism.”

<sup>41</sup> I examine some representations of mammals and sea-creatures below. For relevant discussions of Romantic responses to insects, see Perkins 5–7. For a consideration of the status of birds in

Romantic writing, see Garrard, "Romantics' View of Nature" 124–9. See also Thommasen and Hutchings, *Birds of the Raincoast*, a text which spices its ornithological analyses with references to Romantic literary representations of "the feathered tribes"

<sup>42</sup> The other major text historicizing the prevention of cruelty to animals during the Romantic period is Kenyon-Jones's *Kindred Brutes*. See also Fosso; Hutchings, *Imagining Nature* 71–5.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Thomas Taylor.

<sup>44</sup> See Perkins 42–3.

<sup>45</sup> See Perkins 108–15.

<sup>46</sup> For an incisive ecocritical reading of Coleridge's poem, see McKusick, *Green Writing* 44–51.

<sup>47</sup> For examples of poems dealing with the theme of human cruelty to animals, see Book 6 of William Cowper's *The Task, a Poem in Six Books*; Burns 135–6; Coleridge, "To a Young Ass," in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 10–11; Blake, "Auguries of Innocence" 490–3; Wordsworth, "Peter Bell," in *William Wordsworth* 91–129; Southey; Clare 568–9.

<sup>48</sup> See also Mary Anne Warren 186. Callicott's terminological distinction between "atomistic and distributive" versus "holistic and collective" concepts of ethical value may be explained as follows: Just as Enlightenment science breaks or anatomizes its objects of study into their component parts (or "atoms") for the purposes of analysis, an "atomistic and distributive" ethics focuses its attention upon individual biological entities (e.g., the constituent members of a species, or the component parts of an ecosystem), locating value not in whole (or "holistic") "collectivities" but "distributing" it among discrete members of larger groups or systems.

<sup>49</sup> See Clare, "Lament of Swordy Well" 580–4.

<sup>50</sup> On the same page, Bate goes on to note the impossibility of this process, conceding that Romantic eco-poetics is haunted by "a melancholy awareness of the illusoriness of its own utopian vision."

<sup>51</sup> On the distinction between first- and second-wave forms of ecocriticism, see Buell, *Future of Environmental Criticism* 21–2.

<sup>52</sup> On the concept of linguistic ecotones, McKusick acknowledges a debt to Romand Coles, "Ecotones and Environmental Ethics: Adorno and Lopez," in *In the Nature of Things: Language, Politics, and the Environment*, ed. Jane Bennett and William Chaloupka (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 243.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Serres's claim that "Nature behaves like a subject" (9).

<sup>54</sup> Blake, *Four Zoas* 348, "Night the Sixth."

<sup>55</sup> Wordsworth, "Tables Turned" 130–1.

<sup>56</sup> David Mazel, *American Literary Environmentalism* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000), xii.

<sup>57</sup> For a discussion of genres, modes, and their formal conventions in environmental literary rhetoric, see Hutchings, "Modal Roots of Environmentalism."

<sup>58</sup> For a detailed consideration of the dismissal of new historicist theory in Bate's *Romantic Ecology* and Kroeber's *Ecological Literary Criticism*, see 9–14. See also Morton, *Shelley* 219–20; Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 42–3. For more general insights regarding ecocriticism's polemical rejection of mainstream critical theory, see Buell, *Future of Environmental Criticism* 6; Phillips ix.

<sup>59</sup> This phrase provides the title for an extract from Bate's *Romantic Ecology* as it is republished in *Green Studies Reader* 167–72.

<sup>60</sup> In his critique of the wilderness ideal in American culture, Tallmadge explains that "Enshrining wilderness in distant places allows us to justify our abuse, neglect, or exploitation of local nature, which appears less worthy and so less heinous to victimize" (41).

<sup>61</sup> Thomas De Quincey, "The Nation of London," in *Autobiographic Sketches*, in *Collected Writings*, ed. David Masson (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1889–1890), 1:181.

<sup>62</sup> Leigh Hunt, "A Ramble in Mary-Le-Bone," in *Leigh Hunt's Political and Occasional Essays*, eds. Lawrence Huston Houtchens and Carolyn Washburn Houtchens (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 290.

<sup>63</sup> See Bate, *Romantic Ecology* 47–52.

<sup>64</sup> In a plenary address to delegates attending the recent "Romanticism, Environment, Crisis" conference, James C. McKusick offered a tantalizing ecocritical reading of Blake's urban philosophy (Centre for Romantic Studies, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, Wales), June 23, 2006.

<sup>65</sup> See Timothy Morton, *Poetics of Spice*.

<sup>66</sup> See Binnema and Hutchings.

<sup>67</sup> The text I have cited is derived from a draft of the Introductory chapter to Morton's *Ecology without Nature* (forthcoming, Harvard University Press), which was circulated to participants in the 2006 NASSR/NAVSA conference seminar, entitled "Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environment Aesthetics." I cite it here with the author's kind permission.

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