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Romantic Ecocriticism: History and Prospects

Abstract

This essay examines the origins, development and future of Romantic ecocriticism. British Romanticism has always been central to discussions of literature and the environment. Here, I offer the most extensive assessment to date of relevant scholarship. I concentrate on book-length studies of British literature circa 1780–1830, generally excluding books about individual authors. I close by outlining a new agenda for the field. Instead of claiming to reveal the origins of contemporary environmental sensibilities, I argue, Romantic ecocritics should work towards a critical history of regimes of environmental exploitation. Part one of the essay analyses the paths taken and not taken in ecocritical studies of the Romantic period between 1970 and 2000. Part two parses the diversity of Romantic ecocriticism in the early twenty-first century. Part three argues that Romantic ecocriticism's central concern should be the environmental changes associated with the industrial revolution.

Keywords: industrial revolution; John Clare; Jonathan Bate; Romantic ecology; material ecocriticism; New Historicism; Wordsworth

Twentieth-Century Origins

Ever since the Romantic period itself, thinking about what we now call Romanticism has often meant thinking about its relationship with the nonhuman world. In 1798 the young William Hazlitt looked at William Wordsworth as he gazed out of a window and reflected, wonderingly, 'with what eyes these poets see nature!' (1823/1970, p. 59). We do not need to look so far back, however, to understand the current state of ecocritical or environmental scholarship on British Romantic literature.[1] A good place to start is with two texts that have much in common: John Barrell's *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730–1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (1972) and Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* (1973).

Williams surveys imaginations of the urban and the rural in British literature and culture roughly from Ben Jonson's 'To Penshurst' up to his own day. The Romantic period is the chronological midpoint of that survey, and the long eighteenth century is

The Country and the City's intellectual heart. For Williams, the Romantic decades were above all the decades of Parliamentary enclosure, with the essential proviso that the Enclosure Acts were not a fall from a prior state of rustic grace and innocence. Rather, they were one way in which English agrarian capitalism was intensified and consolidated at the end of the eighteenth and the start of the nineteenth centuries.

The Country and the City scrutinises the responses of Romantic-period writers to this sharpening of capitalist social relationships in the rural world. Thus, Williams writes admiringly of George Crabbe: the insistent directness of *The Village*'s social vision makes him the great poet of counter-pastoral, or of 'a pastoral vision […] made bitter and desperate.' At the same time he sees in Crabbe an evasiveness. Crabbe's poetry shies away from outright criticism of 'the active directors of the social process,' the landowners themselves (p. 93). Others, Williams says, found a way beyond Crabbe's limits. In William Cobbett's country travel writings 'the interaction of classes, now the decisive history, can begin to be described' (p. 112): a breakthrough that prepares the ground for the Victorian novel. John Clare stands for something even more significant. 'Clare marks the end of pastoral poetry,' Williams writes, 'in the very shock of its collision with actual country experience' (p. 141). That word 'actual' is crucial to *The Country and the City*. Writers earn their place in Williams's survey through the forcefulness with which they observe real life on the land: Gilbert White as a scientific inquirer; Jane Austen because of the 'uncompromising morality' with which she examines an acquisitive country bourgeoisie and gentry (p. 116); William Wordsworth with his 'new emphasis' on the role within rural life of 'the dispossessed, the lonely wanderer, the vagrant' (p. 130).

Parliamentary enclosure is equally central to Barrell's *The Idea of Landscape*. But whereas Williams traces shifts and modulations in the social imagination across five centuries, Barrell's main aim is to analyse literary form in just one writer. *The Idea of Landscape* fuses the cultural history of agrarian capitalism with a microscopic close reading of John Clare's syntax. Barrell contrasts Clare's taste in landscape with that of the 'rural professional class': tenant farmers, land agents, surveyors and rural solicitors. The latter, as a class, found pleasing prospects in the orderly, regulated patterns of enclosed and improved land, whereas Clare's aesthetics were fostered by the open-field agricultural system of his childhood in Helpston. The 'open-field sense of space' (p. 103) was essentially circular rather than linear. Large unfenced fields surrounded a central

village, such that the entire landscape—which could include the village's whole working population, engaged in their shared labours—made up a single field of vision. In a series of brilliant readings, Barrell finds a correlate to this airy, uninterrupted way of seeing in Clare's distinctive syntactical structures. In poems like 'Emmonsailes Heath' Clare developed a technique whereby hypotactic syntax pushes towards the condition of parataxis. The result is a sense of hurry or momentum in his descriptions of landscape, such that individual images become 'parts not so much of a continuum of successive impressions as of one complex manifold of simultaneous impressions […] impressions somehow pressed up against each other in time, and inseparable' (pp. 157–58). In Clare's 'manifolds' the whole scene crowds in at once. Thus, Clare establishes in the deep structure of his poetics a communalistic visual sense that constitutes an alternative to the aesthetics of enclosure.

Were *The Country and the City* and *The Idea of Landscape* the first works of 'Romantic ecocriticism'? Neither book shows any sign of intending to inaugurate a new, environmental species of literary criticism. The very word *ecocriticism* might well have seemed to Williams and Barrell like a barbarous neologism. But then, nor did the word *postcolonialism* appear anywhere in the first edition of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Published in the early 1970s, *The Country and the City* and *The Idea of Landscape* were contemporary with the pioneer literary criticism of feminism's 'second wave' (Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* dates to 1970). They were contemporary, too, with the first high water mark of modern environmentalism in Europe and North America. Both books have had a deep influence on subsequent Romantic studies. But it is possible to imagine an alternative history in which their influence was of a different order of magnitude again: one in which they inaugurated a continuous critical tradition examining the cultural stakes of human activity within the nonhuman world.

An ecocriticism that took Williams's sweeping conspectus and Barrell's close reading as its starting points would have been very different to the one that we now know. Its first concern would have been with worked (rather than 'wilderness') land. Questions of labour, consumption, landownership and class would have been central, alongside questions of literary form. The main task of this kind of ecocriticism would have been to examine how representations of physical environments mediate and are mediated by social and cultural relationships, and by the material contexts within which those representations are produced. It would have aimed to reconstruct the historical

processes through which literary figurations of landscapes and species emerged and changed. No particular period would necessarily have been privileged, although the British Romantic era would surely have continued to seem like a turning point within the long history of environmental writing in English. This tradition would have had to overcome significant blind spots in one of its founding texts: *The Country and the City* is inattentive to questions of gender, and, until it reaches the recent past, to the role of colonialism and empire (MacLean, Landry, & Ward, 1999). But in this scenario, ecocriticism would have had free access from the start to the intellectual heritage of historical and cultural materialism.

The 1980s are remembered as the decade of the 'turn to history' in Romantic studies. In part that 'turn' meant seeking out the displaced presence of social conflicts within Romantic texts, an enterprise associated with Marjorie Levinson, Alan Liu, Jerome McGann and others. It also meant renewed attention to many hitherto neglected writers, and the setting of Romantic writing in its broader cultural context; Marilyn Butler was the central figure in this regard. Feminist criticism exerted a transformative influence on this turn to history. An established ecological criticism could have done something similar: for instance, by tracking the displaced presence within Romantic poetry of animal labour and violence towards animals, or by recovering the neglected work of natural historians, agricultural labourers, or vegetarian writers. But this is all hypothetical. In reality, ecocriticism—as compared to feminist and postcolonial criticism—was late to develop. An explicit and self-conscious Romantic ecocriticism would not in fact emerge until the 1990s. And this ecocriticism defined itself by its very hostility to the historical materialism upon which Williams and Barrell had drawn.

The Romantic ecocriticism of the 1990s is best understood through four major texts: Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology* (1991a), Karl Kroeber's *Ecological Literary Criticism* (1994), James McKusick's *Green Writing* (2000/2010) and Bate's *The Song of the Earth* (2000).[2] The four books have much in common, seemingly more because of shared beliefs than because of mutual influence. Their thrust is that the origins of environmentalism can be found in Romantic attitudes towards nature. In the critics' own age of pollution and rampant industrialization, the Romantic ascription of intrinsic value to placehood, dwelling and organic interrelationship has much to teach us about how to live in harmony with the natural world. On those grounds, the ecocritics roundly rejected the historicist desire to maintain a sceptical distance from 'Romantic ideology.' They were,

instead, glad to see themselves as the inheritors of Romantic thought. They charged—although McKusick was less polemical than Kroeber or Bate—that New Historicism had become a stultifying left-wing and anthropocentric orthodoxy. It had been unable, or so the ecocritics argued, to see Romantic nature writing as anything more than a displacement or mystification of human-versus-human social conflicts. The New Historicists were said to have treated the latter as the only reality that was of critical interest, thus missing the larger question of the right relationship between nature and humankind.

The ecocritics wanted to read Romanticism with rather than against the grain. That meant maintaining the traditional focus on the canonical male Romantic poets, led by William Wordsworth, although they did put different Wordsworthian texts centre stage: 'Home at Grasmere' and the *Guide to the Lakes*. The *Guide*'s description of the Lake District as 'a sort of national property, in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy' (1835/1974, p. 225) became talismanic. Bate summed up this Romantic understanding of 'literary ecocriticism':

> A central question in environmental ethics is whether to regard humankind as part of nature or apart from nature. It is the task of literary ecocriticism to address a local version of that question: what is the place of creative imagining and writing in the complex set of relationships between humankind and environment, between mind and world? (2000, p. 73)

Of the four books, Kroeber's *Ecological Literary Criticism* makes the closest connections between literary aesthetics and late twentieth-century science. Romantic poetry—Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley are important to Kroeber, as is Malthus—can exemplify an individual's continuous, pleasurable assimilation to the ever-changing physical world of which she is part. McKusick's *Green Writing* agrees, with some caveats, that 'the essential elements of a modern ecological worldview' first appear in Romanticism (2000/2010, p. 19). For McKusick, however, the core of that worldview is Coleridge's organicist aesthetics. McKusick admires writers who nurture an 'ecolect,' 'a language that arises from extended human habitation in a particular place' (p. 238n17). Wordsworth's and Coleridge's poetry 'clearly foreshadows the modern science of ecology in its holistic conception of the Earth as a household, a dwelling-place' (p. 29). More than any other work, McKusick's book lays out the archetypal 'green' readings of familiar

Romantic texts. Here in their classic forms are the Mariner's shooting of the albatross as a crime against the community of nature; Wordsworth's love of the countryside in *Lyrical Ballads* and 'Home at Grasmere'; Clare as 'the first "deep" ecological writer in the English literary tradition' (p. 78); Blake as the bard of the industrial city; *The Last Man* as 'a novel of environmental apocalypse' (p. 109); and the now well-trodden path from the British Romantics to Thoreau, Emerson and Muir.

The dominant figure in 1990s Romantic ecocriticism, however, was Jonathan Bate. *Romantic Ecology*, his 'preliminary sketch towards a literary ecocriticism' (1991a, p. 11), spelled out the issues with revolutionary zeal.[3] Against twentieth-century interpretations of Wordsworth—not only the New Historicists' search for the real politics lurking in Wordsworth's representations of nature, but also Geoffrey Hartman's account of Wordsworth's imaginative transcendence of nature—Bate called for a return to John Ruskin's vision of Wordsworth as a true nature poet, at a time when environmental crisis was (Bate believed) transcending the old opposition of political left and right. We should 'relearn Wordsworth's way of looking at nature' because it is 'valuable and important to make claims for the historical continuity of a tradition of environmental consciousness.' 'If one historicizes the idea of an ecological viewpoint […] one finds oneself squarely in the Romantic tradition' (p. 9). The crucial book 8 of *The Prelude*, 'Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind,' was neither reactionary nor solipsistic but a still vital exercise in republican pastoral. 'Pastoral poetry as redefined by Wordsworth begets both reverence for nature and political emancipation' (p. 25). Wordsworth's writings fostered an English tradition of social and environmental concern, sustained by Ruskin, William Morris, Hardwicke Rawnsley and Edward Thomas, that deserved rescue from the neo-Benthamite dogmas of McGann and his ilk.

The most notorious crux in the whole of Romantic ecocriticism appears half-way through this exuberant provocation. Bate takes up the following passage from Alan Liu's *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*: 'there is no nature except as it is constituted by acts of political definition made possible by particular forms of government. […] Each time a nation suffers a […] crisis, national or international, it must revise its landscape, the image of its own nature' (Liu, 1989, p. 104). Bate truncates Liu's remarks brutally: 'Liu […] claim[s] that "*There is no nature*," in other words that "nature" is nothing more than an anthropomorphic construct […]. 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' (1991a, p. 56). That truncation might fairly be seen as misleading. Still, it is hard not to admire the chutzpah with which Bate presses home here the contrast between Romantic historicism and his own agenda.

John Barrell reviewed *Romantic Ecology* in damning terms. 'The weakest area of the book's claim to derive a green politics from Wordsworth is its lack of interest in economic issues,' he wrote (1991, p. 16). (Bate countered [1991b] that his aim was 'to reassert Ruskin's claim that the fundamental material basis of political economy is not money, labour and production, but "pure air, water and earth."') But Barrell's principal objection was about literary method:

> Nowhere does Bate show any sense that language could be anything but a transparent window to meaning. No poem is at all opaque or puzzling to him; he paraphrases with a serene confidence, untroubled by the ambiguities or indeterminacies which have made reading Wordsworth such a challenging and exciting experience for other critics. (1991, p. 16)

When, a decade later, Bate followed *Romantic Ecology* with a second and more capacious study, he sought to articulate a deeper literary sensibility that could not be accused of regarding poetry merely as a window on to the poet's message.[4] Far from being didactic, *The Song of the Earth* offered an alternative to 'the New Didacticism, otherwise known as post-colonialism and feminism' (2000, p. 70). That alternative was 'ecopoetics.' *The Song of the Earth* circles around myths of the Golden Age. Deep ecologists naïvely propose a literal return to the state of nature. The Rousseauvian Romantic tradition also envisages the 'imaginative reunification of mind and nature,' but it inflects that nostalgic dream with 'a melancholy awareness of the illusoriness of its own utopian vision' (p. 245). Thus, the work of ecopoetics is at once 'a *revelation* of dwelling' and a reminder that 'language itself is a symptom of humankind's apartness' (pp. 266, 149).

Ecopoetry is not an instruction manual for harmonious dwelling with the earth. In *The Song of the Earth*'s Heideggerian finale, however, it does at least nourish resistance to the destructive instrumentalisation of the natural world. Bate offers seminal 'ecopoetic' readings of British Romantic writing: Wordsworth and chorography; Clare with Gaston Bachelard; Austen, Byron and Peacock's *Melincourt* as well as the expected Coleridge,

Percy Shelley and *Frankenstein*. The outstanding chapter reads 'Darkness' and 'To Autumn' in light of the calamitous 1815 eruption of Mount Tambora. Byron's poem transfigures the dust-palled 'year without a summer' of 1816. Keats's poem—Bate's richest example of ecopoetry—responds to the eventual return of settled weather in 1819. 'To Autumn' 'resemble[s] a well-regulated ecosystem' into which 'the self is dissolved.' 'Prototypically ecofeminist,' the poem is 'an image of ecological wholeness which may grant to the attentive and receptive reader a sense of being-at-home-in-the-world' (pp. 106–10).

Two decades on, Kroeber's, McKusick's and Bate's books are still routinely treated as paradigms of Romantic ecocriticism. Is their legacy enabling or restrictive? Their sense of Romanticism's sheer importance for environmentalism remains invigorating. By anchoring conservationist thought in Romantic aesthetics, they put late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain at the heart of ecocritical concerns. Their interpretive method, which rejected suspicious and distancing critique in favour of a frank openness to literary inspiration, chimes with some present-day trends (see Felski, 2015). And yet their rejection of their main predecessors' work was so complete that it became self-marginalising and reactionary. Few Romanticists outside the sub-field of ecocriticism have been persuaded by their critique of New Historicism. Their embrace of the traditional canon of male poets has come to seem unambitious as critical trends have kept going in the opposite direction. Concentrating on how their chosen writers foreshadowed modern environmentalism made it harder for them to see those writers in their own literary and intellectual contexts, let alone in their social and environmental contexts. And their implied version of modern environmentalism had its own limitations.

These critics saw environmentalism as essentially a moral enterprise. Literature was for them a means to foster more caring and humble attitudes towards nature on the part of a universalised or generalised humankind. The four texts might be said to inaugurate the 'idealist' version of Romantic ecocriticism.[5] Their shared presupposition, too deep-rooted to be articulated fully, is that human attitudes and sensibilities are the fundamental drivers of environmental change, and that the reverential spirit of true ecology can manifest itself—as it did in the Romantics and must do again today—in relative independence from the historical circumstances in which texts are produced.

The idealist legacy has been central to twenty-first century Romantic ecocriticism. In a sense, however, still more significant pointers to the future of the field can be found in other works published in the same decade. These are not books that share an 'ecocritical' agenda, but instead ones that foreground specific aspects of Romantic culture's reckoning with the nonhuman world. I will give just two examples. First, Alan Bewell's *Romanticism and Colonial Disease* (1999). Bewell's book is conceived as a contribution to postcolonial studies and the history of medicine, but in hindsight it is also an indispensable reference point for Romantic ecocriticism thanks to its examination of the era's fears and hopes about global environmental transformation. Bewell re-casts the Romantic period unforgettably as an age of epidemiological crisis in which commerce and empire gave rise, on the one hand, to utopian dreams of climatic reform and the Europeanization of sickly colonial landscapes and, on the other, to the terrifying prospect that the pathogenic geographies of the East might spread uncontrollably. England itself might be tropicalized by tyranny and poverty, the land poisoned by miasmatic fevers.

The second example is Timothy Morton's *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste* (1994). Morton's book is avowedly 'a work of "green" cultural criticism,' among many other things. However, its aim is not to identify a genealogy for environmentalism but instead to 'show […] how the body and its social and natural environments may be interrelated' (Morton, 1994, p. 2). Morton examines Percy Shelley's vegetarian writings and the radical vegetarian subculture in which he participated. He shows how food becomes 'diet' and how diet becomes political. Tyranny can be figured as the gluttonous consumption of flesh, and health as ethical incorporation with other species. The book's implications for '"green" cultural criticism' are suggestive rather than explicit, but Morton's work is both more rigorously archival and much more receptive to literary theory than that of the self-declared ecocritics.

This, then, was the state of ecocriticism in British Romantic studies at the turn of the millennium. Williams' and Barrell's tacitly environmentalist literary criticism by then represented a road not taken. The idealists—Bate, Kroeber and McKusick—had set out the prevailing sense of what it meant to be a Romantic ecocritic; that sense was an insurgent but in some ways a self-limiting one. Some outstanding contributions to the broader field, like Bewell's and Morton's, can be seen in retrospect to have raised the

possibility of a more open-ended kind of ecocriticism, one that would require scholars to think afresh about many more texts than those of the traditional Romantic canon.

Twenty-First Century Developments

The ecocritics of the 1990s looked for parallels to modern environmental attitudes in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literature. A number of subsequent studies have taken the same approach, but the strategy as practised by Kroeber, McKusick and Bate has by now outlived its usefulness. Recent works in the idealist vein do not represent a promising way forward for Romantic ecocriticism. This is not to say that we should abandon the hope of finding new resources for ecological thinking in the Romantic archive. Far from it. But in order to show that Romantic-period Britain still matters for understanding human enmeshment in the nonhuman world, ecocritics must resituate Romanticism within the real process of historical change. It is essential to acknowledge both the lines of influence that stretch across the past two centuries, and the transformations and discontinuities between then and now. Understanding, rather than moral evaluation, should be the primary goal. In order for the Romantic period to teach us something about the present, it must be different from the present.

It is easy to sympathise with recent idealist ecocritics' desire to justify the scholarly enterprise by specifying Romanticism's contemporary relevance, or to find inspiration for an environmental agenda in celebrated literary works. A deeper trust that literary study is worthwhile, however, means being at ease with the likelihood that there will be few perfect coincidences of opinion between Romantic-period writers and twenty-first century environmentalists. The danger lies in intellectual shortcuts: in anachronistic readings that abolish historical distance and distort complex textual realities in order to turn Romantic texts into an immediate commentary on the present day. Idealist ecocriticism has now too often become a way of reading that simply imposes upon Romantic writings the assertion that they foreshadow, intuit or preview the critic's own views about environmental issues.

Thus, J. Andrew Hubbell reinvents Byron as a Regency Murray Bookchin who 'discovered the basic theories of cultural ecology' (2018, p. 66) and who 'understands the need to address global threats by reaffirming the shared fragility of interdependent

ecosystems' and practising 'democratic globalization' (p. 9). Heidi Scott evaluates 'Wordsworth's ecological usefulness' (2014, p. 101), and that of White, Mary Shelley and Keats, on the basis that they were the first theorists of postmodern ecology and experimental microecosystems. Ashton Nichols describes 'the eco-awareness of William Wordsworth' and 'the eco-sensitivity of John Keats' (2011, p. xvi), but dwells especially on Shelley's 'The Cloud' as 'a powerful proto-ecological vision' that 'can be linked directly to current science's idea of the hereditary germplasm' (pp. 94, 23). Dewey Hall rejects literary criticism's distracting concern with 'aesthetics and culture' (2014, p. 50) in order to demonstrate the essential continuity of the 'naturalist tradition' that runs from White and Wordsworth to the present. Many more examples could be adduced.

All that said, in the first decade of the twenty-first century three more substantial studies had made significant contributions to Romantic ecocriticism whilst remaining essentially within the idealist framework. In *Topographies of the Sacred* (2005), both Kate Rigby's concern with the ecological value of 'the romantic resacralization of nature' (p. 49) and her accounts of individual British Romantics—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Clare—are avowedly in the tradition of McKusick and Bate (although she is more willing than those predecessors to identify anthropocentrism and androcentrism in Romantic writing). Her study, however, places equal weight on German Romantic science: on the aesthetics of interconnection with nature in Schelling, Goethe, Herder and Humboldt. Taking up Bate's reading of Heidegger, Rigby adds a suggestive new dimension. An exilic moment of encounter with the earth's 'inassimilable otherness' (p. 90) is essential to Heideggerian dwelling-in-place, she writes; hence her call for a 'negative ecopoetics,' attentive to 'the otherness of the earth' (p. 119).[6]

Rigby's desideratum is very similar to Onno Oerlemans' in *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature* (2002), where the Wordsworths are to the fore. Oerlemans pursues Romanticism's moments of sublime encounter with a grounding materiality that cannot be grasped by the mind. Lyric self-consciousness exposes the discontinuity between mind on the one hand and the sheer actuality and otherness of the substantial world on the other. This argument is framed—which it might not have been—as an ecocritical one, and perhaps Oerlemans' most significant contribution was simply to show how ecocriticism could be reconciled with the body of Wordsworth criticism that descends from Geoffrey Hartman. Reconciliation was also at issue in Kevin Hutchings' *Romantic Ecologies and Colonial Cultures* (2009), where the aim was to put ecocriticism in

dialogue with postcolonial studies. That conjunction has a great deal to offer, and Hutchings' study broached crucial material both on the debate about the slave trade and on the representation of Native Americans. But its theoretical basis proved constraining. Hutchings reprised McKusick's celebration of Romantic ecological holism, and ultimately his study illustrated the fact that the Bate/McKusick version of ecocriticism is ill suited to rapprochement with postcolonial thought. With *Romantic Ecologies and Colonial Cultures*, idealist Romantic ecocriticism ran into its limits.

While these various scholars were seeking to refurbish or double down on the idealist project, others were producing works of Romantic ecocriticism that emphasised their disagreement with the methods of Bate and McKusick. The single most incisive analyst of the limitations of idealism in ecocriticism has been Timothy Clark (2011, 2015). Clark treats with bracing scepticism the 'innumerable' ecocritical readings that 'trace environmental degradation to mistaken knowledge, a false world view' and that rest on 'a faith that environmental destruction can be remedied by cultural means': that is, by nurturing better kinds of imagination (2015, pp. 18–19). In that spirit he performs an exemplary rereading of Bate's greatest touchstone, 'To Autumn.' For Clark, Keats's poem is not an ecosystem into which the self may dissolve but instead a beguiling and phantasmatic adjustment of the nonhuman world to the 'middle scale' of ordinary human perception. In the end, it is not an acceptance but 'a subtle *denial*" of mortality (2015, pp. 39–44). In a compelling parallel critique by David Fairer (2011), the central issue is Romantic ecocriticism's unsuspicious immersion in pastoral myths and longings.

Other scholars have wrestled with particular aspects of the idealist legacy. The method of Scott Hess's *William Wordsworth and the Ecology of Authorship* (2012) is to take the same Victorian version of Wordsworth that Bate lauded, but to reverse his predecessor's evaluations. For Hess—especially in his shrewd reconsideration of the *Guide to the Lakes*—Wordsworth was a self-congratulatory snob whose environmental legacy was the museumification of places like the Lake District as sites for detached high-cultural tourism rather than working landscapes. Wordsworthian ecocriticism, he argues, is a dead end. The problem is that Hess treats the Wordsworth of the Victorian popular imagination as the only possible version of the poet. In that respect he cuts himself off from the main line of Wordsworth criticism, reproducing Bate's example rather than challenging it. Katy Castellano's *The Ecology of British Romantic Conservatism* (2013) is more nuanced in its political thinking. Castellano criticizes Bate's too ready

identification of green thinking with rights-based progressivism. A residual conservative tradition, she argues, harbours a more deeply rooted resistance to the environmental destructiveness of capitalist modernity. Burke is central to her account. His *Reflections* exemplify for Castellano a customary ethos of intergenerational responsibility that can foster habits of care for the land. The contrary of this conservatism, the Romantic period's liberal–imperial remaking of nature, is rather under-characterised in her analysis. Nonetheless, Castellano illuminates something essential.

Simon Kövesi takes the idealist tradition to task over Clare rather than Wordsworth. Barrell's 'historicised and aesthetic sensitivity' about Clare and enclosure has been swamped, he has recently argued, by a 'touristic green criticism' that caricatures the poet as 'a native ecowarrior fighting the anonymous forces of global capital' (2017, pp. 11, 28, 16). This clumsy anachronism is overdetermined by class assumptions: to pigeonhole Clare as the poet of place and displacement has often been a way of keeping this labouring-class poet in his place. Clare's politics, poetics and biography were more complicated than Rigby (Kövesi's main target of opportunity) acknowledges: he worked for a time laying hedges as part of an enclosure gang, for instance. Nonetheless, Kövesi's own study itself works towards a green reading of Clare, even sketching how 'ecological theory' might inform the editing of Clare's manuscripts (p. 149). Kövesi's insistence on the importance of class for Romantic ecocriticism is akin to that of Bridget Keegan in *British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry, 1730–1837* (2008), which likewise faults earlier ecocriticism for anachronism and for assumptions 'that the rural poor […] are somehow "closer to nature"' (p. 6). Keegan's study is bookended by Clare and Robert Bloomfield, and Ann Yearsley is a significant presence, but it is most notable for Keegan's exceptionally broad survey of almost forgotten plebeian authors who invite ecocritical recovery, most notably James Woodhouse. Indeed, a closer entwinement with the study of labouring-class writing is one of the most promising ways forward for Romantic ecocriticism.

Whether for or against, all of this scholarship defines itself at least partly in relation to Bate's version of ecocriticism. Other recent work, however, has had quite different starting points. As Alan Bewell and Timothy Morton had illustrated before the turn of the century, one can examine the cultures of Romantic-era contact points between humans and nonhumans whilst being little indebted to any perceived green critical orthodoxy. The boundaries of 'Romantic ecocriticism' are perpetually undefined.

Morton's own work is probably the most striking and certainly the most garlanded example of that principle. Over the last decade he has published a stream of highly readable works in ecocriticism and ecophilosophy that combine Romanticism with exceptionally wide-ranging allusions, and brilliant insight with goofy bricolage. *Ecology Without Nature* (2007) is the best known, thanks to its sloganistic title. The best is *The Ecological Thought* (2010), which includes memorable readings of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Clare. I turn now, however, to survey noteworthy recent contributions that are more specifically concerned with Romantic-period writing. They can be divided into three loose and overlapping groups. Firstly, books concerned with natural philosophy; secondly, studies of what one might call the Romantic period's spatial imaginary; and thirdly, work in animal studies.

Much of the best modern Romantic ecocriticism has been attentive what we might call the Romantic sciences of dynamic process in the physical world. That is, it has explored the cultural ramifications of natural history, botany, geology, climatology, biogeography, chemistry, population theory, comparative anatomy and environmental medicine. All of those sciences were interlinked. All of them either came into being or underwent fundamental conceptual transformation in the Romantic period. Together, they set the terms for Romantic thinking about the more-than-human world. Their influence was felt throughout the literary and intellectual culture of the age, including on all of the canonical Romantic poets. The exploration of those influences is currently among the most rewarding tasks for Romantic ecocriticism.

Alan Bewell's *Natures in Translation* (2017) is the principal landmark in Romantic ecocriticism since *The Song of the Earth*, less for its chapters on White, Wordsworth or Clare than for its brilliant discussions of ecological modernization and hybridization in writers including Erasmus and Charles Darwin, Joseph Banks and Mary Shelley. Bewell is concerned with natural history as the pre-eminent colonial science, and with the ways in which Britain's empire made exotic species newly portable and newly fashionable. Cultures of environmental 'translation' were, he shows, central to the Romantic imagination. In his analysis of how new colonial natures were generated, managed and consumed, the Pacific and the Caribbean—source and destination of the breadfruit that Banks wished to transplant as food for slaves—become as salient to British Romantic ecocriticism as the Lakes. *Natures in Translation* tells a story that seems bound to have a permanent influence on the field: a story 'of natures mobilized; of

natures uprooted, deterritorialized, and transplanted to new parts of the globe; of immigrant, creole, and transnational natures; of newly emergent natures composed of the entanglement of indigenous species with exotic, foreign, or introduced ones'; and, not least, of 'wild, useless or waste natures that confronted the altogether new possibility of being evicted from their ancestral lands' (pp. 24–25).

Natures in Translation is professedly a work of ecocriticism, but it is well complemented by three others that show little or no interest in that label. The first is another study of Joseph Banks: Tim Fulford, Debbie Lee and Peter Kitson's *Literature, Science and Exploration in the Romantic Era* (2004), an eye-opening account of 'the shadowy impresario of Britain's colonial expansion' (p. 34) and the extent of his influence across literary and scientific worlds. The second is Theresa Kelley's *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture* (2012), which serves as a kind of pre-emptive counterweight to *Natures in Translation*. Whereas Bewell examines the dominant, utilitarian functions of botanical science, Kelley shows how such pragmatic study was haunted by a playful fascination with the sheer materiality of plants, and with species that eluded all taxonomic classification. The third is Beth Fowkes Tobin's examination of British colonial representations of West Indian, Indian and Pacific Island environments in *Colonizing Nature* (2005). Tobin's central theme is how the agronomic labour and expertise of indigenous people and enslaved Africans were erased by invocations of cornucopian tropical fertility, as in Banks's myth that the Tahitian landscape yielded its bounty without effort, or the intellectual contortions whereby West India planters dismissed the horticultural skill of their enslaved workers while relishing food from gardens created by slaves. Tobin acknowledges a primary debt to Raymond Williams. His influence is especially vivid in her exasperated analysis of how James Cook crimped the veracious and earthy prose of his journals into the 'picturesque scenic tourism' (p. 162) of his published *Voyage towards the South Pole*.

Bewell's attention to global interconnections among environments and diseases has another parallel in Gillen D'Arcy Wood's *Tambora* (2014). Wood's book is a darkly vivid account of the Northern Hemisphere epidemic of hunger and sickness that followed Tambora's 1815 eruption. Drawing on sources in historical climatology, Wood argues that the calamity was of far greater dimensions than Bate indicated in *The Song of the Earth*. He makes a persuasive case that the wintry years of 1815 to 1818 were a genuine turning point in world history, and that their anomalous climate exerted a shaping

influence on thinking about issues as diverse as meteorology, ethnicity, Arctic exploration, poor relief and international politics. As that scope suggests, *Tambora* is not primarily a work of literary criticism, but *Frankenstein* runs though it like a talisman. David Higgins's meticulous close reading of Tambora's textual legacies (2017) complements Wood's account, and brings the methodologies of literary studies back to the fore. In reckoning with the cryptic wound that Tambora carved into Romantic culture, Higgins undertakes an intensive scrutiny of Byron's 'Darkness,' Shelley's 'Mont Blanc,' and the multi-authored text that Stamford Raffles compiled as he puzzled over the cataclysm and its implications.

A second germane body of recent scholarship explores the period's imaginative geographies, its representations of space and place. Work in this vein has been centrally concerned with tracking changes in conceptions of nationhood under the influence of modernisation and colonialism. The weightiest example is Fredrik Albritton Jonsson's *Enlightenment's Frontier* (2013), an intellectual and environmental history of theorising about, and interventions in, the ecosystems of the Scottish Highlands. Like the idealist ecocritics, Jonsson is concerned with the genealogy of environmentalism. His narrative, however, is altogether richer. Was the Highland landscape a foreordained nursery of primitive martial virtue, to be sustained by a paternalistic encouragement of spade husbandry? Or was it a new world ripe for internal colonisation and the introduction of exotic species? Would its future be one of crofts or fishing villages, expert management or liberal marketization, population growth or resource depletion? What eventually ensued, of course, was clearance, depopulation and Malthusian pessimism.

Like *Enlightenment's Frontier*, Eric Gidal's *Ossianic Unconformities* (2015) examines the relationship between indigenous culture and industrial modernity in the Highlands—with, in the latter case, a significant extension to Ulster. Gidal draws out remarkable wider resonances from an apparently niche topic: nineteenth-century believers in the pseudo-bardic poetry of Ossian (which was in fact concocted by James Macpherson). He acknowledges that the Ossian devotees could be 'absurd,' but he makes the case that Ossian was more than 'the romantic fantasy of an industrialized society' (pp. 147, 181). The enthusiasts' mapping of the poems' supposed real-life settings could offer critical purchase on a landscape undergoing vertiginous environmental transformation. That theme makes *Ossianic Unconformities* the most explicitly ecocritical of the many excellent recent books about geology in Romantic culture.

Rachel Crawford's *Poetry, Enclosure, and the Vernacular Landscape* (2002) traces the associations between Englishness and confined, productive plots of land. Crawford links the spatial imaginary of Parliamentary enclosure—that great theme of Williams and Barrell—to the ideology of the kitchen garden. Earlier in the century, liberty was most readily instantiated in expansive prospect-views. After the American War, however, the national character increasingly seemed to be exemplified by enclosed or contracted horticultural spaces, prudently husbanded and capable of accommodating exotic imports. Crawford sees the same sensibility in the Romantic rise of the lyric. In sonnets and bower-poems, like cottage plots, artful contrivance could put small spaces to good use. Donna Landry's *The Invention of the Countryside* (2001) casts a still more penetrating light on the eighteenth-century evolution of Englishness. Landry's history of hunting in the era of the game laws is explicitly in the tradition of Williams, Barrell and E. P. Thompson; it is driven by a Cobbett-like relish for traditional sporting culture. Old-fashioned hunting is seen both as a levelling pastime that bound together the rural community, and as implicitly ecological in its reliance on natural-historical knowledge, its antipathy to agricultural intensification (which diminished sporting landscapes), and its ritualistic intimacy with the life-world of the game. The Romantic decades, however, saw hunting's modernisation into a fashionable gentlemanly pursuit, devoted exclusively to fast competitive riding after foxes. In incisive close readings of Wordsworth and many others, Landry offers a provocative interpretation of the Romantic culture of walking—now ascending into 'pedestrianism' and fused with botanical curiosity—as an unacknowledged successor to the defeated tradition of 'naturalistic' rustic hunting.

Each of those four studies examines alterations of Britain's physical surface. Siobhan Carroll's *An Empire of Air and Water: Uncolonizable Space in the British Imagination* (2015), however, journeys into remoter regions. Carroll is concerned with what she calls 'atopias': polar, oceanic, aerial and subterranean realms. Those spaces' resistance to being travelled or mapped made them function both as a limit to empire and as spurs to new dreams of sovereign control. Even as their sublime recalcitrance incited literary representation—Carroll is especially interesting on Sophia Lee and Frederick Marryat, as well as on the *Ancient Mariner* and Byron's *The Island*—navigational and ballooning technologies were promising to extend state authority into those most challenging zones.

The third and final group of books addresses the question of nonhuman animals. Modern Romantic animal studies begins with a remarkable trio of major works: Landry's *The Invention of the Countryside*; Christine Kenyon-Jones's *Kindred Brutes* (2001); and David Perkins' *Romanticism and Animal Rights* (2003). Despite its title, Perkins' book is less about 'rights' than about the cultural implications, strongly mediated by social class, of animal cruelty. It recovers an extraordinary affective intensity in Romantic animals. The argument from design fostered a sense that animals' natural condition was one of blissful delight, even as the animals used for labour, food, hunting and baiting were seen routinely to undergo the grossest torments. William Cowper emerges in Perkins's account as perhaps the central figure for Romantic animal studies, thanks to the morbid sensitivity of his responses to animal suffering. Kenyon-Jones shares with Perkins an interest in children's literature, but *Kindred Brutes* is dominated by Byron and his roughhousing sense of interspecies camaraderie. Kenyon-Jones's main concern is with consanguinity or affiliation between humans and other animals. She traces the long traditions of ethical, evolutionary and libertine thought that influenced Romantic-period understandings of animal kinship. Wordsworth, however, stands out in her analysis for his reluctance to admit into his poetry the disruptive presence of animals.

The richest subsequent contribution is Tobias Menely's *The Animal Claim* (2015). Menely excavates a way of thinking about responsibility towards animals that is predicated on affect and address rather than on reasoning about ethical obligation. In the tradition of sensibility, subjects are represented as susceptible or answerable to the impassioned voice of the 'creaturely.' Menely's main focus is on the earlier eighteenth century, however. The Romantic period appears in *The Animal Claim* primarily as the starting point for 'sensibility's vertiginous fall' (p. 188), the long-sustained indictment of sentimentality in animal rights politics. Peter Heymans' *Animality in British Romanticism* (2012) usefully brings together animal studies and theories of the sublime, although in other respects—like his view that in the late eighteenth century 'humans had become more estranged than ever from nature' (p. 20)—his work seems to belong to an older phase of ecocriticism. Ron Broglio's scattered, suggestive *Beasts of Burden* (2017) proposes a reading of Romantic-period agriculture in terms of Foucauldian biopower. The 'beasts of burden' he has in mind are both domesticated animals and farm labourers. He explores, digressively but invitingly, how the life of the farm and the deaths of animals were realised in literature, painting, encyclopaedias and statistical

surveys. After death comes decomposition and then recomposition: the concern of Janelle Schwartz's *Worm Work* (2012). Schwartz traces revulsion towards and fascination with worms in Erasmus Darwin, Blake and *Frankenstein*, among others; she argues persuasively that Victor Frankenstein's observations of worms have a neglected importance in revealing how a corpse can grow into animated life. Schwartz envisages, finally, a practice of 'vermicular reading,' a worm-like sifting and mingling that would be 'at once unstable and stabilizing' (p. 197).

An Agenda for Romantic Ecocriticism

The canonical Romantic poets and novelists will remain important to ecocriticism in the years ahead. In particular, Coleridge's prose writings call out for more attention. Likewise the authors who have long seemed to be the special province of green reading: Gilbert White, Dorothy Wordsworth and above all John Clare. (Perhaps in the end the most enduring of all Jonathan Bate's contributions to Romantic ecocriticism will prove not to be *The Song of the Earth*, but instead his much admired standard biography of Clare [2003].) William Cobbett belongs alongside White, Wordsworth and Clare as a similarly rewarding figure for ecologically minded critics. The innumerable Romantic visionaries of environmental modernity and futurity, especially Erasmus Darwin and Joseph Banks, are now coming into ecocritical focus. William Cowper, whose importance for animal studies was demonstrated by Perkins' *Romanticism and Animal Rights*; George Crabbe, who was so significant to *The Country and the City*; and Robert Bloomfield, whom Keegan brought to the foreground of thinking about ecology and labouring-class writing, all invite much more attention from environmental perspectives. And I would nominate Anna Letitia Barbauld as the poet most unduly neglected by ecocriticism to date. This list could be extended indefinitely, but detailed analyses of individual authors, although necessary, are not sufficient to the future of Romantic ecocriticism.

The 1990s ecocritics told a powerful story about why the Romantics mattered to ecocriticism: Romanticism was the origin of modern environmentalism. But the more closely one looks at either Romanticism or modern environmentalism, the more that origin story fades away amidst qualifications and complications. A younger generation of literary scholars has grown up in the shadow of climate change and the other converging crises in global ecosystems. Their view of environmental politics is inevitably different to

that of the preceding generation. Current ecological predicaments make reverence for unspoiled areas of natural beauty, and the opposition between spiritual and industrial values, seem less central to green thinking and action. Romantic ecocriticism, too, must be renewed. Recent climate science, sophisticated to a degree that the critics of the 1990s could hardly have imagined, suggests that in the Arctic and the tropical oceans the current global warming trend driven by industrial greenhouse gas emissions commenced during Coleridge's lifetime (Abram et al., 2016). What future Romantic ecocriticism might be adequate to historical data like that?

In the liveliest recent scholarship, it is possible to detect the stirrings of an incipient new paradigm for Romantic ecocriticism. The Romantic sciences of dynamic process that I noted above—natural history, geology, chemistry and so on—were techniques for revealing, understanding and accelerating the physical transformation of the nonhuman world. The 'nature' that concerned those sciences was not diminishing but constantly metamorphosing. Romantic writers witnessed and responded to the restructuring of local and global ecosystems. That implies a new answer to the question of why the British Romantic period matters so much to ecocriticism, or, as we might now say, why it matters to the 'environmental humanities.' The new Romantic ecocriticism promises to tackle the cultural entailments of eighteenth- to nineteenth-century environmental changes in Britain, its colonies and its trading networks: changes that were integral to the British industrial revolution.

Romanticists have often seemed detached from scholarship on the economic history of their period. The warm reception among literary critics of Andreas Malm's *Fossil Capital* (2016), however, suggests that things might be changing. The Romantic era corresponds closely to the 'classic' phase of the industrial revolution. Revisionist scholarship in the 1980s indicated that the British economy as a whole did not accelerate dramatically in the Romantic decades. Nonetheless, most modern economic historians still credit the Romantic period with a pivotal role in a socio-economic transformation that would prove to be of global consequence. Those historians explore fundamental changes in the way that British society metabolized human labour and the nonhuman world between the 1770s and the 1840s, and how those changes depended in part upon empire, slavery and colonial trade; upon transport, travel and urban culture; upon views of the marriage market and of childrearing; upon social aspirations and attitudes to knowledge and education; upon tastes in landscape and in consumer

goods—in short, upon factors that also concern Romantic literary studies. Despite its preoccupation with 'improvement' and its proclivity for millenarian hopes and fears, Romantic-period Britain was to a considerable extent unaware of just how it was begetting global, irreversible social and ecological change. Nevertheless, it *was* bringing about such change. Here, then, is a new explanation for why Romantic ecocriticism matters so much. It is the study of how human-to-nonhuman relationships were imagined, philosophised and culturally mediated amid the first industrial revolution.

Romantic ecocriticism should embrace the world-historical significance of the time and place that it studies. Romantic ecocritics are ideally placed to examine the cultures of agro-industrial intensification, and of resistance to that intensification, in Britain and its empire. Doing so will require a renewed and expanded engagement among ecocritics with economic, demographic and agricultural history. Close textual studies of travel writing, natural history, political economy and the literatures of improvement will have to become more prominent in Romantic ecocriticism, even if that means fewer new readings of 'To a Young Ass' and 'Home at Grasmere.' Ecocriticism of the Romantic period will also have to become more chronologically open-minded. If it is to grow more responsive to secular trends in ecosystems and economic networks, it must locate itself in relation to the literary worlds of early modernity and the later nineteenth century.

I have shown how the work of Raymond Williams and John Barrell represents a road not taken in Romantic ecocriticism. It might sound as though I am now calling for a return to their methodology. That is not the case, although I do think that the Marxian heritage upon which they drew still has much to offer. Instead, the constellation of theories and strategies that goes by the name of the 'new materialism'—a constellation that is now illuminating the whole discipline of the environmental humanities—offers the most promising way forward for Romantic ecocriticism.[7] The new material ecocriticism comes with a seductive vocabulary of flows, entanglements and conjunctions; of meshes and rhizomes, knots and assemblages, swarms and becomings; of 'trans-corporeality' and the posthuman; of diffraction and 'intra-action'; of text as materiality and materials as texts. It is easy to see how that sensuous and tactile language could descend into jargon, and how Romantic ecocriticism's old-fashioned 'holistic interconnection with nature' could simply be rebadged as 'enmeshment in a network of more-than-human actants.' Nonetheless, the new materialism has the potential to make a genuine methodological contribution. It can do so by giving a fresh

direction to Romanticists' well-established historicizing impulses, as Bewell's *Natures in Translation*—which draws deeply on Bruno Latour—and Higgins's *Writing Tambora* have already begun to demonstrate.

Williams and Barrell examined the ways in which human agency is necessarily mediated by the nonhuman world. The new materialists differ from those cultural materialists in that they distribute agency across both the human and the nonhuman parts of the socio-ecological assemblages they examine. 'New materialism' labels various thinkers whose positions are often sharply divergent. As a group, however, they have brought ontological issues to the forefront of critical and cultural theory, proposing ontologies that are always professedly anti-anthropocentric and often explicitly aligned with environmentalist thought. They aim to attend to the constructive powers of language without thereby neglecting (as, they often suggest, earlier thinkers have done) other kinds of world-making force: forces that are realised by or through inhuman things. Medieval and postcolonial studies have led the way so far in drawing on the new materialism to interpret literary history. Romantic studies, however, has just as much salience for the new materialist agenda. In the Romantic decades the most prosaic or out-of-the-way things might acquire increasingly world-altering powers: coal, sheep, cotton plants, cowpox pustules, blackthorn hedges, turnips, breadfruit, Leyden jars and railways. A new materialist Romantic ecocriticism would trace the cultural histories of the human-to-nonhuman juxtapositions that came into being around 1800. It would interrogate the ways in which, amid the workings of industrialisation, changing environmental conditions precipitated new forms of textual production. In place of a celebratory genealogy of Western conservationism, its aim would be a critical genealogy of regimes of environmental exploitation.

Notes

[1] A recent study of Victorian ecocriticism begins by acknowledging the awkward fact 'that there is so little of it' (Taylor, 2015, p. 877). A survey of work on the eighteenth century before 1780 likewise records 'a dearth of ecocritical analyses' (Drew & Sitter, 2011, pp. 228–29). The Romantic period poses the opposite problem, so my discussion is

necessarily selective. However, it aims to be more thorough than existing reviews of the field. The fullest previous analysis of Romantic ecocriticism is by Kevin Hutchings (2007). Christopher Hitt's excellent overview (2004) is primarily a guide to pedagogy. James McKusick's account (2005) is somewhat narrower. Kate Rigby (2014) examines both British and German writers. Anahid Nersessian (2018) gathers recent phenomenological and formalist studies under the banner of ecocriticism, broadly defined.

[2] Note also Kroeber's pioneering essay on Wordsworth and ecology (1974), Donald Worster's influential 'arcadian' reading of Gilbert White (1977/1985), and a landmark special issue of *Studies in Romanticism* edited by Bate (1996).

[3] See Bate (1993) for a revealing description of the book's genesis and purpose.

[4] *The Song of the Earth* also saw Bate reposition himself in relation to Raymond Williams. *Romantic Ecology* had defined itself against Williams's debunking of pastoral (Bate, 1991a, pp. 18, 30–31). Now, Bate downplayed Williams's socialism and treated him as an admired precursor (Bate, 2000, pp. 7, 22–23, 25).

[5] Lawrence Buell's well-known distinction between first-wave and second-wave ecocriticism (2005, pp. 17–28) is not well adapted to the specific case of Romantic studies.

[6] See also Rigby (2015), a study of 'eco-catastrophe' that ranges broadly in a more popular style but remains centred on British and German Romanticism.

[7] Even a preliminary survey of key new materialist thinkers and writings would be a major undertaking, but two slim books have played a uniquely generative role: Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) and Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010).

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