
H-France Review Vol. 21 (July 2021), No. 121

Pauline Goul and Phillip John Usher, eds., *Early Modern Écologies: Beyond English Ecocriticism*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020. 310 pp. Index and illustrations. €99.00 (cl). ISBN 9789462985971; € 98.99 (eb). ISBN 9789048537211.

Review by Rebecca Zorach, Northwestern University.

Early Modern Écologies: Beyond English Ecocriticism, edited by Pauline Goul and Philip John Usher, is a welcome addition to dialogue on ecology and ecocriticism in early modern studies. It enriches contemporary ecocriticism with a sturdy array of essays, each offering a reading or readings of canonical texts of early modern French literature. The authors thus throw open the French literary canon of the sixteenth century field to ecocriticism, producing ecological reframings of classic texts such as Joachim du Bellay's *Antiquités de Rome*, Guillaume du Bartas's *La Sepmaine*, and Pierre de Ronsard's poem "Mignonne allons voir si la rose." Particularly significant is the fact that the collection's authors give substantial attention not only to ecological content but also to form, revealing early modern writing styles that operate ecologically even if their content is not always obviously about "the environment" per se. The chapters move in sympathy with such theorists as Jane Bennett, Gilles Deleuze, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, and Timothy Morton. Moving backward in time as well as forward, they also emphasize the Renaissance reception of certain ancient philosophers, such as Lucretius (as in Hassan Melehy's introductory chapter and Antónia Szabari's wonderful meditations on plants in Montaigne) and Diogenes (as in Goul's terrific chapter on the absurd in Montaigne, Rabelais, and contemporary eco-activism).

As Goul and Usher point out, what goes by "environmental humanities" in the United States has tended to work within a rather narrow scholarly emphasis on literary texts written in English. Indeed, thinking from the perspective of the sixteenth century, it might come a surprise that this body of criticism should have wound up Anglocentric at all. England in the sixteenth and even seventeenth centuries looks like an afterthought when compared to the wealth of literary, artistic, and scientific reflection on nature and the nonhuman on the Continent (and, indeed, throughout the rest of the world). Only the later conquests of the British Empire can account historically for the insistence by American scholars on turning to earlier centuries of British literature (as Timothy Morton, perhaps the most prominent guiding spirit of this volume, regularly does, alongside twentieth-century Continental theory) as both a target for method and a site of inspiration for contemporary eco-theory.

Contributions are divided into three parts, following the editors' introduction and an introductory essay by Hassan Melehy. The volume then concludes with an epilogue by Louisa Mackenzie, whose reflections on the contributions French Renaissance literature could make to

ecocriticism inspired the editors in organizing the volume. Part one, “Dark(ish) Ecologies,” comprises four essays that respond to Timothy Morton’s writings, in particular the concepts of dark ecology, hyperobjects, and agrilogistics. In part two, “Nature’s Cultures,” we encounter moments in which nonhuman beings (or “nature”) and cultural production (of artifacts, metaphors, and human character) appear deeply intertwined with one another. Finally, part three, “Groundings,” contains three particularly strong essays, which, though they might also have served in the book’s other categories, are notable in turning their attention in the direction of the ground—the earth, land use, and plants (as necessarily grounded forms of being and becoming). At the same time, they trouble any solid positioning of the earth as “ground” or foundational in the philosophical sense.

The book would already make a real contribution if it merely “added” early modern French literature to the canon of ecocriticism. There is, of course, much more that could be added. Where European textual production is concerned, much of the action is still happening in Latin in the sixteenth century, and what’s not happening in Latin is spread among many different vernacular languages. Other disciplines—agricultural history, historical geography, history of science, history of art—can provide other forms of evidence, including sensitivity to the realm of visual and material culture. In Europe, the second half of the sixteenth century was a period of heightened attention to the power of Nature.[1] More could also have been included on questions of race and colonialism (gesturing in this direction is the excellent piece by Sara Miglietti on Renaissance theories of climate as they pertain to the body). Other early modern French authors might have been considered; these authors’ choices reflect a clear preference for the established canon. No women authors are present as far as I can tell. (Among others, what of Louise Labé’s sonnet 8, with its eminently vegetative line, “je seiche et je verdoye”?) Too, it is very surprising to me that none of the contributions consider Bernard Palissy, whose ecological reflections would have made him an excellent addition to the book (even if his literary achievements were modest).[2] In the realm of ancient philosophy, I would also add Stoicism as a point of reference for a different set of ideas about Nature that were also actively addressed and extended by Renaissance writers.

But no collection can do everything. And the essays in this volume do more than merely additive work. Their fresh interpretations of canonical texts chime inventively with contemporary ecocriticism in both overt and covert ways. In particular, they present insights into the ways literary form and affect can be understood to be ecological. Jennifer Oliver, reading imagery of the entrails of a wounded, earthy Mother France in the work of both Pierre de Ronsard and Théodore Agrippa d’Aubigné, argues that these authors’ writing style is ecological in its production of messy webs of “weirdly entangled and overlapping images” (p. 94). For her, it works against the “agrilogistic,” a broad way of thinking Morton associates with clarity, planning, and rigid boundaries. Kat Addis’s chapter on Ronsard’s *Franciade* adopts another of Morton’s terms, the hyperobject, viewing the proverbs that punctuate the poem as vertiginous openings onto a fragmentary view of achronic truths. Addis argues that they function as hyperobjects, operating outside the narrative and only barely glimpsed through the proverbs themselves. As Addis beautifully puts it, “Because proverbs are ancient speech acts that only gesture towards their content, and because that content is always at a remove and/or in retreat, listening to proverbs is more like putting your ear up against them and letting their ‘empty’ noise gradually resolve into a message that you can interpret and use” (p. 109). Tom Conley’s chapter on Olivier de Serres’s 1600 *Théâtre d’agriculture et mesnage des champs* takes as a key object of study the visual and material construction of the book (notably its fascinatingly odd frontispiece and

illustrations), as well as the way “the grain of the prose itself, didactic and homiletic but also textured, rife with words and usages from the *terroirs* (lands) it describes and studies ... turns the manner of the *Théâtre* into its matter where figuration inheres in the words themselves” (p. 228).

Hassan Melehy argues in his introductory essay that an ecocritical method should not simply take contemporary theory and “apply” it wholesale to the past in a way that dominates the past’s otherness. Given the horizontality espoused by much of ecocritical thinking, we can enact a more properly ecological approach by “treating sixteenth-century texts in their material specificity and as traversed by agencies not temporally or teleologically subordinate to our own” (p. 26). Many contributions to the volume, however, do give considerable weight to theoretical ideas, and I find myself wishing they allowed their materials to “talk back” a little more forcefully. The historical specificity of this project creates tension with the deference shown to Timothy Morton’s work in particular. There is good reason to be inspired by Morton’s work. Its poetics are compelling, its politics provocative—but its history is often thin. In *Dark Ecology*, operating on the scale of global *longue durée*, Morton pushes the limit for the destructiveness of human societal invention far earlier than other theorists (including many of those also cited in this volume) who emphasize breaks between the modern and the nonmodern, the capitalist and the precapitalist, or the colonial and the indigenous. Morton dates “agrilogistics” to the beginnings of human agriculture and urban settlements in the Neolithic period more than 12,000 years ago, arguing that a constellation of consequences of this mode of thinking have governed human consciousness ever since: planning, clarity, noncontradiction, “thin, rigid boundaries” between human and nonhuman, and the reduction of existence to sheer quantity. Given the space constraints of this review, this is necessarily a reductive account, but we can recognize some of these characteristics in what other theorists might describe as technological modernity, colonialism, the culture of administration, racial heteropatriarchy, colonialism, and/or Western metaphysics. The arguments are complex and seductive—but despite the entirely different politics, I find it hard to distinguish the resort to the Neolithic that structures it from, say, the very problematic circular reasoning of evolutionary psychology (i.e., describing the distant past in terms conditioned by a certain view of the present and then using that description of the past as the basis for a normative claim about that same present).

Let me say a bit more about the implications I see in this point. While Morton espouses the “weird” to be found as a counter to the agrilogistic (even within and around it), he doesn’t seem to allow it to be present in the distant past. The weird, divine, monstrous, and magical are hard to find in his account of ancient societies. Agrilogistics in Morton’s view produces a notion of Nature “as feudal societies imagined it” as a seasonal cycling of weather, “a pleasingly harmonious periodic cycling embodied in the cycle of the seasons, enabling regular anxiety-free prediction of the future.” Few medieval or early modern Europeans would recognize Nature in this description: first of all, they experienced the *weather* as powerful and hardly predictable, brimming with anxiety; second, Nature meant far more than weather: it was sexuality, growth, production, species-being, and destiny, wrapped up together and perfusing human and nonhuman existence. There is a weary inevitability to agrilogistics (itself a hyper-object, impossible to grasp) when considered as a 12,000-year-old basic and seemingly unchanging truth.

I’ve dwelt on this point at some length because it is pertinent to the project of the early modern in *Early Modern Écologies*. Taking a more granular historical approach—as this volume in fact does—can supply moments of alternative philosophies and roads not taken: was this development actually inevitable? Looking to deep time risks absolving Europeans of responsibility for racism,

colonialism, capitalism, and the ecocide that accompany them. Early modern studies can recognize its specific imbrication in ecological destruction, while also making substantive contributions to alternative lines of flight, if we look to ecological “tipping points” that lie in capitalism[3] or colonialism[4] rather than in the onset of agriculture. Oumelbanine Nina Zhiri’s essay on Jean Bodin and enchanted treasure seekers is an example of this: she places the author at a shifting crossroads between the modern and the nonmodern, inhabiting “a nature that is entirely worked through by demons,” a premodern world of vital matter that hasn’t yet undergone “the transformation that will lead to radically separate nature from culture” (p. 220). And as Louisa MacKenzie puts it in her epilogue, “Early modern French humanists were already theorizing natureculture; or rather, they did not have to theorize it because the two terms had not yet been opposed” (p. 290). Then the question *what went on in the early modern* becomes particularly urgent. Early modern scholarship will not stop climate crisis, but it might prompt new reflections about how we handle ourselves with respect to the nested and looped catastrophes and temporalities Morton describes, and the inevitable—and uneven—loss of beloved creature life. This volume does not map out every possible path in that direction, but it gives us some excellent places to start.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Pauline Goul and Phillip John Usher, “Introduction”

Hassan Melehy, “Off the Human Track: Montaigne, Deleuze, and the Materialization of Philosophy”

Part one, Dark(ish) Ecologies

Stephanie Shiflett, “Du Bartas Responding to Morton’s Milton: A Bodily Route to the Ecological Thought”

Jennifer Oliver, “‘When is a meadow not a meadow?’: Dark Ecology and Fields of Conflict in French Renaissance Poetry”

Kat Addis, “Equipment for Living with Hyperobjects: Proverbs in Ronsard’s *Franciade*”

Pauline Goul, “Is Ecology Absurd? Diogenes and the End of Civilization”

Part two, Nature’s Cultures

Sara Miglietti, “Between Nature and Culture: The Integrated Ecology of Renaissance Climate Theories”

Phillip John Usher, “Almost Encountering Ronsard’s Rose”

Victor Velázquez, “Renascent Nature in the Ruins: Joachim du Bellay’s *Antiquitez de Rome*”

Part three, Groundings

Oumelbanine Nina Zhiri, “An Inconvenient Bodin: Latour and the Treasure Seekers”

Tom Conley, “Reading Olivier de Serres circa 1600: Between Economy and Ecology”

Antónia Szabari, “Montaigne’s Plants in Movement”

Louisa Mackenzie, “Epilogue”

NOTES

[1] Levinus Lemnius’s *Occulta miracula naturae*, published in dozens of Latin editions in the second half of the sixteenth century and two French translations in the 1560s, is a probable source for a great deal of later European sixteenth-century thinking about nature. To take one example: Melehy refers to Montaigne’s notion of the shapeless masses of flesh produced by women without intercourse with men (pp. 32-33); this may derive in part from Plutarch, but I think it almost certainly derives most immediately from Lemnius. See my *Blood, Milk, Ink, Gold: Abundance and Excess in the French Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 135-136. Melehy’s “alternative productivities” also parallel the queer productivity I argue for at p. 134.

[2] Another good addition would have been something on Charles Estienne’s *Agriculture et maison rustique* (1572). Tom Conley’s essay on Serres does briefly mention this text. On the topic of agriculture, I am puzzled by Velázquez’s assertion that Cain originally hunts rather than farming (p. 194); the story of Cain and Abel can in fact be understood as an allegory of the triumph of farming over the pastoral.

[3] For example, Jason W. Moore, ed. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016).

[4] See Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.3 (Fall 2003): 257-337; Alexander Koch, Chris Brierley, Mark M. Maslin, and Simon L. Lewis, “Earth System Impacts of the European Arrival and Great Dying in the Americas after 1492,” *Quaternary Science Reviews* 207 (2019): 13-36.

Rebecca Zorach
Northwestern University
rebecca.zorach@northwestern.edu

Copyright © 2021 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without

permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172