

Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination: Forster, Woolf, and Auden, by Kelly Elizabeth Sultzbach, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016, viii + 243 pp., £64.99 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-107-16141-2

Modernism, wrote Malcolm Bradbury, is ‘an art of cities’. The collocations and lineaments characteristic of the urban environment give to the modernist geographic imaginary its angularity, its intensity and torsion. The cosmopolitan energies of Vienna, Prague, and Berlin; London, New York, and Chicago; Paris, Moscow, and St Petersburg embody and generate Modernism’s characteristic tensions and complexities. Studies like Hugh Kenner’s *The Mechanic Muse* (1987) have heightened our awareness of the animating rhythms of the inanimate—the paradoxical energy of the motor car, the light bulb and the linotype—to the point where our consciousness of modernity’s polyphonic richness is subtended by an inescapable technological pulse.

Kelly Sultzbach’s *Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination* offers an enriching alternative view of Modernism’s nascent environmental consciousness, discerned in the works—some canonical, others less well-known—of three key writers: E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, and W. H. Auden. It participates in what Sultzbach calls the ‘turn toward rural perception’ (13), of which Alexandra Harris’s *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (2010) is a noteworthy earlier example. The focus on green modernism complements recent studies by Bonnie Kime Scott (*In the Hollow of the Wave: Virginia Woolf and the Modernist Uses of Nature*, 2012) and Carrie Rohman (*Stalking the Subject: Modernism and the Animal*, 2009), and fits within a developing body of ecocritical work on Renaissance, Romantic, and Victorian literature by scholars such as Ken Hiltner, Robert Watson, Jonathan Bate, John Parham, and Allen MacDuff. Theorists of the pastoral figure large (Terry Gifford and Raymond Williams in particular), but Sultzbach’s volume manages to draw into its ambit a variety of focalising perspectives. The author’s commitment to an intellectual expansiveness is evident in her view of material ecocriticism, ecophenomenology and embodiment theory, queer ecocriticism, and animal studies as elements in a larger critical ecology.

Sultzbach’s central preoccupation is with the unspoken—that which can’t be said. She relates this to a specifically modernist animality located, from Conrad on, in the notorious discontinuities and irrationalities of modernist writing. Her formulation revises and widens the Arnoldian fascination with the buried life into an ecocritical vision of rural landscapes alive with subsumed signification. In place of the light and heat of the modern metropolis, Sultzbach seeks out the densely layered silences of rural landscapes, and calls our attention to the ‘innate, unspoken presences’ of the non human (2). The book positions modernist writers’ deep probing of the frontiers of language, and their interrogation of human interiority and intersubjectivity in relation to their responsiveness to the ‘metalinguistic potential’ of the environment (5). This is not, strictly, a study of non human voice, although the phonic presence of trees, caves, rain, cows, cats, and even snails are all given careful and sympathetic attention. Rather, Sultzbach’s concern is with the environmental dimensions of human identity engaged in ‘reflexive exchange’ with the natural world (23). Although at times the prose struggles to free itself from the constraints of its idiom, the study is an astute exploration of the ways in which Modernism’s formal innovations acknowledge and enter into the fluctuations between human and non human, arguing that modernist troubling of formal boundaries can lead to a heightened responsiveness to ‘the animate complexity of non-human agency’ (4).

The volume is divided into three chapters, 'Passage from pastoral: E. M. Forster', 'The phenomenological whole: Virginia Woolf', and 'Brute being and animal language: W. H. Auden'. In each of these Sultzbach measures the work of her chosen writer against a series of representational responses to the natural world, ranging from an over-reverent feigning of environmental consciousness and fetishisation of the non human "other", to a reified sense of one's own porosity and trans-corporeality in relation to the material world. Chapter 1 describes the 'plastic art' (29) of Forster's progressive shift from pastoral to anti-pastoral and post-pastoral modes. This is discerned in the movement from the idealised and permissive environments of short stories like "The Story of a Panic" and "The Other Kingdom", through the (anti-pastoral) failed sexual and economic promise of rural retreat evident in texts like *Howards End* and *Maurice*, to the post-pastoral intrusion of the non-compliant environment in *A Passage to India*. The chapter makes a persuasive case for the centrality of pastoral tropes in 'registering Forster's growing opposition to social prejudice and colonial politics' (21). Chapter 2 characterises Woolf as a modernist exemplar of cohesion, drawing on the ecological dimensions of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and the material ecocriticism of Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann. This chapter positions the embodied experiences of Woolf's human characters within a network of relations between the animate but inarticulate (animals as agents of social critique), the material inanimate (chairs, steps, street, lighthouse), and immaterial presences drawn from the responsiveness of memory to place (Merleau-Ponty's 'secret blackness' whose dense void generates presence, like the ghost of Mrs Ramsay's reminiscences (140)). This reticulate complexity, Sultzbach argues, allows for the generation of 'more-than-human' meaning (119). Chapter 3 reads Auden's later poetry as making 'gestures of empathy' toward the non human (11), revelling in the kinship between animal and human. With the movement from prose to poetry, the analysis ventures more assuredly into investigating linguistic and poetic strategies for testing the barriers between human and non human communication (something that could have featured more heavily in the earlier chapters). The close readings of "Natural Linguistics" and "First Things First" are highlights, and the book is at its most enlivening when discussing the Auden's embodied relationship with the clouded brightness and limestone undertow of his northern childhood in the Pennines. One gets the sense that this is where Sultzbach's primary passion lies. The volume also contains much valuable information on the environmentally-inflected interactions between authors. Their revealing invocation of the botanical, the animal, and the geometrical in their assessments of one another's work is a rich sub-strata of the volume's field of inquiry.

Thankfully, Sultzbach does not shy away from Modernism's darker thickets, noting evidence of Woolf's racism, and Forster's occasional, reactionary desire for escapism. She is particularly alive to the constraining effects of pastoral narratives on non-white characters, whose fates often reflect the violent damage wrought by empires. In considering 'problems of agency and representation' (3) as they might be reimagined in a more carefully responsive form of environmental perception, Sultzbach reads modernist representations of non human agency as a powerful means of literary reckoning with the corrosive power dynamics of race, empire, and gender. Sultzbach is rightly chary of attributing too immediate a saving role to the burgeoning awareness and responsiveness of the literature she is concerned with, noting that while literary imagination can play a part in altering and expanding cultural perceptions, 'the role of literature is slow-moving' (194), and invoking Auden's quietly desolate observation that poetry survives as 'A way of happening, a mouth'. But the study acknowledges that its vision of green modernist investment in the shared community that

constitutes ‘the flesh of the earth’ has political ramifications for the present. Without making grand claims for empathy’s coalescing power, Sultzbach is able deftly to demonstrate how the experimental quest to give ‘new voices’ to ‘imagined subjectivities ... pries open further productive crevices where wild things grow’ (11). Such concerted attention to the latent and the unspoken has the potential to make visible the ‘attritional lethality’ of environmental degradation (Sultzbach quotes the phrase from Rob Nixon’s work on ‘slow violence’): ‘These are the ethical recognitions that literary art, particularly green modernism, provides, and academic work can forefront.’ (195) The volume’s epilogue contains a thoughtful and personal meditation setting Clarissa Dalloway’s oceanic, interconnected consciousness in poignant metaphorical relation with “Black Lives Matter”, and with the desperate ‘ebb and flow’ of human migration in quest of survival. Such scholarly willingness to breach period boundaries is a timely reminder of the renewed importance of Forster’s injunction to ‘...only connect’.

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