RADICAL PASTORAL: IN LITERARY-CRITICAL CIRCLES IN THE 1980's, the phrase had come to appear as oxymoronic as "military intelligence" or "humane slaughter," and for certain specific theoretical reasons. In the 1990's, however, driven by a powerful sense of anxiety regarding the state of our natural environment, a new group of literary critics has started to reinterpret the literary canon in order to make sense of this conjunction. They have found English and American romanticism congenial surroundings from which to launch a coherent attack on the critical orthodoxies of today. It is important to clarify some of the matters of literary theory that this recuperative project involves.

To a "lay" reader of literature, it is obvious that Thoreau and Wordsworth, for example, were interested in nature and the place of humans in it. However, as Bate points out, "some of the most eminent literary critics of our time have believed that Wordsworth was not a nature poet, or that there is no such thing as nature, or that if there is such a thing and Wordsworth was interested in it then that interest was very suspect on political grounds." A similar point could be made about Thoreau, who has likewise been dragged through the successive hedges of formalism, deconstruction and historicism. The latter figures are the main site of opposition for this generation of ecocritics; yet, as I will argue, and a look at the main texts will show, it is precisely historicism (a late-born progeny of Marxism) that has enabled ecocriticism to take off; they can even be traced to a common "origin" in a genealogy of criticism.

In an economy of influence, the new paradigm, if indeed it can aspire to such a title, is a debtor not only to Marxism: it has borrowed, and in decisive ways, from the "ecological" movements in history and philosophy that are highly credited and established to a degree that the literary-critical development cannot claim for itself as yet. Unfortunately, some ecophi-

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Losophical formulations that have been loaned to ecocriticism are themselves deeply problematic in ways that have adversely affected the new study.

Clearly, interdisciplinarity is given new importance by this development. In *Ecological Literary Criticism*, for example, Karl Kroeber attempts to relate an "ecological" biology of mind to Shelley's poetry, although the cross-disciplinary transition is not entirely smooth, and the more-or-less unthinking anti-scientism of literary studies is replaced in his revisionism by a faith in scientific responsibility and answerability to democratic control that is as remarkable as it is naive. Nonetheless, I would certainly agree with Kroeber's insistence on the importance of scientific ecology, and his opposition to "expansions of 'ecology' beyond all specificity of meaning"—ecocriticism is indeed unique in its attempt to base itself both on a scientific discipline and on the moral imperatives which seem to follow inevitably from its insights. Nothing is more important, and more difficult, than to retain this partnership. Major institutional impediments to interdisciplinarity are compounded by the difficulties inherent in attempts to traverse the extreme specialization of academia with its attendant "Balkanization" of discourse into exclusive jargons and epistemic bases, yet the effort must be made.

We need to retain a sense of proportion. The contribution of humanistic approaches to the environmental cause is not likely to be great, and we are unlikely to recover the romantics' unimaginable confidence in the social importance of poetry as public discourse. Moreover, "Green" discourse is all too often compromised by an emphasis on personal and ethical recon-

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struction that underestimates human complexity, recidivism and pragmatic orientation. Perhaps, though, we have accepted too easily for too long Auden's claim that “poetry makes nothing happen”; if Buell is right, estate agents in the British Midlands would not agree, as internal migration continues to be affected by “novel-begotten stereotypes” of industrial degradation.5

The left-over revolutionary thought that survived the fall of the Wall might suggest that academics are hopelessly compromised by their institutional status, but this view seems to generate a good deal of despair and self-congratulation and little else. So on the age-old reformist premise that being part of the problem (which we are) does not in fact exclude one from participating in solutions, we must at least try to make ourselves useful. This study is a critical evaluation of some of the new theoretical perspectives on history, materialism, literary reference (or mimesis), the canon and the pathetic fallacy.

1. The Newer Historicism

Looking for the meaning of “radical pastoral,” it is first necessary to examine the critical hegemony that would most object to the phrase, that is most hostile to ecocriticism, and that nevertheless seems its sine qua non: historicism. In romantic studies it is Jerome McGann who is credited with developing the modern critique of romantic ideology, and thus takes most of the flak from ecocritics like Bate or Kroeber. Raymond Williams’ The Country and the City anticipates his demand for Wordsworth, for example, to be read with an eye on the real social and political history which the poetry only partly addresses, but McGann is indebted far more than Williams to the “hermeneutic of suspicion,” characterized by Kroeber as an “[extension of] Cold War psychology into literary scholarship.”6 The genealogy of this practice is complex, but the axiomatic form is that provided by Walter Benjamin:

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transferred

5. Lawrence Buell, The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995) 3. Unfortunately, I suspect that the most major impact of literary representations is on leisure patterns, rather than the mainstream of our lives. This likelihood is a serious problem for ecocriticism, but beyond the scope of this essay.

6. Kroeber 39. I would suggest, however, that Kroeber’s obvious political motivation leads him to attack neo-Marxist readings (which, in restrained, non-totalizing versions, can be compelling) and yet accept far too easily the intrinsically unfalsifiable claims of that most unscientific, antimaterialist movement, psychoanalysis (cf. 62–66).
from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.\footnote{Walter Benjamin, \textit{Illuminations}, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Fontana, 1973) 248.}

Several things are clear from this quote, not least of which is the superiority of the critic over the artist which it implies and endorses. Interpretation is about the discovery of “barbarism” in the monuments of magnificence which were happily (and barbarically) reproduced through generations of ideological complicity. The aseptic critic has the job of finding the signs of the repression of “history” (as the absolute \textit{locus} of truth) in the faint-hearted artist and his or her genetic descendants, and exposing the disreputable truth. Thus Antony Easthope can describe a kind of criticism that accepts “at face value” Wordsworth’s intentions as a poet as “collaborationist,” with all the cruel connotations that this term brings with it.\footnote{Antony Easthope, \textit{Wordsworth Now and Then} (Buckingham: Open UP, 1993) 129. The practice of “reading along the grain” is derided here; assuming that Wordsworth may help us to read his works is like “a sardine tin with the key inside.” Instead the prescriptive prose and poetry are lumped together in a thoroughly cryptic package, to which only the true critic has the key.} For McGann, the job of historicist critics is to show how an artistic production “historicizes the ideological materials, gives a local habitation and a name to various kinds of abstractions,” and to trace the ensuing process of reification by critics anxious to deny their status as “alien creatures” relative to the deeply \textit{archaic} works they study.\footnote{Jerome McGann, \textit{The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation} (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983) 11, 2. This odd notion of historical distance derives from a notion of historical \textit{difference} as absolute and un(a)bridgeable. My thanks to Neil Rowlands of Swansea University for his assistance with the historicist critique.}

At least this approach has the advantage of accepting a notion of the “independently real,” which is more than can be said for the radical textualism of the deconstructive formalism that preceded it—it is this shift which seems to have given positive opportunities to ecocriticism. However, the admirable attempt to contrast real social and economic conditions with their representations in romantic poetry carries with it the anthropocentric bias of a certain distinctive \textit{construction} of history. We can therefore historicize historicism, and suggest that a preoccupation with non-human nature is not \textit{per se} an evasion of any kind. Indeed, the idea that it might be is itself founded on another, related mistake: that “politics” is finally only about social relations between humans. In other words, that famous \textit{zoon politikon} has only its own affairs to study, as indeed the etymological relationship between \textit{polis} and “politics” suggests.\footnote{Alongside the new “politics” there is a new historiography, which takes a more ecological view of the “material conditions of existence,” and thus undermines Marxist historiography. See n. 2 above.} Thus McGann praises
Heine (with no apparent sense of irony) for his ability to situate artworks critically in their "concrete and human environment," although it is only recently that the environment has come to seem predominantly "human" or "concrete"! (13). The new criticism would counter that sincere interest in the economy of nature is not necessarily a "compensation" for anything but the political and historical Ding an sich.11

This reduction of politics to the business of human society is looking increasingly untenable, just as the Marxist ideology that drives the historicist project is looking increasingly marginal even in terms of this reduced definition. Thus Bate describes the left-right confrontation that structures their anthropocentric politics as "crude" and "redundant," while Kroeber’s "Cold War" appellation suggests that a merely destructive anachronism is at stake here.12 Insofar as both capitalism and historically-instantiated Marxism subscribe to a notion of continuous economic growth at odds with the limited resources and capacities of the earth, these claims seem justified. However, they should be qualified by an historical awareness of both the "left entryism" that characterizes and moulds modern "Green" movements, and the appropriation of ecologism by Nazism.13 Perhaps "ecologism," as a complex cultural formation, represents an "excess" over conventional political categories—it can neither be subsumed within them, nor assumed to have simply superseded them. Perhaps the term "post-political" would be useful, if by "post" we understand the kind of ambiguous, contested and partial entail that it suggests in "postmodern," for example. In any case, there is little question that ecopolitics represent, even for socialists, an important political force in contemporary society, far outstripping Marxism and rivalled only by feminist and ethnic movements in terms of counter-hegemonic potential.14 Where Marxism survives, it does so in Maoist forms that appeal to the rural poor rather than Marx’s proletariat, and even here there may be admixtures of ecologism.

11. The danger in this analysis is that it might suggest that historicism is fine apart from its reliance on outmoded concepts of politics and history. In fact, its real problem, hinted at here and in Kroeber, is its tendency to slide towards totalizing, non-falsifiable interpretations—not "against the grain" but without any regard for it. A good critique is M. H. Abrams’s "On Political Readings of Lyrical Ballads," in Romantic Revolutions, ed. Kenneth Johnston et al. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990).

12. Bate 3, Kroeber, 3, 5, etc. It is important to point out that I use "anthropocentric" and "ecocentric" in philosophically "weak" senses, connoting orientation. The "strong" senses are part of a project of ontological elision that I find unintelligible.


14. Although Bramwell’s latest book would seem to contradict this assertion, it does so by developing a restrictive definition of "politics." It is certainly true that Green electoral successes outside Germany have been very rare. It should also be pointed out that for many people the separation of feminist and ecological projects would be untenable. Starting points
Thus the new readings of romanticism have arisen asserting the centrality of nature in Wordsworth and Shelley, building on a far earlier critical tradition but assigning a new political significance to their impassioned, contradictory writing. Ironically, Williams (a progenitor of historicism) had seen the genuine importance of the new poetry that was launched with the *Lyrical Ballads*:

[Wordsworth’s] active sympathy is the real change of mind, the new consciousness if only in a minority, in the very period in which the willed transformation of nature, not only of the land and water but of its raw materials and its essential elements, was to enter a new phase, in the processes we now call industrial.\(^\text{15}\)

Where Easthope, responding to the “Boy of Winander” scene in Book v of “The Prelude,” doubts parenthetically “whether you really can mimic owls in this way” (2) (you can, and you can even attract them by this means), Williams is able to see in Wordsworth a real “confidence in nature, in its own workings, which at least in the beginning was also a broader, a more humane confidence in men.”\(^\text{16}\) These remarkable new forms of “sympathy” and “confidence” do not sound like mere delusions, but the central elements in a new, perhaps radical, form of pastoral.

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16. Williams 127. An important claim is that “Clare marks the end of pastoral poetry, in the very shock of its collision with actual country experience” (141). There is a big mistake and a strong claim here. I cannot deal with Clare here, important though he is. My omission is made worse by Clare’s odd position as “central marginals”—always being praised, seldom being studied.
Global flows of money, symbolism, happiness and misery may congregate in one’s acts of consumption. . . . One eats ideology while consuming a McDonald’s hamburger; and ideology is not just a matter of corporate image but of millions of cattle. Or in digesting a British ‘Ploughman’s Lunch’, one is digesting ideology, for the Georgic myth of hearty labour figured in the cheese and Branston pickle is a marketing ploy.17

Timothy Morton, another romantic ecocritic18 illustrates the notion of “ideology” that will guide his reading of Shelley’s poetry and prose in terms of his commitment to “natural [vegetarian] diet.” The point of this is to emphasize “just how material a concept ideology is” (Morton 5). In their conception of a materialist reading of history or poetry, then, Marxist critics have really not been materialist enough! At the same time, where Marxists have habitually evinced suspicion regarding any sniff of spirituality (another evasion of “reality”), there is in ecophilosophy and ecocriticism a strand of thinking which recognizes a need for a sense of awe in the presence of nature. For example, Bate’s reading of Ruskin’s Wordsworth is motivated by “the belief that nature’s sanctity, that an ecological ethic, must be reaffirmed in our contemporary structure of values” (Bate 11). It is important to note that this does not suggest a status conferred by a transcendent deity (as the earlier Christian anti-industrial movements had it [see Thomas]) but rather an immanent spirit.

The idea seems to be inspired by Spinoza’s famous deus sive natura,19 a formulation which denies the Creative God, and indeed, it turns out, the personal, interventive, loving, caring God too. God is nothing other than the universe, eternally existent and utterly determined by the laws of logical causation.20 For Shelley, Kroeber argues, the extraordinary cosmology of

18. There is some difficulty with using this term, as the “ecological” critique is a minor aspect of the book (though see elsewhere in this volume). There is certainly no necessary correlation between animal rights and ecologism—think of the issue of ecologically-necessary deer-culls, or aboriginal hunting (see also Mark Sagoff, “Animal Liberation and Environmental Ethics: Bad Marriage, Quick Divorce,” in Environmental Philosophy 84–94).
20. It is difficult, and important, to remember that Spinoza’s deterministic “causality” was not physical but logical. See n. 25, Ethics 228. Shelley was no doubt impressed by Spinoza’s
the *Ethics*, which may as easily be called atheistic as pantheistic, represented the basis of a “conscious engagement with a dynamic cosmos” in which true freedom lay in comprehension of natural determinism (Kroeber 4). As for Wordsworth, his simultaneous wariness of the pathetic fallacy and yearning for paganism (but precisely as a lost “creed outworn”) indicates that he thought he fell short of pantheism; and in any case, in his own time, “the church’s deistical bias freed [him] to explore in his experiences of the natural world what he could portray as ‘spiritual’ qualities without feeling discomfort about his orthodoxy” (Kroeber 58).

This is not the place to pursue the argument, but I’m pretty sure (pace Kroeber) that Spinozan metaphysics are profoundly opposed to nearly every aspect of modern science, especially but not only cosmology. Most seriously, his philosophy is in no way helpful ecologically (quite apart from his well-known support for vivisection against “womanish pity” [Spinoza iv.xxxvii, n. 1 (166)]). For example, although the *Ethics* made the radical (at the time) claim that it could not “come about that man is not part of nature and not follow its common order” (iv.Appendix vii. See also i.190–91), Spinoza is quite clear on the question of human dominance and the instrumentality of nature:

> Save men we do not know any particular thing in nature in whose mind we may rejoice or which we may join to us in bonds of friendship or any other kind of association: therefore the consideration of our own advantage does not demand that we preserve whatever exists in nature besides men. Instead, it teaches us that we should preserve or destroy it according to its usefulness, or adapt it to our use in any manner we please. (iv.Appendix xxvi: 195)

There is a further problem regarding pantheism and ecology: One might fairly ask whether the inviolability of nature applies to genuine efforts to repair it? Moreover, the pantheistic Shinto religion does not appear to have protected the fish and whales of the Pacific, or the forests of the Russian taiga and South-East Asia, from massive Japanese exploitation. All this is to say that pantheism need not be a credential to be sought for ecowriters, and that the Spinozan version is especially suspect. On the other hand, it is not improbable that Spinoza was a necessary but not sufficient condition for real romantic proto-ecologism, by giving philosophical legitimacy to immanentist thought and the *amor intellectualis Dei*, that intuitive, passionless

claim that a person worships “that God may love him above the rest and direct the whole of nature for the gratification of his blind cupidity and insatiable avarice” (33).
love of the necessary order of the Universe that Shelley praises in Canto vi of “Queen Mab.”

Leaving aside the vexed question of pantheism, it is obvious that Wordsworth sought to ennoble and spiritualize nature—derive a transcendent Nature from ecological nature—yet was able to reconcile this with a “recognition, even . . . idealisation, of ‘humble’ characters, in sympathy, in charity and in community” whose very lives, whose working or vagrant lives, are seen as following from the “promptings of nature” (Williams 130). Within the terms of a reductive Marxist critique, as Bate points out, “Wordsworth’s sublime representation of his shepherds contrived to distort historical reality for literary effect every bit as much as the otium of traditional pastoral had done” (Bate 28). Any attempts to elevate the subjects of pastoral, which is to say in this context, any attempts to portray an ideal human ecology, can only be seen as mystification or distortion of “reality.” Thus “Home at Grasmere,” which both Bate and Kroeber take to be central to Wordsworth’s synthesis of political and ecological radicalism, must be seen as inadequate because historically incomplete; the historicist vision, then, is ironically both anti-materialist (in its narrow conception of “reality”) and over-materialist, in its insistence that spiritualization is really a form of mendacity. The problem seems to lie in a particular literary-theoretical view of reference.

3. How to Refer to a Mountain

Alan Liu has claimed that “there is no nature except as it is constituted by acts of definition made possible by particular forms of government,” and Easthope, in a similar vein, opens his book with the line: “Wordsworth is not interested in nature” (1). It is not only neo-Marxists who make this claim: Alexander Wilson, in a book on cultural geography, “The Culture of Nature,” writes:

Nature is a part of culture. When our physical surroundings are sold to us as “natural” . . . we should pay close attention. Our experience of the natural world—whether touring the Canadian Rockies, watching an animal show on TV, or working in our own gardens—is always mediated. It is always shaped by rhetorical constructs like photography, industry, advertising and aesthetics, as well as by institutions like religion, tourism, and education. (12)

21. Ethics, v.xxxii–xli, esp. xli where it is distinguished from the “absurd” conventional view of piety, in which the “vulgar” are restrained in their insane Thanatotic urges by a despotic and logically incoherent Law. The true love is a pleasure, and a blessedness, with neither carrot nor stick nor a God to wield them.

Even Robert Harrison says in the eco-Heideggerian book Forests, that “nature has no being apart from its modes of revelation, which are given by historicity.”23 The claims here are uncontroversial (or should be): “nature” is never available to us simply “as such.” Not even Grasmere shepherds or archaic Greeks could have a pure perception of a mountain, because we always experience the world in some particular way, within a culturally-given cognitive framework (which would therefore have an historical development, although it is surely Althusserian nonsense to claim that perceptions are directly “made possible by a particular form of government”). Historicist critics have wanted to interpret this “cultural construction of ‘nature’” argument as leading to the conclusion that Wordsworth’s real agenda was the escape from history: “there can be no more or less direct experience of Nature” (Easthope xiv), therefore it can’t make any sense to call anyone a “nature poet.” How has it been possible to move from one acceptable position, to the other, which ecocriticism finds unintelligible?

The problem is a serious one for literary theory, and it is in Lawrence Buell’s The Environmental Imagination that it is most thoughtfully explored, although in a sense all the ecocritics adopt a certain position, and it is one that has assumed, of its own accord, a certain consistency. For instance, when Morton insists that an “ideology” of hamburger consumption must include real dead cattle as well as cultural symbolism, or when Bate brings Chernobyl to bear against the argument that “there is no nature” (the suggestion being that, with a few more like that, there really will be “no nature”), there is a point being made about reference, or “denotation,” as semiotics termed it. Inspired by Saussure and Hjelmslev, or Northrop Frye, depending on whom you ask, criticism before historicism demanded that context be “bracketed out” in favor of some form of textual or intertextual analysis. McGann has usefully attacked precisely this reduction, but, as has been said, only in the name of an anthropocentric “history.”24 Criticism remains without a real “exterior.”

Ecological Literary Criticism, by contrast, begins with an implicit distinction in its demand that critical work “enhance widespread appreciation of how literary art may connect cultural experiences to natural facts” (Kroeber i). It then goes on to attempt the opposite, counter-textualist maneuver of virtually collapsing the former into the latter, with extraordinary claims like this one about the supposedly convergent aims of “present-day scientists” and “romantic poets”:

Their primary aim is to comprehend how we understand the nature of the physical world—out of which all cultures, all languages, and all ideologies are constructed. (Kroeber 98)

If it is difficult sometimes to understand how, say, the beauty of Snowdonia is *culturally* constructed, it is harder to see “Contract With America” or “Natural Born Killers” as somehow *naturally* constructed. It may be that we can retain a notion of “nature poetry” without falling into such a briar patch of deep greenery.

The problem, which Buell identifies but Kroeber ignores, is partly that neo-Marxists have been right: the notion of “radical pastoral” is really, possibly irredeemably, problematic. Concomitantly, the issue of fictional reference cannot be brushed aside with any confidence. There is perhaps a necessary ambiguity here: “to posit a disjunction between text and world is both an indispensable starting point for mature literary understanding and a move that tends to efface the world” (Buell 5). Thus we cannot simply appeal to “natural facts” as though they bore on their faces their true names or demanded a certain mode of representation—Easthope’s strategy of giving “There was a Boy” Modernist, Christian, Sartrian and other endings besides the Wordsworthian one highlights this disjunction of Being and Meaning effectively—but neither can the object–world simply be declared an irrelevance or a pure ideological construct. Buell emphasizes this point by giving a history of the “nature fakers” controversies, which reveals the extreme literalism extant in the 19th century—Ruskin is among those picked out as champions of realist (we might want to say “hyper-realist”) aesthetics—and then compares the effect of this “microscopic vision” with “the experience of first realizing that the generic use of the masculine pronoun might be ideologically loaded, or that *Heart of Darkness* perpetuates the imperial order as staunchly as it critiques it” (Buell 91). Literalism and constructionism are situated side-by-side here as *historically* radical insights.

This awareness of the “dual accountability” of fiction and non-fiction (to differing extents) to both intertextuality and “context” is powerful, and not least because Buell wants to reform the latter notion, insisting on the world as moderator and regulator rather than the mere “setting,” background or accompaniment that the traditional term implies. For Northern ecowriter Barry Lopez, for example, “the contours of subjectivity . . . are molded by the configurations of the landscapes with which a person has been deeply associated.” Closer to home (my home, that is), the issue of the Winander owls cannot be dismissed with a bit of parenthetical skepticism: it makes the most *material* difference whether owls will really respond

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25. Buell 94. Note that this notion of an influence proceeding from a place to a personality is not the same as Kroeber’s “sociobiological” approach, although the latter is confused enough for uncertainty to arise.
to a human imitation in the way that Wordsworth presents it. The poet even gives the technique required, although it is rather more difficult than he makes it sound. If the poet is a liar here, it gives more credence to Easthope's claim that he is working towards a dishonest "affirmation of the reciprocal relationship (or correspondence or bond) between natural world and the inner self," because the structure of call-and-reply is part of the way in which the reciprocity is constructed.26 A similar point about the claims of poetic mimesis is made by recommending people who are really interested in nature to Erasmus Darwin rather than Wordsworth.27 Undoubtedly, "There was a Boy" strives to recreate a sense of the unmediated experience that Wordsworth thought characteristic of childhood and past ages, following the Schillerian model,28 but paradoxically succeeds in emphasizing the nostalgia of the poet. Harrison claims that "nostalgia . . . is an ambivalent stance: it cannot but evoke the condition it laments, and by the same token it cannot but present its lost paradise . . . as anything but imaginary, inaccessible or unreal" (Harrison 156). The point is, however, that any ornithologist will insist that owls are in truth none of these things—they are real and accessible, and our visions of them, even poetic ones, are culturally structured but not determined. As Buell states, "we need to find a way of conceiving the literal level that will neither peremptorily subordinate it nor gloss over its astigmatisms" (Buell 90). "Nature writing" must combine textual artistry with the true description, and mimesis is the key.

The problem is that ecocriticism resolutely refuses to develop into the kind of totalizing reading plan that the "hermeneutic of suspicion" has legitimized in certain Freudian and Marxist practices. There is no simple test by which to measure the ecopolitical valence of a particular object-reference or distortion of reality, such as Wordsworth's apparent topographical disfigurations in "Tintern Abbey," or Thoreau's exaggeration of the severity of the winter spent at Walden Pond.29 Mimesis is defended here,
but even anthropomorphism "can be a radical strategy in a culture like our
own, where the frontier between the human and the non-human is
well-policing" (Wilson 128).

Moreover, it is important to remember that Thoreau aspires to a higher
condition of truth to reality than Wordsworth; accordingly we will judge
the mimetic faults of the former more harshly—the parallel case of Ruskin's
objection to use of "metaphorical expressions in cool blood."30 This ob-
servation is not meant to collapse the distinction between fiction and
non-fiction, but rather insist that it is vital—existing in a symbiotic rela-
tionship with the mimetic/textual31 distinction—and also porous. "Tintern
Abbey" may be judged by internal and intertextual criteria, but also by its
fidelity to ecological nature; "The Guide to the Lakes" would be a poor
thing if it distorted the geography or human ecology of Cumberland, but
it may also be evaluated by criteria more often applied to fictional works.
Poetry can then retain the polemical force of environmental advocacy, and
environmental non-fiction escape the strictures of Ruskinian literalists:

This ambidextrous response avoids opposite reductionisms: reduction-
ism at the level of formal representation, such as to compel us to
believe either that the text replicates the object-world or that it creates
an entirely distinct linguistic world; and reductionism at the ideational
level, such as to require us to believe that the environment ought to
be considered either the major subject of interest or merely a mys-
tification of some other interest. (Buell 13)

4. Charging the canon

Part of the coherence of the ecocritical project lies in its rejection, at the
theoretical level, of textualist reading practices and "suspicious" hermeneu-
tical practices; it tends to read sympathetically, "along the grain," and seeks
presences at least as much as absences.32 Alongside this "collaborationist"
approach,33 it tries to broaden the scope of the canon to take in descriptive,
didactic and prescriptive prose. There is a remarkable consensus on this
subject: Bate started the trend by tracing a textual morphology of

Allen, 1904) 211 [Modern Painters iii.iv.ch. xii].
31. Buell (93) derives from Linda Hutcheons a taxonomy of reference that includes
intratextual, intertextual, autorepresentational (when the text appears qua text) and outer
mimetic. When I use the term "textual," I mean this to incorporate the first three levels.
32. The admirable commitment to "open" readings is not restricted to ecocritics, nor is
it essential to them, but seems to derive from the fact that ecocriticism gives political
legitimation to some who are humanist critics on other grounds. See note 11 above.
33. Signalled, for example, by Bate's talk of a "communion" with Wordsworth, "to allow
Wordsworth to become once more what he imagined himself to be" (9). I suspect that for
McGann et al this would sound like an invitation to a critical seance.
Wordsworth's "Guide to the Lakes," which was his most popular work in the 19th century (followed by The Excursion, also recuperated and for similar reasons). He also constructed a "locodescriptive" tradition in British poetry, taking in Clare, Scott, Thomas Hardy, Edward Thomas and Seamus Heaney, and thus achieved a "double opening": The Wordsworthian canon of "the Great Decade," and the post-romantic tradition were simultaneously challenged. Morton has based his reading of the politics of diet on a canonization of Shelley's prescriptive prose, especially A Vindication of Natural Diet, and showing what Buell's "continuum" of fictive facticity might look like in practice. It is complicated by the addition of exhortation to figuration and description, but contained within a notion of "material ideology" that facilitates a similar fidelity to multivalence. Buell executes a similar manoeuver to Bate's, tracing a development in Thoreau's work from transcendentalism to an ecologically-oriented materialism while at the same time constructing a Thoreauvian canon of American "naturist prose."  

Clearly non-fiction is likely to play a significant role in future green canons, especially in North America, where "naturist" writing has increased in volume in inverse proportion to the wilderness space remaining. However, it is also providing ways to reconnect, for example, the Thoreau of Walden and the Thoreau of Resistance to Civil Government, or the Wordsworth of The Excursion and the one who wrote letters objecting to the prospect of mass tourism in the Lake District. There are problems here, however, the most significant being the danger that ecocritics will try too hard in their efforts to "ecologize" authors who, after all, belong to a period which is, in a technical sense, "pre-ecological." Furthermore, if the theory is to emphasize eclecticism in canon-revision, it must retain an undeconstructed distinction between the central and marginal, and vindicate the revisions.

5. Civic Irony and Pathetic Fallacy

Our feeling for nature is like the feeling of an invalid for health. Schiller could not have known, writing in 1795-96, the resonances this phrase would have for us now, in a time of terrible sickness. We feel, as

34. Buell indicates that he prefers "naturist" to "naturalist" because it distinguishes the former from people who collect butterflies and press flowers. In the UK, however, his preferred term is synonymous with "nudist."
35. See Bate's defense of this against charges of "élitism," 50-51.
36. I mean by this pre-Darwinism rather than pre-Haeckelian.
37. Bate touches on the therapeutic possibilities of ecological reading when he refers to John Stuart Mill's claim that Wordsworth's poetry saved him from nervous collapse, while Morton reads Shelley's poetics of diet as sociopathological diagnosis. Nietzsche saw our inability
Wordsworth does in “The world is too much with us,” an alienation that seems less inevitable than historical—for these as well as for Ruskin and Nietzsche, “the Greeks” are posited as a site of a certain health. In our idealizations of aboriginal peoples, especially indigenous Americans, we reiterate this logic of nostalgia as the loss of the hypostatized Other. As a result, ecophilosophers call for an ethical relinquishment or “ecocentrism” that finds an echo, for example, in Buell’s fruitless search for an “aesthetics of relinquishment” of subjectivity in the American lyric, “imaging human selves as unstable constellations of matter occupying one among innumerable niches in an interactive biota.” Yet here alarm bells ring—“unstable” in what sense exactly? Just one amongst others, yet also the writers of poetry? Indeed, the recognition of an historical loss is precisely an account of an alienation prescribed by temporality, a state shared by Lakota, archaic Athenians and modern Welshmen. Harrison has pointed out that material interdependence, and the obvious myopia of atomistic humanism, cannot elide ontological difference that has language as its ultimate ground: “Language is a differential, a standing-outside of nature, an etsasis that opens a space of intelligibility within nature’s closure” (Harrison 200). But there again, we know that we are evolved, that absolute difference must be impossible, that we are consubstantial and kin with animals.

This problem, which I suspect is undecidable, is also the problem of pathetic fallacy and hence a critical issue for romantic poets and for us. Bate assumes that Wordsworth envisaged a “marriage of humankind to the natural world—‘the very world which is the world / Of all of us, the place in which, in the end, / We find our happiness, or not at all’” (Bate 33; Wordsworth, The Prelude 10.725–27). This is to naturalize and resolve what was a real choice—longing, or belonging?

Kroeber attempts the ecophilosophical sleight-of-hand clumsily: “The romantics . . . believed that humankind belonged in, could and should be at home within, the world of natural processes” (5). The space between the prescriptive and descriptive here marks a real aporia. Yet this view is belied by his sensitive reading of “I heard a thousand blended notes,” which to “have done with” an ascetic, world-denying metaphysics as a kind of indigestion! (e.g. Genealogy of Morals, trans. Walter Kaufmann [1967; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1989]). For a series of attempts to read eco-crisis as a mass psycho-pathological condition, see Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind, ed. T. Roszak, M. E. Gomes, A. D. Kanner (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1995).

38. Buell 167. This demand is conjoined with a hope for a “recognition” of Nature’s “personhood,” another notion absorbed from ecophilosophy.

39. Along with many sympathetic philosophers, e.g. Bernard Williams, R. M. Hare, Martin Heidegger and Michael Leahy.
finds Wordsworth quite uncertain, and in that sense modern. Thus, “the poet finds himself constrained to entertain the notion of the twigs’s pleasure” (Kroeber 45) while simultaneously qualifying his feeling almost out of existence. It is this undecided quality that allows Harrison to read the same poem as a “testimony of civic irony” (164) that bears witness to the poet’s temporal alienation (as “man”) even as it asserts that his “human soul” is linked to nature. We might note also the second half of the third stanza: “faith” attaches to “enjoys” in a tentative natural pleasure principle, while “breathes” reminds us of the natural science that does not need to be questioned as “creed.”

It is this puzzlement, not its resolutions, which mark romanticism as proto-ecological. Human/nature is posed as a question, just as today it is. Ruskin’s account, although situated within an historically-nostalgic history, highlights something of our confusion whilst clearly addressing Wordsworth’s:

And then, puzzled, and yet happy; pleased, and yet ashamed of being so; accepting sympathy from nature, which we do not believe it gives and giving sympathy to nature, which we do not believe it receives . . . we necessarily fall into the curious web of hesitating sentiment, pathetic fallacy, and wandering fancy, which form a great part of our modern view of nature.

The radicalism of pastoral is not given, because the meanings of both terms are always at stake. Shelley represents a quasi-pastoral Utopian-ism—politically radical but strongly humanistic—while in Wordsworth the problematic of pastoral is central but unresolved, in a conflicting play of spiritual and material fidelities.

We are less sure than Marxists what would count as “radicalism”: Advocacy or idealization; pathetic fallacy or naturalism; social ecology or the dream of relinquishment. Thus the radical problem of pastoral: It may cloud our social vision, or open out a human ecological one; it may help in the marginalization of nature into “pretty ghettos” (Buell 4) or engender a genuine counter-hegemonic ideology. If pastoral can be radical, if it has been so, it is not as a finished model, exhortation or ideology, but as a

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40. Stephen Hales discovered plant respiration in 1727.
41. Ruskin 231 [Modern Painters III.iv.xiii]. I do not imagine for a moment that I have exhausted the issue of the pathetic fallacy, only reopened it in a certain way. Cf. Bate’s chapter on “The Moral of Landscape.”
42. I have discussed the “radical” but not the “pastoral” here. Matters of definition like this are important, but beyond the scope of the essay.
questioning, as itself a question. With a new appreciation of the literal, and a theory of the pathetic fallacy as ontological problematic, and a recognition of the special power of poetry to hold in suspension the undecidable, "radical pastoral?" appears as the political, poetical question of be/longing, of the root of human being on this earth.

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