
Ecology without Nature

⌘ RETHINKING ENVIRONMENTAL AESTHETICS

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Toward a Theory of Ecological Criticism

Nobody likes it when you mention the unconscious, and nowadays, hardly anybody likes it when you mention the environment. You risk sounding boring or judgmental or hysterical, or a mixture of all these. But there is a deeper reason. Nobody likes it when you mention the unconscious, not because you are pointing out something obscene that should remain hidden—that is at least partly enjoyable. Nobody likes it because when you mention it, it becomes *conscious*. In the same way, when you mention the environment, you bring it into the foreground. In other words, it stops being the environment. It stops being That Thing Over There that surrounds and sustains us. When you think about where your waste goes, your world starts to shrink. This is the basic message of criticism that speaks up for environmental justice, and it is the basic message of this book.

The main theme of the book is given away in its title. *Ecology without Nature* argues that the very idea of “nature” which so many hold dear will have to wither away in an “ecological” state of human society. Strange as it may sound, the idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art. The book addresses this paradox by considering art above all else, for it is in art that the fantasies we have about nature take shape—and dissolve. In particular, the literature of the Romantic period, commonly seen as crucially about nature, is the target of my investigation, since it still influences the ways in which the ecological imaginary works.

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Why Ecology Must Be without Nature

In a study of political theories of nature, John Meyer asserts that ecological writers are preoccupied with the “holy grail” of generating “a new and encompassing worldview.”¹ Whatever its content, this view “is regarded as capable of transforming human politics and society.”² For example, deep ecology asserts that we need to change our view from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism. The idea that a view can change the world is deeply rooted in the Romantic period, as is the notion of worldview itself (*Weltanschauung*). Coming up with a new worldview means dealing with how humans experience their place in the world. Aesthetics thus performs a crucial role, establishing ways of feeling and perceiving this place. In their collection of narratives on ecological value, Terre Slatterfield and Scott Slovic tell a story about President Clinton’s dedication of a wilderness area in Utah: “At the ceremony dedicating the new national monument [Grand Staircase-Escalante], . . . President [Clinton] held up a copy of [Terry Tempest Williams’s] *Testimony* and said, ‘This made a difference.’”³ Slatterfield and Slovic want to demonstrate how narrative is an effective political tool. But their demonstration also turns politics into an aesthetic realm. For Slatterfield and Slovic, narrative is on the side of the affective, and science, which they call a “valuation frame,” has blocked or is in “denial” about it.⁴ As well as producing arguments, ecological writers fashion compelling *images*—literally, a *view* of the world. These images rely upon a sense of *nature*. But nature keeps giving writers the slip. And in all its confusing, ideological intensity, nature ironically impedes a proper relationship with the earth and its life-forms, which would, of course, include ethics and science. Nature writing itself has accounted for the way nature gives us the slip. In *Reading the Mountains of Home*, for example, John Elder writes about how the narrative of nature appreciation is complicated by a growing awareness of “historical realities.”⁵ *Ecology without Nature* systematically attempts to *theorize* this complication.

Conventional ecocriticism is heavily thematic. It discusses ecological writers. It explores elements of ecology, such as animals, plants, or the weather. It investigates varieties of ecological, and ecocritical, language. *Ecology without Nature* does talk about animals, plants, and the weather. It also discusses specific texts and specific writers, composers and artists. It delves into all types of ideas about space and place (global, local, cosmopolitan, regionalist). Such explorations, while

valid and important, are not the main point of this book. The goal is to think through an argument about what we mean by the word *environment* itself.

Ecology without Nature develops its argument in three distinct stages: *describing*, *contextualizing*, and *politicizing*. The first stage is an exploration of environmental art. Along with books such as Angus Fletcher’s *A New Theory for American Poetry*, which offers a poetics of environmental form, and Susan Stewart’s *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, Chapter 1 develops a fresh vocabulary for interpreting environmental art. It moves beyond the simple mention of “environmental” content, and toward the idea of environmental form. Its scope is wide but precise. Without prejudging the results, or focusing on certain favorite themes, how does art convey a sense of space and place? Chapter 1 explores how ultimately, environmental art, whatever its thematic content, is hamstrung by certain formal properties of language. I consider the literary criticism of environmental literature itself to be an example of environmental art.

Chapter 1 lays out a vocabulary for analyzing works in a variety of media. I have taught several classes on kinds of literature that talk about some idea of environment, in which these terms have proved invaluable. But ways of reading the text intrinsically, with an eye to its paradoxes and dilemmas, are always in danger of themselves turning into the special, or utopian, projects they find in the texts they analyze. What I propose instead is that these close reading tools be used to keep one step ahead of the ideological forces that ecological writing generates. I outline a theory of *ambient poetics*, a materialist way of reading texts with a view to how they encode the literal space of their inscription—if there is such a thing—the spaces between the words, the margins of the page, the physical and social environment of the reader. This has a bearing on the poetics of sensibility out of which Romanticism emerged in the late eighteenth century. Environmental aesthetics is frequently, if not always, caught in this form of materialism.

Chapter 2 studies the history and ideology of concepts, beliefs, and practices that make up current obsessions with the environment in all aspects of culture, from wildlife club calendars to experimental noise music. *Ecology without Nature* is one of the few studies that speak about low and high environmental culture in the same breath, treading the path paved by such books as William Cronon’s *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, which brought together a variety of thinkers in so-called theory and so-called ecocriticism. How did the current environ-

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mentalism arise, and how does it affect our ideas about art and culture? This chapter analyzes the Romantic period as the moment at which the capitalism that now covers the earth began to take effect. Working forward from that moment, the book elaborates ways of understanding the dilemmas and paradoxes facing environmentalisms. In a somewhat more synthetic manner than David Harvey's *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, Chapter 2 accounts for why post-Romantic writing is obsessed with space and place. It employs my existing research on the history of consumerism, which has established that even forms of rebellion against consumerism, such as environmentalist practices, fall under the consumerist umbrella. Because consumerism is a discourse about identity, the chapter contains detailed readings of passages in environmentalist writing where a narrator, an "I," struggles to situate him- or herself in an environment.

Chapter 3 wonders where we go from here. What kinds of political and social thinking, making, and doing are possible? The book moves from an abstract discussion to a series of attempts to determine precisely what our relationship to environmental art and culture could be, as social, political animals. The chapter explores different ways of taking an artistic stand on environmental issues. It uses as evidence writers such as John Clare and William Blake, who maintained positions outside mainstream Romanticism. Chapter 3 demonstrates that the "Aeolian," ambient poetics outlined in Chapter 1—picking up the vibrations of a material universe and recording them with high fidelity—inevitably ignores the subject, and thus cannot fully come to terms with an ecology that may manifest itself in beings who are also persons—including, perhaps, those other beings we designate as animals.

Chapter 1 offers a theory of environmental art that is both an explanation of it and a critical reflection. Chapter 2 offers a theoretical reflection on *this*, the "idea" of environmental art. And Chapter 3 is a further reflection still. This "theory of the theory" is political. Far from achieving greater levels of "theoretical" abstraction (abstraction is far from theoretical), the volume "rises" to higher and higher levels of *concreteness*. *Ecology without Nature* does not float away into the stratosphere. Nor does it quite descend to earth, since the earth starts to look rather different as we proceed.

Ecological writing keeps insisting that we are "embedded" in nature.⁶ Nature is a surrounding medium that sustains our being. Due to the properties of the rhetoric that evokes the idea of a surrounding

medium, ecological writing can never properly establish that this is nature and thus provide a compelling and consistent aesthetic basis for the new worldview that is meant to change society. It is a small operation, like tipping over a domino. My readings try to be symptomatic rather than comprehensive. I hope that by opening a few well-chosen holes, the entire nasty mess might pour out and dissolve.

Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration. Simone de Beauvoir was one of the first to theorize this transformation of actually existing women into fetish objects.⁷ *Ecology without Nature* examines the fine print of how nature has become a transcendental principle. This book sees itself, in the words of its subtitle, as rethinking environmental aesthetics. Environmental art, from low to high, from pastoral kitsch to urban chic, from Thoreau to Sonic Youth, plays with, reinforces, or deconstructs the idea of nature. What emerges from the book is a wider view of the possibilities of environmental art and criticism, the "widescreen" version of ecological culture. This version will be unafraid of difference, of nonidentity, both in textual terms and in terms of race, class, and gender, if indeed textual-critical matters can be separated from race, class, and gender. Ecocriticism has held a special, isolated place in the academy, in part because of the ideological baggage it is lumbered with. My intent is to open it up, to broaden it. Even if a Shakespeare sonnet does not appear explicitly to be "about" gender, nowadays we still want to ask what it might have to do with gender. The time should come when we ask of any text, "What does this say about the environment?" In the current situation we have already decided which texts we will be asking.

Some readers will already have pegged me as a "postmodern theorist" on whom they do not wish to waste their time. I do not believe that there is no such thing as a coral reef. (As it happens, modern industrial processes are ensuring they do not exist, whether I believe in them or not.) I also do not believe that environmental art and ecocriticism are entirely bogus. I do believe that they must be addressed critically, precisely because we care about them and we care about the earth, and, indeed, the future of life-forms on this planet, since humans have developed all the tools necessary for their destruction. As musician David Byrne once wrote, "Nuclear weapons could wipe out life on earth, if used properly."⁸ It is vital for us to think and act in more general, wider terms. Particularism can muster a lot of passion, but it can

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become shortsighted. The reactionary response to wind farms in the United Kingdom, for instance, has tried to bog down environmentalists with the idea that birds will be caught in the blades of the windmills. Yes, we need to cultivate a more comprehensive view of "humanity" and "nature." Before I get accused of being a postmodern nihilist, I thought I would put my heart on the sleeve of this book. It is just that I aim to start with the bad new things, as Brecht once said, rather than try to return to the good old days. I wish to advance ecocritical thinking, not make it impossible. My work is about an "ecology to come," not about no ecology at all. One should view it as a contribution, albeit a long-range one, to the debate opened up by environmental justice ecocriticism.

Actually, postmodernists have a few nasty surprises in store. I do not think there is a "better way" of doing the things I describe in artistic media. Much contemporary artistic practice is predicated on the idea that there is a better way of doing things, with an attendant aura of chic that puts down other attempts as less sophisticated. Supposedly, we should all be listening to experimental noise music rather than Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony. We should all be reading Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari instead of Aldo Leopold. From the point of view of *Ecology without Nature*, these texts have more similarities than differences.

I do, however, distinguish between postmodernism, as a cultural and ideological form, and *deconstruction*. *Ecology without Nature* is inspired by the way in which deconstruction searches out, with ruthless and brilliant intensity, points of contradiction and deep hesitation in systems of meaning. If ecological criticism had a more open and honest engagement with deconstruction, it would find a friend rather than an enemy. Ecological criticism is in the habit of attacking, ignoring or vilifying this potential friend. Walter Benn Michaels has tarred both deep ecology and deconstruction with the same brush.⁹ Hear, hear. There is indeed a connection between the two, and contra Michaels, I wish heartily to promote it. Just as Derrida explains how *différance* at once underlies and undermines logocentrism, I assert that the rhetorical strategies of nature writing undermine what one could call ecologocentrism.

Ecology without Nature tries not to foster a particular form of aesthetic enjoyment; at least not until the end, when it takes a stab at seeing whether art forms can bear the weight of being critical in the sense that the rest of the book outlines. No one kind of art is exactly

"right." I do think that science would benefit from more grounding in philosophy and training in modes of analysis developed in the humanities. But in general the scientisms of current ideology owe less to intrinsically skeptical scientific practice, and more to ideas of *nature*, which set people's hearts beating and stop the thinking process, the one of saying "no" to what you just came up with. Have a look at any recent edition of *Time* or *Newsweek*, which take *Nature*, one of the main science journals, even more seriously than the scientists. In the name of ecology, this book is a searching criticism of a term that holds us back from meaningful engagements with what, in essence, nature is all about: things that are not identical to us or our preformed concepts. For related reasons, I have avoided the habitual discussions of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism that preoccupy much ecological writing. These terms are not irrelevant. But they beg the question of what precisely counts as *human*, what counts as *nature*. Instead of pushing around preformed pieces of thought, I have chosen to hesitate at a more basic level, to lodge my criticism in the fissures between such categories.

Throughout this book, I read texts from the Romantic period, not only because they exemplify, but also because they do *not* accord with the various syndromes and symptoms that emerge from this very period. At the precise moment at which the trajectories of modern ecology were appearing, other pathways became possible. I have called on a multitude of art forms that deal with the idea of *environment*, even when this notion does not strictly entail nature in the way of rainforests or human lungs. A book so brief is only able to scratch the surface of the thousands of available examples. I hope that the ones I have chosen are representative, and that they illuminate the theoretical exploration of the idea of the environment. I have chosen to discuss authors of English literature with whom I am familiar: Blake, Coleridge, Levertov, Wordsworth, Mary Shelley, Thoreau, Edward Thomas. Many agree that they are ecological authors, yet their attitudes are not simple and direct, especially in the contexts of the other writers I adduce. I employ a variety of philosophers to help make my case. It is to Marx and Derrida that I owe almost equal debts, for they have enabled me to create the frameworks with which the analysis proceeds. But I am also indebted to Benjamin, Freud, Heidegger, Lacan, Latour, Žižek, and in particular to Hegel, whose idea of the "beautiful soul" has become the single most important notion in the book. I use Theodor Adorno, whose writing has a strong, often explicit ecological flavor. Adorno

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based much of his work on the idea that modern society engages in a process of domination that establishes and exploits some thing "over there" called nature. His sensitivity to the idea of nuclear annihilation has many parallels with the sensitivity of ecological writing to equally total catastrophes such as global warming. Where the relationships are less clear (for instance, in the case of Descartes, Derrida, or Benjamin), I trust that my text will explain why a certain writer is appearing. And the study introduces some writers as test cases of environmental writing: David Abram, Val Plumwood, Leslie Marmon Silko, and David Toop, among others. Add to these a host of artists and composers: Beethoven, Reich, Cage, Alvin Lucier, Yves Klein, Escher. And along the way we will also be encountering a number of popular products by J.R.R. Tolkien, Pink Floyd, The Orb, and others.

Ecology without Nature covers a lot of ground in a short space. Studies of the idea of nature have appeared before, many times. Diverse accounts of environmentalism and nature writing have emerged. And specifically, scholarship has frequently derived ecology from Romanticism. In a reflexive and systematic way, *Ecology without Nature* accounts for the phenomenon of environmentalism in culture, delving into the details of poetry and prose, and stepping back to see the big picture, while offering a critique of the workings of "Nature" at different levels. It does this by operating principally upon a single pressure point: the idea of "nature writing" or, as this book prefers to call it, *ecomimesis*. The book is thus necessarily one-sided and incomplete, even as it tries to be comprehensive. But I can see no other way of usefully drawing together all the themes I wish to talk about, in a reasonably short volume. I trust that the reader will be able to bring his or her own examples to the discussion, where they are lacking. My own specializations in Romantic studies, food studies, and the study of literature and the environment have necessarily skewed my sense of things.

Environmental Reflections

"A theory of ecological criticism" means at least two things. Clintonian explanations aside, it all depends on what you mean by "of." On the one hand, this book provides a set of theoretical tools for ecological criticism. "A theory of ecological criticism" is an ecocritical theory. On the other hand, the study accounts for the qualities of existing ecocriticism, placing them in context and taking account of their paradoxes,

dilemmas, and shortcomings. "A theory of ecological criticism" is a theoretical reflection upon ecocriticism: to criticize the ecocritic.

Ecology without Nature thus hesitates between two places. It wavers both inside and outside ecocriticism. (For reasons given later, I am at pains not to say that the book is in two places at once.) It supports the study of literature and the environment. It is wholeheartedly ecological in its political and philosophical orientation. And yet it does not thump an existing ecocritical tub. It does not mean to undermine ecocriticism entirely. It does not mean to suggest that there is nothing "out there." But *Ecology without Nature* does challenge the assumptions that ground ecocriticism. It does so with the aim not of shutting down ecocriticism, but of opening it up.

Environmentalism is a set of cultural and political responses to a crisis in humans' relationships with their surroundings. Those responses could be scientific, activist, or artistic, or a mixture of all three. Environmentalists try to preserve areas of wilderness or "outstanding natural beauty." They struggle against pollution, including the risks of nuclear technologies and weaponry. They fight for animal rights and vegetarianism in campaigns against hunting and scientific or commercial experimentation on animals. They oppose globalization and the patenting of life-forms.

Environmentalism is broad and inconsistent. You can be a communist environmentalist, or a capitalist one, like the American "wise use" Republicans. You can be a "soft" conservationist, sending money to charities such as Britain's Woodland Trust, or a "hard" one who lives in trees to stop logging and road building. And you could, of course, be both at the same time. You could produce scientific papers on global warming or write "ecocritical" literary essays. You could create poems, or environmental sculpture, or ambient music. You could do environmental philosophy ("ecosophy"), establishing ways of thinking, feeling, and acting based on benign relationships with our environment(s).

Likewise, there are many forms of ecocriticism. Ecofeminist criticism examines the ways in which patriarchy has been responsible for environmental deterioration and destruction, and for sustaining a view of the natural world that oppresses women in the same way as it oppresses animals, life in general, and even matter itself. A form of ecocriticism has emerged from Romantic scholarship, in the work of writers such as Jonathan Bate, Karl Kroeber, and James McKusick.¹⁰ It puts the *critical* back into academic reading in a provocative and accessible way. It is itself an example of a certain aspect of the Romantic literary project to

change the world by compelling a strong affective response and a fresh view of things. Then there is environmental justice ecocriticism, which considers how environmental destruction, pollution, and the oppression of specific classes and races go hand in hand.¹¹

From an environmentalist point of view, this is not a good time. So why undertake a project that criticizes ecocriticism at all? Why not just let sleeping ecological issues lie? It sounds like a perverse joke. The sky is falling, the globe is warming, the ozone hole persists; people are dying of radiation poisoning and other toxic agents; species are being wiped out, thousands per year; the coral reefs have nearly all gone. Huge globalized corporations are making bids for the necessities of life from water to health care. Environmental legislation is being threatened around the world. What a perfect opportunity to sit back and reflect on ideas of space, subjectivity, environment, and poetics. *Ecology without Nature* claims that there could be no better time.

What is the point of reflecting like this? Some think that ecocriticism needs what it calls "theory" like it needs a hole in the head. Others contend that this aeration is exactly what ecocriticism needs. In the name of ecocriticism itself, scholarship must reflect—theorize, in the broadest sense. Since ecology and ecological politics are beginning to frame other kinds of science, politics, and culture, we must take a step back and examine some of ecology's ideological determinants. This is precisely the opposite of what John Daniel says about the need for a re-enchantment of the world:

The sky probably is falling. Global warming is happening. But somehow it's not going to work to call people to arms about that and pretend to know what will work. People don't want to feel invalidated in their lives and they don't want to feel that they bear the responsibility of the world on their shoulders. This is why you shouldn't teach kids about the dire straits of the rain forest. You should take kids out to the stream out back and show them water striders.¹²

To speak thus is to use the aesthetic as an anesthetic.

To theorize ecological views is also to bring thinking up to date. Varieties of Romanticism and primitivism have often construed ecological struggle as that of "place" against the encroachments of modern and postmodern "space." In social structure and in thought, goes the argument, place has been ruthlessly corroded by space: all that is solid melts into air. But unless we think about it some more, the cry of "place!" will resound in empty space, to no effect. It is a question of whether you

think that the "re-enchantment of the world" will make nice pictures, or whether it is a political practice.

Revolutionary movements such as those in Chiapas, Mexico, have had partial success in reclaiming place from the corrosion of global economics. "Third World" environmentalisms are often passionate defenses of the local against globalization.¹³ Simply lauding location in the abstract or in the aesthetic, however—praising a localist poetics, for example, just because it is localist, or proclaiming a "small is beautiful" aestheticized ethics—is in greater measure part of the problem than part of the solution. Our notions of place are retroactive fantasy constructs determined precisely by the corrosive effects of modernity. Place was not lost, though we posit it as something we have lost. Even if place as an actually existing, rich set of relationships between sentient beings does not (yet) exist, place is part of our worldview *right now*—what if it is actually propping up that view? We would be unable to cope with modernity unless we had a few pockets of place in which to store our hope.

Here is the book's *cri de guerre*, but I will be making a lot of small moves before I interrogate such ideas head-on. There are problems in the fine print of how we write about the environment. Underlining some of this fine print will not make the bigger problems go away, but it is a useful start. The initial focus is what marketing and scholarship in the United States calls "nature writing." Under this banner I place most ecocriticism itself, which, if not wholly an instance of nature writing, contains good examples of the genre. This is far from suggesting that nature writing is the only game in town. It is simply that such writing presents significant artistic and philosophical solutions that crystallize all sorts of issues in ecological writing at large. The book goes on to examine much more: philosophy, literature, music, visual art, and multimedia, in an expanding cone of critical analysis.

Ecocritique

In order to have an environment, you have to have a space for it, in order to have an *idea* of an environment, you need ideas of space (and place). If we left our ideas about nature on hold for a moment, instead of introducing them all too soon—they always tend to make us hot under the collar anyway—a clearer picture would emerge of what exactly the idea of "environment" is in the first place. This is not to suggest that if you subtract the rabbits, trees, and skyscrapers, you will be

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left with something called an environment. That kind of thinking goes too fast for this book. Instead of lumping together a list of things and dubbing it "nature," the aim is to slow down and take the list apart—and to put into question the idea of making a list at all. *Ecology without Nature* takes seriously the idea that truly theoretical reflection is possible only if thinking decelerates. This is not the same thing as becoming numb or stupid. It is finding anomalies, paradoxes, and conundrums in an otherwise smooth-looking stream of ideas.

This slowing-down process has often been aestheticized. When it is called "close reading" it is supposed to convey all sorts of healthy effects on the reader, much like meditation. Like many other forms of criticism, ecocriticism has a canon of works that are better medicine than others. Even though *Ecology without Nature* widens our view of environmental literature to include texts that are not normative in this way, it is possible that it could advocate the medicinal approach in another way. The reading process itself, no matter what its materials, could be thought of as healing balm. But ultimately, theory (and meditation, for that matter) is not supposed to make you a "better person" in any sense. It is supposed to expose hypocrisy, or if you prefer, to examine the ways in which ideological illusions maintain their grip. So *Ecology without Nature* is not an attempt to be slower than thou, in order to outdo the tortoise of close reading, a kind of anti-race toward an aesthetic state of meditative calm that we could then (falsely) associate with some sort of "ecological awareness." This is especially important since ecological ethics can be based on a meditative aesthetic state: for instance, the "appreciative listening" that Michel Serres hopes will replace "mastery and possession."¹⁴ And this ethics of the aesthetic has in general been getting a good run for its money in the recent work of writers such as Elaine Scarry.¹⁵

The point is not to attain any special state of mind at all. The point is to go against the grain of dominant, normative ideas about nature, but to do so in the name of sentient beings suffering under catastrophic environmental conditions. I say this with all due respect to the deep ecologists who think that humans, being just a viral infection on the planet, will at some point be sneezed away in a wave of extinction, and that, ultimately, we could just sit back and relax in quietude—or hasten our own demise; or act as if we didn't matter at all.

A truly theoretical approach is not allowed to sit smugly outside the area it is examining. It must mix thoroughly with it. Adopting a position that forgoes all others would be all too easy, a naïve negative criti-

cism that is a disguised position all of its own. It is all very well to carp at the desires of others while not owning up to the determinacy of one's own desire. This is a political as well as an intellectual position, one to which ecological thinking is itself prone. After Hegel, I call it *beautiful soul syndrome*, and examine it in Chapter 2. The "beautiful soul" washes his or her hands of the corrupt world, refusing to admit how in this very abstemiousness and distaste he or she participates in the creation of that world. The world-weary soul holds all beliefs and ideas at a distance. The only ethical option is to muck in. Thus, the book does offer its own view of ecology and ecocriticism, not only throughout its sustained critique of other views, but also in its own right.

In places I come close to Hegel's idea that art since Romanticism has been surpassed by philosophy—or even to Oscar Wilde's idea that criticism itself is now the best vehicle for telling us where we are at.¹⁶ But I shy away from being absolute about this, preferring instead to suggest ways of thinking, making, and practicing environmental art, politics, and philosophy. Ecocriticism is too enmeshed in the ideology that churns out stereotypical ideas of nature to be of any use. Indeed, ecocriticism is barely distinguishable from the nature writing that is its object. I want to develop an idea of what "properly critical" might mean.

Timothy Luke employs the term *ecocritique* to describe forms of left ecological criticism.¹⁷ I use the term in a more self-reflexive way than Luke. Ecocritique is critical and self-critical. This is the proper sense of critique, a dialectical form of criticism that bends back upon itself. It was the Frankfurt School that established this notion of *Kritik*. As well as pointing, in a highly politicized way, to society, critique points toward itself. There is always further to go. Ecocritique is permeated with considerations common to other areas in the humanities such as race, class, and gender, which it knows to be deeply intertwined with environmental issues. Ecocritique fearlessly employs the ideas of deconstruction in the service of ecology, rather than, as is all too frequent, flogging the dead horse of "postmodern theory." Ecocritique is similar to queer theory. In the name of all that we value in the idea of "nature," it thoroughly examines how nature is set up as a transcendental, unified, independent category. Ecocritique does not think that it is paradoxical to say, in the name of ecology itself: "down with nature!"

The guiding slogan of ecocritique is: "not afraid of nonidentity." To borrow an argument from Theodor Adorno, a member of the Frankfurt School and one of the guiding lights of this study, the thinking process is in essence the encounter with nonidentity.¹⁸ If not, it is just the ma-

nipulation of preformed pieces on a ready-made board. This is also how Hegel distinguished dialectical thinking from sheer logic.¹⁹ There must be a movement at least from A to not-A. At any moment, thought necessarily bumps its head against what it isn't. Thinking must "go somewhere," though whether it goes anywhere particularly solid is up for grabs. This encounter with nonidentity, when considered fully, has profound implications for ecological thinking, ethics, and art. Nonidentity has a lineage in nature writing itself, which is why I can write this book at all. Peter Fritzell delineated a difference between naively mimetic and self-reflexive forms of nature writing. In the latter, "what nature was really like" is often not what nature was really like (or, for that matter, what it is).²⁰

Natural History Lessons

One of the ideas inhibiting genuinely ecological politics, ethics, philosophy, and art is the idea of nature itself. Nature, a transcendental term in a material mask, stands at the end of a potentially infinite series of other terms that collapse into it, otherwise known as a metonymic list: fish, grass, mountain air, chimpanzees, love, soda water, freedom of choice, heterosexuality, free markets . . . Nature. A metonymic series becomes a metaphor. Writing conjures this notoriously slippery term, useful to ideologies of all kinds in its very slipperiness, in its refusal to maintain any consistency.²¹ But consistency is what nature is all about, on another level. Saying that something is unnatural is saying that it does not conform to a norm, so "normal" that it is built into the very fabric of things as they are. So "nature" occupies at least three places in symbolic language. First, it is a mere empty placeholder for a host of other concepts. Second, it has the force of law, a norm against which deviation is measured. Third, "nature" is a Pandora's box, a word that encapsulates a potentially infinite series of disparate fantasy objects. It is this third sense—nature as fantasy—that this book most fully engages. A "discipline" of diving into the Rorschach blobs of others' enjoyment that we commonly call poems seems a highly appropriate way of beginning to engage with how "nature" compels feelings and beliefs.

Nature wavers in between the divine and the material. Far from being something "natural" itself, nature hovers over things like a ghost. It slides over the infinite list of things that evoke it. Nature is thus not unlike "the subject," a being who searches through the entire universe

for its reflection, only to find none. If it is just another word for supreme authority, then why not just call it God? But if this God is nothing outside the material world, then why not just call it matter? This was the political dilemma in which Spinoza, and the deists of eighteenth-century Europe, found themselves.²² Being an "out" atheist was very dangerous in the eighteenth century, as evidenced by the cryptic remarks of Hume and the increasingly cautious approach of Percy Shelley, who had been expelled from Oxford for publishing a pamphlet on atheism. God often appeared on the side of royal authority, and the rising bourgeoisie and associated revolutionary classes wanted another way of being authoritative. "Ecology without nature" means in part that we try to confront some of the intense notions which nature smudges.

Ecological writing is fascinated with the idea of something that exists in between polarized terms such as God and matter, this and that, subject and object. I find John Locke's critique of the idea of ether to be helpful here. Locke's critique appeared toward the beginning of the modern construction of space as an empty set of point coordinates.²³ Numerous holes in materialist, atomist theories were filled by something elemental. Newton's gravity worked because of an ambient *ether* that transmitted the properties of heavy bodies instantaneously, in an analogy for (or as an aspect of) the love of an omnipresent God.²⁴ If ether is a kind of "ambient fluid" that surrounds all particles, existing "in between" them, then what surrounds the particles of ambient fluid themselves?²⁵ If nature is sandwiched between terms such as God and matter, what medium keeps the things that are natural sandwiched together? Nature appears to be both lettuce and mayonnaise. Ecological writing shuffles subject and object back and forth so that we may think they have dissolved into each other, though what we usually end up with is a blur this book calls *ambience*.

Later in the modern period, the idea of the nation-state emerged as a way of going beyond the authority of the monarch. The nation all too often depends upon the very same list that evokes the idea of nature. *Nature* and *nation* are very closely intertwined. I show how ecocritique could examine the ways in which nature does not necessarily take us outside society, but actually forms the bedrock of nationalist enjoyment. Nature, practically a synonym for evil in the Middle Ages, was considered the basis of social good by the Romantic period. According to numerous writers such as Rousseau, the framers of the social contract start out in a state of nature. The fact that this state is not much

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different from the “concrete jungle” of actual historical circumstance has not escaped attention.

In the Enlightenment, nature became a way of establishing racial and sexual identity, and science became the privileged way of demonstrating it. The normal was set up as different from the pathological along the coordinates of the *natural* and the *unnatural*.²⁶ Nature, by then a scientific term, put a stop to argument or rational inquiry: “Well, it’s just in my nature.” He is ideological, you are prejudiced, but my ideas are natural. A metaphorical use of Thomas Malthus in the work of Charles Darwin, for example, naturalized, and continues to naturalize, the workings of the “invisible hand” of the free market and the “survival of the fittest”—which is always taken to mean the competitive war of all (owners) against all (workers). Malthus used nature to argue against the continuation of early modern welfare, in a document produced for the government of his age. Sadly, this very thinking is now being used to push down the poor yet further, in the battle of the supposedly ecologically minded against “population growth” (and immigration). Nature, achieved obliquely through turning metonymy into metaphor, becomes an oblique way of talking about politics. What is presented as straightforward, “unmarked,” beyond contestation, is warped.

One of the basic problems with nature is that it could be considered either as a *substance*, as a squishy thing in itself, or as *essence*, as an abstract principle that transcends the material realm and even the realm of representation. Edmund Burke considers substance as the stuff of nature in his writing on the sublime.²⁷ This “substantialism” asserts that there is at least one actually existing thing that embodies a sublime quality (vastness, terror, magnificence). Substantialism tends to promote a monarchist or authoritarian view that there is an external thing to which the subject should bow. Essentialism, on the other hand, has its champion in Immanuel Kant. The sublime thing can never be represented, and indeed, in certain religions, says Kant, there is a prohibition against trying (Judaism, Islam). This essentialism turns out to be politically liberating, on the side of revolutionary republicanism.²⁸ On the whole, nature writing, and its precursors and family members, mostly in phenomenological and/or Romantic writing, has tended to favor a substantialist view of nature—it is palpable and *there*—despite the explicit politics of the author. Further work in ecocritique should delineate a republican, nonsubstantialist countertradition running through writers such as Milton and Shelley, for whom nature did not stand in for an authority for which you sacrifice your autonomy and reason.

Ecological forms of subjectivity inevitably involve ideas and decisions about *group* identity and behavior. Subjectivity is not simply an individual, and certainly not just an individualist, phenomenon. It is a collective one. Environmental writing is a way of registering the feeling of being surrounded by others, or more abstractly, by an otherness, something that is not the self. Although it may displace the actual social collective and choose to write about surrounding mountains instead, such displacements always say something about the kinds of collective life that ecological writing is envisaging. Fredric Jameson outlines the necessity for criticism to work on ideas of collectivity:

Anyone who evokes the ultimate value of the community or the collectivity from a left perspective must face three problems: 1) how to distinguish this position radically from communitarianism; 2) how to differentiate the collective project from fascism or nazism; 3) how to relate the social and the economic level—that is, how to use the Marxist analysis of capitalism to demonstrate the unviability of social solutions within that system. As for collective identities, in a historical moment in which individual personal identity has been unmasked as a decentered locus of multiple subject positions, surely it is not too much to ask that something analogous be conceptualized on the collective level.²⁹

The idea of the environment is more or less a way of considering groups and collectives—humans surrounded by nature, or in continuity with other beings such as animals and plants. It is about being-with. As Latour has recently pointed out, however, the actual situation is far more drastically collective than that. All kinds of beings, from toxic waste to sea snails, are clamoring for our scientific, political, and artistic attention, and have become part of political life—to the detriment of monolithic conceptions of Nature.³⁰ To write about ecology is to write about society, and not simply in the weak sense that our ideas of ecology are social constructions. Historical conditions have abolished an extra-social nature to which theories of society can appeal, while at the same time making the beings that fell under this heading impinge ever more urgently upon society.

Different images of the environment suit different kinds of society. Substantialist images of a palpable, distinct “nature” embodied in at least one actually existing phenomenon (a particular species, a particular figure) generate authoritarian forms of collective organization. The deep ecological view of nature as a tangible entity tends this way. Essentialist ideas of a nature that cannot be rendered as an image have supported more egalitarian forms. It would be very helpful if ecocri-

tique simply observed that there were other kinds of models for nature. For instance, the republican (small "r") poetics derived from writers such as Milton and the neglected history of radical environmentalism in the English Revolution convey iconoclastic figures of the environment that transcend discrete forms of representation.³¹ Other political forms prohibit graven images of nature. In contrast to the touchy-feely organicism derived from Burkean ideologies of class and tradition, we could think the environment in a more open, rational and differently sensuous manner. The study of iconoclastic representations of space and world recovers fresh ways of thinking and creating. Demonstrating that there are, at least, different sorts of fantasy images of the natural would refresh environmental thinking. But ecocritique does not stop there.

Substance and essence are strangely different from each other. There is no easy way of finding a term that would supersede both at once. If we claim that substance and essence are absolutely different, this is supplanting *substantialism*—substance and essence are two entirely different "substances." On this view, essence and substance are like chalk and cheese, apples and oranges. If, on the other hand, we say that essence and substance are different the way black and white, or up and down, are different, then we approach the *essentialist* view—substance and essence are not different all the way down, but are related to one another in opposition. For instance, the substance of things, on this view, is just a variation in their atomic structure, or DNA code. Substance is embodied in at least one thing, but not in others. Essence cannot be embodied. Nature wants to be both substance and essence at the same time. Nature opens up the difference between terms, and erases those very differences, all at once. It is the trees and the wood—and the very *idea* of trees (Greek *hyle*, matter, wood).

The more we study it, the more we see that, beyond the fact that many different people have many different opinions about it, nature in itself flickers between things—it is both/and or neither/nor. This flickering affects how we write about it. Nature is . . . animals, trees, the weather . . . the bioregion, the ecosystem. It is both the set and the contents of the set. It is the world and the entities in that world. It appears like a ghost at the never-arriving end of an infinite series: crabs, waves, lightning, rabbits, silicon . . . Nature. Of all things, nature should be natural. But we cannot point to it. What we usually get is a suggestive effusion on something "Whose dwelling is in the light of setting suns, / In the round ocean, and the living air, / And the blue sky, and in the mind of man," as Wordsworth marvelously put it.³² Nature becomes

supernatural, a process made clear in John Gatta's decisive treatment of the history of Puritan ideas about nature and wilderness (though Gatta sets aside the more radical Puritan possibilities of the Diggers, the mystic Jacob Boehme and the vegetarian Thomas Tryon).³³ Or nature dissolves and we are left with sheer matter, and a sequence of ideas with numerous high points in radical materialist philosophy, such as Spinoza. We want there to be something in between. But would that be natural? Would it not be supernatural? Would that be supernatural like a spirit—more of a refined essence—or a ghost—something more substantial, maybe made of ectoplasm? We could go on splitting hairs infinitely. Our journey to the middle, to the "in between" space, whatever we call it, would go on generating binary pairs, and we would always be coming down on one side or the other, missing the exact center. It does not matter whether this is materialist spirituality, or spiritual materialism. Thinking posits something "over there" that maintains a mysterious allure.

Since the Romantic period, nature has been used to support the capitalist theory of value and to undermine it; to point out what is intrinsically human, and to exclude the human; to inspire kindness and compassion, and to justify competition and cruelty. It is easy to see why M. H. Abrams would have written a book on Romantic poetry called *Natural Supernaturalism*. In short, nature has been on both sides of the equation ever since it was invented. *Ecology without Nature* takes nature out of the equation by exploring the ways in which literary writing tries to conjure it up. We discover how nature always slips out of reach in the very act of grasping it. At the very moment at which writing seems to be dissolving in the face of the compelling reality it is describing, writing overwhelms what it is depicting and makes it impossible to find anything behind its opaque texture. Even as it establishes a middle ground "in between" terms such as subject and object, or inside and outside, nature without fail excludes certain terms, thus reproducing the difference between inside and outside in other ways.³⁴ Just when it brings us into proximity with the nonhuman "other," nature reestablishes a comfortable distance between "us" and "them." With ecological friends like this, who needs enemies?

Some will accuse me of being a postmodernist, by which they will mean that I believe that the world is made of text, that there is nothing real. Nothing could be further from the truth. The idea of nature is all too real, and it has an all too real effect upon all too real beliefs, practices, and decisions in the all too real world. True, I claim that there is no such "thing" as nature, if by nature we mean some thing that is

single, independent, and lasting. But deluded ideas and ideological fixations do exist. "Nature" is a focal point that compels us to assume certain attitudes. Ideology resides in the attitude we assume toward this fascinating object. By dissolving the object, we render the ideological fixation inoperative. At least, that is the plan.

The ecocritical view of "postmodernism," for which "theory" is a shibboleth, has much in common with the English dislike of the French Revolution—indeed, it is in many ways derived from it.³⁵ "Theory," goes the argument, is cold and abstract, out of touch.³⁶ It forces organic forms into boxes that cannot do them justice. It is too calculating and rational. "Postmodernism" is just the latest version of this sorry state of affairs. Of course, the English position against the French was its own abstraction, a self-imposed denial of history that had already happened—the beheading of Charles I, for instance.

Academics are never more intellectual than when they are being anti-intellectual. No self-respecting farmer would comport himself or herself quite like Aldo Leopold or Martin Heidegger. What could be more postmodern than a professor reflexively choosing a social and subjective view, such as that of a farmer? What could be more postmodern than ecocriticism, which, far from being naive, consciously blocks its ears to all intellectual developments of the last thirty years, notably (though not necessarily all at once) feminism, anti-racism, anti-homophobia, deconstruction? Just as the Reagan and Bush administrations attempted a re-run of the 1950s, as if the 1960s had never happened, so ecocriticism promises to return to an academy of the past. It is a form of postmodern retro.

If ecocritics dislike what I say, however, so will post-structuralists. Post-structuralism—criticism that acts as if the 1960s *had* occurred—has its own views of nature, though it may not name it so baldly. It is just that these views are supposedly more sophisticated than previous ones. There is still the basic search for something "in between" categories such as subject and object, fact and value. There exists a class divide between the enjoyment-objects of ecocritical-conservative and post-structuralist-radical readers. If ecocritics prefer Aldo Leopold's amanac style, complete with cute illustrations, post-structuralists tend to go for the latest compilation album by an ambient techno DJ. It may not be Beethoven, but it is still polite at a cocktail party or art opening, if not more so. Leopold and The Orb are really two sides of the same coin, according to ecocritique. Whether they are highbrow or middlebrow, installation or pastoral symphony, artworks exhibit what I call *ecomimesis*, a rhetorical form described in detail in Chapter 1, and ex-

plored throughout this book. Thunderbird or Chardonnay, retro or futuristic, it's all the same *ecomimesis*.

Postmodernism is mired in aestheticism. It freezes irony into an aesthetic pose. When I suggest that we drop the concept of nature, I am saying that we *really* drop it, rather than try to come up with hastily conceived, "new and improved" solutions, a new form of advertising language. This is about what you think "without" means in the title of this book. Derrida's profound thinking on the "without," the *sans*, in his writing on negative theology comes to mind. Deconstruction goes beyond just saying that something exists, even in a "hyperessential" way beyond being. And it goes beyond saying that things do not exist.³⁷ "Ecology without nature" is a relentless questioning of essence, rather than some special new thing. Sometimes the utopian language of a writer such as Donna Haraway rushes to jerry-build ideas like "natureculture."³⁸ These non-natures are still nature, based on hopeful interpretations of emerging ideas across disciplines such as philosophy, mathematics, and anthropology, ideas that turn out to be highly aesthetic. Chapter 1 focuses on a set of alternatives to traditional ideas of nature that lie just to the side of it. Assuming that nature itself is too soft a target these days, I analyze possible ways of thinking the same idea bigger, wider, or better under the general heading of "ambience."

To get properly beyond postmodernism's pitfalls, genuinely critical ecocriticism would engage fully with theory. If we consider the nontheological sense of nature, the term collapses into *impermanence* and *history*—two ways of saying the same thing. Life-forms are constantly coming and going, mutating and becoming extinct. Biospheres and ecosystems are subject to arising and cessation. Living beings do not form a solid prehistorical, or nonhistorical ground upon which human history plays. But nature is often wheeled out to adjudicate between what is fleeting and what is substantial and permanent. Nature smooths over uneven history, making its struggles and sufferings illegible. Given that much ecocriticism and ecological literature is primitivist, it is ironic that indigenous societies often refer to nature as a shape-shifting trickster rather than as a firm basis. The final word of the history of nature is that *nature is history*. "Natural beauty, purportedly ahistorical, is at its core historical."³⁹

What Is Nature For?

Ecology without Nature starts as a detailed examination of how art represents the environment. This helps us to see that "nature" is an ar-

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bitrary rhetorical construct, empty of independent, genuine existence behind or beyond the texts we create about it. The rhetoric of nature depends upon something I define as an *ambient poetics*, a way of conjuring up a sense of a surrounding atmosphere or world. My argument follows Angus Fletcher's recent work on an emerging American poetics of the environment.⁴⁰ His suggestive idea that the long, sinuous lines in Whitman and his descendants establish ways of reaching out toward and going beyond horizons, and of creating an open-ended idea of nature, is a valuable account of a specific form of poetics. I associate it, as he does, with developments in postmodern and deconstructive thinking. I am, however, less confident than Fletcher of the utopian value of this poetics.

In Chapter 2, we see that this poetics has its own history and that people have invested various ideological meanings in it, over time. When we historicize ambient poetics, we find out that this, too, is devoid of any intrinsic existence or value. Some contemporary artists use ambient poetics to rise above what they see as the kitsch quality of other forms of natural representation. But in so doing, they ignore the ideological qualities of the rhetoric they are using. They risk creating just a "new and improved" version of the kitsch they were trying to escape. The history of ambient poetics depends upon certain forms of identity and subjectivity, which Chapter 2 also discovers to be historical. Chapter 3 goes still further. Rather than resting in historicization, we should begin to politicize environmental art, which means beginning to become less blind to its operations. We ourselves must not venture formulating a "new and improved" version of environmental art. This will involve us in some paradoxes. For example, since there is no escaping kitsch, the only way to "beat" it is to "join" it.

The "thing" we call nature becomes, in the Romantic period and afterward, a way of healing what modern society has damaged.⁴¹ Nature is like that other Romantic-period invention, the aesthetic. The damage done, goes the argument, has sundered subjects from objects, so that human beings are forlornly alienated from their world. Contact with nature, and with the aesthetic, will mend the bridge between subject and object. Romanticism saw the broken bridge as a lamentable fact of philosophical and social life. Post-Kantian philosophy—Schelling and Hegel in Germany, Coleridge in England—often wishes for *reconciliation* of subject and object. If they met under the right circumstances, they would hit it off. Subject and object require a certain environment in which they can join up together. Thus is born the special realms of

art and nature, the new secular churches in which subject and object can be remarried.⁴²

This all depends upon whether subject and object ever had a relationship in the first place; and indeed, upon whether there *are* such things as subject and object, which leads us to a central knot, the problem posed by some forms of utopian environmental art. If subject and object do not really exist, then why bother trying to reconcile them? Or, if they do exist, why would some fresh amalgamation of the pair be better than what we have now? Would this amalgamation look any different than the subject-object dualism that concerns us? If the solution to subject-object dualism were as easy as changing our minds, then why have countless texts seeking to do exactly that not done so already? If the solution is some sense of an environment, then *what* precisely is it if it is not "around" anything? Will it not tend to collapse either into a subject or an object?

There are at least two ways of looking at these irksome questions. The first examines the idea that we need to "change our minds." Instead of looking for a solution to the subject-object problem, a more paradoxical strategy is in order. It questions what is problematic about the problem itself. If, at bottom, *there is no problem*—if reality is indeed devoid of reified, rigid, or conceptual notions of subject and object, and we coexist in an infinite web of mutual interdependence where there is no boundary or center—why then do we need to make all this ecocritical fuss? Surely therefore, the fuss is like scratching an itch that doesn't exist—thereby bringing it into existence. In which case, one of the targets of genuine critique would be the very (eco)critical languages—the constant elegy for a lost unalienated state, the resort to the aesthetic dimension (experiential/perceptual) rather than ethical-political praxis, the appeal to "solutions," often anti-intellectual, and so on—which sustain the itch, albeit in a subtle way.

The second approach is to wonder whether the problem lies not so much "in our heads" as "out there," in social reality. What if, no matter what we thought about it, certain features of the dreaded dualism were hardwired into our world? Ecocritique, in that case, takes the cry against dualism at least half seriously. It perceives it to be a symptom of a malaise that was not an idea in our heads, but an ideological feature of the way in which the world operates.

Ecocritique is indeed critique; but it is also "eco." My aim is not to poke fun at hopeless attempts to join together what could never be torn asunder, or to supplant ecological thinking with a hipper form of belief,

a nihilistic creed that anything goes. The aim is to strengthen environmentalism. Appealing to nature still has a powerful rhetorical effect. In the short term, relatively speaking, nature still has some force. But environmentalism cannot be in the game just for the short term. And that nature remains an effective slogan is a symptom of how far we have *not* come, not of how far we have.

"Ecology without nature" could mean "ecology without a *concept* of the natural." Thinking, when it becomes ideological, tends to fixate on concepts rather than doing what is "natural" to thought, namely, dissolving whatever has taken form. Ecological thinking that was not fixated, that did not stop at a particular concretization of its object, would thus be "without nature." To do ecocritique, we must consider the aesthetic dimension, for the aesthetic has been posited as a nonconceptual realm, a place where our ideas about things drop away. For Adorno, "The iridescence that emanates from artworks, which today taboo all affirmation, is the appearance of the affirmative *ineffabile*, the emergence of the nonexistent as if it did exist."⁴³ Art gives what is nonconceptual an illusive appearance of form. This is the aim of environmental literature: to encapsulate a utopian image of nature which does not really exist—we have destroyed it; which goes beyond our conceptual grasp. On the other hand, a nonconceptual image can be a compelling focus for an intensely conceptual system—an ideological system. The dense meaninglessness of nature writing can exert a gravitational pull.

The aesthetic is also a product of distance: of human beings from nature, of subjects from objects, of mind from matter. Is it not rather suspiciously anti-ecological? This is a matter for debate in the Frankfurt School. Benjamin's famous description of the aesthetic aura does indeed use an environmental image.⁴⁴ Herbert Marcuse claims that "The aesthetic universe is the *Lebenswelt* on which the needs and faculties of freedom depend for their liberation. They cannot develop in an environment shaped by and for aggressive impulses, nor can they be envisaged as the mere effect of a new set of social institutions. They can emerge only in the collective *practice of creating an environment*."⁴⁵ Art could help ecology by modeling an environment based on love (eros) rather than death (thanatos)—as is the current technological industrial world, according to Marcuse. Marcuse uses *Lebenswelt* (lifelworld), a term developed in phenomenology out of Romanticism's construction of worlds and environments that situate the thinking mind. As we shall see in Chapter 2, this line of enquiry linked together the envi-

ronment and the aesthetic. No wonder Marcuse thinks of the aesthetic as a "dimension." He writes: "Art breaks open a dimension inaccessible to other experience, a dimension in which human beings, nature, and things no longer stand under the law of the established reality principle."⁴⁶ *Dimension*, like the aesthetic itself, sits somewhere between an objective notion (in mathematics, for instance) and a subjective experience. Many of the writers this study encounters treat the aesthetic and nature as if they comprised a single, unified dimension. But even if there were more than one dimension, this would not solve the problems of this intrinsically spatial way of thinking. No matter how many there are, a dimension is something we are *in*—or not—and this assumes a dichotomy between inside and outside, the very thing that has yet to be established.

Adorno is more hesitant than Marcuse. For him, the aesthetic helpfully distances us from something we have a tendency to destroy when we get close to it:

The distance of the aesthetic realm from that of practical aims appears inner-aesthetically as the distance of aesthetic objects from the observing subject; just as artworks cannot intervene, the subject cannot intervene in them; distance is the primary condition for any closeness to the content of works. This is implicit in Kant's concept of absence of interest, which demands of aesthetic comportment that it not grasp at the object, not devour it.⁴⁷

In this way, the aesthetic promotes nonviolence toward nature. Art is not so much a space of positive qualities (eros), but of negative ones: it stops us from destroying things, if only for a moment. For Benjamin, on the other hand, the aesthetic, in its distancing, alienates us from the world. What we need is some kind of anti-aesthetic strategy. Benjamin finds a model for this in the age of technical reproducibility, where we can download MP3s of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony, or distribute photocopies of a landscape painting.⁴⁸

It is still uncertain whether the aesthetic is something we should shun, in the name of generating a liberating ecological artistic practice, or whether it is an inevitable fact of life that reappears in ever-subtler guises just as we think we have given it the slip. We could claim that there is a difference between the aesthetic and aestheticization.⁴⁹ But this is rather Romantic. It brings to mind the notion of a "good" aesthetic and a "bad" one. The first is good because it resists becoming objectified or turned into a commodity, if only because it ironically inter-

nalizes the commodification process. My final chapter (Chapter 3) does not entirely escape this Romantic distinction.

A consideration of the aesthetic is vital, since the aesthetic intertwines with the idea of a surrounding environment or world. The idea of a "good" aesthetic is based on the notion that there is some intrinsic goodness in perception, neither captured nor perverted by the aestheticization process. In some sense this *must* be true! Otherwise it would be well nigh impossible to see the cracks in anyone's aesthetic edifice, no clean eyes with which to see that the emperor has no clothes. Ecocritique is loath to give this clarity a name, for fear that it becomes another blinding art-religion. Despite the appearance of his acid negativity, Adorno is really a Romantic, because he thinks that things could be different, and that art whispers that this is so—even when shouting it has become politically compromised. Benjamin, on the other hand, seems to be ready to see where specific artistic practices might lead us, despite his opposition to the aesthetic aura. So he is another kind of Romantic, an experimental, constructivist sort who sees the aesthetic not as an explicit agenda but as a political "boot-up disk."⁵⁰ It appears that even at its metacritical level, this study is caught within the Romanticism it is trying to describe. It remains to be seen whether there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in Romantic ecology.

You Gotta Get into It if You Wanna Get out of It

Ecological culture is supposed to be soft and organic, old-fashioned and kitschy, while technoculture is hard, cool, and electronic. But there are surprising connections between the imminent ecological catastrophe and the emergence of virtual reality. The connections concern not content but form, and they open up questions of epistemology—how can we know that we know, and how can we verify what we know? Both virtual reality and the ecological panic are about immersive experiences in which our usual reference point, or illusion of one, has been lost. Old ways of thinking, we tell ourselves, are not to be trusted. They helped to get us into this mess in the first place. In virtual reality it becomes impossible to count on an idea of "distance." We feel that we can't achieve a critical purchase, but are instead about to be dissolved into a psychotic aquarium of hallucinatory un-being. Part of the panic is the coming to terms with the idea that "there is no metalanguage"—that there is nowhere outside a signifying system from which to pronounce upon it;

further, that this idea is one of the illusions that the signifying system enables and sustains. Virtual reality and the ecological emergency point out the hard truth that we *never had this position* in the first place. Slavoj Žižek has pointed out the salutary effect that this has, at least when it comes to thinking about virtual reality.⁵¹ We are now compelled to achieve ways of sorting things out without the safety net of distance, ways that are linked to ways of sorting things out ethically and politically.

We are losing touch with a nonexistent measuring stick. One of the symptoms of this is the corrosive effect of thinking about "how far in" to virtual reality or the ecological emergency we have "gone"—is the catastrophe imminent, or are we already "inside" it? The very worry about whether we are inside or outside becomes a symptom of how far *inside* we have gone—the inside/outside distinction has itself begun to be corroded by this way of thinking. Not only that, but the illusory measuring stick, in the shape of modern modes of discovery, technology, and categorization, appears to have been partially responsible for immersing us in toxic panic. Quantum-theory utopianism—Hey look! My mind can influence matter!—is just the upside of an all-too-true embeddedness of dominating mind in dominated world. The idea that we cannot extricate ourselves, far from providing a necessarily blissful narcissistic experience, also induces a terrifying loss of bearings. "Read it in the papers / You hear it in the news / Very few listen / A spew without a view" (Public Image Limited, "Don't Ask Me").⁵²

The idea of drowning in an epistemological sea, as toxic as the mercury-filled physical one, is more than unpleasant. Are we thus condemned to insanity? Romantic art, with its engagement with immersion and the strange thing called nature, can give us some clues. The function of *Romantic irony* is to show how far the narrator, who is thought to sit sideways to his or her narrative, is actually dissolved in it, part of it, indistinguishable from it. Since we are still within the Romantic period in a number of very significant ways, as this book demonstrates, it is highly appropriate that we consider how Romantic poetics tackled ideas of immersion.

The so-called ecological crisis, which is also a crisis of reason, has the urgency of being about our physical survival. If it were just a matter of virtual reality, we could imagine that at least we would remain alive, psychotic but alive, in the worst case scenario. When the immersive world is also toxic—when it is not actually just a matter of phenomena appearing on a screen, but of chemicals penetrating our cells—the

stakes get higher. None of this is remotely funny, or just an intellectual exercise. The disorientation of virtual reality—wondering how far immersed we have become in a world with no metalanguage—is as nothing compared with the disorientation of global warming—exactly the same wondering, with extra added death and destruction. The already existing ecological emergency resembles the anxiety about virtual reality—that we will be drowned in a psychotic soup where we won't be able to tell one thing from another—only it also involves the possibility of our own death. It is very hard to get used to the idea that the catastrophe, far from being imminent, *has already taken place*.

More haste, less speed. This is the ideal moment for us to slow down as Derrida encouraged us to do, and *not* act (out), but instead to read the linkage between an apparently technological-aesthetic issue and an apparently wet and organic one. This book will take the injunction to hurry up and do nothing seriously. Exploring the aesthetics of this frightening and seductive immersion will be how it works its way out of the maze. Instead of talking about content—software and wetware—I explore the realm of *form*. This is not by any means because I think that there are, or ever were, purely aesthetic solutions to our social and political problems. It is more that the very act of scrutinizing the aesthetics of the issue at hand encourages the beginnings of a critical view. This is an argument about close reading, which has always tried to be both up close, and distant, at the same time. At a subtle level, it may be impossible to forget the aesthetic dimension altogether, and in that sense, my approach *is* a kind of aesthetic solution!

Teasing out just how paradoxical this is will become one of the book's testing problems as it tries to maintain the appropriate degree of slow reading. Distance and proximity are aestheticized terms. They imply a perceiving subject and a perceived object. They are part of Immanuel Kant's language of aesthetics—in order to have aesthetic appreciation, you have to have an appropriate distance toward the aesthetic "thing."⁵³ We keep hearing that we can no longer just sit back and be spectators when it comes to the environmental events around us. The original advertising of virtual reality was an incitement to get into it and dissolve our boundaries. I am banking on the idea that shedding some critical light on ideas of distance and proximity will be of help. So let us begin by examining some artistic forms that play with these terms, whether they are explicitly "environmental" or not.