

The Scandal of Nature Literature and the Environment

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Abstract

Tree roots that break through the urban asphalt sometimes form stumbling blocks on our busy everyday paths. The Greek word for stumbling block is *skandalon*, and I propose here to read these tree roots metonymically for the role we often assign to the environment in present-day life. More often than not, it is seen as a mere stumbling block—as something we attempt to overcome rather than adjust to, as something we tend to look at from a distance rather than live with. This study argues that literature can play a vital part in challenging this reductive attitude through entangling the reader or listener in contexts that cross the presumed boundary between culture and nature. It places particular emphasis on showing how specific narrative and lyrical modes challenge concepts of time and space embedded in related dichotomies that govern the episteme of modernity, such as natural history versus human history or mind versus matter. In doing so, it shows why and how literature is capable of turning the *skandalon* of nature, which we have chosen to ignore, into a cultural scandal that we cannot afford to ignore.

The central argument of each chapter is illustrated by a comparative reading that draws on the rich sources of German-language and English-language literatures and hearkens back to classical antiquity. These close readings alternate, from chapter to chapter, between the lyrical and the narrative modes, thus emphasizing their differences or commonalities as well as their specific anthropological relevance in an environmental aesthetic and ethical context. Particular emphasis is placed throughout on a reader-response approach: how do specific literary modes negotiate the relation between the human individual (recipient) and (historical, social and ecological) environments? In what ways do particularly modern lyrical and narrative devices offer aesthetic responses to the ecological blind spots of the modern episteme?

These are the chapter titles, with the authors that are discussed in close readings in parentheses:

Introduction: Cultural Ecology

1. Bodies (Sappho, Mayröcker, Utler)
2. Vision (Goethe, Wordsworth)
3. Atmosphere (Hölderlin, Hopkins, Rilke)
4. Environment (Shepherd, Handke)
5. Memories (Ovid, Hughes, Ransmayr)

Conclusion: Ecological Culture

The cultural history of ‘nature’ testifies both to our relation to and alienation from the environment. The concept of “ecology” as a cultural paradigm is in no way less ambiguous: it can either be used to exonerate humans from environmental responsibility (since it encompasses everything, including human collective destructiveness) or it can serve as an appropriate scientific and cultural framework within which humans are able to negotiate the challenges of the Anthropocene. Within the broader project of an ecological aesthetics which seeks to productively negotiate these ambiguities, literature performs a humble yet distinct role in various ways:

1. Certain literary devices and modes of using language question and undermine ossified linguistic habits that perpetuate the subject/object divide.
2. Literature and literary scholarship are able to facilitate a critique of the modern obsession with visual representation and its epistemological ramifications.
3. Literary imagination has the potential to foster an aesthetics and ethics of empathy.
4. Writing literature and thinking about literature keeps humans in touch with rich cultural resources that might help them to respond to the tremendous challenges of human self-reflection and social self-organization in the Anthropocene.

Contextualization

“The Scandal of Nature” offers the first comprehensive account of the role that literature and literary scholarship can play in the rapidly evolving field of the environmental humanities. It focuses on narrative and lyrical strategies that are capable of creating an

awareness of the creaturely nature of human existence through the bodily nature of language; it resists the tendency to replace the objective world by world pictures; it nourishes an aesthetic appreciation of empathy and diversity; and it draws attention to the bioethical potential of the “nature imaginaries” dormant in the literary archives of all cultures.

By intervening in these issues, this study offers an innovative contribution to modernity studies—an interdisciplinary field in the humanities that has not yet been able to respond adequately to current debates on bioethics and environmental issues. My readings also imply that an unacknowledged ecological imaginary runs through the literary history of modernity—an implicit, at times even inarticulate, concern with the changes in the human relation to natural environs during the acceleration of modernization processes. Thinkers as diverse as Ingold, Sloterdijk, Latour, and Chakrabarty have identified an aesthetic sense of acceleration and mobility as hallmark of modern Western identity and freedom; according to them, it is important to understand that this aesthetics is co-emergent with the Promethean technologies of the fuel-driven engine. The cultural praxis of reading and reciting offers, among other things, a craft, or art, of deceleration that charts the losses and dangers associated with this aesthetics and its hypostasis of the human individual.

In addition, the study’s engagement with the philosophical traditions of literary anthropology (in the wake of Iser) and phenomenology (in the wake of Merleau-Ponty) makes a compelling argument for the imaginative and critical potential of literature in an age that is marked by the convergence of social and environmental transformations and, as a consequence, challenges deeply engrained notions of the human and humanness. An implied claim is also that literary scholars will have to redefine themselves in a dual way: first, as humble *archivists* who assist the act of mourning of nature in an age of rapid biodiversity loss and disappearance of “nature imaginaries” and registers or records these losses much as anthropologists catalogue vanishing rituals of indigenous peoples; second, as even humbler *critics* who use the objective correlative of literature to rethink the human in the Anthropocene; and finally, as *biological species* and, inextricably intertwined with this, as *cultural agents* who can no longer turn to a realm beyond the nature transformed by human society.