I: Introduction

1. The connection between Romanticism and ecology has often been recognized in the critical literature on Romanticism and in the writings of ecologists and naturalists. Recently Jonathan Bate, Karl Kroebner, Jim McKusick, Onno Oerlemans, and Kate Rigby have published important books on the subject,[1] and The Wordsworth Circle, Studies in Romanticism, and Romantic Circles Praxis Series have published special issues on the topic.[2] By and large, these books and the articles in the collections argue that we can trace the origins of our current ecological thinking to European Romanticism in general, and sometimes to British and American Romanticism in particular. A similar trend to link various strands of our current environmental thinking to Romantic ur-texts may be found in the works of environmental historians, geographers, and environmentalists, such as Neal Evernden, Max Oelschlager, I. G. Simmons, and Donald Worster, among others. In Worster’s Nature’s Economy, a key history of ecological thought, we read that “at the very core of [the] Romantic view of nature was what later generations would come to call an ecological perspective: that is, a search for holistic or integrated perception, an emphasis on interdependence and relatedness in nature, and an intense desire to restore man to a place of intimate intercourse with the vast organism that constitutes the earth” (82). More recently, in his introduction to “Romanticism and Ecology,” a special issue of The Wordsworth Circle, Jim McKusick pointedly and rightly, I think, claims that “much Romantic writing emerges from a desperate sense of alienation from the natural world and expresses an anxious endeavor to re-establish a vital, sustainable relationship between mankind and the fragile planet on which [we] dwell” (123). These statements point to a position that many recent writers have defended, albeit from divergent and importantly nuanced perspectives: Romantic literature is a germinal site for the rise of ecological consciousness and practices.

2. The affiliation between Romanticism and ecology nonetheless remains problematic. On the one hand, Romantic nature philosophy has been linked, as in Luc Ferry’s The New Ecological Order, with oppressive and totalitarian political dispositions. On the other hand, Romanticism has been reduced to a simplistic nostalgia for a lost unity with nature, or worse, as a rhapsodic celebration of beautiful scenery. In reply to such critics as Ferry, Val Plumwood in Environmental Culture reminds us that “While it is important to note the role of those forms of Romanticism corrupted by the desire for unity and other oppressive forces, any analysis which puts all its stress on this factor ignores the diversity and liberatory aspects of some forms of Romanticism. . . .” (208). In response to the reductive view of Romanticism as nature worship, William Cronon and Paul Fry, among others, remind us that Romantic representations of nature reflect not so much actual places and encounters as virtual landscapes and experiences that mirror their writers’ projected desires and culturally mediated values. Cronon’s “The Trouble With Wilderness,” for example, cites Wordsworth’s description of the Simpion Pass experience (Prelude, Book 6) and Thoreau’s account of climbing Mt. Ktaadn to point up what he calls the “unnaturalness” of natural places rendered through the Romantic eye, informed as it is with Judaean-Christian ideas of the wilderness and Kantian notions of the sublime (73). Moreover, as Ralph Pite warns in “How Green were the Romantics,” while it is important and productive to link Romanticism with ecology, doing so often leads to oversimplifications and confusion, in that Romantic poetry may be used “to support any number of different [and one might add mutually contradictory] versions of ecology” (317); Pite believes that our definition of “green poetry” may become so broad or so restrictive a category that the term becomes unworkable (359). One of the objectives of the course sketched out below is to problematize our understanding of the Romantic apprehension and representation of nature, so that we begin to account for its intertextual and cultural mediations even as we recognize its more or less genuine, but nonetheless partial and vexed, attempt to grasp the natural world with as much immediacy and transparency as language will allow, and its effort to articulate a dynamic reciprocity between human beings and the natural world.
3. The course described here is designed to study the relationship between Romantic literature—especially that of the Wordsworths, Coleridge, and Clare—and the environment. Drawing upon a few key philosophical texts from the seventeenth through the early nineteenth centuries, as well as from present-day critical works of ecological literary criticism, environmental literature, and philosophy, the course encourages reflection upon what constitutes environmental literature, how such literature shapes environmental consciousness and action, and how Romantic poetry engages urgent issues that face us today about the relationship between human consciousness and nature, and about the structures of consciousness and feeling that predispose us to act in certain ways within our environment. Rather than turn to Romanticism as a guide to current environmental practices, our interest is in Romanticism as a site for the emergence of ecopoetics and as a discourse that opens up critical questions and lines of investigation about our human place in the life world. [SEE SYLLABUS]

4. The course is divided into four units of varying lengths: I: Introduction and Outline of Problem; II: Nature and Culture; III: Romantic Aesthetics and Nature; and IV: Romanticism, Nature, Ecology. Using the concept of “discursive clusters,” sets of works that approach certain topics from a variety of perspectives in order to promote discussion and sometimes to orchestrate a kind of imaginary conversation among works, each unit includes a series of primary readings for each week, accompanied by a pair of “Critical Works” that either critically and sometimes historically contextualize the issues and ideas raised in the primary readings. Unit I focuses on Michel Serres’s The Natural Contract, which presents a critical view of the breach of contract that characterizes our current relationship to the life world. Underscoring the critical importance of recalibrating our relationship to the natural world, The Natural Contract inaugurates the course with a sense of urgency that may persuade students to make a serious intellectual investment in the explorations that will follow. Unit II offers a brief genealogical perspective on Romantic nature philosophy and ecopoetics in the context of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy. Reading selections from Francis Bacon, René Descartes, Denis Diderot, and Jean Jacques Rousseau, we spend two weeks discussing enlightenment ideas about mechanism, dualism, the wild, the primitive, and the noble savage. Unit III introduces Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and William Gilpin as the major architects of the beautiful, the sublime, and the picturesque, mechanisms that at least in part structure our perceptions of and responses to the natural world.

5. Having established some of the key concepts that inform early nineteenth-century dispositions toward the environment, Unit IV moves to the heart of the course: the poetry and prose of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and John Clare—along with some other writers, such as Thomas Malthus and Charlotte Smith. Taking up more than half of the course, this unit considers the various ways these writers theorize and represent the sense of interdependence between human beings and nature, the reciprocal bond that anticipates Serres’s idea of the natural contract, and the agency—both natural and human. Drawing from a variety of “Critical Works”—by writers from Geoffrey Hartman and Jonathan Bate to Aldo Leopold and Walker Percy—throughout this unit we use discursive clusters to challenge the reductive stereotypes of Romanticism either as a will to power and mastery or as a nostalgic and simple love for nature. Moreover, we discuss the way Romanticism reacts against, transforms, and sometimes perpetuates some of the modes of perception and understanding it inherited from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

6. Note: The course described here is designed for upper-division undergraduates or first-year graduate students who have some acquaintance with British and ideally American or European Romanticism as well. Students who have taken a form of this course have noted in their teaching evaluations that the reading load is challenging, while at the same time they have generally praised the course for being comprehensive and opening up multiple and divergent perspectives on Romanticism and ecology. Because of its modular design, the course can easily be modified to adjust the contents and/or the pace of the course. By dropping units two and/or three, for example, the course could focus more directly upon the literary texts, which could be supplemented by works from other writers, such as Ann Radcliffe, Byron, the Shelleys (Frankenstein, for example), teaches very well alongside Serres’s The Natural Contract), and, to flesh out American Romanticism and ecology, Emerson, Thoreau, and Susan Cooper, among others. To recover some of the historical and philosophical background lost in that trade off, students might be asked to give individual or seminar-style presentations or to participate in focus-group discussions every two or three weeks. Another way to simplify the course would be to scale back some of the critical readings assigned for each week.

7. Unit I: Introduction and Outline of Problem focuses on the first two chapters of Michel Serres’s The Natural Contract which critique our contemporary environmental predicament and bring a sense of urgency to the questions and issues we will discuss throughout the class. Serres brilliantly interprets Goya’s Men Fighting with Cudgels as a visual metaphor for the struggle between nature and culture, invoking this binary polarization in order to problematize it later in his text. For Serres, the two antagonists of Goya’s painting represent history. As they fight, they remain oblivious to the bog into which they are sinking, and which represents nature. If the two men keep fighting and continue to ignore nature, they will eventually succumb to it. Thus nature, the world-wide system of objects and living things upon which humanity depends for its survival, will emerge from its subordinated position as a neglected third term and become a force which the men, perhaps putting down their own differences, will have to acknowledge, or with which they will have to reckon. For Serres, we are at or near that point of reckoning, and to preclude the eventualty of a serious catastrophe, Serres calls for a
8. Serres’s analysis leads us directly to the questions about interdependence, holism, agency, and reciprocity that we will find in Malthus, the Wordsworths, Coleridge, and Clare. Like Malthus, Serres reminds us of nature’s under-acknowledged power to wage war against humanity, and like Wordsworth he questions what it means to acknowledge the natural world effectively and meaningfully so as to foster a mutually beneficial relationship. Establishing the urgent need for a natural contract based upon the self-conscious acknowledgement of and love for Nature, which Serres recognizes as a creative and destructive, dynamic and indifferent force, *The Natural Contract* may encourage students to begin their reading of Romantic texts with a sense of the legacies of Romantic nature philosophy and the need to refigure the metaphors we use to construct our relationship to nature.

9. Because Serres does not deal explicitly with ecocriticism or ecopoetics, I ask students to read the introductory chapters of three important books of environmental criticism: Jonathan Bate’s *The Song of the Earth*, Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination*, and Jim McKusick’s *Green Writing*. Placing these three books into play highlights the overlapping issues of ecocriticism, establishing some grounds for the students’ own thinking and writing. First, Bate’s introduction challenges the binary opposition between nature and culture, using Jane Austen and Thomas Hardy to tease out the ways that culture is always already imbedded in nature, just as nature is always already imbedded in culture. Along the way, in a brief sketch of the transformations from the old to the new England, Bate adumbrates key points that will orient students within the field of ecocriticism. Bate’s introduction also offers a definition of “environment”; examines the distinction between organic and mechanistic; and shows how operative terms and concepts in environmental discourse, such as organicism, tradition, continuity, and nature, have been appropriated for competing political and ideological purposes. Second, Buell’s introduction offers a rationale for ecocriticism, suggesting that as critics, readers and writers we need to draw upon the anticipatory imaginings from a broad range of literary, cultural, and social texts in order to remake our relationship to the environment. Buell also introduces and defines key terms, such as ecocentrism, anthropocentrism, and the “environmental text,” and discusses the gendering of nature and the hitherto peripheral place of nature writing in the canon of British and especially American literature. While the course concentrates on early British Romanticism, frequently drawing upon Buell’s *Environmental Imagination* allows us to discuss the transnational character of Romantic ecology. Buell’s analysis of Thoreau, Emerson, Susan Cooper, Mary Austin and others offers a model for our own practice, and it creates a kind of cultural dissonance that throws our reading of the British Romantic texts into a fresh perspective. Finally, McKusick’s introduction also addresses the relationship between British and American romanticism and environmentalism, emphasizing the way that American nature writers—from Ralph Waldo Emerson through Mary Austin—seem strategically to ignore or forget the influence of British Romanticism on American nature writing. Arguing that we need to repair the bridge between British and American environmental writing, McKusick points to the common threads these traditions share about culture and nature, humanity, and the environment. In conjunction with *The Natural Contract*, these introductory chapters provide a comprehensive overview of the operative concepts, terms, and cultural-historical connections that will frame our investigations and discussions throughout the class.

10. **Unit II: Nature and Culture** assembles a discursive cluster that brings together Francis Bacon’s *The New Atlantis*, Renée Descartes’ *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, along with Carolyn Merchant’s “Dominion Over Nature,” Donald Worster’s “The Empire of Reason,” Jonathan Bate’s “The State of Nature,” and Hayden White’s “The Forms of Wildness.” This unit provides a critical overview of the history of mechanism and dualism from the seventeenth century up to the Romantic era. If there is not time to read all of *The New Atlantis*, the final section on the House of Salomon suffices to give students a sense of the secretive technologies of mastery over nature that characterize Bacon’s mechanistic view of nature. “Dominion Over Nature,” chapter seven of Merchant’s *The Death of Nature*, offers a classic critique of Bacon’s text, setting it in the context of the witch trials of the sixteenth century and treating it as a pivotal point in the transformation of nature from a benevolent nurturing mother to an objectified and demonized female figure—a witch—whose secrets could only be extracted by means of domination and torture. The selections from Descartes bring into view the origin of the *cogito*, the critical moment when the Western mind reasserts its separation from matter, as well as Descartes’s unfortunate claim that animals are little more than unfeeling machines. Contrasting to, but reinforcing, Merchant’s analysis, “The Empire of Reason,” chapter two of Worster’s *Nature’s Economy*, describes how mechanism and dualism promoted a masculinist and imperialist view of nature as a feminized object to be exploited for the benefit of man.

11. In the second week we examine eighteenth-century ideas of primitivism, the noble savage, and the divide between nature and culture in Diderot’s “Supplement to *Bougainville’s Travels*” and Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality*. Diderot’s “Supplement” is an imaginary travel narrative and philosophical dialogue based upon Diderot’s reading of Louis Antoine de Bougainville’s *Voyage around the World* (1771). Using the customs of Tahiti (as reported by Bougainville and augmented by Diderot’s imagination) as his representative for natural law, Diderot sets up a dichotomy between the “Artificial Man,”
personified by a European almoner tormented by the conflict between his sense of religious and moral propriety and his desire to give in to his natural sexuality, and the "Natural Man," personified by a Tahitian chieftain, Orou, who points out the folly and hypocrisy of European customs that deny the most natural and compelling of human desires. Thus, the "Supplement" anticipates the Romantic revolt against mechanism as it constructs nature, albeit an exotic version of nature, as the ground of fundamental laws and truths uncompainted by civilization and culture. Hayden White's "The Forms of Wildness" sets the idea of the exotic other as noble savage or wild man into historical context and helps us to understand Diderot's treatment of the Noble Savage myth as a projection of European fantasies and as an idealized version of the Wild Man representing everything that is outside of and opposed to the values of advanced civilization.[3] White's essay provides a strong transition to the discussion of Rousseau's primitivism in the second Discourse that follows.

12. Rousseau's Discourse on Inequality similarly projects certain fantasies of simplicity onto his idea of man in a state of nature and tracks the increasing alienation of the individual subject as human beings formed communities, developed systems of government and exchange, invented language, and gradually subordinated their autonomy and self-sufficiency to the trappings of civilization. Bate's "The State of Nature," chapter two of The Song of the Earth, places Rousseau's thought in historical context and explains his contribution to the definition of "nature," thereby making a persuasive case for Rousseau's importance to Romantic ecology. (Two other critical texts that could broaden the discussion of mechanism, primitivism, nature, and gender in this unit include Susan Bordo's "The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought," a still fascinating and important analysis of Cartesian despair and the gendering of the cogito, as well as Shane Phelan's "Intimate Distance," an interrogation of Rousseau's view of nature in the Discourse on Inequality.) Understanding now how mechanism, dualism, and primitivism function as discursive forms that mediate our understanding of and relationship to the natural world, we are ready to proceed to another set of mediations: the sublime, the beautiful, and the picturesque.

13. Unit III: Romantic Aesthetics and Nature brings together Burke, Kant, Gilpin, Schiller, Wordsworth and Coleridge, along with critical essays by Jonathan Bate, Walker Percy, Arnold Berleant, Christopher Hitt, Lawrence Buell, and Neal Evernden. The centerpiece of this unit is, of course, the comparison between Burke's and Kant's ideas of the sublime and beautiful. On the beautiful, we read Parts 1 and 3 of Burke's A Philosophical Enquiry into our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful alongside selections from the First Book Kant's Critique of the Power of Judgment; on the sublime, Part 2 of Burke's Enquiry and the sections on the mathematical and dynamic sublime from the Second Book of Kant's Critique. We also read a few brief excerpts from Gilpin's Three Essays on the Picturesque to introduce this critically important aesthetic category. (While Gilpin stands in as the representative of the picturesque, I acknowledge the limits involved in such an oversimplification of this complex and conflicted theory.) Bringing Theodor Adorno's analysis of the aestheticization of nature to bear on a critique of aesthetic, particularly picturesque, mediations of nature, Jonathan Bate's "The Picturesque Environment," chapter five of The Song of the Earth, provides a point of departure for our discussion. After introducing the sublime, beautiful and picturesque, we place Schiller's On the Naive and Sentimental in conversation with Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads and Coleridge's Biographia Literaria. Schiller's ideas on the naïve and sentimental offer a post-Kantian revision of dualism in which nature serves as an important agency to foster human self-realization—the via negativa, which will re-emerge in our later discussions of Wordsworth and Charlotte Smith.

14. To problematize the question of aesthetic mediation, we read Walker Percy's "The Loss of Creature," a powerful critique (à la post-Heideggerian phenomenology) of the way systems of representation deprive us of direct experience of the world—natural objects, places, works of art. In Percy's words, the overdetermined "symbolic complex" through which we usually encounter the natural world denies us the "sovereign discovery" of the thing before us—whether that thing be the Grand Canyon, a dead dogfish, a Shakespearean sonnet, or, we might add, Tintern Abbey or the River Wye (47). Percy's essay questions the difference between authentic experience and experience as a form of authentication or validation; as such, it provides critical framework from which to analyze the way aesthetic categories and practices set up ways of seeing that may do as much to thwart or distort, rather than enhance, our engagement with the natural world. His emphasis upon tourism is particularly poignant in reference to Gilpin's picturesque traveler with his or her scripted itineraries.

15. To supplement our readings of Burke and Kant on the beautiful and the sublime, I ask students to read Arnold Berleant's "The Aesthetics of Art and Nature" and Christopher Hitt's "Toward an Ecological Sublime." The first of these essays treats the Kantian sublime as a model from which to develop an ambient aesthetics of nature. Berleant hopes to inaugurate a shift from a Kantian model of disinterested contemplation to one of a sensuous, participatory immersion in nature: "Perceiving environment from within...looking not at it but being in it" nature "is transformed into a realm in which we live as participants, not observers" (83). The result is a more ecocentric engagement with nature's beauty and sublimity. The second essay attempts to defend the sublime from some of its recent critics such as William Cronon and Anne Mellor (see below), who find the sublime complicit with masculinist technologies of domination. Hitt argues that the rupture between human and nature that occurs in the Kantian sublime may lead to a defamiliarization that triggers a heightened respect for nature and an clarification of our sense of place within nature. This emphasis upon defamiliarization, a key component of Romantic poetics, anticipates our discussion of Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads and Coleridge's Biographia Literaria.
16. Reading Schiller’s *On the Naïve and Sentimental* helps to place Wordsworth’s relationship to nature within Schiller’s post-Kantian reworking of the dualist model. Schiller’s distinction between the naïve poet who is nature, and the sentimental poet who desires nature, anticipates our later discussions of the dialectic between object and subject that on the one hand embraces natural objects and experience, and on the other may do so in the name of personal, subjective transcendence. Schiller’s essay also reconceptualizes the primitivism we’ve seen in Diderot and Rousseau, establishing a post-Kantian framework from which to understand Wordsworth’s affinity for rustic simplicty and childhood, as well as his nostalgia for a lost unity with nature—all themes that are broached in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.

17. Wordsworth, who may still be one of our best theorists—if not poets—of place, articulates a theory of dynamic reciprocity in the relationship between nature and mind, in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, to which we now turn. In the Preface, Wordsworth tells us that the poet “considers man and the objects that surround him as acting and re-acting upon each other, so as to produce an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure; he considers man in his own nature and in his ordinary life as contemplating this with a certain quantity of immediate knowledge, with certain convictions, intuitions, and deductions which by habit become of the nature of intuitions; he considers him as looking upon this complex scene of ideas and sensations, and finding every where objects that immediately excite in him sympathies which, from the necessities of his nature, are accompanied by an overbalance of enjoyment” (605-606). Wordsworth here describes an embodied poetics of place wherein things and practices, convictions and intuitions, lead to habits or dispositions—a second nature—that shape the poet’s understanding of and responses to his or her immediate environment. This philosophy of reciprocity and interdependence, of course, is not always fully realized in Wordsworth’s poetry, where his interest often emphasizes the disjunction between mind and nature that enables a certain transcendence along the lines of Schiller’s *Naïve and Sentimental*.

18. Wordsworth’s Preface underscores the importance of defamiliarization as one of the more promising and recuperable Romantic strategies for today’s ecopoetics and ecological practice. The poet, Wordsworth claims, effects an imaginative transformation of the ordinary events and situations in life so that “ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way” (597). According to Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, Wordsworth’s project intended “to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand” (*Biographia Literaria*, Chapter 14, 169). Thus, the poet aims to re-orient us, to recalibrate our apprehension of, the world—society and nature—in such a way that we can remake our relationship to it.

19. To link ecocentrism to, and to foreground the importance of, Wordsworth and Coleridge’s ideas on defamiliarization, we may refer to Neal Evernden’s “Talking about the Mountain,” chapter one of his *The Natural Alien*, which divides Romanticism into two streams—the shallow and the deep (29). Shallow Romanticism suggests false consciousness and nostalgia for a lost pastoral age, whereas deep Romanticism suggests what Ernst Bloch would call a positive utopian function—the desire to recognize in the present the necessity and means for transformative thinking and action.[4] According to Evernden, deep Romanticism—like the deep ecology of Arne Naess—challenges the prescriptive and mechanistic assumptions that underlie our conventional beliefs about our place in the life world. In this way, Coleridge’s theory of the imagination may be seen as a way to dissolve the stale maps of the familiar in such a way that we can construct new ways to bridge the distance between humanity and nature.

20. **Unit IV: Romanticism, Nature, Ecology** finds us at last in a position to turn our attention to the Romantic poetry and prose, beginning with a comparison of the figuration of nature’s agency and the web of interdependence in Malthus and Wordsworth, both of whom have had a powerful influence upon our contemporary discussions of the vexed relationship between human beings and nature. From this point forward, each week continues to examine various elements of Romanticism, nature, and ecology by placing key Romantic texts into conversation with either philosophical or critical texts that highlight some aspect of the ideas we have introduced in the first part of the course: mechanism and dualism, holism, interdependence and interconnectedness, human and natural agency, aesthetic and ideological mediation, representation, defamiliarization, and what Greg Garrard has called the essential “puzzlement” that characterizes the Romantic ecopoetics.[5] I do not have space in this essay to describe each week’s assignments in detail, so in what follows I will name the major texts in each week’s discursive cluster and highlight some of the less obvious alignments of texts therein.

21. Week seven focuses upon two revolutionary works, both published in 1798, that would profoundly influence the history of our thinking about the natural world: Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* and Thomas Malthus’s *Essay on Population*. While literary and environmental histories tend to bracket these two complementary but antagonistic works from one another, their ideas about nature’s agency have become part of a discursive repertoire that informs our current debates about the environment and environmentalism. Beginning the section on Romantic literature with Malthus’s apocalyptic view of nature’s force not only displaces our usual definition of Romanticism, but enables us to conduct an
22. Catherine Gallagher’s “The Body Versus the Social Body in the Works of Thomas Malthus and Henry Mayhew,” which argues that Malthus’s principle of population correlates the healthy individual body with food consumption within the context of impending scarcity, helps us to recognize the interdependence of natural and human forces—albeit from a perspective of apocalyptic alarm. As such, Malthus’s essay points forward to the apocalypticism that Buell discusses in chapter nine of The Environmental Imagination, where he points out how master metaphors of interdependence such as “web,” “chain of being,” and “machine” both dramatize the networked relationships within the biosphere and to heighten the sense of catastrophe when the sense of reciprocity they entail is threatened with instability or with a sudden breach (as in the case of predictions of impending doom we find in Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring or in the apocalyptic scenarios of the earth after global warming).

23. In week nine (skipping a week here for a well deserved Fall or Spring break), Buell’s “Pastoral Ideology,” chapter one of The Environmental Imagination, and Geoffrey Hartman’s “Wordsworth, Inscriptions, and Romantic Nature Poetry” enter into conversation to place some of Wordsworth’s shorter lyrics about nature, including “Expostulation and Reply,” “To a Butterfly,” and the Lucy poems into the context of the pastoral tradition. It is interesting to revisit Hartman’s essay in the light of ecocriticism, for Hartman claims that the inscription was a subgenre that enables nature to speak directly from the poem, even as he shows how Wordsworth’s transformation of the inscription leaves conventional topographical description behind by incorporating both setting—nature—and the act of writing into the poem. What results is a fusion of writerly identity and landscape: “The setting is understood to contain the writer in the act of writing: the poet in the grip of what he feels and sees, primitively inspired to carve it in the living rock” (222). Read alongside Hartman’s essay, Buell’s chapter, which tries to strike a balance between what we sometimes call the “red” and “green” politics of pastoral, invites us to question whether the incorporation of writerly process in landscape serves eccentric, anthropocentric, or even ecocentric ends. Does Wordsworth’s version of pastoral foster ecological thinking and action, or does it simply offer a retreat from the world? To paraphrase Buell, does Wordsworth’s poetry participate in a strategized eco-politics, or does it lead to mystification? Buell’s essay leads us to discuss distinctions between English and American versions of pastoral. (One could also invoke here Jim McKusick’s “Wordsworth’s Home at Grasmere,” chapter three of Green Writing. While McKusick claims that Wordsworth’s is “a poetry of unmediated experience” [56] and shows that Wordsworth engages in a conversation with nature, he acknowledges, like Buell, that the poetry of the home place may well be a projection of certain “fundamental attitudes and beliefs about the best way of life in a rural community” [62].)

24. In week ten, we move from Wordsworth to Coleridge, beginning with a sequence of poems—Burns’s “To a Mouse”; Coleridge’s “To a Young Ass,” and Clare’s “The Mouses Nest”—that put to question the post-Cartesian dualism of human and animal. Kurt Fosso’s “‘Sweet Influences’: Human/Animal Difference and Social Cohesion in Wordsworth and Coleridge” engages precisely those questions and dovetails nicely with McKusick’s “Coleridge and the Economy of Nature,” chapter one of Green Writing, that places Coleridge’s ecopoetics in the context of late eighteenth-century natural science. Both Fosso and McKusick point to the importance of Erasmus Darwin’s work as a kind of prelude to the philosophy of One Life, which may be introduced here as a key aspect of Wordsworth and Coleridge’s early ecological thinking. McKusick argues that Coleridge’s very language, what he calls an “eclect” (44), reorients us to see the natural world as a vital, integrated community where human beings become a part of, rather than apart from, the life world. McKusick’s claims may foster a discussion about how far language enables us to converse with nature, to close the distance between us and other living things, and how far it serves, on the contrary, as a means to construct and to reify that distance.

25. Weeks eleven through thirteen bring us to questions of place and return us to some of the questions about the gendering of spaces and nature that we broached in Unit II. Key texts in the cluster include Wordsworth’s Home at Grasmere, Michael, and The Prelude; Charlotte Smith’s Beachy Head; and Dorothy Wordsworth’s Alfoxden and Grasmere journals. Chapter eight of The Environmental Imagination, “Place,” offers a helpful starting point and makes a clean transition to the previous discussions about defamiliarization. Lawrence Buell here reminds us that familiarity with a place does not necessarily “guarantee ecocentrism” (253). On the contrary, familiarity may actually foster a kind of unwise passiveness, if you will, wherein we take for granted and even ignore the particularities of our immediate social and natural surroundings. Buell in fact argues that one of the key functions of environmental writing is to deploy tropes of displacement and disorientation that force us to attend to the home place in a new way: “Seeing things new, seeing new things, expanding the notion of community so that it becomes situated within the ecological community—these are some of the ways in which environmental writing can reperceive the familiar in the interest of deepening the sense of place” (266). The question then
26. Buell’s “New World Dreams and Environmental Actualities,” chapter two of The Environmental Imagination, turns the question the other way around. How much do our projected desires interfere with the apprehension of place and how much do places become projections of our desires? Buell discusses environmental racism and shows how versions of pastoral have been constructed to suit the imperial desires of settler cultures. Nonetheless, he demonstrates that such tendencies, while latent in old world pastoral, may be transformed by writers such as Mary Austin who can take the myth of the new world and “use it in earth’s interests as well as in humanity’s” (55). With Austin’s example in mind, we may ask whether Wordsworth’s home places are places of actualities or templates upon which he projects his own desires for pastoral equanimity and natural simplicity. Either way, we may ask in whose interests Wordsworth’s poetry deploys those representations of place.

27. By placing Wordsworth’s Prelude in tandem with Charlotte Smith’s Beachy Head, we can compare the uses of the sublime in both poems. Geoffrey Hartman’s “The Romance of Nature and the Negative Way” and Anne Mellor’s “Domesticating the Sublime,” chapter five of Romanticism & Gender, promote a conversation about the gendering of the sublime in these two writers and point to the next week’s discussion of Dorothy Wordsworth. Hartman’s classic essay, of course, argues essentially that Wordsworth’s poetry displays an attempt to overcome the tyranny of the visible. Nature, according to Hartman, offers Wordsworth a via negativa by means of which the human subject, at least in “exalted moments” such as the Snowden passage from the Prelude, reaches an ecstatic point of transcendence. Hartman’s essay recalls the masculinist struggle of the Kantian sublime, as well as Schiller’s reformulation of that dynamic in On the Naïve and Sentimental. Contrasting the masculine and feminine sublime, Mellor recasts the position Hartman’s essay postulates by emphasizing that the sublime moment of encounter in the Burkean and Kantian formulations enacts a masculinist appropriation of the feminine: in the sublime encounter the male poet “speaks of, for and in the place of a nature originally gendered as female” (90). Mellor contrasts this form of sublime appropriation, as we might call it, with the feminine sublime of Radcliffe, Owensen and Ferrier which results not in “a moment of masculine empowerment over female nature” but in a sympathetic act of community with others (105). These readings underscore the importance of the aesthetic categories introduced earlier in the semester, and invite us to recall Garrard’s effort to rethink an ecological sublime in which moments of rupture lead to a radical alienation followed by a recuperative act that reconnects the poet with the community of nature.

28. From the sublime, we move in week thirteen to the more tempered demesnes of the beautiful and picturesque in Dorothy Wordsworth’s Journals. Comparing Wordsworth’s sense of place to Dorothy Wordsworth’s has been a common exercise. Yet in the new context of anticipatory ecology the comparison reaps new insights. Here we may recall Buell’s discussion in “Pastoral Ideology,” chapter one of The Environmental Imagination, that the pastoral has been a means of empowering women, and that marginalization of nature writing at the periphery of the consecrated canons of British and American literature has been in part due to the close affinity between nature writing and women’s writing—particularly in their shared interest in commonplace topics and in their minute attention to surface details. Anne K. Mellor’s “Writing the Self/Self Writing,” chapter seven of Romanticism & Gender, offers a generative discussion of the distinctions between what she sees as Wordsworth’s disembodied poetics of mind and Dorothy Wordsworth’s embodied poetics of place. Mellor’s analysis of Dorothy’s “Floating Island at Hawkeshead” and the Journals, while not intended per se as an ecological reading, presents Dorothy’s engagement with nature in a framework that invites comparison with Buell’s discussion of Thoreau’s “particularized immersion” at Walden (Environmental Imagination 132). So too does Anne Wallace’s “Inhabited Solitudes: Dorothy Wordsworth’s Domesticating Walkers,” which argues that Dorothy’s journals and her Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland essentially reconfigure the parameters of domestic space to encompass the landscapes demarcated by her walks: thus Dorothy redefines place, in the broader sense, as domestic space, which may be another way of saying that Dorothy’s tourism, in contrast to that of, say, the picturesque traveler, engages in a practice of embodied re-inhabiting. (If there is time, one might also assign Gary Snyder’s ‘Reinhabitation’ or ‘The Place, the Region, the Commons’ to bring a bioregionalist perspective to the reinhabiting places.) Wallace’s essay also is helpful for the classroom, for it offers students a concise synopsis of the conditions of textual labor and exchange in the Wordsworth household, defined as a set of relations extending beyond the cottage door, and she challenges us to redefine our understanding of domestic space.

29. From immersion we move in week fourteen to rupture, placing Wordsworth’s “Nutting” and Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” alongside Aldo Leopold’s “Thinking Like a Mountain,” a touchstone of environmental writing from his Sand County Almanac. In this influential essay written in the wake of the Kaibob Deer disaster of 1924, Leopold recounts an epiphanic episode in his life as he stares into the dying eyes of a wolf he and his companions have killed for sport. Leopold’s exhortation that we must learn to think like a mountain—that is to think in terms of the symbiotic relationships between predator and prey, life and death—may be seen as a kind of ecocentric clarification of the more general, but related and anticipatory exhortations we find in Wordsworth’s “Nutting” and Coleridge’s “Rime.” All three accounts involve an act of violence against nature—as hazel grove, as albatross, as wolf—that results in a scene of admonishment and instruction in one form or another. In his “In Quest of the Ordinary,” Stanley Cavell reads the killing of the Albatross as the
consequence of the Mariner’s unconscious sense that nature has some claims upon him (193). Each of these acts may be read as a kind of felix culpa, wherein the human agent learns to recognize nature’s agency in the very act of attempting to sever ties to it—in Serres’s terms, in the act of breaching the natural contract of symbiotic reciprocity between humanity and nature. In each case, human agents move tragically beyond conventional knowledge toward an anagnorisis of their connection to the mystery and otherness of the natural world whose affiliation with the human they can no longer deny. Thinking back to the ecological sublime, we might see each of these incidents of rupture that expose our initial failure or inability to recognize our kinship with nature not as Kantian moments of transcendence or masculinist appropriation but as moments of ambient engagement. Such moments may present the possibility of renewing our sense of dwelling as part of the life world. Of course, such a proposition may foster considerable disagreement among students, as well as among ourselves, and some may want to note particular nuances among the three episodes.

30. Weeks fifteen and sixteen bring us to John Clare and to Martin Heidegger’s concept of dwelling, which several of the critical texts throughout the semester have already anticipated. Jonathan Bate’s “What are Poets For,” chapter nine of The Song of the Earth, provides a comprehensive overview of Heidegger’s importance to ecohetics and asks us to consider the importance of poetry and poets in the transformation of consciousness that may lead us to a more balanced and responsible relationship to the earth. Putting Heidegger’s “Building Dwelling Thinking” and, if there is time, “The Thing” together with Clare’s poetry makes a poignant finish to Unit IV, recalling the ideas about nature’s agency first introduced with Malthus and Wordsworth. Time permitting, one might round back on the last day of class to the last two chapters of The Natural Contract and ask whether or not Clare’s presentation of nature’s agency and interdependence recirculate as a part of the discursive repertoire that shapes our ecological vision today. In his final chapters, Serres refigures the symbiotic bond between humanity and nature as a kind of umbilical cord and points to the need for what he calls the “Instructed Third,” a troubadour of knowledge, in his phrase, who elides the sciences and the humanities so that his or her knowledge and love of nature and humanity will enable a rethinking of our connectedness to nature and our “rootedness in the global” (95). It seems fitting to close the semester with Serres’s meditations on “casting off,” where he figures the natural contract as a cord that ties human beings together with earth in a reciprocal, symbiotic relationship that is mutually enabling and beneficial. In the final analysis, as an intensive, sixteen-week course on Romanticism, Nature, and Ecology nears a close, we are casting off. If the course has been successful we have displaced our conventional moorings by means of a critical re-reading of Romantic texts from the multiple perspectives of contemporary environmental and ecocritical debate. In the final papers and projects, we may hope for further displacements, new trajectories for research, and effective, if exploratory, strategies for reading and writing ecocentrically.


Notes

1. [1] See Jonathan Bate, Romantic Ecology and The Song of the Earth; Karl Kroeber, Ecological Literary Criticism; James C. McKusick, Green Writing; Onno Oerlemans, Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature; and Kate Rigby, Topographies of the Sacred. Because both Bate and Kroeber seated their advocacy of ecocriticism in an attack upon New Historicism readings of Romantic literature, considerable controversy has surrounded its advent. Among the early critical responses to Bate and Kroeber, see Paul H. Fry’s “Green to the very door?” Marlon Ross’s “Reading Habits” and Greg Garrard’s “Radical Pastoral?” I cannot discuss in this essay the plethora of ecocritical works dealing specifically with American literature, with the exception of Lawrence Buell’s formative study The Environmental Imagination. [BACK]


3. [3] See also Hayden White’s “The Noble Savage Theme as Fetish,” where he notes that the Noble Savage is not just ‘the projection of a dream of Edenic innocence onto the fragmentary knowledge of the New World,’ but also a nightmare that contains ‘references to violations of taboos regarded as inviolable by Europeans. . . .’ (Travels of Discourse 187). [BACK]

4. [4] For Bloch in The Principle of Hope, the anticipatory potential of utopian thinking may serve a positive function when utopian desire embraces concrete historical possibilities, when ‘human culture [is] referred to its concrete utopian horizon’ (1:146). [BACK]

5. In “Radical Pastoral,” Greg Garrard questions what he describes as the “eco-philosophical sleight-of-hand” that allows eco-critics such as Bate and Kroeber to gloss over Romanticism’s own, sometimes self-conscious, ‘puzzlement’ about the relationship between humanity and nature, evidenced in the very poets put forward to demonstrate the seamless affiliation between the two (463-64). [BACK]

Works Cited


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We just want to make sure you're a human and not a bot.
19th-century science was greatly influenced by Romanticism (or the Age of Reflection, c. 1800–40), an intellectual movement that originated in Western Europe as a counter-movement to the late-18th-century Enlightenment. Romanticism incorporated many fields of study, including politics, the arts, and the humanities. In contrast to Enlightenment's mechanistic natural philosophy, European scientists of the Romantic period held that observing nature implied understanding the self and that knowledge of British romanticism, climate change, and the anthropocene: writing tambora. By David Higgins. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Hubbell shows too how both the Romantic and ecocritical privileging of Wordsworth’s nature have coalesced, particularly in Jonathan Bate’s influential work, effectively screening Byron out of any serious consideration as an ecological poet.