

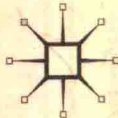
LITERATURES
CULTURES AND THE
ENVIRONMENT



GREEN MODERNISM

Nature and the English Novel, 1900 to 1930

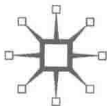
JEFFREY MATHES MCCARTHY



GREEN MODERNISM
NATURE AND THE ENGLISH
NOVEL, 1900 TO 1930

Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy

palgrave
macmillan



GREEN MODERNISM

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First published in 2015 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®

in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

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ISBN: 978-1-137-54935-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McCarthy, Jeffrey Mathes, 1965–

Green modernism : nature and the English novel, 1900 to 1930 /

Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy.

pages cm.—(Literatures, cultures, and the environment)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-137-54935-8 (hardback : alk. paper)

1. English fiction—20th century—History and criticism.

2. Nature in literature 3. Ecology in literature I. Title.

PR888.N36M33 2015

823'.9140936—dc23

2015013123

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Knowledge Works (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: September 2015

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Literatures, Cultures, and the Environment

Ursula K. Heise, University of California, Los Angeles

Literatures, Cultures, and the Environment focuses on new research in the Environmental Humanities, particularly work with a rhetorical or literary dimension. Books in this series seek to explore how ideas of nature and environmental concerns are expressed in different cultural contexts and at different historical moments. They investigate how cultural assumptions and practices as well as social structures and institutions shape conceptions of nature, the natural, species boundaries, uses of plants, animals and natural resources, the human body in its environmental dimensions, environmental health and illness, and relations between nature and technology. In turn, the series aims to make visible how concepts of nature and forms of environmentalist thought and representation arise from the confluence of a community's ecological and social conditions with its cultural assumptions, perceptions, and institutions. Such assumptions and institutions help to make some environmental crises visible and conceal others, confer social and cultural significance on certain ecological changes and risk scenarios, and shape possible responses to them.

Across a wide range of historical moments and cultural communities, the verbal, visual, and performing arts have helped to give expression to such concerns, but cultural assumptions also underlie legal, medical, religious, technological, and media-based engagements with environmental issues. Books in this series will analyze how literatures and cultures of nature form and dissolve; how cultures map nature, literally and metaphorically; how cultures of nature rooted in particular places develop dimensions beyond that place (e.g., in the virtual realm); and what practical differences such literatures and cultures make for human uses of the environment and for historical reshapings of nature. The core of the series lies in literary and cultural studies, but it also embraces work that reaches out from that core to establish connections to related research in art history, anthropology, communication, history, philosophy, environmental psychology, media studies, and cultural geography.

A great deal of work in the Environmental Humanities to date has focused on the United States and Britain and on the last two centuries. *Literatures, Cultures, and the Environment* seeks to build on new research in these areas, but also and in particular aims to make visible projects that address the relationship between culture and environmentalism from a comparative perspective, or that engage with regions, cultures, or historical moments beyond the modern period in Britain and the US. The series also includes work that, reaching beyond national and majority cultures, focuses on emergent cultures, subcultures, and minority cultures in their engagements with environmental issues. In some cases, such work was originally written in a language other than English and subsequently translated for publication in the series, so as to

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Green Modernism: Nature and the English Novel, 1900 to 1930

By Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy

For Whitney and for love

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Erecting a bulky study like this one is a barn-raising—it brings out your best neighbors, and they share their insights, ideas, and energy. This project confirms that meaningful scholarship is a participatory, reciprocal process where ideas are shared, differences are negotiated, and perspectives are challenged. I have had support from institutions devoted to exactly this scholarly ideal: The Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas awarded me a Mellon research fellowship; the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at Edinburgh University hosted me for a semester; the National Humanities Center surrounded me with good company and strong opinions during a Summer Institute in Literary Studies; Westminster College's Gore fund for professional development funded the leave where most of this book's heavy lifting was accomplished.

Many readers have helped me clarify my thoughts on items big and small, while rescuing me from dead ends, infelicitous phrases, and clumsy conclusions. Whatever errors persist are my own. Special thanks are due to Paul Armstrong, Cliff Spargo, Michael Wood, Lance Newman, Bonnie Roos, Ian Campbell, Jack Peters, Lissa Schneider, Robert Newman, Paul Peppis, Bonnie Baxter, Randall Stevenson, Andy Hoffmann, Sylvia Torti, and Richard Badenhause. First among reading equals is Ursula Heise, series editor for *Literatures, Cultures and the Environment*—thank you for guidance and inspiration.

The classroom is one place I have felt happy testing ideas and learning from the students and colleagues who have shared them with me. So to all the Environmental Studies students at Westminster, and to all the folks at Utah's Environmental Humanities master's program—cheers! I also bow to the patience of audiences at readings, conferences, invited talks, and symposia.

In another forum, I've had support from the friends who pulled me away from the desk and into the mountains. I would like to thank Doug Brockmeyer, Bob Palais, Rob Morgan, Danny

Giovale, Greg Gagne, Matt Steward, and Derek Holtved. Just as a barn-raising is about community more than tools, a great pleasure in the writing has been the friends it involved. Special thanks are due to John Fitzpatrick, Kristen Vassallo, and their own Ellie and Jack who shared so much with me in Texas. I would also like to thank Paul Wedgwood who made me welcome with his bicycle in Edinburgh. Among others, Ian Campbell fed me when I was hungry, Tom Hartley and Steve McGlennan poured for me when I was thirsty, and Sean Sutherland cared about the art on the page.

Closer to home, I'm especially glad to share my appreciation for all the Huffards, for my parents again and again, for Bella, Howard, and for Whitney Williams McCarthy, whose name I've already mentioned.

A version of Chapter Two appeared in *Modern Fiction Studies*, and I am grateful to Robert Marzec for his editorial assistance. I acknowledge *Modern Fiction Studies* and the Johns Hopkins University Press for permission to use my work. The cover image by Ben Nicholson appears courtesy of the National Galleries of Scotland.

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1

“THE LAND’S WAY IS IMPORTANT IN THIS STORY”

ENVIRONMENTAL CRITICISM IN MODERNIST STUDIES

Am I,
To see in the Lake District, then,
Another bourgeois invention like the piano?

W. H. Auden

Talk of mysteries!—Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown
matter, to come in contact with it, rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks!
The solid earth! The actual world!

Henry David Thoreau

INTRODUCTORY

Ecocriticism and modernism will be the tracks on which this study runs. Modernism is the more established term, but what is ecocriticism? In the early 1990s literary nature changed: ecocriticism was conceived as the examination of texts in relation to the environment, and it was born mulling nature-writing epiphanies in the North American wild. From these beginnings it was a small step to the British Romantic poets, for whom nature was also a threatened alternative to modernity and a possible cure for the contemplative soul who could perceive its lessons. Methodologically, early ecocriticism was defined by its commitment to the political project of environmental rescue, much more than any unifying theory. Until recently, modernist studies has largely rebuffed the insights of ecocriticism thanks to the aesthetic armor of its autonomous, subjective, urban texts. But today the moment is propitious for ecocritical appraisals

of modernism; each field pulls the other toward reinvention. My task in this opening chapter is to reframe the critical conversation around ecocriticism and then propose a critical apparatus for reading modernism and the environment together.

As a practical matter, this chapter introduces ecocriticism to a modernist studies audience new to its details, and then identifies the promising readings a carefully theorized ecocriticism can perform for modernist texts. The first of these readings is apparent in my title: modernism—and British modernism in particular—carries a green component that has been largely overlooked. At the simplest level, to claim that nature is significant to modernism is to cut against the grain of a century of scholarship. The high-modernist narratives I study have sometimes been cast as ahistorical, at other times as fixated on what Woolf called “the dark places of psychology,” and they have been located in a metropolitan and not a rural consciousness.¹ Nature can change the dominant readings of modernist novels and nature can broaden the archive for modernist studies. The chapters that follow will explore nature’s cultural function in the modern novel, the modernist’s repudiation of the romantic nature they inherited, and their emerging attention to nature’s material actuality. I focus on Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, Mary Butts, and D. H. Lawrence—three canonical modernists and one emerging voice—to insert green modernism into the heart of modernist studies.² In all cases, an actual physical nature founds the striking realm of consciousness and political urgency the novels investigate.

Environmental criticism can unpack the powerful discourses of nature circulating through British modernity and canonical texts like *Heart of Darkness* and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. This environmental reading is more than myth symbols and green compensations, more than nature as a quiet setting, more than the consolatory application of pastoral nostalgia to intractable modernity; it illuminates the discursive construction of alternative subjectivities and national identities through the discourses of nature that were evolving to serve new purposes in the modernist moment. When Hugh Kenner characterized D. H. Lawrence’s work as “industrial England affronting the timeless realm of agricultural life” (116), he observed a fundamental cultural tension, but neglected the organic resolution some modernists offer through nature. When Ford Madox Ford concluded *Parade’s End’s* catalogue of national cataclysms with the hopeful assertion “The land had not changed,” he identified the foundation for a new beginning in nature. When Mary Butts wrote “The land’s way is important in

this story," she made the Taverner novels about culture's emplacement in nature. Modernist meaning creation is founded on landscape in Lawrence, Butts, Ford, and Conrad, and this matters because it is against the ground of nature that modernists define both modernity's threat and its potential reinvention.

Also, *Green Modernism* addresses the recent revisionary critiques of modernism that treat it as complicit with modernity's destructive features. A strategic endeavor of modernist studies in the 1990s was debunking modernist heroes. Before that, the eminent modernist was a kind of savior from modernity, and the art object a lighthouse to guide the sensitive through the fog of mass culture or beyond the horizon of bourgeois morality. But recently we have been shown modernism's complicity with imperialism, the capitalist economy, sexism, anti-Semitism, and consumer culture. Yet, so fully has recent criticism done this work that some worthy babies have been lost with all that bathwater. My research identifies a modernism of resistance founded on a green aesthetic, and thus joins a countermovement in modernist studies to focus attention on strategies of imagining lived correctives. Since the 2000s a third version of modernist studies has emerged, conscious of modernist "complicity," but committed to interpreting artifacts as constituted by the complex mediations of their culture. Michael North's *Reading 1922* (1999) anticipates this third version as "a return to the scene of the modern." This newest version of modernist studies treats the artifact as embedded—embedded in a culture, embedded in a body of prejudices, embedded in the tensions of a nation's self-definition. The collection *Bad Modernisms* (2006) and the monograph *A Shrinking Island* (2004) situate artistic production within particular social and material histories without attributing blame or credit.³ Likewise, *Green Modernism* aims to comprehend the forces to which modernist novels responded and thus to embrace both art and social power. The following readings of Conrad, Ford, Lawrence, and Butts emphasize the tension between modernity and modernism. In this they echo Matei Calinescu's *Faces of Modernity* (1977) and add their own accent by highlighting nature's role in modernist engagements with modernity. I explore an aesthetic intervention founded on nature and aimed first at the unfolding consequences of a Darwinian natural history, and later at what W. H. Auden called "the failure of liberal capitalist democracy" (6). Thus, *Green Modernism* offers a corrective to earlier summaries of modernism as autonomous aestheticism, and also to accounts that reduce modernism to complicity with imperialist, classist, masculinist ideologies.⁴

A central ambition of this book is to substantiate modernism's social significance. In what follows, *Green Modernism* emphasizes modernism as a discourse of diagnosis and protest, an artistic response to a social problem. From Hilaire Belloc to Marjorie Perloff, influential commentators have recognized modernism as a reaction to modernity's host of harmful pressures; *Green Modernism* enlists this energy and reads modernism as a productive textual practice actively modeling new subjectivities within modernity's discursive formations. I take as my focus novelists who doubted that novels could be both art and propaganda, yet repeatedly pushed their art toward civic dilemmas. Their work sidestepped didacticism but should be understood as committed to investigating the fabric of contemporary life. I have selected works that engage their social moment, advance modernist aesthetic goals, and put specific attention toward the material world around their characters. This is where nature enters the picture. Authoritative studies of modernism have all but ignored nature, but what follows will showcase a distinct social function for the green modernist novel.⁵ Modernist studies meets ecocriticism to revise what it is possible to say about the novel between 1900 and 1930, and thus puts the English novel into contact with what Thoreau called "The solid Earth! The actual world!" Nature offers a material context from which literary modernism can affirm an alternative subjectivity to hegemonic versions of Englishness, of work, of manhood, of self. An environmental criticism in modernist studies must investigate modern nature and modern art's liberatory potential, and simultaneously investigate their parallel entanglement with reactionary social movements.

Nature writing's long investment in mimetic representation and its claims for direct referentiality have alienated it from modernism's contrary imperative to foreground epistemological construction. This tension recapitulates a fundamental issue for philosophers stretched between a commonsense realism of physical objects, and the German idealist tradition of a reality shaped by the mind. Now one can follow material criticism in order to theorize about modernism and nature and better wrestle theories of the mind in relation to matter. Such a reading strategy reveals that nature is a set of things never fully reducible to human perception. *Green Modernism* foregrounds the natural world as an actor alongside human agencies and epistemologies. Thus, beyond the effort to unveil nature's presence in the modernist novel, *Green Modernism* develops modes of analysis to close the gap between the human consciousness at the center of aesthetic theory and the material being that surrounds it. This project can be explained in terms of a growing anthrodecenrism within environmental criticism.

Bonnie Kime Scott precedes me in connecting the dots between modernism and nature. In her study of Virginia Woolf, *In the Hollow of the Wave* (2012), she writes: "This study joins the work of environmental and feminist thinkers who feel that we must discover a new, post-humanist pattern that escapes androcentrism and the nature/culture binary" (2). Scott's work underlines the advances Woolf scholars have made in environmental criticism, and it invites other areas of modernist studies to follow suit. Looking beyond Woolf studies, this new work about nature takes the name of posthumanism, corporeal feminism, vital materialism, or object-oriented ontology, but in practice all these approaches insist that humans recognize themselves as entities among entities, beings among other beings with their own ends. My overall effort is to show the spots where modernism reconsiders a world divided into active humans and inert objects. From this perspective, texts like *Armed with Madness* and *Under Western Eyes* flatten the long-established hierarchy that places human above inanimate being, and so *Green Modernism* enlists environmental criticism in the growing project of articulating fuller concepts of materiality in relation to human experience.

Call it the material turn. An environmental criticism that attends to the agency of nonhuman nature, that explores the back-and-forth influences between people and things in literature, takes a place in the vigorous developments of the new materialism. Mary Beaudry and Dan Hicks sum up the new materialism as "letting things in" and by this they mean that the "things" of the world—fires and storms, rabbits and oaks—charge research into environmental culture with new significance. One subfield of new materialism useful to this discussion is object-oriented ontology, and from this field Levi Bryant and Graham Harman offer environmental critics a "way of returning to the things themselves" (*Guerrilla Metaphysics* 2). There is, in Harman's words, "a reality beyond our thinking," and my reading of modernist novels finds these novels returning at crucial moments to nature as the reality beyond the mind's construction. So within the context of the modernist focus on epistemological process, central modernist novels are nonetheless erected atop an independent realm of actuality beyond human thinking. I see Conrad's storms and Lawrence's trees when Levi Bryant writes that "the issues of how we know and what beings are are two entirely different issues" (*Speculative Turn* 268).⁶ Now object-oriented ontology is unfolding a theory of reality independent from human thought, and not a theory of nature as we generally treat it in ecocriticism. Its focus is not even on nature as such, but on the relation of all objects in the world, and

it is just this attention to the way things exist beyond the mind that makes object-oriented ontology a key player in the new materialism's conversations about nature's relation to humanity. However, *Green Modernism* shows the object-oriented ontologists to be one end of a spectrum that stretches toward other material readings that emphasize hybridity and ultimately focus on material nature's constant interconnection with the material bodies of human beings. These readings need not contradict each other but can operate in parallel. One project of this study will be to employ a range of materialist reading strategies and demonstrate that from object-oriented ontology to material feminism is a broad sweep that forms a suite of approaches with meaningful shared commitments. Happily for an ecocriticism tossed between realism and idealism, new materialism's lexicon for an independent world can draft steadily more rigorous treatments of nature's relation to culture.⁷

Finally, it is worth emphasizing nature's profound cultural power during this historical period with some broad brushstrokes. The turn of the century saw millions more English citizens removed from direct work in the natural world of farming, fishing, and livestock to a workplace shaped by abstractions in clerking and banking and administrating. This is in one sense the story of Forster's *Howards End*, Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Sunset Song*, and Lawrence's *The Rainbow*. At the same time, insights of geology, botany, and of course Darwinian biology obliged more and more people to reset their fundamental beliefs about humanity's place in nature, and obliged them to rethink just what that realm called "nature" might actually be. Such a crisis of definition and understanding seeped into modernist invention and is at the heart of the analysis of *Heart of Darkness* in chapter 2. But these are generalized observations, and it is possible to tighten the focus onto particular English expressions of nature's cultural force. Dynamic green social movements sprang up across England after World War I, and in organizations like the Committee for the Preservation of Rural England and the Kibbo Kift Kin, the modernist context was suffused by a green discourse of national critique and national regeneration. Many factions wanted to reinvent England in this period, and one of their primary touchstones was English nature. At its height, the Kibbo Kift Kin had several thousand members including luminaries like H. G. Wells, Augustus John and Compton Mackenzie. Their practice of camping and hiking coincided with the exponential growth of "rambling" and with the class-inflected outcomes that bespeak its broad impact, such as the progressive mass trespass on Kinder Scout in 1932 or the conservative reaction in Mary Butts's pamphlet "Warning to

Hikers." Modernism is suffused with nature and with conflict over nature's meaning and nature's use.⁸ Chapters 4 and 5 reread 1928 novels Mary Butts's *Armed with Madness*, Ford Madox Ford's *Last Post* and D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in connection to the powerful rural enthusiasms that modeled a green alternative to mechanized postwar England. *Green Modernism* puts nature at the center of English society's struggle to conceive itself in modernity, and at the center of modernist novels that imagine an alternative national identity.

MODERNISM AND THE PHYSICAL WORLD

In the English novel from 1900 to 1930 nature shapes the discourses that produce and develop imagined relations between subject and society. A discourse of nature—writing, measuring, employing, and applying nature—produces and perpetuates certain versions of the modern subject, and disallows others. But at the same time, nature exists as a prediscursive physical fact.⁹ For instance, in my reading, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* becomes an exploration of human intercourse with a natural world sometimes packaged as an ideological intervention and sometimes reckoned as an actor alongside humanity. Clifford Chatterley's nature is the physical rationale for a reactionary politics that would discipline the masses, and Connie Chatterley's nature is an actual presence, ontologically free from the cultural roles that beset her. So nature defines green modernism by, on the one hand, empowering cultural interventions and, on the other hand, existing as physical ground beyond language.¹⁰

The following chapters treat modernist texts as culturally enmeshed interventions into the social formation that houses them. What I hope to show here is that nature matters to modernism both epistemologically and ontologically. Discourse is one way to understand nature as a thematic tool of great relevance and power, but the modernist discourse of nature gets that thematic, figurative relevance from its position as the real beyond the artifact. I am using "discourse" in a manner informed broadly by Michel Foucault and poststructuralism, and more specifically by the literary critical matrix of Cultural Materialism and New Historicism. Such a strategy matters to environmental criticism when it bridges the gap between realist ecocriticism's commitment to referentiality and, on the other side, constructionist ecocriticism's pure realm of signs. It is also a political claim; modernists like Conrad or Butts deploy nature as a cultural construct for empowering or destabilizing formations within a social whole, and my readings anatomize the ways

nature is deployed to legitimate power or to generate authenticity.¹¹ Indeed, the works in this study become steadily more overt in their politics, and they become steadily more invested in imagining alternatives to the political economy of laissez-faire capitalism and liberal democracy. There is a distinct trajectory of engagement from 1900 to 1928 starting with Conrad's examinations of nature in relation to humanity and ending with Mary Butts's confidence that English rural nature should define English identity. The movement is toward a more direct engagement with English politics via nature. Specifically, we move from *Heart of Darkness's* general questions about the human role in nature to Conrad's skeptical contemplations of western European politics in *Under Western Eyes*. From there we move to postwar England in order to see nature's direct use in a popular discourse of Englishness, a popular celebration of English rural life that gets picked up and used by modernist novelists Butts, Ford, and Lawrence in their own fictions about personal and societal regeneration. Rural nature has a politicized signifying power for the modernist novel of 1928 that has heretofore been overlooked. After the war, *nature* becomes *English nature*. In this way we follow Jed Esty's claim about modernism's developing attention to the home island, but we follow it via the evolving political function of the natural world in modernist novels. Mary Butts intensifies the focus on material nature and emphasizes the potential for personal and societal reinvention through direct contact with the material world. Ford's georgic does similar work and new materialist theory helps us understand nature's political significance in the modernist novel, while again reinforcing the conclusion that these modernist novels are discursive interventions in the social world that surrounds them.¹²

Understanding discourse as a set of practices constraining and enabling what can be known mobilizes ecocriticism's theoretical shift away from humanist models of self-actuating subjectivity toward a theory that each cultural moment produces the parameters of possibility for individual becoming. If we apply the term "discourse" to a metaphorical site of cultural conflict, a place where contending versions of society unfold, then books are social forces. This seems an obvious point, but modern discourses of nature (from evolution to pastoral to conservation) organize knowledge into a dense cultural construction that enables some forms of subjectivity while disallowing others, and likewise enable some forms of knowing while disallowing others. For the purposes of reading modernism, discourse can be summarized as an arena of negotiation between what Raymond Williams called dominant and emergent ways of knowing in a culture.