

Urban Nature or Urbanature? Those Ecocentric Romantics

Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism: Toward Urbanatural Roosting. Ashton Nichols. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011. 230 Pages.

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<1>“The time has come for a new idea and a new word to describe that idea.” So begins Ashton Nichols’s *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism: Toward Urbanatural Roosting*. “The new word is ‘urbanature,’” and Nichols managed to assuage my immediate leeriness of yet another ecocritical neologism with the parenthetical statement that it “rhymes with ‘furniture’” (xiii). This connection (which also left me trying—and failing—to pronounce “furnitural”) is more than simply wordplay. On the contrary, Nichols’s argument asks us to consider all the various forms of artifice with which we have furnished modernity as the stuff of human adaptation, little different in essence from the larder of a well-stocked squirrel’s nest. To this end, Nichols’s book engages three distinct but related projects: the turn from “anthropocentrism” to “ecocentrism” (along with their counterparts anthropomorphism/ecomorphism); historicizing this idea in the writings of Romantic and Victorian poets and natural historians; and dramatizing an argument for the material implementation of “urbanatural roosting.”

<2>The book is organized by season, running through a year with each of its thirteen chapters corresponding to a month (beginning and ending with March). It incorporates memoir and narrative scholarship, in addition to historicized close readings of Romantic and Victorian authors, in an attempt to display urbanatural roosting as both an idea and a practice. Thus, Nichols’s meditations on the seasonal changes he witnesses from “The Roost”—his cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains—need to be understood as part of his evidence base, and thus need to be weighed as such, rather than anecdotes or rhetorical flourishes. I’ve taken this minor detour into method not only to clarify something that may be surprising to anyone unaccustomed to the technique, but also as a means of getting to the rhetorical stakes of Nichols’s argument vis-à-vis the broader field of ecocriticism.

<3>In “urbanature,” Nichols is advancing the idea that “nature” as that which is completely separate from humanity does not exist and never has. This represents a challenge to what Nichols dubs “Romantic ecocriticism,” in which the existence of such an independent, inviolate “nature” provides the central point of reference, restorative, stable, and sacred. Instead, Nichols’s “urbanature” attempts to capture the sense in which human beings must be understood on a

continuum with the natural world, in which no firm divide between the “urban” and the “natural” exists. He articulates this thesis in terms of a turn to “ecomorphism,” cultivating metaphors (in both poetry and science) that recognize the fact that “humans are more like animals than animals are like humans” (40). Furthermore, Nichols’s key contribution is not so much this fact of breaking down the human/nature boundary in itself, but rather in situating its origins historically in the nineteenth century. The above quote, for instance, follows on a discussion of Erasmus Darwin’s *Zoonomia* (1797).

<4>Drawing on his extensive knowledge of Romantic natural history, as well as close readings of an array of nineteenth-century poets, novelists, and natural historians (both Darwins, both Shelleys, Wordsworth, Blake, Keats, Tennyson, Hardy) Nichols contends: “These authors, poets, and early scientists consistently claim that human beings are contiguous with the natural world rather than distinct from it” (22). As he explains further, “Ecocentrism [...] emphasizes this need for humans to see themselves as determined by—while existing within—a world that lies beyond the boundary of the human body” (79). Again, he is making this point *both* about human beings (and being) in the world in general *and* about the way in which the Romantics (and Victorians) thought about it. Given the importance of the Romantic “I” (and eye), which so readily seems to position everything in relation to itself (i.e., anthropocentrism), this is a very important insight.

<5>Consider these lines from William Blake’s “The Fly” (1793), “Am not I/ A fly like thee?/ Or art not thou/ A man like me?” (ll. 4-8). The answer, one is inclined to think, is “no and no,” with any contention otherwise falling squarely within the realm of imaginative anthropomorphism. However, as Nichols points out, there are many parallels between a man’s life and a fly’s (eating, reproducing, dying) that can be noted without distorting the material realities of either. He offers compelling readings of Keats’s “To Autumn” and “Ode to a Nightingale” along similar lines. Furthermore, as he goes on to argue, “Such species boundary-crossing is not simply a poetic metaphor, however; in the twenty-first century it is a scientific reality” (81). This last element is crucial to the argument. Anthropocentrism is a poetic conceit. It is, in other words, imaginary. Ecocentrism, on the other hand, is literally, materially, true.

<6>As noted above, Nichols shows that it is not simply a “scientific reality” in the twenty-first century; it was already becoming one at the end of the eighteenth: “What was new by 1790 was the sense that these were not just rhetorical comparisons of behavior between human and animal realms; rather, such observationally supported comparisons reflected a deeper—and organic—unity of all living things. Ecomorphism was replacing anthropomorphism” (93). Urbanature, then, begins to appear not so much as a “new word” for a “new idea,” but rather as a new way of understanding what the Romantics and Victorians were actually talking about when they referred to “nature.” And in tracing it, Nichols offers a subtle, but significant new way of understanding many of the central debates in the nineteenth century, most notably around evolution, species, and extinction, and how they relate to pressing global concerns. It is this sense of intextricability between the human and the natural that Nichols tries to capture in the word “urbanature.”

<7>This brings me to a key distinction that I will admit it took me much of the book to fully understand: “urban,” for Nichols, doesn’t refer to the city, but rather all human artifice, such as the light bulb in his cabin. This last point is crucial because it helps to explain (if not entirely

excuse) the fact that there is actually very little of what I would consider “urbanity”—which is to say, the city.

<8>In the preface, Nichols explains that his “emphasis on *urbanature* and *roosting* emerges out of my own contention that gentrification, postindustrial waste, environmental racism, and other forms of urban degradation can come about when land-use urban planners or environmentalists say that wild nature takes precedence over urban wastelands” (xxi). While I agree with such statements, I feel compelled to take him to task for the fact that they *remain* statements, largely unconnected to the real evidence base of the book. To be sure, he points out, “Many of the great ‘nature’ poems of the Romantic era were actually written in the suburbs, in the back gardens of great cities, or in the midst of the largest urban space on the planet at the time: London” (xviii). And he offers a compelling reading of Wordsworth’s “Upon Westminster Bridge” as “nature poem.” But overall, he seems more interested in uncovering the “urban” in the “natural” than vice versa.

<9>The absence of the city is most notable in the personal narrative sections, which (with one exception) take place at “The Roost” and consist of his close observation of wasps, grubs, birds, and trees. The one genuinely urban example shows him seeking out a grove of trees in Florence “near the spot where Shelley composed his West Wind poem” (127) –an instance of urbanity that is exceptional on a variety of levels. While Nichols mentions projects to reclaim derelict urban spaces in Detroit or the South Bronx, most of his invocations of the city seem generic examples chosen for rhetorical purposes, like “Montana/Manhattan,” rather than grounded in the actual lived experience revealed in most of his analysis.

<10>Indeed, one of the clearest evidence that Nichols doesn’t consider genuinely urban spaces conducive to “urbanature” is the fact that he retreats to “The Roost” to find it. This movement of Thoreauvian seclusion is crucial to “roosting” as both practice and critical stance. It dramatizes what seems to be Nichols’s real project, which consists more of pointing out that “Thoreau’s Walden Pond and [Annie] Dillard’s Tinker Creek are not as far from the urban world as they often seem” (170), than of elaborating a fully fledged ecological engagement with the city.

<11>Ultimately, Nichols’s points carry their greatest critical weight when placed *within* the ecocritical tradition he is asking us to move beyond. It is this context that the book’s insights and Nichols’s knowledge of his material truly shine. He gives us a new look at the most canonical authors of Romantic ecocriticism, from Thoreau and Wordsworth to Annie Dillard, *and* to one of its most cherished formal movements, the retreat to the woods. In the process, his wide-ranging knowledge of nineteenth-century natural history and the turn from “anthropomorphism” to “ecomorphism” produce readings of canonical works. For example, my favorite part of the book is an extended discussion of death in the nineteenth-century imagination. These readings have the elusive quality of appearing at once genuinely new and almost intuitively true. As if they, like urbanature, were always already there.