Scott Hess belongs to a group of literary critics who are helping us to rethink the idea of "nature" altogether. His latest book reveals the risks of applying contemporary standards of environmentalism to an author like Wordsworth, whose "nature" was not the Nature of Isaac Newton or Erasmus Darwin, nor the nature of Bill McKibben or Stephen Hawking. Wordsworth's nature was a specific creation of his own mind and time, an aesthetically-controlled and historically-conditioned perspective on the English Lakes, the Swiss Alps, and numerous other "natural" sites that emerged out of Wordsworth's Cambridge education, his middle-class upbringing, and especially his desire to find a place for himself in the literary world of late-Augustan and early nineteenth-century England.

One value of Hess's book lies in the way it links Wordsworth's writings about the nonhuman world to a series of cultural practices ranging from photography, travel writing, and early guidebooks to art museums, railroad expansion, tourism, and environmental preservation. In these projects the language used to describe physical and geographical places--poetically and prosaically--becomes a dominant form of nineteenth-century verbal expression along with the capitalist rise of certain "special" places: aestheticized "painterly" landscapes, historical-, archeological-, and tourist-sites, and museum collections.

Equally valuable is Hess's critique of Romantic ecocriticism in 2012, his comments on recent critics who read Wordsworth in light of twenty-first century environmental and ecological sensibilities instead of within the aesthetic and social frameworks of the early nineteenth century. Though Wordsworth did not believe that God had created the world in seven 24-hour days, nor in the "sacred landscapes" of John Ray's The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation (1691), he also did not know about Aldo Leopold's "land-ethic" or the values of the American Audubon Society. In fact, Wordsworth helped to create a new version of nature for his own era: a "nature" that was mostly male, mostly white and upper-middle class, very literary and very "Romantic." Wordsworth's "nature" monumentalizes and preserves certain moments, landscapes, and environments (the term in our current sense only dates from the mid-nineteenth century) for the sake of their humanizing and "self-creating" power.

Hess shows us how Wordsworth's version of "nature" represents a culturally and socially specific idea: an idea--it is worth repeating--that is masculine, Caucasian, university-educated, professional, and English. This list itself is part of the problem. "Nature" never exists in any pure or absolute sense; it exists only for specific individuals. The specifically Wordsworthian nature-observer is also well-read, observant, and desperately in search of an occupation, a poetic life's work. A somewhat different version of "nature" will emerge from the writings of John Clare, Dorothy Wordsworth, and Mary Shelley. William, a Lakeland northerner with a thick regional accent (a consistent source of embarrassment to him, especially early in life) and a rural upbringing, had a long way to go to become a famous poet like Lord Byron: not as far as John Clare, perhaps, but further than we often realize. As a result, Wordsworth's textual "nature" (English, northern, pastoral, bucolic, and linked to a society of pre-enclosure land-users and post-enclosure landholders) is a crucial part of the way the struggling writer determined to become that "great" poet. Hess also distinguishes the young Wordsworth, who relied on the eighteenth-century picturesque and loco-descriptive tradition (and its emphasis on the aesthetically-detached and visually-framed), from a poet like Clare, who offered a much more fully eccentric version of the natural scene: relying on multiple senses and expressing a sensory connectedness within the landscape, it immersed the "I" in the nonhuman scene rather than keeping the "I" separate.

It now appears that the invention of photographic processes in the early nineteenth century was inspired as much by natural landscapes as by other visually-framed scenes (still lives, painted portraits). Many tourists, travelers, artists, and poets voiced the need for a process that might capture the reality of the natural world in "perfect," "realistic," and "time-freezing" terms. Writing to Dorothy about Alpine scenery in 1790, Wordsworth regrets the inability of my memory to retain a more strong impression of the beautiful forms before me, and again and again in quitting a fortunate station have I returned to it with the most eager avidity, with the hope of bearing away a more lively picture" (qtd. 45). According to Hess, Wordsworth thus anticipates photography; he "wishes for the medium of photography in order to capture and unify the fleeting images" (55), an aesthetic technology that might "give To one brief moment caught from fleeting time / The appropriate calm of blest eternity' ["Upon the Sight of a Beautiful Picture," 1811]." In fact, Hess notes, one of the "earliest published books with photographic illustrations, Our English Lakes, Mountains, and Waterfalls, as Seen by William
Wordsworth (1864), combined thirteen photographic prints with what is basically an anthology of passages from Wordsworth’s poetry” (59).

But photography, like the picturesque, and like the loco-descriptive poetry of the eighteenth century, is about something that poets do to nature, about a version of nature that poets create when they "point" their cognitive cameras at perceptual scenes and then freeze time and space, or at least try to do so. This process is, of course, similar to what a painter like J. M. W. Turner or John Constable "says" on each canvas: "this is what nature is to me at this moment: this is what it feels like." Hess concludes his argument about the picturesque by once again contrasting Wordsworth with poets like John Clare and Dorothy Wordsworth, who are said to be much more willing to represent the natural world in a complex stasis of fleeting images and multiple perspectives. Perhaps "truer" to nature, these poets place themselves within a living environment, describing their own natural worlds from the inside of what we might now call a natural ecology.

Another key to this book’s value is evident when Hess says of Wordsworth:

His influence was constitutive in constructing "nature" as a special aesthetic and spiritual sphere, set apart from the ordinary social and commercial world, to be approached with the same reverent contemplation as a cathedral, an artwork, or a canonical work of literature. Hence Wordsworth’s definition of the Lake District as a literary landscape promoted some of the first modern environmental protests anywhere and continues to have a lasting impact on the environmental movement [. . .]. Such meanings have recently become associated with ecology, but their origin is not ecological but cultural and aesthetic, bound up with social constructions such as authorship, class, and identity” (70).

So, while Wordsworth described those precise landscapes he thought worth preserving, and while Wordsworth’s Lake District embodies one version of "nature," other versions are manifest in John Constable’s Suffolk, Thomas Hardy’s Wessex, and so on, through the “natures” of Charles Dickens, the Brontë sisters, and Henry David Thoreau, and on down to our own contemporary versions of ‘natures’ worth saving: the natures of Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, and Terry-Tempest Williams, among numerous others.

Hess performs a valuable service when he points out the dangers of misreading Wordsworth through a contemporary ecological—or current—lens: "[Kate] Ricby and [James] McKeon," he writes, "are admirable in their support for a current ecological ethos of rehabilitation and restraint, . . . misread the cultural politics of Wordsworth’s railway protest through their own contemporary ecological values. Significantly, critics who come to the railway protest without an explicit environmental focus [footnotes cite Denise Gigante, Stephen Prickett, and John Frow] tend to be much more sensitive to these class politics, likely because they are not predisposed by their own affinity for a Wordsworthian version of nature’’ (149).

One specific land preservation movement from our own time shows the error of assuming that railways threatened the "nature" of the Lake District. In the 1970s, when the Lakeland railways (against which Shelley’s “Poet of Nature” had protested so vehemently) were finally threatened with closure, it was actually the environmentalists--along with railway preservationists (and train-spotters!)--who led the fight to save them. Nature and culture often mix in this way, not as a function of some essentialist truth about either one, but rather as a function of specific elements in each historical era. What appeared to Wordsworth to be hideous steam railway-lines in the 1830s and 1840s look to us like gentle enhancements of the landscape in our own twenty-first-century Lake District: “Bring Back Traditional Steam Engines!” our own era’s railway preservationists cry. Steam-engines in the Lakeland landscape today resemble the “hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines / Of sportive wood run wild” and the “wreaths of smoke / Sent up” from the “vagrant dwellers” or the “Hermits’ cave” in Wordsworth’s iconic “Tintern Abbey.” Such images are clear signs of human culture amid the otherwise natural aspects of this landscape. Of course, the concept of the pastoral itself (Wordsworth cites “pastoral farms” in this poem), which goes all the way back to Theocritus (3rd century BCE), includes not just land but also shepherds, domestic creatures, animal husbandry, and agricultural buildings.

At various points, Hess reckons with his own environmentalism. To note that rich people often "save" wild nature primarily for their own benefit (hiking, biking, camping, photography) is not to argue in favor of trailer parks on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. "But it does mean," he writes, “that environmentalists (including myself) need to be especially vigilant against conflating a specific model of culture and aesthetics with nature in general” (153). No single model works for this purpose. What we need going forward, I think, is a multivalent, multivocal, multicultural, perhaps even Bakhtinian version of the nature/culture duality. Indeed, Hess’s argument would have been strengthened by some reference to Bakhtinian dialogics. Consider the white, upper-middle class values that he sees projected on nature—and used to define it—by environmentalists: such values tend to demonize the urban (dirty, industrial, wasteland), the working class (manual labor, uneducated, immoral), and the subaltern (foreign, nonwhite, servile). At the same time, these “dominant” values privilege the rural (honest, noble, traditional), the middle class (educated, practical, achievement-oriented), and various nationalisms (Englishness, Britannia, “a plot of ground that is forever England”). Each of these interests has its own stake in the way we define and negotiate versions of the natural world.

There is also an important gendered dimension to this argument. The traditionally male eighteenth-century traveler moves through spaces and places; he rarely roots himself to one "spot." Committing to one place—or "dwelling"—has been seen by Western culture as a more feminized activity. Men move on; women stay put. Throughout Western history, the masculine ideal often describes the male arriving at a new place, taking its measure, and then moving elsewhere or beginning to exploit the spot: colonizing, capitalizing upon, and extracting resources. By contrast, migratory butterflies, birds, and turtles have precise geographic sites to which they return and roost, or nest: one patch of forest, one stretch of beach. Wordsworth, in this gendered duality, is the exception. He spends his early years moving from loco-descriptive spot to picturesque spot—the English Lakes, Cambridge, France, the Alps—but then, like those other species with their own territories, he learns how to come “home” to Grasmere. The final image of Wordsworthian nature is not a sublime Alpine crossing or an apocalyptic vision on Snowdon; it is, instead, the gentle fields and hills around Keswick, Grasmere, and Ambleside. Even the high hills of Windermere and the craggy fastnesses of Helvellyn are locales to which the poet can walk from Dove Cottage. By the time of Home at Grasmere (1800) and The Excursion (1814) the poet has settled into a nature that is tamed, domesticated, embraced diurnally (and ordinarily) for the long haul.

Like William Cronon, Dana Phillips, and Timothy Morton, Hess finally helps us move toward overcoming one of the last dualisms of enlightenment culture, that is, the long-held distinction between nature and culture, the sense that one "thing" exists in the streets of midtown Manhattan (human culture) while something very different exists above the tree-line in the Rocky Mountains (wild nature). But Manhattan is nature and the Rockies are culture (at least they contain culture once the
first human arrives, once any human comments upon them in any way). The nature-lover who buys a big load of Gore-Tex (a petroleum product) before flying to the Rockies in a carbon-belching jumbo-jet creates a contradiction that cannot be resolved, unless perhaps by the Manhattanites who are now acknowledging the peregrine falcons on their window-sills on the Upper East side. The Ecology of Authorship helps us to understand that our nonhuman, natural house is the same place as our fully human, cultural home.

Scott Hess has written a valuable book that reveals the limitations of Romantic ecocriticism. By explaining the dangers of applying contemporary standards of environmentalism to an author like Wordsworth, he shows how the apparent ecocentrism of Romantic authors depends on the aesthetic, cultural, and social standards of the nineteenth century, not on contemporary land-ethics or an Audubon-inspired activism. Wordsworth was not worried about nuclear reactors at Sellafield on the East Cost of Norfolk, nor did he fear the extinction of species, as Tennyson did after Darwin’s Origin of Species appeared in 1859. In critiquing Romantic ecocriticism, Hess offers us a valuable alternative, an ecological approach to authorship itself.

So authors have an ecology as much as birds and trees and flowers do, but the ecology of authorship entails bookselling, reviewing, literary aesthetics, and--in the nineteenth century-- the rise of museums, national parks, and other cultural sites where "Nature" is socialized and commodified for consumption by late capitalist consumer culture. Hess leaves us with an environmentalism based not on an abstract and monumentalizing view of nature, nor on our individual (restrictive and restricting) points of view. Instead, The Ecology of Authorship offers us an environmentalism based on human social relations, on our links to other creatures (human and nonhuman), and on our need to preserve the entirety of "nature"--urban and rural, rich and poor, Western and nonwestern, ordinary and extraordinary--not just for ourselves but for the benefit of the planet we share with the rest of animate nature.

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