ASHTON NICHOLS
BEYOND ROMANTIC ECOCRITICISM: TOWARD URBANATURAL ROOSTING

Reviewed by Samantha Harvey

One of S.T. Coleridge’s many passions was “the Science of Words, their use and abuse and the incalculable advantages attached to the habit of using them appropriately. . .” (Aids to Reflection 7). This passion drove Coleridge to coin over 600 words, including “psychosomatic,” “romanticize,” “supersensuous,” and memorable phrases like “the willing suspension of disbelief.” (In fact, the new electronic edition of the Oxford English Dictionary lists Coleridge as #59 in the “Top 1000 sources for quotations,” only a few slots behind the Bible). He also coined the word “desynonymize” in the belief that clarity in language went hand in hand with clarity in thinking. The importance of words, and coining new ones where necessary, is precisely where Ashton Nichols begins his intriguing book. Nichols invents a word -- “Urbanature” -- in order forge a new understanding of our relationship to the natural world. This term (which, as Nichols helpfully points out, rhymes with “furniture”) “suggests that nature and urban life are not as distinct as human beings have long supposed . . . all human and nonhuman lives, as well as all animate and inanimate objects around those lives, are linked in a complex web of interdependent interrelatedness” (xiii). Likewise, Nichols refashions the term “roosting” to describe “a new way of living more self-consciously on the earth” by creating more temporary, environmentally sensitive homes in the surrounding environment (3). By engaging these terms, and examining their eighteenth and nineteenth century antecedents, Nichols hopes to renew our views of nature at a time of increasing peril for our urban, suburban, rural, and wild environments.

Nichols interweaves several types of sources and methodologies in this project: Romantic and Victorian poetry and prose, the history of science, ecocriticism, and personal memoir. In taking an ecocritical approach to Romanticism, Nichols aligns his work with Jonathan Bate’s The Song of the Earth (2000); Kate Rigby’s Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism (2004); and James McKusick’s Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology (2003). But besides conversing with these earlier studies, Nichols’ book features something unusual for a scholarly monograph: personal memoir – not just in the preface and afterword, which is more common – but interleaved in the chapters themselves, where--bit by
bit--Nichols reconstructs a full year spent roosting in a rustic stone cabin and select urban spots. In both idea and text this interfusion (to use a Coleridgean coinage) levels the barriers between nature and culture, city and country, academic and personal. While Robert Macfarlane’s wonderful book *Mountains of the Mind* (2003) also alternates between an intellectual history and personal narrative, Nichols pushes even further by fusing these genres with a manifesto for environmental action.

At the heart of this book is a reevaluation of the concept of nature, a project that began, according to Nichols, “not with the environmental revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, but with a new definition of ‘Nature’ first offered by Romantic writers in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries” (xvi). In *Romantic Natural Histories: William Wordsworth, Charles Darwin and Others* (2004) and a fascinating website called Romantic Natural History, Nichols has already displayed his admirable command of the period’s literature and science. In this new, deeply interdisciplinary book, he examines conceptions of nature in the poetry of Wordsworth, Shelley, Erasmus Darwin, Keats, and Tennyson; in the prose of Thoreau and Hardy; and in the science of wonder cabinets, natural history museums, and zoos.

Nichols finds a precedent for “urbanature” in the science and poetry of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, which both relied upon metaphors. In science and poetry alike, he shows, “the mind makes metaphors from the nonhuman (‘natural’) world as often as it does from human (‘urban’) world” at a time when “poetry (in fact all art) and natural philosophy (in fact all science) were more closely linked than they often seem today” (10). He reminds us that when Coleridge was asked why he attended so many lectures of human physiology in London, he replied, “I attend Davy’s lectures to increase my stock of metaphors.” For Nichols, “the poetic-scientist needs imagination buttressed by facts, or facts fired by imagination, to make new metaphors” (142). Nichols cites Stephen Hawking’s visualization of a black hole as a contemporary example of the poetic-scientist, and the double-helix shape of DNA arriving in a dream came to my mind as well.

Nichols examines the legacy of Romantic poetry through an ecocritical lens, exploring the ways in which the Romantics represent the natural world. Ultimately, however, he aims to go “beyond Romantic Ecocriticism” because “one element of Romanticism has contributed to the problems that urbanature seeks to resolve” – namely, a view that “nature is somehow opposed to urbanity, the wild is what the city gets rid of, human culture is the enemy of nature” (xxi). The goal of urbanature is to remove these harmful divisions:
A look at the legacy of Romantic natural history will move beyond the word “nature” as it has been employed since the Enlightenment – and beyond the nature versus culture split – toward the more inclusive idea of “urbanatural roosting.” Finally, I will argue that Romantic ecocriticism should now give way to a more socially aware version of environmentalism, one less tightly linked to narrowly Western ideas about the self, the “Other,” and the relationship between human beings and the natural world. Urbanatural roosting says that, if all humans are linked to each other and to their surroundings, then those same humans have clear obligations to each other and to the world they share.

Moving beyond Romantic ecocriticism, Nichols seeks to dissolve entirely the opposition between “nature versus culture, the natural versus the artificial, man versus nature . . . one of the last great Western dualisms that needs to be bridged or dissolved” (203). For Nichols, these dualistic categories are “old lines of arbitrary separation” that prevent us from seeing both city and country as “locations are equally worthy of human care and concern, all equally serving of the attention needed to sustain them” (200).

Despite their anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism, the Romantics did succeed in envisioning a dynamic, vital force at work in both the human and natural worlds. In certain poems by Keats and Coleridge, Nichols posits that “one unified power causes all of these natural effects [of the wind, the bird, or the frost], but this power is nothing more than a series of physical processes contained in nature, what John Locke and others had called a ‘natural law’” (27). In Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” Nichols finds a similar merging of the human and natural in an “autumnal and naturalistic paradise” (124-5). But rather than finding transcendence in the poem, he writes: “I want to forget about Shelley’s sentimentality (“As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need”) and set aside his characteristic overstatement (“I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!”) and think instead about precisely what he achieves in these justly famous lines of poetry. The wind here is not merely moving air; it represents the life force itself; the elan vital, the chi, a vital energy that pervades the universe” (125). For Nichols, this world is purely material: “the prophecy itself is nothing more complex that a simple truth of material nature: spring always follows winter . . . Shelley produces a resurrection poem without any link to the supernatural. He offers a promise of natural power and organic efficacy without any reference to a world beyond the physical world, beyond the world I can see and hear and feel outside my
window every day….” (127). But can this naturalistic reading of the poem account for its wealth of secularized biblical imagery? For its references to prayer, the thorns of life, apocalyptic showers of black rain, fire, and hail, and most especially the prophetic stance in the concluding lines? These are, I think, spiritual and supernatural motifs that possibly engage a transcendent third category beyond nature and culture.

Nevertheless, abandoning this idea of the transcendent may be the very first step necessary for realizing “urbanature.” Nichols highlights the inherent cultural bias that shapes our conceptions of nature: “what we observe when we observe nature,” he writes, “is not some Platonically pure nature in itself, but a nature that is always changing, always determined by specific circumstances, by my consciousness, and by precise conditions in each contextual instance” (188). Our cultural context today is more variegated and includes a greater familiarity with atheistic, agnostic, and non-Christian spiritual traditions as well as wider gaps between science, literature and religion. Nichols is consistently forthright in his desire to refashion the term “nature” for our times. Towards the end of the book especially, the manifesto-like rhetoric gains strength: “Like ecocentrism, urbanatural roosting will not be so difficult. All it will require is that every one of us should think about, care about, and do something good about every place, every person, every creature, and everything that each of us can effect on planet earth” (206-7). Nichols calls for nothing less than a new ethic, an “ecoethic” that recognizes the intrinsic value of both animate and inanimate nature.

Nichols has a gift for writing about the history of science: the best chapters in this book elucidate emotional responses to science in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. He sees pleasure “as a concept that links Romantic poetry to Romantic science in significant ways. Pleasure located in the nonhuman world, and pleasure taken by humans in the natural world, are concepts that comingle in a whole range of Romantic metaphors and writings: anthropocentric, ecocentric, and otherwise” (88). Nichols salutes the galvanizing force of wonder in Romantic science, a topic also brilliantly explored by Richard Holmes in *The Age of Wonder* (2008). “Zoos and other forms of live or dead animal displays,” writes, Nichols, “– as I have already suggested in my reflections on natural history museums – emerged out of precisely the combination of scientific curiosity and fascination with spectacle . . . To see something new and amazing is often to learn something new, but the experience is also about being excited, titillated or amazed. . . (153). But he also charts darker terrain. For colonizing scientists, he notes, “it was ethically acceptable to cage other creatures, even human creatures, as long as the knowledge thus
gained could be codified or organized as part of the great encyclopedic project” (154). He gauges too the sheer volume of death implicit in Darwinian natural selection and the horror of deep time, necessitated by new geological and fossil evidence, that demonstrated “how insignificant human life – and all of human civilization – seemed in the face of the timeline required for these incremental biological changes to occur” (61). These are riveting pages.

There is no question that Nichols has written a wondrous book, innovative in its merging of genres, richly veined with intellectual history, literary criticism, and a passionate vision for the future of environmentalism. I read it with great pleasure and wonder, and wrestled with the questions it presented for many days. Indeed, taken as a whole, the book resembles two metaphors Nichols draws from the history of science: Darwin’s famous “entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about” and all of its “endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful” (16) and wonder cabinets, a subject dear to my heart. In both the entangled bank and the curiosity cabinet, a sense of wonder leads to a deeper engagement with nature. Nichols’ best nature writing - including chronicles of intense I-thou encounters with a bobcat and dolphins – also resonate with wonder. Perhaps cultivating this sense of wonder is the Romantics’ greatest legacy for modern environmentalism, one that could help heal the divisions that imperil our world today.

Samantha Harvey is an Assistant Professor of English at Boise State University.