

Information Environmentalism Conference

Professor Drew Hubbell, Ph.D.

Susquehanna University, PA USA

Adjunct Professor

UWA, WA, AU

Andrew.hubbell@uwa.edu.au

What Nature Poetry Can Tell Us About Agency and Authorship in an Information Environment

British Romantic nature poetry might seem marginal to the discussion of modern information environments and intellectual property, but what happens at the margins can expose blindnesses that exist at the center. The poetry allows us to rethink important questions about agency, authorship, and the nature of nature in the formation of modernist notions of autonomy, creativity, and the environment. **(S2)** Our notions of information environment are sourced to our idea of nature, making it significant for this conference that, as critic Timothy Morton notes, the literature of Romantic nature poetry still shapes the ecological imaginary.

Poets who write nature poems construct information about the natural environment that is embedded in an information environment—the poem, but also the publishing industry. Their actions shape what we know about both at the level of epistemology, most importantly by the way the poet creates an information environment to resemble what she or he knows of the natural environment. The poetic practices I'll examine reveal two different ideas of nature: **(S3)** one that is author centered, where individual human agents act and language mimetically represents the world; **(S4)** and one that is action centered, exemplifying an actor-network

theory of relational agencies, and language performs meaningfully within material-discursive relationships. **(S5)** The first provides an information environment where authors own ideas about reality and communicate them in transparent language so that readers can receive them with a minimum of friction. **(S6)** The second provides an information environment where multiple actants conjointly recreate their reality through plural intervention in discursive and material relationships. Creativity is a matter of intervening in the network to make new associations. It is not the intellectual agency of the individual genius.

The two theories have very distinct politics. **(S7)** The first environment sustains a hierarchical politics with strict divisions between human agents and nonhumans, mind and body, living essence and matter, man and nature. **(S8)** According to Marilyn Strathern, traditional Intellectual Property Rights requires this kind of environment: “a separation between things and persons turns out to be a necessary precondition [for IPR...] What is attributed to the thing in question (design, invention, resource) will be used to drive divisions between people (authors or resource holders against the rest of the world). For while an author may claim copyright in a work, the work itself must show, in its makeup, that it has been authored” (Strathern, “What is Intellectual Property After?” 170). As Jane Bennett, Stacey Alaimo, Bruno Latour, and Murray Bookchin argue, this information environment can be sourced to the Baconian-Cartesian revolution in thought that occurred during the Enlightenment, when the things of the external world were redefined as inert matter which was subject to human will and invention. When matter became the malleable, building block of existence, it became the absolute opposite of the human. Matter became “nature” and nature became an inert, exploitable thing for modern agents. Modern society maintains its concept of

sovereign agency by sustaining an idea of nature that is hierarchical, with essential differences between foreground and background, body and soul, word and world.

(S9) By contrast, the second information environment sustains open, reciprocal, spontaneous, dynamic relations between all members of the network. Because all members are constantly interacting to co-shape each other's conditions of existence, there is no such thing as inert matter forming an environmental background to the drama of human agents playing out in the foreground. **(S10)** "The environment," Stacy Alaimo says, "is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves."ⁱ **(S11)** Such a "posthumanist" definition of ecological identity "refuses to delineate the human, the cultural, or the linguistic against a background of mute matter. Nature, culture, bodies, texts all unravel into a limitless 'force field of differentiation.'"ⁱⁱ Bodies are not sovereign, enclosed units, but porously open to colonization, synergistic or parasitic, by other bodies. Alaimo calls this state of existence, "transcorporeality," emphasizing exchange, contact, and connection between bodies as a criteria for self-sustaining reproduction. **(S12)** John Law proposes that the durability of identity in such a network is achieved by the way things constantly perform themselves and are performed in relation to other things.ⁱⁱⁱ

(S13) Ideas of nature, according to Bruno Latour and Murray Bookchin, are intimately connected to the politics of society:

Conceptions of politics and conceptions of nature have always formed a pair as firmly united as the two seats on a seesaw [...] There has never been any other politics than the politics *of* nature, and there has never been any other nature than the nature *of* politics. Epistemology

and politics, as we now understand very well, are one and the same thing, conjoined in (political) epistemology.^{iv}

(S14) Angus Fletcher locates one point of origin for the political epistemology of nature in grammar, particularly the poetic rhetoric of the environment poem: “the politics runs deep, right into the heart of the grammar.”^v Through its grammar, tropes, and genre manipulations, the environment poem performs an environmental epistemology, figuring horizons that provide a feeling of “emplastic encirclement” for the reader.^{vi} The poem actually becomes a kind of surrounding environment by its very attempt to describe the surrounding environment.

Fletcher distinguishes between two types of environment poem: those that open and extend horizons or boundaries, and those that close and limit boundaries. The environment poem that liberates us from our desire for closure and opens us to accepting chance and new associations, performs liberating effects in the design, form, and shape of its poetic rhetoric. It creates a “type-2” information environment. Poetry that affirms our desire for closure, order, and hierarchy by inscribing those political, epistemological values into its design and form, corresponds to “type-1.”^{vii} **(S15)** Type-1 information environment poems image nature as an organic whole by using tropes such as metaphor to create an enclosed, hermeneutic mirroring effect between subject and object, world and self, social and natural: “to use the topos (place in rhetoric) figuratively for the topos (place in nature) is to want the mirror to reflect itself.”^{viii} Metaphors are key because they establish an *equation* between two things; its opposite, metonymy, establishes a *relationship* between a list of things in a network. “Nature” is the metaphor we use to collapse differences between the vast list of things in the external world,

turning the list into a monolithic, tautological unity. **(S16)** “Nature, achieved obliquely through turning metonymy into metaphor, becomes an oblique way of talking about politics.”^{ix} What Morton and Fletcher mean is that the epistemological politics of representation underlies representative politics.

Consider the politics of representation in the metaphoric trope of chiasmus **(S17)**:

So shalt thou see and hear

The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible

Of that eternal language, which thy God

Utters, who from eternity doth teach

Himself in all things, and all things in Himself.

Great Universal Teacher! He shall mould

Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask. (S. T. Coleridge, “Frost at Midnight,” 58-65)

Inverting diction and syntax creates a tautological identity between subject and object, implying a mirror relationship of organic wholeness and enclosure; as here between God and His creation. No other trope works as well to evoke the *Oikos* as home for the human subject, whose everyday sense of alienation from nature dissolves into the bliss of oneness. Yet this trope works only by enclosing subject and object in an endless loop that establishes strict boundaries against the differentiating effect of constantly evolving relationships in an interconnected network. Chaistic organicism sustains a political epistemology of hierarchy, stasis and closure by repeating that politics in the troping of nature.

Two Romantic nature poets who exemplify these two different information environments, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Lord Byron, can also be said to have some responsibility for their ascendancy, since Romantic conceptions of nature are still influencing our environmental imaginary, still sustaining our political epistemologies of nature.

In “Dejection: an Ode,” Coleridge relies on chiasmus to figure the nature-man relationship as a closed, organic unity. It is a trope he uses 8 times in a 139 line poem, which is a remarkable fact in itself.

“Dejection: an Ode” creates an enclosed ecosystem with its creator at the center. **(S18)** Perception is a creative action of human agency, animating the dead matter that exists around us: “Joy [...] is the spirit and the power, / Which wedding Nature to us gives in dower, / A new Earth and a new Heaven” (“Dejection” 67-69). This claim is immediately reclaimed in a chiasmus: “Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud— / We in ourselves rejoice!” (“Dejection” 71-72). Joy is the energy at the center of our being that we project outward into a voice which then echoes back to us so that we rejoice in ourselves. The hermeneutic circle is hermetically sealed so that none of this precious gift of joy can actually escape, despite Coleridge’s claims to the contrary in stanzas one, two, and six. The performance of this joyous poem, ironically titled “dejection,” is itself testimony to the conservation in the system’s economy. Everything is recycled through the ebb and flow of joyous energy. Even the wind, which “ravest without,” gives back to the speaker by playing the eolian lute in an echo of the speaker’s thoughts, first a “dull, sobbing draft” and then a “scream / Of agony by torture lengthened out” (“Dejection” 6, 97-98). The poem figures these melodies as literally the echoes

of his own voice (“Dejection” 74); thus, while “outward forms” are not the source of the passion and the life, they are echoes and mirrors cycling the passion and life back to their source. The final chiasmus figures this closed economy: **(S19)** “To her may all things live, from pole to pole, / Their life the eddying of her living soul” (“Dejection” 135-134). The joy within Sara Hutchinson cycles out to all things, making them live, and their living reflects back to Sara the joy eddying in her living soul. This perfect, hermetically sealed, organic system guarantees that Sara will “evermore rejoice” (Dejection 139) because she is, in fact, in herself rejoicing. The environment created in “Dejection: an Ode” suits the particular social conditions of modernity, by naturalizing the political epistemology of autonomous human agency in an ordered, structured, harmonious world. We should remember that Coleridge was the contemporary of Adam Smith, founder of classical capitalism, Thomas Malthus, founder of economics, and Edmund Burke, defender of the British social system as an organic evolution.

Appropriately, Coleridge was motivated to write this poem, as he says in the poem, by anxiety about his authorial integrity and creative agency. His composition of “Dejection” performs authorial sovereignty through the agency of the chiasmus trope. However, stuck in this endlessly self-reflective stalemate where “I am thou and thou am I,” Coleridge also stuck himself in the endless legal stalemate of attempting to control his ideas as copyrighted intellectual property, as indicated in his infamous disputes with friends, publics, and publishers about who originally said what. Coleridge is one of the most notorious plagiarizers.

The second type of information environment-natural environment is exhibited in Lord Byron’s poem, *Don Juan*, an epic-romance that is over 900 pages of octava rima in 17 cantos,

the longest poem in English. The poem is famous for satirizing European aristocratic culture, bourgeois capitalism, and imperial aggression, but also for a narrative with more digression than plot, no clear structure, and no telos—no sense of trajectory or closure. It purposely violates all aesthetic and social conventions, and exposes the hypocrisy of the dominant modernist epistemology.

The politics of the grammar corresponds to the poem's satiric exposure of modernity as built on a desire for closure, order and autonomous human agency. Irony, allusion, metonymy and apposition release meaning from being the intellectual property of the speaking subject, permitting a dynamic co-creation of meaning by language users, and even language itself, which materializes its own relational codes in rhyme and meter, grammar and syntax. Rather than imagining an idea which he then writes down, a Coleridgean writing process as demonstrated in "Kubla Khan," Byron describes his composition process as spontaneous, free-associative, and intentionless: **(S20)** "I write what is uppermost without delay" and

I ne'er decide what I shall say, and this I call

Much too poetical. Men should know why

They write, and for what end; but, note or text,

I never know the word which will come next. (DJ.IX.325-328)

Ideas become the effect of language, and the author is merely the one who intervenes in an ongoing, spontaneous reproductive process to make new connections. And unlike Coleridge who occupied a paranoid information environment and fretted about losing control of his ideas, Byron inhabits his liberating, open-ended, self-generating information environment by actively encouraging the piracy and mass replication of *Don Juan*.

I admit to preferring Byron's information environment over Coleridge's. Byron's is more fun and sustains an epistemology of nature that is sorely needed to counter the destructive tendencies of modernity. If a livable world depends on information sharing over information ownership, we will all prefer Byron over Coleridge.

15:40 minutes

ⁱ Alaimo, 4.

ⁱⁱ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 14.

ⁱⁱⁱ Law, "After ANT," 4.

^{iv} Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 28.

^v Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry*, 107.

^{vi} Fletcher, *New Theory*, 9.

^{vii} Fletcher, *New Theory*, 90-93.

^{viii} Fletcher, *New Theory*, 54.

^{ix} Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 14-16.