



**Nichols, Ashton. *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism: Toward Urbanatural Roosting*. New York: Palgrave, 2011. Print.**

For the average undergraduate student of literature, the Romantics often seem synonymous with a fear of science and technology. Blame Mary Shelley. Many students encounter *Frankenstein* in high school, where the novel is often taught as a parable about science run amok. In this reading, *Frankenstein* cautions us against “playing God”; Shelley is cast as a detractor of science who anticipates postmodern bioethical dilemmas. Generally, this portrait of Shelley squares nicely with what else we learn of the Romantics, who seem—at the introductory level, at least—like a pretty nostalgic, back-to-nature bunch. Of course, this simplistic portrait of the Romantics has virtually vanished from the academy, where “science and literature” flourishes as vibrant, rapidly-evolving subfield. In recent years, scholars such as Noah Herringman and Alan Richardson have produced an array of ambitious interdisciplinary studies that reveal Romantic literature’s indebtedness to Romantic science. Richard Holmes’s bestselling *The Age of Wonder* (2010) has even taken Romantic science and literature to a popular audience. Meanwhile, ecocritics have worked to complicate “Romantic nature” and “Romantic ecology,” two concepts whose meaning and utility have come under intense critical scrutiny. Thanks to the work of Timothy Morton, Lawrence Buell, and others, “nature” is now among the most frequently-discussed categories in Romanticism studies, and in literary studies more generally.

Ashton Nichols’s *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism: Toward Urbanatural Roosting* is one of the latest monographs to explore Romantic writers’ relationship to natural science and the proto-ecological thinking to which this relationship gave rise. Much like Morton’s *Ecology without Nature* (2007) and *The Ecological Thought* (2010), Nichols’s book not only situates Romantic literature in its scientific milieu but also critiques the role “nature” plays in ecocriticism and in environmentalism more widely. Briefly, Nichols argues that “nature” is now so “worn down” that it has “outlived its usefulness”; it is among terms such as “imagination” that “have been invoked in so many differing ways over centuries that they are now past due for a rigorous verbal and cultural critique” (8; xvi). Instead of “nature,” he proposes, we should embrace the idea of “urbanature,” a concept that captures the “complex web of interdependent interrelatedness” that connects “all human and nonhuman lives, as well as all animate and inanimate objects around those lives . . .” (xiii). As Nichols uses the term, “urbanature” does three things. First, it names the reality we inhabit, one in which “nature is . . . no longer distinct from something mysteriously ‘non-natural’”. . . (10). Second, it reveals the outcome of a process—spanning the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries—in which the West came to see all of creation as “a unified tree or web of life and living things” rather than a Great Chain of Being (16). Whereas earlier thinkers saw nature as static and separate from humans, the Romantics viewed nature as dynamic and very much connected to humans; this new paradigm not only inspired poems such as Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” but also paved the way for modern ecology. Finally, “urbanature” points to a new goal for governments, citizens, and ecocritics: once we reject the existence of “nature” and “culture” we can begin to see woodlands, cities, and suburbs as equally worthy of stewardship.

As this overview suggests, there are actually two arguments in *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism*: a conventional cultural-historical study and an argument about Romanticism’s lessons for the present. The book is arranged to accommodate both projects. It is organized into twelve chapters, each of which corresponds to a month of the year. This design allows Nichols to insert swatches of personal writing—

observations drawn from his own “urbanatural year”—into his four-part academic argument. Cleverly, this academic argument maps onto the four seasons: “Spring,” for example, traces the first stirrings of urbanatural thinking among the Romantics themselves. The beauty of Nichols’s scheme is that it permits him to integrate contemporary discussions into his analysis of Romantic literature and culture in a way that feels neither forced, nor gratuitous. As well, this scheme pays homage to ecocritical classics such as John Elder’s *Imagining the Earth*, updating some of early ecocriticism’s genre conventions to reflect changes in the field’s priorities. While some readers might find the book’s recurrent alternation between nature writing and literary analysis distracting, the book’s structure is a part of its argument. Nichols’s blending of the personal and the academic parallels the merging of “urban” and “natural” for which he advocates.

Portions of *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism* are familiar: Nichols is not the first ecocritic to call for a reappraisal of concepts such as “wilderness” and “environment,” nor is he the first critic to envision a “re-wilding” of urban spaces.<sup>1</sup> What makes Nichols’s argument unique is that it exposes the debts Romantic science owes to literature. Central to the book is the notion that “both poets and scientists need powerful metaphors” and that as such, “poets think more like scientists” than we realize” (8; 10). Nichols contends that developments in biology, chemistry, and geology not only influenced Romantic writers, they were also influenced *by* Romantic writers, specifically by these writers’ conviction that human consciousness and nonhuman nature are interconnected. Hence, it is no accident that Romantic natural science shares key conceptual frameworks with Romantic literature: scientists and poets swapped numerous figures of speech, images, and ideas throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One example of traffic between literature and science that Nichols discusses in some depth relates to pleasure in the natural world, a concept that preoccupied Romantic poets and scientists alike. Pleasure, both as a human response to the natural world and as a phenomenon occurring in the natural world, appears “in a whole range of Romantic metaphors and writings”; indeed, “discussions of plant and animal pleasure” found in the works of Comte de Buffon, Erasmus Darwin, and other scientists “can be linked directly to the idea of ‘pleasure’ in poems by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats” (88). For Nichols, it is important to map these channels of mutual influence, partly because they help us to understand the history of science better. In addition, tracing the connections between science and literature can help us to reassess Romanticism’s legacy for present-day ecology. Ultimately, Nichols suggests that the “link between the poetic and scientific in Romantic natural history also reveals direct links to the twenty-first century’s sense of the interrelatedness of human and nonhuman nature” (88). In other words, Romanticism’s greenest legacy is its interdisciplinarity—its impulse to pursue connections.

A noteworthy strength of *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism* is Nichols’s close reading of several canonical poems.<sup>2</sup> The book’s first chapter, for example, offers a compelling reading of Wordsworth’s “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge” that examines the poem as an urbanatural text. Nichols develops a similarly intriguing reading of Shelley’s “The Cloud”: this poem, he asserts, is “the first . . . work of literature” to “offe[r] the precise details of what scientists now call the hydrological cycle” (22). Nichols’s point is that not that Shelley anticipated modern climate science, but rather that the poet’s familiarity with his era’s natural history caused him to see nature “as an interdependent realm” (27). This sort of proto-ecological thinking inspired Victorian scientists, whose discoveries often validated the Romantic metaphors upon which they were built. Thus, Nichols invites us to see the relationship between Romantic texts and more recent ideas in a new light—and importantly, he does so in a way that moves “beyond romantic ecocriticism.” One reason Nichols asks critics to embrace the urbanatural is that ecocriticism has not entirely shaken the habit of conflating Romantic natural science and modern ecology. While he may overestimate the extent to which critics (and activists) still cling to misguided “Romantic” ideas about nature, he is correct in suggesting that we need better, more nuanced assessment of what Romanticism can do for today’s world.

Overall, *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism* is a smart, engaging, and well-crafted book, and it is certain to shape discussions about ecocriticism's future. Moreover, many readers will find the book refreshingly optimistic. In a moment when too much of our public discourse on the environment is apocalyptic in tenor, we need more voices that encourage and inspire rather than chide—and *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism* is unapologetically hopeful. Summing up his progressive vision for a new ecocentric world, Nichols remarks that “urbanatural roosting will not be so difficult” to enact. “All it will require,” he writes, “is that every one of us should think about, care about, do something good about every place, every person, every creature, and every thing that each of us can affect on planet earth” (207). This agenda is ambitious; indeed, skeptics will find Nichols's call for universal “roosting” a bit too grandiose to be persuasive. I personally am not bothered by Nichols's sanguinity. However, I am puzzling over the question: does embracing the concept of “urbanature” necessarily go hand-in-hand with environmentalism in the way that Nichols imagines? In other words, once we recognize that there is no separation between nature and culture, or between living and nonliving things, are we automatically inclined to treat our local surroundings with more care? The cynical answer is that urbanature should activate our self-interest: once we become aware that even the smallest things around us influence our wellbeing, we should (in theory) take action to protect ourselves, even if we don't really care about “rats in the basement, bats in the attic, slugs in the garden” and so on (204). At the same time, I wonder if urbanature might instead induce a sort of paralysis in people, an inability to act based on the sheer difficulty of figuring out where to begin. “Roosting,” Nichols writes, “asks only that I think carefully and consistently about the relationships that link me to the entire world. Caring for the planet and sharing its riches: that is all that be required” (205). I could not agree more enthusiastically with Nichols's call for a new “ecoethic.” I do wish, though, that he offered a vision for enacting change as persuasive as his case for collapsing the “natural” and the “urban” into the “urbanatural.”

As I read *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism*, I could not help but think of William Cowper, who does not appear in the book. Often labeled “pre-Romantic,” Cowper might at first glance seem to represent the Enlightenment attitudes Nichols describes at the beginning of his book. After all, one of the frequently-quoted lines from Cowper's works is a line from his masterpiece, *The Task*: “God made the country, and man made the town.” Yet might *The Task* actually be considered an “urbanatural” work according to Nichols's definition? Commencing with a mock epic tribute to the sofa, Book I of the poem ranges associatively through musings on childhood, the countryside, art, society, and empire, among other topics. I can think of no other eighteenth-century poem that more thoroughly blends nature and culture—and to such mesmerizing effect. One exciting task for critics will be to test the utility of “urbanature” for understanding literature written outside the Romantic era. Perhaps urbanature will permit us to incorporate writers such as Cowper into a literary history of environmentalism. In this way, we can respond to Nichols's call to move “beyond romantic ecocriticism” toward a perspective that is more responsive to today's urbanatural dilemmas.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Nichols's vision for an urbanatural future echoes calls to action such as Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods* (2005), which Nichols cites approvingly.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that Nichols focuses mainly on major Romantics, and almost exclusively on men. While I am heartily impressed by *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism*, I do wish that it made room for more women's voices.

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