CHAPTER 1

The World Outside in (Literature)

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Critical studies of the relations between literature and environment have become well-established over the past two or three decades, adopting a number of interdisciplinary approaches drawing upon literary history and theory as well as environmental history and philosophy, history of science, psychology, and anthropology, and ranging across a field that now extends beyond “nature writing” and landscape aesthetics to encompass a much wider variety of texts and documents.1 The essays gathered in this volume are meant to contribute to these ongoing debates, without attempting at exhaustivity or consensus, not to mention synthesis. Nor do they purport to settle the question of what is meant by the notions of “nature” or “environment.”

By “environmental awareness,” these essays do not simply mean concern for a disappearing natural world, nor such prescriptive behavior as has sometimes been ascribed to environmental advocacy—in which a writer arguably provides “ecological lessons” and suggests an appropriate way to interact with “the natural world,” on the basis of a “truth” regarding the land, landscape or ecosystem, and a felt necessity to extend human empathy to nonhuman life.2 The phrase instead refers here to the various ways literary texts can question modes of viewing and inhabiting the world which appear innocuous yet hamper genuine insight or the possibility of more sustainable living. The following essays respond to Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s call for critical modes and practices that “foster self-understanding, strengthen and enrich our imaginative powers, and give a distinctive kind of intellectual pleasure” (2005, Author’s abstract). As Scott Slovic and Dan Philippon have emphasized, “savoring” and “saving,” “pleasure” and “sustainability” are inseparable (Slovic 2008, esp. Chap. 1, “Savoring, Saving, and the Practice of Ecocritical Responsibility”; Philippon 2012).

1 The scholarship on literature and environment is so vast that it is impossible to give even a brief overview. Key works mapping the field and giving a sense of its scope include—by chronological order of publication, and without any claim to comprehensiveness—Slovic 1992, Buell 1995, Glotfelty & Fromm 1996, Armbruster & Wallace 2001, Ingram et al. 2007, Outka 2008, Heise 2008, Garrard 2011 and 2014.

2 Dana Phillips (2003) has criticized what he perceives as “naïve” assumptions about nature, ecology and nature writing.
Each of the following essays thus explores the potential of language and the literary experience to expand modes of awareness of the physical world—or, to use more “Romantic” wording, to sharpen our senses and broaden our understanding. They all examine texts that, despite their formal and rhetorical differences, explicitly or implicitly critique the ossification of our conceptions of the relation between human beings and the physical world. Literary criticism, in this perspective, is decidedly an anthropology, in the sense that it interrogates—however obliquely—what it means to be human, and sheds light on the way texts contribute to shaping our lives.

We have tried to avoid being prescriptive in our critical approaches to the issue, so as to remain open to its manifold aesthetic, philosophical, historical and political aspects. But, beyond their diversity, all these essays demonstrate how attention to the “representation” of the physical environment can help question preconceptions and standard views—i.e., those informed by our daily concerns and interests, be they practical or economic, for instance—through a healthy combination of earthiness and skepticism. What most deeply brings these essays together, and what more broadly defines environmental awareness, is that the physical world is not taken for granted—ignored or overlooked—but always ahead of us, a constant horizon as much as a grounding for our life. Literature can help us resist two distinct yet convergent trends: the simple, mindless exploitation of nature and its packaging in bright and cheerful colors that make it blandly attractive.

Far from the clichéd conceptions that would reduce depictions of nature in literature as creating “not [...] a living but [...] an enamelled world,” as Raymond Williams has claimed about the pastoral tradition since the Renaissance (1973: 18), thus evading social conditions as well as real attention to the physicality of nature, the works examined here do take the physical world seriously, without, however, yielding to any simplistic “mimetic” or “realistic” conception of the written text. This volume is nevertheless based on the assumption that some texts do address our relation to the physical world in ways that are more than perfunctory or obfuscatory—even so-called “nature writing” rarely produces an idealized world that obscures the “truth” about nature. Critical attention, particularly in Europe, has long downplayed the role of the physical environment to favor human characters, and our approach shares the ecocritical “militancy” to the extent that it considers the physical world as a genuine focus of literature—reading both comparatively forgotten and well-known texts in ways that are sensitive to the physical environment. In particular, it considers the ways human individuals are in part defined by how they interact with their environment and its tangled topography. This needs not be restricted to “country” or “wilderness” but also includes urban environments. As they probe the interactions of individual human beings