

Steven Swarbrick, *The Environmental Unconscious. Ecological Poetics from Spenser to Milton*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023, pp. 336.

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While ecocriticism has been offering re-readings of present and past literary texts for a few decades, its efficacy as a critical perspective responding to the urgencies of current environmental crises shows no sign of diminishing. On the contrary, hand-in-hand with the transdisciplinary stance of the Environmental Humanities, what was once simply defined as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (1996: xviii) is today transforming into an increasingly nuanced lens to tackle the complexity of the human-environment relationship in literature and culture. *The Environmental Unconscious: Ecological Poetics from Spenser to Milton* is proof of this process due to its innovative engagement with ecocritical and psychoanalytical theories.

The concept of the ‘environmental unconscious’ echoes the eponymous notions first introduced by Lawrence Buell, which pointed to the underlying assumptions about nature that exist within the collective psyche of the society and influence people’s perception and interpretation of the environment (2001). Yet, Swarbrick proposes a new, different understanding of this phrase: he addresses the relevance of concepts such as ‘void’ and ‘loss’, which the notion of the unconscious engrains in the context of psychoanalysis, to reflect on ecology and matter.

Without sparing criticism of well-established contemporary critical perspectives in environmental discourse, Swarbrick illustrates how “in new materialist discourse lies a misreading of atomist poet and philosopher Lucretius” (2023: 9). Lucretius, as the author explains, posits a parallel between matter and language in the sense that matter articulates relations among elements just like language does. However, new materialists, as Swarbrick underlines, often neglect the gap that language – and therefore matter – is implicated with in this process of articulation. In fact, considering that both matter and language are not only sense-making, due to the fact that they are “built on a foundation of non-sense, of letters

with no natural orders,” the volume contests the new-materialist assumption that “matter cannot be thought apart from its meaning” (16) or the idea that “humanity has always been unified with the rest of nature” (16), as ecocritics often affirm. Therefore, just like the unconscious in psychoanalysis appears to be “paved in meanings” (15), scholars should keep this awareness in mind when attempting to understand matter as well, by stressing on its voids. As the book insists, Renaissance poets such as Edmund Spenser, Walter Raleigh, Andrew Marvell, and John Milton epitomize this awareness, and their works show how they enjoy loss when inviting readers to “stop reading nature as adaptable, well-adjusted, and coherent and start reading it as misaligned, plaintive, and like the text of the unconscious, enigmatic—even to nonhuman” (2023: 26).

This argument is developed in the book along five chapters, each investigating selected excerpts from the four poets mentioned above which present surprising resonances – conceptually but also linguistically – to well-established notions in psychoanalysis, including “cerebral unconscious” (Malabou) and “oceanic feeling” (Freud). In addition to that, the book relies largely on references from the philosophical framework of French poststructuralists, particularly from Deleuze and Foucault, which have the capacity to tie the book’s main topic to the framework backing most ecological critical perspectives today, along the idea of human-non-human connectedness. In this sense, the volume becomes evidently an extensive, pluralistic research where several disciplinary approaches, critical glances, and concepts intermingle to create an original hermeneutics to find responses to current crises through the study of literature.

After a concise ‘Introduction’ illustrating the main concepts and topics sustaining the argument, Chapters 1 and 2 – also Part I of the book, titled “Into the Wood?” – discuss Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* through the theories of materialist philosopher Catherine Malabou. Specifically, the first chapter, “Sex or Matter? (Malabou after Spenser),” theorizes the notion of the ‘allegorical event’: just as allegory presents two inseparable sides – formation and destruction – matter, in Spenser’s poem, is depicted accordingly, with an emphasis on its capacity to be both creative and subjected to a destructive impulse, similar to what Malabou explains about sexuality. This effect is visible, for instance, in the way Venus – both form-giving and form-destroying – is depicted in *Faerie Queene*, or in the image of the wounding speaking tree in the same poem, which exemplifies the environmental unconscious in the reiteration of the traumatic, suffering event affecting it.

An 'Interlude,' titled "The Animal Complaint," divides Chapter 2 and 3. In this short section, the author elaborates on the notion of the 'blatant beast,' taken again from a passage in Spenser's poem, to provide another example of his 'eco-psychoanalysis.' Differently from predominant interpretations of the phrase as an allegory of the court's socio-political dynamics in early modern England, Swarbrick reinterprets it as a form of complaining which, in psychoanalytical terms, enables one "to repeat a fundamental absence" (2023: 106) along with a reiteration that reveals a paradoxical sense of enjoyment. This consideration paves the way for Chapter 3, which also draws from psychoanalysis – specifically, from Freud's notion of the 'oceanic feeling,' defined as "selves bleeding into their surroundings, and [...] bodies melting into other bodies" (2023: 115) – to illustrate latent expressions of Raleigh's (maritime) materialism imagery.

Differing from dominant ecocritical discussions that pivot on the enmeshment of human and nonhuman, according to Swarbrick, Raleigh's oceanic feeling is based on the idea that "human thought destroys itself by becoming ocean" (2023: 115). This breakdown of the body becomes the baseline for a kind of material assemblage where, far from holistic figurations, attention is dedicated to differences among its parts, particularly concerning the distance between 'human action' and 'nonhuman duration.' This impossibility of their coincidence illustrated in Raleigh's poem expresses, for Swarbrick, another expression of enjoyment of the loss as well as another understanding of matter through the notion of the environmental unconscious.

Chapter 4, "Architectural Anthropologies," instead, explores Marvell's *Upon Appleton House* by discussing how in the popular 'country house poem,' non-human entities like plants, animals, and earth have the capacity *to build*, in a general sense. The poem's line "In ev'ry figure equal man" is discussed as particularly effective in illustrating the poem's critique of human exceptionalism and the possibility to shed light on inhuman (agentic) power. Moreover, by expressing how this line paradoxically acknowledges both 'man' as the measure of all things and, simultaneously, "*de*-scribes man from the space of *in*-scription by effacing or *de*-facing man's sovereignty" (2023: 159, emphasis in original), Swarbrick provides another example of the complications inherent in reading the (environmental) unconscious to understand matter.

"Queer Life Unearthed" is the title of the conclusive chapter of the book and it is dedicated to Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Swarbrick observes how the reference to fossils in Milton's poem functions – similarly to what was observed in the case of Spenser's 'allegorical event' – both as testifiers of the development of organic

life (form-giving) and as interruptions of life and their disappearance (form-destroying). According to Swarbrick, this co-existence of opposite effects adds on to the queered notion of life in the ecological discourse, evoked by “so many posthumanisms [...] speaking of life as a flowing, unending force of affirmation and creativity” but differently: in fact, as Swarbrick highlights, “Milton includes raptures, negativity, and violent encounter as necessary conditions for making and unmaking earth” (2023: 212). Moreover, where nature becomes an “archive of extinction” (2023: 212) through the image of fossils, it also allows readers to experience a different sense of self by putting forth the capacity of the inhuman *to affect*: this non-anthropocentric perspective, therefore, puts forth a kind of ‘absence’ of human beings which shows another example of how the void becomes a valuable concept when considering the environment in the Anthropocene. As Swarbrick illustrates, a different ecological ethics is needed, “one that can tolerate the nonrelation [...] of earthly life if we are to grasp the catastrophe of the Anthropocene on its own terms: both as a queering of human agency via geology, and as an event written in the earth itself” (2023: 225).

The ‘Conclusion’ effectively ties up all the several threads developed in the book, in such a way that readers who may not be familiar with the wide, extensive theoretical framework employed by Swarbrick will find here a more plain and accessible illustration of the book’s main argument. Due to this theoretical entanglement, the book appears particularly dense at first approach, while the clarity of the argument unfolds as the reading progresses. This is perhaps a possible criticism that can be addressed to the volume. However, the necessity of providing a critical view to well-established theoretical domains backing, in large part, ecological discourses across different approaches – from new materialisms, to ecocriticism, passing through posthumanisms – makes a similar line of argumentation comprehensible. So, while the book may require more than one reading for those who are not experts in psychoanalytical theory, when grasping the core argument – more deductively than inductively – one can open the eye to an original perspective that has the potential to offer a new view on how to approach literature at the time of the environmental crises.

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