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Scott Hess, *William Wordsworth and the Ecology of Authorship: The Roots of Environmentalism in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Charlottesville & London: Virginia University Press, 2012), 290 pp.



In this volume Scott Hess seeks to explore Wordsworth's defining role in establishing what he designates as "the ecology of authorship": a primarily middle-class, nineteenth-century conception of nature associated with aesthetics, high culture, individualism and nation. Instead of viewing Wordsworth as an early ecologist, Hess places him within a context that is largely cultural and aesthetic. The supposedly universal Wordsworthian vision of nature, Hess argues, was in this sense specifically male, middle-class, professional, and culturally elite—factors that continue to shape the environmental movement today.

Significantly, the author aims to trace the historical emergence of the ecology of authorship through a focus on William Wordsworth's writing and influence in relation to a broad variety of interrelated nineteenth-century material and cultural practices—from photography and public art museums through the cultural construction of the Lake District, early environmental protests, and the emergence of modern mass tourism. The book's ultimate concern, however, is to infer how these nineteenth-century discourses have framed contemporary ecological consciousness and environmentalism. In Wordsworthian tradition, Nature has become identified with individual consciousness and identity, as opposed to social or communal life; with aesthetic leisure and spirituality, separated from everyday work, subsistence, and economic activity (3).

Wordsworth is read through the social frameworks of ecofeminism, social ecology, and environmental justice, as well as the critical traditions of cultural materialism. Scott Hess focuses on the poems and contexts most powerfully implicated in Wordsworth's ecology of authorship and its legacy for contemporary environmentalism. The book's five main chapters explore Wordsworth's construction of nature in relation to historically specific cultural contexts and practices, including their extension into the Victorian period. Each chapter concludes by briefly tracing the impacts of such discourses and practices on nineteenth-century America, the nature-writing tradition, and current environmental culture (11).

Chapter 1, "Picturesque Vision, Photographic Subjectivity, and the (Un)framing of Nature", argues that while Wordsworth claimed to break from the visual conventions of the picturesque, his poetry remains deeply informed by its imaginative and perceptual structures, including the stationed position of the "halted traveler"; the visual detachment and general disembodiment of the observer; and the tendency to compose the entire landscape pictorially around a single, central point of view. Wordsworth's landscape vision in these ways fashions a version of the paradigmatic modern self with

its “view from nowhere”; looking on and appropriating the world as image as if from outside the frame of a picture. This visually detached relationship to landscape creates a version of “photographic subjectivity” which contrasts with the poetry of John Clare and Dorothy Wordsworth, who offer alternative structures of landscape vision and perception and present a more embodied, participatory, and social version of nature. The chapter explores these constructions in relation to various forms of framing in the Western landscape tradition and the wider contexts of Romantic and Victorian visual culture, to conclude that “we are ecological citizens, immersed in a network of processes we cannot pretend to order, control, or even fully understand” outside the framework (66-67).

Chapter 2, “Wordsworth Country: The Lake District and the Landscape of Genius,” analyzes Wordsworth’s construction of the Lake District in *Guide through the District of the Lakes* (1835), and argues that Wordsworth capitalized on the area’s high-aesthetic reputation as a premier site of picturesque tourism but shifted its focus from the visual arts to literature and poetry. Thus, Wordsworth associated the Lake District landscape with his own literary identity, cultural authority, and “genius” in ways that contested the authority of aristocratic visitors. The chapter also examines the cultural history of Wordsworth’s association with the Lake District, which became known by the end of the nineteenth century as “Wordsworth Country,” and the influence of this version of the literary landscape on the overall modern construction of nature, including the institutional and imaginative model of the national park (13). Nature in this literary landscape became associated with individualized authorship, autonomous personal imagination, and national culture, uniting such constructions in a central imaginative locus (109).

Chapter 3, “Wordsworth’s Environmental Protest: The Kendal and Windermere Railroad and the Cultural Politics of Nature,” brings to the fore Wordsworth’s public campaign in 1844 to avert the construction of the railways in the Lake District. Wordsworth’s protest focused on the working-class excursionists from the industrial towns of Lancashire, Yorkshire, and the Midlands who in Wordsworth’s eyes threatened both the natural and the cultural value of the landscape. The chapter goes on to trace the underlying influence of Wordsworth’s protest on later environmental campaigns, including subsequent nineteenth-and-twentieth-century “defenses” of “Wordsworth country.” Such efforts continued to be defined by a nationwide cultural elite of middle-class professionals, often in opposition to small local proprietors and other residents who desired modern amenities such as access to railways and, later, electricity and telephone lines. The chapter concludes by determining the legacy of this class-defined, high-cultural model of nature for American and contemporary environmentalism.

The next chapter, “The Lake District and the Museum of Nature,” compares Wordsworth’s aesthetic construction of the Lake District with the discourses of the nineteenth-century public art museum. Wordsworth tries to define the Lake District as a kind of museum of nature, setting a precedent for the broader aesthetic construction of nature in ways that have continued to shape the environmental movement up to the present day (156). Free access to museums institutionalized the moral and aesthetic

education of its citizens, regardless of class, and thus helped to constitute the new nation-state (157). At the same time, art museums became similarly associated with the genius of the artists whose works they displayed (164). William Wordsworth in this way constructed the Lake District as a kind of public museum of nature, a space of “civilizing ritual” for the formation of both individual identity and high-aesthetic, middle class national culture (164). The chapter concludes by tracing the influence of this museum model on American environmental culture.

Chapter 5, “My Endless Way’: Travel, Gender, and the Imaginative Colonization of Nature,” explores Wordsworth’s tendency to construct the landscape through the wandering and autonomous subjectivity of the male traveler, and interprets the motif of travel in William Wordsworth’s poetry in relation to the rise of modern tourism, arguing that he offers what is essentially a tourist’s imaginative relation to nature. The chapter also offers an ecofeminist perspective of William Wordsworth’s use of women to connect him to the sensual and the particular, while he continues to associate himself with the “superior” subject position of male intellect, autonomy, and abstraction. The chapter concludes by exploring the persistence of this masculine traveler’s subjectivity in various forms of contemporary environmental culture, in contrast to the more social version of nature exemplified by Susan Fenimore Cooper’s *Rural Hours* (1850) and Terry Tempest Williams’s *Refuge* (1992).

The epilogue, “The Ecology of Authorship versus the Ecology of Community,” begins by comparing the opening of Wordsworth’s *Prelude* with a culminating episode in Bill McKibben’s *The End of Nature* (1989). While Wordsworth leaves the city and turns to nature to discover both his “true self” and his poetic vocation, McKibben reverses this process to signal the “end of nature,” which ultimately reveals itself as “offering opportunities for the creation of new, more social ecologies, structured around community, participation, and embodied relationships in everyday environments” (16). The turn to nature becomes, in this sense, part of Romanticism’s overall imaginative flight from the social and the everyday: another version of the quest for “something evermore about to be,” rather than an attempt to ground our lives ecologically in the here and now (17).

The studies contained in this volume provide new and original insights for those interested in Romantic ecocriticism, and they open up new possibilities for significant change and renewal of art, culture and the self.