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Literary Exposures for an Ecological Age

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CHRISTY CALL

Literary Exposures for an Ecological Age

In the age of climate change, when the survival of so many species hinges on the capacity of humans to change, it has proven easier for some to simply generate doubt about the existence of any ecological threat. Doubt has been, and continues to be, surprisingly easy to produce and sustain even in the face of so much empirical evidence. We may understand this denial, in part, by realizing that realities in the Anthropocene confront then refute so many long professed beliefs about the design of the world and the human place in it. To accept the truth of climate change will mean not just accepting the challenges inherent in an ongoing event of global dimensions but will also mean relinquishing so many imperialistic ideas that have been professed as timelessly true. These ideas have constructed national trajectories according to visions of unfettered industry and growth as signs of so much progress, have constructed self-identities on individualism and self-reliance as signs of so much strength and resolve, and have constructed human relations with the more-than-human world on paradigms of dominion as signs of so much ontological superiority.

Yet such modes of thought register as increasingly incoherent. It is fortunate that theoretical cosmologies made in an ecocentric design emerge to sponsor alternative views to entrenched Western conventions. These cosmological visions, as in the articulations of Michel Serres, Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, Timothy Morton, and others, revise typical renditions of ontology, agency, and ethics. While each thinker presents their own distinct iteration, all of them advance a vision of life that emphasizes the vitality of the collective. Ontology is presented, for example, as generally more a “becoming” through co-constitutional relations than an “essence.” In this conception, human life is arrayed horizontally with so many other life and material forms. Agency is dispersed broadly so that plants, animals, and matter manifest a vibrant force.¹ The heresy in these renditions extends even to ethical dimensions as expanded notions of significance summon expanded ethical inclusions. We must care about more now that we understand more to matter.

In a Dickensian kind of way, the collisions between Western anthropocentric cosmologies and ecological iterations position us in both the best and worst of times. It may be said that the cognitive and affective challenges inherent in explicating more just cosmologies of ecocentric design are as immense as the cognitive and affective enticements to retreat back to the known

¹ My language here references the influential work of Jane Bennett. Her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* argues that materialities are more than inert.

narrow world, even as it is breaking apart.² It is surely not coincidental that Brexit and the rise of Donald Trump occur against backdrops of melting icecaps, forced displacements, political instabilities, and economic globalizations. We can see evidence in such recent political turns of the seduction of avoidance. Yet it is important to note that this retreat emerges within larger contexts of contested history and narrative. Those who rally behind the greatness of a national past indexed in genocide, slavery, and looting do so from a position of deep privilege.

Reading literature in this time of social disruption and environmental ruin is more than an escape. We know that literature engages reality through the lens of invention. In his work *The Broken Estate*, James Wood notes that readers confront reality through the lie of fiction. Because readers know that they are dealing with a creative work, they actively deliberate the merits of the text, holding it to the light for an assessment of its reliability. In this way, readers are placed both oddly within and outside the story. They may be enthralled yet skeptical. For Wood, doubt has a positive value, and he compellingly contrasts the doubt inherent in engagements with fiction with the doubt regarded as a moral failure in reigning religious paradigms. He writes:

And indeed, the kind of belief that fiction requires of us is very different from religious belief. Fiction requests belief from us, but we can choose not to believe at any moment. This is surely the true secularism of fiction—why, despite its being a magic, it is actually the enemy of superstition, the slayer of religions, the scrutineer of falsity. Fiction moves in the shadow of doubt, knows itself to be a true lie, knows that at any moment it might fail to make its case. Belief in fiction is always belief “as if.” (xx)

Of course, students recognize the demands that the “true lies” make on them. Most teachers of literature frequently hear students characterize reading as a depressing experience. They ask, “Why are books so sad?” This kind of comment shows the way that happiness very often gets equated with a state of ease.

I suggest that melancholy sponsored from the literary page happens from a pervasive and disquieting sense that existence is collectively bound. The space of the page is, of course, a bound space. And in the crosscut dynamics of textual events, existence emerges as fragile and precarious. Let us imagine a text that has a character missing a train. In the story we may see that subsequent events happen from the basis of this seemingly minor occurrence. We can imagine a scene where a right turn on a freeway ends in a crash. We may read of a person, family, or a community undone with grief. In the collision and its aftermath, we detect the ripples of consequence that project outward beyond any single event in any kind of fixed time and outside any form of intentionality. The missed train, the crash on the roadway, these evoke

² At the time of this paper’s publication, an article in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in the United States of America announced that we are living in a time of “biological annihilation” given the mass numbers of species going extinct. The authors state that 70 percent of mammal populations are in steep decline from losses of habitat and other threats. The declining numbers of cheetahs, orangutans, African lions, pangolins, and giraffes stand as indexes on an expanding decimation.

a sense that minor events or events outside one's direct experience hold a shaping force over one's life. The second line in Thomas Wolfe's novel *Look Homeward Angel* sinks the reader's mood in the awareness of such fate-filled contingencies: "Each of us is all the sums he has not counted: subtract us into nakedness and night again, and you shall see begin in Crete four thousand years ago the love that ended yesterday in Texas" (3).

In the exposures of interconnected fates, we discover the pattern of cosmology. In the narratives of climate change the same patterns emerge as well. News stories describe temperature increases of one, two, three, four degrees. In these stories the smallest degree contains magnitudes of consequence. Other stories of micro-plastics in waterways, of vanishing bees, and of dying amphibians undo conventional scales. It is hard to know how much is threatened, how deeply the connections run. We see treatments in films, TV, and books that imagine our demise. At the same time, we may retreat from the magnitude of it all, from the complexity, from the demands of mind and heart suddenly requisite in the task of making sense of the stories of our time. Such reticence isn't unlike the reticence in the reader when the literary page weighs heavily.

It may be that the melancholy initiated and trained through literary exposures best rehearses the affective attunements necessary for living an engaged life on an interconnected orb.

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