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Joseph Conrad first published *Heart of Darkness* in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1899, before republishing it as part of his book *Youth: and Two Other Stories* in 1902. As such, it literally appeared on the cusp of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But its opening paragraph suggests the more complex, philosophical cusp on which it also arose, one that captures the sense of fatalism and human insignificance that characterized an increasingly intense eco-critical perspective of the sixty-odd years around the turn of the century. Conrad's novella opens with an image of inertia verging on apathy: "The *Nellie*, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide."¹ The unfixed setting on the water, the quiet, windless swing of the craft, and the moment just before the recoil of the tide all situate the story about to unfold at the spatial and temporal cusp of a moment. Meanwhile, the human, in this first paragraph, is notably absent. The *Nellie* seems to think and act on its own motivations, if at all, resigned to its bobbing place in the landscape, afloat with nothing to do but wait. One senses an effort on Conrad's part to open his rumination on morality and free will not from a human perspective but through the more dispersed lens of an ecological network within which humans, assuming they exist, are relatively inconsequential.

In *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1877), first entitled *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* in the 1873 edition, Walter Pater suggests we focus on a similar moment of physical life to capture the dispersive outlook of the modern age,

the moment, for instance, of delicious recoil from the flood of water in summer heat. What is the whole physical life in that moment but a combination of natural elements to which science gives their names? . . . Our physical life is a perpetual motion of them—the passage of the blood, the waste and repairing of the lenses of the eye, the modification of the tissues of the brain under every ray of light and sound—processes which science reduces to simpler and more elementary forces. Like the elements of which we are composed, the action of these forces extends beyond us: it rusts iron and ripens corn. Far out on every side of us those elements are broadcast, driven in many currents . . . This at least of flamelike our life has, that it is but the concurrence, renewed from moment to moment, of forces parting sooner or later on their ways.²

Pater here captures a sense of the ecological akin to that of Conrad's opening—air, land, water, and human all melding, morphing, dissipating. Conrad writes, "Only the gloom to the west, brooding over the upper reaches, became more sombre every minute, as if angered by the approach of the sun."³ By the time of this slightly later passage from *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad has introduced some human characters, but they are lethargic, meditative, an extension of the larger context. The environment remains the dominant force, the anthropomorphic "anger" of the gloom the strongest evocation of any sort of energy suggestive of human vitality. While Pater, in his conclusion, captures the intermingling experience of a human's sensorial moment, by the time we get to Conrad's work, the emphasis has shifted to the insignificance of the human individual within vaster scales of time and space.⁴ I do not wish to suggest that this comparison captures a full transition in the modern world from a humanist perspective to a form of posthumanist existentialism, but to note the way in which both individualism and the sense of a loss of selfhood could arise from a similar ontological consideration.

Conrad's and Pater's images eloquently capture this journal's name, *Cusp*. Especially enticing, the authors evoke the growing cultural awareness through the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that diverse ecological forces extend intentionality and influence toward and through humans, as well as a sense of the human as less consequential than what most have usually assumed, what Conrad evokes in

the novella's first breath as an absent referent. Current scholars in eco-studies and the environmental humanities are asking what previously obscured information arises when we engage works from a less confidently human perspective. What occurs if, as Pater's and Conrad's writings encourage, we attempt to read literature, culture, and history through the lens of another species, genus, or ecology? It is not that the authors' main intentions in writing these works were environmental or eco-critical. Rather, eco-criticism offers a methodology, often operating in sync with others, that brings forward anxieties that drive humans to grasp at modes of control, while also exposing the sociopolitical technologies of oppression and domination that are erased by assumptions of superiority that some humans find reassuring and, by repeated performances of privilege, that become essentialized as inevitable. Pater's famous critique of habit as "relative to a stereotyped world" and Conrad's rendering of existential horror both turn, in distinctly different ways, to the ecological to negotiate these sorts of anxieties.⁵

1. Environmentalism on the Cusp

In the United Kingdom, the United States, India, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere, the later nineteenth century was marked by a developing environmentalism that was self-confident and politically determined. The most industrialized nations began to see the negative impacts of these economic developments, and therefore land protection, stewardship, and quality of life became increasingly addressed as critical issues with which a responsible society should engage, with particular locations recognized as offering not only precious historical and cultural records, but also sources of pleasure and opportunities for rest and recreation. In the mid-nineteenth century, John Ruskin emphasized the importance "of self-denial for the sake of posterity, of practicing present economy for the sake of debtors yet unborn, of planting forests that our descendants may live under their shade."⁶ The wish to preserve some treasured image of a simple, agrarian lifestyle or a pragmatic coexistence between nature and economics can be traced through not only environmentally engaged articles and letters by

Ruskin, Octavia Hill, and others but also a combination of sentimental aesthetics, the Arts and Crafts movement, the Land Question, and the back-to-the-land movements and green-ecology lifestyles encouraged by the likes of Edward Carpenter in the UK and Bolton Hall in the US. Nevertheless, by the end of the century, Ruskin's hopeful model of human responsibility and moderation had been extensively undermined by nationalistic arguments enforcing an enhanced quality of urban life and individualist aspirations for prosperity, as well as eco-colonialism and imperialist exploitation for local benefit.

Both the restrained approach encouraged by Ruskin and the acquisitive trajectories of global economics contributed to a collective awareness of humans' co-reliance with the rest of the ecological system in which they operated. First coined by the Darwinian Ernst Haeckel in 1866, the term *ecology* defined a field that was bolstered in Europe and elsewhere by popular interest in the earth sciences, amateur archeology, and other scientific practices. In areas of philosophy and spirituality, inquiries into plant sentience, vitalism, panpsychism, and forms of consciousness other than the human were also gaining attention. Like Pater and Conrad, scientists and many others became increasingly sensitive to the many ways in which ecologies and their strands of influence and alteration remain indeterminate. Notably, much of the literature of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries explored by today's eco-critics, because of its engagement with topics such as planetary disruptions, multispecies co-reliance, or the perspectives of other species, itself often operates in part eco-critically.⁷ That is, poems, stories, novels, and other works of the period often offer commentary not only on humans and their relations within their ecologies, but also on the ways in which these relations were being represented in creative, scientific, and journalistic writing, artwork, and other media. This metatextual tendency leads one to question whether the creative act of representing an open, indeterminate ecology is itself a type of conceptual containment, a way of alleviating anxiety regarding humans' actual lack of knowledge and control.

Addressing the vegetal elements of our ecologies, Michael Marder suggests that we adopt a phenomenological approach that "accommodates plants' constitutive subjectivity, drastically different from that of

human beings, and describes their world from the hermeneutical perspective of vegetal ontology (i.e., from the standpoint of the plant itself). How does the world appear (or not appear) to a plant? What is its relation to its world? What does it strive to, direct itself toward, or intend?"⁸ Meanwhile, through the lens of animal studies, historian Erica Fudge has observed a transition in the field away from a form of history that "focused on human ideas about and attitudes towards animals in which animals were mere blank pages onto which humans wrote meaning: in which they were passive, unthinking presences in the active and thoughtful lives of humans" into one that "traces the many ways in which humans construct *and are constructed by* animals in the past," offering as examples of the latter approach Kathleen Kete's *The Beast in the Boudoir: Petkeeping in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (1994) and Harriet Ritvo's *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (1987).⁹

While different in their conceptual approaches, both Kete's and Ritvo's works locate a key cultural reconceptualization of more-than-human animals within nineteenth-century European culture. *The Beast in the Boudoir* emphasizes the role of the pet in the reification of a coherent middle-class identity, while *The Animal Estate* addresses a range of topics, including pets, the quest for the exotic, and colonialist exploitation. Recognizing the shifting development of the European idea of the animal over centuries, Kete and Ritvo observe that, for various reasons, other species became an especially crucial element of the modern (predominantly urban) human identity.¹⁰ However, at the same time, the period on which *Cusp* focuses is characterized particularly by concerns regarding international and global issues of inhumanity, barbarism, so-called civilizing forces, and societies' loss of any ethical foundation. Which begs one to ask what led to the cusp of these two distinct notions of the human—one, as constructed through its engagement with and reliance on other species, and the other, emphasizing that humans are not necessarily humane and in fact fail to exhibit characteristics assumed to be essential to our sense of self as a species.

2. The Eco-critical Lens and Inhumanity

During the decades surrounding the century's turn, many authors were addressing not only the ecological disorientation that made the self seem to be no more than an embodied site of conflicting identities, but also the related dread regarding the inconsequentiality of the human in whatever form of ethics might exist. The fatalism and defeatism found in the nineteenth-century naturalism of Émile Zola, Guy de Maupassant, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and others, and certain forms of realism such as Conrad's or Thomas Hardy's, would soon lead to even harsher formulations in diverse genres due to, among other factors, the growing sense of colonialist hypocrisy (although imperialism itself continued more or less unabated), the two world wars, and mass murders in the name of nationalism. It is not surprising that, during the decades marking the turn from the nineteenth century to the twentieth, we find a blossoming of literature and art from around the world that engaged with ecological indeterminacy through disorienting, anxious, or even violent frames—including the decadent, neogothic, weird, apocalyptic, catastrophic, war-centered, postimpressionist, expressionist, and Dadaist. The sheer inhumanity marking global politics undermined any sense of an essential human morality, an assumed core that had traditionally reinforced the view that certain humans were in charge of their own progress, as well as that of other civilizations, other species, and the planet at large.

This particular concern is addressed directly by philosopher, novelist, and aesthetic theorist Vernon Lee. While she is currently best known for her decadent and horror fiction, she also wrote many books on travel, nature walks, and the relationship of the human to the natural environment. But Lee was well aware that eco-criticism is not purely about nature, and that one's sense of place engaged not only the organic elements of one's ecology, but also the inorganic, including the cultural. Works such as her 1915 pacifist drama *The Ballet of the Nations*, which she republished in 1920 in an expanded version entitled *Satan the Waster*, effectively demonstrate the correlation between eco-critical thought and broader anxieties regarding barbarism and inhumanity. The 1915 work opens with a recap of the centrality of war in recent history:

With the end of the proverbially *bourgeois* Victorian age, there set in a revival of taste, and therefore of this higher form of tragic art, combining, as it does, the truest classical tradition with the romantic attractions of the best Middle Ages. In South Africa and the Far East, and then in the Near East quite recently, the well-known Ballet-Master Death had staged some of his vastest and most successful productions.

"It is time," said Satan, the Lessee of the World, to "re-open the Theatre of the West."¹¹

The word "ballet" in the title plays on the word "battle" and, by positioning acts of global violence within the context of the performing arts, Lee offers a framework through which humans are encouraged to see ourselves not as independent agents but as pawns in some incomprehensible maneuvering beyond even a global scale. In her introduction to the later version, *Satan the Waster*, she alludes to the horror performances of the Parisian Le Théâtre du Grand-Guignol (Theatre of the Great Puppet), describing *The Ballet of the Nations* as offering

symbolical figures, grotesquely embodying what seems too multifold and fluctuating, also too unendurable, to be taken stock of. A European war was going on which, from my point of view, was all about nothing at all; gigantically cruel, but at the same time needless and senseless like some ghastly "Grand Guignol" performance. It could, as it seemed to me, have been planned and staged only by the legendary Power of Evil.¹²

Lee does not intend to depict conflicts between the "bleeding Nations" themselves, but turns to allegorical terms such as *Satan* and *Evil* to argue for a sense of human thoughts and actions as but puppet-like gestures.¹³ The ecological element here is captured not by a rendering of the organic as mysterious and untamable, but in the inconceivable and thus horrifying realization that there exist forces of engagement greater than us, an open ecology beyond our ken.

In addition to advocating for greater awareness of diverse species and other agents participating in our ecologies, eco-studies is especially important, as Lee suggests, for dislodging some key assumptions scholars today often make regarding culture, identity, society, migration, location, and inclusivity in our engagements with cultural and identity politics. Cary Wolfe observes, for example, that "well-intentioned crit-

ics of racism, (hetero)sexism, classism, and other -isms that are the stock-in-trade of cultural studies almost always remain locked within an unexamined framework of *speciesism*.”¹⁴ On this account, speciesism (whether addressing animals, plants, or both) actually sustains the cultural logic of oppression against which scholars are often attempting to argue, thereby undercutting their own efforts. Scholars such as Chas Clifton, Val Plumwood, Deane Curtin, Hellen Tiffin, and Graham Huggan have worked extensively on the cultural technology by which one such act of subordination, such as racism or misogyny, is sustained through the exploitation and abuse of other participants within the natural environment. Demonstrating the environmental politics that can reside as a structural assumption even in works that do not explicitly analyze it, Plumwood describes the overarching threat of an ecological “coloniser perspective” in language suggestive of Lee’s own allegorical vision:

The logic of domination and the deep structures of dualism create “blind spots” in the dominant culture’s understanding of its relationship to the biosphere, understandings which deny dependency and community to an even greater degree than in the case of human society. . . . The mechanistic world-view means that the master rationality is unable to see in biospheric nature another centre of striving and needs for earth resources, or to see that these needs must limit and bound its own demands.¹⁵

In other words, the dominant order is unable to give up what Plumwood describes as “illusions of identity outside nature.” The very suggestion of the human as partial, as but a component within some larger eco-system arises as a threat that is then inadequately usurped by egotistical panic. What eco-studies approaches allow is a consideration of literary and other works for their acknowledged and unacknowledged rendering of “the individual” as a privileged domain of humans, and only certain humans at that. The conceptual division between the human and other species is characterized as fundamental and yet shifts according to the preferences of those with the privilege of articulating its placement.

We can find this vacillating demarcation in the arguments of the tree portraitist, Sanderson, in Algernon Blackwood’s short story “The

Man Whom the Trees Loved” (1912). The character’s career is based on undermining the assumption of the vegetal as a homogeneous swathe of passive landscape. It remains a standard literary trope to individuate a member of a species as a means of evoking sympathy or empathy for the collective. This can be seen in, for example, Anna Sewall’s *Black Beauty* (1877), Rudyard Kipling’s “Rikki-tikki-tavi” (1894; inspired by a story in the ancient Indian collection of animal fables, the *Panchatantra*), or the pig Wilbur in E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web* (1952). The last of these is rooted in large part in the author’s critical views of factory farming, a process derived from the industrialist ethos that homogenizes both animals as products and human laborers as machines. Blackwood’s portraitist challenges the same logic of homogenization in his investment in approaching trees as individuals. At the same time—musing about the distinctions between the organic and inorganic, or species and other elements—Sanderson notes elements of collectivity that undermines efforts to affirm hierarchized distinctions:

“We’re puzzled by the gaps we cannot see across, but as a fact, I suppose, there are no gaps at all. . . . Behind a great forest may stand a rather splendid Entity that manifests through all the thousand individual trees—some huge collective life, quite as minutely and delicately organized as our own. It might merge and blend with ours under certain conditions, so that we could understand it by *being* it.”¹⁶

Just such an arboreal/human fusion occurs to the titular hero, whose nurturing of trees while in India and Canada results in his being lovingly usurped by the forest in his backyard back in England: “awfully queer, that trees should bring me such a sense of dim, vast living! . . . I wonder . . . whether a tree—er—in any lawful meaning of them can be—alive.”¹⁷

Blackwood’s story brings forward some of the curious conceptual maneuvering within the field of eco-studies itself. Through its methodologies, a scholar might recognize an author’s intentional or unintentional claim for recognizing a more-than-human animal, plant, spirit of place, or other natural force as individual, but they might also recognize an author’s evocation of a universality that problematizes species distinctions and, as has occurred in recent decades, extends rights not

only to other animal species, but to plants, rivers, valleys, and so on. Moreover, just as there may be no thorough means of separating species or the always altering components of an ecology, there are often no gaps between the abuse humans direct at what they see as ecologically other and the oppression and abuse afflicted by certain human sub-groups upon others. And finally, as Blackwood makes apparent in his exploration of inter-species ethics through his character of the portraitist, at the cusp of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries the creative component of eco-criticism was itself already engaged in these mutually enforcing practices of containment and categorization, even if unwillingly. Blackwood reminds us that, while authors and artists from Pater to Conrad grappled with human's agency and sense of individuality, other participants in their ecology were making other decisions, were part of the creative act. As Blackwood's narrator observes, "while [the tree portraitist's] perception of a Tree Personality was true and vivid, his rendering of it might almost approach the ludicrous. Yet the character and personality of that particular tree stood there alive beneath his brush—shining, frowning, dreaming, as the case might be, friendly or hostile, good or evil. It emerged."¹⁸

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NOTES

- 1 Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899); in *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 101.
- 2 Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1877; repr., London: Macmillan, 1902), 233–34.
- 3 Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 104.
- 4 I offer a more extensive discussion of Pater's ecological vision within the context of scientific developments of his period in *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1960–1910: Decay, Desire, and the Pagan Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022). Discussions of Conrad and ecology can be found in Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy, *Green Modernism: Nature and the English Novel, 1900 to 1930* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), and Lissa Schneider-Rebozo, Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy, and John G. Peters, eds., *Conrad and Nature: Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2019).
- 5 Pater, *The Renaissance*, 236–37.
- 6 John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (New York: John Wiley, 1849), 154.

- 7 For recent scholarship exploring scientific methodologies for engaging nonhuman perspectives, see: Karen Houle, "Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics as Extension of Becoming? The Case of Becoming-Plant," *Journal for Critical Animal Studies*, 9, nos. 1 and 2 (2011), 89–116; Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder, *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002); and Carey Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
- 8 Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetable Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 9.
- 9 Erica Fudge, "The History of Animals," in *H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online*, H-Animal, May 25, 2006, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/16560/pages/32226/history-animals-erica-fudge>.
- 10 Animal rights studies has an extensive history of addressing the politics of nonhuman perspectives. Key works within this tradition include: Henry Salt, *Animal Rights Considered in Relation to Social Progress*, 1892 (Clarks Summit, PA: Society for Animal Rights, 1980); Richard Ryder, *Animal Revolution: Changing Attitudes Towards Speciesism*, 1970 (London: McFarland, 1989); and Brian Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
- 11 Vernon Lee, *The Ballet of the Nations*, illus. Maxwell Armfield (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1915), n.p.
- 12 Vernon Lee, *Satan the Waster: A Philosophic War Trilogy with Notes and Introduction* (New York: John Lane, the Bodley Head, 1920), vii.
- 13 Lee, *Satan the Waster*, vii.
- 14 Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 1.
- 15 Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), 194.
- 16 Algernon Blackwood, "The Man Whom the Trees Loved," in *Pan's Garden* (London: Macmillan, 1912), 3–99: 29–31. For a discussion of the colonialist critique to be found in Blackwood's short story, see Elizabeth Chang, *Novel Cultivations: Plants in British Literature in the Global Nineteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019).
- 17 Blackwood, "The Man Whom the Trees Loved," 9.
- 18 Blackwood, "The Man Whom the Trees Loved," 3.