# Victorian Ecologies, Introduction

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As recently as 2015 in a review essay titled 'Where Is Victorian Ecocriticism?', Jesse Oak Taylor was lamenting the seemingly underdeveloped ecological impulse in Victorian studies and the field's belated turn to ecocritical frameworks that had already become commonplace in studies of Romanticism and nineteenth-century United States literature.[1] In subsequent years, however, Victorian ecocriticism has exploded, with four special journal issues on the subject appearing in the year 2020 alone.[2] While the vast array of work now appearing displays, like any robust ecosystem, much internal variation, in general we can characterise recent work in Victorian ecologies as possessing two features that distinguish it from ecocritical work in adjacent fields. First, Victorian ecologies as a field tends to emphasise social and anthropogenic natures and a global, imperial frame, perhaps unsurprisingly considering that Victorian Britain saw the culmination of the Industrial Revolution and the expansion of global empire to unprecedented reaches. Secondly, the field of Victorian ecologies has also shaped, and been shaped by, broader debates in Victorian studies about presentism, and it tends to have an overt interest in drawing the connections between nineteenth-century environmental changes and the many ecological emergencies we face today, including climate change, biodiversity and habitat loss, ocean acidification, and the pollution of air, water, and soil.

Such attunement to present-day ecological crisis is probably the most obvious feature that sets more recent work apart from the earlier, foundational scholarship on which studies of Victorian ecologies continue to draw, such as

[1] Jesse Oak Taylor, 'Where Is Victorian Ecocriticism?' *Victorian Literature and Culture,* 43.4 (December 2015): 877-94.

[2] These include 'The Green Issue: INCS Conference 2020' in *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 42.5 (2020), ed. by Brianna Beehler, Grace Franklin, and Devin Griffiths; the 'Open Ecologies' issue of *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 48.1 (2020), edited by Devin Griffiths and Deanna Kreisel; the 'Victorian Environments' issue of *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 62.2 (Summer 2020), edited by Allen MacDuffie, and Aubrey Plourde; and the 'Placing the Author in Ecologies of Literary Tourism' issue of *Nineteenth-Century Contexts,* 42.4 (2020), edited by Amber Pouliot and Joanna Taylor. Two special issues also appeared in 2018: 'Climate Change and Victorian Studies' in *Victorian Studies,* 60.4 (Summer 2018), edited by me, and the 'Victorian Ecology' issue of *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 26 (2018), edited by Wendy Parkins and Peter Adkins.

Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* (1973), Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots* (1983), and George Levine's *Darwin and the Novelists* (1988). While Beer's book, for example, addresses 'the problem of the future of the earth itself – its survival or decay,' it is primarily focused on what thermodynamics and physics have to tell us about the eventual demise of the planet in the far-off future, whereas recent work on similar topics engages more directly with present-day planetary problems of climate change and fossil fuel addiction, as we see in Allen MacDuffie's *Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination* (2014) and Jesse Oak Taylor's *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (2016).[3] Apart from this key distinction, however, Beer's book actually anticipates many of the more recent directions taken by scholarship in Victorian ecocriticism: her Thomas Hardy chapter, for example, takes up questions of scale and 'the absolute gap between our finite capacities and the infinite time and space of the universe,' which 'burdens Hardy's text with a sense of malfunction and apprehension,' and her chapter on George Eliot's *Middlemarch* stresses the supreme importance Eliot put on literary form: 'In a letter of 1873 George Eliot emphasised the extent to which meaning is expressed through *form* in her fiction' and 'insiste[d] on structure as the bearer of signification and on congruity between semantics and form.'[4] Such quotations convey how more recent studies of scale and form in Victorian ecologies, including key articles by Benjamin Morgan and the essays collected in the 2018 volume *Ecological Form*, descend from the earlier interventions of scholars such as Beer.[5]

How did environmental thinking interpenetrate with the knowledge structures provided by literary genre and aesthetic forms? This question, in particular, has been one of longstanding and continuing interest. Despite different orientations toward present-day crisis and its roots in the Victorian past, most

[3] Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 1983; 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 172. Allen MacDuffie, *Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Jesse Oak Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2016).

[4] Beer, 237, 148.

[5] See, for example, Benjamin Morgan, 'Scale as Form: Thomas Hardy's Rocks and Stars' in *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times* (Pennsylvania, PA: Penn State University Press, 2017): 132-49; and Nathan K. Hensley and Philip Steer, eds. *Ecological Form: System and Aesthetics in the Age of Empire* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2018).

scholars who have turned their attention to the subject of Victorian ecologies have been drawn by the revolutionary transformations in the human relation to the natural world that occurred in the nineteenth century, and by the question of how those changes register in the spheres of art, discourse, and culture. These revolutionary transformations encompassed both the scientific understanding of the world as well as the human assertion of dominance over it. New scientific speculations, as well as new literary and aesthetic forms, provided frameworks for thinking about and perceiving the environment, and in the course of the nineteenth century these enabling frameworks adapted with and alongside the industrialised and globalised natures of the Victorian era. As Nathan Hensley and Philip Steer put it in their introduction to *Ecological Form*, 'Victorian writers experimented with new formal techniques, and generated new models for thinking, in order to comprehend the two massively networked and often violent global systems that organised their experience, and that, we suggest, continue to organise ours: the British Empire and the Industrial Revolution's carbon economy' (4). Together empire and energy transformed the scale of Victorian life and multiplied exponentially the capacities for human exploitation of the natural world, and we remain enmeshed, as Hensley and Steer argue, in the long present of imperialism and fossil capitalism which the Victorians also inhabited. Recent work in the field of Victorian ecologies has sought to explore this legacy, in all its various complex dimensions.

Loosely united, then, around shared concerns about environmental-cultural inheritance and environmental epistemology, the field of Victorian ecologies remains multitudinous in its methods and approaches. Much recent work has drawn, for example, on the broader field of postcolonial ecocriticism. As Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee has argued, early theorists of decolonisation such as Aime Cesaire and Leopold Senghor were in no way inattentive to environmental questions and in fact placed a great deal of emphasis on the politics 'of land, water, forests, crops, rivers, the sea – in other words, on the centrality of the environment to the continuing struggle of decolonisation.'[6] Nevertheless, in Mukherjee's estimation, the academic field of postcolonial studies as it developed in the 1970s and 1980s did not initially pay much attention to environmental questions, until a revival of postcolonial-ecocritical work beginning around 2000. Other recent scholars have worked in the similarly emergent critical idiom of the energy humanities, foregrounding energy systems and the cultural and material

[6] Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English* (London: Palgrave, 2010): 46.

changes wrought by the momentous arrival of fossil capitalism in the early nineteenth century.[7] Other important approaches for recent criticism on Victorian ecologies include Anthropocene studies, literature and science, environmental politics and environmentalism, gender and sexuality studies, animal studies, plant studies, and oceanic studies or the blue humanities. Some of these fields, such as literature and science or gender studies, are in no sense new, but their reading practices are now being brought to bear on ecological and environmental questions in innovative ways.

This special issue brings together five essays by early career scholars who draw variously from these different approaches and whose work, together, showcases the search for new critical methods to help us reinterpret our nineteenth-century cultural inheritance in light of the dismal environmental trajectory of the modern era. The authors discuss paintings and novels, science and the sphinx. Arranged roughly in chronological order, the five articles demonstrate the excellence of early-career contributions to the field of Victorian ecologies; particularly notable is the syncretic work these scholars are doing to unite ecocritical practices and concerns with other critical traditions such as Marxism and feminism, and to bring social-scientific fields such as ecopsychology into the purview of literary studies.

The first essay, 'The Polluted Textures of J. M. W. Turner's Late Works' by Sarah Gould, considers Turner's material practices as a painter and the way that his unorthodox style, and especially his use of impasto, can be understood as an effort to transform painterly craft in order to better represent the air pollution that was becoming increasingly unignorable with the growth of coal-powered industry in nineteenth-century Britain. The ascendance of landscape painting as a genre was coeval with the emergence of the industrial economy, and Gould's essay helps us see how Turner's experimental engagements with the matter of his visual art can be read in terms of these larger industrial and atmospheric transformations. Tracking forward to the current decade in its final paragraphs, 'Polluted Textures' raises unsettling questions about the aestheticisation of climate catastrophe, exploring the human impulse to document our most recent atmospheric calamities using the techniques and forms we have inherited from landscape painting of the past.

In the next essay, Lauren Cameron draws on feminist ecologies and animal studies in her analysis of Anthony Trollope's 1871 novel *The Eustace Diamonds*

[7] See especially Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016).

from his multi-novel Palliser series. Titled 'Gendered Ecologies in Anthony Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds*,' Cameron's article explores Trollope's characterisation of his famous female villain, Lizzie Eustace, against the intellectual context of Charles Darwin's influential works *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871). These works transformed Victorian ideas about humans' place in the natural world and their relation to other living creatures, and they laid new emphasis on sexual selection as a feature of evolutionary ecology. Under Darwin's influence, Cameron argues, Trollope was able to create a new kind of anti-heroine, 'vying for sexual agency in a complicated Darwinian culture, wherein the traditional boundaries between human and animal lack clear meanings.'

In 'A Return to the Origins of Ecology through Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*,' Marie Bertrand discusses a novel published seven years later than Trollope's and describes an author who labored to incorporate new ecological insights into literary form and character in ways quite different from what we see in Trollope. Drawing on the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as well as the emerging field of ecopsychology, Bertrand examines Hardy's account of perception and consciousness in his much-discussed 1878 novel *The Return of the Native* and argues that the work models an ecological consciousness where humans understand themselves in reciprocal relation to the environment around them: 'in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as in Hardy's narrative,' she argues, 'the body is not only a medium to access the world but becomes the world itself through its permeable nature.' Such a feeling of reciprocity, Bertrand argues, is a 'prerequisite for ecological action.'

The final two essays in the special issue move us forward to the late-Victorian period and turn to the new, shorter fictional forms that replaced the three-volume format within which both Trollope and Hardy were writing. First, Corbin Hiday's '"India Isn't Big Enough for Such as Us": Conrad and Kipling's Fictions of Extraction' examines the world ecology of Britain's fossil-fueled economy and its representation in Rudyard Kipling's 1888 story 'The Man Who Would Be King' and Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness*. Reading the late-century moment in which these colonial fictions appeared as 'the apex of intermingled visions of progress and exhaustion,' Hiday brings a postcolonial-Marxist critical approach to bear on two texts that depict – and, in Hiday's argument, diagnose and critique – overseas expansion and extraction and their ruinous environmental impacts at the sunset of the Victorian era.

Lastly, Billie Gavurin's '"Some Old-World Savage Animal": H. G. Wells's White Sphinx and the Terror of Posthuman Time' focuses on a short novel published in between Kipling's and Conrad's works: H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895). Gavurin examines the figure of the sphinx in Wells's novel and the way it engages new understandings from geology and archaeology of deep time and human ephemerality. Through its juxtaposition of human and inhuman timescales, Gavurin argues, the novel engages ecological questions concerning 'what kind of future humanity will create for itself' and 'our ultimate powerlessness to predict or shape environmental outcomes.' Gavurin positions Wells's novel within a rich, fascinating literary and cultural context of thinking about environmental futures, a context that includes Darwin, Egyptology, the Rossetta Stone, John Ruskin, Thomas De Quincey, Helena Blavatsky, and Percy Shelley's 1817 sonnet 'Ozymandias'.

As this last reference to Shelley may remind us, this special issue is heavy on narrative literature with less discussion of poetry, and art history as a field is only represented by Gould's essay; in some ways this is a reflection of Victorian ecologies as a field, which tends, like the rest of Victorian studies, to weigh heavily on the side of fiction, mirroring our primary pedagogical responsibilities at the university level. But exciting ecocritical work is also happening with respect to other genres and disciplines within Victorian studies. Recent ecocritical studies of Victorian poetry, for example, have been published by such scholars as Devin Garofalo, Emma Mason, Ashley Miller, Jesse Oak Taylor, and Daniel Williams, while Sukanya Banerjee and Devin Griffiths have both published groundbreaking ecocritical analyses of nineteenth-century drama.[8] A longer, fuller, more comprehensive special issue would include work in environmental history and the history of science, as well as ecocritical analyses of the literary and cultural productions of colonial writers and artists of color, such as we find in the accomplished scholarship of Sukanya Banerjee and Upamanyu Pablo

[8] On poetry, see Devin Garofalo, 'Victorian Lyric in the Anthropocene' *Victorian Literature and Culture,* 47.4 (2019): 753-83; Emma Mason, *Christina Rossetti: Poetry, Ecology, Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Ashley Miller, 'Ripeness and Waste: Christina Rossetti's Botanical Women' *Victorian Studie*s, 61.2 (Winter 2019): 194-203; Jesse Oak Taylor, 'Mourning Species: *In Memoriam* in an Age of Extinction' in *Ecological Form,* ed. Nathan Hensley and Philip Steer (42-62); and Daniel Williams, 'Down the Slant Towards the Eye: Hopkins and Ecological Perception' *Victorian Literature and Culture,* 48.1 (2020): 127-154. On drama, see Sukanya Banerjee, 'Drama, Ecology, and the Ground of Empire: The Play of Indigo' in *Ecological Form,* ed. Nathan K. Hensley and Philip Steer (21-41) and Devin Griffiths, 'Petrodrama: Melodrama and Energetic Modernity' *Victorian Studies,* 60.4 (Summer 2018): 611-38.

Mukherjee.[9] While a five-essay special issue can hardly be expected to cover the entire range of work in Victorian ecologies, together this issue demonstrates the diverse methodologies and intellectual contexts that are informing discussions of Victorian ecologies and their connection to the environmental crisis today.

Concluding any piece of writing on any environmental subject feels like a fraught and difficult enterprise these days, for it seems to require that one make a prediction about the future. The task feels especially charged when one is concluding the introduction to a special issue that features the work of early-career scholars – the next generation of thinkers, writing brilliant scholarship amidst such precarity and calamity. What kind of benediction to utter in this moment? Should I end on a hopeful note, or a melancholy one? Shift my generic register to utopia, Jeremiad, or apocalyptic Millenarianism? Clear-eyed realism may seem like the right goal, but it is an impossible one to meet, since the future is cloudy and unknown – a work of fiction, at least for now. Concluding an essay on an environmental topic is a reminder that writing is always an act of worldmaking, and we write, today, at a moment when the making of worlds seems particularly audacious, in the face of so much unmaking. As Anna Kornbluh has recently observed, 'We live in destructive times, on an incinerating planet, over institutional embers, around prodigious redundancy between the plunder of the commons and the compulsive echolalia "Burn it all down"'.[10] H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, the subject of the final essay in this issue, is a novel about watching it all burn down: first a forest, then the solar system. But as Darko Suvin perceptively remarks, Wells's greatest legacy for later science fiction writers was his 'rebelliousness against entropic closure,' and the 'basic historical lesson' of his work is that the era in which we live is 'but a short moment in an unpredictable, menacing, but at least theoretically open-ended human evolution under the stars'.[11] If literature, as Kornbluh suggests, is a model for building

[9] For excellent ecocriticism focused on colonial writers of colour, see Banerjee's 'Drama, Ecology, and the Ground of Empire' referenced above, as well as her 'Ecologies of Cotton' *Nineteenth-Century Contexts,* (6 January 2021): 1-15. See also Mukherjee's *Natural Disasters and Victorian Imperial Culture: Fevers and Famines* (London: Palgrave, 2013) and his articles 'Re-charge: Postcolonial Studies and Energy Humanities' in *Reframing Postcolonial Studies: Concepts, Methodologies, Scholarly Activisms*, ed. David D. Kim (London: Palgrave, 2020): 135-55; and '"Yet Was It Human?" Bankim, Hunter and the Victorian Famine Ideology of *Anandamath*' in *Victorian Environments: Acclimatizing to Change in British Domestic and Colonial Culture*, ed. Grace Moore and Michelle J. Smith (London: Palgrave, 2018): 237-58.

[10] Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019): 156.

[11] Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979): 221.

rather than burning, so too is criticism. Let us read these five essays by the light of the stars rather than the fire.