

“AN ALIGNED, TRANSFORMED CONSTRUCTED WORLD”:  
REPRESENTING MATERIAL ENVIRONMENTS IN AMERICAN LITERATURE  
1835-1945

by

MELISSA S. SEXTON

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Department of English  
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

June 2012

DISSERTATION APPROVAL PAGE

Student: Melissa S. Sexton

Title: “An Aligned, Transformed Constructed World”: Representing Material  
Environments in American Literature 1835-1945

This dissertation has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of English by:

William Rossi	Chairperson
Louise Westling	Member
Henry Wonham	Member
Ted Toadvine	Outside Member

and

Kimberly Andrews Espy	Vice President for Research & Innovation/Dean of the Graduate School
-----------------------	---

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

Degree awarded June 2012

© 2012 Melissa S. Sexton

## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Melissa S. Sexton

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

June 2012

Title: "An Aligned, Transformed Constructed World": Representing Material  
Environments in American Literature 1835-1945

This dissertation seeks to avoid two extremes that have polarized literary debate: on the one hand, a strong constructivism that reduces environments to textual effects; and, on the other hand, a strong realism that elides language's constructive power, assuming texts' mimetic transparency. Positioning itself within the ecocritical attempt to reconnect text and environment, my project articulates a constructive vision of material representation that I call "constrained realism." Katherine L. Hayles's "constrained constructivism" emphasizes the constructed nature of scientific knowledge while asserting science's truth; conversely, "constrained realism" re-emphasizes the material real's influence on literature while acknowledging representation's limitations. My project adapts Bruno Latour's work in science studies to literary texts, reconceiving written representation as a dynamic process of human/material interaction.

My reassessment of literary materiality extends to both canonical and neglected American texts that address representational anxieties about materiality. First, I examine how the work of Henry David Thoreau presents the relation between a material world and written text as actively constructed and mutually constituted, a relationship that necessitates Thoreau's self-reflexive engagement with language. A similar dynamic

between material observation and skepticism about language informs Frank Norris's *The Octopus*. Through the poet character Presley's quest to represent the West, this novel questions aesthetic representation's power to shape material conditions. In the cases of William Faulkner and James Agee, the authors' self-reflexive agonizing about language's referential capacity tends to overshadow the material conditions that frame their projects. This dissertation argues that both Faulkner's and Agee's works mask a sense of urgency about the changing material environment of the American South. While Faulkner's fiction develops a concept of "the substance of remembering" in an attempt to understand the hybrid mixture of language and materiality constituting historical memory, Agee's non-fiction demonstrates a similar desire to translate material evidence into text, expressed as the author's commitment to do "what little he can in writing."

By attending to the discursive practices that construct literary representations of the environment, this project argues that texts' representational anxieties and their material concerns can be understood as political projects aimed at changing human relationships to the material environment.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Melissa S. Sexton

### GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene, OR  
Hope College, Holland, MI

### DEGREES AWARDED:

Doctor of Philosophy, English, 2012, University of Oregon  
Bachelor of Arts, English, 2005, Hope College

### AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

American Literature 1840-1940  
Ecocritical theory

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Graduate Teaching Fellow, Department of Composition, University of Oregon,  
Eugene, 2006-2012.

Assistant Director of Composition, Department of Composition, University of  
Oregon, Eugene, 2009-2010.

### GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS:

Sarah Harkness Kirby Award, best graduate student essay, “‘Packing the World  
Into Words’: Ecocriticism and Representations of the World in Thoreau’s  
‘The Bean Field,’” University of Oregon, Spring 2008.

Nominee, Sarah Harkness Kirby Award, “Reading Homosocial Utopia through  
Pastoral Impulse in Melville’s *Billy Budd, Sailor*,” Fall 2007.

Jane Campbell Krohn Fellowship, Department of English, University of Oregon,  
2006-2007.

Graduate Teaching Fellowship, English and Composition, 2006 to present.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Professor William Rossi for his patient and encouraging support in the preparation of this project. His enthusiasm for the work of Bruno Latour and of Henry David Thoreau spurred my own research and writing for the past five years. I also wish to thank Professors Louise Westling, Henry Wonham, and Ted Toadvine for their participation in this project and for the seminars and conversations that refined my critical interests. Additional thanks are due to the members of Mesa Verde; these ecocritical scholars read my work, listened to my presentations, and excited me with their own research. Finally, I want to thank the members of my dissertation work group, who read drafts of my materials and provided support along the way: Taylor Donnelly, Josh Magsam, Nick Henson, Chelsea Henson, Holland Phillips, and Sarah Stoeckl.

This project is dedicated to my two homes: the Sexton family and the Janet Smith Co-Op, who continue to teach me every day about the hard work it takes to mobilize collectives and move towards a truly inclusive political ecology.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION – THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT THINGS: MATERIAL RELATIONS AND IMAGINATIVE TRANSFORMATIONS IN ECOCRITICISM .....	1
II. “PACK[ING] THE WORLD INTO WORDS”: TOWARDS A CONSTRAINED REALISM IN ECOCRITICISM .....	20
Constructed or True? Ecological Risk and the Modern Constitution .....	20
The Emergence of Ecocriticism and the Push for Constrained Realism .....	25
The Science Wars and the Shaming of Constructivism.....	32
<i>The Environmental Imagination</i> and the Recovery of Realism.....	36
Questioning Environmental Realism .....	40
Reference and Representation in the Work of Bruno Latour .....	51
Literary Representation and Perceiving the Real World .....	63
Conclusion: Towards a Constrained Realism in Ecocriticism.....	70
III. “A GOOD WORD FOR THE TRUTH”: HENRY DAVID THOREAU AND THE LITERARY CONSTRUCTION OF THE REAL WORLD .....	74
Critical Responses to <i>Walden</i> and the Problems of Dualism.....	83
“Making the Earth Say Beans”: The Agri-Cultural Mobilization of the World....	92
The Hybrid Ponds .....	106
Conclusion: “Living Poetry Like the Leaves of a Tree” .....	117
IV. “IF THE POETS BECOME MATERIALISED”: THE POLITICAL POTENTIAL OF MATERIAL REPRESENTATION IN FRANK NORRIS’S <i>THE OCTOPUS</i> .....	121

Chapter	Page
<i>The Octopus</i> and the Mussel Slough Affair .....	131
“The Things that Live”: Norris’s Naturalism .....	135
“Absolutely True Poetical Expression”: Dual Accountability in <i>The Octopus</i> .....	139
“These Things I Have Seen”: The Romance of the [Material] Real.....	152
 V. “THE SUBSTANCE OF REMEMBERING”: MATERIALITY, HYBRIDITY, AND HISTORY IN WILLIAM FAULKNER’S <i>GO DOWN, MOSES AND ABSALOM, ABSALOM!</i> .....	165
Critical Responses to History and Materiality in Faulkner’s Fiction .....	173
“Bigger than Any Recorded Document”: The Material/Mythical Woods of “The Bear” .....	176
“Pale Sentence or Paragraph Scrawled”: Dematerializing McCaslin Legacies.....	185
“ <i>Be Sutpen’s Hundred</i> ”: The Material Magic of Language in <i>Absalom</i> .....	196
“At Least a Scratch”: Writing and Material Artifacts .....	204
From Stalemate to Hybridity: Object Lessons for Ecocritics .....	213
 VI. “WHAT LITTLE I CAN IN WRITING”: <i>LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN AND THE ETHICAL POSSIBILITIES OF CONSTRAINED REALISM</i> .....	216
“Honest Journalism”: <i>Praise</i> ’s Rebellion Against Documentary .....	228
“Words Cannot Embody”: Language and the Material World.....	244
“In My Mind’s and Memory’s Eye”: The Contingency of Perception.....	254
“Not by Its Captive but by Its Utmost Meanings”: Endeavors at Truth .....	264
 VII. CONCLUSION – CONSTRAINED REALISM AND POLITICAL ECOLOGY .....	273

Chapter	Page
APPENDIX: ABBREVIATED TITLES OF WORKS FREQUENTLY CITED.....	278
REFERENCES CITED.....	279

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION – THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT THINGS:

#### MATERIAL RELATIONS AND IMAGINATIVE TRANSFORMATIONS IN ECOCRITICISM

Can anyone imagine a study that would treat the ozone hole as simultaneously naturalized, sociologized and deconstructed? A study in which the nature of the phenomena might be firmly established and the strategies of power predictable, but nothing would be at stake but meaning effects that project the pitiful illusions of a nature and a speaker? Such a patchwork would be grotesque. Our intellectual life remains recognizable as long as epistemologists, sociologists, and deconstructionists remain at arm's length, the critique of each group feeding on the weaknesses of the other two.

Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*

A 2011 ExxonMobil commercial called “Unlocking a Century’s Supply of Natural Gas” opens with a smiling scientist reflecting on the ease with which Americans could access natural gas reserves and transform their energy futures.<sup>1</sup> “Things are right under our feet,” he muses, “and all we need to do is change the way we’re thinking about them.” Natural gas appears here as latent potential, energy trapped by inert matter and waiting for human ingenuity to set it free. The commercial reimagines fuel scarcity, changing material lack into a problem of imagination. The search for energy is not a problem of resource availability, since the “things” which provide energy are already “right under our feet.” Rather, discovering energy simply requires us to “change the way we’re thinking” about these material things. For instance, the scientist encourages the viewer to reimagine rocks as containers of potential energy. “We never knew how much natural gas was trapped in rocks,” he claims, enthusing over the technological advances

---

<sup>1</sup> The full commercial is available online at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDfVycbnaBc>>.

that make it possible to see energy within what was once wasted space. The camera pans over rocky landscapes, then cuts away to spacious suburban houses dotted with lights and streets full of cars; this juxtaposition encourages the viewer to imagine empty landscapes as an energy source and as future social space. The barren fields can be transformed into aesthetically pleasing and economically vibrant neighborhoods, and the energy to fuel this transformation lies waiting in the earth itself. All it takes to solve the energy crisis, to access that potential, and to maintain the American standard of living is a little human imagination.

This commercial's defense of existing energy corporations exemplifies a pattern in recent discourse about energy. The problem in this commercial is not about sustainability and lifestyle choices, but about ingenuity and technology; the possible energy shortage we are currently facing is figured not as a material shortage but as a lack of scientific imagination. Such thinking relies on a logic predominant in environmental thought in general: that we need to change the way we *think about things* in order to change our environments. Pushes to pursue technological development and pushes to curtail consumption depend equally on the belief that our attitudes towards the material environment are responsible for environmental problems like the energy crisis. Thus, the answer to these problems is ultimately an imaginative transformation. The commercial focuses not, that is, on the material changes required by the production of energy and the extraction of natural gas but primarily on the power of imagination and innovation. The physical removal and chemical reconstitution of raw materials; the creation of extraction plants, processing plants, and networks of distribution; the relocation of human bodies to provide labor – the ExxonMobil commercial elides all these material transformations by

insisting that “*all* we need to do is change the way we’re thinking” (emphasis mine). However, oil companies encouraging extraction policies are not the only ones focusing on imagination as a way to change the world. The environmental pushes to “Go green,” become “environmentally friendly,” or “Think global and act local” similarly prescribe a change in thinking as a way of transforming material practice and consequently impacting the environment. The future of the planet, whether brought about through the innovations of technoscience or the intervention of environmental activism, requires individuals and society at large to transform their relationship to the material world through a mixture of affect and action.

Environmental rhetoric, then, relies upon a curious mixture of material and affective concerns. In other words, calls to change our relationship to the environment encourage us to change both how we use our environmental resources and how we think and feel about our environments. Thus, criticism of environmental rhetoric needs to address both the material and the affective – on the one hand, biological and economic realities, and on the other, cultural attitudes and perceptions – in order to analyze how “the way we think about things” impacts what we do to the many, many “things” constituting our environments. To understand the environment, we must understand the *things* themselves - the material realities of biological agents and ecosystems, of economic systems and material resources. However, the political decisions we make about environments and the ways we continue to reshape these environments are also based on *how we think*. It is this equally important role of attitude, imagination, and cultural representation that has made space for the environmental humanities and led to the creation of fields such as ecocriticism, the study of literature and the environment that

focuses the theoretical concerns of literary criticism towards human representations of the material world and the more-than-human environment.

Ecocriticism builds on the proposition that cultural narratives and representations impact material conditions, political systems, and human action towards the environment. The way societies choose to use or not use, cultivate or preserve, ignore or worship different environments depends to a large extent on what kinds of environments we value aesthetically and how we imagine our moral and ethical relationship to these environments. In other words, environmental politics relies upon stories about and representations of the environment as much as it relies on ecological understandings of relationships between organisms or economic concerns about resource management. This recognition of representations' power sketches a hopeful role for ecocriticism, suggesting that critical analysis of culture can meaningfully contribute to the struggle for better environmental practice. Material environmental change requires a parallel transformation of environmental representation, and ecocriticism can give us the tools to work towards such representation. Ecocriticism thus investigates the way cultural artifacts, from literary texts to television commercials, influence and register attitudes about the environment. Ecocriticism also intervenes in our thinking about things, asking about the nature of representation and the relationship between the rhetorical, the literary, the imaginative, and the material. In the words of Ursula K. Heise, ecocriticism cultivates a "triple allegiance to the scientific study of nature, the scholarly analysis of cultural representations, and the political struggle for more sustainable ways of inhabiting the natural world" (505).

This triple allegiance is by no means an easy one, however, as “science” is frequently imagined as the opposite of “culture” and “politics.” Commitment to “the scientific study of nature” suggests a belief in the objective truth of scientific data. And if the sciences provide truthful information about the material world, it is only reasonable to use scientific knowledge as the foundation for environmental decisions. In this case, the sciences of ecology and biology would seem to provide a more effective knowledge to inform environmental decision-making than the study of representation or rhetoric. Ecocritics must ask, what does environmental criticism do besides talk about what people like or what people think? Isn’t such cultural analysis less pressingly *true* – or, at the very least, less politically effective – than discussions of what to do with specific things from the environment? While questions about the “realness” of textual analysis and the “objectivity” of science may seem like tired re-hashings of purely rhetorical or disciplinary debates, these are questions ecocriticism has had to reconsider in its pursuit of the allegiance Heise describes. It will never be easy to combine a scientific commitment to a knowable material world; a political commitment to taking action and considering competing interests; and a literary commitment to recognizing subjective positionality, the influence of culture, and the power of language.

Indeed, this combination creates uncomfortable positions, as evident in the mess Bruno Latour describes in the epigraph to this introduction. Latour recognizes that careful environmental thinking requires us to see things as “simultaneously naturalized, sociologized and deconstructed,” but the results of such multi-tiered thinking can be contradictory. Such a transformation to the way we think about things might make our intellectual life unrecognizable, as he fears, by challenging long-entrenched disciplinary

methodologies. However, how else are we to explain environmental problems that have material consequences but are difficult to discern through simple observation, such as the hole in the ozone layer which he contemplates? How else are we to think about politically contentious processes like natural gas extraction, where discussion involves economic concerns, technological capacities, ecological impacts, and aesthetic changes to landscape? How else do we discuss a commercial that uses ecology, technology, aesthetics, politics, and economics to make appeals? How else do we understand environmentalism as a whole, where decisions involve the competing needs of aesthetics, economics, and biology? Beauty, biodiversity, sustainability – these are all potentially powerful concepts for environmental discussion. Yet they are all equally potential liabilities that can contribute to or even veil environmental exploitation. Unrecognizable or not, convenient or not, our thinking about things must address the difficult intertwining of the natural and the social, the cultural and the material.

To “change the way we think about things,” then, turns out to be a tricky proposition, for literary insistence on “deconstructing” problems like the hole in the ozone layer can appear at odds with scientifically motivated belief in this hole’s actual, material existence. Deconstructive or rhetorical analyses seem to undermine the sciences’ claims to capture definitive, objective truth. The desire for objectivity – for a science that lies outside discourse and that cannot be questioned – is at its root a longing for a way to definitively establish the best course of ecological action. Latour describes this longing as a desire to short-circuit the convoluted processes of politics. In *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, he explains how the use of scientific rhetoric in political debate often attempts to replace the struggle of competing human voices with the neutral,

definitive voice of *things*. According to this line of reasoning, if global warming is a concrete thing, a verifiable reality, then political debate will simply stop. The best way to think about things and solve environmental problems would be to escape thinking altogether and simply access the things themselves. Thus, the dangers of political rhetoric, individual interpretation, and competing ethical claims would vanish. Self-evident truth would present itself as the environment told us its needs.<sup>2</sup>

This dream of self-evident truth, accessed through direct contact with the material world, shapes the nature writing tradition as much as the scientific tradition. According to the former, if we could just get out and see the things correctly, by walking through the woods and seeing as writers before us have seen, we would automatically develop a viable environmental ethics; as Timothy Morton explains, this brand of environmentalism's appeal to the power of observation and experience posits that "Ecological awareness would just happen to us, as immersively and convincingly as a shower of rain" (182-83). Dana Phillips expresses nature writing's appeal to accessible, objective truth thus: "The nascent ecocritic has been up early wrestling with abstruse, difficult texts, and once he has seen the light of day and the Wordsworthian 'light of things,' these 'postmodern' texts will figure not as part of the solution, nor as part of the problem, but quite simply as *the* problem he must resolve or, in a concession of defeat, push to one side" (4). But nature writing and problems like global warming both demonstrate that there is nothing automatic about ecological awareness. The things themselves do not provide a stopping point where ethical, ecological behavior becomes uncontested. Rather, political change always demands imaginative transformation as

---

<sup>2</sup> In *Ecology Without Nature*, Timothy Morton uses the term "factual brutalism" to describe this tendency to appeal to an idealized, objective truth that can be located in concrete, observable things (123).

well as contact with things. Whether aesthetically or scientifically motivated, environmentalism uses imaginative transformations to translate material observation into ethical commitment and action. And whether aesthetically or scientifically motivated, environmental rhetoric keeps coming back to the tricky dance between words and things. Therefore, ecocriticism's blend of rhetorical, cultural, and literary analysis can help to clarify the complexity of using scientific facts and appeals to material things in political discourse.

Returning to the ExxonMobil commercial reveals the dense tangle between thinking and things. This commercial is an example of a text that demands analysis of rhetoric, thoughtfulness about material things, and awareness of potential political consequences. It shows us that the insistence that all we need to do is change our thinking to change the world can be used for ecologically troubling purposes and can erase real material consequences from consideration. On the one hand, the dream of self-evident truth shapes its rhetoric. We don't have to *choose* to extract that energy trapped in rocks, the commercial claims; it's been waiting all along, defining the nature of the things it inhabits. We just could not see it. Thus, the development of new natural gas technology will be a way of seeing the things rightly, understanding our environment correctly. On the other hand, the commercial ignores material things and uses the logic of "change your thinking and change the world" to forward less ecologically favorable ends. It appeals both to scientific development and to aesthetic landscapes to argue that current levels of extraction and consumption can be sustained, given sufficient innovation. This commercial imagines the things of the environment as not-yet-activated resources. These things should not be described, experienced, or measured, but *used*. Such an imperative

reveals the political contingency of aesthetic and scientific appeals to ecology and to things. That is, the commercial shows us that we cannot escape political discussion about environmental practice: the self-evidence of things and the power of imagination can both be used to either challenge or support the continued use of non-sustainable energy, and it is rhetoric rather than self-evident material fact that will decide how we use available energy resources.

The commercial not only implies the technological possibility of sustainable energy extraction but also hints at the naturalness of such extraction, depicting the environment as a system of potential energy relations. In this view, material artifacts like rocks become temporary crystallizations of a larger energy flux: why not transform the less-pleasing rocks into more-pleasing networks of transportation and housing? Here, the vision of a web of ever-changing energy naturalizes human extraction processes and posits an easy harmony between social development and sustainable environments. This naturalization in turn points to the ambiguity of terms like “nature” and the uncertainty of their use in environmental rhetoric. If humans are in fact “natural” and should be getting more closely in touch with their natural environment, why shouldn’t we begin to see all human activity as natural, part of the competition for resources and energy in which all life forms participate? Yet such logic ignores the human species’ ability to monopolize resources and reshape ecosystems at a level unmatched by other species. Instead, by marrying technology to the natural world through the conduit of human intellect, the commercial suggests that it would be unnatural *not* to use the evolutionary advantage of ingenuity to tap into the passive resources of the material environment.

The commercial also relies on cultural representations both to support its case and to aestheticize the natural gas extraction process. Not only does the energy *want* to come out; not only is it *natural* for this energy to circulate through human society; but it is *pleasing* for such energy to emerge. The commercial appeals to sentimental visions of an American homeland and to pleasant landscapes, juxtaposing shots of green trees with colorful computer displays, clean suburban streets, and the ever-smiling scientist. Such juxtaposition suggests that the right application of technology can give us our energy and our pretty places, too. While a combination of scientific and aesthetic transformations can encourage sustainable ways of engaging the material world, the same potentials for imaginative transformation can also support industrial development and resource extraction.

The ExxonMobil commercial thus suggests that changing the way we think about things can change our ethical commitments. This ethical ambiguity points out the futility of appealing to science, nature, ecology, or material truth as a way of short-circuiting political debate. And the rhetorical appeals of this minute-long commercial point to the slippery and difficult process of trying to think about and represent “things.” While the commercial exemplifies the political and rhetorical power of appealing to the material, it also demonstrates the way that politics and rhetoric slide away from the supposed self-evidence of materiality. A close analysis of how this commercial legitimizes resource extraction points to the difficult task facing ecocriticism: the need to keep ontological paradoxes like the status of things in mind without abandoning an equal commitment to the realness of environmental problems. In order to critically respond to political appeals like the ExxonMobil defense of extraction, ecocriticism needs to keep thinking – both

about things and about thinking. While recognizing that appeals to “things in themselves” have no guaranteed authenticity or automatic value to sustainable practice, ecocriticism and environmentalism cannot lose sight of material things. We do have to change the way we think about things – learning to see them as the foundation of our appeals to material and scientific truth but also as potential ideological tools mobilized in defense of a wide range of ethical and political positions.

Ecocriticism, as I have sketched above, is one of the fields within the environmental humanities that has influenced the critical redefinition of how we think about things. Wendy Wheeler calls the field a “properly provocative attempt to reframe critical understandings of the relationship between signs, texts, languages, and the world” (139). This dissertation project participates in ecocriticism’s ongoing exploration of language and materiality. In the following chapters, I thread a path between the tyranny of the object Latour and Morton describe and the material elision finally evident in the ExxonMobil commercial. The project thus works towards what Heise calls a “weak constructivist [position] that analyze[s] cultural constructions of nature with a view toward the constraints that the real environment imposes” (512). Latour’s *Pandora’s Hope* and *The Politics of Nature* convincingly argue for the value of such weak constructivist positions, insisting that valid politics – and particularly, valid environmental politics – require us to acknowledge the constructed nature of scientific fact without ignoring the validity of material observation. As a way of holding on to a belief in reality while also acknowledging the contingencies and dangers of construction, Latour argues for process-based attention that focuses on how scientific knowledge develops. Rather than dismissing or idealizing science, a close attention to scientific

process and its use of material things helps to qualify our scientific faith; unless we acknowledge that all knowledge is produced, we start to use things like “energy science” as blunt instruments. According to Latour, material things and material facts need to be considered valid participants in political discussion rather than the ending point or foundation of debate. Rather than accept scientific fact unquestioningly, we must ask ourselves how such facts are being produced and being used.

This project adopts some of the questions Latour and other science studies scholars use to assess the sciences and turns these questions on American literature. In putting scientific knowledge about the environment in dialogue with critical theory and philosophy, science studies has offered a number of convincing arguments about the construction of scientific knowledge within socially normalizing systems, as well as arguments about the sciences’ historical use to forward systems not conducive to “more sustainable ways of inhabiting the natural world” (Heise 505).<sup>3</sup> Cultural representations and political decisions end up impacting how scientific information can be used, and recognizing scientific knowledge as a constructed product rather than seeing it as the objective voice of nonhuman things enables us to accord science an influential rather than all-powerful role in our ecological debates.

In his analysis of the sciences’ construction, Latour demonstrates how scientific knowledge is the product of both material things and human construction, and *Pandora’s Hope* carefully traces the emergence of scientific knowledge from human interaction with material things. *Pandora’s Hope* also documents the creation of texts from scientific

---

<sup>3</sup> *The Science Studies Reader*, edited by Mario Biagioli, gives a helpful overview of the main questions framing inquiry in science studies, including historical, sociological, and philosophical interrogations of the sciences as well as examinations of the relationship between the sciences, textual representations, and the natural world.

research, making a case for the material construction of scientific writing. His work models a way of reading texts that accounts for their construction without disavowing all relationship between written representation and the material world. This project insists that a similar accountability to both material reality and to literary construction can be valuable for literary criticism. While not all texts exhibit a primary interest in representing the world as it is or basing artistic creation in material fact, there are texts that do, including such diverse texts as the nonfiction nature writing treated in first wave ecocriticism, the realist fiction of the American nineteenth century, and even experimental historical fiction from the post-modern and contemporary periods. But while science studies has emphasized the constructed nature of scientific knowledge as a counter to the uncritical acceptance of the sciences as “real,” up until recently, ecocriticism has emphasized literature’s potential for representing the real as a counter to the predominant assumptions of poststructuralist critical theory.

This project positions itself within the realist ecocritical tradition best exemplified by Lawrence Buell’s 1995 *The Environmental Imagination*. Like Buell, this project insists that literary criticism has prioritized aesthetic, ideological, or imaginative concerns over literary projects that strive to represent accurately and intervene politically. Ecocriticism has provided a much-needed correction to this theoretical asymmetry, capitalizing on growing cultural urgency regarding the material and cultural environmental crises of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century in order to reinsert the political potential of material representation into the critical conversation. But fifteen years after Buell’s seminal ecocritical work challenged the primacy of textuality and the futility of reference, ecocritical debate continues to go around and around the

question of representation: can words represent things, or is the connection between language and the material world only an arbitrary projection? The development of weak constructivist positions to which this project contributes continues to challenge the usefulness or accuracy of ontological dualisms that begin by positing an inherent division between words and things and that end by implying a fundamental separation between the ideal realm of human thought and the material realm of the natural environment.

The solution that science studies offers and that this project adapts is to focus on processes of construction, showing how language, knowledge, and texts are human-made but also emphasizing how they are made out of encounters with the material world. By recognizing that “constructed” is not the opposite of “real,” ecocriticism can assert that texts are able to transmit accurate, factual information about the material world and make political interventions in environmental questions that go beyond the simple reproduction of ideology.

Chapter II summarizes some major ecocritical texts that engage with questions of material representation, constructivism, and realism. The chapter explores ecocriticism’s development in the aftermath of the Science Wars of the 1990s, arguing that the ecocritical reassertion of material reality responds directly to the tendencies of post-structuralist, postmodern theory to downplay texts’ interest in or ability to represent the material world. The chapter sketches a history of representational debate in ecocriticism and explores potential theoretical development, drawing on work in environmental aesthetics, phenomenology, and science studies. I use Bruno Latour’s process-based exploration of scientific representation and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s process-based exploration of perception to imagine real/constructed visions of the material world. Both

of these thinkers argue that we get caught in a reductive binary of language and materiality when we ignore the processes contributing to our knowledge of the world. When we pay attention to these processes, however, we can see that we never leap from things to words or from an environment to a text. Instead, observation, experimentation, transformation, and movement allow us to develop knowledge of the world over time and translate this knowledge into language and textual representations. I adapt this attention to historicity, process, and construction, as well as Katherine L. Hayles's concept of "constrained constructivism," to offer what I call a "constrained realist" approach to literary studies: a belief that, while fully aware of texts as cultural, linguistic constructions, we can also insist on their potential to engage material environments.

The remaining chapters focus on American texts from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century whose interest both in material environmental realities and in the complications of material representation could be categorized as illustrations of constrained realism. While the project situates itself within contemporary theory and present-day environmental representation, it focuses on a historical period that was critical to the development of American environmental rhetoric. The dissertation thus extends its consideration of material representation to four Anglo-American authors from the period between 1835 and 1945. Each author is shown to have focused on a contemporary environmental problem. In *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau, writes against the increasing industrialization of the Concord area and challenges humans to rethink their relationship to the nonhuman world. In *The Octopus*, Frank Norris explores the industrialization of the wheat industry in California and the resulting exploitation of ranchers, farmers, and lower-class workers. In *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses*,

William Faulkner writes about the post-bellum collapse of the Southern economy as well as the deforestation of the post-plantation South. Finally, in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, James Agee is haunted by the question of how best to represent the worlds of three poverty-stricken tenant families in rural Alabama, farming amidst national depression and environmental disaster in the mid-1930s.

While all of these writers rely upon realistic depictions of the environment to make critiques, they also all demonstrate anxiety about the possibilities and limits of representation. Their texts integrate theoretical questions about language's success or failure with political questions about how best to represent the material world in order to change existing social as well as ecological conditions. Each of these authors has also been at the center of critical debates about the relationship between environmental and textual concerns. How do Thoreau's philosophical flights of fancy and his rhetorical reduction of his two years' stay at Walden Pond to the single symbolic year of *Walden* affect the accuracy of his environmental depiction? How much should we emphasize *The Octopus*'s connection to historical events of the Mussel Slough incident and the development of the California railroad systems? Is Faulkner merely interested in the play of language, and if so, how do we understand the close relationship that exists between his invented Yoknapatawpha County and historical Mississippi? Finally, what do we make of Agee's seemingly conflicting commitments to ethical, political representation of the tenant farmers and to self-reflexive, tortured prose? All of these questions suggest that the complicated relationship between material environments and language is a central concern pervading these literary texts.

Chapter III explores one of the key writers for first wave ecocriticism and for Buell's own realist revision, Henry David Thoreau. The chapter explores how Thoreau's *Walden* self-consciously plays with the relationship between text, experience, and world, using nonfiction to depict the processes by which an author transforms the actual world into the textual. At the same time, however, Thoreau's work clearly encourages readers to change the way they think about the world, demanding that they recognize how their own economic and political decisions contribute to changes such as the deforestation of the Walden area. Thoreau playfully imagines the world as textual and carefully interrogates how his escape into closer contact with the things of his world leads to writing as well as clearer knowledge.

Chapter IV turns away from nonfiction to explore historical and realist fiction, focusing on Frank Norris's *The Octopus* as an example of work that carefully balances material concern, historical grounding, and literary artifice, all in service of creating a politically powerful, ethically thoughtful, and literarily successful work criticizing the emerging railroad trusts' influence on California agriculture. By making a poet and a potential activist the central character of the novel, Norris explores how textual creation impacts political action and how both rely upon material things.

Chapter V continues the exploration of historically based fiction by focusing on William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* and *Absalom, Absalom!*. Faulkner's creation of an imagined county based closely on a real one, as well as his dual interest in historical events and the failures of language, demonstrate his novels' fundamental interest in the relationship between material reality and literary representation. These novels' obsessions

with the processes of memory and the role of material artifacts mirror the critical concerns of this project as a whole.

Finally, in Chapter VI, the project returns to nonfiction by examining writer James Agee and photographer Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Agee adopts Faulkner's tortured and self-referential style to describe his own experience staying with three tenant families. His need to speak in order to represent the families and the lands that he has seen, paired with his uncertainty about the ethical possibilities of language, returns us to our initial questions about thinking and things: can we write about things in such a way as to represent them accurately, or are we always just mobilizing things to use them for our own political purposes? Do the things themselves tell us something true about the world in which we live? How should we think about – and write about – things in order to be ethical and to stop abuse of the environment?

Agee's anguished commitment to do "what little I can in writing" and his loyalty to both detailed material representation and to self-effacing awareness of language's failures help to contextualize the difficult position ecocriticism faces (10). The environmental problems motivating ecocriticism are very real. Very real things are going to have to change in our relationship to the material environment if we are going to maintain human society, protect other species, and keep an inhabitable environment; such change is indeed going to require us to change the way we're thinking. But in changing our thought, we have to be careful to really think about *things* – environmental things and material things. Thoreau, Norris, Faulkner, and Agee give us lots of ideas and lots of language, but their works show us that ideas and texts never exist apart from events and actions and things. It does not "just" take an idea for us to have energy security and

economic prosperity. We are going to need lots of intellectual creativity to secure a sustainable future, but we have to make sure that the real processes and effects of our decisions are being depicted when we enter into the political discussions of how to fuel such futures. By beginning with environmental texts and material environmental problems a little further removed from our current political sense of crisis, we can begin to hone a delicate rhetorical approach that respects how much *thinking* fuels our actions while also insisting that, rather than stay lost in thought, we need to turn our thoughts to things as well.

## CHAPTER II

### “PACK[ING] THE WORLD INTO WORDS”:

#### TOWARDS A CONSTRAINED REALISM IN ECOCRITICISM

To give a sufficiently generous account of literature’s environmental sensitivity, we need to find a way of conceiving the literal level that will neither peremptorily subordinate it nor gloss over its astigmatism.

Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*

We have taken science for realist painting, imagining that it made an exact copy of the world. The sciences do something else entirely – paintings too, for that matter. Through successive stages they link us to an aligned, transformed, constructed world.

Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*

#### **Constructed or True? Ecological Risk and the Modern Constitution**

Michael Crichton’s 2004 novel *State of Fear* stirred plenty of controversy among scientists and environmentalists alike for its skeptical depiction of climate change and institutional science.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the novel, Peter Evans, a lawyer for multi-millionaire clients and their environmental organizations, becomes increasingly skeptical about the reality of climate change. Evans’s growing skepticism stems in part from his introduction to a world of espionage and conspiracy; his legal work sends him stumbling into contact with a terrorist group that engineers catastrophic climate events intended to fool the media into believing climate change is real. Under the tutelage of John Kenner, a skeptical physicist and paramilitary operative, Evans questions not only terrorist-

---

<sup>4</sup> Challenges to Crichton’s novel include Peter Doran’s *New York Times* article “Cold Hard Facts,” where he claims, “I would like to remove my name from the list of scientists who dispute global warming”; Myles Allen’s *Nature* review “A novel view of global warming,” which challenges the poor science of Crichton’s novel and rejects the public reception of it as “a serious contribution to the climate-change debate” (198); and Harold Evans’s “Crichton’s conspiracy theory,” which claims that the novel misunderstands scientific “consensus” as inherently subjective and uses this “flawed” understanding of human science to dodge responsibility for anthropogenic climate problems. On the other hand, Senator James M. Inhofe asked Crichton to speak to the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, of which he is chair, and made *State of Fear* “required reading for this committee” (Janofksy).

engineered environmental catastrophes, but also the charts, graphs, and scientific interpretations fed to the public through the media. Thus, beneath the novel's conspiracy theory lies a critique of scientific research and its effect on public opinion. As Myles Allen put it in a review in *Nature*, "The central thesis of the book is that we scientists are collaborating with the environmental movement, bending facts in a cavalier manner to fit our mad global-warming theories — and when the facts won't bend far enough, we make them up" (198). *State of Fear* rejects the fabricated nature of scientific facts and longs to access environmental realities without the interference of politics. The novel's central question, voiced by Kenner, is, "If something is real, if it is a genuine problem that requires action, why does anybody have to exaggerate their claims? Why do there have to be carefully executed media campaigns?" (272). If climate change is real, that is, the facts of climate change should speak for themselves and there should be no need for environmental rhetoric.

The novel thus argues that collusion with politics and culture invalidates science. At the novel's end, millionaire and environmental activist George Morton even gives up ecological activism in favor of starting a utopian organization that purifies science from politics and human interests – a dream echoed by Crichton's own appendix, "Why Politicized Science is Dangerous" (631). Encouraging readers to keep their facts and their opinions neatly separated, Crichton argues that "the intermixing of science and politics is a bad combination" (638). The popularity of and controversy over *State of Fear* shows that such debates about the construction of scientific facts and about science's ability to describe the "real world" can affect public perceptions of environmental problems. Crichton's advocacy for objective, apolitical science was appealing. While *Nature* and

the BBC were quick to dismiss Crichton's claims as conspiracy theories or the product of scientific ignorance, some institutions embraced Crichton's theories as a way of debunking climate change, suggesting that his rejection of political science resonated with the American public.<sup>5</sup>

But according to Bruno Latour, Crichton's dream of an apolitical, objective science does not describe how the sciences actually work and cannot provide a viable model for ecological practice. In *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, Latour explains, "We have no choice: politics does not fall neatly on one side of a divide and nature on the other. From the time the term 'politics' was invented, every type of politics has been defined by its relation to nature" (1). Latour attributes the persistent cultural impetus to separate science and politics, clearly evident in *State of Fear*, to what he calls "the modern constitution" (*Modern* 32). He argues that the need to purify two separate realms – an objective nature and a subjective culture – defines "modern" reality and facticity. "Modernization," he explains, "consists in continually exiting from an obscure age that mingled the needs of society with scientific truth, in order to enter into a new age that will finally distinguish clearly what belongs to atemporal nature and what comes from humans" (*Modern* 71). This division reaches its logical extreme in the purification of science, the study of "nature," from any fields that study human thought: politics or the humanities, for example. But Latour argues that this purification is at odds with the actual practices of the sciences, which develop knowledge

---

<sup>5</sup> According to Evans, "the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy, honoured Crichton with an invitation to Washington to address its members - not on the novel, but on science policy in the 21st Century." Allen argues, "It is a sad indictment of the image of modern science that many readers will find this thesis entirely plausible, even if they don't buy the specific scenario of ecoterrorists setting off a train of synthetic natural disasters to provide mood music for an international climate conference" (198).

by creating hybrids of the natural and the social.<sup>6</sup> Ecological politics are not misguided or deceptive when they mix political and scientific questions, but are reflecting the messy hybrid state of the lived-in environment. Demanding that “real” ecological problems be defined by objective and apolitical science sets up a world where no ecological problems can meet the standards of truth and where no proposed solution can escape accusations of ideological bias or subjectivity. Crichton’s proposed purification thus leads to a number of questions about how we understand the environment and truth: are constructed things *true*, and is there anything in the larger environment that is *not* constructed?

While Latour insists that scientific and political questions cannot finally be separated, the desire for purified realms of science and society permeates real world discussions about environmental politics, not just novels. While Crichton’s climate conspiracies are easily dismissed, it is harder to escape the nagging notion that the ‘subjectivity’ of politics compromises scientific descriptions of the ‘real’ world. It can be difficult to think outside of the seemingly fundamental dualism between a real, material world independent of humans and an imposed world of human concepts, ideas, and language. As an example of how deeply the modern constitution affects thinking, Latour begins *Pandora’s Hope* by describing a strange conversation that he had at an interdisciplinary conference. A scientist asked Latour, “Do you believe in reality?” and looked genuinely relieved when Latour answered, “But of course! [. . .] What a question! Is reality something we have to believe in?” (1). This question prompted Latour to ask

---

<sup>6</sup> Latour explains the “modern constitution” as a series of paradoxical “guarantees” that, when considered simultaneously, reveal the fundamental problems with nature/society and subject/object divides. After all, he argues, Nature is both “not our construction” and “our artificial construction of the laboratory” (*Modern* 32). The paradox is that “even though we construct Nature, Nature is as if we did not construct it” (32). The desire to evade such paradoxes drives thought into ever stricter separations of nature and culture: “Nature and Society must remain absolutely distinct” (32). But Latour insists, “The language that transports politics outside of science is precisely what we need to understand and explain” (16).

what conditions could have led to a situation where a scientist expects such a nonsensical answer. Latour realizes that the scientist's skepticism stems from the "modern constitution[al]" separation of the human from the natural world. Under the terms of this purification, Latour's work, which argues that the sciences are constructed, seems to imply that science is untrue.<sup>7</sup> Here, then, Latour confronts the same question that plagues Crichton's novel: can we know the world truly – and speak meaningfully about its conditions – if we know it through constructed processes and speak about it through human language?

Crichton's impossible science and Latour's inquisitive scientist friend point to the continuing need to rethink what science is and how science works, and also what language is and how texts work. If we are committed to understanding ecological problems like climate change – problems that both have material effects and demand political action – then we need different visions of politics, language, representation, and science. The need to make political decisions about the material world challenges common-sensical dichotomies such as science/politics, nature/culture, text/world, and subject/object. If we believe that environmental problems do not, as John Kenner wishes, simply present themselves and automatically generate ecological action, then we must strive to understand how rhetoric, texts, and politics contribute to the development of ecology, using the word here to mean both the scientific study of the environment and the political struggle to develop more sustainable relationships with this environment.

---

<sup>7</sup> Latour argues that he does believe in the factualness of the sciences, but he does not think that the strict separation between subject and object, science and politics, adequately explains how science truly works. However, he realizes, "What I would call 'adding realism to science' was actually seen, by the scientists at this gathering, as a threat to the calling of science, as a way of decreasing its stake in truth and their claims to certainty" (*Pandora* 3).

The move towards “political ecology” by many environmental thinkers, including Latour, suggests that the pairing of science and politics Crichton despises is not in fact a danger but rather a necessity.<sup>8</sup> Thus, instead of accepting politics, language, and texts as inherently disconnected from the material world, Latour asks not only if science can know the world but also if “our representations [can] capture with some certainty stable features of the world out there” (*Pandora* 13). Latour’s rejection of conventional dichotomies moves away from a science of objective material fact, instead imagining scientific reality as *constructed*. By providing a model that validates scientific representation, Latour’s work also provides a way of understanding other textual constructions as something more real than mimetic models, second-hand representations, or weak reflections of the environment.

### **The Emergence of Ecocriticism and the Push for Constrained Realism**

A Latourian challenge to the modern constitution and to conventional models of representation thus proves useful to ecocriticism, the field of literary study dedicated to both a materially real world and to cultural representations of environment. Cheryll Glotfelty’s introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* traces ecocriticism’s emergence to a series of professional developments in the mid-nineties. While the origins of ecocritical inquiry can be traced back to literary criticism from the sixties and seventies, with the list including Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964), Roderick Nash’s *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967), Raymond

---

<sup>8</sup> In *Politics of Nature*, Latour explains, “we cannot choose whether to engage in political ecology or not; but we can choose whether to engage in it *surreptitiously*, by *distinguishing* questions of nature and questions of politics, or *explicitly*, by treating those two sets of questions as a single issue that arises for all *collectives*” (1). Texts that similarly challenge conventional separations of nature and culture in pursuit of political ecology include Timothy Morton’s *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*; Timothy Luke’s *Ecocritique: Contesting the Politics of Nature, Economy, and Culture*; Patrick Curry’s “Nature Post-Nature”; Dana Phillips’s “Is Nature Necessary?”; and Kate Soper’s *What is Nature?: Culture, Politics, and the non-Human*.

Williams's *The Country and the City* (1973), Joseph Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival* (1974), and Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* (1975), the solidification of diverse environmental interests into something like a coherent field did not occur until later (Heise 505; Buell *Future* 13-15). Of particular importance to the field's emergence were the 1991 MLA special session "Ecocriticism: The Greening of Literary Studies," organized by Harold Fromm; the 1992 American Literature Association symposium, chaired by Glen Love; the formation of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) at the 1993 annual meeting of the Western Literature Association; and the 1993 establishment of the journal *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature and the Environment (ISLE)* (Glotfelty xviii).

But while these events signaled ecocriticism's "emerge[nce] as a recognizable critical school," this school contained a heterogeneous collection of critical methodologies and theoretical approaches (Glotfelty xviii). Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* sketches the variety of positions evident in ecocritical work, including deep ecology, ecofeminism, social ecology and eco-Marxism, and Heideggerian ecophilosophy (16-32). Buell separates ecocriticism's interests into two categories, identifying a "first wave" of ecocriticism with nature-positive recuperations "appeal[ing] to the authority of experiential immersion and the efficacy of practice over against the authority of 'theory'" (*Future* 6-7). By contrast, his "second wave" of ecocriticism reflects a circumspect engagement with theory, including more emphasis on nature as a sociocultural construction and recognitions of writing about nature as equally constructed. Thus, "a quest for adequate models of inquiry" led second-wave ecocriticism to engage with "Cybernetics, evolutionary biology, landscape ecology, risk theory, phenomenology,

environmental ethics, feminist theory, ecotheology, anthropology, psychology, science studies, critical race studies, postcolonial theory, [and] environmental history” (*Future* 10).<sup>9</sup>

Yet these wide-ranging approaches shared a commitment to rethinking conventional textual relationships with the more-than-human world. As Glotfelty explains, “Regardless of what name it goes by, most ecocritical work shares a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits” (xx). Ecocriticism thus responded to increasing ecological risk and destruction by insisting that literary critical “work as usual seems unconscionably frivolous” (Glotfelty xxi). Rather than press ahead with “work as usual,” many ecocritics found it necessary to question literary models of representation that “efface the world,” as Buell describes (*Imagination* 5). Motivated by a threatened environment, ecocritical approaches figured the re-theorizing of representation as a political act, a way to “rescue a sense of the reality of environmental degradation from the obfuscations of political discourse” (Heise 505). As Buell argues in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*,

A number of ecocritics looked to the movement chiefly as a way of ‘rescuing’ literature from the distantiations of reader from text and text from world that had been ushered in by the structuralist revolution in

---

<sup>9</sup> While Buell’s “first” and “second wave” classifications have gained favor in present-day ecocritical discourse, Glotfelty offers an alternative categorization. She modifies Elaine Showalter’s model of feminism’s development in order to categorize ecocritical interests as a series of progressing stages: the first stage of ecocriticism focused on “how nature is represented in literature” and raised consciousness by identifying natural tropes and stereotypes perpetuated by cultural representations; second-stage ecocriticism attempted to “recuperate the hitherto neglected genre of nature writing” as well as “environmentally enlightened works” from poetry and fiction; Glotfelty’s third stage of ecocriticism attempted to more rigorously engage theory, from post-structuralist critiques of nature’s construction to pro-science formulations of “ecological poetics” or interdisciplinary collaborations (xxii-xxiv).

critical theory. These ecocritical dissenters sought to reconnect the work of (environmental) writing with environmental experience [. . .]. (6)

Like the concerned scientist questioning Latour, ecocriticism asked if literary studies truly believed in the reality of the world anymore.<sup>10</sup> Such belief was necessary for ecocriticism to become “part of the solution” to escalating environmental crisis (Glotfelty xxi). Thus, as Kate Rigby explains, “For the ecocritic, it is vital to be able to say, with Kate Soper, that ‘it is not language that has a hole in its ozone layer; and the ‘real’ thing continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier’” (4).

Thus, ecocriticism needed a model of reference that acknowledged the realness of the world while also respecting its difference from textual representations. As Buell explains, “To give a sufficiently generous account of literature’s environmental sensitivity, we need to find a way of conceiving the literal level that will neither peremptorily subordinate it nor gloss over its astigmatism” (*Imagination* 90). But this meant a change in critical focus and methodology, since

investigat[ing] literature’s capacity for articulating the nonhuman environment is not one of the things that modern professional readers of literature have been trained to do or for the most part wish to do. Our training conditions us, on the contrary, to stress the distinction between text and referent. (*Imagination* 10)

---

<sup>10</sup> Numerous examples of the move to reconnect with a real world appear in the 1999 *PMLA* “Forum on Literatures of the Environment.” Michael P. Cohen sums up this move clearly: “environment must be conceived of as more than [. . .] setting. Reading human beings into and out of texts is an activity that goes on in a real world humanity inhabits, a real world undergoing, right now, significant climate change, as a result of concrete human artifacts” (1092).

To lessen the importance of this distinction, Buell's work encouraged environmental criticism to re-think ontological divides between subject and world, initiating what Dana Phillips called a movement of "ecocritics of the realist stripe" that attempted to balance constructivist claims about language with belief in the material reality of environments (16). But "the challenge for ecocritics [was] to keep one eye on the way in which 'nature' is always in some ways culturally constructed and the other on the fact that nature really exists" (Garrard 10). Similarly, ecocritics also had to keep one eye on the way in which literary texts are culturally constructed and the other on the fact that the material world these texts describe also exists. This multi-directional vision invites comparison between ecocriticism and science studies, as ecocriticism finds itself confronting the same poles and purifications that Latour identified as the products of the modern constitution.

Like the sciences, ecocriticism recognizes a real world with real problems that demand human response. But ecocriticism also recognizes the influence of discourse, language, and ideology on human understandings of the environment. A viable theory of environmental representation must be situated between, on the one hand, a strong constructivism that reduces environments to textual effects, and, on the other hand, a strong realism that elides language's constructive power, assuming texts' mimetic transparency. To acknowledge the influence of discourse without "denying the extra-discursive reality of nature," ecocriticism needs models of reference that escape dichotomies of text and world (Soper 8). In this chapter, I argue that this parallel need in both ecocriticism and the sciences invites the extension of Latourian models of reference to ecocritical assessments of representation. By focusing on the production of scientific knowledge, Latour demonstrates that this knowledge is both *constructed* and *real*.

Knowledge is neither the projection of the human mind nor the self-evident testimony of objects, but involves mobilizations of the nonhuman and human world.<sup>11</sup>

With this attention to construction and process, Latour's work offers a model of what Katherine L. Hayles calls "constrained constructivism" (33). Hayles concedes that the human mind cannot know the world absolutely, but she also insists that the mind is not free to project just any invention onto the world. The material world imposes constraints on possible interpretations and understandings:

Constrained constructivism points to the interplay between representation and constraints. Neither cut free from reality nor existing independent of human perception, the world as constrained constructivism sees it is the result of active and complex engagement between reality and human beings. (33-34)

While insisting on the shaping role of human activity and language, constrained constructivist accounts limit the shaping influence of language, mind, or culture.

But while Hayles's "constrained constructivism" emphasizes the constructed nature of scientific knowledge as a counter to overly generous accounts of scientific empiricism and objectivity, ecocritical theory offers a correction in the opposite direction. Faced with literary scholarship's general skepticism towards notions of realism and reference in the 1990s, early ecocritical works such as Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* revived realism in order to counter literature's constructivist leanings. Buell describes how, at the time of ecocriticism's emergence, "All major strains of

---

<sup>11</sup> As I elaborate later in the chapter, Latour replaces the idea of a "connection" between world and text or of a one-to-one referential correspondence, describing instead process-oriented ideas like *mobilization* and *translation*. Such terms reflect the active engagement required of both humans and nonhumans in order to generate successful representations.

contemporary literary theory [. . .] marginalized literature's referential dimension by privileging structure, text(uality), ideology, or some other conceptual matrix that defines the space discourse occupies apart from factual 'reality'" (86). Within this theoretical paradigm, environmental realities recorded in literature risked disappearing into pure textuality. To counter this risk, Buell argues that "the claims of realism merit reviving not in negation of these myths but in counterpoise, so as to enable one to reimagine textual representations as having a dual accountability to matter and to discursive mentation" (92). This turn towards realism also countered the way overly constructivist positions "play [. . .] into the enemy's hands by obfuscating the material reality of environmental degradation" (Heise 512).

Positioned within this ecocritical return to realism, this chapter argues for a constructive vision of material representation that I call "constrained realism." Derived from the science studies work of Latour and Hayles, this model directs attention to the processes producing literary texts, insisting that we need not imagine text and world as opposite poles in a dichotomy when we pay attention to the "active and complex engagement between reality and human beings" (Hayles 34). Like constrained constructivism, then, constrained realism offers a viable alternative to the ontological dualism of text and world. However, conversely to Hayles's "constrained constructivism," I assert that literary texts face a more pronounced emphasis on constructivism and a more pronounced challenge to realism than the sciences; while Hayles injects a limited constructivism into the overly realist discourse of the sciences, ecocriticism injects a limited realism into the theoretical emphasis on construction and discourse. But to fully understand the value of this model and to distinguish it from

existing ecocritical discussions of representation requires a brief survey of ecocriticism's theoretical development, beginning with the field's emergence in the midst of a series of vicious academic debates about reality and representational language known as the Science Wars.

### **The Science Wars and the Shaming of Constructivism**

As Heise documents, literature and environment studies emerged in the midst of the Science Wars and hence in the midst of a rigidly reaffirmed, polemical opposition of material reality and textual construction. "Born in the shadows of [the controversy] over representation and reality" that emerged between science and theory in the 1990s, ecocriticism had disciplinary reconciliation as well as theorizing to accomplish if it was going to assert that real environmental problems exist outside of textual or ideological effects. C. P. Snow famously described the tension between science and the humanities as the struggle between two cultures, a formulation Latour repeats when he argues that science studies "are situated [. . .] in the no man's land between the two cultures" (*Pandora* 17). Conflict between the sciences and the humanities flared up in the 1990s with a number of public challenges to the authority of the sciences and a number of responses accusing the humanities of relativism. Stephen J. Gould describes these Science Wars as

a harsh conflict pitting realists engaged in the practice of science (and seeking an absolute external truth progressively reachable by universal and unbiased methods of observation and reason) against relativists pursuing the social analysis of science (and believing that all claims about external truth can only represent social constructions [. . .]). (259)

To some extent, these caricatures reproduce the dichotomies of Latour's modern constitution, insisting that knowledge of the world is either social or real, but clearly not both. The caricatured humanities of this debate are lost in language games; society is omnipresent and everything can be reduced to a construction, thereby deprived of any 'realness.' The caricatured sciences become a blunt instrument to reinforce the social power of existing institutions and to camouflage this ideological capacity via appeals to material fact.

The Science Wars thus illustrate the two competing theories of language and the world that Latour identifies as *realist* and *constructivist* (*Pandora* 30). The sciences are predicated on a realist theory of representation, assuming that language in some way *refers* to the world. In other words, there is some *correspondence* between a word and the thing it represents. An ecosystem, an atom, or a chemical compound described in a scientific report is not primarily an imaginative creation, but a reference back to a material object observed within a rigorously limited set of conditions. The material thing is primary; language is secondary; and reference is a transparent process. Things practically speak for themselves. By contrast, constructivism posits that meaning does not pre-exist language. Rather, meaning emerges from the interrelationship of words, and things have no essential relationship to the language used to describe them. Given this separation of language from the material world, human knowledge becomes contingent, constructed out of language.

This constructivist insistence on contingency appears to threaten scientific claims about the reality of the world. In this framework, science studies and humanities scholars become the enemies of science, a group of relativist "monster[s]" challenging scientific

authenticity (*Pandora 2*).<sup>12</sup> During the Science Wars, scientists retaliated in kind, attacking the credibility of the humanities. For example, in 1996, Alan Sokal launched one of the most divisive shots of the Science Wars when he published “Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” in *Social Text*. The strategy behind publishing the parody was simple: by getting a journal of cultural studies to publish a mixture of post-modernist imitation and shabby science, Sokal hoped to reveal the inherent falseness of post-structuralist critique. In “Transgressing the Boundaries: An Afterward,” Sokal explains that the initial article’s goal was “explicitly *political*: to combat a currently fashionable postmodernist/poststructuralist/social-constructivist discourse – and more generally a penchant for subjectivism” (339). This sally provided a damning critique specific to the humanities, as Sokal admits in his afterword: “Like the genre it is meant to satirize – myriad exemplars of which can be found in my reference list – my article is a *mélange* of truths, half-truths, quarter-truths, falsehoods, non sequiturs, and syntactically correct sentences that have no meaning whatsoever” (338). The so-called Sokal affair questioned the guidelines defining truth: was truth just relative to the individual discipline, defined by professional consent? Did certain disciplines have greater claims to the truth than others? Was there an inherent connection between relativism and social construction?

Of course, the Sokal Affair did not single-handedly initiate this re-examination of the sciences and the humanities. But incidents like the Sokal Affair made it possible to

---

<sup>12</sup> In work as varied as Michel Foucault’s historicizing insistence on the normalizing power of scientific research, Donna Haraway’s attacks on the masculine biases of science, and Carolyn Merchant’s argument about the Western bias towards mechanistic thinking evident in science, post-structuralist and post-modern critiques pointed to the limits of scientific knowledge and strove to socialize science. See Foucault’s *The Order of Things*; Haraway’s *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*; and Merchant’s *The Death of Nature*.

dismiss critical theory's challenges to objectivity and empiricism as lacking scientific understanding. Post-structuralist challenges to objectivity seemed non-sensical as well as easily satirized, resulting in dismissals like Richard Dawkins's more recent challenge to constructivists to defend their professed skepticism with action:

Relativism [. . .] is a pretentious cop-out. There really is something special about scientific evidence. Science works; planes fly. Magic carpets and broomsticks don't. Gravity's not a version of the truth. It *is* the truth.

Anybody who doubts it is invited to jump out of a tenth floor window.<sup>13</sup>

Here, Dawkins defends the validity of the sciences by appealing to the self-evident nature of the material world. How could one believe in social constructivism when one could reach out and touch the world – or plummet downward with all the force of gravity? This jab, like the battles of the Science Wars, demonstrates a rhetorical connection between material self-evidence and defensible truth. Dawkins's challenge repeats the skepticism towards constructivism evident in Crichton: if something is constructed, it must be false; if something is observable, it must be real; therefore, to conceive of reality as constructed is to enter the free-fall of relativism.

Thus, the Science Wars contributed to a rigid separation between realism and constructivism, pointing to a supposed incompatibility between discourse and 'the real.' This ontological dichotomy also influenced the development of ecocriticism. As Heise explains,

Ecocriticism, with its triple allegiance to the scientific study of nature, the scholarly analysis of cultural representations, and the political struggle for

---

<sup>13</sup> Dawkins utters this line in Russell Barnes's documentary *The Genius of Charles Darwin*. An individual clip entitled "Dawkins' Take on Relativism and Science" is available on-line at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohYGd2sSV5w>>.

more sustainable ways of inhabiting the natural world, was born in the shadows of this controversy [. . .] the underlying issues of realism and representation that informed the science wars continue to pose challenges for ecocritical theory. (506)

When read in the context of the science wars, Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination*'s return to realism reflects an attempt to move outside rigid disciplinary separation. Published the year before the Sokal affair, *The Environmental Imagination* shows ecocritical theory struggling to avoid the strong constructivism of which literary criticism was accused without surrendering to the idea of "absolute external truth" (Gould 259). To avoid dismissal by more scientific counterparts, ecocriticism had to avoid association with strong constructivist claims; to avoid dismissal by literary colleagues, ecocriticism had to avoid a "brutal" realism dependent on naïve empiricism (Morton 123).

### ***The Environmental Imagination and the Recovery of Realism***

Emerging from within these competing claims of realism and constructivism, *The Environmental Imagination* makes an important step towards constrained realism, re-establishing the representational capacities of language and offering a "dual accountability to matter and to discursive mentation" (92). *The Environmental Imagination*'s opening claim that "environmental interpretation requires us to rethink our assumptions about the nature of representation, reference, metaphor, characterization, personae, and canonicity" sums up the way that what I am calling constrained realist ecocriticism necessitates reevaluation of language and textuality (2). Buell outlines the uneasy relationship between literary theory and ecocriticism when he argues, "an inquiry

into the environmental imagination forces us to question the premises of literary theory while using its resources to expose the limitation of literature's representation" (5). Buell specifically criticizes theory's overemphasis on ideological distortion, the primacy of aesthetics, and the inherent limitations of language. He also criticizes critical readings of texts for paralleling this world/text disjuncture, focusing solely on aesthetic concerns or ideological limitations. For the bulk of literary theory, the critical imperative remains to treat the text as a discrete object, perhaps crystallizing external realities but never to be trusted in its potential motives or aims.

Buell's environmental project responds to this skepticism about representation by arguing that the overemphasis on ideology, poesis, and textuality derives from a disciplinary focus on certain canonical types of writing. Specifically, literary criticism's focus on the study of fiction leads to a fictional bias that downplays text-world relationships. Because criticism focuses primarily on fiction, "the capacity of literary writers to render a faithful mimesis of the object world is reckoned indifferent at best, and their interest in doing so is thought to be a secondary concern" (84). To counter this asymmetry, Buell proposes a "nonfictionalist" mode of reading. Whereas "fictionalist reading tends to presuppose that the persona is the main subject, that selectivity is suppression, that represented detail is symbolic, that environmental knowledge (in either author or reader) counts for little," in contrast,

nonfictionalist reading presupposes that the persona's most distinctive trait is environmental proficiency—not the professional scientist's command of data and theory but the working knowledge of someone more knowledgeable than we, who seeks to communicate what he or she knows

in a shareable form. It presupposes that the persona's chief rhetorical resource is exposition, that the metaphorical and tonal and meditative complications enriching exposition cannot be distinguished as the sole or even chief ways in which the text becomes artful, that the text's outer mimetic function is as important as its intertextual dimension, and that its selectivity is an instrument for promoting knowledge rather than suppressing it. (96-97)

Buell's nonfictionalist reading thus shifts emphasis to literature's positive referential capacities while still acknowledging its limitations. He envisions literature not as pure mimesis but as a tool that "seeks to communicate" and as a "rhetorical resource" for environmental argument. Without dismissing the "intertextual dimension" of literary reference, Buell's reading highlights the "outer mimetic function" of the text. And while acknowledging that "selectivity" occurs as a result of authorial perception and choice, nonfictional reading does not automatically associate such selectivity with an ideological suppression of knowledge. Buell's argument is not that writing provides direct transmission of reality from the material world, but, rather, that writing's artificial dimensions are not automatically antithetical to truthful expression.

Buell is also critical of the idea that stylization automatically impedes mimesis. Instead, Buell argues that literary constructions like stylization can increase the reader's access to the environment. For example, he cites the Peterson bird books (*Imagination* 97-100). The primary purpose of this field guide is not to create aesthetically pleasing images or compelling narratives but to put the reader in touch with material, non-textual birds and increase the reader's birding knowledge. However, the guide's stylized

representations of birds prove more effective than photographs or live specimens at helping readers learn to identify different species. The reductive textual images that make classifications and identifications possible are, while built from human aesthetics and scientific practice, not imposed on the material birds from within human ideology. Species identification and identification guides only make sense as tools if we acknowledge the simultaneous roles of textuality and materiality at play in the identification of a bird species.

The guide also reveals that representation is not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence with the physical world, but rather the creation of frameworks that facilitate connection. Buell explains this relationship between the textual and the material by saying, “The capacity of the stylized image to put the reader or viewer in touch with the environment is precisely what needs stressing as a counter to the assumption that stylization must somehow work against outer mimesis or take precedence over it” (97). Instead, Buell argues, “We need to recognize stylization’s capacity for what the poet-critic Francis Ponge calls *adequation*: verbalizations that are not replicas but equivalents of the world of objects, such that writing in some measure bridges the abyss that inevitably yawns between language and the object-world” (97-98). The concept of *adequation* which Buell advocates will be one that later critics, both ecocritical and science studies scholars, will take as an uncertain starting point. But what Buell’s analysis importantly indicates is that representation (and meaningful connections between text and world) do not have to be replicas, imitations, or recreations. His notion of representations as “equivalents” suggests two things of entirely different natures connected by other than arbitrary means. Thus, Buell’s careful account of literary

representation does not suggest that the primary role of the text is to mirror the physical world through a mimetic, tedious reproduction of physical description.

### **Questioning Environmental Realism**

But later ecocritics, while building on Buell's commitment to the "dual accountability to matter and to discursive mentation," found his recovery of realism insufficiently constrained (92). For instance, Dana Phillips categorizes Buell as a "realist ecocritic" and expresses skepticism about the role material objects play in Buell's theory. Phillips responds, "I think it is obvious that trees can never be, as Buell insists they are, *in literature*, and least of all *in a novel*, however much they may be 'in' it figuratively" (9). Phillips's response to *The Environmental Imagination* specifically disagrees with Buell's emphasis on the material quality of textual representation, and he dismisses "realist ecocriticism" as attempting an impossible reconciliation of the material world and the text. Phillips identifies a connection in realist ecocriticism between ecological effectiveness and direct appeal to the material, reproducing the empirical facticity we have seen at work in the sciences:

Realist ecocritics present themselves as telling it like it is because to do otherwise, to tell it according to a theory, is not only to be impractical, it is to obscure the truth of ecology and the truth about art, too. Ecocriticism, they argue, should appeal directly to the creation, both natural and literary.  
(136)

Phillips suggests that realist ecocriticism longs for material things to become the foundation and arbiter of ecological disputes. He sees such a rapprochement of world and text as potentially dangerous, failing as it does to account for human involvement in the

processes of textual production, for the referential limitations of language, or for the potential influence of social construction and ideology. Consequently, he rejects the realist ecocritical turn, claiming “ecocritics have been mistaken to think literary realism is a fully coherent aesthetic and therefore one that we need to revive” (145). In contrast, he argues that developing theory should “cure ecocriticism of its fundamentalist fixation on literal representation, and shift its focus away from the epistemological to the pragmatic” (7). His critique of ecocriticism’s “fundamentalist fixation” has two parts. First, Phillips finds ecocritical realism implausible, due to the differences between language and the material world; second, he claims that ecocritical realism is undesirable because it is limiting and dull.

The latter of these claims, that realistic depiction is uninteresting, assumes that a return to realism prescribes certain aesthetics to the ecological writer. Phillips reveals this fear when he claims, “Realistic depiction of the world, of the sort that we can credit as reasonable and uncontroversial, is one of literature’s most pedestrian, least artful aspects” (8). He fears that Buell’s emphasis on nonfiction writing favors description over other potentially “artful” aspects of literature. Such a prescription will not help ecocriticism’s politics, since it will not return the focus to the nonhuman environment but will “put a certain kind of art, and not nature, back at the top of the docket culturally” (163-64). Ecocriticism’s supposedly radical fight against the limitations of theory will in turn be limiting, encouraging a focus on narrowly descriptive writing. Such a change can reduce the writer to a mere copier of the already-existing world and the critic into a referee of mimesis:

If ecocriticism were limited to reading realistic texts realistically, it would have to scant not only nature (ironically enough) but a lot of literature as well [. . .] An ecocriticism pledged to realism will be hamstrung in another way: its practitioners will be reduced to an umpire's role, squinting to see if a given depiction of a horizon, a wildflower, or a live oak tree is itself well-painted and lively. Literary realism privileges description, and even the sharpest description seems inert if it doesn't occur in a narrative context heightened by philosophical, psychological, political, or scientific interests [. . .]. (163-64)

Here, Phillips resists what Buell calls "thick description" (*Imagination* 90). Given the non-fictional basis of Buell's environmental imagination, Phillips fears that the texts available for ecocritical analysis and the tools available for environmental commentary will become unnecessarily narrow.<sup>14</sup>

Phillips is also skeptical about the referential capacity Buell reclaimed, finding his realism too generous in its connections between world and text. Phillips claims, "Realism of the sort that Buell advocates boils down to a desire that *what we say* should be related in something other than a circumstantial way to *what we see*, and is never comfortable with the makeshift character of our words" (170). Phillips's second critique of Buell rejects literary representations of the material environment as anything other than aesthetic, textual functions. He claims, "Buell seems to want there to be a relationship between trees in literature and trees in the world closer than a relationship of a mere

---

<sup>14</sup> Such fears drove the second-wave ecocritical expansion: a wider variety of texts came under ecocritical scrutiny, and the criteria for what counted as environmental writing expanded. In *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Buell describes this second-wave expansion, which "has tended to question organicist models of conceiving both environment and environmentalism" and which has expanded ecocritical attention to "urbanism and environmental justice" (23).

semblance would be, whether that semblance is descriptive, iconic, or metaphorical and symbolic” (6). Buell’s desire is for a “literature of presence” or what Phillips also calls “realism-cum-positivism” (6; 161-62). But Phillips insists that it goes against common sense to imagine textual trees as having this complex relationship to material objects:

textual functions, in the form of words or phrases postulating an imaginary object, describing an imaginary setting, or suggesting a vaguely personified imaginary entity (such as the woods we encounter in fairy tales), is surely what trees must be, and can only be, insofar as they figure “in the pages of American literature.” It seems not so much naïve as occult to suppose otherwise. I wonder how we should regard trees that are *in literature* as something other than textual functions [. . .]. (6)

While Phillips’s critique points to the difficulty of imagining something *other* than pure text or pure materiality, it also re-inscribes the dichotomies Buell strove to avoid. By postulating that literary texts are predominantly “imaginary,” he nullifies the representational capacity of the literary writer. While the woods of fairy tales may very well be “vaguely personified imagin[ar] entities,” the woods of, say, Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County or Thoreau’s *Walden* merit different categories. While still “imagined” at some level, these woods of American literature – fictive and non-fictive, respectively – figure differently than the woods of an *entirely* imagined kingdom. Part of ecocriticism’s task must be to chart the range of figurations possible between an “occult” belief in the material presence of trees on a literary page and a homogenizing dismissal of all trees as equally abstract entities.

Rephrasing Phillips's critique in the terms of materiality can clarify exactly where he disagrees with Buell. Buell claims that literature captures some aspect of the tree's material reality. The goal of literary criticism, then, is to explore *how* this materiality enters the text. But Phillips questions this posited interconnection between text and material world, insisting that the figurative presence of trees in no way guarantees a connection to material trees. However, despite its differences from Buell's theory, Phillips's argument leaves us in a similar position: searching for better language and better theory to understand the relationship of textuality and materiality. Phillips acknowledges the need for such theory when he claims, "texts and trees cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. And in order to come to terms with that fact, one needs not just theory but better theory than in the past. What one doesn't need, it seems to me, are better *representations* of trees" (139). While Phillips rejects Buell's solutions, his critique points to what realist ecocriticism needs to develop in order to be more convincing: an account of the mysterious processes by which a material tree enters into a literary text, and an assessment of representation that avoids the text/world dichotomy.

A more recent exploration of ecocritical realism and foundational environmental dichotomies, Timothy Morton's *Ecology Without Nature*, provides another attempt to develop "better theory" about environmental representation. Like Phillips, Morton argues that the drive to reconnect humans to their environment cannot succeed because of the nature of language and textuality. His rejection of the realist return has political overtones: he contends that too readily accepting art as reality can lead readers and critics to accept aesthetic, cultural constructions as identical to the "extra-discursive" environment (Soper 8). To challenge the notion of "nature" as something outside

discourse, *Ecology Without Nature* focuses on literary devices that enable writers to create a sense of the world's presence while reproducing the ontological dualisms of environmental representation.

Like Phillips, Morton identifies a desire within ecocriticism and nature writing to reconcile humans with their natural environments. Such reconciliation appeals to perceptual immediacy. Ecocriticism and nature writing start from the assumption that nature is external to the human and can only be regained through conscious effort, by both reader and writer alike, to better perceive and better represent their material surroundings. Paradoxically, this set-up suggests we can think and write our way out of an ontological difficulty. If we just think differently, we can change our fundamental relationship to the world of things. Ecological writing is supposed to initiate this transformation, reconciling humans to nature through description whose close attention to material detail models a way of closing the gap between text and world. As Morton says,

Ecological writing [i.e. nonfiction nature writing and ecocriticism] wants to undo habitual distinctions between nature and ourselves. It is supposed not just to describe, but also to provide a working model for a dissolving of the difference between subject and object, a dualism seen as the fundamental philosophical reason for human beings' destruction of the environment. (63-64)

Nature writing thus engages the reader into a complicated dance with texts and with things. On the one hand, texts are supposed to erase themselves and erase the subjectivity separating humans from the world. Towards this end, environmental writing urges the reader to transcend the book and experience the 'real world' instead. But these calls to

escape textuality and return to a present, fully realized environment recreate the basic dichotomies of subject/object, nature/human, social/natural, and real/constructed that environmental writing set out to overcome. Morton thus diagnoses environmental writing as paralyzed by the very divisions that make the concept of “nature” possible.

Indeed, Morton argues that “nature” and “environment” are at once constructed human concepts and legitimate more-than-human entities. The environment is constituted by all the material objects around a perceiving individual, but to perceive it *as* “environment” is to experience these objects as a unified set of *surroundings* rather than as material entities. “Environment” is both a list of all the concrete objects one can perceive and more than the total of these parts; it is a totalizing abstraction that Morton calls *ambience*. Similarly, while nature is defined as all that is outside the perceiving subject – all that is material and objective – this accumulation of perceptual objects moves asymptotically towards an abstract totality. Nature too is ambient:

Nature, a transcendental term in a material mask, stands at the end of a potentially infinite series of other terms that collapse into it, otherwise known as a metonymic list: fish, grass, mountain air, chimpanzees, love, soda water, freedom of choice, heterosexuality, free markets. . . . Nature.

(14)

Thus, while a collection of material objects defines nature, the term also becomes a placeholder for an infinite list; a law or norm; and a fantasy of unified heterogeneity. As Morton says, “*Nature* wavers in between the divine and the material” (14). But despite nature’s hybrid identity, nature writing continually purifies nature of its ideal, subjective, and human components. We return to “factual brutalism,” the desire for a standard

beyond aesthetics or perception, a solid bedrock from which to make ecological choices (123). If “Empiricism is the name of the thinking that tries to be no-thinking,” then nature writing strives to be no-writing (123). It tries to transmit the “built-in bar code of truthfulness” residing in material things by forgetting its own construction (123).

A constrained realism that traces the processes of textual production can provide an alternative to this odd tendency to build separate realms and then smash them together in hopes of creating some new solution. *Ecology Without Nature* begins to move in this direction, seeking a rhetorical framework that evades purified dichotomies. Morton argues that we need to get rid of ambient concepts like “nature” and strive to better understand the connection between the material and the textual. He adopts the term “ecocritique” to describe this proposed theoretical paradigm: a set of tools to simultaneously explore literary representations of and critical approaches to the environment. As part of this set of tools, Morton seeks what I am also claiming we need: a way of reading that attends to the material without exaggerating the immediacy of human access. Thus, Morton articulates “a theory of *ambient poetics*, a materialist way of reading texts with a view to how they encode the literal space of their inscription” (3). His poetics identify the literary devices that create environmental ambience. Like Buell, Morton reconnects the material world to textual representations of environment by analyzing the formal and rhetorical strategies that allow nature writing to create a sense of material immediacy.

Morton defines one particular tool, *ecomimesis*, as central to environmental aesthetics. As Morton defines it, “Ecomimesis is a specific rhetoric that generates a fantasy of nature as a surrounding atmosphere” (77). This rhetoric relies upon first-person

narration, concrete detail, and the simultaneity of writing and lived experience in the timeline of the narrative: “As I am writing, I see a beech tree's leaves. I smell the river.” The “As I write” tagline, in conjunction with the description of sensory detail, gives a sense of the setting’s reality. The narrator figures him or herself as identical to the writer with the phrase “As I write,” establishing the author as an observing, writing, embodied human being. This multidimensional presence of the human figure in both the text and the world grounds the text in the described environment. The phrases following the ecomimetic tag establish the material realness of the writer/narrator’s environment, giving the reader the sense that there is a concrete, material world surrounding the produced text. Hence, an ecomimetic ambience envelops text, writer, and reader. At the same time, ecomimesis strives to break through the aesthetic distance of ambience, pushing the reader away from a book and out into nature.

But while creating an ambient illusion of nature’s immanent reality, ecomimesis still differentiates between text and world. As Morton explains, “the very processes that try to convey the illusion of immediacy and naturalness keep dispelling it from within” (77). One of the paradoxes of ecomimesis is that textual illusions of reality *are* language; the writer who paints reality can only multiply words on a page:

The more I try to evoke where I am – the ‘I’ who is writing this text – the more phrases and figures of speech I must employ. I must get involved in a process of writing, the very process that I am *not* describing when I evoke the environment in which writing is taking place. The more convincingly I render my surroundings, the more figurative language I end

up with. The more I try to show you what lies beyond the page, the more of a page I have. (30)

The more that a writer pushes the reader towards the outside world, the more the writer gets enmeshed in an entirely written world. Whether the author is creating an imaginary world or trying to describe a real world, a literary text only multiplies language, and rhetorical strategies of immediacy are all figurative. To generate immediacy requires an abundance of thick description and hence more writing. As Morton explains, “The more nature we have, and therefore the more ‘lively expression,’ the more writing we have. The paradox is present in the very phrase ‘nature writing.’ Is nature to be thought of as writing?” (70). Ecomimesis, then, is a “weird combination of vividness and distancing, naturalness and artifice, remembering and recording, attuning and hallucinating” (128). The urgency to reconcile the alienated human self with the surrounding environment and escape these paradoxes creates a “form of ideological fantasy” (67). Morton’s paradoxical assessment of nature writing thus makes a non-textual, non-aesthetic encounter with the environment extremely unlikely. Is there a way out of the textual maze Morton sketches?

Morton’s analysis provides no explanation for how literature does anything other than perpetuate “the aesthetic screen of words” and gives no mechanism by which language meaningfully translates reality (35). The inescapability of ecomimesis condemns all writing. Texts that are unconscious of their participation in ecomimetic practice are described as “minimiz[ing]” the “signals that we are in a constructed realm” and thus contributing to the “ideological fantasy” of immediate nature (35; 67). On the other hand, texts that foreground their desire to escape ecomimesis are no less

ideological: “This conscious, reflexive, postmodern version is all the *more* ecomimetic for that” (31). *Ecology Without Nature* leaves ecocriticism with writing barred from the world, saturated in ideology. Morton does not think this dualism is real, but he also does not think it can be transcended:

The problem comes when we start to think that there is something behind or beyond or above (in other words, outside!) the inside-outside distinction. Not that the distinction is real [ . . . ] it is wrong to claim that there is something more real beyond inside and outside [ . . . ] There is *not even nothing* beyond inside and outside. (70)

This paradoxical position leaves ecocriticism with tangled terms inherited from theory and no concrete sense of how the material world relates to aesthetic representations. *Ecology Without Nature* only leaves the reader to “hang out in what feels like dualism” (205).

The only way to avoid Morton’s concluding paradoxes will be to reimagine writing’s goal. Morton shows us that as long as we start with a world and a text, a subject and an object, and then try to work our way towards some reconciliation or connection (reference; *adequation*), we will end up wallowing in “what feels like dualism” and attempting to work sleight-of-hand magic with unhelpful terms (205). A more satisfying solution will need to establish a new way of understanding what texts do when they engage the material world: as Buell claims, they point us to something. To use William Howarth’s words, “Ecocriticism, instead of taxing science for its use of language to represent (mimesis), examines its ability to point (deixis)” (80). But if we accept Morton’s analysis, such a pointing cannot be the “inside” of a text pointing us to

something truer “outside the text.” Fortunately, the work of science studies provides a slightly different assessment of how this pointing actually works, directing readers to a complex chain of reference moving between the material world and texts.

### **Reference and Representation in the Work of Bruno Latour**

Latour attempts to articulate just such an alternative to the classical understanding of reference without simply leaping across an inherited divide. Latour’s first step in rebuilding our understanding of reference is to reveal the constructivist/realist divide as itself a historical and social construction, the result of the specific rhetorical processes he names the “modern constitution.” As a result of this constitution, “Philosophers of science like to remind us, as if this were the epitome of good common sense, that we should never confuse epistemological questions (what our representation of the world is) and ontological questions (what the world is really like)” (*Pandora* 93). But while such a distinction makes for tidy, logically consistent analysis, this separation does not adequately reflect the way scientific knowledge or lived-in environments function: “Unfortunately, if we followed the philosophers’ advice we would not understand any scientific activity, since confusing those two supposedly separate domains is precisely what scientists spend much of their time doing” (*Pandora* 93).

The mistake, Latour claims, is in assuming that truth exists in some independent material concretization outside of human practice, simply waiting to be “discovered” by human observation. Instead of this formulation, which locates all agency with humans and none with the material world, Latour contends that we need to recognize scientific truth as a process of encounter that actively changes both observer and observed. Such a recognition takes us back to a messy world of competing truth claims and competing

politics. Politics, as Latour uses the term in *Pandora's Hope* and *The Politics of Nature*, is the arduous process of argument by which “the collective” decides on its actions; it is by necessity a process full of disagreement, where individuals struggle together to find collective solutions that safeguard the greatest number of interests. The appeal to pure facts is an attempt to circumvent this contingent and tenuous world. If we could access “facts themselves,” we would avoid what Latour calls “the threat of mob rule,” the danger that political decisions are not made because they are “true” or “right” but because they have the support of the largest number of people. As he explains,

To avoid the threat of a mob rule that would make everything lowly, monstrous, and inhuman, we have to depend on something that has no human origin, no trace of humanity, something that is purely, blindly, and coldly outside of the City. The idea of a completely *outside* world dreamed up by epistemologists is the only way, in the eyes of moralists, to avoid falling prey to mob rule. *Only inhumanity will quash inhumanity.* (*Pandora* 13)

Factual brutalism or the world of pure objects: these dreams of the modern constitution emerge as an easy way out of the fraught political struggle to decide how humans and nonhumans can best coexist in the world they constitute.

Latour’s analysis rejects this conceptual framework. He argues that “Instead of a science of objects and a politics of subjects [ . . . ] we should have at our disposal a political ecology of collectives consisting of humans and nonhumans” (*Politics* 61). Instead of an outside world that must both remain inaccessible and be mobilized in defense of truth, Latour imagines a realm of actants that all equally contribute to

knowledge and to consequent political decisions. He argues, “When we say there is no outside world, this does not mean that we deny its existence, but, on the contrary, that we refuse to grant it the ahistorical, isolated, inhuman, cold, objective existence that was given *only* to combat the crowd” (15). Latour thus draws attention to the ignored role of subjectivity and politics in the creation of scientific knowledge, showing how scientific representation involves a complex interaction between humans and the material environment rather than a straightforward transmission of factual information. Scientific practice does not purify the “real” objects of the “natural” world from the “constructed” discourse of politics and human society; it functions by creating “imbroglios” or “hybrids,” weird mixtures of materiality and discourse. True knowledge of the world is thus constructed, though not from imagination or language alone. Latour admits, “All too often the implication is that if something is fabricated it is false; likewise, if it is constructed it must also be deconstructible” (114-15). But Latour challenges this association of fabrication with falseness.

This reconnection of language and the world begins with Latour’s re-examination of scientific reference. In *Pandora’s Hope*, Latour describes how traditional philosophy of language talked about reference in terms of correspondence or *adequatio*, trying to project meaning across the abyssal divide between the incompatible domains of words and things. But Latour dismisses this epistemological divide:

The old settlement started from a gap between words and the world, and then tried to construct a tiny footbridge over this chasm through a risky correspondence between what we understand as totally different ontological domains - language and nature. I want to show that there is

neither correspondence, nor gaps, nor even two distinct ontological domains, but an entirely different phenomenon: circulating reference. (24)

For Latour, there is never a moment when knowledge lurches across a gap between subject and world. While this reformulation is difficult to grasp in the abstract, it makes perfect sense when applied to an example of scientific experimentation. Latour takes up the methodologies of the sciences: he goes out into the field with scientists to watch the production of knowledge from the material world. He discovers that the creation of scientific knowledge takes place through a series of material transformations; in each step of the process, the material world is newly represented and engaged in a way that changes both the knower and the known. This series of transformations results in a set of hybrid object-signs. Latour follows these transformations carefully in order to argue that we do not have to choose between constructed relativism and realism; there *is* a real world that is not just the text, the text *does* talk about this world, and we *can* see the processes by which the world becomes a text.

Latour's name for these processes is "circulating reference." Instead of a leap from object to sign, from world to text, "circulating reference" suggests a "chain of transformation" where the world itself is changed by human attempts to understand and talk about it (310). Latour contends that "one never travels directly from objects to words, from the referent to the sign, but always through a risky intermediary pathway" (*Pandora* 40). Language's ability to talk about the world is in no way guaranteed by the transformations of material practice; it is merely made possible. Furthermore, he argues,

We never detect the rupture between things and signs and we never face the imposition of arbitrary and discrete signs on shapeless and continuous

matter. We see only an unbroken series of well-nested elements, each of which plays the role of sign for the previous one and of thing for the succeeding one. (*Pandora* 56)

Instead of a giant gap between the real world and the human text, Latour sees a process of translation where knowledge emerges from a series of relationships between *hybrids*, strange double beings that function as both signs and objects, both meaning and material.

This pathway of transformations from object to sign and back again is easy to follow in scientific field research. For example, Latour observes the material transformations involved in creating knowledge about the soil in the Boa Vista rainforest. He traces the development of knowledge from the forest itself to a final lab report, showing that there is process rather than rupture between Boa Vista in the world and Boa Vista on paper. To create knowledge of the world requires a transformation or “translation” of both words and of the literal world. In his example, scientists core the soil, making it into a sample which is both an object and a sign. The sample is then arranged in a tool called a pedocomparator that makes a grid out of samples based on their color and texture; this rearranging is another literal reorganization of the material world that makes soil samples into a new sign. The scientists then represent the grid of samples as a table, thereby translating a material object-sign hybrid into a textual object-sign hybrid that fits neatly on a page. Finally, the scientists describe both table and conclusions in a laboratory report that elaborates and analyzes, turning what was learned of the soil through encounter, collection, observation, and rearrangement into language (51-61). What results is undeniably a text, but it is a text that grew out of literal

rearrangements of the material world. Latour calls it a text that “has plants for footnotes” (34).

In this model, world and text do not exist on opposite sides of a dichotomous chasm but at opposite ends of a transforming process. Furthermore, Latour’s conceptual reimagination of plants as footnotes points to a different relationship between text and world than the strange connection of reference. Texts do not try to imitate, copy, or point to a single material item. Instead, they constitute entirely new things whose relationship to the world is guaranteed by process. Textual representations are historical and contingent: their production takes place over time and relies upon the fidelity of individual acts of translation, suggesting a chain of events rather than a one-to-one correspondence between a word and a thing.

Thus, knowledge is not imposed but grows out of this series of transformations. Latour argues, “to achieve certainty the world needs to stir and transform *itself* much more than *words*” (*Pandora* 48-9). Scientific texts never encounter “The immense abyss separating things and words [since this gap] can be found everywhere, distributed to many smaller gaps” which are each overcome by a small transformation that can be recorded and analyzed (51). The limiting dichotomy of words and things becomes plausible only when we ignore the many steps occurring between a thing itself and a representation of the thing. Attending to these chains of transformation reveals that language is neither an imposition nor a mimetic replacement but the end result of a process. The pedocomparator exemplifies this non-imposed process; the tool is material and representative at the same time. But it is not imposed by humans. It is explicable only

as a meeting point of the “social” and the “natural,” as both language and materiality.

With the pedocomparator,

[w]e are not jumping from soil to the Idea of soil, but from continuous and multiple clumps of earth to a discrete color in a geometric cube coded in x- and y-coordinates. And yet René [one of the soil scientists] does not *impose* predetermined categories on a shapeless horizon: he *loads* his pedocomparator with the meaning of the piece of earth—he educes it, he articulates it [. . .]. (*Pandora* 49-51)

The soil-filled pedocomparator is an example of a *hybrid* or *nonhuman*: it is constructed, but it is constructed from material things; it is representational, but its meaning derives from material qualities and material rearrangements. Representation involves encounter with and creation of such hybrids.

This reconceptualization also changes the roles humans and nonhumans play in representation. In classical notions of representation, agency lies with the subject to record and observe, but this agency must be ignored when empirical claims are made about the self-evident nature of material truth. Latour’s model recasts things, writers, and scientists as active agents within a network. Later in the book, speaking of Pasteur’s experiments with lactic acid ferment, Latour explains the function of experiment thus: “The experiment creates two planes: one in which the narrator is active, and a second in which the action is delegated to another character, a nonhuman one” (129). Both must be active for material transformations and the creation of meaning to take place. Science, then, is neither the imposition of human meaning on the nonhuman world nor the self-evident standing-forth of the nonhuman outside of discourse. Instead, circulating

reference is one example of *articulation*, the representational concept Latour substitutes for correspondence or reference.

While correspondence and reference involve static, one-to-one correlations between language and things, articulation is a fluid process. The central differences between Latour's understanding of reference and the traditional philosophy of language to which he refers include his emphasis on process and the contingent nature of reference. Successful reference cannot exist outside of a series of processes, and the relationship between language and the world is never automatic and guaranteed. Texts always move through a "risky, intermediary pathway" when attempting to speak of the world, and no ontology or epistemology can either automatically guarantee or preclude the possibility of truthful statements. This contingency differentiates what Latour calls "constructivist realism" from the relativism expected of constructivist models (135). In a dualistic reality, statements are imposed on the world, haphazardly tossed at pre-existing facts like darts; truth is a lucky strike. But in the world of constructed reality, "propositions" are built out of existing material items (141). To "articulate a proposition" of fact is not to copy the external world's pre-existing truth but to interact with the material objects of this world so that new information emerges (142). A pedocomparator articulates and produces propositions; it rearranges the material world and makes new information evident. The pedocomparator's analysis of the soil is not imposed; neither could a true knowledge of this soil pre-exist the tool's rearrangement. The *fact* of the soil's composition becomes fact only through a process that engages the material and carefully tracks its transformations.

This new vision of representation challenges the conventional understanding of what science – and, I would add – other forms of realist representation do. Representation occurs through a series of translations between materiality and language. Latour argues,

This whole tired question of the correspondence between words and the world stems from a simple confusion between epistemology and the history of art. We have taken science for realist painting, imagining that it made an exact copy of the world. The sciences do something else entirely—paintings too, for that matter. Through successive stages they link us to an aligned, transformed, constructed world. We forfeit resemblance, in this model, but there is compensation: by pointing with our index fingers to features of an entry printed in an atlas, we can, through a series of uniformly discontinuous transformations, link ourselves to Boa Vista [. . .] I can never verify the resemblance between my mind and the world, but I can, if I pay the price, *extend* the chain of transformations wherever verified reference circulates through constant substitutions. (*Pandora* 79)

In this model, the material world is not merely observed, described, or understood; it is *mobilized*. The reality of knowledge, both scientific and otherwise, is always contingent; it can never be definitely proven by comparing it to some non-subjective, nonhuman standard. Rather, we must examine the processes which produce this knowledge to verify or challenge the truth of a representation, for knowledge can become untrue if the chain of transformation fails at any point along the way.

Latour recognizes that this change in how we understand reference is initially uncomfortable, but this is only because “we still imagine the thing to be somehow at one extremity waiting out there to serve as the bedrock for the reference” (150). On the contrary, he claims, “in practice, it is never the case that we utter statements by using only the resources of language and *then* check to see if there is a corresponding thing that will verify or falsify our utterances” (144). Rather, he says, we make statements that gain truthfulness – or, in his language, that “are endowed with a new competence” – as repeated encounters with and transformations of the material world change our thinking (124). We do an experiment, make a claim about the world, repeat the experiment, and through repetitions of this cycle, gradually transform tentative claims into accepted scientific facts.

Latour’s provocative allusion to the way realist painting functions and his insistence that facts are not material entities existing outside texts inspire this project to investigate the transformations and mobilizations that literary texts make when attempting to convey material reality. While a descriptive passage from a nature essay hardly resembles the charts of a scientific report, literary writing can still be analyzed in terms of the strategies it uses to mobilize or trace back to the material world. While scientific and literary representation have different aims and different ways of engaging the world, both forms of representation must traverse an equally “risky pathway” between world and text. Through processes of observation and experience, the literary no less than the scientific observer transforms a temporal experience of contact with the world into ideas that can be reformulated as text. Certainly, the literary writer may edit, invent, rearrange, and expand on experience, but even scientific documents do this.

Literary as well as scientific writing is produced through transformations, and re-reading literary texts as pointing to a chain of “uniformly discontinuous transformations” may help us evade nature writing’s ambience and re-approach literary texts, seeing their engagements with the environment as more than ideological delusion.

But literary transformations do not take place through the use of physical tools or scientific procedures; the bulk of realistic or non-fictional literary accounts deal with the more quotidian material encounters of observation, perception, and experience. Rather than charts or tables that correlate back to material samples, literary texts use rhetorical tools like ecomimesis and thick description to record sensory perceptions and experiences of the world. The difference between scientific and literary writing, then, is methodological. Latour argues that scientific methodology rigorously documents experimental mobilizations of the material world. Such documentation can retrace the transformations that turned undifferentiated material substance into the subjects of human knowledge. Literary writing does not work so hard to maintain traces back to reality. At the same time, however, literature has its own way of pointing to material transformations. Whereas scientific writing minimizes the presence of the experimenting subject, literary writing explicitly or implicitly registers the experience of encountering the material world, and hence draws attention to the situated subjectivity of the non-fictional narrator.<sup>15</sup> Instead of tracing soil from the forest floor through a pedocomparator

---

<sup>15</sup> Latour’s work foregrounds the role of the scientific subject, too. While scientific experimental design specifically negotiates conditions so that this subject occasionally fades to the background, allowing nonhumans to speak as key players in an experiment, Latour returns attention to the individual subject in his or her multiple roles as perceiver, writer, speaker, and character. For example, when describing Pasteur’s experiments with lactic acid ferment, Latour explains that Pasteur “distributes activity between himself, as the experimenter, and the would-be ferment. An experiment, as we just saw, is an action performed by the scientist so that the nonhuman can be made to appear on its own. [. . .] Pasteur acts *so that* the yeast acts alone” (129). Later, Latour explains, “*Pasteur authorizes the yeast to authorize him to speak in its name*” (132).

to a textual table, literature traces a forest like Boa Vista to a moment of perceptual encounter. We still do not face a divided world and text; the processes connecting world and text still involve a central subject coming into bodily contact with a material world and developing descriptions of the world via engaged, active processes that are both material and textual.

But in addressing the embodied writer in contact with an environment, we need not return focus to the author's intentions or return to a reading model that prioritizes biographical or historical context. Instead, recognizing the embodied writer as a component in textual production foregrounds the process by which material observation translates into textual description. A material theory of literary representation can build on this perceiving subject as the point of encounter between materiality and language. Like the pedocomparator, the observing individual becomes the locus of transformations that make it possible to *load* the material world into a text. For this analogy to work, however, there must be a way of explaining human perception that materializes it in the way that Latour materializes scientific experimentation. If literary writing is to be traced back to the material world, such tracing will require human perception to provide a potentially reliable connection to the material.

Thus, the ecocritical question about the relationship between the environment and the text opens into phenomenological questions about the nature of perception: is the perceiving human individual fundamentally divided from the object world, or does perception provide accurate knowledge? In trying to understand human perception, we encounter a familiar dichotomy between subjects and objects; how can I, as a subject who experiences my own perceiving, ever know that the things I perceive truly exist? Like

language, perception appears to leave humans on the other side of an ontological abyss, separated from the world of material things. And, as Latour's recovery of scientific representation demonstrates, to understand the way that language and perception allow us to relate to our world requires us not just to overcome but to rethink this abyss. To do so requires a thoughtful account of how the material world is both present to perception and not identical with it, just as Latour's account of language lays out how the material world is present in the construction of text without being identical to text or merely a projection of textual definitions out onto the material world.

### **Literary Representation and Perceiving the Real World**

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a philosopher who has had much recent favor in ecocriticism, provides exactly this kind of account of perception. In the preface to his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty argues, "Probably the chief gain of phenomenology is to have united extreme subjectivism and extreme objectivism in the notion of the world or of rationality" (xii). Merleau-Ponty's account of perception is "subjective" because it focuses on the experience of the individual. Unlike science, phenomenology attempts to explain individual experience rather than minimize it. But this account is also "objective" because it insists that the experience of perception encounters a world of real objects. We discover in perception that the body and experience serve as mediating lenses between the material world and our ideas about or representations of the world. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology emphasizes the bodily nature of human thought and perception. He argues that perception does not leap from object to mind but instead functions across a series of physical encounters between the sensing, sensible body and the sensible, material world. Like Latour, Merleau-Ponty

focuses on processes and history. When we focus on our perception of the world as a process that gains in connection to the material world as it unfolds over time, we discover that a perception (like Latour's scientific knowledge) provides a contingent but potentially accurate account of the material world.

Thus, like Latour, Merleau-Ponty argues that it is easy, even common-sensical, to see the connections between material things, how we see those things, and what we say about those things (between materiality, perception, and language) if we remember that perception is a process which takes place over time. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty claims, "Consciousness must be faced with its own unreflective life in things and awakened to its own history which it was forgetting: such is the true part that philosophical reflection has to play and thus do we arrive at a true theory of attention" (36). To use Latourian language, each perception is an *event* and knowledge of the world is a *construction* resulting from this event, not a pre-existing entity or a mental projection. Merleau-Ponty says,

reflection never holds, arrayed and objectified before its gaze, the whole world and the plurality of monads, and [. . .] its view is never other than partial and of limited power. It is also why phenomenology is phenomenology, that is, a study of the *advent* of being to consciousness, instead of presuming its possibility as given in advance. (71)

A true knowledge of the world emerges over time, but it is never a foregone conclusion. Just as Latour stresses the contingency of scientific knowledge, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the tentative nature of perception, claiming, "The fusion of soul and body in the act, the sublimation of biological into personal existence, and of the natural into the

cultural world is made both *possible* and *precarious* by the temporal structure of our experience” (96-7, emphasis mine). Along with perception’s contingency, Merleau-Ponty also emphasizes perception’s reliance on process and motion, explaining, “The union of soul and body is not an amalgamation between two mutually external terms, subject and object, brought about by arbitrary decree. It is enacted at every instant in the movement of existence” (102). Thus, the truth is not static but actively created. This creation is not a false projection, nor is it a pre-existing thing reproduced within the mind. Instead, it is a new thing born out of the sensing body’s encounter with a sensible world.

Merleau-Ponty insists that we do not impose meaning on the world from within our minds; after all, there are true and false perceptions, and we can readily distinguish between, say, a genuine perception of another person in the room with us and our mistaking a shadow for another person. There is, he argues, a “decisive moment in perception: the upsurge of a *true and exact* world” – that moment when a perceiving human can recognize that a branch is not a bird, that a shadow is not a puddle, that a cloud is not a hill (62). Such distinctions between true and false perceptions are not imposed by the mind, since such distinctions can be made without conscious thought. At the level of experience, humans can make truth claims about the world that are not imposed. At the same time, however, such truth claims are limited and defined by perception; they are what we might call, with Latour, “aligned, transformed, constructed” claims. Merleau-Ponty elaborates, “What is given is not the thing on its own, but the experience of the thing, or something transcendent standing in the wake of one’s subjectivity, some kind of natural entity of which a glimpse is afforded through a personal history” (379-80).

To further explain the processes of perception, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between two levels of experience. The first level is what Merleau-Ponty calls the pre-reflective, “‘lived-through’ world which is prior to the objective one” (69). This is the world-as-experienced that the subject has not yet consciously explained or explored. But within this level the perceiver can still react to and interact with the world. Merleau-Ponty argues that one need not verbalize or analyze to correct mistaken impressions about the world and move towards a “truer” relationship with the material; I can flinch away from a branch and relax upon realizing it is actually a shadow without having to think through or analyze my body’s responses. Built up on these non-analytical experiences are reflections about the world. The combination of the “pre-reflective” and the “reflective” levels constitutes what we call consciousness. The rational judgments and conscious impressions I have of the world are not necessarily less true than pre-reflective, immediate experience but they are secondary, based on my unfolding experiences as an embodied subject. Ignoring this pre-reflective, embodied state of encounter makes it possible to postulate human consciousness as isolated from the material world; recognizing the mediating role of the pre-reflective state can neutralize this ontological divide.

Thus, when faced with its “own unreflective life in things and awakened to its own history,” consciousness ceases to be a non-material thing (36). Merleau-Ponty insists that the human is not a transcendent form of consciousness with the ability to re-imagine the world at will. Instead, he speaks of the perceiving human as a “body-subject,” an individual whose consciousness, perception, and subjectivity are indivisible from the body as a collection of sensing, perceiving, and synthesizing organs. There is thus no

radical break between the human subject and the material world, nor is the body reduced to being another object in a world of objects, trailing a disembodied consciousness behind it. Instead, “the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject, but it is also discernible of perception” (239). Even while the body is identified as the subject and self of the pre-reflective state, there are dimensions of the body that escape conscious thought and control. Body and thought are not identical; neither are they separate. My body interacts with the surrounding world, but my reactions are not *caused* in any mechanistic fashion. Neither are these reactions self-consciously *mine* the way that conscious thought or willed actions are. I can theoretically *will* not to dodge a tree branch near my face if I anticipate my reaction. But if my reaction to the tree branch is not the mechanistic outcome of material data, neither is it my will that causes me to dodge when I catch the tree branch's motion in my peripheral vision and then flinch. Merleau-Ponty replaces the words *cause* and *choice* with *motivation* to describe the external world's influence on my body-self. Even if I do not direct my conscious attention to the world around me, I can react and respond to it; there is a *meaning* in a swinging tree branch that my body can and will respond to without any conscious will on my part.

Thus, the world motivates my perception, and my interaction with the world can become conscious attention. These examples reveal how I *am* my body, yet the ‘me’ that remembers and describes the tree branch I narrowly escaped differs from the ‘me’ that dodges around a tree branch without thinking. There is both unity and separation within me as a being; I could not think of the tree without a bodily, perceptual interaction with it, yet my body is not just a tool of my thinking self: if I stumble against the tree, I learn of its roughness, but cannot think this roughness away.

Thus, Merleau-Ponty offers a hybrid and process-oriented vision of perception. The result is not guaranteed access to the world in its totality, but a constrained potential for accurate perception that puts the human into contact with a real and knowable world. Thus, Merleau-Ponty describes human perception as both direct and incomplete; sensory experiences give humans real knowledge of a real world, but there are always qualities of the world that resist human perception. Merleau-Ponty claims,

the perception of our own body and the perception of external things provide an example of *non-positing* consciousness not in possession of fully determinate objects, that of a *logic lived through* which cannot account for itself, and that of an *immanent meaning* which is not clear to itself and becomes fully aware of itself only through experiencing certain natural signs. (57)

Much later in the work, Merleau-Ponty explains, “I *have* the world as an incomplete individual, through the agency of my body as the potentiality of this world [. . .] because my body is a movement towards the world, and the world my body’s point of support” (408). Thus, in a way similar to the scientist entering into material relationship with the world via the interactive process of experimentation, the perceiving individual enters into a perceptual, material encounter with the world that is limited but potentially significant:

To live a thing is not to coincide with it, nor fully to embrace it in thought [. . .] The perceiving subject must, without relinquishing his place and his point of view, and in the opacity of sensation, reach out towards things to which he has, in advance, no key, and for which he nevertheless carries

within himself the project, and open himself to an absolute Other [. . .].

(380)

Here, Merleau-Ponty's account of temporality and process parallels Latour's account of representation, positing a world available but never fully accessible to human perception. The relationship between perception and world does not work as a one-to-one connection, a "coincid[ing]," but as a historical sedimentation of events and projects. Like the loading of soil into discourse, perception is a transformation created when a material body encounters material things.

Merleau-Ponty's account shows how perception relies on encounter, and he argues that there is a truth to perception that engages both body and mind. Thus, understanding an object is neither a purely physical nor a purely conceptual process; there is a unifying reality to this encounter that predates reflection and, consequently, predates language. An encounter with a tree is not primarily an encounter with a concept 'tree' nor is it an encounter with a set of discrete physical sensations that are later synthesized by the mind into a false unity called 'tree.' 'Tree' is not imposed by the mind (though the word may be), nor is it a self-contained truth that could be grasped outside of the physical meeting of body and tree. Rather, it is a total *experience*, where thought and sensation are not readily separated, where there is a real meaning synthesized by mind and body. While the word 'tree' has no essential connection to the material tree itself or my experience of it, the concept of 'tree' is not just a human imposition I have made to hold together my disconnected sensations of roughness and green and pine scent. As Merleau-Ponty says,

When we come back to phenomena we find, as a basic layer of experience, a whole already pregnant with an irreducible meaning: not sensations with gaps between them, into which memories may be supposed to slip, but the features, the layout of a landscape or a word [*sic*], in spontaneous accord with the intentions of the moment, as with earlier experience. (25)

There is a totality to my experience of the tree that preexists my naming of it and that points to a tree as a real entity with its own meaningful unity.

### **Conclusion: Towards a Constrained Realism in Ecocriticism**

We finally discover, then, the framework for a constrained realist understanding of perception, language, and textual representation. We are not left with human language attempting to cross a philosophical chasm to a world, nor language attempting to corral the dispersive sensations of the world into an imposed conceptual unity. Instead, language attempts to parallel an already existing and meaningful unity as experienced. To gain a descriptive knowledge of a tree, I may not have to physically manipulate it as I would to gain a scientific knowledge of it. But I have to encounter its materiality through the material medium of my own body. I am free to write about imaginary trees or to write about a tree without any specific referent in mind; but when I describe my narrow escape from this tree branch, such a description grows from perceptual moments and thus bodily encounters with material objects – encounters where language, discourse, and textuality are not readily separable from sensible materiality.

If we take Merleau-Ponty's account of perception seriously, then descriptions of ecological involvement must recognize that the entire natural world is both given to

human observers and resistant to them. Subjectivity, perception, language – these need to be reconsidered as the conditions of understanding the material, not impediments separating humans from the material world. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, the material body is not a confine placed on transcendent, all-encompassing perception, nor is it the limit to an infinite play of textuality. Instead, the constraints imposed by the body are the very conditions which make perception possible:

the system of experience is not arrayed before me as if I were God, it is lived by me from a certain point of view; I am not the spectator, I am involved, and it is my involvement in a point of view which makes possible both the finiteness of my perception and its opening out upon the complete world as a horizon of every perception (354).

Similarly, the state of ‘being human’ is not some limitation on an otherwise uninhibited union with the natural but is itself the very condition that makes engagement with the material world possible. Language also must be recognized as a pre-condition rather than a limitation. While language does not correspond exactly to the material world, words are the pre-condition for the expression of constructed truth, not an impediment to the otherwise unimpeded flow of truth between the material and the ideal.

Given that all knowledge moves through this series of “risky, intermediate pathways” – through the perceiving body, through material mobilizations, and through language – we are set up for a nuanced explanation of the relationship between writing and the material world. If I write of the tree that I previously dodged, I can only write about what I experienced through the medium of my body if I want to write fact. I can exaggerate, invent, or elaborate, but such changes are clearly deviations from what I

experienced, not a constructed truth I impose on my experience that consequently invalidates my experiences as a whole. But, if I carefully describe my experience, I can provide a pointing finger back towards my encounter with the tree. The tree itself is not in the text, true. But the tree is not mythical; it is not a rhetorical effect. I point to it, tracing back through the risky pathway of textual description, conscious reflection, and pre-reflexive sensory encounter to a material thing, open to yet exceeding my ability to perceive. Bodily perception becomes one of the necessary, contingent, incomplete steps connecting the material world to the text.

My movement through science studies and phenomenology has been intended to justify a return to some kind of ecocritical realism, balancing a sophisticated concept of reference with accountability to both the textual and the material. What I hope to have shown is that human experience and perception, as well as human texts, have the potential to express truth, translated through mobilizations of the world, whether via experimentation, collection, observation, description, or other processes of writing. But even if texts and the material world are connected, what value can such a recovery have for literary scholarship, aside from rehashing tired debates about the nature of representation? In the following chapters, I examine a number of environmental texts to explore two ways that issues of representation can influence literary analysis. First, a “constrained realist” position can re-shape the terms we use to talk about the relationship between authors, texts, and the material world. We can re-examine nonfiction writing and historically based fiction as well as realistic fiction. When we see textual articulation of material reality as a possibility achievable through careful mobilization, we can

investigate the level to which various texts achieve such mobilization and ask how an effort to depict and mobilize a real, perceivable material world shapes certain literary texts.

Second, issues of representation are themselves items of concern in environmental texts. Texts that express an interest in representing the real world, usually in pursuit of some political end, often contemplate the difficulties of such representation, drawing attention to the limits imposed by perspective, language, and referentiality. Such texts integrate theoretical questions about language's success or failure with political questions about how best to represent the material world in order to change existing social as well as ecological conditions. While Morton dismisses such self-reflexive contemplation as equally enmeshed in the paradoxes of ecomimesis, I believe that such self-awareness can provide an environmental literary ethics as important or effective as realistic depiction. Self-reflexive texts can push us towards the kind of multi-vocal political ecology Latour advocates: a politics which accounts for scientific facts, cultural attitudes, and political motivations, all competing at once as we make decisions. While self-reflexive literary texts may not all have a fully developed, non-dualistic theory of representation akin to Latour's, all of them look at the relationship between world and text with thoughtful analysis. Their responses, ranging from playfully hopeful to despairing, can help ecocriticism keep thinking through the complicated rhetoric underlying our developing ecological commitments.

### CHAPTER III

#### “A GOOD WORD FOR THE TRUTH:” HENRY DAVID THOREAU AND THE LITERARY CONSTRUCTION OF THE REAL WORLD

If I seem to boast more than is becoming, my excuse is that I brag for humanity rather than for myself; and my shortcomings and inconsistencies do not affect the truth of my statement. Notwithstanding much cant and hypocrisy, – which I find it difficult to separate from my wheat, but for which I am as sorry as any man, – I will breathe freely and stretch myself in this respect, it is such a relief to both the moral and physical system; and I am resolved that I will not through humility become the devil’s attorney. I will endeavor to speak a good word for the truth.

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

In the passage from the opening chapter of *Walden* cited above, Henry David Thoreau voices both a problem and a goal: he wants to share what he learned and observed during his two years living at Walden Pond, but he finds himself limited by his personal perspective and by written language.<sup>16</sup> The narrator Thoreau, writing against the deforestation and industrialization of the Concord area by describing his own experiment in an alternative lifestyle, fears that the ethical impact and truthfulness of his text will be limited by his personal “cant and hypocrisy,” for which he admits that he is “as sorry as

---

<sup>16</sup> Building on the embodied theories of perception and representation articulated in Chapter II, this chapter argues against strict distinctions between Thoreau as a biographical figure and Thoreau as a presence within the text. There is, as Lawrence Buell explains in *The Environmental Imagination*, “an important theoretical difference between imagining *Walden* as about ‘the Thoreauvian persona’ and imagining it to be about ‘Thoreau’ the person. Yet the difference, on second thought, is not so great as it might seem. Ecocritically speaking, these positions have a certain interchangeability as human subject-centered approaches to literary texts. The persona, at least in the case of documentary nonfiction, remains in such close dialogue with the biographical person that the insistence on disjoining them, from an ecocritical standpoint anyhow, signifies little more than a literary-critical incest taboo anxiety. The Thoreauvian persona is not coextensive with the historical Thoreau, but it can legitimately be thought of as a provisional identity that the author has imagined for himself” (385-86). While some of my analysis will blur distinctions between textual and historical Thoreau as it traces his processes of mobilization, I will refer to the textual narrator as “Thoreau” or “the narrator Thoreau” and the biographical personage as “the historical Thoreau” when such distinctions are clear.

any man” but which he cannot, nevertheless, avoid (37).<sup>17</sup> While this apology asks pardon for the narrator’s bragging persona, it also expresses concern about whether “shortcomings and inconsistencies” might actually “affect the truth of my statement” (37). By thus gesturing to the constraining perspective of the individual subject and the questionable referentiality of written language, his apology exhibits a fundamental skepticism about language and subjective perception that appears repeatedly in *Walden*. Indeed, towards the book’s end, the narrator dismisses words outright as the “inadequacy of the residual statement,” only an aftermath of the fullness of the thing or event he seeks to describe (218). Words, in Thoreau’s assessment, can never entirely capture the world. Yet words are the poet’s, philosopher’s, or naturalist observer’s only means for sharing information. Sharing information is essential to Thoreau’s vision of *Walden* as a call to “wake my neighbors up” to the “lives of quiet desperation” created within a system driven by profit and constant labor (61). To not speak is to risk perpetuating these systems and to risk “through humility becom[ing] the devil’s attorney.” *Walden* thus connects an ethical conundrum and an individual political challenge to issues of language and representation. Not speaking out of deference to one’s limited position can be as ethically suspect as speaking, since not speaking will only permit unethical situations to go unchallenged.

The response that the narrator Thoreau offers to this conundrum is to imagine his text as an “endeavor” at effective, truthful representation. *Walden* constructs truth in a

---

<sup>17</sup> Gordon Whitney and William Davis describe the extent of Concord’s deforestation, claiming that, “During Thoreau’s lifetime, the percentage of the town in woodlands dropped to its lowest level (10.5 in 1850) [. . .] The remaining woods in the nineteenth century were exploited extensively for timber, fuel, and pasturage. Many were carelessly managed” (75). In his essay “Thoreau and the Natural Environment,” Lawrence Buell reiterates this description, claiming, “the percentage of woodland in the town of Concord had been steadily declining during Thoreau’s lifetime, reaching an all-time low of 10 percent almost at the moment Thoreau penned” the chapter “The Ponds” (529-30).

complicated way, however, seeing it as the result of an effort made in spite of inseparable cant, hypocrisy, and inconsistencies. *Walden* imagines that it might still be possible to “speak a good word for the truth” from within these limitations: the very bragging that reveals the narrator to be a flawed human speaking from a situated perspective also gives this narrator the power to “brag for humanity” and to defy language’s limits in pursuit of a political goal. This emphasis on expression as endeavor sets up *Walden* as an experiment, not only in creating an alternative to unethical forms of social life, but also in finding ways to mediate truth through the contingencies of personal experience, perspective, and language.

We can thus read *Walden*’s struggle with language as similar to the tension between realist and constructivist theories of language existing in ecocriticism and science studies.<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, the text’s potential to awaken its readers depends upon some relationship between material reality and textual representation. To simply imagine a fictional alternative to contemporary society will not provide readers with a genuine possibility of change. The rhetorical power of *Walden*, evident in its long reign of favor among political activists as well as literary scholars, comes from the text’s documentation of an actual experiment in the world.<sup>19</sup> Like the scientific experiments Latour describes, the *Walden* experience is an experiment whose results are translated

---

<sup>18</sup> As I argued in Chapter II, we can define realism as the basic assumption that language in some way refers to the world, providing correspondence between a word and the thing it represents. Constructivism, by contrast, argues that meaning does not pre-exist language but is created through individual acts of writing.

<sup>19</sup> Buell traces Thoreau’s popular canonization as “as natural historian, pioneer ecologist and environmentalist, social activist, anarchistic political theorist, creative artist” (*Imagination* 315). He argues that the appeal of these personas rests on connections between Thoreau’s supposedly earnest experimentation and his text: “Admittedly, these are popular simplifications; but instead of dismissing them on that account we need to take them seriously as pointing to how literary greatness becomes transmuted into an active ingredient in the minds of its audience. I suspect that most people would be more likely to respond at an emotional level to an unknown work if they approached it taking for granted that it was a deliberate, or at least a heartfelt, act than as if they approached it predetermined to conceive of it as a textual construct” (315).

into textual form. And like the scientific reports Latour analyzes, *Walden* speaks truthfully of the world only by maintaining traces back to specific events of material encounter. Thus, like scientific knowledge, *Walden* requires an understanding of language that does not separate the text from the material.

But this need to connect a historical experience of the material world to a textual representation pushes *Walden* into some of the same philosophical difficulties that face scientific knowledge in an epistemological world defined by the poles of Latour's modern constitution. Struggling to defend its connection to the material world from the slipperiness of language, *Walden* voices a desire for the writer and the reader alike to seek objective, empirical truth. Thus, at times, *Walden* falls back into the "factual brutality" of the material object that Morton diagnoses (123). We hear echoes of this desire for self-evident and materially objective truth in Thoreau's call that we

settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe [. . .] till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin, having a *point d'appui*, below freshet and frost and fire, a place where you might found a wall or a state, or set a lamp-post safely, or perhaps a gauge, not a Nilometer, but a Realometer, that future ages might know how deep a freshet of shams and appearances had gathered from time to time. (70)

This figuration of reality as a firm material bottom appeals to empirical evidence as the *point d'appui* from which to begin developing a politics or an ethics. More specifically,

this vision of reality as a “hard bottom” beneath a “fresheet of shams and appearances” reproduces the stratified notions of truth and reference that Latour’s work debunks. This passage imagines truth in material terms, as something that can be uncovered by patient human work. Meanwhile, the passage dismisses “opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance” – the products of human language and culture – as less definitively solid things. Reality is a tangible, solid entity that exists outside of the human mind while appearances are fluid and unstable projections of the mind. Thoreau invokes this formula when he urges his readers to abandon transcendence and to instead begin searching for the truth in their quotidian surroundings. He claims,

Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment [ . . . ]  
And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us. (69)

The alternative definitions presented here posit truth as either a transcendent thing removed from the human or as a material thing close at hand. Identifying truth with materiality is supposed to bring truth closer, though Morton and Latour’s analyses show us that a material truth too remains “remote” from humans.

However, on the other hand, *Walden* repeatedly recognizes the role of human perception and language in creating truth. At times, *Walden* questions its bragging certainty about the solidity of truth (and about the truth of the statements so assertively championed in this chapter’s epigraph). The same text that calls for a bedrock truth to be

measured scientifically also questions the possibility of an objective truth about which there can be “no mistake.” “Nature and human life are as various as our several constitutions,” Thoreau claims. “Who shall say what prospect life offers to another?” (10). Consequently, truth in *Walden* can be as concrete as Walden Pond and as elusive as personal perception. This play of contradiction permits the text to function as a form of constrained realism, strategically mobilizing the world via personal perception and observation while at the same time self-consciously foregrounding the textual nature of such mobilization. *Walden* as a whole can be understood as reproducing the contradictory strategies of the epigraph, making bold claims about the world and reality specifically to counter its own skepticism about the narrator’s ability to observe or communicate truth.

Take, for instance, the false, bragging bravado of Thoreau-as-narrator in the epigraph. This bravado allows the text to acknowledge the limits of perspective while still making large claims about the truth of experience. The contradiction allows the passage to account for language’s inevitable failure to duplicate the material world and account for the shaping influence of personal perspective. However, the self-consciously arrogant claims also use language’s expressive ability to challenge human relationships to the larger world. Foregrounding the limitations of language becomes an effective rhetorical device, forestalling dismissal but also offering new, bold possibilities for the reader to consider. The persona embodies this strategy. While apologizing for the inevitable conditions of expression, Thoreau-the-narrator still points towards the truths he hopes to communicate. Despite – indeed, because of – language’s limits, communication can occur if we make these kinds of bold and extravagant claims:

The volatile truth of our words should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement. The truth is instantly *translated*; its literal monument alone remains. The words which express our faith and piety are not definite; yet they are significant and fragrant like frankincense to superior natures. (218)

Notably, Thoreau does not stop at language's inadequacy. He pushes on – not to a final or definite truth, but to a “volatile” and “significant” one. This hopeful vision of how truth and meaning function emphasizes the process behind the transmission of truth and hence foregrounds writing's contingency. Thoreau's meaning-making is active and driven by process – it is “volatile,” happening “continually,” and actively being “translated” through acts of representation. Despite its “inadequacy,” language serves as the vehicle for translation between the material (the “literal monument”) and the more ephemeral “significant and fragrant” truth of language. Like an aroma that is undeniably physical and yet intangible, truth envelops the material and the conceptual. While such an epistemological model could imply a dualistic ontology, positing a spiritual realm of truth above and superior to the world of things, it also forges a quasi-material connection between these two realms, imagining truth and language as deriving from the material without being reducible to it. In line with the trajectories of ecocriticism and science studies introduced in Chapter II, Thoreau thus provides another sophisticated way of understanding writing's relationship to the material world as both real and constructed.

But the “volatile truth” of *Walden* depends on bold and extravagant actions as well as bold and extravagant claims. To understand *Walden*'s complicated theory of materiality and language requires us to acknowledge the relationship between these

actions and claims, just as Latour needed to follow scientists into the forests and the laboratories in order to adequately theorize the scientific texts their research produced. The exact nature of the relationship between materiality and language, subject and object in *Walden* has been a matter of critical debate ever since “in his biography of 1873 William Ellery Channing used the phrase ‘poet-naturalist’ to resolve the dichotomy in Thoreau’s work between subjective interpretation and objective reporting” (Baym 221). As Channing’s formula suggests, Thoreau’s burgeoning interest in natural history and other forms of “objective reporting” about the natural world make him a particularly interesting subject for a re-assessing the dichotomies of the modern constitution. His work not only challenges separations between language and the world but also those between science and poetry, as Laura Dassow Walls notes when she describes his work as “literary science” (*Worlds* 178). Critical responses to Thoreau highlight the way his work demands a rethinking, not only of the relationship between science and poetry but also of the conceptual dualisms and theories of representation implied by these disciplinary divisions.

In this chapter, I examine *Walden*’s contradictory relationship to the conceptual dichotomies Latour describes. At times, *Walden* capitulates to these dichotomies, but at others it attempts to rethink these divides. I also examine the complicated relationships to language and materiality that result from *Walden*’s attempt to rethink the division between human and nature, text and world. While *Walden* imagines the natural environs of the pond as a pure material realm outside of human culture’s contaminating influence, the work also recognizes the constructed quality of its pastoral fantasy as well as the construction of the historical Thoreau’s material surroundings. I explore a number of

devices that Thoreau employs to simultaneously draw attention to the inadequacy of his words and to spur the reader beyond language's inadequacy. The goal of such movement through and beyond language is both individual and social. Part of *Walden*'s objective is to challenge individuals' economic relationships and daily living choices, thereby encouraging them to stretch themselves just as writing stretches Thoreau. But this challenge to individual thinking and lifestyle hints at a larger challenge to predominant social systems. While *Walden* at large focuses on individual acts of transformation and exploration, "Economy" pairs its call for individual change with a critique of the economic system in Concord. The solution Thoreau proposes is thus an intertwined transformation of our thinking and of our situation in the world. As Thoreau says, "I perceive that we inhabitants of New England live this mean life that we do because our vision does not penetrate the surface of things. We think that that is which appears to be" (69). Like the ecological subjects of present-day discourse, the readers to whom Thoreau appeals will escape their meaningless lives only by transforming the way they think about things.

While such ethical calls are arguably anthropocentric, focusing on human self-realization and fulfillment, they occur in the context of a fundamental shift in human relationships to the nonhuman world. In pursuit of truth, Thoreau participates in what Latour calls the "progressive loading" of nonhumans into discourse (*Pandora* 96). Rather than appeal only to human tradition as a means of combating the economy and society of Concord, Thoreau increasingly appeals to animals, plants, and environments as sources of more truthful relationships to the earth. *Walden* argues that material observation and the nonhuman world influence and are influenced by human perception; such a mutual

constitution of the empirical and the ideal contradicts critical readings of Thoreau either as a Transcendentalist disdainful of material environment or as a proto-scientist more interested in ecology than inner self.<sup>20</sup> Despite Thoreau's popular reputation as an environmental saint, the natural, material world to which he appeals is in no way a deep ecological one; he does not immerse the human subject into a purely natural realm outside of society.<sup>21</sup> Instead, the environment imagined in *Walden* is an increasingly hybrid world, where human writing transforms the material environment and where the nonhuman, conversely, becomes an increasingly important contributor to human achievement and understanding.

### **Critical Responses to *Walden* and the Problems of Dualism**

To imagine *Walden* as this kind of hybrid, highly acculturated text can be strange, given the work's popular status as an environmental opus and manifesto of personal freedom. Both criticism and popular culture imagine Thoreau's developing environmental prowess in terms of increasing contact with the nonhuman environment and growing distance from human society.<sup>22</sup> That is, Thoreau's environmental authority

---

<sup>20</sup> Critics who claim Thoreau for science include, according to William Rossi in "Thoreau's Transcendental Ecocriticism," Robert Kuhn McGregor in *A Wider View of the Universe* and Robert Milder in *Reimagining Thoreau*. Both argue that Thoreau eventually outgrows his Transcendentalist, Emersonian, bent (29). Kurt Kehr attributes this notion of a development from Transcendentalist poet to scientist to Bradley Torrey, who "first drew attention to the young man's [Thoreau's] development from poet to scientist and ecologist" (32). Nina Baym describes the opposing preference for Thoreau's poetic as contrasted with scientific propensities as a "humanist" tradition in Thoreauvian criticism. Examples she cites include Brooks Atkinson Henry, *Thoreau, the Cosmic Yankee* (New York, 1972); Henry Seidel Canby, *Thoreau* (Boston, 1939); Joseph Wood Krutch, *Thoreau* (New York, 1948); and Mark Van Doren, *Thoreau, A Critical Study* (Boston, 1916) (Baym 221).

<sup>21</sup> As Buell claims, popular imagination frequently paints Thoreau as "the first major interpreter of nature in American literary history, and the first American environmentalist saint" ("Natural" 527).

<sup>22</sup> Buell argues that *Walden* models the kind of transformation individuals, and literary thinkers in particular, have to undergo in order to become more ecological; it traces an individual's developing interest in the material environment and shows the writer leaving behind initially abstract and literary modes of representation in favor of "representational density" derived from observation of the natural world

reinforces a number of dichotomies central to the nature writing tradition and to ecocritical analysis. Whether trying to locate Thoreau's Walden project between the poles of wilderness and civilization, his environmental affect between the poles of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, or his observations of the natural world between the poles of scientific empiricism and philosophical transcendentalism, literary criticism returns to the central dichotomy Latour uncovers: the tension between the human and the natural, and the deep need to purify these realms.<sup>23</sup>

The Walden project itself appears to be about movement between these realms: the "natural" space of the ponds and the "cultural" space of Concord. *Walden* centers around a tension between solitude and sociality, evident from the book's opening lines, where Thoreau's epigraphic assertion that he plans "to wake my neighbors up" is countered by his next sentence's claim that "When I wrote the following pages [. . .] I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor" (5). This contradiction poses a number of problems for environmental thinkers bound by the terms of the modern constitution and shaped by a history of purified wilderness myths. To them, Thoreau's rhetorical appeal to a pure wildness outside of human society merely rehashes old pastoral literary structures and return-and-retreat conventions. It does not encourage a new relationship to the nonhuman world but presents merely a strategic change of scenery and a temporary escape. As Buell argues, Thoreau can be read as

reinforcing for example the notion of androcentric pastoral escape as the great tradition within American literary naturism. To align the 'plot' of

---

(*Imagination* 116). What *Walden* can model, on the aesthetic and the practical level, are gradual transformations from "environmental naïveté to comparative enlightenment" (*Imagination* 115).

<sup>23</sup> Schneider summarizes the critical importance of these dualisms in his introduction to *Thoreau's Sense of Place: Essays in American Environmental Writing*.

*Walden* in terms of this motif with those of the Leatherstocking Tales, *Moby-Dick*, and *Huckleberry Finn* is child's play for seasoned Americanists. (*Imagination* 25)

One way critics including Buell challenge this formulaic reading of *Walden* is by drawing attention to the complicated relationship with the material world depicted. As Thoreau describes himself measuring ponds and counting seeds, the natural environs of *Walden* stop being a homogeneous, symbolic landscape of escapism and become a specific environment constituted by nonhuman beings. In this vein, some critics frame his works' importance to ecology and natural history as an early anticipation of more scientific approaches to biology and ecology. *Walden*, to some extent, and later works like "The Succession of Forest Trees," to a greater extent, indicate interest in empirical observation of the natural environment, and this empirical focus is used to justify Thoreau's inclusion in an early lineage of conservation biology and ecological science.<sup>24</sup> But this move to save Thoreau from pastoral ideology merely leads critics into more unsolved dichotomies and contradictions. Particularly, Thoreau's non-linear prose, literary allusions, and philosophical reflection complicate the apparent relationship of his work to the nascent biological and ecological sciences of his time.

Thus, my interest in *Walden*'s hybrid visions of environment fits into a critical tradition trying to come to terms with philosophical dichotomies that seem to split *Walden* into a series of contradictions. To frame my own discussion, I will briefly introduce one of the most critically discussed dichotomies: the tension between science

---

<sup>24</sup> For an early example of this kind of pro-science recovery, see Phillip and Kathryn Whitford's "Thoreau: Pioneer Ecologist and Conservationist," where they argue that "modern scientists have gradually come to claim Thoreau as one of themselves" (291). More recent examples include Laura Dassow Walls's *Seeing New Worlds*, described in more detail later in this chapter.

and poetry, philosophy, or transcendentalism. This specific dichotomy can be traced back to the terms of Latour's modern constitution. Indeed, in his introduction to *Thoreau's Sense of Place: Essays in American Environmental Writing*, Richard Schneider argues that debates about Thoreau's environmental perspective rehash the basic "epistemological split between subject and object that scholars have long made a central issue and that Thoreau himself emphatically recognizes" (1-2). Schneider claims, "the ecocritical emphasis on a green Thoreau in some ways simply recasts the old epistemological split into a new split between anthropocentric (or homocentric) and ecocentric (or biocentric) views of nature and Thoreau ends up on both sides of this newly defined split" (3).

Lawrence Buell and Rochelle Johnson each repeat Schneider's claim that we can examine Thoreau's work in terms of a split between ecocentric and anthropocentric allegiances. And Buell traces these dualisms to tensions between transcendentalism and natural history. Some Thoreau criticism tries to negotiate the need to purify Thoreau's poetry from his science by identifying his work either as science muddied by philosophical, subjective interests or as literary writing marred by a distracting focus on empirical observation. As Walls describes, criticism argues that Thoreau is either "an Emersonian transcendental poet" or a "fragmented empirical scientist" (*Worlds* 5). Baym divides Thoreau criticism into three separate categories: ecological, symbolist, and humanist. According to Baym, "ecological" criticism argues that Thoreau was "a true scientist ahead of his time," identifying Thoreau with the material pole of our foundational dualism. By contrast, "symbolist" criticism argues that Thoreau was only a poet and never a scientist. "Humanist" criticism acknowledges both Thoreau's empirical

tendencies and his poetic sensibilities, but it dismisses his scientific moments as lapses from a purer vision, framing “Thoreau as unalterably opposed to science but lapsing into it through loss of inspiration” (221). These debates can align with environmental arguments: whether Thoreau was truly more committed to science or philosophy reveals, in turn, whether he was more committed to words or to the material world and consequently whether his work anticipates a more ecocentric turn or exemplifies an enduring propensity towards anthropocentrism left over from his Transcendental roots.

But other criticism asks whether Thoreau’s dissimilar interests are necessarily at odds. Many thoughtful discussions of Thoreau acknowledge his work’s deep ambivalence about such dualisms and try to find ways to escape, avoid, or rethink strict dichotomies. Trying to combine Thoreau’s scientific interests with his transcendentalism leads to a number of questions: “Was transcendentalism a roadblock to Thoreau’s natural history interests, or did it inspire them? What did Thoreau know of nineteenth-century life science [. . .] Did Thoreau’s commitment to nature, existentially and as an object of study, interfere with his development as a writer or quicken it?” (Buell Foreword ix). William Rossi claims that the tension between scientist-Thoreau and poet-Thoreau significantly diminishes with the work of Laura Dassow Walls, who argues that Thoreau becomes “‘something new which combined transcendentalism with empiricism,’ a methodology Walls refers to as ‘empirical holism,’ Thoreau derived from Alexander von Humboldt” (Rossi 29). In this reading, Thoreau combines natural history and philosophy in innovative ways that challenge reductive dichotomies. Walls, for instance, argues that Thoreau avoids Baconian science and romantic ecology, combining the strengths of both by drawing on Humboldt’s new visions of dynamic nature to develop a unique form of

literary science (qtd. in Rossi 29). Rossi argues that Thoreau combines transcendental and empirical goals, mixing “the ‘centrifugal,’ aspiring tendency of his transcendentalism and the centripetal, rooting tendency of his incipient ecocentrism as opposite yet dual manifestations of one ontology” (38).

These re-imaginings do not just smash science and poetry together, nor do they assert that Thoreau establishes some middle ground between the claims of empiricism and transcendentalism. Instead, Walls imagines Thoreau’s combination of scientific and literary pursuits in terms that resemble Latourian representation, emphasizing literary texts as constructed but meaningful participants in natural discourse. In *Seeing New Worlds*, Walls calls Thoreau’s work “literary science, perhaps; not literature-and-science but science seen as literature, in its fictive constructions of the world, and literature seen as science, in its operational effectiveness in the world” (178-9). Walls’s description of Thoreau’s work suggests that factual discourse is itself, at some level, an aesthetic and textual construction; that textual constructions do have impacts on and relationships to the material world; that literature can be considered both constructed and real; and that there can be correspondence between the constructed and the real. She, like myself, arrives at this reading of environmental reference by “read[ing] Thoreau’s endeavors through Bruno Latour’s account of the process of science” (177). Walls uses Latour’s formal analysis of scientific construction to examine how Thoreau’s later natural history writing might effectively construct knowledge of the world while making use of more traditionally “literary” techniques such as metaphor, allusion, and imagery. Such literary science not only challenges a dichotomy between science and poetry, but also challenges realist/constructivist and text/world divisions.

Adopting a less dichotomous vision of representation and language pushes Thoreau criticism to develop alternative theories of Thoreauvian perception and observation. Rick Anthony Furtak, for example, looks at passages from the *Journal* where Thoreau explores the nature of perception and asserts the realness of the perceived world. Furtak uses the work of Stanley Cavell to articulate an idea of “perceptual faith,” an orientation of openness towards the material world. Furtak claims that Thoreau “shares the Cartesian aspiration to find a solid grounding for knowledge, and to recover a connection to the world that is lost to us when we doubt its existence” (543). He insists that such a recovery of the real world depends upon developing a belief in the relationship between the material world and human perception. Thus, Furtak says that Thoreau wants to recover the “connection to things” (Cavell qtd. 543). In this case, the risks of human perception are an inevitable part of understanding reality: of Thoreau’s journal, Furtak says, “Truthfulness does not consist in the accumulation of neutral data, but in the perception of facts that can flower into meaningful knowledge” (548). Rather than being trapped within an individual consciousness and within fabricated reality, humans are only able to access meaningful knowledge through the lens of subjectivity. In a way akin to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, then, Thoreau imagines perception, like language, as a genuine encounter between human and material, mediated through the body of the observing writer.

The recent critical emphasis on Thoreau’s complex visions of representation and perception suggests that, far from a simple escape into nature, *Walden* presents an interrogation of the situated, embodied observer-writer and of the processes by which such an observer-writer can come to know and represent the world. As Walls points out,

Thoreau sets up his experiment in an alternative mode of life as one that foregrounds rather than diminishes the role of the central observer. As he himself explains, “In most books, the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking” (5). For Thoreau, the solution to the egotism of the writer is not a disavowal of perception but rather a broadening of the narrow confines of experience – that is, to put himself bodily into new experiences, acknowledging the limits to his perspective but moving this perspective by relocating himself. In *Walden*, he literally broadens his experience by relocating himself to Walden Pond; he changes his conditions in order to isolate the variables necessary to the creation of a good life.

This mobilization of himself provides the power to support his bold claims. When Thoreau claims that “I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be *extra- vagant* enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced,” he is not just wanting stylistic extravagance (*Walden* 218). His punning on extravagance and vagrancy shows him wanting to move *bodily* and mobilize his expression with him. That is why, as Thoreau proclaims in one of *Walden*’s most famous passages, he must *move*: in order “to front only the essential facts of life,” he must get up and go to the woods (65). Thoreau mobilizes his body in order to gain knowledge of the world; his experiment in living does not take place in the laboratory and does not require the mobilization of experimental items, but rather requires him to move himself and interact with his world in order to learn.

Comparing *Walden* to a laboratory experiment follows up on a provocative allusion Walls makes to *Walden* as “[Thoreau’s] experiment in the making of life, in exploring just how far ‘The universe constantly and obediently *answers* to our conceptions’” (*Worlds* 176). Thoreau himself identifies his two year stay at Walden Pond as “my own experiment,” meant to provide him with insight into “life, an experiment to a great extent untried by me” (31; 9). “Economy” sets up *Walden* as a pseudo-scientific experiment that insists on the primacy of proof from observation and experience. Thoreau claims, “No way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof,” alluding to the text’s foundation on first-hand observation.

Such comparisons of Thoreau’s work to scientific writing has been done in other works, including Walls’s *Seeing New Worlds*. But while Walls focuses on Thoreau’s so-called ‘scientific’ writings – works such as “The Succession of Forest Trees” and *The Dispersion of Seeds* where Thoreau systematically collects and categorizes data about the natural world – Latour’s analysis of experimentation and scientific representation can also help with a re-reading of Thoreau’s more literary works. Latour’s theories seem particularly apt when applied to *Walden* since the text proclaims itself an experiment and evidences a semi-scientific commitment to empirical observation.<sup>25</sup> Latour’s concepts of hybridity, circulating reference, mobilization, and translation can help literary critics to emphasize the highly constructed nature of *Walden* without dismissing the attempts the

---

<sup>25</sup> Walls does extend Latourian analysis to *Walden* in her 2011 article “From the Modern to the Ecological: Latour on Walden Pond.” She claims, “starting at Walden Pond and with increasing skill through the 1850s, Thoreau followed the practice, not of Science, but of the sciences, weaving human and nonhumans together by naturalizing the social and socializing the natural [. . .] His procedure resembles the series of transformations traced by Latour in ‘Circulating Reference’ [. . .] Through just such a chain of transformations, Thoreau loaded his prose with the real” (103). While Walls argues that the rhetorical strategies of *Walden* resemble the Latourian terms of translation, mobilization, and circulating reference, her article does not perform the kind of close reading completed in this chapter, ending instead with a call for critics to consider whether “all texts [could] be read in a Latourian manner” (108).

text makes to find an expression “adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced” (218). Looking at writing through this constrained realist lens can decrease the distinction between world and text, reimagining writing as an active way of knowing the world. The result is a text that does not just see the writer as embodied or participatory; it reimagines writing itself as a form of encounter and as a way of reshaping the material environment.

### **“Making the Earth Say Beans”: The Agri-Cultural Mobilization of the World**

*Walden*'s self-consciousness about the role of the observer in the experimental creation of knowledge leads one to consider how many and what kinds of transformations are necessary to arrive at an author's presented experience of the world. While it might not be identical to a grid of soil that becomes a chart, literary representation can also be understood as mobilizing rather than reproducing or copying the world. *Walden*'s interest in experimentation and representation appears most centrally in “The Bean Field,” where Thoreau half-mockingly compares his agrarian experiment to grow beans with the “experiments of gentlemen farmers” while also insisting on the project's ability to help him cultivate personal insight (112). The simultaneity of these goals is important; for Thoreau, the growth of beans, the growth of himself, and the growth of social critique will all occur through deliberate interaction with and transformation of the soil outside his cabin. His ideas, his self, and his environment will all be changed through their mutual encounter, and the result will be self-knowledge as well as a practical understanding of how to grow beans and of what the environs of Walden Pond are truly like. The question under debate, as Thoreau states early in the chapter, is “What shall I learn of beans or beans of me?” This question frames Thoreau's inquiry with a provocative ambiguity, positioning the observing individual as an object of investigation

just like the beans. His question also blurs the lines of agency, suggesting that the beans might be learning as much about him as he learns of them. Blurring such lines helps to challenge the central importance of the human observer, emphasizing this observer's involvement in the material world as a necessary component to the development of knowledge. At the chapter's opening, the exact nature of that knowledge remains incomplete. Thoreau claims, "What was the meaning of this so steady and self-respecting, this small Herculean labor, I knew not" (107). But the "small Herculean labor" of connecting the field to knowledge through material mobilizations and writing is necessary for him to "learn of beans" and to learn of himself.

To connect the bean field of Thoreau-the-observer's experience with "The Bean Field" of Thoreau-the-writer's text requires the establishment of a meaningful relationship between the text and both past experience and the material world. To develop this sense of immediacy and connection, "The Bean Field" uses ecomimesis as described by Morton. Thoreau brings the bean field experience into the time frame of the reader with the word "Meanwhile" that opens the chapter. This resembles the "As I am writing" phrase that Morton identifies as a marker of ecomimesis. Both formulations make the reader enter the time frame of the writer's experience, collapsing the distinction between narrative voice, embodied observer, and writer. The hammering repetition of present tense verbs encourages the reader to experience the field right along with Thoreau, imagining the moment of perception: "Meanwhile," the chapter suggests, as the reader reads, "I cherish [my beans], I hoe them, early and late, I have an eye to them, and this is my day's work." Simultaneously, Thoreau's repetition of definite pronouns insists on the reality and presence of "this my native town," and "these very woods and this field."

Even when Thoreau drifts into memory, he uses the sensory immediacy of his experience to mix past and present: “And now to-night my flute has waked the echoes over that very water.” His paragraphs resound with echoes of what Morton calls “ambience,” the sense of a world around both reader and writer evoked by the art of words or the art of the flute’s music. Thoreau’s text suggests the ability of these art forms to connect the reader to actual nature as firmly as “they [the beans] attached me to the earth” (all quotes from 107). As much as the described, physical bean field itself, then, the chapter “The Bean-Field” anchors the material world to the text’s philosophical musings.

At the same time, while this chapter begins by using the techniques of ecomimesis, it consistently undermines the purified vision of nature such ecomimesis creates, emphasizing the writer’s role in rendering the landscape. Thoreau self-consciously describes the material transformations necessary during his experiment to transform the field into an agricultural bean field and then into a cultivated text called “The Bean Field.” He is forthcoming about the role he plays in transforming the landscape from undergrowth to cultivated field: “This was my curious labor all summer, – to make this portion of the earth’s surface, which had yielded only cinquefoil, blackberries, johnswort, and the like, before, sweet wild fruits or pleasant flowers, produce instead this pulse” (107). This line has echoes later in the text that foreground Thoreau’s role in transforming the land into prose; Thoreau is the figure who “make[s] the yellow soil express its summer thought in bean leaves and blossoms rather than in wormwood and piper and millet grass, making the earth say beans instead of grass”

(108). This connection between farming and writing again reappears when he describes himself as “dabbling like a plastic artist in his fields” (108).<sup>26</sup>

In these examples, Thoreau presents a strange conflation of words and objects, revealing how his labor in the field, like his writing, is ultimately geared toward the expression of his own thoughts. This is not the kind of rhapsodic rushing of the human to meld into the natural that Morton decries. Rather, the chapter subtly challenges a dualistic division between subject and object, speaker and world. Such a challenge arises not from an image of reconciliation but from an image of mobilization. After all, it is the same speaker who transforms the world into text and who transforms and crafts the material world. By calling material transformations of the earth a kind of writing, and by comparing material plants to language (the words of the earth are “bean leaves and blossoms”), “The Bean Field” collapses the distinction between world and text; it figures the entire world as textual at the same time that it insists on its undeniable materiality. In this regard, the relationship between “The Bean Field” and the historical, material bean field Thoreau cultivates resembles the relationship Latour describes between Boa Vista the forest and Boa Vista on paper. It is a non-identical relationship made possible by the active engagement of a perceiving subject via the processes of observation and writing. *Walden*, too, is a text with plants for footnotes. The writer/farmer plays a curious role here, which Thoreau imagines as creative cultivation, both of plants and of the earth’s own thoughts: rather than presenting writing and agriculture as imposed by human hands

---

<sup>26</sup> Citing the work of Frederick Garber, Buell also points out the connection between planting and writing, but insists on greater difference between the two modes: “For Thoreau, Garber argues, writing was part of a larger field of ‘inscribings that might also include ploughing, cabin building, surveying, tracing Indian trails, and observing loggers’ marks. He wished to connect writing with deeds, from which perspective ‘words take on an inescapable secondariness,’ for Thoreau must recognize that writing in fact never equals deed, only ‘the record of a deed’” (*Imagination* 379).

onto the earth, he imagines these activities as cultivated out of the earth itself, providing a new translation of “the summer thoughts” already existing within the summer soil. These thoughts are strange hybrids, like the actants of Latourian theory; the cultivated plants and the textual representations become possible only through the combination of a material object and a human actor, something different from either an untouched field or an entirely imagined human thought.

The second paragraph of the chapter repeats the ecomimetic move to create an idyllic and ambient picture of nature, then undercuts this vision by emphasizing the way the author figure helps to produce both material and textual landscapes. Thoreau launches into perhaps the most ecomimetic description of the whole chapter when he begins to describe his childhood memories of the original field:

When I was four years old, as I well remember, I was brought from Boston to this my native town, through these very woods and this field, to the pond. It is one of the oldest scenes stamped on my memory. And now to-night my flute has waked the echoes over that very water. The pines still stand here older than I [ . . . ] a new growth is rising all around, preparing another aspect for new infant eyes [ . . . ] even I have at length helped to clothe that fabulous landscape of my infant dreams, and one of the results of my presence and influence is seen in these bean leaves, corn blades, and potato vines. (107)

Here, the evocative flute music and the nostalgia of childhood memory create a highly aesthetic representation of nature void of any specificity. But again, Thoreau curtails pastoral evocation in order to foreground the labor that contributes to a landscape,

effected by “my presence and influence.” Thoreau thereby resists his own “effort to present an original, pristine nature not ‘infected’ with the consciousness, the mentality, or the desire of the ‘perceiver’” (Morton 68). He questions the aesthetic vision he postulates, highlighting how his nostalgia contributes to this perception of the natural environment and pointing to his literal transformations of the earth as a challenge to any imagined purity of the woods and field. He has, he insists, “helped to clothe the fabulous landscape of my infant dreams” through both labor and writing, and thus his intervention takes the form of both words and plants. Buell reads this passage as “a pleasing self-indulgent fancy,” an overestimation of human importance that Thoreau will later move away from in his more ecocentric writing (*Imagination* 118-19). But Thoreau’s farming and his writing *do* clothe and shape the landscape he inhabits, and to acknowledge this is to recognize a more sophisticated notion of the interrelationship of human and environment – to see the environment as an actively constructed material sphere that influences the observer but also accepts his influence when he chooses to write or to act.

Andrew McMurry, in *Environmental Renaissance: Emerson, Thoreau, and the Systems of Nature*, claims that *Walden* is blind to the hybrids Thoreau’s text thus unearths. He argues that *Walden* actively participates in the perpetuation of Latour’s modern constitution, purifying the categories of human and natural while yearning for access to pure nature and lamenting humans’ inevitable isolation within language and society. *Walden*, McMurry claims, strives to keep “the orders of nature and culture in two entirely separate ontological boxes” while failing to recognize the hybrids that keep creeping into the narrative (145). For example, in his reading of the chapter “Spring,” McMurry argues that Thoreau plays with metaphorical hybrids while policing these

purified nature/culture categories, revealing a “discursive construction of hybrids in *Walden* and blindness to the real ones at Walden Pond” (140). But the beans of “The Bean Field” do not function only as metaphorical or discursive hybrids. At a material level, these hybrids manifest Thoreau’s work in the land, being the result of both natural growth processes and human agricultural labor. At a more conceptual level, these plants are hybrids of materiality and metaphor. They are very real hybrids of wildness and cultivation that function on multiple levels in the text: as real plants; as metaphorical symbols for personal growth; as literary tropes that allude to pastoral convention; and as material extensions of the larger world itself with which Thoreau seeks to enter into relationship.

The beans are very real hybrids because, like the bean field itself, they are “half-cultivated,” both in terms of agricultural and textual cultivation. Like the field, they are “the connecting link between wild and cultivated [. . .] beans cheerfully returning to their wild and primitive state” (109). While this statement can be read in terms of literary pastoral convention, presenting the bean field as an ideal middle state between the extremes of civilization and wilderness, it may be read, as McMurry suggests elsewhere, as replicating a system of thought where “nature and society have remained conceptually distinct” (McMurry 145). Yet Thoreau specifically points out that his is not only a half-*civilized* but also a half-*cultivated* field. The term “cultivation” implies the field’s constructed quality, emphasizing interaction between human and material and not just pointing to the field’s position on a spectrum of society and wilderness. Moreover, Thoreau playfully reminds the reader that the field is not just located halfway between Concord and the frontier; it is also a hybrid location because it mixes within itself

evidence of cultivation and wildness that challenges a strict separation of nature and culture. An ideal pastoral landscape erases the presence of labor, provides a temporary escape from society, and alleviates tension within the human/nature dichotomy by providing a place where humans can seamlessly blend with the natural environment. However, Thoreau's "Bean Field" holds within itself the terms that pastoralism cancels, refusing to reconcile the human to the natural but instead exploring the results of their interaction. Hybridity is not an equivalence, a cancellation, or a middle ground, but the production of something entirely new.

Thoreau further reveals the land as a complex hybrid when he literally and textually unearths traces of former cultivation. There are "arrowheads which I turned up hoeing," that lie beneath his nostalgic childhood visions of wildness and beneath layers of supposedly wild plants (107). Other humans no less than he helped to clothe the landscape. He sees these arrowheads as proof "that an extinct nation had anciently dwelt here and planted corn and beans ere white men had come to clear the land" (107). Thus, the wild field Thoreau begins to cultivate was once cultivated by a previous civilization; his cultivated beans eventually will go wild without his intervention; and the field will remain forever half-cultivated – a hybrid field that humans can use for agricultural production and also mobilize for cultural purposes. Thoreau's text foregrounds rather than hides this hybridity, undermining his own attempts at purification. He does not provide a fully articulated "chain of transformation" such as Latour traces in his analysis of contemporary scientific practice (*Pandora* 70). But Thoreau does describe how the process of seeking information about himself, beans, and the world causes him to transform the land; he does describe how the material manifestations of the land itself

must be understood as a historical chain of transformations, without there ever being a moment of pure wildness or pure civilization. Plants and humans together keep cultivating this hybrid place that he so badly wants to know.

Thoreau's investigation of hybridity highlights the interrelationship of materiality and textuality. The material bean field and "The [textual] Bean Field" thus resemble each other, not in a mimetic way, but through their mutually created hybrid forms. Thoreau uses the rhythm of his text's language to heighten this similarity between text and world, comparing the texture of the described bean field to his writing. There are layers of nostalgia and history mixed with empirical observation and aesthetic description in his text, just as there are layers of artifacts and wild plants on and under the soil – plants and artifacts which he only discovers and "knows" by beginning a process of transformation. Such similarities between text and material are not mimetic and yet evoke resemblance. What this reading gives us that an emphasis on ecomimesis alone could not is

a nature thoroughly hybrid, limited, and post-lapsarian [. . .] Nature that is endlessly new is also endlessly old, imbricated with past lives and ages; Europeans who came to the "New World" were folded into American nature just like the Indians they displaced, who also burned and cultivated the land, creating a hybrid landscape that mixes nature's design with layers of human purpose. (Walls 187)

Wild and cultivated here are shown to be processes rather than categories, and the concept of nature here becomes as hybrid as Thoreau's text and landscape. The "American environmentalist saint" thus refuses to depict nature as a source of escape from human limitations – whether social or individual – but instead imagines nature as

always already in contact with humans (Buell “Natural” 527). There is a mutual shaping of individual and environment in Thoreau’s “The Bean Field” that defies escapism. If you go into the wilderness to discover yourself and escape society, what you will discover, Thoreau suggests, is a world already shot through with human presence.

But Thoreau’s hybrid depiction of nature in “The Bean Field” by no means undermines the project’s larger desire to learn of the self by learning of the material world. Rather, by positioning himself within a history of process as well as within a hybrid landscape, Thoreau emphasizes the importance of experience to his growing knowledge of himself and the world. He just challenges the purity of the knowledge that will result. Rather, his knowledge relies on transformations and contacts. There is no knowing the world prior to the experience of encountering the beans themselves and participating in their growth, just as there was no knowing the true hybridity of the land prior to digging in it. There is no final firm wall between text and experience because experience is necessary to create the text and the text can point back to past experience and forward to new experiences. Thoreau describes his experience in terms of action, showing how involvement and change create the possibility of knowledge:

It was a singular experience that long acquaintance which I cultivated with beans, what with planting, and hoeing, and harvesting, and threshing, and picking over, and selling them, – the last was the hardest of all, – I might add eating, for I did taste. I was determined to know beans. (111)

Here Thoreau makes evident what he is trying to accomplish with his descriptions of and labor in the field. He is determined to *know* through experience. Latour argues that “Knowledge derives from such *movements*, not simple contemplation” and that it is only

through interaction that any genuine knowledge of the world develops (*Pandora* 39).

Like Latour, Thoreau recognizes that

*an experiment is an event.* No event can be accounted for by a list of the elements that entered the situation *before* its conclusion [. . .] an experiment is an event and not a discovery, not an uncovering, not an imposition, not a synthetic *a priori* judgment, not the actualization of a potentiality [. . .]. (*Pandora* 126)

His work in the bean field is an event that gives him knowledge not just about agricultural practices or about what the world *is* but also about how he can and should interact with that world. *Walden's* opening cries for a newly awakened life, in concert with his labor, accomplish what Latour calls “*the mobilization of the world* [. . .] by which nonhumans are progressively loaded into discourse [. . .] making it available for arguments” (*Pandora* 99-100). By the end of the text, Thoreau presents the reader with “an unbroken series of well-nested elements,” where the text is linked back to the land through the beans that he cultivated – beans that, because of Thoreau’s experience with them and because of the changes that occur in his knowledge over time, operate as both sign and object (*Pandora* 56).

It is the hybrid sign-object bean that unlocks the strange conclusion of Thoreau’s chapter. The conclusion is startling because, after all the pages dedicated to patiently describing beans, Thoreau suddenly criticizes agriculture and denounces his own project:

This further experience I also gained. I said to myself, I will not plant beans and corn with so much industry another summer, but such seeds, if the seed is not lost, as sincerity, truth, simplicity, faith, innocence, and the

like, and see if they will not grow in this soil [. . .] Why concern ourselves so much about our beans for seed and not be as concerned about a new generation of men? (113)

This conclusion to “The Bean Field” could be read as a movement of abstraction, where Thoreau abandons the practical aspects of bean-growing in favor of supposedly higher aims. This excerpt could suggest that Thoreau takes advantage of the metaphors farming provides to focus on more ideal concerns such as self-growth and virtue. But I believe that the conclusion should be read as the end result of an experiment that convinces Thoreau of the hybrid nature of beans and art and self. Thoreau’s conclusion is not that one should not grow beans, but that it is not sufficient to grow beans alone. He does not condemn bean-raising so much as he condemns agriculture separated from the poetic and the philosophical. His experience in the bean field shows him that hybrid forms which mix the practical and the poetic will allow for the most healthy, fulfilling relationship between human and world. This points Thoreau towards “Ancient poetry and mythology” that mix agriculture and literature into “a sense of the sacredness of [the farmer's] calling” (114).

The knowledge that Thoreau gains through the depicted experience of bean farming mirrors Walls’s description of Thoreau’s work as “literary science.” In her analysis of “The Succession of Forest Trees,” Walls argues that Thoreau mixes scientific and literary convention to “negotiate [. . .] the difficult passage between poetry and science,” both presenting empirical observations about the world and using unconventional poetic language to move these disciplinary limits to “intervene in the deadening discourse of science, and to demonstrate an alternative mode which

nevertheless would be successful *as science*” (Walls 200; 201-2). While *Walden*, an earlier piece, is not yet so heavily invested in legitimizing itself within the scientific community, this text, particularly “The Bean Field,” still explores and experiments with “how to make a single, hybrid text coherent to readers with double vision” (Walls 201).

As an experiment in written hybridity, mingling scientific and poetic writing as well as material beans and language, Thoreau’s strange conclusion begins to make some sense. His entire chapter sets up his experience raising beans as an experiment into how the human, its environment, and its society should interrelate. Through the process of farming beans and the process of writing, Thoreau mobilizes a way of intervening in the deadening, soulless state of modern agriculture without discarding agriculture, just as he intervenes in the sciences without discarding science. Thoreau’s experiment in the field becomes continuous with his experiment in the text, for only the two in concert can point to alternative lifestyles that provide truer or at least fuller knowledge of nature and of life. The chain of transformation in “The Bean Field” allows Thoreau to defend his hypothesis, set up early in “Economy,” that modern life is hollow. By growing beans, Thoreau mobilizes the world and literally grows metaphors and symbols to use in his attack on the developing capitalist economy of Concord while also growing plants that can feed him outside of this economy; he creates hybrids on the page as well as in the world. The beans become the metaphorical and literal vehicles for the translation of human thought to natural human earth. They feed the observing, experimenting Thoreau; they acquaint him with the earth, serving as a literal trace of his points of encounter; and they drive his text and his argument, proving that a human can live more simply than

social standards suggest and that a human can learn something true, both of beans and of himself.

As his chapter draws to a close, Thoreau tries one more time to thread a careful line not only between poetry and science but also between his perspective and the world he seeks to describe. Just after the text reduces beans to symbols of virtue, Thoreau returns the reader to the material field, discussing the ways that the bean field manages to exceed his observation and experience:

We are wont to forget that our sun looks on our cultivated fields and on the prairies and forests without distinction [. . .] In his view the earth is all equally cultivated like a garden [. . .] This broad field which I have looked at so long looks not to me as the principal cultivator, but away from me to influences more genial to it, which water and make it green. These beans have results which are not harvested by me. (114)

Once again, it would be possible to read this as an ecomimetic attempt to re-purify the category of nature and return it to a sphere separate from the human. Such purification could encourage the reader to see the cultural realm of human cultivation and the natural realm of wild plants and sun as two separate spheres, co-existing in tension. Yet I believe that this passage can also be read as another attempt to establish hybridity. At the end of his experiment, Thoreau discovers results which he can observe and quantify and these are linked to his acts of intervention; human work in the bean field and human acts of cultivation construct human knowledge. But activities and processes that the human does not observe or in which the human does not participate are “not harvested” by the human, though Thoreau's invocation to the “true husbandman” to “sacrific[e] in his mind not only

his first but his last fruits also” suggests that this inability of the human to know in total does not need to be a cause of anxiety. In the end, whether harvested or not, the truth is that wild and “cultivated” fields can be seen “without distinction.” They are all cultivated, to some extent. There is thus no rigid dichotomy between a material world and a constructed culture, no cultivation mapped out and then projected onto pure nature. There is just a “broad” environment shaped by a variety of factors. Humans cannot help but continue to shape this environment but a “true husbandman” will try to learn of beans, the earth, and himself in the process.

### **The Hybrid Ponds**

Just as “The Bean Field” mixes nostalgic, purified visions with more critical recognitions of the land’s historical construction, *Walden*’s description of the ponds mixes pastoral visions of purity with complicated considerations of the ponds’ hybridity. At times, *Walden* imagines the ponds as points of access to unmediated nature, only to undermine such purity by insisting on the ponds’ histories of material change. For instance, in “The Ponds,” Thoreau the narrator describes Walden Pond as a pure space, free from the depredations of industry ruining Concord:

There is no rawness nor imperfection in its edge there, as where the axe has cleared a part, or a cultivated field abuts on it. The trees have ample room to expand on the water side, and each sends forth its most vigorous branch in that direction. There Nature has woven a natural selvage, and the eye rises by just gradations from the low shrubs of the shore to the highest trees. There are few traces of man’s hand to be seen. The water laves the shore as it did a thousand years ago. (128)

Here, Thoreau imagines Walden Pond as unchanged and ahistorical, thereby immersing the reader in a fantasy of purified nature. At first, the passage seems to reinforce the poles of the modern constitution, keeping nature distant from the observing human, minimizing his presence to an impersonal “eye,” and allowing him only an aesthetic appreciation of the environment as an abstract landscape. Nature itself has formed a boundary, a “natural selvage,” that surrounds the lake and ostensibly fences out human interventions like clearing woods and cultivating fields. Yet the very idea of a “woven selvage” hints at a hybrid history. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a “selvage” is also “[t]he edge of a piece of woven material finished in such a manner as to prevent the ravelling out of the weft. Also, a narrow strip or list at the edge of a web of cloth, which is not finished like the rest of the cloth.” The imagined seamless, static edge of the pond without “imperfection” competes with a different vision of the shores as raw and unfinished. While Thoreau insists that the water “laves at the shores as it did a thousand years ago,” this timelessness depends upon Nature’s constant weaving. If there are “few traces” of humans to be seen, that is because the natural world engages in a process of “continual [. . .] repairs,” weaving back together any strands disturbed by humans’ presence. The illusion of purity which Thoreau offers here is itself a construction, albeit a “natural” one.

Thoreau more explicitly collapses the fantasy of the ponds’ purity when, in the same chapter, he admits that the “natural selvage” of the pond is not undisturbed, but instead being “laid waste” by the woodcutting industry:

since I left those shores the woodchoppers have still further laid them waste, and now for many a year there will be no more rambling through

the aisles of the wood, with occasional vistas through which you see the water. My Muse may be excused if she is silent henceforth. How can you expect the birds to sing when their groves are cut down? (131-32)

On the one hand, this shift from pure to troubled pond enacts a familiar ecological nostalgia. By replacing the pure Walden pond from his visit with a pond since ruined by developing industry, Thoreau creates an elegiac tone: we do not resent the ecological changes taking place so much as the lost fantasy of a pure retreat. But his admission that these woods have been “*further* laid waste” since his departure hints to the signs of human presence creeping into the pond’s surroundings even during his stay (emphasis mine). The deforestation of Walden also creeps into his narrative, as when Thoreau exclaims, “the woodcutters, and the railroad, and I myself have profaned Walden” (135). “The Ponds” thus enacts a troubled oscillation between recognizing and ignoring, both imagining Walden as a retreat from society and uncomfortably recognizing the pond’s constant inclusion into social networks. The co-existence of these competing descriptions shows Thoreau struggling between active, hybrid textual construction and a mere projection of cultural desires onto a passive landscape. While Thoreau wants to imagine the pond as a place of pure nature, the pond’s own role in the creation of his text challenges this fantasy, pushing material realities to the foreground in ways that perturb the text’s consistency.

As “The Ponds” shifts in its depictions, it is hard to tell if Thoreau buys his nostalgic visions or if he rejects them. Perhaps he offers them in the tone of bragging confidence with which he frames the work as a whole, offering their bold visions of natural power in spite of the “cant and hypocrisy” surely shaping them. And just as he

foregrounds his own bragging without withdrawing his claims, Thoreau contradicts his natural visions with images of destruction but never corrects his former, rapturous fantasies. Thoreau concedes that such fantasies are his own cultivated constructions, a truth to which he alludes by calling these pond scenes “the appearance of an amphitheatre for some kind of sylvan spectacle” as well “my lake country” (131;135). By imagining the ponds as an amphitheatre, Thoreau recognizes the ponds’ alleged purity as performative, an enactment of a cultural construction. And by imagining the ponds as his own version of the English Romantic poets’ lake country, he recognizes that his experiences of the ponds are influenced by a cultural and literary tradition. His text thus reveals a pond of two natures, at once pure and defined by human modes. As McMurry argues, Thoreau does seem blind to the hybrids of Walden Pond: he proliferates hybrids as he wanders the landscape, seeing the environment through the lenses of literature and art. But he also denies these hybrids by weaving together a fantasy of nature’s permanent purity and placing a firm boundary between the pond and the effects of human action.

However, Thoreau also playfully describes the ponds in hybrid terms that challenge their imagined purity. The first such challenge comes in Thoreau’s description of Walden Pond as “intermediate in its nature between land and sky” (129-30). This description stems from a simple observation of the pond as a material entity: its shifting colors resemble a mixture of green water and blue sky. As Thoreau explains, “All our Concord waters have two colors at least, one when viewed at a distance, and another, more proper, close at hand [. . .] Walden is blue at one time and green at another, even from the same point of view. Lying between the earth and the heavens, it partakes of the color of both” (121). But within the narrative development of the chapter, this hybridity

quickly becomes symbolic. The pond is not just a mixture of green and blue, or the appearance of water meeting sky; it is also a symbol of the material (earth) meeting the seemingly immaterial or transcendent (sky), providing a space where the historically embodied and textual author can float and fish, for both empirical observations and metaphors for his text.

His hybrid immersion in the pond becomes complete when, floating on the pond at night, he feels “as if I might next cast my line upward into the air, as well as downward into this element which was scarcely more dense. Thus I caught two fishes as it were with one hook” (120-21). Fishing on the pond reproduces the complex collapsing of materiality and language evident in “The Bean Field.” The historical Thoreau may well have floated on a night pond, unable to distinguish earth from sky. But this experience provides an apt metaphor for the process of nature writing, where the human deliberately immerses him or herself in a space that will blur rigid boundaries. By floating out on Walden Pond at night, Thoreau can cast his line into textual as well as literal waters, catching two fish – a textual symbol and an actual experience – with one line. And again, it is embodied participation in an experience of encounter that separates this complexly imagined relationship between the narrator and the world from the aesthetic fantasy described previously. While standing on the shore, Thoreau can imagine the pond as untouched by human presence, as a purely natural entity that gives humans only aesthetic pleasure. But once he sets out fishing for knowledge, metaphors, and fish, he will “feel this faint jerk, which [comes] to interrupt your dreams and link you to Nature again” (120).

Thoreau's shifting understanding of the pond as either hybrid or purified re-emphasizes how process and mutual participation challenge the poles of the modern constitution. Latour insists, "the notion of a yawning gap between words and world was obtained by erasing all the mediations and interrogating only the two extremes facing each other like two distant bookends" (109). In a parallel manner, Thoreau can imagine the ponds as pure only when he erases the mediations connecting himself to the pond; indeed, his purified visions of the pond imagine Nature as erasing such traces itself, "retain[ing] no breath that is breathed on it" (129). But when he becomes active in the environment, whether through growing beans, catching fish, or simply floating on the water, it becomes more difficult to maintain purifications.

Thoreau recognizes the way active involvement places the observer into a more truthful relationship with the material world when, in a rage about the names of many of the ponds, he insists that the ability to name the ponds *well* only comes via elaborate processes of interaction and the resulting accumulation of knowledge. He scoffs at the names given to the ponds by local farmers, seeing them as impositions of both human language and corrupt human economies:

*Flint's Pond!* Such is the poverty of our nomenclature. What right did the unclean and stupid farmer, whose farm abutted on this sky water, whose shores he has ruthlessly laid bare, to give his name to it? Some skin-flint, who loved better the reflecting surface of a dollar, or a bright cent, in which he could see his own brazen face; who regarded even the wild ducks which settled in it as trespassers; [. . .] I go not there to see him nor to hear of him; who never *saw* it, who never bathed in it, who never loved

it, who never protected it, who never spoke a good word for it, nor thanked God that he had made it. (134)

On the one hand, this passage merely repeats Thoreau's desire for purified nature, demanding an eradication of the human farmer. On the other hand, Thoreau's condemnation does not fall equally on all human acts of perception and naming. Thoreau's accusation leaves space for genuine human knowledge, but such knowledge depends upon processes of involvement. Without seeing, bathing in, loving, protecting, and speaking for the pond, one's language cannot be anything other than a projection of the self. Indeed, this list provides a compelling chain of transformations, mobilizing the pond's identity into something knowable by the individual. Such a process actively involves language – the speaking a good word *for* the pond. This passage thus repeats Thoreau's language of endeavor, imagining such endeavor as an involvement independent of utilitarian purposes. The poverty of nomenclature that Thoreau laments specifically comes from an economic system that substitutes monetary value for complex chains of transformation, preferring “the reflecting surface of a dollar, or a bright cent” to a pond's mixture of blues and greens. Names derived from this kind of knowing will be cultural projections imposed upon a distinct natural world.

Again, as in “The Bean Field,” a genuine Thoreauvian knowledge of nature cannot occur via passive, distanced observation. One must *move* one's body into closer contact with the ponds, simultaneously immersing oneself in and speaking for them. Thoreau's prescription for acceptable nomenclature thus repeats the overall process he attempts in his Walden experiment, using a mixture of observation and speaking as a form of testament and advocacy. Knowledge of the material world thus emerges

simultaneously with the emergence of symbols and language sufficient for rhetorical purposes. This pairing drives “The Bean Field” and repeats when Thoreau measures the ponds in “The Ponds in Winter.” He not only measures them for scientific reasons; he also sees them as potential symbols. But these goals are not at odds: empirical measurement of the ponds *constructs them* as valuable symbols, mobilizing their material qualities. Thoreau admits, “I am thankful that this pond was made deep and pure for a symbol” but he uses this symbol only after determining the pond’s exact depth (192):

As I was desirous to recover the long lost bottom of Walden Pond, I surveyed it carefully, before the ice broke up, early in '46, with compass and chain and sounding line. There have been many stories told about the bottom, or rather no bottom, of this pond, which certainly had no foundation for themselves. It is remarkable how long men will believe in the bottomlessness of a pond without taking the trouble to sound it. (191-92)

Here processes and movement make symbolic meaning valuable. This passage repeats Thoreau’s earlier search for a bottom, a sense of reality from which to make political and ethical decisions, and insists that it is easy to replace false stories with symbolic yet true facts. While many men imposed a myth of the pond’s bottomlessness, Thoreau “fathomed it [the pond] easily with a cod-line and a stone” and was consequently able to “assure my readers that Walden has a reasonably tight bottom” (192). Thoreau finds the solid bottom for which he was searching, yet it is not the “hard bottom and rocks in place” from which he hoped to launch his final description of “reality” (70). The pond

has only a “reasonably sound bottom” and it is too far removed for him to “work and wedge” his feet down in order to contact it.

Yet this “reasonably sound” conclusion provides as convincing a counter to the myths of the pond’s infinitude as Latour’s “sturdy relativism” counters the notion that science is only a social construction (*Pandora* 4). Denied a Realometer, denied the presence of a totally knowable or totally distinct nature, Thoreau still finds ways to mobilize the pond and come to know it. While reporting data and drawing a cross-section of the pond based on his measurements (scientific constructions we can easily read as textual mobilizations in a Latourian sense), Thoreau also insists on the imaginative and symbolic power that come from knowing the pond’s dimensions. He asserts, “not an inch of it can be spared by the imagination” (192). Set side by side in the text, diagram and potential symbol both emerge from Thoreau’s embodied interaction with the pond. Both *mean* because they result from Thoreau’s persistent observations. Unlike poetic dreamers who observe from a distance, “who have lain flat on the ice for a long time, looking down through the illusive medium,” Thoreau gropes towards the pond’s depths and gains a reasonable knowledge. Thus, Thoreau develops a hybrid knowledge of a hybrid pond in pursuit of a solid bottom upon which to rebuild his own life.

In the end, a hybrid vision of the pond that accounts for human mobilizations and involvements provides a more convincing place from which to know and speak for the ponds than an idealized, empirical, definitive reality. Recognizing the pond as hybrid makes environmental responsibility possible. Thoreau’s agricultural role in “The Bean Field” involves participation. By contrast, his pastoral treatment of the pond ignores his own presence as a perceiving, representing individual, as well as other human

interventions on the pond, hiding behind the belief that the timeless power of nature will erase all changes to the environment. As long as the pond remains an ahistorical, natural item outside of human influence, capable of covering over any human traces, humans like the woodcutters become temporary aesthetic annoyances rather than meaningful extensions of Concord's networks of exchange. By contrast, when Thoreau actively recognizes the human role in shaping the pond's environment, he can discern between uses of the pond, condemning economic exploitation.

But the mobilized construction that easily explained an agricultural space like the bean field seems less suited to a supposedly "wild" space like the ponds. However, in "The Pond in Winter," Thoreau extends the agricultural metaphors of "The Bean Field" to a description of ice harvesting in order to argue against this use:

In the winter of '46—7, there came a hundred men of Hyperborean extraction swoop down on to our pond one morning [*sic*], with many car-loads of ungainly-looking farming tools [. . .] I did not know whether they had come to sow a crop of winter rye, or some other kind of grain recently introduced from Iceland. As I saw no manure, I judged that they meant to skim the land, as I had done, thinking the soil was deep and had lain fallow long enough. They said that a gentleman farmer, who was behind the scenes, wanted to double his money, which, as I understood, amounted to half a million already; but in order to cover each one of his dollars with another, he took off the only coat, ay, the skin itself, of Walden Pond in the midst of a hard winter [. . .] when I was looking sharp to see what kind of seed they dropped into the furrow, a gang of fellows by my side

suddenly began to hook up the virgin mould itself, with a peculiar jerk, clean down to the sand, or rather the water,—for it was a very springy soil,—indeed all the *terra firma* there was,—and haul it away on sleds [. . .]. (198)

This scene centers around a gentleman farmer, reminiscent of the experimenting Thoreau from “The Bean Field.” Thoreau deliberately draws the comparison by assuming this farmer wants, like him, to take advantage of the rich soil. But there are notable differences: whereas Thoreau wants to come to know beans, this gentleman farmer wants only “to double his money.” Whereas Thoreau participates in a long process of labor in order to harvest knowledge and an alternative lifestyle, this gentleman farmer puts in none of his own labor in order to harvest profit. And whereas Thoreau creates a hybrid space by mixing his own seeds and labor with the long-fallow earth, this farmer merely takes the earth and water itself without ever putting any labor into the ground. Thoreau makes this contrast explicit by imagining the ice on top of Walden Pond as “virgin mould” and “springy soil,” asserting that no “seed” was “dropped in the furrow.” Rather, the water is simply taken, loaded onto the railroad cars and hauled away. Instead of commingling in order to construct a hybrid plant, the earth remains distinct from humans, and it is this very separation that makes the thoughtless taking of Walden’s ice possible.

The fable of the ice harvest makes us recognize the value of a hybrid view of nature. True knowledge comes from interacting with the earth, mobilizing, measuring, planting, harvesting, observing. To ignore this constructed quality of the environment can enable its use or impede its protection. Such exploitation, far from allowing the human to know the environment as Thoreau came to know beans, removes the pre-conditions of

knowledge: instead of a hard bottom or even a reasonably sound bottom, the ice cutters take away “all the *terra firma* there was.” This loss of a solid material grounding reduces Thoreau to repeating purifications, attempting to cover over their incursion. He muses, “now they are all gone, and in thirty days more, probably, I shall look from the same window on the pure sea-green Walden water there, reflecting the clouds and the trees, and sending up its evaporations in solitude, and no traces will appear that a man has ever stood there” (200). The dream of purity, far from protecting environmental spaces, merely makes it possible to ignore their use.

### **Conclusion: “Living Poetry Like the Leaves of a Tree”**

Thus, there are conflicting depictions in *Walden* of the relationship between human and environment, text and world. At times, as McMurry contends, Thoreau appears to be hopelessly inscribed within the poles of the modern constitution. He struggles to imagine a pure nature impervious to human contact, even as the incursions of the woodcutters and ice cutters – even as his own measurements, poems, and observations – create a proliferation of hybrids in and around the pond. But at other times, Thoreau recognizes the power of hybridity and imagines the relationship between text, observer, and world as connected by complex chains of transformation akin to Latourian processes of mobilization. *Walden* imagines a pastoral pond free from culture’s impurities; *Walden* also imagines bean fields and railroad banks where human activity mingles with the material environment to produce “a sort of hybrid product” (205).

Indeed, Thoreau’s oft-discussed vision of the thawing sandbank in a railroad cut presents an image of the natural world as a truly hybrid construction, mixing human and natural space as well as text and materiality. McMurry argues that the hybrid railroad cut

provides “an initial foray into the vicissitudes of the nature/culture distinction” (135). He adds,

The cut is where the orders of nature and culture meet: the sand foliage, after all, is inscribed as a blank canvas laid bare during the construction of the Fitchburg line. Without the quarter-mile stretch of transfigured earth (provided courtesy of surveyors, engineers, Irish work gangs, the state of Massachusetts, and, to press it, James Watt himself, whose steam technology helped inaugurate the age of the railroad) would Thoreau have been deprived of the images—that is to say, the sand images themselves and the tropes they provide? (136-37)

As Thoreau watches the thawing sand patterns and imagines them as living poetry, as the revelation of universal laws, and as prototypes for a number of biological forms, his imagination leaps from material to symbolic and back again. Indeed, McMurry’s conflation of sand patterns and tropes points to a hybrid mixture of language and materiality, and I contend that this hybridity echoes the hybrid bean plants from “The Bean Field” chapter.

But McMurry argues that Thoreau, “keen observer of nature that he was,” would have recognized that “Any precise parallels between the ontogenesis of sand, plant, human, society, and language must break down eventually” (138). McMurry contends that Thoreau insists on such a continuity in spite of its limitations in order to resolve the nature/culture split that the railroad’s hybrid history brings to his attention. Thus, Thoreau insists on collapsing flowing sand and writing because he is still participating in Latourian cycles of purification and proliferation, pulling apart nature and culture only to

smash them back together in unsatisfying combinations.<sup>27</sup> Yet Thoreau's observation of the sandbank reads differently when connected back to "The Bean Field," since the images of language-plants grown from hybrid space echoes the self-conscious attention to hybridity evident in his agricultural experiments. Thoreau observes the sandbank and imagines nature as a creative Artist similar to Latour's vision of the scientific experimenter, actively involved in constructive processes of material transformation:

I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me,—had come to where he was still at work, sporting on this bank, and with excess of energy strewing his fresh designs about [ . . . ] You find thus in the very sands an anticipation of the vegetable leaf. No wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labors with the idea inwardly. (205)

In its ending sentences, this passage repeats the images of language and materiality that Thoreau used to describe his own work in the bean fields. This parallel allows Thoreau, through his own participation in the hybrid space at Walden Pond, to move words and know the hybrid natural world better. His work in the fields helps him grow the metaphors of his writing and connects him to the thoughts of the earth. While formerly such an interactive process seemed at odds with the pure ponds he wanted to imagine, here the process becomes extendable to a world far beyond an agricultural field. The whole world, from the laws of nature to the divine Artist, becomes visible in an explicitly hybrid space; Thoreau's insistence that this hybrid space gives him access to all of

---

<sup>27</sup> McMurry argues, "on the one hand, he seeks to purify nature from culture by ignoring the mixed origins of the deep cut sand images; on the other hand, by translating these same images across geological and biological domains into the domain of the social, he creates entities of nonhuman and human components [ . . . ] When he is engaged in purification he ignores the translation, and when he engages in translation, he cannot see he is purifying" (139).

nature's truths suggests a dawning awareness that the nature he pursues may too be hybrid. Like the field expressing its thoughts in leaves, the natural world is constituted by hybridity, which makes it knowable and describable. Recognizing hybridity, Thoreau insists that the earth he observes is neither pure language nor pure materiality:

The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit,—not a fossil earth, but a living earth [. . .]. (207)

Instead of a dead, material world that one discovers and brags about mistakenly, “Spring” presents a living and hybrid world constituted by materiality and language. It is this hybrid world for which Thoreau can “speak a good word,” mobilizing the poetry of tree leaves and sandbanks into the poetry of the text through perception, interaction, and language.

## CHAPTER IV

### “IF THE POETS BECOME MATERIALISED”: THE POLITICAL POTENTIAL OF MATERIAL REPRESENTATION IN FRANK NORRIS’S *THE OCTOPUS*

If truth is not an actual work-a-day thing, as concrete as the lamp-post on the corner, as practical as a cable-car, as real and homely and work-a-day and commonplace as a boot-jack, then indeed are we of all men most miserable and our preaching vain. And truth in fiction is just as real and important as truth anywhere else

Frank Norris, “The Need of a Literary Conscience”

“If the poets become materialised, Mr. Presley,” declared Hartrath, “what can we say to the people?”

Frank Norris, *The Octopus*

In the scene from which the second epigraph is taken, Presley, the protagonist of Frank Norris’s 1901 novel *The Octopus*, is arguing with a group of artists, writers, and capitalist investors at an art fete in San Francisco. Presley has recently moved to California in hopes of writing an epic poem about the West, but his interaction with the San Francisco artists as well as his increasing involvement in the politics of the San Joaquin Valley have pushed him to question the value of his poetry. At the novel’s beginning, Presley hopes to write “some vast, tremendous theme, heroic, terrible, to be unrolled in all the thundering progression of hexameters” and to write of “the West, that world’s frontier of Romance, where a new race, a new people—hardy, brave, and passionate—were building an empire” (9-10). However, a growing political battle between the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad and his friends, a group of San Joaquin wheat ranchers, challenges his romanticized visions of Western empire and his romanticized definitions of art; his personal involvement opens his eyes to the escapist, apolitical nature of the San Francisco art establishment. The fete which Presley attends

and the artists with whom he associates are backed by railroad money – the very money derived from grain tariffs which his friends pay, the very money bribing railroad commissioners and driving the ranchers from railroad-leased lands. At the party, Presley accuses the railroad of using such “fairs and festivals” to simultaneously increase railroad traffic and distract public attention from the railroad’s political maneuvering. He realizes that art such as he hoped to produce, when divorced from the political and material conditions of its surroundings, can become a dangerous ideological tool.

But the artist Hartrath responds to Presley’s concern with a question that haunts the novel: if poets become concerned with the material details of economics and politics, what will happen to the social or aesthetic power of their work? What appeal can art have for the population if it ceases to entertain and distract? Will art retain its appeal if it leaves the world of Romance and reenters the world of ordinary things? By exploring these questions, *The Octopus* becomes a novel about the materialization of art. As the conflict between the ranchers and the railroad intensifies, leading to a violent shoot-out between ranch owners and railroad management, Presley abandons abstract literature and turns his attention to the material details of the San Joaquin conflict. But Presley does not give up on creating an epic. He simply re-imagines epic as involving specific historical events and material conditions. Presley replaces a homogenous, general “West” with a more concrete description of conditions in the San Joaquin. *The Octopus* thus becomes more specifically a novel about what a materialized poetry – or, to use Presley’s own term, an “absolutely true poetical expression” – might look like (*Octopus* 13). The novel focuses on Presley’s search for an artistic mode that puts him in contact with both the

material world and the text in order to give his work an authenticity beyond mere aesthetic value.

Presley's search for a material yet epic mode of writing enacts theories about literature and the materially real evident in Norris's own correspondence, criticism, and artistic practice. Like Presley, Norris traveled to the San Joaquin in search of literary inspiration; unlike Presley, Norris always planned to base his epic of the West in the material details of environmental and economic conflicts. Norris's letters show that he went to stay on the wheat ranches specifically to research the Mussel Slough affair of 1880 and to write a novel about the growth of the railroad trusts that occurred in California in the 1870s and 1880s.<sup>28</sup> These letters and essays also present his new definition of "naturalism," a literary mixing of realism and romance, based in material observation and factual accuracy but also in the creation of compelling stories. While Presley does not function as a stand-in for Norris, his transformation into a "materialized" poet does resemble Norris's own developing naturalism: Norris's theory avoids simple dichotomies by rejecting definitions that reduce literature either to artifice or to factual reproduction, threading a path akin to Presley's between the allure of the literary and the desire for factual accuracy.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> For example, in a letter to Harry M. Wright, Norris claims, "I mean to study the whole question as faithfully as I can and then write a hair lifting story...I mean to do it thoroughly.—Get at it from every point of view, the social, the agricultural, [and] political.—Just say the last word [on] the R.R. question in California" (qtd. in in McElrath and Crisler 340). McElrath and Crisler argue that Norris's correspondence reveals his desire to write a book in what would come to be called the muckraking tradition (341). However, Norris eventually changes his plan, prompted by "the complexity of the situation" (344). For more details on Norris's historical research of the Mussel Slough Affair – the 1880 railroad/rancher shootout that inspired *The Octopus*'s own shootout scene – see McElrath and Crisler (346-52).

<sup>29</sup> Norris rejects the overtly literary in essays including "A Plea for Romantic Fiction," where he scoffs at sentimental romance and calls it "a conjurer's trick box, full of flimsy quackeries, tinsel and clap traps, meant only to amuse, and relying upon deception to do even that" (1165). However, in the same essay, he also rejects simple realism, calling it a "harsh, loveless, colorless, blunt tool" (1166).

But, like theorists of representation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Norris struggles to identify a clear alternative to this dichotomy between reality and aesthetics. The result is a series of contradictory positions evident in his theory and his novels. On the one hand, Norris appeals to the material as a way of validating truth, encouraging writers to avoid the “fake” and “sham” writing represented in *The Octopus* by the San Francisco art scene. For example, in the 1901 essay from which the first epigraph is taken, Norris bemoans American literature’s lack of commitment to material and historical truth. While he congratulates popular writers on their ability to reach large audiences, he urges them to ground their work in a more material version of truth. Norris the critic’s impulse towards an objective, empirical truth reproduces the tension between artistic appeal and materiality evident in Hartrath’s question: although the popular artists Norris derides may have much to say to the people, in his estimation, they are not faithful to the facts of material reality.

To correct this imbalance, Norris’s essay encourages writers to pursue truth based on material things – a truth imagined as “the hard nub of the business, something we can hold in the hand” rather than as “an elusive, intangible abstraction” (1158).<sup>30</sup> Norris emphasizes the material by asserting that literary truth should be as immediately discernible as an ordinary object: a lamp-post, a cable-car, or a bootjack. Given this material world’s self-evident truth, more grounded literature should be easy to produce, requiring only that the author actively observe the world. “A whole Literature goes marching by, clamoring for a leader and a master hand to guide it,” he claims; “You have but to step from your doorway” (1158-59). Norris’s invitation to writers to step out and

---

<sup>30</sup> This essay, along with Norris’s other literary essays cited in this chapter, are reprinted in Donald Pizer’s *Frank Norris: Novels and Essays*. Page numbers refer to these re-printings.

observe the truth right outside their doors recalls Timothy Morton's logic of "factual brutalism" (123). For it insists on the self-evidence of empirical truth, seeking, in Latour's phrase, "an objective object untouched by human hands" (*Pandora* 13).<sup>31</sup> Such formulations present truth as less a social construction than a tangible fact, just waiting to be perceived and shared by the observant individual writer.

But the call for material truth that Norris makes in this epigraph is unusual in his critical writing. In other literary essays, Norris openly scorns his friend William Dean Howells's brand of realism, with its interest in the workaday objects of the middle class. While "The Need for a Literary Conscience" exhorts the would-be American novelist to step out in the street and grab hold of a self-evident literature of bootjacks and lamp posts, essays such as "Zola as Romantic Artist" (1896) and "A Plea for Romantic Fiction" (1901) emphasize the artist's role in selecting and constructing the truths of literary work. "A Plea for Romantic Fiction," published the same month as "The Need for a Literary Conscience," dismisses realism's "meticulous presentation of teacups, rag carpets, wall paper and haircloth sofas" as reductive and superficial. Norris counters such superficiality by insisting that not just any observation will suffice as the foundation for truthful writing. While literary truth must be grounded in actual things, perception and selection influence texts, too. Although claiming the objectivity of truth by pointing to its foundation in material things, Norris also fully acknowledges the subjectivity of truth as the end result of human arrangement and selection. Thus, Norris's definition of truth struggles to cultivate a dual allegiance to materiality and to representation. It seeks to

---

<sup>31</sup> Morton describes "factual brutalism" as the idea "that the space of factual things can put a stop to thinking" (123). He argues that appeals to facts thus serve as a way of ending argument; objects provide an end to the subjective wrangling of human discourse.

acknowledge the central roles of both the human writer and the material world being described.

This struggle to encompass both materiality and construction is not only philosophical but also reflects the changing material conditions of the industrializing world. Norris's novels document late nineteenth century America's transition into a more transnational and industrial state of capitalism, a transition accompanied by a loss of material immediacy according to current theorists of globalization and transnationalism. Recent globalization theory describes how space, time, and things all begin to feel disembodied under the influence of capitalism. The alienation of laborers, the rise of the commodity, and the development of international systems of travel, communication, and exchange all disconnect experiencing subjects from the world of material things. Marshall Berman takes the following passage from *The Communist Manifesto* as indicative of capitalism's effect on material relations to the environment:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, everlasting uncertainty and agitation, distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier times. All fixed, fast-frozen relationships, with their train of venerable ideas and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become obsolete before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face with sober senses the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men [338]. (qtd. in Berman 95)

This passage presents a different vision of material things than Norris's literary prescription. In Marx's reading, the concrete specificity of things cannot be immediately

discerned by the individual; in place of the material realness of Norris's lamp post, Marx describes the uncertainty of the commodity form and its consequent alienation. Other theorists diagnose capitalism's symptoms in names that sound science-fictional but similarly emphasize material disconnect: time-space compression (Harvey); deterritorialization (Tomlinson); and dematerialization (Harvey).<sup>32</sup> Relationships to material environments and the resources in them begin, as Marx predicts, to lose solidity as industrial processes of exchange, transportation, and production change human relationships to their physical environments. The effect of such changes on material definitions of truth is evident in *The Octopus*'s engagement with questions of representation, since, like the unfinished Trilogy of the Wheat of which it is a part, Norris's novel focuses precisely on changing systems of exchange and production.

To connect economic conditions to epistemological and ontological questions about the nature of the "real" is to argue that changes in material conditions alter our definitions of significance and truth. Harvey argues exactly this, contending that capitalism's transformation of processes of exchange directly affects systems of representation. Harvey traces the "dematerialization" of culture back to the literal dematerialization of money:

The breakdown of money as a secure means of representing value has itself created a crisis of representation in advanced capitalism [. . .] It is, furthermore, not hard to see how all of this might create a more general crisis of representation. The central value system, to which capitalism has

---

<sup>32</sup> See David Harvey's "Time-Space compression and the postmodern condition" in *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*; John Tomlinson's "Deterritorialization: The Cultural Condition of Globalization" in *Globalization and Culture*; and Harvey's "What's Green and Makes the Environment Go Round?" from *The Cultures of Globalization*.

always appealed to validate and gauge its actions, is dematerialized and shifting, time horizons are collapsing, and it is hard to tell exactly what space we are in when it comes to assessing causes and effects, meanings or values. (“Green” 298)<sup>33</sup>

Harvey postulates *representational* effects from the transformation of *material* relationships, and sees a shift in economic representation influencing language and truth. While he makes this case specifically about late twentieth century global capitalism, this correlation between rapid shifts in material relations and changes in representation also logically applies to the industrialization occurring in Norris’s turn-of-the-century California. If “the changing experience of space, time, and money has formed a distinctive material basis for the rise of distinctive systems of interpretation and representation,” then the dramatic changes depicted in Norris’s novels can also provide the foundation for materialist interpretation – an interpretation which connects literary style to changing material conditions (“Green” 299). In this context, texts’ self-professed “realist” impulses can be read as doing more than blindly circulating ideologically constructed versions of the real. Given the increasing dematerialization of representation in the rising culture of industrialism and capitalism, the textual imperative to speak truthfully of the material world, as professed in letters and essays by Norris, contains a

---

<sup>33</sup> In “What’s Green and Makes the Environment Go Round?” Harvey argues that, “Since 1973, money has been de-materialized in the sense that it no longer has a formal or tangible link to precious metals” (297). The result is world reliance, “for the first time in its history, upon immaterial forms of money” and “Money consequently became useless as a means of storing value for any length of time” (297-98). Thus, Harvey identifies a literal dematerialization of symbolic representation within the money system.

radical political potential: the potential to undermine the dematerializing effects of capitalism and the anaesthetizing potential of aesthetics.<sup>34</sup>

Connecting representational with political questions provides a helpful framework for explaining *The Octopus*'s strange parallel narratives. One of the critical problems common to Norris criticism involves trying to reconcile the novel's professed desire to focus on the political problems of the California railroad trust with its simultaneous interest in the processes of poetic representation, evident in the amount of narrative devoted to Presley's poetic project. For William Vance, Presley's story competes with the rancher-railroad narrative: "Presley is either a wholly superfluous character or else he is the most important character and the book is essentially about him. If the book is primarily about the growing of wheat and the rancher-railroad war, then Presley is useless" (130). But Vance concludes that the novel's focus on Presley's writing is self-indulgent on Norris's part. He claims, "It's a little as though Homer had introduced into the *Iliad* a malcontent would-be bard who complained about the stink of the sacrifices and the difficulty of writing an epic about people who quarreled over concubines" (130).

But connecting representational and political questions makes sense of the novel's dual interest. *The Octopus* does not just ask what a materialized poetry would look like but also what political consequences materialized poetry can finally have. Presley's desire for "absolutely true poetical expression" becomes more than an artistic problem as the events of the San Joaquin give him people and things *for whom* he wants to speak.

---

<sup>34</sup> Terry Eagleton explains the link between ideology, dematerialization, and aesthetics thus: "Aesthetics is thus always a contradictory, self-undoing sort of project, which in promoting the theoretical value of its object risks emptying it of exactly that specificity or ineffability which was thought to rank among its most precious features" (2-3). He elaborates, "it is never easy to distinguish an appeal to taste and sentiment which offers an alternative to autocracy from one which allows such power to ground itself more securely in the living sensibilities of its subjects" (27).

*The Octopus* thus depicts Presley's gradual involvement in a form of political ecology, as Latour defines it.<sup>35</sup> Presley abandons an initial separation of art and the material world, reminiscent of the Latourian modern constitution, and instead begins actively constructing texts from artistic conventions while mobilizing the events and things of the material world. This change in Presley is politically motivated, driven by the economic system that not only silences the material world by separating representative systems from sensible things but also silences people through misrepresentations and oppression.

In this chapter, I explore how Norris's version of material realism negotiates this dual potential of realistic representation, both acknowledging literature's "sense of reality" as a constructed effect and attempting to speak truthfully of the world and thus counter the dematerialization of the late nineteenth century. Norris designed his Trilogy of the Wheat to document the multiple stages of international wheat exchange, from cultivation to trading to consumption, with the two completed novels, *The Octopus* and *The Pit*, focusing on the growth of wheat in California and the trading of wheat in the exchange pits of Chicago.<sup>36</sup> Norris's work on the American wheat economy thus embodies the intersection of concerns introduced here, describing economic changes at the end of the nineteenth century and exploring resulting challenges to material relations and written forms. His work explicitly cultivates a literature accountable to the material, contextualizes literary concerns in economic changes, and questions art's potential

---

<sup>35</sup> For Latour, political ecology is the logical conclusion of challenging the modern constitution. True political ecology shifts from "*distinguishing* between questions of nature and questions of politics" to instead directly examining "those two sets of questions as a single issue that arises for all *collectives*." (*Politics* 1).

<sup>36</sup> Norris's clear conception of this work as a depiction of the multiple stages of the wheat economy is explained in a letter that he wrote to William Dean Howells. In this letter, Norris claims, "My Idea is to write three novels around the one subject of *Wheat*. First, a story of California (the producer), second, a story of Chicago (the distributor), third, a story of Europe (the consumer) and in each to keep to the idea of this huge Niagara of wheat rolling from West to East" (qtd. in McElrath and Crisler 334).

effectiveness to stimulate ethical change within political and economic systems. In *The Octopus*, drastic changes to the economy brought about by industrialization and the expansion of capitalist influence challenge Presley to rethink his relationship to art and to material environments. Envisioned as an epic of wheat's production, exchange, and consumption, the Trilogy of the Wheat shows a world in flux, where the solid is increasingly melting into air. Moreover, in attempting to negotiate transformations by keeping its characters connected to a sense of ethical truth while also recognizing the increasingly tenuous nature of representations of the real, the trilogy also exhibits a form of constrained realism.

### ***The Octopus and the Mussel Slough Affair***

*The Octopus*, as has been well documented, is based on a real gun battle that took place in the San Joaquin Valley, between associates of the Southern Pacific railroad and wheat ranchers who had moved onto and improved railroad lands based on the promise of an eventual, fair purchase price. The climactic shootout of *The Octopus* was directly inspired by the Mussel Slough incident of May 11, 1880, which took place on a homestead belonging to Henry Brewer.<sup>37</sup> While relations between California ranchers and the railroad monopolies had been tense since tracks were laid into the San Joaquin in 1872, the Mussel Slough shootout, which left five farmers and one railroad land-buyer dead, ignited matters. As in *The Octopus*, the ranchers had been involved in a string of legal and public relations battles throughout the 1870s; but these battles failed to make

---

<sup>37</sup> For a detailed summary of the Mussel Slough incident, see the introduction of Terry Beers's *Gunfight at Mussel Slough: The Evolution of a Western Myth*.

any headway against the increasing political and economic control of the railroad trusts.<sup>38</sup>

The railroads controlled the transport of wheat out of the valley, and by controlling transport rates through corrupt commissioners, the railroad neutralized ranchers' profits during prosperous years. Norris's character, Annixter, gives voice to the seeming omnipotence of the railroad when he gloomily asserts, "*You can't buck against the railroad*" (105). Frustration at the railroad's unchallengeable power found vent in ethical outrage about the Mussel Slough shooting. As Terry Beers says, "Press reports depicting the tragic events at Mussel Slough convinced many that the Southern Pacific was even more rapacious than previously believed" (2). Fictional representations further inflamed such sentiment: "dramatizing the incident in novels [. . .] offered an even more effective means for writers to attack the railroad monopoly and attempt to pry loose its stranglehold on commerce" (Beers 2).

Though *The Octopus* was published in 1901, decades after the Mussel Slough shooting, railroad politics remained central in Norris's time. According to Mansel Blackford, California wheat production peaked in the 1890s, with the San Joaquin gradually transforming into a fruit-growing region at the century's end; but resentment about the railroad's monopoly continued long after Norris's death in 1903.<sup>39</sup> The Mussel

---

<sup>38</sup> Mansel Blackford describes the escalating conflict in his history of turn-of-the-century California business: "State supervision of railroads in California started in the 1870s. The state constitution adopted in 1879 set up a three-man regulatory commission elected by district. Empowered to lower rates upon the complaints of shippers and to enforce uniform bookkeeping practices for railroads, the commission would, Californians believed, bring the state's lines to heel. The commission failed to fulfill these hopes. The Southern Pacific corrupted many of the commissioners [. . .] Unfavorable court decisions further eroded the commission's effectiveness" (81). Norris's novel relies heavily on this historical event in its own depiction of the railroad/rancher conflict, including its depiction of legal battles taking place in San Francisco prior to the shooting incident.

<sup>39</sup> Blackford's account of the San Joaquin documents the changing economy and the anxiety that surrounded these agricultural transformations: "When Frank Norris described large-scale wheat ranching as the principal activity of California farmers in his novel *The Octopus* in 1901, his observations had already become outdated, for the production of wheat was yielding to diversified fruit growing as the chief

Slough gunfight served as a conduit of outrage for a larger sense of conflict about the industrialization of agriculture and the power of trusts (the forerunner of modern corporate interests). And Norris participated in the mythologizing of this event, traveling to Southern California in 1899 to research his novel while in residence on the ranch of a friend in the San Joaquin.<sup>40</sup> Norris's correspondence preceding the trip indicates that he planned to go to California to uncover a politically effective as well as compelling story. Joseph McElrath and Jesse Crisler argue that Norris's letters show his desire to write a novel denouncing the railroads. "Although the term had not yet been popularized by Theodore Roosevelt," they argue, "it seems that when he came to San Francisco Norris was intent upon writing a 'muckraking' book like Zola's *Germinal* that singlemindedly championed the cause of 'the people' oppressed by a ruthless corporation" (341).<sup>41</sup> But while political purposes motivated Norris's work, he also expressed a commitment to historical facts. For his desire to reveal the corruption of the Trusts was tempered by the complexity of the railroad situation. As McElrath argues in "Frank Norris's *The Octopus*: The Christian Ethic as Pragmatic Response," "Readers seeking simple moral melodrama of the muckraking variety in *The Octopus* then, are in for a disappointment. There are no

---

occupation of the state's agriculturalists. In 1890, California ranked second among the nation's wheat-growing states [. . .] but in succeeding years production dropped drastically. [. . .] Soil exhaustion, increased competition with grain from Russia and Argentina, and the completion of railroad links between California and the rest of the nation, which made the growing of perishable crops for eastern markets possible, all contributed to the demise of the bonanza wheat ranches" (4).

<sup>40</sup> For a detailed description of Norris's historical research on the California ranches, see McElrath and Crisler (340-355).

<sup>41</sup> Norris's correspondence reveals his plan to write a fairly damning critique of the Southern Pacific: "on 16 October 1899, after he had returned to New York, Norris informed a Mrs. Lilla Lewis Parks that she would be disappointed in her hope that he would be a celebrant or defender of corporations like the Southern Pacific. She had suggested in a letter that he use the powers displayed in *McTeague* and *Blix* 'to handle the subject of 'Trusts' in a way to convince the public that the Trust is a modern innovation—a business evolution that has come to stay, if rightly handled and honorably dealt with.' Norris flatly declared that he was 'enlisted upon the other side,' though he assured her that he was 'very anxious to hear [her] arguments . . . in favor of the trust'" (McElrath & Crisler 341).

untainted heroes in this portrait of American economic realities” (139). Moreover, *The Octopus* critiques the greed and environmental exploitation of the ranchers as well as of the railroad:

Norris remained sympathetic to the people battling the Southern Pacific, the sins of which were fully utilized in *The Octopus*. But it is clear that at some point – if not during his research, then later as he composed – he realized the complexity of the situation would require a balanced perspective if he was to fashion a credible indictment of the railroad.

(McElrath and Crisler 344)

The balanced perspective that Norris develops involves not only weighing various moral positions, but also weighing the potential power of various modes of writing.

While weighing a loyalty to material fact with an investment in persuasive narrative power, Norris also weighed a commitment to realistic forms of representation and to aesthetic creation. Beers describes this as a tension between “two different versions of the past: that recorded in history and that celebrated by myth” (5).<sup>42</sup> The consequence, she imagines, is that “fiction rooted in real events often risks unraveling the fabric of history in favor of weaving patterns from the imaginative threads of myth” (5).

Norris foregrounds these issues of representation and truth by focusing on the writer Presley, a character as concerned with the intricacies of representation as Norris himself. Presley begins the novel as a poet torn between romantic, aestheticized visions and commitment to the real. The events of the novel transform him, into a journal writer, a

---

<sup>42</sup> Beers distinguishes history from myth based on a narrative’s adherence to documented events and causes. *Myths* of the Mussel Slough Affair read the event in terms of larger cultural narratives “rooted in our collective imagination” whereas *history* “at its best supplements compelling storytelling with synthesis and analysis” that are “rooted in facts” (5). Myth involves large scale conceptual patterns; history involves close adherence to historical detail. Fiction must consider where to locate itself within these allegiances.

socialist poet, an anarchist speechwriter, and finally a ruined writer who collapses under his inability to “find expression” (307). Presley’s story of aesthetic transformation suggests that valuable romance must be “materialized” – not just in the Marxist sense, but grounded in the actualities of “grain rates and unjust foreign tariffs” (*Octopus* 13)

### **“The Things that Live”: Norris’s Naturalism**

Norris’s quest for a true style of romance attempts to balance several contemporary realist practices. Norris’s letters and critical essays show him attempting to balance a commitment to events and material things as they are with an aesthetic commitment to developing interesting and effective textual narrative. His search for a form of writing situated between a literal, mimetic form of realism and an epic, inventive form of romance makes him an example of what I am calling “constrained realism.” In the preceding chapters, I built on Lawrence Buell’s formulation of realism as a corrective supplement to constructivism, emphasizing the influence of materiality on textual construction and arguing that a commitment to materiality does not preclude stylistic innovation, imagination, and aestheticization. Norris’s similarly constrained realism recognizes both the potential and value of what George Levine describes as realism’s difficult job: “the very hard work of trying to reach beyond words to things as they are” (16). Levine’s account of realism looks not to environmental writing but to the American Realists in order to consider the difficulties of material representation. Recent scholarship on the Realists parallels ecocritical concerns, focusing on the constructed nature of “reality” within Realist texts but also acknowledging Realist writers’ commitment to an apprehensible real world. Michael Davitt Bell, Amy Kaplan, and George Levine all combat reductive definitions of realism and assert, to varying degrees, that Realist

thinkers are aware of the role aesthetic tradition played in shaping a text's sense of reality. My emphasis on Norris's constrained realism is thus consistent with other Realist criticism, troubling simplified notions of realist representation and recognizing the complex constructions contributing to what Henry James called texts' "sense of reality" (qtd. Bell 79).<sup>43</sup>

What I call "constrained realism" Norris called literary naturalism, a model that grounded literature in the real while also developing epic narratives. Influenced by the work of William Dean Howells and Henry James but unsatisfied with their theories of the realistic novel, Norris's naturalism combined a rejection of the overtly literary with self-consciousness about the acts of construction constituting the literary text. Like Howells, Norris formulates his naturalism as a rejection of the aesthetic.<sup>44</sup> As Norris asserted in his 1897 article "An Opening for Novelists," "We don't want fine writing, we want short stories" (1114). The distinction he makes figures American literature in opposition to European traditions, centering this opposition around the dichotomy of reality and art. While European art is depicted as lost in words and tradition, the emerging American art for which Norris calls (figured alternately as the literature of the West, of California, or of San Francisco) will draw stories from the world of living and material things:

---

<sup>43</sup> Challenges to simplistic notions of Realism include Levine's assertion that "Realism makes the difficulties of the work of representation inescapably obvious to the writer [. . .] No writer attempting to reach beyond words can fail to be struck by the work words do and cannot do, and therefore no such writer can fail to recognize the degree to which the creation of illusion is essential to the realist process (16). Kaplan asserts a similar Realist self-consciousness, though she blames social factors rather than the qualities of language: "Realists show a surprising lack of confidence in the capacity of fiction to reflect a solid world 'out there,' not because of the inherent slipperiness of signification but because of their distrust in the significance of the social. They often assume a world which lacks solidity, and the weightiness of descriptive detail – one of the most common characteristics of the realistic text – often appears in inverse proportion to a sense of insubstantiality (9).

<sup>44</sup> Aesthetic rejection is evident in *Criticism and Fiction*, where Howells urges the writer to abandon aesthetics in favor of depicting the world directly. In Howells's vision of realism, "The 'literary' is to be suppressed in the interest of the 'real' and 'human'; this distinction is absolute, and it lies at the heart of the discussion of realism in *Criticism and Fiction*" (Bell 20).

Give us stories now, give us men, strong, brutal men, with red-hot blood in 'em, with unleashed passions rampant in 'em, blood and bones and viscera in 'em, and women, too, that move and have their being, people that love and hate something better now than Vivettes and Perilles and Goups. [. . .] It's the Life that we want, the vigorous, real thing, not the curious weaving of words and the polish of literary finish. Damn the 'style' of a story, so long as we get the swing and rush and trample of the things that live. ("An Opening for Novelists" 1113-14)

Norris's proposed literature lauds stories of "blood and bones and viscera" over "the curious weaving of words and the polish of literary finish." Literary artifice, in contrast to true stories, works a "curious" black magic through its "weaving" and its "style." But true stories break through words, becoming as visceral as bodies and things themselves. These stories have blood and bones in them, movement and being and life: they have a visceral materiality to them that the artist can "grasp" (1113).

However, while he endorses the anti-aesthetic tendencies of Howellsian realism, Norris's interest in the constructed nature of textual reality leads him to reject this realism as insufficient. Like Howells, Norris believes that writing must avoid the accumulation of fact for fact's sake, but he accuses Howells of this very transgression and mocks Howells's attention to minute social dramas:

This is the real Realism. It is the smaller details of everyday life, things that are likely to happen between lunch and supper, small passions, restricted emotions, dramas of the reception-room, tragedies of an

afternoon call, crises involving cups of tea. Every one will admit there is no romance here. (“Zola as Romantic Writer” 1106)

Norris’s appeal to romance provides the critical difference between his naturalism and Howells’s realism. While wanting to ground his stories in the “things that live,” Norris does not believe that all things make for compelling stories. Norris dismisses realism as a “harsh, loveless, colorless, blunt tool” (1166). “Realism,” he qualifies, “is very excellent so far as it goes, but it goes no farther than the Realist himself can actually see, or actually hear. Realism is minute, it is the drama of a broken teacup, the tragedy of a walk down the block, the excitement of an afternoon call” (1166). Norris’s naturalism tries to see further and see more selectively, choosing from among real things but selecting the most dramatic or romantic in order to cultivate literary effect. And when all he could see was too minute, he relocated, as when he traveled to the California ranches. Thus, the role of the writer is to seek out ideal Truth within material fact; not all *factual* accounts end up making *true* stories. Rather, like Henry James, Norris contends that reality is an *effect*, a *semblance*, rather than a direct presentation of what already is.<sup>45</sup> Norris’s vision of the real, then, pushes the writer to ground himself in the actual but refuses to stay confined to documentation. His naturalism provides what Lehan calls an “exercise [. . .] in constructed reality” or what Norris calls a “real romance” that selects its stories from truth (Lehan 242-43; *Octopus* 13).

---

<sup>45</sup> According to Bell, James argues that even realist texts can provide a “sense of reality only.” Bell claims, “James proposes a version of realism very different from the one Howells sets forth in *Criticism and Fiction*. Unlike Howells, first of all, he insists that even realism gives us not unmediated ‘reality’ but a ‘sense of reality’--that in fiction ‘reality’ depends not on the truth of the writer's material but on the strength of his or her ‘sensibility’ or ‘imagination’” (79). James emphasizes the reality effect of a text as something constructed, defining “novelistic ‘reality’ as ‘a concrete image,’ not something reflected but something ‘produced.’” (qtd. in in Bell 80).

### **“Absolutely True Poetical Expression”: Dual Accountability in *The Octopus***

One way of reading Presley’s artistic struggles in *The Octopus*, then, is as an attempt to balance material fact with aesthetic sensibilities, combining the two to convey the truth of an increasingly complicated political situation. Presley’s initial frustration with the material components of daily life places him too far towards the romantic on Norris’s naturalist spectrum. But as his time in the San Joaquin continues, Presley moves further from a purely aesthetic understanding of art. While his initial preference for expansive landscapes, Homeric poetry, and grand themes cannot encompass the political and economic problems he observes, the increasing prominence of the railroad/rancher battle in Presley’s daily life forces him to adapt his art. He gradually recognizes the drama, romance, and tragedy existing within what at first seemed to be “sordid” and “material concerns” (*Octopus* 12). Thus, Presley changes, into both a nonfiction journal writer and a political poet of the people. As Russ Castronovo argues, Presley’s story is that of

a young poet turned young socialist who denounces the triumph of organized capital by scorning art. [. . .] the novel suggests ‘the people’ will be rejuvenated by twin attacks on corporate greed and genteel humanism. This counteraesthetic impetus correlates exactly with the young poet’s design to politicize the literary in ways that will advance democracy. (163)

Presley, like Norris, however, does not fully embrace this “counteraesthetic impetus” and abandon aestheticism for a pure realism. Indeed, *The Octopus*’s prognosis regarding the political efficacy of art is more tentative than Castronovo suggests. Presley’s successes as a political artist are qualified and limited; his eventual decision to abandon art and head

east to Asia on board a wheat freighter suggests a total inefficacy of even the most political art. But Norris's own completion of *The Octopus* hints at a competing thesis: that an artwork that acknowledges its own limitations and failures may still be able to meaningfully contribute to political, economic, and environmental discourse. While Presley fails to reconcile his epic ambitions with the reality of literature's limitations, Norris does achieve an art that manages to depict political situations without disguising the failings of the literary.

While Norris is interested in an art that is both political and material, Presley initially imagines art and the world in ways that reproduce the polarized dichotomies Latour identifies in the modern constitution, separating language from the material (*Modern* 32). Latour describes the humanities' purifying impulse as a belief that "humanity, morality, subjectivity, or rights are worthwhile only when they have been protected from any contact with science, technology, and objectivity" (*Pandora* 18). In a parallel fashion, Presley believes that his poetry is successful only as long as it is protected from the "material, sordid, deadly commonplace" economic concerns and daily realities of the ranches (12). While he moves to California in hopes of finding a real-world subject worthy of his poetic representation, he believes that such poetry must ignore material concerns. Instead of mobilizing the real world, Presley's poetry functions as projection akin to what phenomenologists, science studies scholars, and ecologists all seek to avoid. Presley takes a style of writing, pre-existing within his own mind, and attempts to make it fit onto the world.

From the outset, Presley's artistic project is troubled by his divided loyalty to aesthetic conventions and to material realities. The novel introduces this tension in the

opening chapter, as it depicts Presley biking around the San Joaquin Valley, seeking escape from the insistently material realities of the ranches and longing for a transcendent viewpoint from which he can discover a landscape fit for poetic description. But this search reproduces the tension between material reality and poetic convention inherent to Presley's desire for an "absolutely true" form of poetry:

Just what he wanted, Presley hardly knew. On one hand, it was his ambition to portray life as he saw it—directly, frankly, and through no medium of personality or temperament. But, on the other hand, as well he wished to see everything through a rose-coloured mist [. . .] He had set himself the task of giving true, absolutely true poetical expression to the life of the ranch, and yet, again and again, he brought up against the railroad, that stubborn iron barrier against which his romance shattered itself [. . .]. (12-13)

The phrase "absolutely true poetical expression" captures the paradoxical imperatives that Presley struggles to reconcile, also evident in Norris's criticism: the desire to write literary, aesthetically pleasing work in tension with the desire to write from truth. Presley initially wants to fulfill "the picture of that huge romantic West that he saw in his imagination," a picture marked by a "great scheme of harmony" (12). However, what interrupts this romantic harmony is the "presence of certain immovable facts" (12). The facts he cannot escape are the "eternal fierce bickerings between the farmers of the San Joaquin and the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad," arguments that Presley finds irritating precisely because they are "material" (12). Presley's contrasting preference for

“harmony” and “the romantic” as opposed to the “material” and the “commonplace” suggests that Presley’s vision does not allow the material and the artistic to coexist.

But it is too simple to argue that Presley begins the novel as a naïve aesthete and ends it as a savvy material and political artist. Even his initial artistic preferences position him between two poles. On the one hand, he is more aesthetically inclined than ranchers such as Annixter and Magnus Derrick, who are actively engaged in economic affairs; on the other hand, he is more connected to the material world than Magnus’s wife, Annie, who uses art to escape harsh economic realities. Annie Derrick is overwhelmed by “the direct brutality of ten thousand acres of wheat, nothing but wheat as far as the eye can see” and consequently retreats into an aesthetic world of literary magazines and fine art. She is disappointed that Presley’s interests as a poet so rarely overlap with her own literary pleasures:

Presley had disappointed her. That he—outside of his few chosen deities—should care little for literature, shocked her beyond words. His indifference to ‘style,’ to elegant English, was a positive affront [. . .] His ‘Song of the West,’ which only once, incoherent and fierce, he had tried to explain to her, its swift, tumultuous life, its truth, its nobility and savagery, its heroism and obscenity, had revolted her. ‘But, Presley,’ she had murmured, ‘that is not literature.’ ‘No,’ he had cried between his teeth, ‘no, thank God, it is not.’ (61)

Annie Derrick represents cultivated aestheticism paired with fear of the “ferocious” and “masculine” realms of economics and politics. She represents the effeminacy of aestheticism and literariness that Norris’s essays scorn. Presley’s work contrasts with her

impotent aestheticism from the beginning; even though his poetry is loyal to literary traditions such as the epic rather than to observed fact or to economics and politics, his work avoids the artificiality, style, and elegance necessary to mark it as “literature.”<sup>46</sup>

*The Octopus* thus, like Norris’s criticism, sets up a spectrum of relationships between art and reality. Presley struggles to position himself between, on the one hand, the “sordid” and “material” realities of daily life and, on the other hand, the useless aestheticism represented by Annie Derrick and the previously discussed San Francisco art scene. The San Francisco art fete is the place where Presley’s disdain for literature, while reproducing the gendered distinction between literary preferences, also reveals a political dimension. Here, Norris repeats his insistence on the uselessness of pure aesthetics:

The ladies and young girls examined the production with little murmurs of admiration, hazarding remembered phrases, searching for the exact balance between generous praise and critical discrimination, expressing their opinions in the mild technicalities of the Art Books and painting classes. They spoke of atmospheric effects, of middle distance, of ‘*chiaro-oscuro*,’ of fore-shortening, of the decomposition of light, of the subordination of individuality to fidelity of interpretation. (311)

The narrator of *The Octopus* dismisses the narrow and “mild” world of the art show as politically dangerous; it is an isolated realm where technicality and the quest for socially

---

<sup>46</sup> Castronovo sets up the contrast between Annie Derrick and Presley in more political terms: “the poet renounces traditional aesthetics. Abandoning genteel verse along with the ‘cluttered bric-a-brac and meaningless objets d’art’ (371) associated with the feminine world of the landowner’s wife, Presley cultivates a counteraesthetic and pens a ‘Socialistic poem’” (394). However, I argue that even before Presley’s Socialist leanings begin, his work is contrasted to the art world of Annie Derrick. While socialism plays a crucial role in his artistic development, politics are not the sole cause of his anti-aestheticism. Rather, from the beginning, Presley’s concern with aesthetics seems specifically focused on issues of the relationship between writing and reality.

accepted, balanced ideas short-circuit any relationship between art and the external world. The art world is

the Fake, the eternal, irrepressible Sham; glib, nimble, ubiquitous, tricked out in all the paraphernalia of imposture, an endless defile of charlatans that passed interminably before the gaze of the city, marshalled by 'lady presidents,' exploited by clubs of women, by literary societies, reading circles, and culture organisations. (314)

As some of the men argue in this scene, the city's devotion of time and energy to the "Fake" and the "Sham" distracts from political pursuits; the railroad donates money to the art scene in San Francisco, diverting the attention of the public from elections, struggles involving railroad tariffs, and the growing political control of the railroad. Presley's friend Cedarquist asserts that "'Shelgrim [the railroad's manager] promotes your fairs, not only as Pres says, because it is money in his pocket, but because it amuses the people, distracts their attention from the doings of his railroad'" (317). As the argument between Presley and Hartrath develops, two possibilities emerge: the materialization of art and the subsequent mobilization of its political power, or the separation of material concerns from art and the preservation of a pure aesthetic realm. To validate art, according to this logic, must be to reclaim it and use it to battle commercialization and trickery. But Hartrath retorts with his question: "'If the poets become materialised, Mr. Presley, [. . .] what can we say to the people?'" (317).

This is the question that Presley's own development as an artist plays out, and it is his desire to achieve materialization while still speaking to the people that pushes him to

pursue a kind of writing that he classifies as “real romance” (13).<sup>47</sup> But Presley’s initial disdain for daily details points to one of the difficulties of representing the material: it’s boring. As Dana Phillips points out in his own critique of recent realist trends in ecocriticism, detailed depictions of daily life lack imaginative power and as a result potentially lack ethical impetus.<sup>48</sup> The monotony of ranch life drives Presley’s initial disgust as he attempts to write his epic: “These uncouth brutes of farmhands and petty ranchers, grimed with the soil they worked upon, were odious to him beyond words” (5). Presley’s disdain for life’s material details (its grime, soil, and pettiness) mirrors Norris’s critical frustration with the small scope of realism. What changes Presley’s dismissive attitude is an ability to recognize the violent potential within the railroad – and to recognize such violence as its own kind of universal epic. Presley’s stay on the San Joaquin ranches coincides with the escalation of conflict between the fictional Pacific and Southwestern Railroad and the San Joaquin ranchers over land ownership and land prices. This conflict’s growth from a minor economic concern to a fatal gun battle and the eviction of ranching tenants forces Presley to relocate the drama of Western romance from open range to economic, capitalist battles, making it possible for Presley to hang on to his competing commitments to accuracy and romance. But what really changes in *The Octopus* and makes the story of the rancher/railroad conflict more than a recasting of Western gunfighter mythology is Presley’s simultaneous shift from writing a mythology of landscapes and metaphor to a mythology of material conflict.

---

<sup>47</sup> Presley expresses this “real romance” directly in response to his own disdain towards daily life: “He searched for the True Romance, and, in the end, found grain rates and unjust freight tariffs. ‘But the stuff is here,’ he muttered, as he sent his wheel rumbling across the bridge over Broderson Creek. ‘The romance, the real romance, is here somewhere. I’ll get hold of it yet’”(13).

<sup>48</sup> In *The Truth of Ecology*, Phillips rejects Lawrence Buell’s argument for realist environmental writing. He claims, “Realistic depiction of the world, of the sort that we can credit as reasonable and uncontroversial, is one of literature’s most pedestrian, least artful aspects” (8).

The materialization of Presley's romance begins in perhaps the most critically famous scene in *The Octopus*. At the moment when Presley comes closest to achieving his initially conceived epic poem, a collision between a locomotive and some sheep forces him to reconsider the abstract nature of his envisioned work. This scene literalizes the collision of literary aestheticism with the material presence of the railroad. A number of critics, including Leo Marx in his influential *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, have read this scene as an example of a trope called pastoral interruption. Prior to the collision, Presley feels inspired by the pastoral Western landscape, complete with sheep and epic vistas, and consequently experiences a moment of aesthetic idealism, thinking his poetic inspiration has occurred:

Ha! There it was, his epic, his inspiration, his West, his thundering progression of hexameters. [. . .] Terrible, formless shapes, vague figures, gigantic, monstrous, distorted, whirled at a gallop through his imagination [. . .] Never had he so nearly grasped his inspiration as at that moment on the hill-top. Even now, though the sunset was fading, though the wide reach of valley was shut from sight, it still kept him company. Now the details came thronging back—the component parts of his poem, the signs and symbols of the West. (46-7)

Latour's conception of the modern constitution provides another way of reading this scene. Presley's poetic inspiration in this moment is actually a hybrid, using observation to generate tropes for his poetry. But Presley attempts to re-purify the categories of material and textual in the aftermath of his inspiration, erasing his own mediating presence and erasing the very landscape itself. While Presley believes the earth itself

inspires his epic poem, the poem he imagines and the vision of the landscape he retains remain general and abstract. The world he observes has no concreteness, just “formless shapes” and “vague figures.” While “the details” of the scene supposedly come back to Presley as he ponders his poem, the novel does not describe such details. The reader has no idea what the valley looks like, for it becomes invisible to Presley as the sun goes down and the “valley was shut from sight.” The darkening landscape signals a literal erasure of any mediations between the world and the nascent poem, completing a re-purification that returns to a basic word/world dichotomy. Thus, the “component parts” of Presley’s epic poem are not, in the end, any particular material qualities of the San Joaquin, but rather abstract “signs and symbols of the West” recycled as conventional writing. The physical description of the landscape omits detail and physical qualities, figuring the landscape as empty, “accentuated by stillness” and “exuding silence.” Even the material qualities of the earth – its food production, implied in Presley’s dramatic descriptions of the land as “nourisher of nations” and “feeder of an eternal world” – are recast on a scale so global as to become abstract. While Presley experiences “physical exultation” as he looks out on the earth, none of that exultation derives from observable physical qualities.

This is also the moment when language overwhelms Presley’s observations. He exclaims, “There it was, his epic, his inspiration, his West, his thundering progression of hexameters” (46). As he overlooks the San Joaquin Valley, he believes he has observed truth as readily apparent as the materiality of a bootjack or a lamp post. He believes the earth itself provides him with an epic poem. However, as he imagines the poem he will write, he talks in the abstractions of “[s]tupendous ideas for which there were no names,”

“[t]errible, formless shapes,” and “vague figures” (46-7). His imaginative erasure of the mediating steps translating between the world and imagination allows him to lose himself in “stupendous ideas.” Such erasures and such immersion perpetuate his fragmented approach to poetry: from the novel’s opening, Presley approaches the world with a set notion of what he will find. His quest for poetic inspiration is really a search for a set of conditions to match his pre-existing, abstract vision of the West. This subjective projection makes the pastoral fantasy Marx identifies possible, positing a real world while subsuming material observation to a predominantly cultural fantasy.

But at this moment, when the fulfillment of aesthetic pastoral convention elides material details and reduces the land to a Western archetype, the material reality of the railroad asserts itself and shatters Presley’s romance. A flock of sheep that have wandered out onto the railroad tracks are run over by a locomotive. Just as the daily material difficulties of railroad conflict interrupted Presley’s earlier quest for poetic inspiration, now the unforgivingly material locomotive interrupts his aesthetic fantasy. The “reek of hot oil” and “the clamour of its iron hooves” draw Presley out of a primarily visual and linguistic relationship to his surroundings, engaging his other senses and creating a multidimensional experience of the real. Such an experience is grotesque and painful:

The pathos of it was beyond expression. It was a slaughter [. . .] The black blood, winking in the starlight, seeped down into the clinkers between the ties with a prolonged sucking murmur. Presley turned away, horror-struck, sick at heart, overwhelmed with a quick burst of irresistible compassion for this brute agony he could not relieve. The sweetness was gone from the

evening, the sense of peace, of security, and placid contentment was stricken from the landscape. The hideous ruin in the engine's path drove all thought of his poem from his mind. The inspiration vanished like a mist. The *de Profundis* had ceased to ring. (50)

For Leo Marx, this collision scene exemplifies the pastoral interruption mentioned earlier, the iconic moment in American literature, where the modern and the technological abruptly interrupt individual pastoral reverie. Such interruption of the pastoral by the technological, Marx argues, is actually *part* of the pastoral experience in American romance; the moment of intrusion and loss only highlights the contrasting pastoral peace. But in this instance, the pastoral interruption occurs on two levels, since this is a fictional scene about an artist rather than a nonfictional account of individual experience. Presley is not just trying to experience a pastoral moment but also to put himself into a pastoral aesthetic framework in order to write an epic American romance. The railroad is not just a jarring noise within an otherwise harmonious sonic landscape; it is a force whose presence interrupts the aesthetic process and forces Presley to give up his working definition of poetry. The interruption in this case is not just of a pastoral landscape but of pastoralism as a literary mode. By undermining Presley's pastoral experience as an aesthetic mode, the collision brings him back from symbolic abstraction to material reality with a resounding smash. He cannot experience the landscape distantly, as a disembodied artist, when confronted with the sounds of dying sheep. Yet while Presley confronts the limits of his abstract aesthetic aspirations, the text of *The Octopus* benefits from the abstractable, symbolic power of the railroad collision scene. The novel thus re-aestheticizes Presley's experience, simultaneously insisting on its

material reality and its symbolic significance. Even as the text of the novel progresses into ever more poetic language and reincorporates the train's passing into melodrama, Presley's poetic inspiration vanishes. In place of an empty landscape exuding mists and silences, broken bodies exuding "blinking blood" and horrifying moans appear.

On the one hand, then, Marx's reading fits *The Octopus* and the scene can best be understood as a struggle between psychic states – between peaceful reflection and violent conflict, between an aesthetically pleasing scene and a grotesque scene. But Marx insists that the ability of the pastoral experience to re-incorporate technological interruption suggests that trains like the one depicted here are primarily symbolic of society and technology, not indicators of material concerns. He argues, "it must not be thought that our writers necessarily use the image of the machine to direct attention to the historic fact of industrialization" ("Kingdoms" 80). However, aesthetic revulsion is not Presley's only response. The presence of the train *does* cause him to think about the railroad's *material* expansiveness: the amount of country it covers, the number of places it connects, and indirectly, the expanse of its economic effects and transformations. The locomotive's collision with the sheep also pushes Presley to reimagine the expansiveness of the West, not as a limitless spread of color and shape, but as the interconnection of points of exchange linked by industrial development:

faint and prolonged, across the levels of the ranch, he heard the engine whistling for Bonneville. Again and again, at rapid intervals in its flying course, it whistled for road crossings, for sharp curves, for trestles; ominous notes, hoarse, bellowing, ringing with the accents of menace and defiance; and abruptly Presley saw again, in his imagination, the galloping

monster, the terror of steel and steam, with its single eye, cyclopean, red, shooting from horizon to horizon; but saw it now as the symbol of a vast power, huge, terrible, flinging the echo of its thunder over all the reaches of the valley, leaving blood and destruction in its path; the leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus. (51)

Like Thoreau measuring the ponds, Presley here imagines the railroad as a symbol precisely as he becomes more deeply aware of its material reality, imagining specific geographical features as well as symbolic aesthetic effects. Thus, the scene balances, on the one hand, a material specificity associated with industrial development and, on the other hand, a new naturalist abstraction that reimagines material conditions in terms of force.

Within the narrative, the train forces Presley to see the environment as more concretely real than the silent San Joaquin he previously imagined. As the locomotive knits the previously vague expanse together into a mappable network of specific points, each with its own concrete economic concerns, the West also becomes concrete. At the same time, the figuration of the railroad as “The Octopus” provides an epic specter vague enough to inherit the menace and mystery of Presley’s Western mythology. As “The Octopus,” the railroad and the West it is spreading across function as both “the symbol of a vast power” and as insistently material, “steel clutching into the soil,” with the railroad both an abstraction of “soulless Force” and the material reality of “steel and steam.” There is an insistent materiality to these symbols, embodied in roaring noises, sparks,

steam, steel, and iron. The encounter with the railroad thus cultivates an epic myth of the West from the historically and materially specific.

Presley's encounter thus suggests that the writer should not give up pursuing the symbolic or the epic, but rather that he must ground the epic in the material. The first chapter of *The Octopus* thus enacts Norris's naturalist theories, using the real to access a larger vision of the romantic rather than limiting the real to fit preexisting literary conventions. The collision with the locomotive challenges Presley's preference for abstraction and primes him to see the epic in events he previously dismissed as dull and material. But this startling collision also leaves him at a loss for ways to write about the West. Struggling to find a new method of writing rooted in material realities, he must also discover how to capture the drama of romance. Consequently, Presley spends a large portion of the novel going back and forth between two different kinds of writing: a politically inspired journal and socialist poetry.

### **“These Things I Have Seen”: The Romance of the [Material] Real**

Throughout the rest of *The Octopus*, changes in the material conditions of the San Joaquin correlate to changes in Presley's writing. The train's bloody collision with the sheep foreshadows the violent conflict between the ranchers and the railroad; the collision's disruption of Presley's abstract, epic poem anticipates his later, more political writing. Now the conflict that has lingered ominously but vaguely in the background of his poetic work moves to the foreground. All of Presley's friends, including Magnus Derrick, the owner of the ranch on which he is staying, are ranchers who have spent significant money improving San Joaquin lands owned by the railroad, operating on the assumption that land prices will eventually be set towards the low end of the range

advertised on the railroad's publicity fliers. With the summer promising an epic wheat harvest, many of the ranchers are poised to make up debts or to accumulate sufficient profit to purchase their lands.

However, as the harvest nears, the railroad company announces prices significantly higher than the ranchers anticipated, telling them it will sell to other buyers should these prices not be met. Facing bankruptcy and eviction, the ranchers gather in Annixter's harness room and decide to form a League to defend their land against the railroad. Caught up in these political events, Presley abandons his poetry and explicitly rejects his former disdain towards economic concerns:

There had been a day when the affairs and grievances of the farmers of his acquaintance—Magnus, Annixter, Osterman, and old Broderson—had filled him only with disgust. His mind full of a great, vague epic poem of the West, he had kept himself apart, disdainful of what he chose to consider their petty squabbles. But the scene in Annixter's harness room had thrilled and uplifted him. He was palpitating with excitement all through the succeeding months. He had abandoned the idea of an epic poem. In six months he had not written a single verse. Day after day he trembled with excitement as the relations between the Trust and League became more and more strained. He saw the matter in its true light. It was typical. It was the world-old war between Freedom and Tyranny [ . . . ].

(307)

Following the formation of the League, Presley's aesthetic taste shifts to mirror his changing political leanings.<sup>49</sup> Instead of seeing only "sordid" and "material" conflicts in the battle between the Trust and the League, he now recognizes the epic potential of a clash between "Freedom and Tyranny."<sup>50</sup>

In the aftermath of the League's formation, Presley's sudden interest in "living issues," combined with his self-professed need to "find expression," drives him to experiment with journal writing, nonfiction essays, and political poetry:

he must find expression. He felt that he would suffocate otherwise. He had begun to keep a journal. As the inclination spurred him, he wrote down his thoughts and ideas in this, sometimes every day, sometimes only three or four times a month. Also he flung aside his books of poems—Milton, Tennyson, Browning, even Homer—and addressed himself to Mill, Malthus, Young, Poushkin, Henry George, Schopenhauer. (307-08)

Presley's transformation into a journal writer represents a new attempt to maintain dual loyalties to artistic sensibility and to being "unflinchingly true" (12). He maintains his commitment to "portray life as he saw it" (12). However, his journal writing emerges from within a written tradition, too; he reads political philosophers in place of poets. But his failure as a writer continues. Whereas his pursuit of an epic poem left him writing within "a mist that dulled all harsh outlines, all crude and violent colors," his foray as a

---

<sup>49</sup> Castronovo's article provides a more detailed analysis of how *The Octopus* imagines politics in strictly aesthetic terms, seeing the work of the [Populist] artist as cultivating a taste for the common-man and the people.

<sup>50</sup> The second novel of the Wheat Trilogy, *The Pit*, depicts a similar re-evaluation of art and material concerns. Laura, the protagonist of *The Pit*, initially dismisses economic concerns as sordid, material distractions from art. However, Laura changes her understanding of art after a dramatic discussion about the wheat trading pits breaks out in the interludes at an opera, causing Laura to experience economic conflict as its own kind of "drama and tragedy and death" that "invaded the very sanctuary of art" (*The Pit* 40).

journal writer focuses only on the violent colors, leaving him uselessly nervous (12). But his failure is not so much in style or form as in his torn commitment to abstraction and to things as they are. Thus, although writing in a new way, Presley hangs on to his vision of the epic, merely replacing the vague notion of “the West” with vague notions of “the People” and “Social Injustice”:

He attacked the subject of Social Inequality with unbounded enthusiasm. He devoured, rather than read, and emerged from the affair, his mind a confused jumble of conflicting notions, sick with over-effort, raging against injustice and oppression, and with not one sane suggestion as to remedy or redress. (308)

While Presley continues to experience his surroundings as abstractions and to filter his experiences through books, his immersion in writing still fails to provide useful tools with which to respond to the escalating conflict of the San Joaquin.

Yet failure to solve the problems of the San Joaquin are not solely due to his overly literary framing. Presley’s failures point to the circumscribed power Norris accorded the literary work. When asked about his intended Wheat Trilogy, “if I shall attempt any solution of the [trust] problem,” Norris replied, “I hardly think so. The novelist - by nature - can hardly be a political economist; and it is to the latter rather than to the former that one must look for a way out of the ‘present discontents’” (qtd. McElrath and Crisler 401). As McElrath and Crisler conclude, “The most Norris could do in *The Octopus* was to picture the historical and present situations in California as he understood them’ (McElrath and Crisler 401).<sup>51</sup> According to Norris’s own assessment,

---

<sup>51</sup> The text of the letters quoted here is taken from Jesse Crisler’s collection, *Frank Norris: Collected Letters*.

the literary artist is not to provide “sane suggestions [ . . . ] to remedy” with regards to social ills but to provide instead an accurate depiction that accounts for material facts and the limitations of perspective while telling a compelling story. Writing may provide a “means of expression” that allows the writer to process emotional responses, political sentiments, and observations, but it cannot solve the problems it describes – and, in attempting to do so, it will fail as surely as Presley’s journal writing.

While Norris is skeptical of literature’s prescriptive potential, the futility of Presley’s journal does not lie in his decision to *write* instead of *act*. For in *The Octopus*, action is equally futile. Late in the novel, Presley makes several failed attempts to become an anarchist, going so far as to bomb the railroad manager S. Behrman’s house. He does not kill Behrman or do significant damage, rendering his political action as ineffective as his writing. As Castronovo analyzes Presley’s ineffectiveness:

Fed up with poetry, the poet turns anarchist and attempts a synthesis of counteraesthetics and revolution. Where he once moped about the landscape seeking inspiration, he now delivers impassioned speeches denouncing a monopoly that feeds on ‘the People’; where he once wrote verse, he now tosses a pipe bomb into the dining room of a railroad official. His reaction against aesthetics seems complete. Still, something remains missing from these incendiary acts. What they lack, *The Octopus* implies, is poetry. (173-74)

While Castronovo dismisses this melding of poetry and political activism as naïve, I believe that *The Octopus* imagines this mixture as the only possibility for even qualified representational success. Just as Presley’s initial pure aestheticism disconnects him from

the people and from the environment, his acts of anarchist violence leave him desperate and depressed. The only successful artistic or political act depicted in *The Octopus* is Presley's socialist poem, "The Toilers," which, while not a perfect artwork, succeeds at least in raising political consciousness and expressing Presley's emotions.

"The Toilers" thus achieves Presley's vision of a "romance of the real," combining epic poetry and aesthetic conventions with material documentation in order to create a compelling text:

His writing had by this time undergone a complete change. The notes for his great Song of the West, the epic poem he once had hoped to write he had flung aside, together with all the abortive attempts at its beginning. Also he had torn up a great quantity of 'fugitive' verses, preserving only a certain half-finished poem, that he called 'The Toilers.' This poem was a comment upon the social fabric, and had been inspired by the sight of a painting he had seen in Cedarquist's art gallery. He had written all but the last verse. (371)

Presley's poetry is inspired by the "living issues" of his time, by artistic convention, and by poetic skill. Presley's draft of "The Toilers" exists in a mediating state between the material conditions of Presley's time and the world of art. While the "social fabric" drives Presley from epic to socialist poetry, this poem finds equal inspiration in an artwork. In Cedarquist's gallery, the very "fake" and "sham" art that Presley rejects as complicit with railroad trickery inspires his own political poem, a work challenging the growing power of the railroad trusts. The ambiguous origins of Presley's poem point to the complexity of connecting the real and the literary. As McElrath and Crisler point out,

“while Norris conceived of himself as writing from real life in *The Octopus*, Presley's *only* literary accomplishment is a poem he derives not from life but secondhand from another work of art picturing the economically oppressed” (400).<sup>52</sup>

But “The Toilers” is derived not *only* from another work of art but from a combination of “living issues” and art. Significantly, while the poem may be based on a painting, Presley does not complete it until his friend Dyke is bankrupted by an unexpected increase in freight tariffs and, as a result, these “living issues” inspire Presley’s angered expression:

He too ‘saw red’; a mighty spirit of revolt heaved tumultuous within him. It did not seem possible that this outrage could go on much longer. The oppression was incredible; the plain story of it set down in truthful statement of fact would not be believed by the outside world. (371)

By combining material representation and aesthetic influence, “The Toilers” serves as an example of a potentially superior art form as opposed to the sham art of the San Francisco aesthetes, a genuine response to changing material conditions. In order for the outrage to be believable, it must be written in a form other than straightforward narration. Like Thoreau, then, Presley faces an ethical conundrum bound up with aesthetic and stylistic concerns. While writing is a limited form that leaves him “sick with over-effort,” it is also the only form that can make sense of the political struggle and make it believable.

This believability stems from “The Toilers” engagement in a network of material facts, mobilized and synthesized through Presley’s journaling project and his

---

<sup>52</sup> The layers of reality and literary reference go deeper. Presley bases his poem on a painting that he sees; and Norris bases Presley’s poem on a real-life poem derived from art: “Norris draws on a historical collision of the ‘literary’ and the popular by basing Presley’s socialist ode on Edward Markham’s ‘The Man with the Hoe’ (1899), a populist poem written ‘after seeing Millet’s World-Famous Painting’ (5)” (Castronovo 175).

participation in the unfolding events of the San Joaquin. While his imagined Great Song of the West worked hard to erase its material origins in order to minimize points of aesthetic inconsistency, Presley's journaling project engaged him in a process of observation, writing, and response. Presley's journal became a self-conscious hybrid: in place of a man on a hillside lost in thought and closing his eyes to the landscape before him, the journal features a self-conscious observer claiming, "These things, I have seen them" (538). Thus, while "The Toilers" repeats the elevated language of his first epic moment on the San Joaquin hillside, the context producing the poem differs significantly through its incorporation of both observation and aesthetics:

As his prose grew more exalted, it passed easily into the domain of poetry. Soon the cadence of his paragraphs settled to an ordered beat and rhythm, and in the end Presley had thrust aside his journal and was once more writing verse. He picked up his incomplete poem of 'The Toilers,' read it hastily a couple of times to catch its swing, then the Idea of the last verse--the Idea for which he so long had sought in vain—abruptly springing to his brain, wrote it off without so much as replenishing his pen with ink.

(372)

The ease with which Presley finishes the poem makes it seem, for one minute, as though he has achieved a total escape from aesthetics, resulting in a direct representation of the San Joaquin struggle against the injustice of the railroad. But while Presley attributes his artistic success to a burgeoning love "for the People" that replaces his initial "vast, vague *impersonal* Song of the West," these People become meaningful to him only through his

close connection to Dyke, an individual person who connects Presley to the sensible world (372-73).

The narrator also carefully reminds the reader that the final poem is a complicated construction, combining aesthetic concerns, individual affect, political commitments, and particular events. Norris thus undercuts simplistic visions of literary and political representation by drawing attention to the craft and revision necessary to the poem's creation:

Then the artist in him reasserted itself. He became more interested in his poem, as such, than in the cause that had inspired it. He went over it again, retouching it carefully, changing a word here and there, and improving its rhythm. For the moment, he forgot the People, forgot his rage, his agitation of the previous hour, he remembered only that he had written a great poem. (372-73)

Here, Presley's artistic processes are not imagined as mobilizing networks but as an oscillation between purely aesthetic concerns and a more engaged relationship with "the cause" inspiring his work. But even given Presley's ability to isolate aesthetics from the material conditions inspiring him, we see him moving towards the "materialized" art that Hartrath derided, creating art that responds to and consequently influences the material world.

The material and rhetorical effects of his poem are mixed. While "The Toilers" earns Presley both fame and derision as a "materialized" poet of the people, it is also co-opted for advertising and art shows:

Presley's Socialistic poem, 'The Toilers,' had an enormous success. The editor of the Sunday supplement of the San Francisco paper to which it was sent, printed it in Gothic type, with a scare-head title so decorative as to be almost illegible [. . .] It was discussed, attacked, defended, eulogised, ridiculed. It was praised with the most fulsome adulation; assailed with the most violent condemnation. Editorials were written upon it. Special articles, in literary pamphlets, dissected its rhetoric and prosody. The phrases were quoted,—were used as texts for revolutionary sermons, reactionary speeches. (394)

This passage points to the simultaneous danger and potential of a hybrid, materialized poetry. The danger of such poetry is its ability to be co-opted as simply an aesthetic object, its political message and material origins elided. While “the plain story” of the railroad’s offenses lacks mobilizable political meaning, the move towards stylistic writing can also make the truth indiscernible. The printed title of the poem, “so decorative as to be almost illegible,” points to this potential for aesthetic obfuscation. Whereas genuine outrage at real events fuels Presley’s writing, the decorative nature of the poem causes it to be treated little differently from the paintings in Cedarquist’s gallery. Like the women exclaiming over artistic terms while looking at the paintings, critics of Presley’s poem comment only upon “its rhetoric and prosody.” However, the poem also has a political impact, fueling “revolutionary sermons” and “reactionary speeches” and ultimately inspiring Mrs. Cedarquist and a number of the San Francisco elite to organize and send ships of grain to the famine-stricken lands of India.

Thus, the materialization of poetry has material consequences, though the novel is skeptical about the political efficacy of Presley's writing. Presley's poem does nothing to prevent the deaths of his friends at the hands of the railroad; conversely, following their deaths, language breaks down for him. His attempts at public oration leave the audience silent; his attempts to respond in his journal deteriorate into simple recitations of fact: "Dabney dead, Hooven dead, Harran dead, Annixter dead, Broderson dead, Osterman dying, S. Behrman alive, successful; the Railroad in possession of Quien Sabe. I saw them shot" (537-38). Finally, Presley abandons his writing, taking passage on a wheat ship bearing the San Joaquin harvest and bound for Asia. Within the confines of the novel, then, writing fails as a political and ethical tool.

But if writing fails Presley, it is because he again slips away from the balance of epic framing and material grounding that would make his writing effective. By the novel's end, he has returned to his initial abstract conceptions of landscape and a still-abstractly epic understanding of the events he observed, as we see in the aestheticized landscape that frames his departure on the *Swanhilda* (649-652). As he looks over the mountains, he slips back into a distanced appreciation of landscape paired with abstract philosophical reflection on "[t]he larger view" which allows him to ignore his friends' deaths, focusing instead on a vague "Truth that will, in the end, prevail" (652). With his hybrid representations of wheat and railroads as equally material and symbolic things, Norris clearly did not buy into any strict definition of realism. But perhaps Presley does. His departure on the *Swanhilda* – his literal disappearance into the international flow of exchange economies – points to a poet that has given up materialization along with writing.

If we read Presley's complex relationship to material realities and to literary representation as a response to Hartrath's question – as an exploration of what happens when poets become materialized – we discover an ambiguous answer. On the one hand, Presley's final despair about writing, his decision to leave California, and his retreat into distanced, aesthetic relationships to landscape and to historical events suggests a pessimistic view of even materialized writing. Should a poet become materialized, he may well become despondent as art ceases to be a retreat from the harsh conditions accompanying turn-of-the-century America's industrial transformation. On the other hand, Presley's temporary success with the creation of "The Toilers" suggests the powerful potential of materialized representation. While we as present day readers may find the fleet of wheat ships, bound for India and inspired by Presley's poem, to be a troubling example of expanding American imperial and industrial power, these ships also indicate the potential for poetic efficacy. By appealing to the things that he sees, Presley taps into the power of material representation, highlighting the double-edged potential of such appeals that we also saw in this project's introductory analysis of oil commercials. The rhetoric of material appeals that can function as a powerful critique of developing industrial systems can also legitimate such systems' continuation. The ethically ambiguous ending of *The Octopus* thus points us back to the dilemmas of political ecology Latour describes in his analysis of the modern constitution, insisting that an attention to material things is a necessary beginning for but will not automatically generate right political or ethical action. While poetry based in the material conditions of California can counter the dematerializing "melting into air" of a transnational system of railroad and ship exchange, it does not automatically generate anti-trust sentiment. The

hard difficulty of this political reality is what fuels Presley's despair and the ambiguous ending of *The Octopus*.

## CHAPTER V

### “THE SUBSTANCE OF REMEMBERING”: MATERIALITY, HYBRIDITY, AND HISTORY IN WILLIAM FAULKNER’S *GO DOWN, MOSES* AND *ABSALOM,*

#### *ABSALOM!*

*Once there was—Do you mark how the wistaria, sun-impacted on this wall here, distills and penetrates this room as though (light-unimpeded) by secret and attritive progress from mote to mote of obscurity’s myriad components? That is the substance of remembering—sense, sight, smell: the muscles with which we see and hear and feel—not mind, not thought: there is no such thing as memory: the brain recalls just what the muscles grope for: no more, no less: and its resultant sum is usually incorrect and false and worthy only of the name of dream.*

William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*

The word ‘substance’ does not designate what ‘remains beneath,’ impervious to history, but what gathers together a multiplicity of agents into a stable and coherent whole. A substance is more like the thread that holds the pearls of a necklace together than the rock bed that remains the same no matter what is built on it. In the same way that accurate reference qualifies a type of smooth and easy circulation, substance is a name that designates the *stability* of an assemblage.

Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*

In the first epigraph cited above, Rosa Coldfield pauses in the midst of reminiscing to muse on the nature of memory. Her own memories remain fixed on her brother-in-law Thomas Sutpen and his children, a family destroyed by the Civil War and by their own secrets. *Absalom, Absalom!* mirrors her obsession, following a handful of characters as they attempt to recreate the historical rise and fall of the Sutpen family from fragmented narratives and scraps of documentary evidence. Few facts remain from Sutpen’s history, and it falls to Rosa’s one listener, the young Quentin Compson, to combine the pieces he gleans from Miss Rosa, from public knowledge, and from his own father in order to explain the Sutpens’ post-bellum collapse. Quentin knows that Sutpen

created a huge plantation on the outskirts of Jefferson, Quentin's own hometown, and that Sutpen lost this plantation after the war. He knows that Sutpen married Miss Rosa's sister, Ellen, and had two children with her, Judith and Henry; he knows that Henry killed Judith's alleged fiancé Charles Bon. He knows that Sutpen fought as a colonel in the Civil War, that he lost all his land in the Reconstruction years, and that he was eventually murdered by his squatter neighbor, Wash Jones. Aside from these facts, Quentin's only evidence comes from oral conjecture such as Miss Rosa's and from a handful of artifacts: an unsigned letter Judith gave to Quentin's grandmother; the Sutpen gravestones in a grove of cedars; the crumbling Sutpen mansion. Yet from these stories and these artifacts, Quentin – and Miss Rosa, and Quentin's father, Mr. Compson – dream of recreating a *true* story, something more substantial than the “incorrect” and “false” “dream” that Rosa describes.

*Absalom* thus locates historical narrative and memory in the space between fiction and nonfiction, and between materiality and language. The novel explores constraints on the construction of memory and history, recognizing the role that human language and culture play in shaping these narratives while also insisting on their foundation in a “real” world. These tensions between materiality and language play out in Miss Rosa's musings cited above. Her own life of bitter remembering has left her hungry for historical truth that can transcend memory's contingency. While she remains skeptical of memory's reliability, she also imagines memory as something other than mere “mind” or “thought.” She interrupts the fairy tale invocation, the “*Once there was*” of her story, by drawing attention to the material conditions of wisteria, sun, and dust that surround her and Quentin, even as she contemplates the now-absent material world that surrounded Judith,

Henry, Sutpen, and Bon. This juxtaposition of the present world's immediacy and the past world's absence gives the word "was" a paradoxical sense. On the one hand, "was" implies a once-existing presence; as Miss Rosa tells her tale of Sutpen's Hundred, she insists that "once there was" a material world which the Sutpens could "see and hear and feel" (143). But on the other hand, the past tense of "was" suggests the transience of materiality. Quentin's and Miss Rosa's muscles grope without success to reach for the Sutpen's Hundred of the 1860s. In Miss Rosa's vision, memory reaches at once for what one body could perceive and what another body can never perceive. Memory constitutes an ephemeral approach to a once-material world of bodies and things that has been reduced to almost-perceptible dust: "obscurity's myriad components." As a result of this ephemeral quality, Miss Rosa fears that human memory of the past can never reach any conclusion that is not simply a "dream."

Yet the process of memory Miss Rosa imagines is less abstract than what one might expect from a mere dream. Rosa recognizes one potential path for memory's success: an accumulation of knowledge (via "distill[ation]" and "attriti[on]") based on what few "components" of the past can be groped towards by the human body and mind. She reimagines memory as a liminal process situated like dust and shadows in the space between the present material world and the immaterial past. Thus, for Miss Rosa, there is an undeniable "substance of remembering," a tangibility translated from the material world that differentiates memory from fiction. Memory is "*not mind, not thought*" alone, but rather an embodied process of seeing, hearing, and smelling (143). Memory is thus a "groping" that pushes against the division between mind and thing as the body reaches out towards the world around it. In language similar to Merleau-Ponty's

phenomenological description of sensory perception, Miss Rosa imagines memory as struggling to draw together a material world, a sensing human body, and a synthesizing human mind.<sup>53</sup> Why, then, given Merleau-Ponty's optimistic assessment of perception as granting humans access to a true knowledge of the world and given Miss Rosa's similarly sophisticated understanding of memory as a synthesis, does she finally conclude that memory can only be a "false" groping for an elusive world, doomed by its very nature to failed status as "only [. . .] dream"?

Quentin Compson also struggles with "the substance of remembering." *Absalom* begins with Miss Rosa's memory but becomes an account of Quentin's attempt to make historical meaning via storytelling. Listening to Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson share their takes on the Sutpen legend, Quentin attempts to corral these competing accounts and connect them to the world he sees. By examining material artifacts and listening to stories, Quentin also attempts to unite a world split into dichotomies of past and present, material and immaterial, story and reality. This reading conflicts with a critical tradition that associates Quentin with language, a loss of referentiality, and idealism. Joel Williamson makes one version of this argument, claiming, "Quentin was given almost totally to idealism. He was so consumed by his passion for what ought to be that at age twenty he was unable to deal with the impurities of this earthly world and had to leave it" (360). For Williamson, Quentin's frustrated attempts at understanding memory ultimately

---

<sup>53</sup> As I summarized in Chapter II, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes perception as the reaching out of the human body towards an already existing, material world. He claims, "I have the world as an incomplete individual, through the agency of my body as the potentiality of this world [. . .] because my body is a movement towards the world, and the world my body's point of support" (408). Such a process can only be understood as taking place over time and involving an embodied human consciousness encountering a similarly material world. Perception gives humans true knowledge of the world, he claims, specifically because "The union of soul and body is not an amalgamation between two mutually external terms, subject and object, brought about by arbitrary decree. It is enacted at every instant in the movement of existence" (102).

drive him to suicide in *The Sound and the Fury*; this frustration stems from his inability to situate himself within the dichotomy of idealism and reality that also plagues him in *Absalom*.

Williamson offers this dichotomy between the ideal and the real as a rubric for understanding the moral universe of Faulkner's novels. He reads their characters as caught within two key dichotomies: the first, the tension between idealism and realism; the second, the tension between nature and society (358-61). A successful solution to the philosophical problems posed by these poles requires balance. "The challenge" for Faulkner's characters, Williamson claims, "was both to know the real world and to transcend it, to walk the middle line in the schematic, the line between the ideal and real" (361). He claims that Quentin's idealism revolts against the fundamental impurity of a world built out of both material substance and language. But while I agree that the impurity of the world contributes to Quentin's despair (in both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*), I do not think a balance between ideality and reality would provide him any relief. Indeed, trying to walk the same narrow tightrope between the ideal and the real upon which his father and Miss Rosa teeter drives Quentin into philosophical defeatism. Quentin has inherited a fundamentally useless dichotomy within which one *cannot* walk an effective middle line. What is a balance between idealism and reality, aside from the defeated "stalemate of dust and desire" that Mr. Compson espouses from within his alcoholic cynicism (*Sound* 123-24)? Even if Williamson's diagram of two dichotomies aptly describes how Faulkner imagined his philosophical universe, these dichotomies cannot provide the escape his characters seek.

But Bruno Latour offers us a slightly different way to look at how Miss Rosa, Mr. Compson, and Quentin are all stuck between a sense that there is something substantially true about memory, and a sense that memory cannot be trusted since it is finally a construction of language. Their struggle to reconcile language and reality makes perfect sense when considered as a historical way of understanding – what Latour calls the “modern constitution” (*Modern* 32). As I described in Chapter II, the modern constitution is a conceptual framework that Latour sees as foundational to modern notions of truth; it insists on the need to purify two separate realms, an objective nature and a subjective culture, creating a détente between poles similar to Williamson’s dichotomies. Latour describes how the modern constitution demands that nature be purified from society, the material be purified from the ideal, and the subject be purified from the object. At the same time, Latour argues, the modern constitution’s drive towards such purifications merely masks the constant hybrids created through human interaction with the world. This theoretical organization thus creates many of the problematic divides that drive thinkers like Miss Rosa and Quentin into philosophical knots: “Things-in-themselves become inaccessible while, symmetrically, the transcendental subject becomes infinitely remote from the world” (*Modern* 56). If Quentin struggles futilely to find a middle ground between the transcendent and the real, it is because the modern constitution offers him a useless, paradoxical way of understanding his world.

That we see these dichotomies and purifications at work in Faulkner, a quintessential American modernist, should not be surprising. What is surprising is that Latour’s assessment of this modern paradox can help us make sense of Quentin’s despair, Mr. Compson’s relativism, and Miss Rosa’s frustrated immobility. For Latour, the only

solution to the paradoxes of representation is not balance but renunciation of the dichotomy's basic premises. He admits, "The moderns are quite right to want reality, language, society and being all at once. They are wrong in believing that these sets are forever contradictory" (89). Instead, things and language are connected by processes: by observation, recording, translation, experimentation, and transformation. Thus, as Merleau-Ponty imagines accurate perception as "the movement of existence" that must be enacted whenever an observer approaches the world, so Latour similarly describes accurate representation as "a matter of moving toward the world, making it mobile [. . .] and making it available for arguments" (*Pandora* 100). Both theories stress a movement that Mr. Compson's "stalemate" or Williamson's dichotomies lack.

Latour's skepticism towards modern dichotomies suggests that any attempt to balance the real and the ideal will be doomed by the paradoxical terms in which it is framed. In this chapter, I argue that the difficulties Faulkner's characters face in *Absalom, Absalom!* result from persisting dichotomies, ones which Latour argues are finally false. Faulkner's characters cannot successfully maintain the purity of the material world of things and the human world of language, given the proliferation of hybrid forms that fill their memory and histories. These characters need a successful vision of hybridity in order do something more successful than walk a tentative line between poles.

The same hopelessness at the world's hybridity evident in *Absalom, Absalom!* also fills *Go Down, Moses*, particularly the novella "The Bear." "The Bear" tells the story of Ike McCaslin's initiation into a disappearing, mythical wilderness space as well as his renunciation of his family's farm. As Ike attempts to track down the descendants of his grandfather and his grandfather's slaves, a quest to discover historical truth similar to

Quentin's drives him. And a similar impasse between language and materiality haunts his efforts to learn of the history of the McCaslin family and their land. Like Quentin, Ike experiences his life in Jefferson as the inheritance of a history ruined by the Civil War and by the historical mistakes of his ancestors. Like Quentin, Ike attempts to recreate his history from scraps of historical evidence and from inherited stories of his youth. But while pursuing the truth of the past, Ike also observes the Big Bottom Woods disappearing before his eyes, transforming from material trees into myth. The deaths of the giant bear, Old Ben, and Ike's wilderness mentor, Sam Fathers, further transform the material world of the Big Bottom Woods into abstraction, where Old Ben becomes a natural ghost. Ike's search through the McCaslin ledgers seeks an opposite relationship to materiality; he strives to return materiality to language and to recreate tangible history as a counter to the present world's dissolution.

Quentin Compson and Ike McCaslin, the two Faulknerian protagonists who are this chapter's focus, thus each inherited a world whose histories have become meaningless because language has been cut off from the material world. Ike lives in a world where his material inheritance is replaced by empty language, where the woods of his childhood are replaced by stories while they are literally whittled away by the growing lumber industry. Quentin lives in a world that his father insists cannot be explained, since all explanations are "just words" and since all stories, letters, and historical artifacts point only to events condemned to inscrutability (*Sound* 78). For Ike and Quentin, the sign and the referent have been literally severed, leaving language a mysterious shadow and leaving materiality a dumb accumulation of stones, rag dolls, and empty houses.

Latour's vision of truthful knowledge as a collaborative, constructed network provides an apt model for understanding these struggles with history and memory. If truth for the Latourian scientist depends on creating and preserving chains of transformation that connect textual representation and material events – that preserve the *processes* and *events* by which true knowledge becomes possible – then truth for the Faulknerian history teller must also ground its truth-making in encounters with the material. History and memory must base themselves on a material world that cannot be objectively known but that must be encountered, transformed, and mobilized. While *Absalom* repeatedly insists on the unreliability of memory, the division of language from the material world, and the elusiveness of history, it also voices a longing to reconnect stories to material reality. It is this reconnection that would make a meaningful “substance of remembering” possible. The tragic fate of Faulkner's characters points to the folly of living within narratives purified from the material world and consequently reduced to self-referential language – what Quentin calls “a fine dead sound” (*Sound* 174). The battle to maintain this purification and ignore the “*proliferation of hybrids*” that occurs in the search for memory leaves the characters of these novels defeated (Latour *Modern* 51).

### **Critical Responses to History and Materiality in Faulkner's Fiction**

My focus on Faulkner's interest in materiality participates in a larger trend of criticism that emphasizes Faulkner as a writer tied to nature and the material world. In the fairly recent past, a number of publications from the annual Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference have discussed William Faulkner's work in terms of materiality, ecology, and the natural world, including *Faulkner and the Natural World*, *Faulkner and the Ecology of the South*, and *Faulkner and Material Culture*. In different

ways, each of these volumes introduces critical approaches that more firmly connect Faulkner's work to material concerns. By examining Faulkner's depictions of Mississippi deforestation and flooding or by analyzing the use of material artifacts in Faulkner's fiction, material approaches insist that, in spite of his works' evident interest in textuality and representation, these texts do not entirely focus on an artificial, literary world.

However, as Donald M. Kartiganer's introduction to *Faulkner and the Natural World* reveals, this emphasis on Faulkner's material representation faces a greater level of hostility than, say, material assessments of Thoreau or Norris. Kartiganer believes that this resistance to an exploration "of the environmental imagination" in Faulkner's fiction results from a critical tendency to associate Faulkner with "high modernism's [. . .] revolution against referentiality itself" (ix). Traceable to "the late nineteenth-century movement, especially among the French Symbolist poets and their British enthusiasts, 'against nature'," such interpretations of Faulkner's work align it with "the attempt to raise art above the merely given [. . .] and move beyond realism and the material world" (viii). This move beyond materiality severs the referential relationship between words and the world: "Language, instead of functioning as the transparent, passive sign of the object, faithfully reflecting what is already 'out there,' takes on a greater solidity, a substantiality of its own, enabling it to recover, or invent, a more essential Reality" (ix).

The turn towards environmental or material readings of Faulkner thus faces many of the same theoretical impasses that hampered first-wave ecocriticism's realist recovery. More specifically, the idea of a "high modernist" imperative to surpass realist or materialist aesthetics reproduces a theoretical asymmetry that Buell diagnoses: an over-emphasis on "structure, text(uality), [or] ideology" (*Imagination* 86). In other words,

Faulknerian criticism runs up against the familiar poles of Latour's modern constitution; it is told that it should not confuse Faulkner's textual and symbolic representations with references to the material world. And yet, a more qualified understanding of representation that accounts for material transformations as well as textual functions would prove helpful not only for topical investigations into Faulkner's environmental or material sensitivity but also to the larger critical tradition struggling to come to terms with Faulkner's strangely hybrid Yoknapatawpha, an entirely fictive county with close connections to the geographical and historical Lafayette County.

Indeed, Malcolm Cowley's 1946 introduction to *The Portable Faulkner* describes Faulkner's writing in terms that both purify and re-combine the poles of text and world. He argues that Faulkner's work performs a "double labor: first, to invent a Mississippi county that was like a mythical kingdom but was complete in all its details; second, to make his story of Yoknapatawpha stand as a parable or legend of all the Deep South" (viii). Caught between fiction and realistic representation, Yoknapatawpha's relationship to the historical world Faulkner inhabited is thus more complicated than a simple purification can explain. This may help account for similar critical conflicts over the exact relationship between Faulkner's imaginary Yoknapatawpha and the Lafayette County that was his historical home. According to Charles Aiken, Faulkner himself was fascinated by the tension between the "actual" and the "apocryphal" that manifested in his imaginary geography (qtd. in "Geographical Fact" 13). His Yoknapatawpha has an illusory air of reality, beginning with the two maps which define the county, and perhaps reaching its most fantastical form in books like Martin J. Dain's *Faulkner's County: Yoknapatawpha*, which uses photographs from Jefferson to illustrate excerpts from

Faulkner's fiction.<sup>54</sup> A geographer and Lafayette native, Aiken argues that a close relationship exists between turn-of-the-century Mississippi geography and the landmarks of Faulkner's maps.

By contrast, noting the way Faulkner's map locates landmarks in relation to key narrative events rather than to simple geographical features, Thomas McHaney argues that "Faulkner's map for *Absalom, Absalom!* is a 'literary' map and not a 'real' map, not even a fictional map that actually imitates cartographic expression" (521). Joseph Uργο similarly downplays any connection between historical geography and Faulkner's maps, positing that "Yoknapatawpha may be less a place than a perspective, less significant for mapping a landscape than mapping a mode of consciousness" ("Yoknapatawpha" 639). This debate over imaginary geography asks where the emphasis should lie: on the imagination or the geography? Should we focus on constructed acts of fictionalizing, on the narrative functions or imaginative uses of geographical places? Or should we focus on referentiality, emphasizing the connections between the world and the text? Such connections surely exist, prompting Uργο to insist that, while Faulkner's literary legacy is "phenomenally irreconcilable with the material reality of the place," still "the two worlds [the material world and the textual world] intersect continuously; they must intersect if either is to be recognizable" (Introduction xi).

### **"Bigger than Any Recorded Document:" The Material, Mythical Woods of "The Bear"**

With its discussion of the disappearing Big Bottom Woods, the land-ownership issues of the McCaslin family, the history of racial conflict regarding the land, and the

---

<sup>54</sup> The first of these maps, crudely sketched, is presented in *Absalom*'s supplementary material; the second, simplified version appears in Cowley's *The Portable Faulkner*.

mythological significance of wilderness space, *Go Down, Moses* thoughtfully examines a host of material, textual, and ecological issues. The stories collected in this work also struggle between the poles of the real and language that so haunt *Absalom, Absalom!* “The Bear” in particular tells the story of Ike McCaslin’s changing relationship to the material land of Yoknapatawpha. Like *Absalom*, “The Bear” demonstrates the conflicts that a dichotomous understanding of language and material environments make possible. It is commonly recognized that there are two distinct narratives at odds within this five-part story, both of which deal with the connection between texts and the environment. The first three parts of the “The Bear,” as well as Part Five, depict Ike’s youthful participation in ritualistic bear hunts that take place in the Big Bottom Woods; Part Four describes Ike’s decision to renounce his right to inherit his grandfather’s farm, basing such renunciation on a mixture of guilt about the McCaslin’s slave-owning past and an idealized preference for wilderness over tamed land. Parts One through Three show Ike recognizing the hybridity of wilderness but also participating in modern acts of purification, such as the hunt for the bear Old Ben. That is, while the attitude towards wilderness that Ike inherits is a hybrid mixture of material encounter and cultural myth, the act of killing Old Ben enacts a strange purification that attempts to separate the material, “mortal” creature from the mythic, transcendent wilderness. The under-examined Part Four, on the other hand, eschews mythical takes on wilderness, focusing instead on textual transmissions of ownership and records of material changes to the land. As the racial and economic conflicts of Part Four make clear, the mythological purity of wilderness can be preserved only by eliding its material history: ignoring the disappearance of the literal Big Bottom and its creatures and ignoring the historical

mistreatment of slaves in service of agricultural development. But the ledgers at the center of Part Four challenge such erasure. Unlike the shadowy texts of *Absalom*, these ledgers clearly document the material conditions of the past. “The Bear” thus demonstrates how a tension between the poles of the modern constitution shapes the McCaslins’ interactions with the land.

A number of critics have focused on connecting part four to the rest of “The Bear.” Paul S. Stein accomplishes such connection by arguing that these two stories are actually parallel tales about ignored social responsibility. That the two narratives are meant to be read in concert is evident, Stein argues, given the virtually identical openings of Parts One and Four.<sup>55</sup> He argues that these stories both rest upon Ike’s failure to take responsibility for his own implication in the systems of slavery and land ownership. Finally, Ike chooses the passivity of observation and renunciation rather than action: “What links the two initiations, making them in essence two retellings of the same story, is that it is really one and the same force being personified: that of Ike’s own sense of culpability and involvement in the ongoing crimes and guilts of his people” (Stein 76). Stein argues that Ike renounces ownership as well as connection to the land, as he moves back to Jefferson and limits his relationship with the wilderness to “yearly holiday hunts (excepting the relation of being, as a carpenter, a customer for the lumber company that is eating up the wilderness)” (67). Ultimately, Ike’s passivity replaces real woods with mythical woods: “Ike does thereby preserve the wilderness – the mythic wilderness he

---

<sup>55</sup> Part 1 begins, “There was a man and a dog too this time [. . .] He was sixteen. For six years now he had heard the best of all talking. It was of the wilderness, the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document” (191). Part 4 begins, “then he was twenty-one. He could say it, himself and his cousin juxtaposed not against the wilderness but against the tamed land which was to have been his heritage” (254). Stein emphasizes the parallel language that links these two openings: the emphasis on age and the description of the land surrounding Ike.

has created. Having preserved the idyllic myth, Ike has no further need of the real wilderness” (81).

But while Stein focuses on the primacy of mythical over material woods, other critics insist that Faulkner’s work forwards a more ecologically thoughtful response to the historical deforestation of the South. While Ike sinks into an escapist wilderness myth, this myth is shot through with material loss, as the Big Bottom Woods vanish through deforestation and the encroachment of the railroad. While “The Bear” initially brushes off such ecological change as the “punily gnaw[ing]” work of humans and as the “pygmies about the ankles of a drowsing elephant,” it also admits that this wilderness is “doomed” (193). As is already suggested in Part Five of “The Bear,” by the time Ike reaches old age in “Delta Autumn,” the puny hacking axes have gnawed the elephantine wilderness down to a small patch of trees “two hundred miles from Jefferson” (342-3). An ecological reading emphasizes *Go Down, Moses*’s clear awareness of the economic systems destroying the Big Bottom Woods.<sup>56</sup> Thus, as Buell argues,

although the claims of the natural world were seldom paramount in Faulkner’s fiction, they could take on a life of their own [. . .] Faulkner was no mere literary pastoralist or primitivist in his reflections on Southern environmental history, but ventured them against the background of considerable knowledge of its economic, social, and racial ramifications. (“Faulkner” 14-15)

---

<sup>56</sup> Buell points out that the collapse of the Big Bottom and the sale of Major de Spain’s land “may or may not have been revisiting a real-life event: the demise of his [Faulkner’s] own Big Bottom happy hunting ground, bought and held as an investment property by his friend Phil Stone’s father, a successful timberland speculator until the Great Depression caught up with him and he died debt-ridden” (“Faulkner” 10).

The Big Bottom Woods, then, is presented not just as a symbolic place but also a material resource caught in economic change.

Indeed, throughout “The Bear,” Faulkner imagines the wilderness as a complicated balance between material actuality and cultural construction. On the one hand, the woods of Ike’s youth are undeniably material. These woods are “bigger and older than any recorded document” and material trophies from the woods pile up at the hunters’ camp, “the *concrete* trophies, the racked guns and the heads and skins” (192, emphasis mine). As Ike goes out to the Big Bottom Woods for the first time in Part One, the text celebrates the sensory immediacy of his encounter, imagining wilderness as an essence that can be distilled. The men even drink “some condensation of the wild immortal spirit” when they share whiskey in their hunting camps. However, the cultural construction of wilderness also appears at the story’s beginning, as we learn that Ike was primed for his experience by the “best of all talking [. . .] of the wilderness, the big woods” (192). Ike grew up among “the voices quiet and weighty and deliberate among the concrete trophies,” surrounded by both material and linguistic traces of the woods (192). Thus, the woods that Ike encounters when he finally sees the Big Bottom mirror this balance of concreteness and ephemerality: the animals he hunts are at one moment “smoke-colored, elongated with speed, vanished” and at another moment the concrete “skin, bones, and antlers of the trophy-kill” (196). This tension suggests the hybridity of the wilderness space and the danger of trying to purify its components. Only killing can render the creatures totally material, and it is only back in town that the simultaneously real and symbolic animals become purified, separated into, on the one hand, dead carcasses mounted on a wall and, on the other hand, stories to be shared.

Old Ben, the bear that is the “epitome and apotheosis of the old wild life,” also reveals this hybrid quality, appearing as both a shared story and an identifiable creature (193). Old Ben is both material, “a shaggy tremendous shape,” and immaterial, “a phantom” (193). Ike recognizes this hybridity when he first sees traces of the bear:

he looked quietly down at the rotted log scored and gutted with claw-marks and, in the wet earth beside it, the print of the enormous two-toed foot [. . .] for the first time he realized that the bear which had run in his listening and loomed in his dreams since before he could remember and which therefore must have existed in the listening and the dreams of his cousin and Major de Spain and even old General Compson before they began to remember in their turn, was a mortal animal [. . .]. (200-01)

This passage suggests a hybrid composite of the mortal bear in the woods and the immortal, phantom-like “Old Ben” of legend. “Old Ben” is not simply an imaginative projection that humans place after-the-fact on a meaningless totality otherwise known as the objective “Big Bottom Woods.” Rather, this fabled creature grows out of a process of encounter and description, and his reality is crafted from both language and observation. Beginning with General Compson, the members of Ike’s party have gone to the woods, experienced and observed the wilderness (“began to remember in their turn”), and then returned to their plantation offices and their town houses with both material trophies and stories for retelling. The stories of the woods that Ike inherits are thus not entirely disconnected from the Big Bottom, even if they are constructions. Rather, the hunting party reconnects stories to the material world by participating in the annual ritual of the hunt, a transformative process that changes woods and hunters by mutual interaction.

“The Bear” thus sets up a constructed vision that connects material presence and language. While Old Ben begins as more myth than mammal, Ike eventually recognizes his existence as a mortal bear; while wilderness is a myth generated by storytelling, it is also a physical space Ike can learn to navigate as he becomes a “fair woodsman.” Ike develops a “real” knowledge of the wilderness that, like the Latourian description of science, is a constructed product deriving from encounter with the nonhuman woods. The idea of “wilderness” is a cultural construction, but it is not an idea that is simply *imposed* on the Big Bottom; it is a story-based way of understanding this natural space that mobilizes the material woods through yearly rituals of reconnection, observation, and human involvement. Such a way of viewing the woods becomes troubling only when it becomes inconsistent: when it remains a static vision of naturalness that does not account for genuine ecological change. That is, the concept of wilderness becomes troubling when it becomes *purified* from material reality – when Ike faces a material reality of ecological destruction, on the one hand, and a perpetual story of untouched natural space on the other. It is significant that Ike’s deepest encounters with the bear and with the woods occur when he has abandoned his gun, thereby abandoning his ability to participate in the killing that will purify the bear’s body from his enduring myth. If, by the time of “Delta Autumn,” stories of the wilderness’s immortal greatness are at odds with the reality of the wilderness’s shrinking status, we must ask what has changed between Ike’s childhood and his old age. What interrupts the chains of transformation that make the idea of wilderness a viable way of knowing the Big Bottom, one that allows Ike to navigate the woods safely? What completes the purification of a wilderness myth from the woods’ threatened materiality?

The answer to this question, of course, is the literal disappearance of the wilderness, prompted by Major de Spain's sale of land to the timber companies, and the parallel killing of Old Ben, the harbinger of the wilderness spirit. As Ike ages, the woods begin to disappear, straining the relationship between stories and material reality. In Ike's childhood, the hunt for Old Ben was a "yearly rendezvous" without concrete goal, designed to avoid the taking of material trophies, a ritual from which men "would return with no trophy, no skin" (194). The bear's death purifies his real presence as a skin-bearing body from his mythical status as a wildness exceeding human capacities to capture. This purification makes him at once more definitively material and more purely mythical. At no point is Old Ben more material and mortal than when Lion latches onto his throat, Boon sinks his knife into him, and all three "[fall] all of a piece, as a tree falls" (241). But Old Ben's death also makes it possible for Ike to mobilize him as a purely symbolic representation of wilderness. When Ike buries Old Ben's paw above Lion and near Sam Fathers, he transforms all three of these beings into a mythical network of symbolic wildness. Like the material tokens of tobacco and peppermint candy that Ike leaves on Sam's grave, these buried bodies are "merely translated into the myriad life which printed the dark mold of these secret and sunny places" (328). Thus, the three characters most directly associated with wilderness in this story become a diffuse and abstract myth of wilderness rather than an apotheosis or condensation of it: their material bodies become distinct from their status as symbolic beings.

Yet even this purification of the bear into material body and myth cannot escape the proliferation of hybridity. The mystical unification of Old Ben, Lion, and Sam Fathers with the wilderness has a biological as well as a symbolic component. The individuals

dissolve as solid entities and literally reenter wilderness through their particulate merging into the cycles of life. As Ike realizes months later, when he returns to the site, they are “not held fast in earth but free in earth and not in earth but of earth, myriad yet undiffused of every myriad part, leaf and twig and particle, air and sun and rain and dew and night” (328). Like the dust pervading Miss Rosa’s imagination, the disintegrating bodies of these creatures enact liminality. Their literal material transformation from perceivable entities into dust and particles resembles the liminal transformations that language performs when rendering them into mythical symbols. On the other hand, as they lose material unity, they become disembodied symbols of wildness. The individual deaths of bears and woods and men dissipate into a timeless vision of mythic unity that underemphasizes human participation in this killing.

Thus, the disappearance of the Big Bottom and the death of Old Ben lead the men of “The Bear” to participate more and more in dichotomous thinking as they purify the transcendent concept of “wilderness” from the material devastation of the land. The creation of nature mythology now depends on ignorance of material conditions, and in this regard Stein’s assessment is right: Ike can reconcile his decision to participate in the hunt for Old Ben and in the deforestation of the Big Bottom Woods by clinging to a nostalgic vision of an absent natural world and ignoring the destruction of the natural world in the present. The purification of the material from language – the separation of the linguistic wilderness of stories from the material wilderness of exploitable resources – sets up a divided consciousness that ignores the proliferation of hybrids occurring in the Big Bottom. This separation ignores the encroachment of human presence, the hybridity of spaces like the hunting camp, and the stories that are built out of both language and

encounter. Such purification is both troubling and powerful. It allows the hunters of the Big Bottom to have it all, keeping their dream of wilderness while using the woods as a resource. This loss of wilderness is symptomatic of a larger disconnection taking place in Yoknapatawpha, a disconnection made possible for white Southerners like Ike McCaslin by plantation slavery's erasure of laboring bodies in its history.<sup>57</sup> These hidden material bodies – of dead bears and of enslaved workers –intertwine in Part 4. For Ike's mythical wilderness is made possible not only by burying Old Ben's body but also by burying the truth of slavery and the land's troubled history. To keep believing in a wilderness that no man can tame, own, or capture, Ike must bury the evidence of man's capacity to kill and cultivate, retreating to a primordial time prior to ownership. This, in turn, means ignoring the racial struggles that have allowed Major de Spain to own the Big Bottom and to preserve it as a recreational space.

#### **“Pale Sentence or Paragraph Scrawled”: Dematerializing McCaslin Legacies**

If Parts One through Three tell the story of how conceptual purification separates timeless visions of wilderness from the material history of the land, Part Four tells a converse story – of Ike's attempt to unearth hidden histories and to engage with hybrid truths, buried not in dirt but in textual documentation. While the saga of Old Ben shows Ike's participation in mythologies that erase their origins, Part Four shows him recognizing the social cost of such mythology. The myths of his family have erased his black relatives and denied them their own due inheritance. This injustice invalidates Ike's own sense of himself as noble in relationship to the wilderness. In Part Four, Ike fights

---

<sup>57</sup> See Godden's reading of slavery and alienation in *Absalom, Absalom!*'s Thomas Sutpen, where Sutpen's identity crisis and struggle to read the land rely upon a paradoxical disconnection brought about by slavery: white men's identity necessarily depends upon a loss of self-reliance in the Tidewater plantation system, since the self-actualized white male must stop working the land himself and rely upon the labor of black bodies. Such a realization troubles individual autonomy and thus must be suppressed.

dematerialization as he attempts to recreate the history of the McCaslin family from the ledgers in order to act justly towards his grandfather's descendants.

Thus, one way of connecting all the parts of "The Bear" is by looking at them as telling the story of the dematerialization of Ike McCaslin's inheritance. The land that he inherits from Carothers McCaslin is land he reads as stolen from the very woods that continue to disappear right before his eyes. Similarly, we learn in Part Four, Ike's inheritance is in the process of transforming from materiality to language. While he is supposed to inherit a silver cup full of gold coins, what he eventually unwraps is a tin coffee pot full of copper coins and handwritten IOUs from his Uncle Hubert Beauchamp. Significantly, the fate of Ike's inheritance also resembles that of the wilderness: the gradual loss of the material and the persistent accumulation of language. While described as inevitable, the disappearance of the Big Bottom Woods is also described as inexplicable, magic akin to a curse. Indeed, the loss of Ike's inheritance is equally mysterious and magical.

From the first description of Ike's legacy, Faulkner insists on its materiality as opposed to the legacies that Carothers McCaslin promised his slaves. Whereas Carothers offers them a "pale sentence or paragraph scrawled in cringing fear of death by a weak and trembling hand as a last desperate sop flung backward at retribution," the inheritance that Uncle Hubert gives Ike is "a Legacy, a Thing, possessing weight to the hand and bulk to the eye and even audible: a silver cup filled with gold pieces and wrapped in burlap and sealed with his godfather's ring in the hot wax" (300-301). In an annual ritual designed to verify this legacy through empirical observation, Uncle Hubert makes every member of the family shake the cup containing the gold pieces and thus feel for

themselves its material weight, “insisting that each take it in turn and heft it for weight and shake it again to prove the sound” (304). Slowly, Hubert begins to modify the test so that it provides only an illusion of material realness, while he steals from the legacy and replaces the coins with worthless pieces of paper:

his uncle no longer put it even into his hands now but carried it himself from one to the other, his mother, McCaslin, Tennie, shaking it before each in turn, saying: ‘Hear it? Hear it?’ his face still innocent, not quite baffled but only amazed and not very amazed and still indomitable [. . .].  
(304)

Eventually, following a mysterious fire, all that remains of the legacy is a “a burlap parcel wrapped in a shirt, the tawny wax-daubed shapeless lump sitting again and on an almost identical shape [. . .] the burlap shape become almost three times its original height and a good half less than its original thickness” (305). Thus, like the Big Bottom Woods of Ike’s childhood, this inheritance too disappears before his very eyes while culturally constructed rituals enact an illusion of its preservation.

Like the substance of memory for which Miss Rosa’s senses grope, the seeming substance of Ike’s legacy is finally suspect. Somehow, the yearly ritual of verification fails. Just as the wilderness became myth, so too does Ike’s legacy become a collection of meaningless coins and leftover stories:

he lifted it, the burlap lump which fifteen years ago had changed its shape completely overnight, which shaken gave forth a thin weightless not-quite-musical curiously muffled clatter [. . .] standing amid the collapse of burlap folds, the unstained tin coffee-pot still brand new, the handful of

copper coins and now he knew what had given them the muffled sound: a collection of minutely-folded scraps of paper [. . .] all dated and signed, beginning with the first one not six months after they had watched him seal the silver cup into the burlap on this same table in the same room by the light even of this same lamp almost twenty-one years ago: *I owe my Nephew Isaac Beauchamp McCaslin five (5) pieces Gold which I, O. U constitutes My note of hand with Interest at 5 percent. Hubert Fitz-Hubert Beauchamp* [. . .]. (306-07)

Here, the most religiously preserved chain of transformation fails. The same package in the same room held by the same hands still changes entirely. Uncle Hubert's yearly testing of the legacy does not stop him from transforming the verifiable Thing into a pile of useless "pale sentence[s]." The value is stripped from Ike's legacy, both land and coins, and it is thus against the dual pressures of failed promises and dematerialization that Ike fights as he pores over his grandfather's ledger books, stubbornly trying to reconnect this text to material actions in a material world. Faced with his own Legacy's evaporation into language, Ike hopes to re-validate his grandfather's failed promises by tracking down the descendants described in the ledgers and paying them the money they were originally promised in frail, failing language.

The key to this discovery lies in immersing himself in the ledgers' detailed records of material exchange. Their referents once existed, and the act of recording "the slow outward trickle of food and supplies, and equipment which returned each fall as cotton made and ginned and sold" had a direct purpose outside of mimetic representation, helping to run a plantation. The ledgers' lists of "the molasses and meat and meal, the

cheap durable shirts and jeans and shoes” explicitly establish a chain of transformation, tracing the material land’s translation into representations. The ledger account hovers between the material and the textual, functioning on the one hand as a “fragile thread” of language whose connection to the world is a construction – a truth emphasized by Ike’s recognition that language functions for him and other white men who can read, but that for the former slave whose life lies recorded in the text, language is unverifiable, for there is “no way under the sun for him [the former slave] to test it [the white man’s word], as to how the account stood” (267). On the other hand, language provides an “iron thread” that controls the lives of former slaves, and that controls Ike’s life, too. Language binds former slaves to plantations by tracing back to material goods. The ledgers thus epitomize textual hybridity, serving as a locus that brings together language and materiality.

“The Bear” imagines Ike’s awakening guilt and his growing awareness of his family’s past specifically in terms of a magical reincarnation of the past, one opposite to the magic that turned his legacy into mere language. As Ike reads the ledger, “it would seem to the boy that he could actually see the black man, the slave whom his white owner had forever manumitted by the very act from which the black man could never be free” (266-67). The ledgers connect Ike to stories that, when activated by his reading and interpretation, “took substance and even a sort of shadowy life with the compassions and complexities too as page followed page” (266). Ike cannot dismiss these books’ words as fiction, and thus he finds that recorded memory is something stronger than mere dream or invention. Ike gets caught in an ecomimetic paradox that demonstrates the descriptive power of hybridity. For it is only via the proliferation of language, page following page, that he sees the shadowy reality of his history. Yet this same language can never be the

same as the world itself. The “shadowy life” that these ledgers evoke recalls his earlier, youthful impression of the smoke-like, phantom animals of the woods that eventually resolve into mortal beings. However, the humans doing the exchanges depicted in the ledger gradually “take substance” for Ike, and events traced in these books seem just as real as the bear he watched fall at Boon’s hand. Thus, Ike McCaslin’s long apprenticeship with the ledgers, like his apprenticeship in the woods, is a process of learning how to read in order to connect to material bodies.

But in the commissary he discovers the contingency of this connection: only active reading will make the ledgers more than scratches, the stories more than dead sounds. In his imagination, even the Allknowing must read and re-read in order to decipher the McCaslin history:

To him, it was as though the ledgers in their scarred cracked leather bindings were being lifted down one by one in their fading sequence and spread open on the desk or perhaps upon some apocryphal Bench or even Altar or perhaps before the Throne itself for a last perusal and contemplation and refreshment of the Allknowledgeable before the yellowed pages and the brown thin ink in which was recorded the injustice and a little at least of its amelioration and restitution faded back forever into the anonymous communal original dust [. . .]. (261)

In this passage, Ike’s recognition of the ledgers as material things that can disintegrate reframes textuality itself as a material quality, as a state of recorded documentation that can become immaterial legend. As long as the ledgers remain hybrid material texts composed from “yellowed pages” and “brown thin ink,” they provide a last chain of

transformation connecting the McCaslin legends to actual bodies and to history. They concretize memory and events, providing a literal trace of the moment when Carothers McCaslin distributed food or clothing in exchange for promised labor. They document an event, in the Latourian sense: a moment when the material world was transformed, resulting in a changed relationship between the world and observer. But when these ledgers disintegrate, as Old Ben's body disintegrates, they lose their potency.

In the case of both Old Ben and the family ledgers, the validity of legends rests upon chains of transformation connecting the material world to stories. What threatens the value of these legends, relegating the post-bellum descendants to life as shades or to life as an ongoing renunciation, is not a fundamental division between language and things but a disruption of these chains of transformation brought about by attempts at purification. When the woods disappear and the legends of wilderness no longer function correctly, it is not because the referent has lost its unique one-to-one connection to the sign – because the name “Big Bottom Woods” no longer refers to a real place or the name “Old Ben” no longer refers to a real bear. The disruption occurs because the continuation of cultural myths requires the erasure of changing material conditions: the two realms are purified of relation. In the case of the ledgers, these books become cut off from the economic processes and material exchanges from which they emerged. As records of a fixed past rather than living documents of a still-changing present, the ledgers function only as “old books” that contain things “fixed, immutably finished, unalterable, harmless” (268). But when Ike finally takes the ledgers down from the commissary shelves, he re-engages the networks translated to the ledgers. The hybrid texts of the ledger are not just artifacts of past injustices but a network of still-existing,

still-evolving relations which demand ongoing participation – perhaps the reason Ike refused to read them for so long.

As living documents rather than dead artifacts, the ledgers translate the realities they depict into Ike's life. At first, Ike reads them as though they were simply chapters of a novel. But then Ike translates the pages into his own life, making "the yellowed pages in their fading and implacable succession" into "part of his consciousness" that will "remain so forever" and thereby escape dissolution. The act of remembering becomes a translation that continues the chain of transformation: from material goods to ledger record; from record to act of reading; from reading to memory. These translations also extend into the material world. Thus, Ike follows the "frail and iron thread strong as truth and impervious as evil and longer than life itself and reaching beyond record and patrimony both to join him with the lusts and passions, the hopes and dreams and griefs, of bones whose names while still fleshed and capable even old Carother's grandfather had never heard" (299). The "frail and iron thread" that Ike recognizes in the ledgers is history's capacity to convey truthful information about the past. Ike experiences skepticism about language's referential possibility but also an opposing recognition that language can connect to the material "bones" of generations long gone. The power of such reference extends "longer than life" and connects to systems of reference beyond either memory or writing. Yet such referential capacity is also tentative, a "frail" thread which could be snapped by the reader's lack of participation.

Since they are able to evoke the past material world, Ike imagines these ledgers differently from other texts. When he gestures in his conversation with Cass, it is "not even towards them," but towards a whole network: "not only [to] the ledgers but the

whole plantation in its mazed and intricate entirety—the land, the fields and what they represented” (298). The material world of the plantation and the textual world of the ledgers intertwine. By contrast, in other rhetoric and texts emerging in the time surrounding and after the Civil War, Ike observes a disconnection between material conditions and language. Political rhetoric, speeches, activism, and pamphlets ignore the material realities of the South and offer abstractions instead, resulting in exploitation or escapist hope. For instance, Ike condemns the empty rhetoric of Northern politicians which ignores the material conditions of slavery and the material consequences of freedom, using slavery and freedom merely as abstract concepts for political purposes. As he explains his repudiation of the land to his cousin McCaslin, Ike explicitly imagines the curse of the South as the increasing separation of the material from abstract rhetoric. He decries the loss of “woods for game and streams for fish and deep rich soil for seed” and the consequent emergence of “the thundering cannonade of pulpiteers earning Chataqua fees, to whom the outrage and the injustice were as much abstraction” (284). The double-edged curse Ike imagines falling on the land parallels the land’s fallowness and the collapse of the South’s agricultural economy with the collapse of a linguistic economy of reference. Thus, it is the purification of text from world, rhetoric from world, language from world that Ike identifies at the root of the South’s problems.

This severance of reality from textuality ultimately overwhelms Ike’s efforts; his attempt to fix the sins of his ancestors runs up against a Reconstruction world holding material despair at bay with empty rhetorics of hope. This tension between empty words and real material conditions appears most forcibly when Ike finally tracks down Fonsiba, one of his grandfather’s descendants. When he finds her failing farm in Arkansas, he

discovers that her Northern freedman husband has eschewed reality and immersed himself in books. The farm remains in total poverty while her husband is

sitting in a rocking chair before the hearth, the man himself, reading — sitting there in the only chair in the house, before the miserable fire for which there was not wood sufficient to last twenty-four hours, in the same ministerial clothing in which he had entered the commissary five months ago and a pair of gold-framed spectacles which, when he looked up and rose to his feet, the boy saw did not even contain lenses, reading a book in the midst of that desolation, that muddy waste fenceless and even pathless [ . . . ]. (278)

This man clings to an illusion of prosperity while living in the midst of material want, and this delusion is figured explicitly as the man's preference for a textual rather than material world – neither of which he can read well. While Fonsiba's husband spouts hopeful rhetoric about the “new Canaan” that he and Fonsiba will build on their Arkansas farm, Ike sees this farm as “a nameless and valueless rubble of dissolution” and as “a farm only in embryo” (277). For such a farm to become successful will require, in Ike's estimation, “labor, hard and enduring and unflagging work and sacrifice” rather than reading, a contrast marked by Ike's perception of the “lenseless spectacles held like a music master's wand in the other workless hand” of Fonsiba's husband (278-79). He is a man who makes pretenses at reading while remaining workless. Fonsiba's husband reads poorly and reads out of contact with reality, and as a result he also cannot recognize his own entrapment in an unforgiving economic system. Ike's strong reaction to this man may well include a racial prejudice towards this Northerner who reads rather than works

and refuses to say “Sir” to white men. But Ike’s angry outburst at him also involves frustration that the man is living an immaterial life of stories that cannot help him survive.

This recognition leads Ike to declare the South cursed and to surrender his own material participation in the quest started by the ledgers. He leaves his “golden belt” which contains a thousand dollars in coins with a banker in Fonsiba’s town, transforming the literal money into “pencil and paper” designed to keep her alive. He thereby relinquishes his last material portions of Carothers McCaslin’s legacy. This, we are told, “was all” and Ike’s quest ends like the now-dead ledgers. “That is all” – the dissolution of world and text is complete, and Ike eventually renounces both land and text, never more reading the ledgers or claiming ownership of the land: “1874 the boy; 1888 the man, repudiated denied and free” (281). In this renunciation, Ike imagines the ideal man as one who eschews language for action and gives up argument to go back to the wilderness:

out of all that empty sound and bootless fury one silence, among that loud and moiling all of them just one simple enough to believe that horror and outrage were first and last simply horror and outrage and was crude enough to act upon that, illiterate and had no words for talking or perhaps was just busy and had no time to, one out of them all who did not bother Him with cajolery and adjuration then pleading then threat and had not even bothered to inform Him in advance what he was about so that a lesser than He might have even missed the simple act of lifting the long ancestral musket down from the deerhorns above the door [. . .]. (284-85)

Ike imagines the ideal supplication before God as the “silent” act of an “illiterate” man with “no words for talking” and no “cajolery” or “adjuration.” But by idealizing the silent man who acts, who simply “lift[s] the long ancestral musket down from the deer horns above the door,” Ike substitutes a wilderness fantasy for the world of rhetoric and troubled economic ownership. The savior will pick up his gun, leave behind this system, and simply return to the land. The irony is that such Christlike repudiation simply replaces Reconstruction rhetoric and pleading with an equally abstract and escapist vision. Replacing one immaterial world of escapist language with another, Ike thereby continues to erase the real changes taking place in the Big Bottom Woods and in Jefferson. By the time Ike reaches old age in “Delta Autumn,” it is clear that he no longer troubles himself with understanding the hybridity of the wilderness fantasy, nor does he trouble himself with resisting the material changes such fantasy facilitates. He allows the world of stories to substitute for the world around him, and by insulating these stories from the true changes taking place in the Big Bottom, Ike loses any ability to resist or respond to the wilderness’ continuing loss.

**“*Be Sutpen’s Hundred*”: The Material Magic of Language in *Absalom***

Just as “The Bear” fixates on a hybrid artifact connected to the material world (the McCaslin ledgers), a hybrid inheritance that is transformed from the material to the linguistic (Ike McCaslin’s cup full of silver), and a number of hybrid artifacts that contribute to the creation of legends (the bear and the Big Bottom wilderness), *Absalom*, *Absalom!* brings a similar set of hybrids into play. For Quentin, the central material/literary artifact is Charles Bon’s letter; the mixed material and linguistic inheritance includes a letter Mr. Compson sends his son at Harvard and a number of oral

stories about the Sutpen collapse; and the artifacts tying Quentin's investigations to the land include the Sutpen graves and the ruined house at Sutpen's Hundred. Like Ike, Quentin attempts to reconcile the stories that he grew up with to the realities that he sees; he attempts to ground what he hears in material fact; and he attempts to escape the slide into legend, myth, shadow, and dust that, for Faulkner, characterizes the post-bellum collapse and the simultaneous severance of material reality from stories.

Like "The Bear," *Absalom* also initially seems more interested in immaterial than material things: ghosts, shadows, legends, stories, and memory. Quentin considers the past distant and abstract. He imagines the Sutpen family springing from nothingness, "looking as though they had been created out of thin air," and he imagines the Sutpen plantation as props on a stage, "the synthetic and spurious shadows and shapes" of a "set" (72). As Quentin gets further immersed in the memories foisted upon him first by Miss Rosa and then by his father, he increasingly imagines the past in their immaterial terms: in Miss Rosa's case, as a dream, "the might-have-been that is more true than truth" (143). In adopting the language of Mr. Compson, Quentin imagines memory and stories as liminal figures like shadows and shades, or as the endless play of language. However, while *Absalom's* characters insist on language's inability to refer to actuality and on memory's inability to extend beyond the individual mind, what lurks behind Miss Rosa's, Mr. Compson's, and finally Quentin's frustration is a longing for a materially verifiable reality that could be translated into language. The cynicism and self-reflexivity of *Absalom's* storytellers results from this longing for artifacts that could make the story of the Sutpen family clear. Relegated to the status of shades, these characters strive to rematerialize the subjects of their stories, bringing all back to embodied life.

Thus, despite the skepticism about language that pervades *Absalom*, for the characters, the dream remains that the *right kind* of retelling will miraculously reanimate materiality. From the novel's opening, truth is described in terms of the solidification and reanimation of long-dead bodies or the reemergence of lost spaces, buildings, and woods. And thus, storytelling that resembles the divine invocation of "let there be light" creates a material world. For example, Quentin imagines the emergence of Sutpen's Hundred as the result of a magical invocation, where language brings a substantive world into being:

Quentin seemed to watch them [Sutpen, his slaves, and his architect] overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing and clap them down like cards upon a table beneath the up-palm immobile and pontific, creating the Sutpen's Hundred, the *Be Sutpen's Hundred* like the oldentime *Be Light*. (8-9)

Of course, Sutpen's Hundred does not emerge out of "soundless Nothing" but out of the "tranquil and astonished earth," and it is not a magical invocation but the labor of black slaves that creates the "house and formal gardens" of Sutpen's wealth. The Sutpen legacy as experienced by Quentin in 1910 is a thoroughly hybrid entity, a mixture of material effects, events, stories, and language. However, the long history of coming to terms with the Sutpen legacy functions as a purification that erases material realities and that isolates legends. According to Richard Godden, the Sutpen erasure of material realities includes a suppression of the plantation's racial history of injustice. Sutpen can become an archetypal Southern plantation owner or a phantomlike force of evil only if he emerges from nothingness. Again, as in "The Bear," racial amnesia leads to imagined

immateriality. This myth of miraculous appearance ignores the plantation's reliance on the material labor of captive bodies, the material origin of the buildings, and the material processes required to make woodlands into cotton fields. The processes of translation connecting the wilderness to the plantation, and the plantation to the present ruins are processes of labor; ignoring these mobilizing steps results in the disconnected elements of a mythical wilderness, a mythical plantation, and a mythical fall. So, Quentin's knowledge of the Sutpen family must rest upon an understanding of transformations and events; his quest to trace back to the Sutpens' past may well unearth suppressed material connections of labor and race.

And thus, as *Absalom* opens, it features a central myth that, like the wilderness myth of "The Bear," relies on imbroglios of materiality and immateriality. Characters struggling to understand the Sutpen story seek on the one hand to find a bedrock of undeniable truth by turning to material artifacts. On the other hand, they strive to render the story merely mythical, ignoring the material realities of the past, including the labor of slaves and the eradication of wilderness spaces. To use Latour's language, they participate in the creation of hybrid forms while trying to purify these hybrids. Torn between such competing desires, the characters of *Absalom* imagine themselves as equally hybrid figures situated between the material and the immaterial. But these "impure" identities are, according to the terms of the modern constitution within which the characters operate, eternally caught, as Mr. Compson imagines in *The Sound and the Fury*, in "a stalemate of dust and desire" with dust representing a liminal state somewhere between material reality and the immaterial space of myth.

Even more so than “The Bear,” *Absalom* obsesses over dust, a gritty material substance that hovers at the boundary of perceptibility. Dust appears in many roles in this novel: it gathers on untouched artifacts; it is left behind by rotted bodies and disintegrating letters, a marker of materiality’s passing; it floats on the air during the hot summer of Rosa’s retelling, differentiating this air of the Southern past from the icy cold air of the Northern present, when Quentin and Shreve try yet again to reconstruct the Sutpen legacy. It is not from nothingness but from “out of the biding and dreamy and victorious dust” that Sutpen and all his offspring emerge. It becomes one of the sensory markers linking Quentin the Harvard storyteller back to Quentin the Jefferson listener: when Mr. Compson’s letter arrives, it is the dust, “the wistaria, the cigar smell, the fireflies” that are evoked by “his father’s hand” on the page, all of which together are “attenuated up from Mississippi” by the written word (173).

Dust thus provides a metaphor for the hybridity of memory, locating narration between the material and the immaterial. This liminal doubleness appears when Quentin calls the dust both “weightless permeant dust” and a thing that can “itself move sluggish and dry across his sweating flesh,” alluding both to dust’s elusiveness and its tangibility (362). Dust illustrates the material world’s hybrid nature, signifying its potential to become insubstantial. The term “shade” or “shadow” similarly illustrates the dual nature of people. Somewhere between the ephemerality of a spirit and the solid flesh of a living body, the storytellers of *Absalom* partake of the same mixture of embodiment and dream that defines the dusty landscape. As Quentin listens to Miss Rosa talk, he imagines people’s bodies functioning in the liminal space between the material and the imagined, becoming “notpeople, in notlanguage” (9). A childhood spent participating in a half-

actualized process of remembering transforms Quentin himself into a shade, a being caught between materiality and language. His “very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts” (12). This formulation resembles the hybrid relationship between the material and the immaterial that appears in *Go Down, Moses*. Quentin’s role as storyteller does not just invite him to walk a middle line between language and the material world. Instead, his existence is hybrid, his “very [material] body” composed out of ghosts, voices, and stories. Living, material bodies are thus partially created from the immaterial.

This hybridity explains why there can be transformations between the language of storytelling and the material bodies of the past – why “as though in inverse ratio to the vanishing voice, the invoked ghost of the man who she could neither forgive nor revenge herself upon began to assume a quality almost of solidity, permanence” (13). When living bodies immerse themselves in language, when language evokes a memory or a “quality” of “solidity,” the division between language and the material becomes small: not an ontological gap to be bridged by philosophical leaps of faith, but small gaps that can be overcome by the process of telling stories in “elapsed and yet-elapsing time” (22). Shreve and Quentin’s attempt to understand the Sutpen story finds them navigating this space between the material and the imagined as, hundreds of miles from Quentin’s home, they piece together the Sutpen tale from what material evidence Quentin gathered. The two both become hybrid shades by interacting with stories and artifacts. When, for example, Shreve and Quentin interact with Mr. Compson’s letter, a material artifact that contains a written tale, they collapse their identities with the shades of Charles Bon and Henry

Sutpen: “both of them were Henry Sutpen and both of them were Bon, compounded of each both yet either neither, smelling the very smoke which had blown and faded away forty-six years ago” (351).

Louise Westling argues that Shreve’s and Quentin’s retellings of the Sutpen story attempt to replace embodied relationships with textual connections. Specifically, their “marriage of speaking and hearing” provides an alternative to the fleshy, embodied relationships that united Thomas Sutpen with his slaves. For Westling, *Absalom* connects bodies and the earth, investigating “dark bodies that stand for the wild energies and dark volcanic body of the earth” (127). Sutpen wrestles his slaves, taming them to his will and using them to tame the earth into plantation farmland. These relationships between bodies are sexualized, suggesting “Sutpen’s real marriage is to the primitive landscapes of Haiti and Mississippi” (128). In Mr. Compson’s account of Sutpen’s self-creation we see “the violence of Sutpen’s engagement with the virgin bottom land,” a “process of submersion, physical union, and almost erotic struggle with the substance of the wilderness earth” (Westling 131). Shreve and Quentin match the intensity but not the violence of Sutpen’s passion as they strive to understand his story. These characters, unlike Sutpen, strive towards “a Platonic marriage of words that he [Faulkner] cannot really believe” and they thus “strain [. . .] to become ‘free of flesh’ like the ghosts they conjure” (140). Yet Westling points out that this flight from materiality fails since “the promised transcendence cannot occur” (140). She highlights how Shreve and Quentin remain fleshy bodies in a cooling room. Their status as embodied beings and the world’s status as a concrete thing interrupt their textual fantasy. While they may pursue a purely textual relationship, such a fantasy is just another form of purification that ignores the hybrid

nature of storytelling. Despite Quentin's attempts to escape into language, he cannot suspend his belief in the reality of the events described. Faulkner reminds us that it is only to one of them, "to Shreve," that the characters and stories they create remain "shadows in turn of what were [ . . . ] shades too" (303). For Quentin, no difficulties of language nor dreams of textuality can erase the fact that the Sutpens were, as Mr. Compson said, "people once as we are [ . . . ] who had the gift of loving once or dying once instead of being diffused limb from limb from a grab bag and assembled" (89). For Quentin, unlike Shreve, his own experiences and sensory memories mingle with the stories he heard and with the words passed to him on paper.

If his embodiment thwarts his escape into a purely textual relationship with Shreve, it also animates the texts for him, making them more than ghosts, myths, or tales. As Quentin remembers his trip to the Sutpen house, he insists on still-immediate sensory perceptions: "He could taste and feel the dust [ . . . ] He could even smell the old woman" (362). Quentin's sensory memory makes the Sutpen story unbearably real for him even as the fluid play of storytelling makes the Sutpen story feel unreal. To the extent that he believes in the need for modern purification, he is stuck. He acknowledges the Sutpen story as an assembled construction "out of the rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking [of] people who perhaps had never existed at all anywhere" (303). But he also recognizes a difference between his stories of the South and pure fiction: the very air he breathed was breathed by the figures standing behind these stories. These characters left marks on the land, pressed hand to page, and left scratches of writing behind. Textuality offers Quentin no escape because he remains embodied and because the characters he

assembles connect back to beings who were once embodied. The uncomfortable reality of history is that it cannot be hermetically sealed off from the world: it is not only fiction.

Like Ike, Quentin discovers that an escape into textuality can attempt, as Westling argues, to conceal past material violence. But this attempt crumbles if one recognizes the hybridity of storytelling. Ike cannot pursue the bear, the great symbol of wilderness, without finally seeing, even slaying, this body; such a move challenges the abstraction of wilderness, which opens up the door to considering the bodies of slaves and Native Americans that were erased to maintain a purified concept of wilderness. Quentin cannot witness Miss Rosa's tale without accompanying her to the Sutpen house, seeing the actual Sutpen bodies, and realizing the erasures that Thomas Sutpen hid from himself as he built his plantation. Quentin's violent closing assertion that he does not hate the South thus functions as a desperate attempt to keep just such knowledge at bay.

### **“At Least a Scratch”: Writing and Material Artifacts**

Quentin's desperation at the end of *Absalom* demonstrates his failure to understand the history of the Sutpens within the dichotomy of reality/language he inherits from his father. The general uselessness of this dichotomy and its power in the Compsons' intellectual life appears most vividly when Mr. Compson and Quentin are considering a letter supposedly passed from Judith to Quentin's grandmother. This anonymous letter proves to be one of the most critically central artifacts in *Absalom*. David Krause's point that the Bon letter is “just about the only scrap of evidence (other than the gravestone) that a man named Charles Bon ever existed and intruded on the lives of the Sutpens” highlights this letter's importance (225). Supposedly written to Judith by Bon (but unsigned), the product of confiscated Union stove polish impressed onto paper

confiscated from a Southern plantation, the letter offers both symbolic possibility and self-reflexive obscurity. The letter also prompts Mr. Compson's frustrated skepticism towards language and history. For it is of this letter that Mr. Compson proclaims the ephemeral existence of

Judith, Bon, Henry, Sutpen: all of them. They are there, yet something is missing; they are like a chemical formula exhumed along with the letters from that forgotten chest, carefully, the paper old and faded and falling to pieces, the writing faded, almost indecipherable, yet meaningful, familiar in shape and sense, the name and presence of volatile and sentient forces; you bring them together in the proportions called for, but nothing happens; you re-read, tedious and intent, poring, making sure that you have forgotten nothing, made no miscalculation; you bring them together again and again nothing happens: just the words, the symbols, the shapes themselves, shadowy inscrutable and serene, against that turgid background of a horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs. (100-101)

Here, Mr. Compson interprets the letter in terms of failed chains of transformation. The comparison of writing to a failed chemical reaction suggests that some critical material component that preserves translation is missing. Without the missing information, what remains is that frustrated dichotomy between the text and the past world – between “the words, the symbols, the shapes” and “men and women who once lived and breathed.”

While Mr. Compson's interpretation provides the origin for his frustrated view of language, the Bon letter demands more analysis. Krause argues that it is difficult to get a

fix on what the letter proves, since Faulkner situates it within competing readings and within uncertainty regarding its origin, its delivery, and its eventual transfer to the Compson family. The letter itself, when the reader finally sees its text, appears as self-reflexive and mystifying as Faulkner's prose. Krause juxtaposes the letter with Thomas Sutpen's own attempts to learn how to read while he is in school, discovering in both clues as to how to read *Absalom* itself. When Sutpen hears stories about the West Indies that prompt him to seek his fortune there, he believes that the stories tell the truth and that he must follow them in order to succeed. According to Krause's reading, the "innocence" of which General Compson accuses Sutpen lies in his willingness to read texts as "representational, referential truth" free from authorial manipulation; Sutpen believes reading is an "innocent, transparent activity, merely a matter of neutrally processing material embedded in words printed on a page" (Krause 228). By contrast, the rest of Faulkner's literate characters develop more sophisticated modes of reading as they analyze Bon's letter.

These characters' more skeptical approaches suggest, according to Krause, a number of realities about how reading relates to history for Faulkner: first, reader and writer must work together to establish truth; second, reading must incorporate both textuality and speech – what Donoghue calls "epos" and "graphos" (qtd. in Krause 226); third, "Faulkner, like Foucault, sees text as (simultaneously) 'document' and 'monument'" – that is, both as a historically functioning artifact that points to past material events and as a text that can function as an independent, even literary piece without need of external referent" (Krause 226). For example, Quentin and Shreve reimagine reading as a process contingent on their situated perspectives as readers, and

they reimagine textuality as a multifaceted connection between language and materiality rather than as the kind of *adequatio* suggested by Sutpen's mode of reading.

But their struggle to avoid Sutpen's innocence and develop a more satisfactory reading strategy becomes even more complexly related to materiality if we also consider Richard Godden's economic and racial interpretation of Sutpen's innocence and his failure to read well. According to Godden, Sutpen's collapse is not caused by innocence but by "his disorientating insight into the dependencies of slave production" (696-97). Godden argues that Sutpen's education was an economic awakening forced on him by his family's move from Appalachian mountain independence to poor white inferiority in the land of Tidewater plantations. When turned away from a plantation door by a black slave, young Sutpen feels inferior due to poverty for the first time in his life, becoming enmeshed in the paradoxical hierarchies of race and class in the antebellum American South. Unlike the mountain man, whose worth derives from strength and independence, the white plantation owner's worth derives from a cultivated passivity, where (the young Sutpen observes) white men lay in hammocks and black men work in the fields and pour the white men drinks. The privilege of the white man thus entirely depends upon the labor of black bodies, and the only way to access privilege is to make oneself equally dependent. Godden argues, "What [Sutpen] sees is traumatic because it leaves him no possibility of an un-enslaved life" (696-97). Either one is working as a slave to support the privilege of the relaxing white man, or one becomes the relaxing white man who is enslaved by dependency to the labor of others. Thus, "Sutpen's solution is innocence" or more specifically, a forgetting of the racial dependencies and paradoxes shaping his life

(Godden 696). Like the McCaslins, Sutpen salvages identity by erasing the material existence of the black individuals shaping his past.

Pairing Godden and Krause's readings allows us to situate Sutpen's beginnings in the plantation system with regards to both the material world and textuality. Like Ike and the McCaslins, Sutpen erases material history and escapes into a textual fantasy, substituting a world depicted in books because he believes in the transparency of reference. Even before his escape into a textual dream of the West Indies, Sutpen tries to retreat from a complex material world into a world of myth, "remov[ing] himself," as Godden argues, by crawling into the woods "from human nature to nature, and from cotton production to self-sufficiency" (697). Like Ike McCaslin, Sutpen tries to dissolve his economic implication and salvage his identity through reversion to a conventional American myth of wilderness self-sufficiency. However, as Godden points out, "Both removals are illusory. In the cotton South, the earth itself is a fact of labor, whose meaning is inseparable from the dominant form of work" (697). In Sutpen's cotton South, the myth of wilderness is not an accessible fantasy, as it is for Ike whose mythic wilderness is facilitated by the collapse of cotton farming in the 1890s. Instead of Ike's ignorance of the methodical erasure of the woods, Sutpen's innocence ignores his reliance on slave labor and his participation in the cotton economy. And just as Ike's transformation of material wilderness into wilderness myth stems from his own capitulation to a dichotomy between language and the world, Sutpen's myth and his creation of a plantation from the forest derives from a naïve form of reading that privileges referentiality at the expense of processes. Ike and Sutpen both fail to develop the complex mode of reading that, according to Krause, Faulkner sees as necessary. In

Latour's terms, Ike and Sutpen both also fail to read hybridity, substituting simplified myths for complex webs of material interconnection and cultural narrative.

Thus, to read his own artifacts and history correctly, Quentin needs to balance a commitment to texts' potential referentiality with an awareness of meaning's contingency. He must learn, unlike Sutpen, how the relationship between text and material reality can deceive if the two are separated. Such reading involves traversing that risky, slippery path between materiality and textuality, coming to terms with history and reality as constrained constructions, shaped by the reader, fragile in their truths, but also able to connect the individual to meaning. Krause explores how one might develop such a reading in his discussion of the tension between "epos" and "graphos," between textuality and artifactuality, and between "semiotics" and "semantics." According to Krause, Mr. Compson struggles as he reads Bon's letter because he comes to it in search of history and meaning, wanting it to be both an artifact that points to specific past events and a text that communicates its own self-contained meaning:

Mr. Compson [. . .] confronted in Bon's letter with a nearly anonymous text from the past, a fragment of different circumstances, cannot recover or discover the sense of history, the cultural or imaginative contexts, texts, and codes that make the letter readable [. . .] in Bon's self-referential letter, Compson finds not just a physical symbol from the past that he cannot read semiotically but a self-enclosing text of 'spidery script' (129), a verbal web that he can neither read semantically nor disentangle from himself. Instead of history Compson finds poetry, and he cannot understand that the unreadability of the letter as poetic text allows him to

go on, to generate his own reading, his own (hi)story. Compson looks in the letter for something not there and sees himself looking. (229)

For Krause, Compson cannot enjoy the play of language in the letter because he is trying to do “epireading” rather than “graphireading.” Compson pursues historical truth instead of embracing the free proliferation of “his own (hi)story” that, unhinged from the limitations of reference, can give him endless cultural power. Krause argues that the historical accuracy of the Sutpen story is not finally of real importance. A demand for referentiality limits the multiple social or psychological functions texts potentially fulfill.

Similarly, R. Rio-Jeliffe claims that *Absalom* argues for the power of fiction; fiction can be more powerful than history, since, as Miss Rosa contends, invented or potential truths can be “*more true than truth*” (143). Thus, Rio-Jeliffe contends that in “The historical context of *Absalom, Absalom!*, the actual presence of fact is of less value than Quentin’s magical transmutation of ‘shadowy. . . myth’ into ‘shadowy character’ (104) who nevertheless lives” (77). Historical reality matters less than an effective *sense* of reality (80). Indeed, the thwarted desire for a non-existent historical “truth” explains why Mr. Compson experiences the letter as “a chemical formula” that fails; “just the words, the symbols, the shapes themselves” are insufficient for Mr. Compson’s purposes, because he wants historical truth and not just language. In Krause’s estimation, what could have helped Mr. Compson’s reading is Foucault’s way of thinking about historical writing as both artifact and text:

Historical reading [of the kind Mr. Compson mistakenly practices] sees the text as document in need of translation, interpretation, while archaeological reading sees the text as monument to its own textuality and

temporality. [. . .] In *Absalom*, Mr. Compson values interpretation and referentiality (‘men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or nicknames [100-01]) and closure. Like most critics who come after him, Compson wants to read Bon’s letter as a document, though the letter itself insists on its temporality, its condition as monument in time: ‘*Because what IS is something else again because it was not even alive then*’ (131). (Krause 230)

Krause insists that Foucault’s “archaeological reading” could help Mr. Compson interpret the tensions of the Bon letter by keeping him from reducing the letter’s own playful relationship to the world into unsuccessful referentiality. Krause sees a model of this kind of double, liminal, archaeological reading in Judith’s approach to the Bon letter. Judith, by contrast to Mr. Compson,

minimizes, even tries to erase any meaning (‘it not to mean anything in itself’) and emphasizes significance (‘at least it would be something’); she stresses the unstable activity of signifying, downplaying signifiers and signified. [. . .] Judith reminds us that even a scrap of paper may demand attention as both document and monument [. . .]. (232)

For Krause, what matters about Judith’s way of reading as imagined by Mr. Compson – and what he wishes Mr. Compson would himself practice – is flexible doubleness that leaves space for both material connections and textual self-sufficiency. “Significance,” the unreferential but memorable import of actions; and “meaning,” the ability of the text to point to historical realities, are both possible. But the text cannot be forced to occupy either one of these functions. Krause sees in Compson’s Judith the both/and of dust and

liminality. He claims, “written texts endure for Faulkner (as for Foucault) as uniquely coded monumental documents” (238). Therefore, he concludes, “their most complete reading must be one that works hard (yet relaxes enough) to remain acutely sensitive to the intricate, ceaseless play of signification, thing and word, silence and voice, scrap of paper and faint spidery script” (238).

The actual, material problems driving the characters’ struggle to understand representation should suggest why the concept of “intricate, ceaseless play” is not finally enough for either Ike McCaslin or Quentin Compson. The economic and racial problems driving Quentin’s flight to Harvard and Ike’s flight into an imaginary wilderness are too pressing to be dismissed with paradox and the play of theory. If Faulkner’s characters are to embrace *play*, they must emphasize the thing as much as the word, the meaning as much as the significance, or they will end up as frozen as Miss Rosa or as useless as Mr. Compson. The idea of play between textuality and historical reality ends up reproducing the dichotomy that Mr. Compson forwards, insisting that language sometimes *is* just language and that one is wrong to try and make it mean something more. Thus, the concept of “play” seems too cavalier to ground Quentin’s hunt for understanding. While Krause reads this idea of play as something that would have helped Mr. Compson, it reproduces the slipperiness of signification that Mr. Compson already practices. It is after all he who ventriloquizes Judith. When Quentin notes that all of the novels’ narrators (Mr. Compson, Miss Rosa, Shreve, and Quentin himself) sound the same, he suggests that they all have adopted a dichotomous approach to language and the world. They are already engaged in the liminal state of play, where Quentin and Shreve collapse their identities with the shades they have created. But they cannot experience the fluidity and

motion that Krause ascribes to such play without finding a way to escape the limiting poles of their paradoxes.

### **From Stalemate to Hybridity: Object Lessons for Ecocritics**

The danger that Quentin fears and that Mr. Compson embodies is that viewing language and texts as pure play can lead to moral relativism. Like ecocritics that have reacted to the constructivist turn in environmental studies by reaffirming language's referential capacity, Quentin reacts against the way that the play of language can reduce the seeming urgency of ethical commitments. As ecocritics developing sophisticated awareness of and responses to the complicated relationship between language and materiality, we hope for more tenable solutions to our paradoxical situatedness than such despair. While Faulkner's novels provide a sophisticated examination of the relationship between the world and the text, showing us how economic, environmental, and literary concerns interconnect, in the end Faulkner's novels offer only desperate solutions because his characters remain committed to the purification of language and the world. While recognizing the ways that racial exploitation, economic collapse, and environmental destruction all contribute to his experience of the South as cursed, Ike still cannot address these balances; he cannot adapt his stories of the wilderness to changing material conditions. Thus, instead of a changed relationship with the environment, Ike chooses renunciation of the land and immersion in a fantasy. Warping the Thoreauvian model of retreat, Ike immerses himself in a masculinist wilderness fantasy that cannot speak to the injustices affecting his home. Like Thoreau, he recognizes the moral shortcomings of his region's economic system and like Thoreau he retreats towards an ideal of wilderness as a response. However, unlike Thoreau, Ike McCaslin continues to

participate in the corrupt economies he sees and salves his conscience with temporary retreats into woods that he simplifies into a fantasy vision of wilderness.

While recognizing a similarly complex and troubled history – one mingling deluded representations, racial lies, and poor uses of the land – Quentin Compson also, in his own way, simply renounces his inheritance, embracing the opposed imperatives of purification and hybridity in his suicide in *The Sound and the Fury*. This death separates his bones from his soul, but then reimagines his soul as a pair of floating eyes that continue to perceive the world he longs to escape (80). He recognizes Mr. Compson's relativity and immersion in language as poisonous symptoms of a broken relationship between words and things; he recognizes that material loss has triggered the breakdown in meaning that allows Mr. Compson to dismiss letters, morality, history, and Quentin's own suffering as "just words." But unable to provide any alternative hermeneutics – unable to read any better than Mr. Compson – Quentin chooses a death that renders him as paradoxical as history or as text, one that embodies hybridity while imagining itself as a successful purification.

Yet, although they do not provide us with a hopeful model of how to develop a politics strong enough to encompass both the tenuousness and the iron strength of language, Faulkner's novels serve as warnings about the dangers of embracing the dichotomy between words and the world when we approach our own negotiations between the interconnected issues of race relations, resource management, economic viability, environmental protection, and the preservation of history. Focus only on language, Faulkner's novels warn, and you will become like Mr. Compson, drinking himself to death without the ability to reach out to his children or to take on any ethical

stances. Alternatively, you might become like Ike, living in a simplified world that functions through disavowal and denial, that allows participation in despicable systems and leaves you impotent to react when hidden material realities reemerge. To divorce the material world from language is to diminish the power that histories can have to warn and to guide: had Ike listened to the stories of his past and recognized them as more than mere myths, he might have been able to recognize the continuity between the ownership battles of early colonial Jefferson and the industrialization of the land in his present day. He might also have been able to believe that these stories could provide something other than mere myths— that they could point to actions that a community should avoid and address rather than simply describe a doom already set in stone.

## CHAPTER VI

### “WHAT LITTLE I CAN IN WRITING”: *LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN* AND THE ETHICAL POSSIBILITIES OF CONSTRAINED REALISM

This is a *book* only by necessity. More seriously, it is an effort in human actuality.

James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

It is simply an effort to use words in such a way that they will tell as much as I want to and can make them tell of a thing which happened and which, of course, you have no other way of knowing.

James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*<sup>58</sup>

Almost three hundred and fifty pages into *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, writer James Agee finally tells the reader the story of the first day he stayed with the Gudgers, one of the three tenant families that became the focus of Agee's collaborative project with Farm Security Administration photographer Walker Evans. An assignment for *Fortune* magazine sent Agee and Evans to Mill Hill, Alabama in 1936 to write an article about Southern tenant farmers for the magazine's "Life and Circumstances" series (Lofaro xxii)<sup>59</sup>. But the intended article never made it to print. Not published until 1941, the finished book that grew out of their research differed significantly from the planned journalistic exposé and from the bulk of Depression-era documentary journalism. As Agee explains when he describes first coming to stay with the Gudgers, his experience in Mill Hill was neither clear-cut nor objective. Instead, his experience was one of failure, self-consciousness, and loss of control. In an age when documentary journalism was

---

<sup>58</sup> According to their respective introductions to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, James Agee and Walker Evans envisioned this work as a truly collaborative project, combining Evans's photography with Agee's writing in a way that escaped hierarchy or privilege of either form. However, when referring primarily to the prose writing, I simply cite Agee. This concision of reference is in no way intended to downplay the complex working relationship between these two artists.

<sup>59</sup> James S. Miller claims that the article was originally planned as a five thousand word essay in support of rural electrification projects (385).

taking off as a tool of social reform and as a government-subsidized response to widespread crisis – in a time when works such as Ernest Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White’s *You Have Seen Their Faces* claimed to capture the very faces of America’s farming poor – Agee’s prose exhibits a contrasting ambivalence. In one scene, the story of Agee’s arrival at the Gudger home repeats questions of surrender and control, success and failure that shape *Praise* as a work that simultaneously embraces the political potential of documentary to “tell of a thing that happened” and rejects documentary journalism’s aesthetic, ethical, and representational failings (217).

Throughout *Praise*, Agee doubts the accuracy of his experiences as well as his writing’s ability to convey what he observed to his readers. As he claims, speaking of his first encounters with the Gudgers, “Things which were then at least immediate in my senses, I now know only as at some great and untouchable distance; distinctly, yet coldly as through reversed field-glasses, and with no warmth or traction or faith in words: so that at best I can hope only to ‘describe’ what I would like to ‘describe,’ as at a second remove, and even that poorly” (355). This typical hesitance makes Agee believe that all he can do is make an effort to translate the experienced world of real events and material things into the poor substitute of words, and that this effort is likely to fail. He doubts his own situated perception’s ability to grasp what was seemingly “immediate to my senses,” and he doubts the “traction” of words, the ability of language to capture such fleeting immediacy. And yet, in spite of this doubt, he argues that his book, “in the cleanest terms I can learn to specify: must mediate, must attempt to record, your warm weird human lives each in relation to its world” (87). Agee’s desire to capture individuals and their worlds in order to expose and challenge the existing system of American agriculture

unites him with his journalistic contemporaries. It is his insistence that this project may not “be lightly undertaken: not lightly, not easily by any means: nor by any hope ‘successfully’” that makes *Praise* unusual (87).

These tensions of hope and failure mark Agee’s project from his first moment of encounter with the Gudgers. He literally gets stuck at their door. While he and Evans have already met and photographed all three families who will form the center of *Praise*, the men have not yet started staying with them. Staying with the Gudgers becomes necessary in the aftermath of a violent rainstorm when Agee gets his car stuck in the wet clay road outside their home. In a passage entitled “Second Introit,” Agee explains that his car gets stuck specifically because he fails to read and navigate the mud correctly. Yet this failure provides an opening into the lives of the families. As Agee describes the mechanical trouble that leads to his first night in the Gudgers’ home, his hesitance about driving becomes a metaphor for his general anxiety about the documentary project<sup>60</sup>:

the clay was so wrought-up it was necessary each time to guess again. You can’t afford to use brakes in this sort of material, and whatever steering you do, it must be as light-handed as possible; about the only thing to say of speed in such situations is to go a full shade faster most of the time than you can imagine is at all safe to go. [. . .] driving, you feel less like an ‘operator’ than like a sort of passive-active brain suspended at the center of a machine, careful to let it take its own way [. . .] well, I didn’t know

---

<sup>60</sup> Peter Cosgrove also reads Agee’s driving scene as metaphorical for artistic process, emphasizing the way that the car manifests Agee’s ambivalence about intrusion into rural communities. But Cosgrove also reads the car as representative of Agee’s desire to control the process of representation, seeing his run off the road as paralleling the thwarted objectivist realism that Agee, despite his protestation, longs to achieve. His reading does not emphasize, as mine does, the odd mix of delight and frustration that Agee finds in his car’s failure.

then, and don't now, whether the things I was doing to save it were  
'correct' or not, and whether or not it was by my will that I wrung the  
wheel and drove so deep that there was no longer any hope at all of getting  
it out [. . .]. (359-60)

These tensions about the car mirror the tensions framing the work as a whole: a sense of losing control and yet trying to steer lightly, of trying to be a "passive-active" being as he approaches his subjects; guilt about his presence paired with exhilaration at having reached a point of being in so deep that there is no chance of leaving; uncertainty about whether the writing and the observation he plans to do will be the "correct" way to "save" the tenant families. By recklessly launching himself into just such a mire of emotions, risking a failed effort to drive through mud and a failed effort to read his material environment accurately, Agee finds entrance into the lives of the Gudgers. The vulnerability born of his failures and his resulting need for shelter allow Agee to share an intimate moment with this family. Failure and impasse thus create possibilities for moments of genuine encounter that go beyond the formality of photography and interviews.

On a larger scale, *Praise's* failure to capture the material detail and emotional complexity of the Gudgers' lives results in the book's self-reflexive sense of impasse, while also leading to its unusual intimacy and attentiveness. Whether or not documentary journalism is the "correct" response to the stuck situation of 1930s tenant farming, *Praise* rushes in anyway, aware of and yet attempting to finesse its way across the ethical dangers of speaking for those unable to represent themselves, hoping that such daring will open up moments of vulnerability and genuine contact. Any documentary knowledge

of tenant farming and any ability to represent these farmers successfully must come from within this mix of earnestness and stuckness. Thus, *Praise* enters the lives of the Gudgers, Ricketts, and Woods families with a mix of reckless speed, guesswork, and failure. The self-reflexive agonizing of *Praise* suggests a central narrator who has driven in too deep to extricate himself; caught in the muddy and “wrought-up” world of the tenant farmers, Agee has no choice but to seek their hospitality, embracing all the inconvenience and intrusion his presence causes and hoping some good will come of it.

The discomfort, self-reflexivity, and effort that Agee describes in the mud scene are thus integral to his efforts to steer through the failures of documentary journalism. Despite its roots in journalism, the finished *Praise* hesitates to embrace what T. V. Reed has seen as the predominantly realist mode of representation evident in documentary work from the 1930s. Rather, the book constantly revisits Agee's moral and political skepticism about photojournalistic texts that

pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings [. . .] for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings, in the name of science, of ‘honest journalism’ (whatever that paradox may mean) [. . .]. (Agee 5)

Frequently read as a rejection of reform-oriented documentary in general and specifically framed in Agee's appendices as a rebuttal of Bourke-White's and Caldwell's *You Have Seen Their Faces*, Agee's cynicism about ‘honest journalism’ questions not only reporters' and photographers' invasion of disadvantaged communities but also the very

notion of “realist” documentary representation.<sup>61</sup> *Praise* as a whole despairs of ever finding words and images to convey the harsh life of tenant farming without in the process reducing its subjects to sentimentalized, simplified objects of pity, types of a class, or aestheticized images within a lifeless, ineffectual art. While *Praise* engages with ethical and political questions about the effects and effectiveness of the documentary, this political skepticism connects directly to a more fundamental skepticism: a skepticism about words and language, about perception and the self. Like science studies and ecocritical theory, *Praise* challenges both the idea of being able to know the world through the accumulation of data and the idea of adequately referential language, insisting that no amount of documentation or data can ever capture the full complexity of a human life and its environment. But like science studies and ecocritical theory, *Praise* also insists on the importance of acknowledging a real, knowable world and of attempting to speak *for* this world in the face of injustice. Given the limitation of the documentary form and of language in general, Agee fixates on how to represent the three tenant families with whom he lived for eight weeks. His ever-present sense of impending failure, his deep sense of guilt about his ethical obligations to the families he is representing, and his earnest desire to make an “effort” at effective, accurate representation lead Agee into a paradoxical relationship with the documentary form he uses.

This linkage of representational with ethical skepticism appears in both of the epigraphs cited above. In the first epigraph, Agee dismisses *Praise* as “a *book* only by

---

<sup>61</sup> In his appendices, Agee reprints a magazine interview with Bourke-White that references her hobbies and her supposed love of coats. This reprinting frames her as a wealthy photographer that naively believes in the political efficacy of documentary work. Such a framing associates her with the “honest journalism” Agee so virulently attacks.

necessity” and hints towards his desire to replace writing with more direct access to observed reality, re-imagining the project as “an effort in human actuality” (ix; emphasis his). By contrasting a book to actuality, Agee sets up a fundamental dichotomy between the material, historical world and the realm of discourse, language, and writing. This dismissal of the book as an ineffective substitute for material things themselves recalls the tendency towards “factual brutalism” that we have seen Morton describe (Morton 123). The second epigraph more explicitly develops this tension between the material world and writing. Here, Agee’s attempts to represent the tenant farmers are limited by his own perspective as well as by language, and he admits that his text will only tell “as much as I want to” and “as much as I [. . .] can make them [words] tell of a thing” (217). While he wants to “represent, not betray, nor pretty up into art” what he calls the “chain of truths” that “did actually weave itself and run through” his experiences, he ultimately believes that accurate representation cannot be undertaken “easily” or “successfully” (87). As he sets out to know and represent the tenant farmers, Agee is thus as mired in his own limited perception and as tethered to language as he is stuck in the clay outside the Gudger house.

Thus, while Agee rejects documentary journalism in specific and writing in general as inadequate and potentially exploitive, he also recognizes the need to represent the realities he observes on the tenant farms. Just as he sits in his foundered car, “feeling a smile all over the bones of my face as strange to me as greasepaint,” Agee feels a troubling, uncomfortable, yet hopeful commitment to the project of representation even in the midst of being mired (360).<sup>62</sup> The need to attempt representation in spite of

---

<sup>62</sup> Given *Praise*’s self-conscious discomfort with the ongoing stratification of race in Alabama, it is possible that this mention of greasepaint is a deliberate reference to its use in blackface performance. Such an

documentary's shortcomings rests on a paradox evident in the second epigraph: while documentary writing and photography cannot adequately represent the world, such representational forms may well be the only tools available for appealing to audiences and working towards social change. The widespread appeal of the documentary in the 1930s shows the social reach of such work. At the same time, these popular documentaries disseminated images that Agee felt were unjust representations of the tenant farmers. To counter Bourke-White and Caldwell's images of the sharecropper and to counter unjust social systems, Agee must refer to his personal experience of the historical, material realities of tenant farmers. His text engages with something very real (something "which happened") and which the reader might not learn about any other way (217). The decision not to speak will only perpetuate the unethical state of tenant farming or sentimentalized representations of tenant farmers. As Reed explains,

Agee and Evans's work can illuminate the problem of representing 'disadvantaged' others, a problem played out between the danger of appropriation and reduction through representation on the one hand and the equal danger on the other hand of leaving these 'others' unrepresented or represented less scrupulously and less justly. Neither pseudofastidious avoidance of the responsibility to represent, nor arrogant assumption of that responsibility, can offer much comfort to those denied the means of self-representation. Something other is required. (157)

Thus, Agee finds himself in an ethical bind: to write is to risk misrepresentation, due both to language's ontological difference from the world of observable things and to the

---

allusion would only strengthen the discomfort Agee expresses here. For an example of Agee's discussion of discomfort at his intrusion into race relations, see specifically "Late Sunday Morning" (23-34).

inevitable distortions of personal perspective; not writing risks the unchallenged continuation of the status quo and leaves observed injustices in secrecy.

In *Praise*, then, Agee positions himself as caught between two imperatives – first, to document the lives of those unknown to his readers, and second, to acknowledge the inevitable failure of this representational project. The desire to represent the world in detail for his readers stems from the idea that “If authors could make readers identify with the people they depicted [. . .] they might promote action to alleviate economic and social inequality” (Quinn 338-39). However, the impulse to disavow such identification reflects a fundamental skepticism about “the vast gulf in experience between readers and subjects” as well as “the limitations of language” (Quinn 338). In Agee’s text, the competing drives to get at the real and to avoid inadequate representation manifest as a dialectical movement between two rhetorical tendencies. On the one hand, Agee attempts to describe the real world as closely as possible through detailed attention to the material objects of his environment; as he says, “The most I can do – the most I can hope to do – is to make a number of physical entities as plain and vivid as possible” (97). On the other hand, Agee undermines textual illusions of reality by drawing attention to their constructed nature. Although Agee promises “plain and vivid” description, he qualifies such promises by also offering only “a series of careful but tentative, rudely experimental, and fragmentary renderings of some of the salient aspects of a real experience” (217). Thus, unlike many documentary projects of the time, Agee’s writing gives nearly as much attention to its own failures to represent the world as it does to the

details of the lives it describes, striving towards the “something other” Reed claims ethical representation demands.<sup>63</sup>

In this chapter, I explore how *Praise* develops a mode of representation that, by acknowledging its contingency, paradoxically creates a more ethical, self-reflexive representation of the unrepresented environments and people of the Southern tenant farms. Like Reed, I argue that Agee develops a sophisticated tension between representational skepticism and detailed description in order to avoid the poles of “pseudofastidious avoidance” and “less scrupulous” representation. While many photodocumentaries of the 1920s and the 1930s attempt to represent the untenable position of American agriculture, *Praise* is unique in its self-conscious framing of writing as “effort” – as an ongoing, active attempt at communication with no guaranteed success. By focusing on what the process of “effort” looked like to Agee, I specifically investigate how we can read *Praise* as an “effort in human *actuality*” (emphasis mine). How does Agee imagine the processes of perception and writing as related to “actuality,” the material world of things that eludes language? And how can we build an ethics based on a “*human actuality*” – that is, on an inescapably human vision of the world-as-it-is shaped by individual perception, by language, and by specific moments of encounter?

To understand these concepts of effort and human actuality, I look at two major strands in Agee’s writing. First, I examine his obsession with material things. Second, I focus on Agee’s obsession with the relationship between human perception and the material world. In his effort to capture actuality, Agee focuses on a basic division

---

<sup>63</sup> Reed argues of *Praise*, “the text aims in two directions: on the one hand, it seeks to make its presentations in typo- and photographic form as intimate, immediate, and realistic as possible (Agee at one point wishes he could put bits of wood, fabric, and excrement on the page; 13). And on the other hand, the text evolves a whole series of devices to inject doubt about any text’s ability to achieve immediacy or full representation” (161).

between the material items constituting the environment of the tenant farm, the human acts of perception which allow the individual to engage with this environment, and the language available for description. *Praise* pairs detailed material descriptions of things – houses, cotton, furniture, earth, food – with self-reflexive dismissals of language’s referential capacity. In an effort to escape the fundamental dichotomy between textual construction and material reality, *Praise* exhaustively catalogues the material things in the tenant houses. This descriptive excess not only provides an alternative ethical approach, seeing plenitude and excess rather than lack within the farmers’ lives.<sup>64</sup> It also attempts to leap across the ontological chasm, pushing language to the very edge of materiality.

But even while invoking this material excess, Agee pauses, drawing attention to the ways in which his textual descriptions cannot capture the material world of the farmers’ homes. By playing with the fundamental disconnect between words and things, Agee forces readers to recognize possible gaps in representation: if words do not correspond exactly to material things, then neither can they correspond to the full reality of a human life or a place in the world. If words cannot provide the reader with direct access to plates, shoes, beds, chairs, and soil, how could they possibly provide direct access to the lives and faces of infinitely more complex human beings? *Praise* oscillates in its use of language, first drawing attention to the gap between language and the world, and then calling upon the very representative power it disavows. The gaps of human perception play a similarly dual role as the failings of language. Agee feels connected to

---

<sup>64</sup> Jeanne Follansbee Quinn assesses Agee’s exhaustive cataloguing in these terms, asserting that this abundance counters the typical documentary presentation of tenants as those lacking food, possessions, and the material markers of middle-class life. Such a reversal attempts to avoid a sentimental or simplified vision of the tenant farmers, illustrating how much that is not immediately visible may exist within a single farmer’s life.

and learns about the tenant farms via his own experience of the tenant farms' sensory immediacy. And yet, it is only by recognizing the gaps and failures in perception that Agee recognizes the ways in which he can never hope to understand the world. Thus, the very failures of representation function, not as a distraction from the project's political and ethical intervention, but as a way of creating ethical possibility. Self-reflexive hesitation paired with elaborate description allows Agee to use all the tools of nonfictional writing but helps him slow down before claiming to know all of the tenant families or their world. Focusing on this tension at the level of the individual, material object allows Agee to recognize the problems of representation and also begin to imagine a way of using writing and perception that still provides politically useful truth.

This combination of uncertainty, sensory immediacy, and material specificity functions as a form of what I have been calling constrained realism: literary writing that strategically mobilizes the world via personal observation while also self-consciously foregrounding the textual nature of such mobilization. Agee's work demonstrates the same two competing imperatives evident in other examples of constrained realism: first, the imperative to recognize language and perception as subjective, constructed, and incomplete; second, the imperative to appeal to the material world of things in support of larger political or ethical claims. The tension between language's constructed, human quality and the autonomy of the material world becomes particularly important in works that, like the documentary nonfiction of the 1920s and 1930s, struggle to make ethical claims about actual, material, historical conditions. To call the hardship of tenant farming merely a social construction is to deny its political urgency; to ignore Agee's influential role in shaping how such hardship is presented is naïve and vulnerable to a sentimental

politics of pity.<sup>65</sup> Agee forestalls such pity by challenging the validity of representation and by closely interrogating the empirical impulse to ground political decisions in indisputable physical artifacts. While he uses the rhetorical power of representational skepticism to insert doubt into facile or sentimental forms of identification, he also uses the rhetorical power of material description to insist on the urgency of addressing the economically unjust tenant farming system. The foundation of Agee's two-part strategy is, as we will see, to resist viewing language as automatically representative of reality and instead to re-imagine it as a contingent effort with potential good effects, reckless and stuck as it may be.

### **“Honest Journalism”: *Praise*'s Rebellion Against Documentary**

In undertaking the assignment for *Fortune* magazine, Agee and Evans became part of the proliferation of documentary journalism that began in the late 1920s and continued throughout the 1930s, fueled by government funding as well as the emergence of photograph-oriented magazines such as *Fortune* and *Life*. Beginning in 1935, the Resettlement Agency, which became the Farm Security Administration in 1937, began a program of photodocumentation intended to illustrate the conditions of American rural poverty and generate support for New Deal programming.<sup>66</sup> But while Agee's and

---

<sup>65</sup> Paula Rabinowitz argues that the self-reflexive nature of *Praise* helps to challenge the sedimentation of us/them binaries between viewers and documentary subjects. She contends that such disruptions in perception are necessary to create the possibility of political change, since us/them dichotomies reinforce pity and fail to challenge the social division at the root of such oppositions. Similarly, Quinn argues that *Praise* avoids sentimental pity by interrupting patterns of identification and distancing at work in documentary representation.

<sup>66</sup> Michael L. Carlebach summarizes the history of the Farm Security Administration's photography program, organized under Roy Stryker. In December 1936, the Resettlement Agency was made part of the Department of Agriculture; in September 1937, this organization was given legal status and the name Farm Security Administration by the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act. Carlebach describes FSA photography as propaganda, not to diminish its worth but to rightly categorize it as work intended towards educating the urban population about the rural works of the New Deal and convincing people of the political necessity for government aid and reform programs. Carlebach claims that FSA photography has occupied a curious

Evans's stay with the tenant families of Mill Hill originated from this documentary impulse and was intended to create similar magazine journalism, the final work's self-awareness about the limitations and failures of representation made it a reaction against as well as a participant in documentary trends. T. V. Reed, Paula Rabinowitz, and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn all argue that a tension between documentary realism and modernist skepticism towards language distinguishes *Praise* from other contemporary photojournalistic texts. These critics also argue that this tension allows *Praise* to criticize the superficial, sentimental ethics promoted by these "realistic" examples of photojournalism. *Praise* provides a documentary countertendency to embrace "an at times extreme skepticism towards the referential reliability of realist modes of narration" (Solomon 800). In a time when the photojournalistic piece was becoming the great weapon of left-leaning writers, Agee hesitates; he trusts his own words' ability to transmit reality to his readers only as much as he trusts his own ability to transcend a privileged past and assimilate into the tenant families with whom he is living. Agee's complication of reality and representation pushes against the validity of documentary projects, many of which assume that language can directly represent the world.

According to Reed,

The collapse of the capitalist economy in 1929 ushered in the most intense period of documentation, the most exhaustive effort to represent the 'real' in American history. The economic crash seems to have brought down systems of representation with it. Almost overnight, the rich modernism of the twenties gave way to a new realism. (156)

---

critical position, alienated from its political and social context and treated either as pure art or as strict factual documentation.

During this period, funded by private industry or by US government programs such as the Farm Security Administration (FSA) or Federal Writers' Project (FWP), journalists and artists spread across the continent to capture contemporary American culture and document the suffering caused by the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. On an unprecedented level, as Reed suggests, the circumstances of American catastrophe were being documented for the unaffected portions of the American public.

There is a way in which the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression were aptly suited for the explosion of photodocumentation and lent themselves to this rhetoric of reactionary realism: these disasters' effects were material, visible, and easily photographed. They had a clearly tangible reality. For example, in their classic documentary work *An American Exodus*, Dorothea Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor repeat an overheard "salutation in Cimarron County, Oklahoma" from August, 1938. It begins, "Hello there Bill. What do you know for certain?" To the response "Nothin'," the original speaker claims, "Well, I know it's windy and dusty. It's got so we get a half a day between the Spring Dust Storm and the Summer Dust Storm" (103). This exchange codes ecological disaster as the one constant in the world of the suffering farmer. The familiar cycle of seasons has been replaced with a new certainty: the inescapable material presence of dust and wind. This world of constant, certain dust persisted across the United States throughout the 1930s, blanketing the entire country in a gritty, material reminder of the ecological disaster taking place across the North American Great Plains.

According to Timothy Egan, "At its peak, the Dust Bowl covered one million acres" (9). As the plains lost their top soil, victim to persistent drought, extensive deforestation, and years of over-farming across the agricultural regions of the Americas,

the entire United States encountered disturbing physical evidence of the disaster. Clouds of blown soil landed in Eastern cities as well as on the towns of the West and the South: “dust fell like snow over Boston and Scranton, and then New York slipped under partial darkness” during the great storms of 1934 (Egan 151). Lange’s photograph of “The Great Blow of 1934” captures epic evidence of an environment gone awry, showing clouds of dust billowing uncannily behind the buildings of an American main street. Photography and a journalism committed to fact – realist modes of representation – seem like logical cultural responses to the combination of a material crisis too massive to ignore and a representational system troubled by economic collapse. Photographs of barren landscapes and descriptions of dirt blanketing the continent point to the sensory immediacy of the ecological crisis. Other ecological crises of the 1920s and 1930s were similarly visible and material, like the massive floodings of the Mississippi River in 1927 and 1937.<sup>67</sup> The extensive documentation of the economic and ecological disasters sweeping the United States suggested that if only one could capture all the details of the disaster, then the American public could be convinced of the problem, sociological and economic solutions could be discovered, and the difficulties could be ameliorated.

But there were potential ethical dangers within this large-scale documentary project: sentimentalism; simplification; exploitation. For example, Daniel Fox points to one of the dangers of realist representation in his examination of the American Guide Series, a set of documentary projects completed under the FWP: “A disturbing note runs

---

<sup>67</sup> Consider the dramatic representation of the Mississippi flooding in Pare Lorentz’s 1938 film *The River*. As the booming voiceover proclaims, the flooding was a catastrophe that could be clearly charted as it cascaded past geographical locations, “carrying every drop of water” and “carrying all the rivers that run down two-thirds of the continent.” The repeated chant of “river rising” that accompanies footage of turbulent, muddy water reinforces the way in which this ecological disaster could be observed as it progressed and spread.

through almost every volume in the *American Guide Series*,” he argues, “the implication that the tour technique is an adequate presentation of history. The federal writers often have a somewhat blurred historical perspective” (Fox 4-5). According to Lionel Trilling along with a loss of historical perspective comes a loss of moral complexity. The result of the realist documentary impulse was a “social consciousness” that was “without fiber and contradiction” (qtd. in Rabinowitz 153). Documentary realism, in this assessment, presents reality as transmitted straight from world to reader and presents language as transparent, resulting in a glib, fast-paced “tour” across the surface details of a place or a group of people. Such cursory documentary does not challenge readers to change their lives or examine contradictions in their own behavior but cultivates what Trilling calls “a pity which wonderfully served the needs of the pitier” (qtd. in Rabinowitz 153). Seen materialized in a dark cloud looming over an American street, the Dust Bowl can invite a sense of horror but does not necessarily invite readers to examine how American capitalism contributed to over-farming and the destruction of American top soil. Even when such a connection is glossed by voiceovers or prose, as in *The River*, *American Exodus*, and *You Have Seen Their Faces*, that gloss can feel at odds with the pictures. Here, sociological analysis and sentimental pity compete for the reader’s attention, leading the reader to turn outwards in search of a perpetrator to blame for the destruction.

This tension between sociological distancing and sentimentalizing pity can be traced back to the progenitor of 1930s American photodocumentary works, Jacob Riis’s 1890 *How the Other Half Lives*. Its very title reproduces all the paradoxes of representation that haunt Agee’s work: the subjects whom this documentary seeks to aid are unavoidably “other” than the work’s audience. The documentary work promises a

portal between these two worlds, offering an account not just of the other half's conditions but also a participatory experience of *how* the other half lives. What Riis provides is far different, however; his chapters group around individual tenement buildings, alleys, or neighborhoods in late nineteenth century New York. The "surface level" feeling of "tour" that Fox describes fits Riis's work, as description moves the reader from "The Down Town Back-alleys" to "The Cheap Lodging-houses," from "Chinatown" to "Jewtown," and from "The Color Line in New York" to "The Reign of Rum." The text treats people similarly, moving from "The Italian in New York" to "The Bohemians" to "The Working Girls of New York." Descriptions of the tenement dwellers focus more on types, groups, or categories than individual stories. The readers may learn the conditions defining the existence of Swedes, Chinese, Irish landlords, blind tenants, or immigrants, but there are few individual stories that set forth what the experience, the *how*, of this life is like. The documentary provides a sociological, detached, sweeping overview which culminates in a clean summation of "the bare facts with which we have to deal in New York" and a proposed solution: the closing chapters are entitled "What Has Been Done" and "How the Case Stands" (223). At the same time, photographs of obscenely crowded tenement houses and of children sleeping on street corners demand pity from the reader. Stories of women and children burning to death in fires and suffering from disease outbreaks function similarly. The *how* of life here is markedly viewed from the outside, and the text does not try to assess the perspectives or experiences of individual tenants.

In contrast to Riis's work, Bourke-White and Caldwell's watershed *You Have Seen Their Faces* "struck reviewers as a new kind of book, one in which pictures

appeared on an equal basis with words” (Trachtenberg v). Yet *Faces* reproduces a mixture of sentimental identification, sweeping narrative, and sociological fact similar to that which marks *How the Other Half Lives*. Like Riis’s captioned photographs of particular areas of New York, Bourke-White’s photos identify places in their captions. Unlike Riis’s photos, however, these photos stand separate from the chapter text, in captioned clusters between the unnamed, numbered chapters, and are glossed with what appear to be lines of dialogue, as though the subjects themselves speak to the reader (an illusion that the text itself disavows in the forward note: “The legends under the pictures are intended to express the authors’ own conceptions of the sentiments of the individuals portrayed; they do not pretend to reproduce the actual sentiment of these persons”).<sup>68</sup> The fictionalized captions and the separate grouping of the photographs has made the relationship between language and photographs a matter of critical debate, especially since *Faces*’ coherent chapters and captioned photos so starkly contrast the open-ended chapters and the stark, separate photographs of *Praise*. If *Praise* undermines its coherence via self-reflexive examination of the boundaries between text and reality, *Faces* creates coherence by collapsing this boundary through fictionalizing and summary. Trachtenberg calls the work “more documentary fiction than strict documentation or sociological analysis” (v). The text’s commitment to narrative effect over factual detail allows Caldwell to speak in generalities, creating an epic tone in his prose. “The South has always been shoved around like a country cousin,” Caldwell proclaims in the first chapter’s beginning. “It is the Southern Extremity of America, the Empire of the Sun, the Cotton States; it is the Deep South, Down South; it is The South,” he continues, setting

---

<sup>68</sup> The page on which this disclaimer appears has no page number, but is situated right after the foreword and right before the first title page.

the work's epic scope. But, as we saw in Chapter IV with Presley's thwarted attempts to write the Great Song of the West in *The Octopus*, such generalizing, epic representation risks losing sight of specifics, subsuming daily concerns in service of aesthetic or dramatic effect, and becoming incapable of seeing daily life as anything other than commonplace and dull in its very materiality.

Caldwell's conclusion also illustrates how an epic framework reduces the tenant subjects to symbols of poverty: "Ten million persons on Southern tenant farms," he asserts, "are living in degradation and defeat. They have been beaten and subjected. They are depleted and sterile. All has been taken from them and they have nothing" (48). While individual faces fill Bourke-White's frames, these faces are without specific histories and become more representative of certain class conditions and potentialities of suffering than of individual lives or experiences. According to Quinn, it is exactly this reduction of farmers to a general mass that Agee and Evans combat. While Caldwell can only weakly assert, "they are still people, they are human beings. They have life," Agee and Evans seek to capture this humanness and life by narrowing their focus to the lives of a very few families.

However, Trachtenberg is right to question the late twentieth century critical tendency to polarize Bourke-White and Caldwell against Agee and Evans, seeing one as simple, self-indulgent, and exploitive and the other as complex, self-reflexive, and ethical. As Trachtenberg argues,

To admirers of James Agee, Caldwell's prose now seemed simplistic and callous, and against the stern eye of Walker Evans, Bourke-White's looked excessively theatrical and manipulative. Agee's anguished, self-

questioning prose and Evans's uninflected, seemingly styleless photographs seemed to readers in the 1960s exactly what honesty, discretion, and moral integrity should look like. (vii)

To see Bourke-White and Caldwell as naïve aesthetes misses the ways in which, arguably, their text does a better job of addressing the socioeconomic concerns involved with the plight of tenant farmers. For instance, Caldwell clearly lays out the intersecting economic and environmental conditions contributing to the continuing oppression of tenant farmers, explaining, "The soil has been depleted and eroded" and "The plantation system pauperized the soil to such a great degree that raising cotton became a means of making a living rather than a method of making a fortune" (3-4). The very epic and dramatic qualities that can make *Faces* seem reductive or simplifying also give it a narrative power and allow it to make firm conclusions about the causes of the depicted injustice. However, *Faces* still reveals a tendency to erase individual stories in favor of the epic, as evident in the utopian strains of Caldwell's conclusion:

The youth of the South can succeed where their mothers and fathers failed if they will refuse to raise another man's cotton while hungry and in rags. With hope and a dream before them, they can change a hell into a living paradise. (48)

Such utopian hopefulness springs from a rejection of the destructive conditions that have dominated the text and the photos of the preceding pages.

The contrast between *Faces*' apocalyptic/utopian rhetoric and *Praise*'s search for a more immanent hope within the already existing world appears most immediately in the contrasts between two of Bourke-White's and Evans's photographs. Quinn explores how

Bourke-White's photographs generate sentiment by turning their subjects into markers of class. An often analyzed photograph of a family in their kitchen in Okefenokee Swamp, Georgia provides an example of such sentiment. To contrast this photograph, Quinn considers Evans's photograph of the Gudger kitchen, highlighting the surprising lack of human presence. In terms of the objects they contain and their physical characteristics, the photographed kitchens closely resemble one another: patterned oilcloth, boards with gaps of light shining through, hand-hung shelves filled with mismatched bowls. Yet these photographs evoke different worlds. Bourke-White's photograph captures crowded conditions, the people sitting at the table pushed up against the walls and the shelves cluttered with jars and dishes. Quinn notes that this scene evokes pity by featuring lack. Poverty appears in the thin faces of the boys at the table, in the bare plates, in the downcast eyes of the mother fingering her knife, in the worn, matte surface of the oilcloth, and in the glaring gaps between the wall boards. The dinner scene is haunted by absence: the absent gazes of the family; the absence of food highlighted by the caption text, which explains, "Every month the relief office gives them four cans of beef, a can of dried peas, and five dollars, the old lady generally spends a dollar and a half of it for snuff."<sup>69</sup>

By contrast, Evans's photograph of the Gudger kitchen glows with light. Separated by hundreds of pages from its descriptor text – emptied of all human presence – the photograph of the Gudger kitchen draws attention to the collected objects: the grain of the floorboards; the bright whiteness of a hanging towel; the sheen of light on the side of a milk dasher; the fluted sides of the oil lamp that features so prominently in Agee's

---

<sup>69</sup> The pages of photographs in *You Have Seen Their Faces* are not numbered. This particular photograph appears between page 34 and page 35, between Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

later prose. Quinn explains the contrast thus: “Evans’s photographs reveal sparse simplicity in a tenant kitchen [. . .] Bourke-White’s show empty plates on a rough table with children sitting behind them” (352).

My point here is not to argue that Evans’s photograph offers a more genuine reflection of tenant life than Bourke-White’s family photograph. As James C. Curtis and Sheila Grannan note, by rearranging the Gudger family furniture to get the impossible angles of this kitchen shot, Evans creates a photograph every bit as staged as Bourke-White’s.<sup>70</sup> Nor do I wish to simply repeat Quinn’s argument that Evans’s photograph reverses Bourke-White’s “interpretation of objects” in order to suggest a “paradoxical beauty and dignity amidst the squalor and pain” (352). Rather I wish to highlight how the composition of objects stands out in Evans’s photograph in a way that it does not in Bourke-White’s.<sup>71</sup> Agee’s prose repeats this close focus on material things. Objects that, as Quinn argues, function poetically in *Praise* also manifest the difficulty of speaking and representing. They thus concretize Agee’s longing for a mode of representation that escapes the mediations and ethical complexity of subjective representation: if the tenants are not going to speak for themselves, perhaps it is more ethical and accurate to let objects do the speaking. In this way, Agee and Evans craft a mystical factualism: they insist that objects will give the truths of tenant life, yet they clothe them in a mysterious light, like that in Evans’s photographs. Things thus remain elusive even in their

---

<sup>70</sup> Curtis and Grannan argue that Evans never liked candid shots; he was a meticulous photographer who actively strove to intervene in the photograph as little as possible but still was interested in composition and detail. While all photographs in this period are somewhat posed, given the long exposure time required, his work “exposes not the realism of Evans’s pictures but their studied artistry and ‘painterly’ perspective” (3).

<sup>71</sup> Peter Cosgrove focuses on the difference between the treatment of objects in Agee’s prose and Evans’s photographs. Whereas “the barrier that language interposes between the object and the reader is what he [Agee] spends much of the book trying to remove, Evans focuses on a photographic literalism that sets forth objects as independent, self-evident entities (335-36).

materiality, like the mud that Agee attempts to navigate and fails to understand. Whereas the unengaged subjects of Bourke-White's family photograph function almost as objects themselves, becoming as much indicators of poverty as the objects in the room, the objects of Evans's photograph have presence, incipient action, and pasts. They stand alone, subtly reinforcing the intrusive nature of documentation by hinting at their owners' absence. They thus create a world for the reader to sneak into and spy upon, rather than framing a scene for the reader to view theatrically, at a distance.

While Agee may have imagined *Praise* explicitly as a response to or attack on the sentimental politics of Bourke-White and Caldwell, we as critics do better to understand these two documentary works as presenting the ethical dilemma of tenant representation from different angles, encoding different definitions of what realism is or should be. For Bourke-White and Caldwell, realism involves a larger sociological context and the presentation of historical facts. The documentary text elicits reader sympathy via a sentiment born from lack; identification via face recognition leads the viewer to see all the ways in which tenant life lacks or fails. By contrast, Agee and Evans see realism as centered around individual events and objects, observed directly by the one who will later represent them. The documentary text thus generates reader sympathy by forcing the reader to recognize his or her complicity in the injustice as well as all the levels on which identification with the subjects of documentation remains impossible.

Agee pushes the reader to recognize the impossibility of facile identification by troubling representational connections, all the way down to the level of the relationship between a single object and a single word. His lavish description, offered and then undermined by self-reflexive uncertainty, mirrors the difficulties of ethical identification:

the material thing, like the tenant farmer, is presented as both immediately available to the reader and as forever inaccessible. Language's very nature makes full identification impossible, while the proliferation of language creates an ambient sense of the real world's presence. Like Thoreau, then, Agee participates in a paradoxical rhetoric of thwarted empirical appeal, first striving "to speak a good word for the truth" through thick descriptions and then recognizing his own performance as a bragging narrator, thwarted by "cant and hypocrisy" (*Walden* 37).

Other critics have linked representational to ethical questions without framing such concerns so specifically in terms of materiality and empiricism. For example, Quinn argues that *Praise* strategically invokes representational uncertainty in order to circumvent ethical complacency, to navigate just such political quandaries, and to distance itself from the failures of other documentaries. For her, *Praise* invites a level of identification with the tenant farmers by giving details about their lives but also prevents readers from entering into overly sentimental identification by constantly breaking the illusion of unmediated connection. While *You Have Seen Their Faces*, according to Fox, is itself a "reaction against the saccharine sympathy and political dogmatism of much of the documentary writing of the 1930's" in a way akin to *Praise*, Quinn disagrees, believing that Agee and Evans find the work transparent and sentimental (Fox 17-18):

For Agee and Evans, Caldwell and Bourke-White's book – and its critical and commercial success – epitomized a public attitude they viewed as 'morally shocking' for masking exploitation in self-righteousness (qtd. in Sott 222). But challenging the liberal politics in *You Have Seen Their Faces* also meant attacking the authors' naive sentimentalism, which

assumed a simple correspondence between aesthetic representation and social response. (Quinn 339)

Quinn sees in Bourke-White and Caldwell's work an assumption that accurate documentation will encourage sympathy in the reader through a process of identification. Identification perpetuates an ideological blurring, hiding the intrusion of photographer and writer into the lives of the people. Such a blurring demands no responsibility on the part of the reader; Quinn argues that such forms create self-righteous, complacent pity rather than a true impetus for social change. Thus, "Agee experimented with an alternative rhetoric that could confound sentimental identification by presenting the sharecroppers as *both* human like us *and* utterly different from us" (Quinn 339). "Agee's insight," she argues, "was to conceive of identification as a dialectical process which, by holding identity in tension with difference, forced readers to recognize the obligations of social privilege" (Quinn 340).

For Agee, then, theoretical questions of whether language can successfully represent the world are linked to questions about whether writing can ever help establish justice between groups of people that might otherwise never meet. By "Connecting the gap in identification between language and the tangible things it describes to the gap in identification between readers and subjects, Agee therefore transforms *aesthetic* limitations into *moral* failure" (Quinn 359). Quinn argues that Agee's frequent insistence on the failure of his prose forces readers to recognize the dangers of too easily assuming they can know, judge, or identify with the tenant farming families depicted. His prose thus forestalls "mere aestheticization of poverty viewed at a distance" as well as facile pity (Reed 168). *Praise* forces readers to interrogate how the inability of a word to

directly and fully represent an object introduces a level of uncertainty that is magnified on a larger scale – say, representing one man or woman’s whole world and life.

Quinn’s discussion of objects focuses on how Agee and Evans transform the conventional documentary use of “the catalogue of possessions, a central trope in 1930s documentary books” (340). For example, in Caldwell and Bourke-White’s book, “catalogues of objects such as houses, clothing, household furnishings, and food helped the authors make visible the invisible economic system that oppressed the cropper” (344). The lack of objects in the catalogues signified poverty. By contrast, “Agee and Evans’s catalogues provide a surfeit rather than a paucity of things, each presented as unique and beautiful [. . .] Agee overloads his text with lengthy and detailed descriptions of things” (352). Quinn reads the transformation in the use of objects as *Praise*’s ironic counter to the pity cultivated by Bourke-White and Caldwell’s representation of poverty. At the same time, she contends that *Praise* “recognizes that lavish description cannot transform the real conditions of the tenants’ lives” (352).

I contend that the elaborate description of so many objects was not intended only as an ironic counterpoint to the paucity of objects in *You Have Seen Their Faces* but also as a paradoxical participation in the rhetoric of empirical appeals. The irony of Agee’s text involves his recognition that, to some extent, it is *only* via lavish description that real conditions can be transformed, because it is only via appeal to the materially real that authors and observers can convince the readers of the truthfulness of their statements. The prolific material description of *Praise* is not only an indicator of the ignored richness of tenant families’ lives; it is also a dramatic gesture meant to support the truthfulness of Agee’s and Evans’s experiences – experiences that defy full representation in language

specifically because of their unrepresentable material specificity. Lavish description thus serves as part of documentary's chain of transformation, pointing to the processes of mobilization and observation that make the text possible. This lavish description creates an ambient sense of realness that convinces the reader that the ethical problem exists outside of text, having more urgency than a narrative construction or aesthetic effects. But this description also insists on the cultural, mediating presence of the writer/observer, that liminal narrating position Thoreau occupied. Thick description reminds the reader that the narrating voice connects to a historical person who observed; all the ethical power and problems of the resulting text stem from the *event* of this person's intrusion into the environment of the tenant families.

Thus, the described world of things is not just an ambient effect as per Morton, nor only an ethical strategy as per Quinn. Rather, the described world is the setting that Agee hopes to make "well-articulated" via his careful observations and consequent notes (Latour *Pandora* 144). In its interrogation of the ontological chasm between words and things, *Praise* repeats the dialectic play of participation and hesitation that marks the work's relationship to documentary. The reader will not only see the faces but the most excruciatingly small details of the tenant families. At the same time, the reader will also be constantly reminded that he or she has not seen faces, houses, environments, or things. She has only seen photographs, words, and what little can be done with them. By insisting that the reader recognize these chains of transformations, Agee simultaneously validates his claims about the troubled environment and forestalls the reader's ability to treat the text as a distanced aesthetic experience.

## **“Words Cannot Embody”: Language and the Material World**

In contrast to the billowing dirt clouds that dwarf the landscape and mark ecological disaster on an epic scale, Evans’s photographs and Agee’s prose paint a world that, while entirely defined by the same ecological and economic conditions evident in other documentary works, seems strangely focused upon itself. Lange and Tyler bring the reader terrifying dust clouds and the stripped Oklahoma fields of the Dust Bowl; Bourke-White and Caldwell capture the rutted soil of the cotton-ruined South. But while Agee also describes the ruined soil of Alabama and how it thwarts farming, perhaps his most memorable and evocative image of soil is that extended description of the mud that mires his car and first forces him to spend the night with the tenant families. If, for Lange and Tyler, the blowing soil of the dust storms becomes a metaphor for the displacement of America’s farmers and a visible manifestation of their rootless wandering, for Agee, soil functions as a metaphor for the mire of suffering, a material through which he unsuccessfully attempts to navigate. The metaphor is apt, as the subjects of Agee’s work are not victims of a sudden ecological catastrophe but rather of a long, slow, unjust system of farming that has methodically ruined the soil and mired thousands of individuals in a livelihood that is eroding away as inevitably as the soil flooding down the Mississippi every spring. While Agee still figures soil as symbolic of larger ecological and economic sorrows, describing it as “this vast continental sorrowful clay” on which exist “encamped, imprisoned” tenant farmers, he sees this clay as a space which he as much as these farmers must keep struggling to escape. *Praise’s* representation of the material world as that which brings despair and brings Agee together with his subjects reinforces the paradoxes and hesitations that differentiate this work from other

photodocumentaries. Acknowledging the possibility of failure allows *Praise* to avoid the pitfalls of sentimentality, simple identification, and pity. The equally hesitant relationships between the human perceiver and the material world, between human language and the material world, simultaneously fail and make representation possible.

This paradoxical vision of the material world as both that which confounds representation and that which makes all text possible frames Agee's prose from the book's opening. The book often shifts from an impulse towards materiality to self-reflexivity. In an early, untitled section, *Praise* expresses a desire to appeal directly to the material environment, replacing written representation with material things themselves.

Agee states:

If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement. [. . .] A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point. As it is though, I'll do what little I can in writing. Only it will be very little. (10-11)

The opening phrase expresses frustration at the necessity of using language. Agee imagines the ideal book not as a written thing but as some means of corralling the dispersive elements of experience; a book in ideality would be replaced by a collection of physical items. He longs to get outside of textuality while paradoxically producing a proliferation of words, what he calls elsewhere "lists and inventories merely, things dead unto themselves" (98). Timothy Morton attributes these paradoxes to ecomimesis and ambience. For Morton, Agee's belief that material things would "be more to the point"

than textual description reproduces the way that ecomimesis gestures towards a real world outside the text: “This may just be language, but think of all the real things which do exist, could I just but capture them here.” The irony of realistic representation, as Morton explains, is that “The more I try to show you what lies beyond the page, the more of a page I have” (30). Writing can only approach the material world it aims to represent asymptotically, generating a sense of material reality through the production of more and more language.

Agee’s appeal to the material world thus participates in what Morton calls “factual brutalism,” the idea “that the space of factual things can put a stop to thinking” (123). This empirical self-evidence provides the foundational logic behind the documentary impulse: if enough things are given in sufficiently concrete detail, ethical awareness will occur automatically. Ethical awareness does not occur only through identification with human subjects, as Quinn claims, but also through belief in the realness of the world described. If only text could be replaced with things, and if only the right things were presented, then the reader would be in contact with reality and would develop a “correct” response to the world: “Ecological [and, I would add, ethical] awareness would just happen to us, as immersively and convincingly as a shower of rain” (Morton 182-83). Agee’s passage implies that if *Praise* could only give the reader every piece of cloth and earth that he saw, then the reader would be automatically converted to the book’s proposed ethical position by encountering a truth that somehow escapes the contingencies of written documentation.

In pursuit of this impossible goal, Agee’s appeal to cotton and earth functions *ambiently*, Morton would say, generating a sense of realness via material description and

resulting in a paradoxical immanence and distance. The ambient, textual world feels close, brought near by the physicality of described detail. Yet it also feels distant, as the proliferation of description reinforces the disparity between the text and the material world. As Morton explains, “the very processes that try to convey the illusion of immediacy and naturalness keep dispelling it from within” (77-78). Agee’s list thus simultaneously evokes and undermines the illusion of a concrete reality just outside the text’s boundary. At the same time, his list also undermines its own ambience by drawing attention to the constructed nature of its illusory realness. In this way, the passage creates an illusion of presence; for even while Agee may disdain his descriptions as “lists and inventories merely,” these lists are evocative (98). In fact, by distinguishing between the phrase “lumps of earth” and the actual earth to which he refers, Agee intensifies the reader’s awareness of reality, goading readers to use their imaginations and engage their senses in order to more fully approximate a connection to the real.

But Agee’s participation in this game of ambience, when read alongside analyses such as Quinn’s, initiates an equally important ethical game: he desperately needs the reader to believe in the realness of the world he describes because such belief will make the reader see the need to change the system of tenant farming; he also desperately needs the reader to recognize that *Praise* can only give ambient illusions of reality and aesthetic approximations of the real, in order to prevent the reader from sentimentally identifying with a simplified vision of the tenant farmers’ lives. The endeavor, the “something other” which the ethical documentary seeks, lies somewhere between identification and alienation, between an unperceived material world with a meaning and existence all its

own and a text with its own logic of symbols and meanings – between, as Morton would say, inside and outside.

Morton's classification of representational anxiety as a kind of postmodern ecomimesis resonates with T.V. Reed's analysis of *Praise* as "postmodern realism." This "postmodern realism" is "a self-conscious, ironic, politically engaged mode of writing that takes reality more seriously than did the realists and aesthetic form more seriously than did the modernists" (Reed 157). For Reed, the goal of such dialectical play is political. In his assessment of *Praise*, anxieties about representation become possible ethical and political strategies. When read alongside Morton's analysis of ecomimesis, Reed's awareness of the tensions in *Praise* frames individual failures of word-thing connection as moments of both ethical fear and potential. The referent earth towards which the textual sign "lumps of earth" gestures serves as the elusive, ambient world out there that short-circuits the self-congratulation of documentary journalism; it also serves as the literal grounding of the project, the "chain of transformations" connecting tentative writing back to historical events and material realities (Agee 211; Latour *Pandora* 70).

This passage also suggests how the paradoxes of ethical representation Reed and Quinn describe extend to the level of individual material objects. Even as his list invites the reader to approach concrete reality, Agee reminds the reader that the list he provides is nothing other than a proliferation of words. The very list that evokes a sense of environment is compromised by Agee's qualification that this is only the "very little" that he can do in writing. Such a qualification points to the equal gap separating the reader in the drawing room from Agee in the Alabaman fields. It suggests the difference separating classes, geographical spaces, and experiences of the world. Thus, the tension between

identification and difference reminds the reader of a shared humanity paired with a simultaneous disparity of material circumstances. There are genuine material differences between the reader and the depicted subjects, and to fully understand these differences requires engaged processes of encounter. This tension subtly challenges the reader's qualification to pass judgment, insinuating as it does that the reader is divided from that which he may well like to pity. And in this particular example, Agee accomplishes all of this tension without addressing the reader directly or talking about his primary subject, the farmers. This tension is relocated onto the material world of objects and the textual world that represents them.

Another example of the fundamental failures of language to capture the material world occurs in Agee's analysis of one tenant farmer, George Gudger. What matters most to Agee is the *actualness* of Gudger's existence – a realness that cannot ever be adequately described or explained:

George Gudger is a human being, a man, not like any other human being so much as he is like himself. I could invent incidents, appearances, additions to his character, background, surroundings, future, which might well point up and indicate and clinch things relevant to him which in fact I am sure are true, and important, and which George Gudger unchanged and undecorated would not indicate and perhaps could not even suggest. The result, if I was lucky, could be a work of art. But somehow a much more important, and dignified, and true fact about him than I could conceivably invent, though I were an illimitably better artist than I am, is that fact that he is exactly, down to the last inch and instant, who, what, where, when,

and why he is. He is in those terms living, right now, in flesh and blood and breathing, in an actual part of a world in which also, quite as irrelevant to imagination, you and I are living [. . .] nevertheless I can think of no worthier and many worse subjects of attempt. (205-06)

To even begin capturing the actualness of Gudger, Agee alludes to his material reality: his “flesh and blood and breathing” and his participation in an “actual part of the world.” While Agee invents a name in order to protect Gudger’s identity, he has not invented any events to characterize him as a real tenant farmer and he repeatedly points to elements which are real but cannot be conveyed. Thus, he cannot put corporeality or historicity into language in the way he can describe Gudger’s mannerisms, conditions, and statements. This insistence on elusive, material elements as the truest part of George Gudger counters the way tenant farmers function as examples or specimens in Bourke-White’s and Caldwell’s or Lange’s and Tyler’s work. Here, the tenant farmer is not just indicative of a certain set of conditions. He also has an elusive quality that defies simple analysis or representation, and hence this farmer is not fungible. He cannot be swapped with any other farmer who, when associated with a similar series of real or invented “incidents, appearances, additions to his character, background, surroundings, [or] future,” would equally represent tenant farming. Because this fundamental yet elusive realness serves as a critical point of departure for Agee as opposed to his journalistic contemporaries, his crisis about language centers around this realness. That is, in appealing to the material world that cannot be translated into language, he points to that which cannot be represented, that which defies easy textual expression and interchangeability.

Agee thus insists that there is no easy connection between the actuality of Gudger's existence and a textual representation of him. The only connecting point for Agee is his, Gudger's, and the reader's mutual existence in a material world where all three are living. Agee only becomes aware of this material reality through embodied, active processes of researching and writing; the reader will become aware of this reality only through the process of reading the resulting book. Thus, nonfiction writing relies not on one-to-one-correspondence between text and world but upon a chain of transformations initiated by the writer's encounter with the world and his extension of a representational system out into this world through processes of observation and recording. Truth and meaning must be extended, and this movement troubles neat divisions between text and world. A purification into pure world and pure text, of the type described by Latour's modern constitution, can simplify the interpretive process but cannot explain the processes creating the nonfictional text.<sup>72</sup> "In a novel," Agee explains,

a house or person has his meaning, his existence, entirely through the writer. Here, a house or a person has only the most limited of his meaning through me: his true meaning is much huger. It is that he exists, in actual being, as you do and as I do, and as no character of the imagination can possibly exist. His great weight, mystery, and dignity are in this fact. (9)

Here, meaning, which is usually associated with textuality and language, is relocated onto the material world. Meaning is *being*, not a sociological analysis, a political position, or an aesthetic theme. Agee then connects this weighty, material sense of meaning to the reclamation of the tenant farmer's dignity. The ethical representation of the tenant farmer

---

<sup>72</sup> For a detailed definition of Latour's modern constitution, see Chapter II or Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (32). As I described in Chapter II, the modern constitution is a conceptual framework that purifies objective nature from subjective culture, the material from the ideal, and the subject from the object.

requires the writer to adhere as closely as possible to the materiality of the farmer, all the while disavowing the possibility of such reality translating successfully. Thus, language's failure is finally reducible to a failure to *embody* and its potential is reducible to a gesture towards embodiment. The writer must acknowledge that "Words like all else are limited by certain laws," the most fundamental of which is that, "Words cannot embody; they can only describe" (210).

What Agee really seeks is writing that gives the world "*in its own terms*" (207). He is seeking a way to let the world speak for itself, but he cannot find such representation. Instead, he keeps returning to the central paradox of ecomimesis: the way writing proliferates more writing, no matter how earnestly it seeks to approach the world and become something other than language. Even "naturalism" or "realism" falls into this trap, for there is no escape from language, as we see in the following passage:

Trying, let us say, to represent, to reproduce, a certain city street under the conviction that nothing is as important, as sublime, as truly poetic about that street in its floatation upon time and space as the street itself. Your medium, unfortunately, is not a still or moving camera, but is words. You abjure all metaphor, symbol, selection and above all, of course, all temptation to invent, as obstructive, false, artistic. As nearly as possible in words (which, even by grace of genius, would not be very near) you try to give the street in its own terms [. . .] all this gathers time and weightiness which the street does not of itself have: it sags with this length and weight: and what have you in the end but a somewhat overblown passage from a

naturalistic novel: which in important ways is at the opposite pole from your intentions, from what you have seen, from the fact itself. (207-208)

Intention matters little here, for even when stripped of literary markers – of “all metaphor, symbol, selection” – still language gathers “time and weightiness.” In other words, the progression of language over time and over the space of the page, one word at a time, cannot ever replicate the experience of direct perception and simultaneous existence within a shared material world. What results is not the thing itself, but a proliferation of text that is the opposite of material things.

For Agee, and I would argue for Morton, this inescapable pull of textuality and language is a potentially dangerous feature of writing; for a real world *is* at stake. Agee *must* express reality and escape textuality if he is to achieve justice for the tenant farmers that are his subjects. Despite his reservations about the limitations of language, he must tell what he has seen to all those who will not or cannot see. While he may be frustrated with the complicated dance between text and world, as Agee says, “you [the reader] have no other way of knowing” certain truths than through the words that authors provide (217). Agee’s writing thus must bear the full weight of recognizing its own limitation, its own failure, and its own perpetuation of certain divides and ideologies. Yet the danger of simply disavowing ecomimesis is remaining simply stuck, never daring to approach or enter the tenant farmers’ lives. What exactly a writer could do aside from producing words on a page remains unclear. Agee needs a way to harness the dangers of representation, to simultaneously remind readers of their own complicity in oppression and encourage them to pursue an alternative.

### **“In My Mind’s and Memory’s Eye”: The Contingency of Perception**

Agee finds a way into this constrained realist relationship with language and reality by recognizing the similar limitation, contingency, and success of his own perception. When dismissing a textual representation of a street in favor of his own experience observing the street, or in privileging his simultaneous existence “in an actual part of the world” with George Gudger, Agee privileges presence, believing that perception provides a direct access to actuality that escapes the contingency of representation. Yet if language limits what a text can disclose because representation must take place in the “terms” available to the author, then perception equally limits the author, who can convey or transmit “only what I saw” (9). If we return to the specific example of George Gudger, we see this dual limitation at work. Not only is Agee’s representation of Gudger limited by the “terms in which I know him,” but also by Agee’s perception, a perception ultimately constrained by Agee’s physical and intellectual boundaries:

George Gudger is a man, et cetera. But obviously, in the effort to tell of him (by example) as truthfully as I can, I am limited. I know him only so far as I know him, and only in those terms in which I know him; and all of that depends as fully on who I am as on who he is. I am confident of being able to get at a certain form of the truth about him, only if I am as faithful as possible to Gudger as I know him, to Gudger as, in his actual flesh and life (but there again always in my mind’s and memory’s eye) he is. But of course it will only be a relative truth. Name me one truth within human

range that is not relative and I will feel a shade more apologetic of that.

(211)

As Agee continues to consider how capable he is of representing George Gudger, he begins to see that some level of truth comes through his observations, even given limitations. While he is admittedly limited by his “mind’s and memory’s eye,” he also finds confidence in his ability to gather a relative knowledge of Gudger’s life. Just as writing first requires Agee to accept the laws limiting writing’s referentiality and then to strive within these boundaries, ethical perceptual awareness requires Agee to accept the relative nature of perception and then to strive within this situated position to be as close to the world outside himself as possible. Agee must give up on the dream of objective journalism that obliterates the mediated positionality of the documenting subject. To invoke the power of having shared an actual world with George Gudger, Agee must recognize his own historical, embodied existence within a material world as well as the historical processes of representation that generate texts. He must stop being merely an observer or merely a creator of text; he must make himself an embodied subject within both the real world and text.

To claim that Agee does this is not to posit a simple one-to-one correlation between Agee as a historical, experiencing subject and Agee as a textual, constructed character. Rather, by muddying the neat distinction between objective narrator and textual character, Agee both challenges and reinforces the difference between the text and the real world. A historical Agee creates a textual Agee based on the experience of the observer Agee; a chain of translation runs through these various personas, united by Agee’s historical continuity as a thinking, experiencing, representing body. It is this

tenuous continuity that provides the linkage, the chain of truths, that can hold *Praise* in connection with the historical world of Mill Hill, Alabama.

But to access this chain of truth, Agee must both recognize and disavow his desire for idealized objectivity. He admits, “I would do just as badly to simplify or eliminate myself from this picture as to simplify or invent character, places or atmospheres” and this admission allows him to claim that

A chain of truths did actually weave itself and run through: it is their texture that I want to represent, not betray, nor pretty up into art. The one deeply exciting thing to me about Gudger is that he is actual, he is living, at this instant. He is not some artist’s or journalist’s or propagandist’s invention: he is a human being: and to what degree I am able it is my business to reproduce him as the human being he is; not just to amalgamate him into some invented, literary imitation of a human being.

(211-212)

The importance of recognizing the author’s embodiment and involvement corresponds directly to the capacity of the text to capture the chain of truths linking a text to the world it describes. Just as Latour’s “chain of transformation” requires a recognition of the historical, constructed nature of scientific knowledge, Agee’s “chain of truths” necessitates a recognition of the documentary observer’s historical, limited participation in the scenes he describes. While the truth Agee will be able to discover and transmit about George Gudger will be a truth relative to his perception, this relative truth *is* still a genuine, valuable knowledge.

This insistence on his own embodiment represents another way that Agee differentiates his work from the documentary journalism of the time, with its sociological tone, its historical scope, and its seeming lack of positionality. Reed and Bruce Jackson both claim that Agee makes himself vulnerable by becoming as flawed a character in the narrative as any of his subjects. But more specifically, Agee makes himself a *body* among suffering bodies. His knowledge of the tenants' lives is not just that of a surveillance camera in their midst, though that is how he imagines himself in order to address the guilt of his intrusion. His knowledge is actually the knowledge of an uncomfortable body creeping around in a world of material things, temporarily experiencing much of the same physical discomfort as those he describes. Just as Evans's photographs make us as viewers feel as though we are sneaking inside a room full of things rather than simply watching suffering play out on a stage, Agee's prose keeps creeping back into the midst of the things he saw, even while longing for an unimplicated, unlimited perspective. To be a voyeur is to live in the world of materiality.

This tension between pursuing an objective ideal and recognizing positionality is where failure becomes potential. The failure of objectivity makes space for an ethical, relative, and earnest way of seeing and of knowing. For example, at the beginning of Chapter One, Agee describes successful perception and representation explicitly as an erasure of one's interfering presence:

I feel that if I can by utter quietness succeed in not disturbing this silence, in not so much as touching this plain of water, I can tell you anything within realm of God [*sic*], whatsoever it may be, that I wish to tell you,

and that what so ever it may be, you will not be able to help but understand it. (46)

The narrator strives for “utter quietness [. . .] not so much as touching” the medium in which he sees the world reflected (46). By erasing himself, he will achieve the political dream of journalistic representation: accurate communication whose truth cannot be avoided. However, this ideal is an impossibility that Agee cannot achieve. If “success” is defined as “utter quietness,” as a disembodied pseudo-presence that sees without limit, without ever disturbing the world, or without taking up material space, then the invasive, embodied perception of all journalism is by definition a failure. Yet such disruption is the inevitable condition of perception and also of documentation: one must move bodily within the conditions one wishes to describe, risking harm to oneself and to others. One must disturb the very conditions one wishes to observe and study, for no possibility of observation avoids these risks. Agee admits this contingency when he muses, “If I were not here [. . .] this would never have existence in human perception” (164). But in the midst of that confession, the recognition that “I am an alien” fights with the dream that he could be “a bodyless eye” (164). Agee’s reflection reproduces the tension between the ideal of objectivity and the actual nature of observation. He continues fretfully:

this would never have existence in human perception. It has none. I do not make myself welcome here. My whole flesh; my whole being; is withdrawn upon nothingness. [. . .] What is taking place here, and it happens daily in this silence, is intimately transacted between this home and eternal space; and consciousness has no residence in nor pertinence to

it save only that, privileged by stealth to behold, we fear the legend:

withdraw, bow down; nor dare the pride to seek to decipher it [. . .]. (164)

Within one paragraph, Agee espouses opposite positions, at once trying to make his body disappear and admitting that nothing has reality outside of his embodied perception.

Should he stop rippling the surface, perhaps he would know nothing. Agee thus foregrounds the paradox at the center of concepts such as “honest” or “objective” journalism. The ideal of objectivity suggests distance, withdrawal, disappearance, condemning interpretation, and construction. But the journalist observer is not a bodiless eye; to learn, the journalist observer cannot withdraw. Instead he occupies a position halfway between that of a bodiless eye (pure perception without materiality) and that of a wasp Agee describes with envy (a fully embodied creature lacking self-awareness and thus able to fully dissolve into the world of the tenant farmers’ home). To practice a truly honest journalism, one might recognize one’s position stuck between these poles and write from a position of both alienation and embodiment.

Here, Agee moves towards a model more akin to Merleau-Ponty’s perception or Latour’s constructed, contingent scientific knowledge. His knowledge of the Gudgers does not happen automatically, crossing the threshold from materiality to mind in an ontological leap that escapes ethical quandary. Instead, knowledge functions as a contingent process that develops over time because of his immersion in the same perceptual world as the Gudgers. He can identify with their bodily experiences and thus begins to have a small sense of what they have experienced, thought, and felt. Agee argues this when he explains how spending night after night in the Gudger home allows him to begin to know something of them: “it is not only their bodies but their postures

that I know, and their weight on the bed or on the floor, so that I lie down inside each one as if exhausted in a bed, and I become not my own shape and weight and self, but that of each of them, the whole of it” (52). Imagined here as the transformation of the observer’s body into that of the observed, knowledge is embodied. In this model, the experience of the tenant farmers is not something that Agee can access directly. But it is something that he can know through his own bodily immersion in their life and through his own sensing, perceiving body’s growing familiarity with the environment shaping their existences. This process of identification necessarily takes place over time as individual events of perception contribute to a growing knowledge of the world. Thus, like text, perception unfolds over time; immediacy and directness remain fantasies.

We see this process of gradual perceptual awareness at work when Agee tells the story of finally meeting the Gudgers. Sitting out an early afternoon rainstorm in their home before he mires his car in the mud, Agee describes his awakening awareness. At this point, he realizes he has not understood the life of the Gudgers at all through simply photographing them, an ignorance mirrored in the scene of the storm, where darkness prevents him from seeing the family’s faces or their surroundings:

here in this room we are in a near dead darkness, in which at first I know, only that it is full of people, whom I do not yet see. Through two walls of this shuttered room and parts of the ceiling daylight is let in short lead slivers [. . .] I see there are on the bed and floor a woman and children, none of whom makes a sound or says a word, nor can I yet make out their faces or their eyes [. . .]. (349)

In direct contrast to the past tense assertiveness of a claim like *You Have Seen Their Faces*, Agee offers a tentative confession that this family is composed of people “whom I do not yet see.” Their “faces and their eyes” remain hidden from him even as he sits in their midst. Similarly, upon first entering the Gudgers’ lives, Agee can know very little about them or their experiences. Staying with them is a process of beginning to see. After Gudger lights an oil lamp – a process as full of failures and missteps as Agee’s process of representation – Agee begins to learn more:

George is scratching a match; it glints and dies; another; dead wet pulp; another, flares; he guards it in his palm, he touches the wick; the dark flame climbs shapeless in braiding of oleaginous smoke; he sets the chimney round it, brings it trim, the flame pales, takes shape, brightens and swells to level, and stands there in glass; I look around me: the sobriety of its fragrant light is spread not quite to the two far walls but on all surfaces of wood more near, details of furniture, bed iron, bodies, faces [ . . . ]. (349)

This lamp is the same one that Agee has previously described at length in “On the Porch:1.” In that scene, as here, the lamp symbolizes both the possibilities and the failures of perception: it is difficult to light, and yet it is the only vehicle allowing one to observe the details of another’s life. The light from this flame cannot illuminate everything in the Gudgers’ cabin, since its light extends “not quite to the two far walls.” The lamp thus provides a metaphor for limited but accurate, embodied perception, one which can provide adequate light to see some details of material life but only through a process of gradual illumination. The material conditions of life become progressively

clearer: first, the furniture of the tenant family; then their bodies; finally, their faces. As Agee comes to know Gudger as a host and familiarizes himself with the environment of the Gudgers' home, perception and mutual embodiment emerge as positive conditions of knowing rather than simply impediments to idealized, disembodied seeing. Agee "begin[s] to see around me a little" and this seeing eventually enables him to say "what little I can in writing" (349; 10).

If we return to Agee's discussion of the natural environment, we see a similar two-step process of mediation at work. While acknowledging the inherent limitations of his own perception and of language, Agee participates in a gradual awakening of perception that puts him into contact with a sensibly real environment:

The dead oak and pine, the ground, the dew, the air, the whole realm of what our bodies lay in and our minds in silence wandered, walked in, swam in, watched upon, was delicately fragrant as a paradise, and, like all that is best, was loose, light, casual, totally actual. There was, by our minds, our memories, our thoughts and feelings, some combination, some generalizing, some art, and science; but none of the close-kneed priggishness of science, and none of the formalism and straining and lily-gilding of art. All the length of the body and all of its parts and functions were participating, and were being realized and rewarded, inseparable from the mind, identical with it: and all, everything, that the mind touched, was actuality, and all, everything, that the mind touched turned immediately, yet without in the least losing the quality of its total individuality, into joy and truth, or rather, revealed, of its self, truth, which

in its very nature was joy, which must be the end of art, of investigation,  
and of all anyhow human existence. (199)

Now Agee specifically situates himself as a body within a world of material items. By thus situating himself, Agee recognizes himself as a thinking, perceiving body immersed in a “loose, light, casual, totally actual” world of trees, ground, and air. His recognition of the simultaneity of embodiment and mental reflection imagines an interactive process of perception leading to understanding and awareness. If the truth Agee encounters is “revealed,” the material world does the revealing, playing an integral part in Agee’s growing awareness of “human existence.” This dawning perceptual consciousness is akin to Latour’s *translation* or the processes of intertwined perception that Merleau-Ponty describes. Understanding of the world is an event that takes place over time and is at no point automatic or guaranteed. The observing mind participates in this process, since there is, as Agee admits, “some combination, some generalizing, some art, and science.” Yet Agee also imagines this process as interactive, as we see by the sexualizing of understanding and representation. Science appears as “close-kneed,” whereas Agee imagines his own understanding as receptive to letting the world in. Knowledge becomes something conceived via the open receptiveness of an observing human mind and body, where “All of the length of the body and all of its parts and functions were participating.” This description of perception accounts for various levels of mediation involved in the creation of human knowledge: involvement with the material realm of the “actual”; the participation of the sensing body; the necessary combination and re-creation by human consciousness required to translate perception into language and knowledge; the achievement, or at least the approach towards, an art or investigation that connects back

through a chain of truths to the “totally *actual*” world of ground, dew, air, trees, and bodies.

Despite the inevitable failures of language and of perception, then, Agee formulates a hopeful vision of representation. He imagines an art of an “immediate world” where “everything is to be discerned, for him who can discern it” when the observer approaches this world “with the whole of consciousness seeking to perceive it as it stands” and when “all of consciousness is shifted from the imagined, the revisive, to the effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is” (9). In these descriptions, the author’s endeavor to align his or her perception and language as closely as possible with the world creates the possibility of successful representation.

#### **“Not by Its Captive but by Its Utmost Meanings”: Endeavors at Truth**

It is thus that Agee imagines his project as an endeavor, approaching a constrained translation of the actual. The effort to immerse oneself in the perceptual universe, to the point that one’s body stops being an impediment and starts to be a vehicle for awareness, can open up the possibility for a kind of documentary writing that shares enough relative, contingent, yet truthful knowledge to challenge existing, unjust systems such as tenant farming. Like the scientific experimenter in Latour’s analysis, the Ageeian observer is actively immersed in the world of material things, engaging it bodily and translating what he learns through this medium into language. While admitting the influence of his individual perspective and bias, he strives as much as possible to put this influence into conversation with what he observes.

If we return to Agee's initial frustration at language's inability to *embody*, we see him responding precisely by striving, making an *effort*. "[A] certain kind of artist," he insists,

whom we will distinguish from others as a poet rather than a prose writer, despises this fact about words or his medium, and continually brings words as near as he can to an illusion of embodiment. In doing so he accepts a falsehood but makes, of a sort in any case, better art. [. . .] becoming, as a result, both nearer the truth and farther from it than those things which, like science and scientific art, merely describe, and those things which, like human beings and their creations and the entire state of nature, merely are, the truth. (210)

Here, Agee accepts the inherent limitations of language and imagines writing as an endeavor that will push these limits as far as possible. It is this pushing that distinguishes the "poetry" of a work from other "prose" journalism as well as from scientific writing. Given how language is bound to fail, *Praise* "accepts a falsehood [. . .] accepts the most dangerous and impossible of bargains[,] and makes the best of it" (210). In this passage, Agee begins to imagine writing as something which, despite its shortcomings, eventually transcends its isolation in a realm of pure aesthetics or pure textuality, coming as close as possible to things that "simply are." Thus, the inevitable failure of language to embody the material world becomes one law that Agee must accept, while yet pushing as close as he can towards the limit of material identification, where language may embody or materialize things.

Agee's self-conscious, hesitant ecomimetic invocation of the material environments of the tenant farmers thus becomes a central weapon in his attack on ideology. This dialectical capacity of representation allows him to alert readers to their tendency to see the world of Southern tenant farming as either too removed from or too akin to daily life in their own towns. Agee wants readers to recognize that the distance between the reader and the tenant farmer is as insurmountable as the distance between a clod of Alabama dirt and the words "Alabama dirt" on a mass-produced page. At the same time, the connection between the two is as real as the image of dirt that such a phrase calls to mind.

The process of effort that Agee imagines is collaborative, involving the relationships between reader, writer, and subject; writing is for him a "human effort which requires co-operation" (98). In order to approach the language of reality, the first responsibility lies on the writer. The writer's obligations include recognizing the limited referential capacity of language, admitting to the perspectival nature of one's situated perception, on a bodily as well as a social level, and cultivating an attitude of humility in the face of all these conditions. The ideal that Agee postulates is

To come devotedly into the depths of a subject, your respect for it increasing in every step and your whole heart weakening apart with shame upon yourself in your dealing with it: To know at length better and better and at length into the bottom of your soul your unworthiness of it: Let me hope in any case that it is something to have begun to learn. Let this all stand however it may: since I cannot make it the image it should be, let it

stand as the image it is: I am speaking of my verbal part of this book as a whole. (281)

While this stance is not fail-safe, it can be a step towards the contingent, ethical “something other” which Reed claims Agee and Evans sought. Yet the recognition of such contingency remains a critical part of this process of effort: “Failure, indeed, is almost as strongly an obligation as an inevitability, in such a work: and therein sits the deadliest trap of the exhausted conscience” (210). Thus, the ethical necessity of failure makes space for the participatory role of the subjects, both the tenant farmers themselves and the nonhuman actants constituting the environment depicted.

Yet the dual motion of effort, of participating in an attempt that may well fail, also recognizes representation as *necessary*. The need to represent remains urgent given the unjust system that perpetuates the unsustainable, ecologically destructive practices of cotton farming. While the act of capturing the *materiality* of Alabama and the *actuality* of the Gudgers fails, the effort and the act of telling remains important, similar to Thoreau’s endeavor to “wake up my neighbors” through his own attempts to speak. Agee shares with his contemporary journalists a desire to wake up his neighbors, but he wants to admit the contingency and shortcomings of his attempts, acknowledging, “There is no way of taking the heart and the intelligence by the hair and of wresting it to its feet, and of making it look this terrific thing in the eyes ” (283). Without being able to force his readers to recognize the political and ethical difficulties of which he speaks, Agee still hopes to elicit their awareness. “We undertake not much yet some, to say,” he claims (97). The ethical impetus behind the need to say becomes clear as Agee sketches the

disparity between Mrs. Gudger's discomfort and his own efforts to describe her circumstances:

how conceivably in words is it to be given as it is in actuality, the accumulated weight of these actions upon her; and what this cumulation has made of her body; and what it has made of her mind and of her heart and of her being. And how is this to be made so real to you who read of it, that it will stand and stay in you as the deepest and most iron anguish and guilt of your existence that you are what you are, and that she is what she is, and that you cannot for one moment exchange places with her, nor by any such hope make expiation for what she has suffered at your hands, and for what you have gained at hers: but only by consuming all that is in you into the never relaxed determination that this shall be made different, and shall be made right, and that of what is 'right' some, enough to die for, is clear already [. . .]. (283)

As this passage makes clear, the writer's effort to *say*, to give an actuality in words, is an effort to reach in two directions: back to the material realities shaping the life of each tenant farmer; and forward to the reader, inviting him or her into an active, imaginative participation that helps to retrace the "chain of truths" woven through each documentary act. Such participation will hopefully be invoked by the recognition of futility and failure. Agee's inability to say is not just a recognition of the incommensurate distance between the reader and the subject; it is not just a means of forestalling identification or pity. It also frames a mirror image of the reader's inability to "make expiation" for a system in which he or she has unknowingly participated. Just as the writer's only option in the face

of certain failure is to participate in an ongoing effort to say, the reader's only option is to participate in a "never relaxed determination" to seek understanding, albeit in guilt and anguish. Such effort, such emotion would be the opposite of complacency and pity, feelings that spring from identification and ready dismissal. The unresolvable guilt that cannot ever result in "expiation" will hopefully cultivate an ongoing urge, even need, in the reader to seek change.

While this quest to find the world "made different" and "made right" may be as doomed to failure as Agee's attempt at adequate representation, the direction and energy of such an impulse seems better than a pity that simply reinforces readers' separation from America's rural poor and the systems that sustain them. It is an invitation to readers to become actively involved in the processes of representation and the processes of social change, an invitation that Agee yearns for by calling to readers to see in his writing something beyond simple textual isolation, to see in themselves something beyond complacent pity. To reach such a goal will require readers to make an effort, which Agee invokes by begging the reader, "let us most quietly and in most reverent fierceness say, not by its captive but by its utmost meanings" (387). While this line introduces the Lord's Prayer, the sentiment it invokes is the same for the writer and the reader – a hope that reverence and an effort to move beyond limitations might help individuals live into a potential as elusive as the materiality of the earth.

Agee thus turns to a kind of constrained realism in order to salvage documentary journalism. While writing will fail to reproduce the event of encounter between a perceiving body and a material, perceptual world, the reader can help to prevent the sedimentation of perception and text into "lists and inventories merely, things dead unto

themselves” (98). As Agee implores, “if they [words] sink, lose impetus, meter, intension, then bear in mind at least my wish, and perceive in them and restore them what strength you can of yourself” (98). Of course, by invoking the necessary participation of the reader, Agee also highlights difficulties and failures inherent to his method. By resorting to a highly aesthetic and literary version of self-reflexivity, Agee employs a register likely to alienate his reading audience and his subjects alike. But, arguably, the very mode of documentary perpetuates such alienation; whether or not it is ethically effective to exaggerate such alienation to a breaking point is open to debate. Agee alienates the reader, accepting that some level of alienation is inevitable. He admits,

anything set forth within an art form, ‘true’ as it may be in art terms, is hermetically sealed away from identification with everyday ‘reality.’ No matter how strong and vivid it may be, its strength and vividness are not of that order which, in the open air of our actual, personal living, we draw in every time we breathe. Even at its very best it is make believe, requiring the killing insult of ‘suspension of disbelief,’ because it is art. This is in some degree true even of the most ‘real’ writing I know (212).

Agee recognizes all artwork as merely a construction or an effect. But he counters this perspective, arguing against himself, “And yet is there any good reason why so-called [*sic*] art cannot, without any complicated wrench of the mind, be accepted as living, as telling of the living ‘truth,’ so long as art meets you halfway, and tries to tell of nothing else?” (212). Agee acknowledges a fundamental difference between art and reality but asks why we cannot accept writing as an effort that does more than create fictions. While fully recognizing the ontological difference between the “hermetically sealed” world of

textual art and the material world of “everyday reality,” Agee invokes the mind and the idea of effort, of an art that meets reality halfway, as a possible way to know the world relatively yet truly.

Agee's concern about the limits of representation thus mirrors a question that continues to haunt critical theory: how can we understand the relationship between produced texts and the material world that they strive to represent? Agee's work implies that literature's ability to change the way humans think about their world depends on whether, as Latour has said, texts can “pack the world into words” (*Pandora* 24). Without a relationship between reality and text, literature has no ability to speak of the world and to speak for justice within that world. This potential impotency is the haunting legacy of post-structuralism: if there is nothing outside the text, *can* a text speak of the world? can it speak to the world? can readers and writers connect world and text? Clearly negotiations between world and text happen all the time; to doubt this would be to surrender to what Ursula Heise has called “the obfuscations of political discourse” (505). However, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* reveals that a simple belief in correspondence may also perpetuate suspect identifications or allow divides between readers and subjects to remain unchallenged. The slippery uncertainties in language highlighted by poststructuralist theory have helped theorists understand how representations of places and groups of people may be insufficient or inadequate; and to surrender this insight to pragmatic political purposes may lead to sentimental identification of the kind Agee disdains. Then, like Agee, ecocritics may ask: how do you write to save what you love, when writing is all you have and it very well may not be enough? How do you recognize the failings of this writing while continuing to validate the importance of making an

effort? And how can we understand the contributions that formal strategies make to writers' attempts to represent realities that must be represented to readers who must understand in order for justice to be accomplished? Agee's complicated dialectical rhetoric provides an example of a text that negotiates these tricky straits, neither surrendering to facile realism nor surrendering its purpose to language's limitations or to self-conscious despair.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION – CONSTRAINED REALISM AND POLITICAL ECOLOGY

[W]e cannot choose whether to engage in political ecology or not; but we can choose whether to engage in it *surreptitiously*, by *distinguishing* between questions of nature and questions of politics, or *explicitly*, by treating these two sets of questions as a single issue that arises for all *collectives*.

Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*

Using the redefinition of politics that Latour offers here, this project has attempted to build on the idea that literature can be political and, at the same time, ecological. As the range of texts included suggests, the ecology I have in mind is not limited to the scientific discipline of ecology – the kind of grounding in scientific thought and culture advocated by both Dana Phillips and Glen Love.<sup>73</sup> Rather, this ecology recognizes the interrelation of questions of nature and politics within literary texts, asserting a parallel interrelation between language and the material world. Literary texts can provide a step in political/ecological chains of transformation, mobilizing individual observations of the material world and “making [them] available for arguments” (*Pandora* 100). Like Thoreau’s *Walden*, literary texts can mobilize the world in hopes of reforming relationships between human societies and the more-than-human world. Conversely, literary texts can document the dominant tendency to disavow mobilization, illustrating our participation in modern purifications and proliferations that thwart our

---

<sup>73</sup> In *Practical Ecocriticism*, Love argues, “I use the word *ecology* here the way Darwinist Gould would prefer, in its scientific sense, to refer to the study of the relationship between organisms and their living and nonliving environment. Ecocriticism’s future is, I believe, encoded in the prefix *eco* [. . .] The new study of literature and nature is connected to the science of ecology – taking from it not only the popular term *ecocriticism* but also the basic premise of the interrelatedness of a human cultural activity like literature and that natural world that encompasses it” (37-38). In *The Truth of Ecology*, Phillips laments ecocriticism’s scientific illiteracy, arguing that ecology as used in criticism tends to be “metaphorical window dressing” or a philosophy of holistic “organicism” (112; 114).

ecological aims. Like Faulkner's "The Bear" and *Absalom, Absalom!*, literary texts can show us how a continued insistence on the separation of culture from nature and text from world can mask deep-seated racial and environmental injustices, fostering unbalanced understandings of our place in the world.

In either framework, literary texts stop being *purely* textual entities, separated from the material world by a fundamental ontological dualism. Instead, a political/ecological criticism recognizes texts' hybridity, whether arguing for writers' self-conscious use of such hybridity in pursuit of political aims or connecting texts' struggle with hybridity to their engagement with political questions that involve the material world. Notably, this collective model of representation provides more than a critical reconciliation of disciplinary conflicts about the nature of representation. It also offers a more generous model for approaching texts' political projects, articulating their potential veracity. When criticism focuses only on the textual artifact or the social effects of the text, the author's and the text's involvement in a larger network of material and social relations can become invisible. Why does this matter to literary criticism? Because it leads criticism to reproduce and struggle within the same conceptual dichotomies facing the authors, narrators, and characters of literary texts. It leaves critical analysis trying to reconcile Thoreau's empirical and transcendental impulses; Norris's political and aesthetic commitments; Faulkner's "sensitivity to nature" and obsession with language; Agee's self-reflexivity and ethics (Kartiganer xi). It leaves criticism convinced, just like Quentin Compson or Presley, that language is ultimately ineffective: a stalemate, a purely co-optable commodity, an extension of ideology, a "problem in impure properties carried tediously to an unvarying nil" (*Sound* 124). By contrast, a Latourian

vision of political ecology positions texts as participants in the struggle to reframe the reductive poles of the modern constitution. This is not to say that authors deliberately attempt to escape the dichotomies of nature and culture, text and world, but rather that serious engagement with questions of nature and society necessarily proliferates hybrids, allowing critics to recognize resulting textual contradictions as responsive to or ignorant of their own hybridity.

But even if a Latourian political ecology and a Latourian model of reference promise new and interesting critical approaches to complex, contradictory texts, does such a conceptual revision provide anything useful for environmentalism? Does it do anything besides add critical complexity to literary discussions and literary representation? Paraphrasing R.H. Peters, Dana Phillips argues that “the goal of ecology, especially at a time of global environmental crisis, should not be to generate a correct picture, complete in all its details, of the workings of ecosystems, but to explore ways in which particular environmental problems can be more effectively addressed and redressed” (*Truth* 74-75). Do hybrid models of representation offer any such effective strategies to environmental practice? Perhaps Phillips is right in asserting that we do not need better *representations* of trees, ecosystems, and environments in order to develop effective means of redress; that is, we don’t necessarily need more thick description just for its own sake. But we do need ways of conceiving human relationship to the more-than-human world that evades reductive dualisms. Thick description provides one important tool that writers use in the struggle to better understand humans’ position in the larger ecological collective. Hybridity, mobilization, and translation provide others.

I believe that these tools can contribute to more successful ecological and critical approaches. Criticism benefits from this model because, without reverting to authorial intent, we gain a way of assessing mobilizations and thinking about how discursive uses of the material world affect our engagement with our environments – both social and natural. This model of representation also reinforces one of the special things that the environmental humanities, and environmental literary criticism in particular, can bring into environmental discourse: a careful attention to the relationship between words and the world, and a watchful insistence that readers, writers, and other actants recognize their participation in the construction of the world we know. While an over-insistence on the cultural nature of the environment can lead to the relativism Heise feared, an over-confidence in the solidity and substance of a pure “nature” likewise contributes to the rash perpetuation of ecological positions that are not politically viable.

I am lucky at this university to have had discussions with a lively community of interdisciplinary environmental scholars, and many of the most pointed debates I’ve heard going on within non-literary environmental circles still struggle to balance the seemingly competing claims of the natural and the social worlds. Do we value the preservation of a seemingly untouched wilderness space over the competing claims of indigenous communities? Can a local food politics or a greening of individual consumption make up for our larger social implication in networks of unjust exchange – networks that continue to exploit distant communities even if we “go green” in our hometown? Environmental justice criticism drew our attention to these nature/culture imbroglios. But as long as we continue to frame nature and society as two distinct realms, forced into uncomfortable proximity only by the particularly weird problems of ecology,

it can be hard to embrace the pursuit of solutions that serve all communities equally.<sup>74</sup>

Despite our best intentions, we feel we must choose between communities and environments, because *only pure nature* is an ecological choice.

If we relinquish this purification, we can more forcefully participate in debates about what is to be done in a given environment, accounting for the needs of all participants. We can recognize, with Latour, how “everywhere, every day, people are fighting over the very question of the good common world in which everyone—human and nonhuman—wants to live. Nothing and no one must come to simplify, shorten, limit, or reduce the scope of this debate in advance by calmly asserting that the argument bears only on ‘representations that humans make of the world’” (*Politics* 129-130). As Latour’s argument suggests, better politics require us to rethink representation. As long as we imagine representation as something false, something separate from the world about which we argue and in which we act, we will continue to limit political debates and discourse. Re-imagining the relationship between humans and the more-than-human world requires us to reimagine the relationship between language and the human world. Doing so will make our arguments, our discourse, and our literary texts meaningful participants in an ecological debate that also includes mobilized nonhumans.

---

<sup>74</sup> In *The Environmental Justice Reader*, Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein define environmental justice in terms that demand consideration of the supposedly separated realms of so-called nature and so-called society: “We define environmental justice as the right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment. We define the environment, in turn, as the places where we live, work, play, and worship” (4).

APPENDIX:

ABBREVIATED TITLES OF WORKS FREQUENTLY CITED

- Absalom* William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*
- Faces* Margaret Bourke-White and Ernest Caldwell, *You Have Seen Their Faces*.
- Future* Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*.
- Imagination* Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*.
- Modern* Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.
- Moses* William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*.
- Pandora* Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*.
- Politics* Bruno Latour, *The Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*.
- Praise* James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families*.
- Sound* William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*.
- Walden* Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*.  
Ed. William Rossi.
- Worlds* Laura Dassow Walls, *Seeing New Worlds*.

## REFERENCES CITED

- Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996. Print.
- Adamson, Joni, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein. "Introduction: Environmental Justice Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy." *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy*. Eds. Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 2002. 3-14. Print.
- Agee, James and Walker Evans. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1939. Print.
- Aiken, Charles S. "Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County: A Place in the American South." *Geographical Review* 69.3 (1979): 331-348. Print.
- . "Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County: Geographical Fact into Fiction." *Geographical Review* 67.1 (1977): 1-21. Print.
- Allen, Myles. "A novel view of global warming." *Nature* 433 (2005): 198. Web. 10 April 2012. <[http://climateprediction.net/science/pubs/nature\\_StateOfFear.pdf](http://climateprediction.net/science/pubs/nature_StateOfFear.pdf)>.
- Arnold, Jean, Lawrence Buell, Michael P. Cohen, Elizabeth Dodd, Simon C. Estok, Ursula K. Heise, Jonathan Levin, Patrick D. Murphy, Andrea Parra, William Slaymaker, Scott Slovic, Timothy Sweet, and Louise Westling. "Forum on Literatures of the Environment." *PMLA* 114.5 (1999): 1089-1104. Print.
- Barnes, Russell. "Dawkins' take on Relativism and Science." *The Genius Charles Darwin*. Youtube. 2008. Web. 10 April 2012. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohYGd2sSV5w>>.
- Baym, Nina. "Thoreau's View of Science." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 26.2 (1965): 221-34. Print.
- Beers, Terry. *Gunfight at Mussel Slough: The Evolution of a Western Myth*. Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 2004. Print.
- Bell, Michael Davitt. *The Problem of American Realism*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996. Print.
- Benson, Jackson J. "Quentin Compson: Self Portrait of a Young Artist's Emotions." *Twentieth Century Literature* 17.3 (1971): 143-159. Rpt. Kinney 214-230. Print.
- Berman, Marshall. "All that is Sold Melts into Air: Marx, Modernism, and Modernization." *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. Penguin: 1982. Print.

- Biagioli, Mario, ed. *The Science Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1999. Print.
- Blackford, Mansel G. *The Politics of Business in California: 1890-1920*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1977. *The Knowledge Bank*. Web. 22 April 2012. <<http://kb.osu.edu/>>.
- Bourke-White, Margaret and Ernest Caldwell. *You Have Seen Their Faces*. 1937. Athens: U. of Georgia P, 1995. Print.
- Breaden, Dale G. "William Faulkner and the Land." *American Quarterly* 10.3 (1958): 344-357. Print.
- Brown, May Cameron. "The Language of Chaos: Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*." *American Literature* 51.4 (1980): 544-552. Print.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge: Belknap, 1995. Print.
- . "Faulkner and the Claims of the Natural World." Kartiganer and Abadie. 1-18. Print.
- . Foreword. Schneider, *Thoreau's Sense* ix-x. Print.
- . *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005. Print.
- . "Thoreau and the Natural Environment." *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*. Ed. Joel Myerson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995. 1711-93. Rpt. in William Rossi, *Walden* 527-543. Print.
- Carlebach, Michael L. "Documentary and Propaganda: The Photographs of the Farm Security Administration." *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 8 (1988): 6-25. Print.
- Castronovo, Russ. "Geo-Aesthetics: Fascism, Globalism, and Frank Norris." *boundary 2* 30.3 (2003): 157-184. Print.
- Cavell, Stanley. *The Senses of Walden*. Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1972. Print.
- Cosgrove, Peter. "Snapshots of the Absolute: Mediamachia in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*." *American Literature* 67.2 (1995): 329-357. Print.
- Cowley, Malcolm. Introduction. *The Portable Faulkner*. Malcolm Cowley, ed. New York: Viking Press, 1946. vii-xxxii. Print.
- Crichton, Michael. *State of Fear*. New York: Avon Books, 2004. Print.

- Crisler, Jesse, ed. *Frank Norris: Collected Letters*. San Francisco: Book Club of California, 1986. Print.
- Curry, Patrick. "Nature Post-Nature." *New Formations* (2008): 51-63. Print.
- Curtis, James C. and Sheila Grannen. "Let Us Now Appraise Famous Photographs: Walker Evans and Documentary Photography." *Winterthur Portfolio* 15.1 (1980): 1-23. Print.
- Dain, Martin J. *Faulkner's County: Yoknapatawpha*. New York: Random House, 1963. Print.
- Doran, Peter. "Cold Hard Facts." *New York Times* July 27, 2006. Web. 10 April 2012. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/27/opinion/27doran.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/27/opinion/27doran.html?_r=1)>.
- Eagleton, Terry. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990. Print.
- Egan, Timothy. *The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. Print.
- Evans, Harold. "Crichton's conspiracy theory." *BBC News*. 7 October 2005. Web. 10 April 2012. <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/magazine/4319574.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/4319574.stm)>.
- "ExxonMobil: Unlocking a Century's Supply of Natural Gas." ExxonMobil. *Youtube*. 19 May 2011. Web. 22 April 2012. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDfVycbnaBc>>.
- Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!* New York: Vintage Books, 1936. Print.
- . *Go Down, Moses*. New York: Vintage Books, 1940. Print.
- . *The Sound and the Fury*. New York: Vintage International, 1984. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1971. Print.
- Fox, Daniel M. "The Achievement of the Federal Writers' Project." *American Quarterly* 13.1 (1961): 3-19. Print.
- Furtak, Rick Anthony. "Skepticism and Perceptual Faith: Henry David Thoreau and Stanley Cavell on Seeing and Believing." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 43.3 (2007): 542-61. Print.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Glotfelty, Cheryl. Introduction. Glotfelty and Fromm xv – xxxvii. Print.

- Glotfelty, Cheryll and Harold Fromm, eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1996. Print.
- Godden, Richard. "Absalom, Absalom!, Haiti and Labor History: Reading Unreadable Revolutions." *ELH* 61.3 (1994): 685-720. Print.
- Goodbody, Axel and Kate Rigby, eds. *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*. Charlottesville, VA: U of Virginia P, 2011. Print.
- Gould, Stephen Jay. "Deconstructing the 'Science Wars' by Reconstructing an Old Mold." *Science* 287.5451 (2000): 253-261. Print.
- Graham, Don, ed. *Critical Essays on Frank Norris*. Boston: GK Hall and Co., 1980. Print.
- Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991. Print
- Harvey, David. "Time-Space compression and the postmodern condition." *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990. 284-323. Print.
- . "What's Green and Makes the Environment Go Round?" *The Cultures of Globalization*. Eds. Frederic Jameson and Masao Misyoshi. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1998. 327-355. Print.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. "Constrained Constructivism: Locating Scientific Inquiry in the Theater of Representation." *Realism and Representation: Essays on the Problem of Realism in Relation to Science, Literature, and Culture*. Ed. George Levine. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1993. 27-43. Print.
- Heise, Ursula. "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism." *PMLA*. 121.2 (2006): 503-516. Print.
- Howarth, William. "Some Principles of Ecocriticism." Glotfelty and Fromm 69-91. Print.
- Howe, Irving. "Yoknapatawpha from a Historical Perspective." *William Faulkner: A Critical Study*. 3rd ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975. Rpt. in Kinney 119-123. Print.
- Howells, William Dean. *Criticism and Fiction*. 1891. New York: Harper, 1893. Print.
- Janofsky, Michael K. "Michael Crichton, Novelist, Becomes Senate Witness." *New York Times*. 29 September 2005. Web. 22 April 2012.  
<[http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/29/books/29cric.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/29/books/29cric.html?_r=1)>.

- Johnson, Rochelle. "Walden, *Rural Hours*, and the Dilemma of Representation." Schneider, *Thoreau's Sense* 179-93. Print.
- Kaplan, Amy. *The Social Construction of Literary Realism*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992. Print.
- Kartiganer, Donald M. Introduction. Kartiganer and Abadie. vii-xix. Print.
- Kartiganer, Donald M. and Ann J. Abadie, eds. *Faulkner and the Natural World*. Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 1999. Print.
- Kehr, Kurt. "Walden Three: Ecological Changes in the Landscape of Henry David Thoreau." *Journal of Forest History* 27.1 (1983): 28-33. Print.
- Kinney, Arthur F., ed. *Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The Compson Family*. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982. Print.
- Kolodny, Annette. *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*. Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina P, 1975. Print.
- Krause, David. "Reading Bon's Letter and Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*" *PMLA* 99.2 (1984): 225-241. Print.
- Lange, Dorothea and Paul Schuster Tyler. *An American Exodus*. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1939. Print.
- Latour, Bruno. *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999. Print.
- . *The Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004. Print.
- . *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993. Print.
- Lehan, Richard. *Realism and Naturalism: The Novel in an Age of Transition*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2005. Print.
- Levine, George. "Literary Realism Reconsidered: 'The world in its length and breadth.'" *Adventures in Realism*. Ed. Matthew Beaumont. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007. 13-32. Print.
- Lockyer, Judith. *Ordered by Words: Language and Narration in the Novels of William Faulkner*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1991. Print.

- Lofaro, Michael A., ed. *Agee Agonistes: Essays on the Life, Legend, and Works of James Agee*. The University of Tennessee Press: Knoxville. 2007. Print.
- Love, Glen. *Practical Ecocriticism*. Charlottesville, VA: U of Virginia P, 2003. Print.
- Luke, Timothy. *Ecocritique: Contesting the Politics of Nature, Economy, and Culture*. Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota P, 1997. Print.
- Lydenberg, John. "Nature Myth in Faulkner's *The Bear*." Utley, Bloom, and Kinney 280-289. Print.
- Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1964. Print.
- . "Two Kingdoms of Force." *The Massachusetts Review* 1.1 (1959): 62-95. Print.
- McElrath, Joseph R., Jr. "Frank Norris's *The Octopus*: The Christian Ethic as Pragmatic Response." *Graham* 138-152. Print.
- McElrath, Joseph R., Jr. and Jesse S. Crisler. *Frank Norris: A Life*. Urbana, IL.: U. of Illinois P., 2006. Print.
- McHaney, Thomas L. "First is Jefferson: Faulkner Shapes His Domain." *Mississippi Quarterly* 57 (2004): 512-535. Print.
- McMurry, Andrew. *Environmental Renaissance: Emerson, Thoreau, and the Systems of Nature*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2003. Print.
- Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: Harper Collins, 1980. Print.
- Morton, Timothy. *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007. Print.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge, 1962. Print.
- Miller, James S. "Inventing the 'Found' Object: Artifactuality, Folk History, and the Rise of Capitalist Ethnography in 1930s America." *The Journal of American Folklore* 117.466 (2004): 373-393. Print.
- Norris, Frank. "The Need of a Literary Conscience," *World's Work*, December 1901. Rpt. in Pizer 1157-1160. Print.
- . *The Octopus*. New York: Doubleday, 1901. Print.

- . "An Opening for Novelists: Great Opportunities for Fiction-Writers in San Francisco," *The Wave*, May 22, 1897. Rpt. in Pizer 1113-1114. Print.
- . "A Plea for Romantic Fiction," *Boston Evening Transcript*, December 18, 1901. Rpt. in Pizer 1165-69. Print.
- . *The Responsibilities of the Novelist and Other Literary Essays*. New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1903. Print.
- . "Zola as Romantic Writer," *The Wave*, June 27, 1896. Rpt. in Pizer 1106-1108. Print.
- Peck, H. Daniel. *Thoreau's Morning Work: Memory and Perception in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, the Journal, and Walden*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1990. Print.
- Phillips, Dana. "Is Nature Necessary?" Glotfelty and Fromm 204-222. Print.
- . *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America*. New York: Oxford UP, 2003. Print.
- Pizer, Donald, ed. *Frank Norris: Novels and Essays*. New York: Library of America, 1986. Print.
- Prewitt, Wiley C., Jr. "Return of the Big Woods: Hunting and Habitat in Yoknapatawpha." Kartiganer and Abadie. 198-221. Print.
- Quinn, Jeanne Follansbee. "The Work of Art: Irony and Identification in 'Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.'" *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 34.3 (2001): 338-68. Print.
- Rabinowitz, Paula. "Voyeurism and Class Consciousness: James Agee and Walker Evans, 'Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.'" *Critical Inquiry* 21 (1992): 143-70. Print.
- Reed, T.V. "Unimagined Existence and the Fiction of the Real: Postmodernist Realism in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men." *Representations* 24 (1988): 156-76. Print.
- Rice, Wallace. "Norris's *The Octopus*." Graham 25-27. Print.
- Rigby, Kate. "Ecocriticism." *Literary and Cultural Criticism at the Twenty-First Century*. Ed. Julian Wofreys. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP. Web. 12 April 2012. <<http://www.asle.org/assets/docs/ECOCRITICISM+Rigby+article.pdf>>.
- Riis, Jacob. *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*. 1890. Williamstown, Mass.: Corner House, 1972. Print.

- Rio-Jeliffe, R. "'Absalom, Absalom!' as Self-Reflexive Novel." *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 11.2 (1981): 75-90. Print.
- . *Obscurity's Myriad Components: The Theory and Practice of William Faulkner*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2001. Print.
- The River*. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Naxos, 2007. DVD.
- Rossi, William. "Thoreau's Transcendental Ecocriticism." Schneider, *Thoreau's Sense* 28-38. Print.
- Sattelmeyer, Robert. "Depopulation, Deforestation, and the Actual Walden Pond." Schneider, *Thoreau's Sense* 179-93. Print.
- Schneider, Richard J. Introduction. Schneider, *Thoreau's Sense* 1-12. Print.
- , ed. *Thoreau's Sense of Place: Essays in American Environmental Writing*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2000. Print.
- Schoenberg, Estella. *Old Tales and Talking: Quentin Compson in William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! and Related Works*. Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 1977. Print.
- "selvage, *n.*" *OED Online*. March 2012. Oxford University Press. Web. 3 May 2012. <<http://www.oed.com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/view/Entry/175531?rskey=PBFSSL&result=1&isAdvanced=false>>.
- Simmons, Nancy Craig. "Speaking for Nature: Thoreau and the 'Problem' of Nature Writing." Schneider, *Thoreau's Sense* 223-34. Print.
- Sokal, Alan D. "Transgressing the Boundaries: An Afterword." *Dissent* 43(4) (1996): 93-99. Web. 22 April 2012. <[http://www.physics.nyu.edu/sokal/afterword\\_v1a.pdf](http://www.physics.nyu.edu/sokal/afterword_v1a.pdf)>.
- . "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity." *Social Text* 46/47 (1996): 217-252. Print.
- Solomon, William. "Politics and Rhetoric in the Novel of the 1930s." *American Literature* 68.4 (1996): 799-818. Print.
- Soper, Kate. *What is Nature?: Culture, Politics, and the non-Human*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995. Print.
- Snow, C. P. *The Two Cultures*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969. Print.
- Stein, Paul S. "Ike McCaslin: Traumatized in a Hawthornian Wilderness." *The Southern Literary Journal* 12.2 (1980): 65-82. Print.

- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*. Ed. William Rossi. New York: W.W. Norton and Company: New York, 2008. Print.
- . "The Succession of Forest Trees." *Henry David Thoreau: Collected Essays and Poems*. Ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2001. 429-443. Print.
- . *A Year in Thoreau's Journal: 1851*. Ed. H. Daniel Peck. London: Penguin, 1993. Print.
- Thoreau, Henry D. and Bradley P. Dean. *Faith in a Seed: The Dispersion of Seeds, and Other Late Natural History Writings*. Washington, D.C: Island Press [for] Shearwater Books, 1993. Print.
- Tomlinson, John. "Deterritorialization: The Cultural Condition of Globalization." *Globalization and Culture*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999. Print.
- Trachtenberg, Alan. Foreword. *You Have Seen Their Faces*. Bourke-White and Caldwell v-viii. Print.
- Urgo, Joseph R. Introduction. Urgo and Abadie, *Faulkner and the Ecology* ix-xxii. Print.
- . "The Yoknapatawpha Project: The Map of a Deeper Existence." *Mississippi Quarterly* 57 (2004): 639-655. Print.
- Urgo, Joseph R. and Ann J. Abadie, eds. *Faulkner and the Ecology of the South: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 2003*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2005. Print.
- . *Faulkner and Material Culture: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha 2004*. Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 2007. Print.
- Utley, Francis L, Lynn Z. Bloom, and Arthur F. Kinney. *Bear, Man, & God: Seven Approaches to William Faulkner's the Bear*. New York: Random House, 1964. Print.
- Vance, William L. "Romance in *The Octopus*." *Graham* 116-137. Print.
- Vernon, Alex. "Narrative Miscegenation: 'Absalom, Absalom!' as Naturalist Novel, Auto/Biography, and African-American Oral Story." *Journal of Narrative Theory* 31.2 (2001): 155-179. Print.
- Wadlington, Warwick. "*The Sound and the Fury*: A Logic of Tragedy." *American Literature* 53.3 (1981): 409-423. Print.

- Waggoner, Hyatt H. "The Historical Novel and the Southern Past: The Case of 'Absalom, Absalom!'" *The Southern Literary Journal* 2.2 (1970): 69-85. Print.
- Walls, Laura Dassow. "Believing in Nature: Wilderness and Wildness in Thoreauvian Science." Schneider, *Thoreau's Sense* 15-27. Print.
- . "From the Modern to the Ecological: Latour on Walden Pond." Goodbody and Rigby. 98-110. Print.
- . *Seeing New Worlds*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1995. Print.
- Welling, Bart H. "A Meeting with Old Ben: Seeing and Writing Nature In Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*." *The Mississippi Quarterly* 55 (4). Mississippi State P, 2002. Print.
- Westling, Louise. *The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996. Print.
- . "Thomas Sutpen's Marriage to the Dark Body of the Land." Kartiganer and Abadie. 126-142. Print.
- Wheeler, Otis B. "Faulkner's Wilderness." *American Literature* 31.2(1959): 127-136. Print.
- Wheeler, Wendy. "Postscript on Biosemiotics: Reading Beyond Words – and Ecocriticism." *New Formations* (2008): 137-154. Print.
- Whitford, Philip and Kathryn Whitford. "Thoreau: Pioneer Ecologist and Conservationist." *The Scientific Monthly* 73.5 (1951): 291-96. Print.
- Whitney, Gordon and William Davis. "From Primitive Woods to Cultivated Woodlots: Thoreau and the Forest History of Concord, Massachusetts." *Journal of Forest History* 30.2 (1986): 70-81. Print.
- Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. New York: Oxford UP, 1973. Print.
- Williamson, Joel. *William Faulkner and Southern History*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993. Print.