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The Politics of Rereading



**Morton Timothy, Ecology: Without Nature.
Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics.**

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Morton, Timothy. *Ecology: Without Nature. Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2007. Pp.249.

Aristotle has famously posited that "nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man" (*Politics*, Bk.1. Ch.8). This is an anthropocentric formulation that works under the assumption that nature is important and valuable to the extent that it serves humans. Ecology has long distanced itself from such man-centered views of the so-called "natural environment," going, at times, to the other extreme by considering, for instance, that (inanimate) nature must be revered because each plant or stone allegedly has a personal(ized) soul therefore it should be treated like a human person (traditional animism); or simply by emphasizing a spiritual interaction between man and mountain, the human and the non-human, revealed through national or tribal rituals and ceremonies (new animism). Thus, modern ecology seems to fall into the trap of either objectifying nature, which has devastating consequences or "subjectifying" it, that is, making it into something that, probably, is *not*—a subject.

In *Ecology: Without Nature*, Timothy Morton reshuffles the ecological cards by disengaging from a discussion of the subject-object dichotomy in order to concentrate on whatever lies in-between, a hazy realm that he calls "ambience." "Ecological writing," he argues, "shuffles subject and object back and forth so that we may think they have dissolved into each other, though what we usually end up with is a blur" called ambience (15). The idea behind Morton's book is simple but strangely enticing. Environmental studies and ecological criticism place so much emphasis upon the environment that from a certain point on it stops being an "environment." By placing it at the center of all discussions and practices we remove it from its natural location, namely the surroundings or the margins. Likewise, nature, in Morton's view, is so persistently in the limelight today that it has, in a way, stopped being natural insofar as it has started to conjure metaphysical representations or notions like God or not so metaphysical (but not absolutely physical, either) concepts such as ecosystem. Nature, that is, as an umbrella term that oscillates wildly between the divine and the material hovers over things without *becoming* those things. Nature rather hides behind an endless series of metonymies, at the end of which it makes an impressive entrance: grass, mountain, air, heterosexuality...Nature. Morton believes that the only way to override the barren metaphoricity and abstractness of ecological thinking is to dispense with the idea of nature altogether. In other words, to have an ecological consciousness that does justice to nature, we will just have to, paradoxically, let go of...nature "as a transcendental term in a material mask," a term that "ironically impedes a proper relationship with the earth and life-forms" (14, 2). If nature is trivialized by our constant references to it, by abolishing not only the term but also its metaphysical representations, we become able to preserve its ineffable mystery, thereby doing justice to an ethical and ambient stance towards the environment, a stance that breaks with the norms of any environmental politics or program.

The author draws upon a number of philosophers and thinkers —Adorno, Kant, Lyotard, Freud, amongst others— to critique environmental *ethics* by questioning ecocritical *aesthetics* and more particularly the kind of environmental writing that claims to take us to the thing itself, raw nature as it really is, through a reproduction of the feeling of being united with nature. The cultural and historical platform upon which he elaborates the (non)concept of *ambience* is eighteenth to nineteenth-century British Romanticism. This is a rather risky thing to do, considering that Romanticism is almost by definition the culmination of the ego, the subjectal I that constitutes, rather than is constituted by, the world, an I used to flaunting itself against the fuzzy background of the surrounding atmosphere or natural environment. The author, to his credit, has decided to let his *own* writing as well as famous Romantic texts work against the grain and norms of Romantic aesthetics. This can be easily understood if we consider that his notions of *ambience* and *ecomimesis* privilege the dimension of encompassing *space*, which is a-temporal and definitely poles apart from the supposedly teleological nature of Romanticism that privileges *time* and the "sense of an ending" (to use the title of Frank Kermode's seminal book). Romantic poets have utilized the environment as a pretext for talking about themselves, a mirror that reflects back their own emotions or, better, a magnifying glass that enlarges those emotions. If Morton is correct, then, Romantic poets must be un-ecological, unless he has an ace up his sleeve and manages to prove that there are more things at stake in Romantic aesthetics than self-reflection and sheer subjectivity. In any case, he does sound determined to show the dark and absolutely ecological or ambient side of Romanticism by announcing that the time has come to engage

in Romantic space/ambience in a more fruitful way, without, however, rendering ambience the epicenter of attention.

The book declares very cogently that we should resist nature as posited by Romanticism, that is, as a transcendental rhetorical concept, and as extolled by ecocriticism. Making a fetish out of nature creates an aesthetic distance between *us* and *it*, which leads to its objectification. The effect of nature's objectification is its demystification, which, in turn, takes us to the next level, that of its violation. The underlying assumption here, as Morton insinuates, is that the prerequisite for truly respecting the environment is to be frightened by it. But why is fear important and where did it go? According to Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of the Enlightenment, the positivistic view of science and rationality contributed to the presentation of nature and the world as a domain governed by specific laws and processes that can be easily explained and predicted. Under these circumstances, nature was no longer dark, fearful and mysterious but was rather reduced to an object that could be studied and eventually tamed. Morton argues that "putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration" (5). The aesthetic distance created probably bore also on the quality of Kantian beauty as the safe contemplation of a natural view, as contrasted to the Sublime that would evoke terror and generate respect for the surrounding ambience. In a way, *ecocritique* (which is preferable, in Morton's mind, to *ecocriticism*) and the so-called *ecomimesis* (a term adjacent to the Platonic conception of mimesis as "the divinely inspired form of madness" rather than its Aristotelian conception as "imitation") favor a re-enchanting, or re-mystification of the environment, which is sadly disenchanting (demystified) thus objectified. The key is to reassume, or resume, the mystery of the world. Morton draws upon Adorno and his idea of "sensuous immediacy" towards nature. Precisely because, for Morton, we begin to consume at the very minute that we start to admire, when the distance between viewer and object dissolves, we stop consuming and actually start interfering with ambience without the mediation of our rational faculties. Apparently, this interference should not occur without at least *some* reluctance on the part of the viewer, as there is always the danger of it turning into a consistent, conscious, and conceptual deed, which is Morton's biggest fear.

Ambient poetics and *ecomimesis* are interchangeable terms in *Ecology: Without Nature*. The author informs us that ecomimesis—a poetic mimesis of our surroundings—puts a lot of effort into simulating the dissolution of inside and outside. The attempted dissolution is "strictly impossible," yet it is attempted all the same (67). The "as if" element of such a simulation (we do it *as if* it were possible) assigns a literary tinge to Morton's idea of the ecomimetic. In fact, ecomimesis is defined by literature and the poetic—this is a book seething with examples from literature and arts—while ambient poetics represents the theory that advances "a materialist way of reading texts with a view to how they encode the literal space of their inscription—if there is such a thing—the spaces between the words, the margins of the page, the physical and social environment of the reader" (3). In short, ambient poetics pays close attention to the empty, unwritten, spaces as well as the written ones, the margins as well as the centers, but, it could be added, it also ensures that the margins remain marginal and emptiness stays empty, otherwise ambience is reduced to either flagrant exploitation of nature or mediocre ecological didacticism. Wordsworth touches upon ecomimesis in the poem "There was a Boy" by hinting at the aesthetically appealing possibility that when you make no sound, you can hear the *absence* of sound. To hear the absence of sound is to become capable of testifying to the existence of those margins of the page, that long-lost emptiness upon which true ecology is supposed to be founded.

One of the most intriguing ideas expressed in Morton's project is that the environment itself is not natural but inherently literary since, in order to exemplify nature, we always resort to metaphors and poeticity. Ecology without nature is an ecology that interrupts the normal processes of comprehending the environment (37). In a way, it defamiliarizes nature by presenting it as literary environment rather than natural reality. By extension, to discuss the environment properly we need to become literary rather than realistic (31); in short, we have to turn into ecomimetic creatures. But how do we become ecomimetic? Allegedly, when we suddenly give up, after an intensive observation of nature, ambience "falls upon you in the form of unprecedented beauty" (74). Thus, intensive observation is followed by some kind of synaesthetic experience that comes to us later, as a repetition or an echo—the author calls it "re-mark," after Derrida. One would assume that Morton means that if it were not experienced later but earlier, as an originality rather than an echo, it would pertain to the realm of consciousness,

which looks only at the center rather than the margin, the words rather than the empty spaces and surrounding ambience around them. Ecomimesis and ambient poetics, argues Morton, are about "making the imperceptible perceptible, the inaudible audible" (96). The problem is that the author has already stated that should we bring the background into the foreground, it stops being background. Attempting to bring ambience into the foreground by making positivistic statements like the one above only subverts the ecomimetic ecology that Morton proposes. Of course, the author is quick to announce that ambient poetics wants to retain "the flavor of the unknown, a mystifying quality" (96). Still, if the unknown becomes momentarily known, we get to know what it will be like. Under those circumstances, doesn't ambient poetics miss the genuine unknown-ness, which is finally lost or, worse, tamed? The question is "how do you retain the mystery?"

Morton espouses with enthusiasm Adorno's radical concept of *nonidentity*, as it gives him the opportunity to analyze what he means when he says that humanity nowadays needs a *dark ecology*. Nonidentity is the place where we become unafraid of difference, where we supposedly simulate the dissolution of foreground into background, of object into subject and back, or of thing into environment and ambience. Paradoxically, nonidentity also means to avoid resting on the laurels of such a fusion/dissolution. Dark ecology, then, borrows from the elusive nature of nonidentity to investigate the non-solidity and nonidentity of perception. How different is this ecology from traditional environmental aesthetics? Whereas the latter calls for an immersion into the beauty of the natural object, thereby inevitably aestheticizing the non-human and eventually keeping it at a distance (while, in some strange way, *reifying* the human as an extension of the non-human), dark ecology leaves the object as it is. Practically, that would mean to abstain from giving emphasis on what should be done in order for the environment to be saved: Presenting nature in the raw would suffice. In ambient art, that might translate as "presenting an object without a frame, or a frame without an object" (150); in music, focusing on repetitive rhythm and forgetting about the melody; in literature, writing endlessly without a target, thus preserving the ambience of sheer textuality. Such tendencies would be dark and melancholic insofar as they allow also for the objecthood of ugliness and dirt. To make waste disappear does not abide by the rules of dark ecology since it would be identical to erasing the margins for the sake of the center: one would have to *use* waste rather than dispose of it.

Morton is right in arguing that an ecology liberated from nature and its metaphysical connotations is an ecology that has done away with didacticism. For instance, he raises the question of whether Wordsworth is *really* celebrating nature when he urges humans (in "The Tables Turned") to "up, up, quit your books" and experience nature as it is. It turns out it is not such an ecological, let alone ecomimetic, advice, first and foremost because it is actually an order: "Go out and adore nature!" One probably ends up hating it! It is the other side of the same coin. Both sides are equally ecodidactic, therefore consumerist and profoundly un-ecological. To be truly ecological (ecomimetic) and ambient, one needs to vacillate between incorporating the environment and "relaxing into an inorganic state of becoming the environment" (72). In Morton's view, ecomimesis should be anamorphic as well as oblique, like the skull in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*. That sounds ideal but how can we see it happen in environmental representations or ecological thinking? There are at least two dangers involved in Morton's concept of the ambient rhetoric and poetics. First, if nature writing fulfills its purpose of respecting nature and the environment by endlessly disseminating itself as pure textuality that extends well beyond the margins of a page or the frame of a painting (Morton does provide us with analogous literary cases to support this argument), then how can it be simultaneously economical, minimalistic, raw, exhibiting silence *as* silence, in short, ambient? That looks like a dead end unless the question is *meant* to remain open. Second, there is a major problem when it comes to thinking seriously about Morton's idea that nature should not be molded into art any more (artwork being a so-called imitation of life), but rather, art should dissolve back into nature. The latter part dictates that representation become presence again. In essence, that was what the Romantics' motto "back to nature" was all about. However romantic that sounds, it is potentially hazardous as it entails the possibility of terrorizing the human by making, for instance, gothic *art* into gothic *reality*. Does being ecological involve also being under some threat?

Morton's poststructuralist (with a touch of phenomenology) take on ecology keeps him, at times, from acknowledging the presence in his work of more theorists than he is willing to acknowledge. To discuss theoretical allegiances, one might retort, would weaken his arguments about the nonconceptuality of ecomimetic thought—after all, it would be an oxymoron to speak of *nonconcept*

by using *concept*. Still, the author is much more indebted to Lyotard, for instance, than he cares to reveal, especially when it comes to theorizing *nuance* as that realm that lies in-between states and opposites. For him, Lyotard is excessively optimistic in trying to trace *nuance*, whereas Morton maintains that there is no such place precisely because we cannot find it. He is also indebted to Heidegger and the idea (taken from *The Question Concerning Technology*) that nature has always already been technologized before we knew it, once "lawn" was seen as "garden," to put it simplistically. He is also preoccupied with the Heideggerian notion of *enframing* as a means of creating aesthetic distance from the object—in our case, nonhuman environment—and subsequently demystifying it. The irony lies in the fact that we do need aesthetic distance to let the world keep its mysteriousness intact—an indispensable prerequisite for respecting ambience. Morton openly admits that we cannot get too close to wilderness, as it stops being one. Still, irony appears to be integral to ambient and ecomimetic poetics and aesthetics.

What is great about Morton's analysis is the insightful way in which he practices what he theorizes: nothing is wasted in his argumentation, and although he keeps coming back to the same terminologies and definitions over and over again, he does it with brilliant style and with the purpose of renewing (should we say "recycling"), in the very process of his writing, his notion of ecomimesis and ambient poetics. Ambient poetics must mutate in order to survive. On the other hand, this last statement risks placing too heavy a burden on the environment.

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