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Review of Steven Swarbrick, *The Environmental Unconscious: Ecological Poetics from Spenser to Milton*

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Steven Swarbrick, *The Environmental Unconscious: Ecological Poetics from Spenser to Milton*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023. 346 pp. $28.

A premise of Steven Swarbrick's *The Environmental Unconscious: Ecological Poetics from Spenser to Milton* is that ecotheory borrows from psychoanalysis its subject. This subject is "opaque to" itself, and its "images of self come from the other": in the case of psychoanalysis "the personal other of intimate relations," and in the case of ecotheory "the impersonal other of ecological interconnectedness" (234–35). However, Swarbrick argues, ecotheory neglects to bring along the *object* of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic theorists like Lacan have taught us that the object is always incomplete, riven, and fugitive, which means that it can never be grasped, much less fulfill or complete the subject. Swarbrick contends that by adopting the psychoanalytic subject but disregarding the psychoanalytic object, ecotheory has been able to make matter and nature into "immaculate objects," objects of a paradisiacal wholeness with the capacity to heal the subject of ecotheory—humans (7). To paraphrase one of Swarbrick's riffs on what are by now clichés of new materialist style, ecotheory tries to surpass, posthumanize, and network its way into harmonious accord with the web of life, where all is entangled (3). Against such reparative visions, *The Environmental Unconscious* poses a bracingly annihilatory one: the ethical task of today is to confront a "disastrous materiality that undoes the imperative to survive" (17). Rather than trying to "give matter its due" in a way that only ends up reinforcing the human perspective, we must conceive of the inevitable, a nature without humans. For Swarbrick, matter cannot be harnessed to a politics of repair because matter, like the object of psychoanalysis, "houses an incognizable lack" (2), a gap at its core, which makes it "disastrous," "excessive," and "disarticulating." Such a matter does not repair the subject, but explodes it. As he puts it, "being a desiring subject … means that the Other, including the ecological Other of networked beings, is radically incomplete … in the sense that the Other houses lack" (235). The relation between self and other, subject and environment, is not, never was, and never again will be transparent, accessible, and complementary, yielding mutual comprehension, satisfaction, and communion.

The Environmental Unconscious is an impressive and richly rewarding book, which makes early modern poets—Spenser, Ralegh, Marvell, and Milton—theoretical collaborators in the endeavor of developing a rigorously psychoanalytic ecotheory. Swarbrick is a brilliant expositor of psychoanalysis, an audacious reader of early modern literature, and a writer of verve and an invigorating taste for polemic. The book comprises a substantial theoretical introduction, one part containing two chapters, a brief interlude, a second part containing three chapters, and a conclusion. The book's

first part, "Into the Wood," identifies resources for thinking the material event without recourse to any sort of unifying construct. Such an event, conceived of as both material and also riven by a gap—remember, no unifying concept—constitutes both sexuality (Swarbrick's intervention into psychoanalytic debates) and allegory (his intervention into early modern literary studies). These two interventions correspond roughly to chapter one, entitled "Sex or Matter? (Malabou after Spenser)," and chapter two, "Trauma in the Age of Wood (Spenser after Malabou)." While the titles and the framings of these chapters lead the reader to believe that continental philosopher Catherine Malabou will be central to Swarbrick's arguments, her work on trauma and what she calls the "cerebral accident" is more of an occasion, and chapter one relies on Freud, Lacan, and Deleuze to build towards a theory of "material events beyond [a] hermeneutic seal" (49), be it a transcendental signified that makes sense of the event (sexuality, as in Freud), or a subject conceived of as whole and coherent, a "subject of full speech" (53) who speaks the event (as in Malabou).

Chapter two recasts the material event thus theorized as an *allegorical* event, turning to Spenser to illustrate what a materialism that is "both form-giving … and form-destroying" (21) would look like. Making a rather wonderful transition from Freud to Spenser, chapter one to chapter two, by remarking that "what Freud calls 'sexuality,' Benjamin calls 'allegory'" (54), Swarbrick also makes a swerve here towards plant life. His provocation, arrived at by way of reading botanical references in Freud and Lacan, is that plants, or "plant thinking," as he calls it, are "the obscure progenitor of allegory" (69).

Following an interlude ("The Animal Complaint") that by way of another reading of Spenser offers a tidy recapitulation of Swarbrick's central claims about psychoanalysis and ecotheory, the three chapters comprising the second part of the book take up Walter Ralegh, Andrew Marvell, and John Milton, respectively. This section of *The Environmental Unconscious* feels more sure-footed than the first. Swarbrick and his chapters are at their best when readings of early modern poetry evenly balance the theoretical moves. In its first part, the book feels most at home in psychoanalysis and ecotheory, and it is not always as obvious as it should be how the readings of Spenser stand on their own, as opposed to supporting the contemporary theoretical interventions. Were one only to read part one of *The Environmental Unconscious*, one might prize Swarbrick more as an interpreter of psychoanalytic theory (he is a very good one) than as an early modern literary critic. This changes in part two, "What Does Nature Want?," which presents compelling new interpretations of important early modern poets.

Chapter three, "The Oceanic Feeling (Ralegh)," argues that "to fully appreciate Ralegh's involvements in the Caribbean and American tropics, we need to be less *geo* and

more *aqua*-centric in our accountings. Only then can we begin to understand 'forms of nationhood' (Helgerson) in their proper relational context … as imbroglios of material (human and nonhuman) agents" (117). Noting important readings that have compared discourses of discovery to the *blazon* form insofar as they segment and separate the body and land into parts, Swarbrick offers a new way to think about the relation between part and whole in the discourse of discovery (125). Ralegh's oceanic feeling (ahoy, Freud!) and writing, instead of seeing bodies as confined and partitioned, presents them as painfully "open to the movements of honey-like, or sealike, flows" (127).

If the movement of chapter three is liquid flow, chapter four's is topographical involution, a kaleidoscope of earth. "Architectural Anthropologies (Marvell)" treats the reader to a wonderful Marvell for whom matter thinks and thinks independently of the human. Swarbrick shows that though Marvell may praise Appleton House's "sober frame," this does not endorse or enact a Vitruvian, an Albertian, or any other worldview that makes man the measure of things. Rather, it uncovers a nature that "is not the object of human measurement but instead the *event* of matter's masturbatory self-involvement … a strange geo-poesy" (169). Some of the gestures of the book's first part come to fruition here, as we find in Marvell's poetry an example of how nature and sexuality can intertwine in an event that discloses not a controlling, thinking, surveying human subject but rather matter's "self-involvement."

The writing in this chapter and the next sings, and Swarbrick's Marvell is not only convincing but also thrilling. The same is true of his Milton, a loving reading of whose work takes *The Environmental Unconscious* from its final chapter into its conclusion. "Queer Life, Unearthed (Milton)," chapter five, gives a bravura reading of *Paradise Lost* as foregrounding "inhuman durations out of sync with human history and disjunct temporalities with the power to rend the universe" (211). Others have found such a prospect "monstrous," but Swarbrick asserts that Milton gives us exactly what we, today, need: "a different ecological ethics, one that can tolerate the nonrelation, or the bottomless nonidentity, of earthly life" (224). According to Swarbrick, *Paradise Lost* develops an ethics of the *impersonal* event. Discussing Satan's wounding during the battle in heaven, and the Earth's wounding at the fall ("she [Eve] plucked, she ate: / Earth felt the wound…" [9.781–82]), Swarbrick insists that wounding always comes before any given wound or wounded: "Before the wound becomes *this* wounded body, or *this* wounded self, it subsists in matter as the potential *to cut*" (220). The mind-body that constitutes a human does not precede the event, rather humans are a "synthesis of myriad inhuman events" (220).

Swarbrick's Milton shares this theory of the event with Deleuze and, indeed, although *The Ecological Unconscious* is avowedly Lacanian, it is also profoundly Deleuzian. There

could be some tension in this, given, among other things, Deleuze and Guattari's radical overhauling of psychoanalysis as schizoanalysis in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. This is not to say, "Lacan is Lacan, and Deleuze is Deleuze, and never the twain shall meet," but rather that the relationship is complex and it would have been helpful to hear Swarbrick reflect more on the terms on which he brings them together. (Lacan comes off much better than Freud in Deleuze and Guattari's work, and Swarbrick's Freud isn't the Mama-Papa-Baby-Oedipal-triangle-Freud who is eviscerated in *Anti-Oedipus*, but points like these go unsaid). Moreover, if Deleuze, and in the Marvell chapter Deleuze and Guattari, is so helpful, why is schizoanalysis not brought into the mix? What would the environmental unconscious look like if it were thought via Guattari and schizoanalysis, rather than Lacan and psychoanalysis?

The other woulda coulda (though not necessarily shoulda) is Lucretius. Early on in *The Environmental Unconscious*, Swarbrick indicates that although psychoanalysis is the theoretical frame for his argument, he probably would have been able to make it with Lucretius. The old materialist's analogy between atoms and alphabetical letters has been read by some new materialists as "grant[ing] the same meaning-making capabilities" to matter as to human language, which facilitates the mirage that if we strain, we will hear nature speaking to us in the language of Eden. In an inventive reading of *On the Nature of Things* that reminds us that Lucretius's nature is composed of atoms *and* void, meaning *and* silence, Swarbrick posits that Lucretius "roots the negativity of language within matter itself" and gives us a language "not only radically contingent but also shot through with negativity or lack" (11, 12). One might wonder why we need Lacan to understand the "eco-negativity at the heart of life" if Lucretius revealed it two millennia beforehand, but this would be to forget Swarbrick's account of ecotheory's debt to psychoanalysis, and his commitment to intervening in contemporary debates. Moreover, the relation between theory (mostly but not exclusively twentieth-century French) and early modern poetry is at the heart of this book, and a Lacanian Lucretius (or is it a Lucretian Lacan?) is one of the many portable gems *The Environmental Unconscious* gifts its readers. Swarbrick's account of Lucretius is an excellent example of the strong readings given throughout his book, most of which manage to offer up helpful new avenues for interpretation by making audacious leaps between historical periods and theoretical paradigms. Even readers who disagree with his claims will be grateful for such a forceful interlocutor, and it is thanks to what Swarbrick calls his "'strong theory,' out-of-joint with the current fashion of 'weak' epistemology" (3) that *The Environmental Unconscious* is so exciting to read.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.