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The Sky of our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf

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The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf. Jesse Oak Taylor (Charlottesville, VA: U of Virginia P, 2016) 260 pp.

Edward Burtynsky's *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006) evokes the aesthetic sublimity of quarry vistas lit crimson by the sunset, the spangled play of light in recycling yards, and the rhythmic intervals of repetition in a Chinese manufacturing plant. The aesthetic effect is a conscious one on Burtynsky's part as the film instigates confrontation with the ways in which aestheticization is a necessary means of rendering visible the monstrous evidence of industrial impact. Similarly motivated, though with fictions of air rather than photographs of the earth, Jesse Oak Taylor's *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* is concerned with the difficult process of "learning to see the smog and the discomfort produced by finding it beautiful" (167).

The Sky of Our Manufacture joins a fruitful discussion about modernism and ecological history that includes Jennifer Ladino's *Reclaiming Nostalgia: Longing for Nature in American Literature* (2012), Jeffrey McCarthy's *Green Modernism: Nature and the English Novel, 1900 to 1930* (2015), Joshua Schuster's *The Ecology of Modernism: American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics* (2016), and Kelly Sultzbach's *Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination: Forster, Woolf, and Auden* (2016). Part of the University of Virginia's "Under the Sign of Nature: Explorations in Ecocriticism" series, *The Sky of Our Manufacture* charts in Victorian and modernist novels a developing awareness of the atmospheric changes rendered by industrial pollution. Therefore, for Taylor, smog, climate, and atmosphere are significant interrelated terms. Bracketing his period of study between Dickens and Woolf, Taylor tracks in the aesthetic shift from realism to modernism literature's increasing ability to describe the weirdness of the changing climate. This literary historical epoch fits more or less alongside two events of cultural and environmental significance: the Great Exposition of 1851 and the Great Smog of 1952 (the latter reaches somewhat beyond the scope of the authors in this study, but is relevant since it is an epochal event, signifying the emergence of environmental policy).

Cognizant of one of ecocriticism's challenges when working with historical rather than contemporary material, Taylor anticipates accusations of presentism or anachronistic ideological interpretation. Acknowledging that such terms as nature-culture (put into circulation by Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway) or post-humanism ill fit this period, Taylor rightly identifies in Victorian and modernist imaginative works the prehistory of these concepts. Taylor regards novels as cyphers or containers of historical thinking that capture the "contingency of the present by way of the alterity of the past" (9), which is a way of saying that the Victorian and modernist novels discussed in *Sky of our Manufacture* present early instances of

writers grappling with some of the first recognizable signs of anthropogenic climate change. The novel, or any imaginative work of literature for that matter, does not, of course, stand in for actual soil samples or barometric pressure gauges or the like, and Taylor is quick to make it clear that he is interested in the novel as a model of thinking, specifically climate thinking. Novels imagine worlds by drawing from the stuff of everyday of life. What Taylor finds in Dickens, Conrad, Woolf, and others is keen observational insight into the complex interplay of the human and nonhuman worlds. Since these novels were written before the widespread understanding of the effects of pollution, the novels are not expressions of environmentalism. In fact, in direct acknowledgment of the period's lack of eco-awareness, Taylor interestingly suggests that the novel by its fictive nature, "encourage[es] readers to imagine themselves as participants in broader, unplanned collectives [and thus] may have actually encouraged the kinds of behavior that enabled the human species to take on hitherto unknown agency" (202). This observation on literature's ability to collude with as well as resist detrimental social, political, and ecological policies, is refreshing, to say the least.

The study unfolds across three sections. The first recasts Victorian realism in George Eliot and Dickens by emphasizing the Victorian novels' reliance on new technological innovations for measuring climate as ways of metaphorically representing character and cityscape interaction and the ways in which climate shapes events. Taylor introduces the term "abnatural" to describe the persistence of nature as it mutates in response to anthropogenic climate change. Smog, existing at the intersection of nature and culture, is a combination of moisture, cool and warm air, and particulate matter ejected into the atmosphere by industrial activity. Smog is a prime example of the abnatural. The discussion of *Bleak House*'s opening smog scene is rather brilliantly executed, but it becomes apparent that the rest of the novel is of far less importance to Taylor than it is as a means of presenting a cultural history of smog. To be fair, *The Sky of Our Manufacture* is upfront about one of its aims, which is to link humanities and meteorological discourses for the purposes of inspiring environmental citizenship. The consequence of this purpose is that the salvific portions of this book are quite inspired and likely more significant than specific readings of some of the individual texts. The comprehensive effect, however, is valuable for scholars of specific authors as well as for more broadly-situated ecocritics.

Whereas the first section dealt with the novel as "climate model," the second section introduces abnatural supernaturalism. Here, attention shifts from realism to fin de siècle works that embrace the uncanny and the weird. Taylor reads *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Dracula* alongside popular Victorian cartoons that personify a "Fog Demon" in order to make a case for an aesthetic of the supernatural which departs from High Victorian realism. The third section, "Climactic Modernism,"

examines literary modernism as witness to climate change in Joseph Conrad and Virginia Woolf as well as less well-known figures like poet and essayist Alice Meynell and nature writer Richard Jefferies. Again, Taylor excels at recovering the environmental-historical moment out of which these novels were written. He elaborates on a widely held summation that the realism that characterized the Victorian novel is replaced by modernist impressionism. Literary Impressionism, or departure from traditional mimetic form, draws attention to the processes of perception.

In his discussion of Woolf, Taylor turns to *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Orlando*, particularly to Woolf's experimentation with nonlinearity. Discussing *Mrs. Dalloway*, Taylor argues that the novel operates through an atmospheric temporality that shifts between local limited perspectives and explains that the city of London links these moments spatially. Although there is no smog in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the collapse of time recalled through London's spaces produces a haunting nonlinear atmospheric effect figured as a "mist," or an equally appropriate atmospheric image of ebb and flow. Taylor relates Woolf's narrative technique to our contemporary awareness of the ways in which petroculture links the present day to deep time, effectively dissolving the fiction of historical linearity. With *Orlando*, Taylor describes a Woolfian satire of "climactic determinism" (209). This reading, as with Taylor's other readings of Woolf and Conrad, brilliantly raises one of the most difficult questions of our time: "What does it mean to imagine an artificial climate? To live beneath a sky of our manufacture and conceive of the weather as in no small measure our own handiwork?" (1).

—Margaret Konkol, *Old Dominion University*

Virginia Woolf Writing the World: Selected Papers from the Twenty-fourth Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf. Pamela L. Caughie and Diana L. Swanson, eds. (Clemson: Clemson UP, 2015) xviii + 228 pp.

In their introduction to *Virginia Woolf Writing the World: Selected Papers from the Twenty-fourth Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf*, editors Pamela L. Caughie and Diana L. Swanson present a map of the globe denoting the countries from which conference participants traveled. All in all, 18 countries were represented, including Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Norway, Poland, Qatar, South Korea, Sweden, and Taiwan. "The conference theme, Writing the World, was motivated by our desire to see what kinds of answers people... would have to the question of whether and how Woolf still matters in the world," Caughie and Swanson explain (xii). Presentations by the scholars, students, teachers, artists, creative writers, and common readers who responded demonstrate that Woolf is, unequivocally, very much a part of our global twenty-first-century world. Co-sponsored by Loyola University Chicago and Northern Illinois University, the