

[Review] Philip Armstrong. *Disturbing Nature in Narrative Literature*. Perspectives on the Non-Human in Literature and Culture. Series Ed Karen Raber. New York: Routledge, 2025. 311 pp. ISBN 9781003463634

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Instances of disturbing nature impacted on the writing of this volume and on my review. Philip Armstrong situates his argument in the initial experience of being in Christchurch during the seismic events of 2010 to 2012. The Western Cape, South Africa, was threatened recently during unprecedentedly severe storms by falling trees; dendrophobia was rife. This volume shows in polished, close readings via ecocriticism, new materialism and theories of affect how disturbing nature has recurred in literature and in philosophy from the Classical period through Medieval literature and art to more recent texts.

Part 1, Nature's Agencies, begins with 'The Literary Seismograph: Earthquakes in European Literature and Thought'; it has an extensive scope covering responses to seismic events from Dante's writing, an earthquake during Christ's death, and the 1755 earthquake in Lisbon. Kant foregrounded mathematics and mechanistic ways of responding to earthquakes occluding the human experience of disaster, even as he celebrated the supremacy of the human intellect over nature. Armstrong's critique of Enlightenment positivism echoes throughout this volume as he homes in on literature that challenges these rigidities. Jose Saramago's novel *The Stone Raft*, he suggests, raises the reader's awareness of inhabiting a world of 'vibrant matter' even as the novel can be read as a liberation from the worst aspects of modernity and its political and ecological disasters.

The chapter 'Fear of the Forest: Cultural Xylophobia from Pliny to Proulx' impresses, once again, with the broadness of its sweep. It covers the advent of the Green Man in medieval churches, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, with the horror of Daphne being transformed into a laurel tree, and the belief kept until the Enlightenment that forests and large trees could emit an unhealthy, even poisonous miasma. The analyses of forests in some of Shakespeare's plays is engrossing. Then comes the fear, Armstrong notes, of the colonial subjected other projected onto the putative hostility of sounds in the bush. A repeated tendency in British writers like R.L. Stevenson, Joseph Conrad and D.H. Lawrence. Xylophobia in fairy tales and folk tales continues in their recent manifestations, although *Lord of the Rings*, for example, is underpinned by an ecological message. The close readings of *The Overstory* by Richard Powers and *Barkskins* by Annie Proulx are superbly done, with the former critiqued for its 'dendromysticism' (115) and the latter regarded as more persuasive in its depiction of xylophobia, colonialism and indigeneity.

Shakespeare scholars will be edified by 'Animal, Vegetable, and Meteorological Actors on the Shakespearean stage'. Armstrong advocates that we take note of and respect 'matter' which, via Jane Bennett, is generally discounted as 'raw, brute or inert' (137). He suggests that Shakespeare's works demonstrate the liveliness of nonhuman matter as the plays undermine dichotomies of nature/culture. Armstrong grounds his readings in historical storms and climate shifts of the time; his consideration of the part played by the unreliability of nature proposes a fresh interpretation of Ophelia's death as suicide. The new materialist readings of Cleopatra's asp and its wayward animal agency, and that of the fly in *Titus Andronicus*, take the reader vividly into the Elizabethan playhouse where audience members harboured their own nonhuman lives in the form of pests. Armstrong sounds almost vatic in his insistence that representations of the agentive and embodied nonhuman can shift dualistic perceptions of the audience and readers, but perhaps this is a consummation devoutly to be wished rather than a certain outcome.

Part 2, *Animal Affects*, takes in Armstrong's non-encounter with a Sumatran tiger in Regent's Park Zoo. While this tiger seems to confirm Berger's view that any captive animal is merely a 'simulacrum' (180) of the embodied animal, Armstrong contends that Berger fails to take into account that animals can resist being utterly suppressed by what he terms 'consumer-capitalist domesticity' (181). Discussions about the gaze of fantasy beasts in classical literature and in *Beowulf* connect with the history of vision itself – in response to the shining eyes of nocturnal animals. As he does throughout this volume, Armstrong foregrounds elements of resistance to the sterility of Enlightenment reason, citing instances of the vibrancy and agency of 'matter'. If ancient beliefs in the power of the 'agentive and dynamic' (188) animal gaze recur in the Romantic and Gothic literary imagination, they are foreclosed in Kipling, Conan Doyle and H.G. Wells in favour of the scientific gaze. Again, Armstrong's range surprises and delights: he examines the deploying of the imagined animal gaze in psychoanalysis before critiquing the limitations of Derrida's response to his cat.

The chapter on 'Taxonomy and Wonder' studies disturbing encounters with imaginary animals in bestiaries and with embodied animals in the New World. Armstrong traces how the desire to commodify such strangeness fed into colonial endeavours from Columbus on. For Descartes, wonder was suspect, contrary to reason, which would eradicate it with great efficiency. As an antidote to the sterility of Descartes, Borges' playful boundary-challenging list of categories and Armstrong's analysis of magic realism is a respite. Underpinned by wonder as a 'critical tool' in its denial of European rationalism, magic realism opens up 'the space between' rationalism and embodied reality (224). The nuanced reading of *Life of Pi* is critical, however, of its reduction of wonder to the rigidity of cause and effect in the boundary between human and animal.

In the final chapter, 'The Lower Deep: Fathoming the Abyss in *Moby-Dick*', Armstrong turns his attention to what he terms 'the cultural and literary history of the ocean and of the human psyche – and of the material and affective relationships between the two' (237). The extended background discussion of German Romanticism is perhaps excessively

detailed, although the tracing of the imagery of depth and the unconscious in English Romanticism is lively and apposite. The reading of the novel itself is a tour de force. Armstrong analyses how Melville develops his representation of ‘tehomic depth’ (a Hebrew word), arguing against the conventional misreading of the novel as allegory and metaphor as he shows how Melville constantly returns the reader to the material. The significance of the body of the whale in connection with both the metaphysical and the material is particularly engaging, as is the analysis of the perspective of an old bull whale and that of a peaceful nursery of sperm whales.

The precision of Armstrong’s writing enlivens this volume as metaphors alert the reader to the material. The ‘thick rotundity of the world’ is ‘struck flat by Cartesian science’ (187) when animals are reduced to mere anatomy. Borges’ list demonstrates ‘the effect of wonder at its most vertiginous’ (221). Armstrong writes with a poet’s sensibility in *Disturbing Nature* as he shows the profound effect of nature on his own embodied realities. During the Christchurch seismic events, he walks his dogs in a cemetery where gravestones shift and revolve daily in an atmosphere of magic realism – the objects agentive and indisputably vibrant.