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Review: Pescott on Nash: 64-65

Kate M. Nash, "The Ecology of Virginia Woolf's *London Scene*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 47. 4 (2024): 1–19.

Kate Nash's paper explores what is labelled as the ecology of Woolf's *London Scene* articles, these being five essays and one short fiction published in *Good Housekeeping* magazine between 1931 and 1932. Whilst these originally appeared in separate issues, Nash reads Woolf's articles together, emphasizing the interpenetration of various underlying themes. The "ecological" nature of these ideas is the wider conception commoner in literary publications than scientific, Haeckel's originating *oikos* being taken here to cover the imaginative experience of the non-human, as well as other physical impacts and transformations that might constitute a global ecosystem; but this allows Nash to work on a large canvas – "Woolf's interest in the life sciences" (4) – oand to bring together threads from earlier scholarship considering Woolf and nature.

Nash begins by overviewing what is known concerning Woolf's exposure to ecological thought, and related trends, in the early 20th century. This material covers evidence of Woolf's reading from her diaries, letters, and other works, highlighting the creative tensions that this appears to have produced. The intense childhood experiences of W.H. Hudson on the Argentinian pampas, imbuing his prose with echoes of avian flight, the non-human fledging human thought, contrasting with the stance of the emerging scientific ecologists, promoted by H.G. Wells, Julian Huxley and others, developing long-held ideas of efficient imperial resource management, lead Nash to imply that the *Scene* set is an *oikos* itself, where "paradoxical understandings of the natural world" are worked through for Woolf's "female middlebrow audience" (3).

The essay presents three sections treating Woolf's articles in published order: "London's Imperial Ecology and Commodity Culture" (4), focusing on "The Docks of London" and "Oxford Street Tide" essays; "Androcentrism and Androgyny in Ecological Thought" (9), dealing with "Great Men's Houses"; and "Bird Watching in Woolf's London" (12), covering "Abbeys and Cathedrals", "This is the House of Commons", and the fictional vignette "Portrait of a Londoner". These are not exclusive mappings, and Nash draws out various interactions between Woolf's pieces. Given that Woolf prepared her work rapidly between February and April 1931, these links may have been as much organic as planned, and one wonders how many of her readers appreciated them (the articles not appearing as a unit until 2004).

Nash's sections find evidence for Woolf's consideration of the "interconnectedness" of life prompted by the imperial sorting houses of the docks and the "polyvocality" of objects and transactions, both riverside and within the human stream of Oxford Street. By comparison, the great men's houses of Cheyne Row and Hampstead contain a more explicit criticism of how the flow of (female) energy allowed Thomas Carlyle to perch in his sound-proofed attic, whilst Jane Carlyle and maid Helen cleaned the nest. Keats' "negative capability" for "symbiosis, coexistence, and mystery" (12) reveals to us another symbolic light(-suffused)-house underscoring his transcendent ecological credentials. Nash suggests that the remaining three pieces "present ways of seeing the natural world that depart from the androcentrism of [Woolf's] contemporary ecology" (13); birds, gardens, and the closed-in existence of a society hostess provide transfiguring lenses for politicians, statued great men, and wider London society.

Nash's themes support ecofeminist readings of Woolf's articles, whilst also

bringing productive tensions in her views and experiences to the surface. Here it complements the work of other scholars, such as Christina Alt, on Woolf's response to the pioneer entomologist Eleanor Ormerod and the Plumage Bill, where her feminist concerns sometimes submerged ecological elements. There are, however, some loose feathers left floating: Nash highlights the ecologist Arthur Tansley as of central importance to the development of both the modern, more encompassing, life science of her contemporaries and its managerial implications, but the contribution of his well-known interest in psychoanalysis to this is left adrift, with the implication that it is somehow accounted for within a generalized "romantic" approach to pristine ecosystems. In the other direction, the analysis of Woolf's response to the most materialist of her London experiences, the docks, could perhaps have been expanded to consider her contemporaries' responses more fully: Nash interprets Woolf's "mixed feelings" relative to the "imperial perspective" which supports human domination (5), but does not quote Aldous Huxley's disquiet which follows some of the text Nash does quote from his essay *The Victory of Art over Humanity*: "For any bird's-eye view of man's incessant and ant-like activity *is* rather appalling [original emphasis]", and whilst this is later softened by an animalistic response to the "aromatic warmth of the warehouse", it is not clear that this is a different thought to Woolf's "[o]ur body is their master". Similar points could be made concerning Harold Nicolson's impressions of the Port of London (Nicolson joined Woolf on her second tour in 1931), which details many of the same objects (Nicolson, 1931, *People and Things: Wireless Talks*).

Nash demonstrates expertly how Woolf's *Scene* draws upon a variety of her motivating concerns with contemporary life, and the reader can derive pleasure from tracing these through her better-known works. Whilst ecological "polyvocality" can, at its worst, descend into sentimental nature rapture, we might end by saying of Woolf what she herself found in Hudson's work, that "[t]he naturalist will see the bird, naturally enough, but he will not see it in relation to the tree, to the small boy, to the strange characters of the plain; nor will the bodies of birds represent for him that mysterious spirit which Mr. Hudson […] finds in all nature" (12).

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