

Sustainability and Utopian Form in Victorian Literature and Culture, 1840-1905

Book Project Description

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Project Overview

“Fear lurks behind the proliferating, sanitized term ‘sustainability.’” In a recent essay, literary scholar Stacy Alaimo highlights the dangers of the panacea of environmental sustainability, which may enable the ecologically minded to sidestep difficult questions about economic justice and biodiversity. Alaimo notes that humanities scholars have a crucial role to play in developing more ethically responsive models of sustainability. The proposed monograph, *Sustainability and Utopian Form in Victorian Literature and Culture, 1840-1905*, will contribute to this crucial discussion by tracing the history of the sustainability concept in nineteenth-century political economy and literature, thereby elaborating what is at stake in contemporary sustainability discourse by limning the perdurable potentialities and limitations of the concept.

In the simplest terms, sustainability refers to the capacity of a system to perpetuate itself indefinitely. The entanglement of environmental sustainability and economic sustainability in recent popular discussion is the legacy of post-Industrial Revolution capitalism, which is predicated on a model of perpetual growth that at best places enormous pressure on natural systems, and at worst is downright impossible. While economic-environmental sustainability has come to seem, in recent years, the pragmatic alternative to more fanciful schemes like geo-engineering and re-wilding, it hinges on an equally utopian ideal of managed resource circulation that can be traced back to the political economy and social reform movements of the Victorian period. When did economic and environmental “sustainability” come to seem not only possible, but also a desirable social goal? What are the relationships between sustainability and other forms of utopian thinking? This project will explore these questions in two broad discursive domains: 1. The manifest content of sustainability discourse in nineteenth-century political economy and its uptake in recent eco-critical theory; 2. The latent content, or cultural subtext, of the sustainability idea in British Victorian utopian literature, the realist novel, and environmentalist poetry.

As the proposed monograph will argue, fantasies of sustainability are a crucial form of utopian impulse. One of the important similarities between sustainability discourse and utopianism—the reason that sustainability *is* utopian—is an emphasis on stable stationary states. The stereotype of utopian literature from Thomas More to the early decades of the twentieth century is that it tends to be descriptive and static. At first blush, sustainability discourse also depends on a static, closed-loop model of recuperated resources. Yet the concept of sustainability, particularly in its capitalist iterations, is also inherently temporal. It imagines futures. Literary analysis, including narratological analysis and recent queer theory exploring non-reproductive futurity, can thus help to articulate the deep structures and fundamental tensions of the sustainability concept as it intersects with other forms of utopian thought. Rather than analyzing only literary works with explicitly ecological content, this project will more broadly consider sustainability as a formal principle—a way of organizing and marshalling the energies of narrativity itself—with a particular history whose effects can be traced in both

realist and utopian literature. It will develop this argument in three literary terrains: the realist marriage-plot novel, which locates the utopian impulse at the horizon of narrative closure; late-Victorian utopian fiction, which imagines sustainable worlds only to simultaneously rehearse their impossibility; and a strain of mid- to late-century environmentalist poetry, exemplified by the work of Matthew Arnold, Thomas Hardy, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, that explores the question of what I term “eco-queer futurity.”

While the study of Victorian environmentalism is a burgeoning new literary sub-field (the international Ecologies working group, which I co-founded in 2016, has grown to nearly 80 members), no current eco-critical work engages directly with utopianism or political economy in the period. The proposed project will thus constitute a significant cross-disciplinary contribution to the field of Victorian eco-criticism in addition to extending and broadening recent critical work on environmental history, literature, and ethics by such authors as Timothy Morton, Jane Bennett, Clare Colebrook, Donna Haraway, and others.

Chapter Descriptions

1. Sustainability and Its Discontents

A key source of the sustainability idea in the nineteenth century is the work of political economists concerned with surplus, whose work can be traced back to Thomas Malthus’s *Essay on the Principles of Population* (1798). Malthus argues that, holding all other variables constant, food supply increases arithmetically while population increases geometrically; thus, without some sort of intervention eventual population reduction through famine is inevitable. One anxious response to Malthus’s theory was the fantasy of a self-regulating system where surplus is metabolized in such a way as to nourish and maintain that system; this image is found repeatedly throughout nineteenth-century political economy, scientific discourse, and imaginative literature. Both John Ruskin and Charles Dickens, for example, imagined a self-sustaining sanitation system in which bodily products and remains (including corpses, human waste, and blood products) would nourish further production in a closed and infinite cycle of renewal. In an 1853 essay entitled “The Circulation of Matter,” chemist F. W. Johnston writes, “The same material—the same carbon, for example—circulates over and over again.... It forms part of a vegetable to-day—it may be built into the body of a man to-morrow; and, a week hence, it may have passed through another plant into another animal. What is mine this week is yours the next.” This fantasy of sustainability predicated on the perpetual recycling of waste is the legacy of most contemporary mainstream ecological discourse. According to Michelle Niemann, “The environmentalist emphasis on the re-use of waste ... is based squarely on the organic metaphor and the way the organic self-enclosure of an ecological unit is instituted as an aim” (213). Yet the impossibility of this version of sustainability haunts contemporary environmental discourse just as it haunted the optimistic growth model of political economy in the nineteenth century.

This chapter will trace the pre-history of the modern sustainability idea in the work of nineteenth-century political economists responding to Malthus’s population thesis, including William Forster Lloyd, Walter Stanley Jevons, and Patrick Geddes. Heterodox nineteenth-century political economists—including, somewhat paradoxically, Malthus himself—developed

a “demand-side” theory of value that warned against the dangers of gluts and stagnation, a nightmarish vision of perverse abundance. This anxiety operated in tension with the scarcity strain in economic thought of the first decades of the century; the image of the self-sustaining, closed-loop economic system is thus undermined in two contradictory directions simultaneously, as both scarcity and abundance come to seem mortal threats to early models of sustainability.

This discussion will build upon the argument of my first book project, *Economic Woman: Demand, Gender, and Narrative Closure in Eliot and Hardy* (Toronto, 2012), which examined the relationship between key metaphors of nineteenth-century political economy—surplus, excess, accumulation, and consumption—and narrative modes in the novels of George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. It will develop that monograph’s concern with the interrelationship of the social and literary form by paying particular attention to the concept of *organicism* in both political economy and the novel. The etymology of “organic” betrays a paradox at the heart of the word: it stems from both the Latin *organicus*, meaning mechanical, having an organized physical structure; and also the French *organique*, designating the jugular vein and by extension connoting a part of the body performing a vital function. This tension between structure and vitalism has persisted in the usage of the term: on the one hand the organic society or the organic literary work connotes wholeness, balance, hierarchical organization and thus stasis; on the other hand, “organic” refers to that which is living as opposed to dead or inert, and thus connotes dynamism and change. This productive tension persists in the discourse of sustainability—which implies both a fixed state of sufficiency and repletion and an anxious and restless futurity. By attending to these several interrelated tensions in the discourse of political economy, this chapter will lay the groundwork for the rest of the monograph’s discussion of sustainability and utopia in other cultural domains.

The chapter will conclude with a discussion of recent scholarship by Jason W. Moore and Andreas Malm, who have demonstrated the centrality of economic theory both to the formation of the political regime of the Anthropocene/Capitalocene and to the modes of historical analysis that have served to elucidate (or obscure) that formation. This section will reconsider Moore’s revision of Marxian value theory in the direction of a “work/energy” model—which abrogates the distinction between exploited human labor and the appropriation of potential energy in “Cheap Nature”—and Malm’s depiction of the climate crisis as a historically contingent process enabled by industrial capitalism’s fantasy of “self-sustaining growth predicated on the growing consumption of fossil fuels” (11). It will complicate this important recent work by placing it in dialogue with Victorian heterodox political economy—particularly its warnings about stagnation and the stationary state—in order to develop a fuller and more nuanced history of the idea/fantasy of sustainable economic growth.

2. Ruskin’s Rust: Sustainability, Organicism, Form

The economic and aesthetic criticism of John Ruskin (1819-1900) illuminates the long history of the entanglement of sustainability and organicism. We can see in his work the grinding edges of two conceptual tectonic plates: a vitalist-organic tradition that is the legacy of Romanticism, and post-Darwinian materialism. In his lecture “The Work of Iron, In Nature, Art, and Policy,” Ruskin delivers a polemical analysis of “raw materials” as an important part of a reconfigured

relationship between natural and human activity, which is characterized by limits to circulation and bounded by literal frames and rigid structures for which (rusted) iron becomes the emblem. In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* he writes: “All real life is known by its depending on nourishment from without.... In proportion to its youthfulness, it is yielding to external force, and eager to receive external nourishment: in proportion to its age, it is stable and fruitful.” The economic system is thus imagined as having a life cycle characterized by shifts in porosity—specifically, greater and lesser mobility of resources. Since external forces such as geological pressure (and economic circulation) also appear vital, for Ruskin the only way to distinguish life from other kinds of force is through a recapitulation of the Coleridgean distinction between organic and mechanical form.

This chapter will trace this strain of vitalist organicism in Ruskin’s writings, paying particular attention to the relationship between his engagement with sustainability and his commitment to a post-Physiocratic fantasy of a self-contained economy in which the managed mobility of resources is the key to perpetual growth. It will consider in particular his deconstruction of the limit boundary between organic and inorganic, which he undertakes in “The Work of Iron” in the case of rusted metal and in *The Ethics of the Dust* in the case of “living” crystals, and present his work as an important precursor to “strong sustainability”—the claim that human-made capital is not interchangeable with natural resources. Ruskin’s emphasis on life as the determinant of value, along with his unwillingness to limit the capaciousness of life (rhetorically extending it to iron, crystals, minerals, rust), form the basis of a critique of the instrumental view of natural resources that anticipates recent work in environmental ethics by such writers as Rob Nixon and Timothy Mitchell, as well as the new materialist critiques of Jane Bennett, Karen Barad, and others. This chapter will provide historical context for the later development of vitalism and organicism in political economy, ecological discourse, and literature.

3. Eco-Queering the Marriage Plot: Realist Eschatologies

Utopian studies has long since identified a rift between the “utopian program” and the “utopian impulse” (Fredric Jameson). The former refers to reality-directed schemas of social reform such as intentional communities and revolutionary praxis. The latter, most fully articulated in the work of Ernst Bloch, refers to any future-oriented hope for a better world and can be found in an array of cultural formations such as music, architecture, popular culture, myths, daydreams, and medicine. This chapter will propose another way of thinking about the distinction between these two strands of utopianism: as a distinction between genre and mode. While the utopian genre comprises a familiar set of conventions, the utopian impulse is more elusive and inchoate: as a mode, it sketches a narrative arc that may be—but most often is not—coterminous with an actual narrative. It appears in many places, often cutting across other genres and importing destabilizing side effects. Its ubiquity and malleability thus pose important questions for the relationship between literary and social forms.

This chapter will consider the connection between utopian impulse and sustainability in four canonical Victorian novels, all of which have been accused of formal bifurcation: Charlotte Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1846); Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855); and two novels by George Eliot: the social problem novel *Felix Holt, The Radical* (1866) and the infamously bifurcated *Daniel Deronda* (1876). It will begin by exploring the relationship between these

texts' formal idiosyncrasies and the political content of their plots: are they enacting eschatology at the level of form? Is their bifurcatedness part and parcel of a resistance to closure that is the emblem (perhaps even the result) of their utopian investments? Is the utopian a destabilizing force within the house of realism? And how can we draw out of these formal and narratological tensions an "ecological unconscious" concerned with economic, social, and environmental sustainability?

The chapter will begin with a discussion of the sanctioned, yet stunted, heteroreproductive love of Catherine and Edgar (Heathcliff calls it "an oak in a flower-pot") that sustains the closed family system of the two houses in the novel against the disruptive force of Heathcliff's love, which threatens the closed-loop utopianism of the system. A queer ecological reading draws out the novel's conflicted investment in nascent ideologies of economic and environmental "sustainability," which are staged as conflicts of scale: between the deep, geological time that shapes the natural world of the novel and characterizes the queer (incestuous, cross-racial, non-reproductive) love of Heathcliff and Catherine and the small-scale domestic ecology that secures futurity through the proper channeling of property relations.

In the more explicitly political novels *North and South*, *Felix Holt*, and *Daniel Deronda*, the utopian impulse is aligned with the "non-marriage-plot" half of each text—with the half that is concerned with community building and social reform. In the case of *Daniel Deronda*, this part is the literally utopian narrative of Daniel's awakening to his Zionist calling, and in the case of *Felix Holt* and *North and South*, it is found in the strike plots and the burgeoning inter-class friendships they ultimately bring about. Not only is the utopian counterposed to the reproductively sexual in these novels, but the more broadly erotic possibilities of both organicist communitarian projects and queer connections of all kinds are chastened and curtailed to the horizon of bourgeois marriage. The marriage plots are thus not only structurally opposed to the utopian in a formal sense, but their content, insofar as they ironize or outright deny the erotic, is thematically opposed to the utopian as well. These novels thus simultaneously rehearse the failure of sustainability as a narrative and social form and organicism as a literary mode. By attending to the ways in which the *form* of utopian impulse destabilizes the realistic frame with which it comes in contact, and resists the marshalling effects of that frame, this chapter will trace the narratological effects of what we might term a "sustainability impulse" while contributing to the robust critical discussion of Victorian literary realism in recent decades.

4. The Problem of Sustainability in Ecotopia

It would seem that the obvious place to find Victorian models of sustainability is in utopian texts, yet late-Victorian utopias reveal striking ambivalences to nineteenth-century political economy: vehement protests about the self-contained nature of economic organizations (in this case, utopia standing in for capitalism) in response to deeper anxieties about growth and scarcity. These concerns take similar form in both discourses: concern over stagnation and gluts as a result of inadequate or insipid demand. This chapter will examine the failures of the sustainability concept in two ostensibly utopian texts, William Morris's *News from Nowhere* and Richard Jefferies' *After London*; in both cases, the failure of the utopian vision occurs along the economic-demand axis.

In *News from Nowhere*, the utopian guide old Hammond explains: “[I]n the last age of civilisation men had got into a vicious circle in the matter of production of wares. They had reached wonderful facility of production, and in order to make the most of that facility they had gradually created (or allowed to grow, rather) a most elaborate system of buying and selling, which has been called the World-Market; and that World-Market, once set a-going, forced them to go on making more and more of these wares.” Yet as we soon learn, the new anxiety in this utopia is that instead of a surplus of consumable objects there will be a surplus of laboring bodies: Nowhereians worry that the supply of pleasurable labor will dry up. Thus, emigration becomes an integral part of the new economic organization: “Those lands which were once the colonies of Great Britain, for instance, and especially America—that part of it, above all, which was once the United States—are now and will be for a long while a great resource to us.... [F]or nearly a hundred years the people of the northern parts of America have been engaged in gradually making a dwelling-place out of a stinking dust-heap; and there is still a great deal to do.” Even in a world with abundant sustenance for all, a new “scarcity” is imagined; emigration becomes a necessary prop to the system, just as colonial markets were necessary to maintain the vicious cycle of nineteenth-century capitalism.

In Jefferies’ *After London*, drastic environmental change is not the result of a revolution in economic organization as in *News from Nowhere*, but rather seems to precede and precipitate it: An unknown catastrophe has taken place that has rendered London uninhabitable, full of pestilential gases and toxic sludge, and the rest of England has returned to a preindustrial state. Different traditions have sprung up to explain the catastrophe, all of which have to do with cataclysmic disruptions in the supply/demand cycle. The strangest is that “the earth, from some attractive power exercised by the passage of an enormous dark body through space, became tilted or inclined to its orbit more than before, and that this, while it lasted, altered the flow of the magnetic currents, which, in an imperceptible manner, influence the minds of men. Hitherto the stream of human life had directed itself to the westward, but when this reversal of magnetism occurred, a general desire arose to return to the east.” Left in a drastically emptied-out England with a collapsed economy, the few who remain have lapsed into a semi-barbarous political organization marked by primitive exchange, feudal class hierarchy, and constant inter-clan warfare.

Both Jefferies and Morris are motivated by a skepticism about nineteenth-century capitalism’s optimistic discourse of simultaneous infinite growth and self-contained sustainability. In both cases the critique of capital has culminated in depictions of a future society that is unable to escape the same contradictions as the one from which it sprung. This chapter will discuss these two texts at length, placing them in the context of other ambivalent utopias of the period (Samuel Butler, *Erewhon*; James DeMille, *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder*; Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *The Coming Race*; H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine*; Anthony Trollope, *The Fixed Period*; Walter Besant, *The Inner House*; and W. H. Hudson, *A Crystal Age*), all of which betray coded anxieties about contemporary economic relations, and the possibility of sustainability, through such images as famine, plague, and cannibalism.

5. Eco-Queer Futurity and Victorian Poetry

The question of how to commingle queer theory and ecocriticism has become an urgent concern for theorists writing in the wake of Timothy Morton's 2010 *PMLA* essay "Queer Ecology." This chapter will take up the question of eco-queer futurity in Victorian environmentalist poetry by Matthew Arnold, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Thomas Hardy. The poems examined here demonstrate iterations of queerness that critique the hegemony of reproductive futurism as described by theorists Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman and challenge the utopianist collectivity of much recent queer studies scholarship.

This chapter will include extended readings of four Victorian poems with broadly ecological themes: Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Binsey Poplars," and Thomas Hardy's "The Ivy-Wife" and "In a Wood." All of these poems—and others which the chapter will treat more briefly—stage challenges to received Victorian notions of reproductive futurity. The famous ending of Arnold's poem implies the ontological priority of the social world—it is the truth of the social that is revealed when the dreamlike operations of natural beauty are stripped away—and thus reverses the familiar operation of much recent ecocritical practice. The poem does so through an affirmation of heteronormative futurity ("Ah love!"), but that futurity is of a piece with the fallen world: the queerness of the poem consists of the way in which it sutures the rhetoric of heterosexual love to the moment of falling away of "the natural." In "Binsey Poplars," Hopkins's persona imaginatively projects a moment of literal fallenness—his agony at the sight of his beloved "felled, felled" aspens—onto future "after-comers" whose erotic engagement with nature can only be imagined as irrevocably impoverished. The poem sketches a linear progression of ecological fallenness that is oddly belied in two directions simultaneously: by the extraordinary poverty of the description of the current "sweet especial scene" and the extraordinary vividness of description of its erotic despoiling.

The chapter will end with a discussion of two Hardy poems that returns the monograph to its argumentative throughline about organicism and its relationship to utopianist futurity. For new materialist eco-critics, symbiosis—which decenters the human through its emphasis on networks, assemblages, and porous borders—is the favored model of extra- or post-human relationship. Yet new materialism's pronouncements about interconnectedness sit uneasily alongside a tendency to denounce naïve organicism: reconceptualizing the individual organism as a holobiont threatens to reinscribe the organic whole at a higher level of organization. My discussion will complicate and historicize the holobiont model by turning to two Hardy poems that queer interspecies relationship by insisting on its parasitic (rather than symbiotic) nature. In "The Ivy-Wife," the parasitic ivy kills and is killed by its failure to account adequately for future contingencies ("afterhaps"), which is characterized as a problem of vision. Moments of hap, impossible to visualize in advance, punctuate the organic field just as they punctuate the poem, literally, in the form of exclamation points. "In a Wood" focuses on the spatial rather than the temporal plane in its depiction of an intertwined forest whose individual trees cannot help poisoning one another. Grammatical shifts emphasize the division between the prelinguistic communion the speaker had hoped (but failed) to find with the trees and the human social world, which is inscribed into language. The trees exist in a perpetual present

tense, while the speaker must turn to an imagined human interlocutor in order to describe historical change, rendered in the past tense. In the end of the poem, the trees are left to themselves: the matrix of competitive parasitism that undergirds the superficial appearance of organic holism will continue even after the human gaze is withdrawn—yet as the poem adroitly dramatizes, it is only the human gaze that distinguishes between these two modalities. These “dendrographic” Wessex poems thus dramatize the relentless human drive to utopian organicism while remaining judiciously silent on the question of the ontological status of such organizations—whose dramatizations, after all, are simply another function of the selfsame drive.