

Environment

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HAS there ever been something called the environment? And if so, what was it—before we destroyed it? Or again, and the reverse: when did the environment come into being? While the term, derived from the middle French “to surround,” dates in English to the seventeenth century, gaining force in the eighteenth, one version of our commonsensical notion of environment—as the physical milieu for biotic life—is definitively Victorian. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives its birth year as 1855, and attributes it to Herbert Spencer.¹ It was not until 1912 that Thomas Hardy would re-outfit his novelistic oeuvre by classifying some as “Novels of Character and Environment.” Yet in Hardy’s Wessex Edition nomenclature, the term stands to mean not a ontologically complete or total nonhuman world, “*the environment*,” but the variable milieus—Flintcomb Ash, the Vale of Fromm—that enable and constrain the human actors attempting to flourish in those particular zones. This pluralized notion of “environment” is the crystal of what Elizabeth Miller calls Hardy’s “bioregional” project, and helped Hardy imagine how an organism like Tess Durbeyfield might or might not fit with a given ecosystem.² Hardy’s commitment to documenting the relation between organism and milieu takes shape, in Miller’s words, as a “dialectical approach to human characters, the environment in which they live, and the complex, reciprocal relation between them,” and is generated from a post-Darwinian sense of human beings’ entanglement with forces and entities beyond themselves.³

Hardy’s work was to document the collapse of liberalism’s fictions of autonomy under the pressure of evolutionary thought. But the notion of environment as a relatively fixed local milieu that determines human action is also what Annales School historian Fernand Braudel had in mind when, in the first section *The Mediterranean* (1949, 1966), he referred to “The Role of the Environment” in the social history of that region. For Braudel, environment names the “constant repetition, ever-recurring cycles” of nonhuman activity, where change is slow or absent and history is “almost timeless.”⁴ “The mountains,” he says, “resist the march of history . . . or they accept it only with reluctance.”⁵ Braudel’s environment is a static or nearly static local backdrop, in dialogue with which human history might coevolve, but which human action cannot substantively change—a formulation that has cognates in the novelistic concept

of “setting.” In this sense as an unchanging *mise en scène*, environment exists in tension with ecology, another Victorian term, which denotes a more robustly interactive collaboration among factors or agents in a system. As Vin Nardizzi has noted, thinkers like Michel Serres in the 1990s began to critique “environment” for its crypto-anthropocentrism and called on philosophy to “forget the word *environment* in this context.”⁶ While working on *Tess*, Hardy himself gothically pointed to lack of reciprocal interaction between foreground and background in his model, when he recorded feeling “as if I were a spectre not solid enough to influence my environment.”⁷

Whatever his existential dilemma, Hardy refers here to *my* environment, not *the* environment. That latter usage, “[f]requently with *the*,” the *OED* says, understands the environment as singular abstraction or ecological totality: “[t]he natural world or physical surroundings in general.”⁸ This world-scaled abstraction was unavailable to Hardy in 1888 and even 1912, and arrives, we are told, only in the postwar moment, smack at the center of the period of vertiginous “growth” and rapidly gathering ecological catastrophe that environmental historians call the Great Acceleration: in 1948, the year of my parents’ birth.⁹ Where did *this* environment come from? Timothy Mitchell argues that the interlinked disasters driven by the twentieth century’s petroleum economy succeeded a Victorian scenario by which coal was extracted, distributed, and incinerated along networks connecting major cities by rail. By the 1970s, these Victorian practices of accumulation—fixed to physical limits, bound by established lines of connection—came to seem quaint against an emergent economic logic whereby petroleum traveled by tanker along variable routes, and in which the concept of growth itself had become unmoored from “spatial and material processes that had physical limits.” Instead, growth came to be conceived in relation to a new and theoretically limitless abstraction: “the economy.”¹⁰ Mitchell shows how, for reasons too complex to detail here, this notion of “the economy” as a closed totality of monetary circulation generated countermovements, political and economic both, that culminated in the “production of the environment as *a rival object of politics*.”¹¹ In this telling, “the environment” owes its roots to specific antagonisms over labor, capital, and energy access in the crisis period of early neoliberalism: it was a new abstraction vast enough to leverage against “the economy.” Baby boomers, caught as they were in the whirlwind of the Great Acceleration’s money economy—which was, we might note, also the moment that established Victorian Studies as a discipline—thus succeeded in solidifying a notion of environment coextensive with something like “earth” or “nature” conceived as total system.

Like the first Earth Day, the Environmental Protection Agency dates from 1970, when it was proposed as an entity able to manage items of legislation, like the Clean Air Act (1970) and the Clean Water Act (1972), directed at more particular earth systems. And as the Great Acceleration accelerated, so too did this newly abstract environment: Google's NGram shows the sharpest spike for "the environment" between 1960 and 1975, after which point the definite-articled term levels off until the mid-1980s, when it shoots skyward again.

Published at the height of this new burst in 1983, Gillian Beer's masterful evaluation of Darwinian thought bears a snapshot of environment's conceptual history in its syntax. In *Darwin's Plots*, Beer summarized natural selection by noting that "the fitness of an individual to *its* environment" depended on a sense (contra Hardy) that "*the environment* is not monolithic or stable."¹² She continued: "we tend to think of the individual organism as dynamic and the environment as static—but *the environment*, being composed of so many more varied needs than the individual, is prone to unforeseeable and uncontrollable changes."¹³

Varied and changeful as it is here represented to be, "the environment" nevertheless receives the definite article: it is a container into which so many other local milieus might be subsumed. Beer's hesitation between "its" and "the" environment thus fixes into uneasy totality what the sentence argues to be plural and endlessly variable. This tension crystallizes the mismatch between, on the one hand, the argot of post-1970s environmental thought informing Beer's 1983 intervention and, on the other, the more plastic or pluralized dance between milieu and instance, background and foreground, animate "organism" and questionably animate milieu, that Charles Darwin himself had always imagined as "entangle[ment]." The twist is that the term "environment" appears not a single time in *On the Origin of Species* itself. Instead Darwin uses a plural term, "conditions," which appears endlessly, and in multiple forms: as "surrounding conditions," "physical conditions," "conditions for . . . propagation," and (most commonly) "conditions of life."¹⁴

To recover this definitional question as a problem for Victorian form, we might turn finally to Dickens, who in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) translates into narrative opportunity the very conceptual difficulties in "environment" charted so far. That gothic study of systems and entropy folds its human and nonhuman worlds together only to prise them back apart, and vice versa. This interchange between foreground and background confirms Bruno Latour's insight that what he calls the work of purification, which establishes the living world of human culture

and the inert or mechanistic domain of nonhuman nature as “entirely discrete ontological zones,” comes hand in hand with “work of translation,” which “creates mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids between nature and culture.”¹⁵ Articulated skeletons, animate dolls, heaps of dust, dead bodies dragged from the river: in all these tropes and more, the novel crystallizes the play between the categories of thing and person, environment and character, nature and culture, a drama that plays out, as in *Beer*, at the level of syntax: here, the personal pronoun. Dead bodies, nearly obsessively, are denied it, and thus find themselves separated across a semantic divide from the world of the human characters who might participate in the sentimental melodrama of this marriage plot. “It was insensible,” notes Lizzie of her future husband Eugene Wrayburn, now floating as part of her environment in the Thames, “if not virtually dead; it was mutilated, and streaked the water all about it with dark red streaks. As it could not help itself, it was impossible for her to get it on board.”¹⁶ But in Dickens’s heteronormative economy of redemption, it must be redeemed into he, and this appalling object *does* become human again. In charting this recuperative motion Dickens ratifies the humanism Latour calls “modern” thinking, but in so doing also names as problematic the very dilemma the term “environment” likewise identifies. I am referring to the transitional space between milieu and character, a variable line that both separates and connects the world of objects from the world of (human) subjects. In this sense Dickens’ experiment might spur us to convert our questions about “Victorian literature and the environment” into other, nimbler conceptual pairings: Victorian Cultures of Nature, say, or Nonhuman Victorians, or even, to channel Dickens and Darwin, *The Conditions of (Victorian) Life*.

NOTES

1. “environment, n.,” OED Online, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com>.
2. Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, “Dendrography and Ecological Realism,” *Victorian Studies* 5, no. 4 (2016): 696–718, 699.
3. Miller, “Dendrography,” 698.
4. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Vol. 1, trans. Sian Reynolds (New York: Harper, 1972), 20.
5. Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, 41.

6. Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, trans. Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003); quoted in Vin Nardizzi, “What is ‘Environment’?,” lecture delivered at Georgetown University, April 8, 2017.
7. Robert Gittings, *Thomas Hardy’s Later Years. In Young Thomas Hardy and Thomas Hardy’s Later Years* (New York: Book of the Month, 1990), 59.
8. “environment, n.,” OED Online, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com>.
9. “Within the last three human generations, three-quarters of the human-caused loading of the atmosphere with carbon dioxide took place. The number of motor vehicles on Earth increased from 40 million to 850 million. The number of people nearly tripled, and the number of city dwellers rose from above 700 million to 3.7 billion. In 1950 the world produced about 1 million tons of plastics but by 2015 that rose to nearly 300 million tons. In the same time span, the quantities of nitrogen synthesized (mainly for fertilizer) climbed from under 4 million tons to more than 85 million tons. . . . The entire life experience of almost everyone now living has taken place within the eccentric historical moment of the Great Acceleration” (Peter Engelke and J. R. McNeill, *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945* [Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2016], 4–5).
10. Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (New York: Verso, 2012), 169.
11. Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, 170–171 (emphasis added).
12. Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 18 (emphasis added).
13. Beer, *Darwin’s Plots*, 18 (emphasis added).
14. Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection; or the Preservation of Favoured Races In The Struggle For Life*, 6th ed. (Project Gutenberg, 1859): <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2009/2009-h/2009-h.htm>. Devin Griffiths explains how Darwin imagined “a world of nonhuman intent and distributed sentience” that “effectively flattened the natural world, diffusing intentionality as an emergent property shared throughout nature” (Devin Griffiths, *The Age of Analogy: Literature and Science Between the Darwins* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016], 238).

15. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 10.
16. Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 683–84.



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THE story of the coinage and popularization of the word *environment* in its modern sense runs through some of the towering intellectual figures of the Victorian period—Thomas Carlyle, Harriet Martineau, G. H. Lewes, and Herbert Spencer—and their continental influences, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Auguste Comte. In some ways, it is a story that bears directly upon the wholesale rethinking of the conventional divide between nature and culture that went on in many disciplines over the course of the century, a conceptual shift that has roots in German and British Romantic thought, and finds scientific theorization in the work of Charles Darwin. But it’s also a story about the complications and difficulties involved in reimagining the relationship between these two crucial categories, and the way racial, imperial, and economic ideologies blunted or even subverted the new conceptual possibilities for ecological thinking that the term *environment* both reflected and helped generate.

It seems fitting that the word “environment” would first appear in its modern guise in 1828, at the dawn of the period that would produce the factory town and the railroad, the Coal Question and the Great Guano Rush, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and *Wuthering Heights*, and, for many contemporary critics, the first observable signs of the Anthropocene. Carlyle first uses it in his essay *Goethe* to translate the master’s original German *Umgebung* and to signify not merely surroundings or context (as it had been commonly used before) but rather the vital, ongoing influence of those surroundings upon a person or thing.¹ As Ralph Jessop argues, this coinage arises from the “counter-Enlightenment” stance Carlyle took against the forces of mechanization and mechanical thinking: *environment* is an attempt to convey something of the holistic, “dialogical