

PREFACE

This book traces the questioning of anthropocentrism in Western literature with attention to some of the key writers at various points over many centuries, from antiquity to the near-present, and especially those who do so from some sort of ecological perspective. Since the questioning of anthropocentrism lies in works written over a large span of time across the world, my interest in the literary critique of anthropocentrism has compelled me to cast my net widely, though I do not presume to have done much more than scratch the surface in the history of this idea. My critical focus lies on the texts themselves and their contexts, but I admit to a bias in favor of a responsible view of our earthly home. If we are going to overcome our global ecological crises, we must reassess our place on the earth and reduce our impact on the planet. Philosophically and spiritually, but especially in our actions, this demands that we revoke an extreme (“hard”) anthropocentrism and act accordingly. The revoking of anthropocentrism is not a new idea or as radical a position as some may imagine. Many of the world’s greatest writers have already done this and have prepared the way for us. Why does all this matter? The nonanthropocentric heritage in Western literature is I think, a substantial part of the philosophical and artistic bridge required to help us move more responsibly into the later parts of the twenty-first century and beyond.

Literature written over the past century or so is more likely to disavow anthropocentrism than that written before it, but it is inaccurate to assume that all or even most literature written before such and such year or event (say, the discoveries of Copernicus or Darwin) operates absolutely from the premise that humans are the most important species or the only one that

matters. In fact, the assumption that modern works are more questioning about anthropocentrism than ones written before the birth of modern science is not completely safe. As represented in the cliché about onion-peeling, the genesis of the rejection of anthropocentrism would appear to be a post-Darwinian reaction, but it also has some connections to the aesthetic of the Sublime that arose in the eighteenth century, and then, a little before that, it appears to be a result of the Enlightenment, yet certain aspects of it appear before the rise of modern science, and more than a few seeds of the idea stretch back well into early American Indian animism, ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, and Eastern religions. This book explores some of this history. I do not, however, suggest that all of the writers I discuss have identical mindsets. I seek a wide set of references in challenging anthropocentrism, but this is not to claim that, say, Seneca, is a “modern.” Seneca’s world is very different from that of Donne, and the world of Tennyson is very different from that of Jeffers (to cite more or less random figures). Although space does not allow anything like a full discussion of these contexts, I have tried to keep them in mind.

My working title was *Man Is No Measure*, a revision of a very old idea—i.e., “man is the measure”—but more precisely a line from Robinson Jeffers’s poem “The Inhumanist”: “Man is no measure of anything” (*Collected* 4:264). (I have, by the way, tried to use the terms “man” and “woman” where the texts use that term but “human” otherwise.) I admit up front that my scope is so large that my execution will fail by overlooking some important works and writers, especially the more contemporary ones. This work is, in reality, “notes toward a history of the critique of anthropocentrism in selected Western writers.” Misreadings, misunderstandings, misappropriated contexts, and other misses are inevitable. My interest in this topic has led me to places that are by no means ones of expertise, with Spenser’s character Mutabilitie on Arno’s Hill and into the Roman ruins with Byron and Shelley, to cite a few examples, and I have found ideas that seem kindred in their interrogation of time and ruminations about the limited roles and abilities of humans on different scales, even as, again, the contexts, worldviews, and epistemologies of the writers differ markedly. The writers I discuss are hardly of one mind about most things. If my readings locate some of the relevance of these works toward our place on earth, physically but also in their ethical and aesthetic implications, then I will have met my goal. While I am interested in more than surfaces of a wide array of texts, I am ultimately more concerned with breadth than depth in my attempt to account for the history of an idea in Western literature.

The implications of my earlier book *Ecology and Literature: Ecocentric Personification from Antiquity to the Twenty-first Century* are essentially affirmative: that trope, I argue there, confirms through scientific, literary, philosophical, and religious works that humans are not completely alone in the universe. It is a common trope and certainly a modernistic one, since it subverts the dominant, traditional mindset that humans may act almost any way they choose, that we (along, perhaps, with our pets) are the only species that matters. Yet it is also a very old one, perhaps a remnant of the interrelationships people felt more distinctly when civilization and progress had not yet removed us so thoroughly from our natural environments. Realizations of the idea in real-world policymaking are difficult to locate. The notion that all living things are kindred and that we are thus bound together is not a feel-good sentiment or wishful thinking but an ethical statement based on ecological and biological science, though, again, many writers suggested this idea long before the rise of modern science. Some may prefer the idea this way: we are all God's creatures and are hence all of worth, though more than a few writers I discuss posit that humans are too hopelessly destructive and self-centered to be able to make any valid claims about the positive worth of our species.

The implications of the present book are also, I believe, affirmative, pointed toward a fuller perspective about the place of *Homo sapiens* in the universe, but they may appear, at least in the short term, gloomy and in some cases negative. The idea that we can undo, perhaps are undoing, or cannot help but eventually undo ourselves and all living things along with us, along with the earth that is our biological basis and home, is not alarmism or an obscure theory but a fact. Life can be wiped out gradually, by environmental degradation (global climate change), economical piracy, human-made or natural plagues, religious fundamentalism, or in the fell swoop of nuclear holocaust, never mind, in descending order of likelihood, a super volcano, an earth-bound comet, or malevolent beings from another planet. Similar to the previous book, this one focuses on our capriciousness, the thorough, largely unquestioned anthropocentrism (attached, it sometimes appears, to a global death wish) that regards the earth solely or primarily as a treasure chest for human consumption.

This is not a book about the apocalypse, all of the possible means of apocalypse, apocalyptic works of literature, or even the narrower category of ecological apocalypse. I am interested in literature and a few other works of art, mostly Western, that show a world without or with fewer humans, works that posit that we are not the end of all existence or the center of the

universe. For the sake of perspective and grounding, though, as well as inclusiveness, I do at points address apocalyptic visions, secular and religious, in general. This is also not a book about a literature of human mortality or the brevity of life, which is one of the grand themes of all literature through the ages, from Homer to Herrick, Bunyan to Beckett, even though the brevity of human life is a necessary element in the confronting of anthropocentrism. The realization of life's brevity or the understanding that life will go on without us isn't at all the same as having an ecocentric view, though many of the works center on these facts. Making judgments about texts that decenter humans from those that seek to mortify human ambition or (among older texts) express *contemptus mundi* (religious contempt for the world) has been a challenge, and some of my judgments are (and should be) questionable.

Ecocentrism is a viewpoint that decenters the human subject through an understanding of the interrelations of species in natural environments. To counter anthropocentrism is not the same as expressing misanthropy, but there are certainly texts that do both. A nonanthropocentric or antianthropocentric view is not the same as an antihumanist one or one that is counter to theism; though the impulse is to apply a neat binary, many of the chief humanist writers regularly question the centrality of our species. To cite one example, for Sartre there are two types of humanism. One places humanity as the end and asserts its primacy over all other species, while in the other "man is always outside of himself, and it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that man is realized" through "pursuing transcendent goals" (51–52). Many other major writers and intellectual figures as diverse as Sophocles, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Marx have espoused the centrality of humans. The final causes, theodicy, and the centrality of humans in God's order were bulwarks for humanism, though a belief in final causes is also central to writers of the romantic era and beyond. Of course, neither do I suggest that all works that avow anthropocentrism are "flawed" or unworthy of reading, enjoyment, praise, and instruction. It is a given that there are countless works of worthy, even great, anthropocentric literature. Nor do I suggest that all texts that call anthropocentrism into question do so from an ecological basis. Some of the texts that do were written well before ecological science was established in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. My definition of "ecological literature" is at times rather broad and loose: some of the works I discuss are only tangentially "ecological."

The book would have been impossible without the love and support of my family, Carol, Patrick, and Sophie, and for these I dedicate this token of appreciation to them. I cannot express my full gratitude to my mother and father, who have supported me in every imaginable way over the years. Thanks also for the support of my brother, Robert Moore, and sister, Pam Lilley. Colleagues in the Arkansas State University Department of English and Philosophy—Jerry Ball, Robert Schichler, Gregory Hansen, Jacob Caton, and Shannon Beasley—read parts or all of my manuscript and gave much needed advice. I'm grateful to Ashton Nichols, who read my manuscript and gave encouragement and helpful feedback. Since I teach a heavy load every semester, it has been difficult to find time for writing and research. Thanks to the school administrators and Faculty Research Awards Committee for granting me a sabbatical for the spring of 2013 to complete major work for this project. (As it turned out, I was for most of that semester stricken with a bulging disc in my back and sciatica that made sitting and typing almost impossible, but I was able to complete some crucial reading, usually while standing, often on my backyard deck, doubtless a strange sight to my neighbors.) I typed most of the manuscript for this book at my computer while one, sometimes two, of our cats (Libby and Artie) lay on the desktop between me and the screen, and they were constant reminders that it is not humans but themselves that are the center of the universe. Thanks to Amber Strother, who, as a graduate assistant in 2010 helped locate some of the texts I discuss; she was a member of a graduate class I taught in 2009 called *American Apocalypse*, and the class helped me think through some of the ideas in my final chapters. Other members of the class were Angelyn Arnold, Eric Baker, Barry Broussard, Melissa Donner, Adam Fraize, Pratap Kattel, Ali Khalil, Maegon Mayes, Beverly Thompson, and Gabriela Varela-Sanchez. I will never forget the examples, knowledge, and advice I have received from my many great teachers over the years both at Arkansas-Little Rock and TCU. I might not have pursued my profession without the encouragement of Michael Kleine, and I remain indebted to him in particular. I am grateful for permission to reprint here, with substantial revision, articles that originally appeared in the journals *Nature and Culture* and *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment*. Thanks to Counterpoint Press for permission to quote an extended portion of Wendell Berry's poem "The Slip" and to the New-York Historical Society for permission to use the cover image, from Thomas Cole's *Desolation*.



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