Michael Ziser, *Environmental Practice and Early American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), 224 pp.

Arriving on the heels of editors Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors's *A New Literary History of America* (2009), Michael Ziser's *Environmental Practice and Early American Literature* provides a fascinating new perspective on the influence of nonhuman agency on literary history. Ziser's analysis marks a groundbreaking contribution to the recent "material turn" in ecocriticism, as he reinterprets early American literary history by examining the significance of nonhuman actors. Rooted in New Historicism, this study draws on current methods in science studies and sociology, most importantly Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory, as well as the work of environmental historians such as William Cronon and Richard White. Rethinking and combining these theoretical approaches, Ziser elaborates the ways in which nonhuman objects can be represented in literary productions and in how far their appearance in these productions can legitimately be understood as agency. He succeeds in this attempt to varying degrees. The monograph was composed to a great extent from essays and articles originally written and published elsewhere between 2004 and 2008, a fact that accounts for the, at times, rather vague connections between separate chapters. Nonetheless, the individual analyses bring forth intriguing arguments. Each of the first four chapters centers on the literary representation of one specific environmental practice, including the cultivation of tobacco and staples, orcharding, and bee-lining. The fifth and final chapter of the book illustrates the significance of the georgic mode for early American literature, concluding in a brief examination of nineteenth-century agricultural magazine culture as its final articulation.

Laden with theory, Ziser's introduction, aptly titled "More-than-Human Literary History," a reference to David Abram's concept of the "more-than-human," makes for a dense but no less illuminating read. His elucidation of the study's overall goal and its theoretical foundations not only serves as a potent opening to the analysis, but also provides an effective introductory guideline for the field of material ecocriticism.

The first environmental practice analyzed is the cultivation of tobacco and its representation in early English accounts of the New World. Ziser comprehensively demonstrates in how far the plant claims agency as "a source of disembodied counter-imperial rhetorical power" (25). He illustrates this in a close examination of King James I's pamphlet *Counterblaste to Tobacco*, published in 1604. King James attacks the newly introduced commodity for its seemingly subversive potential. He fears that his own sovereignty might be at stake, as many of the ideological and symbolic powers usually monopolized by royal authority are now also ascribed to tobacco. Central to his argument are the shifting relations of power due to the increasing economic and political significance of the American colonies. The introduction of tobacco, as a genuine New World organism and commodity, into the Old World, marks the emergence of a new competing force, which ultimately cannot be controlled or contained by the European imperial powers. Furthermore, Ziser's reading of the plant through Derrida's concept of *pharmakon* provides a persuasive interpretation of King James's almost paranoid defense of his royal sovereignty. It is certainly remarkable that the introduction of tobacco into the monarchal structures of Europe would provoke such a strong reaction from one of the highest imperial authorities of the time. Ziser exploits this fact in order to substantiate his argument that the nonhuman "maintains a prior and more fundamental authority and agency in human cultural affairs" (28). He makes a convincing case in contesting modern Western "objectivity," which denies any intrinsic meaning of the nonhuman, by exposing this concept as being merely a "reassuring narrative of human dominance" (28).

By contrast, the chapter dealing with the literary significance of the potato and staple agriculture in general is more diffuse. Pointing out the historical importance of the emergence of the staple as a "key transition" in the human conception of agricultural produce, from "natural provision" to "anonymous commodity," Ziser links this conceptual shift to a change in literary representation (50-1). His analysis of Thomas Harriot's *A Briefe and True Report of the New Founde Land of Virginia* (1588) and James Grainger's georgic *The Sugar-Cane* (1764) is largely based on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Ziser reinterprets Heidegger's categories of *Vorhandenheit*, or presence-at-hand, and *Zuhandenheit*, or readiness-to-hand, drawing on and connecting the work of Graham Harman and

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Brett Buchanan. He uses Harman's notion of "noncommunicating tools" and Buchanan's ideas on the "material-semiotic circuit," in order to advance his theory of "food-being" (71). Ziser claims that food-being constitutes a reversed complement to Heidegger's *Zeuganalyse*, because, different from a breaking tool that shifts from being ready to being present, potential food moves from presence to readiness. For a nonhuman object to become food, he contends, it first has to be recognized as an object distinct from the human body and the rest of the nonhuman world; it has to be "present-at-hand" (72). Its objectification must then be deferred in order for it to be ingested and assimilated; it has to become "ready-to-hand" (72). Consequently, he points out that food-being "uncontroversially establish[es] the human through the nonhuman," as the "environment becomes the body" (74). Ziser links the transition from object to food, its ensuing assimilation, and its implications for intersubjectivity in this particular phenomenological approach to what he calls Heideggerian circumspection, or "solicitous looking around oneself," as the ultimate way to imagine nonhuman objects (75). The literary genre of the eighteenth century that incorporates and displays this notion of circumspection, he maintains, is the georgic. Therefore, the last pages of the chapter are dedicated to a brief analysis of Grainger's *The Sugar-Cane*. Ziser identifies the work as a "hypertextual poem filled with distractions and deferrals" and claims that it can thus be understood as circumspect in the Heideggerian sense (77). Furthermore, Grainger's mammoth project, aimed at instructing and educating through the text itself and the addition of voluminous footnotes, is interpreted as "ecological in its inability to maintain a focus on any particular object" (80). According to Ziser, the georgic mode performed in *The Sugar-Cane* approximates the agricultural object to a state where it can almost be represented. The conclusion seems plausible but the preceding argumentation and especially Ziser's application of Heidegger's phenomenology are rather obscure. Nonetheless, although his theorizing of "food-being" might perhaps not be fully refined, this chapter constitutes a substantial contribution to the field of food studies in connecting the ecological implications of the staple to the phenomenology of Heidegger.

Chapters three and four are less effective because Ziser seems to digress too far from his original claim, more or less substituting nonhuman agency with symbolism. "The Pomology of Eden" focuses, as the name suggests, on the apple. As Ziser points out, the apple, particularly for the early Puritan colonists, is a clearly defined symbol of the Fall of Man and the ensuing struggle to overcome and heal that failure. This Christian symbolism was transferred, just like the plant itself, from the Old World to the New. Other than tobacco or the potato, he argues, the domesticated European apple, including its religious and cultural connotations, has been "invaded, broadened, and modified" by the wildness of its new habitat (87). Ziser illustrates the agency or even authorship of the apple by analyzing three literary works: Ralph Austen's *Treatise of Fruit-Trees* (1653), Anne Bradstreet's poem "Contemplations," which was presumably finished in the 1660s but not published until the middle of the nineteenth century, and Edward Taylor's *Preparatory Meditations*, a collection of devotional poems composed between 1682 and 1726. All three works are informed by strong Puritan belief. Ziser focuses on the changes to the Old World's traditional systems of meaning, which he claims are brought about by planting out "a symbol of narrow theological and cultural self-regard" in the wilderness of the New World, and the way they are reflected in the selected works (87). While there is certainly a recognizable reciprocity between the apple and these specific cultural productions, the agency of the nonhuman is inextricable from a prior attribution of religious symbolic meaning. Even the literary reflection on the alteration of such symbolism through a nonhuman actor requires its prior ascription to the object. In other words, the more-than-human merely gains a conditional agency in Ziser's argumentation, dependent on the human to provide the necessary condition.

The fourth chapter of *Environmental Practice* examines James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Oak-Openings* (1848) as a literary manifestation of the environmental practice of beelining. While Cooper's minute description of the craft itself certainly comes close to the instructional standard of the georgic, Ziser goes even further by claiming that *The Oak-Openings* presents an example for the ability of the nonhuman to actually shape human cultural production. Instead of being the mere subject of Cooper's work, Ziser asserts that the environmental practice becomes the "or-

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ganizational force" of his art (153). His claim exceeds the support of the text. In an attempt to illustrate how deeply embedded nonhuman agency is in the novel, Ziser draws connections to environmental symbolism from the author's verbal puns regarding the names of characters and places in the novel, which are rather far-fetched and sometimes even faulty. To give two examples: the protagonist's last name, Bourdon, would connect the man to the bee because the French 'bourdon' allegedly translates to 'drone' in English, when the actual translation is 'bumblebee.' Another example is the homophony Ziser ascribes to the French 'miel' and English 'meal' which "confounds the bee's meal (*miel*) with the human meal" (150). However, a homophony of these two words would be a forced one and the assumption is most likely based on an error in pronunciation of the French term. The final paragraphs address Cooper's change in the literary representation of the nonhuman. According to Ziser, *The Oak-Openings* goes beyond the capacities of the pastoral in representing a merger of nonhuman nature and human culture, as it shows "how the path from the material to the symbolic is laboriously traveled through the everyday exercise of environmental practice" (156).

In the brief concluding chapter, Ziser's argumentation becomes more clear-cut again. He examines a transitional stage in the representation of environmental practice in the middle of the nineteenth century. In an analysis of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, which is commonly read as pastoral, Ziser reveals the qualities of Thoreau's work that actually characterize it as a "complex georgic" (167). Referring to George Perkins Marsh he explains what he calls "*Walden*'s georgic turn" in terms of the "nonpastoral vision of becoming not the leisured enjoyer of a bounteous earth but…'a co-worker with nature'" (172). In conclusion, Ziser moves from Thoreau's close encounter of the nonhuman world to a brief examination of nineteenth-century agricultural magazines. He considers these journals to be the most refined version of the georgic mode, which he defines as "the meta-framework of U.S. environmental culture" (178). He then returns to Latour in arguing that the agricultural press of the nineteenth century presents a "record of ecocultural collectives" (180). In other words, Ziser interprets these journals as documents of communication between the nonhuman agricultural object and the human engaged with it, and hence as a testament to the agency of nonhuman actors.

Despite some of its bolder claims, Ziser's monograph marks an important contribution to the field of ecocriticism in its attempt to establish the "material turn" as an applicable theoretical approach to cultural productions. Moreover, Ziser's analysis opens a debate on redefining our understanding of literary history and the role of nonhuman agents in it. Another crucial but perhaps less obvious accomplishment of the study is the reconceptualization of texts traditionally conceived of as pastoral, which Ziser interprets through the lens of the georgic. His treatment of the representational dichotomy of the pastoral and the georgic is a recurring theme in the monograph offering a radical change of perspective in approaching such works as Thoreau's *Walden*. In doing so, he calls for a shift in ecocritical focus from "pastoral isolation" to "georgic collectivities" (159). Evidently, *Environmental Practice and Early American Literature* offers several interesting new starting points for subsequent research and analysis. Ziser's methods and subject matter provide a new approach that undeniably deserves scholarly consideration.

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