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Review: "The Usufructuary Ethos: Power, Politics, and Environment in the Long Eighteenth Century."

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Erin Drew. *The Usufructuary Ethos: Power, Politics, and Environment in the Long Eighteenth Century.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2021. 234 pp. \$39.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-8139-4580-4.

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Erin Drew summarizes the core principle of the early modern set of ideas she calls “the usufructuary ethos” as follows: “What you have is ‘yours’ only in a partial and temporary sense” (p. 47). Nowhere did this principle manifest itself more clearly than in the figure of the landlord, who commanded power over tenants and by extension the land itself, but who was also, theoretically, bound by responsibilities to both subordinates and superiors. The concept of “usufruct”—which originated in Roman law but was heavily mediated through Christian theology—addressed the paradoxical nature of the landlord’s power by stipulating that the rights associated with ownership were circumscribed by far-reaching and interconnected obligations “that linked not only past, present, and future but [also] humans, non-humans, and God, as well as the social, political, and natural worlds” (p. 2). Drew argues that recovering the history of the usufructuary ethos in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Britain changes the way we understand the human relationship to the environment in this era and could inform how we imagine it today.

Drew’s analysis of the usufructuary ethos in devotional writing, moral philosophy, legal thought, and poetry challenges a conventional scholarly

emphasis on human dominion over nature and ideologies of improvement during the period under consideration. Strikingly, it does so by turning to an intellectual tradition that is explicitly hierarchical and essentially conservative. Drew acknowledges that the emergent vision of the usufructuary ethos in her study “is not entirely a rosy one, nor is it meant to be aspirational,” but she argues that “hierarchism” in early modern environmental thought has been misunderstood and its moral imagination underappreciated (p. 14). Because scholars have focused almost exclusively on the hegemonic aspects of hierarchy, the potentially salutary environmental ethics encompassed by the usufructuary ethos have not been well understood.

The first chapter of Drew’s book expertly lays out a series of usufructuary concepts and assesses their environmental implications. Given the basis of the usufructuary ethos in a Christian theology of creation, the chapter begins with an analysis of late seventeenth-century English devotional writing before moving on to moral philosophy and legal thought. The theological tenet of God’s sovereignty over all creation led to three core principles of the usufructuary ethos: “(1) that the human right to use nonhuman creation is *displaced* from abso-

lute ownership of it, which rests permanently with God; (2) that human beings have a *medial* relationship to power and to the nonhuman creation, in that they are both under and in authority, and are the media through which the means of subsistence pass from organism to organism and from one generation to the next; and (3) that human beings are *accountable* for the care of the earth and its creatures both to the absolute proprietor and to future generations of users” (p. 22).

These three principles of the usufructory ethos—*displacement*, *mediality*, and *accountability*—shaped a broad swath of English discourse in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, setting rights of possession within a clear framework of responsibilities. Also attached to usufructory principles was a set of terms figuring the usufructory condition, such as “steward,” “tenant,” and “landlord” (p. 22). Frequent recourse to terms referring to the middle positions within hierarchies underscored the fundamental fact of the usufructory ethos, “that every single part of creation, animate and inanimate, human and nonhuman, acts as a medium for God’s ‘gifts,’ passing them from one being to the next” (p. 28). While scholars are no doubt familiar with the concept of the great chain of being, they are less likely to have found it described with the sophistication Drew marshals here.

After tracing various iterations of the usufructory ethos through the writings of John Howe, Richard Allestree, Thomas Adams, Matthew Hale, and Thomas Tryon, Drew concludes chapter 1 with the more familiar John Locke. Locke’s significance to the study lies in the fact that the theory of property articulated in his *Second Treatise on Government* (1690) both relies on the concept of usufruct and undermines it in ways that foreshadow its gradual recession. While the *Second Treatise* contains usufructory provisos against waste and spoilage, Locke included these mainly as a way of protecting *individual* property rights, rather than stewarding resources that properly

belong to God for the sake of others. Furthermore, Locke’s monetary theory, in which the fruits of labor are abstracted into capital, rendered concerns about waste and spoilage obsolete, as did his assumption that the European “discovery” of America opened up a limitless supply of land. By identifying these features of Locke’s thought, Drew illustrates how the usufructory ethos would come under increasing pressure as commerce and colonization came to define the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The remainder of the book explores how writers, and especially poets, continued to deploy usufructory ideas while attempting to negotiate changing economic conditions. Chapter 2 connects the usufructory ethos to more explicitly environmental concerns by examining trees “as both symbols and embodiments of public and intergenerational interdependence” (p. 74). John Evelyn’s *Sylva* and (1664) Anne Finch’s “Upon My Lord Winchilsea’s Converting the Mount in His Garden to a Terras” (ca. 1703) contrast maintaining and planting forests to plowing acreage, praising the former activity as the proper duty of the usufructory landlord concerned about the longevity of an estate. Chapter 3 examines the poetry of Alexander Pope, noting its usufructory concern with how landlords used their riches. For example, and continuing with the themes of trees, Pope disapproved of topiary because “it reduces trees to inert material, denying them their vital embodiment of species and general interconnection, as well as their ability to offer to the rest of the community the gifts God designed them to give (e.g. shade)” (p. 127). At the same time, Drew makes clear that Evelyn, Finch, and Pope all elucidated their ideas of usufruct in response to an increasingly commercial economic context in which the usufructory ethos was being discarded, or, more accurately, altered.

For example, Pope himself looked to the connections forged by commerce as a potential replacement for the more traditional socio-environ-

mental connections imagined by the usufructory ethos. This tendency is magnified in the “midcentury mercantile monocultural georgics” with which Drew concludes her study in chapter 4. In both John Dyer’s *The Fleece* (1757) and James Grainger’s *The Sugar-Cane* (1764), the environment is understood “as wealth generating, rather than sustaining; as a site for transformation in the service of a key product, rather than of sustenance for humans and nonhumans” (p. 139). Grainger’s *The Sugar-Cane* is an especially well-chosen text with which to conclude, as its focus on Caribbean sugar plantations moves the argument out of England into an Atlantic world context where enslavement was the primary form of agricultural labor. While Grainger, like previous writers, evoked trees as embodiments of socio-environmental community, his conflation of the English landlord with the Caribbean enslaver indicates how the georgic genre became essential for legitimating “the changes to socio-environmental relations driven by enclosure, mechanization, colonialism, and enslaved labor” (p. 167).

Drew’s account of how georgic poetry eclipsed the more complex moral imagination of the usufructory ethos is one of several important insights in this book. Another is her persistent contention that scholars must attend to environmental images in literature not merely as ciphers that convey a writer’s social and political allegiances but also as signifiers with real referents and serious environmental implications. This is in some ways *the* signature critical move with which ecocriticism began, and Drew uses it effectively in each chapter to develop new readings of her chosen writers. Relatedly, the book makes an implicit metacritical point about the responsibilities literary critics have toward texts—a usufructory ethos of reading. Such an ethos requires readers not to settle for interpretations that view environmental representations in literature as primarily symbolic or allegorical. Rather they must recognize that environmental representations embody real environmental ethics that critics are obligated to

draw out. If, as Drew concludes, we cannot and should not look to recover the eighteenth-century usufructory ethos for our own time, studying it can prompt us to “face up to the full weight of our usufructory responsibilities,” be they environmental, literary, or otherwise (p. 172).