Eyes for Avonlea: How Maud Teaches Me to See the Natural World

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This creative piece, structured by my acrostic poem “Avonlea,” explores the way in which L.M. Montgomery’s rendering of nature helps me to see the natural world as affective—connected, enchanting, immersive, and generating affection. Interwoven throughout the text are seven Polaroids inspired by Montgomery’s photographs.

Avonlea.

How does Lucy Maud Montgomery inspire such affective heft, with one word, the name of a town? In imagining how a text impinges upon and infuses a reader’s interior lands, I wonder how this combination of seven letters generates such warm, beguiling loveliness. Why do the *Av* and *ea* at the front and end seem to swirl off the page like green vines? The middle *n* looks like a tiny archway in an old garden, the *l* like a graceful gesture from someone reading a poem, the *o* a kind of window. I

wonder, you who are reading this, if you're like me in envisioning that this name on the page itself is a kind of ecology (imaginative, green, shore-lined, spruce-scented). And this is where I'll begin, with an acrostic poem of "Avonlea" that plays with my unfolding experience of the name:

Affective ecologies

Vectors zooming about and creeping in, swelling

Onto each other, spilling out in

New modes of seeing: each leaf, each cell

Lilts into mattering force, spinning

Enchantment, and—

Affection.

1. Affective Ecologies

One affective ecology from the land of Green Gables that first comes to mind is that of the Snow Queen's territory. It is mainly populated by words on pages 4, 30, 31,

and 307 of my 1992 Bantam Book edition of *Anne of Green Gables*. This ecology comes into being via words (that is, via printing processes, fonts/formatting, and booksellers—for me, specifically the old Bookstop on Hwy 90 in Sugar Land, Texas, and … who were the cashier, manager, and shelf-stocker that day?), words that Maud wrote (as I have imagined) at the kitchen table by the warmth of the kitchen stove, to fend off a long winter evening in the brutally numbing boredom, written by a quicksilver hungry mind (and this generative act at the kitchen table is via what strange duct secretions of the imagination, what deep waters of play, where fluid grey swashing swill of the formless forming buttery undulations form at the shoreline, a freckled winsome seeking creature?), words that realize an ecology where beside the window of the east gable room grows a tree. This tree is the Snow Queen, as named by Anne, and about it we read: “A huge cherry-tree grew outside, so close that its boughs tapped against the house, and it was so thickset with blossoms that hardly a leaf was to be seen.”[1]

Let’s vector this now in the fictive storyworld: there is the “longing-home” assemblage known by four specific letters, *Anne*, the last letter zinging in with a decidedly difference-making force (perhaps by balancing out the two middle *n*’s, or maybe the trellis of the *e* is like a scoot toward flourishing); the architectural aesthetic of *window* (sill, pane, lucent, glass-gleam, wood-lines, outside world framed-in and inside world looking-out, portal for perching, perching for dreaming, a very be-longing version of liminal experience); the elements of the inside world: rug, washstand, mirror, bed, blanket; the elements of outside world: air, clouds, oxygen, birds, birdsong, climate, gulf-salt; and then, crucially, the Snow Queen, a living organism with decades of circuit-making sap and all those responsive solar light cycles—so that if we were to step into this ecology we have *home*, homing, gazing out, mutual congruent space of the shade and light, seasonal blossoming and fruition, dappled effects (what kind of light-play happened on the floor and walls of that room because of that tree?), and the attunements between human assemblage overflowing with strings swinging out to almost anything, but especially to the deep living things—most prominently perhaps, the attunement (which I am thinking sets this whole ecology ablaze with affection) between Anne and the tree.

Looking at the above, the operative element for this affective ecology is the Snow Queen itself. This ecology comes into being so that this tree's presence is vital for the *qualia* of its existence, its mattering feel. The nutrients the tree gives to this specific habitat supplies the special biological function (**O_2-CO_2** exchange); and in the morphing zones of repair and belonging, it gives the latitudinal coordinate *I am growing here* and the longitudinal orientation *You are growing here too, Anne*.



Kincora Harbour, Ireland. Polaroid by Jessica Brown, 2018.

2. Vectors Zooming About and Creeping In, Swelling

When I was eleven there was a book cart in Mrs. Crissman's Reading Class (fifth period), and on it I found the *Anne of Green Gables* Bantam edition, and after reading it (though I know you can attest, it was more like gulping it down), I thought, *L.M. Montgomery, where have I* … and I went to the middle shelf in my bedroom, and there was a book given me a few months earlier, *The Story Girl*, which I hadn't really opened yet, for the smallness of the words was frightening. Now heartened, I proceeded and fell far, far, far into the world of the Island, and the Island rolled out before me and also enfolded me in blue-sparkling, green-shimmering, yellow-sunned capaciousness. Prince Edward Island of the imagination swelled into a massive cloudy becoming—but was it so imaginative? It might have been tissued out with dermis, the nerve-endings and brain synapses were so alight, and the happiness being there so somatic.

On my little reading bench the phenomenological space of book-and-child was like a dandelion with its puff of seeding-swinging. The dandelion seeds travelled with me, or I with them, and it didn't take long, but soon the trees at the end of our lane in southeast Texas I *saw*, I really saw. I wanted to name them, not to own them (this was no appropriation, but if it had been, surely the trees were owning me—the direction was the other way than any human-subject tethering out; it was tree knocking on the blank space into the brain, a.k.a. the pupils, its scent taken in through the nose, and somehow, maybe on the wind that carried its scent, into skin cells and nerve-endings) but to enjoy/enjoin: Those trees at the end of my lane were as real as the ones in Avonlea, I realized, as material and growing as any tree in Willowmere or Idlewild. Because of Maud's words, I could register these trees now, the wily pine and the old oak and the rows of pecan trees in my neighbour's orchard.

Register: the ability to realize something after not being able to do so. Maud's Registry of Nature perhaps starts with the beautiful Ruskinian itemized lodging of detail through the observing eye (trees, leaves, flowers) but soon—well, you know this as well as I do—Maud's Registry of Nature goes slanted, tangled, gloaming, a veritable bloom-space of affective processual biological happenings—dappled motion, edging shadow, starry sheen, salt tang, fathomless gradients of the day

ending (dusk, sunset, twilight, moonlight). Oh, how this registry cascades out beyond itself.



Kincora Harbour, Ireland. Polaroid by Jessica Brown, 2018.

3. Onto Each Other, Spilling Out In

If the *o* in Avonlea is like a window, what does it open onto?

As Marilla returns home one evening, “[s]he probably imagined that she was thinking about the Aids and their missionary box and the new carpet for the vestry room, but under these reflections was a harmonious consciousness … of red fields smoking into pale-purply mists in the declining sun …”2 Have Marilla’s receptors been so intensified by Anne’s tutelage that she responds to the beauty of the evening? Even though she might be thinking about practical tasks and cares, and even though she configures *herself* thinking about these things, something altogether different is being registered.

There are always things to do, aren’t there, Marilla? And in the narrow concourse of a single day’s work, living organisms and inorganic material and processes like scent and springtime abide alongside us, if we can open to them—if we can open the window of the self to them. Somehow not stinting on “harmonious” incorporeality, these assemblages—blurry-edged experiences like mists and shadows, the pulses of seeds swelling under foot, the morphing outline of seasonal cycles—abide relentlessly with utter thingness, hereness, nowness, quite apart from anything to do with us. And it is this very “apartness” that makes our window onto these more-than-human things so extraordinarily dynamic.

In his book *Being Ecological*, the philosopher Timothy Morton gives insight into this kind of dynamic, one which I think Montgomery cheekily and poetically plays with in the region of Marilla’s “sober, middle-aged”3 character: “A realm of unspeakable, nonhuman beauty not confined to normative anthropocentric parameters begins to open up.”4 Human work, our long lists of necessary and good tasks, is anthropocentric, of course; but fir trees against the setting sun are not. And if we

can register this as they swerve around us, and latch on, we become braided with these living things, bodily and affected, our stories porous to the Earth’s thrumming.

When that *o* window opens, it opens us up.



Flaggy Shore, Ireland. Polaroid by Jessica Brown, 2019.

4. New Modes of Seeing: Each Leaf, Each Cell

The deep ecologist Robert Hurley writes, “The environment is not just a reservoir of information whose circuits await mapping, but also a field of forces whose actions await experiencing.”5 I think Maud knew what deep ecology mounts toward: Flowers aren’t just things you see (packets of info-seeds to cultivate); they are forces that happen and happen in front of us and to us and within us. I think of a line from another story in Avonlea, when the proud-longing-lonely assemblage Margaret Lloyd leaves flowers for the daughter of a man she once loved: “[A]nd every morning Sylvia found a bouquet of them by the beech—the performed ivory of white narcissus, the flame of tulips, the fairy braces of the bleeding-heart, the pink-and-snow of the little, thorny, single, sweet-breathed early roses.”6 A white narcissus is not simply the flower itself, plucked, held, and displayed, but the “perfumed ivory” that we experience in many cognitive, emotional, and somatic layers as colour and scent. Tulips are little flickers that warm the deep imagining brain, and those early roses breathe sweetness into bio-memory, the storerooms of the heart and gut. When I think about how Maud gives me “eyes for Avonlea,” what I am trying to understand is how she taught me to see nature beyond sight, to see with a kind of beholding that becomes beheld.

This is what nature does: When we behold it in a kind of letting-go/letting-in, we find it is holding us. Metabolically and biologically we are held, nature’s nutrients seeping into the plasma of our cells, and our mitochondria thank the large oaks; but, as well as being intertwined with these dear bodily processes, nature treads with transformative pulses into the affective heart-zone: we are heartened by the sight of dune grass and comforted by the hush of pine trees, eased by dusk’s glow, and inflamed by the way snow sharpens the air as it falls. All this Maud experienced and funnelled into the pen in her hands, and onto the page, and into print, and a century later her words still function in this burgeoning, reparative, teaching way: This is how to see a way of being in nature. Like Anne, a person can be a *being-with-nature*, eventhood immersed, shared, and responsive.

The eyes scanning nature are hungry for beauty, but in this ecology, the hunger doesn’t seem to be *hunting* what it is looking at. Anne might be subject-viewer, but it seems much more accurate to call her immersed-receiver. I mean, I see her in the green shadows of Idlewild—perhaps Diana is there too, and they are immersed in all

the moving elements of this place: the light-play of shadow, the wind lifting the branches and shaking the leaves, the moss and the clover at the banks of the trees, the small buttercups at the eastern sunny corner, the wood grain of the little shelves for the broken dishes, the coolness that creeps in as the sun starts to lower. All things and forces enter in and are entered into—a replete brimming-over; or a hushed, awed footstep.



Fanore Beach, Ireland. Polaroid by Jessica Brown, 2020.

5. Lilts into Mattering Force, Spinning

One aspect of encountering a vision of nature like this is that it is embedded and emerging with *narrative*, in and with a story. More than simple insertions of descriptive passages, experiences of nature in Anne's story are tied at the joint with notches and movements of her own narrative becoming, which is intertwined with the arcs of those assemblages around her, gathering plotlines of "second chances" and repair and being seen by others in unprecedented ways. The best is that nature *matters* in these plotlines.

One of many moments in *Anne of Green Gables* that plays a "duet" of nature movement and character movement occurs when Anne and Marilla return from Rachel Lynde's house, where Anne has apologized. As they walk home, "[a] little gypsy wind came down to meet them, laden with the spicy perfume of young dew-wet ferns. Far up in the shadows a cheerful light gleamed out through the trees from the kitchen at Green Gables." Here we have a layered, affective moment of the natural world: Scented air, growing plant-life, and chemical processes of a candle or oil lamp burning. There is a becoming-ness, a networked-ness, in these elements that invite or prompt the next moment, which is one of human connection and the precious psycho-physiological processes of touch and care: "Anne suddenly came close to Marilla and slipped her hand into the older woman's hard palm."[7] This sentence was dear to me as a young reader, and it has grown more so as I get older. A moment of hand-in-hand is perhaps one of the kindest affordances of life, and two people long unused to it are experiencing it on this walk home. And it seems that the holding, beguiling Earth has no shortage of funds to welcome such a connectedness, and that narratives—Anne's, Marilla's, ours—find unique traction for personhood, in our emotional-sensory interaction with this Earth.



Kincora Harbour, Ireland. Polaroid by Jessica Brown, 2018

6. Enchantment, &—

Enchantment streams from, within, around Avonlea.

For me, enchantment is the feeling of being “swept up,” but I have learned it is also the ability to be open enough to be “swept up.” The philosopher Jane Bennett writes something beautiful about enchantment: “It is a state of interactive fascination … [It] is a mood of fullness, plenitude, or liveliness, a sense of having one’s nerves or circulation or concentration powers turned up or recharged.”8 Structurally and functionally, enchantment is deeply mutual, a kind of ripe, bright, present, brimming *seeing* between two things that have first established enough openness that this seeing is possible. The literary theorist Rita Felski emphasizes both the “involvement” aspect of this experience, as well as how crucial or vital it feels when we experience it; “[e]nchantment is characterized by a state of intense involvement,” she writes, “a sense of being so entirely caught up in an aesthetic object that nothing else seems to matter.”9

When I think of the enchantment of Avonlea, it is layered with words, reading memories, imagined scenes and places, and, also, my own attachments with the natural world inspired by what I learned in Avonlea. This experience of enchantment is built by text; my first brush with it is word-constructed. It begins as a reading encounter with a fictional assemblage who notices with a *responsive*, interactive, “tangled” noticing—“tangled” being the key attitude here for enchantment: “Anne … somehow felt that wind and stars and fireflies were all tangled up together into something unutterably sweet and enchanting.”10 As my mind dwells in this place of fictional beauty, Maud’s rendering of nature welcomes me to be as enchanted as her fictional protagonists are by fictional birch skin and fictional colours of sunrise. Meanwhile, this vision of nature gives vitality and motion to enchantment-capacities for the world outside of book.

To say it another way: Silvered, sunned, greened, and sparkling, Avonlea ecologies enchant me *and* teach me how to be enchanted. This vision is a way of looking that is connective (connective enough to enchant) in the very deeps of networked

structure—and let structure be configured here not with metal beams and bolts, but as the floppy loosening of the peony, the shaped lines of the gardenia, the flowing webs of ivy, the creep of moss, the trough-crest of wave.

I see myself, this young teen taught by Maud to see birches and brooks. I watch me, in my mind's eye, on a walk in typical suburbia, noting the cedar elms by the sidewalk and the tulips by the brick houses, the way shade gathers like bits of gravel in the hot sun. Later, on the small country lane, that pecan orchard becomes a kind of infinite kingdom, a tree-and-clover woven beauty that is a landscape for imagined stories. A specific walk, tenderly folded in the heart's storeroom, comes tripping to the front of my mind: When I was fourteen, my family and I stayed at a motel in Nacogdoches for Thanksgiving. We went on a walk through maples, and my delight tipped over to such wonder—somatic soaring and deep brain-circuitry of maple-gladness. And now, as I walk in the hills of County Clare, either in the forests of the non-native Sitka spruces, or up along the bog tracks surrounded by heather and gorse, or by lake's edge as the hills come (un)folding into the cold water, the capacities to behold interactively so as to be *enchanted* by these wondrous living things, by these abiding processes of rotation and revolution, flourish, and I owe this flourishing to a writer from a century ago, who taught me how to behold this way.



Flaggy Shore, Ireland. Polaroid by Jessica Brown, 2019.

7. Affection

Towards the end of *Anne of Green Gables* (how I remember my immersion into this scene!—so eager was I to trace Anne's lines of becoming, how she was growing up and how grief had formed her), Anne visits Matthew's grave, and as she leaves the graveyard, she surveys the world around her, the village, the ocean, the sky:

The beauty of it all thrilled Anne's heart, and she gratefully opened the gates of her soul to it.

"Dear old world," she murmured, "you are very lovely, and I am glad to be alive in you."[11]

Anne here becomes a special prototype of the kind of affection we can experience when our affordance for seeing the natural world is shaped by the presence of the natural world itself. In this way, green hues teach us to see green and see green-like, or birds teach us to see birds and see bird-like. But it is more than a teaching-learning relationship, because while we are learning, our heart is being moved to deepening fondness, tenderness, and care. More than teaching us to see loveliness, loveliness shows us how to *love* loveliness.

O, Earth. My affection for you has been forming for a long time, the lines and pulses and memories and experiences of being with you have shaped me, the wide arcs of personhood and the going-about-my-day self. This is not just from the sheer pleasure of gazing at you—but being "alive in you," knowing you hold and sustain, as I walk and breathe and behold and be. You teach me green, blue, open, budding, the hyphen in night-fall; you teach me seeding, fallow, coldness, quiet; horizon, hilltop, glade, glen, and valley. I am awash in my affection for you, pulling me like the undertow of the deep forces beneath the hills and the waters. I see you because you have taught me to see you, and in seeing you, I become, become-with-nature.

This kind of seeing is a kind of rejoicing, which becomes a kind of enjoining, which reveals that we have been enjoined all, all, all along.

Maud’s words on the page delight, envelop, and teach me, and they become embodied by me, the reader, such that even three decades later when I am on a walk and see the flower by the base of a tree, I will often think of that imaginative bloom-space Prince Edward Island. Yet, this familiar brain circuit is not only a graced recall of an imaginary island of beauty—but *also* (and this is the heart of Maud’s gift) it invites me to enact the narrative and poetic agency to see myself as radically attuned and entwined with that violet, or daffodil, or wild garlic white blossom. The sightings of the natural world are not merely a moment of aesthetic pleasure but an experience of interactivity with this source of beauty. Another narrative notch assembles in my personhood, so that I am someone who sees *and is affected by* the shimmer on the lake or the arrival of the blackthorn flower in April. This is Maud’s gift, to see ourselves this way. We are porous to the presence of birch and the way the shadows bend at twilight.



Hedge in Summer, Ireland. Polaroid by Jessica Brown, 2017.

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- 1 Montgomery, *AGG* 30.
- 2 Montgomery, *AGG* 213.
- 3 Montgomery, *AGG* 213.
- 4 Morton, *Being Ecological* 60.
- 5 Hurley, Preface ii.
- 6 Montgomery, “Old Lady Lloyd” 21.
- 7 Montgomery, “Old Lady Lloyd” 76.
- 8 Bennett, *Enchantment* 5.
- 9 Felski, *Uses of Literature* 54.
- 10 Felski 180.
- 11 Montgomery, *AGG* 306.

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