RESEARCH ARTICLE

Revisiting Places: Can We Still Be Early Modern? Keynote Address, Early Modern French Conference of the Society for Early Modern French Studies, 5–7 July 2022, St Andrews

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This article articulates the places of early modern poetry with contemporary eco-theories. Mobilising the connectivities of οικος rather than the separations of environment, the author traces ecological senses of place in the poetry of Du Bellay, Jacques Peletier, and Ronsard, and reclaims Renaissance humanism from posthumanist detractors. Humanist pastoral poetry manifests the sense of connection claimed as the purview of contemporary concepts such as naturecultures or transcorporeality. Renaissance place, as an ecological habit of thought, contrasts favourably with modern veneration of wilderness which separates human from environs. The conclusion suggests continuities between Renaissance humanism and our academic humanities inasmuch as they privilege relational, rather than acquisitive or extractive, value systems. The text is a modified version of the keynote address to the 2022 SEMFS Conference and contains references to some of the papers presented in the spirit of archiving that stimulating intellectual space.

KEYWORDS humanism, humanities, place, ecology, Renaissance pastoral, natureculture

Introduction: Returning to Human(ist) Place[1]

Returns can be complicated, as Ulysses and Joachim Du Bellay knew. Whether it's a professional field or a home country, places and spaces have the habit of changing in our absence. And we also change; what we are looking for when we return is never the same. Early modern French places reveal themselves differently to each new generation of readers and scholars. In what follows, I ask what we might be looking for, today, when we return to the places of early modern French literature, and how those places might speak to us in our particular temporo-spatial locations: what are we *inventing* when we return to the past from our current places?[2] Drawing on work by Phillip Usher and others which articulates contemporary environmental humanities – including ecocriticism – with early modern French literature, this paper offers a partial rehabilitation of Renaissance humanism, maligned by some posthumanists and scholars with presentist engagements, arguing instead that Renaissance humanism conveys an ecological sense of place that we would do well to listen to today. The use of *ecological* rather than *environmental* foregrounds ideas of relationality,[3] invokes the etymological stratum of οικος or dwelling place, and gestures towards a situated sense of place which privileges connection between human and non-human rather than their separation into nature and cultures: a natureculture.[4] As someone who believes that early modern studies are necessarily enriched by articulations with critical area studies on race, class, gender, and sexuality (and vice versa), and that canons must always be expanded, I nevertheless keep returning to some of the most traditionally canonical texts because, when read for ecology, they still have something to say to me – to us – about place.

We perpetually return, as scholars and (if we're lucky) as teachers, to early modern topoi and loci; and it's not a coincidence that *topos* and *locus* are spatial and textual terms. Place, *locus*, is usually understood by cultural geographers as a produced relationship, not simply a backdrop for human activity but an activity

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[1]   The following pages represent most of the content of the keynote address to the annual meeting of the Early Modern French Conference, Society for Early Modern French Studies, St Andrews, Scotland, 5–7 July 2022, with academic references added, and a few informal sections – which were more suited for oral delivery – removed. On occasion I reference other papers delivered at the conference, hoping to provide a partial commemoration of, and reflection on, the dynamic and inspiring exchanges that happened over those few days.

[2]   Richard Scholar's presentation at this conference on the imaginative histories of utopias suggested the notion of 'temporo-spatial play' as a dynamic force which *invents* place, following the etymological sense of invention as discovery. This provides a helpful theoretical framing for my own questions here. R. Scholar, 'Utopias and Temporo-Spatial Play' (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Early Modern French Conference, Society for Early Modern French Studies, St Andrews, Scotland, July 5–7, 2022). All subsequent references to conference papers will be to this event, abbreviated as SEMFS Conference.

[3]   The OED defines ecology as 'The branch of biology that deals with the relationships between living organisms and their environment. Also: the relationships themselves.' *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'Ecology', <https://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/59380> [accessed September 26, 2022].

[4]   The influence of Bruno Latour's thought will be apparent throughout. 'Natureculture', now widely used in the environmental humanities and social sciences, refers to an attempt to mediate between the dualisms of what Latour calls the modern constitution: nature and culture, human and animal/non-human, science and humanities. It is mobilised in, among others, B. Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes : essai d'anthropologie symétrique* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991); Latour, *Politiques de la nature : comment faire entrer les sciences en démocratie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1999); and D. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).

itself. Place is 'space invested with meaning',[5] whether temporal, geographic, or textual, and space, its raw material. Michel de Certeau's 'l'espace est un lieu pratiqué'[6] uses *espace* and *lieu* in the opposite way to most cultural geographers: *lieu* is immobile and unacted on, where *espace* is transversed by grids of human activity and movement, but despite the reversed terms the basic distinction is very similar. During this conference, many speakers traced productive tensions in early modern French places – between order and chaos, wild and tamed,[7] mechanical and organic[8] – all of which might themselves depend on a foundational tension between place and space themselves that is traceable in early modern texts and bottoms the ecological mode of being-in-place that keeps calling me back. What if, rather than searching for a site absolutely beyond culture (space), we embraced the human(ist) place?

As climate change renders many human and animal habitats unliveable, it is understandable that we would look to the past to find, with Candide, the place where 'tout va bien'. We may turn to poetry in particular to express a nostalgic, even Edenic, yearning for an ideal site now experienced as lost. But when we return to the *topoi* and *loci* of Renaissance French poetry and read them closely,[9] we find not a naïvely idealised nature so much as a complex natureculture, an awareness of the ways in which human and non-human are always imbricated, not always neatly, and not always gently. This can produce a particular ecological relationship with our immediate natural environment, paying attention to the complex beauty of places we actually inhabit – our home-right-here – an alternative model to the contemporary veneration of wild-places-out-there.

The somewhat grandiose title of my conference address, 'Can we still be early modern?', has an equally grandiose response: we *should* look to early modernity, in our classrooms and beyond, because among many other things it has to teach us is a relationship to place that is perhaps more sustainable than our own, at least in wealthy industrialised nations. The word 'human' in 'humanism' has led to its scapegoating by some posthumanist scholars for whom it has become the original sin of the Anthropocene. Carey Wolfe sets it up as the foil against which posthumanism is defined: 'posthumanism [is] a new mode of thought that comes after […] ideals of human perfectability, rationality, and agency inherited from Renaissance humanism'.[10] But in an important contribution to posthumanist debates, Phillip Usher reminds us that the *homo* in humanism is not the *anthropos* of the

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[5] T. Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 12.

[6] M. de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien. 1. Arts de faire* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1990), p. 172.

[7] John Lyons, in 'Plain and Grotto: Parameters of the Baroque Garden' (paper, SEMFS Conference, 2022), analysed the productive tensions between wild and tame, unbounded and regulated, in the space of the garden.

[8] Jennifer Oliver, in 'Spaces and Places of Ingenuity' (paper, SEMFS Conference, 2022), presented mechanical inventions as sites of mastery over nature's raw material.

[9] For the idea of close reading as an ecological habit, see the collected chapters of P. J. Usher and P. Goul, eds., *Early Modern Écologies: Beyond English Ecocritism* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020). All of the volume's authors practise and model close reading as a way to encounter, or even simulate, material relations with the non-human, but see in particular the chapter by Usher, 'Almost Encountering Ronsard's Rose', pp. 161–80.

[10] C. Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), pp. xv–xvi.

Anthropocene: 'the Anthropos belongs to science, to Nature, the *homo* to humanities and to Culture […] it is as if the word "humanism" is taken to be a simple synonym for "anthropocentrism" – but that is simply a refusal of the word's long and complex histories'.[11] Other early modernists, notably Kenneth Goewens, have pushed back against posthumanist dismissals of Humanism, arguing that some of the supposedly emerging premises of posthumanist theory are perhaps counterintuitively contained within Renaissance humanism itself.[12] As Joseph Campana and Scott Maisano put it in the introduction to their collection *Renaissance Posthumanism*, reading Renaissance humanist texts on their own terms can reveal 'ideas of "the human" as at once embedded and embodied *in*, evolving *with*, and decentred *amid* a weird tangle of animals, environments, and vital materiality'.[13] To think ecologically in early modern France is to think through an ethos of entangled life itself, about how humans inhabit, manage, and relate to, their dwelling places. And when we make that conceptual move, concepts such as the garden of letters, flowers of rhetoric, become not just arbitrary metaphors but a window into the fundamental articulation between nature and culture.[14]

In the following pages, we will (re)visit the ecological thinking of Joachim Du Bellay, Jacques Peletier, and Pierre de Ronsard, tracing their naturecultures and thinking with them about ecological relations to place. Via Renaissance humanism, *homo* is also an ancestor of our academic humanities, and in the concluding pages I follow Usher's invitation to reflect on how this academic field might share with early modern places an ethics of connection with the world we inhabit – at least as an ideal, if not reality.

Du Bellay's οικος in Anjou

Joachim Du Bellay's lyric representations of Anjou have been much discussed by early modernists, including myself; rather than revisiting them here, we will consider instead the quatrains of sonnet 38 from *Les Regrets*:

> Ô qu'heureux est celui qui peut passer son âge
> Entre pareils à soi ! et qui sans fiction,
> Sans crainte, sans envie et sans ambition,
> Règne paisiblement en son pauvre ménage !
> Le misérable soin d'acquérir davantage
> Ne tyrannise point sa libre affection,
> Et son plus grand désir, désir sans passion,
> Ne s'étend plus avant que son propre héritage.[15]

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[11] P. J. Usher, 'Untranslating the Anthropocene', *Diacritics* 44.3 (2016), 56–76, pp. 62–3.

[12] K. Goewens, 'What Posthumanism Isn't: On Humanism and Human Exceptionalism in the Renaissance', in *Renaissance Posthumanism*, ed. by Joseph Campana and Scott Maisano (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), pp. 37–63.

[13] 'Introduction', in *ibid*., p. 3.

[14] Jérôme Brillaud's presentation at this conference demonstrated that culture and cultivation were intimately entwined in horticultural practice: 'Growing Spaces: Vegetable Gardens in Early Modern France' (paper, SEMFS Conference, 2022).

[15] J. Du Bellay, *Les Regrets et autres œuvres poétiques*, ed. by Michael A. Screech and John W. Jolliffe (Geneva: Droz, 1979), p. 38. Subsequent citations of Du Bellay refer to this edition.

This seems far removed from what modern readers might think of as ecological poetry. There is no non-human landscape here, there are no animals. However, there is a sense of place, and this is what constitutes its ecological habit of thought. The poem is a *Beatus ille* that opposes acquisitive thinking, structurally and thematically, to a fantasy of modest self-sufficiency – and though it is a fantasy, this doesn't make it less powerful as an ideal. Du Bellay's hypothetical *beatus* does not desire more than what his family has given him; he is content to stay at home and simply subsist.[16] The poet's articulation of sustainable household management is an excellent example of the ideal early modern οικος. οικος, a household or dwelling place, is of course the root of the morpheme *eco*, in words such as economy and ecology.[17] These two eco-words are still conceptually related: to be ecological is to be economical. We might today call it an ethics of sustainability, a modest relation to habitat subtracted from the logics of (proto)capitalism.

Ecology is in fact a more appropriate concept for early modern France than is environment. Vin Nardizzi has cautioned early modernists to 'unlearn' – with Wendell Berry and Michel Serres – the semantic field of environment, inasmuch as it posits humans in a centre, and other objects outside. 'Like Timothy Morton's Nature (with a capital N), "environment," Berry and Serres indicate, seems to be getting in the way of environmental work and theory. We would do well, then, to unlearn the term.'[18] The sense of place in much French Renaissance poetry, following Nardizzi, invites us to unlearn *environment* and to inhabit ecologies and economies.

The ecological turn in readings of the French Renaissance is not about imposing meanings upon texts that aren't there. Rather, it is about surfacing relations that have always been there, and still whisper to us in our readings, between text and places, objects, animals, plants, gardens, grottos, theatres, fields, forests, rivers, cities, houses. Our readings of Renaissance texts have become so weighted by textuality and intertextuality, such an echo chamber of references, that we might have forgotten quite simply to see a rose or a falling tree with Ronsard, or a smoking chimney with Du Bellay. Early modern naturecultures are about connection, the porosity of boundaries: the Great Chain of Being may establish a hierarchy of creation, but it has links, not gaps.[19] Reading ecologically can produce the *frisson* of brushing up against something real, even if vestigial. And ecological reading is, at its best, necessarily *close* reading because it requires attention to place and because

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[16] Readers who appreciate the relation between metrics and message will note the rhyme positions of the key words *davantage, ménage*, and *héritage*, the form mapping out the poem's moral economy and ecology in ways to which critics such as Tom Conley have trained us to be attentive.

[17] See T. Conley, 'Reading Olivier de Serres circa 1600: Between Economy and Ecology', in *Early Modern Écologies: Beyond English Ecocritism*, ed. by Phillip John Usher and Pauline Goul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), pp. 223–62. Conley argues that 'the economy that goes with the concept and practice of *mesnage* has the tenor of a practical ecology' (p. 263).

[18] V. Nardizzi, 'Remembering Premodern Environs', in *Object Oriented Environs*, ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Julian Yates (punctum books, 2016), pp. 179–84, 179.

[19] Gabriel Egan argues that linked ordering in the Chain implies 'tension in the model [...] within each category there is thus a pull in two directions', in 'Gaia and the Great Chain of Being', in *Ecocritical Shakespeare*, ed. by Lynne Bruckner (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 81–93, 60.

place is textual and spatial, semiotic, and material. This does not, however, mean that Renaissance humanism proposed a celebratory or peaceful discourse of respect for the non-human. We should not think magically over distance and imagine that humanist ecologies were somehow closer to a Golden Age of natural harmony. Images of meshed connection can be brutal and violent just as easily as pastoral and tranquil.[20]

Jacques Peletier's Naturecultures in Savoy

Early modern naturecultures are exceptionally well traced in a text by Jacques Peletier Du Mans, *La Savoie*, published in 1572,[21] and the following pages will compare the author's observations of human–non-human entanglements with some of our own contemporary habits of thought. Peletier was a polymath humanist and the author of volumes of pastoral and scientific poetry. He stopped in Savoy on his way back from Switzerland and liked it so much that he stayed for two years, publishing a long poem containing extended descriptions of its people and places.[22] *La Savoie* draws heavily on sources such as Livy, Munster, and a 1562 map of the region,[23] but adds many new and personal observations of local customs, history, geography, flora and fauna, traditions, and products such as honey, cedar sap, a cheese called serac, saffron, artichokes, and much more. The poem is an extraordinary and unique compendium of local knowledge, and precisely because it provides an anthropology of a specific region, it is representative of a sense of place that is relatively unmediated. Savoy emerges as a nuanced and complex place, its land both fertile and hostile, the mountains terrifying and awe-inspiring. The relation between human and non-human is determined not by a wilderness aesthetic, but by a sense that the mountains – wild nature – are best left alone, with the appropriate space of human endeavour being pastoral.

[20] See L. Shannon, *The Accommodated Animal: Cosmopolity in Shakespearean Locales* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), whose analysis makes space for the unruly and violent in pre-Cartesian human–animal relations. See also J. Oliver, '"When is a meadow not a meadow?": Dark Ecology and Fields of Conflict in French Renaissance Poetry', in *Early Modern Écologies*, pp. 73–98; P. Goul, 'Is Ecology Absurd? Diogenes and the Ends of Civilization', in *ibid.*, pp. 111–36, both of whom provide a corrective to any tendency we might have to idealise past ecologies.

[21] Jacques Peletier du Mans, *La Savoye* (Annecy: Jacques Bertrand, 1572), accessible via the Bibliothèque nationale's Gallica and the Bibliothèques virtuelles humanistes of the University of Tours. The most recent edition, also accessible on Gallica, is *La Savoye : réimpression textuelle de l'édition de 1572. Notice sur la vie et les œuvres par Charles Pagès* (Moutiers-Tarentaise, 1897). Subsequent references are to this edition. The authoritative recent study of Peletier's work as a whole is S. Arnaud, *La voix de la nature dans l'œuvre de Jacques Peletier du Mans (1517–1582)* (Paris: Garnier, 2005), which centres his natural philosophy and also contains a wealth of bibliographic and biographic information.

[22] Alexandra Corey's conference paper analysed the ways in which textual landscapes carry the representational freight of Savoy's political position: 'Political Landscapes: On Descriptions of Nature in Emmanuel Philibert de Pignon's *Emmanuel Philibertus*' (paper, SEMFS Conference, 2022). For an overview of medieval and early modern Savoyard histories, see R. Brondy et al., *La Savoie de l'an mil à la Réforme* (Rennes: Ouest-France, 1982).

[23] First published in Italy by the engraver-editor Paolo Forlani, *Descrittione del ducato di Savoia* (Venice, 1562).

Savoy is one of the most rugged and wild areas of France, appreciated today by nature lovers from all over the world. Dramatic mountains, including the iconic Mont Blanc, loom over lush meadows dotted with villages and livestock. Up to forty thousand climbers annually attempt to summit Mont Blanc, with over twice as many scaling the nearby Aiguille du Midi, to say nothing of the almost one million visitors who took the cable car to the top in 2019.[24] Visitors seeking a serene mountain retreat will find themselves in the typical conundrum of the modern-day nature tourist: the most spectacular areas are crowded and commodified. They may find themselves wondering what it all would have looked like hundreds of years ago, without the crowds and trails and cable cars. But the chances are good that, hundreds of years ago, it would not have occurred to humans to hike in the mountains for pleasure. The very idea of 'getting away from it all' by being alone in wild nature would also have seemed strange.

Witness these few lines from the second book of *La Savoie*, which convey a sentiment which we would be hard-pressed to find in modern nature writing:

> Ce que j'ai dit des Montagnes, ameine
> Joye & profit à cete vie humeine.
> Mais le bon eur de l'homme, & special
> A sa nature, est d'estre social :
> C'est l'homme seul, qui rend le lieu spectable :
> Non pas le lieu, qui rend l'homme acceptable :
> Et la vertu, jointe à l'humanité,
> Donne aus païs toute leur dignité.[25]

These lines might be taken as a prime example of what the environmental humanities or posthumanities consider to be the arrogance of humanism. Is the way to live better in the world not precisely to divest ourselves of the illusion that nature exists to serve us? Maybe. But we can also read these lines not so much as arrogant as realistic: we are humans after all. *Pace* Leopold, I'm not sure we can really 'think like a mountain'.[26] We do not have to deny the material existence, or even the rights, of non-human nature, to recognise that we will never apprehend it without a human/humanist filter. Maybe early modern humanism can provide a model of thinking about our position in the world which is not so much about a will-to-dominate as about naturecultures, or what Timothy Morton calls the 'mesh'.[27] Renaissance writers would not have been surprised by the idea that exterior, physical space and interior, mental place produce each other within

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[24] Enquête Observatoire Agence Savoie Mont Blanc, 'La fréquentation des sites, monuments et manifestations', 7 September 2021, <https://pro.savoie-mont-blanc.com/Observatoire/Nos-donnees-brutes/Frequentation-des-sites> [accessed September 26, 2022].

[25] Peletier, p. 118.

[26] A. Leopold, 'Thinking Like a Mountain', in *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 129–33. Leopold argues that only by shifting perception away from individual humans (here, wolf hunters and cowherds) can ecological balance and species interdependence be preserved.

[27] In their related critique of posthumanism, Morton explains that ecological thinking starts not with eliminating the human subject position, but rather defining it by its interactions with other beings: see for example *The Ecological Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2010).

emmeshed material-semiotic systems. These lines from Peletier, which confer dignity on landscapes to the degree that they conjoin humanity and virtue, contrast starkly with contemporary habits of thought. We tend to define and appreciate Nature as that which isolates us from others, connecting with the non-human inasmuch as it allows us to disconnect from the human. Nature-worship is in this sense rather anti-social; it makes us intolerant of each other, and, given the environmental impact of the kind of travel required to find what we choose to call Nature, it is not particularly sustainable either.

The word Nature above references a post-Romantic ideal of a non-human world absolutely beyond human culture, including what we now call wildness and wilderness. Nature in this limited sense does not really include the earthworms in our garden, the dirt at the edge of the pavement, the swamp behind the strip mall. It certainly doesn't mean the humans inhabiting and traversing these spaces. But why not? That's what *nature* or *natura* meant in the Renaissance. It meant: everything. *Natura naturata* was everything created by *natura naturans* – rocks, animals, planets, hills, rivers – and humans. Peletier's Savoy suggests to us that when we think about 'getting back to nature', it would not be a bad thing if we returned to this early modern nature.

William Cronon wrote in 1995 that wilderness is 'not a pristine sanctuary without the contamination and taint of civilization [...] Instead, it is a product of that civilisation.' He further points out that wilderness, far from being an ahistorical and transcendent truth, is itself the (Euro-American) anachronism, born of the convergence of romanticism with the frontier. Mostly, what is unsustainable about our current idealisation of wildness is this, as Cronon puts it:

> By imagining that our true home is in the wilderness, we forgive ourselves the homes we actually inhabit. In its flight from history, in its siren song of escape, in its reproduction of the dangerous dualism that sets human beings outside of nature – in all of these ways, wilderness poses a serious threat to responsible environmentalism [...] Idealising a distant wilderness means not idealising the environment in which we actually live [...] most of our serious environmental problems start right here at home and if we are to solve these problems we need an environmental ethic that tells us as much about using nature as not using it.[28]

We are right back with ecology as οικος ... or ménage, as Du Bellay would have it, and Olivier de Serres.[29] What might the world look like if nature-loving travellers with disposable income did not seek thrills on the other side of the world in symbolically loaded places such as Antarctica, Everest, or even outer space, sites upon which human fantasies of challenge and escape are played out? Rather than escaping our οικος, whether at the local or planetary level, to 'conquer' extreme far-off terrains, why not direct our resources to overcoming the real challenge of living together well right where we are? What if we sought a sense of wonder and challenge in the everyday naturecultures that surround us, resisting this cognitive and physical separation of human from non-humans – and other humans – and

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[28]   W. Cronon, *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (London: Norton, 1996), pp. 69, 81.
[29]   O. de Serres, *Le Theatre d'agriculture et mesnage des champs (*Paris: Jamet-Métayer, 1600).

seeing ourselves as always already entangled in a Latourian network of actors? What might this look like? Maybe, a little like Renaissance pastoral poetry, with a sprinkling of the Great Chain of Being.

Both pastoral and the Chain of Being were until recently thoroughly unfashionable. They are easily debunked as elite ideology idealising an unequal social hierarchy, and the Chain of Being reinforces a vertical hierarchy justifying human supremacy within sublunar creation. But the time might have come, as Todd Borlik suggests, to dust them off and rethink the usefulness of their world view. The thing about a chain is that there can be movement up and down its links, or it may be repositioned as horizontal rather than vertical, encouraging an analogical form of thinking: 'early modern ecocritics [can] reforge the Great Chain of Being from a vertical hierarchy into something resembling a horizontal bond'.[30] Of course, most cultural products we study from the early modern period did circulate in elite circles, at least in literary studies,[31] but this should not be a reason to dismiss them. On the contrary, given the impact on the natural world of the behaviour and mentalities of the powerful, they should be of interest. In fact, I am comparing two elite world views: early modern pastoral and contemporary wilderness-worship, suggesting that, both socially and environmentally, the former might be preferable to the latter.

When we think of finding respite from the trials of our everyday lives, we may well imagine a solitary spot whose appeal lies precisely in its remoteness from human society. But in *La Savoie*, when Peletier fantasises about fleeing his reality – and in 1572, France is plunged in civil war – he imagines not a far-off mountain but the cultivated meadows between the mountains.

> … souhaite
> A haute vois, devenir de Poete
> Le laboureur qui cultive le val
> Du froid Bessan, ou bien de Bonneval :
> Pour n'avoir point les annuiz qui me cuisent,
> Ni les avis qui mon espoir detruisent ;
> Pour avoir pais, et demeureur agré.[32]

There is a certain aristocratic idealisation of peasant labour in these lines, but what interests me here is less the class politics than the clear boundary-setting. Throughout the poem, the appropriate space for human activity is delimited in the cultivated valleys rather than on the mountainsides:

> Bien se connoit celle ouvriere altissime
> Avoir transmis ces sources à la cime,
> Tant pour les Mons nourrir & humecter,
> Qu'aussi pour l'homme en profit delecter,

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[30] T. Borlik, *Ecocriticism and Early Modern English Literature: Green Pastures* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 43.

[31] Clare Burgess's conference paper on the urban geographies of sex workers surfaced very different kinds of voices from the archives: 'Mapping Sex for Sale: A Geographical Approach to Understanding Sex Work in Late Sixteenth-Century Cities' (paper, SEMFS Conference, 2022).

[32] Peletier, pp. 100–01.

> Quand au milieu des plus hautes Montagnes
> Ell'y a mis prayries & campagnes,
> Donnant à l'homme exercice à propos
> D'utilité, de peine & de repos.[33]

Peletier does mention walking in the mountains, but there is no pleasure associated with it. The overwhelming impression is fear: fear of the torrential spring flash floods; the cacophony of rocks falling down the scree which sound like giants. In a section of the first book describing an alpine walk after a spring rain, Peletier uses in the space of just two pages an abundance of words related to 'les frayeurs de ces eaux débordées': he describes a valley as 'ruineux', a river as 'outrageux', streams as 'intraitables et fiers' and turbulent enough to drown humans 'en son gué decevant', a slope as 'horrible', the noise as an 'horreur bruitive', a ravine as 'horrible et furieuse', a 'hideuse' and 'epouvantable' flood which 'heurte et arrache' everything in its path.[34] These are good examples of environment experienced as environing, 'the state of being encompassed or surrounded',[35] and experienced as a threat from a hostile other. There are also, perhaps, echoes of Pan, the god of wild places who would inspire the irrational fear to which his name gave rise: panic.[36] Pan reminds us that wildness is terrifying. He represents a liminal existence on the borders between wild and tame – an embodied metaphor for the tension between space and place, perhaps. Arcadian Pan, the emblem of pastoral poetry and player of the eponymous pipes, symbolises the mellower, idyllic aspects of rural living. But he also stands for its alarms, its inhospitability to humans.[37]

Admittedly, there is evidence of people climbing mountains for pleasure in Renaissance Europe. In 1541, the Swiss naturalist Conrad Gessner published a letter to a friend, Jacob Vogel, at the end of a treatise on the production of milk. In this letter, which has become known as 'On the Admiration of Mountains',[38] Gessner writes that he intends to climb several mountains each year 'for the sake of their study as well as for the health-giving exercise and spiritual enjoyment mountains afford. For what immense pleasure and delight of spirit do you reckon there are […] [the mind] is swept up in contemplation of the supreme architect'.[39] The spirit of the letter is quite close to modern praises of wilderness experience, although it is explicitly Christian, and draws on the devotional tradition

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[33] ibid., p. 83.

[34] ibid., pp. 83–4.

[35] Nardizzi, p. 182. Nardizzi is citing part of the OED definition here.

[36] Philippe Borgeaud, in *Recherches sur le dieu Pan* (Rome: Institut Suisse, 1979), traces the links between Pan and panic – a sudden unexplained terror – insisting on the duality and ambiguity of both the god and Arcadia, a site of inhospitable wildness inhabited by half-civilised, half-savage natives.

[37] Erwin Panofsky argues that the death of Pan represents the absorbing of the pagan by the Christian, a source of complex melancholy for Renaissance humanists mourning the loss of the classical world in all its wildness: see his *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (New York: Routledge, 1960), p. 113.

[38] C. Gesner, *Libellus de lacte et operibus lactariis* (*Zurich, 1541*). An English translation of the prefatory letter by Dan Hooley is included in Dan Hooley's chapter 'Conrad Gessner: Letter to Jacob Vogel on the Admiration of Mountains (1541) and Description of Mount Fractus (1555)', in *Mountains and the German Mind: Translations from Gessner to Messner, 1541–2009*, ed. by Sean Moore Ireton and Caroline Schaumann (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2020), pp. 23–48.

[39] Gessner, 'On the Admiration of Mountains', trans. by Hooley, in *ibid.*, p. 30.

already shown in Petrarch's ascent of Mont Ventoux. But Gessner's letter, only a few pages long, stands out among sixteenth-century humanist texts of any genre, showing a 'pivotal – in some respects unique – position, linking a copious, multi-valent classical tradition to later ideas deemed revolutionary in respect to aesthetics'.[40] The much more frequent attitude was that humans had no business in inhospitable and wild places.

The mountains in Savoy were in fact a site of human activity, mostly shepherds practising transhumance. Peletier expresses his admiration for these men. However, he cannot relate to the small minority of people who seemed to climb the mountains for something other than necessity, motivated by '[a]rdens desirs, qui les homes affolent / D'aler plus haut que les oiseauz ne volent'.[41] They are fool-hardy, acquisitive, and fail to understand their place in the natural world:

> Alez y voir, & vous voirrez où meine
> La couvoitise & la pratique humeine,
> D'avoir osé mettre le pie es lieus,
> Qui de ça bas donnent horreur aus yeus.[42]

La Savoie is not just a moral lesson in humility. Peletier also sees the mountains themselves as entities in need of protecting from human activity. Here is a striking anticipation of contemporary Gaia theory which bears out what Gabriel Egan and others have argued about the similarities between the scientifically accepted Love-lockian paradigm and the Great Chain of Being, suggesting that 'early modern habits of mind, especially as evidenced in such models as the Great Chain of Being, are much better tuned to this kind of systems thinking than minds limited by the reductionism of the High Enlightenment'.[43]

> Que dirai plus ? Les Montagnes n'echapent
> L'effort cruel des homes qui les sapent.
> Pour arracher l'or au ventre cache
> Avec le fer, qui en fut arraché [...]
> Et toutefois l'abineuse fendace,
> Le vent, l'hyver, cede a l'humeine audace,
> Avec crampons acerez franchissant
> Ce dur chemin perilleus & glissant.
> Que voulez vous ? la trop active envie
> De trafiquer, ne respecte sa vie.[44]

This also confirms Phillip Usher's more recent concept of the 'exterranean', a felt relation between above and below, matter and resource, human and nature: 'The words *to mine* and *to extract* make us forget where that coal comes from. To talk of the *exterranean*, on the contrary, allows us to think-feel material continuities and to take into hermeneutic custody all of the human and nonhuman agents and

40 Hooley, in *ibid.*, p. 28.
41 Peletier, p. 95.
42 ibid., p. 96.
43 Egan, p. 69.
44 Peletier, pp. 91, 98.

materials of the process.'[45] Peletier's anthropomorphised mountain, whose bowels are violated to satiate human greed, presents readers with a kind of exterranean transcorporeality[46] which affectively and effectively blurs subject–object, human–nature polarities. The mountain is humanised and softened, while the humans are rendered as inorganic through their synecdochic steel crampons. These lines illustrate in a striking way that many of the theoretical concepts claimed as the domain of contemporary posthumanism – networks, naturecultures, assemblages, meshes, vibrant matter, intra-action, hyperobjects, dark or queer ecology – are already traceable and recoverable in early modern humanist thinking about the non-human.

In the above citation, Peletier attributes the violence of mining to a 'trop active envie / De trafiquer'. There is in fact a sustained critique of extractive logics throughout *La Savoie*, which Peletier counters with a pastoral fantasy of local, agri-logistic, self-sustaining economies. This is not to say that the pastoral impulse is naïve: on the contrary, pastoral is 'putting the complex into the simple', as William Empson recognised back in 1938 in a formulation that most scholars of pastoral have been refining since.[47] The tension between ideal and real worlds, between poetry and history, is at the heart of pastoral. Part of the idyll is a highly local sense of place that draws on Golden Age troping on the halcyon days of human existence, characterised by harmony between humans and the non-human world, a world in which there was no travel because all needs were provided for *in situ*.[48] Peletier draws on this tradition to explain the hostility of mountain environments to humans: nature, he said, created mountains as frontiers to keep human communities separate and in their given place:

> Ces Mons arduz etoint les justes termes
> Que la Nature avec fondemens fermes
> Avoit donnez, pour separations
> De ciel, de meurs, de langue, aus nations.[49]

This fantasy of rural rootedness is, of course, mobilised in contemporary discourses of racial purity and anti-immigration laws in worrying ways. But I would like to believe there is something that can be redeemed from Renaissance pastoral, that its vision of humans-in-place can be retooled and reappropriated *sous rature*:

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[45] P. J. Usher, *On the Exterranean – Extraction in the Humanist Anthropocene* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), p. 12.

[46] Stacey Alaimo's 'transcorporeality' seems particularly relevant to this troping of the suffering body of the mountain. Transcorporeality upends the idea of humans acting upon inert nature, substituting material inter- and intra-dependencies between bodies. The concept is operative in much of Alaimo's work; see in particular *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

[47] W. Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (New York: Norton, 1938), p. 28.

[48] Ovid is clear that the prelapsarian age lacked travel and displacement: 'Not yet had the pine tree, felled on its native mountains, descended into the watery plain to visit other lands; men knew no shores except their own.' *Metamorphoses Book 1*, trans. by Frank Miller (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), lines 94–6, p. 9.

[49] Peletier, p. 99.

we can acknowledge the presence of pastoral ideals in oppressive histories – and vice-versa! – but still reclaim what could be useful in it.

To offer a simplification of these critics' works, if, for Paul Alpers, pastoral foregrounds human relations,[50] and for Ken Hiltner, pastoral foregrounds or 'gestures toward' the non-human,[51] I'd like to suggest that pastoral is in fact about both at once, about naturecultures or entanglements or any one of these posthumanist concepts whose portability to Renaissance humanism is not surprising to early modernists. Early modern humanism, at least as conveyed through pastoral poetry, might even provide a model for thinking about our position in the world which, as William Cronon would have it, makes us less inclined to seek escape at the ends of the earth, and more inclined to clean up our own back yards.

Humanism, Humanities, and Ecological Thinking in Ronsard's Forest[52]

If Renaissance humanism contains potentially salutary modalities of relating to and being in place, what about its descendent and our current scholarly place/space, the humanities?[53] The so-called environmental humanities are reconfiguring methods and objects of study to shape public awareness of anthropogenic climate change and related matters of concern. But targeted environmental humanities are not quite my focus here; I wonder if, quite simply, the vestiges of early modern humanistic sense of place – ecological, rather than environmental, as distinguished above – might be detected in the humanities *tout court*? This is offered more as a thought experiment, of the somewhat indulgent kind tolerated (I hope) by the keynote genre, and a way of acknowledging the shared professional locations[54] – humanities and history departments – of most of the conference participants who gathered in one place, St Andrews, in our own time, to think about other places and other times.

Early modern sense of place is in many ways quite conservative, in some of the ways that deserve critique, such as class politics, but also in the sense that is linked to conservation. When we return to early modern literary places, we can recover a situatedness which is potentially sustainable *because* it is explicitly humanist, rather than shoring up the separation between nature and culture at the core of Latour's modern constitution. Similarly, arguments for the importance of the

[50] P. Alpers, *What Is Pastoral?* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997).
[51] K. Hiltner, *What Else Is Pastoral? Renaissance Literature and the Environment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).
[52] This section contains paragraphs, some paraphrased, from material previously published, and I thank Amsterdam University Press for permission to republish from L. Mackenzie, 'Epilogue', in *Early Modern Écologies*, pp. 287–96.
[53] See A. Grafton and L. Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities: Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth and Sixteenth-Century Europe* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1986).
[54] The final panel of the conference consisted of two papers on intellectual and professional spaces, adding to the textual and geographic figurings of space/place in previous panels and reflecting our own conversations about professional spaces: H. Taylor, 'Textual Spaces Versus Salon Spaces: The Case of Anne Dacier', and L. Raynal, 'Le cabinet au féminin : l'espace de travail des femmes professionnelles', (papers, SEMFS Conference, 2022).

humanities can often sound quite conservative, and here too it is worth thinking about what we are trying to conserve and what the connection might be. It is possible that early modern humanism, and our own humanities, find common ground not just through a shared curricular genealogy but also as an ecological habit of thought. To think through this, I return to the very first early modern place I ever took seriously: the Gâtine forest in Ronsard's twenty-fourth elegy.[55]

> Escoute, Bucheron, arreste un peu le bras,
> Ce ne sont pas des bois que tu jectes à bas,
> Ne vois-tu pas le sang lequel desgoute à force
> Des Nymphes qui vivoyent dessous la dure escorce ?
> [...]
> Adieu vieille forest, le jouet de Zephyre,
> Où premier j'accorday les langues de ma lyre[56]

This is about classical poetry and its assumed moral order, of course, but it also concerns actual trees, and the environmental reality of deforestation happening as the result of the sale of the forest in 1572. We can read bifocally, for both poetry and landscape, allegorical and real. Ronsard's forest is a space contested between poetry on one side, and economic reality on the other, which represent two divergent world views. As the trees fall to pay the debts of Henri de Bourbon, capitalism seems to win out over the righteous moral order represented by poetry.

I have been rethinking Ronsard's forest in light of what we keep calling the crisis of the humanities. Perhaps Ronsard's lament for his lost forest has become today's commentary on the 'death of the Humanities'. Trees and poetry were disappearing together for Ronsard; for us today, both the planet and the humanities are in crisis, and it's maybe not a coincidence. Maybe Ronsard's humanism and today's equally beleaguered humanities share something ecological, a commitment, however utopian or chimeric (and it is certainly both), to balance, sustainability, relationality?

It is a worrying time to be a humanist. A Google search for the keywords 'humanities in crisis', on the eve of the conference in July 2022, yielded over 44 million results. It is true that, like the always-rising bourgeoisie, the humanities seem to have always been in crisis; the Muses were already banished in Boethius and Burton. We humanists seem defined in part by a posture of defensiveness, producing the humanities as a place of refuge from what Du Bellay, in the sonnet I started with, calls 'le misérable soin d'acquérir davantage', and from what we might call late capitalism, or the neoliberal academy. It is true that the current ringing of our own death knell is, in part, a twenty-first-century reformulation of a stance that has always defined us, a sense of being somehow outside, but also an essential

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[55] L. Mackenzie, *The Poetry of Place: Lyric, Landscape, and Ideology in Renaissance France* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2010), pp. 121–45. My reading of Ronsard's forest and Antoine de Baïf's Bièvre river in this chapter identified the structuring conservative nostalgia in these landscapes; it is interesting to revisit and reinvest such conservatism from a perspective more explicitly engaged in ecological thought and disciplinary formation.

[56] P. de Ronsard, 'Elégie XXIV' (1584), in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Jean Céard, Daniel Ménager, and Michel Simonin (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), vol. 2, pp. 408–09.

counterbalance to, this wretched business of making a living. Of course, humanists are not situated magically outside anything. Those of us lucky enough to have a job are implicated in the same economic logics as the administrators and business schools we sometimes scorn. But it does not feel hyperbolic to talk of a particular threat to the humanities in our current moment.

The humanities are at a tipping point, and while the harm of climate change, also at a tipping point, is exponentially more than the harm of humanities curricula disappearing, it is worth asking if the two are linked. In its scorn for accumulative logics, Du Bellay's 'miserable business of acquiring more' is not unlike the contemporary humanist's distrust of business models in academia. Instead, Du Bellay dreams of sustainability, a modest *ménage* or οικος, and we dream of universities that teach the humanities because they are good to think with, not because they will 'acquire more' for our institutions. Ronsard's anguished lament at the loss of classical poetry, and of the felled trees, has become our lament at the loss of humanistic study, the departments of French and philosophy and drama and German falling like … trees. Behind each of these Renaissance pleas for humanist values is an ecological thought, and the same might be true today. The humanities and the planet are both in crisis. To lose the humanities is to lose something of the subject position of the early modern *homo*, which is an interrogation of our relations with – not our detachment or distance from – human and more-than-human others. Returning to early modernity, and especially returning to its places, can offer a sense of connection to the places we inhabit: a connection that has always included the non-human, offering us ways to think and live *with* and *in* our world. I don't know if we can still be early modern, but we can and should keep returning.

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Biographical note

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