Sociability and the Discourses of Nature in Eighteenth-Century Literature and Culture

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This special issue of *Literature & History* is concerned with how representations of sociability and sociable practices in eighteenth-century English literature were engaged with and informed by contemporaneous discourses of 'nature'. Deceptively ambiguous, the notion remains conceptually problematic. Raymond Williams, writing much closer to the present day, perceives 'nature' as 'perhaps the most complex word in the [English] language',[1] and points to three distinctive areas of meaning: '(i) the essential quality and character *of* something; (ii) the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both; (iii) the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings'.[2] He thus inevitably highlights the social construction of 'nature' and the way in which our understanding and experience of the natural world is affected by cultural, historical, and ideological factors. In other words, even though the anthropocentric double of 'nature' – the notion of culture – is often seen as its opposite, both terms are actually intertwined, especially given the word's Latin root in terms (*colo*, *cooler*, *coqui*, *cultum*) clearly gesturing towards the processes of

cultivation. This dependency is perhaps best seen in the practices of tending to the soil, plants, or crops which mark the paradoxical 'natural' foundations of culture. The idea of cultivating the environment through a series of repeated procedures that physically transform the surroundings would later give rise to trans-*plant*-ations of a different kind: rituals, traditions, and codes of conduct making up the domain of human social interactions, including practices of sociability.[3]

Likewise, conceptualising 'nature' in the long eighteenth century was, admittedly, a complex, multidisciplinary endeavour, one that largely evaded any critical attempts at systematisation. In Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*, the relevant entry shows eleven semantic categories, some of which parallel Williams's, but even this seemingly comprehensive view – from 'an imaginary being' to the natural sciences – does not grasp the entirety of meanings denoted and connoted by the notion throughout the century.[4] Many of them constitute responses to cultural myths about nature (e.g. as a site of pastoral innocence), document approaches to it ('nature' as an object of scientific scrutiny with laws that can be understood), and register the conceptual process of thinking or observation (establishing the contrast of the material world, i.e. the 'natural' environment, with the existing state of society). All such approaches, in diverse forms, are often continued to the present day.

Our starting point for this collection was the already well-researched discourse of human nature in the period, which foregrounded sociability as one of its important, if not crucial, components. As Joseph Addison famously stated in one of his *Spectator* essays (no. 9), 'Man is said to be a Sociable Animal'.[5] In this, Markman Ellis points out, Addison did not break any new ground, rearticulating philosophical ideas on human gregariousness from Aristotle to John Locke, as reflected in his use of 'is said to be', indicating both an awareness of a discursive tradition and his own critical distance.[6] Addison's reshaping of the 'sociable animal' trope involved a move from an outdoor to an indoor perspective. Locke in the second treatise of his *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) problematised the idea with reference to the myth of a state of nature, showing how the 'natural man' gradually becomes a member of 'some politic society'.[7] While the 'state of nature' was to him

an idea of equality and liberty, its popular literary representations in Locke's time and beyond involved pre-civilised (or 'natural') environments, as reflected in the vibrant tradition of utopian, Edenic, and Robinsonade writing. Robinson Crusoe's famous reflection about his being 'reduced to a meer State of Nature' was both appreciative of a longer tradition of fictionalising this state and a generative literary trope in itself.[8] One of the most popular Robinsonades in the wake of Defoe's novel was Peter Longueville's *The English Hermit* (1727), which improved on Defoe's tentative use of the trope (Robinson is never properly reduced to the natural state) as well as offering reflection on the formation of political bodies (based on observation of monkey factions on the island).[9] This tendency gathered momentum later in the eighteenth century, when Jean-Jacques Rousseau, arguing against natural sociability and in favour of the 'simple, uniform and solitary way of life prescribed to us by nature', put forward alluring visions of solitude in natural environments.[10] One of Rousseau's examples was a misinterpreted narrative of *Robinson Crusoe*, which was promoted as a 'most felicitous treatise of natural education' and 'the text for which all our discussions on the natural sciences will serve only as commentary'.[11]

Such notions were not purely theoretical, however, and often moved from the ideal into providing intellectual cover for settler colonialism based on budding notions of racial hierarchies. While contemporary scholarship, including the essays in this issue, rejects such notions, it is important to be aware of the inextricable yet often unacknowledged link between eighteenth-century concepts of nature and sociability to the discourses related to the growth of settler colonialism and its consequences, which continue into the present day. As Indigenous scholar Robert A. Williams, Jr. (Lumbee) points out, while Rousseau himself conceived of this 'state of nature' as an analytical abstraction that may or may not have ever existed, more pragmatic Enlightenment thinkers of the Scottish school, in particular, applied these ideas to the real world. Starting from the view of their own European social organisation as the most advanced, they arrived at a hierarchical view of the stages of human development toward perfectibility, with Indigenous Americans in the 'lowest' state of savagery, closest to the state of nature.

Yet far from idealising this 'primitive' social order as an alluring one, especially in the minds and hands of North American settlers keen on the seizure of Indigenous lands, this school of thought saw those close to unrefined nature as inevitably destined to give way to the purportedly superior and refined social organisation of European civilisation, thus providing the foundations for racialised settler colonialism.[12]

The fruits of this assumed European economic, technological, and, most of all, social superiority were believed to be expressed in refinement, understood here mainly as the cultivated customs of the educated classes in the imagined West, especially when set against the Indigenous 'savage'. This dichotomous savage/civilised construct allowed for a range of 'natural' behaviour and sociability, where the operative distinction was based on how cultivated that nature seemed to be, including in its forms of sociability. These European forms then could be seen as taking place in increasingly 'civilised' spaces, embodying the shift from the view of nature as both primitive humanity and the outdoors, to one that could take place in sociable indoor spaces.

This is precisely the kind of 'natural' sociability that Addison found evidence of indoors: in the newly emerging sociable spaces of clubs, 'those little Nocturnal Assemblies'.[13] Much critical attention has been given to indoor spaces of eighteenth-century sociability, from coffeehouses to literary salons,[14] and recent collections of essays on sociable spaces, even if inclusive of approaches to the 'natural' environments of sociability, have also prioritised closed spaces.[15] In an attempt to complement these latest perspectives, our rationale for the present collection is to foreground open environments of sociability, to study how sociable practices were conceptualised against what was traditionally understood as the 'natural' backdrop, and thus add to the critical work done on such outdoor spaces of eighteenth-century sociability as public gardens or the countryside.[16]

The conceptual framework for the present collection is then the intersection of eighteenth-century understandings of sociability as part of human nature and the various possibilities for sociable practices in 'natural' environments: parks, gardens, rural environs, spas, and more. At the same time, however, the binaries that have typically informed

approaches to 'human nature' and 'natural environments', such as nature-nurture, nature-culture, nature-civilisation, and naturalness-artifice, appear to have been particularly unstable in the eighteenth century – much as they are these days, being critically re-evaluated in contemporary ecocritical studies.[17] The quoted views by Addison and Locke, regarding 'man' as 'naturally' predisposed to sociable practices, were corrective of Thomas Hobbes, for instance, who claimed that humans are not 'born fit for Society' and become part of it 'not by Nature, but by Education'.[18] Such views, as we have seen, were later rearticulated by Rousseau. Accordingly, much of eighteenth-century literature conceptualised sociability as an art that should be taught and practised, with the art of conversation, for instance, being the subject of a number of treatises and conduct books in the period.[19] Sociability was thus both felt to be part of one's natural constitution – an impulse or a passion – and taught as a crucial element of teaching the cultivated manners and polite practices of the time.

Meanwhile, the popular 'natural' spaces of sociability in the period, such as public parks and landscape gardens, purposely depended on the arbitrariness of the binaries of nature and culture, nature and civilisation, as well as naturalness and artifice. Indeed, a substantial strain within eighteenth-century aesthetic thought promoted the ideal of 'improved', 'civilised,' or 'corrected' nature. The unstable character of these binaries comes to the fore in the evolution of garden design: while in principle the English landscape garden emerged as a critical response to the mathematical artifice of the French garden, it largely preserved its predecessor's identity as a 'natural' space designed according to the rules of art, with architectural symmetry abandoned for the sake of painterly inspirations. In this sense, such spaces not only reflected the idea of an abstract wilderness (the 'natural' environment untouched by the human hand), but recorded the garden designer's idea of 'nature', and their cultural interpretation of it.

The articles included in this issue are based on the papers given at a seminar organised at The National Archives, London, on 8 April 2022, as part of the international RISE-Horizon 2020 project DIGITENS (The

Digital Encyclopaedia of European Sociability). They acknowledge the complexity of 'nature' as a subject of discursive practices and, rather than offering a falsely totalising perspective, prioritise their discreet areas of scholarly investigation, with special attention paid to how sociability was problematised with reference to the categories of human nature, gender, health, and the body. They also document how these categories ran parallel with the creation of a public sphere which, apart from allowing the circulation and debate of some of the core Enlightenment values (freedom and justice), gave rise to sociable practices rooted in and influenced by the physical environments in which they were taking place.[20] In this sense, sociable practices, it is shown, were conceived of as driven by a set of familiar conceptual binaries, such as human–animal, naturalness–artifice, spontaneity–performance, solitude–company, as well as being inevitably conditioned by their changing environments.

Kimberley Page-Jones shows how human and animal sociabilities were made sense of in comparative anatomy from Comte de Buffon to Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Pointing out the centrality of social and sociable predispositions of human beings in anatomical discourse, Page-Jones also problematises solitude as a state believed to be potentially conducive to degeneration. Sociability's conceptual shadow – solitude – comes to the fore in M-C. Newbould's reading of Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*, the *Bramine's Journal*, and the related correspondence, which argues that to Sterne, and his fictional alter egos, being alone constituted an opportunity to raise wider concerns about the 'natural' world, human nature, and the connection with others. The dialectic of self and other, solitude and company, also informs Przemysław Uściński's study of how 'harmonious environments' of outdoor spaces, especially gardens, contributed to an ideal of retirement, away from the city crowds and polite society, an ideal which, as the studied poetic examples demonstrate, was also undermined by the related notions of idleness and inactivity. The troubled relationship of literary characters with the period's polite society is also addressed by Anna Paluchowska-Messing, who demonstrates how Frances Burney's *Evelina* and *The Woman-Hater* rework William Shakespeare's *The*

Winter's Tale, offering new configurations of the exhibited (Hermione) and the 'natural' (Perdita) woman. In this, Paluchowska-Messing argues, Burney not only pondered the social conventions of feminine self-display, but also reflected on the instability of the nature–artifice divide with respect to women's sociability. The sociable practices of polite society are also discussed by Karl Wood, who compares satirical works depicting spa sociability away from Bath – in Pyrmont, Germany, and Ballston Spa, New York. Wood shows how the language of satire targeted artificial hierarchies and performative posturing, thus foregrounding the 'non-natural' aspects of embodied interactions in eighteenth-century spas.

The history of 'nature' is the history of human thought. Its constructed social character has been well recognised,[21] and the more recent propositions coming from the field of ecocriticism have understandably reoriented the discourse of 'nature' towards the contemporary climate crisis.[22] Since the complex and dynamic relationship between 'nature' and culture (and humanity) is often seen as rooted in the early modern oppositions between these terms, and further cemented by the objectification of 'nature' from the perspective of hard sciences, attempts have been made to resolve the binary as a way of responding to the crisis. Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature* (2007) is a case in point, enticingly arguing that 'to contemplate deep green ideas is to let go of the idea of Nature, the one thing that maintains an aesthetic distance between us and them, us and it, us and "over there"'.[23] However, if, as Morton suggests, 'we exist in a web of mutual interdependence where there is no boundary or centre',[24] how can sociability be helpful here in navigating such a vast space and in leading us through the crisis?

One intellectual pathway has been suggested by Gregory Claeys, whose recent work looks at utopian sociability as a planet-saving project.[25] While a number of contemporary theoretical positions seek a way out of the ultimately anthropocentric dichotomy of nature and culture, and look to non-human forms of interaction with the surrounding world,[26] sociability, especially in the context of the utopian tradition – which Claeys connects with the notions of community and the

need for belonging – seems to gesture towards the potential that lies within the human interaction and the possibilities and practices enabling us to imagine a different world, one in which we successfully cooperate and coexist with others.

But researching sociability gains in relevance also in the context of the current global crisis of the traditional (i.e. not virtual) performance of sociable acts. As these articles on self-display and posturing, retirement and company, make us realise, the post-pandemic sociability of our own time, the inter-subjective longing for and fear of company, and our own thinking of ourselves as 'sociable animals', can be fruitfully historicised with reference to the creative practices of the long eighteenth century, when modern ideas of selfhood and society were taking shape.

Notes

1. R. Williams, 'Nature', in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford, 2015), p. 164.

2. *Ibid*., pp. 164–5.

3. A good example here is one of the earliest recorded written instances of the use of the Polish language: *Daj, acja pobrusze̜a ty poczywaj*, which can be translated as 'Let me grind, and you take a rest', conceptually linking the farming context and the one of human interactions. *The Book of Henryków* (*Liber fundationis claustri Sancte Marie Virginis in Henrichow; Ksiega henrykowska, 1268-1273*)*;* digitalised manuscript, accessed 12 June 2023, https://digital. fides.org.pl/dlibra/publication/834#description

4. S. Johnson, 'Nature', in *Samuel Johnson's Dictionary* (1755), accessed 7 June 2023, https:// johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/views/search.php?term=nature

5. J. Addison, No. 9, Saturday, March 10, 1711, in *The Spectator*, volume 1, D. F. Bond (ed.) (Oxford, 1987), p. 39.

6. M. Ellis, 'Sociability and Polite Improvement in Addison's Periodicals', in P. Davis (ed.), *Joseph Addison: Tercentenary Essays* (Oxford, 2021), pp. 143–4.

7. J. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*, I. Shapiro (ed.), (New Haven and London, 2003), p. 106.

8. D. Defoe, *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, M. E. Novak, I. N. Rothman, and M. Schonhorn (eds), (Lewisburg, 2020), p. 100. See also M. Novak, *Defoe and the Nature of Man* (London, 1963).

9. P. Longueville, *The English Hermit; or, The Unparalleled Sufferings and Surprising Adventures of Mr. Philip Quarll* (London, 1727).

10. J.-J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract and The First and Second Discourses*, S. Dunn (ed.), (New Haven and London, 2002), p. 93.

11. J.-J. Rousseau, *Emile; or, On Education*, ed. and trans. A. Bloom (New York, 1979), p. 184.

12. R. A. Williams, Jr. *Savage Anxieties: The Invention of Western Civilization* (New York, 2012), pp. 197–218.

13. Addison, No. 9, Saturday, March 10, 1711, p. 39.

14. See, for example, M. Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History* (London, 2005); B. Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse* (New Haven, 2005); I. Baird, *Social Networks in the Long Eighteenth Century: Clubs, Literary Salons, Textual Coteries* (Newcastle, 2014); V. Capdeville, *L'Âge d'Or des Clubs Londoniens, 1730–1784* (Paris, 2008).

15. See V. Capdeville, A. Kerhervé (eds), *British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century: Challenging the Anglo-French Connection* (Woodbridge, 2019), A. Cossic-Péricarpin, E. D. Jones (eds.), *La Représentation et la réinvention des espaces de sociabilité au cours du long XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 2021); V. Capdeville, P. Labrune (eds), 'Sociable Spaces in Eighteenth-Century Britain: A Material and Visual Experience', special issue of *Études Anglaises*, 74:3 (2021).

16. Studies of these spaces of sociability include S. Bending, *Green Retreats: Women, Gardens and Eighteenth-Century Culture* (Cambridge, 2013) and D. Landry, *The Invention of the Countryside: Hunting, Walking and Ecology in English Literature, 1671–1831* (Houndmills, 2001).

17. See, for example, H. Feder, *Ecocriticism and the Idea of Culture: Biology and the Bildungsroman* (Farnham, 2014), pp. 1–27.

18. T. Hobbes, *De Cive*, H. Warrender (ed.), (Oxford, 1983), p. 44. See also I. Knežić,'The Role of Education in the Formation of Human Sociability: Critical Comparison of Th. Hobbes' and J.-J. Rousseau's Approach', *Journal of Education Culture and Society*, 11:1 (2020), 15–29.

19. D. Randall, *The Conversational Enlightenment: The Reconception of Rhetoric in Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Edinburgh, 2019).

20. See J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation if the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. T. Burger with the assistance of F. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA, 1989). See B. Cowan, '"Restoration" England and the History of Sociability', in V. Capdeville, A. Kerhervé (eds), *British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century: Challenging the Anglo-French Connection* (Woodbridge, 2019), pp. 13–14.

21. See, for example, N. Everden, *The Social Construction of Nature* (Baltimore, 1992).

22. See L. Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (Oxford, 2005); K. Soper, *What is Nature?* (Oxford, 1995).

23. T. Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 204.

24. *Ibid*., p. 23.

25. G. Claeys, *Utopianism for a Dying Planet: Life After Consumerism* (Princeton, 2022).

26. See, for example, the work on new materialisms: D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble:Making Kin in the Chtulucene* (Durham and London, 2016), J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London, 2010); and speculative realist traditions: G. Harman, *Speculative Realism: An Introduction* (Cambridge, 2018).