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Book Review: Adkins, Peter. The Modernist Anthropocene: Nonhuman Life and Planetary Change in James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Djuna Barnes. Edinburgh University Press, 2022, 252 pages, £15.62

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Peter Adkins' *The Modernist Anthropocene: Nonhuman Life and Planetary Change in James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Djuna Barnes*, critiques how the respective modernist novels of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Djuna Barnes place their characters and narratives respond to ecology, environment, and non-human world.

Adkins' book positions the novelists mentioned in its title as visionaries who dealt with the idea of Anthropocene long before its formal conception. In fact, Adkins' interdisciplinary approach reveals the deeper role of the modernist writer as an intellectual precursor to environmental thought in the twenty-first century. The scholarship problematises the conventional understanding of modernism as merely as an aesthetic movement or a movement which is primarily concerned with psychological and social upheavals. Alongside, Adkins examines how the titular novelists engage with trauma, grief, and reverences in relation to their varied environmental crises.

Through the examination of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* in the chapter 'The Matter of Politics in the Novels of James Joyce', Adkins focuses on Joyce's complex emotions with the ecological traumas of British imperialism, particularly in Ireland. Through Adkins explains that the 'Citizen's lament for Ireland's rivers, forests, and landscapes unveils colonialism's environmental impact', thus fusing ecology with national identity.¹ Further enriched by an application of Félix Guattari's concept of 'ecosophy,' as an overall frameworth, the text calls for a reimagining of human identity in relation to its ecological and social context.

The second chapter, 'James Joyce and The Revenge of Gaia', argues that Joyce's representation of ALP as a posthuman 'Earth Mother' is similar to the Gaia theory of

¹ Adkins, *The Modernist Anthropocene*, p. 77.

planetary interconnectedness. There is a celebration of an inseparable bond between them. The use of its main set of characters can be seen as commentary on humanity's interaction with the Earth, where nature is both a resource and an uncontrollable force. Through Gaia as both a metaphor and an ecological concept, the study advances the understanding of Joyce's engagement with the idea of Earth, the fluidity of gender identities, and the implications of the Anthropocene. Adkins' reading also suggests that Joyce's work fosters a sense of reverence and even joy for the natural world while also acknowledging its potentially chaotic influence on human lives.

Moving to Djuna Barnes, Adkins examines how *Nightwood* and *Ryder* merge human and nonhuman worlds, exploring her novels of anthropocentrism through 'beastliness,' using it as an aesthetic force to challenge human exceptionalism. This approach is further enriched in 'Sex, Nature, and Animal Life in Djuna Barnes' *Ryder*,' where Adkins reveals how Barnes subverts male-dominated American nature writing, altering the patriarchal roots of transcendentalism. He brings a unique perspective on Barnes' satire of nature writing, showcasing her re-engagement with gendered depictions of nature. The notion of feminine and emotions associated with it is foregrounded here effectively.

Adkins' interpretation of Woolf's *Kew Gardens* is equally compelling. By focusing on Woolf's nonhierarchical portrayal of gardens plants, and snails alongside human figures, Adkins shows how Woolf democratizes her narrative, refusing to prioritize human subjectivity over the nonhuman world, thus embodying an early form of ecological thinking. This analysis also supports Adkins' larger claim that Woolf, like Barnes and Joyce, foster an 'ecological aesthetic' seeking to reposition humans within a broader, entangled natural world.

In the final chapters, especially 'The Disturbing Future of Virginia Woolf's Late Writing', Adkins links these discussions back to environmental humanities, suggesting that these modernist texts inform current discussions on ecological consciousness, sustainability, and human exceptionalism. Through *Between the Acts*, Adkins explores Woolf's idea of 'extinction not as an end, but as a powerful opportunity for rethinking human identity.'² This reading- a concern for the changing world- adds to the growing scholarship of Woolf's environmental consciousness and situating her within contemporary ecological discussions.

² Peter Adkins, *The Modernist Anthropocene: Nonhuman Life and Planetary Change in James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Djuna Barnes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), p. 189.

His final chapter, 'Fallout', revisits the earlier discussions of the book. Through Dipesh Chakrabarty's call for a 'new humanities', Adkins frames modernism as a critical site for rethinking humanity's position in this changing world, by urging for a reassessment of literary history through an ecological framework to confront the planetary concerns, even as they are tangled in questions of identity, gender, and species.

Throughout the book, Adkins draws on an impressive range of primary texts and theoretical frameworks, lending good rigor to his analysis and the book is meticulously researched and thoughtfully argued. As Adkins writes, the reader takes away the understanding that 'modernist literature offers a history of the Anthropocene—a way of making sense of human-environment relations that remain provocative in the twenty-first century', thus inviting interdisciplinary dialogues that promise to inspire future scholarship across literary and environmental studies.³

³ Peter Adkins, *The Modernist Anthropocene: Nonhuman Life and Planetary Change in James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Djuna Barnes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), p. 230.