

Sweeping across scholarly disciplines, *Back to Nature* shows that, from the moment of their conception, modern ecological and epistemological anxieties were conjoined twins. Urbanization, capitalism, Protestantism, colonialism, revived Skepticism, empirical science, and optical technologies conspired to alienate people from both the earth and reality itself in the seventeenth century. Literary and visual arts explored the resulting cultural wounds, expressing the pain and proposing some ingenious cures.

The stakes, Robert N. Watson demonstrates, were huge. Shakespeare's comedies, Marvell's pastoral lyrics, Traherne's visionary *Centuries*, and Dutch painting all illuminate a fierce submerged debate about what love of nature has to do with perception of reality. The contrasting attitudes toward Creation underlying the Metaphysical and Cavalier schools of poetry helped generate the English Civil War. From Ruisdael's landscapes to Saenredam's churches, Northern painting shows how iconoclasm allowed "natural philosophy" to eclipse religion; and, by substituting game animals for Christian martyrs, Dutch still-lives awoke sympathy with nature as our collective innocent victim. The ethics of hunting became entangled with cognitive and erotic forms of aggression. Regressive pastoral fantasies became a volatile mixture of nostalgia for Eden, for the Golden Age, for collective-agrarian feudalism, and for pre-verbal access to the world.

The stakes are no smaller today. Together, the late Renaissance quests for greener worlds, for objective sensation, for truths prior to human corruption, and for the implicit endorsement of nature itself in the wars of religion, class, and gender produced an unprecedented willingness to acknowledge the value of other living creatures. Recognizing the back-to-nature mania of the late Renaissance is crucial for understanding the passions and complexities of its artwork, Watson argues, and understanding that artwork is crucial in turn for recognizing the origins and hence the dynamics of twenty-first-century environmentalist sentiment.