

Melissa Sodeman, “Gilbert White, Anecdote, and Natural History.”
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The common terms, themes, and even procedures of eighteenth-century writers and scientists have been well-attested. In the creative interdisciplinarity of this period, natural historians and writers interested in the material of the earth, its history, and its creatures often shared a practice of close observation and precise description. Gilbert White – curate and naturalist author of *The Natural History of Selborne* (1789) – is a familiar figure in this cultural context, and critics including Donald Worster, Tobias Menely, and Amy M. King have charted his relationship to and influence on nature writers and scientists, as Melissa Sodeman notes in her article “Gilbert White, Anecdote, and Natural History”. Sodeman approaches this subject afresh through a specific focus on White’s use of anecdote – the “short but revealing narratives that shed light on animal behavior”, granting access to what he called “the life and conversation of animals” (507, 508). In her detailed and convincing account, Sodeman recovers the anecdote from its association with “deracinated particulars and insignificant events”, which eighteenth-century natural philosophers used to devalue the parochial practice of natural history (507). This literary form became associated with biography through Samuel Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81), in which it was valued for its ability to provide revealing insights into the private lives of its subjects. Capitalizing on its reinvigorated cultural legitimacy, White’s use of the anecdote in natural history combined empirical observation with an attention to “the vibrancy of living nature”, confirming its evidentiary value and ensuring its legacy in nineteenth-century science (508).

By tracking the shared stylistic tendencies of White and Johnson, Sodeman contributes to our understanding of Enlightenment thinkers “[w]orking at the juncture of literature and science at a moment of epistemological crisis” (509). Amid the difficulties of gleaning “systematic knowledge from observed particulars”, both writers found in the anecdote a fragmented form that paradoxically resisted the fragmentation of knowledge (509). Sodeman cites Johnson’s *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775), in which he struggled to wrest reliable facts from fluid and fallible memory. In *Lives of the Poets* Johnson turned to the anecdote to discover what he elsewhere called the unrecorded “incidents . . . of a volatile and evanescent kind” that capture the “minute peculiarities which discriminate every man from all others” (514). Adopting the anecdote for natural history, White helped to redirect the discipline from global survey to local detail, revealing the value of “particular, contingent, and even provisional knowledge” in its accuracy and ability to connect specific insight to broader truth (512).

For White, as for Johnson, the anecdote can “turn particular incidents into telling exempla” and is therefore crucial for eighteenth-century natural history’s reinvestment in “empiricist ways of knowing”, including White’s commitment to a provincial project as the basis of (and stimulus for) a universal natural history (517). The article details White’s scrupulous record-keeping, and this exactitude corrected even as it operated alongside more remote taxonomic systems and physico-theology’s providential design. White remained an observer in the field and his proximity to the natural subject highlights the anecdote’s function as what Sodeman calls an “epistemological and affective unit of natural history” (508). White’s *Selborne*

connects animal behaviour to human emotion on several levels: the naturalist documents parental protective instincts in flycatchers as evidence of affection that elicits his own sympathy; he peers into the homes of harvest mice and swifts and records his own domestic patterns including hosting visitors and making jam; and his written account “allows readers to dwell with animals – to enter sympathetically into their lives and feel for and with them” (520). In its multivalent emotive engagement, the anecdote illuminates “the affinities and correspondences running between the human and animal worlds” (514).

Sodeman documents the fluctuating popularity of White’s *Selborne* in the nineteenth century, when its anecdotal method became an important convention of Victorian science before losing ground in its association with light entertainment and after Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. Nevertheless, she argues, the elision of the anecdote in histories of literature and science reveals “the ongoing need to recuperate the vitality of what slips out of the narratives we create to explain the world” (524). “Gilbert White, Anecdote, and Natural History” uncovers a further layer of mutually informing literary and scientific projects in the eighteenth century, particularizing their relationship at the level of stylistic and formal craft. And though Sodeman distinguishes her study from previous work tracing emerging ecological consciousness in White’s *Selborne*, her account of anecdotal natural history’s potential for scientific discovery and sympathetic attachment is a powerful reminder of the vital importance of this effort of combined attention and care in current crisis times.

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