PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

When the German philosopher and wit Georg Christoph Lichtenberg mused about the possibility of “a new edition of me and my life,” he said he would like the chance “to make a few not superfluous suggestions” concerning the ways in which it could be made better. What he had in mind, specifically, were improvements “concerning the design of the frontispiece and the way the work is laid out.” Faced with the much smaller task of creating the enhanced edition of *Poetics of Natural History*, a book still near and dear to me, I am delighted to report that “the way the work is laid out” is indeed entirely different, thanks to the collaboration of an artist I have long revered, the incomparable Rosamond Purcell.

This book was born out of my fascination with natural history museums, places that I found, even as a child, both exhilarating and unsettling, a sentiment I share with Rosamond Purcell. In her hauntingly beautiful photographs, we enter the magical world of things—things natural or manmade, found or created, discarded or preserved, things both ordinary and weird. We leave that world transformed, with a new sense of the strangeness of the everyday. Purcell is a scientist, an artist, and a poet. The comprehensiveness of her vision reminds us of a time when disciplines had not yet separated into supposedly different modes of understanding the world. The aim of my book is to take readers back into that world, and also to show how, eventually, we managed to close the door on it. *Poetics* covers a vast range of writers, artists, scientists, and topics. For this new edition, I have, with a nod to Audubon’s description of his writing, smoothed out some of the asperities of my prose, fixed mistakes, and replaced wherever possible the images used in the first edition with new photographs reflecting the vibrant color of the originals. Important new research has appeared during the last two decades. First and foremost, I want to acknowledge Michael Branch’s excellent anthology of early American nature writing, *Reading the Roots: American Nature Writing before Walden*. I consider it the ideal companion volume to *Poetics*. In his selections as well as his headnotes, Branch captures the myopia of these early observers, hampered by their status as colonizers of a land that, paraphrasing Robert Frost, was theirs before they were the land. Collecting texts ranging from Columbus’s log-book to the Swedish traveler Fredrika Bremer’s account of reading Columbus while going up the St. Johns River in Florida, Branch also gives ample space to those luminous moments of altered perception when the boundaries between humankind and nature become porous.

When I wrote this book, gender was not a focus of my research. For readers inter-

ested in that aspect of early natural history, I recommend Tina Gianquitto's *Good Observers of Nature: American Women and the Scientific Study of the Natural World, 1820–1885* and Susan Scott Parrish's *American Curiosity: Cultures of Natural History in the Colonial British Atlantic World*, the latter of which paints a multifaceted picture of the many contributors to early nature study, including women, Native Americans, and people of African descent. Our understanding of William Bartram has been significantly enriched by the work of Thomas Hallock. His *William Bartram: The Search for Nature's Design*, coedited with Nancy E. Hoffmann, besides printing many unknown and unpublished texts by Bartram himself, offers a shimmering picture of Bartram's many passions and the best explanation we have of his pervasive influence on transatlantic culture and science. For a comprehensive overview of Bartram's art, consult Judith Magee's splendidly illustrated *The Art and Science of William Bartram*.

Since the turn of the century, there has been a steady stream of popular biographies of Audubon, but none of them measures up to the high standards of research set by Roberta Olson's magnificent *Audubon's Aviary: The Original Watercolors for The Birds of America*, which also contains the best assessment of Audubon's artistic innovations. Readers curious for more of Audubon's vigorous prose can turn to the collection I have compiled for the Library of America, *Audubon's Writings and Drawings*. Audubon's outstanding collaborator, Maria Martin, receives her due in a gorgeously illustrated biography by Debra J. Lindsay, *Maria Martin's World: Art and Science, Faith and Family in Audubon's America*. Gregory Nobles, in *John James Audubon: The Nature of the American Woodsman* recreates the scientific climate in which Audubon developed his own distinctive visual poetics.

My chapter on the fascinating power of snakes revives the contributions of John Edward Holbrook, Maria Martin's Charleston neighbor. In his excellent *Science, Race, and Religion in the American South*, Lester Stephens traces the formative influence of the circle of Charleston naturalists, to which Holbrook belonged, on American science and Louis Agassiz's misguided racial theories. My own continuing work on Agassiz—in both the full-scale biography I published in 2013 and my recent scholarly edition of Agassiz's *Introduction to the Study of Natural History*—places the insights of the final chapter of *Poetics* in a wider cultural and scientific context. Molly Rogers's *Delia's Tears: Race, Science, and Photography in Nineteenth-Century America* gives a moving and powerful account of the human cost exacted by Agassiz's use of the camera to cement the alleged differences between races. Maria Helena P. T. Machado's *Brazil through the Eyes of William James: Letters, Diaries, and Drawings, 1865–1866* fully documents young William James's participation in Agassiz's Brazilian junket. And Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Idea* outlines, among many other things, the momentous consequences for American intellectual history of James's disenchantment with the kind of science Agassiz represent-

ed. Finally, *America's Darwin; Darwinian Theory and U.S. Literary Culture*, coedited by Tina Gianquitto and Lydia Fisher, charts the myriad and clever ways in which American writers and scientists have tried to integrate Darwin's heterodox vision into the cultural fabric of a nation temperamentally averse to imagining a world without, in the words of philosopher John Dewey, "absolute origins and absolute finalities."

One of the great pleasures of my professional life has been my collaboration with the art historian Alan Braddock which was inspired by the Audubon chapter in *Poetics*. Our coedited anthology *A Keener Perception* emphasizes the environmentalist dimension of the tradition I discuss in *Poetics*, extending the debate to contemporary art. With the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Alan and I jointly taught seminars on Audubon at Indiana University. Our extraordinary students, who were all schoolteachers, helped me see many things differently, but they also affirmed the continuing validity of the interdisciplinary approach I had first tried out in *Poetics*.

My book saw the light of print because of the vigorous encouragement of two remarkable women, Suzanne Katz Hyman, who published excerpts from it in *Raritan*, and Leslie Mitchner, the former editor in chief of Rutgers University Press, who offered me a contract over a celebratory dinner in Harvard Square that I will remember for the rest of my life. I owe continuing thanks also to my excellent copy editor, India Cooper, as well as to the librarians who assisted me again, especially Leslie Morris and Matthew Wittmann of Houghton Library. Kudos to Zach Downey, the Lilly Library's outstanding photographer, who has replaced close to half of the original illustrations with new photographs from the unparalleled holdings of the Lilly, my academic home for more than a decade. No thanks are adequate to acknowledge Zach's contributions as well as the professionalism, warmth, and good cheer he brings to everything he tackles. Joel Silver, the director of the Lilly, has been my supporter, advisor, and friend for years now—thanks again, Joel. And, of course, my gratitude also goes to Elisabeth Maselli, my editor at Rutgers University Press. Without her advocacy, this new edition would not have happened, and she handled the complex task of assembling it with panache, grace, and enthusiasm.

My sentiments behind the dedication, which remains the same, have not changed either: my mentor Daniel Aaron helped me find my voice as a writer, and my wife, Lauren Bernofsky, has made sure that I don't lose it. I also want to acknowledge my friend Raphael Falco who always reminds me, *nel mezzo del cammin di mia vita* (or now a bit past it), to keep looking forward. My children, Nick and Julia, were not yet born when I wrote this book. Watching them grow over the years into independent, beautiful, and confident human beings has been, and will forever be, the chief joy of my life.

CHRISTOPH IRMSCHER

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