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Review: Ecocritical Explorations In Literary And Cultural Studies: Fences, Boundaries, And Fields

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Book Review

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Patrick D. Murphy

Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies: Fences, Boundaries, and Fields

Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009

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This collection of mostly short essays represents the culmination of 5 years of “ecocritical explorations,” as Murphy, professor of English at University of Central Florida, notes in his preface. Each essay operates with a set of key premises: the planet, due largely to human activity, is moving toward numerous “tipping points”; humans can alter the practices that have affected the conditions surrounding those tipping points; literature and literary study can play an important role in the necessary rethinking of suspect practices and their effects. One of the most prominent and well-respected ecocritics, Murphy has published numerous articles and books on a wide variety of topics related to nature-oriented literature and cultural studies. The present volume consists mainly of revised or reprinted articles from a wide assortment of sources: 4 of the 12 chapters first appeared in *Tamkang Review* (Taiwan), 4 appeared in diverse edited volumes, and 2 in academic journals. Though the preface and the book it serves seem at times to be an odd mix of topics (from fatherhood to other disasters) and approaches, Murphy remains true to his premises throughout the work.

The essays are sorted into three sections. The first, “Climbing Through Conceptual Fences,” lays out theoretical starting points (e.g., Bakhtinian informed ideas of “Aloofness” and “Answerability”) for Murphy’s literary investigations. Though many of the works touched on in this section are not themselves ecocriticism per se, they belong to Murphy’s prescription for sound ecocritical practices, the chief ingredient of which is “referentiality.” Referentiality—the concept that words refer to “the material world in which they circulate and from which they arise” rather than operating in “purely self-reflexive communication” (p. 3) or a realm removed from the material world—is the sine qua non of environmentally interested literary criticism; true ecocriticism, according to Murphy, “reinstates referentiality as a crucial and primary activity of literature” (p. 1). Section 2, “Surveying the Boundaries of Genre,” explores manifestations of referentiality in the contemporary American novel. This section comprises a survey of surveys but is helpful as such, especially in introducing readers to otherwise critically neglected popular works (science fiction, detective novels). The concluding section, “Culturally Crossing the Field,” is the shortest and weakest of the three but nevertheless takes a significant step toward applying scholarly work to personal situations and pedagogical matters. A sampler of green ideas loosely linked by the theory of referentiality and a cultural studies approach, the book is most useful for broadening the category of “literature” in which practicing ecocritics operate.

As the introduction and first four essays make clear, Murphy aims to take part in and productively inflect a crucial conversation among literary scholars. Why study literature in an age of dire environmental crises? What methods will best suit literary scholars at present? His response to such questions is to broaden the field of ecocriticism, challenging its categories in order to deal with both timely and long-range issues while ever pushing for referentiality: “With referentiality

comes responsibility and the need for both diversity in method and diversity in intellectual resources” (p. viii). To develop the latter, Murphy warns ecocritics against forcing the works they study into fixed categories; instead, works should be used to “critique the adequacy, productivity, and necessary limitations of our categories” (p. 85). To cultivate a diversity of method, Murphy draws attention to the ongoing evolution of the nature of reading. He questions how ecocritics and environmentalists should position themselves in relation to the audience who will have to deal with global problems associated with climate change, population growth, and resource scarcity. He asks what rhetorical approaches to that audience will be most effective. He wonders what will become of concepts such as inhabitation and environmental justice in a world increasingly shaped by “virtual realities and mixed realities” (pp. 51-52). Chapter 3 in particular tries to describe a new “reading gestalt,” one that is “hypericonic rather than textual” (p. 52), a result of the shift from page to computer screen. The Internet, video games, instant messaging are not the devils, Murphy explains: They can assist us in developing an “awareness of the contingencies of daily life and the porosity and permeability of personal experience” (p. 53). But the rise of hyper-textual practices and online existences require new critical acts and rhetorical strategies for scholars hoping to reach such a retooled readership.

The chapters of Part 2 are the strongest of the book, arguing persuasively for a rearrangement of the field of ecocriticism and its object of study. Consisting primarily of Murphy’s readings in contemporary fiction, these essays are at times more descriptive than interpretive but are nonetheless useful, treating examples of recent nature-oriented literature that turn up on unexpected shelves. Chapter 6, in defense of science fiction novels as a way of thinking about earthly ideas of nature, presents a sustained engagement with works of Ursula K. Le Guin and Kim Stanley Robinson. Murphy praises these novelists for engendering thoughts about “ethical questions just over the horizon but rapidly coming into sight” (p. 108). Although Part 2 demonstrates Murphy’s own wide reading and results from a thoughtful selection of pertinent materials, the discussion throughout the book occasionally relies too heavily on quotation rather than working through some of the complex questions involved. A fallout of the surveylike nature of the explorations, in many cases no more than a paragraph (and sometimes less) is devoted to each author/book. Near the end of Part 1, Murphy writes of another work “I want to mention” (p. 75). This may indicate, to some, a kind of weakness: A good portion of the book is devoted to “mentioning” myriad works, referring to them briefly, without going into detail. (Part 2 is the exception, with its deeper engagements with sci-fi and detective fiction.) But Murphy’s point, in part, is that many of these literary works are greatly in need of “mention,” must indeed be “brought to the mind” of scholars concerned with ethical responses to environmental crises. There are other things that might irk some readers—occasional oversimplifying treatments of texts or writers (Walden, Derrida), passages that could be crisper, places where editing could have been sharper, an infrequent lapse into PowerPoint prose or dot.org.ese (chapter 11, surveying hurricane literature)—yet the path of Murphy’s explorations always bears the signposts of good intention and sustained ecocritical inquiry.

Taken as a whole, the essays of *Ecocritical Explorations* provide an informative resource for literary scholars and for teachers interested in moving their students in ecocritical directions. The gist of the book’s argument may be summarized in Murphy’s discussion of Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, a work that uses literature to illuminate “a planet that human beings have spoiled through overpopulation and unsustainable consumption with the result that they have almost completely destroyed their own means of survival.” Le Guin’s novel is, as Murphy observes, “a eutopian cautionary tale” designed to make possible “freedom in a future that is ecologically sustainable rather than diseased and blighted” (p. 95), and Murphy tries to tell the same tale from a critic’s perspective. At their best, his essays use that perspective to raise significant questions regarding the meanings we find in or make of nature, as well as the ramifications of

those meanings. While not always successful, the essays attempt to acknowledge the imperiled condition of the planet with something quite other than hand-wringing. Quoting Gary Snyder, Murphy suggests that the proper work of the ecocritic is “to make us love the world rather than to make us fear for the end of the world” (p. 115). Literature, for Murphy, is far from escapist. When done right—that is, when written and interpreted responsibly—literature helps make possible our openness to the “wild variability, spontaneity, and unpredictability in life” (p. 117), and to act accordingly.

Bio

T. Scott McMillin is the author of *Our Preposterous Use of Literature: Emerson and the Nature of Reading* (2000), as well as numerous articles on the American transcendentalists, including “Beauty Meets Beast: Emerson’s English Traits,” in a collection published in 2010. His second book, *The Meaning of Rivers*, will appear in 2011.