

Greg Garrard. *Ecocriticism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004. ISBN 0-415-19672-2.

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The publication of Greg Garrard's monograph on ecocriticism in Routledge's New Critical Idiom series marks a significant milestone in the development of ecologically oriented literary and cultural studies. As the first introductory textbook in this area, with a useful glossary, annotated list of further reading and extensive bibliography, it bears witness to the growth of tertiary studies in literature, culture and environment over the past decade: a development that is particularly marked in the US, but likely to be accelerated in the UK too in the coming years, following a major government initiative to promote 'education for sustainable development'. (If only the Howard government were as eager to follow Blair's in this as it was to join Blair in following Bush to war in Iraq!) In early 2005, Garrard, who currently holds the position of Chair of the British Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, was appointed by the Higher Education Academy, together with Richard Kerridge (the founding Chair of ASLE-UK and a colleague of Garrard's at Bath Spa University), to undertake a survey of ecologically oriented teaching and research in departments of English throughout Britain, with a view to determining how ecological literacy could be furthered within the discipline.<sup>1</sup> Somewhat unusually for an introductory text, *Ecocriticism* is also noteworthy as a work of vigorous self-critique from within the fold, suggesting that ecocritics are beginning to feel less like an embattled minority who need to band together in order to be heard at all, and are therefore more ready to acknowledge shortcomings in existing ecocritical practice. If, as Dana Phillips has argued polemically,<sup>2</sup> ecocriticism has been flawed hitherto by an overly pious attitude towards 'nature', along with those writers and critics deemed to be allies in its defence, Garrard is emphatically irreverent, set on sorting the wheat from the chaff in a manner that is erudite, eloquent and often incisive (if perhaps not always entirely just).

The term 'ecocriticism' is a coinage of the early 1990s, and although some earlier works, such as Joseph Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival* (1972) and even Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973) are now hailed as precursors<sup>3</sup>, the approach that it names remains something of a new kid on the block within literary and cultural studies. As Garrard observes, it is generally cast as 'an avowedly political mode of analysis' (3), deriving its impetus from the modern environmentalist movement that began to get underway in the 1960s. However, whereas other modes of political criticism, such as Western Marxism, feminism and postcolonialism, which also have their genesis in the new social movements of that era, have long since been mainstreamed within literary and cultural studies, there has been (and in some quarters remains) considerable resistance to an explicitly earth-centred critical practice. This appears to be related to the so-called 'linguistic turn' and subsequent rise of discursive constructivism within the humanities, which has rendered talk of a more-than-human world 'beyond the text' virtually taboo. While most ecocritics acknowledge, to a greater or lesser extent, the role of language, culture and society in shaping human perceptions of the natural world, they also insist on the existence of an other-than-human material reality that subsists, supports and

potentially impinges upon our cultural constructs and social relations. In seeking to draw this realm of matter, above all in the guise of Earth's endangered biosphere, into the purview of literary and cultural studies, ecocritics frequently make appeal to the witness of science. It is thus perhaps also in its transgression of the great divide between the 'human' and 'natural' sciences, which has been so pivotal to the modern constitution of knowledge, that ecocriticism has met with such suspicion on the part of the academic establishment (including, and perhaps especially, those representatives thereof who fondly consider themselves 'subversive').

While the first major works of ecocriticism, notably by Jonathan Bate and Karl Kroeber<sup>4</sup>, were studies of English Romantic literature, the field has since diversified considerably, encompassing the examination of a wide variety of texts, media and other cultural phenomena, drawing on a plurality of critical theories and methodologies, with affiliations to a number of different tendencies within 'green' thought and politics. In Garrard's very broad definition, ecocriticism entails 'the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term "human" itself' (5). The importance of this undertaking, in his account, derives from the premise that 'environmental problems require analysis in cultural as well as scientific terms, because they are the outcome of an interaction between ecological knowledge and its cultural inflection' (14). At the same time, Garrard stresses that ecological knowledge is itself a shifting terrain rather than a firm ground for ecocritical analysis, emphasising in particular the challenge to earlier ecological postulates of integrity, harmony and stability posed by the new 'postmodern' ecology of fluid and permeable boundaries, discord and change. Garrard also points to the necessarily interdisciplinary nature of ecocritical scholarship, which 'draws on literary and cultural theory, philosophy, sociology, psychology and environmental history, as well as ecology' (14). To this, I would add politics and economics, and, potentially, religious studies (about which more anon).

Garrard's focus is on developments within British and North American ecocriticism, but his approach, which is rhetorical or tropological, clearly has relevance to ecocriticism elsewhere as well. Following a critical survey of divergent 'positions' within contemporary thinking about the natural environment (i.e. cornucopian, environmentalist, deep ecological, ecofeminist, social ecological, eco-Marxist and Heideggerian), Garrard proceeds to a chapter-by-chapter consideration of a number of key tropes governing ecocritical practice. These are cleverly chosen and arranged so as to trace a certain diachronic movement of ecocritical concern, namely from a focus on 'pollution' (which organises the introductory chapter), through 'pastoral', 'wilderness', 'apocalypse', and 'dwelling' to 'animals' and (by way of conclusion) 'the Earth' and its future(s). This is not to say that each of these figures has not been in play throughout the past fifteen to twenty years of ecocritical scholarship. However, a shift in emphasis can certainly be evidenced along these lines. Moreover, this is a shift that Garrard is evidently inclined to cast as progressive, to the extent that it implies a movement away from the nostalgic and ideologically loaded language of pastoral, wilderness, and place-based dwelling, to a forward looking and ironically self-aware engagement with mobile and hybrid (cross-cultural, human-animal and human-machine) identities and global futures, understood in

the comic mode as radically uncertain rather than as unavoidably catastrophic. More explicitly, Garrard exhorts ecocritics to dispense with what he terms the 'poetics of *authenticity*' in favour of one of *responsibility* that takes ecological science rather than pantheism as its guide' (71), calling for a 'politicised reading practice more akin to social ecology and Cultural Studies than to deep ecology and traditional literary studies' (162).

Garrard's exploration of the historical index of each of these tropes is interesting and instructive, and his analysis of their problematic aspects in the present is generally perceptive and occasionally brilliant, as, for example, in his diagnosis of the anthropogenic underpinnings and self-contradictory implications of biocentric apocalypticism (102-3). There are some weaker moments, however. One of the inherent difficulties of surveying a wide field such as this (a problem with which I am all too familiar in my own work) is that specialists are likely to find fault with those parts of the discussion in which they might be able to claim greater expertise. In this connection, I would be inclined to quibble with Garrard's treatment of the German thinkers whom he discusses here. I was surprised, for example, to see the 'poetics of authenticity' attributed to Schiller (45), the whole point of his essay on 'Naïve and Sentimental Poetry' being to clear the ground for an ironically self-reflexive style of emphatically modern classicism that went beyond both 'naïve' realism and 'sentimental' yearning. Similarly, it is not clear in what sense Nietzsche can be termed a 'nihilist' (90) when his entire oeuvre, following the break with Wagner, was directed towards the overcoming of nihilism. And although Heidegger might have been an 'enthusiastic Nazi' (30, 111) for a while, he certainly was one no longer by the time he wrote his essay on 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (1935), in which the conceptual apparatus of Earth and World is implicitly subversive of the racist ideology of 'Blut' (not 'Blud', as on p.112) and 'Boden' ('Blood and Soil'). Still, these are in part differences of interpretation and not central to Garrard's main line of argumentation.

More generally, while I applaud the recent self-critical turn in ecocriticism, I feel that Garrard's approach sometimes errs a little too much on the side of the polemical for an introductory text, where more even-handedness might have been in order (while possibly making for a less lively read). There is much to be said for the development of an ecocritical Cultural Studies leaning on postmodern science and social ecology; but I do not see why this should be at the expense of a continuing engagement with literature, leaning on other disciplines and perspectives, such as poetics, philosophy or religious studies (and potentially no less scientifically informed and socially concerned for all that). Surely there is ecocritical work to be done on all fronts using tools that are appropriate to the matter in hand and the location (disciplinary, institutional and geo-political) in which one is labouring? In this connection, I am particularly troubled by Garrard's doctrinaire dismissal of religious understandings and sensibilities. While his science might be 'postmodern', his dogmatic secularism and uncritical faith in 'free will' and 'observed reality' appears defiantly modern.

Despite these reservations, I consider Garrard's book a 'must read' for anybody with an interest in ecologically informed literary and cultural studies, and I am sure that it will do much to advance the ecocritical project<sup>5</sup>. Although Garrard's register is predominantly

critical, there are also some endearing moments of affirmation. Of these, I am especially taken with his recommendation, in the closing pages of the book, that the hubris of modernity be countered not by a 'self-abnegating humility and submission to the presumed natural order' but by the cultivation of the kind of 'megalopsuche' or 'greatness of soul' (181) that he sees embodied in the Eden Project in Cornwall, which is in his analysis:

attuned to environmental justice, but not dismissive of the claims of commerce and technology; shaped by knowledge of long-term environmental problems, but wary of apocalypticism; informed by artistic as well as scientific ecological insight; and committed to the preservation of the biological diversity of the planet for all its inhabitants (182).

Here, here!

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<sup>1</sup> In 2005, the British Arts and Humanities Research Council also launched a Landscape and Environment Programme with a budget of £5.5 million to fund projects in the ecological humanities.

<sup>2</sup> Dana Phillips. *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph W. Meeker. *The Comedy of Survival. Studies in Literary Ecology*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972; Raymond Williams. *The Country and the City*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1973.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Bate. *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*. London: Routledge, 1991, and Karl Kroeber, *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. As Garrard observes, the wide brief of ecocriticism was already foreshadowed by Cheryl Glotfelty in her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Ed. C. Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. London: University of Georgia Press, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> However, in the interest of balance, I would recommend that it is read alongside Jonathan Bate's *The Song of the Earth* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP, 2000) and Lawrence Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).