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Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby, eds., *Ecocritical Theory. New European Approaches* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 322 pp.

Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby's collection *Ecocritical Theory. New European Approaches* is a welcome addition to the field of ecocriticism, which remains largely dominated by American perspectives, despite the early publication of, for instance, the British anthology *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature* (1998). Overall it is a well-balanced and wide-ranging collection, consisting of strong essays by early contributors and key thinkers, such as Kate Soper, Catriona Sandilands, Patrick D. Murphy, Timothy Morton, and others.

In their introduction to the volume, Goodbody and Rigby are quick to address a sensitive issue at the heart of the collection: ecocriticism's professed theory-phobia. Although a typical feature of early ecocriticism, the controversy following the publication of Kip Robisch's "The Woodshed" in 2009 shows that theory remains a contested theme. After identifying a number of recent ecocritical monographs which show that "the alleged ecocritical antipathy to theory is on the wane" (1), Goodbody and Rigby note that the claim of ecocritical theory-phobia is misleading. This charge overlooks early attempts at ecocritical theorization by scholars such as Murphy and SueEllen Campbell, and it "fails to recognize the theoretical moment that is implicit in the admittedly widespread rejection of the then dominant mode of critical or cultural theory by most first-wave ecocritics" (ibid.). Although they acknowledge that ecocriticism was indeed anti-theoretical in its response to poststructural and postmodern thought, Goodbody and Rigby usefully propose, drawing on Terry Eagleton, that theory comes about at a time when reflection on existing practices becomes necessary. Ecocriticism's insistence on new ways of engaging with the natural nonhuman environment illustrates precisely such a moment. Consequently, "[t]he pressing question then becomes not how to escape from theory, but which path of theoretical reflection to pursue" (2).

The uniqueness of this collection lies in the fact that it both is and is not a strictly European volume. On the one hand, as the title suggests, Goodbody and Rigby have brought together examples of "European ecocriticism" – if, they note, such a thing even exists. They distinguish this European ecocriticism from American ecocriticism by suggesting several differences. Firstly, European ecocriticism is bound to be concerned more with *cultural* landscapes – the pastoral, for instance – than distinctly *natural* landscapes – such as the image of the wilderness so dominant in American ecocriticism. Consequently, Goodbody and Rigby suggest, "European thinkers [may be] more open to perspectives departing from traditional ecocritical assumptions about the dichotomy of nature and culture, and to conceiving of nature as a cultural responsibility and project"

(3). Such perspectives have also influenced European thinking about nature, which is “characterized by a historical rupture in the association of nature with national identity which still plays such an important role in the United States” (3), the second distinguishing feature of European ecocriticism. Thirdly, “European ecocriticism takes inspiration from the proximity of the Continent’s diverse languages, societies, and cultures”, which have “prompted awareness of the relativity of cultural values and understandings of human interaction with the natural environment” (3).

Whereas on the one hand, then, *Ecocritical Theory* is a distinctly European anthology, on the other hand, it is not. For instance, the twenty contributors to the volume are not all European, nor are all of the texts discussed European, although the thinkers discussed in the essays are. This combination of critics, thinkers and texts is one of the major strengths of *Ecocritical Theory*. Precisely because European thinkers are discussed by both European and non-European authors, and applied to both European and non-European texts, the essays in this volume achieve a depth and variety that would otherwise be hard to accomplish.

The applicability of the articles is attained by the basic set-up outlined by Goodbody and Rigby in their introduction. All of the contributors, they write, “were given the task of providing an introduction to a [European] thinker, theory, or approach, explaining key concepts, and demonstrating their significance through practical application to a text or texts” (4). In this sense as well, the volume is a welcome and refreshing addition to ecocriticism and literary studies in general, in which theory is all too often not put into practice. A particularly good example of the approach proposed by Goodbody and Rigby is Louise Westling’s article in which she applies Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. Using a scene from Eudora Welty’s “The Wanderers” and W.H. Auden’s poem “A New Year Greeting” works particularly well, since these short examples allow the reader to analyze the texts along with Westling – much more so than if a summary of a novel would have been provided.

The wide range of the volume is furthermore illustrated by the variety of texts discussed, from traditional ecocritical works such as *Walden* (Dassow Walls) and *A Sand County Almanac* (Bergthaller) to Goethe’s *Faust* (Sullivan) and science fiction (Murphy). It also offers new perspectives on works that have received ecocritical attention before. For instance, whereas ecocritical engagements with the Bible are usually informed by criticism of human dominion over nature as implied in Genesis,¹ Anne Elvey examines the Bible as a material artefact, particularly the material qualities of bibles written on sheepskin parchments.

Ecocritical Theory consists of five parts: “memory and politics”, “culture, society, and anthropology”, “phenomenology”, “ethics and otherness” and “models from physics and biology”. The essays that make up these sections cover a wide range of strands within ecocriticism, from more traditional issues and thinkers such as Marxism, phenomenology and Heidegger, to more recently made connections with cybernetics and quantum theory. A number of ecocritical concerns run through the collection, such

¹ For a classic example, see Lynn White Jr.’s essay “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis”.

as the political and activist dimension of ecocriticism, and the field's explorations of openness and non-duality. Even though questions of activism have always been a part of ecocriticism, the essays in *Ecocritical Theory* provide a diversity of views on this, including some that are decisively uncharacteristic for ecocriticism. In her contribution, Soper addresses the nostalgia often believed to be a problematic part of environmentalism, and argues that so-called "avant-garde nostalgia" enables reflection on the past "in ways that highlight what is pre-empted by contemporary forms of consumption, and thereby stimulate desire for a future that will be at once less environmentally destructive and more sensually gratifying" (24). This reflection, she proposes, could subsequently play a role in "the revisions of thinking about pleasure and the good life that I see as crucial to the furtherance of a green political agenda" (24), which she had earlier discussed more extensively as "alternative hedonism" (See Soper, Ryle and Thomas).

The question of activism recurs in Murphy's essay on ethical responsibility in which, following Bakhtin, he introduces answerability and transgression as two key concepts for ecocritics. Answerability, Murphy argues, "imposes obligations on the ecocritic in relation to environmental issues, representations of ecology, and the quality and functionality of artistic images of nature, environments, ecologies and human practices", while transgression "encourages authors and critics to see themselves through another's perspective: those of the rest of the natural world at the general level, and of specific ecosystems, plants, or animals at the particular level" (156). In practice this means that ecocritics seek to promote those literary works that represent and stimulate answerability and transgression. Although it may be the obvious choice, it is unfortunate that Murphy presents nature-oriented literature as not only the most obvious or logical, but in fact the *only* option in this respect. As he proposes, "ecocritics can argue for the value and significance of nature-oriented literature in general" (160), an argument he repeats throughout the essay. A similar link between activism and nature-oriented literature is made by Serpil Oppermann who, in her article on ecological, quantum and postmodern theories, presents a traditional view of ecocriticism's task. Ecocritics, she argues, "expect of writers that they inscribe ecological viewpoints in their work" (230).

This kind of prescriptiveness is a recurring – and unfortunate – feature of debates on the aims of ecocriticism. In *Ecocritical Theory* it is refreshingly countered by Hannes Bergthaller, who provides a quite radical view on ecocritical activism. Bergthaller applies cybernetics and social systems theory to ecocriticism and concludes that the core of the former theories is that "all observer positions come with a blind spot, and that it is precisely their blind spots which condition whatever purchase they have on the world" (226, emphasis in original). Specifically for ecocriticism this means that an engagement with systems theory "could help ecocriticism to accept its limitations as a necessary prerequisite for the production of a distinct kind of knowledge – in other words, to accept that what ecocritics do is read texts and write about them, not campaign for new environmental legislation or plug tailpipes" (226-27). Although this

standpoint may perhaps be unpopular among conservative ecocritics, it makes sense from the point of view of systems theory which argues that in order to make a difference within a certain system, the language of that system needs to be used. This, Bergthaller argues, has been “the chief problem with which environmentalism has struggled, because the language it uses to describe both itself and its objects often does not meet this requirement. While it is quite possible to voice ‘mountain-like’ thought and to demand that society pay attention, it is naïve to expect that this will produce the desired consequences” (225).

In addition to activism and politics, *Ecocritical Theory* also engages with another issue that has long been at the heart of ecocriticism: dualistic thought and, in particular, the culture/nature dichotomy. For instance, this issue lies at the bottom of more recent ideas such as Timothy Morton’s “mesh” and, in *Ecocritical Theory*, his argument against the use of the word “world” which he claims is limiting. “Since thinking ecologically,” Morton suggests, “abolishes distance, what remains is intimacy with all life forms. This is the (not so bad) alternative to the language of worlds. Thinking ecology without worlds (singular and plural) means thinking coexistence and intimacy in constant flux” (169). A different spin on this familiar issue is provided by Heather Sullivan who draws on affinity studies and open systems in her reading of Goethe’s *Faust*. Both theories emphasize openness, hybridity and continuity and propose that “human-nature interface is part of a *continuum* of complex, interrelated patterns rather than a question of (absolute) difference” (247, emphasis in original). Sullivan consequently proposes an “ecocritical model of open systems” which “looks at flows, boundaries, and agency; it asks how the human/nature interface is portrayed in terms of open or closed boundaries and/or in terms of individual, cultural, or open and distributed agency” (253). Another way in which *Ecocritical Theory* reflects ecocritical thought on dualisms is through a concern with the body shared by several articles in the collection. The body is arguably the primary site of our engagement with the nonhuman natural environment, which explains its significance to contributors such as Luce Irigaray and Christopher Cohoon – whose essay is a response to and elaboration on Irigaray’s “ecological” thought – and its role in Kate Rigby’s discussion of Gernot Böhme and Westling’s engagement with Merleau-Ponty.

Other notable essays in this volume, which I do not have the space to discuss here, are Goodbody’s reading of German literature from both an ecocritical and cultural memory perspective, Mark Lussier’s discussion of Blake and Deleuze, and Wendy Wheeler’s contribution on biosemiotics. All in all *Ecocritical Theory* points the way forward not just for European ecocriticism, which it places firmly on the map, but for ecocriticism as a whole, and provides an example to literary scholarship of the way in which theory and practice can be accessibly yet thoroughly presented.

Works Cited

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