

## So Unwise About Green

Recognition that we do not in fact create the wilderness, but that it makes and remakes itself, is the first step toward learning to read nature's text as something other than fiction.

ALISON BYERLY

In learning to read land, one can't just name objects but must point to what they do: pines live in sandy soil, oaks in clay, and thus their rates of water absorption differ.

WILLIAM HOWARTH

Nature, as revealed by evolutionary biology, paleobiology, and geology, is violent, unbalanced, improvisatory, dynamic.

FREDERICK TURNER

A thought may have no weight and take up no space, but it exists as part of a stream of consciousness that is made possible by food, air, and water.

HAROLD FROMM

In sketching the eclectic history of ecology, William Howarth discovers “what amounts to a vernacular and democratic science.” That such science, undisciplined in its promiscuous receptivity to varied fields and methodologies, has “earn[ed] the hostility of classical science,” should make ecology especially interesting to students of literature, themselves as a group (I include myself) in turn ignorant of, if not hostile to, classical science. Ecology might just be the science most open to literary scholars.

Indeed, the collection in which I read Howarth's “Some Principles of Ecocriticism,” amounts to a sustained argument that students of literature must be governed by Barry Commoner's first Law of Ecology: “Everything is connected to everything else.” *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (U. Georgia Press US\$45.00/19.95) is the first anthology to attempt to assemble the defining

documents of this emergent sub-field. For these editors, those documents are almost exclusively U.S. American, both in origin and focus—a profound irony given the a-national movements of wind, water, and even eagles. But in proposing a second volume, they acknowledge this paradox. And, certainly this reader can and should be a great stimulus to students of Canadian literature, whose project, as I noted in related editorial in *Canadian Literature* No.130, has so often featured land, landscape, climate, wilderness, animals, and region.

Glotfelty and Fromm collect twenty-five essays, organized in sections devoted to theory, criticism of fiction and drama, and studies of environmental literature, in which these terms and concepts constantly circulate and revise one another (although “region” is not listed in the generally helpful Index). An annotated list of recommended reading, and of relevant journals and organizations is appended. Glotfelty’s own Introduction develops “the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it.” “Simply put,” she writes, “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.” The deliberate naiveté of this definition enables (as does the recklessness of ecology itself) a challenging undefining of what literary scholars do.

The name of this *re-placing* is implied by the epigraphs to this review, all selected from essays in *The Ecocriticism Reader*. They propose a program for becoming un-wise, a notion most entertainingly presented in this astonishing tidbit from Frederick Turner’s “Cultivating the American Garden”:

. . . consider the courtship ritual of the blue satin bowerbird, which, convinced that its own color is the most beautiful in the world, builds the bluest nest it can to attract its mate, painting it with chewed-up blueberries and decorating it with blue flowers, bits of blue paper, and its own feathers; a nest which, since it is on the ground and vulnerable to predators, is never used by the lucky bride. (She later builds a sensible little nest in a tree.) This charming un wisdom is more attractive, perhaps, than wisdom. Wisdom sits still and doesn’t make a fool of itself. Nature sends in the clowns.

A little study, Turner notes, will unsettle any assumption that nature is inherently wise, at least, by any analogy to *human* wisdom. The mime of the clowns (they are likely to be mute) enacts ecocriticism’s greatest challenge to be unwise, to abandon (somehow, however paradoxically) our anthropocentric view, so beloved, especially perhaps, of humanists and social sci-

entists, for a biocentric view in which all organisms have equal status. This approach would have us getting our literature classes outside of buildings to taste the needles of the jack pine, and finding out more about Roberts' animals than we can pick up from a dictionary or encyclopedia, and reaching, in some impossibly implausible yet necessary way to learn the *language* of animals.

And, conversely, being un-wise also means attending to a different principle than utility. Even as we try to find the way out of an anthropocentric approach, we, in the "humanities," find ourselves essential to this awkwardly sprawling muddle of ecology. In this collection, this proposition finds its best expression in Canadian Neil Evernden's "Beyond Ecology":

The subversive nature of Ecology rests on its assumption of literal interrelatedness, not just interdependence. Ecology as a discipline has been called upon to ignore the former and deal with the latter, on the assumption that the patterns of dependence can be shifted, whereas relatedness cannot. It seems to me that an involvement by the arts is vitally needed to emphasize that relatedness, and the intimate and vital involvement of self with place. Ultimately, preservation of the non-human is a very personal crusade, a rejection of the homogenization of the world that threatens to diminish all, including the self. There is no such thing as an individual, only an individual-in-context, individual as a component of place, defined by place.

To become less linear, to open the creative irrational un-mind which will discover relatedness, Evernden celebrates the possibilities of the unmodish (for science) concepts of metaphor and pathetic fallacy. Through them, he urges, we can imagine the world— even as we distrust our social constructs, —from a non-human perspective. In elaborating and demonstrating the connectedness of Howarth and Evernden, the essays in *The Ecocriticism Reader* provide a compact, provocative program for genuinely reciprocal study of literature—environment. L.R.

