

BOOKS

Daniel A. Finch-Race, Stephanie Posthumus (Eds.), *French Ecocriticism. From the Early Modern Period to the Twenty-First Century*, Peter Lang, 2017, 294 p.

Mostly sceptic towards politically oriented approaches in cultural studies - such as postcolonialism, gender or animal studies - French critics have also been slower in adopting methodologies from the field of ecocriticism, which emerged and developed mostly in the anglophone context. French publications addressing environmental concerns in humanities became more prolific in the last years and the present volume, *French Ecocriticism. From the Early Modern Period to the Twenty-First Century*, responds the need to draw a framework for the French ecocriticism, casting light upon specific traits and directions that distinguish it from the anglophone tradition.

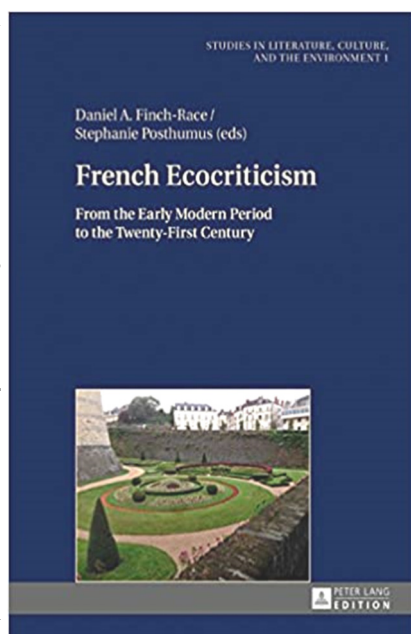
As the editors Daniel A. Finch-Race and Stephanie Posthumus explain in the introduction, one of the purposes of this volume is to demonstrate that ecocriticism does not solely deal with concrete political ecological commitment, but equally with formal and aesthetic elements. It is also worth mentioning that,

reuniting studies conducted by researchers from different countries, one of the strong points of the work is that it relies on a cross-cultural perspective.

The volume contains seven parts that provide a complex overview of French environmental thinking over

the centuries. The authors propose a rich variety of subjects, not only concerning literature, but also cinematography and theoretical texts within the field of ecocriticism.

The first part, entitled "Early Modern Economies and Ecologies" brings attention to how works from the sixteenth century can be interpreted in light of modern ideas of environmental awareness. Jeff Persels reads a set of texts belonging to the didactic genre of the *principum specula* ('mirrors for princes'), questioning how the care for the environment was at the time considered an indicator of good stewardship. Pauline Goul, in her chapter on Montaigne's vision of the New World, identifies a very specific relation between the human and the non-human,



outlined in two chapters of the *Essais*. She argues that the sensations of sickness and fear experienced by the writer during the sea-voyage are a suggestion for the environmental risk posed by the colonial politics of the time. This is further linked to a concern for sustainability that, as Goul argues, can be associated with George Bataille's theory of expenditure, thus affirming the relevance of Montaigne's writings for contemporary ideas on ecology.

Passing from the Middle Ages to the literary period of the nineteenth century, the authors of the second part, "Romanticism and Nature; Naturalism and Animality" revisit the works of the classics Victor Hugo and Émile Zola. Karen A. Quandt argues that Hugo's exile in the Channel Island and his poems from this period – collected in the volume *Les Contemplations* – represented a turning point in his understanding of the nature. Although a romantic writer, with *Les contemplations*, Hugo surpasses the romanticised vision that presents the natural world as a mere setting for human emotions and seems to gain awareness of the entangled relationship between the human and the non-human. Quandt further argues that the experience from the Channel Islands prepared the utopian vision from the fourth book of *Les Misérables*, where Hugo, through depictions of nature in the hybrid landscapes of Paris' peripheries, pleads for the re-establishment of the natural ecosystem.

Next, Claire Nettleton approaches the theme of animal aesthetics in Émile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*. Zola's declared mission of depicting his characters as human animals is traditionally understood in terms of degradation of the human (thus positing the animal on an inferior scale). Nettleton pleads for a completely different interpretation of Zola's naturalist thesis, questioning

whether the association between human and animal nature could instead be considered as "the basis of a radical, non-anthropocentric aesthetic" (82). She associates Zola's methods with Deleuze and Guattari's theorisations of Francis Bacon's work, relying on the concepts of 'becoming-animal' – which forces us to understand the inner wild nature of Thérèse and Laurent in relation with the environment in which they live – and the concept of 'painting of sensation', which, transposed in Zola's work, is supposed to "shock bourgeois sensibilities and undermine aesthetic principles" (86).

The next part, "Nineteenth-Century Eco-poetics", comprises two chapters that focus on the works of Arthur Rimbaud and Marie Krysinska. Reading the "ecopoetic adventures" in Rimbaud's poems 'Ma bohème' and 'Sensation', David A. Finch-Race goes beyond a mere interpretation of figures of speech and poetic images that "accentuate the sensorial immediacy of the narrator's engagement with unembellished elements of nature" (101-102) and engages in an in-depth analysis of the formal elements. He argues that the distinctive versification of the two poems from Rimbaud's early period mirror the changes brought by industrialisation in 19th century's France. In this way, Finch-Race demonstrates how the rhythm, the alternation between feminine and masculine rhyme pairs, caesura, alliterations and assonances, the feminine *e caduc*, the verb tenses, all articulate the poet's encounter and immersion with the "female-inflected nature" (106).

In a literary tradition defined by the alexandrine, Marie Krysinska was a pioneer of the French *vers libre*. David E. Evans argues that, although Krysinska's poetry from her *Rythmes pittoresques* mostly recycles the same romantic clichés

of the nature, it is worth using the ecocritical lenses in a formal reading, rather than a thematic one, in order to grasp the originality of the poet. He pleads that Krysinska's innovative poetry is a *'frais dispositif'* which might have the "potential to shape ecocritical reading strategies" (121) by constantly questioning and challenging the 19th century reader's habits, accustomed to the fixed forms of the sonnet and the ballade. Both the contributions of Finch-Race and Evans are ultimately justifying why French ecocriticism cannot ignore problems related to formal elements.

In the fourth part, "Twentieth-Century Ecological Thought" Teófilo Sanz discusses environmental thinking in Marguerite Yourcenar's works – a writer who publicly stated her beliefs by supporting causes such as animal rights. Sanz points to different ecological directions that can be traced in her writings, from the notion of *place-connectedness* to some ideas suggesting ecofeminist positions. However, animal thinking remains the writer's central environmental concern. The subject is developed primarily in the novel *Un homme obscur*, where, through the figure of Nathanaël, Yourcenar "adopts a kind of biocentrism that encompasses an ethic of responsibility towards every non-human entity" (148), as Sanz argues.

This chapter is followed by a more theoretical discussion, as Cristopher Watkin approaches Michel Serres's relation to ecocriticism. The philosopher refused to use terms such as 'ecocriticism', 'ecology' or 'eco-philosophy', that he considered to be too "narrow", because their use in political discourses diminishes the complex dimension of what ecology scientifically means. As Serres suggests, we should rather regard ecology as a complex network of links and interactions that exist

not only in the natural milieu, but between all domains of existence. In this respect, Watkin proposes the terms of 'restricted' and 'general' ecology to discuss the inextricable relation between the so-called 'narrow' and 'broader' dimensions of ecology, arguing that "the entire paradigm of ecology as 'conservation' and 'protection' is bankrupt and self-undermining" (157). Watkin draws his arguments on Serres's discussion on pollution: as the philosopher asserts, we should consider this problem by asking ourselves not '*how* to stop polluting' but '*why* we pollute'. Since pollution is in fact a natural phenomenon common to animals and humans, the boundaries between 'natural' and 'cultural' become questionable. Watkin further argues that Serres's plea for a new 'cosmography' – a political system where non-human actors would be represented and considered alongside with the interests of humans – is shaped by his ideas on 'natural' and 'cultural'. That is because only by being aware of the interconnectedness between the human and the non-human could we adopt such a political system that would seek a real and effective equilibrium between humans and the environment.

In the volume's fifth section, entitled "Millennial Bodies, Origins and Becoming-Milieu", the authors investigate the notion of landscape and its interactions with the human body, both in literature and cinematography. Jonathan Krell contributes with an ecocritical reading of Stéphane Audeguy's *La Théorie des nuages*. In the novel that begins by exploring a natural phenomenon (and a romantic topos) – the clouds, Audeguy arrives at making analogies between the natural world and the microcosm of the human body. With references to names such as Luc Bureau, Mircea

Eliade, Goethe, Michel Tournier or Plato, Krell investigates how the female sexuality has long been associated with natural elements in multiple domains: geography, mythology, philosophy, literature. On the other hand, Nikolaj Lübecker draws on Gilbert Simondon's concept of the *individu-milieu* to explain Jean-Claude Rousseau's depiction of the encounter between human body and landscape in the experimental film *La Vallée close*. He shows that techniques and formal work is relevant to ecocritical discussions not only in literature, but also in cinematography.

The next part, "Twenty-First-Century Natural Limits" focuses on specific themes from the American eco-literature, as they appear in the works of French contemporary writers. Anaïs Boulard examines how the apocalyptic discourse finds its own specificity in French fiction through Éric Chevillard's *Sans l'orang-outan* and Michel Houellebecq's *La Possibilité d'une île*. Boulard argues that the originality of these writers resides in the diegesis and the aesthetics of their writing. Not so much interested in militating for the environmental cause, Chevillard and Houellebecq are mostly concerned with the formal construction of their novels, experimenting with the notions of subject and time. Thus, "[t]he objective of the two novels is to focus on the ubiquity of fear and a sense of apocalypse, rather than the catastrophe in itself" (220). Moreover, the metanarratives and the parodic tones in the two novels suggest that French fiction is more open towards creativity, which finally represents "a way of overcoming the overwhelming anxiety of environmental catastrophes" (225), as Boulard concludes.

Hannes De Vriese explores the motif of wilderness in the autobiographical nonfiction book *Dans les forêts de Sibérie*

by Sylvain Tesson, who draws his inspiration from Thoreau's *Walden*. Although both the French and the American writers depict their retreat from civilisation into the pristine nature, Tesson presents a more radical experience, as well as a more problematic ecological position. That is because, as De Vriese argues, the French writer's experience in the wilderness has rather hedonistic and aesthetic purposes. However, this is not to say that his work is less valuable. De Vriese points to the differences and tensions between 'ecocriticism', understood in terms of ecological commitment, and 'ecopoetics', which, focused on aesthetic and formal elements, seems to be definitory for French environmental literature. In this respect, Tesson's *Dans les forêts de Sibérie* is ultimately representative for the French ecopoetics.

In the seventh and last part, "Horizons and Prospects", Stephanie Posthumus engages in formulating an original theory on French environmental thinking. Paying careful attention to the connotations of terms such as 'environnement', (which etymologically suggests an anthropocentric perspective), 'nature', 'écologie', or the English 'ecocritique', she proposes the notion of 'French *écocritique*' in order to highlight the specificity and the strangeness of the French case. After surveying how French ecological thinking has generally been shaped by theories related to space and place (such as *écopoétique*, *géocritique*, *géopoétique*), Posthumus outlines her specific contribution by proposing two theoretical concepts, namely *ecological subjectivity* and *ecological dwelling*, that she applies in her readings of literary works by Marie Darrieussecq and Marie-Hélène Lafon. It is worth mentioning that Posthumus largely develops her theory in a separate volume: *French*

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'Écocritique': Reading Contemporary French Theory and Fiction Ecologically (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

Finally, the present volume can be considered a milestone for the French environmental studies. Despite the multitude of studies proposed, drawing on thematic and formal analyses, as well as theoretical enquires, the authors of *French Eco-criticism* manage to outline some general and unitary perspectives in the field, with an emphasis on comparative and diachronic

approaches. If the readings of contemporary works have an unquestionable value for today's environmental context, the attention given to historic and classical texts do not have a merely theoretical and academic importance – the authors of these studies also challenge us to reconsider and constantly challenge our reading habits in order to form an analytical eye, so much necessary for putting in practice a real and efficient eco-criticism.

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