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## Practical Ecocriticism (review essay)

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## Practical Ecocriticism

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**Glen A. Love.** *Practical Ecocriticism*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003. ISBN 0-8139-2245-3. viii + 213 pp. \$17.50.

**Dana Phillips.** *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. ISBN 0-19-513769-8. xii + 320 pp. \$29.95.

Recognized as a distinct subdiscipline of literary studies for about ten years now, ecocriticism (also referred to as *studies in literature and the environment*) is one of the newer theoretical-critical schools, although it originates in sixties environmental activism and texts such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) that catalyzed that movement. Ecocriticism is frequently seen as a logical development out of the field of ecology. But if the term *ecocriticism* connotes attention to the relationship between written works and the nonhuman environment, the subdiscipline has now expanded well beyond this initial focus, which may explain the adoption of the more expansive subdisciplinary label *studies in literature and the environment*.

As the shift in terminology indicates, ecocriticism's identity is still in a formative phase, and though indeed a rigid definition is to be avoided, some clear-headed attention to its conflicting characteristics would improve the area's methods and promote its aims. While ecocriticism presently enjoys an expanding range of critical projects, it continues to exhibit a general animus toward theory and a consequent unwillingness to theorize epistemological and literary critical aims. Initially motivated by environmental concerns, ecocriticism might logically pursue an alliance with biology, but many ecocritics retain a postmodernist suspicion of hard science. Therefore, many of the field's assumptions about the relationship between cultural artifacts and the nonhuman environment have not been considered with much thoroughness, resulting in a habitual collapse of the aesthetic onto the ethical and a celebration of potential incoherence in the guise of diversity and pluralism.

Two important recent books, Glen A. Love's *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment* and Dana Phillips's *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America*, call on ecocriticism to rethink its terms, attitudes, and engagement with science and with pragmatic thought. Both Love and Phillips are sensitive to the subdiscipline's limitations as currently constituted, especially its animus toward normal science. Yet while both

of these scholars urge ecocriticism to expand its interdisciplinary engagement, their conclusions about how scientific insight is best applied to literary studies and what value traditional critical categories might have for ecocriticism are by no means similar. To varying degrees, both authors highlight some of ecocriticism's contradictory commitments and propose solutions to them, but perhaps more importantly, the two books together bring these contradictions into intellectual focus and point to the need for their systematic address.

Love's *Practical Ecocriticism* is an impassioned appeal for practitioners to conjoin evolutionary theory with the ethical imperative of environmental criticism. In the introduction, Love professes his exhilaration at "[t]he present state of [the ecocritical] movement, . . . one of ferment and experimentation," and modestly claims that his book "is a contribution to the mix" (5). Clearly, Love recognizes that a Darwinian perspective will affect this mix, but his is a call for unity in the name of ethical awareness and environmental action. Aiming to marry the text-centered approach of I. A. Richards to scientifically grounded arguments, Love proceeds here and in his first chapter to insist on a "nature-endorsing" versus "nature-skeptical" epistemology, to claim that an evolutionarily informed knowledge of human beings is central to averting ecological disaster, and to champion a rethinking of the canon, "reading from an ecological rather than a narrowly human-centered perspective" (35).

Biocultural critics like myself welcome this familiar soil, but a more systematic argument for a modified realist epistemology might make this chapter more persuasive to Darwin-skeptical literary critics. The epistemological argument could have been made on either bioevolutionary or pragmatic grounds (or both, since philosophical pragmatism was inspired significantly by the theory of natural selection); furthermore, in articulating his theory of knowledge, Love might have clarified the possibilities for broadening a "narrowly human-centered" canon. Nor does Love explain why and how literature is especially crucial in raising consciousness about a distinctly nonliterary feature of actuality, the nonhuman natural environment.

In chapter 2, "Ecocriticism and Science," Love constructs a strong argument for the centrality of evolutionary theory in ecocriticism. Anticipating the objections of fellow ecocritics in the chapter's opening pages, Love relates the cost of humanist ignorance of science through a brief account of the Science Wars, the Sokal hoax, and the criticisms of humanist use and abuse of science tendered by Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt. Following this, Love explains the necessity of reductionism in science and asserts that methodological reduction in science is a valuable complement to the systems approach of ecology and ecocriticism. In his words, "Holistic thinking is necessary, even indispensable, but it must also anticipate all the eventualities of a complex system, for which reductionist techniques may be required. Holistic or top-down thinking may thus depend for its advancement and refinement upon the 'tinkering' represented by reductionism

and the verifying techniques of the scientific method. As Duke University biology professor Steven Vogel notes, while acknowledging the importance of how whole organisms work, 'reductionism may not characterize all science, but it defines most of what we scientists do'" (43). In responding to accusations that methodological reduction is culturally biased, Love pointedly notes the participation of women scientists, including Darwinian feminists Sarah Blaffer Hrdy and Patricia Adair Gowaty, in its defense, thus distinguishing between biases that might appear in specific research programs and the fundamental method of investigation. Love concludes this initial portion of the chapter with the assertion that "Antiscience has revealed itself as neither an intellectually defensible nor a politically effective stance" (46). As Love makes clear in this portion of his argument, both humanist disdain for science and misinterpretation of scientific theories reveal the need for a more knowledgeable engagement with the sciences.

In the remainder of this chapter, Love focuses specifically on the need for an ecocritical engagement with the life sciences, addressing the probable reasons for the neglect of biology and evolutionary theory among literary critics. As Love puts it, "despite the fact that evolution has progressed beyond classification as theory to acceptance as fact by virtually all of the world's reputable scientists, as well as the informed lay community and even some religious leaders . . . it still strikes fear and loathing into the hearts of many humanists" (50). The reasons for uneasiness in the face of mounting evidence are several, according to Love: 1) residual fear of nineteenth-century abuses of evolutionary theory; 2) fear of one's own ignorance; and 3) resistance to evolution's hard truths, to "evidence that many would rather not hear" (51). Providing brief background on the development of evolutionary literary criticism (a development contemporaneous with that of ecocriticism itself), Love concludes the chapter with a nod to E. O. Wilson who, though reviled for his claims about the biological basis of behavior, forwards a variety of hypotheses relevant to ecocriticism in particular and literary studies in general.

Well-argued and authoritative, this is one of Love's strongest chapters. He has read comprehensively in contemporary evolutionary theory and in the Two Cultures debates, and his knowledge of evolutionary literary criticism is considerable as well. Love sensibly notes that if we wish to analyze human behaviors, such as the treatment of the environment and the production of literary texts, what science has discovered about these matters is of the greatest pertinence. From a logical point of view, this may seem like a simple point, but the burden of persuasion, as every evolutionary critic knows, is great. In anticipating all the concerns of his readers and in providing substantial research from the development of evolutionary theory and contemporary research, Love compels his readers to ask at what cost they ignore this expanding body of work.

In chapters 3-6, Love turns to more traditionally literary matters: an endorsement of the pastoral mode followed by successive sections on three American authors, Willa Cather, Ernest Hemingway, and William Dean Howells. Thus, the core chapters of the book engage with the trickiest part of any interdisciplinary literary project, requiring that research or theory from extraliterary disciplines be linked with literary concepts and interpretation. In this endeavor, the critic must avoid reductive interpretation while still illustrating a meaningful link between the science and the literature. Love is most successful in negotiating this terrain in his discussion of the biophilia hypothesis in chapter 3 and in his application of that hypothesis to *The Professor's House* in chapter 4.

The biophilia hypothesis, first proposed by Wilson, states that, as living creatures, we have an affinity for the rest of the natural world, "a partly genetic 'sociobiological' affiliation with other life and life processes" (76). Drawing on environmental psychology and behavioral ecology, Love notes that, from an evolutionary standpoint, biophilia must be weighed with the evidence for biophobia, an equally adaptive disposition logically entailed by evolutionary theory. In particular, Love elaborates the research suggesting that humans have an innate predisposition for certain types of landscape, thus inviting the reader to contemplate what Lawrence Buell has elsewhere called "the environmental unconscious" (though Buell takes care to avoid exactly the kind of bioevolutionary claims Love is here making). In chapter 4, Love deftly connects these hypotheses, several other strands of extraliterary research, and Cather's literary techniques in the novel. Behavioral ecology submits that we have an innate (body-mind) affinity for the physical environment, and the linguist-philosopher team of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson claim that our mental concepts and language are derived from bodily experience; in turn, evolutionary theorists of the arts emphasize the fundamentally emotional appeal of the arts. Art is, in short, a product of the body in the mind, and Love ties this directly to Cather's own remarks about the drive to write: "An artist has an emotion and the first thing he wants to do with it is to find form to put it in, a design. It reacts on him exactly as food makes a hungry person want to eat. It may tease him for years until he gets the right form of the emotion" (*Willa Cather in Person* 79) (91). Noting as well the archetypal elements in Cather and combining traditional literary scholarship with the bioevolutionary analyses of Joseph Carroll and Robert Storey, Love stresses the need to focus on bodily senses and the perception of place in the novel. These features, in Love's analysis, are related to the style and form of the novel. Explaining the disproportion in section lengths in the novel in terms of movement toward an increasingly primitive phenomenological state, Love observes that, in the last section, "Cather has carried the unfurnishing process almost to the point of having to renounce her medium," thus anticipating Hemingway's minimalism (114).

In sum, Love impressively links a range of research to Cather's literary method, offering a thoughtful reading of *The Professor's House*. A scholar of a more theoretical bent might ultimately ponder the implications of the author's final near-renunciation, her move against language. If this drive to renounce language is so intimately connected with the value of the text for ecocriticism—and, indeed, moving outside, above, or beyond words is a frequent desideratum of ecocritical texts—then is there, finally, a conflicted feeling amongst ecocritics about the value of the objects they study? Some theoretical speculation of this kind might prove more conceptually useful than the traditional genres and modes (pastoral, tragedy, realism) that Love marries to his evolutionary readings here and in the remaining chapters. Admittedly, *The Professor's House* provides a fine example of the renewed version of pastoral Love calls for in chapter 3—provides it, that is, if we still feel that that mode has much definitional and conceptual force in Love's context. Of this, I'm not convinced. In Love's account, the original Greek notion of pastoral acknowledged the connection between human and animal life and dealt with the reality of death, thus differing from the idealized versions that inform the core of English-language pastoral literature. But it is the idealized versions dating from the Renaissance that are likely to inform the thinking of Love's readers, and thus the concept itself impedes rather than augments a physiological-ecological appreciation of the work at hand. It is the evolutionary and cognitive concepts here employed that illuminate the literary reading, a reading that the overdetermined concept of pastoral, defined here only as the mode that pairs "those grand narratives, nature and death," is likely to obfuscate (83).

These criticisms notwithstanding, the chapter on Cather exemplifies an ecocritical reading following the method of much evolutionary criticism—applying evolutionary and cognitive hypotheses to textual interpretation. The chapters on Hemingway and Howells both adopt slightly different methods. Love notes that Hemingway combines a simultaneously loving and aggressive attitude toward nonhuman nature, mixing the conflicting modes of native primitivism and literary tragedy, and the method of the chapter, on the whole, follows biographical criticism. After a brief discussion of *The Old Man and the Sea*, the chapter addresses the attitudes of Hemingway and his sons toward hunting and offers a psychological explanation for Hemingway's need to kill. Love's ambivalence about Hemingway—he has said in his introduction that he doesn't want to serve as an ecopoliceman, but it is a common and seductive pastime in the subdiscipline—stands somewhat in the way of treating Hemingway's work in the light of evolutionary theory's hard truth, the hardest one, I think, for the ecocritic: What are, from an adaptive perspective, the motivating forces behind human destructiveness?

Here more than in the Cather chapter, a biased definition of a literary mode, in this case tragedy, interferes with evolutionary interpretation. Love is an ad-

mirer of Joseph Meeker's *Comedy of Survival*, which posits that comedy grows from biological circumstance and condemns tragedy for glorifying heroes who accept no boundaries in the pursuit of personal greatness, no price being too high for personal fulfillment (in Love 125). One might reasonably ask whether such a monolithic definition applies to any number of works categorized as tragedies (*Medea? Hamlet? The Cenci?*), but for the moment it serves to point out that the judgment against acts of individual will inhibits analysis of the human desire to control and triumph and even kill as a sign of agency. In this case, ethics interferes with both science and aesthetics. Interestingly, while Love wishes to wrest pastoral from idealism and romanticism (and, presumably, the Christian dimensions of these), he proposes no similar cleansing of tragedy, yet surely suffering and human will, contra Meeker, are integral to our biopsychological circumstances.

In his final chapter, Love discusses several lesser-known Howells novels, *The Landlord at Lion's Head* and the futuristic Altrurian romances, and the methodology of this chapter leans toward the history of ideas. Specifically, Love opposes the nineteenth-century realist response to contemporaneous theories of evolution (exemplified by *Landlord*) to the idealized versions of Howells's futurist experiments. Like many of his contemporaries, Howells was more influenced by Edmund Spenser's progressivist vision of evolution than the more sober (and apparently accurate) Darwinian theory of natural selection. I am not sure whether Love means to imply that visionary aesthetics should be judged in the light of scientific truth, but his concluding remarks suggest such a judgment: "Howells's altruistic fiat was not based upon evolutionary thought or his observation of human character, but on a visionary rewriting of human nature in which cosmic optimism triumphed over the realist's sharp sense of the probable.

Howells's evolutionism finds its major achievements not in the forced meliorism of the Altrurian romances, but in his courageous commitment, seen in his best realist fiction, to the comedy of survival and to the questionable compensations of muddling through" (162). This chapter may be Love's delicate way of urging his colleagues to contemplate evolution's hard truths, and if he succeeds in this, he will have accomplished something significant; however, if, first, Love means to suggest that relative accuracy in the presentation of scientific and social thought should serve as the predominant criterion for *aesthetic* evaluation, and if, second, he assumes that accurate accounts of intellectual developments are more likely to occur in the realist rather than other literary modes, he needs to inspect the consequences of such ideas for literary studies. On the one hand, much of the canon would end up in the wastebasket; on the other, the criteria for literary judgment having become increasingly literal, the need for imaginative literature might be obviated completely.

In truth, these features of Love's book are symptomatic of a general tendency in literary studies since the seventies to conflate social and literary value

and then presume the desired values inhere in specific literary modes, and thus the resulting problems need to be addressed by a broad spectrum of critics. If, in this sense, Love's book is to my mind not enough of a departure from reigning attitudes, his call for an evolutionary perspective within ecocriticism is revolutionary and ground-breaking, and in pointing to the usefulness of behavioral ecology especially, he has illuminated a body of research of particular promise for ecocritics. In the different methods of his literary chapters, Love is, I suspect, trying to show a range of things that can be done from an evolutionarily informed perspective, for he has intentionally chosen texts not typically selected for ecocritical treatment. Admirably, he has endeavored to avoid the reductiveness that has been a repeated source of disappointment in interdisciplinary literary criticism for nearly a hundred years. Love understands intuitively that creating paradigms for criticism from scientific models or specific concepts overlooks the differences between disciplines and their goals and frequently results in a sameness in interpretation that is ultimately deadening. But some explanation of this at the outset would clarify the book's structure for the reader and invite more forthrightly a reasonable pluralism in evolutionary ecocriticism.

If *Practical Ecocriticism* is a courageous and in some respects perplexing book, *The Truth of Ecology* shares these qualities, but it is the proverbial horse of a different color. Phillips is an apostate, whereas Love is a consensus-builder; Phillips exposes the weaknesses of ecocriticism's most cherished categories, whereas Love incorporates pastoral and realism into his evolutionary interpretation. Two extraordinarily different minds are at work here; given this, it is striking that the books exhibit several similarities in their strengths and weaknesses.

Noting the paucity of the nature-culture dichotomy in his opening remarks, Phillips proceeds with a critique of ecocriticism's central figures and guiding assumptions, including the subdiscipline's antitheoretical stance; its devotionism; and its endorsement of pastoral and realism. These criticisms are long in coming, and Phillips constructs, both in this chapter and throughout the rest of the book, a major challenge to ecocriticism's assumption about nature, the mind, and the relation of these to language as well as to the function of literary art, focusing on the work of two venerated figures, Lawrence Buell and Barry Lopez. As Phillips puts it, "The scandal that alarms ecocritics of the realist stripe only arises if one assumes that the fictional dimension of literature . . . is somehow the source of its faults. Only then will one seek to treat literature as nothing more than a kind of writing, and writing as no more than a form of bookkeeping" (16). But even bookkeeping is a doomed enterprise, as Phillips explains: "If we don't have the 'kinds of minds' enabling us to make copies of and represent 'the amazing variety' of our environment fulsomely, it is very unlikely that the kinds of texts we create are going to be any more representational than our minds are" (15). In the second part of this chapter, Phillips further unsettles facile distinctions between nature and culture and assumptions about reality



through a discussion of hyperrealism as a postmodern phenomenon. Using Umberto Eco's analysis of this phenomenon to great effect, Phillips suggests that perfected, abstracted representations of nature (trees on the computer screen-saver or rhinoceros topiaries at the San Diego Zoo) derive from the same impulse as the drive for pure representationalism, to wit: "the Absolute Fake is the offspring of a pastoral impulse" (23). Delightfully, Phillips pursues this argument to its logical conclusion, addressing the postmodern counterclaim that nature is now irrelevant. Finally, Phillips calls on ecocritics to address the nature-culture dichotomy by hybridizing their method, combining philosophy, theory, and scientific learning with a pragmatic stance: "By taking a more skeptical approach, ecocriticism might avoid the dilemma posed by the rejection of theory, on the one hand, as a needless abstraction, and by theory's rejection, on the other hand, of nature as a mere social construct or, still worse, 'gone for good'" (40).

At the outset, then, Phillips addresses some of the same issues as Love, and likewise calls for a scientifically informed and pragmatic response. However, Phillips argues with just those ecocritical assumptions and concepts that Love intends to preserve and enrich with evolutionary criticism. In Phillips's view, the conflict between values and intellectual work and the misapprehension of human cognition are embedded in the justifications ecocritics give for the techniques and modes they particularly value. Phillips relies on philosophy, philosophy of science, some philosophy of mind (primarily Dan Dennett), and selected evolutionary theorists to support his claims here and throughout the rest of the book. Somewhat surprisingly, given his theoretical orientation, Phillips does not provide his own definition of pragmatism or a pragmatic theory of knowledge, both of which ground the modified scientific realism to which he apparently subscribes. Such a definition would be especially useful, since Phillips occasionally relies on thinkers who lean toward radical skepticism (Rorty is not Dewey or James) and who promote antipragmatic notions of literature (such as the Barthesian *texte*).

If Phillips, like Love, might better establish some of his theoretical presuppositions, his second chapter is nonetheless superb, illustrating the value of science for literature, just as Love does in his second chapter. Phillips provides an excellent summary of the history of ecology as both concept and scientific sub-discipline in "Ecology Then and Now." Here, Phillips especially emphasizes the discrepancy between the popular conception of ecology and the scientific field: "The values to which ecology dedicated itself early on—especially balance, harmony, unity, and economy—are now seen as more or less unscientific, and hence as 'utopian' in the pejorative sense of the term" (42). It is, indeed, the value- rather than knowledge-driven nature of the field that sustains this gap and the animus toward science, as Phillips ably demonstrates in his discussion of the environmental historian David Worster. Although historians like Worster cling

to a holistic and organicist concept of the ecosystem, “the history of ecology has been one of discovering how much unlike an organism and just how nonobvious the natural world can be” (51). As early as 1899, Henry Chandler Cowles’s study of Michigan marshlands demonstrated the difficulty of seeing the phenomenon as a harmonious whole. Phillips traces the history of ecology and the ecosystem concept from Stephen Forbes’s (1887) theatrical analogy through Eugene Odom’s borrowings from cybernetics, pointing to the field’s struggle “to divest itself of analogical, metaphorical, and mythological thinking” (58). Cybernetics and systems science might have seemed, because issuing from the sciences, like promising grounds on which to model the ecosystem, but the resulting logistic equation long taught in ecology courses proved an inadequate tool, for one simple reason: mathematical models do not accurately represent bioevolutionary realities. A strong critic of the application of systems theory to biological domains, Paul Colinvaux explains the problematical notion of the food web, which “sees each individual as a channel at a crossroads through which food freely passes, but real individuals are in fact road-blocks through which food gets with difficulty” (65). As Phillips notes in the chapter’s conclusion, “Much of what has passed for ecological theory has been at odds with Darwin’s insight into the role of natural selection” (77). In the example just cited, for instance, the individuals in the presumed web compete with one another for limited food rather than serving it to their fellows, and the proven outcome is that some, perhaps many, will die.

In explaining so clearly the discrepancies between the concept and the scientific findings of ecology, this chapter provides a powerful rationale for ecocritics to enhance their knowledge of science, since ecocritics themselves have invested overwhelmingly in an idealistic-holistic notion of the ecosystem. The focus of the chapter on the history and critique of ecology proper rather than ecocriticism is one of its strengths, for Phillips presents facts and authoritative commentary that ecocritics should find hard to ignore. My one criticism of this chapter is that the discussion of Darwinian natural selection is unnecessarily brief. An extended discussion of how this theory has endured in the sciences would complement the theoretical discussion of ecology and its problematic terminology (*environment, habitat, ecosystem*); the two together would illustrate the value of scientific criteria of falsification and verifiability—the ecosystem losing credibility, Darwinian natural selection gaining it in light of increasing findings about the natural world. By contrast, the unified ecosystem, like the food web Colinvaux discredits, is only possible through the objectification of individuals and the mechanization of their place in a process.

Chapter 3, “The Science Wars, Ecology, and the Left,” a critique of Science Studies, SSK, and the strong programme (the sociological turn in philosophy of science), is something of a digression from the book’s primary purpose and argument. Logically, the first part of this chapter, an argument against epistemo-

logical nihilism and the postmodern assertion that power constructs knowledge, should precede chapter 2's discussion of ecology as a concept, since claims for the possibility of knowledge provide the groundwork for the critique of the ecosystem. Whereas this epistemological argument might be of value earlier in the book, much of what follows it, a long critique of Critical Theory and its descendents (Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcus, Merchant, and Ross) is unnecessary; the notion that science is grossly exploitative can be countered without a detailed challenge to each of these theorist's arguments. Andrew Ross's attack on Dawkins's notion of the selfish gene is a waste of the Joker cards from which it's constructed and, though we may enjoy watching Phillips raze this intellectual Disneyland, the space taken in doing so breaks up the continuity of the book.

Chapter 4, "Art for Earth's Sake," returns to the subject of ecocriticism's antitheoretical bias and its connection to the realist stance that assumes the identity of natural phenomena and cultural artifacts. Much of this chapter incisively criticizes Meeker, John Elder, and Buell, tying their approval of presumably existentially accurate poetry to a particular notion of American identity. Noting that this value-driven approach to art derives from the Puritan tradition, Phillips challenges Buell, an eminent scholar of Transcendentalism, for perpetuating a tradition he should consciously avoid. When Phillips turns to Petersen's *Field Guide to Birds*, a text Buell praises for its realism, he is in fine form, combining his own obvious knowledge of birds and birding with an explanation of how representational *inaccuracy* actually enhances the value of the text for birders by exaggerating especially relevant features. Similarly, like stylized images, the names of the birds are not representational, but instead highlight particular features that set the animals apart from one another. This discussion of the *Field Guide* is an outstanding example of pragmatic criticism (in the Jamesian sense), bringing literary theory, philosophy of mind, real-world experience, and a specific text to bear on theoretical claims.

Phillips's challenge to Meeker's *Comedy of Survival* is, from the point of view of a biocultural critic, less incisive than his inspection of Buell's claims. Approvingly citing remarks by Richard Dawkins and Stephen Jay Gould that literature can't be seen "in the light of evolution," Phillips atypically accepts these summary dismissals without considering what types of analysis might fall within the beam of such a vague metaphor. David and Nanelle Barash's recent *Madame Bovary's Ovaries* briefly surveys literary works in the light of some of evolutionary psychology's most familiar concepts, and the result is predictably superficial and crude. Ellen Dissanayake's three books on the evolution of the arts, on the other hand, provide a nuanced functionalist account of how the arts might have emerged over the course of human evolution. Scholars now working in evolutionary literary criticism and theory adopt substantially different perspectives and methods, providing a variety of accounts of the purpose of litera-

ture and the meaning of literary works. By contrast, hypothesizing that comedy as opposed to tragedy has a bioevolutionary basis, Meeker apparently sees in the light of his own favorite lamp; an evolutionary perspective would necessarily need to illuminate the existence and persistence of a range of literary subjects, modes, forms, and other features from a biocultural perspective. Thus, like other theorists of the arts who have made value judgments based on evolved predispositions, including Rudolph Arnheim and Morse Peckham, Meeker has borrowed selectively from evolutionary theory to bolster his preestablished preference and has failed to place his analysis within the logic of evolution's scope, magnitude, and central implications. As a critic with an impressive theoretical and philosophical turn of mind, Phillips should see that Meeker's shortcomings don't constitute an argument against evolutionary criticism in general.

Having made short work of ecocriticism's central spokespersons as well as its assumptions about conventional literary modes, Phillips, in his final chapter, goes after the subgenre most beloved among ecocritics, nature writing (nonfictional prose essay). In contrast to those who praise the responsiveness of writers like Annie Dillard to their natural surroundings, Phillips finds her musing centrally self-absorbed and locates the origin of her writing in the tradition of Bradstreet, Emerson, and Whitman, identifying the drive toward transcendence as their motivating force. Using E. O. Wilson as a source, Phillips notes the comparative unresponsiveness of humans to the nonhuman natural environment, asserting that nature writers should pointedly accept rather than obscure the divide between human observer and external environment. In the chapter's conclusion, he turns to John Dewey, who (like James and other nineteenth-century pragmatists) noted the fundamentally mediating and categorizing function of the human mind.

Like the chapter on the history of ecology, this one, in its impressive analysis of the American tradition of nature-as-the-self, calls for serious consideration from ecocritics. Phillips asks his readers to recognize that the features of naïve romanticism in writers like Dillard, Lopez, and Richard Nelson are symptoms of the thoroughly modern perception that we are severed from nature, noting that in Lopez the natural historian and the religious seeker often consort oddly with one another. Phillips's epilogue, calling for "an offensive and picaresque ecocritic" who might police the borders of the wild, holds up A.R. Ammons and Wallace Stevens as potential figures of value for their insistence on inspecting mental and material constructions and boundaries and on pondering the grimier aspects of reality in defiance of art and the mind's formalizing, aestheticizing biases.

*The Truth of Ecology* is packed with insights, many of them brilliant. If I could wish for a little less packing in some places, a little more unpacking in others, I'm nevertheless heartened to learn that this book won the independent scholars award from The Modern Language Association of America in 2004. Although cautious in his use of evolutionary theory, Phillips consistently refers

to Darwin and Wilson as authoritative sources on the natural world. This cautious insistence on the validity of Darwinism is part of the larger picture of a mind that judges ideas according to their perceived intellectual merit, thus doing the hard work of shaking literary theory's self-righteousness and complacency.

*Practical Ecocriticism* and *The Truth of Ecology* together urge a new initiative for ecocritics to make responsible use of science to address a constellation of concerns: values and beliefs in the face of apparent knowledge; the usefulness of received literary categories in a new form of interdisciplinary study; the relationship of political action to academic inquiry. Neither Phillips nor Love addresses these matters in depth, nor do they agree on local issues, and that is why literary scholars should read these two books together.

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