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Book Review

Practical Ecocriticism by Glen A. Love. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003.

Reviewed by

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What does human nature have to do with ecocriticism? This is the question at the heart of Glen Love's book, *Practical Ecocriticism*. For those who aren't familiar with this wing of academia, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the environment. Its practitioners explore human attitudes toward the environment as expressed in nature writing (e.g., Thoreau, Leopold, Abbey, Snyder, Dillard, Lopez), literature about the American West, and literary works in general. An academic outgrowth of the environmental movement of the 1960s, this approach differs from mainstream humanism by downplaying the uniqueness and achievements of our species and highlighting our connectedness to the natural world around us. Amazingly, however, ecocriticism is conducted with little or no understanding of biology, cognition, evolution, or behavioral ecology.

Practical Ecocriticism is an attempt to rectify this situation. Aimed at humanities teachers, scholars and students, the book begins with the premise that, "human behavior is not an empty vessel whose only input will be that provided by culture, but is strongly influenced by genetic orientations that underlie and modify, or are modified by, cultural influences" (Love 6). Love advocates a criticism that is based on "ecological, naturalist, scientifically grounded arguments that recognize human connection with nature and the rest of organic life and acknowledge the biological sciences as not just another cultural construction" (8). In so saying, Love aligns himself with the Darwinian literary critics (e.g., Carroll, Cooke, Easterlin, Scalise Sugiyama, Storey), who have been making this argument for over a decade now with what an optimist might call mixed results.

Love's book is highly useful for those seeking to familiarize themselves with ecocriticism: its reviews of the history of the field (Chapter 1) and of ecological themes in world literature (Chapter 3) manage to be both exhaustive and concise. An added bonus is Love's reader-friendly style: in contrast to the tedious and obscurantist prose favored by so many contemporary literary critics, Love's writing is refreshingly lucid and jargon-free. But the book's main claim to noteworthiness is its attempt to implement evolutionary criticism on a scale that has to date received little attention, and to introduce it to an audience that has to date been overlooked. As Carroll (2001) notes, Darwinian criticism has thus far focused on social and sexual interactions; with few exceptions (Carroll 2001; Scalise Sugiyama 2001a, 2001b, 2004; Tooby & Cosmides 2001), adaptationist literary study has tended to ignore the non-human aspects of our environment.

Compared with past critiques of the humanities' self-imposed scientific ignorance (e.g., Gross & Levitt 1994; Sokal 1996; Wilson 1998), Love's book is much more congenial to the humanist temperament. While insisting that there is a place for scientific knowledge in the humanities, Love argues in terms a humanist can understand and from a perspective a humanist can relate to:

English teaching and research goes on within a biosphere, the part of the earth and its atmosphere in which life exists. In some of the literary texts that we study and discuss, this enveloping natural world is a part of the subject on the printed page before us. But even when it is not, it remains as a given, a part of the interpretive context, whether or not we choose to deal with it in our study and teaching. (16)

This is an argument no literary scholar can ignore. All works of fiction take place in an environment (i.e., setting), and that environment impacts character, action, conflict, mood, theme, and so on. Moreover, the environments depicted in literary works are tacitly understood to correspond to what Love calls the "enveloping natural world": with few exceptions (that prove the rule), the phenomena and characters depicted within literary texts conform to the same laws of physics and biology that exist without them. It follows that literary interpretation can be greatly enriched by an understanding of ontogenetic and phylogenetic interactions between humans and their environment.

Also to be commended: Love's tone is conciliatory rather than confrontational. He includes himself in his indictment of the literary establishment: "My experience of scholars in the humanities, myself included, is that they (we) are usually deficient in scientific aptitude and interests. . . . If you do get acquainted with a scientist, you will probably find that he or she knows much more about literature than you know about science" (39-40). His advice, in

keeping with the title of the book, is eminently practical: learn “. . . something scientific about how the natural world works” (48). Read scientific journals, attend public lectures, take a scientist to lunch, “or at least make eye contact when walking across campus” (40). And most importantly, use references from both fields when doing “interdisciplinary” research. To this end, Love directs his readers to writers whose work offers the best hope of interesting humanists in current scientific research and of leading them to its top practitioners: Pinker, Hrady, Dawkins, Ridley, Dissanayake, and E. O. Wilson.

Like Easterlin and Riebling’s *After Poststructuralism: Interdisciplinarity and Literary Theory* (1993), Carroll’s *Evolution and Literary Theory* (1995), and Storey’s *Mimesis and the Human Animal* (1996), Love’s book is a reminder that literary study is a discipline in crisis. Although I didn’t realize it at the time, this crisis was already in full swing when I started graduate school at UCSB in the late 1980s. The UCSB English Department required all first-year students to take a course on literary theory. We had to write two papers for the class: “Why Study Literature” and “How to Study Literature.” In the second paper, we had to argue for a single theoretical view (e.g., feminism, Marxism, New Historicism). If you argue for a pluralistic approach, we were told, don’t expect an A. My problem was that, in the first paper, I had argued that the reason for studying literature was to deepen our understanding of our fellow human beings. As I saw it, adhering to a single theoretical viewpoint defeated this purpose. If you want to understand human behavior and psychology, I argued, you have to look at it from all perspectives; otherwise, you will never get at the truth (I hadn’t heard about evolutionary psychology yet). In other words, I continued, literary study should not be predicated on a political agenda. Herein lies the Achilles heel of the vast majority of postmodern literary criticism: it measures intellectual worth in terms of political sympathies, thus jeopardizing academic freedom and, ultimately, its own existence.

Love’s book encapsulates this crisis like no other work to date: it argues for empirically-grounded literary scholarship, but it does so in the name of a political cause. Consider, for example, Love’s mission statement, which is to foster “a discourse that aims to test ideas against the workings of physical reality, to join humanistic thinking to the empirical spirit of the sciences, *to apply our nominal concern for ‘the environment’ to the sort of work we do in the real world as teachers, scholars, and citizens of a place and a planet*” (7, my emphasis). Although Love’s intentions are certainly noble, this position is somewhat precarious. Undeniably, literary study is--in part--the study of values. But if, as biology-based literary scholars, we truly want to conduct our teaching and research in “the empirical spirit of the sciences,” our aim should be to understand the values expressed in literary texts, not to impose our own values on them. If we pursue the latter course, we compound the errors of postmodernism: instead of

“testing ideas against the workings of physical reality,” we test ideas against political ideologies.

This being said, *Practical Ecocriticism* inspires some much-needed soul-searching: What sort of work *do* we do as humanists? So far, consilience has been a one-way argument: a demonstration of what science has to offer the humanities. Few people have asked what literary study can do to advance scientific knowledge (cf., Gottschall 2003; Scalise Sugiyama 1996, 2001a). In order to answer this question, we need to identify the realm of knowledge that literary study deals with. Carroll argues that, whereas science seeks impersonal, objective knowledge, literature is concerned with subjective human experience. Literary works are “representations that either take the quality of personal experience as their special subject matter or register the writer’s own sense of the experiential quality of his or her subject” (1995:109). Wilson makes a similar distinction: “Works of art communicate feeling directly from mind to mind, with no intent to explain why the impact occurs. In this defining quality, the arts are the antithesis of science” (1998: 218). These observations hit the nail on the head: literature is about affect. A case in point is Robbe-Grillet’s experimental novella *La Jalousie*, which is an extremely frustrating read because we are not told how the protagonist feels about what is happening to him.

So is literature about values or affect? The answer is both: values and affect are interrelated. Imagine the mind as a vast orchestra: each domain-specific mechanism corresponds to a different section, and the emotions correspond to the conductor, telling each section when to start and when to stop, and regulating the speed and intensity of play. Without such guidance, cognitive mechanisms designed to perform conflicting operations (e.g., sleep and predator avoidance) might be activated simultaneously, resulting in cognitive chaos (Cosmides & Tooby 2000). In other words, the emotions have been selected to triage our responses to environmental stimuli, in effect telling us what to respond to—what to care about or “value”—in any given moment. The study of literature is the study of how individuals feel about people, objects, events, and phenomena around them—that is, what individuals care about. In this sense, the study of literature entails the study of both affect and values.

In adaptationist terms, we can say that literature examines emotions (affect) in the context of a particular individual’s fitness interests (values). On this view, literary texts can be seen as studies of affective responses of particular individuals (i.e., characters) with particular life histories to particular environmental stimuli. Verbal art—both, written literature and the oral traditions which preceded it—can also be seen as a record of those topics, ideas, images, rhythms, and combinations of words that humans have found most memorable (i.e., moving) and most worthy of passing on to subsequent generations (i.e., valuable). In particular, the universal themes (“archetypes”) of the oral tradition

are a portal into memory, inviting us to explore the kinds of information the mind has been designed to attend to and retain.

One place to search for such themes is in human responses to the environment. This facet of human psychology has attracted the notice of numerous adaptationists (e.g., Kaplan 1987, 1992; Kellert & Wilson 1993; Orians & Heerwagen 1992; Ruso et al. 2003; Wilson 1984). However, little use has been made of literary representations of environmental attitudes and preferences, even though, as Love points out, a great deal of world literature deals with the pastoral (Chapter 3) and with the relationship between humans and non-human animals (Chapter 5). For anyone interested in this line of research, Love's book is an excellent resource. But the book serves a larger purpose as well. With one foot in ecology and one foot in literature, it forms a new bridge between the sciences and humanities. This route might have better success than previous ones because it engages a different set of common interests: both ecocritics and scientists (e.g., anthropologists, behavioral ecologists, biologists) study the relationship between humans and their environment. "Literature loves interrelationships," writes Love (47), and so does science. If enough people read *Practical Ecocriticism*, we might see a whole lot more than eye contact going on between the disciplines.

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