

H-France Review Vol. 19 (May 2019), No. 76

Stephanie Posthumus, *French 'Ecocritique': Reading Contemporary French Theory and Fiction Ecologically*. Toronto: University of Toronto, 2017. 264 pp. \$61.00 (U.S.) (cl). ISBN 978-1-4875-0145-7.

Review by Pauline Goul, Vassar College.

A significant amount of the work done and published under the label of French ecocriticism usually consists in bringing the work of Anglophone ecocritics to bear on French and Francophone literature. Stephanie Posthumus, in *French Ecocritique*, proposes instead to assess the compatibility and *correspondances* between French eco-theory and contemporary French literature. This is an exercise in cultural specificity and contingency. She does not mean, however, to assert that French *écocritique* is in any way better or more valid than the one produced in North America or in the United Kingdom. Through a careful analysis, Posthumus succeeds in convincing the reader of the pertinence of her approach, and of the necessity of a cross-cultural dialogue in environmental criticism.

Posthumus defines her concept of “reading ecologically” as clearly separate from any portrayal of nature, preferring to ground it in the perception of the text as a material object, the relationship between imagination and experiences of the world, and interrelatedness between texts, readers, authors, and interpretive communities. The originality of her approach is that she applies this method not only to the fictional texts, but also to the theoretical texts, equally. The four chapters are organized around four key ecocritical concepts: ecological subjectivity, ecological dwelling, ecological politics, and ecological ends. The four fiction authors that she focuses on are Marie Darrieussecq, Marie-Hélène Lafon, Jean-Christophe Rufin, and Michel Houellebecq. Because the first two experiment with *autofiction* while the latter two write speculative fiction, Posthumus’s book explores the relationship between writing ecologically and the very work of literature, for instance, the experimentation of various genres. Posthumus’s method is to pair each fiction writer with a theory writer, selecting Félix Guattari, Michel Serres, Bruno Latour, and Jean-Marie Schaeffer, respectively.

Crucial to Posthumus’s argument is her identification of Luc Ferry and his 1992 book *Le Nouvel Ordre écologique* as a determining factor for any French ecological thinking, but, more importantly, as the root of a problematic vision of both Frenchness and universalism. The influence of his book meant, for French philosophy, that ecology remained out of bounds for longer than a decade, and that humanism was not to be questioned. It is perhaps why, albeit counterintuitively, Posthumus chooses fiction writers who are far from foregrounding “nature,” despite a long potential list of writers, whether in the nineteenth, twentieth or twenty-first

centuries. This is not that kind of “Ecocriticism reader,” merely translated to a specific cultural and intellectual context. Posthumus challenges the idea that literary texts that focus on nature are necessarily environmental, but also, the idea that environmental texts necessarily talk about nature.

In her first chapter, she explores “ecological subjectivity” in the texts of Marie Darrieussecq and Félix Guattari, namely *Un bref séjour chez les vivants* and *Le pays* for the former, and *Les trois écologies* and *Chaosmose* for the latter. While contemporary, her analysis is not bound to chronological considerations: Guattari’s work dates back a decade or so before Darrieussecq’s novels, and Posthumus’s point, of course, is not to illustrate an influence of the philosopher on Darrieussecq’s own work. Instead, she uses both to highlight one particular dimension of French *écocritique*: that, as opposed to deep ecology’s centering on the natural world, it adopts multiple, non-centered positions. The relation between Darrieussecq and Guattari is further justified by the influence of psychoanalysis on their thinking, revealing that, despite ecocriticism’s usual frigid attitude towards psychoanalytical thought, the latter is crucial in defining a notion of subjectivity as “bounded by specific forms of embodiment, materiality, and sociality” (p. 30), allowing her to lay the groundwork for “an ecological thinking that goes beyond environmental issues” (p. 32). It is in a multiple, relational subjectivity that Guattari’s theory joins Darrieussecq’s fiction and, particularly, her attachment to the material world.

The second chapter traces “ecological dwelling” in the works of Michel Serres and Marie-Hélène Lafon. Posthumus defines dwelling, within the French context of these writers, as different from the conventional sense of being-in-place—she cites, of course, Greg Garrard’s introduction to ecocriticism[1]. She wants, instead, something closer to doing-with-space, the “physical processes, exchanges, and interactions of bodies in place” (p. 61). This chapter debunks the stereotype of a pastoral, rural France just as it takes on writers who, at first impression, one may assume to very much partake in it. Instead, they offer, as Posthumus puts it, “a living ecosystem in which new practices emerge and others disappear” (p. 64). She demonstrates, also, that the rural is more global than is usually conceived, and that French contemporary novels are not as traditional as they seem, even when taking up themes that could be deemed “pastoral.”

In the third chapter, “Ecological Politics,” Posthumus pairs Bruno Latour with Jean-Christophe Rufin, and one has to appreciate the difficulty, in such an exercise, of selecting a fiction writer that could be dealt with equally and on the same level as Latour. There is an undeniable imbalance that would be difficult to reconcile entirely, but her purpose has never been to pretend that Rufin is subsuming Latour’s theory in his fiction. Posthumus solves this issue by choosing Rufin, who, at first, could appear to be in direct opposition to Latour’s eco-politics. Yet the chapter is perhaps less specific in its argument because of the sheer complexity and size of Latour’s thought. Truly engaging with Latour would, of course, require its own monograph, where his work would need to be paired with many other fiction writers. Insofar as this book, however, serves as a French ecocriticism reader, it does need a chapter on Latour, and the fact that he could not simply be paired with the other famous writer, Houellebeck, or with a fiction writer that would allow a deeper critique only goes to further justify Posthumus’s approach: the potential canonical status of the literary writers she engages with has little incidence on her analysis. The synthesis of Latour’s theory to this date is excellent, and the readings of Rufin’s fiction do attest to the importance of his work within a complex and daring French *écocritique*.

For the fourth and final chapter, “Ecological Ends,” Posthumus puts together Jean-Marie Schaeffer’s theory and Michel Houellebecq’s fiction to explore a conception of endings that differs from the usual apocalyptic imagination well-known to ecocriticism. Both Houellebecq and Schaeffer move beyond anthropocentrism by developing a notion of the human as matter. Posthumus’s distinction between and definitions for transhumanism and posthumanism are quite helpful. Because Schaeffer, as a literary critic, reflects on the changing forms of fiction, the pairing with Houellebecq works well. His approach, biocultural and posthumanist, is a paradigm shift within French literary criticism. The chapter also interrogates the possibility of arriving at some form of posthumanities.

The shortcomings that such an approach could have are all analyzed to some length by Posthumus herself, who notes the gender imbalance of having two female and two male fiction authors, paired with a group of four male theorists. It is undeniable, however, that three of these theorists could not be left out without jeopardizing the whole work, while one of them (Schaeffer) is less of an obvious choice. Her *écocritique* is open to other points of comparison, but one cannot help but agree with her own question: “What new directions would a French *écocritique* take if it began integrating the work of female philosophers such as Corine Pelluchon and Emilie Hache?” (p.169). The key is in the wording, however, for these would be “new” directions, while Posthumus intends to build the foundations of a French *écocritique*, not make an inventory of its more recent developments—in fact, she is well versed in these, given the extent of her presence in the field of animal studies.[2] She suggests, also, colonial pasts and species concerns, as well as gender issues, for new ecological concepts.

Something could be said against the clear separation made between “theory” and “fiction” within the chapters themselves, which puts in question the equal treatment Posthumus is promising in the introduction. It is a daring choice to let the reader essentially draw their own conclusions regarding how to compare and relate the theory and the fiction in each chapter, but an understandable one: Posthumus’s goal is to provide (eco)critical points of convergence, and she does so with great attention to coherence and detail. Her method also makes room for a genuine analysis of the role of genre and form within French *écocritique*. Insofar as French literature has long been steeped in formal experimentations with literary genres, Posthumus makes several compelling points about autofiction (as directly created by the ecological subjectivity she defines), language (as contributing to the *habitabilité* of a place) and speculative fiction, therefore justifying their place within a field that often refuses to give to these forms, or to contemporary authors, canonical status. One knows well what the genre of “readers” usually looks like: hers is a special one, steering away from the glossary form and from the easy “green studies” canon that one could easily identify French ecocriticism with. Instead, she identifies the organizing ideas of a French *écocritique*, and a functioning, relational corpus of recent theoretical and fictional texts that, in a timely way, makes sense of the current state of affairs, and also opens up new directions for environmental scholarship in the French context and for an ecocriticism that is culturally informed, multiple, and grounded within the politics of language. The book will of course be a reference for scholars working in French ecocriticism, but should not be overlooked by ecocritics from other linguistic traditions, or by scholars of contemporary France, as it does illustrate quite well the undeniable and profound influence of environmental and ecological concepts on recent French literature.

NOTES

[1] Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004) is an obvious reference throughout.

[2] She is also the co-editor, with Louisa Mackenzie, of *French Thinking about Animals* (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2015).

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ISSN 1553-9172