

Knickerbocker, Scott. *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language*. Boston: U of Massachusetts P, 2012.

The exciting study of ecocriticism finds further sophistication in Scott Knickerbocker's study of modern American poetry in *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, and the Nature of Language*. One of the goals of this book is to explore, not "simple representation of the natural world" in poetry, but what Knickerbocker terms "sensuous poesis," which, "rather than mirror the world... enact[s] through formal devices such as sound effects the speaker's experience of the complexity, mystery, and beauty of nature" (13). He specifically describes sensuous poesis as relying "on the immediate impact on the senses of aural effects, such as alliteration, cacophony, and onomatopoeia, and visual effects, such as enjambment and stanza shape, even as the words simultaneously invite the reflective consideration of the intellect" (17). For the body of Knickerbocker's text he focuses on the poetry of Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, Richard Wilbur, and Sylvia Plath. His study of these four major authors oscillates around the significance of reality and language, particularly as they pertain to realism, and dismisses realism as a requirement of environmental poetry.

Knickerbocker claims that Stevens's poetry investigates the relationship between language (as well as the imagination as a quality of language) and "earthy reality" and insists that imagination and reality are codependent (22). Stevens rejects an "eye-centered" positivist or realist approach to language in favor of an aural approach. As such, Knickerbocker suggests that ecocritics explore the sounds of language rather than the visuality of language, which currently dominates the field of ecocriticism (28). In *Necessary Angel* Stevens claims, "words above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds... A poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words... It is not only that the imagination adheres to reality, but, also, that reality adheres to the imagination and that the interdependence is essential" (qtd. in Knickerbocker 28). What Knickerbocker seeks to emphasize, which seems to have been ignored in much criticism of Stevens's poetry, is the way that his poetry is concerned with the way that nature is at once both real and constructed, and how that is represented through the formal conventions of poetry (45).

Knickerbocker's second chapter deals with Elizabeth Bishop's poetry, which in contrast to Stevens's, deals with nature as "palpably particular and 'real'" rather than abstract (56). She relies on formal poetic tradition, which Knickerbocker argues allows her to "enact the world's strangeness and mystery *through* accurate description and form, not in spite of them" (59). Knickerbocker situates Bishop as a Darwinian because of her methods of close observation and slow accumulation of observations. This representation of Bishop suggests not only thematic ecocritical concerns in her poetry, but methodological ones as well. And while Knickerbocker positions the majority of Bishop's work as non-political, he does offer a brief explanation of the gender implications of Bishop's work as it pertains to oppression, particularly amongst native women. This is both helpful and necessary as a glance at the ecofeminist implications of Bishop's work and the significance that ecopoetics might have for ecofeminism.

Knickerbocker's chapter on Richard Wilbur tends to be more biographical. This is perhaps partly because of the lack of attention Wilbur gets against his contemporaries such as Gary Snyder. However, what Knickerbocker does offer in this chapter is a critical look at Wilbur's un-Romantic understanding of the relationship between nature and culture. Wilbur is committed to the paradox of the "dynamic" and

“balance” in his poetry (92). And like Stevens and Bishop, Wilbur is concerned with the relationship between word and world, and considers the “ethical consequence of recognizing such entanglement” to be a growing regard for “a nature from which we are distinct yet inseparable” (109). While much of this chapter is dedicated to Wilbur’s life and process of writing, Knickerbocker uses this discussion to challenge the assumption that free-verse poetry is more organic and natural than formalism. This creates a space within formalist studies for ecocritics that is often overlooked or altogether disregarded.

The final author that Knickerbocker deals with is Sylvia Plath, an author only considered in terms of ecocriticism by Tracy Brain, who highlights Rachel Carson’s influence on Plath’s own work, particularly her “toxic consciousness” (126). Knickerbocker suggests that Plath’s significance as an ecological poet lies in her “use of sensuous poesis as a response to her environmental concerns and sympathies” (136). His study of the aural effects of Plath’s work offer a significant and much needed formalist study of Plath’s work without over emphasizing her biography.

According to Knickerbocker’s discussion of each of these poets, poetic form “foregrounds the most real relationship we have with the natural world” (159). He suggests that the trends of New Formalism, Language Poetry, and “organic formalism” offer unique nature poems that have much to offer to contemporary ecocriticism. His conclusions open up formalism as a new area for ecocritics to further investigate. He touches particularly on formalist concerns of African-American poetry, which addresses nature in reaction to racial injustice and trauma.

Initially, Knickerbocker asks why we should be concerned with the aural and formal concerns of poems in a world wracked with environmental destruction. He suggests that literature and poetry have the capacity to “nudge” consciousness and form behavior, which certainly offers helpful motivation for including sensuous poesis in the classroom, but perhaps not in front of the bulldozer (18). However, this critical text takes its place as a work of formative ecocritical thought in this young field’s development. It positions ecocritical discussions amidst formalist criticism, which often dismisses ecocriticism as a primarily thematic and political approach. As such, Knickerbocker’s repositioning of ecocriticism does credit to the field’s development and further sophistication.

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