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Postmodern Ecologizing: Circumference Without a Center

EVERY NOW AND THEN A REVIEWER FINDS HE IS SORRY to have undertaken to review a book that initially looked promising, because he knows that the outcome will probably make everyone unhappy. The reviewer will be unhappy because no matter what position he takes, he will be dissatisfied with the consequences. The author of the book will be unhappy because he is almost certain to feel he has been treated unfairly. And the readers of the review may very well be confounded by an emphasis on the book as a constructed artifact rather than as a vehicle for "contents."

I fear I am about to embark on just such a no-win exercise in trying to provide a fitting account of Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*,¹ a book with a title more global and ambitious than its contents warrant. It has been given an enthusiastic launching by Harvard University Press and has been much-bruited in ecocritical circles. At the very moment I had finished my reading and was despairing about how to handle it, I received in the mail from Harvard UP a publicity sheet filled with puffs designed to make me feel even more rotten. My minimal consolation is that, apart from my own quirky response, I am sure the book will be well-received, highly praised, and provide a generation of graduate students in American Studies (though generations are very brief these days) with plenty of material for dissertations, scholarly articles, and sessions for MLA conventions.

A hint of the problems to be faced occurs in the first paragraph of Buell's introduction:

This book has refused to remain the modest undertaking I intended it to be. Planned as a history of Thoreauvian writing about the American natural environment, it has led me into a broad study of environmental perception, the place of nature in the history of western thought, and the consequences for literary scholarship and indeed for humanistic thought in general of attempting to imagine a

¹ THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGINATION: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture, by Lawrence Buell. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. \$35.00.

more "ecocentric" way of being. I found that I could not discuss green writing without relating it to green thinking and green reading.

Having just read the book, I am forced to admit that I don't recall most of these immense aims being realized in any substantial way, though the subjects are more or less taken up at one point or another. The result, says Buell, "is an exploratory work with several foci rather than one," and that may be a large part of the problem. Buell attempts to rationalize this by saying, "The combination of broad sweep and cranky hyperfocus [on Thoreau] of which I have forewarned is, I think, in keeping with the nature of environmental representation, which is at least faintly present in most texts but salient in few." Whether "environmental representation" has a "nature" and whether this is it are open questions, but the book still seems unfocused and even its key terms, like "environment" and "ecological," remain somewhat cloudy (quite apart from the fuzzy syntax of the sentence itself). When I turned the final page, I was left with the sense of a very learned ramble rather than "a broad study." Had the book's title and contents adhered to Buell's original plan, something like "Thoreau and Nature Writing in Nineteenth-Century America," the reader's expectations would likely have been more helpfully confined because that is where the major emphasis appears to be.

Before I report on a few of the book's strengths, I would prefer to address other matters. Buell, a professor of English at Harvard, is probably one of the most learned of the Americanists now dominating the academic scene. His reading and interests, well represented by 137 pages of densely bibliographical notes (roughly one quarter of the book), are not merely impressive, they are stunning. His acquaintance with world literature, the other arts, philosophy, history, and criticism is matched by the remarkable depth of his knowledge of American literary (and non-literary) culture. Not only has he read the obscurest of American texts, "ancient" and modern, but his retention of their minute particularity is daunting. His prose is unusually allusive, echoing other writers on every page, and his acquaintance with contemporary culture—from high to pop—is up-to-the-minute. He is so on top of just about everything that, perverse as it may seem, his mastery of the current moment of the flux of western culture served for me as a *memento mori*, a precarious virtuoso athletic feat that called to mind the king of the woods—doomed to be displaced by a younger and stronger hero—that Frazer had so much to say about in *The Golden Bough*, a myth of transience, mortality, and eternal recurrence. The very brilliance of Buell's juggling act, his lifelong workaholicism combined with a super-subtle sensibility and powerful intelligence, left me not only awed but somewhat depressed insofar as they bespoke both the desiderata and the futility of what nowadays constitutes an ideal academic career. In the back of my head I kept hearing Yeats's lines, "Everything that man esteems / Endures a moment or a day." To this, of course, one might

reply, "So what?" Should the temporariness and impermanence of things preclude superhuman effort? Is the fact of mortality an argument for mediocrity? But things are more complicated than that.

Not only is Buell gifted with a magisterial intellect—calling to mind such polymaths as Harold Bloom and George Steiner—but he has an excellence of judgment and a scrupulous, rare sort of sanity and self-awareness far beyond the level of today's bemused race of frequently screwball academics. I don't recall him ever being taken in by anything nonsensical or merely trendy, nor is he conned by phony pieties, even when they are ecological. When he is sympathetic to politically correct shibboleths (and he generally is), he is still likely to express some reservation, some sense of balance, some residue of doubt. He is an intellectual, then, for whom I can personally acknowledge a great deal of respect.

If that's the case, then why all this twitching and dancing? Just what is my problem with *The Environmental Imagination*? I think my allusion to Harold Bloom and George Steiner could offer some assistance here (and I might as well throw in Camille Paglia for good measure, since I treated her at length only recently in these pages). What differentiates these three polymath thinkers so sharply from Buell is that to one degree or another they're all a bit crazy. Their emotional, powerful, intemperate, intrepid, sometimes screws-loose writings are the products of overwhelming visions, *idées fixes*, strong moral convictions, sweeping prose styles, and imperial selves that make them appear to have some inner, profound, subterraneous connection with the universe that the rest of us wimpy mortals lack, however wrong-headed and ridiculous they all at times can be. The things they have to say alter our consciousness willy-nilly, even if we disagree with them and feel they've gone off the deep end. Yet at the same time, while I would be very amenable to following Buell's lead on most of the subjects he addresses, I would be quite wary of much that Bloom, Steiner, or Paglia had to say in the context of the everyday world. In sum, what I appear to be saying is that a certain madness (or "inspiration," if you prefer) is required to write a great book and that Buell is a virtuoso of sanity. Bloom, Steiner, and Paglia recognize that you *can't* make your sun stand still, so you've *got* to make him run. Buell is still hopeful that mortality can be outwitted by sheer effort, by piling Pelion upon Ossa, by carrying yet another coal to Newcastle.

Buell has one insight after another into the texts and writers he discusses, but he is like a metaphysician peeling off layer after layer of reality, ignoring the intimation that there are infinite layers for the peeling. (He is postmodern through and through. The religious call it "living without God," and it's bad. The Derrideans call it "living without a Center," and for them it's the only thing available.) If there *are* infinite layers, however, why take any layer in particular too seriously? A miss in this discourse is as good as a mile, if myriad layers still remain. It's the old story of the spider vs. the bee: the pragmatic bee sucks nectar

from large numbers of flowers—and if he sucked nectar from just one more flower, the final honey would have a slightly different—and maybe better—taste. The spider, on the other hand, spins from his own substance (so to speak, since the substance ultimately derives from the earth). *His* effect is a sort of inspirational *ipse dixit*. The irresolvable dilemma, then, is that clear-sightedness can always in theory see more (thereby weakening what it *does* see), whereas passionate conviction and vision are always at risk of being merely demented (see Bloom, Steiner, Paglia). Buell strikes me as obsessed with the notion of being unassailable: he reviews every possibility that occurs to him, avoids rashness, balances one extreme against the other. He knows that the academy is a snake pit and he has developed eyes all over his body to avoid sneak attacks that might accuse him of anything less than omniscience and “correctness.” But as an author Buell is too self-aware for his own good. He’s a victim of his own cautious intelligence: he is so balanced and sane that he has sometimes balanced his thoughts right out of existence. Useful thinking requires exclusion, emphasis, preferences, commitment, willingness to risk error, because the All is indistinguishable from the Nothing. Though I am far from preferring off-the-wall maniacs to wise and deliberate sages, I feel that a book that has set its sights on capturing in some way the ecological imagination (whatever that may be) will need more than unassailable scholarly acuity and good sense to accomplish its goals. For even unassailability is assailable. *Everything* is assailable if you can’t make your sun stand still.

Buell’s book is not helped by the fact that four of its chapters, in whole or part, are derived from pre-existing essays and previously delivered papers that have been worked and reworked, while the remainder seemingly have not. The quality of the book’s writing ranges from absolutely wretched (“This advantage the analogies of minute realism as grotesque and of ecocentrism as a code of manners underscore in different ways by calling attention to the status of nature-responsiveness as a kind of culture, or rather counterculture, that one must pursue in resistance to the intractable homocentrism in terms of which one’s psychological and social worlds are always to some degree mapped”) to decently serviceable (with brilliant flashes) and these disparities have more than an accidental relation to the provenance of the chapters. The more they have been worked over, the better they are. Though there are a few very good chapters, “The Thoreauvian Pilgrimage” (one of the pre-existing essays) being among the best, there are none I would call “inspired” in the sense that I discuss above. Some of the chapters, such as the one on “place,” are almost unreadably dead. This is not because Buell writes the current self-parodying academic jargon (though he uses some of its key terms—and he has no trouble producing his own sesquipedalianisms and tortured syntax) but because the poorest chapters still need more rewriting and revising, or perhaps more rethinking and conviction instead of endless qualification. The book as a whole reads like a loosely thematic collection of essays rather than a treatise on

the "environmental imagination," and it more or less just stops when it runs out of gas. The reader is never carried along by an irresistible flow. Of course one does not expect much artistry in a routine scholarly book—one is grateful for mere readability. But this purports to be more than a routine scholarly book—and while it is more than routine, it fails as a "book." Finally, despite his thanks to Harvard Press, they have done him little service: the book is full of typos, including the worst kind: those that form legitimate words that often make some sense (e.g.: "shippage" for "slippage"); and the copy-editing is substandard.

Buell's introductory chapter laments the abstract quality of popular environmentalism, its disconnection from everyday life, and proposes that literary works have the power to make this connection in a primal, emotional way. He notes that American Studies, unfortunately, has paid relatively little attention to environmental writing. He laments recent literary theory's disconnecting of the text, the author, and the world, turning them all into ghostly phantasms having little relation to our experience of reality. He would like, in some way, to restore the author as a flesh and blood maker of his text and he goes as far as he can along this line without making himself contemptible in the eyes of his more trend-driven colleagues. "Must literature always lead us away from the physical world, never back to it?" This is certainly a worthy question, especially for the chess game of academic literary studies.

The introduction proceeds by examining American writing as a race-gender-class-produced thing that "otherizes" nature but, again, never going as far (to use Buell's words) as "a more radical critic" might go (though it's far enough for me). Charybdis and Scylla are Buell's constant companions: "It is no easy matter to extricate oneself from these biases, to arrive at a more ecocentric state of thinking than western culture now sustains, without falling into other biases like environmental racism."

The chapters on American pastoralism rehearse the familiar duality of the earth as nurturing mother and victim of technological rapacity, a symbol of resistance to culture as well as a model for it. The European colonizing settlers of North America thought admiringly and wrote appreciatively of the new world as a vast unspoiled pastoral wilderness that they nonetheless did not hesitate to despoil by transforming it from nature into culture. But Buell wants to see pastoral ideology as "a bridge, crude but serviceable, from anthropocentric to more specifically ecocentric concerns." He traces the evolution of pastoral ecology from Bartram's travels in the eighteenth century to Edward Abbey's Utah excursions (in *Desert Solitaire*) in the twentieth, with glances at the different points of view to be found in Native American writers. In the course of doing this he provides some keen attentions to a number of contemporaries such as Abbey, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Annie Dillard and their precursors, like Mary Austin. His hope is that pastoral vision—that is, *seeing* the earth—can be transformed from a mode of

domination and exploitation to one of green receptivity and ecocentrism.

The recurring uneasiness that Buell feels about literary theory's disjunction between text and world, which he regards as anti-environmental in effect, issues in a desire to restore validity to the ordinary layman's immediate and unself-conscious response to literary works as representations of reality. The solace derived from nature and nature-writing by educated readers and writers such as Wordsworth and Mill is now *infra dig* in academic circles. But Buell does not believe that fictions like Cooper's *Deerslayer* and Faulkner's "Bear" are nothing more than formal or symbolic textual patterns produced in order to be shuffled around in articles and conference papers. What academics would call "naive" responses are still the ones experienced by common readers (a dwindling breed) who read for pleasure rather than professional advancement. (A recent review of a new biography of Steinbeck tells me that *The Grapes of Wrath* continues to sell fifty thousand copies a year. Somebody is apparently still reading "for the plot," but it's not Fredric Jameson.) The discrediting of realism thus exerts a pressure to produce non-ecological readings of even avowedly nature-oriented writing. Buell, of course, is quick to add that he "does not deny that they can profitably be so read," but having made this nod toward academic correctness, he manages—as much as he ever does—to hold his somewhat tentative ground in this matter for the rest of the book. Or as he puts it so characteristically, one needs to "reimagine textual representations as having a dual accountability to matter and to discursive mentation." The rest of this chapter (on "Representing the Environment") becomes increasingly casuistical as it tries to sort out the claims of realism and anti-realism, fact and fiction. "Without denying that aesthetic realism can validly be characterized from one perspective as a way station on the path toward total technological control over reality, from another vantage point it signifies precisely the opposite." The returns diminish rapidly.

In a chapter on "The Aesthetics of Relinquishment" Buell looks at the sacrifice of material goods and the sacrifice of the self in the interests of nature, with emphasis on Thoreau, *Robinson Crusoe*, Wendell Berry, Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*, and others. Here as throughout, there are penetrating *obiter dicta* and flashes of light, but even with all his resources Buell is unable to take wing, remaining earthbound in a way he doesn't intend: "What distinguishes *Walden* and other epics of voluntary simplicity from most traditional narrative plots, including that of *Robinson Crusoe*, is that the arrangement of its environmental furniture into linear corridors through which the protagonist strides becomes less important than what Thoreau suggestively calls deliberateness: the intensely pondered contemplation of characteristic images and events and gestures that take on a magical resonance beyond their normal importance now that the conditions of life have been simplified and the protagonist freed to appreciate how much more matters than