

HAROLD FROMM

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.