

Beyond Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism

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Ashton Nichols, *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism: Toward Urbanatural Roosting* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), xxiii + 230pp.

Praise for Ashton Nichols' self-consciously iconoclastic book *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism: Toward Urbanatural Roosting* has come from several quarters. In this volume, Nichols takes the appealing step of blending largely *à-la-moment* memoir with his scholarship, interweaving passages about time spent at his family cabin The Roost, during the year spent writing this book; thoughtful readings of Romantic-era texts, both poems and works of natural history; and a program toward living more sensitively on this planet. His iconoclasm much gentler than that of Dana Phillips or Timothy Morton, with whom he otherwise shares both methods and sympathies, Nichols has been positively reviewed by ecocritics, as in *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, and by nineteenth-century studies scholars, as in *Review 19* and *Nineteenth-Century Studies in Gender*. (There seem, perhaps oddly, to be no reviews yet from Romanticists.) The volume is blurbed, too, by such influential and important ecocritics as Kate Rigby, James McKusick, and the ubiquitous Scott Slovic, each of which could stand on its own as a validating imprimatur.

And yet somehow, I came away from the book unsatisfied, even – at times – deeply annoyed with it. My response seems to have little in common with the responses of other readers who've declared themselves publicly, so it may be that you'd be better served by holding fast to the positive remarks in this review's first paragraph. Still, I need to unpack the difficulties that arose for me in the course of reading what I can safely describe as the most well-intentioned book with which I have ever profoundly disagreed. Before starting that work, let me first give Nichols' book some genuine praise.

Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism, clearly, has arisen from Nichols' long research into and familiarity with Romantic and Victorian poetry and natural history. He shows great facility with that material, offering discerning and distinctly new readings of some classic Romantic poems (especially Blake's "The Fly"; Keats' "To Autumn"; and Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind") that I would recommend to every reader of those works. Indeed, his remarks on these texts are in general insightful and keen, as has been noted by reviewers elsewhere.

Nichols' passages blending natural history with memoir, albeit a curiously contemporary memoir restricted to his experiences during the year of writing this book, show similar strengths. His observations about nesting wasps, for example, and the tragedy that arises when they nest near a heat source in his cabin, show a fine grasp of

storytelling as well as of insect biology, and in this scene and others he works hard to imagine the nuances of relation between human and non-human modes of being, both the distinctions and the overlaps. In other words, in *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism*, Ashton Nichols reveals himself not just as an ecocritical scholar but as a very effective nature writer.

So. If Nichols' textual scholarship is effective, particularly his close readings; and if his nature writing is effective, particularly his evocations of the contact point between the human and the non-human; *and* his intentions are pure, what possible grounds could one have for objecting to the book? To my surprise, I found three major grounds.

For someone like me with a grounding in eighteenth-century studies, Nichols' representation of the literature and ideas of the immediately preceding period verged at times on caricature, where he didn't simply fail to address relevant texts. Romantic exceptionalism has long been an issue within literary studies, though, so to some extent Nichols is merely following established critical conventions. (More than that, all period-focused works of literary criticism are potentially subject to this kind of objection, since they virtually by definition at least appear to devalue preceding literature in order to identify or articulate a new sentiment or insight special to the period under discussion.) The general difficulty is more serious here, though, for two reasons. First, ecocriticism has still not overcome its Romantic roots; this is as true of Scott Slovic as it is of Timothy Morton, admirable critics both, and with seriously divergent perspectives. Second, and more particularly, it's serious for *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism* because a key element of Nichols' critique has to do with the foundations of both ecocriticism and Romanticism. If Romanticism itself needs to be questioned, then it seems an oversight not to question its relationship with its immediate ancestor. Nichols wants to make the case that the Romantics moved away from anthropomorphism, a sense that nature was like people, and toward ecomorphism, a sense that people are like nature (or indeed are nature). In order to make this case conclusively, he needed to spend some time explaining why anthropomorphism – so complex a concept, and so important in its nuances to readers of (for example) James Thomson's *The Seasons* – shouldn't generally be understood as potentially ecomorphic *tout court*. At a few points Nichols seems usefully to imagine Romanticism to have begun much earlier than is generally described, such as identifying Locke as a proto-Romantic (79-80), but this seems to me inadequate. What if Romanticism itself, and the scholarship thereof, should be moved away from the long-existing discourse of a rupture from culture of the decades before 1798?

Second, as someone who reads ecocriticism widely, I found myself wondering repeatedly about the precise outlines of this "ecocriticism" Nichols was trying to go "beyond," as his title has it. In reply to his offhand remark in the Prologue that "a fully developed ecocriticism emerged in the twenty-first century" (xx), I wonder what pupal stages he thinks ecocriticism was going through in the previous two decades before his book's publication, especially the regular appearance in the twentieth century's final decade of so many fascinating ecocritical works. His critique of ecocriticism (as he notes in the Epilogue) overlaps with critiques by Dana Phillips, Patrick Murphy, Timothy Morton, and others, and I make of Nichols the same objection that I make of them.

Ecocriticism, as I understand the term, contains multitudes, with environmental justice and queer ecology being two crucial contemporary aspects of it that these critics have tended to ignore (or to colonize, but that's a discussion for another day). So when Nichols notes that the love of wilderness has "allowed ... environmentalists to ignore the people who may have been living in these places already" (xv), he is repeating an old claim, and he is doing so without apparent awareness that this objection can be made – has been made, forcefully – from within the discourses of both environmentalism and ecocriticism. Ecocritics have made similar objections to urban environmental racism, too, such as inner-city urban pollution, not just about the classic example of First Nations peoples' forced migrations at the founding of "wilderness" parks like Yosemite. Either Nichols is unaware that these critiques have been made by scholars professing an unproblematic relationship with ecocriticism, in which case he has some reading to do, or he does not accept that their relationship to ecocriticism is unproblematic, in which case he might profitably have explained the basis for his objection.

And finally, there's the Romantic ego. The Prologue offers a philosophic stance with which I agree heartily: "if all humans are linked to each other and to their surroundings, then those same humans have clear obligations to each other and to the world they share" (xvii). Nichols' metaphor of "roosting" has to do not just with not fouling one's own nest, but also with not spoiling the branches and understory and ground underneath an arboreal nest. As I say, these are ideas with which I concur entirely: we are all connected to each other, and the boundary of "each other" should be set far, far outside the purely human community.

To me at least, it thus seems bizarre that Nichols would then go on to write a dozen passages of memoir about his time spent at The Roost, where not another human being features. There are other writers in this book, other books in this book, and even some human communities, but there are next to no people. *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism* is thus the portrait of one man's response to literature and culture, and to the relationship between human culture and environment. To some extent, then, Nichols replicates here Thoreau's non-isolated isolation, fully aware of the extent to which he is embedded in the larger society and yet never engaging with it: as with so many revisionary ecocritics, Nichols' book, and Nichols' ecocritical approach, is in many ways fundamentally Romantic rather than "beyond" Romantic.

So in consequence, I found myself repeatedly annoyed by this book, scribbling ripostes on the flyleaf, spraying both question marks and exclamation marks in the margins, and deeply, deeply dissatisfied.

There is, nevertheless, much to appreciate about *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism*. If other reviews are to be relied upon, perhaps my vision of and for ecocriticism is a minority perspective. As I have noted above, and as other reviewers have discussed in some detail, Nichols is both a fine reader of Romantic poetry, and a keen observer of natural phenomena (about which he is well able to craft an emotive story). And the future he'd like to see has much in common with my own hopes. If we ever cross paths, I expect to like Ashton Nichols very much – perhaps it's just that I wish, fervently, that this book had covered more and different ground than it did.