

Tonia L. Payne  
Nassau Community College-SUNY

Terry Gifford, *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry*, 2nd ed. (Nottingham, UK: Critical, Cultural and Communications Press, 2011), 214pp.

Terry Gifford is one of Great Britain's foremost ecocritics. He is perhaps best known for his work exploring the pastoral and post-pastoral in British and American letters; among other significant texts, his book *Pastoral* provides a comprehensive introduction to pastoral themes from their historical roots through the ways in which they are still seen in contemporary literature. Gifford is also a leading scholar of Ted Hughes' poetry and a poet himself. His extensive knowledge of pastoral, ecocriticism, and poetry are combined in *Green Voices* as he examines contemporary British poetry through an ecocritical lens.

One of the texts which established his reputation was *Green Voices*, which was first published in 1995. For this second edition, Gifford has added an extensive introduction, in which he acknowledges significant issues that have come to his attention since the first edition, yet he has chosen to leave the body of the book unrevised. Among the problems stemming from that choice are that the second edition does not analyze work by any poets who have become active since 1994, nor does it address aspects of our culture that have changed in the intervening years. Nevertheless, the issues Gifford highlighted in 1995 remain relevant.

The text seems particularly suited to those with little previous knowledge of the traditions and environmentalist concerns that inform contemporary British poetry that is specifically focused on the natural world. Even scholars with more expertise may well find intriguing applications of the ecocritical lens in Gifford's analyses—and may well find consideration of poets whose work has not received a great deal of ecocritical attention. Gifford casts a wide net, making the book of potential interest for anyone who studies poetry from an ecocritical perspective.

In *Green Voices*, Gifford's overall argument is that a certain kind of poetry about "nature"—as well as ecocritical readings of poetry—can be useful in helping us understand our relationships with and assumptions about nature. Part of ecocriticism's project is to examine the ways in which science, politics, culture, and art intersect as we try to understand those relationships and assumptions, and it is in this light that Gifford acknowledges the value of poetic engagement with both politics and scientific fact. Gifford says, "I have always thought that while 'poetry makes nothing happen' [...], it can contribute to a shift in sensibility rather than life-style. It can raise questions, often conveying a sense of the complexity of their contexts, which get resolved, even provisionally, in other discourses" (8). Gifford indeed raises pertinent questions—and acknowledges when they cannot be answered but instead generate further questions.

Gifford employs close analysis of specific poems to explore the role of poetry in our struggle to understand and cope with our relationship with the natural world. In the process, he focuses on ecopoetry as poetry, as art. One question he asks is, what's more important: aesthetics or consciousness raising? Gifford seems to think both are important but that aesthetics are paramount: poetry works nonrationally, so its contribution to social change comes through aesthetics. If it doesn't work as poetry, it won't move us as poetry is meant to and therefore will not fulfill its "mission." Poetry is not activism—and, as Gifford details, there is critical debate about the extent to which poetry can be expressly political and/or scientifically factual and still remain aesthetically sound. However, there is clear value in the problems and challenges raised in Gifford's analyses.

In the introduction, Gifford acknowledges that the terminology used for the poetry he analyzes has shifted: what he called "green poetry" in 1995 is now more generally called "ecopoetry" (8). However, the term matters less than how it is defined. Gifford states, "I reserve the term 'green poetry' for those recent nature poems which engage directly with environmental issues" (27). More important, Gifford sets up ten questions that need to be addressed in ecopoetry criticism, and although he acknowledges that he does not answer them, providing instead "reflections and some further questions," he challenges critics to address those questions, which include the following: "Does [environmentalist] urgency override the aesthetics?" "What makes good ecopoetry?" and "By what exemplars do we recognize it?" (10)

Gifford analyzes in detail the work of four poets—Patrick Kavanagh, Sorley MacLean, Seamus Heaney, and Ted Hughes—devoting a chapter to each. Additional chapters focus on a wider range of poets, from those he suggests are producing a "contemporary pastoral" to the "many green voices" among contemporary British poets. In the final chapter, when Gifford includes poets from the West Indies and Asia, the extent of "green voices" that can be considered British becomes broad indeed. Central to Gifford's argument is the idea that each culture provides unique material—and problems—for the poet. Indeed, one of Gifford's criteria for the success of any poem is whether it acknowledges human-nature connection within the specific history of a specific culture in a particular place.

The first chapter, titled "The Social Construction of Nature," focuses on how those social constructions are revealed by and contended with in poetry. Gifford draws heavily, and rightly, on Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City*, along with the work of other critics and theorists (among them Keith Thomas, Max Oelschlaeger, and Peter Marshall). In the introduction to the second edition, Gifford acknowledges that when he prepared the first edition, he "was unaware of Neil Evernden's seminal book *The Social Creation of Nature*" (13), and that in the years since, a number of important works have been produced in this area. Nevertheless, as noted above, he has released the second edition without incorporating any of that material into the body of the book. The part of his argument having to do with nature as a social construct is particularly weakened by his decision not to rework the chapter to include that corpus of material.

His second chapter makes the argument that pastoral poetry is still being produced in the British Isles. His trace of the development of the pastoral reads like a doctoral candidate demonstrating his knowledge for his dissertation—and indeed, Gifford acknowledges that, apart from the introduction, the book is his doctoral thesis, “reproduced without a word changed” (15). Still, it can be argued that there is value in Gifford’s placement of his analyses within a deep poetic tradition. Gifford is concerned to identify contemporary pastoral poetry for reasons of contrast: he feels it is not useful in confronting the questions “nature poetry” should address. Pastoral is inadequate because it presents an “idealized description of a supposedly real place” (50); its idealization is “an aspect of nostalgia [that perceives] nature located in the past” (52); and it denies changes in the natural world, as if nature were untouched and untouchable (53). If there were any debate regarding the existence of the pastoral in contemporary poetry from the British Isles, Gifford’s analysis demonstrates its existence—and why it is problematic.

Gifford also explores the antipastoral and what he refers to as post-pastoral. Although the anti-pastoral is perhaps a step more valuable than pastoral in ecocritical terms, as Gifford notes, “the anti-pastoral tradition is [...] caught in a tension between notions of reality and poetic conventions” (81). In Gifford’s argument, among the antipastoral poets, Heaney’s work may be the least problematic in that the “poems [...] characteristically question, uncomfortably, the role of the writer” (116). Further, in Heaney’s poems, “[t]ensions in the self, the tribe and territory are raised and resolved through assumptions about language” (116). Gifford suggests that successful ecopoetry must be aware of the tensions between language and direct sensory experience. Focusing on how ecopoetry can help us address the fact that there “is a material world from which we have become strangely alienated,” Gifford argues, “[w]e not only need [direct experience of nature], we need to communicate it, examine it and share its meaning through our symbolic sign-systems” (33).

Gifford’s stance is that the central problem in our relationship with nature is alienation—a pervasive tenet among ecocritics. He privileges post-pastoral ecopoetry for its ability to use symbolic sign-systems effectively in confronting alienation, and he sees Hughes as an exemplary practitioner of post-pastoral. Gifford delineates six qualities of the post-pastoral, found in Hughes’ poetry, that could be profitable to explore in any ecocritical examination. Among those qualities are recognition of “dynamic tension of elemental forces” in nature (138) and that “[i]f culture, individual human life, animal and bird life, and the workings of weather upon landscape are parts of an interactive whole, then it is possible to express this relationship through interchangeable images” (145). Perhaps most important to consider is whether “the poet [...] takes practical responsibility for nature as a fully conscious, sensitive inhabitant of the natural world” (145). This final point—that ecopoetry asks us to join the poet in taking conscious and sensitive “practical responsibility”—is perhaps the primary means by which, as noted earlier, ecopoetry can “contribute to a shift in sensibility rather than life-style.”

The final chapter looks at poets who, in Gifford's estimation, either engage in the "closed circuit of pastoral/anti-pastoral poetry" or "reach beyond" (158). His examples of poetry that "reaches beyond" are not poems that valorize nature for its own sake. As Gifford argues in analyzing Jeremy Hooker's poem "Itchen Water," in the attempt to "be an observer of what is 'perfect without us,'" the poet can overlook the "implications of those solid enough foot-beats" that brought the poet to the stream (173). Overlooking those implications in effect denies that humans affect the environment. Gifford reserves his praise for the cases in which "poets [...] use nature in order to 'decentre' their own natural inner tensions," those who use nature imagery "as a mirror to look deeper into" themselves (165). Certainly in any form of "nature poetry," in some sense the poet is projecting his or her "inner tensions on external nature" (165). Whether that may be a problematic objectification of nature is left unquestioned. In Gifford's analysis, ecopoetry need not create a greater understanding of nature itself. Rather he argues that the role of ecopoetry is to reveal something about us, that the images drawn from nature create a self-consciousness, not of alienation but of our ability to assume "practical responsibility for nature as a fully conscious, sensitive [inhabitants] of the natural world."