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Scott Knickerbocker, *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2012), 203 pp.

Ecopoetics has long been in search of two things—a canon and a definition. Events like the first annual *Conference on Ecopoetics* in 2013 and the publication of collections such as Brenda Iijima's *The Eco Language Reader* (2010) and Ann-Fisher Wirth and Laura-Gray Street's *The Ecopoetry Anthology* (2013) point to a revived interest in ecopoetic theory that is helping to move the field toward a more solid foundation and thus wider applicability. Scott Knickerbocker's *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language* is a profound attempt to move theories of ecopoetics beyond the lack of clarity and limited application that has hindered its advancement beyond a minor sub-field of ecocriticism. The book includes an extensive outline of Knickerbocker's conception of ecopoetics as “unapologetically embrac[ing the] artifice” of its own form and applies this conception to both surprising and unsurprising subjects for an ecopoetic critique, including Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, Richard Wilbur, and Sylvia Plath (Knickerbocker 2). While books on ecopoetics have gained popularity in recent years, Knickerbocker's inclusion of poets like Plath, who are rarely considered from an environmental angle and engage in little overt discussion of “nature,” is encouraging for the future of ecopoetic theory. *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language* will be useful to those who are just beginning to work with ecopoetics because it not only provides the kind of clear and concise definition of the term that has been lacking in earlier book-length studies, but also shows how it can inform the actual reading of poetry. For those already familiar with debates surrounding ecopoetic theory, however, Knickerbocker's argument will raise new questions, highlight alternative applications of the concept, and encourage further inquiry.

The most effective section of the book is its introduction, where Knickerbocker presents new directions for ecopoetics by re-conceptualizing the term based on its ineluctably linguistic quality. He writes, “[r]ather than attempt to erase the artifice of their own poems (to make them seem more natural and supposedly, then, closer to nature), the poets in this book unapologetically embrace artifice—not for its own sake, but as a way to relate meaningfully to the natural world. Indeed for them, artifice *is* natural” (emphasis in the original; Knickerbocker 2). Previously, ecopoetics was explained by scholars like J. Scott Bryson and Leonard Scigaj in terms of its mimetic fidelity to real-world experience and its attention to eco-political action. By conceptualizing ecopoetics as a field that embraces its inhabitation of language and by

moving it away from attention to overtly natural settings, Knickerbocker makes eco-poetics available for broader application. As the book's analysis of such a diverse group of poets implies, changing our understanding of how eco-poetics engages with nature thus facilitates a larger shift in ecocritical poetry studies. Moving away from a demand for nature in the traditional sense, Knickerbocker's remapping of the field allows for the inclusion of poems that engage with nature only at the margins or in unconventional ways. It should be noted, though, that Knickerbocker's selection of poets like Stevens and Bishop, who regularly receive ecocritical attention, does not really put this broadened applicability to the test. Despite breaking plenty of new theoretical ground, *Eco-poetics* largely stays within the bounds of texts widely recognized as eco-poems.

Along with expanding the field of inquiry for eco-poetic studies, this book also helps to clarify our understanding of the term itself. Since its inception, eco-poetics has struggled for a stable definition. Although a number of scholars have theorized the term in the past, each has done so somewhat differently, creating a great deal of disjunction in how it is used. This lack of clarity is so prevalent, in fact, that Timothy Clark finds "the term *ecopoetry*" to have "an opportunistic feel"; often, Clark contends, "'ecopoetry' does just mean work with a vaguely green message" (139-40). Clark's sentiment is representative of broadly felt reservations towards eco-poetry studies, with some scholars arguing that the very attempt to define eco-poetics would be antithetical to its purpose and others simply disagreeing on its central characteristics. Knickerbocker's introduction, one may hope, may allow the field to move beyond these well-worn debates. He observes that eco-poets "acknowledge an important gap between word and world. Yet rather than treating this gap as a sign of linguistic failure, they explore the fundamentally figurative nature of language" (Knickerbocker 9). Eco-poetics, Knickerbocker argues, studies the ways in which this gap is negotiated in poetry. Positioning himself against what he calls "conventional eco-poetry, which relies on the experiential, authorial presence of the poet-prophet figure who, like Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder, or Robert Bly, wants to affect his audience ethically," Knickerbocker embraces "the figurative nature of ecocentrism" (Knickerbocker 9). Accepting the figurative quality of poetic language rather than striving for referential realism marks a profound step in eco-poetic theory.

The book demonstrates the usefulness of this shift in the fourth chapter on Plath. I single out this chapter in particular because it is not only representative of the attentive close readings that mark the book, but also demonstrates the wider range of application that Knickerbocker's re-imagining of eco-poetics allows. Beginning with an acknowledgment of the unconventionality of reading Plath ecocritically, Knickerbocker points out the way in which Plath's association with "confessional" poetry has often been used, even by ecocritical scholars, to dismiss her use of nature imagery: "One significant result of emphasizing Plath's interiority and confessional mode is that many critics overlook and even flatly deny her connection to the outside world" (Knickerbocker 124). However, the author's case for reading Plath through an

ecopoetical lens becomes evident from his concise discussions of a variety of poems including “Stillborn,” “Mushrooms,” and “I am Vertical.” He focuses these discussions on Plath’s use of language and the physicality that she grants it while also considering the ways in which the poet engages with non-human nature. Knickerbocker observes that Plath’s “acute sensitivity to the outer world, combined with her deliberate attention to the inner workings of language, resulted in unusually powerful nature poetry” (136). Knickerbocker’s reading of these poems makes it clear that language is not a barrier but a bridge between the human and the natural.

Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language propels ecopoetic theory toward the kind of conceptual coherence and broad applicability that it will need if it is to become a useful tool for literary critics, not only within, but also beyond ecocritical circles. Knickerbocker provides new answers to questions that have long troubled ecocriticism—questions about what constitutes nature, about the role of language and the importance of the subjective human experience of the world. Although one might wish that Knickerbocker would have been more daring in his selection of texts, his book will furnish a solid conceptual foundation on which ecopoetic studies can continue to grow.

Works Cited

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