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Nancy Easterlin, *A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory and Interpretation* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 315 pp.



“What is literature *for*?” (ix). From beginning to end, Nancy Easterlin’s interdisciplinary study grapples with basic questions that, in her words, “have never been clearly articulated, much less satisfactorily answered” (4), even as she explores the advantages of “combining traditional humanist methods and research with [relevant] aspects of cognitive neuroscience and evolutionary social science” (34). Easterlin demonstrates convincingly that the task of formulating and responding to such questions as “1. What has been the traditional *aim* of literary studies?” and “2. Currently, how do the *aims* of the humanities and the sciences differ?” (5) grows ever more crucial as the humanities continue to lose ground to the sciences, thanks in part to unexamined assumptions that can be traced back to the beginning of the “two-cultures” divide in the academy—back, in other words, to the origins of English as an academic discipline. While Easterlin pointedly refuses to articulate a “Grand Theory” (20) of interpretation of her own in contradistinction to E.O. Wilson’s *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, this refusal in fact counts as one of the book’s strengths. Ecocritics and other scholars will find plenty of inspiration in her study’s reasonableness, refreshing candor, and attendant commitment to critical pluralism and sensitivity to the “unimaginable complexity” of literary texts (20)—coupled, perhaps surprisingly, with enthusiastic support for the idea of literary merit and a virtually encyclopedic command both of primary texts from a variety of periods and places and of literary, philosophical, and scientific studies in a wide range of fields. Not surprisingly, given the contentiousness of the consilience debate and the provocative nature of Easterlin’s argument, readers will be prompted to ask many questions of their own about her approach, and about how they might envision modes of biocultural criticism related to, or divergent from, Easterlin’s.

The first question ecocritics will likely ask is, “Why should we seek interdisciplinary coherence with the *social* sciences?” In her chapter “Minding Ecocriticism: Human Wayfinders and Natural Places,” Easterlin acknowledges that, at first glance, earth-oriented criticism and her own brand of “cognitive-evolutionary biocultural criticism,” with its “theoretical and interpretive foundation in the evolution and cognitive processes of the mind,” may seem like “polar opposites” (92). Some ecocritics (though not all, as Easterlin seems to think) will probably be startled by the suggestion that “knowledge of human perception, cognition, and conceptual articulation is more crucial to the key issues underlying ecocriticism than it is to perhaps any other area of contemporary literary study” (92). However, there is a good chance that the chapter will induce at least some of us to rethink our very “object of study” (90), moving

away from a “realist aesthetic [...] founded on the fossilized vestiges of a naïve realist epistemology” (96)—one that privileges celebrations of Earth at the expense of an awareness of the operations of human language and consciousness—and toward a pragmatic epistemology and psychologically informed understanding of environmental literature as an outgrowth of “dynamic and mutually modifying sets of relationships” (93). The relationships about which Easterlin writes most persuasively are those between (a) the evolved mind and body of the self, (b) the minds and bodies of members of one’s family and community (particularly the primary caregiver), and (c) the natural world. Easterlin’s perceptive readings of poems by Wordsworth and of Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* show the vital role that stable social relationships play in the establishment of a viable sense of self and a “benign communion with nature” (127) and, conversely, how the breakdown of the self and of human ties can destroy a person’s place attachments.

The interpretive section of Easterlin’s chapter on ecocriticism convincingly demonstrates the importance of factoring in evolutionary approaches to environmental psychology and aesthetics, childhood development, and social dynamics when we are considering authors’ and characters’ relationships with nature. The chapter implies, though, that ecocritics should not just be in the business of *borrowing* concepts and tools of analysis from the social sciences. Since the “profound resource” of literature dramatizes—and draws on—humans’ evolved wayfinding capacities in an especially vivid way, biocultural ecocritics could find themselves in the position of contributing to evolving theories in the social sciences, helping ecocriticism become “perhaps the most far-ranging, theoretically cohesive, sophisticated, creative, and relevant area of literary scholarship” in existence (151).

However, this ringing assertion raises another set of questions. To whom would the new variety of ecocriticism be most relevant? Would it only appeal to social scientists, or would it translate to a greater ecocritical impact on how everyday people view and treat the biosphere? A minor non sequitur in one of Easterlin’s sentences exemplifies a larger problem familiar to anyone acquainted with the history of ecocriticism: “Since a primary goal of *ecocriticism* is to raise awareness of the value of the nonhuman natural world and the human treatment of it, *literary works* that explore the mind’s positive and troubled relationships with nonhuman nature *importantly illuminate* the conditions that shape human attitudes—enthusiasm, caring, antipathy, indifference, and so on—toward the environment” (93; emphasis added). Easterlin makes a very strong case for studying “literary works that explore the mind’s positive and troubled relationships with nonhuman nature,” but how does *studying* these texts contribute to the goal of raising awareness? For that matter, how does studying *troubled* relationships with nature—as Easterlin does not just in her interpretation of Wordsworth’s Lucy poems and *Wide Sargasso Sea* but in her readings of Coleridge’s “Dejection: An Ode” (Chapter 4) and D. H. Lawrence’s novella *The Fox* (Chapter 5), among other texts—relate to the task of promoting “benign communion”? How can we reconcile what social scientists have documented as the “fundamental human ambivalence toward the nonhuman” (127) with the idea of “lov[ing] the world” (151)?

On one level, Easterlin is right to characterize the question “What does it mean for a conscious being to love the insensate world?” as “unanswerable” (127); likewise, it would be asking too much to expect her book to finally resolve dilemmas that have dogged ecocriticism from the beginning. But ecocritics who take a cue from Easterlin’s pragmatic bioculturalism will need to address these difficult issues head-on.

By the same token, they will want to apply pressure to her use of words like “insensate” and “amoral” (132) to describe the nonhuman world. This is certainly how nature often *feels* to someone, like the speaker of Wordsworth’s Lucy poems, who has endured the death of a beloved fellow human. But, as countless studies in the evolutionary life sciences have been showing in recent years, humans have no monopoly on sentience, cognition, emotion, culture, and perhaps even basic concepts of morality. There is a huge difference between loving a dog and loving a truly insensate nonhuman entity like a stone. Easterlin does studiously avoid the “pernicious anthropocentrism” (93) that has long infected both the humanities and mainstream Western culture, just as she manages to navigate around more subtle forms of anthropocentrism embodied in Freudian theory and various other “pseudoscientific twentieth-century programs” (34). Still, one wonders if, in her efforts to distance herself from E.O. Wilson’s model of consilience and the types of Darwinian criticism practiced by such scholars as Joseph Carroll, Easterlin has devoted some pages to “minding” ecocriticism and “bodying” cognitive literary theory (see Chapter 4) that could have been productively used in the pursuit of “worlding” these and other branches of literary studies through new modes of interdisciplinarity that depend not on importing reductive empirical methods from the biological sciences but, rather, on engaging with emerging fields such as biosemiotics and cognitive ethology in ways similar to how Easterlin engages with the evolutionary social sciences. The work of many animal studies scholars, for example, suggests that biocultural criticism may benefit greatly from critical re-articulations, rather than rejection, of the idea of consilience (or at least of a deeper and more productive interdisciplinarity) between the humanities and the biosciences. To paraphrase Easterlin, *worlding* and *minding* ecocriticism from a common Darwinian perspective would be “complementary” endeavors, though perhaps they need not be as “distinct” from each other as she assumes (see 282, n. 50).

These preliminary observations and questions are not at all meant to challenge the validity of biocultural approaches in general or to detract from the considerable strengths of Easterlin’s book; rather, they help confirm Easterlin’s point that “there are many ways to begin biocultural inquiry,” which, she notes with characteristic verve, “is fundamentally a creative enterprise, not a matter of mastering a model and then slapping it down onto unsuspecting texts” (38). Any readers who have found themselves “bored and unenlightened” (34) by a priori approaches to interpretation in the humanities will profit from engaging with Easterlin’s spirited defense of the beauty and complexity of literature. And humanities scholars in every field (especially those of us employed by public universities) should pay close attention to how Easterlin builds her scientifically grounded argument for the centrality of literature and literary studies in helping humanity make sense of itself. But it is in the field of ecocriticism that the book

will probably have the greatest influence, fueling productive debates and serving as a model of rigorous, pragmatic, and nuanced interdisciplinarity and literary interpretation for a long time to come.