What "Taking Place" Means: Pierre Schoentjes' *Écopoétique*

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Pierre Schoentjes, *Ce qui a lieu. Essai d'écopoétique* (Marseille: Éditions Wildproject, 2015), 295pp.

Pierre Schoentjes, a professor for French literature at the University of Gent, has been known for his studies of literature and irony (*Poétique de l'ironie, Silhouettes de l'ironie*), as well as First World War fiction (*Fictions de la Grande Guerre*, *La Grande Guerre. Un siècle de fictions romanesques*, *A la baïonnette ou au scalpel. Comment l'horreur s'écrit*). More recently, his interest has turned towards the relationship between literature and the environment. This has not only led to a series of papers,[1] but also to a special issue of the *Revue critique de fixxion francaise contemporaine* (Romestaing, Schoentjes and Simon) , and to the book under review.

Ce qui a lieu aims to open up the new critical field of "*écopoétique*" (I will continue to use the French term instead of translating it to "ecopoetics," since the latter suggests a stronger link to American-rooted transcendentalism and nature writing). *Écopoétique*, Schoentjes insists, must not to be conflated with ecocriticism,[2] whose political agenda, characterized by "national, lyrical and militant approaches" ("Schoentjes, Pierre"), he strongly rejects. *Écopoétique* is described as the study of the relationship between literature and the environment as perceived by the senses ("la réalité concrète des choses," 18; "au contact du monde sensible," 35). It is defined not by a literary topic, nor by a conceptual turn, but rather is seen as the contextual result of an increasing concern for the environment (13).

The cornerstone of Schoentjes' *écopoétique* is his reading of French writer Pierre Gascar (1916-1997): "The sensual appetite for the world defines Gascar: it is the intimate experience of nature that helps the writer to imagine the real. Without this intimate experience, mythology, history, ethnology and natural sciences are not able to describe the real world" (214; this and all subsequent translations are by the author). Along with the rejection of positivism, anthropomorphic symbolism, and moralism (217), literature's aesthetic unveiling

[1] Pierre Schoentjes' entire bibliography may be consulted here: Web. 22 Mar. 2016. https://biblio.ugent.be/person/801000734934.
[2] For one of the first comments on French reception of ecocriticism, see Blanc *et al*.

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of place encourages the reader to rethink the relationship between reality and imagination (204-205). Whereas Gaston Bachelard's *La Poétique de l'espace* (1957) still strongly influences the way French literary studies address the relationship between space and imagination, Schoentjes quotes (180) Lawrence Buell's formulation that "[t]here never was an is without a where" (Buell 55) to argue that a place can be "fill[ed]" (180) with imagination and meaning. That this is not only a metaphorical, but an onto-geographic bond is best illustrated by the book's title, *Ce qui a lieu*, which suggests—as does the English expression "taking place"—that everything that happens is locally situated.

Despite the seemingly universal appeal of this argument, Schoentjes notes, ecocriticism has struggled to gain a foothold in France. This may be due to very practical reasons, such as the absence of translations (22), but Schoentjes also stresses the lack of a theoretical framework, especially among the early ecocritics of the 1990s, who were very attentive readers of Anglophone literature rather than literary theorists (ibid.). Finally, he explains how ecocriticism, having emerged from an interdisciplinary and "meta-contextual" tradition of cultural studies (Clark 4), differs profoundly from French literary criticism, which is based on a more aesthetic and poetic paradigm and emphases the work of writing and imagination. This difference is exemplified by Buell's definition of environmental literature, which can neither be easily applied to other texts, nor provides aesthetical and poetical tools, since it is focused almost entirely on the thematic and ethical dimensions of fictional texts (77).

For Schoentjes, however, it is all about literature, as he describes his book as an "essai" (attempt) to combine the reader's curiosity and pleasure with theoretical ambitions (13). Thus he emphasizes the relationship between ecocriticism and postmodernism (27-28, 239-240, 258), the theoretical attempt to escape localism and regionalism through irony (262) and cosmopolitanism (268, with the reference to Ursula Heise's *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*), and the tension between reality and imagination (273). This "poetic paradigm" (16) shows how literature changes the way we look—conceptually and phenomenologically—at places and landscapes (100-101). All in all, whereas ecocriticism in its first iteration focuses on nature writing, *écopoétique* is about the writing of place ("lieu") and a particular European literary "sense of place" which is always "situated historically and geographically" (Heise 8).

It must be noted, however, that Schoentjes' ample commentary on the American tradition of nature writing is largely sympathetic, and that he draws much inspiration from Anglophone ecocriticism. His observations and translations will provide French-speaking researchers on literature and the environment with a better insight into the field and possibly enable them to develop their own orientation(s). Schoentjes regrets that, even if ecocriticism has developed internationally, the "French cultural and literary reality" (23) has not been a field of interest. At the same time, he stays surprisingly elusive on the French and European contexts and how they have adopted ecocriticism. As Hicham-Stéphane

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Afeissa has noted in another review (2015: n.p.), the contributions to the concept of landscape by Alain Roger (31), as well as to *géopoétique* and *géocritique* by Kenneth White, Michel Collot, and Bertrand Westphal, among others, are only briefly mentioned (24). It would also have been useful to explore how French and European thinkers have attempted to articulate aesthetics and poetics with ethics and politics, rather than merely stating the scepticism of French literary criticism towards the latter (even if the author stresses that the "hostility" towards Anglophone methodology is often "a caricature," 23).

In order to show that nature is in perpetual transformation, Schoentjes proposes a typology of natural places, which, especially in the French context, does include "domesticated territories" (Bess 175). This typology (28-24) is based on real and on fictional places, and drawn mainly from books, but also from movies and visual arts: Planet Earth "and beyond" ("La nature au-delà de la Terre," 29), spectacular landscapes (inherited from romanticism), rural nature facing urbanisation and being rediscovered by contemporary writers such as Jean-Loup Trassard (89), urban nature and, last but not least, wilderness. The latter receives particular attention from the author. Wilderness has been rightfully described as a concept rooted in a US American cultural tradition which cannot be easily applied to other geographical and cultural contexts (Larrère 25). However, with reference to the work of Hubert Mingarelli and André Bucher, two well-known readers of nature writing (86), Schoentjes insists that texts do travel and that the fascination with wilderness has become a global phenomenon.

The first part of the book addresses the evolution of the poetic depiction of natural places in European texts, thus drawing parallels between the cultural history of nature, the emergence of ecological thinking, and the history of literature. This diachronic investigation starts with a prolegomenon of ecological writing from the 19th century to 1945, highlighting in particular the naturalistic works of geographer Élisée Reclus (48-51). The next section is focused specifically on the interwar period, which saw the development of a new literary regionalism fuelled by anti-modernism and patriotism (52). The Second World War also drastically changed mankind's perception of its environment: the nuclear threat plunged the globe into a new era of finitude and vulnerability;[3] the cruelty of the concentration camps gave mankind a new "place in the world" (61) far away from the one assigned by traditional humanism. In the second half of the 20th century, literature developed a genuinely ecological sensibility, illustrated by the work of writers such as Romain Gary (63) or Pierre Gascar (66-67). Finally, the contemporary period (post-1980) saw literature integrate environmental problems with a wider spectrum of socio-political interests, as can be seen in Antoine Volodine's treatment of post-apocalyptic and post-human society in the

[3] Schoentjes' argument here runs parallel to current discussions about the Anthropocene—a connection which, however, he does not draw.

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novel *Songes de Mevlido*, or of species extinction in Éric Chevillard's *Sans l'orang-outan* (92).

The second and third part of the book develop a cartography of natural places based upon the author's wide-ranging literary excursions and experiences of both fictional texts and real places. Because Schoentjes is mindful of staying close to the texts, his cartography, picking up the typology developed in the first part and complementing it with thematic, generic, and poetic classifications, puts together a vast catalogue of European place writing. Besides the universality of environmental problems, which require us to think beyond national boundaries (14), Schoentjes repeatedly stresses the cosmopolitan dimension of writing and reading and points out that, as a consequence, literature should not be seen as closed in upon itself (17), neither culturally nor aesthetically. Addressing recognised 20th and 21st century authors (e.g. Claude Simon, Mario Rigoni Stern, Arto Paasilinna), but also inviting his readers to (re-)discover the work of writers who have somewhat sunk into oblivion (e.g. Jean-Loup Trassard and Pierre Gascar, to name only two among the many less-known authors treated in the book), Schoentjes' argument for *écopoétique* presents a topical way to embrace the complexity and generic plurality of contemporary prose literature. It is particularly well-equipped to handle the many hybrid forms of fictional and documentary prose, such as autobiography, travel literature, guide book writing (Claude Simon, 244), the literature of adventure and the exotic (Joseph Kessel, 62-63, and Sylvain Tesson, 94), or regionalism (Jean Giono, Lanza del Vasto, Robert Goffin, 54-58). As Schoentjes systematically compares texts from the Anglophone canon with contemporaneous works from the literature of France and, more broadly, continental Europe, his corpus emerges as a European equivalent to Anglophone nature writing. Like the latter, the texts on which he focuses are characterized by formal hybridity, marginality to their respective national literary canon, strong links to particular locales or regions, and ecological thinking.

Ce qui a lieu insists that the multidimensionality of place experience (action, contemplation, primitivism, anti-intellectualism, or nomadism; 162) manifests itself by way of distinctive themes (pollution and apocalypse; 116-123), aesthetic figures (anthropomorphism and analogy; 126-132) and cultural concepts (polarities; 273). It gives birth to a range of different genres (125), including both traditional literary forms (pastoral, fable, utopia, exempla; 142) and more recent ones, such as science-fiction (120). This heterogeneity of the primary texts which Schoentjes' study addresses, as well as the multiplicity of approaches and theoretical frameworks on which it draws, make it quite impossible to present a comprehensive summary, at least within the confines of a brief review. *Ce qui a lieu* indeed takes its readers on a journey that unsettles many of the assumptions ecocritics tend to take for granted. It is for good reasons that in the book's conclusion, Schoentjes speaks of "*les écopoétiques*" in the plural (276), suggesting the need for a further diversification of the field. He clearly states that the very nature of environmental issues makes it imperative to consider contemporary

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French fiction in the light of its connections to American and European literature (17). However, on the methodological level, this questioning of national frames is pursued with less rigor. Sometimes, Schoentjes stresses cultural and epistemological specificities, which are terminologically suggested by the author's insistence of using "*écopoétique*" to describe a more poetic paradigm than ecocriticism and cultural studies. At other times, he adopts an approach that one might designate as 'cosmopoetical'. Such quibbles aside, *Ce qui a lieu* not only represents a seminal contribution to the study of literature and the environment in the Francophone world, but it also constitutes an essential contribution to the environmental humanities as a transnational and transdisciplinary field of study.

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