

Egan, Gabriel. 2006m "Review of Robert N. Watson *Back to Nature: The Green and the Real in the Late Renaissance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006)" *Review of English Studies New Series* vol. 57. pp. 817-9

**Robert N. Watson *Back to nature: The green and the real in the late Renaissance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press) Pp. viii + 437 £39**

Like literature itself, ecocriticism is a topic often approached from an interest in something else. Yet it is hard to agree with Robert Watson that "our struggles with ecology are, in an important sense, an extension of struggles with epistemology" (p. 335). A life-long Green need never look up 'epistemology' in a dictionary, but the concept itself is not obscure. In considering how it is we know what we think we know of the world, we clearly depend on the reports of our senses, and yet find them fallible. Famously, Rene Descartes came to the conclusion that while he might doubt his five senses (any of which could be in the grip of a cunning higher power) he could scarcely at the same time doubt the existence of the mind that was doing the doubting. Mind had to exist, and the problem was to work from there outwards.

Watson believes that anxiety about the relationship between reality-in-itself and perception pervaded cultured minds in the late Renaissance, and that a desire to go 'back to nature' expressed a craving for unmediated knowledge, for an originary Edenic certainty. Watson calls this a yearning (as did Raymond Williams's in his classic *The Country and the City*) but rather than dispel the sentiment with hard truths of historical materialism, Watson traces its expression in Shakespeare's plays *As You Like It* and *The Merchant of Venice*, the poetry of Andrew Marvell and Thomas Traherne, and the paintings of David Ryckaert and Jan Vermeer. These cases illustrate a wider phenomenon, for Watson reckons the anxiety affected not only art but also politics, theology, and science.

Militant Protestants demanded unmediated access to God and political power. In economics, money's rise to prominence was experienced as signs supplanting real lived relations to land and production. But surely the history of science presents an obstacle to Watson's thesis, since it reached forward to new certainties in place of old, lost ones. Watson responds that as technologies improved--cartographical projections, perspective drawing, the telescope and microscope--the problems of representation and knowledge worsened. It was apparent that any means of projecting a terrestrial globe onto a paper plane would distort as it mediated, and that in privileging a single point of view the perspective drawing encoded not the durable outer reality but the mere accident of where the artist happened to be standing and biological details of how the eye works. As optics brought in ever greater reaches of the universe to explore, in the heavens and on Earth, so the proportion of Creation already known to humankind got proportionally smaller.

To show that, as in the seventeenth-century, the 1960s 'back to nature' movement sought to recover lost simplicities, Watson offers the Beatles's song "Get Back". In fact, as the original lyrics make clear, "Get Back" was a satire on anxieties about immigration (specifically arising from Enoch Powell's notorious "Rivers of blood" speech), so it was rather more political than Watson suggests. Likewise, Watson sees in 1980s advertisers' reuse of the Beatles's song "Revolution" an analogy with the late Metaphysical poets' abjuration of radical politics and their co-option of the style to "a conservative ethic" (p. 159). Watson is apparently unaware that the song exists in distinct versions separated by crucial lyrical variations: "count me out" of violence, "count me in", or both. The song was

already ambivalent before co-opted by capitalism, as indeed he might have claimed about the poets.

On the philosophical and theological detail, however, Watson is deeply learned and endlessly fascinating. His claim that the subject/object problem pervaded arguments about iconoclasm and transubstantiation is compelling, though he couches it in obsolete post-structuralist terminology about the arbitrary relation "between the signifier and the signified" (p. 36) when he really means to ask how accurate is the picture of reality we get from language. Watson casts Protestantism as a kind of relativism: the miracle happens in the Christian, not the Eucharist. The link to environmentalism is more problematic, for it is hard to agree that wanting to know whether the Eucharist is really sacred or just seems so to our limited perceptions is like wanting to know "whether our communion with natural reality" is genuine or just a sensory perception (p. 38). Most environmentalists hold that probing the philosophical status of our communion with nature is less urgent than stopping the polar ice caps melting.

Watson is aware that Ludwig Wittgenstein's writings on the practicality of language can deflate post-structuralism's windiness (p. 47), but overlooks the scientific reasons for assuming language accurately conveys reality: minds and their languages evolved as survival-enhancing mechanisms for which accurate models of the world are beneficial. Instead, Watson pales himself within the fort of post-modern unreason: "We need not believe that words have any deep hold on reality, only that we are permanently trapped on the surface and must make the best of it" (p. 38). Sealing the wrongness of this claim, Watson widens it ". . . consciousness, by accepting its map of the world as really and exclusively the world, can sustain its sanity". Surely no-one holds her consciousness to be "exclusively" the world, nor that it contains a perfect representation, else she would take for magic those deceptions (such as card tricks) that defeat the senses. But we are bound to accept that our brains, inherited from thousands of ancestors who successfully avoided an early death, make fine models of reality out of sensory data.

We struggle on with only rough-and-ready knowledge of reality, and Shakespeare, Watson claims, counsels us to accept this rather than to pursue absolute certainty or to renounce it in the name of scepticism. In his readings of Shakespeare, Watson's critical brilliance is abundantly displayed. Plays about female chastity such as Othello and The Winter's Tale show that the unknowableness of the female Other is an epistemological problem that generates fetishistic behaviour, centred on such objects as handkerchiefs. Othello's inability to know Desdemona's moral state is paralleled in the audience's inability to know when Othello sexually possessed her, their consummation being repeatedly deferred. Iago is an embodiment of Descartes's thought-experiment about a malicious being controlling his sensory inputs utterly to deceive him about reality (p. 55). In the same Cartesian vein, Shakespeare addresses philosophy's 'zombie problem': how can one tell a automaton from a being with consciousness, a moving statue from a real woman? It is a matter of faith, the play asserts, and Leontes merely gets a second chance to put up with uncertainty, seeing "the uncanny likeness" of Polixenes (that is, Florizel) go to bed with "the uncanny likeness" (p. 63) of Hermione (Perdita).

Watson's claim of Shakespeare's interest in the limitations of philosophy is like ecocritic Jonathan Bate's claim that the plays show the superiority of practical and performative goodness over philosophically-theorized goodness ("Shakespeare's Foolosophy", Shakespeare Performed, ed. Grace Ippolo, Newark, 2000). There is a Darwinian truth to

this pragmatism, for science cuts philosophy's Gordian knots. Watson gets there by conventional literary scholarship, quoting Roy Porter on John Locke finding that humankind had developed "a sound enough-practical grasp of good and bad" (p. 296). True, because pragmatic interactions often make apparently virtuous behaviour genetically more successful than vice, as Daniel Dennett showed ("The Evolution of Moral Agency", Freedom Evolves, London, 2003). But stuck in his post-modern dead-end, Watson can only trot out the familiar line that Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle formalized early-modern concerns about "the way that perception and its categories interact with phenomena" (p. 327). Such silly claims about perception and categories come from Michel Foucault, would have scandalized the German physicist if he heard them, and are rightly ignored outside the humanities.

Watson ends with a confession: "I set out here to write a piece of ecocriticism . . . I found the project drifting into more philosophical questions" (p. 335). This drift is indeed a flaw unless one agrees with Watson (and Bate too, for that matter) that Martin Heidegger was right to characterize ecological concern as a branch of epistemology. The tools for a more genuinely ecocritical (and scientific and philosophical) approach are to hand but remain unused. For example, Watson invokes Stephen Jay Gould's notion of biological 'spandrels'--features of an organism that arise as side effects of something else rather than serving an evolutionary purpose--to explain the common human love of animals. However, the love of animals is ancient while the animal rights movement is distinctly twentieth-century, and to account for this one must posit something as unfashionable as a progressive march of ideas.

As Marx saw (and attempted to emulate in his own model of progress) Darwin's theory of evolution explained biological improvement without lapsing into teleology. Watson glances at the importance of intellectual struggles in advancing collective human thought, but he cannot escape his terror that our very perceptive hold on the world "tends to destroy its intricate and essential beauty" (p. 336). An ecocritic would answer that although the Exxon Mobil Corporation has such destructive power and is itself made of human minds working in consort, the fault is not in the minds but their incorporation. Only when thus framed politically might we say that the mind/body problem is central to ecocriticism.