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See table of contents

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Book Review

Forrest Clingerman, Brian Treanor, Martin Drenthen, and David Utsler, ed. *Interpreting Nature: The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics*. Fordham University Press, 2014.

I find it fitting that a book marking the emergence of this particular field has emerged as the product of an innovative, environmentally and hermeneutically conscious practice. Over the course of an academic year the contributors to *Interpreting Nature*: *The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics* met virtually each month to hear presented and then constructively evaluate a draft of each of the project's chapters.

To be sure, the editors note, the virtual format of these sessions did detract from the fundamentally material aspects of intersubjective connection—"we could not continue this discussion over a shared meal or coffee, as might have been the case otherwise"—and yet the practice also produced a few very constructive results, many of which are revealed in the essays themselves. One result sets a precedent for forthcoming collections: "This virtual space led to a significant intellectual engagement with each other; essays were read with more depth and seriousness, and later papers were influenced by earlier ones. That is to say, the community and the liveliness of the intellectual connections made through this process were substantive and meaningful in ways that recommend the process" (14). Intratextual connections occurring throughout the volume are impressive, bearing witness to the authors' engagement with the work of their colleagues. These give rise to an enveloping harmony that provides the volume with a sense of overarching unity.

Despite the initial peculiarity, at least for a publication not presenting data-based empirical research, I also find it fitting that the book is edited and introduced by four editors from different institutions and with somewhat diverse hermeneutic specializations. The variety of perspectives represented within this field, coupled with the aforementioned intratextual connections, help establish a fundamental commitment to diversity at the heart of this emerging discipline.

For instance, David Utsler's chapter, "Environmental Hermeneutics and Environmental/Eco-Psychology: Explorations in Environmental Identity," argues that environmental identity is a fundamental aspect of each individual's overall identity. Brian Treanor's chapter, "Narrative and Nature: Appreciating and Understanding the Nonhuman World," draws upon Ricoeur's narrative theory in situating nature narratives alongside scientific understanding and personal experience, arguing that each of these modes of knowing is necessary and that narrative underlies them all.

In "New Nature Narratives: Landscape Hermeneutics and Environmental Ethics," Martin Drenthen addresses interpreted landscapes that shape individual and cultural consciousness, along with the role hermeneutical environmental ethics can and ought to occupy in bringing these interpretations to light and helping shape them. Lastly, Forrest Clingerman's chapter, "Memory, Imagination, and the Hermeneutics of Place," argues the importance of addressing *time* in an environmental hermeneutics of *place*. Memory and imagination enable us to live more richly in the present by drawing upon the past with an eye to the future, especially with reference to histories shaping the places we inhabit.

Illustrating further the diversity of perspectives represented in this volume, Christina Gschwandtner looks to the possibility of understanding Jean-Luc Marion's *saturated phenomenon* in relation to ecophenomenology, doing so with reference to experiences narrated by Heinrich, Abbey, Muir, Leopold, and Dillard. She reflects on necessary conditions:

> Can good nature narrative highlight the saturation of the phenomenon we might have missed in our own experience? This implies an important hermeneutic dimension for any application of Marion's thought to nature, namely an insistence that while sometimes saturated phenomena overwhelm us utterly without any apparent prior preparation, at other times we require hermeneutic preparation—that includes an important role for the imagination, as McGrath suggests—in order to experience a phenomenon as saturated. (94)

Reflections on the connection between reading environmental narrative and experiencing saturation in nature exemplify one way in which environmental hermeneutics advocates for richer experiences and post-experiential reflections, and the "hermeneutic preparation" to which Gschwandtner refers reminds us both that philosophy begins in wonder and that dispositions determine ways in which phenomena are perceived. Imagination, central to the essays of both Drenthen and Sean McGrath, plays a central role in hermeneutic preparation.

Two chapters can be situated within what might be called the "post-natural" hermeneutic province taken up by adherents to Habermasian critical hermeneutics, on the one hand, and structuralist, post-structuralist, and deconstructionist hermeneutics on the other. "Must Environmental Philosophy Relinquish the Concept of Nature?" by W.S.K. Cameron, and "The Question Concerning Nature" by Sean McGrath both address claims concerning our inability to gain access to the realm of the nonhuman.

Cameron addresses the persuasive, Habermasian arguments of Steven Vogel, who maintains that attempts to generate ethical imperatives by appealing to the "speech" of "nature" are socially and politically problematic, and similarly that environmental thinkers ought to abandon the term *nature* insofar as our current, often conflated uses of the term lead us to envision the

nonhuman as a force operating in a manner utterly out of our control, and which our actions do not immediately impact. Himself a student of Gadamer, Cameron presents Vogel's position winsomely, drawing attention to compelling insights revealed in his accounts. Warding away tendencies toward anthropocentrism, he responds by arguing that *pragmatically* we do need a term that encapsulates the content that the term *nature* captures, and that in social, political, and scientific contexts the potency of this term makes keeping it more advantageous than not.

McGrath challenges a pair of opponents whose works have gained notoriety in recent years: Timothy Morton and Slavoj Žižek, proponents of *ecology without nature* (EWN), who are especially concerned to overcome what they perceive as the "political impotence of eco-phenomenology, Heideggerian ecology, deep ecology, and eco-feminism" (202). Responding to EWN's wholesale rejection of pre-modern and modern cosmological models, he showcases *hermetic holism* as an alternative model of material interdependence. Combining elements of renaissance-era alchemy, mystical contemplation, and theosophical reflection, hermetic holism "maintained the crucial primacy of contemplation over critique, calculation, and control (the ideological stance of modernity) without, however, aestheticizing nature" (202-203). Its model is thoroughly integrative: "Most fascinating for our purposes is how hermetic contemplation was not separated from practical or technical work. The alchemical assumption was that nature was not yet finished: God left it incomplete so that the human being might become a participant in its development" (219). McGrath bids us join the *magus* in a quest toward cosmic harmonization.

David Wood contributes the penultimate chapter of the work, "My Place in the Sun," in which he submits to critical scrutiny the perennially claimed, intuitable "right to exist," as tied to localized places with particularized narrative histories. As in the essays of Cameron and McGrath, political ramifications of the problem addressed soon become apparent. Considerations of Lockean property rights and New World colonial expansion underscore urgency and relevance accompanying this mode of inquiry. Having addressed the question on multiple levels, he concludes by upholding a necessary yet hazardous tension: "We have argued throughout that while the intuitive plausibility of history being essential to place rests on a somewhat naïve naturalistic grasp of that history as including everything that ever happened here, the thesis survives the inclusion of intentional attitudes, and narrative constructions, even contradictory and conflicting ones, albeit in a more problematic form" (296).

In addition to the overview of trends in environmental thought included in the introductory chapter, *Interpreting Nature* also includes an appendix with a bibliography of pre-existing works that helped usher in the emergence of environmental hermeneutics. This resource provides an expedient reference point for anyone interested to partake of this mode of environmental thought.

The editors of *Interpreting Nature* are cognizant of the imperative that environmental thought be concretized in action, or activism: "If the purpose of environmental philosophy in general and environmental hermeneutics in particular is to address itself the real-world environmental crises we face, then it cannot be merely abstract or theoretical. We would argue, to borrow from J. Baird Callicott, that environmental hermeneutics is no doubt a form of environmental activism" (9). The communal process of meeting together in virtual seminars to discuss contributed essays attests to their fundamental commitment to this principle, and the overall mood that pervades the book is one of pragmatic ethical concern. Such is only proper for a band of hermeneutic thinkers versed in environmental thought.

CONTRIBUTORS

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