

**Lawrence Buell. *The Future of Environmental Criticism:
Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination.***

Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. ISBN: 978-1-4051-2476-8

Rebecca Garcia Lucas Rose

The emergence of environmental criticism in recent decades stems from “very ancient roots.” While acknowledging that reflection about the material world has a long history based in early cosmologies and intellectual concerns, Lawrence Buell’s book aims to assess what is new in the relationship between writing and the environment, how such critical and creative engagement is relevant to life on earth today, and the potential for environmental criticism to develop much needed interdisciplinary perceptions and values for an endangered earth.

The book is valuable reading as a summary and introduction to environmental criticism, however it also urges established scholars to consciously review the field and to look forward. As an introduction, it is a comprehensive bibliography: a canon is articulated through Buell’s writing which is saturated with references to important fictional and critical works. However, even for a well-read scholar, there are historical and contemporary texts to discover. At times, perhaps, the drawback of such extensive referencing is that the reading process becomes interrupted by a lack of familiarity with the briefly discussed texts.

At the heart of Buell’s book is the desire to clarify how environmental criticism can help address the environmental crisis. His chapter “The World, the Text, and the Ecocritic” takes up the well-known problem of mimesis and the “divide between nature and discourse.” Buell reminds readers that the literary imagination translates into real environmental benefit, starting from the focus of its discourse and that “the subject of a text’s representa-

tion of its environmental ground matters.” Buell does not limit environmental criticism to traditional nature writing, but explains that an ‘environmental consciousness’ may reside in writing that does not take ‘nature’ as its subject, or is not explicitly political or realist.

In the chapter “Space, Place, and Imagination,” Buell notes that environmental criticism “arises within and against the history of human modification of planetary space.” Engaging with ethical tensions surrounding our local and global relationships, he asks practical questions, such as “does environmental citizenship *really* hinge on staying put?” “Can a person committed to life-in-place as value practice environmental criticism without spending long periods of time in offices and in transit?” Importantly, Buell raises the centrality of ethics to environmental criticism (particularly through ecofeminism and environmental justice), in the chapter “The Ethics and Politics of Environmental Criticism.”

The final short chapter gestures towards the future of environmental criticism, with Buell reluctant to pass any stifling predictions. Instead he puts forward four challenges that the environmental criticism in literary and cultural studies face: “the challenge of organisation, the challenge of professional legitimation, the challenge of defining distinctive models of critical inquiry, and the challenge of establishing their significance beyond the academy.” These challenges are currently beginning to be met – more than once Buell notes the global growth of The Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment, and the inclusion of environmental courses in Humanities departments in the university (marginal as these courses are). While Buell admits that environmental criticism has not changed the literary imaginative approach, it has introduced a progressive focus and perspective, which has a growing significance for how we think about our position in the living world.

Trinity College, University of Melbourne
rlucas@trinity.unimelb.edu.au