

8-8-2015

Eco-Joyce: The Environmental Imagination of James Joyce edited by Robert Brazeau and Derek Gladwin

Rebekah A. Taylor

Kent State University - Kent Campus

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose>

 Part of the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), [Nature and Society Relations Commons](#), and the [Place and Environment Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Taylor, Rebekah A. (2015) "Eco-Joyce: The Environmental Imagination of James Joyce edited by Robert Brazeau and Derek Gladwin," *The Goose*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 18.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol14/iss1/18>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Goose by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Eco-Joyce: The Environmental Imagination of James Joyce edited by **ROBERT BRAZEAU** and **DEREK GLADWIN**
Cork UP, 2014 \$64.50

Reviewed by **REBEKAH TAYLOR**

Eco-Joyce announces an official end to the standoff between modernist studies and ecocriticism with over a dozen never-before-published chapters that offer varying environmental approaches to James Joyce, long considered the highest and most notoriously urban modernist (and thus assumed most unlikely to possess an “environmental imagination”). Unlike some edited volumes, *Eco-Joyce’s* vigour comes from the variety of voices, as each essay enters dialogue with the others and demonstrates the robust store of ideas exposed by thinking about Joyce ecologically. The resulting synergy is nothing short of ecological; interconnectivity is both a theme and exemplified in the interplay between discussions of trees, rivers, city streets, and human nature woven in and out of masterful close readings of literary and historical texts.

The editors also achieve continuity with at least one clearly identifiable thesis that carries consistently throughout the volume—this is the general assumption that urban spaces should no longer be considered “unnatural” or excluded from discussions about environment. Indeed, it is Joyce’s “programmatically urbanism” (xv) that has caused him to be overlooked thus far. In fact, these authors argue, it is to Joyce’s credit that he resists a sentimental, romantic, simplified version of nature. This volume proves the complexity of Joyce’s ecological imagination, and an insightful reader eventually understands that Joyce

anticipated moves in current environmental thought—particularly “second-wave” ecocriticism, which deconstructs the notion of Nature as an idyllic entity separate from human species.

Still, *Eco-Joyce’s* greatest achievement is that as a sum these essays challenge the reader’s own paradigms and binaries, so that it becomes not only about Joyce’s environmental imagination but our own. Erin Walsh, for example, in her essay on *Finnegan’s Wake*, suggests we consider the possibility that a tree is both symbol and organism, “biorhetorical, simultaneously material and discursive” (77), and “human culture neither random nor determined but ecological” (79–80). Margot Norris notes in her “Negative Ecocritical Visions in ‘Wandering Rocks’” that “[e]cological disaster is not only material and external, but also imaginary and internal and, arguably, ‘rooted’ in separations and disjunctions in perceptions of the environment” (115). In his standout essay “‘Aquacities of Thought and Language’: The Political Ecology of Water in *Ulysses*,” Greg Winston also urges readers to resist a binary perspective: “[w]ater in Joyce’s fiction is physical and pragmatic, technical and scientific, social and political; it is also spiritual and mythic, represented for its powers to preserve life and to take it away. Water courses through his works as setting and character, image and symbol, style and form” (141). In a pronounced example, Eugene O’Brien closes his essay by answering the question posed in his title, “Can excrement be art?” claiming, “excrement has as much right to aesthetic value as has any other property of the mind, the body or the world: it too is part of the flux of consciousness” (212). If past literary critics irresponsibly categorized certain authors and texts as urban and

therefore somehow uninvolved with global and natural environments, the collection *Eco-Joyce* asks us to reevaluate and complicate our own understandings and practices.

The volume's strength also comes from the self-critique of the individual writers, a good balance of American, Irish, and Canadian scholars, and the editors. Starting with the book's Introduction, which provides an accessible but thorough gloss of ecocriticism, Joyce studies, and Irish studies, each writer carefully considers the validity and role of ecocriticism—a literary criticism that considers first and foremost the changing climate and the human relationship to the non-human world around us. Without a hint of defensiveness, contributors objectively consider the strengths and weaknesses of the growing field of ecocriticism and its relevance in the context of Irish studies and modernist studies. The fourteen chapters demonstrates each writer's commitment to rigorous scrutiny and clarification of the terminology that potentially clouds the field. The collection, therefore, meticulously pushes the boundaries of ecocriticism outward and forward toward what might be called social and political ecology, always maintaining historicity. Ultimately, ecocritical approaches seem a way to reconcile the former readings of Joyce as *either* historically engaged *or* high modernist; *Eco-Joyce* supplements existing Joyce scholarship and recent interdisciplinary work in Irish studies and geography to present a comprehensive approach to its subject wherein political concerns are treated within the context of a particular environment or system, both historical and imaginary. As a result, a picture of Joyce as *both/and* rather than *either/or* emerges.

Not only Joyceans or those with an interest in Irish studies will benefit from the publication of this new collection. Its readability and the editors' attention to detail make *Eco-Joyce* recommended reading for a much wider audience than its very niche title might suggest. In fact, one does not necessarily need any knowledge of Joyce or his *oeuvre* to find this book engaging. Students and scholars of the environmental humanities will find *Eco-Joyce* at the cutting edge of their burgeoning field as well as find a demonstrable model of how to approach non-traditional texts (i.e., not nature writing) ecocritically. For modernist studies specifically, there are several additional implications. One strand that is of particular interest for modernist studies is the focus on literary form and representation. Fiona Becket's opening essay titled "James Joyce, Climate Change and the Threat to our 'Natural Substance'" is notable on this mark, and many other essayists also point to the correlation between changing environments and modes of representation.

Eco-Joyce subtly (and with clover) bulldozes barriers that have prohibited modernist studies and ecocriticism from embracing one another, and the book represents a major step forward in the "greening of modernism." This is not an "inquiry into" or "notes on"—rather, it is a fully developed examination of the possibilities that still remain for Joyce et al. As the editors note, this volume is long overdue and most relevant given the resonances with the world we find ourselves living, reading, writing, teaching in today—a world where writers like Joyce appear prophets of our own environmental crises. Describing a John Cowper Powys novel, for example, Fiona Becket notes the ability of early twentieth century writers to

capture “connectedness of humanity and nature gone wrong” (33). Joyce and this emergent scholarship suggests, in other words, that we know ecological interconnectedness when it is somehow broken—by things like pollution, waste disposal problems, ecological disaster, or in our time, extinction events and the effects of global warming. This symptomatic approach is ripe for future work in modernist and Irish studies, and *Eco-Joyce*

is a much-needed volume that sets the standard for future endeavors of its kind.

REBEKAH TAYLOR is a doctoral teaching fellow and PhD candidate in the English department at Kent State University. She is looking forward to defending her dissertation, “Ecological Modernism and the New Literary Form of the Anthropocene” in the coming months.