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# REVIEWS

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Leonard Scigaj. *Sustainable Poetry: Four Eco-poets*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999. 311p.

ANTHONY FLINN  
EASTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Leonard Scigaj's *Sustainable Poetry: Four Eco-poets*, is a thoughtful, meticulous, well-wrought study of Wendell Berry, A.R. Ammons, W.S. Merwin, and Gary Snyder. It is also, to both its credit and detriment, an angry and impassioned book. In its effort to explore and promote the work of important poets who try to re-connect the reader to the natural world, it is persuasive, even compelling. However, to reach those poets he finds the need to trample on the efforts of poets and critics whose focus is not on nature but on the mind's contact with itself, as well as on language as subject. Scigaj ultimately damns this latter school, most commonly identified with the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets and postmodern critics such as Charles Altieri and Marjorie Perloff, implicating their casts of mind in the planet's sorry ecological condition. That is, because non-ecopoets see themselves as separate from and outside nature, Scigaj argues that they abdicate their responsibility to the world they inhabit, ignoring the complex truth that nature *includes* us all and so must be afforded the same inherent worth, the same subjecthood, as language-wielding humans.

Though the bulk of the book dwells on the work of the four eco-poets, the core of his argument resides in the opening theoretical chapters, which set forth the conflict between Derridean *Différance* and Scigaj's moral and aesthetic touchstone, *Référence*. Deconstruction and its postmodern heirs are anathema to eco-poetry because *Différance* permits us to deny the knowability of nature. If language, therefore, evokes not the presence of nature but its absence, it can provide access to nature but only to itself, to the texts we construct to substitute for that access. No access to nature means no responsibility nor culpability for its decay. *Référence*, by contrast, is that epiphanic moment when one sees that language is "a reified, limited set of abstract rules and concepts, a product of human logic and reason, whose major function is to point us *outward* [emphasis his], toward that infinitely less limited referential reality of nature" (38). By diminishing the power and consequence of language to a finite set of rules, Scigaj grants nature, by contrast, a kind of sublimity, however guardedly expressed as "infinitely less limited" than mental

constructs. He wants us to embrace poetry that can reawaken a sense of awe at the face of the nature. Language, then, ought not to be the subject of poetry, but subordinated, a tool: "For ecopoets, language is an *instrument* [emphasis mine] that the poet continually refurbishes to articulate his originary experience in nature" (29).

However, Scigaj's claim for language's instrumentality is short-lived. For to evoke that "originary experience in nature," that Edenic, pre-nominal state of being, it is necessarily to summon up a faith as passionately as a mystic seeks a colloquy with God. In drawing upon the work of phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, echoing rather than interpreting him, Scigaj refers to "a prereflective moment of perceptual faith" in which "we float in the general sea of being of flesh anonymously sensing itself through the five senses" (70). For such a moment to come into being, however, it must do so as an act of will, a desire, not because there exists an *a priori* condition to which language can connect us. How can we know, in fact, whether or not it is language itself that creates the "moment of perceptual faith"? And how, too, can we even make sense of the exquisite impressionism of phenomenological language such as this without responding to it as language:

Language for Merleau-Ponty is "another flesh" that emanates from dehiscence and speaks not only the voices of humans but the sounds and colors of the referential world from which it grew. Language develops from the dehiscence or folding back on itself of the flesh of the world. (70)

I would argue that this language creates the state it seems only to refer to, and thus that *Référence* is more desire than fact. Moreover, Scigaj's use of Merleau-Ponty counters his view of language as a mere "instrument," a medium of access to nature. For if language is indeed "another flesh," itself of the natural world, able to speak at once in the voice of both humanity and nature, then it too must possess a kind of identity, perhaps even the same subjectivity that Scigaj would have us grant to nature. If so, then why is not language itself fit content for poetry? Finally, even if, as he argues, we are capable of certain kinds of experience without the mediation of language, that does not alter the fact that all the other kinds of experience are necessarily mediated by language that shapes and changes how we interpret it, what we can know of it.

Although it might have lightened the force of his admirable moral passion, Scigaj might have buttressed his argument on behalf of ecopoetry by asserting that the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets fail because they neglect to express fully the complexity of experience. That is, by their focus on language as the basis for constructing visual and sonic artifacts, it could be argued that they ignore language's cre-

ative force, poetry's power to shape our thinking, to help us see clearly. But Scigaj excludes essential subjects for poetry and thus essential means for exploring human experience. For to exclude language as a proper subject for poetry, or to exclude what Faulkner called "the human heart in conflict with itself," is simply wrong, thus diminishing the moral authority of ecopoetry. Scigaj might respond by arguing that "human experience" is itself too limited in its scope, that we must shift our focus from the anthropocentric to the biocentric. Indeed, as a society we must do nothing less than that, but an understanding of the biocentric can come only through human experience.

Nonetheless, Scigaj's anger and arguments must not be taken lightly or dismissed, for his criticism should matter to anyone who cares about how language acts in the world. For unlike many of those who chant the race-class-gender mantra, proving to their great satisfaction that marginalized voices are indeed marginalized, Scigaj is driven by the moral imperative to restore the natural world's subjective status, declaring that the natural world exists not to serve us, but to fulfill itself as an inherent good.

Moral passion is refreshing in contemporary criticism, but still, must poetry make us ecologically aware? Must it make us activists? Must it make things happen? If we think it must, perhaps at that moment it ceases to be poetry. Charles Altieri, one of this book's villains, once declared in a graduate seminar that "poetry expands our vocabulary of moral possibility." Altieri is right in this claim, and that is a primary reason why Professor Scigaj's book is of such fundamental value. His treatments of Berry, Ammons, Merwin, and Snyder serve as superb introductions to these poets, gracefully demonstrating acts of *Référence* in each poet, thereby disclosing the wealth of experiential and moral possibility available to the mind attuned to the natural world. *Sustainable Poetry* is lucid, learned, and invigorating; it deserves to be read and responded to. ✨