

Inscribing Atlantic Canada: an Occasion for Ecocritical Meditation

Milton Acorn. *The Edge of Home: Milton Acorn from the Island*. Selected and with a Preface and Introduction by Anne Compton. Charlottetown: Island Studies Press, 2002. 122pp.

Hugh MacDonald and Brent MacLaine, eds. *Landmarks: an Anthology of New Atlantic Canadian Poetry of the Land*. Charlottetown: The Acorn Press, 2001. 160pp.

"Support for Kyoto soft," states this morning's headline: "Popularity of agreement dips if implementation comes with a cost."¹ Clearly, the ratification of the Accord is no sign that Canadians have seen the ecological light. Instead, oil producers are now deciding whether to take their chances and continue refining their products in Canada or move those operations to some desperate Third World nation whose emissions are still below the environmental radar. Perhaps a few of us ordinary citizens will turn down our thermostats at night, park our SUVs, and take the bus to work. But any impact this may have on global warming is cancelled out a thousand times over by the fuel required to operate the tanks, aircraft, and warships of the armies massing in the Middle East, a military orgy whose purpose it is to ensure that the oil supply continues to keep up with spiralling demand in the West. In the post-9/11 world of good versus evil, regime change in Iraq wins hands down over climate change as the Number One survival issue.

So what does any of this have to do with Canadian poetry? Is there an ecopolitical role for those who write it and those who make their living as professional readers of it? How can the quiet wisdom of poets and scholars possibly compete with the bellicose foolishness of George W. Bush's "axis of evil" speech or the anti-Kyoto grandiloquence of Ralph Klien's Pauline conversion to the cause of Canada's future unemployed? In the grand scheme of things, aren't

ecopoetics and literary ecocritique about as effective as a few lowered thermostats and a few decommissioned SUVs? Here it pays to remind ourselves that the study of political rhetoric's implication in our ecocrisis and poetry's potential for inspiring the shift of consciousness necessary to resolve it is only part of the ecocritical task. Neither ecopoetry [**Page 98**] nor literary ecocriticism is merely about saving the planet. Rather, these literary arts constitute a study of the transformative tension between and among ecosystems—that is to say, among communities of organisms, both human and nonhuman. Environmentalism, if uninformed by this understanding of ecology, tends to slide into the nostalgia of Green Paradise Lost. On this view, ecopoetics is essential to ecopolitics.

Ecocritique is relatively new to Canadian literary criticism, but it has already had an impact, if the two volumes of poems under review here are any indication. *The Edge of Home*, Anne Compton's selection of Milton Acorn's Prince Edward Island poems, and *Landmarks*, Hugh MacDonald and Brent MacLaine's anthology of poems about Atlantic Canada, are presented as regional contributions to Canadian ecopoetics. I notice that the work of D.M.R. Bentley, one of Canada's foremost ecocritics, is cited in the introductions to the poems in these books—a good sign that scholars have been paying attention. In the early 1990s, Bentley challenged the Canadian critical community to develop "a method of reading which diminishes the gaps among people, their world, and their feelings while also emphasizing the uniqueness of all things, be they people or plants or poems, in face of the forces that would grind them down into a denatured uniformity"—that is to say, forces that threaten to obliterate poetry's "unique, local, regional, and national characteristics." Although neither of the two introductions inspires quite the degree of political passion Bentley hoped to ignite in the self-absorbed academic community, they do represent "a method of reading" that foregrounds the importance of regionalism to ecopoetics.

As a Western flatlander who spent the first several of my adult years in the Maritimes, I experienced the reading of these volumes as a vivid reminder of Atlantic Canada's uniqueness—the cities and villages that seemed so ancient to me, the sounds of its voices, the rhythms of its climate, the play of light across its seawaters, the subtle colour of which I have not seen anywhere else in Canada. I wish I could write of the experience without sounding so sentimental, but critical discourse is by definition a reductive account of a critic's personal encounters with the power of poetic expression. With regard to regionalism, suffice it to say that given the radical diversity among its regions, is it any wonder that the common ground we call Canada is most easily

captured in explanations of what it is not? Hence the popularity of a beer commercial's emphatic insistence that we are *not* American. [Page 99]

If I were charged with the task of compiling a list of ecopoetic visionaries, the name of Milton Acorn would not be the first to spring to mind. But ecocriticism is partly about revisiting the poets of the past to determine their possible candidacy for the role of ecopoet. To my mind, Acorn is a poet whose work demands that the ecocritic grapple with the incompatibility of marxian-humanism and an eco-affirming posthumanism; of the autonomous subject and ecopoetic intersubjectivity; of Canadian nationalism and the ecocidal predisposition of the pseudo-democratic State. For Acorn was nothing if not a classical socialist, a ferocious humanist,² a rugged individualist, and a clangorous critic of American cultural imperialism's threat to what he regarded as a distinctly Canadian poetic tradition. Furthermore, as my own ecocritical work privileges gender as an important category of analysis, I would have to add unmodified masculinity to the list of challenges to his ecopoetic rehabilitation. In short, if he is an ecopoet, it's in spite of these qualities, not because of them. And, indeed, this is the thrust of Anne Compton's argument. While I'm not entirely convinced by that argument as it stands, I don't want to dismiss it altogether. For there is something about these Island poems that tells me to consult Murray Bookchin's human ecology theory and the ecosocialism of Joel Kovel,³ and then reread the Island poems alongside Acorn's explicitly political poetry.

What I do appreciate about Compton's work is her focus on Acorn as a regionalist—*first and foremost*. This remedies what I see as an injustice done to his reputation in the late 1960s and '70s as a result of the binarization of regionalism and nationalism in the critical discourse. West Coast poets, suffering from a fashionable case of "Western alienation" and feeling more affinity with western American writers than with the poets of central and eastern Canada, used this regionalism/nationalism binary as a weapon in their battle with the literary establishment, which they—with some justification—accused of subscribing to centralist notions of *the* (i.e., singular) Canadian experience. Somehow, Acorn ended up on the wrong side of this binary—but then, so did just about anybody who questioned *the* West Coast view of things. Acorn's nationalist resentment of American cultural influence, together with his reckless policy of "shoot first, ask questions later," only exacerbated the situation. As a consequence—whatever his reputation in Atlantic Canada—the rest of the country has never fully appreciated Acorn as primarily a regionalist poet.

Compton's work corrects that view. Her judicious selections from his several volumes of poems make a strong argument for Acorn as a "poet of place"—a term which the Western regionalists generally reserved for [Page 100] themselves alone. But poets of place are not *ipso facto* ecopoets. For example, one would be hard pressed to locate E.J. Pratt's Newfoundland verse in the ecopoetic tradition.

Compton's argument in support of Acorn's Island poems as exemplifying ecological poetics hangs by a slender thread. In connection with the Imagist impulse in his work, Compton repudiates "Michael Ondaatje's claim that Canada 'is really not the country' for Imagism since the form is inadequate to 'the vastness of our place [and] our vast unspoken history'" (22). This claim is, of course, part of Ondaatje's promotion of the postmodernist long poem, a form once in need of energetic promotion. For when he made the claim (1979), the long poem was not so centrally in the mainstream of Canadian poetry as it was soon to become. But however understandable Ondaatje's motives for making the claim, Compton is right to question it, for it's a gross over-generalization. She counters it by citing one of Bentley's ecotheoretical points: "In their technical and formal aspects, Bentley argues, poems manifest an 'equivalence' with the spatial features of the external world of which they are an 'integral and inescapable part . . .'" (22). Therefore, in Compton's view, Acorn's small poems are entirely appropriate for his poetic renderings of tiny Prince Edward Island, and this correspondence justifies an ecocritical reading of his work.

I have no quarrel with Bentley. Ecopoetry does "manifest an 'equivalence' with the spatial features" of the world external to it. The presence of this characteristic is a necessary, if insufficient, indication of an ecopoetic sensibility at work. Compton's work might benefit from a closer reading of Bentley's ecotheory which, in my view, is quite clear in its insistence that this equivalence works in conjunction with other characteristics in the creation of an ecopoetic vision—a point to which I shall return. To make this one criterion bear most of the weight of the argument in support of "The Ecological Poetics of Milton Acorn's Island Poems" is to ask too much of it. This is not to say that Compton has told us nothing of importance about Acorn's (Is) landscapes—indeed, she gets a lot of interpretive mileage out of the application of this one ecopoetic criterion. She convinces me that Acorn was a much more meticulous poet than I would have suspected, but her work still leaves me wondering how to reconcile his "I am the centre and measure of all things" persona with ecological ethics.

At this moment, I appear to myself as more prescriptive than I want to be, so perhaps I should be more forthcoming about how I view the

ecocritical enterprise. While ecopoetics is still in the early stages of theorization, what seems to be emerging is a critical consensus that an ecopoetic sensibility involves a demonstration of language as that which paradoxically [Page 101] separates us from, and connects us to, the organic world as it exists beyond our linguistic constructions of it. As an aesthetic struggling to secure a more conspicuous place within an overcrowded empire of competing poetics, ecopoetics is easier to define in terms of what it rejects of that empire. Ecopoets reject both the modernist illusion that the nonhuman world is directly knowable and the equally illusory postmodernist notion that it is *unknowable*. In response to this embrace of paradox, ecocritics tend to focus on poetic acts of imagination that transcend the inherent binarism of language—acts that suggest a space of dynamic linguistic synthesis between the two elements of any number of binary pairs, such as text and context, knowledge and experience, continuity and difference, culture and nature, poet and reader, self and other. While these few criteria in no way exhaust the list of ecopoetic characteristics, their absence from a poetic text or their avoidance by those who seek to explicate it would cause me to question the presence of a truly ecopoetic sensibility.

MacDonald and MacLaine's editorial choices may yield more easily to an ecopoetic paradigm, given that they began their anthology project with a call for thematically appropriate poems:

In our call for submissions to *Landmarks: An Anthology of New Atlantic Canadian Poetry of the Land*, we invited poetry on a wide range of subjects: discovery and settlement, wilderness, pastoralism, women and men of the land, stories of the land, the family farm, mapping, landscape and memory, the garden, the park, aboriginals, Acadians, the English and Celts, loyalist, agriculture, mining, forestry, tourism, depopulation, pollution, erosion, urbanization, environmentalism, archaeology, exile, homecoming, and the future of the land. (10)

Although none of these topics is a guarantee of an ecological aesthetic, a thematic approach is a good way to begin a search for it; the operative word here is *begin*. All the poems selected for inclusion are new, and many of the contributing poets may be as new to other readers outside Atlantic Canada as they are to me. For any reader on the hunt for fresh ecopoetic possibilities, this volume would be a good place to start. The poems are gratifying in their quality and quite unlike the Western Canadian writing with which I'm more familiar.

MacDonald and MacLaine's two introductory pieces to the volume are not nearly as ambitious as Anne Compton's extended piece of

literary criticism on Acorn. MacDonald provides a short preface outlining the history of this anthology project and explaining the rationale for the choice of poems for inclusion. MacLaine, who, like Compton, is a poet himself, [Page 102] authors the lengthier introduction, which attempts to tie together a variety of poems by fifty contributors, who include, in addition to born-and-bred Atlantic Canadians, tourists, part-time residents, and transplants writing in every possible poetic form. It's this quantity and variety that makes a thematic approach necessary, but the real virtue of this approach is that it works as a way of avoiding claims that cannot be supported by at least some of the poems.

What I like about MacLaine's essay is that it addresses the philosophy that underpins the method of reading ecopoetically. While Compton, focussing her interpretive energy on "the technical and formal aspects" of the poetry, asks *how* a poem works, MacLaine also asks *why*—or, to put it another way, *to what end?* It's not enough to say that poems are an "integral and inescapable part" of the material world they inscribe, for however true and necessary this insight, what needs to be acknowledged first is a more fundamental truth, namely that the human body is our primary means of communication with that material world. The embodied poet is physically embedded in it—not only embedded but interacting with it, actively transforming it and, in return, being transformed by it. This "interactive picture of organism and environment"—to borrow a phrase from environmental biology—precedes any inscription of landscape and is the model upon which ecopoetic process is based.

"To inscribe a landscape," writes MacLaine, "is to inquire about one's position in that landscape. . . .

[I]nscription works in two directions: from landscape to poet in the sense that nature imprints both mind and spirit, and from poet to landscape in the sense that the poet imprints the page with his or her impressions, which will, in turn, affect others' impression of that landscape. D.M.R. Bentley, explaining his eco-poetics of Canadian literature, notices a similar kind of relationship: "the crucial links between any culture and its environment are the human beings who, on the one hand, shape and construe their surroundings according to their needs and preoccupations, and, on the other, alter and create their physical and imaginative constructs in response to their environment and expectations" (15)

The "physical" and the "imaginative" are inextricably yoked—indeed,

it's unfortunate that we need two separate words to describe the process of construction, and even more unfortunate that the only way language can represent this interactive process is as a dialectic. But "[b]eyond such dualisms," explains MacLaine, "to inspect our relationship with the land is to understand and appreciate that the land sustains us, one way or another, [Page 103] and that, whether we are a cosmopolitan cyber-junkie or a back-woods hermit, we cannot escape our dependency on other life forms. Our attitudes to those life forms, however, are variously complex and changeable, and it is this complexity that [ecopoems] attempt to penetrate." I would put it another way: we are not born alienated from nonhuman nature, or from our bodies. That alienation has to be taught to us. Ecopoetics is about repairing the consequent damage.

The Edge of Home and *Landscapes* will be well received in English departments and Canadian Studies programs across the land. At least, I hope so. For what better places to get the ecological word out to those about to inherit the environmental mess we have made of the world? The next generation of power brokers are currently passing through our classrooms. The least we can do is introduce them to some alternatives to the bankrupt political and military discourse responsible for the alienation of human communities from each other and from the organic world that sustains them. These two volumes of poems can make a significant contribution to that awesome task.

Notes

1. I'm not making this up. I really did make the mistake of reading the paper before settling in to write this review. See Works Cited. [\[back\]](#)
2. I paraphrase Al Purdy's description of Acorn's "ferocious. . .humanism," quoted by Compton (10). [\[back\]](#)
3. I'm thinking in particular of Bookchin's *Toward an Ecological Society* and Kovel's new book, *The Enemy of Nature: the End of Capitalism or the End of the World?* These two works could be used in the construction of an ecosocialist literary theory that might provide a framework for a more convincing interpretation of the ecological suggestions in Acorn's poetry. [\[back\]](#)

Works Cited

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