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Jonathan F. Krell. *Ecocritics and Ecoskeptics: A Humanist Reading of Recent French Ecofiction*. Liverpool UP, 2020.

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Abstract

Review of Jonathan F. Krell. *Ecocritics and Ecoskeptics: A Humanist Reading of Recent French Ecofiction*. Liverpool UP, 2020, 261 pp.

Keywords

ecocriticism, humanism, French Ecofiction

Jonathan F. Krell. *Ecocritics and Ecoskeptics: A Humanist Reading of Recent French Ecofiction*. Liverpool UP, 2020. 261 pp.

Investigating the tensions between ecocriticism, ecoskepticism, and humanism in contemporary French fiction, Jonathan Krell's monograph contributes amply to ecocritical theory. Whereas ecocritical scholarship often examines the dialectic between nature and culture, Krell's study clears an ambitious path into the genealogy of humanism and its historical tensions with ecocriticism. Without aiming to provide a chronological history, Krell invites readers into longstanding philosophical meditations about what it means to be human in the age of ecological vulnerability, taking as his primary point of departure René Descartes's strict differentiation between thinking man and instinctual animals and connecting it to more recent ecocritical strands of thought. The intellectual inheritance of Cartesianism and its binary divisions between reason and feeling and, for Krell, humans, animals, and the natural world in general, in turn contextualize his reading of the debates around environmentalism, eco-justice, and humanity sparked by Michel Serres's *The Natural Contract* and Luc Ferry's trenchant response in *The New Ecological Order* and the literary texts that comprise *Ecocritics and Ecoskeptics*.

Thus, Krell deftly weaves together close readings and extensive forays into humanistic and ecocritical theory and situates the texts he brings together within the specificities of French ecological thought. And while the binary philosophical topography of human/animal could easily reiterate the polarized discourses that have bedeviled ecocriticism, Krell instead seeks out diverse approaches to ecological questions without obscuring his overarching argument about the compatibility of environmentalism and humanism. The structure of the book contributes in large part to the balance he achieves. Bookended by his introduction that effectively guides readers through the contrasting viewpoints of Serres and Ferry and a conclusion that makes the work's most explicit argument about the need to bridge humanism and environmentalism, the book is divided into three parts with each section comprised of chapters devoted to a range of French authors and themes in ecocritical literature. Leading readers through the rich ambiguities of the French word "temps" (time and weather) explored by Serres in Michel Tournier's *Gemini*, the erotic relationship between humans and the landscape in Stéphane Audeguy's *The Theory of Clouds*, and the separation of language from (the female) body in Chantal Chawaf's *Mélusine des détrius* ('Mélusine of the Rubbish'), Part 1 emphasizes the metaphysical concerns with the unseen and tangible effects of environmental degradation on human psychological, spiritual, and physical well-being.

Krell, however, is at his best in Parts 2 and 3. Although he underscores how the works in Part 1 demonstrate that "humankind's war on nature would signal a

suicidal war on humanity itself” (95), he successfully nuances this perhaps obvious correlation, for environmentalists at least, by linking it to broader questions of colonialism, the Holocaust, and totalitarianism. Part 2 brings into sharp focus the debate on animal rights in France through readings of Vercour’s *You Shall Know Them* and Olivia Rosenthal’s *Que font les rennes après Noël? (To Leave with the Reindeer)*. In these chapters, Krell establishes one of his most intriguing analyses by exploring the porous boundaries between animality and humanity through the lens of Nazism and colonialism. In the wake of Hannah Arendt’s denunciation of the “law of the strongest” (144), Krell examines the striking, if incomplete, parallels between cruelty to animals and the dehumanization of others that the authors in Part 2 imply helped fuel the Holocaust and the cruelties of colonialism. Whereas Krell stops short of endorsing a complete correlation between animal and human rights, his use of the existential humanism of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre to approach the disturbing evocations of slaughterhouse and death camp butchery exemplifies the compelling links between humanism and ecocriticism he forges throughout the book. The emphasis on totalitarianism in Part 2 in turn establishes the “ecoskeptical” perspectives that provide a counterweight to the ecological sympathies in Parts 1 and 2. Focusing on J.-C. Rufin’s *Globalia* and *Le Parfum d’Adam* (‘Adam’s Scent’) and Igor Gran’s *O.N.G!* (‘NGO’) and *L’Écologie en bas de chez moi* (‘Ecology at the Bottom of my House’), Part 3 provides a cautionary and ludic note by presenting the blurred line between environmental stewardship and totalitarianism the authors detect in many ecological discourses. Krell returns to the anti-humanist tendencies Ferry attributes to ecocritical thinking he first presents in his introduction, extending it to broader concerns about the fate of democracy and the categorical rejection of humanity Rufin and Gran express. In doing so, Krell holds up a valuable mirror to the field of ecocriticism, not as part of a caustic attack but rather as an opportunity to move beyond the zero-sum game that he argues has governed the relationship between ecocritics and humanism.

If there is one question that comes to mind about Krell’s book, however, it is the focus on texts written only within hexagonal France. Given that a sizable burden of environmental catastrophe will be borne by island nations, readers might wonder about the exclusion of texts from France’s overseas departments and territories and the lived experiences with ecological crisis they portray. Indeed, the epistemological and historical links between environmental degradation and colonialism he establishes amply position him to expand the book’s scope by inquiring into the works of writers from Martinique, Guadeloupe, and French Polynesia. This missed opportunity notwithstanding, the strength of his contribution cannot be overlooked. Krell’s strong pedagogical voice plots out the far-reaching philosophical strands of thought that have contributed to humanism and environmentalism and the ways they manifest in well- and lesser-known French ecofiction. With its dense bibliographic resources and footnotes that underscore the

depth of his inquiry into the political, social, and cultural contexts of the works he studies, the book provides a rich resource for both established and new scholars of ecocriticism. Perhaps more importantly, though, his work exemplifies not only how the humanities intervene in pressing questions about life in the Anthropocene epoch, but also why the humanities can, and must, continue to reflect on deeply crucial questions about what it means to value simultaneously human ingenuity and the environment.

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