

Thomas M. Wilson. *The Recurrent Green Universe of John Fowles*.

Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006. ISBN 90-420-1989-1.

Chris Coughran

Although John Fowles' non-fiction has long been a staple of "nature writing" anthologies – his essay *The Tree*, for instance, having been reprinted in several collections over the past twenty years – *The Recurrent Green Universe of John Fowles* is the first comprehensive, ecologically-oriented approach to the British writer's novels, poems, essays and journals.

In the book's introduction, Thomas M. Wilson discloses "one of Fowles' central insights," namely,

that more than one manner of perceiving nature is needed in order for us to have a full and humanly satisfying relationship with the natural world. In a similar manner this volume champions the value of a multiplicity of routes towards uncovering useful knowledge about John Fowles' writings. (21)

By "multiplicity of routes" Wilson means, primarily, both science *and* the humanities – the "two cultures" of C. P. Snow (18, 197, 204) – as embodied in the figure of Fowles, an "amateur field naturalist" and "Wordsworthian lover of natural places" (9). "Consilience" in fact emerges as the predominant theme of Wilson's argument, which traverses a promising pastoral revisionism, neo-Romanticist aesthetic criticism, and a variety of scientific perspectives. Eschewing "the usual range of critical schools in Anglo-Saxon literary studies" (15) and above all, "post-modernism" (134), Wilson incorporates into his argument "the vocabulary of neurophysiology" (50), "modern personality theory" (40), "evolutionary psychology" (52) and other strands of contemporary scientific thought, grafting these tokens of "eco-

logical” wisdom onto otherwise tolerable readings of Fowles’ miscellaneous writings.

Literary specialists are unlikely to be convinced by Wilson’s scientism. The fact that “pet ownership,” for example, has been observed to reduce “cholesterol, triglycerides and systolic blood pressure” (106) hardly validates the “biophilia hypothesis” put forward by entomologist Edward O. Wilson. Nevertheless, the “biophilic instinct” is subsequently mobilised – in the name of ecocriticism – to explain everything from “the continuing appeal of pastoral in human history” (106, 113) to Fowles’ fascination with “the mystery of wild nature” (167-68): “If the biophilia hypothesis is ... correct then Fowles is not an eccentric nature recluse, but a human being living a well-adapted existence” (107). No less outlandish is Wilson’s claim that a Heideggerian “ecopoetics of dwelling are [sic] ... explicable ... as brain states characterised by small and fragile neural constellations” (203). Elsewhere, large claims are made on behalf of evolutionary psychology: “Non-human animals might feel momentary fear, but they cannot experience anxiety or depression, states which require inner resources of memory, imagination and generalisation that only we fortunate humans possess” (50); anthropology: “universally, people group local plants and animals into various kinds that correspond to ... the Linnaean classification system of professional biology”; and childhood psychology: “under the age of six children are egocentric and generally uncaring of the natural world; between six and nine they become interested in wild creatures; from nine to twelve their knowledge of the natural world rises sharply, and from thirteen to seventeen they readily acquire moral feeling towards species conservation” (120). What bearing any of this scientific “data” has on Fowles’ writing, remains unclear. In his appropriations of the discourse of popular science, particularly cognitive neuroscience, Wilson would have done well to consult a more sophisticated attempt at consilience, such as Karl Kroeber’s *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind* (1998).

Wilson covers much safer ground in his chapters on Romanticism and pastoral aesthetics – both well-tended preserves of ecological literary criticism. Wilson draws from British and American theorists of pastoral (Terry Gifford, Lawrence Buell, Leo Marx) to make a compelling case for an insistent “post-pastoral” sensibility permeating Fowles’ fiction and autobiographical writings. Wilson’s somewhat perfunctory treatment of the sublime is unfortunate, given his subject’s evident predilection for solitude (118-19, 163-64). Wilson’s glib dismissal of Raymond Williams’ *The Country and the City* – an incisive and cogent interpretation of pastoral form and function – is also regrettable. On this score, Wilson’s allegiances lie (*contra* Snow)

with an earlier critic, F. R. Leavis, whose notion of “organic community” (87) Williams’ book had persuasively debunked. Wilson’s rehabilitation of the Leavisite myth would be considerably less perplexing if Fowles hadn’t himself – in terms remarkably congruent with those of *The Country and the City* – berated “the creators of the cosy myth of the contented cottager, the countryside as humble idyll, for the delectation of those, mostly urban, who preferred to ignore agricultural and rural reality” (94). It is difficult to see how Williams’ book – especially in comparison with Leavis’ *Culture and Environment* – could be so readily misconstrued as a “politically dangerous” “oversimplification” of the British pastoral tradition (114). For Wilson, indeed, the measure of Fowles’ “personal authenticity” (139) is a discernible “love of the natural world” (73), “a feeling for agrarian culture” (83-84), an appreciation of “wild beauty” (78) – all construed not as signs of a recrudescing pastoral subjectivity, but of a robust “biophilic instinct.”

In keeping with an author-centred approach that verges on the biographical (14), Wilson suggests a “turn from the written text to a study of Fowles himself.” Ironically, however, “Fowles himself” turns out to be little more than the sum of his (and others’) “written texts” (156-57). Wilson seems reluctant to concede – in an apparently unsuspecting paraphrase of Emerson – that “the literary artist or poet, even one of greatness, still only provides a second-hand and unfortunately re-presentational perception of nature” (219). This reluctance is all the more striking, given Fowles’ obvious penchant for textual recycling. In his writings both fictional and personal, Fowles is apt to describe nature in terms of intertextual echoes. In his journals, for example: a Scandinavian farmhouse is extolled by virtue of “the unmistakably genuine Thoreau, or Jefferies, feel of the place” (164); the song of a species of finch that inhabits Fowles’ garden is “Stravinsky-like” (217); a contemporary rural scene is likened to “the England of Nash paintings, dimly beyond that, of Palmer” (128); a secluded Greek island – “the land of the *Odyssey*” – is vividly perceived to be “partly French and medieval, partly Greek and classical, partly my own dreamworld” (80). By the same token, the protagonist of *Daniel Martin* apprehends nature with eyes that are “John Clare’s and Palmer’s ... and Thoreau’s” (175). Wilson glosses over this abundant textual recycling, drawing attention instead to “the author’s admiration for the acknowledged masters of nineteenth-century American and British nature writing” (164). Authorial influences and allusions – Henri Alain-Fournier, D. H. Lawrence, Thoreau – prevail over the conspicuous intertextuality of Fowles’ writing.

In the penultimate chapter of his book, Wilson inquires – by way of Fowles’ fleeting acquaintance with Zen – into the possibility of “an alternative to a linguistically-mediated apprehension of nature” (212). Unsurpris-

ingly, given Wilson's dogged allegiance to a myth of origins – as attested to by his echoing, once more, the opening gambit of Emerson's *Nature*: "the lives of our ancestors were surely full and satisfying" (220), etc. – Wilson suggests that it is indeed possible to "experience nature unmediated by language" (231). Eschewing the term "logocentric" and its rather more drastic implications, Wilson posits an alternative to "scriptocentric" culture in specifically oral forms of nature poetry: sympathetic utterances to be "spoken aloud rather than written down on the page" (226). However, it seems ludicrous to suggest, as Wilson does, that Fowles' "nature poetry" is ecologically viable when spoken, "but that when presented to the public in written form ... encourage[s] a regrettable alienation from nature" (226). It is ironic that this Platonic throwback should serve as Wilson's remedy for "Western society's scriptocentric disassociation from the natural environment" (226).

The context of Wilson's study, as of ecocriticism generally, is the global "environmental crisis" and a concomitant need for "widespread social change" (55, 59-60). Although Wilson preempts, only to dismiss the charge of implementing "a morally-committed agenda" (260, cf. 37-38), it is clear that Wilson considers himself a "participant ... in a pandisciplinary inquiry of the first order of historical significance" (Lawrence Buell, qtd. in Wilson 260). Responding to the urgent claims of an environment in crisis, Wilson writes: "I am surprised, and saddened, that the great majority of literary critics continue to politely fiddle at their desks, ignoring both 'nature writing,' and the state of their species' ancestral home outside the library window" (260). In consequence, lurking always beneath the surface of Wilson's analysis is the imperative that "we scriptocentric and selfish Westerners" (259) look to writers such as Fowles that we might learn "the ideal way in which to construe nature as ... interested non-specialist[s]" (19).

The singular contribution of Wilson's book to the burgeoning field of ecocriticism is its comprehensive presentation of Fowles' writings on nature, including obscure journal entries inaccessible to the "interested non-specialist." Wilson's engagement with Fowles' fiction is particularly welcome, even though *Daniel Martin* is discussed at much greater length than, say, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. In a characteristic move, Wilson collapses the notorious multiple endings of the latter novel into a positivistic interpretation loosely based on evolutionary theory (145-46). Regrettably, while Fowles' standing as an early master of British postmodernist fiction presents Wilson with a rare opportunity to bring ecocriticism and postmodernism into a fruitful, mutually illuminating dialogue, the question of Fowles' postmodernism is altogether elided by Wilson's orthodox ecocritical approach. Rather than break new ground, *The Recurrent Green Universe of*

John Fowles rehearses some familiar themes of ecological literary criticism. And yet, despite various flaws (including several bibliographic oversights), Wilson's book remains a useful introduction to the work of a significant twentieth-century "nature writer."

University of Melbourne
coughran@unimelb.edu.au

In 2006, Wilson published *The Recurrent Green Universe of John Fowles* (Rodopi Press), which examines the many profound reflections on the natural world found in Fowles's essays, poems and recently published Journals. In 2007 Wilson posted a blog regarding his visit to Lyme Regis in memory of John Fowles, and it makes for very interesting reading. Included are some beautiful photographs taken by Wilson; one features the "John Fowles Memorial Path" that leads down to the sea and "The Cobb," immortalized in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Here is the link to the blog: <http://tmwilson.org/2007/07/16> Thomas M. Wilson.

Ecocriticism is the emerging academic field which explores nature writing and ecological themes in all literature. Thomas M. Wilson's book is the first to consider the work of one of the most critically acclaimed and generally popular post-war English writers from an ecocritical perspective. Fowles is best known as a novelist and author of such works as *The Magus*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Daniel Martin*. Going beyond the fiction, this book also examines the many profound reflections on the natural world found in his essays, poems and his recently published Journals. Thomas M. Wilson is a writer who focuses on the areas of literature and the environment. Wilson's most recent book, *Stepping Off: Rewilding and Belonging in the South-West* (Fremantle Press, 2017) is part environmental history, and part answer to the question "Where do I come from?" The author's previous book, *The Recurrent Green Universe of John Fowles*, was the first to consider the work of one of the most widely popular post-war English writers, John Fowles, from the perspective of ecocriticism. Wilson is currently at work on a cultural history of rewilding. Experience. "present.

Research Fel Thomas M. Wilson's book is the first to consider the work of one of the most critically acclaimed and generally popular post-war English writers from an ecocritical perspective. Fowles is best known as a novelist and author of such works as *The Magus*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Daniel Martin*. Going beyond the fiction, this book also examines the many profound reflections on the natural world found in his essays, poems and his recently published Journals. Ecocriticism is the emerging academic field which explores nature writing and ecological themes in all literature. Thomas M. Wilson's book is the first to consider the work of one of the most critically acclaimed and generally popular post-war English writers from an ecocritical perspective. Thomas M. Wilson's book is the first to consider the work of one of the most critically acclaimed and generally popular post-war English writers from an ecocritical perspective. Fowles is best known as a novelist and author of such works as *The Magus*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Daniel Martin*. You can write a book review and share your experiences. Other readers will always be interested in your opinion of the books you've read. Whether you've loved the book or not, if you give your honest and detailed thoughts then people will find new books that are right for them. 1. Nearly all the book-length works on Fowles oeuvre from this sector are commentaries on his individual works, usually arranged chronologically (rather than thematically, as in the case of the present study).