

art, - I will say at once, in the simplest manner, that art is vision or intuition" (8, tr. Douglas Ainslie). Also see pages 11, 16, 22 and 24 in the introduction itself. (Reprint by Hard Press Publishing).

² Geoffrey Hartman, "The Fulness and Nothingness of Literature" *Yale French Studies* 16 (1955): 66.

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PLANTS IN CONTEMPORARY POETRY: ECOCRITICISM AND THE BOTANICAL IMAGINATION. By John Charles Ryan. New York and London: Routledge, 2018. 256 p.

One could consider 2018 as a fecund year for research that combines ecocriticism, affect, emotions, and embodiment. Among many publications in this area which appeared in 2018, three of them are worth mentioning here. These include Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino's co-edited volume *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment* (2018), Nicole Seymour's *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age* (2018), and John Charles Ryan's *Plants in Contemporary Poetry: Ecocriticism and the Botanical Imagination* (2018). While Seymour's, Bladow and Ladino's works engage with a wide gamut of literary and media genres in their discussion of emotional connections between material beings and our responses to alarming environmental crises, Ryan's monograph singles out itself by focusing exclusively on plants – what he terms "botanical beings" – in the poetic genre.

Divided into nine chapters, and using eight contemporary poets of great repute in the Anglophone world viz. Les Murray, Mary Oliver, Elizabeth Bletsoe, Alice Oswald, Louise Glück, Judith Wright, John Kinsella, and Joy Harjo, *Plants in Contemporary Poetry* sets out to, among many objectives, "disclose the power of verse to anticipate and parallel scientific thought through a freedom of imagination..." (4). In respect of this objective, the author meticulously demonstrates an impeccable mastery of both scientific (neuro-scientific) knowledge about plants and breathtaking environmental literary criticism. Within a larger framework of the botanical imagination, Ryan proposes *phytocriticism* as a concept for unpacking plant relations and modes of being in poetry. "A phytocritical outlook," he writes, "emphasizes the agencies of botanical beings in poetic texts and considers how plants are rendered, evoked, mediated, or brought to life in and through language" (14). This mode of analysis is situated within the overarching concept of the botanical imagination which, as Ryan puts it, "repeatedly evokes, builds on, and expands previous considerations of the imagination in some of the earliest and most formative scholarship in ecocriticism" (7).

In order to dismantle "the relegation of the plant to the zero-point of behavior, experience, and intelligence against which the capabilities of the animal are turned to in sharp relief" (16), the author highlights what he terms the "sacred ecologies of plants" while establishing that plants have souls, as expressed in Les Murray's poetry. He defines sacred ecology "as a state of plant-animal-human souls in dynamic exchange with the material landscape" (29). Therefore, poetry enacts and evokes vegetal souls through the dynamic interconnectedness of all other beings which share life with plants. Overall, Ryan argues that Murray's sacred ecology of plants deconstructs the idea that plants lack

intelligence by approaching “the botanical domain as a sentient locus of spiritual realization and multispecies exchange” (28); Murray further brings together Christian and Indigenous Australian concepts of nature while mirroring fresh scientific evidence for plant intelligence. In this respect Ryan writes that Murray believes “the sacred is communicated to mortal beings through the interplay of Indigenous and Christian traditions” (33).

The third chapter focuses on the American poet Mary Oliver, arguing for what Ryan calls “the inter-corporeality of the vegetal body.” The author establishes that previous studies on Oliver’s poetry have overlooked her “engagement with botanical life and the sensorial rendering of human-plant transactions” (54-55) and given priority to birds, mammals, insects, reptiles, and other mobile creaturely subjects, thereby neglecting vegetal beings. Consequently, Ryan proposes that “the sensing body of Oliver as poet exists in dialogical exchange with the multitudinous bodies of nature, including those of lilies, trilliums, peonies, grapes, roses, and other everyday vegetal forms that co-inhabit her coastal terrains” (55). He draws on recent scholars on plant communication such as Richard Karban’s *Plant Sensing and Communication* (2015) to demonstrate that science is increasingly exonerating Oliver’s poetic insights into vegetal life which she has garnered through walking, sensing, and writing. The chapter asserts that plants mediate human experience of the world and that they possess the ability to perceive corporeally. Most importantly, it contends that the power of intercorporeality is found in its relationship to empathy which can lead to love of plants. This ushers in the fourth chapter which centers on bioempathic emplacement and the radical poetry of Elizabeth Bletsoe. Ryan argues in this chapter that Bletsoe’s poetics moves beyond the mere utilitarian functions of plants to posit vegetal empathy which consists of “bioempathic feeling into and with plants that conversely entails openness to being affected by plant gestures in response” (93). Without any intention of propounding a revision of Western medicinal history, Ryan underscores that “plants are already endowed with the intentionality, desires, affective states, future-directedness, and empathic resources required for them, in turn, to imagine a future with us and other non-vegetal beings” (102).

Chapter 5 admirably separates John Charles Ryan from those “environmentalists who [have] acquired a reputation as gloom-and-doom killjoys” according to Nicole Seymour. This is one of the chapters that offers Ryan the avenue to engage with positive emotions in botanical beings, thus demonstrating that environmentalism and eco-criticism can also be pleasurable. Using British poet Alice Oswald’s work, he examines botanical humor. Indeed, drawing on the Greco-Roman era and thinkers such as William Copper and Ralph Waldo, Ryan posits that, on the one hand, “Oswald’s collection positions plants as agents of humor that engender laughter in human subjects” as her poems become “a vehicle for comedy through caricature, parody, and other literary techniques leveraged to bring about humor through—or sometimes at the expense of—flora” (109). “On the other hand,” Ryan continues, “Oswald’s poetry figures plants as inherently funny personae who enact the forms of jocosity endemic to their being-in-the-world” (ibid). The above sums up what Ryan calls “the dialectic of botanical humor” and he goes on to ask: “We laugh at plants; do they laugh at or with us? If flora is funny, then what is funny to flora?” (110). Then he surmises that such transposals invite us “to imagine—and reimagine—the plants around, between and within us” (ibid). Finally, the author underscores the importance of vegetal humor as a great resource with which to face the future of the “grossly unamusing geological epoch of the Anthropocene” (121).

The next chapter handles vegetal memory in the poetics of Louise Glück where Ryan argues that the ability to recall past occurrences and anticipate future events is not only possessed by animal-human beings. Drawing on Charles Darwin's experimentation with tendril-bearing plant cotyledons, Ryan submits that Glück's poetry "imaginatively mediates vegetal beings' memories of themselves, one another, and their ecological circumstances" (137). This is followed by Chapter 7 which discusses the temporality of plants using Judith Wright's poetry. According to Ryan, "Wright's work troubles the reduction of plant time and resists the imposition of human timeframes on plants and other beings. Instead, she strives through her ecopoetic practice to responsively and dialogically attend to the time of plants—and particularly to render time in terms of her commitment to environmental consciousness, ethics, activism, and stewardship" (ibid). However, the lengthy accounts of philosophical notions of time here slowed me down as I read this rather poetically and scientifically rich and fascinating book. I therefore consider this as the most difficult chapter of the book.

Chapter 8 explores plant death in John Kinsella's poetry which, of course, is a sad thematic concern, but Ryan delivers it pleurably. He draws a useful demarcation between biogenic and anthropogenic plant deaths before engaging with the manner in which Kinsella's poetry transcends the usual consideration of plant death as metaphors for human mortality and societal decay (190). Instead, Ryan asks: "Why does a tree, shrub, or herbaceous plant die? And when should the death of a plant matter to us?" (191). After astounding textual analysis of vegetal death in Kinsella's poetics, Ryan concludes that both biogenic and anthropogenic plant deaths must be taken seriously in the current age of the Anthropocene and mass species extinction. Fortunately, Chapter 9 wraps up the book on a very positive note by examining vegetal hope and the love of flora in Joy Harjo's poetry. Cognizant of the sadness and sorrow orchestrated by biodiversity loss nowadays, Ryan reminds us of the "bold claim for a vegetally-inflected form of ecological hope [which] is tacit in stories of plant resilience, recovery, and renewal that continue to surface in the public domain despite a prevailing mood of dread and helplessness over the state of the planet" (214). He contends that Harjo's poetry does not approach vegetal life "as aesthetic background or cultural commodity, but as a vibrant agent in the process of writing, composing, and valuing language" (217). Both the chapter and book conclude as follows: "As a resource for the Anthropocene, botanical hope embraces the idea of the plant as a bearer of hope for a more equitable future on earth for itself and us" (236).

It is however curious to note that for a monograph dealing with contemporary poetry in English, all of Ryan's authors come from Britain, the US, and Australia. Surprisingly, Africa, Asia, and Canada are completely missing in the book. That notwithstanding, *Plants in Contemporary Poetry* stand out in many ways, including its breadth and depth of analysis, its dazzling combination of neuroscientific knowledge and literary criticism, and its forceful poetic language, among others. Most importantly, you can never look at plants the same way you did before reading this book!

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UNFORGETTING CHAITANYA: VAISHNAVISM AND CULTURES OF DEVOTION
IN COLONIAL BENGAL. By Varuni Bhatia. New York: OUP. 2017. 291 p.