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*The Ecological Thought* by Timothy Morton (review)

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(Review)

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Similarly, Brennan leaves the mistaken impression that Greene was a wholehearted supporter of liberation theology. He concentrates on Greene's opinion of Father Camilo Torres, who fell in battle on behalf of Colombian guerrillas in 1966: "Torres provided Greene with tangible proof that the concept of a revolutionary socialist (and Marxist) Christian was a viable model for repressed Third World countries" (132). Although Brennan cites some praise Greene penned for Torres in 1969, he seems unaware of Greene's ultimate, more considered judgment on the cleric, uttered in 1988: "Things went too far when a priest, Camilo Torres, actually carried a rifle in Colombia, shooting and killing." Greene's position was thus finally closer to Pope Paul VI's orthodox stance in *Populorum Progressio* that "explicitly denounced violence" in promoting the Church's "preferential option for the poor" (132). Yet Greene's uneasiness with marrying the sword and the cross was already present in 1966, in a funeral oration from *The Comedians* that Brennan quotes only partially. Preaching on the words of the apostle Thomas, "Let us go up to Jerusalem and die with him," a priest declares that "in the days of fear, doubt and confusion, the simplicity and loyalty of one apostle advocated a political solution. He was wrong, but I would rather be wrong with St. Thomas than right with the cold and craven." Greene's avowed sympathy for liberation theology was hence highly qualified: He commended it as an imperfect charitable alternative to disregard of poverty and oppression while nevertheless maintaining that political *caritas* cannot replace religious *agape* in a properly Catholic heart.

As serious as these shortfalls are, they do not vitiate Michael Brennan's central achievement. In establishing conclusively the primacy of Roman Catholicism in Greene's intellectual and imaginative vision, *Graham Greene: Fictions, Faith and Authorship* provides clarity and direction for future critics. Brennan's *tour d'horizon* of six decades of texts is unfailingly stimulating and frequently discerning. Even his misreadings should spur subsequent scholars to craft more accurate critiques of the interplay between Greene's religion and his art. But Brennan's study will insure that such cartographers of Graham Greene's creative journey take his Catholicism as their lodestar. In this author's fictions, his faith is the heart of the matter.

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***The Ecological Thought.*** By Timothy Morton. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. ISBN 978-0-674-04920-8. Pp. 163. \$39.95.

In his latest book, Timothy Morton provides those scholars who are interested in the growing field of ecocriticism but not sure what all the fuss is about with

a provocative, accessible introduction to the radical implications and intriguing possibilities that ecology offers for cultural theory. Those looking for literary analysis or an overview of the current state of environmental literary theory should turn elsewhere—starting with Lawrence Buell's excellent, if now slightly dated, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (2005). In *The Ecological Thought*, Morton leaves behind the close textual analysis, high-level theory, and, thankfully, the impenetrable prose, of his previous book, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2007). Instead, he offers a series of probing thought experiments and far-reaching cultural and theoretical analyses that explore ecology's cultural implications. Morton's style embodies the provocative irony that he argues the ecological thought demands as he takes on the role of "the irritating Columbo-style guy at the back of the room, the one who asks the unanswerable question" (115). So while many of Morton's answers suggest that his conception of the ecological thought is not as radical as he thinks it is, or as it perhaps should be, his questions challenge scholars in the liberal arts to wrestle with the consequences of ecology's recent scientific discoveries.

In his introduction, Morton helpfully pushes the standard boundaries of environmentalism, as he did in his previous book, by claiming, "Ecology can do without a concept of a something, a thing of some kind, 'over yonder,' called Nature." This "Nature" connotes "hierarchy, authority, harmony, purity, neutrality, and mystery," all ideas that Morton rejects (3). Instead, he proposes, "*The ecological thought* is the thinking of interconnectedness. . . . It is a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite center or edge. It is radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings, sentient and otherwise—and how can we so clearly tell the difference?" (7-8). One of the key ways that Morton develops this thought is by drawing on the thinking of Darwin, whom he positions alongside Freud and Marx as one of the forerunners to post-structuralism (62, 65, 118). Thus, at the beginning of his book he asks, "Are we ready to admit the world of mutation and uncertainty that Darwin opens up?" (18).

In "Thinking Big," his first chapter, Morton jumps into this world, combining Milton's cosmic vision in *Paradise Lost* with Tibetan culture and Darwinian biology to argue that environmentalists need to ditch notions of the "local" and "place" in favor of what he terms the "mesh" (28). This mesh allows us to imagine the "interconnectedness of all living and non-living things" (28), and Morton uses it to describe the "intimate" interrelatedness of all things and the absence of any fixed, teleological identity (30-31, 44). Because of our existence in the mesh, and hence our intimate familiarity with others, Morton, drawing on Levinas and Derrida, proposes that we should conceive of other beings as "*strange stranger[s]*" (41).

Morton expands the definition of strange strangers in his chapter "Dark Thoughts," to include not only animals and humans, but also other life forms and even artificial intelligence (71ff). Drawing on Darwin's thought, Morton imagines an existence with no fixed identities; he argues we live in an ecological mesh with

beings who are simulated (69), queer (81-87), contaminated (66), and mutagenic (87), and thus we need to learn to “love the disturbing, disgusting beings” who share this life with us (92). Morton develops this ethical account of how we should choose to live entangled with other strange strangers from Levinas’ reflections on the severe responsibility that derives from our encounter with the face of another. He concludes that since we can no longer clearly distinguish between life forms, we must choose to extend this ethical encounter to “all sentient beings” (96).

In his final section, “Forward Thinking,” Morton confronts one of the underlying paradoxes of his argument; while he admits that his ecological thought is only available in the globalized context of capitalism (104, 132), he attempts to go beyond its ideology by extending choice, on which capitalism puts a “gigantic value” (131), to all life forms so that together we can choose cooperation and coexistence (101). In order to do this, he upholds various artistic forms that represent the “ambience” or “aura” of the ecological mesh and how these forms imagine a radically open form of society and identity (103, 105). Morton critiques posthumanism as being simply the mirror image of deep ecology—both conceive of nature in ways he finds too essentialist (113)—and instead tries to reduce the definition of “consciousness” and simultaneously extend it: “there is no mind as such, because mind always emerges from interacting networks” (116). Morton admits his “connectionist” approach to consciousness has problems, but it is part of his effort to build a philosophy without ontology—“No Being, only beings”—which he argues is the only sort of philosophy consistent with the ecological thought (117-21). He hopes this philosophy can lead to an ethics and a politics that will undo capitalism and perhaps bring an “ecological democracy” in which we make the difficult choice to cooperate and coexist with all the beings (whomever they are) in the ecological mesh (125-27).

Morton should be commended for his gutsy, imaginative efforts to consistently think through the consequences ecology has for cultural theory. Humanists have a responsibility to engage with the sciences, and Morton admirably enters this conversation, even proposing several hypotheses about consciousness and aesthetics that he would like scientists to test (13, 114). It seems to me, however, that Morton’s ecological thought fails on at least two, closely related points: the first is that his capitalistic notion of choice unlimited by a normative or communal good seems antithetical to the radical, democratic coexistence he wants, and the second is that his rejection of ontology trivializes identity and precludes real difference, and thus real love.

While Morton wants to undo the logic of late capitalism by extending the privilege of choice throughout the ecological mesh, this would only deepen capitalism’s hold (101-02). Morton’s ecological aesthetic of radically open choice attempts to make attributes that foster “an erotics of coexistence” pleasurable (127-28), but he never suggests that humans should use their reason to do anything other than choose according to personal pleasure; thus coexistence becomes simply another aesthetic object to consume. At one point, he breaks down human/nonhuman distinctions

by citing Darwin's observation that butterflies choose their mate based on aesthetic displays and thus make subjective choices (71). This notion of subjectivity won't in any way disturb those who make money using glossy advertisements and implies that the function of reason is to choose based on personal pleasure. This is not the kind of choice democracy requires, as Morton would be forced to admit if he tried to articulate how a democracy that included butterflies and artificial intelligences could actually work. So although Morton begins his first chapter by commending Milton for his cosmic, inclusive vision of the universe, Morton would not concur with Milton's Christian belief that humans are responsible not simply to choose, but to use our reason to understand and choose according to a divine reality. At the end of *Paradise Lost*, Milton has Adam explain that he will limit the choices he makes because he has learned that "to obey is best, / And love with fear the only God" (12.561-62). While this submission to a divine order may seem unfashionably regressive, it profoundly overturns the workings of capitalism, which thrives off of Morton's desire to free individuals from any notion of telos or health so they can pursue their choice of pleasures (44, 128). Morton would argue Milton's conception of a created order has been disproved by modern ecology, but he should at least admit the uncanny congruence between the kind of freedom his ecological thought maintains and the license to choose that cost Adam and Eve Paradise and that fuels our consumptive society. Democracy and ecological health, as Milton knew, need individuals to imagine and work toward a vision of the good, not simply make choices based on pleasure.

Morton's fervor to imagine our existence within a mesh of other beings who can't be clearly differentiated from ourselves leads to his inability to imagine actual compassion or love; since difference is a necessary condition for love, his description of the strange stranger leaves no one there to love. This oddity is revealed even more starkly in his recent essay in *Qui Parle* (2011), "Here Comes Everything: The Promise of Object-Oriented Ontology," where he compares his concept of the unknowable depths of the strange stranger to Hopkins's notion of inscape. Hopkins believes in a mysterious depth within each creature because each is God's creation, but in Morton's scheme, there is no reason for believing another being is valuable; after all, he argues in *The Ecological Thought* that they might not even exist (117-20). Morton's dilemma can be traced back to the philosopher he cites most often in his book, Levinas. As David Bentley Hart notes in *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (2003), "the oddest feature of Levinas' thought ... [is that] the other—to remain truly other—cannot in any way actually appear" (77). Thus Hart's conclusion about Levinas' Other applies equally to Morton's strange stranger, it "is not really other at all: without theme, context, contour, identity, the other is always the same, always nothing but the infinite orientation of my ethical adventure" (82). So while Morton claims that "a future society based on the 'whateverness' of the strange stranger" would be "a society of hospitality and responsibility" (105), a society where we consider "others, in their interests ... and

in their very being" (123), his rejection of ontology eviscerates being of content and frees other beings to become malleable projections of personal desire (105).

While Morton's articulation of coexistence, for all its innovative science and theory, fails to imagine radical love, Christian scholars could begin thinking a more profound ecological thought by following the implications of theology and posing some unanswerable questions of their own. For instance, the incarnation involves God crossing a seemingly impenetrable "species" boundary, and yet Christ's incarnation does not minimize the differences between God and man; instead, his life shows both how vast this space is and that it can be traversed out of the desire for another's good. What implications does Christ's embodiment of humanity have for our relations with other species? Instead of trivializing the differences between humans and nonhumans—and between different human individuals—how might we represent these differences in ways that will encourage us to do the difficult work of crossing them in redemptive love? The Christian ecological thought does not imagine all beings as equally unknowable or give us the license to make choices disconnected from our unique responsibilities as humans; rather, it requires us to recognize the potential for radical love that Christ's incarnation offers to humanity.

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***Spiritual Identities: Literature and the Post-Secular Imagination.*** Edited by Jo Carruthers and Andrew Tate. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2010. Vol. 17 of *Cultural Interactions: Studies in the Relationship Between the Arts*. ISBN 978-03911-925-7. Pp. vi + 231. \$58.95.

The Peter Lang series, *Cultural Interactions: Studies in the Relationship Between the Arts*, of which this volume is a part, directs its attention to forging new relationships between the arts, expanding their interdisciplinary possibilities. *Spiritual Identities* serves this purpose well, emphasizing fresh perspectives on the role of "the religious in contemporary literary studies" (1).

Those who dispute nineteenth-century claims that religion was no more than a relic of unscientific thinking will be heartened by the articles in this volume, which start from the perspective, reminiscent of Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade, and others, that "the religious is increasingly revealed as an *irreducible* category of thought, feeling, experience and imagination which can never be explained away and with which we will always have to reckon" (1). In recognizing the importance of contemporary religious yearnings, the editors maintain that the "cracks" into which religious impulses flow in a world without religion are nothing other than the space of literature itself: literature is neither an alternative to, nor a substitute