

Devin Zuber
Osnabrück University

Abstract Title: Greening Cavell: Ecological Literary Criticism and the Problem of Philosophy

Abstract:

Although much of Stanley Cavell's work deals with figures theorized as seminal for the development of American environmental awareness, very little has been done with Cavell's ideas inside the burgeoning field of "ecocriticism," or ecological literary criticism. This is surprising, given that much ecocriticism has premised itself on a critique of contemporary philosophy and post-structural theory—that both have perilously ignored our connection to the non-human world, at the ultimate cost of dehumanizing us from our surroundings (Bate)—and the immediate parallel this strikes with Cavell's contention that traditional philosophy has problematically "rejected the human," a problem which can be solved by recovering the "human animal."

This essay seeks to sketch some of the fruitful conjunctions between Cavell's ideas and ecocriticism's engagement with environmental representations in literature. How might, for example, Cavell's work on Thoreau and Emerson inform the claim made by various ecocritics (Buell, Gatta), that these particular Romantic figures are the soil of "the American environmental imagination"? Emerson and Thoreau both had complicated relationships to empirical science and transcendental belief, and ecocriticism has accordingly faced critiques that its alignment with "hard" science as a critical meta-narrative problematically chafes against its founding investment in certain Romantics with a penchant for the mystical (Philips). Cavell's elaborations on Emerson's "meta-curiosity," his stipulation that Emerson used skepticism and wonder as actual spaces for thinking, writing, and acting, suggests certain cues that ecocriticism might take for a more cogent relation to Romanticism.

Also, if ecocriticism is explicitly concerned with "ecoliteracy" (Kroeber)—a pedagogical imperative that reading "ecocritically" can improve students' relationships to nature, off the page and outside of the book—how might the scholarly interest in Cavell's implications for education (Standish), relate to teaching Thoreau and Emerson in a "green" context? And, finally, what are the ways that Cavell's recent considerations on "Thinking About and Eating Animals" might speak to ecocriticism's ethical claim to textually represent non-human interests, as seen in ecocriticism's growing subfield of animal studies?