

Book reviews / Comptes rendus

Postmodern Wetlands: Culture, History, Ecology

ROD GIBLET

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996.

Rod Giblet's *Postmodern Wetlands: Culture, History, Ecology* leaves the reader somewhat ambivalent, and not only for reasons of its deconstructionist approach. Painted in broad strokes, the theme of the book is the misplaced repulsion towards wetlands expressed by modern man bent on exploitation, colonization and enlightenment attitudes. The theme is well-established and eloquently articulated. The evidence Giblet brings forward to demonstrate modern man's deep-seated anxiety and revulsion towards swamps, bogs and marshes is ample, drawing on both historical record and key literary figures. From Dante and Shakespeare, through Melville and Dickens, Giblet traces the attitude that western man has applied to the description and valuation of wetlands.

Using feminine imagery to describe wetlands as the cold female, Great Mother, whose function is not determined until impregnated by male purpose (being drained for agricultural or urban use), Giblet claims to deconstruct this paradigm of modernity and lay it bare for re-consideration. Throughout, he introduces the postmodern theme of male dominance and hierarchy as the mode through which identification, planning and the use of wetland areas have been generated to the virtual elimination of these areas. Modern value systems, bent on male dominance, have grounded the process of re-constructing wetlands through draining and converting them for purposes of agricultural exploitation and urban development.

Giblet continually repeats the theme that wetlands as the feminine are perceived by modern man as the rotten putrid female element, the shadow of death, miasma, and home of monsters, just the antithesis to the male, rational life of The Enlightened. By their very nature, then, wetlands are the sorts of things to be destroyed through conversion into ordered and useful places. For Giblet, this process is one of colonization. The perception and conversion of wetlands is interpreted throughout *Postmodern Wetlands* in terms of psychoanalytic and especially Freudian categories. He ends with a call to hope that humanity in the postmodern era will be able to become attuned to

the attitudes of the John Muirs, Thoreaus, and Leopolds who see Wetlands as places of great beauty and vital function (*e.g.*, as purifiers).

From my perspective, Giblet's analyses are relevant, but overworked. Here is where the ambivalence enters. While I think it important to recognize the association of wetlands with the feminine, the interpretation, when extended so comprehensively, becomes tiring, as does the constantly repeated sexual imagery of the swamp as the rectal and vaginal. The draining of wetlands is associated with enemas and the ordering of wetlands in development with impregnation. At times, I could not help feeling that this book was an attempt at writing for effect, for shock value. Indeed, it seems to me to be an exploitation of the sexually obsessive. Why could it not be, in contrast, that swamps were drained simply because it made sense to do so for purposes of development, not to colonize and conquer the feminine. Giblet's selection of literary figures surely reflects much of the attitudes of the times, but as is usually the case, these writers do not reflect all of the people's views of the time, and may in fact reflect only a minority view. Having worked alongside those in the development industry, I find it difficult to apply Giblet's analysis to most of their attitudes, however machismo they might be.

Most of the time, wetlands are converted in order to expand production or settlement capacity or simply for money. Greed and perceived necessity are the sources of wetland exploitation and destruction, not the misogynist need to conquer and control the female. Predictably, I will be accused of not seeing sufficiently deeply in failing to recognize the depth of underlying sexual motivations. But it seems to me that Giblet's perception is itself a reconstruction of human motivations to fit a pre-determined Freudian model. For some cases, he seems to be correct or at least insightful. But in my experience, where he is correct, he is identifying pathological behaviour, not normal behaviour.

The reason for taking Giblet to task in this way is not to undermine the project, for sometimes it is vital to identify sexual underpinnings in our attitudes toward the environment, as ecofeminism has taught us. But to identify the problem as a sexual issue can lead to a misidentification of the motives and, therefore, a misdirection in determining how we should address the environmental crisis of disappearing wetlands. The critical problem, it seems to me, is greed. Greed is perhaps such an obvious and simple motive that it does not make for a very interesting theme to write about. Coupled with the demand for security (*e.g.*, absence of malaria repositories), greed is a trans-sexual motivator that causes us to overlook a myriad of functions in the environment. Our reason for overlooking the water purification function of wetlands seems to have nothing to do with associating wetness with feminine fluids, but with the blindness that comes with the desire to accumulate wealth. I see no reason for making such strong connections

between misogyny and the arrogance of greedy exploitation, which may in fact be indifferent toward the feminine.

What is lacking, as is the case in many writings in environmental thought, is a familiarity with the mind set of those who do the exploiting — namely, developers, planners, and political leaders. Academics tend to impose a frame of reference for interpreting or re-interpreting the behaviour of the “common man” without direct familiarity with those being interpreted. Giblet’s project is a case in point. The analysis that could have served as a valuable tool for understanding our destruction of wetlands turns into a discrediting handicap for those of us who could make some use of these insights when addressing policy and decision-makers.

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The Reign of Ideology

EUGENE GOODHEART

New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, 203 p.

This book belongs to the growing body of literature dedicated to the task of exposing the intellectual poverty and politicized dishonesty of postmodern thought. Goodheart concentrates his attack on the ideology critics active in contemporary literary theory and cultural studies, who, he tells us (4):

write from their own ideological position without subjecting it to self-critical reflection, as if its intellectual and moral superiority were self-evident. Uninterested in how the text understands itself, they have no compunctions about aggressively translating what the text believes it is saying into a language that serves their own agenda. That language is one of resistance to the destructive legacy of imperialism, racism, patriarchy, and economic oppression. They affirm the *identities* of particular disenfranchised groups against imperializing tendencies to repress them. “Difference” as a marker of identity becomes sacrosanct.

Like the worst of this literature, Goodheart’s book occasionally resembles the sort of humorless screed we’ve learned to expect from knee-jerking conservatives. As such, it sometimes borders on the oxymoronic: ‘I harbor a suspicion that *postmodern* is a vacuous term, but I find myself using it to