

Book Review

Rowland, Susan. *The Ecocritical Psyche: Literature, Evolutionary Complexity and Jung*. New York: Routledge, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-415-55094-9

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Susan Rowland's *The Ecocritical Psyche* is fundamentally groundbreaking. Her previous writings on a range of subjects from Jung and literary theory, feminist revisioning of Jung's ideas, and analyses of Jung as a writer to the relevance of Jung's ideas to the humanities culminates in her bringing Jung's vision of the unconscious as creative to ecological literary studies. To enter this discourse, she shares a trove of theory so well integrated as to open up the field of literary criticism with a model of how to be relevant to the world. Rowland is striving to do nothing less than persuade that reading literature has the power to transform human relations to nature, or, as she often calls it, non-human reality.

. . . [L]iterature is part of psychic evolution at the edge of chaos. To write and/or read is to participate in nature's evolution. In the literature of the last hundred years is to be found attempts to reconnect deeply and lastingly with nature's voices.
(Rowland 99)

The Ecocritical Psyche is, itself, a model illustrating the intellectually fecund power of reading. Rowland uses as frames for her explorations of literature the research of biological theorists including Charles Darwin, James Lovelock, Roger Wescott, and Carol Yoon; materials from the works of historians from fields as diverse as mythology, medieval studies, renaissance studies, and Native American history; positions of cultural critics on complex adaptive systems and on the political sources of understandings of nature; expositions by psychological literary critics on the gothic and the trickster; new perspectives by Jungian theorists such as Jerome Bernstein on Borderlanders, Andrew Samuels on political forms, and David L. Miller on the symbolic meanings of descent into hell; and numerous concepts from philosophers—including meanings of nature analyzed by Kate Soper, the 'field' as elaborated by N. Katherine Hayles, a phenomenological approach to reading and nature described by David Abram, tacit knowing proposed by Michael Polanyi, imagined vs. perceived images as distinguished and evaluated by Gaston

Bachelard, alterity as critiqued by Luce Irigaray, dialogics of language as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin, discourse and power as articulated by Michel Foucault, and evolution as reformulated by Henri Bergson. If that last sentence seemed dense, may it have succeeded in suggesting the complex interweavings this book achieves between the thoughts of many thinkers in their fields, those of Carl Jung with regard to psyche, and Rowland's concerning ecocritical readings of literature.

Let me illustrate with just one series of extracts, chosen at random. Consider all the connections drawn in the following discussion dedicated to grounding knowledge and culture in the material world:

Jung's synchronicity is the notion of an ordering in nature accessible to the human psyche. A parallel perspective is to be found in the work of Michael Polanyi, in *The Tacit Dimension* (1967), and Wendy Wheeler, in *The Whole Creature* (2006). Wheeler brings Polanyi's concept of 'tacit knowledge' into her imaginative construction of new work in evolutionary science of 'biosemiosis'. She finds in his work an understanding of nature that is significantly oriented around the body as a 'knowing' organ. Polanyi's 'tacit knowledge' is the kind of embodied, partly unconscious knowing that we acquire by body and psyche working together at levels not accessible to ego (separation) consciousness. Effectively, tacit knowledge is knowledge based on body and connection. It cannot be captured in words abstracted from embodied acts. Mythically, tacit knowledge is of the earth mother. (36)

Rowland then connects these ideas to the poems of Sean Heaney: "Wheeler draws on Polanyi's tacit knowledge to re-situate the body in nature as an organ of knowing indivisible from the psyche. Wheeler's tacit body is Heaney's poetical one. Both exhibit the profound desire to re-animate, re-incarnate and *re-embod*y earth mother consciousness."

Rowland then cites Wheeler on complex systems to establish that tacit knowledge is part of the genesis of both cultural and natural development:

Complex systems evolve via the emergence of strata of increasing complexity. Biological evolution proceeds in this fashion, as, we have now seen, does human culture and human knowledge. Human discovery and invention—human creativity—proceeds via tacit knowledge and our sense that we are in contact with a complex reality of which there is more to be known. (Rowland 37; cf Wheeler 67-68)

Rowland then concludes that nature creates culture: "Culture is therefore nature *creating through the tacit, unarticulated knowledge of human beings*" (37).

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All the connections drawn—between the ideas of Jung and Wheeler, those of Wheeler and Polanyi, of Polanyi and Wheeler and Heaney, of Wheeler and Darwin, between body and psyche, body and poems, psyche and nature, nature and culture—are encompassed in the overarching category of connectedness Rowland uses to tie together the chapters of her book: earth mother consciousness.

But before addressing Rowland on the subject of the creation myths of sky father and earth mother, I want to return to her modeling of how to use other people's research in the development of new positions. As illustrated above, she does not merely argue with people with whom she disagrees, although, when it is called for, she does distinguish her positions from those of others. She, for example, distances herself from Literary Darwinism because of its commitment to mechanical causation; she critiques Lacan's patriarchal understanding of the development of culture and contrasts it with Jung's understanding of the creative unconscious; she counters the language theorists who cut language off from the world; and she distinguishes her perspective, which includes human (archetypal, mythic) history from that of the historicists who believe "only forms of material power [not nature] are sources of creative social energy" (142). Most importantly, she explains why she is not one of the ecocritics who believes "nature" is purely a political construct. She redefines nature in terms of psyche, ascribing Jung's concepts of symbol, archetype, and the unconscious to nature: "Jung suggests that the symbol indicates the circulation of energy within psychic nature. As there is a cycle of energy in the natural world, so Jung sees a similar fertilizing cycle of energy exchange between conscious and unconscious [A]rchetypes . . . are part of nature. . . . Jung designates the unconscious as the 'natural' part of the human being, and also *connected* to nature in the psychoid" (12). While Rowland does, as this list shows, critique other positions when necessary to clarify her own, she primarily uses the works of other thinkers, weaving them as she goes, to frame her analyses of literature and her novel conclusions about psyche, nature, and literature. In other words, her method is less oppositional than integrative. Since her arguments are cumulative, it is important to read *The Ecocritical Psyche* in sequence.

She has a vision to convey, one that revisions reading. In that sense, her book is an answer to the analysis of David Abram, whom she cites, but does not acknowledge countering. Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous* argues that the development of the phonetic alphabet severed human consciousness from nature, first in the West, and then through cultural diffusion, throughout all but a few marginal oral cultures. The experience of an animate nature was transferred to print, making reading lively and shrinking human experience of the world by making it seem that humans were the only subjective, signifying beings (Abram

1996: 137-39). In answer, Rowland, through her own deeply digested readings, strives to reconnect the reading psyche to an animate world whose many beings, not just humans, signify. Thus she implies that the phonetic alphabet, when expressing embodied imagination infused by the creative unconscious, can connect readers to the non-human world in ways parallel to the experience of oral cultures.

Rowland lucidly details conceptual frames explored by Jung, such as alchemy, to offer new ideas about literature. She shows, for example, that one can read apparently unlikely works such as Jane Austen's markedly pro-reason (and thus in Rowland's terms, pro sky father consciousness) novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, as an ecocritical—because at least partially alchemical—text. She claims that “true alchemy” balances sky father and earth mother myths, and thus literature that brings them into mutual relationship is alchemical. She reads the relationship between the sisters in *Sense and Sensibility* as “earth mother and sky father reconciliation” (43-4).

She is particularly original with regard to connecting genres with psyche. For example, she argues that the dominant Christian interpretation of the Biblical origin story is a major source of human alienation from nature. Viewing *The Secret Garden* by Frances Burnett Hodgson and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis through the theoretical frames of post-Newtonian complex adaptive systems, Jerome Bernstein's *Living in the Borderlands*, and Roger Wescott's theory of ‘pedomorphy’ and ‘gerontomorphy’, Rowland makes the case for children's literature as a source of new origin stories. She defines origin stories as mythic narratives capable of reconnecting humans with their place within nature. As she puts it, “I am suggesting that the remedy, the new origin story, forms a myth to heal the reader as well” (86).

Similarly, using as theoretical frames Lewis Hyde's *Trickster Makes the World*, Catherine Spooner's ideas about gothic literature, Vine Deloria Jr.'s comparison of Jung and Native American views of nature, and Bakhtin's dialogics, Rowland seeks to establish detective fiction as a genre that reconnects readers with the archetype of the trickster. She identifies trickster with the earth mother prior to the division into genders (103) and argues that he [sic] is still operative in detective fiction, helping readers “remain embodied beings mythically embedded in the environment” through hunting. She says, “What [trickster] hunts are the signs of nature: the writing of the ‘other’ that can re-inscribe us back into a conscious relationship with the non-human” (103). Through detective fiction, the trickster reconnects readers to nature today: “Tracking in the wilderness of modernity, the detective story allows the psyche to operate as embodied trickster, in re-vitalizing our deep roots in non-human nature” (104). Further, Rowland links detective fiction to the various boundary-destroying aspects of gothic literature and then ascribes them both to earth mother consciousness: “Gothic, and its offshoot,

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detective fiction, are both literary forms incarnating earth mother consciousness in their culturally marginalized positions” (108).

Rowland does not flinch from addressing the political impact of literature as she explores the magic of theatre in transforming consciousness. In the penultimate chapter, contrasting E.M.W. Tillyard’s hierarchical and static view of nature with the natureless political readings of the New Historicists, elucidating Foucault’s concept of discourse, offering Bergson’s expansion of the theory of evolution to all beings, and using Andrew Samuels’ theory of political forms, she analyzes both Shakespeare’s *Richard II* and *The Tempest* so as to conclude that “art may be one space in which political forms are debated, psychically worked over” (149).

Rowland evaluates the stances of poststructuralism and of cultural materialism in terms of the earth mother myth:

Poststructuralism’s understanding of language as a slippery net of meanings is her legacy. . . .

Is the materialism derived from Marx and Foucault also a child of earth mother? I would argue yes. Given that their materialism believes that consciousness is a product of relations of power and production resting upon matter, cultural materialism is uncannily close to the generative and inspired creativity of matter as *mater*. Like alchemy, but not identical to it, Marxism, cultural materialism and New Historicism react to the centralizing conservatism of transcendent ideas by embracing immanence. (133)

Again, she advocates balance between sky father and earth mother functions and analyzes Shakespeare’s plays so as to find such rebalancing.

Perhaps her most passionate reading of literature occurs in her analysis of Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* in which she sees symbolic narrative becoming mythic in that characters escape the bindings of the book and enter the psyches of readers. In her analysis of this novel, she faces negative aspects of the creative unconscious, drawing on Ginette Paris’s insight that redemption is not always what the soul requires (54). Rowland concedes that creation requires “destroying, rending apart,” as indicated by alchemy’s stages of *nigredo* and *mortificatio*, the “dying of one stage so that another might emerge” (55). Focusing on the “destructive aspect of imagination” (55) is a way of acknowledging that myths can “go bad” (49) and need to be reimagined. She ascribes such a re-imagining to Emily Bronte in *Wuthering Heights*’ reconstruction of heaven (ongoing love on the wild moors) and hell (patriarchal rule following separation of lovers). Rowland specifically cites the connecting power of reading in the younger Catherine’s

teaching the culture-deprived Hareton to read, a process that balances earth mother and sky father forces and leads to love.

The last chapter in her book, one she confesses is experimental, introduces her personal voice as she reflects on what myth a female researcher might work within. Responding to Robert Romanyshyn's *The Wounded Researcher* which expounds the journey of the male researcher in terms of the myth of Orpheus, Rowland focuses on the myth of Persephone as a way to bridge heaven and hell and keep life on earth going. Since there exist myths of goddesses more autonomous than Persephone who is always under the power either of her mother or of her rapist mate, I find this choice of myth quite constraining. Yet, given Rowland's commitment to connection, Persephone is an almost inevitable "choice." Indeed, Rowland's connection to the Persephone myth illustrates her contention that the myths in which we live are not chosen but fated. Her explanation of her personal experiences with regard to terroristic attacks on her home country account for her mythic root in the Persephone myth and echo on a personal level the authenticity of the inquiring voice that permeates *The Ecocritical Psyche*. Rowland even has the courage to flaunt academic stenosis and to conclude her book by connecting to its dazzling display of sky father analyses the creative work of her own unconscious in two moving poems.

Throughout the book, the roles of symbol and myth are foundational. Rowland bases her analyses on her interpretation of Jung's understanding of myth: "To Jung, myths are a special kind of narrative that changes consciousness. They do not only belong to an ancient past; they also map what is fundamental in our culture today. They *found* consciousness" (viii). Rowland depends on a "mythic substrate" (3) to substantiate nature as existent. She views one of Jung's contributions to ecocriticism as "his radical treatment of myth as a way of simultaneously describing and changing consciousness" (23).

As this review has indicated, Rowland uses two creation myths, those of sky father and earth mother, to suture the chapters and their theses together. Her basic position is that one or the other myth will be operative in shaping cultural consciousness, that avoiding them is impossible. She believes the human crisis of suicidal alienation from understanding our relation to nature results from the sky father myth's having become too dominant. Thus human relationships to the earth and to the nature that sustain us have become too abstract, not felt, lost, allowing us to continue with attitudes and practices that are destroying our world. She is advocating learning to read literature so as to become again readers with embodied imaginations being transformed by the many ways literature can reconnect us with earth and the earth mother myth. She does not mention the long tradition of feminist thinkers who have attempted to resuscitate the earth mother myth, most notably Johann Jakob Bachoffen and Marija Gimbutas, probably because her

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emphasis is on the need for balancing the two myths rather than giving one pre-eminence over the other.

Indeed, Rowland's complex arguments often have the effect of wanting to have the positive significance of an idea without having its possible negative consequence. She, for example, needs to insist on the embodied state of psyche in order to connect it to nature and the earth, but also needs to try to evade the possible intellectual inference that since bodies are sexed, nature can be asserted to found specific psychological differences in males and females. In other words, she strives to maintain that psyche is of the body and yet not determined by it. She says, for example, "our unconscious is also somatic because, to Jung, the structuring elements in the psyche—archetypes—are rooted in the body, yet not governed by it" (8). Again, she claims that culture affects but does not silence nature (22), thus creating a space in which neither is predictably determining.

Most significantly, Rowland seeks to argue simultaneously that 1) myths and nature are fundamentally structuring; and yet, 2) they do not lead to unchanging normative expressions because they are endlessly creative. Her argument proceeds along the following lines: myths are generated by the psychic unconscious, which is nature, thus making myths the creative work of nature. "Myths are nature speaking to culture" (35). Thus, although she never draws this conclusion explicitly, the great variety of cultures is evidence of the non-normative effects of nature-generated myth.

This vision tries to stave off possible critiques raised by ethical injustices caused by mythically-based cultural values, (e.g. religious practices that privilege some groups at the expense of others). Rowland's main purpose is to communicate a life-and-death need for individuals and cultures to rebalance sky father (separation, consciousness) and earth mother (connection, unconscious generation) mythic ways of knowing and living. She valiantly works her way affirming universals, such as objective nature and inevitable mythic frames for knowing, and then qualifying them as she insists on endless creative manifestations of those universals. Once, however, nature and myth are invoked, the conceptual road to normative understandings and to their cultural impositions is opened. Even Rowland, committed as she is to non-judgmental renderings of difference, claims the falling-in-love experience for heterosexuality. She says: "One gender has to be processed with the other in the unconscious. Indeed, gender is a major means by which unconscious creativity works as we fall in love" (57). In addition to the problem of oppressive normative uses that can be made of the concepts of nature and myth, there is the problem of cultural values functionally resulting in evil, e.g. the destruction of life-sustaining systems for profit. Rowland wants to think of evil

as myths “gone bad,” needing “revisioning,” “rebalancing.” She wants to illustrate literature enabling readers to do the necessary revisioning and rebalancing.

It is a noble and arresting effort. I anticipate that it will inspire many critics to follow suit. I cannot, however, refrain from recalling the history of coercive uses of myths and definitions of nature. Still, if any approach to making use of these concepts in a way seeking human fulfillment and survival is to be embraced, I know of none more intricately and inclusively articulated than Rowland’s in *The Ecocritical Psyche*.

The Ecocritical Psyche should be read not only by all Jungian scholars, particularly those wanting to connect Jung’s vision to our ecologically endangered world, but by literary scholars and teachers. Literary theorists will be offered a challenge to their orthodoxies which have long been enervating. For decades, literary criticism has left teachers tasked with initiating students into the psychological richness of literature with desiccating theories that separate mind and body, nature and culture, language and reality, or that treat texts primarily as political exhibits. Rowland addresses the political power of stories, myths, literature, but nested in Jung’s psychological vision of an endlessly creative, always partially unknowable, embodied unconscious—always within an understanding of psyche as connecting non-human and human reality, thus mind and body, imagination and perception, nature and culture. With such a framework, teachers, students, readers can consciously approach literature for its relevance to themselves and their world.

In short, *The Ecocritical Psyche* is not only a treasure trove for Jungian scholars; it is also an opportunity for literary critics of every stripe to rethink how to do literary criticism.

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