

Book Review

Review of *Turning to Earth: Stories of Ecological Conversion* by F. Marina Schaffler, University of Virginia Press, 2003, 161 pp., hardcover US\$49.50; paper US\$14.95.

Review by Serpil Oppermann

Turning to Earth: Stories of Ecological Conversion by F. Marina Schaffler proposes a quasi-religious type of ecological conversion as a valid means of solution to our grave environmental problems. Written in a style of new-age spiritualism, the book provides an in-depth analysis of major stages of ecological conversion exemplified by several American nature writers. The author envisions an ideal ecological life-style through conversion to Earth-based spirituality. She claims that turning to Earth will bring about the much desired transformation in Western culture which she off-handedly blames as the root cause of ecological degradation. To support her idealist approach set against the overvaluation of rationalism and scientific materialism in Western culture and its consistent neglect of inner ecology, she states that we must move beyond “our reliance on cognitive information, regulations, and economic incentives”¹ toward a substantive and enduring change, which, according to her viewpoint, can be prompted by ecological conversion. She then moves on to examine the process of ecological conversion without further discussion. Although at first sight her contention may echo similar arguments within the deep ecology movement, upon a closer examination it falls short of the main objectives of the movement’s philosophical stance. But before expanding on why this proposed solution remains utopic and open to questions, I will give a brief summary of the book’s contents.

Turning to Earth comprises a lengthy introduction, seven chapters that define and explore the stages of ecological conversion, and an epilogue. In the introduction, the author clarifies her aim of reconciling what she calls inner and outer ecology. She defines outer ecology as “the collective web of life and elemental matter in which we participate,”

and inner ecology as “the spiritual beliefs and ethical values that guide our actions.”² Since, in her opinion, inner ecology has been largely ignored in the West, Schauffler makes a call for a return to “the spiritual beliefs and ethical values that shape inner ecology.”³ The revival of Earth-centred belief systems and faiths, she concedes, will “effect an ecological awakening within ourselves and others.”⁴

She posits that this is the only way to fuse inner and outer ecology so that a “new vision of humans’ place within the whole”⁵ can be accomplished. The accessible prose and the inspirational style of the book may help foster ecological conversion in some readers, but her main objective of achieving large-scale social transformation remains rather ambiguous. The questions of what kind of convincing political, social, educational, and economic measures will be needed to approach such an innocent goal are not mentioned in the text. What about people of various religious, ethnic, and social backgrounds who would most probably refuse to let go of their own belief systems in favour of Earth-based spirituality? This is a complex problem that is left undiscussed in the text. Instead the author proceeds to explore the ecological conversions of such exemplary American nature writers as Edward Abbey, N. Scott Momaday, Scott Russell Sanders, Alice Walker, and Terry Tempest Williams. What makes this text problematic is that its entire argument is formulated in idealist terms and romanticized cases. She believes that the ecological conversion of these nature writers will trigger similar conversions in the others and this will initiate ecological awareness on a social basis. This is the main weakness of the book’s entire argument.

The subsequent chapters are devoted to detailed analyses of how the process of ecological conversion occurred in each primary writer. Each chapter explores the key elements of the conversion process and discusses the various stages of this process in the lives of the writers, which, the author posits, are essential elements in their life stories and constitute their reconciliation of inner and outer ecologies. Each chapter ends with the author’s own personal appropriation of the stage in question. She concludes the chapters by giving an autobiographical sketch of how each “R” (the title of each chapter begins with the letter *R*) has played a key role in her own conversion. She also suggests that emotional and physical suffering, and social neglect can also trigger an ecological conversion in a person, which, since she does not develop the contention based on scientific research, is also open to critical interrogation from social and psychological perspectives, in my opinion. Such statements remain on the level of personal reflection and therefore lack intellectual substance.

The following chapters are titled “Remembrance,” “Reflection,” “Revelation,” “Reciprocity,” “Resistance,” and “Ritual,” respectively. Only the first chapter does not begin with an *R*; it is titled “Bedrock” and in it the author outlines the main objectives of the following chapters and highlights the stages of the conversion process briefly to point out how it manifested in each writer’s life and work. She states that the stages of conversion do not follow a linear path and that they may not be common to each writer. But the commonalities in their life stories are emphasized in order to support the main objective of the book.

The second chapter, “Remembrance,” analyzes the writers’ childhood experiences with the natural world. The “commonalities in the formative experiences of the primary writers,” Schauffler states, “set the stage for a subsequent turn to Earth.”⁶ She argues that, by remembering these early experiences, the writers activate and reawaken their sense of belonging to the natural world and thus begin an intimate connection they had experienced while growing up. The author refers to Arne Naess’s concept of “ecological self” in her discussion to point to the significance of developing a new sense of self which is shaped by forming such an intimate bond with nature, and argues that the remembrance of youthful experiences is the first stage to form an ecological self and to start merging inner and outer ecology.

Remembering one’s childhood attachment to the natural places is essential in “sustaining just and moral relations”⁷ with the natural whole. What fosters moral responsibility for the non-human realm for the author is a “deep feeling for other beings” and not a duty or principle.⁸ She posits that “childhood experiences of ecological kinship can become ‘touchstone memories’ that reinforce moral sensibilities in adulthood.”⁹ Thus the formative years of each writers’ life, according to the author, form the first stage of ecological conversion and their turn to Earth, and pave the way for later stages of conversion to take place. The question remains, however, about many people who lack such childhood experiences. Can one proceed to integrate inner and outer ecology without the essential first stage in turning to Earth?

The third chapter, “Reflection,” details how psychological transformation and “periods of enforced introspection” brought about a “deepening of ecological practice.”¹⁰ In this chapter Schauffler explains the struggle of the writers as ecological converts to “awaken from societal torpor by questioning familiar ‘truths’ and assumptions.”¹¹ When confronted by the destruction of natural systems, the author argues, ecological converts first go through a process of denial that leads to a sense of despair, and which, she posits, can “stem from a

personal failure to realize ecological and ethical ideals,”¹² and finally they arrive at a point of reflection. At this stage the writers withdraw from the material world and “seek to immerse themselves in the larger whole, blurring the lines between self and world.”¹³ She discusses the transformative power of loss, suffering, and death as well as social marginalization by the mainstream culture in the lives of the writers. To cope with this, Schauffler avers, the writers “rely on the reflective practice of writing to regain perspective and stamina when they feel discouraged or overwhelmed by personal challenges or societal problems.”¹⁴ Schauffler’s contention is based on her assumption that reflection, or conscious introspection, allows the converts to transmute the emotional and social challenges into “a renewed resolve to value life and care for the Earth.”¹⁵ Such a generalization, however, as she insists to show as applicable to everyone, begs the question.

The fourth chapter, “Revelation,” is an analysis of “how converts experience moments of insights that renew and reconstitute their lives.”¹⁶ This chapter explores the spiritual sense of being interconnected with all life and focuses on the feeling of heartfelt conviction and revelation of the miraculous in life. The author argues that “revelatory insights defy the bounds of reason: their transformatory power manifests in a change of heart more than a change of mind.”¹⁷ This is the chapter in which the author strongly opposes rationalism of Western culture and romanticises the process of ecological awakening in spiritual terms as opposed to the scientific rationalism of the present age. She comments, for example, that “revelatory truths defy dominant positivist views, making it hard for those steeped in scientific rationalism to trust the wisdom of their inner senses.”¹⁸

Such a strong emphasis on spiritual communion with the unseen realms stemming from the wisdom of one’s inner senses, as a significant component of ecological conversion to Earth, and highlighting divine revelation in the process of ecological awakening, turn the book into a literary promotion of new-age spirituality and Earth worship. While emphasizing the importance of holistic vision, the author ironically falls into creating a binary opposition between spirituality and rationalism in her stand against rational thought and science. We all know that pagan communities, and the indigenous cultures that practiced this form of Earth-based spirituality, were not altogether innocent of environmental harm. Advocating spiritual Earth worship as a viable means of solution to the global ecological crisis is therefore a misleading contention. It is an idealist approach that borders on a desired illusion. Anthropologists have already commented on the myth of primitive ecological wisdom in non-industrial societies. Although revelation may help an individual to rethink his or her role in the world and enable a recognition of the

interconnectedness of the universe, it does not necessarily lead to a societal transformation toward an environmentally benign world.

The following chapters, “Reciprocity” and “Resistance” underline the importance of harmony with the natural world. “Reciprocity” is about the converts’ “identification with other members of the ecological community,”¹⁹ and examines their commitment to the ecological whole. “Resistance” illustrates the devotion of the converts “to responsible action, either through land conversion, civil disobedience, or involvement in ecological restoration.” Such actions, according to the author, “testify to a deepening bond with Earth.”²⁰ The seventh chapter, which completes the stages of ecological conversion, is titled “Ritual” and it further expands on the argument of “Revelation.” This chapter “portrays how creative and ritual arts support the conversion process.”²¹ Here Schauffler illustrates the deep impact of ceremonial rites, sacred rituals, and creative writing on the converts’ sense of belonging with the natural world. The book concludes with an Epilogue wherein she describes how her ecological conversion has transformed her own life.

Overall, the book is a descriptive account of ecological conversion process focusing on one’s role, meaning, and participation in the world. The author points out that each stage is unique and should not be read as being common to everyone. She refers to the deep ecology movement in her introduction stating that its proponents “have focused most attention on the inner ecological realm,”²² and writes approvingly that the deep ecologists integrated philosophy and grassroots advocacy. She appreciates the deep ecological call “for dramatic societal change and modes of living that place fewer demands on the Earth.”²³ But her following remark, that the deep ecologists “rarely suggest how to effect an ecological awakening within ourselves and others”²⁴ is quite surprising. Obviously, this is not the correct reading of the objectives and principles of the deep ecology movement. She misses the movement’s profound philosophical and social impact in environmentalist discourses. She ignores the suggestions in the platform principles, for example. The platform points out the need for ideological, moral, and spiritual transformation in the process of creating an ecologically oriented thought and life, and does not privilege one over the other.

Critics of the deep ecology platform have drawn attention to the vagueness in the concepts, but it is well-known that Arne Naess deliberately maintained a certain vagueness so as not to make the movement an essentialist system, or a completed theoretical project closed in on itself; thus, the movement advocates respect for cultural and biological diversity and does not offer only one pointed thought as

a solution to our complex ecological problems. Schauffler, however, advocates spiritual turn as the only way in fusing inner and outer ecology, and strongly dismisses “rational objectivity.” Therefore, she falls into what we may call a “romantic fallacy,” and does not offer convincing guidelines on bringing about a realistic change. Although she describes the ecological conversion of the chosen nature writers in a lucid and inspiring prose, she fails to create a plausible argument for the general reader.

From my perspective, romantic communion with the flora and fauna is not a legitimate solution for global environmental degradation. How can this be made into a public policy? Surely the deep ecology movement, with which she shares the same goal of effecting socio-cultural change, provides more substantial analyses of and answers for an ecologically sustainable way of life than does offering spiritual transformation to save the Earth. Thus, instead of focusing only on intuition, emotion, imagination, and relying on spiritual awakening, I believe, one can put faith in a more holistic approach in which the mind and the heart, reason and intuition, are combined to create a more sustainable future. It is here that Schauffler and the deep ecologists part company. As Arne Naess states, “metaphysical and political and anthropological, all at once, all in one”²⁵ should be considered in effecting realistic change. After all, the deep ecology movement does combine the insights of both the mystical traditions and the new physics. It goes against any ontological divide in the field of existence, which *Turning to Earth* inadvertently suggests by privileging one level over another.

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¹ F. Marina Schauffler, *Turning to Earth: Stories of Ecological Conversion* (University of Virginia Press, 2003) p. 3.

² Ibid., p. 3.

³ Ibid., p. 4.

⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

⁵ Ibid..

⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

⁷ Ibid., p. 48.

⁸ Ibid.

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- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 22.
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 62.
- ¹² Ibid., p. 63.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 65.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 72.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 73.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 22.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p. 75.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 77.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 22.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Ibid., p. 5.
- ²³ Ibid.,
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Arne Naess, The Glass Is on the Table, In *The Selected Works of Arne Naess*, by Arne Naess, Harold Glasser, and Alan R Drengson (Springer, 2006) p.231.