

Ian Frederick Finseth, *Shades of Green: Visions of Nature in the Literature of American Slavery, 1770–1860* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 348 pp., \$39.95 (hbk), ISBN: 978-0-8203-2865-2. Review doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v5i1.106.

Ian Finseth calls *Shades of Green* a work of literary history, a term which captures the book's melding of literary criticism with intellectual history. The aims of the work are ambitious: to examine how, from 1770 to 1860, emerging trends in natural science (particularly the development of racial science) affected the rhetorical use of various conceptions of nature in antislavery literature. The project equally attempts to connect scholarship on the antislavery movement, along with the related literature on the emergence of racial science, to the concerns and themes of ecocriticism. Although it is not the first ecocritical study of the African American literary tradition (scholarship in this area dates back at least to Melvin Dixon's 1987 study, *Ride Out the Wilderness*), it is certainly one of the most sophisticated and gives us some indication of the promising possibilities for further research in this area.

Finseth argues in Chapter 1 that, late in the eighteenth century, the antislavery movement made a critical decision to shift the grounds of their critique of slavery from the Bible to the new science of race. The movement thus 'granted epistemological authority to natural science in determining the meaning of race', a move that (probably unwittingly) contributed to 'the West's elevation of science as a preeminent means of resolving intellectual or social conflicts' (p. 36). An intriguing point, but Finseth's aim is more narrow (although still wide enough): to explore how arguing on the terrain of natural science created both rhetorical opportunities and difficulties for the antislavery advocates. This is a complex subject, and it is made more complicated by the fact that antislavery literature also drew on certain aesthetic traditions—particularly the pastoral and the georgic (which typically depicts agricultural labor)—that are themselves partially affected by the new scientific discourse.

Finseth explores these rhetorical complexities in several representative works, beginning with Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1781), an influential early Euro-American account of the American experience expressing moderately antislavery views, and *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), a pathbreaking slave autobiography. In both works, slavery appears as a challenge to eighteenth-century conceptions of natural law and the image of a harmonious natural landscape. Equiano, he argues, handles this problem somewhat more successfully than does Crèvecoeur, by emphasizing Africans' capacity for racial development. But Finseth points out that this strategy requires the narrator to embrace the equally problematic notion of 'racial development', which for Equiano requires the race to achieve 'mastery' over nature. Thus liberty, in this emerging racial discourse, seems to be inextricably linked to mastery over or subordination of the natural world.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the early nineteenth-century conversation between the biological sciences and theology. This may be a familiar piece of intellectual history to some readers of this journal, but Finseth digs deep into primary sources, focusing on how this conversation played out in the United States with respect to slavery and antislavery. He then uses this exploration to contextualize the writings of black abolitionist David Walker and Ralph Waldo Emerson. These chapters, I think, are the most successful in contributing original insights on the slave narratives in general. Finseth contends that antislavery writers, in response to racial science, articulate a 'natural law of free development', holding that growth and liberty are intrinsic

qualities of all living organisms. Slavery, they argue, unnaturally blocks this development. This emphasis on development is consonant with racial science, but clearly posed difficulties for the pastoral tradition, which idealizes a stable and harmonious landscape. Chapter 5 turns to that problem, beginning with an interesting exploration of how African Americans were depicted in mid-nineteenth-century landscape painting. Finseth suggests that the less prominent georgic tradition, which usually depicts agricultural labor (and rest) was somewhat more useful than the pastoral for antislavery purposes, but both traditions struggle with the complexities and contradictions of race and slavery. Those complexities appear as well in novels like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856), and Frederick Douglass' *My Bondage and my Freedom* (1855), both of which are explicit attempts to help the reader visualize slavery, and both which benefit from being put in the context of these aesthetic traditions.

This summary can hardly do justice to the nuances of Finseth's study, which is more concerned with exploring the shape of these messy rhetorical problems than with producing neat theoretical resolutions. The complexities, unfortunately, sometimes overwhelm the exposition. Chapters 1, 3, and 5 are largely successful at describing aspects of the antislavery milieu that deserve greater attention: the emergence of racial science, and the theological engagement with that science and its effect on dominant aesthetic traditions. Chapters 2, 4, and 6, dedicated to a close reading of representative texts, are weighed down with abstract generalization and provide too little support from the texts themselves. This is perhaps a matter of taste, but the abstract and jargon-laden prose may prevent this work from receiving the wider readership it surely deserves. This is Finseth's first single-authored book, however, and its original conception and depth of scholarship bode well for the field of ecocriticism and environmental studies in general, and their contribution to African American studies.

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