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Review: Passions for Nature: Nineteenth-Century America's Aesthetics of Alienation

By Rochelle L. Johnson

Reviewed by Joselito Silveira

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Johnson, Rochelle L. *Passions for Nature: Nineteenth-Century America's Aesthetics of Alienation*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2009. 320pp. ISBN 0820332909. US\$24.95, paper. Alkaline paper.

Centered on the writings of Susan Fenimore Cooper (1813-1894), *Passions for Nature* explores the nineteenth-century America's celebration of nature through literature, philosophy and landscape design, and implies that there is an influence of the metaphorical view of the natural world at that time on modern society's approach towards nature. By investigating "two distinct types of passion for nature in the middle of the nineteenth century" (p.2) the author aims to provide the reader with a glimpse of what has contributed to distancing Americans from the physical reality of nature.

This book has a wide scope into the environmental area being thus recommended for professionals and college students of matters pertaining to the environment. It should also be of help to natural history researchers, artists interested in nature as a subject, and all those devoted to understanding the construction of environmental thoughts of our days. Even though the book focuses on the northeastern region of the United States, which is the geographical area related to the artists depicted by the author throughout five well interconnected chapters, *Passions for Nature* should interest readers from many other countries due to the influence of American environmentalism on the world.

Rochelle L. Johnson departs from a literary studies subject - the metaphor – to show how the construction of human's connection with nature has been developed, and how some of the most important artists of the 19th century influenced it by approaching or distancing the metaphorical (artistic, philosophical) world from the physical (real) one. She analyses the works of the painter Thomas Cole, the landscape designer Andrew Jackson Downing and the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson as abstractionist, thus distancing physical, real nature "by positing it as a feature of humanity" (p.2). As for the writings of Susan Fenimore Cooper and Henry David Thoreau, the author classifies them as another type of passion for nature "which assumed that the value of nature resided in its physicality, rather than in metaphors for human experience" (p.3). A few illustrations enrich the book by either serving as a sample or a portrayal. *Passions for Nature's* prompting of the dichotomy in the way nature was perceived and shaped by cultural means in the 19th century is an instigating subject.

That is even more so because the author smoothly conducts the reader to think about current environmental crises and the link with thoughts and ideas brought from that time in the past. The book is commendable for its provocative idea, however well grounded in historical facts, that links past and present environmental issues.

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