



LITERATURE AND ECOLOGY: AN EXPERIMENT IN ECOCRITICISM

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ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism is unique amongst contemporary literary and cultural theories because of its close relationship with the science of ecology. Indeed, the widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself. This paper will reflect these trends by giving space to both literary and cultural ecocriticism. Ecocritics may not be qualified to contribute to debates about problems in ecology, but they must nevertheless transgress disciplinary boundaries and develop their own 'ecological literacy' as far as possible. The paper provides brief discussions of some important environmental threats faced by the world today. To consider these in detail, it is essential for ecocritics to recognise that there are serious arguments about the existence of the problems, their extent, the nature of the threat and the possible solution to them.

Key Words Environment, Pollution, Literature, Ecology, Nature, Culture

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world increasingly lost to pollution, contamination and industry-sponsored bio-disaster. It is now a truism to say that mankind is efficiently committing ecocide, making the planet inhospitable for life of any kind. The Ecological disaster requires a theory to recognize pollution or to warn students of the dangers of that plastic wrapper or electromagnetic radiation. We will have reason to question the monolithic conception of 'environmental crisis' implied here, and perhaps to resist the evaluation of 'texts and ideas' against a seemingly secure ecological yardstick: both as a science and as a socio-political movement, 'ecology' itself is shifting and contested. However, the emphasis on the moral and political orientation of the ecocritic and the broad specification of the field of study are essential. Ecocriticism originates in a bio-social context of unrestrained capitalism, excessive exploitation of nature,



worrying definitions and shapes of 'development' and environmental hazard. While it does not seek to alter the course of any of these very real factors, its task is to see how theoretically informed readings of cultural texts can contribute not only to consciousness raising but also look into the politics of development and the construction of 'nature'. Many early works of ecocriticism were characterized by an exclusive interest in Romantic poetry, wilderness narrative and nature writing, but in the last few years Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) has turned towards a more general cultural ecocriticism, with studies of popular scientific writing, film, TV, art, architecture and other cultural artefacts such as theme parks, zoos and shopping malls. As ecocritics seek to offer a truly transformative discourse, enabling us to analyse and criticize the world in which we live, attention is increasingly given to the broad range of cultural processes and products in which, and through which, the complex negotiations of nature and culture take place.

Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism was a term coined in the late 1970s by combining "criticism" with a shortened form of "ecology"—the science that investigates the interrelations of all forms of plant and animal life with each other and with their physical habitats. "Ecocriticism" (or by alternative names, environmental criticism and green studies) designates the critical writings which explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the damage being wrought on that environment by human activities.

'Simply defined, ecocriticism is the study of relationship between literature and the physical environment' (Cheryll Glotfelty). But should we call it 'ecocriticism' or 'green studies'? Both terms are used to denote a critical approach which began in the USA in the late 1980s, and in the UK in the early 1990s, and since it is still an 'emergent' movement, it is worth briefly setting out its institutional history to date.

Ecocriticism as a concept first arose in the late 1970s, at meetings of the WLA (the Western Literature Association, a body whose field of interest is the literature of the American West). In his introduction to a series of brief position papers call entitled 'What is ecocriticism?' Michael P.Branch traces the word 'ecocriticism' back to William Rucckert's 1978 essay 'Literature and ecology: an experiment in ecocriticism'. A claim for first usage in literary criticism of the related term 'ecological' is made by prominent US ecocritic Karl Kroeber, whose article 'Home at Grasmere: ecological holiness', appeared in the journal PMLA,89,1974,pp.132-41. Both terms ('ecocriticism' and 'ecological')apparently lay dormant in the critical vocabulary until the 1989 WLA conference (in Coeur d' Alene, USA), when Cheryll Glotfelty (at the time a graduate student at Cornell University, subsequently Associate Professor of Literature and the Environment at the University of Nevada,Reno) not



only revived the term 'ecocriticism', but urged its adoption to refer to the diffuse critical field that had previously been known as 'the study of nature writing'.

Ecocriticism, as it now exists in the USA, takes its literary bearings from three major nineteenth-century American writers whose work celebrates nature, the life force, and the wilderness as manifested in America, these being Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862). All three were 'members' of the group of New England writers, essayists and philosophers known collectively as the transcendentalists, the first major literary movement in America to achieve 'cultural independence' from European Models. Emerson's first, short book *Nature*, first published anonymously in 1836 (included in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: selected essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff, Penguin, 1982) is a reflective (rather than philosophical) essay on the impact upon him of the natural world, often voiced in words of powerfully dramatic directness. Fuller's first book was *Summer on the Lakes, During 1843* (included in *The Portable Margaret Fuller*, Viking/Penguin, 1994), which is a powerfully written journal of her encounter with the American landscape at large, after a period as the first woman student at Harvard. Thoreau's *Walden* (Oxford University Press, World's Classics, 1999) is an account of his two-year stay, from 1845, in a hut he had built on the shore of Walden Pond, a couple of miles from his home town of Concord, Massachusetts. It is, perhaps, the classic account of dropping out of modern life and seeking to renew the self by a 'return to nature'—this is certainly a book which has always exerted a strong effect on the attitudes of its readers. These three books can be seen as the foundational works of American 'ecocentred' writing.

By contrast, the UK version of ecocriticism, or green studies, takes its bearings from the British Romanticism of the 1790s rather than the American transcendentalism of the 1840s. The founding figure on the British side is the critic Jonathan Bate, author of *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (Routledge, 1991). British ecocritics also make the point that many of their concerns are evident (before the term 'ecocriticism' existed) in Raymond Williams's book *The Country and the City* (Chatto & Windus, 1973). The infrastructure of ecocriticism in the UK is less developed than in the USA (there are as yet no indigenous journals or formal bodies for ecocritics to join, though there is a UK branch of ASLE), but the provision of relevant course options on undergraduate degree programmes is becoming more widespread, especially in new universities and colleges of higher education.

Literary Ecology and Culture-Nature Interaction

Nature writing often privileges wilderness as an authentic, pure form of the landscape. It is the very opposite of a corrupted human condition and man-made landscape. Ecocriticism places a high premium on texts that situate nature as authentic and pure. Wilderness becomes,

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as Greg Garrard puts it, the 'touchstone' in the 'poetics of authenticity'. Texts like Thoreau's *Walden* or John Muir's writings are seen as good eco-texts.

Ecocriticism also looks closely at the human culture-nature interaction in texts. It assumes that nature and human culture are mutually influential. Texts that explore this mutual influence are supposed to embody an ecological consciousness. In the case of Third World nations, postcolonial studies and ethnic studies are invariably based on local cultures. However, as William Howarth has pointed out, they focus on social and political spaces rather than the actual physical environs. What is called for is a critical practice that links socio-cultural spaces to the physical environment. Ecocritical reading also asks us to focus on the state of animals worldwide. Animals for biomedical research, the increased global demand and circulation of meat, the loss of habitats for a variety of animals worldwide, conservation, transgenic animals are some of the issues taken up by activists. Ecocriticism thus focuses on the link between literature and nature. Its emphasis on a practice of reading that pays attention to social inequalities as linked to gender oppression and environmental exploitation turns theory into praxis, locating 'reading' within an activist framework.

This paper presents the scope of some of the debates within ecocriticism concerning the crucial matter of the relationship between culture and nature. Perhaps the most fundamental point to make here is that ecocritics reject the notion that everything is socially and/or linguistically constructed. For the ecocritic, nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironised as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it. Nature, then, isn't reducible to a concept which we conceive as part of our cultural practice (as we might conceive a deity, for instance, and project it out onto the universe). Theory in general tends to see our external world as socially and linguistically constructed, as 'always already' textualised into 'discourse', but ecocriticism calls this long-standing theoretical orthodoxy into question, sometimes rather impatiently, as in Kate Soper's frequently-quoted remark (in her seminal book *What is Nature?* p. 151) that 'It isn't language which has a hole in its ozone layer.' Ecocriticism, then, repudiates the foundational belief in 'constructedness' which is such an important aspect of literary theory.

Of course, that belief in the universality of social constructedness was always vulnerable to the objection that if true it would necessarily be unknowable (since 'everything' would include the idea itself that everything is socially and linguistically constructed'). In the 1980s, social-construction gangs seemed to be everywhere, digging up and replacing the academic sidewalks, and for the most part their work is still in place, constituting the main academic thoroughfare in the Humanities. So the difficulty of either verifying or falsifying the view that everything is socially or linguistically constructed has not diminished its grip on day-to-day debate about literary theory. Nevertheless, the essence of ecocriticism's intervention in



theory has been to challenge it. This crucial point, however, should not be taken as implying that ecocritics hold a naive 'pre-theoretical' notion of nature. In the case of ecocriticism, some of the most heated exchanges have been between the American Wordsworth critic Alan Liu and various ecocritics, including Jonathan Bate (in *Romantic Ecology*), Karl Kroeber (in *Ecological Literary Criticism*), and Terry Gifford (originally in *ISLE* in 1996, and reprinted in Coupe's *The Green Studies Reader*, pp. 173-6). The key feature of Liu's position is the view that calling something 'nature', and seeing it as 'simply given', is usually a way of avoiding the politics which has made it that way. It is obvious here that social inequality is being 'naturalised', that is, literally, disguised as nature, and viewed as a situation which is 'god-given' and inescapable, when actually it is the product of a specific politics and power structure. Of course, attitudes to nature vary, and some of the variations are culturally determined, but the fact that a phenomenon is regarded differently in different cultures doesn't call its 'reality' into question. Yet 'aging', both as a fact and as a concept, features differently in different cultures. Some cultures regard it as almost a shameful thing, so that the elderly affect youthful styles of speech, dress, tastes, and behaviour. Other cultures, and other eras, regard(ed) it as honourable and admirable, as an index of the possession of wisdom or understanding, for instance.

Thus, traditional representations of Socrates or God the Father show elderly, grey-bearded patriarchal figures in flowing garments, rather than glossy, sharply-dressed, youngish men or women, as if age and masculinity were the natural fleshly garb of the 'wisdom of the ages'. But these different, culturally-determined ways of regarding the fact of aging should not prevent us from realising that it doesn't follow that age is 'socially constructed', or that it is part of culture rather than nature. Such statements, we must be clear, are figurative and hyperbolic- they gesture towards an *element* of truth, but they must not be passed off as *literal* truth. They are like the statements sometimes made about actors in film advertisements which proclaim (for instance) that 'Marlon Bando *is* The Godfather'. In teaching literary theory we have perhaps not made this and kindred distinctions as clear as we ought to have done. One of the welcome side-effects of eco-criticism is to bring this vital issue to the fore, making us clarify our thoughts about it, even if somewhat belatedly.

A related issue, which is also thrown into relief by ecocriticism, is whether a distinction is deconstructed into self-contradiction by the fact that (like the nature/culture distinction) it is not always absolute and clear-cut. At one level this can be answered very easily: the existence of distinctions is not undermined at all by the simultaneous existence of intermediate states - grey is real, but its existence doesn't destabilize the difference between black and white. If we translate this into issues directly relevant to ecocriticism, we can say that we have nature, and culture, and states partaking of both and that all three are real. Consider, for instance, what we can call the 'outdoor environment' as a series of adjoining and overlapping areas which move gradually from nature to culture, along the following lines: Area one: 'the wilderness'



(e.g. deserts, oceans, uninhabited continents) Area two: 'the scenic sublime' (e.g. forests, lakes, mountains, cliffs, waterfalls) Area three: 'the countryside' (e.g. hills, fields, woods) Area four: 'the domestic picturesque' (e.g. parks, gardens, lanes) As we move mentally through these areas, it is clear that we move from pretty well 'pure' nature in the first to what is predominantly 'culture' in the fourth. Of course, the wilderness is affected by global warming, which is cultural, and gardens depend on sunlight, which is a natural force, but neither concept ('nature' or 'culture') is thereby invalidated. Furthermore, the two middle areas, to varying degrees, contain large elements of *both* culture and nature, so that we might have doubts about the right positioning of some of the component elements within them (Should mountains be categorised as part of area one, hills as area two?) But these uncertainties should not be seen as destabilising the fundamental distinction between nature and culture. Even if it could be shown that all four areas were actually different degrees or kinds of culture, it would still not follow that there is no such thing as nature. (In the same way, the fact that drizzle is merely a kind of rain does not mean that there is no such thing as drizzle, nor does it mean that it makes no difference whether we say 'It's raining' or 'It's drizzling'.) If we return to the four environmental areas, it will be clear that most of what is called 'nature writing' concerns the two middle ones: eighteenth-century topographical writing, which might be exemplified by James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1730), Thomas Gray's 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard' (1751), and William Cowper's *The Task* (1785), had area three as its preferred location, while British Romantic writing, like Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1805, in its best-known form) often centred on area two, but American transcendentalist writing of the nineteenth century was predominantly interested in area one (mountain ranges, prairies, colossal cataracts, space itself).

Areas three and four are often the setting for domestic fiction and lyric poetry, both of which centre upon relationships between human beings, while the first two areas are the preferred settings for epic and saga, which centre on relations between human beings and cosmic forces (fate, destiny, the deity, etc.), and for 'Promethean' narratives in which human beings test the limits of their scope and powers - such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. The wilderness is entered as if instinctively (for instance, Thoreau's essay 'Walking' (extracted in Coupe, pp. 23-5), which discusses these matters: he writes 'I do not know of any poetry to quote which adequately expresses this yearning for the Wild'.) by those who would 'find' themselves - Moses ascends the mountain to receive the commandments, Christ goes into the wilderness to pray, the aboriginal initiate goes 'walkabout' in the Bush, Muck Finn 'lights out for the territories', and so on. These spaces, then, seem to perform a special function for us, a function vital to our well-being, though this, of course, is to view them in anthropocentric (human-centred) fashion, as if they existed for our benefit, a point which 'deep ecology' would resist. The point repeatedly made by ecocritics is that for the first time in human history, no true wilderness any longer exists on the planet, for every region is affected by global warming, and other



'anthropocentric' problems, such as toxic waste and nuclear fall-out. Our sense of these problems will vary, but we surely need to concede, at least, that issues of gender, race, and class cannot any longer exhaust the range of concerns that literature and criticism ought to have, though 'social ecologists' and 'ecofeminists' will rightly seek to blend such concerns with an ecologically-driven programme and outlook. Seeking to contribute to rectifying injustices in the areas of gender, race and class is a praiseworthy aim for critics and theorists to have, but it isn't sensible to ignore the fact that making a difference in these presupposes that we can manage to avoid environmental catastrophe. Otherwise, it might seem like working flat out to secure improved working-conditions for the crew as the *Titanic* speeds towards the iceberg.

Turning criticism inside out an ecocritical reading of a literary text is, simply, one which in some way incorporates a consideration of the kind of issues and concerns we have just been discussing. But there is, as we have said, no universally accepted model that we have merely to learn: the former are 'environmentalists' who value nature because it 'environs' humanity and contributes to our well-being; they believe we can 'save' the planet by more responsible forms of consumption and production: 'dark Greens', or 'deep ecologists' take a more radical stance- technology is the problem and therefore can't be the solution, so we have (in some way) to 'get back to nature': they dislike the anthropocentric term 'environment', preferring 'nature', viewed as being there for its own sake, not ours.) and apply. Often, it is just a matter of approaching perhaps very familiar texts with a new alertness to this dimension, a dimension which has perhaps always hovered about the text, but without ever receiving our full attention before.

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