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Preaching Environmental Advocacy-Ecocriticism and Beyond

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Abstract-Ecocriticism, an academic fallout of environmentalism and its contemporary agenda, is a new critical movement that attempts to link literary criticism and theory with today's ecological issues. It studies the relationship between the science of ecology and literature by applying ecological concepts to literature. Its aim is to synthesize environmental matters and literary criticism by focusing on the analyses of the literary representations of nature in literary texts, and the literary constructions of the environmental crisis in eco-literary discourses. The ecosystems

sustaining all life on earth have become critically endangered by our growing numbers and levels of consumption. This paper aims to define “literary ecology” suggesting that literary criticism should explore the relationship between humans and the other beings, thereby examining the influence of literature on human behaviour and the natural environment. In an attempt to reconnect nature, this paper delineates ecocriticism as a literary tool to foster a mutual symbiotic co-existence for both humans and the non-humans in the same biosphere.

Keywords-*Ecocriticism, literary ecology, symbiotic co-existence, linguistic turn*

Since the eighteenth century, the necessity of recalling the true cost, both to subordinate humans and to the earth, of our production processes and consumption habits has grown in equal measure to its difficulty. The ecosystems sustaining all life on earth have become ever more critically endangered by our growing numbers and levels of consumption. We live at an ever greater remove from the natural world, unmindful of our impact upon the earth. Slavoj Žižek has keenly observed that the extent of our ecological crisis pertains to what Lacan terms the ‘real, precedes, defies and disrupts symbolic representation’ and remains strangely elusive to thought, even while pressing in upon us daily, shifting the literal ground of our being.” Literary critics and cultural theorists in particular have been notoriously slow to register those changes in thinking about the relationship of culture and society to the natural world which began to be articulated in neighboring disciplines, above all philosophy, but also theology, politics and history, from the early 1970s. Cheryll Glotfelty states that with our knowledge of the outer world being limited to the major publications of the literary profession, one would quickly discern that race, class and gender were the hot topics of the late twentieth century, but would never know that the earth’s life support systems were under rigorous stress. Indeed, one might never know that there was an earth at all. There were in fact some isolated calls for an ecologically oriented criticism during the 1970s.

However, it was not until the end of the twentieth century that the study of literature and the environment was finally recognized as 'a subject on the rise. In some respects, it is perhaps not surprising that the study of literary texts should be coupled with such forgetfulness of the earth. Although the practice of criticism has ancient origins in the exegesis of Biblical and Classical Greek texts, modern literary criticism only began to be institutionalized as an academic discipline in the early nineteenth century. This was precisely the time when a rigid separation began to be drawn between the "natural and the 'human" sciences. The compartmentalization of knowledge affected by this divide is central to what Bruno Latour terms the 'Modern Constitution "which sunders the human from the non-human realm, while defining society's relationship to nature predominantly in terms of mastery and possession". It is the Modern Constitution, which facilitates also that characteristically modern (and especially urban) form of self-deception, whereby the consumption of meat can be disconnected from the suffering and death of animals. Thus, to regain a sense of the inextricability of nature and culture, physis and techne, earth and artifact - consumption and destruction - would be to move beyond both the impasse of modernism and the arrogance of humanism.

In one of his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' Walter Benjamin observes that, to the historical materialist, there is 'no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism". Most ecocritics would agree with this, but they would add that there is also no work of culture which is not simultaneously exploitative of nature. This is of course also true of Boisseau's *Parchment* (and, indeed, this essay), the writing, publication and distribution of which has taken its own toll on the natural environment. In her poem *Parchment* Michelle Boisseau gives us some valuable leads reminding us of the price of production borne by

subordinate humans, as well as by non-human others. This link between social domination and the exploitation of nature is vehemently hinted at the close of the poem:

whose pregnant bodies gave pigment, and the goose
 who supplied quills, the horse its hair, and flax
 the fine strong thread that held the folded skins
 into a private book stamped with gold for a king.

And yet, the relationship between nature and culture is not one way. For the written prayers and visual images contained in this prayer book convey ideas about nature, and about the relationship between nature, humanity and the divine, which crucially conditioned medieval perceptions and practices regarding the natural world, and which continue to resonate in complex and contradictory ways up to the present. Culture constructs the prism through which we know nature. We begin to internalise this prism from the moment we learn to speak; the moment, that is, that we are inducted into the *logos*, the world as shaped by language. `Nature, which, as Raymond Williams has remarked, is `perhaps the most “complex word in the language” and is in this sense a cultural and, above all, a linguistic construct. The physical reality of air, water, fire, rock, plants, animals, soils, ecosystems, solar systems referring to `the natural world, nonetheless precedes and exceeds whatever words might say about it. It is this insistence on the ultimate precedence of nature vis-à-vis culture, which signals the ecocritical move beyond the so-called “linguistic turn” perpetuated within structuralism and post-structuralism. For some ecocritics, this precedence extends to a consideration of the ways in which human languages, cultures and textual constructs are themselves conditioned by the natural environment.

Thus ecocriticism as a new critical movement attempts to link the literary criticism and theory with today’s ecological issues. It studies the relationship between literature and the science

of ecology by applying ecological concepts to literature. Its aim is to synthesize literary criticism and the environmental matters by focusing on the literary analyses of the representations of nature in literary texts and the literary constructions of the environmental crisis in eco-literary discourses. Eco-literature, Eco-poetics, Green Studies, Green Literature and Nature Writing are the modern literary off-springs relevant to ecocriticism expanding the notion of “the world to include the entire ecosphere”. The renowned ecocritic Prof. Jonathan Bate highlights two important aspects of ecocriticism:

A. The first aspect of ecocriticism he comments, refers to the influence of literature or culture on nature. Contextual references can be elicited from Aristotle’s *Politics* where the Greek philosopher states that “nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man”. The great Italian saint Thomas Aquinas in his famous Gospel *Summa Contra Gentiles* argued that the value of non-human things in nature is merely instrumental. They are “ordered to man’s use, who can kill them or use them” according to his wishes and without any justice catered to their existence. Lynn White Jr.’s controversial essay “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” undeniably critiques the anthropocentric belief of Christianity. God had planned all of his physical creations explicitly “for man’s benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose, save to serve man’s purposes. Although man’s body is made of clay, he is not simply a part of nature rather he is made in God’s image. Rachel Carson, the famous ecocritic draws our attention to condemn this Jewish-Christian document which glorifies man to reign supreme over the natural inhabitants-“let them (mankind) have dominion over the fish, over the cattle, over all the earth and every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.” Both White and Carson scrutinize the world’s environmental issues to this Christian world view codified in the Bible, promoting anthropocentrism rather than biocentrism. Human beings attain a separate entity in the natural world. Anthropocentrism fosters

an attitude of arrogance rather than of humility before the natural world. It stimulates an attitude of senseless exploitation and domination by mankind, rather than of humility before the natural world. It stimulates an attitude of senseless exploitation and domination by mankind rather than wise acceptance of limitation and compliance with the natural laws. For a long time nature was not given its due acknowledgement. Man's voracious urge was to usurp nature to enjoy his material gains. Man in due course of time enjoyed propensity in terms of his mutual co-existence with nature and its elements on earth.

B. Prof. Jonathan Bates however explains the second aspect of ecocriticism exploring the relation between the human and nature, by analyzing the literary works from an ecological perspective. William Rueckert defines ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature because ecology has the greatest relevance to the present and the future of the world. Ecocriticism aims to reconnect nature by finding a common ground between the human and the non-human to show how they co-exist in the same biosphere as an integral part of existence. It is "the broad re-thinking of the relations between human and nature". As a theoretical discourse, the literary tool negotiates between the human and the non-human world. It is "the critical and pedagogical broadening of literary studies to include texts that deal with the non-human world and our relationship to it". Contradicting the anthropocentric world view with its attendant attitudes and actions, ecocriticism promotes interconnectedness and inter-relationship advocating rootedness and affection for one's bio-region. Ecocritics promote literature that embodies these values of community and co-operation acknowledging it with their ecocritical stamp of approval. On the contrary they criticize literature that portrays human kind as separate from nature.

The American eco-literary writer Rachel Carson in the 20th century has poignantly pointed out that the Jewish Christian doctrines regarding mankind as the centre of nature dominates our thought. The humans have already been accustomed to recognize and judge the world by their own interests reaping the benefits of the exploitations incurred on nature. Carson firmly upholds the idea that by “only giving up anthropocentric thoughts can humans save the planet and all things of creation sustained within it. Environmentalists, no matter how grim the statistics on the degradation of soil, air and water, on the loss of biodiversity, on global warming and the depletion of the ozone layer, on rising human population and consumption levels display continue to wager on the possibility that the extraordinary beauty, diversity and fecundity of the earth can, in some measure, yet be saved, and that we might one day learn to live on this earth more equitably. Buoyed by this leap of faith, we continue to seek for sources of hope: places from which change for the better might be initiated. For environmentally committed literary critics and cultural theorists, attempting to reconcile their love for the more-than human natural world with their professional engagement with works of human culture, has meant that critique has often taken a back seat to recuperation. In the ecocriticism of the 1990s, the recuperative predominates even more strongly over the critical. Here it is important to note that in the US especially, ecocriticism to a considerable extent grew out of the study of the hitherto highly marginalised genre, nature writing. The Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) at the 1992 annual meeting of the Western Literature Association along with several of the key scholars of nature writing, including ASLE’s first President, Scott Slovic, and Cheryll Glotfelty prominently enshrines the ASLE’s official mission, ‘to promote the exchange of ideas and information pertaining to literature that considers the relationship between human beings and the natural world,’ and to encourage ‘new nature writing, traditional and innovative scholarly approaches to environmental literature,

and interdisciplinary environmental research". This revaluation of nature writing or, more broadly, 'environmental literature', constitutes the third way in which ecocriticism recasts the canon. According to the checklist provided by Lawrence Buell (1995, 7-8), an environmentally oriented work should display the following characteristics:

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. [...]
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest. [...]
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical framework. [...]
4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. [...]

While some of these characteristics might be found in particular works in a variety of genres, including prose fiction, lyric poetry and drama, Buell argues that the kind of literature that most consistently manifests most or all of his ecological desiderata is nonfictional nature writing.

While much ecocriticism remains devoted to the counter-canon of environmental nonfiction, the revaluation of nature writing generated a new perspective on many canonical texts and traditions, the romantic affirmation of the ties binding human well-being to a flourishing natural environment finds its critical counterpart in the recognition that "ecological exploitation is always coordinate with social exploitation." This is the point of departure for much recent ecocriticism, which incorporates a concern with questions of gender, 'race' and class. Adorno and Horkheimer primarily concerned with domination on the basis of 'race' and class, pointed to certain connections between the domination of women and that of the natural world explored more recently by ecofeminist philosophers, historians, sociologists and critics. Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* from 1975 examines the metaphorisation of the land as feminine, in particular

drawing attention to the conflict between phallic and foetal attitudes towards the feminised landscape, whereby the impulse to penetrate and master the country as a whole has oscillated uneasily with a desire to preserve certain places perceived at once as “virginal” and “maternal”. Another aspect of the exploration of inter-connections between nature, gender, ‘race’, and class is exemplified by Westling’s work, in consideration of the extent to which others stand in a different relation to nature from elite males on account of their occupation, social position or cultural traditions might have valuable alternative. This consideration drives much ecocritical work focusing on environmental literature by women, Afro-American, Indian and Chicano authors.

Although, as we have seen, ecocriticism often incorporates questions of social justice, it nonetheless differs from other forms of political critique in one important respect: namely, as a form of advocacy for an -other, which is felt to be unable to speak for itself. This is not to say, however, that nature is entirely silent. Nor, despite all our best efforts at domination, is it truly subordinate (as we are forcefully reminded by every earthquake, volcanic eruption, passing comet, and the sheer unpredictability of the weather). The perception that nature has indeed been enslaved is perhaps most readily arrived at by people inhabiting relatively gentle regions with the benefit of air-conditioning, electricity and clean water on tap. Similarly, the view that nature is silent might well say more about our refusal to hear than about nature’s inability to communicate. Christopher Manes observes, human language takes its place alongside, and in communication with, ‘the language of birds, the wind, earthworms, wolves, and waterfalls – a world of autonomous speakers whose interests (especially for hunter gatherer peoples) one ignores at one’s peril. In a very different discourse and context, contemporary biologists also testify to the abundance of signifying systems in the natural world. These range from the biological information system of the genetic code itself, through the largely involuntary production of a huge variety of indexical signs

by all species of plants and animals, to the possibly intentional deployment of apparently conventional signs by many birds and mammals. More generally, whole ecosystems might be said to be sustained by complex networks of communication and exchange between species and non-biological elements of their environment. Robert S. Corrington has rightfully observed that “the human process actualizes semiotic processes that it did not make and that it did not shape. Our cultural codes, no matter how sophisticated and multi-valued, are what they are by riding on the back of this self-recording nature.”

Jonathan Bate in the final chapter of *The Song of the Earth* emphatically states that specifically through the literary use of language we can reconnect to the natural world. Taking his cue from Heidegger, Bate privileges metrical writing, which he suggests, ‘answers to “nature’s own rhythms”’. In a world where nature has been reduced to what Heidegger, in his *Essay Concerning Technology* terms ‘standing reserve’, literary constructions become all the more important in recalling and sustaining a non-instrumental relationship and sustainability in the world:

And Nature, the Old Nurse took
 The child upon her knee
 Saying, “Here is a story book
 Thy father hath written for thee
 “Come wander with me “she said
 “Into regions yet untrod
 And read what is still unread
 In the Manuscripts of God”
 And he wandered away and away
 With Nature, the dear Old Nurse

Who sang to him night and day
The rhymes of the universe.

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