

ECOCRITICISM : NATURAL WORLD IN THE LITERARY VIEWFINDER\*

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“Ecocriticism” is the word on the recently published anthology entitled *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. This book is a collection of carefully selected essays on the ecological approach to literary studies. It signals the emergence of a new type of literary criticism, now unanimously accepted as ecocriticism. As the essays in this book indicate, ecocriticism aims to bring a transformation of literary studies by linking literary criticism and theory with the ecological issues at large. To define it Cheryll Glotfelty writes, “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”(1996:xviii). Ecocriticism actually launches a call to literature to connect to the issues of today’s environmental crisis. In other words, ecocriticism is directly concerned with both nature (natural landscape) and the environment (landscape both natural and urban). But the attempt to synthesize natural phenomena with literary criticism raises conceptual problems, because ecology itself is an abstract concept that emerged in a historical process of academic formation . Relying on the ontological argument of ecology that everything is connected to everything else, ecocriticism seeks to study what John Bennet calls, “a multiorganismic concept” symbolically. That is, to create “an image or idea of holistic entity and then treat that image as a real entity: the ‘environment,’ ‘human ecology,’ Gaia or the organismic Earth, the universe, God” (1996:356-357). However, examining the symbolical inscriptions of the Earth as an interactive process in literary texts, cannot be the only adequate basis for analyzing or interpreting the literary versions of nature/human relationships. From the literary standpoint ecocriticism needs a more inclusive and interdisciplinary approach. The question is whether it is possible to find a theoretical position that covers the diversity of environmental issues. In fact any inquiry into ecological matters in literary theory necessitates the need for theoretical and critical specificity. First, to reform present perceptions and approaches in critical theory requires a considerable expansion of the theoretical systems; and second, if critical focus becomes specific to particular forms of writing, such as nature poetry or fiction, then critical lenses must be widened in their analysis. And finally, if other forms of writing are to be included in the ecocritical examination, then considerable effort must be

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expended in their study in terms of how they construct or approach ecological matters. If all intersections of literary and the physical environment are to be analyzed, ecocritical theory needs an eco-literary system of some complexity, because any interaction between these two phenomena requires systemic properties. The dilemma is one of choosing an adequate critical perspective that synthesizes the natural and the literary phenomena. Consequently, ecocriticism today is in a process of inventing and shaping itself, borrowing largely from other disciplines and the natural sciences.

The growing number of ecologically informed critical studies, however, signals the necessity to develop an ecological or environmental criticism in the profession of the humanities, as well as to bring ecological consciousness to the practice of literary criticism. Today more and more young academics respond to the global environmental crisis by turning to the new field of literary ecology. Thus, the ecological investigations and interpretations of the relationship between nature and culture, toward formulating ecologically informed critical principles in literary criticism and theory, inevitably lead to an ecologically oriented critical approach. As a result, ecocriticism arrives with the promise of offering a unique combination of literary and natural scientific discourses. This new eco-theory responds to the global ecological crisis and addresses important environmental issues, specifically by examining values, in literary texts, with deep ecological implications. Ecocriticism, then, takes an earth-centered approach to literature, and an ecological approach to literary criticism. Ecocriticism mainly concentrates on how literature interacts with and participates in the entire ecosphere.

In his essay, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," William Rueckert defines ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world" (1996:107). In this context the possible relations between literature and nature are examined in terms of ecological concepts. Ecocriticism, then, attempts to find a common ground between the human and the nonhuman to show how they can coexist in various ways, because the environmental issues have become an integral part of our existence. This is one problem that ecocriticism addresses in its attempt to find a more environmentally conscious position in literary studies.

"As environmental problems compound," writes Cheryll Glotfelty, speaking on behalf of the academics worldwide, "work as usual seems unconscionably frivolous. If we are not part of the solution, we are part of the problem" (1996: xxi). Therefore, her question, "How then can we contribute to environmental restoration...from within our capacity as professors of literature" (1996: xxi), is of crucial importance. But this contribution should be well focused on the literary as well as on the ecological concepts, not privileging one over the other. The task of ecocriticism, then, is to formulate a conceptual foundation for the study of interconnections

between literature and the environment. Literature can be perceived as an aesthetically and culturally constructed part of the environment, since it directly addresses the questions of human constructions, such as meaning, value, language, and imagination, which can, then, be linked to the problem of ecological consciousness that humans need to attain. Within this framework, ecocritics are mainly concerned with how literature transmits certain values contributing to ecological thinking. They state that the environmental crisis is a question that cannot be overlooked in literary studies.

Consciousness raising in environmental thinking, and the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by the global ecological crisis, force literary scholars to recognize the important role literature and criticism play in understanding man's position in the ecosphere. This, however, raises the question of the politization of literature if the critical focus falls only on extra-textual themes in any given literary text. It would presuppose treating literature as "a means of moral instruction" as Sven Birkerts warns in his *Boston Book Review* article in 1996. The questions he poses are in fact rather noteworthy in understanding the danger of falling into outdated modes of critical approaches while conducting eco-literary analyses. He asks: "Can literature be usefully examined as having some bearing on man and his practical relation to the natural world? And: Can literature- should literature- serve as an agency of awareness? Should it be publicized to help advance the cause of natural environment?"(1996:4). Although ecocriticism can- and indeed should- explore the ways in which literature and ecology interact, it should not do so at the expense of a naive reduction of literary texts into mere transcriptions of the physical world, and by politization of literature itself. It is important to note that literature should not be used as a pretext for examining the ecological issues. In other words, the task of putting literature in question in order to save nature implies a reductionist approach. Since poststructuralist theory "has sharpened the focus on textual and intertextual issues" (Strehle 1992:2), the ecocritical reader cannot go back into perceiving literary texts as transparent mediums that unproblematically reflect phenomenal reality. Therefore, the true concern of ecocriticism ought not to be with obsolete representational models, but with how nature gets textualized in literary texts to create an eco-literary discourse that would help produce an intertextual as well as an interactive approach between literary language and the language of nature. But as Christopher Manes notes, in his article on "Nature and Silence," "[T]o regard nature as alive and articulate has consequences in the realm of social practices" (1996:15). Manes argues that knowledge about nature is always conditioned by historical and social formations of power. In this respect, what William Rueckert calls, "literary ecology" inquires into the ways in which nature is marginalized, silenced, or pushed, in Manes's words, "into a hazy backdrop against which the rational human subject struts upon"(1996:16). This outlook shows that literary ecology is a projection of human ideas about human responsibility into the natural environment.

Nevertheless, eco-literary discourse can address how literary texts articulate the silence of nature, and to what consequences. Thus, ecocriticism can explore what we can call a discursively manipulated nonhuman world in literature, and discuss how it gets marginalized or silenced by, or incorporated into the human language. Ecocriticism, in this framework, offers an “analysis of the cultural constructions of nature, which also includes an analysis of language, desire, knowledge, and power” (Legler 1997: 227). The verbal constructions of nature, either in its romanticized, idealized form, or as hostile wilderness, especially in poetry and fiction, usually lead to a binary way of either/or thinking that justifies the present catastrophic abuse of nature. To counter this logocentric approach, ecocriticism embarks upon the project of reconceptualizing nature, not as an object of observation or interpretation, but as an active agency in its own right. Ecocritics like Donna Haraway, Diana Fuss, Patrick Murphy and Evelyn Fox Keller urge for a reconception of nature as an active and speaking subject. For example, Diana Fuss, in *Essentially Speaking*, suggests that such a reconception of nature attributes to it a metaphorical status as a speaking and alive subject: “It might be necessary to begin questioning the constructionist assumption that nature and fixity go together (naturally)...” (1989: 6). But, as H.D. effectively voices it in her poem “Late Spring,” we cannot really enter into the realm of Earth’s life forms without making any constructions: “We cannot stand/ Where enclosures for the fruit/ Drop hot-radiant-slight petals/From each branch. We cannot see:/ The dog-wood breaks-white-/ The pear-tree has caught-/ The apple is red blaze-/The peach has already withered its own leaves-/ The wild plum-tree is alight” (Martz 1986:309). Although the plea of the deep ecologists for learning the language of nature has a just cause, the language of nature always speaks through human discourses, as H.D.’s poem expresses.

A vision of nature as a self-articulating subject refutes nature/culture dualism inherent in our thinking towards a consciousness of humans valuing both nature and culture in their diversity. However, the assumption that nature speaks for itself creates a discursive problem in literary texts, for it is again the human subject speaking *for* nature in a paradoxical attempt to overcome the human/ nonhuman divide within the discourse itself. As Val Plumwood discusses, “the assumption that we as humans can therefore speak *as* nonhuman nature seems to play on inclusive and exclusive senses of ‘nature,’ and also to assume that we can somehow completely eliminate the nature/culture divide, not merely overcome its dualistic construction” (1997: 349). Despite such problematic paradoxes, ecocritics recognize the need for reconstructing nature, not as the Other excluded from the realm of discourse, but as a subject which requires a non-dualistic perception and interpretation from a human position. A dialogue with nature is not possible in linguistic terms, but constructing a new mode of understanding and perception that surpasses, if not eliminates, nature/culture dichotomy is. An ecocritical attempt to deconstruct the privileged human subjectivity in its dialogue with the language of

nature might create a sustainable ecological vision in the reading and writing of literature. Although the distinction between nature and culture is quite problematic, it is a category “humans have created to help us understand and order the world” (Gruen 1997: 364). Therefore, ecocriticism advocates a rethinking of our commonly held beliefs and perceptions, and our versions of nature, towards creating a “consciousness of the essential unity of all life” (Eisler 1990: 26).

A new eco-literary discourse can address nature’s voice without infusing it with human preeminence. Then a dialogic interaction with nature’s language would challenge the status of humans as the privileged speaking subjects. To do this ecocriticism needs to draw from the existing critical theories to codify literary ecology, to define ecologically focused literary discourses, which I have called eco-literary discourse, and to formulate the conceptual basis of ecological criticism as such.

Ecocriticism does enable the critic to examine the textualizations of the physical environment in literary discourse itself, and to develop an earth-centered approach to literary studies. In this case, crossing of the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman spheres would enable the ecocritic to analyze the ways in which an ecological vision is addressed or subverted in literary texts. In such ecocritical approaches the use of literary and ecological discourses would inevitably create a rich cross-fertilization when interconnections between the natural sciences and literary studies are laid bare. Yet it should be taken into consideration that translation across different discourses raises fundamental problems. Can a literary text be read in view of certain non-literary concepts? Doing so would create literary resonances that are irrelevant to these concepts’ use within their own field of ecological science. Instead ecocriticism ought to focus on the textual strategies of literary texts in constructing an ecologically informed discourse about the ways in which humans interact with other life forms. In other words, ecocriticism can launch a “new ethic and aesthetic embracing the human the natural,” as Glenn A. Love aptly puts it (1996:238), but not through undermining the literary, textual, performative and linguistic properties of literature. The specific problems posed by the natural sciences cannot be used as a backdrop against which literature is judged, and such problems do not entirely find their resonances in literary texts. On the other hand, the deep ecological crisis is a global phenomenon that needs to be addressed in literary studies as well. “Connecting science and literature is difficult,” as William Howarth states, “for their cultures have grown widely apart” (1996:76). Yet it is not entirely unprecedented. As Howarth continues to argue:

...in fact texts do reflect how a civilization regards its natural heritage. We know nature through images and words, a process that makes the question of truth in

science or literature inescapable, and whether we find validity through data or metaphor, the two modes of analysis are parallel. Ecocriticism observes in nature and culture the ubiquity of signs, indicators of value that shape form and meaning. Ecology leads us to recognize that life speaks, communing through encoded streams of information that have direction and purpose, if we learn to translate the messages with fidelity. (1996:77)

Although Howarth is right in arguing that “we know nature through images and words,” he attests value, meaning and truth to those and equates the question of scientific and literary truth in his argument. We can object to this thesis on the grounds that he validates the question of truth as if it were an objective category both in literature and science. This is a philosophical rather than a literary or a scientific question, and answering it is not easy. Raising questions about the problematic values of truth also poses interpretative problems. Surely nature images in literary texts cannot be taken as objective qualifiers in making anything like a finished claim about “truth.” For discursive and critical texts do not actually follow the logic of scientific texts. Therefore, a critique of truth cannot be conducted on the ground of value judgements that Howarth claims words and images embody. The critic’s job is to follow the metaphors, images or motifs that govern a text, seeing if they render unimportant any ecological issues. Using a deconstructive strategy then, the critic can read the marginalized or “excluded component back into the text” (Rose 1990: 439). As such literary texts that refer to nature imagery can be read with an ecocritical awareness of what they silence or conceal through omission.

The question of truth, however, is an issue demanding an epistemological speculation uncharacteristic of the natural sciences, and made irrelevant in the humanities by the poststructuralist theory. Indeed the “ubiquity of signs” Howarth speaks of cannot be considered as “indicators of value that shape form and meaning” as he asserts. In fact this type of reasoning belongs to philosophical speculation. Then, the task of such philosophical reflection on science, on truth and on literature ought not to be the task of ecocriticism in literary studies. Secondly, ecocriticism ought not to entirely rely on scientific data for truth claims either; because the reliability of scientists in accounting for truth (based on the so-called objective observation itself,) is an unreliability. As quantum mechanics have proved beyond the shadow of doubt, there is no objective observation as such. Instead reality is observer created and subject to the process of observation in coming into being; and that process itself is subjective. Thus, science itself as the arbiter of truth that is fixed, unitary and absolute is fundamentally illusory. What, then, can be done to make ecocriticism a sophisticated branch of interdisciplinary studies which draw conceptually from one another? The answer lies in parallel paradigms in the natural

sciences and literary theory.

Despite the conceptual problems, however, it is possible to develop an ecologically informed critical theory from those theoretical elements implicit in the natural sciences. If ecocriticism wants to formulate a response to crises and problems of the ecosystem by theorizing on the relationships between literature and the natural world, it should first focus on the parallel paradigms in literary theory and parallels in the natural sciences, particularly quantum physics, biology and geography. At this point, as Heisenberg posits, “an interaction between science and the general trend of thought may take place”(1962: 204), that ecocriticism may utilize. Arguing about a possible comparison between “the different sets of concepts in natural science with different styles of art” (1962:108-109), Heisenberg also tells us that the two processes, “that of science and that of art, are not very different” (1962:109).

The interconnections between nature and culture, as the subject of ecocriticism, provide a broad scope of inquiry. William Rueckert’s invoking of Barry Commoner’s First Law of Ecology as “[E]verything is connected to everything else” (1996:108) echoes the claim of quantum physicists who define reality as “an undivided wholeness” (Herbert 1985: 18). Relying on the recent research in quantum experiments, physicists claim that “in spite of its obvious partitions and boundaries, the world in actuality is a seamless whole” (Herbert 1985: 18). In this light, as the physicist Heitler states: “The separation of the world into an ‘objective outside reality’ and ‘us,’ the self-conscious onlookers, can no longer be maintained. Object and subject have become inseparable from each other”( qtd. in Herbert 1985: 18). Fritjof Capra, too, in his book *The Web of Life*, points out that “the origin of our dilemma lies in our tendency to create the abstractions of separate objects, including a separate self, and then to believe that they belong to an objective, independently existing reality” (1997: 287). Capra proposes a systematic shifting of “our conceptual focus from objects to relationships” (1997:287), which can be taken as a basis for ecocritical analysis of literature. But the actual harbinger of quantum connectedness is the physicist David Bohm who has emphasized the principle of “unbroken wholeness” by stating that “the inseparable quantum interconnectedness of the whole universe is the fundamental reality, and that relatively independently behaving parts are merely particular and contingent forms within this whole” (qtd. in Capra 1987:18).

Quantum physics also emphasizes what Dewey and Bentley called “transactions” between entities that are defined through the act of relating to one another (Weaver1985: 301). Subatomic research has led the physicists to perceive the universe as an interconnected organism. As Weaver suggests, this organic model can be particularly relevant “for our understanding of the reading process and the literary experience”(1985: 302). This will be of significant relevance for the ecocritical practice as well. Certainly the concepts of the undivided wholeness, transactions of energy, and organicism provide a powerful model for understanding

the nature and the function of cultural, ecological, and literary -theoretical systems. Such concepts find their parallels in literary theory. Accordingly, as Weaver puts it, “meaning is determined through transactions of various sorts; the whole is not the sum of ‘parts’ which can be separately identified; and there is no sharp separation between the knower and the known” (1985: 304). He also states, using David Bohm’s terminology, that “the poem... is *implicate* in the colligation of reader and text. The poem is made *explicit*, actualized during the transaction between the two. In effect the reader triggers a quantum leap” (1985: 309). In this connection, the contention of Bohm and other physicists can be related to the ecocritical understanding of nature/culture interrelationships; and concepts borrowed from the natural sciences help reinforce a mode of ecocritical discourse that would shape a cross-disciplinary paradigm exemplified in ecology.

Fritjoff Capra calls the natural world, “a multidimensional world” (1997: 35). Similarly literary texts create a multidimensional world of their own which allows for a context to be ecocritically examined; and, to use Derrida’s words, such a context “neither produces nor guarantees impassable borders”(Aporias 1993:9). Thus ecocriticism crosses the boundaries and can help close the gap between ecological investigations and literary considerations. Then, the literary concept of ecology is not only linked to the question of inter-relatedness between literature, theory and ecology, but to the entire system of their implications. That being said, literary studies become, not something distinct from environment, but an integral part of it by contextualizing the ecological concepts of wholeness, interconnections and interrelatedness of all organisms, human and non human alike. Moreover contextualizations, in literature, of ecological themes, such as the environmental pollution, extinction of the species, deforestation, toxic waste contamination, and destruction of tropical rain forests, would lead to more and more analyses of ecologically informed criticism.

The adoption of ecological concepts to the critical terminology is in fact an enhancing process towards developing a more comprehensive perspective in the literary field. Besides, as Rueckert clearly states, experimenting with “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature... has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world we all live in” (1996:107). Arguing about the importance of “literary ecology” William Rueckert also produces a new conceptualization:

The conceptual and practical problem is to find the grounds upon which the two communities- the human, the natural- can coexist, cooperate, and flourish in the biosphere. All of the most serious and thoughtful ecologists...have tried to develop ecological visions which can be translated into social, economic, political, and individual programs...All this may seem rather remote from creating, reading,

teaching, and writing about literature; but in fact, it is not. I invoke here...the first Law of Ecology: 'Everything is connected to everything else.' (1996:107-108).

Conceptualization is necessary in understanding the connections between reading literary texts and the science of ecology itself; but it must take into account the fact that the use of overreaching metaphysical terms, like truth, always leads to totalizations, and hence to dogmatism. On the other hand, using the first Law of Ecology in developing ecocritical conceptualizations brings to mind Derrida's notion of "the general text" that stands for all reality, both textual and extra-textual. Accordingly, the general text "is not limited...to writings on the page" (*Positions* 1987: 60). At this point, thinking along with Derrida one can propose that literature "...can be investigated, not only in its specificity," but also in its articulation of the other "fields of the text in general" (1987:60). In this framework ecocriticism helps establish relationships or connections between literary and ecological *texts*.

The very multidimensionality of literature itself opens new critical paths to be explored. Even the example of postmodernist fiction-that mostly foregrounds metafictional games, and privileges textuality-shows that it incorporates the cultural, social, political, and ecological themes in a dynamic interaction with the textualist strategies. Many metafictionally oriented writers -Ronald Sukenick, Raymond Federman, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth in the U.S., and Jeanette Winterson, Graham Swift, Julian Barnes, and Peter Ackroyd in England, as well as many others- have commented on both life and art in their fictions, although their constructions emphasize the fragmentary and decentered nature of human reality. Yet their fictions transcend the longstanding duality separating art and reality, and expand the "general text." Ecocriticism can be the new aesthetic category for such texts that comment upon Earth's life forms one way or the other. As Susan Strehle effectively argues, "[B]reaking out of the false and restrictive duality between realism and anti-realism, these postmodern authors manage an original fusion that transforms both strands of their literary heritage" (1992:6). They are an integral part of the general text that ecocriticism wants to critique.

Ecocritical approach, then, is one that attempts to transcend the duality of art and life, human and the natural, and to work along the principle of interconnections between them. Establishing an ethical and aesthetic ground towards a renewed understanding of both literature and ecology is the purpose behind. In this respect, ecocriticism offers a unique fusion of literary, scientific, ecological and philosophical perspectives.

How, then, does all this this apply to practice? Michael J. McDowell provides a useful model by tracing what should be avoided in critical practice. First, he cautions against using "the analysis of an ecologically conscious writer's work as a springboard for leaping into discussions of pressing environmental analysis" (1996: 383). Second, he advises against playing

“ecopolice,” and asking whether literature contributes “to our survival” or to “our extinction” (1996:383). He then suggests finding “naturally sympathetic literary forms” (1996: 384). His third observation is that there is a tendency among the ecocritics to “condemn Western civilization for its oppression of nature,” and seeking answers in Eastern thought (1996: 384). He objects in principle by stating that as Westerners we should instead recognize what is valuable in Western literature and literary tradition. So, instead of a wholesale rejection, he offers a radical critique of Western attitudes. Then he focuses on another tendency: “to discover eternal themes and recurring characters in the literature” (1996: 384). He refutes, however, what he calls the “myth and symbol school of critics,” because of their ahistorical approaches. Having put aside what should be avoided, McDowell emphasizes certain questions “which might be of greater concern to an application of ecological literary criticism” (1996: 384). His first concern is stylistic: “What does the way a writer uses metaphors reveal about his or her representation of landscape?” (1996: 384). He mentions the implications of the metaphors related to landscape. His second concern is about the modification of genres and modes, “such as pastoralism to incorporate...an understanding of the complex relationships within nature” (1996: 385). The third concern he mentions has to do with the methods used by nature writers “to enable a dialogic interplay of voices and values in contradiction to each other and to each writer’s own views” (1996: 385-86). He suggests that the study of nature and character in interaction is a method of useful application. Accordingly, studying dialogic voices in a landscape would enable the critic to analyze the values attributed to nature. Such an analysis “might begin by looking at the roles which the narrator or point-of-view character plays in the landscape” (1996: 387). Finally he states that assessing “the limits of each writer’s view” is the last concern of practical ecocriticism. Though useful this list of concerns is for ecocriticism, McDowell only considers literary analyses of nature writing and ignores other forms of fiction and poetry which also invite ecocritical explorations. Some postmodern fictions, for example, self-consciously present an eco-literary use of language in their narratives. They engage both art and life, and open to an ecocritical study of the relationship between fiction and the physical environment.

Within a textualist approach, paradoxical though it may seem, these novels attempt to erase the divide between art and reality, or subject and object. In fact, the idea that postmodern novelists attempt to create a process of writing that includes both realist and metafictional strategies is not an uncommon issue. Because, as Susan Strehle argues, “they form a challenging new fiction that is based on the awareness of interpretation as an interactive process”(1992: 5). Some postmodern novels stage close encounters between the natural and the cultural worlds by placing them in confrontation and displaying the interconnections between them. In the most typical postmodern contexts confrontation as such should be

understood as an interrelated process. That means that postmodern fiction shifts the contexts in such way as to lay bare how such contexts are created with language, and to show how language is connected to contexts. In this way the relationship between the real and the fictive world is maintained. In postmodern novels the nature of this relationship becomes the subject of inquiry. The ontological structure of the fictional text in such fictions is exposed to the degree that fictional possible worlds and the real world-the environment in this case- overlap. Therefore ontological landscapes fuse to form a pluralistic model, because postmodernist fiction foregrounds the complex ontological structure of text and the natural environment. But this is a problematized context, precisely because postmodern fictions are about discourses which, as Brian McHale observes, “reflect upon the world of discourse. As such, they... [view] reality as *constructed* in and through our languages, discourses, and semiotic systems” (1989: 164). But they also expose how such constructions effect our interpretations and understanding of the physical environment. Therefore, they state the importance of interpretation as an interactive process in which nature and the human agency fuse to form an interrelated subjectivity, or more precisely, intersubjectivity, towards an erasure of subject/ object duality. Foregrounding such intersubjectivity inevitably creates an eco-literary discourse.

Postmodern fictions like Graham Swift’s *Waterland* , and Jim Crace’s *The Gift of Stones*, thematize geographical, biological and ecological issues to underline the changes in the reality around us. In Swift’s *Waterland*, which is a historiographic metafiction on the problematic representations of history, the history teacher Tom Crick, as narrator, struggles with his students who prefer to learn the “here and now” of a world threatened by nuclear catastrophe instead of studying the French Revolution. From the very beginning of the novel metafictional reflections on the problematic line between narrating histories and telling stories are linked to the marshy land of the Fen country. The major historical and ecological metaphor of the novel is “Silt. The Fens were formed by silt...Silt: Which shapes and undermines continents; which demolishes as it builds; which is simultaneous accretion and erosion; neither progress nor decay”(1983: 7). The novel employs this metaphor to comment upon fictional representations of history, and to problematize our notion of historical knowledge by a recourse to natural history. More significantly, however, the Fens signal a symbolic representation of nature’s dictating a new worldview, “setting harsher limits,” in Dana Philip’s words, “to our thinking, and our behaviour” (1996: 219) in *Waterland*. The symbolically inscribed “slow and arduous process, the interminable and ambiguous process-the process of human siltation- of land reclamation” (Swift 1983: 8) opposes the “grand metamorphoses of history” (1983: 8).

The Fens determine the ontological reality in the narrative itself and underline how such an eco-literary discourse can coincide and intermingle with the challenges offered by historiographic metafiction. Hence the coexistence of two different worlds, the natural and the

fictional in terms of their ontological structures. As Crick tells his students, “in misty Fernland settings...history merges with fiction, fact gets blurred with fable...”(1983:180). The historicist accounts of the Fens are also intertwined with the discourse of fictionalized historical representation. Crick’s account of the Dutch engineer Cornelius Vermuyden’s attempts to cut a straight channel to the sea in the 1650s offers an eco-literary interpretation of nature’s role in inscribing itself as a subject: “And nature, more effectively than my ancestors, began to sabotage his work. Because silt obstructs as it builds; unmakes as it makes” (1983: 9-10). Thus silt as ecological metaphor is explored through textual self-reference, and is given a self-determining status in the novel.

The narrative structure of *Waterland* is based on the repetition of eco-literary metaphorical paradigms, such as land-reclamation, water, Fenlands, and the European Eel, as well as the metafictional paradigms of historicity, textuality, discontinuity and circularity. In this way the metafictional, geographical and the biological elements are linked to generate an eco-literary metafictional discourses. As Crick tells his students: “Natural history, human nature. Those weird and wonderful commodities, those unsolved mysteries of mysteries. Because just supposing...this natural stuff is always getting the better of the artificial stuff” (1983: 178). Only this eco-literary approach is able to reintroduce a form of textual coherence opposed to the chaos of fragmented and discontinuous human experience in the historical process. Nature and environmental metaphors in *Waterland* operate as meta-textual implications which resonate with the quantum of life itself. If history is discontinuous, natural continuity challenges it forming a striking postmodern paradox in the novel. Such literary representations of human relationships with the environment project ecological thinking into the novel’s central literary context. In keeping with this view, postmodern novels describe a condition where nature as the *other* in our culture is challenged, and nature as *subject* is accounted for.

As the current ideology puts a sharp distinction between human and nonhuman realms, postmodern novels become more ecologically oriented in challenging it. The echoes of an eco-literary discourse make themselves explicit especially in recent postmodern novels. Jim Crace’s *The Gift of Stones* is another example where the narrator in chapter 12 says: “YOU SEE? I’VE PULLED A screen of grass across the story too. ‘I’ll not creep up and tell you what I saw” (1997:50). The story takes place in a coastal Stone Age village where the narrator’s father loses an arm as a little boy when he gets fatally wounded by an arrow during the attack of the bowmen. After that event the father grows up to be the story-teller of the village, and “invents tales to explain the injury” (1997:1). The narrator praises “[Her] father’s ornateness as a story-teller”(1997:9) in many instances, and says, “Beware of father’s tongue. He has led us in his story to the hill and...the firing of the grass and gorse and heather...”(1997:9-10). During the process of telling her father’s story, the narrator self-consciously draws upon nature imagery,

just as her father does in his stories that he tells to an expectant audience in the village: “So here I must abduct my father’s story for a while and spend some time- as father never would- talking of our village skill with flint”(1997:13-14). The process of the fictionalization of the event is thus powerfully grounded in a natural landscape which is made ontologically present in the eco-literary use of the novel’s language. After the father loses his arm, he is rendered useless in the village to work with stones, and takes long excursions outside the village. When he comes back, he fashions tales about his adventures, “making shapes and stories of flames” (1997:71). His stories are “like dreams, like dragonflies. They came and went” (1997:56). In other words his language itself is ecologically oriented and informs the novel’s language at large. He has a gift of stories that “transformed him in that village, overnight, from the wild plant, not-much-use, into their raconteur” (1997:57). As these examples indicate, the linguistic medium of the novel challenges the idea that nature and literature- in particular postmodernist fiction- have incommensurable discourses. The discourse of the novel, then, is positioned within an ecologically informed language determining the eco-literary mode of the postmodernist fiction. The father’s inventing stories out of nature creates an “unconstructed” version of nature itself. In other words, nature, the landscape of which he is an integral part, contains his language within its own patterns of special, nonhuman, speech. Thus, his fictions, made of nature, gain a multitude of fictional meanings through which the novel offers a unique combination of postmodern and ecological perspectives. There is no attempt made in the plot to reconceptualize human relationships with nature, because nature is not regarded as the *other* to the culture of the storyteller. As a matter of fact, the Stone Age itself signifies a world outside nature/culture duality. The villagers have no such sense of separation. They are like “stones. You strike them right, they open up like shells” (1997:48) to the father’s stories:

Making flints, that’s all they knew. That’s what gave them heart. That was the ritual which kept them going, that filled their time, that stocked their larders, that gave them pride. Work made them comfortable...They were the stoneys, heart and mind. They blindly fashioned flints. And gulls laid top-heavy eggs. And the winds blew off the sea. That’s how the world was made and never pause for thought. (1997: 35)

The novel puts a special emphasis upon the idea that the villagers act along with nature, and are unaware of the dualistic forms of living. They blend into the landscape. Their interconnection with their environment is used as a strategy to subvert the conceptual frameworks of today’s destructive perception of nature. Therefore, the novel is able to present nature as an active subject of the story in an ecologically informed literary discourse that

challenges nature/culture dichotomy. Because the plot is situated in the Stone Age, the boundaries between inner and outer realities are put under erasure. Thus, human emotions and nature imagery merge to create stories “made by life” (1997: 105).

Moreover, without employing the cliché terms, such as, primitive, savage, and pagan, the eco-literary narrative unfolds in conjunction with distinctively postmodernist strategies, namely the strategy of the flouting of the conventions of novel-writing. In other words, the self-conscious narrator teases the reader with her light-hearted commentaries on the storytelling process:

The power of a tale is in the gaps and pauses. I hear his voice. I know his tricks. And there is a phrase that comes to mind which father often used. “We’ll never know,” he’d say. “We can but guess.” A young man and a woman in the grass... His audience applauded. He had delighted them. Their minds- so used to earthbound things-had flown, danced, like larks, like gnats, with father’s tale... if only life was like a story, simpler, freer, less ordained. (1997:58-59)

Throughout the plot, gulls, wind, rocks, sea and many other natural elements function as the eco-literary devices of the novel’s postmodernist mode of writing. The characters- who are themselves described as “earthbound” things without proper names- and nature fuse together to form an interconnected world of culture and nature. The novel comes to an end when the narrator’s father is just starting a new story:

He closed his eyes and what he saw was the shingled margin of the sea with horses wild and riderless close by. He tried to place a sail upon the sea, but could not. He tried to fill the air with human sounds. But all he saw were horses in the wind, the tide in loops upon the beach, the spray-wet rocks and stones reflecting all the changes in the sky, and no one there to notice or applaud. (1997:169-70)

The meaning that shapes the father’s narratives until this moment, here shifts to the full presence of nature which the human agency can neither dominate nor subject to silence. This ending of the novel signals the beginning of a self-reflexive pause in which nature projects a very different narrative of its own from the one the father intends to invent for the future. This is nature in its self-conscious role as the only subject installing its version of the story in the narrative. In this way *The Gift of Stones* anticipates the ecocritical awareness that nature is not to be used as a social or linguistic construct, but that it is there to be acknowledged as an inseparable process from the human experience. Therefore *The Gift of Stones* can be read as a

postmodern reappropriation of ecological consciousness in literary terms. Furthermore, the language of the novel also projects an ecological awareness, and can be ecocritically evaluated. The few characters who are given names, for example, echo nature imagery, like Leaf who tries to amputate the father's arm, and Rabbit and Doe, the woman father falls in love with, and addresses as such. *The Gift of Stones*, then, opens new paths to the ecocritical analyses of postmodernist fictions, and renders the study of the relationship between the physical environment and the postmodern novel to be more than critically relevant.

Applying ecology or ecological concepts and themes to literary criticism proves to be an enhancing process to literary studies. Contemporary novels already make use of parallel paradigms between ecology and literature which await detailed critical exploration and evaluation in terms of an interdisciplinary approach of ecocriticism. As more and more environmental theorists make a call for an inward transformation in the humanities, literary theorists cannot ignore the presence of interconnections between nature and culture, particularly the fact that cultural dimensions of literature do influence and are influenced by the environmental issues. Therefore, a new vision is shaping itself among the theorists now, one that allows negotiations between culture and nature as inseparable processes. As the environmental philosophers, Bill Devall and George Sessions explain, this process requires the acceptance of this new vision and a new realization: "But the deep ecology sense of Self requires a further maturity and growth, an identification which goes beyond humanity to include the nonhuman world" (1985: 65). Such thinking will no doubt inspire many critics to create new insights and new critical paths in the ecocritical domain, as well as enable them to put the natural world more in the literary viewfinder. As a matter of fact the humanities do make a call for such an intellectual revision.

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