

Only God Can Make a Tree: The Joys and Sorrows of Ecocriticism

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We witness at times in the realm of ideas an intriguing trickle-to-tributary development: a well-timed article in a professional journal, agile responses by a few editors, and an invisible flurry of e-mail yield up other articles and references, and with them the sudden impression that people in different places have been incubating some of the same notions. Then--figure this as a sequence of rapid dissolves--come the panels, the symposia, and the larger conferences, all of them stocked with newly emergent players. The magic happens. The ideas start to get streamlined, and as soon as the pundits can manage it, the whole business gets dubbed a trend and is given a place on the ever-more-rapidly-revolving style-wheel. Then, before those players have even hammered out a coherent philosophy, a flashy and knowing article appears in *The New York Times Magazine*, the water table to which all higher aspirations are condemned to return--and from that point on, whether or not the trend (or "movement") establishes itself in academia, it lodges in the public mind, certainly that portion that watches with interest what thinking people are thinking.

Thus, for the moment, for better or worse, we have a nascent new "ism." Jay Parini's tremblingly sycophantic essay in the magazine of our newspaper of record, entitled "The Greening of the Humanities" (October 29, 1995), gave a scatter of tendencies a habitation (a slew of upper-crust institutions, most prominently Middlebury College, where he himself teaches), and a name: Ecocriticism. So he referred to it, and that is the word in boldface on a fat new anthology called *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (University of Georgia Press).

From the essay we learn that the movement already boasts a set of gurus, including, in no special order of merit, Middlebury's John Elder ("quietly charismatic," writes Parini, "with a high forehead and steady gaze"), Glotfelty (a "wiry, intense woman with eyes like diamond chips"), David Orr from Oberlin, Lawrence Buell from Harvard, Fromm from the University of Illinois, Chicago, and essayist Scott Russell Sanders.

Easy as it is to name some of the key figures, it is somewhat more difficult to set out exactly what ecocriticism believes or espouses. I don't mean this in any slighting way. Indeed, new disciplines, like new marriages, should be granted honeymoon privileges. They should be allowed to work out their credos away from the glare of publicity. Now that ecocriticism has been exposed, however, it must stand up for scrutiny. And as the Glotfelty/Fromm anthology has all the markings of a foundation document, it is probably the best place to look.

Glotfelty gives us this preliminary definition of ecocriticism in her Introduction: "Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." She then offers an array of sample questions that might suggest the kinds of inquiries that ecocritics might be venturing. Such as: "How is nature represented in this sonnet?" Or: "Are the

values in this play consistent with ecological wisdom?" Or: "In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind's relationship to the natural world?"

The scope, clearly, is broad, and though Glotfelty tries to supply her reader with a basic armature--a tripartite scheme of developmental stages--one cannot easily shed the sense of a rampant proliferation of perspectives and approaches. Glotfelty borrows her stages from Elaine Showalter's breakdown of the origin and evolution of feminist criticism. The first reflects a concern with "representations"--how nature is represented in literature. Second, there is the re-discovery and re-consideration of antecedent works--the claiming of a heritage. And finally Glotfelty proposes a theoretical phase, for, say, examining "the symbolic construction of species. How has literary discourse defined the human?"

Under the three corresponding section headings, then, and presumably representative of the movement at large, we find essays ranging from Lynn White, Jr.'s "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" (I), to Cynthia Deitering's "The Postnatural Novel: Toxic Consciousness in Fiction of the 1980s" (II), to Vera L. Norwood's "Heroines of Nature: Four Women Respond to the American Landscape" (III). The writing from one piece to the next is fairly predictable, reflecting here the more empirical locutions of the naturalist, there the cattle-car agglomerations of the career academic.

Metaphors of place spring to mind. Here is yet another new frontier; a land-rush is underway; critics and thinkers are staking out their fields, their terrain. There is a bit of that excitement of origins that is found when options are still open, before the power brokers have muscled the first orthodoxies into place. Indeed, the sideline watcher may wonder whether the survival struggle (a natural phenomenon if there ever was one) will play itself out as usual in a discipline that takes the respectful interdependences of the natural ecosystems as a kind of core model. Much will be decided. We are not even sure whether ecocriticism will attempt to be a transformation of literary study, or whether it will become its own bridging endeavor, a link between the humanities and the natural sciences. In the face of so much provisionality one feels a certain speculative license.

I wonder, for instance, whether ecocriticism is to be seen--as suggested in Parini's article--as a reply to and, perhaps, corrective for the perceived irrelevancy of "theory" in recent years. Ecocriticism does seem to have arisen at a moment when text has, in the hands of its exegetical theorists, become a kind of hypothetical cloud formation, too vaporous to offer purchase to the presumptuous demands of sense. Ironically, a sort of comparison can be drawn between the will to specificity of the early New Critics and the drive of the ecocritics to bring the world--at least the natural world--into the literary viewfinder. In all other respects, of course, the disciplines (it feels odd to be calling ecocritics a "discipline" already) are in fundamental opposition. The New Critics hedged off the text for scrutiny and banished any extra-textual awareness of the world. Ecocriticism, by contrast, uses texts mainly as a way to get at the world itself. Ecocritics might, one suspects, ignore any uses of language that are not a direct conduit to the nature they claim such devotion to.

Ecocriticism raises yet again those tiresomely persistent questions. What is the proper sphere--the purpose--of literary study? Which is to ask, naturally, about the nature and purpose of literature itself. Is literature, as some might contend, a dream dreamed alongside our common reality, a symbolic system that trains us, but always indirectly, for life in the real world? Or is it, less romantically, just another part of mucky reality--directly referential, a guide to our moral determinations and our political actions? Or is it something in between?

These are not, finally, questions that can be answered by reasoned analysis. We take positions based not on proof but on the warps and wrinkles of temperament. I can see with perfect plainness the arguments that call for literature to serve in some way the concrete business of living and propose for all art an implicit political role. I can even nod my head to many of the premises, the more so if they are advanced one by one by a non-hysterical individual. But persuade my mind as they may, they are powerless against my intuitive conviction, which I seem to have imbibed with mother's milk, that art bears no instructive relation to life in the world. Reading the ecocritics has, as one might imagine, activated my prejudices, as some of the notions that follow will confirm.

The essays in the Glotfelty/Fromm anthology have convinced me that, before they do anything else, the ecocritics must sort out a crucial terminological confusion. This involves use of the terms "nature" and "environment." The problem is that "environment" and "nature" are so often used interchangeably that they have become near synonyms. But of course they are not, and the distinction isolates a core uncertainty in this emerging discipline. "Environment" is a capacious term and refers to the whole of the surrounding scape, whether natural, urban, or something mixed. "Nature" is the original given; it is the environment before the transformations wrought by technology.

Ecocriticism appears to be dominantly concerned with nature, though Parini, to be fair, does quote Oberlin's Orr as saying: "Our subject, to borrow a phrase from Alfred North Whitehead, is 'life in all its manifestations.' We study cities as well as forests." But on the evidence, Orr is an exception. Nature and its preservation is what occupies most of the ecocritics. And this imposes a kind of programmatic simplicity upon the whole movement, gives it a "crunchiness" that may prove to be a liability. There is, moreover, no great battle to be fought, certainly not among the constituent intelligentsia. Fascism is bad; we must oppose it. The destruction of nature is bad; we must oppose it. The message should go out to those who need to hear it, but academic discourse is the least moveable of feasts.

How much more interesting and controversial would be an ecocriticism pledging itself to the more inclusive idea of "environment." For the fact is that most of our late-century environment represents a replacement, a covering over, of nature. Mainly technological, it includes now the myriad invisible electronic transmissions, all of which mediate and warp our contact with the natural world and which are changing us significantly into the bargain. Here is a subject upon which a debate can be--needs to be--centered: technology, yea or nay? But the ecocritics are nowhere in evidence, and this does not bode well.

After nomenclature, there is another abstract issue, this one involving a more reflective assessment of the idea of "nature." What do we mean, really, when we invoke that most commonplace noun? Generally we refer to the natural world at large or some part of it. We intend land, vegetation, waterways, living creatures, and the ecosystem that allows them all to flourish. But we also mean--or, rather, assume--something else. For nature is a time-honored shorthand for "what is." Nature is, in a sense, the ground of all reference, the origin and end of all organic existence. This is only a problem insofar as ecocriticism tends to isolate, or focus upon, nature as phenomenon, and while it does not ignore the underlying process, or the even more basic ontology, it has as its aim the foregrounding of what has always, until recently at least, been the all-embracing basis of being. The ground cannot be foregrounded! It is a vexing paradox. Our culture makes a strong association between nature and the ideal of naturalness. Be natural, be like nature. In other words, be without self-consciousness, be without too much reflection, just be. By focusing on nature, by bringing it forth as an object for attention and analysis, ecocriticism makes nature, in effect, unnatural.

We don't know yet in what specific ways the awareness of nature will be brought into the field of literary study—ecocriticism is still inventing itself. But we can glean a few clues, perhaps, from a work that is setting itself up as a staple reference in the field, *Greening the College Curriculum: A Guide to Environmental Teaching in the Liberal Arts*, edited by Jonathan Collett and Stephen Karakashian (Island Press). In the "Literature" chapter, written by Vernon Owen Grumbling, the subject is introduced thus:

Because literature works through value-laden images and offers itself to the interpretation of the reader, its particular value is to personalize the moral and aesthetic issues that inevitably arise in exploring conservation of biodiversity and sustainable development. Those teaching in disciplines other than literature can easily "borrow" a particular literary text as a means of stimulating students to respond in personal terms to the environmental consequences of attitudes and behaviors. Conversely, the fusion of environmental awareness into the study of literature often results in unusually lively discussion. Sometimes its students even develop an abiding affection for literature itself.

One example of a specific recommendation will have to suffice. Writes Grumbling:

By considering the environment as a subtext submerged in setting, one can infuse discussions of environmental concerns into most literature courses, even standard surveys required by general education mandates. With Huck Finn [sic], for example, one may explore the consequences of the steamboat, not only for Huck's journey, but for the future of other species and ask how the reader feels about that obviously doomed future. If a text does not admit non-human attributes to its environment, that fact is itself significant.

Grumbling's suggested approach strikes me as pernicious in the extreme. Not for nature, but for literature itself. As the opening passage makes obvious, literature is treated as a kind of

means, an instrument of moral instruction. A text can usefully be "borrowed" by instructors in other genres—can, in other words, be treated not as the larger expression it is meant to be, but as an icebreaker, a way to get students talking about certain non-literary concepts. This is no different from using films in order to study fashions or gender relations. There are obvious uses to these sorts of "readings," but the benefit always comes at the expense of the integrity of the works themselves. And to have this recommendation coming from inside the camp tells us that we should loft the warning flags.

The second passage, similarly, reveals no compunction on Grumbling's part about using a text—"Huck Finn"—as the basis for discussions that ultimately have nothing to do with the novel or its characters. That Grumbling would propose to fellow English teachers that they "explore the consequences of the steamboat, not only for Huck's journey, but for the future of the species" is a sin against the discipline. It is divesting a literary work of its literariness in the interests of an entirely separate agenda. "A more important agenda," one might retort. But that is to put politics ahead of art, an action that presupposes that the two are even remotely comparable operations, which of course they are not.

Not that the future of the planet is not more important than Mark Twain's novel. To be sure it is. But I have doubts about whether that more important agenda is being served in any meaningful way by the chatter that arises when a professor departs from a text to pursue extra-textual themes. Part of the point of literature has always been, through vision, focus, and craft, to give the lie to the easy stances and insights that belong to the sphere of mere conversation. That is to say, the study of literature and conversation about topical matters related to a given book represent two different orders of discourse.

We are back again to asking about the place and purposes of literature. And that these questions should even need asking points as clearly as anything else to a crisis in the humanities. If we keep the inquiry centered strictly on ecocriticism, the question might be posed as follows: 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 politicized to help advance the cause of the natural environment?

I will speak as a literary purist and assert that literature cannot and should not be used as a pretext for examining man and nature, certainly not more than it is a pretext for examining any other thing or relation. I resist the politicization of literature, though not, as some might suppose, for political reasons. My claim is more philosophical. Literature may be about the world, but not in the simple correspondence sense that people often imagine. Wordsworth's or Thoreau's or Twain's settings, however much they appear linked to actual places, are not finally transcriptions of settings in the out there. They are independent creations of the world; they are language in the mind. Ecocritics I have read—and Grumbling must be included here, too—very often make the mistake of conflating world and mind, thing and symbol. A critical error.

All of which is to propose that ecocriticism not take the natural world as its core subject, but look instead to man, the most problematic denizen. The true concern, finally, ought not to be with nature and its representations, but with the human being and whatever it is in his nature that has led us into crisis. In other words, ecocriticism might want to re-christen itself ego-criticism and explore what literature has to say about human nature, its avariciousness, rapacity, the will to power . . . this would mean, in some ways, going back to an almost abandoned tradition. But is this necessarily a bad idea? *Huckleberry Finn* studied seriously from a humanist perspective tells us more about the causes underlying the destruction of our environment than does the seemingly more direct—but in fact more oblique—approach that brings to the foreground the characters' interactions with the natural environment. Surely there is more to be gleaned from a study of the assumptions of slaveholding than a tabulation of riverine imagery.

Parini quotes Middlebury's Elder as saying, "It doesn't make sense to have English departments anymore. . . . I've come to prefer a concentric and bioregional approach to learning." By this I understand him to mean that the world is a dense fabric of interdependencies and that the proper study of literature—which is ostensibly about the world—ought to be correlatively interdisciplinary. This may be just the ticket for other fields—biology, history, geology, and sociology, say (and of course the *Annales* historians do something of the sort) —but it is a radical misunderstanding of English, of literature—indeed, of art itself—to insist upon cross-pollinating it with more worldly matters.

I feel somewhat guilty about insisting upon this separation—about keeping Church and State apart, as it were—for I do accept that a) nothing could be more important than the survival of our natural world and its ecosystems and b) literature, if it is to matter, must remain relevant, must address the state of things in some meaningful way. But I cannot thereby advocate that literature and literary study be about the natural world. No, literature and all that depends on it must continue to be about what it is in us humans that has brought the crisis about; about what it means for us to confront the evidence of our destructiveness and the likelihood of a severely diminished future; and where in ourselves we might look to find the strength needed to begin to deal with the crisis. Moving the focus anywhere away from the psyche, the soul, ultimately depreciates the art and hobbles it from doing what it does best. We do want to save nature, but we don't need to kill literature in our zeal to do so.

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