

Scholars Embark on Study of Literature About the Environment

By Karen J. Winkler

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In the late 1980s, Cheryll Burgess was finishing her dissertation on American women authors when she realized that she was more interested in another topic—environmental literature.

She was intrigued by authors from Henry David Thoreau to Edward Abbey who wrote about nature, but she could find no field of literary criticism devoted to analyzing their writing. True, she came across scattered books and essays on what she thought of as an ecological approach to literature, but the authors didn't even seem aware of each other's work.

So she set about compiling a bibliography of nature writers and the scholars who discussed them, sending the material to all the names on her list for whom she could find addresses. She asked them to consider organizing a field, publishing an anthology, starting a journal. And by the way, she added at the end, she'd like to become the first professor in the United States with a specific position in literature and the environment. Anyone interested?

Today, Cheryll Burgess Glotfelty says that "my beginning assumption was that something we could call ecocriticism was possible, but we would have to invent the field."

A few years later, that effort is well under way. This spring the University of Georgia Press published a survey of the field, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Ms. Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, an independent scholar. It is just one of many such books that publishers are adding to their lists. From anthologies of nature writing such as *The Norton Book of Nature Writing* (Norton, 1990) to books of literary criticism and Garland Publishing's upcoming *Environmental Literature: An International Handbook*, environmental literature is hot.

Taking Notice

In 1992 scholars founded the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (known as ASLE), and it now boasts some 900 members. There's a journal—*ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*—as well as *The American Nature Writing Newsletter* (just renamed *ASLE News*), and an active e-mail discussion list (asle@unr.edu). And yes, Ms. Glotfelty is a professor of literature and the environment at the University of Nevada at Reno, an institution fast becoming a center for ecocriticism.

At the same time, the rest of literary criticism is taking notice. Journals such as *The North Dakota Quarterly*, *The Indiana Review*, *The Georgia Review*, and others have published special issues on literature and the environment. This year, groups that meet annually to discuss the literature of Faulkner and Hemingway have adopted the natural world as their theme.

Still, nobody is willing to pin down just what ecocriticism is. Very broadly, scholars say that it adds place to the categories of race, class, and gender used to analyze literature. For some, that

means looking at how texts represent the physical world; for others, at how literature raises moral questions about human interactions with nature. Some critics are resurrecting forgotten texts of nature writing, bringing them into the classroom and scholarly discussion; others are using postmodern literary theory to analyze them. Ecofeminists are looking at the way representations of nature are influenced by gender; environmental activists are pointing to the ways in which literature addresses ecological problems.

"Green Cultural Studies"

Scholars call the emerging field "green cultural studies," "environmental literary criticism," "the natural history of reading." "The fact that we can't agree on a name is a sign of the incredible diversity in ecocriticism," says John Elder, a professor of English and environmental studies at Middlebury College. "It's a free-for-all, and that's exciting."

The diversity stems at least in part from the different routes that literary critics have traveled to ecocriticism. Some literary critics see their role as raising public awareness of environmental issues. Many of these scholars were environmental activists before they become ecocritics.

Avid backpackers have transferred their love of the outdoors to appreciation of its depiction in literature. Others have responded to the growing interest among literary scholars in studying non-fiction. Perhaps most important, scholars have been galvanized by the contemporary renaissance in nature writing among such authors as Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, Terry Tempest Williams, and many more.

A number of literary critics also say that ecocriticism represents a reaction to the heady theorizing of the 1980s and 90s. They jokingly call themselves "compoststructuralists," to differentiate themselves from poststructuralists and to emphasize the, um, earthiness of their approach.

"For a long time, the focus of literary studies was on the world of words," says Lawrence Buell, a professor of English at Harvard University. From new critics in the 1950s, who thought that texts could be analyzed on their own terms, without reference to the context in which they were produced, to recent theorists who have argued that language never accurately reflects reality, "there's been a gap between texts and facts," Mr. Buell says.

"But now there's a recoil: Ecocriticism assumes that there is an extratextual reality that impacts human beings and their artifacts—and vice versa."

Not surprisingly, diversity breeds controversy. When Jay Parini wrote an article on the new field for *The New York Times Magazine* last year, he says that he got over 100 letters—most of them angry.

"People said that I'd neglected the feminists or ignored the theorists," says Mr. Parini, a professor of English at Middlebury. "Everybody seems to think that they started ecocriticism."

The Use of Theory

One of today's biggest debates is over the use of theory. Scholars such as Glen A. Love, who has just retired as a professor of English at the University of Oregon, argue that ecocriticism needs to leave postmodernism behind. Environmental studies began in the life sciences and then broadened out to the humanities, Mr. Love says, but the two parts of the field still interact very little.

"As a literary scholar, it embarrasses me to listen to colleagues who see science as just a bunch of cultural stories or who talk about nature writing without knowing very much about nature," he says. "It's time to heal the breach between the hard sciences and the humanities--and literary theory isn't going to do it."

Nevertheless, a number of scholars combine theory and ecocriticism. In *The Ecocriticism Reader*, one essay draws on the theories of Michel Foucault and Edward Said to demonstrate that the environment is a cultural construct that, for example, ascribes feminine characteristics or prevailing definitions of innocence to nature.

"It's a big debate, but I suspect that a lot of people—like myself—are eclectics," says Mr. Buell. "I sympathize with the view that a stone is a stone, and no amount of literary theory can change that. But I've also learned from contemporary theory that we have to watch it when we move from stone to text. No text can exactly mirror the non-human world."

A related debate focuses on whether ecocriticism is compatible with feminist theorizing and analysis. Clearly, ecofeminism is an up-and-comer, with its own special issue of *ISLE* in the works and numerous anthologies of women nature writers already published.

Reflections of Gender

Yet Louise H. Westling, a professor of English at the University of Oregon, worries that by emphasizing the way gender is reflected in depictions of the landscape, ecofeminism reinforces a longstanding tradition of assuming that the land is female and the people who affect it male.

"That's absurd. The land is not a woman. But from ancient times, writers have used feminine images to justify conquering it," says Ms. Westling. Academic analysis sometimes jars on environmental activism.

Another essay last year in *The New York Times Magazine*, by the historian William Cronon, prompted a lengthy debate among ecocritics. Mr. Cronon argued that designated wilderness areas are not pristine enclaves, but reflections of society's "longings and desires," cultural inventions that are, for example, tied to our myths about the frontier.

What is Nature?

"A lot of ecocritics thought that kind of analysis academicized the discussion in ways that debunked the efforts of conservationists and could be manipulated by developers," says Scott

Slovic, editor of *ISLE* and director of the Center for Environmental Arts and Humanities at the University of Nevada at Reno.

Other questions abound:

What is nature--and where does one find it? The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment started at a meeting of the Western Literature Association, and some of the most prominent departments in ecocriticism are in the West--at Reno, the University of Oregon, the University of California at Davis. Perhaps as a result, a lot of ecocriticism has focused on Western literature. But Mr. Tallmadge, a professor of literature at Cincinnati's Union Institute, asks: "Do you have to just read John Muir and his encounters with the Sierras? Can't you read John Updike on the city and talk about place and location in terms of urban environments?"

What is nature writing? Traditionally, scholars have thought of it as the non-fiction essay popularized by Thoreau, a blend of scientific observation and self-analysis. But the writer Annie Dillard recently set off a furor on ASLE's e-mail network when she confessed to a writing seminar that she had made up a number of descriptions and incidents in her *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, which describes her life in a valley of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. If you can't trust a nature writer, some scholars asked, who can you trust? Nevertheless, a number of scholars are calling for a broadened definition of nature writing, one that includes poetry and fiction.

Are nature writing and ecocriticism a middle-class preserve? Most critics would say Yes. So far, nature writing and the scholarly discussion of it have centered primarily in Europe and North America, attracting people who have the leisure and money to go out and enjoy nature. But some literary critics say they should study how other traditions--for example, the oral stories of American Indians--represent nature. Moreover, scholars such as Mr. Slovic are trying to spread ecocriticism abroad: While on a Fulbright fellowship to Japan a few years ago, he helped establish ASLE-Japan, which now boasts more than 100 members. This month the group is sponsoring an international symposium in Hawaii on Japanese and American nature writing.

Do nature writers and the ecocritics who study them take themselves a bit too seriously? A number of literary critics are experimenting with nature narratives, blending their personal experiences, for example in the woods of Maine, together with their readings of poets such as Robert Frost, who described those locations.

The Western writer C.L. Rawlins recently poked fun at this kind of introspection in an article in *The Bloomsbury Review*, dubbing it "the gentle thunder of a well-beaten breast." "Sitting at the desk with PowerBook, herb tea, and a stack of index cards, one suddenly realizes that upon reaching that farthest, highest peak, instead of eating a sandwich one in fact saw God," he wrote.

"Do we always have to come back to ourselves?" asks Oregon's Ms. Westling. "Surely nature writers and ecocritics ought to be looking for a less androcentric approach."

A Scathing Satire

Outside of ecocriticism, the reaction to the field is mixed. Mr. Parini's *New York Times* article provoked a scathing satire in *The Washington Post*. Jonathan Yardley, a *Post* columnist, echoed the thoughts of some English professors when he dubbed ecocritics "just another passel of academics who've figured out how to turn the classroom into a political forum."

Some among the ranks of literature's theorists also voice qualms. Donald E. Pease, a professor of English at Dartmouth College, worries that "the turn to nature can spawn an attitude of rugged individualism that is escapist and narrow. It still needs to be affiliated with other kinds of emancipatory literary practice."

Indeed, in some ways ecocriticism still hasn't quite broken into the mainstream. Phyllis Franklin, executive director of the Modern Language Association, says that preliminary plans for the association's next annual meeting show few sessions in the field. She adds, however, that "I do know people working on books that will appear in the academic marketplace in the future. That's when this approach will have more of an impact."

Scholars such as Harvard's Mr. Buell say that "the worst thing that could happen would be for ecocriticism to become just another branch of literary criticism. I would hope that we could continue to have meetings where smart dropouts and backpackers talk to tenured professors."

Key Works, Recent Books, and Anthologies in Ecocriticism

Sisters of the Earth: Women's Prose and Poetry About Nature, edited by Lorraine Anderson (Vintage, 1991)

Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition, by Jonathan Bate (Routledge, 1991)

The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture, by Lawrence Buell (Harvard University Press, 1995)

Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature, by John Elder (University of Illinois Press, 1985)

The Norton Book of Nature Writing, edited by Robert Finch and John Elder (W.W. Norton & Company, 1990)

The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (University of Georgia Press, 1996)

Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind, by Karl Kroeber (Columbia University Press, 1994)

This Incomperable Lande: A Book of American Nature Writing, edited by Thomas J. Lyon (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989)

The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology, by Joseph W. Meeker (Scribner's, 1972)

Wilderness and the American Mind, by Roderick Frazier Nash (third edition, Yale University Press, 1982)

Made From This Earth: American Women and Nature, by Vera Norwood (University of North Carolina Press, 1993)

The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology, by Max Oelschlaeger (Yale University Press, 1991)

Pilgrims to the Wild: Everett Ruess, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Clarence King, Mary Austin, by John P. O'Grady (University of Utah Press, 1993)

Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing: Henry Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Barry Lopez, by Scott Slovic (University of Utah Press, 1992)

The Practice of the Wild, by Gary Snyder (North Point Press, 1990)

The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction, by Louise H. Westling (University of Georgia Press, 1996)

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