

## The Greening of the Humanities

*Deconstruction is compost. Environmental studies is the academic field of the 90's.*

By Jay Parini

Excerpted from: *New York Times Magazine*, 29 October 1995: 52-53.

Environmental studies began in the sciences—geology, biology, meteorology—but it has widened its embrace to include humanities and social sciences. To find out how environmental studies connected to literature, my field, I attended a gathering in the Colorado Rockies this summer: the first conference of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment. On the plane from Denver to Fort Collins, I sat beside a rumpled looking man in his 50's with a black mustache and peculiar beard; he looked like an English professor, and he was. Prof. Barton St. Armand, who teaches at Brown, was also attending the conference. I asked him if environmental studies was the latest fad in academe.

"Absolutely not," he said. "This is a new place in the curriculum. Students like it because it taps into some very basic concerns, and teachers of literature like it because they're bored with theory. Literary theory wasn't real. Nature is tangible." He paused to reflect. "We're seeing a return to realism, to exact and esthetically pleasing descriptions of nature."

The first morning of the conference, I met my colleague John Elder for breakfast at a pancake house in Fort Collins. Scott Russell Sanders, an essayist, sat across from us in the booth, beside Prof. Lawrence Buell, who teaches at Harvard. Professor Buell's latest book, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, has become the standard work on the subject, and a pioneering example of what is being called "ecocriticism."

Since arriving in Fort Collins, I'd been hearing about ecocritics. I asked Professor Buell if he was one. "Let's just say there is such a thing as ecocriticism," he said. "We've gotten used to character, theme and plot; it's the sense of place that is ignored or slighted. The ecocritics are trying to remedy that."

Eating pancakes with these men was intimidating. All three are magnificent specimens of the human animal: sinewy, tall sun-tanned. Obviously, much can be said for getting out of the classroom. They all climb mountains and run on country roads. I can't imagine any of them smoking.

We strolled together through the leafy, modern Colorado State campus to the Lory Student Center, now jammed with youngish professors. I sipped hot cider with a Mormon mountain climber whose shaved head reminded me of Mr. Clean; he stood between an aging hippie from Santa Cruz, Calif., in colorful, billowing trousers, and a robust Irishman who had recently spent more than a year by himself in a cabin in Maine -- a la Thoreau. "You're the first people I've talked to in a long time," he said.

Between sessions, I met Cheryll Glotfelty, a conference organizer. A wiry, intense woman with eyes like diamond chips, she compared the beginnings of ecocriticism to the feminist movement. "They began by rediscovering early or neglected texts by women," she said. "Then they reexamined the classics, reading Henry James, for example, from a feminist perspective. Then came the phase of theory: seeing how language itself constitutes reality. In much the same way, ecocritics are rediscovering early writers, rereading the classics from a 'green' perspective and beginning to frame their subject in a theoretical way."

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**Readings:** Edward Abbey, "Desert Solitaire." Annie Dillard, "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek." Robert Finch and John Elder, editors, "The Norton Book of Nature Writing." David Orr, "Earth in Mind." Mitchell Thomashow, "Ecological Identity." Terry Tempest Williams. "Refuge."

**Top Courses:** "Literature of the Wilderness" (David Robertson, University of California at Davis). "The Ecohistory of New England" (Noel Perrin, Dartmouth College). "Representing the Other: Animals in Literature" (Cheryll Glotfelty, University of Nevada at Reno). "Environment and Society (David Orr, Oberlin College). "Environmental Visions and Environmentalism" (Donald Swearer, Swarthmore College). "Radical Environmentalism" (Stephanie Kaza, University of Vermont).

**Gurus:** Lawrence Buell, Harvard University. William Cronon, University of Wisconsin at Madison. John Elder, Middlebury College. Cheryll Glotfelty, University of Nevada at Reno. David Orr, Oberlin College. David Robertson, University of California at Davis. Donald Swearer, Swarthmore College. Louise Westling, University of Oregon at Eugene.