

BOOK REVIEW

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SIMBOLOGIA DE LA MONTAÑA. ALCALÁ DE HENARES: PUBLICACIONES UNIVERSIDAD DE ALCALÁ, 2012

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Realidad y simbología de la montaña, first volume in the “Cultura, Literatura y Medio Ambiente” (CLYMA) series, is the result of the collaborative efforts of the Grupo de Investigación en Ecocrítica, Instituto Franklin - UAH (GIECO), a research group consisting of scholars at the University of Alcalá and other institutions from Spain and the United States. GIECO is the leading ecocritical group in Spain, and during the last few years its members have worked towards establishing the foundations of ecocritical studies in Spain. Besides the present volume, the group has also published several numbers of *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment*, and other joint publications such as *Paisajes Culturales: Herencia y Conservación* (2010), where the scholar analysis is put in contrast with the practical aspects of politics.

Ecocriticism is such a recent school that an introduction to its aims, methodology, and impact is needed to truly appreciate the scholarly value of the multidisciplinary approaches collected in this volume. In this light, the introductory words by editor Juan Ignacio Oliva are a good starting point, as they wonderfully put forward the multiplicity of ideas behind a name which has too often been reduced to the simplistic denomination of scholarly branch of ecology (2012:9).

In the words of its editor, this volume strives to offer “new views on the relationship between human beings and mountains” (2012:13). Those visions range from the analysis of poetic approaches to mountains and their mythical presence in

the human soul to the appraisal of literature as a means to denounce social, political, and environmental abuses.

The magic word in ecocriticism is “interdisciplinarity”, and the editor of this book takes it to heart: ecofeminism, geography, political denounce, literary mysticism, or children’s literature show how multiple and diverse the possibilities of ecocriticism are. *Realidad y simbología de la montaña* is divided into two sections, each one dedicated to one broad category. The first one, “Idearios poéticos y populares” contains papers that explore literary approaches to mountains, with a special focus on poetry and children’s literature. The second half of the volume, “La montaña: imaginarios de ideología y resistencia”, revolves around the idea of denunciation and resistance, addressing more firmly ecocriticism’s aim of finding a balance between nature and human beings. The papers are primarily targeted to Spanish audiences who are not yet familiar with ecological criticism; notwithstanding their translation into Spanish, the essence of the original texts –whether in English, French, or Italian– is unadulterated.

The articles by Esther Rey-Torrijos and Bibian Pérez-Ruiz, from widely different methodological points of view, analyse women’s writings and African geography. Rey-Torrijos contributes to this volume with the excellent “Dian Fossey y Jane Goodall: ciencia y literatura en las montañas de África” on the writings of the two famous scientists whose writings called attention to the situation of primates in Tanzania –Goodall’s *A Reason for Hope* (1999)– and Rwanda –Fossey’s *Gorillas in the Mist* (1983). Rey-Torrijos’s paper highlights how *Gorillas in the Mist* and *A Reason for Hope* can be analysed from an ecocritical perspective because they place human beings in an environmental context that determines them but which is in turn modified and manipulated, as shown by the deterioration of the habitat of primates in the African mountains denounced in both works. This paper is key to the future of ecocriticism insofar as it explores Goodall and Fossey’s writings for their scientific rigor as much as for their literary sensibility and their impact in popular culture, advocating the need to broaden the field of ecocritical study and to truly embrace interdisciplinarity (2012:97). In another twist of ecocritical response verging in ecofeminism, the author suggests that the remarkable empathy that both Fossey and Goodall showed towards primates and their environment may have been enhanced, in a way, by their being women.

African mountains are also at the core of Pérez-Ruiz’s “La montaña zimbabuense como lugar de resistencia real y simbólica,” an ecocritical reading of the novel *Under the Tongue* (1996), by Zimbabwean writer Yvonne Vera. Pérez-Ruiz explores the novel’s particular postcolonial view and comments on Vera’s subtle use of poetic language to denounce the situation of women and children in the war-ridden Zimbabwe of the 1980’s. The mountains in Zimbabwe, sacred and

unsettling, are in *Under the Tongue* the mountains experienced by Muroyiwa, a character who combines aesthetic sensitivity with atrocious cruelty and who serves as an example of how mountains are in Zimbabwe both a psychological haven and an actual refuge from the war. Ultimately, this article serves as a welcome introduction for Yvonne Vera and her work to Spanish-speaking audiences.

It is perhaps in poetry where mountains achieve their full symbolic power: poetic language seems to be the best means to convey the mysticism arising from the confrontation of man and mountain. That confrontation, fully signified in the ascent, actual and symbolic, of the mountain, results in pieces of literature of enormous evocative power that bind literature and environment, hence making them suitable elements for ecocritical study.

The best examples of this approach in *Realidad y simbología de la montaña* are the papers by M^a Antonia Mezquita-Fernández and Terry Gifford. Both explore the mysticism of mountains as elements to be experienced, but while Mezquita approaches the subject from a comparative literature stance, Gifford puts in his own experiences as a climber to survey the poems in the anthology of Mountaineering poetry *The Climber's Fireside Book* (1964), by editor Wilfrid Noyce.

Gifford's privileged position as mountaineer and literary scholar bestows his article "Nuestro cuerpo adaptándose a este mundo': Poetas alpinistas" de la Universidad de Cambridge" with a formal and experiential sincerity that is arguably the most hands-on take on ecocriticism in the whole volume. The poets in *The Climber's Fireside Book* –all hailing from the University of Cambridge– are examples of Romantic and Post-romantic Mountaineering literature, analysed here through the reasons that led Wilfrid Noyce to include them in his anthology. Gifford adds some input regarding his own experiences as climber and poet that undoubtedly lend a genuine charm to his otherwise impeccable study.

Gifford briefly comments on Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, also included in the anthology, stressing the contradictions present in the depictions of mount Snowdon and the Simplon Pass. In "Poética de la imaginación y simbolismo de la montaña en William Wordsworth y Claudio Rodríguez", Mezquita-Fernández focuses instead in Wordsworth's mysticism, comparing the poet's experience in *The Prelude* with "El Cerro de Montamarta dice", by the great Spanish poet Claudio Rodríguez. Through the comparative analysis of the two works, Mezquita draws some points of connection and departure between Wordsworth and Rodríguez, two poets very distant in time but with similar sensitivities towards environment. According to Mezquita-Fernández, mountains represent for them a spiritual ascent: Wordsworth's exhilaration as he climbs the slopes of Snowdon is in stark contrast to the poignant voice of the Cerro, which carries in itself the voice of Claudio Rodríguez. Snowdon provokes a nearly mystical experience in Wordsworth, while

the humbler Cerro de Montamarta expresses a desire for knowledge and elevation that is the heart of the poet as well.

Julia Barella also makes Spanish literature her subject in “Regreso a las montañas de la infancia”, focusing on the writings of poet Antonio Colinas. Barella studies his poetry, essays, and interviews in order to recreate an image of the mountains as perceived by him, and introducing the idea of the mountains of childhood, a mythical and ecologically conscious place undisturbed by the external world. Barella also provides a list of Spanish authors with a similar take on nature, opening a window for new ecocritical studies on such important figures as Juan Ramón Jiménez, Antonio Machado or Rafael Alberti. With these articles, Mezquita-Fernández and Barella demonstrate how ecocriticism can open new paths of study in Spanish literature.

Also on the subject of the mountains of childhood are Esther Laso y León’s “La montaña en la literatura infantil y juvenil” and Lorraine Kerslake’s “Pensando como una montaña: un reencuentro con caperucita y el lobo.” Laso y León surveys children’s literature in French to find abundant commonplaces regarding mountainous environment and the people and animals that inhabit it. On her part, Kerslake analyses the image of the wolf in children’s literature and how that image has evolved from Antiquity to contemporary times, while claiming the importance of the concept of “environmental imagination” to encourage and focus the children’s future approaches to nature.

Ecology in other French-speaking countries is examined in Monserrat López-Mújica’s “Visiones literarias y ecocríticas de la montaña suiza”, which presents the works of Lausanne-born authors C.F. Ramuz, Corinna Bille, and Maurice Chappaz. Placing their writings in a wider ecocritical frame, López-Mújica highlights the different symbolic approaches towards the Alps in the works of the three writers who criticised the decay and manipulation of Swiss natural environment during the twentieth century.

The articles in *Realidad y simbología de la montaña* do not explicitly denounce the abuses on the environment: ecocriticism works underlining the denounce in the writings of ecology-aware authors, proving that environmental decay is a global disease and the offspring of our failures as a society.

The studies by Irene Sanz-Alonso and David Río-Raigadas, though focusing on different aspects of the mountain as symbol, bring to light the parallelisms between deterioration of the environment and moral decay of politicians in the wildly different contexts of Mafia-ridden Southern Italy and the American far West.

Roberto Saviano and his immensely popular *Gomorra* (2006) are the subject of Sanz-Alonso's essay "Montañas de basura y tierras de fuego en *Gomorra*, de Roberto Saviano". Through the analysis of Saviano's metaphors –which link the Camorra, the ominous Mount Vesuvius, and the toxic dumping sites filling the Campania–, and engaging in literary, social and historical readings, the author explores the variety of ecocritical readings that can be applied to *Gomorra*, with special emphasis on the tragedies of social and environmental violence that seem to go hand in hand in Saviano's account.

Glossing over the arms trafficking and the illegal drug trade that were provocatively detailed in the first part of the book, and which arguably made *Gomorra* an international bestseller, Sanz-Alonso focuses on Saviano's denunciation of the unsustainable social and environmental situation created by the Mafia in the area of Naples. The many dumpsters where the Mafia illegally disposes of the toxic waste are very vividly described by Saviano as man-made mountains, an image in which the idea of mountain is reverted to stand for the absolute opposite of nature in its most positive aspects. Sanz-Alonso insists on the "man-made" element of these mountains to suggest the deteriorated social state in the region, which is consistent with its deteriorated environmental state.

Taking nature's most negative aspects, however, the author suggests that Mount Vesuvius and its destructive power work as natural counterparts of the Italian organised crime in Saviano's work. Vesuvius's destructive capacities as described in Pliny the Younger's account of the eruption in the year 79 B.C. and the trail of bodies it left behind further underline that the identification between the Mafia and the destructive Vesuvius is all-pervasive in *Gomorra*, thus enhancing the ecocritical possibilities of Saviano's work.

David Río-Raigadas's "Yucca Mountain": la montaña tóxica del oeste americano" presents the mountain as a reference in Native American cosmology, and delves into its spiritual dimension in novels by Wendell A. Duffield, Frank Bergon, and James Conrad. All of them bring to the fore the concept of "environmental racism" (141) that is another aspect of that violence already explored in Sanz-Alonso's article and which is, at the same time, a covert attack on Native American society.

While Río-Raigadas comments on the importance of mountains for Native-american culture and literature, Carmen Flys-Junquera focuses on African American and Chicano literature in "La montaña liberadora en James Baldwin y Rudolfo Anaya." Flys-Junquera is the coordinator of the GIECO group and the CLYMA series, and, with José Manuel Marrero Henríquez, and Julia Barella, the editor of the first volume on ecocriticism written in Spanish, *Ecocríticas. Literatura y Medio Ambiente* (2010). In *Realidad y simbología de la montaña* her contribution

is an article on the uses of mountains as a symbolic device for character development in the novels by Baldwin and Anaya. The charge of environmentalist reivindication is less pronounced in Baldwin and Anaya than in the novels discussed by Río–Raigadas, but Flys–Junquera draws lucid parallelisms in the uses of mountains in minority literatures, something that makes both articles a good example of ecocriticism applied to ethnic studies.

Besides editing this volume, Juan Ignacio Oliva also contributes with an article on the literary, cultural, religious, and symbolic connotations of mountains in the exile poetry of Khrisna Rao Amembal, Surjeet Kalsey, Suniti Namjoshi, and Agha Shahis Ali. Oliva's "'De las Rocosas a los Himalayas': simbología y afiliación de las montañas exóticas" explores the way in which the poetry written by Indian authors living abroad is always reminiscent of the native landscape, and how mountains are the places where human, divine, and natural coexistence and communication come into being. His article serves as a bridge between the two halves of the book because, while placed within the more reivindicative second part—perhaps in favour of simetry—its topic and the way in which it approaches literature and mysticism are more in tune with the articles of the first part.

Many of these papers share the same theoretical foundations: Cheryl Glotfelty's introduction to the decisive *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996:XV-XXXVII) encourages the cultivation of an environmental awareness while at the same time maintaining the ambition for scholarly brilliance. Aldo Leopold inspired several of the articles with his lament on the extermination of wolves in "Thinking Like a Mountain", where he ponders about the interconnections in the natural world (1945). The continuous references to these works denote a field of studies that is still budding but which has tremendous potential, as attested by the wide variety of subjects and approaches contained in the present book and, more importantly, by ecocriticism's exponential possibilities of growth.

The papers in this volume are not political pamphlets trying to raise awareness about the sorry state of the global environment. They do not strive to offer solutions or alternatives. They do, however, highlight the critical space of mountains (and, by extension, the whole mother nature) in the spiritual soul of humanity and how that environmentally-conscious mind has permeated literature and scholarship.

The articles by Barella and Mezquita on the possibility of ecocriticism applied to the analysis of Spanish literature almost work as appetizers for future publications dealing with the endless possibilities of ecocritical discourse in Latin-American literature. The effort of presenting ecocriticism to Spanish audiences is praiseworthy, and undoubtedly the impact on Spanish-speaking audiences will be all the greater when accompanied with more studies on Spanish and Latin-

American literature. The possibilities of exploring literature in Spanish from an ecocritical perspective are exciting, and I am personally looking forward to reading future publications by GIECO members.

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