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Ecocriticism

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Recommended Citation

Siewers, Alf, "Ecocriticism" (2010). *Faculty Contributions to Books*. 131.
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A DICTIONARY OF
CULTURAL AND CRITICAL
THEORY

Second Edition

Editors

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 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

2010

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Eagleton, Terry (1943–) British critic, novelist, and playwright. Terry Eagleton is doubtless the most widely read Marxist critic now writing in English. He appears to have systematically and successfully defied the usual social and professional British class boundaries in a way that has contributed to his work. His many publications include a number of small pamphlet-size books – such as *Criticism and Ideology* (1976), *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976), *The Function of Criticism* (1984), and *The Significance of Theory* (1990) – which have all reached a wide audience. But he has also written several more detailed books for what is still a substantial readership. These include *Walter Benjamin* (1981), *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), and *Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990). In his inaugural lecture as Warton Professor, Eagleton (1993, p. 19) repeated a note that he has sounded throughout all of his recent criticism:

If . . . everything just goes on as it is, English studies can abandon an illusion that they have anything of significance to say to those outside the charmed circle of academia. And if this comes about, then it will represent a profound betrayal of their own finest traditions. For all the greatest moments of English criticism . . . have been points at which, in speaking of the literary work, criticism has found itself unavoidably speaking of more than it – found itself, indeed,

mapping the deep structures and central directions of an entire culture.

His commitment is clearly to the transformative powers of critical literary study.

Reading

Eagleton, Terry 1983: *Literary Theory: An Introduction*.
 — 1990: *The Significance of Theory*.
 — 1993: *The Crisis of Contemporary Culture*.

MICHAEL PAYNE

ecocriticism Ecocriticism, also known as literary ecology or environmental literary studies, is a field of criticism that emerged in the late twentieth century as a slightly delayed response in the humanities to the global emergence of the environmental movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Together with environmental philosophy and environmental history, and to some extent studies of place, space, and landscape, it forms the core of what in the early twenty-first century is an emerging cross-disciplinary field of environmental humanities. That spectrum of studies subverts twentieth-century paradigms of discrete liberal arts institutional divisions, in resistance to the growth of more quantitative-based professional and interdisciplinary programs in policy, planning, and environmental sciences. As such, while ecocriticism may seem a bridge between the “two cultures” of academia, it can in some ways also

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THOMAS C. GREAVES

represent an attempted resurgence of a qualitative tradition of liberal arts, based often in an implicit critique of scientific complicity in massive degradation of the world's physical environment during the past two centuries.

Lawrence Buell of Harvard, a leading senior scholar in the field, at a 2009 conference on "Environmental Imaginations" at Susquehanna University, defined ecocriticism in general terms as up-ending a traditional quasi-Aristotelian fourfold framework for reading literature (plot, characterization, theme and setting) by refocusing it around setting, the element most often neglected in Western criticism. Yet Buell and others in their writings also make clear how ecocriticism does this richly through probing the relation between physical and social contexts and text as a continuum of textual setting, while often drawing on a complex definition of "nature" in debt to Martin HEIDEGGER's view of *phusis* as that which both appears and hides simultaneously. This is often done to subversively re-read power relations in stories by interweaving contexts and setting.

In the primary ecocritical journal *ISLE* (which in 2009 became housed at Oxford University Press, symbolizing growing scholarly recognition of the field); and elsewhere, practitioners have moved beyond a first wave of criticism related closely to the late twentieth-century philosophical movements of deep ecology (as developed by Arne Naess) and ecofeminism (articulated by Val Plumwood). Increasingly ecocriticism, while often still connected to those roots, attempts to build complex engagements of texts with concerns of environmental social justice, neocolonialism/globalization, and "posthumanities"/"postnature" studies. These involve an increasingly diverse array of literatures ranging beyond the field's initially heavy North Atlantic and Western US focus on English Romanticism, American Transcendentalism, twentieth-century Anglo-American nature writing, and American Indian literature.

In the process, ecocritics continue efforts to develop their field as a theoretical approach as well as a way of reading, focusing on setting as a pre-text for studying the interplay of environmental and social contexts, including how texts themselves can be understood as serving an environmental function in human development and exploitation of the world and other beings. In this sense, in a

much more sophisticated way than understood by some of its critics, ecocriticism has begun to explore comprehensively issues of how text and the subjectivity of both author and reader can be seen as emerging in a kind of "nature-text." Ecocritics at gatherings such as the biennial North American conference of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE, which sponsors *ISLE*), increasingly are looking at environmental phenomenology and semiotic studies based in Charles PEIRCE's sign theory, as well as into globalization studies under the "eco-cosmopolitanism" banner of Stanford's Ursula Heise (a rising star in the movement), seen in her field-redefining book *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet* (2008).

Nonetheless the current financial collapse of neoliberal globalization and challenges to higher education's own "bubble" likely will reinvigorate localist and regionalist approaches, rooted in Wendell Berry's "new agrarianism" and the sustainable economics of philosophers such as E.F. Schumacher, tracing back to Heidegger's environmental writings on region. In trying to steer clear of allegations of ecofascism in their localist tendencies, such approaches will likely intensify efforts to articulate an "ecopoetics" engaging developments in neuroscience with environmental phenomenology, as in the writings of Toronto philosopher Evan Thompson, linking also to work on ecosemiotics emanating from Tartu University.

Through such efforts, some ecocritics see their field contributing significantly to redefining critical theory in a "post-theory" era, through a literal grounding of theory across previous abstracting of humanities from the sciences. But in any case the field's concern with placing cultural and social narratives of what is "natural" at the center of interpretation has opened significant opportunities for modern Western criticism to engage less condescendingly with "pansemitotic" nature-texts and art from indigenous and pre-modern cultures, which regard nature itself as a system of signs with its own semiotics apart from conceptualized codes of human sciences. Recent interest by environmental activists and organizations in the relevance of cultural imagination, narratives, and storytelling to realizing the inherent value of non-human being and ensuring human care for a region (for example,

way than understood criticism has begun to assesses of how text and author and reader can find of "nature-text." Such as the biennial of the Association for the Study of the Environment (ASE), increasingly are phenomenology and Charles PEIRCE's signification studies under the banner of Stanford's (the movement), seen in *Sense of Place, Sense*

financial collapse of challenges to higher education likely will reinvigorate approaches, rooted in "post-positivism" and the suspicion of philosophers such as E.F. Schlegel to Heidegger's environmentalism. In trying to steer environmentalism in their localist directions, ecocritics will likely intensify "ecopoetics" engaging science with environmentalism in the writings of William S. Thompson, linking ecocritics emanating from

ecocritics see their role to redefining criticism in the "post-positivist" era, through a literalist and previous abstracting sciences. But in any case with placing cultural at is "natural" at the time is opened significant Western criticism to work with "pansemiotic" indigenous and pre-colonial regard nature itself as its own semiotics apart from the human sciences. Environmental activists and the practice of cultural imagery-telling to realizing non-human being and region (for example,

the Conservation Fund's interest in the development of designated historic corridors around the Chesapeake Bay) ensures expanding support for ecocritical approaches in the foreseeable future. This is counteracted, however, by fundamental tensions within environmental studies between quantitative and qualitative approaches, and the unsure footing of ecocriticism in conventional departmental and divisional categories of the academy.

An example of ecocritical analysis in its fairly new extension to non-modern literatures highlights the contrast between early Irish and Anglo-Saxon views of an ancestral spiritual Otherworld in nature, and hence the relation of human societies to the physical world and cultural constructions of human subjectivity and the "natural" (Siewers, 2009). In *Beowulf*, the natural world of the Grendelcyn's mere is a place described in terms borrowed from hellish religious allegory. The inhabitants of this natural realm are human descendants of Cain but also monsters, probably identifiable to Anglo-Saxon audiences with non-Germanic native inhabitants of Britain. The hero Beowulf becomes well defined as a teleological individual in opposition to monsters of the wetlands and earlier of the sea. By contrast, in the perhaps roughly contemporary *Immram Brain*, or *The Voyage of Bran*, an early Irish narrative portrays the sea as an otherworldly realm both contiguous with Ireland (and overlapping it through other elemental and topographical interactions expressed in various early Irish texts) and in a sense encompassing it, with a respected mode of time of its own different from human concerns. Bran's engagement with the external environment shapes his figure in the story, rather than his opposition to it. Such analysis engages in a focus on setting that morphs into historical, social, source-study, and philological contextualization, examining differing colonial, racial, and theological situations of alternative early Christian literary cultures. It suggests how certain textual traditions such as that of *Immram Brain* can highlight a non-allegorical and iconographic view of desire, selfhood, and symbolism, essentially a "non-Western" view (by later standards), in which desire is relational rather than a condition of lack, following on the "geophilosophy" of Gilles DELEUZE and Félix GUATTARI, which also informs aspects of ecocritical theorizing.

Buell in his foundational *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995) developed a set of criteria for identifying texts that cue the reader into a more "ecocentric" or nature-centered literary experience. The use of such criteria reflects the influence of PHENOMENOLOGY ON READER-RECEPTION THEORY, while also embracing explanations of such cues based in POSTCOLONIAL/neocolonial theory and NEW HISTORICISM, building on work on literary and cultural landscape by figures such as Raymond WILLIAMS, W.J.T. Mitchell, and (in terms of the simulacra-landscape of global capitalism) the Deleuze-influenced team of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. As picked up by the "second wave" of ecocriticism, such analyses of power relations in connection with textual shapings and reflections of nature extend ecocritical analysis into areas beyond Euroamerican- and North American-centered textual traditions, to work on Caribbean, African, Asian, and African-American cultures, including, for example, ecocritical study of the works of Toni Morrison. The 2009 ASLE Book Award for Ecocriticism was awarded to Paul Outka for his book *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* (2008), which addresses interconnections of race and nature. Outka's study discusses the sublime and race, related to transcendentalism, abolitionism, and the pastoral, within contexts of slavery, reconstruction, "Strange Fruit," and white flight. Typical of the field, the book uses a mix of theoretical approaches with a strong historical context, exemplifying in the words of one reviewer how ecocriticism can "begin to embrace the true complexity of the American landscape."

Place-centered phenomenologically based work by the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (see CULTURAL LANDSCAPE IN A GLOBALIZING WORLD) represents an important area of overlap between landscape studies, human geography, and concerns with normative values of sustainability in ecocriticism, implicit in the latter's search for authentic human development, or what Naess termed a self-realization that is neither selfish nor altruistic but emergent in environmental relationships. Some ecocritics today regard notions of the "natural" as outdated in explorations of "post-humanities," as in the related emerging fields of animal studies and cyborg theory. But a dynamic

sense of nature in which the human is implicated (a "real" with which, however apophatically, the embodied human mind must come to terms at least in relation to social ethics and mortality) remains a strong element of most ecocritical projects, related to continuing activist connections of the field, its engagement with indigenous and now premodern traditions, and its connections with phenomenology.

In part this has been addressed through a phenomenological sensibility in line with Heidegger's observation that what we see often is in a sense our ideas, an actual that is not real. To achieve a paradoxically "virtual real" involves trying to establish a more personal and experiential sense of reality apart from more abstract theoretical constructs of Western Scholasticism and modernity, and this is achievable through certain types and approaches of narrative. Erazim Kohák's *The Embers and the Stars* (1984), from what is sometimes called the Czech school of phenomenology, articulates an early ecocritical quest for human realization in nature. Its phenomenological exegesis (and ultimate normative embrace) of the Jewish biblical text of the Ten Commandments in environmental terms parallels some ecocritical ethical concerns with deep ecological notions of self-realization in the environment. Works of Edward S. Casey mark a more comprehensive application of phenomenology to environmental concerns, considering (in terms of place) writings by critical theorists including Jacques DERRIDA and Luce IRIGARAY. Casey defines place by extending Heidegger's fourfold into a "happening" intersection of cosmology and cosmogony in personal experience. Place-landscape is a regional field of such narrative intersections. Irigaray's elemental sense of a double-folded femaleness as the basis of such a landscape, both contained and containing, provides an alternative to the modern generic universal grid of "space," cognitively controlled and interiorized by the human mind. Casey's gloss of Irigaray provides another significant analogue-basis for ecocritical theory. They share parallel concerns with place as a relational mode of life threatened by modern constructions of space emerging from a paradoxical merger of the transcendent and the interiorized in the anthropology of modern science. Casey's explicating of active and passive memory in relation to experience of time highlights the

importance of textual highlighting of multiplicitous and simultaneous modes of temporality in "ecocentric" texts, exemplified in the American Indian writer Linda Hogan's novel *Solar Storms*. Active memory involves an experience of multiple temporal realities, rather than Augustine's "eternal present" possessed by the transcendental subject.

Narratives such as Hogan's that highlight dynamic boundaries of human and non-human temporalities of time and non-time, and overlapping diverse cultural and personal temporalities within human experience, exhibit what ecophenomenologist David Wood (in his essay "What is eco-phenomenology?" in the collection *Eco-Phenomenology*; Brown and Toadvine, 2003) calls "time-plexity." In certain ways this notion of time-plexity parallels premodern or non-modern experiences of time, such as the early-medieval/patristic sense of simultaneous entwined layers of human social time, non-human natural cycles of time, the eternal time of non-corporeal and spiritual but created beings (such as angels and demons), and the everlasting uncreated "non-time" of divinity. In such time-plexity, human narrative control or possession of an objectified nature is impossible. In Hogan's twentieth-century fiction, the reality of Indian family and cultural memories form a different temporality from that of the linear time of whites, which ignores also cycles of natural time and a temporality of a spiritual realm entwined with it and traditions. Attentiveness to that time-plexity in the novel empowers resistance to corporate cultural and environmental domination through imaginative revival of engagement with alternative indigenous traditions that enables activism. Nor is such non-modern time-plexity confined to indigenous writings of the past century. Peter Hallward in his critique of Deleuze and Guattari notes the surprising affinity between their notion of "bodies without organs" or a virtual real (desire as relational rather than objectifying), and views of nature as theophanic in the work of the early Irish patristic writer John Scottus Eriugena, whose definition of nature as including non-being and the divine articulates a worldview in sync with Celtic stories of the Otherworld that formed a basis for what Northrop Frye called the "green world" of later English literature, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

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A static ecological sense of climax communi-
ties as a normative basis for literary ecology is at
odds with emphases of science in the later twen-
tieth century, and this has spurred the search
for an understanding of relational dynamics as
supporting the ethical framework that remains
an important strand in ecocriticism. In this the
importance of time-plexity is related to notions
of environmental empathy as narrative eco-
poesis (Thompson, 2007). Ecopoesis in eco-
phenomenology can be understood as a type of
cultural textuality in which the autopoiesis of the
individual's shaping of environment becomes
linked developmentally into a broader empathetic
sense of dynamic ecosystem within larger contexts.
Ecopoesis (sometimes spelled ecopoiesis) as a
literal shaping of ecosystems in this sense can be
defined in terms of both the role of narratives
(as in how Enlightenment texts shaped the right-
angled property landscape of the central portion
of North America today, via Thomas Jefferson's
writings), and processes of physical shaping of
ecosystems through scientifically inspired efforts
such as ecological restoration, which often rely
on early texts about landscape. The very term
ecopoesis evokes the recognition in ecocriti-
cism of the biological role of human beings as
storytelling and poetic beings, or "mythopoetic
subcreators" as put by J.R.R. Tolkien. Tolkien's
popular fiction, in its central depiction of
nature stemming from mid-twentieth-century
social contexts, highlights yet another focus of
contemporary ecocriticism, which increasingly
includes fantasy and science fiction genres and an
expanded definition of texts to include categories
such as *anime* and virtual-reality media.

Although many ecocritics have embraced evo-
lutionary theory wholeheartedly in their approach
to narrative as human environmental adaptation,
resistance to hegemonic Darwinism or NEO-
DARWINISM as both anthropocentric and ethno-
centric is also reflected in the field, echoing
Gregory Bateson's comment that rather than
focusing on the organism *versus* the environment,
ecological cultural studies needed to focus on
the organism *within* the environment (related to
Thompson's "neurophenomenological" notion of
environmental empathy and the role of ecopoe-
sis). Such emphases place aspects of ecocriticism
potentially in line with Thompson's critique of
Richard Dawkins's "genocentrism," in a trend

towards renewed examination of the human
being as in effect a psychosomatic and "extra-
organismic" ecosystem. Ramifications of this
for textual studies in the unfolding first half of
the twenty-first century are likely to involve
increased explorations of possible connections
of ecocritical theory to multidimensional frames
of physics from quantum mechanics to the
anthropic principle.

But at the moment perhaps the most fertile field
for new development of ecocritical theory lies
in its potential relations with ecosemiotics, an
offshoot of the also-young field of biosemiotics,
which has been centered mainly to date in a few
European universities, notably the former-Soviet
and now-Estonian semiotic studies center of
Tartu. Ecosemiotics looks at the cultural aspects
of signs as an environmental phenomenon. As such
it focuses on Peirce's concern with the relations
of the sign to both object (environment) and
meaning (formation of both writer and author in
the text). Wendy Wheeler's *The Whole Creature:
Complexity, Biosemiotics, and the Evolution of
Culture* (2006) provides a good introduction,
but articles by Winfried Nöth, Kalevi Kull, and
Timo Maran are foundational.

From a *longue durée* perspective, the developing
field of ecocriticism highlights the potential both
for further reassessment of Western intellectual
and social history in a global context, and for new
coalitions on environmental and related issues
between different non-modern worldviews glob-
ally. Through its distinctive focus and meld
of theoretical approaches, ecocriticism suggests
that the great watershed in the construction of
nature by Western culture was neither so much
the Renaissance nor the spread of Christianity,
but the normatizing of a reality of individual
human interiority from the twelfth-century
Renaissance onward. In developments of the era
of the Crusades and Scholasticism, it suggests, lie
the emergence of what became global modern-
ity, which can be seen as having a more direct
complicity than previously often assumed with
the medieval in Western European culture as
the latter morphed into global capitalism and
scientism.

Reading

Brown, C.S. and Toadvine, T., eds 2003: *Eco-
Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*.