

The Function of Criticism: A Response to William Major and Andrew McMurry's Editorial

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It was with what they called “desperate optimism” that William Major and Andrew McMurry assessed the “function of ecocriticism” in the last issue of the *Journal of Ecocriticism* (1). It is with the same desperate optimism that we are writing this short response – coming from two distinct ‘branches’ of ecocriticism, if you will, but sharing a commitment to debate and dialogue, as well as the experience of a recent conference, of which we will speak later. Fortunately, and despite their ostensible dislike for “words upon words” vis-à-vis the more pressing question “What is to be done?” (1), Major and McMurry behave like exemplary humanist scholars in that they self-critically reflect on their field of academic praxis, the relevance of our studies and, as they put it, the connection “between the library carrel and the Greenland ice shield” (1). It is therefore in the same vein that we would like to propose a response. This response will entail

- a reflection on the role of theory and the idea of a linear relation between ecocriticism and the real world (yes, we are saying it, too!)
- a discussion of the potential of ecocriticism once it is released from the pressing apocalypticism of urgency and immediate practicability, and a discussion of the straw spectre of the Humanist
- some remarks on the educational implications of these ideas.

One reason for our response is that the Call for Papers that has been cited as a prime example of “humanist boosterism” in the last issue (Major and McMurry 3) had been sent by one of us (R.B.). In fact, the issues touched upon in Major and McMurry’s dismissal were, unsurprisingly, central concerns at the conference, and we agree that the discussion about the role of criticism, academic environmentalism, humanism and – especially – pedagogy is crucial if ecocriticism wants to be taken seriously, and if it wants seriously to contribute to our dealings with environmental crises.

It is true that ecocriticism developed because ethically-minded or guilt-ridden scholars felt the need to address environmental degradation, species extinction and all the other aspects of our current environmental crises and thus overcome what Major and McMurry identified as “the unstated [requisite] for becoming a scholar”: “that you must, on a professional level, give up the notion that you are working in a biosphere” (2). Yet, even making allowance for the enjoyable hyperbole of Major and McMurry, we are not sure “nothing much has changed since the time of the Babylonian times” (2) – the role of rhetoric and intellectual labour has changed a lot in the interim, while what early ecocriticism chose to confront was specifically the abstraction and alleged unworldliness of *postmodernism*. Moreover, the question of the connection between words and world is not new and has been asked repeatedly in ecocriticism. Susie O’Brien, for instance, remarks on various explanations given by prominent ecocritics such as Cheryll Glotfelty, who explains that “as environmental problems compound, work as usual seems unconscionably frivolous” (qtd in O’Brien 180). She also refers to Glen A. Love, who mentions an ethical and environmentalist consciousness that is commonplace within the English departments and asks, “how are we to account for our general failure to apply any sense of this awareness to our daily work?” (qtd in O’Brien 180). While these scholars explain their individual, moral motives, O’Brien is not satisfied. She criticises that Love, like other ecocritics, leaves “unexplained the precise mechanism by which the work of individual scholars, refracted through the profession of literary studies, might effect changes on the political

level" (O'Brien 181). But is there such a "precise mechanism?" And, picking up on the other part of the mixed metaphor, is it not inevitable that it will be the prismatic unpredictability of the classroom that will 'refract' our work most beautifully – if anything will?

We tend to agree with Derek Attridge who in *The Singularity of Literature* (2004) claims that

[t]he effects of the literariness of certain linguistic works [...] are not predictable and do not arise from planning [...] – there can be no guarantee that the alterity brought into the world by a particular literary or other artistic work will be beneficial. (Attridge 60)

Ecocriticism must resist the instrumentalising of literature *even in its own interests*. Indeed there is, as Attridge goes on to say, no "guarantee that the future will have a place for the literary" (62). But it seems certain that for now, by responding to a literary text *as literature*, "my pleasure and profit come from the experience of an event of referring, from a staging of referentiality, not from any knowledge I acquire" (95-6). To argue otherwise would be to connive with the instrumentalisation of knowledge that currently threatens the academic humanities and its ethical promise throughout the western world.

Thus, close readings can help in the environmental context even if they do not make you a better person, as Timothy Morton notes (2012). Why not try to be "slower than thou, in order to outdo the tortoise of close reading" and take part in the "anti-race toward an aesthetic state of meditative calm" (Morton 2007: 12)? It might lead to an environmentally oriented version of what James Wood calls the "dialectical tutoring" of reading: "Literature makes us better noticers of life; we get to practise on life itself; which in turn makes us better readers of detail in literature; which in turn makes us better readers of life" (Wood 53). Slow reading that conducts the student into a singular and unpredictable encounter with otherness is our business, and it would be foolhardy to pretend to any other.

This sounds as if we had all the time in the world indeed – which we haven't – and it clearly contrasts with the urgency and apocalypticism of Major and McMurry's assessment of the function of ecocriticism. That's not because we think that, politically, we can waste any more time but because we believe that the contribution of ecocriticism is inherently and valuably gradual: making us think anew about the world, nature, and the place of the human animal. Ecocriticism should continue to prompt searching reflection in its institutions and practitioners: successful scholars fly too much (indeed EASLCE's latest conference was in the Canary Islands, accessible only by air), but ASLE-UKI recently voted to make all conference food vegetarian henceforth and there are continuing experiments with Skype lectures and presentation. But twinges of conscience and organisational ethics are not the same as theoretical scholarship with its prerogative for critical and thorough analysis, evidence and argumentative plausibility. If ecocritical practices were simply restricted to transforming scientific findings into environmental activism (as if *those* things always align) we would sell our competences remarkably short, and that is to say nothing, yet, about the responsibilities of being teachers. We should not seek to be the literary wing of the IPCC.

It is because of its authority in questions of thinking things through in new and open ways that the humanities can contribute to comprehending the environmental crisis which is, as Lawrence Buell writes, a "crisis of the imagination" (L. Buell 2). "I am persuaded," Dana Phillips concludes his discussion of the connection between ecology and criticism, "that the truth of ecology must lie elsewhere, if it lies anywhere at all, in nature-culture, a region where surprising monsters dwell" (Phillips 39). Mapping nature-cultures and dealing with the monsters Phillips talks about is what we can do better than "retrain ourselves as scientific specialists" (see Westling 82) or sell us short as people who cannot understand the relevance of critical thinking once faced with the urgency of a problem. The task of understanding the "provisional and culturally inflected quality of scientific research at the same time that we acknowledge its indisputable power" (81) is a complicated and maybe even paradoxical one – so there is all reason in the world to think it through properly. As Morton says of deconstruction, part of the task of the environmental humanities is to show that "you don't have to believe everything you think" (Morton 2012: 165).

This already outlines what we believe is the benefit of ecocritical studies once they are freed from apocalypticism and confinement to immediate practical results. We are not saying that ecocritics shouldn't be scientifically literate or keenly interested in action, activism and commitment generally. But at the same time we are cautious of anti-intellectual attempts to play down the relevance of thorough analysis, interrogation, self-critique and constant negotiation of what we mean when we talk about saving the planet. The examples of relevant – practically relevant! – places for that are legion: whether we are looking at postcolonial environments and their struggle with “ecological imperialism” (Crosby), or at the scientific understanding of animals, or at the dangers of exploitation of supposedly easy concepts of the green movement by global capitalist players – think of “sustainable development,” for instance – or at what Frederick Buell calls the “culture of hyperexuberance” (F. Buell 214).

The critical engagement with the complexities of the issues at hand sounds like a traditional humanist enterprise. That is not to say that the humanities have always and only produced wonderful and eternally true wisdom – but neither has any human praxis as far as we know. But they are the place for the discussions that we need if ecocriticism's effectiveness is conceptualised beyond the claim to the immediacy of activism. Peter Singer's animal liberation theses may serve as an illustration here: Singer does not argue from an anti-humanist perspective but sees the concern for sentient creatures in line with an ever-growing expansion of interest in the well-being of “others” (people of colour, women and, now, nonhuman animals) – a similar argument to the one brought forward by Aldo Leopold in his land ethic. By contrast, Cary Wolfe says of such moral extensionism that:

its penchant for the sort of ‘pluralism’ [...] extends the sphere of consideration (intellectual or ethical) to previously marginalized groups without in the least destabilizing or throwing into question the schema of the human who undertakes such pluralisation. (Wolfe 568)

Is this what Major and McMurry mean by humanism? It's a rather fluid concept: humanism can be defined as the (self-)critical intellectual practice of humans interested in truth of the subjective kind but it is also taken as a phrase that covers hyperrationality, uncritical anthropocentrism and whatever else have you in the poison cabinet of ecocritical language. Thus Patrick Curry, “reluctantly contradicting” David Ehrenfeld's *The Arrogance of Humanism* (1981), wishes to retain the term for these ontological and ethical entanglements: humanism (Curry 55). “It is true”, he admits,

that the word and the philosophy have become a hubristic denial of any limits to human self-aggrandisement, and the worship of technology in this pursuit. [...] But humanism also [...] implied almost the opposite of its modern meaning: the need to be humane, including but extending beyond humanity, in order to be fully human. Nor did humanism entail a denial of human limits and fallibility; again, quite the opposite. It is at least possible that in the context of ecocentrism, this original attitude could be recovered. (55)

We would argue for the compatibility, if not the isomorphism, of ontological posthumanism and humane ethics.

Which leads to the third point of our response: how to teach that? The main question of the conference hosted by the University of Cologne, Germany, in September 2012 was not the role of humanism or anti-humanism in the context of a discussion of the effectiveness of literature: “We are looking for contributors to a transdisciplinary symposium on the didactical implementations of ecocriticism, critical animal studies and green cultural studies.” We were concerned with the conditions of possibility for ecocritical teachings in a situation where we are grappling with various and highly diverse antagonisms and pedagogical challenges. In their energetic response to the Call for Papers, Major and McMurry approved of “transdisciplinarity” as well as its “didactical implications,” but took issue with the warning that teachers should avoid: “breaching the topics’

complexity, falling into the mode of environmentalist propaganda or succumbing to warnings and claims to catastrophic urgency which are hard to reconcile with an ethos of critical and democratic pedagogy.” What went wrong, or, what turned this “dream come true for ecocritics” (Major and McMurry 3) into something to be located in the “hallowed halls of humanist boosterism” (3)?

On a very general note, all kinds of inter- or transdisciplinary work requires a great deal of openness to other terminologies and concerns as well as faith in the honesty and accuracy of each other’s findings. We cannot be literate in all discourses that are touched upon; so what we needed first was some kind of understanding and trust that enables the historian to talk to the philosopher, and the literature teacher to the biologist. Ecocriticism is maybe *the* field where such an objective is taken seriously; however, unanimous commitment to political or civil activism does not make such trust easier. One of the greatest risks for genuine interdisciplinary ecocritical research is not being taken seriously – not because nobody cares for the environment (although the ratio could be better) but because other academics find it peculiar that ecocritics unashamedly propagate their agendas and personal views and think they can get away with it. It must remain open for the moment whether the cure for that problem lies in rhetorical agnosticism, or more theoretical sophistication – as in Timothy Morton’s suggestion to exploit deconstructive theory and language in the service of “ecological humanism” (yes, he said it!): “you need a way of proceeding that is as fast and as smart as the cynicism” because otherwise “you will be laughed at for being anti-intellectual” (Morton 2012: 163) – or in declaring one’s partiality and taking it as the basis for debate. Whatever the answer, the tension between teaching and preaching has to be an integral part of a conference dealing with ecocriticism in the curriculum.

John Parham in a provocatively clever essay discusses the last option: open acknowledgement of one’s partiality, followed by an invitation to students to “challenge our partiality” (Parham 17). This is because “a more abstract education in critical thinking might come prior to, even take precedence over, a specific commitment to an education that ‘raises environmental awareness’” (19). Yet Parham endorses humanistic education in a posthumanist cause, arguing that critical pedagogy seeks to “enable a democratic classroom practice that encourages free expression” and to foster a “concern to engage students in an oppositional [...] critique of society”, even if “environmental pedagogy invariably fails to practice the ‘dialogic’ approach that it preaches” (7). As teachers, Parham claims, we often address this “tension between the democratic spirit of Academia and the imperative nature of Green thought” (Dominic Wood qtd in Parham 7), by accumulating what he calls “environmental capital”; analogous to Bourdieu’s ‘cultural capital’, environmental capital means a shelf full of appropriate publications demonstrating environmental consciousness, knowledge of key texts and motifs, and the ‘right attitude’ to environmentalist action (see Parham 10).

Yet far from simply applauding the habitus of the activist professor, Parham argues that “the teacher’s self-appointed environmental capital creates an unwillingness to entertain dissent which [...] runs the risk of driving a wedge between teacher and student” (11). He quotes John Paul Tassoni who, as an ecofeminist, writes that

[s]uch impositions reinforce the very sort of monologic, hierarchical relationships that ecofeminists resist. Teachers who force their views on their classes subordinate the interests and concerns of students of their own. Furthermore, such teachers promote passivity in their students. (qtd in Parham 14)

This impasse was a crucial point on the conference as well, for example in Greg Garrard’s paper on the outlines of an ‘pedagogy of the unprecedented’, which remarkably differs from the didacticism of a David Orr or others who see ‘green teaching’ as requiring a prescriptive curriculum that will save the world. One delegate, Pamela Swanigan, went so far as to assert that prioritising preaching over teaching was ‘dishonourable’.

Instead of taking these issues as reasons for a bigger dose of gloom, however, we believe that discussing the challenges will make our work better and more effective. And contrary to the beliefs expressed in the last issue of the *Journal of Ecocriticism*, namely that “it takes images of planetary annihilation to motivate people into action after years of sitting idly by watching things slowly decay”

and that “even when our images of apocalypse aren’t fully accurate, our use of elements of scientifically-established reality reconstructs the surrounding power structures in beneficial ways” (Schatz 21), we tend to think that, especially in the context of pedagogy, “[e]schatological narrative [...] brings with it philosophical and political problems that seriously compromise its usefulness” (Garrard 2004: 105). Major and McMurry’s frenetic prose takes us hurtling, like Thelma and Louise, towards the cliff edge, whereas we prefer less sweaty, if still demanding, journeys, such as Seamus Heaney’s ‘From the Republic of Conscience’:

Fog is a dreaded omen there but lightning
spells universal good and parents hang
swaddled infants in trees during thunderstorms.

...

Their sacred symbol is a stylized boat.
The sail is an ear, the mast a sloping pen,
The hull a mouth-shape, the keel an open eye.

At their inauguration, public leaders
must swear to uphold unwritten law and weep
to atone for their presumption to hold office ... (Heaney 1990)

Heaney’s map of an impossible journey exemplifies the reticent, obdurate fragility of literature, to which critics ought to bear patient witness – even to the crack of doom.

If apocalyptic fear is enervating, the optimistic alternative of ‘sustainability’ is such a distant and elusive destination that education ‘for’ it can only ever consist in asking students the right sort of questions and then encouraging them in their own search for answers. Such a procedure coheres well with the best traditions of humanistic and democratic education whilst also being the only real preparation imaginable for a risky, exciting and unprecedented future. Which is, after all, where our students will have to live.

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