

An Update on the Status of Ecocriticism: A Case Study Using *The Environmental Imagination*

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The Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) recently posted a number of position papers on its web site that attempt to define ecocriticism. Some of the papers are proudly anti-theoretical; some are dogmatic and prescriptive in their listing of ecocritical principles; some claim that no such lists have yet been given and hunger for an ecocritical theory; some think they offer answers; and some only raise questions. All of them struggle with the reality that the term "ecocriticism" lacks a clear enough signified to be understood (let alone practised) by any kind of community of critics. Ecocriticism is a thing that was named before it was properly born,¹ and the desire for some kind of pithy definition of this rather new theoretical enterprise registers in most of the writing on the subject. At this point, it is very clear that there are different kinds of ecocriticism, and "that different kinds of ecocriticism are necessary and desirable" (Head 38). I would think, however, that some kinds might strategically be more desirable than others right now. So much of the ecocritical work being conducted is in the area of what Lawrence Buell calls "environmentally focussed perspectives" (430, n.20) that one starts to wonder whether ecocriticism is useful to anything but nature writing. But before we can even think of discussing the opposition between the "nature studies" and the generalist camps, we need to agree on some terms. One of the main reasons ecocriticism is slow in becoming viable is simply that the necessary critical and pedagogical terms for meaningful discussion are only now becoming available.

1 William Rueckert coined the term in "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," which first appeared in 1978. It is only since the mid-1990's, however, that the term has gained relatively popular currency.

Another reason, of course, is that there is considerable resistance to new critical theory, even (perhaps especially) among critical theorists.

It is possible for at least two reasons to debate such well-established issues as misogyny, racism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism in literature: firstly, in each case the estranged and disaffected subjects are concrete things that walk among (often as a threat to) fully enfranchised subjects; and secondly, it is possible to debate the issues because there is a whole litany of terms with which to describe and then examine the concepts. If, for example, "misogyny" is a hatred of women; "racism," of racial difference; "homophobia," of some sexualities; and "anti-Semitism," of Jewishness and Jews, then what should we call a fear and contempt for the environment? Perhaps we might use a term such as "ecophobia," but whatever the terminology, the ways in which the environment is perceived and represented "for better and for worse" are concerns of ecocriticism.

In *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, Lawrence Buell defines "ecocriticism" . . . as [a] study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (430, n.20).² Most people in the field agree that ecocriticism must be motivated by a desire to effect real change in the material world. Ecocriticism that is not motivated by such a desire quite simply isn't critical social theory, which, as geographer Edward W. Soja explains so well, searches "for practical understandings of the world as a means of emancipation versus maintenance of the status quo" (14). For many ecocritics, the question about whether there is any relationship between art or theory and the real world is, for the most part, tacitly acknowledged but rarely discussed at any length. What is more pressing is a frenzied desire to fix meanings.

Buell, for instance, acknowledges that there is considerable uncertainty about what the term "ecocriticism" exactly covers but argues that

if one thinks of it . . . as a multiform inquiry extending to a variety of environmentally focused perspectives more expressive of concern to explore environmental issues searchingly than of fixed dogmas about political solutions, then the neologism becomes a useful omnibus term for subsuming a large and growing scholarly field. (430, n.20)

2 Buell is most solidly ecocritical, according to his own terms, when he talks about "the [at times] interlinked values of pastoralism and counterculturalism" (375). Unfortunately, Buell takes this topic little further than mentioning it.

An omnibus term just isn't good enough, though, for some people. Stephanie Sarver's position is that

"ecocriticism" is . . . an unfortunate term because it suggests a new kind of critical theory. The emerging body of work that might be labeled ecocritical is united not by a theory, but by a focus: the environment. This ecocritical work draws on a variety of theories, such as feminist, Marxist, post-structuralist, psychoanalytic and historicist. (Sarver)

In a sense, Sarver has a point, but it is a point that may be applied to any kind of theory, indeed, the very theories she mentions as being theories-in-themselves: feminist, Marxist, poststructuralist, psychoanalytic, and historicist theories. All of these draw heavily on other theories that preceded them, so the argument Sarver is making is valid only insofar as it calls ecocriticism to task for not being theorized enough. All theories are a synthesis, and Sarver's failing is in not recognizing this fact.

Perhaps the most promising synthesis of material that works toward articulating a methodology for ecocriticism is to be found in the work of Patrick D. Murphy. For Murphy, the problem with ecocriticism is that too much of it remains theoretically unsophisticated. Too often, there remains an anti-theoretical, naive, realist attitude expressed in such presentations and practices. (1996, 165)

In place of these theoretically unsophisticated stances, Murphy offers what, at its most fundamental level, is a Bakhtinian approach. "A dialogical orientation," Murphy maintains, "reinforces the ecofeminist recognition of interdependence and the natural need for diversity" (1996, 22).³ Again, Sarver would argue that this is simply not good enough. In her own words,

Literary scholars who are environmentalists seem not to be creating a new critical theory; rather, they are drawing on existing theories to illuminate our understanding of how human interactions with nature are reflected in literature. (Sarver)

The obvious dialogic answer would be that such borrowing is exactly what goes on in the articulation of a new critical practice. If nothing else, Murphy succeeds in taking ecocriticism out of the hands of the theoretically unsophisticated. If Murphy is to be critiqued, it is for the theory that he chooses rather than for the

3 See also Patrick D. Murphy 1998, 42.

choosing of theory. It is for opposing dialogic criticism and dialectical materialism in ways that seem to run counter to his own dialogic arguments; it is to be criticized for its arrogant assertion of the validity of the dialogic over the dialectic, an argument that few ecologists or marxists would give credence to. A better argument might be one that tries to use both dialogic and dialectic approaches.

Buell's approach, on the other hand, seeks to avoid the complexities of theory entirely, it seems; to avoid the stumbling block he terms "mesmerization by literary theory" (111); and to bridge the gap between what he, in fact, does acknowledge as a theoretical problem: the relationship between text and world. He calls this bridge an "aesthetics of dual accountability" (98), which will satisfy "the mind and the ethological facts" (93), and the way it is to be achieved, he maintains, is through a revival of the claims of realism. "The claims of realism," he argues, "merit reviving . . . so as to enable one to reimagine textual representations as having a dual accountability to matter and to discursive mentation" (92). One has to wonder, though, if there is not a more productive way of dealing with Derridean challenges to the transparency of language than simply ignoring them and falling back on problematic suppositions about the merits of realism.

One of the more promising recent examples of such an attempt to deal directly with the problems of representation comes from Gretchen Legler's essay in the 1998 *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*. Legler raises a number of deconstructionist questions about the markings of language in *Walden* that strike me as being fairly important – at least, if we are to make the kinds of interconnections among structures of oppression that ecocriticism seeks to make. There are a number of ugly threads hanging behind *Walden* that Buell simply doesn't offer to view. To reverse the tapestry, as Terry Eagleton remarks in *Against the Grain* (80), "in order to expose in all its unglamorously dishevelled tangle the threads constituting the well healed image it presents to the world" is to deconstruct a text. Legler deconstructs *Walden* briefly but effectively by noting how Thoreau constructs the natural environment:

Nature in Thoreau's work is constructed as a place that nurtures [the] white masculine aesthetic and as a place that is not suitable for the nurturance of other bodies, the bodies of Native Americans, immigrants and white women. (75)

Legler helps to connect issues such as race, class, gender, and sexuality with questions about the environment.

Making connections is perhaps the best way of securing ecocriticism a place in literary studies. Many scholars find it difficult to take ecocriticism seriously.

Things haven't really changed a lot since Rebecca Raglon's brief 1991 critique of the failure of literary studies to discuss the natural environment: "why," she asks, "hasn't environmental thought been used more extensively to approach the entire canon of English literature?" (30). But it isn't so much a question of scholars ignoring conceptualizations of the natural environment as it is a question about the *ways* that the environment has traditionally been discussed, namely, through structuralist approaches that speak in terms of themes, images, symbols, and settings rather than in poststructuralist terms that are, to borrow SueEllen Campbell's words, "at core revolutionary" (1996, 127); approaches whose goals are to expose and overthrow hierarchies and to challenge anthropocentric beliefs about humanity being the centre of value and meaning, while at the same time drawing connections among things like misogyny, ecophobia, homophobia, racism, and so on.⁴ Glen Love, paraphrasing Cheryll Glotfelty's point that it is difficult to defend the traditional failure of the literary profession to address "green" issues,⁵ puts it best:

race, class, and gender are words which we see and hear everywhere at our professional meetings and in our current publications . . . [but] the English profession has failed to respond in any significant way to the issue of the environment. (226)

4 Campbell discusses some of these issues in her passionate plea for a bridge between poststructuralism and deep ecology, but her arguments, at least in "The Land and Language of Desire," amount to little more than a comparison between the two. Her more recent essay in *Writing the Environment* also raises a number of important questions while "deferring answers" (1998, 14), on the grounds that "questions are a wonderful tool for thinking" (ibid).

Something like "answers," however, finally becomes necessary if a project such as ecocriticism is to be deemed worthwhile, if connections are to be seen, and if progress is to be made in the theories and methodologies of ecocriticism. A lot of work has already been done. Discussions looking at dynamic similarities between the representation of women and animals are extensive (see particularly Carol J. Adams 1991, 1993 1995a, 1995b and Donna Haraway 1991). There is also a growing body of work that looks at women and geography (see Gillian Rose 1993, Doreen Massey 1994, and Annette Kolodny 1975). A flurry of discussion has recently appeared linking racism and ecophobia, in widely divergent ways (see Buell's second chapter ["New World Dreams and Environmental Actualities" in *The Environmental Imagination*], Gretchen Legler 1998, Anna Bramwell 1989, Janet Biehl and Peter Staudenmaier 1995, and Richard H. Grove 1995). Discussions that draw links between ecophobia and homophobia, on the other hand, are much more difficult to locate (see Barbara White 1998). Links between geographies of exclusion and dissident sexualities are implied in many of the essays in Bell and Valentine (1995).

5 See also Glotfelty xvi.

The problem is one that the editors of *Writing the Environment* also note: "Unlike feminism," they say,

with which it has points in common, environmentalism has difficulty in being a politics of personal liberation or social mobility . . . environmentalism has a political weakness in comparison with feminism: it is much harder for environmentalists to make the connection between global threats and individual lives. Green politics cannot easily be, like feminism, a politics of personal liberation or empowerment. (2, 6)

One of the problems we run into, though, in trying to make ecocriticism seem relevant is that we often fix ourselves into positions of homocentrism.

Moving away from homocentrism (or anthropocentrism)⁶ is certainly a big concern in a lot of ecocritical writing. But the tendency is to speak in absolute terms, and we have to wonder how feasible these kinds of anti-anthropocentric pursuits are. Surely when Buell talks about the "relinquishment of homocentrism" (167) in various authors, claiming that there is a "heroic difficulty of achieving a thoroughgoing redefinition of the self in environmental terms" (167), surely there is something wrong-headed in the thinking? Surely, the *inescapable fact* that *people* tell stories about nature must in some way force us simply to *accept* that, finally, it is impossible to completely "relinquish the superintending human consciousness" (164) of such an eminently human thing as writing? It is one thing to focus on the nonhuman; it is quite another to relinquish the human altogether. The occasional absolutism of Buell's suggestions simply isn't realistic. Buell's more moderate endorsement of "Thoreau's vision of coextensiveness of the human body with the inanimate earth" (170) is, however, a step in the right direction, as are his more focused comments about the important (but largely neglected) role women writers played in the development of an "eccentric sensibility toward which Thoreau had to grope his way labouriously" (177). Yet, Buell's final questions about "the self" (179) lead us again to what seems an irresolvable paradox, one sewn into the fabric of representation: the authoritative voice that finally speaks the chopped corn is human. To articulate the natural environment entirely on its own terms is futile: as Buell himself comments, "[t]he constraints of human perception, and of art, make zero-degree interference impossible" (81).

Buell has touched on an important topic, one which has produced some outrageous suggestions in various quarters of the ecocritical camp. Jim Cheney

6 Following Buell, I use these terms interchangeably and synonymously.

ranks high in this quarter with his "Postmodern Environmental Ethics: Ethics as Bioregional Narrative," where he assumes that the environment speaks and that we may somehow be the voicepiece for this speaking. Peter Quigley responds in "Rethinking Resistance: Environmentalism, Literature, and Poststructural Theory" in the form of a question: "Who decides how to recognize this role?" (303). Of course, assuming that there is *no* "language source other than the human brain" (*ibid.*), as Quigley does, is patently anthropocentric. Granting that the post-medieval European introduction of literacy and Christian exegesis have "created an immense realm of silences, a world of 'not saids' called nature" (Manes 17), we can agree with Christopher Manes that it is time to dismantle the model where "a certain kind of human subject . . . only speaks soliloquies in a world of irrational silences" (25).

Perhaps the problem here is semantic, and the solution might be to see the environment as responsive rather than communicative (except in the case of animals that are known to possess language skills, some primates and aquatic mammals, for instance); still, the question about how to give voice to the voiceless is problematic, and the question about avoiding homocentrism may end up being simply a question of relativity. It doesn't seem rational to expect that we are completely able to avoid homocentrism. But there are ways to lessen the degree of it.

Buell is acutely aware of the contradictions of an approach that seeks to raise the issue of the environment in terms that are anthropocentric, but his own approach renders the problem irresolvable. It is difficult not to agree with Dominic Head's assessment that the principal effect of Buell's approach is "to make criticism ecologically accountable by projecting its social function in a way which is connected to material concerns" (34). Part of the problem, I would argue, lay in the choice of texts that have "environmentally focussed perspectives." Nature studies and ecocriticism are not the same thing. A recognition of this is probably what is at the bottom of Stephanie Sarver's call for "a new kind of critical theory."

Having "nature writing" the singular focus of ecocriticism strikes me as something of a misapprehension (if not a delimiting) of the goals and possibilities of the theory. Environmental issues are written into many nooks and crannies of canonical literature, in much the same way that issues of concern to other kinds of theorists are embedded in "the canon." As Glotfelty acknowledges, feminist theorists do not confine themselves to works about feminism any more than Marxist theorists confine themselves to works about Marxism or commodity fetishism; the question, then is simple: why should ecocriticism restrict itself to the genre of nature writing? This is not to say that Glotfelty is

mistaken in seeking to recoup professional dignity for what she calls "the undervalued genre of nature writing" (xxxii); rather, it is to encourage all literary scholars to take the environment seriously, to see it as an important thing, to bother with the ways that we conceptualize and speak about (or are silent about) the natural environment. As Buell notes,

To investigate literature's capacity for articulating the nonhuman environment is not one of the things that modern professional readers of literature have been trained to do or for the most part wish to do. (10)

It is important to bother with this kind of work. It is important to bother with it because there are problems in these times, "skin lesions from the ozone hole" (110), to name one. It is important to bother with it because understanding the relationship of humanity with the natural environment, both in contemporary times and in earlier periods, can help us to understand how we got to where we are.

If it is currently chic to ignore the validity of the past, it is also perilous to do so. One of the positive achievements of Buell's book, of course, is that it manages to do (at times) ecocritical readings of pre-modern texts, the more satisfying because the bulk of the work being done in ecocriticism focuses on twentieth century texts. But doing ecocritical work, regardless of the age of the texts being studied, as Buell is aware, is difficult, sometimes plodding, and necessarily interdisciplinary work. The theories and data provided by geographers, historians, philosophers, scientists, artists, and so on are integral to the work of the ecocritic. There are times when the book would have profited to have made use of a bit more of these theories and data. One gets a sense while reading *The Environmental Imagination* that the book ran away from Buell, that the material simply became unwieldy, and that the book just tries to do too much with too little. And Buell is clearly aware of this, as he comments in the very first sentence: "This book has refused to remain the modest undertaking I intended it to be" (1).

Buell's broad erudite sweep does cover a lot of material, including discussions on writers such as Susan Fenimore Cooper, Robinson Jeffers, John Muir, John Burroughs, Mary Hunter Austin, Rachel Carson, Annie Dillard, and Henry David Thoreau, but the coverage is quite uneven. While the scope is very impressive, there are problems, factual and theoretical. If, for instance, at the opening of Chapter 7, Buell is saying that the Klamath Mountains of California are a part of the Sierra Nevada Range, he is quite mistaken. Anyone who has ever climbed the Klamath Mountains knows that they are *not* "in the northern end of the same range [as the Sierra Nevada]" (219). But the theoretical problems

are more substantial. Because discussions about the environment are nothing new, it seems a great mistake not to acknowledge the work of some of the more important forebears and practitioners of ecocriticism. Buell's discussions of Lynn White's "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," or the work of Cheryl Glotfelty, are at best, cursory; the importance of a book such as Clarence Glacken's *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, or the work of Patrick Murphy, aren't even mentioned; and there is virtually no effort to disentangle the theoretical complexities of some of the various branches of ecocriticism, bioregionalism for instance.

When he is talking about "place" (Chapter 8), Buell touches teasingly on this important topic but finally neglects to name it. He manages his entire discussion without actually naming the topic, bioregionalism (except in a sentence on page 108 and in a three and a half page subsection [405-8] in the "Appendix"). Nevertheless, the questions he asks in Chapter 8 are important ones for bioregionalists:

To be environmentally sensitive, must one commit to living one's entire life in a particular place . . . "Must a writer write only about his or her home place?" Does the vision of "the local life aware of itself" guarantee respect for [the] natural environment as a value independent of the values assigned to it by the community of human inhabitants? (253)

He answers "clearly not" for each case, but admits that a "self-conscious commitment to place . . . would more likely produce or accompany environmental responsiveness than would atopia or diaspora" (*ibid.*).

While Chapter 8 begins with such high promise for a stimulating discussion about "place," it quickly devolves into fitful discussions of "place" as a literary device, about the role and function of "place" (perhaps better described as setting), both within texts and as formative elements in their authors' writing. Consequently, Buell's comments imply a number of questions about issues such as bioregionalism, questions which Buell doesn't directly ask. For instance, is it possible (or desirable) to avoid biographical questions when discussing bioregionalism? Does Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*'s "indoor circumstances of composition, from a stack of notecards put together in a library" (237) make the text somehow intellectually dishonest, or do such things not matter?

7 A great deal of material has been written on bioregionalism in recent years, most significantly Kirkpatrick Sales 1985, Van Andrus *et al.* 1990, Michael Zimmerman 1993, Jim Cheney 1989, and Greg Garrard 1998.

As a book about Thoreau, *The Environmental Imagination* is nothing short of brilliant, thorough, and awe-inspiring; as ecocriticism, though, it lapses from its initial promises. The further along we get in the book, the worse things go for ecocriticism. The slide in the general tenor of Buell's discussions, from promising quasi-theory to close readings that treat thematic particularities within a very closed structuralist hermeneutic, is unsettling. The most radical departure comes in Part 3, "Environmental Sainthood." In the first chapter of this section (Chapter 10: "The Thoreauvian Pilgrimage"), we move from the promise of poststructuralist ecocritical theory (if, indeed, there is such a thing yet) into what seems a relatively uncritical endorsement of canon-building, myth-making, and largely biographical criticism that urges readers not to "underestimate the importance of myths about authors' lives and personalities" (315); that urges readers to accept and learn from the sacralization of Thoreau (Buell states that he uses "the term 'sacred' with all seriousness" [319] in reference to *Walden* and Thoreau); and that argues for a brand of legitimate scholarship that does not merely "focus rigorously on textual evidence" (312). If nothing else, the sacralization Buell endorses does reflect the globalist/bioregionalist dichotomy (as an environmentalist political button has it, "Think Globally, Act Locally") he is implicitly examining throughout the book. After all, the sacralized Walden is both the local and, in this case, the national. It is the historic site of a major American battle, a shrine on the American historical/literary landscape; it is also sacralized as an intensely local landscape, an "entire," according to Buell, "2,680-acre ecosystem: Walden Woods" (325), a place where people go to enjoy a bit of "nature" (as much of "nature" as millions of tourists can realistically leave behind). Walden (the place) embodies the globalist/bioregionalist schism, but this point goes unremarked in the book.

Buell's shift away from ecocritical theory leads into frenetic endorsements of Thoreau's canonicity and into questions about the ways that looking at these things might "shed light on the history, present state, and future potential of the environmental imagination as a literary and cultural force" (312).

In spite of Buell's unequivocal endorsement of canon-building and myth-making as an important part of literary comment, Buell seems aware of the politics of exclusion (in which he is complicit) that is often involved in such an approach, hence, the numerous self-exculpations and apologies he makes.⁸ But it is

8 At numerous points throughout the book, Buell explains, in various ways, that he chooses a text that privileges a culturally dominant group because "a study focused on texts from the traditionally dominant American cultural group may illuminate more than just the dominant group" (19); because as the twentieth century nears its close, the world has become

remarkable that when Buell speaks of his love of canon-building and biographical criticism, his characterization of his own work as a potentially "rear-guard rescue attempt" (534, n.1) does *not* refer to his problematic interests in authorial intentions. Why Buell takes such an interest in biographical questions, and implicitly or explicitly, authorial intentions, is curious: the practices of the likes of E.D. Hirsch have long been discounted.⁹ Theoretically passé or not, something is lost in all of the biographical talk of Thoreau in Buell, namely, a refining of the critical apparatus, to use Buell's words, with which we can talk about environmental imaginations.

The final chapter of the book takes as its purpose an investigation of the literary eminence of Thoreau within "a wider and more complicated sense of what a text does than its linguistic and ideational properties, essential as those are" (370). While this seems theoretically retrogressive, Buell acknowledges the opposition that Derrida, Barthes, and Foucault might, for instance, make and claims that the literary persona (the "author," constructed though he or she may be) circulates and has effects in the world. Nevertheless, the problems remain with Buell's approach, and his "best answer" is that "the path to biocentrism must lead through humanitarianism" (386). Such an argument, in my thinking, undoes a lot of the ecocriticism that Buell advocates in the book. It is profoundly anthropocentric. Ultimately, Buell does not satisfactorily resolve the problem, but in his erudite attempts, he succeeds in showing that both *Walden* and Thoreau function in different ways and to different ends at different points in time and place. Buell has shown beyond a reasonable doubt that some people see

sufficiently westernized to ensure for Euro-American culture, for better or for worse, a disproportionately large share in determining world environmental attitudes during the next century (22); and because literature such as *Walden* participates in a kind of global colonization and "promotes the idea of vast [ready-for-use] territories of the actual globe subsisting under the sign of nature" (54). Therefore, Buell argues, it is worthwhile to study such literature.

It must be said here that the bulk of the work done in ecocriticism has a strong Americanist slant. Such is true even of the ecocriticism being done outside of the United States (and there is relatively little of it). Even the Kerridge and Sammells book, collected in England, devotes a disproportionate share of its pages to American angles. Kerridge states simply that they "wanted to give readers elsewhere [outside of the US] a substantial sample of American work" (9). Arthur Phillips would call this Americanist angling a "cultural cringe" (see Phillips 1958), and if ecocriticism pretends to an interest in making connections with projects of decolonization, it is important to note this cultural cringing.

9 See E.D. Hirsch, Jr.'s *Validity in Interpretation* as perhaps the most representative of the "authorial intention" school.

Thoreau as a "good mainstream American," others as "a radical dissenter" and that "the divergence of views is one infallible sign that an author has achieved canonical status: sharply differing codifications of history seek to claim him or her" (355). Buell has also shown that there is a lot more work that needs to be done in ecocriticism.

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