

Ecocriticism as a Contribution to Consilient Knowledge

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What kind of enterprise is ecocriticism? At first – to generalise unforgiveably – it was a discourse of *value*: influenced by the proximate discipline of environmental philosophy, it looked for evidence of biocentrism and its evil twin, anthropocentrism, in cultural texts. Lawrence Buell’s idea, from *The Environmental Imagination*, of an ‘aesthetics of relinquishment’, expresses the idea of a recentring of perspective from what has been called ‘human racism’ towards a considerably enlarged moral world of intrinsically-valuable ‘Earth Others’ (Val Plumwood). Now, increasingly, ecocriticism is a discourse of *power*: ecofeminism has always argued for the interarticulation of cultural constructs of gender and nature, and the other two members of the ‘martyrological trinity’ (Robert N Watson), race and class, have now (though to varying degrees) been brought to bear in ecocritical theory. The addition of sexual orientation and dis/ability to the critical theorisation of ‘nature’ has generated a hypothesis – masquerading already as an established and unquestionable orthodoxy – of the inextricable intertwining of multiple forms of oppression, all of which are supposed to contribute to ecocide.

The theoretical dimension for this hypothesis has been developed quite persuasively by Plumwood, Greta Gaard, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Timothy Morton, and it receives, with the help of a fair bit of selection bias, due confirmation from literary sources. However, the empirical evidence – showing that sexually oppressive societies are less environmentally conscientious, say – seems signally lacking; it’s not even clear that the problem has been noticed much. The power inflection risks imposing upon us as professional critics and teachers an *activist* identity, with multiple possible axes of privilege and oppression, that we may not be keen to conform to, and condemns us to dismal repetition of the compulsive anxieties about subalternity (and their defensive reflex, political beggar-my-neighbour) that have plagued postcolonial studies. I have no desire to compete on environmental virtues, nor do I find the teacher-as-preacher a congenial pedagogical model; for me, ecocriticism is (dare I say it?) a resolutely *intellectual* – even a *professional* – pursuit, with a primary allegiance not to philosophy, ethics or literary theory, but to biological science. Whereas some critics continue to characterise ecocriticism in Romantic and

Weberian terms as an anti-Enlightenment project of ‘re-enchantment’, I see it as a contribution to the utopian unity of knowledge dubbed ‘consilience’ by E.O. Wilson:

With the aid of the scientific method, we have gained an encompassing view of the physical world far beyond the dreams of earlier generations. The great adventure is now beginning to turn inward, toward ourselves. In the last several decades the natural sciences have expanded to reach the borders of the social sciences and humanities. There the principle of consilient explanation guiding the advance must undergo its severest test. The physical sciences have been relatively easy; the social sciences and humanities will be the ultimate challenge. (Wilson 71)

Minimally, consilience demands the abandonment of forlorn redoubts of literary theory whose garrisons still espouse the most empirically unsustainable ideas (think: psychoanalysis). Far more demanding will be the programme of bridge-building it will require between entrenched and sometimes hostile disciplines; literature and ecology are just too far apart conceptually to be interrelated in anything but weakly analogical terms. Fortunately there are already at least four construction programmes under way: biosemiotics, risk theory, environmental history and philosophy of biology. The first of these has been addressed with considerable enthusiasm and insight, but too much antipathy to neo-Darwinism, by Wendy Wheeler in *The Whole Creature*, while the second is the keynote of the second part of Ursula Heise’s *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*. Environmental history, on the other hand, has tended to play second fiddle to the history of ecological *ideas*, thereby ensuring that hypotheses about the origins and causes of environmental change have been relatively unencumbered by facts. For example, the notion that animistic re-enchantment might act as an ecological prophylactic is appealing from a selective reading of philosophical and literary *texts*, but seems to be belied by the substantial ecological impact of animistic human colonists of islands such as Madagascar, New Zealand and all those Micronesian islands formerly populated with tasty flightless birds. At a far more specific and local level, empirically-grounded environmental history could provide a transformed sense of context for the literary texts of the past – a kind of new *environmental* historicism. To take a simple example: John Clare experienced enclosure as oppressive, and the interarticulation hypothesis described above would tend to support his perspective, but what, really, did enclosure *do* to biodiversity? It helped drive urbanisation and facilitate population growth, which had ecological effects in turn, but what did it do to the soil, or the birds Clare loved so? It is these

‘little parcels little minds to please’ of enclosed landscapes, recall, that constitute the prelapsarian Eden depicted in jeremiads against agricultural intensification such as Graham Harvey’s *The Killing of the Countryside*. The point is not, of course, simply and anachronistically to prove Clare ‘wrong’ as an ecologist, but rather to estimate the gap between his and our, more Enlightened but less passionately loved, Helpstons.

The other possible bridge between ecocritical theory and the biological sciences is a little-known branch of philosophy that has developed and thrived somewhat independently of environmental ethics. Rather than asking questions of *value*, philosophy of biology exposes key scientific concepts to scrutiny – of the critical rather than the sceptical kind habitual in ‘science studies’. Dana Phillips’s *The Truth of Ecology*, for instance, deployed philosophical critique of ecology in order to impugn the nature writers who drew (lazily and inaccurately in his account) upon it. The famous Dawkins-Gould controversies centred upon philosophical arguments about evolutionary biology that rage to this day, and it is perhaps symptomatic of the rather incoherent state of ecology that it has produced neither popularisers nor debates on this scale. One of the participants in the evolution wars, Richard Lewontin, also offered a stringent critique of the reifying and simplistically teleological uses of the concept of a ‘niche’ in ecology:

The niche is a multi-dimensional description of all the relations entered into by an organism with the surrounding world. What kind of food, and in what quantities, does the organism eat? What is its pattern of spatial movement? ... To maintain that organisms adapt to their environment is to maintain that such ecological niches exist in the absence of organisms and that evolution consists in filling these empty and preexistent niches. But the external world can be divided up in an uncountable infinity of ways, so there is an uncountable infinity of conceivable ecological niches. (Lewontin and Levins 68)

If evolution is conceived as a process of adaptation of organism to its environment, but the environment is imagined as already subdivided into adaptive niches defined (as they must be) by the needs of the organism, the argument seems circular. The solution proposed by Lewontin is that organisms adapt to an environment that is continually changing with respect to it, and at the same time that there may be constraints in the morphological space occupied by ecological niches. Simplistic appropriation of ecological concepts – ‘niche’, ‘symbiosis’, ‘ecosystem’ and the like – needs to be moderated by such complicating perspectives.

The Iron Curtain between literary theory and biological science is clearly in trouble, and some of us are already queuing up in our crusty Trabants waiting for it to crumble once and for all. Ecocritical theory, to the extent that it breaks with Weberian romanticism, is at once opening up environmental criticism to the radically political, the queer and the global, and exposing established theories to the possibilities of science. Welcome as this development is, the calmer heads of philosophers are needed to help evaluate its more overheated claims. For instance, Timothy Morton claims in ‘Queer Ecology’ that ‘evolution theory is anti-essentialist in that it abolishes rigid boundaries between and within species’ (n.p.), which is trivially true as regards its first claim: species are not eternal or ideal types. But it does not follow that ‘species’ is merely a nominal designation; philosophers of biology enumerate five major species concepts, confirming that it is a controversial question, but, as Kim Sterelny and Paul Griffiths argue, ‘evolutionary theory lends no support to the idea that our species classifications do not reflect objective features of the living world.’ (182) While it would be exciting if species differences were as fluid and ‘queer’ as human differences are supposed to be, it would seem they probably are not – at least, in organisms bigger than bacteria.

At first, then, consilient ecocritical theory will aim to limit and rectify the most embarrassing of errors – already a massive task. But could it have any higher ambitions? The evidence from Darwinian literary theory and biopoetics is not encouraging. As Wilson’s weaker vision of consilience admits, the laws that apply at one level of explanation (e.g. physics or neurology) can be used to *constrain* but not to *prescribe* or even *predict* what will be found at the next level of complexity (e.g. chemistry or psychology); literature as such has emergent properties that may make it blessedly resilient to the most reductive of accounts. But literary theories that have revelled in their transgression of disciplinary boundaries are for that very reason vulnerable to the principled and professional empirico-philosophical critique that I mean when I say ‘ecocriticism’.

Works Cited

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