Remapping English

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In many respects, the fifteen-year career of ecocriticism as an emergent field in literary and cultural studies has been spectacularly successful. Its professional organization in the United States, the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment, boasts well over 1,000 members. Sister and daughter organizations have sprung up in continental Europe, Britain, India, Korea and Japan. ASLE's journal *ISLE* is now being distributed by a prestigious university press, and the number of publications in the field, in both book and article form, has exploded to the point where it has become difficult to keep track. Starting from a close association with certain subfields in British and American literature in the 1990s, the field has come to address a much wider array of regions, languages, and periods, and ecocritics have forged theoretical connections with many of the major theoretical paradigms in literary and cultural studies: feminism, poststructuralism, New Historicism, Cultural Studies, and in recent years, postcolonialism. Two-book length introductions to the field and a guide to teaching environmental literature have appeared, reflecting a sense on the part of publishers that ecocriticism has come to form part of the average literary scholar's theoretical and pedagogical horizon. And even in the constrained job market in literary studies of recent years, job descriptions with ecocritical or environmental subfields specified have begun to be advertised in the United States. This means there is much to celebrate: the latest comer on the scene of literary studies among the new social movements of the 1960s, environmentalism has made its mark in the field.

Or has it? In surveying the achievements and successes of ecocriticism, I also worry at times that we have missed some crucial opportunities. To put it in a nutshell, I wonder whether we have succeeded by reinforcing and repeating many of the theoretical assumptions, methodologies, canonical preferences and disciplinary constraints of work in literary studies – particularly in English, on which I will focus here only because it has been the major disciplinary framework for ecocriticism over the last decade and a half, whereas Comparative Literature and other national/regional literary studies have only come to form part of our intellectual horizon more recently. While it was perhaps necessary to engage with the existing disciplinary topography of English by adding environmental dimensions to it so

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as to make ourselves visible in the emergent phase, it seems to me we have now come to a point where we may want to be more forceful about mapping a somewhat different topography – one with different historical and generic emphases, and maybe different theoretical and methodological assumptions.

"Environmental criticism in literary studies has, thus far, not changed literary studies or environmental humanities so much as it has been increasingly absorbed therein," Lawrence Buell summarizes his survey of the field; "its durability so far rests on its having introduced a fresh topic or perspective or archive rather than in distinctive methods of inquiry" (*Future* 130). He quickly tempers this rather sobering assessment by adding that "to succeed in changing the subject or in changing the archive is every bit as important in the evolution of critical inquiry as a revolution in critical theory as such" (*Future* 130). While I would agree with this assessment, it also seems to me it would be dangerous to be satisfied with this state of affairs. For this reason, I would like to offer a few brief thoughts on how we might go forward by emphasizing some of our own areas of concern that are not necessarily shared by the discipline of literary studies at large, and how we might explore theoretical itineraries we have so far been left by the wayside.

One of ecocriticism's trajectories has been its spread from an original emphasis on British Romanticism and twentieth-century American literature to the full compass of historical periods from the Middle Ages to the contemporary period, and its initial focus on nonfictional nature writing and nature poetry to a wide range of genres. In the process, we have also come to emulate some of the fixations of English as a discipline in the late twentieth century: its obsession with Shakespeare, for example, or its fascination with American minority literatures. That highlighting the relevance of environmental questions to these areas is unquestionably, as Buell points out, a disciplinary achievement, should not blind us to the fact that it has made us miss a chance to remap the canon in terms of genres. Ecocriticism's initial investment in nonfictional prose and its sustained attention to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* could, in a different trajectory, have led to a major research emphasis on popular scientific texts and travel narrative (not infrequently in combination) that is quite distinct from the shape of twentieth-century studies in British and American literature. Our own deep-rooted love for poetry and fiction quickly led us back into the genres preferred by the discipline; yet precisely texts such as *Silent Spring*, Ehrlich's *Population Bomb* or Barry Commoner's *The Closing Circle* might have alerted us that much of the current discussion of environmental questions in the public sphere is not mediated by conventional literary texts, but instead by books authored by scientists or journalists.

Over the last two decades, books such as Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature*, Sandra Postel's *Last Oasis*, David Quammen's *The Song of the Dodo*, Mark Hertsgaard's *Earth Odyssey,* Sandra Steingraber's *Living Downstream* (which has been discussed by ecocritics as a successor to *Silent Spring*), Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* and *Collapse*, Michael Pollan's *The Botany of Desire,* Tim Flannery's *The Weather Makers* and Elizabeth Kolbert's *Field Notes to a Catastrophe* have arguably generated more public attention to and debate about environmental issues than the poems of Gary Snyder or Joy Harjo, or the novels of Karen Tei Yamashita or Amitav Ghosh, much as we might prefer the latter to the former. Neither is this phenomenon limited to the United States: the German biologist Josef Reichholf's many popular scientific books on ecology and the future of nature (e.g. *Stabile Ungleichgewichte: Die Ökologie der Zukunft, Ende der Artenvielfalt?: Gefährdung und Vernichtung von Biodiversität* and *Die Zukunft der Arten: Neue ökologische Überraschungen*), the German economist Hermann Scheer's proposal for a global solar-based economy (*Solare Weltwirtschaft*) or the Spanish journalist and naturalist Joaquín Araújo's *Viaje de un naturalista por España* are at present as unlikely to feature in articles or courses on environmental literature as the works of their American counterparts. Not, I believe, because we as ecocritics are unaware of their influence, but because our discipline does not provide us with ready templates for approaching and teaching them in their generic specificity, or for dealing with authors who – unlike, say, Annie Dillard, Rebecca Solnit or Suzanne Antonetta – do not so much aspire to reframe environmental issues aesthetically and literarily as to convey information to a general public. But narrative, style, and metaphor, to name just a few salient dimensions, are crucial to these kinds of writing, and deserve ecocritical attention. In turn, showing how such works form part of what the discipline of English (or German, or Spanish) is engaged with might alter not just the archive in which we deploy the conventional methods of literary analysis, but the way in which we think about our interpretive methods as well as our textual politics.

Like English at large, ecocriticism has remained focused on print, though both fields, mainly through the influence of Cultural Studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s, have opened up to include a range of other media and artifacts, film prominently among them, photography less so. Yet it remains surprising how little of the analytical core work in ecocriticism is dedicated to film or photography, compared to the work done on printed text – and above all compared to the visibility and public influence of film in the twentieth century in its relation to literature. "Film" tends to occupy one chapter of a book or part of one essay otherwise devoted to environmental writing. Yet there is an astonishing number and variety

of films that engage with nature and humans' relationship to it, all the way from horror and science fiction films to innumerable nature documentaries, which tend to get longer, more sophisticated and more technically brilliant over the course of the twentieth century, all the way from Jean Painlevé's surrealist shorts on the love life of the octopus or "dancing" sea snails in the 1930s to the monumental documentaries of David Attenborough and the BBC at the turn of the millennium. Moreover, since World War II, animation has exerted an outsized influence on the popular imagination of nature, from Disney's *Bambi* to *Finding Nemo* and the environmentally inflected anime of Japanese film-makers Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata. Of course, some work on these genres exists – Jhan Hochman's *Green Cultural Studies*, David Ingram's *Green Screen,* Gregg Mitman's *Reel Nature on Film* or David Whitley's *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation* all approach film genres from an environmental perspective. But the question is to what extent such work – some of which has been produced by scholars in other disciplines – might help to reconfigure the English canon: in an ecocritical perspective on twentieth-century culture, film and photography should arguably occupy as important a place as literature. The issue is not just the (by now thoroughly clichéd, though sometimes still necessary) call to open up the "textual" canon more widely to include additional authors, genres or traditions. Rather, even for those among us who do not see our work as centrally engaged with visual media, the media-theoretical question how literary and nonliterary texts need to be reconceived in a cultural landscape in which they are surrounded by visual representations that compete with them for the attention of the public matters a great deal. This is one of the crucial differences between, say, Henry David Thoreau and Annie Dillard or Barry Lopez, and asking how the dominance of visual over verbal media changes nature writing itself is not one that ecocritics can afford to miss.[1]

Considering such genres as popular scientific environmental writing or nature documentaries, both concerned to translate scientific insights into the workings of nature into the public sphere, might also lead us to re-engage science itself. Ecology, which formed a crucial part of ecocritical debates in the field's early years, has more or less disappeared from view over the last decade. A good part of this disengagement is no doubt due to criticism of the kinds of connections that were initially forged between ecology and the study of culture:

[1] I realize that suggestions such as an increased engagement with popular science, film and photography might earn me the reproach of being "presentist," since these genres are arguably irrelevant for the study of cultures that predate the last two centuries. I accept this objection: most theoretical approaches have not equally transformed all subfields in our still rigidly chronologically organized discipline, and ecocriticism will hardly be an exception. If the suggestions I make here help us visualize how the business of literary and cultural studies might be conducted differently where the last two centuries are concerned, that in itself will be a significant step ahead.

like environmentalism itself, ecocriticism in its initial stages often thought of ecology as a science apart from the other sciences, synthetic, qualitative and holistic rather than analytic and quantitative, and therefore as a source from which ethical imperatives for the interaction with nature could be derived. Ideas of harmony, balance, and homeostasis lent themselves to translation into the social and ethical realms. As is well known by now, these ideas about the working of nature itself as well as their connection with particular social and ethical models were subjected to critical scrutiny by Daniel Botkin, Josef Reichholf, Donald Worster, William Cronon, Richard White, Michael Cohen and Dana Phillips. Descriptions of the functioning of ecosystems, it turned out, could not be translated as easily into political guidelines and imperatives as had originally been imagined. As a consequence of this wave of criticism, ecocritics seem to have lost interest in engaging with science in any depth.[2]

Yet one could argue that considering ecology as a source for cultural and ethical values was not the most interesting approach to start with, and that skepticism vis-à-vis this perspective by no means disables other and potentially more interesting avenues of exploration. Basic biological and ecological concepts such as "species" and "biodiversity" are surprisingly ill-defined and embattled in the scientific conversation itself, and lend themselves to detailed exploration in terms of what cultural assumptions contribute to their different definitions and uses, how they are translated and received in the public sphere, and how they shape different cultural communities' perceptions and representations of nature.[3] Some of the great biological unknowns – such as how many species inhabit the planet, how many of them there were in the past, or how many will survive this century – have intimate connections to how humans define their place on the planet today, what stories we tell about the history of our interactions with nature, and what it means to think about humans as a species (rather than as different, conflicted populations) in this context in the first place.[4] Similarly, one of the recurring concerns of cultural anxiety in the twentieth century, the relationship between statistical methods of research and humanist conceptions of the subject, has to date been little explored in the specific context of ecological issues: What does it mean for scholars in the Humanities to talk about individuals and populations in terms of their per-

[2] One should add that the results of a very different approach to the connection between ecology and culture, the evolutionary perspective proposed by Joseph Carroll and Glen Love, yielded results that were felt to be extremely reductionist by many and therefore added to the disinterest in science.

[3] David Takacs, writing from the perspective of social studies of science, tackles the question of biodiversity and its meanings in *The Idea of Biodiversity*.

[4] On this question, though in the context of climate change rather than biodiversity loss, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History."

capita consumption of resources or their ecological footprint? What role do literature and other aesthetic forms play in mediating between such quantitative measures and other ways of understanding humans ecologically? Novelists such as Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo have asked analogous questions in the military and medical realms, respectively, but the environmental context awaits further scrutiny.

The question of the relationship between quantitative and other ways of measuring and representing human and nonhuman activity also invites connections between ecocriticism and another emergent field, Digital Humanities. In a broad sense, scholar working in Digital Humanities ask how the advent of digital data collection, processing and representation changes not only the archives Humanities scholars have ready access to (such as extensive archives of historical texts that could previously only be accessed in specific libraries), but also the kinds of question we can ask about them. What kind of insights into our ecological past do digital databases offer, and how do they change the stories we tell about where we have ecologically come from and where we are going? How might the availability of vast amounts of digitally searchable texts enable us to ask questions about the historically and culturally changing meanings of crucial concepts such as "nature"? How do visual representations of data about the ecological state of a particular place, a region or the globe compare and contrast with verbal representations?

What I would like to suggest, therefore, is that an ecocritical re-engagement with biological and ecological science could lead to an abundance of new avenues of research. These new possibilities, along with a stronger emphasis on the genres and methods that the environmental perspective encourages in defiance of what might be the standard in departments of literature, may also give us the ground from which we can, more forcefully than we have done to date, challenge the conventions of literary and cultural studies and remap English from the ecocritical perspective.

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