

**The Human Alien. Otherness, Humanism,
and the Future Of Ecocriticism.***

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The debate on the future of ecocriticism, inaugurated in these terms by Lawrence Buell's prominent book of 2005, is engaging scholars from different countries and perspectives. In particular, the possible emergence of a third-wave ecocriticism is being examined—one which would enrich Buell's canonization of a "first" and a "second wave" with issues connected to the dialectics between ethnicity and globalization, post-bioregionalism, translocality, "material" ecofeminism, postmodernism, and even quantum theory.¹

The discussion on the "third wave" is very recent. In their Introduction to the 2009 summer issue of *MELUS*, Joni Adamson and Scott Slovic stressed the insurgence of "a diversity of voices' contributing to the understanding of the human relationship to the planet" (6). Reflecting on the questions implicit in Buell's description of the first two "waves," and on Cheryll Glotfelty's considerations about the "multi-ethnic" potential of ecocritical studies (Glotfelty xxv) they wrote:

[W]hat seems to be a new third wave of ecocriticism [...] recognizes ethnic and national particularities and yet transcends ethnic and national boundaries; *this third wave explores all facets of human experience from an environmental viewpoint*" (6-7, my emphasis).

With the "third wave" Slovic and Adamson portray an ecocritical trend which is at the same time more "ethnically global" ("allonational," to use Patrick Murphy's expression) and more wide-ranging: they explicitly say that it is concerned about "all facets of human experience from an environmental viewpoint."

Approaching this issue from an ethical outlook, my reflection on the possible theoretical developments of ecocriticism takes inspiration from this very statement. What does

¹See Scott Slovic, *Materiality and Commitment in a Global Age*. On the third wave and postmodernism, see Serpil Opperman's essay *The Rhizomic Trajectory of Ecocriticism* in this issue of *Ecozon@*, and her lecture on *The Future of Ecocriticism: The Third Wave* (International Conference "The Future of Ecocriticism"). Interesting contributions to the debate are, a.o., the essays included in *Coming into Contact: Explorations in Ecocritical Theory and Practice*, and in *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies*.

ecocriticism mean if we include “all facets of human experience”? Buell’s first wave viewed the human by and large as an “outsider” in nature, whereas the second wave examined the human mostly as a socially constructed category. A third wave ecocriticism which could broaden this perspective should, in my opinion, take a step further in its ethical consideration of the human. Can ecocriticism indeed be a “discourse on the human”? And how might the idea of Otherness (an Otherness more radical than the socially constructed one) play a role in this “discourse on the human,” an implicit—and yet essential—concept in ecological culture? A consideration about the links between ecocriticism and humanism is the basic premise here.² In its very essence, humanism is an ethical vision of culture. Echoing the Latin-American liberation theology, we may call humanism a “culture of liberation,” one which critically rejects ideological authorities and creeds, providing more words to define our experience of the world, and so preparing the basis for a more humane and inclusive understanding of the world.³ Ecocriticism, on the other hand, presupposes an anti-ideological outlook. Its stance explicitly denies the dogmas of asymmetrical dualisms such as those implied by culture and nature, human and non human, center and periphery, and so forth. Instead of a clear-cut antithesis, these dualisms represent a co-presence and interdependence. To interpret this in ecological terms does not mean to embrace a simplistically “harmonious” and “balanced” worldview, but rather to substitute the concept of dualism with that of complexity.⁴ It means to see reality as a system of co-existing entities, one that does not require—at least by principle—a hierarchical organization. Understood in this perspective, ecocriticism becomes an inclusive culture of difference.

In such a framework, literature can act as a means of ethical and epistemological liberation, as a source of words and of potential critical awareness. The theoretical shift from a human-centered culture to a more open and inclusive range of moral subjects has, in fact, enormous political implications, because it entails the recognition and the emancipation of

² See, a.o., Louise Westling, Contribution to the “Forum on Literature of the Environment”; “Green Humanism”; and Serenella Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria* 59-70; “Ecocriticism and a Non-Anthropocentric Humanism” (forthcoming).

³ Contemporary developments of humanism as a culture of liberation and of “social hope” can be found in the works of philosophers such as Cornell West, Richard Rorty, Noam Chomsky, a.o. See also Maurizio Valsania, “Social Hope,” and Tony Davies, *Humanism*.

⁴ See, for instance, Daniel B. Botkin, *Discordant Harmonies*; Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 134-135.

every form of Otherness. Literature, Italo Calvino said, is “necessary to politics” in that it gives “a voice to whatever is without a voice, [...] a name to what as yet has no name, especially to what the language of politics excludes or attempts to exclude. I mean aspects, situations, and languages both of the outer and of the inner world, the tendencies repressed both in individuals and in society” (98). In other words, literature can represent deficits, imbalances, and contradictions “within dominant systems,” orienting the cultural discourse toward a reintegration of “what is marginalized, neglected, repressed or excluded.”⁵

This re-opens the question: What is the role, or better, the scope of the human for ecocriticism? And how does ecocriticism deal with the multiplicity of human experience? What does “human” mean for ecocriticism? As a culture of difference and an “evolved” form of humanism, ecocriticism should take into account the difference that the concept of “human” finds *within* itself. This means extending the reflection on the idea of “human” beyond its socially constructed characterizations (as in the “second wave” ecocriticism), at the same time rethinking the concept of “otherness” not exclusively in relationship to non-human nature (as in the “first wave” ecocriticism). By placing the focus not *outside* but *inside* the human being, ecocriticism can contribute to a critical reflection on humanism, in which the category of *radical otherness*, taken as an attribute *of* the human, plays a pivotal role. Issues such as madness or disability, for example, radically challenge and provoke the very idea of being human, regardless of social contexts, race, religion, or ethnicity. Madness and disability create in fact a “wilderness zone” inside the civilized or “tame” area of humanity-as-normality. By showing that the Other is not only nature (as the other-than-human), madness and disability introduce a radical fracture in the traditional taxonomy of the human subject. The human itself can become the Other, the human alien. Examining this “alien” presence within the human is a way for ecocriticism to deconstruct the idea of humanity-quanormality and to approach a more complex and inclusive type of humanism, a plural, and “evolved” one.

Every text that represents the islands of otherness inside the human world—or the human in its “wilderness zones”—is potentially significant here. By way of attempts and provisionally, I have identified three of these “zones”:

- Wilderness of the body: deformity, physical disability;
- Wilderness of the mind: madness, altered states of consciousness, mental disability;
- Wilderness of the “more than human”: mystical experience

⁵ Hubert Zapf, “The State of Ecocriticism” 62; 56. See also Zapf, *Literatur als kulturelle Ökologie* 63-67.

Since this paper represents an exploration and a theoretical proposal, rather than an accomplished research, I will limit my examples.⁶ A clear case of the first “wilderness zone” (wilderness of the body) could be, for instance, Italo Calvino’s *The Watcher* (1961), a novel set in a hospital for mentally and physically disabled, in which the question about the “boundaries of the human” is addressed in philosophical terms, touching on the idea of an “ontological segregation” of the human “others.”⁷

As to the second “zone” (“wilderness of the mind”), the ecocritical research could take, in my opinion, at least two directions. Studying the literary representation of madness (e.g. in Shakespeare’s works, or in *Don Quijote*) is one. Another is the self-representation by authors that reflect on their own mental condition as a form of alienation from the “normal human.” Especially interesting is when this inner wilderness is related to images drawn from the natural world, and connected to the human self by way of identification, comparison, or other subjective experiences. Examples from Italian poetry can be easily provided, namely, Dino Campana (1885-1932) and Alda Merini (1931-2009), two important authors (Merini was nominated for the Nobel Literature Prize) whose works consistently reflect the experience of mental hospitals.⁸

In the case of the third “zone” (“wilderness of the more-than-human”), texts that couple mystical experience with a radical questioning of the essence and the destination of the human are particularly interesting. A case in point is here Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector’s *The Passion According to G. H.* Besides providing subversive responses to the discourse on

⁶ The attempts to couple ecocriticism with disability studies are very few. Some critical works relate the discourse of disability to the “toxic discourse,” or consider disability as a metaphor for our alienation from nature—something introduced by Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire* (See Sarah Jaquette, “Maimed Away from the Earth”). From a postmodern (or “posthumanist”) perspective, Cary Wolfe (“Learning from Temple Grandin”) has recently proposed an interesting parallel interpretation of disability studies and animal studies. Also important here is Michael Bérubé’s autobiographic memoir *Life as We Know It*, which, even though not from an explicit ecocritical viewpoint, addresses in a very fascinating way the conceptual connections of disability with the ways we think about “normality,” “abnormality,” and the environment. (Joni Adamson recalled my attention on Bérubé’s work.)

⁷ I have analyzed Calvino’s novel in my lecture at the Antalya conference. The text will be available in *The Future of Ecocriticism*.

⁸ Another very recent example of the description of “wilderness of the mind” is Jay Griffith’s memoir *Wild*. The kind of wilderness here described is that of depression and emotional pain. (I owe this reference to Scott Slovic).

transcendence and immanence (God is here identified with the body of a dying cockroach), this novel describes mystical experience as implying that “being inhuman” might be the real accomplishment of the human.⁹

A reflection on the role of literature in representing human otherness is important here. Exploring the “alien” world inside the human, literature can reveal another language: that of the other-than-human, the other-than-reason, the non-reason inside the human. In the wilderness of body, like in the wilderness of madness or of mystical experience, a merely rationalist gaze may not be sufficient to grasp and represent this human complexity. Dealing with individuality, literature becomes therefore a non-monologuing way of saying and seeing the otherness, and a sort of sensuous code of the world. In a world which is “more-than-logical” (i.e. which has factually overcome conceptual universalities) there are many orders of understanding. These orders are co-present, parallel, and co-existent. Literature can engage this co-presence and prepare a political language for this experience: a language far from universal concepts, but made of concrete, sensorial images.

In providing individuals with new vocabularies, with new words and entire languages, literature can potentially impact the imagination of an entire society, and thus offer more tools designed to interact with social life. In presenting more ways in which to define phenomena, literature and the humanities can bestow people a sharper sight of reality social and natural. This sharper *sight*, in turn, leads to a sharper *insight* of oneself, contributing to cultural emancipation and to a more democratic society. As Hubert Zapf, theorizing the compensatory function of literature as a “cultural ecology,” has suggested:

[B]y breaking up closed circuits of dogmatic world views and exclusionary truth-claims in favour of plural perspectives, multiple meanings and dynamic interrelationships, literature becomes the site of a constant, creative renewal of language, perception, communication, and imagination (“The State of Ecocriticism” 56).¹⁰

⁹ For an ecocritical analysis of *The Passion According to G. H.*, see Iovino *Ecologia letteraria* 87-100. Regina Root recently recalled my attention on the link between otherness and disability which characterized Lispector’s late years. The Brazilian author was in fact horribly disfigured in a fire a few years after the publication of *The Passion According to G. H.*—her hand almost amputated. This is way, besides the intrinsic obscurity of her works, she often presented herself as a mysterious writer, who did not want to show herself. Disability fueled her hermeticism, apparently.

¹⁰ See also Zapf, *Literatur als kulturelle Ökologie* 6: “Literatur erfüllt so im Haushalt der Kultur die Aufgabe, eindeutige Welt- und Selbstbilder zu subvertieren und auf das von ihnen ausgeblendete Andere zu öffnen;

To explore “all facets of human experience from an environmental viewpoint,” ecocriticism has to reconsider the very scope of this experience. Within an ecological framework, to “experience the human” means to experience the human and its boundaries, its inner and outer dialectics, to go past any fixed concept of “humanity.” It means to envision a culture in which the “humanity” as such “can no longer be taken for granted” (Davies 135), but must incessantly be rediscovered and reinvented—a humanism based on a concept and practice of the human proceeding from its irreducible otherness *in itself*.

As Jean François Lyotard has shown in his essay on *The Inhuman*, the question of the human is that it consists itself of a dilemma between the biological and the cultural (and we can say, between the “inside” and the “outside,” its being at once “wild” and “civilized”). It is impossible to draw a clear-cut border between human and its antonyms: non-human, pre-human, inhuman. This reflects one more time the need for a real conceptual extension of the scope of human experience, revealing how problematic, precarious, and shifting the notion of “human” is: far from be an essence and an end, being human is a dynamic process, a continuous biological and conceptual evolution.

In one of the most quoted sentences of his “archeology of the human sciences,” Michel Foucault declared that the notion of human is “an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end” (387). But the “end” of the human, as a universal and ideologically constructed concept, does not necessarily mean the end of humanism—at least in its ecologically evolved form. Humanism is a discourse of pacification. The way to overcome, politically and conceptually, the cultural conflicts which are at the basis of the ecological crisis does not involve naturalizing the human or humanizing the non-human. Instead, it involves restoring the human in its dynamic complexity. In a word, humanizing the human. Remapping the conditions of human experience from within as well as from without, in its internal as well as external dialectics, ecocriticism can contribute to this humanization. This could result in an effectively inclusive culture—an inclusive culture that would be humanistic, not in the sense that it would be more *human*, but in the sense that it will be more *humane*. If exploring all facets of human experience is intended as a way to go past a merely human culture, then ecocriticism should focus on the need human culture has to reclaim its

eindimensionale Realitätskostrukte in mehrdimensionale Bedeutungsprozesse zu überführen; das von dominanten kulturellem Diskursen Ausgegrenzte zu artikulieren und in seiner ganzen Vielgestaltigkeit der symbolischen Erfahrung zugänglich zu machen, das heisst für die Erneuerung kultureller Kreativität zu aktivieren.”

humanity.

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