

Ecocriticism in Poland: Then and Now

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present a synoptic picture of the development and current state of ecocriticism in Poland. Understood in the generic sense of the study of literature and environment, ecocriticism began in Poland already in the 1970s. It has since then generated its own original tradition. Understood in the specific historical sense of a field devoted to the study of literature and environment that was consolidated in the 1990s in the USA and the UK and then expanded both in disciplinary and national terms, ecocriticism was imported to Poland only in the beginning of the 21st century, but it has managed to generate its own tradition as well. For a while, both these currents of Polish ecocriticism ran in parallel to one another, but they have recently merged, stimulating new exciting developments. The paper delineates these historical trajectories and recent developments alike. It also shows how today's Polish ecocriticism contributes to ecocriticism globally, not only by offering its own culturally unique perspective and archives, but also by proposing new methodologies, including so-called empirical ecocriticism, an emerging field that originates in part from Poland.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, animal studies, history of ecocriticism, Polish ecocriticism, comparative ecocriticism, empirical ecocriticism, new materialism.

Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es dar cuenta del desarrollo y del estado actual de la ecocrítica en Polonia. Las raíces de la ecocrítica, entendida en términos generales como el estudio de la literatura y del medio ambiente, se remontan en Polonia a los años 70 del siglo XX, dando inicio a una tradición propia y original. En cambio, la ecocrítica—tal como se había concebido históricamente en el seno de los estudios dedicados a la literatura y el medio ambiente, desarrollados a partir de los años 90 en los Estados Unidos y Gran Bretaña y propagados como una disciplina aparte—fue importada a Polonia solo a comienzos del siglo XXI. Con todo, esta vertiente también logró originar su propia tradición. Durante un tiempo, ambas corrientes de la ecocrítica coexistieron para fusionarse finalmente en los últimos años y llegar a ser un estímulo para interesantes desarrollos. En este artículo, se comentarán las dos trayectorias históricas de la ecocrítica, así como sus aportaciones más recientes. Asimismo, se presentarán las maneras en que la ecocrítica polaca contribuye al desarrollo de la global, no solo en lo que se refiere a sus propios archivos o a su perspectiva cultural única, sino también en lo que respecta a las nuevas propuestas metodológicas, incluida la llamada ecocrítica empírica, un creciente campo de investigación en parte originado en Polonia.

Palabras clave: Ecocrítica, estudios animales, historia de la ecocrítica, ecocrítica polaca, ecocrítica comparativa, ecocrítica empírica, nuevo materialismo.

One of the most important consequences of the growing attempts at making the ecocritical community more inclusive has been the realization that the common use of the term “ecocriticism” is exclusionary and needs to be changed (cf. DeLoughrey and Handley; Oppermann). The reason it can be called exclusionary is that it both defines “ecocriticism,” generally, as ‘the study of literature and the environment’ *and* assumes the extension of that term to be a certain culturally specific form of such study. That would be, the official story goes, a line of research that originated in the 1970s in the USA thanks to the work of Joseph Meeker and William Rueckert, was consolidated in the 1990s by Cheryll Glotfelty, Jonathan Bate, Lawrence Buell, and other British and American scholars, and remains to this day heavily influenced in its choice of methods, themes, and archives by the work conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom (see Bracke and Corporaal; Gladwin; cf. Estok). The problem here is that if one defines ecocriticism as the study of literature and the environment in general, then one cannot deny that such work was conducted before the Anglo-American tradition even emerged, and that some scholars who conduct it today have nothing to do with that tradition whatsoever. To abide by the common use of the term “ecocriticism,” then, equals downplaying or misrepresenting that kind of work and is a form of epistemic injustice (Fricker).

Since such work can be found in the Polish context too, in writing this paper we had to make some important terminological choices. On the one hand, we did not want to abide by the exclusionary, common use of the term ecocriticism, but on the other hand we did not want to discard the term altogether. We fully realized that anyone who finds themselves in such a situation has basically two options to choose from. One is to revise the definition of the term “ecocriticism” so that it matches its commonly accepted extension. In other words, it is to declare that one shall define “ecocriticism” as ‘the Anglo-American tradition of the study of literature and the environment’ and use a different term to describe anything that does not belong to the tradition. The other is to change the extension of the term so that it matches the commonly accepted definition. In other words, it is to apply the term consistently to all the known traditions of the study of literature and the environment, including those that do not originate from the Anglo-American tradition or draw on it altogether. The latter option is naturally more difficult to realize in practice as it would demand rewriting the official history of ecocriticism, along with its current periodization into waves flowing from an epicenter located in the USA and gradually embracing the whole globe. But, at the same time, implementing this option on a wider scale could allow scholars from various culturally marginalized research communities to profit from the academic capital the term has already accrued, just as analogous practices have profited such communities in other fields. Since we think that something similar is possible and needed in ecocriticism, we are in favor of that latter option, both as a general strategy and in this particular essay.

What this means is that in narrating the history of ecocriticism in Poland we have to begin with a researcher who has never drawn from the Anglo-American tradition or even called himself an “ecocritic” for that matter, but whose work definitely falls under the definition of the study of literature and the environment in general. The researcher in

question is Jacek Kolbuszewski, a historian of Polish and other Slavic literatures who almost singlehandedly established environmentally-oriented literary studies in Poland in the early 1970s. He gave the Polish tradition of ecocriticism its theoretical foundations as well as its first historical accounts and anthologies of Polish environmental literature (Kolbuszewski, *Ochrona przyrody a kultura*). In his work, which continues until today, he has consistently presented a pro-ecological, nonanthropocentric attitude (Kolbuszewski, "Wstęp" 7-8), argued against the idea of a fundamental epistemic gap between the humanities and the natural sciences, and explored various forms of what Barry Lopez has called "the literature of place" (Lopez). Kolbuszewski has been particularly interested in literary representations of the Sudety Mountains and the Tatra Mountains (Kolbuszewski, *Krajobraz i kultura*), a subject which is now extensively studied by those who follow the ecocritical tradition he helped to originate. One of them is his former student Ewa Grzęda, the editor of the journal *Góry, Literatura, Kultura* [Mountains, Literature, Culture], the author of numerous ecocritical studies, and now herself an established scholar who passes the Polish tradition of ecocriticism on to the younger generation of researchers.

Despite the fact that this line of ecocritical work had been established entirely independently of the Anglo-American tradition, in their beginnings, both movements possessed surprisingly many similarities. Both stressed that studying the relationships between literature and the natural world is important for scholarly and practical reasons alike, and both stressed that literature is a unique form of representing that world and connecting us with it (Buell 2, 17, 64-78; Slovic "Nature Writing and Environmental Psychology"). These and other similarities are quite interesting, not only because the two traditions appeared independently of one another, but also because they originated in entirely different conditions. The Anglo-American tradition emerged in a context of late capitalism and literary departments dominated by poststructuralist theory, whereas the Polish was a response to late real socialism and literary departments defined by a combination of structuralism and traditional humanist criticism. While in the Anglo-American case, the emphasis on the power of literature to connect us with nature was, to an extent, a reaction to the poststructuralist claims about the textual construction of everything and texts referring only to other texts, Kolbuszewski and his followers never had to defend the material world from constructivists and literary reference from deconstructionists. There were just too few of those around, as Western poststructuralist theory never had a wide reception in the countries of the Eastern Bloc. In exploring the capacity of literature to connect us with nature and to represent it, the Polish tradition was primarily motivated by the assumption that this might have potentially beneficial practical results in encouraging educators to use literature in promoting pro-environmental attitudes.

This brings us to the differences between the two traditions. Aside from the obvious difference that one focused on literature in the English language, and the other on Polish writing, in the beginning, those differences pertained also to the literary forms and themes the two traditions focused on and the methods they used. As regards literary forms and genres, the Polish tradition focused more on poetry (the Polish lyrical poetry of the nineteenth century in particular) and less on nature writing than its Anglo-

American counterpart. When it comes to the choice of themes, much nineteenth-century Polish literature was concerned with the country's struggle to regain independence, so the Polish tradition focused to a far greater extent on the intersections of nature preservation, ethnic identity, and political struggle. And, finally, as far as methods are concerned, the Polish tradition employed a unique blend of structuralist poetics, thematic criticism, and comparative analysis. As a result, it paid much more attention than did the Anglo-American tradition to the formal qualities of environmental literature as well as to the deep historical roots of environmental literature's main themes and their different articulation in different languages—Polish, Slovak, Czech, and German in particular (cf. Kolbuszewski, *Góry, przestrzenie i krajobrazy*).

However different their original contexts were, neither tradition was initially widely embraced in the literary community it grew out of. In the Polish case, this was mostly because environmental issues resonated with a relatively small number of literary scholars, while in America, in addition to a similar lack of interest in environmental issues within the larger literary community, one important factor was precisely the latter's overwhelming poststructuralist orientation (Garrard 10.). As a result, both Anglo-American and Polish ecocriticism remained relatively small movements for years to come. This parallel trajectory only began to change at the beginning of the twenty-first century, with the Anglo-American tradition rapidly gaining popularity and the Polish tradition remaining relatively small in its reach. One likely reason for this divergence was that, after decades of its almost complete dominance in the US and other Western countries, the poststructuralist paradigm came to be seen as having exhausted its possibilities (Elliot and Attridge). A search for an alternative paradigm began, prompting the emergence of new movements and the empowerment of some older ones, especially those which were emphatically anti-textualist, including the Anglo-American tradition of ecocriticism (Slovic, "The Third Wave of Ecocriticism" 7-8).

Such tendencies eventually led to the following historical paradox: when in the early 2010s, mainstream literary studies in Poland began to recognize the importance of environmental issues, this was mainly due to the work of a younger generation of Polish scholars influenced by the Anglo-American tradition, rather than any inspiration from the local tradition established decades earlier (Tabaszewska, *Jedna przyroda czy przyrody alternatywne?*; "Zagrożenia czy możliwości?"). Among those scholars a key role has been played by Julia Fiedorczuk and Anna Barcz. Fiedorczuk, who in addition to being a literary scholar has also gained considerable international recognition as a poet and translator, is the author of the first Polish introduction to the Anglo-American tradition of ecocriticism titled *The Cyborg in the Garden* as well as a captivating essay on ecopoetics she wrote together with the Mexican poet Gerardo Beltrán (*Ekopoetyka*). Barcz, a literary scholar and a philosopher, aside from her ecocritical work, is also a pioneer of Polish posthumanism and animal studies (Barcz, *Animal Narratives and Culture*; *Realizm ekologiczny*; Barcz and Łagodzka), alongside such scholars as Przemysław Czapliński, Justyna Tymieniecka-Suchanek, and Monika Bakke (Czapliński, Tymieniecka-Suchanek, Bakke).

Understandably, after it had been brought to Poland, Anglo-American ecocriticism very soon began interacting with various locally vibrant fields. Over time this has led to some original methodological developments. One such development is an ecocritical current in the study of Polish nineteenth-century fiction (Piechota, *Barcz Realizm ekologiczny*), while another is the greening of Polish Holocaust studies, trauma and memory studies, totalitarian studies, and post-dependence studies, as exemplified by the work of Roma Sendyka, Katarzyna Szalewska, and Justyna Tabaszewska on the ecopoetics of historical conflicts and a rising interest in the landscape as a scene of historical and ecological trauma (see Korczyńska-Partyka, Kuliś, and Ubertowska). Yet another example would be the influence that the recent new materialist trends in Anglo-American ecocriticism has had on the work of the younger-generation leftist literary critics exploring the political function of poetry. This is well illustrated by the collection titled *Ekokrytyka*, whose authors try to see the ecocritical reading of a poem as an activity that “on the one hand would confirm the agency of poetry itself, the performative dimension of poetry, and on the other encourage a specific change, individual action that will set the history of the world on a different path” (Wojciechowski 5). In this perspective, literature and reading become an “exercise of friendship” with non-human actors entangled with humanity as part of the planetary ecosystem (Skurtys, “Pieśń kopalni i tworzyw sztucznych” 26; cf. “Zamiast Szymborskiej?”).

These are but a few of the many possible examples of research resulting from the introduction of the Anglo-American tradition into Poland. Today, this line of Polish ecocriticism is too diverse for anyone to do it justice in a short report like this one. Let us only note, in closing, that it has recently begun to interact in a meaningful way with the tradition that was established by Kolbuszewski decades ago and with which we began. The whole process was cemented by the conference *Go East! Ecocriticism in Central and Eastern Europe*, held in 2016 at the University of Wrocław, in Poland, whose keynote speakers were Kolbuszewski, the pioneer of ecocriticism in Poland, Fiedorczuk, a top Polish ecocritic of the middle generation, and Scott Slovic, one of the most prominent representatives of the Anglo-American tradition today, and which featured researchers from Germany, Estonia, Ukraine, and other countries. The event is worth mentioning here not only because it contributed to the consolidation of the Polish ecocritical community, but also because it pointed to some new directions for ecocritical work in Central and Eastern Europe and for ecocriticism more generally. Among other things, it was one of the first academic events to feature work in empirical ecocriticism, a new field dedicated to providing empirical evidence on the social and political power of environmental literature and art (Małecki, “Experimental Ecocriticism”; Schneider-Mayerson, Weik von Mossner, and Małecki). While empirical ecocriticism is currently an international phenomenon, embracing countries as different as the USA, Singapore, Austria, Australia, and Croatia (see, e.g., Schneider-Mayerson; Weik von Mossner), some of its roots can indeed be traced to Poland, in particular to the experimental studies on the psychological influence of animal narratives conducted at the University of Wrocław by a team of specialists in literary studies, biological anthropology, and social psychology (Małecki, Sorokowski, et al.; Małecki, Pawłowski, and Sorokowski). Examples such as these show not only that

Polish ecocriticism has its own original sources, but also that its contributions to the global ecocritical community consist both in shedding light on the archives of Polish environmental literature and in providing new methods for investigating environmental literature elsewhere.

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