

Ecocriticism in Spanish

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Any “eco-word” sounds good in a time of global warming and other environmental worries, but *ecocriticism*, that is, the idea that literary criticism can also be ecological, may sound somewhat strange. Not many people among Spanish scholars seem to have ever heard about it and I was even surprised to know that there was a research group on the subject in my own university, which aroused my curiosity to know what ecocriticism was and what exactly ecocritics did. Then I learned about a thematic issue on ecocriticism that had been published in a Spanish literary journal, *Nerter*, published by the University of La Laguna since 1999, and I thought this could be an opportunity to definitely know about it. Besides, this volume included some articles by Spanish scholars, which was a bonus, since most ecocriticism is done in English and I did not think there were many Spanish ecocritics, which turned to be a wrong impression.

First of all, the way in which the articles in the volume have been arranged is especially noticeable. As if actually thought for introducing completely newcomers – like myself - into the discipline, they are perfectly organized from the most general, comprehensive ones, on its history, state of the art and first works on ecocriticism, through definitions and attempts to delimit its boundaries, on to more specific ones about its links to feminist and post-colonialist criticism, and on the ecology of science fiction and postmodern narrative, until it finally provides some actual examples of ecoliterature or eco-poetry. So the volume allows the reader to deeper and deeper into the subject and so provides an outstanding overview of ecocriticism, not only of its aims, best authors and history, but also about its controversies, its fears and, of course, its own contradictions.

As is so often the case with most academic disciplines, definitions are only fully understood when one has already become familiar with the subject. Thus, it does not help much when you read that ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment (Glotfelty 19), or the study of ecological implications and human-nature relationships in any literary texts, even those that seem at first glance oblivious of the nonhuman world (Slovic 21), and also that ecocriticism is the ability to criticize genres, cultural artefacts, existing discourses and to explore alternatives (Garrard 27). Thus, leaving definitions apart, as I went on reading, I could not but agree with

Carmen Flys when she claims that one of the most defining characteristics of ecocriticism is its ideological commitment and its combination of theory and criticism with creativity, teaching and activism (14). As a matter of fact, what I have found out in this volume is a high degree of commitment to an environmentalist agenda with explicit educational purposes, especially in the first articles (Glotfelty, Slovic, Garrad, Estok...). Rather than a mere description and analysis of literary texts, it is obvious that ecocriticism intends to influence readers. Ecology must be taught and practiced in order to save our world, they say, and literature is as good a means to this end as any. Consequently, ecocritics appear as committed people who believe that it is not enough to be an environmentalist in your free time, and that if you teach literature, you can do so from an ecological point of view (Glotfelty 19). Also Garrard (27) provides us with a practical lesson on ecocriticism and insists on the need of being critical towards the current way of thinking and living. The most radical position is the one taken by Estok (33-40), who does not seem to agree with broad, comprehensive views of ecocriticism that are not fully committed to activism.

Therefore, in the first articles, the reader can find a lot of environmental concerns and green educational efforts, but also may feel that there is not so much literary criticism. Besides, in the first half of the volume, there is a good deal of theoretical information but not much practice. Thus, it is possible to learn about the origins and development of ecocriticism, about the state of the art that evidences that ecocriticism is real and alive (Flys 12-18), also about the close link of this approach to feminist criticism (Murphy 41-47; Rey 48-54) and about environmental justice (Martín 55-58). I particularly had already raised my expectations regarding what ecocriticism could achieve by reading these first articles, especially the long list of questions that ecocriticism is intended to answer, some of which sound very promising –What’s the role of the physical environment in this novel? How has the idea of wild nature evolved over time? How is the environmental crisis influencing contemporary literature? How do our metaphors for the earth influence the way in which we deal with it? (Glotfelty 19). However, doing an ecological reading of texts of nature writing and environmental justice does not sound like a novelty, and one would say that ecocriticism must provide something else to justify its approach to literature. Fortunately, the latter part of the volume provides some answers to these needs in articles on the ecological approach to postmodern novel (Oppermann 59-71) and to science fiction (Sanz 72-76). Therefore, one can conclude that ecocriticism is actually possible with literary works that are not intentionally ecological, but where our cultural conceptualizations of the environment are reflected. Ecocriticism shows how it is possible to read a piece of fiction and see the author’s view on nature and on the influence of the environment and its changes on human behaviour. Science fiction is, as Sanz points out, remarkably well-suited for this kind of analysis, since it not only denounces destructive

practices towards nature, but also offers alternatives to our current relationship with the natural world (76).

Particularly interesting to me was the article by Marrero (82-86) on the ecocriticism of literature in Spanish, not only because it focuses on ecoliterature and ecocriticism in my own language, but also because it shows the controversy between those that conceive ecocriticism in a very narrow way and those who argue that it is possible to do an ecocritical reading of non-ecologist texts. Thus, opposing Paredes and McLean's opinion, who carried out the first typology of ecologist literature in Spanish in 2000, that ecoliterature is impossible in Europe and that it therefore can only be found in indigenous Latin American literature in Spanish, Marrero claims that it is in Europe that the term *ecology* developed and that ecocriticism can also be found in Spanish literature. Especially shocking is his defence of Miguel Delibes (1920-2010) as an example of commitment to ecology. I wonder whether Simon C. Estok, given his radical view of ecocriticism, would accept Delibes as a genuinely ecological writer, since this Spanish author, who was distinguished with the most important prizes in Spanish-speaking literature (*Nadal*, *Cervantes* and *Prince of Asturias*) was very fond of hunting and in fact often described himself as "a hunter who writes". Still, one can only agree that Delibes' novels are among the best examples in Spanish to be considered in ecocriticism, since his work brilliantly presents the relationship between human beings and the environment and shows the need of a new attitude towards the environment.

Finally, the volume includes several examples of ecopoetry (Hogan 103-109; Barella 97-99; Gifford 100-102), which complete this journey through ecocriticism and allow the reader to finally understand the meaning and reach of this perspective.

Of course this is a relatively recent approach to the reading of literature and consequently, there is still much work to be done, especially regarding methodology and the development of a thorough, systematic model of analysis. These are, among others, some of the challenges for the "third wave" of ecocriticism we are just witnessing, as Flys writes (16). Ironically enough, it is by reading about the controversies and contradictions of ecocriticism that I have actually come to know it better, as I would distrust a pure, perfect theory, especially in so new a theory. Thus, by reading the different articles collected in the volume, one learns that ecocritics are still trying to define boundaries, that some of them consider that ecocriticism ought to focus on explicitly ecological texts (pastoral, nature writing and so on) while others try to extend its purview to science fiction and postmodern novels. Some ecocritics defend a broad view which enables an ecological reading of any literary text, whereas others intend to confine their efforts to those texts which are intentionally ecological. From my own point of view, the first position is the real challenge, for only ecocriticism can make us aware of how influential the environment is in human behaviour and how pervasive ecological worries are these days.

Finally, I would like to point out a minor drawback. Some of the articles in this issue were not originally written in Spanish, and some of the translations are not as good as they should be, which sometimes impedes a fluent reading of those articles. Fortunately, this is not the case with the translations of the poems, which are skilfully executed and where the editors have thoughtfully included the original versions in English. Apart from this, I must say that this is a comprehensive, illuminating volume that will be highly useful for readers who are not familiar with this new approach to literature, especially if they wish to learn more about the possibilities of its application to Spanish literature.