

Interview with Richard Kerridge

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Richard Kerridge lectures in English and Creative Writing and leads the MA in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University, where he also co-ordinates research and graduate studies in the Humanities and is a leading member of the research centre in Writing and the Environment. He was founding Chair of ASLE-UK (which has recently become ASLE-UKI: the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment - United Kingdom and Ireland). He chaired the association from 1999 to 2004, has always been a leading member, and is now treasurer. In 1992 he introduced probably the first ecocriticism module to be taught in British higher education. He has since served on the ASLE Executive Council, as the first non-American elected member, and has published numerous ecocritical essays on diverse topics. In 1990 and 1991 he received the *BBC Wildlife Award* for Nature Writing. His book *Beginning Ecocriticism* will appear from Manchester University Press next year, and he is currently writing *Cold Blood*, a nature writing memoir concerned with the British reptiles and amphibians, supported by a Roger Deakin Award from the Society of Authors. *Cold Blood* will be published by Chatto and Windus in 2014. This interview was conducted in the University of La Laguna, in the island of Tenerife, during the 5th EASLCE biennial conference and was later edited by Richard Kerridge.¹

ISABEL PÉREZ RAMOS: ASLE-UKI is an affiliate organisation of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment in the United States. Tell me about the beginnings of this British (and Irish) branch.

RICHARD KERRIDGE: I went to the first ASLE conference in America in 1995. Terry Gifford, I believe, was also there. At the time, I was putting together *Writing the Environment*, the first collection of ecocritical essays to be published in Britain, and through that, following Jonathan Bate's recommendation, I met Greg Garrard, who was then completing his PhD. Greg wrote an essay for the book, and in 1996 organised the first explicitly ecocritical conference in Britain at the University of Swansea.

I had begun teaching a course called "Writing an Environmental Crisis", an undergraduate literature module at Bath Spa University, in 1992. I believe it was the first of its kind in an English course in Britain. On the strength of the success of that course, we advertised a post in ecocriticism at Bath Spa University in 1997 and Greg was appointed, coming from Swansea (though his PhD was at Liverpool, directed by

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Jonathan Bate). In 1998, *Writing the Environment* was published, co-edited with Neil Sammells.

Greg and I held another conference in 1998 at Bath, and these two conferences established the small network of people who were interested in starting ASLE-UK. The two universities especially involved were Bath Spa University and Bretton Hall, a college in Yorkshire that later became part of Leeds University. At Bretton Hall there were Terry Gifford and Harriet Tarlo, and at Bath Spa myself and Greg. That was the nucleus, along with Axel Goodbody at Bath University (the other university in Bath), and John Parham, then at the University of East London. After the 1998 conference we made a proposal to ASLE in the USA, and in response were granted some seed-money to start the British affiliate group. John Parham organised a conference at the University of East London in 2000, which became the launching conference for ASLE-UK. Another important contributor to the emerging British ecocriticism was Laurence Coupe, at Manchester Metropolitan University, who edited *The Green Studies Reader* in 2000, a reader in ecocriticism that made connections with various British traditions of radical literary criticism.

IPR: Right now, what is the connection of ASLE-UKI with ASLE?

R.K.: ASLE in the US was an inspiring model, and we had personal contacts with many of the members. They were keen and supportive. We remain an affiliate organisation, but the running of ASLE-UK was always quite independent of ASLE. We had a separate membership fee and our own journal – though we took care to hold our conferences in the off-year for the Americans. This policy has just been changed, to assist our developing links with EASLCE, with whom we shared our 2010 conference. Perhaps this also reflects a growing, though still faint, recognition that we really should not travel so much. But we remain very close to ASLE, participating in numerous friendly debates and frequently inviting leading ASLE members as plenary speakers.

IPR: What do you think were the needs, or the reason to create ASLE-UK?

R.K.: We did admire what was happening in the USA, and looked wistfully at the amount of support there was for literary environmentalism in American literary and cultural studies. Britain was much more conservative and unreceptive. But of course, we perceived strong cultural differences. American ecocriticism, at that time, was in what was later called the ‘first wave’, which meant a concern with wilderness – that is, with wild space and its spiritual meanings, as a radical alternative, separate from urban space. Britain does not really have wilderness in that sense – or hardly any. Large parts of the Scottish Highlands can be called wilderness, but even there historical memory is dominated by the forced clearances of the Highland people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the landscape is very much perceived as historically marked. Elsewhere in the UK, there are very few places that really seem remote from human social space – places where you are more than an hour’s walk from a road. What we wanted, therefore, was ecocriticism without wilderness: not without the love of wild nature, but without that American sense of the purity of wilderness and the separation between social space and wild space.

The British landscape is a patchwork landscape, in which wild nature and human social life are closely folded together. Jeremy Hooker, the poet, coined the term 'ditch vision' to characterise the paradoxical small-scale sublime of British nature writing. A new orientation in nature writing is currently emerging in Britain. 'The new nature writing', as it is sometimes called, is characterised by its enthusiasm for the 'edgelands,' where wild nature and human life overlap. Exponents include Richard Mabey, Roger Deakin, Kathleen Jamie, Robert Macfarlane, Mark Cocker, Paul Farley, Michael Simmons Roberts, Tim Dee, Jay Griffiths and Jean Sprackland.

We were conscious, also, that Britain has a much stronger and more central social-democratic tradition than the United States. From the beginning, we were very concerned with the relationship between environmentalism and other political movements, particularly the social democratic and conservative traditions in Britain. Both traditions have sometimes claimed environmentalism, advancing their own versions of it, but both are also capable of being hostile and dismissive. Each of these old political opponents sometimes sees environmentalism as the other in disguise, which is a sign of the difficulty that established political thinking has in really taking environmental concerns seriously.

In Britain, the popularity of literary nature writing has fluctuated. There is a long tradition, and the genre was extremely popular in the before the First World War and in the inter-war period, but in the second half of the 20th century it went into decline. I think this happened mostly because in literary culture a concern with wild nature had come to be seen as a conservative force. In the inter-war period, the genre had been associated with a nostalgic conservative politics – this was even true at government level, Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin being an enthusiast for traditional rural life and a champion of the novels of Mary Webb. Much of this inter-war ruralism and love of wild nature was connected with war-trauma. Some returning soldiers turned to the love of wild nature for complex forms of solace. The solitariness – the relief from scrutiny – seems to have been important, and the cathartic witnessing of natural dramas of life and death. There was also the search for a lost world – not only a pre-war world but a pre-industrial world not implicated in responsibility for the war.

Writing by war-traumatised soldiers has often, in many places and periods, concerned itself with this solace and search. The post-Vietnam writing of the American grizzly-bear expert Doug Peacock is a more recent example. But at this time in Britain there was a complex and developing ideological context that produced dangerous associations for nature writing. It was a combination of several things – an association of the war with industrial modernity, a fear that the rural England that offered refuge would be swallowed by growing cities and suburbs, and, for some, a desperate wish to avoid another war with Germany. This specific history lay behind the literary unfashionability of nature writing in the decades after World War Two – a time when popular enthusiasm for natural history was strong and growing, encouraged by the first television wildlife programmes. Even in the thirties, nature writing did not always go with conservative nostalgia; it has always been Left as well as Right, or contained elements of both. In Britain, environmentalism provides a new opening for a nature

writing that – *because* it is nature writing – is not backward-looking but profoundly responsive to contemporary conditions. It is the rejection of environmental concerns that now seems evasively nostalgic (though nostalgia too can be radical and liberating, as Kate Soper has recently pointed-out). I think it is fair to say that British academic literary culture has been especially slow to recognise this change – because of the history I have described.

The story I have just told is a British story, delineating some of the British context for ecocriticism. Part of the mission of each national or regional ecocritical association – each version of ASLE – is to analyse its own cultural background, including the culture-specific associations of nature writing, love of nature, environmentalism and love of place. Some themes will be general, some more local. The changing cultural and ideological context for nature writing is just one ecocritical thread, of course.

IPR: What term do you think is more appropriate to define the analysis of literature and culture from an ecological perspective?

R.K.: Personally, I like the word ‘ecocriticism’ – partly for my own nostalgic reasons. Some people prefer ‘the environmental humanities’ or ‘environmental literary criticism’, because ‘ecocriticism’ seems too much associated with the broader environmental movement, and therefore seems to lack the proper academic distance. I like the idea that ecocriticism is a committed criticism – I think it should be that, like feminist criticism.

And then there is ‘ASLE’. At the beginning, we were not very worried about names. We called the organization ASLE-UK because it was branching out from ASLE in the US, and we were proud of that connection. ASLE was impressive and inspiring, and felt like a real movement. We saw ourselves as trying to reproduce that in Britain, so it seemed natural to use the name. The main objection is that ‘ASLE’ refers to literature alone, rather than the whole field of culture. Sometimes we have discussed these names, and some have wanted to change one or both, but the prevailing feeling has been that to do so would feel like losing visibility and starting again. ‘Ecocriticism’ has become the recognised term. It has entered the academic vocabulary and even gained a little recognition in the wider culture. Similarly, ‘ASLE’ in the US (and they have had the name debate too) has wide recognition, which is vitally important. If we *were* starting again, we would probably find a different acronym that included the word ‘culture’, but I think people generally recognise that culture in the broad sense is included anyway. EASLCE of course made a different choice.

Our name has in fact changed a little, because only this year we have added the letter ‘I’, making ‘ASLE-UKI’, because now we are including Ireland, and Ireland is most certainly not part of the UK.

I am even rather sorry that ASLE-UKI has stopped using the old ASLE logo – the person reading under a tree. Indeed, ASLE itself is now thinking of changing it. The fact that Kindle, for some reason, came out with exactly the same logo as ASLE is something to be both pleased and annoyed about, I think.

IPR.: What is ASLE-UKI's official definition of 'ecocriticism'?

R.K.: We have not really got an 'official' definition. People are free to define the activity in different ways. Broadly, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between culture and environmental or ecological questions. Many ecocritics – I would guess nearly all – have some sort of commitment to environmentalist values, and believe that there is an urgent crisis. Ecocriticism is the cultural criticism that is emerging in response to that crisis. Many therefore take ecocriticism to be the critical evaluation of literature and culture from an environmentalist viewpoint. This implies a political, activist ambition – a hope that the criticism, and the new cultural works it influences, will help to change culture and behaviour.

IPR.: Tell me about ecocritical or environmental movements in the United Kingdom, previous to the founding of ASLE-UK.

R.K.: Environmentalism is partly a new movement in response to a new predicament, and partly an adaptation of older campaigns and cultural enthusiasms. One pre-existing element that fed into late twentieth-century environmentalism was the popular enthusiasm for wild nature, realised through leisure-pursuits such as ecotourism, rambling and birdwatching, and through campaigns to protect endangered species and loved landscapes. Lovers of wild nature remain an important source of support for environmental causes, and the connection with this enthusiasm gives the broad environmental movement a link with popular culture (nature programmes are one of the most popular television genres in Britain, and have been so for fifty years) and a popular form of pleasure. Modern environmentalism also has important origins, in historical campaigns to improve public health by regulating the pollution of air and water. Romanticism has been hugely and variously influential, providing a continuing tradition of associating wild nature with a sense of sublime beauty and pleasurable disquiet. Older traditions of pastoral also feed through in various ways. Greg Garrard has identified the Eden Project in Cornwall – a theme park exhibiting the world's plants and their ecosystems and uses – as belonging to the tradition of Georgic.

In literary studies, there were many forerunners of ecocriticism: important works published before the term 'ecocriticism' was used, and before environmentalism had quite emerged as the movement we know now. Perhaps the most obvious example is Raymond Williams's book *The Country and The City*, a profoundly influential book about the literature of the borderlands between rural and urban from renaissance pastoral to the twentieth century. Before that, there was the Leavisite tradition, so dominant in university 'English' for fifty years, and so fiercely repudiated by the 'theory' that became the new dominant in the 70s and 80s. The study of Leavisite criticism shows how foundational a certain idea of the love of nature has been in British literary criticism – how much it was the basis of Leavis's critique of industrial modernity. A set of fears about the loss of cultural value motivated a concern for nature. The love of nature was seen as a kind of source of cultural value, as against the diminishing of humanity brought about by commercialism and the industrialization – a diminishing that was seen as an alienation from nature. That is very important in the work of D.H. Lawrence, so foundational for Leavis. In Leavisite criticism, the love of nature often functions as the

indicator of a set of humanistic values standing in opposition to industrial culture. This association with Leavisite liberal humanism was another reason why the love of wild nature became unfashionable in literary studies.

Marxist and socialist literary culture often used the love of wild nature similarly up to a point. That is, they saw it as a response to the alienating effect of industrial capitalism – sometimes as a respected and powerful form of solace, though often also as a conservative diversion, and seldom if ever as a real component of material political struggle. That insight had to wait for environmentalism – it is one of the ways in which environmentalism is an ideological game-changer. There was a tradition of the love of nature in British Marxism, most obviously in the writing and influence of William Morris, but there was also much suspicion, as there still is. Raymond Williams explores these dilemmas sensitively in *The Country and the City*, and later in *Towards 2000*. From the other end of the conventional political spectrum, the conservative philosopher Roger Scruton, in *Green Philosophy*, has recently argued for a conservative environmentalism in the tradition of Edmund Burke's ideas about local communities and the obligation to pass on inherited institutions to future generations. Left and Right are both inclined sometimes to claim environmentalism and sometimes to see it as the other in disguise.

It was not only 'theory' that displaced Leavisite humanism in literary studies. New forms of literary radicalism were emerging, much influenced by deconstruction, but also the product of non-academic political and cultural movements. Feminist criticism, new Marxist criticism, postcolonial criticism and Queer Theory began to be powerful options. Here was a new model. Environmentalism, too, was a radical counter-cultural movement, though one that emerged later and was slower to find its literary form (and sometimes the others perceived it as conservative rather than radical). In many ways we took those established radical criticisms as our model, and much of the development of ecocriticism over the last ten or fifteen years has come about through negotiation with those other criticisms, as ecocriticism has attempted to accommodate their perspectives.

Like other countries, Britain has many environmental organisations involved in activism, campaigning, research, journalism, lobbying, developing new practices and technologies, buying land and maintaining nature reserves. They range from groups with pre-environmentalist origins, such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds or the Soil Association, to NGOs such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace that are clearly products of the environmentalist era. It is fascinating to see how an organisation such as the RSPB – a specialist wildlife-conservation organisation, with a huge membership and many purchased nature reserves – has perforce become concerned with climate, farming methods, overfishing and a host of other environmental questions, not only relating to British territory but to the birds' migration routes as well. This is a fine illustration of the interconnectedness of things, and the way that one specialist concern opens doors in all directions.

Relations between ASLE-UKI and these non-academic organisations are not well-developed. Our conferences have featured invited speakers from some of them, and from some of the political parties, but that is as far as it currently goes. We have not

involved ASLE-UKI in any more sustained collaborations, though we have some hopes and plans in that direction – to give a series of talks and exhibitions in nature reserves, for example. There are several reasons why our involvement with the broader environmental movement has been so limited. Partly, it is a matter of cultural demarcations. Academics are often wary of anything that seems too populist and oversimplified; professionally embarrassed by it, even. Public-facing groups, in turn, are deterred by anything that seems too intellectual and literary; this attitude applies especially to the arts and humanities, I think, since science is undeniably relevant and is perceived as dealing in essential facts – and in the field of natural history, at least, there is a long tradition of amateur science.

The dominance of ‘theory’ in the academic humanities over the last three decades has increased these suspicions. Whatever else one might say about ‘theory’, and there are many positive things to say, it does tend to trap academics in language that, to outsiders, is impenetrable and intimidating. Some ecocritics are introducing ecocentric and New Materialist ideas that challenge conventional subjectivity and therefore conventional forms of literary viewpoint, but this does not mean they can be happy with an exclusive reliance on language that seals-off academic discourse from the outside world. This is one of the most important tasks – to follow the lead of writers such as Catriona Sandilands in telling human stories inspired by abstract theory.

One of the things that concerned us in ASLE-UKI from the beginning was the split between the arts and the sciences, a very strong feature in British education. Environmental crisis brings this split to our attention in very troubling ways; climate change especially does so. A threat like that, identifiable only by specialist scientists, demands of non-experts a special scrupulous exactness about the limits of our own knowledge. We have to confess our own reliance on debates in which we cannot intervene, yet not allow our uncertainty to become vacillation or passivity. This danger challenges the conventional association between uncertainty and tentativeness of action. We are called upon to act with unprecedented collective decisiveness on the basis of a probability that we cannot assess for ourselves, is not yet tangible, yet is catastrophic in its implications. The ‘environmental humanities’ have an essential role to play in addressing the human implications of this predicament: the strange emotions and behaviours it produces. This will not exactly be to challenge the arts-science divide. In some ways, in insisting on the primacy of expertise and the authority of expert consensus, we must reinforce that divide. But we must bring the arts and sciences into new dialogues across it. Recognising a divide must not mean that we turn our backs to it.

IPR: Has the idea of the organization evolved from academia to activism? In previous talks you mentioned the necessity of applying the theory of ecocriticism practically, in order to actually change things; is that a general perspective of ASLE-UKI?

R.K.: I think that is the hope of ecocriticism everywhere, isn't it? We want it to be an activist, political criticism, like feminist criticism, a very important model (though it is much harder for environmentalism to present itself as a politics of personal liberation – harder, but not impossible). Most ecocritics hope that they are contributing to a change of culture that will go with a dramatic change of behaviour that will help us avoid

environmental disaster, whether we talk about planet change, or biodiversity loss, or the other forms of pollution that threaten us. We want to be sure that we are doing whatever cultural argument, literary criticism and creative writing can do, and many of our arguments about literary and cultural value involve questions about what has the best chance of having some effect. The peculiar pressure on ecocritical work comes from the combination of urgency, uncertainty and transformative radicalism that environmentalism needs. Our question is not only what is truest and what is most moving or challenging, but what might help us change quickly.

IPR: In what other dimensions, if any, is ASLE-UKI interdisciplinary?

R.K.: The organisation has always been a mixture of academic disciplines, including English Literature, Creative Writing, Environmental Philosophy, Cultural Studies, Film Studies, Cultural Geography, Environmental History and Music. More recently, we have made tentative efforts at dialogue with the environmental sciences, including climate science. Mike Hulme, for example, the eminent climate scientist who wrote *Why We Disagree About Climate Change*, has been a guest speaker at two recent ecocritical events. From 2005 to 2011, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (the government body that awards funding to research in the humanities) funded a number of interdisciplinary projects resulting from a call for bids under the theme of 'Landscape and Environment'. One was a project on landscape and environment set jointly by geographers and literary critics based in Exeter University. It was led by Adeline Johns-Putra, from English department at Exeter, and Catherine Brace, from Geography. Creative writers, artists and historians were also involved. Adeline Johns-Putra is now the chair of ASLE-UKI.

Picking up on what I said earlier, I will add a little here about developments in Creative Writing, and specifically about the nature writing genre in Britain. I described its fall from literary fashionability, and suggested some reasons for that – reasons that seem cautionary now. In recent years the genre has re-emerged in Britain, and there has been a surge of publications by new writers and re-issues of works from the nature writing canon. This is very encouraging. In 2008, *Granta* (one of the most respected literary magazines in Britain), published an issue entitled "The New Nature Writing", which attempted to distinguish the new from the old, partly in terms of the new situation produced by environmental crisis, and partly in terms of the breaking-down of old binary distinctions between wild nature and social space. "New nature writers" are interested in borderlands, or "edgelands", of all kinds, and in bringing together intensely personal perspectives and the global dimensions of the environmental crisis. Writers who can come under this 'new nature writing' heading include Kathleen Jamie, John Burnside, Robert Macfarlane, Jay Griffiths, Paul Evans, Jean Sprackland, Jim Perrin, Paul Farley, Michael Symmons Roberts, Mark Cocker and Tim Dee.

IPR: Would you say ASLE-UKI helped making this re-launching possible?

R.K.: We had no direct involvement. Some of these writers have had contacts with us, but the most I can say really is that the emergence of ecocriticism in Britain is part of the same climate that produced this new writing. Both are causes and signs of a wider

and deeper integration of environmental concerns into British culture. Whether this will bring any lasting political and behavioural change is a much tougher question.

IPR: In the light of the interdisciplinarity of the association, and all the different British universities involved, is it possible to trace ASLE-UKI back to a particular university department?

R.K.: Well, as I said at the beginning the two most important universities were Bath Spa and Bretton Hall. Now we are much more dispersed (and, sadly, Bretton Hall has closed). It is interesting to think where our conferences have been: Swansea, Bath, University of East London, Bretton Hall, Chichester, Lincoln, Edinburgh, Bath again, Worcester. Most of these are smaller, newer universities, though Edinburgh and Swansea are there. In addition to the people I have mentioned already, Rupert Hildyard at Lincoln, Wendy Wheeler and Kate Soper at London Metropolitan University, David Ingram at Brunel and Martin Ryle at Sussex have all made important contributions. Our graduate studies conferences have become a really important biennial feature as well – recently at Glasgow University and Queen Mary University in East London. Perhaps the most heartening thing of all is the new generation of graduate students coming through.

IPR: You have mentioned that in Great Britain ecocriticism has not achieved the relevance that it should. Up to what point has it made it to the academic curriculum in the UK, especially in terms of graduate and undergraduate courses?

R.K.: I think it is developing. Timothy Clark, at Durham, has just written *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, which I think will be an important book – it approaches ecocriticism from the point of view of a sympathetic outsider finding a way into the subject, as it were. All the main student guides to literary theory now include sections on ecocriticism, and it is frequently listed as a topic in courses on contemporary literature or literary theory. Several Creative Writing Masters programmes in the new nature writing have opened in recent years.

IPR: What do you consider holds a more relevant role in the association in the present moment: the journal or the conferences?

R.K.: They are both important, and they are inter-related. The conferences have a particular role in forming networks, giving newcomers an intensive introduction and giving everybody moral support. *Green Letters* shows the work in greater depth and reaches out to wider audiences. It is now published by Taylor & Francis, one of the major publishers of academic journals – another sign that ecocriticism has gained academic recognition.

IPR: Before we finish, tell me about the evolution of ASLE-UKI.

R.K.: We face a lot of challenges. One of the most difficult is how we can match our professed beliefs to our material practices. Can we go on flying to academic conferences all the time? Should we be Skyping instead? Will ecocriticism change the material academic culture, as it should? I am afraid this is the question we are all avoiding, myself included. But in other ways, developments are very encouraging, and it is exciting to see ecocritical associations emerging in other parts of the world. As far as the UK is concerned, the most positive thing is that so many new graduate students see these concerns as the foundation of their work.

IPR: With this positive thought about both the future of ASLE-UKI and ecocriticism in the United Kingdom and Ireland, as well as of ecocriticism, we can end this interview. Thank you very much for your time and answers.

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