

Ecological Sensibility and the Experience of Nature in the Twentieth-Century French Literature of Jean Giono, Marguerite Yourcenar and Julien Gracq

*Walter Wagner
University of Vienna*

Abstract



This essay provides a survey of relevant works by Jean Giono, Marguerite Yourcenar and Julien Gracq, three major authors of twentieth-century French literature. All of these authors attempt in various ways to overcome the nature-culture dualism, a largely neglected topic in modern French literature, which is in accordance with a Romantic conception of nature. The following article falls into two parts. In the first part, I will analyse selected examples of experiences of nature that reflect an awareness of the complex interdependence of humans and their natural environment, i.e. a basic form of ecological sensibility. In the second part, I propose to explore the correlation between ecological sensibility and the search for the good life, which aims at cultural and social change. Finally, I will evaluate the three writers' debt to Romantic ecology and where they transcend it in order to create a modern ecological awareness informed by environmental ethics and science.

Keywords: environmental ethics, environmental aesthetics, antimodernism, wilderness, Romanticism

Resumen

Este ensayo proporciona una visión general de las obras de Jean Giono, Marguerite Yourcenar, and Julien Gracq, tres grandes autores de la literatura francesa del siglo XX. Estos escritores intentan superar de diferentes formas el dualismo naturaleza-cultura, un tema en gran medida olvidado en la literatura francesa moderna, que está de acuerdo con una concepción romántica de la naturaleza. El siguiente artículo se divide en dos partes. En la primera parte analizaré una selección de ejemplos de experiencias de la naturaleza que reflejan un conocimiento de la compleja interdependencia de los humanos con su entorno natural, es decir, una forma básica de sensibilidad ecológica. En la segunda parte propongo explorar la correlación entre la sensibilidad ecológica y la búsqueda de una buena vida, que pretende cambio cultural y social. Finalmente, evaluaré la deuda de los tres escritores hacia la ecología romántica y dónde la trascienden para crear una conciencia ecológica moderna influida por la ética medioambiental y la ciencia.

Palabras clave: ética medioambiental, estética medioambiental, antimodernismo, naturaleza, Romanticismo.

Introduction

It might seem presumptuous to propose a survey of as vast a field as the experience of nature and ecological sensibility in twentieth-century French literature. As a matter of fact, my corpus comprises only the works of three prose authors, that is, Jean Giono (1895-1970), Marguerite Yourcenar (1903-1987), and Julien Gracq (1910-2007), and it does not refer to others who have also dealt with relationships between humans and nature.

The interwar years in particular saw a rich production of so-called rural novels,¹ characterized by the call for a return to the soil, anti-urbanism and a profound distrust toward technology. According to Romy Golan, this literary trend was part of “a specific regionalist ideology that linked France’s cultural vitality to the strength of its rootedness in the soil” (7). Placing a special emphasis on local colour, rustic novels depict the ways of rural people living in close contact with their natural environment. One of the most eminent regionalist writers is Swiss-born Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz (1878-1947), who, as Pierre-Henri Simon points out, is admired “without reservation for having opened the novel to a poetry of nature which is not only grandiose but new” (31). Novelists who belong to this movement are Henri Pourrat (1887-1960), Maurice Genevoix (1890-1980), and Henri Bosco (1888-1976). These authors, whose works are associated with specific French regions, were in vogue before World War II and are remembered because their celebration of the land “largely influenced the mores and the literature” (87) of the thirties. Jean Giono, who has certain affinities with this school, surpasses the regionalist writers however in terms of thematic scope and aesthetic research. A pre-war writer whose environmental dimension deserves to be mentioned is the novelist and essayist Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1900-1944), who depicted pilots in their heroic fight against the forces of nature.

The present selection is justified by the fact that it focuses on three authors whose lives span most of the last century and whose writing has a strong focus on the natural environment. Due to the lukewarm reception of ecocriticism by French scholars, this essay offers a quick glance at what one may consider largely uncharted literary territory. Apart from American literature scholars, French academia does not show a keen interest in the practice of environmental criticism: “There are, of course, scholars who are struggling to expand ecocriticism of French literature on the other side of the Channel (Desblache), the other side of the Atlantic (Posthumus), and the other side of the planet (Jacomard)” (Posthumus 151).²

¹ In his seminal book *Le Roman rustique de George Sand à Ramuz*, Paul Vernois defines the *romans rustique* (rural novel) as follows: “The rural novel confronts man with the Earth and not with the Province. Trying to restrict it to geography and to reduce it to folklore actually means dehumanizing and betraying it” (15). Giono’s *roman rustique* go beyond this perspective by creating an “imaginary South” (Durand, *Jean Giono* n.p.), which is informed by Greek mythology, and by celebrating a pantheistic cult of the Earth, which transcends the realism of the rural novel as it is defined above. Considering these facts, Martin Neumann wonders “why it is precisely he who is claimed to be a ‘regional author’ is beyond comprehension” (“*Der roman rustique*” 237).

² All translations of French and German quotations are my own.

Bertrand Westphal, whose research has been influenced by the spatial turn, seems to be an exception. His *géocritique* explores “the human spaces that the mimetic arts arrange by and in the text, by and in the image, as well as the cultural interactions which are woven under its patronage” (17). His approach is *géocentrique* (185), which means that “it is up to the spatial referent to establish the coherence of the analysis and not to the author and his work” (185). However, unlike ecocriticism, Westphal’s paradigm does not focus on the representation of the environment in literature.

Alain Suberchicot, an expert in American literature, is one of the outstanding figures in the field of ecocriticism in France. In his essay *Littérature et environnement*, he studies the global eco-crisis from a comparative perspective, drawing on examples from modern French, American and Chinese literature. He is also one of the first French critics to have realized the ecocritical dimension of Gracq.

The aim of this paper is to identify examples of ecological sensibility and to find out to what extent they determine the experience of nature in the work of the authors mentioned above, which encompasses the complete works, both fiction and non-fiction, of Giono, Yourcenar and Gracq. Furthermore I will explore the correlation of ecological experience and the good life, which aims at social and cultural change. Finally, I want to evaluate these three writers’ debt to Romantic ecology and where they transcend it in favour of a modern conception of ecology informed by environmental ethics and science.

Before proceeding to the actual analysis, the key concepts which I shall use need to be defined. The first term is ecological sensibility. This, I define as the awareness of human kinship and interdependence with non-human nature. The idea of ecological sensibility is therefore not limited to the age of the global ecological crisis but as Donald Worster suggests: “ecology, even before it had a name, had a history” (X).

Another term is Romantic ecology, which is based on “Romantic conceptions of nature as a holistic living agent or spirit in which all participate and interact” (Clark 16). This holistic ideal, however, does not question its anthropocentric focus on human well-being. As Jonathan Bate points out, “The ‘Romantic ecology’ reverences the green earth because it recognizes that neither physically nor psychologically can we live without green things; it proclaims that there is ‘one life’ within us and abroad, that the earth is a single vast ecosystem which we destabilize at our peril” (40). The ideal of Romantic ecology is planetary homeostasis, a misconception which modern science has replaced by the idea of “stable imbalances” (Reichholf n.p.). We must, however, distinguish Romantic ecology from Romantic ideology, which Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre define as “a critique of modernity, i.e., of modern capitalist society, on behalf of values and ideals of the past (*precapitalist, premodern*)” (30; italics in original), and which still plays a major part in modern environmentalism.

Modern ecology is indebted to Romantic ecology, using its concept of cosmic interrelatedness as a metaphor of the web of life which constitutes the terrestrial ecosystem. It could be described by the characteristics that compose Lawrence Buell’s checklist of environmentally-oriented texts. First, environmentally-oriented texts position the natural environment as more than a mere background to human action, suggesting that human history is influenced by nature. Second, these texts reveal an awareness of and respect for non-human interests. Third, they reveal an ethics of human

responsibility for the natural environment. Fourth, environmentally-oriented texts understand the environment to be a continuous process and therefore subject to change (Buell 7-9).

Ecological sensibility and the experience of nature

In the following, the literary experience of nature will be presented in 'ecological order', i.e., according to its impact on the natural environment. The analysis will start with the acts of smelling and contemplating, which are the most environmentally-friendly forms of involvement with nature. This will be followed by a discussion of walking, the encounter with non-human animals, and finally, dwelling.

Giono's characters are gifted with a particularly sharp sense of smell that enables them to decipher the olfactory landscape around them. Like animals, they perceive odours which ordinary people cannot and therefore have a deeper relationship with the environment. Distrusting rationalism and sterile objectivity, Giono draws upon his senses as the only way to know and understand the world even if they mislead him. To prove the importance of his olfactory sense, Giono reports that one night he went to his library, where there was no electric light, and perceived a strong smell of wine although there were no bottles there. Nevertheless he insists, "It is not possible to err; my olfaction does not reason" (*Provence* 132). Later on, he realized that it was, in fact, three hyacinths whose scent filled the library. What Giono wants to prove with this anecdote is that sense experiences are superior to those of the intellect, even when they are mistaken. Apart from Giono himself, there are other champions of olfactory sensitivity. Jaume in the first novel *Colline* can smell water, the soldier Regotaz in *Le Grand Troupeau* smells a vixen, Antonio and Matelot are guided through the forest at night by the odour of trees, and Tringlot, the protagonist of the last novel *L'Iris de Suse*, like most of Giono's characters, is gifted with a heightened sense of smell that allows him to orient himself in and adapt to his environment. Olfaction, like the other senses, is a privileged way of experiencing the world, as well as acquiring pleasure from and interacting with the natural world, which is the home of Giono's characters. As Vignes writes, "Giono seems to believe in the possibility of a physical and carnal union with the world" (120).

Besides smelling, contemplating is a privileged way of environmental experience in the works of Giono, Yourcenar, and Gracq, all of whom place special emphasis on the depiction of scenery. Among their favourite landscapes are woodlands, mostly semi-wild places on the edge of society, which are equally cherished by nature lovers and wood choppers. In Giono's fiction, this conflict is often won by the loggers. However, one character compensates for the damage done by the loggers: Elzéard Bouffier, the protagonist of the short story *L'Homme qui plantait des arbres*, published in 1953. He is a simple shepherd who buries acorns in the highlands of Provence and little by little turns the desert into a Garden of Eden. Although the story is fiction, its hero has been praised by environmentalists as an example of good ecological practice, something that has enhanced Giono's image as 'green' writer, even though he never intended this text to

contain an ecological message.³ In fact, he meant his story to be a hymn to human achievement thanks to which “from now on this was a place where one wanted to live” (*L’Homme* 766).

Yourcenar’s forests are admired and marvelled at by her protagonists, such as Hadrien, Zénon or Nathanaël. There even seems to be a genetic predisposition to love trees because Yourcenar’s granduncle Octave Pirmez, a second-rate Belgian writer, considers them to be “green gods” (*Souvenirs pieux* 830) which have to be protected against the loggers. For him, as well as for the author herself, woodlands are sacred and therefore need to be conserved and worshipped. They are places where the mundane world has access to the transcendental, where the memory of prehistoric ages seems alive. Consequently, Octave calls a forest “temple” (*Souvenirs pieux* 831) and a poacher “profanator” (831). Yourcenar strongly identifies with all nature and therefore uses the personification of trees to highlight a bond with non-human nature, which reminisces on a heritage of Romantic organicism. Nathanaël, the most ecologically-minded of Yourcenar’s characters, defends the cause of “these vigorous young brothers” (*Un homme obscur* 1040) because they are “incapable of escaping or of defending themselves” (958).⁴ These anthropomorphic creatures are synonymous with Mother Nature and therefore in danger of those humans for whom they are just a resource to be exploited. In the face of perpetual ecological apocalypse, Yourcenar does not remain objective but polemicizes against cruelty against trees. This explains why the bombing of her grandparents’ home, Mont-Noir, during World War I is considered a “disaster for humans and plants alike” (*Quoi? L’éternité* 1388). What Yourcenar wants to say is that not only humans were killed or suffered damage but, the green giants in the park of the manor house were victims as well. Summing up, one can say that in Yourcenar’s works, trees are entities where spiritual and ecological discourses meet.

Unlike Yourcenar, Gracq tried not be associated with environmentalism. However, he confessed to having been influenced by German Romanticism and its philosophy of nature. Thus whenever woods appear in Gracq’s prose, they evoke an atmosphere of magic and fairy tale. Castles and ruins, dark valleys and moonlit nights are Romantic motives that dominate his novels *Au château d’Argol*, *Un beau ténébreux* and *Un balcon en forêt*, as well as his play *Le Roi pêcheur* in which he pays homage to Wagner’s *Parsifal*. Gracq was not interested in the aesthetic experiments in which the Romantics were involved, but felt strongly attracted to their search for a new mythology where nature would once again come into its own. In his literary manifesto “Pourquoi la

³ Despite Giono’s ecological sensibility, there is no evidence of his commitment to environmentalism. Even his fierce opposition to the construction of the nuclear power plant of Cadarache in 1961 was not caused by ecological preoccupations. In reality, he did not wish to see the beautiful landscape spoiled by this emblem of technological progress, which he hated more than anything else, and worried about the health consequences arising from the use of nuclear power. Although some critics underline Giono’s environmentalism, his antimodernism contrasts with mainstream political ecology in France: “The French Greens arguably stood out among the world’s environmentalists for their particularly enthusiastic embrace of modernity” (Bess 138).

⁴ Yourcenar’s veneration of forests and trees perpetuates elements of ancient pagan tree cults. See her letter to Jean Chalon dated 15th January, 1980, in which she writes, “Yes, trees are the worthiest of creatures and among those which deserve most to be loved” (*Lettres* 625).

littérature respire mal,” issued in 1960, Gracq declares that the modern age has caused a nostalgia for the Golden Age of mankind’s union with nature, which is why “it is time to think again about this broken marriage” (*Préférences* 879). This quotation contains Gracq’s literary programme, which is nothing less than the endeavour to overcome the culture-nature divide of the modern world by drawing upon Romantic ecology. In Gracq’s literature, the woods provide a mythical space where the individual experiences the joy of rediscovering his or her roots by reconnecting with nature. Officer Grange, having spent several months with his platoon in the Ardennes, is a model of naturalization and even succeeds in crossing the line that separates man from nature. What he thinks is a subtle subversion of the ideals of humanism which in the works of Giono, Yourcenar and Gracq tends to include non-human nature: “Maybe I am already on the other side” (*Un balcon en forêt* 114). Once more the enthusiasm for nature is linked to the idea of Romantic organicism. In this respect, Gracq cannot deny his intellectual affinity with Giono and Yourcenar.

Under the premise that environmental destruction is mainly anthropogenic, it seems only too logical to dream of a biosphere devoid of human beings. This radical consequence contradicts the essence of humanism and is not seriously considered by the three authors. However, they meditate upon the possibility of a “world without us” that is reconquered by plants (Weisman n.p.). Giono’s version of a human environment invaded by vegetation is conjured up in his paradigmatic essay “Destruction of Paris”. He invokes the inhabitants of the city he hates, promising a greener and happier future:

Come, come all of you! There will only be happiness for you when the tall trees break open the streets, when the weight of the lianas causes the Obelisk to break down and the Eiffel Tower to bend, when before the counters of the Louvre you hear nothing but the slight noise of the ripe jackets of chestnuts opening and of the wild seeds falling; the day when dazzled wild boars with trembling tails come out of the caves of the underground. (*Solitude de la pitié* 526)

Fascinated by the idea of a world that has once again become pure, i.e., showing no traces of civilization, Yourcenar, in turn, draws a positive image of the prehistoric woodlands that once covered Europe, thereby reviving the Romantic myth of the origin through this *regressio ad fontes*. Instead of referring to the forests teeming with wild animals, she highlights the peace and silence that dominate in the unspoiled environment:

Let us rather contemplate this world which is not yet full of humans, these few miles of forest severed by heaths which stretch out almost without interruption from Portugal to Norway, from the dunes to the future Russian steppes. Let us recreate within us this green ocean, which is not immobile like three quarters of our representations of the past but moving, changing as the hours, the days and the seasons pass and flow on without having been computed by our calendars and our clocks. (*Archives du Nord* 955-56)

However chaotic and unliveable this vast primeval environment may be, there is no space for man, who remains the odd one out wherever he appears.⁵

⁵ The most visible expression of Yourcenar’s misanthropy is a passage in *Archives du Nord* where she calls *Homo sapiens* “the king of predators, the woodcutter of animals and the killer of trees” and also “wolfman, foxman, beaverman” to highlight man’s extraordinary hunting skills (*Archives du Nord* 957).

Believing that one day plants will reconquer the space inhabited by man and erase the traces of civilization, Gracq wonders what Paris would be like if grass covered the flight of steps of the Opera, if “the bell of a *real* cow” could be heard and if the whole urban sprawl were suddenly transformed into “a *prairie green* ocean more perfect than nature” (*Liberté grande* 268; italics in original). In contrast to Giono’s dislike of cities, a paradigm of modern French pastoral, Gracq enjoys strolling around urban areas, preferably on the outskirts, where he is constantly on the lookout for overgrown gardens, wastelands, and ruined houses, i.e., wilderness reconquering civilization.⁶ Like Yourcenar, Gracq welcomes the idea that our monuments will disappear behind rampant plants, devoured by the “green leprosy” that will triumph over the stones to produce hybrid ecosystems where the dichotomy of culture and nature is undone (*Liberté grande* 316). This explains why Gracq regrets being unable to visit the ancient city of Rome that Goethe, Byron or Stendhal knew, but also why Aldo, the hero of his novel *Le Rivage des Syrtes* is fascinated by the ruins of the sunken city of Sagra. For Gracq, a true disciple of Oswald Spengler, the decline of empires and nations and the return to an era when “beasts talked to humans” (*La Route*) are good things because they will allow the earth to rejuvenate, a theory that is exemplified in *La route* and *Le Rivage des Syrtes*: “This [= the end of civilization] is called dying the good death” (*Rivage des Syrtes* 835). Gracq’s Golden Age, like that of the Romantics, is in the distant past when humans and non-humans were still close enough to communicate with one another.

Dreams of green wilderness are one way of coping with “toxic anthropocentrism” (Curry 67); returning to the desert is another. Giono counts as one of the few authors of French modernism who deals with the confrontation of the individual with an environment hostile to man. As W.D. Redfern points out, “In the country of notoriously *indoor* fiction and mainly psychological landscapes, Giono’s private world includes the great outdoors” (*The Private World of Jean Giono* 191). Giono’s heroes are confronted with wild nature mainly in the mountains and highlands of Haute-Provence which the writer visited for the first time when he was child—first impressions which exerted strong and lasting effects. He writes, “I gained experience in a Provence which was hardly known, poor, far away from roads, a land luckily without tourists, still drenched from the waters of the deluge” (*L’Eau vive* 104-5).

This fictional portrait of an antediluvian pristine landscape certainly differs from the territory the writer knew in his lifetime and has little in common with the vibrant lavender fields appearing in Van Gogh’s paintings or in glossy brochures made for mass tourism. Giono’s depictions of landscapes of the past, as well as the revival of the old ways, reveal his nostalgia for origins, so typical of Romantic *Weltanschauung*. Yet his

⁶ Gracq’s liking for buildings and cities reconquered by nature is probably inspired by Oswald Spengler’s biological vision of history. In *Der Untergang des Abendlande*, he claims that civilizations, just like organisms, go through a life cycle and will disappear one day: “The huge city of Tenochtitlan fell to pieces, in the jungles of Yucatan the big cities of the Mayan empires are close to one another and quickly fall victim to vegetation” (*Der Untergang des Abendlandes* 607). In an interview with Jean-Louis Tissier, Gracq calls this book “extremely exciting” (*Entretiens* 1195). Gracq prefigures Gilles Clément’s concept of the “third landscape,” which designates interstitial landscapes, such as wastelands and abandoned areas. No longer used by humans, these spaces form a new kind of wilderness (*Manifeste du Tiers Paysage n.p.*).

depictions are not ecological statements in a modern sense, all the more so as the Provence of his novels and essays has remained mostly untouched by the ecological crisis.

Giono's enthusiasm for the barren Provençal plateaus gives rise to fictional counter-models of a pre-war France conquered by capitalism and to fictional environments where only the physically toughest can survive. Yourcenar's going back to the beginning of human time reflects her "liking of extreme frontiers", as she confesses in an interview with Jean Montalbetti, and provides an escape for her cultural pessimism (*Portrait d'une voix* 195). That is why she notes, "Among the most stirring landscapes I know are those of certain fjords of Alaska and of Norway in spring" (*Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur* 406).⁷ Thanks to her exile in North America, the Belgian-born writer gets in touch with the sublime as it is incarnated by wild landscapes, an experience that is so new and powerful that it shatters her conception of nature. Yourcenar suddenly realizes that there are environments that have never been interfered with. It is in the far north of the American continent that she becomes aware of the true dimension of the individual in contrast with the awe-inspiring majesty of mountains and glaciers.⁸ In a letter to Jeanne Carayon dated July 6, 1977, the author formulates her impressions of a journey to Alaska but then admits the difficulties in finding appropriate expression: "How shall I speak about the beauty of these immense landscapes still almost unviolated (for how long?)" (*Lettres* 552). She continues to draw upon examples taken from Rimbaud, Vigny, Baudelaire, and Hugo to express what is "actually *indescribable*" (552). The aesthetic doubts suggested in this quotation are completed by the allusion to anthropogenic environmental change in brackets. By asking how long this fragile Arctic ecosystem will continue to exist, she raises the question of human responsibility and thus manifests an authentic ecological awareness that goes beyond Romantic musings on the entanglement of humanity in cosmic relationships.

Landscapes that have not been reached yet by the upheavals of history are given special attention in Gracq's writings too. Similar to Giono, he feels strongly attracted to vast grasslands which can be encompassed from an elevated standpoint.⁹ According to Edward O. Wilson, the liking for panoramas developed at the time when *Homo sapiens* roamed the savannah:

They [= people] like a long depth of view across a relatively smooth, grassy ground surface dotted with trees and copses. They want to be near a body of water, whether ocean, lake, river, or stream. They try to place their habitations on a prominence, from which they can safely scan the savannah and watery environment. (*The Future of Life* 134)

For Albrecht Koschorke, "the paradigm of the panoramic view" characterizes the perception of nature from around 1800 through the 19th century and is typical of Romantic landscapes (*Die Geschichte des Horizonts* 178). Among the various landscapes

⁷ See also *Sources II* 231.

⁸ For details on Yourcenar's American years see Deprez 2009.

⁹ Gracq distinguishes between myopic and hypermetropic writers, that is, those who have a passion for tiny natural objects and those who prefer to depict landscapes: "I am personally rather interested in panoramas, vast landscapes, and if I have to take a walk and if I have the choice, I am sure to take a path on a ridge in order to have views" (*Entretiens* 1205).

that fulfil Gracq's aesthetic expectations are the limestone plateaus of the French Massif Central, the Spanish Meseta, and the fictitious highlands of the Sertalejo in the Andes. However, it is while exploring steppe-like landscapes that "a euphoric relationship between man and the world" is generated (Monballin 146). Gracq's visual pleasure turns into physical joy amidst impressive scenery, triggering a "violent desire to run with the air on the barren plateaus" (*Carnets du grand chemin* 957). This is a case where aesthetic hedonism turns into what Gernot Böhme calls "an ecological aesthetics of nature" which translates the "bodily and sensual experience that a human makes in relation to a specific place in nature where he works, lives and moves around" (Böhme 12). When Gracq gives up writing fiction in favour of non-fiction, the characters who lack psychological depth and are subordinated to the landscape disappear, and the author himself now turns into the upright figure contemplating nature scenes that are often located at the edge of civilization, where the observer is invited to mingle with the universe.

The rambler's encounters with the earth are narcissistic, excluding the presence of a companion with whom to share the joy of deciphering the topography of a specific area. "Silence" and "solitude", probably Gracq's favourite themes, are the prerequisites of profound outdoor experience, which can only take place beyond the limits of human society. I therefore agree with Alain-Michel Boyer, who posits that Gracq's characters "dream of an earth capable of freeing itself, of cleansing itself of its human weight so that it can find again a mythical original innocence" (14-15). Gracq's characters' yearnings are deeply Romantic.

The perception of the environment via the senses normally excludes direct contact with material nature and is therefore the most ecological way of relating to a place. In addition to smelling and contemplating, walking allows humans to immediately experience nature without harming it. Giono and most of his characters are hardy hikers and prove that this type of movement can be more satisfying than travelling on the motorway. The landscape reveals its beauty only to those willing to discover it by walking. This archaic method of exploring nature is the antithesis to the alienating world of technology, which has turned man into a stranger in his natural environment. Giono resorts to irony, his favourite rhetorical weapon against modern society, to praise the advantages of using one's feet: "Walking or rather the process of walking means transforming oneself into a magnifying glass or a telescope" (*L'Eau vive* 206). Giono literally walks in the footsteps of the Romantics who, like himself, appreciated being in close contact with nature while travelling the roads of Europe.

Gracq and his characters are likewise addicted to a peripatetic lifestyle. In his novels, the protagonists walk around while searching the horizon—usually a border—for signs of things to come. In other words, it is not the psyche that determines the characters' fate but the landscape. The situation is different in Gracq's notebooks and travel journals. After giving up writing fiction, Gracq mainly dedicates himself to translating landscape into literature. Hence, there is no doubt as to the importance of rambling which precedes the act of creation: "Every great landscape is an invitation to possess it through walking" (*En lisant en écrivant* 616). This kind of peaceful invasion of the environment in search of aesthetic pleasure has almost no ecological impact

compared to other forms of human activity. Gracq sticks to walking till he buys his first car and continues to leisurely travel around the beloved French countryside. Later on, the once indefatigable hiker metamorphoses into a gentleman stroller who takes pleasure in visiting parks and the outskirts where rural areas touch the urban sprawl. As Gracq prefers contemplation to action, walking remains the most immediate form of encountering nature throughout his works. From an environmental perspective, Gracq's literature could be interpreted as a plea for non-intervention into and respect for the natural world, which is best illustrated by the sentence: "So many hands to transform this world, and so few glances to contemplate it" (*Lettrines* 210). What he aims at is to contemplate the face of the earth which the trained geographer tries to decipher like a coded text. Instead of going on field trips, Gracq makes excursions to explore "the habitable world" (*Liberté grande* 306), i.e. a planet that has managed to preserve its beauty and ecological stability despite all the harm that has been done to it. In this respect, Gracq's writings contrast with Yourcenar's, which teem with apocalyptic rhetoric, warning readers against the imminent collapse of the planetary ecosystem.

Smelling, contemplating and walking are not the only modes of connecting with nature and overcoming the anthropocentric isolation modern humankind lives in. In his works, Giono constantly undermines the culture-nature dichotomy by naturalizing his characters. Giono's characters hunt, kill and devour animals and rarely defend their right to live. Through the use of metaphors, similes and personification, Giono makes certain characters look and behave like animals and underscores the fact that they do not hold a privileged position within the great chain of being. By anthropomorphizing animals and zoomorphizing humans, Giono blurs the human-animal boundary, counteracts speciesism and highlights the friendship between man and beast. The difference between these two ontological realms is summarized by the metaphor of "the great barrier", which the author tries in vain to cross (*Solitude de la pitié* 521-23). In an essay entitled "La grande barrière", Giono saves an injured rabbit and realizes that the animal is terrorized by the human being who is trying to help it. Unable to understand Giono's intention, the rabbit finally dies in his hands and Giono has to accept that "a great barrier separated us" (*Solitude de la pitié* 523). Giono is unable to overcome the human-animal divide which in his fiction, however, becomes unstable. So when the shepherds gather to celebrate Mother Earth, the most experienced shepherd, who is called Sarde, speaks on behalf of his companions, declaring triumphantly, "They are there, those who have jumped over the barrier! [...] Can you hear us, Earth? We are there, we, the shepherds!" (*Le Serpent d'étoiles* 135). These characters, who live in a fictional preindustrial society, fulfil the Romantic ideal of continuity between humans and non-humans, which the writer himself did not manage to live up to.

In general, people who live in close connection with their environment and are highly sensitive to its secret life manage to cross the dividing line between nature and culture. Sometimes these exceptional individuals speak the language of the beasts, which is the case of Maudru in *Le Chant du monde* (334) or Bobi in *Que ma joie demeure* (535), and occasionally animals communicate with each other like the ram and the stag in the latter novel (495). These examples again illustrate the influence of Greco-Roman mythology and Romanticism on Giono's writings. It is not until Bobi persuades the

highland farmers to plant hedgerows along their fields and scatters grains to feed the birds that Romantic ecology is transcended in order to consider the interests of non-human animals. By defending animal rights, Bobi not only differs from the rural population but also proves to be Giono's most eminent supporter of environmental ethics.

In Yourcenar's works, all beings, including animals, can be the object of human sympathy. Embedded in the cycle of life and death, man is prone to identify with the suffering of his fellow creatures which have an equal right to life. Among the characters created by Yourcenar, Nathanaël, the humble protagonist of the short novel *Un homme obscur*, set in seventeenth-century Holland, most convincingly embodies this biocentric credo. Sent as a gamekeeper to an almost deserted Frisian island by his Dutch master, he has plenty of leisure to muse upon the order of nature, realizing that "child or old man, man or woman, animal or biped who talk and work with their hands, they all shared the experience of misfortune and the sweetness of existence" (*Un homme obscur* 1036). In the course of his stay on the island, Nathanaël lapses into some kind of ecological mysticism, which makes him sympathize even with trees, "these vigorous young brothers" (1040), as he sees them lying around, uprooted by a storm the night before.

Yourcenar, who repeatedly complained about the various forms of torture inflicted on animals, is particularly fond of them. She wrote several essays denouncing human cruelty against these creatures which, just like Emperor Hadrian, the hero of one of her novels, she "sometimes secretly preferred to humans" (*Mémoires d'Hadrien* 289). Apart from dogs, wild animals such as stags and moose are given special attention in her works and are compared to gods (*Quoi? L'éternité* 1328; *Lettres* 552), just like dolphins (*Quoi? L'éternité* 1375).

Whether they be wildlife or pets, animals are morally equal or superior to human beings according to Yourcenar, who, as Lucile Desblache puts it, evolves "towards an increasingly 'osmotic' conception of the species where none dominates" (151). Such a comparison relativizes the role of humans in the universe and seems to make sense for Nathanaël who searches for "resemblances between animals and man" (*Un homme obscur* 1023). Convinced of the kinship of all living beings, Yourcenar proves to be anti-speciesist when she poses the rhetorical question, "And why not equality of all beings regardless of species?" (*Lettres* 581). Claiming our proximity to other forms of life, she suggests the possibility of communicating with other animate beings: "There is nothing I have loved more than these encounters over the wall of species; the bird which talks to you or sits down on your hand, the squirrel which is not too scared, the friendly dog" (*Sources II* 249). These remarks sound like an echo of Giono's shepherd climbing over the "grande barrière", which again reminds us of the Romantics' endeavour to re-establish the original union of man and nature.

Only against the backdrop of such an attitude to the non-human world can we understand Yourcenar's bold thought experiments that are meant to bring about a new understanding of the endless web of relations in which we are involved: "By the way, you can, if you want, be friends with animals, plants or stones [...]" (*Les yeux ouverts* 307). By extending the human self to non-human nature and the whole cosmos, Yourcenar transcends her biocentrism to attain a more encompassing ecocentric

position, which allows her to overcome the modern alienation of humans and nature. According to Konrad Ott, this branch of environmental ethics “attaches intrinsic value to all individual living beings *and* all ecosystems” (140). Furthermore, ecocentrism stresses the relatedness of animate and inanimate nature, which means that “humankind is an element within rather than the reason to be of natural systems” (Oelschlaeger 294). Thus, the subject is no longer an isolated entity surrounded by a hostile environment but merges with the biosphere, which is his real home. Yourcenar asks in this respect by referring to Novalis, “I do not know why mankind is always said to be set apart from the rest of Creation. Animals, plants, and stones, stars and the air, do they not equally form part of humanity?” (*Sources II* 331).¹⁰ However, Yourcenar goes beyond Romantic ecology because, unlike Nathanaël, who simply identifies with Earth others, she defends biocentric equality, a major topic of modern environmental discourse.

The wish to mingle with nature or the whole universe is also true of some of Gracq’s landscape meditations and once more shows the strong impact of Romanticism on modern ecological sensibility. As an admirer of Novalis,¹¹ Gracq cannot deny nostalgia for the time when man was involved in an ongoing dialogue with the cosmos whose forces permeated the whole world. Remains of this all-pervading magical reality appear in Gracq’s fragmentary travel sketches. For instance, roaming the Dutch part of Flanders, he immerses himself in prairies stretching out to the horizon. Scattered cows, deserted villages and deep silence fill the grass-grown space of this landscape, where man’s presence is hardly perceivable. It is there that he introduces the concept of the “human plant” (*Liberté grande* 319). By resorting to this metaphor, Gracq designates our rootedness in the world despite modern nomadism, suggesting that our bond with the natural world has never been severed. In reality we have always belonged to the earth and remained “a drop among the drops, pressed out for a moment from the soft sponge of the earth before being absorbed again” (320). This type of nature meditation reveals the writer’s Romantic consciousness of the interrelatedness of all things without leading to the formulation of an environmental ethics.

Dwelling constitutes the least environmentally-friendly way of relating to nature and is a leitmotif of Giono, Yourcenar, and Gracq. Giono’s fiction is predominantly set in a mythical Provence which is inhabited by “these men who carry the magnetism of the earth” (*Solitude de la pitié* 528). Far from urban culture and degenerated urbanites, these rural folks distinguish themselves by their pre-modern way of life which is dominated by intuition, common sense, self-sufficiency, and the constant interaction with nature. Giono is full of praise for these countrymen, who are so perfectly integrated with their environment that he declares: “You belong to everything” (*Les Vraies Richesses* 250). Their archaic lifestyle is full of hardships and material deprivation, and yet it offers “the true riches” of personal fulfilment to those who are willing to collaborate with nature.¹² Giono’s rural cosmos is not devoid of conflicts and human

¹⁰ I could not find the source of Yourcenar’s quotation from Novalis. However, a passage from his *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* is an analogous example of Novalis’ organicism: “Humans, animals, plants, stones and stars, elements, sounds, colours come together like one family, act and talk like one race” (217).

¹¹ See his essay “Novalis et ‘Henri d’Ofterdingen”” (*Préférences* 983-1000).

¹² In general, Giono’s characters know how to collaborate with nature and succeed in surviving in surroundings which are very inhospitable for humans. However, two exceptions can be noted. In *Colline*,

tragedies because he knows that “whoever searches for Eden will not find it anywhere” (*Le Poids du ciel* 482).

Like Giono, Yourcenar believes that the countryside is the ideal place to live. Her memoirs give a vivid insight in what country life was like for the members of her aristocratic family. As she explains in *Quoi? L'éternité*, she grew up in a manor house near the Franco-Belgian border, an area which is described as an Arcadian idyll. After immigrating to the United States in 1939, she settled down in Mount Desert Island in Maine where she bought a wooden house surrounded by trees and meadows. Especially in her correspondence, she is enthusiastic about the beauty of her garden and the seasonal changes in vegetation. Like Giono, she is “at odds with all big cities” and only leaves the country to travel abroad (*Lettres* 126).

Gracq, who describes his life as “a long hesitation, never really overcome, between the city and the country”, worked as a teacher in Paris and used to spend his holidays in his birthplace Saint-Florent-le-Vieil (*La Forme d'une ville* 792-93). His writings are almost exclusively set in the French countryside, where he grew up and got to know the pre-modern way of life of people who, to quote Boyer, “still lived in total harmony with the plant and the beast” (47). The memory of the landscape of his childhood and the stability of rural culture, which had remained the same for centuries, also shaped his imagination: “My books are in general non-urban—without necessarily being, at least I hope so, rural or regionalist”—another parallel with Giono (*Entretiens* 1263).

Ecological sensibility and the good life

After investigating ecological awareness as a condition of the experience of nature, it will be explored as a manifestation of search for the good life. The latter aims at the implementation of “strategies based on green cultural change,” as Derek Wall put it, and will be identified *ex negativo* through the critique of anthropocentrism, technology, progress, capitalism, and consumerism (120).¹³

A distinctive feature of the writers dealt with here is their criticism of modern civilization. Giono, Yourcenar, and to a lesser degree, Gracq denounce the destructive impact of anthropocentrism on the environment. They all prove to be very sensitive to the despoliation of the French landscape after World War II due to the common effort of rebuilding Europe and consider this a loss of the quality of life. The development of the stricken economy once peace had been brought to the continent led to the construction of highways, extensive urbanization and the transition from traditional farming methods to the industrialization of agriculture with its multiple impacts on the environment. At the same time, factories were built or extended to meet the growing demand of goods

the peasant community is punished by nature for their exploitation of the land; in *Batailles dans la montagne*, Giono depicts villagers fighting against the blind forces of nature, i.e., a flood caused by a melting glacier.

¹³ Robert and Edward Skidelsky propose the term “good-life environmentalism” to designate the effort to “promote ‘green’ ways of life not for nature’s sake or for future generations’ sake but for *our* sake” (*How Much is Enough?* 141). However, its anthropocentric focus contrasts with the non-anthropocentric attitude inherent in the works of Giono, Yourcenar and Gracq.

and thus changed the face of *la douce France*, the country where life used to be sweet. The wish to return to the status quo ante of a landscape, often expressed by Giono and Gracq, is typical of their Romantic *Weltanschauung*. However, trying to preserve the beauty of landscapes is also a case of aesthetic preservationism¹⁴ and insofar ecologically significant. In other words, as soon as landscape perception is not just an aesthetic activity but a mode of expressing “affective participation in the perceived object,” this must be considered an ecological aesthetics of nature according to Böhme (10). Giono’s and Gracq’s nostalgia for the pre-war French countryside is an emotional and therefore ecological response to environmental aesthetics.

What all three authors have in common sounds like an elegy for the lost beauty of the environment they used to enjoy in the past. Giono critiques, above all, architects and building contractors, both speculators, who destroy ancient monuments and picturesque sites in order to make profit. For this reason he remarks in one of his chronicles, “I sighed when I thought that the country would be entirely disfigured” (*Les terrasses de l’île d’Elbe* 22). He complains because the traces of human intervention are particularly visible along the important waterways of Provence. Its longest river, the Rhône, has been regulated and so has the Durance because of the construction of power plants by the state company *Électricité de France*. “Before Serre-Ponçon and all the manipulations by the EDF, it used to be a proud alpine torrent: its waters resembled a herd of horses. It is now a river full of dust and insects” (*Provence* 215). The balance that Giono strikes at the end of his life reveals his disillusion concerning progress: “Things are changing with extraordinary speed before our eyes. And one cannot always pretend that this change is progress. Our ‘beautiful’ creations can be counted on one hand, our ‘destructions’ are countless” (280). Giono repudiates progress because it threatens the human values of rural society and the ‘beauty’ of country life. The destructions he points out are not only cultural but also environmental, as the example of the Rhône proves. However, he does not mention pollution or the necessity of protecting precious ecosystems and biodiversity because he is not yet influenced by the environmental discourse that reached France after his death in 1970.

Yourcenar, who spent most of her childhood in the countryside of Northern France, immigrated to the United States in 1939 and settled down on Mount Desert Island in Maine, which looked very much like the rural Eden where she had grown up. Although living comfortably in her pastoral retreat, she travelled widely, visiting all continents except Australia and Antarctica. In the diary she kept at the end of her life, she makes it clear how much she suffered from the uglification of the places to which she felt very strong emotional ties. The entries are extremely concise and fragmentary, as if the impressions were too painful to be described in detail. “The hideous entrance to the cities. Yokohama worse than Paris. The ugliness and beauty of Tokyo / Ugliness of Bangkok. Ugliness of Athens / The rest of the threatened beauty” (*Les trente-trois noms de Dieu* 36). Throughout her works—and most notably in her non-fiction—the tone becomes mournful whenever the author revisits places that meant a lot to her in her youth and that have changed beyond recognition or vanished since. Therefore, she

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion of the concept of aesthetic preservationism see John Andrew Fisher’s article “Aesthetics” (Fisher 264-276).

legitimately laments that “our century is that of building contractors” (*Le Tour de la prison* 627). Yourcenar resorts to apocalyptic rhetoric to denounce the damage done to nature and to call upon her fellow human beings to change their way of life.

Gracq, a keen observer of the morphology of the earth, normally withholds emotions when he translates visual perceptions into literature. Yet he allows himself to deliver harsh aesthetic judgments if the pleasure of contemplation is disturbed by an eyesore. In his essay “La Forme d’une ville,” he gives a detailed account of the metamorphoses of Nantes, where he attended boarding school before World War II. Visiting the seaport and its surroundings some forty years later, he is struck by the changes the cityscape has undergone and appalled by “the taluses, the tumuli, the trenches, the brutal disembowelments of the bulldozer which form an integral part of the aspect of today’s countryside” (“La Forme d’une ville” 865). Oscillating between the outskirts of Nantes, which were the pastoral landscape in his youth, and the city centre, Gracq once again realizes how much the French countryside has changed due to human intervention. Again, his sticking to the ideal of the historic landscape is motivated by aesthetic and sentimental reasons and not environmental concerns such as the loss of biodiversity or ecosystemic disequilibrium.

An arduous and passionate Rambler in his youth, Gracq retained countless images of sceneries he discovered on his trips—mostly across France—and published them from 1967 on, that is, in the middle of *Les Trente Glorieuses* (translated as, “The Glorious Thirties”), a period of unprecedented economic prosperity, which lasted from 1945 to 1975. It is little wonder that some of the cherished places were no longer there when Gracq returned to them in his old age. “Around me not only the shape of the cities but even the face of the earth has changed: soon nothing will be left of what I feasted my eyes on—with such friendship, such great affection. Let us stop these jeremiads”¹⁵ (*Lettrines* 2 281).¹⁶ In contrast to Giono and Yourcenar, Gracq tries to display stoic calm in the face of the degradation of the French countryside, where he has travelled intensively so that one can share the opinion of Bernhild Boie, who declares, “The earth, even what has become of it, has remained habitable for him [= Gracq]” (1345). Gracq complains about the aesthetic degradation of the world but does not seem to be worried about environmental problems which haunt Yourcenar, who lives in a perpetual ecological apocalypse. In other words, landscape destruction as one side-effect of the ecological crisis mainly affects Gracq’s aesthetic sensibility whereas it poses an existential threat to Yourcenar, whose world has come out of balance.

Another side-effect of anthropocentrism is pollution, which in Giono’s opinion is caused by industry. Those most affected by toxic emissions are the workers, who suffer from so-called “factory lungs” (“Préface” 155), a term coined by the writer obviously associating their fate with the gassed soldiers in the trenches of World War I. Giono, who was committed to communism and pacifism, not only implicitly criticizes the capitalist

¹⁵ See also his refusal of environmental rhetoric in the same context: “But let’s leave aside these ecological ruminations” (*La Forme d’une ville* 834).

¹⁶ Gracq, who is only incidentally interested in cities, is aware of the fact that they have changed, too, since his childhood and youth. Mourning the bygone beauty of the world is another manifestation of what Durands calls “the Romanticism of loss” (*Les métamorphoses de l’artiste* 419).

mode of production but also expresses genuine sensitivity to environmental justice in the case of the factory workers.

Feeling solidarity with the average man on the street, Giono uses his eloquence to protest against the construction of the nuclear energy research centre in Cadarache (near Marseille) in 1961. Giono's opposition to the plant is motivated by his concern about environmental risks but also his technophobia. He is opposed to technology because it tends to enslave humans and also because it is a symbol of modernity, which, as a true Romantic, he is bound to reject. Although the engineers guarantee that there will not be any health risks once the plant is operating, Giono ironically asks them why they are not building it on the Champs-Élysées since it is "harmless like all nuclear power stations" (*Provence* 287). Despite his worries, Cadarache is finally built and nuclear energy has played a major role in France to this day. It is interesting to note that ten years before "a group of activists based in Alsace organized France's first antinuclear demonstration", Giono fought against what was to become the most important nuclear power research centre of France (Bess 89).

For Yourcenar, purity and virginity are qualities she associates with the sacredness of nature.¹⁷ This explains why her eco-discourse does not allow for irony, which belongs to the realm of the profane. Her attitude towards various forms of pollution demonstrates her sensibility to the ecological crisis which affects her *joie de vivre*. From acid rain to radioactive fallout and the thinning of the ozone layer, she does not omit any of the dangers in the atmosphere to which humans are permanently exposed and from which they cannot hide. Although the idea of globalization did not exist yet, Yourcenar considered the omnipresence of pollution to be a global issue. Once again she denounces "those who have built this world where the air, the water, the earth, the foodstuffs, even the silence are polluted" (*Les yeux ouverts* 285). What seems to be irrational environmental alarmism becomes tangible when Yourcenar—a true heiress of pastoralism—enumerates the most polluted places, which are mega-cities such as "Pittsburgh, Sydney or Tokyo" (*Souvenirs pieux* 764). Searching for the origin of humankind's dysfunctional relation to nature, she finds out that even our ancestors spoiled the land: "They, too, had out of ignorance soiled the earth and abused it, but lacking a perfected technique, they had been prevented from going very far down this road" (764). In the end, for Yourcenar, the problem underlying pollution is not technology but human nature and its incapacity for moderation.

If the death of the environment forms part of Yourcenar's private eschatology, Gracq, as we have seen, does not despair in the face of the ecological crisis. On the contrary, his works constitute a highly lyrical praise of the beauties of the Earth. It is especially to his home country that he dedicated most of his non-fiction and probably the best of his prose. In the essay *Les Eaux étroites* the author recalls memories of boat trips on the River Èvre, an affluent of the Loire. Conjuring up the atmosphere of Poe's short story *The Domain of Arnheim*, Gracq compares the waterway to a green tunnel separated from the anthropogenic world. Thus the Èvre epitomizes a fairy-tale-like enclave in the countryside around the town of Saint-Florent in central France, where

¹⁷ See Mircea Eliade: "For religious man, Nature is never exclusively 'natural'. It always holds a religious value" (101).

Gracq grew up. Despite the pastoral feel, the riverside landscape is still steeped in the time when the author portrays it, in the seventies. Gracq resists the temptation to idealize it: "Today pollution is likely to have depopulated the river like all the others but in my childhood going angling on the Èvre meant attacking big game: these waters which were the colour of liquorice were said to feed centenarian animals" (*Les Eaux étroites* 531).

Like the Èvre, the Rhône in Southern France is now "dead and dirty," confirming "the loss of noblesse which year after year man imposes on the world, that he soils" (*Lettrines* 2 259, 353-54). Obviously Gracq remains faithful to a poetics of realism and does not conceal the adverse effects of human activities on the environment. However, the painstaking documentation of the ecological transformations that have been brought about does not turn into an obsession like in Giono's or Yourcenar's case. Gracq is deeply rooted in the immanent and rarely falls prey to transcendental moods because even as an artist he is and remains a dweller in the physical world.

To sum up the critique of anthropocentrism, which implies a preference for the countryside and wild spaces, one can say that, while humanism posits the ethical perfectionism of human nature, Giono believes that humanity has made little moral progress and Yourcenar regards humans as a failure and consequently unable to progress morally and live in harmony with nature. Gracq, on the other hand, abstains from emitting moral verdicts but insists, like the other two authors, on the negative effects of human activity on the environment. Without insinuating that the only way of saving nature would be to ban man from the realm of nature or worse, to annihilate him, Giono, Yourcenar, and Gracq represent environments from which man has disappeared or into which he has never entered. No doubt the abolition of mankind would cure ecological problems, but it would also entail the end of art, literature, religion, and in short, civilization as a whole, the expressions to which these authors are precisely indebted. Therefore, the only remedy to ecological imbalance seems to be the non-anthropocentric ethic that the three authors share.

Giono, as a prophet of the good life, condemns the so-called achievements of technology because they stop people from having a direct experience of nature. In his literature, he turns out to be technophobic because "the machine will kill humans, joy, the balance and the civilization where it originates" (*Les Vraies Richesses* 202). Giono's communities of self-sufficient farmers use no machinery, no technology whatsoever, have no means of transportation other than horse-drawn carriages or donkeys, and live outside the capitalist economy. They do not only leave the slightest ecological footprint possible but are also examples of modern bioregional consciousness. This is in spite of the fact that the author had never heard of bioregionalist consciousness, though the return to the Earth movement in the thirties in France was prominent. This movement was, however, meant to promote local patriotism rather than ecological thought.

In Giono's opinion, the good life is not only threatened by technology but by progress, which is its cause. For him, "progress is just a shop full of prostheses", unable to promote human happiness, which consists of living in close union with nature and seeking the sensual experience of the natural world (*Les Héraclides* 125). In order to do

this, one does not need sophisticated appliances but simply has to go for a walk in the countryside.

Giono's criticism of modern civilization is also aimed at capitalism. "The society based on money destroys the harvests, destroys the animals, destroys humans, destroys joy, destroys the real world, destroys peace, destroys the true riches" (*Les Vraies Richesses* 155). Giono knows that farmers burn their harvest to create artificial scarcity and keep prices high. He is revolted by the waste of crops and the destruction of food while people go hungry. In addition, he protests against the tendency of capitalism to turn everything into a commodity and to exploit the natural environment and humans. Giono is also aware of the correlation between capitalism and environmental justice when he remarks, "The worker is the only one who totally lives on the planet of misery and the suffering of the body" (*Les Vraies Richesses* 154). That is why he declares, "Capital does not have a fiercer enemy than I. I consider it an illness and I am sorry for those who have been infected by it" (*Le Poids du ciel* 504). By and large, Giono's attitude to society is downright technophobic, anti-progressive and anti-capitalist, characteristics that overlap with the ideology of the Greens who "generally advocate anti-corporate, anti-capitalist and left-wing policies" (Wall 57).

As for Yourcenar, she was a professed environmentalist, having written about and evoked ecological topics from the fifties on.¹⁸ Far from occurring by chance, the awakening of this kind of sensibility can be attributed to her living in the United States, a country with a culture she rejected because she felt it did not have much to offer apart from business and consumerism. Profoundly materialistic, the New World produced mainly pollution, traffic, noise, and waste and therefore deserved to be criticized. Nevertheless, in her letter to Jean Lambert, dated September 23, 1956, the author tries to adopt a balanced stance. Talking about the United States, she mentions, "the urge to progress is grotesque when it expresses itself in terms of publicity, but it has remained sincere and efficient with certain people; despite the scandalous waste of resources, there is an extraordinarily beautiful natural environment once you manage to discover its secrets, which are not ours" (*Lettres* 125). On January 11, 1970, she mentions the protests against the war in Vietnam, condemning "governmental rhetoric, the abundance of cars, the television running continuously and easy money" (342). In the light of the enormous destruction caused by human beings and the general climate of the Cold War, she concludes fatalistically, "We live in a permanent catastrophe" (382). Struggling to adapt to the realities of the United States, she takes comfort in nature and is, at least in this respect, not disappointed.

Permeated with Greek culture, Yourcenar sticks to the ideal of a happy medium that modern civilization does not respect and that is responsible for massive environmental degradation. In the United States, Yourcenar is struck by how immoderately people live, something she manages to counteract by opting for a more self-sufficient lifestyle. She hates buying things she does not need and dreams of "a world where every living object, tree, animal, would be sacred and never destroyed, except with regret and because it is absolutely necessary" (*Source II* 240). In this same

¹⁸ Yourcenar was an untiring defender of animal rights and a member of several environmental organizations.

notebook, she includes a list entitled, “Wishes,” that reads in part like a manifesto of deep ecology destined to lay the foundations of a new society (see 239-41). Ideally, its members would be vegetarians, live to a large extent on subsistence farming, prefer cooperation to competition, and search for personal rather than economic growth. All these endeavours are meant to fight ecocide and result in one guiding principle. She explained to Pierrette Pompon-Bailhache in *Portrait d'une voix*, “Do not be a burden to the Earth. That’s the main thing” (207). Yourcenar’s art of living consists in a deontology that benefits both the individual and the environment while promoting the good life.

Conclusion

After a critical examination of various examples of environmental experience in the works of Giono, Yourcenar and Gracq, we can say that the three authors are, at least to some extent, ecologically oriented. Imbued with Romantic ecology, they have adopted the idea of cosmic organicism and kinship between humans and nature. In their works, they defend more or less implicitly the Romantic belief that there is a balance in nature that must not be upset by humans. As followers of the Romantic ideology, they praise pre-industrial civilization and cherish wild places. Moreover, they are critical of urban lifestyles and believe that the good life can only be found in the countryside. They also share a non-anthropocentric axiology insofar as they relativize the hegemony of the human species and castigate the harm that anthropogenic intervention has caused to the environment.

Giono stands out among these authors due to his affinity with pre-modern lifestyles. He condemns technology, technical progress and capitalism, which are typical of those with an affinity for Romantic ideology. While Giono’s environmental sensibility¹⁹ can be explained by this affiliation with Romantic ecology, he proves to be receptive to issues of environmental justice, especially in his critique of technology and capitalism. He thereby joins the heterogeneous field of French environmentalism, which has a common denominator in what Kerry H. Whiteside, “Only one of these categories—ecosocialism—fits the French case neatly” (12).

Faithful to the spirit of Romantic ecology, Yourcenar strongly identifies with non-human nature. However, she goes beyond Romantic ecological thinking by unconsciously following the teachings of deep ecology,²⁰ thus defending the environment, often polemically, in both theory and practice,²¹ as well as expressing her preoccupation with the global ecological crisis. Moreover, Yourcenar’s species egalitarianism and commitment to animal rights can be attributed to her biocentric awareness. In short, Yourcenar’s writing exemplifies modern environmental ethics

¹⁹ The relevance of the topic of nature for Giono has been noted by several critics. Vincent Borel published an article entitled “Giono, our first great environmental writer?” (33). Teresa Minhot, in turns, calls him emphatically “Jean Giono, environmental prophet” (95).

²⁰ For convergences with deep ecology, see Wagner 89-100.

²¹ Here is just one example of Yourcenar’s commitment: In 1983, she was awarded the Erasmus Prize, half of which she donated to the WWF, as she told Sussha Guppy (*Portrait d'une voix* 391).

because it makes us question our responsibility for the environment and the Earth, though it is not scientifically informed, similarly to H. D. Thoreau's literature.

Unlike Giono and Yourcenar, Gracq's ecological sensibility seems limited to environmental aesthetics. Gracq, an admirer of German Romanticism, manages to reinsert humans into the environment and to tune them into the universe. However, this attitude is not ecological in a modern sense because it does not relate the subject to other humans or to non-humans. In fact, Gracq's experience of nature is reflected in his writings by an oscillation between a purely aesthetic perception of scenery and an emotional involvement with the land and the landscape. Given this is more than an aesthetic relationship with the natural environment, we can agree with Alain-Michel Boyer, who claims, "By the way, is Gracq's relationship with the territory not a kind of loving relation with its attraction and antipathy?" (30). Due to this "emotional participation", we can say that Gracq's works manifest an ecological aesthetics of nature that is still Romantic insofar as the author does not develop a fully ethical relation to the land that aims at the preservation of "the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community" (Böhme 10; Leopold 224-225). If we take into account Buell's typology of environmental texts, there is one criterion that corresponds to Gracq's literature: "Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text" (Buell 8). In fact, Gracq regrets the urbanization of the French countryside and the transformation of its formerly rural pattern, an irritation that he finds difficult to conceal: "But let's stop this ecological rumination" (*La Forme d'une ville* 834). It is only on this point that he deserves to be called an ecologically-oriented writer, a fact that is confirmed by Suberchicot, who pretends that his literature "belongs to the specialized ecological writings" because of its emphasis on landscapes (46).

To summarize, we can conclude that in twentieth-century French literature, the experience of nature is not just an aesthetic or sentimental affair but also a matter of ecological sensibility. This discovery is all the more important as "it is not obvious to defend nature in France" (Jacob 12) and that the above mentioned authors, by encouraging their readers to cherish and protect the natural environment, contradict the common notion that "the French are basically not people who have a passion for nature", as Yourcenar claimed in a TV interview with Denise Bombardier (*Portrait d'une voix* 332).

Received 30 May 2013

Revised version accepted 9 March 2014

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