



Introduction: The Function of Ecocriticism; or, Ecocriticism, What Is It Good For?

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Abstract

How effectual is ecocriticism at practically addressing our most pressing and poignant global environmental issues? What hope through words? We organized this special issue of the Journal of Ecocriticism to consider the application and relevance of our-kind-of-thing, this marriage between words, texts, and earth; between criticism and trees; between the library carrel and the Greenland ice sheet. Tasked to consider how such a project operates within the strictures of ephemeral literary criticism while simultaneously considering what happens on the ground, "The Function of Ecocriticism" demands that its contributors juggle the competing burdens of rhetoric and activism, and reflect on whether the modus operandi of the former has any purchase on the ethical demands of the latter. We fear, however, that our efforts in this endeavor come to more of the same: words upon words, while elsewhere the fearsome and composed economic imperatives that brought us to this place at this time charge ever onward. This ecocritical experiment surely forces us to ask an obvious but no less difficult question: Are we also part of the problem? Each contributor to this volume—like all ecocritics—must tackle the inevitable: What is to be done? That they do so in such disparate ways points to the lively welter that is ecocriticism, as well as to the white noise of ecocide that hums in the not-so-distant background.

We convene these essays in a spirit of desperate optimism. Knowing, as most readers of this journal do, that the course of global environmental health arcs steadily downward (with requisite nods toward some progress in some jurisdictions on some charismatic environmental issues: water and air quality, recycling, local food, renewable energy), and bearing in mind that even as some communities appear to lessen their ecological footprints, the broad view indicates that planetary sustainability is so distant, so improbable, that industrial civilization now looks to have been nothing more than our species' elaborate and protracted endgame. Knowing this, bearing in mind that, we, the organizers of this special issue of the Journal of Ecocriticism, still

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prefer to hope there is value in the work we do, that our contributors do, that you do, as ecocritics.

Literary critics have long known (if not always acknowledged) that criticism is most relevant within the secure confines of academic specializations, but they also imagine that this relevance can ripple outward via teaching, publication, and other modes of dissemination to the broader culture and, perhaps, to the bosses, policy makers, and managers who shape the contours of our future. Still, we can't help but note that those able to leverage their work beyond the narrow ambit of literary studies have been rare indeed. At the risk of belaboring the argument over whether or not humanistic scholarship has any real world relevance at all—a particularly decayed question that nevertheless bedevils us like an underfed dog—the urgency of the moment suggests that ecocritics must reflect upon, when it comes to the effectuality of their product, *the character and quality of their ecological engagement*. Notwithstanding Simon Estok's and Serpil Opperman's call for more theorizing in light of what Estok calls ecocriticism's "activist ambitions" (205), direct engagement would seem to task ecocritics with *fewer words, more action*. But what this latter formulation might mean for those whose primary materials and methods are exactly words and the analysis of words, well, that is what we have convened this special issue to consider.

For the planetary tragedy plays on, and it is well into its third act. As the principle players strut and fret, the land, the water, the air, the entire non-human host, are also taking their turns, and they can no longer be mistaken for mere stage dressings or props in the human pageant. We see them now as the primary personae they have always been, made all the more poignant because their appearance at center stage is underscored by their imminent departure out the wings. That *exeunt* will bring the final curtain on what we'd foolishly thought was our production.

One of the unstated requisites for becoming a scholar of the literature is that you must, on a professional level, give up the notion that you are working in a biosphere. You come to believe, quite *organically* think, that because you are for the most part producing texts about other texts, the orders of meaning and representation take precedence over the orders of matter and energy. You tend to imagine, for example, that the nightingales in Keats or the albatrosses in Coleridge are more substantial than the noisy birds at your feeder. (They are starlings, by the way, introduced by literary societies into North America in the nineteenth century to ensure that the New World would boast all the Old World birds named by Shakespeare.) These textual entities are your bread and butter, and though the real ones are raucous and colorful, in your daily regime of reading and writing they do not figure; or, if they do figure, they do so quite literally apart from your business of criticism. In the all the ways that literary studies bind us to shared practices of meaning-making and exchange, the starlings massing in your maple are beside the point. At least, they have been.

Long before the advent of the digital computer, philologists were immersing themselves in the hot bath of information. In fact, nothing much has changed since the time of the Babylonian scribes. Signs took on powers and substance beyond the mundane world of dirt and wind. Could dirt sing the deeds of gods and heroes? Could the wind style the lineage of kings or number the bushels of wheat in the granaries? No. Words and pictures, representation of all kinds attracted the attention of a certain type of thinker, and very powerful, abstract modes of cognition emerged. Aesthetics, rhetoric, history, metaphysics, to name but a few, all rely on a coding of material reality into system of signs, which can then be articulated in ways no longer beholden

to any objective reality. This is liberating in its own way. But this type of science—speculative, inferential, introspective—always runs the risk of the echo chamber effect, whereby texts come to talk to texts alone, never getting outside the room for a breath of fresh air. Even ecocritics, who are fully aware of this creeping self-absorption—who have, indeed, defined a field to help overcome it—are not immune to the autopoeitic pressures of the literary system, which programmatically shunts aside the real world (yes, we said it) in favor of the system-sustaining gravy train of textual communication. This gives us pause.

If we are being too elliptical, let us offer an example. We recently received a call for papers from an environmental humanities conference. Ostensibly, the conference should have been a dream come true for ecocritics like ourselves: “We are looking for contributors to a transdisciplinary symposium on the didactical implementations of ecocriticism, critical animal studies and green cultural studies. With a special emphasis on transdisciplinary perspectives, we would like to discuss how the tenets of these academic fields can be incorporated into the daily practice of teaching the humanities and arts--”. So far so good. But here is the other side of that hyphen that sends this symposium off into the hallowed halls of humanist boosterism: “without either breaching the topics’ complexity, falling into the mode of environmentalist propaganda or succumbing to warnings and claims to catastrophic urgency which are hard to reconcile with an ethos of critical and democratic pedagogy.” In other words, the very thing that in the last 20 years has prompted many humanists to question humanism—i.e., the “catastrophic urgency” of our environmental moment—is dismissed out of hand, as if serious scholars shall have no truck and trade with planetary catastrophe in its full horror. To succumb to any such urgencies would be to let slip, evidently, the reasoning mask so carefully secured over many centuries, to allow the raucous street fight to disturb the high-toned discussion in the parlor. At the end of the day, environmental calamity must not be allowed to frame literary studies (e.g., “Sure, I know the oceans are dying but my gig’s Shakespeare!”)

It seems fitting, given our sense that ecocriticism struggles with its own adequacy to the task at hand, that global climate change has surpassed rainforest destruction and toxic waste dumping as the most pressing environmental challenge (though, of course, we are aware that all these issues are linked). Like ecocriticism, climate change presents us with a simple but pithy question: given that the effectiveness of any praxis is by no means assured, just what are we supposed to be doing? It’s one thing to clean up a waterway, remove a damn, watch the salmon return after 50 years. Such initiatives simply take enough community and political will. True, one could argue, that with even more political will we might return CO2 levels to a reasonable 350 ppm. Yet even if we began the reduction today the glaciers are still going to melt, sea levels are going to rise, and life on Earth as we’ve known it is going to change—forever. And in any case, the political will does not exist and, sadly, may never exist. There is so much invested in business as usual that even ecocide takes a back seat to the needs of the economy. We must ask ourselves, therefore, if all our small efforts in recycling and composting, in reduction and re-use, are so much tilting at windmills. What matter our individual carbon footprints when we know full well that the machine will have its tar sands, will have its coal, will not rest until every drop of oil profit is sucked out of the ground? And so it goes for ecocriticism: as the ice disappears, as the drought lengthens, as the flood crests, does the article on Shakespeare-inspired weed species matter a whit more than the article on food imagery in *Troilus and Cressida*? We fear that it does not. We fear our work is puny, and that we always knew it to be. We fear we have been careerists and frauds.

Still, there is the *desperate optimism* that we invoked at the outset. Ecocriticism, after all, begins close at hand, born out of a felt need to confront, however indirectly, the wreckage piling up all around us. *Eco* comes to us from the Greek *oikos*, meaning home, and thus forms the radical out of which springs fundamental concepts, necessary practices: economy, ecology. If you are reading this you might think that the problem is the economy; if we know our audience, many of you already understand that capitalism and ecology are two systems operating at some cross purposes. And if you are reading this you also know that economy traditionally means the right kind of home management, the kind that highlights land stewardship, usufruct, husbandry and housewifery, and we mean this irony free. That our current understanding of economy fails to recognize and account for these practices would seem to call for a new economy, as if—to borrow a current phrase—that boat could be turned around. It can't, and small modifications to its direction would seem to merely forestall the inevitable. In our society, to an alarming extent the economy is seen to *supersede* ecology, and despite the catastrophic stupidity of that view, ecology continues to be indentured to the economy. We have little doubt that the next great phase in capitalist expansion will be geoengineering, in which the planetary managers put all options on the table in an effort both to save human civilization and to at last put what used to be called nature fully under our yoke. But, even supposing that we could *innovate* our way out of this terrifying century, can we accept an ecology in total thrall to the economy? "Certainly not!" we hear most of our readers reply, and we agree that it is our moral duty to resist that trajectory. But do we then improperly style ourselves ecocritics, when what we should really be are *econocritics*?

This project was conceived, therefore, as a way to clean our own house, as a way of taking the *eco* as seriously as we have taken the *criticism*. In taking our inventory we are, *pari passu*, asking far larger questions about not only ecocriticism's role in a world of diminishing resources and prospects, but also about whether the academy in its current guise is the most appropriate place for this kind of work. Is the ecocritical project really different from any other liberal arts activity, i.e., with apologies, a means of reproducing disciplinary roles and structures? Are the structures—our journals, conferences, and books; our endowed chairs, grants, and organizations—the right way to go? We ask these questions knowing that the institutional resources that support our kind of thing are diminishing as well. At the risk of rehearsing the obvious, the corporatizing of the university and the attendant growth of a bloated administrative plutocracy also has consequences, and we cannot—and should not—assume that the ecocritical enterprise exists apart from other ethical considerations not principally concerned with nature, perhaps the most important of which is the shrinking availability of tenure track jobs in the humanities in American higher education and the attendant vocational thrust of student educational needs and desires. One of our contributors, Daniel Anderson, would seem to raise this very issue about the material position of the ecocritic: "at present, much ecocritical work often lacks a position of critique that is reflexive and aware of the material and political situation in which it is produced." Enmeshed, therefore, in various structural and institutional frameworks, ecocriticism comes with the added baggage of being a part of a large and many-tentacled governmental and corporate entity known as higher education. Its pursuit of a better world through criticism loses, by association, its "activist intentions" (Estok 205) by virtue of the company it keeps and depends upon. As another contributor, Aubrey Streit Krug, perceptively asks, "Can ecocritical theory be applied to institutions of higher education, to the means and modes of scholarly production? If so, what might it show us?"

The Essays

Aubrey Streit Krug and Kristin Van Tassel's "Back on the Farm: The Trade-offs in Ecocritical Lives" explores the impact that doing ecocriticism has on two scholars living, by their own estimations, at the margins of both criticism and academic life. Krug is a doctoral student at the University Nebraska-Lincoln in English and Great Plains Studies and Van Tassel is an Associate Professor of English at Bethany College in Lindsborg, Kansas. Their concerns over the role of ecocriticism and, by association, higher education take the form of a dialogue in which they "perform feminist theories of rhetorical listening." This collaboration raises questions about some fundamental tensions between life and criticism, between living and working both within and without the university system. When Van Tassel says that her interests begin with the question, "How should we live?", she immediately sets the tone and agenda for a conversation that is less about ecocritical in-fighting between the theorists and the mimeticists (Estok/Robisch; Phillips/Buell) as much as it is about how to marry one's work with one's ethical principles and one's history. Their discussion of ecocriticism therefore slides from an initial excitement (Krug calls it "invigorating") to a realization about the difficulties of fulfilling the initial ecocritical promise of a critique that is also an ethic.

Significantly, Krug and Van Tassel come to the enterprise with wildly different beginnings. Van Tassel bought a small farm in central Kansas in part because of ecocriticism; Krug grew up on a ranch in north-central Kansas and came to ecocriticism because it spoke to her history and identity. Both women understand that the academic borders within which ecocriticism is produced are essentially meaningless in the face of the inevitable tensions between teaching and studying and producing criticism as part of higher education while living on the Great Plains. They are, as they put it, on the margins professionally and, arguably, in their commitment to tradition and history. This disquiet is not so much ameliorated by ecocriticism as much as it is highlighted. Ecocriticism has given them both the remarkable potential to act in ways consonant with their values even as it, and its concomitant university expectations and responsibilities, pulls them in other directions. Their collaboration is rife with these apprehensions, explored both from and toward the boundaries. "If ecocriticism fails to acknowledge those inhabiting the perimeters," Van Tassel writes, "people like you, Aubrey, whose dad actually farms with a combine, or people like me, whose students are rural undergraduates in General Education classes—then it will fail to matter."

Whether ecocriticism matters is a question taken up by J.L. Schatz in his provocative essay "The Importance of Apocalypse: The Value of End-Of-The-World Politics While Advancing Ecocriticism." Schatz understands that ecocriticism takes place within a certain rhetorical and discursive context, namely in the heavy wake of twentieth-century theory's skepticism over the use-value of practical political protest. How might ecocriticism's promise of resistance be theorized when the Foucaults and Heideggers of the world have made it clear how easily resistance can be co-opted through biopower? What strategies can ecocritics employ to avoid the pitfalls (assuming there are some) of ennui and bland acceptance of the ecological status quo? What, again, can be done?

For Schatz, ecocritics must strive to avoid a univocal approach, a tactic that would make it all too easy for biopower to deploy its panoptic strategies. Instead, ecocritics must make use of the discourse of apocalypse to counter "poststructuralist thinkers like Michel Foucault and Martin Heidegger [who] influence some ecocritics to retreat from omniscient rhetoric." What Schatz

means here is that both the language and metaphors of contemporary postmodern life would have us believe that we can visualize our way out of environmental catastrophe, when in fact our imaginative capabilities need to be arranged to highlight, through apocalyptic language and imagery, a future that cannot so easily be wished away. Apocalypse therefore challenges the apathy of political pessimism and conservative blindness, as well as the ethical indifference of a postmodern politics that would have us revel in a future of negative possibilities. Accordingly, Schatz proposes a kind of apocalyptic interconnectedness in which the fraught future is made the less so through the struggle within the present moment.

A similar theoretical charge runs through Daniel Gustav Anderson's "*Natura Naturans* and the Organic Ecocritic: Toward a Green Theory of Temporality." Anderson notes that ecocritics have done a poor job of taking into account historical temporality, in part because of the regnant critical privileging of a transhistoricist and transcendental criticism in which he identifies two contradictory impulses: a wary and distrustful eye aimed at critical social method coupled with the desire to be transformational, if not revolutionary. For Anderson, the oppositional promise of ecocriticism must go through Marx if it is to understand the relations between nature, labor, and time. His reading of Czech philosopher Karel Kosik's *Dialectics of the Concrete* help situate his critique of those ecocritics who ostensibly privilege a different future, if not a different now, without a more fulsome understanding of the material conditions that might make it so. Fundamental, too, in Anderson's espousal of a Marxist concept of time is the premise that all human activity can be conceived as "*natura naturans*," or "*nature naturing*." By this he means that if ecocriticism is going to privilege nature, per se, it might start with the social formations from which our ideas about nature spring. Without a clearer concept of the relations obtaining between time, nature, and labor, Anderson suggests, the transformational hope of ecocriticism can hardly be realized except as an epiphenomenon of false consciousness.

Conversely, however, in "Save the Planet on Your Own Time? Ecocriticism and Political Practice," Wojciech Małecki would have ecocritics be very skeptical about any position whose claims to truth or overarching method assume the mantle of orthodoxy. That neopragmatists like Richard Rorty or Stanley Fish are routinely ignored in ecocritical studies does not concern Malecki as much as the absence of ecocritical "gadflies" that would naturally spring from a neopragmatist attitude toward theory and literary criticism. The neopragmatist position, Malecki suggests, looks with skepticism upon the all-too-convenient marriage of theory and literary criticism as it begs the question as to why theory doesn't need literary criticism to illuminate its own suppositions and conclusions, rather than the other way around. Moreover, for ecocriticism specifically, theory and literary criticism may not, in fact, be the best place to be political, if by politics one means changing the practical circumstances of life-on-the-ground, in this case, the undoing of the very ground we all depend upon for life. Malecki does not argue against doing theory; rather, he sides with the neopragmatist middle ground to aver that a pluralistic approach to the political question of ecology will not by definition rely on one method. This being the case, philosophy, theory, and literature can live in a harmonious if not productive tension whereby the political effects of one or the other aren't exaggerated in a paroxysm of self-delusion.

Ecocritics, Nicole Seymour contends, are a rather humorless lot. In "Toward an Irreverent Ecocriticism," Seymour looks to poststructuralism and queer theory as templates to help the despairing ecocritic "have a sense of humor about [the] specter of failure." For Seymour, ecocriticism is fighting what amounts to a losing battle with its own affective shortcomings; why

not, she asks, remake the discourse with a change in tone, one that might look (as one example) to MTV's *Wildboyz* as an example of an ecocritical text that blends irreverence with an ecological consciousness—as Seymour does. What would be so “heretical,” Seymour wants to know, about an environmental discourse that understands itself as both necessary and absurd? For ecocriticism to be effective as a discourse, it needs to be affective in its approach. Only by recognizing the perversity of and absurdity of actually having an ecocriticism in the face of overwhelming environmental disaster might we liberate ourselves from the self-righteous posturing that afflicts so much environmental writing. That queer theory and poststructuralism have already arrived there (and perhaps moved on) says to Seymour that environmental criticism had better lighten up by adapting a slightly more ill-mannered tone.

Conclusion

We believe that our authors would agree with us that often times our current fascination with who we are and what we do, as well as our difficulties and frustrations with dealing effectively with environmental realities, implies an awkward adolescence. At times we seem almost too enthralled with how our bodies are changing—even as our rapidly approaching adulthood looks increasingly difficult and limited. At times some of us keep looking back to an idyllic childhood of twenty years ago when all seemed well and we could revel in nature, a time when nature seemed so close, our words could almost touch it. However, like it or not, we are now gangly, fearful teenagers, liminal both in the academy and out, fully facing the possibility of an ineffectual adulthood, one without clear answers, or firm directions.

But, as each of our authors have shown here, we go on, of course, even in the face of a difficult future.

After all, what choice do we have?

Works Cited

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