

## Save the Planet on Your Own Time? Ecocriticism and Political Practice

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### Abstract

*In the paper, I try to consider the function of ecocriticism at the present time using insights taken, or derived, from the work of a loose group of scholars that is sometimes labeled as 'neopragmatists.' In particular, I shall be concerned with the points made by Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish to the effect that putting too much hope in the power of one's academic discipline can be detrimental to the political tasks one wants to realize with its help. As Rorty argues, to effectively address any pressing political problem usually demands directly impacting the powers that be, which, as is safe to assume, is very unlikely to be achieved solely through books and articles in literary criticism. What one needs in such cases, Rorty tirelessly reminds us, is "real politics," i.e., participating in demonstrations, supporting financially the political organization or party one finds the most hopeful, or writing letters of protest to officials. In order to see how these points apply to ecocriticism, understood as a subdiscipline of literary studies devoted to inquiring into "the relationship between literature and the physical environment," I will begin by asking how that field can be useful in furthering the ecological cause, and will then turn to an example of an ecocritic's engagement in "real politics."*

If the title of this paper evokes associations with that of Stanley Fish's 2008 book *Save the World on Your Own Time*, then I should like to explain that their similarity is indeed intended. And it is intended because in what follows I would like to consider the function of ecocriticism at the present time using insights taken, or derived, from the work of a loose group of scholars that is sometimes labeled as 'neopragmatists' and that includes Fish himself among its most prominent members.<sup>1</sup>

Yet exactly at this moment some readers may ask incredulously: "We know that Fish and several other neopragmatists have been relatively prominent in literary studies, but what have *they* to do with ecocriticism?"<sup>2</sup> Such a reaction would hardly be surprising. Nay, it would be entirely justified, insofar at least as neopragmatism has been virtually unrepresented in the study of literature and environment,<sup>3</sup> despite the fact that there have been systematic attempts to deploy *classical* pragmatism in that field (see, e.g. Browne 2007; Morris 2011). Admittedly, it is a common practice in

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literary studies that the very fact that something has not been done before is automatically seen as a sufficient (some would certainly say necessary) reason to do it, yet if I want to talk about neopragmatism and ecocriticism here it is because of something else. It is because neopragmatist thinkers have been among the most penetrating analysts of the practical (social, political, and ethical) arrogations of the humanities and literary studies, and therefore it should seem entirely reasonable that their voice be heard in a debate on what ecocriticism can and what it cannot do for plants, animals, and the earth in general, which is exactly the humble perspective that ecologically-oriented literary scholars situate their work in.<sup>4</sup>

That neopragmatists have additionally been the most critical of all critics of the aforementioned arrogations is a good thing too. Every discipline, every institution, and every community needs its gadflies, and given that much of current ecocritical discourse seems to be pervaded by a belief in the power of literature and literary scholarship to “save the planet,”<sup>5</sup> ecocriticism needs them in particular. This is not to say that there have been no such gadflies (Timothy Morton and Dana Phillips have even been recently denominated as ecocriticism’s “‘conspicuous’ internal critics,” Dodson 11), but rather that the field should welcome more of them in order to secure a proper balance that could, in turn, help it become more realistic in its political ambitions.

To be more exact, in what follows, I shall be concerned with the general points made by Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish to the effect that putting too much hope in the power of one’s academic discipline can be detrimental to the political tasks one wants to realize with its help. In order to see how these points apply to ecocriticism, understood as a subdiscipline of literary studies devoted to inquiring into “the relationship between literature and the physical environment,”<sup>6</sup> let us begin by asking how that field can be useful in furthering the ecological cause. Now, while Richard Rorty, who admittedly never said a word about ecocriticism, even if he said quite much about nature, the human-animal distinction, and literature, could grant that ecocritics may be relatively capable at detecting the rhetoric of dominance over the environment that pervades much of our literature and public discourse,<sup>7</sup> and that their promoting some “environmentally enlightened” works may prove fruitful, in the long run, for raising ecological awareness among the general public, he would still warn them against overestimating their role *qua* literary scholars in politics – a misjudgment that often befalls those who suffer from a syndrome related to what Rorty calls “occupational alienation” (*Essays* 133-134; 136-137).

In a nutshell, that intriguing syndrome occurs when one is so troubled by the awareness that what one does professionally may have very limited impact on the current political struggles that one begins to develop a self-defense mechanism which consists in believing something quite the contrary, namely, that these professional activities have a profound value in this regard. According to Rorty, this is actually what has happened to quite a lot of humanities scholars in the recent decades, leading eventually to the rather absurd situation that while “in the old days you could get the professoriate to turn out for demonstrations ... now when you try to do that, they say, ‘I’ve just finished my latest book on cultural studies—I gave at the office’” (Rorty and Ragg 132). And this is absurd for the very simple reason that to effectively address any pressing political problem usually demands directly impacting the powers that be, which, as is safe to assume, is very unlikely to be achieved solely through books and articles in literary or cultural criticism. What one needs in such cases, Rorty tirelessly reminds us, is “real politics,” i.e., participating in demonstrations, supporting financially the political organization or party you find the most hopeful, or writing letters of protest to officials (see *Achieving* 15). This is why he would with all probability appreciate the American ecocritic Scott Slovic’s correspondence with the Coca-Cola Company on the subject of the “impact” the latter is “having upon Indian society through the privatization of water and the pollution of water resources” (Slovic 214-215); a correspondence which Slovic related in his book *Going Away to Think* (2008), encouraging others to do similar things (see, e.g., 81, 136).

Let us leave Rorty for a moment, but nevertheless stay with Slovic's letter, which is instructive in more ways than the one I have just mentioned. To begin with, if it were not for Slovic's explicitly mentioning his professional activities in the letter, one would not be able to tell at all that it was written by a literary critic. It lacks references to works of literature, specialist terminology, its claims are not supported by references to the oeuvre of other critics, not to mention that the style is rather plain and bears no traces of wordplay or other semantic subtleties, as evidenced, for instance, by its opening paragraphs:

Dear Mr. Isdell:

I write to you as a longtime fan of your company's best-known product – Classic Coke. I grew up enjoying this drink and have, until very recently, remained an enthusiastic consumer of various Coca-Cola products.

However, during a recent lecture trip to India, I became aware of the impact Coca-Cola and its rival companies – chiefly, Pepsi and Parle Bisleri – are having upon Indian society through the privatization of water and the pollution of water resources in places like Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Himachal Pradesh (Slovic 214-215).

But is the style of the letter even worth mentioning in this context? Why would an epistle addressed to the CEO of the Coca-Cola Company contain such things as specialist terminology or literary references? That someone is a literary critic by profession does not mean that she must write every text in a literary-critical manner and if she actually did so, we would have all the reasons to become worried about her mental health. In a word, it is not at all surprising that Slovic's letter looks the way it looks, or at least it is no less (or more) surprising than the fact that the documents Franz Kafka wrote as a lawyer employed by an insurance institution look like exactly as we would think an average bureaucrat would write them (see Corngold et al.).

Everything becomes slightly more interesting, however, if we ask *why* it is appropriate that Slovic shaped his letter thus, and one answer to this question is provided by Fish, who argues that literary-critical discourse simply "*cannot be heard*," or read, by CEOs or politicians (*Professional* 91), at least when they perform their duties and are not enjoying a volume of Slovic or Buell in their spare time (provided that anyone of them has such a noble hobby indeed). And this is not so much because this discourse is hermetic (all professional discourses are esoteric to an extent, yet politicians and CEOs can somehow swallow a bit of jargon when it comes from nuclear scientists, lawyers or economists), but rather because it so happens that in the present sociocultural context of the US and most Western countries, the expertise of literary critics is considered irrelevant by the representatives of big business and politics. The qualification, "in the present sociocultural context of..." is worth emphasizing here because Fish does not want to say that literary critics are condemned to such a position *necessarily* and for all eternity, but rather that, again, it is a function of cultural context, and that their position looks, or looked, entirely different in places such as today's Israel, or communist Russia. This of course gives a glimmer of hope to literary scholars who would like to save the world without getting up from their armchairs ("We can make it – we just need to wait until the cultural context changes!"), yet it is quickly extinguished by Fish's point that whoever could effect such a transformation, these would certainly not be literary scholars themselves (see *Professional* 37, 93-97).

Such a skeptical position is doubtless sober and largely up to the point, yet as Richard Shusterman has pointed out, those who adopt it tend to forget about one particular, very large audience, on which the discourse of literary criticism may have a certain immediate impact, perhaps even up to the point of encouraging them to take concrete political action – an audience which consists of students in literature departments.<sup>8</sup> This is actually an audience that Slovic himself mentions in a

passage of his letter which is worth quoting here as it is probably it that prompted the Coca-Cola Company to eventually send him a lengthy reply. The passage reads:

You may think this is a trivial complaint – that of a single Coke drinker. However, I happen to spend much of my time traveling around the world lecturing to audiences of teachers and scholars in my branch of literary studies – I would estimate that I reach combined audiences of several thousand influential people in an average year, and each of these listeners (not to mention readers of my articles for academic and popular audiences) is likely to encounter hundreds of students and colleagues in a year. Even though my lecture topics tend not to have much to do with soft drinks, I have found ways to work comments about my disenchantment with Coca-Cola and other soft drink (and bottled water) corporations into many of my lectures and plan to continue to do so indefinitely, until I learn that a new era of corporate responsibility has arrived (Slovic 215).

But doesn't that passage and my admitting that it probably convinced Coca-Cola to treat Slovic seriously (at least seriously enough to respond to him) stand in tension with what I said above about the impotent position of literary critics? Yes. And no. Yes, because what seems crucial here is indeed that it is *his being a literary critic* that has given Slovic the ability to reach a wide public, an ability which he uses astonishingly well. No, because the relative persuasiveness of Slovic's letter derives not, I contend, from the power of his expertise per se, but rather from the number of (influential) people he can reach, and reach, mostly, by doing something exceptional in his profession (after all, the schedule of public lectures given by the majority of his colleagues certainly looks far less impressive, both in quantitative terms and in terms of its geographical reach). If this distinction is not clear, then consider the simple fact that a lawyer, for example, would not have to refer to any lectures, audiences, etc. to give a huge company a pause. It would be enough for her to say, for instance, "my legal analysis shows that, according to the recent changes in Indian law, the actions of your company constitute serious legal offence, which can even lead to your factories in x, y, or z being closed down." And since we are talking about audiences, it is finally worth stressing that in his letter, Slovic chooses to foreground the wide public of his *lectures*, mentioning the readers of his academic articles only parenthetically, which was of course a strategically wise decision.

If I began this article by referring to the similarity between the title of Fish's book *Save the World on Your Own Time* and the title of my paper, then I would like to finish it by addressing how they differ. One, rather trivial, difference is that in mine the word "world" is substituted with the word "planet," which reflects the fact that the subject of Fish's diatribe are *all* academics who within their professional capacities want to pursue their political goals, while I focus exclusively on those whose political aims are related to the environment. Secondly, unlike Fish's title, the title of the present paper has a question mark at its end, which implies that while I have some doubts about the matter in question, Fish seems not to have any in conveying his message. The message, put forward not only in this but also his other books, is that insofar as they remain within the walls of academia, scholars should abdicate their pretensions to save the world, period. Now, I believe, that message is unacceptable. It is unacceptable because the questions such as the one posed in the title of this paper do not allow for a simple yes or no answer, something which should become clearer if we follow Richard Rorty in adopting an instrumentalist perspective on literary criticism.

Instruments, or tools, are things with which we do or make things, and whether a given tool can effectively serve a given purpose depends not only on the character of the latter and the qualities of the former, but also on who uses it, when, where, and in what way. This is why assessing the general usefulness of a tool is not always an entirely simple matter, something which is further complicated by the fact that frequently in order to achieve one purpose we must also achieve another, and that some tools work better when combined with others. But what has this to do with literary studies? As

it is conceived today, literary studies serves a host of different purposes – for instance, that of propagating certain political messages, providing theories on the relationship between literature and a given x (gender, class, race, animals, plants, inanimate things) and that of producing insightful and novel interpretations of literary works. These purposes (and the list is, of course, not exhaustive) need not get in each other's way,<sup>9</sup> but as Rorty reminds us, they may. They might, for instance, if we thought that by writing sophisticated literary analyses or concocting radical theories, and then publishing the results in specialist journals, we thereby could significantly contribute to advancing the ecological agenda. (We don't – our audience is then limited to a narrow group of specialists, most of whom share our ecopolitical views anyway.) They might get in each other's way, too, even if we tried to reach out to a *larger* audience (e.g., through the popular press), but nevertheless retained our scholarly pose and offered large theoretical arguments for our progressive views. As Rorty argues, this is because when we want to convince somebody to adopt a different *Weltanschauung* than the one she currently holds (say, we want those who think the environment is there to be freely exploited by human beings to become more ecologically-aware), abstract theoretical arguments can hardly succeed in doing so, given that in the logical space occupied by our interlocutor, they will be seen either as supporting her, instead of our, position or as question-begging – that is, as a form of rhetorical table-thumping (cf., e.g., *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* 54-55). A much more effective way to achieve that task, continues Rorty, is to employ narratives instead (as is well-known, Rorty believes that narratives, especially novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, have greatly contributed to the emancipation of racial minorities in the US and other countries<sup>10</sup>), something which in the case of ecocritics would mean promoting those works of literature that constitute powerful acts of "environmental imagination" (to use Lawrence Buell's term).<sup>11</sup> Namely, works that depict in concrete, gripping details "others' experience, suffering, pain" ("that of nonhumans as well as humans"), and the visions of possible futures to which the current ecological crisis may lead, thereby making the physical world "feel more or less precious, endangered or disposable" (Buell, *Writing 2*; cf. Slovic 140).

Now, while we may, and should, try to raise the environmental awareness of our students by assigning such books to them, and then go even further and try to shape the minds of future generations through the construction of new literary canons (see Murphy 4), we must always hold firmly in mind that the outcome is not certain, and, most importantly, that there are political tasks (stopping a given legislature, saving a certain nature reserve)<sup>12</sup> that will necessarily demand more direct, non-academic action.

So, again: should ecocritics save the planet on their own time?

Yes. On their own time too.

In fact, it is a must.<sup>13</sup>

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> I understand the term 'neopragmatists' as denoting those contemporary thinkers who are inspired by the work of classical pragmatists (William James, John Dewey, Charles Sanders Peirce, F.C.S. Schiller) or whose ideas chime in this way or another with those of the latter. I must admit, however, that the identity of both classical and neo- pragmatism (or the new pragmatism, as it is sometimes called) is a vexed issue, which unfortunately cannot be discussed here in more detail. See, e.g., Fish, "Truth and Toilets" 424; Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy* 7; Eldridge; Menand; Gale; Haack; and Macecki, *Embodying Pragmatism* 12-16.

<sup>2</sup> (Neo)pragmatism in literary studies is usually associated with such figures as Fish, Richard Rorty, Walter Benn Michaels, Steven Knapp, Steven Mailloux, Gilles Gunn, Richard Poirer, and Richard Shusterman. For a

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comprehensive account of the role of neopragmatism in contemporary literary studies, see Drong. See also Fluck; and Małecki, *Pragmatism and Literature*.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted, however, that there are exceptions in this regard. For instance, Dana Phillips deploys some arguments by Rorty in his book *The Truth about Ecology*.

<sup>4</sup> As far as ecocriticism's "'green' moral and political agenda" (Garrard 3) and its activist ambitions are concerned, see, e.g. Slovic, 8; Estok 3, 15-16; and Dodson 7.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Gomides; and Reed. Note that even though Elizabeth Ammons observes that "most literary inquiry has become ... irrelevant," she nevertheless is convinced that it is possible to "link" literary criticism "directly to progressive activism" (Ammons x).

<sup>6</sup> Needless to say, thus conceived, ecocriticism is internally diversified and riven by fundamental tensions, one of which concerns the role of so-called 'theory' (roughly put, the term 'theory' is in such debates understood as a kind of politically engaged variant of Continental philosophy, amalgamated with elements taken from linguistics, cultural anthropology, psychoanalysis, and a few other fields). As Buell argues, the second wave of ecocriticism that have "started to predominate around the year 2000" can be seen as "the turn toward cultural studies and cultural theory ... which in practice meant to some extent ... trying to inflect it [ecocriticism] with one or another strand of poststructuralism" (Buell "Ecocriticism" 94). Yet, on the other hand, one still hears that ecocriticism is "undertheorized" and that theory is its "blind ... or sore spot" (Dodson 6). Cf. Serpil Opperman's remark that "Despite the strong impulse in the latest phase of ecocriticism to establish connections with the major theoretical paradigms in cultural and literary studies 'theory' is a contested issue in the ecocritical field" (Opperman 153). Cf. also Morton, *Ecology* 161; Estok, Parham; O'Brien 194; and Buell *The Future* 112.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Glotfelty, xxii-xxiii

<sup>8</sup> See Shusterman, *Practicing* 86-87; cf. *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, chap. 2. To be exact, Fish does not forget about this audience (it is actually one of the main subjects of his book *Save the World on Your Own Time*), but rather explicitly denies that professors can effectively instill in their students any political values, and argues, moreover, that the former *shouldn't* even try to do this. See *Save the World*.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Buell "Ecocriticism" 105.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Rorty and Ragg 123; Rorty, *Truth* 181; Rorty, *Contingency* 141. For a discussion of Rorty's "politics of the novel," see Voparil 61-88.

<sup>11</sup> One could mention here the works of Barry Lopez, Rick Bass, Aldo Leopold, Terry Tempest Williams, etc. I leave aside the fact that Rorty would have major doubts about the general views about the nature of 'nature' held by many of the authors (including those just mentioned) who are typically revered by ecocritics.

<sup>12</sup> See Slovic 81, 84-7,

<sup>13</sup> The ambiguity of the final lines is intended because the question posed in the title of this article does not allow for a simple yes or no answer. To the question "Should ecocritics save the planet on their own time?" I respond "yes", but with a proviso-- "On their own time, too". This is an indirect (perhaps even koan-like) way of saying that ecocritics should not save the world ONLY on their own time, but, by implication, that they should do so too in their capacity as literary critics.

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