



Kindred Ethics: Leopold and Badiou; Ecocriticism and Theory

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Abstract

“Kindred Ethics” discusses the similar objections expressed in Aldo Leopold’s “The Land Ethic” and Alain Badiou’s Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil. Both men oppose formulaic, procedural ethics that render thinking and consciousness unnecessary. Although the role of post-structuralist theory in ecocriticism has generated much contentious debate, the juxtaposition of these two texts—one a pillar of environmental writing and the other the work of a contemporary French theorist—demonstrates that environmental writing and theory share some common ground. Bearing the kinship of these texts in mind, this article also argues that the supposed rift between ecocriticism and theory is a fabrication: that is, both the urgent drive to “theorize ecocriticism” and the equally passionate desire to preserve its “untheorized” purity are founded upon myths that an examination of the history of the field overturns. In concluding, “Kindred Ethics” points out that in addition to being informed by post-structuralist theory from its very origins, ecocriticism should be understood as a theory in its own right—one that challenges anthropocentrism, scrutinizes setting, and utilizes narrative scholarship as an important form of archival research.

As the 2012 Special Issue of *The Journal of Ecocriticism* devoted to “Ecocriticism at the Present Time” (volume 4, number 2) and the “Special Forum on Ecocriticism and Theory” in the Autumn 2010 issue of *ISLE* reiterate, one of the dominant ongoing discussions in ecocriticism involves the role of post-structuralist theory in our field. In his introduction to the forum, Anthony Lioi’s reference to theory as

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“the thing we must have, the thing we mustn’t have” accurately represents the current range of the debate between “the theorists and the mimeticists” (Lioi 754; Major and McMurry 5).¹ However, tracing the genealogy of this dispute back through the history of ecocriticism establishes a cycle of recurrence that actually begins at the very origin moment of ecocriticism. That is, if we conceptualize the history of ecocriticism as a tree with concentric annual growth rings—like the one Aldo Leopold gives an account of sawing through in the “February” section of *A Sand County Almanac* (6-18)—any transect of that history would encounter multiple rings representing the debate over the role of theory in ecocriticism and would finally discover that this issue exists at the very pith of our discipline.

In a recent and memorable moment, the argument regarding the value or danger of theory to ecocriticism rose to a fevered pitch with S. K. Robisch’s response to Simon C. Estok. In “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia,” which appeared in the spring 2009 issue of *ISLE*, Estok offers the theorizing of ecocriticism as a solution to what he regards as the inevitable collapse of the discipline. Specifically, he argues that “ecophobia”—a term he defines as “an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world” (208)—should serve as the focus of ecocriticism, much like misogyny and sexism serve as the core issues of feminist studies.² In his response to Estok, titled “The Woodshed: A Response to ‘Ecocriticism and Ecophobia,’” Robisch declares Estok’s piece contemptible from the start because it is hospitable towards theory. Robisch demonstrates a clear distrust of “the culture of ‘theory’”—which, he argues, “seeks rank and power more than it seeks art and insight,” “relinquishes thorough analysis in a quest for the limelight,” and “is the Monsanto of a native grassland” (698, 699, 703). Throughout his article, Robisch’s message to sympathetic readers is clear: he suggests it is high time to “start monkey-wrenching the theory machine” and concludes with a rallying cry capable of producing a wide range of emotions, including amusement, passion, and even anxiety (700). After describing his urge to pelt a panel of theorists with karo-syrup-filled water balloons, Robisch outlines his vision of a militant ecocriticism: he writes, “Let’s go PETA on these nature fakers, these seated hikers. I want an ELF of ecocritics. . . . ‘Theory’ fantasizes itself victimized. I say, dreams can come true” (707).

Though the Estok-Robisch exchange stands apart in terms of venom, it is, in fact, only a recent iteration of an older dispute that includes Dana Phillips’s 2003 book-length critique of the ecocritical failure to adequately address or incorporate the insights of post-structuralist theory, as well as calls from Glen Love (among others) to look away from theory and toward evolutionary science as a means of grounding ecocriticism. Love’s statement that “no interdisciplinary study has more to offer us humanists now than evolutionary theory as it relates to biology, ecology, the neurosciences, psychology, anthropology, biogeography, linguistics, and related fields” well represents his persistent efforts to steer ecocriticism clear of theory (166). In fact, he even defines ecocriticism as quintessentially opposed to post-structuralist theories, as standing “against a recent past dominated by opposing critical tendencies, by which I mean those approaches that, for the most part, have little or nothing to do with the physical world” (5-6). In the introduction to his book Phillips reacts to Love and those like him by suggesting that the “curatorial model of literary scholarship” and the “[spurning of] literary theory” characteristic of “first generation” ecocritics remains a problem for the field (ix). And in his chapter on “Art for Earth’s Sake,” Phillips outlines his charges against several ecocritics, including Love, whom he sees as dangerously antiquated (135-84). Thus, the argument over the role of theory in ecocriticism clearly predates Estok and Robisch.

Indeed, even Lawrence Buell cites the early ecocritical aversion to theory, but he also argues, somewhat paradoxically, that theory was already being utilized by ecocritics at the origin of the field. As he explains in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, many early ecocritics looked to nascent ecocriticism “chiefly as a way of ‘rescuing’ literature from the distantiations of reader from text and text

from world that had been ushered in by the structuralist revolution in critical theory” (6). Coupled with his statement that “most currents set in motion by early ecocriticism continue to run strong,” one should not be surprised to encounter the recurrent debates about the role of post-structuralist theory in ecocriticism, even up to the current day (17). Yet, as Buell acknowledges, even from its beginning as a “self-defined movement” (which he dates to roughly 1993), ecocriticism was not uniformly inhospitable to literary theory. Indeed, several essays from *The Ecocriticism Reader* reveal that ecocriticism, from its beginning, was also informed by post-structuralist theory.³ The history of this debate, as well as the early presence of post-structuralist theory in ecocritical scholarship, challenges Estok’s claims about the dire need to *begin* theorizing ecocriticism, and likewise calls into question Robisch’s near-fanatic desire to defend the purity of an ecocriticism untainted by theory: both arguments depend upon a misleading conception of ecocritics as uniformly opposed to theory, and of ecocriticism as wholly untheorized. As provocative, interesting, and entertaining as their polarized polemics might be, they are both founded on a reductive construction that fails to consider the multivalent nature of current (as well as past) environmental criticism.

In order to reaffirm the ecocritical willingness to engage with post-structuralist theory—as well as to help move us beyond the clichéd paradigm which advocates for one of the two extreme positions on theory—I wish to position myself somewhere on the middle ground between the polar ends of the spectrum as represented by Estok and Robisch. Rather than situating theory in “a Space of Ambivalent Openness” or taking theorists behind “The Woodshed” for a dose of discipline from the belt of praxis, I will examine one point where existing theory intersects usefully with a canonical work of environmental literature. I will juxtapose Aldo Leopold’s “The Land Ethic” and Alain Badiou’s *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* in order to discern what the continued synthesis of environmental criticism and theory might yield.⁴

Though Leopold’s “Land Ethic” has recently come under attack for the ways it espouses dated ecological concepts, such presentist molestations unfairly dismiss his work: even if the language and scientific terminology of *A Sand County Almanac* have, in some cases, expired, the volume is not therefore emptied of meaning. For the lasting relevance of Leopold’s project resides in his attention to issues of morality. Though scientific understanding of the natural world has increased over the past half-century, we still have not lived up to the ethical challenge he articulates; because we remain largely apathetic towards our ethical responsibility to the land (which, for Leopold, included soil, water, and all associated flora and fauna), *Sand County* cannot be as easily dismissed as those discussing the truth of ecology might wish. In the first section of this article I will situate *A Sand County Almanac* in its proper historical milieu and present Leopold’s argument. This contextualization provides a convenient opportunity to reveal that the attacks of Dana Phillips and Simon Estok, though accurate in some regards, fail to seriously deflate Leopold’s work, and unexpectedly reinforce the current purchase of the moral components of “The Land Ethic.”

After reasserting the contemporary value of Leopold’s work, I will turn, in the article’s second section, to Alain Badiou and his *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Interestingly, though Badiou’s writing is separated from Leopold’s by the Atlantic Ocean and nearly fifty years, the texts nevertheless share a remarkable synergy. Just as Leopold refrained from outlining specific ethical practices, Badiou critiques the formulaic ethics so prevalent today. Given the genre of the two texts—one an environmental classic written by a professor of game management and the other a product of a contemporary French theorist—the degree to which they complement one another is striking, particularly given the supposed animosity existing between the two distinct groups of scholars who *either* focus on environmental texts *or* post-structuralist theory. I conclude by reasserting that the

relationship between theory and ecocriticism is actually a *both/and*, and by arguing that the kinship between Badiou and Leopold provides an important consideration for ecocritics: the companionability of their texts affirms that theory and environmental criticism turn out to be neither diametrically opposed nor wholly symbiotic. Instead, their works reach an agreement which frustrates the activist inclinations of environmentalists and ecocritics.

The Moral Challenge of Leopold's "Land Ethic"

Though Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* is well-known to many modern readers, few, it seems, have properly considered the book's bibliographic context. When the book was first issued in a paperback edition during the environmental fervor of the late 60s and early 70s, *Sand County* reached a large audience eager to read and understand Leopold as an authoritative scientific voice akin to Rachel Carson.⁵ Though Leopold was trained as a forester, those who regarded *Sand County* as a treatise from a concerned scientist misconstrued his project—such readers pursued a mistaken approach to the text which has continued to this day. Readers who encountered the book during "The Environmental Decade" and since have often neglected to consider the story of the book's publication history and its position in Leopold's larger corpus. Because recent critics—Dana Phillips and Simon Estok, for example—have carried forward the misappropriation of Leopold's final work, it is my intention to establish the moral and aesthetic focus of Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*.

The difficulties Leopold encountered as he attempted to publish *A Sand County Almanac* suggest that the work deviated from his earlier, successful scientific writings. As Curt D. Meine explains, the composition process required Leopold to overcome "multiple rejections, continual questioning of its content and style, and a series of difficult personal challenges" (706).⁶ Though the "personal challenges" Leopold battled are no doubt significant, the "multiple rejections" bear more directly on the argument at hand. Why, after all, would editors from Alfred A. Knopf (some of whom had solicited the book) reject two different manuscripts? Similarly, why would Macmillan Company and the University of Minnesota Press also reject the work of a successful, respected author? For by the 1930s Leopold had emerged "as one of the preeminent leaders in wildlife ecology and management" after writing the field's first textbook (*Game Management*) and being appointed to the Chair of Game Management at the University of Wisconsin, both in 1933 (Meine 697-98). And by the late 1940s, Leopold's renown had grown even larger. Thus, even though Leopold persisted and received a call on April 14, 1948, from Philip Vaudrin at Oxford University Press informing him that the manuscript had finally been accepted for publication, his struggle should prompt critics to take a closer look at the problematic book (704).⁷

When compared to *Game Management* (1933), *Sand County* stands out as a very different work. In the earlier volume, Leopold stakes his claim as the foremost pioneer and leader in the new field of wildlife ecology and management. While Leopold posited theories, presented evidence, and positioned himself as a scientific authority in *Game Management*, the tone of *Sand County* is entirely different: instead of situating himself within the scientific discourse of his day, Leopold wanted to distance himself from and critique those who focused science on "the creation and exercise of power" and ignored "the creation and exercise of wonder or respect for workmanship in nature" ("The state of the profession" 343). As Meine has argued, Leopold recognized the need to move outside his professional circle and target a wider audience: "His conviction was that conservation had to rest on a base that included not only the integrated natural sciences, but also philosophy, ethics, history, and literature" (Meine 697). Thus, Leopold abandoned the strictures of purely scientific prose and began to address a general

audience by publishing many of the pieces eventually collected in *Sand County* in journals such as the *Wisconsin Agriculturist and Farmer* and the *Wisconsin Conservation Bulletin* (Meine 700). Julianne Lutz Newton identifies in this turn a dramatic difference in authorial voice: the university science scholar has become “an artist with an unusual gift for lyrical prose” (xi). In addition to a change in style, Leopold’s shift in audience necessitated a modification of his purpose: Leopold understood that the readers he was now targeting did not require authorial objectivity and rigorous data analysis in order to grasp the moral questions being raised. In responding to his audience’s characteristics, Leopold crafted *Sand County* as a pathos-driven moral challenge.

Critics who have recently targeted Leopold’s “Land Ethic” choose to (mis)read the essay as a modern treatise on ecology. Their deliberate misprision allows them to attack the shallow science of a volume primarily intended as a moral challenge. Dana Phillips introduces *The Truth of Ecology* (2003) by claiming that Leopold’s “words understate the difficulty” of ecological thinking, and that his “Thinking Like a Mountain” encourages us to “assume that the truth about nature is straightforward” (vii). Phillips echoes Luc Ferry—who suggested that learning to think like a mountain “promises to be a bit tricky” (Ferry 59)—and points out that today, “increasing numbers of ecologists have realized that knowledge of nature of the sort imagined by Leopold is impossible to acquire” (Phillips vii). Simon C. Estok takes an equivalently narrow view of Leopold’s work when he presents the most familiar passage from “The Land Ethic” in order to excoriate Leopold for a variety of reasons (discussed below). Phillips’s and Estok’s portrayal of Leopold’s ecology as “scientifically naïve,” simplistic, and misinformed suggests the possibility that they have taken *Sand County* out of context (Estok 209). Though right about the now dated ecological thinking that grounds the text, they have missed its larger point; by focusing on the volume as a scientific work, they have overlooked its moral core. Or perhaps they have only failed to realize that in fact they do understand Leopold’s moral project. For Leopold surely knew that the mentality of a mountain would be “tricky” if not “impossible to acquire” and that answering the challenge of a land ethic would be equally difficult.

In explaining his concept of a land ethic, Leopold seems fully aware of the demands underlying his challenge.⁸ Leopold argues that our ethical framework should be extended so as to include land as a community member—simple enough to phrase, but nearly impossible to imagine, even today. Further, one should note that Leopold does not view this expansion of community as an act of human benevolence. Rather than granting the land membership in *our* community, a land ethic requires humankind to recognize the equality of man and land: Leopold writes, “a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it” (204). His opening gesture in “The Land Ethic” towards Greek epic demonstrates that he is aware of the way his idea goes against concepts of anthropocentrism engrained in human culture over millennia. That is, when he opens with a reference to Odysseus’s decision to hang a dozen slave girls for misbehaving during his absence, Leopold is stressing the ways that “property” once included certain humans (201). Thus, Leopold wants to cite the slow process by which the enslavement of other humans came to be viewed as morally reprehensible as a precedent for the kind of valuation he wants to see extended to the land. He understands that instituting such sweeping ideological concepts will be hard, but does not refrain from further elaborating on what he knows will be the unpopular stipulations demanded by a land ethic.

Leopold posits that once a land ethic takes hold, humanity will embrace land’s status as an equal, move beyond land-use practices determined by economic self-interest and governmental stipulations, and recognize our “individual responsibility” for maintaining the health of the land (221). Thus, because enacting and exercising a land ethic is every individual’s duty, Leopold does not outline any specific

actions or restorative practices. In fact, Leopold explicitly opposes a genuine land ethic to the formulaic conservation that directs citizens to “obey the law, vote right, join some organizations, and practice what conservation is profitable on [their] own land” (207). Leopold objects to such scripted conservation because, as he argues, “in our attempt to make conservation easy, we have made it trivial” (210). Similarly, Leopold critiques simple codes of conservation which prove “too easy to accomplish anything worthwhile” (207). Even when he defines the rights and wrongs imposed by a land ethic, Leopold remains deliberately vague: as he famously writes, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends to do otherwise” (224-25). Leopold’s essay emphasizes tendencies, not absolutes. For example, when he discusses the conservation he practices with his axe, he explains that he will usually fell any red birch that is crowding a white pine. However, even this tendency falls well short of an iron-clad rule: for “if the birch stands south of the pine, and is taller, it will shade the pine’s leader in the spring, and thus discourage the pine weevil from laying her eggs there” (70). Since “birch competition is a minor affliction compared with this weevil” Leopold will gladly rule against his first impulse and the general trend of his November conservation (ibid.). *A Sand County Almanac* is replete with further examples of instances where Leopold explains the times he must carefully consider his course of action and cannot depend on a hard and fast rule. Thus, “The Land Ethic”—that is, Leopold’s essay—cannot be understood as a coda for environmental conduct or reduced to a twenty-five word directive. Because Leopold understands an ethic as the product of a “process” of “social evolution” and stresses that “nothing so important as an ethic is ever ‘written,’” any scholar who locates in “The Land Ethic” Leopold’s ecologically-informed instructions for improving man’s relationship with the environment situates his or her criticism on shaky ground (225).

Enter Simon Estok and his theorizing of ecocriticism through ecophobia. Like Leopold’s efforts to introduce the concept of a land ethic, Estok’s project involves the “extension of moral consideration” beyond standard, contemporary usage. Estok argues that though Peter Singer takes a step in the right direction with his articulation of “speciesism,” “Ecocriticism has yet to formulate a vocabulary for similar prejudices against the broader category of nature” (206). Thus, just as Leopold wanted to combat the perception that the land constitutes an “other” which can be exploited, Estok, too, is concerned with the othering of nature because such differentiation leads to fear and malevolence. However, instead of crediting Leopold as an influence, Estok vehemently denounces his work: after reducing Leopold’s work to the familiar chorus quoted above, Estok argues that though Leopold’s language

sounds good, . . . it is philosophically ungrounded and scientifically naïve. It forces us to rehash the problems associated with the term “beauty.” It suggests that biotic systems are static when, in fact, they are not. It compels us to believe that nature is kind and good, when, in fact, it is morally neutral. Nature actively disrupts the integrity and stability of biotic communities all of the time, and this is neither good nor bad. Leopold’s dictum forces us to accept his anthropocentric notions of good and bad and to foist these notions of good and bad onto nature. (209)

Estok’s argument likely strikes anyone familiar with all of Leopold’s volume as reductive in a number of ways.⁹ However, Estok’s anxiety about “[rehashing] the problems associated with the term ‘beauty’” stands out as the most important for the purposes of this article. Estok seems to assume that we have already determined, conclusively, what “beauty” means, and that any further discussion would be merely redundant—a waste of precious time and energy at a time when environmental apocalypse

represents a perennial threat. Estok's displeasure with the deliberation required by Leopold's ideal land ethic reveals that Estok's fundamental objection grows out of Leopold's tacit refusal to provide streamlined and efficient solutions for environmental issues. As noted above, he repeatedly refrains from proposing specific practices. Rather than prescribing remedies—recycle, plow along contours, maintain wildlife corridors between disparate wilderness areas, etc.—Leopold asks us to think about the illness for ourselves, to individually “rehash” what terms like integrity, stability, and beauty really mean and how we might best foster them. Leopold's implicit demand for deliberation at the individual level is worth a closer look: in addition to frustrating Estok's desire for an efficient coda of principles capable of guiding environmental actions, Leopold's work also accords with Alain Badiou's critique of the way contemporary usage has emptied the word *ethics* of all vigor and meaning. As we shall see, Badiou—a French theorist of the sort considered anathema by those prizing praxis-oriented ecocriticism—would applaud much of Leopold's work on ethics.

Badiou and Subjective Ethics

Before using his work on ethics as a lens through which to examine Leopold, I will provide a more general contextualization of Alain Badiou and his writings since, as a French theorist not named Foucault or Derrida, he likely requires some introduction.¹⁰ Indeed, Gabriel Riera, among others, has commented on Badiou's marginality, but does not apologize for the theorist's limited renown (2).¹¹ Instead, he asserts that the scarcity of scholarly attention accorded Badiou results from the need for an interdisciplinary perspective in order to fully comprehend his novel philosophical program: “He approaches philosophy with the recalcitrant rigor of a mathematician and the economy of means of a modern poet, but also with the passion of a militant of truth” (1). Riera asserts, though, that to anyone versed in mathematical set theory, continental philosophy, and post-structuralist theory, Badiou's system of philosophy is discernible, consistent, and remarkably courageous: “Badiou responds to an age dominated by cultural relativism and skepticism by positing the existence of universal truths” (4). Jason Barker, by emphasizing the importance of the “scientific foundations” for Badiou's philosophy, echoes Riera's description of Badiou's theory as a kind of grab-bag and also expresses a similar respect for the theorist's ultimate aims: “Badiou pierces the common sense of each and every one in order to reveal, against a backdrop of conventional wisdom, philosophy as a militant discourse on truth” (8). Unpacking Badiou, then, clearly depends on careful consideration of the conditions necessary for truth.

Understanding the meaning and importance of several key terms from Badiou's *oeuvre*—including *event*, *subject*, *fidelity*, and *truth*—outfits one with the fundamentals necessary to grapple with Badiou's turn to ethics later in his career. According to Peter Hallward, Badiou divides the “sphere of human action” into two overlapping realms (viii). First, an ordinary, objective realm where the state completely controls and manages all knowledge. This sub-sphere contains no truths and also no subjects, only static situations. Hallward describes the second realm as “an ‘exceptional,’” subjective “realm of singular innovations or *truths*” (viii). One can only enter this realm of truths by affirming and proclaiming the veracity of a non-verifiable *event* that announces itself by forming a clear break with and disruption of the status quo. Events are “irreducible singularities” (Badiou 44)—something greater in magnitude than any situation or natural phenomenon, “a hazardous [*hasardeux*], unpredictable supplement” (67). However, an event, as Hallward emphasizes, is not objectively provable. Instead, events are “ontologically unthinkable” and, after they occur, quickly vanish along with all evidence (Barker 59). Thus, the event creates the possibility of subjectivity—that is, only by militantly proclaiming the occurrence of an event (for which there is no longer any substantiation) does one move beyond the

realm of knowledge, become a subject, and enter into the realm of truths. Interestingly, the truths themselves depend on their subjects in order to exist: truths “persist only through the militant proclamation of those rare individuals who constitute themselves *as the subjects* of a truth, as the ‘militants’ of their cause” (Hallward viii). Riera provides a helpful overview of the interplay between truth, subject, and event:

A truth is produced by the excessive irruption of an event of whose passage only a name remains. A truth is what results from the subjective process once the name of the event is put into circulation in a given situation. What must be stressed here is that the subject does not preexist the event but, rather, that the event is what makes possible a process of subjectivization. (4)

Further, the truth can only endure through a subject’s fidelity to the event, and one can only remain a subject through unflinching fidelity.¹² Truths and subjects substantiate one another through the sustained faith of the subject.

Badiou uses the Apostle Paul as an example of a subject who maintained fidelity to an event which could not be objectively proven to have occurred. Though Paul zealously persecuted early Christians, he experienced a Badiouian *event* on the road to Damascus, as recorded in Acts chapter nine. The blinding light and divine voice that characterized the *event* which incapacitated Paul clearly disrupted his situation and gave him insight into a *truth*—for Paul, the *truth* was that the resurrected Jesus Christ was the Jewish Messiah and the son of God. Accepting that *truth* made Paul a *subject* and simultaneously enabled that *truth* to exist beyond its momentary occurrence—Paul put “this singular occurrence into circulation and [rendered] it into a universal truth” (Riera 12). Because no one was with Paul to confirm the things he experienced, his *truth* could only persist through his militant proclamation and continued *fidelity*. Paul’s lifelong dedication to the Christian Gospel—he was, by all accounts, a zealous advocate of the Gospel and is generally credited with writing thirteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament—Badiou suggests, confirms his *fidelity*.¹³

Fidelity, event, subject, and truth all play a part in Badiou’s project in *Ethics*; however, in this 1993 work, Badiou also considers the problem of evil. Badiou writes in anxiety: he is concerned that the understanding of the interplay between ethics and evil has been reversed. He argues that when properly understood, ethics provides a way for the subject of a truth to discern Evil before it compromises his or her fidelity. Today, “Evil—or the negative—is primary” (Badiou 8). Because evil has been given *a priori* status, ethics have become a strictly defensive reaction against an ever-present evil. As Badiou outlines, this inversion has dangerous consequences.

Badiou is clearly concerned about the way “ethics” has degenerated over time from its early Greek signification of “the search for . . . a wise course of action” (1). He points out that the frequent discussion of “ethics” in print and other media today has rendered the term obsolete. Recognizing that the modern proliferation of these so-called “ethics” replaces an individual’s responsibility for thought—one’s duty to *search*—with a list of appropriate responses to infringements upon human rights, Badiou saw the need to combat what he terms an “‘ethical’ delirium” and a “mindless catechism” (liii). Barker suggests that “for Badiou ethics has become far too thoughtless in its definitions and discredited in its field of application, a victim of too many journalistic platitudes to defend effectively the universal rights of man” (135). Unsurprisingly, Badiou objects to such illegitimate ethics because they can only be remedial and are ultimately nihilistic in that their “underlying conviction is that the only thing that can really happen to someone is death” (Badiou 35). Rather than a concerted effort toward improvement,

these procedural ethics can only be used to redress evil and to stave off death—the formula cannot be applied until some disturbance to the system has been detected. Badiou also recognizes that since such an ethics of response requires a set definition of disturbance and of evil, this kind of ethics quickly becomes a tool seized by existing powers in order to uphold the status quo; by defining disturbance and evil, those in power supervise and define the “objective” application of ethics. Because of the state’s controls, ethics cannot provide an opportunity to become a subject and enter into the realm of truths. Finally, and related to its power-preserving mode and blocking of subjectivization, procedural ethics relegates humans to an unappealing role: “Ethics thus defines man *as a victim* . . . man is *the being who is capable of recognizing himself as a victim*” (10). Humans are only needed to recognize the disruption and carry out the procedure. In such an arrangement we have been reduced to middle managers without any need—or right—to think. Procedural ethics demands that an oil spill be cleaned up. Genuine ethics would prompt an individual to ponder the alternatives to a transient culture addicted to prodigious amounts of fossil fuel.

Oil spills and other human-generated environmental disasters are appropriate to invoke: for environmentalism, as Badiou himself identifies, is no exception to this general tendency toward a profligate use of the word ethics (24). Because environmental threats are often articulated using apocalyptic rhetoric, concerned citizens are understandably eager to act—they fear hesitancy because if they wait too long, it may be too late. In such a climate, the procedural ethics lamented by Badiou flourish because they give the environmental warrior things to do and battles to fight—no thinking required. However, because one can only utilize procedural ethics after identifying a problem, Badiou would argue that environmental ethics cannot be used to *improve* the world. Thus, an environmental ethics based on remediation eliminates the possibility of stewardship (leaving something better than you found it—being a caretaker concerned with the heirs of your garden, farm, or planet).

Badiou’s pointed critique of “ethics” as *they* exist today suggests that Leopold’s “Land Ethic” should be celebrated for the way it demands intellectual labor from environmental activists.¹⁴ Leopold, too, realized that ethics cannot function as a set of rules to be memorized and followed. Instead, he seems to have understood that the goal of genuine ethics—the ethics Badiou favors, it turns out—is to produce ethical people, subjects capable of deliberating over and deciding upon the best solution to individual ethical dilemmas. Leopold’s land ethic also requires a rootedness in place. Because of the ecological diversity within a single watershed, realizing what is “right” and “wrong” requires chronic scrutiny of one’s place. Thus, even in Leopold’s description of a land ethic’s fundamental characteristics—which Estok isolates and attacks—Leopold begs questions of the reader. Badiou would commend Estok for asking these questions, but would also chastise him for complaining about Leopold leaving them unanswered.

Conclusion: Ecocriticism as Theory, Narrative Scholarship as Method

Perhaps I am being too hard on Estok and those, like him, who favor a fully theorized ecocriticism. Estok does, with a touch of sarcasm, point to activism as environmental criticism’s greatest strength: he writes, “It is the activist ambitions that have differentiated us and what we seek to do from the legions of staid thematists who muse uselessly as the world smolders to an end” (205). However, his appraisal of the current state of environmental criticism and his attempt to propel our discipline towards theory suggests that he has not adequately considered the complicated relationship between activism and theory. Any grand plan for symbiotically conjoining theory and praxis at the level of the multitude would, after all, surely sacrifice something important—either by abridging theory or by offering a

superficial and strictly remedial activism. Due to the dangers of such hybridization, I have approached theory and praxis-motivated ecocriticism not as waterways that must be ditched and diked until they are violently combined, but as different channels within a braided river full of intersections. In this article I have examined the point (or perhaps the plane) where Leopold's work on encouraging the development of a land ethic meets Badiou's *Ethics*. My attention to this juncture has demonstrated that the synergy between the works of Badiou and Leopold challenges those who assume an injection of theory will inspire environmental activism. Such critics proceed under the assumption that theory, by engendering the reflexivity necessary to recognize the constructedness of meaning, will resolve murky arguments and illuminate the path forward. In fact, Leopold's concept of a land ethic, though unappealing to aggressive pro-theorists, actually harmonizes quite well with Badiou's *Essay*, and the work of both men seriously hampers almost all of what passes for environmental activism today. Indeed, Badiou's work suggests that unless environmentalists are willing to assume the role of automatons relegated to the remedial labor which ultimately bolsters the existing power structure, Leopold's "Land Ethic" remains valuable. Thus, we should be careful not to cast the deliberate pacing required by Badiou and Leopold in a negative light. Working cautiously is important: regardless of velocity, progress is not progress if it is movement in the wrong direction. Any attempt to extract from theory a set of environmental dictums applicable to the masses is likely a wrong direction. The maintenance of an entirely anti-theory mindset and approach to ecocriticism is, in all likelihood, similarly incorrect. Neither approach provides a vision for a viable future for environmental criticism.

Fortunately, there are other alternatives, and I want to suggest one such possibility—a rather different "program" for maintaining a vigorous ecocriticism. Critics positioned at the extreme ends of the issue advocate a top-down organization which often tellingly locates its apex in their scholarship. They therefore neglect the power of a grassroots model that embraces a multiplicity of approaches. Rather than requiring a choreographed and synchronized consensus, why not allow a mass of ecocritics to follow their own interests and instincts—to maintain fidelity to their own personal truths? As Badiou points out, three prominent theorists—Foucault, Althusser, and Lacan—fused theory and praxis in their lives: in addition to their publications, they were each "the attentive and courageous militants of a cause" (6). Such an undesigned design would produce a flexible ecocriticism composed of thinkers who answer the question of theorizing ecocriticism in a variety of ways. It would certainly be capable of embracing the work of those who, like me, are concentrating on the individual crossroads of theory and ecocriticism, and could also sustain the work of those with a more polarizing opinion. Such a diverse ecocriticism would have room for Estok and Robisch, Dana Phillips and Glen Love. By providing a variety of options, we are bound to find a path—or, more likely, many paths—forward.

Further, while I want to resist any diametrical opposition between theory and ecocriticism, I also want to argue, along with Jim Warren, that ecocriticism is "a theoretical approach in its own right" (771). That is, in addition to the ecocriticism-*versus*-theory paradigm—of which many ecocritics are likely growing weary—I want to conclude by outlining an understanding of ecocriticism-*as*-theory. For one of the ways to step out of the familiar rut that opposes theory and ecocriticism is to conceptualize ecocriticism as not only informed by post-structuralist theory from its very origins, but also as a theory in its own right—one that privileges an ecocentric point of view and pays closer attention to setting than other critical approaches. Also, in the same way that close reading identifies the methodology of New Criticism, narrative scholarship exists as a specific approach to literature adopted and implemented by ecocritics. In short, narrative scholarship functions as an ecocritical methodology that offers insights particularly useful to a discipline focused on place-based literature. Of course, narrative scholarship is no monolithic entity: ecocritic-practitioners each offer their own specific definitions and, occasionally,

terminology. Scott Slovic urged ecocritics to “tell stories,” “use narrative as a constant or intermittent strategy for literary analysis,” and to “encounter the world and literature together, then report about the conjunctions” (28).¹⁵ In *Story Line* (1998), Ian Marshall cited Slovic, and described his approach as “literary criticism enlivened with stories,” a means of using our lives “as equipment for understanding literature,” and as a way to generate a different kind of “foot notes” (7, 8, 147). Finally, John Tallmadge, in “Towards a Natural History of Reading” asked critics of environmental literature to enact a program which engaged in erudition followed by engagement in the form of “disciplined subjectivity” similar to that practiced by Natural Historians (36). However, when the work of these critics is viewed together, an important consensus emerges: narrative scholarship functions as an *additive* approach to literary criticism in which the critic *consults the land as an archive* in an effort to gain insights into an author’s text or life. Narrative scholarship is additive in that it should not take the place of any other type of erudition. Publication history, historical and biographical context, etc. all remain essential. Narrative scholarship merely adds an additional source of information: the land itself.

Of course, narrative scholarship offers no guarantee of insight. In fact, as Michael P. Cohen points out in “Blues in the Green: Ecocriticism under Critique”—and as Tallmadge anticipated in his article from several years earlier¹⁶—narrative scholarship offers several temptations that ecocritics have occasionally found too enticing to resist. Cohen singles out John Elder in particular for reproach, some would say unfairly, citing the latter’s *Reading the Mountains of Home* (1998) as an example of narrative scholarship that in Cohen’s view has degenerated into an example of “praise-song school” ecocriticism that functions more as “clichéd” “travelogue” and “sermonizing” “testimonial” than as rigorous scholarship (21-22). Cohen’s critique applies with equal force to applications of narrative scholarship in which the author appears *compelled* to mention that he or she visited the places discussed. To avoid this kind of checklist scholarship—this kind of formulaic methodology—critics should recognize that narrative scholarship should not appear in published work unless it performs some service. Like other forms of archival research, narrative scholarship may not necessarily yield publishable findings.

As John Tallmadge noted, “any method can be abused, and someone will always make a career out of doing so” (43). However, a lack of discretion on the part of an individual critic should not invalidate the methodology. Narrative scholarship offers the *potential* for novel insights, but never a guarantee. Narrative scholarship also has a special relationship with ecocriticism. Because we pay more attention to setting than other critics, we have a responsibility to check a text against the place it references, keeping in mind, of course, that no environment is static. Narrative scholarship places texts within their geographic context. Just as New Historicism has emphasized the need to guard against reading ahistorically, narrative scholarship provides a check against “ageographic” or “atopographic” reading. To paraphrase Fredric Jameson’s famous imperative—“Always Historicize!” (ix)—ecocritics should make a habit of consulting the land as an archive. In short, “Always Geographize!”

Though he is an environmental historian rather than an ecocritic, Brian Donahue demonstrates the value of narrative scholarship. In *The Great Meadow*, he explains that his observations of the land and his work as a farmer led him to rethink the standard story about why agriculture failed in Massachusetts: “I didn’t want to hear again the timeworn New England tale of rocky hill farms succumbing to hard economic reality because as an ambitious young farmer I wasn’t buying it—the land seemed kindly and responsive to me” (xiii). Because the land was answering his agricultural effort—because, that is, this archive was saying something other than he had been led to believe it would—Donahue recognized that his “career as a practicing farmer . . . turned out to be another kind of scholarship,” and found himself revising the standard story of Concord’s and New England’s agricultural history (xvii). Thus, when properly utilized narrative scholarship complements the post-structuralist

mindset: because Donahue pairs skepticism towards the “just-so stories” of agriculture in Massachusetts with a heightened awareness of on-the-ground particularities, he comes to recognize the way discourse has (falsely) constructed history. His scholarship, then, results from a seamless (perhaps even unconscious) integration of theory and narrative scholarship; in short, his work models the practice of ecocriticism *as* theory.

Endnotes

¹ In an article appearing in that Special Issue of *JoE*, Nicole Seymour falls into line with Lioi. She differentiates the contemporary strains of poststructuralist ecocriticism and queer ecology from “classic” ecocriticism, and even suggests that the former represents a clear “break” with the latter (57). Interestingly, Seymour identifies David Mazel’s *American Literary Environmentalism* (2000) as one signifier of this break, but fails to note that the germ of Mazel’s book was collected in Glotfelty’s *Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) after being published several years earlier. As I discuss in detail below, arguing that ecocriticism progressed from a wholesale rejection of theory into a contemporary acceptance ignores certain historical realities.

² Here Estok appears heavily influenced by Cheryll Glotfelty’s introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, in which she compares ecocriticism to feminist criticism: “Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective . . . ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies” (xviii).

³ See SueEllen Campbell’s “The Land and Language of Desire: Where Deep Ecology and Post-Structuralism Meet” (124-36), Michael J. McDowell’s “The Bakhtinian Road to Ecological Insight” (371-92), David Mazel’s “American Literary Environmentalism” (137-45), and Christopher Manes’s “Nature and Silence” (15-29). Campbell’s piece seems particularly worth emphasizing for the way she outlines some shared tendencies between deep ecology and post-structuralist theory: both methods share “a critical stance,” “begin by criticizing the dominant structures of Western culture and the vast abuses they have spawned,” stand “opposed to tradition,” question “the concepts on which hierarchies are built” (anthropocentrism and traditional dichotomies, respectively), and “criticize the traditional sense of a separate, independent, authoritative *center* of value or meaning; both substitute the idea of *networks*” (127-28, 131). McDowell’s, Mazel’s, and Manes’s essays are also noteworthy for the ways they apply the post-structuralist insights of Bakhtin, Foucault and Said, and Foucault, respectively.

⁴ Badiou’s text was first published as *L’éthique: Essai sur la conscience du Mal* in 1993. I take my text from Peter Hallward’s 2001 translation.

⁵ Oxford UP released a paperback edition in 1968. In 1970 Sierra Club/Ballentine books released an enlarged paperback edition and the book became a surprise bestseller.

⁶ The personal challenges included Leopold’s struggle with “the painful facial spasms associated with trigeminal neuralgia (or *tic douloureux*)” and the fluctuations in the studentry brought about by World War II (Meine 704).

⁷ However, Leopold would not oversee the final changes made to his manuscript; that responsibility fell to his son Luna (along with Joe Hickey and Frances and Frederick Hamerstrom) after Leopold died from a heart attack while fighting a fire on a neighbor’s property just one week after receiving the good news. The book was published in the fall of 1949 as *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There*. The title was one of the changes Luna agreed to make to his father’s manuscript. At the time of Aldo’s death, the book was titled *Great Possessions*. However, editors at Oxford found that title “too Dickensian” (Meine 705). Aldo had also used “Marshland Elegy—And Other Essays” and “Thinking Like a Mountain—And Other Essays” as earlier titles for his manuscript.

⁸ References to the published essay use quotation marks (“The Land Ethic” or “Land Ethic”). Because it is my contention that Leopold did not view his essay as an actual land ethic but only wished to discuss what one would look like *when it arrived*, I refer to the concept Leopold described as “a land ethic” rather than “Leopold’s land ethic.”

⁹ Grounds for objecting to Estok’s reading of Leopold are many. First, any treatment of Leopold’s “anthropocentrism” needs to account for the ecocentrism present in “Thinking Like a Mountain.” Also, his description of riding horseback on White Mountain during a lightning storm makes clear his understanding that nature is not kind and good: “The explosions are fearsome enough, but more so . . . are the splinters that fly when a bolt explodes a pine. I remember one gleaming one, 15 feet long, that stabbed deep into the earth at my feet and stood there humming like a tuning fork” (126). Again, given the audience Leopold envisioned for *Sand County*, labeling the work as “scientifically naïve” is simply unfair. Finally, “stability” is not nearly as concrete a term as Estok makes it out to be. As a student of Clementsian succession (see Newton, 184-91), Leopold was not using “stability” as a stand in for “static”: rather, he understood that ecosystems change, but, even in the midst of change, maintain a homeostasis quite different from a human-imposed monoculture.

¹⁰ Because I discuss only one of Badiou’s works—his *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*—in much detail and do not claim to advance any new argument about his theory, I have found it convenient to utilize scholarship from critics who specialize in Badiou’s work. I have found the works of Barker, Riera, and Hallward (both his introduction to *Ethics* and his *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*) especially useful. Though the scope of the primary and secondary sources on Badiou that this article considers is limited, I have, whenever possible, presented what I take to be the consensus view of Badiou’s theory, or emphasized points of contention and my own readings.

¹¹ Riera suggests that Badiou’s marginality is a result of “his public image as a militant philosopher who still believes in the possibility of forms of the collective that defy neoliberal logic” and of his extensive use of mathematical set theory (2). Riera’s conception of Badiou as a liminal figure is not, however, uniformly accepted. In fact, Hallward suggests that Badiou is rivaled only by Deleuze and Derrida as the most important contemporary French philosopher (viii) and Barker labels him “the most ambitious speculative thinker since Hegel” (1).

¹² For Badiou, one’s fidelity to a truth can fail in three ways: delusion, betrayal, and disaster. That is, one might confuse an event’s simulacrum with the real event, abandon the truth, or identify the truth with a total power. See *Ethics* 71-87.

¹³ For more of Badiou’s discussion of Paul and his writings, see his *Saint Paul. La fondation de l’universalisme* (1997), *Ethics* 123-25, and Bell’s article.

¹⁴ Obviously Badiou would not applaud Leopold’s decision to develop a *Land Ethic*. For Badiou, there are no specialized ethics; there is only one universal ethics.

¹⁵ Although I quote from Slovic’s 2008 *Going Away to Think*, I list him first because his call for narrative scholarship dates to “Ecocriticism: Storytelling, Values, Communication, Contact,” a paper delivered at the 1994 meeting of the Western Literature Association.

¹⁶ Tallmadge lists several potential “objections” to narrative scholarship, or, to use his terminology, “a natural history of reading”: “that such criticism is mere self-indulgence; that the critic, by engaging in narrative, presumes to supersede the artist and blur the line between literature and criticism; that by endeavoring to speak for nature the critic is merely perpetuating the scandal of human domination; that engagement is just an excuse to avoid real, serious work in the library; and so forth” (43).

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