



## Nature as Ecology: Toward a More Constructive Ecocriticism

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In the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, one of the flagship texts of ecocriticism, Cheryll Glotfelty recalls advice she received from environmentalist Wallace Stegner on developing a “branding system” for what she refers to as a “mixed herd” of scattered ecocritics (xxii). Stegner suggested that ecocriticism be allowed to remain “large and loose and suggestive and open, simply literature and the environment and all the ways they interact and have interacted” (qtd. in Glotfelty xxii), and, considering this advice, it's safe to say that he would be quite happy with the way that the field has developed since the *Reader's* publication. Today, ecocritics not only study the ways in which literature and the environment interact and have interacted, they have also cultivated an interdisciplinary interest, extending the scope of their work into the fields of environmental philosophy and bioethics as well as the environmental sciences, especially ecology (Tiffin 12); however, what exactly the resulting multifarious discourse *is* depends on who you ask. Twenty-first century ecocriticism is a field both wonderfully diverse and so ideologically fragmented as a result of that wonderful diversity that ecocritics rarely agree on what the major questions in the field are, let alone how best to answer them.

Yet, it is this fragmentation that gives ecocriticism its vibrancy, its continued and even increasing relevance. Glotfelty's *Reader* was published in 1996, eighteen years after William Rueckert first introduced the term “ecocriticism,”<sup>1</sup> and yet Glotfelty's main goal, through three hundred ninety-one pages and twenty-five collected essays, was still to answer the question “What is ecocriticism?” (xxvi). Many of the essays included in the *Reader* are in direct conversation – if not outright argument – with one another and even today – sixteen years later still – “What is ecocriticism?” is a question with no easy answer.

This is as it should be. As a discipline that is connected to literary theory by the dual bridges of culture and science – a culture that is becoming increasingly aware of its culpability in worldwide environmental

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destruction through the work of science – ecocriticism would be worse than useless if it was unable to reinvent itself in the face of this growing environmental awareness. It continues – appropriately – to adapt, not unlike the ecosystems that it discusses.

So, how does one define the parameters of a critical discourse that can't agree on its own tenets? I suggest that instead of searching for a definition of ecocriticism in the answers it provides, we look instead at the questions it asks. There are many, for certain, but a few stand out: the Big Questions that are the most repeated and that can often be glimpsed lurking behind many smaller questions. By enumerating these Big Questions and synthesizing some of the most important responses to them, I hope to be able to create a skeleton – if you will – upon which the muscles of ecocriticism can be seen to work. I will then extrapolate from this model to critique the thesis of Timothy Morton's book *Ecology Without Nature* and, through that critique, suggest a constructive revision of Morton's idea of “ecology without nature,” a conceptual mode of responsible, ecological living that I label “nature as ecology.”

### The Biggest Question: What Is “Nature”?

Central to ecocriticism is the question of “nature”: what is it, and what is our relationship to it? I ask this second question since the very fact that we have the word “nature” in our vocabulary implies our assumption of a fundamental separation or intentional distinction from it. Nature is that thing Over There, somewhere that we choose go to, something that we can either take part in or avoid as we choose. What's more, the existence of the word also implies that, far from being something natural<sup>2</sup>, nature itself is a very human idea. We've created a label for those places that we perceive as being qualitatively apart from *our* “civilized” places.

Contrary to how we often use the word in a sentence, “nature” is not just a thing, or a place, or even a state of being. It is actually, as Morton explains in *Ecology Without Nature*, “a transcendental term in a material mask” (14). Nature “stands at the end of a potentially infinite series of other terms that collapse into it [and] a metonymic series [...] becomes a metaphor” (14). As a stand-in for a near-endless parade of other terms, then, “nature” becomes, on one level, meaningless in and of itself: it means the trees, the ocean, the mountains, the sunlight, etc., but never has a meaning of its own. Morton also suggests, though, that on another level, nature is a norming force. Something that is “unnatural” is against the norm (14). On this second level, we even see *ourselves* as unnatural, apart from the metonymy of “nature.” The struggle to reconcile these two senses of nature – both as a palimpsest of our embodied experiences of so-called natural places *and* as everything from which the post-Lapsarian human has been estranged – is a paradox with which ecocriticism is deeply engaged.

But, what if “nature” is the reason for this paradox in the first place? Is understanding the human relationship to nature the key to finding the human place in the world ecosystem, or is all of ecocriticism's talk of nature merely masking the real issue: that by making “nature” a topic of literary, scientific, and cultural consideration we've only further distanced ourselves from it? While deconstructing the aims of ecocriticism in *Ecology Without Nature*, Morton argues for this very idea: that even having an idea of “nature” is counterintuitive to what he calls an “ecological state of human society” (1). That is to say, if we want to live as responsible members of an ecological world system, we

must abandon the idea of “nature” and, by extension, the man/nature dichotomy that our idea of “civilized” society is built on. For Morton, only dissolving the foundation of the “nature” idea can allow us to successfully function ecologically. Could it be that in studying man's relationship to nature, ecocriticism is directly damaging that relationship by insisting upon the nature-concept?

Ecocriticism is certainly guilty – at times, at least – of perpetuating the man/nature dichotomy. Consider as one example the field's treatment of what's often classified in capital-“L” Literature as “nature writing.” Despite ecocritical veneration of writers like Edward Abbey, Aldo Leopold, and John Muir, there is a conceit at work in such writers' composed retellings of adventures in so-called nature, a conceit that becomes all the more obvious as more time passes, and more forests are replaced by cities. Morton describes this conceit thusly: “Nature writing tries to be 'immediate' [...] but this can only be a supreme illusion, ironically, in a world in which one can find Coke cans in Antarctica. The immediacy that nature writing values is itself reified as a Coke can” (125). He goes on to argue that “Nature writing partly militates *against* ecology rather than for it. By setting up nature as an object “over there” – a pristine wilderness beyond all trace of human contact – it re-establishes the very separation it seeks to abolish” (125). In establishing a distinction between “nature” and “ecology” – his “ecology” being, broadly, the idea that the world is made up of sociobiological systems and that to be “in nature” is to simply understand and accept our responsibility as a species living within these systems – Morton clearly illustrates traditional nature writing's one-step-forward-two-steps-back hypocrisy. Certainly, this genre can make us aware of our unnatural effects on natural places<sup>3</sup>, but does this awareness outweigh the simultaneous reification of the man/nature dichotomy?

Even more fundamentally, we should question to what degree nature writing communicates to us an unmediated, natural experience in the first place. We have, in practice, fully infiltrated this natural world that we wish to observe in its supposedly pristine form through books like Abbey's *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*. It has long been known in more scientific disciplines that one cannot be perfectly removed from that which one wishes to observe, and yet this consequence of observation is often not considered in ecocritical responses to nature writing. Morton suggests that “[w]e could address this problem by considering the role of subjectivity in nature writing. What kinds of subject position does nature writing evoke? Instead of looking at the trees, look at the person who looks at the trees” (125). To put Morton's suggestion into action, let us briefly consider Don Scheese's passionate defense of Abbey's “nature writer” status in the essay “*Desert Solitaire: Counter-Friction to the Machine in the Garden*”.<sup>4</sup>

Scheese characterizes Abbey as being in the nature-writing vein of Thoreau, Muir, and Leopold, claiming that he “is yet one more inhabitant of the wild” (304).<sup>5</sup> But what “wild” is Scheese talking about? The desert trailer – complete with a refrigerator stocked weekly from the local grocery – that Abbey lives in during the time written about in *Desert Solitaire*? How does our hearing Abbey's experience secondhand give us any insight into living ecologically? Worse yet, what unintended consequences does Abbey's presence in the desert have? Whether we answer this question on a small scale (consider the poor rabbit he impulsively brains with a rock as an exercise in Getting Closer To Nature), or a large scale (the impact on Arches National Monument due to increases in tourism throughout the canyonlands of the American southwest caused directly by the popularity of Abbey's books), the answer remains the

same: nature is made unnatural by the imposition of any member of a culture that upholds the idea of pristine, “natural” places.

So, then, what would a world without “nature” look like? Contrary to Morton's too-cynical argument, there *is* a school of thought within ecocriticism – largely working interdisciplinarily between literature, anthropology, archeology, and cultural studies – that presents the argument that not only is it possible for a human society to be “in” nature – thus achieving Morton's “ecology without nature” in an indirect way – it is in fact that very type of society which dominates our genetic and cultural past. By briefly surveying the ecocritical discourse surrounding pre-Lapsarian human culture, we can shed light on where “nature” came from, as well as consider where it – and we – may be going.

### **Prehistory and the Plow: Where Does “Nature” Come From?**

Let us take a look at what ecocritical discourse has to say on the historical origins of the man/nature dichotomy. Archeology and anthropology tell us that the Fall of Man – the movement from a hunting and gathering lifestyle to settled agriculture that is most popularly symbolized in the West by the Eden story – took place between eight and twelve thousand years ago.<sup>6</sup> This historical moment is significant in ecocritical discourse, as both permanent settlements and sustained agriculture are cultural manifestations of the post-Lapsarian idea that the natural world can be consumed as a resource and that ecosystems can be fully understood and controlled through the employment of technology.

The human shift to settled agriculture could also be seen as the historical moment at which “nature” became part of man's vocabulary,<sup>7</sup> both literally and culturally. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. What if it wasn't the physical practice of settled agriculture that created the nature/man divide, but instead something even more fundamental to the way we see the world? Paul Shepard's book *Coming Home to the Pleistocene* gives us an idea of how deep our acceptance of this harmful dichotomy might run.

Shepard argues that it was not the invention of agriculture or the idea of landowning that separated us from nature, but instead the advent of written history. As he tells it, it was Hebrew “demythologizers” who “created a reality outside the rhythmic cosmos of the gentiles who surrounded them and who were grounded in prehistoric, mythical consciousness with rituals of eternal return” (8). William Cronon agrees, asserting a parallel between the advent of written history, linear time, and monotheism: “Nature in Western culture is the product of a monotheistic religious tradition; it is often unrecognizable for people whose cultures have not taught them to worship a lone deity” (35). Cronon's claim is borne out by recent research performed on existing polytheistic and animistic hunter-gatherer cultures like the !Kung San. It is basically impossible to overstate the impact that the development of monotheism had on human culture,<sup>8</sup> but it is just as important to consider the impact it had on the world ecosystem, by indirectly spawning man's belief in his superiority to the natural world.

By employing written history rather than an oral tradition, the Hebrews changed humanity's concept of time. Prehistorically experienced as a circle, a cycle, time was instead made linear as specific events were preserved beyond their immediate duration in writing (9). As Judaism flourished, this idea of linear

time spread, bringing with it dire ecological consequences. Lynn White, Jr. explains that “the intellectuals of the ancient West denied that the visible world had had a beginning. Indeed, the idea of a beginning was impossible in the framework of their cyclical notion of time. In sharp contrast, Christianity inherited from Judaism not only a concept of time as nonrepetitive and linear but also a striking story of creation” (9).<sup>9</sup> Linearity of time not only introduced and enforced that idea with which all we post-Industrial-Revolution Westerners are now so familiar – Progress – but the Christian creation story includes an injunction from God Himself that man should “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and *subdue it*; have *dominion* over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over *every living thing that moves on the earth*” (The Bible, Gen. 1.28, emphasis added).

Our severance from mythic time has had far-reaching consequences for us as a people trying to find our way in a world in which we see ourselves as being apart from the natural. “The nature of the primitive world is at the center of our modern anxiety about [change],” claims Shepard, “because history cannot resolve for us the problem of change, which was mythically assured for many thousands of years as a form of renewal” (11). History forces us to lose touch with our natural, biological heritage because “we humans are not now what we once were – bacteria or quadruped mammals or apish hominids” and since history sees the time in which we were those things as “past,” “other forms of life are irrelevant” (11). The severance from nature caused by our development of linear time is ultimately – ironically – a cycle of self-reinforcement; the further in time we move from the original crisis point, the harder it is for us to resist equating “prehistoric” with “primitive.”<sup>10</sup> Worse yet, this fundamental metaphysical severance began to manifest serious real-world ecological consequences with the advent of agriculture.

I will refrain from giving too thorough a survey of the effects of agriculture on the land, and on man's relationship to it before modern (i.e. medieval) times – much can be inferred from what I've already discussed, and I don't want to belabor the point.<sup>11</sup> However, the medieval period, especially in Western Europe, deserves special consideration, as it is during that age that man makes the leap from “primitive” settled agriculture to the first forms of truly industrialized agriculture – the mechanism that would eventually become today's monocultured fields and factory farms. Lynn White, Jr. provides more compelling evidence that this change was not merely a technological but also a sociocultural one. Starting towards the end of the seventh century, certain northern European peasants started to employ a new, more efficient sort of plow. This new plow was much more effective than old-style plows, but as a function of this increased efficiency, it required the use of eight oxen instead of the usual two. This required families to pool their oxen and, as a result, land was no longer divvied up on a per-family basis – as had been the case previously – but instead on the basis of one or another plow-team's capacity for production (8).

Clearly, this was a dramatic change in the way that people related to the land. White goes on to explain that this type of plow and the landowning system that was ushered in to deal with it was unique in the world at the time (8). He closes by asking: “Is it coincidence that modern technology, with its ruthlessness toward nature, has so largely been produced by descendants of these peasants from northern Europe?” (8). Through industrial agriculture, medieval Westerners formalized a break with nature in practice that had been executed in theory long before. That break was then later perpetuated across the globe along with its Western progenitors.

Through Shepard's and White, Jr.'s work, Morton's basic contention that "nature" is a man-made construct endemic to (at least) Western culture is borne out, leaving the question: "what now?" Well, for starters, this puts ecocriticism at odds with itself – again. On one hand, the field often fails to look beyond the man/nature dichotomy – sometimes even intentionally emphasizing it for added effect, as in the case of its veneration of traditional nature writers – and so it sees our place as stewards of a nature that can't protect itself from us. Yet we've also now seen a discourse that provides an alternative to this view, one that could potentially propagate a more constructive view of man's legacy with regard to nature.

If we are well and truly estranged from nature, and have been quite literally since the beginning of recorded history, how do we respond to the last two centuries of increasing environmental crisis without simply reifying that estrangement? William Cronon indirectly makes the case for such a more-constructive ecocriticism when he points out that "the ideas that 'history begins at Sumer,' that the modern age caps a human project started in antiquity, and that the story of humankind rests in triumph over the malevolent forces of nature cannot withstand critical scrutiny. Indeed, they beg for criticism, for deconstruction" (7). I believe that performing this deconstruction is a niche that ecocriticism needs to fill.

### **Progress and the Pastoral: How Do We Respond to Environmental Crisis?**

The Western cultural response to our estrangement from nature – greatly exacerbated by the environmental awareness brought to the fore during the Industrial Age – can be seen broadly as having taken two forms.<sup>12</sup> First, we have in many ways chosen to deal with this estrangement by ignoring it. More specifically, we have chosen to worship – in a secular sense – Progress instead of ecology. Ecocriticism's consideration of the Western fascination with Progress is based on the idea that something significant changes in our relationship to nature with the cultural acceptance of the idea of the mind/body split as far back as Plato. The agricultural Fall from nature discussed in the previous section happened in various times and in various places for various reasons (Shepard 81), and although its ultimate effect might have been to further distance humans from nature, there is no evidence to show that societies switched to agriculture as a response to life in what they perceived as a cruel and capricious natural world. The same cannot be said for the idea of the mind/body split, which came to prominence, according to Harold Fromm's essay "From Transcendence to Obsolescence: A Road Map," as a direct response to a nature men already perceived as antagonistic.

Part of Western culture for millennia and most effectively popularized by Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, the idea that man can be considered separately as soul and body severs him from the natural world metaphysically as effectively as agriculture severs him in physical practice. Fromm investigates the effect of the mind/body split on man ecocritically, arguing that our obsession with man-as-rational-mind has "been the product of man's sense of his own physical weakness, his knowledge that Nature could not be tamed or bent to his own will" (30). Note two motivations here: one, man realizes he cannot control nature's innate processes; two, man realizes that his body is tied to nature in at least one insurmountable way: death. As Fromm explains:

[T]here was never any serious likelihood that man could win the body-mind battle on the field of the body. If one found that it was necessary to produce ten children in order to insure the survival of five, if one could be swept away by plagues that killed hundreds of thousands, if one lost one's teeth by thirty, could not be certain of a food supply for more than a few days, carted one's own excrements out to the fields or emptied chamberpots out the window, one could hardly come to believe (despite man's fantastic ability to believe almost anything) that one's ideal self would ever stand forth on the field of the body, in the natural world. (30-1)

Things have, of course, changed since the time of Plato or even of Descartes. Today one could make a case that we may have – or soon will have – the ability to “stand forth on the field of the body” and claim victory. The cost of this battle, though, is greater even than losing touch with our Pleistocene instincts. Instead, according to Fromm, we lose touch with transcendence – spirituality – itself. “For what,” he wonders, “after all, is so dreadfully unpleasant about contemporary Western middle-class life that it needs to be transcended?” (32). This inversely proportional relationship between physical comfort and spiritual need has as its ultimate result a decline in religion in the West that began simultaneously with European industrialism and continues to today (31).

For Fromm, the endpoint of our obsession with Progress is an alteration in the very nature of transcendence itself: spirituality no longer needs to exist because we no longer need to comfort ourselves against the ravages that capricious Nature wreaks on our hapless bodies, but we instead feel a need “based on satiety and not on deprivation, and it does not seek a haven in another world but rather a more beautiful version of this one” (33). Once industrialized society had allowed us to be “mostly unaware of a connection with Nature that has been artfully concealed by modern technology,” we had the luxury to engage in nostalgia for “the way things used to be” (33). Nostalgia, specifically, for a way of life that never actually existed, living “in tune with nature” – a concept we could only have created after Falling out of tune in the first place. The primary way that ecocriticism engages with said nostalgia is through the study of the literary trope known as the pastoral.

In *Ecocriticism*, his survey of the field, Greg Garrard dates the modern pastoral back to the Romantics' “poetic responses” to the Industrial Revolution (33).<sup>13</sup> Garrard lists three main characteristics of the pastoral: “the specifically literary tradition, involving a retreat from the city to the countryside”; any literature that contrasts the rural and the urban; and the “pejorative sense in which 'pastoral' implies and idealisation of rural life that obscures the realities of labour and hardship” (33). The pastoral became immensely popular in colonial and then frontier America, due to a sort of cultural “perfect storm” that Leo Marx describes in *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Idea in America*. Europeans in the throes of a literary pastoralism characterized by “[t]he ruling motive of the good shepherd, leading figure of the classic, Virgilian mode, was to withdraw from the great world and begin a new life in a fresh, green landscape” come upon a “virgin continent” (3). The timing ensured that the pastoral was catapulted out of its literary frame and enacted upon the face of what would become America.

Nearly coincident with the seemingly inevitable American fascination with pastoral came a similar fascination with technology, Progress, and – more specifically – steam power. Hence, “the machine in the garden.” Marx muses: “Consider how the spectacle of the machine in a virgin land must have struck the mind. Like nothing ever seen under the sun, it appears when needed most: when the great west finally is open to massive settlement, when democracy is triumphant and gold is discovered [...] here – as if by design – comes a new power commensurate with the golden opportunity of all history” (206). If we view the circumstances of mid-1800s America through Marx's historical lens, is it any wonder that by the early 1900s the middle of the country would be quite literally farmed to death?

Ultimately, the pastoral taken beyond the literary realm is no more free of the influence of industry than nature is free from the influence of man. As Johnathan Bate puts it in *The Song of the Earth*: “You only need Arcadia when your reality is Rome” (74). But where do you turn if there is no Arcadia left? Marx wryly points out that today “An inchoate longing for a more 'natural' environment enters into the contemptuous attitude that many Americans adopt toward urban life (with the result that we neglect our cities and desert them for the suburbs)” (5). How is the pastoral modified when there is little land left to work, and when all of the arable land is worked by the employees of faceless megacorporations? Marx has no answers, opining that “American writers seldom, if ever, have designed satisfactory resolutions for their pastoral fables” (364) – for good reason, it seems.

More recently, the motivation behind the pastoral – the mythification of pre-industrial natural places – can be seen to be embodied in the creation of America's network of nature preserves, National Forests, National and State Parks, and Wilderness Areas. These places conveniently remove the human element that is so troubling in the pastoral through an ideological slight of hand that is written directly into the legislation that makes the places possible. Consider the 1964 Wilderness Act on the definition of the term “wilderness”:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions[.] (“The Wilderness Act”)

Where to begin? The separation between “earth and *its* community of life” and man? The assignment of a “primeval” character to the land?<sup>14</sup> Clearly, though many of these wilderness places were and are still established with the best of intentions, they are not meant to encourage us to confront our basic estrangement from nature; in fact, their existence is in many ways yet another reinforcement of the same man/nature dichotomy.

In his “Wilderness Letter”, Wallace Stegner advocates for a “geography of hope” (519) before the encroaching forces of industry. His contention is that by setting up what he calls “wilderness banks” (516), we will be able to freely develop the remaining surface of Earth, as that bank will be “good for our



spiritual health even if we never once in ten years set foot in it" (515). But this "solution" is not ecological in the way that Morton uses the term. It assumes a separation between Stegner's wilderness bank and the rest of the world, rather than showing an awareness of the connectedness of a world ecosystem. Stegner's solution fails to acknowledge that what happens in civilization effects the wilderness and vice versa. A line drawn on a map or a set of gates closing off a park cannot stop the movement of polluted groundwater or the fall of acid rain.

We continue to lose awareness of our indebtedness to and our reliance upon the so-called natural world as our ability to convince ourselves that that world remains only as an item of curiosity or nostalgia increases. Fromm summarizes this potentially deadly progression thusly:

[I]t becomes apparent that man has failed to see that now, as in the past, the roots of his being are in the earth; and he has failed to see this because Nature, whose effects on man were formerly *immediate* is now *mediated* by technology so that it appears that technology and not Nature is actually responsible for everything. This has given to man a sense that he mentally and voluntarily determines the ground of his own existence and that his body is almost a dispensable adjunct of his being" (35).<sup>15</sup>

Considering the lengths we go to in our attempts to deny, obfuscate, outrun, and romanticize our connection to the natural world, is it any wonder that it wasn't until after two World Wars and a nuclear near-miss that the we in the West began to acknowledge our ability to effect nature on a large scale? Only now is the conversation over global warming reaching a fever pitch, yet compelling evidence for the phenomenon existed over a century ago (McKibben 8-9).

We are loath to give up our myth of Progress, though we find it necessary at times to reinforce our resolve by resorting to simplistic reconstructions of the past – but the evidence is piling up. It is becoming harder and harder to deny the fact that what we do on this Earth affects more than just us, that not just our past but also our present and future are and will be determined in large part by how we choose to enact "ecology." "Thus," Fromm argues, "the problem of the environment,' which many people persist in viewing as a peripheral arabesque drawn around the 'important' concerns of human life, must ultimately be seen as a central philosophic and ontological question about the self-definition of contemporary man" (38). Originally a discourse limited to investigating the intersections between literature and the environment, ecocriticism has more recently expanded both within the boundaries of literary studies and across disciplinary lines, in part driven by this very question nipping at its heels: how exactly do we successfully attack "the problem of the environment"?

Is ecocritique an inherently political act?<sup>16</sup> If not, *should* it be? Where should we draw the line between critique and action? Is our role as ecocritics simply to read about the environment and publish in journals? Or should we be out on the Glen Canyon Dam with Abbey's George Hayduke, dynamite in hand?

## Poetics vs. Policy: Must Ecocriticism Function Socially and Politically?

Surprisingly, there is comparatively little discussion within ecocriticism regarding its social and political applications, or lack thereof. There are of course many historical examples of texts that fall under the purview of ecocriticism affecting social and political change on behalf of the natural world. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* is often considered to be the spark that touched off the modern environmental movement. Abbey's work, especially *Desert Solitaire*, had – and still has – an effect on Americans' appreciation of their southwestern desert country. Wallace Stegner's "Wilderness Letter" has been used time and again as a rallying cry for saving many remaining wilderness areas. Terry Tempest Williams and Stephen Trimble's collection *Testimony: Writers Speak on Behalf of Utah Wilderness* was famously cited by Bill Clinton as the motivation for the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. And, of course, there are the writings of John Muir, which helped preserve much wilderness that might have otherwise ended up under a bulldozer's tread.

Muir is an interesting example, for he was not only a writer for the wilderness, but also an activist. He began the Sierra Club, he hobnobbed with President Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot, and he led the charge for environmentalism by example. Is this what we should expect of ourselves as ecocritics? Are we of more value if we enact our arguments in "the real world," or are we most effective when we choose not to venture out from behind the keyboard? Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's book *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* addresses this question in an attempt to meld ecocriticism with the sociopolitical agenda of postcolonialism.

Huggan and Tiffin raise the point that while ecocriticism often includes what they call an "advocacy function" (13), it is sometimes difficult to tell who it is advocating *for*. When we employ ecocriticism's advocacy function, do we, like Thoreau, speak a word for nature? Do we speak for the people of a specific place? Do we speak for all people? *Can* we speak for all people? *Should* we? Huggan and Tiffin's postcolonial ecocriticism "preserves the aesthetic function of the literary text while drawing attention to its social and political usefulness, its capacity to set out symbolic guidelines for the material transformation of the world" (14). In this way, "postcolonial ecocriticism" lays a blueprint for twenty-first century, Abbey-esque ecocritics who can wax poetic about the beauty of the desert while at the same time urging readers to consider wilderness parks as potential bases for conducting guerrilla warfare against an ecologically ignorant government.

For another, less anarchic take on the ecocritic's place in the scheme of things, consider Bate's *The Song of the Earth*, in which he argues that "poetry – perhaps because of its rhythmic and mnemonic intensity – is an especially efficient system for recycling the richest thoughts and feelings of a community" (247). Bate extrapolates to suggest that the poet has a special significance in society through a sort of aesthetic instantiation of James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, as he believes that: "Every time we read or discuss a poem, we are recycling its energy back into our cultural environment" (247). Much like Morton, Bate criticizes twentieth century literary theory in general, and ecocriticism in particular because it "could not look out from the text to the planet. It was too busy manipulating the words 'nature' and 'man' to pay any attention to man's manipulation of nature through technology" (248). He seems to be in search of a

way to move language beyond a hermeneutic circle that neuters its usefulness in the situated, physical world.

Bate ultimately chooses to center on poetry specifically, and the idea that poetry can perform through language a Heideggerian bringing-forth. He goes on to explain via Heidegger: "When a tree brings itself forth into blossom, it unconceals its being as a tree, whereas the unconcealing of the being of a chalice is the work not of the chalice but of the craftsman" (253). For Heidegger, modern technology disrupts this unconcealment, and "poetry is our way of stepping outside the frame of the technological, of reawakening the momentary wonder of unconcealment" (258). Bate argues that poetry is unique across writing in that it is "a form of being not of mapping" (262). His project throughout *The Song of the Earth*, then, is to show that "a poem is not only a making of the self and a making of the world, but also a response to the world and a respecting of the earth" (282). Perhaps this argument mitigates the question of whether or not ecocritics should be social and political animals – in Bate's view, they are both intrinsically by what they do, and only need to continue doing just that to "save the earth" (283) through *poesis*.

## Conclusion: Nature As Ecology

In his brilliant essay "The Comic Mode," Joseph Meeker convincingly argues for a relationship between ecology and comedy, between tragedy and industrial Progress (163). Meeker characterizes Progress-as-tragedy thusly: "We demand that one species, our own, achieve unchallenged dominance where hundreds of species lived in complex equilibrium before our arrival. In the present environmental dilemma, humanity stands like a pioneer species facing heroically the consequences of its own tragic behavior" (164). The catch here is, of course, that we *desire* to see ourselves this way – Meeker believes that the role of the tragic hero is in our blood, so to speak. It should come as no surprise then that he notes that "The intellectual presuppositions necessary to the creation of tragic literature have not been present in all civilizations. It is conspicuously absent, for instance, in Oriental, Middle Eastern, and primitive cultures" (157) – again, here, there is something particular about Western culture that compels us to battle against the natural. Meeker's solution to this self-identification dilemma echoes Morton's argument for an ecological human society, and therefore I introduce my closing thoughts on the value of ecocriticism by way of a comparison between the two.

Though I believe Morton's idea of "ecology without nature" is a necessary challenge to an ecocritical discourse that is often too interested in studying "nature" as a quality, an idea and a place apart from man and civilization, I find that Morton is hesitant to suggest a method of *how* we can accomplish such a thing. In *his* essay, though, Meeker indirectly begins to lay out an idea of what an ecological humanity might look like in his study of literary comedy:

Comedy demonstrates that man is durable even though he may be weak, stupid, and undignified. As the tragic hero suffers or dies for his ideals, the comic hero survives without them. At the end of his tale he manages to marry his girl, evade his enemies, slip by the oppressive authorities, avoid drastic punishment, and to stay alive. His victories are small, but he lives in a world where only small victories are possible. His

career demonstrates that weakness is a common condition of mankind that must be lived with, not one worth dying for. (159)

Meeker's idea of comedy seems to parallel the ultimate motivation for Morton's idea of "ecology without nature": the search for a way back to a pre-Lapsarian understanding of nature, not necessarily through a return to a hunting-gathering lifestyle, or the forsaking of our possessions and technology, but through a coordinated act of cultural awareness during which we forsake "metaphysical despair" in order to engage in a "ritual renewal of biological welfare" (159). In an ecology without nature, we choose to live the comic life of the animals over the tragic life of the human – the supposed non-animal. And why should we not? After all, consider how tragedies always end. Fromm invokes Faust, appropriately, writing that "In the past, man's Faustian aspirations were seen against the background of his terrifying weakness in the face of Nature. Today's man's Faustian posturings take place against a background of arrogant, shocking, and suicidal disregard of his roots in the earth" (39). But how to return to an eco-comic life?

I believe that this question is the most important one for future of ecocritics to tackle. If the most fundamental originary question of ecocriticism deals with our severance from nature, our Fall, then what better use for the future of the discipline than an attempt to understand how best to repair that severance? As one potential answer, I'd like to suggest an alteration to "ecology without nature." As much as I appreciate Morton's means, I find his end unsatisfactory, and worse, potentially destructive. Indicating the fundamental necessity of abandoning the man/nature dichotomy is the brilliance of Morton's project, and yet I cannot follow him through to the point at which we abandon the idea of "nature" completely. Too many steps back towards an ecological way of living have been taken in the name of "nature," especially in the last fifty years of Western society, to simply toss out the idea in all its forms. "Nature" has recently become a rallying cry for exactly the type of ecological living that Morton and Meeker advocate for. Therefore, in place of an "ecology without nature" I would suggest "nature as ecology."

What would happen if, instead of abolishing "nature" from our minds, we began thinking of nature as *everything* within the world ecosystem? Ecology without nature leaves us with the unintended consequence of having to navigate the idea that without nature, everything is unnatural. Including ourselves, our buildings, our cities, our cars and even our oil spills and strip mining and clear-cutting as part of nature allows us to navigate the mounting environmental catastrophe from an ecological point of view – how can we not live ecologically if we are part of nature? – but it also allows us to wield all the positive force of "nature" while minimizing the negative repercussions that the idea has given rise to in the past.

Our relationship with what we still choose to see as the non-human world is changing dramatically – to a degree this is now out of our hands. We have already, in a sense, overridden nature, as Bill McKibben argues when he acknowledges that "We have changed the atmosphere, and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial" (54). Are we animals, deluding ourselves into thinking otherwise, or are we a special case, made so by our ability to modify our environment on a global scale? It is becoming clear that both are true. What better way,

then, for us to reconcile our effects on the globe with an ecological mode of living that recasts nature as ecology? There is no better project for ecocriticism than finding a way for us post-Lapsarian apes to acknowledge our place in a new “nature” in which we too can be natural.

## Endnotes

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- 1 Among others, Harold Fromm suggests Rueckert's 1976 essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” as the origin for the term in his foreword to Glotfelty's *Reader*. Rueckert's essay is also reprinted in that same collection.
- 2 Though part of my goal in this section is to problematize our use of and assumptions about the word/idea “nature”, it is perhaps a testament to its metonymic ubiquity that I find myself unable to do so without resorting in some cases to the use of terms like “natural” or “natural world” as contemporary Western culture would typically understand them, as I do in this case.
- 3 Consider Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and its effect on the modern environmental movement, for example.
- 4 Abbey himself refused the label of “nature writer” on the grounds that he saw *Desert Solitaire* as “the plain and simple account of a long sweet season lived in one of the world's most splendid places” (Abbey xii) and thus not worthy of critical investigation.
- 5 Scheese fails to note that Abbey claimed to have intentionally avoided reading Muir, having not seen the point of reading those nature writers who in his eyes failed to go “far beyond simple nature writing to become critics of society, of the state, and of our modern industrial culture” (Abbey xi).
- 6 For some more mythic-age examples of this frequent trope, consider, among others, the Cain and Abel story and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.
- 7 For the rest of this essay, unless otherwise stated, “agriculture” will mean specifically “settled agriculture”, as there are of course nomadic forms of agriculture as well, and those practices don't necessarily imply the same set of values in relation to the land that settled agriculture does.
- 8 Obviously a lengthier discussion is beyond the scope of this essay; to learn more, consider Karen Armstrong's *A History of God* as a starting point.
- 9 For a lengthier discussion of the effect of the Bible on Western culture at large, I recommend starting with Herbert Schneidau's *The Sacred Discontent: The Bible and Western Tradition*.
- 10 Much has been written about the evidence that prehistoric society was no more “primitive” than our own. Consider this excerpt from Max Oelschlager's *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* that sums up the argument nicely: “The claim that Paleolithic life was short is problematic and controversial. Modern medicine has increased the survival rate of infants and has made major strides in dealing with trauma, thus creating an appearance, resting on statistical artifact, that the human life span has been increased [...] The modern mind is oblivious to the reality that starvation, malnutrition, warfare, and pestilence are post-Neolithic phenomena and therefore probably a consequence of urbanization, explosive population growth, and the socioeconomics of *agri*-culture [...] Further, we have no reason to think that we have surpassed our prehistoric kin in cognitive powers and achievements. The intellectual life of hunter-gatherers was as rich as that of modern people, and the rate of intellectual innovation, as well as technological and artistic creativity, also appears to be roughly equivalent. Civilized people do have the legacy of the past to augment their efforts, but there is no evidence that the neocortex has evolved” (15).
- 11 Consider, among others, Charles A. Reed's essay collection *Origins of Agriculture*.
- 12 I distinguish here between the advent of industrial agriculture (as White describes above) and the Industrial Revolution, as I see the former to be a development spurred by an invention and the latter to be a development spurred by a widespread ideology. Considering the thrust of this essay, it seems appropriate to consider the beginning of the Industrial Age to be the late 1700s, coincident with the rising popularity in

- England of the Romantic poets and their awareness of industrialism's environmental effects (aesthetically, at least, if not scientifically).
- 13 Garrard, among others, traces this literary trope all the way back to Virgil and Theocritus, but for the sake of brevity I will pick up discussing it here as it takes shape in the American frontier, as the American form of the pastoral is more germane to my larger discussion in this essay.
  - 14 The *OED*'s first definition for "primeval" is "Primal, original, primitive; spec. of or relating to the earliest history of the world" ("Primeval", *adj.*). I would argue, based on the observer's inherent effect on the observed, that no place on earth can now rightly be described as "primal", "original", or "primitive." As a rather blatant example of this, consider Google Earth.
  - 15 The extremity of this renewed disassociation with the body – not the mind/body split, *per se*, but the technology/body split, if you will – is seen in the discipline of posthumanism. Huggan and Tiffin charge posthumanism with being anti-ecological in the sense that it is "a point of view characterised by the assumption that embodiment is an historical accident rather than a biological necessity" (207), a viewpoint that, from an ecocritical standpoint, we clearly indulge at our peril.
  - 16 In *Ecology Without Nature*, Morton uses the term "ecocritique" in a very particular way; here, I simply use it to indicate the act of applying ecocriticism.

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