

Round Table: *Theorizing Ecocriticism: From Phobia to Philia*

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Ecocriticism is a relatively new school of literary and textual criticism whose exponential growth, both of academics and publications in the field, is testimony to its acceptance. Moreover, the current environmental crisis makes the case for a critical theory that brings ecological issues to the forefront. However, Ecocriticism has its detractors, being often accused of not having a theoretical basis. Peter Barry points out that perhaps the major difference between the dominating critical schools and Ecocriticism is that ecocritics tend to reject the notion that everything is socially and/or linguistically constructed, which is one of the principal recurrent ideas of most other theories. Due to this rejection of constructedness and to Ecocriticism's focus on a new dimension to the reading of a text, Barry affirms that Ecocriticism has "turned criticism inside out" (2009: 248). Might this be at the root of the frequent skepticism towards environmental criticism in traditional academia?

While initially Ecocriticism did not have a strong theoretical slant, to the degree of being accused of theoretical phobia, this has changed over the years, and theory has become a major concern, as the recent special focus section of the key journal of ecocriticism, *ISLE* 17.4 (2010) illustrates. Thus the purpose of this round table is to present a variety of ecocritical theories and directions, highlighting not only its diversity—Peter Barry notes that "ecocriticism is itself a diverse biosphere" (2009: 259)—but also its theoretical basis, often based on other disciplines, as one definite characteristic of environmental criticism is its interdisciplinary nature, as illustrated by the three panelists. Terry Gifford presented the cross-pollination of transatlantic cultural perspectives of the traditional literary mode of pastoralism and how this has adapted to our urgent cultural needs. Juan Ignacio Oliva highlighted the fertile ground of merging two different critical schools, Postcolonialism and Ecocriticism. Finally, Carmen Flys foregrounded the cross-fertilization of different disciplines such as law, public policy, activism and philosophy with Ecocriticism, reassessing the concept of justice and ethics applied to nature.

Gifford analyzed the two different perspectives of pastoralism: UK and US. While in British criticism 'pastoral' is a pejorative term, associated with the idealised and the nostalgic, often located in a Golden Age, typified by a movement of retreat to an Arcadia followed by a return to the urban court renewed by various degrees of insight, the US notion of the 'pastoral' ranges from the representative to the realistic. In the UK there is recognition of the classical pastoral tradition that is distinct from the current pejorative use of the term in literary criticism. In the US the term 'pastoral' has a third, more general meaning concerned with any representation of wilderness, landscape, or nature, as distinct from the urban.

Of course, any theory of the pastoral has to acknowledge a parallel anti-pastoral tradition. This is what Raymond Williams called "counter pastoral", a corrective to idealisation and escapism (1973: 23). Moreover, outflanking the polar tension of

pastoral and anti-pastoral is the challenge facing the contemporary nature writer. If 'pastoral' has become an obsolete term, associated with idealisation, what is needed is a term for writing that takes responsibility for both our problematic relationship with our natural homeground (from slugs to the solar system), and our representations of that relationship, such as "post-pastoral" (Gifford 1999). This is not postmodern, in that it is conceptual rather than temporal: not 'after' but 'beyond' pastoral limitations. It encompasses an awareness of the problematics of our environmental crisis. So it includes Shakespeare's pastoral dramas, the work of Blake, the best of Wordsworth, American writer Rick Bass's narrative *Fiber* and the English poet Ted Hughes's collection *River*. Rather than the escapism of so much pastoral literature, the post-pastoral demonstrates that retreat can result in a more complex understanding of community, in a fully ecological sense.

Oliva discussed the convergences and contestations between two modern trends in literary and cultural criticism, Postcolonial Studies and Ecocriticism, which have recently come together. The culmination of this tight relationship is the recent publication in 2010, precisely by some of the 'founders' of Postcolonial Theory, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, of *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Largely speaking, if we take into account the diminishing role of Nature in postmodern societies, many elements of comparison between Postcolonial Theory and Environmental Studies come to mind when regarding the subaltern position in which Earth, and all the non-human species that inhabit it, have been progressively treated in the evolution of humankind, and especially in the last and current historical period that has been denominated as the Anthropocene Era. Postcolonial Studies have as one of their main objectives the analysis of the subaltern condition in the power pyramid scale and the deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of unequal "Others". In this sense, postcolonial concepts such as class, gender and race, and items like "dislocation", "surfacing", "voicing", or "agency", in colonized subjects can be easily applied to the ongoing debate over Nature as an articulated material agent that can be addressed differently throughout the history of humanity. Thus, postcolonial concepts can serve as a tool in the rewriting of the canon of Nature in human culture, and animal and pastoral literature can be reread to endow it with a new sense of dignity in which, the mind will have to be decolonized of prejudiced anthropocentric thoughts.

Finally Flys presented a developing approach to environmental justice, often perceived as the anthropocentric face of environmentalism, which is that of ecological justice, the biocentric face. Using legal and political theories of justice, she illustrated how the concept of justice can also be applied to Earth's others. The concept of justice, according to David Schlosberg (2007), is based on four principles: distribution, recognition, capabilities and participation. In other words, if there is no equality in these four areas we have a legal case of injustice. If these four principles were applied to Earth's others, awarding nature a moral consideration, would that warrant the right to justice? Clearly linked to this debate is the one on agency. Do we recognize the agency of nature? Val Plumwood suggests that we try to view the "world as another agent or player" (2002: 227). Agency lies at the heart of another current philosophical and ecocritical debate. For example, physicist and philosopher Karen Barad, speaks of a "posthumanist performative reformulation" of the notion of discursive practices and materiality (2008: 126) and presents her theory of "agential realism". She claims that

[a]gency is not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity. Nor does it merely entail resignification or other specific kinds of moves with a social geometry of antihumanism. Agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment,

not something that someone or something has ... Agency is not an attribute whatsoever –it is 'doing'/'being' in its intra-activity. (2008: 144)

If agency is divested of the concept of intentionality, then it becomes much easier to see that Nature has agency. However, speaking for Nature recalls the postcolonial debate of speaking for the subaltern. Undoubtedly, humans must acknowledge that they are "interest carriers" any time that they try to attribute subject status to animals or "inanimate" entities such as rocks or rivers. Yet, we as humans make sense of things through words, and as such, in order to understand the non-human, we need words. Thus, Literature and an "empathizing imagination" (Malamud 2003: 7) might be one way to attempt to understand and make sense of our relationships in and with the world.

This round table traced only a few of the current theoretical engagements in Ecocriticism; they illustrate, though, not only the dynamics of the field but also its clear relevance to some of the most pressing issues of our contemporary world. The panelists also presented a series of issues and questions for debate, based on their presentations. The field is truly interdisciplinary, as the above debates suggest, diverse and eclectic in the readings, open to new ideas and approaches.

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