
The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism

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The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism

The Emergence of Ecocriticism

URSULA K. HEISE

THE FIRST FEW FRAMES OF THE BELGIAN COMIC-STRIP ARTIST RAYMOND MACHEROT'S WORK "LES CROQUILLARDS" (1957) PROVIDE A SHORTHAND

for some of the issues that concern environmentally oriented criticism, one of the most recent fields of research to have emerged from the rapidly diversifying matrix of literary and cultural studies in the 1990s. A heron is prompted to a lyrical reflection on the change of seasons by a leaf that gently floats down to the surface of his pond (see the next p.): "Ah! the poetry of autumn . . . dying leaves, wind, departing birds. . . ." This last thought jolts him back to reality: "But—I'm a migratory bird myself! . . . Good grief! What've I been thinking?" And off he takes on his voyage south, only to be hailed by the protagonists, the field rats Chlorophylle and Minimum (the latter under the spell of a bad cold), who hitch a ride to Africa with him. "Are you traveling on business?" he asks his newfound passengers. "No, for our health," they answer.

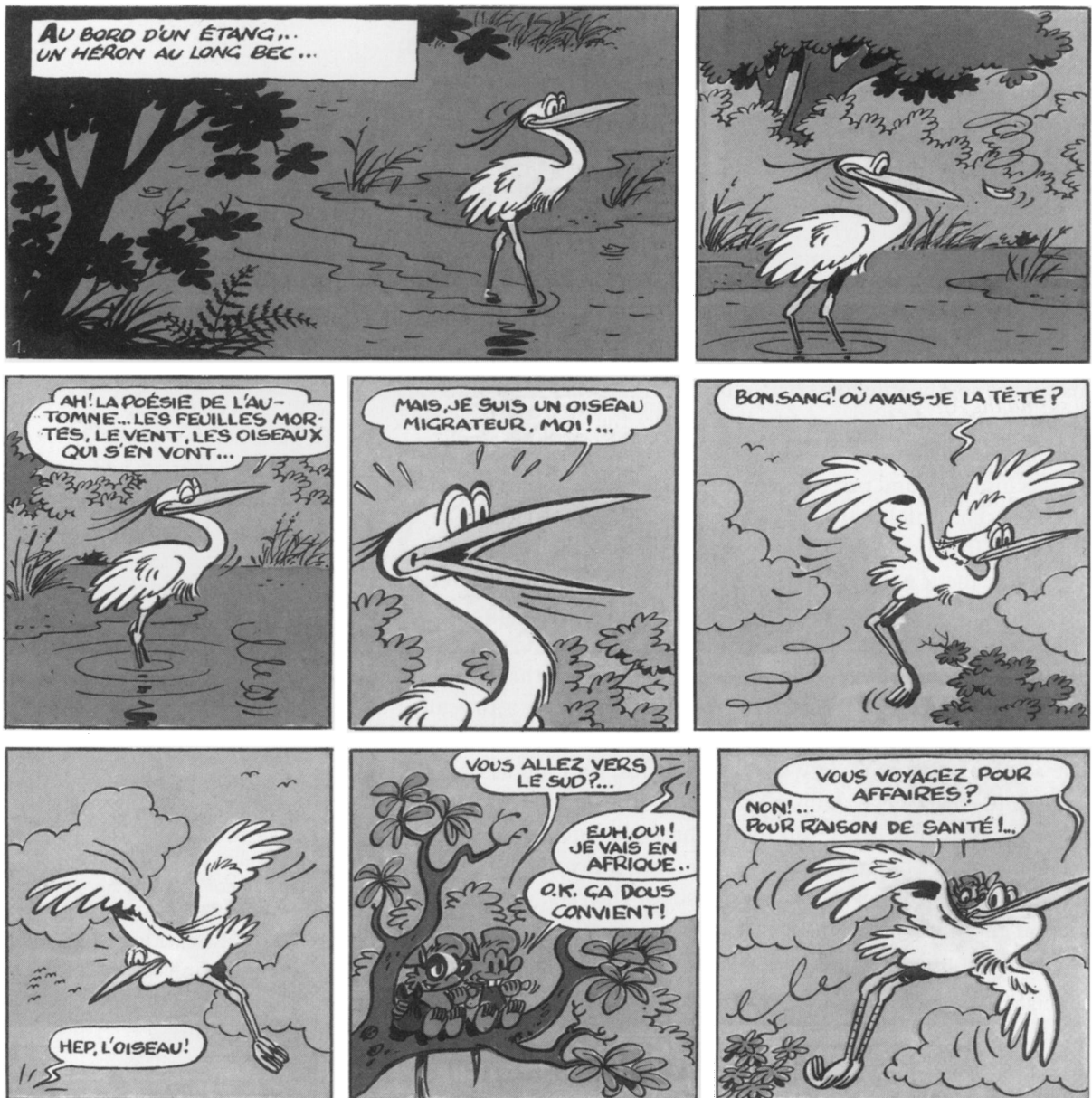
The scene unfolds around two conceptual turns relevant to ecocriticism. The speaking animal, a staple of comic strips, is credited with an aesthetic perception of nature that relies on the long Western tradition of associating beauty with ephemerality: autumn's appeal arises from its proximity to death, decay, and departure, a beauty the wind will carry away in an instant. But ironically this Romantic valuation of nature separates the heron from his innate attunement to its rhythms: the falling leaf makes him sink into autumnal reverie and forget to seek out warmer latitudes. As soon as he takes flight, however, Macherot once again twists the idea of seasonal migration by turning the heron into a sort of jetliner on bird wings transporting what might be business or leisure travelers. What is (or should be) natural for the bird is not so for the rats, whose illness hints at another type of failure to adapt to seasonal rhythms. On one hand, this comic strip humorously raises the question whether an aesthetic appreciation of nature brings one closer to it or alienates one from it; on the other, it highlights the tension between bonds to

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nature that are established by innate instinct, those that arise through aesthetic valuation, and those that are mediated by modern-day travel. The heron's flight remains comically suspended between the vocabularies of nature, art, and international business. In what ways do highly evolved and self-aware beings relate to nature? What roles do language, literature, and art play in this relation? How have modernization and globalization pro-

cesses transformed it? Is it possible to return to more ecologically attuned ways of inhabiting nature, and what would be the cultural prerequisites for such a change?

This is a sample of issues that are often raised in ecocriticism, a rapidly growing field in literary studies. The story of its institutional formation has been told in detail and from several perspectives (Cohen 9–14; Garrard 3–15; Glotfelty, "Introduction" xvii–xviii, xxii–



xxiv; Love 1–5; Branch and Slovic xiv–xvii):¹ scattered projects and publications involving the connection between literature and the environment in the 1980s led to the founding of ASLE, the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment, during a convention of the Western Literature Association in 1992. In 1993 the journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* was established, and in 1995 ASLE started holding biennial conferences. Seminal texts and anthologies such as Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), Kate Soper's *What Is Nature?* (1995), and Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) followed, as well as special journal issues (Murphy, *Ecology*; *Ecocriticism*). At the same time, newly minted ecocritics began to trace the origins of their intellectual concerns back to such seminal works in American and British literary studies as Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950), Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967), Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* (1973), Joseph Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival* (1974), and Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* (1975). ASLE membership grew rapidly, topping a thousand in the early years of the new century, and offspring organizations in Australia–New Zealand, Korea, Japan, India, and the United Kingdom were founded, as was, most recently, the independent European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and Environment (EASLCE).

Given the steadily increasing urgency of environmental problems for ever more closely interconnected societies around the globe, the explosion of articles and books in the field may not strike one as particularly surprising. But what is remarkable about this burst of academic interest is that it took place at such a late date; most of the important social movements of the 1960s and 1970s left their marks on literary criticism long before environmentalism did, even though environmentalism

succeeded in establishing a lasting presence in the political sphere. Why this delay?

The main reason lies no doubt in the development of literary theory between the late 1960s and the early 1990s. Under the influence of mostly French philosophies of language, literary critics during this period took a fresh look at questions of representation, textuality, narrative, identity, subjectivity, and historical discourse from a fundamentally skeptical perspective that emphasized the multiple disjunctures between forms of representation and the realities they purported to refer to. In this intellectual context, the notion of nature tended to be approached as a sociocultural construct that had historically often served to legitimize the ideological claims of specific social groups. From Roland Barthes's call in 1957 "always to strip down Nature, its 'laws' and its 'limits,' so as to expose History there, and finally to posit Nature as itself historical" (*Mythologies* 175; trans. mine) to Graeme Turner's claim in 1990 that "Cultural Studies defines itself in part . . . through its ability to explode the category of 'the natural'" (qtd. in Hochman 10), the bulk of cultural criticism was premised on an overarching project of denaturalization. This perspective obviously did not encourage connections with a social movement aiming to reground human cultures in natural systems and whose primary pragmatic goal was to rescue a sense of the reality of environmental degradation from the obfuscations of political discourse.

By the early 1990s, however, the theoretical panorama in literary studies had changed considerably. New historicism had shaded into American cultural studies, which styled itself antitheoretical as much as theoretical, signaling not so much the advent of a new paradigm as the transition of the discipline into a field of diverse specialties and methodologies no longer ruled by any dominant framework. Ecocriticism found its place among this expanding matrix of coexisting projects, which in part explains the theoretical diversity it

has attained in a mere dozen years. But this diversity also results from its relation to the sociopolitical forces that spawned it. Unlike feminism or postcolonialism, ecocriticism did not evolve gradually as the academic wing of an influential political movement. It emerged when environmentalism had already turned into a vast field of converging and conflicting projects and given rise to two other humanistic subdisciplines, environmental philosophy and history. This diversity resonates in the different names by which the field has been identified: *ecocriticism* has imposed itself as a convenient shorthand for what some critics prefer to call *environmental criticism*, *literary-environmental studies*, *literary ecology*, *literary environmentalism*, or *green cultural studies* (see Buell, *Future* 11–12).

Changes in the perceived cultural relevance of biology also helped to open up the conceptual space for ecocriticism. Sociobiological approaches that had been rejected in the 1970s reentered debate in the 1990s as genetic research and biotechnologies began to shed new light on old questions about innate and acquired behavior. While many of these questions have remained intensely controversial among scientists and humanities scholars and while many ecocritics are highly critical of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, there can be no doubt that the 1990s offered a climate very different from that of earlier decades for investigating the relation between nature and culture. This is not to say that the early 1990s marked an altogether welcoming moment for the articulation of an environmentalist perspective on culture. The so-called science wars, brewing since the 1980s, came to a head with Paul Gross and Norman Levitt's polemical repudiation of constructivist approaches to science in their book *Higher Superstition* (1994). The physicist Alan Sokal's faux-poststructuralist essay on quantum mechanics in the journal *Social Text* in 1996 took the confrontation between scientists and their critics to a new level of ferocity as well as

public awareness. Ecocriticism, with its triple allegiance to the scientific study of nature, the scholarly analysis of cultural representations, and the political struggle for more sustainable ways of inhabiting the natural world, was born in the shadow of this controversy. Even though the grounds of the debate have shifted since then, the underlying issues of realism and representation that informed the science wars continue to pose challenges for ecocritical theory.

Because of the diversity of political and cross-disciplinary influences that went into its making, ecocriticism is not an easy field to summarize. Even if ecocritics, perhaps more than other academic scholars, still long for a sense of community and shared holistic ideals, the reality is that they diverge widely in their views. Recent vigorous critiques and ripostes are healthy signs of a rapidly expanding field. Somewhat like cultural studies, ecocriticism coheres more by virtue of a common political project than on the basis of shared theoretical and methodological assumptions, and the details of how this project should translate into the study of culture are continually subject to challenge and revision. For this reason, ecocriticism has also become a field whose complexities by now require the book-length introductions that have appeared over the last two years: Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* (2004), Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), and, shorter and sketchier, Walter Rojas Pérez's *La ecocrítica hoy* (2004).

Environmentalism and the Critique of Modernity

Like feminism and critical race studies, ecocriticism started with a critical reconceptualization of modernist notions of human psychological identity and political subjecthood. The ecocritical attempt to think beyond conceptual dichotomies that modernity, the Enlightenment, and science were thought to have imposed on Western culture—the sepa-

ration of subject and object, body and environment, nature and culture—articulated itself, as it did in other fields, through the combination of analytic modes of academic discourse with more experientially based forms of writing that Scott Slovic has called “narrative scholarship” (“Ecocriticism”). But ecocriticism in its first stage differed sharply from other forms of “postmodern” thought in that it sought to redefine the human subject not so much in relation to the human others that subjecthood had traditionally excluded as in relation to the nonhuman world. Environmentalism and ecocriticism aim their critique of modernity at its presumption to know the natural world scientifically, to manipulate it technologically and exploit it economically, and thereby ultimately to create a human sphere apart from it in a historical process that is usually labeled “progress.” This domination strips nature of any value other than as a material resource and commodity and leads to a gradual destruction that may in the end deprive humanity of its basis for subsistence. Such domination empties human life of the significance it had derived from living in and with nature and alienates individuals and communities from their rootedness in place.

Projected alternatives to this kind of modernity extend from deep ecology to social ecology. Deep ecology foregrounds the value of nature in and of itself, the equal rights of other species, and the importance of small communities. Social ecology, by contrast, tends to value nature primarily in its human uses and has affinities with political philosophies ranging from anarchism and socialism to feminism. Deep ecology, associated often with a valuation of wild and rural spaces, self-sufficiency, a sense of place, and local knowledge and sometimes with an alternative spirituality, played an important part in the early stages of ecocriticism. Especially for Americanists, this philosophy resonated with writers from Thoreau (in a certain reading of his work) to Wendell Berry, Edward Ab-

bey, and Gary Snyder. From the late 1990s on, however, the field gradually moved to the more social-ecological positions that dominate ecocriticism today (Buell, *Future* 97–98).

This shift was prompted in part by the sheer numerical expansion of the field, which led scholars from a wide variety of intellectual backgrounds to bring their interests to bear on environmental issues. In part it also emerged under the pressure of explicit challenges to the field: like other areas of cultural theory, ecocriticism saw its initial assumptions questioned for what they had socially excluded, historically erased, and textually forgotten (or refused) to account for.² The historicization of the wilderness concept by the environmental historian William Cronon is undoubtedly one of the most important critiques. Unlike ecological movements in other parts of the world, Cronon argues, environmentalism in the United States tends to hold up an ideal of landscapes untouched by human beings as the standard against which actual landscapes are measured. But this standard is problematic in its relation to past and future. It conceals the fact that the apparently transhistorical ideal of *wilderness* only acquired connotations of the sublime and sacred in the nineteenth century and that the cultural valuation of pristine and uninhabited areas led to the displacement of native inhabitants and in some cases to the creation of official parks. Far from being nature in its original state, such wildernesses were the product of cultural processes. The wilderness concept makes it difficult for a political program to conceptualize desirable forms of human inhabitation, relying as it does on the categorical separation of human beings from nature.

For ecocritics, who had often referred to statements such as Thoreau’s “In wildness is the preservation of the world” as touchstones, Cronon’s critique prompted a reexamination of established environmental authors as well as a broadening of the canon. Greater attention to women’s and Native American

literature shifted the emphasis to more communal engagements with a natural world conceived as always intertwined with human existence.³ But greater inclusiveness also brought more challenges, since not all minority literatures proved as easy to assimilate into ecocritical concerns as Native American texts, many of whose authors had long been active in the environmental movement. African American literature, for example, as Michael Bennett and others have shown, is difficult to address with standard ecocritical vocabulary, since African American authors tend to associate rural life and sometimes even wild places with memories of slavery and persecution rather than with peaceful refuge (see Wallace and Armbruster). “[O]f what use is ecocriticism if the culture under consideration has a different relationship with pastoral space and wilderness than the ideal kinship that most nature writers and ecocritics assume and seek?” Bennett asks, and he emphasizes that “even the most inviting physical environment cannot be considered separately from the sociopolitical structures that shape its uses and abuses” (195, 201).

Critiques such as these led to increased emphasis on urban spaces (Bennett and Teague; Dixon; MacDonald) as well as on issues of social inequality that environmental problems often overlap. From the turn of the millennium, environmental-justice criticism increasingly influenced the field by drawing attention to social and racial inequalities in both access to natural resources and exposure to technological and ecological risk (Martínez-Alier; Adamson, Evans, and Stein). “Aesthetic appreciation of nature has not only been a class-coded activity, but the insulation of the middle and upper classes from the most brutal effects of industrialization has played a crucial role in environmental devastation,” T. V. Reed argues in his call for an ecocriticism that fuses concerns for natural preservation with those for distributive justice (151). Along with the emergence of a fully post-

structuralist ecocriticism (about which more later on), this critical agenda has opened up the full gamut of concepts and methods from cultural studies for environmental criticism.

The shift to a more in-depth engagement with the sociopolitical framing of environmental issues has also fundamentally, if not always explicitly, altered the way in which most ecocritics view the relation between modernity and nature. In earlier types of environmental scholarship, nature tended to be envisioned as a victim of modernization but also as its opposite and alternative; nature is now more often viewed as inextricably entwined with modernity—both as a concept and in the material shape in which we experience it today. More than that, environmentalists and ecocritics have begun to see how their search for a more authentic relation to nature is itself a product of modernization. The geographer David Harvey points out that

the problem of authenticity is itself peculiarly modern. Only as modern industrialization separates us from the process of production and we encounter the environment as a finished commodity does it emerge. . . . The final victory of modernity . . . is not the disappearance of the non-modern world, but its artificial preservation and reconstruction. . . . The search for an authentic sense of community and of an authentic relation to nature among many radical and ecological movements is the cutting edge of exactly such a sensibility. (301–02)

Understanding itself in this way, as both derived from and resistant to modernity, may also help ecocriticism develop modes of critique of the modern that are less dependent than they have been so far on recourse to pre-modern forms of inhabitation and culture.

Scientific Intersections

Ecocriticism's engagement with modernization has been partly shaped by environmentalists' ambivalence toward scientific inquiry

(see Heise). On one hand, science is viewed as a root cause of environmental deterioration, both in that it has cast nature as an object to be analyzed and manipulated and in that it has provided the means of exploiting nature more radically than was possible by premodern means. On the other hand, environmentalists are aware that the social legitimation of environmental politics and their own insights into the state of nature centrally depend on science. In ecocriticism, this ambivalence has translated into divergent perceptions of how the sciences should inform cultural inquiry.

At one end of the spectrum, a small number of ecocritics, such as Joseph Carroll and Glen Love, would like to make the life sciences in general and evolutionary theory in particular the foundation of literary study, following E. O. Wilson's idea of "consilience." Starting from the idea that culture is based on the human "adapted mind"—that is, "a biologically constrained set of cognitive and motivational characteristics" (Carroll vii)—this group seeks to explain cultural phenomena in terms of what they accomplish for human adaptation and survival. Many scholars in the humanities almost instinctively recoil in horror from such a sociobiological agenda, associating it with social Darwinism or Nietzschean ideology and the legitimations they have historically provided for various forms of political hegemony. But, in fairness, Darwinian theory should not simply be conflated with such ideological appropriations: Carroll categorically dismisses social Darwinism as a value-laden misinterpretation of evolutionary theory (xiv).

The more crucial question is what contribution an adaptationist approach, with its concept of human nature as a "universal, species-typical array of behavioral and cognitive characteristics" (vii), might be able to make to a discipline that has recently invested most of its theoretical capital in historical and cultural diversity. One answer is that there is no compelling reason why cultural inquiry

has to focus on cultural differences rather than similarities. Fair enough—literary criticism certainly used to be more interested in universals than it has been in the last three decades. If the adaptationist approach can produce an analysis of cultural and literary universals that is descriptive rather than normative and that does not rely on the values of one particular culture dressed up as human nature (as was usually done in earlier attempts to define universals), it deserves to be heard as part of a full theory of culture. Obviously, an important part of such an analysis would have to be a careful examination of the terms used to describe the object of study: words such as *literature*, *aesthetics*, *narrative*, and *culture* itself have complex cultural histories and cannot be taken for granted in a biologically based approach.

What is less clear is how such an adaptationist understanding might inflect the vast areas of literary study that are concerned with historically and culturally specific phenomena. Human anatomy and physiology have not changed substantially over the last few thousand years, whereas cultural forms have varied enormously over the same time period. While a biological perspective might provide a general background, it seems at present unlikely to transform the study of such variations in the near future. In this sense, literary Darwinism offers not so much a competing theoretical approach as the outline of a different research area (culture, in its most abstract and universally human dimensions and evolutionary functions) that only partially overlaps with what most cultural scholars focus on today (cultures, in their historically and locally specific dimensions and social functions).

Most ecocritical work is shaped by science in a more indirect but no less important way. Ecology, for many environmentalists a countermodel against "normal" analytic science, has opened the way for a holistic understanding of how natural systems work as vast interconnected webs that, if left to

themselves, tend toward stability, harmony, and self-regeneration. A fully mature ecosystem, the climax community of classical ecology, consists of a set of animals and plants ideally adapted to their environment. With such a standard in mind, science can be easily associated with a set of ideal values and a code of ethics: "Ecology . . . seemed to be a science that dealt with harmony, a harmony found in nature, offering a model for a more organic, cooperative human community" (Worster 363). Understood in this way, science can help determine what kinds of human interventions into the natural world are acceptable and what types of cultures are to be considered superior or inferior, and it can help ecocriticism evaluate texts that engage with nature. A powerful image behind an important social movement, the idea of holistic, self-regenerating ecosystems has catalyzed political, legal, and cultural changes that have unquestionably benefited the environment and human welfare (340–87).

But by the time ecocriticism emerged in the 1990s, this idea had already been exposed as no longer in accord with the state of knowledge in ecological science. Even by the 1960s, ecology had become a more analytic, empirical, and mathematical field than it was at its emergence in the late nineteenth century. Holistic notions of universal connectedness, stability, and harmony had lost much of their credibility among ecological scientists, for the most part engaged in specialized research (372–79). As environmental historians realized, ecology no longer offered a general foundation for "morality and causality": "Historians thought ecology was the rock upon which they could build environmental history; it turned out to be a swamp" (White 1113, 1114). The biologist Daniel Botkin's popular scientific book *Discordant Harmonies* (1990) brought such insights to a broader public by presenting a different and more complex image of ecosystems as dynamic, perpetually changing, and often far

from stable or balanced: "We have tended to view nature as a Kodachrome still-life, much like a tourist-guide illustration . . . but nature is a moving picture show" (6).

This idea is taken up in the first book-length critique of ecocriticism, Dana Phillips's *The Truth of Ecology* (2003), which lambasts environmental scholars for adhering to an obsolete notion of ecological science and for transferring ecological terms to literary study by means of mere metaphor (42–82). Phillips is certainly right in cautioning ecocritics against undue metaphorization, moralization, or spiritualization of scientific concepts and in calling for more up-to-date scientific literacy—a literacy that, one should mention, would minimally require some training in quantitative methods that does not to date form part of cultural scholars' education. Yet a comprehensive alternative model for linking ecology and ecocriticism does not emerge from his analysis. Perhaps, given the varied and controversial nature of current connections between the humanities and sciences, such a model would be a rather tall order. Nevertheless, because of the importance of ecological science for environmentally oriented criticism, Garrard is surely right that defining their relation more clearly is one of the key challenges for ecocritical scholarship (178).

Those ecocritics who situate their work at the poststructuralist end of the spectrum would go one step further than Phillips by not only criticizing particular ideas about the environment wrongly believed to derive from science but also exposing the concept of the environment itself as a cultural construct. In his study of antebellum American literature, for example, David Mazel emphasizes that his analysis

is not . . . about some myth of the environment, as if the environment were an ontologically stable, foundational entity we have a myth about. Rather, the environment is *itself* a myth, a "grand fable," a complex fiction, a widely shared, occasionally contested, and literally

ubiquitous narrative. . . . [T]his study treats the environment as a discursive construction, something whose “reality” derives from the ways we write, speak, and think about it. (xii)

Mazel examines how early America’s self-definition as “Nature’s Nation” generates environmental discourses that end up bolstering conservative social agendas despite their professed progressive politics (xii). This resolutely constructivist and politically oriented argument is quite familiar from new historicism and cultural studies. To the extent that a scientific view of nature forms part of the analysis at all, it is to study science’s role in the emergence of a socioculturally grounded conception of the environment. Most ecocritics have been reluctant to go as far as Mazel in reducing nature to a discursive reality, but he illustrates one extreme of the theoretical spectrum: while literary Darwinists subordinate cultural phenomena to scientific explanation, ecopoststructuralists subordinate material reality and its scientific explanation to cultural analysis. Ecocritical inquiry, most of which adopts a more dialectical perspective on the relation between culture and science, plays itself out in the tension between these two extremes.⁴

Realisms: Perception and Representation

This tension between realist and constructivist approaches crucially involves questions about how our perception of the environment is culturally shaped and how that perception is mediated through language and literature. One strand of ecocriticism critical of modernist thought has tended to privilege philosophies and modes of writing that seek to transcend divisions between culture and nature, subject and object, and body and environment. The European phenomenological tradition has provided some of the most powerful impulses for thinking beyond such dichotomies. The German philosopher Mar-

tin Heidegger’s notion of “dwelling” as part of human essence and as a form of existence that allows other forms of being to manifest themselves (160–64) has been interpreted as proto-environmentalist by some. The French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on bodily experience, and especially the erotic metaphor that undergirds the “embrace of the flesh of the world,” spelled out in his *Le visible et l’invisible*, (188–95, 302–04), has been taken up by some ecocritics as a way of envisioning the physical interrelatedness of body and habitat. The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess’s “deep ecology,” finally, itself influenced by Heidegger, portrays environmentalism as the realization of a self that encompasses both the individual and the cosmos (171–76).

The influence of these phenomenological approaches makes itself felt in numerous literary works and critical analyses that focus on the importance of a “sense of place,” on “dwelling,” “reinhabitation” (Snyder), or an “erotics of place” (T. Williams). Sometimes this cognitive, affective, and ethical attachment to place is envisioned in terms of epiphanic fusions with the environment: Edward Abbey describes in *Desert Solitaire* how after a prolonged solitary stay in the wilderness, he began to perceive a leaf when he looked at his hand (251); Snyder’s “Second Shaman Song” and one of Aldo Leopold’s sketches feature similar experiences of total immersion.⁵ This emphasis on interrelatedness had led some ecocritics to revise assumptions of conventional rhetoric—for example, the pathetic fallacy, which “is a fallacy only to the ego clencher,” as Neil Evernden puts it: “There is no such thing as an individual, only . . . individual as a component of place, defined by place” (101, 103). Since metaphor is a particularly easy way of establishing such connections between mind, body, and place, it is not surprising that ecocriticism has engaged poetry more than other schools of criticism have in recent decades.⁶

The interest in modes of thought and language that reduce or nullify the distance between the experiencing body and experienced environment has been productive for ecocriticism and set it apart from other theoretical approaches. Yet the difficulties of such a perspective are also quite obvious. In the pursuit of physical connectedness between body and environment, language and texts might initially function as mediating tools but can in the end be little more than obstacles—as they are for Macherot's lyrically minded waterfowl (see also Phillips 11–20). Physical closeness also usually refers to the individual's encounter with nature, but some feminist and indigenous perspectives understand this encounter as a fundamentally communal one. Phenomenological approaches tend not to offer clear models for mediated and collective experiences of nature; neither do they provide the means for explaining how the authenticity of natural encounters is itself culturally shaped. To the extent that this postulation of authenticity relies on the assumption that all modern subjects are alienated from nature, it is difficult to describe the particular forms of alienation suffered by socially disenfranchised groups.

This is not to say that attention to the real differences that class, gender, and race make in the experience of nature does not come with its own set of representational problems. As Buell has convincingly shown, many instances of “toxic discourse”—accounts of pollution, health threats, and the displacement of native inhabitants—that at first sight look realistic rely in fact on tropes and genres with long traditions in American literary history (*Writing* 35–54). The rhetorical power of such accounts derives precisely from their reliance on such traditions. To give one well-known example, Rachel Carson's influential indictment of pesticide overuse in *Silent Spring* (1962) skillfully uses tropes of the pastoral, biblical apocalypse, nuclear fear (in her comparisons of chemical contamina-

tion with radioactive fallout), and 1950s anti-Communism (“a grim specter has crept upon us almost unnoticed” [3]; Killingsworth and Palmer 27–32). Problems of textuality and literariness therefore surface at both ends of the ecocritical spectrum, in phenomenologically informed explorations of the encounter between body and environment as well as in politically oriented approaches to the disjunctions between body, community, and nature that result from environmental pollution and social oppression.

Poststructuralists circumvent such difficulties by presenting nature as a purely discursive construction. But like feminists and race theorists who emphasized the cultural rather than biological grounding of their objects of study, these critics must face the objection that such a view plays into the enemy's hand by obfuscating the material reality of environmental degradation. This problem may be a minor one for academic cultural theory, which surely stands to be enriched by the poststructuralist approach, as Mazel argues (xv), but it is serious for green politics. In the end, it seems likely that strong constructivist positions will be less convincing to ecocritics, many of whom are also green activists, than weak constructivist ones that analyze cultural constructions of nature with a view toward the constraints that the real environment imposes on them (see Hayles; Soper 151–55). This would also seem the most promising theoretical ground from which to pursue the analysis of environmental literature in its relation to cultural and rhetorical traditions, on one hand, and social as well as scientific realities, on the other.

Thinking Globally

Along with its theoretical diversity and interdisciplinarity, the rapid expansion of its analytic canon is one of the most striking features of ecocriticism. British Romanticism and twentieth-century American lit-

erature initially proved the most fertile fields of inquiry, as two cultural moments with a decisive influence on current conceptions of nature. Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology* (1991) and *Song of the Earth* (2000) as well as Karl Kroeber's *Ecological Literary Criticism* (1994) blazed the environmental trail in studies of Romanticism; Slovic's *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing* (1992) and Buell's *Environmental Imagination* foregrounded the importance of nature writing for the American literary canon. Slovic's and Buell's efforts were accompanied by a multitude of other studies of American literature, often with a focus on nonfiction and nature poetry by such writers as Thoreau, Emerson, John Muir, Mary Austin, Robinson Jeffers, Edward Abbey, Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard, and Barry Lopez. A second wave of publications placed greater emphasis on women writers, from Willa Cather and Adrienne Rich to Terry Tempest Williams and Karen Tei Yamashita, and on Native American literature, from Leslie Marmon Silko to Simon Ortiz, Linda Hogan, and Joy Harjo. This shift in themes and authors was accompanied by a broadening of the generic horizon. Science fiction came into view as a genre with important environmental dimensions, as did film and computer games. At the same time, ecocritics have developed analyses of cultural institutions and practices outside the arts, from landscape architecture and green consumerism to various forms of tourism and the national park system.

Critics such as Patrick Murphy and Slovic have also made sustained efforts to spread ecocritical analysis to the study of other cultures and languages, though their success has been limited. Ecocriticism has achieved fairly good coverage of Australian, British, Canadian, and United States literatures, but ecocritical work on languages other than English is still scarce,⁷ and some of it is not well connected to scholarship in English. Murphy's monumental anthology *Literature of Nature:*

An International Sourcebook (1998) represents a first heroic effort to put ecocriticism on a truly comparatist and global basis. Yet its coverage remains uneven, not only because there are more essays on anglophone than on other literatures but also because essays on some countries cover several hundred years (India), others only one literary period (Taiwan), and yet others a single author (Brazil). The surprising selectiveness of the bibliographies in some of these essays is symptomatic of broader international disjunctures.⁸ Works on British or American environmental literature tend to refer to one another but not to work like Jorge Marcone's and Candace Slater's on Latin American texts or Axel Goodbody's and Heather Sullivan's on German literature, even though much of this work is available in English. Critical anthologies are usually not received by anglophone ecocritics when their focus of study lies outside English-based literatures.⁹ Ecocriticism is a good deal more international than cultural studies was initially, but its geographic scope is not evident in most of the published work. Obviously, part of the problem is linguistic: monolingualism is currently one of ecocriticism's most serious intellectual limitations. The environmentalist ambition is to think globally, but doing so in terms of a single language is inconceivable—even and especially when that language is a hegemonic one.

Precisely because ecocritical work encompasses many literatures and cultures, it would also stand to gain from a closer engagement with theories of globalization (Garrard 178).¹⁰ To date, environmental-justice ecocriticism is the only branch of the field that has addressed globalization issues in any depth. To put it somewhat simplistically, this type of ecocriticism rejects economic globalization, which it understands to be dominated by transnational corporations, but welcomes cultural border crossings and alliances, especially when they are initiated by the disenfranchised in the current economic world order.

The interdependencies of these two forms of globalization, however, deserve closer theoretical scrutiny. Ecological issues are situated at a complex intersection of politics, economy, technology, and culture; envisioning them in their global implications requires an engagement with a variety of theoretical approaches to globalization, especially, for ecocritics, those that focus on its cultural dimensions. With such a theoretical framework to link together the pieces of its international and interdisciplinary mosaic, ecocriticism promises to become one of the most intellectually exciting and politically urgent ventures in current literary and cultural studies.

NOTES

1. See also the useful typology of ecocriticism in Reed 148–49.
2. See Cohen for a more chronological account of these challenges.
3. Space constraint makes it impossible for me to give a detailed account of the role of ecofeminism here, whose intellectual trajectory and complexity deserve an essay of their own.
4. As Levin sums it up, “Much recent [ecocritical] work can be divided into two competing critical camps: realists, who advocate a return to nature as a means of healing our modern/postmodern alienation, and social constructionists, who see that nature as a discursive strategy and adopt a more skeptical stance with regard to its alleged healing properties. . . . [T]he dialectical critics from the two different camps appear to have more in common with each other than the more and less sophisticated representatives of the same camp” (175).
5. On Snyder, see Buell, *Environmental Imagination* 166–67; on Leopold, see Berthold-Bond 23–24.
6. Admittedly, the emphasis has been on fairly conventional forms of poetry from Romanticism to the present. More recently, however, experimental poetry has come into focus, from the founding of the journal *Ecopoetics*, in 2001, to Cooperman’s work on Olson, Hart’s on Eigner, and Fletcher’s on Ashbery (175–224).
7. Research by Americanists outside the United States includes work by Hollm; Mayer; and Suberchicot. In her 2004 presidential address to the American Studies Association, Shelley Fisher Fishkin foregrounded the importance of more sustained attention to such research in American studies at large (35–40).

8. Even in single national traditions, some of the omissions are surprising: the essay on Brazil does not refer to Soares’s critical anthology *Ecologia e literatura* (1991), and none of the four pieces on Japan in Murphy’s anthology mentions Colligan-Taylor’s *The Emergence of Environmental Literature in Japan* (1990).

9. For example, Larsen, Nøjgaard, and Petersen’s *Nature: Literature and Its Otherness* (1997).

10. Guha’s critique of American environmentalism and Guha and Martínez-Alier’s *Varieties of Environmentalism* provide good starting points for such an inquiry.

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