

Distance to Nature: Some Cases of Controversy over Language in Ecocriticism

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What roles should literary studies play against environmental crisis? This is a question critics who are engaged in ecocriticism have asked ever since its birth in the early 1990s. In *Romantic Ecology* (1991), one of the groundbreaking studies by the earliest, “first wave” ecocritics, Jonathan Bate defines his analysis of Wordsworth as the “green reading” (9: emphasis added) and says: “it [green reading] has strong contemporary force in that it brings Romanticism to bear on what are likely to be some of the most pressing political issues of the coming decade” (9). The “issues” that this British scholar has in mind in this quotation are, of course, environmental issues. Literary criticism should, he proposes, open up its practice toward discussions about the threatened environment, connecting itself with subjects concerning how humans should live “in the ecological field” extending endlessly outside the literary text (34). His book offers an earliest example of literary studies that seek to contribute to solving environmental issues. The possibility of developing environmentally-oriented literary criticism is pursued with similar enthusiasm by American ecocritics. Lawrence Buell, for example, carries out his study on the assumption that “the creative and critical arts . . . are exercising, however unconsciously, an influence upon the emerging culture of environmental concern” in his *Environmental Imagination*, published in 1995 (3). Bate and Buell both insist that critics should, through the acts of reading the literary text, turn their attention toward the environmental endangerment taking place in the real world existing “over there” outside the text.

In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmark in Literary Ecology*, the first ever anthology of ecocriticism published in 1996, Cheryll Glotfelty theorizes the role of ecocriticism more concretely. She uses the word “earth” as a key in defining ecocriticism.

What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is *the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment*. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an *earth-centered approach* to literary studies. (xviii: emphasis added)

What is notable in this definition is her use of the term “physical environment.” She insists that ecocritics should study literature in relation to the “ecosphere,” unlike other literary theories that have focused exclusively on the relationship between literature and the social sphere (xix). It is clear that she is not presenting the word “earth” as either a metaphor or a symbol. The “earth” as a physical entity is among the subjects which literary criticism needs to be focused on.

These examples show us the clear tendency of ecocritics to define their particular roles in literary studies as including a strong concern about the world outside the text. Their emphasis on the outside world originates from the change in the social climate witnessed over the last three decades, a period during which people have come to pay acute attention to the environment. Throughout this period, global warming, air pollution, deforestation and other environmental problems are among the common topics widely discussed among people around the world. Ecocriticism emerged in response to the same anxiety over the state of the environment. Therefore, it is no wonder that there would be a similarity between the words of Glotfelty quoted above and those of Al Gore in his speech at the Kyoto Climate Change Conference in 1997:

We have reached a fundamentally new stage in the development of human civilization, in which it is necessary to *take responsibility for a recent but profound alteration in the relationship between our species and our planet.* Because of our new technological power and our growing numbers, we now must pay careful attention to the consequences of what we are doing to *the Earth*—especially to the atmosphere. (856: emphasis added)

It is not a coincidence that they both insist on the need for reconsidering the relationship between human beings and the physical planet Earth. Their suggestions reflect a certain climate of our age.

That the first wave ecocritics define their roles in the above way explains why they denounce the contemporary literary criticism based on post-structuralist and postmodernist theories. Ecocritics criticize these theorists for positing the disjunction between the text and the world as inevitable; this attitude toward literary works allows them to devote their attention to the analysis of the text to the extent of ignoring the world completely (Buell, *Future* 5-7, 31-3). What is concerned here is that degrading nature and reducing it to the status of textual functions lead literary critics toward an absolute indifference to the environment. The first-wave ecocritics seek to change this situation by claiming the opposite: “Ecocriticism rejects absolutely and considers absurd and dangerous the claim of

post-structuralism that “there is no nature” (Scheese 9). Ecocriticism offers its own resistance to literary theory.

Here it becomes clear that ecocriticism at its early stage had a double concern, an environmental and an academic one; the former was about how they could contribute to the protection of the global environment and the latter was about how they could differentiate themselves from what they called literary theory. Although it might seem reasonable to demand that these two concerns should be correlative, do they really have to be so? Is it an inevitable outcome that literary criticism needs to shun theoretical insights in order to achieve truly environmental literary studies? We need to ask these questions so that we can fully understand the nature of the practices of environmental literature and ecocriticism.

The same kind of question has been taken up by some ecocritics.¹ For example, Robert Kern, while admitting that ecocriticism emerged as an attempt to change the situation in contemporary literary criticism dominated by literary theory, seeks to find a way out of the opposition between literary theory and anti-literary theory (258-9). Dana Phillips also deals with this issue in *The Truth of Ecology* (2003). What distinguishes his study from those of other critics, however, is his strong rebuke of ecocriticism. Phillips criticizes ecocriticism as “largely reactionary,” for it came out literally as a reaction against the long-time dominance of theory in the field of literary studies. Hence his sarcastic remark that what really concerns ecocritics is not the condition of the environment but that of the contemporary literary studies (6). Their resulting ignorance of theoretical insights, he asserts, can lead them to making primitive mistakes in analyzing literary works. He thus insists that ecocritics should gain a much better understanding of the theoretical discussions and adopt a much less devoted attitude toward the environment (240).

What Phillips finds particularly disagreeable is the way ecocritics deal with the subjects concerning literary representation. In his opinion, they blindly trust the efficacy of language in depicting the outer world. This belief makes them completely disregard the discussions about the referential capacity of language, which have long been pursued in the fields of linguistics, philosophy and literature. By ignoring the thoughts presented by such eminent figures as Ferdinand Saussure and Roland Barthes, who laid the foundation of literary theory today, ecocritics make the serious mistake of believing that “trees can occur in literature as something more vital than textual functions,” as Phillips puts it (9).

It is true that we can encounter some examples of ecocritical studies presenting the views that exemplify what Phillips sees as serious shortcomings of ecocriticism. For instance, Lawrence Buell warns in *Environmental* that literary critics today fail to pay enough attention to “the capacity of literary writers to render a faithful mimesis” (84). Phillips would also reject Glotfelty’s discussion which seems to insist that trees in literature

should be “physical,” not fictional (xviii). Although, in fact, Buell’s remark on mimesis quoted above is not at all what accurately represents his thoughts on literary language and he is, as we will see later below, fully conscious about the limits of its referential capacity, it might not be so difficult to understand why the concept of mimesis itself is problematized in Phillips’ discussion. Phillips denounces attempts at rehabilitating the status of mimetic representation as follows by making Buell the foremost object of his attack:

Ecocriticism needs a rationale enabling it to use the resources of literary theory while retaining some respect for the force of theory’s premises

Adopting such a rationale would mean letting go of, or at least relaxing one’s grip on, the central claim of Buell’s book. This is the claim that ecocriticism should focus on recovering a sense of the “experiential or referential expects” of literature, and on “the recuperation of natural objects and the relation between outer and inner landscapes.” By pressing claims like this one, ecocriticism fall prey to the false hope that there is some beyond of literature, call it *nature* or *wilderness* or *environment*, where deliverance from the constraints of culture, particularly that constraint known as theory, might be found. (162)

It is clear that what really concerns Phillips is the inclination of ecocriticism to ignore what he sees as one of the most foundational ideas in the field of literary theory, and probably of literary studies in general as well; the limits of referential capacity of language and the unsurpassable gap between the text and the world. By dismissing these ideas, Phillips asserts, ecocriticism, as well as environmental literature, seek to step completely outside the domain of literature. He is especially critical about this effort to “step outside,” emphasizing the impossibility of such a seemingly heroic act.²

What is at issue in this series of discussions which I have just outlined is how to define the nature of the poetics of environmental literature. The discussion of Phillips is based on the assumption that, concerning this point, there is an irreconcilable gap between the prevailing attitude in ecocriticism and his own. Phillips is especially critical against Buell, who he regards to reevaluate and seek to rehabilitate the mimetic capacity of literary language employed in environmental literature. Phillips protests that such an attempt is groundless because no such capacity resides in language at all. This opposition between mimesis and anti-mimesis, which Phillips translates into the opposition between ecocriticism and anti-ecocriticism that he represents, is one of the major frameworks that

support his study. Against Phillips, however, I want to contend that the position of Buell concerning the capacity of literary language is in fact not so different from that of Phillips. Although Buell treats “mimesis” and “referential capacity of language” as his main subjects in a section in *Environmental*, he does not seek to reclaim a one-to-one correspondence between language and referent, or between the text and the world. He rather rightly considers the literary text to be able to become only “a partial register” of the outer world (103). This recognition remains at the basis of his next book published in 2001, where Buell makes his point even clearer by introducing the concept called “environmental unconscious,” which I discuss in detail below. Phillips could have referred to this concept in his *Truth of Ecology* published in 2003, but he did not.

Buell presents the concept of “environmental unconscious” in *Writing for the Endangered World*, which is based on Fredric Jameson’s discussion on literary and aesthetic acts in *Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1982). Buell’s concept can elude categorization into either mimesis or non-mimesis. What is at the core of this concept is his recognition that the totality of our environment never fully and directly appears to our perception. Buell defines this situation as the negative aspect of “environmental unconscious”:

By this [environmental unconscious] I mean to refer in part to the limiting condition of predictable, chronic perceptual underactivation in bringing to awareness, and then to articulation, of all that is to be noticed and expressed. . . . [E]nvironmental unconscious in its negative aspect refers to the impossibility of individual or collective perception coming to full consciousness at whatever level: observation, thought, articulation, and so forth. I do not pretend to be able to identify all the many causes of foreshortening: scientific ignorance, inattention, specialized intellectual curiosity, ethnocentricity, self-protectiveness, the conventions of language itself—the list is long. (22)

In explicating “environmental unconscious” in its negative aspect, he is alluding to the limitations of the referential capacity of language. If “bringing to awareness” all that we are supposed to experience in the outer world is impossible, bringing that to the fully mimetic “articulation” is also impossible. As his reference to “the conventions of language” as a cause of “environmental unconscious” in the above quotation suggests, Buell recognizes the limitations of language. Buell and Phillips are no different from each other in this point. What differentiates Buell from Phillips, however, is that former seeks to see this same situation also in its latent positivity:

Yet environmental unconscious is also to be seen as potential: as a residual capacity (of individual humans, authors, texts, readers, communities) to awake to fuller apprehension of physical environment and one's interdependence with it. Indeed, the various foreshortenings . . . are less worth lingering on than the breakthroughs achieved in grasping the significance of the unnoticed detail. (22)

Buell goes on to write that what makes possible to achieve this "fuller apprehension" of the environment, which he describes as "breakthrough," is not the accuracy of the observation and description but "the power of imagination" (22).

Buell's juxtaposition of the impossibility and the possibility of "environmental unconscious" even suggests that both aspects are interdependent. Buell writes as follows:

To my mind, awareness of the chronic presence of these[blockages], of the foreshortened or inertial aspect of environmental unconscious, ought not diminish but intensify one's interest in environmental unconscious as an enabling ground condition as it becomes activated in the work of composition and critical reading. (22)

It is not a far stretch to say that the possibility of "fuller apprehension" of the environment must be unthinkable without the radical impossibility of awakening to the *fullest* apprehension of the environment. His use of the term "fuller" (22) is very suggestive. The possibility of "environmental unconscious" only exists as a residual capacity of its negative aspect. It is always in the state of "fuller" and it never offers the *fullest* apprehension of the environment. The same thing can be said about literary representation. As Buell indicates, literary language can surely enable writers to give fuller representation to the outer world that they seek to inscribe in their texts. Yet they can never achieve its *fullest* representation because there is always an unresolvable gap between language or the text and the environment.

How can we make of this state of "fuller?" In my opinion, this term points to the realm between mimesis and non-mimesis. If the fullest representation refers to mimesis, then it is impossible for writers to achieve it. Yet this impossibility does not automatically speak to their retreat into non-mimesis; it rather signifies their aspiration for the *fullest* representation of the environment accompanied with their unequivocal recognition of inescapable failure. It is now clearer why Jameson's discussion is important for Buell's own conception of "environmental unconscious." Jameson regards the literary or aesthetic act as that of "draw[ing] the Real into its own texture" and "manag[ing] to carry the Real

within itself as *its own intrinsic or immanent subtext*,” not as the *unreconstructed* external reality itself (81: emphasis added). Jameson describes this interaction between the text and the Real as “active relationship” (81). Buell slightly reframes this “active relationship” as what can be achieved as the result of the subject’s, and most likely writers’, “efforts to raise unconsciousness to conscious awareness and articulacy” (*Writing* 26). Writers seek to draw the environment into their own texts. Yet in this process, their texts necessarily subject the environment to themselves and transform it into their internal subtexts, contradictorily allowing the environment as purely external reality to step back from them. Following Buell’s conception of “environmental unconscious,” we can say that such dynamism exists between the literary text and the environment.

The concept of “environmental unconscious” allows us to reconsider nature writing and environmental literature in general in the following way. These are literary practices in which writers strive to discover the language and the literary form that enable them to get closer to that mimetically unrepresentable entity called the environment, or nature most likely in the context of nature writing. It is possible to think that nature and environmental writers, contra Phillips, are by no means trying to “step outside” the domain of literature by reclaiming mimesis. Rather, they seek to stay in this domain, striving to find some new forms of articulation that enable them to achieve *fuller* representation of nature and the environment.

It is true that the above idea concerning the act of textualization has underlain my general analysis of environmental writing. Yet, when such an undertaking to draw the external world into the text is explored in nature writing, it is likely to lead to an undesirable outcome from the perspective of “ecology without nature,” a rather new current in ecocriticism in the last 10 years. In seeking to capture nature while realizing how it is extremely unrepresentable, nature writers contribute to setting up nature as an entity lying “over there” beyond their reach, essentially beyond their apprehension and language. Just as the efforts to dissolve humans into nature ironically end up reinforcing the gap between humans and nature, as suggested in Timothy Morton’s study representing the latest current in ecocriticism, the efforts to narrow the gap between language and nature presuppose an unsurpassable distance between language and nature. In so doing, nature writing is very likely to reinforce such a distance and thereby dismiss the “nearness” of the environment which “ecology without nature” seeks to recuperate.

The idealization and aestheticization of such gap and distance is one of the thought habits that “ecology without nature” seeks to abandon. Let me quote the passage from Morton’s *Ecological Thought* here:

The ecological thought permits no distance. Thinking interdependence involves dissolving the barrier between “over here” and “over there,” and more fundamentally, the metaphysical illusion of rigid, narrow boundaries between inside and outside. This means confronting the fact that all beings are related to each other negatively and differently, in an open system without center or edge. (39)

The “sublime” distance and resulting separation of “over here” and “over there” do not accord with the way “ecology without nature” understands the environment, which presupposes “dissolving the barrier between ‘over here’ and ‘over there,’ and more fundamentally, the metaphysical boundaries between inside and outside” (39).³ What things can we find there once we uncover the veil of the “sublime” and how can they be represented in environmental literature and criticism? These are the questions which need to be at the basis of current and future ecocriticism.

Notes

1. Lawrence Buell points out that ecocriticism at an early stage was characterized by a propensity for realistic modes of representation, which were considered to be old-fashioned in the field of literary criticism. But in recent years, there is a division within ecocritics. Some critics persist in dismissing theoretical insights, privileging literature’s capacity for rendering a mimetic representation to the outer world. Other critics have come to adopt literary theory in their analysis of literary works, abandoning their belief in literature’s capacity for mimesis (Future 30-2).

2. He says that his position is that of “a sort of agnostic” (7). He thinks that we need to cure ecocriticism of its fixation on literary representation. To assert the imaginary status of nature that is described in literary works raises no controversy. Were ecocritics to abandon their belief in literary representation, he insists, they could easily come to terms with literary theory. When they fail to do so, they “restrict the interpretive options available to” them, making their interpretations “unintelligible” (240).

3. The sublime derives from the unsurpassable gap between subject and object, or nature to be more specific (Kant 53; Eagleton 89).

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