

The Green Language

RAYMOND WILLIAMS*

[WORDSWORTH]

There is full separation of possession: the control of a land and its prospects, but there is also a separation of spirit: a recognition of forces of which we are part but which we may always forget, and which we must learn from, not seek to control. In these two kinds of separation the idea of Nature was held and transformed.

'Why,' asked Addison, 'may not a whole Estate be thrown into a kind of garden by frequent Plantations. A man might make a pretty Landship of his own Possessions.'

Wordsworth, almost a century later, took as the centre of his world not a possessive man but a wandering child:

Full creature as he is, helpless as frail,
An inmate of this active universe;
For feeling has to him imparted power
That through the growing faculties of sense
Doth like an agent of the one great Mind
Create, create and receiver both,
Working but in alliance with the works
Which it beholds.

Two principles of Nature can then be seen simultaneously. There is nature as a principle of order, of which the ordering mind is part, and which human activity, by regulating principles, may then rearrange and control. But there is also nature as a principle of creation, of which the creative mind is part, and from which we may learn the truths of our own sympathetic nature.

From *The Country and the City* (1973), London: Hogarth Press, 1985.

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This active sympathy is the real change of mind, the new consciousness if only in a minority, in the very period in which the willed transformation of nature, not only of land and water but of its raw materials and its essential elements, was to enter a new phase, in the processes we now call industrial. The agrarian confidence of the eighteenth century had been counterpointed, throughout, by feelings of loss and melancholy and regret: from the ambivalence of Thomson to the despair of Goldsmith. Now, with Wordsworth, an alternative principle was to be powerfully asserted: a confidence in nature, in its own workings, which at least at the beginning was also a broader, a more humane confidence in men.

This movement is not, at first sight, very easy to distinguish from what, in the second half of the eighteenth century, is an evident alteration of taste. It is significant and understandable that in the course of a century of reclamation, drainage and clearing there should have developed, as a by-product, a feeling for unaltered nature, for wild land: the feeling that was known at the time as 'picturesque'. It is well known how dramatically the view of the Alps altered, from Evelyn's strange, horrid and fearful crags and tracts, in the mid-1640s, or Dennis's 'Ruins upon ruins, in monstrous Heaps, and Heaven and Earth confounded' in 1688, to the characteristic awed praise of mid and later eighteenth-century and nineteenth- and twentieth-century travellers:

Not a precipice, not a torrent, not a cliff but is pregnant with religion
and poetry.

(Cray, 1739)

Motionless torrent! silent cataraict!
Who made you glorious as the Gates of Heaven
Beneath the keen full moon?

(Coleridge, 1802)

In the course of the change, comparable districts in Britain – the Lake District, South Wales, the Scottish Highlands, North Wales, the Wye Valley and under the direct influence of William Gilpin – became places of fashionable visiting and even of pilgrimage. Johnson's attitude to the Highlands –

the appearance is that of matter, incapable of form or usefulness, dismissed
by nature from her care and left in its original elemental state

seemed left far behind! That Nature was an improver; the new Nature is an original. But we are bound to remember that most, though not all, of these tours to wild places were undertaken by people who were able to travel because 'nature' had not left their own lands in an 'original elemental state'. The picturesque journeys and the topographical poems, journals, paintings and engravings which promoted and commemorated them – came from the profits of an improving agriculture and from trade. It is not, at this level, an alteration of sensibility: it is strictly an

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addition of taste. Like the landscaped parks, where every device was employed to produce a natural effect, the wild regions of mountain and forest were for the most part objects of conspicuous aesthetic consumption; to have been to the named places, to exchange and compare the travelling and gazing experiences, was a form of fashionable society. That in the course of the journeys some other experiences came we know well enough from Wordsworth and others; but it is Wordsworth who makes what for him is the vital distinction:

even in pleasure pleased
Unworthily, disdaining here, and there
Liking, by rules of mimic art transferred
To things above all art; but more – for this,
Although a strong infection of the age,
Was never much my habit – giving way
To a comparison of scene with scene;
Bent overmuch on superficial things,
Pampering myself with meagre novelties
Of colour and proportion: to the moods
Of time or season, to the moral power,
The afflictions and the spirit of the place
Inscrutable.

The conventional 'awe' of wild places, that Johnson in the Highlands had described

terror without danger . . . one of the sports of fancy, a voluntary agitation of the mind, that is permitted no longer than it pleases

is something that Wordsworth had known, when he sought *that* beauty, which, as Milton sings,
Hath terror in it.

But he had learned a more general perception:

When every day brought with it some new sense
Of exquisite regard for common things,
And all the earth was budding with these gifts
Of more refined humanity . . .
– a spirit, there for me enshrined
To penetrate the lofty and the low.

It is a complicated movement, including many feelings which were already familiar, but now united, even forced, into a principle of human respect and human community.

It is right to stress some continuity from Thomson and the eighteenth-century tradition. There is the use of the country of 'nature', as a retreat and solace from human society and ordinary human consciousness:

I well remember that those very plumes,
Those weeds, and the high spear-grass on that well,
By mist and silent rain-drops silvered o'er,
As once I passed, into my heart conveyed
So still an image of tranquillity,
So calm and still, and looked so beautiful
Amid the uneasy thoughts which filled by mind,
That what we feel of sorrow and despair
From ruin and from change, and all the grief
That passing shows of Being leave behind,
appeared an idle dream.

Characteristically, in this, it is the lonely observer who 'passes', and what he sees is a 'still life': an image against stress and change.

There is also continuity in a different dimension: the recognition, even the idealisation, of 'humble' characters, in sympathy, in charity and in community. *Michael* is subtitled 'a pastoral poem', and it is so in the developed sense of the description of a rural independence – the shepherd and his family who are

as a proverb in the vale
For endless industry

– and its dissolution by misfortune, lack of capital, and final sale:

The Cottage which was named the Evening Star
Is gone, the ploughshare has been through the ground
On which it stood; final changes have been wrought
In all the neighbourhood . . .

It is significant that Wordsworth links the 'gentle agency' of Nature with the fellow-feeling which binds him to such men as Michael: the link we observed in Thomson. Wordsworth often came closer to the actual men, but he saw them also as receding, moving away into a past which only a few surviving signs, and the spirit of poetry, could recall. In this sense the melancholy of loss and dissolution, which had been so marked in late eighteenth-century country writing, is continued in familiar terms.

But there is also an important development in Wordsworth: a new emphasis, corresponding to just this view of history, on the dispossessed, the lonely wanderer, the vagrant. It is here that the social observation is linked to the perceptions of the lonely observer, who is also the poet. The old Cumberland beggar, in the poem of that title, is a later version of the old man whom Crabbe had observed, but the change of viewpoint is remarkable. He is not now evidence of the lack of

community – of the village as a life of pain. On the contrary, more truly separated from its life in any direct way, he concentrates in himself, in his actual vagrancy, the community and charity which are the promptings of nature. It is in giving to him that fellow-feeling is kept alive. It is 'Nature's law' that none should exist divorced from:

a spirit and pulse of good,
A life and soul to every mode of being
Inseparably link'd.

The beggar is the agent of this underlying, almost lost community:

And while, in that vast solitude to which
The tide of things has led him, he appears
To breathe and live but for himself alone.
Unblam'd, uninjur'd, let him bear about
The good which the benignant law of heaven
Has hung around him, and, while life is his,
Still let him prompt the unletter'd Villagers
To tender offices and pensive thoughts.

The spirit of community, that is to say, has been dispossessed and isolated to a wandering, challenging if passive, embodiment in the beggar. It is no longer from the practice of community, or from the spirit of protest at its inadequacy, but from

this solitary being,
This helpless wanderer

that the instinct of fellow-feeling is derived. Thus an essential isolation and silence and loneliness have become the only carriers of nature and community against the rigours, the cold abstinence, the selfish ease of ordinary society. . . .

[CLARE]

Accursed Wealth! o'er-bounding human laws,
Of every evil thou remain'st the cause:
Victims of want, those wretches such as me,
Too truly lay their wretchedness to thee:
Thou art the bar that keeps from being fed,
And thine our loss of labour and of bread.

As a way of seeing the dispossession of labour by capital, this is exact. But it is set in a structure of feeling in which what wealth is most visibly destroying is 'Nature':

that complex of the land as it was, in the past and in childhood, which both age and alteration destroy. There are the scenes of what is really an older agriculture

Thou far fled pasture, long evanish'd scene!
Where nature's freedom spread the flow'ry green . . .
. . . Where lowing oxen roam'd to feed at large,
And bleating there the Shepherd's woolly charge . . .

– alongside the more primitive land which is being directly altered: the brood diverted, the willows felled, in drainage and clearance.

Over a century and a half I can recognise what Clare is describing: particular trees, and a particular brook, by which I played as a child, have gone in this way, in the last few years, in an improved use of marginal land. And then what one has to consider is the extension of this observation – one kind of loss again one kind of gain – into a loss of 'Nature'. It is not only the loss of what can be called – sometimes justly, sometimes affectively – a piece of 'unspoiled' country. It is also for any particular man, the loss of a specifically human and historical landscape, which the source of feeling is not really that it is 'natural' but that it is 'native':

Dear native spot! Which length of time endears
Nay e'en a post, old standard, or a stone
Moss'd o'er by age, and branded as her own
Would in my mind a strong attachment gain,
A fond desire that they might there remain;
And all old favourites, fond taste approves,
Grieve'd me at heart to witness their removals.

And then what is most urgently being mourned – the 'old favourites' approved to 'fond taste' – is a loss of childhood through a loss of its immediate landscape:

But now, alas! Those scenes exist no more;
The pride of life with thee, like mine, is o'er.

It is wholly understandable that this was written at the age of sixteen. A way of seeing has been connected with a lost phase of living, and the association of happiness with childhood has been developed into a whole convention, in which not only innocence and security but peace and plenty have been imprinted, indelibly first on a particular landscape, and then, in a powerful extension, on a particular period of the rural past, which is now connected with a lost identity, lost relation and lost certainties, in the memory of what is called, against a present consciousness, Nature. The first feeling is so urgent that it inevitably connects widely with other experience:

His native scenes! O sweet endearing sound!
Sure never beats a heart, howe'er forlorn,

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THE GREEN LANGUAGE

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His native scenes! O sweet endearing sound!
Sorrow never beats a heart, however fond.

Unruffled quietness hath made
A peace in every place,
And woods are resting in their shade
Of social loneliness.

It is wholly understandable, this development of responses to a disturbing history and an altering landscape: the real scenes of both at once dissolved and recreated in images which carry the meanings and yet compose a way of seeing that suppresses them. As so often in romantic poetry, it is the survival of human feeling in a factual dispossession:

While threshing in the dusty barn
Or squashing in the ditch to earn
A pittance that would scarce allow
One joy to smooth my sweating brow
Where drop by drop would chase and fall
Thy presence triumphed over all.

The presence is poetry, speaking to and for the humanity of the hedger, the thresher, the man actually altering the landscape in the service and for the gain of others, but distorted by its very loneliness into an opposition to that noise of the world, the noise of actual exploitation and, ironically, of direct response to it:

Bred in a village full of strife and noise,
Old senseless gossips, and blackguarding boys,
Ploughmen and threshers, whose discourses led
To nothing more than labour's rude employs,
'Bout work being slack, and rise and fall of bread
And who were like to die, and who were like to wed.

It is from this actual village, where a community lives under pressure, that the poet withdraws to the quiet of nature, where he can speak for his own and others' humanity, through remembered ballads and contemplated scenes, a speaking silence from which he is torn, bitterly and desperately, to put what he has written back into the noise of the market: profit, malice, envy; a fashionable contempt for his simplicity; and then again, but now virtually breaking the mind, into the speaking silence of the neglected poet, the man alone with nature and with poverty, retreating world in his green language:

I am, but what I am
Who cares or knows?

It was as far as the mind could go, within that structure. Any new direction required an alteration of structure and of essential convention. Clare marks the end of pastoral poetry, in the very shock of its collision with actual country experience.

But the warm'd breast has soft emotions found
To cherish the dear spot where he was born:
E'en on the poor hedger, in the early morn
Chopping the parting bushes hung with dew,
Scarcely lays his miren on a branching thorn,
But painful memory's banish'd thoughts in view
Remind him, when 'twas young, what happy days he knew.

And the transition is then almost unnoticed, as in *Jays of Childhood*:

Dull is that memory, vacant is that mind,
Where no sweet vision of the past appears.

Living in this connecting feelings, Clare recognised, even while he created, the conversion of particular memories into the generalising, 'sweet vision of the past'. His most crucial recognition, relating quite centrally to the tradition we have been examining, comes in another verse of the same poem:

Time spreads I'dens whensoe'er they be;
The world breaks on them like an opening flower;
Green joys and cloudless skies are all they see;
The hour of childhood is a rose's hour . . .

The natural images of this Eden of childhood seem to compel a particular connection, at the very moment of their widest generality. Nature, the past and childhood are temporarily but powerfully fused:

In nature's quiet sleep as on a mother's breast.

The plough that disturbs this nature connects with the hardest emotions of maturity: dispossession, the ache of labour, the coldness of the available world: a complex of feeling and imagery in the experience of this man and of everyone; of each personal generation and of this generation in history. But what is then achieved, against this experience of pain, is a way of feeling which is also a way of writing:

A language that is ever green

the language of what Clare now re-creates as 'pastoral poesy' in the title of the poem from which the line comes. This is a radical development of language and of the idea of literature; its strength in its connecting feelings of human warmth and community, in a time of real dispossession, eviction and social division; its paradoxical weakness in the making of this connection through withdrawal into 'nature', into the 'Eden' of the heart, and into a lonely, resigned and contemplative law of men.

He could not accept Lamb's characteristic advice, which had tamed so many: 'transplant Arcadia to Holfstone'. The true rustic style, the Arcadian English, I think is to be found in Shenstone. He is, rather, the culmination, in broken genius, of the movement which we can trace from a century before him: the separation of Nature, from the facts of the labour that is creating it, and then the breaking of Nature, in altered and now intolerable relations between men. What we find in Clare is not (Ben) Jonson's idealisation of a landscape yielding of itself, nor Thomson's idealisation of a productive order that is scattering and guarding plenty. There was a conscious reaction to this, in Goldsmith, in Langhorne, and in Crabbe. But there was also an unconscious reaction, to a country from which any acceptable social order had been decisively removed. Clare goes beyond the external observation of the poems of protest and of melancholy retrospect. What happens in him is that the loss is internal. It is to survive at all, as a thinking and feeling man, that he needs the green language of the new Nature.

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51 *Correspondence of Thomas Gray* (ed. Peter Toynbee and L. Whibley), (Oxford, 1935, 2 vols. edn 1971, Vol. I, 128.
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51 Johnson, cit. C. Hussey, *The Picturesque*, London, 1927, 112.
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53 *Ibid.*
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- 54 *Halcyon*, in *Poems of John Clare* (ed. J. W. Tibble), 2 vols, London, 1935, Vol. II.
55 *The Village Minstrel*, CVA, *op. cit.*
56 *Sops of Childhood*, *op. cit.*
56 *Original Poetry*, *op. cit.*
57 *The Progress of Religion*, *op. cit.*
57 *I am*, *op. cit.*

PART II

The Earth, Memory and the Critique of Modernity

about 'the construction of the self from the raw material of the other, the appropriation of nature in the production of culture ... [and] the issue of man from the body of woman', she goes right to the heart of the debate which we are conducting in this part of the reader. More particularly, her own anti-patriarchal position is worth comparing with that of Hélène Cixous. Much closer to what we call 'ecofeminism' in her positive identity of woman with nature, Cixous's achievement is discussed here by Verena Andermatt Conley in an extract from her book *Ecopolitics*. Conley demonstrates that Cixous' affirmation of a female language that precedes the severance from nature made by male language, while being rhetorically effective in inspiring women to refuse their subordination and inferior identity, yet suffers from a blind spot' In agreement with Plumwood, Conley suggests that it is not enough to assert woman's proximity to nature, given the immense task ahead of countering dualism itself. Thus, Part III ends with a reminder that the nature/culture/gender debate has only just begun.

NOTES

- 1 Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 42.
- 2 Ibid., p. 43.
- 3 Ibid., pp. 195-6.
- 4 See Donna J. Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialism in the Late Twentieth Century', in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York and London: Routledge, 1991, pp. 149-82.

The Idea of Nature

KATE SOPER*

[THE 'TEXTUALITY' OF NATURE?]

GIVEN HOW LARGELY the appeal to the preservation of a 'natural' order of things has figured in the discourse of social conservatism, an uncritical ecology naturalism is always at risk of lending ideological support to those systems of domination that have played a major role in generating ecological crisis. This may be an obvious point to make. But ecological critics of the atomizing and destructive effects of instrumental rationality need to be careful in redeploying the organic imagery that has been such a mainstay of right-wing rhetoric. Romantic aestheticizing approaches to nature have as readily lent themselves to the exploitation of reactionary sentiment as sustained the radical critique of industrialism.¹ This means that left-wing ecologists, however understandably keen they may be to re-seize this tradition of romanticism for their own purposes, are dealing with a problematic legacy.

We have also to be wary of the ways in which romantic ideology may serve as the cover for the continued exploitation of nature. However accurate it may be to portray our engagement with nature as 'anthropocentric', 'arrogant' and 'instrumental', it is the work of a culture that has constantly professed its esteem for nature. The societies that have most abused nature have also perennially applauded its ways over those of 'artifice', have long valued its health and integrity over the decadence of human contrivance, and today employ pastoral imagery as the most successful of conventions to enhance the profits on everything from margarine to motor-cars.

At the same time, ecological politics needs to be ever alert to the multiple dimensions and repercussions of its own social impact. Today, we are building 'virtual reality' zoos to preserve wildlife from the miseries of captivity, and eschew nature's fir and flesh in favour of synthetic fibres and factory-made protein. Japanese businessmen are seeking relief from the pressures of catering to a booming culture industry in 'refresh capsules' where they can revel in the sounds and see

*From *What is Nature?* London: Blackwell, 1995.

of nature's heritage and nature conservancy have become themselves big business; green products are the latest capitalist growth area; the interests of thousands of human offspring are daily discounted as we monitor the habitats of other animal species. Meanwhile public support for any radically corrective logical programme remains vanishingly small. These developments speak to complex and contradictory attitudes to 'nature' and our place within it, and indicate that we may be contributing to its destruction and pollution in the very name of its preservation. In an overall way, I suggest that an eco-politics will prove that much more incisive the more prepared it is to question its own discourse on 'nature'.

It is, however, one thing to argue that eco-politics must rid culturalist criticisms of naturalist rhetoric; it is another to suppose that everything has been said about nature once we have remarked on its 'textuality' and its continually shifting signifier. It is true that we can make no distinction between the 'reality' of nature and its cultural representation that is not itself conceptual, but it does not justify the conclusion that there is no ontological distinction between the ideas we have of nature and that which the ideas are about: that since nature is only signified in human discourse, inverted commas 'nature' *is* nature, and we should therefore remove the inverted commas.

In short, it is not language that has a hole in its ozone layer; and the 'real' thing continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier. Hence the inclination to respond to the insistence on the 'textuality' of nature as Johnson did to Berkeleyan idealism, by claiming to reduce it with straightforward realist kick, by pointing to the latest oil spill or figures on species extinction and saying, 'there's nature fouled and destroyed by human industry, and I refute your anti-naturalism thus'. This is an understandable response to those who would have us focus only on the play of the 'sign' of nature. But the straightforward realist kick is not only insensitive to the ideological representations of nature already discussed, but also fails to register the fact that an adequate response to anti-realism can only be conducted from a position which recognizes how difficult it is to refer to the landscape one is seeking to conserve simply as 'nature'. For if nature is conceptualized and valued, as it sometimes is in environmental philosophy, as that which is independent of human culture, then another little of the environment corresponds to the concept: hardly anything we refer to as natural landscape *is* natural in this sense, and its supposed value might therefore be seen to be put in question. Even Cicero distinguished between an inherited non-human nature and a nature constructed through human activity, and concluded his survey of the forms taken by the latter by remarking that 'one may say that we seek with our human hands to create a second nature in the natural world'. In our own time the human impact on the environment has been so extensive that there is an important sense in which it is correct to speak of 'nature' as itself a cultural product or construction.⁴

Yet there is, of course, all the difference in the world between recognizing the truth of this and refusing to recognize the independent existence of the reality itself on the causal role played in its creation by processes that are not humanly created. It is one thing to recognize that much that is referred to as 'nature' takes the form

it does only in virtue of human activity, another to suppose that this has no exclusive reality, or that there are no discriminations to be drawn between which is and that which is not an effect of culture.

ECOLOGICAL DISCOURSES OF NATURE

[I] would seem important to recognize the multiple roles which 'nature' is called upon to play in ecological discussion, and notably to distinguish between three very differing concepts it may be drawing upon. . . . I shall refer to the 'metaphysical', the 'realist' and the 'lay' (or 'surface') ideas of nature.

- 1 Employed as a metaphysical concept, which it mainly is in the argument philosophy, 'nature' is the concept through which humanity thinks its essence and specificity. It is the concept of the non-human, even if, as we see, the absoluteness of the humanity-nature demarcation has been disavowed and our ideas about what falls to the side of 'nature' have been continually revised in the light of changing perceptions of what counts as 'human' in a formal sense, the logic of 'nature' as that which is opposed to the 'human' or the 'cultural' is presupposed to any debates about the interpretation placed on the distinction and the content to be given to the ideas. Invoking the metaphysical concept in the very posing of the quest humanity's relation to nature.
- 2 Employed as a realist concept, 'nature' refers to the structures, processes causal powers that are constantly operative within the physical world: provide the objects of study of the natural sciences, and condition the forms of human intervention in biology or interaction with the environment. It is the nature to whose laws we are always subject, even as we harness it to human purposes, and whose processes we can neither escape nor deny.
- 3 Employed as a 'lay' or 'surface' concept, as it is in much everyday, and theoretical discourse, 'nature' is used in reference to ordinarily available features of the world: the 'natural' as opposed to the urban or in environment ('landscape', 'wilderness', 'countryside', 'rurality'), a domestic and wild, the physical body in space and raw materials. This nature of immediate experience and aesthetic appreciation: the nature destroyed and polluted and are asked to conserve and preserve.

I submit that when the Green Movement speaks of nature, it is most correct in this third 'lay' or 'surface' sense: it is referring to nature as wildlife, raw materials, the non-urban environment, and thus to a 'nature' that has been affected in certain respects by human occupancy of the planet, and in some cases acquired form only in virtue of human cultural activity. But when it appeals to biology to preserve nature or make use of it in sustainable ways, it is also of employing the idea in a metaphysical sense to designate an object in relation to subject (humanity), with the presumption being that subject and object are

NOTES

GARY SNYDER*

LANGUAGE HAS BEEN popularly described, in the Occident, as that by which humans bring order to the 'chaos of the world'. In this view, human intelligence flows through the supposedly unique faculty of language, and with it imparts order to the universe. The more objective and rational the language, the more accurate this exercise in giving order to the universe will be. Language is considered by some to be a flawed mathematics, and the mathematics might even supplant language has been flirted with. This still colors the commonplace thinking of many engineer types and possibly mathematicians and scientists.

But the world – ordered according to its own inscrutable mode (indeed a chaos) – is so complex and vast on both macro and micro scales that it ren forever unpredictable. The weather, for hoary example. And take the very that ponders these thoughts: in spite of years of personhood, we remain dictable even to our own selves. Often we wouldn't be able to guess what our thought will be. But that clearly does not mean we are living in hopeless cision; it only means that we live in a realm in which many patterns remain nous or inaccessible to us.

Yet we can affirm that the natural world (which includes human language) is naturally, shapedly, coherent, and patterned *according to its own devices*. Each of four thousand or so languages of the world models reality in its own way, patterns and syntaxes that were not devised by anyone. Languages were not intellectual inventions of archaic schoolteachers, but are naturally evolved systems whose complexity eludes the descriptive capacities of any one

'Wild' alludes to a process of self-organization that generates systems of organisms, all of which are within the constraints of – and constitute components of – larger systems that again are wild, such as major ecosystems or the water cycle in the biosphere. Wildness can be said to be the essential nature of nature reflected in consciousness; it can be seen as a kind of open awareness – full

⁴From *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Watersheds*, Washington, DC: Counterpunch, 1995.

conservation biology to the study of literature. Perhaps the overriding feature of ecocritical theory, though, is it is nearly always attached to an accessible, helpful application, sometimes making it almost unrecognizable as theory. We do not (yet) have any Lacans or Foucaults in our ranks (although we certainly have our share of colleagues and students applying Lacanian and Foucaultian perspectives to green texts). If you're looking for ecocritical theory, look for it in our practice.

Ecocriticism in Context

WILLIAM HOWARTH*

ECOCRITICISM is a name that implies more ecological literacy than its advocates now possess, unless they know what an embattled course ecology has run during its history. *Eco* and *critic* both derive from Greek, *oikos* and *kritikē*, and in tandem they mean 'house judge', which may surprise many lovers of green, outdoor writing. A long-winded gloss on *ecocriticism* might run as follows: a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harmful through political action. So the *oikos* is nature, a place Edward Hoagland calls 'the widest home', and the *kritikē* is an arbiter of taste who wants the house kept in good order, no hoots or dishes strewn about to ruin the original decor.

I am toying with words, in the hope they will raise some questions about ecocriticism and its future. If its political agenda insists on an Us-Them dichotomy, then ecocriticism cannot be self-scrutinizing, only adversarial. Since ecology studies the relations between species and habitats, ecocriticism must see its complicity in what it attacks. All writers and their critics are stuck with language, and although we cast *nature* and *culture* as opposites, in fact they constantly mingle, like water and soil in a flowing stream. . . .

We know nature through images and words, a process that makes the question of truth in science or literature inescapable, and whether we find validity through data or metaphor, the two modes of analysis are parallel. Ecocriticism observes in nature and culture the ubiquity of signs, indicators of value that shape form and meaning. Ecology leads us to recognize that life speaks, communicating through encoded streams of information that have direction and purpose, if we learn to translate the messages with fidelity.

To see how far these values dwell from current humanism, we may turn to the Modern Language Association guide, *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of Literary Studies* (1992). As its title implies, this survey proposes a sweeping act

*From 'Some Principles of Ecocriticism', in Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (eds) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Athens, GA and London: University of Georgia Press, 1996.

of land reform in all literary fields, medieval to postcolonial, by using bold spatial language: ideas intersect at odd angles, disciplinary maps raise questions of boundaries (national, racial, sexual, political), frontiers project beliefs that shape imagined spaces. Yet this geography is only rhetorical, according to its mappers, because literature dwells nowhere: "The odd thing, in fact, about literature as an imagined territory is that there are apparently no natural limits – and hence, it would seem, there are no natural limits to the field of literary criticism" (Greenblatt and Gunn 6).

The dogma that culture will always master nature has long directed Western progress, inspiring the wars, invasions, and other forms of conquest that have crowded the earth and strained its carrying capacity. Humanists still bristle with tribal aggression, warring for dominion even though they spurn all forms of hegemony. The boldest new scholars have focused on 1500–1900, four centuries of global domination, with such revisionist ferocity as to sustain what Leah S. Marcus recently calls "a set of geographic metaphors . . . that suggest our continuing engagement on one level with a cast of mind we have rejected on another" (Greenblatt and Gunn 61). Many recent works of critical theory chart borders, boundaries, frontiers, horizons, margins, but these tropes also have no natural or geographical reference (Marshall). Yet if current literary maps are devoid of content, postmodern geographers are not: several have used contemporary theory to re-examine the spatial, perceptual, and textual conventions of maps and land (Enrlikin, Monmonier).

Ecocriticism seeks to redirect humanist ideology, not spurning the natural sciences but using their ideas to sustain viable readings. Literature and science trace their roots to the hermeneutics of religion and law, the sources for early ideas of time and space, or history and property. Concepts of property and authority are central directives in science; hence its long service to Western expansion (Bowler). Today science is evolving beyond Cartesian dualism toward quantum mechanics and chaos theory, where volatile, ceaseless exchange is the norm. While some forms of postmodern criticism are following this lead, many humanists still cling to a rationalist bias that ignores recent science.

Throughout the twentieth century, literary theory has often challenged the scale and verity of science. The "human sciences" of Dilthey asserted differences between scientific knowledge and human understanding, laying emphasis on consciousness and sympathetic insight as traits cultivated by civilization. War and genocide dimmed this optimism, yet among humanists the conviction endures that experience is mind-centered and free of reference to actualities of space and time. Literary critics still place an expansive trust in poetry and dreams, states they see as providing alternative relations to material substance. Hence the persistence of psychoanalytic criticism, despite recent advances in medicine that provide chemical aids for mental disease. As philosophers of mood and ego, humanists are inclined to trust "the talking cure" above pharmacology, finding lithium or Prozac less reliable than Freud and Kristeva.

Cultural critics share an attachment to ideology and a distrust of physical experience. Marxist theory has influenced environmental history, often by ignoring

natural science. In Marxist readings, economics determines social history; but capitalism becomes the source for all conflict, oppression, and environmental a (Crosby). Such views ignore many inconvenient facts: that disturbance is common in nature; that aborigines and socialists often commit ecocide. Revolutionary theories tend to ignore natural constraints on production: as farmers have known, floods and locusts can destroy years of rational planning. A more critical approach examines how social systems change as rural agrarian life evolves toward urban industry (Benjamin, Williams). This emphasis on the interaction of place and work agrees with ecology, which charts how physical conditions affect beliefs. Historians who accept such a teleology are anticipating ecocriticism which shares the hope that flawed social conditions may be improved. . . .

Ecocritics may detect more parity between literary and scientific writing than other postmodernists, but that view is not eccentric or unprecedented. The formalists present systematic studies of language, so regular in Jakobson's resemble generic code. New Critics used close readings to explore the intricate complexity of words, insisting that they share an organic coherence (Krieger). Structuralism and semiotics focused on descriptive language, offering precise descriptions of signs and signifying that form culture (Blanchard). . . . Also anticipating ecocriticism were structuralist critics of myth and anthropology who examined systems often from agricultural fertility rites, that explain natural conditions or prevent disasters, such as famine and flood (Blumenberg). Ethnic and postcolonial studies have a strong regional emphasis, but they dwell on political or cultural spaces rather than their physical environs. In time, ecocriticism may provide a history of race and ethnicity with a view of how those social constructions relate to histories of land use and abuse. As land is traded, people are degraded, moved and from regions as mere chattel in an invidious property system (Dixon).

Ecocriticism finds its strongest advocates today in feminist and gender studies who focus on the idea of place as defining social status. Of particular interest is woman's place, often described as an attic or closet, that contains yet sustains individuals until they locate a congenial environs (Gilbert and Gubar). Some feminist equate anatomy with geography, envisioning the female body/text as a "no land" aligned against a hostile masculine world, the patriarchal settlement (C. and Gubar, Kolodny). But in this work most ideas of sexual difference still from Freudian theory, rather than recent biogenetics. Ecocriticism urges the of gender to examine evolutionary biology, where communities are not just cultural spaces.

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From 'Red' to 'Green'

JONATHAN BATE*

[ROMANTIC IDEOLOGY?]

The air pollution, more than the existence of the Iron Curtain, brought about the revolution in Czechoslovakia.

Lubos Beniak, *Mladý Svet*, Prague, December 1989

LITERARY CRITICISM HAS never been a pure discipline. Ever since Plato, an Aristotle argued over whether poets are harmful or beneficial to the state, political and moral concerns have borne in upon the discussion of literature. Inevitably and properly this will be the case so long as poetry continues to have any effect on how we understand ourselves, how we think about the ways in which we live our lives. As political and moral visions change, so literary criticism will change too. I began writing this introduction on a fairly typical day early in 1990 when the three leading stories on the evening television news were: the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union voted to abolish article six of the constitution, thus bringing to an end the formal guarantee of the Party's sole right to power; the announcement of a move towards a unified German currency; and the appearance of a scientific report supporting the hypothesis that there are links between freak weather conditions and global warming.

[The year] 1989 was more of an 1848 than a 1789, but it may well take its place in history beside the original revolutionary year as a moment when an order finally died. One could well imagine a citizen of Czechoslovakia who has seen the Prague Spring of 1968 nipped in the bud finding in the events of 1989 'the shoots / And hopeful blossoms of a second spring'. The phrase is Wordsworth's. He used it when he opened the eleventh book of the 1850 text of his autobiographical epic, *The Prelude*, at the moment after the execution of Maximilien Robespierre: 'From that time forth, Authority in France / Put on a milder face Terror had ceased.' The resonances with 1989 do not need spelling out. But it

*From *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*, London and New York: Routledge, 1991.

making a contemporary application it is worth pausing for a moment on the metaphorical appeal to spring. The 'Prague Spring' has remained a powerful image because of its seasonal propriety: it makes us think of the end of a long winter of tyranny or perhaps of flowers sprouting from an iron curtain. As with Wordsworth's second spring, a transformation in the volatile political order is dramatized by means of comparison with a familiar process in the cyclical notion of external nature. The force of the image depends on the stability of the notion of spring, the knowledge that every winter will be followed by a spring which will bring warmth and new life. This notion in turn depends on a set of assumptions about meteorological certainty: it assumes that, in Europe at least, winter will always be cold. A phrase like Wordsworth's 'It is the first mild day of March' only makes sense after a cold January and February.¹ Suddenly that third news item is seen to be relevant not only to politics but also to poetry. One effect of global warming will be (is already?) a powerful increase in the severity of winds in northern Europe: the swallow has great difficulty in coping with wind, so there is a genuine possibility that within the lifetime of today's students Britain will cease to be a country to which this bird migrates. Keats's ode 'To Autumn' is predicated upon the certainty of the following spring's return; the poem will look very different if there is some autumn when 'gathering swallows twitter in the skies for the last time'.

The 1980s witnessed something of a return to history, a move away from ahistorical formalisms, among practitioners of literary criticism. In the area of English Romantic poetry, the foundation for the most characteristic work of the decade was laid by Jerome J. McGann in a series of essays and a small but provocative book called *The Romantic Ideology*.² The capstone of the decade's criticism, published in 1989, was a very large book by Alan Liu called *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*.³ The conceptions of 'ideology' and 'history' underlying these books are in the broad sense Marxist: indeed, McGann's title is a very conscious echo of Marx's *The German Ideology*. If we reduce the thesis of these critics to its bare bones, we find that it is essentially a sophisticated revision of a very old accusation:

In honoured poverty thy voice did weave
Songs consecrate to truth and liberty. -
Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve.

Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be

(Shelley, 'To Wordsworth')

Just for a handful of silver he left us.

Just for a riband to stick in his coat . . .

He alone breaks from the van and the freemen,

He alone sinks to the rear and the slaves!

(Browning, 'The Lost Leader')

Wordsworth developed a creed of the all-powerful, redeeming poetic imagination, it is proposed, as a kind of compensation for his political disillusionment or even

apostasy. Romanticism gives up on its original revolutionary impulses and for what it supposes is 'A paradise within, happier far'. Wordsworth's great autobiographical epic ends not with the blissful dawn of the early days of the French Revolution, but with the Restoration of Imagination:

the mind of man becomes

A thousand times more beautiful than the earth

On which he dwells, above this frame of things

(Which, 'mid all revolutions in the hopes

And fears of men, doth still remain unchanged)

In beauty exalted, as it is itself

Of substance and of fabric more divine.

(*The Prelude*, xiii, 446-52)⁴

Imagination is seen as a way of transcending 'this frame of things', the earth which we dwell, where revolutions go sour; imagination remains 'unchanged', 'exalted', 'divine'. The most remarkable *tour de force* in Alan Liu's book is an evocation of the 'history' - in this instance the Napoleonic matter - that is buried beneath Wordsworth's most powerful apostrophe to the Imagination, the cross of the Alps section of *The Prelude*, book six. Implicitly, Wordsworth is upbraided for suppressing history and for 'privileging' the individual imagination. After 'individualism' is a bourgeois fetish.

The arguments are extremely subtle, at times brilliant, but the underlying vision is the crude old model of Left and Right. This is understandable: after those terms themselves are derived from the seating plan of the National Assembly in the revolutionary France which Wordsworth visited. But it is precisely this model that is beginning to look redundant as Marxist-Leninism collapses in Eastern Europe. Furthermore, if the quotation at the beginning of my introduction is to be believed, this collapse cannot be constructed as anything so simple as a triumph of the Right, let alone of international capitalism. It is not difficult to assimilate nationalism and religion, two of the driving forces of the 1989 revolutions, into Left-Right model, but the political significance of air pollution demand rethinking of the categories. The political map has been redrawn and it is time literary criticism to politicize itself in a new way. . . .

[THE GREAT PASTORAL CON-TRICK?]

. . . In Romantic poetics, poetry is to be found not only in language but in nature: it is not only a means of verbal expression, it is also a means of emotional communication between man and the natural world. John Clare's poem 'Pastoral Poet begins with a manifesto remarkably similar to Hazlitt's (in the first of his *Lectures on the English Poets*). . . . [He speaks of] 'A language that is ever green'. . . . Clare, himself a farm-labourer, not a 'gentleman' like Wordsworth, pastoral poet is the life and the beauty in nature. It is available to give joy unto all, to elev-

even the 'simplest hearts': when the shepherd's heart lifts with joy at the sight of a wild flower, that is poetry. Pastoral poetry has a permanent, enduring power – it is an *evergreen* language.

For modern criticism, however, pastoral poetry is historically and socially specific. *Pure* Clare, it is not really written by shepherds, it is a comforting aristocratic fantasy that covers up the real conditions of oppression and exploitation in feudal and neo-feudal agrarian economies. Raymond Williams writes with honest indignation: 'It is not easy to forget that Sidney's *Arcadia*, which gives a continuing role to English neo-pastoral, was written in a park which had been made by enclosing a whole village and evicting the tenants.'⁶ Roger Sales lashes out with less measure: 'Pastoralism covers a multitude of economic sins. Literary criticism ought, therefore, to take the form of a brutal strip-tease. Pastoralism should be directed of its silver-tongued language and myths of the golden age.'⁷ A major count in the critical indictment of Wordsworth is that he was among the many conspirators in the Great Pastoral Con Trick....

What, then, are the politics of our relationship to nature? For a poet, pastoral is the traditional mode in which that relationship is explored. Pastoral has not done well in recent neo-Marxist criticism, but if there is to be an ecological criticism the 'language that is ever green' must be reclaimed. ... I would suggest ... that Wordsworth built an account of the pastoral into the pivotal retrospective eighth book of *The Prelude* in order to forge a link between the holistic values of his native valleys and the 'social modernism' that underlay the French Revolution. If this is so, then we must abandon the model of Wordsworth the young radical with his 'outraged' social and political instincts sooner or later ... becoming Wordsworth the 'counter-revolutionary' promoting a conservative ideology. An 'ideology' based on a harmonious relationship with nature goes beyond, in many ways goes deeper than, the political model we have become used to thinking with. By recuperating the Wordsworthian pastoral, we may begin to reconfigure the model.

Book eight of *The Prelude*, 'Retrospect: Love of Nature leading to Love of Mankind', was written before book seven, but in the structure of the completed poem it is crucial that it comes after it. ... For Wordsworth, the distinction between being in the city and being in nature is cardinal; so it is that the move from book seven to book eight is from negative types to positive ones. As 'Residence in London' ends with [the competitive chaos of] Bartholomew Fair, so 'Retrospect' begins with Grasmere Fair. In contrast to the unknown faces in the city, the community gathered in Grasmere for the annual fair is a 'little family'. The only patriarch is the mountain itself. The Vale of Grasmere is imagined as a visionary republic; as Wordsworth put it in his *Guide to the Lakes*, it is a 'pure Commonwealth'; the members of which existed in the midst of a powerful empire like an ideal society or an organized community, whose constitution had been imposed and regulated by the mountains which protected it.⁸ The language here – 'Commonwealth', 'ideal society', 'organized community' – is from a tradition of radical republicanism that goes back to the English civil war. To summon up English republicanism was to declare allegiance to the French Revolution; it therefore follows that, by associating Grasmere Vale with republicanism, Wordsworth was retrospectively finding a

seedbed for his own revolutionary enthusiasm in the rural community had known since his earliest years.

[THERE IS NO NATURE?]

Whatever our class, nature can do something for us. Alan Liu writes of the name under which we use the nonhuman to validate the human pose a meditation able to make humanity more easy with itself.⁹ This is to describe accurately what nature does for Wordsworth, for Hazlitt, for Morris, for the factory-labourer who contributed to the Derwentwater. However, Liu links this statement to the claim that 'There is no nature' by Wordsworth and the rest for their own purposes. The polemical desire any casual recourse to 'nature' as panacea for social ills has the consequence of occluding any consideration of the whole question of society's stewardship of 'the features and products of the earth itself, as with those of human civilization' (OED's thirteenth sense of the word). 'There is no nature' at a time when our most urgent need is to address the consequences of human civilization's insatiable desire to consume the earth. We are confronted for the first time in history with the possibility of there being no part of the earth left untouched by man. 'Human civilization' has been in the business of altering the land, whether through deforestation, urbanization or mining or enclosure or even the artificial reimposition through landscaping in the manner of William Kent and Capability Brown. But until now there have always been domains into which 'human civilization' did not extend; there has always been a 'state of nature'. Enclosure and gardening have had no effect on the higher fellsides and farns of West Churnaby, however. There is a difference not merely in degree but between local changes to the surface configuration of the land and the transformations of the economy of nature that take place when the land is radioactive or the ozone layer is depleted. When there have been a few accidents at nuclear power stations, when there are no more rainforests, a every wilderness has been ravaged for its mineral resources, then let us say 'is no nature'.

NOTES

- 1 The opening of 'Lines written at a distance from my House', in *Lyrical Ballads*, J. J. McCann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*, Chicago, 1987.
- 2 essays collected in *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historic and Theory*, Oxford, 1988.
- 3 A. Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*, Stanford, CA, 1989.

The Social Construction of Nature

TERRY GIFFORD*

I AM WRITING this at my home in Sheffield. If I turn my head a little at the frame of the screen on which I am writing, I look through the window. This frame is filled by two things: tree and sky. Both are changing, although at different rates. The Japanese cherry has just finished weeks of flowering. Now as I look out into the top of the tree I see bare leaves. In the winter I shall look through the branches to the top of a house dipping away to miles of industrial buildings and housing estate; the tree the blue sky is filling with clouds. It has started to rain. The new swifts have disappeared. The rain gets heavier. I see it and hear it.

Do you? I have not described it, so what has the word *rain* signified here? Presumably you have imagined water falling past my window and no or cats and dogs? (Perhaps not.) Your own direct experiences of rain will be framed by your contexts, but you will know what it generally looks, so it feels like so that the word *rain* works in a broad sense. The signified thus a primacy over the signifier (I am relieved to discover). However, as I communicate in words my own context or frames. I am mediating in reader. To convey more of what it has meant to me would require the suggestion of poetry, which in turn would require in the reader some degrees of experience of rain for the signifiers to make distinctions. The Amhara people of Ethiopia only one word for all rain. A German correspondent recently sent me: German expressions for rain. Rain can be a concept, such as fertility or fruit the feel of rain, snow, or sun is a direct contact with external nature lose touch with at our peril. If we lose direct experience of seasonal change are we to understand growth and decay in ourselves?

But from this material world in which we live we have become strange. There is much evidence to show that those of us living in large industrial (and in Britain that is most of us) still need to have unmediated contact with nature. A study of the therapeutic value of trees for hospital patients found that, with patients whose windows looked out onto brick walls, those whose

*From 'The Social Construction of Nature', *ISLE*, 3(2), 1996.

4 *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850* (ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill). New York, 1979. All quotations are from this edition in the 1805 text, unless otherwise stated.

5 I. C. L. *Selected Poetry* (ed. Geoffrey Summerfield). London, 1990, p. 163.

6 R. Williams, *The Country and the City*, London, 1973, repr. 1975, p. 33.

7 R. Sales, *English Literature in History 1700-1830: Pastoral and Politics*, London, 1983, p. 77.

8 *Wordsworth's Guide to the Lakes: The Fifth Edition (1835)* (ed. Ernest de Selincourt) (Oxford, 1906, repr. 1977, p. 68).

9 *Ideas*, Wordsworth, p. 38.

