

13 Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism or green studies?

Simply defined, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Cheryll Glotfelty). But should we call it 'ecocriticism' or 'green studies'? Both terms are used to denote a critical approach which began in the USA in the late 1980s, and in the UK in the early 1990s, and since it is still an 'emergent' movement, it is worth briefly setting out its institutional history to date. In the USA the acknowledged founder is Cheryll Glotfelty, co-editor with Harold Fromm of a key collection of helpful and definitive essays entitled *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (University of Georgia Press, 1996). In 1992 she was also the co-founder of ASLE (pronounced 'Az-lee', the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment). ASLE has its own 'house journal', called *ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment)*, which started in 1993, so American ecocriticism was already a burgeoning academic movement by the early 1990s, beginning to establish its professional infrastructure of designated journals and an official corporate body. However, unlike most of the theories discussed in this book, it is still distinctly on the academic margins – the present book is the first of the many available general readers and introductions to literary theory to mention ecocriticism, and the movement still does not have a widely-known set of assumptions, doctrines, or procedures. Since ecocriticism in the USA seems to be strongest in the universities

of the West – that is, away from the largest cities, and from the major academic power-centres of the East and West coasts – we might expect it to embody 'decentrist' ideals of this kind.

Ecocriticism as a concept first arose in the late 1970s, at meetings of the WLA (the Western Literature Association, a body whose field of interest is the literature of the American West). In his introduction to a series of brief position papers (all entitled 'What is ecocriticism?') Michael P. Branch 'traces the word "ecocriticism" back to William Rueckert's 1978 essay "Literature and ecology: an experiment in ecocriticism".¹ A claim for first usage in literary criticism of the related term 'ecological' is made by prominent US ecocritic Karl Kroeber, whose article "'Home at Grasmere": ecological holiness', appeared in the journal *PMLA*, 89, 1974, pp. 132–41. Both terms ('ecocriticism' and 'ecological') apparently lay dormant in the critical vocabulary (says Branch) until the 1989 WLA conference (in Coeur d'Alene, USA), when Cheryll Glotfelty (at the time a graduate student at Cornell University, subsequently Associate Professor of Literature and the Environment at the University of Nevada, Reno) not only revived the term 'ecocriticism', but urged its adoption to refer to the diffuse critical field that had previously been known as 'the study of nature writing'.

Ecocriticism, as it now exists in the USA, takes its literary bearings from three major nineteenth-century American writers whose work celebrates nature, the life force, and the wilderness as manifested in America, these being Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), Margaret Fuller (1810–1850), and Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862). All three were 'members' of the group of New England writers, essayists and philosophers known collectively as the transcendentalists, the first major literary movement in America to achieve 'cultural independence' from European models. Emerson's first, short book *Nature*, first published anonymously in 1836 (included in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff, Penguin, 1982) is a reflective (rather than

¹ Branch's introduction, and the twelve short pieces presented at a 1994 symposium on ecocriticism, can all be accessed in the ASLE website at: www.asle.umn.edu/conf/other_conf/wla/1994.html

philosophical) essay on the impact upon him of the natural world, often voiced in words of powerfully dramatic directness:

Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. (chapter one p. 38)

Fuller's first book was *Summer on the Lakes, During 1843* (included in *The Portable Margaret Fuller*, Viking/Penguin, 1994) which is a powerfully written journal of her encounter with the American landscape at large, after a period as the first woman student at Harvard. At Niagara, for instance, she writes:

For here there is no escape from the weight of a perpetual creation; all other forms and motions come and go, the tide rises and recedes, the wind, at its mightiest, moves in gales and gusts, but here is really an incessant, an indefatigable motion. Awake or asleep, there is no escape, still this rushing round you and through you. It is in this way I have most felt the grandeur – somewhat eternal, if not infinite. (p. 71)

Thoreau's *Walden* (Oxford University Press, World's Classics, 1999) is an account of his two-year stay, from 1845, in a hut he had built on the shore of Walden Pond, a couple of miles from his home town of Concord, Massachusetts. It is, perhaps, the classic account of dropping out of modern life and seeking to renew the self by a 'return to nature' – this is certainly a book which has always exerted a strong effect on the attitudes of its readers. These three books can be seen as the foundational works of American 'ecocentred' writing.

By contrast, the UK version of ecocriticism, or green studies, takes its bearings from the British Romanticism of the 1790s rather than the American transcendentalism of the 1840s. The founding figure on the British side is the critic Jonathan Bate, author of *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (Routledge, 1991). British ecocritics also make the point that many of their concerns are evident (before the term 'ecocriticism' existed) in Raymond Williams's book *The Country and the City* (Chatto & Windus, 1973). The infrastructure of ecocriticism

in the UK is less developed than in the USA (there are as yet no indigenous journals or formal bodies for ecocritics to join, though there is a UK branch of ASLE), but the provision of relevant course options on undergraduate degree programmes is becoming more widespread, especially in new universities and colleges of higher education. Of course, institutional affiliations change, but at the time of writing, apart from Bate himself (who teaches at the University of Liverpool), most of the active British proponents of ecocriticism were based at these institutions (such as Laurence Coupe at Manchester Metropolitan University, Richard Kerridge and Greg Garrard both at Bath Spa University College, and Terry Gifford at the former Bretton Hall College, now part of the University of Leeds). The definitive UK collection of essays (having equivalent status in the UK to that of Glotfelty and Fromm in the USA) is Laurence Coupe's *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (Routledge, 2000).

The existence of two distinct national variants of the ecological approach suggests a situation similar to the one described in Chapter 9, in which we saw how 'British' cultural materialism and 'American' new historicism are clearly linked in their approaches and aims, but differ in emphasis and 'ancestry'. Generally, the preferred American term is 'ecocriticism', whereas 'green studies' is frequently used in the UK, and there is perhaps a tendency for the American writing to be 'celebratory' in tone (occasionally degenerating into what harder-left critics disparagingly call 'tree-hugging'), whereas the British variant tends to be more 'minatory', that is, it seeks to warn us of environmental threats emanating from governmental, industrial, commercial, and neo-colonial forces. For instance, Bate's more recent book, *The Song of the Earth* (Picador, 2000), argues that colonialism and deforestation have frequently gone together.²

Culture and nature

What attitudes, then, are characteristic of ecocriticism, irrespec-

² He writes: 'As Robert Pogue Harrison has demonstrated in his remarkable book *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, imperialism has always brought with it deforestation and the consuming of natural resources' (p. 87).

tive of which national variant is in question? This sub-section indicates the scope of some of the debates within ecocriticism concerning the crucial matter of the relationship between culture and nature. Perhaps the most fundamental point to make here is that ecocritics reject the notion (common to most of the other theories considered in this book) that everything is socially and/or linguistically constructed (which is the first item in the list of five recurrent ideas in critical theory given on pp. 34-6, above). For the ecocritic, nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironised as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it. Nature, then, isn't reducible to a concept which we conceive as part of our cultural practice (as we might conceive a deity, for instance, and project it out onto the universe). Theory in general tends to see our external world as socially and linguistically constructed, as 'always already' textualised into 'discourse', but ecocriticism calls this long-standing theoretical orthodoxy into question, sometimes rather impatiently, as in Kate Soper's frequently-quoted remark (in her seminal book *What is Nature?* p. 151) that 'It isn't language which has a hole in its ozone layer.' Ecocriticism, then, repudiates the foundational belief in 'constructedness' which is such an important aspect of literary theory. Of course, that belief in the universality of social constructedness was always vulnerable to the objection that if true it would necessarily be unknowable (since 'everything' would include the idea itself that 'everything is socially and linguistically constructed'). In the 1980s, social-construction gangs seemed to be everywhere, digging up and replacing the academic sidewalks, and for the most part their work is still in place, constituting the main academic thoroughfare in the Humanities. So the difficulty of either verifying or falsifying the view that everything is socially or linguistically constructed has not diminished its grip on day-to-day debate about literary theory. Nevertheless, the essence of ecocriticism's intervention in theory has been to challenge it.

This crucial point, however, should not be taken as implying that ecocritics hold a naïve 'pre-theoretical' notion of nature. There have been set-piece confrontations on this issue which will

repay study and are equivalent in importance to the key debates over the fundamentals of theory mentioned elsewhere in this book, such as the exchanges between F. R. Leavis and René Wellek in the 1930s over the principles of literary criticism (p. 16), and the dialogue between F. W. Bateson and Roger Fowler over linguistics and literary criticism in the 1960s (pp. 205-6). In the case of ecocriticism, some of the most heated exchanges have been between the American Wordsworth critic Alan Liu and various ecocritics, including Jonathan Bate (in *Romantic Ecology*), Karl Kroeber (in *Ecological Literary Criticism*), and Terry Gifford (originally in *ISLE* in 1996, and reprinted in Coupe's *The Green Studies Reader*, pp. 173-6). The key feature of Liu's position is the view that calling something 'nature', and seeing it as 'simply given', is usually a way of avoiding the politics which has made it that way. Of course, it *can* be so: for instance, the well-known nineteenth-century children's hymn by C. F. Alexander, 'All things bright and beautiful' originally contained the notorious lines (long omitted from most editions):

The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate;
He made them high and lowly
And ordered their estate.

It is obvious here that social inequality is being 'naturalised', that is, literally, disguised as nature, and viewed as a situation which is 'god-given' and inescapable, when actually it is the product of a specific politics and power structure. (Perhaps Karl Marx had such sentiments in mind when he said, in his 'Critique of the *Hegelian Philosophy of Right*', in 1844, that religion is the opium of the people.) The Left's long-standing assumption is that *any* invocation of nature will have the side-effect of disguising politics and so legitimating inequalities and injustices. Hence, for Liu (in Bate's paraphrase of his position) '*There is no nature ... in other words, "nature" is nothing more than an anthropomorphic construct created by Wordsworth and the rest for their own purposes*' (Coupe, p. 171). Liu's now notorious remark is a frequent target in ecocritical writing and has been, paradoxically, a valuable stimulus to the definition and crystallisation of ecocritical

positions (see for instance the chapter 'Surprised by nature: ecology and Cold War criticism' in Kroeber's book, listed below). Gifford quotes Liu directly to the effect that 'Nature is the name under which we use the nonhuman to validate the human, to interpose a mediation able to make humanity more easy with itself' (Coupe, p. 175). Gifford's response is to say that 'while Liu is right to identify the word *nature* as "a mediation", he is wrong to deny the general physical presence that is one side of that mediation' (p. 175). Indeed, the meaning of the word 'nature' is a key 'site of struggle' for nearly all the theories discussed in this book, and it is the word with one of the longest entries in Raymond Williams's influential book *Keywords*, which is a glossary of key terms and concepts from cultural history.³

Perhaps it is appropriate in the final chapter of a book of this kind to say that this issue of the social and linguistic constructedness of reality (sometimes called 'the problem of the real') has been one of the areas on which the teaching of theory has tended to generate confusion. Of course, attitudes to nature vary, and some of the variations are culturally determined, but the fact that a phenomenon is regarded differently in different cultures doesn't call its 'reality' into question. Like Terry Gifford (Coupe, p. 176), I can point to my own bald head as evidence of the overarching grand narrative of nature which contains us all in the cycle of growth, maturity, and decay. I may have plenty of Lyotardian 'incredulity' towards this narrative, but it won't make any difference. Yet 'aging', both as a fact and as a concept, features differently in different cultures. Some cultures regard it as almost a shameful thing, so that the elderly affect youthful styles of speech, dress, tastes, and behaviour. Other cultures, and other eras, regard(ed) it as honourable and admirable, as an index of the possession of wisdom or understanding, for instance. Thus, traditional representations of Socrates or God the Father show elderly, grey-bearded patriarchal figures in flowing garments,

³ I recall Williams at a conference on literary theory in the 1980s becoming increasingly irritated at the nervous apologies offered by speakers whenever they had to use the word 'nature' – even apparently innocent phrases like 'the nature of the problem' had become taboo, or were felt to require elaborate fumigation before being used in public.

rather than glossy, sharply-dressed, youngish men or women, as if age and masculinity were the natural fleshly garb of the 'wisdom of the ages'. But these different, culturally-determined ways of regarding the fact of aging should not prevent us from realising that it doesn't follow that age is 'socially constructed', or that it is part of culture rather than nature. Such statements, we must be clear, are figurative and hyperbolic – they gesture towards an *element* of truth, but they must not be passed off as *literal* truth. They are like the statements sometimes made about actors in film advertisements which proclaim (for instance) that 'Marlon Bando is The Godfather'. In teaching literary theory we have perhaps not made this and kindred distinctions as clear as we ought to have done. One of the welcome side-effects of ecocriticism is to bring this vital issue to the fore, making us clarify our thoughts about it, even if somewhat belatedly.

A related issue, which is also thrown into relief by ecocriticism, is whether a distinction is deconstructed into self-contradiction by the fact that (like the nature/culture distinction) it is not always absolute and clear-cut. At one level this can be answered very easily: the existence of distinctions is not undermined at all by the simultaneous existence of intermediate states – grey is real, but its existence doesn't destabilise the difference between black and white. If we translate this into issues directly relevant to ecocriticism, we can say that we have nature, and culture, and states partaking of both, and that all three are real. Consider, for instance, what we can call the 'outdoor environment' as a series of adjoining and overlapping areas which move gradually from nature to culture, along the following lines:

Area one: 'the wilderness' (e.g. deserts, oceans, uninhabited continents)

Area two: 'the scenic sublime' (e.g. forests, lakes, mountains, cliffs, waterfalls)

Area three: 'the countryside' (e.g. hills, fields, woods)

Area four: 'the domestic picturesque' (e.g. parks, gardens, lanes)

As we move mentally through these areas, it is clear that we move from pretty well 'pure' nature in the first to what is predominantly 'culture' in the fourth. Of course, the wilderness is affected

by global warming, which is cultural, and gardens depend on sunlight, which is a natural force, but neither concept ('nature' or 'culture') is thereby invalidated. Furthermore, the two middle areas, to varying degrees, contain large elements of *both* culture and nature, so that we might have doubts about the right positioning of some of the component elements within them (Should mountains be categorised as part of area one, hills as area two?) But these uncertainties should not be seen as destabilising the fundamental distinction between nature and culture. Even if it could be shown that all four areas were actually different degrees or kinds of culture, it would still not follow that there is no such thing as nature. (In the same way, the fact that drizzle is merely a kind of rain does not mean that there is no such thing as drizzle, nor does it mean that it makes no difference whether we say 'It's raining' or 'It's drizzling'.)

If we return to the four environmental areas, it will be clear that most of what is called 'nature writing' concerns the two middle ones: eighteenth-century topographical writing, which might be exemplified by James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1730), Thomas Gray's 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard' (1751), and William Cowper's *The Task* (1785), had area three as its preferred location, while British Romantic writing, like Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1805, in its best-known form) often centred on area two, but American transcendentalist writing of the nineteenth century was predominantly interested in area one (mountain ranges, prairies, colossal cataraacts, space itself).⁴ Areas three and four are often the setting for domestic fiction and lyric poetry, both of which centre upon relationships between human beings, while the first two areas are the preferred settings for epic and saga, which centre on relations between human beings and cosmic forces (fate, destiny, the deity, etc.), and for 'Promethean' narratives in which human beings test the limits of their scope and powers – such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. The wilderness is entered as if instinctively

⁴ See, for instance, Thoreau's essay 'Walking' (extracted in Coupe, pp. 23–5), which discusses these matters: he writes 'I do not know of any poetry to quote which adequately expresses this yearning for the Wild'.

by those who would 'find' themselves – Moses ascends the mountain to receive the commandments, Christ goes into the wilderness to pray, the aboriginal initiate goes 'walkabout' in the Bush, Huck Finn 'flights out for the territories', and so on. These spaces, then, seem to perform a special function for us, a function vital to our well-being, though this, of course, is to view them in anthropocentric (human-centred) fashion, as if they existed for our benefit, a point which 'deep ecology' would resist.⁵ The point repeatedly made by ecocritics is that for the first time in human history, no true wilderness any longer exists on the planet, for every region is affected by global warming, and other 'anthropocentric' problems, such as toxic waste and nuclear fall-out. Our sense of these problems will vary, but we surely need to concede, at least, that issues of gender, race, and class cannot any longer exhaust the range of concerns that literature and criticism ought to have, though 'social ecologists' and 'ecofeminists' will rightly seek to blend such concerns with an ecologically-driven programme and outlook. Seeking to contribute to rectifying injustices in the areas of gender, race and class is a praiseworthy aim for critics and theorists to have, but it isn't sensible to ignore the fact that making a difference in these presupposes that we can manage to avoid environmental catastrophe. Otherwise, it might seem like working flat out to secure improved working-conditions for the crew as the *Titanic* speeds towards the iceberg.

Turning criticism inside out

An ecocritical reading of a literary text is, simply, one which in some way incorporates a consideration of the kind of issues and concerns we have just been discussing. But there is, as we have said, no universally accepted model that we have merely to learn

⁵ Bate distinguishes 'light Greens' and 'dark Greens' (*The Song of the Earth*, p. 37): the former are 'environmentalists' who value nature because it 'enriches' humanity and contributes to our well-being; they believe we can 'save' the planet by more responsible forms of consumption and production. 'dark Greens', or 'deep ecologists' take a more radical stance – technology is the problem and therefore can't be the solution, so we have (in some way) to 'get back to nature': they dislike the anthropocentric term 'environment', preferring 'nature', viewed as being there for its own sake, not ours.

and apply. Often, it is just a matter of approaching perhaps very familiar texts with a new alertness to this dimension, a dimension which has perhaps always hovered about the text, but without ever receiving our full attention before. This is well illustrated in the opening of a short piece by Ralph W. Black entitled 'What we talk about when we talk about ecocriticism':

Not long ago I saw *King Lear* again. Olivier's *Lear*. I marvelled as usual at Lear's deep rage and deeper sadness, and I cried as usual as he carried Cordelia's body across the stage at the end. But I was struck even more by the beginning: A map of the kingdom is unrolled. It is painted across the tanned hides of a small herd of royal deer. The old Sovereign uses his sword to symbolically divide his domain among his daughters. Even before the daughters have spoken, or refused to speak, the trajectory of their love, there is this transgression: the commodified landscape is sliced up and parcelled out to the highest rhetorical bidder. For a moment I wonder about my understanding of the tragedy; about what hubristic act instigates Lear's fall, about the significance of the natural world in the play; the moments of clarity that all seem to take place outside – in a storm, on the moors, at the seashore.⁶

These introductory remarks signal a reading of *Lear* which would have a distinctly different flavour from any other, not because the play is being reduced to ecological considerations, but, rather, because these are being added for the first time to all the other issues which more traditional approaches have always seen in the play. Such a reading would remind us that the slice of the kingdom available to Cordelia (the 'third more opulent'), provided she says what her father wants to hear, is real peopled landscape – hills, fields, rivers, farms, communities – which are about to be randomly chopped up at the monarch's whim, as if they had no claims or integrity of their own. Likewise, the 'blasted heath' on which Lear enacts his madness is a real place located somewhere within this territory, and perhaps emblematic (in its 'blastedness') of the neglect and degradation which that territory suffers as a political consequence of Lear's act. The storm, too, isn't just the

emblematic correlative of Lear's madness, but real weather, representing the natural processes which his unnatural behaviour refuses to come to terms with, processes such as his own aging, and his consequent side-lining by the following generation ('All old men are King Lear', said Tolstoy, and Freud, too, saw *Lear* as an archetypal 'family drama'). Ecocritical readings of canonical texts, then, begin by adding a different perspective, and are not limited to works self-evidently about nature.

But the *Lear* reading implied here does have one other characteristic which is worth noting particularly, namely the way it tends to turn the conventional manner of reading inside out (so to speak). By this is meant that its strategy seems to be to switch critical attention from inner to outer, so that what had seemed mere 'setting' is brought in from the critical margins to the critical centre (so that, among other things, the storm *is* a storm, and not just a metaphor for the turmoil in Lear's mind). I want to illustrate this important move – this refusal to privilege the inner over the outer – at slightly greater length using another text as example, the aim being to emphasise that this need not be a reductive move, and that the complexity which is (after all) the life-blood of our literary study is thereby enriched rather than diluted. The text I am using here is Edgar Allan Poe's well-known tale 'The Fall of the House of Usher'.⁷ In the tale, Rodrick Usher, and his sister Madeline, undergo a kind of voluntary imprisonment in the ancient, crumbling, isolated House of Usher, which stands next to an evil-looking lake, 'a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling'. The sister suffers from a strange wasting disease, while Usher himself, a being of 'lofty and spiritual ideality', is afflicted by 'a morbid acuteness of the senses', which makes him unable to bear any contact with the natural world – 'the odours of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light'. His only contact with the world beyond himself is through art, and when the narrator first encounters him, 'many books and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to give any vitality to the scene.'

6 This is one of the items from the symposium mentioned in footnote 1.

7 If you do not have it to hand you can download the complete text from a web-site, such as: www.kingkong.demon.co.uk/gsr/usher.htm

The tale is usually read with a focus on the morbid psychology of Usher, and on the strange way in which the narrator's arrival triggers Madeline's decline: the narrator's complicity in her premature entombment in the vault directly beneath his own room is described, as well as his orchestration of her re-appearance (he reads aloud to Usher from a lurid novel which parallels the grotesque drama of break-out and resurgence taking place below). The shock of seeing his resurrected sister kills the neuroathenic Usher, and because the presence of the unnamed narrator triggers all these events, it is common to read Usher and Madeline as aspects of the narrator's own being, that is, as the subconscious underside of his rationality. This is a common literary-critical ploy – the *external* (whether characters, objects, situations, or events) is read as *internal* (in this case, as elements of the subconscious).

The ecocentred reading, by contrast, focuses *outside*, on the house and its environs, rather than inside, on the owner and his psychology. It uses ideas of energy, entropy (which is a kind of negative energy within systems which tends towards breakdown and disorganisation), and symbiosis ('sym-biosis', literally 'living together', denoting mutually sustaining, co-existing systems). Thus, the house exists as an isolated entropic system which has no symbiotic connections at all with the broader biosphere. The stagnant lake reflects the house's own unmoving image; the house breathes in the atmosphere of its own decay – the 'gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and the walls.' It has its own sealed-off microclimate, and as the climax approaches it seems to stew in its own locked-up and aborted energies, for when Usher and the narrator look out of the window 'the exceeding density of the clouds (which hung so low as to press upon the turrets of the house) did not prevent our perceiving the lifelike velocity with which they flew careering from all points against each other, without passing away into the distance'. The House of Usher, then, is not part of a living system; no new elements come in from outside to energise it and enable it to contribute to other systems; it is a light that failed, a stream which has ceased to flow, a fire with nothing to burn. Its narcissistic aloofness from the flow of the broader life-force turns

it into a kind of Black Hole, which becomes a vortex into which its energies are sucked and destroyed – 'a whirlwind had apparently collected its force in our vicinity' says the narrator when he looks out of the window, and we also have the black tarn (or lake) into which the house collapses and disappears at the end. Most eerie of all is Usher's mind, 'from which darkness, as if an inherent positive quality, poured forth upon all objects of the moral and physical universe, in one unceasing radiation of gloom'. Usher, then, radiates not energy, but entropy like an imploded star rushing towards its own disintegration. Frightheningly, he is all 'culture' and no 'nature'; he is 'photophobic' (hyper-sensitive to light) and cannot bear natural light at all, and prefers the represented light in paintings; he cannot bear natural sounds either, only the 'processed sound' of music. What is imaged here, then, is an eco-system damaged beyond repair and in its death-throes: this is life on a cooling planet, a system clogged with its own detritus and cut off from any possible sources of catharsis or renewal. On this reading, the centre of the story is not a dark night of the soul, with its accompanying ontological anxieties, but the permanent night of wilfully-courted ecological disaster, nuclear winter, or solar exhaustion. This is a more frightening tale than conventional readings usually produce, for when the narrator runs from the collapsing house there will be nowhere for him to run to.

STOP and THINK

The offices in my college department have what I think of as 'counter-intuitive' door locks – you unlock the door by turning the key *towards* the door jamb, rather than away from it. The result is that you must consciously reverse the intuitively obvious procedure every time you unlock the door. Critical theory has provided us with sets of keys for unlocking doors (Yale keys, in some cases), and many of them seem to have a strongly 'counter-intuitive' base. By this I mean that they put forward positions which seem to contradict notions which in everyday life we tend instinctively to regard as right or true. In

the case of ecocriticism, the intuition we have to counter is a long-standing, deeply-ingrained Western cultural tradition of anthropocentric attitudes, which are both religious and humanist, and often enshrined in commonplace references and sayings: thus, the early Greek philosopher Protagoras (fifth century BC) makes the famous statement 'Man is the measure of all things', which places us confidently at the centre of everything; in the Book of Genesis human beings are given 'dominion' over 'the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every creature that moves on the ground'; likewise, Leonardo da Vinci's famous drawing 'The Vitruvian Man' (the familiar image shows a naked male figure set within a circle and a square, with arms outstretched both horizontally, and diagonally above the head) sees the proportions of the human body as the basis of the most fundamental geometrical shapes, and hence, supposedly, of all proportions which please the eye; and in the eighteenth century Alexander Pope writes (in *An Essay on Man*) 'Know then thyself, presume not God to scan; / *The proper study of mankind is Man*' [my italics]. All these, and many more images and sayings like them, seem to give us a high cultural licence for attitudes which are anthropocentric rather than ecocentric.

In the nineteenth century the great Victorian art critic John Ruskin, in his *Modern Painters*, vol. 3 (1856), coined the term the 'pathetic fallacy' for our instinctive tendency to see our emotions reflected in our environment, which seems to be another form of the habit of seeing everything as centred upon ourselves: 'All violent feelings', he says, 'have the same effect. They produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of external things, which I would generally characterize as the "pathetic fallacy"'. Hence, a phrase like 'the cruel sea' manifests the pathetic fallacy by projecting a human attribute (cruelty) onto a natural element. Ruskin was deeply eco-conscious, the first major British writer to record a sense that nature's powers of recovery might not be infinite, and that modern forms of production and consumption have the potential to inflict fatal environmental damage: in his lectures on what he called 'the storm-cloud of the nineteenth century', which he also called

'the modern plague-cloud', he expressed his deep anxiety that the atmosphere was being permanently damaged by industrial pollution, which we might say was the environmental consequence of assuming that our 'dominion' over nature need have no limits. The 'minatory' Ruskin is convinced, after twenty years of making observations, that cloud formations, atmospheric conditions, and weather patterns had changed (had been changed) during that time.

Interestingly, Emerson, by contrast, had no worries about the pathetic fallacy – 'Nature always wears the colours of the spirit', he says, in the first chapter of *Nature*, and it is difficult not to sympathise with what he is saying. Is it going too far to suggest that the difference between these two figures on this point is symptomatic of that divergent tendency between US and UK ecocriticism mentioned earlier? Is it an over-simplification to label the two viewpoints as symptomatic of (respectively) environmental optimism and environmental pessimism? Are crowded islands like Britain and Japan likely to inspire the gut feeling that nature is rapidly being gobbled up by culture, while on the other hand, vast land-masses like America or Australia tend by their very surrounding presence, to produce the deep-down conviction that the earth will survive, no matter what evidence there might be about global warming and the ozone layer? Whichever way we instinctively incline on this, can our own well-meant awareness of the problem make any difference? What changes in the world order will be needed to make an improvement in the situation, and will they inevitably curtail our freedoms? After all, what gave Ruskin the freedom to write about and worry about industrial pollution (while other men and women had to sweat for a living)? Wasn't it, ultimately, the family fortune, which was based on the importing of sherry, a trade which must be as intimately linked as any other to the forces which produce industrial pollution? Can our own lives, of books, and courses, and web-sites, be any less implicated?

What ecocritics do

1. They re-read major literary works from an ecocentric perspective, with particular attention to the representation of the natural world.
2. They extend the applicability of a range of ecocentric concepts, using them of things other than the natural world – concepts such as growth and energy, balance and imbalance, symbiosis and mutuality, and sustainable or unsustainable uses of energy and resources.
3. They give special canonical emphasis to writers who foreground nature as a major part of their subject matter, such as the American transcendentalists, the British Romantics, the poetry of John Clare, the work of Thomas Hardy and the Georgian poets of the early twentieth century.
4. They extend the range of literary-critical practice by placing a new emphasis on relevant 'factual' writing, especially reflective topographical material such as essays, travel writing, memoirs, and regional literature.
5. They turn away from the 'social constructivism' and 'linguistic determinism' of dominant literary theories (with their emphasis on the linguistic and social constructedness of the external world) and instead emphasise ecocentric values of meticulous observation, collective ethical responsibility, and the claims of the world beyond ourselves.

Ecocriticism: an example

In 1915 the aging Thomas Hardy, overwhelmed by a sense of the collapse of civilised values as the Great War dragged on, wrote a brief poem called 'In time of "The Breaking of Nations"':

I
Only a man harrowing clods
In a slow silent walk
With an old horse that stumbles and nods
Half asleep as they stalk.

II

Only thin smoke without flame
From the heaps of couch-grass;
Yet this will go onward the same
Though Dynasties pass.

III

Yonder a maid and her wight
Come whispering by:
War's annals will cloud into night
Ere their story die.

As 'Dynasties pass' and nations are broken in the onslaught, the poet desperately looks round him for an example of immutability, seeking to re-assure himself that there is *something* permanent which will 'go onward the same' for ever, in spite of the catastrophe of world war; and the something he chooses is that most commonplace manifestation of low-tech agricultural practice – a ploughman working a field with a horse-drawn plough, 'a man harrowing clods / In a slow silent walk'.

But it's only *literally* true to say that the poem was written in 1915; it would be more accurate to say that it was written *down* in 1915, since the remembered ploughman had actually been seen by Hardy in 1870, from the garden of a rectory in Cornwall when he was courting his first wife, Emma Lavinia Gifford. Thinking of this from a broadly ecological perspective, we might say that in his now remote personal past, the seed of an idea was planted in the poet's mind, an image grew and matured over time, and was eventually re-cycled to meet a need which arose many years later. So the gestation of the poem itself mirrors the patient processes of growth and cultivation which are depicted in it. As Hardy relates in the autobiography 'ghosted' by his second wife, the courtship with Emma took place during an earlier European conflict, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871, and the ploughman used in the 1915 poem was seen on 18 August 1870, the day of 'the bloody battle of Gravelotte' (a Prussian victory that cost 20,000 Prussian casualties and 13,000 French), when Hardy and Emma had been reading Tennyson together outdoors. In spite of all that had changed or passed away in the meantime – the old

European order, the transformations in farming practices which his own novels had recorded, the passing of his own youth, the years of estranged bitterness between the two of them, and finally the death of Emma herself – Hardy still believed in *durance* and immutability, in natural forces which are timeless and inexhaustible. The 'timeless' ploughman, therefore, lives on for forty five-years in his mind without alteration, embodying the time-defying qualities Hardy seeks. The 'maid and her wight', by contrast, are not persons seen by Hardy, either in 1870 or in 1915, but a retrospective 'back projection' of himself and Emma into that 1870 scene, drawn into the artifice of eternity by their association with the ever-enduring ploughman, the figure whom the agnostic poet makes into a kind of guarantee of the future and of the indestructibility of nature and humanity.

In terms of the landscape schema given earlier, the leisured speaker/observer in the poem is poised between areas three and four, looking out from the rectory garden (gardens being the place of decorative flora intended for aesthetic and sensuous pleasure, and hence a traditional setting for relaxation and erotic dalliance – 'Come into the garden, Maud!'). He looks out into the valley of arable land, area three, locus of planting for sustenance, and scene of the labour required to bring the good life to fruition. The two regions, agriculture and horticulture, adjoin each other and Hardy implies an ideal fusion between them by projecting the courting couple out 'yonder', which is to say beyond the garden, giving them attributes in common – horse and man slow and silent and half asleep, maid and wight whispering and hence also moving slowly. The whole scene moves slowly and quietly, as if under hypnosis, but they are not quite fused into one, for the ploughman in the first stanza and the couple in the third, are divided by the second stanza, with its more negative image – thin smoke without flame from the heaps of burning grass, as if the vision of united, productive harmony across the local and domestic landscape is ominously interrupted. All that destructive human activity which hovers just beyond the poem (the breaking of nations referred to in the title's quotation from Jeremiah, and the battles of the Franco-Prussian war mentioned in the autobiography), splits and dislocates the two areas, and is represented by the

burning. The symbiosis between the two areas, we might say, between these different phases and aspects of life, is threatened by the entropic carnage of war.

Burdened with a sense of the disruptive waste of war, what comfort, we might ask, could the couple have found in Tennyson? What Tennyson poems might they have been reading? Was it the work of the patriotic, armchair-warrior Tennyson of 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' (according to his son, so excited by the *Times* account of that charge that he whooped about the room swishing the newspaper round above his head like a mock sabre)? Or the Tennyson of 'Locksley Hall', who celebrated technological change and the coming of the railways, with little sign of any environmental anxieties? Or the sombre Tennyson of 'In Memoriam', who seemed to have little trust in life going on forever, for he realised that the fossil record of the loss and extinction of species (then gradually being interpreted by pioneer Victorian geologists, many of whom were clergymen amateurs) carried no re-assuring message of a benign, natural continuity, but told vividly of a life force that cared nothing even for the disappearance of innumerable entire species, and of 'nature red in tooth and claw', driven by ruthless predatory instincts rather than by love? This Tennyson spoke from his agnosticism (which was similar to Hardy's – he was 'churchy', but not solidly religious) of hills and continents whose forms and identities are quite without *durance* and (when viewed across the vista of geological aeons) seen as fluid as cloud formations.⁸ Finding words of comfort in Tennyson, then, would probably have been pretty difficult, so that the poet looks for comfort in the world around him, rather than in his reading, and so lights upon the figure of the ploughman.

From the perspective of our own present, the confidence which is restored by contemplating the 'timeless' figure of the ploughman will seem somewhat over-optimistic and self-deluding – Hardy's figure of immutability would be *our* emblem of fragility,

⁸ *In Memoriam*, 123: 'The hills are shadows, and they flow / From form to form, and nothing stands; / They melt like mist, the solid lands, / Like clouds they shape themselves and go'.

a being redolent of a vanished era of human-scale agriculture and of a remote time when the primary associations of farming were not with subsidised over-production, diseases like BSE and Foot and Mouth, and the disappearance of song-birds and hedge-rows. To react in this way is to begin to frame an ecocentred reading of the poem, centred, that is, not on the pathos of the author's personal life, but on that bizarre contrast between, on the one hand, the loving incubation of a single poetic image across a whole lifetime, as if a poet had all the time in the world, and, on the other, the actual precariousness of the ecological balance, which is what that figure must embody for us.

What, in conclusion, are some of the characteristics of this kind of ecocentric reading? The list below indicates what my ecologically inflected reading attempted, rather than what it perhaps achieved, but it is illustrative, I hope, of the traits which ecocritical readings commonly have. So, *firstly*, the commentary gives evidence of the incorporation of broadly conceived ecological thinking, showing, for instance, a keen awareness of the growth processes of the poem itself, how it builds in several layers across a lifetime, and does not come into being in a single flash of inspired imaginative insight with no visible means of support. *Secondly*, the reading is aware that the materials which contribute to the poem's slow growth are diverse and disparate, some are actual events – some from the past some from the present – and others are imaginative projections, so that the poem isn't 'true' in any simplistic way, but has the much more potent quality of 'truth-to-life'. *Thirdly*, of course, an explicitly ecological level of content has been identified (the material about the 'areas' of environment again), and these too have appropriate weight in the discussion. *Fourthly*, we have read back into the poem a hard-edged, retrospective irony (that its emblem of permanence cannot function as that for us, considerably less than a century after Hardy wrote the poem), this irony arising from our own acute sense of environmental crisis and danger. *Finally* (which is the sum of these), the reading is itself diverse and eclectic, not hidebound by a single issue (such as an allegorical parallel or some kind of esoteric symbolism) but having a methodological balance and openness which allows it to build from a wide range of materials, not restricting

itself, in the way that most critical approaches do, to a single type of evidence (purely textual for the 'Formalist' critic, predominantly historical for the Marxist, mainly counter-intuitive linguistic elements for the deconstructor, and so on). Such eclecticism is often very marked in ecocritical readings, but not usually remarked upon, since anxieties about critical method can seem somewhat remote from this approach. A well-known remark by American ecocritic Scott Slovic comes to mind as encapsulating this attitude; Slovic quotes Walt Whitman's line in 'Song of Myself' in which the speaker proclaims 'I am large, I contain multitudes' and applies it to the community of ecocritics, adding 'There is no single, dominant world-view guiding ecocritical practice – no single strategy at work from example to example of ecocritical writing or teaching' (Coupe, 160). Of course, most critical and theoretical movements make the same eclectic claim about themselves, even those which are closely aligned with the insights of a single founding figure (such as Freud, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, etc.), but it is striking that there is no single figure within ecocriticism who has that kind of dominance – ecocriticism itself is a diverse biosphere.

Selected reading

Readers

Coupe, Laurence, ed. *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (Routledge, 2000).

This is the definitive UK collection, but it represents major contemporary American voices (Soper, Snyder, Slovic, Buell, Roszak, Giotfeldt, etc.) as well as British ones (Bate, Gifford, Garrard, Kerridge, etc.), and includes earlier material from the Romantic period onwards. Fifty chapters, mostly quite short, in six well conceived and well introduced sections, so the book is kept to a sensible size of around 300 pages.

Giotfeldt, Cheryl and Fromm, Harold, eds, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (University of Georgia Press, 1996).

The US rival of the above – another excellent, but not mammoth, collection (brevity and concision are ecocritical virtues).

Kerridge, Richard and Samuels, Neil, eds, *Writing the Environment* (Zed Books, 1998).

Fifteen essays by major British and American contributors to the field, in three sections – 'Ecocritical theory', 'Ecocritical history', and 'Contemporary writing'. Still a useful and engaging book, in spite of the subsequent publication of Coupe's collection.

General

Bate, Jonathan, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (Routledge, 1991).

Already a classic; the founding text of contemporary British ecocriticism: a brief, thought-provoking and engaging book.

Bate, Jonathan, *The Song of the Earth* (Picador, 2000).

Impressive for its overall scope and for the breadth and variety of the individual readings. The book shows that this approach can make full use of technique and learning as well as zeal.

Buell, Lawrence, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Harvard University Press, 1995).

A highly significant and influential work in this field – this is the book most frequently cited by ecocritics.

Gifford, Terry, *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry* (Manchester University Press, 1995).

Discusses R. S. Thomas, George Mackay Brown, John Montague, Norman Nicholson, Patrick Kavanagh, and others in what he calls the 'anti-pastoralist' tradition of Crabbe and Clare; and, in what he calls the 'post-pastoral' mode, Heaney (successor to Wordsworth) and Hughes (successor to Blake).

Gifford, Terry, *Pastoral* (Routledge, the Critical Idiom series, 1999).

A very useful book developing the three-layer model of pastoral, anti-pastoral, and post-pastoral used in the previous book.

Kroeber, Karl, *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind* (Columbia University Press, 1994).

Another brief and engaging book, making an ideal paired read with either of Bate's (above).

Murphy, Patrick D., ed. *Literature of Nature: An International Source-book* (Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998).

'A reference work that explores the diversity of genres, modes, and orientations of literary representations of nature and of human interaction with the rest of the natural world.'

Plumwood, Val, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Routledge, 1993).

'Explores the emergence of ecofeminism or ecological feminism, explaining its relation to other feminist theories, and to radical green theories such as deep ecology.'

Schama, Simon, *Landscape and Memory* (Harper Collins, 1995).

'How does environment influence history? ... This work attempts to answer these questions and gives a portrait of the world around us and how it shapes us.'

Soper, Kate, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics, and the Non-Human* (Blackwell, 1995).

Another readable and fundamental text from the mid 1990s period which laid the foundations of contemporary ecocriticism.