

Indian Journal of Ecocriticism, Vol. 1, August 2008

The Eco-Ontological Literary Imperative

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Abstract

Modern societies have exhibited difficulty in grasping the implications of the mounting ecological crises, such as the melting of the polar ice caps. The necessary political will to address these crises well will not be mustered unless there is a deep shift in consciousness. Green literary art can help to shift our ontological assumptions, and the international network of scholars writing ecological literary criticism are poised to review and assign a stream of high-quality new eco-ontological literature. Yet where is it? Most of the acclaimed new literature in modern societies continues to focus on human adventures lived as if on top of nature.

It may be true that literary art exists for its own sake – but only in less ominous times.

Are we hurtling toward widespread ecocide? Are we blithely drifting into species suicide of *Homo sapiens*? We cannot really know because all our patterns of thought were shaped by the complex infrastructure of the supremely confident assumptions of modernity – a way of perceiving reality that is now being spread worldwide through economic globalization. Modern society is so impressively advanced that we tend to be carried along by the inertial assurance that the not very interesting, nonmodern “givens” will always be at our disposal: water in the ground table, rainfall and an annual snowmelt in mountains; topsoil rich enough to grow crops; oceanic currents and the temperatures they influence on land; vegetation of all sorts; pollination by birds, bees, bats, and butterflies; abundant fish in the sea and the rivers; and temperatures that would not rise to the point of destabilizing all of the above.

As modern societies are beginning to grasp, through, all of those elements in our ecological life-support system are indeed shrinking into diminished states ... and far more quickly than the modern methods of scientific prediction supposed. Why, then, do we barely hear this alarming phenomenon mentioned in conversation or in public discussions of government policy and corporate behavior, as well as “lifestyle” choices made by individuals? Far more attention is devoted to the rise or fall of a country’s Gross Domestic Product, or

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the value of its currency, or the state of its stock market. This “misplaced concreteness” (to conscript Whitehead’s phrase for Green purposes) eerily keeps our focus on the conceptual level, rather than on material conditions. We cannot seem to grasp the nature of our larger context, “the Real” – the actual physical state of our embodied, embedded existence in the processes of the Earth and the cosmos. It is as if modernity has enclosed us in a sophisticated glass box that is situated seemingly on top of nature.

Worse still, we do not even look out from the glass box very often because our attention is focused almost entirely on human projects. Being schooled in the solipsistic logic of hypermodernity – how clever the latest electronic devices make us! – we hardly notice that the polar ice caps are melting. In fact, it is nearly unthinkable that the polar ice caps are melting ... and that is precisely our problem: we cannot seem to grasp the significance of this gargantuan event in the life of the Earth. We cannot seem to think through the implications of all the ecological devastation that is mounting.

While I do not disagree that “political will” is necessary to put in place effective responses to the ecological crises (to the extent that effective responses are still possible), we are collectively a very long way from mentally feeling the need for a manifestation of that political will. We need first to be delivered from our strange state of denial, disengagement, and apathy with regard to the Earth crises. We need wise and capable leaders, yes, but who would follow such leaders unless our consciousness had first been dislodged from its solipsistic ruts, its hypermodern faith that progress continuously brings us to a better time than what came before? No single source can achieve such a deep shift in our habits of thought and socialization. Rather, a complex end calls for complex means, each contributing from different directions.

What might be the role of the literary arts in this most urgent and profound challenge ever faced by the human race? Noteworthy art has the ability to lure us – or to shock us – out of our familiar patterns of thinking and to immerse us in a different reality. If the fiction or poetry or essay is sufficiently compelling, we are changed. We now exist in new relationships to the narrator’s or poet’s voice and insights, or the characters, or their situation. We inhabit a new space, along with our familiar rounds of thought. Our old ways of perceiving the world make room for this new perspective to which we have been exposed. We have grown.

I am not calling for a didactic genre of ecological literary art, a wave of narratives in which environmental statistics and manifestos would be inserted into the mouths of characters and the voices of poets. Yet I find it exceedingly odd that, as the polar ice caps melt and the related ecological crises gather speed, each year’s crop of new literary art focuses primarily on human dramas and traumas situated solely inside the glass box. Family dynamics, love stories and triangles, the pitfalls of assimilation into modernity and/or a foreign culture, adventures in the world of work and politics – all these are the common concerns in the human sphere. They are unfolding, however, amid the largely unmentioned collapse of various life-support systems of the Earth community. Might not this be noted or, at least, alluded to? Better still, might not the sort of art be created, now and then, that breaks us out of our comfortable boundaries to make real both the dangers and corrective options that lie before us, the sort of art that enlarges our sense of what it

means to be fully human and fully of the Earth? Could not that be part of the mix, part of the "givens" in contemporary literature?

The emergence of the field of ecological literary criticism over the past fifteen years has manifested an international network of scholars who, having perhaps spent the past several years mining their national literary canon for the presence and significance of an engagement with nature in the literature, are now also poised to analyze new literature. They are well prepared to write insightful essays about the new "green" literature, to express their opinions about it at professional conferences, to assign it in college literature courses, to help situate it in their national heritage of literary achievement.

But where is the new stream – nay, flood – of literature that engages with the Real in our time? I do not mean simply stories "about nature" or in which nature plays a part but, rather, stories and poems that challenge our diminished sense of existence and enlarge it such that we begin to grasp that each of us is formed and informed by constitutive relationships with the subtle processes of the natural world. This broad grouping might be called eco-ontological literature.

Good poetry, of course, always enlivens, or even breaks open, our pod of habitual consciousness, so one might well look to that genre for examples. Moreover, scholars and critics in every country can probably point to a handful of exceptions among their nation's critically successful novels, those few that deeply engage with our ontological relationship to nature. (In the United States, for instance, several novels by Native American authors do so). Some of these exceptions are impressive indeed.

Yet the times call for so much more.

REFERENCE

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