◆ 17

Literature as Ecological Thought: Mind the Metaphor

Juan F. Egea

To examine how literature "addresses concerns" or "raises awareness" regarding the state of our natural environment seems like a rather meager ambition for a criticism that wants to add the prefix eco to its name. It seems too unambitious, at least, for a literary ecocriticism that may aspire to go beyond its necessary but ultimately naïve first wave, where the dominant questions seem to have been "How is nature represented in this sonnet?" or "What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel?"[1] How literature clashes with, or even erases, nature, how it disrupts that which is non-human, and, ultimately, how it "intervenes" in the environment seems like a more critical daring mandate from the outset.

Let us consider, for instance, the academic discipline of the history of the book. It is hard to deny that the relation of literature with paper and hence with the environment has been devastating. That is literature affecting nature, for sure. Admittedly, this approach may be materialist in excess and perhaps shortsighted for an ecocriticism that, as a result, would run its course too soon. However, the cartonera publishing phenomenon should give us at least pause for thought here. After all, since the Argentinian Eloísa cartonera started the movement in 2003, it has grown into a multi-national initiative closely connected with life in times of crisis that challenges elitist, neoliberal publishing practices at every level (from production to copyrights), and that invokes communal efforts which will not be reckless to associate with a de-growth logic within the consumption of literature.[2] Much more than the poster child for recycling in the market of books, the cartonera phenomenon could become an exemplary study case for an ecocritical approach to literature that recognizes the need to engage with consumer or corporate capitalism in its different guises and at every level. In that scheme, the materiality and the actual production of books would represent a sort of ground zero for thought, closely followed by the analysis of circulation and consumption. All this would provide the space for the encounter of

A Polemical Companion to
Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates
Hispanic Issues On Line Debates 7 (2016)

ecocriticism and the political economy of literature: an important one for sure, however limited may be destined to be in comparison with the practice of ecocriticism as a hermeneutic activity, as a critical praxis that generates mainly readings.

Indeed, it would seem that ecocriticism in Iberian studies has chiefly consisted of textual analysis: either symptomatic readings or plain old exegesis. That is, of course, fine. That is what literary criticism has been doing with different emphasis and ambitions since its beginnings. In that regard, to ask how can literature "help" in our current global environmental crisis seems like another way to pose the question of the usefulness of literature as an instrument for social change. The point is almost inadvertently made by Cheryll Glotfelty in the most popular reader on the subject: "Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading to texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (xviii). Although we can agree with Terry Eagleton and consider all literary criticism as political, the lineage implicit in the analogy aligns ecocriticism with critical endeavors where concerns with actual conditions of power and domination are paramount. Is ecocriticism the latest attempt at vindicating a critical engagement with literature easier to justify, easier to connect with that "real world" academics are being continuously slapped with? The healthy provocation will be to ask whether or not any Marxist criticism has done more for the "real world" than, say, Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*. To put it differently, when it concerns itself with the literary, ecocriticism confronts us once again with the uneasy confluence of writing and activism, of representation and action, of critical thinking and political engagement. When it concerns itself with the literary, ecocriticism forces us to redefine what an organic intellectual that speaks for or with nature would sound like and how to distinguish such a discourse from shamanism. When it concerns itself with the literary, the lingering question is whether or not ecocriticism is a last ditch attempt to make the study of literature in the academia relevant. The critical engagement with literature possesses an obvious ethical dimension ultimately concerned with the what and the how of representation. At the same time, in the academic world, engagement is propped up by a sometimes not-so-explicitly scaffolding where the higher moral ground depends solely on matters of concern and not on matters of representation. That tacit hierarchy, in my estimation, has lent itself to a brand of criticism of good intentions within ecocriticism that, firstly, puts the emphasis on the prefix eco rather than on the noun criticism, and, secondly, assumes too readily that the choice of topic is in itself a form of activism.

Let's take, for instance, science fiction and the type of engagement with that genre that I would consider conventional in the field of ecocriticism.

Disaster narratives and futuristic dystopias have been with us for so long and are so intimately connected to the entertainment industry that is hard to gauge their potential to raise awareness. Arguably, one can be entertained and cautioned at the same time. However, I would contend that representing the end of our physical world is not automatically a consciousness-raising mechanism. The apocalypse has been represented way too many times in order to make a profit as to accept it as an unproblematic call to arms. The scarcity of water figures prominently in both Rosa Montero's *Lágrimas en la lluvia* and George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road*. Which of the two fictions is worthier of an ecocritical reading? Let the comparison begin, together with the backlash for having mentioned both titles in the same sentence and with such a phrasing. Along the way, let us not forget the aforementioned questions of cultural circulation and consumption. Let us not forget questions of imagination and ethics either. Both Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson have famously quipped that it seems easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.[3] The end of nature has been certainly easy to imagine in literature and film. Ecocriticsm should at least be curious, if not weary, about that facility of representation. It may come as an unneeded reminder, but an ethics of life becomes inextricable from an ethics of writing, with one of representation. To put it slightly differently, and much more bluntly: it is all about the metaphors.

When it comes to critical thinking, the "metaphors we live by" (Lakoff) run the risk to become stabilized morphisms, in Bruno Latour's terminology; metaphors to get by, really. For Latour, that type of morphism provides "clichés of objectivity and clichés of subjectivity," while the uses of what he calls "transformed morphisms [. . .] renew our understanding of what it is to be a thing" (8). In the same text, Latour calls for the need "to be reflexive about the metaphysics of good and bad fabrication" (ibid.), and he does so, precisely, in the midst of his engagement with novelist Richard Powers's narrative. Science or speculative fiction not only does not get a free representational pass, but rather anchors a reflection on the ethics of representation where figures of speech are as vital in a literary sub-genre as they are in scientific and legal discourses—something also worth emphasizing, since apparently money is free speech and corporations are people. Interestingly enough, the use of these two very different morphisms is predicated of "bad writes [. . .] of both novels *as well as* [emphasis in the original] of academic articles" (7). For quite some time, I have been adamant about the need to radically question the metaphors we use to think about, say, dictators or civil wars: enough with the stabilized morphisms of family romances, Oedipus complexes, and disenchantments to explain away the cultural complexities of a whole country at a certain historical juncture. It is not a problem of "dead" metaphors. It is a problem of metaphors that kill—that kill thinking at least—that are intellectually dangerous. Being reflective

about the metaphysics of bad and good fabrication seems even more urgent in ecocriticism since metaphors are what we have been extracting from nature as much as material riches. Poetry, traditionally the genre that has had metaphor at its dearest trope, makes for an instructive study case.

"Poetry is stored energy" (108). This quote, used in Flys-Junquera and Raquejo's overwiew of the environment in literature and the fine arts in Spain does not come from a poem, nor is it an innocent, unremarkable statement on the literary genre traditionally burdened with the weight of literariness. The quote comes from one of the foundational texts in ecocriticism. In fact, it comes from the one in which the term "ecocriticism" was coined. It is, of course, William H. Rueckert's master metaphor in "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," a text originally published in 1978. The complete tropological chain goes like this: "A poem is stored energy, a formal turbulence, a living thing, a swirl in the flow. Poems are part of the energy pathways which sustains life" (108). As definitions of the lyric go, this one is as valid and as questionable as any. It is certainly as felicitous and as lacking as the one that states that, "poetry makes nothing happen."[4] As the latter, it cannot be taken a-historically either. Unabashedly metaphorical, Rueckert's definition borrows from the sciences (from the ecology of the mid-1970s, to be precise) to turn the act of poetry writing and reading into a physical process of transference. Rueckert famously resorted to ideas of interconnectedness and energy flows in the biosphere. He wanted to vindicate the power of poetry to make something happen, its potential to, in truth, to create a community. But, in 1978, he also was responding to the close reading methods of the decaying but still hegemonic New Criticism in the North American university. In fact, Rueckert is painfully aware that his community is an academic community: the classroom, the lecture hall, and the seminar room are the spaces of action he mentions in the text. When quoting or using Ruerckert's "ecological poetics," the first thing to consider is that its morphism is as much a response to the stagnation of the academic environment as it is to the crisis of the natural one. Using Ruerckert's approach to read contemporary poetry is not a sin, but it definitely makes one commit to critical metaphors that are dated, highly problematic, and that it may even lead to the perpetuation of those clichés of objectivity and subjectivy that Latour mentions. The lessons of Reurckert's groundbreaking text are certainly useful, although many of them are so because of their contradictory nature. The one I would like to stress has to do with the quality of Reuckert's morphism.

It has been noted that Rueckert's text has two versions that differ in just one adjective. He finished his 1978 original piece with the proclamation "Free us from figures of speech" (122). The same text, reprinted in 1996, reads "Free us from false figures of speech" (ibid). Action was opposed to tropes in the first version of the essay. Tropes, true ones—whatever their

truth consists of—are saved twenty years later. In 1982, Rueckert wrote a sequel to his initial experiment in ecocriticism entitled "Metaphor and Reality: A Meditation on Man, Nature and Words." It also finishes with a cautionary statement: "Metaphorical naiveté is not charming, as some other forms of naiveté are; it is dangerous, just a naïve verbal realism is" ("Metaphor"). Decades before Latour, Rueckert also found in the metaphors we use the key to an ethical engagement with the physical world within the realm of words. Yet, his own master metaphors cannot but sound naïve. Are they, then, dangerous too?

Missing from Ruerckert's approach, and, more importantly, from approaches close to his unacknowledged Romantic New Wave spirit, are, once more, questions that belong to an ethics of representation, to the politics of writing, if you will. Going back to the comparison/lineage offered by Glotfelty, the so-called social poetry of the 1950s in Spain, for instance, had to come to terms with questions of diffusion and readership, with disputes about aesthetic value, and with nagging suspicions of political impotence. Poetry written by women, since at least the 1970s, has had to confront concerns about, among other things, essentialism and representativeness. What are the equivalent issues that an eco-criticism of poetry should tackle, reframe, or rethink? What would be the critical metaphors, the truly transformed morphism that will make us understand what it is to be a thing called eco-poetry? To borrow them from nature would not suffice anymore. As it is not sufficient to note the "environmental sensibility" of Spanish contemporary poets, from Jesús López Pacheco to Jorge Riechmann. Especially, it is not sufficient—nor particularly illuminating—to use a poem by the former to exemplify the "deep social and environmental messages" in his work when the poem, entitled "Epigrama de un ingenio de la corte imperial" ("Epigram by a Wit in an Imperial Court"), reads like this: "Consumer society / has its own culture: / to produce garbage and smoke, / or, if not, smoke and garbage" (Flys-Junquera and Raquejo, xx, their translation). I would argue that there is nothing deep in these lines of poetry, and that there is hardly any message either. This is witicism: questionable in content, amusing in form. This is, in fact, a platitude that rhymes (in Spanish). It is an epigram, a type of poem that traditionally calls attention to how cleverly it expresses its verbal surprises or its satire. Anachronic as a form and anachronically titled, it distances its lyric persona twofold. It is a type of writing from a remote (golden?) past, branded by archaic terminology that, at the same time, positions its speaker outside the reality it criticizes, as it is often the case with satirists and with wits. The vast majority of lyric poetry places a voice in the world. The vast majority of lyric poems position a subject in relation to imagined environments both human and non-human. In this one, López Pacheco's speaking subject appears to be occupying a place outside the consumer society he decries and

whose environmental evils are less a reason for concern than a reason to rhyme. That over there is consumer society, and here I am as a lyric voice, somehow outside of it, being witty. There is as much ontological and hermeneutical naiveté in the Romantic poetic voice that speaks of communion with nature as there is in the urban lyric voice that holds the ills of our time at arm-length. Too much for just an epigrammatic, good-intentioned denunciation? An ecocritical approach to poetry, even panoramic in nature, would be certainly ill served if what we do with certain poems is just to cheerlead its choice of subject matter.

In more general terms, the critical task should start with more daring and more complex premises. We should depart, for instance, from the idea that, "'nature' is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art" (Morton, *Ecology Without Nature* 1), or with the initial acknowledgement that, "[e]nvironment, the upgrade of Nature, is fraught with difficulty" (Morton, *The Ecological Thought* 10). In fact, I would like to see the sobering, challenging tenets of Morton's "dark ecology" figure more prominently in the approaches to poetry as "ecological thought." The expansive, overwhelming nature of Morton's research program—or his sometimes dazzling sometimes puzzling use of Shelley, Blake, or Wordsworth to make his theoretical points—is too small of a drawback in comparison with the promise of its big, dark, and forward thinking. Ultimately, the practice of ecocriticism should not be (only) about generating new readings, attesting to ecological concerns or commenting on symbolic rehearsals of the end of nature. It should rather be an exercise in thinking through literature (through poetry in this case) that does not shy away from the contradictions, failures and connivances of that un-natural human activity. With such a research program in place, the problem will still be the space between to think and to act, unless we are willing to see as "transformed morphisms" statements that claim that "thinking is acting" or that "writing is doing." But, on that account, now as ever, we should mind the metaphor.

Notes

1. These are the first two questions of the series provided by Cheryll Glotfelty in the reader I will discuss momentarily (xviii–xix).
2. For a more nuanced account of the phenomenon or the movement (including questions regarding the fact that it can be called like that) see Bilbija and Celis Carvajal. Several of the contributions to the volume underline the diversity of goals and methods in *cartonera* editing.
3. Žižek has repeated the thought with different phrasings in several occasions. Fredric Jameson reproduced it in 2003, although he himself attributed the quip to an

unknown author: "Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" (76).

4. W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" (Mendelson 248)

Works Cited

Bilbija, Ksenija and Paloma Celis Carbajal, eds. *Akademia Cartonera: a Primer of Latin American Cartonera Publishers = Un Abc De Las Editoriales Cartoneras En América Latina*. Madison: Parallel Press, University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries, 2009. Print.

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Chicester, UK: Wiley, 2011. Print.

Flys-Junquera, Carmen and Tonia Raquejo. "The Environment in Literature and the Arts in Spain." *Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates*. Ed. Katarzyna Beilin and William Viestenz. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press. 2015. Print

Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism; Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957. Print.

Glotfelty, Cheryll and Harold Fromm, eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996. Print.

Jameson, Fredric. "Future City." *New Left Review* 21 (May–June 2003): 65–79. Print.

Lakoff, George. *Metaphors We Live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. Print.

Latour, Bruno. "The Powers of Fac Similes: a Turing Test on Science and Literature." *Intersections: Essays on Richard Powers*. Ed. Stephen J. Burn and Peter Demsey. Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2008. Print. 263–292. Print.

Mad Max: Fury Road. Dir. George Miller. Village Roadshow Pictures, 2015. Film.

Mendelson, Edward, ed. *W.H. Auden: Collected Poems*. New York: Vintage, 1991. Print.

Montero, Rosa. *Lágrimas en la lluvia*. Barcelona: Seix Barral, 2011. Print.

Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. Print.

_____. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. Print.

Rueckert, William H. "Literature and Ecology: An Experimenet in Ecocriticism." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996: 105–123. Print.

_____. "Metaphor and Reality: A Meditation on Man, Nature and Words." *The Journal of the Kenneth Burke Society* 2.2 (2006): n. pag. Web. 11 August 2015.

Egea, Juan F. "Literature as Ecological Thought: Mind the Metaphor." *A Polemical Companion to* Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates. Ed. Katarzyna Beilin William Viestenz. *Hispanic Issues On Line* Debates 7 (2016): 101–107. Web.