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The Problems of Environmental Criticism: An Interview with Lawrence Buell

Lawrence Buell (b. 1939) is currently a Powell M. Cabot Professor of American Literature at Harvard University. His scholarly interests include nineteenth-century American literature, postcolonial Anglophone literatures and literature and the environment. One of the most outstanding researchers of American Transcendentalism and a pioneer of ecocriticism, Buell has published six books, the most recent of which is *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Blackwell, 2005), an important study marking the author's shift from first-wave to second-wave ecocritical analysis. His book on Emerson (*Emerson*, Harvard University Press, 2003) earned him the Warren-Brooks Award for outstanding literary criticism and *Writing for an Endangered World* (Harvard University Press, 2001) received the 2001 John G. Ca-welti Award for the best book in the field of American Culture Studies.

Buell's interest in environmental issues, considered especially in connection with the problem of American national identity, dates back to the beginnings of his academic career. His first ecocritical book appeared in 1995 under the title *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and The Formation of American Culture* (Harvard University Press). Buell's erudite knowledge of Anglophone literature, combined with his impassioned search for what he describes as "mature environmental aesthetics", contribute to the body of work that is eminent in its scope and profundity and that constitutes a challenge to the dominant ways of thinking about the relationship between the environment, culture and politics.

JULIA FIEDORCZUK: *What is ecocriticism?*

LAWRENCE BUELL: The so-called ecocritical movement is still only a dozen years old. So perhaps I should start with a definition. For more detail, please see my book *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005). Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary movement committed not to any one methodology but to a particular subject: the subject of how literature and other media express environmental awareness and concern.

For at least two reasons, “ecocriticism” is a somewhat confusing and inadequate term. For one thing, “eco” suggests a specifically biotic or “natural world” emphasis, too narrow to encompass the broad range of environmental interests actually pursued by self-identified ecocritics, many of whom are at least as concerned with the built environment and its effects on both human and non-human life forms. And secondly, many literary scholars who are passionately concerned with environmental issues—including two of the three scholars whose work I am about to discuss—would object to the label of “ecocritic” as excessively restrictive, because “ecocriticism” in the first instance was used especially to designate a particular kind of literary criticism that focused preeminently on nature writing and post-Wordsworthian nature poetry with a view to emphasizing its potential for reconnecting people to nature. Hence I myself prefer the less familiar but more capacious rubric of “environmental criticism.” But “ecocriticism” is nonetheless the omnibus term, or nickname, by which environmentally-oriented literary studies is most likely to be known for the foreseeable future; and so I retain use of it here.

Can you talk a little about the beginnings of ecocriticism?

Ecocriticism did not start as a transnational project, but rather as a movement within U.S. and British literary studies. But since then it has spread worldwide. In China, two major conferences have taken place during the autumn of 2008. And, increasingly, American ecocriticism, which still leads the movement, stresses the importance of thinking of national imagination and national territory as interconnected with the rest of the world, not distinct from it. It now seems self-evident that such prominent ecocritical concerns as the representation of environmental instability or endangerment and the theory of “place” or “sense of place” must be understood in comparative terms. It could even be argued that ecocriticism was always at least incipiently transnational. For instance, the first of my own three ecocritical books, *The Environmental Imagination*, centers especially on Henry David Thoreau and U.S. nature writing, but it prepares the way for this by surveying how the dissemination of Eurocentric pastoral ideology throughout the Afro-Atlantic world helped form the bases of various counter-colonial discourses of nationalism in a wide number of national cultures throughout Europe, Africa and the Americas—not just in the U.S.

I’m glad you mention the terminological issue. I think the problem with the term ecocriticism, beside its narrowness, is that the prefix “eco” is so dramatically overused, for instance in marketing. Such designations as “eco” and “bio” are commonly used to make products more sellable.

On the other hand, one must remember that ecology (and, by extension, ecocriticism) is sometimes viewed negatively on the grounds of its alleged naivety (the stereotypical image of the ecologist is that of a simple-minded tree-hugging individual who does not understand the higher orders of economy and infrastructural development). Does this negative stereotype of the ecologist and the ecocritic exist in the United States? If so, how does ecocriticism respond to this problem?

The extent that the “eco” in “ecocritic” is negatively viewed by non-literature types is more because of the construction of focus of the very early ecocritical efforts than because of the eco-PR industry you allude to. That too has not passed without criticism, but I don’t think it affects the humanistic critical project. For that matter, the terms “environment” and “environmentalism” are also used in grossly elasticized and/or misleading senses to the same end, as with the first President Bush claiming that he wanted to be “the environment president.”

Regarding the politics of ecocriticism itself, most ecocritics think of their ecocritical work as implicitly, if not overtly, progressive political interventions, although within the movement one finds the same tension as in environmental history between a nature-centric protectionist strain and public health environmentalism concerned especially with such issues as pollution, global warming, and environmental justice. Broadly speaking, the center of ecocritical interest has been shifting from the first emphasis to the second, and as part of this shift one sees a certain amount of “intratribal” criticism of the kind you rightly mention as often coming from outside—namely, contempt for “tree-hugging” images and the like. This internal critique is directed toward the conceptual or theoretical naivety of simplistic versions of “deep ecology” as well as motivated by political commitment.

Is the use of the term “environmental” part of the solution to these problems? (Perhaps you will find this interesting: “environmental criticism” is not easily translatable into Polish. While the Polish noun “środowisko,” usually used with a specification such as “natural,” “urban,” or “chemical,” means more or less the same as the English “environment,” the adjective “środowiskowy” has a different set of connotations than the English term “environmental”).

You do well to call attention to translation problems. As ecocriticism continues to spread, these are becoming increasingly consequential. Polish is not the only language with no precise equivalent for “environment.” In China too, so I am told, the standard translation for environment is a term (huan-jing) that means something more like “mi-

lieu”—the sense of physical environment is attenuated to the vanishing point. Some day there ought to be a multilinguistic task force deployed to work on this kind of issue. A retirement project for me, perhaps?

*I think that many languages will probably end up adapting English terminology. That often happens in critical discourse. For instance, the English term “gender” is now widely used in Polish (Polish uses the same word to denote “sex” and “gender”). Speaking of which, I have noticed that skeptical reactions among Polish academics echo the kind of responses that gender or queer studies evoked, say, ten years ago. I would like to ask you about the affinities (and differences) between ecocriticism and other kinds of political criticism, such as feminist criticism or postcolonial theory. In *The Future of Environmental Criticism* you say that ecocriticism “has not yet achieved the standing” accorded to those other discourses but you also say you believe it eventually will. Why do you think it is still not treated with the same amount of respectful scholarly attention? Is it just because it is new, or is it because, ultimately, it deals with non-human otherness?*

As to why ecocriticism or environmental criticism should have lagged behind race, gender, sexuality, and postcolonial studies, one reason, surely, is that environmental imperialism did not become consistently “front-page news” until about the 1980s. Another reason, perhaps equally important, is that “environment” differs from the others in being a non-human, or let’s say, a transhuman entity, and on that account not in so obvious, self-evident a sense a part of personal or social identity. Thus it might be argued that environmental criticism would predictably be a harder sell than the other two revisionisms, especially insofar as it involves privileging the welfare of the non-human equally or more than the human. On the other hand, the lines of distinction are hardly absolute, and there has been mutual cross-pollination, as in the case of ecofeminism and environmental justice criticism (discussed in chapter 4 of my *The Future of Environmental Criticism*). These synergies, as I intimated before, help account for the shift from the more ecocentric paradigm of first-wave ecocriticism to the more sociocentric paradigm of second wave ecocriticism that now more or less prevails.

Could you say more about environmental justice criticism? What is it and how does it differ from what you call “first-wave ecocriticism”?

“Environmental justice” refers to the problem of (in)equitable distribution of environmental ills and benefits across population groups. In the U.S. this has been associated

especially with “environmental racism”—targeting minority communities as sites of hazardous waste facilities and other bearers of toxification. Outside the U.S., and also to a certain degree within, the question has been raised as to whether the key factor in producing environmental injustice is poverty rather than race. Both seem very important to me, and I am not sure whether it is possible (or fruitful) to insist on one alternative rather than the other—even though in the U. S. and many other countries there is a suspiciously high correlation between racial or ethnic minority status and social immiseration of every kind. But to move more closely to the subject of (literary) discourse, environmental justice revisionism tends to focus on urban rather than rural or backcountry settings, in minority and other subaltern voices, and in discourse of the past half-century or so rather than earlier eras—although it can legitimately claim antecedence back to at least the start of the industrial era.

Another kind of accusation that is sometimes made against eco- or environmental criticism is that it is not theoretically sophisticated: according to this hostile view, ecocritics express their love of nature where they lack intellectual rigor. Is this kind of suspicion still present among American academics? If so, what is your way of responding to it?

This is indeed a common but increasingly outdated charge. The very first ecocritics did indeed sometimes exhibit what Paul de Man famously called “resistance to theory” in their anxiety to reinforce traditional nature writing and nature poetry’s ethos, as they took it, of “return to nature,” over against poststructuralist decoupling of word world and material world, the new historicist push to represent figures like the Romantic poet Wordsworth as dis-invested in nature. But since the mid-1990s ecocriticism has become increasingly, although not universally, more sophisticated. One has only to read the most recent major book, Ursula Heise’s *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (Oxford University Press, 2008), to perceive that.

I have recently come across an article by Dana Phillips, titled “Ecocriticism, Ecopoetics, and a Creed Outworn”, in which the author expresses his very critical views on ecocriticism in general, and Jonathan Bate’s ecopoetics in particular. Let me quote some fragments: “ecocritics ... have been trying to revive forms of common sense that they suppose to have been vital to the earth-centered traditions of the past ... Unfortunately, it has met with and is likely to continue to meet with limited success, in part because it is at odds with the facts of contemporary intellectual life”; “Too many ecocritics are fond of assuming the posture of the faux naïf, and while standing in that posture like

to suggest, among other things, that environmental literature (and art) ought not to be read (or viewed or audited) in the critical sense of the term. Instead, they go on to say, one ought to absorb, accept, and then promulgate anew its earth-friendly, ecocentric values simply because that is manifestly the right thing to do.”

Further, Phillips speaks of Jonathan Bate’s “ecocritical fundamentalism.” He sketches the parameters of the disagreement between the New Historicists and an eco-poetics enthusiast such as Bate. The argument is rather brilliant, though I think his choice of quotations from Bate is tendentious. Phillips’s discussion of Bate suggests that ecocriticism is something extremely reactionary, intellectually lame, almost aggressive in its insistence on the intuitive, rather than intellectual, reception of art. Do you have a way of responding to this kind of wholesale critique? Would you agree that ecocriticism is about reviving a kind of “common sense” approach? And if so, in what sense is it at odds with “the facts of contemporary intellectual life”?

Phillips, together with Timothy Morton (*Ecology without Nature*, Harvard University Press, 2007), have written probably the most intelligent and slashing internal critiques of the ecocritical movement in English. Both are worth reading. Phillips, incidentally, attacks a great many ecocritics (including me), not just Bate—whereas Morton pursues his argument at a higher level of conceptual abstraction. My own summary judgment, in brief, is (a) that both overstate their cases (Morton for example strikes me as off-base in suggesting that ecology can do without nature even though he is right about the many abuses and ambiguities of “nature”), (b) that Phillips’ book rests on a quite selective culling of an earlier stage of ecocriticism beyond which the movement’s best work had evolved in point of critical sophistication by the time his own book appeared; but (c) both books are nevertheless thought-provoking, challenging books whose irreverence, including even the extremes to which they go, is a sign of salutary ferment within ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism is an engaged practice. How do you envision the passage from criticism to activism? Can textual analysis ever bring us closer to a sounder—or simply saner—environmental practice?

Ecocritical practice at the level of ecotheory and discourse analysis is obviously not the same thing as activism. On the other hand, I believe (and have heard this credibly affirmed by others) that its (re)readings of world literature from the standpoint of attention to environmental emplacement and environmental concern can have a public consciousness-raising effect, and all the more so when one considers the combined impact

of scholarship, non-specialist writing, public lecturing, and pedagogy in which most serious practicing ecocritics engage. Furthermore, engagement in such work is likely to reinforce for the ecocritic as well as some of his or her hearers, the motivation to engage in on-the-ground activist work. All that having been said, I am inclined to fall back on a haunting line in a poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson: “Nor knowest thou what argument thy life to thy neighbor’s creed has lent.” To measure the social impact of any intellectual intervention is tricky if not impossible. Here one can only hope.

Thank you.

WORK CITED

Phillips, Dana. “Ecocriticism, Eco-poetics, and a Creed Outworn.” *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* 64 (2008): 37-50. Print.